

## Ghazali on Free-will

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### Abstract

According to Ghazali God is primarily and essentially a Will. God created the world through His Will and sustains it through His will. For proving that God is essentially will, he discussed cause and effect relation. According to Ghazali whatever happens in this world happens only by God's absolute free will. He is the only agent of all actions. So in the case of man's freedom of will, we can say that his freedom of will for performing action is also regulated by God's will. But for Ghazali, the will alone is not sufficient for causing actions. An action can happen only under three conditions viz. knowledge, will and power. Knowledge is the basis of action. But without willing it that action cannot be performed. Similarly, power or strength is also required for performing an action.

### Key Words

Determinism, Destiny, Quran, Free will, Ghazali.

### Introduction

Ghazali believes that human personality and his characteristics are the result of meeting of the body and the spirit. The human self is the combination of spirit and matter. Ghazali uses the term *latifah rabbaniyah* through which he says man's nature is constituted. Latifah has four terms. Each of them indicates the reality of spirit and shows the relationship of the spirit to its body. The four terms are – *Qalb* (heart), *Ruh* (spirit or soul), *Nafs* (the self), and *Aql* (intellect or intelligence)

For proving freedom of will, al-Ghazali divided man's nature into certain categories. The first type of men are those whose character is unformed; they are ignorant. The second kind of men are those who are under the control of passions. They know the rational self is real self yet they follow their lower self. Ghazali says that they can reform their character by off shutting their evil habits. Third type of persons do evil addictively. Fourth type of people feel proud of their evil doing. Ghazali holds that the fact that human character can be changed and improved shows that man is a free agent.

### **Ghazali on Free Will:**

Free-will and predestination are the central problems of many religions. These have been important concepts in philosophy of religion as well in the history of philosophy. There have been several theories pertaining to problem of free will, such as determinism, fatalism, voluntarism, predestinarianism and so on.

Several questions arise in regard to this concept. The fundamental question pertains to morality but it also has bearing on one's view of religion as well as science. Is man a free agent? Are his actions predetermined by mechanical laws by way of cause and effect relation? Is man responsible for his good and bad actions? If it were so, then supremacy of almighty God would be in jeopardy. If, on the other hand, man was not free then there would be no responsibility on man and no justification to reward or punish him for those actions.

We can understand free will in two senses. In one sense free will is freedom of choice and in the other sense it is absence of compulsion and constraint. First meaning of free will shows the total freedom of man in doing anything he wants. Such type of freedom implies responsibility for the actions that man performs whether good or bad. Other meaning of freedom of will shows that one performs willingly or voluntarily what is determined for him by God, or some supreme power outside him. Freedom of will is here not understood as freedom of choice but as voluntary necessity i.e. some determined action having been done willingly or voluntarily.

We see that voluntary necessity has been accepted by most or all predestinarian theologians. They hold that these predestined actions are performed by human beings and they do involve responsibility although man has no power to choose his action. Such type of necessity has been common place in Augustinian Calvinistic theology in Christianity and also found in Islamic ideology.

This problem also has been discussed in modern Western philosophy. While Descartes accepts the view that human freedom as well as human understanding is limited, Spinoza calls free will as self-determination. He says that man is free only when his actions are determined by the inner tendencies or inner consciousness of his being. Leibniz, on the other hand, believed in physical freedom. He said that every event is determined and related with each other by the mechanics of natural law. But Locke does not accept this. Against Leibniz he gave preference to cause. He says that everything has a cause and that the present effect is the result of the past antecedent cause. After Locke, Hume too discussed this problem. According to him, free action is one that could have been avoided. That means there is

a choice before human being. Man chooses this or that and he has the liberty to avoid undesirable option.

For Kant determinism is phenomenal and freedom nominal. Hegel said that freedom and necessity are two sides of the same coin.

This problem has also been discussed in different religions. We know that Judaism, Christianity and Islam belong to same Abrahamic family. So, most of the tenets of these religions are same. But there are some differences, too. The main difference is on the question of man's original sin.

The problem of original sin started after the seduction of Adam and eve by Satan. Although God created man in His own image and the form of man was faultless, He also gave him free will. Adam and Eve could not observe the commandments and they lost their freedom of will and became sinners. At this point, the main difference between Christianity and Islam started. In Christianity it is believed that through Adam's disobedience of God whole humanity became sinner. It also came to be believed that man cannot repent sin by his own effort. But according to Islam there was no collective sin and man could remove his sin by his own effort and get salvation. But in Christianity there is a need for some help for salvation i.e. God's grace.

