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A Glance

The issue of determinism and free will (*al-jabr wa al-ikhtiar*) is among the very profound and subtle issues that has preoccupied the mind and heart of human beings, specially philosophers, from a long time ago. This issue holds significance among Muslims as well. To prove their beliefs, each of these groups resorted to some verses of the Qur'an about this issue and took the superficial meaning of these verses to prove their view. At this juncture, the adherents of the school of Ahl al-Bayt (A), the household of the prophet (S), have been protected from going to the extremes. Following their Imams, they have insisted on their view called "the way between two ways" (*Amron Bayn-a Amrayn*).

The Qur'anic perspective about this issue is higher than philosophical and theological views. No one knows the mystery of this subtle and vital view except for the immaculate Imams (A); thus, the several Muslim theologians who strode in this route without relying upon Ahl al-Bayt (A) have not been immune from making mistakes.

Introduction

The idea of free will as a human thought has no specific opening time because free will is an inward matter originated from within. From the beginning, man continuously pondered about free will.

In offering personal and social principles of life, philosophers have regarded the principle of free will.

Without accepting free will, the ultimate aim of revealed religions, i.e. training and purification of human beings, would be absurd and therefore legislation, punishment, and reward would render useless.

Upon several years of reflection on this subject, I confess that such a deep and sophisticated issue, characterized by Imam Ali (A) as an ocean with strong waves, has yet a great deal of unsaid and non-obtained points. However it is possible to prove the idea of "a way between ways" as the highest thought by resorting to religious teachings even with admitting free will and human choice.

Incorrect interpretations of the Qur'an concerning determinism

By resorting to the superficial meaning of verses attributing everything to the will of God, some scholars think that this understanding of the Qur'an is not compatible with a world based on causes and effects, and with man's free will. Some Orientalists falsely introduce Islam as a religion in which determinism is one of its fundamental principles.

It is obvious that the aim of revealed religions is to train and purify the souls. Had all human affairs been predestined and decided, the appointment of prophets would be useless.

Although divine religions believe in comprehensive and eternal knowledge and will of God and in divine decree (qadha), they do not find these ideas in conflict with human flourishing; rather, they have regarded the human faculty of will and choice very efficient for choosing the way of perfection and happiness.

Concerning this issue, Ayatollah Mutahhari says:

Qur'an has offered the generality of divine providence and divine decree and destiny in such a way that it never contradicts with the free will and choice of human. One of the verses that has brought the human free will up seriously is this:

ذلِكَ بِمَا قَدَّمْتُ أَيْدِيكُمْ

- ***That is because of what your hands have sent ahead (3: 182)***¹

God does not say that this chastisement was a result of your actions so that they could reply we were not free in our actions; rather he says that it was due to the actions that you did with your free will and your choice and without any compulsion. God created you free and with free choice:

فَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُؤْمِنْ وَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيَكُفِرْ

[This is] the truth from your Lord: let anyone who wishes believe it, and let anyone who wishes

disbelieve it. Whoever please, i.e. with his free will, believe and whoever please disbelieve:

(18:29)

إِنَّا هَدَيْنَاهُ السَّبِيلَ إِمَّا شَاكِرًا وَإِمَّا كَفُورًا

Indeed We have guided him to the way, be he grateful or ungrateful. (76:3)[2](#)

In the Chapter The Family of Imran, God says:

ذُلِكَ بِمَا قَدَّمْتُ أَيْدِيكُمْ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ لَيْسَ بِظَلَامٍ لِلْعَبْدِ

This is for what your own hands have sent before and because Allah is not in the least unjust to the servants. (3: 182)

That is, these actions have been done by ourselves, not by God. Were the actions done by God, the punishment would be unjust. This means that someone has committed a sin and instead, the punishment is imposed on someone else. God has done the actions/sins and yet he would impose the punishment on his servants. This verse informs readers to know that God never oppresses His servants.

There are two subtle points here: One is that God used the word "servant", a sign of His compassion. Thus, how God can oppress his servant? A servant due to his servitude deserves compassion. A needy and weak servant in regard to the Omnipotent God is so insignificant that is impossible to imagine God needs to oppress him.

