MORAL OBLIGATION
IN CLASSICAL MUSLIM THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT
This essay analyzes two contrasting conceptions of ethics set forth in Muslim funda­mental theology (kalâm), namely, those of the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites of the fourth and fifth centuries A.H. (tenth and eleventh centuries C.E.). After setting forth a brief statement on the already well-studied position of the Mu'tazilites on human actions, the author devotes the rest of this essay to the less-studied position on human actions of the Ash'arites. Of special interest is his analysis of God's creation (khalq) of actions and man's performance (kasb) of them.

Ethical reasoning in Islam is most often associated with jurisprudence (al-fiqh), the juridical elaboration of the deposit of revelation as it relates to the conduct of human affairs, public and private. The more general theoretical context, however, is presented in the discipline known as kalâm or fundamental theology, for it is here that the basic theses ('usûl) or dogmas concerning the nature of God and of creation and of man's relation to God as creator, lawgiver, and judge are explicitly set forth in conceptual terms.

What I wish to do here is to outline two radical and radically opposed conceptions of the ground of the ethical value of human actions and of the nature of man as a moral agent, as they were formulated in the two predominant schools of orthodox (sunni) theology in the fourth and fifth centuries A.H. (tenth and eleventh centuries C.E.), namely, by the Basrian Mu'tazilites and by the Ash'arites to the beginning of the sixth A.H./twelfth C.E. century. My aim is to view the two contemporaneous ethical systems (Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite) in their broadest theological contexts. Since the ethics of the Mu'tazilites has recently been the subject of rather thorough investigation and since, on the basis of hitherto unexploited sources, it may be possible to give a more precise account of the Ash'arites' teaching than is elsewhere available, I shall devote the greater portion of the present study to the Ash'arites.

THE BASRIAN MU'TAZILITE POSITION ON HUMAN ACTIONS

Actions for the Basrian Mu'tazilites are contingent entities ('ashyâ', dhawât), simple or complex, the principle or origin of whose existence resides in an
agent insofar as he is able to act. Human actions include both (a) "primitive acts" (al-mubtada'āt), namely, those, whether mental or physical, produced immediately in some part of the agent by his ability to act (qudratuhū) and (b) "engendered acts" (al-mutawallidāt), namely, those effects which are caused in a lawful manner as the consequents of a primitive or basic act. As an entity, then, a given action has attributes and characteristics which are either (a) essential and such that they define it as a member of a given class (jins) of entities or (b) are not essential, being grounded directly or indirectly in the presence of some other entity to which it is related in a particular way. Volitions ('irādāt) constitute a distinct class of actions; and an act other than a volition (for example, a judgment or a movement) is said to be voluntary or intentional when the agent forms the volition ( = intention) to do it simultaneously with his initiating the being of the act. Thus, if a person utters a statement, the act belongs to the class of vocal sounds and consists essentially in the occurrence ( = coming to exist) of the sequence of syllables (al-ḥurūfu 1-manẓūmah). But that it is a voluntary act and is a sentence (kalām) and a statement (khabar), and that its truth or falsity is or is not intentional on the part of the agent, do not belong to it essentially. Rather they belong to it as characteristics or modes of its occurrence determined by the correlation of the act (ta'alluquhū) to states of the agent other than his being able to act, namely, to his belief and volition. Ontologically significant predicates of actions, therefore, are referential either to an action's "essence" or class, for example, "utterance" or "movement," or to the mode of its occurrence (wajhu wuqū'īhi), for example, "false statement" or "devotional prostration."

The agent is considered morally responsible for the act under those descriptions as he caused it to exist simply ('ahdathahū, 'awqa'ahū) or as he knowingly and intentionally caused it to occur in a particular way.

According to the Basrian Mu'tazilites, all men of sound mind know in an immediate and irrecducible intuition that certain acts, for example, to show gratitude to a benefactor or to avoid grave and irremediable harm to one's self, are morally obligatory (wājib), that is, that any one who omits them deserves blame, and that certain actions, for example, to perform an utterly pointless act or to inflict on another living being undeserved hardship or harm which is not offset by subsequent benefit, are morally bad (qabīh) that is, that any one who intentionally performs them deserves blame. They hold, moreover, that it is readily possible by systematic reflection to derive from these absolute principles a full set of rules such that one can know the ethical value of any act and thus, at least in principle, what is good or best, or right or wrong, to do in any given situation. All actions may thus be divided into four basic categories, of which the first three are termed "good" (ḥasan): (1) obligatory, (2) laudable but not obligatory, (3) neutral, and (4) bad. Where human ethical judgment is often limited because of our incomplete knowledge of present circumstances and of future contingents, and so must pro-
ceed frequently on the basis of a judgment of what seems most likely to be the case (zann), God's knowledge of the circumstances and of the consequences of His acts (and of ours) is eternal and exhaustive.

Ethical predicates, then, are referential to concretely real and objective attributes and characteristics of the actions they describe, either (1) essentially, as the intention to perform a wrongful act is essentially wrong, since its essence is to be an intending that has this particular object; or (2) according to the mode of its occurrence simply, for example, an utterly pointless act is bad because it is purposeless; or (3) according to the circumstantial mode of its occurrence, as to direct a wayfarer is generally laudable. Our intuitions of the fundamental moral principles are given to us in God's completing the maturation of our minds (ikmālu l-'aql). The principles given to us in this way are not, however, arbitrarily determined by God. Ethical predicates refer to objectively real characteristics of actions, and God knows them to be thus. His acts too, therefore, are subject to moral valuation (liable to praise and blame) on the basis of the same rules and criteria as are ours.

God created mankind constituting them as living beings, capable of pleasure and pain, having needs and desires, subject thus to benefit and harm. He endowed them with the conscious awareness of their own states, a perceptual grasp of the world, an intuitive knowledge of the basic principles of practical and moral judgment, and the ability to reason and to act in order to fulfill their needs and desires. Man is thus created such that he is under moral obligation with implicit sanctions. Every individual of sound mind ought (and knows that he ought) to do what is morally right and to abstain from what is morally wrong. He deserves (and knows intuitively that he deserves) punishment for wrongdoing. And furthermore, since consistently to do what is right and to avoid what is wrong inevitably involve some hardship, he deserves compensation, if not reward, for so doing.

