Wrestling with Free Will: Reflections on Divine and Human Freedom

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The tension between determinist reasoning and free-will intuition is one of the most debated topics in philosophy. In theology, it is Godly determinism and human free will that are most contentious. Where is the space for human free will, with an omnipotent God who knows and wills the future? Is this not some kind of cosmic ventriloquism? If theological compatibilism is true, what is the mechanism through which Godly determinism and human free will can coexist?

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omnipotent God who knows and wills the future? Is this not some kind of cosmic ventriloquism? If theological compatibilism is true, what is the mechanism through which Divine determinism and human free will can coexist? Questions like these have long occupied my thinking since childhood. They have also occupied a large part of my intellectual curiosity in both my Islamic Studies and Applied Christian Theology postgraduate courses. In this essay, I hope to take the reader on a journey of some of the key breakthrough moments, personal reflections, and deep learning opportunities I have had in my studies. I shall consider all of the major philosophical and theological positions (both Islamic and Christian) in turn, pausing at key moments to reflect on practical themes. As a Muslim, I hope my reflections will be useful to people of other faiths and will function as an exploration of comparative theology.

When I was studying for my A-levels, I came across a small pamphlet entitled *Free Will*, written by Sam Harris, in which he argues that no such thing as free will exists, and that the human being is no more than a 'biochemical puppet'.[1] His claims both unsettled and confused me; unsettled because here was an atheist posing the same philosophical problem that had so plagued me as a Muslim; confused because one of his central claims against religion was moral in nature, and morality presupposes free will. Hence, I was left unconvinced by Harris' argument in its entirety, but his problematisation of free will continued to perplex me. I was surprised to learn that New Atheists were actually divided on this issue. Sam Harris fell into the determinist camp and, as a result, found himself in frequent disagreement with New Atheist fellow traveller and colleague, Daniel Dennett, a compatibilist who believes that free will and causal determinism can be compatible. In his rejection of compatibilism, Harris writes, "compatibilism amounts to nothing more than an assertion of the following creed: A puppet is free as long as he loves his strings."[2]

After continuing my study of the issue, I discovered that the determinism vs. compatibilism debate is not a new one; it is, in fact, an ancient one that goes as far back as known human civilisation. A number of thinkers had laid out thought experiments and analogies aimed at squaring the circle. For instance, the stoic philosopher Chrysippus crafted an analogy of a cylinder and a cone: A person's character is like the shape of the object which, if pushed, will react to external stimuli by either rolling or staying still. If the person's nature is corrupt–symbolised by a cone–it will remain uphill even if it is nudged. If its shape has a roundness–like a cylinder–it will roll upon being nudged. Depending on one's own nature, so the analogy goes, antecedent events will have a particular effect on you.[3] Analogies such as these are the best means to get at the tensions that exist between theological determinism and the notion of free will. But even this analogy falls short in capturing all of the various dynamics at play in this relationship. Relatedly, there exists in the hadith literature an analogy drawn by the Prophet Muhammad in which he compares guidance and knowledge with rain that falls on some ground, some parts of which are fertile and absorb the rain, and other parts are infertile and sandy 'which neither retains the water nor produces herbage'. In this is the likeness of a person who receives revelation favourably as compared to someone who does not.[4]

This hadith, like the famous example drawn by the stoic philosopher, characterises the human being as possessing an intrinsic nature to which it responds to revelation either receptively or unreceptively–the nature of the ground on which the water falls signifies the nature of the recipient of revelation.

Although analogies such as the aforementioned provided me with important breakthrough moments, they were not intended to be comprehensive illustrations of the workings of human free will and theological determinism. And yet making complete sense of the mechanics of theological compatibilism was something I was determined on being able to do. I looked everywhere, across secular traditions and traditions beyond Islam, determined to discover the right formulae that could explain all of the variables at play. I looked to the works of Augustine and Aquinas. I consulted Maimonides. Without knowing it, I was engaged in full-blown comparative theology as formalised by the likes of Francis Clooney.[5] This approach stands in contrast from 'comparative religion' and 'old comparative theology' in that it does not concentrate on proving the superiority of one religion

over another. Rather, as described by the likes of Paul Hedges, it is an approach 'where two or more religions are compared not in a spirit of contestation but in a spirit of mutual learning'.[6]

