

MU'TAZILITES AND ASH'ARITES VIEW OF HUMAN FREEDOM

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ABSTRACT:

The Mu'tazila, literally 'those who withdraw themselves' - movement was founded by Wasil bin 'Ata in the second century AH. Its members were united in their conviction that it was necessary to give a rationally coherent account of Islamic beliefs. (Jarullah: 1969) In addition to having an atomistic view of the universe, they generally held to five theological principles, of which the two most important were the unity of God and divine justice. The former led them to deny that the attributes of God were distinct entities or that the Qur'an was eternal, while the latter led them to assert the existence of free will. Ash'arism is the name of a philosophico-religious school of thought in Islam which developed in fourth/fifth centuries A.D, which named after its founding thinker, al-Ash'ari. Islam. It laid the foundation of an orthodox Islamic theology. It had its origin in the reaction against the excessive rationalism of the Mu'tazila. (Sharif: 1983) Its members insisted that reason must be subordinate to revelation. They accepted the cosmology of the Mu'tazilites but put forward a nuanced rejection of their theological principles. One of the principle which distinguish Ash'arites from the Mu'tazilite school of thought is "Freedom of the Human Will". Disputes about free will in Islam began with the *Kharijite vs Murji'ite* disputes, with the *Kharijites* like Mu'tazilites arguing that humans had "*qadar*," "Free Will" the capacity to do right or wrong, and thus deserved the reward or punishment they received, whereas *Murji'ites* insisted on God's "*jabr*," or total power and initiative in managing all events. (Denny: 1985) Later thinkers such as al-Ash'ari searched for ways to explain how both human *qadar*, and divine *jabr* could be asserted at the same time. Ash'arites took up an intermediary position between the libertarian and fatalistic view, held by Mu'tazilites and Jabrites respectively. (Sharif: 1983) Ash'ari develops a "dual agency" or "acquisition" account of free will in which every human action has two distinct agents. God creates the possibility of a human action with his divine *jabr*, but then the human follows through and "acquires" the act, making it theirs and taking responsibility for it using their human *qadar*. (Watt: 1948)

DISCUSSION:

The problem of Free Will vs. Determinism has puzzled philosophers for thousands of years. Historically, debate has centered on the issue of the

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will's freedom, a question of prime importance for the analysis of human action and moral responsibility. It is a profound problem for without free will there can be no morality, no right and wrong, no good and evil. All our behaviour would be pre-determined and we would have no creativity or choice. Philosophers have often thought that persons are responsible only for those actions that they have the option either to do or not to do or to will or not to will. If all acts, including acts of will, are predetermined, then this option does not appear to exist.

Society generally holds people responsible for their actions, saying that they deserve praise or blame for what they do. However, many believe moral responsibility to require free will, in other words, the ability to do otherwise. Thus, the issue here is whether individuals are ever morally responsible, and if so, in what sense. Incompatibilists tend to think that determinism is at odds with moral responsibility. After all, it seems impossible that one can hold someone responsible for an action that could be predicted from the beginning of time. The problem of free will and determinism is both old and complex. From the early days of human civilization men reflected on it and formed their opinions about its various aspects. The Greek philosophers, Socrates (470-399 BC), Plato (427-347 BC) and Aristotle (384-322 BC) concentrated on the internal capacity of man to find the truth of practical good. **(Frank: 1993)** The medieval Christian dogmatism led man to despair as he had no freedom to enquire about the authority and had to suffer for the 'original sin'. **(Islahi: 2001)** The Renaissance thinkers of Europe like Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Rene' Descartes (1596-1650) and Leibniz (1646-1716) focused more on the rational mechanism of the universe than on the spirituo-ethical reality of man. The propounders of Enlightenment and empirical science revolved round the material progress and happiness in the world of cause and effect, thus ignoring the role of transcendental or spiritual powers. **(Marvin Perry et. al.: 1989)** To many of them man is subject to cosmic physical determinism, which, in consequence, restricts his domain of activity. **(Maududi: 1979)**

Islam, the primordial and revealed religion of God for all-embracing guidance of mankind, treats the problem of free will and determinism in totality. In the history of Islam scholars have dealt with it in various dimensions and paradigms. Its conspicuous rise was during the period of Umayyads and it continued to stimulate the scholars of subsequent times. Here an attempt is made to look into the early rise of the problem and its treatment by the Muslim theologians of the medieval times. The focus of study Mutazilites and Asharites views on human free will only.

According to Qur'an, man is born free, and can choose (freely) from good and bad ways of life that has been manifest to him. **(Shadai & Yousaf: 1993)** But later on, when Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Central Asia, Africa etc, countries far from Hijaz, (today's Saudi Arabia) people came to background. Naturally they read into Islam different meanings. This led to the difference of opinion, instance whether the Attributes of God are distinct identical with His Being. Whether the Qur'an is a determined; whether man is free or absolutely with God; nature of God's knowledge; does He know only Particulars;? These and similar other questions divided the Muslims into different camps. But the first problem that shocked the Muslim world was whether man is free or determined. Some of the Muslims were of the opinion that man is determined so much so that even his will is not in his control, nor he can perform any action by his own choices. He is like a puppet in the hands of supernatural forces and eventually God is responsible for every action.

