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Relationship between Rationality and Servitude to God in the View of ‘Allama Tabataba’i *

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Abstract

Servitude to God is the basic essence of religion, and all religious teachings and rulings are aimed at cultivating this virtue. Basically, the goal of creation is nothing but servitude to God. On the other hand, the existence of human beings depend on their intellect, and it is intellect which is addressed by God and is tasked with observing divine laws; thus, servitude to God cannot be achieved except through intellect. However, servitude has degrees, just as knowledge and perception in the world of creation have levels. Servitude to God in creation exists in all the world of creation, but volitional servitude to the Almighty is exclusive to self-conscious creatures, and the levels of perception are concomitant with the levels of servitude and worship. As some levels of servitude are actual and the others are to be actualized, some levels of rationality are also actual in humans but its higher levels should be achieved.

Keywords

rationality, servitude, unity of god, lordship, ‘Allama Tabataba’i.

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Introduction

One of the most fundamental bases of religion is servitude to God and worshipping Him. It may be said that in human history, there is neither a society without religion, nor a religion without worship. However, an important question is whether worship and servitude are rational and whether human intellect, which seeks no goal but preserving and promoting life, seeks the same goals in worshipping. Are servitude and worship merely human phenomena? In the present article, we will show that, based on Islamic teachings, servitude is an all-encompassing category with different levels, and it is rooted in the nature of creatures and the relationships between them. We will explain that servitude has certain characteristics in human beings which distinguishes it from other forms of servitude; servitude in human beings is harmonious with rationality, both of which work toward human transcendence and closeness to God.

Worship: Form and Content

Like any other action, worship has an appearance and an essence. The appearance of worship is the forms established for it in divine religions; for example, daily prayers or fasting are two forms of worshipping God, but these forms are rooted in other realities that constitute the essence or spirit of worship. The essence of worship is the worshiper's servitude to God, without which his worship cannot really be considered worship. The form is nevertheless necessary and the person's perfection in worship depends on its manifestation in certain forms (Tabataba'i 1390 SH, 1: 507).

So, it can be said that worship refers to certain actions performed by a believer at certain times and in certain manners. However, in addition to this special meaning, which includes only some actions, worship in a broader sense includes all actions of our body and heart such that the whole religion—including beliefs, ethics, and rulings—aims at nothing but servitude to God: "Worship

has seventy parts, and the best part of it is earning lawful provision” (Mohammadi Reyshahri 1417 AH, 4: 1799; Javadi Amoli 1390 SH, 388).

However, humans’ servitude to God shows their inclination and love for God and their devotion and commitment to a reality which dominates the world of creation and the human soul. Now, if we exclude human attributes from this relationship and observe the relationship from the aspect of ownership and being owned or dominance and subordination, we understand the all-encompassing reality of worship, which is a creature’s being owned by, and absolute dependence on, another being.

Many people think that worship is a human category and does not include other creatures, such as inanimate objects, plants, animals, or immaterial beings; however, in Islamic teachings, worship is a comprehensive principle that defines the relationships between all creatures and God, as all creatures are inclined toward God and seek Him, because God is the Perfect Existence and Ultimate Goal of all creatures (Ibn Sina 1379 SH, 69).

Now, if we look at the world of creation from this viewpoint, we see that all creatures are owned by God and thus worship Him. Therefore, servitude is concomitant with being created; that is, every creature’s existence is dependent on and subordinate to another being, and all its perfections are due to the other’s perfections. Therefore, it can be said that servitude to their Creator is essential to all creatures. In other words, every cause is truly desired and loved by its effect; God says, “Indeed all matters return to Allah!” (*Qur’an* 42: 53) (Zunuzi 1381 SH, 221).

Worship as the Goal of Creation

The glorious Qur’an clearly considers the goal of creation to be servitude to God: “I did not create the jinn and the humans except that they may worship Me” (51: 56). Therefore, the goal of

creation is the relationship between creatures and the Creator; in other words, creatures were created in order to be related to God. God is free from any imperfection or need, so creation does not add anything to His perfection. On the other hand, God is wise and does not do anything in vain, so He has a goal, which is nothing but His own essence. God's action is surely beneficial, but the benefit is for the action, not for Himself (Tabataba'i 1390 SH, 18: 579; 1371 SH, 189).

