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## 2. Second approach to the relativity of knowledge (relativity of values)

Of course, there are other views on relativity which are not as disgraceful as the abovementioned, among which is the relativity of values. Those who have such a view do not say that there is no absolute and certain case in any field. Instead, according to them, empirical sciences, rational sciences and mathematics to some extent have certain, decisive and absolute cases, and only cases of ethical sciences, viz. fields related to values, ordinances and obligations do not.

That is, wherever good or bad, do's and don'ts are talked about they are relative. In a bid to prove their claim, the proponents of the relativity of values and practical duties give deceitful and misleading statements. For example, they say: "We can see that a certain thing is considered good and acceptable in a certain country and the same customs and traditions are abominable, detestable and repulsive for the people of another country.

Regarding the manner of expressing respect and admiration for individuals—as I have heard—in some East Asian countries, they smell each other. Perhaps in other countries, such an act is abominable and unacceptable. In Western countries, particularly in Latin America, whenever they want to express utmost appreciation of a prominent speaker, they embrace him or her. But in our Islamic society, for a woman to embrace a male stranger is abominable and deplorable.

So, it is possible that an action is good and acceptable in one society but the same action is abominable and reproachable in another country. From this, it becomes clear that the system of good and bad, do's and don'ts are subjective, and the ruling on them differs from one society to another. It is even possible that something is considered good at a time and unacceptable at another time.

It is reported to us that around 40 years ago in one of the Canadian cities, a person removed his coat on account of the warm climate and was walking down the street wearing a short-sleeved shirt. Immediately, horse-riding policemen came and asked him why he had removed his coat. To appear in

public in a short-sleeved shirt was against public decency! But today, in the same country, i.e. Canada, a man or woman can appear half-naked in public, without being rebuked or reproached or their action being considered detestable.

So, good and bad, indecency and beauty in relation to different times are relative and not the same. They conclude that the sciences that express good and bad, do's and don'ts—such as ethics, jurisprudence and others related to social and civil domains—are relative and subjective. They do not have any absolute basis. We cannot say that a thing is absolutely good everywhere at all times, or say that a thing is absolutely bad everywhere at all times.

## **The absoluteness and inalterability of some values**

In dealing with the claim which has been presented as an affirmative totality [*al-qadhiyyah al-mujibah al-kulliyah*] whose connotation is that all good and bad, or value-laden cases are absolute and general, one can easily present a negative particularity [*al-qadhiyyah as-salibah al-juz'iyyah*] which will disprove the general case or ruling. That is, when we find value-laden cases that are not absolute and an action is good and acceptable in some societies but considered indecent and reproachable in other societies, we can say that some value-laden cases are relative or subjective.

No doubt, this is the correct and proper judgment. We do not say also that every value-laden case or each of the do's and don'ts is absolute and general, fixed and inalterable for all societies at all times, but this does not mean that no value is ever absolute. That is, proving the relativism or subjectivism of values pertains to the negative particularity and not to the affirmative totality. As such, what we can prove is only the relativism or non-absoluteness of some values.

Our claim is that we can have an absolute value and absolute faith in some value-laden cases. If the essence of this theory is proved, we can possibly have hundred examples of such cases because rational discussion or theory is not based upon numbers and figures. Can we find a person who says that justice in some cases or societies is bad? No sensible person will say that oppression in some places is good and wholesome.

Of course, it is possible to commit a mistake with respect to the manifestations of justice and oppression and sometimes an expression or term is erroneously applied or is used out of context. For instance, one might say that every beating is an act of oppression whereas some cases of beating serve as a punishment or retaliation which is not bad. But the beating which is done as a punishment or retaliation is not an act of oppression. It is rather consistent with truth and justice. The point is that if an action is indeed an act of oppression, it cannot be good in any case. Similarly, if an action is really consistent with justice, it cannot be said that in some cases it is bad and conclude, therefore, that justice in some cases is unacceptable. This issue is so vivid and clear for all that when the Qur'an wants the people to shun polytheism, it says:

## ﴿...إِنَّ الشِّرْكَ لَظُلْمٌ عَظِيمٌ﴾

**“Polytheism is indeed a great injustice....”<sup>1</sup>**

That is, there is no doubt in the major premise that “One must shun or keep away from any act of injustice.” This case is absolute and general, fixed and inalterable. Since polytheism is one of the manifestations of injustice, it is bad and detestable and it must be shunned.