God does not act by any necessity of His nature, according to the Basrian Mu'tazilites, but freely and for chosen ends. His creation of the world and of mankind is a purely gratuitous act (tafaddul) on His part (He could as well have created a different world or nothing at all). It was not, however, purposeless, for the purposeless act is ethically bad and God does only what is good (see note 12 below). He created mankind as autonomous moral agents precisely with the purpose of rewarding them in a future life in a way that proportionately exceeds whatever in strict justice they might deserve because of their having done, either entirely or on balance, what is good and avoided what is bad. It is for this end, indeed, that God has sent prophets: in order to inform us of the conditions of the life to come and to impose upon us certain additional obligations not specifically deducible from the basic ethical principles by autonomous reason. Revelation, that is, gives men further incentives to do what is fundamentally right and imposes duties the fulfillment of which fosters the habit of right action.
Men normally act for what they perceive to be in their own best interest and it is thus that prudent individuals will consistently do what is right in order to achieve their ultimate well-being, namely, God's reward in the next life. Reasonable men, in fact, can and should know this even without the assistance of revelation, for we know intuitively that we deserve praise and blame, reward and punishment, in proportion to our good deeds and bad, and that we can (and ought to) discover by reasoning that there is a creator who is altogether just and who, in view of the conditions of our present state which He has established, owes us reward for the difficulty we have in doing right and may justly punish us for our wrongful acts. To do what is right can thus be rationalized on purely utilitarian grounds. That we ought to do so, however, that is, to fulfill the moral obligation to seek one's own good and to avoid grave or irremediable harm, is absolute and irreducible.

As we have seen, the Basrian Mu'tazilites hold that it is not our acts alone which are subject to the basic ethical rules; God's are too. Neither God's acts nor our voluntary acts are causally predetermined. Given creation in its present state the same set of moral rules is binding on all agents. Because of this, God's acts as well as ours can be rationalized in terms that are, at least in principle, fully comprehensible to us. As we are obligated absolutely to do what is right and obligatory, so God is obligated absolutely to reward us for doing what is right and for fulfilling our moral obligations. Knowing this we are certain of our reward in the next life, because God will inevitably do what is just and what He has said He will do.

THE ASH'ARITE POSITION ON HUMAN ACTIONS

In contrast to this Mu'tazilite teaching, the doctrine of the Ash'arites represents, as we shall see, a very pure kind of voluntaristic occasionalism. According to the Ash'arites “to do right” is defined in the lexicon of ordinary speech as “to put something in its own [that is, appropriate] place” (al-Anšârî, [a]: fol. 166v,19ff.) and “to do wrong” as “to put something in other than its own place” (al-Anšârî, [a]: fol. 131r,3 and 12f.; al-Baghdâdî, 1928: 132,4). The question, then, is what is the basis of the formal determination of what is appropriate. Abû Ishâq al-Isfarâ'înî (d. 418 A.H./1027 C.E.) states the common doctrine of the school: “The ethical valuations (ʿahkām) of actions are grounded neither in the acts themselves nor in their properties; they are grounded simply in what God says” (cited in al-Anšârî, [a]: fol. 81v, 20f. = [b]: fol. 103v,11). So too, speaking explicitly against the teaching of the Mu'tazilites, abû l-Qâsim al-Anšârî (d. 512 A.H./1118 C.E.) says that “to be good and to be bad are not attributes of what is good or is bad, nor are they modes in which they occur; good and bad have no meaning other than the very promulgation of [God's] command and prohibition” (al-Anšârî, [a]: fol.
163v,rf.). That is to say, since the referent of “good” or “bad” cannot be the act itself or any attribute of the act, the assertion must be ontologically grounded in an entity extrinsic to the act (al-Mutawallî, [a]: fol. 40v.; al-Juwaynî, 1950:258,4ff. and 1969:115,9–12):

What is good is distinguished from what is bad by an entity which is extrinsically related to it (ṣifatun muta‘alqatan bihiḥ), namely, the command of the One to Whom it belongs to command and of the King of all Beings. (al-Anṣārî, [a]: fol. 165,21f.)

The ethical values of acts (their being good and bad, and obligatory and forbidden) are not grounded in the attributes of actions; they are simply prescriptions (qaḍāyâ) of God’s speech and the entailment (mûjâb) of [His] command and prohibition (al-Anṣārî, [b]: fol. 52r f.)

That God command something entails its being wise and good and correct and that He prohibit it entails its being bad and pointless. (al-Bâqillâni, 1957:185,6f.)

Thus it is that when alternative hypotheses regarding the basis of the ethical values of human actions are reviewed systematically, the Ash’arites find that “what is bad is what the King has forbidden, and consequently when one knows that something is bad the real object of the cognition is its being forbidden” (al-Anṣārî, [a]: fol. 165r,10f.). In brief, the ontological reference of “bad” is God’s prohibition. “These valuations are true of actions only by the giving of the law (bish-shar*) and not by the mind’s intuitive judgment (al-Bâqillâni, 1957:105,12f.), so that “he who does not validly know the law does not validly know that a bad action is bad” (al-Anṣārî, [a]: fol. 164v,15f.).

The Mu’tazilite thesis, that what is good and bad, obligatory and wrongly wrong, is known intuitively, is denied on the basis of the observed fact that there is no universal agreement among prudent and intelligent men regarding these values. (Confer, for example, al-Bâqillâni, 1957:122,5ff; al-Mutawallî, [a]: fol. 40r f.; al-Juwaynî, 1950:260ff. and 1948:42f.; al-Anṣārî, [a]: foll. 164r ff.)

A good or right action, then, is defined as “one for the agent of which the law presents commendation” (mâ warada sh-shar’u bith-thanâ’i ‘alâ fâ‘ilihi) (al-Mutawallî, [a]: fol. 40r f.; al-Juwaynî, 1950:258ff.) or one “the doer of which may legitimately do” (mâ li-fâ‘ilihi fa’lühû) or “one the Master of Beings judges to be good” or “one for doing which there is no threat of punishment.” A wrongful act is defined as the contrary of these, the obligatory as “that for the omission of which there is a threat of punishment,” and the forbidden as “that whose omission is obligatory.”

