

Ibn Taymiyya's Ethics and Its Ash'arite Antecedents

LOOKING OVER IBN Taymiyya's intellectual trajectory, it would not take much to conclude that Ibn Taymiyya and the Ash'arites had never enjoyed an easy peace. It had been the Ash'arites, as we know, that had been responsible for one of his earliest public trials after the publication of his *al-'Aqida al-Ḥamawiyya*, adding a new episode to an old history of hostile relations between Ash'arite and Ḥanbalite thinkers and launching Ibn Taymiyya on a career of high-pitched polemical confrontations with Ash'arism waged with both word and pen. Many of Ibn Taymiyya's best-known works are directed against targets that are either exclusively composed of Ash'arites or include Ash'arites as prominent mouthpieces. His famed *Dar' ta 'āruḍ al-'aql wa 'l-naql* is pitted against a view of the relationship between reason and revelation notably developed by Ash'arite theologians. His *Bayān talbīs al-jahmiyya* attacks a view of the divine attributes pressed by Ash'arite theologians, and most particularly by al-Rāzī. His *al-Radd 'ala 'l-manṭiqiyyīn* finds its stimulus in the insidious infiltration of logic into the religious sciences, which Ash'arite thinkers like al-Ghazālī had spearheaded, and in his discussion of ethical propositions, it is characteristically an Ash'arite thinker, al-Rāzī, that Ibn Taymiyya confronts along with Avicenna.

There is much truth in this appearance of conflict, and there is much in the Ash'arite transactions with reason in theological matters that Ibn Taymiyya would trenchantly and unambiguously oppose. Yet turning to the topic of ethics, we will find that the relationship between Ibn Taymiyya and the Ash'arites cannot be written in such straightforwardly conflictual terms. As with Ibn Taymiyya's engagement with the philosophers, which gave rise to al-Dhahabī's accusation that Ibn Taymiyya "repeatedly swallowed the poison of the philosophers and their works," in engaging the Ash'arites what Ibn Taymiyya ingested turns out to have been greater than what he expelled. This is an insight, however, to be gained by working

through several appearances that train the spotlight more sharply on what divides Ibn Taymiyya from the Ash'arites than what unites them.

In this chapter my aim will be to take the first major step in limning the relationship between Ibn Taymiyya and the Ash'arites on ethical questions. My emphasis will fall on key convergences that relate to the way these thinkers approach the nature of ethical value and the nature of human beings' epistemic access to it. Having documented what unites these viewpoints, it will then be the task of the next chapter to locate Ibn Taymiyya even more firmly within his theological topography by documenting what divides them and what constitutes the heart of Ibn Taymiyya's more distinctive contribution.

Schematizing Ash'arite Ethics: Reason, Natural Desire, Social Convention

It is an emphasis on what divides that emerged strongly in the stage-setting exposition of Ibn Taymiyya's *via media* considered in the first chapter, whose themes we are far from having depleted. Ibn Taymiyya had significantly objected to the Ash'arites for denying that "what is right [*ma'rūf*] is . . . right in itself [*fi nafsihī*]" and "what is wrong [*munkar*] in itself wrong" and that actions have objective qualities that provide grounds for God's command. He had remonstrated with them for making out ethical qualities to be a mere matter of "relation and association [*nisba wa-idāfa*]" and for not acknowledging any other meaning to such qualities besides "that which agrees with people's appetites [*mā yulā īmu al-ṭibā*]."¹

Yet looking back over the ground we have covered in the previous chapters, it will not be difficult now to pick out several features of Ibn Taymiyya's perspective that throw unmistakable bridges into the terrain typical of Ash'arite ethical thought. Ibn Taymiyya's sidelining of the deontological perspective was the first important bridge. This was an aspect of Mu'tazilite ethics that Ash'arite writers had also rejected in claiming, as we heard from al-Ghazālī, that evaluative judgments reflect the subjective desires of human agents. They had paired this to an egoistic view of human nature epitomized in al-Ghazālī's words in the *Mustasfā*: "Every person is formed by nature to love himself." These were words Ibn Taymiyya at first appeared to be exposing to vertical bouleversement with his counterclaim in the *Radd*: "People are naturally formed to love justice and those party to it." Yet his view turned out to be merely a new investiture of al-Ghazālī's under a different guise, and it was al-Ghazālī whom he elsewhere directly echoed. For the Ash'arites, as for Ibn Taymiyya, this was naturally paired with the claim that God is not subject to the ethical standards of human behavior.

This last claim, as we will recall from chapter 1, was one of the key objections Ibn Taymiyya had brought against Mu'tazilite ethics. We may notice that the

other objections on his list had also met with vocal endorsement among Ash'arite authors. The Ash'arites had also claimed that God determines human actions. And they had similarly made the divine punishment of actions conditional on the arrival of revelation—God's word, after all, *created* the relationship between actions and their otherworldly consequences—rejecting the notion of desert that the Mu'tazilites had made the cornerstone of their account of this relationship. The notion of desert is likewise absent from Ibn Taymiyya's thinking, an absence that reflects a deliberate act of exclusion, as we will see more fully in chapter 4. No less relevant, Ibn Taymiyya's privileging of revelation as a source of our knowledge of the consequences (and thus the overall utility) of actions directly echoes a view adopted by Ash'arite theologians. For having asserted that revelation institutes the consequences of actions, the Ash'arites had asserted the natural corollary, namely that these consequences are epistemically accessible to people only by revelation. As al-Ghazālī had pithily written in *al-Iqtisād fi'l-i'tiqād*: “The one who creates obligation is God, the one who informs is the prophet [*al-mūjib huwa Allāh ta'ālā, al-mukhbir huwa al-rasūl*].”² God makes actions obligatory or prohibited by attaching reward or punishment to actions as their consequences; it then falls to the prophets to inform us of this.

In this light, Ibn Taymiyya's advertised objections to Ash'arite ethics as expressed in the stage-setting passage of chapter 1 and as widely rehearsed elsewhere may in fact strike us as deeply perplexing.³ For Ibn Taymiyya himself has referred ethical value to human desires and to what is “agreeable” to human beings. “Agreeability”—the very term he uses in dissociating himself from the Ash'arite view that value is merely a matter of what “agrees with people's appetites” (*mā yulā 'imu al-ṭibā*)—appears in several of his own remarks about value, including a seminal passage of the *Radd* we have already heard: “The foundations of [ethical] judgments are necessarily known by people, for they are formed by nature to love what is agreeable to them and to hate what harms them [*al-nufūs . . . maftūra 'alā ḥubb mā yulā 'imuhā wa-bughḍ mā yaḍurruhā*], and what is signified by the term ‘good’ is what is agreeable to them and by ‘bad’ what harms them. So if they are formed by nature to love the one [*maftūra 'alā ḥubb*] and to hate the other . . . it is evident that people know these widespread propositions by their inborn nature [*bi-fiṭarīhim*].”⁴ This passage will immediately put us in mind of the kind of analysis that al-Ghazālī had put forward in his *Mustasfā* in discussing the meaning of moral terms. Focusing on the term “good” (*ḥasan*), as we have seen, al-Ghazālī had proposed a naturalistic account of ordinary usage of this term, arguing that what we call “good” is whatever agrees with our purposes (*mā yuwāfiqu gharāḍ al-fā'il*).⁵ These self-interested purposes are grounded in our passionate or appetitive nature (*ṭab'*) and reveal evaluative terms to be fundamentally relative (*idāfi*) in nature. Every agent calls “good” whatever agrees with *his* purposes, and his purposes may not agree with another's; indeed they will often conflict. Given these

dramatic resemblances, one must wonder how Ibn Taymiyya could possibly have meant to distinguish his ethical view from the one Ash'arites like al-Ghazālī had espoused. No less crucially, one must wonder how Ibn Taymiyya could have taken his view to be capable of securing the kind of ethical objectivism he made central to his quarrel with the Ash'arites. There must be something in the actions themselves (*fī nafs al-amr*) that makes them good, we heard. Yet what is that something if all there is to the value of actions is "what is agreeable"?

Juxtaposing Ibn Taymiyya's words to al-Ghazālī's, our eye will naturally first be caught by the similarities that connect them. A closer reading, however, may also call attention to certain palpable differences between the ways they couch their respective views—differences that may hold critical clues for answering such questions and that it is therefore worth bringing out. For the accent on desire (what a person "loves," in Ibn Taymiyya's idiom; what an agent takes as his "purpose," in al-Ghazālī's) may be shared, as may some notion of "agreeability" (whether *mulā'ama* or *muwāfaqa*). Yet is there nothing to be made of the fact that al-Ghazālī speaks of "purpose" where Ibn Taymiyya—both here and even more clearly elsewhere—speaks of the pair "benefit" and "harm"? "What I want" as against "what is good for me" or what in fact benefits me and serves my interests. We may put this difference most relevantly by using a notion not unlike that of "objectivity" we just queried. Ibn Taymiyya is referring evaluative concepts to the desire individuals have for their real welfare; al-Ghazālī is referring them to the contingent desires individuals happen to have for one thing or another—desires that may or may not serve their real welfare. What I "subjectively" consider good may not always coincide with what is "objectively" good for me. Having marked this distinction, we might connect it to another, this time more interestingly relating to the notion of "nature" with which each desire is associated. For where al-Ghazālī speaks of *ṭab'*, Ibn Taymiyya speaks of *fiṭra*. Al-Ghazālī connects the term *ṭab'* to the egoistic desires of particular individuals which he makes foundational to our ordinary usage of "good" and "bad." Ibn Taymiyya, by contrast, has connected the term *fiṭra* to natural (paradigmatically physical) desires that are universal to human beings and to a desire for objective good. In this respect, human nature as *fiṭra* would seem capable of serving as a foundation for ethical norms in a way that human nature as *ṭab'* could not. Taken as the seat of the egoistic desires of individuals, *ṭab'* supports a merely relative usage of the term "good." *Fiṭra*, by contrast, can serve as a basis of a more objective usage.

These differences in turn help propel to the foreground something else that might have otherwise passed unnoticed, namely the diverging ways al-Ghazālī and Ibn Taymiyya invite us to construe the nature of their accounts. Al-Ghazālī highlights the fact that this is *what people call* "good"; he emphasizes what people say, and in doing so emphasizes the subjectivity and fallibility of such "sayings" and "callings." Ibn Taymiyya's remarks are not free from such emphasis: *al-murād*

bi-qawlinā ("what is signified by the term"), he says here; *al-nāsa idhā qālu . . . ya 'nūna* ("when people say . . . they mean"), he captions his concern elsewhere.⁶ Yet his voice falls with a different accent, most visible in his concluding statement, which speaks not of "calling" or of "saying" but of *knowing*: "People *know* these judgments by their inborn nature." Not linguistics, but epistemology. Ibn Taymiyya's parsing thus appears objectivist twice over, in focusing on what *really* benefits or harms us and on what we *know* is good and bad—thus what is *really* good and bad. Emerging from his pen, the last statement seems less like the kind of statement one might have encountered in the work of a lexicographer documenting with descriptive neutrality the usage of language and more like what we might find in the work of a moralist, setting out in clear normative tones what *is* or *is not* right and wrong. "The goodness and badness of human actions is a matter of the benefit and harm acts involve," we heard earlier. And again: "The only kind of good that exists is in the sense of what is agreeable, and the only kind of bad that exists is in the sense of what is disagreeable."⁷

This way of indexing the differences between Ibn Taymiyya's view and the view expressed by al-Ghazālī will seem particularly interesting, and all the more compelling, for allocating a central place to the notion of *fiṭra* that we have recognized as a salient element of Ibn Taymiyya's ethical viewpoint and indeed of his theological vision as a whole. Setting out the context of Ibn Taymiyya's discussion in the *Radd* and his appeal to *fiṭra* as a foundation of ethical judgments, we earlier saw that he had pitted himself against a set of ideas that had found their home in the writings of Avicenna. Yet what is now important to bring out is that this is a home that had brought the Ash'arites and Avicenna under the same roof, uniting them in a common ethical perspective.

The reasons why Ash'arite thinkers came to find in Avicenna's approach to ethical judgments a particularly fertile resource for bolstering their own position are not hard to come by. Avicenna's discussion, we may recall, had found its purchase in the basic contention that not everything we consider self-evident may in fact constitute a primary rational truth. We may *think* we know certain truths, but we may be mistaken. Yet it was just such a claim of unassailable self-evidence that had typified the Mu'tazilite ethical viewpoint, set down as a nonnegotiable premise that Mu'tazilites stubbornly barricaded themselves behind and refused to converse with those who denied it. Everyone knows ethical truths; you do too—all you need to do is look inside you. A simple turn inward (*al-rujū ' ila 'l-nafs*), as 'Abd al-Jabbār had said, was all that was needed to set the facts straight on certain questions, including questions about moral knowledge.⁸ The turn inward to reason, as we also saw in the previous chapter, was coupled to an outward turn to the empirical world to harvest examples of ordinary people acting in disinterested ways that reflect the influence of purely ethical principles. In trying to secure the purest possible conditions for such

case studies, this empirical turn outward, it is true, sometimes appeared to inch closer to something rather less real than ideal. Mānkḏīm would thus use the telltale language of a “hypothesis” in rehearsing the point in his own voice: “We are hypothesizing” (or stipulating: *nafrīḏu al-kalām*) that the person in question is hard-hearted, indifferent to praise or blame (or acting on a desert island where social praise cannot reach him), an unbeliever who does not believe in posthumous reward or punishment.⁹

Avicenna's discussion of ethical judgments would upstage the real-yet-ideal hypothesis of the Mu'tazilites by a more radical thought experiment designed to transport one to a perspective not merely materially outside the reach of human society, but intellectually prior to its epistemic influence. Seen from this perspective, the phenomenal surface of our ordinary moral consciousness can be plowed up to reveal our sense of self-evidence as the product of a longer genealogy built on the bedrock of self-interested desire as it makes its way upward through the social world. You think you know objective ethical truths, but you are mistaken. What you “know” are merely conventional ideas that have been etched into you in the social world that shaped you by harnessing your natural desires. Avicenna's account would thus allow the Ash'arites to grant the Mu'tazilites their precious claims while emptying them of their significance, boring beneath them to displace the notion of “reason” no less than the notion of “disinterested action,” and to replace them with a typically Ash'arite view of desire and self-interested action as the heart of the ethical life.

