

Reason, Grace and the Freedom of Conscience

The Period of Investigation in Mu'tazilī Theology

التكليف لا يزول على طريق البناء وإن زال على طريق الابتداء

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Introduction

Of all sources that help one understand the Islamic *weltanschauung*, it is doubtless the Qur'ān that occupies the paramount position, due to its privileged status as God's revelation. An examination of religiosity in Islam, be it in relation to orthodoxy or orthopraxy, ought thus to take the Qur'ān as a point of departure, even if intending to venture further into theology (*kalām*), ethics (*akhlāq*), mysticism (*taṣawwuf*) or law (*fiqh*).

The Qur'ān, the cardinal source of Islamic ethics, is replete with verses that stress individual responsibility.¹ Moreover, ethical values are predicated on a particular conception of eschatology that makes individuals' otherworldly destiny a direct consequence of their conduct in this world.² As such, salvation or damnation are intimately related to what the Qur'ān judges as one's ethical standing. Brought together, these observations suffice to establish that individual salvation is what an Aristotelian would call the 'teleological cause' of Qur'ānic ethics.

The above, however, leaves open the question of what defines Qur'ānic ethics in concrete terms. For it is one thing to know the prescribed outcome and undergirding presumptions of a model; it is another to know what constitutes this model: its components, their inner relations and their order of priority regarding the ultimate purpose. Thus although deeds seem to be highly relevant in judging ethical value, it is belief (*īmān*) that represents the dividing

* I am grateful to Maher Jarrar, Mahmoud Youness and Nader El-Bizri (American University of Beirut) for their useful remarks. Any shortcoming is solely my responsibility.

1 Qāḍī al-Quḍāt 'Abd al-Jabbār, al-Mughnī fi Abwāb al-Tawhīd wa-l-'Adl, ed. 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Sulaymān Dunyā, Cairo, Wizārat al-Thaqāfa wa-l-Irshād al-Qawmī, v. 12, p. 464.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 108, p. 203.

line between the two sides of the Qurʾān's ethical worldview.³ On the side of belief one meets the realm of positive judgment; on the side of disbelief, the realm of negative judgment. As such, individual salvation can be said to be dependent on belief.

The status of sinning believers (*fussāq*, sing. *fāsiq*) represents one of the primal controversies in classical Islamic theology, both chronologically and conceptually. It quickly evolved into a debate concerning the nature of belief, whether it comprises doctrines only—first and foremost believing in God's unicity (*tawḥīd*)—or together with deeds (*aʿmāl*, sing. *ʿamal*). Nevertheless, these disagreements do not conceal the fact that for various parties, upholding the 'right doctrine'—i.e. the requirement of orthodoxy—is obligatory; the debate is centered on whether observing the 'proper behavior'—i.e. the requirement of orthopraxy—must also be considered part of belief.⁴ In either case, belief involves a theoretical aspect pertinent to orthodoxy; individual salvation, therefore, depends on satisfying the theoretical requirement of belief, solely or in conjunction with a practical requirement.

Though such is the state of affairs, Muslim theologians seem to have bothered more with what belief is than with how to acquire it; this still applies even when their discussions went beyond the dry doctrinal approach to belief, thus venturing into its more 'spiritual' aspect as a fruit of divine help (*luṭf*) or grace (*niʿma*). A detailed analysis of the causes of this phenomenon goes beyond the scope of this article, but it is worthwhile to allude to some factors that might have concurred to make it more prevalent with time. Among these is the nature of the question, extremely abstract and scholastic; for it makes no difference in reality if a scholar attains his conviction in a particular manner as long as he can get his 'facts' right to proceed to other disciplines of traditional Islamic scholarship. Another factor is the intimate connection of the question with a particular position on moral values that became an earmark of Muʿtazilī theology, as seen below;⁵ interest in this discussion must have then shared the unfortunate trajectory of Muʿtazilī thought. A third factor is the growing significance of law to the detriment of theology; for despite the debt of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) to theology, many scholars of law regarded the latter as irrelevant or even harmful.⁶ The rise of philosophy, moreover, proved a tough

3 *Ibid.*, p. 105, pp. 184-185, p. 252.

4 Khlaïd Blankinship, "The Early Creed" in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 42-51.

5 See section 2.1.

6 Umar F. Abd-Allah, "Theological Dimensions of Islamic Law" in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 237-238.

challenge to theologians' assertions regarding the superiority of their methods in producing categorical proofs; in post-Avicennian times, theologians became more immersed in appropriating some of his views than in preserving the teachings of classical theology.⁷ Finally, the spread of mysticism, with its express elevation of the 'heart' (*qalb*) over the 'intellect' (*aql*), must have dealt a severe blow to this discussion; the demonstrable became less appealing than the experiential.⁸

The 'right' belief, nevertheless, cannot be simply ignored or sidelined. Given its primary ethical value and overwhelming presence in Qur'ānic discourse, its relation to individual salvation guarantees it a prominent place in the Islamic *weltanschauung*. Paradoxically, its conspicuous individualistic tone brought it back to the fore with more modern discussions concerned with the freedom of conscience. Underlying this connection was the assumption that the freedom of conscience necessitates that the individual be granted time to think for himself; the expectation being that the process of thinking—if it proceeds in an ideal manner—would turn out to be a process of acquisition of the 'right' belief. Nevertheless, the question, once more, was far from being duly addressed. Unfortunately, it was reduced to a detailed problem of Islamic law, with the painful oversight issuing from conflating the two distinct concepts of accepting Islam (*islām*) and belief, as law is mainly concerned with the former.⁹ In addition, whenever it was approached from an ethical perspective, the approach was driven by ethical considerations and themes that draw more on their Western provenance than on the Qur'ānic conceptual world or on the interrelated classical discourses of theology and ethics.¹⁰

The Mu'tazilī school, which is the earliest to produce elaborate polemics on this question, was known for being very 'rational'—one would say irrationally so—in outlook.¹¹ However, the almost obsessive preoccupation with

7 Robert Wisnovsky, "Avicenna" in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard Taylor, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 132-133.

8 Toby Mayer, "Theology and Sufism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 258-259.

9 See Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed, *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam*, Burlington, Ashgate, 2004, p. 35 where the main contention, along with case studies, is confined to the legal aspect.

10 See for example Abdulaziz Sachedina, *Islam and the Challenge of Human Rights*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 41-80, pp. 185-208.

11 Reason (and all derivative terms) are used throughout this study not as a value judgment but to denote the belief that revelation is not the only source of true knowledge of the end of human existence; see Richard M. Frank, "The Science of Kalām" in *Classical Islamic Theology: The Ash'arites*, ed. Dimitri Gutas, Burlington, Ashgate, 2007, p. 22; on the problematic connotations of using these terms without much caution see Olivier Leaman,

measurements and precision in argument and judgment, coupled with the recursive nature of their theological thought, led their discussion into uncanny outcomes. Though originally growing out of concern with individual salvation and a keen awareness of God's help for humans and His care for their destiny, the Mu'tazilī analysis of the situation ended up with attempts to analyze one's belief into its smallest cognitive constituents, gauging people's speed of wit, pondering the discrete or continuous nature of time or even proposing quasi-mathematical formulations to make sure divine intervention is justly—but also economically—distributed among people. The nature of the topic seems to necessitate jumping into minor discussions that always branch from major ones. But it has also been noted that another reason could also explain this phenomenon; namely, that theology developed in a hostile context and always needed to be apologetic, which leads to interminable discussions.¹²

This uncomfortable place in which one finds himself should not, nonetheless, eclipse two important facts. (1) The first is that despite the meticulous concentration on the minutia of the salvation manual in both chapters of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, these Mu'tazilīs were aware that what matters more is grand (*jalīl*) theology, for which subtle (*daqīq; latīf*) theology is mostly an instrument. Points like the ones alluded to concerning the natural world were classified under subtle theology, whereas whatever is directly linked to individual salvation was pertinent to grand theology. (2) The second is that Mu'tazilī theology is just one rival school among many that disagree with this sort of salvific calculus, preferring instead to stick to the grander concern with human dependency and casting one's destiny in the hands of God's mercy. Therefore, it is important to recall that despite the Mu'tazilī historical precedence over other schools, it must not be seen as the exclusive representative of Islamic theology on the question.

In short, the above suffices to make necessary an interrogation of the classical Islamic tradition on the attainment of belief in relation to the question of freedom of conscience, the former being a prelude to salvation, the latter a concomitant of individualistic ethics. Since salvation is individual, the knowledge of God, which is the core of the 'right' belief, would be acquired on an individual basis through a process of rational investigation. It is worth noting that the findings of such an inquiry need not provide different answers to the current debates, at least not in the direct sense. Nevertheless, in casting light on a significant—yet marginalized—aspect of the question in the classical

"The Developed Kalām Tradition" in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 81.

12 Frank, "The Science of Kalām," pp. 16-18.

Islamic tradition, these findings should assist in broadening the horizon of discussion and further deepening its connection with relevant themes within the context of Islam's intellectual history. It is more likely that such a different perspective help not in carving out new answers but in framing novel questions.

In classical theological debates, a rational being (*ʿāqil*) is defined as a human being whose intellect has matured as to make him a subject of the divine law. Based on the above, this article examines what a rational being should do on his way towards the purpose of fulfilling his moral obligation (*taklif*) which must be met through a journey of investigation (*nazar*). Although revelation (*samʿ*; less commonly *wahy*) might be assumed to be present and accessible to such a morally obligated individual (*mukallaf*—hereupon individual), its crucial relevance to him in this stage may only take effect after a good leg of the journey has been travelled. The question is, thus, one of how and when to complete this journey, and what to account for in case of failure. As such, it will be seen that individual salvation hinges on the individual freedom of conscience, not in the sense of him being saved so long as he is acquiescing to the dictates of his conscience, but in the sense of him being saved as a result of the proper workings of both his conscience and consciousness; the former provides the ethical starting point, the latter the roadmap to proceed.

