

CHAPTER ONE

ETHICAL RATIONALISM

I. THE DEONTOLOGICAL GROUNDS OF RIGHT AND WRONG

AS WE HAVE ALREADY MENTIONED, THE Mu^ctazilah were the first genuine moralists of Islam. Not only did they formulate coherent answers to the three principal ethical questions we have isolated, but they laid down the groundwork for all subsequent ethical developments, especially in theological circles.

One of the notable Mu^ctazilite doctors, Abu'l-Ḥusayn al-Khayyāt (died end ninth century) has listed in his *Kitāb al-Intiṣār* the five fundamental principles on which the different sections of the Mu^ctazilite school were agreed. The fifth of these principles is expressed by him as 'enjoining what is [morally] approved (*ma^crūf*) and prohibiting what is [morally] disapproved (*munkar*).'¹ The clearest and most succinct gloss on this statement is to be found in *al-Milal wa'l-Niḥal*, written in the twelfth century by the erudite and perceptive Ash^carite author, Muḥammad al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153). "They (i.e. the Mu^ctazilah) were agreed," he writes, "that the principles of knowledge and gratitude for benefaction (*ni^cmah*) are obligatory, prior to the advent of revelation (*sam^c*). Similarly, that right and wrong ought to be known through reason, and the adoption of right and the avoidance of wrong is likewise obligatory. The advent of religious obligation (*taklīf*) is a grace from God Almighty which He imparted to mankind through the Prophets to test and prove them, so that 'whosoever perished might perish by a clear sign, and by a clear sign he might live who lived'." (Koran 8:42, trans. Arberry).²

The correlation between knowledge and right in this gloss is the keynote of this rationalist thesis of the Mu^ctazilah. These theologians were concerned to establish in the face of traditionalist protestations by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855) and his followers, on the one hand, and those of Jahm ibn Ṣafwān (d. 745) and the Determinists generally,³ on the other, that the nature of right and wrong can be determined rationally and that it is ultimately independent of the divine prescriptions as laid down in the

¹ See *K. al-Intiṣār*, ed. and trans. into French by A. Nader, Beirut, 1957, 53. On the Koranic background of these two terms, see *supra*. Cf. al-Ash^carī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. H. Ritter, Istanbul, 1929-30, I, 378.

² Al-Shahrastānī, *Al-Milal wa'l-Niḥal*, I, 29.

³ See *infra*, 46.

Koran; in short they wished to establish that the two moral categories of right and wrong can be known by unaided reason and the ground of their validity can be rationally justified.

We find in the recently published theological *summa* of the late Mu^tazilite author *al-qāḍī* ^ʿAbd al-Jabbār, entitled *al-Mughnī fī Abwāb al-Tawhīd wa'l-ʿAdl*, the fullest and most systematic discussion of this problem. The author begins by considering the nature of action (*fiʿl*) in relation to an agent who is both capable and conscious. He finds in this relation the defining ground of that type of action by which he clearly means human action. He rejects accordingly the definition of action as “an event (*kāʾin*) that comes into being after it was not”, i.e. is produced in time (*muḥdath*) on the grounds that: (a) it is known to be so produced *after* it has come into being, and (b) the actual or present status of the action should not be injected into the definition. The temporal determination in other words is not essential, but accidental; the action should be defined instead by reference to the factor which ‘exhibits’ the purpose underlying it, as envisaged by a willing and capable agent. The relation to this agent actually determines the moral quality of the action in question. For not all actions are morally determined, only those which possess an adventitious quality (*ṣifah zāʾidah*), identified alternatively as good (*ḥasan*) and bad (*qabīḥ*), or praiseworthy and blameworthy, and stemming ultimately from the will of the agent.⁴

This correlation between good and praiseworthy and the one hand, and bad and blameworthy on the other, enables the author to subdivide good actions into three groups: (a) permissible (*mubāḥ*), or capable of being done or left undone without earning commendation or reproach: (b) admonished (*mandūb ilayh*), or exhorted to (*muraghghab fih*), or deserving of praise if done, but not of reproach if left undone; and (c) obligatory (*wājib*), or deserving of reproach if not done, but not of praise if done. The obligatory has two subdivisions: (a) obligatory in the ‘narrow sense’, and (b) obligatory in the ‘broad sense’. Omitting a particular action is obligatory in the first sense; omitting the action and its kind is obligatory in the second.⁵

The knowledge of the “adventitious quality” of goodness is stated by this Mu^tazilite author, as indeed by the Mu^tazilite school as a whole, to be a matter of intuitive certainty. Some, he argues, have claimed that

⁴ *Al-Mughnī*, Cairo, 1962—, VI, i, 6f. and VI, ii, 65f. ^ʿAbd al-Jabbār rejects in this connection the ‘ontological’ view advocated by Islamic Neo-Platonists like al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, according to which a thing is good simply because it is. *Ibid.*, 9 and 77f.

⁵ *Ibid.*, VI, i, 7f. Cf. G.F. Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism. The Ethics of ‘Abd al-Jabbār*, Oxford, 1971, 39.

the goodness and badness of certain actions is known esthetically, i.e. in the same way in which a picture is known to be beautiful or ugly.⁶ However, the analogy between the two classes of objects involved will not do; a picture is ugly in the sense that some are 'repelled' by it, but not others, and this repulsion, which is entirely subjective, is not an object of commendation or reproach, two of the criteria of goodness and badness, as we have seen. Others, like the Determinists (Mujbirah) and the Ash'arites, as will appear from the next chapter, claimed that goodness and badness are determined by, respectively, the divine command (*amr*) and prohibition. This claim, however, is rejected on the grounds that, were the commanding or prohibiting the essential basis of the goodness or badness of the action, any action prohibited or commanded would *ipso facto*, be, respectively, good or bad, regardless of the status of the author of the prohibition or command, be it God or any one else; this is absurd, however, since it renders goodness and badness entirely arbitrary. In fact, it is only by virtue of the intrinsic goodness or badness of the action that it becomes a fitting object of God's command or prohibition.⁷

Now this intrinsic goodness or badness is known to us, the author argues, 'by necessity'. Whoever questions this knowledge "repudiates necessity" and his repudiation is not worth attending to. Should he, however, grant the substance of the distinction between good and bad, and yet insist that allegedly good actions, such as equity and gratitude, are not obligatory or praiseworthy, and contrariwise bad actions, such as falsehood and injustice, are neither prohibited nor blameworthy, his contention would turn on purely semantic points which could be settled by reference to linguistic usage.⁸

An important characteristic of this intuitive ethical knowledge is that it is autonomous and self-validating: it requires neither 'acquired' nor 'deductive' evidence to support it, not even the warrant of divine revelation (*sam'*). Rather the contrary, for unless the grounds of religious or revealed Truth, such as the wisdom of God and the truthfulness of the Prophet who bears His message to mankind, are rationally known, the Truth of revelation, identified by 'Abd al-Jabbār with the Koran and Traditions, would remain forever questionable.⁹

In view of this autonomy of rational knowledge, one might ask what function, if any, can revelation discharge in the ethical field, and what

⁶ Al-Mughnī, VI, i, 19f. It is noteworthy that identical terms are used to denote good and beautiful (*hasan*) and bad and ugly (*qabīh*).

⁷ *Ibid.*, VI, i, 102f. Cf. XIV, 153 *et passim*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, VI, i, 18f. and 43.

