

# When Qadar Becomes Fatalism: A Category Error in Modern Readings of Divine Decree

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## ABSTRACT

Contemporary discussions of Divine Decree (*qadar*) increasingly give rise to psychological fatalism among Muslims, particularly in modern intellectual environments shaped by deterministic modes of explanation. This paper argues that this difficulty does not stem from incoherence within classical Sunni theology, but from a category error in how Divine Decree and human freedom are commonly presented and understood today. Classical doctrines such as *kasb* were formulated as theological safeguards to preserve divine sovereignty, not as phenomenological accounts of human choice. When their technical language is foregrounded without proper framing, it can unintentionally obscure lived moral agency. This paper proposes a pedagogical reframing that affirms two distinct but non-competing levels of explanation: full divine determination at the ontological level, and full human freedom at the moral and experiential level. By refusing to collapse these domains into a single causal register, the reframing restores moral clarity without revising creed, weakening divine sovereignty, or invoking metaphysical speculation. The paper concludes that human accountability does not depend on understanding how decree and choice coexist, but on the Qur'anic conditions of awareness, capacity, and absence of coercion. Properly framed, Divine Decree grounds humility without eroding responsibility.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Among many modern Muslims, the doctrine of Divine Decree (*qadar*) has become a source of quiet moral confusion rather than spiritual grounding. This confusion rarely presents itself as open theological rejection. Instead, it manifests as a subtle *fatalism*: a sense that one's actions are already determined in such a way that personal responsibility is diminished, or that effort, repentance, and moral striving are ultimately secondary to an unseen script. This posture is often unspoken, yet its effects are visible in *moral passivity*, weakened resolve, and a quiet detachment from ethical accountability.

Importantly, this difficulty does not arise from the Qur'an itself, nor from the classical Sunni theological tradition. Rather, it emerges from a mismatch between pre-modern theological language and modern cognitive habits. Contemporary audiences are accustomed to deterministic explanations that collapse causation, authorship, and responsibility into a single explanatory plane. When Divine Decree is introduced primarily through metaphysical formulations—such as the assertion that Allah creates all acts—without careful framing, it is easily assimilated into this flattened causal model. The result is not doctrinal error, but psychological distortion.

Classical Islamic theology did not face this problem in the same way. Theologians articulated doctrines of decree in a context where moral agency was not threatened by mechanistic worldviews. Concepts such as *kash* were formulated to protect divine sovereignty against rival metaphysical claims, not to describe the lived experience of human choice. When these technical formulations are transferred into a modern setting without translation across epistemic frameworks, they can unintentionally undermine the very accountability the Qur'an relentlessly affirms.

This paper contends that the perceived tension between Divine Decree and human freedom is not a genuine contradiction, but the result of collapsing distinct levels of explanation into a single frame. The Qur'an consistently affirms both Allah's absolute sovereignty and human moral responsibility without attempting to reconcile them through mechanical explanation. Rather than viewing this as an unresolved paradox, the paper argues that this dual affirmation reflects a deliberate refusal to reduce moral life to metaphysical transparency.

The aim of this paper is therefore not to revise doctrine, but to reframe understanding. By distinguishing between divine determination at the ontological level and human freedom at the moral and experiential level, it becomes possible to preserve both humility before Allah and full accountability for one's actions. Such a reframing aligns with the Qur'anic mode of address, restores moral clarity for contemporary readers, and prevents the drift toward fatalism without compromising any tenet of Sunni belief.

## 2. THE CLASSICAL AFFIRMATION: DECREE AND RESPONSIBILITY TOGETHER

Classical Sunni theology affirms, without hesitation, two claims that modern readers often assume to be in tension: that Allah possesses absolute sovereignty over all that occurs, and that human beings are fully responsible for their actions. These affirmations were never presented as rival explanations competing for causal space, but as simultaneous truths addressing different dimensions of reality. The Qur'an itself speaks in this dual register, asserting comprehensive divine power while addressing humans as morally accountable agents who choose, obey, disobey, repent, and are judged accordingly.

