

The Attributes Of The Divine Being

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Sub Title:

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This text explores the attributes of God in Islamic theology. It examines how God's essence and attributes are unified, without separation.

It categorizes these attributes into affirmative and negative, as well as attributes of essence and action.

The discussion includes concepts like God's mercy, compassion, omniscience, and omnipotence.

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The Attributes Of The Divine Being By Sayyid Mujtaba Musavi Lari Translated from the Persian By Dr. Hamid Algar This is the second part of the first volume of the author's work in Persian Mabani-ye i'tiqadat dar Islam (The Foundations of Islamic Doctrines). Here he discusses the Divine Attributes of Omniscience and Omnipotence as well as other related issues.

How Does The Qur'an Present God?

When we wish to assess the scientific personality and knowledge of a scholar, we examine his works and subject them to close study. Similarly, in order to measure the talent, creativity and ability of an artist to invent original images, we undertake the study of his artistic production.

In the same way, we can also perceive the attributes and characteristics of the pure essence of the Creator from the qualities and orderliness that pervade all phenomena, together with their subtlety and precision. Thereby, within the limits set by our capacity to know and perceive, we can become acquainted with God's knowledge, wisdom, life and power.

If it be a question of complete and comprehensive knowledge of God, then, of course, we must accept that man's ability to know does not extend that far. God's characteristics cannot be placed within given limits, and whatever comparison or simile we offer for them is bound to be false, for whatever is observable to science and thought in the natural realm is the work of God and the product of His will and command, whereas His essence is not part of nature and does not belong to the category of created beings. Hence, the essence of the divine being cannot be grasped by man by way of comparison and analogy.

He is, in short, a being for the knowledge of Whose essence no measure or criterion exists and for the fixing of Whose power, authority and knowledge, we have no figures or statistics.

Is man, then, too abject and powerless to perceive anything of the essence and attributes of so elevated a reality? To concede the weakness of our powers and our inability to attain complete, profound and comprehensive knowledge of God does not imply that we are deprived of any form of knowledge, however relative. The orderly pattern of the universe loudly proclaims His attributes to us, and we can deduce the power and unlimited creativity of the Lord from the beauty and value of nature. Phenomena are for us an indication of His unique essence.

Contemplation of the will, consciousness, knowledge and harmony inherent in the order of being and all the various phenomena of life, makes it possible for us to perceive that all these qualities—together with all the other elements that speak of aim, direction and purpose—necessarily derive from the will of a Creator Who Himself possesses these attributes before they are reflected in the mirror of creation.

That which comes to know God and to touch His being is the remarkable power of thought—a flash which deriving from that pre-eternal source shone on matter and bestowed on it the capacity of acquiring knowledge and advancing toward truth. It is within this great divine gift that the knowledge of God is manifested.

Islam deals with the knowledge of God in a clear and novel way. The Qur'an, the fundamental source for learning the worldview of Islam, applies the method of negation and affirmation to this question.

First, it negated, by means of convincing proofs and indications, the existence of false gods, because in approaching the transcendent doctrine of unity, it is necessary first to negate all forms of pseudo-divinity and the worship of other-than-God. This is the first important step on the path to unity. The Qur'an says:

“Have the ignorant polytheists abandoned the true God and chosen, instead, the false and powerless gods? Tell them: “Bring forth your proof!’ This call of mine to unity is my saying and that of all the learned men of the community, as well as the saying of all the Prophets and learned men before me. But these polytheists have no knowledge of the truth and constantly avert themselves from it” (21:24).

“Say [O Messenger] ‘You worship one other than God who has no power to help or to harm you.

It is God Who is all-hearing and Who bows the state of all of creation” (5:76).

The one who has severed his connection with divine unity forgets, too, his own true position with respect to the world and being and becomes estranged from himself.

For the ultimate form of self-alienation is the severing of all links with one's essential nature as man. Conversely, once man has become alienated from his own essence, under the influences of internal and external factors, he will also be separated from his God and become enslaved by other-than-God. Subordination to other-than-God, then, takes the place of all logical thought. This represents a reversion to the worship of phenomena, for worshipping an idol and according primacy to matter both are forms of regression that rob man of his innate capacity for growth.

Monotheism is the only force that makes it possible for man to recapture the creativity of human values. By regaining his true rank, he enters a state of harmony with his own human nature and the ultimate nature of all being, thus attaining the most perfect form of existence open to him. Throughout history, all divine summons and movements have begun with the proclamation of divine unity and the exclusive lordship of God. No concept has ever occurred to man that is more productive of creative insights and more relevant to the various dimensions of human existence, or a more effective brake on human perversity, than the concept of divine unity.

Using clear proofs, the Qur'an shows man the way to attaining knowledge of the divine essence as follows:

“Did man emerge from non-being through his own devices? Was he his own creator?” (52:35).

“Did mankind create the heavens and earth? Certainly, they do not know God” (52:36).

The Qur'an leaves it to man's reason and commonsense to realize the falsity of these two hypotheses—that man came into being of himself, or that he was his own creator—by testing and analysing them in the laboratory of his thought. By reflecting on the signs and indications of God, he will come to recognize with clear and absolute certainty the true source of all being and to understand that no value can be posited for any model of the universe unless behind it an organizing and capable intellect is at work.

In other verses, man's attention is drawn to the manner of his creation and gradual emergence from non-being. He, thus, comes to realize that his remarkable creation, with all the wonders it contains, is a sign and indication of the infinite divine will, the penetrating rays of which touch all beings. The Qur'an says:

“We created man out of an essence of clay” (23: 12).

“Then We established him in a firm place in the form of sperm” (23: 13).

“Then We made the sperm into coagulated blood, and then into a formless lump of flesh. Then

we made it into bones, and then clothed the bones with flesh. Finally, We brought forth a new creation. How well did God create, the best of all creators!” (23: 14).

When the foetus is ready to receive shape and form” all the cells of the eyes, the ear, the brain, and the other organs, start to function and begin their ceaseless activity. This is the truth to which the Qur’an is directing men’s attention. It, then, poses to man the question of whether all these wondrous changes are rationally compatible with the hypothesis that there is no God.

Is it not rather the case that phenomena such as these prove and demonstrate” with the utmost emphasis, the need for a plan, a design, a guiding hand inspired by conscious will? Is it at all possible that the cells of the body should learn their functions, pursue their aim in a precise and orderly fashion, and crystallize so miraculously in the world of being, without there being a conscious and powerful being to instruct them? The Qur’an answers this question as follows:

“He it is Who creates and brings forth [the totality of parts], Who separates [the parts belonging to each organ], and Who gives form [to different aspects]” (59:24).

The Qur’an describes every sense phenomenon that man sees around him as something calling for reflection and the drawing of conclusions.

“Your God is but one God. There is no god other than Him, Compassionate and Merciful” (2: 163).

“In the creation of the heavens and the earth, in the alternation of night and day, in the ships that ply the seas to the benefit of man, in the water sent down from the heavens to revive the earth after its death, in the different species of animals scattered across the earth” in the rotation of the winds, in the clouds that are subordinate to God’s command between heaven and earth—in all of this, there are signs for men who use their intellects” (2: 164).

“Say [O Prophet]: ‘Consider all that is in the heavens and the earth!’” (10: 101).

The Qur’an also mentions the study of human history and the peoples of the past with all the changes they have undergone, as a special source of knowledge. It invites man to pay heed, in order to discover the truth, to the triumphs and defeats, the glories and humiliations, the fortune and misfortune, of various ancient peoples, so that by learning the orderly and precise laws of history, he will be able to benefit himself and his society by aligning the history of his own age with those laws. The Qur’an thus proclaims:

“Even before your time, certain laws and norms were in force, so travel and examine the historical traces left by past peoples, to see what urn the fate of those who denied the truths of revelation and the promises of God” (3: 137).