The notion of a social genealogy had not been wholly absent from the brew of Ash'arite theological ideas even prior to the more forceful engagement of Avicenna's philosophical resources from al-Ghazālī's time onward. Al-Ghazālī, certainly, was far from the first to propose an egoistic deconstruction of disinterested motivation. This was a proposal already at work in the thinking of earlier Ash'arites, as attested by al-Juwaynī's (d. 1085) dense reference to people's “natural inclination to pleasures and their aversion to pains [*mayl al-ṭibā' ila'l-ladhdhāt wa-nufūrihā 'an al-ālām*]” in this context, and even earlier by the remark of al-Ash'arī relayed by Ibn Fūrak (d. 1015): “For both good and bad, in the domain of the present world, the same thing holds: bad acts are avoided due to the deficiency and harm that redounds to one who commits them, and good and wise acts are chosen due to the benefit and perfection¹⁰ that redounds to the one who performs them.”¹¹ The pain and pleasure or benefit and harm at stake had often in turn been concretized in terms of the praise and blame attracted by actions. Yet to focus on praise is immediately to invite attention to the identity of those directing praise to certain actions over others. It is also to invite attention to the formative processes that effect the link between “morally good” actions and egoistic drives—and more specifically to the processes of education or habituation through which practices of praise cement that link.

The notion of habituation, and the implicit reference to the social community as its administrator, had already glimmered into the open in the works of earlier Ash'arites, as in al-Juwaynī's anticipatory remarks in the *Nizāmiyya*. Referring to people's drive toward noble behavior, he had stated that this "is caused by the strong influence praise usually exerts; for if one keeps at something and grows accustomed to it [*yata 'awwaduhu*], there comes a point where it becomes difficult for him to oppose it."¹² Yet it is a generation later, with al-Ghazālī, that it stands out more distinctly, in ways that betray the influence of Avicenna more clearly and also lay its deconstructive potential plain. The connection between ethical actions and praise, al-Ghazālī clarifies, cannot be done away with merely by temporarily removing ourselves from the physical reach of society, as the Mu'tazilites had fancied in postulating their semifictional "moral informants." Even if in a given instance an action is unlikely to be praised *in fact*, this connection is indelibly imprinted within us. "For one sees praise attaching to [*maqrūn bi*] this form [i.e., the action] and one supposes that praise attaches to it under all circumstances alike," just as when a person of healthy constitution (*ṭab' salīm*) who has been bitten by a snake sees a mottled rope and flinches from it in fear. And "what is conjoined to the pleasurable is pleasurable, and what is conjoined to the repugnant is repugnant."¹³ Al-Ghazālī does not explicitly stress the notion of education or the role of the social environment in effecting this connection here, yet it must clearly be presupposed. As this remark suggests, it is our passionate nature or *ṭab'*—that aspect of ourselves that experiences pleasure and pain, desire and fear, and is capable of learning from them—that gives us our educability and also the dark core of our irrationality, a core that must therefore belong equally to our ethical responses.¹⁴

This is the genealogy that could be used to explain how universal moral judgments like "lying is bad" come to acquire the absolute airs that the Mu'tazilites had ascribed to them. For there are certainly cases, as al-Ghazālī writes in the *Mustasfā*, where lying is the right course of action, for example when it is a matter of saving a prophet's life. Yet in those cases, "one finds oneself shrinking from it, given how long he has been brought up thinking that this is bad. For it has been inculcated in him ever since he was a child, by way of disciplining and instruction [*al-ta'dīb wa'l-irshād*], that lying is bad and nobody should engage in it . . . and when one hears something at a young age, you might as well be carving it into stone."¹⁵ Avicenna's thought experiment, in which the claim that ethical judgments are produced by social enculturation achieved a potent expression, would be reprised by al-Ghazālī directly in his discussion of widely accepted propositions in *Mi'yār al-'ilm fī fann al-mantiq*, as also in the logical introduction to the *Mustasfā*, and its motifs would then recur in his account of the ethical question of the "determination of good and bad."¹⁶

Many Ash'arites after him would follow his example, injecting Avicenna's ideas forcefully into the bloodstream of Ash'arite polemics against Mu'tazilite

moral rationalism and developing them in ever-finer nuance. The key idea that society *teaches* us ethical standards, crisply set out in al-Ghazālī's last statement, would thus be reformulated by other Ash'arites more pointedly as a claim that society *produces* these standards. Writing in his *Nihāyat al-iqdām fī 'ilm al-kalām*, al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153) would deny, in true Ash'arite style, that good and bad constitute intrinsic qualities of acts, and would then offer the following alternative construal. Since these qualities have no real epistemic foundation, they must instead be founded on "people's custom [*'ādāt al-nās*] of calling what harms them bad and what benefits them good. For our part we do not deny these kinds of designations, but they vary from one people to another depending on their custom, they vary from place to place and from time to time . . . and anything that varies depending on these [kinds of] relations and parameters [*al-nisab wa 'l-iḍāfāt*] has no intrinsic reality of its own [*ḥaqīqa . . . fī 'l-dhāt*]."¹⁷

This statement is significant not only in offering an illustration of the notion of custom or convention as Ash'arite writers would deploy it but also in revealing the idea that would be taken as its logical adjunct, namely the relativity and variability of moral norms. In this respect, this understanding would align itself with a motif that formed one of the defining features of the Ash'arite approach. For the relativity of norms generated by social means, and their variability from one social milieu to another, mirrors the relativity of norms founded on self-interest and their variability from person to person. Al-Ghazālī had emphasized the latter point in the *Mustasfā* when speaking of the relative (*iḍāfi*) meaning of moral terms: people call things "good" when they agree with their personal purposes, and one man's purposes are not another's. To this view, al-Shahrastānī's claim now appears as the precise counterpart, yet with a telling shift from the individual to the community. Different societies call acts "good" when they benefit them, and what one society thinks beneficial and harmful may not be shared by another. Importantly, thus, moral norms may be explained by reference to the social whole taken as a suprapersonal unit with interests that can be harmed or served.

All that is left is to add the name of al-Rāzī to the list of Ash'arites imbibing this particular element of Avicenna's resources. It is indeed, as already mentioned, in his capacity as commentator to the relevant passage of Avicenna's *Ishārāt* that al-Rāzī appears as one of Ibn Taymiyya's chief interlocutors in that location of his *Radd* that provides the stage for a concerted treatment of ethical ideas. The cradle out of which Ibn Taymiyya's ethical deployment of *fiṭra* emerges, thus, is one in which his opposition to Ash'arism seems to be directly flagged. If in fact one was looking for a formulation of the precise statement that Ibn Taymiyya's entire discussion in the *Radd* would seek to overturn, one need not look beyond al-Ghazālī's discussion of widely accepted propositions in his *Mustasfā*. "The original nature," he had written about moral propositions, "does not entail them [*al-fiṭra al-ūlā lā*

taqḍī bihā].”¹⁸ Indeed it does, Ibn Taymiyya would counter. Given all the above, it would be only natural to conclude that the notion of *fiṭra* has a pivotal role to play in guarding the borders between Ibn Taymiyya’s ethical viewpoint and the Ash‘arites’. The opposition seems simple and profound. The Ash‘arites had claimed ethical norms are mere matters of convention; Ibn Taymiyya claimed they have their basis in nature.

Yet this way of limning the relationship between Ibn Taymiyya and the Ash‘arites, as I hope to show, is not as straightforward as it appears, and the self-evidence it carries belies some deeper surprises that tell a rather different story about this relationship once probed more fully. To piece this story together, however, we need to bring more of the landscape of Ash‘arite ethical thought into view. And this means, among other things, training a sharper light on some of the central distinctions drawn above in juxtaposing Ibn Taymiyya and al-Ghazālī—between epistemology and linguistics, or the merely descriptive and normative perspective, or again between subjective and objective notions of the good—to ascertain their significance and place in the Ash‘arite understanding.

It is al-Ghazālī who once again offers us the edge of the wedge we need for turning to the first distinction, to assess the importance of the distance between “calling” and “knowing,” or the “descriptive” and the “normative.” And he does so by voicing a view to which he stands not as architect but simply as representative exponent. “Whoever seeks for meanings through words, loses his way and is led to ruin,” al-Ghazālī writes in his *Mustasfā*; one should rather “first establish the meanings in one’s mind” and language will follow. As long as we agree on the meaning, he continues, there is no need to quarrel about the words (*lā mushāḥḥa fi’l-alfāz ba’dā ma’rifat al-ma’ānī*).¹⁹ In stating this, al-Ghazālī would be expressing a view about the relationship of mind and language that many of his fellow theologians would have recognized and endorsed. Language follows the mind; we apply words to realities after we have grasped their intelligible characteristics through the mind. In this respect, to frame something as a demand of our language is already to tie it umbilically to the demands of our thought. A gap between what is said and what is thought, however, would seem to arise to the extent that it would then be a further step to recognize “what is thought” as a product of *reason*, or indeed, as its *demand*. To put it in al-Ghazālī’s language: it might be questioned whether, having discovered that people call something good when it agrees with their purposes, they are right to do so, so that this claim can be stated positively in one’s own voice, not merely as a statement of semantics, but as an evaluative or normative claim.

I talk about a claim of “semantics” here, taking my cue from the terms of al-Ghazālī’s and his fellow-Ash‘arites’ discussions. Al-Ghazālī in the *Mustasfā* indicatively parses his question as one about the “meaning of good and bad” (*ma’nā al-ḥusn wa’l-qubḥ*). But the central focus of his discussion, in fact, seems

to be less a question about what terms like “good” or “bad” mean than a question about what kinds of things “good” and “bad” are applied to—what kinds of things are therefore thought to *make* actions good or bad. Having noted this ambiguity (an ambiguity reflected, as we saw earlier, in Ibn Taymiyya's own remarks), it becomes easier to see why it would not have taken much for the door of semantics to open out to a more positive engagement of these evaluative judgments, and indeed to a more normative appropriation of them.

In the works of earlier Ash'arites, the normative cadence does not yet seem to have emerged strongly, though streaks of it already appear in Ibn Fūrak's account of al-Ash'arī's views.²⁰ The same might be said of al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013), one of the earliest Ash'arites to relate evaluative notions to human desires, who does not seem to have transcended the neutral tones of a semantic claim when, in his legal work *al-Taqrīb wa 'l-irshād*, he accepted the definition of good and bad in terms of “what people's natures [*ṭibā*] incline to and what attracts and repels their souls through instinctual dispositions [*gharīzat al-jibillāt*]*—whether pleasures . . . or pains and different kinds of harm.*”²¹ Yet if this cadence is not fully audible in al-Bāqillānī, it can be heard distinctly in the tones of his successor, al-Juwaynī, who would articulate a view fated to percolate widely through the writings of the later Ash'arite school. The new tones are perceptible still modestly in his theological work *Kitāb al-Irshād*; they assert themselves more openly in his late *al-'Aqīda al-Nizāmiyya*; but it is in his work of legal theory, *al-Burhān fī uṣūl al-fiqh*, that this view unveils itself with the greatest clarity.

Resuming the traditional debate about the value of actions, al-Juwaynī announces his own preference for the following position as the one closest to the truth: “We do not deny that reason demands [*al-'uqūl taqtaḍī*] from its bearer to steer clear from dangers and hasten toward possible benefits [*ijtināb al-mahālik wa-ibtidār al-manāfi*]. . . . To deny this would be to part ways with the deliverances of reason [*al-ma'qūl*].” This, al-Juwaynī clarifies, only “concerns the domain of human beings”—drawing a distinction between the application of evaluative standards to God and to human beings that will be familiar to our ears and that will instantly fall in place. Because if utility forms the main criterion for the application of evaluative terms, God is inaccessible to such considerations. Al-Juwaynī continues: it is only this preexisting rational judgment or demand that explains how the notion of “obligation” (*wujūb*) could have any meaning for human beings when they find themselves confronted with the revealed Law. For it is the harm that God threatens to visit upon us—the threat (*wa 'īd*) of punishment for failing to perform the acts commanded in the Law—that gives the notion of obligation its purchase. Thus “were we to imagine that a categorical command should be issued by God without any threat attaching to its omission, to qualify this as ‘obligatory’ would have no rationally intelligible meaning [*ma'nan ma'qūl*] with respect to us.”²² Yet such a rationally intelligible meaning the notion of obligation indeed possesses.

