

Divine Power in the Holy Qur'an and Traditions

By: Muhammad Sa'idi-Mihr Amir Divani

The Holy Qur'an emphasizes the power of God through repetition of qualities such as qādir (able) and qadir (all-powerful), and thus it regards God as omnipotent. In addition, the phrase "God is capable of all things"³¹ and similar phrases have been used many times over in the Qur'an—all of which inform of the generality and illimitability of divine power.

In various Qur'anic verses, we encounter a type of reasoning regarding the boundlessness of God's power. As an example, the Qur'an regards the creation of the heavens and earth as a sign of God's ability to resurrect the dead: "Have they not seen that Allah, who created the heavens and earth and has not been wearied by creating them, is able to resurrect the dead? Yes indeed, He is capable of all things."³²

In addition, the generality of God's power is emphasized in many Hadiths. According to one Hadith, Imam Ṣādiq ('a) declared: "He is All-encompassing in knowledge and power with respect to His creations... All things are equal for Him in His knowledge and power."³³

4. Divine Life

God is living. Like knowledge and power, this attribute can also be ascribed to both God and some of His creations. Through contemplation of the uses of this attribute, we realize that a living being is a being that possesses active volition and awareness.

Thus, in definition we can say: "Life is a type of existential perfection which manifests such that the creature possessing it engages in volitional actions, and has knowledge and awareness." According to this definition, activity and awareness are signs of life, and lack of these qualities in an object shows that object to be lifeless.

With regard to this explanation, the fact that God has life means that the Divine Essence possesses a specific perfection that affirms His knowledge and actions. Naturally, in order to uphold the holiness and sublimity of God, we must purify this attribute of all limits and restrictions perceived in the life of created things.

For instance, in natural creatures such as humans and animals, life is accompanied by growth, consumption of food, reproduction, and movement such that these things signify life in these creatures. However, we must not regard these qualities as necessary to life and we must not assume that life is absolutely linked with these qualities; rather, these qualities are only necessary in natural beings. In fact, divine life is pure of all limiting properties, which are not befitting of the divinity of God. Divine life is inherent, past eternal (azalī), future eternal (abadī), and immutable without it being associated with the necessities of natural life such as growth, consumption of food, etc.

Divine Life according to the Qur'an and Traditions

There are many Qur'anic verses wherein God is accredited with the quality of life: "He is Allah; there is no god but Him, the Living, the Everlasting."³⁴

"He is the Living; there is no Allah but Him, so call upon Him purifying your religion for Him, wholeheartedly."³⁵

The phrase, "هو الحيّ" (He is the Living)—according to Arabic grammar³⁶—indicates the exclusivity of life for God and holds that true life is unique to God. Bearing in mind the fact that inferior degrees of life exist in other beings and that essentially, the Qur'an introduces God as the life-giver of all beings,³⁷ it seems that the signification of this exclusiveness is that only divine life is inherent, and past and future eternal, while lives of all creatures are temporary and 'on loan' from God.

The inexhaustibility and eternality of divine life has been stressed in various Qur'anic verses: "And put thy trust in the Ever-living who dies not."³⁸

In various Hadiths, the truth of divine life and its differences with the lives of creations are enumerated. The following is a profound and precise Hadith from Imam Kāzīm ('a): "And God is living but not a life that has come into being; His life does not have an [independent] existence with which to be qualified; it does not possess limitative conditions or a location in which to remain or a place in which to abide; rather, His life is inherent."³⁹

This valuable Hadith reveals that in contrast to the lives of His creations, divine life has not come into being; on the contrary, in adherence with the past eternality of the Divine Essence, His life is also past eternal. Life is not accidental and separate from His essence; rather, it is one with His essence. Thus, in accordance with His essence, it is illimitable and boundless.

5. Past and Future Eternality

God is past and future eternal.⁴⁰ Most monotheists believe that God is a past eternal being, meaning that He has always existed and, in the past, there was no time in which He has not existed. Furthermore, God is future eternal—meaning that no time will come when He does not exist.

