

Chapter 4

Ibn Taymiyya's World

[M]ost of the great statements of political philosophy have been put forward in times of crisis; that is, when political phenomena are less effectively integrated by institutional forms.¹

Place yourself ... at the center of a man's philosophic vision and you [will] understand at once all the different things it makes him write or say. But keep outside, use your post-mortem method, try to build the philosophy up out of the single phrases, taking first one and then another and seeking to make them fit, and of course you fail. You crawl over the thing like a myopic ant over a building, tumbling into every microscopic crack or fissure, finding nothing but inconsistencies, and never suspecting that a center exists.²

The classical age and its intellectual syntheses were deeply disrupted in the sixth/twelfth and seventh/thirteenth centuries as the crusaders from the west and, much more devastatingly, the Mongols from the northeast shook the Muslim societies, shattering and rearranging their politics. This led to new emphases in Muslim thought ranging from ultraconservative and apocalyptic to self-critical. In a milieu of intense crisis and soul-searching, Ibn Taymiyya sought to profoundly reform Islamic society and politics.

Born in 661/1263 in the northern Syrian city of Ḥarrān five years after the destruction of Baghdad by the Mongols, Ibn Taymiyya lived more than two centuries after Ghazālī and one after Rāzī, in one of the most tumultuous periods of premodern Islamic history. The terror

¹ Wolin, *Politics*, 9.

² W. James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Longman, Greens and Co., 1909), 263.

and apparent invincibility of the Mongols, their killing of the Abbasid caliph, destruction of the center of the Islamic world, Baghdad, and the annexation of the entire eastern half of the Islamic world were traumatic beyond comprehension. The world seemed to be nearing its end, and many interpreted these events in apocalyptic terms.³ Ibn Taymiyya's impression of this tragedy was likely intensified as his own family was forced to flee from its native town, Ḥarrān, to escape the Mongol army that was then pushing northward into upper Syria. Even in Damascus, where Ibn Taymiyya's family took up residence, the Mongol threat continued to be felt for many years, and indeed, on four separate occasions, they launched direct attacks against the city. On at least three of these occasions, Ibn Taymiyya played a direct personal role by not only being involved as a soldier, but also using the full force of his charisma to help rally the local population as well as the scared and fleeing rulers and ulama to defend the city against the invaders.

The political and social upheavals were far from merely a product of the ulama's imagination. Besides the Mongols, there were wars, internal violence, famines, plagues and economic upheavals, which were of course not strange to the medieval world; "what was different [in the Mamluk period] was the perception that they now occurred in combination and with devastating affect [*sic.*] on Muslim society [and] led to a pervasive sense that the past was better than the present and that all things contemporary paled in comparison with the glories of the earlier history of Islam."⁴ The historical works of later-Mamluk-period historians like al-Maqrīzī, Ibn Taghri Birdi and Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī are rife with "a pessimistic criticism of the present and regret 'for the good old days'."⁵ In addition to these disasters that seemed to reflect divine displeasure, the failure of the wielders of power and religious authority seemed obvious:

Internally, the Mamluk state was extremely chaotic. The first half of the era, known as the Baḥrī period, lasted from 1260 to 1382. Over the course of little more than a century, the Sultunate had changed hands 24 times. The second half of the period was dominated by the violent rise of the Circassian Mamluks who saw the Sultanate change 27 times between 1382 and 1517. With each

³ As Richard Bulliet has reminded us in his *Islam: View from the Edge*, 6–10, to those away from the center (of orthodoxy as well as geography), the fate of Islam might not have looked quite as gloomy.

⁴ K. Jaques, *Authority, Conflict and the Transmission of Diversity in Medieval Islamic Law* (Brill, 2006), 1.

⁵ W. Popper, *Egypt and Syria under the Circassian Sultans: 1382–1468 A.D. Systematic Notes to Ibn Taghri Birdi's Chronicles of Egypt* (University of California Press, 1955), 8.

change of Sultan there would follow purges of political authority at all levels of administration. By the middle of the 9th/15th century these purges became extremely violent with mass executions and mutilations as new leaders sought to consolidate their control.⁶

The ulama, Mamluk historians inform us, were often “intimately involved” in the violent political games, “[s]liding with different contenders to the throne, [and they] frequently suffered punishments for falling in with defeated groups, losing wealth and suffering torture and sometimes even death.”⁷

Many leading influential jurists, like the prodigious Shāfiʿi jurist and *muḥaddith* of Damascus, Muḥyi al-Dīn al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277), had turned, in a self-critical vein, to their own profession as being a part of the problem. In the midst of the Mongol invasion, Nawawī wrote that legal standards had declined because of the incompetence of the contemporary jurists, in particular their “truly disqualifying lack of [historical and contextual] knowledge” in contrast with the *ḥadīth* scholars’ meticulous attention to the same.⁸ Perhaps it was in response to this that the *ṭabaqāt* (biographical) literature among the jurists emerged during the next few centuries.⁹ What is interesting for our purpose is that Nawawī’s diagnosis of the problem consisted of a technicality, a minutia, and the response, if we are to accept Jaques’ thesis, was the development of a technical genre of biographical literature. Furthermore, Nawawī’s presumption of the critical significance of jurists (*fuqahāʾ*) and their unquestionable position of religious and social leadership within the Muslim society are also noteworthy. Jurists, according to Nawawī, have “the exclusive right and ability to interpret the texts of revelation so that Muslims, common people and rulers alike, might know what God wants them to do in all walks of life.”¹⁰

Another type of response, even more common, was represented by the Shāfiʿi Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), an admirer and disciple of Ibn Taymiyya. Ibn Kathīr fundamentally understood the decline of the lands of Islam in apocalyptic terms. He blamed not only the corruption and infighting of the Muslim princes, but complained “even the jurists in Baghdad and

⁶ Jaques, 19.

⁷ Ibid. See also, Chamberlain, *Knowledge*, 94–6; C. Petry, *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton University Press, 1981), 206–9; Johansen, “A Perfect Law,” 260.

⁸ Jaques, 10.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 2.

Damascus were more concerned with their internal struggles for power than they were for the plight of the Muslim community.” When Baghdad was attacked and tens of thousands of Muslims were massacred by the Mongols, the leaders of the Muslims, including “court officials, ... judges, Sufis, members of the noble houses as well as commoners” fled the city or collaborated with the invaders, while the Caliph “occupied himself with the concubines.”¹¹ The significance of the Mongol onslaught served for Ibn Kathir to highlight the “decline of moral conditions and the failure of the scholars to act as guides for the community.”¹² The Muslim community was facing what the Israelites had faced according to the Qur’an: a divine censure of apocalyptic proportions, because just as the Israelites “had rebelled and killed many of the prophets and scholars (ulama),” so had Muslims treated the righteous among the ulama. It is not unlikely that Ibn Taymiyya’s persecution and eventual death in prison were a vivid demonstration of precisely this crisis in Ibn Kathir’s mind. For Ibn Kathir, his own time coincided with the end of time. He thought that “the Mongol attacks began a period of eschatological turmoil, and unless the community returns to obeying revelation and listens to those with knowledge (*ilm*), God will unleash apocalyptic destruction that will ultimately lead to the day of resurrection.”¹³

Resentment against the ulama for their responsibility for the state of the *umma* seems to have had wide currency among the populace and popular preachers. David Cook in his *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* observes that the failure of the ulama to guide the Community and set aside their own interests is a common theme in apocalyptic literature.¹⁴ The association of scholars with the rulers is also condemned – an attitude that became common since at least the beginning of the classical age. This criticism had been popularized by widely esteemed scholars like Ghazālī, and traditions attributed to the Prophet had long circulated to that effect. One such report has it: “The ulama are the guardians of Messengers ... [they are] faithful as long as they do not intermingle with the Sultan and (do not) have intercourse with the world. When they do so, they have betrayed the Messenger, and so be wary of them.”¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid., 5.

¹² Ibid., 6.

¹³ Ibid., 6–7.

¹⁴ D. Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Darwin Press, 2003), 250–1; Jacques, 8.

¹⁵ Jacques, 7, quoting an eighth-/fourteenth-century preacher al-Daylami, *Irshād al-qulūb fi’l-mawā’iz wa’l-ḥikam*; D. Cook, *Apocalyptic*, 248.

RATIONAL-REVELATIONAL CRITICISM AS
THE RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS

Ibn Taymiyya's recognition that his world was in crisis was not unique,¹⁶ but his understanding of it was, as was his approach to the solution. His diagnosis was neither of a technical nature like Nawawī's nor apocalyptic like that of most preachers and scholars. Rather, it was a total critique of the contemporary Muslim society, starting with its intellectual apparatus and social and political institutions. His criticism was directed at all segments of society, but in particular at the ulama and the rulers. He criticized the ulama not for associating with the rulers, but for failing to guide them properly while maintaining their integrity; not for lack of markers of piety, but for lack of proper balance; not for technical deficiencies that could be fixed by adding a new subfield to their curricula, but for a fundamental mismatch between the abstractions and formulations of their legal and theological systems and the spirit of the scripture they claimed to represent.

Although the Mongol onslaught and the general sociopolitical upheavals of his age are undeniable aspects of the context in which to understand Ibn Taymiyya's writing, he contended that the spiritual and intellectual corruption of the *umma* is far worse than its military defeats. Chastising, for instance, the proponents of the Neoplatonist Sufi doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, such as the Mercian theosophist Sufi Ibn 'Arabī (d. 637/1240), the antinomian Sufi Ibn Sab'īn (d. 669/1270),¹⁷ and their contemporary admirers for their antinomian and anti-*Shari'a* tendencies, he writes:

Opposing (by word and deed) these [proponents of *waḥdat al-wujūd*] is the greatest of religious obligations, for they have corrupted intellects and creeds of the people, including shaykhs [Sufis], scholars and rulers ... their harm is greater in religion than harm of the one who corrupts the worldly affairs of the Muslims but leaves their religion untouched such as the bandit or the Mongols who take away people's wealth but leave alone their religion.¹⁸

Despite a strong practical and activist bent that characterized his life and thought, he prioritized the reform of theology and theory over that of

¹⁶ Jacques, 3.

¹⁷ Ibn Sab'īn, an Andalusian antinomian and pantheistic Sufi, founder of the Sab'īniyya order. During his incarceration in Alexandria, Ibn Taymiyya debated and refuted Ibn Sab'īn's followers; this also motivated his composition of *al-Radd 'alā al-manṭiqiyyīn* (Leaman and Nasr, *History*, 347–9).

¹⁸ MF, 2:132; Maḥmūd, 870.

jurisprudence. Accordingly, although he considered jurisprudence and *ḥadīth* criticism to be the most genuine and organic of the Islamic sciences, his own proclivity toward theoretical sciences (*uṣūl*) is explicit. Engagement with purely rational sciences is indispensable in order to undo the influence of the corrupting intellectual trends, be they foreign or indigenous: “Were it not for that the propagators of such heresies have become dominant and spread in great numbers and become in the eyes of people respected leaders ... to the extent that they are deemed superior to the prophets ... we would have felt no need to show the falsity of these claims. But alas, error has no limit.”¹⁹

This preference is thrown into sharp relief in a conversation recorded by a disciple of his, Al-Ḥāfidh Muḥammad b. ‘Alī al-Bazzār (d. 749/1350). Bazzār poses the problem in these words: “He, God be pleased with him, wrote profusely in the matters of *uṣūl* (principles or theory) as opposed to the other sciences, so I inquired about that, beseeching him to write a text in jurisprudence (*fiqh*) that would include his preferred opinions, so that it may become a reference for jurisprudential verdicts.” Ibn Taymiyya’s response, he informs us, was something like this:

The sciences of the branches (that is, *fiqh*) are an easy matter, and [there is no harm] if a Muslim subscribes to one of the scholars who are followed, so long as it is not done despite the knowledge of that scholar’s error. As for the fundamental principles of religion (*uṣūl al-dīn*), I saw the people of heretical innovation, misguidance and desire, such as the philosophized (*mutafalsifa*), the Bāṭinis, the anti-religious (*malāhida*), the advocates of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, the atheists (*dahriyya*), the Qadariyya (who denied God’s power over human destiny), the Nuṣayris, the Jahmiyya, the Ḥulūlis (monists), *mu’aṭṭila* (deniers of divine attributes), the *mujassima* (anthropomorphists), the *mushabbihā* (those who liken God to His creatures), the Rāwandis,²⁰ the Kullābis, the Sulaymis, and others who possess heretical ideas become lost in error. It became clear to me that many of them intend to belie the sacred *Sharī‘a* of Muḥammad and the majority of them have led people to doubt the very foundations of their religion – such that rarely do I meet or see someone who adopts their opinions in lieu of adhering to the Book and the Sunna who has not thereby secretly reneged from his faith (*tazandaqa*) or lost certitude in his religion and creed....

¹⁹ MF, 2:357–8; Maḥmūd, 291.

²⁰ To the medieval ulama, the third-/ninth-century theologian Ibn al-Rāwandī was the arch-heretic. A philosophical freethinker of medieval Islam, he has been judged as merely a nonconformist by some modern scholars, like M. Fakhry and van Ess, and a radical freethinker and outright disbeliever by others. For the second viewpoint, see S. Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam: Ibn al-Rāwandī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, and their Impact on Islamic Thought* (Brill, 1999).

When I saw this, it became clear to me that it is incumbent upon everyone who can repel their doubts and lies and refute their arguments and errors, to do so, in the service of the right creed (*milla ḥanafīyya*) and the correct path.²¹

Ibn Taymiyya's "heretics" cannot be, and perhaps are not intended to be, mapped each to a historical group of people who had systematic doctrines that went by those labels. For instance, he applies the term *mutafalsifa* to those he disparages as following the ideas of Neoplatonist philosophers, often half-heartedly, either because of their lack of understanding or lack of courage to subscribe fully to the philosophical conclusions that defy scripture. Most of the other heretical tendencies listed here share, in his view, this problem of the half-hearted influence of *falsafa*; hence, they are all, in a sense, philosophized (*mutafalsifa*) but rarely were proper philosophers (*falāsifa*). This is not to say Ibn Taymiyya had a soft spot for proper philosophers, but he deems them more consistent within their own scheme, and hence more properly outside the pale of orthodoxy and even Islam.

Based on Ibn Taymiyya's response to a question from his fellow traditionalists (*ahl al-ḥadīth*) about whether they are the only "saved sect" in Islam, George Makdisi succinctly sums up Ibn Taymiyya's "mental map" of orthodoxy:

Ibn Taymiyya's conception of the Muslim community may be described by a series of concentric circles whose common center is marked by the Qur'an and tradition [Sunna]. Around this common center the various schools of theology are located, each of them arranged according to the degree of its 'orthodoxy'. The sole criterion of orthodoxy is the scripture supported by the *consensus of the Muslim community*.

In the first circle, inside all the others, the one which encloses the common center, we find the *salaf* [the early Muslims]. Then come the *ahl al-sunna wa 'l-ḥadīth*, who are follower of the Qur'an and the Tradition [*ḥadīth*] of the Prophet. Next come the Sufis. And after them the *ahl al-kalām*, proponents of rationalist theology. These latter are divided into two groups: the *ahl al-ithbāt* [lit. affirmers], and the *ahl an-nafy* [lit. deniers], also called *aṣ-ṣifātiyya* and *an-nufāt*, respectively. The former is composed of those rationalist theologians (*mutakallimūn*) who accept the divine attributes; the latter refers to the theologians who deny the attributes of God. The former [i.e., affirmers] are divided into three groups: the Ash'ariyya, the Kullābiyya, and the Karrāmiyya, while the second [deniers] are represented by the Mu'tazila. Next come the philosophers, the Khawārij and, finally, the Rāfiḍa [Imāmi Shī'a] who are farthest removed from the *salaf*. Only the Jahmiyya [a theoretical category; historically extinct] are outside the community,

²¹ Al-Bazzār, *al-A'lām al-'alīyya fī manāqib Ibn Taymiyya*, ed. Z. al-Shāwīsh (al-Maktab al-Islāmi, 1400), 35–7.

but they must be well-informed Jahmiyya, for there are some among the common people who are dupes of the theorists and consequently must not be condemned because of their ignorance.²²

Given the inclination of the traditionalist Sunnis (his camp) to use the well-known reports about “the saved sect” (*al-firqa al-nājiyya*) to justify the exclusivity of their own claim, the complexity of Ibn Taymiyya’s response is noteworthy.