To rephrase and clarify: it is only because, prior to revelation and thus “rationally,” we exhibit certain evaluative responses to benefit and harm, seeking the one and avoiding the other, that the Law acquires its normative hold over us. It is our ability to experience punishment as an evil—what al-Juwaynī in the *Nizāmiyya* calls an undesirable *ḥazz* or “stake”—that underwrites the notion of “obligation” and the obligating ability of the Law.²³

To the extent that this view grounds the normative force of the Law in our existing motivations and desires, it involves an important modification of the one often associated with Ash‘arite ethics, according to which “good” and “bad” receive their definition from the Law itself. “Good,” in this familiar view, means whatever agrees with God’s command, and “bad” means whatever contravenes it. This is a view that would seem to leave a yawning chasm between the legal definitions of evaluative terms and actual human motivations, or between the value assigned by God to actions and any value assigned by human beings. The demand that human beings should respond to God’s commands and prohibitions would then have to appear as inexplicable or dizzyingly high-minded as any Kantian motive of duty. Given the egoistic emphasis that shapes the Ash‘arite understanding of human nature, motives of self-interest would a priori offer themselves as the best if not the sole way of bridging this heady divide. With al-Juwaynī’s remarks, this bridge is openly laid down, and the demand of the Law is decisively grounded in a claim of reason framed explicitly (*al-‘uqūl taqtaḍī*) as a demand.

Looking forward to later legal theory, one can discover the implicit presence of this demand in the definitions of “obligation” that would be expounded by theorists of different stripes, where the threat of punishment for omission would be isolated as a central component. Looking backward, and with the benefit of some hindsight, one can also follow the thread of this view to the works of earlier Ash‘arites, including (however discreetly) al-Ash‘arī himself.²⁴ At the same time, were we to seek the beginning of this thread more widely, we would have to connect it with a view taken by the Mu‘tazilites, and more narrowly the Baṣrans, which has already come before us. For Baṣran Mu‘tazilites, as we saw in chapter 2, had not only spoken of the pursuit of benefit and avoidance of harm as moral demands of reason, but they had indeed made these demands the principal paradigm for relating the normative demands of reason to the normative demands of the revealed Law, casting the latter as a particularization of the former. Already knowing through reason that we must seek what benefits us and repel what harms us—“It has been established in reason,” Mānkḍīm would write, “that it is obligatory to repel harm from oneself”—we discover through revelation which particular acts serve our welfare and which impair it.²⁵

Many later Ash‘arites would take up al-Juwaynī’s normative claim, modulating it in different ways and with varying points of emphasis. Given the context of our own argument, it is worth observing that this rational demand was framed using

terms that speak to a very specific side of the distinction we carved earlier between “what we want” and “what is good for us,” and thus between “subjective” views of the good and “objective” good. What reason bids us is the avoidance, not of what we contingently happen to dislike, but of what objectively harms us. These terms reappear among later Ash'arites rehearsing this claim, including, significantly for our story, al-Ghazālī. There is thus an interesting contrast—a contrast that al-Ghazālī himself does not mark or gloss for his readers—between al-Ghazālī's discussion in both the *Iqtīṣād* and the *Mustasfā* of the terms “good” and “bad” (*ḥasan/qabīḥ*) and of the term “obligation” (*wājib*). His emphasis on the subjective and relative nature of the former—each of us *calls* good what he desires—is strikingly absent from his discussion of the latter, which is defined through the notion of harmful consequences (*yasta 'qibu tarkahu ḍarar*).²⁶ And it is with reference to the latter, in addressing the controversial obligation to undertake religious inquiry (*wujūb al-naẓar*), which the Mu'tazilites had claimed is known by reason, that al-Ghazālī, openly rejecting this specific Mu'tazilite claim, concedes its partner—now already seen to have been conceded by al-Juwaynī—that reason bids us to avoid what harms us. Reason, or, indeed, nature; for talk of reason here should not obscure the fact that this is a knowledge grounded in natural desire. To call this *rational* is then simply to indicate its availability independently of revelation against the context of a familiar antithesis between “reason” and “revelation” as competing epistemic possibilities. “We do not deny,” al-Ghazālī thus writes in this connection in the *Iqtīṣād*, that “a rational being is incited by his natural disposition [*al-'āqil yastahiththuhu ṭab'uhu*] to protect himself from harm . . . and there is nothing objectionable in applying the term ‘obligation’ to this incitement.” He continues, striking a note that we have already heard: “for one need not quarrel about the use of terms [*al-iṣṭilāḥāt lā mushāḥḥa fihā*].”²⁷

Certainly, with words one need not quarrel. Yet in al-Ghazālī's case one wonders whether this high-minded attitude toward language may not have concealed a certain hesitation about the normative claim at issue and may not indeed have served as a way of avoiding the awkward acknowledgment of any gap between the “semantic” and “normative” ways of inflecting this claim—and of perhaps using the back door of semantics to quietly let the normative into the house. For al-Ghazālī at times appears rather too eager to call attention to the linguistic character of his observations, speaking of what language “permits” or “prevents” and sequestering the empire of language in ways that seem to leave reason uninvolved.²⁸ This linguistic emphasis is visible, for example, in his naturalistic account of people's usage of moral terms in the *Mustasfā*. Yet it is an emphasis that is not uniformly sustained, as indicated by the last-quoted remarks in the *Iqtīṣād*, where the point is clearly put not as a claim of semantics but a demand of reason or nature. And it is likewise a less descriptive kind of emphasis that we see expressed in the remarks on obligation in the *Mustasfā*. “One cannot describe as ‘obligatory,’ ”

al-Ghazālī writes there, “something whose commission and omission are equal in our respect, for the only sense in which we can conceive of obligation is in terms of an act’s performance having a preponderant claim over its omission relative to our purposes [*lā na ‘qilu wujūban illā bi-an yatarajjaḥa fi ‘luhu ‘alā tarkihi bi ‘l-iḍāfa ilā aghrādinā*].” The relationship between language and thought is here brought into plain view: what we grasp (*na ‘qilu*) is seen to provide the basis for what we say about an action or how we describe it (*naṣifu*). Yet the normative note rings out distinctly: it is not only that our words mirror our contingent conceptions; it is that *we cannot* conceive of obligation except in these terms.²⁹

The emphasis on reason as against language, and on a normative as against a semantic perspective, appears in different combinations and degrees among later writers. Al-Āmidī (d. 1233), who follows al-Ghazālī’s lead particularly closely, issues a rather hybrid and uncertain sound, rehearsing the main elements of al-Ghazālī’s account about people’s linguistic usage yet redubbing this in several places as a judgment of reason. (“One may call ‘good’ . . . what agrees with one’s purpose from the perspective of reason”: *mā wāfaqa al-gharaḍ min jihat al-ma ‘qūl*; and more clearly: *taqbīḥ al- ‘aql lahu bi-i ‘tibār umūr khārījīyya . . . min al-aghrād*.)³⁰ But it is al-Rāzī who perhaps strikes the normative note most decisively, and he does so in the context of a sharp distinction—earlier introduced by al-Juwaynī—between the ability of reason to deliver ethical judgments with regard to the human domain and the relevance of these judgments for the divine one. The nub of these judgments is expressed in a set of statements from the *Maṭālib* that we already heard at the end of chapter 1: “Everything that leads to preponderant benefit [*manfa ‘a*] is good [*ḥasan*], and there is no other meaning to its being good than that fact, and everything that leads to preponderant harm [*maḍarra*] is bad [*qabīḥ*], and there is no other meaning to its being bad than that.” Thus there is “no meaning to good or bad than the fact of conducing to what serves and impairs one’s welfare [*al-maṣāliḥ wa ‘l-mafāsīd*].”³¹

A knowledge of reason, or indeed a knowledge of desire—so that our desire for certain things (our desire for them by nature) is implicitly commuted into a judgment of value that we may not object to dignifying with the term “knowledge.” Several writers evince an endemic slippage between the notion of reason and that of desire in their remarks on the subject. Yet underlying this slippage seems to be a clear understanding that the language of reason, to the extent that it is used, takes desire—the biddings of our *ṭab*—as its core and foundation. As such, this claim stands to be distinguished from the claim that had typified the Mu‘tazilite brand of ethical rationalism. The concern to mark such distinctions is palpable in al-Ghazālī’s remark in the *Mustaṣfā* that “it is our *appetitive nature* [*ṭab*], naturally disposed to experience pain at punishment and pleasure at reward, that incites one to guard against harm,” a remark that registers as a direct counter to Mānkḍīm’s formulation: “It has been established in *reason* that it is obligatory

to repel harm from oneself." ("You have erred," al-Ghazālī continues, "in saying that reason motivates.")³² In the *Iqtisād*, al-Ghazālī qualifies the relations between reason and desire in terms that hold up a picture essentially Humean in outline. Through reason we grasp the relevant facts and form the beliefs that inform our actions—most important, beliefs concerning the consequences of actions, formed on the basis of the facts revelation transmits to us. But it is our appetitive nature that sets the ends to which our actions are directed and that provides us with the motivation to pursue or avoid particular actions by finding itself in agreement or disagreement with their consequences.³³

This schematic overview of the evolving Ash'arite approach to ethics could be fine-tuned further. But for our purposes, we have enough before us to finally be able to rejoin the main trunk of our investigation.

Ibn Taymiyya's Ethics: New Wineskins, (Mostly) Old Wine

How, I began by asking, might we understand the relationship between Ibn Taymiyya's ethical viewpoint and the one expressed by Ash'arite authors? In his exposition of his *via media*, Ibn Taymiyya advertised points of friction. The architecture of the *Radd* appeared to second the advertisement of conflict. A survey of his ethical positions, however, called attention to fundamental points of union. Juxtaposing the statements of al-Ghazālī and Ibn Taymiyya, we looked more closely for the seams, and we seemed to find a promise of seams in certain perceptible differences of register. These included a difference between calling and knowing, or the linguistic against the normative perspective; between a subjective notion of "what I want" as against an objective notion of "what is good for me"; and between a related notion of nature: *ṭab'* as against *fiṭra*. What the above survey suggests is that these apparent differences collapse upon a more attentive consideration of Ash'arite ethical thought in its evolution. For all of the facets that initially appear distinctive about Ibn Taymiyya's viewpoint turn out to have been critical components of the Ash'arite ethical approach. By the same token, in collapsing these apparent differences, this discovery allows us to recognize the profound similarities that tie Ibn Taymiyya's viewpoint to the Ash'arites', and suggests that here we may indeed need to speak less neutrally of "similarities" and more thickly of "debts."

We have seen, thus, that evaluative judgments were drawn into connection not only with fallible contingent desires but also with objective welfare in Ash'arite works from at least as early as al-Juwaynī. Similarly, from at least al-Juwaynī's time prominent Ash'arite thinkers embraced the view that reason delivers normative judgments concerning matters that affect our interests. What reason tells us is

that it is obligatory to repel harm and good to pursue benefit. This admission was perfectly compatible with holding that reason does not tell us *what* repels harm and benefit, a point that al-Ghazālī drew attention to in discussing the obligation to undertake religious inquiry. Al-Juwaynī would put the point even more plainly and in more pregnant terms in his *Niẓāmiyya*: “Human reason may command a view of what is in our interests on a general level, yet it cannot arrive at its details [*wa-la-in tashawwafat al-‘uqūl ilā kulliyyāt al-maṣāliḥ lam taqif ‘alā tafāṣiliḥ*].”³⁴ Put this way of course, and using the language of general and particular, this statement will again evoke the scheme developed by the Baṣran Mu‘tazilites for relating rational and revealed norms—a scheme that Ibn Taymiyya’s resembles, as I noted in chapter 2, while excluding the deontological elements implicit in the Baṣran view. As such, it suggests a different and more compelling way of drafting this resemblance, one that also accommodates Ibn Taymiyya’s exclusions.

No less seminal here is another resemblance that will have cried out for remark in the foregoing survey. In considering Ibn Taymiyya’s ethical remarks in the *Radd*, we earlier recorded the notable slippage between his talk of *knowing* what is good and his talk of *desiring* what is good, and between the more cognitive notion of “reason” and the noncognitive notion of “desire” as an epistemic foundation of ethical norms. This slippage now turns out to reflect one that had been endemic in Ash‘arite writings. And this observation prepares us to pick up another point, and another seminal resemblance, this time linked to the critical notion of “nature” at stake in Ibn Taymiyya’s and the Ash‘arites’ thinking and shadowing their respective notions of “desire.” Al-Ghazālī’s *ṭab‘* and Ibn Taymiyya’s *fiṭra*, I heuristically suggested at the outset of this discussion, appear to be divided by important differences that relate to the types of desire to which each is coded. The first refers us to the egoistic desires of particular individuals; the latter to natural (paradigmatically physical) desires universal to human beings, and to a desire for objective good. Human nature as *fiṭra* thus seems eligible as a foundation of ethical norms in a way that human nature as *ṭab‘* does not.

