Forum Islamic-Theological Studies
vol 4 (2025), issue 1, 7–26
https://doi.org/10.71573/2941-122X_2025_4-1_121

David R. Vishanoff
Department of Religious Studies, University of Oklahoma

God's Attributes of Will, Speech, and Justice in Muʿtazilī Thought: Interconnections and Implications

Abstract

The twin Muʿtazilī principles of divine Oneness and divine Justice did not sit together comfortably: if God is eternally unique and completely transcendent, how can he produce, know, and act upon the temporal material world in ways that are beneficial to humans and thus worthy of a just God? This essay recounts how one strand of Muʿtazilī theologians, running from Abū al-Hudhayl to ʿAbd al-Jabbār, attempted to bridge the gap between the eternal and created realms by the way they defined God's attributes. They wove their theories of God's closely interconnected attributes of will, speech, and justice into a thoroughly anthropocentric web of doctrine centered not on God's eternal knowledge and power but on human knowledge, human power, and human concerns. That anthropological recentering of theology remains relevant for Muslims today.

Keywords: Muʿtazila; divine attributes; will; speech; justice; anthropocentrism

David R. Vishanoff, Department of Religious Studies, University of Oklahoma, USA
E-mail: vishanoff@ou.edu

Introduction

The twin principles of God's Oneness and God's Justice, which the Muʿtazilī school of theology claimed as their trademarks, did not sit together comfortably. It sounds easy to affirm both principles at once, but if God is in fact completely transcendent, timeless, simple, and unlike the temporal and material realm that he created, as the Muʿtazila's particularly strong statement of God's Oneness affirmed, then it is not so easy to define exactly how God produces, knows, and acts upon all those particular temporal material beings that he is credited with bringing into existence. Nor is it simple to explain how human beings, for their part, can know and articulate any meaningful claims about God that might circumscribe his actions with any humanly definable principle such as justice.

The story of Muʿtazilī theology can be told as an attempt to bridge the ontological chasm they had excavated between the eternal and created spheres of being, and to make Muslim discourse or *kalām* about God meaningful in human terms and relevant to human concerns. This essay narrates how one prominent strand of the Muʿtazila, the tradition running from Abū al-Hudhayl al-ʿAllāf (d. ca. 841) to the Bahshamiyya branch of the Basran tradition and culminating with ʿAbd al-Jabbār al-Hamadhānī (d. 1025), wove their definitions of God's attributes of will, speech, and justice into a thoroughly anthropocentric web of doctrine centered not on God's eternal knowledge and power but on human knowledge, human power, and the temporal material concerns of human beings. That anthropological recentering remains relevant for Muslim theologians today.

How God's knowledge and power relate to particulars

This way of narrating the history of Muʿtazilī theology starts from a certain interpretation of a basic problem that the founders of Muʿtazilī theology were seeking to address. In addition to addressing the internal Muslim political divisions of their day, which initially elicited their hallmark teachings on "the promise and the threat," the "intermediate position" of grave sinners, and "commanding good and forbidding wrong," the Muʿtazila were also seeking to carve out a space for Muslim belief in the enduring philosophical and theological conversations of the late antique Near East. Early figures like Abū al-Hudhayl were aware of several strands of Greek thought and their Christian adaptations.[1] Because of their commitment to the Qur'anic notion of a divine creator who remains active in history, as well as their atomistic ontology in which the universe consists entirely of "atoms" and "accidents," they could not adopt either the Aristotelian doctrine of the eternity of the material world or the Neoplatonic view that God knows the world only at a very abstract level as a unified whole.[2] The Muʿtazila acknowledged no inherent unity to the physical world; even human beings they regarded not as individual beings unified by a single essence or substance such as a soul, but as agglomerations of atoms and accidents that could be spoken of as whole individuals only because God had created in their component atoms the accidental unity of conjunction (*ijtimāʿ*) or

[1] Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 452, 454–455, 461–462, 499. See generally Wolfson, *Philosophy*; Nader, *Le système philosophique*, xix–xx and passim. Pretzl (*Die frühislamische Attributenlehre*, 7–8, 13, 35–36) denied that figures as early as Abū al-Hudhayl had any grasp of Greek philosophy.

[2] On the latter view see al-Shahrastānī, *Nihāyat al-Aqdām,* 215, 221–223. Cf. Richard Frank's remark that the Muʿtazila understood knowledge to be knowing facts about things, not intuiting their essence; Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 465–467; Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes,* 14, 27.

composition (*taʾlīf*).[3] The physical world was not unified in such a way that God could know it with a simple knowledge; it was irreducibly plural and temporal, and somehow they needed to explain how God could know and create, at particular points in time, vast numbers of temporally and physically distinguished beings without having any multiplicity or temporal differentiation within his own simple and eternal attributes of knowledge and power.[4]

This problem was particularly acute because the Muʿtazila early on came to identify both God's knowledge and his creative power with God's essence itself.[5] This was their way of ensuring God's Oneness against other Muslim theologians such as the proto-Ashʿarī ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Kullāb (d. ca. 855), who held that to affirm that God knows things was to affirm that God has an attribute of knowledge eternally subsisting in him.[6] To the Muʿtazila this affirmation of eternal divine attributes ran the risk of falling into the same error as some Arabic-speaking Christians, who defended their conception of the Trinity by arguing that Muslims themselves recognized that God has eternal attributes of knowledge, life, power, will, and even an eternal speech or Word analogous to Christ. To sidestep this argument, and to defend the purity of their monotheism, the Muʿtazila famously argued that God's Word is in fact created, not eternal, and that although God does eternally have attributes of knowledge, life, and power (but not will, as we will see) those attributes are identical to (or just different names for) his own essence, and thus have no separately distinguishable reality of their own that might lead one to think of them as eternal beings.[7]

This view of God's essential attributes had two disadvantages. First, it meant that God's life, knowledge, and power are not readily distinguishable in the way that human life, knowledge, and power constitute distinct accidents subsisting in the atoms of the heart; God's essential attributes can be distinguished from each other only analytically, from a human perspective, by pointing out that the objects God has knowledge of are not coextensive with the objects over which he has power. God's life, knowledge, and power would thus seem not to be analogous to what humans mean by those terms, or what they experience as those qualities.[8] Second, it seemed to imply that the vast number of particular atoms and accidents that make up the created world are not only the objects

---

[3] See Frank, *Metaphysics of Created Being,* 13–15, 27–28, 34–38, 41–42; Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 464–465; Frank, *Abu Hashim's Theory of "States*," 87–90, 92–93; Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes,* 39–47, 104, 111, 156–157; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 16, 131–134, 161–166, 172–173, 409. Briefly put, in the teaching of the Basran tradition, atoms (*jawāhir,* singular *jawhar*) are the basic indivisible space-occupying units of created being, the material substrates in which subsist the accidents (*aʿrāḍ,* singular *ʿaraḍ,* also called *maʿānī,* singular *maʿnā*), which are the ground of their having certain qualities predicated of them. Conjunction (*ijtimāʿ*) and composition (*taʾlīf*) are accidents which, when created by God in a particular set of atoms, bind them as a single physical body of which we can predicate further qualities.

[4] See Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 466–468; Nader, *Le système philosophique,* xii–xiv, 65–68, 76, 142–143, 217. As ʿAbd al-Jabbār notes in *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:193, one cannot know a thing in all its details by means of a single attribute of knowledge.

[5] See Pretzl, *Die frühislamische Attributenlehre,* 10–17; Nader, *Le système philosophique,* xii, 49–50, 56–57, 63–65, 69, 75; Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 453–454, 459, 461, 469, 472. Abū al-Hudhayl, however, avoided speaking of God's essence and referred only to "God" or "him"; Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 471.

[6] Al-Aššʿarī, *Maqālāt,* 169, 546; Frank, "Divine Attributes," 470 n. 66, 472; Wolfson, *Philosophy,* 208–209.

[7] See Wolfson, *Philosophy,* 61–64, 81–82, 112–141, 180–181, 217–218, 225, 236–244, 263–264, 313–314, 721–724; Nader, *Le système philosophique,* xii, 37, 49–50, 99, 101, 105; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 250–253, 411; Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes,* 11–19.

