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On Intention: Part I

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Abstract



After citing a number of hadiths that indicate the primacy of intention, Fayd states that an agent can carry out an intentional action only if he has knowledge, will, and ability. The movement of body parts requires ability, which in turn requires a motive, while motivation occurs when the given action is known to be in agreement with the agent's objective. Fayd elaborates on the definition of intention and types of motives by asserting that intention is to be motivated to act, and there are four types of motives, among others, for an action: a single motive, two motives that can independently result in an action, two dependent motives that cannot lead to an action unless jointly, and two motives one of which is dependent and the other is independent. Then, assessing different interpretations of the Prophet's (S) remark that the intention of the faithful is better than his deed, he interprets it by explaining that this is because the faithful intends to perform good actions in the best way but he may fail to do so. Finally, he suggests an appropriate process by means of which people can instill ethical virtues into their characters.

Keywords

intention, types of motivations, moral traits, Fayd Kashani, Islamic ethics

* Translated by Muhammad Heydarpour

Part 1: The virtues of intention¹

God, the Exalted, has said, ‘Do not drive away those who supplicate their Lord morning and evening desiring His face’ (6:52). What is meant by desiring (*iradah*) [in this verse] is *intention (niyyah)*. The Prophet (S) said, ‘Deeds are [measured] by intentions; everyone shall achieve what he intended [...]’ (Hurr al-‘Amili 1416 AH: vol. 6, p. 5; Tirmidhi 1419 AH: vol. 1, p. 7). [...] He said, ‘God, the Glorious and Sublime, does not look at your faces and wealth but at your hearts and deeds’ (Shahid al-Thani 1421 AH, p. 813). He looks at hearts, because intentions are formed there. [...] It is narrated from the Prophet (S), ‘Whoever wages jihad while he only intends to gain a rein for his camel will solely gain what he has intended’ (Ibn Hanbal 1421 AH: vol. 37, p. 365; Muhasibi 1420 AH: p. 216). [...] There are many hadiths stating, ‘If one resolves to perform a good act but fails to do so, a reward for carrying it out will be written for him’ (Kulayni 1382 AH: vol. 10, p. 144).

[...] Imam ‘Ali ibn al-Husayn (a) said, ‘There is no action except with intention’ (Kulayni 1382 AH: vol. 2, p. 429; Kulayni 1429 AH: vol. 3, p. 218). [...] The Prophet (S) said, ‘The intentions of a faithful person are better than his actions, and the intentions of an unfaithful person are worse than his actions; every agent acts in accordance with his intention’ (Kulayni 1429 AH: vol. 3, p.

1. This series of papers is dedicated to excerpts from *al-Mahajjat al-Bayda’ fi Tahdhib al-Ihya’* by Fayd Kashani. Regarded as one of the most influential books in Islamic ethics, this book has attracted not only a large audience from academic communities but also a wide range of common readers owing to its simple style and profound contents. Mulla Muhsin Fayd Kashani (1007-1091 AH) was a prominent scholar in the 11th century. He studied under some leading figures such as Muhammad Taqi Majlisi, Shaykh Baha’i, Mir Damad, and Mulla Sadra. Muhammad Baqir Majlisi and Sayyid Ni’matullah Jaza’iri were among his famous students. Fayd authored numerous books and treatises in different scholarly fields including exegesis, jurisprudence, hadith, theology, mysticism, and ethics.

218). [...] Imam al-Sadiq (a) said, ‘Surely, the people of Hell will remain eternally in it, only because had they lived in this world permanently, they would have intended to disobey the commands of God, the Exalted, forever; and the people of Paradise will remain eternally in it, only because had they lived on in this world, they would have intended to obey the commands of God, the Exalted, forever. So, the eternal dwelling of either group [in their respective abodes] is due to their intentions [...]’ (Kulayni 1429 AH: vol. 3, p. 220).

