

The metaphysical Free Will of Sufi: Fate (*qaḍā'*) and Destiny (*qadar*) in Ibn Arabi

INA KISELIOVA-EL MARASSY

Lithuanian Culture Research Institute
ina.kiseliova@gmail.com

With the rise of Sufi thought in the modern world, the paraphrased ideas of Andalusian mystic Ibn Arabi (1165–1240) often emerge as romanticized fundamental truths of life. The fictional sayings like “The destiny of a person is determined by their efforts” implicate the existence of free will in changing one’s destiny, which was quite under question (as God is Omniscient) in the tradition of Classical Islamic thought while arguing on the issue of divine predestination (*qaḍā' wa l-qadar*).

Relying on Ibn Arabi’s works *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (“Meccan Revelations”, 1203–1240), *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* (“The Bezels of Wisdom”, 1229) and his basic concepts: the Unity of Existence, the immutable entities, the Perfect Man, the creative and obligating/prescriptive commands that construct the understanding of Ibn Arabi’s *qaḍā'* and *qadar*, I will try to show that though invented and not found in any actual writings of *Shaykh al-Akbar*, such sayings partly correspond to the view of fate, destiny and free will proposed by the thinker and presumably could be compared to that of compatibilists, but in an exclusively metaphysical way.

Keywords: Sufism, Ibn Arabi, Sufi metaphysics, Free Will, Fate and Destiny, the Perfect Man, Secret of Destiny.

Though having much said about Ibn Arabi’s philosophy by such prominent scholars like Seyyed Hossein Nasr, William C. Chittick, Alexander Knysh, Mehdi Aminrazavi and others, it shouldn’t be forgotten that Western comprehension of Ibn Arabi comes firstly from the 20th century Traditionalist thought¹, as before the rise of Traditionalism the works of Ibn Arabi were not much known and translated. The early Orientalists paid little attention to Ibn Arabi’s writings as so-thought being not much influential to the West, and it

was only Perennialists who discovered and acknowledged the authority of the thinker. Being highly concentrated on mysticism and metaphysics, the Traditionalist view Ibn Arabi doesn’t facilitate the task of defining his esoteric philosophical concepts.

Ibn Arabi was highly innovated in his philosophy and extended the previously known borders of *falsafa*, presenting it as a much broader multicomplex discipline. Ranging in length from one or two folios to several thousand pages, his works were covering a vast field of Islamic sciences, with philosophy, theology, jurisprudence, metaphysics and mysticism being on the

1 S. H. Nasr and W. Chittick belonging to this movement.

highest focus. The later Sufi tradition called him: “al-Shaykh al-Akbar, the Greatest Master, a title that was understood to mean that no one else has been or will be able to unpack the multi-layered significance of the sources of the Islamic tradition with such detail and profundity.”² His works, moreover, are notoriously difficult to read and comprehend, which explains the lack of Ibn Arabi’s translations even nowadays. In her book “Free Will and Predestination in Islamic Thought: Theoretical Compromises in the Works of Avicenna, Ghazali and Ibn Arabi”, by relying on some remarks of Alexander Knysh, Maria De Cillis states: “During his life, the Ibn ‘Arabi’s speculative system became the object of different levels of disparagement. The Shaykh seemed to be, at any case, mainly oblivious to this criticism which had failed to understand that his hyperbolic language, his bewildering paradoxes, his juxtaposition of ‘orthodox’ and ‘unorthodox’ dictates were meant to abolish the parameters of conventional speculations, had they been theological philosophical or mystical. Despite showing fondness for the Qur’anic and *hadith* vocabulary, Ibn ‘Arabi’s non-conceptual language makes use of philosophical, theological as well as mystical idioms as *linguae francae*, that is, vernacular parlances, serving the scope of conveying to the readers, in the best possible way, his mystical insights and evanescent experiences.”³ For the reasons listed above

2 Chittick, W., *Ibn ‘Arabi*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessible online: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ibn-arabi/>