The question especially of free will was very hotly debated in the early days of Muslim religious thought. Disputes about free will in Islam began with the *Kharijite vs Murji'ite* disputes, with the *Kharijites* like *Mu'tazlites* arguing that humans had "*qadar*," the capacity to do right or wrong, and thus deserved the reward or punishment they received, whereas *Murji'ites* insisted on God's "*jabr*," or total power and initiative in managing all events. **(Denny: 1985)** It is important to note, however, an early and significant association between *Mu'tazila* and a contemporary of *Wasil*, *Jahm b. Safwan* (d. 745), founder of rival *Jahmite* School, which upheld the unqualified doctrine of divine omnipotence and the consequent absolute determination of all human action by God. Other theologians must be assumed to have subscribed to this view which with minor refinements was later identified with the orthodox belief and whose exponents are generally referred to as *Jabrites* (Determinists), without being identified by name. **(Fakhry: 1983)** A controversy between *Jahm* and an emissary of *Wasil* is reported by later authority, and echoes of the polemics between the two schools ring through the old doxographical treatises. **(Fakhry: 1983)**

Later thinkers such as *al-Ash'ari* searched for ways to explain how both human *qadar*, and divine *jabr* could be asserted at the same time. *Ash'ari* develops a "dual agency" or "acquisition" account of free will in which every human action has two distinct agents. God creates the possibility of a human action with his divine *jabr*, but then the human follows through and "acquires" the act, making it theirs and taking responsibility for it using their human *qadar*. **(Watt: 1948)**

The Mutazilites also called the rationalist of Islam, advocate absolute freedom of human actions, and thus justified the existence of heavenly bliss for the good, and eternal tortures of hell, for the wicked. Mutazilites became the supporters of justice and unity of God. They called themselves the people of unity, and Justice, and as a corollary from justice and unity of God believed in man's freedom and his responsibility for his actions, otherwise God will become a party to human action which in turn will nullify the reward and punishment of God on the Day of Judgment. If man is not free in his action, how could he qualify for reward and punishment? Besides fatalism of man entails that God is a party to evil which is indeed blasphemous. Hence in order to protect the purity and perfection of God, it is essential to maintain the freedom of man which is in consonance with the teachings of the Qur'an.

In brief, we can say, that the Mutazilites believe that man is the author of his own acts and as such is responsible for the consequences. They maintain that man is free, man is freedom. (Tariq: 1985-87) He can indeed choose freely from the right and wrong course of life. Since man has been bestowed with intelligence and freedom and has also been guided as to what is good and bad, he is assumed to make the right choice and be obedient to God and his Prophet, and thus qualify for success here and in the hereafter. Mutazilites contend everything comes from God, then reward and punishment are absolutely unjustified. We can not think of God punishing a man for crime which he never committed nor can we think of God rewarding a man for something which he has never done.

They pointed out two kinds of actions: One "*Taulid*" and the other "*Mubasharah*", that is, "volitional" and "in-volitional" acts. (Sharif: 1983) By *Taulid* they implied the necessary occurrence of another act finger necessities the movement of my ring or watch. Although I do intend to move the ring, yet I alone will be regarded as the mover. Some people thought that the Mutazilites based there Divine Justice theory on the Greek thought while the Mutazilites themselves claim that they are inspire by the following Qur'anic verses:

1. God is not unjust to his servants.
2. God will not wrong any body the weight of an atom. On contrary if anyone has done any good/bad upto the weight of an atom; he will be rewarded or punished accordingly.
3. God does not impose (any task) on any soul but to extent of its capacity. (Tariq: 1985-87)

These verses of Qur'an clearly suggest that strict justice will be meted out on the Day of Judgment. In fact, man will be rewarded or punished by his own deeds. These deeds will be hung to our neck. Evil doers' will cry for punishment and no justice will be done to any soul. Mu'tazilites further holds that, God makes the distinction between good and evil. Goodness and evil are innate in the things themselves. The goodness or evil of things is called to be the cause of commands. They believed that God will not do any thing against laws of nature. It is obligatory on Him to do justice; otherwise it would imply cruelty and injustice, which is against His nature. It seems clear that Mu'tazilites were of the view, that man is free. He can act according to his own volition and is responsible for his actions. **(Jarullah: 1969)**