To continue with Ibn Taymiyya’s response to al-Bazzār:

By God, I have not seen anyone writing in this manner and claiming high place but aiding the destruction of the foundations of Islam by his discourse. The reason for that is neglecting the clear and open truth and what the noble messengers have brought from God and following the ways of philosophy that they have claimed to be wisdom (*ḥikamiyyāt*) and rational truths (*‘aqliyyāt*), but in truth it is nothing but ignorance and error. Such a person’s adherence to [this philosophy] overwhelms him as to cover up his sound reason until he is blinded and unable to differentiate between truth and falsehood.... These are the considerations that made it incumbent upon me to direct my foremost concerns to the sciences of principles (*uṣūl*) and made me attend to their statements and respond to them with what God the Exalted has bestowed upon me of answers, be they from reason or revelation.²³

Naturally, the more conservative traditionalists did not appreciate his deep involvement with reason and philosophical questions or his nuanced approach to questions of doctrine, and considered him to have been poisoned by philosophy. Al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) writes:

[Some] groups, among the imams of the traditionalists, those of them who knew the Qur’an by heart and their jurists, loved the Shaykh and revered him. They however did not like his deep involvement (*tawaghghul*) with the *kalām* theologians and the philosophers, [preferring that he avoided it] just as it had been avoided by the earlier imams of traditionalists, like al-Shāfi‘ī, Aḥmad [b. Ḥanbal], Ishāq [b. Rāhawayh], Abū ‘Ubayd [al-Qasim b. Sallām] and their like. Likewise, many scholars, among the jurists, the traditionalists and the virtuous, hated his dedication (*tafarrud*) to some odd questions which the Ancients (*salaf*) had disapproved of.²⁴

Ibn Taymiyya’s commitment to reason was no light matter, however. In contrast with Ghazālī’s claim that the *salaf* detested rational argument and proceeded from scriptural dogma to the sword and the whip as means

²² Makdisi, “Ḥanbalī Islam,” 257–8 (italics and comments within the square brackets are mine).

²³ Bazzār, *A‘lām*, 37.

²⁴ Ibn Rajab, *Dhayl*, 2:394; Michot, “Mamluk Theologian,” I, 166n39.

to persuade, Ibn Taymiyya expanded much effort in refuting this impression. The *salaf*, according to him, not only permitted rational argument in refutation of erroneous ideas, but indeed engaged in such endeavors themselves. They had disapproved only of the invalid ways of argument and the premises of *kalām* but not of responding to the errant ideas by means of valid arguments based on reason as well as revelation. Later Sunnis – both the traditionalists (*ahl al-ḥadīth*) and the theologians – had misunderstood the way of the *salaf*. The theologians had erred not by engaging in rational argument, but by doing so with insufficient knowledge of both the position they defended and the one they refuted. The traditionalists had claimed that the *salaf* avoided rational engagement altogether because rational engagement was prohibited in itself, whereas the masters of *kalām*, like Juwaynī and Ghazālī, lacking firsthand and in-depth knowledge of the *salaf*'s teachings, had taken the traditionalist claim on its face value and had ascribed the revered *salaf*'s supposed anti-rationalism to their excessive piety and exaggerated fear of reason.²⁵

Toward his fellow traditionalists, he directs the argument that to refute rational objections to revelation is like providing medicine to one who is sick, and to such a person, sound and necessary nutrition – namely revelational knowledge – brings no benefit because his body, his rational apparatus, has been corrupted. To keep repeating an argument based on revelation before someone who thinks that reason definitively affirms its contrary is going to bring only harm, for such conduct will make an intellectually sick person believe that revelation is flawed.²⁶ Nevertheless, while seeking to strike a balance between those who defended rational theology and those who rejected it, Ibn Taymiyya reserved his fiercer criticism for the *mutakallimūn*, for, in his view anyway, the simplistic anti-rationalism of the traditionalists had done less harm compared to the intellectual and spiritual havoc wreaked by flawed rational discourse.

A Nonlegalistic Jurist, an Anti-*kalām* Theologian

He was a Ḥanbali by heritage and initial training, and thus his commitment to the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet followed by “the way of the *salaf*” was nothing new. But his engagement with the range of intellectual trends and problems of the age along with a critical historical awareness of early Islamic history gave him a vantage point of his own. Furthermore, his

²⁵ *Dar'(S)*, 7:149f.

²⁶ *Dar'(S)*, 1:44.

commitment to the Qur'an was also extraordinary²⁷ and his approach to *ḥadīth* far more nuanced than that of his fellow traditionalists.²⁸ These foundations explain his independent mind and chastening of many prominent Ḥanbalis, occasional disagreement with the revered Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal himself,²⁹ his defense of many non-Ḥanbalis, in particular the Ash'aris, against their indiscriminate condemnation by his fellow Ḥanbalis, his insistence, even against traditionalist resistance, to engage in rational argument, and his myriad reform attempts in legal theory and practice. To say that he had transcended the Ḥanbali school and entered the realm of independent *ijtihād*, as it is often said, does not quite capture it.³⁰ His influence went far beyond Ḥanbalism. Every aspect of the classical Islamic tradition, it is no exaggeration to suggest, was either transformed or profoundly challenged by his intervention.³¹

Modern scholars have frequently asserted numerous influences on Ibn Taymiyya. Goldziher suggested that he was fundamentally influenced by the great Andalusian Zāhiri theologian and jurist, Ibn Ḥazm (d. 465/1064)³² and Laoust that his fiercely independent and egalitarian thought (in particular his political thought and alleged rejection of the idea of the caliphate) was indebted to Khārijī influence. More recently, Michot, perhaps the most perceptive and sustained modern reader of Ibn Taymiyya's philosophical

²⁷ W. Saleh, "Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics: An Analysis of *An Introduction to the Foundations of Qur'anic Exegesis*," in Rapoport and Ahmad, where Saleh considers Ibn Taymiyya's a major intervention and a turning point in the history of exegesis.

²⁸ His commitment to *ḥadīth* is not simplistic as that of many fellow traditionalists, but holistic, as being one of many ways of determining the Sunna, aware of the need to ferret out the "raw" material of *ḥadīth* through both isnād and content criticism. His generous appreciation of the early Mālikite school, despite the latter's critical attitude toward isolated *ḥadīth* in favor of anonymous but less corruptible "Sunna" in the form of Medinan practice ('*amal*'), borders on undermining Ḥanbalism and exceeds any praise by him of the Ḥanbalis as a group that I have come across (MF, 20:294).

²⁹ Cook, *Commanding*, 157.

³⁰ For a recent, brief but insightful, appraisal of his legal scholarship, see Y. Rapoport, "Ibn Taymiyya's Radical Legal Thought: Rationalism, Pluralism and the Primacy of Intention," in Rapoport and Ahmed, *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, 191–221.

³¹ He criticized many Ḥanbali masters both in theology and law (A. H. Matroudi, *The Hanbali School of Law and Ibn Taymiyyah: Conflict or Conciliation?* [Routledge, 2006], 92–108).

³² Among the more able scholars on the subject was Goldziher, who thought Ibn Taymiyya to have been under the influence primarily of the scholar he worked on, Ibn Ḥazm. To a lesser degree, he was thought by Goldziher to have been under the influence of al-Ghazālī, although he was considered poles apart from the latter because of his opposition to Sufism, proclivity for literalism, and general exclusivism and intolerance as compared to Ghazālī's more embracing inclusivism (Rosenthal, 245n84).

thought, has nonetheless insisted that Ibn Taymiyya was indebted in some fundamental way to Ibn Sinā.³³ But for a thinker who was as widely read and engaged as Ibn Taymiyya, the simple claim of influence loses any analytical utility unless the influence can be shown to be persistent and systemic, a test that none of the preceding suggestions passes. The sheer number of issues, both in theology and law, in which Ibn Taymiyya took an unpopular and at times entirely unique position is a testament to his fierce intellectual independence. Some modern scholars even characterize him as “philosopher of the first order,”³⁴ one concluding that:

Ibn Taymiyya's stance towards all of the Islamic intellectual trends, be it *kalām*, philosophy, or Sufism, was that of (critical) acceptance and refutation; a superficial reading of his vehement attacks against each of these trends at first suggests that he categorically rejected them all, but a careful and surgical investigation demonstrates invariably that Ibn Taymiyya benefited intellectually to the maximum possible extent from each of these.³⁵

If we are to recognize resemblance in content and direction, the scholars whose tradition Ibn Taymiyya continues are the philosophized Ash'arites like Ghazālī and Rāzī; this may sound odd given his fierce critiques of these two. Intellectually, however, there is no better way to describe less space between the two words his project than as a continuation of the project they left behind, of harmonizing reason and revelation to provide a stable foundation for belief and action. In contrast with Ghazālī and Rāzī, however, whose synthetic impulse had taken them to the ends of the available philosophical systems of their day and back, his deconstructive project took this end as its point of departure. He was far from being a system builder; in this lay his greatest strength as well as the limit of all his thought. As Wael Hallaq has observed in his study of Ibn Taymiyya's refutation of Greek syllogism, he had a knack for recognizing the essence of an argument, the foundational premise that animated a discourse, and then he persistently attacked it from all possible angles without being distracted by myriad subsidiary issues hiding it or centuries of imposing authority underpinning it.³⁶

He was also, it is less often recognized, an exceptional student of early Islamic history and conflicts and had an uncanny ability – exceptional even in his day of prodigious memorizers – to draw on an astounding variety of references from not only the opinions of the *salaf*, but also the

³³ Michot, “Mamlūk Theologian,” I, 156–7.

³⁴ ‘Abd al-akīm al-Ajhar, *Ibn Taymiyya wa isti'nāf al-qawl al-falsafi fi'l Islām* (al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-‘Arabi, 2004), 24.

³⁵ Ibid., 235.

³⁶ Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya*, xiv.

myriad “heterodox” sects of Islamic history, thus making his points by adeptly pitting his foes against each other. In contrast with most scholars of his age, Laoust notes, he “went directly to the primary sources themselves which he read and studied carefully.”³⁷ Accordingly, even as he rejected the methodological presuppositions of *kalām*, he devoted himself to a serious study of it and had a surpassing mastery over it.³⁸

One result of Ibn Taymiyya’s wide intellectual and practical engagement and independence of thinking was his rejection of blind following (*taqlīd*). But *taqlīd*, in his view, was not an issue particular to Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) as often understood, nor was the jurisprudential *taqlīd* the most serious threat to the well-being of Muslims. Rather, *taqlīd* is a psychological human proclivity whose worst consequences manifested themselves among intellectuals rather than the commoners. In legal matters, he does not reject the justified following of a trusted juristic authority by an unqualified or less qualified person. Legal *taqlīd* was blameworthy when qualified scholars refused to see the truth of the argument of an opponent or another school out of ego, prejudice for an authority, or school loyalty. However, in a society where communal life and personal identities were so entrenched in legal loyalties, even this moderate critique of *taqlīd* as an institution had profound and disruptive repercussions.³⁹

But the *taqlīd* that Ibn Taymiyya criticized most vehemently was that of those who prided themselves in intellectual speculation, namely the philosophized (*mutafalsifa*, which was his derogatory designation for those who blindly followed the trendy philosophical opinions without understanding them) and *kalām* scholars. Blind following of established authority was to him the reason why many Muslim scholars had put

³⁷ Laoust, *Essai*, 93–100.

³⁸ Laoust, *Essai*, 89–93; see also, idem, *EP*², s.v., “*Ibn Taimiyya*.”

³⁹ His views on *taqlīd* are spread throughout his writings and are quite complex. The absolutely prohibited *taqlīd* is to deny the truth of God or a true prophet for custom or partisanship (in matters of creed), or for anyone to follow another despite contradicting clear evidence from the Qur’an or the Sunna (MF, 20:15; 19:260). In legal matters, it is permissible for a nonexpert and even a scholar (*muftahid*) if he lacks the opportunity or capacity to judge various opinions on his own (19:261). The majority of scholars of Islam correctly hold, in his view, that both *taqlīd* and *ijtihād* are permissible generally, each becoming permissible or impermissible based on factors of capacity, effort, and intention (20:204). Where Ibn Taymiyya differs with a rival trend, *madhhabism*, that had arisen since the consolidation of schools in sixth/twelfth century is the strict discipline of belonging to a single legal school in all matters and systemic rejection of any contrary evidence (33:128). His strongest censure of *taqlīd* (legal or otherwise) is when it becomes blind following of a human authority against clear evidence from revelation (22:248–9).

masters like Ghazālī and Rāzī on a pedestal of unquestionable orthodoxy in *kalām*, the likes of Ibn 'Arabī in Sufism, and Greek philosophers like Aristotle and Plato in philosophy. He included in blameworthy *taqlīd* even blind following of the *salaf*, in particular the four Sunni Imams of jurisprudence, of whom he otherwise thought quite highly. This type of following leads the followers to endorse inherited opinions without fully investigating them and even when they find inconsistencies or errors to explain them away as being the result of some higher wisdom rather than honestly acknowledging them. He writes:

You will find that the followers of Aristotle follow his teachings in logic, physics and theology, even as many of them arrive by their own reasoning at the opposite of his position. But because of their reverent opinion of the philosopher, they do not dare express their opposition or attribute the contradiction to their own lack of comprehension of the problem.... Indeed, this attitude is found even among the followers of the great imams of jurisprudence and of imams of piety and worship, such as the companions of Abū Ḥanīfa, al-Shāfi'ī, Mālik, Aḥmad and others. They would at times notice something that they deem invalid in the teachings [of their imams], but they fall short of expressing their opposition, believing that their imam is greater in perfection of reason, knowledge and religion than them, while knowing full well that no imam is infallible and quite likely to make mistakes.⁴⁰

With this understanding of human psychology, which makes people impressed more with authority than reason, Ibn Taymiyya sought to engage with and dislodge the masters of a discourse rather than criticize their less independent followers, who would have made much easier targets. Commenting on this method, he writes:

I have been amazed by what I have observed in this regard. Rarely do I come across a rational argument by a sect that opposes revelation and whose invalidity has become clear to me but that I also find that some of the masters of that sect have already acknowledged the invalidity of that argument and elaborated on it. That is so because God has created His servants upon the *fiṭra* (natural constitution), and sound intellects are naturally inclined (*maftūra*) to recognizing the truth (*ma'rifat al-ḥaqq*) were it not for certain obstacles.

Human nature and proper reason are capable of recognizing the truth, or at least certain truths, were it not for irrational obstacles such as excessive reverence of authorities and lack of confidence, courage, or integrity to recognize and express dissent. To persuade the many blind followers of his time, he had to dismantle the authorities of the past, "for the majority

⁴⁰ *Dar'(S)*, 1:151–5.

of these groups, despite their claims to rational independence, are blind followers of their masters. When they see that their highest authorities mutually disagree and acknowledge the truth, their knots of blind following are loosened.”⁴¹

There is yet another reason to engage with the present and past heresies; often they are not devoid of all truth, but only of proper balance. One persistent theme in Ibn Taymiyya’s writings is that of the golden mean – that truth is the middle path that is often missed by partisans who only see part of it. “Though the content of his doctrinal system was derived essentially from the Qur’an and the Sunna,” observes Swartz in his commentary on Ibn Taymiyya’s *al-‘Aqīda al-Wāsiṭiyya*, “the spirit and direction of his thought were to a large degree shaped by the concept of *wasat*, the happy or golden mean.”⁴² This does not mean, Swartz explains, that to Ibn Taymiyya truth always lies between two opposing extremes. Rather,

the concept of *wasat* carries with it the conviction that truth is a whole or totality. Defined in these terms, then, *wasat* means that doctrinal error or heresy results when one element of the truth is elevated to the level of the whole, so that the integrity and dialectical tension that ought to exist between the parts of the whole are destroyed. Heresy, then, is not so much outright falsehood or error as it is a partial and fragmented truth.⁴³

Rather than rejectionist or intolerant, his was a refined understanding of the human intellectual enterprise reflected in his serious engagement with even those positions in Islamic history that had been long condemned as misguided.

Personal Charisma and Activism

If one browses through the biographies of medieval scholars, the image of the typical scholar is that of a schoolman, a jurist, a theologian, a conservative figure who served the authorities as a civil servant, or fled in pious evasion. The typical member of the civilian elite to which the ulama belonged was not an activist, a warrior, or a popular reformer. Ibn Taymiyya was different.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Ibid., 1:376–7.

⁴² Swartz, 115–6.

⁴³ Ibid., 95–6.