[8] See Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 454, 461–462, 464–465, 468–469; al-Aššʿarī, *Maqālāt,* 531 (regarding Abū ʿAlī al-Jubbāʾī); Pretzl, *Die frühislamische Attributenlehre,* 12, 22; Nader, *Le système philosophique,* 54–57, 76; cf. Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 253–255.

of God's eternal knowledge (and of his power in the case of those he creates directly himself) but are also somehow present in, or at least correlated with, God's essence itself. If God is one, simple, eternal, and immaterial, how did he suddenly, at some point in time, become the creator of a great variety of particular physical beings?

A first step toward resolving this dilemma was to posit that created particulars do not depend on God's knowledge or power for their individual natures and particular characteristics, but have some kind of status of their own independent of God's knowledge and power. They cannot exist without God's power, since the material world initially comes into being only thanks to God's creative power. As mere possibilities, however—as things that can be conceived of, can be known to exist or not to exist, and could, given the requisite power, be brought into existence—they are already there in the possibility-structure of things. Unicorns, for example, do not exist, but they are conceivable beings that God could have created, and we have a general idea of their nature and characteristics. In the same way, every possible material being that could exist in some possible world is a distinct and definite possibility, with its own nature and characteristics that it would have if God created it. Every possible being is individually known to God as such, and is within the scope of God's power to create, and was already within the scope of God's creative power in eternity past before God actually created anything. When God did create the universe, he did so not by thinking up new possibilities but simply by voluntarily bringing a selection of those spectral but already well-defined possible beings into existence.[9]

As Albert Nader pointed out in an early systematic study of Muʿtazilī theology, in a sense this belief in the non-existent world of possible things (*al-ʿadam* or *al-maʿdūm*) gave the material world a kind of reality independent of God, and Nader concluded that the Muʿtazila had in effect declared the world to be eternal.[10] The Muʿtazila themselves would not have admitted this; they insisted that the material world is entirely temporal, and did not believe in anything like a Platonic realm of ideal forms. I think it better to take their doctrine of the non-existent instead as an admission that the logical possibility-structure of the universe exists independently of God, and this indicates at least one way in which the Muʿtazila did admit a parallel between God and his creatures: both are subject to the same laws of logical possibility. God has power to do any possible thing,[11] but not to create

---

[9] See Pretzl, *Die frühislamische Attributenlehre,* 55–62; Nader, *Le système philosophique,* xiii–xiv, 35, 54, 65–71, 76, 129–144; Frank, *Al-Maʿdūm wal-Mawjūd*; Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes,* 54–55; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 107–109, 204, 242, 412–413. Regarding possible worlds, see note 26 below. Against Nader, Frank emphasizes that this classical Basran Muʿtazilī concept of non-existent things (*al-shayʾ al-maʿdūm*), as upheld by Abū Hāshim and ʿAbd al-Jabbār, postdates Abū al-Hudhayl, and that for Abū al-Hudhayl the possibility of non-existent things resides not in themselves, in some kind of unactualized "essence," but entirely in God's actually existing power to do them—which power, considered merely in its specific applications, is limited to those things that God has eternally known he will in fact create. Frank, *Metaphysics of Created Being,* 24–25, 46–49, 53; Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 467 n. 57, 481–484, 488–489. Abū al-Hudhayl (among others) similarly limited God's knowledge to things that actually are or will be; see Pretzl, *Die frühislamische Attributenlehre,* 11, 23; Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 466–467. Wolfson (*Philosophy,* 359–372, 726) argues fancifully that the Muʿtazilī theory of non-existent things was a confused response to Greek and Christian discussions of whether the actual world came into existence *ex nihilo;* with Nader and Frank, I take the discussion to be driven by the question of how God's eternal knowledge and power can apply to temporal and contingent creatures.

[10] Nader, *Le système philosophique,* 67, 131 n. 2, 133, 135–136, 139–141, 217. Frank rejects Nader's interpretation in *Metaphysics of Created Being,* 48–49 n. 9, and in *Al-Maʿdūm wal-Mawjūd,* 187 n. 5.

[11] That is, any possible divine act; a human act is not a possibility for God, since it would not be exactly the same act if God brought about similar results himself. Wolfson, *Philosophy,* 580, 735; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 198–199, 204, 238–239, 413, 416; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/1:4, 6/2:122–123, 268, 307, 7:55, 64–65. On other limitations to the

a square circle; to have power over, or even knowledge of such an absurdity is itself absurd, so it is not conceivable that God should have knowledge of or power to create such impossible non-things.[12] Some of the Muʿtazila even held that God does not have the power to commit acts of injustice, not because these are logically inconceivable in and of themselves but because they are incompatible with God's nature—with his knowledge of what is good and his immunity from any need to do evil—and so are impossible in fact.[13] This established the rules of logic, and even a certain conception of justice, as an important commonality between God and his creation—a conceptual bridge that enabled the Muʿtazila to argue "by analogy from our world to the Unseen" (*qiyās al-ghāʾib ʿalā al-shāhid*). Nader understood the Muʿtazila to have eschewed any such admission of similarity between God and humanity,[14] but in fact they employed it regularly in their arguments.[15]

Even this logical connection between God and creation, however, did not solve the problem of how to attribute the particulars of the created realm to God's undifferentiated and utterly simple essence. To my mind, the most satisfying answer the Muʿtazila came up with for that problem was the theory of "states" (*aḥwāl,* singular *ḥāl*) that was first proposed by the Basran Muʿtazilī Abū Hāshim (d. 933) and was taken over by ʿAbd al-Jabbār. In this theory, God does not really have eternal attributes of life, knowledge, or power, so they do not have to be identified with his essence to avoid a plurality of eternal beings. Instead Abū Hāshim argued that when we say God is eternally living, knowing, or powerful, we are not asserting attributes that themselves exist (such that they would have to be either identical to God or other than God) but only states, modes, or manners of God's being: God eternally exists livingly, knowingly, and powerfully.[16] When a human being is truly said to be living or knowing, this state must be grounded in some accident of life or knowledge that subsists in the atoms of the body or the heart, by virtue of which the whole composite human being can be said

scope of God's power, see notes 9 above and 13 and 23 below, and Pretzl, *Die frühislamische Attributenlehre,* 23–24; Nader, *Le système philosophique,* 86–87, 138–139.

12 See Nader, *Le système philosophique,* 71, 131, 141, 144; Frank, *Al-Maʿdūm wal-Mawjūd,* 189, 201–202; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 237–239; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:121–123, 180; cf. Wolfson, *Philosophy,* 579–589.

13 See Nader, *Le système philosophique,* xii, 77–79, 83–86; al-Aš'arī, *Maqālāt,* 508–509. Al-Naẓẓām said that God does not have the power to do evil or anything else that he knows he will not do; Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 488; Brunschvig, *Muʿtazilisme et optimum*, 238; Wolfson, *Philosophy,* 579–580; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/1:127, 141. Abū al-Hudhayl reportedly held that God has the power to do (*yaqduru ʿalā*) injustice, but that his wisdom makes it impossible (*muḥāl*) for him to do so; Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 486–489; Brunschvig, *Muʿtazilisme et optimum*, 235; Wolfson, *Philosophy,* 579; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/1:128. ʿAbbād ibn Sulaymān (d. ca. 864) held that God has power over (*yaqduru ʿalā*) injustice but does not have the power to bring into being (*lā yaqduru ʿalā an yukawwina*) either injustice or anything else that we know he will not in fact do; Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 486; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/1:127–128. ʿAbd al-Jabbār said that God has the power to do acts he does not will to do and knows he will not do, including acts that would be evil if he did them—though something non-existent cannot technically be good or evil (and is not even an act) before it is actually performed in such a manner as to make it one or the other; see Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 31, 269; Frank, *Al-Maʿdūm wal-Mawjūd,* 201–202; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/1:3, 5, 127–129, 159, 6/2:203–210.

14 Nader, *Le système philosophique,* xi, 51–52, 61–62, 76.

15 See note 71 below, and Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 72, 105, 225–231, 269–270, 272–273, 408–409; Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 488; Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes,* 160–161. Wolfson (*Philosophy,* 6–7, 12–17, 20–24, 29–30) proposes an Aristotelian origin for this kind of theological argumentation by analogy.