That the ethical values of actions cannot be rationalized is argued by al-Kiyâ’ (d. 504 A.H./1110 C.E.) in the following terms:

We refuse to say that its being good or being bad is grounded in any essential property [of the act]. Good and bad are grounded in the very giving of the law (nâfsu sh-shar*) itself, for what is good is that which the agent may legitimately do, and what is bad is that which the agent may not legitimately do, and this
is grounded in the command and the prohibition. The law-giving neither discloses anything nor does it evidentially point to anything, since what points to something and what discloses discloses something; there is, however, no real entity prior to the giving of the law which the law explains or discloses. Good and bad are grounded simply in God's command and prohibition (al-Kiyâ', [a]: fol. 119v).

The argument here is basically formal. The propositions "x is right" and "y is wrong" are ontologically significant and so are true in that and only in that they are implicitly referential to God's command and prohibition. Commands and prohibitions, however, are not statements (akhbâr) and so do not assert or deny anything about anything. Nor can they be analytically reduced to statements, since command and prohibition constitute one of the fundamental categories of sentences (aqsâm al-kalâm). Accordingly, God's command and prohibition reveal nothing concerning the nature of the actions which are allowed, commanded, or forbidden. Nor can they reveal any systematic purposefulness in His legislation. How radically this is understood is made plain where the same author argues that advantages and disadvantages are simply ascertained from the law. Be not deceived by what the jurists say, that is, that such an act is obligatory because of what is advantageous in it or is forbidden because of what is disadvantageous in it, for the law is formulated in terms adapted to the understanding of the common people and the jurists cannot employ it in a way that is formally rigorous. They are "reasons" that are acceptable as good in a juridical context, as one says "I ate and was sated," even though what the individual ate did not strictly speaking cause him to be sated; rather God simply caused things to happen in their usual sequence by making satiety occur after the act of eating. So also God makes things happen in their usual sequence by making what is advantageous occur after a certain act and makes things happen in their usual sequence by making what is disadvantageous occur after a certain act. The term "reason" ('illah) is employed thus informally and according to popular usage, even though there is no "reason" in a strict and formal sense. (al-Kiyâ', [a]: fol. 201r.)

In sum, the unbeliever may think that some actions are bad and others good, but he does not and cannot actually know them to be so since he has no knowledge of the ontological basis of the truth of ethical predicates (al-Mutawallî, [a]: fol. 41r; al-Juwaynî, 1950:262f.; and Ikhtisâr, [a]: foll. 230r, 2ff. and 232r,10ff.). God's being, moreover, is such that He is subject to no limitation, obligation, or constraint; the perfection of His being is such that it can neither be augmented nor diminished by the existence or nonexistence of any creature or by any activity or state of a creature. And consequently there can be no reason ('illah) for His action. He can have no motive or purpose for what He does (al-Ash'ârî, 1929:98,21f.; al-Bâqillânî, 1957: §55 and [a]: fol. 19v f.; al-Mutawallî, [a]: fol. 54v,16f.; al-Qushayrî, 1983:§XXII and [a]: 1:48; al-Anşârî, [a]: fol. 169r. f.). God's acts, that is, and His commands
cannot, as such, be explained or rationalized. Abū Ishāq al-Isfarā'īnī argues therefore that since it is theoretically possible that God command either of any pair of contrary acts (or any action under either of any two contrary descriptions), nothing can be obligatory prior to the revelation of the law (cited in al-Anṣārī, [a]: fol. 168r f.). “Lying is wrong since He declares it to be wrong . . . and if He were to command it there would be no argument to the contrary” (al-Ash'ārī, 1953: §171). “Prior to the revelation of the law acts have no ethical value at all” (al-Mutawallī, [a]: fol. 41v,3-5; cf. also al Baghdādī, 1928:149,1-8; and al-Juwaynī, 1978:36,7ff. and 39,13ff.). “God alone is the one who commands and there is besides Him none to command” (al-Mutawallī, [a]: fol. 42v, 2). Accordingly it is His to do whatever He will and all His acts are by definition therefore good and just, for “He is the Sovereign Master, the Almighty (al-Mālik, al-Qāhir) who is not the chattel of another and above whom there is none to permit or command or forbid . . .” (al-Ash'ārī, 1953: §170).18

THE AGENCY OF HUMAN ACTIONS: GOD AND MAN

God is the creator of every entity that comes to exist. We have therefore to see how the Ash'arites of the classical period construe the application of ethical predicates to concrete actions and how the predicates derived from these, such as “does right” (ṭādil) and “does wrong” (jā’ir), are applicable to the agent responsible for the act under its ethical descriptions.

Every agent acts by virtue of an ability to act (qudrah): “acts” (fā‘il) and “does x” (= “is agent of x”), that is, are true by definition when there comes to exist an entity which is the realized object of the agent’s ability to act (muta‘allaqu qudratihī = maqdūruhū), and the action is by definition the act or performance of the one to whose ability to act it is related as object. Again, whatever God wills comes to be and whatever He does not will does not come to be; He creates whatever occurs (= comes to exist) in the world, as it exists in itself and in its attributes. Whatever exists, therefore, exists as the realized object of God’s eternal ability to act and of His eternal volition, so that He is in an absolute sense the agent of whatever occurs in the world: all beings other than God, among them human agents and their attributes and their actions, are His creations (al-Ash'ārī, 1953: §§52 and 59; al-Bāqillāni, 1957: §477; al-Qushayrī, 1982:59,16ff.; al-Baghdādī, 1928:145,9ff.; al-Fūrakī, [a]: foll. 98r f. and 100v ff.; al-Kalābādhi, 1960:46f.). Human agents are agents of their voluntary actions in a secondary sense, for if God does not create the act and the ability to act, there is no human action (e.g., al-Ash'ārī, 1953: §§95 and 128; al-Bāqillāni, 1957: §524). Terminologically, then, one makes a distinction: God’s action is a creation (khalq = ikhtirā‘ = 'ijād), while the voluntary act of a human being is a performance (kasb, iktsāb).19
The determination of events, both good and bad, is God’s: He creates the de-liberate actions of human beings and the human individual performs his acts. The true doctrine is neither one of total autonomy on the part of the human agent nor of total determination on God’s part. The human individual has an ability to act which is a capacity of performance (istita’ah) that is sufficient for the performance of an act but is not sufficient for creating or initiating absolutely. God, thus, creates and does not perform; the human individual performs and does not create. (al-Qushayrî, 1982:61)²⁰

