

Free Will And Determinism

Free Will And Determinism



Sayyid Mujtaba Musavi Lari

**Translated by
Hamid Algar**

Al-Islam.org

Al-Tawhid Vol. 6, No. 3

[1] [1]

SHARES

[Get PDF](#) [2] [Get EPUB](#) [3] [Get MOBI](#) [4]

Authors(s):

[Sayyid Mujtaba Musavi Lari](#) [5]

Publisher(s):

[Al-Tawhid Islamic Journal](#) [6]

Translator(s):

[Hamid Algar](#) [7]

Topic Tags:

[Free Will](#) [8]

[Determinism](#) [9]

[Beliefs and Doctrine](#) [10]

Free Will And Determinism

By Sayyid Mujtaba Musavi Lari

Translated From The Persian By Dr. Hamid Algar

Al-Tawhid, Vol.VI, No. 3

Rajab – Ramadhan, 1409 A.H. – March – May, 1989

[A General View Of The Problem](#)

One of the questions that has always attracted the attention of thinkers concerned with the nature of human life and been the subject of eternal controversy is whether man is free to choose his aims and implement his wishes in all his deeds and activities, in all the affairs of his life, whether material or otherwise.

Are his desires, inclinations and will the only factor determining his decisions? Or are his acts and his

conduct imposed upon him? Is he compelled to helplessly perform certain acts and take certain decisions? Is he an involuntary tool in the hands of factors external to himself?

In order to understand the importance of this question, it must be borne in mind that on its solution depends our ability to benefit fully from economics, law, religion, psychology and all other branches of knowledge that take man as their subject. Until we find out whether man has free will or not, whatever law be propounded for man in any of the sciences will apply to a being whose nature remains unknown to us. It is evident that no desirable result is then to be had.

The question of free will versus determinism is not exclusively an academic or philosophical problem. It is of concern, too, to all those who posit a duty for man that he is responsible for fulfilling and encourage him to do so. For if they do not at least implicitly believe in free will, there will be no basis for rewarding people who do their duty and punishing those who do not.

After the rise of Islam, Muslims too paid special attention to this question, because the world view of Islam caused it to receive more profound scrutiny than had been the case hitherto and all the attendant obscurities had to be clarified. For on one hand the problem was connected with the unity of God and on the other hand with His attributes of justice and power.

Thinkers of both past and present can be divided into two categories on the question of free will versus determinism. The first resolutely rejects the freedom of man in his actions, and if his acts appear to show the signs of free choice, this is because of the faulty and deficient nature of human perception.

The second category believes in free will and says that man enjoys complete freedom of action in the sphere of volitional acts; his ability to think and decide has far-reaching effects and is independent of all factors external to him. Naturally man experiences the effects of compulsion with regard to his birth, as well as various factors that surround him and occurrences he encounters during his life. The result of this may be that he ends up believing there is no such thing as free will. He entered the world involuntarily and appears to be completely controlled by fate, blown around like a piece of paper until he finally leaves the world.

At the same time, man clearly perceives that he is free and independent in many things, without any form of compulsion or imposition. He has the ability and capacity to struggle effectively against obstacles and to extend his control of nature by relying on previous experience and knowledge. An objective and practical reality he cannot deny is that there is a profound and principal difference between the volitional motions of his hands and feet and the functioning of his heart, liver and lungs.

So given his will, awareness and ability to choose, which are a hallmark of his humanity and the source of his responsibility, man knows that he does indeed have free will in a whole series of acts and that no obstacle prevents him from implementing his will or forming his belief. But in other respects his hands are tied and he has no power to choose: matters determined by material or instinctual compulsion which make up a considerable part of his life, and others that are imposed on him by factors external to him.

Determinism

The proponents of determinism do not believe that man is free in the acts he performs in the world. Theological determinists such as the Muslim theological school known as the Asha'irah (Ash'arites), relying on the outer meaning of certain verses of the Qur'an and not pausing to reflect on the true meaning of all the relevant verses or on the nature of God's power to predetermine, conclude that man has no freedom whatsoever. They also deny that things produce effects and do not acknowledge that causes have a role to play in the creation and origination of natural phenomena. They consider everything to be the direct and unmediated effect of the divine will, and they say that although man

has a certain amount of will and power at his disposal it has no effect on his acts. Men's acts are caused not by their power and their will but by God's will, which produces all effects in exclusivity. Man can only give a certain colouring to the acts he performs with his aim and intention, and this colouring results in acts being qualified as 'good' or as 'bad'. Apart from this, man is nothing but the locus for the implementation of God's will and power.

They also say that if we suppose man to possess free will, we will have narrowed the sphere of God's power and governance. God's absolute creativity requires that no man confront Him as a creator; likewise belief in the doctrine of the Oneness of God, considering the absolute sovereignty we ascribe to Him, must mean that all created phenomena, including the acts of men, are enclosed in the sphere of the divine will and volition.

If we accept that a person creates his own acts, we deny God's sovereignty over all of creation, which is incompatible in turn with God's attribute of creator, for we would then enjoy complete sovereignty in the realm of acts and there would be no role left there for God. Thus a belief in free will is held to lead inexorably to polytheism or dualism.

In addition, some people make the principle of determinism whether consciously or unconsciously an excuse for committing acts contrary to religion and morality, opening the way to all kinds of deviation in the sphere of belief and action. Certain hedonist poets belong to this group; they imagine predetermination to be sufficient excuse for their sins and hope in this way to escape both from the burden of conscience and from ill-repute.