16 See Frank, *Abu Hashim's Theory of "States"*; Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes,* 19–24; Nader, *Le système philosophique,* 211–216; Wolfson, *Philosophy,* 167–174, 183–188, 722–723; Pretzl, *Die frühislamische Attributenlehre,* 51–54; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 145–148, 251–253. ʿAbd al-Jabbār argued that these states are distinguishable from each other because they imply different things: God can act because he is powerful, but his acts are well-ordered only because he is knowing. Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 253–255.

to be living and knowing;[17] but God is these things by virtue of his divinity, not by virtue of any accidents or other kinds of qualities subsisting in his essence. God's life, knowledge, and power are not what Abū Hāshim called attribute-based states but rather essential states: God by his nature cannot but exist livingly, knowingly, and powerfully.[18] One advantage of this theory was that it was no longer necessary to posit any correlation between created particulars and God's eternal attributes or essence: created beings are simply knowable things that God is eternally in a state of knowing about; they are not correlated with any metaphysical reality existing in the unseen realm.

This arguably solved the problem of God's knowledge of particulars, if only by a verbal sleight of hand, but it left unresolved the problem of how God can choose to create some possible things rather than others without there being anything in himself on the basis of which to differentiate between those he does create and those he does not. Most of the Muʿtazila were in agreement that all possible divine acts—or at least those that are not incompatible with his nature, wisdom, and knowledge of good and evil—are at least potentially objects of God's power.[19] How then does God choose which ones to apply his power to? On what basis did he ever come to play any determinative role in, have a formative impact on, and then become involved with the physical world of atoms and accidents—the world of human life and death, joys and sorrows, worries, concerns, and hopes?

God's Will

The Basra Muʿtazila[20] mostly agreed that what determines a free and capable agent's choice to perform one possible action rather than another is the agent's will. In the case of voluntary human actions—which the Muʿtazila famously regarded as freely chosen and performed by the human agent's own power—the will that determines whether or not to perform a specific possible action is an accident, subsisting in the atoms of the heart, by virtue of which the whole human agent is said to be in a state of willing. It is temporal, and occurs following a deliberative process during which the agent is pushed and pulled between different motivations; once a decision is reached, this will is brought into existence by the agent as an accident that determines the physical movements whereby the agent performs or sets in motion the ensuing action.[21] In God's case,

---

17 Frank, *Abu Hashim's Theory of "States,"* 88–92; Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes,* 43–47; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 171–173, 410.

18 Frank, *Abu Hashim's Theory of "States,"* 96–97, 99. Cf. Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 147–149, 171, 236–237, 242, 243; Wolfson, *Philosophy,* 183–185.

19 See, for example, ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:122–123, 203–210, 7:55; cf. notes 9, 11, 12, and 13 above, and note 23 below.

20 Al-Naẓẓām and some of the Baghdad Muʿtazila, on the other hand, effectively denied that God has a will in this sense. Al-Ašʿarī, *Maqālāt,* 190–191, 365, 509–510; Pretzl, *Die frühislamische Attributenlehre,* 25; Nader, *Le système philosophique,* 88–90; Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 506. ʿAbd al-Jabbār argues (*al-Mughnī,* 6/2:111–148, especially 111, 119, 134, 140, 146) that God must have an attribute of will because there is nothing else to differentiate those things he does will from those he could will but doesn't.

21 See al-Ašʿarī, *Maqālāt,* 415–418; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:8–9, 22–30, 56–58, 78–90, 108–109, 150, 178, 190, 191, 194, 207, 258–261; Frank, *Metaphysics of Created Being,* 29–33; Frank, *Abu Hashim's Theory of "States,"* 90, 92; Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes,* 44–47, 106–107, 132; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 166–167, 199, 211–222, 410, 412–417; Nader, *Le système philosophique,* 259–262, 265–267, 277–278. Peters argues that although ʿAbd al-Jabbār affirmed human freedom, his theories of will and action made him in effect a determinist in that both divine and human actions are determined not by the will but by motives (or combinations of conflicting motives), which are a kind of knowledge (perfect knowledge in God's case) or some other less reliable intellectual appraisal of the benefits of each

however, there is no need for prior deliberation; indeed it is not even possible for God to "think things through," since his knowledge is eternal and thus does not go through stages, and since anyway he already necessarily knows what is best.[22]

Consequently, God's will does not follow from deliberation and decision, but flows straightway from his knowledge. We might expect, therefore, that the Muʿtazila would regard the will that determines God's actions as identical to or closely correlated with his knowledge of what is good and in the best interest of his creatures, so that the will that determines his choice of creative actions would be eternally wrapped up in his knowledge and, indeed, in his essence. In some sense some of the Muʿtazila do seem to have held a shadow of such a doctrine, since some of them held that, given God's eternal knowledge of what he will create, it is not actually possible for him to do anything else; his creation is thus determined by his knowledge and, ipso facto, by his essence.[23] But this view threatened to reduce the Muʿtazilī position to the determinism of the philosophers, for whom the whole universe proceeds necessarily and deterministically from God's eternal nature.[24] The Muʿtazila were generally too committed to the idea of God's free acts of creation and intervention in history to adopt this thesis.[25] Some of them argued that God has the power and freedom to create any possible world, and even those who affirmed that God's wisdom and justice compel him to create only what is in the very best interest of his servants still typically argued that

possible action. Will is a separate action determined by these same motives, and has no effect on that action except to give it a particular character arising from its intentionality, as when an utterance is intended as a command rather than a statement. But Peters' account is not entirely consistent, and he admits not being able to pin ʿAbd al-Jabbār down on the precise determinants of action. ʿAbd al-Jabbār is indeed evasive about how will results in action, if only because he is not so much attempting to explain how actions come to be as to explain how they come to have certain characteristics, and to account for our experience of feeling inclined toward certain actions and not others. He says that the will affects the character but not the existence of actions (*al-Mughnī,* 6/2:94), and he argues that one's will does not necessarily entail (*tūjib*) or generate (*tatawallad*) one's own actions, even if it always correlates with them in the absence of impediments; but then he says that motives do not necessarily determine actions either (*al-Mughnī,* 6/1:7, 187–189, 193, 6/2:84–88, 140), he indicates that human will sets the body in motion (*al-Mughnī,* 6/2:108), and he insists that God's actions are entirely free, not compelled by his knowledge of what is good (*al-Mughnī,* 6/1:13–14, 6/2:197). Peters' interpretation also seems to be contradicted by ʿAbd al-Jabbār in *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:24, 68. Here I follow Frank's presentation of the main tradition stemming from Abū al-Hudhayl, which regards the will as determinative of free action. ʿAbd al-Jabbār's view seems to me compatible with that tradition in that every divine act (other than will itself) occurs with the character of beneficent purposefulness and therefore must be intended or willed as such; that will simultaneously determines God's choice of action and gives the act its good and purposeful character; cf. Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes,* 132.

22 Nader, *Le système philosophique,* 70, 88, 262; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:132, 260.

23 Nader, *Le système philosophique,* 70–72, 76, 88–89, 92, 262. Al-Naẓẓām held that God does not have power to do what he knows he will not do; Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 488. On Abū al-Hudhayl's related view, see note 9 above. ʿAbd al-Jabbār said it was the position of the Basran masters that the things God knows he will not do are nevertheless within his power; Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 487; Frank, *Al-Maʿdūm wal-Mawjūd,* 201–202; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/1:128, 6/2:138–139. Cf. the Baghdad Muʿtazilī Bishr ibn al-Muʿtamir (d. 825), who argued that God must have an eternal will that correlates with his knowledge because he could not eternally know something to be good without also willing it; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:3.

24 Nader, *Le système philosophique,* 67, 76–79; Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 486, 500–502, 505–506. Peters interprets ʿAbd al-Jabbār as arriving in effect at just such a deterministic view that God's actions are fully determined by his knowledge of what is best for his creatures; see note 21 above.

