

## Revisiting Divine Impassibility through Tabataba'i Notion of 'Perfect Human'

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### Abstract

In the realm of analytic philosophy, the prevailing concept of Allah underscores Divine impassibility owing to His inherent necessity. Nevertheless, the Qur'an attributes characteristics such as consent (e.g., 5:119; 9:100; 48:18) and anger (e.g., 2:61; 4:93; 48:6; 60:13) to Allah. In light of certain statements attributed to the Infallibles, theologians have attempted to address this paradox through a two-fold approach: (1) distinguishing between two categories of God's attributes, namely those intrinsic to His essence and those abstracted from His actions, with the latter category deemed relational and contingent in nature, and (2) interpreting these attributes as consequential outcomes, where anger represents a form of punishment and consent signifies a reward. While Tabataba'i appears to support these solutions, he acknowledges this problem and alludes to other statements attributed to the Infallibles, asserting the role of the "Perfect Human" in ascribing these attributes to God. In the context of this discourse, Tabataba'i seeks to address the origin of Allah's attributes, suggesting that Allah experiences anger when the Perfect Human is dissatisfied and expresses consent when pleased. By invoking the notion of mediation, this approach appears to reconcile Allah's impassibility, as He remains unaffected by the contingent, while still permitting the ascription of emotional attributes. This article aims to articulate and evaluate this solution within the framework of Shia theoretical mysticism to determine its validity.

**Keywords:** Divine impassibility, perfect human, Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i

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## 1. Introduction

The principle of Divine impassibility can be succinctly summarized as follows: “external factors have no capacity to influence God in any way, and specifically, cannot elicit negative emotions such as sorrow.” While this doctrine may appear straightforward, it has given rise to a multitude of theological and philosophical inquiries.

One could argue that this doctrine has held significant influence, particularly among Shia theologians and seemingly within Abrahamic religions as a whole. Such an influence is predicated on references found in various scriptures. In the *Old Testament*, there is the assertion that “I, the Lord, change not; therefore ye, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed” (Malachi, 3:6). Moreover, within the *Nahjul-Balāgha*, conveyed by the first Imam of Shia, ‘Ali ibn Abī Ṭālib, we encounter the statement,

Stillness and motion do not occur in Him, and how can that thing occur in Him which He has Himself made to occur, and how can a thing revert to Him which He first created, and how can a thing appear in Him which He first brought to appearance. (Imam Ali 2009, 612)

Conversely, scriptures also ascribe various emotions to God. For instance, in Genesis, there is the account of “And the LORD regretted that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart” (Genesis, 6:6), following the creation of humanity. Similarly, in expressions of sympathy with the Israelites, the Book of Isaiah states, “In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them” (Isaiah 63:9). The *Qur’an* presents a similar narrative, as in the verse, “Indeed, Allah was pleased with the believers when they pledged allegiance to you” (48:18).

Indeed, it appears that a conflict arises within certain portions of the scriptures, indicating a divergence in the interpretation of these texts. The term “interpretation” is apt, as it becomes evident that preconceived notions and biases have played a substantial role in shaping the problem at hand, leading to the prioritization of certain passages over others.

There has been a contention regarding the impact of Greek philosophical traditions in shaping the biases of theologians (Mozley 1926, 4). Some have argued that specific connotations in theological doctrines point to a potential influence of Aristotelian ideas on the conception of God. According to this Aristotelian perspective, the “unmoved mover” (*primum movens*) is inherently devoid of any affectations, encompassing emotions, whether stemming from internal or external sources.

While there is a notion that equates Impassibility with immutability (Owen 2006, 110), a rigorous examination in this domain demonstrates that immutability

does not necessarily entail or necessitate divine impassibility (Leftow 2014). A historical analysis of this issue reveals that many have inferred divine impassibility from attributes such as necessary being, immutability, and transcendence.

This article comprises two primary sections: firstly, it offers a historical overview of how Shia intellectuals have grappled with the challenge of an impassible Allah; and secondly, it introduces an innovative conceptual framework for consideration in this context, with a focus on Tabataba'i's insights concerning the doctrine of the Perfect Human.

## 2. Historical Background

The primary focus of many Shia theologians centers on the concept of impassibility within discussions related to Allah as a non-contingent entity. As a necessary being, Allah possesses various attributes, including immutability. Consequently, given the theologians' perspective on emotions as involving changes in a person's emotional state, they maintain that Allah cannot be influenced by external factors. Furthermore, there are no scriptural references that can be cited as evidence supporting the idea of Allah being susceptible to such influences (Baḥrānī 1985, 75). Therefore, Allah is generally perceived as impassible in His intrinsic nature.

