

Levels of Existence: The Connection between the Material World and Higher Realms

What Role Does Knowing the Levels of Existence Play in Understanding the Human's Place in the System of Creation?

Is the world of creation only this material world we live in, or are there realms and levels before and after this world as well? Questions such as “Where did we come from?”, “Where are we now?”, and “Where are we going?” are among the *fitri* questions that people of different beliefs ask themselves in various ways. The importance of these questions lies in the fact that their answers lead us to a profound understanding of the levels of existence and the place of human being in the system of creation. Knowledge of the levels of creation helps us comprehend why we exist, what path lies ahead, and how we can better know ourselves; it gives direction to our lives, and gets us closer to the ultimate purpose of creation.

The system of creation is a precise, purposeful, and layered structure that possesses harmonious and corresponding levels from the highest to the lowest. Understanding the levels of existence not only facilitates knowing the diverse realms but also aids in discovering our own position within the system of creation.

From a divine perspective, the system of creation begins at a level whose comprehension is difficult for the material human mind. God initiates creation with a light that is referred to in verses and narrations as the “Light of Muhammad,” the “Spirit,” or the “Intellect.” This light is the beginning of existence and the true root of the human being.

According to the verses of the Quran and the narrations of the Infallible Imams (Peace be upon them), the system of creation is structured into various levels (realms), which consist of: the realm of *Jabarut* (the realm of intellect and power), the realm of *Malakut* (the realm of spirits and meaning), the realm of *Nasut* (the material world and forgetfulness). The human is a being that descends this path from the higher realms and only pauses for a time at the lowest point, which is the material world. However, this is not the end of the human journey. Our soul will once again ascend this path, moving from the bottom upwards, toward the Absolute Truth and Perfection.

All human beings, both religious believers and non-believers, possess *fitrah*, which seeks for the infinite. The feeling of dissatisfaction with this world, the desire for immortality, and love for infinite knowledge, power, and beauty are all indications of the human's belonging to a level higher than the material realm. But what exactly are the realms higher, or perhaps lower, than this world? Where does this world and the material realm fit within the levels of existence? What are the specific characteristics of each of these levels and realms?

In this lesson, we will examine the different levels of existence, the structure of each realm, different perspectives regarding these levels, and the significance and function of knowing them.

The Structure of the Levels of Existence: From the Light of Muhammad to the Sensory World

knowing the levels of existence is a key topic in understanding the system of creation and our place in it. All beings in the universe have been created based on

Divine Wisdom and within a precise and orderly system. Knowing this structure is considered the key to understanding the relationship between humanity, the world, and God.

The levels of creation possess a geometric and descending structure (from top to bottom). This system begins with the first manifestation of God, which is referred to as the most perfect example of Allah. In narrations, it is known by titles such as the “Spirit,” the “Intellect,” the “Pen,” or the “Light of Muhammad” [1]. All of God's creations, from the angels to the heavens, the earth, all beings, and ultimately humankind, originated from this light.

Mulla Şadra [2], Fayḍ Kashani [3], Mulla Hadi Sabzavari [4], and other sages and philosophers believe that these terms are different descriptions of one single truth, similar to the light passing through a prism and displaying various colors. Essentially, each level of creation is a reflection of the level immediately above it.

God has organized the system of creation into three main domains:

1. **The Realm of *Jabarut*:** This realm is the abode of non-material beings, pure intellect, will, and absolute power. *Jabarut*, also known as the Highest *Malaku* is considered the strongest level of the existential system and the source from which all other levels are formed. This realm has existential precedence over and encompasses all other realms and levels.

2. **The Realm of *Malakut*:** This level is the domain of spirits, souls, non-material archetypes, and imaginal forms. *Malakut*, which is also referred to as the *Barzakh*, and the separated imaginal world, is weaker than *Jabarut* in terms of existential intensity and level, yet it is stronger than and encompasses the material world.

3. The Realm of *Nasut*: This realm is the sensory, material, and limited world in which we live. The Realm of *Nasut* is the shadow and image of the higher realms and is considered the weakest of all other realms in terms of existential intensity. However, it is the place of trial and the platform for humanity's growth and ascension to higher levels.

The Realm of *Nasut* is the realm of oblivion and forgetfulness. Upon entering this realm, humans forget their past, which creates a pressing need for remembrance. God frequently reminds humanity of their truth and essence in numerous verses [5]. From this, it becomes clear that understanding the levels of existence and the characteristics of each realm can help human beings escape this forgetfulness by returning to their spiritual roots, thereby organizing their lives in alignment with the purpose of their creation.

