CHAPTER 4

Are the ethics of religion objective or subjective?

It is difficult to overemphasize the significance of legal discussions in the origination of controversies concerning the nature of ethics in Islam. The traditional view of the divine law held that legal judgments must be based upon nothing but the law, and if necessary derived indirectly from that law by some approved technique such as analogy, often interpreted in rather a restricted sense. The more innovatory position of those who adhered to opinion (*ra'y*) argued that in cases where the law provides no obvious guidance one must use one's own rational judgments alone in arriving at conclusions to disputes in law and ethics. This basic conflict was played out in many different contexts, with the 'rationalists' insisting that we can know much of what is right and obligatory by independent reasoning, while the 'traditionalists' acknowledged only revelation as an appropriate source for such knowledge. A great deal of the Muslim establishment – Shāfi'ī, ibn Ḥanbal, al-Ash'arī and a large number of other theologians and jurists – lined up firmly on the side of tradition, believing basically that any other position would deny God's power, for, if we could judge independently of God what is right and wrong, could we not from an independent point of view judge God's actions and assess his moral pronouncements to us? Could we not do away with trying to follow God's instructions since all we need to do is to follow the instructions of our reason?

Quite apart from these theologically dangerous consequences, the 'traditionalists' argued that the results of using independent reason are unsatisfactory since they contradict each other and are incapable of providing the certainty of revelation, or, indeed, even the certainty of reason. The 'traditionalists' did not always differentiate clearly between two distinct 'rationalist' positions, one fairly extreme in that it argued that independent reason is all that is required for the right to be known, the other milder and only claiming that independent reason is required in some cases, scripture in others, and so there is no incompatibility

between them. It seems that sometimes they attacked the latter position more fervently than the former since it could be regarded as rather insidiously masking its faith in reason by pretending to believe in the use of both faith and reason as routes to the truth.

This controversy in Islam has been extensively discussed in the works of George Hourani, who fairly consistently takes a critical view of the 'traditionalist' position, and it will be useful to examine his critique first. The 'traditionalists' could be labelled 'ethical voluntarists' because they believed that ethical norms mean *only* what is approved or disapproved, commanded or forbidden by God.[1] The rationale for such an interpretation of ethical terms in the Qur'ān is provided by the stress in many of the suras on God's power. If, the argument might go, God's ordinances comply with already existing objective values then he would be subject to such norms himself, thereby limiting his omnipotence. The analogy between this view and objections to the idea that the universe is eternal should be obvious. As we saw in the first chapter, some Muslims objected to Aristotelian and Platonic conceptions of the universe not being created *ex nihilo* because this would imply that God was subject in his dealings with the universe to following certain previously established principles of natural behaviour. The idea that ethical rules are similarly independent of God is unpalatable to some thinkers.

Perhaps the best starting point for this discussion, as with that of the preceding chapters, is the Qur'ān. Does the Qur'ān discuss ethical terms in such a way that ethical voluntarism is the only feasible interpretation of their meaning? Hourani argues that it does not, and it is by examining his argument (and using his translations) that we shall introduce this discussion and broaden it later to consider the relationship between reason and revelation in Islamic philosophy.

Hourani begins by examining texts which, on the surface, appear difficult to interpret on voluntarist principles. There are texts which refer to ethics and interpersonal human relations. For example, 'The way [of force] is to be taken only against those who do wrong to the people' (XL,42). There are also references to self-inflicted harm as in 'Whoever does that harms himself' (II,231). Hourani argues that the passive use of 'wrong' is even more difficult to analyze on the voluntarist theory, as in 'Except those who believe and do good deeds and mention God often, and overcome after they have been wronged' (XXVI,227). He argues that these sentences could not be interpreted in terms of obedience or

[1] G. Hourani, 'Ethical presuppositions of the Qur'ān', *Muslim World*, LXX, 1 (1980), pp. 1–28.

disobedience to divine commands, and concludes that this suggests that the voluntarist thesis is mistaken. For example, in XL,42 we would get 'The way [of force] is to be taken only against those who disobey God in regard to the people', and in XXVI,227 the second conjunction would have to be 'and overcome after they have been affected by an act of disobedience to God'. There are in addition plenty of references in the Qur'ān and classical Arabic to harm and wrong which are unconnected with moral senses of wrongdoing, and the ethical senses of these expressions seem to have arisen from a more descriptive and objective meaning.

A good example of this development of a non-moral into a moral term is provided by '*adl* or justice, the opposite of *ẓulm* or harm just considered. For example, in the moral use of justice in 'If it [one of two quarrelling parties] yields, set things right between them with justice' (XLIX,9), justice is nothing more than a relation between two persons without any reference to the commands of any third party. Where there is a reference to God's commands, the voluntarist position would result in boringly truistic propositions. The verse 'God commands justice, beneficence, and giving to relatives, and he forbids shameful and blameworthy acts and insolence' (XVI,90) would be analyzed in terms of 'God commands what he commands, and forbids what he forbids'. Hourani points out that the term for justice has emerged in Arabic from the notion of equality and the balanced distribution of weights such as loads on animals. He concludes that the term for justice originally described a tangible and physical notion of even balance and was developed into a moral concept of balance and natural justice. He contrasts his account with that of the eminent jurist al-Shāfi'ī (d. 204/819), 'Justice is that one should act in obedience to God',[2] and suggests that the Shāfi'ite use has no relevance to the Qur'ān. The same sort of approach can be made to the terms for good and evil, *ḥasan* and *sū'*. There are contexts in which *ḥasan* means 'satisfactory' or 'beneficial' and cannot easily be interpreted as 'commanded' or 'permitted'. Hourani wonders how the voluntarists could cope with a verse like,

> And it is said to those who fear God 'What has your lord sent down?' They say 'Good. For those who have done good in this world there is a good [reward], and certainly the house of the afterlife will be better and pleasant will be the house of the godfearing.' (XVI,30)

In this context it is difficult to see how 'doing good' when applied to actions can mean 'obeyed the *sharī'a*' (i.e. Islamic law), and there is some

[2] Al-Shāfi'ī, *Risāla* (Treatise), ed. M. Shakir (Cairo, 1940), p. 25.

evidence that this particular Arabic term has as its basic meaning an aesthetic rather than ethical sense.

Particular problems arise in applying ethical predicates to God on the voluntarist view. Take for example, 'that he may justly reward those who believe and do good deeds' (x,4), 'God is not a wrongdoer to his servants' (viii,51) and even the famous 'In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate' (i,1). There seems to be considerable difficulty in seeing how a voluntarist could make sense of these verses. Hourani identifies the voluntarist position as holding that ethical terms when applied to behaviour and character never have any objective meaning but only refer to divine commands or prohibitions, and compliance or non-compliance with them. All their opponents have to show is that there are *some* uses of ethical terms which purport to be objective and independent of divine fiat. Now, it is possible to argue that Hourani goes too far here in his attack on voluntarism. The voluntarists may accept quite happily all that Hourani and the lexicographers have to say concerning the non-ethical origins of the ethical terms used in the Qur'ān, and yet still insist that when such terms are used morally they maintain an essential link with the notion of divine command. When a moral standard is set by God, then it is reasonable to expect God to adhere to it, so references to God as possessing moral attributes are not especially problematic.

