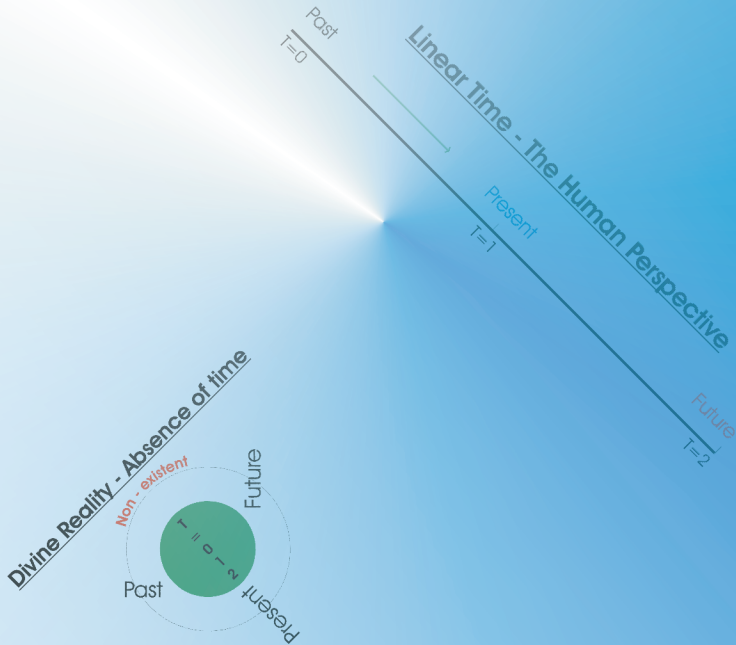


UNDERSTANDING PREDESTINATION AND FREE WILL



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An al-Ghazzali Centre Awareness Paper

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Understanding “Predestination” And The Concept of Free Will

*In the Name of Allah, The Source of Mercy, The Most Merciful
Peace and Blessings of Allah upon the Prophet of Allah,
Muhammad, his Family, Companions, and Followers.*

I. Introduction

The most complex of matters in Theology is the matter of “predestination”, or some would call it, fate. Many a times it has caused some to succumb to a feeling of helplessness, and for some the concept has led them astray and away from their firmness in their heart upon Belief in God Almighty, Allah Ta’ala. Furthermore, it has also been misused to lead others astray, to confuse them and to cause doubt in them about the All-Knowing, All-Wise Allah.

In Islam, “predestination” as a reality constitutes one of the six Principles of Faith. Acceptance of it is a basic requirement for a Muslim. Having said that, it is important to mention that not believing in it, does not negate its existence, but certainly negates ones Faith.

The purpose of this essay is to provide insight into the matter of “predestination”, in as simple words as possible. An attempt will also be made to describe, not define, the concept behind “predestination”, as well as to look at the semantics of language, both Arabic and English, to clarify some of the misconceptions, as well as to provide as accurate a description as possible.

The matter of “predestination” is a realm of Allah. And fundamentally because of that, and that we as humans know so little, all that is good and worthy of truth in this essay is truly from Allah, and all that is incorrect, are exclusively my own shortcomings.

2. Definitions

Defining the terms is essential in understanding any matter. However, it is more likely, more often than not, that human beings merely describe things, rather than define them. And this topic is no exemption from that. In defining the subject matter, it will be necessary to undertake a semantic post-mortem of the actual

words that define the concept, via utilising descriptions to define this complex matter.

The more apt term for the concept of “predestination” is Divine Decree. We will return to language semantics in English, as to why the former term is very inappropriate, and in fact incorrect.

And, even before looking to understand the concept, it would be prudent to recognise the source of this concept in Islam, and what exactly it says.

