



# Freedom and Responsibility in Classical Islamic Philosophy: A Study of Al-Ghazali and Ibn Sina

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## Abstract

*The problem of freedom and responsibility occupies a central place in classical Islamic philosophy due to its profound metaphysical and theological implications. This article examines the perspectives of two major thinkers, Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Al-Ghazali, on human agency, determinism, and moral accountability. While Ibn Sina develops a rationalist framework grounded in metaphysical necessity and intellectual deliberation, Al-Ghazali proposes a theological model that emphasizes divine omnipotence while preserving human responsibility through the doctrine of kasb. By employing a comparative and analytical methodology, this study argues that both thinkers offer forms of compatibilism, reconciling human responsibility with divine causation. Their approaches not only shaped classical Islamic thought but also remain relevant to contemporary debates on free will, ethics, and responsibility.*

## Original Research Article

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## 1. Introduction

Freedom and responsibility have long been among the most fundamental questions in philosophy, occupying a central position in both metaphysical inquiry and ethical theory (Kane, 2002). Within the Islamic intellectual tradition, this issue acquires a distinct dimension due to the centrality of divine omnipotence and omniscience, which shape the very framework in which human agency is understood (Fakhry, 2004). If God is the ultimate creator of all actions, can human beings truly be considered free? And if not, how can they be held morally responsible for their actions in a just and meaningful way?

Classical Islamic thought produced diverse and often competing responses to this problem. The Mu'tazilites emphasized human free will in order to safeguard divine justice, arguing that moral responsibility presupposes genuine human agency (Adamson, 2016). In contrast, the Ash'arites stressed divine determinism to preserve God's absolute power and sovereignty, often at the expense of autonomous human action (Frank, 1994). Within this intellectual landscape, Ibn Sina and Al-Ghazali developed two of the most influential and enduring approaches to the problem of freedom and responsibility.

Ibn Sina approached the issue from a philosophical perspective, integrating Aristotelian and Neoplatonic ideas

into an Islamic metaphysical framework, thereby constructing a highly systematic account of causality and human agency (McGinnis, 2010; Wisnovsky, 2003). Al-Ghazali, by contrast, critically engaged with philosophy while defending a theological position rooted in Ash'arite doctrine, seeking to reconcile divine omnipotence with moral accountability (Griffel, 2009).

This article examines their views comparatively, arguing that both thinkers, despite their profound differences, sought to reconcile human responsibility with a divinely ordered universe. In doing so, they offer distinct yet converging forms of compatibilism that remain philosophically significant.

## 2. Theoretical and Intellectual Context

The debate on freedom and responsibility in Islamic philosophy is closely linked to broader discussions on causality, necessity, and divine power, which form the metaphysical foundation of all ethical inquiry (Nasr, 2006). In philosophical terms, the issue parallels the classical tension between determinism and free will, a problem that has persisted from antiquity to modern philosophy (Kane, 2002).

Ibn Sina's system is grounded in metaphysical necessity. God, as the Necessary Being (wājib al-wujūd), is the ultimate cause of all existence, and the universe unfolds through a

hierarchical chain of causes governed by rational and intelligible principles (Wisnovsky, 2003). This creates a structured and intelligible cosmos in which every event has a determinate cause, thereby reinforcing a deterministic worldview.

Al-Ghazali, however, rejects necessary causation in the created world. According to his occasionalist view, all events are directly produced by God, and what appears as causality is merely habitual succession (Marmura, 1997). This critique of causality is most famously articulated in *Tahafut al-Falasifa*, where Al-Ghazali denies any intrinsic causal power in created things (Griffel, 2009).

These two frameworks reflect fundamentally different ontologies. Ibn Sina emphasizes rational order and metaphysical necessity, while Al-Ghazali emphasizes divine immediacy and voluntarism. Yet both must address the same core problem: how to account for human responsibility in a world governed either by necessity or divine will.

### **3. Ibn Sina: Rational Freedom within a Deterministic Cosmos**

Ibn Sina's conception of freedom is rooted in his sophisticated theory of the human soul and intellect, which he develops within a broader Aristotelian-Neoplatonic framework (Davidson, 1992). He argues that human beings possess rational faculties that allow them to deliberate and choose between alternatives, thereby distinguishing them from purely natural or mechanical entities (McGinnis, 2010).

