

The Issue of Predestination and Free Will

One of the issues which is directly related to the issue of the justice of the Creator is the question of predestination or free will.

According to the fatalists (those who believe in predestination), a human being has no choice whatsoever in his or her actions, behaviour or words and the movement of his organs are just like the predestined movements of the parts of a machine.

Thus, the question arises, how does this opinion relate to Divine Justice? And perhaps because of this, the previously-mentioned group of the *Ash'arites*, deny intellectual good and evil and have accepted predestination. Their belief in predestination is a denial of justice. Why? Because when one accepts predestination, justice makes no sense.

In order to further clarify this point, we are obliged to study several subjects with care:

Why Believe in Predestination?

All people, within their being, sense that they are free to make decisions. For examples, whether or not to give a loan to such and such a friend or whether or not to drink a glass of water placed before oneself. If another person commits an error in relation to this person, this second can forgive or not forgive the error. Everyone can tell between a hand which shakes because of illness or old age from a hand which one purposefully causes to shake.

In spite of the fact that the issue of free will is a general human sense, why do some people follow the school of the fatalists?

There are several important factors that can affect a human: environment, education, propaganda, social culture and without doubt, the thoughts of a person. Sometimes, even one's economic position can provide a motive for why a human being acts a certain way.

The totality of these cause one to assume that a person does not have free will, but rather that the external and internal factors join hands and force us to make a decision and that if these factors did not

exist, we would not be forced with these problems.

These are things which can be called ‘the environmental determinants,’ ‘economic determinants,’ ‘educational determinants’ and predestination are among the factors considered to be important by the school of fatalists.

The Main Error of the Fatalists

But those who think this way have forgotten an important point and that is that the discussion is not about motives and defective causes, but rather the discussion is about complete causes.

In other words, no one can deny the role played by the environment, culture and economics in the thoughts and acts of a human being. The discussion is that with all of these motives, the final decision still remains with us.

Because we clearly sense that even in an erroneous system, one which rebels against God’s Commands like the monarchical system of the past – which had laid the groundwork for deviation – we were not obliged to deviate and go to the centers of corruption.

Thus, one must distinguish between and separate out defective causes from complete causes. A great many people who live in comfort or have been nurtured in a deviated culture or they inherited unsuitability, at any rate, have separated their way from that of others, and have either arisen or revolted against their environment. If every human being was supposed to be the child of his or her environmental culture and the propaganda of the times, no real or basic revolution would ever take place in the world. Everyone would have to adapt to his or her environment and never build a new one.

All of these show that the above-mentioned factors do not make one’s destiny; one’s principle or main fate is determined by one’s own will power.

For instance, if we were to decide to fast on a very hot summer day, despite our body needing water, we would be doing so in order to obey God’s commands while denying our own needs. It is possible, on the other hand, that others follow their body’s request for water and not fast. Thus, all motives which cause one’s destiny exist within the human being’s free will.

The Social and Political Factors for Belief in Fatalism

The truth is that the issue of predestination and free will has been misused throughout history. A series of factors have increased the belief in fatalism and the denial of free will of the human being. Among them:

1. Political Factors

Many of the despotic and selfish politicians in order to extinguish the fire of revolution among the deprived and in order to assure the continuation of their illegal rule (for every rule of regime which oppresses the people and denies people their rights is illegal from the point of view of Islam) convinced the people through all the means available to them that they have no free will, that predestination and predetermination of history holds our destiny in its hands. If one group rules and another is ruled, this is a rule of fate and the destiny of history!

It is clear how this kind of thinking can silence people and aid the policies of colonialism whereas according to our intellect and our Divine Law, destiny and fate lies in our own hands and fate and destiny in the sense of predestination and predetermination does not exist. Divine fate and destiny is determined through our action, desire, willpower, faith, effort and endeavour.

2. Psychological Factors

Lazy, indifferent and lethargic individuals exist who most often meet up with defeat in life. They never desire to admit the bitter truth that their laziness or errors have caused their defeat. Thus, in order to avoid confronting themselves with their deficiencies and developing themselves into better people, they turn to fatalism and they think that their sin is a result of coercive fate so that they find a false sense of security. They say: "What can be done? We were blackened from the beginning. It will not be whitened even with the water of Zamzam or Kawthar. We are extremely talented and make great efforts, but unfortunately, we have no luck."

3. Social factors

Some people want to be free to be able to follow their carnal desires and commit every sin which is to their liking, at the same time, they want to somehow convince themselves that they are not sinners and they want to deceive society that they are sinless!

