

“Do We Really Choose? Free Will, Qadar, and Responsibility in Islam”

1. Introduction: Do We Really Choose?

The question of free will is not just a “philosophy class” problem. It shows up in the middle of the night, after a mistake we regret, during a hardship we didn’t ask for, or when we look back and think: *Was I actually in control of any of this?*

Modern science, psychology, and religion all circle around the same tension:

- If my brain, my past, and my environment shape my choices...
- And if Allah has already written my destiny...
- Then **what exactly is left for “me” to choose?**

In Islamic terms, this question lives inside the discussion of **al-Qadā’ wal-Qadar** (Divine Decree and Predestination). Muslims are asked to believe that everything is written, yet also that they are morally responsible for what they do. On the surface that sounds like a paradox.

2. Qur’anic Foundations: Everything Is Known, Written, and Measured

The Qur’an is very clear that nothing in the universe escapes Allah’s knowledge and decree:

- **Life and death are written:**
“No soul shall die except by Allah’s permission, at a term written.” (Al ‘Imrān 3:145)
- **Every people has a fixed term:**
“To every people is a term appointed. When their term is reached, they can neither delay it nor advance it by an hour.” (Al-A’rāf 7:34)
- **Misfortune is already recorded:**
“No misfortune happens on earth or in yourselves except that it is in a Book before We bring it into being.” (Al-Hadīd 57:22)
- **Nothing is hidden from Allah:**
“Not even an atom’s weight escapes Him in the heavens or on earth.” (Saba’ 34:3)

These verses (and many similar ones) are sometimes read as if they mean:

“We don’t really choose. Allah decides everything and we just act it out.”

Historically, some groups *did* move in that direction. The **Jabriyya** argued that humans are almost like a feather in the wind—moved entirely by divine will, with no meaningful agency. Others, like the **Mu’tazila**, went to the opposite extreme, saying humans themselves “create” their actions, to protect the idea of moral responsibility.

Most Sunni scholars, however, took a more balanced route that keeps both: Allah’s complete knowledge and power, *and* real human responsibility.

3. Two Spheres: What You Control vs. What Controls You

The text you shared (from *The System of Islam*) explains this balance beautifully using the idea of **two spheres** of human existence:

1. A sphere that **dominates you**
2. A sphere that **you dominate**

3.1 The Sphere That Dominates You (Qaḍā')

This is the part of life you *never* chose and *cannot* change:

- Where and when you were born
- Your parents, language, early environment
- Basic physical features (height, eye colour, etc.)
- Natural laws (you can't fly with your body, walk on water, stop ageing)
- Accidents and external events beyond your control (car crashes, random illnesses, natural disasters, etc.)

You didn't pick any of these. They "happen" to you. In Islamic terms, these fall under **Qaḍā'** – Allah's decisive decree in matters outside your control.

The key point:

☞ **You are not judged for anything in this sphere.**

If someone dies in a train accident, or is struck by a falling object, or is born with a particular body or into a particular place, these are not moral actions. They are tests, circumstances, and contexts – but not sins or good deeds in themselves.

3.2 The Sphere You Dominate (Kasb Ikhtiyārī – Your Free Choice)

The second sphere is where **your choices actually live**:

- Deciding to speak or stay silent
- Choosing to help or harm someone
- Whether to pray or skip it
- How you respond to hunger, anger, desire
- Whether you use fire to cook food or burn someone's property
- Whether you satisfy your needs in a halal way or a haram way

Here, you are not being *dragged*. You:

- Understand what you're doing
- Can do it or leave it
- Know, at least roughly, the difference between right and wrong

This is the domain of **moral responsibility**. In this sphere, Allah holds you accountable and says:

“Every soul is held in pledge for what it has earned.” (Al-Muddaththir 74:38)

So in simple language:

**You are not responsible for where you were thrown,
but you are responsible for how you stand there.**

4. Qadar: Built-in Properties, Not Pre-Programmed Actions

The same text also makes an important distinction: **Qadar** (often translated as “predestination”) is not mainly about your *individual actions* – it’s about the **fixed properties Allah placed in creation**.

Examples:

- Fire burns
- Knives cut
- Wood catches fire
- Hunger makes you seek food
- Sexual desire makes reproduction possible

These properties are part of the “settings” of the universe. Allah created them and made them stable.

But what you do *with* those properties is your responsibility:

- Hunger exists, but you choose whether to eat halal or haram.
- You have a tongue, but you choose whether to backbite or speak truth.
- Fire burns, but you choose whether to use it for warmth or for arson.

So:

- **Qadar = Allah’s design of the system**
- **Your action = How you move inside that system**

That’s why you can’t say, “Fire burned the house, blame Qadar.”

Qadar gave fire the capacity to burn; **you** decided what to expose to it.

5. But What About Allah’s Knowledge, Will, and the “Written” Destiny?

A lot of confusion comes from mixing up **three separate things**:

1. **Allah’s knowledge ('ilm)** – He eternally knows what will happen.
2. **Allah’s will (irādah)** – Nothing can occur against His will.
3. **Allah’s writing (kitābah / al-Lauh al-Mahfūz)** – Everything is recorded.

The text you provided is very clear:

- Allah knowing what you will do **does not cause** you to do it.
- Allah's will **does not force** you; it simply means nothing happens *outside* His permission.
- The writing in *al-Lauh al-Mahfūz* is an expression of His encompassing knowledge, not a chain around your neck.

A simple analogy:

A teacher might know a student very well and can predict the grade they will get. When the student finally takes the test and gets that grade, the teacher's knowledge didn't **cause** it – the student's effort did. The knowledge just matched the reality.