For example, Hourani argues that the voluntarists would have terrible difficulty in making sense of these two verses, which deny that anyone is wronged by God, 'To each one there will be degrees [of recompense] depending on what they have done, so that he may pay them in full for their deeds and they shall not be wronged' (xlvi,19) and 'Whatever you spend on the path of God will be restored to you, and you will not be wronged' (viii,60). Hourani notes: 'Both grammatically and theologically, fantastic contortions would have to be performed to interpret such sentences in terms of disobedience to God's commands, and the resulting equivalent sentences would be so absurd that they are better left unmentioned.'[3] But why? It would certainly be clumsy to replace the ethical terms with expressions involving God, but most analyses of sentences into another discourse are clumsy and grammatically unappealing. A voluntarist could claim that what is meant by 'wrong' when we use the expression of ourselves or when the Qur'ān uses it is quite simply what God defines as wrong, and accordingly it is behaviour which he forbids, informing us of this fact through the teachings of Islam. Saying

[3] Hourani 'Ethical presuppositions', p. 15.

that God does not do wrong is to claim that there is a type of behaviour which God has defined as not to be performed, and he accordingly does not perform it.

Exactly the same move may be made with the other ethical terms we have considered. Arguments which suggest that particular applications of 'good' and 'justice' are used to relate aspects of the conduct of human beings and have nothing to do with God just beg the question. Of course, Hourani is perfectly justified in arguing that many such applications of these terms do not appear to relate to God in any way, but the voluntarist would not want to stay at this superficial level. He would point to the necessity for analysis in order to understand what the ethical terms in the Qur'ān really mean. It is certainly true that there are examples of terms which can be used ethically being used also in non-ethical contexts, perhaps in aesthetic (*ḥasan*) or in physically descriptive ('*adl*) contexts. In such contexts, there is no necessity to look for a reference to God's commands. The voluntarist would insist, though, that when those terms are used as *ethical* terms, they must import some implicit reference to God's commands. There may indeed be strong arguments against such a view, but they are not to be found in the Qur'ān.

The Qur'ān places much emphasis upon the dependence of all human beings on divine guidance, incorporated in religious authorities, for moral knowledge to be possible. The theme of confused and errant individuals being guided by the book runs throughout the Qur'ān. When appropriate guidance appears, the Muslim is obliged to surrender his personal opinions to that guidance, as in 'Say "God's guidance is the true guidance, and we are commanded to surrender to the lord of the worlds" ' (VI,71) and 'It is not for any believer, man or woman, when God and his Messenger have decreed a matter, to have the choice in the affair. Whosoever disobeys God and his Messenger has gone astray into manifest error' (XXXIII,36). The connection which is said to exist between a system of beliefs and their clear formulation in a book is an important one, namely, 'What is the matter with the way you make decisions? Do you have a Book in which you study?' (LXVIII,36–7). It would only be fair to punish people after the appropriate revelations and formulation of the revelations in a text. 'We never punish until we have sent a Messenger' (XVII,15) and 'Truly God was gracious to the believers when he raised up among them a Messenger from themselves, to recite to them his signs and to purify them, and to teach them the Book and the wisdom, though before they were in manifest error' (III,164). A frequent alternative to accepting the revelation offered in the Qur'ān and being guided by it

is to be misled by one's passions, e.g. 'Then we set you on a path of command, so follow it and do not follow the passions of those who do not know' (XLV,18).

The general tenor of these and many other Qur'ānic verses is that the Book itself is taken to provide the exclusive guide to moral and of course religious knowledge for human beings. Indeed, the only alternative to following this path is to succumb to one's passions, hardly a very tempting moral alternative. But is it as simple as this? Does the Qur'ān rule out explicitly the possibility that we might be able to know how to behave rightly by using nothing to guide us except our reason? It should be emphasized yet again that the Qur'ān is not a philosophical work and should not be expected to make explicit statements on this sort of topic. Yet there are respectful references in the Book to people who are intelligent and thoughtful in the appropriate interpretation of the signs (*āyāt*) of God in the world which permit an inference concerning his caring attitude for human creatures. The Qur'ān itself frequently declares its respect for the human intellect and urges us to use that great gift of God to its fullest capacity. The implication is that some facility in reasoning proves useful to the Muslim when deciding how to interpret scripture to find out how to deal with a moral issue. There are, though, a number of passages which include interesting references to pagans who are described as morally evil even though they could not have known, through the Qur'ān, how to behave morally in the first place. For instance, there is ' "What has pushed you into Saqar?" They say "We were not of those who prayed, and we did not feed the needy" ' (LXXIV,42–4), and also: 'Have we not given him two eyes and a tongue and two lips, and guided him on the two paths? Yet he has not attacked the steep path, and what makes you understand what is the steep path? It is freeing a slave or giving food on a day of hunger to an orphan relative or a needy man in misery' (XC,8–16).

It would seem from these two passages that there are at least *some* duties which anyone, believer or not, is morally obliged to perform. And, if that is the case, then it must be possible to know that there are such duties without scripture. But these passages do not establish that view at all firmly. In LXXIV,42–4 there is a conjunction between feeding the needy and praying, which could well suggest that they go together. Again, in XC,8–16 the sense could be that the various duties mentioned are indeed duties but, without scriptural backing and Islamic motivation, they can only be carried out haphazardly and without any clear direction. They could also be regarded as just prudential rules, or socially desirable norms

relevant for *any* community. A large proportion of the Qur'ān consists not just in arguing for the performance of particular kinds of acts but also the cultivation of virtues, or the acquisition of dispositions to carry out such acts. Without scriptural direction, the suggestion appears to be, it might well be possible to carry out particular acts but difficult if not impossible to ensure that the appropriate traits to act in morally righteous ways would be developed in people. So the Qur'ān has yet to admit that there are truths which are both moral and knowable independently of the Book, where 'knowable' means 'knowable as moral truths'.

For the anti-voluntarist, there are more hopeful references to reason in the account of God's reasons for making human beings rather than the angels his deputies (*khalīfa*) on earth (II,28–30). Human beings are capable of knowing the names of things or the essential nature of reality, so that, when God appoints us to govern the earth, he can be confident that we will use our reason to make good use of the gift. There is certainly nothing in Islam which would give support for the decrying of reason; indeed, it is regarded as the means to attain happiness in this world and the next. According to al-Ghazālī, a staunch defender of the voluntarist thesis, even 'Turks, Kurds and the rough Bedouin', whose existence is barely superior to that of animals, know by instinct that they ought to honour the old as a result of their experience and the application of reason.[4] Does it follow, then, that they are capable of discovering their duty without the aid of religion? This is very far from al-Ghazālī's intention. It is always open to him to argue like Juwaynī (d. 478/1085) that those people without the benefit of the Qur'ān who follow some sound ethical principles nonetheless base their practices on moral ignorance rather than knowledge. For example, the Brahmins think it wrong to slaughter animals, which in Muslim law is perfectly acceptable. Some of their other customs are in accord with Islam, yet not all their moral judgments are valid, and indeed perhaps the basis of *all* their moral reasoning is inappropriate. Doing the right thing for the wrong reason may be to strip the action of all its morally commendable features, since it could then be regarded as merely a chance occurrence. Any analysis of someone's ethical system which represents it as a hit-and-miss affair because it is not based firmly on some valid principle or theory is in effect a criticism of that system as a *moral* system.