⁹ *Ibid.*, XIV, 151.

bearing can it have on the problem of moral and religious obligation and responsibility (*taklīf*). For neither ʿAbd al-Jabbār nor his Muʿtazilite colleagues made so bold as to declare revelation to be entirely superfluous, as did some naturalist philosophers of the ninth and tenth centuries, such as al-Rāzī (d. 925).¹⁰ It can, according to ʿAbd al-Jabbār, ‘exhibit’ the principles already established by reason, but does not confirm or validate them. For, (a) having been established by reason as necessary, they obviously are not in need of confirmation of any kind, (b) the validity of revelation, as already mentioned, being dependent on reason, cannot without *petition of principle*, depend on revelation, and, finally, (c) were revelation to confirm these principles, it would require another revelation to confirm it, and so on *ad infinitum*.¹¹

Another function which devolves upon revelation is the arbitration between conflicting revelations or parts of revelation. Whenever error or disagreement arises, revelation is required in order to correct this error or ‘abrogate’ (*nasakha*) an outdated revelation. In cases in which the responsible agent is known to have fulfilled all his obligations, or to have discovered rationally all the principles of morality, revelation is entirely superfluous.¹²

A third function is that of specifying those particular acts which are morally commendable and whose goodness is determined by reason, but only in general terms. The prophets are sent by God, argues ʿAbd al-Jabbār, in order to instruct us concerning those actions that He had already instilled in our intellects, with a view to confirming (*taqrīr*) and specifying them in detail.¹³

To illustrate the type of ‘rational obligation’ incumbent on the agent, ʿAbd al-Jabbār lists three categories of action: (a) those that are obligatory by virtue of an intrinsic property, (b) those that are obligatory by virtue of a divine grace (*luṭf*), which presumably specifies or confirms the goodness of the action, and (c) those that are obligatory by virtue of the advantage accruing to the agent from performing them or avoiding their opposites. (a) is then subdivided into actions which define our obligations: (1) towards our fellowmen, such as returning what is entrusted to us, (2) towards ourselves, such as guarding against injury, and (3) towards God,

¹⁰ See M. Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, 94f. The thesis that revelation (or prophethood) is superfluous is attributed in the Arabic sources to the Brahmins (*al-Barāhimah*), cf. *al-Mughnī*, XIV, 160 *et passim*, and ʿAbd al-Jabbār’s other important treatise, *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-Khamsah*, Cairo, 1965, 564f. and Hourani, *op. cit.*, 134f. Cf. Barāhima in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*².

¹¹ *Al-Mughnī*, XIV, 151f. and VI, i, 64. Cf. Hourani, *op. cit.*

¹² *Ibid.*, XIV, 151f.

¹³ See *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-Khamsah*, 564f. Cf. Hourani, *op. cit.*, 135.

such as gratitude (*shukr*) for His benevolence and forgiveness.¹⁴ (b), on the other hand, includes all those obligations which are revealed to man as a divine grace and cannot be known rationally, such as the duty of reflecting on God and conforming to the precepts of the Holy Law.¹⁵ Finally, (c) includes a large class of actions whose goodness is a feature of the advantage, pleasure or interest that the agent can derive from them. The 'utilitarian' maxim that man ought to ward off injury to himself and seek his own advantage in matters spiritual and temporal is regarded by this Mu^ctazilite theologian as incontrovertible; revelation, as already mentioned, simply exhibits the mischievous quality of certain actions, but does not validate or affect the maxim itself. A corollary of this maxim is the right to self-defense, even if it involves the killing of an aggressor who threatens one's life or property, and provided the killing is not sought for its own sake.¹⁶

However, the line of demarcation between rational and religious obligation is not always clearly drawn by ʿAbd al-Jabbār. Apart from 'specifying' the general moral maxim, or reaffirming it, revelation defines the kinds of sanctions attached to them in the life-to-come. In that respect, revelation (or scripture) does no more than restate the obligation in the general theological or eschatological context: bad thus becomes equivalent to the prohibited (*mahẓūr*), unlawful (*muḥarram*), or sinful (*maʿṣiyah*),¹⁷ all of which describe the action in terms of violating the precepts laid down by God. Contrariwise, good becomes equivalent to the permitted (*mubāḥ*), lawful (*ḥalāl*), allowed (*jāʿiz*), or the act of obedience (*ṭāʿah*).¹⁸ If we abstract this theological ground of compliance or violation, as well as the sanctions attached to each, the difference between the two sets of terms becomes purely semantic.

II. HUMAN CAPACITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

A moral action is defined, as we have just seen, in terms of its relation to an agent who is both conscious (*ʿālim*) and capable (*qādir*). The consciousness in question, as we have also seen, bears on the general moral

¹⁴ *Al-Mughnī*, XIV, 161f.

¹⁵ *Al-Mughnī* ʿAbd al-Jabbār's thinking on the relation of reason and revelation is not free from inconsistency. Like other Mu^ctazilite doctors, he believed that God can be known rationally. The two obligations in question appear to refer to the sanctions attaching to this knowledge, and the advantage of seeking it, as well as the obligation to start the deductive process (*istidlāl*) leading to the knowledge of God. See *al-Mughnī*, XII, 230f. and 325f.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 168f. Cf. pp. 33f. ʿAbd al-Jabbār, however, regards the distinction between right (*ḥasan*, *ṣalāḥ*) and useful (*naʿf*) to be purely semantic. *Ibid.*, 35f.

¹⁷ Other synonyms are *dhanb*, *khaṭīyah*, *sayyiʿah*.

¹⁸ *Al-Mughnī*, XVII, 95f.

quality of an action as rationally or religiously determined. Power (*qudrah*) or capacity (*istiṭāʿah*) bears on its production either directly (*mubāsharah*) or indirectly (*bi'l-tawallud*). The theological problems which this production raised were legion. Starting from the Koranic premise that God was Omnipotent, the Determinists (*al-Mujbirah*) asserted that man is incapable of any activity, since he is fully determined (*majbūr*) in his actions, which are wholly created by God. In fact, actions are predicated of man purely metaphorically (*majāzan*), in exactly the same way as they are predicated of inanimate objects. Even reward and punishment are a matter of compulsion (*jabr*).¹⁹ The Traditionists, like Ibn Ḥanbal and his school, tended to agree with this thesis, but in their deference to the sacredness of the Koranic text, they refused to even debate these questions, and so did the Ashʿarites in the tenth century, who virtually inherited all the basic presuppositions of the *Mujbirah*.

Against this gloomy background heightened by the explicitness of the Traditions on the question of predestination, as well as the ambiguity of the Koran, the Muʿtazilite school as a whole affirmed capacity as a precondition of morality. As adumbrated by al-Shahrastānī, their moral theory consisted in the view "that the servant is the creator of his deeds, good or bad, and is deserving of reward and punishment in the life-to-come for whatever he does."²⁰ God, it followed from this view, was to be exonerated from the responsibility for human actions, whether good or bad, since such responsibility belonged exclusively to man. In speaking of man, or the 'servant', as the creator of his deeds, the later Muʿtazilites simply intended to underscore this responsibility, rather than posit a second creator alongside God, as their Ashʿarite opponents actually charged.²¹

It is perhaps not the assertion of human capacity, but rather the sophisticated way in which the Muʿtazilah rationalized it that gave their moral doctrine its particular significance. Power, which was predicated of man, his spirit or soul, depending on the anthropology adopted by the theologian in question, was stated by some to be an accident and by others to be a more general condition of physical fitness. It was unanimously asserted, however, to precede the action. Some theologians, like Abu'l-

¹⁹ See al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa'l-Niḥal*, I, 87. Cf. *al-Ashʿarī, Maqālāt*, I, 279f. and *infra*.

²⁰ *Al-Milal*, I, 45.

²¹ Al-Juwaynī attributes to 'later Muʿtazilites' the predication of the term creator (*khāliq*) of man. See *al-Irshād*, ed. J.D. Luciani, Paris, 1938, 106. The charge of positing man as co-creator recurs in almost all Ashʿarite treatises and is even supported by a Tradition: "The Qadariyah (i.e. Muʿtazilah) are the Magians of this community." See, for instance, al-Ashʿarī, *al-Ibānah ʿan Uṣūl al-Diyāna*, Hyderabad, 1948, 6f. and *Maqālāt*, I, 223.

Hudhayl, maintained that it endured for a certain period of time; others, like al-Balkhī, that it did not.²² Its impact on the object gave rise to elaborate theories of direct and indirect causation. The distinction between these two modes is crucial to understanding Muʿtazilite ethics. As has become abundantly clear in recent years, the Muʿtazilah, like the vast majority of the Mutakallimūn, subscribed to a metaphysics of atoms and accidents intended to account for observable physical processes in a manner which accorded with the Koranic world view.²³ To account for the moral efficacy of the agent and to ensure a real connection between the will and the action, they were compelled to accord to the atoms and accidents making up physical objects a certain measure of durability and continuity, and safeguard thereby the causal dependence of physical processes on the will. This is precisely what their theory of 'generation' (*tawallud* or *tawlid*) actually did; the action stemming from the will of the agent causes it to take a certain form corresponding to this will, or else his responsibility for the action cannot be vindicated.