We do not claim that all value-laden concepts are absolute. We rather say that some values are absolute. Similarly, with respect to knowledge, we do not regard every kind of knowledge as absolute. We do not believe that every perception of a person is correct. Obviously, some perceptions of individuals are not correct. So, some perceptions are relative or subjective, and relativism or subjectivism exists in some accounts. For example, if you asked whether Tehran University campus is big or small, once you compare Tehran University campus to your house you will reply that Tehran University campus is very big. But if you compare Tehran University campus to the planet earth, you will say in reply that it is as small as a grain of sand compared to the desert.

Thus, concepts like big and small are relative or subjective and any case encompassing such concepts shall be relative or subjective. But from the fact that bigness and smallness are relative or subjective it cannot be concluded that everything, including God, is relative or subjective, or that the existence of man, earth and the world is also relative. Bigness or smallness is a subjective and supplementary concept, but there are concepts that are not relative and the cases they encompass can be absolute.

Therefore, we are not of the opinion that every value that every person believes everywhere is absolute. Our point is that as far as affirmative particularity [*mujibah juz'iyah*] is concerned we can have an absolute value. That is, we have also value-laden cases that are absolute and not subject to change or exception with respect to different places, individuals and times. No doubt, we have absolute values; we have absolute values that are dependent on the circumstances of time and space as well as the preferences of individuals.

We believe that injustice or oppression is always bad and detestable for everyone everywhere while justice is always good and wholesome for everyone everywhere. In objective cases and cases related to the descriptive sciences, we have absolute and certain accounts. For instance, we declare with certainty and conviction that the sky, earth and man exist; that God exists; and the divine revelation and the Resurrection exist. Indisputably, these cases are absolute and not relative or subjective.

### **The basis of absoluteness of some values**

The question posed here is this: How should we know that a case is absolute or relative? The concise reply to this question is that every axiomatic case or case which is correctly derived from axiomatic

cases is absolute. But non-axiomatic cases or cases incorrectly derived from axiomatic cases are relative or subjective. The same classification is true regarding values. *The values whose bases are emotion, imagination, customs, and contracts are relative or subjective. But the values that are substantiated by reason and can be rationally justified are absolute.*

For example, worship of God is a value which will always be absolutely desirable and acceptable, and it can never entertain any exception. It is on this basis that we assert that the worship of God is the real and true way of man's perfection. Concerning value-laden social concepts, justice too is always good and this rule knows no exception. In contrast, injustice is always detestable everywhere. So, we can have absolute values.

## **The relativity of all values and religious narratives in Western culture**

Nowadays, there are numerous schools of philosophy in the West that regard values as absolutely devoid of rational and objective basis. They maintain that all values are relative or subjective and subservient to contracts. That is, whatever people agree upon as good is good and whatever they agree upon as bad is bad. One of the important schools of moral philosophy is the positivist school or positivism, which regards acceptance by society as the foundation of value.

On this basis, the positivists hold that value and anti-value, good and bad depend on contract. Anything the people today consider as valuable and good is valuable and good. If tomorrow, the opinion of people changes, the same value will change into anti-value and the good into bad.