The other point is that literary men say that the word "zallam" (most oppressing) is made for hyperbole. So this verse means that God is not too much of an oppressor. Someone may understand from this meaning that God is not very much oppressing but He might oppress a little. The usual answer is that here zallam (most oppressing) is equal to zalim (oppressor), i.e. God is not oppressive at all, not too much or too little. In some cases, zallam is used instead of zalim and it is not unusual.

Another answer is offered by the late Allamah Tabatabai in Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an. He holds that concerning God, to be oppressor is not imaginable. He is either too much of an oppressor or is not an oppressor at all. God is either righteous or He is most oppressing; because, if the world is based upon oppression and tyranny it encompasses everything. The action of God is comprehensive and unlimited: either the complete and absolute justice, as it is, or otherwise the most and maximum oppression, There is no middle case. So what is possible to say about God is that whether this system is just or unjust, whether God is the most oppressing or the most righteous. Righteous means that God is setting up the ideal and is perfectly Just.[3](#)

The other verse which has been invoked to support the idea of determinism is this verse:

كَذَابٌ أَلِ فِرْعَوْنَ ۝ وَالَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ ۝ كَذَبُوا بِآيَاتِ رَبِّهِمْ فَأَهْلَكْنَاهُمْ بِذُنُوبِهِمْ وَأَغْرَقْنَا أَلِ فِرْعَوْنَ ۝ وَكُلُّ كَانُوا ظَالِمِينَ

Like the precedent of Pharaoh's clan and those who were before them, who denied the signs of their Lord; so We destroyed them for their sins, and We drowned Pharaoh's clan; and they were all wrongdoers. (8:54)

Imam Ali (A) in a sermon called al-Qasi'ah presents a detailed discussion about the honour and dishonour of nations. There he explains the verse under our discussion. In Usul al-Kafi, Imam Sadiq (A) is quoted as saying:

أَنَّ اللَّهَ بَعَثَ نَبِيًّا مِّنْ أَنْبِيَائِهِ إِلَى قَوْمٍ، وَأَوْحَى إِلَيْهِ أَنْ قُلْ لِقَوْمِكَ إِنَّهُ لَيْسَ مِنْ أَهْلِ قَرْيَةٍ وَلَا نَاسٌ كَانُوا عَلَى طَاعَتِي فَأَصَابَهُمْ فِيهَا سَرَاءً فَتَحَوَّلُوا عَمَّا أَحَبُّهُمْ إِلَى مَا يَكْرَهُونَ، وَإِنَّهُ لَيْسَ مِنْ أَهْلِ قَرْيَةٍ وَلَا أَهْلِ بَيْتٍ كَانُوا عَلَى مَعْصِيَتِي فَأَصَابَهُمْ فِيهَا ضَرَاءً فَتَحَوَّلُوا عَمَّا أَكْرَهُهُمْ إِلَى مَا يَكْرَهُونَ لَهُمْ عَمَّا يَكْرَهُونَ إِلَى مَا يَحْبُّونَ

“God sent one of the prophets towards his nation and inspired him to tell them: “There is no nation or a group of people that obey me and by virtue of this obedience they enjoy pleasure and comfort and easy life and then they misuse their easy life unless I will change their condition and take back what they love from them and give them instead what they dislike. And there is no nation or a group of people that commit sins and due to their committing sins they reach difficulties and misery and then they return from what I dislike to what I like, unless I will remove their misery and give them what they love”.