It is here that they turn to fatalism as their justification that we have no free will -- neither to choose nor avoid these sins. But they know well that all of these are lies and even those who make such claims and raise such issues know that they are baseless but their pleasures and passing fantasies do not allow them to admit this truth. Thus, in order to build a healthy society, we must struggle against this fatalistic way of thinking. We must realize these are tools used in the hands of colonialism and exploitation and an instrument to deceitfully justify defeat and the factor which causes corruption to increase in a society.

Reasons for Belief in Free Will

1. The Collective Conscience

Philosophers and divine scholars give different reasons for free will of the human being. The clearest reason given by the supporters of free will: The 'universal' or 'collective' conscience of human beings.

That is, no matter what we deny, we cannot deny the reality that in all human societies, including both the worshippers of God and the materialists, East and West, ancient and modern, wealthy and poor, developed or underdeveloped, of whatever culture, all without exception, agree that a law should rule human beings and that human beings are responsible before the law and people who disobey the law must be punished.

In other words, the rule of law, the responsibility of individuals before it and the punishment of those who disobey the law are things which all intelligent people agree with and it was only primitive tribes who did not officially recognise these three things.

The fact that we explain this as the general conscience of human beings of the world is the clearest proof of the existence of free will in human beings and the fact that they have free choice.

How can it be accepted that a human being be obliged in their actions and that they have no freedom of choice but are still responsible before the law? And, that when a law is broken, the person must be tried and asked why they did – or did not – commit a certain action. If proven guilty, that person is sent to prison or even, depending upon the crime, executed. This is exactly as if we were to punish stones which slide down a mountain causing a landslide on a mountain road which results in the death of one or more human beings.

It is true that a human being differs from a stone, but if we deny free will and choice in a human being, the difference between a human being and a stone will not be relevant in this instance – as both will be the victims of fate.

A stone, following the law of gravity, falls upon the roadside and a human being who murders another, is the victim of another factor of fate. Thus, the logic of those who believe in predetermination allows for no distinction to be made between a stone and a human being from the point of view of result as neither the stone nor the human acted according to their own free will. Why should the human be tried and not the stone?

We are at a crossroads. We either have to deny the existence of the common conscience of all of the people of the world and consider the courts, punishment of those who disobey the law to be ridiculous and useless and even oppressive or we have to deny the beliefs of the fatalists. Obviously the latter is preferable.

It is interesting to note that those who believe in the school of fatalism, and give reasons for their belief, when they are faced with a real life situation, they act according to free will!

For instance, if a person aggresses against them, or annoys or bothers them, they take this person to court and do not rest at ease until that person is punished.

Well, if it is really true that a person has no choice or free will, what is all of this commotion and court and trial about?

At any rate, this common conscience of the intelligent beings of the world is a living idea for the reality that human beings have accepted the existence of free will in the depths of their being and have always been loyal to that. They cannot live without the belief in free will for even one day. This belief has caused the wheels of social and individual programs to progress.

A great Iranian philosopher, Khawjeh Nasir al-din Tusi, in discussing predestination and free will says in one short sentence in his book, "Kitab Tajrubaah bih al- 'Aqa'id:" *'Our necessary under-standing and conscience tells us that we are responsible for all of our deeds.'*

2. Justice

That which we have said above was about the contradiction between the school of predestination and the common conscience of the intelligent of the world, both from the point of view of supporters of religion and people who do not at all accept religion.

But from the point of view of religion thought, there is another sure reason for recognising the falsity of the school of fatalism. (And if fatalism were to be believed, religion as we know it, would have to be altered).

How can we reconcile the Justice of God which we proved in previous lessons with the school of fatalism? How is it possible that God oblige someone to do an evil deed? Then punish him because he did it. This does not agree with any kind of logic!

Thus, by accepting the school of fatalism, spiritual rewards, punishments, heaven and hell are meaningless as well as 'scroll of deeds', 'questioning', 'Divine reckoning', 'reprimanding the evil doers in the Qur'an', 'encouragement and praise for those who do good', all of these lose their meaning. Because according to the school of fatalism, neither the good doers nor the evil doers have a choice.

In addition, in religion, one of the first issues we encounter is 'duty' or 'responsibility', but does 'duty' or 'responsibility' make any sense if a person has no choice?