Therefore, worship or servitude to God, which is the desired goal of creatures, has no purpose other than benefitting creatures themselves. In other words, servitude to the Creator has no benefit for Him; rather, its benefit is for creatures, because in the relationship between the Perfect and the imperfect or between the Infinite and the finite, it is the imperfect or finite that can achieve perfection, not God the Perfect. Such goal-seeking is possible for a being that is inferior to and less perfect than another being, and since God is the ultimate goal and the most perfect being, there is no goal for Him beyond Himself. Therefore, the reason why God is "not questioned concerning what He does" (21: 23) is His perfection, and the reason why creatures are questioned is that their actions should be the means of their perfection. In other words, since God is the Ultimate Goal and there is no goal beyond Him, a creature, which is not the ultimate goal, can have a goal beyond itself (Modarres Zunuzi 1376 SH, 504-5).

Thus, it can be said that it is not only humans who seek absolute perfection; rather, all creatures, due to their imperfection and limitation, seek the Endless Being that has all perfections. This is why godly theosophers believe in the stream of love and knowledge in all creatures and maintain that every creature's love and knowledge are proportionate to its level of existence (Mulla Sadra 1380 SH, 236).

Thus, servitude to God, seeking perfection, and loving the higher perfection is an attribute of all beings and is not exclusive to humans, though humans' quest for perfection is based on awareness and will, as they have a conscious inclination toward

absolute perfection. Other realms of creation, such as the material world, also has such a tendency. Godly theosophers have stated that the tendency toward actualization and perfection is found even in the prime matter and the basic constituent of nature; and as long as these perfections are not actualized, material creatures do not abandon their endeavor (Mulla Sadra 1410 AH, 2: 232).

Therefore, the direction of the material world is toward the actualization of perfections, upon achieving which things reach their goals and tranquility. Evolutionary and vertical motions should end in essential goals, because an object's potentials cannot be limitless; thus, creatures of the natural world reach the destination one after another (See Javadi Amoli 1376 SH, 4: 189). However, this series of essential vertical goals cannot infinitely continue, and thus the world of creation reaches a level of perfection, beyond which no other perfection is possible.

Servitude to God Alone

In Islamic teachings, servitude must be to God only; no one is allowed to worship another being. But why is this the case? Why are humans not allowed to serve or worship anyone other than God? To answer this question, we need to identify the criteria for servitude.

If we look at human history and their relationships, we see that the servitude of slaves to their masters was considered legitimate with respect to what masters owned of their slaves. In other words, every master deserved the servitude of his slave to the extent that he owned his slave, but with respect to those aspects of the slaves which the master did not own, he could not demand the slave's servitude and obedience. For example, if one's slave was the son of Zayd, one could not ask him to be the son of 'Amr; or if the servant was tall, the master could not ask him to be short (Tabataba'i 1390 SH, 1: 40).

So, the criterion for the slave's servitude to the master is the

master's ownership of the slave; however, in ordinary slavery, ownership is a conventional issue, as no human being has dominance over another in creation. Moreover, in ordinary slavery, servitude is possible to the same extent that the ownership is possible. So, it can be said that the criterion for servitude is the dominance of one being over another. Now, if we look at the world of creation, there is no being with absolute and overall dominance over all beings except the One Perfect and Infinite God. Since creatures are manifestations of the Creator, they depend on Him in their existence. So, it can be said that whatever is actual in the world of creation is dominated by the infinite essence of God; in other words, only God the Glorious is infinite and perfect and dominates all beings. So, only one being is the True Served and Worshipped One; if another being claims that, it would be unacceptable, because it is contingent and in need. Thus, servitude is towards the Perfect Existence and only God is perfect, so the infinite perfection of the essence of God is the reason for the exclusiveness of servitude toward Him, and this is the basis of the call of the prophets of God to worship God alone; this is why the Glorious Qur'an says, "That is Allah, your Lord, the creator of all things, there is no god except Him. Then where do you stray?" (40: 62)

