

REASON, REVELATION
& THE RECONSTITUTION OF
RATIONALITY:

Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya's (d. 728/1328)
Dar' Ta'arūḍ al-'Aql wa-l-Naql

or

*'The Refutation of the Contradiction
of Reason and Revelation'*

by
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وما توفيقى إلا الله

This thesis is dedicated, with
gratitude and awe

to

PROF. MAYSAM AL-FARUQI

*a truly peerless woman whose uncanny lot it has been
to save me not just once, but twice.*

No thanks will ever be enough.

ABSTRACT

Author: Carl Sharif El-Tobgui

Title: REASON, REVELATION & THE RECONSTITUTION OF RATIONALITY:
Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya's (d. 728/1328) *Dar' Ta'arud al-
'Aql wa-l-Naql*, or ' *The Refutation of the Contradiction of
Reason and Revelation*'

Department: Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University

Degree: Doctor of Philosophy

This thesis explores the broad outlines of Ibn Taymiyya's attempt to resolve the "conflict" between reason and revelation in late medieval Islam in his 10-volume, 4,000-page magnum opus, *Dar' ta'arud al-'aql wa-l-naql*, or *The Refutation of the Contradiction of Reason and Revelation* by breaking down and systematically reconstituting the basic categories in terms of which the debate was framed.

The perceived conflict between revelation and reason centered on the interpretation of a number of Divine Attributes, considered rationally indefensible by the philosophers and the Mu'tazila because their affirmation would involve an unacceptable assimilation (*tashbīh*) of God to created beings. This stance culminated in the Ash'arite theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's "Universal Law" (*qānūn kullī*), which stated that whenever a conflict between revelation and reason arises, the dictates of reason must be given priority and revelation interpreted metaphorically through *ta'wīl*.

Ibn Taymiyya counters these claims with a comprehensive response, attacking the logical integrity of the Universal Law but also articulating a textually self-sufficient hermeneutic and devising a radical reformulation of the philosophers' ontology, particularly their realist theory of universals which has resulted in a chronic confusion between what exists logically in the mind and what exists ontologically in external reality. This in turn allows him to elaborate a new epistemology based on three principal avenues for gaining knowledge, namely, "*ḥiss*," or sense perception; "*khavar*," or the transmission of reports (particularly revelation); and "*aql*," or rational knowledge (both innate and inferred). These sources of knowledge are corroborated by the mechanism of *tawātur* and undergirded by an expanded notion of the *fiṭra*. The disparate elements of Ibn Taymiyya's theory of language, his ontology, and his epistemology eventually converge into a synthesis meant to accommodate a robust and rationally defensible affirmationism vis-à-vis the Divine Attributes while yet avoiding the *tashbīh* generally presumed by the later tradition to be inevitably entailed thereby.

RÉSUMÉ

Auteur : Carl Sharif El-Tobgui

Titre : LA RAISON, LA RÉVÉLATION & LA RECONSTITUTION DE LA
RATIONALITÉ: le *Dar' ta'ārud al-'aql wa-l-naql*, ou « *La réfutation de la contradiction entre la raison et la révélation* » de
Taḳī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya (m. 728/1328)

Faculté : Institut d'Études islamiques, Université McGill

Grade : Doctorat

La présente thèse se voue à une exploration des grandes lignes du projet d'Ibn Taymiyya dans son chef-d'œuvre en dix volumes et 4 000 pages, le *Dar' ta'ārud al-'aql wa-l-naql*, ou *La réfutation de la contradiction entre la raison et la révélation*. Cette œuvre a pour but de résoudre une fois pour toutes le « conflit » entre la raison et la révélation dans l'Islam médiéval tardif au moyen d'une déconstruction et d'une reconstruction systématiques des catégories structurelles du débat.

Le prétendu conflit entre la révélation et la raison portait surtout sur l'interprétation de certains des attributs divins jugés irrationnels par les philosophes et les Mu'tazilites, qui y voyaient une assimilation inadmissible de Dieu aux choses créées (*tashbīh*). Cette prise de position culmine dans l'élaboration de la « loi universelle » (*qānūn kullī*) par le théologien ash'arite Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. Cette « loi » oblige à privilégier les préceptes et les conclusions de la raison en tout cas de conflit entre celle-ci et la révélation coranique, dont les versets s'en retrouvent réduits, par le biais du *ta'wīl*, à une lecture métaphorique.

La riposte d'Ibn Taymiyya se révèle exhaustive et globale. Elle a pour effet non seulement de vicier l'intégrité logique de la Loi universelle, mais elle donne lieu également à l'élaboration d'une herméneutique ancrée sur le texte même de la révélation tout en permettant une refonte radicale de l'ontologie des philosophes, surtout de leur théorie réaliste des concepts universels qui avait abouti à une confusion chronique entre ce qui tient à l'existence mentale logique et ce qui relève de la réalité ontologique externe. Cette approche permet à notre auteur de mettre au point une nouvelle épistémologie empirique qui met en valeur trois voies principales d'acquisition de la connaissance, à savoir, le « *ḥiss* », ou la perception sensorielle; le « *khavar* », ou la transmission de récits (surtout en guise de révélation); et le « *'aql* », ou la connaissance rationnelle (autant innée qu'inférentielle). Ces sources de la connaissance sont corroborées à leur tour par le mécanisme du *tawātur* et sous-tendues par une conception étendue de la *fiṭra*. Les divers éléments mis en avant par Ibn Taymiyya en matière de linguistique, d'ontologie et d'épistémologie s'entremêlent pour s'élever à une synthèse permettant d'adhérer à une affirmation stricte et rationnellement défendable à l'égard des attributs divins tout en évitant le *tashbīh* qui, dans la perspective générale de la tradition ultérieure, devait inévitablement en découler.

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No thanks will ever be enough.

والله واخيرا فالحمد لله

الذي لا حول

والقوة

الله

به

INTRODUCTION

Mise en scène

It is the year 1300. The city of Damascus is filled with a heavy sense of foreboding. Where once the vibrant lights of civilization shone forth to illuminate the surrounding lands, a decidedly somber atmosphere now hung thickly over the deserted marketplaces and alleyways. Most of the city's inhabitants had already fled in horror before the impending cataclysm. The governors and intellectual elite had massively abandoned camp as well, following their terrified populace south into Palestine, then further down into Egypt, whose perpetually sunny skies had not yet been darkened over by the chilly shadow cast by the gathering menace to the north. The land of Syria was under existential threat. Nowhere in the annals of the ancient metropolis had a more fateful day been recorded; for, perched along the northeast border of the city, ready to swoop down like a voracious pack of vultures at the slightest nod of their redoubtable chief, camped the wild hordes of the sons of Genghis Khan.

At almost the same time, in the dungeon of the citadel at Cairo, quite another battle was being waged. Having been sentenced to one and a half years in prison for propagating allegedly anthropomorphic ideas regarding the nature of God, an energetic, bold, and innately combative scholar and man of religion by the name of Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) scarcely seemed fazed by the fact that he was locked behind bars. As long as the prison wards continued to restock him with ream after ream of paper and an ever fresh supply of ink and pens, Ibn Taymiyya could continue to fight a battle infinitely more consequential than the struggle against the Mongols in Syria, for if Damascus – one of the first of the illustrious external citadels of Islam – were to fall to hostile forces, then much was lost indeed. But if the internal citadel of faith itself were to be overrun, then *all* was lost, for the stakes here involved no less than eternity.

The battle lines had been drawn long before Ibn Taymiyya's day. Nearly a full seven centuries had passed since the Prophet of Islam had brought to a

chaotic world God's final message to mankind – a revealed Book whose very words were those of God Himself. The message, in its youth, had been clear and pristine. God was the *ḥaqq*, the ultimate Reality, or the ultimately Real. He was also the *khāliq*, the Creator of the heavens and earth and everything therein. God had also created man and had placed him in the earth to worship his Lord and to work good deeds for as long as he might tarry on earth. Man, inexorably, would one day taste of death, after which God would raise him up again, body and soul, to judge him for the sincerity of his faith and the goodness of his works. So it was revealed to them in the Book and so did they believe in it, with their hearts *and* with their minds.

Yet over the centuries that had elapsed since those earliest days, the clear and unencumbered plains of God's Holy Word had been slowly, yet steadily, encroached upon from yonder the horizon, and foreign troops had since come to occupy many a Muslim thinker's mind. The mass translation of Greek and Hellenistic medical, scientific – but especially philosophical – texts into Arabic from the time of the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mūn in the early 3rd/9th century resulted in the influx of a host of new and strange ideas and modes of thinking onto the Muslim intellectual landscape. The works on logic, metaphysics, and other disciplines – both by Aristotle and by various Neoplatonic thinkers – fascinated and enticed, yet likewise discomfited and repelled. For here was a sophisticated, brilliantly explicated view of the world, carefully elaborated over the course of centuries by some of the most brilliant minds the world had ever known. Provocatively, it was a view of the world, a vision of reality, that pretended to far-reaching coherence and comprehensiveness and that presented itself, very compellingly, as being based on, as growing out of, as deriving from no less august a thing than Reason itself.

And what cause for worry? For did not the Qur'an itself, in numerous passages, beseech its followers to reflect, to ponder, to exploit their God-given intellects, to employ their minds, perchance they might better fathom the secret

of their existence? “*A-fa-lā ya‘qilūn*”¹ – “Will they not then understand?”; “*A-fa-lā yatadabbarūn*”² – “Do they not consider (with care)?”; “*la‘allahum yatafakkarūn*”³ – “Perchance they may reflect.”

Yet what to make of it were one to comply with God’s behest to use one’s intellect, only to find, no doubt unsettlingly, that what the trusty companion of reason has delivered one disaccords with, or is somehow incongruent with what God, Creator of all things – including man and his intellect – has Himself declared in revelation? For the Greeks spoke of man as well. They spoke too of the heavens and the earth, and of God Himself. Reason, Aristotle tells us, perceives that God is a perfect being. Now, all may agree that God is perfect. But reason, Aristotle tells us further, judges that a perfect being must be – among other things – perfectly simple, indivisible, non-composite. So, while revelation may very well seem to predicate of God certain qualities or certain attributes – such as His being “*ḥayy*” (living), “*qayyūm*” (self-subsisting), “*jabbār*” (mighty), “*wadūd*” (loving); “*‘alīm*” (omniscient); “*baṣīr*” (all-seeing); “*samī‘*” (all-hearing) – reason, for its part, avers that God cannot *in reality* possess any such attributes, for then He would no longer be perfectly simple as reason requires Him to be, but rather, composite – composed, that is, of His uniquely indivisible essence and His alleged attributes, or qualities. Similarly, God, by the dictates of sound reason, we are told, cannot be held to have knowledge of any particular, individual, instantiated thing in the world, as all such things are impermanent, springing into existence one day only to be overcome by demise the next. It follows by rational inference, therefore, that God cannot be held to know any such ephemera, for to know them would, the argument goes, imply a relational change in His knowledge. So the argument goes. But, does not God Himself say in revelation: “*Wa-mā tasquṭu min waraqatin illā ya‘lamuhā*”⁴ – “Not a (single) leaf falls except that He knoweth it”? Indeed, He does. And so the lines are drawn. And the battle is on.

¹ Qur’an (Yā Sīn) 36:68.

² Qur’an (al-Nisā’) 4:82 and Q. (Muḥammad) 47:24.

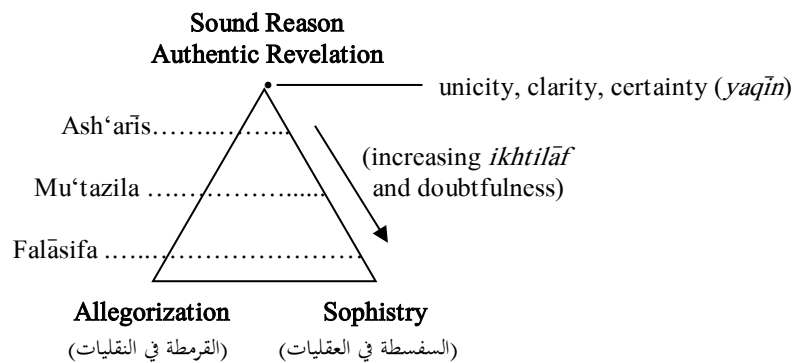
³ Qur’an (al-A‘rāf) 7:176, (al-Naḥl) 16:44, and (al-Ḥaṣhr) 59:21.

⁴ Qur’an (al-An‘ām) 6:59.

I. Project Overview

The current work explores the broad outlines of Ibn Taymiyya’s attempt to resolve the alleged conflict between reason and revelation in late medieval Islam in his 10-volume magnum opus, *Dar’ ta’ārūḍ al-‘aql wa-l-naql*, or *The Refutation of the Contradiction of Reason and Revelation*. The *Dar’ al-ta’ārūḍ* represents a bold and sustained attempt on the part of its author to transcend the “reason vs. revelation” dichotomy altogether by breaking down and systematically reconstituting the very categories in terms of which reason was conceived and debated in medieval Islam. In the 4,046 pages of the *Dar’*, Ibn Taymiyya endeavors to prove the bold and original contention that pure reason (‘*aql ṣarīḥ*) and a straightforward reading of authentic revelation (*naql ṣaḥīḥ*) can never be in actual contradiction. Any perceived contradiction between the two results either from a misunderstanding of the texts of revelation or, more pertinently for our project, a misappropriation of reason. The more speculative (and hence dubious) one’s rational premises and precommitments, the more extravagantly one must interpret – or “twist,” for Ibn Taymiyya – scripture in order to bring it in line with the conclusions of such “reason.”

We can illustrate this concept in the form of a “Taymiyyan pyramid” as illustrated below:



Truth is that point of unicity, clarity, and certainty (*yaqīn*) at which the testimony of sound reason and that of authentic revelation, understood correctly and without any attempt to “interpret away” through allegory or metaphor, fully co-

incide. At the opposite end of this point lies pure sophistry (“*safsafa*”) in rational matters coupled with the unrestrained allegorization (“*qarmaṭa*”)⁵ of scripture. As individuals and groups move away from the point of Truth where reason and revelation are fully concordant, the wide-reaching unity of their views on central points of both rational truth and religious doctrine gives way to ever increasing disagreement (*ikhtilāf*) on even the most basic issues – to the point where the philosophers, in Ibn Taymiyya’s words, “disagree (massively) even in astronomy (‘*ilm al-hay’a*’), which is the most patent and least controversial of their sciences.”⁶

In concrete terms, the perceived conflict between reason and the overt sense of certain Qur’anic passages revolved to a large degree – and for Ibn Taymiyya almost exclusively – around the question of the Divine Attributes. Revelation affirms not only that God exists, but that He exists as a particular entity with certain intrinsic and irreducible qualities. As we saw in our opening scenario, such qualities as affirmed in revelation were held by various groups – particularly the philosophers, the Mu’tazila, and later Ash’arites – to be rationally indefensible on the grounds that their straightforward affirmation would entail an unacceptable assimilation of God to created beings, or *tashbīh*. In other instances, attributes may be denied or interpreted away because affirming them would undermine one or another group’s particular argument for the very existence of God. In both cases, a conflict is thought to ensue between the clear dictates of reason and the equally clear statements of revelation, resulting in the unsettling notion that there exists a fundamental contradiction between revelation and rea-

⁵ Term derived from the Qarmatians (Ar., *qarāmiṭa*), a Shī’ite Ismā’īlī group in the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries known for adhering to a highly esoteric exegesis of the Qur’an that very often seemed to involve complete disregard for the outward sense of the texts. The Qarāmiṭa are perhaps most reputed for their infamous theft of the Black Stone and desecration of the well of Zamzam with Muslim corpses during the Hajj season of 317/930. [John L. Esposito, ed. *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 253].

⁶ Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya, *Dar’ ta’āruḍ al-‘aql wa-l-naql, aw muwāfaqat ṣaḥīḥ al-manqūl li-ṣarīḥ al-ma’qūl*, ed. Muḥammad Rashād Sālīm, 11 vols. (Riyadh: Dār al-Kunūz al-Adabiyya, 1399/1979), I: 157-158. [The text itself is ten volumes, with the eleventh volume consisting of an index.] For passages where Ibn Taymiyya expresses the relationship between revelation, reason, concordance, and contradiction as illustrated by the Taymiyyan pyramid, see *Dar’*, V: 248, 281, 314, 347-348; *ibid.*, IX: 252; and *ibid.*, X: 110.

son – both of which have nevertheless been accepted as yielding authentic and invaluable knowledge about ourselves, our world, and our Creator.

The question of how to deal with such “rational objections” to the plain sense of revelation elicited various kinds of responses from both philosophers and theologians, ultimately culminating in the “Universal Law” (*qānūn kullī*), which Ibn Taymiyya cites on the very first page of the *Dar’* as it was formulated by the Ash‘arite theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in the 6th/12th century. The Universal Law states, in brief, that whenever a conflict between revelation and reason arises, the dictates of reason must be given priority and revelation reinterpreted metaphorically through a process known as *ta’wīl*. This prescription is justified on the consideration that it is reason that “grounds” our judgment that revelation is true, such that allowing revelation to override reason in the event of a conflict between the two would amount to a global impugning of the integrity of reason itself, thereby undermining the rational basis on which our knowledge of the authenticity of revelation has been founded.

Ibn Taymiyya makes the refutation of this Universal Law his primary explicit goal in the *Dar’*. To accomplish this task, he devotes roughly twelve percent of the work (about 500 pages) to the elaboration of approximately 40 separate arguments against the logical coherence of the Universal Law and the integrity, in purely theoretical terms, of the premises and assumptions on which it is based. In the remainder of the *Dar’*, Ibn Taymiyya takes up what seems to be practically all of the actual instances of alleged conflict between reason and revelation raised by various philosophical and theological schools over the seven-century career of the Islamic intellectual tradition that preceded him. It is here that Ibn Taymiyya both develops and applies a characteristic Taymiyyan philosophy and methodology by means of which he attempts to dissolve once and for all the conflict that had been raging so intractably for centuries.

Ultimately, Ibn Taymiyya attempts to solve the issue by demonstrating that the very notion of reason employed by the philosophers and theologians is corrupted, with the result that the arguments based on such “reason” are incoherent and invalid. His mission is to show that no *valid* rational argument exists

that opposes or conflicts with what revelation affirms about any of the particular attributes or actions affirmed therein of God, or the temporally originated (*ḥādīth*) nature of the universe, or any other topic. If Ibn Taymiyya can do this convincingly, then the famous “rational objection” evaporates once the notion of reason has been cleared and purified of its corrupt elements and specious presuppositions and returned to what Ibn Taymiyya holds to be the inborn, unadulterated state of pure natural intelligence (‘*aql ṣarīḥ*’).

Establishing precisely what the inborn, unadulterated state of pure natural intelligence is, and the manner in which it interacts with revelation, constitutes the final segment of Ibn Taymiyya’s reconstructive project in the *Dar’*. In an attempt to wrest the Qur’an from the sweeping allegorization entailed by the philosophers’ rationalist exegesis of revelation, Ibn Taymiyya endeavors to articulate a textually self-sufficient hermeneutic which privileges the natural contextual use of language, judged against the larger linguistic convention, over the speculative rational interpretations of his opponents. Having clarified the proper method for determining what revelation says, Ibn Taymiyya then turns to a reconstruction of reason itself by considering the numerous ways in which knowledge is actually brought about in the human mind. Ibn Taymiyya’s reformed epistemology, in turn, rests on an even more fundamental questioning of the basic ontology taken for granted by the philosophers, particularly their realist theory of universals which has resulted, as he sees it, in a chronic confusion between what exists logically in the mind and what exists ontologically in external reality. Working from a careful and consistent distinction between mental and external existence, Ibn Taymiyya replaces the philosophers’ “intellectualization” of reality with a firmly empiricist epistemology which confines the valid sources of knowledge about reality to perception (*ḥiss*) and “report” (*ḵabar*). Nevertheless, the abstract and universalizing functions of the mind, as well as the *a priori* logical principles embedded within it, are vital for our comprehension of the unseen realities reported to us through revelation, particularly the Divine Attributes. Ibn Taymiyya’s whole epistemic system is undergirded by an extended notion of the *fiṭra*, or “original normative disposition,” and ultimately guaranteed

by a universalized notion of *tawātur* borrowed from the Muslim textual and legal traditions but applied expansively as the final guarantor of all human cognition. The disparate elements of Ibn Taymiyya's theory of language, his ontology, and his epistemology eventually converge into a synthesis meant to accommodate a robust and rationally defensible affirmationism vis-à-vis the Divine Attributes while yet avoiding the "assimilationism," or *tashbīh*, so often presumed by the later tradition to be entailed thereby.

II. Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into two parts, comprising a total of five chapters and a substantive conclusion. **Chapter 1** provides a broad overview of the historical development of the issue of reason and revelation in Islamic thought in the fields of theology, philosophy, and law from the first Islamic century up to the time of Ibn Taymiyya in the 7th/13th and 8th/14th centuries. **Chapter 2** presents a survey of the life and times of Ibn Taymiyya, followed by an intellectual profile of our author intended to situate him both ideologically and methodologically within the wider intellectual and religious context of late medieval Islam. We then examine how Ibn Taymiyya received and interpreted his own intellectual heritage by reconstructing, from numerous remarks scattered throughout the *Dar'*, what *his* view was concerning the nature and historical development of the conflict between reason and revelation in the centuries preceding him. Understanding exactly how the issue looked to, and was interpreted by, Ibn Taymiyya is critical for comprehending not only his motivations, but more importantly, the strategy and overall methodology he employs in the *Dar'* in attempting to provide once and for all a credible and viable solution to the dilemma. The chapter ends with a brief discussion of two earlier high-profile attempts to resolve the conflict between reason and revelation – those of al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198) – and situates Ibn Taymiyya's project in the *Dar'* vis-à-vis those of his two eminent predecessors.

Chapter 3 synthesizes, presents, and then analyzes Ibn Taymiyya’s main theoretical objections to the Universal Law, which occupy approximately 500 pages (12% of the total work) located primarily in Volumes I and V of the *Dar’*. Ibn Taymiyya offers around 40 arguments (lit., ‘aspects,’ “*wujūh*”) as to why the charge of contradiction between reason and revelation is, in logical terms, self-referentially incoherent and, therefore, theoretically baseless. In order to refute the Universal Law, Ibn Taymiyya deconstructs the assumptions on the basis of which its premises have been formulated then proceeds to reconstitute the categories of the debate along several major new lines, each of which will be dealt with in a separate subsection of the chapter.

Part II, consisting of Chapters 4 and 5, presents the main elements of Ibn Taymiyya’s philosophy and methodology as can be gleaned from the *Dar’ al-ta’arud*. **Chapter 4** explores exactly what, for Ibn Taymiyya, “authentic revelation” (*naql ṣaḥīḥ*) is and the hermeneutical principles according to which it should be interpreted. **Chapter 5** examines exactly what “pure reason” (*‘aql ṣarīḥ*) is for Ibn Taymiyya, as well as the ontology which his notion of reason both presupposes and advances. Part II is intended to be a formal, theoretical presentation, in summarized form, of all the major elements of Ibn Taymiyya’s philosophy – his linguistics, his ontology, and his epistemology – that are indispensable for understanding how his critique of reason and its alleged conflict with revelation works. The goal of Part II is to expound the theoretical elements of Ibn Taymiyya’s philosophy and to equip ourselves with the characteristic *principles* and *methods* he employs in tackling the substantive issues that form the core of his overall concerns. In the **Conclusion**, we shall bring together the disparate elements of Ibn Taymiyya’s system to demonstrate how he applies them to the specific question of the Divine Attributes, as well as offer more general reflections on the larger implications of his work.

The broader interest – and ingenuity – of Ibn Taymiyya’s project, to be explored in future research, lies primarily in his broad-based approach to knowledge, in which he expands the notions of “reason” and “rational proof” to include a substantially wider range of sources and arguments than admitted in

the recondite and, to his mind, arbitrarily circumscribed syllogistics of the philosophers. Furthermore, Ibn Taymiyya does not stop at arguing that reason and revelation do not conflict. Rather, he insists that revelation itself appeals to, endorses, and demonstrates the proper functioning and authentic use of pure reason (*‘aql ṣarīḥ*). Building on these precepts, Ibn Taymiyya contends in the final analysis that we may possess bona fide knowledge (and not mere “belief”) of the basic truths of religion – particularly the existence and fundamental attributes of God – on the basis of precisely the same order of axioms, intuitions, and other elements that underlie and are constitutive of *all* human knowledge. Indeed, the vast majority, perhaps even all, of what we regularly and justifiably take ourselves to know comes about variously, and often through a corroborative combination of, precisely the same kinds of factors and considerations upon which, Ibn Taymiyya contends, the most solid, stable, and evincive cumulative case for the existence of God and the basic truths of religion can be made.

III. Why the *Dar’ al-ta’arūḍ*?

Ibn Taymiyya’s *Dar’ ta’arūḍ al-‘aql wa-l-naql* is of particular scholarly interest on a number of levels. On the intellectual plane, the work is highly compelling on account of the astonishing richness and variety of the doctrines and trends with which our author deals. Y. Michot marvels that “one can only be dumbfounded before the breadth of Ibn Taymiyyah’s erudition” and goes on to remark that the quantity alone of his references in the *Dar’* justifies regarding Ibn Taymiyya as “the most important reader of the *falāsifah* after Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in the Sunni world.”⁷ Commenting on the quality of Ibn Taymiyya’s treatment of the works he analyzes, Michot remarks that “his virtuosity is often only matched by his pertinence,” and goes on to suggest that the “spiritual father of contemporary Islamism” should perhaps henceforth be included in the “prestigious line of the commentators of [Aristotle].”⁸

⁷ J. Yahya Michot, “Vanités intellectuelles...l’impasse des rationalismes selon le *Rejet de la contradiction* d’Ibn Taymiyyah,” *Oriente Moderno* 19, no. 80 (2001): 599.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 599-600.

Given the fecundity and promise of the *Dar'* as a text, it is all the more remarkable that more than 30 years have now passed since the first complete, 10-volume edition of the work was published, yet it has so far received no comprehensive treatment by any Western scholar and, with the exception of several more preliminary studies by Y. Michot,⁹ B. Abrahamov,¹⁰ and N. Heer,¹¹ appears to have gone completely neglected by the Western scholarly community.¹²

One may suggest several reasons why this may be the case. For one, Ibn Taymiyya was not only a very prolix, but also, one must concede, a rather disheveled writer. Though his language is clear and accessible, he rarely treats any given topic compendiously within a single volume or treatise, with the result that one often must simply pick one's way through vast stretches of Ibn Taymiyya's writings in order to assemble in one place for analysis everything he may have said on a given topic.¹³ Dauntingly voluminous and unprepossessingly disorganized, it would not be surprising if some of his works, not least of which the *Dar' al-ta'arūḍ*, have simply broken the nerve of many a well-intentioned scholar. While a detailed study of every particular issue dealt with in such a massive work is neither feasible nor desirable, the current thesis seeks to redress this

⁹ Ibid. See also J. Yahya Michot, "A Mamlūk Theologian's Commentary on Avicenna's *Risāla Adhawiyya*, being a translation of a part of the *Dar' al-Ta'arūḍ* of Ibn Taymiyya, with introduction, annotation, and appendices," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 14, no. 2 (2003), as well as the introduction to Jean R. Michot, *Ibn Taymiyya: Lettre à Abū l-Fidā'*, Traduction de l'arabe, présentation, notes et lexique (Louvain-la-Neuve: Institut Orientaliste de l'Université Catholique de Louvain, 1994).

¹⁰ Binyamin Abrahamov, "Ibn Taymiyya on the Agreement of Reason with Tradition," *Muslim World* 82, no. iii (1992).

¹¹ Nicholas Heer, "The Priority of Reason in the Interpretation of Scripture: Ibn Taymīyah and the *Mutakallimūn*," in *Literary Heritage of Classical Islam: Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of James A. Bellamy*, ed. Mustansir Mir (in collab. with J. E. Fossum) (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993).

¹² See also Jon Hoover's summary remarks in Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism*, ed. H. Daiber, vol. LXXIII, *Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science* (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2007), 29-32.

¹³ W. Hallaq observes that "Ibn Taymiyya's digressive mode of discourse," which "leaves the modern reader with a sense of frustration," entails that "the treatment of a particular issue may often not be found in any one chapter, or even in any one work. The search bearing on an issue takes one through the entire treatise, if not through several other tracts and tomes. Some two dozen treatises of his must be consulted in order to establish, for instance, his views on the problem of God's existence." [See Wael B. Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya against the Greek Logicians*, [translation, with extensive introduction and notes, of al-Suyūṭī's *Jahd al-qarīḥa fī tajrīd al-naṣīḥa*] (Oxford & New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1993), li].

scholarly neglect by providing a synoptic analysis of the work as a whole, serving as a sort of “roadmap of the *Dar’ al-ta’āruḍ*” that would allow wider access to a difficult and cumbersome text for those who may find its contents and arguments relevant to their own researches.

A second factor that may explain why the works of Ibn Taymiyya, and the *Dar’* in particular, have received comparatively little scholarly attention has to do with their author’s placement in history. Ibn Taymiyya comes just on the heels of what is often termed the great “classical period” of Islamic civilization – politically, intellectually, and culturally (at least in the Arab lands, for the Persians, Turks, and Indians were all to know their most splendid days subsequent to this period). As it is, much scholarly attention – especially when it comes to intellectual history – has tended to focus on that period, which Ibn Taymiyya managed to miss by scarcely more than a cat’s whisker. The immediately following period, having often been written off as a period of unmitigated decline, has consequently received until now comparatively little scholarly attention. D. Gutas, for instance, has described Arabic philosophy in the 6th/12th and 7th/13th centuries as “almost wholly unresearched,” yet goes on to suggest that this period “may yet one day be recognized as its golden age.”¹⁴ The present study of Ibn Taymiyya’s *Dar’ al-ta’āruḍ* seeks to add a significant brick to the emerging scholarly edifice dealing with this important, yet understudied, period.