In another hadith, Imam Sadiq (A) is quoted as saying:

كان أبي يقول، إن الله عز وجل قضى قضاء حتما، لا ينعم على العبد بنعمة فيسلبها إياه حتى يحدث العبد ذنبًا يستحق بذلك النعمة

My father, Imam Baqir (A), used to say: “Verily, God the Almighty has made it necessary that He does not take blessing He has given to his servant, unless His servant commits a sin by which he deserves misery.⁴

The question arises: is there any relationship between sins and the blessings which are taken back? If man committed a sin, would God take all his blessings from him? Or there is a kind of relation between sin and its results, i.e. each kind of sin results in losing a pertinent blessing, as is the case in obedience; each kind of obedience results in obtaining a specific blessing and not all blessings. The latter seems to be the case. This can be understood from the supplication of Kumayl⁵:

اللَّهُمَّ اغْفِرْ لِي الذُّنُوبَ الَّتِي تُغَيِّرُ النِّعَمَ اللَّهُمَّ اغْفِرْ لِي الذُّنُوبَ الَّتِي تُنْزِلُ الْبَلَاءَ اللَّهُمَّ اغْفِرْ لِي الذُّنُوبَ الَّتِي تَحْبِسُ الدُّعَاءَ

Imam Ali (A) in this supplication divides the sins in some groups: the sins that cause blessings to be taken away, the sins that cause the calamities, and the sins that prevent God from answering prayers. Thus, each kind of sin leads to a specific result.

Therefore, the holy Qur'an says:

وَمَا كَانَ رَبُّكَ لِيُهْلِكَ الْقُرَى بِظُلْمٍ وَأَهْلُهَا مُصْلِحُونَ

Your Lord would never destroy the townships unjustly while their inhabitants were bringing about reform. (11:117)

What does it mean that a nation is both unjust and reformer? Injustice here means the great injustice, polytheism (shirk), and the meaning of reform (islah) is that social justice is established among them. So they are unjust by associating partners to God and they are good doers by establishing justice in their society.

Therefore, the Qur'an says that if a nation is good in worldly actions but infidels and polytheists with regards to God, in other words, if the justice is established among them but they are infidel, God doesn't punish them in this world. So, it is clear that each kind of sin has a certain result. The Prophet (S) said:

الملك يبقى مع الكفر ولا يبقى مع الظلم

A kingdom may endure even with infidelity, but would not survive with injustice.[6](#)

Both infidelity and tyranny are sins, but each of them will effect in a certain direction. The effect of infidelity in collapsing a social system is less than oppression and tyranny. We can compare two nations: one is Muslim in general, but in dealing with each other they have an oppressive manner, and one is pagan, but the social justice is established among them and equity is prevalent there. In this case, Muslims may have a better condition in the hereafter, but the pagan nation may be more prosperous and successful in this world.

Some verses and traditions from the Prophet Mohammad (S) and Imam Ali (A) confirm this claim. We will briefly mention some of them:

لِيَهْلِكَ مَنْ هَلَكَ عَنْ بَيْنَةٍ وَيَحْمِي مَنْ حَيَّ عَنْ بَيْنَةٍ ۝ وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَسَمِيعٌ عَلَيْهِ

so that he who perishes might perish by a manifest proof, and he who lives may live on by a manifest proof, and Allah is indeed all-hearing, all-knowing. (8:42)

مَنْ اهْتَدَى فَإِنَّمَا يَهْتَدِي لِنَفْسِهِ ۝ وَمَنْ ضَلَّ فَإِنَّمَا يَضْلُلُ عَلَيْهَا

Whoever is guided is guided only for] the good of [his own soul, and whoever goes astray, goes astray only to its detriment. (17: 15)

إِنَّا هَدَيْنَاكُمْ السَّبِيلَ إِمَّا شَاكِرًا وَإِمَّا كَفُورًا

Indeed, We have guided man to the way, be he grateful or ungrateful. (76:3)

قَدْ جَاءَكُمْ بِصَائِرٍ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ ۝ فَمَنْ أَبْصَرَ فَلِنَفْسِهِ ۝ وَمَنْ عَمِيَ فَعَلَيْهَا ۝ وَمَا أَنَا عَلَيْكُمْ بِحَافِظٍ

Say, “Certainly insights have come to you from your Lord. So whoever sees, it is to the benefit of his own soul, and whoever remains blind, it is to its detriment, and I am not a keeper over you”. (6: 104)

إِنَّمَا تُجْزَوْنَ مَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ

You are only being requited for what you used to do. (52: 16)

كُلُّ امْرٍ بِمَا كَسَبَ رَهِينٌ

Every man is a hostage to what he has earned. (52:21)

