

Are we “born to be free”?

هل ولدنا لنكون أحراراً؟

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“Freewill is the most difficult of God’s gifts to understand or appreciate. The person who gives up selfish freedom and agrees to be God’s servant will always be truly free.”

Freedom is one of the most valuable things there is, although many of us have no idea how precious it is until we suffer the loss of it. It is considered to be one of the basic human rights, and to attempt to withhold that right without very just cause is a most serious sin. We all like to think that we are free, and that we have freewill when making our choices in life - but let us think for a moment about the realities of the situation. Are we really born to be free? And if, in what ways? What does this mean for us?

For a start, the amount of freedom we actually have is much more limited than we perhaps realize. Let’s start with simple examples that we can all understand, things that concern our physical bodies. How much freedom do we have over yawning, or sneezing, or sweating, or bleeding, or breathing, or digesting, or excreting? How much freedom do we have over whether we can see, or hear, or feel, or get our muscles and limbs to work? I used to be able to run a bus and climb mountains - but no matter how much I insist I am free to do that now, I cannot do it. I cannot

even choose to stand up; if I have been typing for a long time my legs get so stiff I just can't do it. I have absolutely no control over what is going on inside my body - I have no idea how my kidneys extract waste matter, or how they can know what is needed and what is to be got rid of. I have no idea what makes my heart beat, or when it will stop. I cannot choose whether I salivate, urinate, coagulate, replicate, deteriorate or disintegrate!

And consider the people I am related to. I had no freedom to choose my parents or grandparents, or brothers and sisters. I could not choose my genetic make-up. I tried to choose when my own children would be born, but this did not work out as I expected. And I had no idea of what sex my children would be, or what they would be like. Some people believe that it is only a matter of time before we will be able to fiddle about with genetics to produce children to order, but then - of course - the little person produced will have had no freedom whatsoever about what he or she will be physically. So, when you consider all this - it doesn't really seem as if human beings have very much freedom at all, does it?

And yet, belief in the freedom of the human spirit is one of the key things God has revealed down the ages. In Islam, we are taught that it was something God granted to human beings which He did not grant to angels. We may not be able to choose what we are physically, but we have to choose what we will do as regards our soul-activity. We are requested by God to take control of our selves, and make particular choices and act in particular ways - but He never forces us. We do not even have to believe in Him, and we may choose to ignore Him or disobey Him. Millions of people do.

As it happens, we are not programmed robots. We do not react in the same way to given situations; some of us are much more unselfish, generous, forgiving, helpful and able to cope than others. But we don't have to be. If we see an old lady struggling up the road carrying heavy parcels, we can choose whether to go to help her, knock her down and steal her parcels, ignore her, or shout

rude names at her and run away. This leads on to an interesting thought. We can entertain ourselves by guessing what any particular individual might do to the old lady with the parcels. But we all have a feeling of 'ought'; we think we know what course of action the good person, the religion person, the person of conscience, ought to take.

Whenever we say that a person ought to do something, we assume that the person is actually free and able to do it. It is quite pointless to say that someone ought to help her, for example, if that person is locked up in jail, or unconscious, or living in a distant country. 'Ought' implies 'can'. Now, if God can do anything He wants, then it would obviously be perfectly possible for Him to control our minds and our choices. This is a matter that is within the capabilities of human beings themselves, and it would be only too easy for God. However, the very fact that He allows people to choose not to believe in Him and not to do what He wants, demonstrates conclusively that God does not robotize peoples' minds.

Each of the prophets, including Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, taught that what people chose to do with respect to belief in God and obedience to His will made a very great difference to the final outcome of their affairs. Humans have a tremendous ability to love and be kind, or to hate and be destructive. This means that although they may have all been born with souls of equal worth, they do not remain equal. Freewill is actually the most difficult of God's gifts to understand or appreciate. The point of freewill is to make sense of human morality - without it there is no such thing as good or evil conduct, for we should simply be automatons.