1 Moral Obligation: Theoretical Prerequisites and Ethical Justification

The state of moral affairs, independent from divine guidance as it appears in revelation, has been fiercely debated in the classical tradition of Islamic theology and jurisprudence. A number of controversial questions arise in this regard, forming a set of problems related to moral epistemology that Reinhart has dubbed “the before Revelation complex.” These include people’s responsibility in the absence of revelation, what it means for something to be legit, the way moral value is assigned to an act and the significance of thanking the benefactor.¹³ Eventually, “the before Revelation” question, at its most fundamental, interrogates boundaries: those of Islam, of revelation and of community.¹⁴

In light of the previous discussion, it becomes plausible to propose that the problem of attainment of belief is a problem of boundary in theology. True, the situation with which the study is concerned belongs to the ‘before revelation’

13 A. Kevin Reinhart, *Before Revelation: The Boundaries of Muslim Moral Thought*, Albany, N.Y., State University of New York Press, 1995, pp. 7-8.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

complex, since the assumed framework is that of Mu‘tazilī theology with its sharply defined division of the realms of reason and revelation. Nevertheless, it is not the analysis of the static situation, seen in the absence of revelation, that constitutes the subject of interest here. Rather, it is the dynamic status of moving across the boundary of belief and non-belief that defines the problem.

Following a position that stresses the objectivity of ethical values, Mu‘tazilī theology highlights two different types of moral obligations to be performed by individuals. The first type is rational moral obligation (*taklīf ‘aqlī*), which is independent from revelation and is purely premised on being characterized by sound reasoning; examples of this type include specific moral judgments such as the obligatoriness of expressing gratitude and of returning deposits, the laudability of charity and the vileness of injustice. The second type is revelational moral obligation (*taklīf sam‘ī*; *taklīf shar‘ī*), which follows the injunctions of revelation as prescribed in the Qur‘ān and the Prophetic tradition and cannot be established by independent reasoning; this type constitutes the corpus of Islamic legal rulings in both the ritual and the social aspects. These two types of moral obligation are related in a particular manner: revelational moral obligations function as instances of divine help, defined as that upon which an individual chooses or comes closer to meeting his obligation which he would have not done otherwise.¹⁵ Once fulfilled, revelational moral obligations assist individuals in meeting their rational moral obligations.¹⁶

A point here is worth noting regarding the type and extent of knowledge required for an individual to be brought under moral obligation. Although this has been thoroughly debated, it suffices to affirm that the ability to understand the basics of demonstration (*al-‘ilm bi-uṣūl al-adilla*) is acknowledged as

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- 15 ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 13, pp. 9–11; al-Ḥasan b. Aḥmad Ibn Mattawayh, *al-Majmū‘ fi al-Muḥīṭ bi-l-Taklīf*, ed. J. J. Houben, D. Gimaret, and J. Peters, Beirut, Dār al-Mashriq, 1965–99, v. 3, pp. 328–329; Aḥmad b. Ḥusayn Mānkdim, *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-Khamsa*, ed. ‘Abd al-Karīm ‘Uthmān, Cairo, Maktabat Wihba, 1965, pp. 519–520; Al-Sharīf ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Mūsawī al-Murtaḍā, *al-Dhakhīra fi ‘Ilm al-Kalām*, ed. Aḥmad al-Ḥusaynī, Qum, Mu‘assasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī, 1990, p. 186; Al-Sharīf ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Mūsawī al-Murtaḍā, *Sharḥ Jumal al-‘Ilm wa-l-‘Amal*, ed. Ya‘qūb al-Ja‘farī al-Marāghī, Tehran, Dār al-Uswa, 1998, p. 107; see the detailed presentation of the concept in ‘Abd al-Karīm ‘Uthmān, *Naẓariyyat al-Taklīf: Ārā’ al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Kalāmīyya*, Beirut, Mu‘assasat al-Risāla, 1971, pp. 386–399.
- 16 ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 15, pp. 32–34 reports a debate on whether acts that belong to revelational moral obligations function as instances of divine help towards meeting rational moral obligations exclusively or towards other revelational moral obligations; however, the ultimate outcome leads to rational moral obligations, though with additional intermediary steps.

an indispensable component for the maturity of intellect and thus the establishment of rational moral obligation;¹⁷ without it, an individual loses rational character. As for revelational moral obligation, it is more controversial. If one is deprived from its theoretical requirements—such as the proper examination of transmitted reports, then this individual would still be rational; nevertheless, he would be absolved from revelational moral obligation since there would be no way for him to establish a proper knowledge of it.¹⁸

The obligatoriness of expressing gratitude, itself a rational moral obligation, is taken to be the root of religious experience: the great benefits enjoyed by individuals require an expression of gratitude towards the benevolent divine Benefactor (*mun'im*) for providing such a commodious environment, otherwise punishment will be deserved for the utter ingratitude of failing to thank Him as one should.¹⁹ To support the Mu'tazilī justification of obeying God's orders, the necessary caveat is a dictate of moral theory which proves to be the sole deontological component in Mu'tazilī ethics. The vileness of lying makes it imperative to trust God's threat to punish unbelievers; otherwise, there would be no reason to carry out His commands, since it will be unclear whether obeying or disobeying them are different in terms of their consequences.²⁰

The morally anthropomorphic conception of God notwithstanding, thanking the Benefactor (*shukr al-mun'im*) was crowned as the sufficient explanation of religion by Mu'tazilīs: the reason one ought to worship God is due to the obligation to thank Him for His benevolence. Paradoxically, the Mu'tazilīs' bitter opponents, the pietists, held thanksgiving in great esteem, but as a

17 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 11, pp. 375-387; Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū'*, v. 1, pp. 5-7, 3, p. 237; for a survey of the possible meanings of the maturation of intellect see 'Uthmān, *Naẓariyya*, pp. 60-64.

18 Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū'*, v. 1, pp. 5-7, more significantly v. 3, p. 216; Murtaḍā, *Dhakhīra*, 184. The list provided by Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr b. Baḥr al-Jāhīz, *Risālat al-'Uthmāniyya*, ed. 'Abd al-Salām Hārūn, Cairo, Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1955, pp. 7-8 and pp. 15-17 should be seen in the context of his fervent polemic and extravagant style, first and foremost. The prevailing character of the traits listed there, however, is the individual's ability to guard against deception, as a necessary means to distinguish true prophets from impostors.

19 The history of the concept of thanking the benefactor merits a separate study; for its meanings in pre-Islamic and Qur'ānic discourse see Reinhart, *Before Revelation*, pp. 107-111; for its significance in the social life of the 'Abbāsīd times, which is the context of most theologians covered in this piece, see Roy Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1980, pp. 79-96.

20 Sophia Vasalou, *Moral Agents and Their Deserts: The Character of Mu'tazilite Ethics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008, p. 20, pp. 85-86.

necessary religious obligation, not as a justification of theology.²¹ The fear of punishment, a powerful motive as it stands towards investigating the existence and attributes of God in order to learn how to thank Him, may not arise in many individuals due to the lack of evidence for His existence. In such cases, it must be instilled in them either through their social context or—which is unlikely—through direct divine intervention by giving a hint (*khātir*)²² in a particular form;²³ only then can they start investigation.²⁴

- 21 Reinhart, *Before Revelation*, p. 118. Whether the waning of the Mu'tazilī position, i.e. the analogy of thanking God and thanking a king, has to do with Muslims' increasing intellectual 'sophistication' (Reinhart, *Before Revelation*, p. 120) can be questioned, especially given the fact that the other position, which is more cognizant of God as 'Something other', does not seem to be keeping the same level of 'sophistication' when it comes to other—arguably more anthropomorphic and hence less 'sophisticated' aspects—of the divine.
- 22 This is reflected in the Qur'ānic episode of Abraham (Cor 6, 76-79). Despite his maturity of intellect, he still needed a divine hint in the form of some thoughts crossing his mind before he embarked on investigation; Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wil Āy al-Qur'ān*, ed. Ṣidqī Jamīl al-'Aṭṭār, Beirut, Dār al-Fikr, 1995, v. 7, p. 326; Al-Sharīf 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Mūsawī al-Murtaḍā, *Tanzīh al-Anbiyā' wa-l-'Imma*, ed. Fāris Ḥassūn Karīm, Qum, 1998, p. 39; Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Tūsī, *Al-Tibyān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥabīb Qaṣīr, Qum, Maktab al-'Ilām al-Islāmī, 1989, v. 4, pp. 182-183; Al-Faḍl b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabrisī, *Majma' al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, Beirut, Mu'assasat al-'Alāmī, 1995, v. 4, p. 93; Jārullāh Maḥmūd b. 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, Cairo, Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1966, v. 2, pp. 30-31; Al-Ḥusayn b. Mas'ūd al-Baghawī, *Ma'ālim al-Tanzīl fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, ed. al-'Akk, Beirut, Dār al-Ma'rifa, n.d., v. 2, p. 110; Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, Cairo, 1932-1964, v. 13, p. 48, p. 51. See the controversy surrounding the hint in Reinhart, *Before Revelation*, pp. 156-157.
- 23 The discussion of the nature of this divine hint is a lengthy one, mostly concerning its form (i.e. written, sent in a dream, whispered by angels, received from prophets, heard from scholars, read in books etc.); 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 12, pp. 396-398; Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū'*, v. 3, pp. 244-246; Murtaḍā, *Dhakhīra*, pp. 171-179; Al-Sharīf 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Mūsawī Murtaḍā, *Rasā'il al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā*, ed. Aḥmad al-Ḥusaynī, Qum, Dār al-Qur'ān al-Karīm, 1985-1990, 1:128; Mānkdmī, *Sharḥ*, p. 68; Rukn al-Dīn Maḥmūd b. Muḥammad Ibn al-Malāḥimī, *al-Mu'tamad fī Uṣūl al-Dīn*, ed. Wilferd Madelung, Tehran, Written Heritage Center, 2012, p. 76; Rukn al-Dīn Maḥmūd b. Muḥammad Ibn al-Malāḥimī, *al-Fā'iḳ fī Uṣūl al-Dīn*, ed. Wilferd Madelung and Martin McDermott, Tehran, Iranian Institute of Philosophy, 2007, pp. 378-380. A rare testimony to the occurrence of this hint is recorded in Ibn al-Malāḥimī's *Fā'iḳ*, pp. 380-381: in an uncharacteristic personal account, he reports how he first thought of the cause of the existence of clouds, then decided to turn to his father for an answer. This brief episode combines both scenarios for the inception of religious experience: that of divine hint (the question triggered by the clouds) and that of social context (seeking people's advice).

