

## Question 1: Divine Will and Human Will

**Question:** What is the relationship between Divine will and human will?

### Short Answer

The human being is a contingent existent who derives his existence and existential qualities from Allah (awj). Allah (awj) has, by His generative will (*irada takwini*), created him as a volitional creature and has thus distinguished him from all other creatures. Hence, the human being is the highest being addressed by Allah's (awj) legislative will (*irada tashri'i*) and as such, has been given permission to choose between obedience and disobedience, to determine his way of life, and to mould his own fate.

The human being is the chosen creature who is able, by making the right choice, to obey the injunctions of Allah (awj); to ascend the levels of perfection by conforming to the legislative will of Allah (awj), and submitting his desire to the generative will of Allah (awj) thereby reaching the station of Divine regency – that level which in paradise, entitles him to receive whatever he wishes. Because he has chosen Divine satisfaction, Allah (awj) is satisfied with him and will provide for him so profoundly that he will in return be pleased with Him and satisfied with his own conduct.

But the human being can also make the wrong choice by taking up the path of disobedience and aversion to Divine injunctions, descending to the pits of *saqar*. This would be the result of not making his will conform to the legislative will of Allah (awj). However, this disobedience does not signify that he has overcome the Divine will, for the Divinity Himself has willed that he should choose his path.

In other words, Divine will encompasses the entire world of existence – including the human being and his actions – and as such, transcends the human will, hierarchically. This is not the same as the concurrence of two independent, complete, and parallel causes in generating a single effect, which is impossible. Rather, in accordance with the principle of “unity of Divine Acts”, the only independent agent in the cosmos is Allah (awj), and thus all other existents are dependent on Allah (awj) in their existence and their agency.

Thus, their will, which is an aspect of their agency, is not independent or detached of the Divine will.

Therefore, we [as *Shi'ites*] neither approve of determinism as the *Ash'arites* do – who believe that the only will at work is the Divine will, thus considering all other agents sterile and merely tools for Allah (awj). Neither do we accept the concept of delegation which is held by the *Mu'tazilites*, who assume that Divine will should be abstracted from human will, thereby considering the human being a sovereign agent in his volitional acts.

Rather, we, in following the teachings of the Qur`an and the infallible Imams (ع), consider the human being to be a willing and volitional agent, but at the same time we know him to be under the dominion of Divine will and governed by the authority of Allah (awj) – being essentially in need of the will and power of Allah (awj).

## Detailed Answer

Human will is vertically inferior to Divine will and as such is dependent on Divine will and cannot exist independently and without need of Allah (awj). This is confirmed by many Qur`anic verses, among them the following:

***“...but you do not wish unless it is wished by Allah, the Lord of all the worlds.”*** <sup>1</sup>

But this in no way contradicts the human being's volition and his accountability for his thoughts, intentions, and actions. For it is he who is the direct agent of his will, choice, and conduct, but this is possible only through the power and permission that Allah (awj) has granted him in making his choices.

Thus, in many verses [seemingly contradicting the aforementioned verse which reserves authority solely for Allah (awj)] the actions of natural agents, including human beings, are attributed to themselves, thereby considering the human being responsible for his own conduct. And it is in this light that the Qur`an establishes certain responsibilities for him, giving him various encouragements and warnings. Two such verses read:

***“...and that nothing belongs to man except what he strives for”***<sup>2</sup>;

***“Whoever acts righteously, it is for his own soul, and whoever does evil, it is to its detriment, and your Lord is not tyrannical to the servants.”***<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, on the one hand, the issue concerns the assumption that the human being's independence is in contrast to the principle of unity of Divine Acts and also to the essential need of existents for Allah (awj). On the other hand, there is the supposition that the human being is totally predetermined and hence powerless, undermining the rationale for all Divine injunctions, encouragements, warnings, and consequently negating Divine justice and wisdom. Hence, the seemingly contradictory verses of the Qur`an must be reconciled by realising that some of those verses merely clarify the meaning of the others (and do not contradict them) so that we are able to avoid being entrapped by either determinism or delegationism.