The human agent’s performance belongs to him and is ascribed to him as his act by virtue of its correlation to an ability to act which God creates in him at the instant of the performance of the act. “Is able to . . .” (qādirun ‘alã . . ) is verified and is true of a human agent only with respect to a performance that actually occurs and at the moment of its occurrence (e.g., al-Ash’arî, 1953:§§123ff.; al-Bāqillânî, 1957: §§488ff.; al-Juwaynî, 1950:218ff.). God creates, thus, as separate and discrete entities in the performer both the ability to perform the act and the performance at one and the same instant. We have then to ask concerning (a) the status of the human agent with respect to his act as obedience or disobedience to God’s command and (b) how the act is understood to be related under its diverse descriptions to the primary and/or secondary agent. Or, as our sources would put it, what predicates are derived as descriptions either of the creator or of the performer from the various predicates which are true of the act?

Strictly speaking, “is able to x” is true of a human agent only at the moment he actually does x. It follows then that if an agent deliberately does x when he ought (is commanded) to do y, it is not true to say that he is able to do y or, if he has done x when he ought to have done y, that he was able to do y. The Ash’arites are accused on this account of holding that God imposes upon His servants the obligation to do what in fact they are, at least in some instances, incapable of doing.²¹ This is true if “is able to . . .” is taken as a strict and formal sense as ontologically referential to a particular instance of the ability to act which has the given action as its object. Distinctions are made, however: “unable” (‘âjiz) is not synonymous with “not able” (ghayru qâdir). If the agent who is subject to God’s command voluntarily performs x as the contrary (didd) of y, that is, if he knows that he is required to do y now and chooses instead to do and does x, then it is true by definition that he omits y (tarakahû). If, however, he omits y, then it is likewise true by definition that he is not unable to do y,²² since “is unable to do y” implies that there exists no action which is both a performance of this agent and validly described either as y or as a contrary (that is, as the omission) of y.²³ By contrast, the omission is a voluntary performance and “the one who omits the act knows intuitively that he is in a state such that if he wished to cause the occurrence [of the omitted act] he would discover that he had a genuine ability [to perform it], given there is no disability (‘âfah) in him” (al-Anşârî,
The nonperformance of what is commanded is thus not described as its omission (tarkuhū) when the agent is, because of any disability (physical or circumstantial), unable to perform it. It has therefore no ethical value (hukm) insofar as it is a failure to do what under other circumstances would be required. Similarly, to do what one cannot choose to avoid, that is, what is done "by necessity" (darūratan, muḍṭarran), is not subject to ethical valuation, since the individual is formally unable to omit it. The command and prohibition are not applicable where there can be neither obedience nor disobedience, that is, where the agent cannot choose voluntarily to do or to omit what is enjoined (e.g., al-Ash'ārī, 1929:102f. and 1953: §§137f.; al-Anṣārī, [a]:fol. 143v,18ff.).

It remains, however, that God wills and creates all human performances, those which are described as disobedience (al-maʿāṣi) as well as those which are described as obedience (at-tassāt). If, then, one person deliberately and without cause strikes another so as to injure him, there occurs an event which is described by "entity," "action," "performance," "motion," "blow," "imprudence" (safah), and "injustice." The predicates of the agent which are derived from these, that is, "causes to be," "acts," "performs," "moves," "strikes," "is imprudent" (saṭḥ), and "does wrong" are not said indifferently both of God and of the human agent.

The human performance, insofar as it is an entity (shay' = dhāt = mawjūd), is attributed to God alone, since its existence is its being created and a thing’s being created is the act of creating it (al-mawjūd = al-mūjad = al-makhlūq = al-wujūd = al-ījāḍ = al-khalq). An action, as we have seen, is by definition an event that occurs as the object of an ability to act. "Action" is thus ambivalent in that voluntary human actions occur as objects of God's eternal ability to act and also of the human agent’s created capacity to act. "Acts" or "does" (fā'il) may thus be validly predicated both of God and of the human agent with respect to the same event, albeit not univocally, since when said of God "acts" is equivalent to "creates" and when said of the human agent it is equivalent to "performs."

The only events which are properly and truly ascribed to human agents as their performances are those basic acts which occur in the agent, namely, "in the locus of the particular ability to act" (maṣāḥal l-qudrah) (e.g., al-Ash'ārī, 1953: §127; al-Bāqillānī, 1957:193,13–15 and 307,18ff.; al-Juwaynī, 1969:380, 8f.; al-Furakī, [a]:fol. 88v). Thus, whereas "acts" is a general term which, since it does not of itself imply that the event takes place in the agent, may be said of God (al-Juwaynī, 1978:35,4f.), "performs" is said only of the human agent with respect to the particular act.
The more particular terms which describe the event as a given kind of entity (\textit{akhaṣṣu ʿawṣāfihi}), for example, "motion" (\textit{harakah}), or that describe it in its more specific characteristics, for example, "blow" (\textit{darb}), are said of the act as it occurs concretely in and so qualifies the being of a subject. For this reason the predicates derived from these terms, namely, "moves" (intrans.: \textit{mutaḥarrik}) and "strikes" (\textit{dārib}) are predicative only of the subject in which the event occurs (e.g., al-Ash'arī, 1953: §§89f. and 177; al-Juwaynī, 1978:34, 17ff., al-Anṣārī, [a]: foll. 82v ff.) and cannot be said of God. Finally, the law commands and prohibits various actions only under their particular descriptions, wherefore the ethical terms "imprudence" and "injustice" are said of it only as a voluntary performance (obedience or disobedience) which takes place in the human agent. For this reason "imprudent" and "unjust" are predicative of the human agent alone (e.g., al-Baghdādī, 1928:132,6ff.; al-Anṣārī, [a]: fol. 131r,2f.): the human agent performs his act for himself (\textit{li-nafṣihi}) and in himself. With respect to the occurrence of the performance so described, then, one says of God, who is in an absolute sense the agent of all being, that he creates or "does" (\textit{yaf'alu} = makes) the act "for another" (\textit{li-ghayrihi}) (e.g., al-Ash'arī, 1953: §§63ff.,96ff. and 177).