“How many were those powerful ones whom We destroyed in their cities on account of their oppression and wrongdoing, and We made another people to be their heirs” (21: 11).

The Qur'an also recognizes man's inner world, which it expressed by the word *Anfus* ("souls"), as a source for fruitful reflection and the discovery of truth. It points out its importance as follows:

"We make Our signs and indications entirely manifest in the world and in the souls and inner beings of Our servants so that it should be clear that God is the True" (41:53).

"On the face of the earth there are signs fur the possessors of certainty" (51:20).

"And also, in your own selves; will you not see?" (51:21).

In other words, there is an abundant source of knowledge in the beauty and symmetry of the human body, with all of its organs and capacities, its actions and reactions, its precise and subtle mechanisms, its varied energies and instincts, its perceptions, feelings and sensations, both animal and human, and most especially in the astounding capacity of thought and awareness with which man has been entrusted—a capacity which still remains largely unknown, for man has taken only a few steps in studying this invisible power and its relationship with his material body.

The Qur'an proclaims that it is sufficient to reflect on and examine your own self in order to be guided to the eternal, infinite source that is free of all need, has unlimited knowledge, skill and power, and a feeble reflection of which is manifest in your being. You will then know that it is that infinite reality which has thus brought together in one place so fruitful a compound of elements and brought it forth onto the plain of existence.

Given the existence of such vivid indications and decisive proofs, placed at your disposal and within your own being for you to seek the knowledge of God, no excuse will be accepted from you for misguidance and denial.

The Qur'an also applies the method of negation and affirmation to the question of God's attributes. Thus, it describes the attributes that the essence of the Creator possesses as "affirmative attributes." Among them are knowledge, power, will, the fact that His existence was not preceded by non-existence and that His being has no beginning, and the fact that all the motions of the world derive from His will and His power. The Qur'an says:

"He is God, the One other than Whom there is no god, the knower of the hidden and the manifest, the Compassionate, the Merciful" (59:22).

"He is God, the One other than Whom there is no god, the Commander, the All-powerful, Pure and Without Defect, the Bestower of Safety, the Protector, the Precious; the Mighty, the Sublime, the Most Elevated. Exempt and purified be He from the partners which they ascribe to Him" (59:23).

The "negative attributes" are those from which God is free. They include the fact that God is not a body and has no place; His sacred being has no partner or like; He is not a prisoner to the limitations set up

by the bounds of the senses; He neither begets nor is begotten; there is neither change nor motion within His essence, for He is absolute perfection; and He does not delegate the task of creation to anyone. The Qur'an says:

[O Messenger] Say: "He is God, the One" (112:1).

"The God Who is free of need for all things and of Whom all beings stand in need" (112:2).

"No one is His offspring, and He is not the offspring of anyone" (112:3).

"And He has no like or parallel" (112:4).

"Pure and exalted is thy Lord, God the Powerful and Unique, Who is pure of what men in their ignorance ascribe to Him" (28:180).

Human logic, which inevitably thinks in terms of limited categories, is incapable of sitting in judgment on divinity, because we must admit that it is impossible to perceive the ultimate ground of that being for whom no observable or comprehensible analogue or parallel exists in the world of creation. The most profound schools of thought and the greatest methods of reflection here fall prey to bewilderment.

Just as all existent beings must lead back to an essence with which existence is identical, to an independent being on which all other beings depend, so, too, they must derive from a source of life, power and knowledge, from the infinite being of which all these attributes and qualities surge forth in abundance.

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The Conditions For An Ideal Object Of Worship

The Lord of the World, as presented in the Qur'an, possesses all the necessary conditions of an ideal object of worship. He is the creator of love and all forms of beauty, the originator of all forms of power and energy. He is a vast ocean on the slightest ripple of whose surface the swimmer of the intellect is tossed around like a plaything. It is He Who preserves the heavens from falling and the earth from collapsing.

If, for an instant, He closes His eye of mercy or averts it from this world, the whole of the universe will perish and hurtle toward non-being in the form of dust. The existence and survival of every atom in the universe is, therefore, dependent on Him.

It is He Who bestows all bounties and all felicities, Who owns us and may freely dispose of us. When He commands and an order goes forth, as soon as He says, "Be!," a creature comes into being.

Truth and reality derive their substance from His essence, and freedom, justice, and other virtues and perfections derive from the rays of His attributes. To take flight towards Him, seek to draw near to His glorious threshold, is to attain all conceivable desire at the highest degree. Whoever gives his heart to God, gains an affectionate companion and a loving friend; the one who relies upon Him has placed his hope on a firm foundation, while the one who attaches his heart to other-than-God is a prey to illusion and builds a foundation on wind.

He Who is aware of the slightest motion that takes place anywhere in creation can also determine for us a path leading to happiness and lay down a way of life and a system of human relations that conforms to the norms He has established in the order of creation. He is, after all, aware of our true interests, and it is even His right alone to lay down a path for us as the logical outcome and natural consequence of His divinity. To act in accordance with the program He lays down is the only certain guarantee for our ascent toward Him.

How is it possible that man should be so enamoured of truth and justice that he is ready to sacrifice his life for their sake, unless he is aware of their source and origin?

If a being is worthy of worship, it cannot be anyone other than the Creator Who is the axis of all being. No thing and no person have such a rank as to deserve the praise and service of man. All values other than God lack absoluteness and primacy and do not subsist in and of themselves; they are relative and serve only as a means for the attainment of degrees higher than themselves.

The primary qualities that elicit man's worship are being the bestower of all bounties and being aware of all the possibilities, needs, capacities and energies contained in man's body and soul. These qualities belong exclusively to God; all beings stand in need of and rely upon that being Who is existent by virtue of His own essence. The caravan of existence is constantly moving toward Him by means of His aid, and His commands descend unceasingly of every speck in the universe.

Absolute submission and worship belong, then, exclusively to His Most Sacred Essence. His glorious presence, uninterrupted by a single moment of absence, is felt at the heart of each atom of being. All things other than God resemble us in that impotence and deficiency prevail over them. They are, therefore, unworthy of our submission and are not worthy of usurping sovereignty over any part of God's realm, which is the whole broad plain of existence. Man, too, is too noble and valuable a being to be subjected and humbled by anything other than God.

In the whole broad plain of being, it is God alone Who deserves man's praise. Man must grant to his love of God, to his efforts to draw near to Him and earn His pleasure, precedence over all other beings and objects of love. This Will result in the ennobling of man and, the augmenting of his value, for man is but a small drop and if not united with the ocean, he will be swept away by the storm of corruption, dried

up by the burning sun of chaos.

Man gains his true personality and becomes eternal when he attaches himself to that effulgent source, when God gives meaning to his world and becomes the interpreter of all the events of his life. It is in this sense that men's worlds may be either broad and expansive or narrow and constricting.

The Commander of the Faithful, Imam 'Ali, peace be upon him, says, in discussing the weaknesses of man and his limited capacities: "How strange and remarkable is the affair of man! If he becomes hopeful with regard to a certain desire, greed will render him abject; desire will lead to greed, and greed will destroy him. If he falls prey to hopelessness, grief and sorrow will kill him.

If he attains happiness and good fortune, he will fail to preserve them. If he falls prey to terror and fear, they will reduce him to utter confusion. If abundant safety is granted him, he will become negligent. If his blessings are restored to him, he will become arrogant and rebellious. If he is stricken with misfortune, sorrow and grief will disgrace him.

If he acquires wealth, he will become overweening. If poverty lays hold of him, he will be plunged in misery. If he is weakened by hunger, he will be unable to rise from the ground. If he eats to excess, the pressure of his stomach will discomfort him. So all deficiency in the life of man is harmful, and all excess leads to corruption and ruin.¹"

Generally speaking, justice, nobility, virtue and other qualities that earn respect and praise must either be illusionary and imaginary, or we must consider these values as real and necessary, based on the perceptions of conscience and instinct. In the latter case, we ought humbly to submit to that universal existence and absolute perfection which flows over with virtue, life and power, and from which all values derive.