This determinist mode of thought is contrary to the principle of justice, with reference both to God and to human society. We clearly see divine justice manifested in all its dimensions throughout creation, and we praise His most sacred essence as possessing this attribute. The Qur'an says:

شَهِدَ اللَّهُ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ وَأُولُو الْعِلْمِ قَائِمًا بِالْقِسْطِ

“God bears witness to His own Oneness; He it is Who maintains justice; and His unique essence is empowered over all things and is knowledgeable of all things” (3: 18).

God also describes the establishment of justice in human society as one of the purposes for the sending of the prophets and states His desire that His servants should maintain justice:

لَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلَنَا بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ وَأَنْزَلْنَا مَعَهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْمِيزَانَ لِيَقُومَ النَّاسُ بِالْقِسْطِ

“Indeed We sent our Messengers with proofs and miracles and sent down to them the Book and the Balance so that men should establish justice” (57:25).

On the Day of Resurrection God’s treatment of His servants will similarly be based on justice, and no one will be subject to the slightest injustice. The Qur’an says:

وَنَضَعُ الْمَوَازِينَ الْقِسْطَ لِيَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ فَلَا تُظْلَمُ نَفْسٌ شَيْئًا

“We will establish the scales of justice on the Day of Resurrection and none shall suffer injustice” (21:47).

Now would it be justice to compel man to do something sinful and then to punish him for it? Were any court to issue a verdict providing for punishment under such circumstances it would certainly be unjust.

If we deny the principle of freedom and assign no positive role at all to man’s will, no difference will remain between man and the rest of creation. According to the determinists, the acts of behaviour of man resemble those of other creatures in that they are caused by a series of factors beyond their control; our will does not of itself have the power to produce an effect.

But if God creates the volitional acts of man, if He is the creator of injustice and sin, even of the assignation of partners to Himself, how can we explain such behaviour on the part of a perfect and exalted being?

The belief in determinism nullifies and abolishes the principles of prophethood and revelation; the concept of a divine message that is to serve as the source of human awareness; the idea of commands and prohibitions, of religious criteria and ordinances, of law and of creed; and the doctrine of certain requital for one’s deeds. For once we believe that all of man’s acts take place mechanically, without any will or choice on his part, no role will remain for the message of the prophets who have been sent to assist man in his strivings.

If the duties imposed on man and the instructions addressed to him have nothing to do with his free will and ability to obey and respond, of what use are they?

If man's spiritual states and outer actions are to be mechanically determined, all the ceaseless efforts of moral educators to redeem human society and move it in the direction of creativity and higher values will be totally ineffective.

Their efforts would serve no purpose; it is fruitless to expect a being whose every act is determined to change. But man is responsible for his own salvation or destruction as well as that of others; his choice fashions his destiny, and once he knows that every act he performs has some consequence, he will choose his path with great care. His reliance on God's love and favour will cause windows of power to be opened for him.

It may be objected that considering the belief in the comprehensive knowledge of God (He has from the beginning known all that transpires in the world; nowhere in the world does an event occur, major or minor, of which He does not have prior knowledge), God must necessarily know in advance of the atrocities, evil deeds and sins men commit, and since they take place nonetheless, men are clearly unable to refrain from them.

We answer as follows. It is true that God is aware of all phenomena, both lesser and greater, but this knowledge does not mean that man is compelled in all that he does. God's knowledge is based on the principle of causality; it does not apply to phenomena or human acts that lie outside that framework. A knowledge that operates by means of cause and effect does not involve compulsion.

God was aware of the future course of events in the world and knew that men would perform certain acts in accordance with their free will. Their exercise of free will is part of the chain of causality that leads to their acts, and it is men themselves who decide to do either good or bad deeds. In the latter case, through misuse of their free will, they cause ruin and corruption; so if evil and oppression exist in a given society, this is the result of men's deeds. It is not created by God. God's knowledge has no effect on man's choice of good or evil.

It is true that within the sphere of man's freedom and power to decide certain factors exist such as environmental circumstances, the innate nature of man, and divine guidance which play a role in the choices he makes. But that role is confined to the arousal of inclination, to the encouragement and assistance of man's will; it does not compel man to choose a certain direction. The existence of these factors does not mean that man is imprisoned in their grasp; on the contrary, he is fully able either to obey the inclinations created by external factors or to resist them by confining them or changing their course. An individual can profit from the guidance available to him through insight and clear vision, giving shape to his inclinations and controlling or modifying them. The abundant instinctual drives man has within him can never be fully eliminated, but it is important to rein them in and deny them the opportunity to run wild.

Suppose an expert mechanic inspects a car before it sets out on a journey and foresees that the car will

not be able to proceed more than a few kilometres before stopping because of some technical defect.

Now if the car sets out and breaks down after a few kilometres, just as the mechanic has predicted, can it be said that he was the cause of the breakdown simply because he had predicted it?

Obviously not, because the car's poor state of repair was the reason for its breaking down, not the knowledge of the mechanic and the prediction he made; no rational person can regard the knowledge of the mechanic as the cause of the breakdown.

To give another example: a teacher knows of the progress his pupils are making and knows that one pupil will fail in his final examinations because of his laziness and refusal to work. Once the results of the examinations are given out, it becomes apparent that negligent student has indeed failed to pass. Now is the cause of such a result the knowledge of the teacher or the laziness of the pupil? Obviously, the latter.

These examples enable us to understand, to some degree, why God's knowledge is not a cause for the deeds of His servants.

One of the harmful effects of determinism on society is that it makes it easier for arrogant oppressors to stifle and repress the downtrodden and more difficult for the downtrodden to defend themselves.

Using determinism as an excuse, the oppressor denies all responsibility for his violent and pitiless acts; he claims that his hand is the hand of God and attributes all his transgressions to God God Who is beyond all reproach and objection. The oppressed are then obliged to endure and accept whatever the oppressor does with them, because to struggle against his injustice would be in vain and efforts to bring about change would inevitably fail.

