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The Scripture and Reason: The Case of Real Interests and Harms

Thesis

In certain jurisprudential reasoning (*usūl al-fiqh*) works, e.g. that of Shaykh Murtaḍā Anṣārī, resort is made to the concept of “real interests and harms” (“*maṣāliḥ wa mfāsīd wāqiʿiyya*”). It is maintained that divine rules are intended to bring about real interests and avert real harms. Indeed, the argument continues, there is a causal relationship between them. That is, the interests and harms derive from the objects of the orders (i.e. acts and states of affairs), rather than from the orders. This position is sometimes introduced as the prevalent one among the Imāmīs and as a decisive stance among the ‘*adliya*. It is so emphasised upon that even scriptural evidence is provided in support of the belief. For instance, reference is made to certain Quranic Verses such as 29:45 where, it is believed, the prayer (*ṣalāt*) prevents against indecency and abomination. That is to say, *ṣalāt* is of a nature that results in such a real outcome.

The debate has centred around two main questions. First, do the said interests and harms exist in the objects (acts and states of affairs) independent of the deity’s order to commit or avoid them? This is characterised as *ḥusn wa qubḥ dhātī* (inherent good and evil). Secondly, even if one embraces the realistic idea, is the human intellect capable of understanding (discovering) these interests and harms as they are? This is characterised as *ḥusn wa qubḥ ‘aqlī* (rational good and evil). A firm affirmative answer to both of the questions would undoubtedly render the interests and harms entirely independent from the divine and, indeed, may make the latter redundant, while keeping away any conflict between the scripture and reason. Nevertheless, from this perspective, one may maintain a complementary role for the both. On the other hand, an affirmative answer to the first question and a negative answer to the second seems to lead to the same result as that of giving a negative answer to both of them (i.e. the complete opposite position to the real interests and harms thesis), that can amount to a total incompatibility of the scripture and reason position. After all, a legitimate question arises here as to the possibility of a middle ground position hereto. Is this a viable path to take?

Having said all the above, the controversy seems to boil down to the same one forming around the correlation principle (*qāʿida al-mulāzama*). After all, what would be the theoretical implication of a full-fledged adherence to the thesis of *maṣāliḥ wa mfāsīd wāqiʿiyya* (real interests and harms) for an inherently religious normative system?

Keywords: real interests and harms, revelation, scripture, reason, religious normative system.



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