Can we tell a person whose hands involuntarily shake not to shake their hands? Or can we tell a person who is falling down a steep mountain to stand still? It is because of this that Imam 'Ali, peace be upon him, says in a famous tradition (Usul al-Kafi, Vol. 1, p. 119) that the school of fatalism is a school of idol worship whose followers are members of Iblis' party:

"These words of idol worshipping brothers, enemies of God, members of Iblis' part."

The Middle Way

1. The Opposite of Fatalism

Of course, opposing the belief in fatalism, which is one kind of an extreme, is the school of 'conferring', which is at the other extreme.

Those who accept this school believe that God created us and then put everything at our disposal and that, in general, He is not responsible for anything that we do and in this way, we are completely independent in choosing what we do.

Doubtlessly, this belief does not agree with monotheism because monotheism has taught us that God rules the entire world and nothing is beyond His control. Even our free will and free choice cannot be beyond His realm, otherwise duality or polytheism would, of necessity, result.

In other words, we cannot believe in many gods, one, the great Creator of the universe and the others, the human beings who are free to do whatever they wish, completely free and independent – even God cannot affect what they wish to do!

2. The School of the Middle Way

What is important is that we know human beings have freedom of choice and free will at the same time we know God to be the Ruler over all persons and deeds.

The fine point to recognise here is that we should not imagine that there is a contradiction between the two. The fact is that we can accept His Justice and Rule over the entire universe of existence as well as freedom and responsibility of His servants – and this is that very thing which is known as the middle way (the way which is between two extremes).

Let us clarify this with an example as the issue is a very complicated one. Let us assume that there is an electric train that is being driven by a train driver. A strong electric cable has been placed along the line of the train and the train is connected with a link to this electric cable. The electricity is passed to the locomotive in such a way that if for just one moment, the electricity to the locomotive stops, the whole train will stop. Without doubt, the train driver is free.

He can stop wherever he wants and he can move at his own speed. But in spite of all of this freedom, the person who is sending the electricity can, at any moment, make the train stop because all of the train's power and strength is through that electric cable. The person who holds the key to the electrical cable is in charge.

When we note this example with care, we see that one can have freedom, choice and responsibility (the train driver), while one is completely at the disposal of the power of another (the electric cable operator)

and these two concepts do not contradict each other.

God has given us physical power or strength and from moment to moment, it continues and if it is cut off for even a moment, and our connection with Him be cut off, we would be destroyed.

If we can do anything it is because we have strength which He has given us and it continues moment by moment and even our freedom and choice is also from Him. That is, He willed that we be free and by making use of this great Divine Kindness, one can transform one's self.

Thus, at the same time that we have free choice and free will, we are in His grasp and we will never move beyond His realm. At the same time that we have strength and power, we are dependent upon Him and without Him, we will be destroyed. This is what "The Middle Way" means. Neither have we recognised any creature to be equal to God (which would result in polytheism) nor do we believe creatures are obliged to act according to a set destiny (which would result in oppression). We have learned this lesson from our pure Imams, peace be upon them (Usul al-Kafi, vol. 1, p. 121). Whenever they were asked, "Does anything exist between fatalism and conferring?"

They said, "Yes. More extensive than the distance between heaven and earth."

The Holy Qur'an and Free Will

The Holy Qur'an states this issue directly and proves the free will of human beings and there are hundreds of verses which talk about free will.

All of the verses which relate to commanding virtue and preventing vice are all proof of the free will of human beings because if a person was destined to do so, commanding them to do so would make no sense.

All of the verses which speak of blame and reproach against the evil doers and praise for the good doers are proof of free will because if one was destined to do whatever one did, blame or praise would make no sense.

All of the verses which speak about the questioning on the Day of Judgement and the Judgement in that Court and then the rewards and punishments and heaven and hell are proof of free will because if one was to assume that everything was predestined then questioning, judging, rewards and punishments would all be oppressive.

Some explicit verses of the Qur'an which say that a human being is responsible for his or her deeds are:

"Every soul will be (held) in pledge for its deeds." (Surah Muddathir, 74: 38).

"(Yet) in each individual in pledge for his deeds." (Surah At-Tur, 52: 21).

“We showed him the Way: whether he be grateful or ungrateful (rests on his will).” (Surah Al-Insaan, 76:3).

“But you will not except as God wills...” (Surah Al-Insaan, 76:30).

Guidance and Error are in God's Hands

1. Means of Guidance

A traveller has an address in his hand. He meets you and asks you to help him find the address. You have two choices before you:

First, to go with him and complete your good deed by accompanying him to his destination and then say goodbye and leave him.

