

GENETIC DETERMINISM:
A MODERN CHALLENGE TO ISLAMIC BELIEF IN HUMAN
FREEDOM OF CHOICE

Fatimah Abdullah

Introduction

Man is a slave of God; willingly or unwillingly, he has to submit to His Will, for he is created to serve Him (56:56). For his existence in this world, man owes God a debt. On the side of God, human existence is His gift to humanity; on the side of man, the rightly-guided feels indebted, for he knows it is like a debt he owes God for bringing him into existence, and more, for maintaining him in his existence.¹ Man has a duty to fulfill his responsibility in this world out of his feeling of gratefulness and sense of indebtedness which lead to obedience to God (33:72). He has to do the best he can to serve Him, and in this sense, action presupposes knowledge of what is good (90: 8-10, 32: 9, 67: 23, 23: 78).²

¹ In Islam, the idea of man's indebtedness to God is closely related to the concept of religion (*din*). According to al-Attas, the primary significations of the term *din* are reducible to four: indebtedness, submissiveness, judicious power, and natural inclination or tendency. These fundamental significations denote faith, beliefs, practices and teachings as interpreted by Islam. See al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1995), pp. 41-62.

² Al-Māturīdī also argues that although the freedom of choice is inherent in the nature of the willed act, yet he asserts that this does not lead to the idea that man is unconditionally free. The condition for free choice is not that one can do whatever he or she wants, but one should choose the most appropriate thing to do. What is directly confronted is the question of the impact of God's creative power on the nature of human action. In this respect al-Māturīdī is of the opinion that it is only through the Divine creative act that human freedom is established.

The most appropriate action or the choice for the better depends heavily upon an individual's knowledge; even the availability of choices itself depends on his knowledge of what choices are available; moreover, it is only with knowledge that he can determine what is for the better, since that which is worse is not a choice, as it is based upon ignorance of what its effects and consequences are and due to instigation of the carnal soul.³

Free will, Responsibility and Accountability as Religious Doctrines

Islam and other Abrahamic religions preach about the Hereafter in which man is either rewarded or punished for whatever he had done in this life. This belief must obviously first assume that there is a Divine revealed code of ethics specifying what is morally good and what is morally sinful or evil. Furthermore, that man, unlike other animals, is bestowed with a soul and mind that enables him to carry out the dictates of his revealed religious commands. Accordingly, he must be responsible for the good or sinful actions he had performed during his lifetime in this world. This belief in human responsibility is also firmly based on the conviction of freedom of choice. Divine Justice necessitates that if man is to be punished or rewarded in the

Man's nature in this regard is created like that of any other acting agent. Free choice, according to al-Māturīdī, thus operates with a definite limitation; the limitation is that the proper object of free choice is the most appropriate action. Now what is appropriate to be done is subject to both internal and external definition. In the case of the internal definer, al-Māturīdī stresses, throughout his great philosophical tract, *Kitāb al-Tawhīd*, that the role of 'aql is preeminently that of *tamyīz*, the act of discernment. The external definer of what is appropriate is supplied above all by the Qur'ānic revelation of God's *amr*. Appropriateness of free choice, therefore, lies in conformity with both these definers. Freedom of choice in his system does imply indefinite orientation of the act of willingness. See J. Meric Pessagno, 'al-*Irādah*, *ikhtiyār*, *qudrah*, *kasb*—the view of Abū Maṣū'ir al-Māturīdī,' *The Journal of American Oriental Society* (1984), 104:182.

³ Al-Attas, S.M.N., *The Meaning and Experience of Happiness in Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993), p. 8.