For a better understanding of this matter, attention must be paid to two points:

1. The different ways in which various causes concur in creating an effect;
2. The various ways in which the Divine will can be conceived of.

The concurrence of causes in generating an effect can transpire in two ways:

1. One possibility is that in the occurrence of a phenomenon only one cause is responsible; such as the Divine Act of creation in which Allah (awj) produces directly and without the mediation of any other existent, or like the dependency of human conceptions on the mind [in which case, it is solely the mind that generates the mental concepts and images without the mediation of any other agent].

2. The other possibility is that several causes are responsible in the creation of a phenomenon. This possibility can itself be conceived in several ways:

- a. The various causes are responsible in a collective manner. In this case, each cause is referred to in technical terms as an “incomplete cause” and all of them considered collectively are referred to as the “complete cause.” An example is the interaction of water, light, heat, seed, soil, farmer’s work, etc. in the growth of a plant. In this case, not only is the concurrence of multiple causes not impossible, it is a necessary prerequisite for the production of the effect.

- b. The various causes are responsible in an alternating manner. Such as if a certain machine had three motors, but they had to operate one at a time, hence one motor would come into operation only after the previous one had stopped, thereby providing the machine with a constant and uninterrupted movement. [Hence, the constant motion being the effect of three alternating causes.] In this case also, the cooperation and combination of all the causes is necessary for sustaining the effect. However, in this case, there is no particular dependency between the causes as there is in the third case.

- c. Certain causes are dependent on other ones in efficacy but without such a dependency in their existences such as the roles that human volition, the motion of the hand, etc. play in producing writing [in which case the will to write propels the hand into motion, which in turn moves the pen, and which in turn makes ink marks on the paper that constitute the writing] or such as the soldier’s obeying his superior [in which case, the soldier’s will to perform a certain action depends on the superior giving an order but the soldier’s existence itself does not depend on the superior’s existence].

- d. Two sets of causes are at work in generating one effect in the same mode (*haythiyyah*) and from the same aspect (*jahah*)—which is technically referred to as “the concurrence of two complete causes in generating one effect.” An example of this would be a single piece of writing on one specific corner of a sheet of paper, written by two writers writing simultaneously.

Or if one particular plant were to grow by the work of two [distinct and independent] groups of causes—e.g. soil, farmer, seed, etc.—simultaneously. In this case, “mutual exclusion” would result, and

thus [the actualization of] this case is impossible.

For, the agency [i.e. the work, the acting] of each set would bar the agency of the other set, resulting in either one rendering the other ineffective (which would mean that two complete causes have not actually concurred and only one has produced the effect unilaterally) or both mutually hindering the agency of one another (which would mean that neither of the complete causes has been actualized so as to take part in creating an effect). Therefore, as this case is impossible, there is no actual instance of it.

e. Several sets of causes, vertically associated, generate a single effect, in such a manner that the inferior cause is dependent upon the superior in its existence as well as in its agency [or efficacy]; such as, the relation between the grandparents and the parents in the procreation of the latter's children.

Considering the above-mentioned classification, it must be clarified under which of the aforementioned categories the concurrence of Divine causation, agency, and will with those of His creatures—including human beings—falls.

If this concurrence were of the first, second, or third types, the result would be the existential independence of the human being and the rest of the creatures from Allah (awj), which would contradict the unity of the Divine Acts. Thus on careful examination, the possibility of such instances would prove unacceptable. It cannot be of the fourth category either, as this does not have any occurrence in reality. Furthermore, it is erroneous to consider the concurrence of human will with Divine will impossible as the human being would not even exist without his connection to Allah (awj), and thus his complete agency as parallel to Allah (awj) is not possible<sup>4</sup> so to give rise to the potentiality of parallel and simultaneous concurrence in generating one effect.<sup>5</sup>

Thus the only category plausible is the last one; that is, the human will and agency being vertically inferior to Divine will and agency.

