

TIME, DETERMINISM, AND RELIGIOUS
WORLDVIEWS: REVISITING THE OPEN
FUTURE HYPOTHESIS IN ISLAMIC
THOUGHT THROUGH IBN ARBI AND
IQBAL

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ABSTRACT

As opposed to the deterministic, static and block universe of Parmenides that has generally been considered 'official' by philosophers and clergy alike, the present study aims at outlining the contours of a world with *open future*. Contrary to the *philosophy of being*, this work advocates the *philosophy of becoming*. The task has been undertaken in three steps. First, given the nature of time is compatible with the *philosophy of becoming*, the concept of open future is established. Secondly, the concept of destiny, which is the lifeline of static interpretations of time, is interpreted in line with the dynamic view. Finally, as the nature of God's knowledge of future events is in harmony with free, creative and accountable world, it is hypothesized. The seeds of this endeavor are collected mainly from Iqbal's '*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*.' Additionally, enlightening principles on the concept of time, destiny and the nature of God's names and attributes have been picked from Ibn Arbi's '*The Meccan Revelations*.' Whereas, the thoughts from the former are fully endorsed, the results drawn from the latter are divergent to what he offers in his deterministic system of *the unity of being*.

The concept of time is central to every metaphysical system. It is vitally related to such ontological categories as essence, existence, causation, and change. Apart from this, the concept of time is essentially at the core of the issue of free will and determinism. In line with Parmenides, the prevalent tendency favors the deterministic views in the Muslim world. Not only theologians (for instance, Asharites, Mutazilites, etc.), but even philosophers (for instance Razi) have favored the deterministic temporal picture of the world. But such determinism is a threat to ethical as well as eschatological essentials of religion. Iqbal goes so far as to declare the correct understanding of the concept of time (which for him is the open future hypotheses) as a matter of life and death.¹ With such centrality and significance attached to it, it is only natural to put an effort and attention in this direction to make it consistent with the religious worldview.

Following Iqbal, the author favors the dynamic religious worldview that can only coexist in the world with an open future. With this presupposition in the background, this study tries to suggest those conditions under which the open future hypotheses can possibly be maintained while remaining within the boundaries of Muslim thought. The principal Muslim thinkers from whom the main principles of such a paradigm are drawn are Ibn Arbi and Iqbal. The task has been undertaken by focusing on the nature of time, destiny, and God's foreknowledge as will unfold during the course of this study.

Traditionally speaking, there are two main descriptions of the nature of time. According to one, time is objective and self-existent ontological entity. This view is adopted by deterministic theories of time, following Parmenides. The past, the present, and the future are symmetric according to this view. Being the philosophy of *being*, this point of view treats the past, the present, and the future as equally real. Contrary to this, there are views which describe time as relational and not substantial. In being the philosophy of *becoming*, this view favors the asymmetry of time. Future, according to this view, far from being real is representative of open possibilities. Unless an event has occurred, it falls under the category of 'possible' with all the options open. This second view is called the open future view. According to this view, the concept of time arises out of relation between things (which are considered substantial).

Time is representative of processes and becoming, according to this view, in the absence of which it makes no sense to talk about time.

Relational View of Time:

The concept of time is essentially linked to matter, according to Iqbal, apart from which there would be no time.² While endorsing this, the author thinks that this view necessarily implies that time is not an ontologically self-existent entity. Time far from being absolute, is relational and makes sense only in the world with matter (things). Whatever there was before the current setting of the universe, of which we know about, there was no *time*. No *becoming* implies no *time*, according to the view favored in this study. This further implies that the theological questions related to the choice of the moment of creation of the universe by God or the nature of time before the existence of this universe are all faulty and do not make sense. This view is in resonance with the view Leibniz held on the issue, while favoring the relational view of time (in opposition to Newton's absolute view of time).³

The relational theory of time has also been favored by Ibn Arbi. He denies any substantial existence to time but still embraces the worldview of Parmenides by accepting determinism. Time, for Ibn Arbi, is an imaginary thing that stems from the question "when?". It is the measurement of the motion, as has been discussed by Aristotle, and therefore is a matter of convention. Selection of chronometric scale defines the conception of time in a setup. Ibn Arbi, in his *Futubat-i-Makijya* describes this in the following words.