3 De Cillis, M. *Free Will and Predestination in Islamic Thought: Theoretical Compromises in the Works of Avicenna, Ghazali and Ibn Arabi*, London: Routledge, 2014, p. 168.

the translations of Ibn Arabi are not gaining any significant momentum and most of his theories and philosophical concepts are still in need of further concern and study. Another obstacle to comprehension of Ibn Arabi’s thought is his highly metaphysical and mystical thinking, making it complicated to understand the structure of his theories and define the authors position on certain questions, such as destiny and predestination in our case. Though Ibn Arabi has never stated being a Sufi himself, his Sufism and *via mystica* is clearly presented in his works. The problem is that after reaching his main goal – Unity with God, *sālik* renounces any active power and the earthly concepts become no more existing, melting in the God’s Light, as Sufi: “lives in a constantly overflowing fountain of divine self-expression, experiencing a renewed Self-disclosure of God and perceiving a new understanding of what it means being God’s image.”⁴ With the highest point of the mystical path, in the face of the reality where/when nothing exists except God, the question of Sufi Free Will is no longer relevant.

***Waḥdat al-wujūd* (The Unity of Being / Existence)**

It should be emphasized that Ibn Arabi was very much influenced by Neoplatonism, which speaks of the reality as a result of the superabundance of God. The will of God does not necessitate the creation as it happens naturally because of God’s absolute superabundance and absolute perfection.

4 Chittick, W. *The Muhammadian Inheritance, Iqbal Review* No. 38, 1997, p. 147.

This attitude was also characteristic to Ibn Sina, but in difference with Ibn Arabi, Ibn Sina was speaking of God and existence in terms of his concept *wājib al-wujūd* (Necessary Existent), which means that in Ibn Sina's thought God is the only being in which essence (*dāt*) and existence (*wujūd*) are one. Hence God is Necessary Existent and responsible for existentializing possible beings of creation (*wujūd*). The Avicennian distinction between the possible and necessary seems also resonating in Ibn Arabi's words: "It is established that the originated is dependent on which that brings it about, for its possibility. Its existence is derived from something other than itself, the connection in this case being one of dependence. It is therefore necessary that that which is the support [of originated existence] should be essentially and necessarily by itself, self-sufficient and independent of any other." (Ibn Arabi, Fuṣūṣ, p. 53)⁵ Still, Ibn Arabi doesn't consider God as a primary cause of everything that exists. He finds it problematic to refer to God as a cause, because if God is being put in connection with the creation, the form of necessarily dependence of God with his creation is established. Evolving his famous concept *waḥdat al-wujūd* (Unity of Existence/Unity of Being), he employs the term *wujūd* to refer to God as the Necessary Being and also attributes it to everything other than God. *Wujūd* is not a part of real cosmos; rather, it is borrowed by things from God, same like Earth borrows the light from the Sun: "*Wujūd* is the unknowable and inaccessible ground of everything that

exists. God alone is true *wujūd*, while all things dwell in nonexistence, so also *wujūd* alone is nondelimited (*muṭlaq*), while everything else is constrained, confined, and constricted. *Wujūd* is the absolute, infinite, nondelimited reality of God, while all others remain relative, finite, and delimited."⁶ From the perspective of transcendence *wujūd* belongs to God alone, but in case of earthly perspective all the things are *wujūd's* self-disclosure. "Utter bewilderment", as often stated by William Chittick.⁷ All things seem to be both God and not God, both *wujūd* and not *wujūd*, but on the other hand Ibn Arabi is very clear in differentiating: God is God, things are things. He states: "Know that the cosmos is everything "other than God" and it is nothing but the "possible things", either they exist or they do not exist... The status of *mumkin* (possible) is inherent in them either they exist or not." (Ibn Arabi, *Futūḥāt*, III, p. 443)⁸. So, God is independent of the world, there's nothing that can be compared to Him, but again – if we look at everything that is other than God as belonging to the realm on the *mumkināt*, of the possible things, then it becomes quite clear, why Ibn Arabi considers all these possible things as *wujūd*.