⁴⁴ See H. Q. Murad, “Ibn Taymiyya on Trial: A Narrative Account of his *Miḥan*,” *Islamic Studies* 18 (1979): 1–32; S. Jackson, “Ibn Taymiyyah on Trial in Damascus,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* (1994): 41–85.

The first thing that set him apart from his contemporaries, much more palpable than his intellectual ingenuity, was his extraordinary personality and persona, heroic piety, asceticism, reformist activism, and single-minded all-out defense of what he believed to be the truth. His rivals among the ulama charged him with heresy and tried to have him executed and succeeded in having him exiled more than once, even while acknowledging these virtues. Donald Little, in his provocatively titled article, "Did Ibn Taymiyya Have a Screw Loose?" observed that Ibn Taymiyya "must have been an exceptional person to evoke such universal respect."⁴⁵ Even his adversaries, numerous as they were, betrayed a sense of reverence for his learning, piety, and asceticism. Ibn Makh'lūf (d. 718/1318), the Mālikī chief *qāḍī* of Egypt, who had been largely responsible for Ibn Taymiyya's early trials and tribulations in Egypt, reportedly conceded that "[t]here is no one more righteous than Ibn Taymiyya; we should abandon our struggle against him."⁴⁶ Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 756/1355), an indefatigable defender of Ash'arism, is reported to have confided the following to al-Dhahabī:

As for what you say in regard al-Shaykh Taqī al-Dīn [Ibn Taymiyya], I am convinced of the great scope, the ocean-like fullness and vastness of his knowledge of the transmitted and intellectual sciences, his extreme intelligence, his exertions and his attainments, all of which surpass description. I have always held this opinion. Personally, my admiration is even greater for the asceticism, piety and religiosity with which God has endowed him, for his selfless championship of the truth, his adherence to the path of our forebears, his pursuit of perfection, the wonder of his example, unrivalled in our time and in times past.⁴⁷

These statements are all the more weighty because al-Dhahabī was far from an uncritical admirer of Ibn Taymiyya and al-Subkī was Ibn Taymiyya's avowed intellectual foe.⁴⁸ His biographers consistently mention his detachment from "his worldly surroundings," his "complete absorption in his religious cause," and his "indifference to the various forms of punishment which might be inflicted upon him."⁴⁹ He famously

⁴⁵ D. Little, "Did Ibn Taymiyya Have a Screw Loose?" *SI* 41 (1975): 99.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 99–100.

⁴⁸ C. Bori, *Ibn Taymiyya: una vita esemplare. Analisi delle fonti classiche della sua biografia* (Supplemento no. 1 alle Rivista degli Studi orientali, vol. LXXVI. Istituti editoriali e poligrafici internazionali, 2003), 142–8 and 191–4; and summarized in *idem*, "A New Source for the Biography of Ibn Taymiyya," *BSOAS* 67 (2004): 321–48, 327.

⁴⁹ Little, "Did Ibn Taymiyya," 106.

said when given the news of his house arrest, “What can my enemies do to me? My Garden is in my heart; wherever I go, it goes with me. My imprisonment is solitary (worship of God)! My death is martyrdom! My banishment is a journey (across God’s earth – reference to a Qur’anic verse!)”⁵⁰

Similarly revealing and intense are his most influential disciple Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya’s discussion of his spiritual insights and devotion.⁵¹ What his doting admirers like Ibn al-Qayyim took to be his remarkable godliness, resolve, and willpower were seen by his foes as marks of his “pride, impetuosity, obstinacy, intolerance, and tactlessness.”⁵² His contemporaries, nonetheless, consistently tell us of his incredible clemency toward his detractors, including those jurists and judges who had campaigned to have him executed.⁵³

He was a relentless activist who engaged in social reform, even vigilante dispensation of justice and moral policing, which he did with his group of devoted fellow scholars and students. He was also exceptionally well informed about his political and social world.⁵⁴ Swartz aptly sums up Ibn Taymiyya’s exceptional breadth of practical as well as theoretical knowledge: “It is not going too far to say that Ibn Taymiyya was one of the best informed men of his time. Though he was a staunch defender of Sunni traditionalism, this firm attachment did not prevent his thought from being influenced in important ways by the rationalist theologians, philosophers and sectarian thinkers.”⁵⁵

Whereas Ibn Taymiyya doubtless shared with Ghazālī the project of the reform of Muslim thought and spirituality, his attitude toward reason and politics is as far as it could be from Ghazālī’s attitude of “eating carrion.” Instead, one finds Ibn Taymiyya persistently and optimistically engaged with the political, intellectual, and spiritual problems of the day

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ See Anjum, “Sufism.”

⁵² Little, “Did Ibn Taymiyya,” 107.

⁵³ His last epistle from the prison where he died declares his forgiveness for all his enemies and goes on to say, “If a man could be thanked for his evil deeds, I would have thanked all those responsible for [my trial and imprisonment]” (MF, 28:55).

⁵⁴ As noted earlier, Ibn Taymiyya’s leading part in defending Syria against the Mongols won him great fame and influence in Syria and generally. Ibn Taymiyya provided legal basis for fighting against them and charged that they were conspiring with the crusaders against Muslims (Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāya wa’l-nihāya*, ed. ‘Alī Shīrī [Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1408/1988], 14:24). Recent studies, incidentally, confirm this charge: R. Amitai-Preiss, “Mongol, Imperial Ideology and the Ilkhānid War,” in *The Mongol Empire and Its Legacy*, ed. idem (Brill, 1999), 58–60.

⁵⁵ Swartz, 95.

with the conviction that they can be resolved or reformed in the light of reason and revelation.⁵⁶ The flip side of his activist scholarship is reflected in the sharp and quick tone of his writings, laced with declarations of deviation and misguidance of his opponents. Even when engaged in involved deconstruction of a most recondite discourse, he did not lose sight of his role as a preacher, a teacher, and a spiritual guide, supremely concerned to alert his readers of the error of these doctrines and their consequences.

IBN TAYMIYYA AND ASH'ARISM: CONSTRUCTION AND CRITICISM

Truth often being a complex balancing act, adherence to it was seen by Ibn Taymiyya as a relative matter rather than a sharp dichotomy. His stance toward Ash'arism was a manifestation of this general attitude: "The discourses of [the Ash'aris] contain sound arguments and that are in agreement with the Sunna, the Community and *ḥadīth*, and they are in fact to be counted from amongst the *Ahl al-Sunna wa'l-Jamā'a* relative to the likes of the Mu'tazila, the Rāfiḍis and others."⁵⁷ He frequently acknowledged the merits of the Ash'aris and defended them against their more vitriolic opponents from both among the traditionalists and rationalists.⁵⁸ The great Ḥanbali Sufi Abū Ismā'īl al-Anṣārī al-Harawī (d. 481/1089), the author of *Dhamm al-kalām* (Censure of *kalām*), had vehemently censured the Ash'aris as being no better than the hated opponents of Sunna, the Jahmiyya, and the Mu'tazila. Defending the Ash'aris against this charge, Ibn Taymiyya wrote that al-Harawī "has exaggerated his censure of the Ash'aris, for in fact they are the closest of the groups to the Sunna."⁵⁹ He acknowledged their contribution in defending the truth (Sunni orthodoxy). He mentions in particular the role of the vizier Niẓām al-Mulk and scholars in his entourage like Juwaynī and Ghazālī who in the wake of the Rāfiḍi and Qarmaṭi threats ... established the Sunna, refuted their heresies, and for that the Community duly reveres and honors them."⁶⁰ Saladin, a staunch Ash'arī, is praised as the champion of the

⁵⁶ Jon Hoover's *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism* (Brill, 2007) points out Ibn Taymiyya's optimism in the domain of divine justice. I seek to point out the political optimism that characterized his entire intellectual and practical career.

⁵⁷ Ibn Taymiyya, *Naqd al-ta'sīs*, 2:87, quoted in Maḥmūd, 727.

⁵⁸ MF, 6:55; See also, MF, 12:32–3; *Dar'(S)*, 6:292; and *Mantiḡiyyīn*, 142–3.

⁵⁹ MF, 8:230.

⁶⁰ MF, 4:18.

Sunna because of his defeat of the Fāṭimids in Egypt.⁶¹ Furthermore, he writes: “There is not one among the [the early Ash‘arī masters] who has not made much appreciated contribution deserving of divine reward in refuting the heretics and enemies of religion and support of religion and the people of the Sunna in a way that is not hidden from anyone who known of them and speaks of them with knowledge, truth and fairness.”⁶² He writes that the Ash‘arīs “sometimes erred and exaggerated in their reaction to the Mu‘tazila, but that can be likened to an army that fights the enemy and in the process commits mistakes and transgressions.”⁶³ Indeed, in a remarkably fair and nonpartisan vein, he comments that some of the early Ash‘arīs were closer to the original position of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal and the *salaf* than some of the Ḥanbalis who had engaged in *kalām*, “such as Ibn ‘Aqīl, Ṣadaqa b. al-Husain, Ibn al-Jawzī and others.”⁶⁴ His praise of Bāqillānī is particularly generous, and he considers him the ablest of *kalām* scholars among the early Ash‘arīs and second only to al-Ash‘arī himself in his closeness to the early Muslims’ positions.⁶⁵ Yet, despite their best intentions to defend the Sunni orthodoxy by using the intellectual arguments of *kalām*, they inadvertently accepted the fundamental premises of their opponents, the Mu‘tazila, while rejecting their corollaries in subsidiary issues:

But this principle [namely, the denial of divine temporality], which they had accepted from the Mu‘tazila, confused them. Being learned and intelligent scholars, they needed to respond to it and [in that attempt, they] accepted its premises and corollaries, and that led them to positions which the leaders of religion and knowledge disapproved, and people became divided into extremes regarding them.... Moderation, however, is always the best course.⁶⁶

Against the allegation, reported by al-Sijzī that “al-Ash‘arī had embraced the Mu‘tazili school for [the first] forty years [of his life], then he repented, but [in fact] he reverted only on subsidiary issues (*furū‘*) and stayed on the [Mu‘tazili] fundamentals (*uṣūl*),”⁶⁷ Ibn Taymiyya is at pains to argue that, after his conversion, al-Ash‘arī indeed conformed to all of the traditionalist positions and sincerely sought to refute all the positions of the Mu‘tazila,

⁶¹ MF, 3:281.

⁶² *Dar‘(S)*, 2:102.

⁶³ *Minhāj*, 1:313.

⁶⁴ *Dar‘(S)*, 1:270.

⁶⁵ *Dar‘(S)*, 5:98.

⁶⁶ *Dar‘(S)*, 2:101–2.

⁶⁷ In *Dar‘(S)*, 7:236, Ibn Taymiyya reports this opinion as cited the Shāfi‘ī Abū Nasr al-Sijzī’s (d. 444) *al-Ibāna*, who in turn reports it from a Mālikī jurist Abū Sa‘īd al-Barqī.

fundamental or subsidiary, that he understood as having been rejected by the traditionalist imams.⁶⁸ His evaluation of the Ash'ari school is significantly more nuanced, in fact, than even the early Orientalists' who were sympathetic to Ash'arism, such as Goldziher, who criticized al-Ash'ari for having capitulated to Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's doctrine, and insisted that "one must not credit him with something which belongs to the Ash'aris of the fifth/eleventh century if one is to remain within the real world."⁶⁹

Turning now to substantive issues in Ibn Taymiyya's critique of Ash'ari *kalām*, let us recall that the latter had been a response to two major problems that were posed to the traditionalists by various rationalist theologians: the problem of the nature of divine being and attributes and that of human responsibility. The Ash'aris had resolved the problem of theodicy by privileging God's omnipotence over justice (thus embracing an extreme form of voluntarism against Mu'tazili intellectualism), and thus having to undermine human free will and, by corollary, ethical capacity or responsibility (although, as shown later in the chapter, given the primacy of law in Islam, this doctrine was never straightforward, varied overtime, and was often limited to theological polemics). The specific Ash'ari doctrines that Ibn Taymiyya criticized lay primarily in the domains of theology and ethics⁷⁰ and had implications in the domain of law and politics: (1) the problem of the obligation of *naẓar*, rational speculation about God, upon every believer.⁷¹ (2) The method of "temporality of bodies" (*ṭarīq ḥudūth al-ajsām*) as the means to prove the existence of a Creator. (3) Negation (or metaphorical interpretation) of some of the divine attributes affirmed in scripture, namely other than the seven attributes that, according to the Ash'aris, could be rationally known. These were: life (*ḥayāt*), power (*qudra*), will (*irāda*), knowledge (*ilm*), sight (*baṣar*), hearing (*sam'*), and speech (*kalām*).⁷² The first four (life, power, will, knowledge) are taken to be attributes known by reason, while the last three (sight, hearing, speech) are considered to be accessible only through revelation (*sam' iyyāt*). (4) Primacy of reason over revelation in case when a contradiction is perceived, namely the *qānūn* discussed

⁶⁸ *Dar'(S)*, 7:236–8; Maḥmūd, 836.

⁶⁹ Makdisi, "Ḥanbali Islam," 224.

⁷⁰ Maḥmūd, 803.

⁷¹ Ibn Taymiyya, *Dar'(S)*, 8:348–358, notes that Juwayni, Ghazālī, Rāzī, and the Ḥanbalis Abū Ya'lā al-Farrā' and Ibn 'Aqil all first held to the obligation of *naẓar* and then later retracted their opinions.

⁷² *EP*², s.v., "Allāh" (L. Gardet). For Ghazālī's presentation and defense of these in a summary form, see *Iḥyā'*, 1:121–3.

earlier. (5) Extreme emphasis on predestination and voluntarism so as to effectively (but not consistently) deny human agency in the moral world and causality in the natural world.⁷³ (6) The impossibility of rational knowledge of ethics, or, in extreme form, the denial of even the ontological reality of ethics.⁷⁴

A Theology of Active Obedience and Disciplined Love

Two concerns appear to be paramount in all of Ibn Taymiyya's theological and philosophical writings: the imperative of knowing and loving God and acting righteously (in accordance with the law and reason) as a direct result of it. Henri Laoust aptly emphasizes the second of these commitments: "It thus appears that Ibn Taymiyya's entire theology tends towards one sole aim: that of giving a foundation to his ethics and, consequently, to all his juridical and social philosophy."⁷⁵ To secure this end, Ibn Taymiyya, notes Fazlur Rahman, "bluntly points out the discord that exists at the bottom between the Sunni orthodox theological formulas and the presuppositions of the law."⁷⁶ Ibn Taymiyya writes,

You will find many jurists involved in self-contradiction. Thus, when they think along with the theologians who affirm the sole Power of God by saying that the (human) power and efficacy (does not precede) the act (but is created by God) together with the act, they agree with this. But when they think in terms of law, they have to affirm a preceding (and free) human power which is the foundation of the Command and the Prohibition.⁷⁷

To separate God's goodness from the fact of human evil, the difference between divine will (*irāda*) and love (*maḥabba*), not recognized by the Ash'aris, is of cardinal significance for Ibn Taymiyya. The Ash'aris denied it because (1) given His Omnipotence and lack of any personal interest (*gharaḍ*), they considered it impossible that God loved something but did not will it; (2) attributing love to God is to attribute a weakness (inclination and need of the beloved) not suitable to God; (3) love required some similarity (*munāsaba*) between the lover and the beloved (in holding

⁷³ *Minhāj*, 1:94–5.

⁷⁴ ME, 8:231.

⁷⁵ Laoust, *Essai*, 177.

⁷⁶ Rahman, *Islam*, 114.

