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Sophia Vasalou: Moral Agents and Their Deserts

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The Framework: The Mu'tazilites

Questions about the nature of moral values and the conditions that determine one's otherworldly destination—whether to paradise or the Fire—had formed an important part of the Islamic theological curriculum from early on, and generated lively debate. Many of the distinctive features of these debates were molded from the earliest days of the nascent Islamic caliphate when political developments revolving around the succession to Muḥammad placed them at the top of the agenda, and the parameters and membership conditions of the Islamic community came under dispute. At the time from which I will pick up the narrative, two types of responses to the broader questions about moral value and the narrower ones about desert stand out in the Islamic theological milieu, and in particular, in the practice of dialectical theology known as *kalām*: the responses of the Ash'arites and those of the Mu'tazilites. The latter thinkers shall be my interlocutors in this study, and by way of introducing them, I shall here attempt a brief—and perhaps impressionistic—sketch of their thought and their relation to Ash'arism.

The name of the Mu'tazilites is usually associated with an approach that gives supremacy to reason at the expense of revealed data, and the master script for the rise of the schools of Islamic theology is usually recounted along the following rough lines: at the time of the caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 813–33), a famous Inquisition took place at the instigation of a set of Mu'tazilite theologians well versed in and much enamored of disputational inquiries into matters of belief, and wielding great influence over the caliph. The aim of the Inquisition was to compel acquiescence in the doctrine that the Qur'ān was created and not eternal. The Inquisition excited great opposition among prominent traditionalists, who rejected this view and opposed themselves to this type of theological dispute on questions of faith, including the influential Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 855), who was imprisoned but refused to deliver the required profession of doctrine. The abolition of the

Inquisition with al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–61), the latter’s prohibition of such disputes about the Qur’ān, and the release of a triumphant Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal marked the beginning of the fall from grace for Mu’tazilite thinkers. The Mu’tazilites continued to flourish until, some time in the first quarter of the tenth century, a great defection from their ranks occurred that was to alter the course of Islamic theology. After many years of apprenticing in the circle of Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā’ī (d. 915), one of the most renowned leaders of the Mu’tazilites in the tenth century, Abu’l-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d. 935) dramatically disavowed Mu’tazilite doctrines. He then committed himself to the recovery and stout defense of the traditionalist view of such matters, thereby becoming the founder of the eponymous school of the Ash‘arites, arguably the most prominent theological tradition in medieval Islam. In the writings of al-Ash‘arī and his followers—al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013), al-Juwaynī (d. 1085), al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153), and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210) are only a few of the glittering names the school boasts—Mu’tazilism was subjected to a devastating critique, and the uncompromising rationalism of Mu’tazilite theology was repudiated in favor of an approach that gave primacy to revelation across the entire spectrum of positions discussed in the Islamic theological curriculum.

This story may verge on the mythological in its stark simplicity and paucity of detail, but for the purposes of the present study it can function as a backdrop for a brief account of the contents of the categories “Mu’tazilite” and “Ash‘arite.” The Mu’tazilites identified themselves by a set of five principles that were unanimously affirmed by all, whatever their differences on other, secondary theological questions. Most of these principles are given to us in the account of the Mu’tazilite Abu’l-Qāsim al-Balkhī (also called al-Ka’bī, d. 931) in the following way:

The Mu’tazilites unanimously agree that God—may He be exalted—is in no way like any other thing, that He is neither a body nor an accident, but rather the Creator of bodies and accidents, and that the senses cannot perceive Him neither in this life nor the next. . . . And they unanimously maintain that God does not love depravity, and that He does not create the acts of human beings, but it is the latter who do the acts they have been commanded to do and prohibited from doing, by virtue of the capacity for action [*qudra*], which God has created for them and instated within them, that they may obey through it and desist from disobedience.¹ . . . And He willed—great and exalted is He—that they might come to believe out of their own accord and not by compulsion, that they may thus be tried and tested, and that they may deserve the highest form of reward. . . . And they unanimously agree that God—great and exalted is He—does not forgive those who commit grave sin [*murtakibī al-kabā’ir*] unless they repent . . . and that the grave sinner does not deserve to be designated by the noble name of faith

[*īmān*] and submission [*islām*], nor by that of unbelief [*kufr*], but by that of grave sin [*fiṣq*], as he was called by God, and as the community unanimously affirms.²