Bishr ibn al-Muʿtamir (d. 825), head of the Muʿtazilite school of Baghdad who apparently initiated the theory of 'generation', argued that 'generated actions,' like the pain caused by a blow of the hand, the pleasure caused by eating, the flight of the arrow when released from the bow or the perception ensuing upon use of a sense organ, —all these are of 'our own doing' and are "produced by the causes emanating from us." We are accordingly responsible for them.²⁴ Abu'l-Hudhayl (d. 849), head of the rival school of Baṣrah, confined the responsibility of the agent to "whatever is generated by him in such a way that he knows its modality." Everything else, he argued, is the product of God's action, such as the accidents of color, humidity, dryness and the like. In fact, this doctor appears to have restricted 'generated actions' to the motion and rest produced in the agent or in other entities, as well as their consequences, however remote.²⁵ Al-Nazzām (d. 845) was even more rigorous in restricting all actions, such as love and hate, prayer and fasting, knowledge and ignorance, to the one accident of motion; even rest was to him nothing but the act of moving in the same place twice. Anything which occurs out-

²² See al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālāt*, I, 229f. On the question of the essence of man, some, like al-Nazzām and Muʿammar, identified it with spirit; others, like ʿAbbād ibn Sulaymān, said that it is body; others still, like Bishr ibn al-Muʿtamir, that it is the union of both. See *Maqālāt*, II, 329f., and ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, XI, 310f.

²³ See M. Fakhry, *Islamic Occasionalism and its Critique by Averroës and Aquinas*, London, 1958, Ch. I, and *Maqālāt*, II, 301ff. Cf. H. Daiber, *Das theologisch-philosophische System des Muʿammar Ibn ʿAbbād as-Sulamī (gest. 830 n. Chr.)*, Beirut-Wiesbaden 1975.

²⁴ See al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālāt*, II, 401f.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 402f.

side the 'locus of man', on the other hand, is the product of God's action "through a creative necessity", such as the falling of the stone or the flight of the arrow. By this creative necessity, al-Nazzām, a qualified naturalist, apparently meant, as al-Ash'arī observes, that God had endowed the object upon its creation with a specific nature (*tabʿ*), which determines its subsequent operations in a necessary manner, all physical entities and properties having been created initially and at once.²⁶

Other Muʿtazilite doctors, such as Muʿammar (first half of ninth century), denied that motion and rest are generated acts, confining this property to the will and related psychic phenomena, like knowledge, hatred and perception. Still others, such as Thumāmah (d. 828), confined it exclusively to motion. Everything other than will is "produced without a producer", such as the falling of the stone when catapulted by man, to whom the action is attributed purely metaphorically.²⁷

As already mentioned, actions were either directly (*mubāshar*) or indirectly produced (*mutawallid*). Accordingly, late Muʿtazilite authors, like ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 1025), al-Jubbāʾī (d. 915) and Abū Hāshim (d. 933), dwelt at length on these two divisions which amounted in fact to primary and secondary operations. Sounds, pains and composition were asserted to be generated or secondary effects; others, like will and similar psychic phenomena, as primary. Still others, such as the modes (*akwān*) of motion, rest, composition and location, were sometimes regarded as primary, sometimes as secondary. As to the external accidents of colors, tastes, sounds and smells, as well as life, power and body, they were produced neither directly nor indirectly by man, but only by God, either through a cause (*sabab*) or without a cause.²⁸

This highly sophisticated disquisition on the types of action and their relation to the agent, who was asserted to be responsible for them, led the Muʿtazilah to speculate on the will and the way in which its object (*murād*) emanated from it and affected the external objects coming within its purview. The act of willing is known intuitively to us, according to ʿAbd-al-Jabbār, in exactly the same way as the act of believing, desiring or thinking is, and accordingly requires no proof. For, as he writes, "no rational person can deny that he is able to intend the action, will or choose it, as well as discriminate between this specific condition (of choice) and

²⁶ *Maqālāt*, II, 403f. Cf. *al-Mughnī*, IX, 11, and M. Fakhry, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 49f.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 407. Cf. *al-Mughnī*, IX, 11. ʿAbd al-Jabbār reports the vacillation of this scholar on the author of this kind of action, whom he identified sometimes with God, sometimes with physical objects. Cf. also *al-Milal*, I, 71; al-Baghdādī, *al-Farq bayn al-Firaq*, Beirut, 1973, 319 and 328.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, IX, 13f. Cf. 125f.

that of aversion, or between what he wills (or wants) from himself and from another.’’²⁹

A fundamental characteristic of the willed action is its correspondence with what the will originally intended. For it is logically impossible that the action should occur in a determinate way, unless the will has deliberately determined this occurrence, and brought it about through the organs of the body.³⁰ In this and other respects, the will differs from both wish and desire in the following ways: (a) will determines the occurrence of the action, as just mentioned, but desire does not, (b) will may be directed towards a repugnant object, but desire may not, (c) enjoyment is a by-product of desire, but not of will, (d) desire may grow or wane, whereas the will remains constant, and (e) will is within our power, but desire is not. Likewise, wish differs from will in a number of ways: (a) it can have a bearing on the past, as when we wish that what is done be undone, (b) it does not affect the object of wishing in any way, whereas will certainly does, as the theory of ‘generation’ incidentally assumes, (c) will can become its own object, as when we will to will, but wish cannot, and (d) will has an opposite, but wish does not.³¹

The object of willing is simply defined by ‘Abd al-Jabbār and his masters as that which is known to be possible, excluding thereby the impossible, in the sense of (a) what can never come to be in the absolute sense or (b) what can never come to be in a particular way.³² As to what ought to be willed, the author denies that it depends on the willed object and argues instead that it depends on the motive (*dā‘ī*) which impels the agent to choose, as long as his will is not shackled. As to the act of willing itself, it is not an object of willing for him, despite the assertion to the contrary. That is why, as he states, that which is generated by reasoning cannot be willed, until one comes to know that it belongs to the category of belief or certain knowledge. In other words, one must understand first that it is an object of knowledge, either in the weak or the strong sense.

The key concept in this argumentation is the consciousness of the connection of the will to its object; when the motive has determined the will of the agent, he cannot but will it, as a matter of necessity. For, as his master Abū Hāshim apparently held, it is impossible that the agent should know what he is doing without willing it; this would entail that he could ‘hate’ what he is doing or will its opposite.³³ Nevertheless, the will does not determine the action necessarily; it would otherwise have to determine

²⁹ *Al-Mughnī*, VI, ii, 8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, VI, ii, 22.

³¹ *Al-Mughnī*, VI, ii, 35f.

³² *Ibid.*, VI, ii, 78.

³³ *Al-Mughnī*, VI, ii, 80. The Arabic for hate, *yakrah*, is the antonym of will, *yurid*; hence the plausibility of this argument.

all the consequences of this action, including the actions of others, insofar as they are caught up in the network of conditions stemming from it. This, however, is impossible, because the will of the agent can, by definition, affect his own action only. The illusion that the will determines the willed object necessarily arises from the observation that they always occur in conjunction; such conjunction does not entail causal determination, however, only temporal contiguity. This contiguity itself is not necessary, since the will can either precede the object or occur together with it. It follows that it is neither the will nor the object, but rather the 'motive' (*dāʿi*), that determines both.³⁴

The moral implications of this view are not far to seek. If the will determined the object in every way, it would have to determine its goodness or badness as well, but as we have seen, the Muʿtazilah regarded these two moral categories as intrinsic or objective properties of the action which depended neither on the will of man nor that of God. The will simply determines that the action should occur in a certain way, which is subsequently characterized as objectively good or bad. Some actions, it is true, are morally determined by the will of God, such as the performance of the ritual prayer and other religious observances; thereupon they become acts of worship through the will. Such actions, however, belong to the category of religious, rather than moral obligation.³⁵

Should the agent will what he knows with certainty to be evil, his will would be unquestionably evil and the corresponding action unquestionably blameworthy. However, to will what is only deductively known to be evil cannot be as readily determined from a moral standpoint. Its moral quality should first be deductively determined. Once it is established that it is morally evil, such as commanding what is intolerable, then it will be unquestionably proved that willing it is evil. The same is true of willing the good to no avail or in vain (*ʿabathan*), for the futility of the action is evil, and to will such futility is equally evil. God's actions could not therefore be spoken of as entirely without purpose, without derogating from His wisdom and justice.³⁶ The two propositions, that God can command the intolerable (*mā lā yuṭāq*) and will the creation of the universe for no reason, were, as will appear from the next section, two major aspects of the polemic between the Muʿtazilah and their opponents.