Within this framework, theological discussions of Divine Decree were not primarily concerned with describing the internal experience of human choice. Rather, they emerged in response to specific metaphysical and doctrinal disputes. The formulation of concepts such as *kasb* was aimed at safeguarding divine unity and omnipotence against views that attributed independent creative power to human beings. In this context, the language of "acquisition" functioned as a boundary marker, ensuring that human responsibility did not imply rivalry with divine creation.

Importantly, this technical language was never intended to replace the Qur'an's moral mode of address. The Qur'an does not ask human beings to understand how divine creation and human willing intersect at the level of metaphysical causation. Instead, it addresses them as agents who possess awareness, capacity, and the ability to respond to guidance. Accountability is grounded in these conditions, not in metaphysical independence or creative authorship.

Over time, however, the defensive formulations of theology were increasingly abstracted from their original polemical context. When presented without their historical motivation or without careful pedagogical framing, they can appear to redefine human action in a way that is unintuitive to contemporary readers. The result is a misunderstanding of purpose: what was meant to protect divine sovereignty is misread as diminishing human agency.

This paper does not dispute the validity of classical Sunni formulations. On the contrary, it affirms their coherence and necessity within their historical context. What it challenges is the assumption that these formulations, when taken in isolation, provide a sufficient account of human moral life for modern audiences. To recover that clarity, it is necessary to distinguish between the metaphysical claims these doctrines were designed to protect and the moral reality they presuppose but do not attempt to describe.

## 3. THE CATEGORY ERROR: COLLAPSING ONTOLOGICAL AND MORAL LEVELS

The persistent sense of contradiction between Divine Decree and human freedom arises not from the doctrines themselves, but from a category error in how they are interpreted. This error consists in treating divine causation and human choice as competing explanations operating on the same explanatory level. When both are forced into a single causal framework, affirmation of one appears to negate the other. Yet this collapse reflects a modern intellectual habit rather than a Qur'anic or classical one.

At the ontological level, Divine Decree concerns the existence, order, and continuity of reality itself. It addresses why anything occurs at all, grounding all events in divine knowledge and will. At the moral level, human freedom concerns intention, deliberation, and responsibility as they are experienced and addressed within human life. These are not rival descriptions of the same phenomenon, but accounts of different questions entirely. One asks how reality is sustained; the other asks how a moral agent stands within it.

Modern deterministic thinking often assumes that a complete causal explanation of events must also exhaust their moral meaning. Under this assumption, if an act is fully determined at the level of existence, it cannot simultaneously be a free act for which an individual is responsible. Classical Islamic thought never accepted this premise. Moral accountability was never grounded in metaphysical independence from causation, but in awareness, capacity, and the absence of coercion.

The Qur'an itself reflects this separation consistently. Verses affirming divine determination do not function as moral excuses, nor do verses commanding action pause to clarify metaphysical mechanics. Each speaks within its proper register. The error emerges only when these registers are merged and treated as answers to the same type of question. What results is not theological clarity, but confusion produced by explanatory overreach.

When divine creation is interpreted as psychological compulsion, or when human responsibility is interpreted as metaphysical self-origination, both concepts are distorted. The former turns Divine Decree into fatalism; the latter turns freedom into autonomy that rivals divine sovereignty. Neither distortion reflects the Qur'anic posture, which affirms both divine determination and moral accountability without reducing one to the terms of the other.

Recognizing this category error allows the apparent contradiction to dissolve without resolution by synthesis or compromise. Divine Decree explains the structure of reality; human freedom explains moral orientation within that structure. Once these explanatory domains are distinguished, the pressure to reconcile them mechanically disappears, and with it the psychological drift toward fatalism.

#### **4. HUMAN FREEDOM AT THE EXPERIENTIAL LEVEL**

Human freedom, as addressed by the Qur'an, is not presented as metaphysical independence or unconditioned autonomy. It is presented as lived moral agency: the capacity to deliberate, intend, choose, and act without coercion within the conditions of one's life. This freedom is not abstract or theoretical; it is the very basis upon which command, prohibition, repentance, praise, and blame are made intelligible.

The Qur'an consistently speaks to human beings as genuine choosers. It commands belief and action, warns against wrongdoing, praises obedience, censures injustice, and calls repeatedly to repentance. None of this discourse is framed as symbolic or merely pedagogical. It presupposes that human beings experience themselves as agents capable of responding meaningfully to guidance. Without this presupposition, the moral language of revelation would be unintelligible.