In this verse, God considers His lordship an offshoot of his creatorship: since God is the creator of all things, He is their Lord; and since He is the lord, He is served and worshipped; He deserves to be served and worshipped because of His Creatorship and Lordship. In other words, it can be said that only serving Him can take human beings to perfection, because He is humans' natural Beloved and Desired One. The secret of God being Beloved is His infinite perfection, because humans never choose a being for its deficiencies and imperfections; rather, their love for any being is due to its perfections and goodness, and since no being is more perfect than God, no being is more beloved than Him. The reason why no one deserves to be worshipped other than God is that no being is

independent except Him. A limited and imperfect being does not possess the ultimate perfection and cannot be the real beloved of humans.

Types of Servitude and Worship

If we compare creatures in terms of their agency in acting, we see that a group of creatures (i.e., humans) are different from other beings in their agency in that some aspects of their existence are actualized without their knowledge and will, while some other aspects of their existence are actualized by means of knowledge and action. This volition is the basis for the distinction between human beings and other creatures and for the human need for religion.

Thus, it can be said that contrary to general servitude to God, which encompasses all the world of creation, there is another level of worship that is through volition and comes after general servitude. In other words, in a certain level of their existence, human beings can have volitional worship, but their existence per se is dominated by their cause, while some of their actions depend on their knowledge and will, and this is where volitional worship comes into play. In other words, it can be said that the base level of perception requires existential servitude and the general Mercy of God, while being aware about having perception (self-awareness) is a type of knowledge requiring volitional worship, spiritual journey and special Mercy of God (Shabistari 1387 SH, 47).

Therefore, it can be concluded that there are two types of servitude and worship: existential servitude and volitional servitude, which is legislated worship specific to creatures with thinking faculty (See Raghīb Isfahani 1416 AH, 542). Existential Servitude, which is the existential glorification of God by the world of creatures, has no opposites, and no creature can ever reject it, because objects have natural perception of God's Lordship. The Qur'an mentions,

“Your Lord has decreed that you shall not worship anyone except Him” (17: 23), and this means that all creatures acknowledge their servitude to God and God’s lordship; and all creatures constantly worship God, since the verse “All are obedient to Him” (2: 116) means, “all are worshipping Him”; and all creatures seek God day and night. In other words, since creatures depend on God in their existence, they have ontological closeness to Him. Accordingly, they have a simple perception of Him and have servitude to Him in creation (See Lahiji 1371 SH, 165, 351).

Thus, there is no disobedience, polytheism, or disbelief in creation; such issues belong to human beings, who are always to choose between perfection and imperfection. However, in addition to existential servitude, human beings have another level of servitude, which is due to being aware of having perception; that is, since human beings have self-awareness and can think, they are responsible and subject to divine law. Of course, observing divine law is for the sake of achieving higher levels of awareness about having perception. The goal of the creation of creatures and the purpose of sending Prophets (s) is the realization of outward and inward worship, and the goal of worship is achieving greater levels of awareness about having perception. Since human beings are aware of having perception, they are susceptible to error (See Lahiji 1371 SH, 351).

Therefore, it can be said that although human self-awareness results in his volitional worship, this worship can increase the actualization of his perfections and help him reach a higher level of awareness about having perception. So, self-awareness and servitude are two aspects of a human being and are always reflected in each other, such that arguably human beings worship according to their self-awareness and have self-awareness proportionate to their servitude. Thus, knowledge about the self and knowledge about God in human beings are somehow proportionate.

Although, human beings’ servitude is based on their understanding

of the world of creation, the quality of this understanding influences the quality of their worship, such that the degree of perfection and sincerity in humans' worship depends on their perception of God. Sometimes, human beings worship God out of fear and sometimes desirous of rewards and blessings. Imam Ali (a) called the worship of the first group the worship of slaves and the worship of the second group the worship of traders. In these two states, fear and greed are the motives for worshipping God. Although these two types of worship are not perfect forms of worship, they are two levels of it. Primarily, every human being relates to other creatures in order to repel harms or gain benefits. However, the highest level of worshipping God is worshipping Him based on love and gratitude. At this level, human beings worship God, because He deserves to be worshipped, because they love Him and stand in awe of His Infinite Perfections, and because they find all perfections and goodness in Him and all beings as the manifestations of His existence. Imam Ali (a) calls this type of worship, the worship of freemen (See Sayyid Radi 1413 AH, 171).

