

A Comparison of Western Concepts of Free Will and Compatibilism with Islamic and Salafist Determinism

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ABSTRACT

Both theologians and philosophers are concerned about the moral implications of determinism, because it implies that an individual cannot be held responsible for anything he does merely because it happened to him, affected by God or nature as a result of something. This article compares Western concepts of free will and compatibility to Islamic determinism and Salafism, as well as disparities in viewpoints on these philosophical positions. An answer to the question of whether determinism can overcome humanity's inconsistencies, as demonstrated by Western free will and compatibility and Eastern Islamic Salafi views. Determinism (divine determination) has been widely disputed by Muslim scholars and thinkers, just as the discussion over determinism and free will has captured the attention of Western scholars throughout the centuries. Since the classical Islamic era, however, no consensus has been established, and the controversy over the concept of predestination (divine predestination) or predestination has sparked several debates about its relationship to the problem of freedom (freedom) and choice.

INTRODUCTION

This essay compares Islamic and Salafist views regarding free will, in particular determinism, with views found in early modern European philosophy and analytic philosophy. The aim is to seek an answer to the question of whether it is possible to resolve the contradictions for humanity of Western free will and compatibilism and Eastern Islamic, Salafist beliefs in determinism, "that God is in control of everything" (Wagemakers, 2018, p.12). In order to reflect upon the interaction of the philosophical concepts it is also necessary to consider their meaning in the context of how different people of apparently disparate beliefs, traditions, faiths and cultures conduct their lives and decision-making. It should be noted that the focus here is on Salafist and hence a form of Sunni Islam, as it is not possible to fully explore other Islamic denominations within the constraints of this essay, despite their rich philosophical history.

Prior to engaging in the deeper theoretical debate and critique of various perspectives on human free will, it is important to clarify the terms used herein. Therefore, this introductory section presents an overview of determinism, followed by its three main critiques, which are libertarianism, compatibilism, and hard determinism; in addition, the notion of qadar (predestination) in Islam is described, in order to set the scene for an analysis of Western and Islamic Salafist perspectives on free will and determinism.

AN OVERVIEW OF DETERMINISM

Determinism is sometimes called mechanism, and it means that what occurs, or what a person does is fixed and is entirely as a result of the specific conditions that preceded it; therefore,

according to determinism, events do not happen randomly but are part of a cause and effect mechanism. This is despite events appearing to be random from the point of view of the persons involved due to them being unaware of the causes (Gifford 2007). According to determinists then, nothing happens by chance, but everything that happens is determined by what occurred in the past - whether we know about it or not - and the decision to carry out an action is based on multiple background conditions.

LIBERTARIANISM, COMPATIBILISM AND HARD DETERMINISM

The most obvious critique of determinism may be said to be libertarianism, as this states that people do have free will. Moreover, people typically feel as though they are freely making choices, rather than being constrained by a number of causal factors, despite recognising that outside factors have an impact on their decision making. In other words, we have to take decisions and act in the way we see fit, but determinists label this the 'illusion of free will' (Caruso 2012). Furthermore, just because we feel free does not mean that we are free, yet for libertarians, people do actually have free will, and people exist outside of the deterministic causal chain.

Compatibilists posit that although people do not have free will, and despite being determined, they still have moral responsibilities. From the viewpoint of Hume, people are both free and constrained, with constraints preventing the person from doing what they want to do, rather than actions being entirely determined. According to Hume then, when we have the ability to do what we want, we are free, but when we are unable to do so, we are imprisoned and cannot do as we would choose (Kanu 2016). This causes a shift in the debate, and Hume states that we should not concentrate on determinism as it simply exists. "Compatibilists, while acknowledging that agents are determined nonetheless believe that they possess enough 'control' to ground free will and moral responsibility" (Caruso 2012 p.19).

Hard determinism differs from determinism as it states that because we have no free will to choose what acts we perform, thus we have no moral responsibility, and while our acts may be due to our character, we did not freely choose our character. Overall, "The hard determinist maintains that the actions agents perform are causally determined by antecedent conditions, which themselves are outside the control of the agent" (Caruso 2012 p.19).