III. Divine Wisdom and Justice

If human capacity is regarded as the first cornerstone of Muʿtazilite

³⁴ *Al-Mughnī*, VI, ii, 88.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, VI, ii, 94 and 99.

³⁶ *Al-Mughnī*, VI, ii, 99.

ethics, the justice and wisdom of God are the two other cornerstones of this distinctly theological ethics. The former tended to be interpreted in autonomous terms, but could obviously not be entirely divorced from their theodicy or their conception of God's role in the world, and in particular His relation to man.

As we have seen, the intrinsic goodness or badness of actions can be established on purely rational grounds; theological arguments can, however, be advanced in support of this quasi-deontological theory of right and wrong and reinforce it thereby in no small measure against the attacks of theological adversaries, such as the Ash'arite Voluntarists and the Jahmite and Hanbalite Determinists.

The Mu'tazilah argued that the claim that God can will evil, apart from being rationally repugnant, can be rebutted on the ground that it entails frivolity (*safah*) or futility (*'abath*) on the part of God. In addition, to induce man to desire evil and be repelled by the good contradicts the very essence of desire, as the urge to will the good, and of revulsion, as the urge to avoid evil. It would also rob man of the opportunity to earn the reward meted out by God to those who choose the right.³⁷

Moreover, to will evil is evil. Accordingly, God can neither will the evil done by others nor initiate it Himself. If one were to object, in the manner of Voluntarists and Determinists, that the divine act of willing determines the goodness of the action, just as the divine prohibition determines its badness, one would be reminded that this claim is irreconcilable with the intrinsic morality of action, which we have already established.³⁸ The act of commanding or prohibition, as indeed the status or condition of its author, is entirely irrelevant to the goodness or badness of the action; otherwise any command, regardless of its author or its merit, would be right, and any prohibition would be wrong, but this would obviously make a mockery of the very distinction between good and evil, and render these two irreducible concepts purely arbitrary.

The theological complement of this argument is skillfully presented by 'Abd al-Jabbār. Prior to revelation (*al-sam'*), man cannot be expected to recognize certain actions as obligatory except through natural reason, as shown by the case of atheists and naturalists, such as the already-mentioned Brahmins (*al-Barāhi mah*), who deny revelation altogether.³⁹ It follows that he cannot be bound by any (moral) obligations whatsoever, since he cannot be expected to rationally anticipate the revealed commands upon which obligation turns.⁴⁰

³⁷ *Al-Mughnī*, VI, ii, 218f.

³⁸ See *supra*, 33, and *al-Mughnī*, VI, i, 102f.

³⁹ See *supra*, 34, note 10.

⁴⁰ *Al-Mughnī*, VI, ii, 232.

It is, moreover, incompatible with God's justice, affirmed repeatedly in the Koran.⁴¹ God could not without self-contradiction will injustice and command it. Nor could He dispense His graces, such as the grace of guidance (*al-hady*) or provision (*rizq*), freely to some and deny them to others. Indeed, the very conception of such graces, especially guidance, implies that they are dispensed universally, rather than selectively. Those who persist in their error and refuse to be guided obviously have only themselves to blame.⁴²

Whether God could be described as capable (*qādir*) of doing wrong and refraining from right was apparently a highly debatable question in theological circles, both Mujbirite and Mu^ctazilite, and it is not without interest to note that, in consonance with their vindication of divine justice, the Mu^ctazilites, including al-Nazzām, al-Aswārī (d. middle ninth century) and al-Jāhīz (d. 868), denied this thesis, despite the protestations of their opponents that this would entail the limitation of God's power. Other Mu^ctazilites, like Abu'l-Hudhayl, Abū Hāshim and ʿAbd al-Jabbār, however, qualified this thesis in a subtle way. God, they argued, is capable of wrongdoing, but does not actually do wrong, by virtue of His wisdom and mercy, thereby satisfying the double requirement of omnipotence and justice.⁴³

ʿAbd al-Jabbār inveighs in particular against the Mujbirite view that the denial of God's capability of wrong-doing involves a limitation of His power, on the grounds that it rests on a misconception of the relation between His actions and His will. The divine will bears either on what is an object of God's power or that of His creatures, including man. That which is an object of divine power is inexorable and irreversible; that which is an object of the creature's power is either compulsory or voluntary. The fact that voluntary actions do not always accord with the divine will does not entail any deficiency or weakness in God, since it was His intent initially that the agent should choose the action freely and earn thereby the reward attached to the deed. Should the agent nonetheless fail to act rightly, the responsibility should be imputed to his 'evil choice' rather than to God's.⁴⁴

A major corollary of divine justice, as conceived by the Mu^ctazilah, was the duty incumbent on God to act in accordance with the universal precepts of wisdom. The three test cases of this thesis that were actively debated in theological circles were: (a) whether God had created mankind

⁴¹ ʿAbd al-Jabbār quotes the following Koranic verses: 3:108; 40:31.

⁴² *Al-Mughnī*, VI, ii, 238f.

⁴³ *Al-Mughnī*, VI, i, 127f. Cf. al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālāt*, I, 200f. and II, 555f.

⁴⁴ *Al-Mughnī*, VI, ii, 256f. and 274.

for a reason (^c*illah*), (b) whether God could demand what is intolerable (*mā lā yuṭāq*), and (c) whether God could torture the innocent, without any reward (*bilā* ^c*iwaḍ*).

Some of the Mu^ctazilah, such as ^cAbbād ibn Sulaymān (d. 864), denied that God's creation had a reason, or, such as Mu^cammar,⁴⁵ that the infinite series of reasons could be exhausted, every reason according to them having a reason *ad infinitum*, but the majority asserted in response to the first question that God had created mankind for a positive reason, which they identified with their own advantage (*manfa^cah*).

^cAbd al-Jabbār regards the first thesis as an instance of the more general maxim that God can only act for the sake of the good (*al-ḥasan*). To prove his point, he impales the opponent on the horns of a dilemma: whether God created mankind (a) to benefit, (b) to harm, or (c) neither to benefit nor to harm it. (b) and (c) are incompatible with God's justice and wisdom—in the first case, because God's intent would be definitely evil, and this is contrary to His justice, and in the second, because a knowing agent (^c*ālim*) must act for the sake of a definite purpose, and this we know from (b) to be the good. It follows that God can only create mankind in order to benefit it.⁴⁶ The subsidiary alternative that God has created the world accidentally (*bi'l-ittifāq*) is discounted on the ground that the creation of every entity in its specific location clearly proves that it was created for a purpose.⁴⁷

What befits God to create in the first instance, according to this theologian, is a living, perceiving (*mudrik*) and desiring entity. Such an entity need not direct its perception or desire, and consequently the satisfaction of desire, towards anything external to it; in other words, its activity of perception or desire could be entirely self-centered. The other attributes we associate with the living, such as power, knowledge and will, are not necessary; God is not compelled therefore to create them. Even the creation of space and time, as well as the vault of heaven and the orb of the world, is not necessary for vindicating God's goodness, since it is possible for the living, perceiving and desiring entity to achieve its goal, which is pleasure, without any of these external conditions.⁴⁸ From this it appears that by the 'advantage' stipulated by this theologian and his school should be understood as pleasure, or the satisfaction of desire. This pleasure is of two kinds: (a) direct or conducive to this satisfaction instantly, and (b)

⁴⁵ Al-Ash^carī, *Maqālāt*, I, 253. Cf. al-Khayyāt. *K. al-Intiṣār*, 26. Cf. Daiber, *Mu^cammar*, 236f.