The late Majlisi narrated an expressive hadith from one of infallible Imams (A) about the negation of both fatalism and delegation of all power to man (tafwidh):

إِنَّ اللَّهَ أَكْرَمُ مَنْ أَنْ يَكْلُفَ النَّاسَ مَا لَا يُطِيقُونَ وَاللَّهُ أَعْزَ مَنْ أَنْ يَكُونُ فِي سُلْطَانِهِ مَا لَا يَرِيدُ

God is too noble to oblige people to do what they cannot, and God is too sovereign to let something happens in His kingdom that He does not want. [7](#)

In another hadith, the fatalism and delegation are rejected with reference to obedience and disobedience:

الله عز وجل لم يطع باكراه ولم يعص بغلة

God is not obeyed by compulsion and not disobeyed by defeat.[8](#)

In another hadith, the infallible Imam (A) denies delegation since it shows a kind of weakness in divine power and also denies fatalism, because it implies that God is an oppressor. Then the late Majlisi quoted a hadith which explains the right meaning of "the way between two ways":

وجود السبيل إلى اتيان ما أمروا به وترك ما نهوا عنه

The possibility of doing what is commanded and refraining from what is prohibited.[9](#)

Human freedom and denial of determinism according to the Qur'an and hadith

The Qur'an and hadith recognise man as free and independent against environment, historical determinism, economical determinism, political determinism, geographical determinism, etc. The Qur'an and hadith indicate that that God-given nature and conscience of man can survive under any circumstances and God's reward and punishment are based on this fact. This point is stated in the first hadith of Usul al-Kafi by a parable:

لما خلق الله العقل استنطقه ثم قال له: أقبل فأقبل ثم قال له: أديب فأديب ثم قال: ... ما خلقت خلقا هو أحب إلي منك ... وإياك أعقاب، وإياك أثيب.

When God created the Intellect (al-'Aql), He examined it. Thereupon He said to it: "Come forward!" It went forward. Then He said: "Go back!" It went back. Thereupon He said: "By My power and majesty, I have not created any creature dearer to me than you! I will not perfect you except in one whom I love. Indeed, to you, My orders and prohibitions are addressed. And for you, My rewards and retributions are reserved."[10](#)

Undoubtedly, those schools that take man bound to geographical, political, economical, and social conditions have disregarded human identity. However, the Qur'an believes in man's identity beyond these conditions.

One of its reasons is that human life, according to the Qur'an, has begun from Adam, a person who was taught all the names by God (2:31) and was chosen by God (3:33), Yet, he was free to disobey His Lord (20:121) and after that, again he was free to repent (2:37). This shows that before and more than anything else, man is a free being.

According to the Qur'an, man has to choose between good and evil. On one hand, Satan encourages and tempts man, (called Taswil in Qur'anic expression), i.e. he displays sins as good actions. On the other hand, God-given nature and reason and also prophets, from the very outset, call man to goodness and righteousness. Man was told that he possesses full authority to choose one the two.

Therefore, according to the Qur'an, human life consists of a bitter struggle between lower desires on one hand, and higher desires and intellectual inspirations and prophetic directions on the other.

Free choice, a great human merit in the Qur'an

Many thinkers have introduced man as a social animal, i.e. he is a living creature that his life is bound to coexistence. Coexistence is not a simple and easy word to be understood. It entails and includes a world of meanings. Coexistence needs co-working shoulder to shoulder, and hence it needs thousands of rules, regulations, learning, industries, techniques, distribution of work, social moralities such as justice, fairness, sympathy, beneficence and etc. A bricklayer uses some brick, mud, iron, lime, gypsum, and cement to make a building. Consequently thousands of brick and tons of iron, mud, and gypsum stay with each other in one place for many years. Is co-working of a group of people like this example, simple and easy?

Higher than this, some creatures such as bees, termites and ants are social beings. Some of them distribute their duties in an exact manner and perform a kind of astonishing social activities. If someone studies their complicated and vast life he would think that they are more advanced in social life than human. But, yet the human life and their life are not comparable, why? Since, they just strive according to their instinct. Their activities are like natural activities of our body; like, regular functions of heart, lung, circulation of blood, and etc., i.e. a kind of determinism and coercion ruling over them.

