

## **Human Freedom and Moral Responsibility In The Light Of Theistic Beliefs**

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Theistic and atheistic beliefs respectively play a fundamental role in the definition of man's free will and moral responsibility, so far as they can determine the nature, quality, and quantity of human's freedom. After believing in God, the belief in a revealed or a non-revealed religion and the manner in which God's attributes are interpreted play an essential role in the definition of free will. In fact, the nature of our understanding of some of God's attributes—such as His knowledge, power, will, creation, and sovereignty—as well as His relation to human beings can impact the way we envision the quality and quantity of man's free will. In revealed religions, God is introduced as the personal and all-powerful being, who is the real creator of humans, and humans are considered His creatures, servants, and vicegerents. Human free will and moral responsibility is defined in the light of such a theistic perspective.

**Keywords:** God, revealed religions, divine attributes, free will, moral responsibility.

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## **Introduction**

The idea of God is of the most important concerns of a human's mind. This is true to such an extent that it impossible for the mind to completely ignore this issue. In fact, atheists also agree with the fact that their greatest intellectual problem revolves around the concept of God. Following this, the most significant of questions for them concerns the existence of God. So, the atheists who present some of the strongest arguments for the rejection of God's existence also confess that they are always concerned about the idea of God. In fact, this preoccupies their minds more than anything else. John Paul Sartre, the French atheist philosopher, is a good example of this general rule. He confesses that the idea of God was of one of his incessant concerns. Hence, some thinkers say that Sartre's works point to his long battle with the idea of God that is natural to man (Huse 2004, 162). The reason the theist emphasizes the existence of God and the atheist stresses His non-existence is the important consequences that a belief or disbelief in Him has on a human's life and the way he thinks. The belief in God, introduces a being into man's life that impacts all the aspects of his life and its virtues. This is because the belief in the existence of God imposes some social, religious, individual, and moral rules and obligations upon man. So, if God exists it means that the human being is not absolutely free; rather, he is responsible for his actions and must answer to God for them. In other words, the belief in God fundamentally restricts human freedom and creates many responsibilities—including moral ones—for him. Believing in God, in fact, casts a shadow on human existence and restricts his freedom. This shadow is removable only by rejecting the existence of God. Sartre says that the human tendency to believe in the existence of God is the result of his desire to be like God (Mosleh 2005, 181). Dostoyevsky also believes that the existence of God limits human freedom. Following this, he says that everything is permissible if there is no God (Mosleh 2005, 182).

On the contrary, disbelieving in God also has some very grave consequences. This is because in this ideology, since the existence of a god or gods is rejected, man is considered an independent and free being with no limitations; that is, he has absolute freedom and is not responsible before anything other than himself. He can live just as he wants. In this approach, the idea of God is considered to have been made by the human mind who wants to be like a god.

Therefore, the first consequence of adhering to the theistic viewpoint is the limitation of human freedom and increase of his moral responsibility. Conversely, the main result of the atheistic point of view is absolute human freedom and the rejection of any kind of moral responsibility. The importance of these two viewpoints lies in the kind of meaning of life that a human acquires based upon them. On the other hand, according to divine religions, the outcome of human deeds and actions are realized in this world and the hereafter. Therefore, keeping in mind the outcome of an action, a human being does not allow himself to perform any action, since he dreads the outcomes of moral vices. In the atheistic outlook, since there is no belief in the hereafter and the human does not consider himself religiously responsible for his actions, he is free to do anything as long as there are no social laws and obligations.

So, the belief in God or the disbelief in Him fundamentally determines the nature of human freedom and moral responsibility in so far as the meanings freedom and ethics can change depending on whether theistic or atheistic belief is adopted.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to show what effect the belief in God has on our ideas regarding human freedom and moral responsibility, and how our definitions of God and His attributes determine the meaning of our freedom and moral responsibility. This paper shows how the belief in God and His attributes defines human

freedom and moral responsibility and argues that without theistic thought, it is impossible to speak of comprehensive morality.