A 'yān thābita (The Immutable Entities)

A 'yān thābita (fixed beings) are the beings contained in God's primordial knowledge; the metaphysical basis for the things that

5 Austin, R. W. J. *The Bezels of Wisdom*, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980, p. 54.

6 Chittick, W. *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, p. 53.

7 Chittick, W. *The Self-Disclosure of God*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998, p. 186.

8 Cited in: De Cillis, M., *Ibid*, p. 175.

exist in the external world. A *'yān thābita* are infinite and immutable possibilities (*mumkināt*), fixed in the Ipseity (God). These beings have the attribute “fixed” (*tā-bit*) because they are contained in God’s knowledge regardless of their external existence. “Immutable entities represent the eternal archetypes of everything which is manifested in the cosmos. These archetypes designate ideas which express God’s foreknowledge of how His Essence will become disclosed in particular situations. They are ‘moments of eternity’, determinations perpetually existing *ab intra* in God’s absolute Essence at the level of His unity.”⁹ At a glance, a *'yān thābita* would seem to resemble Plato’s ideas and are sometimes misleadingly named “eternal archetypes”. The problem of translation, definition and usage of this specific Ibn Arabi’s is exhaustively analyzed and discussed by Finnish islamist Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, in his article “The Immutable Entities and Time” (The Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society): “The *a 'yān thābita* are not universals, nor blueprints under each of which a series of individuals would fall. On the contrary, each *'ayn thābita* is individual and particular. For this very reason, the translation “permanent archetype”, used, among others, by Izutsu (1983) and criticized by Chittick, should be avoided as it may lead one to think of a *'yān thābita* in terms of Platonic ideas or Jungian archetypes, something common to a series of individuals. For the same reason, it might be wise to avoid using the translation “fixed prototypes”, given as an

9 De Cillis, M., *Ibid.*, p. 175.

alternative translation in the Twenty-Nine Pages.¹⁰”¹¹

In his work *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* Ibn Arabi relates the fixed beings to the words of God (Qur’an), which are fixed and cannot be changed. In *Futūḥāt al-Makkīyya* Ibn Arabi refers to hadith Qudsi, according to which God said: “I was a hidden treasure that was not known. But I wanted to be recognized. That is why I created the creatures and made myself known to them. And they recognized me.”¹² This narration says Allah was a hidden treasure and He wanted to be known so He created the creation and became Known, which, in Ibn Arabi’s view, proves the existence of a *'yān thābita*, the fixed beings of possible (*mumkināt*). According to Ibn Arabi, all things which are subsistent in a latent status in God’s essence become creation only at the very moment God becomes conscious of them through his self-determination. For Ibn Arabi, creation of things is that God is knowing these things: “His Will is self-dependent and is an [essential] attribution dependent on His Knowledge, which is [in turn] dependent on the object of His Knowledge, which is you and your essential status. Knowledge has no effect on the object of knowledge, while what is known has an effect on knowledge, bestowing on it of itself what it is.” (Ibn Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 83)¹³ God’s knowledge

10 Here the cited author means the book *The Twenty-Nine Pages: Introduction to Ibn Arabi’s “Metaphysics of Unity”* by A.E. Affifi (1998).

