

Lesson 18: 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, laws, 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 the question, because the worldview of Islam caused it to receive more profound scrutiny than had been the case hitherto and all the attendant obscurities to be clarified. For, on the one hand, the problem was connected with the unity of God and, on the other, 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 vs. 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 say 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 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 coloring to the acts he performs with his aim and intention, and this coloring 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:

"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 this desire that His servants should maintain justice:

"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:

"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 behavior 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 behavior 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 men'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 favor 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 kilometers before stopping because of some technical defect. Now, if the car sets out and breaks down after a few kilometers, just as the mechanic has predicted, can it be said that he was the cause of the breakdown simply because he has 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 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 down trodden 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 Commander of the Martyrs, Husayn b. '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 see 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."¹

In respect of the question of free will and determinism, the materialists are caught in a contradiction. On the one hand, they see 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 pre-determined 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 revolution 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 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 mono-dimensional 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 and ideal factors, 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 or that the force of history and economic factors prepare 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 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.

"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)

"Did you not see what God did with the people of 'Ad ? Or the people of Iram who had great power, a might the like of which had never existed in any other land ? Have you not seen the people of Thamud who split the hearts of rock and raised up palaces for themselves? Or the Pharaoh who had abundant forces and troops that arrogantly wrought oppression and much corruption in the land? God brought down on them the scourge of His wrath; indeed, God lies in wait for the oppressors." (89:6-14)

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

"Pharaoh began to act with arrogant rebelliousness in the land and cast dissension 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)

"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:

"O you who believe, hold firm to your faith, because the misguidance of others can never compel you to fall into misguidance." (5:108)

"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?' (thereby escaping the environment; i.e., their excuse will not be acceptable)." (4:97)

In this verse, those who regard themselves as compelled to conform to society are strongly condemned and their excuse for failing 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 chances 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.

¹. Muntaha al-Amal, p. 299.

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