At the experiential level, human beings encounter alternatives as real possibilities. Deliberation is not felt as the passive unfolding of an internal script, but as active engagement with competing inclinations, values, and consequences. One may hesitate, resist, comply, regret, or resolve otherwise. This experience of choosing is not an illusion to be explained away; it is the very medium through which moral responsibility operates.

Importantly, this freedom is always exercised within constraints. Human beings do not choose their circumstances, capacities, or limits. Yet constraint does not negate freedom; it defines its scope. Moral responsibility has never required unlimited possibility, only the absence of coercion and the presence of understanding. The Qur'an explicitly affirms this by tying accountability to capacity and knowledge, not to idealized autonomy.

From this perspective, freedom is not something that must be defended against Divine Decree. It is the condition that Divine Decree presupposes in its moral address. The Qur'an does not ask whether humans are free before holding them responsible; it holds them responsible because they are addressed as such. Any theological account that undermines this experiential reality risks misrepresenting the very audience to whom revelation speaks.

This level of freedom is sufficient for judgment, repentance, and moral growth. It does not require metaphysical transparency regarding how divine will and human willing coexist. It requires only that the human being is not compelled against their awareness and intention. When freedom is understood in this way, it remains intact regardless of one's position on the deeper ontological structure of reality.

## **5. DIVINE DECREE AT THE ONTOLOGICAL LEVEL**

Divine Decree concerns the structure and intelligibility of reality as a whole. It affirms that nothing comes into existence, persists, or unfolds outside Allah's knowledge, will, and power. This affirmation is ontological rather than psychological: it explains why events occur at all, not how they are experienced from within human consciousness. When properly situated at this level, Divine Decree does not function as an internal force overriding human deliberation, but as the ground upon which all existence—including human agency—rests.

Crucially, divine determination does not operate as compulsion within the moral subject. The Qur'an does not depict Allah's will as bypassing human awareness or negating intention. Instead, divine knowledge and decree encompass human choices without intruding upon the experience of choosing itself. Knowing an outcome does not cause it, and determining the existence of an act does not negate the agent's orientation toward it. Confusion arises only when divine causation is misinterpreted as psychological pressure rather than ontological grounding.

From this perspective, Divine Decree secures coherence rather than control. It affirms that reality is not chaotic, accidental, or independent of meaning. Human actions are not exceptions to divine sovereignty, nor are they absorbed into a mechanistic script. They occur within a reality fully known

and sustained by Allah, while remaining morally attributable to the human agents who enact them with awareness and consent.

Importantly, the Qur'an does not require human beings to comprehend how divine determination and human willing coexist. It does not present decree as an object of speculative mastery, but as a truth that humbles without paralyzing. Attempts to force a mechanical explanation of this coexistence often produce the very fatalism the doctrine was never meant to inspire. The absence of such an explanation in revelation is therefore not a gap, but a safeguard.

When Divine Decree is confined to its proper ontological register, it no longer threatens moral responsibility. Instead, it underwrites trust, humility, and reliance upon Allah without dissolving accountability. The human being remains a real chooser within a reality that is fully determined—not because the two cancel one another out, but because they address fundamentally different questions.

## **6. REFRAMING WITHOUT REVISION: TWO LEVELS, ONE REALITY**

The preceding sections make it possible to articulate the central claim of this paper with clarity: Divine Decree and human freedom do not require reconciliation because they do not compete. They operate at distinct explanatory levels, addressing different aspects of the same reality. Confusion arises only when these levels are collapsed and treated as rival accounts of causation.

At the ontological level, reality is fully determined, ordered, and sustained by Allah's knowledge and will. Nothing escapes this determination, including human actions. At the moral and experiential level, human beings are genuinely free, deliberating among meaningful alternatives and accountable for the orientations they enact. These affirmations do not weaken one another. Rather, each becomes distorted when forced to answer questions that properly belong to the other.

This reframing does not posit multiple realities, branching futures, or parallel outcomes. There is one reality and one unfolding of events. Nor does it redefine freedom as illusion or autonomy as independence from divine will. Human freedom is understood as uncoerced moral agency exercised within real constraints. Divine determination is understood as the ground of existence, not as an intrusive mechanism overriding consciousness.

