

Degrees and Levels of Conceit

As we have quoted from the imām, may his blessings endure, about pretension, that is, it has three levels, and each level has two degrees the explanation of which has already been indicated, so is the case with conceit; it, too, has the same levels and degrees.

The first level is conceit about beliefs. The second is conceit about the faculties. The third level is conceit about deeds. The first level has two degrees: the first is conceit about belief and true branches of knowledge. The second degree, in contrast, is conceit about disbelief, apostasy and inward beliefs. The second level, too, has two degrees: The first is conceit about good faculties and commendable merits. The second, in contrast, is conceit about bad manners and ugly faculties. The third level, too, has two degrees: conceit about the good deeds. Contrasting the second degree is conceit about ugly deeds and wrongdoings.

Levels of Conceit

A scholar of the hereafter has divided conceit into two levels. The conclusion of what he says, with some explanation from our part, is this: Conceit exists in man for a merit the owner of which sees it as a mark of perfection, there is no doubt about it, and everyone considers himself, in his innermost, as being complete, whether in his knowledge, or wealth, or all other forms of perfection. He, hence, goes through conditions, including fear of losing these perfections, fear of being robbed of that perfection as a whole or in part, or a shortcoming happens to him which spoils his purity. This condition is not described as making anyone wonder.

Also among them is that he does not fear its disappearance, but he feels elated about this perfection, so much so that he sees it as a blessing from Allāh Almighty; he renders it to the Almighty, not to himself; such elation and pleasure about perfection is not conceit, either.

But man has a third status which is labeled as conceit. He is not concerned about the disappearance of

perfection but feels elated about its existence, and he feels glad about it. At the same time, his heart becomes attached to it, and he is happy because it is perfection and eminence, not due to its attribution to the Truthful One, the Almighty, not one of His boons, and he has neither independence nor a principle for this perfection.

If he believes in his heart that this perfection is a blessing from Allāh, that the Almighty can take it away from him whenever He wishes, such a feeling leaves no room for conceit to find its way to his heart. If we suppose there is conceit in him, such a belief, the remembrance that Allāh, the most Praised One, can take it away from him whenever He wills, removes conceit from his heart.

Based on all of this, conceit is that one looks with magnifying glasses at a blessing and perfection for his own self, and his heart becomes attached to it, forgetting to attribute it to the True Giver of Boons. Such a condition is the first level of conceit. If he rises from this condition and sees it in his heart as though Allāh Almighty owes him a favor, that he has a status and nearness to Him, he expects Allāh Almighty to grant him eminence in the life of this world as a reward for his [righteous] deed. And if something wrong happens to him, he goes further in his attitude to the extent that if this wrong happens to a debauchee, it would not have been far-fetched in his view in this goal; this status is called flirtation and coquetry.

For example, it may coincide that he gives someone something. He magnifies this giving in his view and considers himself as having done that someone a favor. This person admires his giving. If he employs the same person to whom he gave something, and if he rests his hopes on getting something out of him, thinking it far-fetched that this person would disagree with him, this condition is called flirtation and coquetry, and it is a higher level than conceit. In every case of flirtation, conceit exists, and not the contrary.

Conceit can exist through the sentiment of flirtation because the balance and the criterion in conceit is over-estimating a deed and forgetting the blessing without expecting a reward. As regarding flirtation, it accompanies the expectation for the greatest reward. If one expects Allāh, Praise to Him, to definitely respond to his supplication, having no inner thoughts of being rejected, he will be surprised if his supplication is not honored. He does not ask himself why his supplication is not honored. Or he is not surprised when the supplication of a debauchee is not honored, but he is surprised when his own supplication is not honored! This poor person, in addition to his conceit, is flirting with Allāh Almighty, too.¹

Be informed that conceit, in each of the previous levels, has [sub] levels some of which are obvious: One goes in its direction without being aware of it, without noticing. And some of them are minute, quite thin to the extent that unless one fully examines, he will not know accurately nor realize properly. Also, some of its levels are more intense and causing more perdition than others.

