

UNDERSTANDING FREE WILL FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF PHILOSOPHY, NEUROSCIENCE, AND ISLAM

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Abstract

The concept of free will is a subject of debate for centuries among philosophers, scientific community and religious scholars. Some people say free will is not possible, while others say it is possible. Those who oppose the existence of free will, say how can free will be possible in a deterministic physical environment? Determinism is a principle that everything happening in the Cosmos, including human actions, depend upon cause-and-effect. Those who say it is possible, argue that free will is compatible with determinism and there is no logical conflict between the two. Therefore, Free will is possible. Currently, this problem is addressed by neuroscience in which it is claimed that there is a correlation between free will and brain function. The will of a person is dependent upon certain unconscious intentions taking place in the brain that result in human actions. They say, there is a build-up of activity in the brain that results in spontaneous voluntary movements (SVM). This neuroscience perspective of free will is closer to the 'instinctive and common-sense' perspective of philosophy. In addition, every religion in the world has a viewpoint as regards to free will. In this paper we have explained Islamic point of view about free will. All related issues have been discussed in this paper in order to reach to some new findings in this context.

Keywords – Free Will, Philosophy, Neuroscience, Theosophy, Islam

Introduction

As per the traditions of law and philosophy, if a person was not 'free' when he committed an act, he cannot be held responsible for that action. Freedom in this context would mean social freedom from external factors, as well as free will. Free will means (i) the ability to do otherwise, (ii) have absolute control over the choice, and (iii) have a rational motivation for committing an act. However, there are differences of opinion about the existence of free will, as follows.

(a) Free will is not possible because determination is incompatible with free will. Determinism means, cause-and-effect, meaning, events happening within a paradigm are determined by its prior states. This theory is known as incompatibilism.

(b) Free will is possible because determinism and free will are compatible and not logically inconsistent. In freedom of choice, there is a distinction between freedom of will, and freedom of action, to enact it.

(c) The Neuroscience of free will.

(d) Islamic point of view about free will.

We have discussed the above points briefly in the following.

Determinism is incompatible with Free Will

Determinism means 'the causes determining the outcome of an event which are external to the will'. In physics, it is known as cause-and-effect. There are two theories in this context, (i) the whole Cosmos is a single determined system, and (ii) there are numerous determined systems in the cosmos. The philosophical debates in this context are generally related to, is 'free will' possible within this paradigm.

It is important to note that cosmic determinism is different from the determinism of human actions which are related to reasoning, motivations, desires and cravings. It is said that human actions are the consequence of what they have done in their lives earlier as that impacts their cognitive

processes. It is claimed that if an analyst has enough information about someone's life, he can predict possible actions of that individual in future even though a perfect prediction is not possible.

Various types of determinisms have been identified by philosophers. A few of them are described below.

(i) Causal determinism

Causal determinism means, every occurrence including human actions and choices are predetermined by previous events and situations together with the laws of nature. Therefore, freedom of choice is unreal. Human actions are the necessary connections in the causal sequence as a result of which something happens. There is an unbroken chain of earlier happenings which are continuous from the beginning of the Cosmos. And there is nothing in this Cosmos that is self-caused. In other words, the reality follows a pre-determined course.

(ii) Necessitarianism

Necessitarianism means, everything occurs for a reason and necessity. It is a metaphysical principle that rejects different possibilities and there is only one way that the world progresses on a determined path. Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632 - 1677) and British philosopher Anthony Collins (1626 – 1729) are famous proponents of this concept.

(iii) Predeterminism

The concept of Predeterminism implies that every event in this Cosmos is predetermined in advance. Since the chain of events are pre-established, human actions have no role and cannot interfere in this chain.

(iv) Biological or Genetic determinism

In this concept it is claimed that each human behaviour, belief and desires are fixed by its genes.

(v) Teleological or Fatal determinism

In this concept, it is claimed that everything that happens is already destined to happen, therefore

humans have no control over their future. This concept is also known as theological determinism in which God determines all human actions.

Determinism is compatible with Free Will

Free will is so deep rooted in our daily lives that it is difficult to consider it to be untrue. Like, we think before taking an action all possible its pros and cons and consequences. We learn from our past mistakes and avoid repeating them for desired results. We consult an expert before involving in any business activity or finding a cure to an ailment. In all such cases, we make choices between different options available to us.

The philosophical debate between free will and determinism is to find out which is the right theory, compatibilism or incompatibilism. Apparently, the reason for this debate is to fix moral responsibility of individual actions. Therefore, it is more appropriate to view this issue within the parameters of ethics rather than metaphysics.

Meghan Griffith, Professor of Philosophy at Davidson College, US proposed a psychological viewpoint known as mesh theory. According to this theory, free will consists of an appropriate mesh between various elements of an action and an agent's (individual's) inner states.