### **The Effect of the Belief or Disbelief in God**

After the belief in God or gods, the most significant problem is the identity of God or the gods, as it can define the way we think about freedom and moral responsibility. The above-mentioned question can be stated in the following manner: do we believe in the personal God of the revealed religions, the God of the natural theology of some western philosophers, or the gods of non-revealed religions like Buddhism, Hinduism, and so on? The importance of this question stems from the fundamental differences between the God of revealed religions and the gods of non-revealed religions or natural theologies. The reason for this is that the nature of God plays a significant role in the definition of God's relation to man. Then, the nature of this relation, in turn, determines the function and place of God and man in the whole system of being. In particular, it helps delineate man's moral duties and rights.

In monotheistic religions—like Islam, Christianity, and Judaism—God is described as a personal, unique, and glorified being that is absolutely distinct from humans and the world and is a unique deity. He is the creator and guardian of the whole system of being. All things, including the world and the humans that inhabit it depend on Him. In these religions, God is introduced as having infinite power, knowledge, and perfection, and as being the real creator and preserver of all things (See McGrath 2013, 2:398, 418-425; Unterman 2006, 39-45; Hilli 2007, 37-41). In Islam, for example, He is perceived as a personal and exalted God who neither is in everything, nor is everything in Him. At the same time, He is a God other than nature and humans and has infinite perfections and virtues. And, it is impossible that there be a god other than Him (Hilli 2007, 37-69).

On the contrary, the gods of non-revealed religions have a unity with the natural world. This leads to a kind of pantheism in which infinity

and unity is not one of essential attributes of the divine. Some of the most important properties of non-revealed gods are their plurality and their susceptibility to change in different temporal and spatial situations. Moreover, they mostly have anthropomorphic attributes according to the unlettered human beings' understanding of the nature of these attributes. In this case, for example, it is possible to speak of the different ideas of God within Hinduism, who is sometimes called "Brahman," occasionally "Vishnu," and often "Shiva." The Brahman or *the Absolute*, which is not a person or even a universal spirit, is the source of the phenomena in the universe and is their intrinsic and essential principle, and also transcends them. In Hinduism, there are some tendencies like Ishtadu (personal selective divinity) in which everyone chooses his own god but does not reject the truth of other gods. Each person orients himself to his own god and considers other gods to be its servants (Hinnells 2009, 535-36, 661-62). This kind of thinking is not able to determine a substantial relation between them and other humans. The result of such a view of God is imbued with anthropomorphic properties; that is, God is pictured as having human attributes and is therefore unable to control the totality of human relations. In particular, human freedom and moral acts fall outside of His jurisdiction.

Also, in the view of some modern western philosophers, God is defined in a subjective and humanistic manner. As a result, the idea of God is humanistic in nature and depends upon how modern man understands and interprets Him. In this regard, the viewpoints of Descartes, Kant, and Hegel are significant. Descartes, for example, tries to demonstrate the existence of God using his subjective and methodic reasoning, ontological certainty, and clear and distinct ideas. The result is a philosophical God who is not similar to the God of Christianity (Descartes 1997, 287-88). This method was exceedingly used by Kant when he sought to prove the existence of God based on the moral

foundations that are responsible for, and give meaning to, human moral responsibilities, like the existence of the hereafter that gives meaning to human ethical responsibilities and consequently his salvation. According to Kant, morality, so far as it depends on the idea of the freedom of man, does not require a being who rules over him and does not need any other motivation save a rational law. In other words, man does not need religion in any way whatsoever in order to achieve his moral objective, and his practical faculty is enough (Kant 1996, 49). Keeping in mind human limitations and defects, Kant had no choice but to finally accept God as the final end of existence in order to guarantee the outcome of human morals in the Hereafter (Kant 1996, 268-69). In fact, Kant's rational approach to morality and God leads to the negation of the conception of a divine God and replaces Him by a humanistic and rational God. In this approach, the identity of God varies according to the way that we define Him. Most of His attributes are defined based on our requirements and social functions, and, thus, this conception of God is temporally and spatially subject to change. This leads to religious relativism, pluralism, and subjectivism. One of the important moral results of such a view about God is the complete dependency of morality and divinity on human will and understanding. Therefore, human freedom can be unlimited and there is no restriction on his moral acts save social laws and obligations. Humans can define the meaning of their moral responsibilities based on their desires and tendencies. On the other hand, in this subjective approach, the roles of God and humans are reversed, and God becomes a servant and the human turns into His master; that is, God and the divine affairs are understood and their functions are determined according to a human subjective perception. Consequently, such a God has no dominion over human freedom and moral responsibility.