When we look into the matter carefully, we see that all the countless beings that exist in the world, as well as the love and aspirations that are rooted in the depths of our being, all converge at one point, all revert to one source—God. The very essence and reality of the world is identical with its connection, relation and attachment to God. Being reascends by a different route to the point where it began and from which it descended, and that point alone is worthy of man's love and devotion. Once man discovers this point, he becomes so enamoured of its absolute beauty and perfection that he forgets all else.

We see that all phenomena have emerged from non-being into a state of being, and that throughout the period of their existence, whether short or long, they are dependent on a source external to themselves for aid and sustenance; they are marked indelibly with subordination and lack of autonomy.

If the ideal object of worship we seek and toward which we are attempting to advance were unaware of the pains we suffer and the nature of the world; if it were unable to satisfy our desires and longings, being replete with impotence and deficiency just like ourselves and belonging to the same category as us—it could not possibly be our final aim and ultimate object or possess absolute value.

When we seek the fulfilment of a wish by means of our worship, it is God alone Who can respond by meeting our needs. The Qur'an says: "Those whom you call upon other than God are servants like yourselves [i.e., they have no power of themselves]" (7: 194).

The Commander of the Faithful, upon whom be peace, while supplicating his Lord in the mosque of Kufa, said: "O my Master, O my Master! You are God the Great and I am your wretched and insignificant slave. Who can show mercy to His insignificant slave but God the Great? O Master of mine, O Master of mine! You are strong and powerful, I am weak and impotent; other than one strong and powerful, who can show mercy to the weak?"

"O Master of mine, O Master of mine! You it is Who bestows generosity on the beggar, and I stand as a beggar at your threshold. Who will show mercy to the beggar other than the generous and the munificent one?"

"O Master of mine, O master of mine! You are eternal existence and I am a creature destined to perish. Who will have mercy on one destined to perish other than the eternal, everlasting essence?"

"O Master of mine, O Master of mine! You are the guide Who points out the way, and I am lost and bewildered. Who will take pity on the lost and bewildered if not the guide Who points out the way?"

"O Master of mine, O Master of mine! Have mercy upon me by Your infinite mercy; accept and be satisfied with me in Your generosity, favour and kindness, O God, possessor of generosity, favour and kindness, and in Your all-embracing mercy, O most merciful of the merciful!"²

Thus, to show reverence to other-than-God, to orient oneself to other than His pure essence, is in no way justifiable; apart from God, nothing can have the slightest effect on our true destiny. If an object of worship deserves man's devotion and love and is capable of lifting him to the peaks of felicity, that object of worship must be free of all deficiency and inadequacy.

Its eternal rays must touch all creatures with sustenance and life, and its beauty must cause every possessor of insight to kneel down in front of it. Possessing infinite power, it quenches the burning thirst of our spirits, and gaining knowledge of it, is nothing other than attaining the ultimate source of our true nature.

If we choose an object of love and worship other than God, it may have certain capacities and be able to fulfil our desires up to a point, but once we reach that point, it will no longer be an object of love and worship for us. It will no longer be able to arouse and attract us; it will, on the contrary, cause us to stagnate.

For not only will it not satisfy our instinctive desire to worship, it will prevent us from reflecting on any higher value and imprison us in a narrow circle, in such a way that we no longer have any motive to advance or ascend.

If the object we choose to worship and love be inferior to us, it can never cause us to ascend and refine our beings. Our inclination to it will, on the contrary, drag us down to decline, and we will, then, be like the needle of a compass which is diverted from the pole under the influence of a completely alien magnetic field. The result will be total loss of direction; eternal misery will become man's inevitable destiny.

[1.](#) Shaykh al-Mufid, Irshad, p. 142.

[2.](#) Mafatih al-Jinan., p. 400.

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Worship, Man's Loftiest Of Expression Of Gratitude

An object of worship can give direction to man's motion and light up his darkness with its brightness when it is able to give him ideals, is endowed with a positive and elevated existence, is the cause of effects, and is the very essence of stability and permanence. Then, the object of worship produces inner effects in man and guides him in his thought and his actions. It facilitates for the essence of man, that part of him nurtured by the divine wisdom, its search for perfection.

Any effort or motion on the part of man to choose a false direction for himself, to take the wrong path in life, will result in his alienation from himself, his loss of all content, and the distortion of his personality. Man cannot possibly come to know himself correctly if he has separated himself from his Creator. To forget God means to forget oneself, to be oblivious to the universal purposes of human life and the world that surrounds one, and to be unable to reflect on any form of higher values.

Just as attachment to other-than-God alienates man from himself and transforms him into a kind of moving biological machine, so, too, does reliance on God and supplication at His threshold draw mono-dimensional man, lacking all spiritual life, up from the oceanic depths of neglect, revive him and restore him to himself.

Through worshipping God, the spiritual capacities and celestial forces in man are nourished. Man comes to understand the lowliness of his worthless material, hopes and desires and to see the deficiencies and weaknesses without his own being. In short, he comes to see himself as he is.

To be aware of God and take flight toward the invisible source of all being illumines and vivifies the

heart. It is utterly pleasurable, a pleasure that cannot be compared to the pleasures of the three-dimensional material world. It is through orienting oneself to that abstract, non-material reality that thoughts become lofty and values transformed.

The Commander of the Faithful, Imam 'Ali, peace be upon him, discusses the wonderful effect of awareness of God on men's hearts as follows: "The Almighty Creator has made awareness of Him the means for purifying the heart. It is through the awareness of God that deaf hearts begin to hear, blind hearts begin to see, and rebellious hearts become soft and tractable."¹

He says, too: "O Lord! You are the best companion for those who love You and the best source of remedy for all who place reliance upon You. You observe them in their inner states and outer doings and are aware of the depths of their hearts. You know the extent of their insight and knowledge, and their secrets are manifest to You. Their hearts tremble in separation from You, and if solitude causes them fear and unease, the awareness of You comforts them, and if hardship and difficulty assail them, You alone are their refuge."²

Imam Sajjad, upon whom be peace, that paragon of purity and justice who had an unbreakable bond with his Lord, demonstrates to us in his supplicatory prayers the highest expression of love. This was a sacred love that had inflamed all of his being, and although his spirit was sorely pressed by the mortal sorrow of separation, the powerful wing of love enabled him to soar up into the limitless heavens. With indescribable sincerity and humility, he thus prayed at the threshold of God, the Eternal: "O Lord! I have migrated to Your forgiveness and set out to Your mercy.

I ardently desire Your pardon and rely on Your generosity, for there is naught in my conduct to make me worthy of forgiveness, and Your kindness is my only hope.

"O God, send me forth on the best path and grant that I die as a believer in Your religion and be resurrected as a believer in Your religion. "O Lord Whom I worship! O You whose aid the sinners supplicate through Your mercy! O You in the remembrance of Whose generosity the wretched seek refuge! O You in fear of whom the wrongdoers bitterly weep!

"O source of tranquillity for the heart of those banished in fear from their homes! O consoler of those who sorrow with broken hearts! O succourer of the lonely, helper of the rejected and needy! I am that servant who responded obediently when You commanded men to call on you. "O Lord! Here I am prostrate in the dust at Your threshold. O God, if You show mercy to whomever calls upon You in supplication, then let me be earnest in my supplications, or if You forgive whomever weeps in Your presence, then let me hasten to weep.

"O God, do not make hopeless the one who finds no giver but You; do not thrust me away with the hand of rejection now that I stand here at Your threshold."³

Anyone who wishes to understand the profound meaning of supplication must realize that rational

explanation and logical deduction are incapable of yielding a deep understanding of questions touching on spiritual illumination.

