

Free Will

In previous discussions we studied the status of human beings in the Glorious Qur'an. We saw that they are not at the same level. They can be higher than angels and they can be representatives (caliphs) of Allah on earth. They can also go downwards and be lower than animals. It is up to human beings themselves to select their own way of life.

In this part we want to study free will and answer those who believe in determinism. If someone believes in determinism he will lose his hope in a better future and will not try to purify himself. Some criminals or despotic rulers used to justify their crimes and sins by saying that they were determined. So it is necessary to refute determinism as one of the most dangerous obstacles against purity of the soul.

The next step will be to see how we select something and what we should select and what we should observe in our selection or decision. The question that arises is: "Are human beings free to do what the person (or even independent being). Having understood the non-existence of the society, it is obvious that there is no place to claim that some demands of the society determine the behaviour of its members.

Individuals are makers of societies through their free will, just as they make history. It is noteworthy that these individuals are not separated from each other. There is a close relationship between them. There is a strong interaction among them. So if someone wants to adapt his actions and activities to social ideals it will be very easy for him because other members of the society or at least the majority agree with him and they will support him. But if someone wants to change his society, it needs many efforts, constant work.

Even if someone wants to conduct his life in his own way, in spite of others, it will be very difficult, for there are many interactions between individuals in the society. To be religious in a religious society is much easier than in a non-religious society, but it is not necessary. Also, to be a real Muslim in some society which is not committed to Divine morals and values is difficult, but it is not impossible.

According to Islam every person is responsible]e for his actions. On the Day of Judgement no one can say that he was bad because he lived in a bad family or society. But on the other hand all people are

responsible for their societies. No one can say that he had nothing to do with his society. If children are being attracted by enemies or some Muslim youth are imitating Western habits or generally a Western way of life and I can do something about it with my thought or my money or so on, I cannot say: it is none of my business”.

Natural determinism

Some people believe that according to the natural laws not only our body is formed and controlled by nature, but also our thoughts and behaviours are all controlled by nature or natural factors which are not decided or planned by ourselves. These determinists emphasise the effects of climate, environment, food, medicine and inheritance. It is possible to make a person sad or happy with some foods or medicine. If a person's father is an artist, a painter, that person will be an artist as well.

This view is partly true. Natural factors have some effects on our behaviour or actions, but they are not absolute. Finally it is up to a person to decide for himself. Those external factors might make the process of decision-making easier or harder. However, a human being is free. If a person's parents are illiterate, that person will not have to be the same. If the parents are bad, the possibility of him being good is not nil. As we see in history there existed good people amongst bad people and vice versa. Take the example of Noah's son. Although Noah (a.s.), the father, was a prophet of God, his son chose to become a bad and disobedient servant of God. When Noah made the ship and called all the people to board it, his son refused and claimed on the top of a mountain thinking the water would not reach him. Allah says:

“And Noah called out to his son, and he was aloof 0 my son! Embark with us and be not with the unbeliever He said: I will betake myself if for refuge to a mountain that shall protect me from the water Noah said: There is no protector today from Allah’s punishment except for whom He has mercy; and a wave intervened between them, so he was of the drowned.” (11:42–43)

Thus, Islam pays attention to the children's upbringing and training before, during and after birth. All these are taken into account, but their influences are not decisive as free will is preserved.

Religious determinism

There are some sects in Islam and other religions which believe that Allah decides for us and none of us is free to do what he wants.

This belief is mainly due to lack of knowledge. For instance, they say whether a person prays or not, whether he is truthful or not, whether he is an oppressor or not, is all because of Allah's will and human beings have no say or fault in this matter.

This belief was developed by some theists to preserve monotheism. They thought that if we say people

are free in their life, it means that Allah has nothing to do in this part of the world and it is up to human beings to do whatever view monotheism demands the denial of any human role in action. They also misunderstood some verses of the Glorious Qur'an.

This view is completely against Divine justice. It is also against Divine wisdom (hikmah). According to this view sending prophets and inviting people to the religion and Divine commands are useless. If this view were true, then Allah would not have assigned rewards and punishments for our actions.

The evil intentions and politics of some despotic rulers like the Umayyads and Abbasids is another reason for the appearance of this belief in Islamic culture. They spread this belief for their own desires and benefits. They said that Allah had given power to them and no one was able to interfere in His deeds. So no one was allowed to protest against them. If the Ahlul-bayt (people of the household of the Prophet) were not allowed to rule, it was because Allah wanted this, or if Yazid as a ruler did many bad things nobody had a right to say anything. For example, when Imam Husain was martyred, 'Ubayd Allah, the son of Marjanah and the commander of Kufa, took members of the Ahl al-bayt as prisoners.