During my postgraduate degree in Islamic studies, I enrolled in a module titled Medieval Arab Thought. I wanted to dive deep into this issue from an Islamic perspective and survey how it is addressed across different creedal schools of thought. I realised from the outset that the implications of this question of how to reconcile free will and theological determinism extends well beyond the question itself. Conclusions drawn about this particular question would, for instance, directly impact the way in which we conceive of and understand God's attributes. The most notable challenge within this is how we understand and reconcile between the Divine attributes of omnipotence and omniscience on the one hand, and His justice and mercy on the other. If God was unaware of our actions or incapable of changing them, there may be little controversy regarding where we end up as a consequence of our actions. The question would instead be: What sort of god lacks omnipotence and omniscience and remains worthy of being regarded as a god? Not a god I would consider worthy of worship. However, if God is in fact all-knowing and all-powerful and still willed that some people will go to heaven and others will be consigned to hell, would this not impinge upon His perfect justice and mercy?

To explore these questions, I first looked to the *falasifa* (Islamic philosophers). Despite the *falasifa*, in my estimation, being the most innovatively intelligent of all Muslim theological currents (as well as the most anti-normative from a Sunni theological perspective), they had the least convincing answer. The most well-known of them, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), was an emanationist who held that everything, just like the rays of the sun, had to be the way it is as a matter of hard determination.[7] God, or the 'necessary existence', had to emanate things into existence by necessity. In this view, there was no need for God to know all of the particular instantiations of the universe. Not only are human beings bereft of free will according to this view, but God Himself is not volitional. I was less than convinced by this approach as it rendered God ignorant and somewhat impotent. I found al-Ghazali's refutation of Ibn Sina compelling in this regard. Al-Ghazali was able to demonstrate, through the doctrine of specification (*takhsis*), that because the universe is composed in one way rather than another, it was specified by a 'voluntary sorting agent'.[8] This argument had the net effect of proving a kind of will for God on first principles, which rendered Ibn Sina's emanationism superfluous or even lacking in the context of an intelligible universe exhibiting both a uniformity of nature and laws governing it. Hard determinism also struck me as somewhat counterintuitive in light of feeling that, deep down, I know firmly that I possess the ability to prefer some things over others. To me, this strikes me as being as unquestionable a reality than almost anything else. Moreover, the idea that free will may be illusory was unacceptable to me. If my psychological ability to have intellectual preferences is illusory, so too would the results of any intellectual decision I make on the basis of such illusion; an unacceptable proposition that I could not possibly endure.

During the module of Medieval Arab Thought, we also covered the creedal beliefs of the Mu'tazilites. The Mu'tazilites were a group of 'rationalists' that rose to prominence between the 8th and 10th century, particularly in Baghdad.[9] Throughout all of my life, I had never met a Muslim that identified as a Mu'tazilite. I read the books of al- Qadi Abdul Jabbar, a forgotten genius who had made a case no less compelling than that of the Asharites. Al-Qadi Abdul Jabbar made a series of arguments starting from an assumption that dictates that two actions cannot be carried out upon one object simultaneously, particularly in the initial production of the object in question.[10] Abdul Jabbar sought to convey that there cannot be more than one 'power' responsible for the emergence of a thing in its initial production. In this view, human actions must originate either in human beings themselves or God, and, according to Abdul Jabbar, it is humans who created their own actions. It was clear from reading Abdul Jabbar's words that he prioritised free will (understood as thoughts and acts that operate efficaciously in the real world) at the expense of God's omnipotence. Sherman Jackson summarises this well:

In short, in addition to freedom of choice the Mu'tazilite construction of free will entailed human efficiency and secondary causation. In fact, their insistence that humans had both the ability to choose and the autonomous power to translate their choices into reality resulted in an outright affirmation that humans actually created their own actions.[11]