QADAR (DIVINE DETERMINATION) IN ISLAM

It is essential to consider the importance of divine determination in Islam when discussing determinism and free will in order to support a comparison with other standpoints. Moreover, the aforementioned texts are recognised by the Sunni denomination of Islam, including the Salafi sect, although as with all faiths, interpretations vary.

According to Sunni Muslims, Qadar is the sixth pillar of faith in Islam, and there are several verses in the Quran which refer to qadar; for example, "No misfortune can happen on earth or in your souls but is recorded in a decree before We bring it into existence: that is truly easy for Allah (God)" (Al-Quran 57:22). In addition, there is a statement by Prophet Muhammed) that when the baby is in its mother's womb, "...Allah sends an angel who is ordered to write four things. He is ordered to write down his deeds, his livelihood, his (date of) death, and whether he will be blessed or wretched (in religion). ..." (Khan 1995, Sahih Al Bukhari 3208). While these texts appear to render free will as futile, as God is in control of all that happens, there are other

texts that create a kind of balance; for example, the saying of Prophet Muhammed that “Nothing repels the divine decree but supplication, and nothing increases lifespan but righteousness” (Al Tirmidhi 1:587). In addition, as life is seen as a test according to Islam, then free will is a necessary prerequisite, or such a test would be meaningless, and there is nothing in the Quran or the various branches of orthodox Islam that suggests that people are devoid of moral responsibility.

Having presented an overview of the key philosophical standpoints, the next section will explore free will in general, followed by examining it in relation to faith.

FREE WILL: SOCIETY AND CONSCIOUS THOUGHT

The concept of free will is commonly considered to be the making of choices, without limitations imposed by external pressures, often with conscious planning, deliberation and rational forethought (Monroe and Malle, 2010). It is the exercise of autonomy and resistance to conformity, an exertion of one’s own “inner thoughts, feelings, and motives” even where there is clear guidance on expected behaviour (Alquist et al, 2013, p.3). The suppression of one’s free will, however, is not necessarily negative for the stability of society, as it is predicated on rules of behaviour, occasionally inconvenient but generally “reasonable and beneficial”, as well as conformity to societal norms and values (Alquist et al, 2013, p.21); although such conformity need not necessarily be indicative of a determinist perspective, but could be an exercise of choice for a reasonably quiet life with minimum effort expended. Even so, it should be born in mind that non-conformity is not necessarily indicative of free will, as a person might be driven to non-conformist behaviour by forces outside their control, such as psychological compulsions. The exercise of free will in decision-making requires a social system based on the absence of obstacles to choices and alternative ways of behaving, as well as the availability of resources to facilitate a variety of options (List, 2019, p.21). This, it is suggested, cannot exist outside of philosophical theory given that independence of action is impacted upon by the disparity of resources and limitations placed by societal conditions and demands, even in the ability to communicate when one uses a different language. Alquist et al (2013, p.22) conclude from their study that “belief in free will encourages people to think for themselves and depart from social norms and pressures, as they may often be inclined to do anyway” (Alquist, *et al.* , 2013, p.80). There is also the choice to conform when it suits current rational needs. This reasoning appears on the face of it to be somewhat mechanical and lacks acknowledgement of the general unpredictability of the human being with their capacity for “ambivalence, conflict and self deception” (Frankfurt, 1971, p.15).

Furthermore, without choice or free will, Harris (2012 p.1) claims that there is no justification for the punishment of the criminal as their actions are pre-ordained, nor praise due to the individual who rises far beyond his personal circumstances. However, there are clearly justifications for punishment on consequentialist grounds, as a deterrent, and for the protection of society and rehabilitation. The more freedom a person has to make choices the greater the belief they have in free will (Feldman et al, 2014), yet these choices may be impacted upon by: (i) coercion, a psychological pressure to act, (ii) manipulation by direct interference with the mind, (iii) addiction, a compulsion which overcomes the will and (iv) mental illness, none of which arguably have status as factors in determinism (Allan, 2016, p.4).