The Noble Qur'an describes the conduct and way of life of the unbelievers and materialists as follows:

“The deeds of those who are unbelievers are like a mirage in a flat and waterless desert. A thirsty man will imagine them to be water and hasten toward them, but when he reaches them, he will find no water” (24:39).

“God and His Messengers summon mankind to the truth; other than God, all claims are baseless and vain, for they are unable to meet any of man's needs. One who relies upon them will be like the one who dipped his hand in a well to drink from it but found his hand could not reach the water. The unbelievers summon men only to misguidance” (13: 14).

“The dwelling of those who choose other than God as friends and protectors is like the dwelling of the spider; were the spider to know, the weakest of dwellings is his” (29:41).

“The deeds of those who disbelieve in God are like ashes that are swept away by a strong wind; they have no benefit from all their strivings. This is the path of misguidance, utterly distinct from the path of salvation” (14: 18).

The loftiest expression of thankfulness that man can make at the threshold of his true object of worship is supplication, the profession of love for His absolute perfection and devotion to it. This he does in harmony with all of creation, because all beings praise and glorify God. The Qur'an says:

“The seven heavens and the earth and all they contain praise God. There is no creature not engaged in the praise and magnification of its Lord, but you do not understand their praise. God Almighty is forbearing and most forgiving” (17:44).

This worship and praise naturally do not bring God the slightest benefit, for He possesses all perfections to an infinite degree and neither the world nor man can add anything to Him or take anything away from Him. Is it at all conceivable that He would create man in order to benefit from his worship and praise? On the contrary, it is man who, by gaining knowledge of the supreme being and worshipping Him in His sublimity, reaches his ultimate aim and true perfection.

Professor Ravaillet, celebrated philosopher and physicist, has the following to say about consciousness in the universe: “The new cosmology says that atoms and molecules know what they are doing; in the normal sense of the word, they have awareness of the tasks they perform and of the course of their lives. This consciousness of theirs is superior to the knowledge of the physicist, because all the physicist knows of an atom is that if it were not tangible and recognizable, no one would know anything about it.

“Bodies, motion, speed, the concepts of here and there, radiation, equilibrium, space, atmosphere, distance, together with many other things—all came into existence thanks to the atom. If the atom were

not to exist, what would be the origin of all the remarkable phenomena of creation? There exists the same affinity between consciousness and body as there does between motion and motion-lessness, or the positive and negative aspects of motion.

“Now, space, taken as a whole, is not blind. We demonstrated, if you remember, when examining the field of vision, that the eye is not the basic and determining factor. Since it is fixed at a given point on the globe, according to the limited circumstances of the human species and other terrestrial beings, it has a certain narrow physical field within which it operates.

But as for the space between the earth and the sun, between the sun and the galaxies, and between the galaxies and remote gigantic planets, where huge forces with tremendous range are engaged in exchanging energy there an organ such as the eye of terrestrial creatures has no opportunity to show itself or demonstrate its effectiveness.

“But precisely for this reason we cannot believe that lack of consciousness and awareness prevail in that field for the exchange of vast energies and forces ruled by the laws of attraction, equilibrium, motion, light and centrifugal force. Blindness does not exist in these wondrous phenomena, and even particles of light cannot be regarded as something akin to an illiterate mailman whose only job is to deliver messages he cannot read.⁴”

¹. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 220.

². Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 225.

³. Sahifa as-Sajjadiyya, pp. 163–198.

⁴. Dau Hazar Danishmand dar Justuju-yi Khuda-yi Buzurg, pp. 61 and 99.

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The Incomparability Of The Divine Attributes

In our efforts to describe the Creator and gain knowledge of His attributes, we ideally need concepts and expressions that are beyond our reach. Those terms we do employ are unable to help us in reaching our goal, a true description of God, for our limited understandings cannot accommodate a perception of the nature of God’s infinite attributes. He is exalted above all concepts coined and fashioned by the human mind.

Man, who is created and limited in every respect, should not expect to be able to assess and describe a non-material being by means of material attributes and characteristics.

A reality that is other than contingent beings and natural beings, whose absolute power and infinite knowledge encompass all things, who in the words of the Qur'an:

“Has no similarity to finite and deficient created beings” (42: 11).

Such a reality naturally cannot be discussed in the same breath as ordinary topics.

Imam 'Ali, upon whom be peace, the Master of the God-fearing, said:

“Whoever compares and assimilates God to something or refers to His sacred essence, has not, in reality, had Him in view. Whatever man knows to be the ground of His essence must necessarily be created. God is the Creator and Maker. Whatever depends on other than itself is caused and created. It is God alone who is only a cause (and not an effect).

“He undertakes creation without any means of instruments. He measures without having recourse to thought and reflection. He is free of all need and derives no profit from anything. Time and place do not accompany Him. Tools and instruments do not aid Him. His existence precedes all time and His pre-eternity precedes all beginning.

“He is not limited by any limit, for it is phenomena that delimit their essence by means of the limits peculiar to them and it is bodies that indicate their likes. His sacred essence does not admit the concepts of motion and motion-lessness; how is it possible that something created within phenomena should also exist in His being?

“Were there to be motion and stillness in His essence, He would be exposed to mutation and change; He would be divisible and the pre-eternity of His being would be negated.

“He is the source of all powers, and hence no being can have any effect upon Him. Finally, He is the Creator Who does not change or disappear and Who is never hidden from the people of knowledge and insight.¹”

The fact that God's attributes are utterly separate from ours and cannot be examined through a comparison with our attributes is because the attributes of that fountainhead of being are different from the attributes of all other beings.

For example, we have the ability to perform certain tasks, but this is not the same as the power of God; in our case, the attribute is one thing and the entity it describes is another. When we boast of our knowledge, we are not one and identical with our knowledge. During infancy there was no trace of learning or knowledge in our beings, but later we gradually acquired a certain amount of knowledge by learning. Knowledge and power form two distinct comers of our being; they are neither identical with our essence nor are they united with each other in our being. The attributes are accidents and our essence is a substance; each is independent of the other.

But the case of the divine attributes is fundamentally different. When we say that God is all-knowing and all-powerful, what we mean is that He is the source of knowledge and power: the attribute is not something other than the entity it describes although it is conceptually distinct. In reality, His attributes are identical with His essence; for His essence does not constitute a substance to which accidents might adhere.

He is absolute being, identical with knowledge, power, life, stability and realization; He is not subject to any mental or external limit or restriction.

Since we are nurtured in the very heart of nature and are, therefore, familiar with it at all times, and since whatever we see has particular dimensions and shape, a time and a place, and all the other properties of bodies—in short, because of the habituation of our mind to natural phenomena—we try to measure all things with the criteria of nature, even intellectual and rational concepts. The criteria of nature thus serve as the point of departure for all scientific and philosophical investigations.

To imagine a being who has none of the properties of matter and who is other than whatever our minds might conceive, and to understand attributes that are inseparable from the essence, not only requires great precision but also demands of us that we completely empty our mind of material beings.

Imam ‘Ali, peace be upon him, has spoken eloquently, profoundly and meaningfully on this matter. He emphasizes that men cannot imprison God in a description, saying:

“Pure monotheism and perfect faith lie in exempting, negating and excluding from His sacred essence all the attributes of created beings. God forbid that He should be described by any such attribute, because when He is so described, it appears as if each attribute is separate from its possessor and alien to it. So, one who says something in description of the Creator imagining Him to possess some attribute superadded to the essence has made Him the partner of something and suggested He consists of two parts. Such an attempt to describe God arises from ignorance and lack of awareness.²”

Mental concepts cannot describe God by recourse to finite attributes; being limited, they are inapplicable to God’s being. Each attribute, with respect to the particular meaning it conveys, is separate from all other attributes. For example, the attribute of life is quite different from the attribute of power; they are not interchangeable. It is possible that certain instances might gather all these attributes together in a single location, but each of them lexically has a different purport.