⁷⁷ Ibid. Zysow, 103, similarly notes that "orthodox theologians" (i.e., Mātūrīdīs and Ash'aris) negated human free will but, when faced with issues of practical legal theory, had no qualms about accepting the Mu'tazili-sounding legal doctrine; some even dislike importation of theological contentions into legal theory (121).

this, the Ash'arīs were reiterating the ancient Near Eastern doctrine on the nature of love), which could not be posited between God and His creation; and finally, (4) love, in its usual sense in the Qur'an and *ḥadīth* literature, is tied to particular acts and states of a beloved servant, which would require that God love a person at one instant when she or he acted righteously and cease to love when the same person sinned. This would entail a change in God, which is impossible. If, however, God's love mentioned in the Qur'an is interpreted as the unchanging divine will to pre-deterministically reward or punish a particular servant (regardless of his/her state at any particular moment), all of the aforementioned problems can be resolved and the metaphor of divine love can be seen as consonant with the omniscience and timelessness of God.⁷⁸

Al-Ash'arī's attempt to harmonize his extreme voluntarism (emphasis on God's omnipotence) at the expense of divine justice and human responsibility, along with the traditional insistence on not ascribing evil to God, led him to subscribe to and develop an earlier Mu'tazilī doctrine of *kasb*. According to the doctrine of *kasb*, God created both human action and the power to act at the time of action, yet humans acquire the action and thus become the site of the action. In Ibn Taymiyya's view, this doctrine lacked cogency as well as coherence (in this critique he was simply agreeing with Juwaynī and many others), and upon closer examination it gets reduced to the *jabr* (fatalism) of the type the Jahmiyya had posited.⁷⁹ Of course, the Ash'arīs rejected Jahmism, Ibn Taymiyya argued, but only superficially, "only in choice of words, thus putting forth something that escapes understanding."⁸⁰ Later, the more philosophically astute Ash'arīs, in particular Rāzī, altogether abandoned the doctrine of *kasb* and endorsed unequivocally the doctrine of *jabr* and saw no reason not to extend it to the domain of legal theory; indeed, in his mystical writings, Rāzī draws from it the obvious conclusion of moral indifference.⁸¹

⁷⁸ See Bell, *Theory of Love*, for denial of God's love: Bāqillānī (56–7), Juwaynī (58–9), Ghazālī (206).

⁷⁹ MF, 8:339–40 (*Iḥtijāj*).

⁸⁰ *Minhāj* 1:326; MF, 8:230.

⁸¹ Thus Rāzī, "It is thus established that ... the human choice is pre-determined, and there is nothing in existence except *jabr*" (*al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*); "The existence of the action of a servant depends on the motive (*dā'iya*) that God creates, and when that motive is found, the action must result, and, therefore, predeterminism (*jabr*) is a necessity" (*al-Maḥṣūl fī uṣūl al-fiqh*), and in his mystical writings, Rāzī takes *jabr* to its logical result of moral indifference: "The mystic knower must have no concern with the acts of the creation, nor does he feel displeasure upon seeing evil being done, for he knows God's secret in predestination (*qadar*)" (*Sharḥ al-ishārāt*; all qtd. in Maḥmūd, 686).

Pointing to a qur'anic verse, namely that "God does not burden someone who does not have capacity,"⁸² Ibn Taymiyya rejects *jabr* and insists that "a servant is indeed the doer of his acts."⁸³

It is to rescue ethical and religious responsibility from the antinomy latent in the doctrine of *jabr* that Ibn Taymiyya distinguished between two aspects of divine oneness (*tawhīd*): oneness of God's Lordship (*rubūbiyya*), which emphasized God's power and providence, and the even nobler aspect of oneness, oneness of divinity (*ulūhiyya*), which emphasized God's right to be loved and obeyed and human responsibility and capacity to do so.⁸⁴ Thus, the doctrine of human responsibility and assertion of God's power became simultaneously built into the very idea of God's oneness. How and whether Ibn Taymiyya himself resolves this problem is beyond the purview of the present study.⁸⁵ His statement of creed written for the common Muslims of al-Wāsiṭ best summarizes his view in an uncomplicated way: "Men are actors in the genuine sense of that term; however, God is the creator of their actions (as stated in the Qur'an). Men are the ones who believe or disbelieve, who live piously or impiously, who pray and fast. Men have power (*qudra*) over their deeds and will them (*irāda*), while God, on the other hand, is the creator of their power and their will."⁸⁶

Ibn Taymiyya is careful to separate the issue of God's omnipotence from that of human ethical knowledge. His insistence on the possibility of what we may call natural law must not be tied with any kind of necessitarianism or intellectualism.⁸⁷ He writes:

⁸² *Minhāj*, 1:274; Kūnākātā, 103.

⁸³ *Minhāj*, 266; Kūnākātā, 104.

⁸⁴ MRK, 2:136, 2:116; Kūnākātā, 104, 163ff.

⁸⁵ L. Holtzman, "Human Choice, Divine Guidance and the *Fiṭra* Tradition: The Use of Hadith in Theological Treatises by Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya," in Rapoport and Ahmed, *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*.

⁸⁶ *Wāsiṭiyya*, 27–8; Swartz, 123.

⁸⁷ Incidentally, the medieval Christian theologian and philosopher, William of Ockham (d. ca. 1349) has a remarkably similar doctrine in many respects. Natural law is possible but it does not bind God; rather, it becomes possible because of God's willingness, in the realm of his ordained power. A modern commentator writes: "What Ockham did was to ground the natural law, and indeed all ethical values, on the will of God. Natural laws ceased, therefore, to be a 'dictate of reason as to what is right, grounded in the being of God but unalterable even by Him,' and became 'a divine command ... right and binding merely because God was the lawgiver.' ... The dictates of natural law, the infallibility of right reason, the very fact that it is virtuous to act in accordance with right reason – all of these amount to nothing more than the inscrutable manifestation of divine omnipotence" (Gierke-Maitland, qtd. in F. Oakley, *The Political Thought of Pierre d'Ailly: The Voluntarist Tradition* [Yale University Press, 1964], 171). Oakley continues, "The finality

Some people think that those who believe in the rationality of good and evil thereby deny *qadar* (omnipotence of God) and are bracketed with the Mu'tazila on the issue of divine justice (*ta'dil wa tajwīr*). This is not correct. The majority of Muslims do not side with the Mu'tazila in this regard; nor do they agree with the Ash'arīs in their denial of purpose in divine actions or in their negation of causality in nature The issue of (rational) knowledge of good and evil is not tied to the issue of divine omnipotence (*qadar*).⁸⁸

God's acts, to Ibn Taymiyya, have a purpose known ultimately only to Him, for God's reason is nothing like human reason, and hence human reason is not in a position to postulate a purpose for divine actions and require him to act according to its dictates:

God's acts cannot be judged on the pattern of human acts, for humans are slaves while God is their Lord. They wrong each other and commit shameful acts; and He has power to stop them, yet He chooses not to do so. This does not impute evil to God, for He may have a higher purpose (*ḥikma*) behind [allowing such evil to occur] or may have some good to bestow on His slaves. This is what the *salaf*, the jurists, and Muslims in general believe; they all affirm that creation as well as the legislative decree of God has a *purpose* [rational to God, but possibly out of the reach of human reason].⁸⁹

The Ash'arī doctrine "that God neither loves good nor hates evil" is unacceptable, for it is contradictory to the Qur'an, the consensus of the early Muslim community, as well as common sense.⁹⁰ To act ethically in accordance with one's reason, even if not specifically commanded in the law, thus becomes more than mere following the command; it becomes a reflection of one's love for God because God loves both what is good and those who do good.

of right reason is contingent upon God's will, for it is only 'by the very fact that the divine will wishes it that right reason dictates what is to be willed'" (Ibid., 189).

⁸⁸ MF, 8:428–30; Ansari, 8–9.

⁸⁹ Ansari, 10. He elaborates elsewhere what this higher rational purpose might be. It is a key doctrine of Ibn Taymiyya that God has chosen to create the universe and acts the way he does out of wisdom, which ultimately can be explained as love. He loves good and justice and has chosen to not do evil or injustice. The question of whether God is bound to love is invalid, for love, just like wisdom and might, are attributes of God, and any questioning beyond this is futile and, for Ibn Taymiyya, against reason as well as revelation. It is significant, however, that Ibn Taymiyya places love at the center of God's creative as well as prescriptive commands (Bell, 209–10).

⁹⁰ Ansari, 11; MF, 8:428–36.

Defending Revelation and Liberating Reason

Reconciling reason and revelation was one of the main intellectual projects of Ibn Taymiyya in all of his theoretical engagement. In particular, he was concerned with the refutation of the Ash'arī hermeneutical principle, *qānūn al-ta'wīl*, which posited the possibility of contradiction between reason and revelation and gave primacy to reason over revelation in theological matters. The main interlocutors of Ibn Taymiyya, therefore, were the Ash'arīs: As fellow Sunnis, they shared many of his commitments, yet, precisely because they represented the dominant Sunni tendency, they were the chief target of his criticism. His engagement with the Mu'tazili *kalām* and the *falāsifa* may be considered corollaries of his key concern to challenge and rectify the prevailing orthodoxy.

DAR' TA'ĀRUḌ: IBN TAYMIYYA'S MAGNUM OPUS

Ibn Taymiyya's critiques of *qānūn al-ta'wīl*, the Ash'arī principle of interpretation, and the epistemological and hermeneutic principles that underlay it are scattered throughout his massive corpus. His persistent engagement with it can be appreciated by his own account that he refuted one of its premises, namely the impossibility of definitive knowledge based on revelation, in his commentary on Rāzī's *Muḥaṣṣal*, and refuted the rest of its clauses some thirty years later in *Dar' ta'āruḍ*.¹

Ibn Taymiyya's views on the harmony of reason and revelation were first discussed by Henri Laoust, whose comments on this issue were brief but perceptive. He wrote that according to Ibn Taymiyya, "The Law [*Shari'a*]

¹ *Dar'(S)*, 1:22.

then is all reason. No opposition between revelation and reason should exist. The authentic scriptural tradition (*naql ṣaḥīḥ*) and proper reason (*‘aql ṣarīḥ*) are two manifestations of the one and same reality.”² Another study that took on this problem was an article by Benyamin Abrahamov, who concluded at first that Ibn Taymiyya comes very close to Ibn Rushd in his manner of denying contradiction between reason and revelation, except that whereas Ibn Rushd considered the two domains true but independent of each other, Ibn Taymiyya chose to confine himself to the terms and rational proofs found in revelation, thus subjugating reason utterly to revelation and allowing it no status outside of it.³ In a later study of Muslim thought, Abrahamov rejected his former conclusion, arguing that “for Ibn Taymiyya there are rational arguments arising from the human intellect independently of revelation, which are valid so long as they do not contradict revelation. Reason is thus an independent source of knowledge of God.”⁴ Yahya Michot has reached a similar conclusion.⁵

The endeavor of harmonizing reason and revelation in itself was not new among Muslim theologians; it may be said to be the object of all theology. After all, the *qānūn* was merely a way for the *mutakallimūn* to circumvent the contradictions between reason and revelation that had appeared inescapable. But Ibn Taymiyya’s was a challenging time in Islamic history to claim harmony of reason and revelation. In the face of the formidable rationalist metaphysical systems that held sway in the medieval period, the traditionalists had no easy options. They could either defend revelation against all intellectual objections or abandon the intellectual scene completely, declaring it prohibited to even set eyes on the books of *kalām*, let alone *falsafa*. The first option was clearly far more difficult and risky, for rational objections against faith in the statements of revelation were too many and too deeply entrenched to allow positing a facile harmony of the two. Not only the die-hard *ahl al-ḥadīth*, but even the typical Ash‘arī followers found it safer to stay clear of reopening

² Laoüst, *Essai*, 176–7.

³ B. Abrahamov, “Ibn Taymiyya on the Agreement of Reason with Tradition,” *MW* 82:3–4 (1992): 173–256.

⁴ B. Abrahamov, *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationalism* (Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 51; Hoover, 30n37.

⁵ Quoted in Hoover, 30n39. Also, Y. Michot, “Vanités Intellectuelles ... L’impasse des rationalismes selon *Le Rejet de la contradiction d’Ibn Taymiyya*,” in *Oriente Moderno*, 19/80 NS (Rome, 2000), 597–617; N. Heer, “The Priority of Reason in the Interpretation of Scripture: Ibn Taymiyya and the *Mutakallimūn*,” in *Literary Heritage of Classical Islam: Arabic and Islamic Studies in the Honor of J. A. Bellamy*, ed. M. Mir (Darwin Press, 1993), 181–95.

questions that had been settled by the great masters. Ghazālī had himself advised the commoners and lesser scholars, in his *Ihyāʾ* and more passionately in *Iljām*, against delving in *kalām* if one wished to keep one's "glass of faith" intact. Ibn Taymiyya's way of demonstrating the harmony of reason and revelation denied easy shortcuts, namely the theologians' interpreting away the problematic revelational texts to fit rational judgments as well as the traditionalists' convenient solution of endorsing reason only where it agreed with revelation. Instead, he argued for taking both reason and revelation seriously, each on their own grounds, and attempted to show that they invariably agreed.

Ibn Taymiyya's Letter to a Syrian Prince as a Summary of *Darʾ*

Known for their digressive style and lack of didactic markers, Ibn Taymiyya's writings pose many a challenge to the modern reader. What more than compensates for these stylistic infelicities, however, is a certain methodological simplicity made possible by a profound coherence in his entire corpus. Taking our cue from William James and beginning by looking for the center of his vision rather than crawling like a "myopic ant" over the massive edifice of his thought makes the task of understanding *Darʾ* manageable.⁶ Despite the complexity of the subject matter, the vast range of issues and interlocutors, and the length of the treatise, the coherence of its overarching argument makes the presentation orderly and logical.

Our task of analyzing *Darʾ* is further facilitated by what I contend is the author's own summary of his argument in a brief epistle he wrote a few years after the completion of *Darʾ*. *Darʾ* has been dated to have been authored between AH 712 and 717.⁷ The epistle, addressed to a

⁶ James, *A Pluralistic*, 263.

⁷ The editor Muḥammad Rashād Sālim (see later in the chapter) dates the writing of *Darʾ* to somewhere between 712 and 717, the earlier being the more likely case. The first modern edition of *Darʾ* was published in an incomplete form as *Bayān muwāfaqat šariḥ al-maʿqūl li-ṣaḥīḥ al-manqūl* (Exposition of the Agreement of Clear Reason with Authentic Revelation) on the margins of an early edition of *Minhāj* in Cairo (Būlāq), 1321/1903. This corresponds to *Darʾ*, 1:3–4:295. Another incomplete edition appeared as *Muwāfaqat šariḥ al-maʿqūl li-ṣaḥīḥ al-manqūl*, ed. M. M. ʿAbd al-Ḥamid and M. Ḥamid al-Fiḳī (Maṭbaʿ al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyya, 1370/1951). Another incomplete edition appeared as *Darʾ* in Cairo, 1971, edited by Muḥammad Rashād Sālim, which was then completed in a full eleven-volume edition (al-Mamlakah al-ʿArabīyah al-Saʿūdīyah, Jāmiʿa al-Imām Muḥammad ibn Saʿūd al-Islāmiyah, 1979–1981), and then reprinted several times.

Syrian prince Abū 'l-Fidā' (d. 732/1331) who was "the then Governor of Ḥama' ... and a well-known historian," is dated between 720/1320 and 726/1326.⁸ It was most likely written as a part of Ibn Taymiyya's missionary activism to spread his message as far and wide as possible. Siraj Haque, who first published it in 1952, incorrectly surmised that it was written "on the request of some person, whose name has been suppressed in the manuscript, and was meant to serve him as a letter of introduction to the Sultan." Furthermore, Haque misinterpreted crucial cues as to the purpose of the letter masking its relationship to *Dar'*.⁹ The letter effectively states its main purpose in a few statements and concludes abruptly with the ending salutation without suggesting any other intention but religious advice. Haque further mistakes a description for a title, surmising that Ibn Taymiyya refers his reader to his treatise entitled *Maqālāt al-'ālim [sic.] fī mas'alat ḥudūth al-'ālam wa-qidamih* (Opinions of the scholar on the issue of the temporality of the world and its eternity). In reality, this segment is merely a reference to *Dar'* in which, Ibn Taymiyya states, he has discussed "opinions of [the philosophers] of the world on the issue of the temporality of the world versus its eternity."¹⁰ Haque dating of the letter, however, seems correct. The content of the letter suggests that Ibn Taymiyya had written *Dar'* already and now was ready to provide an effective summary of its recondite arguments in a few statements, which we may take to be his final and mature position on the matter.

The letter opens with the usual praise for God followed by a brief discourse on the nature of revelation, insistence that the Greeks were devoid of revelational knowledge, and refutation of the *falāsifa's* claim that the

⁸ S. Haque, "A Letter of Ibn Taymiyya to Abū 'l-Fidā'," *Documenta Islamica inedita* (1952): 155–61.

⁹ Haque, 155. However, nothing in the letter justifies that it was meant as a letter of introduction; rather, as the letter suggests, the unnamed person seems to have served only to have introduced and praised the Sultan before Ibn Taymiyya. The main thrust of the letter also confirms this conclusion.

