

Background article: Beliefs, Power, freedom and destiny

Power

Sometimes we speak as though there were two things: ‘the power of good’ and ‘the power of evil’. We might even imagine two heaps of power, one good and one bad, with God sitting on top of the good one and the devil sitting on the bad one. In this model, the whole of existence is a ‘snowball fight’ between the two heaps of power, but, as you might imagine, God’s heap of good power is bigger than the devil’s heap of bad power and so, in the end, God wins! This is not the way in which Islam understands the question of power.

In Islamic understanding, God is all-powerful and the source of all power within the creation. There is therefore no power except God’s power. This means that the power that human beings use to do both good and bad deeds is ultimately God’s power. Our good deeds are done in obedience to God, but we have also the ability to rebel and abuse God’s power and so do bad deeds with it. This is the great gift to human beings and one of our dignities – to be free to obey or to disobey God.

Freedom and destiny

The question of human freedom is not simple. If we were to stop people in the street and ask: What does it mean to be free? We might receive an answer something like, “I am free to do whatever I want. No-one tells me what to do!” Technically, we would call this value-free freedom. If I have two identical exercise books, one with a red cover and one with a blue, and give my daughter the choice between them, then this choice is value-free; whichever choice she makes will have an equally good outcome. If I were to say to her older sister, “You are free to choose whether you drive on the left, or the right side of the road,” we can see that the consequences of this choice are not the same – the wrong choice here could see her killed in an accident. This would be a value-laden choice; she is still free to choose, but I want her to make the right choice and attain the right outcome!

In Islamic understanding, the moral choices that we make are value-laden. God has given human beings guidance on how human life should be lived and we have been given freedom to choose the right path, which will lead to human flourishing. This would be freely choosing to live in accordance with the revealed ethical will of God, which will lead us towards being fully human. A wrong choice here also has consequences [Q. 18:29]. We need to ask, “What kind of a being is God?” God is defined as being purely good; there is no evil in God. God never wills a bad outcome for any creature. If one freely follows the guidance of God and obeys God’s commands and observes God’s prohibitions, the outcome will be good. Even though it may not seem it at the time! Living in obedience to God does not guarantee that this life will be ‘a bed of roses’. A key Muslim virtue is patience, or *sabr*, which includes the willingness to persevere on the right course, even though we do not see the desired

outcome. It may be that only when we look back from God's perspective that we can fully comprehend the good path that we have chosen.

How free are we really? Muslim scholars have given a whole range of answers to this question. Indeed, as on many questions, there is a spectrum of positions that have been taken by different Muslim scholars and schools of Islam. Let's explore such a spectrum on the question of freewill.

There were some people who said that human beings have complete freedom and are accountable for their actions, which will be judged by the justice of God alone. They argued that, if God is merciful to the person who makes a wrong choice and sins, then God would be acting unjustly with regard to the person who made the right choice and avoided sin even though they were tempted. At the extreme end of this spectrum, some said that God must judge by justice alone. This leaves no room for mercy and means that human beings receive exactly the outcomes that they earn. The majority of Muslim scholars said that this was going too far as it allows no room for God's mercy. One of the principal names for God in the Qur'an is "the All-merciful." The Muslim spectrum on freewill must end short of this extreme position.

At the other end of the discussion, there were those people who said that human beings have no freedom at all and that we just play out the part that has been written for us, as though in a play. At the extreme end of this spectrum, there were those who said that God compels our actions. If this were so, then how could God hold human beings to account? We would have no moral responsibility. The Muslim spectrum on freewill must end short of this extreme position too.

The spectrum can be seen to lie between these two extremes. Some Muslim scholars emphasise the pre-determined nature of human freedom, but would say that nothing is written for us until we write it ourselves. Other Muslim scholars emphasise the wide range of possibilities open to human freedom, but without taking anything away from the all-powerful nature of God. Sunni scholars can be found at a wide range of points across this whole spectrum. Mainline Shi'a scholars stress the freedom and accountability of human beings, but make a distinction between the rewards that God *promises* for those who commit good acts, and the punishments that God *threatens* for those who commit bad acts. The justice of God demands that God keeps *promises*, and so obedient people can rely on the rewards. At the same time, God is at liberty, through the mercy of God that overwhelms God's wrath, to exercise that mercy and not carry out what was *threatened* as punishment for wrong-doing.

Why take the risk?

The nature of giving human beings a degree of freewill means that we have the capacity to rebel and choose not to live by the ethical values contained in God's guidance. Would it not be easier to programme us like the daffodils and sunflowers, which naturally turn towards the sun, so that we automatically do what God wants? In Islamic understanding, angels do not have freewill. God has all the angels that God

wants in heaven constantly worshipping God [Q. 39:75]. They have no choice in the matter; we can say that they are programmed to do it. In creating human beings with freewill, God wants that we should freely choose to worship and obey God – that worship and obedience should be freely chosen and not programmed.

Perhaps this example will make it clearer. We have a washing machine at home. We fill it with clothes and turn it on. The rest is automatic. It does not choose whether to obey or not. It just does what it is programmed to do. I don't feel the need to thank it! Now one day it breaks down and the washing begins to pile up. I get up before anyone else on Saturday morning and steadily work my way through the pile, washing things by hand. I know that my wife has had a hard week at work and want to save her the time and effort. My action is a free one based on love and concern for someone else. I have done what no machine can do; that is a free act. We can see that the quality of a free act is quite different to that of a programmed act. What God wants is the worship of a free being motivated by love.