In fact, al-Ghazālī distinguished between four uses of reason (*'aql*). Firstly, it is the quality that distinguishes us from animals and makes

[4] Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā'*, ed. 'Irāqī, I, p. 83.

possible the development of the theoretical sciences, for which he had great respect. Secondly, it enables us as children to build up a repertoire of necessary truths such as mathematical equivalences. More unusually, reason is also identified with the knowledge which experience produces; and, lastly it is identified with continence and efficiency in carrying out one's practical ends.[5] The connection between reason and morally right conduct is interesting in this context. The traditional distinction is between the *ʿaqlīyāt*, or kinds of knowledge that are accessible to us through reason alone and demonstration, and the *samʿīyāt* or *al-ʿulūm ash-sharīʿa wadīnīya*, legal and religious knowledge established through revelation and so not demonstrative in nature. The contrast between these two different types of knowledge will be examined in some depth in both this chapter and chapter 5.

It is evident that al-Ghazālī accepts that at least some ethical rules fall into the realm of rational knowledge, since they could well express rational rules about how people should live together, and so on. There could be a danger in such a position, though, if it slips over into the thesis that even directly religious rules must have some intrinsically rational explanation. For example ibn Miskawayh (d. *c.* 421/1030) relates the Islamic rule that believers should perform the five daily prayers together and not in private to the desirability of stimulating and incorporating the natural human tendency to be companionable. The Friday service which brings together people from different ends of the city, the two main festivals which unite the city with the countryside and the pilgrimage (*haj*) to Mecca which brings together Muslims from all over the world, all are evidences of the purpose of the rules being the uniting of diverse believers. This sort of approach is roundly condemned by al-Ghazālī, who is adamant in upholding the importance of obedience to commands just because they are commands, not because they are rational. He argues that the *haj* to Mecca is quite the reverse from the actualization of a rational decision in ibn Miskawayh's sense, and includes practices which we would not have arrived at by ourselves and which we do not really want to perform. By having the obligation to perform such actions foisted on us, we are better able to acquire the correct attitude of powerlessness and servitude to God. Of course, some rules have rational features, such as the tax for the poor and fasting to help control the emotions. But other rules such as stoning the devils at Mina cannot be justified in this sort of way – these are rituals carried out solely in response to a

[5] *Ibid.*, I, pp. 84–5.

command and as part of a policy to subdue our wills to that of the deity.

Al-Ghazālī was concerned to establish the compatibility of mysticism and exact observance of the ritual laws. Although he was sympathetic to aspects of Ṣūfism, he disapproved of that movement's rather cavalier attitude to the observance of the religious commandments. While it is true that virtue is only a necessary condition for the supreme degree of knowledge and love of God that represents true happiness and the end of man, nonetheless the development of moral perfection is essential if we are to be successful in attaining this end. The commandments help, guide and support the struggle to overcome base impulses and to purify our hearts to do God's will. As al-Ghazālī puts it, 'God has wisely made the salvation of mortal beings dependent on their actions and not on their natural feelings, and has put religious law in charge of them.'[6] The exact compliance with the law is upheld by him as vital to the development of morally valid modes of behaviour, and any questioning of the law, whether to defend it in terms of non-religious explanations or to challenge and criticize it, is regarded as objectionable.

Now, it is interesting that, in spite of his scepticism about the value of philosophy and the anti-voluntarist approach which most of the Greek philosophers taught, his comments on the philosophical attitude to ethics should be so mild, especially when compared with his comments on philosophical doctrines with respect to creation, immortality and God's knowledge:

> All they have to say about the moral sciences comes down to listing the qualities and habits of the soul, and recording their generic and specific kinds, and the way to cultivate the good ones and combat the bad. This they simply took over from the sayings of the Ṣūfīs . . . In the course of their spiritual combat the good habits of the soul and its shortcomings had been disclosed to them and also the defects that vitiate its actions. All this they set forth plainly. Then the philosophers took over these ideas and mixed them with their own doctrines, using the lustre afforded by them to promote the circulation of their own false teaching.[7]

He claims, though, that their remarks on ethics are dangerous, both for those who accept them and for those who reject them. The latter might well be led to reject at the same time the prophetic, Qur'ānic and Ṣūfī aspects of their doctrines, and this would be a great loss. The

[6] *Ibid.*, 1, p. 85.
[7] Al-Ghazālī, *Munqidh*, trans. R. McCarthy, p. 77.

former might accept the philosophical doctrines along with the religious truths, and thus be spiritually damaged. Yet, it is still true to say that al-Ghazālī objects to the philosophical doctrines concerning ethics far less strenuously than those which deal with metaphysical issues.

In some ways this is surprising given the fact that it is for exactly the same reasons, namely, the implication of limitations on God's power, that al-Ghazālī argues against eternal creation and objective ethics. The very notion of God being compelled to behave in a certain way is repugnant to al-Ghazālī. Some theologians argued that, given the sorts of creatures God created, he is morally obliged to provide a revelation that sets out specific instructions and rewards designed to apply to the natures of the creatures on which they are imposed. The imposition of this obligation is not really something that God can do anything about, he is morally obliged to impose it given his nature, the nature of the creatures in the world, and the world itself. Al-Ghazālī objected to the idea of God being confronted with notions of human good and evil which had the status of an extrinsic and independent law. To argue against the notion of the objectivity of ethics, then, al-Ghazālī presents a detailed defence of how specifically religious references can be incorporated into the meanings of ethical terms. He does this by interpreting the key ethical concepts of good and evil (*ḥasan* and *sū'* or *qabīḥ*) teleologically, i.e. in terms of what is appropriate to a certain end and what prevents the attainment of that end. These ends are entirely relative to the agent, in which case an adulterer will think that adultery is good and anything which prevents him from an adulterous lifestyle as bad. Ethical voluntarists would not be happy with this approach since it seems to ignore that dimension of human behaviour which involves people doing things just because they are right, even though they have no advantage to themselves. For example, people sometimes care for others when they have no hope or prospect of reward. Some unbelievers will steadfastly refuse to break their word even though they are threatened with considerable punishment. We might say that they act as they do because those are the right things to do. Some people will risk death in order to avoid committing evil actions even though they have no hope of future recompense in an afterlife. Al-Ghazālī has to put forward a variety of different motives to explain this sort of behaviour. Some people are so desirous of praise for their honesty that the prospect of death is overshadowed by the idea of the praise! Or he suggests that they rigidly adhere to an association of ideas whereby breaking one's word is normally followed by unpleasant consequences.

It may be also that some people feel a natural sympathy for others and help them for that reason. It is possible to doubt the motives of those who act in apparently virtuous ways for no particular end.