A third reason for the neglect of the *Dar’* may very well have to do with our own inherited notions of who Ibn Taymiyya was as an intellectual figure. Ibn Taymiyya almost never makes it into books published on the topic of Islamic thought, Islamic philosophy, nor yet even Islamic theology! For if Ibn Taymiyya is even anti-Ash‘arite, one might be tempted to argue, could he really be doing anything at all interesting in the way of what we might even recognize as theology, let alone philosophy? Such impressions, it may be suggested, are perhaps the result of an unconscious tendency to project onto Ibn Taymiyya’s milieu our own categories regarding what distinguishes, for example, respectable philosoph-

¹⁴ Dmitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998).

ical activity from “mere theological quibbling.” Yet, the *Dar’ al-ta’arud*, I would submit, has every right to be investigated and appraised on its own terms – that is, philosophically – and analyzed accordingly. Though Ibn Taymiyya certainly cites passages of scripture in the work – occasionally with some abundance – in order to reinforce a particular point he is making, the overwhelming majority of the more than 4,000 pages of the *Dar’* are dedicated to argumentation that should, I submit, without controversy be admitted as philosophical. Were we to judge the book not by its cover but by its title and rashly write it off as simple “theological apologetics” or as a mere piece of elaborate sophistry without first subjecting Ibn Taymiyya’s arguments and methodology to careful philosophical scrutiny, we would, I believe, be forming our stance prejudicially. The current work proposes to carry out just such an investigation and to lay open the *Dar’* for a philosophical appraisal of the ideas and arguments contained therein.

In terms of the larger significance of the *Dar’*, perhaps the most compelling part of Ibn Taymiyya’s project goes beyond the man himself to the problem with which he grappled. In a sense, the whole question of the tension felt between revelation and reason, which Ibn Taymiyya internalized so poignantly, can in many ways be considered the key issue in Islamic modernity. Though the particular issues have changed – few today, for example, from the most text-hewn conservative to the most liberal-minded reformer is much concerned by the question of the Divine Attributes – yet the underlying problematic remains, in significant ways, very much the same. Whether it is the issue not precisely of “reason and revelation” but, say, of “science and revelation” or, for instance, the tension between sacralized and secularized visions of law and government which has been a particularly troubling issue for Muslims in the modern period – all these can be seen as going back, at their root, to the deeper-lying tensions with which Ibn Taymiyya grapples in confronting the delicate question of the relationship of reason to revelation in his own day.

But before we join Ibn Taymiyya on the battlefield, we must first acquire a better feel for the lay of the land and the overall intellectual situation which presented itself to our combatant with such existential urgency.

CHAPTER 1

REASON & REVELATION IN ISLAM BEFORE IBN TAYMIYYA

The massive effort exerted by Ibn Taymiyya to refute the Universal Law and his exhaustive attempt at the deconstruction and reconstruction of reason in his colossal work, *Dar' ta'ārūḍ al-'aql wa-l-naql*, was not the expression of a mere spur-of-the-moment intellectual exercise. Rather, it was occasioned by centuries of intense theological and intellectual debate that involved scholars of law, theology, and philosophy, as well as Sufis, and expressed a fundamental clash between distinct epistemological approaches. This debate was not, however, simply the result of the absorption into Muslim thought of Greek philosophy, as has often been assumed, but rather manifests itself in nascent form from the earliest days of the Islamic community. In the following sections, we shall provide a broad-brush overview of the multilayered development and interaction between reason and revelation in the Qur'an and the major Islamic disciplines, with a particular emphasis on theology, up to the time of Ibn Taymiyya in the 7th/13th and 8th/14th centuries.

I. Reason *and* Revelation, Reason *in* Revelation

The Qur'an is a book intensely concerned with knowledge.¹ In addition to making various declarative and imperative statements, the Qur'an repeatedly incites those it addresses to reflect, especially to reflect upon the created order, including man, as a sign of God. In addition, the Qur'an makes abundant use of arguments in persuading its audience of the truth of its teachings, thus establishing or inviting to, from the very moment of revelation itself, an integrated paradigm of

¹ The word “*ilm*” (‘knowledge’) and other verbal and nominal derivatives of the root (‘ - l - m, ‘to know’) appear in the Qur'an in a staggering 811 verses, or roughly 13 percent of all verses of the Qur'an.

reason and revelation. The Qur'an, moreover, is not the least bit self-conscious or defensive in the face of a questioning human reason, and indeed boldly challenges its readers to find within it any fundamental contradiction² and to inspect with careful scrutiny the created order for any gaps or incongruence therein.³

The Qur'an identifies the locus of rational reflection variously as the “*‘aql*,” “*qalb*,” “*lubb*,” and “*fu’ād*,” among other related terms.⁴ It also frequently employs terms connoting mental cognition and reflection, describes itself as bringing knowledge to a humanity that has “been given of knowledge but little,”⁵ draws stark distinctions between “those who know and those who do not know,”⁶ repeatedly exhorts man to ponder and to reflect,⁷ and, significantly, insists repeatedly that belief in God and the acceptance of revelation as true arise as the natural result of a healthy, properly functioning intellect. It is a remarkable fact that nowhere in the Qur'an is “knowledge” (*‘ilm*) contrasted with “faith” (*īmān*), as is typical in modern parlance, but only with “ignorance” (*jahl*). Knowledge and faith, rather, are presented as being fully concomitant and coimplicative. The distinctly post-Enlightenment notion that one has “faith” in something of which one does not have, and in principle cannot have, bona fide knowledge, or the related notion that to know something precludes having “faith” in it, are entirely alien to the Qur'anic epistemology and worldview.⁸ At

² “Do they not consider the Qur'an (with care)? Had it been from other than God, they would surely have found therein much discrepancy.” [Qur'an (al-Nisā') 4: 82]

³ “... No want of proportion wilt thou see in the creation of (God) Most Gracious. So turn thy vision again: seest thou any flaw? Again turn thy vision a second time: (thy) vision will come back to thee dull and discomfited, in a state worn out.” [Qur'an (al-Mulk) 67:3-4]

⁴ For a discussion, with Qur'anic references, of various terms used in the Qur'an to denote reason, reflection, and related meanings – particularly the words “*ya‘qilūn / ta‘qilūn*,” “*ulī al-albāb*,” “*yatafakkarū*,” “*yubṣirūn*,” “*yafqahūn*,” “*ulī al-abṣār*,” and “*ya‘lamūn*” – see Muḥammad al-Kattānī, *Jadal al-‘aql wa-l-naql fī manāḥij al-tafkīr al-Islāmī*, 2 vols., Dirāsāt Islāmiyya (Casablanca: Dār al-Thaqāfa, 1992), I: 281-285.

⁵ See, for example, Qur'an (al-Isrā') 17:85, “and of knowledge have ye been given but little.”

⁶ As in the verse, “Say: ‘Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know?’” [Qur'an (al-Zumar) 39:9]

⁷ For example, “Thus do We explain the signs in detail for those who reflect” [Qur'an (Yūnus) 10:24], and similar at Q. (al-Ra'd) 13:3, (al-Naḥl) 16:11 & 69, (al-Rūm) 30:21, (al-Zumar) 39:42, and (al-Jāthiya) 45:13. Also, “perchance they may reflect” at Qur'an (al-A'rāf) 7:176 and similar at Q. (al-Naḥl) 16:44 and (al-Ḥaṣhr) 59:21.

⁸ Josef van Ess observes the fact that ‘Christianity speaks of “mysteries” of faith; Islam has nothing like that. For Saint Paul, reason belongs to the realm of the “flesh”; for Muslims, reason, *‘aql*, has always been the chief faculty granted human beings by God.’ [Josef van Ess, *The Flowering*

the same time, however, the Qur'an squarely admits that human reason, being a faculty of a limited and finite being, is of necessity not boundless – for “of knowledge have ye been given but little,”⁹ and indeed, more soberingly, “God knoweth, and ye know not.”¹⁰ The Qur'anic revelation, therefore, actively incites man to thinking and reflection, the full and earnest use of which will inexorably bring him to God and the truth of religion, but simultaneously to the understanding that ultimately, only God is absolute and that all else, including man's powers of intellect, is relative and limited.

Complementing its insistence on the centrality of knowledge and its persistent incitation to pondering reflectiveness, the Qur'an also describes itself variously as an “evincive proof” (*burhān*),¹¹ a “criterion of judgment” (*furqān*),¹² and even as the “Conclusive Argument” (*al-ḥujja al-bāligha*).¹³ Indeed, it frequently challenges its interlocutor with a variety of actual arguments, inferences that are to be drawn stepwise by the individual who reflects with consideration.¹⁴ The

of Muslim Theology, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 153-154]. Similarly, Eric Ormsby begins a chapter on Arabic philosophy with the statement: “Reason is central to Islam,” then goes on to elaborate that “an intense preoccupation with reason is one of the most enduring and characteristic aspects of Islam and of Islamic culture.” Indeed, “reason and the use of the human intellect, though seen by some as challenges to the all-encompassing mind of God, have occupied a position of unusual importance in the tradition of thought with which this chapter is concerned.” [Eric Ormsby, “Arabic Philosophy,” in *From Africa to Zen: An Invitation to World Philosophy*, ed. Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1993), 125].

⁹ Qur'an (al-Isrā') 17:85.

¹⁰ Qur'an (al-Baqara) 2:216. Also Q. (al-Baqara) 2:232, (Āl 'Imrān) 3:66, (al-Naḥl) 16:74, and (al-Nūr) 24:19.

¹¹ Qur'an (al-Nisā') 4:174.

¹² Qur'an (al-Baqara) 2:185. See also Q. (Āl 'Imrān) 3:4 and (al-Furqān) 25:1.

¹³ Qur'an (al-An'ām) 6:149.

¹⁴ See Khalid Blankinship, “The early creed,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 34, where the author remarks that: “While it is true that the Qur'ān, as a text in the genre of Semitic prophecy, does not contain a single sustained argument of the kind familiar in the elite literature of the Greco-Roman world, it nevertheless develops its own themes argumentatively, sometimes at considerable length, to explain its teachings, and to rebut the established anti-monotheistic arguments of its initial target audience.” Rosalind Ward Gwynne has dedicated an entire monograph to identifying and categorizing all instances of rational argumentation used in the Qur'an, remarking in her introduction to the study that “I believe that the reader will be surprised at how thick with argument the Qur'ān actually is.” [Rosalind Ward Gwynne, *Logic, Rhetoric, and Legal Reasoning in the Qur'an: God's arguments* (London & New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), xiii]. See also Josef van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert der Hidschra: Eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam*, 6 vols. (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1991-1997), I: 48, where he likewise makes note of the Qur'an's frequent use

notable fact that the Qur'an grounds its teachings not only in raw assertion, but likewise through argumentation and persuasion, is very often overlooked, yet is of key importance because it establishes – or at the very least opens the door to – a complementary and harmonious paradigm of the relationship between reason and revelation in and through the very text of revelation itself.¹⁵

Further evidence of the argumentative nature of the initial revelatory moment can be found in classical sources of hadith¹⁶ and *sīra*¹⁷ which record echoes of discussions during the lifetime of the Prophet that can comfortably be termed proto-theological, if only by virtue of their subject matter rather than any

of dialectical argumentation, engaging the Prophet's opponents directly in an argumentative and reasoned manner.

¹⁵ The view that the Qur'an makes abundant use of various kinds of argumentation is echoed by the famous 9th–15th-century polymath, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī (d. 911/1505), in his *Kitāb al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, where he states: "Scholars have held that the Qur'an contains all kinds of demonstrations (*barāhīn*) and proofs (*adilla*), and that there exists no [type of] argumentation (*dalāla*), disjunction (*taqṣīm*), or admonition (*taḥdhīr*) built upon the general categories of knowledge afforded by reason and revelation (*tubnā min kullīyyāt al-ma'lūmāt al-'aqliyya wa-l-sam'iyya*) that the Book of God has failed to mention, except that it has mentioned them according to the customary [speech] habits of the Arabs and not in accordance with the detailed [discursive] methods of the theologians." (Cited in al-Kattānī, *Jadal al-'aql wa-l-naql*). Earlier protagonists in the debate on reason and revelation in Islam also rested claims to the legitimacy of certain forms of ratiocination on particular verses of the Qur'an. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), for example, believed to have located the five classical figures of the Aristotelian syllogism in implicit form in the Qur'an while Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198) the three levels of argumentation as defined by Aristotle, i.e., rhetorical, dialectical, and demonstrative. On al-Ghazālī, see Victor Chelhot, "« al-Qiṣās al-Mustaqīm » et la connaissance rationnelle chez Gazālī," *Bulletin d'études orientales* 15 (1957): esp. 6-8 and Michael E. Marmura, "Ghazali's Attitude to the Secular Sciences and Logic," in *Essays on Islamic Philosophy and Science*, ed. George F. Hourani (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), esp. 102-103. On Ibn Rushd, see George F. Hourani, *Averroes on the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy: A translation, with introduction and notes, of Ibn Rushd's Kitāb faṣl al-maqāl, with its appendix (Ḍamīma) and an extract from Kitāb al-kashf 'an manāhij al-adilla*, E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Series (London: Luzac & Co., 1961), esp. 32-37.

¹⁶ For a précis on the Western scholarly debate concerning the authenticity of hadith material, see Harald Motzki's Introduction in Harald Motzki, ed. *Hadith: Origins and Developments*, vol. 28, *The Formation of the Classical Islamic World* (Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 2004) and Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 197-239, both of whom discuss the developments of recent scholarship casting doubt on the radical skepticism of earlier generations of Islamicists (such as, most famously, Ignaz Goldziher and Joseph Schacht). Furthermore, the types of questions raised in the hadith cited here are not too formally developed or anachronistically theoretical to appear unlikely at this point. In fact, it would be extraordinary if the Companions had never asked the Prophet any questions related to theological issues. If anything, one would expect rather more such queries than are recorded in the extant literature.

¹⁷ See van Ess, *Flowering*, 45ff where he discusses the *sīra* literature as containing formal argumentation.

conscious effort to engage in deliberate, methodical speculation implied in the common use of the term “theological.” The Prophet was naturally questioned by his companions on numerous occasions regarding matters of the afterlife, God, angels, and a host of other topics directly connected to the creedal content of the new faith. Some hadith portray the Prophet as instructing his followers, similar to the manner of the Qur’an, through an invitation to reflect and draw certain conclusions on their own.¹⁸ Other hadith show the Prophet warning his community against the inherent futility of pursuing certain lines of rational enquiry that are necessarily without issue, such as the hadith which states: “Satan shall come to you and say, ‘Who created this?’ and ‘Who created that?’ until he says, ‘Who created your Lord?’, so if any one of you should reach this point, let him seek refuge in God and desist”¹⁹ – as if to alert his companions that the argument of infinite regress cannot with proper rational justification be extended to God, the Necessarily and Beginninglessly Existent. Finally, a few hadith reports depict the Companions as having occasionally been embroiled in some controversy over a theological topic, such as the instance in which a group of them were once arguing over the divine decree (*qadar*), whereupon the Prophet, overhearing their altercation, became vexed and obliged them to hold silence over such matters as are “but known unto God.”²⁰ The main lesson to be gained from these instances seems to be that rational inference is reliable and legitimate in some domains, that rational inference is invalid if based on absurd premises, and, finally, that certain matters lie inherently beyond the ken of rational encompassment altogether. What seems to be implied, therefore, is that one should (1) employ reason to its full extent in areas that are amenable to rational scrutiny; (2) be certain to reason on such matters in a correct and valid manner; and (3) accept that some matters, by their very nature and that of reason itself, are simply not subject to

¹⁸ See al-Kattānī’s discussion of the use of rational methods of inference by the Prophet and his Companions (al-Kattānī, *Jadal al-‘aql wa-l-naql*, I: 614-627, 642-643).

¹⁹ Reported by al-Bukhārī and Muslim. An alternate version of the hadith says: “... let him say, ‘I have believed in God and His messengers’,” and a third version contains the wording: “People will continue to pose questions until they ask, ‘Who created God?’”

²⁰ A more extensive discussion of such instances can be found in M. Abdel Haleem, “Early *kalām*,” in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), 71-88.

rational apprehension, such that trying to “rationalize” them can only, of necessity, lead to their distortion. The Qur’an and the prophetic Sunna, therefore, appear to be urging us to deploy our rational faculties within their proper scope and domain, yet we are ever reminded that, as great as these powers may be, in the larger scheme of reality and from the perspective of Omniscience, we have indeed “been given of knowledge but little.”²¹

II. Early Political *cum* Theological Controversies

In addition to its numerous exhortations to think, reflect, and ponder and its own not infrequent deployment of rational argumentation in support of its fundamental doctrines, the Qur’an also contains the germ of theological speculation by virtue of its engagement with questions of ultimate truth and the interpretation of reality. Though the utterances of the Qur’an were accepted definitively by all Muslims as authentically transmitted and preserved articulations of divine revelation, such utterances could nevertheless lend themselves to more than one understanding. Moreover, certain Qur’anic verses could, when taken in isolation of each other or stripped from their larger context, seem to endorse different, even opposing, viewpoints – a fact which was bound to create rifts not only in questions of theology, but in the daily tumble of social and political affairs as well. In fact, the very first schisms that arose in the early community were, though to some degree expressed in theological terms, unmistakably political in origin²² – a

²¹ It is of significance that the Qur’an’s emphasis on the validity of reason, on what reasoned reflection ultimately leads to (i.e., knowledge of and faith in God), and on reason’s inherited limitedness (i.e., that certain existent realities escape the grasp of reason altogether) parallels the Qur’anic picture of the reality of the empirical realm which it so urgently insists that we ponder. Our senses mediate to us a picture of reality that reveals an underlying unity and perfection of structure that rational reflection (‘*aqī*’) finds can only be the result of an intelligent, omniscient will backed by boundless powers of instantiation, but that not all that exists lies (not even potentially, that is, it inherently, and not merely accidentally, does not lie) within the realm of our empirical perception. In this vein, the third verse of Sūrat al-Baqara, the second chapter of the Qur’an, makes mention of “those who believe in the unseen,” enunciating thereby the existence of two fundamental orders of reality, the empirical, or seen (*shahāda*), and the “hidden,” or unseen (*ghā’ib*). A thing is no less real for its being unperceivable to our senses.

²² L. Gardet and M.-M. Anawati speak of the “« ferment » déposé par les dissensions politiques au sein de la pensée religieuse.” [Louis Gardet and M. M. Anawati, *Introduction à la théologie musulmane : essai de théologie comparée* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1948), 35].

fact hardly surprising given that the Qur'an both specifically addressed, and intimately interacted with, the socio-political milieu of its original recipients even as it presented its message in universal ethical and spiritual terms.

The first such schism occurred immediately upon the Prophet's death (11/632) and, as is well known, involved a disagreement over who was to succeed the Prophet in the moral and political leadership of the fledgling Muslim community.²³ Contending political alignments presupposed certain fundamental, if largely implicit, stands of principle with regard not only to the secular organization of the Muslim polity, but also to normative ethico-religious concerns,²⁴ most compellingly and explicitly articulated by the insistence of a group of 'Alī's original supporters that 'Alī be censured for what amounted, in their view, to an unconscionable compromise of principle on his part.²⁵ And if the supporters of 'Alī had from early on staked their opposition to Abū Bakr and his immediate successors ('Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and 'Uthmān b. 'Affān) on the contention that 'Alī had been unjustly deprived a natural right of immediate succession to the Prophet, the supporters of the first three caliphs, who eventually came to form the core of the Sunni mainstream, were not long in articulating as an ethical and religious justification of their stance the overwhelming moral duty to maintain the unity of the Prophet's community and to prevent the specter of bloody fratricide from rending asunder the bonds of the nascent *umma* irreparably.²⁶

²³ In brief, while a majority of the community accepted the caliphate of Abū Bakr (d. 13/634), one of the Prophet's oldest and most intimate companions, some supported the caliphate of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), the Prophet's paternal cousin (and thus blood relative) and son-in-law. Underlying tensions between these conflicting sympathies came to a head with the assassination of the third caliph, 'Uthmān b. 'Affān (d. 35/656), and the succession to the caliphate of 'Alī – whose reign was fraught with discord – led to the First Civil War (35-40/656-661). These political perturbations sharply reinforced the lines of schism that had been sketched 25 years earlier at the accession of Abū Bakr.

²⁴ Gardet and Anawati cite the legitimacy of political power and the ethical question of the relationship between faith and works as the two main issues at this time. (Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 32-33).

²⁵ Namely, when 'Alī consented, at the Battle of Ṣiffin (36/657), to arbitration with the Umayyad troops sent by Mu'āwiya (d. 60/680), governor of Syria situated at Damascus, to put an end to 'Alī's caliphate headquartered at Kufa. In protest of 'Alī's concession to arbitration, these individuals seceded from him and, for this reason, came to be known as the Khawārij (sing., *khārījī*), or Secessionists, at whose hands 'Alī was eventually assassinated in 40/661.

²⁶ Yet it would seem that such support was not always only purely pragmatic, since it appears that many of the Muslims at least in Syria concurred that the Umayyads were, even in principle,

With the passage of time and continuing opposition to Umayyad rule through the Second Civil War (61-73/680-692),²⁷ the inchoate ideological and theological tendencies born of the earlier round of strife now came to be more sharply delimited. True to their uncompromising moral puritanism and the maximum premium they placed on works in the definition of who was a Muslim, the Khawārij held that the committing of major sins took one outside of the Islamic faith. The ruling Umayyad caliphs had sinned gravely in their eyes through rank injustice, thereby negating their faith such that they were no longer to be considered rightful members of the Muslim community (let alone its legitimate leaders). From this stance, the Khawārij further concluded that it was an obligation upon every conscientious Muslim to rise up against and depose the (unjust) Umayyad rulers. A somewhat amorphous group, collectively known as the Murji'a, eventually arose after the Second Civil War seeking to temper the rigors of the Khārijites' moral exclusivism. Taking their name from Qur'an (al-Tawba) 9:106,²⁸ these men advocated a "deferring of judgment" about the moral standing and political legitimacy of the earlier rulers, particularly 'Uthmān and 'Alī. The Murji'a seem to have been motivated by a desire to preserve the unity of the Muslim community and recoiled from the manner in which Khawārij, Shī'ites, and Umayyad authorities cursed – and, in the case of the Khārijites, excommunicated – their respective opponents. The Murji'ites branded wayward Muslims merely as sinful or misguided believers, not as disbelievers (*kuffār*). Membership in the Muslim community was thus defined for them by one's declared faith in the basic tenets of Islam, not by one's actions. This should not be taken to imply that actions had no religious or ethical importance for the Murji'a, only that one could not be declared an *unbeliever* on account of grave sin.

legitimate successors, Muslims in good standing who could rightfully lay claim to the approbation and obedience of the Muslim faithful. (See Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 35).

²⁷ The start date of the Second Civil War (*fitna*) is alternately given at either 61/680 (the end of the reign of Mu'āwīya) or 64/683 (the death of Mu'āwīya's son, Yazīd I), while the end date is given at various points between 65/685 (the ascension of 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān to the caliphate) and 73/692 (the death of 'Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr and the termination of his revolt against the established Umayyad caliphate).

²⁸ This verse reads: "And others are deferred (*murjawn*) to God's commandment, whether He chastises them, or turns towards them; God is All-knowing, All-wise." (Arberry)

Out of the midst of these various early factions emerged a “proto-Sunni” tendency, which M. Watt has termed the “general religious movement.”²⁹ This group, headed by ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar (d. 74/693-4), the son of the second caliph, frequented the mosques of Damascus, Medina, Basra, and Kufa to discuss matters related to law, Qur’anic interpretation and, on occasion, theological doctrine.³⁰ A further grouping of “proto-Sunnis,” headed by ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr (d. 64/692)³¹ and centered in Medina, occupied themselves intensively with preserving and transmitting information about the early community and its practices.³² These very live political and social issues eventually came to be intellectualized in terms of variant approaches to the question of reason and revelation.

III. The Nascent Development of the Islamic Disciplines: Qur’an exegesis, grammar, law, and hadith

Concurrent with the political developments mentioned above and the inchoate proto-theological discussions they engendered, other disciplines were starting to be developed more systematically and deliberately. These were Qur’anic exegesis (*tafsīr*), grammar, law (*fiqh*), and hadith, of which the first two were aimed at understanding the language and meanings of the Qur’an and the third was concerned with deriving legal and ethical norms therefrom. Hadith, the fourth discipline, is of relevance to both *tafsīr* and *fiqh*, but especially to this latter. These disciplines represent fully indigenous Islamic sciences pursued (originally) with the tools and methods of reasoning and analysis that came most intuitively to the earliest generations of Muslims. These methods and tools, the nature of which we shall explore in greater detail below, are of significance because they had a

²⁹ W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology: an Extended Survey* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985; reprint, 1992, 1995, 1997), 19. For more on this broad neutralist movement that prefigures what eventually came to be recognized as mainstream Sunnism by the 3rd/9th century, see W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1998), 72-75.

³⁰ Watt, *Islamic Phil.*, 20.

³¹ A grandson of Abū Bakr through his daughter, Asmā’ bint Abī Bakr, sister of the Prophet’s wife ‘Ā’isha. Campaigned alongside his father, al-Zubayr b. al-‘Awwām, and maternal aunt, ‘Ā’isha, against ‘Alī at the Battle of the Camel (36/656) in Basra during the First Civil War.

³² See Blankinship, “The early creed,” 42.

direct impact on the first systematic theological reflections that arose subsequent to the period described above.³³

*Qur'anic Exegesis (tafsīr) and Early "Textualism" vs. "Rationalism"*³⁴

It is unsurprising that the proper exegesis of the Qur'an should have been one of the first concerns of the nascent Muslim community. The primary motivations for this activity lay in the desire to understand the divine message as accurately and completely as possible, and to apply its teachings and rulings to daily life in a systematic and integral manner. To accomplish the first end, the earliest exegetes were concerned to elucidate the meaning of uncommon words or obscure allusions in the text, often by reference to the large and omnipresent body of Arabic poetry that provided an important backdrop for the linguistic contextualization of the revealed text. A second major concern was to assure the proper interpretation – and applicability – of verses by identifying the material and historical circumstances in which they had been revealed.³⁵ The search for the so-called "occasions of revelation" (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) became a central and permanent feature of Qur'anic exegesis, a cardinal rule that early passed on to the burgeoning science of *kalām*.³⁶

The exegetical activity of the early *mufasssīrūn* bears relevance to our topic on two counts. First, as we have seen in the case of the earliest theo-political discussions, the major fault lines between various opposed theological tendencies in early Islam can often be traced back or reduced to questions of an essentially

³³ For a concise discussion of the three main aspects of religious learning under the Umayyads, i.e., law, Qur'an, and hadith, see Watt, *Formative Period*, 64-68. For a discussion of the rise and significance of the science of Arabic grammar, see Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 41-43. Also, C. H. M. Versteegh, *The Arabic Language* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, c1997), Chapter 5, "The Development of Classical Arabic."

³⁴ For more details about the very earliest attitudes toward *tafsīr*, the presence of "*muḥkam*" vs. "*mutashābih*" verses in the Qur'an, and related issues, see Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 26-31.

³⁵ Ibid., 29. For examples of how verses can be substantially misinterpreted when read in a de-contextualized fashion, see Ingrid Mattson, *The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life* (Malden, MA & Oxford: Blackwell Pub., c2008), 196-198.

³⁶ See Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 418 (main text and note 3) about rules passing at an early date from *tafsīr* into *kalām*, primary among them the placing of texts in their original context in an attempt to understand them in the way they were meant by their Author.

exegetical order. Second, we can already discern among the early *mufasssirūn* the adumbration of two contrastive methodological approaches – one more “rationalist,” the other more “textualist”³⁷ – prefiguring a pattern which will recur throughout the subsequent development and crystallization of the various Islamic disciplines and which lies at the heart of the putative tension between reason and revelation that Ibn Taymiyya will attempt so urgently to defuse seven centuries later.³⁸

We may characterize a “textualist” approach to exegesis (referred to as *al-tafsīr bi-l-manqūl*)³⁹ as one which seeks to ground our understanding of the text to the extent possible in what has been transmitted (“*manqūl*”) to us from authoritative early sources. Such an approach would privilege clarifying verses of the Qur’an, to whatever extent possible, by means of other verses, of Prophetic hadith reports, or of the known opinions of the Prophet’s companions, as well as the so-called occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) as they have been transmitted in the various works of Prophetic biography (*sīra*), chronicles of the early Muslim conquests (*maghāzī*), and hadith, and in accord with the linguistic conventions of 7th-century Arabia as known to us through poetry, dictionaries, and the like.

By contrast, a more “rationalist” approach to exegesis, while also presupposing knowledge of Arabic linguistic custom, Prophetic dicta, and *asbāb al-nuzūl*, would nevertheless allow a skillful exegete to complement these sources with his own considered opinion (*ra’y*, *ijtihād*, *ijtihād al-ra’y*). Such a “rationalist” tendency may be discerned in the exegetical practices of such figures as

³⁷ Most contemporary scholars reflexively speak rather of a “rationalist” versus a “literalist” tendency (see, *inter alia*, *ibid.*, 30). I consider the term “literalist,” however, to be problematic, as it not only carries a distinctly negative connotation, but also carries with it implicit assumptions regarding reason, the use of language, and the relationship of language to rationality which would prejudice a number of issues central to Ibn Taymiyya’s critique. I have therefore opted for “textualist” as a more neutral, purely descriptive term. My usage follows that of B. Weiss in Bernard G. Weiss, *The Spirit of Islamic Law* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, c1998), particularly Chapter 3, “The Textualist/Intentionalist Bent,” where he defines and uses the term “textualist” in the same manner as described here, and primarily for the same reasons.