He said in the great mosque of Kufa: "Praise be to Allah Who has made righteousness successful and has helped the leader of the believers (meaning Yazid) and his followers and killed the liar, the son of the liar." When he took the prisoners to his palace, he addressed Zaynab (a.s.) and said: "Praise be to Allah Who destroyed your respect and killed you and proved that you are liars." Then Zaynab (a.s.) spoke and defeated him. Then he turned his face to Imam Sajjad, the fourth Imam (a.s.), and asked who he was. Some answered: "Ali, the son of Husain."

He said: "Did Allah not kill 'Ali, the son of Husain?" Imam said: "I had a brother who was also called 'Ali, the son of Husain. People killed him." Then 'Ubayd Allah' said: "No, Allah killed him." When Imam disproved his claim he became very angry and commanded his soldiers to cut Imam's neck off, but Zaynab said:

"O son of Ziyad! You did not leave any of our men alive. If you want to kill him, You must kill me with him"

These rulers tried to attribute everything to Allah in a wrong way to conceal their role. There were also some weak and ignorant Muslims who wanted to justify their weak and bad behaviour through determinism and attributing everything to Allah. Praise be to Allah we have today pure Islam and we can easily solve the problem. We know that monotheism does not demand determinism at all.

Now let us quote some Qur'anic verses on this topic.

"Say - O Allah, Master of the kingdom! Thou givest the kingdom to whomsoever Thou pleases and takest away the kingdom from whomsoever Thou pleases, and Thou exalsts whom Thou pleasest and abases whom Thou pleasest; in Thine hand is the good; surely, Thou hast power over all things." (3:26)

This verse has one of the pictures that show monotheism (tawid) very well and it is a must for every Muslim to believe in monotheism in this way (mentioned in the verse). Some people misunderstand or misuse this verse. They say that according to this verse, Allah had given the power of rulership to all despotic rulers. We should know that Allah has two kinds of will (iradah):

Generative : This kind of will is necessary in every thing. If there is something or there is not, it is because of Allah's will. Nothing in the universe is independent from Allah, the Creator. For example, if the weather is hot it is because of Allah's will or if I am alive it is because Allah wants. Every single action in this world is done because of His will. Does this mean Allah is satisfied with all the actions of human beings? No, although Allah's will is in their actions, He has given them free will at the same time to choose the right way. Here comes the second type of Divine will.

Legislative: This is about goodness and badness, about what to do and what not to do. He commands to do good and refrain from bad. So all good actions are done according to this will and all bad actions are done against this will. In order to make this conception clear, let us take the example of Imam Husain (a.s.). Was he killed through Allah's will? The answer is "Yes" and "No": Yes according to the generative will and No according to the legislative will.

As far as the generative will is concerned, nothing can be done without Allah's will. But this does not mean that He is pleased with all actions. This is the point of misunderstanding which leads to determinism. Another example: One father gives some money to his son to buy something and advises him to buy good things like books. The son is not determined to buy. Whatever he buys is according to his father's decision, but if he buys cigarettes he buys against his father's advice. No one can say that this son was independent in his action and also no one can say that this son had to buy cigarettes or he was not responsible arguing from the fact that his father made him able to do that.

Thus, the above verse (3:26) talks about His generative will. It does not mean that Allah is pleased with rulers like Pharaoh or Yazid. Another verse is the following verse which expresses the idea of free will explicitly.

"Surely we have created man from a small life-germ uniting (itself): We mean to try him so We have made him hearing, seeing. Surely We have shown him the way: he may be thankful or unthankful" (76-2,3)

So Allah has shown us the way. It is in our hand to be thankful or not. How can we be thankful? By using His blessings in the right manner and not only by saying thanks be to God. Another verse:

"It is naught but a reminder for the nations, for him among you who pleases to go straight And you donor will, unless God wills, the Lord of all Being."(81:27-29)

Thus the Glorious Qur'an is useful for those who want to go straight. They are free. They just have to take the first step and Allah will help them. But their decision is not independent of Allah's generative will

(to enable them). They will what Allah wills. In the following verse again the doctrine of free will is expressed.

“Most surely there is a reminder in this for him who has a heart or he gives ear with a present mind.” (50:37)

The process of being a faithful person is not a physical or chemical process, but a spiritual one. It does not need material things. It needs attention and consciousness.

Source URL: <https://www.al-islam.org/self-knowledge-mohammad-ali-shomali/free-will>