I was intrigued by Abdul Jabbar, as he argued compellingly. I was surprised to learn that his arguments have been practically forsaken by Sunni Muslims despite him arguing almost as convincingly as the Asharites. However, Abdul Jabbar had solved one problem by creating another. In his keenness to preserve free will of human beings from the will of God– rendering human beings independent and abolishing any possible infringement from an entity such as God–he was willing to consider human beings as being capable of creating actions from non-actions. This is a possibility flatly denied by the Quran: 'Allah has never had any offspring, nor is there any god besides Him. Otherwise, each god would have taken away what he created, and they would have tried to dominate one another. Glorified is Allah above what they claim!.'[12]

Jackson summarises the Mu'tazilite opinion (best represented through Abdul Jabbar) in the following way: 'in sum, the Mu'tazilite understanding of omnipotence refused to privilege this divine characteristic over divine omnibenevolence in such a way that the latter would be emptied of substantive meaning or made contingent on divine or human subjectivity'.[13] I was not satisfied with this trade-off of God's omnipotence for human freedom, nor was it acceptable to me in light of my intellectual certainty that only a necessary being can create from nothing. Human beings are contingent and not necessary, and thus cannot create something from nothing.

Most of the Muslim students in my class were Asharites who subscribed to concepts such as *kasb* ('acquisition' through 'petitioning' God). In a conversation with one colleague after a class discussion, I suggested that occasionalism and hard determinism are two sides of the same coin. He rejected this, arguing that there is a kind of 'petitioning' that the worshipper of Allah does which allows him to literally be responsible and 'earn' a kind of salvation. I was not convinced with this as it came close to what I had read of Sam Harris about human beings being no more than biochemical puppets. 'If there is no causation in the world,' I asked my friend, 'how isn't God the author of my sin?'

He struggled to answer, but gave a last-gasp attempt to convince me of the doctrine on *kasb*. 'You do have a free will,' he said, 'but ultimately Allah is in control of everything.'

'If I lie,' I asked, 'is the direct cause of my action Allah? Is he responsible for me lying?'

'Yes,' he answered in a nonchalant way, 'Allah is the cause for everything. If you deny this, you deny the omnipotence of God.' I was not satisfied. An approach that entailed de- emphasising free will was not what I was looking for given that the Quran and morality in general presuppose human agency and choice. It is true that the Asharites possessed a model of free will, but it was lacking. The notion that God would allow the human to petition and then accept or reject the petition may itself be understandable. However, that God would directly cause the petitioning and then choose to accept or reject it struck me as nothing short of crass and fully-fledged determinism.

I later discovered that this issue of Allah lying was a matter of great controversy between Deobandis and Barelvis, two Indian Muslim currents. Upon returning home, I researched the issue further by exploring the works of al-Ghazali, al-Razi, al-Baqillani, and al-Juwayni–arguably the four most important contributors within the Asharite tradition. Although all four men had interesting things to say on the matter, I found the words of al-Baqillani most remarkable. Firstly, as was the custom of both Asharites and Mu'tazilites, al-Baqillani divides things into three things: *ajsaam* (bodies), *araad* (accidents), and *jawahir* (atoms). He then makes the point that any contingent and caused object cannot be so as a result of characteristics which inhere

in itself. If this were so (and objects were necessary), all objects from the same genus would all exist at the same time and would never be out of existence in the first place.[14]

After reflecting on this, I eventually asked my professor about the implications of this passage. He told me that here, al-Baqillani was making an argument for God's existence by relying upon occasionalist reasoning. He told me that al-Baqillani was making the argument that each individual instantiation of any object fitting into any master-key transcendental category or genus must have been directly caused to be by an ultimate cause. While I understood the argument and found it both fascinating and useful, I was still not convinced. If the world is just the illusory appearance of causes, like dominoes falling on one another, but each domino was not causing the other to actually fall, to what extent could we say we are in charge of our own actions? *Kasb*, or 'petitioning', seemed frivolous and fatalistic. It was clear that they wanted to preserve a certain notion of God's omnipotence in their explanations and were willing to do so at the expense of human freedom and, by extension, God's justice. How could God directly cause my actions and then hold me responsible for it? This struck me as merely the mirror opposite of what Abdul Jabbar was doing.