According to American philosopher, Harry G. Frankfurt (b. 1929), there is a difference between the freedom of the will of a person and freedom of his action. He says the freedom of will is the first order desire of a person. And freedom of his follow up action is his second order desire.

Like a person desired to eat an ice cream. He reached an ice cream parlour. Now he needs to choose which ice cream he would eat. The first order desire brought him to the ice cream shop and the second order desire allowed him to choose the type of ice cream he would eat. Thus, the person is free in choosing what he wants to do, like eating an ice cream. This is freedom of his will. The second desire is when he chooses an ice cream of his choice and eats it. This is the freedom of his action.

The first order desire is the origin of a free will and if a person does not act upon it and chooses to ignore it for certain rational reason, it will not be treated as free will. Like a person went to a bar, with the will to drink wine, but while he was sitting in the bar, he remembered his physician's advice about the health concerns of drinking wine, so he avoided drinking the wine and took a soft drink. Free will happens when the first order desire of the person or his intention is culminated into an action of his choice. This is the reason the court of law does not treat killing of a person as murder when it was committed unintentionally, meaning he did not desire to kill the person in the first place.

It is logical to believe that a person is free in choosing what he wants. And he is also free in fulfilling his desire in a certain way for his satisfaction. However, this is not true if a person is manipulated to do a thing by brain washing or misleading advertising, or hypnosis or he was under the influence of a drug, or an ailment of the brain, etc.

There is another concept known as 'adequate or statistical determinism' in which statistics show that the object is near to certainty. It is observed that there is no strict determinism at any level in the world, rather it is a theoretical concept used for the logical and mathematical differential equations.

In the macroscopic world, statistical determinism is the average of extremely large number of microscopic particles. It is a probabilistic law of large numbers in dealing with great many individual events. This is the determinism with which astronauts are sent to space and they come back with astonishing accuracy. This is the reason it is said that quantum effects are negligible in the macroscopic world, particularly in considering casually determined will, and casually determined actions, that are set in motion as a result of that will.

Neuroscience of Free Will

During 1980s, Neuroscientists started research to find out the origin of actions in the brains of

human beings. The research was triggered in 1983 when Physiologist Benjamin Libet (1916-2007) found out that a brain signal to which he named 'readiness potential' (RP) preceded self-initiated actions in human brain. A debate was triggered from this discovery and some people took it as evidence that free will is an illusion. However, further research in this field seems to have provided a different interpretation of RP. According to this research the build-up of brain activity before spontaneous voluntary movements (SVM) reflect a recurring rhythmic form of decline and growth of neuronal noise considered to be the result of several factors. This research has bridged the gap between the 'neuroscientific viewpoint of free will' and the philosophical intuitive and common-sense point of view of free will. In effect, the neuroscientific research so far has revealed that 'free will' is indeed a complicated issue. Many philosophers and neuroscientists are involved in this research in cooperation with each other and it is expected that a new field of 'Neuro-philosophy of free will' is emerging from it.

Islamic perspective on Free Will

Islamic perspective about free will consists of two levels, (i) macro and (ii) micro. At macro level, often we cannot go against the physical laws of nature, and we will have to function under the parameters of our physical environment which is provided to us for our survival.

As far as micro level is concerned human beings are completely free to act as per their desires, reasoning, motivations, and cravings.

People get confused when they read certain statements in the Quran which should be understood in their proper perspective. We provide some Quranic verses below which look conflicting, but in fact they solve the puzzle of free will of human beings.

(i) *It is in Quran* - لَهَا مَا كَسَبَتْ وَعَلَيْهَا مَا اكْتَسَبَتْ [The servant gets good of the virtue he earned, and he suffers for the evil he earned.] (*Al-Baqara* - 286).

Explanation: It is obvious that we pray, we fast as per the commandment of Allah, but many of us

also get involved in sinful activities, like lying, backbiting, etc. Sinful activities cannot be associated with Allah. Therefore, the virtue and evil are related to us, and not to Allah.

(ii) *It is in Quran* - مَا أَصَابَكَ مِنْ حَسَنَةٍ فَمِنَ اللَّهِ وَمَا أَصَابَكَ مِنْ سَيِّئَةٍ فَمِنْ نَفْسِكَ [Evil is from the servant and virtue is from Allah.] (*An-Nisa* - 79)

Explanation: We know the sunlight is coming equally to everything on this planet. But when it hits various things, it gets reflected in accordance with the capacities of these things. This is the reason we see the colourfulness of this Universe. In the same manner, Allah's bestowal is reaching everyone equally. Some people are using it correctly, as per Allah's guidance, while others are misusing it to get involved in all kinds of sins. Thus, it is established that the virtue is from Allah and evil is from human beings.