The one of us who does injustice and wrong is unjust and a wrongdoer because he is forbidden to do it and does it in himself and for himself, while the Eternal (He is exalted) creates injustice and wrong and imprudence as injustice and wrong and imprudence for another, neither for Himself nor in Himself. (Al-Bâqillânī, 1957:308,9–12)

In the next life God will reward and/or punish men in accord with the actions they perform in this. God has a right to obedience on the part of His servants (e.g., al-Anṣārī, [a]: fol. 126v,18). Their being rewarded by Him for their obedience to Him cannot, however, be construed as something which God owes them in justice; no creature can have any claim of right with respect to God (e.g., al-Anṣārī, [a]: foll. 131r,23f., 155r,19ff. and 173r ff.; al-Kalābādhī, 1960:50f.), for this would imply that there is something which God ought (that is, is obliged) to do (e.g., al-Anṣārī, 1953: §41; al-Mutawalli, [a]: foll. 54v f.; \textit{Ikhtisār}, [a]: fol. 163v,13ff.). "Just," to be sure, is one of God’s Most Beautiful Names and describes Him essentially ("\textit{ʿadil}" is \textit{ṣifatu dhāt}). What this means, though, is that He is such that it is His to do what He will (al-Qushayrī, 1983: §LIX,27 and 1968:50; al-Baghdâdī, 1928: 131,11ff., and al-Juwaynī, 1978: 39,5f.). "He is the Sovereign Master, the Allpowerful, who is not the chattel of another and above Whom there is none to permit or command or forbid. . . ." Justice for God is thus to be God, to will what He wills and command what He commands; for His servants it is to do what He commands. Since God is bound by no rule or obligation, the obedience and disobedience of men cannot constitute reasons (\textit{šī‘ā}) such as to rationalize or explain the ultimate reward or punishment of individuals. They can serve,
however, as indicative signs (dalālāt, 'amārāt) of what most likely He will do (e.g., al-Qushayrī, 1982: 61,16f. and 1965: 414; al-Mutawallī, [a]: fol. 35v,10ff.; Ikhtisār, [a]: fol. 163v,13ff.). No creature, that is to say, nor any state or activity of any creature, can be the basis or cause ('illah) or condition of God's action. We know that He will reward the faithful and punish the unbelievers simply because He has said so (e.g., al-Ash'ārī, 1953: §169) and He does not deceive. It is His to forgive what He will (e.g., al-Bāqillānī, 1957: §588) and we know that He is forgiving. (Ghaffār and ghafūr are among His Most Beautiful Names.) God's forgiveness, however, is unmotivated and wholly gratuitous (fadl); He does not forgive the sinner because of his repentance or for any other act of obedience (al-Qushayrī, 1968: 38), for He is under no obligation even to accept the sinner's repentance (al-Qushayrī, 1965: 414; al-Mutawallī, [a]: fol. 57v f.).

James Gustafson remarks that "if God were free, that is, not even self-bound to do what he wills, moral reflection with a theological reference would be impossible, for there would be no moral generalization that would be applicable to his purposes and actions. If God's action directly and strictly determined each event and human action, no moral reflection would be necessary, for what is would be what ought to be" (1978: 70). For the authors whom we are considering, however, the matter is somewhat more nuanced. Insofar as the objective or material structure of human actions is concerned, ethical reflection both with regard to general rules and to particular actions, whether public or private, belongs to the discipline of jurisprudence and the study of its basic procedures ('usūlu l-fiqh). Here rationalization in terms of reasons ('ilāl) and ends is demanded in order that one possess the rules of the shari'ah in their generality and know how to apply them, even though absolutely speaking the command and prohibition of God cannot be rationalized. Further, while it is true, absolutely speaking, that what is really true and as it should be (al-haqq) is what really is, namely, God, His judgments, and His acts (al-Qushayrī, 1983: §LXX,46, where see note 14 to the translation; al-Bayhaqī, [a]: 210; al-Juwaynī, 1950: 153; al-Anṣārī, [a]: fol. 167r,4), what ought to be in an ethical sense is not coextensive with what is, since what God commands is not coextensive with what He wills (e.g., al-Mutawallī, [a]: fol. 38r,1ff.; al-Anṣārī, [b]: foll. 88r f.; Ikhtisār, [a]: foll. 96v. ff.). Though God wills that sin and unbelief exist (otherwise they would not exist), He has nevertheless forbidden them, so that they are not ethically right. We may not, therefore, acquiesce in or approve (raḍiya) of them insofar as they occur as performances of human agents (al-Ash'ārī, 1953: §§104f.; al-Bāqillānī, 1957: §§557f.).

Finally, and most importantly perhaps, God's command requires obedience simply and obedience (at-ta'ah) consists, by definition, in the servant's conforming his action not to the will of his Lord but to His command (al-Anṣārī, [a]: fol. 159v,7ff.; Ikhtisār, [a]: fol. 98v,10f.). Since it is fundamentally and ul-
timately impossible to explain God's command in terms of any purpose or end of His whose achievement might be construed as dependent upon and resultant from our obedience, so there can be, strictly speaking, no reason or purpose for our voluntary conformity to His command that lies beyond obedience itself. The ultimate moral perfection of a human being is simply to obey God: to draw near to Him (at-таqarrubу 'ilayhï) by obeying Him. If the agent's intent in obeying God's command looks beyond the act itself as obedience, even to the expected reward of the next life, his obedience is to this extent imperfect. Viewed in this perspective, the purification of the intentions we form in acting (al-'ikhlas) is not an easy habit to acquire, and the study of the problem from a theological, from a moral, and from a psychological perspective occupies a significant place in Muslim religious writing. This, however, lies beyond the scope of the present inquiry.

In the dogmatic section which begins his Risāla 'ilā jamā'at as-ṣūfiyya al-Qushayrī, following a very carefully formulated statement of al-Wāsitī (d. 331 A.H./942 C.E.), explains God's creation of human performances in explicit and formal terms and then continues with a quotation of the ascetic, abū Sa'id al-Kharrāz (d. 286 A.H./899 C.E.), which runs

Whoever is of the opinion that he will achieve what he seeks by the exertion of much effort labors in vain; whoever is of the opinion that he will achieve it without effort longs for what will not be. (al-Qushayrī, [a]: 1:53)

NOTES

1. I want to thank the American Research Center in Egypt and the Social Science Research Council for grants that enabled me to complete the research for this study.