In Judaism we find the concept of freedom of will in Torah. According to Moses Maimonides, this concept is very deep and profound. Without this concept what remains is only God's power and, as a corollary, the entire world would be impotent and passive. Furthermore, he says that in Bible God always scolds peoples. He always directs them to do good and improve their character. This means we have power to do good as well as evil. Torah tells us we have the ability to do good with the help of God. But it does not mean we have power to do whatever we want. Nor does it mean God helps us in every deeds either good and evil. Maimonides says that from Torah we can infer that we have free will for performing action but consequence is not in our hands. He gave the example: I work hard and plant a field full of seed by my choice. But it is not necessary that planting will be successful. Mostly the result is out of our hand. We can only do whatever is necessary for success.

In Christian theology, St. Aquinas maintains that man's action as well as animal's actions are not same as mechanical action. He said man's as well as animal's actions are voluntary actions. Like humans, animals also have voluntary power or freedom of choice. He gave the example when sheep sees the wolf, it takes immediate decision that running way is best for her at that time. But in the case of man, running away is not the only option. In man the choice of action depends upon mode of

knowledge. He considers human will as “rational appetite”. He says that we choose evil will only because we understand evil will is desirable. No one can choose evil will knowingly.

Similarly, we find various views about freedom of will in Islam. In Qur’an we find both types of verses which show on the one hand supremacy of God and, on the other, man’s power in making his destiny. On the basis of these two apparently contradictory types of verses, two different schools emerged.

وَيُمِيتُ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

“It is He who gives life and Death; and He has power over all things”.<sup>1</sup>

(*Al-Qur’ān*, 57:2).

مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيَهْدِي مَنْ يَشَاءُ

“And whom God shall please to guide, that man’s breast will He open to Islam; but whom He shall please to make go astray, strait and narrow will He make his breast”.<sup>2</sup>(*Al-Qur’ān*, 57:2).

خَتَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ وَعَلَىٰ سَمْعِهِمْ

“Allah hath set a seal on their hearts and on their hearing”.<sup>3</sup> (*Ibid.*, 2:7)

وَاللَّهُ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ

“Allah is well acquainted with (all) that ye do”.<sup>4</sup>(*Ibid.*, 63:11)

Similarly, we find some verses in the Qur’an which show the freedom of choice and freedom of action and also show man’s responsibility for his action.

مَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلِنَفْسِهِ ۖ وَمَنْ أَسَاءَ فَعَلَيْهَا

“Whosoever acts virtuously does so for himself, and whosoever acts viciously does so for himself”.<sup>5</sup> (*Ibid.*, 41:46)

وَمَنْ يَكْسِبْ إِثْمًا فَإِنَّ مَا يَكْسِبُهُ وَعَلَىٰ نَفْسِهِ

“Whosoever gets to himself a sin, gets solely on his responsibilities”.<sup>6</sup> (*Ibid.*, 4:111).

وَإِذَا فَعَلُوا فَحِشَةً قَالُوا وَجَدْنَا عَلَيْهَا آبَاءَنَا وَاللَّهُ

أَمَرْنَا

“And when they (sinful) commit a deed of shame, they say: ‘we have found that our father did so, and God obliges us to do it’: say thou: surely, God requireth not shameful doing”.<sup>7</sup>

(*Ibid.*, 7:28)

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَغَيِّرُ مَا بَقِيَ حَتَّىٰ يُغَيِّرُوا مَا بِأَنْفُسِهِمْ

“Verily, God changes not what concerns my people, untill they change what depends on themselves”.<sup>8</sup> (*Ibid.*, 13:11).

On the basis of these two apparently contradictory types of verses, two different schools emerged.

The ‘Jabr’ or deterministic school of thought was founded by Jahm b Safwan who said that man has no freedom of will. He has no liberty, no choice of action. His actions are same as the action of machine. So man is not responsible for his action. Against this Jabr school of thought, the Qadr school of thought came into existence. The founder of this school was Ma’bad al-Juhaini. He expressed the view that man has liberty and has freedom of choice. The problem of Qadr and Jabr directly related to the problem of good and evil.

