

Lesson 69: Divine Decree and Destiny

Introduction

One of the problems raised in heavenly religions, especially in the sacred religion of Islam, in the field of theology, which has been explained intellectually and philosophically by theologians (mutakallimin) and metaphysicians, is the problem of decree and destiny (qadha' wa qadar), which is one of the most complicated problems in theology and at the core of whose complexity is its relation to man's free will in his voluntary actions, that is, how can one believe in divine decree and destiny while accepting the free will of man and man's role in determining his own destiny?

Here, some have accepted the inclusiveness of the divine decree and destiny with respect to the voluntary actions of man but have denied true human freedom. Others have restricted the scope of decree and destiny to involuntary matters, and they consider the voluntary actions of man to be outside the limits of destiny and decree.

A third group has tried to combine the inclusion of the voluntary actions of man in destiny and decree with a demonstration of man's freedom and volition in choosing his own destiny. They have presented different views the review of which would require an independent book.

For this reason, here we shall first present a short explanation of the concept of decree and destiny, and then provide a philosophical analysis and explanation of the relation between destiny and man's voluntary actions. Finally, we will explain the benefits of this discussion and the reasons for its emphasis in divine religions.

The Concepts of Destiny and Decree

The term qadha' (decree) means passing, bringing to an end, finishing, and also means judgment (which, figuratively, is a kind of finishing). The terms qadar and taqdir mean measurement and measuring and building something to a determinate size. Sometimes qadha' and qadar are used as

synonyms in the sense of [the Persian] sarnevesht, destiny.

It seems that the reason why the term nevesht (written) is used in the translation of the Arabic terms is that, according to religious teachings, the destinies (qadha' wa qadar) of existents are written in a book or tablet.

Regarding the difference between the literal meanings of qadha' and qadar, one can consider the stage of qadar to be prior to qadha', because until the measure of something is determined it does not come to completion, and this is the point which is indicated in many noble ahadith.

A Philosophical Explanation of Destiny and Decree

Some of the great scholars have identified destiny and decree with the causal relation among existents and have considered qadar to be 'the contingent relation between a thing and its incomplete causes,' and qadha' to be 'the necessary relation between and effect and its complete cause.'

That is, when an effect is compared with each of the parts of its complete cause or with all of them, except for the last part, the relation will be one of contingency by analogy (imkan bil-qiyas), and when it is compared to the entire complete cause, the relation will be one of necessity by analogy (dharurat bil-qiyas), the former being called qadar and the latter qadha'.

Although in itself this identification is acceptable, that which requires more attention here is the relation of causes and effects to God, the Supreme, for qadha' and qadar are basically divine attributes of action, and must be discussed as such.

In order to clarify the place of these attributes among the divine attributes, some points must be made about the levels which the intellect considers for the realization of an action.

Levels of Action

Whenever the intellect considers an whatness which does not have to exist or not exist, in other words, whose relations to existence and nothingness are equal, it judges that in order to escape this indifference another existent is needed, which is called its cause.

This is the issue about which the philosophers have said, 'the criterion of the need for a cause by an effect is whatish contingency (imkan-e mahuwi).' It was previously said that according to the fundamentality of existence, contingency of whatness must be replaced by ontological poverty (faqr wujudi).

If a cause is compounded of several things, all of its parts must be obtained in order for the effect to occur, for the assumption of the occurrence of an effect without one of the parts of its complete cause would mean the lack of efficiency of the absent part, and this would be contrary to the assumption that it

is a part of the complete cause.

Hence, when all the parts of a complete cause obtain, the existence of the effect due to its cause becomes “necessary by another” (wujub bil-ghayr), and it is here that the cause creates its effect and the effect comes into existence.

These stages, all of which are obtained by means of rational analysis, are explained in the language of the philosophers as follows: “Whatness is contingent, then in need, then is made necessary, then becomes necessary, then is made to exist, then comes to exist” (al-mahiyyatu amkanat, fa’htajat, fa-ujibat, fa-wajibat, fa-ujidat, fa-wujidat). The succession of stages of each of these concepts is distinguished by the “then” (fa) of succession.

On the other hand, we know that in intentional agents, the will of the agent is the last part of the complete cause, that is, although all the preparations for an action may be provided, the deed will not be performed until the agent wills to perform it. The occurrence of will depends on ideas and assertions and the acquisition of a fundamental yearning for the conclusion of the deed and a secondary yearning for the deed itself.