2. The terms value and valuation will be used throughout this essay as they are customarily employed in Islamic studies, namely, to speak generally of the moral status or character of actions, persons, and states of affairs, rather than, as often employed in contemporary ethical studies, to refer more restrictedly merely to one of three normative categories, the other two being obligation (or duty) and virtue (or moral excellence).

3. The Mu'tazilites, who preceded the Ash'arites in time, upheld the efficacy of natural reason as a basis of ethical judgments, though often supported, and sometimes extended, by revelation. The Ash'arites (followers of al-Ash'ari [d. 324 A.H./935 C.E.], who began his theological career as a Mu'tazilite) maintained that the will of God known through revelation is the only proper ground of ethical judgment. References to the Mu'tazilites throughout this essay pertain to the Basra school of Mu'tazilite theology (i.e., to the Basran Mu'tazilites) rather than to the Baghdad school thereof.


5. In the present study I have restricted consideration of the Ash'arites to those
writers who are exponents of what we might call the classical doctrine of the school and so have not treated any authors later than the generation of the students of al-Juwaynî. Al-Ghazâlî (d. 505 A.H./1111 C.E.), though belonging to this latter group, I have omitted from consideration because of his introduction of a number of elements from the Aristotelian tradition which make his ethical thought unique in the school at that period. Following the controversies evoked by the teaching of al-Hallâj (d. 309 A.H./922 C.E.) a number of Sufis took up kalâm (most of them following the doctrine of al-Ash'ârî) as a defense and hedge against extreme or heretical theories (Massignon, 1954:314f. and 1975:11,217). Since this is of importance in the historical context I have included a few citations of al-Kalâbâdhî's Kitâb at-Ta'arruf when dealing with the Ash'ârites, even though he is not strictly speaking a follower of that school.

It is important to note that in contradistinction to the Mu'tazilites and to many of the Ash'ârites after al-Ghazâlî, al-Ash'ârî and those of his followers whose works we shall here review were but little concerned to set forth and to justify an account of how events and actions take place. Their almost exclusive concern is with the logical coherence of a relatively small number of basic propositions beyond which neither inquiry nor explanation is much pursued.

6. For an analysis of the ontology of ethical predicates according to the Basran Mu'tazilites, see Frank, 1978b: 124ff.

7. That the objective rightness and wrongness of actions are logically prior to the agent's deserving praise or blame, reward or punishment, confer Hourani, 1971: 108f.

8. The construction and argumentation of this thesis has rather conspicuous Patristic parallels. Confer Frank, 1979: 120ff.

9. This too has Patristic parallels. Compare, for example, Methodius, 1917: 186ff. and Zacharias of Mytilene, 1864: coll. 1133A ff. Gumaret does not recognize the validity of a distinction between reasons and causes and, disallowing therefore a number of distinctions explicitly made in the texts, claims that the Basran Mu'tazilites were psychological determinists in their teaching concerning human voluntary actions, the determination resulting through a sequence of events which originates in God's deliberate action (1980: 34, 49, 59f.). Such a thesis is untenable. It is not only inconsistent with what the texts explicitly say concerning the relation of belief to voluntary action, but inevitably leads to a formal contradiction in their analysis of the predicates which are said of God. (Concerning this problem, see Frank, 1982.)

It will be opportune to point out here that in contrast to the Ash'ârites the Basrian Mu'tazilites held that to assert that an agent is able to do something (qâdirun 'ala .) is to assert now that he is able, in a moment subsequent to now (so long as he continues to live and to be able to act), voluntarily to perform the posited act or its like, abstain from performing it, or perform its contrary.

10. Concerning the relation of the obligations imposed by revelation (at-taklîfu s-samîl) to those which are absolute and universal (at-taklîfu l-`aqli) and the necessary subordination (that is, reducibility) of the former to the latter, see Frank, 1978b: 126ff.

11. As we have noted, compensation and reward are required for undeserved hardship and grief and so for our consistent pursuit of good actions insofar as this involves hardship. God is not, however, morally obligated to resurrect evildoers in order to punish them. His doing so is, rather, analogous (but not properly speaking equiva-
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lent) to an ethically neutral act on the part of a human agent. Cf., e.g., 'Abd al-Jabbar, 1959–65, vol. 6/1:15f. and vol. 11:85,9ff. and Ibn Mankdim, 1965:309 (where read (al-fī'f) for (al-`uql in line 13) and 326f.

12. God is absolutely just. Since His being is such that it is ontologically impossible that He receive benefit or suffer harm, it is concretely impossible (lā yajüzū) that He be motivated to anything which is not ethically good, so that He is beyond doing anything which is morally wrong; cf., e.g., ‘Abd al-Jabbar, 1959–65, vol. 8:53; and 1979:81,6ff. and, 1971:169,17ff. Contrast this with the Ash'arite interpretation of what it means to say that God is just (infra).

13. For the argument that God commands as the absolutely sovereign Master (Mālik) of all beings, confer, e.g., al-Bāqillānī, 1957:114,16ff., 341,10ff., 121,9ff.; al-Ash'ārī, 1953:§§170ff. (cited below); and compare al-Baghdādī, 1928:131,15f. and al-Anṣārī, [a]: fol. 167v,11f. See also note 18.


What the author means here by “to know validly” (taḥqīqan) is that the believer appropriates his belief and acquiesces to God's commands in an act of rationally-grounded conviction, not merely out of social conformity or the like.

I have in several places rendered shar' by “law.” As Wilfred Cantwell Smith has pointed out (1955:582ff.), shar' most properly designates God's lawgiving: His communication of His revelation to a prophet and through him to the believers, so that obedience is to God, not to the law as a non-personal entity or principle. I should suggest that “ash-shar'ah” is contextually equivalent to θέσις τοΟ νομού as employed by Patristic writers while “as-sharah” designates the body of revelation of what is to be believed and what is to be done (or not done) delivered to a particular prophet. In the present context, however, “law” will be adequate as it refers to a juridical determination of what is to be done (or is allowed to be done, or is not allowed to be done) as opposed to what is true of an entity or an action by virtue of the way it is in itself or in some concrete or intrinsic attribute of it.