2 Knowing God: Rationale and Restrictions

2.1 *Rationale*

Since an individual is required to abide by both types of moral obligation, it becomes essential that he acquire a proper knowledge of God. Without such knowledge, revelational moral obligations cannot be observed due to the lack of instructions on how to do so: it is only God, not human reason, who defines and valorizes them. For their *raison d'être* is that they be done out of obedience to God and not due to their intrinsic value.²⁵ This lack would automatically absolve him from observing these obligations. "Obligation to the impossible" (*al-taklīf bi-mā lā yutāq*), defined as requiring individuals to do what they cannot, due to incapacity for which they are not responsible, is vile according to Mu'tazilī ethics; therefore, it cannot be imposed by God. But since these revelational moral obligations must be observed as they are instances of divine help that facilitate the performance of rational moral obligations, an individual must acquire the prerequisite to them, i.e. the knowledge of God. In addition, the knowledge of God is essential in helping individuals towards carrying out their rational moral obligations in a different manner: it undergirds one's certainty in deserving punishment (*'iqāb*) and reward (*thawāb*). In fact, it is the firm conviction in the desert (*istiḥqāq*) of reward and punishment that constitutes divine help; in the process of acquiring the knowledge of God, all other aspects have their value inasmuch as they lead to it. Only once this desert is established can one speak of divine help provided in the knowledge of God.²⁶

The knowledge of God is thus the root of all revelational moral obligations and gains double obligatoriness: on the one hand, it is a concomitant of the rational moral obligation of expressing gratitude; on the other hand, it is a necessary condition to carry out this expression in the appropriate way prescribed by God, which in turn assists an individual in meeting the requirements of rational moral obligations. The knowledge of God must therefore be internalized by the believer in a categorical conviction that would lead him to effect a

24 A relevant discussion is that concerning how far this hint is expected to lead an individual in his investigation, i.e. whether it is sufficient to instill in him the fear of ingratitude or also to instruct him on the right point of departure to start with investigation; 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 12, pp. 389-391; Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū'*, v. 2, p. 237.

25 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 12, p. 517; Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū'*, v. 2, pp. 355-359; Murtaḍā, *Dhakhīra*, pp. 397-398; see Reinhart, *Before Revelation*, p. 156. for a description of how revelation 'supplements' but does not 'determine' the judgments of reason.

26 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 12, pp. 416-417; Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū'*, v. 2, p. 263; Ibn al-Malāḥimī, *Fā'iqa*, p. 382, p. 385.

moral change toward the fulfillment of his various obligations. But in its most insipid expression, the exact content of such knowledge can be summed in a minimum which amounts to a catechism attesting to God's unity, eternity, incorporeality, omnipotence, omniscience and wisdom in sending messengers. This last requirement is necessary inasmuch as it establishes the legitimacy of revelational moral obligation; for no such obligation can be separated from the call of messengers,²⁷ whereas the absence of divine message restricts moral obligation to the first type.²⁸ In all these doctrines, the detailed arguments are not part of this minimum, but only required of scholars.²⁹

Such is the reasoning that leads to ascribing to the knowledge of God a front seat in the Mu'tazilī logical and chronological order of moral obligations. All other rational moral obligations still hold due to their intrinsic ethical value; nevertheless, they need a context for them to be performed (one may not encounter an occasion to avoid injustice or to thank a benefactor or to return a deposit . . .). As for the knowledge of God, it is unconditionally and universally required of all individuals at a primal point of their religious experience. The debate whether it is the very first obligation or not has to do with whether the investigation necessary to arrive at this knowledge is considered a separate obligation or one whose value is merely instrumental inasmuch as it leads to the ultimate purpose of acquiring it.³⁰ But in either case, investigation is the

27 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 15, pp. 26-29; Murtaḍā, *Rasā'il*, v. 2, pp. 317-318; Al-Hākim al-Muḥassin b. Karāma al-Jishumī, *Taḥkīm al-Uqūl fī Taṣḥīḥ al-Uṣūl*, ed. 'Abd al-Salām b. 'Abbās al-Wajīh, Ṣan'ā, Mu'assasat al-Imām Zayd al-Thaqāfiyya, 2008, pp. 36-37.

28 Thus before the Prophet received revelation, he was only bound to follow the dictates of reason, without legal obligations; Abū al-Fatḥ al-Karājaki, *Kanz al-Fawā'id*, Tehran, lithograph, 1913, p. 119; the position is reported in Al-Sharīf 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Mūsawī al-Murtaḍā, *al-Dharī'a ilā Uṣūl al-Sharī'a*, Qum, Mu'assasat al-Imām al-Ṣādiq, 2009, p. 412. though the author does not endorse it.

29 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 12, pp. 154-155, p. 370; Mānkdim, *Sharḥ*, pp. 123-125; Ibn al-Malāḥimī, *Mu'tamad*, pp. 589-590, where Ibn al-Malāḥimī is aware of the different expectations; the above minimum he claims to be known by primary arguments (*awā'il al-adilla*), which suffices to bring an individual under moral obligation of both types; cf. a late Ash'arī position, which is similar, in 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-Jurjānī, *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif*, Cairo, Maṭba'at al-Sa'āda, 1907, v. 1, p. 256.

30 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 12, p. 374-377; Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū'*, 1, p. 10; Jishumī, *Taḥkīm*, pp. 47-48; Mānkdim, *Sharḥ*, pp. 68-70; Ibn al-Malāḥimī, *Fā'iḳ*, pp. 7-9, p. 218; *Idem.*, *Mu'tamad*, pp. 77-78; in *Fā'iḳ*, p. 382, Ibn al-Malāḥimī rules that the disagreement between Baṣrans and Baghdadis over the question is merely a matter of phrasing (*'ibāra*). Even within the Ash'arī camp, with its different point of departure, the equivalent debate is seen in the same light; 'Abd al-Malik b. 'Abdullāh al-Juwaynī, *al-Shāmil fī Uṣūl al-Dīn*, Edited by 'Alī Sāmī al-Nashshār, Fayṣal 'Awn and Suhayr Mukhtār, Alexandria, Munsha'at

first active step required from an individual in the process of fulfilling his revelational moral obligation.

2.2 *Restrictions*

Having established this position, early Mu'tazilī masters proposed that an individual has a period of time (*muhla*) where he is required to investigate God's existence and His attributes; this period is the time separating the inception of his contemplation about the possibility of punishment at the hands of a possible benefactor and his arrival at the conclusions that allow him to learn his revelational moral obligations, i.e. the teachings of the right religion. As such, this period might be considered a grace period in respect to revelational moral obligations; during it, an individual is exempt from the rulings of religious law.³¹

The period of investigation (*muhlat al-naẓar*) is thus founded on the Mu'tazilī view of objective ethical value, coupled with the distinction between the different types of moral obligations and their peculiar relation with each other and with God's transcendence. Thus, God's benevolence makes it incumbent upon people to thank Him as their rational moral obligation. His transcendence renders it impossible for them to learn the proper way of doing so, as they are only familiar with human interactions that are ridden with need and emotions, all of which unascrivable to God. His justice, known by reason to be an attribute of His, necessitates that people be given such knowledge, lest the requirement of thanksgiving become an obligation to the impossible. In His benevolence He ruled that this knowledge be acquired and not implanted effortlessly in individuals' intellect, since the effort they would exert in acquiring it would increase their otherworldly rewards. As such, the knowledge of God is not simply an obligation that comes before others, not even in the logical sense. Beyond that, it is the root from which all other obligations branch; it is the *par excellence* instance of divine help, which is incumbent upon God to provide.³² The last aspect is of paramount importance; it justifies the urgency to analyze the different aspects of this knowledge, namely its content, scope and—most importantly for this article—the process of acquiring it. Nevertheless,

al-Ma'ārif, 1969, p. 122. But if the scope of the debate is widened, then the question is no longer merely verbal. Whoever holds that belief—not investigation—is the first obligation would not consider it a sin to neglect the latter; for an individual would have then met his obligation without having to start it off by the act of investigation; see the elaborate discussion in Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Bahādir al-Zarkashī, *al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ fī Uṣūl al-Fiqh*, ed. Muḥammad Tāmir, Beirut, Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2000, v. 1, p. 37.

31 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 17, pp. 94-102.

32 Vasalou, *Moral Agents*, p. 71.

it is also significant to study whether the failure to arrive at the desired 'right' outcome is a legitimate option—as one might expect from an absolutist position on the freedom of conscience. But in case it is not legitimate—as might well be the case in the context of an exclusivist religious discourse, one ought to investigate the possible consequences of such failure.

