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## The Various Meanings of Freedom

### [The Importance of Understanding the Various Meanings of Freedom](#)

These days, what has been talked about more than anything else, and has also been included in the political and legal literature of our country (Iran) and been discussed a lot, is the issue of “freedom.” For every person, the issue of freedom is interesting. One of the slogans chanted in the Islamic Revolution of Iran was also “freedom”—“Independence, *freedom* and Islamic Republic.”

Political figures and groups in various countries, on account also of the same attractiveness that this issue has, talk a lot about it. In our own country we can observe that these days and the past three or four years, this slogan is regularly repeated, and everyone is presenting a particular interpretation of it. In order to make the issue clear, it is necessary for us to deal on it a little bit more specifically and precisely, and to examine its diverse aspects.

The interpretation that we usually have of “freedom” is in contrast to captivity, bondage and entanglement. Perhaps, at all times and in all societies the same conception of freedom, more or less, has been and is understood. The various terms, which exist in the different languages for this concept, approximately, are all denoting such meanings.

Every time a person hears this word (freedom) what usually first comes to his mind is that this concept is used in contrast to captivity and bondage. In principle, we comprehend opposite and contradictory concepts with the help of one another. For instance, when we want to describe light we use the concept of darkness. Similarly, in describing the concept of darkness, we discuss the concept of light. There is a famous Arabic expression, which states:

“Things are known by means of their respective opposites.”

At any rate, in understanding contradictory concepts; in order for our mind to understand them better and easier, it usually imagines them together. The same is true for the concept of freedom. Once we want to imagine the concept of freedom, we envisage a being in captivity and bondage, saying that freedom means not in such a condition.

For example, we picture a bird inside the cage, a person whose hands and feet are chained, or a person who is detained and imprisoned, and we say that freedom means to be not in such a state and to have no such fetters—the bird shall be free from the cage, the hands and feet of the person shall be unfettered, or the person shall be set free from prison and allowed to go wherever he wants, and thus we say, “He is free.”

The attractiveness of the concept of freedom for man is exactly on account of this contrast with captivity and bondage; for nobody wants to be in captivity, bondage and entanglement. Nobody wants to confine himself in a room and not allow himself to go out. Nobody wants to enchain his own hands and feet such that they could not move.

Everyone wants to freely and willfully go wherever he wants and to behave the way he likes. Without anyone teaching him so, man naturally and innately likes freedom and liberty, and abhors captivity and bondage. It can even be said that every sensible being is such that he wants freedom of action, and limitation and restriction are against his nature.

Because of this appeal that the concept of freedom has for us, anyone who would also talk about it and praise it will catch our attention, and anything over which freedom is applied is attractive and desirable for us. At this juncture, we are most of the time negligent of these facts: does freedom have only one meaning?

Or, are there diverse meanings for it? Is freedom, in whatever sense, concordant with the nature of man, and desirable? Does freedom have only a single type, and that is when the bird is freed from the cage? Or, are there various types of freedom, some of which are not only not beneficial but even destructive and harmful?

As what is stated in the science of logic, one of the fallacies, which is relatively so rampant, is the fallacy of common word, i.e. a word having more than one meaning. The feature and attribute related to one meaning of the word is erroneously proved for the other meaning. As an instance, the word “*shir*”<sup>1</sup> can be cited. Mawlawi<sup>2</sup> says:

بادیه اندر است شیر دگر وان بادیه اندر است شیر یکی آن

می خورد آدم است شیر دگر وان می خورد آدم است شیر یکی آن

*That one is shir [milk, or lion] in the badiyeh [cup, or jungle].*

*And the other one is shir in the badiyeh.*

*That one is shir, which devours human (or, which human eats).*

*And the other one is shir, which devours human (or, which human drinks).<sup>3</sup>*

The word “*shir*” means “milk” as well as “lion.” “*Badiyeh*” also denotes two meanings: the first one is “desert” and the other is “cup” and “vessel.”

In this poem of Mawlawi it is not exactly clear which one is “lion” and which one is “milk.”