Now, these arguments might seem truly extraordinary. What religious person, after all, would defend in this way the idea that an act is good when it promotes our ends and bad when it does the reverse? Yet al-Ghazālī does manage to adapt this seemingly unpromising position into quite a persuasive theory. One of his purposes in setting up such a doctrine is to make it easier to argue that God has no ends. Since God is far too exalted and superior to his creation to have needs, it would be misleading to call any of his actions good in the normal sense. He did indeed create the world with the purpose of revealing his power and will, but he does not benefit from that creation. It is also totally inappropriate to think of God committing any evil actions; he cannot do wrong since doing wrong is a matter of dealing unjustly with the property of others, and since everything in existence is his property anyway, no one has a claim on anything he affects by his actions. Thus he argues that God's actions are not necessary in any way but merely possible – he could have done otherwise. Al-Ghazālī sums up his view in this way:

> Our position is that it is possible for God not to demand that his servants take on obligations, and to demand of them unattainable obligations, to cause them pain without compensating them subsequently . . . it is not necessary for him to take any interest in their welfare nor to reward their patience or punish their disobedience . . . he does not have to send prophets, and if he does not then that does not show he is evil.[8]

His first claim is an attempt at challenging the Mu'tazilites' arguments that God is obliged to impose obligations on his servants since he at the same time confers benefits on those servants. Al-Ghazālī objects that God need not have created any creatures at all, and his creation of such creatures was not an attempt at avoiding harm or benefiting himself. He could easily not have created at all. There is no inconsistency in thinking of God as not creating the world, provided that we avoid the philosophical doctrine that God has eternal knowledge and an eternal desire to create, in which case he has no alternative but to create. Al-Ghazālī makes the shrewd point that it is not at all obvious how being put under obligation to God constitutes a benefit to his creatures. Of course, the Mu'tazilites' claim that if we are put under such obligation then we can have the satisfaction of earning our eventual reward, but this seems rather small

[8] Al-Ghazālī, *Iqtiṣād*, ed. I. Çubukçu and H. Atay, p. 160.

beer compared with the prospect of God presenting us with entirely gratuitous benefits without any accompanying burdens (in the form of obligations) at all. Besides, 'Some . . . have advanced the argument that there will be compensation in the afterlife for . . . [undeserved] suffering. These people fail to realise how evil a king's act of slapping a weak person as a condition for giving him a loaf of bread is, if he could have given him the loaf without the slapping.'[9] And God, surely, is precisely in the position of a king who has unlimited power.

Al-Ghazālī reproduces a famous argument in Islamic theology to 'show decisively that God Most High is not bound, in the qualities of His perfection, to consult the advantage of his creatures'. The argument goes thus:

> We suppose three children one of whom died as an infant, and one attained puberty as a Muslim, and the other reached maturity and embraced unbelief, then died. Then God requires each according to his merits, and He will execute justice, So He will lodge the one who matured and embraced unbelief in the depths of hell, and the one who matured and embraced Islam in the ranks of the blessed, and the one who died an infant without embracing Islam and sustaining an act of worship after puberty in a rank inferior to that of him who reached maturity and embraced Islam. Then the one who died an infant will say: 'O Lord! Why have you put me behind my brother the Muslim who reached maturity and died? . . . How, then, does that befit justice? And God will tell him . . . that [the other] reached maturity and embraced Islam and toiled and endured the hardships of the acts of worship – 'So how does justice demand putting you and him on an equal footing?'. Then the infant will say: 'O Lord! You are the one who caused me to live and caused me to die. And You ought to have prolonged my life and caused me to reach the stage of independence and guided me to Islam' . . . Then God will say to him . . . 'It was to your advantage to cause you to die in childhood: for had you reached maturity, you would have embraced unbelief and deserved the Fire.' Whereupon the unbeliever who dies after he had reached maturity will cry out from the depths of hell and say: 'O Lord, You knew of me that if I reached maturity, I would embrace unbelief. Could You not, then, have caused me to die in my childhood? For I would be satisfied with the lower rank in which You have lodged the child who yearns for the sublime ranks.' At this point it remains for him who claims 'Wisdom' only to stop replying and venturing.[10]

Al-Ghazālī intends this argument to show that it is a mistake to ask whether God's actions are just, and indeed his argument could be taken

[9] Al-Ghazālī, *Mi'yār*, ed. Dunya, p. 194. This passage is translated in M. Marmura, 'Al-Ghazālī on ethical premisses', *Philosophical Forum*, 1 (1969), pp. 393–403.

[10] Al-Ghazālī, *Fadā'ih al-bāṭiniyya* (The infamies of the Batinites), 222–3, in R. McCarthy, *Freedom and fulfillment*, pp. 241–2.

by a critic of religion as an admission of the impossibility of reconciling an omnipotent and omniscient deity with a modest conception of justice. The trump card which al-Ghazālī has in his possession, though, is the fact that he thinks there is no point in trying to show that God's decisions are just, since the notion of justice is logically inappropriate as an attribute of divine action. In that case there are no problems involved in the claim that God can impose obligations which are impossible to fulfil. Since the nature of God's transmission of commands to his creatures is similar to an officer addressing an intelligent subordinate, there is no contradiction between ordering the impossible and the order being obligatory on the subordinate. Such an order could not be described as evil, since only acts with personal ends can be called evil, and God has no such ends. He is free to do with his human possessions what he likes. This thesis does at least have the virtue of accounting for the recorded instances of impossible obligation in Islam, like the obligation to become a believer even when God knew that the person would not and could not become one. In addition, although it is obvious from even a casual glance at the world that God does make entirely innocent people suffer without any compensating reward in this life, this does not offend the bounds of justice since he is only playing with his own toys, over which no one else has any claim. There is, then, no objective notion of justice which stands over God and which determines how he is to behave towards his creation.

It is hardly surprising, given al-Ghazālī's strong anti-Mu'tazilite position, that he denied that independent reason is sufficient guide to ethical knowledge. One of the interesting aspects of his hostility to the philosophical and the Mu'tazilite theories of ethics is his attack on their theory of natural connection which lies behind their theories of teleology. The entire mechanism of ends and means, of virtuous acts leading to rewards in this and the next life, is based upon notions of causality which fail to mention God's overwhelming power and influence over all these happenings, and so must be rejected. We saw in chapter 1 how al-Ghazālī attacked the philosophical position on natural causation. Yet it is worth recalling that a problem with identifying his disapproval of philosophical ethics with his attitude to philosophical accounts of causality is that, of course al-Ghazālī did not doubt that science could establish reliable and certain generalizations, nor that we could discover by intelligently examining nature in a scientific manner, constant relations between phenomena. His objections were to accounts of these relations which made mention of God's influence over them nugatory.

Yet, while al-Ghazālī argued that reason is not always a reliable guide to understanding how we should develop appropriate ethical and religious knowledge, it does not follow that reason has no part to play. Reason is important in understanding how the natural world works, where, as we have seen, he accepted the analysis of natural connection offered by Avicenna, albeit radically reinterpreted. His mentor, al-Ash'arī, stressed the rationality involved in becoming convinced of the truth of Islam. He claimed that the Prophet observed the variety of beliefs and faiths and 'showed them what they did not understand with conclusive proofs of God and his direct explanation, and he proved the validity of his position with demonstrations of God and his signs so that there was no room for any other argument or for any attempt to refute his argument'.[11] But how are we to become persuaded of the validity of the message provided by Islam? It cannot just be a matter of suddenly knowing by some sort of intuition, since all sorts of highly dubious propositions are suddenly 'known to be true' in this way. Al-Ash'arī suggested that people are led gradually to recognize the authority of the teaching of Islam. There is a rational order of the progress of faith which starts with the acknowledgement of the contingency of the world and its creatures, moves to the impotence of the world with respect to God, the true prophethood of Muḥammad and the consequent veracity of his message. In this model the veracity of the Prophet and the validity of his claims and authority are established by signs and miracles which *follow* the conclusive arguments and demonstrations of the first two stages. And, indeed, this seems reasonable, since the whole point of the miracle is to emphasize our contingency and dependence upon an omnipotent God.