Firstly, the Qur’an mentions the following:

With Him are the keys of the Unseen. None but He knows them. He knows what is in the land and the sea. Not a leaf falls but He knows it, not a grain amid the darkness of the soil, naught of wet or dry but it is in a “Kitabun Mubin” (Manifest Book). [6:59]

There is nothing hidden in the heaven or the Earth but it is in a Manifest Book. [27:75]

It is We Who bring the dead to life. We record what they send (of their lives and conduct to the Hereafter) and what is left of them. All things we have kept in a “Imamun Mubin” (Manifest Record). [36:12]

Verily, all things We have created in determined measure. [54:49]

Therefore, believe in Allah and His Messenger, and in the Light (this Qur'an) which We have sent down. And Allah is All-Aware of what you do. (and remember) the Day when He will gather you on the Day of Gathering, that will be the Day of mutual loss and gain. And whosoever believes in Allah and performs righteous good deeds, He will remit from him his sins, and will admit him to Gardens under which rivers flow to dwell therein forever, that will be the great success. But those who disbelieved and denied Our Signs, they will be the dwellers of the Fire, to dwell therein forever. And worst indeed is that destination. No calamity befalls, but with the Decree of Allah, and whosoever believes in Allah, He guides his heart, and Allah is the All-Knower of everything. [64:8-11]

They ask: “When (will) this promise (be fulfilled), if you are truthful?” Say: “The knowledge (of time) is with Allah alone, and I (Muhammad) am but a plain warner.” [67:25-26]

Nay, this is a glorious Quran. On a "Lawhun Mahfuz"(Tablet preserved from corruption) [85:21-22]

Prophetic Narrations mention the following:

Narrated 'Abdullah: Allah's Messenger, the truthful and truly-inspired, said, "Each one of you collected in the womb of his mother for forty days, and then turns into a clot for an equal period (of forty days) and turns into a piece of flesh for a similar period (of forty days) and then Allah sends an angel and orders him to reveal four things, i.e., his provision, his age, and whether he will be of the wretched or the blessed (in the Hereafter). Then the soul is breathed into him. And by Allah, a person among you (or a person) may do deeds of the people of the Fire till there is only a cubit or an arm-breadth distance between him and the Fire, but then that writing (which Allah has ordered the angel to write) precedes, and he does the deeds of the people of Paradise and enters it; and a man may do the deeds of the people of Paradise till there is only a cubit or two between him and Paradise, and then that writing precedes and he does the deeds of the people of the Fire and enters it." [Saheeh Bukhari 8:77-593]

Narrated Abu Huraira: The Prophet said (that Allah said), "Vowing does not bring to the son of Adam anything I have not already written in his fate, but vowing is imposed on him by way of fore ordainment. Through vowing I make a miser spend of his wealth." [Saheeh Bukhari 8:77-606]

Evidences from the Qur'an and the Records of Prophetic Narrations, Hadeeth, are plentiful, and so the quotes above are not exhaustive. The Revelation of the Qur'an and the narrations of the Prophet formulate an unavoidable principle in the Creed of a Muslim, Aqeedah:

Faith is belief in Allah, His Angels, his Revelations, his Messengers, The Last Day, Resurrection after Death and the Divine Decree, its benefit and harm, its sweetness and bitterness is from Allah, The Exalted ... from the Creed of Imam al-Tahawi

2.1 The Key Arabic Terms

This is the required belief of a Muslim, in which the Divine Decree, its bitterness and sweetness, forms an integral part.

The key terms in all of the Qur'anic and Prophetic sources are "Qadaa" and "Qadar". Scholars differ in the exact meaning of these two simple yet profoundly complex words. They differ principally on which of the two words refer exactly to a particular description. They both have a similar meaning, with slightly different descriptions, and here we shall look at them

collectively rather than separately. We will briefly look at the meaning of the terms, without getting too deeply into the pedantry of delicate scholarly differences.

In simple English, it would be described as “*The Decision and Determination of Allah*”... Allah being the Divine entity, hence the more appropriate phrase, “Divine Decree”.

The concept has two components to it, namely:

- i) Act of determined, deliberate measure as decided;
- ii) the exclusive will to execute that decision

Everything exists in Allah’s Knowledge, and He assigns to each a certain shape, life span, function or mission, and certain characteristics. Its execution is Willed, either permitted or disallowed, by Allah.

These are obviously, earthly descriptions of a heavenly matter. And the concept of time as we, human beings and probably all created things know it, makes it

complicated. The human intellect considers the two components in a time line, in a linear manner. I shall return to this important issue later, but suffice to say now that this is indeed where the problem lies in understanding Divine Decree.