1. There is a reference to this in the "Opening Supplication" (du'a al-iftitāh). It states the following: "... so I became

supplicating to You feeling secure, asking You, feeling close to You, neither afraid nor being apprehensive, flirting with that for which I seek You; so, if Your response is slow, I remonstrate with You due to my own ignorance..., etc."

First Level:

It is the highest of all, and it does the most harm. It is a condition found in man because of intense conceit, so intense it is that he considers himself as doing a favor to the One Who bestows His favors on him, the King of Kings, on account of his belief or other merits. He claims his merits have created, through his conviction, an expansion in the domain of the Truthful One, the most Exalted One, creating dissemination of His creed, that he, because of promoting the Sharʿa, or due to his instruction and guidance, or his enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong, or by his safeguarding His limits, or because of his prayer niche and pulpit..., he created in Allāh's creed freshness.

Or it is because of his attendance at the congregations of the Muslims, or his holding mourning congregations for Abū Abdullāh, Imām al-Hussain (ع), that the creed has enjoyed promotion which he feels he thus has done the Almighty, His Honored Messenger and the Master of Martyrs a favor, even if such a thought did not surface, he thinks it in his mind, inwardly.

From this door comes the attitude of someone doing a favor to the servants of Allāh in the religious matters such as one offering obligatory and commendable charities, his assistance to the weak and the poor. So he feels he has done them a favor, and this attitude may be hidden even from his own self, too. (An explanation of people having done no favor to the Almighty, but that Allāh does them favors, has already been made before in the discussion of pretension).

Second Level:

It is when one flirts with Allāh Almighty through the intensity of conceit in his heart. This flirtation is different from the feeling of having obliged, although some scholars do not differentiate between them. A person filling this category claims he is loved by Allāh Almighty, considering such love to be extended to those who are close to him and to those who preceded him.

When one of the friends of Allāh is mentioned by name, or when a talk goes on about those who are loved by Allāh or who love Allāh or the one on such a path who attracts others to Him, one of them feels in his heart that he is one of them. Pretension may humble itself and appears to be different from that.

Or, in order one may confirm such a station for himself, one may deny it in a way when the denial is akin to confirming! If Allāh afflicts him with an affliction, he will then beat the drum of "only friends [of Allāh] are afflicted".

Those who claim that they offer guidance to others, the men of knowledge, the Sufis, the men who study behavior and mathematics, are all closer to this danger than all others.

Third Level:

This is the level of one who sees himself as demanding his right from Allāh on account of his conviction, or merits, or deeds which he sees as worthy of rewards, obligating Allāh Almighty to strengthen him in the life of this world and get him to reach the stations in the Hereafter. He believes he is a sincere believer.

When the believers are reminded of the unknown, he sticks his head out among others, imagining he is worthy of rewards even if Allāh, Praise to Him, treats him with justice. Rather, he increases the ugliness of his rudeness, so he speaks out this false statement. If he is afflicted and something wrong happens to him, he objects to Allāh in his heart, wondering about the actions of the Just Almighty, how He afflicts the pure believer and sustains the hypocritical sinner. He, hence, is angry at heart with the Truthful One, the Almighty, because of his own estimates.

He feigns acceptance, demonstrating [in reality] his anger with the One Who bestows the blessings on him, pretending to others that he accepts destiny. If he hears that Allāh, Praise to Him, afflicts the believers in the life of this world, he solaces his heart with such a thought, not knowing that the hypocrites who are tested in this life are numerous, and not everyone who is afflicted is a believer.

Fourth Level:

Here, one sees himself as being distinguished from all others, better than all other believers on account of the basis of his belief, by the good characteristics, than those who do not have them, by doing what is obligatory and abandoning what is prohibitive compared to the contrary. He sees himself as being more perfect than all other people, that he performs what is commendable, regularly attending Friday services, the congregational prayer services and all other rituals, abandoning all contemptible acts.