On the contrary, in theistic religions, we encounter the unique, infinite, exalted, and stable God, who is infinitely greater than the human being, who is created by Him. So, man's encounter with God in

the divinely revealed religions is extremely different from his encounter with Him in religions that are not divinely revealed. In later religions, humans play a role in the formation of the nature of gods. Also, the quantity and activity of these gods are based on human needs and wishes. So, humans can define, reinterpret, and change their freedom and moral responsibility by themselves. This is because such ideas about the divine depend on myths, a human understanding of God, and a subjective interpretation of natural and supra-natural causes. Therefore, these do not play an affective role in the limitation of human free will. In the eyes of some modern western philosophers, as was previously mentioned, God is defined in an imperfect manner, since His attributes are understood anthropomorphically. Therefore, such a god cannot introduce laws and rules for humans. In the theistic approach, however, man is subordinated to God, whose sovereignty encompasses everything, including humans. Here, the human's free will and moral responsibility has a very different meaning from the two previously mentioned views.

### **Approaches to Divine Attributes and Their Effects on Other Areas of Thought**

Another very important problem is how the human being understands and interprets the nature and attributes of God, since the way divine attributes are interpreted clarifies their relations with human action. In fact, the *essential attributes* of God—such as knowledge, power, and life—and His *attributes of action* introduce a God having certain virtues that determine His relation to human attributes and actions. In this case, there are clear differences between revealed and non-revealed religions and philosophies. Meanwhile, there are different theological interpretations amongst the adherents of revealed traditions, as is the case with Islam and Christianity.

In theistic religions, like Islam and Christianity, God is considered to be infinite, absolutely perfect, omniscient, omnipotent, eternal,

living, pre-eternal, dispenser, clear-sighted, and the creator of all things, including the world and human beings. Now, we will first explain theoretical and practical monotheism and then an attempt will be made to explain their different categories. Divine unity is divided into three categories: the unity of the essence, the unity of attributes and the unity of acts. The unity of the essence states that God has no parts, and that there is no other than God beside Him. This kind of unity negates any kind of materiality, composition, and corporeality from God. It also refutes all forms of idolatry (Saidimehr 2002, 1:75; Hilli 1997, 39-41). The unity of attributes describes the multiplicity of God's attributes conceptually and demonstrates their external unity with the essence of God and with one another. In other words, the essence of God is conceptually different from his numerous attributes but is one with them in the external world. The unity of divine actions also delineates the relation of the human being with God. It clarifies the belief that the only real agent in the world is God and that there are no actions except those performed by Him. In fact, the unity of divine actions not only relates all acts to God, but also negates the idea that actions can be independent from God in any manner whatsoever. Therefore, all actions—such as creation, nourishment, and sovereignty—stem from God, and all other agents in this world are really only manifestations of God's agency (Saidimehr 2002, 1:100-5).

Here the following question may be posed: if all acts are God's, then how can we still believe that some actions belong to humans and that they are performed freely by them? Also, how is it possible for humans to be morally responsible for their actions?