Allah's Knowledge includes all space and time, yet He Allah is absolutely free of both of them. Allah is not bound by time or space.

2.2. The Key English Terms

It is very important to also consider the English words often rendered to mean the Divine Decree described above. Here is where the key definitional problem lies, and a lot of which has to do with the dimension of time as humans recognise it.

The two terms often used are “predestination” and “fate”.

- i) Predestination
 - *determined in advance*

- *the doctrine that God in consequence of his foreknowledge of all events infallibly guides those who are destined for salvation*

ii) Fate

- *The supposed force, principle, or power that predetermines events*
- *The inevitable events predestined by this force, normally personified as a woman, as in Greek mythology The three goddesses, Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos*

Both these words fail to come close to describe the exactness of what Qadaa and Qadar are. Firstly, “predestination” considers the meaning in a timeframe, as in something happened first, then something is happening and then something will happen, as three separate occasions. It also has a concept of fatalism, that one is completely stripped of free will to choose, **AS WELL** as the results that follow. Secondly, “fate”, in its original form (although this aspect is very much lost in modern English), really refers to a force that

bounds all actions. The fact is that the very word “fate” does not refer to the power of God in its original sense. Again, although a timeline aspect is secondarily present in the meaning, the more corrupt aspect is of fatalism, that one is stripped of freewill to act because it was **previously** destined by that force.

The concept of Divine Decree in Islam is far from this types of definition or description. It is really neither “predestination” nor “fate”. It is Divine Decree by the Decision and Determination of Allah.

It would greatly help the discussion by briefly analysing the concept of time as recognised by human beings. Whilst I am not a scientist, and in fact am a layman to the depths of the science of time, my brief attempt to explain the concept will greatly aid those who have been misguided into believing in fatalism, that they were somehow powerless to effect positive change in their lives.

3. The Concept of Time

Human beings understand their lives based on the dimension of time. It is a linear thought-process. Human beings know nothing, if time is not an included factor. We cannot fathom, nor imagine a state of timelessness. We see and recognise things as it were in the past, we experience things as they are in the present, and we anticipate a future. At no one point of time can we know any act we are capable of, in its past form and simultaneously in its present and future. We can predict and we can rely on “natural” laws to give us the same answer to an action. That is simply because for it not to follow the “natural” laws, it would be a miracle, that only the Creator of that Law can effect. And, miracles do not occur everyday, not for ordinary people... but that is another story. These natural laws are the laws as Willed by Allah. It is not some unknown force. Science may argue it knows a lot, but really its “god of the unknown” is nature. Nature often acts as the “I don’t know” plug. Islam, on the other hand, confirms to us that we as humans do not know much,

and the only entity that knows all, is the creator of all- Allah, the One and only God, the Creator of all things.

But how does all that explain Divine Decree and the lack of time in that reality, a reality beyond human comprehension?

The answer is quite simple. Allah is not bound by what it creates. Allah is free of its creation. One of the Creations of Allah is, time. Therefore time does not apply to the realm of the Divine.

Let us briefly look at how human beings observe or recognise their existence.

Linear Time - The Human Perspective



This is how human beings decipher knowledge that is processed... in a linear fashion. It is not until $t=0$ occurs (which really means that if you had a stop

watch, it is the time you click “start”), that $t=1$ will be recognised, when THAT actually occurs, not before, i.e., the present (by which time, $t=0$ is now the past, and $t=2$ is still a future). When we arrive at a future time, $t=2$, this now becomes the present, and the $t=1$ the past, and so on. In other words, it is impossible for human beings to know everything, or in fact anything, beyond what it can recognise as actually happening or already happened. Further, even in the zone of $t=1$, the present, we only know what we are made to know or are aware of. If at the present, for example, there is a cat on the window, but you do not see or hear it, you have not idea it is there... but its existence remains despite you not knowing it.

This is the extremely limited nature of human beings.