This passage may appear somewhat opaque without a knowledge of the turns of phrase and concept that characterize Islamic theological discussions, and a full explanation of the principles would take us out of our remit. These principles can be gathered together under two main headings, after a practice initiated by the Muʿtazilite masters themselves: principles of divine unity (*tawḥīd*) and principles of justice (*ʿadl*).³ All Islamic factions affirmed God’s unity, and all subscribed to the Qurʾānic description of God as a being like whom there is none (*laysa kamithlihi shayʿ*, 42:11), but the Muʿtazilites’ approach was distinguished by their austere view of His simplicity and their anxiety over all things anthropomorphic. Things anthropomorphic included the bodily parts (e.g., God’s eyes or His hands) and functions (e.g., sitting on the throne) ascribed to God in various Qurʾānic passages, which the Muʿtazilites duly interpreted by the device of *taʿwīl*, or allegorical interpretation, in ways that deflected the possibility of corporeality from God. One of the most contentious extensions of their doctrine was their denial of the beatific vision in the afterlife, since the denial of corporeal aspects entailed that God could not be perceived by sight.

Their adherence to divine unity was expressed in the view they took of the divine attributes, where they affirmed that God’s essential attributes were identical with Him, and were not different entities or hypostases. Thus, when one affirms that God is knowing, powerful, eternal, living, one is not thereby affirming any separate “entitative accidents”—a term I will say more about below—or essences. One does not affirm a divine knowledge or life in affirming God as knowing or living. This was not a blanket approach taken toward all the divine attributes, nor was it one that found Muʿtazilites unanimous about the details. Certain other attributes—those that were designated as “attributes of action” (*ṣifāt fiʿliyya*)—were not ascribed to God by virtue of His essence; for example, God’s being willing (*murīd*) was theorized in a different way, to deal with certain constraints set down by the Muʿtazilite commitment to freedom of will, and was ascribed to God by virtue of a temporally originated “accident” of willing. Similarly with divine speech (*kalām*)—another unpopular and controversial Muʿtazilite tenet—which was not seen as an attribute predicabile of God eternally and by virtue of His essence but one that was predicated of Him by virtue of and at the time of His creating the entitative accident of speech. This view grounded the doctrine of the createdness of the Qurʾān, which some scholars have suggested may have been adopted partly as a solution to certain questions relating to human freedom of will.⁴ It is worth stressing the degree of diversity characterizing Muʿtazilite theological professions as well as the inevitable revisions of doctrine that came with the passage of time, among the most significant of which was Abū Hāshim’s (d. 933) theory of modes or

states (*aḥwāl*) as a means of understanding the divine attributes, developed in the first part of the tenth century.

In this ontological economy the Mu'tazilites were at odds with the wider Islamic view, which was represented by traditionalists such as Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, who recoiled from the rationalism characterizing the Mu'tazilite approach and the way it seemed to undermine Qur'ānic authority. If the Qur'ān affirms knowledge of God, who are the Mu'tazilites to so boldly interpret it away? If the Qur'ān speaks of God's hands or God's eyes, then what hermeneutic device can legitimize the denial of them? Which is not to say that God has hands and eyes in the way in which we normally understand these features; we must simply accept such aspects of God without asking how (*bi-lā kayfa*) and resign our claims to knowledge of their modality. When al-Ash'arī opted out of Mu'tazilism and took up the Ḥanbalite banner, it is this sort of return to a primitive acceptance of scriptural authority that he advocated, and the denuded, achromatic, and unQur'ānic God of the Mu'tazilites that he was rejecting.

Yet al-Ash'arī did not wholly repudiate the methods of *kalām* that had served as means for the exposition of Mu'tazilite ideas, and this meant that the door to the temptations of rationalism remained open; so while on certain matters the rich Ash'arite tradition that sprouted after him continued to challenge Mu'tazilite views on the nature of the divine attributes—for example, in denying the identity of God's attributes with His essence and affirming His knowledge, power, and so on—soon the Ash'arites began to inch closer to their opponents in several respects, such as their discontent with a no-questions-asked, uninterpreted acceptance of the anthropomorphic features of God. In this, they provided grounds for an abiding hostility on the part of the traditionalist camp, which had been distrustful of al-Ash'arī's self-appointment as defender of their cause from early on.