⁴⁶ *Al-Mughnī*, XI, 58f.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

indirect or attended by temporary pain, but resulting in eventual satisfaction. The hedonistic theory, which defines pleasure as relief from pain, adopted as we shall see by contemporary philosophers such as Miskawayh, is rejected by ʿAbd al-Jabbār on the grounds that certain positive pleasures, on the one hand, and certain positive pains, on the other, are intuitively known to be generically different; we could not without circularity define one in terms of the other.⁴⁹

More pertinent to his theological purposes, perhaps is ʿAbd al-Jabbār's division of advantages into deserved and undeserved. The former is subdivided into (a) what is earned by the agent as a reward for his actions, and (b) what is dispensed by someone else as restitution or payment of what is due. Undeserved reward, on the other hand, is a matter of gracious benevolence (*tafaddul*) on the part of the benefactor. It follows that God's actions are good in four different respects: (a) insofar as they benefit man directly, such as the creation of life or reason, (b) insofar as they benefit him indirectly, such as the creation of animals and inanimate objects to serve him, (c) insofar as they are conducive to his being rewarded for his good deeds, such as the creation of obligation and pains, and (d) insofar as they are conducive to the creation of the world at large in a specific way.⁵⁰

God, however, is not compelled, by reason of His essential goodness, as the Neo-Platonists have argued, to create this world or any other at the specific time He has created it. For "the knowledge of the goodness of the object by the agent does not entail its production necessarily, but simply the possibility of choosing it for that reason, and the fact that, accordingly, His choice would be good for that reason (. . .) For motives do not necessitate the action, but only that its choice is more justifiable than any other."⁵¹ In short, God is at liberty to create or not to create the world at any time or in any manner He pleases, through an act of gratuitous benevolence (*tafaddul*). This was obviously ʿAbd al-Jabbār's answer to those Ashʿarites and Determinists who accused the Muʿtazilah and the Neo-Platonists of subjecting God to a creative imperative which He could not violate. And it is noteworthy that Muslim Neo-Platonists, like al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, were in fact driven by the inexorable logic of divine goodness to describe the emanation of the world from God in necessary or quasi-necessary terms.⁵²

With this rigorous conception of the justice and wisdom of God went

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, XI, 80, cf. *infra*, 72.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, XI, 84f.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 98. Cf. p. 125.

⁵² See M. Fakhry, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 118 and 156f.

the Mu^ctazilite thesis that God could not demand the intolerable from His creation. The very concept of obligation (*taklīf*), as well as the already mentioned imperative of grace or benevolence, logically entailed that God's demands be rationally tolerable. In their desire to magnify God's power, the Determinists and Ash^carites who went so far as to ascribe to God the capacity to demand the intolerable tended in fact to derogate from His wisdom and justice, according to the Mu^ctazilah.⁵³

The concrete instance of demanding the intolerable or perpetrating it was the capacity, ascribed to God by the Determinists and the Ash^carites, to inflict unrequited pain on His creatures. Accordingly, the discussion of suffering figured prominently in theological treatises. Its reality, like that of other psychic affections, is for ʿAbd al-Jabbār unquestionable.⁵⁴ Its divisions are two: (a) some pains are praiseworthy, such as putting up with hardship for the sake of a noble cause, or bearing a small pain for the sake of a greater advantage, and (b) other pains are entirely evil, because they result in unqualified injury (*ḍarar*). An agent is not justified in inflicting the latter type of pain on others, for such infliction is entirely unjust (*ẓulm*), injustice being defined as "every action not attended by an advantage exceeding it, or aimed at warding off an undeserved or inordinate injury."⁵⁵ So long as the action is a cause of unqualified injury (*ḍarar*), and so long as it is pointless or futile (*ʿabath*), it is an unqualified evil, regardless of whether it is perpetrated by God or man. It follows therefore that the claim of the Mujbirah and their followers that God can torture children and brutes and inflict other forms of sickness or suffering on mankind, is entirely false. It was predicated on the thesis, universally rejected by the Mu^ctazilah, as will appear more clearly in the next chapter, that actions of this kind are perfectly justified since they are performed by God. The goodness or badness of actions was for them entirely independent of the status of the agent or his relationship to the action, being intrinsic qualities intuitively known by reason as self-evident.⁵⁶ We should not, however, in determining the moral quality of a painful action, overlook the many aspects of the action, which, though *prima facie* evil, may in reality be good. Thus pain or injury should only be regarded as unqualified evil once the following conditions are fulfilled: (a) it is not counterbalanced by a greater advantage, (b) it is not counterbalanced by the repulsion of a greater pain or injury, (c) it is not requited altogether, and (d) it is not an object of belief (*ẓann*) rather than of certainty.⁵⁷

⁵³ *Al-Mughnī*, XIV, 156f.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, XIII, 229f.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 298f.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 303f. Cf. al-Baghdādī, *Uṣūl al-Dīn*, Istanbul, 1928, 240f. and al-Baqillānī, *al-Tamhīd*, ed. R.J. McCarthy, Beirut, 1957, 254 and 341f.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 316f.

ETHICAL VOLUNTARISM: THE EARLY DETERMINISTS AND THE ASHʿARITES

I. THE DIVINE WILL AS THE GROUND OF RIGHT AND WRONG

THE Muʿtazilite theologians, who, as we have seen, had developed in the ninth century a quasi-deontological theory of right and wrong fit into a peculiar theological framework, were arguing against an established theory, attributed by ʿAbd al-Jabbār and other heresiographers to the Mujbirah, or early Determinists.

Three major representatives of this school are mentioned by al-Ashʿarī, our earliest authority, and his successors: Jahm ibn Ṣafwān (d. 746), Ḍirār ibn ʿAmr (d. middle of eighth century) who is sometimes regarded as a Muʿtazilite, and al-Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad al-Najjār (d. middle of the ninth century). Other less important figures are Muḥammad ibn ʿĪsā, nick-named Burghūth (the Flea) and Bishr ibn Ghiyāth al-Marīṣī (d. ca 33).¹ From the scant information that has come down to us, it appears that these Determinists were unanimous that God is the real author of every action or occurrence in the world, and that accordingly voluntary actions are imputed to man purely metaphorically. In fact, as one authority has put it, “actions are imputed to him, just as they are imputed to inanimate objects, and just as we say (for instance) that the tree bore fruit, water flowed, the stone moved, the sun rose and set (...)”²

Apart from this Determinist maxim, their teaching revealed considerable divergence, but it is significant that they did not devote as much attention to the distinction between right and wrong as their Muʿtazilite rivals had done. However, it is a fair inference from their general theological and moral presuppositions that they identified right with what God wills or commands and wrong with what He prohibits. Jahm, the most illustrious Determinist we are told by al-Ashʿarī, surprisingly accepted (*intaḥala*) the Muʿtazilite theory of right and wrong, or approved (*maʿrūf*) and disapproved (*munkar*), as he had accepted their view of the created Koran and the identity of attribute and essence in God.³

¹ See al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālāt*, I, 279–85; al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal*, I, 85–91 and al-Baghdādī, *al-Farq*, 195–202.

² *Al-Milal*, I, 87.

³ See al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālāt*, I, 279 and al-Khayyāt, *K. al-Intiṣār*, 92.

More sophisticated, however, was the speculation of al-Najjār, a vehement rival of al-Nazzām, on the question of right and wrong. He is reported to have argued that actions, whether right or wrong, are of the creation (*khalq*) of God, and the doing (*fi'l*) of man—an obvious rebuttal of the Mu'tazilite thesis that man is the 'creator' of his deeds. His conception of the divine will, however, was so encompassing that it left nothing out, whether in the domain of acting or willing, so that both good and evil, justice and injustice were comprehended within it. It followed therefore that the very determination of right and wrong was, according to him, an object of this will. When empowered to act, through the capacity (*istiṭā'ah*) which God creates in him at the time of action, as the Ash'arites were to hold a generation later, it was still possible for 'an act of obedience' to exist apart from the act of disobedience, or sin, corresponding to it simply through the divine determination.⁴ He also allowed that God could punish innocent children in the life to come or withhold punishment from them, as He pleased. His many writings on such subjects as justice and injustice, the 'necessitating', capacity, the divine decree and predestination (*qadā' wa-qadar*), although lost, strongly suggest that al-Najjār was exercised by many of the problems which exercised the Mu'tazilite theologians as well, and that he had in fact reacted against their ethical rationalism by seeking the ground of good and evil in the divine will.⁵

However, these early Determinists were superseded in the tenth century by the Ash'arites, who virtually took over all their major tenets, to refine and develop them. Almost simultaneously, Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturidī of Samarqand (d. 944) developed, in his *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, a voluntarist ethical theory which was analogous to that of al-Ash'arī. Thus on the questions of divine justice and wisdom, creation and acquisition and the nature of right and wrong, their positions are almost identical. Accordingly, the dependence of both the Ash'arite and Māturidī schools on their Mujbirite predecessors is confirmed; the identity of their views on such fundamental issues could not have been purely fortuitous.⁶

The impact of the Ash'arite school has been so decisive in the subsequent history of Islamic theology and ethics that al-Māturidī's contribution to the ethical controversy can be accorded no more than a casual mention; besides, it lacked the subtlety and sophistication of parallel contributions by Ash'arite doctors, whose thought is far more prototypical.

