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# Lesson 20: The Form of God's Will and Volition

Fate and destiny are one of those controversial topics that are often misinterpreted because of lack of precise understanding or, some- times, malicious intention. In order to explore the topic, we will analyze it here as concisely as possible.

Everything in this world is based on a precise calculation, logic and law. It has been put in its place according to an exact measurement, and it derives its defining characteristics from the causes and factors on which it is dependent.

Just as every phenomenon derives its primal existence from its specific cause, it also acquires all its outer and inner properties from the same source; it derives its shape and extent from the cause. Since there is a homogeneity between the cause and the effect, the cause inevitably transmits to the effect a characteristic bearing affinity to its own essence.

In the worldview of Islam, fate and destiny have the meaning of God's firm decree concerning the unfolding of the affairs of the world, their extent and their limits. All phenomena that occur within the order of creation, including man's deeds, become fixed and certain by means of their causes, their being a consequence of the universal validity of the principle of causality.

Fate (qada') has the meaning of something terminated and irreversible, and it refers to the creativity and the acts of God. Destiny (qadar) has the meaning of extent or proportion and it indicates the nature and quality of the order of creation, its systematic character; it means that God has endowed the world of being with a planned and systematic structure. In other words, destiny is the result of His creativity as it leaves its impress on all created things.

To express it differently, what is meant by destiny is the external and objective fixing of the limits and proportions of a thing, externally and objectively, not mentally. Before executing his plan, an architect will prepare in his mind the qualities and dimensions of the complex he proposes to build. The Qur'an speaks of these fixed forms, properties and proportions of things as qadar:

***"We have created everything according to a fixed proportion."*** **(54:49)**

***"God has fixed a quantity and proportion for all things."*** **(65:3)**

The term, fate (qada'), in the Qur'an means rational and natural necessities, all the parts of the cause that lead to the emergence of a thing. It implies that God's want will implement itself only when the fixed quantities, conditions and causes of a thing are aligned with each other.

The Creator takes into consideration the spatio-temporal situation of all phenomena, together with their limits and proportions, and then issues His decree based on them. Whatever factor or cause is visible in the world is the manifestation of God's will and knowledge and the instrument for the fulfillment of what He has fated.

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The capacity for growth and development is fixed in the very heart of things. Matter, which is subject to the law of motion, has the capacity of assuming different forms and traversing various processes. Under the influence of different factors, it assumes a whole variety of states and qualities. It derives energy from certain natural factors that enable it to advance, but when it encounters certain other factors, it loses its existence and vanishes.

Sometimes it continues to advance through different stages until it approaches the highest degree of development; at other times, it lacks the necessary speed to advance through further stages of progress and moves sluggishly.

So, the outcome of things is not directly connected with fate and destiny because it is the cause that determines the nature of the effect. Since material beings are connected with a variety of causes, they will necessarily follow different paths; each cause fixes the being subordinate to it in a particular path.

Imagine that someone is suffering from appendicitis. This is a destiny" arising from a particular cause. Two additional, separate "destinies" await this invalid: either he agrees to surgery, in which case he will recover his health, or he fails to agree, in which case he dies. Both of these choices represent a form of destiny.

Destinies can, then, be interchangeable, but whatever decision the invalid takes and acts upon will not be outside the sphere of what God has destined.

One cannot sit with hands folded and tell oneself, "If it is my fate, I will remain alive, and if it is not my fate, I will die, whatever effort I make to be treated."

If you seek treatment and recover, this is your destiny, and if you refuse treatment and die, that, too, is your destiny. Wherever you go and whatever you do, you are in the embrace of destiny.

People who are lazy and refuse to work first decide not to work and then when they are penniless, they throw the blame on destiny. If they had decided to work, the money they earned would equally have

been the result of destiny. Thus, whether you are active and diligent or idle, you in no way contravene destiny.

A change in destiny does not, then, mean the rebellion of a certain factor against fate or opposition to the law of causality. No factor producing an effect in the world can be exempt from the universal law of causality. Something that causes a change in destiny is, itself, one linking the chain of causality, one manifestation of fate and destiny. To put it differently, one destiny is changed by means of another destiny.

In contrast with the sciences that point in only one direction and show the orientation only of certain aspect of phenomena, the laws of metaphysics are not concerned with phenomena from the conjunctural point of view although the laws do regulate the phenomena, they are indifferent with respect to the orientation they assume.

In reality, both the phenomena themselves and their orientation are subject to the vast and comprehensive laws of metaphysics: in whatever direction the phenomena tend, they are still held inescapably in the embrace of those laws.

The situation is like that of an expansive, broad plain; even its most northerly and most southerly parts are included within the plain.

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In short, fate and destiny represent nothing other than the universality of the principle of causality; they represent a meta- physical truth that cannot be measured in the same way as the data of science.

The principle of causality says only that every phenomenon has a cause; it cannot of itself make any prediction, this being a property totally absent from metaphysical awareness.