³⁸ For a discussion of the development of these two trends, see al-Kattānī, *Jadal al-‘aql wa-l-naql*, I: 504-529ff.

³⁹ Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 30.

‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abbās (d. 68/687) and ‘Abd Allāh b. Mas‘ūd (d. 32/652-3) among the Companions, and Sa‘īd b. Jubayr (d. 95/714), Mujāhid (d. 104/722), and ‘Ikrima (d. 105/723-4) – all students of Ibn ‘Abbās – among the Successors (*tābi‘ūn*), in addition to others.⁴⁰ And while the opinions, or *ijtihād*, of such early authorities do, for the textualist, constitute valid interpretations on account of who propounded them (namely, the Salaf), the textualist would not extend to later exegetes the same prerogative of judging by their own lights in a like manner. A rationalist, by contrast, would see in the *ijtihād* of the early community an invitation for later exegetes to avail themselves of a similar interpretive prerogative.

Grammar

The early systematic studies of Arabic grammar also had a profound effect on the development of theology, “not only from a linguistic perspective, but also in the form of thought itself.”⁴¹ There emerged early on two rival schools of grammar, the first in the southern Iraqi port city of Basra in the early to mid-2nd/8th century, and the second 230 miles to the northwest in the city of Kufa a short time thereafter. The Basran school of grammar was characterized by a noted preference for maximum rational consistency, searching for the most generally applicable grammatical rules and readily disqualifying exceptions to the rules so formulated as incorrect, or at least non-paradigmatic, instances of usage. The Kufan school, by contrast, allowed for considerable latitude in the acceptance of diverse rules, sometimes taking rare examples of usage as the basis for establishing new rules.⁴² We can thus discern, even in the field of grammar, a distinct early contrast in methodology between the deductive, abstractive tendency of the Basran school, which sought maximum consistency and transparency in the sys-

⁴⁰ al-Kattānī, *Jadal al-‘aql wa-l-naql*, I: 507-509.

⁴¹ Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 43. For a detailed study of the influence of grammar on the development of *tafsīr*, see C. H. M. Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar and Qur’ānic Exegesis in Early Islam* (Leiden & New York: E. J. Brill, 1993).

⁴² Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 42. The authors (at *ibid.*, 43, n. 1) cite L. Massignon [Louis Massignon, *La passion d’al-Hallaj*, 4 vols. (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1914-1921), 571-577] for his “precise analysis of this mechanism and its philosophical presuppositions.”

tematization of grammatical rules, versus the more inductive and less prescriptive approach of the Kufan school, more concerned to catalogue language as actually used than to identify a set of airtight grammatical rules exhibiting a maximum of rational coherence and predictability.⁴³ Grammar played an important role not only in the exegesis of the Qur’anic text, but also by supplying the practitioners of the emerging discipline of *kalām* with categories and terminology that “would lend that *kalām* a characteristic accent.”⁴⁴

Sunna, Hadith, and Ra’y

The Qur’an speaks of the Prophet Muḥammad as a “beautiful exemplar” to be followed (*uswa ḥasana*),⁴⁵ assures Muslims that he possesses a most high and noble moral character (*khuluq ‘azīm*),⁴⁶ commands the believers in numerous verses to follow his exalted model,⁴⁷ and makes obedience to the directives and commands of the Prophet an integral part of one’s submission and obedience to God.⁴⁸

Parallel to the text of the Qur’an, God’s directly revealed Word, the deeply entrenched pre-Islamic ideal of “following the sunna” – in the sense of emulating the normative conduct of a highly charismatic and virtuous individual – carried over, with even greater imperative force, to the normative example set by the Prophet Muḥammad, the most charismatic and virtuous individual the Arabs had yet known.⁴⁹ Though there is substantial scholarly disagreement among

⁴³ For a discussion of the contrasting methodologies, and particularly the variant terminology, of the Kufan and Basran schools of grammar, see Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar*, 9-16.

⁴⁴ “qui donneront à ce *kalām* une note particulière.” (Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 43)

⁴⁵ Qur’an (al-Aḥzāb) 33:21.

⁴⁶ Qur’an (al-Qalam) 68:4.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Qur’an (al-A’rāf) 7:158, and numerous others.

⁴⁸ As in Qur’an (al-Nisā’) 4:80, which reads: “He who obeys the Messenger has obeyed God.” Many other verses simply command obedience to “God and the Messenger” together, such as Q. (Āl ‘Imrān) 3:132, “And obey God and the Messenger, perchance you may be shown mercy.”

⁴⁹ On the vitally important notion of “sunna” for traditional Arab society, and hence for the contemporaries of Muḥammad who received him as no less than the Messenger of God, see M. M. Bravmann, *The Spiritual Background of Early Islam: Studies in Ancient Arab Concepts* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2009), 123-198, esp. 123-177. See also Zafar Ishaq Ansari, “Islamic Juristic Terminology before Šāfi’ī: a Semantic Analysis with Special Reference to Kūfa,” *Arabica* 19, no. 3 (1972): 259-282.

Western Islamicists as to how reliably prophetic reports considered by Muslim tradition as authentic can in fact be dated to the Prophet's actual lifetime or shortly thereafter,⁵⁰ there is no reasonable doubt that the *concept* of the prophetic Sunna emerged immediately after the Prophet's death⁵¹ and loomed large in the collective psyche of the early community, with the result that the imperative to follow that Sunna was taken to heart and constituted a significant preoccupation of the first generations of Muslims. Furthermore, evidence suggests that at least some material in the form of verbal reports relating the Prophet's words or deeds was, in fact, transmitted consciously from the generation of the Prophet's own companions, and with certainty by judges (*qāḍīs*) as of the decade of the 60s/680s.⁵² The impetus to collect and record prophetic hadith reports mounted enormously as of the last quarter of the first century at the latest, rapidly evolving into a movement that represents perhaps the single most colossal scholarly enterprise of the first three to four centuries of Islam. In fact, the very word for knowledge, “*‘ilm*,” was often used as a synonym simply for “*ḥadīth*,”⁵³ and the word for student, “*ṭālib*” or “*ṭālib ‘ilm*,” was precisely one who traveled far and wide in search of (*ṭālib^{an}*) knowledge (*‘ilm^{an}*), that is to say, hadith.

The term “*‘ilm*” signifying knowledge of the textual sources of Islam, primarily the Sunna of the Prophet as embedded in hadith reports, had as its binary opposite the notion of *ra’y*.⁵⁴ In the realm of law as well as more generally, the term *ra’y* originally carried the positive connotation of “considered opinion” or “measured judgment,” but, with the abrupt take-off of the hadith movement in the last quarter of the 1st/7th century, increasingly came to be negatively contrasted with *‘ilm*, especially as of the brief reign of ‘Umar b. ‘Abd

⁵⁰ See H. Motzki and J. Brown (cited in n. 16 above) on this complex and highly contentious debate among Western Islamicists.

⁵¹ Wael B. Hallaq, *Shari‘a: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 40.

⁵² Ibid., 41, 43. See ibid., 45ff for the increasing importance of specifically prophetic Sunna as an authoritative source of law as of the 60s/680s onward.

⁵³ But see also ibid., 44 for the term “*‘ilm*,” along with “*fiqh*,” signifying law in the 1st/7th century.

⁵⁴ Wael B. Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunnī uṣūl al-fiqh* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 15.

al-‘Azīz (99-101/717-19) who, significantly, is also the first major authority to have commissioned the systematic collection of Prophetic hadith reports.⁵⁵ The notion of *ra’y* over the course of the 2nd/8th century continued to fall in status in the face of “*ilm*,” with the result that by the beginning of the 3rd/9th century, “*ra’y*, as both a technical term and a method of free reasoning, seems to have lost, for the most part, its grounds in legal discourse.”⁵⁶ This fact is of importance because it shows up a trend: namely, the more abundant the available material data of revelation, the more restricted the scope of *ra’y* tends to become.⁵⁷ This tendency is manifest not only in law, but in theology as well – a fact hardly surprising given the status of law as a central and foundational discipline, one whose textual sources, characteristic methods, and overall values and attitudes conditioned, to a large extent, the whole intellectual atmosphere in which the scholars of other disciplines, such as theology, conducted their work. Furthermore, the ever increasing élan of the drive to collect and disseminate hadith led to a brisk sharpening of the tension between the “people of hadith” (*ahl al-ḥadīth*), on one hand, and the “people of *ra’y*” (*ahl al-ra’y*), or considered opinion, on the other. Perhaps nowhere was this tension manifested as clearly and with as much consequence as in the domain of law and legal reasoning.

Law and Legal Reasoning

Whereas the enterprise of speculative theology, as we shall see, lays claim by its very nature to being a rational (*‘aqlī*) science – rational in the sense that the

⁵⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁷ Indeed, of the reasons given for the greater reliance on *ra’y* in early Iraqi jurisprudence is the presumption that scholars in that region during the early period had access to fewer hadith, and therefore a somewhat less complete knowledge of the details of the prophetic Sunna, than their counterparts in the Hijaz. This point is made, for example, in al-Kattānī, *Jadal al-‘aql wa-l-naql*, I: 307-309, 631, but also by no less an interpreter of early Muslim history than Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406), who, in discussing the rise of a hadith- versus a *ra’y*-based jurisprudence in the early period, identifies this latter with the jurists of Iraq, explaining that: “The people of Iraq had little in the way of hadith (*kāna al-ḥadīth qafilan fī ahl al-‘irāq*) for the reasons we have previously stated. For this reason, they made much use of *qiyās* (*fā-’staktharū min al-qiyās*) and became skilled in it (*wa-maharū fihī*).” [‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, 4 ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1398/1978), 446, I. 9-12].

main truths of religion are seen as being derivable through, or at the very least defensible by, rational means – the subject matter of the legal sciences was always seen as squarely textual and revelational (*naqlī*). In as far as jurists of all theological persuasions, from rationalistic Mu‘tazilites to textualist Zāhirites, take the texts of revelation – Qur’an and Sunna (with some discussion as to the *extent*, though not the normative authority, of valid Sunna materials) – as the repositories of legal rules and norms for the Muslim community, we may say that the science of jurisprudence is at heart already heavily weighted to the side of “revelation,” in contrast to the more abstract, speculative “reason” prized in the disciplines of theology and philosophy.

Be that as it may, revealed texts must be understood and interpreted in order for their relevance and applicability to a given situation to be determined. It is significant that the very term usually translated as “law” is known as “*fiqh*,” the primary meaning of which is simply “to understand.”⁵⁸ The methodological and hermeneutical principles involved in deriving law (*fiqh*) are, therefore, without question based on disciplined and methodical reasoning, reasoning that became ever more sophisticated and refined as the science of jurisprudence developed. In the earliest period, however, almost any type of legal reasoning came under the term “*ijtihād al-ra’y*,” with little attention paid to the exact methods used.⁵⁹ *Ijtihād al-ra’y* in this early stage essentially consisted of independent reasoning based on common sense and general rational considerations, coupled with pragmatic and ethical considerations also of a straightforward and commonsense nature. Similar to the case of Qur’anic exegesis, however, the use of reasoning in legal matters was regarded with suspicion by some, who preferred to resolve legal questions, to the extent possible, solely on that basis of the Qur’an and what had been transmitted of the prophetic Sunna.⁶⁰ As with the emergent sciences of

⁵⁸ Derivatives of the root *f-q-h* occur twenty times in the Qur’an, invariably with the meaning of “to understand,” “fathom,” “comprehend.” In a well-known prophetic hadith, the causative verbal form “*faqqaḥa*” (“to cause to understand, comprehend”) is used in an analogous sense: “*man yurid Allāhu bihi khayran yufaqqihhu fī al-dīn*,” “For whomever God desires good, He grants him understanding in religion.”

⁵⁹ Watt, *Formative Period*, 180.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 181.

tafsīr and grammar, this methodological bifurcation resulted in two very distinct approaches to questions of law – one self-consciously based on a strict adherence to hadith with as little interpretation of these latter as possible, and the other according freer rein to considered opinion, or “*ra’y*,” in the application of revelation to the social and legal realities at hand. The opposing methodological tendencies of “*ahl al-ra’y*” and “*ahl al-ḥadīth*” resulted in a tension that was not to be resolved until the 3rd/9th century.

It fell to Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204/820) to sketch what would eventually become the outlines of a reconciliation between these opposing tendencies. In his famous treatise, *al-Risāla*, al-Shāfi‘ī argued for a restriction of the notion of “*sunna*” to that exclusively of the Prophet, further mandating that the Prophetic Sunna must be supported by properly attested hadith reports.⁶¹ While such formal use of traditions was already in place before al-Shāfi‘ī, it became universal after him such that eventually, “virtually all Muslims came to agree that the Sunna of the Prophet was known through the Traditions.”⁶² By this move, al-Shāfi‘ī both *limited* acceptable attestations of the Sunna to prophetic hadith alone (as against a looser tendency to view the Sunna in wider, yet ultimately less definitively verifiable, terms), but in doing so also *expanded* (as against *ahl al-ra’y*, as well as early Mu‘tazila skeptical of hadith) the scope of authoritative revelatory texts to include not only the Qur’an, but also the now extensive – and ever growing – body of prophetic hadith as well. Parallel to this, al-Shāfi‘ī articulated a theory of legal methodology which, while reducing the

⁶¹ For a detailed presentation and discussion of the contents of al-Shāfi‘ī’s *Risāla*, see Hallaq, *History*, 21-29.

⁶² Watt, *Formative Period*, 181. Al-Shāfi‘ī disqualifies even reports of the Companions, insisting in his famous treatise, *al-Risāla*, that the Qur’an and the Prophetic hadith alone be taken as the material sources of the law and, eventually, of the religion as a whole. In other words, delimiting the “revealed sources” in Islam explicitly and definitively to the Qur’an and the Prophetic Sunna (alone) brings to a close the process by which the question of the boundaries of revelation was settled as a matter of principle, though the content of one of the two components of authoritative texts – namely the hadith, which ended up in terms of sheer bulk being the much vaster of the two – continued to have porous borders, so to speak, and, unlike the Qur’an, never actually reached a stage where one could say that it was definitely fixed once and for all, since the process of judging the authenticity of individual reports always remained – and theoretically remains even today – the province of the individual hadith scholar, who retains the prerogative to pronounce on the authenticity or inauthenticity of any given report.

kinds of rational arguments that could be used, simultaneously confirmed and consecrated those kinds of rational arguments accepted in the theory (mainly analogical reasoning), making these a permanent part of Islamic juristic thought – thereby defending and consecrating the use of *qiyās* against those who were opposed to it, while simultaneously reducing other, less controlled methods of legal reasoning. It is remarkable that al-Shāfi‘ī’s treatise was practically ignored by legal scholars for almost an entire century after its publication and only began to elicit commentaries and rebuttals as of the 4th/10th century.⁶³ W. Hallaq attributes this rather curious fact, significantly, to the pronounced divergence of epistemological approach that continued to divide rather sharply those who held that all human affairs should be directly determined by divine revelation to the extent possible and those who resisted this tendency and sought to claim for untutored reason as large a free range as possible (in any matter, that is, which is not directly and unambiguously adjudicated by the Qur’an). A true synthesis, operative on the ground, between the two positions was not to occur until the early 4th/10th century, at which point interest in al-Shāfi‘ī’s treatise was resuscitated and the major lines of his thesis, particularly through the work of the prominent Shāfi‘ite Abū al-‘Abbās Ibn Surayj (d. 306/918), precipitously adopted as the universal norm of *uṣūl al-fiqh* across all legal schools and sectarian divides forever thereafter.⁶⁴

Al-Shāfi‘ī’s thesis is by no means to be seen as a one-sided triumph of “textualists” over “rationalists.” While much of the *Risāla* is squarely aimed at justifying the preeminence of scriptural sources of the law, especially the prophetic Sunna as expressed in hadith, over “free” rational methods, al-Shāfi‘ī’s incorporation into legal theory of the *rational* processes of analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) was apparently enough for hard-core textualists to associate him with the (legal) rationalists and even the Mu‘tazilites!⁶⁵ In tracing a middle path between textualism and rationalism, however, the *Risāla* aptly represents “the first at-

⁶³ Hallaq, *History*, 30-35 and Wael B. Hallaq, “Was al-Shafi‘i the Master Architect of Islamic Jurisprudence?,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25, no. 4 (1993): 587-605.

⁶⁴ Hallaq, *History*, 30-35 passim.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

tempt at synthesizing the disciplined exercise of human reasoning and the complete assimilation of revelation as the basis of the law”⁶⁶ – a synthesis which came to form the basis of Islamic legal theory as a whole after the late 3rd/9th century. The tension that al-Shāfi‘ī sought to alleviate between rational modes of reasoning and the revealed texts – that is, between reason and revelation – constitutes a reflection on the legal plane of a much broader, more general tension that was occurring in Islamic thought as a whole, as we shall see further below in the case of theology, and which would equally cry out for an attempt at synthesis analogous to that of al-Shāfi‘ī’s in law.

We have now seen the emergence of four separate, distinctly identifiable disciplines – Qur’an exegesis, grammar, hadith, and law – all of which are Islamic in genesis, substance, and method, albeit with “method,” significantly, already manifesting an identifiable fault line, more or less distinct according to the discipline in question, between proto-rationalist and more cautious, scripturally conservative trends. It is only natural that the same bifurcation would be reflected on the theological plane, as we shall explore presently.

IV. Early Theological Reflection and Contention

The methodology of early theological reflection initially reflected patterns of thought and methods of reasoning worked out in the indigenous disciplines of Qur’an exegesis, grammar, law, and hadith, particularly since, as we have seen, the men who engaged in these early theological ruminations were, generally, first and foremost jurists, who, incidentally, were required to know grammar and

⁶⁶ Ibid., 34. As we shall see shortly, the theological school of Ash‘arism will attempt one century later to effect a similar reconciliation between revelation and reason, synthesizing in this case the disciplined exercise of human reason and the complete assimilation of revelation as the basis of *theology*. And this is precisely Ibn Taymiyya’s project as well, albeit on the basis, as we shall discover over the course of this study, of a radically different notion of reason – reason returned, as Ibn Taymiyya contends, to its original, intuitive (*fiṭrī*), pre-*kalām* / pre-*falsafā* synthetic state. For a discussion of the synthesis of reason and revelation and lack of dichotomy between the two in the early Muslim community, see Tim Winter, “Reason as Balance: The evolution of ‘*aql*,” in *CMC Papers no. 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge Muslim College).

tafsīr in order to do their *fiqh*.⁶⁷ But the early Muslims who were elaborating the new Islamic sciences were, of course, by no means living in comfortable isolation in the Arabian Peninsula. As early as the end of the Rāshidūn Caliphate in 40/661, the Muslims found themselves at the helm of a vast cosmopolitan empire that already stretched from western Libya to the eastern outreaches of Persia, and in less than 100 years later from northern Spain in the west past the Indus River in the east. Following the assassination of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib in the year 40/661, namely, as early as 30 years after the death of the Prophet, the capital of the new empire was moved from Medina (and briefly Kufa) to Damascus, an ancient seat of culture most recently heir to a fecund overlay of Hellenistic high culture deposited upon the Syrio-Aramaic backdrop of an age-old Near Eastern civilization. The very earliest influences of Greek thought came about through contact with a living Hellenistic tradition still alive in the Christian schools established in Iraq and Persia under the Sassanians and continued by the Muslims upon taking possession of these territories.⁶⁸ Most notable among these is the school of Jundishapur, in addition to non-Christian schools, particularly that of the Sabians of Harran.⁶⁹ The intellectual language used throughout the region was predominantly Syriac, in addition to Greek.⁷⁰ The dominant intellectual strand throughout most of the region covered by the early Muslim state was thus Hellenism in its Syriac expression, but also with some Indic elements admixed with it that had been transmitted through Old Persian, or Pahlavi.

The Muslims thus inherited a vast metropolis of diverse peoples and cultures teeming with philosophies and beliefs of Persian, Indian, Greek, and other extraction often radically irreconcilable with Islam. Such doctrines included

⁶⁷ Indeed it has even been observed that the “discussion of the roots of jurisprudence affected the whole future course of Islamic thought, for jurisprudence was the central intellectual discipline in the Islamic world.” (Watt, *Formative Period*, 181). It has likewise been suggested that the formative legal training of most early theologians naturally predisposed such men to apply to their theological reflections the habits of mind they had already acquired in their study of *fiqh*. (Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 44).

⁶⁸ Watt, *Islamic Phil.*, 37.

⁶⁹ The city of Harran, incidentally, is Ibn Taymiyya’s very own hometown.

⁷⁰ On the linguistic situation of the Near East in the early Islamic period, see C. H. M. Versteegh, *Greek Elements in Arabic Linguistic Thinking*, ed. G. F. Pijper, vol. VII, *Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977), 1-4.

Mazdaism, Manichaeism, materialism (“*al-dahriyya*”), the Sumāniyya in Central Asia,⁷¹ and others. Contacts with educated non-Muslims in the early empire – particularly Christians, but also members of the aforementioned groups – invited polemical arguments against Islamic teachings, which seems to have increased the need that Muslims felt for a tool to defend in more universally acceptable terms the underlying reasonability and plausibility of Islamic teachings. This was true especially with respect to the Christians, who not only formed the majority of the populace particularly in the region of Greater Syria, but who also represented a rival monotheism to that of Islam with similarly universalist pretensions, and whose competing theological truth claims were couched in a sophisticated intellectual idiom that was the product of over 600 years of the infusion of Christian theological thought with Greek philosophy, particularly in the guise of late Hellenic Neoplatonism (admixed with certain elements of Aristotelian and Stoic origin as well).⁷² The early Muslims were already primed for engaging in such debate by virtue of a “dialectical way of thinking”⁷³ that they had learned both through the example of the Prophet and the Qur’an, as well as the early indigenous Islamic disciplines of *tafsīr*, grammar, and law discussed above.⁷⁴ But these tendencies were now reinforced and supplemented by the new cultural milieu of the lands which they (Arabs) had inherited or from which they (non-Arab converts) had originally hailed. The immediate effect of this cultural and intellectual *côte à côte* was the adoption by Muslim theologians of certain concepts

⁷¹ Primarily Tirmidh and Samarqand. We recall the suggestion that Jahm b. Ṣafwān may have taken certain extreme positions primarily in response to this group, who may have been Buddhists of some sort.

⁷² For a detailed analysis of the Stoic influences on early Islamic theological thought, see Josef van Ess, “The Logical Structure of Islamic Theology,” in *Logic in Classical Islamic Culture*, ed. Gustave E. von Grunebaum, *Giorgio Levi Della Vida Conferences* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1970), esp. 26-42.

⁷³ “*dialektische[r] Denkstil*,” van Ess, *Theologie*, I: 48-49. See also *ibid.*, I: 55, where the author observes that not only in the Qur’an, but also in the *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq (d. ca. 150/767), one can begin to detect a *kalām* style of argumentation. For a critique of van Ess and a different perspective on the sources and dates of *kalām*, see Michael Cook, “The Origins of Kalam,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 43 (1980).

⁷⁴ M. Watt observes that the receptivity of Muslim scholars to the use of Greek rational methods once they became available may have had much to do with the fact that they had already been trained in Islamic jurisprudence and through it had become familiar with various rational forms of argumentation. (Watt, *Formative Period*, 180).

and methods felt to be necessary in order to answer their rivals and to present Islam in what were taken to be the neutral canons of a universally shared rational discourse. Greek concepts in particular – as well as Greek methods of argumentation, such as formal disputation⁷⁵ – presented themselves as a seductively powerful tool that could be deployed for the defense of Islam in the context of strident inter-confessional polemics.⁷⁶ The overall result of this polemical *rencontre* was that both the methods, and to a considerable extent even the content and problems, of *kalām*-theology as developed by the late 2nd/8th century bear the distinct imprint of these early exchanges in which Muslim debaters were compelled to adapt themselves to the categories of their opponents.⁷⁷

It is in the context of this intellectual backdrop that the first full-fledged, properly speculative theological discussions in Islam took place.⁷⁸ The first such debate⁷⁹ revolved around the question of free will and determinism, and would influence the manner in which various other questions of dogma were conceived and debated.⁸⁰ The Iraqi city of Basra, which happened to have a large concentra-

⁷⁵ As both theological and legal thought in the old world were steeped in the practice of disputation, which Aristotle knew from the older Academy and which he described in the *Topics*, the dialectical art of argumentation through disputation quickly came to define the dominant approach of the rising coterie of rationalist Muslim theologians.

⁷⁶ The influence of Hellenism specifically is to be found chiefly in Iraq, first Basra and Kufa, then Baghdad. The regions further to the east had also long been exposed to Hellenistic culture, but not much is known about the rationalizing theological activity there prior to al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944) in the early 4th/10th century. (Watt, *Formative Period*, 184).

⁷⁷ Van Ess, *Theologie*, I: 52-53. For further details on these exchanges, see Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 44-46 and, more generally, Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 1-43 and 64-66.

⁷⁸ The extent to which early Muslim theological debates may have arisen due to Christian or other outside influence – such as that of the Sumāniyya of Tirmidh in the case of al-Jaʿd b. Dirham and Jahm b. Ṣafwān, for example – is a matter of debate among scholars of early Islamic intellectual history. For a fairly extensive discussion of Western scholars' (highly variable) views on possible Christian and other influences, see Wolfson, *Philosophy*, 58-64. Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 37, for instance, speak in favor of the likelihood of Christian influence, but simultaneously admit that early discussions on issues such as free will, for example, may easily have developed simply through contemplation of the Qur'an itself.

⁷⁹ Regarding precisely when these two debates began, see Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 37, where the authors suggest that the earliest attestations of these debates exist in the context of Muslim-Christian polemic carried out between certain Muslim proto-theologians, on the one hand, and the likes of John of Damascus (d. 132/749) and Theodore Abū Qurra (d. 204-5/820 – 209-10/825), on the other. Gardet and Anawati point out that the debates recorded from this period have already reached a rather developed level of sophistication and so most likely began at an earlier period, probably in the early 8th century.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

tion of Khārijites and Ibāḍīs,⁸¹ was a particularly fecund center of theological discussion that produced, in the period between approximately 70/690 and 111/730, debates on the basis of which “the foundations of all later Islamic theology were laid.”⁸² There was also, in Damascus, a sizable group of Christians and of Qadarites,⁸³ a group associated initially with the stress on human freedom of action and derivative moral responsibility propounded by al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), a figure universally revered by later schools of law, theology, and Sufism.⁸⁴ After al-Ḥasan’s death, the Qadarīs began to champion a more robust doctrine of free will in which human moral responsibility was held to depend not merely on the fact that men chose and performed (*fa‘ala*) their actions, but that they positively “created” (*khalaqa*) them as well, a view widely denounced as compromising the unique status of God as the only creator (*khāliq*) and instantiator in existence. The cause of Qadarism was taken up for a brief time by means of a political revolt against the Umayyad caliph al-Walīd II in the year 126/744, then eclipsed with the eventual political failure of the movement. The opposite, “*jabrī*” impulse, tending towards a strict determinism and categorical denial of human free will, was represented in its most extreme form by Jahm b. Ṣafwān (d. 128/745-6), whose views on the issue were supported by the ruling Umayyads – perhaps, it has often been speculated, since this would allow their actions to be excused as simply a result of God’s direct creative will and not something for which they could be held morally – and politically – accountable by the community.⁸⁵

The third major debate⁸⁶ was the abstruse and perplexing question of the relationship to God of the Qur’an as His word – specifically whether the Qur’an,

⁸¹ Blankinship, “The early creed,” 39.

⁸² Watt, *Islamic Phil.*, 12.

⁸³ Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 37.

⁸⁴ On al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, see Watt, *Formative Period*, 77-81.

⁸⁵ Although Jahm b. Ṣafwān is an important figure of the early Islamic theological landscape, we possess relatively little certain information regarding the actual positions he may have held. The pejorative term “Jahmī,” however, came to be employed (particularly by Ḥanbalites) as an invective against anyone suspected of harboring Mu‘tazilite or semi-Mu‘tazilite proclivities.

⁸⁶ “Third,” that is, including the pre-speculative question of the grave sinner discussed above, but only the second properly speculative theological question (the first of which was the debate on free will and predestination discussed immediately above).

as God's speech, should be considered an "attribute" of the divine essence and therefore eternal (*qadīm*) or, rather, separate from God's essence and therefore contingent and temporally originated (*muḥdath*), or as it eventually came to be described, "created" (*makhlūq*).⁸⁷ First formulated by al-Ja'd b. Dirham (d. 105/724) and subsequently propagated by his student, Jahm b. Ṣafwān, the notion that the Qur'an was not eternal but "created" may have been an attempt to safeguard the notion of God's exclusive sempiternity in the face of Christian claims of Jesus' divinity based on his status as God's Word (*kalimat Allāh*), or logos.⁸⁸ Yet the notion of a "created Qur'an" appears by all accounts to have stoked the ire of the near totality of contemporary Muslim scholars, and in fact was considered so pernicious a doctrine as to have served as the motive for the execution of both al-Ja'd b. Dirham (in 105/724) and of Jahm b. Ṣafwān (in 128/745-6). The debate on the nature of the Qur'an became one of the most pivotal and divisive issues in early Muslim theology and eventually formed, as we shall soon see, the crux of a major showdown between theological "rationalists" and "textualists" in the mid-3rd/9th century. The question is also central to the concerns of this study because it relates directly to the question of the divine attributes, which not only forms the spine of Islamic theology overall but also lies at the very heart of Ibn Taymiyya's main preoccupation in the *Dar' al-ta'arūd*.