We saw, in chapter 1, that miracles are regarded by Islam as very much part of a package of proofs and signs rather than the decisive factor themselves in stimulating belief. Miracles are rational devices provided within the context of prior theoretical rational understanding. So an unbeliever is obliged to become a believer when 'the Prophet has produced a clear proof . . . and it can be grasped through their natural intellect which was provided as a means of understanding'.[12] The arguments put forward by the Prophet are the best possible arguments which reason can assemble, from which al-Ash'arī draws the conclusion that people who wish to develop and employ their reason would be well advised to

[11] Al-Ash'arī, *Risāla ila ahl at-tajr bi-Bāb al-abwāb* (Letter to the people of the frontier) (Ankara, Ilahiyat Fakültesi Mecmuasi 8, 1928), pp. 80–108; p. 86.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 101.

restrict themselves to just those arguments and no other. Interestingly, some Mu'tazilites defend the view that the obligation to know God arises not from knowledge of the contingency of the world but rather from human nature – it is just one of those ideas of which one becomes more aware as one grows older, but it is really there all the time. As the Qur'ān puts it 'Is there any doubt regarding God, creator of the heavens and the earth?' (XIV,10). Muḥammad based his message on this pre-existing knowledge of God. This notion that knowledge of God is innate is sometimes used as a justification for God to punish everybody who refuses to take his revelation seriously. People are obliged to speculate about God's nature and to ask after his rules because we are supposed to know about his existence from the beginning.[13] Before discussing in more detail the nature of the dispute over ethical behaviour between the Ash'arites and the Mu'tazilites it is worth pointing out that there is no justification for thinking that the latter hold reason in greater respect than the former. Indeed, as we have just seen, it might be claimed that precisely the reverse is the case, in that the Ash'arites, as opposed to the Mu'tazilites, more readily admit reason's relevance to the very basis of faith.

In opposition to ethical voluntarism, the Mu'tazilites developed a deontological theory of ethics which identifies the key ethical terms obligatory, good and evil (*wājib, ḥasan* and *qabīḥ*) as 'that for the omission of which the agent deserves blame', 'that for doing which the agent deserves praise/blame'. The consequences of the action do not always enter into the decision as to the moral descriptions appropriate to it; rational people just are in a position to judge accurately on the moral standing of particular actions. What is axiomatic in their system is that human beings can become aware of at least some of their obligations, and the difference between good and evil actions, through the independent use of reason. This has the same force for them as the way in which it is possible for human beings to describe accurately the natural qualities of the objects in the world regardless of their religion or divine guidance.

The claim that there are such general rational rules of ethical conduct is challenged by al-Ghazālī in a number of ways. A rather unsatisfactory argument is to select a putative universal rule and then point to cases where it can quite easily be seen that that rule should not be applied. For example, telling the truth is doubtless held to be universally valid, yet we would all accept counter-examples to it, where perhaps it would

[13] E.g. Abū-l-Hudhayl discussed by J. van Ess. 'Early Islamic theologians on the existence of God', in K. Semaan (ed.), *Islam and the medieval West* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1980), pp. 64–81.

be better not to tell the truth. This sort of objection just ignores the elaborate descriptions by the Mu'tazilites of different kinds of universal ethical truths and the requirement to qualify them in some way in case they are rigidly applied regardless of the consequences. A stronger argument is based on a theme of Avicenna's, where both philosophers distinguish between the undeniability of necessary truths and of the so-called universal moral truths. Al-Ghazālī comments

> that if we want to understand the difference between what we generally accept to be true and what cannot be anything else but true, we should take some basic moral norm such as 'killing a human being is evil and saving him from death is good'. If we imagine ourselves just coming into existence, and being a part of no community and having no prior knowledge of how human beings live, it would be possible to doubt that norm, or even deny it is true. Yet this would not be true of statements like 'two is greater than one' or 'a statement cannot be both true and false'.[14]

This example is not perhaps very appropriate, since it might well be argued that a person in the position described here would not be able to make any judgment at all about such a moral rule, since he would be totally abstracted from any community which provides the appropriate context for ethical life. Such a person would not be in a good position to comment on the moral rule's universality and necessity, since he might not even be able to grasp what a moral rule *meant*. But the general tenor of the argument is valid, namely, that there is an important distinction between necessary truths of logic and mathematics and the sorts of 'truths' which constitute ethics.

Al-Ghazālī points out that if one accepts his interpretation of 'obligatory' as 'necessary to produce benefits', then the Mu'tazilites have a big problem in showing that their list of necessary moral truths is acceptable. For instance, he argues that

> There is no rational requirement that we are grateful to a benefactor, despite what the Mu'tazilites say . . . If gratitude is rational then it must involve some beneficial consequence or otherwise. If it has no beneficial consequences then it could not be rational, since it would be without any point. If it does have a beneficial end, it must either be for the One who is served [i.e. God] or the servant [i.e. us]. It cannot be for [the former] since he is above being benefited and is too holy to have ends. The welfare of the servant applies either to this world or the next. There seems to be no benefit in this world, since he is worn out by study and contemplation, knowledge and gratitude, and these affect his desires and reduce his pleasures. But there is no

[14] Al-Ghazālī, *Mi'yār*, ed. S. Dunya, p. 197.

benefit in the next world, any reward there is provided as a favour from God.[15]

As we saw when al-Ghazālī was arguing with the philosophers over the creation of the world, he tends to present his preferred definitions of the key terms and to show how inconsistent they are with opposing views, which is hardly a surprising discovery. Yet at the same time al-Ghazālī is offering examples of his interpretations of such terms to try to persuade others that those interpretations are preferable to the alternatives. In this case, he rejects the idea that from our knowledge of the nature of God we can derive certain principles which would govern his behaviour towards his creatures. Al-Ghazālī's form of theological reductionism does at least have the virtue of clearly specifying how to determine which sorts of moral rules are incumbent upon us, and these are those which 'God has made necessary and ordered with the sanction of punishment if they are omitted, for if there is no revelation, what does "necessary" mean?'[16]

Al-Ghazālī uses his theory to try to skate neatly around what the Mu'tazilites must have thought of as one of their most powerful arguments. This is the argument that there must be at least one duty apprehensible by reason before revelation and this is the duty to verify the genuineness of the Prophet through an understanding of his miracles. Without such an attempt it is not possible to accept the genuineness of the Qur'ān and the moral rules which follow from that acceptance. To argue that one's obligation to accept the Qur'ān and its consequent obligations are all derivable from the Book itself is to indulge in circularity. Al-Ghazālī suggests that if this is indeed a circular argument then it will serve to discredit the argument which has reason as the necessitating motive, for with reference to evidence, 'If one does not examine it rationally, one does not understand the rational need to examine it rationally, and if one does not understand the need to examine it rationally, then one will not examine it rationally.'[17] Given the vast benefits which potentially lie in adhering to the edicts of the Qur'ān, a person would be foolish were he to hear about such benefits and fail to investigate their source in scripture. This investigation would soon come up against the first requirement to see whether the Prophet's miracles are a proof of his divine mission and salvifical purpose. Al-Ghazālī compares someone who requires the discovery of a necessary reason to examine the genuineness of

[15] Al-Ghazāli, *al-Mustaṣfā min 'ilm al-usūl* (Cairo, 1937), I, p. 39. This book deals with the theory of the sources and methods of knowledge fo rules in jurisprudence.
[16] *Ibid.* = *Iḥyā'*, I, ed. 'Irāqī, p. 113.
[17] Al-Ghazālī, *Mustaṣfā*, I, p. 40.

the Prophet with a person who is told of a lion behind him and replies that he will not look around until his informant convinces him of his veracity. His point is that it is hardly prudent to doubt the informant in such a case, where the penalty for being wrong is so great and the cost of the informant being mistaken is so slight. God has sent a prophet to guide us, miracles to establish his authority and our reasoning faculties are sufficient to comprehend the significance of the message and the miracles.