¹⁰ No treatise of Ibn Taymiyya by the title Haque suggests is extant or mentioned by his biographers. The text surrounding the segment makes is clearer: *wa-lahum fī 'l-mabādī' kalāmūn ṭawīlun qad basatnāhu fī 'l-kitāb al-kabīr alladhī dhakarnā fī-hī maqālāt al-'ālam fī mas'alat ḥudūth al-'ālam wa qidamih* (and they [the Greek philosophers] have much to say in this matter, which we have explained in the big book in which we have mentioned the opinions of [the scholars of] the world on the issue of the origination of the world or its eternity). The only known lengthy treatise of Ibn Taymiyya that elaborated in great detail on the issue of the creation versus eternity of the world is *Dar'*, which, according to M. Sālim, the editor of the critical eleven-volume edition of *Dar'*, can be dated somewhere between 713/1313 and 717/1317. This also corroborates Haques' suggestion that the latter had originated between 720/1320 and 726/1326.

qur'anic hero Dhu 'l-Qarnayn ("the two-horned one") was the same figure as Alexander the Macedonian, for Alexander was pagan, whereas the qur'anic hero a righteous monotheist. These references appeal, for one, to Abū 'l-Fidā's historical interest and also suggest that Ibn Taymiyya was concerned with the influence on the prince of the propaganda that Aristotle, the First Teacher of philosophy, was a monotheist given that his disciple, Alexander the Great, had been mentioned with praise in the Qur'an as a monotheist. Then there follows a rational defense of the position that only God is eternal, and those who claim the eternity of the world following Aristotle contradict reason as well as revelation. Then Ibn Taymiyya takes up his main point:

Whoever considers definitive rational proofs (*al-adilla al-'aqliyya al-yaqīniyya*) with due thoroughness will know that they agree with the teachings of [God's] messengers and prove the necessity of trusting them. Similarly, whoever considers revelational proofs (*al-adilla al-sam'iyya*) with due understanding will know that God has guided His servants in His Book to definitive rational proofs by which can be known the existence of the Creator, the subsistence of His attributes of perfection ... the truthfulness of His messengers ... and that [the messengers] have perfected for God's servants what their unaided intellects were incapable of comprehending.

The means of knowledge are three, sense perception (*hiss*), speculative thinking (*naẓar*), and report (*khabar*). The early adherents (*salaf*) of this Community had acquired the knowledge of the ultimate purpose of both types of sciences, rational as well as revelational, and they knew that each of the two entails the other, there being no contradiction between them. God has revealed in His Book that both reason and revelation lead to salvation (*anna kulla" min al-'aql wa 'l-sam' yujīb" al-najāt*), thus God informs us of the denizens of the Fire that "they shall say: 'Alas, had we listened or reasoned, we would not be among the companions of the Fire!'" (Q, 68:10) ...

Thus God has implied that reason by itself (*mujarrad al-'aql*) leads to salvation, and so does revelation by itself, except that revelation does not benefit without reason, for mere transmission by an informer cannot guide¹¹ if its truthfulness is not known, and the truthfulness of prophets can be known only by reason.

However, a group of the people of *kalām* has supposed that the guidance of revelation is limited to mere transmission and, realizing that mere transmission of information is of no benefit if the truthfulness of its transmitter is not known, have made the arguments of reason external (and prior) to what the messengers have taught. But the best masters of *kalām* (*ḥudhdhāq al-mutakallimīn*) know well that the Messenger elucidated for the people rational arguments by which is

¹¹ The editor, Haque, informs us that he has replaced the original *yadull* (guides) with *yudrak* (is comprehended), but upon reading the full sentence, his replacement turns out to be awkward whereas the original reads perfectly well.

known the existence of the Creator, His Oneness, His attributes and the truthfulness of His Messenger...

[The early Muslims knew of the validity and mutual necessity of reason and revelation] but there came from among the *kalām* theologians those who were deficient in their knowledge of the Prophet's teachings and in what rightly guided reason necessitates, and they conjectured erroneously regarding God's words and deeds in [the context of] the problem of the creation/temporality of the world (*ḥudūth al-ʿālam*). Their conjectures contradicted both the teachings of prophets as well as the requirements of reason. These people, ignorant of the Messenger's teachings [in depth], assumed that they knew them well and found them in contradiction of clear reason. This is the reason for people's confusion in the matter of messengers.

A group¹² among them [tried to explain this contradiction by suggesting] that [messengers] taught only by way of imaginative allegories and have only addressed commoners. Another group opined that their teachings do not state what they intend but rather the opposite of what they really mean, leaving people to have to discover the truth on their own. Then they go on to interpret prophetic teachings metaphorically (by means of *taʿwīl*) to fit what they have (thought up). Yet another group opines that prophetic teachings are equivocal (*mutashābiḥa*) and their meanings are known to no one, including the messengers themselves, except God.¹³

According to this passage, reason and revelation are not two entirely distinct sources of knowledge, but ones that overlap in some cases and mutually complement each other in other cases. They never contradict because they emanate from the same source. Without rational argument, the truth of revelation cannot be ascertained nor can its content be assessed, and although reason may subsist without revelation and guide human life, it will do so only imperfectly. Unaided reason, furthermore, cannot grasp the unseen truths necessary to perfect and guide human life to the ultimate happiness in this life and the afterlife. In fact, contrary to the *mutakallimūn*'s contention, theological knowledge regarding God and the afterlife is in even greater need of revelation

¹² This is a brief list of the interlocutors of *Darʿ*, a more complete version of which can be found in *Darʿ(S)*, 1:176. The first group is the *falāsifa*, who teach that revelation consists of useful metaphors meant only for the commoners; the second group is a reference to the later Ashʿaris like Rāzī, who do not consider the scripture entirely useless but profess to interpret it in ways vastly divergent from the literal meaning and sometimes opposite to it; the third reference is to others, including Juwayni and Rāzī in their disillusioned phase, who argue that the true meanings of scriptural description of the unseen cannot be known to anyone but God. Finally, there are those like Ghazālī who hold that the truth may only be known through *kashf*, mystical revelation available to the elect few, a position that endorses the Ashʿari conclusions but by using the Sufi method.

¹³ Haque, 159; for a slightly different translation of a part of this passage, see Hoover, 31.

because those truths are entirely beyond human reason in contrast with the empirical world.

The Main Objectives

Beyond demonstrating the harmony of reason and revelation, the three main objectives of *Dar'* may be identified as follows: to demonstrate the incoherence of the *qānūn*, to expose its consequences, and most significantly, to question the claims of necessity and universality of *kalām* by unsettling its very epistemological foundation and providing an alternative epistemological foundation that is rationally sound as well as in line with revelation.

1. *Incoherence of the Qānūn*

Ibn Taymiyya argues the invalidity of the *qānūn* by using three intertwined strategies: by showing its internal contradictions, its contradiction with revelation, and the incoherence of its epistemological premises. He begins by shifting the focus from the question whether reason or revelation is to be given preference to the more fundamental question of which of the two is definitive *on rational grounds*: “It could be that both arguments [that are said to contradict] are definitive (*qaṭʿī*), or that both are non-definitive (*ẓannī*), or one is definitive while the other is non-definitive.” Because definitive knowledge (*ʿilm*) obtains in one of three ways – sensory experience, inferential reason (*naẓar*), and report (*khābar*) from a trustworthy source – revelation and rational inference, epistemologically, are at the same level in their respective domains. Hence, in determining which type of argument is to be given preference, what matters is the relative level of certainty that each argument furnishes, not its source:

If both rational and revelational proofs are definitive, we do not concede that a contradiction is possible.... However, if [the contradiction is posited when] both are non-definitive (*ẓannī*), then the preferred position is the one that is preponderant. If one of them is definitive while the other is non-definitive, then the definitive one is privileged without question. And if it is judged (*quddira*) that the rational argument is definitive, then it is privileged, not for being rational, but for being definitive.... It is therefore established that to privilege rational over revelational without qualification is an error.... We do not claim that rational arguments are invalid, or that [the rational arguments] by which we know the validity of revelation are invalid, but that it is rationally inadmissible to oppose revelation by reason or privilege reason over it.¹⁴

¹⁴ *Dar'(S)*, 1:86–7.

It is notable that the process of determining the relative weight of various arguments is a rational one – as reflected in Ibn Taymiyya's choice of words, "*quddira*" – a rational process of weighing and judging. In this respect, Ibn Taymiyya agrees with theologians. Revelation cannot be accessed without first establishing its veracity and then interpreting its meanings by rational means. It might seem here that reason, even in Ibn Taymiyya's scheme, has the upper hand.

However, two of Ibn Taymiyya's key contentions recover the authority and necessity of revelation. The first contention is that natural reason (*'aql fiṭrī*) as a faculty is to be distinguished from the judgments of inferential reason or speculation (*ma'qūlāt*). The concept of natural constitution (*fiṭra*) attached to reason gives reason legitimacy, indeed a divine nod, but also serves to limit the scope of rational speculation that might challenge revelation. *Fiṭra* is hard-wired, in Ibn Taymiyya's view, to love what is beneficial and to conclude that there is a Creator and that He is good, and hence to love God. What is beyond the ken of immediate experience and natural reason, however, falls into the category of rational speculation, such as the details of God's nature and attributes, and cannot be known with certainty except by revelation.

The second contention is that revelation already contains the best of rational arguments that appeal to the human *fiṭra* and guidance on how to use reason to interpret it; hence the dichotomy of reason and revelation is false. In the first article of *Dar'*, Ibn Taymiyya writes: "A *shar'ī* argument could be revelational (*sam'ī*) or rational (*'aqlī*). Being *shar'ī* for an argument means either that the *shar'* has established it and guided to it, or has considered it permissible."¹⁵ This is a critique of the theologians' view of the reason-revelation problem in two ways. Firstly, they had treated revelation as if it consisted only of information or positive assertions about practical or unseen matters, devoid of rational arguments. The *qānūn* embodies their simplistic attitude toward the reason-revelation problem: Before the truth of revelation is ascertained by independent (namely, rational) means, revelation is to be treated like a black box; human reason must establish its truth without looking into it. All matters pertaining to this endeavor have come to be labeled as intellectual or fundamental matters (*masā'il 'aqliyya* or *uṣūliyya*). Secondly, once this truth has been established, then, in the postrevelation universe, reason becomes incapacitated, except in interpreting the commands of revelation. The latter is considered to be the domain of transmitted, subsidiary, or practical

¹⁵ *Dar'(S)*, 1:198–9; Maḥmūd, 320–1.

matters (*masā'il naqliyya*, *furū'iyya* or *'amaliyya*). Ibn Taymiyya questions these presumptions both in cases before and after the encounter with revelation.

Before one comes to accept the veracity of someone's claim of having received divine revelation, one naturally looks into it. Given that, in Ibn Taymiyya's scheme, in contrast with the Ash'arī view, unaided human reason is capable of knowing not only the existence of God, but also ethical verities, which revelation confirms, rational engagement with the content of revelation becomes one way for the human mind to judge its veracity. He writes in *Nubuwwāt*, "The difference between a (true) prophet and a false claimant ... is to be found in their respective characters and attributes (*ṣifāt*), acts (*af'āl*), commands, teachings about the unseen (*khabar*), and signs (*āyāt*).... Hence one who believes in prophets (generally) does not rely solely upon miracles (*khawāriq*) which might be performed by infidels and the impious, but seeks evidence in the [character of the] one who follows that prophet."¹⁶ A true prophet commands what is known to reason to be good, such as "oneness of God, sincerity towards Him, and forbids worshipping false gods, lying, injustice (*ẓulm*). Therefore, intellects (*'uqūl*) and natural constitutions (*fiṭar*) confirm [a truthful prophet] and other prophets before him. Thus he is confirmed by clear reason (*ṣarīḥ al-ma'qūl*) and authentic revelation (*ṣaḥīḥ al-manqūl*) other than his own."¹⁷ He goes on to ground his affirmation of ethical rationalism in an even more fundamental theological point about divine purpose in which he rejected the Ash'arī view that denied that God had any interests, and hence any purpose, in His acts:

This discourse on prophethood is a corollary of affirming God's wisdom (*ithbāt al-ḥikma*) which makes God do all that wisdom requires and not do all that is against it. It says: He the Exalted and Glorified is Most Wise, places everything in a place appropriate for it, and it is not permissible for him (*lā yajūzu 'alayhī*) to equate the essence of truth and falsehood, or the just and the unjust, or the knowing and the ignorant, or the reformer and the corrupter.¹⁸

For the same reasons (divine wisdom and ethical rationalism), after the truth of a particular claim of revelation has been established, reason does not lose its effectiveness in the normative domain. Indeed, revelation itself endorses reason because it requires its adherents not only to obey what it specifically commands, but also to do good generally and gives

¹⁶ *Nubuwwāt*, 24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 216.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 374.

general commands to be just and benevolent without specifying all the ways of seeking these goods, and thus prompting the believers to continue to use reason.

Ibn Taymiyya thus rejects the categorical distinction implied in the Ash'ari system between *uṣūl*, theoretical/theological (in prerevelation time) issues in which reason trumps revelation, and *furū'*, practical/legal/religious (in postrevelation time) issues in which revelation reigns supreme and reason plays no independent role. The sequence of pre- and postrevelation reasoning as presupposed by the Ash'aris was arbitrary and may be easily reversed, for in reality, the two types of reasoning are concurrent: One may look into and follow the teachings of a religion before having complete faith (hence the distinction between *islām*, submission, and *īmān*, faith¹⁹), and afterwards one continues to seek faith and conviction through obedience and appreciation of its commands.

Arguing for the unity of epistemology in the two domains, he contends reason and revelation agree and complement each other in both theoretical and practical domains, and, in both domains, each leaves room for the other. He posits the same trichotomy in both domains: there are issues in which only reason can judge, those in which only revelation can judge, and those in which the two complement and confirm each other.

Accordingly, in the practical domain, he writes elsewhere, revelational commandments are of three kinds: (1) those known by revelation alone and altogether not accessible to reason, and these are few, such as God's commandment to Abraham to offer his son in sacrifice or to the believers to not eat pork; (2) those commanded by revelation but completed, implemented, or corroborated by the use of reason, such as the five ritual prayers, whose benefits and some of the details are known by reason, but the basic obligation in its particular form is known by revelation alone; and (3) those whose desirability or benefit is known only by reason.²⁰ Now, even in the first and third cases, while seeming to judge independently of each other, reason and revelation in fact cooperate and corroborate. For instance, in the first category, Abraham knew that it is most rational to act in accordance with God's commandment. Similarly, an act in the third category, judged by reason to bring benefit or remove harm, automatically becomes endorsed by revelation, because revelation, in its general commandments, requires its adherents to attain human benefit and remove harm.

¹⁹ MF, 7:7f., (K. *al-Īmān*).

²⁰ MF, 8:433–6; also, Ansari, 12–13.

In the theoretical domain, he gives a similar tripartite classification. God's messengers inform their followers of things that either agree with reason (revelation, in fact, provides the best rational arguments for God) or are acknowledged by reason to be beyond its scope, but never contradicted by its definitive judgments.²¹ Finally, as noted earlier, there are truths that must be known by reason in order to establish the authenticity of revelation.

The reason Ibn Taymiyya was able to reject any categorical distinction between practical and theoretical domains is that he differed with the theologians of either kind on the nature of revelation as well as of reason. On the issue of revelation, his contention that rational certitude indeed is possible through revelation was two-pronged; he tried to show that the *qānūn* effectively rendered revelation entirely meaningless – and would not be acceptable even to its advocates (an argument I elaborate on below) – but also provided direct critique of the hermeneutical techniques that the *qānūn* implied.²² In the process of establishing this position, he was led to review the entire foundation of classical textual hermeneutics and language and proposed an alternative theory of linguistic pragmatics. His hermeneutic theory, however, is beyond the scope of the present study.²³

2. *Exposing the Consequences of the Qānūn as a "Shock Therapy"*

Although nowhere explicitly stated, reading between the lines we may suggest that one of the objectives of *Dar'* is a kind of "shock therapy" for the Sunni theologians and their followers by highlighting that this ill-conceived settlement of reason and revelation in fact led to losing faith both in reason, or revelation, or both. In Article 32 of *Dar'*, Ibn Taymiyya makes the potent argument that the *qānūn* renders revelation utterly ineffectual in imparting any definitive knowledge in any matter whatsoever – a proposition that is dangerously close to the *falāsifa's* position, which the Ash'arīs agreed amounted to a heretical rejection of the

²¹ MF, 13:136–41; translated in Ansari, 17–19; see also, *Dar'(S)*, 5:297, 7:327; Maḥmūd, 334.