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to point out that there is a kind of agency in which actions are simultaneously ascribed to God and the human being – albeit at two different levels; that is, although all human actions are ascribed to them, they are ultimately the actions of God, because God has willed that humans do some of their acts freely

and without any compulsion. This is harmonious with human freedom and moral responsibility. In fact, if there was no jurisdiction within which humans could act freely and there were no means for humans to use to perform their voluntary actions, it would be meaningless to speak of their freedom and moral responsibility. So, since God is the only real agent in the world, He wants human to act freely and to choose good or bad on their own. Thus, it is in the light of divine justice and wisdom that their freedom and moral responsibility makes sense.

Consequently, this monotheistic approach can define the meaning of our freedom and moral responsibility. There is a specific relation between God and humans in which their practical and theoretical boundaries are restricted by the light of divine unity, and their freedom and moral responsibility find their proper meaning under the auspices of the same. However, if our understanding of the divine unity is deficient, it can lead to certain erroneous conclusions. We can find similar theories to this in the beliefs of some Islamic denominations, such as the Mutazilites, who believed that although God has absolute power and knowledge over all things in the world, His power and agency do not encompass a human's volitional actions, because if human actions are really only God's, it is meaningless for Him to send prophets and reward or punish people for their actions (Sheikh al-Islami 2008, 154-58). This religious tendency emphatically introduces man as being free. Nevertheless, it has two problems. First, practical human experience indicates that there are many restrictions and defects upon him. Second, if we exclude human acts from the realm of divine agency, it forces us to accept the fact that the God is deficient and finite. So, God would not really be God. Consequently, it is possible to conclude that absolute human freedom is incompatible with objective facts and is rationally impossible.

Another aspect of monotheistic thinking is the *practical divine unity*, in which our relation to God is determined. Practical unity explains how

we should act in relation to God, and can be divided into different categories such as worshiping, seeking help, obeying, loving, and trusting in God. The *unity of worship* means to completely devote oneself to God and to consider Him as the only thing deserving of worship. The *unity of supplication* implies that we only ask God for help; *unity of love* implies that we consider God as the only thing truly worthy of being loved; *unity of trust* means that God is the only thing that should be trusted by man; and according to the *unity in obedience*, man should only obey the true God (Gulpaygani 2011, 1: 93-100). It seems that the practical divine unity delineates certain duties for humans by means of which their moral freedom and responsibility become meaningful. The reason for this is that, according to this belief, humans must perform their religious duties, and they are responsible before God and others, as well as before themselves. So, based upon this view, there is no absolute freedom or moral irresponsibility. This is because humans are the servants and creatures of God, who has defined their freedom and moral responsibility based on their monotheistic thought.

On the contrary, if we do not adhere to the unity of divine acts and rather maintain that humans are not created by God, then this implies that humans are not restricted and obliged by the divine agency and will; therefore, it would be impossible to determine the boundaries of their freedom and moral responsibilities save through the social obligations, which are relative and subjected to alteration.

In addition to the above-mentioned cases, there is also a close relation between divine attributes and human attributes, which affects our understanding of freedom and moral responsibility. In non-revealed religions and some modern western philosophies, a number of God's attributes are considered to be finite and deficient. These ideologies do not ascribe absolute attributes—such as omniscience, omnipotence, infinity, absolute creation, and nourishment—to God. Whitehead and

Hartshorne, two adherents of Process Theology, consider some of God's attributes to be subject to change and therefore defective (Barbour 2006, 158-60). This leads to the idea that God is deficient, which, in effect, would be a negation of God.