However to understand how the concurrence of Divine and human will in such a vertical manner does not contradict man's free will, attention must be paid to the different types of Divine will.

In a general classification, Divine will is understood in two ways:

1. The will of essence;
2. The will of action.

The latter is subdivided into the generative will and the legislative will.

The Will of Essence: It is the Divine will that is assigned to Him without the need to consider the creatures or Allah's (awj) relation to them. Hence, it is identical with the Divine Essence and is the necessary requirement of Divine volition, of His not being restrained by any other agent, of His not being overpowered by anything, and of His needlessness in relation to all creatures. The human being and his

relation to Allah (awj) have no role in this sense of Divine will.

The Generative Will of Action: This is Allah's (awj) will in establishing the objective destiny and portion; that is, it pertains to the systems governing the cosmos, how things come about and operate, and their certain and definite ends. This is manifested in the creation of creatures in different shapes, different ways, and in different times.

In the world of being, the Divine generative will governs the entire corpus of existents, including human beings, and as such, no creature has the will or choice to violate it, as is pointed out in the following verses:

***“Then He turned to the heaven, and it was smoke, and He said to it and to the Earth, ‘Come! Willingly or unwillingly!’ They said, ‘We come heartily.’”***<sup>6</sup>;

and,

***“There is none in the heavens and the earth but he comes to the All-beneficent as a servant.”***<sup>7</sup>

The human being has been created as a willing and volitional creature based on the Divine generative will of action and thus cannot divest himself of free choice and will. So whether he likes it or not, he must act on his own accord, choose the path he desires to follow and determine his own fate. He has no choice in being a volitional creature, just as he has no say in choosing his parents, his gender, or his appearance.

The Legislative Will of Action. This will is identical with Divine legislation for the willing and volitional human being.<sup>8</sup> In the very act of lawmaking for humanity, no one can share the authority with Allah (awj) and no one is capable of changing the laws before they reach the people.

Therefore, the angels, prophets, and successors to the prophets are duty bound to convey to the people the exact rules revealed to them without the slightest change and to interpret and clarify them only in the framework designated by Allah (awj). It is in the stage of implementing these injunctions that the human being has been given the capacity to obey or disobey [on his own accord].

Hence, by making the right decision, the human being can conform his will to the will of Allah (awj), the Supreme, and being satisfied with the Divine generative will, can decide to abide unconditionally by the Divine legislative will thereby securing his final felicity and meriting the leisure and serenity of Paradise—to such an extent that Allah (awj) will satisfy his wishes, whatever they may be, very quickly;

***“...but those who have faith and do righteous deeds will be in the gardens of paradise: they will have whatever they wish near their Lord. This is the greatest grace.”***<sup>9</sup>

As they preferred Divine satisfaction over their own, Allah (awj) will in return be pleased with them and will reward them so abundantly that they would be happy with what they have done and with their

Lord. 10

Therefore, the human being can, on his own accord, will that which Allah (awj) wills and be satisfied with Allah's (awj) existential and legislative satisfaction—refusing to want or to seek anything but that which Allah (awj) wants from him and that which He pleases.<sup>11</sup> In so doing, the human being has willed in accordance to the Divine generative and legislative wills, although the human will and potency themselves have been bestowed to the human being by this same Divine generative will, and as such his existence and will is an extension of the will and existence of Allah (awj). This concurrence entails no contradiction and thus is not impossible for it is not the concurrence of two complete causes in the generation of one effect.

At the same time, the human will and volition has not been denied to him. Rather, because Allah (awj) has given him the permission to will and choose, he determines what path he wants to follow and in doing so ends up willing what Allah (awj) has willed.