Al-Ghazālī's argument that we can use our reason to perceive the nature and persuasiveness of the miracles and the Prophet seems to come close to the basic Mu'tazilite position. Indeed, they claim that one of the universal moral principles apprehended by all rational people is that one ought to avoid what is harmful to oneself and to seek what is of benefit to oneself. Yet, as the Ash'arites point out, 'it may happen that you will hate a thing which is better for you; and it may happen that you will love a thing which is worse for you; God knows and you know not' (II,212). As al-Ghazālī puts it, directly quoting Avicenna, 'But the true often is other than the praisewothy and the false is other than the repulsive. For many a repulsive thing is true and many a praiseworthy thing is false.'[18]

According to the principles of the Mu'tazilites, we know that in our actions we deserve punishment or reward, and so we are led to wonder whether we shall be punished or rewarded after this life has finished. This is far from being a casual speculation since it concerns not only the matters of this world but in fact the sum of events throughout our existence (in whatever form) which affects us. They argue that we can by reason acquire the knowledge that there exists an omnipotent and omniscient being to whom worship is due and from whom punishment or reward stems. Now, it would have been possible for God to have created us directly in paradise so that we acted all the time in morally correct ways, but in which case we would have missed the opportunity to obtain the greater reward available to us as ordinary human beings who are capable of *deserving* and *earning* rewards. Even in our world, there might be people who only require natural reason in order to carry out all those acts which are morally obligatory and at the same time to avoid those acts which are blameworthy, but on the whole we require something more than just unaided reason to motivate us to behave properly and avoid evil. God has graciously acceded to our frailty here and sent prophets

[18] Al-Ghazālī, *Mi'yār*, ed. Dunya, p. 197 and a direct quote from Ibn Sīnā, *Ishārāt*, ed. Forget, p. 401. And yet al-Ghazālī also claims that 'What urges us to follow the path of salvation is nature', *Iqtiṣād*, ed. I. Çubukçu and H. Atay, p. 195.

to tell us what rewards and punishments await us in the next life and at the same time helps us to achieve the former and avoid the latter by detailing various laws and duties which strengthen our disposition to act rightly and so merit the ultimate reward.

There is an interesting distinction here between those obligations which are known and motivated by our reason alone and those obligations which are known and motivated by revelation. There is quite a difference between these two types of obligation, not just by virtue of the different routes to them but in themselves. Norms established by reason are universal while those based on revelation are particular and reveal to us in detail how we are to act if we wish to merit the ultimate reward. We can know by the use of our intelligence the broad direction in which our moral activity ought to go, but the more detailed and specific rules provided by revelation complete the picture to provide us with a practical guide to everyday actions within the framework of the entirely general rational rules. Although revelation provides us with these rules, they are readily seen to conform to the universal principles of reason and the desirability of our attaining our ultimate goal. However, it is problematic whether we could arrive at these rules just by the use of reason. We could determine just about how we should act, at least in general terms, by the use of reason alone, although our attainment of moral perfection and the spread of moral perfection over all classes of society is far less likely than would be the case were we to be provided with revelation.

As we have seen, the arch-opponent of the Muʿtazilites, al-Ashʿarī, accepts that there are a number of vitally important truths concerning creation and its designer which can be known by reason alone. For example, one can come to know by reason that the world is contingent, that a certain sort of creator exists and that certain sorts of evidence demand our belief in the veracity of the Prophet's claim to present God's message. Al-Ashʿarī stresses those aspects of Islam which point to the *reasonableness* of the assumption that both the Qur'ān and the Prophet's utterances have a divine source. However, we cannot stop with reason if we are to discover how we are to act, for our moral principles can only stem from God's commands and his prohibitions and our reward or punishment is based on whether we act in accordance with or in opposition to God's command. Our knowledge of good and evil and the nature of the obligatory is then only obtainable through our acceptance of revelation in which God details the precise nature of his commands and prohibitions and describes the nature of our ultimate goal and rationale for obedience to God's commands, i.e. the enjoyment of reward in the next life.

The use of reason is extremely important in this respect, and yet can only take us so far. It can take us as far as understanding the source and nature of revelation, and then the obligation to submit to divine authority for the sake of human well-being. The only point that al-Ash'arī can see in *kalām*, or speculative enquiry into the basic principles of religion by a believer, is to reinforce the faith of fellow believers by setting out before them the appropriate methods of attaining the truths, and to refute non-believers or innovators in their erroneous views. In no sense is such reasoning intended to replace the Qur'ān and the Sunna. These both contain in perfect and clear form an account of the source and nature of the revealed law, and they show how the law itself demands affirmation of truths concerning God and his qualities, the contingency of the world and so on, along with practical knowledge of how we are to behave. In spite of this perfection there is a point to *kalām* in that it can deal with questions not obviously settled by the law, and it can reformulate Islamic doctrines in ways perhaps more appropriate for different contexts. Nonetheless, the *mutakallim* must beware of straying from the exact message of revelation in the formulation of his arguments.

The *falāsifa* extended this initial theological point to argue that we are constructed in such a way that our ultimate happiness is the attainment of a kind of perfection that transcends the ordinary circumstances of this life in 'another life' (which need not be interpreted as equivalent to the afterlife). On the whole this state of affairs can only come about in a well-regulated society based on appropriate laws which organize the community in such a way that each person will be enabled to attain this ultimate goal. The law which we obtain through revelation involves both religious regulations concerning our beliefs about God, the future life, death, and so on, and also positive laws regulating the secular and religious behaviour of the religion's adherents. The close connection between these aspects of religion and the recipes for how we are to live led the *falāsifa* such as al-Fārābī to describe a theoretical approach to religion as part of political science. After all, any political theory must embody some account of what it is that constitutes human happiness and how it is to be realized. So the nature of human beings and the world in which they live are important aspects of any account of political science. It would seem, then, that political science involves not just the study of society but also the sum of the speculative sciences, metaphysics, physics, psychology, etc.:

political science is the knowledge of things through which the inhabitants of states in communities reach happiness, each in proportion to his natural

capacity. It will be shown . . . that the political group and the collective which is constructed through the combination of citizens in the cities is like the grouping of bodies in the whole of the universe, and we can see that everything which the state and nation contains has something similar to what the universe as a whole contains.[19]

The philosopher acquires knowledge of the world and of God. He sets out to construct an ideal state which resembles the world and which proceeded from God. Then he goes on to imitate God by founding such a state in time and space. Since political science is the study which illuminates the ultimate perfection and goal of all human action, and lists the conditions of the attainment of those all-important ends, it cannot be studied without at the same time (or better, at a previous time) the speculative sciences being studied.

