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Question 14: Self-Confidence and Trust in Allah

Question: On the one hand, in the sciences of education and psychology a great deal of emphasis is placed on self-confidence, but in Islamic teachings, ethics, and gnosticism (‘irfan) on the other hand, it is stressed that one must trust only in Allah (awj) and not in oneself. Is there a contradiction between the two perspectives?

Brief Answer

To apprehend whether there is a conflict or not, one must first have a clear definition of the two terms. There are two ways of understanding self-confidence:

1. Comprehending ones’ abilities, potentials, and building on the existing capabilities in the attempt to satisfy one’s desires and attain to the true human identity. This version is in no way in conflict with the spirit of trust in Allah (awj). The advantage of this version is its compatibility with two key religious terms: self-knowledge and knowledge of Allah’s (awj) blessings and the right way of employing them.
2. Egocentrism. That is, to rely solely on one’s personal capabilities and knowledge to the extent of considering one’s ambitions and desires as the source of ultimate well-being and success. This understanding is not only in disharmony with religious teachings; it is a mirage, a mere figment of the imagination. This objectionable self-confidence is actually self-centeredness and being over-confident of oneself. It is in allusion to this type of self-confidence that the Commander of the Faithful says, “Whosoever trusts in his self will be betrayed many times.”

The Definition of *Tawakkul*

Tawakkul comes from the root *wikalah* and so by derivation means “appointing someone as one’s trustee (*wakil*)”. What is meant by the self-confidence that is in harmony with *tawakkul* is maintaining one’s composure in the face of great predicaments by relying on the endless power of Allah (awj), thereby considering oneself triumphant. It means to struggle resolutely in the face of all the troubles and tribulations that befall one, trusting in Allah (awj) where one feels powerless and not ceasing to try.

Rather, even where one feels capable, one should know that the real power is Allah (awj). For, in the eyes of the true monotheist, He is the fountainhead of all existing powers, so that viewing the natural phenomena in separation from the Divine will is a kind of polytheism. All natural causes derive their potency from Him and exist due to His will.

But the second interpretation of self-confidence is in no way compatible with *tawakkul*, for in this sense self-confidence would be to regard one's strengths and capabilities independent of Divine will. And self-reliance and relying on other creatures are in opposition to the spirit of trust in Allah (awj).

The Prophet (ص) has been related as having said, "I asked Jibra'il (ع), 'What is *tawakkul*?' He replied, 'Recognizing the truth that a creature can neither harm nor benefit, and not to have your eyes on the wealth of others. When a servant of Allah acquires these traits, he will act only for Allah and will not have any hope in other than Him. This is the truth and boundary of *tawakkul*.'"

Detailed Answer

In order to properly examine the question of the contradiction of self-confidence—in the context of psychology—with the concept of trusting in God and not trusting in oneself—in the context of religious teachings—one must first analyze the meanings of the two concepts.

Analyzing the definition of self-confidence

Self-confidence is acknowledging one's strengths and capabilities, therefore relying on what one has for achieving what one desires and for attaining to the true essence of humanity. This conception of self-confidence is not in conflict with religious teachings. Rather it is exactly in line with the will of Allah (awj) and acceptable by the godly people. We are duty bound to attempt to acquire this trait and the failure thereof might result in being deprived of many advantageous things, the least of which might be the lack of success and the inability to achieve Divine satisfaction. Hence, we refer to this conception of self-confidence as the laudable self-confidence.

There are several qualifications that contribute to the positive conception of self-confidence. The first is comprehending oneself, one's capabilities, strengths and weaknesses, duties, and material and spiritual assets. What is the most effective plan for utilizing these assets? These are all points and questions that stem from the two key religious concepts: self-knowledge and recognizing one's God-given blessings and appropriately exploiting them.

This conception of self-confidence is in essence to be aware of the supra-human entity and the lofty aspects of the human being by means of knowing the blessings of Allah (awj). And this is based on the fact that Allah (awj) has bestowed certain blessings on the human being and thus holds him responsible vis-à-vis those blessings and at the end will hold him accountable, asking as to how he employed those blessings. Hence, taking the responsibility of these blessings on one's shoulders is not possible without

taking advantage of one's personal assets, without self-confidence, without benefiting from those blessings, or feeling positive. So to reward [unclear] the positive definition of self-confidence: It is the belief that "I" am one of Allah's (awj) creatures that has been given blessings by a Being who has control over these blessings and who would not be harmed were He to deprive me of all of them. We would be ungrateful if we did not think of the scheme of our existence in this manner.

We accept the first definition of self-confidence because it reinforces our independence and self-esteem and thus prevents us from being dependent on other creatures as well as underestimating ourselves. In other words, self-confidence is the conscious and beneficial acceptance of our values, assets, and symbols, such that with this lofty human/Islamic self-confidence we can stand up against all instances of timidity, [cultural] disorientation, thereby preventing our subordination to those who only wear the disguise of humanity.