The imperialists and other major criminals in history have sometimes used determinism to perpetuate their cruelty and oppression.

When the family of the Doyen of the Martyrs, al-Husayn Ibn 'Ali peace be upon him came into the presence of Ibn Ziyad, that wretched criminal said to Zaynab al-Kubra, peace be upon her: "Have you seen what God did with your brother and family?"

She answered: "From God I have seen nothing but kindness and good. They have done that which God wanted of them to elevate their station and performed the duties that were entrusted to them. Soon you will all be gathered in the presence of your Lord and called to account; then you will understand who has triumphed and who has been saved."

In respect of the question of free will and determinism, the materialists are caught in a contradiction. On the one hand they consider man as a material being, subject like the rest of the world to dialectical

change and unable to produce an effect of himself; faced with environmental factors, historical inevitability and predetermined circumstances, he lacks all free will. In choosing his path of development, his ideas and acts, he is entirely at the mercy of nature. Any revolution or social development is exclusively the material result of a certain environmental situation, and man has no role to play in it.

According to the determining relationship between cause and effect, nothing occurs without its own preceding cause and man's will, too, when faced with the material and economic circumstances of his environment and mental factors, is subject to inflexible laws, being in fact little more than the "effect" they produce. Man is compelled to choose the path that is imposed on him by the demands of his environment and its intellectual content. There is thus no way for the independent will and choice of man to express itself, and no role for his sense of moral responsibility and discrimination.

But at the same time the materialists consider man able to influence society and the world, and they place even more emphasis than other schools of thought on propagation and ideological discipline within an organized party. They summon the masses who have been victimized by imperialism to rise up in violent *révolution* and try to make men change their beliefs and play a role different from that which they were previously playing all this by relying on the power of free choice. This ascription of a role to man contradicts the whole scheme of dialectical materialism since it proclaims that free will exists after all!

If the materialists claim that arousing the oppressed masses and strengthening revolutionary movements accelerates the birth of the new order from the womb of the old, this would be illogical, because no revolution or qualitative change can take place out of turn or at other than its proper time. Nature performs its own task better than anyone, according to the dialectical method; to engage in propaganda and to seek to mobilize opinion is an unjustifiable interference in the work of nature.

It may also be said by the materialists that freedom consists in knowing the laws of nature in order to make use of them for the sake of certain goals and purposes, not in some independent stance *vis-à-vis* the laws of the nature. But this too fails to solve the problem, because even after one has learned those laws and decided in principle to make use of them for specific purposes, the question remains of whether it is nature and matter that determine those purposes and impose them on man or man that freely chooses them.

If man is able to choose, are his decisions a reflection of the wishes and conditions of nature, or can they run counter to them?

The materialists have regarded man as a monodimensional creature so that even his beliefs and ideas are the result of economic and material developments and are subject to class positions and production relations within society; in short, they reflect the particular conditions arising from the material needs of human beings.

It is, of course, true that man has a material existence and that the material relations of society and physical, geographical and natural conditions all have an effect on him. But other factors, arising from

within man's essential nature and his inner being, have also influenced man's destiny throughout history, and it is not possible to regard the intellectual life of man as having been inspired exclusively by matter and the relations of production. One can never overlook the important role played by religious factors and ideals, by spiritual impulses, in man's choice of a path to follow; his will is definitely one link in the causal chain leading him to do a certain act or not to do it.

No one doubts that man is subject to the influence of natural actions and reactions, and that the force of history and economic factors prepares the ground for the occurrence of certain events. But they are not the sole determinants of history and they do not play the fundamental role in deciding the destiny of man. They are unable to take from man his freedom and power to decide because he has progressed to a point that he has a value which, lying beyond nature, enables him to acquire consciousness and a sense of responsibility.

Not only is man not a prisoner to matter and the relations of production; he has power and sovereignty over nature and the ability to change the relations of matter.

Just as changes in material phenomena are subject to external causes and factors, certain laws and norms exist in human society that determine a nation's degree of prosperity and power, or its fall and decline. Historical events are neither subject to blind determinism nor accidental; they correspond to the norms and designs of creation, among which man's will holds an important place.

In numerous verses of the Glorious Qur'an, oppression, injustice, sin and corruption are shown to change the history of a given people, this being a norm observed in all human societies.

وَإِذَا أَرَدْنَا أَنْ نُهْلِكَ قَرْيَةً أَمَرْنَا مُتْرَفِيهَا فَفَسَقُوا فِيهَا فَحَقَّ عَلَيْهَا الْقَوْلُ فَدَمَّرْنَاَهَا تَدْمِيرًا

“When it is decided that a land shall be destroyed, the self-indulgent worshippers of profit in that society begin to work corruption and sin. Then God's ineluctable decree comes to pass concerning the vile and corrupt people who have been caught up in the deeds of pleasure-seeking hoarders of wealth: the land is turned upside down and its people are destroyed” (17:16).

أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِعَادِ

“Did you not see what God did with the people of 'Ad?’” (89:6).

إِرَمِ ذَاتِ الْعِمَادِ

“Or the people of Iram who had great power” (89:7).

الَّتِي لَمْ يُخْلَقْ مِثْلُهَا فِي الْبِلَادِ

“A might the like of which had never existed in any other land?” (89:8).

وَتَمُودَ الَّذِينَ جَابُوا الصَّخْرَ بِالْوَادِ

“Have you not seen the people of Thamud who split the hearts of the rock and raised up palaces for themselves?” (89:9).

وَفِرْعَوْنَ ذِي الْأَوْتَادِ

“Or the Pharaoh who had abundant forces and troops” (89: 10).