It is the second principle or general heading, however, that gives this study its subject matter. It would make little sense to issue unrestricted judgments about the relative importance of these two principles. Both were the subject of acute controversy that continued to engage the energies of theologians from both sides for centuries after their initial launch. Moreover, the topics grouped under one principle are never entirely insulated from those discussed in another (it is, after all, the demand for a perfect consistency, and thus for a communication between all constituent parts of the doctrine affirmed, that made of *kalām* such a *technē*). Nevertheless, what may be said is that the topics discussed under the principle of justice percolated into seminal streams of Islamic thought and practice to a greater extent than did the theological discussions of divine unity. This was in great part a function of the relations these topics bore to legal thought, in which the values of acts were theorized, making works on legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) and often also substantive law (*fiqh*) vehicles for the expression of theological commitments. This, in turn, was a reflection of the multiple

roles Muslim thinkers frequently bore, for they were never just jurists or theologians but quite often served in both capacities.

The positions gathered under the Mu'tazilite principle of justice converged on the affirmation that God is just and good, and will not commit acts that are wrong or evil. If the principle of unity in many respects emphasized the unlikeness of God to human beings, the principle of justice laid greater stress on the likeness. The standards of good and evil, justice and injustice, are those that we human beings know by our own reason, and are univocally applied to God and human beings. God and human beings are bound alike by a single code of moral values, though God is unlike human beings in that He will not commit evil due to His lack of need (that is, self-sufficiency) and knowledge of moral values. Moral values are intrinsic qualities that attach to acts by virtue of their satisfying certain descriptions that are accessible to reason: if an act is a lie, it is evil; similarly if an act is injustice; gratitude is always obligatory, and so is the repayment of debts. The Mu'tazilite thesis that human acts are not determined by God was linked to the defense of divine justice, for the evil acts of human beings would otherwise be fixed on God. God does not prejudice anyone's ability to become a believer, lead anyone astray, or close anyone's heart against belief—as some Qur'ānic passages and prophetic traditions seemed to suggest.

The Zaydite Mu'tazilite Mānkdim Shāshdīw (d. 1034) provides us with a pithy portrait of the God of the Mu'tazilites when he describes Him in these words:

His acts are all good, He does not do evil, He does not fail to perform what is obligatory on Him, He does not lie in His message nor is He unjust in His rule; 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 people obligations that they can neither bear nor have knowledge of. Far from it, He enables them to accomplish the duties He has imposed on them, and acquaints them with the qualities of these duties . . . so that he who perishes, perishes in the face of clear signs, and he who is saved, is saved in the face of clear signs. If obligation is imposed on a person and he fulfills it as he is bidden to, then He will necessarily reward him. And when He—glory to Him—afflicts people with pain and sickness, He does so in their interests and for their benefit, for otherwise He would be failing to perform what is obligatory.⁵

The Mu'tazilite defense of the belief that God is bound by the same code of value as human beings was often conducted via a defense of the view that moral values are independent from revelation, since the contrary perspective, taken up by the Ash'arites, consisted of the belief that acts acquire their values when divine command or prohibition attaches to them, and that it was revelation that promulgated the values of certain acts. The universal human knowledge of such moral truths—even on the part of those who adhere

to no religion—was cited by the Muʿtazilites as proof of their independence from revelation. The claim that moral truths are apprehensible by reason was linked with the claim that the moral obligation to reflect on the existence of God is a rational one that precedes revelation; indeed, were there no such prerevelational moral imperative, it is hard to see how human beings could be held accountable for their failure to believe.

The Muʿtazilite claims about moral value tied in with their views on desert and posthumous destinies, which formed the subject matter of the principle of “the promise and the threat” (*al-waʿd waʿl-waʿid*). Since the moral values of acts are independent of God’s will and command, so is the desert one acquires through such acts. Reward and punishment in the afterlife—what I shall call posthumous treatments—were inexorably determined by one’s deeds, though here two separate principles collaborated to guarantee this determination: not simply the moral value of one’s acts but the word God had sent forth once and for all by promising and threatening certain treatments in scriptural passages. God would not retract, for lying is intrinsically evil.

Closely related to these concerns was the rubric titled “the intermediate position” (*al-manzila bayna al-manzilatayn*), in which the Muʿtazilites argued their answers to the following questions: What is the status of grave sinners? And what destinies are reserved for them in the afterlife—in particular, are they to be consigned to eternal punishment? The first was a question about the definition of faith: the status in question was whether the grave sinner remained a believer, whether his sin rendered him an unbeliever, or whether he should be designated as a *tertium quid*. The Muʿtazilites were distinguished by taking the third view, saying that the grave sinner was in an intermediate position, and defined faith with a strong bias toward acts of obedience at the expense of internal belief. In answer to the second question, they affirmed that the grave sinner would receive eternal punishment unless he repented of his sin before dying. The intermediate position in this life resolved itself into the status of unbeliever in the next (and everyone agreed that unbelievers would receive eternal punishment).⁶