Several comments of a conceptual nature are in order here regarding the nature and implications of the three main debates of this early period – namely,

⁸⁷ For an in-depth account of the issue of the createdness of the Qur'an, see Wilferd Madelung, "The Origins of the Controversy Concerning the Creation of the Koran," in *Orientalia Hispanica: sive studia F.Mf. Pareja octogenario dicata*, ed. J. M. Barral (Leiden: Brill, 1974).

⁸⁸ See Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 38 for a discussion of the probable origin of this discussion in the Christian challenge of the logos. It is of note that not only Christian theology, but the Qur'an itself, describes Jesus as "a word from Him" [Q. (Āl 'Imrān) 3:45]. The need felt by the early Muslims to explain such verses in a manner consistent with Islamic monotheism in the face of Christian trinitarianism must have been great, particularly since it was the Christian understanding of the concept of the logos – ostensibly (in Christian eyes) embraced by the Qur'an as well – that underpinned the widespread Christian doctrine of the (co-)divinity of Jesus. For the challenge of the "Sumāniyya" of Tirmidh, who may have been Buddhists, and their possible influence on the highly abstractive and transcendentalizing theology of Jahm b. Ṣafwān, see Tilman Nagel, *The History of Islamic Theology from Muhammad to the Present*, trans. Thomas Thornton (Princeton: Markus Weiner Publishers, c2000), 101-102.

the question of the grave sinner, of free will, and of the nature of the Qur'an – manifesting a progression in terms of abstraction, formalization, and the explicit adoption of rational philosophical terminology and/or the explicit appeal to reason as an arbiter of competing understandings of theological issues. First, the question of the status of the grave sinner – essentially a question of who is a Muslim – is not so much an issue of “reason vs. revelation,” nor even primarily an exegetical issue concerned with how to understand the texts, since the Qur'an does not overtly address the relationship between having faith and gravely sinning in terms that permit of automatic formalization into doctrine. Nor is it clear that “reason,” however it may be construed, suggests in any definitive manner that a grave sinner is or is not to be considered a Muslim. Nor do any of the parties involved – the Khawārij, the proto-Shī'a, or the Murji'a – appear either to have relied explicitly on the Qur'an in support of their positions, or to have made an overt appeal to “reason” to arbitrate the issue. That the question carries acute theological *implications*, however, is unarguable. Rather, we see here an issue that began as a purely political rift, but one that nevertheless harbored serious theological implications in that it gave rise to an unprecedented question that demanded a response formulated in theological terms.

If the first debate that arose was couched in communal terms (“Who is a member of the community?”), did not arise directly from nor was directly connected back to revelation, and was centered squarely on the human being (i.e., “What makes a person, primarily in political terms, a believer?”), the second major question – the debate over free will and predestination – involved a crucial aspect of the relationship between man and God and directly implicated revelation inasmuch as it was connected to different ways of interpreting scriptural assertions about God. This debate, though initially motivated by political events as well, differs from the first in that it involves the nature of God and turns on the implications to be drawn from certain discrete statements in revelation concerning that nature. Since God is just, reasoned the proponents of free will (Qadarīs), then it must be that man acts freely as the author and creator of his own deeds such as justly to merit reward and punishment in the afterlife. But if God

is all-powerful,⁸⁹ reasoned the proponents of determinism (Jabrīs), then it must be that this power extends, as the Qur'an so clearly seems to state, to *all* things, including the actions of man. Were it not so, one may reason, then God would not be "powerful over *all* things." The debate over free will is thus conceptually foundational for two reasons. First, it illustrates the manner in which early theological debate grew out of differing interpretations of the Qur'an, once questions were raised that had not been posed in the time of the Prophet or addressed explicitly by revelation, leaving latter-day protagonists in the discussion to interrogate the verses of scripture in search of answers to such newly arisen quandaries.⁹⁰ The second reason for the importance of the debate over free will is largely a historical one insofar as it discloses, now in the realm of theology, the same emerging fault line between two distinct epistemological approaches to revelation that we have already observed in the domains of Qur'an exegesis, grammar, law, and hadith, and that were soon to pit faction against faction in a bitter ideological tussle that raged throughout the second and third Islamic centuries. The question of free will is thus foundational because it is the first instance of theological debate that clearly shows a transposing of the nascent rationalist-

⁸⁹ As per numerous verses of the Qur'an, such as Q. (al-Kahf) 18:45, "Verily, God has power over all things." See also Qur'an (Fāṭir) 35:44, (al-Aḥzāb) 33:27, (al-Zukhruf) 43:42.

⁹⁰ It is important, however, to underscore that the difference of opinion in this instance is reflective not so much of a "rational" exegesis of the text as contrasted with an unreflective "literalism," but rather of a differential emphasis placed on contradistinctive descriptions of God found in revelation. The Qur'an asserts that God is just. It likewise asserts that He is all-powerful. Revelation affirms both statements unequivocally, yet the *implications* of this twin affirmation for the question of the freedom or determinism of human action, once posed in this manner, are found to be neither elaborated, nor even adumbrated, in the Qur'an. This question of emphasis, of privileging a particular divine attribute or set of attributes over others in the way we conceive of and speak about God, is of fundamental importance for our present inquiry. In fact, I would submit that it is possible to view many of the most trenchant theological debates in Islam as manifestations of just such a phenomenon. If God is just *first and foremost in our minds*, then our conception of His justice must be maintained at all costs, even if doing so might seem to imply a limit on His omnipotence. If God is all-powerful *first and foremost in our minds*, then we might not be unduly exercised if the concept of His justice should recede somewhat into the background of our minds so long as the divine omnipotence remains front and center, uncompromised in its monopoly over our conception of the Divine. A skewing of our (inherently limited) view of the divine nature thus occurs when one attribute is zeroed in on and conceived of as dominating the divine nature such as to overshadow other, contradistinctive qualities equally affirmed of God in revelation. It is the distinct challenge of the theologian somehow to articulate an understanding of the Divine that coherently and judiciously accounts for *all* the various attributes and qualities predicated of God in revelation.

textualist cleavage already determinative in the other Islamic disciplines onto the plane of theology.

The question of freedom and determinism, therefore, is essentially an exegetical debate cast in moral-ethical terms, both in the sense that it carries implications for human moral responsibility and that it attempts to account rationally, in human ethical terms, for God's justice in the face of His unbounded might. This is in contrast to the first debate on who is a Muslim, which has primarily sociopolitical, as opposed to moral and ethical, implications, as well as to the third debate – concerning the nature of the Qur'an as God's word – which involves considerations of an explicitly metaphysical and ontological order. That is, what was at stake was not whether God had spoken the Qur'an and what implications that might entail for men's ethical, moral, and spiritual lives, but rather the *nature* of God's being, His relationship to His word, and the nuanced ontological questions pertaining to God's essence, His attributes, and so forth. Furthermore, the *terms* in which this third debate was conceived and the conceptual framework on the basis of which the problem itself was defined and discussed – “essence,” “attributes,” etc. – are a direct result of the influence of Greek philosophy and the discussions that were being held with Hellenized Christian theologians in Syria and elsewhere. In such discussions, proto-Mu'tazilite, rationalistically inclined theologians appealed directly and explicitly to “reason” (*'aql*) and sought to adopt a consistent methodological rationalism as the choice method not merely to serve the hermeneutic objective of understanding or interpreting scriptural passages related to the nature of God, but for the quasi-philosophical goal of delineating a conception of God's nature in entirely rational terms and independently of the “constraints” of revelation. The debate over the Qur'an thus introduces into the discussion for the first time a level of speculative abstraction – e.g., the philosophical distinction between essence and attributes – supplied by outside sources that now comes to form a particular rational optic through which revelation is henceforth to be refracted. With the debate on the status of the Qur'an, we are thus no longer in the presence of an inter-textual, purely hermeneutical enterprise fully contained within the texts, but

rather, for the first time, of a bona fide speculative theological venture making claims in its own right and independently of revelation regarding how the nature of God “must be” according to the dictates of “reason” as part of a systematic attempt to mold the understanding of revelation to the contours of a rational framework that henceforth dictates on its own authority the essential terms of analysis.

The Translation Movement & the Influence of Greek Philosophy

Despite the centrality of personal contact with a living philosophical tradition and contact with Hellenized Christian theologians in the early Islamic period, as discussed above, the influence of Greek ideas on Muslim minds eventually came primarily, and massively, in the form of Arabic translations made of the Greek philosophical corpus, either directly from Greek originals or from intermediate Syriac translations thereof. Although some Greek works, particularly medical and scientific treatises, began to be translated in late Umayyad times (i.e., the first half of the 2nd/8th century, prior to the Abbasid revolution of 132/750), it was not until well after the consolidation of Abbasid rule that the large-scale project of translation came into full swing. The Abbasid revolution was to bring about far-reaching changes on a number of levels, spelling a new era for *kalām* as well as for a host of other intellectual disciplines and cultural pursuits. Politically, the capital of the Muslim *umma* moved from Damascus to Baghdad, after which Syria and the Hijaz were no longer centers of innovative theological development.⁹¹ Under the new order, religious knowledge and its cultivators received a new prominence, as the Abbasids explicitly promoted themselves as the defenders of a multiethnic *Islamic* order meant to supersede the Umayyad order based on the ethnic favoritism of Arabs.⁹² Such circumstances inaugurated an unprecedented efflorescence of *kalām*, the technique of which was developed primarily in Iraq due to a favorable disposition toward theological discussion and

⁹¹ Van Ess, *Theologic*, I: 56.

⁹² See discussion in Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 39-41.

concomitant protection thereof afforded by interested Abbasid authorities.⁹³ Indeed, it was primarily at the caliphal court itself, where thinkers from various regions and intellectual proclivities regularly comingled, that the new theology was most highly refined and developed into a sophisticated arm of intellectual dispute.⁹⁴

Although *kalām* as a discrete discipline was already firmly established by the time of the illustrious Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 170-193 / 786-809) and the term “*mutakallim*” is applied in the literature to some figures even prior to this period, information about the views of these latter is so scanty that we cannot accurately say to what degree they relied explicitly on Greek methods or rather confined themselves to the types of reasoning already being used in legal discussions.⁹⁵ In any case, it was the translation movement – particularly subsequent to the founding of the Bayt al-Ḥikma, or “House of Wisdom,” in Baghdad by the Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mūn (r. 198-218 / 813-833) – that seems to have constituted the major impetus both for the dramatic political rise of the first theological school proper, that of the Mu’tazila, in the first half of the 3rd/9th century, as well as for the discrete content of their doctrine and their signature methods of argumentation.

V. The Mu’tazila

The first full-fledged *school* of theology in Islam was that of the Mu’tazila. The first Mu’tazilite speculations can be traced back to the last decade of the Umayyad dynasty just prior to the Abbasid revolution.⁹⁶ Regarding the origins of Mu’tazilism, al-Shahrastānī and others give the account of a certain Wāṣil b. ‘Aṭā’ (d. 131/748), who allegedly separated from the circle of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī over the question of the status of the grave sinner, though the main architects of

⁹³ Van Ess, *Theologic*, I: 55.

⁹⁴ Ibid., I: 56.

⁹⁵ Watt, *Islamic Phil.*, 37-38.

⁹⁶ Van Ess, *Flowering*, 123.

the school died several generations later, between 204/820 and 224/840.⁹⁷ In the process of responding to Greek philosophy, *kalām* in the form of Mu‘tazilism borrowed from its opponent the method of argumentation (appropriated differently and to different degrees according to school) that it had previously been lacking.⁹⁸

Despite their often highly divergent opinions on a number of theological points, the representative Mu‘tazilite thinkers may nonetheless be grouped together due to their common adherence to the so-called “five principles” of Mu‘tazilism, namely: (1) divine unity (*tawḥīd*), a principle which for the Mu‘tazila demanded the denial of the proposition that God could possess any attributes distinct from His essence; (2) divine justice (*‘adl*), a shorthand term for a pro-free will stance based on the consideration that God could justly mete out reward and punishment only to agents who had not only freely chosen but, as we have seen, also “created” their good or evil actions; (3) the “promise and the threat” (*al-wa‘d wa-l-wa‘īd*), according to which God was held to be morally *obligated* to reward the just and punish the wicked (i.e., with the implicit inadmissibility of remitting punishment through divine forgiveness and mercy); (4) the intermediary status (*al-manzila bayn al-manzilatayn*) of the gravely sinful Muslim, i.e., that he occupies an intermediary status between that of a believer and a non-believer; and (5) Muslims’ individual and collective obligation, imposed by the Qur’an,⁹⁹ to “command the good and forbid the evil” (*al-amr bi-l-ma‘rūf wa-l-nahy ‘an al-munkar*).¹⁰⁰

Of these five principles, the most important for our topic is the first principle involving the notion of *tawḥīd*, since it touches directly on the question of the divine attributes, one of Ibn Taymiyya’s overriding preoccupations in the *Dar’*. The three main aspects of the Mu‘tazilite notion of *tawḥīd* are: (a) denial of the hypostatic character of the essential attributes of God, such as knowledge,

⁹⁷ Watt, *Islamic Phil.*, 47.

⁹⁸ Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 224.

⁹⁹ See Qur’an (Āl ‘Imrān) 3:104, (al-Ḥajj) 22:41, (Luqmān) 31:17.

¹⁰⁰ For a fuller discussion of these five principles, see Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 47-51. Also Watt, *Islamic Phil.*, 48-53.

power, and speech; (b) denial of the uncreatedness or eternity of the Qur'an; and (c) the radical denial of resemblance between God and any created thing (*tan-zīh*).¹⁰¹ Indeed, the doctrines most hated by the Mu'tazilites were predestination and anthropomorphism,¹⁰² the latter of which they regularly sought to "neutralize" by means of figurative interpretation (*ta'wīl*).¹⁰³

In addition to these five common points of doctrine, Mu'tazilite thinkers were also brought together by a shared apologetic program motivated by a common zeal to defend the core doctrines of Islam against the adherents of other religions, as well as against groups of their Muslim co-religionists whom they considered to have compromised God's unique and incomparable nature by clinging to what they considered to be an overly literal and, consequentially, overtly anthropomorphist understanding of scripture. Most important for our topic, however, is the fact that Mu'tazilite thinkers sought to realize this defensive project through a shared interpretive methodology that consisted in applying reason, as they conceived of it, as rigorously and consistently as possible to all questions of a theological nature, even if – critically – the conclusions thereby reached ended up contradicting the plain meaning of the Qur'anic text.

It is important to note in what sense the Mu'tazila were and were not rationalists. To begin with, they were certainly not pure rationalists in the ideal Greek sense, since they took the Qur'an as their starting point and sought explicitly to fulfill an apologetic role vis-à-vis the divine revelation – as opposed, say, to proceeding from a position of initial agnosticism regarding all the central theological questions concerning God, man, the cosmos, etc., and then "following reason wherever it may lead," as the Greek and the Muslim *falsafa* ideal would have it. They were, however, theological rationalists in the sense that, although as theologians they naturally began their discursive endeavor with explicitly Islamic worldview precommitments, they nevertheless explicitly sought to anoint reason as the highest arbiter in *interpreting* the dicta of revelation. If the

¹⁰¹ Watt, *Formative Period*, 242.

¹⁰² Van Ess, *Flowering*, 31.

¹⁰³ See Watt, *Formative Period*, 248.

Mu'tazila denied the ontological distinctiveness of the divine attributes, it was due to a purely *rational* judgment on their part that affirming them would imply plurality in God's essence and hence violate the Islamic *theological* principle of *tawhīd*. Similarly, it was what the Mu'tazila understood to be the requirements of *rationality* that led them to come down so strongly in favor of human free will over and against any suggestion of divine foreordainment.¹⁰⁴ Similar to this was their rationalistically motivated need to make “*tanzīh*” of God by holding, in the way of the Qadarites, that human beings not merely perform their actions, both good and evil, but that they – and not God – positively “create” (in the sense of “instantiate”) them. In like manner, the Mu'tazila would argue, reason demands that a just God *necessarily* reward the righteous and punish the iniquitous and slovenly, a stance which corresponds to the third Mu'tazilite principle enunciated above, that of the God's “promise and threat.” And although the Mu'tazila did at times simply affirm certain propositions that the Qur'an asserts as a matter of truth beyond the reach of human empirical or rational ascertainment – such as the resurrection of the body after death and the temporality or “originatedness” (*ḥudūth*), as opposed to the eternality, of the world – their overriding impetus was nevertheless to subordinate all such dicta, to the extent possible, to what they perceived to be the dictates of reason, then to interpret quite freely as metaphorical, through the mechanism of *ta'wīl*, anything that conflicted with what they determined reason to have judged to be the case.

M. Watt credits the Mu'tazila with the “assimilation of a large number of Greek ideas and methods of argument,”¹⁰⁵ adopting any and all such notions which seemed even remotely useful in the elaboration of Islamic doctrine, then leaving it to later scholars to sift through the spoils to decide what of it was truly assimilable. The result of this process was that in the end, many ideas were retained and absorbed into Sunni *kalām*, such that Greek ideas “came to dominate one great wing of Islamic theology, namely, rational or philosophical theolo-

¹⁰⁴ Both of which notions, incidentally, might appear to have support in the Qur'an – at least if verses are taken in isolation of each other – and therefore stand in need of some sort of interpretation.

¹⁰⁵ Watt, *Islamic Phil.*, 54.

gy.”¹⁰⁶ Yet since the Mu‘tazilites were generally regarded as heretics, their doctrines and theses could not simply be taken over by mainstream thought in the same form as presented by the Mu‘tazila.¹⁰⁷ The result of this is that such ideas often exercised an influence only indirectly – a reality to which, as we shall discover, Ibn Taymiyya is acutely sensitive and which, in fact, he holds responsible for a great deal of what “went wrong” in later Islamic theology.¹⁰⁸ Thus, although Mu‘tazilism as a school was eventually defeated, as we shall see, it was to mark permanently, even if by way of reaction, the form of and the problems dealt with in all subsequent *kalām*.¹⁰⁹

VI. Non-Speculative Theology and the Legacy of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal

Throughout the 3rd/9th century, there existed a number of individuals who upheld conservative doctrinal positions but who nevertheless engaged to some extent, even if by way of refutation and disavowal, with the newly developing science of Mu‘tazilite *kalām*.¹¹⁰ Indeed, the 5th-/11th-century Ash‘arite theologian Abū Maṣṣūr ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037) includes, in his famous *Kitāb Uṣūl al-dīn*, a section on the “*mutakallimūn* of *ahl al-sunnā*” and even a short list of early “*mutakallimūn* of *ahl al-ḥadīth*.”¹¹¹ For our purposes, then, a “theologian” is to be understood not strictly as a “rationalist theologian” in the way of the Mu‘tazila, but as anyone who explicitly and consciously articulated views on theological matters, especially the “hot-button” theological issues of his day, regardless of the extent to which he may or may not have relied on, or articulated his views in terms of, the rationalistic framework of the emerging science of *kalām*. It is precisely such individuals as took explicit stands on theological issues, albeit while consciously avoiding and/or openly opposing the rationalistic pro-

¹⁰⁶ Watt, *Formative Period*, 249.

¹⁰⁷ Watt, *Islamic Phil.*, 55.

¹⁰⁸ See below, Chapter 2, Section V, p. 109ff on Ibn Taymiyya’s own understanding and assessment of the intellectual tradition he inherited.

¹⁰⁹ Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 52.

¹¹⁰ Watt, *Formative Period*, 279.

¹¹¹ See *ibid.*

gram of the Mu‘tazila, to whom we refer here as “non-speculative theologians” and whose style of theology we have dubbed “non-speculative theology.”¹¹²

The non-speculative approach to theology, which eventually came to be most closely associated with Ḥanbalism, was in fact favored, especially prior to the triumphant rise of the Ash‘arī and Māturīdī style of *kalām* as of the 5th/11th century, by a substantial number of scholars from all of the major legal schools. This was particularly true of adherents of the early Mālikī and Shāfi‘ī schools, but also holds for a number of prominent early Ḥanafīs – who, in legal matters as we recall, tended to accord a greater role to reasoned opinion (*ra’y*) and other extra-textual methods, such as *istiḥsān* (‘juristic preference’), often looked upon with a measure of disapproval by other schools. So although a certain strand of Ḥanafīs accepted *kalām* and the conclusions to which it lead, and although a number of prominent Mu‘tazila were also Ḥanafī in legal *madhhab*, it is by no means the case that the early Ḥanafīs as a group were automatically or immediately theological rationalists. Indeed, there is a contrasting, more cautious Ḥanafī attitude rather apprehensive of rationalistic *kalām*, as evidenced by the famous creed of Abū Ja‘far b. Muḥammad al-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 321/933), who in general was “not prepared to go beyond the terms used in the Qur’an and Tradition.”¹¹³ Al-Ṭaḥāwī, a “convert” from Shāfi‘ism to the Ḥanafī school, was considered one of the top Ḥanafī authorities of his day, as well as a leading scholar

¹¹² The term “non-speculative theology” we have employed here is roughly equivalent in scope and implication to the Arabic term “*uṣūl al-dīn*,” which likewise refers in a general sense to the sum total of Islamic creedal commitments and their “foundations” (*uṣūl*) – both scriptural and rational – without, however, implying a commitment to or endorsement of the particular rationalistic approach and dialectical style normally implied by the term “*kalām*,” be it the “*kalām*” of the early Mu‘tazila discussed above or yet the “*kalām*” of their later Ash‘arī or Māturīdī opponents. In this vein, therefore, it would be incorrect simply to identify “*kalām*” with theology proper, since this latter is a general term that may apply to any reasoned reflection upon the Divine, while the term “*kalām*” represents only one particular way of doing theology. The ability to hold a reflective and nuanced theological stance outside the boundaries of formal *kalām* is evidenced, among others, by no lesser a figure than Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, as we shall see shortly.

¹¹³ Watt, *Formative Period*, 284. Watt mentions this in respect to the specific question as to whether the verbal pronunciation (*lafẓ*) of the Qur’an during recitation is “created” or “uncreated,” though al-Ṭaḥāwī’s circumspection on this issue is generalizable to the treaty as a whole. For a recent translation of al-Ṭaḥāwī’s work with extensive introduction and notes, see Hamza Yusuf, *The Creed of Imam al-Ṭaḥāwī*, 1 ed., translated, introduced, and annotated by Hamza Yusuf (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2009).

of hadith, and may thus responsibly be classified as one of the “*mutakallimūn* of *ahl al-ḥadīth*” mentioned above.

The final piece of the puzzle in the 3rd/9th century Islamic theological scene is represented by those who opposed the methods and conclusions of (Mu‘tazilī) *kalām* outright, but who nevertheless put forward explicit doctrines on theological issues. Such individuals generally belonged to the group that the sources designate as “*ahl al-ḥadīth*,” the most influential of whom was none other than Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), founder of the fourth Sunni legal school to which Ibn Taymiyya was a loyal adherent. Ibn Taymiyya, as we shall see, has much praise for Aḥmad’s keen intellect. Modern scholars are quite in agreement that “although he [Ibn Ḥanbal] rejected the rational methods of the Mutakallimūn and insisted on deriving religious doctrines and legal rules solely from the Qur’an and the Traditions, he was clearly a man of powerful intellect capable of adopting a coherent view in matters of great complexity.”¹¹⁴ Prominent Ḥanbalīs of this period include al-Khallāl (d. 311/923), al-Barbahārī (d. 329/941), and Ibn Khuzaymā (d. 311/924).¹¹⁵ Yet not all hadith scholars who also took public positions on theological matters were followers of Ibn Ḥanbal. Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), for example, who lived approximately one generation after Aḥmad, considered himself a member of *ahl al-ḥadīth* but not necessarily a follower of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, whom he considered to be “only one of at least a dozen distinguished scholars of this party.”¹¹⁶ The famous Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) – famous primarily for this 40-volume historical chronicle¹¹⁷ but also founder of his own legal school which, however, did not survive in the long term – also held theological views that were, by and large, very close to this group of scholars, though he is not usually thought of as a Ḥanbalite and, in fact, drew upon himself the ire of the Ḥanbalīs in the last year or so of his life for, apparently, having conceded to certain Mu‘tazilite theses regarding the so-called “an-

¹¹⁴ Watt, *Formative Period*, 291.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 296-297.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 296.

¹¹⁷ Entitled *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* (*History of the Prophets and Kings*).

thropomorphic” passages of scripture.¹¹⁸ These various names and tendencies serve to demonstrate the extent to which there existed orthodox, primarily “non-speculative” Sunni (as opposed to Mu‘tazilite) theologians even before the time of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d. 324/936).¹¹⁹

VII. The Miḥna and its Aftermath

The clash between Mu‘tazilite rationalistic theology, on the one hand, and the non-speculative or minimally speculative, amodal adherence to the overt meaning of scripture as propounded by Mālik, the other founders of the main Sunni schools of law, master hadith critics such as al-Bukhārī and Muslim, and the non-speculative theologians (such as al-Baghdādī’s “*mutakallimūn* of *ahl al-sunnā*”) more generally, on the other hand, came to a head in the first half of the 3rd/9th century with the infamous so-called Miḥna, or “Inquisition.” At issue in the Miḥna was the highly contentious question, already encountered above, of the “createdness” of the Qur’an. Though remembered primarily as a theological dispute, the Miḥna had important political ramifications and was symptomatic of a wider struggle for legitimacy and ultimate religious authority between the office of the caliph and the collective body of religious scholars, or ‘*ulamā*’.¹²⁰ During the reign of three successive Abbasid caliphs, all religious scholars, judges, and other notables, particularly in Baghdad and its immediate environs, were forced to endorse publicly the Mu‘tazilite doctrine that the Qur’an was “created” (*ma-khlūq*) rather than eternal (*qadīm*). Those who refused were imprisoned, beaten, and, in some cases, killed. While the vast majority of ‘*ulamā*’ relented under such pressing duress, a few stalwart souls held out against all odds, braving any amount of torment and humiliation in order to uphold what was widely considered the orthodox position – that of the early community (*salaf*) and authorita-

¹¹⁸ See van Ess, *Flowering*, 60-61.

¹¹⁹ Watt, *Formative Period*, 297.

¹²⁰ For a discussion of the political dimensions of the Miḥna and its connection to the struggle over ultimate religious authority, see Qasim Zaman, *Religion and Politics under the Early ‘Abbasids: The Emergence of the Proto-Sunni Elite* (Leiden: Brill, 1997). Also see, for a different perspective on the possible causes of the Miḥna, John Nawas, “A Reexamination of Three Current Explanations for al-Ma’mun’s Introduction of the Miḥna,” *IJMES* 26 (1994).

tive scholars (*a'imma*) of the first two centuries of Islam – namely, that the Qur'an was the *uncreated* and eternal Word of God, an intrinsic and inseparable part of His essence and not a mere thing, extrinsic to the divine essence and originated in time like the created universe and all that it contains.

As we have noted above, attitudes to *kalām* at this time, and to the Miḥna in particular, did not necessarily coincide with allegiance in jurisprudence. As upholders of *ra'y* in legal matters, many Ḥanafīs indeed sided with the government during the Miḥna. Notwithstanding, a number of them were vehemently opposed to it as well. In fact, no less a figure than Abū Yūsuf (d. 182/798), illustrious pupil of Abū Ḥanīfa and one of the main architects of the Ḥanafī school, was himself a staunch and vocal opponent of *kalām*, and Abū Yūsuf's own pupil, Bishr al-Marīsī (d. 218/833), incurred the wrath of his teacher on account of his engagement in *kalām*, and no doubt specifically because of al-Marīsī's belief in the createdness of the Qur'an.¹²¹ Be that as it may, the vast majority of scholars put to the test acquiesced publicly to the new doctrine, whatever their private convictions on the issue may have continued to be. Only a few defied the Inquisition authorities by refusing to flinch under any circumstances, the most celebrated of them being Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal himself.¹²²

In the year 232/847, the tables were abruptly turned on the Mu'tazila when Ja'far b. al-Mu'taṣim al-Mutawakkil (r. 232-247 / 847-861), a staunch supporter of orthodoxy, succeeded his brother al-Wāthiq (d. 232/847) to the caliphate and immediately deposed the Mu'tazila, removing them from their posts in ignominy and sending them reeling on a brusque downhill spiral from which they ultimately would never recover. Though the Mu'tazila remained a strong theological – and sometimes political¹²³ – voice in pockets outside the central lands

¹²¹ Watt, *Formative Period*, 285-286.

¹²² The one other individual who held out indefinitely – until finally dying in chains while being transported back to Baghdad from the Byzantine border where he and Aḥmad had been interrogated under the caliph's personal supervision – was an individual by the name of Muḥammad b. Nūḥ (d. c. 218/833). [Christopher Melchert, *Aḥmad ibn Hanbal*, ed. Patricia Crone, *Makers of the Muslim World* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006), 11].

¹²³ In at least some cases to the extent that they were able to encourage large-scale persecution of the rival Ash'arīs, such as was the case at the time of the Ash'arite theologian al-Juwaynī some 200 years after the Miḥna. (Watt, *Islamic Phil.*, 81).

for several centuries to come,¹²⁴ they increasingly lost touch with the common folk as well as with mainstream scholarly discourse, from which they became ever more marginalized.¹²⁵ The termination of the Miḥna represented the definitive defeat of the doctrine of the created Qur'an and the triumph, at least on this point, of the orthodox view, which has remained unchallenged down to the current day. Yet the Miḥna is also significant for a second reason, for it was through this bitter experience – in which the new weapon of Greek-inspired rational argumentation was married to the coercive arm of the state to enforce a doctrine felt so profoundly to compromise the very nature of the Qur'an as the Word of God – that many non-speculative hadith scholars and jurists reluctantly came around to the view, despite the “last-ditch opposition of Aḥmad ibn-Ḥanbal,”¹²⁶ that engagement in at least some form of rational *kalām* had become all but unavoidable if the orthodox positions of the authoritative early generations (*salaf*) were plausibly to be defended in a public arena whose intellectual idiom was now so thoroughly transfused by the categories and terms of Mu'tazilite *kalām*.