Time is an imaginary entity having no existence. It is denoted by the movements of the spheres or those of objects occupying a place when the question "when?" is asked. Space and time have no substantial existence. Only the objects of movement and repose have existence.⁴

Besides, Ibn Arbi openly advocates determinism in his writings. The world of Ibn Arbi (as opposed to Iqbal's), therefore, is necessarily static as there is no possibility of anything happening anew in it. To know and embrace the deterministic picture of the world is a great virtue for him. In *Futubat*, he presents his position univocally as stated below.

Know, my dear friend (may God help you), that when God created the Universe, He determined the courses of all things which they cannot escape from. He created angels as angels, messengers as messengers, prophets as prophets, saints as saints, believers as believers, hypocrites as hypocrites, and infidels as infidels. Everyone of these groups is distinctly and knowingly determined by God. Nothing can be added to

or abstracted from them. Nor can one be changed into another. No created thing can acquire or labor for a place unless it is created of it. Even the very desire happens in accordance with determination.⁵

These conclusions related to the negation of motion alongwith such open embrace and legitimization of determinism is a result of Ibn Arbi's ontological commitment to the doctrine of *the Unity of Being*(which does not let him embrace anything other than the deity as substantial). Nonetheless, the doctrine of *the Unity of Being* itself has problems and objections associated with it. First of all, creation implies coming into existence of something, quite apart from the Creator. However, if we consider creation to be a part of the creator then it implies a sort of imperfection (in the Aristotelian sense) in the Creator himself. Furthermore, whatever is a part of the Creator must also be creator and not the creation in the same manner as every part of human body is a part of the same human. All this implies that pantheism amounts to saying that while creating, God created his own parts. Nevertheless, as stated earlier this suggests the imperfection of God and renders it incomplete. Secondly, if creation would have been nothing other than God, the attribution of eternity to humans seems appropriate. It deems counter intuitive to attach two opposite attributes – eternity and mortality- to one and same entity. This not only violates the principle of identity but also the principle of contradiction.

The relational view does not in any way advocate the psychological relativity of physical time. Instead of being observer dependent or mind dependent, physical time depends upon the relatedness of actual events in the world. Any attempt to make physical time psychologically subjective leads to idealism – the doctrine of '*the unity of being*' being a version of it – and must be avoided. The problem in the case of Ibn Arbi lies in that even though he declares time to be relational and non-substantial, he deprives all entities (other than Being) of substantiality. So, the openness of future cannot be established in his system wherein nothing is substantial. The reason being, openness of the future demands some substantial agents in the world to make use of the resultant freedom and be responsible as well as accountable afterwards.

The postulation of time as relational rather than absolute is necessary to hold the future as open. In the universe with the absolute time, it would not be possible to maintain the asymmetry of time. Another problem that is related to the absolute view of time is 'time travel'. To declare time travel as possible amounts to

the adherence to Parmenidean static universe in which there is no becoming. Time travel theories treat time as analogous to space and consider that just as it is possible to travel backward and forward in space at will without any contradiction it is also possible to move in the past and the future. However, this conception of travel in time is contradictory to not only common sense but also gives rise to many known temporal paradoxes (for instance the grandfather paradox, causal loop, and Fermi paradox).

On the Question of Destiny:

It is the misinterpreted concept of fate that provides the base to widespread (yet unreal) religious fatalism. Fate is generally believed to be a determined life course of every creature, of the sort that has been described as the determinism of Ibn Arbi in the previous section. According to this view, *'whatever will be, will be of necessity'* and by no means can be otherwise. All the events of the world from origination till doomsday are present (either in actual or at least in written) in the metaphysical realm. All the creatures are going to meet their corresponding set of events, during the course of their lives. This view interestingly embraces a block universe where time is symmetric. The metaphor of flow of time is a feature of this sort of static and fatalistic world. Furthermore, this prison is considered to be inescapable irrespective of the effort. This sort of view is not only untenable but also poses serious paradoxes of ethical nature.