With regard to the opinions of Moslem scholars, there are evidently two perspectives in the interpretation of past and future eternity. According to the first exposition, God exists in all times; He has existed in the past, He exists now, and He will exist in the future. This explanation necessitates that God be a temporal being, restricted to the confines of time, and subject to the passage of time. In contrast, the second interpretation states past and future eternity. Basically, this means that the essence of God transcends the framework of time while being immanent throughout time and all temporal beings.⁴¹ According to this perspective, saying that God has always existed or will perpetually exist in the future, is a careless and negligent statement.

Even though the general meaning of past and future eternity is compatible with the first interpretation, it would appear that the second interpretation presents a more precise and in-depth perspective because the absoluteness of the Divine Essence signifies that His essence is not restricted to any limits or conditions—even time. To state this differently, time—with regard to the prevailing definition—is considered a quality of mobile and material creatures while the Divine Essence is pure of materiality and motion.

Accordingly, when speaking of the past and future eternity of God, we must bear in mind that the exact and acceptable meaning is that Divine Essence transcends time and that He surpasses all temporal beings. Naturally, we do not deny the fact that as long as we are restricted to the natural and physical world and have a temporal existence similar to all other natural creatures, it is difficult to imagine an ultra-temporal entity—for whom the past, present, and future are the same.⁴²

Past and Future Eternity of God in the Qur'an and Traditions

The terms “azalī” (past eternal) and “abadi” (future eternal) are not mentioned in the Holy Qur'an; the Qur'an has used other terms to indicate the past and future eternity of God. For example, the Qur'an introduces God as the “First” [awwal] and “Last” [ākhir]: “He is the First and the Last, and the manifest and invisible; and He is aware of all things.”⁴³

Although exegetes have interpreted the two terms “awwal” and “ākhir” dissimilarly, it appears that the meaning behind these terms equates to past and future eternity and this interpretation has been endorsed by several Traditions. In a sermon entitled “Apparitions” [Ashbāh] Imam 'Alī ('a) states: “[God] is the First who has no before in order that there be something before Him, and He is the Last who has no after in order for there to be something after Him.”⁴⁴

In another Hadith, Imam Ṣādiq has stated: “He is the First without there being anything before Him or a beginning preceding Him, and He is the Last without having an end Himself... He has always been and always will be, without having a beginning or end.”⁴⁵

These statements show that “First” and “Last” mean that with regard to God no before or after can be imagined, He has no beginning nor end, and nihility neither precedes nor follows Him.

Several Qur'anic verses also emphasize the eternity and indestructibility of God: “All things perish except His Face.”⁴⁶

Many exegetes believe the intent of “God's Face” is the Divine Essence. Accordingly, this verse implies the perpetuity and eternity of God.

6. Divine Wisdom

God is wise. Wisdom [hikmat] has several meanings and identifying them is necessary in order to understand this discourse better:

1. One definition of wisdom is “knowing and understanding the truth of objects”. With respect to the boundless knowledge of God, this definition is correct regarding God, the Exalted; however, it ultimately refers to the knowledge of God. In other words, according to this definition, wisdom is one of the branches of divine knowledge.

2. The second meaning of wisdom is that the acts of an agent are consistent and perfect to the extremity, and far from any faults. According to this definition also, God is wise; meaning that all His actions are realized in the most unimpeachable and perfect manner and are free of any defects or flaws.

As a concise reasoning for the wisdom of God—regarding this definition—we can declare that doubtless, there is a type of congruency and general resemblance between an agent and its action because an action is, in truth, a manifestation of the fundamental nature of the agent and a display of the perfections of its essence. Thus, the action of an agent whose

essence is perfect in all aspects, must be perfect in all aspects. In definition of divine wisdom the Commander of the Faithful [Amīr al-Mu'minīn] ('a) has made the following statements: "God measured all He created and then secured and stabilized creation."⁴⁷

"Through His knowledge He originates His creations and through His wisdom He creates them; without copying or learning from someone or utilizing a sample from a wise creator."⁴⁸

An important result of divine wisdom—according to this definition—is deeming this world the best of all possible worlds, because the world, with all its immeasurable expanses, is an act of God and divine wisdom behooves that His actions be as perfect as possible.