Through self-confidence we will be able to regulate our mind, thereby gaining access to all the golden keys to success. Is it not true that when imperialists decide to enslave a people, their first tactic is to convince the people that they have nothing, that their mentality is backward and that they have fallen behind from modernism and that they are too immature to stand up on their own feet? By such intimidations a nation might fall from the heights of self-confidence to the pits of self-abasement, and seeing itself as inferior it will try to emulate the predator culture. Such emulation is in itself a manifestation of the cultural deficiency of the nation in question and is the beginning of its self-alienation, both culturally and religiously.

A good number of those who get caught in psychological voids—and as a result get involved in crime—are those who underestimate themselves. The analysis provided by 'Ali Mirzabiygee states that, "Self-esteem plays a major role in one's logical and normal behaviour or on the other hand one's abnormal, unfriendly, and criminal behaviour. Based on the conducted research in this field, self-esteem can prevent, ameliorate, or worsen some types of modes of human behaviour. As narrated in a tradition, "He who is self-abased will become such that there will be no security against his mischief."¹ Therefore, the positive self-confidence results in self-esteem and is itself the fruit of self-assurance, determination, and capability. "The determination of men of eminence can uproot mountains."² (*The Role of Psychological Needs*, pg. 33)

Another positive quality of this definition of self-confidence is its harmony with the spirit of *tawakkul* in Islamic culture. We will explain this point in more detail later on.

The second possible definition for self-confidence is egocentrism—i.e., the absence of any concerns other than one's desires. This could end in such extremes that one might solely depend on his faculties and knowledge, considering his needs and aspirations as the source of absolute good and ultimate success. This illusion is not only in opposition to Islamic teachings; it is also a figment of the imagination. It would be more accurate to refer to this negative definition of self-confidence as *egocentrism*. It is the latter psychological state that has been the cause of many failures and by which the human being has

been betrayed: “Whosoever trusts his ego will be betrayed by it.”³

Why is this definition of self-confidence deplorable? The following factors all play a role in the negative nature of this state of mind. This conception of self-confidence creates a false self-image in the mind of the human being and thus entails disequilibrium. When one thinks, “What I want should be... Truth is that which corresponds to my opinion and so my opinion should be done... There are no obstacles in my way... I am strong enough so that others are nothing in comparison to me...” —such thoughts can only lead to “personal overestimation”. The solidification of this notion would cause “extreme conceit” which will open the way for an unrealistic overestimation of oneself. And without doubt such mental waves and whirlpools will entail “instability” and the distortion of one’s true personality.

At any rate, the limits of one’s capabilities should be recognized. One should take into consideration all the other factors and realities too. With such awkward self-confidence there will be no possibility of a realistic assessment of one’s capabilities. The Commander of the Faithful, ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) says, “If you seek Allah’s grace, determine the aspects of your capabilities and the limits of your inabilities. Otherwise you would exceed your scope thereby undermining the possibility of progress and Divine grace.”⁴

It is for this reason that Islam prohibits such overestimation of oneself and has warned that if a human being does not abandon this state of mind, he would be seized by two entailments: conceit and self-love.

In addition to the detriments you heard regarding *‘ujb*—viewing oneself beyond the range of fallibility and being satisfied with one’s deeds—it is an evil tree whose fruit is a range of greater sins... The veil of *‘ujb* and the heavy curtain of self-satisfaction blocks one from seeing one’s own weaknesses. And this is a great affliction that prevents the human being from all perfections... And another detriment of *‘ujb* is being overconfident of oneself and one’s deeds. This causes the ignorant and unfortunate human being to consider himself free of need of the Truth, exalted is He, therefore neglecting His grace.⁵

The second feature of the negative self-confidence which renders it a deplorable trait is that it implies a notion of independence from Allah (awj), which is practically denying the principle of Divine unity in actions. In the science of theology it has been demonstrated that all existents, motions, and actions in the cosmos derive from the Pure Essence of Allah (awj). He is the cause of causes, the head of the chain of causality. Even our actions are, from one aspect, from Him. He has bestowed upon us strength, choice, and free will, but this Divine agency does not reject the role of the human being. He has bestowed strength and choice, but at the same time we are the doers of our own actions and as such are responsible for them. But this fact does not contradict the agency of Allah (awj), for all that we possess is from Him and will return to Him: “There is no active agent in existence but for Him.”⁶ Attributing the main role to oneself is tantamount to assuming absolute agency for oneself in opposition to Allah’s (awj) absolute will and His boundless rule.

