EQUAL BEFORE THE LAW: THE EVILNESS OF HUMAN AND DIVINE LIES 'ABD AL-ĠABBĀR'S RATIONAL ETHICS

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The discussion of lying occupies a position of paramount impor-
tance in Mu'tazilite ethical theory, and is an issue which engaged
the energies of Mu'tazilite thinkers from early on. Our focus in
this article shall be on the works of the 10th/11th century
Mu'tazilite 'Abd al-Ġabbār (d. 1025). Direct follower of the
'Ǧubbā'iyyān', Abū 'Alī (d. 915) and his son Abū Hāšim (d. 933),
'Abd al-Ġabbār belongs to the Basran line of Mu'tazilites, whose
opinions and internal debates have been preserved in his monu-
mental *al-Muġnī*, as well as in the briefer *Šarḥ al-uṣūl al-ḥamsa*.
The latter will form an auxiliary source for his views (it is often
much clearer than *al-Muġnī*), but we will be abstemious in its
use, keeping in mind Gimaret's remarks on its authorship.
Penned by his disciple Mankdīm Shashdīw, it was wrongly
ascribed to 'Abd al-Ġabbār by the editor of the work.[1]

Like Kant and modern-day deontologists, 'Abd al-Ġabbār finds
himself compelled to establish that there is a certain moral value
which attaches to an act regardless of the consequences it brings
in its wake, assuming a deontological position that rejects any
utilitarian justification.[2] It is with respect to lies in particular that

[1] See *EI*², 'Mu'tazila'; but cf. 'Abd al-Karim 'Uthman's introduction to the work:
Mankdīm Shashdīw ['Abd al-Ġabbār], *Šarḥ al-uṣūl al-ḥamsa*, ed. 'Abd al-Karim
'Uthman (Cairo, 1965), pp. 24-8.

[2] This study takes the distinction between deontological and teleological (or
consequentialist) moral theories for granted (synoptic definitions can be found in
W.D. Hudson, *Modern Moral Philosophy* [New York, 1983], p. 87, while for Kant's
exposition of the division, in many ways illuminating when reading 'Abd al-Ġabbār,
see *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* [London and New York, 1997], trans.
H.J. Paton, pp. 78-80). This distinction is indispensable for understanding the issues
at stake; Kant's deontology acts as a particularly sharp foil for consequentialist
conceptions of the good – one which is perhaps unequalled in more recent deontological
positions that I'm aware of. I will be employing the term 'teleology' rather than
'consequentialism', though the latter term currently enjoys greater prevalence in
modern moral philosophy.

this position is taken. To frame lies as unconditionally evil is to set the stage for inevitable situations of conflict where the reasons to tell a lie may seem to be overwhelming, or – the converse – where the lie is too trifling for moral judgements to attach to it. Why does he have to establish this axiom and as a response to what problems is it intended? What routes did 'Abd al-Ǧabbār follow in his endeavour to disengage principles from consequences? Our survey will encompass these questions and a number of other related aspects indispensable to understanding the problem of lying, and will be calibrated by the scathing Ašʿarite critique this thesis received.

The discussion of lies is steered throughout by the seminal objective which drives Muʿtazilite theology: exonerating God's justice. That this is the ultimate inspiration for Muʿtazilite theorising is evident from the very first page of *al-Taʿdīl wa al-Taǧwīr*: 'The aim of this section is to show that God will only do good', we are instructed.[3] Ethics is an outgrowth of the 'sciences of justice' (*ʿulūm al-ʿadl*), whose aim is to show that God's justice is such that He

does not lie in His message nor is He unjust in His judgment; He does not torment the children of pagans for the sins of their fathers, He does not grant miracles to liars, and He does not impose on men obligations which they can neither bear nor have knowledge of […] If obligation was imposed on a person and he fulfilled it as he was bidden to, then He will necessarily reward him. And when He – glory to Him – afflicts men with pain and sickness He does so in their interests and for their benefit.[4]

To support their arguments for the goodness of God, the Muʿtazilites take the position that good and evil are objective qualities known by reason, as proved by the fact that men know them independently of revelation. These qualities and values, far from being engendered by divine commands (as the Ašʿarites maintain), govern God's acts, and the goodness predicated of God's acts is that which is understood through the independent and rationally apprehended meanings of 'good' and 'evil'. Lying is the paradigm in which the demonstration of these positions is largely carried out, and it is argued that all men know that to lie is evil, regardless of whether they confess an adherence to or have knowledge of any divinely revealed message.

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[3] *Al-Muġnī* 6: *al-Taʿdīl wa al-taǧwīr*, ed. A.F. al-Ahwani, I. Madkur, supervised by Taha Hussein (Cairo, 1962), p. 3.

[4] *Šarḥ*, p. 133.

THE AŠʿARITE RIPOSTE: ACTIVATING A CONFLICT

It is the Muʿtazilites' Ašʿarite opponents who succeed in bringing out the latent problems and incongruities involved in this position. This is accomplished by activating a conflict between deontological and teleological considerations. The following problem-scenario is thus presented. A prophet is fleeing from his enemies, and one is asked about his whereabouts. Is it evil to lie in a case such as this one, even if a prophet of God might perish as a consequence? For Šahrastānī (d. 1153), writing against the Muʿtazila in his *Nihāyat al-iqdām*, the case is quite clear: such a lie spoils the Muʿtazilite case for the nonnegotiable, absolute evilness of lies. According to him, to tell a lie is to describe something as it is not, while to tell the truth is to describe it as it is, and there is nothing more to the meaning of these words. 'Goodness' and 'badness' are not intrinsic aspects of their reality. 'For there are truthful accounts (*aḫbār ṣādiqa*) which deserve reproach – such as when one gives indications about [the whereabouts of] a prophet fleeing oppressors – while there are also accounts that are false yet deserve reward – such as refusing to give indications about him. That it is evil is not part of the definition of a lie'.[5]

Šahrastānī is writing in the 12th century, but there is no anachronism in our juxtaposing this argument to ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār's thought; it had obviously been around a long time already, for ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār is aware of it more than a century before, as we will see below. It is a classic case of conflict between the dictates of teleology and deontology. For Šahrastānī, the conflict is so irresolvable that he can draw the desired conclusion: ethical values are hardly the immediately apprehensible qualities the Muʿtazila assert them to be and the human intellect is not capable of discriminating between good and evil on its own. 'Reason does not […] declare anything good or bad'. Consequently, revelation – the source of moral knowledge – is the exclusive and indispensable means for man's guidance, for 'reason may consider one thing necessary from one point of view, but from the other

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[5] Al-Šahrastānī, *Nihāyat al-iqdām fī ʿilm al-kalām*, ed. A. Guillaume (London, 1934), p. 372; and generally see 370-96 for a spirited defence of Ašʿarism against Muʿtazilite ideas. My translation of this passage is much indebted to an anonymous reviewer who pointed out an important ambiguity in my original rendition.

point of view may consider its opposite necessary'.[6] An upholder of the view that there is no good and evil save what God commands and prohibits, Šahrastānī follows in the tradition of the founder of his school, al-Aš'arī (d. 935), who set the tone for equating morality with divine command, placing God above any *šarī'a* and underlining the fundamental differences between the application of concepts to God and their application to man.[7]

Other attempts at discrediting the Mu'tazilite moral theory, such as that of al-Ġazālī (d. 1111) in his *al-Iqtiṣād fī al-i'tiqād* and al-Ġuwaynī (d. 1085) in his *Kitāb al-Iršād* proceed in similar fashion, by impugning the deontological assertions of the theory, and raising doubts about whether any such thing as 'acting on principle' can ever be conceived. Al-Ġazālī's critique is among the most astute (the idea of *ends* at last finds expression in the word *aġrāḍ* whereas it is conspicuously absent from 'Abd al-Ġabbār's discussion, he very rarely employing a term to signify the general concept of an 'end'; he merely speaks of things which are *de facto* such ends).[8] His pragmatic psychological insights challenge the simplicity of Mu'tazilite explanations for the moral actions performed by people who do not appear to be prompted by revelation. The correlation between discrediting the idea of a 'moral motive' and denying the idea of intrinsic, absolute concepts of good and evil is a very close one. For if, as al-Ġazālī tells us, people use 'good' to denote nothing more than whatever suits a person's purposes and 'evil' that which does not, this

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[6] Al-Šahrastānī, *Muslim Sects and Divisions (The Section on Muslim Sects in Kitab al-Milal wa'l-Nihal)*, trans. A.K. Kazi, J.G. Flynn (London, 1984), p. 86.