He attributes to himself a distinction, depending on his own self, belief and deeds, looking at all other

beings as nothing, as incomplete, looking at people askance. He inwardly or outwardly taunts the servants of Allāh, keeping away everyone from the gate of the mercy of Allāh through some means, keeping His mercy just to himself and to groups similar to him. The individual who occupies this station reaches a degree where he discusses the good deeds of people, no matter how high they may be, belittling their deeds in his heart or in some other way, raising the standard of his own deeds above such belittling, purifying them from such discussion.

The good deeds of people he sees as nothing. If he does the same deeds, he magnifies them. He realizes the tiny faults in people very well while not realizing his own fault, overlooking it.

These are the marks of conceit even when one is indifferent to them. Conceit has other degrees which I have not stated, and I am certainly unaware of some of them.

Here, his speech, may Allāh prolong his shade, ends.

Comment:

What the imām, may his shade prolong, has said about conceit according to the beliefs, the faculties and the deeds, is not confined to the good beliefs. Rather, conceit is found in false beliefs, in ugly faculties, in wrong deeds, too. Perhaps this is far-fetched according to some, for how can one become conceited about his disbelief, hypocrisy, bad faculties and disobedience of Allāh, Praise to Him?! But let him be informed that Allāh, the Praised One, created the human nature as it is: containing the status of being accustomed to something.

If it undertakes a deed more than once, whether this deed belongs to those of the five senses or of the innermost, it likes it and becomes used to it. This status in the soul is one of Allāh's major paths and important factors for uplifting and heading towards perfection. This is so because a good deed, likewise, in earning the stations and virtuous beliefs, may seem to be a problem for the individuals in the beginning, and they require tolerance for hardships and exercises.

But if they are followed by a period of time during which they become accustomed to them, the hardship and difficulty will be removed from it. (Doing something good is a habit, and also a habit is doing evil things). From the standpoint of this status found in the soul, some great men who delved into the meaning of verses referring to torment and to eternity in the fire determined by Allāh, Praise to Him, to the unbelievers and polytheists, is derived from some principles of knowledge and philosophy which we are not here to discuss.

Those who remain tortured for some time reach a state when they feel accustomed to their environment;

they become used to it; they are not bored by it. Perhaps this sacred verse is useful to cite in this regard:

“As often as their skins are roasted through, We shall change them for fresh skins (so) that they may taste the penalty” (Qurʿān, 4:56).

This verse supports our argument about the people of the fire particularly if we pay attention to the phrase “... (so) that they may taste the penalty...”. Anyway, we have no knowledge of the facts relevant to the conditions of the world of the hereafter and its horrors, and we must not measure the conditions of that world according to our own: this one.

But it is taken for granted that the soul has the ability to get used to something in this world, that it feels comfortable with any action which it does repeatedly and which the heart likes and gets attached to. If one loves something, this love becomes a barrier between him and seeing the faults of that thing just as this verse of poetry says:

The pleased eyes are too tired to reach a fault,

But the eye of wrath reveals all the faults.

Based on what we have stated when we quoted the imām, may Allāh prolong his shade, that is, the unbelievers, the hypocrites, the unbelievers, those whose manners are contemptible, those whose desires are low, and those who commit transgressions and sins, may all be dragged to admire their disbelief, sins, bad manners and ugly deeds. They may even feel good about them, seeing themselves as having free spirits, revolting against tradition, not believing in whims.

They think that they have the manliness and courage, that belief in the Almighty is a whim, that adherence to the legislated religious laws is an indication of shortsightedness, that the good manners and virtuous wishes stem from weak souls, considering adherence to obligations and forms of worship as signs of weak comprehension and a shortcoming of feelings.

They see themselves from a standpoint as bearing free spirits that are not complicated by whims, not caring about the religious laws but worthy of praise and lauding. All of this is due to the low characteristics setting deep roots within them, and they have become comfortable with them.