For the laws of metaphysics, which is a descriptive form of knowledge and the firm and stable ground for the various phenomena of the world, it makes no difference which particular phenomena occur. A highway along which men travel thanks to its firmness and stability is completely indifferent to the direction in which they are traveling.

‘Ali, peace be upon him, the Commander of the Faithful, was resting in the shade of a broken wall that seemed likely to collapse. suddenly he arose and went to sit in the shade of another wall. He was asked: "Are you fleeing what God has destined?"

He said, "I am taking refuge in God's power from what He has destined," meaning, 'I am fleeing from one destiny to another destiny. Both sitting and rising were equally subject to destiny. If the broken wall collapses on me and I am harmed, it will be fate and destiny, and if I leave the zone of danger and escape all harm, that, DO, will be fate and destiny."

The Glorious Qur'an describes as divine norms the systems and laws of nature that rule over the world and follow inevitable and immutable courses: *"The divine norm is immutable and unchanging."* (33:62)

The immutable norm of God decrees, among other things, that:

***"If a people provides itself with the capital of faith and performs good and worthy deeds, it will be triumphant on the stage of life and win the viceregency of the earth."*** **(24:55)**

According to the Qur'an, this, too, is an immutable divine norm:

***"God will never change the destiny of a society until its people change that Society."*** **(13:11)**

From the point of view of the religious worldview, realities are not confined within the four walls of material causation. Phenomena ought not to be considered purely in their sensory relations and heir material dimensions. Non-material factors have access to realms that are totally closed off to material factors, and they have independent and decisive role in the emergence of phenomena.

The world is by no means indifferent to the distinction between good and bad; man's acts produce certain reactions during his lifetime. Kindness and benevolence toward one's fellows and the love and service of God's creatures are factors that, through non- material means, ultimately result in a change of human destiny and contribute to tranquility, happiness, and an abundance of blessings.

Oppression, malevolence, egoism, aggression also bear bitter fruit and have inevitably harmful results. So, from this point of view, some form of requital is inherent in nature, for the world possesses perception and consciousness; it sees and it hears. The manner in which it requites deeds is one manifestation of fate and destiny; it is impossible to flee from it, for wherever you go, it will seize you.

A certain scientist says: "Do not say the world lacks perception, for you will then have accused yourself of lacking perception. You have come into being as part of the world, and if there is no awareness in the world, there is none in you either."

Concerning the role of non-material factors in fashioning des- tiny, the Qur'an says the following:

***"Were the people of the earth to believe and act with piety, We would open to them the gates of all heavenly and earthly blessings, but since they denied the truth, We punished them for their evil behavior."*** **(7:96)**

***"We never destroy region unless its people become cruel and aggressive."*** **(28:59)**

The concepts of fate and destiny are cited by the proponents of determinism as one of their proofs. In their opinion, it is not possible for any act to be performed independently by anyone, for God has predestined the acts of man, general and particular, good and bad, so that no scope remains for any volitional acts on his part.

There is a difference between determinism and irreversible destiny. Every phenomenon is bound to occur once all of its causes are present. One link in the chain of causes is man's will, which plays a definite role of its own. Man is a being endowed with free will, hence his acts pursue definite goals, and in pursuit of those goals, he does not follow some automatic law of nature, like raindrops that fall in accordance with the law of gravity. Were it to be otherwise, man could not, in fact, pursue the goals he has in mind as a being possessing free will.

This is in contrast with the determinist view, which regards the free will of man as inoperative and relates all causes exclusively to God and to factors external to man's own essence.

Belief in fate and destiny results in determinism only when they are regarded as supplanting man's powers and will, so that no role or effect is ascribed to his wishes in the acts he performs. In reality, however, the and destiny are nothing other than the system of cause and effect.

The Qur'an proclaims that some of those who opposed the Prophets and raised the banner of rebellion against the chosen of God interpreted fate and destiny in a determinist sense. They did not want the existing situation to change in such a way that the social order of monotheism should replace the rotten customs to which they were attached.

These are the relevant verses:

***"They said, 'If God wanted us not to worship the angels, we would not do so.' They speak not in accordance with logic or scientific proof, but t with their own vain imaginings . Did We ever send them a book containing proofs for their erroneous belief in determinism?"*** **(43:20–21)**

By contrast with the determinists, the messengers of God and the followers of heavenly teachings have been concerned not with the preservation of the status quo but with the overthrow of traditions and looking toward the future.

The Noble Qur'an promises mankind ultimate victory in its struggle against tyrants and emphasizes that the final government to rule upon the earth will be the government of justice; falsehood will vanish and the final outcome of all affairs will belong to the God fearing. This is the promise of the Qur'an:

***"It is Our will that We show favor to those who have been oppressed throughout history by making them leaders and the inheritors of the earth."*** **(28:5)**

***"God promises those among you who believe and do good deeds that He will make you viceregents on earth, that He will firmly establish the religion He has chosen for you, and that He will bestow on all the believers safety after their fear of the enemy this, in order that you might worship Me alone and not ascribe to Me any partners."*** **(24:55)**

***"We made the people who had been oppressed to inherit the blessed and promised land. Thus did the favor of God to the Children of Israel reach its full measure, and as a reward for their***

***patience in enduring hardship We destroyed Pharaoh and his people together with an they had wrought."*** **(7:137)**

So the Qur'an depicts an opposition between belief and unbelief, between the deprived and the tyrannical, and it tells us that the world is moving toward the triumph of truth over falsehood, of the deprived over their oppressors; a revolutionary movement is underway that is in harmony with the motion of all creation toward perfection.