Mutrazilites, who were Qadrites, maintained that reason is the true criterion of choosing between good and evil. According to them, through reason we can distinguish between the things which are good and rewardable and the things which are evil and punishable. Mu’tazilites like Ibrahim al-Nazzam, Abu-al-Hudhyal etc. believed in the view that man has free will which is given by God.

Man performs action according to his freedom of will. God has no power over man's action. Because two possessors cannot be there for one object of power.

But Shahham's view is different from the rest of Mutazilites and Qadrites. He claimed that God has power over man's action. He maintains that every object of power has two possessors i.e. God and man.

Ash'arite school of thought come into existence to oppose Mutazila school of thought. Al-Ash'ari adopted intermediate position between Jabr and Qadr. He said that God is the originator and derived power cannot create anything.

Power which man possesses is derived power. Hence God is the creator of man's power. Man is only acquirer. He creates the power in human being for performing action and also creates the power for choosing between two alternatives. Hence human action is created by God. Man is free only in making the choice between the alternatives. On the basis of this power he gets reward or punishment in the other world.

As the question of freedom of will arises only in human context, any discussion on this issue must start with grappling the question of human nature. The philosophy of al-Ghazali is a more or less full length interpretation of Islam and it is also a complete philosophy of man. . The human personality and his characteristics are the result of meeting of the body and the spirit.

“The characteristics of his body and all that is generated within the human personality, as a result of the meeting of the spirit with its body, are all necessary accidents and are what they are in order to adequately serve the spirit in the fulfillment of its “Trust”.<sup>9</sup> (Othman, 1960, p.71)

It is the combination of spirit and matter that constitutes the human self. As to the question, what is meant by “human self” (*nafs*). As to the question, what is meant by “human self” (*nafs*), Like any other Sufi Ghazali, too, speaks of a lower self of man and a higher self which, in other words, means man's having an animal self and a spiritual self. The nature of animal self is eating, sleeping and fighting. One who is completely under the domination of his animal nature is always busy in these activities. The higher or spiritual self, on the other hand, is what leads man to pursue God and the realization of His attributes. Corresponding to these two are the two kinds of nature's namely, devilish

and angelic. The devilish nature is to deceive or misguide others; if you have such nature, you are engaged in doing devil's work. Angelic nature is to contemplate beauty of God. Ghazali says, if you have angelic nature then you are searching out your original nature. A third way of describing the same duality is to call the two realities as body and soul.

“The first step to self-knowledge is to know that thou art composed of an outward shape, called the body, and an inward entity called the heart, or soul”.<sup>10</sup> (Ghazali, p.21).

But heart does not mean the physical heart. The heart or the spirit, which constitutes the human nature is called by Ghazali as “*latifah rabbaniyah*”, which resides in the body. This *latifah* has different states according to its various activities and its life in the body. It is also beyond the comprehension of ordinary understanding. It has four terms and each of them indicates the reality of spirit, and represents the various activities showing the relationship of the spirit to its body. Each term indicates a reciprocity of interaction between the *latifah* and the body. The four terms are:

- i. Qalb (heart)
- ii. Ruh (spirit or soul)
- iii. Nafs (the self) and
- iv. Aql (the intellect or intelligence)

In Arabic literature, it is used interchangeably with the words like “soul”, “life”, “appetite” and “worldly desires”. It has also two meanings. The first meaning is passion or lower self and includes such proclivities as greed, anger, lust and such other evil attributes. The second meaning of *nafs* is the same as that of the “divine subtlety”. The latter state of self is the actual states which have developed from the previous state.

“Thus it refers to actual relationships between the heart and the appetites of the body and the particular condition of the “divine subtlety” under these conditions”.<sup>11</sup>

(Othman, *op.cit.*, p.84)

There are three stage of the *nafs* according to Qur'an:

- a) Al-nafs al ammarah
- b) Al nafs al-lawwamah
- c) Al nafs al-mutmainnah

a) *al-nafs al ammarah* (The self that commands evil): At the lowest level, self is slave of passion.