The foregoing exposé is not restricted to Mu'tazilī theology proper. The above-mentioned view was shared by Muslim theologians who were heavily influenced by Mu'tazilī teachings though not belonging to the Mu'tazilī school in the full-fledged sense; for example, many Shī'ī theologians studied under Mu'tazilī masters and appropriated parts of their corpus, while still maintaining a distinct Shī'ī position on dogmatic questions.³³ As for those who deny the objective value of ethical acts, especially the Ash'arīs, a number of positions concur to produce a different reading: there is only one type of moral obligation, i.e. revelational moral obligation; nothing can be said to be incumbent upon God and there is no such thing as divine help the way Mu'tazilīs define it.³⁴ The knowledge of God, for them, is still obligatory; but its importance is seriously compromised: it is something that is known to be obligatory by revelation, whether in the form of consensus or *prima facie* scriptural dicta. It is

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- 33 Two prominent examples, in Imāmī Shī'ism, are al-Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 413/1022) and al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (d. 436/1044). On the former see M. McDermott, *The Theology of al-Shaikh al-Mufid*, Beirut, Dār al-Mashriq, 1978, *passim.*; on the latter, Hussein Abdulsater, *The Climax of Speculative Theology in Būyid Shī'ism*, Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 2013, *passim.* Zaydī Shī'ism was even more influenced by Mu'tazilī theology, as seen in the fact that the Mu'tazilī tradition was eventually preserved, though partially, in the Zaydī stronghold of Yemen; for this article, it suffices to mention the example of the Daylamite Zaydī scholar al-Ḥākim al-Jishumī (d. 494/1101).
- 34 The centrality of ethical theory in the theological divergences between various sects has been noted early on by prominent Ash'arī theologians. In his creed *al-Irshād*, Juwaynī (d. 478/1185) repeatedly states that rejecting the objective moral value of acts suffices to refute the Mu'tazilī positions on pain, compensation, grace, worldly best interest, moral obligation, punishment and reward. Still unsatisfied with this, he asserts that upholding the moral value of acts is the cornerstone of the *Barāhima*'s (on them see Sarah Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam: Ibn al-Rawāndī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī and Their Impact on Islamic Thought*, Leiden, Brill, 1999, pp. 145-162) rejection of prophethood; 'Abd al-Malik b. 'Abdullāh al-Juwaynī, *al-Irshād ilā Qawāṭi' al-Adilla fi Uṣūl al-'Itiqād*, ed. Muḥammad Yūsuf Mūsā and 'Alī 'Abd al-Mun'im 'Abd al-Ḥamīd, Cairo, Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1950, p. 279, p. 281, p. 286, p. 295, p. 296, p. 303; Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Rāzī, *al-Arba'in fi Uṣūl al-Dīn* ed. Aḥmad Ḥijāzī al-Saqqā, Cairo, Maktabat al-Kulliyāt al-Azhariyya, 1986, 2, p. 326. See also the position of the Ḥanbalī Abū Ya'lā al-Farrā' (d. 458/1066) in his *al-Mu'tamad fi Uṣūl al-Dīn*, ed. Wadī' Ḥaddād, Beirut, Dār al-Mashriq, 1974, pp. 21-22.

still prior, chronologically and logically, to other obligations; but it is not what bestows meaning on subsequent acts carried out by the observant Muslim. Although the question is still given due attention in various works of creed among the upholders of this position on ethical value, the focus is there shifted towards matters related to what an individual should learn during this period of investigation rather than the characteristics of this period that would make it a manifestation of divine justice and help.³⁵

3 The Period of Investigation: Utility, Consequences and Properties

The status of an investigating individual, during this period, is that of unbelief, although he has not yet endorsed beliefs that oppose the fundamentals of faith. This is so because this individual is in a state of doubt which necessitates the absence of any affirmed beliefs, albeit not being tantamount to unbelief in itself. Only after ridding himself of doubt would he be able to become a believer.³⁶ This position, nevertheless, leads to the conclusion that every individual, upon his maturity of intellect, is to be considered an unbeliever till he concludes the period of investigation properly. Such a position might contradict the axiomatic ethical rejection of the obligation to the impossible: no one can escape such a phase of unbelief in his religious development, since there will always be a phase when an individual has not yet arrived at the required conclusions. A late proposed solution was to take this form of unbelief to be identical to that said of children and insane individuals, i.e. neither punishment nor reward can be meted out to whoever dies during this phase.³⁷ As such, the ruling that this individual is an unbeliever becomes a statement

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- 35 Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Ṭayyib al-Bāqillānī, *al-Inṣāf fi mā Yajib l'tiqāduh wa-lā Yajūz al-Jahl bih*, ed. 'Imād al-Dīn Aḥmad Ḥaydar, Beirut, 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1986, p. 21, p. 28, p. 39 (quoting al-Ash'arī); Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Ṭayyib al-Bāqillānī, *al-Taqrīb wa-l-Irshād*, ed. 'Abd al-Ḥamīd 'Alī Abū Zunayd, Beirut, Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1998, v. 1, pp. 215-216; Juwaynī, *Irshād*, v. 3, pp. 8-11; *Idem.*, *al-'Aqida al-Nizāmīyya fi al-Arkān al-Islāmīyya*, ed. Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī, Cairo, al-Maktaba al-Azhariyya, 1992, pp. 58-60; *Idem.*, *Shāmīl*, p. 115, p. 120; Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Rāzī, *al-Muḥaṣṣal*, ed. Muḥammad Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥalabī, Cairo, al-Maṭba'a al-Ḥusayniyya al-Miṣriyya, 1903, p. 28 (though using a different argument to establish the same position); Jurjānī, *Sharḥ*, v. 1, pp. 251-252. See also Farrā', *Mu'tamad*, p. 21 for a Ḥanbalī view on the question.
- 36 Ibn al-Malāḥimī, *Fā'iḳ*, pp. 512-513, claims that this position is a matter of consensus among the Mu'tazilīs; cf. Murtaḍā, *Dhakhīra*, p. 534.
- 37 Zayn al-Dīn b. 'Alī al-Jubā'ī al-Shahīd al-Thānī, *Ḥaqā'iq al-Īmān*, ed. Mahdī Rajā'ī, Qum, Maktabat Āyatullāh Mar'āshī Najafī, 1989, pp. 133-135.

concerning his convictions, without voicing a judgment on his deserved treatment in the afterlife.

Arguing, however, for the necessity of a period of investigation is too idealistic and simplistic, as many Mu'tazilī masters were quick to notice; for a number of problems arise immediately once this proposition is made. If a person acquires this knowledge of the existence of God and His attributes, how can it be verified that it has had any practical significance regarding his revelational moral obligations? What if he, for one reason or another, is committing mistakes in the process of making the necessary steps towards establishing this knowledge, thus always stumbling midway before arriving where he should? If he proceeds very slowly, does it leave him with an open window of time that might delay his death till he makes it? Would this not lead to the possibility of an infinite lifespan? If this scenario is to be rejected, how can we measure the exact interval of time needed for the process to be justly completed? Also, in case it is his fault to have failed to acquire this knowledge, is his moral obligation restricted to the rational type for the rest of his life, or is the revelational type also included? What, then, of his desert in the afterlife?

3.1 *Utility*

3.1.1 The Verification Period

The question regarding the practical significance of the knowledge of God is to be seen in light of the theory of divine help as understood within the framework of Mu'tazilī ethics. Since the ultimate value of any ethical act is to be weighed against its contribution to an individual's desert of reward or punishment, then the best way to verify the benefit of the knowledge of God must be through checking whether it leads an individual to meet his obligations—whether in refraining from a vile (*qabīḥ*) act or performing a good one (*ḥasan*). To acquire the knowledge of reward and punishment—and *a fortiori* of God—is therefore a mere prelude to the real ethical test where the effect of divine help on an individual's behavior can be gauged. An individual must thus be given sufficient time, after having reasoned to the right theoretical conclusions concerning religious matters, in which he is able to meet his obligation and pass the test. Such a period, which we shall dub 'the verification period',³⁸ is chronologically posterior to the period of investigation; but as it furnishes the latter with its *raison d'être*, it will be covered first, this way also

38 Arabic sources do not use a particular term to refer to the concept, but rather employ phrases such as "[the individual] must endure" (*lā budda min an yabqā*) or "the least [period of time an individual] must be left to endure" (*aqall mā yajib al-tabqīya*); see 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 12, p. 419.

reflecting the overwhelmingly consequentialist mindset of Mu‘tazilī theology and ethics. The verification period seems to have been introduced by the head Mu‘tazilī theologian ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1024) as a necessary concomitant of moral obligation.³⁹ The obligatory act which constitutes the test must be an act whose ethical value is known through revelation, i.e. a revelational moral obligation. This is because only such acts indicate obedience to God. As for the dictates of rational moral obligation, their judgment concerning the ethical value of acts is independent from the knowledge of God; they cannot thus be used to test the effect of this knowledge.