²² Ibn Taymiyya states that he wrote that in his commentary of the first part of Rāzī's *al-Muḥaṣṣal*, only part of which has survived in unpublished form. It is found in his *Naqḍ al-ta'sīs* (A Critique of Rāzī's *al-Ta'sīs*), the only study of which I have come across is Maḥmūd, 861f.

²³ M. M. Y. Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics: Sunni Legal Theorists' Models of Textual Communication* (Routledge-Curzon, 2000).

TABLE 5.1. *Reason and Revelation as Sources of Knowledge in Ethical and Theological Domains*

	Theological Domain (prerevelation)	Ethical/Practical Domain (postrevelation)
Mu'tazila	Reason: Effective Scripture: Dependent/ Ineffective [denial of most divine attributes in scripture through metaphorical interpretation]	Reason: Effective Scripture: Dependent (intellectualism; God bound by rational ethics) [scripture confirms reason]
Ash'arīs	Reason: Effective Scripture: Dependent/ Ineffective [metaphorical interpretation of selected scriptural divine attributes]	Reason: Ineffective Scripture: Effective (strict voluntarism; ethics not rational but God's command) [scripture initiates ethical norms]
Ibn Taymiyya	Reason: Dependent Scripture: Effective [acceptance of all scriptural divine attributes without modality]	Reason: Effective Scripture: Effective [middle position of divine self-obligation] [scripture confirms reason]
Falāsifa	Reason: Effective Scripture: Ineffective [scripture as useful myths, theological truth by reason alone]	Reason: Effective Scripture: Effective [scriptural law useful for commoners]

truth of revelation. The *falāsifa*, who held that metaphysical truths could only be discovered by their method, had also attempted reconciliation with revelation by reducing revelation to morally effective myths that addressed only the commoners. Ibn Sinā had written, "What is demanded by the *shar'* and creed (*milla*) which have come to us through the tongue of any of the prophets is to address (*khiṭāb*) all the crowd (*al-jumhūr al-kāffa*)." ²⁴ Ibn Rushd wrote, in a similar vein, that the *Sharī'a* intended "simply to teach the masses (*ta'lim al-jamī'*)" and to "take care of the majority (*al-'ināya bi 'l-akthar*)." ²⁵ Ibn Taymiyya did not fail to link the

²⁴ Michot, "A Mamlūk," I, 169.

²⁵ Ibid., 170.

consequences of Rāzī's *qānūn* to the bolder Avicennan principle that while "the prophets indeed meant [by their revelation its] outward meanings, even though these outward meanings, as far as the matter itself is concerned, are a lie and opposed to the truth; they wanted to make the crowd understand by means of lies and vain things what is in their [own better] interest (*maṣlaḥa*)."²⁶

Ghazālī had similarly repeatedly complained that "[the *falāsifa*] accused the prophets ... of lying in the [public] interest.... They say that the Prophet taught in opposition to what he knew to be true, in the [public] interest (*li 'l-maṣlaḥa*)."²⁷ He wrote elsewhere that according to the *falāsifa*, "[the Prophet] was not able to state the truth openly because the wits of men were too dull to grasp it."²⁸ Ibn Taymiyya agreed with Ghazālī's critique and ultimate judgment against the *falāsifa*'s teachings as heretical, but he also agreed with the *falāsifa*'s critique of Ghazālī and the Ash'arīs, who denied certain qur'anic divine attributes, that their own *qānūn* was nothing but a version of the same phenomenon for which they had denounced the *falāsifa*.

Rāzī's formulation of the *qānūn* in *Nihāyat al-'uqūl*, as noted earlier, emphatically posits that reason is the only source of definitive knowledge. Anticipating the objection that this utter incapacity of revelation despite its own claim to convey absolute truth would entail that God had revealed a false discourse, Rāzī distinguishes himself from the *falāsifa*'s view by reaffirming the standard Ash'arī voluntarism:

If it is said [in objection]: God would not reveal to the accountable believer [*mukallaḥ*] a discourse whose apparent meaning is contradictory to reason, for then it would be obligation upon God to inspire that rational [corrective] upon the believer, or else, God would be blamed for misleading His servants, and that is not legitimate. We say in response: this [objection] is based on the principle of good and evil [having independent existence outside of God's commands], and that God can be obligated to do something. But we do not hold that.²⁹

But then Rāzī goes on to entertain the objection anyway, and argues that even though there is nothing in his theology that would prohibit God from misleading the believers, in this case, it is not so, because it is the responsibility of the believer to not rely on the apparent meaning and look for the real one, and if he fails to do so, the fault is his, not God's. Then

²⁶ *Dar'(S)*, 1:9; Michot, "A Mamlūk," I, 158.

²⁷ Ghazālī, *Qānūn*, 226; Michot, "A Mamlūk," I, 159n32.

²⁸ *Iqtīṣād*, 120.

²⁹ Quoted in Ibn Taymiyya, *Dar'(S)*, 5:333.

Rāzī concludes: “The conclusion of what we have mentioned is that it is invalid to adhere to revelational arguments in intellectual matters (*masā’il ‘ilmiyya*) ... It is permissible to adhere to [revelation] in traditional matters (*masā’il naqliyya*)... as in case of the rulings of *Shari‘a*.”³⁰

Of this line of reasoning, Ibn Taymiyya’s criticism is devastating. The upshot of Rāzī’s insistence that revelation secures certainty only when confirmed by reason amounts to relegating revelation to an utterly superfluous status, even in suprarational matters of the unseen. Now, this critique seems to ignore Rāzī’s explicit statement that revelational knowledge *is* effective in suprarational matters. But when Rāzī’s limited concession to revelation is closely examined, it turns out to be less than real. In Article 32, Ibn Taymiyya argues that the essence of Rāzī’s argument boils down to this:

[N]one of the intellectual matters (*masā’il ‘ilmiyya*) whatsoever can be argued by the Qur’an and Prophetic teachings, and that the information given by God and His Messenger may not be used to confirm anything.... For if someone grants that the knowledge imparted by God or His Messenger ... contains that which contradicts definitive reason ... it is not possible for him to establish with certainty anything that the Messenger has taught.... Indeed, such a person does not believe in anything that the Messenger has taught simply because he is the Messenger, nor does he obtain knowledge or guidance from revelation. In fact, he does not believe in any of the unseen things that have been taught by the Messenger, because [by definition] he does not know them by his reason.³¹

Put differently, how could revelation, once believed to be misleading in some matters, be trusted at all? Thus Ibn Taymiyya reduces Rāzī’s position to that of the *falāsifa*, who were explicit in considering revelation a noble lie.

Ibn Taymiyya’s contention must be read in the context of the greatest of Ash‘ari theologians’ own troubled retractions and confessions with regard to reason and rational inquiry. It seems calculated to shock his fellow Sunni theologians and their followers who prided themselves on their rational defense of faith and orthodoxy. The great Ash‘aris like Ghazālī and Rāzī had not been unaware of these gnawing difficulties and had tried to reconcile at times by attempting intellectual compromises, other times by abandoning the intellectual pursuits in favor of fideism (*tafwīd* of Juwaynī and Rāzī in his later life), and yet other times, as in the case of Ghazālī, by turning to subjective spiritual experience (*kashf*)

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ *Dar’(S)*, 5:242–3.

for certitude. The overall effect of this inescapable contradiction between what they believed to be reason and what they understood to be revelation had led to a fundamental mistrust of reason. In this context, Ibn Taymiyya's contribution was one of the most far-reaching attempts in Islamic intellectual history to "exculpate" and rehabilitate reason, paradoxically, by defending revelation.

3. *Critique of the Foundations of Kalām and Falsafa*

The third main concern of *Dar'* that claims most of its space as well as intellectual ingenuity is the critique of the very foundations of *kalām*, namely its view of the nature and role of reason. Given, as he writes, that "all intelligent people agree that what we label as rational argument (*dalīl 'aqlī*) could be true or false (in its conclusion or premises),"³² the challenge was to account for this obvious subjectivity of reason and mutual disagreements of various philosophers and theologians while maintaining trust in the validity of reason. What kind of reason was trustworthy if the best of philosophers and theologians fundamentally disagreed with each other and, even more ominously, with revelation, while all claiming to invoke reason? This led Ibn Taymiyya to engage in a comprehensive examination of the epistemological foundations of *kalām*, which, he held, had become involved in Greek metaphysics. This in turn led him to challenge the foundations of Aristotelian metaphysics, especially in the form developed by the great Muslim Aristotelians, Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, and Ibn Rushd. In a move of truly outstanding intellectual courage and stamina, he offered an original critique of syllogism and pioneered a nominalist and empiricist epistemology, challenging the edifice not only of *kalām*, but of centuries of prevailing Hellenistic philosophy. Nothing less than an alternative account of epistemology could rehabilitate trust in reason after its conflicted encounter with revelation.

He had completed aspects of his critique of syllogism before the writing of *Dar'* during his imprisonment in Alexandria around 709/1309 in *al-Radd 'alā al-manṭiqiyyīn*. An abridgement of *al-Radd* by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) has been translated recently by Wael Hallaq. Its usefulness is limited by the fact that Suyūṭī had excised all theological and metaphysical discussions of *al-Radd* focusing solely on logic.³³ This means that Hallaq's valuable study – an important contribution in the

³² *Dar'(S)*, 1:191.

³³ Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya*, liv; lviii.

budding field of Taymiyyan studies – does not exhaust what could be learned about Ibn Taymiyya's contribution in *al-Radd. Dar'* is perhaps a more developed and philosophically significant work, but its fuller understanding would benefit from focused studies of *al-Radd. Dar'* can be seen as the next philosophical step to *al-Radd*, in which Ibn Taymiyya further develops that epistemology by providing positive foundations for it in the qur'anic concept of *fiṭra* and puts it to use in addressing the reason-revelation problem.

Hallaq ably sums up Ibn Taymiyya's reason for engaging in a thoroughgoing refutation of syllogism:

It is not difficult to understand why Ibn Taymiyya should have chosen to attack the entire system of logic through the theories of definition and syllogistics. Since the beginning of the fourth/tenth century, Arabic logicians had held that the acquisition of knowledge, as well as the principles governing the correct uses of the methods and processes by means of which knowledge is acquired, are the tasks of logic. As there must be some postulates presupposing the acquisition of new knowledge, logic was seen as the sole tool through which sound human knowledge can be derived and augmented. On this view, then, logic stood not merely as a set of tautologies, but equally served as an epistemic system, a theory of knowledge proper. In this theory, it was emphasized that, to avoid an infinite regress, the mind must be seen as proceeding from some *a priori* or pre-existent axiomatic knowledge to new concepts (*taṣawwūrāt*) by means of definitions. If we know, for instance, what 'rationality' and 'animality' are, we can form a concept in our minds of 'man,' who is defined as 'a rational animal'. It is through definitions, then, that concepts are formed.... [F]ollowing in the footsteps of Aristotle, Arabic logicians deemed the syllogism as the only argument capable of yielding apodictic knowledge, and thus they considered it the chief, indeed the only, tool which can bring about *taṣḍīq* [confirmation] with certitude.³⁴

The belief that logic was the only rigorous way to acquire knowledge and evaluate judgments was shared by Ibn Taymiyya's most important interlocutors: Ibn Sīnā, Ghazālī, and Rāzī, and the later *mutakallimūn* generally. The *qānūn* that Ibn Taymiyya sought to dismantle was in fact based on arguments that claimed to be apodictic based on these claims of logic. Ibn Taymiyya's grievance against the exaggerated claims of logicians, Greek or Arab, is summed up in a passage in his *al-Radd*. Responding to the advocates of Greek logic such as Ghazālī and Ibn Rushd, who had argued that logic and syllogisms are prescribed by the Qur'an – Ghazālī having gone to the extent of declaring his mistrust

³⁴ Ibid., xiv–xv.

of the religious knowledge and learning of scholars who do not study logic³⁵ – Ibn Taymiyya writes:

No intelligent man should think that the rational balance (*mīzān*) which God revealed [referred to in the Qur'an, 55:7–8] is Greek logic.... They have further claimed that it is a canonical instrument which, when properly used, can protect the mind from erring in its thought.... [This is invalid, for] when natural intelligence is sound, it measures [things] by means of the rational balance, but if it is dull, logic only renders it more so.... It prolongs the road; renders the clear ambiguous; and causes errors and fallacies. But when they relinquish natural (*fiṭrī*) and rational (*'aqlī*) knowledge of particulars in favor of categorical syllogisms – whose concepts, which they have coined, are ill defined and include both truth and falsehood – the result is so erroneous that it stands in contrast to what the balances are meant to be. Such balances become instruments of injustice, not of justice.³⁶

Ibn Taymiyya's critique began by rejecting that apodictic knowledge could be obtained by means of syllogism because definitions are arbitrary, conventional, relative, and mental rather than exact verbal parallels of some universal existents. He held, in accordance with the early Sunnis doctrine, that intellect is a faculty (*gharīza*) that empirically senses the external world and creates concepts to express it. The function of human intellect was therefore not to grasp some universal existents and thus derive apodictic knowledge by using syllogism. Yet, later theologians like Ghazālī, despite himself being a nominalist of sorts,³⁷ endorsed syllogism as a guarantee of apodictic knowledge, thus failing, or refusing, to see the link between the system of definitions and essences that syllogism presupposed and its realist epistemological foundation. Ibn Taymiyya, in contrast, insisted that “what is at stake in adopting a realist theory of universals is no less than an entire metaphysic” and attempted “to show how involved logic is in metaphysics.”³⁸

Ibn Taymiyya's unrelenting empiricism is a reflection of his clear thinking on the subject – his insistence that there is no necessary connection between the mind and the external world is directly dependent on the

³⁵ Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya*, 100, par. 160, n. 1.

³⁶ *Manṭiqiyyīn*, translated in Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya*, 162–3.

³⁷ Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's*, 176–8, argues that Ghazālī advocated a moderate nominalism and was not always consistent in avoiding epistemological realism under Ibn Sina's influence.

³⁸ For an elaboration of the connection between language, logic, and metaphysics in the thought of the Arabic Aristotelians, see S. B. Abed, *Aristotelian Logic and the Arabic Language in Al-Fārābī* (SUNY Press, 1991).

concept of an omnipotent, personal God with will, power and knowledge, who could create the world any which way He wished, and the human intellect is only an instrument of observation and interpretation. In Ibn Taymiyya's scheme, the process of ratiocination is a creative and active process in contrast with the realist epistemology of the *falāsifa* and the Greeks, for intellect does not simply detect the absolute reality that is out there, but observes and interprets it subjectively.

Confidence in natural reason or common sense had been an early casualty in the rise of *kalām*. The *mutakallimūn* as early as Bāqillānī had required of every believer speculative reflection (*naẓar*)³⁹ about the existence of God and the knowledge of the way to prove divine existence. The preferred proof of God's existence in Sunni *kalām* was the method of "the temporality of bodies" (*tarīq ḥudūth al-ajsām*), its central premise being that "whatever is not devoid of temporality is temporal/created" (*mā lā yakhlū min al-ḥawādith fa huwa ḥādith*), thus temporality could not be attached to God. For this way of proving God's existence to work, this premise had to have an axiomatic status that even God's revelation could not contradict. If it did, it had to be subjected to *ta'wīl*. To Ibn Taymiyya, limiting what one knew to be God's words by the measure of one's own speculation amounted to an absolutist and unwarranted trust in one's rational capacity.

The reason for this dilemma was, as he addressed at length in *Radd*, that the *mutakallimūn* had wittingly or unwittingly accepted Greek concepts of apodictic knowledge, taking the propositions thus produced to be the absolute and universal judgments of reason.⁴⁰ In *Dar'*, Ibn Taymiyya attacked these premises of *kalām* in two complementary ways: by invoking scripture to persuade the believers and rational arguments to refute theologians and philosophers on their own turf.

Is Theoretical Speculation (Naẓar) an Obligation?

The last two articles of *Dar'*, which occupy more than half of the multi-volume tome, are devoted to refuting the necessity of *kalām* in guarding

³⁹ For Ibn Taymiyya's usual thorough cataloguing of the development of various opinions on the obligation of *naẓar*, see *Dar'(S)*, 8:348–58 and MRK, 2:346–7 (*Fiṭra*). See also, Hoover, 31n52.