⁴ Al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt*, I, 283.

⁵ For a list of his writings, see Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, Cairo, 269.

⁶ For al-Māturidī's views, see *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, ed. F. Kholeif, Beirut, 1970, 215f., 221f., 225f. *et passim*.

Abu'l-Hasan al-Ash'arī (d. 935), the founder of the school which was named after him, took an almost diametrically opposed stand on all the major ethical questions adumbrated by the Mu'tazilah. Thus on the question of the obligation, he denied that reason stipulates anything as morally or religiously necessary. The knowledge of God, for instance, may be attained (*taḥṣul*) through reason, but it becomes obligatory (*tajīb*) only through revelation. Similarly, gratitude, rewarding the pious and punishing the sinner are 'necessitated' through revelation, rather than through reason. For, as al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153), a subtle and erudite Ash'arite author, has put it: "Upon God nothing is rationally incumbent, neither the good nor the better, not even grace (*lutf*). For whatsoever is stipulated by reason as a matter of necessitating wisdom, can be countered by its contrary from a different standpoint."⁷ The very concept of obligation is not incumbent upon God insofar as it entails no advantage to Him or wards off any injury. Not that God is incapable of imparting every grace or advantage to mankind, but the ground of imparting it is not any abstract moral precept, such as the Mu'tazilite concept of divine justice and wisdom, but rather the unfettered and gratuitous benevolence (*ifḍāl, tafaddul*) of the Benefactor Who, as the Koran has put it, "shall not be questioned as to what He does, but they shall be questioned."⁸

We have in this account of obligation the complete reversal of the position of the Mu'tazilah to which al-Ash'arī had until his fortieth year actually subscribed. That this was the consensus of the Ash'arite school in the tenth and eleventh centuries may be inferred from the list of fundamental principles (*uṣūl*) accepted by the mass of Ash'arite theologians and set forth by an eminent Ash'arite authority of the eleventh century, 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 1037), in *al-Farq bayn al-Firaq*.

The actions of responsible agents are divided by al-Baghdādī into: (a) obligatory (*wājib*), (b) prohibited (*maḥẓūr*), (c) promulgated (*masnūn*), (d) bad (*makrūh*), and (e) permissible (*mubāḥ*).⁹ By obligatory we are to understand what God has commanded as a matter of necessity in such a way that its omission is a sin deserving of punishment. By prohibited, on the other hand, we are to understand what God has countermanded in such a way that its perpetration is likewise deserving of punishment. The promulgated action is in an intermediate position: whoever performs it will be rewarded, but whoever omits it will not be punished. The bad, on the other hand, is that action whose omission is rewarded whereas its per-

⁷ *Al-Milal*, I, 102.

⁸ Koran, 21:23 (trans. Arberry).

⁹ Cf. 'Abd al-Jabbār's list, *supra*, 32.

petration is left unpunished. Finally, the permissible is not an object of reward or punishment at all.¹⁰

The grounds for such an obligation, whether in the domain of speaking or acting, is God's command and prohibition. Had no command (*amr*) or prohibition (*nahy*) emanated from God, the human agent would have been liable to no obligation whatsoever, contrary to the contention of the Mu^ʿtazilah and the Barāhimah, who alleged that obligation is a matter of reasoning or deduction, accessible to man prior to the advent of revelation.¹¹

Al-Juwaynī (d. 1085), illustrious teacher of al-Ghazālī, confirms this account of al-Baghdādī. The only grounds of moral goodness or badness is, for him, revelation (*sam^ʿ*) and the religious law (*shar^ʿ*). For nothing is good in itself or bad in itself, because goodness and badness are neither generic nor essential qualities of the action. The good is what is commanded by the religious law, whereas the bad is what is proscribed.¹²

The claim of the Mu^ʿtazilah that goodness and badness, being essential characteristics of the action, can be rationally known is rejected by this Ash^ʿarite author, on the grounds that the presumption of intuitive certainty in the apprehension of good and evil is contradicted by the disagreement of vast numbers of people on the allegedly certain maxims of morality. Moreover, many actions deemed necessarily bad by the Mu^ʿtazilah, such as unrequited suffering, are attributed to God and consequently regarded as positively good; accordingly, the goodness of such actions cannot be an intrinsic quality intuitively and indubitably known through reason.¹³

The other Mu^ʿtazilite argument already discussed in the previous chapter,¹⁴ that the goodness and badness of certain actions is rationally known even to those who, like the Brahmins and the atheists, deny revelation altogether, is discounted by al-Juwaynī on the grounds that it rests on an equivocation. Those irreligious groups do not have a certain knowledge (*ʿilm*) of right and wrong, but only belief (*i^ʿtiqād*). Moreover, many actions regarded by them as evil, such as slaughtering animals and inflicting pain and hardship on them, are regarded as perfectly permissible by the majority of mankind.¹⁵

A related Mu^ʿtazilite argument, which has also been broached ear-

¹⁰ See al-Baghdādī, *al-Farq*, 337. Cf. *Uṣūl al Dīn*, 207f.

¹¹ *Al-Farq*, 338.

¹² Al-Juwaynī, *al-Irshād*, 148f.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁴ See *supra*, 34.

¹⁵ *Al-Irshād*, 151.

lier, is that reasonable men everywhere regard charity (*iḥsān*), rescuing the drowning and coming to the aid of the dying as good, injustice and aggression as evil, regardless of whether they have been stipulated by revelation or not. The goodness or badness of such actions is rooted in customary usage (*ʿādah*). It is refuted by al-Juwaynī on the grounds that many actions, such as allowing slaves to engage in debauchery, are reprehensible, whereas the lawgiver has permitted them.¹⁶

The second major line of reasoning adopted by al-Juwaynī in refuting the deontological position of the Muʿtazilah is the consideration of the connotation of the term obligatory (*wājib*). Obligatory, according to him, may mean what devolves as a duty either upon man or upon God. In the first instance, obligatory is synonymous with the rationally good, and the Ashʿarite strictures against the Muʿtazilite position on this score have already been examined. In the second, obligation, insofar as it involves the notion of constraint (*ijāb, ilzām*), is not applicable at all, since God is not liable to any constraint whatsoever. In addition, it involves a relationship of subordination between commander and subject, which does not apply to God, the 'Supreme Commander', either. Finally, insofar as it refers to actions whose omission may result in injury, obligation does not apply to God, the Being who is neither liable to injury or advantage, nor to pleasure or pain.¹⁷

In his major scholastic treatise, *Nihāyat al-Iqdām*, which marks in many ways the culmination of the scholastic Islamic tradition, al-Shahrastānī, a generation later, marshalls an array of even more sophisticated arguments to support the Ashʿarite position on the grounds of goodness and badness. Like al-Juwaynī, he denies that these two categories are intrinsic properties of acting, entailing *per se* reward or punishment, praise or reproach, respectively. The alleged certainty of these two moral concepts is to be distinguished from theoretical certainty. If we imagine a person born fully competent to understand and reason, but one who has not received any moral education of any kind, he will recognize at once the truth of the proposition that two is larger than one, but will suspend judgement on the proposition that lying is bad, or that it entails reproach from God. This clearly shows, according to al-Shahrastānī, that there is no analogy between theoretical and moral propositions.¹⁸ The definition of truth is conformity between the statement and the fact, whereas falsehood is their divergence. He who apprehends this conformity or divergence will recognize the truth or falsity of a statement, without apprehending its

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 156ff.