Importantly, this approach does not revise classical doctrine. It affirms the substance of Sunni theology, including the intention behind concepts such as *kash*, while declining to treat their technical formulations as exhaustive descriptions of human moral life. Where classical theology spoke defensively to protect divine sovereignty, this reframing speaks pedagogically to protect moral clarity. The difference is one of emphasis and audience, not belief.

By refusing to demand a mechanical explanation of how decree and choice intersect, this reframing aligns more closely with the Qur'anic mode of address. Revelation affirms both divine sovereignty and human responsibility without collapsing one into the other, and without suggesting that moral agency depends on metaphysical transparency. The human being is not asked to understand how freedom and determination coexist, but to act responsibly within the reality in which they do.

In this sense, the reframing does not solve a contradiction; it dissolves a confusion. It restores the proper scope of each affirmation and allows both to stand fully without rivalry. Divine Decree remains absolute, and human accountability remains intact—not by compromise, but by clarity of levels.

## 7. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR MODERN TEACHING

The *manner* in which Divine Decree is taught today is often as important as *what* is taught. In contemporary intellectual environments shaped by deterministic explanations and mechanistic causality, leading with metaphysical language about divine creation of acts risks producing unintended fatalism. When such language is presented without careful framing, it can be subconsciously absorbed as a denial of personal agency, even when the doctrine itself does not imply this conclusion.

For this reason, pedagogical order matters. Teaching should begin where the Qur'an itself begins in its moral address: with responsibility, command, prohibition, repentance, and accountability. The Qur'an speaks first to the human being as a chooser who understands, intends, and responds. This address presupposes freedom at the experiential level and establishes the moral posture of the believer before any metaphysical reflection takes place. When this foundation is secure, Divine Decree can then be introduced as a deeper truth that grounds humility, trust, and reliance upon Allah, rather than as an explanation that displaces agency.

Tone and language are equally crucial. Technical theological formulations were never intended to function as primary moral vocabulary, especially for audiences unfamiliar with their historical purpose. When terms such as “Allah creates all acts” are presented without contextual clarification, they are easily misheard as statements about compulsion rather than sovereignty. Educators must therefore be attentive to how such language is received, not only to what it intends to safeguard doctrinally.

A sound pedagogical approach affirms human responsibility plainly and confidently, without immediate metaphysical qualification. Once moral agency is clearly established, Divine Decree can be taught as a truth that does not compete with choice but situates it within a meaningful and ordered reality. This sequencing reflects the Qur'anic method itself, which does not interrupt moral exhortation to resolve philosophical anxieties, but allows moral life to proceed on the basis of accountability already assumed.

Ultimately, the goal of teaching Divine Decree is not to produce metaphysical certainty, but moral clarity. A pedagogy that preserves doctrinal correctness while inadvertently weakening moral resolve has *failed* in its task. By attending to order, tone, and explanatory scope, educators can transmit the doctrine of Divine Decree in a way that deepens humility without eroding responsibility, and strengthens trust in Allah without encouraging passivity.

## 8. ADDRESSING COMMON OBJECTIONS

### 8.1 DOES THIS DENY '*KASB*'?

This reframing does not deny *kasb* nor undermine its doctrinal role. It affirms *kasb* as a classical theological formulation designed to safeguard divine sovereignty, while declining to treat it as a phenomenological account of human choice. The reframing clarifies the function of *kasb* rather than replacing it: it situates *kasb* at the level of metaphysical attribution, while preserving full moral agency at the experiential level. What changes is not the doctrine, but the scope within which it is asked to operate.

### 8.2 DOES THIS WEAKEN '*TAWHID*'?

On the contrary, this approach preserves *tawhid* by refusing to assign creative independence to human beings while simultaneously refusing to portray divine sovereignty as coercive. By clearly distinguishing between ontological determination and moral agency, it prevents both the fragmentation of divine power and the psychological erosion of responsibility. Divine unity remains intact, while human accountability remains meaningful.