When the human mind wishes to ascribe an attribute to a certain thing, his aim is to establish in a given instance a kind of unity between the attribute and the entity it describes. But since the attribute is conceptually distinct from the entity, the mind inevitably decrees that they remain separate from each other.

The only means for the knowledge of things is to describe them through the use of mental concepts, which are conceptually separate from each other and, therefore, necessarily finite. Those concepts

cannot, therefore, be used to gain knowledge of that Most Transcendent Reality. He is exalted above the possibility of being known by description, and whoever limits God with a given attribute has failed to gain any knowledge of Him.

By mentioning a few examples, we can understand to some degree how the attributes are not superadded to the essence. Take into consideration that the rays of heat proceeding from fire convey heat to everything, so that one of the qualities and attributes of fire is burning and the distribution of heat.

Has this quality occupied one corner of the being of the fire's being? Of course not; the entire being of fire has the attribute of burning and the distribution of heat.

Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq, upon whom be peace, said in answer to someone who was questioning him about the nature of God: "He is something utterly other than all things; He alone is identical with the very essence of being. He is not a body and has no form. The senses cannot perceive Him and He cannot be sought out. He escapes the grasp of the five senses; fantasy and imagination are unable to perceive Him. The passage of time and the succession of ages in no wise diminish Him and He is exempt from all mutation and change.³"

¹. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 181.

². Nahj al-Balaghah, ed. Fayz al-Islam, p. 14.

³. Usul al-Kafi, Kitab at-Tawhid, p. 150.

[1] [1]

SHARES

The Unity Of God

When the question of divine unity is raised in religious discourse, it is taken to include many topics including belief in the oneness of the essence, so, too, the compounding of the attributes and the distinction between essence and attributes is totally excluded with respect to unity of the attributes. Distinctness and differentiation derive from limitation.

If we posit a difference among the divine attributes, it is valid only from the point of view of our rational thought and reflection; a multiplicity of directions and of superadded attributes cannot affect the divine essence as such.

If in the world of nature, we look at a body through different coloured pieces of glass" that body will appear to us in a succession of different colours. Similarly, when we contemplate the unique divine

essence with our reason, we sometimes ascribe knowledge to that infinite being with regard to the fact that all creatures are at all times present before Him; we then say that He is all-knowing. At other times we are aware of His ability to create all things, and we then speak of His being all-powerful.

So, when we perceive through these various apertures, the different attributes which appear to resemble the properties of our limited beings, we attempt to separate them from His infinite essence. Objectively, however, all the concepts conveyed by the different attributes have a single existence and convey a single reality, a reality that is free of all defect and deficiency, that possesses all perfections such as power, mercy, knowledge, blessedness, wisdom and splendour.

Imam 'Ali, upon whom be peace, the Commander of the Faithful, says in the first sermon of the Nahj al-Balaghah,

“The beginning of religion is the knowledge of the pure divine essence, and the perfection of such knowledge lies in faith in that sacred being. Perfect belief” in turn” lies in sincere devotion at His threshold, and perfect devotion is none other than the dissociation of that Unique Principle from all the attributes of contingent beings.

“Beware, for He cannot be described with any attribute, for then difference would appear between the name and the attribute. Whoever attempts to describe Him with an attribute is, in effect, creating a like and a partner for Him, or rather he is seeing God to be two. Whoever sees God to be two is attempting to divide His being. Such a person lacks all knowledge and insight into the nature of God’s unique being and is blind and ignorant.

“The one who is thus deprived of vision will attempt to point to God (i.e., restrict Him to a given time and place), and whoever does this posits imprisoning limits for the Creator of all being and makes Him finite. Whoever limits and restricts Him in this way regards Him as a measurable quantity. Whoever asks: “Where is God?” unintentionally makes of Him a body enclosed within another body, and whoever asks, “In what is God engaged?” unintentionally states that certain places are empty of His being.”

So, each attribute is infinite and coextensive with the infinitude of the essence. God is free of and exempt from finite attributes that might be distinct from each other and separate from the essence.

Once we realize that God’s being derives from Himself, it follows that an absolute being is infinite in all respects. If being and non-being are equally conceivable for an entity, it must acquire being from some external cause to come into being; self-origination is, after all, impossible. It is, then, only absolute being that derives from itself; all other realities are subordinate to it and knowable only by means of it.

Once an essence is identical with its own existence, it is infinite with respect to knowledge, power, non-origination and everlastingness, for all of these are forms of being, and an essence that is identical with existence must necessarily possess all these perfections to an infinite degree.

The oneness of God is one of His foremost attributes. All the heavenly religions, in their original and undistorted teachings, have summoned mankind to a pure affirmation of God's unity, untainted by the ascription of partners to Him. Such ascription of partners, in all its forms and dimensions, is the most harmful error to which man is liable. It has occurred throughout history as a result of ignorance, unawareness, and turning away from the guidance of reason and the teaching of the Prophets.

If men believed in God according to correct thought, the proofs of reason and the guidance of the Prophets, it would be impossible for them to accept any contingent phenomenon or created thing in His place, and to imagine that any other being might be His partner or equal in commanding and controlling the destinies of the world, or even have some share in administering the order of the universe.

If numerous gods ruled over the world and each of these gods acted and gave commands in accordance with his own will, the order of the universe would dissolve into anarchy. The Qur'an says:

"If there were numerous gods other than the one true God" the order of the heavens and the earth would collapse. So exalted be the Lord of the Throne above what they say concerning Him"
(21:22)

If we say that God is one, it is because He is not a body. A body is a compound of a series of different elements, the union of which causes it to come into being. Compounding, division and generation are all attributes of contingent beings and bodies; we, therefore, negate them in the case of God and assert that whatever has come into existence, as a result of compounding and generation, neither is God nor resembles Him.

It is feasible to conceive of plurality within a given category once we speak of limitations such as quantity, quality, and time. God, however, is not limited by any of these, and it is, therefore, impossible to conceive of Him having any like or congener.

If we try to imagine the essence of water, without any limiting attribute, and repeat this exercise several times, nothing will be added to our original conception. Because in the beginning we conceived of water in an absolute sense, not limited by any condition, quantity or quality, it is impossible that in our subsequent attempts to conceive of it, a new hypothesis should occur to us.

But when we add to the essence of water certain limiting attributes which are extrinsic to it, different forms and instances of water will appear and with them, plurality. Examples of this would be rainwater, spring water, river water, sea water, all of these observed at different times and in different places, here and there. If we eliminate all these limiting attributes and look again at the fundamental essence of water, we will see that it is exempt from all duality and is a single essence.

We must be aware that any being which can be contained in a certain place necessarily has need of that place, and any being that be contained in a certain time owes its very existence to the defining conditions of that time: its existence will be realized only within the specific temporal framework where

those conditions obtain.

So, when we come to know a being that is present at all times and in all places and who possesses the highest conceivable degree of perfection, and other than whom nothing is perfect or absolute and free from defect, we must recognize that to impute duality to such a lofty reality is to make it finite and limited.

Indeed, God is not one in a numerical sense so that we might imagine Him to be the first member of a category that is followed by a second. His oneness is such that if we imagine a second to exist with Him, that second must be identical with the first.

Since the multiplicity of things derives from the limiting circumstances that differentiate them from each other, it would be totally irrational to posit a second for a being that is free of all limits and bounds. The existence of a second would mean that the first had limits and bounds, and if limits and bounds are excluded, we cannot possibly have two beings; our conception of the second will simply be a repetition of the first.

The doctrine of divine unity means that if we consider God alone, to the exclusion of all phenomenal being, His sacred essence is completely affirmed. Likewise, if we regard His being together with phenomenal being, again His existence will be completely affirmed. But if, on the contrary, we look at contingent phenomena to the exclusion of God, they cannot in any way be said to be existent, because their existence is dependent on the Creator for its origination and perpetuation.