11 Hämeen-Anttila, J. The Immutable Entities and Time, In online *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society*: <https://ibnarabisociety.org/the-immutable-entities-and-time-jaakko-hameen-anttila/>

12 Cited in: De Cillis, M., *Ibid.*, p. 176.

13 Austin, R.W.J., *Ibid.*, p. 94.

is determined by the object of his knowledge and this understanding is fundamental for Ibn Arabi's concept of Fate (*qaḍā'*) and Destiny (*qadar*), as the Entire elevates from Him: "He Who is Elevated in Himself enjoys that [complete] perfection in which all realities and relationships, determined or undetermined, are immersed, since none of the attributes can possibly apply to other than He. This means all realities and relationships, whether they be, in the eyes of convention, reason or law, praiseworthy or otherwise." (Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 80)¹⁴

Fate (*qaḍā'*) and Destiny (*qadar*)

Qaḍā' is usually translated as divine decree, as a preeternal plan, according to which God predetermines everything that will occur in the world and in another dimension: "Know that the Decree [*qaḍā'*] is God's determination of things, which is limited to what He knows of them, in them, since His knowledge of things is dependent on what that which may be known gives to Him from what they are [eternally] in themselves [essentially]." (Ibn Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 131)¹⁵ It is stating that *a'yān thābita*, the immutable entities, forms of possible things, are dictating what God can know of them and as already said, it is the object of God's knowledge that determine God's knowledge.

The other term – *qadar* is largely translated as destiny and explained by Shaykh as modification of the Decree: "Destiny [*qadar*] is the precise timing of [the ma-

nifestation and annihilation of] things as they are essentially. This then is the very mystery of Destiny itself *for him who has a heart, who hearkens and bears witness, for God has the last word, for the Determiner, in actualizing. His determination, complies with the essence of the object of His determination in accordance with the requirements of its essential nature. The thing determined, in strict accordance with its essential state, itself determines the Determiner to determine concerning it by that [which it is essentially], since every governor is itself governed by that in accordance with which it governs or determines, whoever or whatever the one governing may be. Therefore grasp this point, for Destiny is unknown only because of the intensity [immediacy] of its manifestation and, although greatly sought after and urgently pursued, it is seldom recognized [for what it is].*" (Ibn Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 131)¹⁶ It can be seen that there's a kind of contingent independence and freedom of choice for each of the created, as God's knowledge is basically reliant on what is the object of His knowledge, so it is the nature of *a'yān thābita* that determines what God can know of them and what God can choose [for them].

***Al-amr al-takwīnī* (creative command) and *al-amr al-taklīfī* (obligating/ prescriptive command)**

Another conceptual intersection in Ibn Arabi that sets the ground for the paradoxical reconciliation of God's decree and

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

man's free will is the distinction of God's commands (*amr*), an important Islamic theological and philosophical concept on the issue of fate and destiny. The creative command stems from an important Qur'anic term "Be!", by which the cosmos is coming into existence. This command is addressed to all the creatures, without any exceptions or possibilities to choose – under *al-amr al-takwīnī* all the creatures are becoming exactly what they must be in the existence: "All creatures are indeed words of God, which are inexhaustible, stemming as they do from [the command] *Be*, which is the Word of God." (Ibn Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*)¹⁷ Being the images of God, the creatures are being brought into existence, but the divine attributes demand also the earthly qualities, which are fully manifested under the obligating command, when the creatures, through their own freedom of choice are actualizing the possibilities, given by God: "God's control and judgement over the choices of His servants are understandable exclusively within the realm of the engendered things where the divine Law still preserves its power and its functionality. God's instructions, His prescriptive command, can simply suggest to the possible things the right direction to take. In truth, the divine influence is limited by the innate immutable entities' predispositions to either obey or not the divine prescriptive command. Therefore, the legal impositions God prescribes are, in relation to His prescriptive command, exclusively alerts and warnings."¹⁸ The obligating command

is the righteous path, the ability to know God and the obedience to it is paradoxically expression of the human free will. On the other hand, God's infinite will would not be actualized without human and the more the divine possibilities are realized in the human, the deeper is man's knowledge of God, which is reflected in the concept of *insān al kāmīl* (The Perfect Man).