*Badiyeh* is equally not clear which one means “desert” and which is one means “vessel” and “cup.”

Or, the word “*zamin*” can also be considered. Sometimes, when we say *zamin*, we mean a limited, small and specific part of the earth. When we say, *zamin-e keshavarzi* [agricultural land] or when we say, “So-and-so has bought such-and-such *zamin*,” we mean a limited piece of the earth’s surface. Yet, at other times by *zamin* we also mean the earth; for example, when we say, “The earth [*zamin*] is one of the planets in the solar system,” or when we say, “The earth [*zamin*] revolves around the sun.”

When the earth is meant, the concept of *zamin* does not only refer to the surface of the earth but also encompass the atmosphere and space as well as the mines and depth of the earth. If we say, “So-and-so has bought such-and-such *zamin* and has also received its land title,” we do not mean that he has bought the earth and registered it under his name, or if we say that the rotation of the earth causes the day-and-night phenomenon, we do not mean that the rotation of the house or garden’s track of land brings about this development.

In any case, this problem regarding all words having more than one meaning exists. In using this kind of words by us or others, we should be careful lest the fallacy of common word were committed.

The concept of freedom is also among those concepts having diverse meanings, and is used in various senses in different sciences. Owing to this, there is the possibility of committing the fallacy of common word. Consciously or not, one could possibly issue a decree related to one meaning of freedom for another, and could even cause discord among the proponents of freedom.

Sometimes, on one hand, one would present his understanding of a subject and on the other hand, another would say, “I did not mean what you said. What I meant by the concept and meaning that I was defending was something else.” In contrast, the other one will oppose his statement and say, “What you attributed to me was not what I meant. My point is something else.”

If we take a survey of the collection of articles, books and treatises related to the concept of freedom, particularly the works written in the recent years, we will find out that there is no specific and common

conception of the term among the scholars and writers.

A person has described freedom in a certain manner and renders his support for it while the other does the same for another conception of freedom and criticizes the other writer's definition of the term. It is natural that given such differences and disparities in outlook, understanding cannot be attained. In order to attain so, we must have a common definition so as to bring the discussion to a conclusion. That is, once we can answer this question—Is freedom concordant with Islam or not?—then that is the time for us to know the meaning of freedom.

Concerning a term having diverse meanings—since the Western writers in their writings have mentioned up to about two-hundred definitions—although so many of these definitions are closer to one another and only through the omission or commission of one and two words that they are different from one another, in some cases those definitions have also inconsistency with one another—how could it be judged that it is concordant with Islam or not?

Similar to “freedom” is the term “democracy”, which is a Western term and sometimes described also as “populism” and at other times as “the government or sovereignty of the people.” Yet, a fixed and precise definition has not been presented, too. It is not clear whether democracy is a form of government and a type of social conduct. Is it related to the domain of government and political issues, sociology, or management? There is a lot of discussion in this regard.

At any rate, in order not to commit the fallacy of common word regarding the concept of freedom, it is necessary for us to be familiar with its various meanings.

## **1. Freedom as existential independence**

One of the meanings of freedom is that any being shall be totally independent, not to be under the influence or sway of another being, and no kind of dependence to other being shall be presumed about it. For example, if somebody would say that the universe exists by itself, stands by itself and is not dependent on God, and the Will of God has no role in the rotations and revolutions (of its components), this statement connotes that freedom means deliverance of the universe from any sort of divine control.

In this case, as one of the beings in this world, man will also have the same ruling, and it opens the way for us to say that man is free from any kind of responsibility and servitude toward any other being including God. Of course, concerning the independence of the universe, there are two views.

Some believe that there is no such thing as “God” for the universe to be dependent on “it” and be under “its” will. Some others believe that God does exist and has created the world, but after the creation of the universe, He has left it to itself and after the creation the universe is no longer in need of God and is independent from His will.

By abiding with the regulation and system that God has set for it, it spontaneously continues the

rotations and revolutions of its components. According to them, creation of the universe is like constructing a building. Once the constructor built the building, its survival no longer depends on his existence. It is in fact independent from his existence. It is even possible that the constructor would die, but the building would remain for tens and hundreds of years.