The Ashʿarites countered such views with their vocal and challenging brand of voluntarism, which construed good and evil as qualities generated through divine command and prohibition. What was it that piqued Ashʿarite theologians about the creeds of their colleagues and excited their zealous indignation? The creation of an order of causality that was not subject to God’s sovereign power and seemed to operate autonomously from the divine Will. God himself, Ashʿarites affirmed, cannot be subject to a *Law*, nor can moral concepts be applied univocally to His acts and those of human beings. Desert and moral value do not operate in this quasi-autonomous manner, nor indeed do human beings behave in an autonomous manner such as would set them up as little “creators”—creators of their acts—side by side with God. The doctrine propounded by al-Ashʿarī attempted to preserve divine omnipotence by claiming that God created human acts, and human beings

“acquired” them. In addition, whereas for the Mu‘tazilites it is external acts that are the primary bearers of value and the ingredients of faith, possessing decisive significance for one’s posthumous treatment, the Ash‘arites gave primacy to the internal, cognitive act of belief in God’s unity as a criterion for faith, and thus included grave sinners in the community of believers. And while both schools shared a scriptural legacy that tended to depict deeds as a form of moral currency that could be stored up and put one in credit or debit, the Ash‘arites backed off from this model when its independence from God’s will became too conspicuous.⁷ The Mu‘tazilites immortalized this model in the structure of their theodicy.

If one was to schematize the conflict, one might try juxtaposing the competing theological perspectives in the following way. The Mu‘tazilites said of God: “It is obligatory for Him to . . . it is not permissible that He . . .”; the Ash‘arites replied: “God—may He be exalted and may His names be sanctified—is not under a Law [*taḥta shari‘a*] . . . nor is there anyone above Him who permits and forbids Him, who commands and proscribes.”⁸ “He is the sovereign ruler [*mālik*] who is subject to none and above whom there is none to permit or command or rebuke or forbid . . . and as such, nothing He does can be evil.”⁹ The Mu‘tazilites said: God does not do wrong, for one who does wrong is a wrongdoer deserving of blame, and thus God does not create wrongful human acts; the Ash‘arites countered: “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 *inheres* and the liar is the one in whom lying *inheres*.”¹⁰ The Mu‘tazilites said: Good and evil are intrinsic attributes of acts; the Ash‘arites objected: “The meaning of ‘good’ (*ḥasan*) is an act whose agent is commended in the Law, while the meaning of ‘evil’ (*qabīḥ*) is an act whose agent is reproached in the Law; when the Law speaks of acts as being good or evil, this does not involve the ascription of such attributes to the acts.”¹¹ The Mu‘tazilites said: It is obligatory to reward good deeds and evil to reward the undeserving; the Ash‘arites responded, “Nothing is obligatory on [God]”; “reward is not an inalienable right (*ḥaqq*) . . . but it is a voluntarily rendered beneficence (*fadl*) from God Almighty”; “if it were impossible that God not reward, the Creator would be a necessitating cause of that reward (*‘illa mūjiba*) and not a voluntary agent.”¹²

This was a conversation only in part, and it is open to question to what extent Mu‘tazilite or Ash‘arite *kalām* can be wholly reduced to the reactive character of a dispute (a question that gives the impetus for the issues forming the subject of the next chapter). Extroverted conversations aside, the Mu‘tazilites themselves were not without their internal divisions. The distinction between the Baṣran and Baghdadi schools of the Mu‘tazilites was only at first a reflection of actual differences in location, and soon came to designate differences in theological positions, albeit ones secondary to the fundamental principles by which the Mu‘tazilites identified themselves. By the end of the tenth century, the Baghdadi school seems to have been eclipsed by its Baṣran counterpart in number of adherents and importance.

Perhaps the last prominent member of the Baghdadi school in its later years was Abu'l-Qāsim al-Balkhī, who was a contemporary of two seminal thinkers of the Baṣran school, Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī and his son Abū Hāshim, who succeeded his father as head of the school on his death (d. 915 and 933, respectively).