They [their faults and sins] look good in their own eyes, so they consider them as signs of perfection as referred to in a sacred tradition in Al-Kāfi from Ali ibn Suwaid from Abul-Hassan, peace be with him, who has said, "Conceit comes in degrees. Among them is the servant of the Almighty sees his bad deed decorated, so he sees it as good, and he admires it, thinking he is doing something good. The Almighty has said,

'Say: Shall we tell you of those who lose most in respect of their deeds, those whose efforts have been wasted in this life, while they think that they are acquiring good by their deeds? They are those who deny their Lord's Signs and the fact of their having to meet Him (in the hereafter):

Their deeds will be in vain, nor shall We grant them any weight on the Day of Judgment" (Qur'an, 18: 103-5).

The imām, may his shade endure, says the following about those who admire their false beliefs, low desires and ugly deeds: "This group of people includes those who consider themselves as men of knowledge while they are ignorant and the most poor and wretch of all. Doctors of psychology are unable to treat them. Advising and admonishing them have no effect on them; rather, the effect may reflect contrarily on them. These do not listen to proofs; they close their ears and visions against the guidance of the prophets, the evidence of the wise, the admonishment of the scholars.

One, therefore, has to seek refuge with Allāh, Praise to Him, against the evil of the nafs and its schemes: It drags man from transgression to apostasy, and from apostasy to admiration of apostasy. The nafs and Satan, because of underestimating some transgression in the sight of man, afflict him with such transgression.

Once the transgression sets root in the heart, and once it is taken lightly, one is afflicted with a greater transgression by one degree. After its repetition, this, too, falls down in his sight. He underestimates it and commits one greater than it, and so on he progresses in committing transgressions: one step after another. The major transgressions get minimized in his eyes gradually till all the transgressions become unimportant to him. The religious laws, the divine and the prophetic way shrink in his view, so he is dragged into apostasy, disbelief and admiration of them both." Here ends the speech of the imām.

I say that this precious statement and practical piece of wisdom, which we have just cited from the great teacher of manners, may his shade prolong, is one of the unique practical pieces of wisdom and lessons of moral cultivation. The magnanimity of a transgression and sin may fall in the sight of one who commits it as a result of repetition. If transgression, from which we seek refuge with Allāh, becomes something ordinary and not ugly, nobody can imagine there will be a limit for it where one will stop.

Someone whom I trust from among my believing brethren told me once that he was in the presence of one of those who use usury and who trade in it, and that man's hand was shaking, uncontrollable. But this person, as a result of repeating his prohibitive deed, became the first person to take usury in the market of Kermanshah (now Bakhtaran).

The greatest calamity is that this state of being "daring" about transgression causes darkness in the heart that gradually puts out the noor of conviction, so one will find in himself doubt and hesitation with regard to true beliefs. If he does not properly repent and treat this detrimental ailment, he may be dragged as he draws his last breath from life and in the stupor that happens to him at the time of death to putting out the noor of conviction in his heart in its entirety.

He goes from this world in a state of disbelief in Allāh Almighty. If his condition becomes like that, there will be no hope at all for his salvation. The gates of happiness will be closed from all sides. A reference has been made to this in verses and traditions. The Almighty has said,

"In the long run, the end of those who do evil will be extremely evil because they rejected God's Signs and held them with ridicule" (Qur'^ʿn, 83: 14).

In the books of tradition, the effect of sinning in the heart is described as the black spot that keeps getting larger as one keeps repeatedly sinning till it completely encircles it. Ab^u Ja'far (ع) is also cited in traditions as having said, "Every servant of All^āh has a white spot in his heart. When he commits a sin, a black spot comes out of it. When he repents, that blackness disappears. If he gets deeper into sinning, that blackness increases till it over-covers the whiteness, and the person will never return to anything good." This is the meaning of this verse:

"By no means! But the stain of the (ill) that they do is on their hearts on account of what they used to earn" (Qur'^ʿn, 83: 14).

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