Upon being admitted to the Master of Theology postgraduate programme at the University of Oxford, I still had this matter in my mind. I was eager to see what the crème de la crème of the academic world might offer me by way of trying to resolve this issue. The subject of theological compatibilism came up in a course entitled Science and Religion. The lecturer was not linking the issue to any particular theologian, but gave an analogy of a shepherd and sheep, which managed to lodge itself in my mind. The shepherd would allow the sheep to graze in a designated area but would restrict the sheep from transgressing the bounds of said area. The sheep enjoyed a kind of restricted freedom. Through this parable, the lecturer argued that, in likewise fashion, God may have created us and given us permission to act freely within certain parameters. These parameters, it would be assumed, are sufficient to render us morally responsible for our actions. The lecturer asked if anyone had any reservations with her analogy. I immediately put my hand up to share the Asharite perspective, assuming it would be an argument she would not have come across. 'The sheep are not free if their actions are directly caused by the shepherd,' I said.

'Why do they need to be caused by the shepherd unless you believe in a kind of Asharite occasionalism?' she asked. I was ready to debate but I decided to bite my tongue as I did not want to come across as polemical, particularly as a faith outsider; the lecture was being held in a church. I wanted to question the proposition that the sheep could independently do what they wanted to do in the first place given that the shepherd, unlike God, did not will the sheep's actions aforetime. I was still left wondering how I could personally square the circle of the conflicts between divine and human freedom.

Some weeks later, I was auditing a philosophy course when the issue of compatibilism and free will came up once again, though this time in a godless, secularised format: If the universe follows deterministic laws (e.g. the laws of physics) and free will was the 'ability to do otherwise', it can either be the case that free will exists and the universe does not follow deterministic laws, or that free will does not exist and an uninterrupted causal chain of antecedent events render us all puppets. If this line of reasoning is prioritised, determinism may be seen as very convincing. Prioritise another and one may come to view compatibilism as more convincing. In this view, an action is considered 'free' if one could have done otherwise. If the past was different, a person would have done otherwise. The past could have been different, therefore one could have done otherwise. But could the past really have been different?

What seemed to be popular in compatibilist literature is this 'Principle of Alternative Possibilities'. I sat in the common room after the philosophy sessions and realised how disturbing this issue was for atheists convinced by the determinist paradigm. 'If we are just puppets, what's the point?' asked one of them as he gazed out of the window. The Streatham terrorist stabbing had

occurred that very week. 'On determinism, the terrorist didn't do anything wrong as he was forced to commit the act by antecedent events,' he said. As he said this, I remembered Sam Harris being refuted by fellow New Atheist thinker Daniel Dennett for holding people morally accountable after negating them of any choosing power.[15] I had realised the clear psychological advantages that theists have in believing in both the will of God and the moral responsibility of human beings. Something that stuck out as consistently shared in my interactions with Muslims and Christian students was a strong impulse to make sense of evil using Quranic or Biblical eschatology, and with particular reference to the mysterious wisdom of God.

For my paper for the Doctrine, Context and Practice module, I decided to compare Fazlur Rahman (a 'liberal' Muslim thinker) with Karl Barth, one of the most influential Christian theologians of the 20th century. Since Barth came out of the Reform tradition, I had to do my homework on the approaches of different creedal schools of thought in relation to this issue. I realised from the outset that the same tensions and questions that live in the Muslim context existed in the Christian world as well. I was fascinated by this and had been, by this point, convinced that all major religious and intellectual traditions have had to deal with this issue in some form. Similar arguments that Asharites were having with Mu'tazilites in the 8th century were being had by Calvinists with Arminians in the 16th and 17th centuries. My objective in looking at the Christian works on determinism and free will was to see if there were formulations, articulations, or arguments that have been used to good effect to allow for one to affirm the doctrine of free will without compromising God's omnipotence, omniscience, justice, or mercy. I decided to read all the relevant chapters in Calvin's institutes. Calvin seemed to prefer what he may have considered as God's freedom over and above human freedom. What made Calvin's views on predestination more consequential than any developed Islamic creedal school is the doctrine of original sin or, in Calvin's words, the teaching that man is 'forced to be the servant of sin'.[16] Calvin also realised he was opposing much precedent within Christianity, with the notable exception of Augustine, who he quotes (on these issues) as regularly as he does scripture itself. In this regard, Calvin says:

Moreover, although the Greek Fathers, above others, and especially Chrysostom, have exceeded due bounds in extolling the powers of the human will, yet all ancient theologians, with the exception of Augustine, are so confused, vacillating, and contradictory on this subject, that no certainty can be obtained from their writings.[17]

I was interested in how Calvin, along with others, defined free will. It had been defined as:

The thing meant by free will, though constantly occurring in all writers, few have defined. Origin, however, seems to have stated the common opinion when he said, It is a power of reason to discern between good and evil; of will, to choose the one or other.[18]

I went back to some of my Christian colleagues to ask them about Calvin. They told me that he had a 'strong view' of God's sovereignty. The assumption, of course, is that it takes away from the sovereignty of God to have actors in the world whose actions have efficacious free will.

After consulting a number of secondary sources, I realised that it would be unfair to say that Calvin did not believe in human agency at all, as he writes, '…man is said to have free will, not because he has a free choice of good and evil, but because he acts voluntarily, and not by compulsion'.[19] But what is the substantive difference between these two things? In his discussion on free will, R.C. Sproul prefers the definition of Jonathan Edwards, writing, 'Edwards says that free will is 'the mind choosing.'' What he is saying is that, though he distinguishes between the mind and the will, the two are inseparably related'.[20] On a secular level, these definitions are also in line with those of the famous compatibilist Harry Frankfurt who states:

My conception of freedom of the will appears to be neutral with regard to the problem of determinism. It seems conceivable what it should be causally determined that a person is free to want what he wants to want. If this is conceivable, then it might

be causally determined that a person enjoys free-will.[21]

What is common across all of these definitions is that free will is defined as a first- person experience. Notably, none of the aforementioned definitions have an 'alternative possibility' requirement. In other words, they are all compatible with determinism to some extent as they do not demand that a person 'could have done otherwise'. This being the case, it could be easy to criticise these articulations of free will, as they deprive human actors of having efficacious will on the world. Having said this, some of the key doctrines that, after Calvin, would go on to form part of the famous T.U.L.I.P. acronym (like total depravity) would run counter to Muslim notions of original goodness from the *fitrah* (dispositional state). On this point, the Qur'an narrates a spiritual event where all of the souls of humankind are consulted on whether they accept the sovereignty of God, and they reply in the affirmative:

And remember when your Lord brought forth from the loins of the children of Adam their descendants and had them testify regarding themselves. Allah asked, "Am I not your Lord?" They replied, "Yes, You are! We testify." He cautioned, "Now you have no right to say on Judgment Day, 'We were not aware of this.'"[22]

This difference, though important, would not be all that consequential in terms of the major tension between theological determinism and free will. Even if the T.U.L.I.P. acronym was missing the T, the same basic questions would remain around how symbiotic harmony could exist between free will (understood internally or psychologically) and theological determinism. This exercise in comparative theology was beneficial nonetheless in helping me to notice that definitions of free will across major schools of Islamic creedal thought, namely Asharism, were in line with those from the Reform tradition.

After making known that I wanted to further explore alternative opinions on these subjects, I was recommended two books, Arminianism: *Against Calvinism* by Roger E. Olson, and *Classical Arminianism* by F. Leroy Forlines. Arminianism, named after Jacobus Arminius, was a group that had resisted T.U.L.I.P. concepts and had instead laid out five articles on the matter of predestination.[23] The two articles perhaps most at odds with Reformed theology were that 'God's grace, which is not irresistible, is necessary for thinking or doing any good',[24] and, 'True believers are enabled by grace to persevere to the end, and it may be possible to lose this grace'.[25] Reading *Against Calvinism*, I highly appreciated the emphasis on free will that both authors had made an effort to depict. A few things really caught my attention while reading these books, including the following statement by Forlines:

A God who can grant true freedom of will and still retain His sovereign control is a much greater God than a God who must limit His approach to sovereign control to determinism.[26]