And if debates between the two schools of the Mu'tazilites abounded, so did debates within the schools themselves. With Abū 'Alī and Abū Hāshim, the Baṣran school splintered anew over disputes concerning such questions as repentance, desert of blame, and Abū Hāshim's theory of modes or states (*aḥwāl*).¹³ History favored the son's school, and by the eleventh century its members had outnumbered those of all other Mu'tazilite schools and produced some of the most important thinkers through which we have come to know Mu'tazilism. 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1025), the Zaydite sharīf Mānkdim Shashdīw (d. 1034), Ibn Mattawayh (d. 1076), and Abū Rashid al-Nīsābūri (d. before 1076?) are among the names that have put their signature on our understanding of Mu'tazilite ideas. It is perhaps 'Abd al-Jabbār who must take pride of place among them all, not simply because he stands at the head of this sequence of thinkers, but also on account of his astonishing output and in particular for his work *al-Mughnī fi abwāb al-tawḥīd wa'l-'adl*, which runs to over twenty volumes, and whose length is only matched by its formidable complexity and capacity to perplex.¹⁴

It is on this branch—the Baṣran branch—of Mu'tazilism that the focus will be placed in this study, as the strongest and also the best-documented school. In talking about this school, I will often be referring rather clumsily to the “Baṣran Mu'tazilites,” as opposed to the abbreviated “Baṣrans,” out of a sense that it is crucial to keep in view the broader intellectual platform with which the school was associated and not to allow the internal divisions, generating eponymous subschools—a tendency stoked by hostile heresiographers eager to portray the Mu'tazilites in their factiousness—to obscure the sources of unity. The more parochial appellation “Baṣran” should not obscure that these thinkers were first of all Mu'tazilites in their loyalties. The central theme with which much of this study will be concerned—namely, the conception of desert—is itself a development of the fundamental ethical vision of Mu'tazilite theology.¹⁵

To prepare for our discussion of this theme, several comments are in order concerning the nature of the sources to be used and especially the complexity referred to above in connection with 'Abd al-Jabbār's *Mughnī*. The complexity in question is partly a result of the fact that many of the works that have reached us—the *Mughnī* being a prime example—were the products of a process of oral dictation, which has left its mark on their organization in the form of frequent repetitions, discontinuities, and interpolations. The mode of composition is connected to and serves to heighten the effects of the disputational character of Mu'tazilite theology. While Mu'tazilite works do contain expository sections, these are often outweighed by the dialectical sections that consist of arguments responding to objec-

tions that previously had been or might in the future be brought against the positions canvased. The proportion of the expository to the dialectical varies from one work to another: ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s *Mughnī* and al-Nisābūrī’s *al-Masā’il fi’l-khilāf bayna al-Baṣriyyīn wa’l-Baghdādiyyīn* outstrip a work such as Ibn Mattawayh’s *al-Majmū’ fi’l-muḥīṭ bi’l-taklīf* in the space given to this “if someone says, we will reply” sort of argumentation. (And it is for this reason that likening ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s *Mughnī* to Saint Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica* is not helpful: beyond parity of length, the analogy must fail when it comes to the quality of systematic exposition.)¹⁶

It is the dialectical sections of Mu’tazilite works that usually need to be winnowed if one wishes to get the Mu’tazilite view on a question in any detail. But the challenges such a style poses for the student cannot be overestimated. It is not only that it makes it difficult to pronounce with confidence that one has surveyed the entire body of texts where one might expect to find statements relevant to the question under investigation (given the interconnection between theological theses, texts relevant to a given question may exist in wide geographic dispersion). Nor is it just that one must scavenge for relevant statements and strands of argument from widely scattered places within the Mu’tazilite corpus and weave them together on one’s own looms to produce what one will then describe, somewhat sheepishly and self-consciously, as “the Mu’tazilite view” of a matter. It is also that often, the locations in which such statements are met will be arguments in which the angle of interest does not coincide with the angle of interest that one carries to the investigation. These angles—which dictate the focus, choice of topics, and organization of means and ends in the argumentation—are frequently determined by the history of the debates, and that is not something that can be read off their sleeve. The origins of the debates will need to be reconstructed by crisscrossing through the body of arguments, so as to finally permit one to dispel the unfamiliarity and oddity of a particular view in light of the interconnecting whole.

