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## Is Islam Committed to Dualism in the Context of the Problem of Free Will?

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# Is Islam Committed to Dualism in the Context of the Problem of Free Will?

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## Abstract

The concept of *free will* became an early source of debate amongst theologians and philosophers within Islamic intellectual history. The influential theologian Ghazali refuted neoplatonic philosophers who laid claim to a deterministic view of human nature by pointing to the problem of causation. Ashari theologians refuted those who claimed humans create their own actions by arguing that such a statement would undermine God's omnipotence. The core issue in these Islamic debates was not so much *human* free will, but rather concern over the preservation of *divine* free will. A largely dualistic picture emerged regarding the nature of human beings from these early debates. Human free will did of course play an important role in law, morality and theology and was accommodated with the development of the doctrine of *kasb* (acquisition). It is not until recently, with the advances in neurophilosophy, psychology, neuroscience and neuroimaging that the Islamic theological understanding has required a revisiting. Recent thinkers such as Iqbal have critiqued Ghazali for not being able to break from dualism, and articulate a more wholesome view of man in which *human* free will takes center stage. I will argue that Iqbal's conception of free will within the Islamic context is not much different from that articulated by Daniel Dennett, even if the implications drawn by the two men are vastly different. The rich intellectual history of Islam is relevant to many of the contemporary debates on free will and these intersections will be discussed.

## Keywords

Dualism, Free Will, Islam, Ghazali, Ibn Sina, Iqbal, Dennett, Soul

## Soul & Free Will

The classic problem of free will has often assumed a worldview based on a dualistic perspective of the universe. This dualism which was once used to explain free will has now become an obstacle in the same discussion. According to this view, two distinct substances exist: physical and metaphysical. The body (the physical component) is acted upon by the soul (the non-physical component). The locus of the human capacity for free will is thought to be located in the soul (the non-physical component). A version of this type of dualism is also seen within Islamic intellectual history.

This particular view has come under sharp criticism by modern day scientists and philosophers. They argue that granting a metaphysical status to the soul exempts it from

being the subject of any meaningful scientific inquiry. If this is the case, then how can we be sure that it exists at all? Furthermore, if it exists, they ask, how can a metaphysical entity interact with a physical entity?

Daniel Dennett, the famous philosopher from Tufts University, summarizes the problem when he writes,

One widespread tradition has it that we human beings are responsible agents, captains of our fate, because what we really are souls, immaterial and immortal clumps of Godstuff that inhabit and control our material bodies rather like spectral puppeteers. It is our souls, that are the source of all meaning, and the locus of all our suffering, our joy, our glory and shame. But this idea of immaterial souls, capable of defying the laws of physics, has outlived its credibility thanks to the advance of the natural sciences. (Dennett 2003, 5)

Contemporary neuroscience poses new challenges to the problem of free will. Consciousness is closely connected with the central nervous system; we know, for example, that certain brain damage affects consciousness. Furthermore, with advanced brain imaging such as functional MRI, studies have claimed to detect thoughts and decisions in the brain even before we become conscious of them. These studies further erode the concept of a sharp dichotomy between the body and the soul.

Muhammad Iqbal, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century Muslim philosopher critiques dualistic tendencies within Islamic thought and proposes a non-dualistic framework for understanding the problem of free will within Islam. Iqbal's analysis is, therefore, particularly relevant to this discussion.

According to Iqbal, dualism, as adopted by the dominant Ashari school of Muslim theology, has several problems.

1. The static view of substance does not serve any psychological interest. We do not think of elements of our conscious experience as qualities of a soul-substance. Iqbal writes, "Our conscious experience can give us no clue to the ego regarded as soul-substance, for by hypothesis the soul-substance does not reveal itself in experience" (Iqbal 2013, 81). Instead in Iqbal's view our conscious experience is exactly what makes up our self.

2. He points to Immanuel Kant's critique of the Cartesian dualism. Kant argues that the jump from Descartes "I think" to "I am a substance" is illegitimate and carries no proof.
3. The concept of the soul as indivisible does not prove indestructibility.
4. If the soul-substance is considered metaphysical then there is a whole host of other problems in trying to explain how it would interact with the physical body and soul.

Let us assume for the sake of argument that Dennett and Iqbal are correct. The question arises, to what degree is a theistic (specifically an Islamic) worldview dependent upon this type of dualism?

### **Islam & Free Will**

I will argue in this paper, that in so far as soul/body dualism emerges from Islamic theological legacy, it does so due to practical considerations and not because of any intrinsic Islamic creedal commitment to such belief as essential dogma. The practical considerations were guided by the quest by the orthodox Ashari theologians to seek an intellectual framework that would reconcile essential Islamic beliefs with reason and philosophy.