In response to the *Qur'anic* verses that attribute emotions to Allah, theologians had to devise a two-step solution. First, they categorized Allah's attributes into two distinct types: (a) attributes inherent to His essence (*Ṣifāt al-Dhāt*) and (b) those derived from His actions (*Ṣifāt al-Fi'l*). By excluding impassibility from the first category, it necessitated considering it as part of the second. In defining this second type, theologians posited that these attributes are intelligible only when directed toward created beings. For example, Allah's forgiveness is meaningful only when there exists a created being to receive and accept that divine act of mercy.

This initial step taken by Shia theologians regarding the classification of Allah's attributes opens a pathway for considering the attribution of emotions to Allah. By categorizing some attributes as contingent and related to Allah's deeds rather than being eternal within His essence, they imply that these attributes are influenced by the actions of created beings (Ḥillī 2009, 400). However, it's important to note that this approach still falls short of fully understanding Allah's emotions, as it primarily attributes emotions to Allah Himself and not just to His deeds.

To bridge this gap, Shia theologians utilize the second type of attributes as a foundational concept. They argue that when we speak of Allah expressing consent and anger, what is meant is that Allah rewards and punishes, respectively. In this way, the emotions attributed to Allah are not seen as inherent emotional states but rather as manifestations of divine responses to human actions.

This interpretation found support in quotes attributed to the infallible Imams, particularly the 3rd and 5th Imams, Ḥusayn ibn ‘Ali and Muḥammad al-Bāqir. When questioned about the meaning of Allah's anger and consent, and with reference to the doctrine of Allah's uniqueness and impassibility, these Imams explicitly articulated this interpretation. They explained that by adopting this perspective, it becomes possible to avoid ascribing emotions to Allah, which is a characteristic associated with dependent creatures (Kulaynī 1987, 1: 110).

Nevertheless, among Shia theologians, the prevailing view has been to reject the notion of any emotional pain or pleasure within Allah's essence and to interpret these as representing His deeds instead. However, following the philosophical shift in Shia theology, some scholars posited the possibility of a form of intellectual pleasure in Allah. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (1150-1210) (1990, 183-4), a notable anti-philosophical theologian of his era, attributed this idea to philosophers, especially Ibn Sina (1997, 396-7), but he did not endorse it, citing both rational and religious arguments against it (Al-Rāzī 1994, 370-1). In response, Naṣir al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (1201-1274), a prominent figure in the philosophical transformation of Shia theology, attempted to refute al-Rāzī's objections and argued in favor of at least this intellectual form of pleasure in Allah (Tūsī 2018, 492). In his work *Tajrīd al-Ṭiqād*, al-Ṭūsī ultimately asserted that “there is no pain at all, and no bodily pleasure for Allah.” By this statement, al-Ṭūsī and his followers, such as al-Ḥillī (1250-1325), intended to convey that since intellectual pleasure is essentially the perception of that which is harmonious and does not depend on bodily senses, Allah experiences the pinnacle of this pleasure through the observation of His creation, perceiving His fullness (Ḥillī 2009, 409).

In this context, we can view al-Rāzī as a staunch proponent of impassibility, akin to how James E. Dolezal has characterized it in his essay (Dolezal 2019). On the other hand, al-Ṭūsī represents a nuanced or qualified form of impassibility, aligning with the perspective presented by Daniel Castelo (Castelo 2019). This diversity of views among Shia theologians underscores that the discussion on this topic remains open and, as Fāḍil Miqdād (2003, 140) suggests, a challenging one fraught with potential pitfalls and complexities.

### **3. Impassibility Concerning the Doctrine of Perfect Human**

Continuing this discourse brings us to the ideas of Muhammad Husayn Tabataba‘i (1904-1981), a prominent proponent of the philosophical tradition in contemporary Shia thought. Initially, his views might appear to be in alignment with his predecessors. His characterization of attributes ascribed to deeds appears reminiscent of earlier interpretations (Tabataba‘i 2006, 243), and he also reiterates the solution that Shia theologians have historically offered for the issue

of impassibility. He references the same Qur'anic verses and deduces that the mention of Allah's satisfaction in the Qur'an essentially pertains to Allah rewarding the righteous, and so on (Tabataba'i 1973, 18: 284, 245; 17: 241; 2002, 108).