***Insān al kāmīl* (The Perfect Man)**

The concept of *insān al kāmīl* is widely discussed in Ibn Arabī's works. At the time of Ibn Arabī this idea was already common within Islam, particularly in Sufi thought. *Insān al kāmīl* was first and foremost understood as a transcendental idol, God's messenger or vicegerent (*khalīfa*), the intermediary between God and His creation, which is namely the role of *nabī* (prophet), as written in the Holy Qur'an: "And [mention, O Muhammad], when your Lord said to the angels, "Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority." They said, "Will You place upon it one who causes corruption therein and sheds blood, while we declare Your praise and sanctify You?" Allah said, "Indeed, I know that which you do not know." (2:30). *Insān al kāmīl* is explained by Ibn Arabī as the Perfect Being, the model of human possibility, the transmitter of Divine, the traveler between the Earthly and the Transcendent, the one who knows the Reality of Realities. Ibn Arabī writes: „The whole cosmos is the differentiation of Adam, and Adam is the All-Comprehensive Book. In relation to the cosmos he is like the spirit in relation to the body. Hence man is the spirit of the cosmos,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹⁸ De Cillis, M., *Ibid.*, p. 175.

and the cosmos is the body. By bringing all this together, the cosmos is the great man, so long as man is within it. But, if you look at the cosmos alone, without man, you will find it to be like a proportioned body without a spirit. The perfection of the cosmos through man is like the perfection of the body through the spirit. Man is “breathed into” the body of the cosmos, so he is the goal of the cosmos.” (Ibn Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, II:67.28)¹⁹ For Ibn Arabī Perfect Man is the Spirit, the Animator of cosmos, or, same like his disciple Sadr al-dīn al-Qūnawī (1207–1274) expresses: “The true Perfect Man is the isthmus (*barzakh*) between necessity and possibility, the mirror that brings together in its essence and level the attributes and properties of Eternity and new arrival” (Qūnawī, *Al-Fukūk*, 248). Qunawi uses the metaphor of the mirror, which is a well known from Ibn Arabī’s writings. When talking about Perfect Man or Perfect Being in *Fuṣūṣ*, Shaykh compares an object and its reflections in infinite quantity of mirrors with God and His creatures, where one is unseparable from another, as God is the essence of all the existent things and without Him the creation would not come into existence. Hence the Perfect Man is the individual, who by his deepest devotion to God, spirituality and intellect reaches the Ultimate Unity, with realizing the structure of the Entire and responding to the God’s desire to be known. The cosmos is incomplete without

the existence of Perfect Man, because he is the one, who possess a complete knowledge of God, while other creatures can only be considered as partial images of God, who’s knowledge of Him is incomplete:²⁰ “Everything in the cosmos is ignorant of the whole and knows a part, except only perfect man, for God taught him all the Names and gave him the all-comprehensive words. So his form was perfected, since he combined the form of God and the form of the cosmos... God sees His own form in the mirror of man..., since all the divine names are ascribed to him.” (Ibn Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, III:398.15)²¹ This leads to the assumption, that *Insān al kāmīl*, being the transmitter of cosmos to the Divine and vice versa, realizing and fulfilling God’s wish to be known, being earthly and heavenly, is gaining the access to metaphysical realm of Freedom or, putting another way, by understanding the metaphysical structure of the Entire, he unravels *sirr al-qadar* (the mystery of destiny): “The mystery of Destiny is one of the most glorious kinds of knowledge, and God grants insight into it only to one whom He has selected for perfect gnosis. Knowledge of this mystery brings both perfect repose and terrible torment, for it brings the opposites by which God has described Himself as Wrathful and Approving.” (Ibn Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 166)²² Finding the mystery of destiny is the conscious realization, that God knows of the created object in all his states the same, as when it was in the state of *‘ayn*, before coming into existence: “The secret of destiny is what God the Exalted

19 Cited in: Chittick, W. *Microcosm, Macrocosm, and Perfect Man in the View of Ibn al-‘Arabi*, accessible online: <http://www.williamchittick.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Microcosm-Macrocosm-and-Perfect-Man-in-the-View-of-Ibn-al-Arabi.pdf>

20 *Ibid.*

21 Cited in: *Ibid.*

22 Austin, R.W. J., *Ibid.*, p. 166.

knows eternally of each entity in terms of the states that it will pass through during its existence. He does not pass judgement over a thing except through what He knows from its *'ayn* in the state of its establishment [in the Divine Knowledge].” (Ibn Arabī, *Kitāb al-Ma'rifa*, p. 126)²³ This conceptual understanding, realization of absolute oneness with God and paradoxically – the unconditional servitude towards God makes the Sufi “smell the whiff of Freedom”²⁴.