Part 2: The nature of intention

Know that ‘intention’ (*niyyah*), ‘will’ (*iradah*), and ‘purpose’ (*qasd*) are synonymous terms that indicate a state and attribute of the heart that is encompassed by two things: knowledge and action. And knowledge precedes [action], since action originates from, and requires, knowledge, whereas action follows knowledge, since action is its fruit and consequence. That is the case, because every volitional action (i.e., every movement and stagnation) is carried out only by three things: knowledge, will, and strength. Since man cannot will what he does not know, he needs firstly to know. He would not do what he does not will; therefore, he needs to want to do the action. ‘Will’ means that a person motivates his heart to do what he regards as suitable for his purpose either presently or in the future. Indeed, man is created in a way that he can make certain things suitable for him and appropriate to his purpose, whilst also making certain other things inappropriate to it; therefore, he needs to obtain the suitable and appropriate things, and to repel the harmful and unsuitable things. Hence, one must know and discern harmful and beneficial things in order to attain or avoid them. Indeed, if a person was not familiar with a type of food and did not recognize it, it would not be possible for him to eat it. Similarly, if a person

does not see fire, it would not be possible for him to escape from it. God created guidance and knowledge, and He made for them causes, which are the internal and external senses. However, it is not our aim to discuss them here.

If someone sees some food and finds out that it is suitable for him, this will not be sufficient for him to eat it as long as he does not have a desire and a motivating appetite for it, since a patient may see some food and know that it is suitable for him, but, due to his lack of interest, desire, and incentive, it would not be possible for him to eat it. Thus, God created for him desire, interest, and will – i.e., inclination towards the food in his soul and attention to it in his heart – however, these do not suffice either. Likewise, there are many people who see some food, are interested in it, want to eat it, but are unable to do so, due to immobility. So strength and moving limbs are created for human beings so that they can eat. The limbs do not move except by strength, strength follows on from motive, and motive is preceded by one's knowledge and awareness or opinion and belief (when he becomes highly confident concerning the fact that the food suits him).

When one knows for certain that something suits him, has to be done, and is free from any other opposing motives, which prevent it from happening, willpower will be motivated and desire will be realized. When willpower is motivated, strength will move the limbs. Therefore, strength serves willpower, which follows the judgments of belief and knowledge. Hence, intention is this middle attribute – the soul's will and motivation to do what serves one's purpose, either in the present or in the future, in line with his interests and desires.

The first incentive is the desirable purpose, which motivates; the motivating purpose is the intended goal; and motivation is deliberateness and intention. Using strength to serve will by moving limbs is to perform an action. Using strength in fulfilling a single action can sometimes be caused by one motive and at other

times by two or more motives. If the latter were the case, each one of the motives might be able to use strength on its own, or might be unable to do so except in the case of combination or in its absence, or it might be that one of them is enough but needs the other for support and assistance. From this division, four cases appear. We shall give a name to each of them and provide examples:

The first case is where there is only an individual, single motive. For example, if a person is attacked by a wild animal, he moves from his position whenever he sees it. What disturbingly concerns him is merely the goal of escaping from the wild animal. He saw the wild animal and figured out that it was harmful. Therefore, he was motivated to escape, and his strength was gathered. Therefore, practical strength arose owing to this motive. Then, he stood up in order to escape from the animal; he did not intend anything else in his standing. This intention is called 'pure' (*khālis*) and the action which arises as a result of it is called 'purified' (*ikhlas*) in relation to the motivating purpose. This means that it has been purified so that nothing else participates or is mixed with it.

The second case is where two motives, which can independently motivate, come together. Consider the common-sense example of two men cooperating to carry something, while each of them has enough strength to carry it on his own. Another example which serves our purpose here is that of one who has a poor relative. The poor relative asks the person for something, and the person fulfils his need considering both his poverty and his kinship, whereas he knows that if the relative were not poor, he would satisfy his need considering his kinship, and that if the poor person were not his relative, he would do so considering his poverty. The person knows that if a rich relative came to him for help, he would be interested in satisfying his need; and if a strange poor person did the same, he would also be interested in meeting his need. Similarly, if a person is prescribed by a physician to stop eating food and then the day of

‘Arafah comes, he fasts while he knows that he would not be eating food as per the prohibition of the physician if ‘Arafah did not come, and he would do so [i.e. fast] for its being ‘Arafah even if he were not prohibited from eating. Therefore, in this case, there are two motives. While the second motive assists the first one, he sets out to perform the action. We call this case ‘the agreement of motives’ (*muwafaqat al-bawa‘ith*).

The third case is where neither of the two motives is independent, but they jointly can muster up strength. Consider the following common-sense example of two weak individuals cooperating in order to carry something which neither can carry by himself. An example which serves our purpose here would be as follows: if a rich relative visits a family member to ask for money, the latter will not give him any money, and if a strange poor man visits him to ask for money, he will not give him any money either; however, if a poor relative visits him, he will give him money. Therefore, he is motivated by the combination of the two motives – i.e. kinship and poverty. Likewise, suppose that a man gives charity in front of people both for its reward and for people to praise him, such that the mere aim of being rewarded would not motivate him to give if he were alone, nor would the mere aim of being praised motivate him to give if the one requesting were a transgressor to whom giving charity was not rewarded. When these two motives are combined, they can jointly stimulate his heart. We call this type ‘the cooperation [of motives]’ (*musharakat*).