[7] Abū al-Ḥasan al-Aš'arī, *al-Ibāna 'an uṣūl al-diyāna* (Beirut, 1985), pp. 103-4, in the context of a discussion of the notion of '*safah*' – probably best translated as 'folly', counterpoised to *ḥikma*, wisdom – which can apply to human beings but not to God (the argument aims at showing that one who wills *safah* is not necessarily '*safīh*' – foolish or imprudent – himself). The difference between the approaches of the Aš'arites and the Mu'tazilites, insofar as one roots ethics in God's will and the other in objective aspects of acts, is well conveyed by the description of the former as 'subjectivism' (or ethical voluntarism) and the latter as 'objectivism' – for a discussion of this division, see G.F. Hourani's *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 57-66; see also the discussion of 'Abd al-Ġabbār's definitions of moral categories below.

[8] Words like 'teleology' and 'deontology', of course, appear nowhere in the voluminous *al-Muġnī*, but one may have expected a clearer terminology to mark the different types of moral value involved. A general word for 'ends' or 'consequences' makes a cameo appearance in *al-Aṣlaḥ*, p. 141: *taba'* – the only instance I have come across. Nevertheless the distinction between the two types is clearly in 'Abd al-Ġabbār's mind, visible in the juxtaposition of 'harm' and 'lying' as two distinct categories in places where evil is discussed (*e.g. Ta'dīl*, pp. 18, 68; 120 as *ẓulm* and *kiḏb*).

entails that nothing which contradicts human purposes can be good, and the dependence of 'good' and 'bad' on these purposes makes it relative and subjective.[9]

THE SETTING OF THE CONFLICT: BENEFITS AND CONSEQUENCES IN 'ABD AL-ĞABBĀR'S THEORY

It is obvious that moral principles that are completely detached from consequences are incongruous within 'Abd al-Ğabbār's ethical landscape itself, one which is naturally and necessarily teleological. For most other acts called evil, good or obligatory, the moral value they receive is grounded in the consideration of how much benefit (*nafʿ*) or harm (*ḍarar*) they bring in their wake. Benefit and harm are the ends against which almost everything is measured, with the former analysed into pleasure and joy (*surūr*, *laḏḏa*), or what leads to them, and the latter into pain and grief (*alam*, *ġamm*), and what leads to them.[10] A way of summing up the factors that render an act evil[11] is to say that it is evil when it leads to pain that is either *final* (*i.e.* there is no subsequent benefit) or is *undeserved*: 'Whenever harm is devoid of benefit, repulsion of harm or desert (*istiḥqāq*) it is evil, whereas when one of these things is present in it, it is good'.[12] The formal definition of what is evil is 'that which, if it issues from the agent in a certain way (*waǧh*), the one who knows it is issuing in such a manner

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[9] See al-Ġazālī, *al-Iqtiṣād fī al-iʿtiqād*, ed. H. Atay and I.A. Çubukçu (Ankara, 1962), pp. 160ff. For al- Ǧuwaynī's remarks, see his *Kitāb al-Iršād ilā qawāṭiʿ al-adilla fī uṣūl al-iʿtiqād*, ed. M.Y. Musa and A.M. Abd al-Hamid (Cairo, 1950), pp. 257ff.

[10] See *al-Muġnī* 14: *al-Aṣlaḥ / Istiḥqāq al-ḏamm / al-Tawba*, ed. M. al-Saqa, I. Madkur, supervised by Taha Hussein (Cairo, 1965), pp. 33-7 and 41-2 for the discussion of these terms.

[11] 'Evil' is the translation that has been adopted for '*qabīḥ*', as is common practice, yet with the reservation that it is not suitable for all instances of what 'Abd al-Ğabbār calls '*qabīḥ*'. One reason for the occasional incongruity is the extent to which 'Abd al-Ğabbār subsumes egoistic ends into morality, but it is also a result of the limited gamut of evil acts around which his ethics revolves. Many of these have been chosen due to their theological implications and applications, and seem to be the happy by-products of a technical understanding of the defining components of *qabīḥ*, to designate which as 'evil' would stretch the meaning of the word ('*abaṯ* – vain action – is a prime, but not the only, example: it signifies actions which result in no further benefit, and yet involve exertion; such acts are characterised morally with a view to upholding the purposefulness of divine acts). 'Bad' (perhaps also 'wrong') would be more appropriate on such occasions, but for the purpose of consistency, 'evil' will be employed.

[12] *Taʿdīl*, p. 90.

from himself, while he has freedom of choice, deserves blame, unless there exist factors that prevent this'.[13] The 'way' mentioned includes the various categories of evil which we intuitively know to be evil: wrongdoing (or injustice: *ẓulm*), vain action ('*abaṯ*), imposing obligations that cannot be borne (*taklīf mā lā yuṭāq*), ignorance, ingratitude (*kufr al-niʿma*) etc.[14]

The identification of an act as 'wrongdoing' or 'lying' or 'vain action' entails the act's evilness with the inevitability of a natural law: it represents the *ṣifa* or *waǧh*[15] which *necessitates* (*awǧaba/ iqtaḍā*[16]) the ruling of 'evil', just as motion causes a body to move and capacity (*qudra*) causes the possibility of acting.

That which necessitates the evilness of what is evil, such as the fact that a statement is a lie or a pain is wrongdoing, must resemble necessitating causes (*ʿilal mūǧiba*) in this respect. As it is not possible that the cause arise without giving rise to what it necessitates, so it is impossible also that the grounds of evilness be present without necessitating that the act be evil.[17]

Elsewhere the inevitability of the relation between the subject (for example) '*ẓulm*' and the predicate '*qabīḥ*' is framed in terms of desert: the act *deserves* the attribute 'evil'.[18] It would seem that what all human beings know is the general, propositional form of moral truths ('wrongdoing is evil', 'thanking the benefactor is obligatory', and so on), and what is then required is to identify the moral category which specific acts instantiate. For most of the categories – most, and not all, since it is not a purely

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[13] *Ibid.*, p. 26.

[14] A full inventory of what is evil is given in *Taʿdīl*, pp. 61-9. The preventative factors (which mostly pertain to the agent's state) include that the act may be a mere 'peccadillo' – a minor, not major evil – that the agent may repent, or that the preponderance of good deeds over evil ones in his 'record' will prevent his being blamed/punished. It is not that evil becomes not deserving of blame (no change occurs to the value of the act), but that the blame may not be actually received (*ibid.*, p. 19, 100).

[15] In this context I will not be concerned with an analysis and categorisation of the terms used by ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār in the exposition of his theory (thus, *waǧh* is the term most consistently employed to designate 'categories' or 'grounds' of evil – such as vain action, lying, and so on – but it is not the only one). See G.F. Hourani's *Islamic Rationalism: the Ethics of Abd al-Jabbar* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 62ff., for an examination of the terms.

[16] Here these two words are used for the same purpose; a distinction between them is drawn by ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār later on when he has to speak of human actions (*iqtaḍā* is used to describe how the motives cause an act; *awǧaba* has the connotation of deterministic causality and therefore is not used).