Any view that embraces the world with the open future must not only reject this sort of religious fatalism but also give tenable interpretation of the concept of fate. The concept of fate has to do with the potentiality of a thing. It is related to the possibilities associated with any creature which are not escapable. All species are imprisoned within a set of possibilities, which are characteristic of them and are incapable of acting against or beyond those. Even deity cannot make a thing act against the fate (associated possibilities) as stated by Hussaini, while explaining the system of Ibn Arbi, in the following words:

God cannot make a thing act against its potentiality or aptitude. It is wrong to say that God can do anything. God cannot change the course of anything, nor can He do a thing which is impossible.⁶

So this interpretation impels us to declare that fate is only that everything has its own proper and defined course (qualitative entry into any species). It by no means is the determination of the whole life events of an entity. Both Ibn Arbi and Iqbal define destiny in the same manner. In the words of Ibn Arbi (*Fass-e-Uzayri*),

Destiny is keeping to the time (of expression) of what the things are capable in their essence and relates to every state of the particular entities without any excess.⁷

This interpretation of destiny is in resonance with that of Ali's (the Fourth Caliph of Islam). It is associated with him that freedom and destiny have equal share in the life of any creature. Just as a human being can lift only one leg at a time and not two at the same time is due to its course, constitution, or possibility that is utterly defined. However, to lift one leg alongwith the timing, reason, and other modalities are utterly in his control and are not dictated by any external agency. It is due to this reason that humans are and will be held accountable for all their actions. What Iqbal says on the subject is quite similar as is stated below.

The destiny of a thing then is not an unrelenting fate working from without like a task master; it is the inward reach of a thing, its realizable possibilities which lie within the depths of its nature, and serially actualize themselves without any feeling of external compulsion.⁸

There cannot be any stronger and more valid external compulsion than the knowledge of God, considering the fact that it must necessarily be true and not otherwise, under any circumstances. The open future hypothesis favors the dynamic God of Iqbal in contrast to Aristotelian static God. It advocates an active deity, as opposed to a mere spectator. Prevalent deterministic interpretations of destiny have in their background the idealization of a static God. Not only this, most theological riddles – nature of God's knowledge, problem of motion and change, block universe with no novelty – originate from this static conception of deity. In such a static world, it appears as if god is not only static but also a choice-less entity. This naturally leads to the question about our very existence in this world, i.e., what we are here for? Therefore, we are not here as actors but as conscious individuals bestowed with the ability to choose between right and wrong and no one else can do it for us. Being human necessarily implies being directive. In the words of Iqbal,

God Himself cannot feel, judge, and choose for me when more than one course of actions are open to me.⁹

The directive nature of human beings contrary to the widespread fatalism may also be established using the following argument;

Man is fashioned in the image of God.
God is directive in nature.

Therefore, man is also directive in nature.

The Nature of Knowledge:

Knowledge is essentially related to something that is already out there, in the presence of the knower. It is due to this reason that truth is necessarily linked to knowledge as knowledge implies the unveiling of the object of knowledge completely to the knower. In a world with open future, knowledge cannot be related to future in any objective way whatsoever. The reason being, any such declaration will inevitably lead to the confirmation of the symmetry of time. It will lead to the inference that like the past, the future is also determined, fixed, and knowable or known. Evidently, the association of knowledge with the future seriously threatens the open future hypotheses, and reduces it to a version of Parmenides' block universe where every time-event – no matter whether it belongs to the past, the present, or the future – is accessible, fixed and already out there. So, in the world with open future, we cannot grant such a privileged access to the future, even to deity. This difficulty can be avoided by declaring the knowledge of deity relational, following the footsteps of Ibn Arbi. Far from being substantial, the names and attributes of deity, according to Ibn Arbi, are a creation of human imagination. All the names and the attributes – including knowledge – exemplify the need of the creatures to know about the named. The creatures do not have any other access to the named, apart from the names, as the essence of God is too pure to have anything to do with the creatures. The essence is simply inaccessible, while the names are only speculative. In the words of Hussaini;

... all the names of God are only speculative without any reality about them. Man has attributed God with all human attributes – with such attributes as he found in himself and also with such as he thought worthy of God.¹⁰

The names and attributes are related more to the creatures than to God, as they are representatives of the existential need in which creatures are, since their creation. They are related to the event of creation, and are responsible for the working of the universe – apart from which they have no significance – as has been advocated by Ibn Arbi by saying,

Names are by us for us. They are based on us and are manifest in us. They are supposed by us to serve our purposes.¹¹

On the same footing, knowledge – as an attribute and name – is also relational and related to the world dynamically. This

assumption supplies a revolutionary freshness to not only our conception – of the world, but also of God. This makes God a dynamic as well as an active entity rather than being a static observer of his plans. This view also elevates the status of man and makes him responsible and accountable in return. As far as the nature of universe is concerned, it proposes a growing universe with dynamism for both the creator and the creatures contrary to the static block universe of Parmenides – embraced and universalized through theology. Iqbal describes the contours of a dynamic world with the open future in these words.

