



Summary

The debate about the relation between free will and determinism, which revolves around the idea of human freedom and possible obstacles to that freedom, has been on the agenda of the philosophers for centuries. This debate is mainly associated with qadar (predestination) in Islamic philosophy and Islamic philosophers has been trying to reconcile God's omnipotence with human responsibility.

Prof. Catarina Belo of the American University in Cairo discuss the question of free will and determinism from the perspective of Islamic philosophy comparing the ideas of al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd. She argues that al-Farabi is a proponent of human free will while Ibn Sina strongly defends a deterministic approach to causality and Ibn Rushd accepts that we have the power to act, but this is determined by external causes, and ultimately by God.

Free Will and Determinism in Classical Islamic Philosophy: Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd

by Prof. Catarina Belo

The question of free will and determinism has a long history, and possible solutions to the problem have been proposed by several philosophers. The question revolves around the idea of human freedom and possible obstacles to that freedom. On the one hand, human freedom is important in supposing that we are autonomous and free agents and able to decide on our actions, choosing among different possible courses of action. Being free means that we can be held accountable and responsible for those actions which are undertaken freely. Kant understood free will from the point of view of autonomy. We are free if we act according to our own laws and principles, without external impositions.

On the other hand, philosophers have pointed out several possible obstacles to that freedom. We could be conditioned by external factors, such as nature or God, or by internal ones, such as particular biological tendencies.

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Within Islamic theology, this question is known as the theme of *qadar* or predestination. According to the doctrine of God's *qadar*, God is all-powerful and creates everything through *qadar*, as stated in the Qur'an (54:49). The theme of predestination also features prominently in Hadith literature. God's omnipotence means, for some theologians, that He can also determine human action. This becomes a problem if we also take into consideration another divine attribute, namely God's justice. If our acts are compelled, then we are not responsible for them. However, we cannot be justly punished or rewarded for actions which were not in our power to perform. Reward and punishment





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must be given according to merit. Reconciling God's omnipotence and justice required finding a theory which ensured that human beings became responsible for their own actions.

Some theologians, such as the Mu'tazilites, an early school of Islamic philosophy, favored the doctrine of human free will, thereby safeguarding the principle of God's justice, which was one of the main tenets of the Mu'tazilite school. A later school, the Ash'arites, held that God creates human acts, but these are appropriated by human beings, who thereby become responsible for them.

Classical or medieval Islamic philosophers were acquainted with the theological positions on *qadar*. They were also conversant with ancient Greek and Hellenistic philosophy, in particular Aristotle's works and his commentators. Aristotle developed a detailed theory of causality which sought to attribute a cause for every event and substance. He also analyzed questions of modality and the nature of possible and necessary events.

Al-Farabi (d. 950) wrote on many subjects, such as philosophy, science and music. He developed a complete philosophical system in his systematic works, and he also wrote introductions to philosophy, and commentaries on Plato's and Aristotle's works. In his commentary on Aristotle's *On Interpretation*, he enquires about the truth value of statements regarding the future. If a proposition stating that there will be a sea battle tomorrow is necessarily true or false, this means that this future event is determined, and also other future events, which would detract from our freedom. According to al-Farabi's interpretation of the problem posed by Aristotle, statements about the future do not entail necessity. For al-Farabi, something which is possible may or may not exist or happen, and he therefore stresses the indefinite truth value of such statements. He adds that God knows what will happen in the future, given His omniscience, which would indicate that the future is determined. Al-Farabi believes that this does not take away from our free will, and that God's foreknowledge does not impose necessity on events in the case of human action. In this work, he makes a case for human freedom of action and free will.

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In other works, al-Farabi proposes a theory of emanation which explains the creation of heaven and earth by the First. In his magnum opus, *The Principles of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City (Mabādī' Arā' Ahl al-Madīna al-Faḍīla)*, he distinguishes between the celestial and the terrestrial realms. The celestial realm is more stable and predictable than the terrestrial realm, whose events are caused by the movements of the celestial spheres. This is due to the fact that the celestial bodies are perfect and always active, unlike the substances on earth. In politics, al-Farabi accepts the principle of free will. Human beings can decide to act virtuously or not.

Al-Farabi was an inspiration for many philosophers in classical Islam, including Ibn Sina (d. 1037), who in his works adopted al-Farabi's cosmological system and his theory of emanation in its main features. Ibn Sina stated that from the First, only one effect proceeds, the first emanated intellect, from which another emanated intellect follows, leading to a total of ten emanated intellects. He also developed concepts of metaphysical modality, namely the possible and the necessary. According to Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*, the necessary is that which cannot be otherwise. He also identifies the necessary with the eternal. According to Ibn Sina in the *Metaphysics* of the *Healing*, the possible is that which does not actually exist but may come to exist, through a cause. The necessary is that which exists, through a cause, except for God, who is necessary by Himself. Everything that exists is necessary through its cause. This means that for Ibn Sina, everything that exists is necessary and could not have been otherwise. Ibn Sina's conception of emanation confirms this deterministic outlook. Emanation starts from God and appears to unfold in a necessary way. God determines the universal order of



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Ibn Sina also wrote on *qadar*, God's predestination, developing a theme present in the Qur'an and in Hadith literature. He expands on the topic, which is also known as *al-qaḍā' wa-l-qadar*, God's decree and predestination. The first term indicates God's first decree, and *qadar* refers to God's predestination of particular events. According to Ibn Sina's interpretation, everything is determined by God directly or indirectly through a series of necessary causes.