In the imagination of some, the world is also like that. God created it and thereafter left it to itself. This view denies the “cosmic Lordship” [*rububiyyat-e takwini*] of God while the first view denies the principle of God’s existence. Both the two views are incompatible with the monotheistic viewpoint of Islam.

## 2. Freedom as “free will”

The other meaning of freedom, which is also related to the domains of theology, philosophy, scholasticism [*ilm al-kalam*], and philosophical psychology, is the freedom in contradistinction to “predetermination.” Since time immemorial, this discussion has existed among the thinkers and scholars: Is man really free in his action and has freewill, or is it that he is only imagining that he is free and the truth is that he is under compulsion and has no will of his own?!

The issue of predetermination [*jabr*] and freewill [*ikhtiyar*] is one of the oldest discussions, which exists in the philosophical discussions of all peoples and nations. After the coming of Islam or from the very advent of Islam, because of the Muslims’ contact with other peoples and cultures, or due to the intellectual sediments they had in their minds from the culture of pre-Islamic thought and heresy, this issue was intensely discussed among Muslims.

The fatalistic tendencies, meanwhile, gained much currency, and they would even cite Qur’anic verses in proving the predetermined state of man. Among the Islamic schools of thought, Asha’irah (Ash’arism), which is among the scholastic schools of the Ahl as-Sunnah, upholds the theory of predetermination.<sup>4</sup> Of course, it is not as extreme and passionate as others.

In any case, this question is posed: In terms of action, does man really have freewill and is free such that he could decide and do whatever he likes? Or, are there elements in the offing, which compel man to do a certain action and even to accept a particular idea and thought, and that freewill is just an illusion?

The proponents of predetermination believe that the different social, natural and supra-natural elements compel us to act and even think and decide in a certain way. According to them, as what Mawlawi cites as an example,

صنم ای است اختیار دلیل خود کنم آن یا کنم این گویی که این

*That you said I have to do this or that  
Is itself a basis of freewill, O master!*

Speeches are nothing but illusion and imagination, and are incompatible with the reality; man has no freewill of his own and is under the influence of various elements.

This matter is also discussed in the philosophical psychology: Is man a being who, in terms of personality and mental frame, has the power of decision-making, or not? In scholasticism and theology this is also discussed: As the servants of God, are human beings under compulsion, or autonomous and free?

According to our view and that of the majority of Muslims, this belief in the domain of (personal) opinion and outlook is rejected, although in the domain of action and deed all people know that they have freedom and freewill. If mere predetermination rules over man, there is no more point of having moral and educational systems as well as government organs.

In the domain of ethics and educational system, if man is compelled to do a good or bad action, having no choice of his own, with respect to the good deed he must not be praised, lauded and be given reward. Equally, if he were compelled, he must not be punished and reprimanded for an evil deed.

If the child were compelled in his action, there is no more point of training him, and for controlling his action educational systems must be abandoned. In case both the teacher and trainer, and the child and pupil were under compulsion in their actions, the trainer could not advise the child to perform a certain activity and to avoid a certain undertaking. In the same manner, in the domain of legal, political and economic issues, all those regulations and recommendations that have been made are pieces of evidence that man is indeed free and autonomous.

When man is autonomous to perform a certain action or abandon the same, they will admonish him to perform or abandon a certain act. If he were under compulsion, having no choice and freewill on his action, then there is no point of admonishing or giving order to him.

This freedom and freewill in which we do believe is a creational [*takwinī*] affair whose opposite is predetermination [*jabr*]. It has been endowed by God to man, is among the peculiarities of man and the criterion of his superiority over all creatures.

Among the creatures that we know, it is only man that has the power to choose and select, notwithstanding his diverse, and at times, contradictory inclinations. In responding to the call of his desires—whether they are bestial desires, or divine and sublime aspirations—he is totally free and autonomous. Undoubtedly, God, the Exalted, has bestowed this divine blessing to man so that out of his freewill he could select the right path or the wrong path.