الَّذِينَ طَغَوْا فِي الْبِلَادِ

“Who committed inordinacy in the cities” (89: 11).

فَأَكْتَرُوا فِيهَا الْفُسَادَ

“And arrogantly wrought oppression and much corruption in the land?” (89: 12).

فَصَبَّ عَلَيْهِمْ رَبُّكَ سَوْطَ عَذَابٍ

“God brought down on them the scourge of His wrath” (89: 13).

إِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَبِالْمِرْصَادِ

“Indeed God lies in wait for the oppressors” (89: 14).

The Qur’an also reminds us that men who worship their desires and obey their stray inclinations cause many of the calamities of history:

إِنَّ فِرْعَوْنَ عَلَا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَجَعَلَ أَهْلَهَا شِيَعًا يَسْتَضَعِفُ طَائِفَةٌ مِنْهُمْ يُذَبِّحُونَ أَبْنَاءَهُمْ وَيَسْتَحْيِي نِسَاءَهُمْ إِنَّهُ كَانَ مِنَ الْمُفْسِدِينَ

“Pharaoh began to act with arrogant rebelliousness in the land and cast disension among its people, humbling and laying low the Children of Israel. He killed their sons and left alive their womenfolk; he was indeed given to corruption and evil” (28:4).

فَاسْتَخَفَّ قَوْمَهُ فَاطَاعُوهُ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا قَوْمًا فَاسِقِينَ

“He [the Pharaoh] humbled his own people, compelling them all to obey his command; truly they were a sinful and corrupt people” (43:54).

How much bloodshed, war, ruin and disorder has been caused by the worship of passionate desire and the hunger for power!

Men, who are the component elements of society, possess intelligence and innate will in their own beings, prior to their inclusion to society; the individual spirit is not powerless vis-à-vis the collective spirit.

Those who claim that the individual is completely determined in his acts by the social environment imagine that any true compounding must necessarily involve the dissolution of the parts in the unity of the whole to enable a new reality to emerge. The only alternative to this, they believe, would be either to deny the objective reality of society as a compounding of individuals and acknowledge the independence and freedom of the individual, or to accept the reality of society as a compound and abandon the independence and freedom of the individual.

It is impossible to combine these two possibilities, they maintain. Now although society possesses greater power than the individual, this does not mean that the individual is compelled in all his social activities and concerns. The primacy of essential nature in man – the outcome of his development on the natural plane gives him the possibility of acting freely and rebelling against the impositions of society.

Although Islam posits personality and power for society, as well as life and death, it regards the individual as capable of resisting and struggling against corruption existing in his social environment; it does not see in class conditions determining factors leading to the emergence of uniform beliefs among those subject to them.

The duty of enjoining the good and forbidding the evil is itself a command to rebel against the orders of the social environment when these involve sin and corruption.

The Qur’an says:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا عَلَيْكُمْ أَنْفُسُكُمْ لَا يَضُرُّكُمْ مَنْ ضَلَّ إِذَا اهْتَدَيْتُمْ

“O you who believe, hold firm to your faith, because the misguidance of others can never compel you to fall into misguidance” (5: 105).

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ تَوَفَّيْتَهُمُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ ظَالِمِي أَنفُسِهِمْ قَالُوا فِيمَ كُنْتُمْ قَالُوا كُنَّا مُسْتَضْعَفِينَ فِي الْأَرْضِ قَالُوا أَلَمْ تَكُنْ أَرْضُ اللَّهِ
وَاسِعَةً فَتُهَاجِرُوا فِيهَا فَأُولَئِكَ مَا لَهُمْ جَهَنَّمَ وَسَاءَتْ مَصِيرًا اللَّهُ

“When they die the angels will ask them, ‘What did you do? They will answer, ‘We were weak and powerless on earth. The angels will then say, “Was God’s earth not wide enough for you to travel in it?””¹(4:97).

In this verse, those who regard themselves as compelled to conform to society are strongly condemned and their excuse for falling to assume responsibility is rejected.

For man to progress morally and spiritually, the existence of free will in him is indispensable. Man has value, and values can be expected of him, only insofar as he is free. We acquire individual independence and value only when we choose a path conforming to truth and resist the evil tendencies within ourselves and our environment by means of our own efforts. If we act only in accordance with the course of natural development or dialectical determinism, we will have lost all value and personality.

There is, then, no factor compelling man to choose a certain path in life, nor a force obliging to abandon one. Man may claim to be making himself not when he changes his form in accordance with the laws prevalent in society or pre-fashioned goals, but only when he himself chooses, decides and invests his own efforts.

Free Will

The proponents of this school say that man is automatically aware that he possesses freedom in his actions; he can decide as he wishes and fashion his own fate in accordance with his own will and inclinations. The existence that decrees responsibility for man, the regret man feels for certain acts he commits, the punishments law provides for criminals, the deeds men accomplish in order to change the course of history, the foundation of science and technology all of these prove man to be free in his actions.

Likewise the question of man’s religious accountability, the sending of the prophets, the proclamation of divine messages, and the principle of resurrection and judgement all these rest on man’s free will and choice in the acts he performs.

It would be completely meaningless were God on the one hand to compel men to do certain things and on the other hand to reward or punish them. It would surely be unjust were the Creator of the world to set us on whatever path He chose, by means of His power and His will, and then to punish us for actions

we have committed without any choice

on our part. If the deeds of men are in reality the acts of God, all corruption, evil and cruelty must be regarded as His work, whereas His most sacred being is utterly pure of all such corruption and injustice.

If there were no free choice for man, the whole concept of man's religious accountability would be unjust. The oppressive tyrant would deserve no blame and the just would merit no praise, because responsibility has meaning only within the sphere of what is possible and attainable for man.