[17] *Taʿdīl*, p. 122 (-126); see also pp. 52-60.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 123.

teleological system – the criterion for this is provided by their definition in terms of benefit and harm. Thus wrongdoing, the archetypical category of evil in the system, is harm which neither leads to benefit or prevention of harm nor is deserved, and observing this relation of benefit and harm in the act is what reveals it to be wrongdoing.[19]

What has to be especially emphasised is the *necessity* of teleological – *i.e.* end-based – ethics. This 'necessity' lies in the fact that the pursuit of beneficial consequences bridges this world and the next, that is to say, the scope of benefit and harm is not restricted to this world alone. We noted above the importance of *desert* in identifying the moral value of an act; its importance is magnified by the fact that, as presented by ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār, it constitutes a form of *causation* – it is mentioned as one of the two ways in which an act can be described as 'leading to' benefit and harm.[20] But the good or ill deserts one acquires will be reaped not just in this life, but in the next one as well; the rewards of paradise are nothing but a form of benefit and the punishments of hell a form of harm, which shows how far the nerves of the system extend. The inclusion of the levels of both this life and the next in the scope of benefits and harms is obvious in the moral characterisation of repentance (*tawba*) and the obligation to inquire (*wujūb al-naẓar*), which are both obligatory as a means of averting harm from ourselves – and here it is clearly posthumous consequences which are at issue.[21] Thus, the 'objects

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[19] *Ibid.*, p. 81. The relations between benefit and harm and the moral values of acts are too complex to go into here in detail. The rules of thumb that govern them – and which may act as an instructive foil for our discussion of lying in particular in what follows – can be summarised by saying that one is obliged to protect oneself from harm but not obliged to protect others from such harm (unless they are kin, and thus an extension of oneself, as it were), and conversely, it is evil for one to harm both self and others. One is not obliged to seek (unlimited) benefit for others or for oneself, unless the possibility of gaining benefit is so immediate that one is 'compelled' to do so (*mulǧaʾ*). Hourani's *Islamic Rationalism* is a good introduction to all aspects of ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār's moral theory, studied with reference to categories of moral thought current in European moral philosophy. Among ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār's works, the book of *al-Aṣlaḥ* is perhaps the best place to understand these relations, for the argument against the proponents of *al-aṣlaḥ*, who believe God is obliged to do what is best for human beings, concerns whether and to what extent it is obligatory to seek benefit, for oneself and others, giving a good window on these relations.

[20] *Al-Aṣlaḥ*, p. 41; the other way is ʿ*āda*, short for ʿ*ādat Allāh*, God's custom – applied to laws of nature. Natural causality is what is suggested by his example there. Cf. *al-Muġnī* 15: *al-Tanabbuʾāt wa al-muʿǧizāt,* ed. M. al-Khudayri, M.M. Qasim, I. Madkur, supervised by Taha Hussein (Cairo, 1965), p. 39.

[21] *Al-Aṣlaḥ*, p. 161.

of value' of the system as it operates in this life – the teleological considerations on which 'Abd al-Ǧabbār bases his ethics – lie at the heart of the religious economy. If one is forbidden to harm others and *obliged* to protect *oneself* from harm, if pleasure and joy are good and pain and grief evil,[22] that ultimately reflects the way God designed the world. For God created man to benefit him,[23] and it is only natural that benefit be the 'end', and that pleasure and joy be sought both for this life as well as the next – within the limits set by the laws of desert. In line with this, one can understand 'Abd al-Ǧabbār's position that it is an *obligation* to seek after one's own interests,[24] of which the final one is posthumous reward – entry into paradise.[25] The description of paradise in physical terms in the Qur'an allows for a certain sense of continuity with earthly life; only, the pleasures and joys will surpass by far those one can gain in this life.[26]

It is an ethic whose paradigm is not a selfless altruism, and one not likely to emphasise the conflict between body and mind or between pleasure and principle. Moral conflict seems to be muted – partly owing to the purposes of Muʿtazilite argumentation.[27] If it is to arise, it would seem that its most likely form should be a negotiation between the immediate and the deferred (pain now, pleasure later; moral constraint now, joy in the afterlife). Such a monism permeates 'Abd al-Ǧabbār's writings and finds a similar expression in the continuum he draws up between *al-šāhid* (the seen) and *al-ġāʾib* (the unseen), wherein God and man share the same, objective moral standards. God may differ morally from

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[22] As should be evident from the above, this is not an equation: for pain can be good if it is a means to something better, if it is punishment for pain one has created, etc. (*Taʿdīl*, p. 73).

[23] E.g. *Šarḥ*, p. 77; *al-Aṣlaḥ*, pp. 110-15.

[24] *Tanabbuʾāt*, p. 39.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[26] Although the Muʿtazila, in their horror of anthropomorphism, denied the possibility of seeing God in the hereafter, the physical features of paradise are not in dispute; al-Ašʿarī will argue for the beatific vision on the understanding that paradise is the place where we will experience the greatest *pleasure* (*Ibāna*, pp. 30, 34) and the philosophers will be rebuked for denying precisely this aspect of afterlife in their depiction of an immaterial soul.

[27] It is primarily because 'Abd al-Ǧabbār employs his model of moral motivation (for which, see more below) to demonstrate that God *cannot but* do good, that this model can be and was criticised for its determinist leanings; this theological objective also explains the avoidance of *problems or conflicts* in the operation of motives which might disrupt the reliability of his model. This is very summarily put, but unfortunately it is not something I can go into here.

man in one cardinal aspect, which is that 'God is not susceptible to benefits and harms'[28] (these, as we saw above, are defined essentially in physical terms, and God is no way corporeally affected). Other differences which could frustrate the view that the same moral standards are applicable to both parties are denied; this is the essence of many of ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār's – often rarefied and disorientating – discussions in *al-Muġnī*, where he argues that the identity of the agent is irrelevant to the moral status of the act (it is not relevant that God is the sovereign and the 'owner' of the world, nor that a human being is a subject, owned by God and beholden to the Law). This objective must likewise inspire his claim – which other Muʿtazilite thinkers deny – that God is capable of committing evil, though He would not do so; to say otherwise – apart from offending religious sensibility by denying a potency of God – would introduce a dissimilarity between man and God, in this case a difference in the 'freedom to act' or possibility of acting.[29]

In a system informed to such an extent by considerations of benefit and harm, it would seem that the deontological would find itself at odds. It would seem most natural that, if lies are to be pronounced evil, this should be done on a long-term consequential basis: that one will be rewarded for not lying in the hereafter. One of the reasons which foreclose this option is that lies are not *made* evil by God's command – contra Ašʿarite creed – and so cannot be avoided simply because of the reward He has promised. How, then, can the unconditional evilness of lies be established?

THE ROLE OF DEONTOLOGICAL ETHICS: DEMONSTRATING THE EXISTENCE OF A MORAL MOTIVE

The general objective of Muʿtazilite dialectic, we will recall, was to ground the goodness and justice of God, and this, essentially, is the function of the claim that the moral values attributable to acts are independent of revelation. In arguing this position, the Muʿtazila had a variety of alternatives open to them. One was to show that moral values were in fact known by reason; another was to show that the independence thesis, and the divine goodness described on its terms, were necessary preconditions for

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[28] *Al-Aṣlaḥ*, p. 43.
[29] See especially the sections starting in *Taʿdīl*, pp. 87ff.

the religious economy to 'work' – that they *had* to be known by reason. Under the latter argument – an argument *ex concessis* since it took the requirements of the religious economy as its starting point – a number of well-known Mu'tazilite claims ranged themselves, such as the contention that the obligation to reflect on God's existence (*wuǧūb al-naẓar*) must necessarily precede acceptance of revelation and thus be apprehensible by reason, showing that moral values – with the prudential conceived as an instance of the moral – predate revelation.[30] The evilness of lies likewise appears in this category of preconditions: it must be known that God would not perpetrate a lie prior to accepting the revealed message, for, otherwise, how would one believe the contents of any divine communication? More than that – lies must be evil regardless of all consequences, whether good or bad, if one is to be assured that God could not have lied in His message for some reason and with a view to a further (albeit good) end.

This necessity stands as a proof in itself, and we will be resuming it below when we turn to several interesting questions relating to God's goodness.[31] It is another proof which will engage our attention now, one which represents the first category of argument, which aimed to show that moral values are *in fact* known by reason. It is a proof that came to be enshrined as the silver bullet for Mu'tazilite claims, relying on what the Mu'tazila term 'common knowledge' of human behaviour. A precious heirloom handed down through the Basran line of disciples, it was first coined by Abū Hāšim, and its unstinting use by 'Abd al-Ǧabbār bespeaks the unassailable aspect it had taken on. In this proof, the aim is to deduce the ontological status of ethical concepts (independent of revelation) from the epistemological grounds represented in the fact of universal moral knowledge; and this last, in turn, is demonstrated through the existence of distinctly *moral motives*. The proof aims to establish the very thing that Kant was to declare to be beyond the bounds of empirical knowledge – namely, that when one acts according to *what seem* to be the dictates of morality, one is indeed acting out

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[30] This represents an obligation to protect oneself from harm; see *Šarḥ*, p. 68 and J.R.T.M. Peters, *God's Created Speech* (Leiden, 1976) pp. 63-5 for the process which culminates in one's apprehension of the obligation. Peters' work serves as an encyclopaedic survey of 'Abd al-Ǧabbār's conceptual framework, though if it suffers any incompleteness, it is in its coverage of his views on ethics.