15. These definitions are very common, the particular definition being generally selected on the basis of its contextual appropriateness. For a general list and discussion, see, e.g., al-Juwaynī, 1978:38ff.

16. The reference to juridical procedure envisages, for example, the kind of analogical reasoning by which from the proscription of wine made from grapes (al-khamr), which is expressly forbidden, one infers the proscription of that made from dates (annabîd), since both are intoxicating. The grounds are that the reason (‘illa) for the legal status (hukm) of wine-drinking is determined by its effect. The reasoning is juridically valid, al-Kiyyā' says, even though, absolutely speaking, there is no cause/effect relationship between the wine, the drinking, and the drinker's intoxication, since God creates each event occasionalistically. Compare also al-Juwaynī, 1969:113,3–5 and see Brunschvig, 1970:69f.

17. Since it is impossible that any action (whether it be viewed in itself or in its circumstantial context and/or in its relation to God) be more appropriate for God to command than any other, God has in fact commanded in His eternal speaking everything that can be commanded (al-Anṣārī, [a]:fol. 89r,24f.), just as He wills in
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an eternal volition everything that can be willed (e.g., al-Ash'ari, 1953: §49; al-Qushayri, 1982: 59,16f.).

18 Confer also al-Ash'ari, 1929: 100,4ff., al-Bâqillânî, 1957: 342,5-7; al-Juwaynî, 1978: 40,9-12; and al-Anşârî, [a]: fol. 180r “Mäliku l-mulk” (“al-mâlik” = the legitimate owner or master of his property) is one of God’s “Most Beautiful Names” He is the creator whose creation is His possession absolutely to do with as He will. Confer, e.g., al-Juwaynî, 1950: 196,13. Compare also al-Qushayri, 1982: 61,17f. and 1983: §LIX,3; and abû Sulaymân al-Khaṭṭâbi, cited in al-Bayhâqî, [a]: 68,2-4, s. “al-Wâli.”

19. The notion of kasb has been much discussed. Confer, for example, Gardet in EP, s.v.; Schwartz, 1976: 229-263; Frank, 1966: 13-75; and most recently Gimaret, 1980: 79ff. A very few general remarks here will have to suffice to make the basic concept clear. What is perhaps most important to keep in mind is that the authors who employ the notion and with whom we are presently concerned do not primarily seek to explain thereby how an action takes place but simply to sort out and keep clear the ontological commitments of the predicates which are said of the human agent and of God.

The word “kasb” has most frequently been rendered by “acquisition” and the verb “iktasaba” by “acquire.” “Acquire,” however, make little sense in this context and Schwartz has shown (1972: 355ff.) that “kasaba” and “iktasaba” are commonly employed in the lexicon of early classical Arabic as terms for deliberate action. I have chosen to render “kasb” by “performance” because the latter may (a) be used formally in English for a voluntary human action and may (b) be conveniently distinguished from the more general “act” or “action” and because (c) “performance” is commonly employed (albeit in an entirely different and distinct sense) for the acting out (for example, in a theater) of a work that may be described as the “creation” of another.

That a performance (kasb, iktsâb) is, by definition, the action which occurs as the object of a human being's ability to act (qudratun muhdathah) and in the “substrate of the ability to act” is true for all the Ash'arites of the classical period, regardless of what further assertions or distinctions they may make regarding the relationship between the ability to act and the event which is its object. The ability to act and the event which is its object are conceived to be distinct and separate entities. The basic sense of the thesis is, thus, that the kasb is an act or occurrence which belongs to the human agent (is strictly speaking his act) and for which he is therefore responsible under certain descriptions. (A performance is thus distinguished from an occurrence in the human subject over which he has no control. See note 25 below) Performances are almost always treated as voluntary or intentional on the part of the performer (e.g., al-Bâqillânî, 1957: 307f ; al-Mutawallî, [a]: fol. 36r,10ff. and 42r; al-Juwaynî, 1950: 215; al-Fûrakî, [a]: foll. 92v f.; and al-Kalâbadhî 1960: 48,3f.). Thus, however, is because the texts are chiefly (and with the frequently polemical contexts, exclusively) interested in those acts for which the human agent is morally responsible and these must be intentional, since intentional actions alone can be described as obedience or disobedience. There is no intrinsic or logical connection between performance and volition since the volition which has the performance as its object is itself a distinct entity. The single power of acting and the performance could be created by God without the concomitant volition, and the performance occur thus (by definition) as the agent’s performance even though unintended (cf., e.g., al-Mutawallî, [a]: fol. 36r f.), just as the volition can occur without God’s creating the ability to act (e.g.,
Similarly the agent's awareness of his act and his belief(s) concerning it are neither intrinsically nor logically required for its being his performance (e.g., al-Mutawallî, [a]: fol. 33r,3–7; al-Juwaynî, 1950: 191; Ikhtisâr, [a]: fol. 173v,11ff.). The coincidence of volition, cognition (belief), the ability to act, and the performance is simply a matter of the normal pattern in which God makes things happen (al-‘âdah). Such is the basic notion of kash, iktsâb common to all the authors with whose teaching we are here concerned. Various authorities (and in some cases single authorities in different works) express differing views concerning the kind of relationship which exists between the particular ability to act and the performance which is its object. Though some (e.g., al-Ash'ârî, abû Ishâq al-Isfârâ’înî, Ibn Fûrak, and, in one work, al-Juwaynî) will say that a performance “occurs through a created ability to act” (waqa’a bi-qudratin muhdathah), the instrumental “bi-” is variously construed and explained (at least when any explanation is offered). Others (e.g., al-Mutawallî and, in most of his works, al-Juwaynî) refuse this formulation asserting that the relationship is analogous to that which obtains between a cognition and its material object (e.g., al-Mutawallî, [a]: fol. 34v; al-Juwaynî, 1950: 210,3–6; al-Ansârî, [a]: fol. 127r,13f.). In any event, all descriptions of the event except for “performance” are true of the act whether it occurs as the human agent's performance or simply happens to him “by necessity” and unintentionally. Al-Bâqillânî alone, and for purely formal reasons, considers “being a performance” to be a real attribute (hâl, sifah) of an act which occurs as the object of a human agent's ability to act (al-Bâqillânî, [a]: fol. 48v,9–12; and 1977: §§486 and 527; al-Juwaynî, 1950: 209,2ff.; al-Ansârî, [a]: foll. 119r,12ff. and 141,8ff. and [b]: fol. 82r,10f.). Against this Ibn Fûrak, for example, insists that “is a performance” is a mere description and not referential to any attribute of the act which is so described (cited in al-Ansârî, [a]: fol. 120r,7ff.).