This struck me as a profound articulation of the issue and resonated with me deeply. It enabled me to develop an intellectual response stressing the theological feasibility of compatibilism, allowing me to further develop my thoughts on the concept of impossibility. The logical category of impossibility relates to something that cannot instantiate in the real world, like a squared circle.[27] On this definition, the question 'can God create a squared circle' is meaningless. Muslim thinkers of virtually all creedal schools also include those things that conflict with God's nature (e.g. God transforming into a golden calf) as also being impossible as they contradict his intrinsic and necessary attributes. The question 'can God grant true freedom of will to human beings and still retain his sovereign control' (in at least the definitions of free will we have mentioned by the Reform and Muslim theologians above) does not seem to fit into the categories of impossibility outlined above. Thus, the notion of theological compatibilism, from this perspective, should be seen as consistent.

The main problem I faced in my encounter with Arminianism and Molinism (named after Luis Molina and popularly defended by William Lane Craig) was how both schools seemed to compromise God's power. Craig, who defends a notion of 'middle

knowledge' of God or 'counterfactual knowledge', notes the following:

"Given the truth of certain counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, it is possible that God did not have it within His power to realize a world in which all persons freely respond affirmatively to His offer of salvation."[28] (Craig, 2013:1)

Forlines explicitly places conditions on God:

"In conditional efficacious decrees, God efficaciously decreed that certain things would take place when certain conditions were met."[29]

I was surprised to learn that some contemporary Arminians reject altogether the view that God possesses foreknowledge of the free acts of human beings.[30] This reminded me of the Mu'tazilites' take on the interplay between free will and Divine decree. Given that I was troubled by the prospect of a necessary being (God) being contingent on a set of extraneous conditions, the Arminian, Molinist, and Mu'tazilite responses were all clearly lacking and unsatisfactory. It would seem that in order to remove one impossibility from God (namely, the impossibility of granting human beings free will), they were forced to introduce another (namely, imposing external forces that condition God's actions).

I was surprised, however, that I had not come across a like-for-like Islamic alternative to 'middle knowledge' in Islamic works. Of course, the Asharites, Maturidites, and Traditionalists affirm 'hypothetical knowledge' of God, but I had not come across anyone as articulate the matter as Najm al-Deen al-Toofi. In a completely unexpected book (a book of law extrapolation), al-Toofi states:

"Allah knows the knowledge of all things, about what is, what was, what will be, and what would have been. So, Allah knew that had he left the creation as independent with their actions (in creating them and bringing them to be) they would have been exactly what they are now."[31]

Reading al-Toofi after my exposure to Molinism was an interesting instance of creedal beliefs of another faith leading me to understand more about different opinions within my own. The appeal in al-Toofi's thought is that at first glance he seemingly sorted out a mechanism for symbiotic coexistence between Divine determinism and human free will, namely, that the will would be based on the completely free actions of humans in a hypothetical state, which would allow God full omnipotence. Two things stuck out as real problems to this line of reasoning. Firstly, the hypothetical state of 'independent humans' was an impossible state as it describes contingent actors (humans) being independent (necessary). Such a state is as impossible as the existence of a squared circle. Secondly, that humans would be judged based on potential actions and not actual ones is clearly against Divine justice. Besides this, al-Toofi's notion seemed to be in direct conflict with one of the most popular hadiths in the Islamic tradition: if someone 'intended to perform an evil deed, but did not do it, then Allah writes it down with Himself as a complete good deed'[32]

Over the course of my studies, I have encountered a number of people of my own faith who were incensed after learning that I am exploring the theologies and philosophies of 'deviants' and 'disbelievers'. One of them advised me to return to 'the way of the Salaf' (the early generations of Muslims). When I asked him for book recommendations, he gave me a list of small primers, all of which I had already read. I was about to thank him and walk away when he added, 'Read Ibn al-Qayyim on the issue of *qadr* in his *Shifa Al-Aleel* and Ibn Taymiyyah on this issue.' I was perplexed that this person who had warned me against relying on philosophy to explore these questions had recommended books jam-packed with philosophical explanations.