[31] See the skeletal argument presented in brief in *al-Aṣlaḥ*, pp. 151-2.

of a moral motive and not out of self-interest.[32] So let us see how this challenge was met by our writers.

The argument runs as follows: we know (it is 'common', widespread or necessary knowledge referred to here) that were someone presented with the option either to *lie* or to *tell the truth*, wherein both options yield the same amount of benefit or harm, he would certainly choose to tell the truth. 'Thus, if one knew that he would obtain a needed dirham either through lying or telling the truth, he would not choose lying over truthfulness, but would *inevitably* choose truth. It is not possible that he prefer *either* of the two [without distinction] as though the status of the two were like 'two lies' or 'two truths'. If the good was no different from the evil, and it was *need* that formed the reason for doing it and *not* its goodness, then as far as the motives for choosing to lie or to tell the truth are concerned, their status would be one and the same for the agent. That, though, being false, proves that he chooses truth for its goodness.'[33]

This example is meant to be 'factual' and empirical, in the sense that we 'know' everyone, even unbelievers, heretics or material-ists, act in such a way – it is meant to refer us to our common experience. Since such categories of people would act in this way, ethical knowledge is not introduced by revelation. This argument underpins the theory of motivation to do good or evil: if one is cognisant of the evilness of an act and of his lack of need (*ġinan*) to do it, he will not choose it. Ergo, God who knows both, will not commit evil.[34]

The controversial assumption included in the argument is that it is the knowledge of the moral status of the act which has provided a reason for action; and the operation of a moral motive 'proves' that moral qualities are intrinsic to acts. It would do injustice to 'Abd al-Ǧabbār's argument to interpret the proof as asserting that one's choice would be made *purely* out of moral motives: the moral motive is what will make act A *preponderant* over act B; the reason for acting will be the benefit or repulsion of harm involved in performing either one of the two acts. It is a choice between *alternatives* amongst acts which entail the same

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[32] *Groundwork*, pp. 63-5, 71-3; the idea, though, is one of the main contentions of the work.

[33] *Ta'dīl*, pp. 214-5; this example is mainly discussed over the section that begins p. 181.

[34] See mainly *Ta'dīl*, pp. 177ff. for the theory of (moral) motivation.

type of consequence. This coheres with certain positions else-
where maintained: it is unlikely that human beings can ever be
devoid of need; and human motives seem capable of attaching
mainly to benefit (pursuing) and harm (avoiding).[35] Thus, ʿAbd
al-Ǧabbār is not arguing that people can and do act on a principle;
but rather that other things being equal as far as consequences
go, the principle will catalyse the choice: teleology has to be
neutralised for deontology to be realised. This argument is of
course remote from the complexities posed by *conflicts* in moral
callings such as those which the Ašʿarite problem-scenario
involved; the purpose at hand is to establish that people know
moral truths such as that lying is evil, and the distillatory
character of the proof should be expected in an act of *istidlāl*.

Yet the proof is still beleaguered by the difficulty of proving
whether the teleological considerations – *i.e.* the consequences
desired – could ever be even equalised, allowing us to conclude
that it was moral value which tipped the balance. And that is
tantamount to a restatement of the original question. This is
precisely what the objections raised by ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār's
imaginary interlocutors query ('If one were to say…'), and their
critique coincides with the content of actual Ašʿarite criticism
levelled at the Muʿtazilite propositions. One of these is remi-
niscent of Ǧuwaynī's remarks in his *Iršād* where he notes that

> Someone who commits lying, which [according to the Muʿtazila] is evil in itself,
> deserves to be censured, blamed, and punished […] and to be marked out as
> base and deficient […] so how can they possibly imagine that telling the truth
> and lying could be equal?[36]

The very definition of evil, according to Muʿtazilite formulation,
incorporates blame. Even leaving aside the problem of drawing
the distinction between blame and divine, posthumous *punish-
ment*,[37] blame is a form of harm – as ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār suggests

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[35] *Taʿdīl*, p. 181, and *al-Aṣlaḥ*, p. 44. This means that it is unlikely that motivation
attach to a principle alone. The same opinion is clearly expressed by al-Bāqillānī in his
Kitāb al-Tamhīd [ed. R.J. McCarthy (Beirut, 1957)], p. 31, where it is said that as a
human being one is 'obliged to' and 'commanded' to seek benefit and ward off harm,
while to act otherwise would be decried as 'folly' (*safah*); this opinion is certainly much
more compatible with Ašʿarite argumentation insofar as it pre-empts deontological
motives.

[36] *Al-Iršād*, p. 264.

[37] That is, how could the injunction against lying resist the conversion into a
teleological one – to protect oneself from divine punishment? The laws regulating desert
are of such rigour that one can see how easy it is for ethics to become completely

when he says that 'evil is repugnant *because* of the blame and harm it entails' and as he clearly spells out when he lists blame as an example of harm.[38] Conversely, praise for doing good is a form of benefit. Thus, could one possibly say that when we choose not to lie, the prospect of being blamed does not come to bear upon our decision? 'Abd al-Ǧabbār seems to think not, but he contributes nothing new save repeat the lie-or-truth scenario with a special emphasis: 'and imagine he thinks he will not be blamed – yet *we know* that he will still opt for the truth'.[39] Al-Ǧazālī's perspicacious criticism deals with such imaginative extensions through the idea of ingrained psychological *associations*, by which an act is chosen because praise or blame has been customarily associated with it, and not due to our principled belief in its moral value. Thus, when we see someone keeping his pledge under pain of death, it is not the goodness of keeping pledges that underlies his act, but

its cause is the praise people extend to those who keep their pledges, and their incessant exhortations to such behaviour, insofar as that is in the interests of people. Even if one imagines a situation where one does not expect praise, its cause is the action of imagination, for it is still associated with praise – which is pleasurable – and whatever is associated with something pleasurable is pleasurable itself.[40]

The suggestion implicit in this criticism, which finds clearer expression in other Ašʿarite works, is one that impinges upon the provenance of ethical beliefs. For to speak of the praise that *usually* attaches to truthfulness and the blame *usually* incurred for lies is to remind us of the actual distributor of praise and blame: society. Morality is a product of social conditioning, from this standpoint.[41] The problems of disjoining social customs from one's moral convictions is one which strikes at the heart of the cluster of Muʿtazilite ideas, yet is not really addressed in 'Abd al-Ǧabbār's works. His incorporation of ethical precepts into necessary knowledge, whose author is God, glosses over any questions pertaining to the acquisition of this knowledge.

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consequentalist in view of the inevitability of incurring the treatment deserved by one's deeds. The Muʿtazilite argument, of course, is careful to confine the discussion to types of people who are unaware of revelation, and therefore punishment.

[38] *Taʿdīl*, p. 25 and *al-Aṣlaḥ*, p. 123 respectively.
[39] Paraphrase mine; *Taʿdīl*, p. 201.
[40] *Al-Iqtiṣād*, p. 174.
[41] *E.g., Nihāyat al-iqdām*, pp. 372-3.

All attempts at prosthetic improvements to the proof[42] are essentially beset by the problematic nature of all appeals to 'common knowledge' and to what 'we all know' and is 'firmly established'. And as M. Marmura shows, this epistemological aspect of the proof was singled out for unwelcome attention by Ašʿarite opponents of the Muʿtazilite theory of ethics. Their criticism converges on the complaint that this proof 'begs the question', assuming what it sets out to prove. Both Šahrastānī and Bāqillānī (d. 1013) counter the hypothetical appeal to experience contained in the proof by suggesting that for a certain person or people truthfulness and lying may have no such moral connotations as we take for granted (Šahrastānī accentuates the social conditioning that goes into moral knowledge), but may be as neutral as choosing between two *dirham*s or between the use of one's right or left hand (the examples are Bāqillānī's[43]). Marmura this concludes that ''Abd al-Ǧabbār does not really answer the objection that the proof begs the question'.[44]

This same proof is incorporated in the formal, pithier statements about the evilness of lies that are found throughout 'Abd al-Ǧabbār's writings. These fall in the same mould, though they reveal much more clearly two aspects which are important for understanding the position taken: first, that the knowledge of moral values which arises from consequences is primary, and deontological moral principles are known only on the basis of this first class of values. Secondly, the latter principles are known not by necessity, but by proof (*istidlāl*).[45] We shall not be detained

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[42] For such improvements, see *e.g. Taʿdīl*, pp. 215-17.