⁴⁰ In the words of Sherman Jackson, Ibn Taymiyya's problem with the prevalent theological and philosophical thought in the classical Muslim legacy was "that [certain] rationalist forces had succeeded in identifying their particular system of reasoning with reason itself, such that only those who paid homage to the former could lay any legitimate claim to the latter" (*Islam and the Blackamerican* [Oxford University Press, 2005], 10–11).

faith and making a case for its error and redundancy in most (but not all) cases. The arguments seem to echo Ghazālī, Juwaynī, and Rāzī's disenchantment with *kalām*, except that whereas these theologians seemed to have lost hope in the efficacy of reason in attaining proper faith altogether, Ibn Taymiyya attempts to provide a coherent alternative basis for harmonizing reason and revelation.

Interestingly, as Yahya Michot points out, Ibn Taymiyya agrees with Ibn Sinā and Ibn Rushd in their criticism of *kalām* scholars for imposing on the common believers the arcane propositions they had formulated. For the *falāsifa*, the reason that the masses cannot be required to know the real truth is their intellectual incapacity. Ibn Taymiyya's reasoning was the exact opposite. He held that the truth that is most worthy of being known is as accessible to common believers as to the pompous intellectuals, thus underscoring "the self-sufficiency of the religious rationality manifested in scriptural literality and common faith, and its validity for all, the elite as well as the crowd."⁴¹ Believers could not be required, he insisted, by any political or religious authority to believe in anything but the self-evident meanings of the scriptural texts. In this vein, he criticized the Ash'arī warrior Muḥammad b. Tūmart (d. 524/1130) and the Mu'tazila (recall their role in the *Miḥna*) for imposing their theological creeds on all Muslims. He contended that all Muslim authorities have "agreed that what is compulsory for a Muslim to believe is what God and His Messenger have made compulsory, nobody else having the right to make compulsory something that neither God nor His Messenger have made compulsory."⁴² Rational speculation (*naẓar*) is not necessary for all people in order to establish the existence of a Creator, for that knowledge is readily available to those whose natural reason has not been corrupted. The various claims to being the one correct path to establishing God's existence are unjustified in their exclusivism, even if a given method might be correct in its own right: "Whoever limits the way of knowing (the truth about God) to one particular path (of reasoning) that consists of a particular definition and a particular argument has erred, as has one who holds that another's definition and argument [in this regard] that differs from his own can never be correct."⁴³

⁴¹ Michot, "A Mamluk Theologian," I, 171.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ *Dar' (S)*, 3:303–4; Maḥmūd, 313. See also Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya*, 11, for an elaboration of this "relativity" of ways of arriving at fundamental truths.

Systematic rational speculation in unseen matters is not without its usefulness. In the matter of acquiring knowledge about God, however, its usefulness can be likened to that of medicine, which is needed only by those who suffer from some ailment. Ibn Taymiyya goes on to emphasize the subjectivity and relativity of human ways of attaining knowledge of all types; only divine revelation is above this relativism:

This knowledge [of God] is necessarily obtained by those of sound constitution (*ahl al-ḥiṭar al-salīma*), but many need speculative thinking (*naẓar*) in order to acquire it. Therefore, some could acquire this knowledge without *naẓar* while others need it. The same is the case with definitions: in some cases they are needed while in other cases they are not. Similarly relative is the judgment on whether a certain proposition is necessary versus acquired speculatively (*naẓariyyan*), and definitive versus conjectural. Something can be definitively known to a certain person in a certain situation, while in another situation it becomes unknown let alone non-definitive. Similarly, a proposition may be necessary for a person but theoretical for another in a different condition. In contrast, what the Prophet has taught is truth in itself and the difference in people's beliefs and conditions does not change it.⁴⁴

But if the ways of acquiring knowledge are so utterly relative and contingent on human experience, what makes the knowledge of God accessible to all? How could Ibn Taymiyya respond to the theologians' concern to find a rationally irrefutable proof of God's existence, an endeavor that necessitated and justified the enterprise of *kalām*? It is here that we find Ibn Taymiyya's employment of the qur'anic concept of *ḥiṭra* to develop a theory of human psychology and epistemology that served as an alternative to *kalām*.

ḤIṬRA AS THE ALTERNATIVE EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

The concept of *ḥiṭra* appears in the Qur'an and had been long recognized by Muslim scholars: "So set your face to the religion (*dīn*), as a man of pure faith (*ḥanīf*); the constitution (*ḥiṭra*) on which He has created human-kind; that is the right religion but most men know not" (Q, 30:30). The contributions of two fifth-/eleventh-century scholars, Ṣāḥirī Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) of Cordoba and Māwardī are worth mentioning in this regard. Camilla Adang's study presents various exegetical views on the term *ḥiṭra* and states that some exegetes "saw *ḥiṭra* as an inborn tendency, a

⁴⁴ *Dar'(S)*, 3:303–4.

natural disposition towards monotheism (*tawḥīd*), or even towards Islam itself,” although there were also those who interpreted God’s creation of human being upon the *fiṭra* as meaning “a healthy physical condition, a state of perfection,” or, in a predestinarian vein, in accordance with His plan or destiny.⁴⁵ The majority of Muslim thinkers, however – Ibn Ḥazm included – “came to equate *fiṭra* with Islam and, hence, to believe that everyone starts his life as a Muslim. They found corroboration for their interpretation in another passage from the Koran, specifically S. 7:172, in which God makes a covenant with the descendants of Adam, who unanimously and unwaveringly confirm that God is their Lord.”⁴⁶ Ibn Ḥazm’s concern is primarily with the issue of the children of the unbelievers who die before the age of distinction, who he forcefully argues are to be considered believing Muslims who will enter paradise, even though, legally speaking, they are to be considered part of their parents’ community.⁴⁷ Ibn Ḥazm, like most exegetes, seems to have no epistemological or metaphysical but rather purely legal and contingently theological considerations in mind for his attention to this concept.

Māwardī’s understanding of reason or intellect (*‘aql*) gives us another clue about the conceptual space for *fiṭra* among Muslim thinkers, even though he does not use the term *fiṭra* itself. In *A‘lām al-nubuwwa* (Signs of Prophethood), he writes:

[Knowledge is of two types, axiomatic and acquired.] The way to obtain acquired knowledge is theoretical reasoning and argumentation (*al-naẓar wa’l-istidlāl*), for this knowledge is not axiomatic (*badīhat al-‘aql*), since it is legitimate in its case to require evidence. Such non-axiomatic knowledge may be acquired by reasoning or revelation. The matters of reasoning are again of two types, those that are known by necessity of reason (*ḍarūrat al-‘aql*) and those that are known by rational arguments (*dalīl al-‘aql*). The first type, that known by necessity of reason, are those about which there can be no rational objection, such as Oneness of God, which is a matter of necessary knowledge (*al-tawḥīd fa yūjibu al-‘ilm al-ḍarūrī*), even if its necessity is established by means of arguments of necessary reason (*wa in kāna ‘an istidlālīn li ‘l-wuṣūl ilayhi bi ḍarūrat al-‘aql*). The second type of knowledge, that known by rational argument, is that the opposite of which might be true, such as the claim of one particular person to be a prophet of God.⁴⁸

What is noteworthy here is the ambiguity in Māwardī’s categorization of the human knowledge of the Oneness of God: *It is necessarily known*

⁴⁵ C. Adang, “Islam as the Inborn Religion of Mankind: The Concept of *Fitra* in the Works of Ibn Hazm,” *Al-Qantara* 21(2000): 393.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 408–9.

⁴⁸ Māwardī, *A‘lām*, 3–4.

by reason, yet it is not axiomatic. Māwardī then goes on to establish the existence of God by the classic proof of *ḥudūth al-‘ālam* (temporality of the universe) in a traditional *kalām* style. What makes a non-axiomatic rationally argued statement necessarily true, however, he does not consider.

To later theologians who inhabited an increasingly stratified society, *fiṭra* became a dysfunctional concept beyond the kind of limited legal debates noted earlier, for theological proofs of God’s existence and monotheism were no longer deemed available to commoners. In Article 44 of *Dar’*, Ibn Taymiyya reports at length the elitist views of theologians and philosophers on the subject. Abū ‘l-Ḥasan al-Ṭabarī al-Kiyā al-Harāsī (d. 504/1110), a student of Juwaynī, mentions that although the Ash‘arī masters have agreed that common believers are to be deemed believers, there is a difference in opinion regarding the nature of their knowledge of God. Some Ash‘aris have held that commoners do possess that knowledge but are unable to articulate it, whereas others hold that they are to be deemed believers but without possessing the essence (*ḥaqīqa*) of the knowledge of God. Kiyā then goes on to support this latter opinion, arguing that the commoners have only a superficial idea of God, that they can be persuaded either way about God’s existence easily, and that it is rational theology that establishes necessary proofs. Such commoners are still considered believers for no act of their own, but because of God’s predetermination, “for God has destined for them this destiny [of being believers] but has not destined for them the ‘*ilm* (definitive knowledge).”⁴⁹ Kiyā argues for the indispensability of the kind of *kalām* theology he was engaged in because, he states, the qur’anic arguments for God’s existence lack “domination and incapacitation” – that is, they do not completely silence the opponents and skeptics the way *kalām* does.⁵⁰ As we have seen in Ghazālī and Rāzī, the more sophisticated Ash‘arī theologians were to soon lose Kiyā’s somewhat naïve confidence in *kalām*.

Ibn Taymiyya likens the philosophers and negationist theologians to the practitioners of Alchemy, who rarely attain their desired object and often get lost in the way or have misgivings about the truth as well as themselves. In an anecdote he relates in *Dar’*, Ibn Taymiyya captures his view of *kalām*’s violation of common sense. The anecdote concerns an eminent contemporary theologian who, like most Sunni theologians,

⁴⁹ *Dar’(S)*, 7:360.

⁵⁰ This disparagement of scripture, of course, never fails to hit Ibn Taymiyya’s raw nerve, provoking in this case a vehement refutation of al-Kiya and his cohort (*Ibid.*).

denied some of God's scriptural attributes, and hence, in Ibn Taymiyya's language, was inclined toward Jahmism. When the scripturalist teaching of unqualified affirmation (*ithbāt*) of divine attributes (re)appeared among the common people in that region, theologians like him were expected to fiercely oppose this tendency. But he did not. When asked by his companions why he did not respond, he said, "When people hear this [i.e., affirmation of God's attributes without any modalities, *bilā kayf*], they accept it and agree wholeheartedly with it, and it appears to them to be the truth which the Messenger has brought. As for us, if we took a person, educated him, fed him, and cajoled him for thirty years, and thereafter wanted to make what we say go down his throat, it would not go down his throat but painfully." Ibn Taymiyya then goes on to add,

The truth is indeed as he said. God, the exalted, has set up proofs and signposts of the truth and the light against falsehood and darkness. He gave the pristine nature (*fiṭra*) of His servants the capacity to apprehend realities [of things] (*haqīqa*) and to know them. If, in the hearts, there were no such capacity (*isti'dād*) to know these realities, neither speculative thinking (*naẓar*) would be possible nor demonstration (*istidlāl*), neither discourse nor language. [He Almighty prepared them], praise to Him, just as He gave physical bodies the capacity to accept nourishment: if there were no such [capacity], it would not be possible to feed them and to make them grow. Just as, in the bodies, there is a faculty that separates between suitable and unsuitable food, likewise, in the hearts, there is a faculty that separates even more between truth and falsehood.⁵¹

Kalām arguments, even when valid, serve not as nutrition needed by all but as medicine needed by the sick, whose minds are ailing from corruption and doubts:

They are needed by those who either do not know or turn away from other (easier) ways to these truths.... For some people, the more difficult the path, the more involved in convoluted premises, the more impressed they are by it. Such people have become used to long deliberation over abstruse matters, and if an argument requires few premises or is simple, they are not pleased by it. *For such people, the method of kalām and syllogism may be used in accordance with their habits, not because the required knowledge is dependent exclusively on these means.*⁵²

Ibn Taymiyya justifies his own engagement in theological arguments based on the need to refute opponents based on their own premises and method. The problem, in his view, is not that their arguments on God's

⁵¹ *Dar' (S)*, 3:62; Michot, "Mamluk Theologian," II, 350–1.

⁵² *Manṭiqiyyīn*, 1:253–4; Maḥmūd, 292 (emphasis added).

existence are altogether invalid, but that the theologians and the philosophers narrow these proofs to one or two arbitrarily and give them a dogmatic status, whereas in fact there are myriad ways to establish the existence of the Creator:

We have explained that many of the thinkers (*nuzzār*) follow a particular argument to the desired result and assert that the result cannot be obtained except by this path; but his exclusivity is unwarranted, even if his path is in itself valid. For *the greater the need the people have to know a truth, the easier God makes it for the intellects of the people to know its proofs*. Hence the proofs for the existence of the Creator, his Oneness and the signs and proofs of prophethood are numerous indeed. Similarly numerous are the ways by which the people may reach these truths – and most of these ways are not needed by most of the people.⁵³

In light of the aforementioned, the common claim that Ibn Taymiyya deemed *kalām* or philosophical proofs of existence of God essentially invalid cannot be maintained.⁵⁴ He in fact chastises those traditionalists who “reject outright all rational argument and believe that they have been manufactured by theologians,” as well as those theologians who think “that the Qur’an only avers truths (without rational argument).”⁵⁵ Furthermore, intellectual exercises, whereas for some merely a way to seek self-importance, do have a utility of their own, for they train the mind and make it capable of perceiving things quickly, thus sharpening the natural reason. Speculative rational argument about the unseen, if valid and divested of false premises and contradictions with the definitive teachings of revelation, is useful. This would suggest that it is possible for a valid type of systematic rational discourse to exist and help protect the revelational truth against false doctrines, even if Ibn Taymiyya would not put it in these words.

Such a properly rational discourse had already emerged, Ibn Taymiyya held, among early Muslims who were the most intelligent people by the standards of this natural reason, for they were the most successful in serving God actively and intelligently and interacting with revelation most naturally. Their uncorrupted reason made them understand the meanings of the Qur’an and the Prophetic teachings better than anyone after them:

For when the Messenger, God grant him peace, addressed them in order to teach them God’s Book and his example (Sunna), he made sure that they knew exactly

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Recently, this claim has been repeated by B. Johansen, “A Perfect Law,” 262.

⁵⁵ MF, 13:136–41; translated in Ansari, 17–19.

what he meant by those words – and thus the Companions’ acquaintance of the Qur’an was even greater than their knowledge of its words, and they communicated to the Successors those meanings even more than they communicated its words.⁵⁶

Elsewhere:

It is known that the closer one is to the Sunna and to the method of the prophets, the more correct his discourse in theology (*ilāhiyyāt*) by rational means, just as his discourse is more correct by the standards of revelation – for the proofs of truth mutually agree and reinforce rather than oppose and contradict each other.⁵⁷

Fiṭra and Reason

Fiṭra and reason are related but not synonymous, according to Ibn Taymiyya. Hallaq holds that Ibn Taymiyya reserves the term ‘*aql*’ for the faculty whose “function it is to conduct inferential operations,” whereas *fiṭra* is “the faculty of natural intelligence, or the innate faculty of perception which stands in contrast to the acquired methods of reasoning that bring about perceptions in our minds.”⁵⁸ Hoover rejects Hallaq’s distinction and suggests that *fiṭra* and ‘*aql*’ in Ibn Taymiyya’s usage are “closely linked,” but it is hard to pinpoint the exact relationship.⁵⁹ Hoover attempts to better define the two concepts and suggests that Ibn Taymiyya’s statements on the relationship are vague, sometimes suggesting that *fiṭra* is synonymous with reason; at other times, *fiṭra* appears to be the foundation of reason whereas, at other times, reason seems to be the basis of *fiṭra*.⁶⁰ Hoover sums up his view that reason and *fiṭra* are two “functionally equivalent” sources for attaining knowledge of God’s existence and the ethical truths.⁶¹ Hoover’s misgivings ignore Ibn Taymiyya’s general use of language, which is consistent with his theoretical understanding of language as fundamentally “relative” and “pragmatic,”⁶² and his dislike for formal and technical definitions of, in particular, scriptural terms like *fiṭra* and ‘*aql*’, for such formalization for theoretical neatness might distance the terms from how they have been used in scripture. The question of which comes first, *fiṭra* or ‘*aql*’, would have been disregarded

⁵⁶ MF, 17:353; Maḥmūd, 295.

⁵⁷ *Dar’(S)*, 6:248; Maḥmūd, 305.

⁵⁸ Hallaq, 55.

⁵⁹ Hoover, 39.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Hoover, 45.

⁶² Ali, *Medieval*, 237.

by Ibn Taymiyya as obscure and futile unless the entailments of that question become clear.