### 8.3 IS THIS PHILOSOPHICAL EVASION?

This reframing is not an evasion of a genuine contradiction, but a refusal to force false unification across explanatory domains. The demand for a single mechanical explanation that collapses divine causation and human choice into one framework is a modern philosophical expectation, not a Qur'anic one. Declining to meet that demand is not avoidance, but methodological restraint. Moral responsibility does not depend on metaphysical transparency, and revelation never made such transparency a condition of ethical life.

## 9. CONCLUSION: FREEDOM WITHOUT RIVALRY

This paper has argued that the perceived tension between Divine Decree and human freedom is not a genuine contradiction within Islamic theology, but the product of an interpretive collapse shaped by modern deterministic habits of thought. Classical Sunni doctrine consistently affirmed both Allah's absolute sovereignty and full human accountability without treating them as rival claims. The sense of conflict arises only when these affirmations are forced into a single explanatory frame that neither the Qur'an nor the classical tradition ever required.

By distinguishing between divine determination at the ontological level and human freedom at the moral and experiential level, it becomes possible to preserve both without compromise. Divine Decree explains the grounding and order of reality, while human freedom explains moral orientation and responsibility within that reality. These are not competing accounts of the same phenomenon, but answers to different questions. When each is allowed to operate within its proper scope, the pressure to reconcile them mechanically disappears.

The contemporary crisis surrounding Divine Decree is therefore not doctrinal, but pedagogical and interpretive. When metaphysical formulations are presented without regard for modern cognitive assumptions, they can unintentionally foster fatalism. A careful reframing—one that begins with the Qur'an's moral address and situates Divine Decree as a deeper truth that grounds humility rather than negates agency—restores clarity without revising belief.

Divine Decree was never meant to absolve responsibility or burden the conscience. It was meant to anchor trust, patience, and reliance upon Allah while preserving the meaningfulness of human choice. Properly understood, it does not stand in rivalry with freedom, but alongside it. The Qur'an affirms both without demanding that human beings comprehend how they coexist. Moral life proceeds not by metaphysical mastery, but by accountability, sincerity, and action within the reality Allah has willed.

## 10. APPENDIX A

### *Historical Note on Classical Sunni Approaches to Human Action*

Classical Sunni theology addressed the question of human action primarily in response to metaphysical challenges rather than pastoral confusion. The Ash‘arī and Māturīdī schools both affirmed that Allah is the sole creator of all acts, while maintaining human accountability. Their disagreement concerned explanatory emphasis rather than moral outcome.

Ash‘arī theologians articulated the doctrine of *kasb* to block any implication that human beings possess independent creative power. In this framework, the human does not originate the act but acquires moral responsibility for it through intention and consent. The language was deliberately restrictive, aimed at safeguarding divine omnipotence in the face of theological rivals who elevated human causation.

Māturīdī theologians, while equally committed to divine creation, emphasized the effectiveness of the human’s God-given capacity (*qudra*) at the moment of action. This allowed them to speak more comfortably of the human “doing” the act by a power created by Allah, thereby foregrounding moral intelligibility without compromising divine sovereignty.

Despite these differences, both schools agreed on all practical implications: humans are accountable, commands are meaningful, and repentance is real. Neither school treated its formulations as descriptions of psychological experience, nor did either suggest that moral agency depends on metaphysical independence. Their debates operated within a pre-modern intellectual context where moral responsibility was not threatened by deterministic worldviews.

The reframing proposed in this paper does not adjudicate between these classical emphases. Instead, it situates them historically and clarifies their function, while addressing a modern interpretive problem that arises from cognitive habits foreign to the original debates. In doing so, it preserves doctrinal continuity while restoring moral clarity for contemporary audiences.

## 11. REFERENCES

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2. **Al-Bāqillānī**, *Kitāb al-Tamhīd* (early Ash‘arī articulation of divine creation and human responsibility)
3. **Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī**, *Kitāb al-Tamhīd* (human capacity (*qudra*) and accountability under divine sovereignty)
4. **Ibn Taymiyyah**, *Majmū‘ al-Fatāwā*, sections on *qadar* and human action (explicit rejection of both fatalism and Mu‘tazilite autonomy)

5. **Fazlur Rahman**, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (for the Qur'an's moral posture and responsibility-centered address)