[43] Al-Bāqillānī, *Tamhīd*, p. 125. Al-Bāqillānī's argument purports to show a certain circularity in the Muʿtazilite proof in the following manner. According to him, the proof begins in the form, 'If one can achieve his objective through either lying or truth-telling, it is obligatory for him to choose the truth; therefore, truth-telling is good'. In reaction to al-Bāqillānī's criticism it is rephrased by saying, 'Truth-telling is good; therefore if one can achieve his objective through either lying or truth-telling, it is obligatory for him to choose the truth' (p. 126). This circularity and mutual dependence between two moral values (obligation and goodness) would nullify the argument. Yet this is not really the Muʿtazilite argument, since it takes the form (which is also given on p. 125) of a *factual* assertion that *we know* that people *do* act in such a way under such circumstances. In any case, al-Bāqillānī's criticism retains its force despite this misrepresentation: his argument that the proof takes the evaluation for granted addresses the factuality of the proof as well.

[44] M. Marmura, 'A medieval Islamic argument for the intrinsic value of the moral act', in E. Robbins, S. Sandahl (eds.), *Corolla Torontonensis: Studies in honour of R. M. Smith* (Toronto, 1994), pp. 113-31 (129 quoted).

[45] See for example the versions which appear in *Taʿdīl*, p. 66, and related passages on pp. 63-4; also *al-Aṣlaḥ*, p. 156, 241. For an instructive presentation of the problem

by these though, as they contribute but little to what was said above.

Despite the weakness in the Mu'tazilites' views on moral motivation, what was still open to them was a response to the particular problem-scenario their critics had posed, where one could either lie or cause the prophet's destruction; and that was by way of a practical solution.[46] The key is provided by a device we have already made note of when speaking of the example of the 'dirham by lies, dirham by truth', where the existence of *alternatives* was seen to be crucial in enabling one to choose the good. Humans are always in need, yet it is possible to gratify needs in more ways than one; indeed 'Abd al-Ǧabbār designates *alternatives* as one of the main ways in which the notion of *istiġnā'* (lack of need) is realised.[47] Thus we find him suggesting the following, framed in reference to a believer rather than a prophet: 'In our opinion it is unsound […] to say that it is good that a person should tell someone who seeks to murder a believer, and who asks 'Is he at home or not?', 'No, he is not at home' even if it is a lie to save him from being killed. For that is evil from him. His obligation is to save him by insinuation and similar means.' Quizzed on the case of one incapable of such prevarications, he affirms that 'a sane man who knows the usual things knows insinuations just as he knows how to give information, and he knows insinuation and riddles just as he knows true speech'.[48]

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of lies in 'Abd al-Ǧabbār – treating aspects which considerations of length forbid me to attend to here – see Hourani's *Islamic Rationalism,* pp. 76-81.

[46] I am not aware whether Šahrastānī had a specific Qur'anic passage in mind that delivers guidance on how to act in such a scenario – recalling that part of his response to the Mu'tazilites consisted in his claim that the human mind is incapable of ethical judgment on its own, and that revelation is indispensable for human beings to properly manage their affairs. Another example with which he illustrates the helplessness of the human mind *does* find its answer in a relevant Qur'anic passage; the example concerns the problem of deciding what is the best way to deal with murderers, wherein to take a life for a life seems equally well-argued as to let live – see *Nihāyat al-iqdām*, pp. 387-8; cf. Qur'an 2:178-9. Whatever the case may be, the scenario of the fleeing is an unmistakable appeal to religious sentiments, to religious 'common sense' – he speaks of the *prophet*, not any random individual fleeing persecution.

[47] See *Ta'dīl*, p. 181 for an explanation of *istiġnā'*.

[48] *Islamic Rationalism*, p. 78. Though 'Abd al-Ǧabbār's example substitutes the believer for the prophet, we find a direct reference to the specific scenario in *Šarḥ* by his disciple (who only outlived 'Abd al-Ǧabbār by a decade; p. 306). Perhaps 'Abd al-Ǧabbār is here inspired by such accounts as are found in Ibn Hišām's biography of the Prophet, where it is related that around the time of the battle of Badr, Muḥammad sought to sound out a certain 'shaykh from the Arabs' for information about the warring parties. When asked to identify himself, the Prophet enigmatically says, 'We

This resolution is in turn made possible by the asymmetry between truthfulness and lying: while the latter is evil, the former is not obligatory or good in itself, but will in great part be evaluated on the basis of its consequences.[49] The two are not, as

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are of water' (*min mā'*), and walks off leaving the old gentleman mulling over what tribe this 'Water' could be. (Ibn Hišām, *al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*, ed. M. Bayumi, 2 vols. (Cairo, 1995), vol. 2, pp. 177-8.) This anecdote is reproduced in al-Ibšīhī's chapter on eloquence in his *al-Mustaṭraf fī kull fann mustaẓraf*, among other shrewd examples of how the truth can be told or lies avoided by artful use of language, illustrating the literary devices of allusion and metonymy (*ta'rīḍ, kināya*); al-Ibšīhī fills the gap by explaining that the Prophet's words refer to the Qur'anic verse 'Now let man but think from what he is created! He is created from a drop emitted (*min mā' dāfiq*)' (86:5-6. Translation of verses by A. Yusuf 'Ali (*The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an*, [Brentwood, Maryland, 1992]); Šihāb al-Dīn al-Ibšīhī, *al-Mustaṭraf fī kull fann mustaẓraf*, ed. A. Anis al-Tabba' (Beirut, 1981), pp. 71-2.)

Thus the solution discovered completely sidesteps the source of tension created by advocates of Aš'arism, and conscripts wile and cunning into the cause of good. Other illustrious personae that have availed themselves of such a technique include Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (when asked by an unbeliever about the identity of the Prophet) and al-Šāfi'ī (when questioned about the nature of the Qur'an, whether it is created or not). The statement '*inna fī al-ma'ārīḍ mandūḥatan 'an al-kiḍb*' is one of the catchphrases around which al-Ibšīhī's examples are rallied (p. 72). This phrase likewise turns up in al-Ġazālī's *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* where he discusses the merits of truthfulness (*ṣidq*, a term which he applies to a variety of meanings, many with mystical overtones; of these it is the verbal *ṣidq* that concerns us). There he points out that such artifices are equivalent to lies, strictly speaking, since to lie is to give the other to understand the opposite of what is true – that is, the nature of lying is deception, and technical definitions of it must not manipulate the obvious. However, in line with the position he had expressed in his *Iqtiṣād*, he asserts that such tricks are sometimes rendered necessary by considerations of welfare or need (he includes resistance to oppression and warfare among the situations in which such deception may be needed). In his view, in such cases truthfulness becomes one of *intention*, of willing the good, and it is this kind of truth that constitutes virtue (see *Iḥyā''ulūm al-dīn*, ed. S.M. Jamil al-'Attar, 5 vols. [Beirut, 1999], vol. 4, pp. 328-9). This kind of account, of course, would hardly suit Mu'tazilite needs, for whom welfare and need could not be seen as overriding the principle of not lying.

This ethic would seem to have a much more deeply rooted presence in various levels of Islamic literature than the handful of textual links provided here suggests. Not just in a literary work like al-Ibšīhī's, not just in an exposition of the principles of faith and practice like al-Ġazālī's, but even in the standard legal textbooks do we find it embedded, in the section dealing with oaths (*aymān*). The relevant context concerns the problematic case where the *ostensible* meaning of the words used is different from the meaning *intended* by the one who took the oath (see for example the Hanbalite Ibn Mufliḥ's *Kitāb al-Furū'*, 3rd edn, ed. 'Abd al-Sattar Ahmad Farraj, 6 vols. (Beirut, 1402 AH) vol. 6, pp. 353ff.; discussions of the use of *tawriya* (equivocation, ambiguous utterance which conceals one's real intent) are dealt with in both substantive legal works and commentaries on the relevant traditions, under the rubric of oaths).