Islamic intellectual history has a rich history of debate concerning the problem of free will. In fact, the very first formal theological dispute in Islam concerned the issue of free will and determinism (Blankinship 2008, 38).

### **Mu'tazilites**

An early group of Muslims known as the Qadarites advocated for absolute free will, and this cause was then taken up by the more influential group of Muslim theologians known as the Mu'tazilites. Mu'tazilites stressed Divine justice. They held that good and evil are objective. In order for God to be just he had to punish those who do evil and reward those who do good. In order for this to be case, in order for Him to be just, humans must be able to act freely, so they can be held accountable for their actions. Therefore they argued that man is the creator of his own actions.

But this conflicted with the orthodox Ashari school, which thought that human free will in this sense would restrict the sovereign freedom of the creator. All acts are created and caused by God. God is all powerful and all knowing. Therefore man could not create his own actions. They promulgated a more nuanced theory of free will in which man acquired action but God remained the creator.

### **Aristotelians**

On the other hand a group of early Muslim Aristotelian philosophers believed in a deterministic universe. They rationalized the existence of God, as the first cause, on the basis of reason. They argued if everything has a cause, and God is the first cause, then everything else must necessarily flow from that first cause resulting in a determined universe.

This led some of them, like Ibn Rushd, to reject free will. He writes, "Our actions occur according to a definite pattern... The determinate order of the internal and external causes is the decree and foreordination that God has prescribed for His creatures; that is the Preserved Tablet" (Ibn Rushd 1998, 189.)

This view also ran contrary to the more orthodox Ashari position which argued that a determined universe would deny God the ability to intervene within the world. A view championed by Ghazali.

### **Ghazali**

The influence of Ghazali upon Islamic orthodoxy cannot be understated. Richard Frank, describes him as "the most important Sunni theologian at a crucial turning point in the history of orthodox Muslim theology" (1987–89, 274).

Ghazali demonstrated that necessary causation was a flawed doctrine, as Hume did many centuries later. He argued that cause and effect relationship cannot be proved; only a temporal succession of events is seen. In Hume's words there is no "causal glue" linking cause to effect.

He furthermore, more importantly, showed that necessary causation resulted in denying God freedom of will. If everything necessarily follows from previous events, then God would not be able to interfere with the workings of the Universe. For example, miracles would then be impossible. Therefore, for Al-Ghazali, the laws of causation were not necessarily true and could, in theory, be suspended by God at any given time. The primary purpose of Ghazali's argumentation during his time was to ensure God's freedom of will. His position on human free will was perhaps intentionally ambiguous, secondary to the theological debates of the time.

Professor Druart writes, "Whether or not Al-Ghazzali truly grants some agency to human beings is dubious, but he certainly wishes to grant it fully to God" (Druart 2005, 345).

In fact in both the case of the Mutazalites and the Aristotelians the primary concern of the orthodox Muslim theologians was preserving God's power and freedom of will.

The doctrine of human free will that emerges from this is simply a secondary consequence of that primary consideration.

### **Asha'rites**

This emphasis upon granting God His attributes is a characteristic feature of Ashari theology which would become the dominant form of scholastic theology in Sunni Islam. Ghazali is generally identified with the Ashari school, although he may have had his differences. The Asha'rites adopted a dualistic picture of the human person one which consisted of a body and soul, with the soul serving as locus of personal identity. Iqbal summarizes their view when writes,

To the Muslim school of theology of which Ghazali is the chief exponent [presumably Asharites], the ego is a simple, indivisible, and immutable soul-substance, entirely different from the group of our mental states and unaffected by the passage of time. (Iqbal 2013, 80)

This type of dualism served the purposes of the orthodox Asha'rite school in order to solve certain theological problems. However, as is being argued, Islam has no clear doctrinal commitment to it. Therefore, Islamic dualism differs in its nature when compared to the dualism which emerges out of Western Europe. It is worth pointing out the distinction in the substance of Islamic dualism and the context in which it arose.

### **Islamic & Cartesian Dualism**

The dualism from Islamic tradition differs from the Cartesian dualism which arises in the West. It is worth noting that Islamic dualism arises within the field of kalam, or rational/analytic/scholastic theology. This field is understood by Muslim theologians to be a tool or a dialectic method of dealing with intellectual challenges posed to Islamic doctrine. Kalam is generally not equated with Islamic doctrine or dogma itself. But is rather the art and science of defending this doctrine.

On its surface this appears to parallel the dualism we see develop in the western tradition, namely Cartesian dualism. But the type of dualism within Islamic scholastic theology, is not of the same category as the radical dualism found with Descartes. The dualism within Islamic theology does not arise out of radical skepticism, but rather out of pragmatic considerations. The primary pragmatic considerations were the rights and attributes of God. The Islamic concepts of free will and the soul are shaped based upon

concepts like the life hereafter, and preserving divine attributes like omnipotence and omniscience.