Therefore, here a succession may be posited of idea, assertion, yearning for the conclusion, yearning for the deed, and finally the decision to perform the action, in which the idea and assertion include considering the characteristics, limits and preparations for the deed.

Although this succession in the origination of the will is specific to intentional agents, by divesting it of the aspects of imperfection it can be considered to be a rational succession including knowledge, fundamental love for the result and secondary love for the action in any voluntary agent. It can be concluded that every voluntary agent has knowledge of his own action and its characteristics, and likes its consequence, and because of them performs the action.

Now, if we consider a deed which must be performed gradually and by bringing about causes and means and making preparations, it is necessary to consider the relation between the action and its preparations and temporal and spatial conditions. The preparations must be arranged in such a way that the action is performed with specific limits and characteristics so the desired result is obtained.

This review, evaluation, and estimation and the determination of limits and characteristics may be called the determination of the action (taqdir-e kar), which in the realm of knowledge is called epistemic-determination (taqdir-e ‘ilmi), and in the realm of the external world is called objective determination (taqdir-e ‘ayni). Likewise, the final stage may be called ‘decree’ (qadha’), which in the realm of knowledge is called ‘epistemic-decree’ and in the realm of the external world is called ‘objective decree’.

Given these introductory remarks, we should heed the following noble verse:

“When He decrees an affair He only says to it, ‘Be’ and then it is” (2: 117).

In this noble verse, the existence of every creature, which is denoted by the sentence “then it is,” succeeds the command “Be” of the Supreme Creator, which is similar to the succession of existence (wujud) after being made existent (ijad) in the words of the divine sages. Likewise, making existent (ijad) succeeds the divine decree, which naturally will result in being the object of decree, and these two concepts (decreeing and becoming the object of the decree) may be compared to the terms ‘being made necessary’ and ‘becoming necessary.’

Since making necessary depends on the completion of the cause, and the last part of the cause of a voluntary action is the will of the agent, the level of will must be considered to be prior to the level of decree.

“His command, when He wills anything, is only to say to it: ‘Be,’ then it is” (36:82).

The point to be noticed here is that, as was explained in previous chapters, action and the attributes of action, insofar as they are related to God, the Supreme, are free from temporal and spatial restrictions, but these restrictions are attributed to actions and attributes of actions insofar as they are related to temporal, gradual, material creatures. Therefore, there is no contradiction in saying that divine bringing into existence is instantaneous and without duration, but the existence of creatures is gradual and temporal. (Note carefully.)

In this way, a series of attributes of action is obtained at the head of which is knowledge and then will, then decree and finally making existent (ijad) (imdhā’, execution). The position of permission (idhn) and Divine Will (mashiyyat) can be considered as being between knowledge and will, just as taqdir (destining) can be inserted between will and decree, and this accords with the noble narrations [from the Prophet (s) and Imams (‘a)]. It should be added that determination of the term (temporal limits of existents) is also considered a part of destiny.

Given that the real bringing into existence is specific to God, the Supreme, and the existence of every existent is ultimately traced back to Him, we may conclude that everything (even man’s voluntary actions) is included in divine decree and destiny, and here the main problem displays itself, that is, how can one combine decree and destiny with human volition?

The Relation of Destiny and Decree to Human Volition

The problem of how to combine divine destiny and decree with human volition is the same problem which is raised with even greater intensity with regard to the unity of divine acts (tawhid af’ali) in the sense of unity in the emanation of existence, whose solution was dealt with in Lesson Sixty-Four.

The conclusion drawn from the answer to this problem was that tracing an action to a proximate and direct agent and to God, the Supreme, has two levels, and divine agency is placed in a vertical position above man’s agency. It is not the case that the actions done by humans must either be traced to them or

to God, the Supreme, but rather these actions, while they are traced to the will and volition of man, at a higher level, are traced to God, the Supreme.

If it were not for the Divine Will, there would be no humans, no knowledge or power, no will or volition, and no action or consequence of any action. The existence of all of them in relation to God, the Supreme, is their very relation and attachment and dependency on Him. None of them has any sort of independence of their own.

In other words, the voluntary actions of man, with the attribution of being voluntary, are objects of divine decree (qadha') and their being voluntary are part of characteristics and aspects of their being destined (taqdir). Hence, if they occur deterministically, that would be a violation of the divine decree.

The main source of the problem is that it is imagined that if a deed depends on divine decree and destiny, there will be no room for the agent's volition and choice, while a voluntary action, disregarding the agent's will, will not become necessary, and every effect depends upon divine decree and destiny only through its own causes.