[49] In brief, truthfulness is good as long as none of the grounds of evil obtain in it. The position on truthfulness is set out over several passages: see *Ta'dīl*, pp. 59, 74, 87; *Tanabbu'āt*, p. 329. This position results in the kind of depiction of *ṣidq* as an act totally devoid of intrinsic moral value which we find in *Šarḥ*, where it appears to be presented

Hourani remarks, contraries.[50] Of course, as Hourani points out, 'he refuses to face the extreme and crucial instance, when the *only* way to save a life is to tell a lie'; partial solace may or may not be found in the fact that to save a life – indeed to extend benefits to others in general – is not considered obligatory.[51]

Here we reach the end of the road in our attempt to establish the evilness of lies on the part of human beings. This, however, does not signal the end of our search.

GOD'S GOODNESS: AN END OR A MEANS? DEONTOLOGY AND TELEOLOGY IN DIVINE ETHICS

At this point it is instructive to turn our attention to the other level at which the discussion of ethics unfolds, and make the leap from *al-šāhid* to *al-ġā'ib* – a leap in fact integral to Mu'tazilite theorisation – to address the question of *God's* lies. Here, too, establishing the evilness of lying as a principle uncompromised by a consideration of consequences takes an intriguing road.

We will recall that one Mu'tazilite argument for God's goodness – a goodness which means more than that 'He is above morality since morality denotes nothing more than His command' – relied on the idea that in order to accept revelation, one must be capable of knowing in advance that God does not lie, and lies must be known to be unconditionally evil regardless of consequences. This argument is based on conditions necessary for revelation. And it is precisely the invocation of the idea of conditions that gives rise to an intriguing situation: it is in a *teleological* framework that the need for a *non-teleological* moral axiom is framed. Thus:

If lying could be good due to [resulting] benefit or repulsion of harm, we could not guarantee that God Almighty would not lie and it [*i.e.* the lie] would be

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as a neutral 'giving of information': 'some types of truthfulness are not deserving of praise of reward, for if one of us were to sit all day saying, "the sky is above me and the earth below", he does not deserve praise and reward – he may even merit blame and punishment' (p. 306).

[50] *Islamic Rationalism*, p. 78.

[51] *Al-Aṣlaḥ*, pp. 24-5: one is not obliged to extend benefit to another, or repel harm from him. Another possible solution could be afforded by the operation of one of the factors we mentioned above (in the definition of 'evil') as preventative of blame – such a factor may be created by the overall obedience of the perpetrator. While the moral value of lies (evil) remains in place, its deserved moral consequences are dropped (*Ta'dīl*, p. 19).

good; that, in turn, would *entail* doubting His message (*aḫbār*), and the message of His envoys, *which would lead* to our knowing nothing whatsoever […] whoever deemed it possible that He may lie in any part of His message cannot trust anything He says[52].

Thus if lying was not adjudged 'evil regardless of consequences' this would *entail* and *lead to the consequence* that men do not trust His message. This could appear to be a very odd way of restating the fact that lying is evil because of revelation – yet not as the Ašʿarites mean it. For the Ašʿarites understand moral categories to be emanating from Divine *command*. In this new understanding, it would look as though lying is bad because of God's own choice to give out revelation – because of His *will*. If we thought it was possible that He lie, then the 'plan' He had set up would have been thwarted, and that, according to Muʿtazilite theory, would have rendered His acts *ʿabaṯ* – action that is vain and wasted.

Does this mean that even for God not to lie is good only conditionally, and that it is necessary merely for the sake of the consequence that men believe? And the latter may indeed be an end which indicates God's goodness in that He desires to benefit men – if they believe and obey the Law, they will be rewarded by entering paradise – yet surely this cannot be the kind of intrinsic moral values the Muʿtazilites were aspiring to ground. Speaking of how God's acts should be classified, ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār informs us that God does not have any 'obligations' as such. He is protesting against the open-ended view of God's 'duties' taken by some, mainly Baghdadian, Muʿtazilites who believe beneficence and extending sheer benefit towards others is a ground of obligation for God. In contrast, ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār takes the view that the only obligations He can be said to be subject to are those which He Himself has created by imposing the Law (*taklīf*). Such obligations include enabling men to fulfil it, rewarding them (according to what they deserve), and so on.[53] These obligations are thus contractual, established through God's voluntary decision to impose the Law. The contractual nature of these obligations resembles that of certain human obligations, such as thanking the benefactor, returning a deposit, or paying one's debt, which are incurred due to preceding causes – *i.e.* that one

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[52] *Taʿdīl*, p. 67.
[53] *Al-Aṣlaḥ*, p. 53.

received benefaction, a deposit, a loan.[54] Is lying like them? If it is – if, that is, it is a *contractual* form of evil on the part of God (only evil because of the design He has willed) – then the diachronic nature of ethical truth would seem to have been seriously impaired.

However, if moral principles turned out to be intractable entities on the level of *al-šāhid*, the unseen seems to enjoy an advantage. To understand the workings of this a bit better, let us first turn to 'Abd al-Ǧabbār's discussion of what we referred to above as God's 'plan' or 'will'. This concept is denoted by the term *tadbīr*, which finds expression in the constructions '*ṣalāḥ fī al-tadbīr*' and '*fasād fī al-tadbīr*'. *Tadbīr* is the design a rational being can pursue – or the end, the consequence – while the measures and means which either promote or hamper his plan are respectively *ṣalāḥ* and *fasād*. Thus these last two terms have a *conditional* and *expedient* character.

A certain thing is called *ṣalāḥ fī al-tadbīr* if [the design] flourishes through it, while it is called *fasād* if [the design] becomes defective because of it. When '*ṣalāḥ fī tadbīrih*' is applied to the acts of God Almighty, it refers to what concerns the imposition of the Law (*taklīf*) and those made subject to it (*mukallaf*). Whatever He does that does not affect how these two [*i.e. taklīf* and *mukallaf*] function, nor upsets the *mukallaf*'s trust in His acts is described as *ṣalāḥ*, while everything that, were it to occur, would remove the *mukallaf* from a state of trust, is described as *fasād fī al-tadbīr*. This is why we said that if He, Almighty, were to lie in His promise and His threat and go back on them, it would be *fasād fī al-tadbīr*, while we say that His being truthful in His message, or generally His seeing to it that proofs are properly borne out is *ṣalāḥ fī al-tadbīr*.[55]

This passage would seem to state unequivocally that lying is not evil unconditionally. It is necessary as an expedient for a pre-supposed goal: that the *taklīf* succeed as desired. Close on the heels of this follows the assertion that had God lied and *not* gone on to create the world and to impose *taklīf* this would not be *fasād fī al-tadbīr*. But does 'Abd al-Ǧabbār really intend this to mean that lying is *only evil if* it is *fasād*? The vista baring itself to our view is a very familiar one in *kalām*, which concerns God's

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[54] *Ibid.*, p. 24, and ff. These can be termed the 'positive' obligations, as against the 'negative' ones which include avoiding harm, or avoiding evil (evil being the opposite of obligatory [*ibid.*, p. 7]; in this sense, God's obligation not to lie is negative in that evil is the central term here and it has to be avoided, and positive in that the nature of evil has been 'incurred' by preceding causes – His design).

[55] *Ibid.*, pp. 42-3.

relation to the world, to objects, to His own attributes. Does God know before there are objects of knowledge? (This leads on to the problem of the determination of human actions). Is He powerful (*qādir*) before He creates – can He *not* create if He has power? (This leads on to the problem of the determination of divine actions). Does He see, hear, and – most crucially – speak, even before the world existed? And so to our question: is He good even before any objects existed for good or evil to be acted out upon? Yet it is evident that 'Abd al-Ǧabbār considers doing evil to be conceivable even before the creation of the world, for he speaks of the possibility of God lying before He has created. Thus good and evil do not exist because of the world; and so the statement that lying would not be *instrumentally evil* (*fasād*) if there was no prospect of creation does not necessarily entail that it would not be *evil* regardless of consequences and of the world – in short, of any objects whatsoever, including the act of imposing the Law.

