

Antinomy of Free Will and Pre-Ordained Sustenance

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Abstract

The problem of free will and pre-ordained sustenance presents one of the various dimensions of the problem of free will and predestination identified by Muslims and orientalists both with respect to Islam. Present study argues that the problem arises from un-Qurānic concept of Allah's Bounty, His Will and Pleasure. Allah approves at present the measure of sustenance for each individual according to His Absolute Knowledge and Wisdom. Qurān says: He straitens the provisions for some, He amplifies for some, and He gives Provisions without measure for whom He please. Therefore pre-ordaining of sustenance as wrongly supposed in the dilemma does not mean that it has been preordained as to its measure from the creation of the universe or from the birth of the individual.

The problem of freewill and predestination in Islam has been identified both by the Orientalists as well as the Muslims. W. Montgomery Watt,¹(1909–2006) in his *Freewill and Predestination in Early Islam*, and in *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, identifies various aspects of this problem.² The writings of Harry Austryn Wolfson (1887-1974)³ on the problems of Muslim theology reflect vastness of his learning. He, in his *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, mostly discusses the problem of Freedom and Predestination with reference to Divine Power. He cites in great detail the views of the Muslim theologians and their formulations of the theories of acquisition. He, however, does not miss to identify aspects of the problem of predestination other than those based on the concept of Divine Power. He states these problems in the form of antinomies. He does not miss to identify the antinomy that arises for human freedom by believing in pre-ordained sustenance.⁴ Franz Rosenthal, in his *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*, discusses different definitions of knowledge including views of Muslim theologians about God's Knowledge. Dilating upon the implications of the view that takes God's Knowledge to be eternal he identifies the problem of the incompatibility of Omniscience with human freedom in Islam.⁵ Allama Mohammad Iqbal (1877-1938), who is an eminent Muslim thinker of the modern era, discusses the problem of freewill and predestination in the perspective of Divine Omniscience. However he discusses it only with reference to its implications for Freedom of God and develops his own philosophical concept of Omniscience.⁶

Syed Abul A'la Moududi (1903-1979)⁷ identifies the problems that arise for human free will with reference to its compatibility with Omniscience, Omnipotence, and Eternal Will but observes that the Qurān does not discuss these problems in their metaphysical aspect because of man's inability to understand them.⁸ Dr. Abdul Khaliq,⁹ in his *Problems of Muslim Theology* while discussing the problem of Determinism and Human Freedom, mostly concentrates on the implications of the concept of Divine All-Powerfulness on free human actions and does not address to the problem that arises for Human Free will from any interpretation of the concept of pre-ordained sustenance.¹⁰ The same is the case with Professor M. Saeed Sheikh (d. 2003).¹¹ His ultimate focus in his article, "Freedom and Fatalism in Islam",¹² is to examine and explain the following three Arabic terms: 'Qadar', 'Taqdīr', and 'Hādith'. This essay is primarily an analysis of some of the statements of the renowned Western scholars with regard to freedom and fatalism in Islam. However, he nowhere finds an occasion even to identify the problem under discussion. Dr. Hanifi Ozcan in his article "The Relationship between God's Knowledge and Human Freedom: A New Approach to the Problem." discusses the problem only in the context of the statement that "Knowledge ('ilm) depends upon the known (*ma'lūm*)."¹³

The problem that arises from the belief in preordained sustenance mostly has not attracted the attention of those who have worked on freewill and predestination. Encyclopedia of the Qurān just gives stray reference but does not very clearly identify the problem under discussion.¹⁴

Preordained sustenance (*rizq*) is a principle taught in the Qurān. Its antinomy with free will, as stated by Wolfson, is as follows:

“Given free will, a thief who steals for a living, acts of his own free will and his sustenance therefore is not pre-ordained by Allah. But given pre-ordained sustenance, the sustenance which comes from stealing must be pre-ordained by Allah.”¹⁵

In order to examine the dilemma we need to understand the Qurānic concept of “pre-ordained sustenance” and Qurānic concept of “earning” this sustenance. Qurān says: *And there is no animal in the earth but on Allah is the sustenance of it, and He knows its resting place.*¹⁶

1. It is in the sense of its being on Allah, that the sustenance for every living being in the earth is pre-ordained. However, as for the human beings are concerned, the measure of sustenance for every individual is not same: *And Allah has made some of you excel others in sustenance.*¹⁷ Allah approves at present the measure of sustenance for each individual according to His Absolute Knowledge and Wisdom. Qurān says: *He straitens the provisions for some, He amplifies for some, and He gives Provisions without measure for whom He please.*¹⁸ Therefore pre-ordaining of sustenance as wrongly supposed in the dilemma does not mean that it has been preordained as to its measure from the creation of the universe or from the birth of the individual. In all these antinomies the false concept of a God who cannot act in the present is pre-supposed.
2. As for the earning of this provision is concerned, Allah decrees the servants to seek Allah’s bounty (*faḍal*) in earning sustenance. Only he who observes the limits prescribed by Allah in earning the provisions ordained for Him, seeks Allah’s bounty (*faḍal*). One who does not observe these limits does not seek Allah’s bounty (*faḍal*).¹⁹
3. No one can earn more, by any machinations on his part, than what Allah has ordained for him, for: *And there is no animal in the earth but on Allah is the sustenance of it...*²⁰; also: *only Allah knows what a soul will earn on the morrow.*²¹
4. One who earns something by means of theft, is the one who does not observe the limits prescribed by Allah, so whatever he gets is not Allah’s bounty (*faḍal*). Since Allah possesses Power over all things, it is by Allah’s Will (*mashiyat*) that the thief, even in spite of choosing the wrong course, gets the sustenance which is ordained for him. Whatever a thief earns is out of that sustenance which is on Allah to provide him²² and which has already been ordained for him.²³ So far as human action is concerned there are always two lines of action open to him: a right line of action (*i.e.*, the way of the righteous) and a wrong line of action (*i.e.*, to follow one’s desires), and it is man who is to freely choose one of them. A thief chooses the wrong line of action.