So instead of it being a theory of the human self, it is really a theory of God's interaction with humans. As Iqbal writes, "The unity of human consciousness which constitutes the center of human personality never really became a point of interest in the history of Muslim thought. The Mutakallimun regarded the soul as a mere accident which dies with the body and is resurrected and re-created on the day of judgment" (2013, 77).

According to this view, the soul is immaterial, indivisible, immortal and unchanging. This worked for the purposes of Islamic theological doctrines. The soul defined in this school had to be immaterial so it could be separated from the body. It had to be indivisible so it could not be destroyed, it had to be immortal so it could continue its life after the body died, and it had to be unchanging so that it could act as the anchor for personal identity. All of this was accomplished by creating the concept of the soul as a "substance."

This view is summarized by the celebrated contemporary Muslim Philosopher Dr. Naquib Al-Attas when he writes, "Man has a dual nature, he is both body and soul, he is at once physical being and spirit" (1995, 143). Ghazali himself repeatedly makes statements to the effect that "this subtle tenuous substance is the real essence of man" (Skellie 2010, 6).

A form of this dualistic soul picture becomes part of mainstream Islamic theology. But this happens not because there is an intrinsic Islamic basis for it but rather because it is a convenient tool in scholastic theology to deal with certain problems posed by other philosophers and theologians.

### **Origins of Islamic Dualism**

To further examine how this type of dualism is different from Cartesian dualism we must examine its origin. This type of dualism originated with Ibn Sina and his floating man thought experiment. He asks his readers to imagine themselves suspended in air and isolated from all sensation without even sensory contact with their own bodies. He says the fact that we can imagine ourselves in this situation maintaining self-consciousness independently from the body implies that the idea of the self is not dependent on a physical thing. The soul therefore should be considered a primary given or a substance.

The type of dualism Ibn Sina introduces here is slightly more radical than that of Aristotle who regarded the soul as the form of the body, but Ibn Sina goes further and refers to it as a substance. Deborah Black writes,

Ibn Sina does not reject the Aristotelian conception of the soul outright, but he upholds a form of soul-body dualism that is foreign to Aristotle... For Avicenna, the individual human soul is more than a physical entity and organizing principle for the body. It is a subsistent being in its own right, and a complete substance independent of any relation it has to the body. (Nasr 2002, 309-10)

Ibn Sina's experiment can be considered a precursor to Cartesian Dualism. However, there is an important difference. Ibn Sina's dualism is not as radical as that of Descartes. Descartes engaged in methodological doubt, doubting literally everything and concluding that only a metaphysical "I" could definitely exist. But Ibn Sina is not doubting the existence of the world or even of the body, these were already accepted as real in the Islamic worldview of his time.

Ibn Sina is only using the thought experiment as a way of securing for humanity an existence which is more than mere physical matter. He was using it to argue against a type of materialism that other philosophers were advocating. Despite his concept of dualism, however, Ibn Sina recognizes close ties between soul and body. He thinks of the body as an instrument of the Soul. He refers to it as a perfection of the body, or the captain of a ship or ruler of a city. In other words, he is still trying to maintain a link between the body and the soul. A link he ultimately cannot explain.

Ibn Sina was attempting to accommodate Islamic doctrines within a philosophical framework. Ghazali who was highly influenced by Ibn Sina, went a little further and critiqued philosophical methods when they contradicted Islamic doctrine while still attempting to maintain a rational worldview.

Although it seems Ghazali is subscribing to Ibn Sina's type of dualism by referring to the soul as a subtle tenuous substance, in fact there is more to the story than this. Even though he refers to the soul as a substance, he doesn't seem convinced that it is completely independent.

Jules Janssens, one of the foremost authorities on Ibn Sina in the world today writes,

Whereas Ibn Sina justifies a sharp dualism between soul and body, this is far from the case in al-Ghazali. Indeed, he insists on the existence of a very special connection between the "subtle" heart and the "physical" heart. Referring to Sahl al-Tustari (d. 896) and his saying that the heart is the throne and the body the footstool, he points out that the relationship between them can be compared to that between God and His throne and footstool. However, al-Ghazali remains rather vague and



admits that he consciously avoid offering any deeper explanation. In fact, he neither denies nor affirms a radical dualism between body and soul.... His designation of the "subtle intellect" as a particular expression for the seat of knowledge is of no real help in clarifying the issue. As to the subtle notion of 'spirit', al-Ghazali says nothing about it, except that it belongs to the "Lordly things," offering no clear explanation whatsoever. (2011, 619)