Unlike animals, man enjoys freedom and free choice in his actions. He needs to divide the duties among people but he does this by free will and his choice. He needs order and discipline, though he can freely perform it by choice. The major difference between man and animal is that he always confronts more than one option and constantly sees himself at the crossroads. But social animals like ant, bee, and termite are not the same as human beings. They merely have one way.. Hence, regarding humans, the Qur'an says:

أَلْمْ نَجْعَلُ لَهُ عَيْنَيْنِ

وَلِسَانًا وَشَفَتَيْنِ

وَهَدَيْنَاهُ النَّجْدَيْنِ

Have We not made for him two eyes, a tongue, and two lips, and shown him the two paths [of good and evil]? (90:8-10)

إِنَّا خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ نُطْفَةٍ أَمْشَاجَ نَبْتَلِيهِ فَجَعَلْنَاهُ سَمِيعًا بَصِيرًا

إِنَّا هَدَيْنَاهُ السَّبِيلَ إِمَّا شَاكِرًا وَإِمَّا كُفُورًا

Indeed We created man from the drop of a mixed fluid so that We may test him. So We made him endowed with hearing and sight. Indeed We have guided him to the way, be he grateful or ungrateful. (76:2-3)

Allah (SWT) shows the way to man and created him in such a manner that he is not forced to follow nature or his instinct. He was created free and independent and he must choose his path by himself. Allah (SWT) shows him the way; whether he be thankful or unthankful.

This is the human free will that has created thousands of laws, regulations, learning, philosophies, moralities, contradictory customs, and has added thousands of fields to knowledge. If human social duties were like breathing, pulsation of heart, blood circulation and other organs and cells that function naturally and in a deterministic way, he would not need any more to establish regulations and rules, and reward and punishment, and the many orders, commands, books, speeches, and lectures.

All these needs are due to the natural freedom of man, and yet this very freedom is the basis of his likely excellence over the angels because the angels were created in a way that they do not know and move but in one direction, which is the way of sacredness, worship, and purity. However, man is capable of reaching to a supreme heavenly court as well as sinking into nature and falling into baseness. Now, if man goes towards perfection and promotion and severely struggles against his lower soul he will achieve more. Thus, he should select the right path by dynamism of his free will.

It should be noted that the way of perfection must be discovered, not to be invented. Man is equipped with natural talent, yet he needs a guide to make sure that he is on the right path, because he is radically different from all other beings. The difference is that the path of other beings is fixed, that is, they have but one way to pass. But man is not like them.

The freedom of man in setting his destination

God, the Exalted, has stated in two verses that He would never change the condition of people until they themselves change it. These verses are:

ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ لَمْ يَكُنْ مُغَيِّرًا بِعْمَةً أَنْعَمَهَا عَلَى قَوْمٍ حَتَّى يُغَيِّرُوا مَا بِأَنفُسِهِمْ ۚ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ سَمِيعٌ عَلَيْهِ

That is because Allah never changes a blessing that He has bestowed on a people unless they change what is in their own souls, and Allah is all-hearing, all-knowing. (8:35)

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُغَيِّرُ مَا بِقَوْمٍ حَتَّىٰ يُغَيِّرُوا مَا بِأَنفُسِهِمْ

Indeed Allah does not change a people's lot, unless they change what is in their souls. (13:11)

According to these verses, God would never change the conditions of a people until they change what belongs to themselves, i.e. change what is relevant to their spirit, mind, thought, morality, and actions.