William James, in 1884, asserted there are two components of free will according to his model, namely, the random generation of multiple alternative options to facilitate the exercise of chance, an external phenomenon, and decisions made consistent with character, values and desires, which reflect choice (Doyle, 2010). The first concept is akin to Darwin's theory of evolution, and contrary to the determinism of an ordered universe given that "the existing species would be the predetermined consequence of laws of nature and events in the distant past" without the generation of chance events (Doyle, 2010, p.2). Although James explains the role of chance and choice in the exercise of free will, his philosophical analysis lacks comment on how the individual actually makes the decision. This draws in consideration of the biological and psychological processes which underpin choice, such as how behaviour is shaped by rationality compared to, for example, impulse (Felsen and Reiner, 2011, p.10). It is beyond the scope of this study to evaluate such physiological and psychological operations, save to perhaps point out the diverse operations affecting the exercise of free will compared to determinism, where answers are essentially provided by God or the universe.

FAITH(S) AND FREE WILL

Opinions on faith and free will differ according to the belief system and specific denomination or sect of the individual, therefore this section explores free will in classical, Christian, and Islamic thought in an attempt to provide comparisons and highlight the complexities involved in conceptualising free will.

In Christianity, the requirement to act with self-control is closely aligned with free will, although ultimately, believers consider their destiny to lie with God (Baumeister et al, 2010). Religion essentially limits the exercise of free will insofar as it limits the choices available on impulse in preference for the long-term goal of entry to Paradise. In historical terms, Shell (2009, p.2) summarises how "the image of a healthy soul as "self-governing" is very ancient." Indeed, the gift of free will is essential to God's purpose, for "although it makes evil possible, [it] is the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata, of creatures that worked like machines, would hardly be worth creating" (C.S. Lewis, 1952, p.49). Freedom is basically a voluntary covenant between God and Man which accommodates challenge to divine law and deviation from His path. This is the moral basis of responsibility for the exercise of freedom which cannot exist in the theistic perspective of an omniscient God who controls everything (Pinnock, 2009, p.151).

Hume (1739/2012) claims that the role of God is understood as providing the circumstances and path of life, and believers consider that whilst free will is a gift from the Divine, it is consistent with the determination of what must occur in an ordered universe based on the will of God. However, Peterson and Williams (2010, p.143) argue that this is a restrictive, deterministic perspective which de-personalises the relationship with God, yet it is philosophically difficult to detach the principle of free will from the Biblical stance that God commands everything in conformity with His will and is always sovereign. Nevertheless, in the words of Christ when addressing the Jews, "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would have no sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin" (John, 15:2), which emphasises the role of free will – to accept or reject the message. This aligns with the point that God's law only has value when followed by those with the free will to make the choice, ignorance having no import, whilst knowledge makes the choice to sin more grave and worthy of greater sanction (Augustin, 427 AD). Furthermore, the libertarian perspective on free will adds to the understanding of why

there is so much evil in the world even with the oversight of a loving, omniscient God (Vargas, 2009, p.139).

The direct antithetical concept to free will is that of determinism. According to determinists, everything that happens is determined by what occurred in the past - whether we know about it or not - and the decision to carry out an action is based on multiple background conditions. Furthermore, part of determinism involves social conditioning - a form of social determinism which can impose a burden on the individual's behaviour as strong as that of faith. This may lead to the conclusion that "citizens do what they do as a result of a complex interplay between their genes, physical environment, socialisation and just plain luck of where and when they were born" (Allan, 2016, p.32).