All the advantages that man has over other creatures including the angels are under the auspices of having the power to choose and select. If he would make use of this power in the right path and choose the divine wishes while putting aside the bestial desires, he will reach an exalted station wherein the angels will feel humble before him. Of course, man's possession of this freedom is a creational issue.

Approximately, nowadays, nobody denies it and regard himself as totally under compulsion, having no freewill of his own. The Qur'an naturally gives emphasis on this issue:

...وَقُلِ الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ ۚ فَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُؤْمِنْ وَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُكْفُرْ

***“Say: (It is) the truth from the Lord of you (all). Then whosoever will, let him believe, and whosoever will, let him disbelieve.”***<sup>5</sup>

إِنَّا هَدَيْنَاهُ السَّبِيلَ إِمَّا شَاكِرًا وَإِمَّا كَفُورًا

***“Lo! We have shown him the way, whether he be grateful or disbelieving.”***<sup>6</sup>

Hundreds of verses, nay it can be said, the entire Qur'an, highlight the autonomy of man because the Qur'an is meant for the guidance of man. If man were under compulsion, his being guided was a predestined matter and so with his being misguided, and there was no place for guidance by choice.

In this manner, the Qur'an will become useless and futile. It is clear that the second meaning of freedom is different from the first one that we mentioned. Of course, they are common in indicating objective realities and so to speak, the “beings” and “not-beings.” None of the two meanings falls in the domain of “must” and “must-not.”

If man had been really created to be under compulsion, it can no longer be said: “He must be free.” On the contrary, if man had been created as autonomous, it cannot also be said: “He must be compelled.” In these two meanings of freedom, one cannot speak of “mandatory” and “moral” orders.

If in the parlance of philosophy it is proved that man is created to be under compulsion, the slogan of the freedom of man can no longer be chanted. If man is by creation under compulsion, whether we like it or not, the freedom of man will be an impossible and absurd affair. The domain of “being and not-being” is different from that of “must and must-not.”

Therefore, if someone applied “freedom” with its creational meaning and then arrived at the “must and must-not”, he is committing that fallacy of common word, which we pointed out before. If we proved that man by creation is free, one cannot arrive at the legal and moral freedom, and say: “So, he *must* be free,” or “It is *good*” for him to be *free*.” To discover and prove an external reality is one thing, and to talk about “good and bad” and “must and must-not” is another. One must not mix the two together, however.

### **3. Freedom as “the lack of attachment”**

The third meaning of freedom is a concept, which is often used in ethics and mysticism. In this famous

poem of Hafiz,<sup>7</sup> he has pointed to it:

است آزاد تعلق پذیرد رنگ هرچه ز کبود چرخ زیر که آنم همت غلام

*I am the servant of anyone who under the sky*

*Is free from every color of attachments.*

In this sense, freedom is the opposite of “belongingness” and “attachment.” That is, sometimes the heart of man is attached and fond of some things, and at other times it has no attachment to anything; it is free from any form of belongingness.

Of course, what is meritorious is that man should have no affection to the world, material things, and worldly and non-divine pleasures, and not that he should have no love and affection to anything or anybody including God, the Prophet (S),<sup>8</sup> *awliya'* [saints], and the like.

One more precise and mystical meaning of “the lack of attachment” is that the man in the sublime station of monotheism reaches a point where his love belongs to anything or anybody except the Divine Sacred Essence. In this state, even if he would love a person or thing, it is under the auspices, and because, of love of God, which is under the aegis of the Divine Beauty. In the perspective of the Islamic sciences, one of the highest stages of human perfection is love and affection to God:

لِلَّهِ حُبًّا أَشَدَّ آمَنُوا وَالَّذِينَ

***“Those who believe are stauncher in their love for Allah.”<sup>9</sup>***

In the *Du‘a Kumayl*<sup>10</sup> we read:

مُتَيْمًا بِحُبِّكَ وَقَلْبِي

“(O Lord! Make) my heart enthralled by Your love!”