In an even more explicit way, he dissociates God's attributes from His acts, when he says that 'His being powerful does not necessitate that He act – nor [is action necessitated] by any other states/attributes He possesses; likewise, His not acting does not mean that He does not possess *ḥikma*'.[56] I understand *ḥikma* to refer to moral goodness; *ḥakīm* is the term used in the Mu'tazilite affirmation of God's justice: '*ḥakīm, lā yaf'al al-qabīḥ*'.[57] Elsewhere 'Abd al-Ǧabbār equates it with '*adl*, which specifically refers to acts dictated by the consideration of *rights* and *desert*, including the distribution of punishment.[58] '*Adl* consists of 'according others their rights and receiving one's own rights from others',[59] is the opposite of injustice (*ẓulm, ǧawr*), and attaches to acts. Though the relations of rights and desert are bound to the existence of human beings – to created objects – who possess rights and who act in ways that deserve remunerative or retributive action from God, evidently the laws of desert and the value-scheme of rights must precede all this. Thus God's goodness (his *ḥikma* and '*adl*) would seem to be put on a diachronic basis, unconnected to whether He acted – created the world – or whether He did not.[60]

[56] *Ibid.*, p. 112.
[57] *E.g. ibid.*, p. 151; similar, p. 71.
[58] *Ṭa'dīl*, pp. 48-51.
[59] *Šarḥ*, p. 132.
[60] Although the Mu'tazila had no qualms about attributing purpose to God – something which Islamic Neoplatonic philosophers found inconceivable due to their

This kind of dissociation of divine acts from divine attributes is intended to mean that God both *is* moral and *acts* morally – both is just and good, and acts thus, and even if He did not *act* he would *be* moral; it is conducive to the overall monism that marks Mu'tazilite thought. It differs markedly from a similar dissociation which the Aš'arites perform, for very different purposes – in order to show that divine acts which are 'evil' by human standards do not 'attach' to God, by separating God's essence from His acts. This is encapsulated by al-Baġdādī's formulation, 'we do not say that the liar and wrongdoer is the one who *creates* lying and wrongdoing; rather that the wrongdoer is the one in whom wrongdoing *subsists* […]',[61] a dualism which protects God's transcendence of (what we know as) morality, which is in fact His own command.

What further suggests that the existence of revelation cannot be the cause – in this novel sense – of the evilness of lies is that 'Abd al-Ǧabbār, in line with prevailing Mu'tazilite thought, does not consider revelation (*sam'*) as the sole means by which *taklīf* is realised. The Law is imposed on human beings by virtue of their being endowed with an intellect, which supplies them with the knowledge of right and wrong, and not by virtue of hearing the prophetic message. Indeed it is the function of the intellect to discriminate between good and evil,[62] God having instilled this into our intellects *ab initio*. The form of this necessary knowledge is general ethical propositions (the *ǧumla*), and it is enjoined upon us that we seek to discover and apply the specifics (*tafṣīl*) of this

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association of purpose with need and multiplicity (God cannot have a 'final cause' – see, briefly, Ibn Sīnā's *al-Najāt*, ed. M.D.S. al-Kurdi (Cairo, 1913), pp. 448-9; cf. the Aš'arite expression of this in al-Bāqillānī, *Tamhīd*, pp. 30-1) and traditionalists likewise shrank from, in their disapprobation of '*ta'līl af'āl Allāh*' – it would seem that our division of ethics into the teleological and the deontological level fulfils the function of distinguishing between God's goodness where objects and ends are involved, and His object-less, purpose-less goodness; establishing the latter undergirds the absolute nature of ethics.

[61] Al-Baġdādī, *al-Farq bayn al-firaq*, ed. M. Muhyi al-Din Abd al-Hamid (Beirut, n.d.), p. 125. Al-Aš'arī had suggested this already by saying that 'Evil (*šarr*) may proceed from God, may He be exalted, by way of creation, but He will be just notwithstanding' (*Ibāna*, p. 121).

[62] *Al-Aṣlaḥ*, p. 117. Cf. 'Abd al-Karim 'Uthman's interesting expression of this idea: 'And where some believe the definition of a human being to be 'the rational animal' (*al-ḥayawān al-'āqil*) […] the definition of a human being according to the Qāḍī can be simply said to be 'the animal subject to the Law' (*al-ḥayawān al-mukallaf*), since the purpose of his being rational is that he be capable of being charged with obedience of the Law' (*Naẓariyyat al-taklīf* [Beirut, 1971], p. 27).

knowledge.[63] Revelation is only one way in which this can be done, its function being to provide us with the *tafṣīl* of rational moral truths and obligations. Another way, it appears, is by reasoned proof (*istidlāl*).[64] This can explain 'Abd al-Ǧabbār's reference to God's 'seeing to it that proofs are properly borne out'.[65] As he puts it, 'it is as if God Almighty created in human intellects this knowledge [our knowledge that certain acts are evil – *e.g.* lying, wrongdoing, etc.], which concerns acts and the precepts that govern them in a general form (*ǧumla*), then set up indications revealing its specific aspects (*tafṣīl*), and bade the subject of the Law (*mukallaf*) to investigate these so that he may learn the specifics of that general form, and act or abstain [as appropriate], seeking after what is in his best interests through his acts and his decisions'. What knowledge the intellect cannot come by on its own strength, revelation comes to provide, draping the particular facts on the template of reason-based moral knowledge (the *taklīf 'aqlī*).[66] Revelation is meant to act as *luṭf*, helping the person already under the Law by virtue of reason to fulfil his rationally known obligations (*al-wāǧibāt al-'aqliyya*),[67] and if revelation were to serve no such purpose, it would not be necessary for God to send a prophet, for that would rank as 'vain action'.[68] 'Abd al-Ǧabbār seems to *subordinate* revelation to the rational Law to a greater degree than his Basran forebears appear to have done.[69] Thus, this breaks the teleological circle that binds the evilness of lies to the existence of a message. Lies are evil in a sense which must go beyond that which is generated by a contractual revelation; for

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[63] For example, while we know by necessity (*ḍarūra, iḍṭirār*) that wrongdoing (*ẓulm*) is evil, we must inquire by proof (*istidlāl*) to find out whether a specific act is wrongdoing by ascertaining whether it results in undeserved harm or in harm which does not entail any further good (see *e.g. Ta'dīl*, p. 20).

[64] *Tanabbu'āt*, p. 43.

[65] Above, p. 261.

[66] *Tanabbu'āt*, pp. 44-5.

[67] 'It is as if a person was told, "Apply this *šarī'a*, so that you may fulfil what is contained in the intellect"' (*ibid.*, p. 23); prayer is a classic example for this function, for it is said that carrying it out disposes one to carry out other ethical obligations: 'Enduring things odious to one, hardships and pains induces one to endure its *rational* parallels, because they are similar in that one is enduring hardship for the sake of benefit' (*ibid.*, p. 36); see also *Islamic Rationalism*, pp. 129-39 (examines role of revelation).

[68] The relationship between reason and revelation is addressed in *Tanabbu'āt*. A focal point of the discussion is the function of sending a prophet (on this point, opinions vary among the Basran Mu'tazila – see a synopsis of these in *Tanabbu'āt*, pp. 19-23).

[69] *Ibid.*, pp. 42-3.

this moral precept is perceived by the intellect, the medium for the apprehension of absolute knowledge. The divine design is intellectual rather than verbal in its promulgation.

While some ontological features of moral values may have thus been established, there are others which remain to be addressed, which present themselves to us through a motif which we will recognise from our examination of human lies – that of a conflict between teleological and deontological moral requirements. Here it arises in the form of a conflict between God's beneficence (*tafaḍḍul*) and the principle of not lying regardless of consequences. The case here is as different from the one we had encountered before as human beings are from God, seen from the perspective of motivation; for God is subject to no needs, and thus no benefit or harm, praise or blame can be used to offer alternative interpretations for the choice of morally good acts. On the other hand, the conflict between moral demands is remarkably similar to the one embedded in the scenario of the prophet in flight, in that here, too, teleological requirements which concern *another'*s good (cf. saving the life of the prophet) are ranged against the claims of a deontological moral principle.