25 See Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 488, 502, 506; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:197.

there are multiple equally good options from which he can choose.[26] It was necessary, therefore, to assert that God has an attribute of will that determines which of all the possible actions he can perform he does in fact perform; this cannot be explained solely by his eternal knowledge.[27]

That is why the generality of the Basra Muʿtazila came to hold that God's will is not one of those eternal attributes that are indistinguishable from both his knowledge and his essence, but rather one of God's temporal and contingent attributes—an action and an "accident" (*ʿaraḍ*) that comes to be in time, at the moment when he in fact creates things, and in virtue of which God is said to be willing.[28] The main difficulty with this view is that since accidents are by definition contingent, they can only characterize and subsist in contingent substances, namely atoms and objects made up of atoms. Human will is an accident subsisting in the atoms of the heart,[29] but if God's will is an accident then it cannot subsist in God himself because he is eternal and immaterial. Yet if it were to subsist instead in some material being, then that being, rather than God, would be the one who wills by it.[30] So Abū al-Hudhayl and the Basran tradition that culminated in ʿAbd al-Jabbār argued that God's will is an accident that exists without subsisting in any substrate or locus at all.[31] In this way they neither identified God's will with the eternal divine attribute of knowledge from which it flows, nor located it in the material world of atoms and accidents that God creates;[32] they made it a kind of bridge, floating between the two—a divine attribute that is both the ground of God's own state of being willing[33] and, at the same time, one of God's acts, occurring in time but not in the

---

[26] For example, Abū al-Hudhayl and al-Naẓẓām, but not ʿAbbād ibn Sulaymān (d. ca. 864); see Brunschvig, *Muʿtazilisme et optimum*, 235, 238–240, and *passim;* Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 489–490; al-Aškʿarī, *Maqālāt,* 247, 249–250, 574–578. Cf. Nader, *Le système philosophique,* 77–79, 98, 149, 191–192. Peters (*God's Created Speech,* 415–416) appears to assume that for ʿAbd al-Jabbār there is only one best possible world, and argues that since God knows what is best his actions must be uniquely determined and predictable; in fact ʿAbd al-Jabbār did not hold that God has to do what is best in all his acts, but only in those by which he helps us to fulfill our moral duties, and even in those he sometimes has multiple options; see Brunschvig, *Muʿtazilisme et optimum*, 241–247; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/1:8, 43, 46, 205, 223, 14:23, 32–33, 37, 53–54.

[27] Cf. Abū ʿAlī al-Jubbāʾī's argument (related in ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:177) that if God's actions were effectively determined by his eternal knowledge God would have to be eternally acting.

[28] See Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 459, 494–498, 502, 504–506; Frank, *Metaphysics of Created Being,* 17, 30 n. 21, 51; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 250, 273–275; al-Aškʿarī, *Maqālāt,* 418, 508–509, 512; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:3, 58, 107–109, 111–147, 176, 194, 198, 214, 298. ʿAbd al-Jabbār specifies on pp. 145–147 that although God's will is one of his acts, his being willing is not strictly speaking one of his attributes of action (*ṣifāt al-afʿāl*) because he is not willing simply by virtue of creating an act of will; if he created a will in someone else he would not thereby be willing. Cf. Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 266–267; Nader, *Le système philosophique,* 90–92. On atoms and accidents, see note 3 above.

[29] ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:22–23, 26–30, 150; Frank, *Abu Hashim's Theory of "States"*, 92, 94; Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes,* 106–107; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 215, 222.

[30] According to ʿAbd al-Jabbār, an act or accident of will gives rise to a state of being willing in whatever living being it subsists in, not in whatever agent performs the act of willing—though for human will these are always the same. ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:47–49, 149, 153, 158.

[31] Al-Aškʿarī, *Maqālāt,* 189–190, 363, 510; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:3, 108, 149–174; Nader, *Le système philosophique,* 90; Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 494–498, 505; Frank, *Metaphysics of Created Being,* 51; Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes,* 70–71, 73–75; Wolfson, *Philosophy,* 140–141; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 275–276.

[32] Al-Naẓẓām and some of the Baghdad Muʿtazila, however, did identify God's will to create something with his act of creating it and/or with the thing itself. See al-Aškʿarī, *Maqālāt,* 189–191, 363–365, 509–510; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:3–4.

[33] For those who upheld Abū Hāshim's theory of states. See Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 497; Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes,* 73, 77; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 266–267.

material world. It is a divine attribute, yet not a simple one; indeed, ʿAbd al-Jabbār held that God has a separate attribute of will for every single act that he chooses to perform.[34] It is at the level of God's will, therefore, that we find real plurality entering the Godhead, characterizing God but not subsisting in him; and it is this great plurality of states of willing—one for each of God's actions—that explains how God, despite being eternally simple and undifferentiated, ends up differentiating those non-existent possibilities that he does bring into existence from those that he does not.

God's will does not determine everything that happens in the world, because God is not the cause or creator of everything. While only God can create atoms, many accidents are brought into existence directly by human beings, or caused (secondarily) by other accidents rather than by God's direct acts of creation. For example, the movement of one object might be "generated" by that of another object that presses against it; and the voluntary movements of human beings, along with many of the consequences resulting from them, are determined or generated by free acts of their own wills.[35]

A great deal of what happens in the world is thus neither brought about nor even willed by God.[36] This was one of the most important ideas separating the Muʿtazila from their opponents, who rejected the Muʿtazilī notion of physical chains of causation (*tawallud*, "generation") that unfold deterministically, following the laws of nature, stemming from motions created in objects by God or generated by voluntary human actions.[37] Many of the Ashʿariyya held that the world would have no continuity at all were it not for God's habit or custom of recreating things at successive moments following predictable patterns and sequences. They also rejected the Muʿtazilī doctrine that voluntary human actions (which consist of accidents subsisting in atoms) are brought about by human beings themselves, through their own free choices and the decisions of their own wills, by means of their own powers or abilities—not by God's will, God's power, or God's creative action. Indeed, the Muʿtazila argued that if human actions were determined by God's will they could not properly be attributed to their human agents at all, for the agent of an act is defined precisely as the one according to whose will it occurs.[38] (That is why, for example, people attribute the speech of an insane person to the jinn they believe to be speaking through him and not to the possessed person who involuntarily lends his voice to the jinn's speech.[39]) Their opponents objected that this severely undermines God's power, since it makes human actions subject to human rather than divine power and will; they argued instead that all human actions are created by God, and come about by his will and power, and therefore are fully determined by God and are not subject to free human choice—even if, as some of the Ashʿariyya posited, a voluntary human act is simultaneously the object of a human power that accompanies God's power without determining the act.[40] According to the

---

[34] See Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes,* 73–75, 77; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 275; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:96–98, 110, 142, 192–195, 292, 311.

[35] See al-Ašʿarī, *Maqālāt,* 400–415; Nader, *Le système philosophique,* 198–204; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 197–198, 203–209, 267.

[36] See al-Ašʿarī, *Maqālāt,* 514; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:4, 74.

[37] See the references in note 35 above.

[38] Frank, *Metaphysics of Created Being,* 29–30; Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes,* 136; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 198–203, 207, 210, 228; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:91, 120, 7:48.

[39] ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 7:48–49; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-khamsa,* 535; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 329; Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics,* 148.

[40] See ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:211, 238, 256–283, 298, 305, 307, 310.

Muʿtazila, God does not create or bring about voluntary human actions, and he wills only some of them, and that in a way that does not determine them. And although God does know all human actions from eternity past, his knowledge only reflects, and does not predetermine, what humans choose to do.[41]

God is not indifferent, however, regarding human actions. Since he necessarily knows what is good and what is evil, and has neither any need nor any way to benefit from anyone's actions, God can have no motivation to will evil, so he wills (*arāda*) only what is good, including those good acts that are incumbent on human beings, and he hates (*karaha*) the evil actions that humans perform.[42] But his will concerning freely chosen human actions does not determine them as his will concerning his own actions does.[43] The Muʿtazila's opponents, holding as they did that God's will determines all that actually happens in the universe, seemed compelled to affirm that God actually wills the evil acts that humans perform, but the Muʿtazila regarded this as an absurd contradiction of God's justice.[44]

Thus alongside the will that accompanies God's own actions, we must consider a second dimension of divine will directed toward the actions of creatures. This aspect of God's will must be treated somewhat differently.[45] It correlates not with what actually happens in the universe—since human beings often freely go against God's will—but rather with God's commands[46] and with all the obligations God imposes on human beings, whether these be known rationally or by revelation.[47] In the Basran branch of the Muʿtazila, starting with Abū ʿAlī al-Jubbāʾī (d. 915) and continuing through ʿAbd al-Jabbār, commands became a subject of theoretical discussion because of their importance for Islamic law. Definitions varied slightly, but all agreed that a speaker's utterance of an imperative verb, having the form *ifʿal*, constitutes a command only if the speaker also wills that the addressee perform the commanded act; if the speaker is indifferent about the act, and only intends to give the addressee the option of performing an action—as when one says "please go ahead, have some coffee, make yourself at home"—then the imperative verb does not constitute a command but only an invitation or a granting of permission.[48] In a legislative context, however, when God commands humans to "perform the prayer," for example, ʿAbd al-Jabbār argued that by

---

41 ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:206, 308, 316–317.

42 See al-Ašʿarī, *Maqālāt,* 512; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/1:30, 6/2:130, 215, 218–225, 229, 237, 254–255, 297, 333, 335, 351; Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes,* 149.