So, whenever we ascribe some limit and condition to God, it means that God will cease to exist whenever that limit and condition cease to exist. However, God's existence is not subject to condition and plurality, and reason cannot, therefore, posit a second member of His category.

Let us give an illustration. Suppose that the world is infinite it has no bounds and in whatever direction we travel, we never come to its end. With such a concept of the world of bodies, all of its dimensions being infinite, can we imagine another world to exist in addition to it, whether finite or infinite? Certainly, we cannot, because the concept of an infinite world of bodies necessarily excludes the existence of another such world. If we try to conceive of another such world, it will be either identical with the first world or a segment of it.

So, considering that the divine essence is absolute being, to posit the existence of a second being resembling Him is exactly the same as imagining a second world of bodies to co-exist with an infinite world of bodies. In other words, it is impossible.

It is, thus, clear that the meaning of God's being One is not that He is not two; it is that a second is inconceivable and that the exclusive possession of divinity is necessitated by His essence. He becomes distinct from other than Himself, not by means of any limit but by means of His essence itself which can clearly be distinguished from all else. All other beings, by contrast, attain their distinctiveness not from their essence but rather from God.

We see clearly that extensive interrelatedness and harmony exist among all the components of the world. Man produces a carbonic gas that enables plants to breathe, and trees and plants, reciprocally produce oxygen that enables man to breathe. As a result of this interchange between man and plants, a certain amount of oxygen is preserved at all times; were it not to be so, no trace of human life would remain on earth.

The amount of heat received by the earth from the sun corresponds to the need of living beings for heat. The speed of the earth's rotation around the sun and the distance it keeps from that source of energy and heat have been fixed at a level that makes human life on earth possible. The distance of the earth from the sun determines a degree of heat that exactly corresponds to the needs of life upon earth.

Were the speed of the earth's rotation to be a hundred miles an hour instead of a thousand miles an hour, as it now is, our nights and days would be ten times as long, and the intensity of the sun's heat would rise to the point that all plant life would be burnt and the cold nights of winter would freeze all fresh shoots in the ground.

If, on the one hand, the rays of the sun were to be reduced by half, all living beings would be frozen in place by the extreme cold. If, on the other hand, they were to be doubled, the sperm of life would never come to fruition. If the moon were farther away from the earth, the tides would become strong and fierce enough to uproot the mountains.

Seen in this light, the world appears to be a caravan in which all the travellers are joined together like links in a chain. All of its parts, big or small, are striving cooperatively to advance in a single direction. Throughout this organism, everything fulfils its particular function and all things aid and complement each other. A profound and invisible link joins every single atom to all other atoms.

A world that is thus replete with unity must necessarily be connected to a single source and principle. Being derives from a single origin; if the entirety of the universe is one, its creator must also be one. The fact that the creator has brought forth unity within the multiplicity of the created world is in itself a convincing proof of His oneness, power and wisdom. The Qur'an says:

“Ask them, ‘Show me these partners whom you worship in place of God. Have they created anything from earth or have they shared with God in the creation of the heavens? Have we given them a book on which they rely in their ascription of partners to us?’ No, the wrongdoers deceive each other with their false promises” (35:40).

“Certainly, it is God Who preserves the heavens and the earth from collapse and annihilation; were they about to collapse and be annihilated, there is none other who could preserve them. Know that God is most forbearing and forgiving” (35:41).

Our innate nature, which is a fundamental dimension of our existence, also confirms the oneness of God. In severe crises and times of hardship, our desires are all focused on one point; we turn in one

direction and entrust our hearts to Him.

One of the pupils of Imam Ja'far Sadiq, upon whom be peace, asked him, "What proof is there for the oneness of God?" The Imam answered him: "The proof of His oneness is the interrelatedness and continuity of all creation, the integral order of being that rules over all things. God says in the Qur'an: 'Were there a creator in the heavens and earth other than the One God, their order would vanish and the world would be destroyed.¹'"

So, the regularity and comprehensiveness of the order that ruled over all things refutes the theory that there might be several gods, ruling the same or different spheres.

Although the Qur'an stresses the unity of God in creation and wisdom, it also mentions the role of the causes and means that implement the divine command. It says:

"God sent down water from the heavens and revived the earth thereby after its death. In that is a clear sign for men who pay heed" (16:65).

Once we reach the conclusion that God alone is engaged in creating, ordering and managing the entire universe, and that all sources of effect and causality are subordinate to His will and command, each having its particular role assigned to it by God once we reach this conclusion, how can we imagine any other being to be on the same level as God and bow down in worship before it? The Qur'an says:

"Some men regard other beings as equivalent to God and love them as if they were God but the believers devote all of their love to God" (2:165).

"Among His signs are the night and the day and the sun and the moon. Do not bow down and prostrate yourselves before the sun and the moon. Instead, prostrate yourselves humbly before the God that created them" (41:37).

¹. Usul al-Kafi, Kitab at-Tawhid.

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SHARES

The Infinite Power Of God

The infinite power of God has no clearer proof than that furnished by the study and examination of the phenomena of the created universe and the multiple forms and colorations of nature that can never be

fully described.

When we look at God's creation, we find ourselves confronted with so vast an energy that no limit can be imagined for it. A look at creation and the millions of truths secreted in the wonders of nature and the depths of man's own being provides the clearest indication of the scale of the power of the One Who has created it, for the rich and complex order of being admits of no other explanation.

It is God's incomparable power that compels man to bow humbly before the Creator of this great scheme. There is no word to express the dimensions of His power; that unique essence has much power that whenever He wills a thing to come into existence, it suffices for the command "Be!" to issue forth from Him and the object addressed will be. The Qur'an says:

"When He wills a certain thing, He commands it 'Be!' And it is" (36:82).

The law expounded in this verse is the best indicator of His limitless power and manifestation of His boundless power and splendour. It negates any limit that might be set on God's power and proclaims the inadequacy of all criteria and measures when confronted with this divine law.

The champions of the natural sciences, the men of the laboratory, despite all the advances they have achieved, have not yet gained complete knowledge of the inner secrets of a single one among the numerous and varied beings of the created universe. Nonetheless, the partial and defective knowledge that man has acquired concerning a few of the beings that exist in this world is enough for him to realize with all his being that the great power that has created such variety and abundance in the universe must be infinite.

Consider the range of His creation: tiny creatures and monstrous beasts with strange appearances both dwelling in the depths of the ocean; delicate and melodious birds with multi-coloured wings, the beauty of which skilled artists imitate as an adornment to their craft; stars that shine in the heavens and the sun that rises and sets; the dawn and the moonlight; the planets, galaxies and nebula each of which sometimes contains at its heart millions of great shining stars giddy in their apparent infinitude.

Does not a creation such as this, awe inspiring in its splendour, indicate the infinite power of its Maker? Can one disregard the power of a Creator Who imparts such variety to life and made distinct, finite forms of it appear in all this vast range of phenomena?

Now, given the fact that all these captivating forms of creation ultimately arise from the atom, the question of being cannot be explained except by reference to a guiding and infinite power. It is He Who impels all things toward the assumption of life-giving form and possesses the power and intelligence to plan and design this vast and precise scheme.

Large and small, difficult and easy, are properties pertaining to finite beings; in the infinite realm of God's essence and attributes, there is no question of great and little, much and few. Impotence and inability are

caused by the finiteness of the energy at the disposal of an agent, by the existence of an obstacle on his path, or by the absence of means and instruments; they are inconceivable in the case of an infinite power. The Qur'an says:

“Nothing in the heavens or on earth can induce weakness or impotence in God; indeed, God is all-knowing and all-powerful” (35:44).