Man deserves blame or merits praise only when he is able to decide and to act freely; otherwise, there can be no question of blame or of praise.

Those who adhere to the above position have gone to such extremes in asserting the principle of man's free will that they regard man as being the undisputed possessor of absolute free will in all his volitional acts. They imagine that God is unable to extend His rule over the will and wishes of His creatures and that men's volitional acts are

excluded from the realm of His power. This, in summary, is the position of the proponents of absolute free will.

Those who say that it is natural norms and the will of men that create the phenomenal world, and that neither the rotation of the world nor the acts of men have any connection with God, are ascribing all effects to a pole opposed to God. At the very least, they are making created things a partner with God in His creation, or setting up another creator in confrontation with God, the Creator. They unconsciously regard the essences of created things as independent of the Divine essence.

The independence of a creature – be it man or other than man – entails belief in that creature being a partner with God in His acts and His independence, resulting clearly enough in a form of dualism. Man is thus led away from the lofty principle of divine unity and cast into the dangerous trap of polytheism. To accept the idea of man's absolute freedom would be to withdraw from God His sovereignty in a given area, whereas, it in fact embraces all beings, for we would be attributing to man untrammelled and indisputable sovereignty in the sphere of his volitional acts. No true believer in God's unity can accept the existence of a creativity separate from that of God, even in the limited realm of man's acts.

While recognizing the validity of natural causes and factors, we must regard God as the true cause of all occurrences and phenomena and recognize that if God wished, He could neutralize man's will even in the limited sphere where it operates and render it ineffective.

Just as all creatures in the world lack independence in their essence, all being dependent on God, they also lack independence in causation and the production of effects. Hence we have the doctrine of the unity of acts, meaning perception of the fact that the entire system of being, with its causes and effects,

its laws and its norms, is the work of God and comes into being from His will; every factor and cause owes to Him not only the essence of its existence but also its ability to act and produce effects.

The unity of acts does not require us to deny the principle of cause and effect and the role that it plays in the world, or to regard everything as the direct and unmediated product of God's will, in such a way that the existence or non-existence of causal factors would make no difference. But we should not attribute independent causation to those factors, or imagine that God's relationship to the world is like that of an artist to his work for example, that of a painter to his painting. The work of art is dependent on the artist for its origination, but after the artist has completed his job, the charm and attractiveness of the painting remain, independent of the artist; if the artist leaves this world, his brilliant work will still remain.

To imagine God's relationship with the world to be of the same type is a form of polytheism.

Whoever denies the role of God in phenomena and in the deeds of men supposes thereby that God's power stops short at the boundaries of nature and of human free will. Such a view is rationally unacceptable, because it implies both a denial of the entirety of God's power and a limiting of that unlimited and infinite essence.

One holding such an opinion will regard himself as free of any need for God, which will cause him to rebel against Him and engage in all manner of moral corruption. By contrast, a feeling of dependence on God, of reliance on Him and submission to Him, has a positive effect on the personality, character and conduct of man. Recognizing no source of command other than God, whether inner or outer, passionate desires and inclinations will be unable to drag him this way and that, and no other man will be able to enslave him. The Noble Qur'an denies man any participation with God in managing the affairs of this world:

وَقُلِ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي لَمْ يَتَّخِذْ وَلَدًا وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ شَرِيكٌ فِي الْمُلْكِ وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ وَلِيٌّ مِنَ الذَّلَالِ وَكَبْرَهُ تَكْبِيرًا

“Say: ‘Praise belongs to God alone, He Who took no offspring and Who has no partner in the managing of the world. There is never any diminution in His power that He might stand in need of a helper. Praise His Essence continuously as possessing the greatest attributes of perfection’”
(17:111).

Numerous verses unambiguously proclaim the absolute power and might of God. For example:

لِلَّهِ مُلْكُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا فِيهِنَّ ۗ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

“God controls whatever exists in the heavens and on the earth, and He has power over all things”
(5:120).

وَمَا كَانَ اللَّهُ لِيُعْجِزَهُ مِنْ شَيْءٍ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَلَا فِي الْأَرْضِ ۚ إِنَّهُ كَانَ عَلِيمًا قَدِيرًا...

“Nothing in the heavens or on earth can frustrate God, for He is all-knowing and all-powerful” (35:44).

The beings of this world need God for their survival and perpetuation just as strongly as they do for their origination. The entirety of creation must receive the gift of existence anew every instant failing which the whole universe would collapse. The creativity of all the forces in the world is identical with the creativity of God and is an extension of His activity. A being that in its very essence is dependent on the divine will does not have any independent standing of its own.

Just as electric lamps derive their light from the power station when first switched on, so too they must constantly receive energy from the same source in order to remain alight.

The Glorious Qur’an emphatically and clearly declares:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ أَنْتُمُ الْفُقَرَاءُ إِلَى اللَّهِ ۚ وَاللَّهُ هُوَ الْغَنِيُّ الْحَمِيدُ

“O Men! At all times are in need of God, and it is He alone Who is utterly free of need” (35: 15).

All essences derive from His will and are dependent on Him; all phenomena are continually sustained by Him. The powerful and magnificent order of the universe is oriented to one pole alone and turns on one axis alone.

Al-Imam Ja’far al-Sadiq, upon whom be peace, said: “The power and might of God are too lofty for aught to occur in the universe that is contrary to His will²”

Had God not bestowed on us the principle of free will and were He not every instant to endow us with life, resources and energy, we would never be able to do anything. For it is His unchanging will that has determined that we should perform volitional acts according to free will, thereby fulfilling the role He has assigned to us. He has willed that man should construct his own future, good or bad, bright or dark, in accordance with his own discernment and desires.