God, The Creator, Allah, does not operate in this manner. Time does not exist in His realm. He is not bound by it. This is a very important matter to understand, in order to understand why, to say that Allah has “advanced or prior knowledge”, really is not

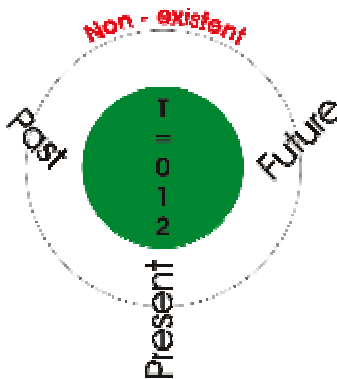
correct, because we end up reducing the Divine by encompassing it with time... $t=0$, the past. Allah encompasses everything and nothing encompasses Him.

The only human concept of understanding this matter of Divine Decree is to know that Allah encompasses the knowledge “what was, is and will be” without time. It is almost like looking at the timeline drawn above from its end.

Imagine you are holding a straight-edge stick (your pen will do for this exercise) that you first align to your eye in front of you, seeing the length of the stick. You may even mark the stick out like the diagram above. Now rotate the stick so that you only see its end. If it is a round stick, you would see a little circle. Imagine that as you rotated it, all those times, $t=0$, 1, 2... past, present and future rotated with you. Now that you are seeing it from one end, you are in fact seeing these timeframes overlapping on each other, as it exists. The past, present and future are reduced to the same plane, without the lapse of actual time. It is like a point. In fact

time lapse, which allows us to recognise past, present and future, can no longer exist in this realm- a realm beyond human comprehension. This is the realm of the Divine, Allah.

Divine Reality - Absence of time



In the above diagram, the green circle represents the end of the round stick you were holding to understand this concept- the point like a pinhead. Those three points in time, $t=0$, 1, 2 now overlaps, which we know cannot occur in our reality.

This exercise is a description only, for the purpose of understanding the concept of Divine Decree, and why the concepts of fatalism, and human beings not having free will is a false one. In fact the above exercise is a proof also that Allah does not exist in a time-space realm. Allah did not or does not manifest Himself as a human or another form to exist in our linear world of space and time. He neither existed in such a realm, nor exists so. Further, He never will exist in such a realm, as it is above and beyond the Divine Reality. Divine Decree is the Determination and Decision by Allah.

4. Free Will

Islam considers all human beings to be born free of any sin or embellishment. Islam rejects the idea of the Original Sin, but embraces and confirms individual responsibility. It is our own actions by responding to the stimuli of our environment (not just the natural environment, but all that exists and interacts with us), that brings upon us our own shortcomings or goodness. When we act by the Guidance of Allah, and intend to act so, we are acting righteously, for which

our Creator rewards us for that good deed. When we act against the Guidance of Allah, and intend to act so, we are acting wrongfully, for which our Creator punishes us for that sin.

The free will of human beings is in the action, in the choice to act one way or the other. Allah is All-Aware of those choices and its consequences. We as human beings are not always aware of the consequences. To every action there is a consequence, as is the “Natural” Law. Allah’s Awareness is not a reason for Him stopping us from acting righteously OR wrongfully. The free will of the human is in the choice to act. The Decree of Allah is in His Decision or Will for it to occur. In addition, the Decree of Allah by the measurement of the “natural” law, leads to the consequences... or the results of the action.

The concept of Free Will is extremely simple. We are responsible for our actions. The Knowledge of Allah of our actions must not be confused with fatalism, or that

we are unable to have control over our actions. We have total control, by the Will of Allah.

5. Conclusion

If every human being understood the laws of action leading to consequences by virtue of our own actions, willed by Allah, the matter of Divine Decree and Free Will poses no difficulty in understanding. More importantly, understanding and an acceptance of this matter, should be the most potent of cures, and prevention of illnesses like depression, low self esteem, feeling of loss, despair and helplessness. Whilst there are biochemical reasons for complications like depression, most such illnesses are a loss of trust in the Divine Decree. According to Islamic Tradition, this is a Disease of the Heart called “*Sakkhatul Qadar*”, or displeasure with the Divine Decree.

As human beings, and indeed as people who understand the Revelations of the Creator, Allah Almighty, we ought to understand and accept that Divine Decree is in fact our protection and

empowerment to become the best we can as human beings. Everything is from Allah alone, and success indeed is from Allah alone.