As I ploughed through Ibn al-Qayyim's discussion on predestination in Arabic (it has not been fully translated into English), I stumbled upon an analogy that reminded me of my Science and Religion lecturer's parable of the shepherd and the sheep. Ibn

al-Qayyim gives an analogy of a master and a slave. The slave has been given permission to spend money from the master, but all transactions of the slave are possible only because of this permission. If the slave spends the money he has been given permission to use properly, he will be rewarded; if not, then he will be punished.[33]

The strength of this analogy lies in the fact that it emphasises the importance of Divine permission in this broader question. It is this permission which allows God to maintain sovereignty and omnipotence while simultaneously allowing human beings to act freely within the parameters of such permission. The main problem I had was in relation to independence. The sheep in the professor's analogy and the slave in Ibn al-Qayyim's were seemingly acting independently, but one cannot be regarded as acting independently if all that one does is willed by God.

Following the recommendation of the student, I also read Ibn Taymiyyah's works on this issue. Unlike the Asharites, Ibn Taymiyyah affirms secondary causation in the universe and makes it clear that all secondary causes are not independent.[34] Interestingly, this is also the view of the Maturidites and a point of departure between them and the Asharites. The Maturidites were named after Abu Mansur al-Maturidi and have beliefs very similar to those of the Asharites in general, including affirming belief in the previously discussed doctrines of *kasb* (acquisition). In this regard, Ibn al-Humam affirms that God has given power for humans to act, and has allowed their actions to be efficacious.[35]

Here, Ibn Taymiyyah refutes the Mu'tazilites and all who claim that it is logically conceivable for the human being to act independently of God. He affirms secondary causation by giving the example of a child who is caused by a mother from one perspective and by God from another.[36] Like al-Baqillani above, he states as evidence of the contingency of the action the fact that it had a start point.[37] Unlike al-Baqillani, however, Ibn Taymiyyah affirms secondary causation and efficacious free will of human actors.

Reflecting on Ibn Taymiyyah's words, I felt that he provided answers to some of the key questions being explored in my philosophy class. If we abstract human actions, they are contingent and possible as they are caused and dependent on the will of God as well as secondary causation in order to exist. Ibn Taymiyyah was able to demonstrate why human actions are necessary from one perspective and contingent from another. They are necessary because they are permitted to exist by the will of the necessary existence (God). Anything that God does, permits, or enacts is necessary. Our volitions and actions fall squarely within this purview. We could not have done otherwise, not because our actions are not efficacious (or because we do not possess a 'libertarian free will'), but because we were permitted to act by a necessary being with a necessary will.

Nonetheless, Ibn Taymiyyah, like all who preceded him, still failed to answer the question of 'how': How is our will and God's will compatible in the ways suggested? After reading the explanations of all of the major Islamicate and Western theological and philosophical contributors on this topic, I had arrived at the conclusion that this question simply could not be resolved completely. There is no thought experiment, analogy, nor argument capable of doing so that accounts for all of the variables on this issue. Having said this, my experiences at SOAS and Oxford, interacting with experts and students from all major world traditions, provided me with several worthwhile breakthroughs on this issue.

Firstly, on the question of whether God can grant true freedom of will to human beings and still retain his sovereign control, I am confident that the answer is 'yes'. The realm of impossibility for God is designated to two categories: that which is logically impossible (like squared circles), and that which, if used to characterise God, would entail an opposite to His intrinsic and necessary attributes (e.g. the proposition of God losing his omni-qualities). For one to argue that the compatible coexistence of human free will and Divine will is an impossibility, they must necessarily possess a full knowledge of the nature of the generally inaccessible will of God.

Secondly, we have been able to show how a kind of libertarian free will can coexist with Divine will and omnipotence. First-person human decision-making as well as human action are both things which are necessary. They are necessary not because they possess some intrinsic eternality or uncaused nature (in fact, the opposite is true), but only because they have been allowed to be efficacious by the all-powerful will of God. In this way, they are contingent in themselves and necessary because of their connection with God's will. Even hard determinists must admit that there is nothing intrinsically necessary about human thoughts and actions. The argument is that an uninterrupted chain of causal events made these actions inevitable. Perhaps the main demonstrable difference between theists and atheists or deist determinists is that the former believe that the 'uninterrupted chain' was broken by a pre-eternal first cause.