20. Compare al-Qushayri, 1968: 81. The terms rendered by “good” and “bad” here (namely, khayr and sharr) are not ethical terms but mean rather “good for . . .” and “bad for . . .” as beneficial or harmful.

21. On this confer al-Ash'ârî, 1929: 10lf.; al-Bâqillânî, 1957: §§504ff.; al-Juwaynî, 1950: 226ff.; al-Ansârî, [a]: fol. 142v,12ff.; Ikhtisâr, [a]: foll. 16v ff. and generally the discussion in Brunschvig, 1964: 5ff. and esp. 18ff. Most authorities explicitly recognize that God may command anything and that He need not (in fact does not in many cases) will what He commands. He cannot, however, command the logically impossible (Ikhtisâr, [a]: fol. 16iv) and thus al-Juwaynî notes (1948: 42) that it would be contradictory (mustaḥîl) for Him to command the realization of what is logically impossible including unbelief in Himself, since obedience to such a command would require the prior recognition of the existence of God as the one whose commands are to be obeyed.

22. For the definition of at-tark (omission) confer al-Juwaynî, 1978: 35. Cf. also al-Ash'ârî, 1953: 20,1f. and 58,15f.; al-Ansârî, [a]: fol. 79r,17f. and [b]: fol. 97r f.

23. This is the basic and general sense in which “is unable to . . .” is most commonly found in the kalâm. (Cf., e.g., al-Ash'ârî, 1953: §§92 and 135 and 1929: 101,13ff. and 102,8ff.; al-Bâqillânî, 1957: 294,2ff. and 298,12ff.; and generally the discussion in al-Ansârî, [a]: fol. 140v,23ff. and Ikhtisâr, [a]: foll. 155v ff.). Occasionally, some authors, because they are uncomfortable with an analysis which, as they understand it, makes a term referential to something that is non-existent (maḍûm), insist that “is unable to . . .” implies the existence of an act (an event in the agent who is described
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as unable to . . ) to which the agent is constrained (mahmûlun 'alayhi) and which happens to him by necessity.” (Confer al-Qushayrî, [a]:4:48 and al-Anşârî, [a]: fol. 141r,1–4.) Concerning the sense of “by necessity” as here employed, see note 25 below.

24. Confer al-Ash'âri, 1929: 102,12 (. . . if they wished they would be able . . .) and 1953: 64,15f. Thus it is formally true that “any one who omits an act . . . is not able to do it, even though [the act] is such that if he wished to do it, he could within the normal course of events” (la-ta'attâ lahû fi jaryî l-'âdah: al-Bâqillânî, [a]: fol. 171r,9f.) One notes that the formulations here are very carefully constructed so as not to offend the basic occasionalism of the system, while at the same time stating our common experience, namely, the normal course of events is that the agent is given the power to do it when he tries (qad jarâ l-'âdatu bi-tamkînhî mnhî 'dhâ ḥâwalahû), the normal course of events being God’s conventional way of doing things. One is reminded of G. E. Moore’s notorious thesis that “can” = “can if he wishes,” whose ambivalence becomes fully apparent in the present context. It is clear that the authors whose doctrine we are discussing would like to take a position such as that of St. John Chrysostom in commenting on Philippians 2: 13 (1862, 62: coll. 239 f.) according to which God creates (êvêryêl) the act in accord with our autonomously formed intention. The Ash’arite system, however, has consistently to regard volitions as entities and so as such created (e.g., al-Bâqillânî, 1957: §§525 and 529). Generally the subject of the origin of human intentions and volitions is scrupulously avoided, and how the human agent forms (makes) his volitions (e.g., al-Bâqillânî, 1957: 283,17f.) we are seldom told. Confer al-Anşârî, [a]: foll. 52r,9f. and 137r f.

25. The expression “by necessity” (or “by force”) has much the same ambivalence in Arabic as does “βία” in the Nichomachean Ethics. In the formal use of the kalâm it properly designates an occurrence over which the subject has no control (yuṣbaru 'alayhi), an event which is the object neither of a volition nor of any ability to act belonging to him and which therefore is not his performance but rather something which he undergoes (for example, al-Ash‘î, 1953: §§89 and 92ff.; al-Bâqillânî, [a]: fol.: 31r,11–20 and 1957: §486; al-Qushayrî, [a]: 4:48; and al-Anşârî, [a]: fol. 121v,15ff.). In some places, however, “necessity” is taken to refer to an action which the agent performs (which is thus the realized object of his ability to act and of his volition) unwillingly (mukrah), under some form of constraint or duress (‘iljâ’). (Cf., e.g., al-Anşârî, [a]: loc. cit. and Ikhtîsâr, [a]: foll. 171r ff.). The latter acceptance of the term, however, is essentially juridical. (Cf., e.g., al-Anşârî, [a]: fol. 8v,2–5 and al-Juwaynî, 1981: 84,12ff.). Such an action, that is, is juridically considered to be involuntary even though it is, strictly speaking, voluntary.

26. The events that follow as apparent consequences of our basic acts, though generally predictable and therefore in many cases expected and intended, are simply created by God according to his conventional sequence of doing things. (Cf., e.g., al-Bâqillânî, 1957: §§71 and 514ff.; al-Juwaynî, 1969: 284,4–7; and al-Kiyâ’, [a]: fol. 201r, translated above.) Such events are juridically (and ethically) significant insofar as they are (or can be) expected and intended.

27. The Ash’arites have some difficulty in arguing that God will not (or cannot) deceive His creatures. Various arguments are offered, but given the radically voluntaristic context according to which God is bound by no rule, none is really satisfactory. (Confer, for example, al-Ash‘î, 1953: §119 and al-Bâqillânî, 1957: §578.)
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