

Part 5: Freedom and Liberty

There is no doubt that if the divinely appointed fate is supposed to be related to the events direct without the intervention of the causes, human freedom and liberty will have no meaning. Now the next question is whether it is possible to accept the general principle of causation and the principle of human liberty simultaneously. Are they not inconsistent? It appears that the only way to believe in human freedom and liberty is to consider human will and acts not to be related to any external causes and to accept the first theory out of the three theories mentioned above.

Many ancient and modern thinkers are of the view that the principle of causation is inconsistent with human liberty, and hence they believe in free will not related to any cause. In other words they are the proponents of mere chance and accident.

We have established in the foot-notes of our book, *Principles of Philosophy*, vol. III that the general principle of causation is undeniable and it admits of no exception. The denial of relation between human will and external causes would amount to saying that the acts of man are totally beyond his control. Thus instead of adding to human liberty, we will be diminishing it further, by accepting the view.

Man has been created free. That means that he has been endowed with intellect, will and thinking power. As far as his intentional acts are concerned, he is not like a stone which if dropped from above will automatically fall on the ground under the pressure of the gravity of the earth. Nor is he like a plant which has only a very limited course open to it and is only subject to the laws of growth and decay. Similarly he is not like a mere animal which works only instinctively. Man always finds himself at cross roads, but is not in any way compelled to choose anyone of them. Other roads are not closed to him. The choice depends upon his will and personal thinking. It is entirely up to him to choose a particular way.

His choice will be the outcome of his personality, his moral and spiritual qualities, his previous training, his hereditary traits and his intellectual capacity. His happy or unhappy future depends on these qualities and the choice he makes consequently.

Fire burns; water submerges; a plant grows and an animal walks. They all work. The difference is that

they do not choose, whereas man chooses. He decides what he wants to do and which way he wants to go. His work is subject to his own personal desire.

Inevitable And Non-Inevitable

In the reports and traditions, fate and destiny have been described as revocable and irrevocable. There are hints in the Qur'an also to that effect. It appears that there are two kinds of fate and destiny, one inevitable and unalterable and the other non-inevitable and alterable.

Now the question is: what is the meaning of non-inevitable fate and destiny? Let us take any particular event in view. Have the Eternal Knowledge and Will of Allah attached to it? If they have not, there is no question of destiny. If they have, the event must take place, otherwise that would mean the nonconformity of the Divine Knowledge to the reality and the nonfruition of Allah's Will.

To be more precise we may say that destiny means the emanation of all the required causes from the Knowledge and Will of Allah, who is the First Cause. As we know, the general law of causation necessitates inevitability. This law requires that the occurrence of an event should be sure under its own special temporal and spatial conditions and its non-occurrence also should be certain in other circumstances. The finality of the scientific rules is due to this very law.

Man can make scientific predictions to the extent of his limited knowledge of the causes. Therefore the decision of fate and destiny which determines the occurrence of the events through the system of causation, must be regarded as conclusive. As such to divide destiny into inevitable and non-inevitable appears to be meaningless.

At this stage a dilemma arises. Either we should, like the Ash'arites, believe in destiny in its limited sense only or say that it is absolutely unalterable and that man has no power to change it; or like the Mu'tazilites deny its role at least as far as human acts and deeds are concerned. Let us see how we can resolve this dilemma.

It may incidentally be said that just as the Ash'arite view implies the denial of man's liberty and his control of his destiny, the Mu'tazilite view also besides being contrary to the monotheistic principles and the concept of divine knowledge, does not serve any useful purpose from the angle of human freedom. Even if we do not accept the fate and destiny in their divine sense, what shall we do of their material concept, according to which every event in the world is controlled by the system of causation? That also amounts to compulsion.

Can we deny the working of the law of causation at least in the case of free agent, that is man. Some modern European philosophers also have expressed the same view as was held by the Mu'tazilites. They have talked of free will not subject to the law that it is applicable only to the material world composed of atoms, and is not applicable to the spiritual world or even to the internal world of the atoms.

We cannot here dwell on the law of causation. Anybody interested in its detailed discussion may refer to our book, "The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism", vol. III, footnotes.