Islam shares the same confusion on the concept of free will in the context of an omnipresent and omnipotent God, with Fazli (2012) claiming that this dichotomy is not dealt with in the Quran given Man's inability to understand the interaction. Should preordination apply to human actions, it means that God is endorsing evil which cannot be part of the plans He has for His world. It is a common complaint made in the denial of the very existence of God that should there be an omniscient being, He would not permit disaster. This somewhat conflicts with the Ash'arite philosophical perception (394-925) of God's purpose, which suggests that "what is created by God is without a reason (*sabab*) which makes it necessary and that God is not bound to any compulsion or any duty towards mankind" (Maria De Cillis, 2014, p.13). This is in direct conflict with the words of Prophet Muhammed (pbuh): "Good works protect from evil fates" (Hadith of al-Ṭabarānī, Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad). Where God is believed to be the cause of the human act, it denies the responsibility of Man. Nevertheless, God proclaims to His people a warning: "Each soul is responsible for its own actions; no soul will bear the burden of another. You will all return to your Lord in the end, and He will tell you the truth about your differences" (Quran 6:164). It is only when Man makes decisions on his actions that the day of judgement has any purpose. This will be discussed further in the context of determinist philosophy.

DETERMINISM AND FAITH

The concept of determinism shared by all major faiths, and known by different names such as predestination, or more commonly in a secular context, fate and destiny, is used to explain predictability according to rules which govern the operation of the universe (Smit, 2005). Predestination is a specifically theological concept whereby the causality of events is decreed by God and in the context of change, each minute, each action, is indicative of an evolving world of miracles, as distinct from the more stable determination of nature (Kame, 2013).

Iredale (2014, p.1) defines determinism as "the thesis that there is only one physically possible future or only one physically possible outcome following a series of events." However, the 9th century BC Greek philosopher Homer postulated that if free will does indeed exist, it does so within boundaries which enable the world's natural balance and cohesion (Smit, 2005, p.4), which suggests a basis for compatibility rather than strict determinism. In the exercise of free will, the individual has a choice of courses of action, whereas those who take the determinist approach may avail themselves of only one, pre-designated path (List, 2019 p.81). Related to this, Moazzam (1984) describes the viewpoint of the Muslim intellectual, Afghani, who condemned the view of man as merely an inanimate being with no will of his own and the view of God as a coercive power, as this view renders man's life useless. Afghani views human will

as being based on external causes that are controlled by and subordinated by God, suggesting that God's power over human will is not direct but occurs through a pattern of causation, thereby leaving room for human choice.

Determinist belief, therefore, is not a single philosophical perspective, possessing two potential sources, namely, nature and God. Furthermore, its effect on human behaviour ranges on a scale from 'hard' - a complete denial of moral responsibility for one's actions or influence over opportunity or outcomes, as free will does not exist (Waller, 1988), to 'soft' - where all behaviour is related to a prior event, but this does not prevent the application of responsibility (Eggerman, 1976). However, the soft precept appears a rather clumsy attempt to introduce blame and responsibility into determinist thought. It has been argued by hard determinists that their perspective is "a normative position according to which, given that there is no libertarian free will in the world, moral responsibility and desert are impossible" (Smilansky, 2003, p.260). Psychologists argue that to a significant extent the actor is limited not only by the external environment and social circumstances, but physiologically by genes and the way their brain works, and thus the person's underlying personality traits (Pinker, 2002). This potentially has the effect, as Vedantam (2007, p.A01) suggests, of "reducing morality and immorality to brain chemistry—rather than free will—might diminish the importance of personal responsibility." The absence of self-responsibility and sense of control over one's fate will tend to undermine personal effort, leaving what occurs in life to fate, with the inherent potential of encouraging deviant behaviour by way of frustration (Peake, 1989).

Uschanov (2013, p1) makes three propositions that apply to the practice of deterministic beliefs: (i) nobody can be morally responsible for their actions where they could not have done otherwise, (ii) every human action is conducted in circumstances where nothing else could be done, so (iii) no moral responsibility attaches to any human action. Moral philosophers serve little purpose and the consequences for the stability of society will lack appropriate methods of control or the establishment of norms "because everyone's freedom is destroyed by determinism" (Uschanov, 2013, p3). Social wrongs and actions such as crime and addiction, as well as the actions taken to deal with their effects, are all predestined.