There was another group in Islamic theology, which was against the extreme rationalistic attitude of Mu'tazila. They have given their own views about the human freedom. It was the orthodox reaction in the form of Ash'arism, named after its founder Abul Hassan Al-Ashari. They denied causation and uniformity of the laws of Nature, not in order to defend the freedom of human will, but to support the absolute Power and Sovereignty of God. They maintained that God could not be bound by any laws. The Ash'arite School, therefore, declared that God is free in His action, and it is not necessary for Him to follow any law. He can forgive whom he likes; and punish whom he likes. Though one should not miss the point that God has imposed upon Himself the law of Mercy. He will not do any injustice. But His Sovereignty and Power is just Absolute. The main concern of the Ash'arites is to circumscribe the freedom of man in order to protect and preserve the Sovereignty of God. This concern is central to the Ash'arites, view of human freedom. And if we examine the evolution of Muslim History, it appears that it was the Ash'arites view that eventually prevailed amongst the Muslim community though it was the Mu'tazilites view that is nearest to the spirit of Qur'anic teachings that is, man is free. In fact, life and liberty are interchangeable concepts in Islam.

According to Ash'arites, the objects of physical world do not possess any inherent qualities. Ash'arites maintains that God creates not only the object of the world, but also the knowledge about them in human mind. This free will is nothing but the presence of power in us, and the various possibilities which are corresponding to the power and choice thus created. All the actions of human being are created by God, and they are acquired by human beings.

The Ash'arites seems to take the middle path between the libertarian and fatalistic views, which was presented by Mu'tazalites and *Jabarites* respectively. The orthodox *Jabarites* maintained a purely fatalistic view.

According to them human actions are predetermined and predestined by God. Man has no power to produce any actions. They said that everything is from God, while the rationalist, Mu'tazalites and *Qadarites* maintained that man has full power to produce an action, and he is fully free in his choice, although the power to choose and to act is created in him by God. **(Jarullah: 1969)**

As stated earlier, the Ash'arite takes an intermediary position between the two extremes. They made a distinction between creation and acquisition of action. Ash'arites was of the opinion that God is the creator of human action and man is simply an acquirer. "Action of human being are created (*mukhlug*) by God, the creatures are not capable of creating any action". "There is no power except the power of God and actions of man are, therefore, His creation". **(Sharif: 1983)**

They further advanced their view, that, power is of two types which is either

(1) Original; or (2) Derived.

The Original Power is effective one, while the derived power can create nothing. Man has a derived power which is given to him by God. Asharites were of the opinion that whatever occurs is due to the derived power, and a person only acquires the actions by the derived power, and simply called as acquirer. Man has no power to create any action or even he has no power to initiate any work. **(Sharif: 1983)** Ash'arites further maintained that God Creates in man the power of free choice and it is by virtue of this power that he makes a distinction between the right and wrong. Although it is not an effective power in producing the actions because God only creates the action and man only acquires these actions. He is only free to choose between good and evil. If he performs good actions, reward will be given, and if he does wrong action, punishment will be given to him. **(Sharif: 1983)**

From the above discussion it is clear that the problem of free will and determinism has remained baffling to mankind in general and the Muslim treatment of it illustrates the appropriation of man's role in the world of Divine power and creation. Muslim theologians (*mutakalimun*) like Mu'tazilites and Ash'rites look at the problem and relates it to Allah's Justice and the sense of reason in man himself. Ash'rites on the other hand, observe that power of action in man lies really with God and the former derives it from the latter (God) and so he is the acquirer (*muktasib*) of actions rather than their creator. The power of action is bestowed man by God and His is the effective power and that of man is acquisitive as he takes initiative to do

the act. The power corresponds with the choice and initiation of man and results in the completion of an act which is rewarded as per its merit.

CONCLUSION:

To conclude we may say that the Qur'an clearly maintains that the freedom of man and his ability to choose good from evil or vice versa. In fact, the Qur'an is addressed to a man who is presupposed to have basic intelligence and freedom to change his way of life meaningless. *Hidaya* is addressed only when it is his way of life. Since man is free, it is simply logical to hold him responsible for his actions, reward, and punish him accordingly.

The Mu'tazilite school solved the problem by denying God's activity in the sphere of human free will and confining it to the field of nature, this they found necessary in order to preserve human responsibility and divine justice. This freedom, however, is carefully defined, checks and balances are introduced not to eliminate his freedom but just to protect it. God as a creator, creates the basic possibilities. For instance, it is He who created barren deserts as well as the adjoining pastures. Man is free to encamp either in the desert or in the pastures. Choice is his own and so is his responsibility. Islam therefore, allows freedom to human beings and Mu'tazilites were correct in insisting upon it.

It is really unfortunate, however, that it was Ash'arites view of human freedom that came to survive in the history of the Muslim. Most of the revivalists tried to correct this unfortunate trend and restore the dignity and freedom of man as it has been granted to him by the Qur'an. Shah Wali Allah, Iqbal, Mulana Maududi, Ali Shariati are some of the instances in point.

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