The structure of the levels of creation, in addition to explaining the order of the cosmos, also provides a criterion for recognizing the status of the human being and the path of their growth and transcendence. As the axis of the system of creation, humanity must strive to know and strengthen their spiritual dimension to be able to move along the arc of ascent toward perfection.

Examining the Mathematical Ratio of the Levels of Existence

All the levels of existence are regulated by specific mathematical ratios in relation to one another. Imam Şadiq (Peace be upon him) expresses the formula for this ratio as follows: "Indeed, Allah, the Exalted and Mighty, created His realm of *Mulk* [material world] as a likeness of His *Malakut*, and He established His *Malakut* as a

likeness of His *Jabarut*, so that by His *Mulk*, He may argue for His *Malakut*, and by His *Malakut*, He may argue for His *Jabarut*" [6].

This saying indicates that an essence of the Realm of *Jabarut* formed the Realm of *Malakut*, and likewise, the Realm of *Nasut* and the material system were created based on the Realm of *Malakut*. In reality, *Jabarut*, *Malakut*, and *Nasut* are degrees and stages of one single truth. Therefore, the idea that there is a place called *Jabarut* in the system of creation, followed by a place called *Malakut*, is incorrect. These realms are nested and have a longitudinal relationship with one another.

The existential foundation of all the levels of creation is the light of the Holy Prophet (Peace be upon him and his family). In support of this claim, one can refer to the verses of the Quran and authentic narrations. In the Quran, God says: "The All-Beneficent has taught the Quran, created man" [7]. However, the question is: Why, in these verses, is the teaching of the Quran mentioned before the creation of humanity? To whom or what did God teach the Quran before creating the human being? The answer to this question is hidden in the sayings of the Infallible Imams (Peace be upon them). The Holy Prophet (Peace be upon him and his family) stated: "The first thing God created was my light." Based on the words of Imam Sadiq (Peace be upon him) as well, he existed thousands of years before the creation of the angels and the creation of humans and was teaching the angels *dhikr* (remembrance of God) [8].

These verses and narrations show that all creations and levels of existence are rooted in a realm full of light and consciousness. Understanding this truth not only leads to humanity's spiritual growth but also provides a precise perspective regarding the origin and destination of existence.

The Quranic View on the Levels of Existence Compared to Scientific and Philosophical Theories

When discussing the origin of the universe and the levels of existence, the focus often shifts to physics, astronomy, and the “Big Bang Theory.” However, the perspective of the Quran and narrations points to a different path. Understanding this difference can significantly impact our attitude toward the system of creation and its levels.

In the scientific perspective, the discussion always begins with “matter.” According to this view, a compressed particle existed, and its explosion led to the formation of the universe. Philosophers also believe that a “non-material being” or the “First Intellect” was emanated from God, which subsequently led to the second, third, and subsequent intellects, and finally the material world came into being.

Scientific and philosophical approaches are mostly concerned with the system, laws, measurement, and knowledge of existence, focusing on cause-and-effect relationships. The shortcoming of these views, from a religious standpoint, is that they look at the world without considering its inward truth and spiritual purpose, thereby ignoring the relationship between the human being and God.

According to the Quran and religious narrations, creation begins with the light of the Holy Prophet (Peace be upon him and his family), not with matter or an explosion! The Quran speaks of the existence of the “Light,” “Throne,” “Pen,” “Tablet,” and the “Spirit” before anything material. The narrations of the Infallible Imams also point to the existential Light of Muhammad (Peace be upon him and his family) as the first creation.

The crucial difference between the Quranic/narrative perspectives and the scientific/philosophical views is that in the Quran and narrations, creation is not described as a scientific event, but rather as a purposeful, spiritual, and meaningful process. The Quran and narrations are not aiming to present the levels of creation in a scientific or philosophical sequence; their goal is to introduce the origin of creation, the path of life, and the ultimate destination.

God says in the Quran: “We did not create the heaven and the earth and everything between them in vain” [9]. Such verses indicate that the system of creation is not the result of a coincidence or a natural system. Rather, it is a trial and an invitation to growth, constituting a path toward the return to God.

Why Is Knowing the Levels of Existence Important?