A time-process cannot be conceived as a line already drawn. It is a line in the drawing – an actualization of open possibilities..... It is a growing universe and not an already completed product which left the hand of its maker ages ago, and is now lying stretched in space as a dead mass of matter to which time does nothing.¹²

The future that is already known is not future anymore. The concept of prayer is quite contradictory to such a view. Prayers are invoked in order to get the favors of God regarding the matter. However, if God knows everything beforehand then what is the need of supplication and prayer. Because, if as a result of prayer nothing is going to change then prayer is useless (which in fact cannot be the case). Nevertheless, if as a result of prayer God changes what already forms his knowledge then it violates the very definition of knowledge (as either what was prior to prayer can be right or the posterior and not both). This implies that the future is open as well as unknown (as it is yet to become) and prayers are aimed at getting the favor of God regarding the variety of possibilities at hand and not written. This further implies that the acceptance of God's knowledge of fixed future comes at the cost of His freedom, as both cannot be held together. If God's knowledge of the future is deterministic then He cannot go contrary to it – under any conditions and at any time – as has been narrated by Iqbal in these words.

Divine knowledge must be conceived as a living creative activity to which the objects that appear to exist in their own right are organically related. By conceiving God's knowledge as a kind of reflecting mirror, we no doubt save His foreknowledge of future events; but it is obvious that we do so at the expense of His freedom. The future certainly pre-exists in the organic whole of God's creative life, but it pre-exists as an open possibility, not as a fixed order of events with definite outlines.¹³

Conclusion:

The Philosophy of time plays a key role in the formation of our worldview. It is due to an adherence to a static block universe of Parmenides that Muslim Theology as well as Muslim thought are deterministic in general. Moreover, religious acceptance, indoctrination, and propagation of the doctrine made it official. The problem with such a static pre-determined world is that it poses serious threats as well as questions on ethical and eschatological doctrines of religion. It makes the concept of responsibility, accountability, creativity, and novelty fall flat. To get rid of such paradoxes, we must try to build a system that accounts for an open future. In this context, even Ibn Arbi who favors the relational view of time, as opposed to the absolute version of Parmenides, infers a thoroughly deterministic universe through his idealistic system. The main reason behind this is the declaration of all things as non-substantial. However, we get courageous and enlightening principles – such as those related to the nature of God’s knowledge, time, and destiny – in his thought, which are very helpful in building the world where future is open and not determined. Regarding the open future hypothesis, some important contributions and insights have been offered by Iqbal in *‘The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam’*, which was the reference point of the present study. Also, by focusing on other mentioned thinkers, an attempt has been made to analyze the contours of such possibilities, which are identified and summarized as follows.

On the basis of the assumption that things in the world are substantial irrespective of the degree that may be associated with this substantiality, it is concluded that far from being an independent and absolute ontological entity, time is relational in character. Secondly, on the basis of the interpretation that destiny is the determination of the possibilities or potentialities of species and not more, it is established that the concept of destiny does not render religion as fatalistic. As opposed to the misinterpreted notion of destiny, the offered interpretation of destiny (that is favored by both Ibn Arbi as well as Iqbal) favors the view that being fashioned in the image of God, man has the freedom and choice in the absence of external limitations. Lastly, by conjecturing on God’s names and attributes, it is speculated that they are relational, speculative, and imaginative. The inference drawn from these speculations favors the asymmetry of time with the declaration that future is not known beforehand to anyone. As opposed to this, it is asserted that the future is open and not

defined, known, or determined in advance to further establish that there is novelty, creativity, and emergentism in the world.

Notes and Reference

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- ¹ Iqbal. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 105.
 - ² Iqbal. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 31.
 - ³ For details see the Leibniz-clarke correspondence.
 - ⁴ Hussaini, S.A.Q. *The Pantheistic Monism of Ibn al-Arabi* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1970), 123.
 - ⁵ Hussaini, *The Pantheistic Monism of Ibn al-Arabi*, 212.
 - ⁶ *Ibid*, 207.
 - ⁷ *Ibid.*, 212.
 - ⁸ Iqbal. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 40.
 - ⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.
 - ¹⁰ Hussaini, *The Pantheistic Monism of Ibn al-Arabi*, 157.
 - ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 173.
 - ¹² Iqbal. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 44.
 - ¹³ *Ibid.*, 63.