Yet on the one hand, we have seen that the notion of *ṭab‘* was also tied by Ash‘arites to the desire for a more “objective” kind of good—for what *really* benefits and harms us. Similarly, physical desires like the ones Ibn Taymiyya connects to *fiṭra* must certainly be understood as forming part of the appetites constituting the Ash‘arite *ṭab‘*. And if we wanted to seal the distance between the two notions of nature even further, all we would need to do is turn back to the discussion of the previous chapter to recapitulate one of its conclusions. For the domain of *fiṭra*, as we saw, includes natural desires whose satisfaction may not be in our interests. It thus includes desires that are not objectively good for us and that need to be ordered normatively by an external criterion not provided by our nature. To the extent that *ṭab‘* refers us to a set of desires (and capacities for pleasure and pain) that provide the corrigible *material* for value but not its normative *criterion*,

fiṭra and *ṭab'* hardly lie far apart. In the evaluative domain, at any rate, the notion of *fiṭra*—for all its resonance and all the rhetorical force deriving from its scriptural roots and its role in other significant contexts, such as the knowledge of God—would not seem to have traveled far from the notion of *ṭab'*.

Just how little it may have traveled, in fact, is a question that some of our Ash'arite authors give us tantalizing occasions for asking, in doing so inviting a more pointed change of register from talk of "similarities" to talk of "debts." Particularly tantalizing here will be the otherwise unobtrusive remark with which al-Rāzī opens his discussion of benefit and harm and their relationship to our nature in the *Maṭālib*. For if *ṭab'* was the term we had grown accustomed to meeting among the works of our Ash'arite authors—not only al-Ghazālī but also many of his predecessors speaking in the same context—here we find a rather delicate shift of diction. "There is no doubt," al-Rāzī writes, "that there is something which our nature [*ṭab'*] inclines to and which the original natural disposition [*aṣl al-fiṭra*] ordains that we desire to realize, and that there is something else which our pure natural disposition [*ṣarīḥ al-fiṭra*] ordains that we cringe from and flee."³⁵ What we incline to, of course, are pleasure and joy (*ladhdha*, *surūr*), and what we flee from are pain and grief (*alam*, *ghamm*). These represent respectively what we desire intrinsically and what we are intrinsically averse to, and they form the foundations, in turn, for the notions of benefit (*maṣlaḥa* or *khayr*) and harm (*mafsada* or *sharr*), which include both intrinsic and instrumental goods. None of these distinctions will seem surprising, having already made extensive rounds in theological and philosophical works. Nor is there anything to excite our surprise in the general point itself, which chimes in with the by now familiar Ash'arite endorsement of normative judgments grounded in our nature (or reason). Yet it is the unobtrusive appearance of the vocabulary of *fiṭra* that lends this passage its special interest. For it appears at a juncture we will recognize: as the referent for our desire for benefit and our aversion to harm. And if this already provokes recognition, juxtaposed to al-Rāzī's definition of good and bad (which we saw moments ago) it will make our sense of familiarity instantly deepen. If the meaning of good comes down to benefit, and bad to harm, the claim that *fiṭra* forms the foundation of evaluative judgments lies but an ever so slight logical step away.

Al-Rāzī himself does not seem to take that particular step. Moreover, the language of *fiṭra*, appearing here so tantalizingly, flashes through the sky like a one-time comet and fails to return, and it is rather *ṭab'* that figures prominently throughout his discussion in the relevant contexts.³⁶ Even so, it will be difficult to dismiss the observation that it has already fulfilled the function that Ibn Taymiyya would later call upon it more openly and extensively to perform. Should we take this observation at face value and permit ourselves to read al-Rāzī's suggestive usage as a tributary to Ibn Taymiyya's development of this term in his moral epistemology—albeit not the sole one, and if only by way of seeding the latter—then we should be

led to a surprising conclusion. For while it is one Ash'arite (al-Ghazālī) who had provided the formulation from which Ibn Taymiyya would remove the sign of negation ("not by *fiṭra*") in order to frame his own view of ethical judgments, it is another Ash'arite who had performed the same move before him and formulated the very positive claim that Ibn Taymiyya would defend.

The conclusion flowing from the above is that the distance dividing the Ash'arite notion of *ṭab'* and Ibn Taymiyya's seemingly distinctive idiom may be nugatory indeed. On this reading, the distance between Ibn Taymiyya and the Ash'arites would narrow down even further; the distance between Ibn Taymiyya and al-Rāzī even more. Having attuned ourselves to this point, we will find it easy to pick up on important similarities between these two theologians that attest to Ibn Taymiyya's fundamental indebtedness to al-Rāzī's work. Some of the greatest similarities—as in the claim that the meaning of ethical terms comes down to benefit and harm or that the latter are grounded in our nature, whether we call it *ṭab'* or *fiṭra*—we have already seen. But we may now note other similarities in more specific positions and formulations, revealing several of Ibn Taymiyya's characteristic turns of thought to have their anticipating counterparts in al-Rāzī. It will thus be hard not to hear echoes of the salient passage in the *Radd*, where Ibn Taymiyya had connected our love of justice and hatred of injustice to the meaning of moral terms, in the following remark from al-Rāzī's *Maṭālib*, addressed to Mu'tazilite theologians:

If, in claiming that beneficence is good, you mean that it is beloved to our nature [*maḥbūb al-ṭab'*] and desired by the self [*marghūb al-nafs*] as a means for obtaining benefits, that is true and correct. Taken on this interpretation, we do not dispute your claim that our knowledge of its [i.e., beneficence] goodness is necessary [*ḍarūrī*]. Similarly, if what you mean in claiming that injustice is bad is that it is hated by our nature [*makrūh al-ṭab'*] and despised by the heart [*mabghūḍ al-qalb*] insofar as it is a cause of pains, griefs, and sorrows, there is no dispute concerning the fact that the knowledge that it [i.e., injustice] is bad is necessary, taken on this interpretation.

Using the term *ṭab'* instead of *fiṭra* and stating explicitly what Ibn Taymiyya had left it to his readers to deduce—namely that acts such as justice and beneficence are desired (or "loved") due to their impact on one's self-interest—this would seem to be the spitting image of the view we had heard in *Radd*.³⁷

The kernel of this view does not seem to have been originated by al-Rāzī, as it had appeared earlier in al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* in the context of a set of remarks in which he had connected our love of others' beneficence to our natural self-interest. "Human hearts," he had written there, "have been naturally formed to love [*jubilat al-qulūb 'alā ḥubb*] those who do well by them and those who do

them harm"—a mere corollary of their fundamental self-love. Only moments later he had restated the point using the more telling vocabulary of *fiṭra*.³⁸ This is one of several moments in the *Iḥyā'* that directly prefigure Ibn Taymiyya's terminological usage, so that nothing but the simple linguistic transfiguration of *ṭab'* into *fiṭra* would seem to be missing to obtain Ibn Taymiyya's characteristic formulations. Perhaps the most evocative of these moments, in fact, are those that relate not to the ethical but to the theological context, and to the love of God. Al-Ghazālī's discussion of the human love of God is heavily laced with references to our natural *ṭab'*. This is the term he notably invokes to explain the very notion of love: to love a given thing means to have an inclination for it in one's nature (*ṭab'*). Yet it is al-Ghazālī's deployment of the notion of *sound* nature—reminding us of Ibn Taymiyya's emphasis on *fiṭra salīma* in his theological epistemology—that provokes the strongest echo with Ibn Taymiyya's understanding of our natural disposition to love God, when he refers the spiritual pleasure experienced in the divine to the "inclination of sound nature and right reason" (*mayl al-ṭab' al-salīm wa l-'aql al-ṣaḥīḥ*).³⁹ This, of course, reveals a deployment of *ṭab'* in al-Ghazālī's writings in which it carries positive connotations that mirror those adhering to Ibn Taymiyya's deployment of *fiṭra*, even as, for al-Ghazālī's *ṭab'* no less than Ibn Taymiyya's *fiṭra*, nature remains material in need of discipline and education in order to be harnessed to its salutary bent.

Ibn Taymiyya himself often does little to signal the affinities that connect his ethical views to those of the Ash'arite school, though there are isolated occasions when he not only invites us to remark them but indeed openly advertises his indebtedness. One of the most significant of these occasions, in fact, concerns the very characterization of his ethical *via media* itself. In the *Minhāj al-sunna*, having reiterated the traditional debate about ethics and outlined its two extremes—two extremes that serve to identify his own approach as a middle road and third possibility—Ibn Taymiyya crucially adds that "there is a third view concerning this question which al-Rāzī opted for in his later works, and this is the view that good and bad are determined by reason as regards the actions of human beings but not as regards the actions of God."⁴⁰ For the basis of this remark, we need look no further than al-Rāzī's affirmation of this position in his *Maṭālib*. The qualification that al-Rāzī may not have been the originator of this position (this position having been earlier expressed by al-Juwaynī) leaves the substance untouched.⁴¹

Taken together, this serves to confirm the appearance of unison suggested by our initial tabulation of the convergences between Ibn Taymiyya's ethical views and those of the Ash'arite school, reinforcing the insight that these convergences run deep. Yet even if this insight is accepted, it may now be said, the appearance of conflict cannot be wholly cleared away. And there is one particular point where the conflict would seem to stand before us with particular obstinacy. This is the conflict that formed the heart of the argumentative exchange of the *Radd*, bringing

Ibn Taymiyya into unambiguous collision with the Ash'arite viewpoint. For where the Ash'arites had claimed that ethical norms have their basis (both epistemically and indeed ontologically) in social convention, Ibn Taymiyya claimed they have their basis in (human) nature. Yet once again, one only needs to scratch the surface of the facts to uncover a more complex story that calls the appearance of unambiguous collision into question and in doing so again deepens our understanding of Ibn Taymiyya's debts, while also providing the traction for addressing some of the consequences of his unmarked borrowing of Ash'arite resources.

The best wedge into this more complex story can be found by turning back to that tantalizing deployment of the notion of *fiṭra* that al-Rāzī had made in the *Maṭālib* to confront the obvious paradox this deployment would appear to generate. For al-Rāzī, commenting on the *Ishārāt*, had not used the notion of *fiṭra* at that juncture; this was a notion, as we saw in chapter 2, that was after all not present in the relevant passage of the *Ishārāt*. Yet it was present in the counterpart of the thought experiment in Avicenna's *Shifā'*, and its connection to the topic was cemented by Avicenna's discussion of *fiṭra* in the *Najā*. Other Ash'arites taking over these resources, such as al-Ghazālī, had incorporated it clearly in their discussion of ethical judgments. To the extent that the notion of *fiṭra* is implicit in the context of al-Rāzī's discussion, it might then seem paradoxical that al-Rāzī should be seen connecting the notion of *fiṭra* to ethical judgments in one context, while disconnecting it in another.

In the *Maṭālib*, of course, al-Rāzī had couched his point using both terms, *fiṭra* and *ṭab'*. This observation suggests one obvious way of making the paradox disappear, namely by interrogating the significance we attach to the terminological shift at stake. *Fiṭra* was, after all, a term that had long formed a living part of Islamic religious vocabulary given its scriptural origins, and had infiltrated ordinary usage in ways that may open to question the wisdom of hearing it as an exclusively technical term. The linguistic seams between the terms *fiṭra* and *ṭab'*, in fact, long appear to have been fluid in kind, as Gobillot brings out in her study of the former notion. In earlier phases of their linguistic history, thus, the terms *ṭab'* or *ṭabī'a* and the term *fiṭra* had both been employed by different writers to designate the four humors or elements. This fluidity finds a particularly intriguing illustration in the work of al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 869) that directly anticipates the use later theologians would make of both terms in their ethical writings. God created animate beings, he writes in one of his epistles, and then "naturally disposed them to seek out benefits and avoid harms. . . . This is an inbuilt natural disposition and innate formation [*ṭaba'ahum 'alā ijtirār al-manāfi' wa-daḥ' al-maḍārr . . . hādhā fīhim ṭab' murakkab wa-jibilla maḥṭūra*]." We will instantly recognize this as the claim that Ibn Taymiyya would parse in terms of *fiṭra* and Ash'arites in terms of *ṭab'*.⁴²

Al-Rāzī's fluid transition from one mode of designation to the other should thus be taken to signal the light semantic weight this transition carries. The same

weight, I would argue, is exhibited by several of the appearances of the term *fiṭra* in Avicenna's works, where it displays a loosely linguistic meaning that often lacks the technical force that, reading his works backward—especially backward from Ibn Taymiyya—one is tempted to hear.⁴³ In other locations, particularly in the context of the thought experiment that defines it, the notion of *fiṭra* indeed seems to carry a stronger meaning. Al-Rāzī's own attunement to the semantic force of the notion of *fiṭra*, this additionally suggests, might be modulated by the different contexts of its appearance. His simultaneous affirmation of *fiṭra* in one and (implicit) denial of *fiṭra* in the other then become easier to comprehend.

The more obvious resolution of the paradox, however, lies elsewhere. For on the one hand, it will be clear that the notion of *fiṭra* as deployed in the *Maṭālib* does not coincide with the notion deployed by Avicenna, where, as I have argued, it is most intuitively taken as referring to our intellectual nature. In the *Maṭālib*, by contrast, al-Rāzī uses it to refer to our nature as beings susceptible to certain characteristic forms of pleasure and pain, susceptibilities that determine what constitutes our welfare. The notion of *fiṭra* that figures in al-Rāzī's claim that "ethical judgments are grounded in our *fiṭra*" in the *Maṭālib* and in his implicit denial of this same claim in his Avicenna-related remarks is simply not the same. With this in view, we will now recall that al-Rāzī had explicitly excluded considerations of welfare from the perspective of the thought experiment. Once such considerations were included, ethical judgments would indeed be possible. To the extent, in fact, that our nature in the second sense (the sense of the *Maṭālib*) determines the kinds of things that we can count as goods, notably with respect to physical pleasures and pains, al-Rāzī could not have meant to deny that ethical judgments have a natural foundation. In this respect, the Ash'arite claim that ethical judgments are grounded in convention was perfectly compatible with the Ash'arite claim that ethical judgments, in another sense, are grounded in human nature taken as *ṭab'*.