Two high dignities

God has given every human being two high dignities and also responsibilities. These are summed up in two Arabic words: *abd* and *khalifa*. We can translate these as the 'loving servant' and the 'regent' of God. The regent is one sent in the place of God to cherish the creation according to God's guidance. To be an *abd* is to be a loving servant of God. Service without love in Muslim understanding is forced, de-humanising slavery. Love without the discipline of service leads to chaos. The servant obeys the master's will and lives according to God's commands. The servant seeks to attune his or her will completely to accept the divine will in all things. Four things go together in Islamic thinking: worship, obedience, service and love.

In the Qur'an we read that God created human beings for no other reason than that we should worship God [Q. 51:56]. If we want to worship God, then we must obey all God's commands and keep clear of those things that God forbids. This will lead us to a life of service – to serve God and our fellow human beings. Muhammad tells us that "you have not put your foot on the first step of the ladder of faith until you wish for your neighbour all the good that you wish for yourself." We must learn to serve our families and take care of our neighbours. We must also serve our own selves by not doing anything that will harm us. Suicide is forbidden in Islam as by committing suicide we take to ourselves the right of God to decide when we should die [Q. 4:29-30]. Alcohol and drugs are forbidden as they ruin us physically and mentally. All life is of the highest value in the sight of God. As the Qur'an puts it [Q. 5:32]: to take a life unjustly is like killing all humankind and to save a life is like saving all humankind.

The motive for all human actions should be love. We have a saying summarising this that is attributed to Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad:

Some worship God out of fear, that is the slaves' worship.

Some worship God for reward, that is the businessmen's worship.

And some worship him out of love for him, that is the worship of freemen.

A similar sentiment was expressed by Rabi'a of Basra, an 8th century woman mystic:

O God, if I obey you out of fear of hell, send me there as I am unworthy of you.

O God, if I obey you out of hope of the reward of heaven, deny it to me as I am unworthy of you.

But, O God, if I obey you out of pure love for you alone, then hide not your face, for you are a loving God.

Power and freedom

Let us combine together two elements. First, God is all-powerful and there is no other source of power except God, which means that the power that human beings use to do good and bad is God's power, rightly or wrongly used. Second, human beings possess freewill to choose how they use God's power and must accept the consequences of their actions; they cannot blame God for what they do. Now add to them a third element: no-one can force God to do anything that God does not will. This means that every action that we do is by the will and power of God – but it may not be according to the way that God wishes us to use that power.

Philosophically, we might speak here of primary and secondary causality. Primary causality is *that* something is done, and secondary causality is *how* something is done. Therefore we can say that primary causality belongs to God: *that* I exist, *that* I have the ability to use the power of God, *that* I do an action, whether it is good or bad. I would have no power at all were it not the power of God. Secondary causality belongs to the human being: *how* the power of God is used. We can say that the power to do the act has been transferred from God to me and thus I am responsible for the use of that power. If you lend me your car and give me the keys, primary causality belongs to you (*that* I drive the car). As soon as I take the keys and begin to drive, secondary causality belongs to me (*how* I drive the car). If there is an accident, I am in court and not you!

Let us explore this with another example. Imagine a parent teaching a child how to swim so that the child can safely navigate the waters of life. The parent gives guidance also on where to swim and which places to avoid. If the child obeys the guidance, then dangers will be avoided. On the other hand, if the child rebels and disobeys the guidance, then the gift of learning how to swim can be abused by swimming in dangerous waters with disastrous consequences. The human being has been given the power to act and all the guidance necessary to avoid disaster and thus to flourish, but with freedom comes the possibility to rebel and thus bad outcomes are the responsibility of the individual. Good gifts can be used for bad ends, but the gifts and the intention of the giver remain good.

Held to account

God has given us great responsibility and made us free so that we can freely choose to obey God's guidance. With responsibility comes accountability. It is only reasonable that God will hold us to account for our lives. Every human being will face the Day of Judgement [Q. 6:21-31]. We will be questioned and judged according to the way that we have lived. The Qur'an records an assembly of all the pre-embodied human souls before they were sent to the earth. God asked them: "Am I not your Lord?" They responded, "Yes indeed!" [Q. 7:172]. From this, Muslim scholars deduce that every human being has a natural ability, based on reason, to know that we are all creatures of God and in a relationship of service and obedience. In addition to this, none of the peoples of the earth has been left without the guidance of revelation and at least one prophet. We will all be judged then, according to what we know and the way that we have followed what we know to be right.

Some people on earth have never even heard of the guidance of the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad. They cannot be judged on what they do not know, but they have all received guidance at some time and so will be judged according to the way that they have followed what they do know. There is a difference between ignorance and rejection of something; those who know and reject the guidance of God must expect to face the consequences on the Day of Judgement. On that awesome day, God alone is the judge. God alone knows the human heart and the inner intentions of each one of us. No human being is capable of standing in ultimate judgement on another human being. Following on from that judgement comes the life hereafter, which can be lived in Paradise and drawing ever closer through wisdom and purity to the infinite being of God, or hell and the torments of those who have knowingly rejected God's guidance and been judged worthy of hell by God.