Now, it does not follow that the study of the speculative sciences will in itself provide us with *detailed* constituents of the positive law that ought to be established in virtuous régimes, yet we could thus arrive at very *general* principles which must underpin any such particular law or norm. In fact, these specific parts of the positive law must embody highly abstract and complex metaphysical truths in such a way that they succeed in communicating with the majority of the citizens the nature of these truths without at the same time talking over their heads. The ordinary, everyday law should present these difficult notions in easily digestible form, so that all citizens have the chance to act virtuously and come to know, albeit merely partially, the nature of reality. As al-Fārābī again puts the point, insofar as people become involved in philosophy, we should insist that

the end at which one should aim in studying philosophy is knowledge of the creator . . . that he is one and unmoved, the efficient cause of everything and the director of this world through his generosity, wisdom and justice. The actions which the philosophers should follow are those which imitate the creator in so far as human beings can do this.[20]

We can, according to the *falāsifa*, use our reason by itself to determine the nature of God and his creation, the general principles of ethics and human happiness, and so on. Revelation describes these truths in a manner appropriate to a particular community, i.e. by using the appropriate conventions for that particular time and place. So the application of reason to the nature of the world comes first and revelation is seen to fit that pattern later, by showing how the general principles

[19] Al-Fārābī, *Philosophische Abhandlungen*, ed. F. Dieterici, p. 16.
[20] *Ibid.*, p. 49.

of virtuous life established by reason are translated into more specific terms and applied to a particular community. The lawgiver–prophet is required to devise these specific norms, since no amount of abstract thought will arrive at them, yet the framework within which he has to work is that laid down by reason alone.

The implication that this sort of approach has for the nature of the *kalām* should be evident. It is not a speculative science which seeks to establish an entirely theoretical and demonstrative understanding of the nature of God and his creation. It is not concerned with very general rules or truths, but rather with defending the dogmas established by a particular lawgiver–prophet within a certain religious and cultural context. The purpose is to strengthen faith and acceptance of the law by those who are not capable of following the justification on purely philosophical lines, and so must be content to accept a justification in terms of only the 'similitudes' (*miṭālāt*) of the demonstrative truths. Indeed, if *kalām* would only stick to its job here it would never come into conflict with philosophy. *Kalām* proper is limited to discussing rhetorically and dialectically the dogmatic principles of a particular religion, and cannot, without distortion, rise to the task of seeking to establish logically the fundamental truths which are only crudely represented in the religious principles. Unfortunately, *kalām* is sometimes overambitious and theologians argue that the principles and customs represented in positive law are equivalent to the universal truths of the philosophers, and in such cases much confusion and controversy arises. This is solely due to a category mistake, to a misunderstanding of the differing logical natures of philosophy and *kalām*.

At the beginning of his *Book of letters*, al-Fārābī states:

dialectical and sophistical powers, together with philosophy grounded on opinion, or philosophy based on sophistical thinking, should have preceded in time certain, i.e. demonstrative, philosophy. And religion, regarded as a human matter, is later in time than philosophy in general, since it is aimed at teaching the multitude theoretical and practical things which were deduced from philosophy in ways which facilitate the multitude's understanding of them, either through persuasion or representation, or through them both together. The arts of theology and jurisprudence are later in time than religion and are subordinate to it. And if the religion is subordinate to an ancient philosophy, either based on opinion, or on sophistical thinking, then the theology and the jurisprudence which are subordinate to it accord with either of them, but are below either of them.[21]

[21] Al-Fārābī, *Book of letters*, trans. L. Berman, 'Maimonides, the disciple of Alfarabi', *Israel Oriental Studies*, 4 (1974). pp. 154–78; pp. 156–8.

Al-Fārābī's model is of a variety of different forms of thinking following each other in time, gradually improving until they reach the level of demonstrative thought. Sophistical thinking which depends upon rules of persuading an audience to accept one's view by poetic exaggeration and literary tricks is superseded by dialectical thinking, which is capable of showing us how to move logically from one premiss to others, but is incapable of establishing the acceptability of that premiss in the first place. This final task can only be completed by demonstrative thought. Religion follows philosophy in time and fulfils the task of instructing the mass of the population in practical and theoretical truths which can be philosophically established by those capable of the activity, so that 'Religion consists of opinions and actions, determined and limited by conditions, which their ruler lays down to the group, seeking to achieve a specific goal which he has, either in them or by means of them, through their active utilization of these opinions and actions.'[22]

Following religion in time comes jurisprudence and theology. The former is required to establish the details of the law, given that the original lawgiver did not go into great depth, and thus accepts the axioms of the religion as true. The theologian defends the principles of religion against opponents and attacks opposing views in general: 'The jurisprudent accepts as given the views and actions of the founder of the religion and treats them as basic principles from which he reasons to necessary conclusions, but the theologian defends the principles which the jurisprudent treats as axioms and so not derived from other things.'[23] Al-Fārābī expresses his view of the interrelationship between these different thought processes and roles thus:

> On the whole philosophy comes before religion in the way that the user of an instrument comes before the instrument in time. Dialectical and sophistical thinking comes before philosophy just as the nourishment of the tree comes before the fruit, or as the flower of the tree comes before its fruit. Religion is prior to theology and jurisprudence just like the way someone in charge of a servant comes before the servant and someone who uses an instrument precedes the instrument.[24]

The contrast between the form of presentation of moral rules in philosophy and in religion is important. Although the latter is said only to provide images or representations of the demonstrative truth, nonetheless the link between these forms of expression and the truth is supposed to

[22] M. Mahdi (ed.), *Alfarabi's 'Book of religion' and related texts* (Beirut, Dār al-Mashreq, 1968), p. 43.
[23] Al-Fārābī, *Enumeration*, v, pp. 75–6, in Mahdi, '*Book of religion*'.
[24] Al-Fārābī, *Book of letters*, ed. M. Mahdi, p. 132.

be a strong one: 'Every religion exists through inspiration and is blended with reason. And he who holds that it is possible that there should exist a natural religion based on reason alone must admit that this religion must be less perfect than those which spring from reason and imaginative symbolization' (*TT* 361). This is because a religion which involves inspiration or imaginative symbolization will have the capacity to appeal in appropriate language to everyone, not just the wise. In some religions the symbols employed are not up to much: 'The images which symbolize . . . differ in merit. Some are better grounded and adequate in their imagery, others are less so. Some are closer to the truth, others less close . . . If the systems of symbols differ in adequacy, then the one which is best and which has the smallest number of objectionable features, if any, should be chosen . . . and the others rejected.'[25]

Avicenna firmly agrees with al-Fārābī on this issue, arguing that religion cannot be presented without its appropriate symbolization:

> As for religious law, one general principle is important, namely that religions and their laws, produced by a prophet, seek to communicate with the masses as a whole. It is obvious that the deeper truths concerning the real unity, that there is one maker who is exalted above quantity, quality, place, time, position and change, which lead to the belief that God is one without anyone sharing his species, that he contains no parts . . . that he cannot be pointed to as existing in a particular place, it is obvious that these deeper truths cannot be passed on to the multitude. For if this had been communicated in its true form to the bedouin Arabs and the crude Hebrews, they would have immediately refused to believe and would have unanimously declared that the belief which it was proposed they accept was belief in an absolute nonentity.[26]