The fourth case is where one of the two motives is independent if alone and the other motive is not, but when it is added to the first, it can be influential in supporting and facilitating it. Consider the following common-sense example of a weak person who helps another strong man carry something that the strong man can carry on his own, but the weak man would not have been able to do so alone. If the weak man assists, that will facilitate and effectively ease the burden of doing the action. Another instance

pertaining to our purpose is that of a person who performs a certain invocation in prayers and has a habit of offering charity. Then, when he wants to do either of them, there happens to be a group of people. Consequently, because he sees them, it would be easier for him to carry out the action, while he knows of himself that if he were alone and in the company of none, he would not feel sluggish to do it; and he also knows that if his action were not an act of worship, he would not be led to do it merely by [the motive of] showing off. That is a taint or defect that has penetrated his intention. We call this type 'helping' (*mu'awanat*). The second motive agrees or assists. We will mention their features in the section on sincere devotion (*ikhlas*). Here, we aim to explain the kinds of intentions. Indeed, action follows its motive, so it obtains the judgment of its motive. This is why it is said that deeds are measured by intentions, since actions are subsequent to them. There are no judgments on actions by themselves, and the judgment belongs to what is followed.

Part 3: Revealing the secret of what he (A) said: 'The intention of a faithful person is better than his action.'

Know that it may be supposed that this preference is due to the fact that intention is a secret that no one is aware of except God, the Exalted; [external] action is apparent and the secret action [i.e. intention] is superior. This is true, but it is not what is meant, since if one intended to remember God, the Exalted, in his heart or to think about Muslims' interests, then the generality of the hadith would require his intention to think to be better than his thinking.¹

1. It seems that Fayd thinks the above-stated hadith can apply to the case in which intention and action are both secret. If it can, then there should be a difference between them while what makes a difference cannot be intention's being secret, because action in this case is secret as well.

It might be supposed that the preference is due to the fact that intention lasts until the completion of the action, while actions do not last very long. But this is unconvincing, since its meaning goes back to the idea that carrying out many actions is better than carrying out few ones,¹ and yet this is not always the case. Indeed, intending the components of prayers sometimes does not last except for a few moments, whereas the components themselves last longer. The generality of the hadith requires this intention to be better than those actions here.²

It is sometimes said that the hadith means that intention by itself is better than action by itself without intention. This is true, but it is unlikely that this is meant, for there is no good at all in performing an action without intention or out of negligence, but intention by itself is good.

The preference appears to be due to two things that have some common goodness. What is meant is that every kind of obedience is constituted by an intention and an action which are regarded to be good, and the good intention is better than the [good] action; that is, each of them has an influence on the purpose, and the intention is more influential than the action. Therefore, it means that the intention of a faithful person, which is considered as one of his practices of obedience, is better than his action, which is considered as one of his acts of worship. The objective is that the servant is free in choosing his intentions and actions that are both acts of worship; however, in comparison, the intention is better. Therefore, this is what the hadith means.

I hold that the hadith may convey another meaning. It is that the faithful intends to conduct his acts of worship in the best way.

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1. It refers to the fact that the quantity of actions is not the ultimate criterion for assessing them; their qualities are also significant.
 2. It indicates that on Fayd's account, intention is better than action even if action lasts longer than intention.

Then, when he involves himself in performing them, it is not possible for him to do so. He becomes weary of them and he does not perform them as he should. Thus, what is intended is better than what is performed. Also, he intends to do the obligatory and recommended acts and avoid sins and bad deeds forever, due to his faith in God and the Day of Judgment. Nevertheless, he does not succeed and cannot realize what he intended. He may intend that he will spend his wealth in the way of God if He gives him wealth. If God gives wealth to him, he may possibly stop following his intention. Thus, his intention is better than his action.