If the human being disobeys and violates the legislative will of Allah (awj), doing what Allah (awj) dislikes, he has done so on his own accord and as such, has headed towards an awful fate. But this disobedience is not a violation of Allah's (awj) generative will, for He has, through His own generative will, created the human being willing and volitional, and as such has given him the capacity to defy His legislative will. Accordingly, this defiance does not signify the human being's overcoming the will and power of Allah (awj). He can deprive the hopeless human being of his will and power whenever He desires and it is concerning this that He says,

***“Do those who commit misdeeds suppose that they can out-manoeuvre Us? Evil is the judgment that they make.”***<sup>12</sup>

To sum up: In the realm of generative will and the act of Divine legislation itself, the human will cannot exert any influence whatsoever, and hence the question of the concurrence of Divine will and human will does not arise at this stage.

When it comes to the level of abiding by the legislative will, the human will is ontologically an extension of Divine will. If he obeys the Divine injunctions, he has on his own accord aligned his desire to what Allah (awj) desires and as such, is pleased with the Divine generative will, and with this correct decision, has secured a felicitous end for himself. If he disobeys, if he does not make Allah's (awj) desire his own desire, he has acted only to his own disadvantage, without in any way damaging the creation or harming Allah (awj) for Allah (awj) has through His generative will, granted him the capacity to defy and disobey but has at the same time, through His legislative will, warned him of the consequences.

Thus by making the wrong decision of disobeying Allah (awj), he has incurred Allah's (awj) wrath. Although, he might arrogantly think that in doing so he has overcome Allah's (awj) will, the reality of the matter is that the creature can never, even while disobeying, escape the Divine domain, power, and will. The creature is always in need of that Most Sacred Essence.

It is to this that the following verse speaks:

**“Whatever good befalls you is from Allah; and whatever ill befalls you is from yourself.”**<sup>13</sup>

Although in essence, everything is from Allah (awj) for nothing can occur without His consent, but the issue is that He does not deem misdeeds and evil appropriate for the human being, and it is the human being himself who, in misusing his free will, chooses evil.<sup>14</sup>

However we do admit that to conceive and comprehend the relationship of human volition to Divine will—i.e. the immutable cosmological system— is difficult. It is precisely for this reason that those who are not in touch with Divine revelation and the school of Ahlul Bayt (ع) have strayed to antipodal extremes in this regard.

One group, the Mu'tazilites, concluded that the human being has been granted absolute autonomy, and as such is the only agent involved in his actions—and for this they have been termed *The Delegates*<sup>15</sup>; another group, the Ash'arites, saw the human being as lacking any role in conducting his actions, hence being compelled in his actions, without free will and the right to choose— and for this they have been termed *The Compelled Ones*. But the truth and the right path is the intermediate path, that is, neither the theory of compulsion nor delegation.

The generative will of Allah (awj) concurs with human will in a vertical manner. If the human being obeys, the Divine legislative will and the human will are in harmony, but if he disobeys, his will and action are despised by Allah (awj). But the latter does not imply liberation from Divine dominion and sovereignty or the overcoming of the will and power of Allah (awj). Such disobedience only signifies being removed from Divine mercy as a result of the individual's own misuse of volition and free will.

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1. Surat al-Takwir (81), Verse 29:

﴿ وَمَا تَشَاءُونَ إِلَّا أَنْ يَشَاءَ اللَّهُ رَبُّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴾

also see Surat al-Insan (76), Verses 30–31:

﴿ وَمَا تَشَاءُونَ إِلَّا أَنْ يَشَاءَ اللَّهُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمًا. يُدْخِلُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ فِي رَحْمَتِهِ وَالظَّالِمِينَ أَعَدَّ لَهُمْ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴾

2. Surat al-Najm (53), Verse 39:

﴿ وَأَنْ لَيْسَ لِلْإِنْسَانِ إِلَّا مَا سَعَى ﴾

3. Surat al-Fussilat (41), Verse 46:

﴿ مَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلِنَفْسِهِ وَمَنْ أَسَاءَ فَعَلَيْهَا وَمَا رَبُّكَ بِظَلَّامٍ لِلْعَبِيدِ ﴾

4. For this would mean that the human being is independent of Allah (awj) in his existence. (Tr.)

5. The reason why this is being said here is that those who have refuted the concurrence of Divine will with human will have first assumed that the only manner in which two causes can concur is if they were parallel in their agency and causation. And because this type of concurrence is obviously impossible, they concluded that the human being is independent in his will. While their mistake stems from their lack of conceiving two or more causes related in a vertical and hierarchical manner; i.e. cause B receiving its existence and efficacy from cause A; and cause C in turn receiving its existence and efficacy from cause B, and so on. (Tr.)