The exact length of the verification period appears nowhere to have been mentioned accurately. The Mu‘tazilī masters were content, it seems, to preserve the perfection of divine morality in generic terms, trusting that God, in His wisdom and justice, will never take the life of an individual who reasoned to know Him without yet benefiting from such knowledge. But it is still possible to satisfy one’s curiosity in light of the plethora of acts in the taxonomy of Mu‘tazilī ethics. It must be recalled that to will is itself an act that belongs to the class of mental acts (*af‘āl al-qulūb*).⁴⁰ Of course, one must always keep in mind that will, for our theologians, did not constitute a vague inclination towards the execution of an act; rather, it meant a clear determination without a shred of hesitance, doubt or inadvertence—as their elaborate discussions of these fine distinctions of human intentionality show.⁴¹ Only if understood in this manner can will be seen as a moral act sufficient to fulfill an individual’s moral obligation. Its ethical value is independent from the act that follows it; to will an act and to do it are two separate acts.⁴² Since the act of will takes

39 ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 12, pp. 419-421; Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū‘*, v. 1, p. 9, 3, pp. 263-264; although Abū Hāshim (d. 321/933) and his father Abū ‘Alī (d. 303/915) disagreed on the particular moral obligation which serves as a minimum for an individual to observe, they both did not consider the verification period; rather, their discussion was centered on the beliefs that must be professed during the investigation period.

40 ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 6{2}, pp. 28-30; Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū‘*, v. 2, pp. 267-268; Murtaḍā, *Dhakhīra*, p. 206.

41 On the moral aspect of will see ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 6{2}, pp. 91-104; Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū‘*, v. 2, pp. 305-307; Al-Sharīf ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Mūsawī al-Murtaḍā, *al-Mulakhkhaṣ fī Uṣūl al-Dīn*, ed. Muḥammad Riḍā Anṣārī Qummī, Tehran, Kitābkhāna-yi Majlis-i Shūrā-yi Islāmī, 2000, pp. 347-348; *Idem.*, *Sharḥ Jumal*, p. 88; cf. Richard M. Frank, “The Autonomy of the Human Agent in the Teaching of ‘Abd al-Jabbār” in *Classical Islamic Theology: The Ash‘arites*, ed. Dimitri Gutas, Burlington, Ashgate, 2007, pp. 329-347.

42 The independence of the act of will from other acts is a necessary concomitant of two Mu‘tazilī positions: first, they stipulate the agent’s awareness of the nature of his act for him to be blameworthy or praiseworthy; second, certain acts are defined not by their

the shortest period of time compared to other acts, it is safe to judge that the verification period can be as short as the moment needed for one to make a deliberate decision to observe (or neglect) a revelational moral obligation out of obedience (or disobedience) to God; the instant the decision is made, one will have used his opportunity to put his knowledge of God in effect.⁴³ Thus with acts the minimum revelational moral obligation is executing the act itself or just establishing a deliberate will to do so, which is the corresponding mental act.

But there is still room for a different scenario, where the minimum moral obligation is purely theoretical, consisting of endorsing a particular doctrine which cannot be proven by reason, thereby confirming an individual's true acceptance of divine command shown in prophetic authority. Here, the distinction between willing an act and doing it no longer holds: willing to accept is itself accepting. It remains, nevertheless, to define a proper minimal doctrine that can satisfy this function in the hypothetical scenario of prophets whose divinely commissioned message does not include legal obligations—a scenario allowed by many theologians.⁴⁴ One thus has to search for a gap in the 'rational' structure of theology that can only be filled by revelation, though without legal content. Here, the need to reinforce Mu'tazilī dogma reveals itself most conspicuously: since categorical belief in the eternal punishment of

apparent image but by the will of the agent as such; for example, giving money to poor people is an act whose meaning comes solely from the agent's will, as the image of giving it for charity or bribery is one, even in the eyes of a recipient not privy to the donor's will. A pertinent discussion is that of the moral value of intention (*nīyya*), which is closely related to will. The Prophetic tradition "A believer's intention is better than his work" (*nīyyat al-mu'min khayr^{un} min 'amalih*) poses a problem as to how mere intention—an inconsequential effortless mental act—can surpass an actual one. In addition, an act that lacks intention is not good in the first place, so it cannot be party to the relation based on comparatives. The Imāmī scholar al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā struggles through interpretations, opting primarily for reading the phrase "*khayr^{un} min*" in non-comparative terms to mean "good of," thus rendering the tradition as "A believer's intention is a good act of his;" otherwise, the best option left, which Murtaḍā does not prefer, is that the intention to do acts of great goodness is better than actually doing acts of little goodness; Al-Sharīf 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Mūsawī al-Murtaḍā, *Amālī al-Murtaḍā: Ghurar al-Fawā'id wa-Durar al-Qalā'id*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, Cairo, Dār Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya, 1954, v. 2, pp. 267-270; *Idem.*, *Rasā'il*, v. 1, p. 120, v. 3, pp. 235-239.

43 Hence the phrasing "the shortest of the short periods of time" (*aqall qalīl al-awqāt*), used by 'Abd al-Jabbār in his description of the verification period; 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 12, p. 421.

44 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 15, pp. 19-21; Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū'*, v. 3, pp. 438-441; Murtaḍā, *Dhakhīra*, pp. 323-324.

sinner cannot be established by reason due to the existing prospect of divine pardon, the only source for us to know about the sinner's real fate is revelation. Revelation thus fills the remaining gap in the corpus of ontologically consequential moral problems in Mu'tazilī creed. Therefore, if a person—upon completing his investigation—only moves from being skeptical about the damnation of sinners to becoming certain about it, he will have met a revelational moral obligation which suffices to show that he has gone through the verification period successfully.⁴⁵

3.1.2 Divine Help: Proper Management and Prudent Delivery

But once more, one is faced by the recursive nature of classical theology. If the knowledge of God is divine help, then an individual must know that once he starts investigating, he will be kept alive by God until he is done with the process of reasoning to know Him and thereafter granted the verification period as a window of testing the presumably acquired knowledge; dying before one gets through this knowledge and the subsequent verification period will bring about theological difficulties pertaining to the absurdity of providing divine help without allowing time for it to be exploited—contrary to God's wisdom. The problem that arises is related to the controversial concept of temptation (*ighrā'*): whoever knows that he is going to live for a certain period of time is tempted to commit sins, counting on the fact that he will be able to repent afterwards. This challenge invited a novel explanation. In the knowledge of God, divine help lies in acquiring certitude in the desert of punishment and reward, since this certitude is what motivates individuals most towards performing the required acts. Therefore, it is normal to assume that whatever comes before acquiring this certitude is important only as a necessary prelude to arrive at it. Therefore, divine help is not to be distributed among all the steps of the thought process that lead to the desired certitude, but is to be collected in one installment upon its completion; only then would it be of utility to this individual. In this case, premature death will not bring about the absurd situation of divine help having been received purposelessly, since none will have been provided anyway.⁴⁶

45 Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū'*, v. 3, p. 438; Ibn al-Malāḥimī, *Fā'iqa*, p. 298, p. 326, p. 386; cf. the argument of the Imāmī scholar Abū Ja'far al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067), where the claim is pressed that during the period of investigation one cannot be sure about the desert of punishment; Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *al-Iqtisād al-Hādī ilā Sabil al-Rashād*, Qum, Maṭba'at al-Khayyām, 1980, p. 115.

46 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 12, pp. 420-423.

But a different scenario might serve as a counter example, with the usual recurring difficulties. It so happens, in acquiring the knowledge of God, that divine help is borne by a precise given, i.e. the desert of punishment and reward. However, there are other ordained acts where divine help cannot be as easily detectible; for example, although ritual prayer is supposedly an instance of divine help, it is not clear whether such help hinges on the prayer as a whole or on a specific part of it. To assume that divine help is delivered only upon its completion will bring about the same awkward situation resulting from this individual's knowledge that he will stay alive for some time, i.e. the time needed to finish prayer, and the subsequent problem of temptation. To make things even more complicated, Mu'tazilī masters could not resort to the same solution as above: there is no specific part of prayer that is connected to the set of rationally known moral values, contrary to the desert of reward and punishment in the previous case; this precludes the attempt to consider the different parts of prayer as merely instrumental components leading to a morally well-defined one as was done before regarding the knowledge of God.

Here too, the infinitesimal view of theological problems provided by Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā'ī is useful in living up to what was believed to be the requirement of consistency. In accordance with his usual practice of pushing analysis farther to see these problems on a microscopic level,⁴⁷ he proposed that divine help be uniformly distributed among the subsequent parts of prayer; this way, every 'bit' of divine help corresponds to the detail of prayer that will be performed next: the divine help 'bit' thus functions as the necessary prelude to the prayer 'bit'. As precarious as it may seem, it is suggested that this help is manifest in the fact that the praying individual at any point is kept from committing a vile act by the simple fact that he is preoccupied with prayer, which allows him to proceed with it properly. But the utility of this solution—at least for these pedantic discussions—is best seen once we consider the scenario of an individual who dies while performing prayer: every

47 A salient example of this attitude is Abū Hāshim's introduction of the theory of states (*ahwāl*) in discussing divine essence and attributes. The complexity of this proposition was mainly due to his attempt to avoid the pitfalls of previous theories, but his position was famed for being extremely arcane and even—as his opponents always contended—contradictory. On the difficulties surrounding the understanding of the theory in both classical tradition and modern scholarship, see Richard M. Frank, "Abū Hāshim's Theory" in *Early Islamic Theology: The Mu'tazilites and al-Ash'arī*, ed. Dimitri Gutas, Burlington, Ashgate, 2007, pp. 85-100; cf. Mufid's ridicule in *Hikāyāt*, ed. Muḥammad Riḍā al-Ḥusaynī al-Jalālī, Beirut, Dār al-Mufid, 1993, pp. 45-56. Another example is Abū Hāshim's handling of the argument regarding God's ability to do evil acts, as opposed to other theologians' approaches; 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 6{1}, pp. 151-152.

delivered bit of divine help will have been properly used; as for the detail of prayer which was interrupted by death, its incompleteness indicates that the simultaneous bit of divine help was not delivered in the first place.⁴⁸ This elaborate formula aims at two points: first, to make sure that divine help is never given without enough time for it to affect an individual's obligation, lest it become an absurd wasteful act on God's part; second, to establish that no individual can be certain of staying alive for any period of time, which would encourage him to commit sins.