According to theistic religions, like Islam and Christianity, God has many positive and negative attributes. The positive ones are divided into two categories: essential and active attributes. Essential attributes—such as unity, eternity, life, and simplicity—indicate those of God's attributes that are ascribed to Him without taking into consideration His relation to other beings. On the contrary, His active attributes (or attributes of action)—like creation, will, nourishment, sovereignty—find meaning only in relation to the world and humans. Since human beings possess such attributes to a certain degree, the way we view God's attributes can define and determine the nature and meaning of our own freedom and moral responsibility. For example, some religions consider God's attributes as being finite, while other religions consider them to be infinite. Also, some religions negate some attributes of God, such as His creation of the world, His omnipotence, or His omniscience. Such approaches to God's attributes can change the way one envisions man's relation to God. In this case, there are some attributes of God which play a more important role in defining human's freedom and moral responsibility. Attributes like omniscience, omnipotence, divine will, and creation are more related to human acts. If these attributes are considered to be finite, then God will not have sufficient knowledge, power, and control over the world and humans. Then, there will be some realms that fall out of His control. So, the human being is freer, since he falls outside of the jurisdiction of God's power, knowledge, and will. Also, some Muslim theologians, like the Mu'tazilites, believe that the jurisdiction of God's attributes does not encompass human acts. Consequently, from the Mutazilite point of view, the grounds for absolute human freedom and the need for moral

laws—such as the need for being morally good in one’s dealings with others—is completely based on human reason, not on religious teachings.

On the contrary, if we say that divine knowledge, power, and will are absolutely infinite, then it will imply that God knows everything about the world and human actions, and has the power to do anything in any circumstance. In this case, some Muslim and Christian theologians and philosophers maintain that God knows universals, not particulars. Moreover, some other philosophers reject God's knowledge about the events of the world and human acts before they occur; that is, there is a kind of qualitative and temporal limitation upon God's knowledge. Such interpretations of God’s attributes do not allow human knowledge, power, and will to act freely. Consequently, they lead to absolute determinism, which is supported by some theistic theologians, like Ash'arites in Islam, and by some other philosophers (Sheikh al-Islami 2008, 217-20). In this way of thinking, the whole realm of existence—including the human being—is considered to fall under the sovereignty of God’s knowledge, power, and will. Any kind of human agency in the world and in relation to human actions is negated. The origin of this view is some of verses of the Quran in which God is introduced as the absolute agent of all things (Quran 2:282; 64:11; 57/4; 3/29/ 31/34). In fact, in this viewpoint, divine agency is considered to be absolute, leaving no room for human agency.

On the other hand, if it is believed that although God has some infinite attributes, like knowledge, will, and power, His will has allowed humans to do some actions on their own, human freedom will not fall outside the jurisdiction of God's will; rather, it falls under the command of the divine will. Therefore, human free will stems from God's will. According to this point of view, it can also be said that—although God has eternal knowledge of all things, regardless of whether they occur in the past, present, or future—His infinite knowledge does not contradict

the freedom of human actions. Also, although God has power over everything, His power does not apply to impossible things, without this limiting His power in any manner. Also, His power is not opposed to human power (Hilli 2007, 98-105). In this outlook, all human attributes, such as will, knowledge, and power, are considered to fall under the divine will. Therefore, they are neither rejected completely nor considered to be unrestricted. Rather, all human qualities, including will, power, and knowledge, are restricted by God's infinite wisdom, power, and will. Most of Shi'ite Muslim philosophers and theologians have supported this viewpoint. They believe that humans are not absolutely free and not absolutely compelled; rather, their freedom and compulsion is relative and limited (Kashefi 2007, 268-69).

There are, in addition, some other important points of view regarding attributes such as creation, nourishment, and sovereignty. If God is the Creator, Caretaker, and Absolute Ruler of the world and the human beings that inhabit it, then humans will be His creatures and servants and fall under His dominion, always in need of divine power to preserve their existence. Human free will has meaning only in so far as God permits. He is a creature of God and nothing else. Also, he falls under the dominion of the divine laws. Therefore, his first responsibility is to recognize God, worship Him, and also respect other creatures. Most of the adherents of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism believe in such an idea.

On the contrary, if God is not considered as the creator, dispenser, and ruler of the world, this view can affect the nature of the relation of human beings with God. In some ancient religions, such as Greek religions, God is considered as the creator of the world and humans, but not as their ruler, dispenser, and preserver. Also, according to some Asian religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, God does not interfere in the world and human actions, and He has no concern with human deeds. This view leads to the conclusion that human beings are

not created by God and do not fall under His dominion and hegemony. Therefore, they are free to do everything, without being morally responsible before anyone or anything but society or government.

