

# IBN 'ARABĪ ON HUMAN FREEDOM, DESTINY AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL\*

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*We are, in view of our physical nature, at the bottom of the mountain.*

*We go on ascending this mountain till we reach the top. Thereupon,  
as soon as we take a view of what is beyond, we never return.*

*For beyond the top there lies what cannot be given up.*

Ibn 'Arabī<sup>1</sup>

## 1. *Freedom and Predetermination*

The concept of freedom includes a wide range of values, both involving human action as well as social activity. In philosophy there are certain questions in this area that have concerned thinkers more than others. One of these is whether the possibility exists of man's freedom of his own volition, so that he may choose between alternatives independently of external obligations and circumstances. Freedom in this respect denotes the absolute free will, or the spontaneity of action with multiple alternatives guaranteed. However, free will in some cases, e.g., in the rationalistic philosophies, can be associated with morality, and consequently the former is conceived in terms of deliberation that chooses only what is good. In this sense the conception of free will is presupposed to comply with morality.

The theological concern with freedom in Muslim thought

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<sup>1</sup> *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah* (Cairo: Būlaq, 1293 A.H.), 1: 327-8; cf. *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, ed. Osman Yaḥyā (Cairo: 1972-78), 4: 107. Further references to these two different editions will be abbreviated as *Futūḥāt* and *Yaḥyā* respectively. The quotation represents the striving of the sincere, true Ṣūfī to transcend the unchosen limited existence in which he finds himself. It is a purposeful strife to achieve a spiritual "unity with God" and thus it stands in contrast to the blind suffering of the archetypal Sisyphus in Greek mythology. For meaninglessness, whatever its dramatic value, has no place within Ibn 'Arabī's optimism.

consists of a peculiar question which differs from the previous ones. That is, to what extent can the human being be deemed responsible for his own actions, when these are related to the Omnipotence and Volition of God? Certain orthodox Muslims, in the 2nd/8th century, maintained that "man's actions are attributed to him by way of metaphor" in the same way as the stone is said to move and the sun to set.<sup>2</sup> This meant that man does not really act; rather, God created the will and the power in him to do the act and therefore man is always under compulsion (*jabr*). Conversely, the Mu'tazilah, who emerged in the same century, defending the principle of Divine Justice, inferred that man has a free will by which he performs his acts and consequently is responsible for them. Thus they aimed at the rationalization of the religious dicta: (a) "Promise and Threat" and (b) "Divine Reward and Punishment." Taking these Qur'ānic dicta for granted, the Mu'tazilah argued that God can be just only if man acts with complete free will. Otherwise, and here they made use of *reductio ad absurdum* argument, the dictum (a) would be nonsense and (b) would be arbitrary, and if so, God is not just.

Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d. 330 / 941) departed from the Mu'tazilite body, holding that Divine Justice can be established without imposing rational bond upon it. In effect, the Ash'arites adopted the principle of acquisition (*kasb*) which meant that the human action is created by God but at the same time it is acquired by man, attributed to him and he will be responsible for it. This idea in fact stands closer to the Predeterminists (*al-Jabriyyah*), despite the then common feeling of the orthodox scholars that their theses along with those of their opponents, the Mu'tazilah, were now transcended. Without dwelling upon minor and insignificant differences, it can be said that the orthodox schools of Islam, mainly the Māturīdiyyah and Ash'ā'irah, were of similar standing. They professed that God by His external volition

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī, *Kitāb Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn wa Ikhtilāf al-Muṣallīn*, ed. Helmut Ritter (Istanbul, 1929), 279; W. Montgomery Watt, *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam* (London: Luzac & Co., 1948), 96-104.