43 Human beings too can will the actions of others in a non-determinative way. See ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:91–92; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 216–217. ʿAbd al-Jabbār notes (*al-Mughnī,* 6/2:257–268, 316–317; cf. 292) that in addition to willing humans to freely choose certain actions, God can also will and compel humans to perform certain actions.

44 See, for example, ʿAbd al Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:4–6, 74, 101–102, 125–126, 179, 183, 204, 206, 212, 216–217, 231, 250–252, 276, 279, 283, 286, 293. ʿAbd al Jabbār noted (6/2:250–252), however, that most of his opponents tried to avoid saying outright that God wills unbelief.

45 See al-Ašʿarī, *Maqālāt,* 190, 364–365, 509–510; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:257; Nader, *Le système philosophique,* 90, 92–94.

46 See al-Ašʿarī, *Maqālāt,* 512, 514; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:5, 217–218, 223–225, 230, 17:107, 113–114; Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics,* 135–136.

47 On God's imposition of obligations (*taklīf*) see Vishanoff, *Informative and Performative Theories of Divine Speech*, 187–189; Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism,* 118–121; Vasalou, *Moral Agents and Their Deserts,* 47–51; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:218–219, 232–233, 11:293–300 and *passim*.

48 ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:10–11, 95–98, 223–230, 17:22, 107, 115; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 212, 214, 217, 221, 271–272, 329, 345, 351; Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics,* 117–118, 130, 134.

default this should be taken as indicating that God wills his audience to pray, and this in turn indicates that praying is good and, if not obligatory, then at least recommended, since that is the least that can be said of an action that God positively wills for us to do.[49]

When God's will relates to his own actions, it determines which of all possible things he brings into existence; but when it relates to the free actions of human beings it does not determine what humans actually do—since that depends on their own wills—but instead determines the meaning and legal force of the commands that God addresses to humans. God's being willing, then, is a temporal state of his transcendent being that directly impinges upon and shapes the created world and human life in two ways. The will that determines God's own creative actions sets the context and parameters of each human life by assigning its physical environment, its lifespan, its health or physical suffering, and its wealth or prosperity. And God's will that humans should freely perform certain actions, which is the meaning expressed by his commands, helps to structure the moral environment—the rights and obligations, the sense of who deserves praise or blame, and the expectations of future reward and punishment[50]—within which humans make all their daily choices. God's attribute of will is a lynchpin in the relationship between God and humanity.

God's Speech

If God's will is the first attribute by which the Muʿtazila began to entangle God's transcendent being with the material and human world, his speech is a close second, for through it God intrudes and intervenes in the moral lives of human beings, and thus participates in shaping their eternal destiny.

The Muʿtazila famously held God's speech to be created.[51] By ʿAbd al-Jabbār's time the two main alternative views against which he had to argue were the traditionalist view that the Qur'an itself is eternal and uncreated, and the Ashʿarī view that God's speech is an eternal "inner speech" or speech-meaning subsisting in God's essence while the words of the Qur'an are created, temporal expressions of that eternal divine attribute. ʿAbd al-Jabbār dismissed the first as an absurdity: how can the letters and verses of the Qur'an be eternal if they form a sequence in which some letters and verses precede others?[52] The second view he took more seriously, and criticized it for making God's speech an unknowable feature of God's essence which, if it did exist, would be useless to human beings.[53] He defended the Muʿtazilī doctrine of the created Qur'an by pointing out that only if God's speech is a created, temporal, and material sequence of perceptible sounds and letters can it function as evidence from which humans can come to know God's will, his commands, and what

[49] ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:226–227, 344, 17:106–108, 113–116; Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics,* 118, 130–131.

[50] On the connection of God's will to reward and punishment, see ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:218–220, 258, 274, 316.

[51] See generally Pretzl, *Die frühislamische Attributenlehre,* 26–35; Bouman, *Le conflit autour du Coran;* Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 1–3, 278–402; Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics,* 145–150, 152–153, 179–181, 188.

[52] ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-khamsa,* 527, 531–532; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 7:85–86; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 333–334, 349–350.

[53] ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-khamsa,* 527–528, 530–533, 536–537; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 7:14–15, 95–101, 110, 156, 179, 181; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 308–310, 331–332, 353–359.

they should do to achieve maximum blessedness in this life and the next.[54] There has been a long tradition among both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars of interpreting the Muʿtazilī doctrine of God's created speech as a way of minimizing the importance of revelation in favor of reason,[55] but ʿAbd al-Jabbār saw it the other way around: he believed he was safeguarding the epistemological value of revelation, and it was his opponents, he argued, who made God's attribute of speech meaningless and humanly unknowable, and rendered the Qur'an untrustworthy and epistemologically useless.[56]

The Muʿtazila all agreed that God's speech is not one of his essential or eternal attributes. In this they may initially have been motivated by a desire to avoid the Christian argument that the Trinity should be unobjectionable to Muslims because they too believe that God has an eternal Word or attribute of speech.[57] The Muʿtazila dodged that argument quite neatly by making God's speech one of his attributes of action: God is properly said to be speaking not because of some attribute of speech that subsists in him, but because he is the agent and creator of certain letters subsisting in the air (or in a Heavenly Tablet[58]) which, being intended to convey certain meanings and being formed in accordance with the rules of a specific language, constitute meaningful speech. This is precisely what we mean when we say that a human person is speaking: we mean that he voluntarily produces a sequence of sounds and letters[59] and, if he is speaking properly, conveys thereby certain meanings. It is these letters and sounds, which are accidents he produces in his tongue and engenders in the air, that qualify him as speaking; we need not posit any special accident of "speech" subsisting in his heart or tongue and giving rise to a state of "being speaking."[60] It is the same with

---

[54] Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, 122, 147–150; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-khamsa*, 528–531; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 7:93, 208, 224.

[55] See Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, 149.

[56] See note 53 above and ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 7:18–20, 65, 71, 101–109, 114; cf. 6/2:212, 280; Peters, *God's Created Speech*, 345–347.

[57] Bouman, *Le conflit autour du Coran*, 3–4, 10–12; Nader, *Le système philosophique*, 99, 101, 105; Wolfson, *Philosophy*, 236–244, 263–264. ʿAbd al-Jabbār still echoes some such concern when he argues (*al-Mughnī*, 7:86–87, 110–113, 116) that if the Qur'an were eternal it would itself be divine—a view he says some people actually hold. Pretzl (*Die frühislamische Attributenlehre*, 26–27, 50–51) points to an Iranian rather than a Christian background for the debate, while others argue that the debate arose entirely from internal Muslim concerns.

[58] Abū al-Hudhayl held that God's speech was created (and endures) in a Heavenly Tablet containing all God's revelations (Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 492–494; Nader, *Le système philosophique*, 104; Wolfson, *Philosophy*, 264–275), but ʿAbd al-Jabbār, who defined speech as sounds that cannot endure beyond the moment of their utterance (see note 63 below) and regarded writing only as secondary evidence of speech (*al-Mughnī*, 7:23, 105–106, 109, 191, 195–198, Peters, *God's Created Speech*, 302, 390–393, 396), said the Tablet is only a sign of God's speech written down by the angels (*al-Mughnī*, 7:201–202; cf. Peters, *God's Created Speech*, 394; I was mistaken on this point in Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, 148).

[59] Following Abū Hāshim and ʿAbd al-Jabbār, who considered letters to be articulated sounds. Abū al-Hudhayl and Abū ʿAlī distinguished letters (*ḥurūf*) from sounds (*aṣwāt*), and identified speech as meaningful letters that can exist (and remain in existence) in several places at once—together with the sounds in the air, with the ink on the written page, in the memories of Qur'an reciters, and, in the case of God's speech, in the Heavenly Tablet. Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 490–492; Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes*, 129; Peters, *God's Created Speech*, 139, 296–297, 301–302, 388–396, 417; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-khamsa*, 528–529; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 7:6–8, 187, 191–192.

[60] Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes*, 70, 129–131, 135–137; Peters, *God's Created Speech*, 62–64, 138–141, 287, 293–329, 336–340, 360–361; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 6/2:153, 7:5, 10–12, 26, 34, 40–41, 46–48, 53, 58–69, 85, 101–102, 114–115, 142, 161, 178–179; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-khamsa*, 535–537; Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, 147–148.