3.2 *Consequences*

The previous discussion assumes that prior to the verification period an individual has progressed smoothly and flawlessly throughout the period of investigation, which enabled him to arrive at the 'right' conclusions in good time. But this is an ideal scenario which is not always encountered in reality; in fact, it is the case more often than not that the process of investigation, for whatever negligence done by this individual, is hindered and thus requires more time than ideally allocated.⁴⁹ The possible outcomes are all problematic; as they contradict one or another of the main presumptions of Mu'tazilī theology.

Let us take the example of an individual who is hindered by his failure to grasp some critical pieces of the puzzle that constitute the whole set of beliefs required to arrive at the knowledge of God. In such a case, he is left with less time than he originally had to complete the required investigation, as his death

48 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 12, pp. 424-425. It remains to address the case of divinely ordained acts that are revelational moral obligations that cannot function as instances of help in rational moral obligations. The most obvious example is the Qur'ānic episode regarding God's commanding the Israelites to kill themselves (Q 2: 54). Self-murder is not part of the rationally defined moral acts; but since death brings all obligation to an end, this act cannot serve any future purpose in an individual's obligations either. Therefore, the Qur'ānic episode is brilliantly interpreted (away?) to mean that the act of self-murder was supposed to be done gradually, to make sure that the above framework would preserve the wisdom of moral obligation. As for the last 'bit' of the act, i.e. the actual occurrence of death, it is caused by God's act, in which an individual has no role whatsoever. This is also consistent with the position on the question of norms (*'ādāt*) in the natural world as opposed to necessitating causes (*'ilal mūjiba*), for it considers death not to be caused by natural laws of any type; Abdulsater, *The Climax*, pp. 113-114; McDermott, *The Theology*, pp. 211-212, pp. 215-216.

49 The discussion of an individual's failure due to his inherent inability to grasp the proper doctrines is irrelevant. For according to Mu'tazilīs, the level of rationality required to understand sound arguments is within the limits of sanity; any failure in this regard amounts to insanity and an individual will thus be no longer a subject of moral obligation; 'Uthmān, *Nazariyya*, pp. 62-64.

date is approaching. If this failure absolves him of moral obligation, then the paradoxical situation faced is that of an individual who, despite still being characterized by the necessary conditions to be brought under moral obligation, is allowed to live irresponsibly.⁵⁰ If, on the other hand, he is still considered morally obligated, then it needs to be justified why an individual is required to meet an obligation for which there is no sufficient time, as this would constitute an instance of the infamous “obligation to the impossible”⁵¹—the all-time Mu‘tazilī nightmare. A third proposed alternative proves equally problematic; i.e. if it is to be argued that God will extend his lifespan in such a way to always allow him enough time to finish the required investigation, then the next awkward consequence is that this implicitly allows infinite lifespan for any individual who persists in his failure to grasp the right doctrines,⁵² which threatens the very concept of moral obligation as a test that must be passed in due time. The test falls now to the Mu‘tazilī masters, the part and parcel of whose theology is the theory of moral obligation; divine justice, the jewel of their theological crown, would be a useless category in understanding human affairs if moral obligation is stripped of meaning. Moral obligation, as their famous phrasing goes, has no middle state between being vile and being obligatory, once it is not vile, it immediately becomes incumbent on God to impose on individuals;⁵³ for it offers the only acceptable explanation of the wisdom behind the act of creation—let alone the existence of religion.⁵⁴

The solution lies in exploiting the area bounded by the two embarrassing extremes: that of accepting irresponsibility and that of “obligation to the impossible.” In short, it is true that moral obligation is no longer in effect if it leads to obligation to the impossible, but it is also true that someone must take the responsibility for arriving at such an awkward situation. Two points must then be established: the identity of the responsible agent—together with his deserved treatment, and the period of time needed for moral obligation to still be within the capacity of an individual to fulfill before it turns into an impossible requirement.

50 ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 12, p. 460; Murtaḍā, *Dhakhīra*, p. 182.

51 ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 12, p. 452; Murtaḍā, *Dhakhīra*, p. 184.

52 ‘Uthmān, *Naẓariyya*, p. 31; cf. ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 12, pp. 460-461; Murtaḍā, *Dhakhīra*, p. 182.

53 Richard M. Frank, “Several Fundamental Assumptions of the Baṣra School of the Mu‘tazila” in *Early Islamic Theology: The Mu‘tazilites and al-Ash‘arī*, ed. Dimitri Gutas, Burlington, Ashgate, 2007, pp. 15-16.

54 ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 11, p. 100; Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū‘*, v. 2, pp. 174-186; Murtaḍā, *Dhakhīra*, pp. 108-109, p. 140, p. 191; Murtaḍā, *Sharḥ Jumal*, p. 100; Ibn al-Malāḥimī, *Fā‘iq*, pp. 203-204.

3.2.1 The Responsible Party

Originally, some theologians argued that in this case, an individual is not blameworthy as he is still within the period of investigation, thus taking it to mean a sort of 'grace period.'⁵⁵ But this was quickly countered by pointing out the initial assumption that an individual is required to be carrying out a particular obligation during this period, i.e. investigation; therefore, the responsible agent is this individual himself, for he has wasted the opportunity and failed to meet his moral obligation.⁵⁶ But such an answer, once more, avoids the subtleties of different scenarios, as can be expected in the framework of infinitely differential discussions: although many adhered to this position, others believed that the situation merits different treatment based on whether an individual is left with sufficient time to restart his investigation and complete it. He is only blameworthy if he has sufficient time; else, he is not, lest, again, he be obligated to the impossible.⁵⁷ As long as the time left before his death is a period which suffices to complete the required investigation, he is still under moral obligation and he deserves punishment for failing to start the process.⁵⁸

55 Abū Rashīd Saʿīd b. Muḥammad al-Naysābūrī, *al-Masāʾil fī al-Khilāf bayn al-Baṣriyyīn wa-l-Baḡhdādīyyīn*, ed. Maʿn Ziyāda and Riḍwān al-Sayyid, Beirut, Maʿhad al-Inmāʾ al-ʿArabī, 1979, p. 347.

56 ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 12, pp. 452-457; Murtaḍā, *Dhakhīra*, p. 184.

57 ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 12, pp. 450-452, pp. 460-462; Naysābūrī, *Masāʾil*, p. 348; Murtaḍā, *Dhakhīra*, p. 184.

58 ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 12, p. 483; Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmūʿ*, v. 3, pp. 268-269; Murtaḍā, *Rasāʾil*, v. 2, pp. 317-318. A curious analogy appears here in Muʿtazilī works, particularly that of ʿAbd al-Jabbār. In his insistence that an individual must deserve punishment for not carrying out the subsequent steps of investigation, ʿAbd al-Jabbār argues that it was originally his fault to miss the first step and he still can retry it. The Qāḍī refuses to liken such an individual to someone who has cut off his legs, since the latter has irreversibly lost his ability and can no longer rise to perform his prayers; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 12, p. 451. Interestingly, the same analogy, but this time with ʿAbd al-Jabbār endorsing it, appears in the context of the discussion of the occultation of the Twelfth Imam in his *Mughnī*, 20{1}, p. 58. There, the Qāḍī proposes that Imāmī Shīʿīs should not be under the obligation to follow the instructions from the Imam since the latter, in his occultation, has discontinued the delivery of divine help to his followers; their status is, then, like that of an individual whose legs have been cut off and is no longer required to rise for prayer. In his elaborate response, al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā built on the same scenario, changing the analogy into that of someone who has tied up his legs and can no longer stand up to pray, since it is still within his ability to untie his legs and rise to meet his obligation, which makes him blameworthy; al-Sharīf ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Mūsawī al-Murtaḍā, *al-Shāfi fī al-Imāma*, ed. ʿAbd al-Zahrāʾ al-Ḥusaynī al-Khaṭīb, Tehran, Muʿassasat al-Ṣādiq, 1986, v. 1, pp. 144-146; Murtaḍā, *Dhakhīra*, pp. 415-417. Murtaḍā's form of the analogy would have

Though originating in a later—and considerably different—context, this remaining time was dubbed in a nice turn of phrase by the great Ash‘arī al-Fakhr al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) “the time of hope for faith” (*waqt rajā’ al-īmān*).⁵⁹ The model at work is a one-chance-model: God’s justice makes incumbent upon Him to give an individual one chance, but not to attend to his mishaps. This attitude is typical of Baṣran Mu‘tazilism which stressed the role of justice and human responsibility, unlike the Baghdadi school in its great concern with God’s mercy and human dependency.⁶⁰

3.2.2 The Mode of Desert

Yet a new problem arises regarding how punishment is deserved for failing to properly start the process of investigation. It is accepted that if this individual’s negligence leads him to the situation of wasting all time needed to fulfill this obligation, then he would be an unbeliever and thus deserve the whole lot of punishment reserved for unbelievers. It is also accepted that if he manages to complete investigation before the termination of his moral obligation, then his punishment for being late doing it would be abrogated; for becoming a believer suffices to clear one’s record, no matter how late he is doing so, as the dictates of revelation necessitate. The question to be addressed is whether a process, like the one that leads to the eventual outcome of being an unbeliever and dying as such, causes the agent to acquire his deserved treatment gradually⁶¹ or in one installment.⁶² Here, the discussion might seem pointless: at the end of the day, it will make no difference whether an individual’s record which indicates a status of unbelief was populated at once or gradually to reflect his increasing sinfulness as time went by. Either way, the outcome will be eternal damnation. But the usefulness of the discussion appears in cases where scenarios are not that binary, as in the case of someone who interrupted his prayers: thinking in terms of gradual desert will leave him with some credit, as opposed to the other approach.⁶³

worked for ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s argument regarding investigation, so long as the time left is sufficient.

