

Some Answered Questions, Free Will and Its Limits

'Abdu'l-Bahá

Translated. Original Persian



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Free Will and its Limits

Question: Is man free and unconstrained in all his actions, or is he compelled and constrained?

Answer: This is one of the most important questions of divinity, and it is most abstruse. God willing, another day we will explain this matter at length from the beginning of our lunch. For now, we will briefly say a few words, as follows.

Certain matters are subject to the free will of man, such as acting with justice and fairness, or injustice and iniquity—in other words, the choice of good or evil actions. It is clear and evident that the will of man figures greatly in these actions. But there are certain matters where man is forced and compelled, such as sleep, death, sickness, failing powers, misfortune, and material loss: These are not subject to the will of man and he is not accountable for them, for he is compelled to endure them. But he is free in the choice of good and evil actions, and it is of his own accord that he performs them.

For example, should he so wish, he can pass his days in praise of God, and should he so desire, he can occupy himself with that which is other than Him. He can light the candle of his heart with the flame of the love of God and become a well-wisher of the world, or he can become an enemy of all mankind or set his affections on worldly things; he can choose to be just or iniquitous. All these deeds and actions are under his own control, and he is therefore accountable for them.

But another question arises: Man's condition is one of utter helplessness and absolute poverty. All might and power belong to God alone, and man's exaltation and abasement depend on the will and purpose of the Most High. Thus it is said in the Gospel that God is like a potter who makes "one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour". Now, the dishonoured vessel has no right to reproach the potter, saying, "Why did you not make me a precious cup that would be passed from hand to hand?" The meaning of these words is that souls occupy different stations. That which occupies the lowest station of existence, like the mineral, has no right to object, saying, "O God, why have you denied me the perfections of the plant?" Likewise, the plant has no right to protest that it has been deprived of the perfections of the animal realm. And, similarly, it is not befitting for the animal to complain of the want of human perfections. No, all these things are perfect in their own degree and must pursue the perfections of that degree. As we have said previously, that which is inferior in rank has no right or qualification to aspire to the station and perfections of that which is superior, but must progress within its own degree.



TRANSLATION

Moreover, man's stillness or motion itself is conditioned upon the aid of God. Should this assistance fail to reach him, he can do neither good nor evil. But when the assistance of the all-bounteous Lord confers existence upon man, he is capable of both good and evil. And should that assistance be cut off, he would become absolutely powerless. That is why the aid and assistance of God are mentioned in the Sacred Scriptures. This condition can be likened to that of a ship that moves by the power of wind or steam. Should this power be cut off, the ship would become entirely unable to move. Nevertheless, in whatever direction the rudder is turned, the power of the steam propels the ship in that direction. If the rudder is turned to the east, the ship moves eastward, and if it is directed to the west, the ship moves west. This motion does not arise from the ship itself, but from the wind or steam.

In like manner, all the doings of man are sustained by the power of divine assistance, but the choice of good or evil belongs to him alone. It is like when the king appoints an individual as governor of a city, grants him full authority, and shows him that which is just and unjust according to the law. Now, should the governor commit injustice, even though he acts by the power and authority of the king, yet the king would not condone his injustice. And should the governor act with justice, this too would be through the royal authority, and the king would be well pleased and satisfied with his justice.

Our meaning is that the choice of good and evil belongs to man, but that under all circumstances he is dependent upon the life-sustaining assistance of Divine Providence. The sovereignty of God is great indeed, and all are held captive in the grasp of His power. The servant can do nothing of his own will alone: God is almighty and all-powerful and bestows His assistance upon all creation.

This question has been clearly explained and elucidated.