In the wake of the Miḥna, there emerged a group of theologians in Baghdad whose doctrinal positions were close to those of Ibn Ḥanbal and of those Ḥanafīs and others who had remained aloof of Mu'tazilism and had refused to debate theological issues on the terms set by *kalām*.¹²⁷ One figure in this emerging group was the famous early Sufi, Abū al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857), a contemporary of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal who, despite his essentially traditionalist orientation, nevertheless incurred Aḥmad's wrath merely for having engaged with

¹²⁴ To the extent that the great later Ash'arite theologian, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), spent the larger part of his scholarly career battling, among others, the Mu'tazilites of Herat and surrounding areas, located in the southwest of current-day Afghanistan. This region is not too far from Samarqand, the home of Muḥammad Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944), founder of the second main school of orthodox *kalām* (along with the Ash'arī school), a school whose methods and discussions retain evidence of the polemical struggle with the Mu'tazilites in which it was born. Watt also speaks of the reaction against the Karrāmites that likewise left its imprint on the Māturīdī school. (See Watt, *Formative Period*, 290, 316).

¹²⁵ Watt, *Islamic Phil.*, 53.

¹²⁶ Watt, *Formative Period*, 283.

¹²⁷ One must always remember that *kalām* was more or less an entirely Mu'tazilite affair at this time, which certainly goes far in explaining why some were so adamantly opposed to it. It had not yet been domesticated into mainstream orthodox discourse, declawed, and rendered “safe” in the eyes of more circumspect, traditionally minded individuals.

the discourse of *kalām* in order to refute it – an engagement which Ibn Ḥanbal seems to have considered in and of itself already a dangerous endorsement of the legitimacy of the methods and assumptions of *kalām*. Other such figures were Abū al-‘Abbās al-Qalānisi¹²⁸ and the aforementioned Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889). Regarding the divine attributes, Ibn Qutayba took the position that God’s essence and acts could not be fully comprehended by reason, that is, the full, essential reality of such matters lay inherently and irremediably beyond the pale of full human comprehension, such that trying to straightjacket any such truths into perfectly transparent rational categories can only lead to their distortion.¹²⁹ Ibn Qutayba and al-Muḥāsibī have been understood as treading a middle path between *kalām* as it had developed up to their day and those who refused even to engage its discourse. Al-Muḥāsibī, for instance, attempted to respond to the Mu‘tazila by “develop[ing] the concept of a certain alignment of God’s actions and those of His creatures,”¹³⁰ that is, by “rationalizing” the divine attributes to some, even if slight, degree in order to bring them within the range of human rational apprehension. Nevertheless, many traditionalist Sunnis were apparently not yet ready to follow these men down such a path. Chief among such reluctant individuals, of course, was Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, despite the fact that he “by his own assessment could not answer the inquisitors’ questions appropriately.”¹³¹ In the end of the day, however, both al-Muḥāsibī and Ibn Qutayba seem to have concluded that *kalām* was largely futile, as it had an uncanny habit of leading to the inconclusive “*takāfu’ al-adilla*,” or “equivalency of proofs,” by virtue of which opposing arguments are concluded to be equally well founded (or unfounded).¹³² We shall see further on that this inconvenient feature of *kalām* argumentation is the subject of frequent lamentation – and most often from *kalām* scholars themselves – and that it figures with some prominence in Ibn Taymiyya’s attack on

¹²⁸ The place and dates of al-Qalānisi’s birth and death are not known with precision, though he is known to have been a contemporary of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī.

¹²⁹ Nagel, *History*, 135.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 140.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid., 149.

the methods of choice adopted by the *mutakallimūn* in their speculative theological endeavor.

One of the theologians who exercised the greatest influence in the period immediately following the Miḥna was Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh b. Kullāb (d. 240-1/853-5).¹³³ Watt credits Ibn Kullāb with having played a central role in the movement among mainstream Sunnis for the acceptance of *kalām* and its methods.¹³⁴ Ibn Kullāb’s main contribution to *kalām* was his elaboration of the doctrine of the attributes of God.¹³⁵ An associate of his was the aforementioned al-Qalānisi, a rough contemporary of al-Ash‘arī. It seems that al-Qalānisi was the head of a group of Kullābī theologians to whom al-Ash‘arī (see below) most likely attached himself upon first abandoning the Mu‘tazila.¹³⁶ Al-Muḥāsibī, Ibn Kullāb, and al-Qalānisi can thus be seen as the immediate forerunners of al-Ash‘arī in defending old-school theological doctrine with the seemingly (to many) volatile new methods of *kalām*.¹³⁷ It has even been suggested that al-Ash‘arī’s eventual consecration as the founder and spiritual leader of the new movement, as opposed to Ibn Kullāb or al-Qalānisi, may have been somewhat fortuitous,¹³⁸ and that the book *Ṭabaqāt al-mutakallimīn* by Ibn Fūrak (d. 406/1015) may well have had much to do with this. Al-Baghdādī, for one, considers himself a follower of al-Ash‘arī, but nevertheless refers with equal ease to al-Qalānisi as “our shaykh.”¹³⁹

¹³³ On Ibn Kullāb, see Josef van Ess, “Ibn Kullāb and his School,” in *Proceedings of the twenty-sixth International Congress of Orientalists (New Delhi, 1964)* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1970), 263-267. For a more specific discussion of Ibn Kullāb’s role in the Miḥna, see Josef van Ess, “Ibn Kullāb und die Miḥna,” *Oriens* 18-19 (1965-66), subsequently published also in a French version as Josef van Ess, “Ibn Kullāb et la Miḥna,” *Arabica* 37 (1990).

¹³⁴ Watt, *Formative Period*, 288.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 287.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 286-287.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 288.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 288-289.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 311.

VIII. Al-Ash‘arī and the “Old *Kalām*”

al-Ash‘arī

Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d. 324/935-6), a descendent of the famous companion of the Prophet, Abū Mūsā al-Ash‘arī, was born in 260/874 in the southern Iraqi city of Basra but spent most of his life in Baghdad, where he dedicated himself to the religious sciences, excelling particularly in the study of *kalām*. An adherent of the Shāfi‘ī legal *madhhab* who hailed from an orthodox family, al-Ash‘arī became the top student of the leading Mu‘tazilite authority of his day, Abū ‘Alī Muḥammad al-Jubbā‘ī (d. 303/916). Around the age of 40, al-Ash‘arī experienced an abrupt change of heart subsequent to a dream visitation from the Prophet, who urged him to defend what had been related from him (i.e., his Sunna as transmitted through hadith). Al-Ash‘arī thereupon publicly recanted Mu‘tazilism,¹⁴⁰ abandoned the pursuit of *kalām* altogether, and gave himself over to the exclusive study of the Qur’an and hadith. In a subsequent vision, however, the Prophet reproved al-Ash‘arī, clarifying that while he had commanded him to defend the doctrines reported on his authority, he had not commanded him to give up rational methods of argumentation. Al-Ash‘arī thus dedicated the remainder of his life to working out a methodology of systematically defending revealed doctrines on the basis of rational argumentation.¹⁴¹

Al-Ash‘arī explicitly adopted positions close to those of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal which, however, he sought to support by reason, specifically the methods employed by the Mu‘tazila.¹⁴² The novelty in al-Ash‘arī’s approach can be discerned in the fact that even when, in the course of an argument, he quotes from the Qur’an, it can be seen that he is building up a “considerable structure of ra-

¹⁴⁰ For an account of the public dispute with his master, al-Jubbā‘ī, that occurred around the same time and also contributed to al-Ash‘arī’s loss of faith in the Mu‘tazilite creed, see Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, 2 ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 204-205.

¹⁴¹ Watt, *Islamic Phil.*, 64-65. See *ibid.*, 65-66 for the main differences between Mu‘tazilite theology and that eventually developed by al-Ash‘arī.

¹⁴² M. Fakhry remarks, in speaking of al-Ash‘arī, that “his *method* is analogous to that of the Mu‘tazilah, whereas his *doctrine* is substantially a restatement of Traditionist or Ḥanbalī theses.” (Fakhry, *History*, 207; emphasis original).

tional argument”¹⁴³ around the verses.¹⁴⁴ And while it is true that Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal had “very cautiously used this approach [i.e., of rationalizing arguments],”¹⁴⁵ al-Ash‘arī went further by arguing unapologetically for the outright legitimacy of a systematic defense of theological doctrine by means of formal rational argumentation, based on none other than the very methods developed and employed by the Mu‘tazila whose substantive theological doctrine he had so resolutely rejected. Al-Ash‘arī even sought to justify the legitimacy of this approach by arguing that the Qur’an contained the germ of certain of the rational methods the Mu‘tazila had been wont to employ.¹⁴⁶ For this reason, the majority of the Ḥanbalites of al-Ash‘arī’s own day rejected him and his followers since they, like their leader Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, considered the very use of formalized *kalām* to represent a dangerous and unpardonable capitulation to methods and assumptions that in and of themselves were invalid and without foundation.¹⁴⁷

In terms of substantive doctrine, al-Ash‘arī differed with the Ḥanbalites in that he took up the question of the divine attributes, which had been raised by the Mu‘tazilites, and took an explicit position on it¹⁴⁸ – in contrast to the Ḥanbalīs, who adhered to a strict amodalism (*bi-lā kayf*) with respect to the at-

¹⁴³ Watt, *Formative Period*, 307.

¹⁴⁴ Consider Watt’s comments (Watt, *Islamic Phil.*, 66): “When he [al-Ash‘arī] quotes a verse and argues from it, he is not simply quoting (as some other writers did) but is placing the verse within a setting of rational conceptions, and he has other arguments which do not depend on quotations.”

¹⁴⁵ Nagel, *History*, 152. We recall M. Watt’s comment about Ibn Ḥanbal’s “powerful intellect capable of adopting a coherent view in matters of great complexity.” (See p. 35 above.) Ibn Taymiyya goes even further than this to claim that Aḥmad was, in fact, one of the strongest in his use of *valid* rational arguments in favor of theological postulates built up on the basis of the truest of rational principles. What precisely he means by such rational principles is the subject of Chapter 5.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. This is a critical point since Ibn Taymiyya also lays great stress on the Qur’an’s use of rational argumentation and very consciously tries to develop a notion of reason that grows out of and is congruent with the Qur’an. In contrast to many of the *mutakallimūn*, however, Ibn Taymiyya will argue that not only the conclusions, but also many of the arguments and methodological assumptions, of the likes of the Mu‘tazila are decidedly *not* in line with the pure reason (‘*aql ṣarīḥ*’) employed in and extolled by the Qur’an.

¹⁴⁷ Regarding the perception of early Ash‘arism within some quarters of the Islamic intellectual landscape in which it arose, T. Nagel remarks that “Ash‘arite rationalism was by no means uncontroversial even within Sunnism. Some regarded it as a dangerously far-reaching concession to the Mu‘tazilites, who had once persecuted Ahmad ibn Hanbal and other *sunna* experts.” (ibid., 178).

¹⁴⁸ Watt, *Formative Period*, 310.

tributes of God. Al-Ash‘arī’s position on the attributes allows some measure of analogy between God’s attributes and those human attributes designated by the same name, in accordance with an attenuated form of the Mu‘tazilite principle of “*qiyās al-ghā’ib ‘alā al-shāhid*” (or “*al-qiyās bi-l-shāhid ‘alā al-ghā’ib*”), that is, making an inference from the “visible” world (*shāhid*) of our empirical experience to the “invisible” world (*ghā’ib*) of unseen realities that lie beyond our sense perception.¹⁴⁹ Through a cautious adoption of this principle in a moderated form, al-Ash‘arī attempted to steer a middle course between the radical views of the Mu‘tazila¹⁵⁰ and those of the strictest Ḥanbalites, a middle course in which “from the analogy between God and the world there perforce followed the reality of the divine attributes.”¹⁵¹ T. Nagel sums up al-Ash‘arī’s position on the divine attributes by explaining that: “[t]hey [the attributes] were not merely some phantom of the necessarily human language of revelation. To be sure, when the Koran spoke of God’s hands, it meant something that exclusively referred to God’s reality, but it also had a comparable reference point in the realm of human experience. ... Expressions in the revelation such as hand, face, etc., which God Himself chose, were by no means metaphors! But neither must they be understood in purely human-physical terms. Rather, they were real attributes whose true nature man was not able to recognize.”¹⁵² A specific application of this principle of analogy between the divine and human attributes is al-Ash‘arī’s “use of

¹⁴⁹ Nagel, *History*, 153.

¹⁵⁰ This principle of inferring from the seen to the invisible was one of the Mu‘tazilite principles that al-Ash‘arī adopted initially, but attempted to bend to his own purposes. He seems to have concluded that the Mu‘tazila were not wrong in principle to make such inferences with regard to the divine attributes (otherwise we would have no way of relating to the attributes at all), but that, in their attempt to achieve maximum rational consistency, they pushed the principle to the point where they ended up committing precisely that kind of *tashbīh* they had originally fled from, such that they essentially came to conceive of the divine attributes as being subject to the very same sorts of limitations that apply to human attributes denoted by the same name. It is for this reason that, in an effort to avoid likening God to created things, they ended up denying the divine attributes altogether. Since they had essentially assimilated God’s attributes to man’s, they drew the inexorable conclusion that affirming *any* of the divine attributes of God necessarily involved likening Him to creation (*tashbīh*).

¹⁵¹ Nagel, *History*, 154.

¹⁵² Ibid.

an analogy from the relation of human wills to elucidate the problem of divine omnipotence and human responsibility.”¹⁵³

Nevertheless, this notion of *qiyās al-ghā’ib ‘alā al-shāhid*, which had been so popular in the early stages of rationalism, had, according to Nagel, already been greeted with skepticism by al-Ash‘arī’s Ḥanafī contemporary, Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944), and was now proving to be even less tenable for al-Ash‘arī himself.¹⁵⁴ Al-Ash‘arī’s own eventual skepticism regarding this principle¹⁵⁵ also extended to his view of causal connections, which he denied in favor of an occasionalism which posits that all would-be cause and effect events in the world are merely concomitant through divine fiat (referred to as God’s “*āda*,” or “habit”) with no actual causal efficacy obtaining between them whatsoever. This occasionalism remains a cardinal principle of Ash‘arī (as well as Māturīdī) theology until this very day.

Al-Ash‘arī’s early post-conversion work, *al-Ibāna ‘an uṣūl al-dīyāna*,¹⁵⁶ has been described as a turning point in Islamic theology between the earlier credos and the later dogmatic treatises, such as those of al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286 or 691/1292), al-Ījī (d. 756/1355), or al-Sanūsī (d. 895/1490).¹⁵⁷ The *Ibāna*, being the first work written after al-Ash‘arī’s conversion, shows no compromise with Mu‘tazilism whatsoever. In a later work, *Maqālāt al-Islamiyyīn*, however, al-Ash‘arī’s tone is calmer and the positions taken less black and white, with its author freer to “take the spoils from defeated Mu‘tazilism and enrich therewith a henceforth orthodox *kalām*”¹⁵⁸ (which for Ibn Taymiyya, it might be added, is precisely where al-Ash‘arī went wrong).¹⁵⁹

¹⁵³ Watt, *Formative Period*, 310.

¹⁵⁴ See Nagel, *History*, 155-157. For the four essential differences between the Ash‘arī and Māturīdī schools, which in general are very close on most issues, see Watt, *Islamic Phil.*, 67-68.

¹⁵⁵ In reference to this notion of a commonality between characteristics, Nagel speaks of how al-Ash‘arī criticized “the carelessness with which the Mu‘tazilites had established analogies between both the two ontological domains and the facts in this world.” (Nagel, *History*, 165-166.)

¹⁵⁶ For the Arabic text of this work with an English translation, see Richard J. McCarthy, *The Theology of al-Ash‘arī* (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1953).

¹⁵⁷ Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 60.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. The difference in tone among al-Ash‘arī’s various treatises has also been interpreted as a function of each work’s respective audience. Watt (*Formative Period*, 306-307), for instance, follows Allard in viewing al-Ash‘arī’s *Luma’* as being directed to Mu‘tazilites and other

When Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī died in 324/936, he left behind only three pupils, none of whom however are particularly well known to posterity.¹⁶⁰ It is not until the second generation after al-Ash‘arī that we encounter three prominent figures who took up the torch of Ash‘arism, further developing and formalizing the method and school of thought of their esteemed master. The most important of these three figures is Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 402/1013).¹⁶¹

al-Bāqillānī

Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Ṭayyib al-Bāqillānī (d. 402/1013) was born (c. 328/940), like al-Ash‘arī, in the city of Basra, where he is reported to have studied *kalām* under two of al-Ash‘arī’s own direct students.¹⁶² A Mālikī in legal rite,¹⁶³ al-Bāqillānī spent much of his mature life in Baghdad, with the exception of a period where he held the office of judge (*qāḍī*) somewhere outside the capital city.¹⁶⁴ Ibn Khaldūn in his day credited al-Bāqillānī with perfecting the early

mutakallimūn, whereas the *Ibāna* contains arguments specifically addressed to the Ḥanbalīs, perhaps explaining its more strident, less compromising tone. See Michel Allard, *Le problème des attributs divins dans la doctrine d’al-Aṣ‘arī et de ses premiers disciples* (Beirut: Imprimerie catholique, 1965), esp. 215-285. Yet it must be borne in mind that al-Ash‘arī seems to have written the work *Istiḥsān al-khawḍ fī ‘ilm al-kalām* (*The Vindication of the Use of the Science of Kalām*) also with a Ḥanbalī audience in mind, in this case to convince them of the legitimacy and appropriateness, or “permissibility” (“*istiḥsān*” here presumably being used in its legal sense), of engaging in *kalām*. These positions are perhaps not incompatible, since a strict Ḥanbalī (recall Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal) would have objected to any rationalistic defense of theological doctrines, no matter how conservative and traditionalist the positions so defended actually were. (For the Arabic text of al-Ash‘arī’s *Istiḥsān* with English translation, see also McCarthy, *Theology*.)

¹⁵⁹ For a summary of the achievement of al-Ash‘arī, see Watt, *Formative Period*, 303ff. For a full study of the life and thought of al-Ash‘arī, see McCarthy, *Theology*.

¹⁶⁰ These are: Abū Sahl al-Ṣu‘lūkī (d. 369/980) of Nishapur, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Bāhifī (d. ca. 324-333 / 935-944) of Basra, and Abū ‘Abd Allāh b. Mujāhid (d. 370/980) of Basra. (Watt, *Formative Period*, 312). For a discussion of the major Ash‘arite figures up until al-Ghazālī, see Watt, *Islamic Phil.*, 75-83.

¹⁶¹ The other two being Ibn Fūrak (d. 406/1015) and Abū Ishāq al-Isfarāyīnī (d. 418/1027).

¹⁶² Namely, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Bāhifī and Abū ‘Abd Allāh b. Mujāhid. (Watt, *Formative Period*, 312).

¹⁶³ Watt remarks that al-Bāqillānī’s Mālikism “contributed to the spread of Ash‘arism in Mālikite circles in North Africa.” Prior to this time, most adherents of Ash‘arism were Shāfi‘ī like al-Ash‘arī himself, though there were some Ḥanafis among them as well. (Watt, *Islamic Phil.*, 76)

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

methodology of the Ash‘arī school,¹⁶⁵ and M. Fakhry in our day has remarked that al-Bāqillānī “played a pioneering role in elaborating the metaphysical groundwork of Ash‘arism.”¹⁶⁶ It is through the work of al-Bāqillānī that the early stage of Ash‘arism (that of the so-called “*mutaqaddimūn*”) can be said to have reached maturity.

Al-Bāqillānī endeavored to draw out more fully al-Ash‘arī’s initial insights and positions and to refine the method which al-Ash‘arī had adopted in order to yield all that it could be made to yield in the defense of al-Ash‘arī’s original doctrine – a doctrine which, we recall, was on the whole very conservative and close to that of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, though on some issues tended more towards a middle path between strict Ḥanbalī traditionalism and Mu‘tazilī-influenced rationalism. Whereas al-Ash‘arī had been strict in setting the conditions for proofs, al-Bāqillānī laid down even more stringent standards, namely through his “reversibility principle” which requires that proofs be fully reversible, that is, that the invalidity of a proof entail the falsity of that which it was meant to prove.¹⁶⁷ Al-Bāqillānī, like al-Ash‘arī and all later Ash‘arism, adopted the principle of occasionalism discussed above. He also firmly domesticated within Ash‘arism an atomistic notion of time and matter “with Greek and Indian overtones”¹⁶⁸ first promulgated by the Mu‘tazilite theologian Abū al-Hudhayl (d. c. 226/841). This theory conceives of everything in existence other than God as being composed of discrete atoms and accidents that are ontologically unconnected to each other and fully dependent directly on God not only for creating them, but for maintaining them in existence from moment to moment (or, on one interpretation, destroying them and recreating them anew in each new atom of discrete time). The theory of atomism represented the antithesis of the philosophic conception, based on Aristotle, of a world composed of continuous time

¹⁶⁵ See Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, 465, l. 12-13, where he remarks that al-Bāqillānī “*taṣaddara li-l-imāma fī ʿarīqatihim*,” specifically by making explicit the rational premises (*al-muqaddimāt al-‘aqliyya*) upon which the key positions of the school rested.

¹⁶⁶ Fakhry, *History*, 213.

¹⁶⁷ Nagel, *History*, 160.

¹⁶⁸ Majid Fakhry, *A Short Introduction to Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, c1997), 67.

and matter operating deterministically on the basis of immutable natural laws. This doctrine of occasionalism, predicated upon an atomistic conception of both the time and the matter of which the universe is composed, has been described as the ideal natural philosophy for preserving divine omnipotence¹⁶⁹ and, in conjunction with the denial of the principle of causality, becomes one of the fundamental tenets of all later Ash‘arism. So critical, in al-Bāqillānī’s eyes, was the theory of atomism to the rational defense of traditional Islamic tenets regarding divine omnipotence and sovereignty in the world – a notion so forcefully and unambiguously insisted upon in the Qur’an and hadith – that al-Bāqillānī went so far, according to Ibn Khaldūn, to declare the theory “as sacred as these tenets themselves.”¹⁷⁰

In conclusion, then, al-Bāqillānī can be considered the greatest systematizer of “old-school” Ash‘arism (that of the “*mutaqaddimūn*”), and in a sense the last one, since starting with al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085) in the next generation,¹⁷¹ fundamental changes begin to occur that pave the way for a “new *kalām*” (that of the “*muta’akhkhirūn*”), which involves a number of conceptual reformulations and methodological renovations of earlier Ash‘arī doctrine. To gain an adequate understanding of exactly what happened and why, however, we must divert our attention for a few moments to the rise and development of an entirely separate discourse – that of philosophy, or “*falsafā*” – which will end up having a major impact on Ash‘arī *kalām* as of the middle of the 5th/11th century, immediately upon the death of its greatest expositor, Abū ‘Alī b. Sīnā (d. 427/1037).

IX. Philosophy

Philosophical reflection got off to a fairly early start in the intellectual career of Islam. As we saw above, some Greek materials were already in circulation and being used in the Syriac tradition prior to the rise of Islam in the 1st/7th century.

¹⁶⁹ Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 62-64.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 284. (“*wa-ja‘ala hādhihi al-qawā‘id taba‘an li-l-‘aqā‘id al-īmāniyya fī wujūb i’tiqādihā li-tawaqquf tilka al-adilla ‘alayhā.*” Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, 465, l. 15-16).

¹⁷¹ See below, Section X, p. 58ff.

Greek logic and other categories of Greek philosophy had been incorporated into Christian theological discourse for several centuries, and elements thereof had already begun to make their appearance in early Muslim theological debates.¹⁷² But it was the massive movement to translate Greek philosophical and scientific texts, which lasted from the 2nd/8th to the 4th/10th century and known simply as the “translation movement,” that was the major catalyst not only for the rise of a rationalist Mu‘tazilite theology, as seen above, but even more directly for the development of an independent tradition of philosophical reflection in Arabic, one whose formative and classical stages stretch from early 3rd-/9th-century Baghdad to late 6th-/12th-century Andalusia.¹⁷³

A genealogy of the Arabic-Islamic philosophical tradition, known also by its Arabic name “*falsafa*,” that was transmitted to the Muslim world via the Greco-Arabic translation movement would include Aristotle and the main Hellenistic commentators on his work (all of whom, with the exception of the Aristotelian Alexander of Aphrodisias, were Neoplatonists), in addition to original Neoplatonic texts as well.¹⁷⁴ Since even Aristotle was transmitted into Arabic through a distinctly Neoplatonic lens, Neoplatonism was of major importance in setting the tenor of the Muslim philosophical tradition and, as it turns out, many of the ideas that Ibn Taymiyya happened to find most objectionable in the philosophical and theological traditions he inherited were of distinctly Neoplatonic inspiration. The most outstanding figures of the Arabic-Islamic tradition of *falsafa*¹⁷⁵ are Abū Yūsuf Ya‘qūb b. Ishāq al-Kindī (d. 256/873) and Abū Naṣr Muḥammad al-Fārābī (d. 339/950), with the pride of place indisputably occupied by their preeminent successor Abū ‘Alī b. Ḥusayn ‘Abd Allāh Ibn Sīnā (d. 427/1037), an independent and original thinker widely considered the greatest figure in the *falsafa* tradition. Ibn Sīnā, in fact, took up many of the questions

¹⁷² See above, Section IV, p. 19ff.

¹⁷³ For a detailed presentation of the various stages of the translation movement and the actors involved, see Fakhry, *History*, 4-19.

¹⁷⁴ For a table of the numerous Neoplatonic writings translated into Arabic (or Syriac) presented in convenient table form, see Cristina d’Ancona, “Greek into Arabic: Neoplatonism in translation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 22-23.

¹⁷⁵ Known in Arabic as “*falāsifa*,” sing. *ḥaylāsūf*: “philosopher.”

that had been put forth in *kalām*, such that the philosophical tradition after the classical period, according to R. Wisnovsky,¹⁷⁶ had to contend both with Ibn Sīnā and with the tradition of *kalām*, with the result that post-Avicennian philosophy became more consistently concerned to provide solutions anchored in *falsafa* to the problems set forth by the *kalām* tradition.¹⁷⁷ On the other hand, and far more significantly for our inquiry, *kalām* was in turn enormously influenced by the thought of Ibn Sīnā, whose categories, ideas, and terminology were to leave a lasting imprint on the works of the latter-day *mutakallimūn*.¹⁷⁸ Understanding the challenge posed to *kalām* – and to Islamic religious belief more generally – by philosophy, as well as the imprint left by *falsafa* on *kalām* and its practitioners, is vital for gaining a just appreciation of the attempted synthesis of al-Ghazālī at the turn of the 6th/12th century and, ultimately, of the nature of the

¹⁷⁶ See comments at Robert Wisnovsky, “Avicenna and the Avicennian Tradition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 92.

¹⁷⁷ *Falsafa* has traditionally been seen as primarily, and perhaps exclusively, influenced by Islamic theological discourse not in its method or basic philosophical precommitments, but only in the sense that it ended up taking up some of the issues discussed in *kalām* and “philosophizing” them, so to speak, by assimilating them to the larger philosophical *Weltanschauung* and recasting them in light of a purely philosophical interpretation. On this point, Gardet and Anawati maintain that: “Les seuls points où se retrouverait une influence positive indiscutable de l’Islām [i.e., on the philosophers] seraient donc d’une part le vocabulaire, et d’autre part l’introduction dans les systèmes philosophiques d’un certain nombre de problèmes : la prophétie, sa nature et son objet, les anges, les rétributions de la vie future. Mais on peut dire que l’influence directement musulmane se borne là à l’énoncé des problèmes beaucoup plus qu’à l’esprit dans lequel ils sont envisagés, et aux solutions adoptées (esprit et solutions tout déterministes). Quant à l’ensemble de la problématique des systèmes, c’est l’influence aristotélico-plotinienne qui joue encore.” (Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 323, n. 3 [starting on p. 322]). More recent scholarship, however, has contended that the boundaries between theology and philosophy were not as clearly demarcated, whether in terms of methodology or in terms of subject matter. See, for instance, Robert Wisnovsky, “Notes on Avicenna’s Concept of Thingness,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 10 (2000), as well as Robert Wisnovsky, “The Nature and Scope of Arabic Philosophical Commentary in Post-Classical (CA. 1100-1900 AD) Islamic Intellectual History: Some Preliminary Observations,” *Bulletin of the School of Classical Studies* 47 (2004).

¹⁷⁸ Though again, it can be argued that in this case also, the borrowings of *kalām* from philosophy were, in the end, more terminological and cosmetic than substantive. Gardet and Anawati point out that while in the later centuries, *kalām* avidly appropriated to itself anything it saw in philosophy that could be of use to it, all such borrowed aspects no longer operated on philosophical terms, but rather became absorbed into the body of existing *kalām* and domesticated to *kalām*’s methods, priorities, and stances. They cite as a prime mature example of this phenomenon al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī’s (d. 816/1413) commentary (*Sharḥ*) on al-Ījī’s (d. 756/1355) *Mawāqif fī ‘ilm al-kalām*, one of the most voluminous, mature, and authoritative summae of late Ash‘arī *kalām* still studied today at illustrious institutions of Islamic learning such as the Azhar University in Cairo or the Qarawiyyin University in Fez. (See Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 319).

intellectual tradition inherited by Ibn Taymiyya and to which he responded with such vigor two centuries later.

al-Kindī

Born (185/805) and educated in the Iraqi city of Kufa, al-Kindī was not only the first Muslim philosopher of note, but also the only one of Arab descent. For this reason, he is sometimes referred to as “*ḥaylasūf al-‘Arab*,” or “the philosopher of the Arabs.” Al-Kindī flourished in Baghdad, where he enjoyed the patronage of three Abbasid caliphs – the same three, incidentally, who executed the Miḥna (al-Ma’mūn, al-Mu’taṣim, and al-Wāthiq).¹⁷⁹ Al-Kindī endeavored to make philosophy acceptable to his fellow Muslims through a “policy of reconciliation,”¹⁸⁰ partly by denoting philosophy by the Qur’anic term “*ḥikma*” (“wisdom”) and partly by attempting to demonstrate the consistency of the rational sciences with true belief, specifically *tawḥīd*.¹⁸¹ Classical biographers, both supporters and detractors, agree that al-Kindī sought to bridge the gap between philosophy and religion,¹⁸² holding that the two could not be in true contradiction since they both served the common end of making accessible to men knowledge of the True One (*al-Ḥaqq*), God.¹⁸³ As a philosopher, al-Kindī advocated the application of rational philosophical methods to the texts of revelation.¹⁸⁴ Not surprisingly, his overall positions on theological issues were close to those of the Mu’tazila, although he did oppose certain of their theses and, as a methodological principle, placed the methods of philosophy above those of *kalām*.¹⁸⁵ While the titles of a number of his works show al-Kindī’s clear affinities with Mu’tazilite preoccupations, the titles of other treatises show that he also undertook detailed refuta-

¹⁷⁹ Fakhry, *History*, 67.