3. The third definition of wisdom is eschewal of unrighteous and abhorrent actions. According to this definition, a wise being never commits indecent and evil acts. This definition is also true of God. According to Islamic belief, even though God is able to commit evil acts, His perfect and illimitable essence requires that He be solely a source of good acts. Belief in this type of divine wisdom entails believing that God is pure of committing any act the general intellect of humankind deems evil.

By contemplating this definition, it becomes evident that justice is a branch of this type of wisdom; because, it means that God does not commit any evil act including lying, deceit, perfidy, or injustice.

4. The fourth definition of wisdom is that an agent performs actions according to rational ends and reasonable motives, and refrains from performing useless and futile acts. Therefore, this type of wisdom is the same as finality in deeds, meaning that God is pure of committing useless and purposeless acts and all His deeds are supported by rational intentions.

We humans also perform many of our actions with specific aims, but we must not overlook the fact that there is a fundamental difference between the finality of our deeds and the sagacity of divine acts. Through our volitional and meaningful actions, we generally endeavor to resolve one of our needs or deficiencies and by performing an action, we reach a level of perfection. Thus, the aim of our deeds is resolving needs and attaining perfection. For instance, persons who endeavor to gain knowledge by learning from a master or reading a book are in fact attempting to resolve their need of acquiring knowledge and replace ignorance with understanding to attain an ideal perfection. However, the purpose of divine acts is not attaining perfection. This is because God is absolute perfection and possesses no faults for which to attempt to compensate by carrying out various actions. In fact, the purpose of divine actions is guiding creations to an ideal perfection and the usefulness of these actions is resolving the needs of creatures.

The definition of divine wisdom under discussion is outlined in many Qur'anic verses. For example, regarding the finality of the creation of humans, it states: "Did you [truly] think that We have created you in vain and that you would not be returned to Us?"⁴⁹

In this verse, the Qur'an regards the creation of humans as a divine act and states that this act is not futile; rather, it has a sagacious aim. The second part of this verse may be a subtle indication of this aim, meaning that God has created us in order that we utilize our facilities for attaining perfection and bliss and ultimately achieve the results of our actions in the next life.

In another verse, the Qur'an speaks of the sagacity of the creation of the heavens and earth and the creatures in between—which is probably an allusion to the creation of the universe:

"And we have not created the heavens and earth and all that is between for sport."⁵⁰

Also, according to a Hadith from Imam Ṣādiq ('a), in answer to someone who asked "Why has God created His servants?" he stated: "Verily, God, the Blessed, the Exalted, has not created His creatures in vain and has not forsaken them... and He has not created them for profit or to draw off harm through them; rather, He has created them to bring them profit and to adjoin them with eternal blessings."⁵¹

Divine Wisdom and Evil

Up to this point, it has become clear that in Islamic thought all divine acts are sagacious and have rational purposes, and naturally these purposes pertain to His creations. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that in the world around us, there are affairs which we consider evil; all people are to some extent entangled in calamities and misfortunes caused by natural phenomena such as floods, earthquakes, epidemics, physical pains, mental illnesses, etc. which form an extensive share of evils. However, is the existence of various evils consistent with divine wisdom and the finality of Creation? If the purpose of the creation of humanity is securing their benefits, how can the existence of evil, which is contrary to human good and the purpose of humankind's creation, be justified?

First, we must realize that the existence of calamities, misfortunes, pain, suffering, and

hardships in the world is not void of rational purposes. In fact, these affairs aim to provide the true personal and general good of humanity. It is evident that presenting an in-depth exposition of the philosophy or wisdom behind the existence of evil would require a detailed discussion; however, here we shall concisely enumerate several advantages of the existence of evil in the personal and social lives of humankind.

a) Fulfillment of the Potential of Humanity

Humanity's nature and the general circumstances of the natural world are such that much of our material and spiritual potential can only be realized through confrontation with hardships and struggling with problems. Just as the muscles of an athlete develop through exhausting and onerous exercise, so also some of humanity's spiritual and mental abilities emerge only in order to overcome the difficulties of life when faced with trials and tribulations. For instance, many discoveries and scientific inventions have been made in response to the fundamental needs of humankind and in order to solve individual or collective problems.