Although God is capable of doing all things, He has created the world according to a precise and specific scheme in the framework of which a set role has been assigned to certain phenomena in the origination of others. Those phenomena are completely and unquestioningly subordinate to His command while fulfilling that role and never rebelling against His orders in the slightest. The Qur'an says:

“The sun, the moon and the stars are all at His command. Be aware that creation belongs only to God; it is His penetrating command that in its exalted purity creates the world and all it contains” (7:54).

Strictly speaking, no creature in the scheme of the universe can be a manifestation of power or have any share in His will and command, for just as God has no partner in His essence, so, too, He has no partner in His agenthood.

Just as all creatures in the world lack independence in their essence and are dependent on Him, they also lack it in producing acts and effects. Every agent and cause derive the essence of their being from God and also its power to act and produce an effect.

Whenever He wills and necessitates it, the order that encloses all beings abandons its role, for that order is itself subordinate to His will, precious and firm though it may be. The Creator Who has assigned a particular effect to every factor and cause is able to neutralize and suspend that effect at any instant. Just as one command brought the order of the universe into existence, another command robs phenomena of their customary effect.

Thus, the Qur'an says:

“They said, ‘Burn him [Abraham] and thus render help unto your gods, if you are men of action” (21:68).

“We commanded the fire, ‘be cool for Abraham and harm him not” (21:69).

“They sought a stratagem against him, but We made them the losers” (21:70).

Although the powerful attraction exerted by the sun and the earth prevails over a vast space, both bodies are subordinate to His will. As soon as He gives a little bird the necessary power, the bird is able to resist the pull of the earth and take flight. The Qur'an says:

“Do they not look at the birds in the heavens and see how the skies have been subjugated to them? It is God alone Who keeps them aloft, and in this there is an evident sign of God’s power for the people of faith” (16:79).

Whatever phenomenon may be imagined to exist in the world of being finds its needs for sustenance and life met by the Creator. Therefore, whatever power and capacity is found in the scheme of creation must necessarily go back to the infinite power of God.

Imam ‘Ali, peace be upon him, the Commander of the Faithful, says in a sermon reproduced in the Nahj al-Balaghah:

“O God, we cannot penetrate the depths of Your splendour and majesty. We know only that You are living and self-subsistent, that You are exempt from eating and sleeping. No mind can perceive You and no eye can see You. But You see all eyes, You know the life span of all things, and You are all-powerful. Although we have perceived nothing of Your creation, we are astounded by Your power and praise You mightily. That which is hidden from us and our eyes cannot see and our mind and intelligence cannot attain, which is concealed from us by veils of the unseen, is much greater than what we can see...[1](#)”

When man decides to build something—for example, a hospital—he assembles the necessary tools and pieces of equipment that do not have any essential relationship with each other, and, then, connects them with each other by means of a series of artificial relationships in order to reach his goal.

In order to create such artificial relationships, he makes use of different forces and objects that he finds to be already existing. His work and activity are a part of the system of creation; they are not properly speaking creative activity, but only a form of motion that takes place within existing objects. Divine creation forms a quite different category from the production of artificial relationships between unrelated objects. God originates things with all their properties, forces and energies and characteristics.

When we say that God is all-powerful, we must be aware that His power relates only to things that are possible. Things that are rationally impossible are entirely outside the sphere of His power, and to use the word “power” or “capacity” in connection with things that are impossible is incorrect and meaningless. Although the power of God is, indeed, unlimited, the receptive capacity of things and their ability to serve as locus for the manifestation of divine power must be taken into consideration.

The implementation of God’s will is intertwined with the relations between cause and effect, with the complex network of reasons and causes. In order for a thing to become the object of the divine will, it must not be impossible and must, in its essence, possess receptive capacity; divine will is accomplished by means of the receptivity of things. It is true that the divine effulgence is infinite and constantly overflowing, but the ground destined to receive it may be defective and unable to absorb the infinite share that superabundant source offers it.

The ocean is an immensely abundant source of water, but a tanker has only a limited capacity to take on its water; in fact, only a minute amount of that water can be loaded onto a tanker. Clearly enough, what is finite and limited in this case is the capacity of the tanker, not the water in the ocean.

Someone once asked Imam 'Ali, the Commander of the Faithful, upon whom be peace, "Is your Lord able to fit the whole world into a hen's egg?" He answered: "God Almighty is, indeed, able to do anything, but what you ask is something impossible.²"

So, although God's sacred essence is utterly free of all impotence and inability, it is meaningless and irrational to ask whether God can do something inherently impossible.

One whose heart beats with the love of God and flows over with belief in the Creator of all being will never be discouraged, lonely and hopeless even in the midst of the most complex difficulties. Whatever deed he undertakes he does so in the consciousness of being in the protective shade of a supreme power that can make him triumph over all difficulties.

A man who is aware of God and knows that he enjoys His support can resist and endure all kinds of hardship. Difficulties are for him like foam on swift vanishing foam on the face of the waters. The fire that burns within him becomes ever brighter and he emerges stronger than ever from the crucible of hardship.

Throughout the toils he endures, he is comforted and strengthened by God's kindness and favour, and it is this that forms the true motor of his activity. Failure does not block his path and cause him to surrender; instead, with sincere intention and diligent effort, he continues his strivings until final victory.

He understands well that his efforts cannot remain fruitless and that victory goes to the deserving. Whenever He wills, God takes the hand of the fallen and the oppressed who have no refuge other than Him and raises them up to the apex of power. Sometimes, too, He rubs in the dust of humiliation and disaster the noses of the powerful and arrogant oppressors who believe only in violence and the logic of force and treat men as if they were worthless.

How many arrogant tyrants have been cast down by disaster in the course of human history, sinking and vanishing in a tempest of shame!

The story of God's messengers represents in itself a complete and ideal model of human values. We all know how the messengers stood alone against the oppressive forces of their day in order to guide men to salvation, reform their society, and inculcate lofty values in them. In doing so, they lit the first spark that ultimately destroyed polytheism.

The response aroused by their beliefs caused such a positive tumult that they were able to change the face and direction of history. They laid the foundations of monotheistic worship and established the principles of virtue in the most comprehensive way.

Who can deny the role played by their devotion and faith in the untiring struggle they waged? How far can will power alone take man, and how much can it enable him to endure and sacrifice?

A cursory review of the proud history of the Prophets' lives enables us all to behold, in the most vivid fashion possible, the sincerity and devotion they displayed, their mercy and forbearance, and their intense desire to guide and reform men. The fundamental secret of their success was the fact they never thought of themselves for a single instant; they sincerely renounced their own beings, making them a gift to God's cause. God then responded by bestowing immortality and everlasting fame on them.

[1.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 159.

[2.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, IV, p. 143.

[1] [1]

SHARES

The Boundless Knowledge Of God

A Creator Who cannot be circumscribed by place, for Whose Essence no limit is conceivable, of Whose being not a single part of the heavens and earth is empty—such a Creator is naturally aware of all things; there is nothing throughout the whole scheme of being on which the bright rays of His knowledge do not shine.

The events that occur in the most distant part of the universe, happenings that occurred billions of years ago or will occur billions of years in the future—all are contained in the sphere of His knowledge, and the most comprehensive attempts at interpreting His knowledge are, therefore, doomed to failure.

In order to understand the extensive scope of His knowledge, we stretch the limits of our thought, apply our intelligence to reflection and search, and try to advance to our goal with a clear mind. In the last resort, however, our mental apparatus lacks the skills required for reaching the goal.

If we were to exist everywhere in just the same way that we exist at a given place and in a given time, so that no place was deprived of our presence, nothing would be hidden from us and we would be aware of everything.

For us, the world of being has been divided into two sectors: the manifest and the hidden. Things are “hidden” in the sense that certain truths, being infinite and non-material, cannot be perceived by the outer senses. It is important to remember that the entirety of existence does not consist of matters that lie within the range of the empirical sciences.

