

Question 24: Purpose of Creation

Question: What is the purpose of creation? Please state rational proofs in this regards. If the purpose is to perfect ourselves, then why did not Allah (awj) create humanity perfect to begin with?

Brief Answer

Allah (awj) is an unlimited being who holds all perfections. Creating (bringing to existence) is munificence (*jamal*) and Allah (awj) is munificent. His munificence necessitates that He grant existence to anything worthy of creation. Thus, Allah (awj) created because He is munificent. In other words, the goal and reason behind creation is Allah's (awj) attribute of munificence. Since, Allah's (awj) attributes of essence are not extraneous to His essence, we can conclude that the goal of creation is Allah's (awj) essence.

Allah (awj) created man with dual inclinations—for good and evil—and with two opposing poles in the external world that correspond to these two, namely the prophets (who represent good) and the devils (who represent evil). In so doing, Allah (awj) enabled man to reach the highest level of perfection possible for creatures, and also allowed him the freedom to fall into the lowest pits of depravity. If man, despite his animalistic desires and the constant whispering of satanic beings, follows the path of truth, he attains stations above even that of the angels, precisely because the latter do not have such animalistic desires and satanic whispers. However, if he chooses falsehood, he ends up being lower than even the animals, for they lack the spiritual capabilities and potential of man.

Had Allah (awj) given man every perfection that he could possibly achieve at birth, those perfections would not have been volitional ones. Besides, Allah (awj) had already created beings that had all the perfections that they could achieve from the outset and that were without any potential perfections. Thus, the purpose for which man was created is only met if man achieves perfection through his freely chosen actions.

Although the disbelievers and sinners who do not reach perfection certainly do not achieve the true goal of their creation (i.e. acting according to Allah's (awj) decree and wishes) they nonetheless do not go against the existential goal of man's creation. This is because Allah (awj) wanted with His existential will

that man be able to choose between truth and falsehood. Had Allah (awj) made it impossible for man to choose falsehood, belief and obedience would not have been volitional and man would not have free will.

Detailed Answer

In order to clarify the answer to this question we must pay attention to the following points:

1. The aim and end of Allah's (awj) actions: Allah (awj) is not limited by any thing. This is because He is the necessary being and His existence does not depend on another. He has, therefore, all perfections.
2. One of His perfections is the fact that He is the giver of grace and is generous. Allah (awj) has said in the Qur'an,

"The grace of Allah is not withheld."¹

3. On Allah's (awj) part, there is nothing that prevents Him from giving. Therefore, if in an instance He does not give, it is because of the limitations of receiver; not the Giver. Everything that can be given, is given. Every good thing, it can be said, is backed by existence while every evil is "backed" by non-existence. For example, knowledge is goodness and perfection while ignorance is evil and imperfection. Also, power, in opposition to incapacity, is perfection and good. When we pay attention to the third preliminary, we can infer that the grace of Allah (awj) comes about by means of His creating. Therefore, the giving-nature necessitates creation.

In other words, if we suppose something deserves to exist but Allah (awj) does not create it, then this is preventing a good from occurring and will be considered niggardliness (given that existence is good). We know, however, that Allah (awj) cannot be miserly. We can conclude from these preliminaries that if one were asked, "Why does Allah create," we can reply that "His being the giver of grace has caused Him to create."

The attributes of Allah (awj) are not external to His Essence. The attributes of Man and other bodies are additional to their essence. For example the apple has an essence and redness and sweetness are its external attributes. The apple can be sour or green and still be an apple.

The unity of Allah (awj) and His attributes is an extensive theological problem that one can follow further in theology under the discussion on the unity of His attributes. What concerns us here is the fact that Allah's (awj) creativity, which is the purpose of creation, is one with His essence and does not lie outside His essence. Therefore, if we are asked, "Why does Allah create," we will reply that, "because He is Allah." Therefore, the cause for His creating is Himself. This is what our philosophers have said: the goal and the agent in Allah (awj) are one. It is possible to derive this meaning from some of the verses of the Qur'an including

“All affairs return to Him.”²

What has been mentioned up to now was the goal of the agent in creation in general. However, the goal of any particular agent, such as man, requires a more specialized objective. This goal is none other than the specific perfection that Allah (awj) intends from the creation of man.

In order to explain, we may say that the fact that Allah (awj) is creative necessitates that He create every perfection possible. Before creating man, He had created other beings called angels. From the start of their creation they possessed all the perfections that were possible for them. Therefore, they will in no way obtain new perfections. Their level of existence will in no way evolve. Allah (awj) relates from the tongue of the angels that

“There is none of us except that he has a specific station; it is we who are filled in ranks; it is we who glorify Allah.”³

Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) has said, “Then He created the openings between high skies and filled them with all classes of angels. Some of them are in prostration and do not raise their heads. Others are in a kneeling position and do not stand up. Some of them are in array and do not leave their position. Others are extolling Allah and do not get tired.”⁴

They worship Allah (awj). This is a perfection that Allah (awj) has given to them. It is not possible for them to disobey Allah (awj). Allah (awj) says,

“The angels do not exceed Him in speech and they act only according to His command.”⁵

He also says,

“Upon it were placed mean angels. They do not shrink from acting upon what they were ordered to do.”⁶

Because Allah (awj) is creative, He wanted to create a greater perfection, aside from the perfection given to the angels. That is the perfection of man’s free-will. In other words, He wanted to create a being who would obtain all the aforementioned perfections (that belonged to the angels) with his own freewill.