This level Qur'an describes as,

وَمَا أُبْرِئُ نَفْسِي إِنَّ النَّفْسَ لَأَمَّارَةٌ بِالسُّوءِ إِلَّا مَا رَحِمَ رَبِّي  
إِنَّ رَبِّي غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ

“Verily the self indeed commands to evil”.<sup>12</sup> (*Al-Qur'ān*, 12:13.)

b) *al-nafs al lawwamah* (The upbraiding self) : This is the struggling self. In this state, self is struggling against anger and lust. The Qur'an refers this state in its verse:

وَلَا أُقْسِمُ بِالنَّفْسِ اللَّوَّامَةِ

“And nay! I swear by the self that upbraids...”.<sup>13</sup> (*Al-Qur'ān*, 75:2.)

(c) *al-nafs al-mutmainnah*: (The tranquil self): This is the highest stage of the *nafs*. Qur'an describes it as:

يَا أَيَّتُهَا النَّفْسُ الْمُطْمَئِنَّةُ ارْجِعِي إِلَىٰ رَبِّكِ رَاضِيَةً مَّرْضِيَّةً

“O tranquil self-return unto thy lord, well pleased and accepted”.<sup>14</sup> (*Al-Qur'ān*, 89:27.)

After describing the human nature in terms of various *latifah*, Ghzali describes man's character as consisting of beastly, animal, devilish and angelic qualities.

“There are four natures of man:(1) Beastly nature, (2) Animal nature (3) Devilish nature (4) Angelic nature”.<sup>15</sup> (Maulana,1982 p.10)

Beastly nature of man shows the anger, hatred, rebuke and so on. The animal nature shows mainly his sexual passions. In the devilish nature we find the quality of deceit, fraud, conspiracy and so on. Lastly, in the angelic nature we find in the man divine service, worship of God, doing good to all etc.

The root of man's nature is his soul. If he has lower animal nature, he becomes like a pig or dog. If he has devilish nature,

According to Ghazali, whatever happened in this world happened only by God's absolute free will. He is the only agent of all actions. So in the case of man's freedom of will we can say that his freedom of will for performing action is also regulated by God's will. All actions of man are created by God and his freedom of will is also created by God. Man is not creator of his actions. But the other way of arguing may be that since God wills and man shares his nature with God, he can also be said to possess will.

It is clear that the affirmation of God's will can act both ways i.e. as an argument both for and against the idea of man being a free agent. When we talk about God's action one thing that immediately comes to mind is that everything or every event in the world is God's action either by way of creation or invention. There is no other creator except Him. He is thus also the creator of man's action. He created man's actions without losing His power. God's power is connected with movement of men. But though He is the creator of man's actions, He does not prevent him from his voluntary actions. God created for man power as well as choice. Power is an attribute of man, which is given him as a gift by God. Furthermore, motion is also created by God that is acquired by man on the strength of power. Motion is connected with the power. This power of motion cannot be considered as matter of compulsion; nor is it completely a matter of volition. There must be a middle position relating to man's voluntary action. His actions are created by God but also by himself in so far as he has been given power to create his actions. In other words, man has a will that nevertheless, also comes under God's will. Everything happened in this world and out of this world according to His will.

“Good or evil, benefit or loss, belief or infidelity, knowledge, or ignorance, success or failure, guidance or misguidance; in or virtue, shirk or Iman come from Him”.<sup>16</sup>

(Maulana, *op.cit*, p.137).

It is only God who guides us and misguides us and He is not responsible toward men but man is:

فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ يُضِلُّ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيَهْدِي مَنْ يَشَاءُ  
لَا يَسْأَلُ عَمَّا يَفْعَلُ وَهُمْ يُسْأَلُونَ

“He guides whom He wishes and misguides whom he wishes. There is none to question Him of what He does, but the people will be questioned”.<sup>17</sup> (*Al-Qur’ān*, 21:23).

From the point of view of having a free will Ghazali divides human kind in certain categories. The first one are those whose character is unformed. They have no ability to distinguishing between good and evil, right and wrong. They are ignorant. They have no self-consciousness and no moral character. They have neither will nor belief. The character of such type of men can be improved easily. They are in need of some guidance, a determination through which they could walk on right path.

The second kind of men are those who are under the control of passions. They possess quality of distinguishing between good and evil. They know the rational self is the only true self. Although they realize the rational self is real self yet they follow their lower self, because they do not customarily perform right action. Ghazali says that since they have knowledge, they can be reformed of their character by off shutting their evil habits, and cultivating the virtuous habits. and cultivating the virtuous habits. Such types of men are amenable to good influence, if they have the will to improve their character.