59 Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, v. 26, p. 43.

60 Abdulsater, *The Climax*, pp. 99–101; McDermott, *The Theology*, pp. 71–79.

61 ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 12, p. 484; Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū’*, v. 3, pp. 266–267; Murtaḍā, *Dhakhīra*, p. 185.

62 Ibn al-Malāḥimī in *Fā’iq*, p. 387 expresses the view that punishment is to be deserved fully at once upon erring in the first step, as long as it was due to negligence. Abū Hāshim seems to have wavered between these two positions.

63 Van Ess’ judgment that the discussion of desert of punishment is some sort of a mental trick which is intellectually fruitless applies to cases where unbelief is the eventual

3.3 *Properties*

The critical point, when an individual is absolved of moral obligation, is the point when he can no longer finish the required investigation because of the decreasing time remaining for him to live. Here, to avoid the “obligation to the impossible” Mu‘tazilī masters ruled that this individual is no longer morally obligated. To protect him against the repressive situation of being pressured by social context, let alone by divine intervention motivating him to investigate the existence of a creator, he is to be distracted from all this and kept busy by a variety of experiences.⁶⁴ But this ‘irresponsible’ status must be qualified: although revelational moral obligations are no longer required of him, rational moral obligations retain their full imperative force, since they are independent from the knowledge of God. The most, nevertheless, that can be acquired from them is to mitigate his punishment in the afterlife, given the fewer vile acts he will have committed and the more recompense to which he would be entitled; for reward can only be meted out to believers.⁶⁵

3.3.1 Beginning and End Points

Thus far, the discussion suffices to establish the conceptual boundaries of the period of investigation, i.e. that its beginning is the inception of the religious idea and its endpoint the arrival at the conclusions affirming the need to abide by both rational and revelational moral obligation to avoid eternal damnation. But this period of investigation is, in the final analysis, an interval of time; as such, it must have a definite temporal length and known limits for the debate to have a stronger connection with reality.

Since being endowed with reason is the necessary requirement for the process of investigation to take effect, it is extremely hard to identify an exact

outcome, but not to all scenarios of desert; Josef van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre des Aḡuḡaddīn al-Īcī*, Wiesbaden, 1966, pp. 349-350.

64 Theologians usually explain an individual's distractedness by the numerous social interactions and the silence of the divine hint, originally the last resort to incite individuals towards the knowledge of God in the absence of other possible motives. The assumption here, it seems, is that there is a point of no return where an original mental peace, needed to embark on this investigation, is irrevocably lost; ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 12, pp. 460-461; Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū‘*, v. 3, p. 269; Murtaḡā, *Dhakīra*, pp. 181-182.

65 Given the dictates of dogma regarding the eternal punishment of unbelievers, the mitigation of punishment would not take the form of shortening its duration; thus the argument here is centered on the intensity of such punishment; see the problem and its discussion in ‘Uthmān, *Naḡariyya*, pp. 417-418.

point in time when such a condition has been fulfilled,⁶⁶ let alone the fact that individuals reach this point at different ages. Recourse to experience proves this, as one cannot—no matter how diligently he tries—recall when he took the first step towards religious investigation. The fact that revelational moral obligation, with its legal character, is included provides an indicator; this point of time must be prior to that defined by lawyers as the age of adulthood, i.e. when a Muslim is first required to observe the instructions of the sacred law. In the context of separating rational and revelational moral obligations, this priority is related to the conceptual order: as the age of legal responsibility is clearly defined, and since this is undergirded by theological responsibility, the latter must come before the former.⁶⁷ The most that can be inferred from this conclusion is that the time difference between the inception of the rational moral obligation and that of legal moral obligation must be at least equal to the duration of the period of investigation; as such the individual would always become subject to legal moral obligation after having fulfilled the dictates of rational moral obligation that undergird the knowledge of God. This is an opportune occasion to note the pervasive influence of the Mu'tazilī separation of the rational and revelational moral obligations. It is also an ideal context to reiterate the earlier observation about the extent of injustice done to the

66 In 'Abd al-Jabbār's words, a human being cannot keep track of time [intervals] with precision (*dabt al-awqāt 'alā al-taḥṣīl minmā lā yaṣīḥu min al-'abd*); *Mughnī*, v. 12, p. 196, p. 259, p. 385, p. 422.

67 Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū'*, v. 1, p. 2 where a boy's adulthood is defined as the time when he can fully attain the knowledge of God; cf. *Majmū'*, v. 1, pp. 18-19 where it is described as "the beginning of intellectual maturity" (*awwal kamāl al-'aql*). The debate between theologians and lawyers about the meaning of maturity has been noted in early heresiographies; Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (*Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn wa-Ikhtilāf al-Muṣallīn*, ed. Helmut Ritter, Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner, 1980), pp. 480-482 reports that most theologians concur on that it is the maturity/completion of intellect, whereas lawyers saw this as a condition that must be conjoined to other signs that have to do with physical maturity or age. See also Murtaḍā, *Rasā'il*, v. 2, p. 319 where the author stresses the disagreement between theologians and lawyers, emphasizing that during the period of investigation, the dictates of revelational moral obligation are not in effect. A consequence of such an analysis is that a major division falls along gender lines, as females are considered legally obligated before males, at least according to the view of Imāmīs who still share the same Mu'tazilī view on the period of investigation; for an early comparative survey of the question see Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *al-Khilāf*, Qum, Mu'assasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī, 1987, v. 3, p. 282. The interesting inference would be that females reach maturity of intellect before males, which might not be the most expected result in classical circles, as seen in later objections; cf. al-Shahīd al-Thānī, *Ḥaqā'iq*, pp. 135-136.

Islamic approach, even from within the Islamic tradition, to freedom of conscience when confined to the premises of law.⁶⁸

As for the end time, it must be calculated backwards from the individual's time of death. Assuming that the individual has successfully reasoned during the period of investigation, the duration between the end of moral obligation and the time of death must be less than the verification period. As long as it is greater than or equal to that period, his moral obligation would still be justified. As he is not privy to the time of his death,⁶⁹ the inability to pinpoint the exact time has a strong theological justification—unlike the case with the start time. The individual's ignorance is seen in light of divine help, since such ignorance is what protects him against being tempted into sinning once he knows that he is no longer morally obligated.⁷⁰

The more challenging question, however, remains that of the length of the prescribed period of investigation. The basic assumption here is that the doctrines that must be eventually grasped are clear, well-known, exhaustively enumerated and sequentially related; so this individual is required to move from establishing the first premise (used here in a non-technical sense) of the first doctrine to the second and so on; once the first doctrine is endorsed, the first premise of the second doctrine must be considered for a similar progress. The number of these premises and doctrines, though varying according to different presentations of theologians, is kept within a narrow range: whenever the doctrines are identified, the variation becomes a matter of each master's willingness to analyze a proposition into its simpler elements.

Intuitively, the first requirement that needs to be accepted, as a concomitant of the doctrine of divine justice, is that such a period must be long enough

68 See the discussion by the late Imāmī scholar, al-Shahīd al-Thānī (d. 965/1557-1558), of Murtaḍā's view on the question, where the debate devolves to become centered around the verbal profession of faith as a sufficient testimony to one's state of belief. Nevertheless, here, the author is using legal categories to discuss an originally theological problem; Zayn al-Dīn b. 'Alī al-Jubā'ī al-Shahīd al-Thānī, *al-Maqāṣid al-'Alīyya fī Sharḥ al-Risāla al-'Alfiyya*, ed. Muḥammad al-Ḥassūn, Qum, Markaz al-Nashr al-Tābi' li-Maktab al-'Ilām al-Islāmī, 2000, p. 39. The different positions of these two scholars, keeping in mind their respective time periods, speaks eloquently about the direction of the discussion in the Islamic tradition.

69 'Uthmān, *Nazarīyya*, pp. 455-456 argues that the time of death is itself the time of the termination of moral obligation; although this might end up being extremely close to the practical outcome—given the instantaneous nature of the verification period, it fails to note the two concepts are distinct ones whose ostensible real-life concurrence does not suffice to conflate them theoretically.

70 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 11, pp. 517-518; Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū'*, v. 2, pp. 234-235.

for an individual to complete the process. But the writings of classical masters of theology are not of great help here; one cannot find there what might be used as a tool to gauge the speed of thought, if such a speed is to be taken as the rate at which the thought process moves from one doctrine to another. Rather, the works of theologians betray a somewhat reversed approach; in discussing an individual's chronological progress during the period of investigation, the first interval of time is usually defined as the time needed to finish the first part of investigation, i.e. to grasp the first doctrine and proceed to the second; such a position is reminiscent of early definitions of time as [the interval] that separates actions.⁷¹ In addition, despite what is probably a conception which supports a discrete definition of time, the units of such a discrete time—although infinitesimally short—are never defined clearly for the observer to develop a proper assessment of the length of such a unit in less technical contexts.⁷²

The closest our theologians get to gauging the temporal segments of the thought process is when they state that an individual is much faster recalling a belief than proving it; in the former case, he recalls the needed data 'within the following temporal unit' (*al-waqt al-thānī*), whereas in the former case he needs 'more than one temporal unit' (*azyad min al-waqt al-wāhid*).⁷³ This is why attaining the knowledge of one's moral obligation, which is not an act of recollection but rather an act of demonstration, must be separated by a period equivalent to two or more temporal units (*tataqaddaru taqdīra al-waqtayni aw azyada minh*) from when an individual is effectively morally obligated.⁷⁴ Therefore, it can be stated that for every element that needs to be established by investigation there is an allotted temporal unit, and there is a corresponding moment on an ideal timeline to reflect the presumed progress in an individual's thought process; but even then, there is no clear measure of these units.⁷⁵ But if one takes a temporal unit to be equivalent to the time needed by a body

71 Ash'arī, *Maqālāt*, p. 443 ascribes this view to the early theologian Abū al-Hudhayl (d. btw. 226/840-235/849); cf. Alnoor Dhanani, *The Physical Theory of Kalām*, Leiden, Brill, 1994, pp. 38-47.