### **The Nature of the Relation Between God and Man**

The definition of God and the delineation of the relation between Him and man play an important role in understanding man's free-will and his moral responsibility. We may ask: Do divine power, knowledge, and will govern humans or vice versa? Is man the servant of God or vice versa?

An attempt to answer these questions may lead to a proper definition of God and determine the actual relation between man and God. In fact, the manner in which we understand God's attributes has a profound effect on this problem. In theistic and revealed religions, since God has unlimited attributes, like power, knowledge and will, and is considered to be the real creator of the world and humans, man has two very significant relationships with God. First of all, he is God's creature and servant. Second, God has placed him as His vicegerent on the earth. In this viewpoint, human free will and moral responsibility has meaning only in so far as God desires that he choose his salvation or misery freely and by means of his power of reason and knowledge. So, free will and moral responsibility are means by which man makes spiritual progress. They are not aims in and of themselves. Most of the teachings of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are related to the above-mentioned points. There are some verses in the Quran and the Bible that point to the human being's prominent place as servant and vicegerent of God and the most noble of all creatures.

On the other hand, according to some non-divine religions, some modern philosophers, and many natural scientists God is not the creator of mankind. This viewpoint is advanced by the biological theories of scientists and philosophers like Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche who consider God to be the product of human moral intellect. According to

these ideologies, there is no real God who rules over humans and their actions. Rather, the idea of God is the outcome of human myths, naturalistic philosophies, or scientific hypotheses. The consequence of such views is the introduction of a God who is made by human beings and has anthropomorphic attributes. His attributes and qualities are subject to change based on human desires. In fact, according to such a view, God is the servant of human beings. The nature of human understanding and the requirements of human beings determine the function of God. So, the result of such a manner of thinking is that human thought rules over God and that man is absolutely free. Consequently, all types of moral responsibility are negated. In this ideology, humans are only limited by social and political laws; that is, individually, man is absolutely free and has no moral responsibility. However, since he lives in a society and the incorrect use of his freedom may hurt others, there is no choice but to restrict his freedom by means of social rules.

Here, it is necessary to point out that some Muslim and Christian mystics are of the opinion that all things other than God are unreal phenomena—like shadows—and that only God really exists. Other beings exist only in the shadow of God's existence. A shadow has no independence and identity without the thing of which it is a shadow. It is difficult to define human free-will if we adhere to this view, unless it is understood as being a manifestation of the divine will. In this viewpoint, man's moral responsibility is to go to the mystical journey that leads to the understanding of this reality, and, following this, to guide other people to the same verity.

## **Conclusion**

Human beings seek immortality and use all of their characteristics, including free will, in order to achieve this goal. The main problem, however, is that man is faced with a being, called God, who has restricted all his desires and freedom. A human's picture of God is the

only thing that can delineate his own identity and characteristics such as free will, knowledge, and power. Sometimes God is depicted by humans anthropomorphically. In this case, human freedom increases and his moral responsibility decreases. This is a picture that is introduced by non-revealed religions and by some modern philosophies of the west. However, this understanding of God is false and lacks the ability to explain the real identity of God, His attributes, and the divine agency in the world and its connection with human acts. It can be said that relativism, absolute moral pluralism, and nihilism are the results of this kind of thought.

The importance of the theistic way of thinking about God is that it uses revelation to understand God, since human knowledge is limited in nature. The outcome of such an outlook is the proper recognition of God's attributes and the establishment of a real relation with the infinite, exalted, powerful, and omniscient God. As a result, the human who is His creature, servant, and vicegerent tries to spiritually travel towards Him by means of his intellect, knowledge, and free will. Also, he considers himself responsible before God and His creatures. So, in this approach, free will and freedom are instruments for the spiritual journey of human beings, and moral responsibility prevents humankind from wrong-doing.

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