However, there is a notable departure from the conventional approach when we encounter a new solution to the problem, which does not appear to be heretical and, interestingly, draws from the Islamic heritage but had not been explicitly articulated previously. In his work *Risāla al-Wilāya*, first published in 1981, Tabataba'i introduces a fresh solution to the paradox rooted in the doctrine of the Perfect Human. This concept primarily derives from the theoretical mysticism within the Shia tradition rather than traditional theological discourse.

Before delving into the solution, it is beneficial to understand the context of the "Perfect Human" doctrine. The term "Perfect Human" (*al-Insān al-Kāmil*) was first coined by Muḥyi al-Dīn ibn 'Arabī (1165-1240). While we can trace the concept back to earlier mystics such as Bāyazīd Baṣṭāmī (804-874) and Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj (858-922), it was only in the works of ibn 'Arabī that the term was formally introduced and found application in various contexts. Subsequently, other scholars like 'Azīz al-Dīn Nasafī (-1287) and 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jilī (1365-1424) further developed and enriched the concept by writing dedicated treatises on it. However, the fundamental ideas associated with the "Perfect Human" doctrine are primarily articulated in the works of Ibn 'Arabī himself.

The primary religious reference for the "Perfect Human" doctrine is a *Hadith Qudsi*, which is derived from the Night Journey of Prophet Mohammad (*al-Mi'rāj*) and is referred to as "*Qurb Nawāfil*." In essence, this *Hadith* conveys the idea that through the practice of recommended actions, a human being can attain a state in which Allah enables them to hear with their ears, speak with their mouth, and see with their eyes (Kulaynī 1987, 2: 352-3). In other words, the human being becomes a mediator for Allah's presence in the world.

In accordance with the terminology of Ibn 'Arabī, all phenomena in the world are considered as manifestations of Allah's divine names, and the concept of the "Perfect Human" represents the collective culmination of these manifestations, bearing the overarching title of "Allah" itself, which encompasses the totality of God's names. The necessity for the existence of a Perfect Human in all eras arises from the idea that this individual serves as the conduit through which Allah can fully reveal Himself in the world and actively engage in worldly affairs through their agency. The Perfect Human essentially reflects Allah's divine essence, serving as the mirror in which Allah's presence is realized. While this might appear reminiscent of an Islamic version of the incarnation theory, it is crucial to emphasize that the emphasis here is on divine transcendence rather than

immanence. This doctrine leans more towards the idea of “human becoming God” rather than “God becoming human.”

It is evident that Tabataba’i had a well-defined understanding of the “Perfect Human” doctrine when he formulated his new solution. In one of his statements characterizing the Perfect Human, he describes this individual as one who sees Allah through themselves, and another who sees Allah through the Allah, with no barriers between them. The deeds of this Perfect Human are essentially the deeds of Allah, reflecting a deep unity and intimate connection (Tabataba’i 2007, 411-1).

In the pivotal phrase under consideration, Tabataba’i invokes the “Perfect Human” doctrine and asserts that through this doctrine, Allah can experience emotions (Tabataba’i 1986, 117). He supports this statement by referencing a direct quote from the 3rd Imam (al-Ṣadūq 2008, 164-5) and highlights certain Qur’anic verses where Allah attributes human deeds to Himself (3:28). Additionally, Tabataba’i points out a similar perspective among Sunnis, where a quote suggests that Allah’s consent is aligned with the consent of the Prophet and, subsequently, with the consent of Fāṭima (Qalqashandī 2006, 73). This further underscores the idea that emotions can be associated with Allah through the framework of the “Perfect Human” doctrine.

It appears that the Perfect Human, in each era, assumes a mediating role in Allah’s relationship with the world, allowing for the attribution of emotions to Allah through this mediation. Through this perspective, Allah can be perceived as both passible and impassible simultaneously. This duality arises from the fact that Allah is not directly influenced by external factors, yet can manifest and express emotions in relation to the world through the agency of the Perfect Human.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, it appears that this approach offers a novel resolution to the issue of impassibility, aligning the concept of a necessary being as posited by Shia theologians with Qur’anic verses that attribute emotions to Allah. The mediation of the Perfect Human acts as a bridge, allowing for a harmonious reconciliation between these seemingly divergent perspectives. While this solution may not have been fully articulated in an analytical form yet, it presents the potential to open new avenues for understanding and reconciling Divine impassibility.

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