72 *Ibid.*, pp. 131-133. Rather than translating the term *waqt* as 'moment' or 'instant' as has been done in Dhanani's work, the current author prefers to preserve the obscurity of these early theological terms, for other translations might be, though inadvertently, defining these terms against a different background.

73 Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū'*, v. 2, p. 199.

74 *Ibid.*, v. 3, p. 241.

75 As in Ibn al-Malāḥimī, *Fā'iq*, p. 387 where the author speaks about "when it is time for every [element] of investigation" (*fa-idhā ḥaḍara waqtu kulli naẓar*), thus leaving the reader with the impression that there must be a presupposed sequence which is both logical and chronological.

to move to the closest location, then this must not be a long time at any rate, as the shortest distance is measured in atoms.⁷⁶ The clearest extant source on the question, the Jewish scholar Maimonides (d. 601/1204)—by no means friendly to theologians, affirms this; these units of time would result after an hour is subject to “ten or more successive divisions by sixty.”⁷⁷

Naturally, then, one is encountered by the fact that people, due to their various mental abilities, need different times; such a discrepancy is acutely noted in theological writings, even with attempted explanations of the phenomenon.⁷⁸ The required time, as they would put it, is such that it does not surpass the ability of individuals, i.e. it must not be too long for a human lifespan, nor too short for human reasoning. Given the simplicity of the minimum doctrines required from people to endorse as a preamble to internalizing them, it is argued that the period of investigation is such as acquired knowledge cannot be gained in a shorter duration (*lā yumkin an taqa‘ al-ma‘rifā al-kasbiyya fī aqṣara minh*), i.e. its length cannot be less than the time needed for a smart person to arrive at conclusions.⁷⁹ But this is still ambiguous; for it is not yet possible to know how much time people need in average according to these masters: is it the time allocated for the question in an introductory level discussion, or that taken by an average person reading theological works on his own to understand them properly and develop adequate conviction, or that spent by an individual starting from scratch and reasoning for himself or etc.?

In this thicket of possible answers, it might be useful to recall the centrality of divine help in Mu‘tazilī theology. Inasmuch as an individual is required to endorse and internalize the right doctrines, it is also incumbent upon God to provide the maximum help for him to arrive there. Thus an individual must first be allocated the whole period of time that he needs to reason independently to all the required doctrines, even if the aid of teachers and books is available to him. In this case, their aid facilitates and speeds up the process, but it does not shorten his originally allocated period. The less intelligent the individual, the longer the allocated period, the more this aid is needed and

76 Dhanani, *The Physical Theory*, p. 132.

77 Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedlander, intro. David Taffel, Barnes & Noble, 2013, pp. 219-222.

78 For example, one such explanation of the main difference between a smart and a slow person is the former’s quick grasp of an argument’s relevance to the point that it seeks to establish (‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, v. 12, pp. 89-90, p. 150, p. 198; Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū‘*, v. 2, p. 226, p. 238); or the speed of combining the necessary premises to bring about the conclusion; Ibn Mattawayh, *Majmū‘*, v. 2, pp. 285-286; Ibn al-Malāḥimī, *Fā‘iq*, p. 377.

79 Murtaḍā, *Dharī‘a*, v. 1, p. 389.

the stronger his obligation to seek it; for those individuals who cannot proceed flawlessly through the investigation process, this aid is divine help in the strict technical sense, since it amounts to a form of assistance without which an individual would fall into disobedience to God.

Having established this, it remains to assess the length of such a period in real life scenarios. Here, one must not be too optimistic; given that theirs—and doubtless ours—is a society where religious debates abound, the social context would bring people to start the process of investigation at an early stage, always making sure that they do not stray from the establishment of the ‘right’ belief. As such, the period of investigation is rarely long.

Even if all this is cast aside, the hypothetical case of someone growing up isolated from all social context and religious instruction can be studied by looking at the Qur’ānic episode of Abraham, which reinforces the original caution against being too optimistic: it took him no longer than one day to move from the first premise of the first doctrine to conclude the existence of God.⁸⁰ In the Mu‘tazilī tradition, the question appears as a concomitant of the inner-Mu‘tazilī debate on the status of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661). The pro-‘Uthmān group takes ‘Alī’s profession of Islam to have been out of Prophetic instruction (*talqīn*) not investigation, due to his very young age at the time.⁸¹ The pro-‘Alī camp, nonetheless, claims he was older, only to argue that he had reached intellectual maturity and did go through the period of investigation after the Prophet called him to Islam.⁸² But even if this is granted, his investigation took only one night, explicitly compared to Abraham’s period of investigation.⁸³

In an unexplained statement, Abū al-Qāsim al-Ka‘bī al-Balkhī (d. 319/931) is reported to have declared that the period of investigation is more than a part of the day (*sā‘a*) and less than a month.⁸⁴ The absence of categorical textual demarcation of this period, in addition to the difficulty of developing a clear

80 Karājaki, *Kanz*, p. 119.

81 Jāhiz, *Risālat al-Uthmāniyya*, pp. 18–22.

82 ‘Abd al-Ḥamid Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj al-Balāgha*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, Cairo, Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyya, 1959, v. 13, pp. 247–248.

83 *Ibid.*, 13, pp. 249–250; Karājaki, *Kanz*, p. 119; Karājaki was also an Imāmī and a student of Murtaḍā, but the point of interest here is not whether his Shī‘ī convictions were influencing his judgment on ‘Alī’s mental abilities; the text suffices here to point to the approximate period needed by individuals most qualified and well-equipped to arrive at the ‘right’ conclusions.

84 Ṭūsī, *Tibyān*, v. 4, pp. 182–183; Ṭabrisī, *Majma‘*, v. 4, p. 93.

measure, is probably what underlies the judgment that its length can only be known by custom (*urf*).⁸⁵

Conclusion

An individual's journey towards salvation involves a well-defined set of doctrinal requirements. These, however, are not to be endorsed at once, the way one swallows a capsule; rather, an equally well-defined roadmap is provided. This roadmap is believed to be exclusive; for no other route can take a sound individual to his prescribed destination. Moreover, this roadmap follows strict directions, based on the assumption that the shortest path between any two points is a straight line. The two intended points are the advent of intellectual maturity and the desert of reward at the time of death; the straight line is the sequence of neatly stringed arguments that would lead to conclusive results. But given the labyrinth of questions and challenges in which an individual is engulfed, this string—though believed to be made of straightforward answers—should function as the thread whose help is essential to escape the minotaur of everlasting punishment. This is a truly paradoxical situation: a well-defined thread of connected answers might, due to its intricate formulations, lead into a chaos of confusion. Such a situation cannot but bring to mind the perceptive remark made by José Saramago, whose novels present a fine critique of religiosity: "A man can go astray even when he follows a straight line."⁸⁶

Being lax, it goes without saying, precludes one's successful arrival at the destination. But any wrong turn taken during the trip would also seriously compromise one's chances to get there on time. Since the directions are clearly sorted out and help is always available on the way, such wrong turns cannot be excused. The longer one needs to be back on track, the slimmer the chances of a fruitful trip. Some detours, therefore, might be literally damning: the more one proceeds, the farther from the road. All this is due to the fact that in the first place, he was found eligible—and therefore bound—to take the trip which, once started, must lead to either of the extremes but can never be cancelled belatedly. The freedom of conscience, therefore, is not unconditional, nor is the conscience to which the appeal is made; it is a freedom of a clearly-defined conscience to move within tightly-marked boundaries. As such, the

85 Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, v. 15, p. 228; the fact that the author belongs to a different tradition has no bearing on this judgment, as this attests to the absence of an unequivocal textual teaching on the matter.

86 José Saramago, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, Harcourt Brace, 1991, p. 73.

failure to arrive at the destination can bring about judgment on one's intellect or will: it is the lack of instruction or energy that diverted the course. It is here that one gets to fully appreciate 'Abd al-Jabbār's eloquent summary of the situation, quoted in the epigraph.

In addition to these questions that are brought up in traditional theological debates, and in light of the overwhelming negative assessment of the 'proofs' for the existence of God in contemporary debates, the question regarding the problematic demarcation of the limits of the period of investigation is even more complicated. Given the Mu'tazilī definition of knowledge as 'authentic confidence' which indicates certainty, and if one is to take into account the difficulty of attaining certainty in matters that constitute the points of investigation during this period, what is one to make of this concept if Mu'tazilism is read in contemporary light as a plausible school of Muslim theology?

A more direct consequence of this debate is manifest in the time-frame that should be granted for individuals in a modern context. One can argue that the attainment of certainty is still possible through different routes than both the Mu'tazilī and the post-Mu'tazilī ones in classical Islamic theology—such as more recent epistemic claims on the acquisition of knowledge. Nevertheless, in the absence of a systematic approach that attempts to produce an estimate of the time needed, the veritable challenge lies in coming to terms with scenarios where an individual can live through an indefinite interval of investigation. The problem that our Mu'tazilī theologians—or their presumed heirs—would have to face is whether such a scenario contradicts their view of divine justice by making a subtle form of worldly procrastination a pretext for otherworldly eternal salvation.