Analyzing the definition of *Tawakkul*

Tawakkul is derived from the root *wikalah* and means the appointment of a trustee (*wakil*). It should go without saying that appointing a trustee is necessary where one is incapable of personally handling the situation, in which case the strength of some one else is employed. It should also be noted that the right trustee should at least have the following four traits: well informed, trustworthy, having the power to undertake the task in question, and concerned for the welfare of the client.

The first interpretation of self-confidence—i.e., self-knowledge and self-assurance along with utilizing all personal capabilities and assets—has no contradiction with *tawakkul*. For, in addition to the purely religious concepts that are embedded in this interpretation of self-confidence—such as self-knowledge, knowledge, and utilizing the blessings of Allah (awj)—essentially the realistic *tawakkul* stems from this positive interpretation of self-confidence. For, what is intended by the concept of *tawakkul* is that the human being, when confronted with tribulations in life, must not feel abased or weak.

Rather, relying on the limitless power of Allah (awj), he must see himself triumphant and victorious. In this light, it becomes clear that *tawakkul* possesses an inspiring, revitalizing, and regenerating meaning that increases one's endurance and resilience.

Hence, relying on Allah (awj) should not be construed in any other way but that the human being, when faced with the troubles and vicissitudes of life, when exposed to the animosity of enemies and the stubbornness of detractors, or in running into difficulties or seeming impasses, must endeavour to open the doors of success and when incapable, rely on Allah (awj) thereby continuing to struggle. More accurately, even where one is capable of undertaking a task, Allah (awj) should still be recognized as the principal agent in the world, for from the perspective of a monotheist, the fountainhead of power and strength is Allah (awj)

Those who assume that being cognizant of the world of causes and natural elements is in opposition to the spirit of *tawakkul* are in deep error. For dissociating the natural elements from the will of God is itself a type of polytheism. Is it not true that even natural elements owe their efficacy to Him and exist due to His will? Of course, if such elements and causes are considered independent entities in contrast to His will—then such a view is in opposition to the spirit of *tawakkul*.

The main point is that self-assurance, taking advantage of Allah's (awj) blessings, utilizing one's capabilities, and hopefulness are not in contrast to *tawakkul*. The Prophet of Islam (ص), the crown of those who rely on God, never failed to seize any opportunity, plan, or positive tactic, nor did he neglect any natural element, and he used to warn the believers, "You can... You are superior." Why should we not consider "You are superior" as the rightful interpretation and the true scheme for the conformity of *tawakkul* and self-confidence.

The second interpretation of self-confidence is in contradiction with *tawakkul* because relying on other people is in diametrical opposition to relying on God. That is, living as a liability for others and being

dependent on them means a lack of independence. For relying on God frees the human being from dependence (which is the cause of human disgrace and bondage) and bestows on him freedom and self-confidence.

The Prophet of Islam (ص) has been narrated as having said, “I inquired from the Messenger of Revelation, Jibra`il (ع), ‘What is *tawakkul*?’ He said, ‘Being aware that a creature can neither harm nor provide nor block [others’ sustenance] from being provided; that you take your eyes off of the possession of other people. When a servant of Allah has thus transformed himself, he will act only for Allah and will have hope only in Him. This is the truth and definition of *tawakkul*.’”⁷

1. Tuhaf al-’Uqul, pg. 483:

مَنْ هَانَتْ عَلَيْهِ نَفْسُهُ فَلَا تَأْمَنُ شَرَّهُ.

2. Musnad al-Shahab, vol. 1, pg. 378

3. Ghurar al-Hikam, vol. 5, pg. 161

مَنْ وَثِقَ نَفْسَهُ خَانَتْهُ.

4. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 66, pg. 79

5. Ayatullah Khomeini, Forty Hadith, under the explanation of the third hadith

6. Ayatullah Nasir Makarim Shirazi, Payam Qur’an, vol. 3, pg. 274

7. Ma’ani al-Akhbar, pg. 261:

فَقُلْتُ: وَمَا التَّوَكُّلُ عَلَى اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ؟ فَقَالَ: أَلْعِلْمُ بِأَنَّ الْمَخْلُوقَ لَا يَضُرُّ وَلَا يَنْفَعُ وَلَا يُعْطِي وَلَا يَمْنَعُ، وَاسْتِعْمَالُ الْيَأْسِ مِنَ الْخَلْقِ، فَإِذَا كَانَ الْعَبْدُ كَذَلِكَ لَمْ يَعْمَلْ لِأَحَدٍ سِوَى اللَّهِ وَلَمْ يَرْجُ وَلَمْ يَخَفْ سِوَى اللَّهِ وَلَمْ يَطْمَعْ فِي أَحَدٍ سِوَى اللَّهِ فَهَذَا هُوَ التَّوَكُّلُ.

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