Averroes occasionally goes further and suggests that inspiration has an even more important function because 'The laws which it [the Qur'ān] includes on doctrine and practice are such as could not be acquired by learning but [only] by inspiration [*waḥy*].'[27] As we have seen, the *falāsifa* argued that the law is closely connected with the total conditions of human happiness and the structure of the universe, so that any successful legislation must be based on knowledge of these principles. Yet how can we, with our limited capabilities and finite knowledge come to know which sort of legislation is appropriate? Fortunately 'we find all this determined in the scriptures. And all or most of this only becomes

[25] F. Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam* (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1958), p. 41.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 42.
[27] Ibn Rushd, *Kitāb al-kashf 'an manāhij al-adilla*, in M. Müller (ed.), *Philosophie und Theologie von Averroes* (Munich, 1859), p. 100.

clear through inspiration, or else its explanation through inspiration is superior [to a rational explanation alone].'[28]

In his commentary on this passage. Hourani suggests that Averroes did not really think that inspiration was the best source of knowledge about the universe, nor did he think that it was indispensable to anyone seeking to understand that universe. He hints that Averroes is merely presenting an exoteric view and that he 'could work sincerely as a *qāḍī*, because he believed in the worth of the *sharī'a* as a guide to practice for most people and most cases'.[29] This suspicion of Averroes' real views is misguided, at least in this case. Averroes' claims are quite mild, and he does not suggest unequivocally that *all* topics are best comprehended via inspiration – he qualifies his claim by saying 'all or most'. The idea that he thought that *sharī'a* had only limited worth as a guide to practice for *some* people is entirely unsupported by any evidence. It is not surprising that there are no reports of attacks on his legal judgments.

Hourani goes on to suggest that in his *Commentary on Aristotle's 'Nicomachean Ethics'* Averroes shows how practical reason could be used to 'correct' religious law. He is there considering Aristotle's definition of the equitable as 'a correction of law where it is defective owing to its generality' and relates this to Islamic law concerning holy war or *jihād*. It is generally obligatory on all Muslims to wage war against non-Muslims at all times. Yet it is clear that such a general policy would on occasions be of considerable disutility to the Islamic regions. Following rigidly such a general instruction is said by Averroes to be a result of 'ignorance of the intention of the lawgiver, and for this reason it should be stated that peace is preferable, and war only occasionally relevant'.[30] Hourani comments that 'Such correction of positive law by equity implies the existence of a natural right, to which the Legislator conformed, and by our direct knowledge of which we may interpret his intentions.'[31] This is far from the case, however. All general rules require interpretation, and one often seeks to establish the nature of the intention which those rules embody so that in a difficult case it is possible to compare the original intention with the actual consequences of following the rule. When the comparison reveals some sort of discrepancy we might think about interpreting the rule in a particular way which makes sense of

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 101.

[29] G. Hourani, 'Averroes on good and evil', *Studia Islamica*, XVI (1962), pp. 13–40; pp. 38–9.

[30] Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Aristotle's 'Nicomachean Ethics'*, fo. 248r on Books V, ch. 10; in Latin trans., *Averrois Cordubensis . . . commentarii* (Venice, 1560), III.

[31] G. Hourani, 'Averroes on good and evil', p. 39.

the intention. This is especially clear in the case of the law surrounding *jihād*, since the intention of that law is at least in part to extend the realm of Islam. If the actual practice would in certain circumstances have the contrary effect, it would be reasonable not to declare *jihād* at that time and in that place. There is no necessity to appeal to some knowledge of natural right which regulates the use of positive law.

What sorts of reasons would the philosophers give for the necessity of a prophet and for his embodying his intentions in a law and legal institutions? As we have seen more than once, a prophet is required to teach people how they ought to live, in which ways they ought to control their natural selfishness, and to lead those of them capable of the journey into acquaintance with the basic religious and philosophical truths. It is essential that any prospective prophet be able to reconcile the abilities and interests of the wide variety of human beings in the state, so that; 'the lawgiver is a man who has the power to deduce, through the excellence of his cogitation, the conditions through which these practical intelligibles can be actually realized for the attainment of ultimate happiness'.[32] For the law which the prophet leaves to remain effective once he has gone, it is necessary for his intentions to be constantly at the fore of legal debate, so that legislation does not descend to the condition of merely an empty playing with rules and terms. Again, this shows how important it is that the legislator in the first place be a prophet, since only someone who has such well-developed imaginative powers will be in a position to present the law in such a way that the line of development of those rules which still embody his intentions will remain clear. As Avicenna suggests,

> It is necessary for the prophet to institute certain acts which he obliges the people to perform regularly . . . in order to keep alive in their minds [the purpose of the law] . . . These acts should keep in people's hearts the memory of God . . . and the next life, if they are to be useful. These reminders can be either outer words or private intentions. One ought to tell people that such actions bring them closer to God and bring benefits to them . . . They are equivalent to the various kinds of worship people need to follow.[33]

Al-Fārābī goes into detail concerning the distinct types of approach appropriate to different sorts of people:

> There are two ways of making people understand, one is to make its essence clear while the alternative is to communicate an image which represents it symbolically. Judgment is formed in two ways, through a convincing rational argument

[32] Al-Fārābī, *Attainment*, ed. M. Mahdi, p. 45.
[33] Ibn Sīnā, *Najāt*, ed. M. S. Kurdi, pp. 305–6.

or through persuasion. When we understand the nature of existence and work from there via rational argument to conclusions, we practice philosophy. But when imagination receives symbols imitating reality, and judgments are made about these symbols using persuasive reasoning, this is the type of knowledge which was called by the ancients 'religion'.[34]

It would be a mistake to conclude that since the philosophers made this sort of distinction between philosophy and religion, they claimed that some people might be excused the devotional behaviour that religion specifies for its adherents. One might have thought that they would argue that religious practices could be limited to those incapable of a philosophical understanding of the topics which religion deals with in its own imaginative way. But they did not argue in this way. Al-Fārābī for one insists that 'A philosopher must perform the external acts and observe the duties of the law, for if a person disregards a law ordained as incumbent by a prophet and then pursues philosophy, he must be deserted. He should consider unlawful to himself what is unlawful in his community.'[35] One reason for not holding oneself aloof from the masses in religious matters, apart from the obviously prudential motive, is because 'the existence of the learned class is only perfected and its full happiness attained by participation with the class of the masses' (*TT* 360). Yet it is worth for the moment expressing a difficulty in this line of reasoning. If the philosopher understands, as Averroes suggests, 'that the aim of these doctrines lies in their universal character' (*TT* 360), why should he conclude that this universality applies equally to him? Philosophers do not require imaginative symbolization to appreciate important religious points. Why, then, are they required, in the opinions of al-Fārābī and Averroes, to adhere to religious procedural norms in order to behave rightly? If we can be made aware by the use of reason why religious laws and regulations take the form they do, is there any point in also claiming that it is revelation which establishes those laws as *the* laws to be obeyed?

The relevance of this discussion for the issue of the objective or subjective status of ethics in religion is quite evident. If it is possible for some people (e.g. philosophers) to acquire knowledge concerning their duty without relying upon revelation, then it would seem to follow that duty is not grounded in revelation at all, but rather in reason, and revelation is only a *means* of communicating truths to those not capable of using reason as both a method of discovery and a source of ethical norms.

[34] Al-Fārābī, *Attainment*, ed. M. Mahdi, p. 44.

[35] Al-Fārābī, *Risāla zainūn al-Kabīr* (Hyderabad, 1930), p. 9. This commentary could well be by Avicenna.