¹⁸ See *Nihāyat al-Iqdām*, ed. A. Guillaume, London, 1934, 391f.

goodness or badness. It follows that these two moral concepts do not form part of the essential attributes of the statement and are not necessarily conjoined to it. Hence some true assertions are blameworthy, such as informing on the movements of a fugitive prophet, and very often good and bad are predicated of actions, in accordance with conventions prevalent at a certain time or place, whereby people designate as bad what is harmful to them, and good what is profitable.¹⁹

An interesting variation on this "intuitionist" theory is attributed to the philosophers, by whom al-Shahrastānī obviously means the Neo-Platonists of the type of Ibn Sīnā. Those philosophers, he argues, divide being into absolute good, absolute evil and a mixture of both. The absolute good is identified by them with the desirable in itself, whereas the absolute evil is identified with the undesirable in itself, and the mixed type with the partly desirable, partly undesirable in itself. Now it is indubitable, according to them, that the desirable is morally good (*mustahsan*) and the undesirable is bad, 'sound human nature' calling us to choose the first and shun the second, regardless of whether it is prescribed by a lawgiver (*shāri'*) or not. Examples of the first type of actions are the virtues of temperance, generosity, courage and succor; examples of the second one, the corresponding vices.

Moreover, the perfection of man consists in fulfilling his intellectual and practical capabilities, by emulating God and the spiritual beings, according to the measure of human capacity. Religions have simply confirmed what reason has already discovered, rather than modify or alter it; these would have been unnecessary but for the deficiencies of individual reasons and their liability to error. Accordingly, divine wisdom has stipulated that religious ordinances and beliefs be laid down, so as to guide mankind to the modes of right living and inform them of the rewards and punishments meted out to them in the life-to-come, to insure thereby the preservation of their species and of the universal order of the world.²⁰

In his rebuttal, al-Shahrastānī observes that the philosophers' threefold division of being is contradicted by their well-known equation of being with goodness and non-being with evil. This twofold division, however, leaves undetermined the moral status of actions, which varies with varying relations and circumstances and cannot be known speculatively. Accordingly, the nature of obligation and the reward and punishment attached to it cannot be known either.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 373. Cf. al-Juwaynī, *al-Irshād*, 143.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 375. Cf. al-Shahrastānī's account of Ibn Sīnā's theory of good and evil and their moral implications, in *al-Milāl wa'l-Niḥāl*, II, 39f. and Ibn Sīnā, *Aḥwāl al-Nafs*, ed. A. F. al-Aḥwānī, Cairo, 1952, 127f.

Al-Shahrastānī further observes that the philosophers' theory of happiness and misery, predicated on the actualization of man's intellectual aptitudes, is shot through with difficulties. According to them, this actualization depends ultimately on the Necessary Being, who through the intermediary of the active intellect, fulfills the intellectual and moral nature of man and otherwise operates in the world. Individual intellects, argues al-Shahrastānī in rebuttal of this view, may elicit intuitively the first principles depending on them, but may not elicit the mode of their necessity or whether they are universally obligatory or not. Only the prophet assisted and inspired by God can. That is why we hold, he concludes, that the principles of knowledge are known through reason, but become obligatory through revelation only.²¹

What determines the validity of obligations in the Mu'tazilite view, as we have seen, is ultimately divine wisdom. The Mu'tazilah, according to this Ash'arite doctor, simply misunderstood the connotation of wisdom. By wisdom we should understand, he argues, "the occurrence of the action in accordance with the foreknowledge [of the agent], regardless of whether any interest or purpose is involved or not."²² God's actions are by definition wise, insofar as they invariably occur in accordance with His foreknowledge, and are conditioned by no other factor than His will. In fact, the whole concept of an obligation incumbent on God, or of a necessary desert (*istiḥqāq*) due to the creature, is entirely irrational; God, who has dispensed to mankind His infinite blessings is under no obligation to reward them, or even to create them in the first place.

Another argument may be advanced against the concept of an obligation rationally incumbent on God. Prior to revelation, reason could not discover the truth of the proposition that God is the author of those commands or prohibitions which constitute the substance of obligation (*taklīf*), since the attribute of commanding and prohibiting is not an essential attribute of God.²³ By this subtle argument, al-Shahrastānī appears to mean that, being relational attributes, commanding and prohibiting cannot be rationally predicated of God prior to the act of His commanding, through the intermediary of the Prophet, certain actions as lawful and prohibiting others as unlawful. Reason can establish at best the possibility (*jawāz*) of these attributes prior to the revelation of God's commands and prohibitions, but not their necessity.

²¹ *Nihāyat*, 391f.

²² *Ibid.*, 385.

²³ *Ibid.*, 385.

II. CAPACITY AND ACQUISITION (*KASB*)

The early Determinists (*Mujbirah*), as we have already mentioned, tended to rule out the role of the agent in human activity and to refer, probably in agreement with the general predestinarian sentiments of the public and the learned Traditionists, all activity to God. The Ash^ʿarite doctors were in sympathy with the substance of this Determinist view, but tried, on the one hand, to offer dialectical justification for it and, on the other hand, to reconcile it to the phenomenon of human responsibility. Accordingly, they rejected, as we are also told by al-Baghdādī, the two extreme theses of the *Mujbirah* and the *Mu^ʿtazilah*. By describing man as the 'creator' (*khāliq*) of his deeds, in the manner of late *Mu^ʿtazilite* authors,²⁴ the former had repudiated the uniqueness of God as sole Creator; the latter had repudiated His justice.²⁵ The Ash^ʿarites substituted for the determinism (*jabr*) of the first group and the libertarianism (*qadar*) of the second, the concept of acquisition (*kasb* or *iktisāb*), which became from the tenth century on the touchstone of orthodoxy in religious circles.

This elusive concept was given a certain measure of articulation by the Ash^ʿarite doctor al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013), probably for the first time. In his best-known work, *al-Tamhīd*, he brings out vividly the relation between the three foregoing cognate concepts. Is man capable (*muṣtafiʿ*) of earning (*kasb*) the credit for his action, he asks in the opening part of the chapter dealing with capacity (*istiṭāʿah*), and answers this question in the affirmative. He adds by way of amplification that man knows instinctively (*min nafsih*) the difference between voluntary actions, such as standing up or sitting, and involuntary actions, such as trembling or convulsion. He knows likewise that the two types of action do not differ in point of genus, place or will, but rather in point of the power created in him by God at the very moment of performing the voluntary action.²⁶

Although it may appear at first sight that acquisition (*kasb*) of the action is not really different from creating (*khalq*) it, and that accordingly the Ash^ʿarite position on the subject of free will or self-determination (*qadar*) is identical with that of their predecessors, the Determinists, further reflection reveals a commendable preoccupation on the part of the Ash^ʿarites with the problem of finding some ground for distinguishing between them, on the one hand, and restoring a measure of responsibility to the human agent, from which he had been completely robbed by the Determinists, on the other.

²⁴ See al-Juwaynī, *al-Irshād*, 106.

²⁵ Al-Baghdādī, *al-Farq*, 328.

²⁶ *Al-Tamhīd*, 286f.

In seeking to determine this ground, al-Shahrastānī, expounding and defending the methods of al-Ashʿarī and al-Bāqillānī on the subject of acquisition, reduces it to: (a) the mode or scope of the knowledge of the object by the Creator or agent, and (b) the type of relationship of the object to the agent. The Creator has an all-comprehending knowledge of His object, whereas the human agent has a determinate and circumscribed one; the former knows the object in every detail, the latter has no more than a general and potential knowledge of it only. In addition, the 'created power' by which man acts can bear on the object (*al-maqdūr*) in a particular way also. A power which can bear on the object in a universal way is competent to produce every kind of being. For in point of being or existence (*wujūd*), all accidents or substances are alike in depending on the Creator from whom their being is derived.²⁷

As to the mode of relationship of the action to the agent, al-Ashʿarī, we are told, had denied that the 'created power' has any effect on its object, either in point of being or its many determinations. Al-Bāqillānī, on the other hand, observing the already mentioned difference between voluntary and involuntary motions, attributed it to a condition extraneous to their being, which he designated as contingency (*ḥudūth*) or possibility (*imkān*). The action, he argued, admits of a variety of conceptual aspects, whether general, such as being or contingency, on the one hand, or particular, such as colour, motion or rest, on the other. In itself, the action possesses none of these attributes; they are all entirely derived from God, with the exception of contingency. Now as a particular and contingent event, such as writing or speaking, the action is in relation to a particular agent, who is the writer, speaker, etc. This particular agent is the acquirer (*al-muktasib*), as distinguished from the creator (*al-khāliq*). The power of the former can only have a specific relation to a certain type of object or accident, whereas the latter has a universal relationship to a single object, which is being (*al-wujūd*). That is why it can bear on the production of everything at all times, unlike the 'created power', which is thoroughly circumscribed by the conditions of space and time.²⁸

If we ask now whereto does the responsibility for the acquired action attach, the answer can only be to those aspects which depend on the 'created power' of the agent and are liable to change through his action, rather than to the original being, which depends, as we have seen, exclusively on the creative or 'eternal power'. Indeed, the 'created power' of the agent can never be independent of God, Who creates in him at every moment such power or capacity (*istiṭāʿah*) as is proportionate to the

²⁷ *Nihāyat*, 70f.