In addition, in the *Physics* of the *Healing* Ibn Sina comments on Aristotle's text about the concept of 'chance' in Book II of the *Physics*. Aristotle asks whether chance is real and whether events happen haphazardly or in a necessary way. In his commentary on this text, Ibn Sina states that chance is an accident attached to an essential cause. He gives the example of someone who goes to the marketplace intending to do business there and accidentally finds his debtor. This event is only considered to happen by chance because the agent did not expect to find his debtor in the marketplace. If he had known that his debtor was in the marketplace, the event of finding the debtor would not have been considered to have happened by chance.

Ibn Sina's conception of modality, as well as his interpretation of Aristotle's conception of chance and his own conception of God's *qadar*, indicates a strong deterministic tendency. Ibn Sina did not write much on

ethics and did not seek to reconcile God's predestination with the need to account for human responsibility for moral actions.

The philosopher and Islamic scholar Ibn Rushd (d. 1098) was well versed in al-Farabi's and Ibn Sina's works. In addition to his philosophical studies, he was a jurist and a judge. In Europe he became known as the Commentator on account of his long commentaries on Aristotle's works. He wrote on jurisprudence (*fiqh*), medicine and theology, as well as on philosophy.

Like al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, he held that there are secondary causes, natural and human, in addition to God's causation. According to al-Ghazali (d. 1111), an influential theologian who had criticized al-Farabi and Ibn Sina in his work *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*), only God is true agent and the link between natural causes and effects is not a necessary one. In other words, fire does not necessarily burn a piece of cotton; rather, it is God who burns the cotton at the approach of fire.

In his endeavor to defend Aristotle's theories, Ibn Rushd rejects the theory of emanation developed by al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. He states that God produces many causes at the same time, and draws everything from potentiality to actuality. God brings everything into existence through His command. Ibn Rushd accepts that beings on earth are possible, in the sense that they may or may not exist, and therefore he does not defend the kind of determinism proposed by Ibn Sina.

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Ibn Rushd devoted a work to solving central theological questions, including the theme of God's predestination, namely *Unveiling the Methods of the Proofs concerning the Beliefs of the Religious Community* (*Kashf 'an manāhij al-adilla fi 'aqā'id al-milla*). One chapter in



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this work is devoted to *qadar*. He analyzes what the Qur'an and the Sunna state concerning this issue. With regard to the different theological schools, he concludes that the Ash'arites holds a middle position between the defense of human freedom, proposed by the Mu'tazilites, and the view that human actions are compelled, as upheld by the Jabarites (from *jabr* in Arabic, meaning compulsion). Ibn Rushd seeks a middle term between two extreme positions while accepting that God is the one true agent. In examining human action, Ibn Rushd states that it is a combination of human power and external factors, while defining free will as the ability to choose between two opposites. The process of human action implies imagining and assenting to something. If something agreeable presents itself to us, we desire it, and thus our will is determined by external factors. We have power to act but it depends on external factors. In addition, God determines the things that condition our actions. Consequently, for Ibn Rushd free will and human action are not autonomous. Our choices are conditioned by external factors, and secondary causes ultimately revert to God.

To conclude, we find in al-Farabi a proponent of human free will. Ibn Sina strongly defends a deterministic approach to causality. Ibn Rushd accepts that we have the power to act, but this is determined by external causes, and ultimately by God.

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About the Author

Catarina Belo, an associate Professor of philosophy at the American University in Cairo (AUC), completed her BA in Philosophy at University of Lisbon in 1997 and in Arabic and Islamic Studies, at School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London in 2000. She received her PhD in Oriental Studies at the University of Oxford in 2004.

She specializes in medieval Islamic philosophy, particularly on Avicenna's and Averroes' physics and metaphysics. Other interests include medieval Islamic theology (kalam) and medieval Christian philosophy with a focus on the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas. She has also conducted research on German Idealism, in particular, Hegel's philosophy. In addition, she has studied the interaction of philosophy and religion in the middle ages and in Hegel's works. She is the author of "*Chance and Determinism in Avicenna and Averroes*" (2007), "*O essencial sobre Averroës*" (2007), "*Averroes and Hegel on Philosophy and Religion*" (2013) and "*Spirit in Philosophy: A Metaphysical Inquiry*" (2019). Her book "*Chance and Determinism in Avicenna and Averroes*" was translated to Turkish under the name of "*İbni Sina ve İbni Rüşd-Belirlenimcilik ve Rastlantı*". Professor Belo has published in many academic journals and has received several international awards.



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All of these crises are being aggravated by the impact of the pandemic, revealing the inability of humanity to tackle them collectively, and invalidating the romantic discourse of globalization. As history continues its march, we are reminded that the answer to the common problems of humanity cannot be found by becoming more introverted, polarized or prejudiced. No matter how severe our problems, our destiny should not be seen as unchangeable. The problems we experience are primarily a result of human activity, and can be overcome only through human effort, but we should remain aware that there are many different hurdles to be passed if we are to rid ourselves of the crises being experienced in many parts of the world.

Only through conscious, patient and collective effort can we overcome the problems of humanity. Now is the time for dignified people from the different cultures and geographies of the world to come together in solidarity. It is time to speak with full respect of human dignity, setting aside the importance we place in our individual identities. An alliance of people who see truth and justice as the major pillars of our kind, will be able to open the door to a new era of solidarity for humanity. A dignified future is possible. We believe that Turkey holds a special, if not privileged, position, based on its geographical, historical and cultural characteristics, and can serve as a host to this joint effort of humanity.

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