

Lesson 19: 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 the 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 judgment—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, 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 act 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, in fact, He 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 it 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 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 produce of God's will, in such a way that the existence or non-existence of causational 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:

"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:

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

'Nothing in the heavens or on earth can weaken 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 on its own.

Just as electric lamps derive their light from the power station which 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:

'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.

Imam Ja'far as-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 will."^{[1](#)}

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 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 which 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 in 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 their 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 are guided by instinct. In the first period of his life, the child is covered directly by the comprehensive 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 unfavorable 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 is able to stand on his own feet.

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

"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 implying 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 beings 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, eh can advance swiftly in the process 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 oneness 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, weigh 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 this creation, and it does not, therefore, create any problem with respect to the oneness 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.

Imam Ja'far Sadiq, peace be upon him, said: "Neither determinism nor free will; the truth of the matter lies between these two."[2](#)

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 by a kind of 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 comprehensiveness 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.

Obedying the desires of their lower self, these people of inequity prevent their hearts, their eyes and ears from functioning, and, as a result, earn a state of eternal perdition. The Qur'an says:

"Whether you warn them or warn them not, they will not believe you. God has placed a seal on their hearts; there is a veil over their ears and their eyes, and a painful torment awaits them."
(2:6-7)

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 behavior, 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 things."³

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:

"Whoever does the smallest good deed shall experience the result of it, and whoever does the slightest evil deed shall experience the result of it." (99:7-8)

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

"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 become polytheists, and they would not practice the deeds of the Age of ignorance. Those who went astray in previous times 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 lying. '(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:

"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 forms 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.

"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'an.

[1.](#) al-Kafi, I, p. 160.

[2.](#) al-Kafi, I, p. 160.

[3.](#) al-Kafi, I, p. 183.

ment-0