It may be concluded that destiny and decree in the realm of knowledge are two levels of actual knowledge, one of which (epistemic–destiny) is abstracted from the discovery of the relation between the effect and its incomplete causes.

The other (epistemic–decree) is abstracted from the discovery of the relation between the effect and its complete cause, and according to what is inferred from the verses of the Qur'an and ahadith, the level of epistemic–destiny is related to 'the tablet of clearing and establishing' (lawh mahw wa ithbat), and the level of epistemic–decree is related to 'the guarded tablet' (lawh mahfuz), and those who are able to become aware of these tablets will be aware of the knowledge related to them.

Objective destiny (taqdir-e 'ayni) is the regulation of creatures so that they will be subject to specific phenomena and effects, and naturally, this destiny will be different for phenomena according to their proximity and distance, just as it will be different in relation to genus, species, individuals, and the states of individuals.

For example, the destiny of the human species is to live on the earth from a determined time of origin to a determinate termination. The destiny of every individual is such that he comes into existence from a determinate mother and father in a limited slice of time. Likewise, the destinies of his livelihood and the various aspects of his life, and his voluntary actions, amount to the availability of specific conditions for each of them.

The objective decree (qadha'–e 'ayni) is the attainment of every effect to the limits of ontological necessity through the occurrence of its complete cause, including the attainment of voluntary actions to their limits of necessity, by means of the will of their proximate agents. Since no creature is independent in existence and its ontological effects, naturally the necessitation of all phenomena may be traced back

to God, the Supreme, Who possesses absolute self- sufficiency and independence.

It must be noted that decree (qadha'), in this sense, is unchangeable. Therefore, that which is stated in some noble narrations about the change in 'decree,' means that the word 'decree' is used for destiny (taqdir), whose decisiveness is relative.

Meanwhile, it has become clear that the objective destiny, insofar as it is related to special relations among phenomena, is changeable. It is this sort of change in destinies which, in religious texts, is called bada' (surprise).¹ It is related to the tablet of clearing and establishing:

“Allah clears away and establishes what He wills, and with Him is the Mother of the Book.”
(13:39).

Subordinate to objective destiny, epistemic-destiny is also changeable, for epistemic-destiny is knowledge of contingent relations and the conditional occurrence of phenomena, not knowledge of necessary relations and the absolute occurrence of phenomena.

The Benefits of this Discussion

Given the emphasis which is placed on decree and destiny in religious teachings, the question arises as to why so much emphasis is placed on it.

The answer is that the belief in decree and destiny has two important benefits, theoretical and practical. Its theoretical benefit is an increase in the level of man's spiritual knowledge with respect to the divine plan of things, and a preparation to understand the unity of divine actions in the sense of unity in the emanation of existence, and attention to the divine presence in the ordering of all aspects of the cosmos and man.

The effects of this understanding are profound in the perfection of the soul in its intellectual dimension. Basically, the deeper and firmer man's knowledge of divine attributes and actions is, the more perfect the soul is.

From the practical aspect, there are two important benefits to this doctrine: one is that when man knows that all the events of the cosmos appear on the basis of decree and destiny, and the wise ordering of God, he will bear with difficulties and hardships more easily, and will not give up in calamity and crisis, but he will be well prepared to acquire virtuous characteristics such as patience, gratitude, reliance on God, contentedness and submission.

Secondly, he will not become inebriated and conceited with the pleasures and joys of life, and he will not be enamored or infatuated with worldly pleasures and negligence of God.

“So that you may not grieve for what has escaped you, nor be exultant at what He has given you;

and Allah does not love any arrogant boaster” (57:23).

Anyway, care must be taken so that the problem of decree and destiny is not incorrectly interpreted so as to provide an excuse for laziness, complacency and a negation of one’s responsibilities, for this sort of misinterpretation of religious knowledge is the ultimate desire of the satans among men and genies.

It causes one to fall into the deepest and most dangerous valleys of wretchedness in the world and in the hereafter. Perhaps it is for this reason that according to many narrations, entrance into this sort of problem for those who are incapable is forbidden.

¹. See W. Madelung, “Bada” in Encyclopedia Iranica, 3:354–5, and Martin J. McDermott, The Theology of Al-Shaykh Al-Mufid (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1978), pps. 329–338.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/philosophical-instructions-muhammad-taqi-misbah-yazdi/lesson-69-divine-decree-and-destiny>