Human action, according to Ibn Sina, follows a structured psychological process involving perception, desire, deliberation, and decision. This process reflects the hierarchical organization of the soul and provides the basis for moral responsibility, as actions originate from internal cognitive and volitional states (Wisnovsky, 2003).

However, Ibn Sina does not advocate absolute free will. Human choices are influenced by prior causes, including psychological dispositions, habits, and external conditions. Thus, freedom is conditional rather than absolute, operating within a deterministic framework governed by causal necessity (Fakhry, 2004).

For Ibn Sina, true freedom lies in rational self-determination. The more a person acts in accordance with reason and intellectual insight, the more free they become. Conversely, ignorance and irrationality diminish freedom by subjecting individuals to external influences and internal impulses (Leaman, 2001).

Responsibility, therefore, arises from the internal origin of actions. Even within a deterministic system, individuals are accountable because their actions proceed from their own rational and volitional faculties. This position closely resembles modern compatibilist theories, which define freedom in terms of internal control rather than the absence of causation (Kane, 2002).

### **4. Al-Ghazali: Divine Omnipotence and the Doctrine of Kasb**

Al-Ghazali's approach reflects a deep theological commitment to divine omnipotence, which he considers essential for preserving the integrity of Islamic monotheism (*tawhīd*) (Griffel, 2009). In his critique of philosophy, he rejects the notion that causality operates independently of God, arguing that such a view undermines divine sovereignty.

According to Al-Ghazali, all events are directly created by God at every moment. This position, known as occasionalism, denies any inherent causal efficacy in created things and emphasizes the continuous dependence of the world on divine will (Marmura, 1997).

To reconcile this with human responsibility, Al-Ghazali introduces the concept of *kasb* (acquisition). While God creates actions, humans acquire them through intention and choice, thereby establishing a basis for moral accountability (Frank, 1994).

This doctrine allows Al-Ghazali to preserve moral responsibility without compromising divine omnipotence. Responsibility is grounded not in independent agency but in the individual's intention, awareness, and participation in the act.

Moreover, Al-Ghazali emphasizes the ethical and spiritual dimensions of responsibility. Intention (*niyyah*) plays a central role in determining the moral value of actions, reflecting a deeply inward conception of moral agency (Griffel, 2009). True freedom, in his view, is not autonomy from God but alignment with divine will.

### **5. Comparative Analysis**

The comparison between Ibn Sina and Al-Ghazali reveals both significant differences and important similarities. Ibn Sina presents a rationalist model in which freedom is tied to intellectual deliberation within a causal framework, whereas Al-Ghazali prioritizes divine omnipotence and redefines freedom in terms of intention and spiritual alignment (Adamson, 2016).

Despite these differences, both thinkers reject absolute libertarian free will. Neither accepts the idea that humans act independently of all constraints. Instead, both propose nuanced forms of compatibilism, albeit grounded in different metaphysical assumptions.

In Ibn Sina's system, compatibility arises from the harmony between rational agency and causal necessity. In Al-Ghazali's system, it emerges from the coexistence of divine creation and human acquisition. Thus, both models seek to preserve moral responsibility without denying the overarching structure of reality (Nasr, 2006).

### **6. Ethical and Spiritual Dimensions**

Both Ibn Sina and Al-Ghazali emphasize that responsibility is not merely theoretical but deeply practical and ethical. For

Ibn Sina, ethical responsibility is grounded in knowledge and rational control, making intellectual development essential for moral agency (Leaman, 2001).

For Al-Ghazali, responsibility is inseparable from spirituality. Human beings are accountable not only for their external actions but also for their internal states, including intentions, beliefs, and desires (Griffel, 2009).

This dual emphasis highlights a profound insight: responsibility involves both outward behavior and inward consciousness. Moral evaluation, therefore, requires attention to both dimensions.

## 7. Contemporary Relevance

The classical debates on freedom and responsibility remain highly relevant in contemporary philosophy, particularly in discussions of determinism, moral accountability, and the nature of agency (Kane, 2002). In modern philosophical discourse, questions concerning whether human actions are causally determined or freely chosen continue to occupy a central place, especially in light of developments in neuroscience, psychology, and artificial intelligence, which increasingly challenge traditional notions of autonomous agency. These developments have revived interest in classical compatibilist frameworks that seek to reconcile causal determination with moral responsibility (Kane, 2002; McGinnis, 2010).