Examples help in understanding things. A person presented some quantity of rice to his sufi mentor. The mentor asked one of his disciples to put this rice into 5 kg bags. The mentor also told him to whom these were to be given. Concerning one of the beneficiaries the mentor gave a special direction. “Mr. ABC will be given two bags of 5 kg each. But if he takes one on his own, then he will be given just one.” Mr. ABC comes to the mentor’s abode. He goes towards the cooking area and sees bags of rice. Thinking that he is not going to be given rice bag by the mentor, makes a plan. Finds a big flower-pot (*gamla*), empties it and prepares it for filling with soil. Takes it towards the cooking area and thinking that he is not being seen, puts a bag of rice in it and covers it with soil. Fastening it on the carrier of his bicycle he takes it outside the mentor’s abode on the pretext that he is going to bring a plant from the nursery. When he comes the next day with a plant in the *gamla*, the worthy disciple of the mentor gives him one bag of rice. Mr. ABC keeps on considering that he acquired 10kg of rice by his own planning, whereas it had already been ordained that he would be given the same quantity.

Thus the antinomy is formulated on the wrong concept of the pre-ordaining of sustenance. According to Islamic religious teachings the concept of pre-ordained sustenance and human freedom never confront each other.

Notes

¹William Montgomery Watt (14 March 1909 – 24 October 2006) was a Scottish historian, an Emeritus Professor in Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Watt was one of the foremost non-Muslim interpreters of Islam in the West, was an enormously influential scholar in the field of Islamic studies. He is largely known in Muslims for his comprehensive biography of the Islamic prophet, Muhammad, Muhammad at Mecca (1953) and Muhammad at Medina (1956).

²W. Montgomery Watt, *Freewill and Predestination in Early Islam* London: LUZAC, 1948; Ibid, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973, 103.

³ Harry Austryn Wolfson was the first and full time scholar of Judaica to the faculty completely devoted to Jewish Studies established in Harvard University America. He was the first Nathan Littauer Professor of Hebrew Literature and Philosophy, a wide read scholar, a prolific and creative writer in the history of philosophy. He retired from this post in 1958. Professor Wolfson's trail-blazing study of Jewish thinkers from Philo of Alexandria to Benedict Spinoza, and his systematic integration of the study of Jewish, Islamic, and Christian philosophy, attracted wide international attention. His many well-known and celebrated volumes are as follows: Wolfson, H. A. (a) (1929) *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle: Problems of Aristotle's Physics in Jewish and Arabic Philosophy*; (b) (1934) *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning*. 2 volumes; (c) (1947) *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. 2 volumes; (d) (1956) *The Philosophy of Church Fathers: Faith, Trinity, Incarnation*; (e) (1976) *The Philosophy of the Kalam*; and (f) (1979) *Kalam Repercussions in Jewish Philosophy*. In addition to these, there are three book-length collections of papers and articles: (g) (1961) *Religious Philosophy: A Group of Essays*; and (h) Volume 1 (1973) and Volume 2 (1977) *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*. Harvard University has established Wolfson Chair in his memory, in its Center for Jewish Studies.

⁴H. A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, Harvard University Press, 1976, 660.

⁵Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970, 124-125.

⁶ Cf. Iqbal, Allama Muhammad, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, ed. & ann. M. Saeed Sheikh, Pakistan: Institute of Islamic Culture, reprint 1986, chapters 3-4; see also, Abdul Hafeez Fāzli, "Iqbal's view of Omniscience and human freedom", *The Muslim World*, 2005, 95(1), 125-145.

⁷Founder and Amir of Jama't-e-Islami India and then Amir of Jama't-e-Islami Pakistan after 1947.

⁸Syed AbulAlaMoududi, *Mas'la-e-JabroQadr* (Urdu), Lahore: Islamic Publications, 20th edition, 111.

⁹ Chairman retired of the Department of Philosophy University of the Punjab, Lahore (Pakistan) and renowned scholar of Muslim Philosophy.

¹⁰Abdul Khaliq, *Problems of Muslim Theology*, Lahore: Izharsons, 199, 169-70.

¹¹ Professor and Chairman, Department of Philosophy, Government College, Lahore; retired as Director, Institute of Islamic Culture, Lahore (Pakistan); renowned scholar of Muslim Philosophy.

¹²M. Saeed Sheikh, "Freedom and Fatalism in Islam", in Dr. C. A. Qadir ed., *The World of Philosophy* (Lahore: The Sharif Presentation Volume Committee), 1965.

¹³Ozcan, Hanifi, "The Relationship between God's Knowledge and Human Freedom: A New Approach to the Problem." *HamdardIslamicus*, 1997, 3, 63-70.

¹⁴*Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. 2, ed. 2002, cf., s. v. "Freedom and Predestination".

¹⁵Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, Harvard University Press, 1976, pp. 660.

¹⁶ Al-Qurān, 11:6

¹⁷ Ibid., 16:71

¹⁸ Ibid., 13:26; 17:30; 28:82; 29:62; 30:37; 34:36; 34:39; 39:52; 42:12.

¹⁹ *But when the prayer is ended, disperse abroad in the land and seek of Allah's bounty (faḍal)...ibid., 62:10 And when they see merchandise...they break away to it...And Allah is the Best of providers.* ibid., 62:11, also see ibid., 2:198.

²⁰ Ibid., 11:6

²¹ Ibid., 34:11

²² Ibid., 11:6

²³ Ibid., 31:34