Abu Ja‘far al-Baqir (a) refers to the preceding meaning where he says, ‘The intention of a faithful person is better than his action; this is so because he may intend good things that he cannot achieve. And the intention of a faithless person is worse than his action; this is so because he intends evil and he wishes bad things that he cannot achieve.’ Imam al-Sadiq (a) was asked about the meaning of this hadith. He said, ‘As the action is to show off to the creation and the intention is dedicated solely to the Lord of all the worlds, so God, the Glorious and Sublime, gives for the intention what He does not give for the action,’ and he said, ‘Indeed, [it happens that] the servant intends by day to perform night prayer (*salat al-layl*), then sleep overcomes him and he goes to sleep, so God records for him a night prayer, counts his breath as glorifying Him, and regards his sleep as giving charity.’

Al-Ghazali has said that the fact that intention is better than, and superior to, action is identified only by the one who has recognized the purpose of religion, its path, and the extent to which this path is effective in attaining the goal, and who has compared some of its effects with other ones so that it subsequently becomes clear for him that it is superior in relation to the goal. If one says that bread is better than *faludhaj*,¹ he

1. A kind of sweet beverage containing starch jelly or fruits.

means that it is better in relation to the purpose of energy and nutrition. This is understood only by the one who knows that the purpose of nutrition is health and survival, and that foods produce different effects, and identifies the effect of each one, and compares some effects with other ones.

To obey [God] is to nourish the heart. What is meant by this is the heart's healing, survival, and health in the hereafter, and the happiness and joy of the vision of God, the Glorious and Sublime. The objective is just to enjoy the pleasure of meeting Him, the Exalted. One would be endowed with the vision of God only if one dies upon His love and knows Him. He is loved only by the one who knows Him. The intimacy with God is developed only by the one who remembers Him for a long period of time. The intimacy with God is achieved by constantly remembering Him. Knowing Him is achieved by thinking constantly. Love necessarily follows knowledge. The heart would not be devoted to remembering and thinking about Him constantly except when it is free from the occupations of this world. The heart would not be free from this type of occupations except when it is detached from its lusts so that it would desire or will the good and hate or abhor the bad.

The heart will desire to achieve the good and to obey once it comes to know that its happiness in the hereafter is dependent upon them, just as a rational person desires bloodletting and cupping because they are beneficial for his health. If a desire for good and obedience has been obtained owing to this sort of knowledge, it can be strengthened by doing, and practicing constantly, what the desire requires, since doing continuously, and applying in action, what the features of the heart require may serve as food and nourishment for those features so that they will be inculcated and strengthened. The desire of the one who asks for knowledge and leadership is weak at first, but if one pursues what the desire requires and occupies oneself with acquiring knowledge, training to be a leader, and other relevant acts, then

one's desire will be implanted and inculcated in such a way that it would be hard for one to desist from it.

If one opposes what one's desire requires, it will weaken and decrease; it may even vanish or perish. Take as an example a person who looks at a beautiful face. At first, his natural desire for it is weak. If he followed his desire, acted according to its demands, and continued to watch, accompany, associate, and get close to it, his desire would be intensified to the extent that things might go beyond his control, so much so that he will not be able to desist from it. If he abstained from following it in the first place and opposed what his natural desire required, that would stop providing nourishment and food for the desire and push it back and repel it to the extent that it weakens and decreases or even vanishes and perishes.

Similar are all kinds of traits, good deeds, and acts of obedience by which the hereafter is sought and all kinds of evil by which this world is sought. The soul's desire for the good of the other world and its abandoning this world make it free to remember and contemplate. The desire is never intensified except by performing acts of obedience and refraining from acts of disobedience via bodily limbs, for there is a connection between them and the heart which results in a mutual influence. You can see that if an organ hurts, it causes pain in the heart; and if one's heart feels pain because he was informed that a dear one of his has passed away or that something frightening has happened, his organs will be influenced, tremble with fear, and the colour of his face will change.

The heart is the origin which is followed. It looks as if the heart is the master and ruler, whilst the other organs are like servants, subjects, and followers. So the organs serve the heart by inculcating the traits in it. The heart is the primary objective, and the other parts of the body are the instruments to achieve this objective. This is why Prophet Muhammad (S) said, 'There is a piece of flesh in the body; if it is healthy, all other parts of the body

will be healthy' (Majlisi 1403 AH: p. 192; Majlisi 1363 AH: vol. 8, p. 95), and 'O God! Make good and correct the shepherd [i.e., the ruler] and the folk [i.e., the subject].' He (S) meant by the shepherd the heart. God, the Exalted, said, 'It is not their flesh or their blood that reaches Allah. Rather, it is your God-wariness that reaches Him' (*Qur'an* 22:38). God-wariness is a feature of the heart. From this viewpoint, it necessarily follows that the acts of the heart in their entirety are superior to the movements of the body parts. Thus, it would be necessary that intention be superior to all acts of the heart, since intention consists within the heart's tendency towards, and wanting, good. Our objective of doing things by our organs is to get our hearts accustomed to wanting good, and to inculcate the desire for good in them in order for our hearts to be free from the lusts of this world and to turn to remembering and contemplating.