Similarly, this subject is also present in numerous supplications and traditions, and the highest station of man is that the love of God encompassed his entire being from head to foot and his whole heart is enthralled with His love such that not a single speck of love to other than God is ever present there.

This meaning is another conception of freedom; freedom means “emancipation” and lack of attachment to anything and anybody other than God. It is again obvious that this meaning is totally different from the first two meanings mentioned earlier. The two meanings are related to the domains of realities and “beings and not-beings” while this meaning is related to the domain of values and “must and must not.”

Here, we are saying that it is “good” for man to be free from affection to other than God, and if he wants to acquire more perfection, he “must” be free and liberated from love to other than God.

If we apply this meaning to freedom, then absolute freedom is not desirable. That is, that man should be free from love and affection to anything and anybody other than God, the Exalted, is against moral values.

There is also an opportunity here to commit error and fallacy. Anyone would deceptively talk about freedom in this sense that man must not be under captivity and bondage, and then say that man must thus not be fettered even by the love of God and that he must emancipate himself and be totally free. To emphasize his point, he would recite the same poem of Hafiz:

است آزاد تعلق پذیرد رنگ هرچه ز کبود چرخ زیر که آنم همت غلام

*I am the servant of anyone who under the sky  
Is free from every color of attachments.*

This is while it is an obvious and deceptive fallacy. When did Hafiz wanted to say that “I am the servant of the aspiration of him who, to the extent of being insensible and cold-hearted, nurtures nobody’s love in his heart”? Hafiz negates affection and attachment to other than God.

His point is the negation of affection to materiality and worldliness, and that man should give his affection to a thing, which is worthy of such an affection, as well as to somebody who is the embodiment of all goodness, and whatever beauty and perfection existing in the world are all reflections of His Beauty. This is yet another meaning of freedom, which is often applied in ethics and mysticism.

#### **4. Freedom vis-à-vis “slavery”**

The fourth meaning of freedom is a social subject and that is freedom vis-à-vis “slavery.” In the past it was such that some human beings used to take other human beings as slaves, forcing them to work, buying and selling them. Some were also free and were slaves to no one. This meaning of freedom is also totally different from the three meanings mentioned earlier, having its own particular ruling features.

There are also numerous meanings of freedom apart from these four, which we will presently refrain from mentioning. We will instead tackle a meaning of freedom which is related to law and politics, and is the focus of our attention for the present discussion.

The purpose of mentioning these meanings of freedom is for us to pay attention to the fact that freedom has numerous meanings, each having its own particular ruling features, and the ruling features and effects of one meaning must not be erroneously applied to the other meanings.

## 5. Freedom in the legal and political parlance: mastery over one's destiny

One current meaning of freedom advanced in law and politics is freedom in the sense of “mastery over one's destiny.” In this meaning, man is free in the sense that he is not subject to the sovereignty of others and he is the one determining the mode, nature and way of his own life. Naturally, on the contrary, a person who is under the domination of others, receiving orders from the latter to do or not to do something, and cannot act the way he likes, is not free.

Thus, freedom in the legal and political parlance of the contemporary world means the negation of the right of others to have sovereignty over man, even if they happened to be God, the Prophet, the Commander of the Faithful,<sup>11</sup> and the Imam of the Time<sup>12</sup> (‘a).<sup>13</sup>

In this perspective, only man and his sovereignty right are genuine. If man himself willfully delegated this genuine right of him to God, the Prophet or others, they will acquire the same right; otherwise, they do not have the right. In sum, “man is free” means that no one and no being has the right to trample on the right of man to have mastery over his destiny and to designate duties for his life and actions.

In interfering on the affairs and lives of people, the jurist-guardian [*wali al-faqih*], infallible Imams (‘a) and the Prophet (S), who have their own particular stations, and even God Himself have to wait for their approval otherwise they have no right to issue decree and order to the people, and even if they did so, it has no value, and the people are not obliged to accept their enjoinder and prohibition.

We will examine this meaning of freedom in the future discussions. We will clearly explain the viewpoint of Islam on this issue.

<sup>1</sup>. In Persian language the word “shir” means various things: lion, faucet and milk. [Trans.]