Knowledge about the Self and Knowledge about God

In Islamic teachings, especially in the glorious Qur'an, there is a relation between forgetting God and forgetting the self; the Qur'an clearly says, "Do not be like those who forget Allah, so He makes them forget their own souls" (59: 19). This means that remembering God helps a person find himself and that knowing one's self leads to knowing God. In other words, the self is a path toward God. The perfection and promotion of the self is possible only if it has a target, and paying attention to the goal is a requirement of moving towards it.

However, this knowledge is not acquired knowledge; rather, it is intuitional knowledge or direct knowledge of one's self and God. It is as if the level of one's presence before himself is proportionate to

the level of his presence before God; in other words, one finds God to the extent that he finds himself and vice versa. This path is not like other volitional paths, one of which one can choose; rather, it is inferred from Qur'an 84: 6¹ that it is an inevitable path (See *Tabataba'i* 1390 SH, 6: 244). The differences of opinion among people is over the method of treading this path, or, in other words, their difference is over the method of actualizing the self.

Now, if there is a link between knowing the self and knowing God, what is the reason behind this connection? What is the relationship between the existence of the self and the existence of God that knowing one leads to knowing the other? It may be said that the reason is the quality of the self's existence. Like all creatures of the world, the self seeks its perfection. As no being seeks its non-existence and since the principle of creatures' existence is preserving and maintaining their existence, the fundamental tendency of the self is toward the maintenance and expansion of its actualities. So, it can be said that the self struggles to reach its perfection, and for this purpose it needs desire, will, and most importantly knowledge. Human beings can go beyond any level of knowledge. This transcendence can be a sign of human tendency toward infinity. Therefore, human beings seek perfection and never take an imperfect being as their goal; they seek the Infinite Perfection, beyond which there is no perfection.

Thus, there is an existential relation between human inclination toward the Absolute and the Absolute Existence, and that is why human beings by their infinity-seeking nature are inclined toward the Absolute Existence and through the Absolute Existence find the truth of their infinity-seeking natures. Thus, the quality of the self is only harmonious with the essence of God and it is through

1. "O man! You are labouring toward your Lord laboriously, and you will encounter Him"

His remembrance alone that the self reaches tranquility and its desire for infinity is satisfied.

Therefore, it is only through knowing and worshipping God that human beings can know themselves, and only through knowing themselves and actualizing their potentials they can come to know God and worship Him. The self is the mirror that reflects God's knowledge and presence; the more this mirror becomes perfect, the more the manifestations of God will appear in the soul. So, knowing God and knowing the self are mutually related; the level of knowing the self is the same as the level of knowing God and vice versa. However, the influence of knowing and worshipping God on human relationship to the self and to the world has also been discussed by contemporary thinkers. One of such thinkers has said, "We and God have business with each other; and in opening ourselves to his influence our deepest destiny is fulfilled. The universe, at those parts of it which our personal being constitutes, takes a turn genuinely for the worse or for the better" (James 1391 SH, 561).

Relation between Intellect and Servitude

As we saw, the link in the relation between the self and God is the issue of seeking perfection and human inclination to transcend. Now, the question is whether worship is rational and harmonious with human intellect. To answer this question, it is necessary first to clarify the function of intellect and its role in human existence, so that we can discuss its relation with worship.

A very important point in understanding the relation between the intellect and worship is considering the role of intellect in religious culture. Many scholars use "intellect" to refer to the highest degree of the mind, which perceives universals and can discover unknown facts by composing known facts. Considering intellect a degree of the mind and confining human perception to

the perception of concepts have resulted in vain disputes, and consequently some people have considered different branches of knowledge contradictory and in conflict with different aspects of human life. Such an idea has made them consider faith and reason in conflict with each other. One of the thinkers who hold this view writes, “In our idea of God, the non-rational aspect is overborne by the rational aspect, even perhaps it may be wholly excluded by the rational. Or conversely, the non-rational aspect preponderates over the rational” (Otto 1380 SH, 40).