Ibn Sina's model resonates strongly with modern compatibilist theories, which attempt to reconcile freedom with causal determinism by redefining freedom in terms of rational self-governance and internal coherence rather than metaphysical independence from causation. His emphasis on the role of intellect, deliberation, and self-awareness anticipates contemporary accounts of agency that prioritize reflective endorsement and rational control as the basis of responsibility (Wisnovsky, 2003; McGinnis, 2010). Al-Ghazali's approach, meanwhile, provides valuable insights into religious ethics and the role of intention in moral evaluation, particularly in contexts where moral responsibility is understood not merely in terms of external actions but also in relation to inner states such as belief, sincerity, and awareness (Adamson, 2016; Griffel, 2009).

In an age shaped by scientific determinism and rapid technological transformation, including advances in artificial intelligence and algorithmic decision-making, these classical perspectives offer a rich conceptual framework for rethinking human agency. They challenge reductionist interpretations of human behavior by emphasizing the complexity of moral responsibility and the interplay between external causation and internal intentionality. Consequently, the philosophical legacies of Ibn Sina and Al-Ghazali continue to provide valuable resources for contemporary debates, demonstrating that the tension between determinism and freedom can be addressed without abandoning the notion of ethical accountability (Nasr, 2006).

## 8. Conclusion

The problem of freedom and responsibility in classical Islamic philosophy represents one of the most profound intersections of metaphysics, theology, and ethics. As this study has demonstrated, Ibn Sina and Al-Ghazali offer two highly sophisticated yet distinct frameworks for addressing this enduring philosophical problem. Their approaches, while rooted in different intellectual traditions—philosophical rationalism and theological occasionalism—both aim to preserve the meaningfulness of human moral responsibility within a divinely governed universe (Fakhry, 2004; Nasr, 2006).

Ibn Sina constructs a system in which human freedom is understood through the lens of rational self-determination. Although embedded within a causally necessitated cosmos, human beings retain a form of agency grounded in their intellectual and volitional capacities. This model does not deny causality but reinterprets freedom as the alignment of human action with rational necessity. In this sense, Ibn Sina anticipates later compatibilist theories by emphasizing internal control and rational deliberation as the basis of moral responsibility (McGinnis, 2010; Wisnovsky, 2003; Kane, 2002).

Al-Ghazali, on the other hand, reconfigures the problem by prioritizing divine omnipotence and rejecting the autonomy of secondary causes. His occasionalist framework places God at the center of all causal activity, thereby eliminating any independent causal efficacy in the created world. Nevertheless, through the doctrine of *kasb*, he successfully preserves a meaningful notion of human responsibility grounded in intention and conscious acquisition of actions. This approach shifts the focus from external causation to internal moral awareness, thereby offering a deeply ethical and spiritual understanding of responsibility (Griffel, 2009; Marmura, 1997; Frank, 1994).

Despite their apparent opposition, a closer analysis reveals that both thinkers converge on a crucial philosophical insight: absolute freedom, understood as complete independence from all forms of causation or divine influence, is neither possible nor necessary for moral responsibility. Instead, both Ibn Sina and Al-Ghazali articulate forms of compatibilism in which human accountability is preserved within a structured metaphysical or theological order (Adamson, 2016).

Furthermore, their theories underscore the importance of internal dimensions of human agency—such as reason, intention, and consciousness—in grounding responsibility. Whether framed in terms of rational deliberation (Ibn Sina) or sincere intention (*niyyah*) (Al-Ghazali), moral responsibility ultimately depends on the inner states of the individual rather than merely external actions. This shared emphasis suggests a nuanced understanding of agency that integrates both ethical and psychological dimensions (Leaman, 2001).

In a broader philosophical context, the contributions of Ibn Sina and Al-Ghazali extend beyond the Islamic intellectual tradition and engage with universal questions concerning determinism, free will, and moral accountability. Their ideas resonate with contemporary debates in philosophy of mind, ethics, and philosophy of religion, particularly in discussions surrounding compatibilism and the conditions of moral responsibility (Kane, 2002).

In conclusion, the comparative study of Ibn Sina and Al-Ghazali demonstrates that the tension between divine causation and human freedom can be addressed through sophisticated conceptual frameworks that preserve both metaphysical coherence and ethical accountability. Their enduring legacy lies in showing that human beings can be understood as morally responsible agents even within a universe governed by necessity or divine will. This insight remains not only historically significant but also philosophically relevant in contemporary discussions on the nature of human agency and responsibility.

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