Yet of course the crucial point that Avicenna had brought out is an insight that contemporary writers have often highlighted: what our nature "determines" is far more limited than we might suppose. Our biological nature may constrain cultural possibility, yet, as Alasdair MacIntyre notes, "man who has nothing but a biological nature is a creature of whom we know nothing."⁴⁴ It is precisely the educability of human nature and its permeability to cultural influence, I argued in chapter 2, that accounted for Avicenna's exclusion of moral and psychological sentiments from the thought experiment. Ash'arite writers assimilating Avicenna's insights had heard that point well, accentuating the central role of the community in shaping the ethical responses of individuals by harnessing the material of their nature. With this facet of the Ash'arite ethical approach freshly in our sights, in fact, the notion of "welfare" that al-Rāzī deploys in his reprise of Avicenna's thought experiment can be read more insightfully. For it will be noticed that al-Rāzī refers us to "*judgments of utility*" (*qadāyā maṣlahiyya*), a cognitive parsing that will

seem surprising if we are thinking mainly of individuals' instinctive responses to pleasure and pain. Yet the fact that al-Rāzī is not thinking in these narrow terms becomes clear when in the immediate vicinity he refers more specifically to "public interest" (*maṣlaḥa 'amma*). This is a notion we may recall meeting earlier when surveying the Ash'arite appropriation of Avicenna's conventionalism, which had fed into a view of the social community as both teacher and producer of ethical norms that was twinned to a conception of the community as a subject of benefit and harm. Different societies, al-Shahrastānī had suggested, call acts "good" when they benefit them and "bad" when they harm them.

These kinds of ideas similarly find an important expression in al-Rāzī's work. The idea that ethical standards are grounded in a social contract or convention is one that al-Rāzī develops more fully outside his commentary on the *Ishārāt*, claiming, as Shihadeh puts it, that "an implicit social agreement lies at the background of widely-accepted moral conventions, which is then, as it were, 'forgotten.'" ⁴⁵ In responding to the Mu'tazilites in the *Maṭālib*, he refers to the general interests (*maṣlaḥat al-'alam*) that are served by the moral disapproval of lying and the approval of beneficence and that might lead people to adopt the convention (*iṣṭalaha 'alā*) that lying is bad and beneficence good. ⁴⁶ It is this notion of public interest, thus, that should be taken to interpret al-Rāzī's gloss on Avicenna's discussion of widely accepted propositions and the specific terms in which he frames the notion of utility. What is to be excluded from the "privileged" perspective of the thought experiment are "judgments of utility that have become habitual and familiar to oneself" (*mā ta'awwadtaḥu wa-aliftaḥu min al-qaḍāyā al-maṣlaḥiyya*), and that is to say: that have been taught to one by the community to which one belongs because of the way they service its interests (*al-maṣlaḥa al-'amma, al-niẓām al-kullī*). ⁴⁷

To the extent that the community is involved in the inculcation and production of such moral principles, one has little difficulty seeing why they should appear on the conventional side of the divide at stake in Avicenna's thought experiment. Thus, to repeat, the Ash'arite claim that ethical judgments are a matter of convention was not inconsistent with the claim that ethical judgments are grounded in human nature, taken in the sense of those instinctive responses that provide social convention with the educable material for its operation. If we thought that the essential distinction between Ibn Taymiyya's and the Ash'arites' ethical views could be captured in the contrast between two diametrically opposed claims—"ethical judgments are founded on convention," yet "ethical judgments are founded on nature"—it is clear we need to think again. A more nuanced reading of the issue shows that the notion of nature itself admits of different interpretations, and that the relations between nature and convention are too complex to be accommodated by a simple disjunction that would place these terms on opposite

sides of a sharp divide. And a less simplistic interpretation of the Ash'arite position accordingly shows that they had inhabited both sides of this divide.

Having weakened this antithesis, in fact, we will be more prepared to bring to the fore something that readers who have followed the argument so far may already have found perplexing. For I noted in chapter 1 that in certain writings Ibn Taymiyya himself *also* employs the notion of a social contract or convention to talk about the origin of ethical norms. Through a mutual pledge and contractual agreement (*al-ta'āhud wa'l-ta'āqud*), we heard in *Qā'ida fi'l-maḥabba*, human beings have bound themselves to ethical norms that allow them to collaboratively pursue what benefits the community as a whole and to repel what harms it. These ethical norms include deontological-sounding principles such as telling the truth, keeping promises, and generally conforming to the demands of justice. The discovery, in chapter 2, that Ibn Taymiyya made a special point of grounding ethical norms *not* in convention but in nature cannot but have left readers bemused.

How could Ibn Taymiyya have intended us to understand the relationship between these claims? Ibn Taymiyya, once again, offers to shed no light on the question, never placing his remarks about *fiṭra* into conversation with his remarks about the social contract. Is this a case where we are simply forced, on account of the sheer dissonance of the intellectual phenomena, to postulate intellectual change and to hypothesize about diverging textual chronologies? The notion of the social contract, it will thus be noticed, makes isolated appearances in his work, even if the notion of public interest to which it is linked appears pervasively. And, measured against the centrality of *fiṭra* certainly, the notion of the social contract seems far less prominent in his ethical remarks. Guarding against strong claims about the status of the latter notion within Ibn Taymiyya's thought, all I would note here is that the need for complex hypotheses disappears once we see that this apparent dissonance can be dispelled even without sacrificing the interpretive heuristic of an unchanged intellectual viewpoint. Just how the two claims can be reconciled had after all been clearly demonstrated before Ibn Taymiyya by Ash'arite thinkers, whose conception of a social convention and the related idea of communal welfare his writing reflects. While there is undoubtedly a more composite story one could tell about the infiltration of these ideas into Ibn Taymiyya's thought—particularly the idea of public welfare, which also found a salient home in Islamic legal writing—for the most intuitive pedigree we need not look past the writings of Ash'arite theologians.

A closer analysis of the nature-convention antithesis thus suggests that *neither* party under consideration stood for a single term of this antithesis. As such, this antithesis seems useless as a tool for approaching the relationship between Ibn Taymiyya and the Ash'arites, and more specifically for identifying the issues that divide them. The result of this analysis, in fact, is once again to reinforce our perception of what unites Ibn Taymiyya's ethical viewpoint with that of Ash'arite

theologians and to point us in the direction of his intellectual debts. Ibn Taymiyya's view of the nature of ethical value and his view of the human knowledge of ethical value appear to coincide with the Ash'arites' in their essentials.

Yet looking back at our discussion in earlier chapters, it might now seem that it had brought to light a feature of Ibn Taymiyya's understanding where he had proposed to push things further, and showed a readiness to broach terrain where the Ash'arites had been unwilling to tread. For in many locations, as we have seen, Ibn Taymiyya takes deontological types of actions such as justice or truth-telling as central foci in his discussion of our evaluative grasp. Human beings know such actions to be good—in Ibn Taymiyya's characteristic parsing, they love such actions. Hence the fact that such acts are called "right" or *ma'rūf*, literally "what is known." When the Qur'an thus says that the Prophet "commands [people] that which is right [*ma'rūf*] and forbids them that which is wrong" (Q 7:157), it implicitly refers us to an ethical grasp that predates its own advent and that is presupposed in understanding it. Something similar could be said about the statement that "God bids to justice and good-doing [*ya'muru bi'l-'adl wa'l-ihsān*]" (Q 16:90). Such passages call attention to our extrarevelational ethical grasp in ways that undercut the Ash'arite denial that ethical norms are known by reason, and resist the Ash'arite definitional disemboweling of evaluative terms by referring them to God's command and prohibition. "God commands what He commands" is simply an empty statement.⁴⁸ Ibn Taymiyya's willingness to highlight such passages aligns him with a typically Mu'tazilite practice and, significantly for our context, gives evidence of his willingness to foreground deontological types of acts in specifying our ethical grasp.

In his seminal discussion of the proof of prophecy in *Sharḥ al-Iṣbahāniyya*, Ibn Taymiyya goes so far as to make the ordinary human knowledge of the value of such actions a *criterion* for evaluating the veracity of prophets. Everyone who has falsely claimed to be a prophet, he writes there, "has exhibited ignorance, lying, and turpitude . . . that are plain to even the most indiscriminating, and everyone who has truthfully claimed to be a prophet has exhibited knowledge, truthfulness, uprightness, and varieties of good that are plain to even the most indiscriminating." It is our ability to ethically judge a prophet's actions and his character, conscripting an extrarevelational horizon of moral understanding that notably includes an evaluative response to deontological categories such as "lying" and "truth-telling," that underpins our ability to determine the truthfulness of a given prophet. The same point emerges even more forcefully in Ibn Taymiyya's additional claim that our assessment of a prophet's veracity is supported by an assessment of the content of his prophetic message itself. "Were we to suppose," thus, that someone came along and "commanded polytheism and idolatry and permitted foul deeds, injustice, and lying, and did not command the worship of God or belief in the hereafter—would this person need to be asked for a miracle

[before his claims could be doubted].²⁴⁹ The implication is clear: it is our ability to judge acts like injustice and lying bad independently of prophetic revelation that gives us a criterion for judging the soundness of any supposed revelation. These commands, we are in a position to say, are *all wrong*.

What we see in such passages is a powerful appeal to our independent moral intuitions that is notably couched in terms of deontological types of actions. It is an appeal that brings out Ibn Taymiyya's readiness to talk about the content of ethical awareness in ways that the Ash'arites rejected, and as such it would seem to provide an important check on our picture of the near-exceptionless concordance between the ethical views of these parties. Yet this check in fact turns out to be far weaker than it appears; a closer examination of the reasons why offers a more judicious perspective on Ibn Taymiyya's ethical approach and on some of the consequences of his unlabeled borrowing of Ash'arite resources.

For on the one hand, as we will see in greater detail in chapter 5, the prerevelational moral horizon Ibn Taymiyya evokes in discussing the ethical judgments that allow us to appraise prophetic veracity cannot be taken as a straightforward reference to the resources of reason. The backdrop for our appraisal of *one* prophetic revelation is often the pattern set by another and the divine signature these prophetic incidents collectively spell out. More relevant for our present context, however, is another point, one that formed a central theme of previous chapters and that we can now revisit for a more insightful consideration. One of the recurring motifs of our discussion from the very beginning has been a question about the ambiguous relationship between deontological and consequentialist considerations within Ibn Taymiyya's ethical outlook. If the argument in chapter 1 was correct, Ibn Taymiyya gives little sign of being invested in an ethical approach that gives a robust place to deontological considerations. On the ontological front, his embrace of a view that appears to resemble Mu'tazilite moral objectivism turns out to be sharply differentiated from the Mu'tazilite view by construing ethical value seemingly exclusively in consequentialist terms. On the epistemological front, as I argued in chapter 2, the most plausible way of construing the description under which people desire certain kinds of actions is their description *qua* beneficial—whether to themselves or whether to the community, recalling Ibn Taymiyya's enigmatic statement that “*it is known* that justice serves the good of the world [*maṣlaḥat al-‘ālam*] and injustice tends to its harm.” And it is as objects of desire, I emphasized, that Ibn Taymiyya typically presents ethically good actions. In this respect he once again differs starkly from the Mu'tazilites, who had spoken of ethical actions as objects of knowledge. “There is no rational person [*‘āqil*],” as Ibn Mattawayh had characteristically put it, “who does not know [*ya ‘lamu*] that injustice is bad and justice is good, and that it is obligatory to return deposits . . . and give thanks for benefaction.”⁵⁰

Ibn Taymiyya's adoption of a noncognitivist idiom to talk about ethical epistemology, as I have shown, reflects his assimilation of a typically Ash'arite approach. The same thing would have to be said about his adoption of an exclusively consequentialist understanding of ethical ontology. All this seems clear; yet what I particularly wish to call attention to here is the fact that in both cases, Ibn Taymiyya is adopting views that served a *reductive* function at the hands of Ash'arite thinkers. They were views that had been developed as a counter to that more ambitious conception of ethical rationalism and ethical objectivism that had been articulated by Mu'tazilite theologians. The Ash'arite claim that natural desire tells us what is good was designed as a deconstruction of the Mu'tazilite thesis that reason is our informant. The Ash'arite claim that utility is what makes acts good was designed as a deconstruction of the Mu'tazilite thesis that deontological grounds (at least in part) make acts good. The notion of public interest, in turn, featured in an argument with a reductive function, aiming to show that the way ethical truths *appear* to us may not be a reliable indication of the way things are in themselves. Underlying the phenomena of ordinary moral consciousness is a longer social genealogy which reveals that judgments whose surface form is deontological and indeed absolutist in kind—"it is always bad to lie" or "it is always good to act justly"—are watered by consequentialist roots that are not transparent to ordinary consciousness.⁵¹ Appearance and reality, surface and depth, come apart. In each case, the thesis the Ash'arites asserted could not be understood independently from the counterthesis it served to disprove.