Our volitional acts are then connected both with ourselves and with God. We can use the resources God has placed at our disposal in full awareness either to uplift and improve ourselves in accordance with a correct choice, or to plunge into corruption, sin, and self-indulgence. It remains of course true that the scope of our volitional acts lies within a fixed framework; power is from God, and the use made of it, from us.

Suppose that someone has an artificial heart, powered by a battery that we can switch on and off in a control room; whenever we want we can turn off the switch and stop the heart’s functioning. That which

lies within our power is the current that goes from the battery to the heart; at any moment we can stop it. But as long as we allow the battery to function, the person in whom the heart is implanted will be free to act as he wishes. If he performs a good or an evil act, it will without doubt be in accordance with his own will. The way in which he makes use of the power we have placed at his disposal depends entirely on him and has nothing to do with us.

Similarly, our power derives from God and He can withdraw it from us at any moment, but He has assigned the manner in which we make use of that power entirely to our free choice.

The Median School

All beings in the world enjoy a form of guidance particular to the stage of development they have reached; their specific forms of guidance correspond to their different degrees of existence.

It is possible for us to clarify and distinguish our own position among the different beings of this world. We know that plants are captives in the hands of the determining forces of nature, while exhibiting at the same time certain slight developmental reactions vis-à-vis changes in their environment.

When we analyze the properties of animals, we feel that they possess attributes quite different from those of the plants. In order to obtain their nourishment, animals have to engage in a wide range of activities, since nature does not invite them to a feast at which their nutritional needs are placed before them. Animals need certain tools and instruments in their efforts to gain food, and these nature has provided them with.

Although animals are subject to the strong pull of the instincts and are, in this sense, subjugated beings, they enjoy a certain degree of freedom by means of which they can free themselves, to some extent, from the harsh captivity of nature. Scientists are of the opinion that the weaker animals are with

respect to their natural structure and organs, the stronger they are with respect to their instincts and the more they enjoy the direct aid and protection of nature. Conversely, the better equipped they are as regards sensory and conceptual powers and the greater their degree of independence, the lesser the extent to which they first period of his life, the child is covered directly by the comprehensive are guided by instinct. In the protection of his father and mother; as he grows, he gradually emerges from their all-encompassing supervision.

Man, who has attained the highest level of development as the only being possessing the faculty of independent will and discernment, has a relatively low level of instinctual power. As he gradually attains his freedom, he is progressively beset with relative weakness in his sensory capacities.

Nature satisfies in various ways all the different needs of the plants. In the animal realm, although the mother has to make certain efforts to carry, nurture and protect her offspring, instincts appear very early in the young and the mother need not concern herself with training and educating them. But in the case

of man, we see that he does not possess powerful natural instincts, and his power to resist unfavourable and hostile environmental factors is much inferior to that of the animals. Thus his dependence on his parents continues for many years until he finally attains independence and self-sufficiency and his own feet. is able to stand on his own feet.

The Noble Qur'an speaks clearly of man's weakness and impotence:

وَخُلِقَ الْإِنْسَانُ ضَعِيفًا...

“Man was created weak and impotent” (4:28).

Nature has left man to his own devices far more than the animals. We see in man, on the one hand, an unfolding of freedom and an emergence of a capacity to grow and gain awareness, and, on the other, an increase in dependence and neediness. While enjoying a relative freedom, man is powerfully drawn deeper and deeper into the thralls of need.

These varying situations of different orders of creation constitute, in the view of certain thinkers, factors impelling growth and development. The farther a being advances on the ladder of progress, the closer it comes toward freedom. It is precisely neediness and lack of innate equilibrium that enable growth and advancement to take place.

For free will and choice to express themselves, a factor opposing natural instinct must exist. Man will then be caught between two opposing attractions, each seeking to gain his obedience, so that he is compelled to choose the path he desires, freely, consciously, and relying on his own efforts and resources. Free of all determining factors and mental preconceptions, he begins the work of making and developing himself on the basis of specific principles and criteria.

Once faced with this element of contradiction, man cannot attain equilibrium or choose a correct path for himself by acting as an automaton or refraining from all effort. Bearing as he does the burden of the divine trust, the great divine gift that the heavens and the earth were unfit to receive, man alone proving worthy of accepting it, man is confronted with only two choices in his conflict and struggle. Either he becomes a prisoner to the tyranny of instinct and unbridled desire, thus debasing and degrading himself; or, drawing on his abundant capacities of will, thought and decision, he embarks on the path of growth and development and begins to ascend.

Whenever a being is freed from compulsory obedience to the instincts, casts off the chains of servitude, and begins to make use both of its innate capacities and its acquired abilities, its sensory faculties are weakened and its natural capacities diminish.

The reason for this is that any organ or capacity left stagnant and unused in a living being gradually stultifies. Conversely, the more intensively an organ or capacity is used, the more it will grow and be filled with energy.

So when the light of man's conscious and creative will, inspired by the power of discernment and reason, lights his path and determines his actions, his power of insight and thought enable him to discover new truths and realities.

Furthermore, man's state of bewilderment and hesitation between two opposing poles inclines him to reflect and assess, so that through rational exertion he can distinguish the right path from the wrong. This will activate his mental faculties, strengthen his reflective capacities, and endow him with a greater degree of motion and vitality.

Ownership, the desire for liberty, science and civilization all these are the direct result of man's exercise of his free will. Once man attains freedom and continues his necessary and positive efforts, he can advance swiftly in the processes of growth and the unfolding of all aspects of his innate, essential nature. As his talents and capacities mature, he will be transformed into a source of benefit and virtue in society.

We see the results of free will everywhere, and the struggle waged against its proponents by those who oppose it is itself a clear indication that the latter implicitly accept it.