²⁸ *Nihāyat*, 72–6. Cf. al-Bāqillānī, *al-Tamhīd*, 303ff.

production of the intended action. The human agent is by himself entirely incapable of carrying out any of his own designs, for he lacks the properties of self-sufficiency and independence, which are the genuine marks of efficacy. He knows instinctively (*min nafsih*) the measure of his dependence and his need for assistance in whatever he does; that is why he calls constantly on God to accord him such assistance and succor.²⁹

III. JUSTICE AND INJUSTICE AS APPLIED TO GOD

Despite their dramatic insistence on the supremacy of divine power, the Ash^Āarites were unanimous, as al-Baghdādī has put it, that "even had God Almighty not imposed any obligation (*taklif*) on His servants, that would be perfectly just (. . .) They (i.e. the Ash^Āarites) also claimed that had He added to or subtracted from what He has imposed, that would be permissible, contrary to those Mu^Ātazilites who denied this. Likewise, had He refrained from creating the world, He would not thereby violate the precepts of wisdom (. . .) and had the Almighty created inanimate objects without creating the animate, that would be permissible too (. . .) To Him belongs the power to command and to prohibit, and the judgement; He does what He pleases and judges as He will."³⁰ The scope of God's power and will was so all-embracing that any limitation of this scope, in the name of His wisdom, would be a completely unwarranted repression (*hajr*). God's activities and decisions are not subject to any transcendental norms or precepts, other than the dictates of His will.

As one might expect, the major line of attack on the Mu^Ātazilite concept of a transcendental and objective system of duties and obligation, to which even the Almighty was subject by virtue of His wisdom and benevolence, was the linguistic line. One primary connotation of justice, argues this eminent Ash^Āarite, is that type of action one is empowered to do; the second connotation is that type of action which is in conformity with the divine command (*amr*). Contrariwise, injustice (*jawr*, *ẓulm*) denotes actions improperly done, or done in violation of God's command.³¹ It follows at once from this double definition that justice and injustice should be determined in terms of the relationship of the agent or his action to God, as Supreme Commander or Ruler, and that accordingly those two terms have no application to God whatsoever. In fact, what God does or decrees is by definition just; what he refrains from doing or prohibits is unjust. If accordingly it is asked whether it is permissible (*yajūz*) for God

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 87f.

³⁰ *Al-Farq*, 331f. Cf. *Uṣūl al-Dīn*, 145f.

³¹ See *Uṣūl al-Dīn*, 131f.

to torture children, order the beasts to be slaughtered and made to suffer, and to demand from His servants the intolerable (*mā lā yuṭāq*), without any reward or advantage accruing to them, we would answer, writes al-Bāqillānī: “Yes, for this would be just, if done by Him, and permissible (*jāʿiz*) and praiseworthy (*mustahsan*) as far as His wisdom goes.”³²

To justify this rigid voluntarism, it is enough, according to this Ashʿarite doctor, to recognize the fundamentally different grounds of right and wrong, as applied to our actions and those of God. The above-mentioned actions are regarded as evil or unjust, simply by virtue of their being prohibited by God; had He not prohibited them, they would not, if done by us, be evil. The grounds of goodness and badness are not rationally determined, otherwise all reasonable men would concur in recognizing those grounds, and particular actions would be good or bad to the extent they partake of the particular property of the reprehensible action.³³ God, being the “ruler and conqueror (*al-qāhir*) to Whom all things belong (. . .) and over Whom no commander (*āmīr*), who permits or prohibits, has any say,” it follows that His actions can never be decried as evil, by analogy to our actions.³⁴

Moreover, were the badness of the inflicting of suffering (*ilām*), without advantage or reward, evident *per se* (*li-nafsih*), its evil would be apprehended necessarily (*idtirāran*), but this is far from being the case. In the second place, the action in question would be universally bad, regardless of the agent, or the place in which the action occurs. Consider, however, the case of motion *per se* (*li-nafsihā*); it is motion wherever it occurs, and that (although this proviso is left out by al-Bāqillānī) regardless of the cause initiating it. The inflicting of unrequited pain would by analogy be evil even if committed by a beast, and this beast would be deserving of reprisal and would be designated a sinner (*fāsiq*). However, the general consensus of mankind (*al-ittifāq*) shows this to be false.³⁵

Significantly enough, al-Bāqillānī does not rule out rational deduction in substantiating this voluntarist thesis. If it is asked whether God, who is at liberty to act so ruthlessly in the world, can commit a falsehood (*kādhīb*), the answer would be no. However, it is not because such commission is morally reprehensible (*yustaqbaḥ minh*); but rather because the attribute truthful (*ṣādiq*) is one of the essential attributes of God and He cannot therefore without contradiction be said to lie. The case of commanding falsehood or sin is entirely different; were He to command them, they

³² *Al-Tamhīd*, 341.

³³ See *al-Tamhīd*, 341f. and 293f.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 342.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*

would no longer be sins, but would become instead acts of piety (*ṭā'ah*) deserving of praise, since it is not by virtue of its genus that, as has been repeatedly mentioned, an action is sinful, but rather of the divine prohibition. "In fact, God has commanded us to lie on certain occasions; a person who is in fear for his life in the country of the infidels (*dār al-ḥarb*) has been allowed to lie."³⁶

It is noteworthy, however, that the thesis that God could command (*ya'mur*) or will (*yurīd*) evil or sinful actions was not affirmed without qualification by all Ash'arite doctors. To mollify the impact of the predication of the power to command evil of God, some Ash'arite theologians, we are told by al-Juwaynī, resorted to various linguistic expedients. When asked whether God wills the evil of infidelity or sin, some of them refused to give a specific answer, confining themselves to the general proposition that God's will bears on all contingent events (*ḥawādith*) whether good or evil, useful or harmful, and avoiding thereby the presumption that whatever God wills. He actually commands or exhorts to.³⁷

Much more skillful is al-Shahrastānī's attempts to rationalize the voluntarist position of his school. It is necessary in speaking of the object in its relation to the will, he argues, to distinguish between what we might call its ontological status, on the one hand, and its moral or axiological status, on the other. All actions, insofar as they are contingent particular occurrences in the world, fall within the purview of God's all-comprehending will, and are ordered towards the universal good and order of the world, which is the 'pure good'. When God is spoken of as willing evil and disobedience, on the one hand, or goodness and righteousness, on the other, it should be clearly understood that He does not will all these things insofar as they are evil or good respectively, but rather insofar as they are events occurring in the world at specific times and according to certain specific determinations (*aqdār*). Only in relation to the acquisition (*kasb*) and capacity (*istiṭā'ah*) of the human agent, as we have seen in the previous section, are they designated as acts of obedience or disobedience, depending on whether they conform to the divine command or not. The divine will does not bear (*tata'allaq*), therefore, on sins insofar as they are sins, nor does the divine power bear on the actions of the agents insofar as they are his acquisitions, but only insofar as they are morally neutral occurrences in the world, so to speak.³⁸

In this subtle distinction between the action as a determinate occur-

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 344.

³⁷ See *al-Irshād*, 135f.

³⁸ See *Nihāyat al-Iqdām*, 255f. and 258f.

rence in the world, directly referable to God's will and power, on the one hand, and as a deed performed or acquired by the human agent, on the other, al-Shahrastānī succeeds in removing the linguistic sting from the crude assertion that God is the willer (*murīd*) of sins (*al-ma'āṣī*), without removing its moral sting. God, Who creates the action as a physical occurrence, and determines the relation of the human acquirer (*kāṣib*) to it, as well as the obligation incumbent on him to conform to the command by virtue of which it becomes morally binding, cannot surely be relieved of the ultimate responsibility for bringing it about in a particular way at the hand of a particular agent at a particular time or place.

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