In taking over the Ash'arite view, Ibn Taymiyya severs the umbilical cord between thesis and counterthesis. What are essentially Ash'arite positions are presented to us as stand-alone assertions with little to betray their Ash'arite origin and nothing to betray their original context and motivation. Ibn Taymiyya uses the noncognitivist language of desire without making clear to his readers whether this is a deliberate rejection of the language of reason or indeed a reinterpretation of it along Ash'arite lines. He talks exclusively of utility as a ground of value and does not make clear to his readers what alternative view of its ground this excludes. It is not that the Mu'tazilite notion of deontological act-descriptions (*wujūh*) is brought up for explicit discussion and rejected. The theory of *wujūh* is simply never mentioned. While Ibn Taymiyya continues to refer to these kinds of act-descriptions, such as justice and truth-telling or injustice and lying, his silence on this front means that there is nothing to make such references register as a claim that such act-descriptions are ontologically and/or epistemologically basic. Taken on its own—to finally make contact with the beginning of this argument—the mere fact that Ibn Taymiyya refers to these act-descriptions is not a feature that fundamentally sets his ethical approach apart from the Ash'arites'. Ash'arites, after all, had also accepted that "deontological" types of acts could have value—because of their utility. They had also accepted that deontological types of judgments could figure

in the content of our surface moral consciousness—itself the product of a consequentialist communal mindset. The more interesting distinctions turned out to center not on the level of *whether* but of *why*. Most intellectual systems, Arthur Lovejoy has observed, “are original or distinctive rather in their patterns than in their components,” so that the “seeming novelty of many a system is due solely to the novelty of the application or arrangement of the old elements which enter into it.”⁵² This holds as true for Ibn Taymiyya as for any other thinker. Yet in Ibn Taymiyya's case, one cannot help but wonder whether, in the re-presentation of intellectual ingredients, something of the original pattern that gave these ingredients their meaning has fallen away from view.

Noting Ibn Taymiyya's neglect of the deontological side of Mu'tazilite moral theory in chapter 1, I suggested there is an invidious question to raise as to whether this neglect should be taken as the result of a deliberate choice or an unintended oversight, perhaps reflecting Ibn Taymiyya's limited familiarity with Mu'tazilite texts. Yet even if we eschew more invidious talk of oversight and confine ourselves to more neutral talk of silence, the thematization of his silences, we now see, is something to which we are inescapably driven when we seek to consider his ethical thought against its context and indeed its formative influences. Probed attentively, these silences hold the key for locating Ibn Taymiyya within his theological topography and situating his specific view of ethics against preexisting possibilities. Our story took its departure, in chapter 1, from a sense that Ibn Taymiyya's *via media* conceded so much to Mu'tazilite rationalism and objectivism that it was tempting to simply close the subject and conclude that his ethical approach was a *via media* that leans heavily toward one of its extremes. Its current denouement shows that such an impression could not be further from the truth, and masks Ibn Taymiyya's profound debts to Ash'arite thought. Yet it is highly significant that there should be a discrepancy between what Ibn Taymiyya's remarks initially invite us to conclude and what a closer analysis reveals, and that the real contours of his ethical understanding should need to be elicited by an act of excavation that digs beneath his own representation of the debate to which he is contributing.

It is an act of excavation that has made for many of the turning points of our narrative thus far. It made for the discovery of Ibn Taymiyya's silence on deontological considerations in chapter 1, or his silence on nonimperative concepts of value. It made for the unearthing of the distinction between first-person and third-person perspectives that gave us one of the plots of the same chapter, and the distinction between individual and communal interest there and elsewhere. Many of these suppressions carry important consequences for the way we locate Ibn Taymiyya on the map of classical debates about ethics, as I have just said. They also carry important consequences for the cogency of his arguments, just as they carry consequences for the substantiveness of his ethical views. Having brought to light Ibn Taymiyya's Ash'arite debts in founding ethical norms on

communal welfare, we have been given additional grounds for adopting the suggestion outlined in chapter 2 regarding how the epistemological subject implicit in his gnomic statement “*it is known* that justice serves the good of the world [*maṣlaḥat al-‘ālam*] and injustice tends to its harm” should be construed—not as the first-person singular but as the first-person plural of the community. For in the Ash‘arite analysis that trails this statement, the perspective from which ethical judgments are shown to be grounded in communal welfare is not the perspective of ordinary ethical experience, but of a higher-order reflective (and indeed reductive) analysis of it. Yet to accept this conclusion is to be confirmed in the sense that the ordinary moral subject as this looks back at us from Ibn Taymiyya’s writings is made of gossamer material indeed.

Such suppressions, to resume a theme that closed chapter 2, offer a testament to the theoretical thinness of Ibn Taymiyya’s ethical remarks and provide us with telling indications regarding the character and also the limitations of his account. I hope the discussion pursued in the previous chapters will have given abundant reasons for thinking that a close analysis of Ibn Taymiyya’s ethical remarks is worth undertaking *despite* these limitations. So long as our interest does not lie in narrowly engaging his views for their philosophical cogency or substantiveness, there are robust insights such analysis can offer regarding both the contours of his ethical understanding and his place within his theological topography. Yet no less central are the insights it affords us into the form of his ethical remarks and indeed of his writing more broadly. Appreciating the form of Ibn Taymiyya’s writing, in this respect—including those features that throw obstacles before the effort to understand its content and that invite partial interpretations—is a part of the task equally crucial as appreciating its content.

What about Objectivity?

I have shown that Ibn Taymiyya’s view of the nature of value and the human knowledge of value, scrutinized more carefully, turns out to share many of its distinctive features with the Ash‘arite view. In that case, it may be asked in closing, what of the points of conflict that Ibn Taymiyya called attention to in outlining his *via media*? For he may share far less with Mu‘tazilite ethical rationalism and ethical objectivism than may be initially evident. Yet we will recall that it was a vigorous claim of ethical objectivity that had shaped his remarks in the stage-setting exposition we heard in chapter 1 and that formed the backbone of the disagreement he had expressed with the Ash‘arite perspective. He had objected to the Ash‘arites’ denial that the value of actions is a matter of objective reality—that “what is right [*ma ‘rūf*] is . . . right in itself [*fī nafsīhi*]” and “what is wrong [*munkar*] in itself wrong.” Similarly, he had objected to their reduction of value to a mere matter of “relation and association” (*nisba wa-idāfa*), such as the relative value

deriving from agreement with people's natural appetites (*mā yulā'imu al-ṭibā*). Ibn Taymiyya's objection to the latter point will seem very puzzling, as signaled earlier, given the paramount role he also allocates to natural desires in his ethical account. What purchase, one may ask more broadly, could a notion of objectivity have within such an understanding?

The analogy with Hume that picked its way through earlier parts of our narrative is worth reviving at this juncture. In chapter 1, I compared Ibn Taymiyya's way of grounding morality in emotional responses to the sentimentalist view of morality articulated by Hume. Ibn Taymiyya's comparison of ethical reactions to aesthetic responses carried a similar resonance. The analogy seems illuminating, among other reasons, because it allows us to observe the ways certain ideas naturally organize themselves into similar neighborhoods and conjunctions in sharply diverging intellectual contexts. No less noteworthy than the common concern with the emotions and with utility or indeed the shared empiricist temper, in this respect, is the larger theological aim that shadows the projects of both thinkers. For the context of Hume's ethical project, as Schneewind has shown, was a long-standing conflict between rationalist and voluntarist views of God's relation to morality. Hume's own concern was to discredit the former by denying that "there are eternal fitnesses and unfitnesses of things, which are the same to every rational being," and that "the immutable measures of right and wrong impose an obligation, not only on human creatures, but also on the Deity himself" (*T* 456).⁵³

Whatever their other differences (and there are many), it is an interest in driving a wedge between the human and the divine domain that Hume shares with Ibn Taymiyya. Yet Hume, on his side, made it clearer than Ibn Taymiyya had before him that this involved denying that morality is a matter of "conformity with reason," and that his proposal to ground morality in the passions was a proposal to ground morality in feeling *in contradistinction* to reason. He also made clear that the decision to ground morals, just "like the perception of beauty and deformity," in human nature—in "the particular fabric and constitution of the human species" with its particular emotional capacities and susceptibilities to pleasure and pain—was a decision to embrace a very different conception of what it means to talk about the objectivity of morality. You discover the moral quality of an action when you "turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of [approbation or] disapprobation, which arises in you"—a sentiment in turn reflecting the way this action impacts on human beings' dispositions to pleasure and pain. Hence this quality "lies in yourself, not in the object" (*T* 468–69).

Hume's choice of expression will seem highly evocative in considering the Islamic context. For it was a phrase just like this one, as we saw—inviting a simple turn inward (*al-rujū' ila'l-nafs*)—that 'Abd al-Jabbār had used in affirming the ethical testimony that our inner resources afford us. Yet 'Abd al-Jabbār, of course, had had an inward turn to the resources of reason more specifically in mind. And

reason provides us with a window to real truths that are not merely a product of our own minds and that are not applicable to us alone by virtue of our specific features as subjects. This is a point that 'Abd al-Jabbār and his fellow Mu'tazilites would dwell on at length in their works, often in response to a peculiarly Ash'arite claim regarding those features of human subjects that made all the difference to the moral standards that applied to them. It is the fact that human beings are owned by God as chattels (*mamlūk*) and that God is the proprietor and lord (*mālik*) of created beings, Ash'arites had suggested, that makes the former subject to ethical constraints and the latter immune to them. God's actions cannot be limited by moral standards, for they themselves serve as their source. Al-Ash'arī had put the point clearly early on when writing that God "is the all-powerful Master, who is under the mastery of none, and has none above Him to issue sanctions, none to command or restrain or proscribe, and none to draw lines and trace out boundaries for Him [*man rasama lahu al-rusūm wa-ḥadda lahu al-ḥudūd*]; this being so, nothing He does can be evil." In this, God is entirely unlike human beings, who can overstep the boundaries set by their Master.⁵⁴

The Mu'tazilite emphasis on the real features of acts that provide the grounds of their value came as a counter to this type of "theistic subjectivism" (in George Hourani's phrase). Acts have value because of something that relates to the acts themselves (*amr yarji 'u ilayhā*) and that indeed operates as a necessitating cause (*'illa mūjiba*). This is the respect, as 'Abd al-Jabbār would significantly comment elsewhere, in which ethical judgments diverge most sharply from aesthetic judgments, such as our response to pretty or ugly pictures, which vary from person to person and indeed from time to time. A picture is called ugly (*qabīḥ*) "to the extent that one dislikes looking at it [*min ḥaythu tanfuru al-nafs min al-naẓar ilayhā*]." As such, this disapproving response is grounded in something that relates to us rather than to the picture itself (*amr yarji 'u ilaynā lā ilayhā*). The disvalue of lying or of injustice, by contrast, in no wise depends on the features of the agent contemplating such acts, whether human beings or God.⁵⁵

Ibn Taymiyya's ethical claims, as we have seen, are often couched in terms that carry strong objectivist commitments. We have heard him speak of what an act is "in itself" (*fī nafsīhi* or *fī nafs al-amr*) in our stage-setting text; we have heard him speak of the "attributes" (*ṣifāt*) of actions. Elsewhere he speaks more emphatically of *intrinsic* or *essential* attributes (*ṣifāt dhātiyya*), though in other locations he retreats from this strong specification. Yet in many of these instances, it is clear from the context that he is thinking, once again, of benefit and harm, which ultimately refer us to the material of human pleasure and pain.⁵⁶ Now it is not, to recapitulate an earlier observation, that the Mu'tazilites made no room for such notions within their framework. It is thus important to recall that within Mu'tazilite theory, deontological act-descriptions took their place next to a number of consequentialist considerations. What is crucial, however, is that the Mu'tazilites had reserved their

strongest objectivist language for the former class as against the latter, for reasons that can be easily summed up.