Now let us see what limits are set on man's power of choice and what scope he enjoys in the exercise of this faculty.

The authentic view of Shi'ism, which is drawn from the Qur'an and the words of the Imams, represents a third school, intermediate between the determinists and the proponents of absolute free will. This school does not suffer from the inadequacies and weaknesses of determinism, which contradicts reason, conscience and all ethical and social criteria and denies God's justice by attributing to Him all the atrocities and injustices that take place, nor by asserting absolute free will does it deny the universality of God's power and reject the unity of God's acts.

It is obvious that our volitional acts differ from the motions of the sun, the moon and the earth, or the movements of plants and animals. Will power arises from within us and makes it possible for us to perform or not to perform a certain deed, thus giving us freedom of choice.

Our ability to choose freely whether to perform good or evil deeds arises from our freely exercised capacity of discernment. We must use our gift of free choice consciously: first we must reflect maturely and carefully, weight things with precision, and then make a calculated choice. It is God's will that we should use our freedom in this way in the world that He has created, with consciousness and alertness.

Whatever we do is definitely included in the sphere of God's antecedent knowledge and will. All aspects

of life, all that touches on the destiny of man, is limited by and conditional on His knowledge; it is defined by limits already existing in God's knowledge. Furthermore, we are not free of need for a single instant of that Essence to which we are connected, and the use of the powers inherent in our being is impossible without God's continuous aid.

With His supreme, overwhelming power, He closely watches us, and in a way beyond our imagination He has complete awareness and sovereignty over all our intentions and deeds.

Finally, our free will cannot go beyond the limits of the order established by God in His creation, and it does not therefore create any problem with respect to the unity of God's acts.

While being able to create effects in the world by means of his will, man is himself subject to a series of natural laws. He enters the world without any choice on his part, and closes his eyes on the world without any desire to do so. Nature has fettered him with instincts and needs. Nonetheless man possesses certain capacities and abilities; freedom produces a creativity within him which enables him to subjugate nature and establish dominance over his environment.

Al-Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq peace be upon him said: "Neither determinism nor free will; the truth of the nature lies between these two³".

So there is free will, but it is not all-embracing, because to posit a separate sphere for man would be equivalent to assigning God a partner in His acts. The free will that man enjoys is willed by the Creator of nature, and God's command manifests itself in the form of the norms that rule man and nature, natural relations, causes, and factors.

In the view of Islam, man is neither a ready-made creature, condemned to determination by fate, nor has he been cast forth into a dark and purposeless environment. He is a being overflowing with aspirations, talents, skills, creative awareness and diverse inclinations, accompanied always by a kind of in-dwelling guidance.

The mistake made both by the determinists and the protagonists of unlimited free will is that they have imagined man to have only two possible roads before him: either all his acts must be attributed exclusively to God, so that he then loses all freedom and becomes determined in his acts, or we are obliged to accept that his volitional acts derive from an independent and unbounded essence, a view entailing the limitation of God's power.

However, the fact that we have free will does not affect the com-prehensiveness of God's power, because He has willed that we should freely take our own decisions, in accordance with the norm and law He has established.

From one point of view, man's acts and deeds can be attributed to him, and from another point of view to

God. Man has a direct, immediate relationship with his own deeds, while God's relationship with those deeds is indirect; but both forms of relationship are real and true. Neither does human will set itself up in opposition to the divine will, nor is man's will contrary to what God desires.

Obstinate men intent on disbelief, who oppose all kind of preaching and warning, initially take up their erroneous position through an exercise of free will, and then experience the consequences of their obstinacy and blindness of heart, visited on them by God.

Obeying the desires of their lower self, these people of iniquity prevent their hearts, their eyes and ears from functioning, and as a result earn a state of eternal perdition.

The Qur'an says:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا سَوَاءٌ عَلَيْهِمْ أُنذِرْتَهُمْ أَمْ لَمْ تُنذِرْهُمْ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ

“Whether you warn them or warn them not, they will not believe you” (2:6).

خَتَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَى قُلُوبِهِمْ وَعَلَى سَمْعِهِمْ وَعَلَى أَبْصَارِهِمْ غِشَاوَةً وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ

“God has placed a seal on their hearts, there is a veil over their ears and their eyes, and a painful torment awaits them” (2:7).

Sometimes corruption and sin are not of such magnitude that they block the path of return to God and the truth. But at other times they reach an extent that the return to true human identity is no longer possible; then the seal of obstinacy is set on the polluted spirits of the unbelievers. This is an entirely natural result of their behaviour, determined by God's will and desire.

The accountability of such persons originates in their exercise of free will, and the fact that they have not acquired the blessings of guidance does not lessen their accountability. There is a firm and self-evident principle to the effect that “whatever originates in free will and culminates in compulsion does not contradict free will.”

The Imam is related to have said: “God wished that things should take place through causes and means, and He decreed nothing except by means of a cause; He therefore created a cause for all things⁴”.

One of the causes employed by God in His creation is man and his will, in keeping with the principle that particular causes and means are established by God for the appearance of every phenomenon in the universe: the occurrence of the phenomenon necessitates the prior existence of those causes and means, and were it not for them the phenomenon would not appear.

This is a universal principle which inevitably governs our volitional actions as well. Our choice and free will come to form the last link in a chain of causes and means that result in the performance of an act on our part.

The Qur'anic verses which relate all things to God and depict them as arising from Him are concerned with proclaiming the pre-eternal will of the Creator as the designer of the world and explaining how His power embraces and penetrates the entire course of being. His power extends through every part of the universe, with no exceptions, but God's unchallenged might does not diminish the freedom of man. For it is God who makes free will a part of man, and it is He Who bestows it upon him. He has made man free to follow the path of his own choosing, and He holds no individual or people accountable for the failings of another.