Similarly, classical Sunni scholars insist:

Allah's knowledge is **perfect awareness**, not **coercion**. ([Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research](#))

Modern works that explain this include:

- Jonathan Brown / Yaqeen Institute's article "*Predestination vs. Free Will in Islam: Understanding Allah's Qadr*" ([Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research](#))
- J. Parrott, *Reconciling the Divine Decree and Free Will in Islam* ([NYU Libraries](#))

Both show how early Muslims understood qadar without denying real choice.

6. Neuroscience and the Libet Experiments: Does the Brain Kill Free Will?

In the 1980s, **Benjamin Libet** ran famous experiments where he measured brain activity just before a person moved a finger or wrist. He found something surprising: the brain showed a "**readiness potential**" (RP) about 500–600 milliseconds *before* the person reported feeling the conscious intention to move. ([Spot](#))

Some people concluded:

"See? The brain decides first. Free will is an illusion."

But later analysis of Libet's work is more cautious:

- The readiness potential may reflect a *general buildup*, not a fixed decision. ([ScienceDirect](#))
- Libet himself thought that conscious will could still "veto" an action before it happens. ([Spot](#))

From an Islamic point of view, this is not a crisis. Islam already distinguishes between:

- **Thoughts/impulses that arise in you** (not in your control)
- **Your decision to act on them or not** (in your control)

Imām al-Ghazālī, for example, describes how impulses and thoughts (*khawāṭir*) enter the heart, and the human being then either welcomes them and acts on them or resists them. ([EMAA Library](#))

So even if neuroscience shows that many impulses start unconsciously, that does not destroy the idea of responsibility. It just tells us that part of our inner life is hidden and automatic – something Islamic spirituality already acknowledged.

7. Classical Debates: Ghazālī, Avicenna, Ibn ‘Arabī, and Others

If someone wants to go deeper historically, there is a whole field of academic work on **free will in Islamic thought**. A very important modern study is:

- **Maria De Cillis, *Free Will and Predestination in Islamic Thought: Theoretical Compromises in the Works of Avicenna, al-Ghazālī and Ibn ‘Arabī* (Routledge, 2014)** ([Ijtihad Net](#))

She shows how:

- **Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā)** uses a philosophical framework where God is the necessary cause and human choices fit into a rationally ordered universe.
- **Al-Ghazālī** emphasizes God's omnipotence (occasionalism) but still maintains that humans truly *intend* and are morally responsible, a kind of compatibilism. ([Scholars Crossing](#))
- **Ibn ‘Arabī** speaks of divine will and human will in more mystical, symbolic terms.

For the early centuries:

- **W. Montgomery Watt, *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam* (Luzac, 1973)** is a classic study of the Jabriyya, Qadariyya, and Mu'tazila debates. ([Google Books](#))

And for accessible Muslim treatments today:

- **Bilal Philips, *Qadar (Predestination in Islam)* ([Kalamullah](#))
- “**The Book of Divine Destiny (Kitāb al-Qadr)**” – a curated collection of Qur'anic verses and hadith on the topic. ([The Quran Blog - Enlighten Yourself](#))

8. So, Do We Have Free Will or Not?

Putting it all together in simple terms:

1. **Allah knows everything, has written everything, and nothing escapes His will.**
2. **There are parts of life you absolutely do not control** (where you're born, when you die, accidents, others' actions, natural laws).
3. **There is a part of life where you genuinely choose** (your responses, intentions, and deliberate actions).
4. **You are only judged on that second part.**

Islam does *not* ask you to solve the entire metaphysical puzzle. It asks you to **recognize the two spheres**:

- Accept what you could never have controlled.
- Take responsibility for what is clearly in your hands.

As *The System of Islam* concludes: man has been given a mind, instincts, needs, and the ability to choose—to act or abstain. Because of this, **reward and punishment are just and meaningful**.

9. Further Reading and Study

For people who want to go deeper, here are some recommended works (all either academic, semi-academic, or serious popular treatments):

On Free Will and Qadar in Islam

- Maria De Cillis, *Free Will and Predestination in Islamic Thought: Theoretical Compromises in the Works of Avicenna, al-Ghazali and Ibn 'Arabī* (Routledge, 2014). ([Ijtihad Net](#))
- W. Montgomery Watt, *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam* (Luzac, 1973). ([Google Books](#))
- Bilal Philips, *Qadar (Predestination in Islam)* – an accessible Sunni overview of belief in qadar. ([Kalamullah](#))
- Anonymous, “**Predestination vs. Free Will in Islam: Understanding Allah’s Qadr**”, Yaqeen Institute. ([Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research](#))
- J. Parrott, “**Reconciling the Divine Decree and Free Will in Islam**” (NYU, 2017). ([NYU Libraries](#))

On Spiritual Psychology and the Heart

- Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Marvels of the Heart* (Kitāb Sharḥ 'Ajā'ib al-Qalb) – explains how thoughts and impulses enter the heart and how the human being responds. ([EMAA Library](#))

On Neuroscience and Free Will

- Benjamin Libet, “**Do We Have Free Will?**” – classic paper on the readiness potential and voluntary action. ([Spot](#))
- C.D. Frith, “**Volition and the Brain – Revisiting a Classic Experimental Study**” (Journal article). ([PMC](#))
- Aaron Schurger, “**What Is the Readiness Potential?**” – updated interpretation of Libet’s findings and what they really mean. ([ScienceDirect](#))
- Overview articles on the “**neuroscience of free will**”, summarizing Libet-style experiments and critiques. ([Wikipedia](#))