Acts like lying or injustice, as Ibn Mattawayh explains, owe their value to unchanging characteristics (*ṣifa lāzima lā tazūlu 'an al-mawṣūf bi-ḥāl*). Where the value depends on the consequences (the utility) of actions, by contrast, the same action can be good in some circumstances and bad in others. Ask yourself, “Is it good to travel for trade purposes?” or “Is it good to run?”, and you will find that you cannot give absolute answers. Traveling may be good if there is a realistic chance of financial gain but bad in other circumstances. Running may be wrong in some circumstances—it seemed undignified to those critics of Muslim practice who lampooned many of the rituals, including running, comprised in the hajj—but it may be right if you are fleeing a beast of prey, if you are coming to greet your father, if the doctor has prescribed it for health, or if it has been prescribed by a caring Creator who has discerned other benefits that are hidden from your limited view. The context-dependence of such acts finds its complement in their dependence on features of agents, to the extent that they presuppose a disposition to benefit and harm.⁵⁷ Ibn Taymiyya thus applies the language of “objectivity” to actions that the Mu‘tazilites had handled in distinctly relative terms. In the axis extending between “what relates to us” and “what relates to acts themselves,” Ibn Taymiyya leans strongly to the former, just like the Ash‘arites before him. What makes acts good is very much a matter of the kinds of creatures we are and our natural disposition to characteristic pleasures and pains: its quality, to return to Hume’s phrase, “lies in yourself, not in the object.”⁵⁸

Could we still speak of objectivity on these terms? Writing in a related connection, James Rachels has suggested that ethical naturalism can be seen as a “compromise between objective and subjective views of ethics. It is objective in that it identifies good and evil with something that is really ‘there’ in the world outside us, but at the same time, what is there is the power to produce feelings inside us.”⁵⁹ Hume himself, while setting aside the notion of “conformity with reason” and instructing us to look for the passions moving within our breast, spoke of what this inward look discovers as a “matter of fact.” The responses of pleasure and pain we find within our breast or wired into our body—responses that reflect our characteristic dispositions as the natural creatures we are—after all constitute some of the hardest facts in the world, and thinkers in the past have often judged them far more robust than alternative facts constituted by so-called rational intuitions. That certain kinds of actions and events produce certain effects or result in certain experiences that we find pleasurable or painful is another hard fact, which places our nature into conversation with the natural world we live in, though for Ibn Taymiyya this conversation also extends to the supernatural world that follows. Even if the “stuff” of value is human pleasure and pain, against such facts we can still draw distinctions, as suggested earlier, between

pleasures that serve our overall interests and ones that do not—between a “subjective” sense of the good that reflects our fallible likes and dislikes (“what I want”) and a more “objective” sense of the good that represents our true welfare in the long term (“what is good for me”). These distinctions become sharper still if, with Ibn Taymiyya, we believe there are objective facts of the matter as to what constitutes our true welfare and as to the means for achieving it.

A place for the language of “objectivity,” this schematization suggests, could still be argued within this framework. Yet to the extent that we are considering Ibn Taymiyya against his theological topography, it will be crucial to be clear how far, once again, this would be from the place the Mu‘tazilites had prepared for it and how much nearer to a kind of place Ash‘arite theologians would also have been prepared to concede.⁶⁰

MY MAIN CONCERN in this chapter has been to document the fundamental convergences that unite Ibn Taymiyya’s ethical positions to those articulated by Ash‘arite theologians, revealing Ibn Taymiyya’s profound debts to the latter for his understanding of the nature of value and the mode of human beings’ epistemic access to it. Any appearance of conflict on these issues gives way to a picture of deeper concord.

Yet this, in fact, is not to say that genuine conflict is not at stake between the outlooks of these thinkers. If we wish to identify the real location of Ibn Taymiyya’s conflict with Ash‘arite ethical thought, however, it is not among the topics we have considered in this chapter that we should primarily seek it. These topics, it may now be observed, lie on one particular side of a boundary that we met early in our inquiry yet that has remained quietly in the background in these three chapters, namely the boundary between the human domain and the divine. To talk about what human beings can and cannot do, we earlier heard Ibn Taymiyya declare, is still to say nothing about God. The analogy between the human domain and the divine (*qiyās al-ghā’ib ‘alā al-shāhid*) that the Mu‘tazilites practiced has to be categorically rejected. To say that the morality of human beings is not the morality of God, at the same time, is not to say that there is no sense whatsoever in which one can speak of a divine “morality.” Having focused on the human domain thus far, it is to the divine domain that we need to make the leap in order to bring into view not merely the real grounds of Ibn Taymiyya’s quarrel with the Ash‘arites, but indeed the larger theological vision in which his ethical views about human morality find their deepest roots and his *via media* achieves a further—and perhaps its most critical—articulation. If what we say about God is not what we say about ourselves, what *can* we say about God?

CHAPTER 3

1. Ibn Taymiyya, "Mas'alat taḥsīn al-'aql wa-taqbīḥuhu," in *Majmū' Fatāwā*, 8: 433.
2. Al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtīṣād fi'l-i'tiqād*, 195; cf. Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad Maqālāt al-shaykh Abi'l-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī*: "The reward and punishment that attach to acquired actions . . . attach to them by way of revealed report rather than reason" (99); discussing the notion of obligation: "There is no indicant in [reason] regarding the benefits and harms that form the consequences [*al-'awāqib*]" of actions (286).
3. Ibn Taymiyya's critical remarks about the Ash'arites can be tracked in many of the locations cited in chapter 2. For further expressions of the objections that opened this section, see "Risāla fi'l-Iḥtijāj bi'l-qadar," in *Majmū' Fatāwā*, 8: 343–44; *Sharḥ al-Iṣbahāniyya*, 448–49; *Nubuwwāt*, 1: 459.
4. Ibn Taymiyya, *Radd*, 430.
5. Al-Ghazālī, *Mustaṣfā*, 1: 56.
6. Ibn Taymiyya, *Radd*, 423.
7. Ibid., 422; Ibn Taymiyya, "Risāla fi'l-Iḥtijāj bi'l-qadar," in *Majmū' Fatāwā*, 8: 309.
8. The phrase is from 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Ta'dīl*, 185.
9. Mānkdim, *Sharḥ*, 308. The unbelievers' moral awareness is frequently invoked by Mu'tazilites in support of their position: see, for example, Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū'*, 1: 254; 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Ta'dīl*, 109 (*ya 'rifūna dhālika wa-yukhbirūna bihi 'an anfushim*). The "desert island" condition often turns up in anti-Mu'tazilite critiques; see, for example, al-Rāzī, *Maṭālib*, 3: 67.
10. The text has *jamāl* (a term that appears elsewhere in the same vicinity) but with Shihadeh (*Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, 51) I take the meaning of *kamāl* to offer a more natural counterpart to the preceding *naqs*.
11. Al-Juwaynī, *Kitāb al-Irshād ilā qawāṭi' al-adilla fi uṣūl al-i'tiqād*, 265; Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad*, 141–42. In reading Ibn Fūrak's remarks as a psychological claim rather than a claim about the definition of ethical concepts, my view departs from the one expressed by Shihadeh in *Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, 51; cf. his "Theories of ethical value in kalām." See also, as part of this same longer lineage, al-Bāqillānī's *Kitāb al-Tamhīd*, remarking that everyone acts in order to obtain benefit or repel harm, and "the only kinds of agents one can conceive in the present realm [*al-shāhid*] are of this kind" (107).
12. Al-Juwaynī, *al-'Aqida al-Nizāmiyya fi'l-arkān al-Islāmiyya*, 36; note the interesting continuation, juxtaposing custom and nature: *li'l-'ādāt āthār ghayr mankūra fi'l-jibillāt*. The notion of custom or indeed convention is also present in al-Anṣārī's *Ghunya*—note for example his reference to right and wrong in the sense of "that which people agreed upon" (*tawāda 'alayhi*) or which is grounded "in their conventions and purposes" (*awḍā'ihim wa-aghrādihim*) (2: 1003)—but

it does not seem to me to be foregrounded. The term *‘āda* itself is used to refer more broadly to the familiar or natural operation of the world, including human nature (e.g., 2: 998: *mā ya ‘bāhu al-ṭab’ . . . fī mustaqirr al-‘āda*).

13. Al-Ghazālī, *Mustasfā*, 1: 60.
14. Our irrationality: al-Ghazālī speaks of the subservience of the soul to the imagination or “estimation”: *khuliqat quwā al-naḥs muṭī‘a li’l-awḥām* (ibid., 1: 59). The appearance of *wahm* at this juncture will certainly remind us of Avicenna, whose remarks on the educability of the estimation by “something like experience” (*shay’ ka’l-tajriba*) al-Ghazālī echoes: see *Naḥs*, 163–64; cf. Black, “Estimation (*wahm*) in Avicenna,” 226–27. Yet the key idea, as well as its defining vocabulary, had been in the intellectual bloodstream much longer. See the particularly suggestive remarks in this regard in al-Jāhīz’s epistle “Min Kitāb al-Masā’il wa’l-jawābāt fi’l-ma’rifa,” 322–23. A new edition of this epistle is forthcoming by Professor James Montgomery, to whom I owe my closer reading of it.
15. Al-Ghazālī, *Mustasfā*, 1: 59; cf. al-Ghazālī, *Iqtiṣād*, 167: *al-ṭab’ yunaḥḥu ‘anhu min awwal al-ṣibā bi-tarīq al-ta’dīb wa’l-istiṣlāḥ*.
16. See al-Ghazālī, *Mi‘yār al-‘ilm fī fann al-mantiq*, 193–97; al-Ghazālī, *Mustasfā*, 1: 48–49, and the discussion of *taḥṣīn* from 55 ff. Compare the reprise of the terms of the thought experiment in al-Shahrastānī, *Nihāyat al-iqdām*, 371–72; also al-Āmidī, *Ghāyat al-marām fī ‘ilm al-kalām*, 235.
17. Al-Shahrastānī, *Nihāyat al-iqdām*, 373, reading *lā ḥaḥiqata lahu* instead of the present *lahā*.
18. Al-Ghazālī, *Mustasfā*, 1: 48.
19. Ibid., 21, 28.
20. This cadence certainly seems present, albeit discreetly, in the remark found in Ibn Fūrak’s *Mujarrad* (142): unless an action brings benefit to a person, “there is no longer any motivation for him to perform the act, and one does not choose that act assuming he is wise/rational [*ḥakīm*].” In my view the notion of “wisdom” or “rationality” deployed in this manner clearly registers with normative tones. I would also hear al-Ash‘arī’s remarks on the notion of obligation (285–86) in the same tones, as does Gimaret, *La doctrine d’al-Ash‘arī*, 213.
21. The remark is in al-Juwaynī’s abridgment of the work, *Kitāb al-Talkhīṣ fī uṣūl al-fiqh*, 1: 159. Cf. the remark in *Tamhīd*, where, arguing against the view that we know what is good by reason, al-Bāqillānī distinguishes the possibility that by “good” one might be referring to no more than our “natural inclination toward pleasure and natural aversion to pain” (122–23). The text reads, *muyūl al-ṭibā’ ilā fi’l al-ladhdhāt wa-nuḥūrahā ‘an fi’l al-ālām*—a phrase virtually identical with the one used by al-Juwaynī in the same context in his *Irshād*—but the notion of *fi’l* must be read in context; the argument seems to refer us to the pleasure/pain caused by *others*.
22. Al-Juwaynī, *al-Burhān fī uṣūl al-fiqh*, 1: 91–92.

23. See the relevant remarks in al-Juwaynī, *Niẓāmiyya*, 58–59 (*fa-law lam yathbut ḥazz al-‘abd fī tanakkub al-‘iqāb, la-mā taqarrara fī ḥaqqihi al-wājib*). Al-Juwaynī’s role in the adoption of this position has been remarked by Schmidtke in *The Theology of al-‘Allāma al-Ḥillī*, 102–103; cf. ‘Abd al-Qādir, *al-Masā’il al-mushtaraka bayna uṣūl al-fiqh wa-uṣūl al-dīn*, 78. It is thus a mistake to credit al-Ghazālī with the central role in this development, as Frank has suggested in a couple of works. See his remarks in *Creation and the Cosmic System*, 67, where he discusses al-Ghazālī’s seemingly innovative transformation of “the juridically obligatory,” which he associates with earlier Ash‘arism, into the “prudentially necessary.” The argument for this thesis seems to me somewhat elliptical and obscure, but in any case the above clearly suggests that this transformation had already taken place. Part of Frank’s argument—an argument that forms part of a broader reading of al-Ghazālī’s ambivalent relationship with the Ash‘arite school and his tactic of effecting subtle subversions of traditional Ash‘arite positions—rests on al-Ghazālī’s use of the notion of *ṭab‘* in his discussion of obligation in the *Iqtiṣād*. Frank takes this to introduce the notion of secondary causation—unfashionable in Ash‘arite theology—into the discussion (*Al-Ghazālī and the Ash‘arite School*, 34). Yet this reading of the term *ṭab‘* overlooks its longer pedigree in the ethical writings of earlier Ash‘arites, including al-Bāqillānī and al-Juwaynī.
24. See n20.
25. Mānkdim, *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl*, 68.
26. Al-Ghazālī, *Iqtiṣād*, 161.
27. Ibid., 190.
28. See, for example, the remark in ibid., 162: *al-iṣṭilāḥāt mubāḥa lā ḥajra fihā li’l-shar‘ wa-lā li’l-‘aql wa-innamā tamna ‘u minhu al-lughā idhā lam yakun ‘alā wifq al-mawḍū‘ al-ma’rūf*.
29. Al-Ghazālī, *Mustaṣfā*, 1: 66. Here, interestingly, the more subjective notion of *aghrāḍ* takes the place of the objective notion of *ḍarar* that appears more frequently in *kalām/uṣūl al-fiqh* definitions of obligation. This should caution us against taking such distinctions too rigidly. In the works of certain Ash‘arites, such distinctions are indeed even harder to draw; a good example is al-Āmidī, who seems to use both in *Ghāyat al-marām* with little distinction.
30. Al-Āmidī, *Ghāyat al-marām*, 235, 234.
31. Al-Rāzī, *Maṭālib*, 3: 66.
32. Al-Ghazālī, *Mustaṣfā*, 1: 62, 61. See also al-Anṣārī’s stark comments in *Ghunya*, 2: 1008.
33. Al-Ghazālī, *Iqtiṣād*, 194–95. This involves a revised understanding of the role of reason: not to provide us with knowledge independently of revelation but to serve as an instrument for understanding revelation. An indicative token of the slippage noted above, as well as the foundational role assigned to desire in this transition, is provided by al-Rāzī in his *Maṭālib* in the context of affirming the

