

ARE WE “BORN TO BE FREE”? (PART 1 OF 2): FREEDOM, AN INVALUABLE GIFT

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Description: A look into how much freedom we really do and don't have over ourselves and lives.

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“Freewill is the most difficult of God's gifts to understand or appreciate. The person who gives up selfish freedom and agrees to be God's servant will always be truly free.”

Freedom is one of the most valuable things there is, although many of us have no idea how precious it is until we suffer the loss of it. It is considered to be one of the basic human rights, and to attempt to withhold that right without very just cause is a most serious sin. We all like to think that we are free, and that we have freewill when making our choices in life - but let us think for a moment about the realities of the situation. Are we really born to be free? And if, in what ways? What does this mean for us?

For a start, the amount of freedom we actually have is much more limited than we perhaps realize. Let's start with simple examples that we can all understand, things that concern our physical bodies. How much freedom do we have over yawning, or sneezing, or sweating, or bleeding, or breathing, or digesting, or excreting? How much freedom do we have over whether we can see, or hear, or feel, or get our muscles and limbs to work? I used to be able to run for a bus and climb mountains - but no matter how much I insist I am free to do that now, I cannot do it. I cannot even choose to stand up; if I have been typing for a long time my legs get so stiff I just can't do it. I have absolutely no control over what is going on inside my body - I have no idea how my kidneys extract waste matter, or how they can know what is needed and what is to be got rid of. I have no idea what makes my heart beat, or when it will stop. I cannot choose whether I salivate, urinate, coagulate, replicate, deteriorate or disintegrate!

And consider the people I am related to. I had no freedom to choose my parents or grandparents, or brothers and sisters. I could not choose my genetic make-up. I tried to choose when my own children would be born, but this did not work out as I expected. And I had no idea of what sex my children would be, or what they would be like. Some people believe that it is only a matter of time before we will be able to fiddle about with genetics to produce children to order, but then - of course - the little person produced will have had no freedom whatsoever about what he or she will be physically. So, when you consider all this - it doesn't really seem as if human beings have very much

freedom at all, does it?

And yet, belief in the freedom of the human spirit is one of the key things God has revealed down the ages. In Islam, we are taught that it was something God granted to human beings which He did not grant to angels. We may not be able to choose what we are physically, but we have to choose what we will do as regards our soul-activity. We are requested by God to take control of our selves, and make particular choices and act in particular ways - but He never forces us. We do not even have to believe in Him, and we may choose to ignore Him or disobey Him. Millions of people do.

As it happens, we are not programmed robots. We do not react in the same way to given situations; some of us are much more unselfish, generous, forgiving, helpful and able to cope than others. But we don't have to be. If we see an old lady struggling up the road carrying heavy parcels, we can choose whether to go to help her, knock her down and steal her parcels, ignore her, or shout rude names at her and run away. This leads on to an interesting thought. We can entertain ourselves by guessing what any particular individual might do to the old lady with the parcels. But we all have a feeling of 'ought'; we think we know what course of action the good person, the religion person, the person of conscience, ought to take.

Whenever we say that a person ought to do something, we assume that the person is actually free and able to do it. It is quite pointless to say that someone ought to help her, for example, if that person is locked up in jail, or unconscious, or living in a distant country. 'Ought' implies 'can'. Now, if God can do anything He wants, then it would obviously be perfectly possible for Him to control our minds and our choices. This is a matter that is within the capabilities of human beings themselves, and it would be only too easy for God. However, the very fact that He allows people to choose not to believe in Him and not to do what He wants, demonstrates conclusively that God does not robotize peoples' minds.

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