If there is any compulsion in the affairs of man, it is only in the sense that he is compelled to have free will, as a consequence of God's will, not in the sense that he is condemned to act in a given way.

So when we undertake the best of deeds, the capacity to perform them is from God, and the choice to use that capacity is from us.

Certain other verses of the Qur'an clearly emphasize the role of man's will and actions, decisively refuting the views of the determinists.

When it wishes to draw man's attention to the calamities and torments he endures in this world, it describes them as being the result of his misdeeds.

In all the verses that are concerned with God's will, not even one can be found which attributes man's volitional acts to the Divine will. Thus the Qur'an proclaims:

فَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ خَيْرًا يَرَهُ

“Whoever does the smallest good deed shall experience the result of it” (99:7).

وَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ شَرًّا يَرَهُ

“And whoever does the slightest evil deed shall experience the result of it” (99:8).

وَلْتَسْأَلَنَّ عَمَّا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ...

“Certainly you are accountable for what you do” (16:93).

سَيَقُولُ الَّذِينَ أَشْرَكُوا لَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ مَا أَشْرَكْنَا وَلَا آبَاؤُنَا وَلَا حَرَمْنَا مِنْ شَيْءٍ ۚ كَذَلِكَ كَذَّبَ الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ حَتَّى ذَاقُوا بَأْسَنَا ۚ قُلْ هَلْ عِنْدَكُمْ مِنْ عِلْمٍ فَتُخْرِجُوهُ لَنَا ۚ إِنْ تَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا الظَّنَّ وَإِنْ أَنْتُمْ إِلَّا تَخْرُصُونَ

“Those who assign partners to God say that their worship of idols and other deeds derive from God’s will; had God not willed it, they and their forefathers would not have practised polytheism, and they would not practise the deeds of the age of Ignorance. Those who went astray before them also spoke such nonsense, denying the heavenly teachings and attributing their misguidance to God, but they suffered the punishment for their lies and their slander. Say to them, O Prophet: ‘Do you have a decisive proof for what you say? If you do not, your excuses are nothing but the result of erroneous ideas and fantasies; you speak vainly and lyingly” (6: 148).

Were the salvation and misguidance of man to be dependent on God’s will, no trace of misguidance or corruption would exist upon earth; all would follow the path of salvation and truth whether they wished to or not.

Certain miscreants who seek excuses for themselves have claimed that whatever sinful acts they commit are willed and desired by God. Thus the Qur’an says:

وَإِذَا فَعَلُوا فَاحِشَةً قَالُوا وَجَدْنَا عَلَيْهَا آبَاءَنَا وَاللَّهُ أَمَرَنَا بِهَا قُلْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَأْمُرُ بِالْفَحِشَاءِ اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ عَلَى اللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

“When they commit some abominable act, they say: ‘We found our fore fathers doing this, and God has commanded us to do it. Tell them, O Prophet, ‘God never commands men to commit foul deeds, but you attribute to God every sinful and erroneous act you commit in your ignorance” (7:28).

In just the same way that God has willed a reward for good acts, so too He has willed punishment for sin and corruption, but in both cases willing the result is different from willing the act that leads to the result.

Man’s being and the natural effects of his acts are indeed subject to God’s will, but his volitional acts arise from his own will.

The view of Islam, as conceived by Shi’ism, is that man does not possess such absolute free will that he is able to act outside the framework of God’s will and desire, which cover the entire universe in the form of fixed laws and norms, thus reducing God to a weak and impotent entity when confronted with the will of His own creatures. At the same time, man is also not prisoner to a mechanism that prevents him from choosing his own path in life and compels him, like the animals, to be a slave to his instincts.

The Noble Qur’an clearly states in some of its verses that God has shown man the path to salvation, but he is compelled neither to accept guidance and salvation nor to fall into misguidance.

إِنَّا هَدَيْنَاهُ السَّبِيلَ إِمَّا شَاكِرًا وَإِمَّا كَفُورًا

“We have shown man the path of truth and the path of falsehood; he may choose either the path of guidance and offer the thanks, or choose the path of ingratitude” (76:3).

To attribute man’s volitional acts to God is therefore rejected by the Qur’an⁵.

¹. Thereby escaping the environment; Le. their excuse will not be acceptable.

². Al-Kafi, Vol. 1, p. 160.

³. Al-Kafi, Vol. 1, p. 160.

⁴. Al-Kafi, Vol. 1, p. 183.

⁵. Editor’s Note: This is part four of the first volume of the author’s book in Persian, Mabani-ye i’tiqadat dar Islam (The Foundations of Islamic Doctrines). Here, he discusses the problem of free will and determinism from the viewpoint of Shi’i Kalam. The translations given under the Qur’anic verses here are those of the somewhat freely paraphrased rendering of them in Persian by the author, rather than being exact translations of these verses.

[1] [1]

SHARES

Source URL:

<https://al-islam.org/al-tawhid/vol-6-no-3/free-will-and-determinism-sayyid-mujtaba-musavi-lari>

Links

[1] <https://www.addtoany.com/share>

[2] <https://al-islam.org/printpdf/book/export/html/193401>

[3] <https://al-islam.org/printepub/book/export/html/193401>

[4] <https://al-islam.org/printmobi/book/export/html/193401>

[5] <https://al-islam.org/person/sayyid-mujtaba-musavi-lari>

[6] <https://al-islam.org/organization/al-tawhid-islamic-journal>

[7] <https://al-islam.org/person/dr-hamid-algar>

[8] <https://al-islam.org/tags/free-will>

[9] <https://al-islam.org/tags/determinism>

[10] <https://al-islam.org/tags/beliefs>