God, except that God produces these ordered sounds directly and immediately, in whatever material substrate he wishes, rather than by means of physical organs.[61]

God's attribute of speech, then, is just a specific part of his creation by virtue of which he deserves to be described as speaking. It is part of the material order,[62] but because he is its agent it qualifies him as speaking—not eternally or continually, since speech is a sound that cannot endure beyond the moment in which it is produced,[63] but only when he first utters his revelations and they are written down by the angels, which he does at various times over the course of history before subsequently sending them down bit by bit to specific prophets. ʿAbd al-Jabbār stated explicitly that he considered God's speech to have been created not all at once but rather in response to the course of human events, for if God had created the Qur'anic verse "We sent Noah to his people" (Q 71:1) before actually sending Noah, that statement would have been false.[64] God's speech, then, like God's will, is a divine attribute that enmeshes him in the temporal created order: it is not just something he created at the beginning and left there as a piece of evidence for us to decipher; it is his very own attribute of action by which he communicates with human beings in time, responding to and intervening in their thoughts and actions.

Moreover, God's created speech is tightly interconnected with his equally temporal and contingent attribute of will. Not only does God will to create certain sounds, he also wills that humans be informed of certain things and that they perform certain actions, and those acts of his will are what give his speech its meaning. Sounds and letters, all by themselves, do not have meaning, even if they correspond to words in a dictionary and follow the rules of grammar; for speech to be meaningful it must be intended or willed to convey a certain meaning or further a certain purpose. The "meaning" of a particular utterance—a particular sequence of letters uttered by a specific person in a specific circumstance with a specific intent—is an additional attribute of those letters above and beyond their existence as accidents of sound subsisting in the speaker's tongue. Meaning is one of that class of attributes that, in the Basran Muʿtazilī theory of attributes so carefully studied by Richard Frank, are classified as "attributes determined by (the states of) the agent who causes the existence of the thing."[65] An imperative verb produced by a speaker has the meaning of command by virtue of the speaker's state of being willing that the addressee perform the commanded act. A

---

61 ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 7:23, 34, 41, 57; Peters, *God's Created Speech*, 140–142, 314–323.

62 This does not necessarily apply to the command "Be!" by which the Qur'an appears to say that God creates things (e. g., Q 2:117, 3:47, 6:73, 36:82). This creative command would seem to present a special problem for the Muʿtazila: how could God initiate creation by speaking if his speech was itself created? Abū al-Hudhayl held that this creative speech, although temporal, is immaterial and not itself created but rather an accident that, like God's will, subsists in no material substrate and that, coming into being together with God's will to create at the very moment of creation, constitutes his act of creation; Frank, *Divine Attributes*, 490, 494–496, 505; cf. Wolfson, *Philosophy*, 141. ʿAbd al-Jabbār avoided the problem by interpreting the Qur'anic statement metaphorically and denying that God creates by saying "Be!" See ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 7:67, 90, 166; Peters, *God's Created Speech*, 377–382.

63 According to ʿAbd al-Jabbār and Abū Hāshim; see ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 7:51, 84–85, 189, 191; Peters, *God's Created Speech*, 138, 300, 304, 388, 394, 417. Abū al-Hudhayl and Abū ʿAlī, however, regarded speech as remaining in existence from one moment to the next; see note 59 above and ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 7:187, 191.

64 ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 7:78–81; Peters, *God's Created Speech*, 340, 347, 387.

65 Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes*, 124–134; Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, 133–135; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 7:10–11, 107, 113, 15:323, 16:347.

sentence in the form of a statement conveys a certain meaning only thanks to the speaker's will to inform the addressee of its contents.[66]

ʿAbd al-Jabbār argued that the only thing God's speech can really convey information about is God's law, because that is the only kind of information God can really teach to humans by his speech, and is therefore the only kind of meaning he can will to convey by his revelations. This is because humans must first arrive at their principal beliefs about God and his attributes by means of unaided human reason, before they can have sufficient grounds for believing that what God reveals through his prophets is true. If they did not first determine rationally that God is just, for example, they could not be sure that God does not lie, or that prophets who perform miracles really speak on his behalf.[67] So God cannot will to teach or inform humans about himself through his speech; he can only give them verbal reminders or prompts to encourage them to come to a knowledge of his attributes through rational inference from nature, and then use the medium of speech to convey other information that will be beneficial for them. That information can only be knowledge of that relatively limited range of actions (such as the five daily prayers) that are in fact good or bad for humans, and that God will in fact reward or punish, but that humans could not determine to be good or bad on their own.[68]

The meaning of God's speech, then, is precisely what God wills to convey through it, and the only information he can will to convey is knowledge of what actions he wills for his servants to perform or to avoid. God's will for his own actions determines what he creates, including the speech that he creates;[69] but his will for his human servants' actions determines what his speech means. His will and speech are thus intimately interconnected. God's speech, operating in conjunction with God's will, is another lynchpin in the relationship between God and humanity, whereby God intervenes decisively but not forcibly in human ways of thinking and acting.

God's Justice

As we noted, however, the only reason humans can trust God's speech, and learn anything from it, is that they already know God to be just. God's justice was the second cardinal Muʿtazilī principle, yet it is one of God's attributes only in a derivative way. Justice is not the kind of quality one can have by nature; one can only be just in one's actions. In fact, to call God just is not even to describe the nature of his actions, but only to ascribe to them a secondary moral evaluation. To say that God is willing and speaking is to ascribe to God two categories of action, but to say that God is just (*ʿadl*,

---

66 Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes,* 128–131, 134, 137; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/1:83, 6/2:10–12, 15–19, 78, 94–99, 104, 223–225, 15:323, 17:22, 27, 107; Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics,* 116–120, 130, 134–135.

67 Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics,* 136; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:237, 343, 349, 7:54, 16:354, 17:30, 93–94; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Mutashābih al-Qurʾān,* 1–5; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 99–101.

68 ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/1:37, 64–65, 7:224, 17:23–24, 94–95, 101; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Mutashābih al-Qurʾān,* 4–5; Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics,* 130, 135–137, 143; Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism,* 132–136; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 96–97, 100–102, 224–225, 385–387, 402, 417–419. Peters notes (418) that revelation can communicate some other details about the universe, such as that knowledge inheres in the heart and not some other part of the body, but ʿAbd al-Jabbār himself is clear that all such knowledge must serve to support the law.

69 Recall, however, that on Peters' interpretation it is not God's will but solely his knowledge of what is best for his creatures that determines what he creates, including his speech. Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 415–416; see note 21 above.

or "acting justly," *ʿādil*) is to ascribe to those actions, and to all his acts, the property of being always good, never evil or pointless. To call God just is thus not to describe who God is or even what God does, but to say how God does things: whatever he does, he does in such a manner (*ʿalā wajh*) that it is always an instance of goodness toward his creatures, never an instance of evil. The Muʿtazilī doctrine of God's justice tells us a great deal about how God interacts with his creation, and establishes a pillar of what we might call God's character, but it is not a statement of God's essential nature, and can be called one of his attributes of action only in a derivative way.[70]

The Muʿtazilī theory of divine justice is vast and complex. A full outline of it would encompass their theory of what makes acts good or bad, their proof that God only does what is good and never does anything bad or pointless, the claim of some that God must always do what he knows to be in the very best interest of his creatures, their argument that God must reward good human actions, and their famous insistence that humans do good and bad by their own power, will, and free choice—without which God's own acts of reward and punishment would be incompatible with his justice.

This is not the place to survey these topics, which occupy an even greater place in Muʿtazilī theology than God's essential attributes. Here I wish only to point out how God's attribute (or quasi-attribute, or characteristic) of justice inextricably binds him (and the whole discipline of theology) to human beings and their concerns, thoughts, actions, hopes, fears, and welfare.