If God gives honour to a people or lowers them from the zenith of honour to the lowest point of wretchedness, it is due to the fact that those people have already changed their affairs. So there is no contradiction between these verses and those that attribute everything to the divine will, such as:

٤ قُلِ اللَّهُمَّ مَا لَكَ الْمُلْكُ تُؤْتِي الْمُلْكَ مَنْ تَشَاءُ وَتَنْزِعُ الْمُلْكَ مِمَّنْ تَشَاءُ وَتُعَزِّزُ مَنْ تَشَاءُ وَتُذَلِّلُ مَنْ تَشَاءُ ۖ بِيَدِكَ الْخَيْرُ
إِنَّكَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

Say, "O Allah, Master of all sovereignty! You give sovereignty to whomever You wish, and strip of sovereignty whomever You wish; You make mighty whomever You wish, and You abase whomever You wish; all good is in Your hand. Indeed You have power over all things. (3:26)

Everything is in the hand of God, but His actions are not arbitrary. He is the Wise and everything He does is based on reasons. He never acts in vein or by chance. All changes in the world are based on certain and regular orders and laws.

Human freedom and the universality of divine will

The universality of divine will can be seen throughout the Qur'an:

وَمَا تَشَاءُونَ إِلَّا أَنْ يَشَاءَ اللَّهُ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمًا

But you do not wish unless it is wished by Allah. (76:30)

وَمَا تَشَاءُونَ إِلَّا أَنْ يَشَاءَ اللَّهُ رَبُّ الْعَالَمِينَ

But you do not wish unless it is wished by Allah, the Lord of all the worlds. (81:29)

The Qur'an keeps always the polytheism away from man and never accepts the idea that an event

occurs in the world independent from His power and will. Hence the expression such as "whatever God wills" is frequently seen in the Qur'an. This means that nothing occurs without His will or leave.

Those who believed in determinism like the Ash'arites deduce from this verse that it is only the divine will that works and His will is not based on anything that we may or may not do. Thus, if a group of people are granted honour or dishonour it is due to nothing other than the will of God. According to them, God may treat equals unequally. Therefore, there is no problem for God to send good and pious people to hell, and bad and sinful people to the paradise. Because he wills so and because nothing in the universe is bound to anything else save to the will of God. This group has supposed that if they say otherwise it will contradict with theism and general divine will.

This approach is wrong and undermines divine justice and wisdom. As we said, the Qur'an emphasises on the fact that nothing happens in this world independent from God and without His leave, but at the same time, the Qur'an emphasises on divine wisdom and justice and on human responsibilities.

Conclusion

The Qur'anic account of freewill is very impressive, especially for theologians. Following the Qur'an, the same attitude is adopted in hadiths of the Prophet (S), Imam Ali (A) and other infallible Imams (A). This account was far beyond any theological discourse of that age or even that of centuries later, when theology and philosophy pervaded.

This logic is a higher and lofty one. A balance is stricken between two opposing poles of determinism and delegation. Neither man is forced to act nor does man have full control over everything. Neither God is retired and indifferent nor does He force us to act in a certain way.

1. The verse before this verse says:

لَقَدْ سَمِعَ اللَّهُ فَوْلَ الْأَذِنِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ فَقِيرٌ وَنَحْنُ أَغْنِيَاءُ[¶] سَكَنَّتْبُ مَا قَالُوا وَنَقْتَلُهُمُ الْأَنْبِيَاءَ بِغَيْرِ حَقٍّ وَنَقُولُ نُوْفُوا عَذَابَ الْحَرِيقِ

"Allah has certainly heard the saying of those who said: surely Allah is poor and we are rich. I will record what they say, and their killing the prophets unjustly, and I will say: taste the chastisement of burning."(3:181)

2. Murtadha Mutahhari, Acquaintance with Quran, vol. 3, p. 121–123.

3. Allamah Tabatabai, Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, vol. 4, p. 83 & vol. 9, p. 100–101.

4. Allamah Tabatabai, Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, vol. 9, p. 110. See also Al-Safi fi Tafsir al-Quran.

5. Shaikh 'Abbas Qummi, Mafatih al-Jinan, Dua Kumayl.

6. Kulayni, 'Usul al-Kafi, Section: 'Iman and Kufra.'

7. Majlisi, Bihar al-Anvar, vol. 5, p. 41.

8. Majlisi, Bihar al-Anvar, vol. 5, p. 16.

9. Majlisi, Bihar al-Anvar, vol. 5, p. 12.

10. Kulayni, 'Usul al-Kafi, vol. 1, Section: 'Aql and Jahl.'

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