In Ghazali's famous text the Incoherence of the Philosophers, Ghazali actually argues against knowing that the soul-substance exists by pure reason, and is merely accepting it as part of religious law. The title of Discussion 18 is as follows: *On their inability to sustain a rational demonstration [proving] that the human soul is a self-subsistent spiritual substance that does not occupy space.*

In in he writes,

We only want now to object to their claim of their knowing through rational demonstrations that the soul is a self-subsistent substance. .... We deny, however, their claim that reason alone indicates this, and that there is no need for the religious law. (Marmura 2002, 178 )

For Ghazali the concept of the soul as a self-subsistent spiritual substance is consistent with revelation and serves the purposes of theology, so there is no problem with using it as a working theory. But even here he does not believe that this is inherently obvious via pure reason.

So his aim is primarily to preserve the importance of religious law, and he is okay with the contemporary concept of soul or self, which serves this purpose. We have seen that the concern of Muslim theologians was to secure the Islamic concept of God, and the concept of Man was simply a byproduct of ensuring that Gods attributes are preserved.

### **Unified Theory of Body & Soul**

Putting this all in perspective, writing in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Iqbal then can make sense of an Islamic view on Free Will, which does not require such a sharp dualism between the body and the soul. Iqbal is arguing that given the problems with the classical formulation of the problem of free will and the soul a re-examination of the core Islamic doctrines reveals that indeed we are not committed to a dualistic picture of humans, but rather one that is not all that different from what Dennett has proposed.

According to this view the human person occupies a central role in the Islamic worldview. This is an underdeveloped concept in Islam's intellectual tradition, outside of the discipline of *tasawwuf* (Sufism). The Quran, he says, emphasizes the individuality and uniqueness of man. That man is chosen of God, that he is the representative of God on earth and he is a trustee of a free personality. To quote Iqbal again, he says, "It is surprising that the unity of human consciousness which constitutes the centre of human personality never really became a point of interest in the history of Muslim thought" (Iqbal 2013, 77).

Iqbal notes the difference in the word used by the Quran for creation of objects, *khalq*, with that used for the creation of the self, *Amr*. *Amr* is a directive command, it is a dynamic word. He writes, *Amr* "means, [that] the essential nature of the ego is directive, as it proceeds from the directive energy of God, though we do not know how Divine *Amr* functions as ego-unities." He writes, "the ego is present as a directive energy and is formed and disciplined by its own experience." And continues, "life of the ego is a tension caused by the ego invading the environment and the environment invading the ego" (Iqbal 2013, 82).

Iqbal writes: "Thus my real personality is not a thing; it is an act. My experience is only a series of acts, mutually referring to one another, and held together by the unity of directive purpose." According to this view the mind and body become one in action:

When I take up a book from my table, my act is single and indivisible. It is impossible to draw a line of cleavage between the share of the body and that of the mind in this act. Somehow they must belong to the same system, and according to the Qur'an they do belong to the same system. "To Him belong *Khalq* (creation) and *Amr* (direction)" [7:54]. How is such a thing conceivable? We have seen that the body is not a thing situated in an absolute void; it is a system of events or acts. The system of experiences we call soul or ego is also a system of acts. This does not obliterate the distinction of the soul and body, it only brings them closer to each other. (Iqbal 2013, 84)

So according to Iqbal, we can discard thinking of selves as substances and focus on our real complete experience, which is best manifest in action. Professor Absar Ahmad explains this view:

The self in its efficient aspect does not depend upon any obscure or hidden core, but depends upon what it does, has done, proposes to

do, or is able to do. This self is revealed in its action; it reveals itself and constitutes itself by acting. It is nothing before acting, and nothing remains of it if experiences cease completely. One is not given a ready made self in this sense; one creates one's self daily by what one does, what one experiences. Our behavior is not an expression of our efficient self, but the very stuff which constitutes it. From the side of the efficient self, then, what holds experiences together, what gives us personality is not a substantial bond, but a functional one, a coordinated structure of activities. Being never a finished product, the efficient self is always in the making. It is formed throughout the course of its life. The efficient self, so to say, has no aboriginal nucleus of its own that exists prior to its action; it arises and takes on existence as it acts, as it undergoes experiences. (1986, 17)

In this view there is a distinct emphasis upon action. I think at this point Iqbal's view is not too different from that of Daniel Dennett on this point. Dennett writes,

You have to distribute the moral agency around as well. You are not out of the loop; you are the loop. You are that large. You are not an extensionless point. What you do and what you are incorporates all of these things that happen and is not a completely separate thing from them.

Therefore, Islamic theology is not committed to dualism in the Cartesian sense. Moving away from a dualistic form of thinking could help solve at least some of the problems we typically associate with free will.

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