First of all, since justice is specifically about God's actions in time and space, and especially his engagement with humanity, it constitutes another important link, alongside God's will and speech, in the bridge the Muʿtazila attempted to build between their utterly transcendent definition of God and the world of human experience. Perhaps their doctrine of divine justice is not enough an attribute of God himself, and is too limited to describing things and events within the created realm, to serve as much of a bridge; but affirming the justice of God's acts does place God within the same moral universe as humans, just as the Muʿtazila placed God within the same logical universe of possibility and impossibility. The Muʿtazila frequently reasoned "by analogy from our world to the Unseen" in proving aspects of divine justice, just as they did in establishing God's will and speech.[71] The very use of the category of justice, understood in the same terms as human justice, to describe

[70] Technically, the Muʿtazila did count "acting justly" (*ʿādil*) among God's attributes of action—those he has by virtue of his choice to do certain things and not by virtue of his essence—as though "acting justly" were on the same order as "willing," "creating," and "speaking." See al-Ašʿarī, *Maqālāt,* 507–509; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 266–271, 280; and more generally ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/1:3, 15, 48–49, 76, 134, 137, 177, 7:107, 20:194–195. But ʿAbd al-Jabbār said that attributes of praise like beneficence follow secondarily from the underlying attributes of action that make a person worthy of them; see *al-Mughnī,* 6/1:7, 9, 7:52. The word justice (*ʿadl*) only ever describes actions, even when it is applied in an extended sense to God himself (ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-khamsa,* 301). Justice should thus be counted among the "derived predicates" (*al-ṣifāt al-mushtaqqa*) which, as Frank explains (*Beings and Their Attributes,* 135), do not indicate states or characteristics of an agent's being but only the occurrence of certain kinds of acts by his power and will. In describing God himself ʿAbd al-Jabbār tends to use "wise" (*ḥakīm*) rather than "just," but he says these are synonymous (*al-Mughnī,* 6/1:49; cf. 20/2:195). On the Muʿtazilī theory that actions are good or bad by virtue of the *wajh* (manner or overall character) of their occurrence, see Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism,* 29–36, 62–70, 103–126; Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes,* 126, 131–135; Vasalou, *Moral Agents and Their Deserts,* 72–74, 87–89; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/1:7, 10–11, 31, 52, 55, 70–72, 77, 11:84.

[71] E. g., ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-khamsa,* 302–303; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:226, 269, 341, 7:49, 53, 76, 95–99, 210, 17:30.

and circumscribe God's actions was itself a way of enmeshing God within the same moral framework as human beings.

The doctrine of God's justice helps to bridge the gap between his essence and his creatures in more substantive ways as well, thanks to the impact that it has on his will and his speech. God's justice does not govern his essential attributes of life, knowledge, and power; he knows and is capable of performing all possible acts, whether they be good or bad, according to most of the Muʿtazila.[72] It is rather at the level of his intermediate, non-essential attribute of will that God's justice begins to govern his other attributes. For as we have seen, the Muʿtazila held not only that God cannot do evil, but also that he cannot will evil to be done, either by himself or by anyone else. God's will therefore corresponds entirely to what is good and beneficial—not beneficial for himself, since he has no needs such that he might stand to benefit from anything, but for his creatures and their blessedness in this world and the next. This means that his will, insofar as it concerns the free actions of human beings, corresponds precisely with the moral and legal guidelines under which they live—both those basic moral duties that they know by unaided reason, and those additional requirements such as prayer and fasting that God has imposed upon them by revelation in order to further dispose them to the performance of their basic moral duties, so as to maximize their potential reward.[73] God's justice is what makes his will correspond to the moral order within which humans live.

Moreover, since God's will is what determines the meaning of his speech, this correlation between his will and morality entails, in ʿAbd al-Jabbār's thought, that God's speech always corresponds precisely to the law. As we have seen, God's speech cannot convey basic theological information about himself. Nor can it convey basic moral truths, since these are already knowable by reason, and God cannot teach humans something that they already know or that they could figure out for themselves. God's speech can help to confirm and emphasize what they know, and bring it home through exhortations, stories, and parables, as the Qur'an frequently does; but the only new information it can convey is about those legal requirements that God imposes by revelation. In the end, ʿAbd al-Jabbār concludes that the entire meaning of revelation is his law. That is what makes revelation a good and beneficial action worthy of a just God.[74]

Furthermore, since God's speech is created and thus one of God's actions, it is itself subject to God's justice. This means that it can only be good, and indeed perfectly so. That is why it can only convey useful information, and that is why it must do so clearly.[75] It would be evil, ʿAbd al-Jabbār held, for God to utter words that literally mean one thing when he actually means something else, except in those cases when figurative speech might communicate more effectively—but then the evidence of what is meant must be readily available so that every rational and legally responsible person who hears God's word might understand it and have the chance to apply it for their own good.[76] God's justice is thus our only guarantee that God's speech discloses his requirements clearly enough for

---

[72] See note 13 above.

[73] See ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/1:14, 6/2:218–225, 232–233, 254–255, 258, 274, 316; and notes 42 and 47 above.

[74] See note 68 above.

[75] See Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics,* 123, 137; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-khamsa,* 527; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 16:353, 17:30, 182–184; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 37–38, 280–281, 385–387.

[76] ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī,* 6/2:106, 226–227, 7:182–186, 16:350–351, 353–358, 17:27–29, 35–38, 42, 44, 65–72, 81–82; Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics,* 111–113, 115–116, 125–129, 133, 137–141; Peters, *God's Created Speech,* 102, 387.

us to understand them using the rational and other revealed evidence available to us. Indeed, his justice is our only guarantee that God is not simply lying to us or sending us false prophets to begin with.[77]

In this way God's justice, even though it is not exactly an attribute of God himself, constitutes another indispensable link in the chain of connections—will, speech, and justice—whereby an eternal and utterly transcendent God involves himself with humans, guiding them and shaping the physical and moral contours of their lives by willing, speaking, and acting in such a way as to maximize human welfare in this world and the next.

Contemporary relevance

It is striking that a Muʿtazilī discourse about God's attributes that started out trying to defend God's utter transcendence against the fallacies of other Muslim and non-Muslim theologies, and that even seemed to put God's essence beyond the reach of human understanding, ended up, in the marvelously systematic and tightly interconnected theology of ʿAbd al-Jabbār, portraying God as single-mindedly focused on human welfare. The Muʿtazila had to explain how a transcendent God utterly unlike his creation could know and be known by his creatures, and how his power could exercise a determinative effect on the world, both through his initial creation and through his continuing involvement in history. What they perhaps did not anticipate was the extent to which their explanations of God's attributes, and particularly of those intermediate divine-yet-temporal attributes of will, speech, and justice, would end up entangling God in the created realm, and would ultimately result in a remarkably anthropocentric theology.[78]

This anthropocentric turn in classical Muʿtazilī theology remains relevant for Islamic theology today, which is undergoing its own anthropological turn—explicitly so, and especially in Europe where Christian theology, which looms large in theological conversations, has already taken a sharp anthropological turn of its own, arguably turning modern Christian theology into anthropology: the study of divinity has become in fact a study of humanity.

The modern relevance of Muʿtazilī theology was already noted early in the 20th century by Sunni Muslim intellectuals and reformers such as Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905), Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī (d. 1914), and Aḥmad Amīn (d. 1954) who sought to rehabilitate selected aspects of Muʿtazilī thought and sparked a movement to recover and publish their writings—a movement to which we owe our knowledge of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's *Mughnī fī abwāb al-tawḥīd wa-l-ʿadl*, on which this essay relies so heavily. That resurgence of interest in the Muʿtazila, however, was focused primarily on their supposed rationalism and on their doctrine of human free will. With the possible exception of the doctrine of the created Qur'an, toward which Muḥammad ʿAbduh may have gestured before it was expunged from later editions of his *Risālat al-tawḥīd*, these reformers were not as interested in the hairsplitting technicalities of Muʿtazilī teaching about the divine attributes, which seemed to

[77] See note 67 above.

[78] Cf. Peters, *God's Created Speech*, 14, 16.

them of little relevance for the modern concerns of a Muslim community that had lost its way, its prosperity, and its influence in the world.[79]

Hairsplitting as they admittedly were, however, those early and classical Muʿtazilī debates about the divine attributes are not just the irrelevant "pie in the sky" that the Muʿtazila's famous emphasis on divine transcendence might lead us to think. Quite ironically for the Advocates of Divine Unity (*ahl al-tawḥīd*), who saw themselves as the defenders of God's transcendence against the anthropomorphism of the masses and the half-baked fallacies of the Ashʿariyya, their technical definitions of God's attributes had important implications for God's involvement in mundane human affairs, especially through his will and speech as those are shaped by his justice.