The knowledge of the levels of existence must not be considered merely theoretical knowledge. Rather, it is an essential need for understanding the process of developmental journey and discovering the path of return to one's essence. If we do not know where we came from, we lose the path of our return. However, when we realize that we are from God and to Him we shall return, we no longer view the material world as the final destination of life.

Knowing the levels of creation has a profound impact on our motivation, perspective, and lifestyle. Life without a horizon is simply a daily, aimless existence. But when we realize that we are commissioned to journey toward infinity, everything acquires meaning for us. In fact, knowing the levels of existence is a way to comprehend humanity's place in system of creation.

We humans are beings between the earth and the heavens. Through will, we can ascend from the lowest level to the highest spiritual peak. Therefore, understanding the system and the levels of creation is not just a religious belief but a map for purposeful and conscious living. A person who knows themselves becomes devoted to remembrance, movement, and hope, not stagnation and despair.

One of the functions of knowing the levels of creation is that humans realize their essence, truth, and heavenly family are Muhammad and his family (Peace be upon them). Grasping this truth also facilitates the intuition of other truths, such as prophethood and guardianship (*Wilayat*). If a person knows the essence and origin of their existence, they easily understand the reason for their need for the Infallible ones (Peace be upon them), and know that their path to growth and bliss lies in following these great personalities.

Understanding the levels of existence in the system of creation changes our perception of the world and helps us not to see the world merely in its outward, material form. Instead, we realize that every event has a root in the higher realms. This shift in perspective invites us to contemplation, knowledge, and movement toward our essence, making us aware of our current position and where we are destined to go.

The summary of the diagram of creation and the levels of existence is encapsulated by the concepts of the [“arc of descent”](#) and the [“arc of ascent,”](#) which we have previously discussed. The levels of creation in the arc of descent are, in order: Allah, the Light of Muhammad, the realm of *Jabarut*, the realm of *Malakut*, and finally, the realm of *Nasut* (this world).

These levels are traversed in the reverse order in the arc of ascent: The material world, death, the realm of *Malakut* and *Barzakh*, the Day of Judgment, eternal hereafter, and the return to the Light of Muhammad. All levels of creation are founded upon a longitudinal and mathematical truth. God's creation is a precise geometric project in which every stage is considered the essence of its preceding stage.

In this lesson, we examined the various levels of existence. These realms include the realm of *Jabarut* (the realm of the Intellect), the realm of *Malakut* (*Barzakh*), and the realm of *Nasut* (the material world). Each of these realms possesses unique characteristics and functions. The world we live in is at the lowest level in terms of existential intensity and precedence. Nevertheless, this very realm serves as the platform for humanity's ascension to higher realms and levels.

There are different viewpoints regarding the levels of creation and the starting point of existence. The scientific perspective, based on the Big Bang Theory, introduces the beginning of creation as the explosion of a compressed particle. However, in the Quranic and narrative approach, the existential light of the Holy Prophet (Peace be upon him) is introduced as the starting point and foundation of creation. Accepting such a perspective leads to the recognition and belief in the two fundamental principles of prophethood and *Imamate* [leadership of the Infallibles].

Knowing the various levels of existence enables humans to better know their place in the system of creation and, with awareness of the origin, the path, and the destination, to adjust their lifestyle in a way that moves toward the purpose of creation with the least damage and the greatest speed.

What is your knowledge of the levels of existence? Do you think that knowing these levels has an effect on people's daily lifestyle? Share your thoughts with us.

References

- [1]. Muhammad Baqir Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, vol. 25, p 32.
- [2]. Mulla Şadra (c. 1571–1640 CE), known fully as Şadr al-Din Muḥammad Shirazi, is one of the most influential philosophers and theologians in the history of Islamic intellectual tradition.
- [3]. Fayḍ Kashani (c. 1598–1680 CE) was a towering Shia polymath of the Safavid era.
- [4]. Mulla Hadi Sabzivari (c. 1797–1873 CE) is considered the last great master of the "Transcendent Theosophy" (Ḥikmat-i Muta'āliyah) school in traditional Islamic philosophy and the most influential philosopher of the Qajar era.
- [5]. "To Allah We belong, and to Him is our return." (Holy Quran, 2:156)
- [6]. Shaykh Bahai, *Miftāḥ al-Falāḥ*. Qom: Manshūrāt al-Hādī, 1413 /1992, introduction. (In Arabic).
- [7]. Holy Quran, 55:1-3
- [8]. Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, vol. 26, p. 409, no. 24.
- [9]. Holy Quran, 38:27