The Qur'an emphasizes the fact that facility and ease is latent in every hardship and affliction: "So [know that] truly with hardship there is ease. Yes, verily, with hardship comes ease."⁵²

In addition, using beautiful analogies Imam 'Alī ('a) describes the effects of hardships in developing humanity's hidden abilities: "Know that the branches of a tree that grows in the desert are tougher, [while] the membrane of pleasant grass is thinner, and the fires [made] of desert plants are more radiant and they burn longer."⁵³

b) Divine Trials

One of the general traditions (sunnat) of God is *ibtilā'* or trialing. Based on the purposes of our creation and existential characteristics, God tests us in the various contexts of our lives. Of course, it must be kept in mind that divine trials are not carried out by God with the purpose of discovering an unknown; on the contrary, the purpose of this divine act—trialing—refers to His creations—humanity, and the purpose is the development of our innate abilities and emergence of our inner treasures. Humanity, in the process of divine trials, is like an ore that is placed in a fiery furnace in order to separate its impurities and reveal its precious essence. Even so, sometimes divine trials are accomplished through ease and welfare.⁵⁴ Several Qur'anic verses indicate trialing humans through hardships and affliction, such as: "And surely we shall try you with something of fear and hunger, and reduction of assets, lives, and produce; and give thou good tidings unto the patient."⁵⁵

Regarding God's purpose in testing His servants through hardships, Imam 'Alī ('a) declares: "As punishment of indecent behavior, God afflicts His servants with reduction of the fruits of trees, withholding rain, and closing off the cascade of blessings so that a repentant repents, and a sinner renounces his sins and a self-edifier becomes edified..."⁵⁶

c) Awakening

One of the most important consequences of trials and tribulations is that they awaken humans from the slumber of negligence due to our immersion in worldly luxuries; they remind us of our important responsibilities regarding our Lord and transform our arrogance into humility and modesty. As an indication of this fact, the Holy Qur'an declares that the peoples of the prophets have always been confronted with difficulties so that they might renounce their disobedience and surrender to righteousness: "And We have sent no prophet to any city but that We burdened its people with hardship and affliction that haply they might weep [before Allah and be humble]."⁵⁷

In addition, the Qur'an states that the calamities and hardships afflicted upon Pharaoh's nation were admonitions to remind them of the truths they had neglected: "And verily, we afflicted the people of the Pharaoh with drought and diminution of produce that haply they might be edified."⁵⁸

d) Appreciation of Divine Blessings

Another advantage of the existence of evils is that people realize the significance of divine blessings and are thankful for them because, "Only one who has been afflicted can appreciate health and ease"⁵⁹. Imam Ṣādiq has stated: "While both the righteous and the wicked are plagued with these blights, God has instituted them as reformation for both. The blights and calamities which befall the righteous cause them to appreciate the past blessings of their Lord and this leads them to thankfulness and patience."⁶⁰

So far, we have indicated several advantages and positive results of evil in the lives of humans. Here we shall discuss several general principles whose consideration will facilitate

reaching the conclusions of this discourse.

1. Doubtless, the proportion of the knowledge of humanity before their ignorance is similar to the proportion of a raindrop before an endless ocean. Not only in the external world but also in the depths of our own beings there are still many untold secrets that we have yet to discover. Bearing in mind the limits of our knowledge, we cannot claim that we are aware of all the secrets and mysteries of what we call evil. Evils may have many advantages that we do not understand and evidently, not finding something is not a sure sign that it does not exist. Accordingly, wisdom dictates that we be more careful in our judgments because it is possible that what we deem evil is in fact good. The Qur'an reveals this truth beautifully by saying: "And much it happens that you abhor something which is best for you."⁶¹

While rendering this enameled circle full of patterns, No one knows what He did in the revolution of the compass.⁶²

2. The ultimate purpose of the creation of humanity is not that we occupy ourselves with indolence and leisure; rather, our main and ultimate purpose is attaining true bliss, which is not possible except through worship of God and achieving divine proximity. Therefore, one must not deem anything that is in conflict with one's welfare and ease, contrary to wisdom and the purpose of creation because our eternal bliss and salvation habitually depends on enduring hardships and harshness. Therefore, consideration of the true purpose of the creation of humanity is a fundamental factor in analyzing the relationship of evils with divine wisdom. Consideration of this purpose results in a more comprehensive and realistic picture of reality.