¹⁸⁰ Gerhard Endress, “The Defense of Reason: The Plea for Philosophy in the Religious Community,” *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaften* 6 (1990): 15.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

¹⁸² Fakhry, *History*, 68.

¹⁸³ Felix Klein-Franke, “Al-Kindī,” in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman, *Routledge History of World Philosophies* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), 171.

¹⁸⁴ Fakhry, *History*, 68.

¹⁸⁵ Endress, “Defense of Reason,” 6, 8. Also Watt, *Formative Period*, 206-208.

tions of certain other Mu‘tazilite theses, such as atomism.¹⁸⁶ Significantly, however, al-Kindī – almost uniquely among the *falāsifa* – parted ways with Aristotle on a number of fundamental issues in favor of positions that lined up with Islamic theological postulates. He joined ranks with Mu‘tazilite theologians in defending Islamic beliefs against various groups (materialists, Manicheans, atheists, and rival philosophers), breaking ranks with both Aristotle and the Neoplatonists on touchstone issues such as the creation of the world *ex nihilo*,¹⁸⁷ the resurrection of the body, the possibility of miracles and of prophetic revelation, and the ultimate destruction of the world – all of which he upheld, in agreement with Islamic teachings and in opposition to the Greek philosophical tradition and all later *falsafa*.¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, al-Kindī seems to agree with al-Ghazālī (and the Ash‘arī tradition in general) against later Peripatetics and Neoplatonists that God is the only true agent in the universe. All things other than God are said to “act” only metaphorically in the sense that they merely pass God’s sovereign ac-

¹⁸⁶ Peter Adamson, “Al-Kindī and the reception of Greek philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 48. For a detailed discussion of the philosophical convergences and divergences between al-Kindī and the Mu‘tazilites, see Peter Adamson, “Al-Kindī and the Mu‘tazila: divine attributes, creation, and freedom,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 13 (2003): 45-77. For the theory of atomism as first introduced by the Mu‘tazilite theologian Abū al-Hudhayl, see Richard M. Frank, *The Metaphysics of Created Being According to Abu l-Hudhayl al-‘Allāf: A Philosophical Study of the Earliest Kalām* (Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, 1966).

¹⁸⁷ Though he seems to have embraced a composite doctrine that combined the Neoplatonic emanationist notion of the One, Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover, and the theistic conception of God as Creator, thus simultaneously combining Neoplatonic, Aristotelian and Islamic doctrines on God. [See Adamson, “Al-Kindī and the reception,” 38-39; also Gerhard Endreß, “Athen, Alexandria, Bagdad, Samarkand: Übersetzung, Überlieferung und Integration der griechischen Philosophie im Islam,” in *Von Athen nach Bagdad: zur Rezeption griechischer Philosophie von der Spätantike bis zum Islam*, ed. Peter Bruns (Bonn: Borengässer, 2003), 49].

¹⁸⁸ Fakhry, *History*, 69. Fakhry stresses how orthodox al-Kindī was for a philosopher, describing him as “thoroughly imbued with the spirit of Islamic dogma” (ibid.) and concluding that “[i]n this [i.e., the literary and epistemic superiority of the Qur’an], as indeed in many other important respects, there can be little doubt that al-Kindī stands decidedly at the center of the Islamic theological tradition, and that his philosophical interests do not prejudice his unconditional adherence to the fundamental tenets of Islamic dogma.” (ibid., 93-94). In this he contrasts al-Kindī to the later philosophers, about whom he remarks: “His [al-Kindī’s] fellow Muslim philosophers, from al-Fārābī on, were so carried away by their philosophical zeal that they were unable to perceive that, to have any significance, revealed truth could be neither equal nor inferior to philosophical truth, but must be superior to it, if the reality of its supernatural origin is to be safeguarded.” (ibid., 94). Other secondary sources, it should be noted, do not paint the “philosopher of the Arabs” as being quite so in line with mainstream Islamic teachings. See, for example, Nagel, *History*, 185-188.

tion down successively from one to the other.¹⁸⁹ This latter concession, however, is tantamount to a recognition of some real role played by secondary causes, a thesis against which the Ash‘arites (though not Ibn Taymiyya) were invariably staunchly opposed.¹⁹⁰ Al-Kindī’s conception of God as the efficient cause of the universe can in a sense be seen as an adaptation of the Neoplatonic conception of the One to the theistic concept of God as Creator.¹⁹¹

We can likewise discern an impact of *kalām* on some of the topics taken up by philosophy even as early as al-Kindī, in the sense that al-Kindī attempted to provide solutions from within philosophy to some of the issues being debated in *kalām*.¹⁹² In his most important treatise, *On First Philosophy* (of which only the first of four parts has been preserved¹⁹³), al-Kindī gives the study of Aristotle’s metaphysics a distinctly theological coloring as a science primarily concerned with the study of God.¹⁹⁴ In one discussion, al-Kindī departs from Aristotle, and from almost all subsequent *falsafa*, in holding that the world is not eternal, but created in time.¹⁹⁵ A second discussion in the work revolves around the notion of oneness, the gist of which is that nothing about which something can be predicated can be said to be “one” (*wāḥid*). Since God is the ultimate One and since the ascription of any predicate or concept to an entity automatically entails its multiplicity, it follows that nothing can be predicated of God whatsoever. The radical negative theology that results from this conception of oneness is a feature of all later *falsafa* and, as we have seen, a central tenet (albeit in a somewhat mitigated form) of the Mu‘tazilites, self-styled “People of Unity and Jus-

¹⁸⁹ Fakhry, *History*, 78.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 79.

¹⁹¹ Endress, “Defense of Reason,” 10-11.

¹⁹² It is important to stress that the “impact” of *kalām* on *falsafa* remains limited to *kalām* having raised questions which the philosophers subsequently took up, but always on the basis of the methods and assumptions of philosophy. *Kalām* never influenced philosophy methodologically. If anything, it was the methods of *kalām* that, in the long run, ended up becoming more and more imbued with the notions and tools of *falsafa*.

¹⁹³ Klein-Franke, “History,” 168.

¹⁹⁴ Adamson, “Al-Kindī and the reception,” 34.

¹⁹⁵ The question remains, however, whether this conclusion was motivated by theological concerns, or whether al-Kindī arrived at it independently on the basis of the philosophy he was elaborating. According to Adamson (ibid., 39), al-Kindī was following John Philoponus in using Aristotle’s notion of contraries against him (Aristotle) to argue that if God conferred being upon the world, it necessarily must have been in an opposite state, that of non-being, prior thereto.

tice.” This particular conception of oneness and the radical denial of the divine attributes entailed thereby is, as we shall come to discover, one of the targets Ibn Taymiyya attacks the most consistently and relentlessly in the *Dar’ al-ta’arūḍ*.

al-Fārābī

Born (260/874) in Fārāb (located in current-day Turkmenistan), al-Fārābī spent almost his entire life in Baghdad, where he studied logic under the Christian scholars Yūḥannā b. Ḥaylān (d. 297-8/910) and Abū Bishr Mattā b. Yūnus (d. 328/940) and was the teacher of the Christian translator and logician Yaḥyā b. ‘Adī (d. 363-4/974).¹⁹⁶ Al-Fārābī was universally venerated as an unparalleled master of logic, as well as the leading expositor of Plato and Aristotle in his day.¹⁹⁷ It is primarily his work on logic which earned him the epithet “the Second Teacher” (*al-mu‘allim al-thānī*)¹⁹⁸ – second, that is, only to the First Teacher, Aristotle himself. Ibn Rushd and Maimonides pay tribute to him in respect to his work on logic,¹⁹⁹ and Ibn Sīnā records his debt to al-Fārābī for his understanding of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*.²⁰⁰ Al-Fārābī wrote a brief treatise, *The Reconciliation of the Two Sages*,²⁰¹ in which he attempted to harmonize the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. He is also well known for his writings on political philosophy, especially his *‘Arā’ ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila* (*Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City*), in which he discusses the proper relationship between philosophy and religion in the ideal state in terms that are highly reminiscent of Plato and later echoed by the Andalusian Aristotelian philosopher Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198).

¹⁹⁶ Deborah L. Black, “Al-Fārābī,” in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman, *Routledge History of World Philosophies* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), 178.

¹⁹⁷ Fakhry, *History*, 107. For a list of al-Fārābī’s chief logical writings, see *ibid.*, 109.

¹⁹⁸ For further on this appellation, see S. H. Nasr, “Why was Al-Fārābī Called the Second Teacher?,” *Islamic Culture* 59 (1985): 357-364.

¹⁹⁹ Black, “Al-Fārābī,” 192.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

²⁰¹ Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Jam‘ bayna ra’yay al-ḥakīm mayn Aflātūn al-ilāhī wa-Arīṣṭūṭālīs*, ed. Albīr Naṣrī Nādir (Beirut: al-Maṭba‘a al-Kāthūlikiyya, [1960]). But see Black, “Al-Fārābī,” 193, n. 4 for certain scholarly reservations regarding the authenticity of this text’s attribution to al-Fārābī.

Al-Fārābī is credited with the “first systematic exposition of Neo-Platonism in Arabic.”²⁰² Like al-Kindī, only a small portion of his many works has survived.²⁰³ The majority of al-Fārābī’s writings are dedicated to logic and the philosophy of language, specifically the relationship between, on the one hand, abstract logic and the philosophical terminology in which logical relations are expressed and, on the other hand, ordinary language and grammar.²⁰⁴ This latter question represents a cardinal point of contention in the debate between reason and revelation²⁰⁵ and, in fact, constitutes a major element of Ibn Taymiyya’s attack on abstract philosophical reasoning and his attempt to reconstitute rationality on more intuitive principles of everyday reasoning.²⁰⁶

Of direct relevance to the topic of reason and revelation also is the fact that al-Fārābī, like al-Kindī before him, dealt explicitly with the relationship between philosophy and religion,²⁰⁷ a discussion which he cast in linguistic terms that are later closely echoed by Ibn Rushd. Al-Fārābī sees the language of revelation as a popular expression of philosophical truth, employing the tools of rhetoric (*khiṭāb*) and poetics (*shi‘r*) to hint to the masses in figurative terms at truths which their philosophically unschooled intellects would be incapable of grasping in rational terms.²⁰⁸ Al-Fārābī articulates a hierarchy of syllogistic arts in which demonstration is the only apodictic, and hence the only suitable, method of philosophy, whereas all other modes – dialectics (*jadal*), rhetoric (*khiṭāba*), poetics

²⁰² Fakhry, *History*, 107.

²⁰³ Black, “Al-Fārābī,” 179.

²⁰⁴ Ibid. For a full treatment, see Shukri B. Abed, *Aristotelian Logic and the Arabic Language in Al-Fārābī* (Albany: State University of New York Press, c1991).

²⁰⁵ Epitomized by the famous debate between Mattā b. Yūnus the logician and Abū Sa‘īd al-Širāfi (d. 368/979) the theologian, jurist, and philologist. For a presentation of this debate, see Muhsin Mahdi, “Language and Logic in Classical Islam,” in *Logic in Classical Islamic Culture*, ed. G. E. von Grunebaum, *Giorgio Levi Della Vida Conferences* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1970), 51-84.

²⁰⁶ We will return to the issue of language and terminology, a crucial component of Ibn Taymiyya’s critique, in greater detail in Chapter 4, and will take up the question of the status of formal (philosophical) logic and its relationship to other modes of reasoning and knowing in Chapter 5.

²⁰⁷ See Muhsin Mahdi, “Alfarabi on Philosophy and Religion,” *Philosophical Forum* 4 (1972): 5-25.

²⁰⁸ Black, “Al-Fārābī,” 181.

(*sh'ir*) – serve the purposes of non-philosophical communication.²⁰⁹ In contrast to al-Kindī, al-Fārābī explicitly called for scripture to be reinterpreted as allegorical in any instance of conflict with reason.²¹⁰ In this vein, al-Fārābī outlined a theory in which Aristotle's poetics (*shi'r*) is identified as the means of communication employed by revelation, the truths of which are thus communicated to the masses through *takhyīl*, a mode of “imaginative evocation” meant to stand as a surrogate for those incapable of philosophical reasoning.²¹¹ This notion of revelation's reliance on poetic language, and the imaginative evocation such language is said to enable, go on to become standard doctrines of the *falāsifa*, are both forcefully reasserted two and a half centuries later by Ibn Rushd, and come both under massive and sustained attack by Ibn Taymiyya in the *Dar'*.

In addition to linguistics, al-Fārābī also took up the more formal aspects of logic, such as the syllogism, demonstration, and related epistemological issues,²¹² all of which are of central importance to Ibn Taymiyya's critique and to which we will return in more detail in Chapter 5. In metaphysics, al-Fārābī upheld the Neoplatonic theory of emanation.²¹³ Al-Fārābī's articulation of metaphysics as the study of being *qua* being and his relating of theology to metaphysics on the basis that God is the “principle of absolute being (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*)”²¹⁴ become central to all subsequent *falsafa* (with the exception of Ibn Rushd), as well as to later speculative Sufism and, to some extent arguably, to theology itself.²¹⁵ The particular philosophical metaphysic propounded by al-Fārābī and the theology subsumed under it likewise form a major target of Ibn Taymiyya in the *Dar'*. The central relevance of al-Fārābī to the debate on reason and revelation in Islam is perhaps best summed up by D. Black, who states that “[a]l-Fārābī's interest in types of rationality, in modes of discourse and argumen-

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Fakhry, *History*, 116.

²¹¹ Black, “Al-Fārābī,” 182.

²¹² Ibid., 181.

²¹³ For the details of al-Fārābī's emanationist scheme, see *ibid.*, 189; Fakhry, *History*, 118-119.

²¹⁴ Black, “Al-Fārābī,” 188.

²¹⁵ Indeed T. Nagel states that “[f]rom the eleventh century on, al-Farabi's metaphysics strongly influenced theology, which, however was not expressly acknowledged by theologians.” (Nagel, *History*, 189).

tation, and in the relations between ordinary and philosophical language, are an integral part of his answer to [the] historical challenge [i.e., of the ‘need to address seriously the sometimes competing claims between philosophy and religion’].”²¹⁶

Ibn Sīnā

Abū ‘Alī al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Sīnā, born in 370/980 near Bukhārā (located in current-day Uzbekistan), is without a doubt *the* central figure in the Arabic-Islamic philosophical tradition. Before Ibn Sīnā, *falsafa* and *kalām*, despite cross-fertilizations, represented two distinct strands of thought. With Ibn Sīnā, the two strands become intertwined to such an extent that post-Avicennian *kalām*, according to one prominent scholar, comes to represent a synthesis of Ibn Sīnā’s metaphysics and Islamic theological doctrine.²¹⁷ Ibn Sīnā’s metaphysical theses were taken up and debated by *kalām*-theologians right up until the dawn of the modern era.²¹⁸ Indeed, R. Wisnovsky goes so far as to describe Ibn Sīnā as having “straddled two worlds: the world of *falsafa* and the world of *kalām*.”²¹⁹

Ibn Sīnā’s influence, like that of al-Fārābī, was felt most profoundly in the fields of logic and, especially, metaphysics. Our concern here shall be strictly limited to those aspects of Ibn Sīnā’s thought that were eventually adopted by mainstream *mutakallimūn* and naturalized into later *kalām*. One of the most important of such ideas is Ibn Sīnā’s all-important distinction between essence and existence (with which we shall deal in greater detail in Chapter 5), as well as his distinction, which did not fail to attract a considerable amount of criticism, between that which is necessary by virtue of itself (*al-wājib bi-dhātihī*) – namely, God – and that which is necessary, but by virtue of another (*al-wājib bi-ghayrihī*)

²¹⁶ Black, “Al-Fārābī,” 192.

²¹⁷ See Wisnovsky, “Avicenna,” 92. See also Ayman Shihadeh, “From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī: 6th/12th Century Developments in Muslim Philosophical Theology,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 15 (2005): 175, where he remarks that philosophy (*falsafa*) and theology (*kalām*) “came to be as if one and the same discipline.” Also Endress, “Defense of Reason,” 30, where he says: “It was through him [Ibn Sīnā] that the *falsafa* came to be and to stay an integral and living part of Islamic thought,” and further remarks at *ibid.*, 37.

²¹⁸ Wisnovsky, “Avicenna,” 93.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

– that is, everything but God – which is deemed necessarily existent, albeit by virtue of God and not by virtue of itself. These twin theses exercised an enormous influence in post-classical Islamic intellectual history, both in various strains of later philosophy as well as in mainstream Sunni, as well as Shī‘ī, *kalām*.

Ibn Sīnā considered logic to be the key to philosophy, an indispensable tool whose function was to lead to the knowledge of the essential natures of things²²⁰ – a conception of logic which Ibn Taymiyya attacks vigorously. Ibn Sīnā is credited with the entirely original notion of God as “necessary of existence by virtue of Himself” (*wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātihi*) – the Necessarily Existent from whom the rest of existent things then overflow of necessity (which is why they are classified as *necessarily* existent, though by virtue not of themselves, but of God) in typical Neoplatonic emanationist fashion. Ibn Sīnā’s particular notion of God precluded that He could have any intentional relation to the world,²²¹ a major point of variance with Islamic doctrine regarding God’s fully free and volitional creation of the world. Furthermore, divine providence may not, according to Ibn Sīnā, be understood in terms of God’s direct superintendence of or concern for the world, but only in the far more remote sense of God’s knowledge of the order of all existence and the manner of its goodness.²²²

Later critics of Ibn Sīnā, such as the Ash‘arite theologians al-Ghazālī and al-Shahrastānī, mostly took issue with Ibn Sīnā’s concept of God and His relationship to the world, God’s (lack of, according to Ibn Sīnā) knowledge of particulars, the doctrine of the eternity of the universe, and Ibn Sīnā’s purely spiritualist, non-corporeal conception of the afterlife. Al-Ghazālī, as we shall see, dedicated one of his most famous and influential works, *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*), to a devastating refutation of the *falsafa* tradition, primarily as incarnated in Ibn Sīnā’s rather unique synthesis of Aristotelian, Neoplatonic, and original “Avicennian” elements. In his attack on philosophy, al-

²²⁰ Shams Inati, “Ibn Sīnā,” in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), 234-235.

²²¹ Ibid., 242.

²²² Ibid.

Ghazālī singles out the last three aforementioned doctrines as fundamentally irreconcilable with the doctrinal tenets of Islam, so entirely and irredeemably so as to put anyone holding them decisively outside the pale of the faith.

Such criticism did not, however, prevent Ibn Sīnā's thought from affecting profoundly not only post-Avicennian *falsafā*, which is to be expected, but also from penetrating the very conceptual core of *kalām*, leading to a distinction between the early *kalām* tradition (that of the so-called *mutaqaddimūn*) and a later, distinctly "post-Avicennian" *kalām* (that of the so-called *muta'akhkhirūn*) that bears so unmistakably the imprint of Ibn Sīnā's philosophy.²²³ Even al-Ghazālī, who was formerly conceived in Western scholarship as being diametrically opposed to *falsafā* on all levels, is now understood to have been rather profoundly influenced by his arch-rival Persian compatriot, as we shall discover shortly.²²⁴

X. The New *Kalām* and Subsequent Developments

The Malaise of Theology in the 5th/11th Century

Theology in the 5th/11th century underwent a fundamental change as it came under the direct influence of the enormous shadow cast by the imposing philosophical system of Ibn Sīnā. T. Nagel speaks evocatively of the malaise of a "pessimistic Sunnism"²²⁵ in the late 5th/11th century, reeling under the "painful impression of the futility of rationally defending its own faith and rationally

²²³ Wisnovsky, "Avicenna," 92. See further at p. 133, where the author goes so far as to characterize the post-Avicennian *mutakallimūn* as "the torchbearers of the Avicennian tradition in Islamic intellectual history."

²²⁴ And in fact this post-Avicennian "*kalām* of the *muta'akhkhirūn*" may just as well be described as a "post-Ghazālīan *kalām*," since it was primarily al-Ghazālī, as we shall learn, who, in refuting Ibn Sīnā, simultaneously opened the door to his philosophy and (unwittingly?) ended up adopting and domesticating within both *kalām* and Sufism a number of important tenets of his rival's philosophy. For a study of the affinities, on a number of points, of al-Ghazālī's thought with that of Ibn Sīnā, see Jules Janssens, "Al-Ghazzālī's *Tahāfut*: Is it Really a Rejection of Ibn Sīnā's Philosophy?," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 12, no. 1 (2001). See also the remarks of Tim Winter in the introduction to Tim Winter, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 12-14.

²²⁵ Nagel, *History*, 181.

striving for ultimate certainty.”²²⁶ We recall that philosophy until the middle of the tenth century was, both methodologically and institutionally, separate from *kalām* to a considerable degree and that the philosophers as a group, from al-Kindī through al-Fārābī, had a relatively minor impact on theological discourse.²²⁷ Indeed, despite the fact that the theologians had already absorbed a number of methodological tools from the philosophers,²²⁸ the problems treated in *kalām* remained essentially the same issues throughout this nearly three-century period, until we witness a seismic shift with the rise of the “new *kalām*” post-Ibn Sīnā through the work of al-Juwaynī and, especially, his student al-Ghazālī. Given the relative isolation in which philosophy had incubated in the phase of its initial development and subsequent consolidation – that is, from al-Kindī up through Ibn Sīnā, a period of some 200 years – it must have seemed like *falsafa* had come as if out of nowhere to shake the very foundations of theology itself. This is presumably what led to the aforementioned pessimism – that is, not just the challenge of philosophy itself, but the realization that the *kalām* originally developed by al-Ash‘arī in response to Mu‘tazilism was relatively ill-equipped to deal with *falsafa* proper, and that even when what were hoped to be the requisite methodological renovations, such as those wrought by al-Bāqillānī, had been instituted, rational *certainty* in matters of theology – particularly in the face of *falsafa*’s supreme confidence in its ability to engender *yaqīn* – continued to prove frustratingly elusive.

Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī

The first major Ash‘arite theologian to have come under the direct influence of *falsafa* via Ibn Sīnā was Abū al-Ma‘ālī “Imām al-Ḥaramayn” al-Juwaynī (d.

²²⁶ Ibid. This melancholic mood contrasts, as we shall see, with Ibn Taymiyya’s optimistic view of the ability of reason – reason reconstituted, that is, and not the “reason” of *kalām* and *falsafa* – to uphold and defend the basic premises of revealed religion.

²²⁷ Watt, *Formative Period*, 204-208.

²²⁸ On the nature of this process, see especially Wisnovsky, “Nature and Scope,” as well as Robert Wisnovsky, “Essence and Existence in the Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Islamic East (*Mašriq*): A Sketch,” in *The Arabic, Hebrew and Latin Reception of Avicenna’s Metaphysics* ed. Dag Nikolaus Hasse and Amos Bertolacci (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2012).

478/1085). Al-Juwaynī made a bid to make up for the now apparent inadequacies of *kalām* in the face of *falsafa* by adopting certain aspects of that very same *falsafa* that he considered not only compatible with *kalām* but, in fact, vital to the project of shoring up the worldview of *kalām* in the face of the onerous shadow cast by Ibn Sīnā's imposing philosophy. A sign of al-Juwaynī's changing attitude towards the place of the rational sciences in the overall hierarchy of Islamic religious disciplines is his view that “*nazar*,” understood in the sense of engaging in a deliberate search for rational certainty regarding the fundamentals of faith, is a requirement upon each and every Muslim upon reaching the age of maturity in order for his faith to be considered valid.²²⁹

Though al-Bāqillānī had already entertained reservations about the previously discussed inference from the visible to the invisible (*al-qiyās bi-l-shāhid ‘alā al-ghā’ib*) and tried to reinforce the defensive arsenal of *kalām* by adding to it his reversibility principle, it is with al-Juwaynī that this inference from the seen to the unseen – the “rock on which Islamic theology had rested until then”²³⁰ – finally crumbled altogether. But al-Juwaynī went further and dropped al-Bāqillānī's reversibility principle as well, replacing it with certain elements selectively incorporated from the new logic then gaining wider spread via the work of Ibn Sīnā. Among other things, al-Juwaynī incorporated into the logical armor of *kalām* such techniques as enumeration and division (*al-sabr wa-l-taqṣīm*) and the disjunction between affirmation and negation, supplementing with these techniques the two main procedures previously in use, namely, the *reductio ad absurdum* (*qiyās al-khulḥ*) and the probative syllogism (*al-qiyās al-mustaqīm*).²³¹

²²⁹ Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 66 (citing the opening of al-Juwaynī's *Irshād*). As we shall come to discover, Ibn Taymiyya would not reject this in principle, since the Qur'an is full of exhortations to “look” (*fa-’nzurū*, etc.) and ponder, as we have seen, and therefore is considered by him as fundamental to reaching and maintaining an authentic assent to the truth of Islam. His main goal in the *Dar’*, however, is to refute the validity of the methods and content of what passed for “*nazar*” among later *kalām* theologians, such as al-Juwaynī, and to replace this with a reconfigured “sound reasoning” (*ḥusn al-naẓar*) which he identifies with that of the early community of the pre-*kalām* / pre-philosophy phase, in which “‘reason and revelation’ ... were not experienced as dichotomous.” (Winter, “Reason as Balance,” 8).

²³⁰ Nagel, *History*, 165.

²³¹ Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 73.

Al-Juwaynī further abandoned the older *kalām*’s method of proving the existence of God based on the createdness of the world (specifically the argument from *ḥudūth al-ajsām*, or the temporal origination of bodies) in favor of Ibn Sīnā’s proof based on the dichotomy of ontological necessity (*wujūb*) and contingency (*imkān*).²³² This change in the argument used for proving the existence of God marks, along with the increasing incorporation of logic, one of the fundamental distinctions on the basis of which practically all later thinkers²³³ differentiate between the “old *kalām*” of the *mutaqaddimūn* and the “new *kalām*” of the *muta’akhhirūn*. Al-Juwaynī furthermore seems to be the first to have incorporated atomism organically into Ash‘arī *kalām* as a standard procedure, combined with the argument from contingency, for proving the existence of God, His attributes, and the temporality or “temporal originatedness” (*ḥudūth*) of the world.²³⁴

Another crucial departure from al-Ash‘arī’s methodology in the work of al-Juwaynī has to do with al-Juwaynī’s position on the divine attributes. Al-Ash‘arī, as we have seen, upheld a modified version of the *bi-lā kayf* doctrine of the early community as a means of preserving both the divine transcendence and the literal integrity of the Qur’an’s assertions regarding the attributes of God. Al-Juwaynī, however, goes further, separating attributes into essential (*nafsī*) and qualitative (*ma’nawī*), a move that has been described as a shift towards a more “liberal” Ash‘arite theology, one less attached to the letter of the Qur’an and to a “literal” understanding of Qur’anic statements regarding the divine attributes.²³⁵ In this vein, al-Juwaynī was the first Ash‘arite theologian to interpret – that is, to make *ta’wīl* of – the so-called revealed attributes (*al-ṣifāt al-khabariyya*), such as God’s “hands,” “face,” and other such attributes that cannot

²³² Nagel, *History*, 173. See also Robert Wisnovsky, “One Aspect of the Avicennian Turn in Sunnī Theology,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2004).

²³³ Such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (see Nagel, *History*, 207). See Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, 465, l. 22 – 466, l. 4 for the incorporation of logic into *kalām* and its centrality in the demarcation of “old-style *kalām*” (*ṭarīqat al-mutaqaddimīn*) from “new-style *kalām*” (*ṭarīqat al-muta’akhhirīn*).

²³⁴ Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 73.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

be derived through independent reason and that are denoted by terms that could seem to imply corporeality.²³⁶

Al-Juwaynī was likewise the first theologian to elaborate a juridical methodology on the basis of the principles of the new *kalām*, an initiative brought to full fruition by his student, al-Ghazālī, through the systematic incorporation of logic in this latter's classic work on jurisprudence, *al-Mustaṣfā min 'ilm al-uṣūl* (*The Essentials of Jurisprudence*). Al-Juwaynī's comprehensive theological treatise, *al-Shāmil fī uṣūl al-dīn* (*The Comprehensive Treatise on the Fundamentals of Religion*), as well as his own abridgment of this work, known as *Kitāb al-Irshād ilā qawāṭi' al-adilla fī al-i'tiqād* (*The Book of Guidance to the Decisive Proofs in Matters of Belief*), became classics in North Africa and it is to them, incidentally, that the Andalusian philosopher Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198) refers for his knowledge of Ash'arī doctrines.²³⁷ Indeed, the structure of al-Juwaynī's *Irshād* became a model for later theological treatises written in the same genre.²³⁸

Though the firm and complete incorporation of logic into *kalām* would only come to pass at the hands of al-Ghazālī in the following generation, al-Juwaynī nonetheless represents a critical juncture in the transition from the old style of reasoning in *kalām* to the new philosophically oriented *kalām*, being as he was "old-school by virtue of his dialectical method, but an old-schooler who portends the triumph of the new method."²³⁹ According to Ibn Khaldūn, the old way is exemplified by al-Bāqillānī's reversibility principle which, as we have seen, entails that "the invalidity of the proof entails the falsity of what is being proven," while the new way, informed by Aristotelian logic, is not bound by this principle. Yet it has been remarked that the principle of reversibility amounted to no less than "the necessary and mutual connection established by the 'an-

²³⁶ Ibid., 73.