In order to understand the secrets and mysteries of creation we need, as it were, a launch platform. The elevation we are able to reach depends on the intellectual force we have at our disposal and the degree of understanding that propels our ascent. Once we have a suitable launch platform, many realities become knowable to us.

Through its use of the term “ghayb” (hidden), the Noble Qur’an sets before man a broad vision of reality. God’s messengers have also striven to raise man’s awareness of the created universe to a level that embraces infinite as well as the finite and the boundaries of the unseen as well as the dimensions of the manifest.

For God, the “hidden” does not exist; for Him, the universe is entirely “manifest” The Qur’an says:

“He is the Knower of the Hidden and the Manifest, the Compassionate and the Merciful” (59:22).

Whatever is made by man derives from the skill, intelligence and knowledge of its maker. The more subtle and refined the product, the more clearly it displays the profound and extensive knowledge of its maker, and the more fully it proves his ability to plan and design.

Man’s handiwork is not in any way comparable to the mysteries and splendour of creation. Nonetheless, it suggests to us that the harmonious and orderly scheme of the universe, and the manifestation of intelligence in this vast, beautiful and astounding pattern of creation, must necessarily indicate that the one who plans it and endows it with order must possess boundless and comprehensive knowledge. The orderliness of the universe is the strongest proof for the existence of a being that overflows with the knowledge, will, awareness and wisdom and has designed the wonders of creation in accordance with a precisely calculated plan. The signs of His infinite knowledge are to be seen plainly in every particle of every phenomenon.

The experiments and theories of scientists furnish proof for whoever desires it of the boundless knowledge of God and its countless manifestations in the insect, animal and vegetable realms.

God is aware of the course of the stars in space, the tumult ridden world of the nebulae and the rotation of the galaxies; of all things from pre-eternity to post-eternity; of the total number of atoms in all the heavenly bodies; of the motions of the billions of creatures, large and small, that move on the face of the earth and in the depths of the oceans; of the norms and laws that unfailingly regulate nature; of the hidden and manifest aspects of all things. He even knows the perplexities of the distraught better than they do themselves.

Listen again to what the Qur’an has to say:

“Is not the one who created the world aware of the secrets of His own creation? Certainly, He has knowledge of all the subtleties and mysteries of the world” (67:14).

“Nothing is hidden from God, neither on earth nor in the heavens” (3:5).

Natural scientists are better acquainted than others with the subtle and precise mysteries that are implanted in every particle of creation; they are aware from their studies and researches of the various calculations that are built into things both living and lifeless, in cells and globules; of the various forms of action and reaction, outward and inward, that take place in them; and of the effects of various materials and substances.

Thus, they witness the signs for God's astounding wisdom and infinite knowledge in nature or, as the Qur'an puts it:

"...on the horizons" (41:53).

More than others, they are exposed to the manifestation of God's attributes and perfections, including His unbounded knowledge, and if they do not reject the call of their conscience, they will also discern the existence of the Creator more clearly.

A certain thinker once said, "Our world resembles a great idea more than it does a great machine. As a theory or a scientific definition, it can be said that the world is the product of a great idea, the manifestation of a thought and an idea superior to our own. Scientific thought seems to be moving in the direction of this theory."

God's knowledge is not restricted to things past or to present events and objects; His knowledge of the future is exactly like His knowledge of the present.

God's knowledge is, so to speak, "immediate" in the complete sense of the word. It is not in the first instance necessary that there should be an object of knowledge to which His knowledge should attach itself. All things stand revealed before Him, for at the very same time that His sacred essence is utterly other than all creatures and phenomena, it is also not separate from them: all things past and future are in His unmediated presence.

Imam 'Ali, upon whom be peace, the Commander of the Faithful, says: "He knows all things, but not through means and instruments, the absence of which would entail the cessation of His knowledge. There is not some added entity called 'knowledge' interposed between Him and the objects of His knowledge; there is nothing but His essence alone.¹"

Here, Imam 'Ali, peace be upon him, is referring to the theological principle that God's awareness of things is direct and immediate. In His knowledge of phenomena, God has no need of the mental forms that are the basis of acquired knowledge. Were He to acquire His knowledge by means of those forms, need would arise in Him, whereas He is utterly free of need.

The one from whom the existence of the world and its inhabitants derives, who is capable of meeting every imaginable need, who grants every perfection and bounty—is it all conceivable that He should Himself be imprisoned by need?

Mental forms remain in our minds only so long as we wish them to exist; they disappear as soon as we withdraw our attention from them, because they are fashioned and created by us. This form of knowledge is not direct and unmediated and it is, therefore, termed “acquired knowledge,” by contrast with “immediate knowledge,” that has no need of a means.

The difference between us, who create our own mental forms and the Creator Who originated all being, lies in this, that we owe our very existences to Him and, therefore, stand in need of Him, whereas He is the true Creator and vivifier of all things, is free of need, and does not need the exercise of vision to acquire knowledge.

The delineation of past and future events that takes place on the horizons of our being and thought is inevitably limited, since we occupy a given time and space outside of which we have no existence. We are material phenomena, and matter, according to the laws of physics and relativity, needs time and place in its gradual and continuous process of development and change. Past and future have no meaning for a being who is present from pre-eternity to post-eternity, in all places and at all times and free from the captivity of matter and its consequences.

Since every phenomenon relies on the infinite existence of the Creator for its origin and existence, no veil or barrier can be supposed to exist between God and that phenomenon; God encompasses its inner and outer dimensions and is utterly empowered over it.

Someone once asked Imam ‘Ali, upon whom be peace, the Commander of the Faithful, “Where is God?”

Imam ‘Ali answered: “It is not correct to ask where God is because it is God Who made place. Nor is it correct to ask how God is, of what nature is God, since it is God Who created all nature. Further, it is not correct to ask what God is because it is God Who created all quiddity.

“Glorified be God Almighty in the waves of Whose splendour the wise are unable to swim, the remembrance of Whose eternity halts all thought in its track, and in Whose vast heaven of sanctity the intellect loses its way!”²

The Qur’an says:

“God is aware of all that exists on the face of the earth and in the depths of the oceans. He knows of every leaf that falls and every seed that is hidden in the darkness of the earth. All things, fresh and dry, are clear and evident to Him” (6:59).

Let us imagine that we are in a room overlooking the street and watching through a small window the mass of cars that swiftly moves down the street. Obviously, we cannot see all the cars at once; we see them one by one as they pass in front of the window, and then they disappear from sight. If we knew nothing about cars, we might imagine that they gradually come into being on one side of the window and cease to exist on the other.

Now this small window corresponds exactly to our field of vision; it determines a past and a future for the cars. Those who are outside the room standing on the sidewalk see all the cars moving along together.

Our situation with respect to the past and future of the world is like that of the person watching the cars through a small window.

Once we realize that God is above time and place, we understand that all past and future events are always present and existent in front of Him, like a painting.

We ought, therefore, to have a sense of responsibility toward a Creator Who is aware of the slightest act and deed of creation—as the Qur’an says: **“He knows all that you do” (2:283)** – and avoid any sin or mistake that would cause us to become distant from Him. We ought to worship God, the possessor of absolute knowledge Who has caused us to traverse these various stages and to attain the capacities we now have. We ought not to disobey His commands Which open up for us the path to true felicity and the ultimate aim of man, and we should accept no goal other than Him.

In order to reach God, we must adorn ourselves with divine attributes and prepare ourselves, during our brief sojourn in this world, for the meeting with Him. Then we may return to Him, the source, origin and beginning of our existence. This requires action and striving effort aimed at refining the self, for the responsibility to act in this sense has been placed on man’s shoulders as a Divine trust.

1. Saduq, Tawhid, p. 73.

2. Bihar al-Anwar, III, p.297.

[1] [1]

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