Conclusions

Ibn Arabi joins the philosophical and theological ideas of his predecessors and sheds the new light by placing them in the core of mysticism (*tasawwūf*) and its basic Akbarian concept “unicity of existence” (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). Unique spiritual (metaphysical) experience and innovative philosophical theories lead him to alleged understanding of Mystery of Destiny (*sirr al-qadar*) which is not accessible by thinking, but only by

Divine Revelation. Ibn Arabi proposes a solution by distinguishing between God’s creative command and God’s obligating command, where the submission to the latter is paradoxically determinant to human free will. This approach is based on his ideas that “God’s knowledge is determined by the object of his knowledge” and the concept of “immutable entities” or “the nonexistent objects of God’s knowledge” (*a 'yān thābita*). These are of main importance in the configuration of Ibn Arabi’s argument on fate because existing things are places for the divine manifestation. God’s desire to be known (or Divine Decree) is fulfilled with the Entire coming into existence. The concepts of fate and destiny in Ibn Arabi’s thought are intertwined: the nature of immutable entities decrees their eternal essence, though they have the ability to direct their destinies by determining God’s knowledge of them. Thus, Shaykh al-Akbar offers an idea that with knowing this metaphysical structure of fate and destiny freedom is reachable for the Perfect Man or Sufi (*insān al kāmīl*), which was hardly known to the earlier philosophical tradition and considered heresy by some later scholars and *ummah*.

23 Cited in: Alladin, B. *The Mystery of Destiny (sirr al-qadar) in Ibn 'Arabi and al-Qunawi*, In online Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society: <https://ibnarabisociety.org/destiny-qadar-qunawi-aladdin-bakri/>

24 A paraphrase of Ibn Arabi’s often quoted sentence “a 'yān thābita have never smelled a whiff of wujūd”.

Bibliography

Alladin, B. *The Mystery of Destiny (sirr al-qadar) in Ibn 'Arabi and al-Qunawi*, In online *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society*: <https://ibnarabisociety.org/destiny-qadar-qunawi-aladdin-bakri/>

Chittick, W. Ibn 'Arabi. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessible online: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ibn-arabi/>

Chittick, W., *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.

Chittick, W. *Microcosm, Macrocosm, and Perfect Man in the View of Ibn al-'Arabi*, accessible online: <http://www.williamcchittick.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Microcosm-Macrocosm-and-Perfect-Man-in-the-View-of-Ibn-al-Arabi.pdf>

Chittick, W. *The Muhammadian Inheritance*, *Iqbal Review* No. 38, 1997.

Chittick, W. *The Self-Disclosure of God*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998.

De Cillis, M. *Free Will and Predestination in*

Islamic Thought: Theoretical Compromises in the Works of Avicenna, Ghazali and Ibn Arabi, London: Routledge, 2014.

Hämeen-Anttila, J. The Immutable Entities and Time, In online *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society*: <https://ibnarabisociety.org/the-immutable-entities-and-time-jaako-hameen-anttila/>

Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, trans. by Austin, R.W.J. as *The Bezels of Wisdom*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980.

Nasr, S. H., *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.

Nasr, S. H., *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2006.

Nasr, S. H., *Three Muslim Sages*, Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1997.

Netton, I. R., *Allah Transcendent: Studies in the Structure and Semiotics of Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Cosmology*, London-New York: Routledge, 2013.