(iii) *It is in Quran* - قُلْ كُلٌّ مِّنْ عِندِ اللَّهِ - [Say (O' Prophet ﷺ), everything is from Allah.] (*An-Nisa* - 78).

Explanation: Everything in this cosmos is appearing after Allah's command 'Be'. Allah is the creator of all the things in this cosmos. Unless He commands 'Be', neither we can come into existence, nor our deeds. Thus, in the bestowal of being or existence everything is dependent upon Allah.

All the above are appropriate in their own places. Without understanding these issues, people get mixed up and make the mistake of blaming Allah. We have clarified their objections in the following.

(i) Allah is the creator of this Cosmos. He is free from the considerations of body, form, shape, etc., as is the case with his creatures. All the things in this Cosmos are his creations which are appearing in different forms as per their requirements of survival in their respective environments.

Allah is alive, knowledgeable, wise and omnipotent. His omnipotence is subordinated to his wisdom, which in turn, is subordinated to his knowledge.

The omnipotence of a mad or senseless person is not subordinated to wisdom. The omnipotence

of a sensible person is subordinated to his wisdom.

Irrelevance of omnipotence of Allah to baseless things does not show his powerlessness. The powerlessness is indicated when a thing was feasible in the first place. Therefore, if someone asks, since Allah is omnipotent, can he make a God, like himself? This is meaningless question. Similar are other questions, like: (a) can Allah create subordinate divine beings or lesser gods. This again is a meaningless question. (b) Can Allah commit suicide like human beings? This is another meaningless question. Nonexistence of the creator of the Cosmos is impossible. (c) Can Allah create a deficiency in himself? It is also a meaningless question. (d) Can Allah order or lead human beings to do evil and then punish them for their actions? No, it is not possible. This is where philosophers are confused. Those who raise this type of questions need to turn their attention towards their creator and seek his assistance to explain them the setup of this cosmos. Request him to open you mind and heart to understand the complexity of this Cosmos.

(ii) Allah knows about His creatures before their birth. Meaning, they are created with Allah's prior knowledge. The question is, where were we before birth? The answer is, we existed in Allah's knowledge as units of individual existences. When Allah wanted to bring us into this world, he associated his attribute of 'living' with our unit of existence in his knowledge which is known as our soul. The moment the soul was associated with us, we became visibly existent in this world. This is the reason it is said that our existence is dependent upon Allah's existence.

(iii) Soul is Allah's support system associated with us. When this support system is removed, we die. Each one of us have his own support system or soul provided by Allah. Similarly, our attributes are different, and our choices are also different from each other. Everyone is allowed to live as per his free will within the parameters of the suitable environment required for his survival. This is the reason our bodies are made up of earth.

There is no compulsion from our creator in our living. Allah's support system or soul is provided to each one of us on equal basis. If a person

wants to do evil, he is free to do so. If a person wants to live a virtuous life, he is free to do so. Allah has given us liberty in our actions. And to guide us to spend our lives like human beings with human morals, he sent his Prophets as our teachers.

(iv) Allah's knowledge is as per the fact of the creatures. If tiger is fed with green leaves, it will die. If a cow is fed with flesh, it will die. Allah knows horse as horse and elephant as elephant. Allah will not force a virtuous person to steal and kill people.

(v) Any organization without a justice system cannot work efficiently. Therefore, humans are made responsible for their actions. They need to follow the guidelines required for a peaceful community where rights and duties of every individual is clearly defined. If they act contrary to these requirements, they will create disorder in human society. For this reason, we have prisons where troublemakers and criminals are kept detached from society. Similar are the laws of our creator which he described in the Quran. Every one of us is required to purify his evil and animalistic first and second order desires and live with human morals, such as caring for each other, caring for their environment, their neighbourhood and community. In Islam, life of this world is treated as a test and whoever performs well, is assured of rewards in this world and in Hereafter.

(vi) The Quran supports human free will and emphasizes upon human being's responsibility for their actions. Islam recognizes human beings as creatures able to understand their responsibilities in context of the revealed law which is made by Allah for their benefit. Allah has created human beings, so he knows about them more than they know about themselves. And he knows what the best way for them is to spend their lives on this planet. These laws are meant to ensure their survival and survival of their environment.

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Ash Shaikh Mir Asedullah Quadri is well known all over the world for his explanation of Islamic Tawheed, Sahih Iman, Sahih Islam and Sahih Ihsan. He is a scholar, historian and poet. He is the author of Tafseer-e-Asedi, Irshad Al Asedi, Fusus Al-Iman and over 1000 books on various Islamic subjects. He has written many research articles on religion, history and other subjects. He is also the Editor in Chief of CIFIA Global Journal.