- existence of “rational” ethical knowledge: “Pleasure and joy are objects of intrinsic desire [*maṭlūbatāni bi’l-dhāt*], and pain and grief objects of intrinsic repugnance [*makrūhatāni bi’l-dhāt*]. . . . Our claim is thus established: namely, that reason judges [*al-‘aql yaqḍī*] that certain things are good and that certain others are evil” (3: 290). See generally 289–90 for an interesting set of remarks that distinguish more clearly than has emerged in the above discussion between the judgments parsed in terms of “good” and those parsed in terms of “obligatory.”
34. Al-Juwaynī, *Niẓāmiyya*, 61; a variant has *tasāwaqat* for *tashawwafat*.
 35. Al-Rāzī, *Maṭālib*, 3: 21. I am indebted to Shihadeh’s *Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī* for calling attention to al-Rāzī’s usage of both terms—*fiṭra* and *ṭab’*—in several instances of his writings.
 36. It is the notion of *ṭab’* likewise that Shihadeh foregrounds in his account of al-Rāzī, for example, *Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, 58–59. It is indicative that when al-Rāzī rephrases the same point elsewhere in the book—as in *Maṭālib*, 3: 348—the language of *ṭab’* alone appears. The vocabulary of *fiṭra* had certainly made earlier (though seemingly equally isolated) appearances in Ash‘arite ethical discussions before al-Rāzī’s time. For example, in dismissing the Mu‘tazilite view of ethical responses as judgments of reason, al-Anṣārī instead tied them to “the nature with which God vested human beings [*jibilla faṭara Allāh al-‘ibād ‘alayhā*]” (*Ghunya*, 2: 1008); cf. 2: 1030–31: *al-fā’il minnā . . . fuṭira ‘alā bunya yaḥūzu ‘alayhi ma ‘ahā jarr al-manāfi’ wa-daf’ al-maḍārr*. A longer study of this paper trail would be needed to trace the fuller trajectory of the notion of *fiṭra* in classical ethical discussions.
 37. Al-Rāzī, *Maṭālib*, 3: 347. Elsewhere the conflict between the first- and third-person perspectives that Ibn Taymiyya obscured is also clearly picked out by al-Rāzī; see Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, 77. Cf. the remark quoted by Shihadeh from al-Rāzī’s *Nihāyat al-‘uqūl*, which makes the impact on self-interest even clearer while still using the key notions of love and hate: “If the wrongdoer declares [*aftā*] that wrongdoing is good, someone else will soon wrong him. Since, in his natural disposition [*ṭab’*], he hates that anticipated wrongdoing, and since all that leads to what is hated is itself hated in the natural disposition, wrongdoing will indeed be hated by the wrongdoer. The same applies to all other [commonly accepted moral norms]” (*Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, 81). My thanks to Ayman Shihadeh for providing me with additional textual detail.
 38. Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’*, 4: 255–56: *ḥubb al-qalb li’l-muḥsin . . . jibilla wa-fiṭra lā sabīla ilā taghyīrihā*—a continuation with Qur’anic echoes. Cf. al-Anṣārī’s statement of this view in *Ghunya*, 2: 1004. Ibn Taymiyya’s statement to the same effect (“Al-Tuḥfa al-irāqiyya,” in *Majmū‘ Fatāwā*, 10: 84), quoted in chapter 1, can now be heard as a direct echo of al-Ghazālī’s view.
 39. For the first remark, see al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’*, 4: 254: *kull ladhīdh maḥbūb ‘inda al-multadhdh bihi wa-ma’nā kawnihi maḥbūban anna fi’l-ṭab’ maylan ilayhi*. Al-ṭab’

al-salīm: see 4: 255; cf. the typical Taymiyyan conjunctions: *huwa muqtaḍāhā bi 'l-ṭab' / muqtaḍā ṭab' ihā* (4: 264). The positive connotations carried by al-Ghazālī's *ṭab'* may not seem surprising given his reading of natural desire as a script of divine intentions, as we will see in the next chapter. The above debts provide further support for Michot's recent remarks about Ibn Taymiyya's extensive familiarity with (though also critical engagement of) al-Ghazālī's work: see his "An important reader of al-Ghazālī."

40. Ibn Taymiyya, *Minhāj*, 1: 450.
41. Al-Rāzī, *Maṭālib*, 3: 289. Ash'arites were not the only ones to adopt the strategy of separating the claim that we know right and wrong by reason from the claim that right and wrong apply to God. This strategy, for example, seems to be at work in the spare remarks on the topic by one of the traditionalists that Ibn Taymiyya refers to, al-Sijzī, in his *Risālat al-Sijzī ilā ahl Zabīd*, 140.
42. See Gobillot, *La conception originelle*, 112–29; For al-Jāḥiẓ's remark, see "Risālat al-Ma'āsh wa'l-ma'ād," in *Rasā'il al-Jāḥiẓ*, 1: 102. Cf. Bernand, "La critique de la notion de nature (*ṭab'*) par le *kalām*," esp. 60–62.
43. As Gutas notes, the term *fiṭra* is not the only one that appears in Avicenna's relevant remarks; it neighbors on a number of synonymous terms, such as *jibilla*, *gharīza*, and indeed *ṭab'* ("The empiricism of Avicenna," 406–7).
44. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 161.
45. Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, 82. For the notion of a social contract, see 176–81.
46. See al-Rāzī, *Maṭālib*, 3: 68, 69, and the argument on 291. For further discussion of these passages, see Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, 77–83.
47. Ibn Taymiyya, *Radd*, 398; al-Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 1: 269.
48. This point emerged clearly in the stage-setting passage cited in chapter 1: Ibn Taymiyya, "Mas'alat taḥsīn al-'aql wa-taqbīḥuhu," in *Majmū' Fatāwā*, 8: 433. See also the additional remarks about the Qur'anic foundations of Ibn Taymiyya's ethical rationalism in chapter 5.
49. Ibn Taymiyya, *Sharḥ al-Iṣbahāniyya*, 540, 544; it is a theme that surfaces in several places in this work, but see especially the discussion at 539–48. Cf. Anjum's remarks, discussing the *Nubuwwāt*, in *Politics, Law, and Community*, 204.
50. Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū'*, 3: 180.
51. Though it is worth noting that some Ash'arites, such as al-Rāzī, considered that the content of individuals' motives may involve direct reference to the consequences of "deontological" acts like justice and injustice taken in the sense of their impact on one's self-interest. One acclaims the value of justice because one knows that to do otherwise would be to expose one's own person and property to threat (al-Rāzī, *Maṭālib*, 3: 68).
52. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 3–4.
53. See Schneewind, "Hume and the religious significance of moral rationalism," in *Essays on the History of Moral Philosophy*.

54. Al-Ash‘arī, *al-Luma‘*, 117; cf. al-Bāqillānī, *Inṣāf*, 50: *huwa al-mālik ‘ala l-ḥaqqīqa, yataṣarraḥu fī milkihi kamā yashā‘u, lā yus‘alu ‘ammā yaf‘alu wa-hum yus‘alūna*. The phrase can be found almost verbatim in other Ash‘arite works.
55. Quotes are from ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Ta‘dīl*, 20, 25. Cf. Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū‘*, 3: 140: “Just as if an act constitutes injustice, it is bad for any agent [to perform it], similarly if the ground of obligation is realized in an act, different agents should not stand in a different relation to it.” Certain considerations about persons did of course matter in this context—for example, whether one acted intentionally or had reached the age of responsibility. See ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s discussion in *Ta‘dīl*, 87 ff., where his concern is precisely to mark off features about the agent that are relevant to the value of the action (93: they have a *ta‘alluq* or connection to the action) and features that are not. As always, the picture becomes more complex the closer one looks; as I have emphasized elsewhere, the subject-independence of Mu‘tazilite ethics finds an important qualification in the subject-dependence introduced by the foundational notion of *ḥaqq*. See *Moral Agents and Their Deserts*, chapter 4, and synoptically the remarks on 86.
56. In “Qā‘ida fi l-mu‘jizāt wa l-karāmāt,” in *Majmū‘ Fatāwā*, 11: 354, Ibn Taymiyya appears to embrace the language of essential (*dhātīyya*) attributes, whereas in *Radd*, 422, he rejects this language for reasons that flow naturally from his consequentialism: whether or not a given act is beneficial is not a fixed feature of that act but may vary according to circumstances. That the language of *ṣifāt* is deployed with a reference to utility is clear from the former passage and is also made clear in *Sharḥ al-Iṣbahāniyya*, 448. Compare also the remark interpreting “intrinsic attributes” in terms of utility by ‘Abd al-Qādir, whose discussion in many places reads as an unmarked rehearsal and clarification of Ibn Taymiyya’s views (*al-Masā’il al-mushtaraka*, 80–81). In this respect Anjum’s characterization of Ibn Taymiyya’s ethical *via media* as a rationalist epistemology combined with a voluntarist ontology (*Politics, Law, and Community*, 225) seems to me to overlook the complexity of Ibn Taymiyya’s statements on both topics.
57. For Ibn Mattawayh’s remarks, see *Majmū‘*, 3: 447–48; compare Mānkadīm’s discussion in *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl*, 564–67. Of course, not all acts whose value invokes the notion of benefit accrue to the agent and thus depend on his features—beneficence is a case in point. Cf. Ibn Mattawayh’s distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding acts (*ta‘alluq bi l-fā’il* versus *bi l-ghayr*) in *Majmū‘*, 1: 244–45, in the context of circumscribing God’s possible modes of action.
58. It is not incidental that ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s sentimentalist account of aesthetic judgments—we call a picture ugly because we are repelled by it—anticipates not only al-Ghazālī’s claim that we call acts bad when they disagree with our purposes but also Ibn Taymiyya’s own claim that we call acts bad because we

are repelled by them. Notice the pregnant occurrence of the term *ṭab*ʿ in ʿAbd al-Jabbār’s framing of the point in *Taʿdīl*, 55: *yanfuru al-ṭab*ʿ ʿanhā.

59. Rachels, “Naturalism,” 87.
60. Though, as we will see in chapter 4, the character of the causal relation invoked in these remarks was the topic of another important point of friction between Ibn Taymiyya and Ashʿarite theologians.

CHAPTER 4

1. ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Taʿdīl*, 3.
2. Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 5.
3. Ibn Taymiyya, “Al-Ḥasana waʾl-sayyiʿa,” in *Majmūʿ Fatāwā*, 14: 309.
4. Ibn Taymiyya, “Masʿalat taḥsīn al-ʿaql wa-taqbīḥuhu,” in *Majmūʿ Fatāwā*, 8: 433.
5. Ibn Taymiyya, *Minhāj al-sunna*, 1: 141. Cf. Ibn Taymiyya, “Al-ʿAqīda al-Tadmuriyya,” in *Majmūʿ Fatāwā*, 3: 19. Justice, to be sure, did not form the only focus of Muʿtazilite reflection, and it is useful to keep in mind that in the Muʿtazilites’ discussions, as in Ibn Taymiyya’s, the boundaries between the notions of wisdom and justice are permeable. See indicatively ʿAbd al-Jabbār’s discussion of these two terms in *Taʿdīl*, 48–51.
6. Al-Juwaynī, *Nizāmiyya*, 36; al-Ghazālī, *Iqtisād*, 187.
7. Al-Qarāfī, *Nafāʾis al-uṣūl fī sharḥ al-Maḥṣūl*, 7: 3450.
8. See, for example, al-Anṣārī, *Ghunya*, 2: 1032. Cf. Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, 51.
9. See the discussion of this theological point in al-Shahrastānī, *Nihayat al-iqdām*, 397–416; al-Rāzī, *al-Arbaʿin fī uṣūl al-dīn*, 249–53; cf. Gimaret, *La doctrine dʿal-Ashʿarī*, 447–51.
10. Ibn Taymiyya, “Al-Ḥasana waʾl-sayyiʿa,” in *Majmūʿ Fatāwā*, 14: 313, stating the objectionable view *wa-lā irādatuhu murajjaḥa liʾl-iḥsān ilaʾl-khalq*.
11. Ibn Taymiyya outlines some of the evidence provided by the first kind of document in *Sharḥ al-Iṣbahāniyya*, 178–79, and some of the evidence provided by the second kind of document on 698, 700. Both methods of establishing God’s wisdom can be read instructively against El Shamsy’s distinction between “rationalist” and “empiricist” approaches to God’s wisdom in “The wisdom of God’s law.”
12. Ibn Taymiyya, *Minhāj al-sunna*, 1: 141; cf. Ibn Taymiyya, “Tafsīr sūrat al-Baqara,” in *Majmūʿ Fatāwā*, 14: 144, more broadly: *hādḥā madhhab aʾimmat al-fuqahāʾ qātibatan wa-salaf al-umma wa-ʾammatihā*. For the stage-setting phrase, see again Ibn Taymiyya, “Masʿalat taḥsīn al-ʿaql wa-taqbīḥuhu,” in *Majmūʿ Fatāwā*, 8: 434.
13. And indeed becomes more intelligible; cf. my discussion in “Ibn Taymiyya’s ethics between Ashʿarite voluntarism and Muʿtazilite rationalism.”

Ibn Taymiyya's Theological Ethics



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