It is best therefore to turn to Ibn Taymiyya's own usage and description of the two terms. In Ibn Taymiyya's formulation, *fiṭra* is best understood as God's way to make human reason incline toward truth and righteousness. That natural constitution may be corrupted for a number of reasons, but correct rational argument still can salvage and recover the original human nature. Yet, without the original inclination toward goodness in the *fiṭra*, reason would itself be of no help, just like medicine is of no use to the body if the body lacks basic biological capacity; no amount of language training can make a monkey talk. And if *fiṭra* has not been corrupted, belief in and love of one God would necessarily obtain given the myriad of arguments that reason in its natural environment furnishes. Thus, Hallaq's view that *fiṭra* is distinct from intellect (*ʿaql*) is closer to the mark, except that a more precise way to distinguish Ibn Taymiyya's usage of the terms would be that while intellect is a tool, *fiṭra* is an inclination. When *fiṭra* is corrupted, intellect loses its "true north" and is overwhelmed by desires or confused by doubts. God sends messengers to guide humans and unveil the truth to which their *fiṭra* is already inclined. This the messengers accomplish by two means: by conveying reports of the unseen and accountability and, more significantly for Ibn Taymiyya, by invoking and teaching the rational arguments that would appeal to the intellect and undo the corruption of *fiṭra*. He writes in *al-Radd*, "God Almighty has created his servants on a constitution (*fiṭra*) in which there is the knowledge (*allatī fihā maʿrifa*) of truth and its affirmation and the knowledge of falsehood and its rejection; the knowledge of that which benefits one and love for it and knowledge of that which harms one and its dislike."⁶³

An imprecise reading of statements like this may have led Hallaq to conclude that Ibn Taymiyya's views on *fiṭra* as a basis of the knowledge of God's existence are inconsistent.⁶⁴ For, Hallaq suggests, sometimes Ibn Taymiyya presents *fiṭra* as a means or faculty for knowing necessarily from created things that they must have a creator, whereas at other times, he regards *fiṭra* as an inborn knowledge of God requiring no evidence whatsoever. This second view, however, is explicitly rejected by Ibn

⁶³ MF, 4:32 (*Manṭiq*); Maḥmūd, 325.

⁶⁴ Hallaq, "Ibn Taymiyya on the Existence of God," *Acta Orientalia* (Copenhagen) 52 (1991): 49–69; for Hoover's critique of Hallaq, see Hoover, 40–1.

Taymiyya. The phrase “*allatī fibā maʿrifat al-ḥaqq*” could mean “that which contains the knowledge of the truth,” but it could also mean, “in which there is that which leads to the knowledge of the truth.” Another important subtle clue in this passage is that Ibn Taymiyya here has used the term *maʿrifa*, which cannot be used for inborn knowledge, for, linguistically, his disciple Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya explains, *maʿrifa* is applied only to “acquired knowledge,” whereas *ʿilm* is knowledge which may or may not have been acquired.⁶⁵

But we scarcely need to guess what Ibn Taymiyya means, for he explains his concept of *fiṭra* in much greater detail elsewhere while explaining the Prophetic tradition, “Every newborn is born in the state of *fiṭra*”:

Every human being has in his nature the submission to God (*islām*). If this nature is not corrupted by the erroneous beliefs of the family or society, everyone would be able to see the truth of God and submit to it.... *Fiṭrah* is the original nature of the human being, uncorrupted by subsequent beliefs and practices, ready to accept the truth of *Islām*, which is nothing but submitting to God and to none else... The *fiṭrah* is to the truth as the eye is to the sun – everyone who has eyes can see the Sun if there are no veils over them. It is like saying that every human being likes sweets, except if some corruption occurs to his sense of taste and sweetness turns into bitterness in his mouth.

However, the fact that people are born with *fiṭrah* does not mean that a human being is born with the Islamic creed inscribed in his mind. To be sure, when we come out of the wombs of our mothers we know nothing. We are only born with an uncorrupted heart which is able to see the truth of Islam and submit to it.⁶⁶

The most systematic discussion of the concept of *fiṭra* and its extensive defense appears in the final article of *Darʿ* (Article 44), which alone spans almost half of the length of this massive treatise. Here Ibn Taymiyya provides a rational explanation for his position:

It has been shown that in the human constitution (*fiṭra*) there is an urge (*quwwat^{un} yaqtaḍi*, lit. a power that requires) to believe in the truth and intend the beneficial. Now, either confirming the existence of the Creator, his knowledge and belief in him, is the truth or its opposite. The falsity of the latter is known with certainty, hence the former is true: it becomes established that the *fiṭra* has an urge to know the Creator and believe in Him. Also, after believing in Him, either loving Him is beneficial or not loving Him; since the second is known to be invalid, (the first is established) for loving the beneficial is part of the *fiṭra*. Then, either worshipping Him alone without any associating any partners to Him is beneficial and closer to perfection for the people, both in terms of knowledge and intention, or

⁶⁵ Hence, the term *maʿrifa* is never applied to God’s knowledge, which is invariably referred to as *ʿilm* (*Madārij*, 1:124).

⁶⁶ ME, 4:245–7.

associating false gods with Him. The invalidity of the latter is known, hence it is established that the *fiṭra* has an urge for *tawḥīd*.⁶⁷

He also describes *fiṭra* as possessing “an urge (*murajjih*) for the right religion whose basis is the knowledge of the Creator, His love and exclusive submission to Him.”⁶⁸

We may now conclude that *fiṭra* is neither used inconsistently by Ibn Taymiyya, nor is it a loose concept “functionally equivalent” to reason, as Hallaq and Hoover have suggested. *Fiṭra* is neither equivalent to intellect, nor primordial propositional knowledge, nor a rational premise or argument. Rather, *fiṭra* is a divinely placed inclination in the human psyche toward all that is good, which provides guidance to intellect, which is a tool and could be used for good or evil. *Fiṭra* separates “right reason” from reason’s misguided uses. In reaching the ultimate truths, *fiṭra* and intellect are complementary and interdependent and, therefore, insufficient without each other. This becomes clearer as we see *fiṭra* in action.

Fiṭra and Rational Knowledge of Ethical Truths

As noted earlier, Ibn Taymiyya held, as many authorities in Islamic law and theology had, that ethical truths are, in a qualified way, accessible to unaided human reason.⁶⁹ Except that now, when such a proposition could no longer be negligent of the objections that Ash‘arī theologians had raised for centuries, one needed a consistent foundation to claim ethical rationalism that was rationally coherent as well as scripturally grounded. That foundation was *fiṭra*. Its philosophical centrality can be understood best if we appreciate the formidable objections to ethical rationalism (parallel problems were being raised across the Mediterranean in the Christian West) of which Sunni theologians were only too aware, such as how could one square rationality of ethics with God’s omnipotence, given

⁶⁷ *Dar’(S)*, 8:458–9; Maḥmūd, 325.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ The issue of the rational knowledge of good and evil exemplifies Ibn Taymiyya’s historically grounded style of metaphysical argument: “On the question of whether good and evil [attribute of acts] are known through reason, there are different views among the Orthodox community (*Ahl al-Sunnah wa ‘l-Jamā‘ah*), that is, the four schools of jurisprudence as well as others. The Ḥanafis, and many of the Mālikis, Shāfi‘is and Ḥanbalis believe in their rationality. This is also the view of the Karrāmīs and the Mu‘tazila, as well as that of many sects among Muslims, Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians and other religions. On the other hand, many of the followers of al-Shāfi‘i, Mālik, and Ibn Ḥanbal oppose that position, and this is the view of the Ash‘arīs” (MF, 8:428; translated in Ansari, 7).

that now God, in order to be good, was bound to act in accordance with human rational judgments? And, more pertinent to Ibn Taymiyya's system, given that he held to a nominalist epistemology and denied the existence of universals, on what grounds could any universals be defended?

To this second problem, *fiṭra* was Ibn Taymiyya's answer. It provided the psychological foundation necessary for a rationalist epistemology, for it was universally available to all humans without requiring extramental universals. Reason, in this system, enables the mind to grasp, through empirical encounter with the world, the nature of things, their relationship and consequences, whereas *fiṭra*, a divinely placed moral compass in the human heart, turns this knowledge into ethical verities and inclines the human heart to the love of good and, hence, of God.

Scholars are beginning to note Ibn Taymiyya's ethical thought but have not appreciated its remarkably coherent foundation in *fiṭra*. Jon Hoover, for instance, states that Ibn Taymiyya reduces the various ethical terms the Muslim theologians had used – such as *ḥusn* (beauty) and *qubḥ* (ugliness), terms perhaps of the early Mu'tazili origin, or perfection (*kamāl*) and imperfection (*naqs*), terms the *falāsifa* preferred – to “pleasure and pain and the suitable and incompatible.”⁷⁰ Hoover, however, does not explicate the underlying epistemological system of which this reduction is a part. Accepting the philosophical and theological terminology, he astutely incorporates it into his own system, arguing that “the soul takes pleasure in what is perfection for it, and it suffers pain in the imperfection. So, perfection and imperfection go back to the compatible and the incompatible.”⁷¹ His definition of good is agreement with or suitability to the self (*nafs*); the standard, in other words, lies within the self. This contention is entirely consistent with his notion of *fiṭra*. “Souls,” he writes more explicitly elsewhere, “are naturally disposed (*majbūla*)⁷² to love justice and its supporters and to hate injustice and its supporters; this love, which is in the *fiṭra*, is what it means for [justice] to be good.”⁷³

⁷⁰ Hoover, 34.

⁷¹ MF, 8:309–10 (*Ilḥijāj*).

⁷² The term *majbūla*, from the Arabic root *jabala* (to predispose; *jibilla*) is carefully chosen by Ibn Taymiyya here in conscious opposition to *jabr* (compulsion). There are two reasons given elsewhere in *Dar'* for this choice: firstly, the latter word, *jabr*, which the *kalām* theologians used, was not used by the revelation, whereas the former was used by the Prophet. Secondly, *jabr* has connotations of coercion against one's will, which, according to the early Imams, Ibn Taymiyya reports, does not befit God, hence the word used in the Prophetic traditions is more befitting to God (*Dar'(S)*, 1:65–72, 1:254–6, 8:414–27, 8:498–502).

⁷³ *Manṭiqiyyin* 423, Hoover 42 n. 101.

The potential clash of ethical rationalism with divine omnipotence is addressed by Ibn Taymiyya on several occasions in his writings. The Baghdādī Mu'tazila, as noted earlier, attributed the ethical value of an act to an essential feature of the act itself, a position known to Western scholars as "rational objectivism" or *intellectualism*.⁷⁴ Rejecting the implications of this position that compromised divine omnipotence, the Ash'arīs adopted the other extreme that Hourani has called "theistic subjectivism," also known as voluntarism.⁷⁵ This position implies that: (1) acts have no essential ethical value (*ṣifa dhātiyya*), they acquire it upon divine command, (2) which is not bound by any purpose, and is arbitrary, as demanded by divine omnipotence, and hence, (3) ethical value can only be known by explicit revelation of God, and finally, (4) reward and punishment in afterlife can obtain only on the basis of revelation, not what reason judges to be good or bad.

Ibn Taymiyya charts a middle course between the two groups of theologians, agreeing with the Mu'tazila in that unaided reason has the capacity to know ethical verities, but with the Ash'arīs regarding the contingency of good and evil on God, thus positing a moderate voluntarism. He reconciled the two positions, namely God's absolute power (voluntarism) and rationality of good and ethics (intellectualism), by means of the *ḥadīth*-based notion of God's self-obligation to act in accordance with the standards of good and evil that He has freely created.⁷⁶

Agreeing with the Ash'arīs that acts do not have an essential ethical attribute (1), he writes:

[S]ome thing may be good, loved and profitable in some circumstances and bad, hated and harmful in others. Acts have attributes by which they become good or bad, but these are accidental (*'āriḍa*) and must be considered in light of what is suitable (*mulā'im*) or unsuitable (*munāfir*) to the agent.... Some things like eating meat that has not been slaughtered may be bad in some circumstances and good in others.⁷⁷

On divine purpose (2) and ethical epistemology (3), however, he parts ways with the Ash'arīs and seeks to disengage them from the divine authorship of ethics (1). God acts out of wisdom, inscrutable as it may

⁷⁴ G. Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism: The Ethics of 'Abd al-Jabbār* (Clarendon Press, 1971); also, Hoover, 35n64.

⁷⁵ Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism*, 8–14.

⁷⁶ ME, 18:136–209 (*Abū Dharr*), where he comments at length on a long *ḥadīth*, recorded in *Muslim*, which begins thus: "God says, 'O my servants, I have prohibited injustice upon myself.'"

⁷⁷ Hoover, 35–6, paraphrasing *Minhāj*, 3:76, 78; ME, 8:310f.

be to the human mind, freely bestows acts with ethical value and makes it accessible to human reason. This was the precise view, notes Sherman Jackson, that the Basran Mu'tazila had held.⁷⁸ Ethical value is neither arbitrary nor created by revelation; rather, it is only clarified by revelation to a human nature already inclined toward them:

[Prophetic commandments] were brought forth to perfect the *fiṭra* and firmly establish it, not to replace it or change it. They command only what agrees with what is right to rational minds which pure hearts accept with receptivity.... The prophets perfected the *fiṭra* and made humankind open their eyes to [their own nature].... Their opponents [on the other hand] corrupt perception and reason just as they obfuscate the proofs of revelation.⁷⁹

God being the source of revelation and intellect both, any fundamental contradiction between the two, if they are properly grasped, is impossible. Thus, on the human side, Ibn Taymiyya leaned more toward the Mu'tazila, whereas on the divine side he was closer to the Ash'arīs.

On issue (4) of the soteriological value of acts (i.e., punishment or reward in the afterlife), Hoover deems Ibn Taymiyya vague or noncommittal and in disagreement with the Ash'arīs.⁸⁰ This is incorrect, however, for Ibn Taymiyya clearly agrees with the Ash'arī position and rejects the Mu'tazilī doctrine that reason's judgment can lead to reward or punishment in afterlife.⁸¹ Yet, even here, there is a caveat, because his inclusive definition of the normativity of Islam (the *Sharī'a*) which, as we have shown, included judgments of reason that revelation has approved: "Being *shar'ī* for an argument means either that the *Sharī'a* has established it and guided to it or has considered it permissible."⁸² Because God has commanded justice and goodness in general, even if a particular act is not explicitly prescribed or prohibited, if its justness or the opposite becomes known to human reason, it becomes part of the *Sharī'a* and is rewarded or punished in the afterlife.

⁷⁸ S. Jackson, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (Oxford, 2009), 84, explains the teachings of two Mu'tazilite schools on ethical objectivism: "For the Baghdādīs, it was a confirmation of the inherent characteristics of acts themselves; for the Basrians, it was a confirmation of the mental schemas that God had pressed on the human psyche as the normative prism through which uncorrupted humans naturally viewed the world." The Basrans held this rational human ethical knowledge to be grounded "in a primordial psychological schema of norms and values that was a direct result and reflection of God's will."

⁷⁹ *Nubuwwāt*, 431–2; Hoover, 44.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ *Nubuwwāt* 162–3; MF, 8:435 (*Tahsīn al-'aql*); Ansari, 14–15.

⁸² *Dar'(S)*, 1:198.

The implication of the distinction between particular and general commandments of scripture and, hence, the crucial role of *fiṭra* are quite subtle and have been missed by earlier commentators on the subject like Laoust and, following him, Johansen. Johansen, for instance, writes that “according to Ibn Taymiyya [the Qur’an] contains the spirit and the letter of all religious knowledge and from God’s revelation not only all major principles of law but also all rules of detail can be deduced.”⁸³ This observation needs to be corrected. If one holds to a voluntarist ethic that deems ethical reason to be ineffectual and, therefore, demands specific indication in the scriptural texts to pass judgment on an act, as the Ash‘arī-Shāfi‘ī theory did, then the general ethical commands of the Qur’an exhorting to be just and good are indeed not very meaningful. This Ibn Taymiyya explicitly rejected. Such general ethical commands are in fact not meaningless or “empty”; rather, they are part of the *Shari‘a* even though they require the use of human reason to determine their implications. Thus, the Qur’an indeed contained all that is good and rational, but, for Ibn Taymiyya, human rational ethical endeavor guided by the spirit of the Qur’an was a necessary part of this guidance. The real impact of this teaching of Ibn Taymiyya’s is felt in the domains of legal and, even more distinctly, political thought.

⁸³ Johansen, “A Perfect Law,” 263.

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The Taymiyyan Moment

OVAMIR ANJUM

University of Toledo



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