The Muʿtazilī debates about divine attributes even had implications for human epistemology and the hermeneutics of Qur'anic and legal interpretation. ʿAbd al-Jabbār's theology did not lead him to the kind of flexible hermeneutic that modern reformers of Islamic law might wish for; on the contrary, it led him to posit the supreme clarity of God's speech, and thus to limit the kinds of metaphorical interpretation and other deviations from the surface meaning of language that would have given jurists leeway to adapt the law to changing circumstances. Although the Muʿtazila were famous for their metaphorical interpretations of the Qur'an's apparently anthropomorphic statements about God, this was only because they thought the Qur'an did not set out to teach theology; ʿAbd al-Jabbār argued that it was really all about law, which it had to communicate with complete clarity, leaving a minimum of wiggle room for interpreters.[80]

Nevertheless, despite the relative inflexibility of their legal hermeneutic, the Muʿtazila did place law and scriptural interpretation firmly within the framework of a rational morality that could be known by unaided human reason and that governed the meaning of revelation, as indeed it governed all aspects of God's will and actions. Moreover, by placing the Qur'an firmly within history, the Muʿtazilī doctrine of divine speech pointed to the possibility of a hermeneutic grounded in the historical context of revelation. Although ʿAbd al-Jabbār himself did not pursue this hermeneutical implication of his theology of divine speech,[81] it remains a tantalizing and very relevant possibility in today's world, where the historicity of revelation is seen by many as the master key to unlocking reform in Islamic thought.

One modern thinker who did take up some Muʿtazilī teachings about God's attributes, and who saw their relevance for Qur'anic hermeneutics, was Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd (1943–2010). His flexible reader-centered approach to the Qur'an found support in the Muʿtazila's notion of the temporal, created Qur'an, in their doctrine that the meaning of God's speech depends on his will or intent, in their claim that God's intent can only be known through a rational process of inference, and in their view that human languages were not created by God but arose from social convention. In the end, however, even for his theory that the Qur'an is a historical and cultural product, he relied more

---

[79] See Caspar, *Un aspect de la pensée musulmane moderne*; Gardet, *Signification du "renouveau muʿtazilite"*; Martin and Woodward, *Defenders of Reason in Islam* (especially 128–135, 148–153, 164–177). Hildebrandt (*Neo-Muʿtazilismus*) reviews this literature, greatly expands and updates it, and cautions that modern Muslims have used the Muʿtazila more as a symbolic source of legitimacy for their own projects than as a source of theological ideas.

[80] See Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics,* 133, 150, 276–278, and *passim*.

[81] ʿAbd al-Jabbār argues in *al-Mughnī,* 7:78–80, that Qur'anic verses referring to historical events must have been spoken by God after, and thus in some sense in response to, the events they narrate; yet in 17:127 he insists that Qur'anic language should be taken at face value without regard for the historical context in which it was revealed.

on modern thinkers and mainstream Ashʿarī views about the Qur'an than on the Muʿtazila. He saw correctly that the Muʿtazilī hermeneutic of reason-based metaphorical interpretation (*taʾwīl*) did not really support the ambiguity and multivocality that he wished to claim for the Qur'an.[82]

Even Abū Zayd, then, who paid close attention to Muʿtazilī teachings on the divine attributes, did not fully explore their potential for contemporary thought. Yet perhaps, as contemporary Muslim theology comes into conversation once again with Christian theology, including process theology, and with the contested European legacy of classical Greek philosophy, the Muʿtazila's subtle distinctions and hairsplitting discussions of God's attributes may yet prove valuable. They show by example precisely what many contemporary Muslims wish to do in their theology: they explain how a Muslim theology of transcendence can become enmeshed with anthropology, and can be made to address in a theologically principled and rigorous way the physical and temporally specific concerns of modern life, giving theology and God himself a humanistic focus on human welfare.

Bibliography

ʿAbd al-Jabbār, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Asadābādī (1960–1969). *Al-Mughnī fī abwāb al-tawḥīd wa-l-ʿadl*. Ed. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, et al. 14 vols. in 16. Wizārat al-Thaqāfa wa-l-Irshād al-Qawmī.

ʿAbd al-Jabbār ibn Aḥmad al-Hamadhānī (1969). *Mutashābih al-Qurʾān*. Ed. ʿAdnān Muḥammad Zarzūr. 2 vols. Dār al-Turāth.

ʿAbd al-Jabbār b. Aḥmad (1965). *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-khamsa*, with the commentary of Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn b. Abī Hāshim [Mānkdīm]. Ed. ʿAbd al-Karīm ʿUthmān. Maktabat Wahba.

al-Aššʿarī, Abu l-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Ismāʿīl (1980). *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn wa-ikhtilāf al-muṣallīn* / Die dogmatischen Lehren der Anhänger des Islam. Ed. Hellmut Ritter. Franz Steiner Verlag.

Bouman, Johan (1959). *Le conflit autour du Coran et la solution d'al-Bāqillānī.* Jacob van Campen.

Brunschvig, Robert (1976). *Muʿtazilisme et optimum* (al-aṣlaḥ). In *Études d'islamologie 1* (233–251). Maisonneuve et Larose. Originally published (1974) *Studia Islamica 39*, 5–23.

Caspar, Robert (1957). *Un aspect de la pensée musulmane moderne: Le renouveau du moʿtazilisme. MIDÉO: Mélanges de l'Institut dominicain d'études orientales du Caire 4*, 141–202.

Frank, Richard M. (1971). *Abu Hashim's Theory of "States": Its Structure and Function.* In *Actas: IV Congresso de Estudos Árabes e Islâmicos, Coimbra-Lisboa 1 a 8 de setembro de 1968* (85–100). E. J. Brill.

Frank, Richard M. (1980). *Al-Maʿdūm wal-Mawjūd: The Non-Existent, the Existent, and the Possible in the Teaching of Abū Hāshim and His Followers. Mélanges de l'Institut Dominicain d'Études Orientales du Caire 14*, 185–210.

Frank, Richard MacDonough (1978). *Beings and Their Attributes: The Teaching of the Basrian School of the Muʿtazila in the Classical Period.* State University of New York Press.

Frank, Richard M. (1969). *The Divine Attributes According to the Teaching of Abu l-Hudhayl al-ʿAllaf. Le Muséon 82*, 451–506.

[82] Hildebrandt, *Neo-Muʿtazilismus,* 379–382, 385, 392–393, 399–401, 405–417.

Frank, Richard M. (1966). *The Metaphysics of Created Being According to Abû l-Hudhayl al-ʿAllâf: A Philosophical Study of the Earliest Kalâm.* Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut in het Nabije Oosten.

Gardet, Louis (1972). *Signification du "renouveau muʿtazilite" dans la pensée musulmane contemporaine.* In S. M. Stern, Albert Hourani, and Vivian Brown (eds.), *Islamic Philosophy and the Classical Tradition: Essays Presented by His Friends and Pupils to Richard Walzer on His Seventieth Birthday* (63–75). University of South Carolina Press.

Hildebrandt, Thomas (2007). *Neo-Muʿtazilismus? Intention und Kontext im modernen arabischen Umgang mit dem rationalistischen Erbe des Islam.* Brill.

Hourani, George F. (1971). *Islamic Rationalism: The Ethics of ʿAbd al-Jabbār.* Clarendon Press.

Martin, Richard C., Woodward, Mark R. & Atmaja, Dwi S. (1997). *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Muʿtazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol.* Oneworld.

Nader, Albert N. (1956). *Le système philosophique des Muʿtazila (premiers penseurs de l'Islam).* Imprimerie Catholique.

Peters, J. R. T. M. (1976). *God's Created Speech: A Study in the Speculative Theology of the Muʿtazilī Qāḍī l-Quḍāt Abū l-Ḥasan ʿAbd al-Jabbār bn Aḥmad al-Hamadhānī*. E. J. Brill.

Pretzl, Otto (1940). *Die frühislamische Attributenlehre: Ihre weltanschaulichen Grundlagen und Wirkungen.* Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

al-Shahrastānī, [Abū al-Fatḥ Muḥammad ibn] ʿAbd al-Karīm (n. d.). *Nihāyat al-Aqdām fī ʿilm al-kalām.* Ed. Alfred Guillaume. *Maktabat al-Thaqāfa al-Dīniyya.*

Vasalou, Sophia (2008). *Moral Agents and Their Deserts: The Character of Muʿtazilite Ethics.* Princeton University Press.

Vishanoff, David R. (2011). *The Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics: How Sunni Legal Theorists Imagined a Revealed Law*. American Oriental Society.

Vishanoff, David R. (2021). *Informative and Performative Theories of Divine Speech in Classical Islamic Legal Theory.* In Nadja Germann and Mostafa Najafi (eds.), *Philosophy and Language in the Islamic World* (183–208). De Gruyter.

Wolfson, Harry Austryn (1976). *The Philosophy of the Kalam*. Harvard University Press.