<sup>2</sup>. It refers to Mawlana Jalal ad-Din ar-Rumi (1207–1273), the greatest mystic poet in the Persian language and founder of the Mawlawiyah order of dervishes (“The Whirling Dervishes”). He is famous for his lyrics and for his didactic epic, *Mathnawi-ye Ma'nawi* [Spiritual Couplets]. [Trans.]

<sup>3</sup>. In the last two lines of the poem, with the absence of the Persian post-positional word “ra”—which is common in poems—in either the word shir [milk, or lion] or insan [man], it is not clear which line means “The lion [shir], which devours human,” or “The milk [shir], which human drinks.” [Trans.]

<sup>4</sup>. For information on Asha'irah and other scholastic schools in Islam, see Murtada Mutahhari, “An Introduction to ‘Ilm al-Kalam,” trans. ‘Ali Quli Qara’i, *At-Tawhid Journal* vol. 2, no. 2 (Rabi‘ ath-Thani 1405 AH–January 1985), available online at <http://www.al-islam.org/at-tawhid/kalam.htm> [1]. [Trans.]

<sup>5</sup>. Surah al-Kahf 18:29.

<sup>6</sup>. Surah al-Insan (or, ad-Dahr) 76:3.

<sup>7</sup>. It refers to Khwajah Shamsuddin Muhammad Hafiz Shirazi (ca. 1325–1391), the fourteenth century Persian lyric bard and panegyrist, and commonly considered as the preeminent master of the ghazal form. [Trans.]

<sup>8</sup>. The abbreviation, “S”, stands for the Arabic invocative phrase, *sallallahu ‘alayhi wa alihi wa sallam* [may God's salutation and peace be upon him and his progeny], which is used after the name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S). [Trans.]

<sup>9</sup>. Surah al-Baqarah 2: 165.

<sup>10</sup>. *Du'a Kumayl* [Supplication of Kumayl]: The supplication taught by Imam ‘Ali (‘a) to one of his loyal companions and staunch supporters of Islam, Kumayl ibn Ziyad. Usually offered on every night preceding Friday [Laylat'ul-Jum'ah] individually or in congregation after Isha' prayers, this supplication envisages divine teachings and solid foundations of

religion in order to enable everyone to follow the right path for becoming a worthy Muslim. The Arabic text, English translation and commentary of this famous supplication are available online at <http://www.al-islam.org/kumayl> [2]. [Trans.]

[11.](#) The Commander of the Faithful: ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, and first of the Twelve Imams after the Prophet. He exercised rule from 35/656 until his martyrdom in 40/661. See Yousuf N. Lalljee, ‘Ali the Magnificent (Qum: Ansariyan Publications, 1987); Muhammad Jawad Chirri, The Brother of the Prophet Mohammad (Imam ‘Ali), (Qum: Ansariyan Publications, 2000); George Jordaq, The Voice of Human Justice, trans. M. Fazal Haq (Qum: Ansariyan Publications, 1990). [Trans.]

[12.](#) It refers to Imam Muhammad ibn Hasan al-Mahdi, the Twelfth and Last Imam from the Prophet’s Holy Progeny who is presently in the state of major occultation and will appear on the appointed time in the future to fill the world with truth, justice and faith after being engulfed by falsehood, injustice and unbelief. For further information on the Islamic belief on the Mahdi, see Ayatullah Ibrahim Amini, Imam Mahdi: Just Leader of Humanity, <http://www.al-islam.org/mahdi/nontl/index.htm>; [3] Ayatullah Sayyid Muhammad Baqir as-Sadr and Ayatullah Murtada Mutahhari, Awaited Savior, <http://www.al-islam.org/awaited/index.htm> [4]. [Trans.]

[13.](#) The abbreviation, “a” stands for the Arabic invocative phrase, ‘alayhis-salam, ‘alayhimus-salam, or ‘alayhas-salam [may peace be upon him/them/her], which is used after the names of the prophets, angels, Imams from the Prophet’s progeny, and saints (‘a). [Trans.]

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