A good example of this deep embeddedness of Mu’tazilite discussions can be mentioned by way of introducing some of the sources I will be using, and concerns a topic included in the Baṣran Mu’tazilite corpus whose title would have readily recommended it as a first port of call for gaining an understanding of the Baṣrans’ view of desert. Attractively and suggestively titled “Desert of Blame,” this topic is discussed by ‘Abd al-Jabbār in one of three books that comprise volume 11 of the *Mughnī*, and by his successor Ibn Mattawayh in a similar thematic neighborhood in his *Majmū’*. The subject of debate was one internal to the school of the Baṣrans, dividing Abū ‘Alī (whose side was taken by the Baghdadi Abu’l-Qāsim al-Balkhī), on the one hand, and Abū Hāshim and his followers, including ‘Abd al-Jabbār, Mānkdim, and Abū Rashīd al-Nisābūrī, on the other. The delicate question around which the debate revolved was parsed in the following form: in the case in which an agent failed to do what was obligatory, was the true relatum—or simply, “the ground”: *muta’allaq*—of blame *the fact that the*

agent had not done the obligatory (the “not-doing”) or was it *the act one had done instead?*¹⁷

The origin of the debate, as Mu‘tazilite writings suggest and the Ash‘arite heresiographer al-Baghdādī also testifies—not without a measure of pride—went back to a certain *reductio* directed by Ash‘arite opponents against a central Mu‘tazilite claim—namely, that human beings determine their own acts.¹⁸ This claim had been spelled out in the position that the agent’s power of autonomous action (*qudra*) precedes in time the action which it empowers one to do, and is not simultaneous with it, as opponents of a libertarian position held. The *reductio* consisted of saying that if this power precedes the act by a certain amount of time, then there is nothing to specify the length of time by which it should precede, and it may precede by “one time” or “many times” (*waqt/awqāt*). It is then conceivable that an agent endowed with this power may go through life without undertaking a single act—whether of commission (*akhdh*) or omission (*tark*; and this, it must be noted, is conceived as the *positive* act done instead of commission)—and thus complete life without coming to deserve anything on account of works done. Yet it is accepted by all parties that human beings must ultimately be *either* punished *or* rewarded, so it is impossible that they should deserve nothing at all.

Abū ‘Alī and Abū Hāshim responded to this objection in different ways; while Abū ‘Alī rejected the possibility that a capable agent could ever be free from acts, Abū Hāshim lent his weight to the position that it was indeed possible for an agent to be *qādir* but not *fā’il* (“capable” but not “acting”), to be endowed with the power of action but not to use it to produce any acts and thus to be altogether free from them. He complemented this with the view that blame may accrue on account of not-acting; in this and other ways, he eschewed the final entailment that it was possible that no desert should arise. This complementary position crystallized in the statement that the “relatum” (*muta’allaq*) of blame may be that “one has not done the obligatory,” and that blame need not attach to a positive act, such as the act of omission done instead of the obligatory act.

While the origin of the question may have been an external challenge, the intramural debate between the two masters holds the field in the book of *Istihqāq al-dhamm*, and gives rise to intricate discussions of the concept of omission, the definition of obligation, and the counterfactual possibility of God’s not rewarding those who obey His commands, and all these discussions—long and arduous—are conducted with primary reference to the debate about the relatum of blame. One would have had to admit that one’s expectations had been confounded by the agenda of this book, if one had expected a treatment of the central issues relating to desert as a principle connecting acts to consequences. Why must punishment be perpetual? What kind of causality is involved in the relation between an act and what one deserves by it? And what is the relation between God’s agency and efficient powers and the type of causality that engenders deserts and necessitates

deserved treatments? Such questions are among the ones that we might have expected to find answered in a book thus titled. And it is important to have expectations, for the perplexity they generate whets the need to understand.

Indeed, this need is one that continues to press on one even after one's grasp of the situating dispute has modified one's sense of its relevance for the above questions; for even obliquely, there is much to be gleaned from this book concerning the Baṣran Mu'tazilites' approach to desert. The need to utilize these resources is rendered more pressing by the vagaries of manuscript transmission, which have deprived us of texts of central relevance to our interest, such as the sections of 'Abd al-Jabbār's *Mughnī* concerning *al-wa'd wa'l-wa'īd*, in which matters of desert would have received their most concerted treatment, compelling us to fall back on other, more indirect means of garnering some of his views.

These, then, are some of the challenges and puzzles one needs to face in educating Mu'tazilite views out of their dialectical warrens and situating disputes. So it is not surprising that at the end of one's task and detective work, one should be left with the confident belief that one knows the minds of the Mu'tazilites better than they knew them themselves, nor to notice a somewhat imperious or triumphant tone creep into one's exposition of "the Mu'tazilite view." These challenges also give the reason why it often proves difficult to adduce sizable and continuous textual quotations in the course of mapping their positions, for the textual grounds are frequently both too dispersed and too deeply embedded in contexts of argument and angles of interest to lend themselves to such a presentation. Hence, it is critical to bear in mind these qualities of Mu'tazilite writing, for the way in which their views have to be studied affects the ways in which these views can be presented.