6. Surat al-Fussilat (41), Verse 11:

﴿ ثُمَّ اسْتَوَىٰ إِلَى السَّمَاءِ وَهِيَ دُخَانٌ فَقَالَ لَهَا وَلِلْأَرْضِ ائْتِيَا طَوْعًا أَوْ كَرْهًا قَالَتَا أَتَيْنَا طَائِعِينَ ﴾

7. Surat Maryam (19), Verse 93:

﴿إِنَّ كُلَّ مَنْ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ إِلَّا آتِيَ الرَّحْمَنِ عَبْدًا﴾

8. That is, this concept is abstracted from the act of legislation itself and externally has no instance but the legislation itself. However, the human mind abstracts it from the concept of legislation itself and treats it as a different entity, although externally both concepts refer to the same thing. (Tr.)

9. Surat al-Shura (42), Verse 22:

﴿وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ فِي رَوْضَاتِ الْجَنَّاتِ لَهُمْ مَا يَشَاءُونَ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ ذَلِكَ هُوَ الْفَضْلُ الْكَبِيرُ﴾

Also see: Surat Qaf (50), Verse 35; Surat al-Nahl (16), Verse 31; Surat al-Zumar (39), Verse 34; Surat al-Furqan (25), Verse 16

10. Surat al-Bayyinah (98), Verse 8:

﴿جَزَاؤُهُمْ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ جَنَّاتٌ عَدْنٌ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا أَبَدًا رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ وَرَضُوا عَنْهُ ذَلِكَ لِمَنْ خَشِيَ رَبَّهُ﴾

Also see: Surat al-Mujadalah (58), Verse 22; Surat al-Tawbah (9), Verse 100; Surat al-Ma'idah (5), Verse 119

11. Surat al-Insan (76), Verse 30; Surat al-Takwir (81), Verse 29:

﴿وَمَا تَشَاءُونَ إِلَّا أَنْ يَشَاءَ اللَّهُ﴾

12. Surat al-Ankabut (29), Verse 4:

﴿أَمْ حَسِبَ الَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ السَّيِّئَاتِ أَنْ يَسْبِقُونَا سَاءَ مَا يَحْكُمُونَ﴾

Also see: Surat al-Zumar (39), Verse 51:

﴿فَأَصَابَهُمْ سَيِّئَاتُ مَا كَسَبُوا وَالَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا مِنْ هَؤُلَاءِ سَيُصِيبُهُمْ سَيِّئَاتُ مَا كَسَبُوا وَمَا هُمْ بِمُعْجِزِينَ﴾

13. Surat al-Nisa` (4), Verse 79:

﴿... مَا أَصَابَكَ مِنْ حَسَنَةٍ فَمِنَ اللَّهِ وَمَا أَصَابَكَ مِنْ سَيِّئَةٍ فَمِنْ نَفْسِكَ﴾

14. Surat al-Nisa` (4), Verses 78–79:

﴿وَإِنْ تُصِيبُهُمْ حَسَنَةٌ يَقُولُوا هَذِهِ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ وَإِنْ تُصِيبُهُمْ سَيِّئَةٌ يَقُولُوا هَذِهِ مِنْ عِنْدِكَ قُلْ كُلٌّ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ ... مَا أَصَابَكَ مِنْ حَسَنَةٍ فَمِنَ اللَّهِ وَمَا أَصَابَكَ ...﴾  
﴿... مِنْ سَيِّئَةٍ فَمِنْ نَفْسِكَ﴾

15. The name arises from the fact that they assume that Allah (awj) has delegated His authority to the human being in the realm of his volitional actions and so He does not take part in human actions. (Tr.)

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