3. Another important point that must not be neglected is the influence of the actions of people themselves in originating various evils. Humans are volitive creatures, and according to the law of causality, some of their volitional actions resulting from incorrect choices may cause or intensify various calamities and tragedies. Consequently, sometimes people bring about evil for themselves and others; however, due to unawareness of the relationship between their own actions and the results, they use the results of their actions as an excuse to challenge divine wisdom. Alas, "A self-inflictor cannot complain".⁶³

The Qur'an also warns of the effects of human actions in creating unpleasant incidents: "Corruption has appeared in land and sea for that which humans have done by their own hands."⁶⁴

4. A final point is that it may be that not all the advantages of the existence of evils can be found in every evil. However, despite the fact that this may be due to our lack of understanding, it does not harm our claim because, even if one advantage can be found for each unpleasant phenomenon, the challenge of incompatibility of evil and divine wisdom would become void.

Notes:

31. - (إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ) (For examples see: Sūrah Baqarah 2:109, 2:148, 2:259, etc.)

32. - Sūrah Aḥqāf 46:33.

33. - Shaikh Ṣadūq, Al-Tawḥīd, chap. 9, Tradition 15.

34. - Sūrah Baqarah 2:255, and Sūrah Āli 'Imrān 3:2.

35. - Sūrah Ghāfir 40:65.

36. - According to Arabic grammar, if the predicate of a substantive sentence is definite it demonstrates the exclusivity of the predicate for the subject.

37. - For example, see: Sūrah Rūm 30:19, and Sūrah Ḥajj 22:66.

38. - Sūrah Furqān 25:58.

39. - Shaikh Ṣadūq, Al-Tawḥīd, chap. 11, Tradition 6.

40. - Of course, this attribute can also be designated as an apophatic attribute [ṣifat-e salbī] and thus we can declare that God is a 'non-temporal' entity.

41. - This issue will be explained in further detail in the discourse on cosmology.

42. - For a more comprehensive analysis of this discussion, issues that are more complex must be brought up, which would exceed the brevity of the current discourse.

43. - Sūrah Ḥadīd 57:3.

44. - Nahj ul-Balāghah, sermon 91.

45. - Kulaīnī, Uṣūl-e Kāfī, Chapter of Definition of Names [Ma'ānī ul-Asmā'], vol. 1, Tradition 6.

46. - Sūrah Qaṣaṣ 28:88.

47. - Nahj ul-Balāghah, sermon 91, p. 76.

48. - Nahj ul-Balāghah, sermon 191, p. 208.

49. - Sūrah Mu'minūn 23:115.

50. - Sūrah Dukhān 44:38.

51. - Allāmah Majlisī, Biḥār al-Anwār, vol. 5, p. 313.

52. - Sūrah Sharḥ 94:5-6.

53. - Nahj ul-Balāghah, letter 45, p. 318.
54. - For more information, see: Sūrah Anbiyā' 21:35.
55. - Sūrah Baqarah 2:155.
56. - Nahj ul-Balāghah, sermon 143, p. 138.
57. - Sūrah A'rāf 7:94.
58. - Sūrah A'rāf 7:130.
59. - This is a Farsi proverb: “قدر عاقبت کسی داند که به مصیبتی دچار آید”.
60. - Allāmah Majlisī, Biḥār al-Anwār, vol. 3, p. 139.
61. - Sūrah Baqarah 2:216.
62. - آنکه پر نقش زد این دایره مینایی کس ندانست که در گردش پرگار چه کرد
63. - This is a Farsi proverb: “خودکرده را تدبیر نیست”.
64. - Sūrah Rūm 30:41.