Here it is enough to say that the modern philosophers have denied the generality of the law of causation, because they think that it is an experimental law and as such have considered those cases to be out of its scope in which human experiments have not been able to discover a definite relationship of cause and effect.

In fact it is a big mistake to presume that all scientific laws, rules, all mental conceptions are based on human perception and experiment. This is a mistake which has been committed by many Western systems of philosophy and from them it has passed to their Eastern followers.

In short, there is no way of denying the law of general causation, and with its acceptance the problem of the non-inevitability of destiny remains as it is, whether we believe or not in its divine aspect. Briefly speaking the problem is that all events including human acts and deeds are bound to acquire inevitability through their causes which determine their specifications and characteristics. The system of causation itself means inevitability and certainty. Hence the question of a change in destiny does not arise.

All the believers in "the general principle of causation" and they include the materialists, who believe in determinism and at the same time hold that the destiny is changeable and that man controls his destiny, are faced with this dilemma. Therefore the Mu'tazilite theory of the denial on the view that all the events of the world are not subject to Divine Will and that Divine Knowledge is not the source of the entire system of the universe, serves no purpose.

Impossible Fantasy

If the alterability of destiny and its non-inevitability are construed to mean that Divine Will and Knowledge necessitate one thing and then an independent factor arises and necessitates something contrary to it, or that an independent factor can change Divine Will and Knowledge, then obviously such an idea is absurd.

Similarly it is also not possible that the law of causation should necessitate one thing and a factor independent to it may nullify its effect.

The fact is that all factors in the world flow from the Knowledge and Will of Allah. Every factor is a manifestation of His Will and Knowledge and an instrument of the implementation of what He has decreed. At the same time every factor which we can think of is subject to the law of causation. It cannot be imagined that a factor which is in itself a manifestation of the Will of Allah and is subject to the law of causation can ever go against what He has obtained.

Hence, a change of destiny in the sense that any factor can go against what has been divinely ordained or what the law of causation necessitates, is impossible.

What Is Possible

But a change in destiny in the sense that the factor bringing about the change should itself be a manifestation of what Allah has decreed, is possible. Though it may look rather queer, it is a fact that the destiny can be changed by another destiny.

It may look more surprising if we think of the divine aspect of fate and destiny, for a change in this aspect implies a change in the celestial world, in the angelic tablets and books and in the Divine Knowledge. So can Allah's Knowledge still undergo a change? The surprise reaches its height when we admit that certain terrestrial affairs, especially human will and actions cause changes in the celestial world and the angelic record.

Is it not a fact that the terrestrial and material system emanates from the celestial system? Is it not a fact that the terrestrial world is inferior and the celestial world is superior? Is it not a fact that the human world is dominated by the angelic world? Is it still possible that a lower system, or at least a part of it, *viz.* the human world should influence a higher system and bring about changes in it, even if these changes also should take place in accordance with an appointed destiny? Here several remarkable questions crop up consecutively. Is the Knowledge of Allah changeable? Is a divine decree revocable? Can an inferior influence a superior?

The answer to these questions is in the affirmative. Yes, the Knowledge of Allah is changeable. In other words Allah has such knowledge also which is changeable. A divine decree is revocable. In other words Allah has decrees which are revocable. An inferior can influence a superior. A lower system, especially the will, desire and human acts can shake the higher world and cause changes in it. This is the highest form of man's control of his destiny.

We admit that this statement is surprising, but it is factual. This is that lofty question of Bada' which for the first time in human history was mentioned by the Qur'an.

“Allah creates whatever He wants (out of what was recorded previously) and records whatever He wants (that was not recorded previously) and with Him alone is the Mother Book”. (Surah al-Ra'd, 13:39)

The doctrine has no precedent in the field of human knowledge. Among the Muslim sects it is only the Twelver Shi'ahs who have been able to derive this truth from the sayings of the Imams of the Ahlul-Bayt and they are proud of this distinction.

We are unable to give a full explanation of this highly philosophical question in this brief book. It is enough to say that the question of Bada' has a Qur'anic basis. It is one of the most subtle philosophical subjects and only very few Shi'ah philosophers well-versed in the Qur'an have been able to reach its depth. They were able to do so in the light of the sayings of the Imams, especially those of Imam Ali (a),

the Commander of the Faithful.