When compared with the objective, intention is definitely superior to action, because it involves the objective itself. This is similar to the condition that if someone's stomach aches, it may be treated by putting some *tala'*¹ on the chest or taking some syrup that reaches the stomach; however, drinking the syrup is better than putting *tala'* on the chest, because the aim of doing the latter is also taking its effect to the stomach, and what gets to the stomach itself is better and more beneficial. The effect of the acts of obedience should be understood in this way, for what is wanted is that hearts – not parts of the body – change and their traits be transformed.

One should not assume that our purpose for placing our foreheads on the ground is to conjoin the forehead and the ground; rather, it is to inculcate the virtue of humbleness in our hearts by way of habituation. Thus, if one who finds humbleness

1. A kind of drug rubbed on an organ.

in one's heart appeals to one's body parts and expresses it in the form of humbleness, one's humbleness will be intensified. If a person who finds himself tender-hearted towards orphans caresses an orphan's head and kisses him, the quality of being tender-hearted will be intensified [in him]. Hence, there is no benefit at all in actions without intention, since if the person caressing an orphan's head were ignorant in his heart or supposed that he is touching a piece of clothing, the effect of doing so would not flow from his body parts to his heart so as to inculcate kindness. In the same manner, if a person prostrates himself ignorantly while he is preoccupied with the concern for worldly ends, the effect of putting his forehead on the ground will not extend from his forehead to his heart and humbleness will not be inculcated [in him]. The existence of the act of prostrating looks like its non-existence, and, when compared with the desirable purpose, the thing whose existence is equal to its non-existence is referred to as being pointless or in vain. Therefore, it is said that obedience without intention would be pointless, and this is what it means to act ignorantly.

If one intends to act in order to show off or revere someone else, then the existence of this action is not like its non-existence; rather, these intentions add to it a vice, because not only it does not reinforce a trait whose inculcation is desirable but also reinforces a trait whose eradication is desirable—that is, the trait of showing off, which comes from a desire for this world. This is why intention is superior to action. By this, one can figure out the meaning of the Prophet's (S) remark, 'If one resolved to do good but failed to do so, a good deed would be written for him,' since his heart resolved in its desire to do good and to abandon its whims and love for this world. This is the goal of carrying out good deeds. Completing the task only reinforces the traits of the heart.

The purpose for sacrificing is not the blood and flesh of the sacrificial animal. It is rather that the person's heart abandons its

love for this world and gives it away for the sake of God, the Glorious and Sublime. This trait is gained when the intention and concern were made firm, even though something impedes the agent from sacrificing. It is not their flesh or their blood that reaches God; rather, it is your God-wariness that reaches Him (*Qur'an* 22:38). God-wariness here denotes a trait within the heart. For this reason, the Prophet (S) said, as it has been narrated, 'There are people in Medina, but they are participating in jihad,' since their hearts sincerely wanted good, gave away their wealth and lives, craved martyrdom, and elevated the word of God, just as the hearts of those who went out of Medina for jihad did so. The only difference was [location of] their bodies, just because of some barriers concerning the causes external to their hearts. Those are insignificant, unless they reinforce the mentioned traits. In light of this, all the hadiths we mentioned regarding the virtues of intention are to be understood. To discover their secrets, you should apply our points to the hadiths. We will not cite them again for the sake of brevity.

A conclusion one may draw from what Fayd has stated

A practically significant consequence of Fayd's discussion of the heart is that he gives priority to the heart, and thinks of the movements of body parts as aiming to change the heart's attributes if their movements are to be morally valuable. The actions of the heart are better than the actions of other body parts, and good intention is the best act of the heart, because intention is the heart's inclination towards good, and this is the target that other acts aim at if they are to succeed. Following this general strategy, Fayd presents a specific method for cultivating virtues and eradicating vices. The central theme of the idea is that if one creates a desire for pursuing good and acts of obedience by understanding the demands of his own happiness, one can act on

these demands and persist in discharging his duties so as to strengthen his previous desire, since acting upon what a moral trait requires makes it stronger, just as failing to act upon what it requires makes it weaker.

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