If we cannot make real free choices then judgment cannot apply to us - it would be totally against justice. Whenever people are not free to make choices, then they cannot be held responsible. Aishah recorded that the Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, made it clear that those whose freedom or

intellect was limited - for example, those too young or too ignorant, or whose balance of mind was disturbed - could not be held morally responsible for their actions, either in a shari'ah court of law, (or a UK court, for that matter), or in the judgment to come.

So, what about the Muslim concept of *al-Qadr*, the key doctrine of God's complete and final control over the fulfillment of events, or Destiny? How does one balance the idea of God knowing absolutely everything with the idea of freewill? If God knows in advance everything that will happen, then surely a person's life must be entirely predestined? Furthermore, if God does not intervene to stop particular things happening, then one can say that He alone is responsible for them. This is linked to the problem of evil. Who is responsible for evil, if God is ultimately responsible for everything? A thief might plead innocence, because he was surely predestined to steal, and therefore how can it be his fault?

Many people think that all Muslims are fatalists, who believe that since 'everything is written', and that God knows everything in advance - therefore it must all be predetermined. No human brain has actually been able to untangle this problem totally - certainly not mine - but the whole business of God sending Messengers with revelations surely indicates that humans are expected to listen, and then make choices, and then adjust their lives accordingly (Quran 6:91; 23:73). God in fact revealed:

"Truly, God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves." (Quran 13:11)

This certainly seems to indicate that humans have the power to change through their own freewill, and these decisions alter their fates. It must be true that God does know everything and every possibility, but humans do not. Therefore, if a human chooses a particular thing, there will be a particular outcome leading to a particular conclusion. If the human chooses a different course of

action, then the outcome and conclusion will be different. If you choose to swallow a whole bottle of painkilling tablets, you will die this afternoon; but if you choose to swallow only two, it may cure your migraine and you may live to be a hundred. God, knows all the possible outcomes but He leaves the choice to you. We cant understand it, but God can - His 'intelligence' is millions of times greater and totally different from ours.

The real truth lies in the realm of *al-Ghayb* [matters which lie beyond human perception]. All that believers can do is to ask for guidance along our path of life. We may not be able to see the road way into the distance, but we can pray that God will show us the next step, one step at a time. If it were impossible for people to choose because their futures and destinies were already fixed, not only would God be unfair instead of just, but there would also seem to be very little point in us even trying to live good lives. Fatalism leads to despair and helplessness, defeatism, and hindering people from making any effort to improve either their own lot or the lot of those around them.

What does God want for us? He wants us to achieve happiness and success. He wants us to find true freedom. If true freedom brings happiness, then it seems things are not quite as many folks think. I might be very happy to be free to have a relationship with a different partner every week, or to stuff myself with tasty but unhealthy food, or to spend a fortune on clothing or jewelry or pop CDs, or to smoke, or stay out late worrying my parents, or avoid chores or homework, or have a laugh at my enemies, or earn lots of money perhaps dishonestly, or be famous and admired by lots of people. Surely these are the things that make people happy?

How simple it would be if that were so. It's so easy for Satan to fool people - the way that leads to destruction is so tempting and enjoyable. But stop and think. Many of the richest and most powerful people in the world are the loneliest. People who stuff themselves get all the problems and misery of being overweight. Those who are lazy and avoid learning and training in their youth

wake up to the realities of failed lives later on. Smokers puffing away contentedly behind the bike-sheds will die young of cancer or heart failure - to the great grief of those who love them. People who are promiscuous usually end up with heartbreak for themselves and the children they later neglect, abandon (usually the young fathers) or kill in abortion (the young mothers).

True happiness is to look after that which God has loaned to us and entrusted to our safe-keeping for such a brief time - our bodies, our families, our talents, our sensitivity towards others. This means not being free to give in to our lusts and desires, the things we know very well will hurt us and others in due course. But here's the odd thing - the person who gives up that kind of selfish freedom and agrees to be God's servant will always be truly free. They will know that they have done their best; their consciences will be clear, their inner persons confident and full of hope, and they will never be slaves to their own selves, or to any other person or thing.