The call of the Prophets, reward and punishment, paradise and hellfire all these prove that man has duties and responsibilities, and the Qur'an accordingly links man's salvation in this world and the hereafter to his deeds.

According to the doctrine of fate and destiny, man is free and responsible for his own destiny and in control of it. Fate and destiny are, indeed, at work if one people is powerful and another, wretched and humble, if one community is triumphant and proud, and another, defeated and humble.

This is only because fate and destiny determine that one people make use of the means of progress and advancement and walk on the path of honor and dignity, while another chooses self-indulgence and indifference, and can expect nothing but defeat, humiliation and wretchedness. The Qur'an clearly states:

***"God never changes the state of a people until they themselves change their own situation."*** **(8:53)**

No doubt it may happen that our wishes are not fulfilled as we expect, but this does not in any way prove that man is compelled and determined in his acts. The fact that the scope of man's volitional acts is limited does not in any way contradict his definite possession of free will; to assert that man has free will in no way implies that his free will is unlimited.

God has set numerous factors to work throughout the vast expanse of being. Sometimes these factors, together with the phenomena in which they result, are evident to man, and some- times they are not. A careful and realistic interpretation of the concept of fate and destiny will inspire man to strive harder to know and to recognize all of those factors, so that by taking them into account, he can aspire to still greater accomplishments.

It is precisely because of the limitations of man's capacities that he is unable to acquire all the factors needed for success so that his wishes and desires remain unfulfilled.

In accordance with the general principle of causality, the destiny of every being is tied to the causes that precede it. Whether one accepts the existence of a divine principle or not has no bearing on the question of the freedom and destiny of man, because one may either attribute the system of cause and effect to the will of God, or assume that it is independent and has no connection to a divine principle.

This being the case, it can also not be maintained that determinism results from belief in the doctrine of fate and destiny. What we mean by destiny is the inseparable link of every phenomenon with its causes, including the will and choice of man; we are certainly not denying causality.

Fate and destiny bring forth the existence of every phenomenon by means of its particular cause. The divine will rules over the entire world as a universal principle and law. Any change that takes place is also on the basis of a divine custom or norm. Were this not to be the case, fate and destiny would never have any external expression.

Any scientific school of thought that accepts the principle of universal causality is obliged to accept the reality of the relations between a phenomenon and its cause, whether it is theistic or materialistic in its outlook.

Now, if a definite link between the occurrence of a phenomenon including human acts and its causes leads to man being an automaton, predetermined in his acts, both theism and materialism are open to objection, insofar as they both accept causality. But if it does not lead to that conclusion (as indeed It should not), the question still arises: what is the difference, in this respect, between theism and materialism?

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The difference is that the theistic worldview, in contrast with that of materialism, regards ideal and non-material factors as fully capable of exerting an effect. Those factors are, indeed, more subtle and complex in the web of creation than are material factors.

The worldview based on belief in God gives spirit, aim and meaning to life It bestows on man courage, vitality, breadth of vision, profundity of insight, and strength of mind; prevents him from falling into the abyss of purposelessness; and bears him upward in an unending arc of ascent.

So, a believer in God who is firmly convinced of fate and destiny, who perceives that there are wise purposes at work in the creation of man and the universe, will advance on the straight path through his reliance on God; knowing himself to be supported and protected by God, he will be more confident and hopeful of the results of his activity.

But one who is caught up in the worldview of materialism, whose mental framework inclines him to belief in a material fate and destiny, enjoys none of these advantages. He is deprived of a sure and invincible support in striving to attain his goals.

It is, then, obvious that there is a profound difference between the two schools of thought as far as their social and psychological effects are concerned.

Anatole France says: "It is the beneficial effect of religion that teaches man the reason for his existence and the consequence of his deeds. Once we reject the principles of theistic philosophy, as almost all of

now do in this age of science and freedom, we no longer have any means of knowing why we came into this world and what we are meant to accomplish after setting foot in this world.

"The mystery of destiny has enveloped us with its powerful secrets, and if we wish completely to avoid experiencing the sorrowful ambiguity of life, we must not think at all. For the root of our sorrow lies in our complete ignorance of the reason for our existence. Physical and spiritual pain, torment of the soul and the senses all would be bearable if we knew the reason for them and believed God to have willed them.

"The true believer takes pleasure in the spiritual torment he endures. Even the sins he commits do not rob him of hope. But in a world where the ray of faith has been extinguished, pain and sickness lose their meaning and become ugly jokes, a form of sinister ridicule."

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