We believe, however, that not all values are relative or subjective and not all values depend on contract. It is true that customs and traditions are conventional, alterable and depend on circumstances of time and space, but we have a set of values rooted in the natural disposition [fitrah] of man—natural disposition which is fixed and inalterable:

﴿فَأَقِمْ وَجْهَكَ لِلدِّينِ حَنِيفًا فِطْرَةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي فَطَرَ النَّاسَ عَلَيْهَا لَا تَبْدِيلَ لِخَلْقِ اللَّهِ﴾

“So set your heart on the religion as a people of pure faith, the Creative Essence of Allah according to which He created mankind. There is no altering Allah's creation.”<sup>2</sup>

Since the Creative Essence of Allah [*fitrat Allah*] is immutable, values that are based upon *fitrah* are also inalterable. Hence, we can have an absolute value. If by saying to us, “Do not regard your ideas as absolute,” they mean that we should not regard our ideas on values as absolute on the ground that we believe in a set of values not accepted by others.

On the contrary, they believe in other values and, we are not supposed to impose our ideas because our ideas on values are based on our preference and theirs are based on their preference. Such an understanding is anchored in moral positivism, whose basis or criterion is the people's preference and desire. This inclination is rooted in corruption and falsehood and it is not consistent with Islam and the correct schools of moral philosophy.

Those who by relying upon positivism say to us that we must not regard our views and ideas as absolute are in gross blunder. We shall remain firm in protecting the absolute values and we will strive to revive and propagate the fixed Islamic values in society. We will never allow them to be blemished in the least.

Since the Renaissance, the Westerners have relegated religious concepts to the realm of values, particularly those religious concepts and narratives that are related to religious ordinances and rituals. Meanwhile, since they consider values as relative and conventional, they also treat religious concepts and narratives as relative and conventional and they do not regard them as having any absolute value. On this basis, they say: "All religions can be good and in truth. This religion is good and true for its followers and that religion is also good and true for its followers. One should not treat as absolute his religious opinion and view and say that only Islam is correct and in truth and the other religions are false."

The religion of Islam consists of a set of value-laden concepts and an array of do's and don'ts such as the enjoinder of a certain action and prohibition of a certain action, and the decree to pray and fast, not to tell a lie, not to commit fornication, and not to violate people's property and honor. Naturally, once values are relative and conventional, religious concepts shall also become relative or subjective. Consequently, Islam is accordingly a set of conventions and contracts.

It is in keeping with the positivist view and the relegation of religious concepts in the domain of value-laden concepts that they tell us: "You have no right to impose your religion on others and to ask them to become Muslims. The religion of Islam is wholesome for the Muslims and the Jewish religion is also wholesome for the Jews because these religions and faiths are relative or subjective and none of them is absolute. Once these religions and values are relative and dependent on a contract, their ruling is different from one society or people to another and from one period to another.

Fourteen hundred years ago, Islam was suitable and good for the people of the Arabian Peninsula but today another religion is desirable and suitable for the modern world! So, one should not regard it as absolute and the Muslims should not impose their Islamic thought upon others. Islam is good for those whose preference and desire are consistent with it but for others who do not like and accept this religion and have chosen another religion according to their preference, it is not good. Thus, we should not impose our preference of Islam upon others and disregard their preference.

Our reply to the above mentioned view is that we acknowledge that some decrees of Islam—like the secondary decrees—are relative, alterable and change according to the two elements of time and place,

but not all Islamic concepts are alterable. In fact, some Islamic laws are fixed, absolute and unchangeable. Besides, none of the Islamic laws depend on social contract or people's preference. Even the alterable laws have specific reasons for their alteration.

So, firstly, we do not accept the basis that regards all values as dependent on social contracts and people's acceptance and preference. We believe that some values and their opposites are absolute, and in accordance with essential interests and corruptions, and thus, they are fixed and inalterable. Secondly, since the fixed values of Islam are consistent with essential interests and corruptions, they are absolute and credible everywhere at all times. We argue that only our Islamic viewpoint is absolute, true and correct. As such, this type of relativism prevalent in the West is also inconsistent with Islam.

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1. Surah Luqman 31:13.
  2. Surah ar-Rum 30:3.

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