He therefore created man: a being who does not have all the possible perfections from the start of his creation. But he is such that he can reach these perfections. It is clear that the perfection that man obtains with his own freewill is loftier than that given to the angels. Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) has said, “Allah has created the angels from the intellect, He did not place lust in them; and He created the animals with lust, but did not place intellect in them. But He placed both intellect and lust in the sons of Adam (ع). Therefore, he whose intellect overcomes his lust is greater than the angels. And he whose lust overcomes his intellect is lower than the animals.”⁷

Therefore, the purpose behind the creation of man is Allah’s (awj) creativity. Allah’s (awj) creativity

requires Him to create this kind of perfection: The greatest possible perfection.

When we ponder upon the above mentioned points we can conclude that the purpose behind the creation of man will come into existence when man has the capacity to reach perfection and strives to do so with his own freewill. If he had this perfection from the start, it is clear that it would not have come about from his own freewill and therefore the purpose of his creation would not have been met.

We must not forget that for man, obtaining even one minor perfection is accomplished by him exercising his freewill. And hence in doing this he is fulfilling the purpose of creation.

Now if man does not climb even one rung in the ladder of perfection and passes his whole life in sin and disbelief, though he may not have actualized the special purpose of his creation, he nonetheless has not escaped from the overriding reality that defines the purpose of creation in general. This is because he has actualized something that was a potential for him—for on the opposite pole of his potential to become better than the angels, lay the potential to sink to the lowest of the low. It is Allah (awj) who created him in such a way that he is able to choose either perfection or failure. Therefore, even the disbeliever or sinner does not move contrary to the existential will of Allah (awj).

Allah (awj) likes and wishes that man ascends the degrees of perfection and does not like him falling into misguidance. In other words, in the creation of man, Allah (awj) has an existential will and a conventional will (or wish). His existential will is that man actualizes all his potentials—whether good or bad. His conventional will or wish is that man only actualizes his potential for good.

With this explanation it can be said that the believing man has actualized both purposes of creation, existential and conventional, and that he has acted according to both the will and wish of Allah (awj). The unbelieving man or sinner on the other hand, although he does not actualize the conventional purpose and is not in agreement with the wish of Allah (awj), is nonetheless in line with the existential goal of creation and never escapes the overriding will of the Almighty.

1. Surat al-Isra` (17), Verse 20:

﴿ وَمَا كَانَ عِطَاءُ رَبِّكَ مَحْظُورًا ﴾

2. Surat Hud (11), Verse 123:

﴿ ... وَإِلَيْهِ يُرْجَعُ الْأَمْرُ كُلُّهُ ... ﴾

Also see: Surat al-Baqarah (2), Verse 210; Surat Ali-`Imran (3), Verse 109; Surat al-Anfal (8), Verse 44; Surat al-Fahir (35), Verse 4; Surat al-Hadid (57), Verse 5

3. Surat al-Saffat (37), Verses 164–166:

﴿ وَمَا مِنَّا إِلَّا لَهُ مَقَامٌ مَعْلُومٌ. وَإِنَّا لَنَحْنُ الصَّافُّونَ. وَإِنَّا لَنَحْنُ الْمُسَبِّحُونَ ﴾

4. Nahjul Balaghah, Sermon 1:

﴿... ثُمَّ فَتَقَ مَا بَيْنَ السَّمَوَاتِ الْعُلَا. فَمَلَئَهُنَّ أَطْوَارًا مِنْ مَلَائِكَتِهِ مِنْهُنَّ سُجُودٌ لَا يَرْكَعُونَ، وَرُكُوعٌ لَا يَنْتَضِبُونَ، وَصَافُّونَ لَا يَنْزَالُونَ، وَمُسَبِّحُونَ لَا يَسْأَمُونَ... ﴾

5. Surat al-Anbiya` (21), Verse 27:

﴿ لَا يَسْبِقُونَهُ بِالْقَوْلِ وَهُمْ بِأَمْرِهِ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴾

6. Surat al-Tahrim (66), Verse 6:

﴿عَلَيْهَا مَلَائِكَةٌ غُلَاطٌ شِدَادٌ لَا يَعْصُونَ اللَّهَ مَا أَمَرَهُمْ وَيَفْعَلُونَ مَا يُؤْمَرُونَ﴾.

7. Wasa'il al-Shi'ah, vol. 11, pg. 164:

قَالَ أَمِيرُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ عَلِيُّ بْنُ أَبِي طَالِبٍ (ع): إِنَّ اللَّهَ رَكَّبَ فِي الْمَلَائِكَةِ عَقْلاً بِلاَ شَهْوَةٍ، وَرَكَّبَ فِي الْبَهَائِمِ شَهْوَةً بِلاَ عَقْلِ، وَرَكَّبَ فِي بَنِي آدَمَ كِلْتَيْهِمَا، فَمَنْ غَلَبَ عَقْلُهُ شَهْوَتَهُ فَهُوَ خَيْرٌ مِنَ الْمَلَائِكَةِ، وَمَنْ غَلَبَ شَهْوَتَهُ عَقْلُهُ فَهُوَ شَرٌّ مِنَ الْبَهَائِمِ.

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