It was out of His beneficence that God created the world, and, installing the intellect as man's inner Lawgiver, set up the scheme of *taklīf* by which men might reap the rewards they deserve through labouring under the Law. Yet can God to lie in order that His beneficent aims be fulfilled? Can He annul the threat (*al-waʿīd*) by which men are punishable for the iniquities they performed so as to benefit them, and thereby render His message a lie? This is the well-known question concerning the punishment of grave sinners, which was one of the positions differentiating the Muʿtazilite school from their Ašʿarite colleagues. ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār, in line with this tradition, affirms God can do no such thing (indeed, the reality of punishment is a central thesis cited as evidence against the *aṣḥāb al-aṣlaḥ*[70]). What this conflict – and the action in whose favour it is resolved – reveals is that, though the evilness of lies must be demonstrated as a precondition for the efficacy of God's benevolent designs, these designs are not the highest value and supreme good such that God would lie to fulfil them. So what is the furthest up the chain of 'good' we can reach? What is the higher good that checks the powers of beneficence?

[70] *Al-Aṣlaḥ*, pp. 106ff.

In part, the answer is provided by the Mu'tazilites' adherence to free will. For God's aim is a conditional one: it is not to provide us with the reward *ab initio* (though He could have done so, creating us in paradise from the start[71] – a suggestion which likewise undermines the doctrine of *al-aṣlaḥ*). It is to give us the opportunity to reap the reward (*al-taʿrīḍ li-al-ṭawāb*) *if* we respond; the 'if' of His plan is the repository of the doctrine of free will.

Yet there is a further explanation; and that is grounded in the formidable law of desert. We noted above that the force of desert is such that it can be compared to a law of natural causation. When good acts deserve reward and evil acts punishment, it as though these acts stood in a *causal relation* to the subsequent effects. When 'Abd al-Ǧabbār speaks of revelation merely *indicating* (*dalīl, dalāla*) what *is*, rather than making it thus,[72] we must infer that the correspondence of the moral values of acts to the moral consequences of reward or punishment was not 'made thus' and arbitrarily appointed, but that the criterion of desert determined this relation. Thus for God to *lie* is not a mere question of altering the 'contract', for the contract was fixed by immutable 'moral facts'. If the Message – the Qur'an – was created in time, yet these 'moral facts' have been objects of God's eternal *knowledge*: His knowledge, one of His essential attributes, encompasses 'all things that can be known by the ways in which it is possible for them to be known, and as one of the ways by which an object can be known is evilness, God Almighty must know it'.[73] Thus, the principle of desert constitutes a separate class of deontological value; and this, indeed, is indicated by the fact that 'Abd al-Ǧabbār lists as a separate ground of evil 'promising reward for what does not deserve reward, and threatening punishment for what does not deserve punishment'.[74] God would appear here as the administrator of moral

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[71] As argued in *al-Aṣlaḥ*, pp. 137-40. Note, however, that many Mu'tazilites claim that the magnitude of the benefits men will be rewarded with could *not* have been given out of beneficence, and could *only* be received through desert, though a lesser order of benefits may have been granted (otherwise, the hardship of observing the Law would be in vain).

[72] E.g. *Taʿdīl*, pp. 65, 105.

[73] *Šarḥ*, p. 302.

[74] *Taʿdīl*, p. 61. In the same mould: 'it is not permissible that one who is Wise impose as obligation which has no grounds for being obligatory, *for that would be tantamount to lying*' (*Tanabbuʾāt*, p. 28).

law, as the 'broker' of moral deserts, in a way which would understandably fill Mu'tazilite opponents with disquiet about the incursions made into His omnipotence and sovereignty. It is in rejection of these Laws of Desert that the Aš'arites asserted all reward bestowed by God to be 'gratuitous' (and all punishment just).[75]

Thus, in God's case, the balance shifts in many ways, and we see that though the operation of certain moral principles – such as the evilness of lies – may be a precondition for the fulfilment of God's design, these principles are not conditional in themselves and God's design is itself conditioned by principles of higher value than the good intended through that design. This is the journey we have taken to trace the highest value up the scale of 'good'.

CONCLUSION

Our intention has been to review the function of 'lying' in the positions the Mu'tazila were endeavouring to consolidate. In brief, what we saw was, firstly, that moral motives are difficult to discover through empirical means, and any ontological claims about moral values will resist a simple deduction from such motives. On the other hand, we saw that a coherent theological position emerges concerning God's truthfulness, and the categorical evilness of lies was joined by another deontological principle – that of desert, which relates acts to consequences in a way suggestive of forces of causation. Though the motifs we followed seemed to draw a continuum between the levels of the human and the divine, it may be noticed that we approached each level with very different standards and expectations: moving on the first level, it was possible to raise the question, 'But is this plausible? Does it make sense?' as though on shared standards of reasoning and truth; on the second level, we were concerned to discover and order coherently a theological narrative.

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[75] *Muslim Sects*, p. 86. 'Abd al-Ǧabbār's thought does address the possibility of forgiveness, which would represent a circumvention of the 'laws of desert': he says God could have forgiven men *only* if He had not issued a 'message' (*al-Aṣlaḥ*, pp. 108-9, cited as an example proving that God does not do the 'best'). This might seem to cast doubt on the equation of intellectual and revelational *taklīf* I have suggested here, with revelation equivalent to rational moral truths, including the distributive principles governing reward or punishment; my interpretation rests in great part on 'Abd al-Ǧabbār's conception of revelation as a mere *dalīl* of what *is*.

Our orientation has been provided, throughout, by the motions of argument which conclude with God's goodness and justice; these motions included the attempt at differentiating between 'God' and 'good', that is, between God's command and what is good – a type of tautology which, in one form or another, has been familiar to moral philosophy.[76] In this attempt of differentiation, *istiḥqāq* raised itself as a boundary between the two, yet a law of such force cannot help but suggest the descent of an innocent *differentiation* into a nocuous *dualism*, for the relation of such rigid moral laws to God's power to act is but dimly defined.

The inadequacy of orderly solutions to such speculative problems merely reflects the position of human weakness and insufficiency which inspires such investigations. That is to say, among the purposes of a theology that affirms God's justice must be the solace it brings when all facts suggest otherwise, so that at such times ignorance may be converted into a trustful posture of *tawakkul*, and in one's affliction one may remain convinced of the providence that governs the world, safe in one's inability to understand.[77] This is why the most interesting and most cogent argument we have looked at would seem to be the one that revolved around the issue of trust, for the suspicion that God might commit evil would deprive us of the capacity for trust. From one angle, the argument is one from design – from God's benevolent design; but it is also an argument from helplessness – from need. And one would be hard put to deny that this last is the reason why, after all, God simply *must* be good.

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[76] The most recent example is what has been termed the 'naturalistic fallacy', which G.E. Moore in the beginning of this century discredited in his *Principia Ethica*. Ethical naturalists claim the good can be defined in natural terms, for it refers to such things as happiness, pleasure, etc (opinions may vary as to what it refers to), so that 'good' means nothing more than 'happiness', 'pleasure', and so on. Moore's observation was that this renders the statement 'happiness is good' a tautology, showing that such an equation is impossible (Hudson, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, pp. 69ff.). Similar criticism can be applied to the positions of ethical subjectivists like the Ašʿarites, for whom 'good' means 'what God has commanded'; hence ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār's criticism by way of citing the Qurʾanic verses 'God commands justice, the doing of good […] and He forbids all shameful deeds and injustice and rebellion' (*Inna Allāh* yaʾmur *bi-al-ʿadl wa al-iḥsān* […] *wa* yanhā *ʿan al-faḥšāʾ wa al-munkar* […]') (16:90), cited in *Taʿdīl*, p. 113. [An argument of very similar structure had appeared on the Ašʿarite side, in connection to the debate over the nature of the Qurʾan, where speech was shown to be different from creation by citing a passage which juxtaposed the two, 'a-lā lahu al-ḫalq wa al-amr' (7:54), cf. *Ibāna*, p. 41].

[77] As suggested by *Tanabbuʾāt*, p. 42.