²³⁷ Ibid., 65.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid., 154. "[Al-Juwaynī] est bien encore un ancien par sa dialectique, mais un ancien qui laisse deviner le triomphe de la méthode nouvelle." For an analysis of the main differences between old-style and new-style *kalām*, see the discussion at ibid., 72-76.

cients' between their philosophy of nature and their tenets of belief.”²⁴⁰ This link was based on the older logic of analogy, drawn primarily from *fiqh*, in which the Aristotelian syllogism had not yet made its appearance. In the new logic on the basis of which al-Bāqillānī's reversibility principle is rejected, however, the Aristotelian syllogism becomes predominant. The fact that this is the main difference between the two systems of logic (and between the old versus the new *kalām* based on each system, respectively) becomes apparent through reading the long discussions on this topic in al-Juwaynī's *Shāmil*.²⁴¹ This “new method” – which incorporates both the new logic as well as the new argument for the existence of God, both compliments of Ibn Sīnā – comes fully into its own with al-Juwaynī's illustrious student, al-Ghazālī, after whom the method and terminology of *kalām* come to resemble that of philosophy more and more with each succeeding generation of Ash‘arites.²⁴²

Ironically, despite the decisive role al-Juwaynī played in further developing the science of *kalām* and domesticating within it certain fundamental methods and concepts from philosophy, he is reported at the end of his life to have lost faith in the rational sciences and turned (back) instead to the study of jurisprudence, having discovered that “the triumph of metaphysics did not entail the *rational* certainty of faith that had been hoped for.”²⁴³

al-Ghazālī

The “Proof of Islam” (*ḥujjat al-Islām*) Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) is a major watershed figure in the history of Islamic thought who represents a confluence of jurisprudence, theology, philosophy, and Sufism and rightfully deserves a separate discussion under each of those titles. We treat him here not only because he possessed a superb philosophical education and sharply analytical mind, but also because it is his engagement with the *falsafa* tradition that is of

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 72-73.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 73.

²⁴² Ibid., 154.

²⁴³ Nagel, *History*, 167.

most direct relevance to the concern of this study – not only because he attempted to refute the theses of the philosophers on purely *philosophical* grounds, as Ibn Taymiyya aims to do, but also on account of what he took from philosophy and made part and parcel of Islamic orthodoxy (both legal and theological, not to mention mystical). In fact, al-Ghazālī has been characterized as “the greatest figure in the history of the Islamic reaction to Neo-Platonism.”²⁴⁴ In the pivotal figure of al-Ghazālī, we witness the full accomplishment of the crossover in Islamic *kalām*-theology from the “way of the ancients” (*ṭarīq al-mutaqaddimīn*) to the “way of the moderns” (*ṭarīq al-muta’akhhirīn*) foreshadowed by al-Juwaynī.²⁴⁵

Born (450/1058) in the northeastern Iranian city of Ṭūs, al-Ghazālī studied in Nishapur under the eminent Imām al-Ḥaramayn (al-Juwaynī). He subsequently taught at the prestigious Nizāmiyya madrasa in Baghdad for four years. Intense study of philosophy in this period produced a number of important works, including the aforementioned *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, an exposition of logic entitled *The Standard of Knowledge* (*Mi’yār al-‘ilm*),²⁴⁶ which was written as an appendix to the *Incoherence*,²⁴⁷ and an important work of Ash‘arite theology, *The Just Mean in Belief*²⁴⁸ (*al-Iqtisād fī al-i’tiqād*). He wrote his most famous work, *The Revivification of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*), after a lengthy period of seclusion dedicated to treading the Sufī path of spiritual purification and mystical realization. Upon returning home after his extended

²⁴⁴ Fakhry, *History*, 217.

²⁴⁵ Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 72. For a more detailed discussion of the progressive crossover from the “old way” to the “new way” through an analysis of al-Bāqillānī’s *Tamhīd*, al-Juwaynī’s *Irshād*, and al-Ghazālī’s *Iqtisād*, see *ibid.*, 153-160. In sum (see p. 154), the authors remark that the new way, whose eventual triumph one can already sense in the work of al-Juwaynī, becomes fully actualized in the work of al-Ghazālī, with Ash‘arite theologians thereafter steadily moving ever closer to *falsafā* and incorporating an ever greater portion of its terms and categories into *kalām* proper.

²⁴⁶ Michael Marmura speaks of al-Ghazālī’s work as being an exposition of “Avicenna’s logic” [Michael E. Marmura, “Al-Ghazālī,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 139]. M. Fakhry specifies this notion of an Avicennian logic as one in which “Aristotelian, Neo-Platonic, and Stoic elements are intermingled.” (Fakhry, *History*, 133). For a discussion of Ibn Sīnā’s presentation of logic in his famous *Shifā’*, see *ibid.*, 133-135.

²⁴⁷ Marmura, “Al-Ghazālī,” 139.

²⁴⁸ following the translation of this title by T. Winter (in Winter, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, 9).

hiatus, al-Ghazālī resumed his teaching and other scholarly activities, producing *inter alia* a major work on *uṣūl al-fiqh* (the aforementioned *Mustaṣfā*), an autobiography, two mystical treatises and, shortly before his death, a small work warning *against* the pursuit of *kalām*-theology by the common people.

In one of his most famous and influential works, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*), al-Ghazālī delivers a devastating blow to the *falsafa* tradition, particularly Ibn Sīnā’s metaphysics and psychology²⁴⁹ (but also aspects of al-Fārābī’s philosophy as well²⁵⁰) and elicited a strident, line-by-line response by the arch-Aristotelian philosopher Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198), born in the far western Andalusian city of Cordoba only fifteen years after al-Ghazālī’s death in northeastern Iran. In the *Incoherence*, al-Ghazālī sets out to refute twenty discrete doctrines of the philosophers, three of which he deems radically and irreconcilably in conflict with Islamic belief.²⁵¹ These three doctrines are: (1) the eternity of the world; (2) the idea that God knows only universal concepts and not particular instantiations thereof (that is, while He has knowledge of an abstract and universal “humanity,” He has no knowledge of you, nor me, nor of any other individual human being); and, (3) the impossibility of a physical resurrection after death. As all three doctrines stand in direct and irreducible contradiction to unequivocal and universally agreed upon Islamic teachings, holding any one of them, al-Ghazālī concludes, is sufficient to invalidate one’s Islamic belief and render one a *kāfir*, or disbeliever.²⁵² All three doctrines were upheld by practically all Muslim philosophers with the exception of al-Kindī who, as we have

²⁴⁹ Marmura, “Al-Ghazālī,” 137.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 144.

²⁵¹ For a tight and lucid summary of all twenty issues dealt with in the *Tahāfut*, see Fakhry, *History*, 222-233.

²⁵² For a succinct discussion of al-Ghazālī’s views on defining the proper boundaries of faith in his *Fayṣal al-tafrīq bayn al-Islām wa-l-zandaqa* (*The Criterion for Discernment between Islam and Disbelief*), see Sherman A. Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī’s Fayṣal al-Tafrīq*, ed. S. Nomanul Haq, vol. I, Studies in Islamic Philosophy (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). For an extended analysis of the issue, see Frank Griffel, *Apostasy and Tolerance in Islam: Die Entwicklung zu al-Ġazālī’s Urteil gegen die Philosophie und die Reaktionen der Philosophen* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), esp. Sections 3 and 4. The force of al-Ghazālī’s *takfīr* of these three positions upheld by the philosophers is especially emphatic given the broadness of the boundaries of orthodoxy he delineates in *Fayṣal al-tafrīq* and his clear reluctance to pronounce disbelief in any but the most extenuating of circumstances.

seen, explicitly adhered to Islamic teachings on all three counts despite his overall commitment to the ontology and methodology of *falsafa*. In addition to these three doctrines endemic to the system of the *falāsifa*, al-Ghazālī strongly opposed Ibn Sīnā’s conception of God as an eternal *essential* cause from which all that exists (merely) emanates, as this conception entails the negation of any meaningful concept of divine volition whatsoever. Al-Ghazālī, on the contrary, embraced the standard Ash‘arite so-called “occasionalist” ontology, which, as we have seen, views all events in the world as brought about directly and immediately by the will and power of God.

Al-Ghazālī’s was the first, though decidedly not the last, attempt in Islam to respond to philosophy on its own grounds, by purely philosophical arguments, rather than merely vilifying it as a foreign science, or accusing its practitioners of impiety, or leveling against it purely theological arguments based on the sole authority of scripture.²⁵³ Yet despite the mordancy of al-Ghazālī’s attack against the philosophers and the longstanding view that his offensive effectively sounded the death knoll of (at least a particular brand of) philosophy in the Muslim world, more recent studies have begun to reveal the extent to which al-Ghazālī’s own thought is indebted to that of his ideological foes, in particular Ibn Sīnā.²⁵⁴ It has even been suggested that, through his overt and deliberate appropriation of certain key aspects of the philosophers’ system, al-Ghazālī ended up making “certain radical concessions to philosophy in general and to logic in particular.”²⁵⁵ Indeed, it is well known that while al-Ghazālī rejected many aspects of *falsafa* out of hand, most notably its precarious metaphysics, he nonetheless embraced with enthusiasm the Aristotelian logic built on definition and syllogism that forms the very core of the whole system.²⁵⁶ In his autobiographical *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (*Deliverer from Error*), al-Ghazālī describes this logic as a neutral instrument, a trusty scale used for distinguishing true from false argu-

²⁵³ Fakhry, *History*, 221.

²⁵⁴ See, for example, Janssens, “Al-Ghazzālī’s *Tahāfut*.” Also Hermann Landolt, “Ghazālī and ‘*Religionswissenschaft*’: Some Notes on the *Mishkāt al-Anwār* for Professor Charles J. Adams,” *Asiatische Studien: Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Gesellschaft für Asienkunde* 45 (1991).

²⁵⁵ Fakhry, *History*, 319.

²⁵⁶ See Introduction to Hallaq, *Greek Logicians*, xii-xiv.

ments. Perhaps sensing the vulnerability of *kalām* arguments supported by the “old logic” in the face of Ibn Sīnā’s imposing edifice of philosophical ingenuity, al-Ghazālī made Ibn Sīnā’s logic his own and henceforth incorporated it eagerly into *kalām* as well as the science of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*). In his enthusiasm for the powerful new tool of logic, al-Ghazālī even believed he could identify the five forms of the Aristotelian syllogism prefigured in the Qur’an.²⁵⁷ We saw above how, starting with al-Juwaynī, the dialectic and syllogistic methods of argumentation combined. Al-Ghazālī now accords formal deductive reasoning based on the search for a universal middle term full *droit de cité*.²⁵⁸ Like al-Juwaynī, al-Ghazālī also no longer admits al-Bāqillānī’s “retroactivity” principle. Yet significantly, he nevertheless maintains all the major Ash‘arite positions, such as the negation of the efficacy of secondary causes and divine voluntarism, albeit without attempting to base these in any direct manner either on al-Bāqillānī’s atomistic physics.²⁵⁹ Since the traditional Ash‘arite theses are upheld integrally, al-Ghazālī’s innovation lies primarily in his method, his mode of exposition, and his style of reasoning,²⁶⁰ and it is this new method of reasoning and arguing that is identified as the “way of the moderns” (*ṭarīq al-muta’akhhirīn*) by Ibn Khaldūn and others.²⁶¹

Regarding metaphorical interpretation of the texts, al-Ghazālī admits *ta’wīl*, in the manner of al-Juwaynī, in order to obviate overtly anthropomorphic readings of the *ṣifāt khabariyya*, or “revealed attributes” (hands, face, etc.).²⁶² Yet al-Ghazālī seems willing – at least in some of his writings – to go a step further than al-Juwaynī had. Gardet and Anawati remark that while al-Ghazālī certainly did maintain the apparent sense of the texts in the face of extreme esoteri-

²⁵⁷ See Chelhot, “Qisṭās,” 12-15, discussing al-Ghazālī’s identification of the “five rules of thought” (namely, five different syllogistic figures) that he contends are revealed in the Qur’an.

²⁵⁸ Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 360-361.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 71-72.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁶¹ See Ibn Khaldūn’s discussion at Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, 466, esp. l. 3-7ff.

²⁶² For a detailed discussion of al-Ghazālī’s position on the use of *ta’wīl*, see Mehmet S. Aydin, “Al-Ghazālī on Metaphorical Interpretation,” in *Metaphor, Canon and Community: Jewish, Christian and Islamic Approaches*, ed. Ralph Bisschops and James Francis, *Religions and Discourse* (Bern & New York: P. Lang, 1999).

cist (Bāṭinite) tendencies, against which he directed a sustained and acerbic polemic,²⁶³ he nevertheless at times proffers an interpretation of the apparent sense of the text that seems to reduce it, as his later adversary Ibn Rushd will also do, to a purely symbolic value for the benefit of the common man.²⁶⁴ One of the best examples of this tendency is al-Ghazālī's *Niche of Lights* (*Mishkāṭ al-anwār*),²⁶⁵ which contains a complete theory of symbolism (in the sense of allegory, or *tamthīl*) with respect to the sensible and intelligible worlds, as well as multiple examples of "symbolic" explanation of the Qur'an, coupled with an affirmation both of the validity, but also of the reduced reach, of the literal or historical sense of such verses.²⁶⁶

Al-Ghazālī's attitude towards *kalām* – and, by extension, to the status of discursive knowledge more generally – is critical for understanding the potent legacy he left behind and the course of the development of Islamic thought as bequeathed to Ibn Taymiyya one and a half centuries later. In the *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, al-Ghazālī exhibits a guarded attitude towards *kalām*, admitting that it was not indeed practiced by the earliest generations of Muslims, but nevertheless justifies a limited use of *kalām* deemed indispensable once innovations (*bida'*) arose that risked leading believers away from the path of the Qur'an and Sunna and therefore had to be combated by adequate means on their own – that is to say, on rational – grounds.²⁶⁷ Despite this palliative function of *kalām*, however, al-Ghazālī does not seem to accept it as a fully legitimate (or at least not a fully adequate), let alone necessary, path for reaching truth.²⁶⁸ The inherent limitations of *kalām*, as we learn in the *Munqidh*, lie in the fact that it proceeds on the

²⁶³ See his caustic tract, *Faḍā'iḥ al-Bāṭiniyya* [Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Faḍā'iḥ al-Bāṭiniyya* (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-ʿAṣriyya, 2000)].

²⁶⁴ Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 218. "Il maintient sans doute contre les bāṭiniyya le sens « apparent »; mais l'interprétation qu'il en donne parfois semble le réduire, comme le fera plus tard son adversaire Ibn Rushd (et comme Philon jadis), à une pure valeur de symbole, à l'usage du « vulgaire »."

²⁶⁵ On this text, see Landolt, "Ghazālī and 'Religionswissenschaft'."

²⁶⁶ See Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 218, n. 6. For al-Ghazālī's use of allegory and the development of a vocabulary of symbolic meaning in the *Mishkāṭ*, see Landolt, "Ghazālī and 'Religionswissenschaft'."

²⁶⁷ Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 115.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 70-71.

basis of premises that are not certain in and of themselves, since they must be accepted on the basis of revelation or the consensus (*ijmāʿ*) of the community and for this reason are incapable of yielding apodictic certitude (on a purely rational level) as the result of a syllogistic process of inference.²⁶⁹ Yet just as we saw in the case of the newly converted al-Ashʿarī, al-Ghazālī's initially critical, if not deprecatory, assessment of *kalām* yields, in his later writings, to a moderated and more nuanced tone that accords *kalām* a legitimate, if duly circumscribed, place in the overall hierarchy of sciences. Thus in his *al-Risāla al-Ladunniyya*, for instance, al-Ghazālī classifies *ʿilm al-tawḥīd* – the science of the Oneness of God, “also known as *kalām*”²⁷⁰ – as occupying a position of prime importance. And while the sources of the knowledge of *tawḥīd*, according to the *Risāla*, are primarily the Qurʾan and the Sunna, they are also acknowledged specifically to comprise “rational arguments and syllogistic proofs” (*al-dalāʾil al-ʿaqliyya wa-l-barāhīn al-qiyāsiyya*) as well.²⁷¹

Al-Ghazālī's guardedly approbatory assessment of *kalām* in some of his writings should not, however, obscure his abiding insistence on the irredeemably limited nature of all purely discursive thought and related rational discourse, that of *kalām* marking here no exception. Rather, true certainty (*yaqīn*) for al-Ghazālī can ultimately be gained only through the “apprehension of realities” (*mushāhada*, or *mushāhadat al-ḥaqāʾiq*)²⁷² by way of mystical unveiling (*kashf*). While *kalām* may be of initial assistance in helping one move towards this goal, it can also act as a veil in as far as one may unwittingly mistake means for end.

Upon his death in 505/1111, the Proof of Islam left to subsequent generations a “highly explosive legacy that already contained the outlines of the main ideas of the theological work of the high and late Middle Ages.”²⁷³

²⁶⁹ Fakhry, *History*, 220.

²⁷⁰ Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 119.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Marmura, “Al-Ghazālī,” 152.

²⁷³ Nagel, *History*, 211.

XI. *Kalām* and *Falsafa* in the Wake of al-Ghazālī

Ash‘arism and the Struggle to Orthodoxy

The immediate reception of the new Ash‘arism in the 6th/12th century is illustrative of the larger intellectual mood of the period. While Ash‘arism undoubtedly had its enthusiastic supporters, it also had many implacable opponents. We recall that adherents of the tendency that we have referred to as “strict Ḥanbalism” rejected even the approach of al-Ash‘arī himself, not on account of his substantive doctrine – which, as we have seen, hewed very close to that of Ibn Ḥanbal – but as a protest against al-Ash‘arī’s appropriation and legitimization of the *methods* of the Mu‘tazila, methods whose adoption he saw as imperative for establishing *kalām* on a proper rational footing. Now with the further acclimation of *kalām* to philosophy represented in the new method of the *muta’akhkhirūn*, opposition to the entire venture of speculative theology seems to have spread, with the result that Ash‘arism, at least in some quarters, was a dangerous position to hold, just like being a Mu‘tazilite two centuries earlier.²⁷⁴ As may be expected, the most vociferous opposition came from Ḥanbalī quarters – an example being that of ‘Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī al-Harawī (d. 481/1088), a Ḥanbalī and well-known Sufi who “attacked the Ash‘arites downright furiously”²⁷⁵ – but opposition at this period went considerably beyond strictly Ḥanbalite circles. The tensions inherent in late 5th/11th-century Sunnism between a philosophizing Ash‘arite theological rationalism, on the one hand, and a rigorously non-speculative text-centered Ḥanbalism, on the other, eventually ran so high that open violence against the Ash‘arīs broke out in Baghdad in 460/1068.²⁷⁶ The battles between proponents

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 195.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 242. Al-Harawī’s opposition to *kalām* seems to have stemmed as much from his mystical orientation as from his Ḥanbalism. With respect to the view that *kalām* is unnecessary at best and that scripture alone suffices, T. Winter remarks that “al-Harawī (d. 1089) agrees, suggesting that *kalām* is an unreliable substitute for the true gift of mystical illumination.” (Winter, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, 5).

²⁷⁶ Nagel, *History*, 243.

and opponents of rational theology continued, until “increasingly the Ash‘arites became a minority persecuted by the Hanbalites.”²⁷⁷

Yet despite ongoing polemics against rationalist *kalām* by Ḥanbalites and others, Ash‘arism boasted a number of enthusiastic and vocal supporters as well, such as the Shāfi‘ī hadith master and historian Ibn ‘Asākir (d. 571/1176), who defended vigorously the legitimacy of a rational theological dialectic,²⁷⁸ and even the Ḥanbalī jurist and theologian Ibn ‘Aqīl (d. 513/1119). In time, Ash‘arism eventually established itself as the dominant school in the central regions, but not without a fight.²⁷⁹ The old conservatives all along refused to yield any turf, even to post-conversion al-Ash‘arī, wanting to have nothing at all to do with the “innovated” methods of the *mutakallimūn*. On the other hand, the Mu‘tazilites, furious at having been routed by al-Ash‘arī and his followers, turned to persecuting these latter wherever they were able to. In the middle of the 5th/11th century, this persecution spread to Syria, the Hijaz, Iraq, and Khurasan. The “*ahl al-sunnā*” (here referring to the Ash‘arīs, not the Ḥanbalīs) were condemned from the pulpit, stripped of their positions and functions, and prevented from teaching and preaching. The most prominent Ash‘arites were hunted down, maltreated, and thrown into prison. Al-Juwaynī himself got caught up in the fray – which was as much political, it seems, as theological – and was forced to flee his native Nishapur. It was not until the famous Seljuq vizier Niẓām al-Mulk (active 455-485 / 1063-1092) created in the major madrasas of the empire chairs specifically for the teaching of the new theology that Ash‘arism was finally put on its way to triumphing over its two rivals, the Mu‘tazila on the one hand and the more unyielding of the Ḥanbalīs on the other.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 57.

²⁷⁹ See George Makdisi, “Ash‘arī and the Ash‘arites in Islamic Religious History,” *Studia Islamica* 17 (1962) [to be qualified, however, by K. El-Rouayheb’s remarks at Khaled El-Rouayheb, “From Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 1566) to Khayr al-Dīn al-Ālūsī (d. 1899): Changing Views of Ibn Taymiyya among non-Ḥanbalī Sunni Scholars,” in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, ed. Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed, *Studies in Islamic Philosophy* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 295-296ff].

²⁸⁰ Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 61-62. Major representatives of new-way Ash‘arism in the post-Ghazālī period include ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), Ḥāfiẓ al-Dīn al-Nasafī (d. 710 / 1301 or 1310), ‘Aḍud al-Dīn al-Ījī (d. 756/1355), Sa’d

By the time Ibn Taymiyya was born some 200 years later,²⁸¹ any significant opposition to *kalām*-theology had all but dissipated in most quarters. Ash‘arism had long since come to be seen by a large number as the normative orthodox expression of Islamic belief in rational-theological terms. At the same time, the Mamluk rulers of Syria and Egypt, the two countries between which Ibn Taymiyya spent his life, had proven themselves enthusiastic patrons not only of the now dominant Ash‘arite theology, but of the many eclectic brands of Sufism – some quite orthodox, others rather less so – which had also become widespread, ensuring that “conflicts with the strict proponents of the *sunna* were unavoidable.”²⁸²

Philosophical Theology and the Fate of Falsafa Proper

While al-Ghazālī’s attack on *falsafa* was long understood in Western scholarship to have spelled the death of philosophy in the Muslim world, this is only true in one sense, namely, that there was to be no continuation of an *independent* philosophical tradition pursued along the largely *Aristotelian* lines of classical *falsafa* – with the notable exception of Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198), whose work, however consequential it may have been for medieval Europe, ended up having virtually no impact on the Muslim world whatsoever.²⁸³ On the one hand, alternate schools of philosophy arose and flourished, most notably the *Ishrāqī*, or “Illuminationist,” tradition founded by Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. c. 587/1191), a tradition that reached its culmination in the 11th–/17th-century grand synthesis represented by the “transcendent theosophy,” or *ḥikma muta‘āliya*, of the Persian Shī‘ite philosopher, theologian, and mystic Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (Mullā Ṣadrā) (d. 1050/1640) which has survived as a living tradition in Iran up to the present

al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 792/1390), al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī (d. 816/1413), Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Sanūsī (d. 895/1490), and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Dawānī (d. 907/1501). On the appropriation of Avicennian thought by the new *kalām*, see Wisnovsky, “Nature and Scope.”

²⁸¹ I.e., in the year 661/1263.

²⁸² Nagel, *History*, 243.

²⁸³ Ibn Rushd’s views on the relationship between reason and revelation shall be discussed in more detail at the end of the following chapter. For an overview, see Fakhry, *History*, 270–292, “Ibn Rushd and the Defense of Aristotelianism.”

day.²⁸⁴ On the other hand, a perusal of later *kalām* works makes it abundantly clear that Islam in a sense co-opted, rather than banished, philosophy, absorbing it into the body of *kalām* while bending it to the outlook, purposes, and needs of the discipline.²⁸⁵

Contemporary scholars have offered contrasting interpretations of the precise nature of the intertwinement that took place between *falsafa* and *kalām* in the post-Ibn Sīnā / post-Ghazālī period. L. Gardet and M.-M. Anawati stress how the *falāsifa* (with the sole exception of al-Kindī) always retained full autonomy vis-à-vis Islamic doctrine;²⁸⁶ R. Wisnovsky, on the other hand, stresses the extent to which *kalām* influenced *falsafa*, at least in terms of the topics dealt with therein. These positions may perhaps not be in contradiction, however, once we realize that such topics as are imported into philosophy from *kalām* are always dealt with on purely philosophical grounds. That is, theological topics such as angels, the afterlife, prophethood, etc. were reinterpreted by the *falāsifa* and naturalized into their own discipline and worldview,²⁸⁷ without ever making “the slightest real concession”²⁸⁸ to Islamic doctrine as derived from revelation. M. Fakhry likewise underscores the reluctance of the *falāsifa* to “surrender any as-

²⁸⁴ M. Fakhry refers to Mullā Ṣadrā as “the last great encyclopedic writer in Islam” and remarks that “[h]is voluminous output is an eloquent disproof of the view expressed by many historians of Islamic medieval philosophy that by the end of the eleventh century al-Ghazālī had dealt philosophy a crippling blow from which it never recovered.” (ibid., 311).

²⁸⁵ See Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 325ff. See also the remarks of T. Winter in his *Introduction* to Winter, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, particularly the section “The fate of *falsafa*,” pp. 11-14, where he observes (p. 12) that “[e]ven the most superficial perusal of a late *kalām* work will reveal the immense influence which Avicenna exerted on the framing of Muslim orthodoxy.” He goes on to remark (p. 14), following K. El-Rouayheb, that “Muslim orthodoxy did not shed Hellenism, but steadily accumulated it, and continued to extol the core Aristotelian discipline of logic, not only in *kalām*, but in law.”

²⁸⁶ In their analysis of this point, they argue that although the *falāsifa* tried hard to maintain the letter of the Qur’an, they never accepted anything from revelation that actually went beyond the domain of philosophy proper, so much so that “toute l’attitude des falāsifa vis-à-vis du Coran fut toujours une tentative pour affirmer leur respect de la lettre, revendiquant ainsi, avec raison, le titre de musulmans, mais au prix de tous les jeux dialectiques d’une libre exégèse personnelle. Jamais par contre la ligne de leur recherche philosophique ne fit à la ligne des traditions musulmanes la moindre concession vraie.” [italics mine]. (See discussion at Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 321-323).

²⁸⁷ Such as, for instance, identifying angels with the intellects (*‘uqūl*) of the spheres, or explaining the phenomenon of revelation descending upon a prophet as the conjunction of that prophet’s intellect with the active intellect.

²⁸⁸ See quotation cited in foregoing footnote (n. 286 above).

pect of the former [philosophy], or to attribute any mark of privilege or distinction to the latter [Islamic belief] by virtue of its supernatural or divine origin.”²⁸⁹ Yet even if we accept Wisnovsky’s more recent view that philosophy in fact became further “theologized,” especially through Ibn Sīnā, and that it shared with *kalām* in certain methodological tools as well as in some of the topics that had been raised by the *mutakallimūn*, then it is easy to understand why the overall system of the *falāsifa* retained a monotheistic coloring and religious mood not found in the original works of the Greeks. In terms of substantive borrowing from *kalām*, T. Winter cites the argument (following Wisnovsky) that Ibn Sīnā himself had borrowed from *kalām* certain fundamental notions, including the key distinction between essence and existence so central to his thought. This in turn, he suggests, may help to explain why Ibn Sīnā’s thought spread so rapidly among the *mutakallimūn* and was taken up in so many quarters with such enthusiasm.²⁹⁰

Regarding the degree to which *kalām* was influenced by *falsafa*, it has been suggested that philosophy was never roundly defeated in Islam, but rather that it lived on through *kalām*. (Ibn Taymiyya, incidentally, would fully agree with this, but would hardly see in it a cause for rejoice.) But if this be true, then the question arises: To what degree did philosophy live on *as philosophy*? It has been argued that philosophical themes and methods, once torn from their own context and incorporated into *kalām*, no longer operated “philosophically,” but rather became co-opted by theology and bent to serve its own purposes.²⁹¹ It has been further remarked that the “old” (pre-philosophical) and “new” (philosophical) methods of *kalām* continued to exist side by side in the later *kalām* treatises

²⁸⁹ Fakhry, *History*, 91.

²⁹⁰ Winter, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, 11. Regarding the popularity of Ibn Sīnā among later Sunni theologians and other intellectuals, Winter (p. 12) notes that “Avicenna continued to be taught in tandem with the *kalām* texts which took him, as well as the scriptures, as their point of departure for the study of God, who was now explicitly defined in Avicennian terms as the Necessary Existent [a term, incidentally, which even Ibn Taymiyya does not disdain to use, and with considerable frequency at that]. The Ottoman chief judge Molla Kestelli (d. 1495) was proud to have read Avicenna’s *Shifā’* seven times, and Avicenna continued to be referred to extensively by some Sunnīs as well as many Shī’īs up to and beyond the dawn of modernity.”