In his identification of different forms of determinism, Weatherford (2017, p.3) explains the physical nature of causal and scientific philosophy, as "natural laws [that] are strictly determinative of future consequences" giving rise to only one outcome of human action - a physical inevitability. Furthermore, the socio-biology category of determinism propounds that role in society are prescribed by genetics. Marxist economic theory talks of the physical restrictions placed on what an individual may do to develop by society and circumstances imposed by the demands of industry. Cultural determinism assures the majority of the world that they have no need to enter a metaphysical debate on the nature of freedom simply because the making of life choices will never be available to them (Weatherford (2017, p.7). It is suggested that many if not all of these categories should be considered in terms of compatibilism because they contain the seeds of rebellion. This is not a course of action which avails to believers in the Salafist philosophy, as explored next.

ISLAM, SALAFISM AND DETERMINISM

The 16th century Christian Protestant reformer postulated that, ultimately, the decision of who will enter Heaven belongs to God as Sovereign over Man, which emphasises predestination and

no human control over one's fate or destiny save for adherence to His rules (Kennard, undated). This is consistent with the doctrine of fatalism as an Islamic sect, while it differs from Salafism, which asserts that, while God determines fate, the individual is responsible and has the right to choose in determining his destiny, in other words, the individual has the right to choose within the circle of determinism 'soft determinism' (Hoover, 2007). Salafists believe that God determines fate through the Qur'an and Sunnah, yet they also believe that the individual has the right to choose. As a result, Salafi thought tends to reconcile destiny between freedom and determinism.

When the term Salafism is mentioned, it is often confused with the term Wahhabism. As a result, the purpose of this section is to distinguish between the two terms and to what extent they are related to determinism. (Schaik and Gruwez, 2013) argue that Salafist orthodoxy has a close relationship to determinist belief within the more political Wahhabism, which forms the basis of Saudi Islam and belief in its aim of rejuvenating the faith (Burkhardt, 1968), on the other hand, asserts that Wahhabism was an extension of early Sunni Salafism rather than a new religion. He continues by claiming that they were reformist ideas that were neither Salafi nor deterministic. According to (Zwemer, 2020), Wahhabi Salafism followed the old ancestor's approach and relied on the Qur'an and Sunnah. Because of a lack of comprehension of the term Wahhabism and the problematic relationship between Salafism and Wahhabism, some went so far as to attribute acts of violence, atonement, and the stifling of economic, social, and political progress to the unavoidable belief in Wahhabi Salafism. However, it is not recommended to study this last element of the movement, but rather to concentrate on the philosophy of faith that underpins the behaviour.

In summary, in order to understand Salafism's position—whether it is deterministic or not—it is necessary to understand where it stands on the Islamic intellectual scenery. Salafism is a branch of the Sunnah, and it is situated between the Jabrism, which emphasises acute determinism, and the Mu'tazila, which tends to choose and absolute freedom as with liberalism (Hoover, 2007). Determinism and liberalism's two extremes were thus reconciled by the reformist movement known as Wahhabi Salafism (Hoover, 2007). Thus, Wahhabi Salafism being as a reformist movement from Sunni thought, reconciling the two extremes of determinism and liberalism, as is the solution to compatibilism. As will be apparent at the end of the following section.

COMPATIBILISM

Iredale (2014, p.2) describes free will in the context of its relationship with determinism, suggesting different categories for: (i) those who assert they cannot co-exist, the incompatibilist libertarians with a purity of belief in free will, (ii) the deniers who emphasise determinism as the guiding force of humanity, and (iii) the compatibilists. Those who promote the compatibility of the theories, what he calls "soft determinists", tend to believe that free will remains exercisable in the natural order of the universe (Iredale, 2014, p.3). It is free will that appears to cause the problems in debates regarding its relationship with determinism so that compatibilism arguably adsorbs free will in the course of the discussion. Uschanov (2013, p8) suggests "compatibilists are philosophers who say that although there is no complete freedom, people are morally responsible because they are still free in some sense." Moreover, compatibilism encourages concentrating on what we are able to do, and that by making

decisions about our actions, we are morally responsible. Hence, according to Frankfurt (1969), determinism is not relevant because if we decide to do something that makes us responsible. Kantian philosophy accepts determinism as true from a scientific perspective, but that we have to assume it is false from a moral standpoint. Unlike the non-human animal, the human being has the will power to resist impulse and decide what ones to avoid and which to satisfy, a positive, moral sense of freedom and rationality in decision-making on choices made available by the natural order (Wood, 1998, p.242). The machinations of nature produce several options for action and therein lies the freedom of the individual to decide which path to take. Compatibility's attempts to marry the theories of determinism, albeit 'soft', and free will denies the "all or nothing" precepts of both, an inherent conceptual shallowness of a concept simply aimed at introducing moral responsibility into the natural, biological or theological order of the universe (Smilansky, 2003).