Ghazali has discussed the problem of free will and acquisition in three places in his book *Ihya Ulum-id-Din* i.e. *Kitab Kawaid wal-‘Aka’id*, *Kitab al-Taubah* and *Kitab al-Tauhid wal-Tawakkul*.

He starts the discussion with the statements on which all predestinarians are agreed i.e. “that God, who created man and his powers and his movements, created also all his actions and that all his actions remain dependent upon God’s power”.<sup>18</sup> (Wolfson, 1934,p.699)

In favour of this common belief, he gives two arguments:

“since the power of God is perfect and unrestricted, it cannot but be that the actions of man are created by God. Second, since man’s actions are dependent upon the movements of his body and all the movements of man’s body are by their essence equally dependent upon the power of God, there is no reason for differentiating in this respect some movements, called actions, from other movements”.<sup>19</sup> (Wolfson, 1934, p.699)

The second argument referred to those libertarians who distinguish among actions and maintain that God has power upon certain actions and does not have power over certain actions. For example, God has power over movements and rests of man. But he has no power over belief and unbelief. Further, they distinguish between man's act and act and God's act. They hold that noble acts are created by God and base acts are created by man. According to them, "God created at once the power (*al-kudrah*) and the object of power (*al-makdur*) and He created at once the choice (*al-ikhtiyar*) and the object of choice (*al-mukhtar*)".<sup>20</sup> (Wolfson, 1934, pp. 699-700).

According to Ghazali, "power", means the power to move and he used the word in the general sense of power of action, and power of choice. The latter included the choice between moving and not moving. Further, "object of power" and "object of choice", meant according to him a movement which is performed by the power to move which is result of choice to move and not to move. In other words, we can say that it is a voluntary movement or voluntary action. He says that in every voluntary action of man three things are involved, i.e., the power to act, the choice between moving and not moving, and the action performed by the power as a result of the choice. He said that all these three things are created by God in man. Ghazali distinguishes between created power to move and created movement which is created by God in man. He says:

"The power is an attribute (*wasf*) of man and a creation of God but is not an acquisition (*kasb*) of man, whereas the movement is a creation of God and an attribute (*wasf*) of man but is also an acquisition of man, for it is created as an object of power by [another] power [namely, the power to choose]; which is to him [also] an attribute".<sup>21</sup> (Wolfson, 1934, p.700).

The power then is an attribute of man, but not an acquisition of man, and movement is an attribute of man but also an acquisition. Both are created by God.

"In short, acquisition is any movement of man preceded regressively by a power to move and by a power to choose, that is, to will, to use that power to move, plus the assumption that the movement itself and the power to move and the will to use that power to move are all created by God".<sup>22</sup> (Ibid.)

Ghazali says that acquisition is regarded as a movement which is created by God. It cannot be regarded as compelled act nor can it be said to be a free act. It cannot be said to be a compelled act,

because how could a movement be regarded as compelled act when man has consciousness or has a power to distinguishing between a movement which is the object of power as the raising of hand and the movement of the uncontrollable trembling hand. He therefore adopts the middle position that is of acquisition.

“Since both these extremes are untenable, there remains only to adopt a middle course with regard to the belief under consideration, namely, that the movement is determined by the power of God by way of creation and by the power of man by way of another kind of relationship that which is designated by the term acquisition (*iktisab*)”.<sup>23</sup> (Ibid., p.701).

So, according to al-Ghazali, man has two kinds of power i.e. power of choosing and power of action and these two powers are created by God. Ghazali’s view on acquisition is identical with that of Najjar and Asha’ri.

## Conclusion

Ghazali says that before this discussion it is necessary to understand the nature of reward and punishment. He says everything possesses particular natural properties. For example, in the science of medicine a certain medicine possesses a certain quality. If a man takes poison, by its natural property it will kill the man. Then he has no right to ask the question, why poison kills him. Similarly, good and bad actions are invariably followed by pleasure and pain respectively. Man gets reward of pleasure for good actions and is punished for evil action. The good action is like nectar and evil works like elixir. The properties of actions have been discovered, as discoveries are made in medicine. The saints and prophets are the physicians of the heart. So man should listen them for the discovery of good and bad action. If one does not listen them he will suffer.

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