

Determinism or Freedom

One of the fundamental problems discussed by philosophers, particularly in the last century, is the problem of determinism and freedom of individual as against society, or, in other words, determinism and freedom of the individual spirit vis-à-vis the social spirit. If we accept the first theory regarding the nature of society, and consider social structure to be merely a hypostatized notion, and believe in the absolute independence of the individual, then there will be no place for the idea of social determinism.

Because, there will be no power or force except that of the individuals, and no social force that may rule over the individual. Hence, in this theory, there is no room for the idea of social determinism. If there is any compulsion or determinism it is of the individual and operates through the individuals. The society has no role in this matter. Hence, there can be no social determinism as emphasized by the advocates of social determinism.

In the same way, if we accept the fourth theory, and consider the individual and individual's personality as a raw material or an empty pot, then the entire human personality of the individual, his intellect, and his free will would be reduced to nothing but an expression of the collective intelligence and the collective will, which manifest themselves, as an illusion, in the form of an individual to realize their own social ends. Accordingly, if we accept the idea of the absolute essentiality and primariness of the society, there will be no place left for the idea of the freedom and choice of the individual.

Emile Durkheim, the famous French sociologist, emphasizes the importance of society to the extent of saying that social matters (in fact all the human matters, as against the biological and animal urges and needs, like eating and sleeping) are the products of society, not the products of individual thought and will, and have three characteristics they are external, compulsive, and general.

They are considered to be external, because they are alien to individual existence and are imposed from without upon the individual by society. They existed before the individual came into existence and the individual accepted them under the influence of society. Acceptance of the moral, social, and religious traditions, customs, and values by the individual comes under this category. They are compulsive, because they impose themselves upon the individual and mould the individual's conscience, feelings, thoughts, and preferences according to their own standards.

Because of being compulsive, they are necessarily general and universal. However, if we accept the third theory and consider both the individual and the society as fundamental entities—although admitting the power of the society as dominating that of the individual—it does not necessitate any compulsion or determinism for the individual either in human or social affairs.

Durkheimian determinism arises due to the failure to recognize the essential nature of the human being. Man's nature gives him a kind of freedom and liberty that empower him to revolt against social compulsions. On this basis, we may say that there is an intermediary relationship between the individual and the society that lies between the extremes of absolute freedom and absolute compulsion (*amr bayn al-`amrayn*).

Although the Holy Qur'an attributes character, personality, reality, power, life, death, consciousness, obedience, and disobedience to society, it also explicitly recognizes the possibility of violation of social law by an individual. The Qur'an in this matter relies on what is termed as the (*Fitrat Allah*) 'Divine nature'.

In Surat al Nisa, The verse 97 refers to a group of people who called themselves "*mustad'afun*" (the oppressed and the weak) in the society of Mecca, and took shelter in their 'weakness and being oppressed' as an excuse for shirking their natural responsibilities. In fact, they considered themselves helpless as against the social compulsion and pressures. The Qur'an says that their excuse cannot be condoned on any ground, because at least they were free to migrate from the Meccan society to another one better suited for the fulfillment of their aspirations. Elsewhere it states:

..يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا عَلَيْكُمْ أَنْفُسَكُمْ لَا يَضُرُّكُمْ مَن ضَلَّ إِذَا اهْتَدَيْتُمْ

"O believers! You have charge of your own souls. He who goes astray cannot injure you if you are rightly guided." (5:105)

The famous verse (7:172) regarding human nature states that man is bound by the Divine covenant to believe in monotheism (tawhid), and it has been made inherent in human nature. The Qur'an says further that it is ordained in this way so that people should not say on the Day of Judgement that "our fathers were idolaters and we did not have any other alternative except helplessly adhering to the faith of our forefathers." (7:173) [1](#)

With such a nature gifted to man by God, there is no compulsion to accept any faith contrary to the Divine will and to human nature itself.

The teachings of the Qur'an are entirely based upon the notion of human responsibility man is responsible for himself and for society. The dictum *al-`amr bil ma`ruf wa al-nahy `an al-munkar* (commanding others to do what is commanded by God and forbidding them from that which is prohibited by Him), is a command to the individual to revolt against social corruption and destructiveness.

This is the Qur'anic code of conduct prescribed for the individual to save society from chaos, disorder, and destruction. Tales and stories embodied in the text of the Qur'an deal mostly with the theme of the individual's revolt against a corrupt social order. The stories of Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Prophet Muhammad, the Companions of the Cave (Ashab al-Kahf), the believer of the tribe of the Pharaoh, etc. deal with the same theme.

The notion of social determinism is rooted in the misconception that society in its real composition needs complete merger of its constituent parts into one another and dissolution of their plurality into the unity of the 'whole'. This process is considered to be responsible for the emergence of a new reality.

Either one has to accept that the personality, freedom, and independence of the individual are real, and so negate the reality of society and social structure (as in the case of the first and the second theories regarding the nature of society and the individual), or the reality of society is to be affirmed at the cost of the individual and his freedom and independence (as in the case of Durkheim's theory). Reconciliation between these two opposite viewpoints is impossible. As all the conjectures and arguments of sociology support the supremacy of society, the opposite view is necessarily rejected.

In fact, from a philosophical point of view, all forms of syntheses cannot be regarded similar. On the lower levels of nature, i.e. minerals and inorganic substances, which in philosophical terms are governed by a 'simple force,' and as interpreted by the philosophers, act according to one and the same law, are synthesized in a way that they completely merge into one another and lose their individuality in the whole.

For example, in the composition of water, two atoms of Hydrogen and one atom of Oxygen are merged together, and both lose their individual properties. But at the higher level of synthesis, the parts usually retain a relative independence with respect to the whole. A kind of plurality in unity and unity in plurality manifests itself at higher levels of existence. As we see in man, despite his unity, a unique plurality is manifested.

Not only his lower faculties and powers preserve their plurality to some extent, but, at the same time, there is also a kind of continuous inherent opposition and conflict between his internal powers. Society is the strangest natural phenomenon in which all its constituent parts retain their individual independence to a maximum possible degree.

Hence, from this point of view, we have to accept that human beings, who are the constituent parts of a society in intellectual and volitional activity, retain their individual freedom, and, therefore, their individual existence precedes their social existence. In addition to this

fact, in the synthesis at the higher levels of nature, the generic character of the parts is preserved. The individual human being or the individual spirit is not determined by the social spirit; it rather preserves its right to think and act freely.

1. Following verses are referred to :

وَإِذْ أَخَذَ رَبُّكَ مِنْ بَنِي آدَمَ مِنْ ظُهُورِهِمْ ذُرِّيَّتَهُمْ وَأَشْهَدَهُمْ عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِهِمْ أَلَسْتُ بِرَبِّكُمْ ۖ قَالُوا بَلَىٰ ۖ شَهِدْنَا ۚ أَنْ تَقُولُوا يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ إِنَّا كُنَّا عَنْ هَذَا غَافِلِينَ أَوْ
تَقُولُوا إِنَّمَا أَشْرَكَ آبَاؤُنَا مِنْ قَبْلُ وَكُنَّا ذُرِّيَّةً مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ ۚ أَفَتُهْلِكُنَا بِمَا فَعَلَ الْمُبْطِلُونَ

And when your Lord brought forth from the children of Adam, from their backs, their descendants, and made them bear witness against their own souls: Am I not your Lord? They said: Yes! we bear witness. Lest you should say on the day of resurrection: Surely we were heedless of this. [Or you should say: Only our fathers associated others (with Allah) before, and we were an offspring after them: Wilt Thou then destroy us for what the vain doers did? (7:172-173)

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