Thirdly, occasionalism (although not fully convincing personally for reasons discussed earlier) casts considerable aspersion on the hard determinist narrative. This is so because it puts into question the entire notion of an uninterrupted causal chain. Even if one is not committed to a state of affairs wherein God is directly causing everything in the universe (or in existence), the fact that God can stop causes from taking effect is something that certainly unsettles the hard determinist narrative. For example, if God decides to interrupt the burning effect of fire, there is no rational reason to regard this an impossibility.

Lastly, I felt that the cylinder and cone analogy of Chrysippus (and the similar analogy found in the hadith about rain and ground quality) is the best analogy I have encountered by which to illustrate some of the tensions between human and Divine will. The analogy seems to strongly substantiate 'the different person principle' that two different people faced with the same external cause will choose or act differently.[38] This proposition, at least on face value, seems irrefutable.

I had to resign to the seemingly unsolvable nature around the exact mechanics relating to God's will and human will, and I had to come to terms with their being possibly irreconcilable. The question of whether God can grant true freedom of will to human beings and still retain his sovereign control, and the question of *how* God does this, are two distinct questions. How God wills is as unknown and unknowable to us as how God sees or how God hears or how God knows. All of these questions are practically unanswerable. Demonstrating God's existence and identity are very different endeavours to seeking to understand or explain the precise modality of how God does what he does.

On a practical level, feeling that one does not actually possess free will can be psychologically damaging. In a debate with Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris argued his case for hard determinism and, in doing so, admitted that 'people feel they have libertarian free will and when I get emails from people who are psychologically destabilised by my argument, these are people that believe that something integral to their life and well-being is in jeopardy'.[39] I see a pathetic irony in being convinced that one is choiceless. One must start with the assumption of being able to 'decide' in order to decide that they cannot truly decide. This, of course, entails a kind of cognitive dissonance, which in turn creates 'de-stabilisation', the kind of which even some avid followers of Harris complain to him about.

On the other hand, I would feel a great deal of anguish if I believed each of my actions to be all-defining and consequential. Knowing that death and disaster have been preordained and willed by God provides me with a personal sense of liberation. As the Bible states:

And if they ask you, 'Where shall we go?' tell them, 'This is what the LORD says: "Those destined for death, to death; those for the sword, to the sword; those for starvation, to starvation; those for captivity, to captivity."'[40]

The Prophet Muhammad is also reported to have said:

"Strange are the ways of a believer, for there is good in every affair of his, and this is not the case with anyone else except in the case of a believer; if he has an occasion to feel delight, he thanks [God], and thus there is a good for him in it; if he gets into

trouble and shows resignation [and endures it patiently], there is a good for him in it."[41]

Believing in both free will and theological determinism allows me to feel a profound sense of protection and internal stability in the face of life's hardships and traumas. Reminding oneself of the perfect wisdom of God in decreeing anything and everything that transpires has been the best antidote to hopelessness and depression personally. Knowing that life is a test and that bad things can sometimes ultimately be good for me has allowed me to make sense of pain. After all, without pain, would I truly appreciate pleasure? On this point, Ibn al-Qayyim states that the 'creation of opposites is in order to manifest His dazzling wisdom, his vanquishing power, accomplished will and perfect and complete sovereignty'.[42]

In an age of cancer and coronavirus, there are many things that are beyond our control. A robust theory of theological determinism makes sense of otherwise seemingly senseless events of needless human suffering. According to a worldview characterised by atheistic materialism, there is no objective 'reason' why evil or suffering happens. Everything is merely a series of arrangements and rearrangements of physical atoms. I am ultimately no more significant than a slab of meat in a butcher shop. My physical annihilation in a car accident or a plane crash is no more objectively significant than the destruction of a snowman. The atheist philosopher Alex Rosenberg admits this candidly, stating that 'purpose and its parent aboutness are illusions created by introspection'.[43] On such a view of existence, I do not believe there is any number of drugs one could take or distractions one could pursue to make life feel ultimately worth living. Pastorally, helping religious people to see and acknowledge God's wisdom is half of the psychological battle. The other half relates to giving them hope in their own choices.

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