However, the word “*‘aql*” (i.e., intellect/reason) has a much deeper meaning in the Islamic tradition; for example, it is introduced as the internal *proof* (*hujja*) of God, the link between God and His servants, the basis of human existence, and an apostle of God. So, it can be concluded that the truth of a human’s existence is his intellect. Here are some examples of hadiths referring to intellect: “Man’s constitution is [upon] his intellect,” “Religion and good manners are the results of intellect,” “Intellect is the apostle of the truth,” “Intellect is the strongest basis,” “The correction of everything is by intellect,” “The richest richness is intellect” (See Mohammadi Reyshahri 1417 AH, 5: 2033-35).

The above hadiths and other points mentioned about intellect show that intellect is the heart of human existence and the power to distinguish good from evil, the right from the wrong and perfection from imperfection. In other words, intellect is the faculty which perceives the world and illuminates the human’s path toward transcendence and perfection and the means by which he treads the path of perfection. In religious teachings, the significance of intellect is so much that it is the addressee of God’s orders and prohibition and the criterion of reward and punishment (See *Ibid.*, 5: 2034).

The importance and role of intellect is so much that lacking it results in lacking faith; the Prophet (s) said, “Man’s constitution is [upon] his intellect, and he who lacks intellect lacks faith” (*Ibid.*, 5: 2033). Not only intellect is the strength of human existence but

also the rewards for all religious deeds depend on the degrees of a person's intellect; the prophet (s) is reported to have said, "Surly, men engage in jihad, perform prayers, fast, or enjoin good and forbid evil, but they are not rewarded on the Day of Judgement except in proportion to the degree of their intellect" (Ibid., 5: 2036). Thus, it can be said that the reward in the hereafter for jihad, prayer, fasting, and enjoining good and forbidding evil depends on one's degree of intellect.

Another point is that intellect is the basis of human prosperity in this world and the hereafter; in other words, intellect is a faculty which perceives perfections in the world and shows the way of achieving them. So, intellect is the means of human journey toward the Absolute Perfection, and, as it was previously mentioned, servitude does not have any meaning other than knowing the Absolute Perfection and moving toward Him. Therefore, knowing the Absolute Perfection and moving toward Him is the link between intellect and servitude. That is why it is mentioned in hadiths that "intellect is that by which the All-Beneficent is worshipped and Paradise is achieved" (Ibid., 5: 2046). So, servitude to God and reaching happiness in the hereafter are achieved by intellect, and the perfection of intellect and using it is in fact an expression of servitude to God. In other words, thinking is the greatest form of servitude; as Imam Ali (a) says, "Reflecting upon the kingdom of the heavens and the earth is the worship of the sincere" (Ibid., 4: 1799). That is because intellect helps us know and achieve perfection, and servitude is seeking and achieving perfection, and the ultimate perfection is God. In Islamic teachings, intellect is as authoritative as the Qur'an (See Tabataba'i, 1371 SH, 60).

Outcomes of the Article

Like humbleness and obeying God, servitude is a state which encompasses all the world of creation. All creatures are totally

dependent on, and related to, God in their existence, qualities, and actions. Thus, their existence is permeated by servitude to God. However, since human beings have intellect and volition, they have another level of servitude, in addition to existential servitude, which is volitional worship. Divine religions aim at strengthening this type of servitude in humans, which leads to nearness to the Absolute Perfection, which is the goal of intellect as well. Therefore, servitude to God is rational and rationality requires servitude to Him; the more perfect a person becomes, the closer to the Absolute Perfection he gets; and one who is closer to the Absolute Perfection has greater perfections in his human nature. So, servitude to God is to achieve the perfections, and the more one achieves them, the closer to God he draws. This closeness is not possible except through actualization of higher degrees of intellect. Thus, the degree of servitude is proportionate to the degree of rationality and vice versa.

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