Second, indicate with your hand and giving various signs guide him towards his destination.

It is evident that in both cases, you have guided him towards his destination but there is a difference between these two; the second one is just telling which way to go and the first, is taking one to one's destination. The Holy Qur'an and Traditions of Islam mention both ways.

On the other hand, sometimes guidance only has a legal quality to it, i.e., formed by means of laws and rules. Whereas, sometimes it has an instinctive quality, i.e., by means of facilities provided by creation like the guidance of an embryo to becoming a complete human being and both of these ways are mentioned in the Holy Qur'an and the Traditions. By clarifying the means of guidance (and, naturally, the point opposite it, leading astray or error), we return to the main discussion.

We read in many of the verses of the Holy Qur'an that guidance and leading astray is God's work. Doubtlessly, the 'indication of the way' comes from God. Why? Because He sent the Prophet and sent a heavenly Book to show people the way.

But 'reaching the goal' through coercion or force clearly does not agree with free will and choice. However, because all power and strength which is necessary to reach one's goal is given to us by God and it is He Who gives us success upon this way, this sense of guidance is also from God. That is, preparation of the equipment and the preliminaries and providing them is at the disposal of humanity.

2. The Question of God's Guidance

Now, an important question arises and that is that we read in many verses of the Holy Quran:

“God guides whom He wills and misleads whom He wills.” (Surah Ibrahim, 14: 4).

Some people, without considering other verses of the Holy Qur'an, and the interpretation which one

verse has relative to others, immediately, upon seeing this verse, object and say, “If God guides whom He will and misleads whom He wills, what are we supposed to do in the middle?”

The important point is that the verses of the Holy Qur’an must always be studied in relation to each other in order to understand them in truth. Here we will recall several other verses about guidance and leading astray so that you can study them in relation to the above verse:

“God will establish in strength those who believe, with the Word that stands firm in this world and in the hereafter; but God will leave, to stray, those who do wrong: God does what He wills” (Surah Ibrahim, 14:27).

“Thus does God leave to stray such as transgress and live in doubt.” (Surah Al-Mu’min, 40:34).

“And those who strive in our (Cause), We will certainly guide them to Our paths: for verily God is with those who do right.” (Surah Al-Ankabut, 29: 69).

As we see, God’s will is not inexplicable. He neither gives the success of guidance to a person nor does He deny a person success. Those who undertake the jihad upon God’s Way, war with their difficulties and show strength and firmness of purpose, have been promised guidance and this is justice.

But those who create oppression and suppression and those who take steps towards extravagance, doubt, injustice and causing temptation in hearts, God takes away their possibility of guidance. Their hearts, as a result of these deeds, are darkened and they will not be able to succeed in reaching the station of wellbeing. This is how the Creator leaves the results of our deeds in our own hands and this is justice.

God’s Knowledge

The last point which we feel should be mentioned here in the discussion of predestination and free will is the excuse used by some fatalists as knowledge of the eternal of God.

They say, “Does God know that so and so at such and such an hour on such and such a day will kill someone or will drink an alcoholic beverage?”

If we say, “He does not know,” we have denied God’s knowledge. And if we say, “Yes, that person must do this, otherwise God’s knowledge will be imperfect,” then, in order to preserve God’s knowledge, a person is obliged to sin and obey God!

But the fact is, this excuse was fabricated in order to cover over the sins they wanted to commit but they have forgotten the fact that we say that God knew from eternity whether we would be inclined towards free will and choice and will obey or sin. That is, our will or choice was also part of God’s knowledge. Thus, if we are obliged to sin, God’s knowledge will become ignorant.

Allow us to put forth some questions on this point to clarify them. Assume that a teacher knows that a lazy student will fail at the end of the year and the teacher is one hundred percent sure of this fact because of years of experience as a teacher.

When the student fails, can the student take the teacher to task and say: “Your knowledge and what you foresaw caused me to fail.”?

Or, let us assume that there is a sinless and pure person and he knew of a murder which would take place on such and such a day and interferes to prevent it, does the knowledge of this pure person take away the responsibility of the criminal, obliging the criminal to commit the crime?

Or, assume that a new machine has been invented which can predict the occurrence of an event several hours before it happens and it can say that so and so at such and such an hour in such and such a place will commit such and such an act. Does this oblige that person to do this?

In summary, God’s knowledge never obliges anyone to do anything.

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