Anyhow, it is obvious that in respect of such a subtle question reliance cannot be placed on the lay man's conception of it, which is nothing but absurd.

For the present we are mainly concerned with the question of the changeability of destiny. We have to see whether it is true that from material angle destinies are revocable and some others irrevocable. If so, how can this phenomenon be explained?

The things existing are of two kinds. Some of them do not have the possibility of having more than one kind of special existence, like the heavenly abstracts. Some others have such a possibility, like all visible and perceptible things. They are composed of some kind of matter and prepare the ground for coming into being of some other things. Natural matter can receive various forms and shapes. It can evolve. It grows, decays and decomposes. It is affected by various factors and under the impact of each one of them its state and quality changes. A seed sown in the soil grows and matures if it meets favorable climatic conditions, receives an appropriate amount of light and heat and is not affected by the pests. But its growth will naturally be hampered, if any of the necessary factors are lacking or the seed itself is damaged in any way. There are thousand and one if's in the case of any way. There are thousand and one if's in the case of any kind of natural matter. If this happens, the result will be that, and if that happens, the result will be something different. In other words, the effect varies as the causes vary.

As the heavenly abstracts do not have more than one kind of existence and are not influenced by divergent causes, their destiny is irrevocable and cannot undergo a change. Destiny is always determined by its causes. As in the case of the abstracts their causes are not changeable, their destiny also does not change. But the case of the non-abstracts is different. They are subject to the law of motion, and have countless forms and colours. They are always at cross-roads and have several possibilities. Hence their destiny is revocable.

In other words, one single destiny does not determine them. As we have said, the destiny of every effect is determined by its cause. As the non-abstracts can have many causes, they can have many destinies also. As each series of their causes is liable to be replaced by another series, their destiny cannot be firm. There will always be a possibility of the change in destiny with the change in the circumstances. If someone falls sick, there is no doubt that his disease is the result of some particular cause, which has brought about this particular destiny. Now suppose he takes some effective medicine. This medicine is another cause. It will produce a different destiny. If with the taking of medicine the disease disappears, that means that the destiny of the patient has changed. Suppose this particular patient is treated by two physicians and their diagnosis and prescription are different. While the treatment diagnosis and prescription are different, the treatment prescribed by one of them has a curative and healing effect, that of the other is lethal. In this case it may be said that two different destinies are in store for this patient, and as he has an option to choose either of the treatments, it may be said that neither of his destinies is irrevocable. Naturally his eventual choice will depend upon so many open and hidden factors. But the

fact that he chooses one particular treatment, does not preclude the latent possibility of the choice of the other.

Hence it is clear that in many cases a number of destinies are operative and they can replace one another if a man suffering from a disease takes a medicine and recovers, he does so in accordance with his fate and destiny. Again if he does not take any medicine and continues to suffer, or takes a harmful medicine and dies, that is also perfectly in accordance with his fate and destiny.

Similarly if a man moves out of an infected area and saves himself from being affected by a disease, that is also owing to his fate and destiny. In short everything is within the purview of destiny and one can never escape it.

The point is that destiny is the source of all factors in the world, but in itself it is not a factor which may bring other factors into play. Every factor which comes into play is a manifestation of destiny and at the same time is subject to the general law of causation. As such, destiny cannot be a factor independent of other factors nor can it force any other factor to act in a particular way.

That is why the theory of predestination, which means compulsion by destiny, is not tenable. As we have said, destiny is the source of all factors, but in itself it is not a factor to bring into play any other factors. Hence, destiny cannot force man to do a thing. There is no doubt that certain manifestation of destiny can be compelling, but that compulsion is totally different from predestination which is supposed to influence human will direct as a negative factor to deter man from doing a thing or as a positive factor to force him to do it. In other words destiny is changeable because it necessitates the existence of a thing through its natural causes, which are manifold. The matter in this world is liable to be influenced by a number of causes simultaneously.

Naturally the position becomes different if like the Ash'arites we hold that causation is a mere illusion, or like the semi-Ash'arities believe that in exceptional circumstances the course of events is directly affected by fate and destiny. But such a fate and such a destiny do not exist, nor can they exist.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/man-and-his-destiny-ayatullah-murtadha-mutahhari/part-5-freedom-and-liberty>