Options to act become limited for diverse reasons, maybe because one's faith demands a single path or nature decrees an inability to perform, or indeed some socio-biological reason. This does not mean the options do not exist and a choice is made, arguably predetermined, but this would not explain their existence per se. Walzer (1983, p.261) further argues that more personality related aspects of character, "[t]he reflexive forms of recognition, self-esteem and self-respect, our most important possessions ... must seem meaningless to individuals all of whose qualities are nothing but the luck of the draw". Hence, whilst science, nature and theology provide a relatively sound basis for determinism, it is suggested that this cannot provide a full explanation for the conduct of the individual and what happens to them. The denial of free will by determinists, or determination by libertarians, fails to provide a rounded explanation for the events of life and the role of the individual in shaping their destiny.

The understanding of what constitutes freedom varies in libertarian thought, as does the meaning and effect of determinism for advocates of that philosophy, and so this means the compatibilist will be involved in debates where the philosophical goal posts are constantly moving (Moreland et al, 2003). The theory of compatibilism aims to combine principles of science and religion, which has caused some concern amongst some Muslim clerics who desire to effectively clean Western science from the debate where it conflicts with faith imperatives and return to determinism, referred to as "salafi positivism" (Howard, 2011 p.47). However, there is another aspect to this when considering the Salafi perspective. Hoover (2007) has considered the Islamic philosophy of Ibn Taymiyya, a scholar from the 8th Century who plays a major role within Salafist thought. Whereas the Salafist perspective on free will seems to concentrate on determinism, as mentioned earlier, Ibn Taymiyya provides a more nuanced approach to the subject, with Hoover (2007) explaining that he was somewhat opposed to compulsion and held the view that "belief in the human will is vital for belief in command and prohibition, promise and threat" (Hoover 2007 p.147), thereby emphasising the point that there is no moral accountability without choice. Hoover (2007 p.154), states that according to Ibn Taymiyya, "Humans act by their will, power and free choice (ikhtiyār), and judgements for their acts are attributed to them and not to God." This appears to be in line with the compatibilist view that determinism exists, yet humans still have the agency to make choices. This is particularly pertinent when comparing freedoms in the Western world to those in the Muslim world, and the restrictions enforced by a strict Salafist interpretation of Islam.

CONCLUSION

This essay has presented a comparison of Western concepts of free will and compatibilism with Islamic and Salafist determinism, including the variations in perspectives regarding these philosophical standpoints. It is clear that the moral implications of determinism are a major concern for both theologians and philosophers, for it means responsibility cannot fall upon the individual for something he does because it has simply happened to him, affected by God or nature as a result of a series of unfortunate events. Externality essentially governs one's life and deprives the person of control, leaving the desire for betterment in the exercise of God's will or the course of events of nature. A negative aspect of this is not only the impact on the life of the individual, but the way that this manifests itself in wider society and the attitudes of different groups in society towards each other; as seen in the example of Salafi extremists, particularly Daesh, and their treatment of others. Just as the debate on determinism and free will has captured the attention of Western scholars over the centuries, so has qadar (divine determination) been widely debated by Islamic scholars and theorists. However, no consensus of opinion has been reached since the classical Islamic era, and "the discussion on the concept of fate (divine predestination) or qadar has created various debates with regard to its relationship with the problem of freedom (hurriya), choice (ikhtiyar) and free will (irada)" (Zakaria 2015 p.41). Furthermore, one should not forget a third explanation, which is that rebellion and instability is ordained by God.

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