²⁹¹ Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 325.

and that the old methods were still considered valid.²⁹² It has also been suggested that the increasing “philosophization” of *kalām* manifested itself mostly in the ever increasing philosophical preambles to the larger works of the later *kalām* tradition, but that these preambles are more or less tacked onto works whose conclusions are already known and which always end up in substantially the same place doctrinally. One may be tempted by this fact to imprecate *kalām* on the basis that it absorbed philosophy in a purely superficial and cosmetic manner, as if merely grafted onto the body of *kalām* doctrine with the view of lending *kalām* a misleading sense of intellectual sophistication. Such a verdict would be injudicious, however, if we consider the original nature and function of *kalām* as a primarily *apologetic* undertaking, the main purpose of which was to show that the basic propositions of faith were rationally defensible (that is, that they were not absurd, even if they could not, in the main, be derived solely through reason), and to protect the existential truths known through revelation by means of an “impregnable fortress” capable of defending their integrity from philosophical attack.²⁹³ From this perspective, *kalām* perhaps never entertained any pretensions of being “philosophical” in the manner in which the *falāsifa* would have understood their own endeavor, but rather concerned itself with the task of assembling the strongest arguments it could lay its hands on in order to demonstrate, in the face of a persistent philosophical challenge, the rational integrity of its substantive doctrine (or rather, the substantive doctrine of the Qur’an and Sunna, as *kalām* itself would certainly have understood it).

Seen in this light, *kalām* cannot be said to have ended up capitulating to philosophy in any fundamental manner – though once again, there was at least *some* adjustment not only of method, but also of some secondary points of doctrine in the wake of Ibn Sīnā’s philosophical tidal wave. Be that as it may, *kalām* remained resolutely *kalām* at heart in its overall attitude, inspiration, and mission. On the other hand, while philosophy may have in a sense lived on through *kalām* by enriching this latter with both a nuanced terminology and improved

²⁹² Ibid., 425.

²⁹³ See ibid., 313: “une forteresse imprenable et défiant toute attaque.”

methods of rational argumentation, its various premises and procedures no longer operated, in the habitat of *kalām*, on terms that the *falāsifa* would likely have recognized as authentically “philosophical.” What results, then, is neither pure philosophy nor a purely scripture-based, non-speculative theology, but rather a singular intellectual enterprise – a unique “philosophical theology” – operating on its own terms, borrowing, rejecting, incorporating, appropriating, and reinterpreting the elements with which it comes into contact to suit its own purposes and in the service of its own autonomous objectives.

One of the main architects of this new “philosophical theology” in the immediate post-Ghazālī period was the Persian Shāfi‘ite theologian and polymath Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), whose articulation of the Universal Law²⁹⁴ serves as Ibn Taymiyya’s primary target in the *Dar’ al-ta‘arūf*. Born in the city of Rayy near present-day Tehran in 543/1149, it is al-Rāzī who, coupled with al-Ghazālī, did the most to incorporate the new philosophical approach into the body of *kalām*.²⁹⁵ In addition to his studies of history, literature, law, theology, medicine, and the natural sciences, al-Rāzī immersed himself deeply in the study of philosophy and was a master of the art of disputation. His thought was deeply influenced by Ibn Sīnā, but more in the way of the philosopher Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī (d. 560/ 1164-5), a convert to Islam from Judaism whose thought, while steeped in Ibn Sīnā, was nevertheless critical of this latter and, on the whole, stood closer in his views to orthodox Muslim and Jewish theological positions.²⁹⁶ Al-Rāzī wrote an important work on metaphysics, called *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, or the *Oriental Investigations*, which manifests his clear debt to Ibn Sīnā, but also his rejection of certain central aspects of this latter’s system, such as Ibn Sīnā’s doctrine of emanation.²⁹⁷ Nevertheless, al-Rāzī’s most important work on theology, the *Muḥaṣṣal afkār al-mutaqaddimīn wa-l-muta’akhkhirīn* (*The Harvest of the Thought of the Ancients and Moderns*), which begins with an extended disquisition on metaphysics, epistemology, and

²⁹⁴ See Introduction, p. xv above.

²⁹⁵ Watt, *Islamic Phil.*, 94.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Fakhry, *History*, 319-321.

logic, shows clearly the increasing influence of the terms and categories of *falsafa* in the discourse of *kalām*, and al-Rāzī's inclusion of a metaphysical preamble to the *Muḥaṣṣal* becomes standard in subsequent works of Ash'arī *kalām*. Of equal significance, however, is that fact that although al-Rāzī was more liberal in his use of philosophy than al-Ghazālī, he was nevertheless "more conservative in questions of dogma and less given to speculating freely."²⁹⁸ This combination of philosophical sophistication and theological conservatism, characteristic of the direction taken by later *kalām*,²⁹⁹ bears eloquent testimony to the observations made earlier regarding *kalām*'s function as a primarily defensive and prophylactic undertaking committed to the programmatic use of reason in order to defend and explicate revealed truths, and to the unique brand of "philosophical theology" into which *kalām* developed in its mature stages.

²⁹⁸ Watt, *Islamic Phil.*, 95. Consider also the remarks of Gardet and Anawati regarding the nature of al-Rāzī's approach and the stage *kalām* reached by and through his œuvre: "En ce XII^e siècle, le kalām avait atteint avec Rāzī l'un de ses points extrêmes de « modernité ». La question à débattre pour lui restait une question de méthode plus que de nature : quels modes de raisonnement appeler à l'aide dans la réfutation des « négateurs » [i.e., Mu'tazilites and others who negate the divine attributes]? — et quelle importance accorder aux « préambules philosophiques », non tant pour le service intrinsèque (assez limité) qu'ils pourraient rendre aux autres chapitres, que pour leur part de connaissances acceptables, non discordantes de la Loi." (Gardet and Anawati, *Introduction*, 258). For a more recent revision of this evaluation of al-Rāzī, see Wisnovsky, "Essence and Existence."

²⁹⁹ Watt, *Islamic Phil.*, 95.

CHAPTER 2

THE LIFE, TIMES, AND INTELLECTUAL PROFILE OF IBN TAYMIYYA (661-728 / 1263-1328)

I. The Life and Times of Ibn Taymiyya

In the previous chapter, we sought to provide an overview of the development of the Islamic intellectual tradition over the course of the seven centuries preceding Ibn Taymiyya, with special emphasis on those aspects most relevant to our main concern – the relationship between reason and revelation – as can be pieced together from various Muslim theological, historical, and heresiographical works and the secondary source materials that are based on, and that analyze, these works. We shall now complement this in the current section with a brief overview of the political and social circumstances into which Ibn Taymiyya was born, followed by his own biography, intellectual profile, reception by his contemporaries, and major works.

The chaotic intellectual climate into which Ibn Taymiyya was born was matched by the political uncertainty and fragmentedness of his times.¹ Born in the city of Harran (located in southeastern Turkey adjacent to the Syrian border)

¹ For general studies on the political background of Ibn Taymiyya's times, see Robert Irwin, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages: The Early Mamluk Sultanate, 1250-1382* (London: Croon Helm; Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986) and Linda S. Northrup, "The Bahārī Mamlūk Sultanate, 1250-1390," in *The Cambridge History of Egypt, Vol. 1: Islamic Egypt, 640-1517*, ed. Carl F. Petry (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). On the specific Mongol incursion into Syria in the year 700/1300 (and in the resistance to which Ibn Taymiyya played a pivotal role), see Reuven Amitai, "The Mongol Occupation of Damascus in 1300: A Study of Mamluk Loyalties," in *The Mamluks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society*, ed. Michael Winter and Amalia Levanoni (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2004). On the cultural and social backdrop of the period, see Jonathan Berkey, "Culture and Society during the Late Middle Ages," in *The Cambridge History of Egypt, Vol. 1: Islamic Egypt, 640-1517*, ed. Carl F. Petry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Concerning the religious life of the period, see Donald P. Little, "Religion under the Mamluks," *The Muslim World* 73 (1983) and Louis Pouzet, *Damas au VII^e-XIII^e siècle : vie et structures religieuses d'une métropole islamique*, vol. 15, Recherches. Nouvelle série. A, Langue arabe et pensée islamique (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1988), Ch. 1, "Situation du sunnisme à Damas" (pp. 20-105).

in the year 661/1263,² Ibn Taymiyya's family fled southwest to Damascus in 667/1269 before the westward advance of the Mongols, who had already reached the gates of northern Syria when Ibn Taymiyya was only six years old. The area of Greater Syria was under the thumb of petty amirs who, in their infighting and general ineptitude, were quite incapable of mounting any credible resistance to the advancing Mongol armies, while Egypt – generally safe from the menace of a direct Mongol onslaught – was under the rule of the Bahārī Mamluk dynasty.

Upon fleeing Harran,³ Ibn Taymiyya's family settled in the Ḥanbalī quarter of Damascus, where Ibn Taymiyya's father was the director of the Sukkariyya Ḥanbalī madrasa, located in the shadows of the Ḥanbalī gate outside the walls of Old Damascus. It is in this madrasa that Ibn Taymiyya received his

² The most complete and authoritative single source for the life of Ibn Taymiyya is Ibn 'Abd al-Hādī's (d. 744/1343) *al-'Uqūd al-durriyya min manāqib Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya*. Other important sources for the biography of Ibn Taymiyya are al-Dhahabī's (d. 748/1348) *Kitāb Tadhkirat al-ḥuffāz* and *al-I'lam bi-wafayāt al-a'lām*; Ibn Kathīr's (d. 774/1373) *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya*; Ibn al-Dawādārī's (fl. 708-735 / 1309-1335) *Kanz al-durar wa-jāmi' al-ghurar*; Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī's (d. 795/1392) *Dhayl 'alā Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila*; and al-Kutubī's (d. 764/1362) *Fawāt al-wafayāt*, which is a supplement to Ibn Khallikān's (d. 681/1282) famous *Wafayāt al-a'yān wa-anbā' abnā' al-zamān*. Later works include Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī's (d. 852/1448) *al-Durar al-kāmina fī a'yān al-mi'a al-thāmina*; al-'Ulaymī's (d. 928/1521) *al-Manhaj al-aḥmad fī tarājim aṣḥāb al-Imām Aḥmad*; Mar'ī b. Yūsuf al-Karmī's (d. 1033/1624) *al-Kawākib al-durriyya fī manāqib al-mujtahid Ibn Taymiyya*; al-Shawkānī's (d. 1250/1839) *al-Badr al-tālī 'bi-maḥāsin man ba'd al-qarn al-tāsi'*; and al-Ālūsī's (d. 1295/1899) *Jalāl al-'aynayn fī muḥākamat al-Aḥmadayn: Aḥmad b. 'Abd al-Ḥalīm ibn Taymiyya, Aḥmad b. Muḥammad ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī*. For a detailed discussion of the classical Arabic sources for the biography of Ibn Taymiyya, see Donald P. Little, "The Historical and Historiographical Significance of the Detention of Ibn Taymiyya," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 4, no. 3 (1973): 313-318 et passim. For an excellent contemporary study in Arabic, see Muḥammad Abū Zahra, *Ibn Taymiyya: ḥayātuhu wa-'aṣruhu, āra'uhu wa-fiqhu* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-'Arabī, 1952); also Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Ibn Taymiyya*, Muntakhab min Mudawwanāt al-Turāth (Beirut: Riyād al-Rayyis li-l-Kutub wa-l-Nashr, 2000). The most extensive treatment of Ibn Taymiyya's life and thought in a European language remains Henri Laoust, *Essai sur les doctrines sociales et politiques de Takī-d-Dīn Aḥmad b. Taimīya, canoniste hanbalite, né à Harrān en 661/1262, mort à Damas en 728/1328*, vol. 10, Recherches d'archéologie, de philologie et d'histoire (Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1939). Shorter studies include Henri Laoust, "L'influence d'Ibn-Taymiyya," in *Islam, Past Influence and Present Challenge*, ed. Alford T. Welch and Pierre Cachia (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979), and Henri Laoust, "La biographie d'Ibn Taimiya d'après Ibn Kaṭīr," *Bulletin d'études orientales* 9 (1942), which is a paraphrase and summary of Ibn Kathīr's *Bidāya* (see above). Studies on Ibn Taymiyya's influence include Laoust, "L'influence," 15-33, and El-Rouayheb, "From Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī," 269-318.

³ The following account of Ibn Taymiyya's life constitutes, in the main, a rough paraphrase of Henri Laoust, "Ibn Taymiyya," in *EF*² (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), 951-955. For a more detailed account of the same events, see Laoust, "Biographie," 115-162; Laoust, *Essai*, 110-150 ("L'action publique"); and, Hasan Qasim Murad, "Ibn Taymiyyah on Trial: a Narrative Account of his *Miḥan*," *Islamic Studies* 18 (1979): 1-32.

principal education, following in the scholarly footsteps of his uncle, Fakhr al-Dīn b. Taymiyya (d. 622/1225), and paternal grandfather, Majd al-Dīn b. Taymiyya (d. 653/1255), both of whom had distinguished themselves as important authorities of contemporary Ḥanbalism.⁴ Though Ibn Taymiyya studied with a large number of scholars (including a number of women)⁵ over the course of his education, his strength and independence of mind were such that none of his various mentors alone exercised a sufficient influence on his thinking for Ibn Taymiyya to be considered his (or her) disciple.⁶ Ibn Taymiyya eventually succeeded his father as director of the Sukkariyya and gave his first public lesson there at the young age of 21. One year later, he began teaching Qur’anic exegesis (*tafsīr*) at the famous Umayyad mosque in Damascus, and a decade later took up teaching at the Ḥanbaliyya madrasa in Damascus upon the death of one of his teachers there. At around the same time, he was offered the prestigious and much coveted position of chief judge (*qāḍī al-quḍāh*), which, however, he turned down.⁷ In addition to a strong grounding in Ḥanbalī law and jurisprudence, Ibn Taymiyya is said also to have gained such an expert knowledge of the other schools of law – and from each school’s authoritative primary sources – that never did he discuss legal matters with a scholar from another school except that his interlocutor left having learned something of value about his own school from Ibn Taymiyya. In addition to his formidable training in law, Ibn Taymiyya was particularly well grounded in hadith and *tafsīr*, and read avidly in the fields of philosophy and theology, as well as the existing Muslim heresiographical literature.⁸ Indeed, through the vast and varied corpus of his writings, Ibn Taymiyya exhibits an al-

⁴ For a detailed presentation of Ibn Taymiyya’s education and intellectual training, see Laoust, *Essai*, 71-109 (chapitre II: “La formation intellectuelle et morale”).

⁵ Abdul Hakim I. Al-Matroudi, *The Ḥanbalī School of Law and Ibn Taymiyyah: Conflict or Conciliation* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 16 mentions that Ibn Taymiyya had a large number of teachers, with some sources claiming up to 200. In the corresponding note (n. 124), he cites in this connection Ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī, ‘*Uqūd*, 3; al-Karmī, *al-Kawākib*, 54; and Ṣafī al-Dīn, *al-Qawl*, 5-6. He further reports that a “*mashyakha*” of Ibn Taymiyya’s, related by al-Dhahabī, includes 41 male teachers and four female teachers (*shaykhāt*).

⁶ Laoust, *Essai*, 71-72.

⁷ M. Umaruddin, “Ibn Taimiyya as a Thinker and Reformer,” in *Usbū‘ al-fiqh al-islāmī wa-mahrajān al-Imām Ibn Taymiyya (1380/1961: Damascus)*, ed. Muḥammad Abū Zahra (Cairo: al-Majlis al-A‘lā li-Ri‘āyat al-Funūn wa-l-Ādāb wa-l-‘Ulūm al-Ijtimā‘iyya, 1963), 718.

⁸ Such as al-Ash‘arī’s *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn* or al-Shahrastānī’s *Kitāb al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*.

most astonishing familiarity with all the major schools of thought and particular writings of most of the philosophers and theologians before his time, a fact which has led Y. Michot to dub Ibn Taymiyya “the most important reader of the *falāsifah* after Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in the Sunni world.”⁹ Ibn Taymiyya was a bold and formidable debater as well, which, coupled with the enormous range and depth of his erudition, guaranteed that he rarely, if ever, lost a debate.

Ibn Taymiyya was a public intellectual *par excellence* who had his feet firmly planted in the social and political realities of his day. Indeed, the external political turbulence of his times closely resembled the many vicissitudes of his own personal and professional life. Ibn Taymiyya’s boldness in defending and proclaiming his views, coupled with his undisputed reputation for great personal uprightness and high moral integrity, won him many admirers among the common folk and the political and intellectual elite alike. Nevertheless, the idiosyncratic and often controversial nature of some of his views, no doubt exacerbated by his often condescending and vituperative tone and self-admitted inclination towards irascibility, earned him numerous powerful opponents as well. All told, Ibn Taymiyya, over the course of his 67-year life, was summoned to trial nine times, exiled twice (from Damascus to Cairo, then from Cairo to Alexandria), twice ordered to desist from giving fatwas, and imprisoned on six separate occasions for what amounts to a total duration of more than six years.¹⁰

Ibn Taymiyya’s first foray into political life took place in the year 693/1293, when a Christian by the name of ‘Assāf al-Naṣrānī was alleged to have publicly insulted the Prophet Muḥammad, a punishable offense under Islamic law. Though the authorities inclined to leniency, Ibn Taymiyya resolutely insisted on the full application of the law, an act of insubordination to the authorities which earned him his first stint in prison. In 698/1299, he wrote one of his most famous statements of creed, *al-‘Aqīda al-Ḥamawīyya*, which was hostile to

⁹ “le plus important lecteur des *falāsifah* après Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī dans le monde sunnite.” (Michot, “Vanités,” 599).

¹⁰ Little, “The Historical and Historiographical Significance,” 313.

Ash‘arism and to *kalām* in general.¹¹ Ibn Taymiyya’s opponents from among the *mutakallimūn* accused him of anthropomorphism on account of this creed, whereupon he was summoned to questioning in the home of the Shāfi‘ī qadi Imām al-Dīn ‘Umar al-Qazwīnī. After a close review of the text of the *Ḥamawīyya* and Ibn Taymiyya’s detailed explication of it during this session, he was acquitted of the charges brought against him and permitted to continue his teaching and writing.

The events of the following few years called upon Ibn Taymiyya to take an active political, and even military, role on a number of occasions. During the Mongol invasion of Damascus in 699/1300, Ibn Taymiyya was one of the spokesmen of the resistance party at Damascus sent to negotiate with the Ilkhān Ghāzān, leader of the invading forces. Due to his forceful pleading, Ibn Taymiyya was able to obtain the release of many prisoners as well as a declaration of peace for the city’s inhabitants.¹² Later that year, he took part in an expedition under Mamluk command against the Shī‘ites of Kasrawān, who were accused of collaborating with both the Mongols and the Crusaders. Shortly thereafter, in the face of a second Mongol threat, Ibn Taymiyya was bidden to exhort the people to mount a defense and traveled all the way to Cairo to beseech the Mamluk sultan, Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn, to dispatch an army to Syria. Ibn Taymiyya was also present as a fighter at the victory of Shaqḥab scored against a third Mongol invasion several years later (702/1303) and participated in a renewed campaign against the Shī‘a of Kasrawān in 704/1305.

Following these political engagements, Ibn Taymiyya returned to his scholarly writing and debates. On one occasion during this period, he is reported to have led a party of stonemasons to smash a sacred rock that was being venerated in the mosque of Naranj. He also sent a letter to the shaykh Naṣr al-Dīn al-Manbijī, one of the leading members of the Damascene disciples of the Andalusian Sufi Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240-1), in which he politely but roundly con-

¹¹ Laoust speaks of the “insolent mépris” with which Ibn Taymiyya “s’en prenait à la légitimité de la théologie spéculative.” (Laoust, “L’influence,” 15).

¹² Umaruddin, “Ibn Taimiyya,” 718.

demned this latter's increasingly popular, yet highly controversial, mystical monism.¹³ Around the same time, Ibn Taymiyya's opponents raised a second round of doubts surrounding the orthodoxy of his belief, this time based on a second statement of creed, known as *al-'Aqīda al-Wāsiṭiyya*.¹⁴ Two councils¹⁵ were held back to back in 705/1306 at the residence of the governor of Damascus, during the second of which a pupil of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), that master of late Ash'arī philosophical *kalām*, judged Ibn Taymiyya's *Wāsiṭiyya* to be "in conformity with the Qur'an and Sunna." Nevertheless, a Shāfi'ī judge, Ibn Ṣaṣrā,¹⁶ immediately reopened the case against the *Wāsiṭiyya*, resulting in a third council held on the orders of the sultan. This time too the council refrained from condemning the treatise, whereupon Ibn Ṣaṣrā resigned and, along with Ibn Taymiyya, was banished to Cairo several months later. Immediately upon his arrival in Cairo, Ibn Taymiyya was summoned before yet another council, this time composed of high-ranking Mamluk officials and the four chief qadis of Egypt, where he was convicted of propagating anthropomorphic views and condemned to imprisonment in the Citadel of Cairo. After 18 months of internment, Ibn Taymiyya was set free but was not permitted to return to Syria.

¹³ For the text of this letter, see Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya, "Kitāb Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyya ilā al-'arīf bi-'Llāh al-shaykh al-Naṣr al-Manbijī," in *Majmū'at al-rasā'il wa-l-masā'il*, ed. Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Manār, 1341h), I:161-183.

¹⁴ There is some question as to whether it was *al-'Aqīda al-Wāsiṭiyya* itself which landed Ibn Taymiyya before the Damascus tribunal, or whether his troubles were a result of his activities and theological positions in general, with him calling the *Wāsiṭiyya* to witness himself in order to expound his creed in detail before his jurors. On this question, see Sherman A. Jackson, "Ibn Taymiyyah on Trial in Damascus," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 39, no. 1 (1994): 49-51, esp. at 49, n. 53. For a translation of the *Wāsiṭiyya* with an introduction and notes, see Merlin Swartz, "A seventh-century (A.H.) Sunnī creed: The 'Aqīda Wāsiṭiyya of Ibn Taymiyya," *Humaniora Islamica* 1 (1973): 91-131, and before him, Henri Laoust, *La profession de foi d'Ibn Taymiyya : texte, traduction et commentaire de la Wāsiṭiyya* (Paris: Librairie orientale Paul Guethner, 1986). For the specific charges brought against the *Wāsiṭiyya*, see Swartz, "A seventh-century (A.H.) Sunnī creed," 101-102.

¹⁵ For a detailed study of the Damascus trials, including a presentation of all the actors involved and a translation and discussion of Ibn Taymiyya's own first-person account of their proceedings, see Jackson, "Ibn Taymiyyah on Trial." Also Little, "The Historical and Historiographical Significance."

¹⁶ On the correct pronunciation of this name as "Ibn Ṣaṣrā," as opposed to "Ibn Ṣaṣarī" or other variant pronunciations often given in Western sources, see Jackson, "Ibn Taymiyyah on Trial," 46, n. 20 [following Brinner's conclusions in W. M. Brinner, "The Banū Ṣaṣrā: a Study in the Transmission of a Scholarly Tradition," *Arabica* 7 (1960)].

Ibn Taymiyya continued in Cairo his denunciation of various beliefs and practices that he considered to be *bid'a*, or reprehensible innovation, inviting the opposition, in the year 707/1308, of the famous and influential Sufi shaykh of the Shādhilī order, Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh al-Iskandarī (d. 709/1309) and that of another prominent Sufi, Karīm al-Dīn al-Āmulī (d. 710/1310-11). At question here was Ibn Taymiyya's vocal opposition to the practice, widely accepted both by Sufis and the majority of legal scholars, of *tawassul* (or *istighātha*), a form of supplication for divine assistance through the intermediary of either the Prophet Muḥammad or of a subsequent individual of high spiritual rank, known as a *walī* (pl., *awliyā'*). Seemingly out of fear that such a practice – sometimes referred to as “maraboutism,” or the “cult of saints” – if taken to an extreme, could result in shifting the believer's primary spiritual focus from God to created beings, however pious they may be, Ibn Taymiyya declared *tawassul* prohibited, seeing in it a subtle form of *shirk*, or idolatry.¹⁷ Following a popular demonstration against him, Ibn Taymiyya was called before a Shāfi'ī judge in Cairo where he was asked to explain his views on *tawassul*. The judge apparently acquitted him, as he was officially granted permission to return to Syria, but was nevertheless held in prison in Cairo for several additional months.

One year later, in 708/1309, Baybars al-Jāshnakīr, a disciple of the aforementioned shaykh Naṣr al-Dīn al-Manbijī, was proclaimed sultan. The new sultan's alignment with the Sufi forces that Ibn Taymiyya had directly opposed led to a new round of recriminations against him. In the very same year of Baybars' ascension to the sultanate, Ibn Taymiyya was arrested and exiled to Alexandria, where he was placed under house arrest for seven months in the tower of the sultan's palace. During this period, he wrote several important works, most notably his *Radd 'alā al-manṭiqiyyīn*, or *Refutation of the Logicians*,¹⁸ which has been

¹⁷ For a comparison of Ibn Taymiyya's opposition to the “cult of saints” with that of the famous Christian iconoclast two centuries later, Martin Luther, see Niels Henrik Olesen, “Étude comparée des idées d'Ibn Taymiya (1263-1328) et de Martin Luther sur le culte des saints,” *Revue des études islamiques* 50 (1982).

¹⁸ See Hallaq, *Greek Logicians* for a heavily annotated translation of, and extensive introduction to, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī's (d. 911/1505) abridgment of Ibn Taymiyya's tract, entitled *Jahd al-qarīḥa fī tajrīd al-naṣīḥa*.

described as “one of the most devastating attacks ever leveled against the logical system upheld by the early Greeks, the later commentators, and their Muslim followers,”¹⁹ and a work whose theme is of central importance to Ibn Taymiyya’s critique of the philosophical and theological methods he holds responsible for engendering the famous “contradiction” between reason and revelation that he sets out to refute in the *Dar’ al-ta’arūḍ*.

In the following year, Ibn Taymiyya was released from captivity in Alexandria and returned to Cairo, where he taught privately and continued writing for three years until a new Mongol threat to the north occasioned his return to Damascus in the year 712/1313. At virtually the same time, a new governor of Damascus was appointed under whose rule Ibn Taymiyya was promoted to the rank of professor. His supporters by now considered him an independent *mujtahid*, and it is during this period that he first began the training of his most talented and influential pupil, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350), who did much to synthesize, organize, and popularize his master’s teachings. Relations between Ḥanbalīs and Ash‘arīs in Damascus remained troubled, however, and open rivalry broke out in an incident in 716/1316 that once more pitted the two schools against each other over questions of creed.

By the year 718/1318, trouble flared up once again, this time in conjunction with Ibn Taymiyya’s ruling – against the consensus opinion (*ijmā’*) of the four legal schools, including his own Ḥanbalī *madhhab* – that a triple divorce formula uttered in one instance only counted as a single repudiation – and hence was insufficient to bring about a full and irrevocable divorce – if the man uttering the triple formula had not intended an actual definitive repudiation of his spouse.²⁰ Ibn Taymiyya was ordered by the sultan to stop issuing fatwas on divorce that did not conform to the doctrine of the Ḥanbalī school, and two coun-

¹⁹ Ibid., xi.

²⁰ On the question of Ibn Taymiyya and the triple *ṭalāq*, see Yossef Rapoport, “Ibn Taymiyya on Divorce Oaths,” in *The Mamluks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society*, ed. Michael Winter and Amalia Levanoni (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2004); also Laoust, *Essai*, 422-434. See too Al-Matroudi, *The Ḥanbalī School*, ch. 6, where the author argues that a careful study of the evidence reveals that Ibn Taymiyya’s stance on *ṭalāq* in fact agrees with that of some scholars in other schools of law, but that he was indeed the first Ḥanbalī (though not the last) to hold this position.

cils were held in 718/1318 and 719/1319 to investigate the matter further. It would seem that Ibn Taymiyya was initially acquitted after these two hearings, but a third council held in 720/1320 charged him with insubordination to the sultan's order to refrain from giving fatwas. At the close of this hearing, Ibn Taymiyya was arrested on the spot and imprisoned for five months in the Citadel of Damascus. Over the six years following his release from prison in 721/1321, Ibn Taymiyya continued teaching and writing, and is also reported to have been involved numerous times in the political and public religious life of both Syria and Egypt.

In the year 726/1326, Ibn Taymiyya was again arrested, deprived of the right to issue any fatwas whatsoever, and thrown back into the citadel at Damascus, where he remained this time for a period of two full years. The issue in this instance involved his treatise, *al-Risāla fī ziyārat al-qubūr wa-l-istinjād bi-l-maqbūr* (*Treatise on the Visitation of Graves and Seeking Aide from the Buried*), in which he attacked the practice of visiting the graves of righteous people (*awliyā'*) for the purpose of making *tawassul* to them.²¹ Ibn Taymiyya faced at this time the opposition of two more influential figures, the Mālikī chief judge Taqī al-Dīn al-Ikhnā'ī, and the Shāfi'ī chief judge 'Alā' al-Dīn al-Qūnawī, a prominent disciple of Ibn 'Arabī, an opposition which perhaps explains the length of his sentence. Ibn Taymiyya continued to write from the Damascus citadel, producing, among other works, a treatise in which he leveled a personal attack against al-Ikhnā'ī and laid out at length his views on visiting and supplicating at the graves of the *awliyā'*. A complaint from al-Ikhnā'ī prompted the sultan to order that Ibn Taymiyya be deprived of any further paper, ink, or pens.

Five months after this final edict from the sultan, on 20 Dhu 'l-Qa'da 728 / 26 September 1328, Ibn Taymiyya, as if of chagrin over the loss of his ability to write, passed away in his cell at the citadel. Despite such strong and persistent opposition from some quarters, Ibn Taymiyya had managed to endear himself to

²¹ For a discussion, see Christopher S. Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous: Ziyāra and the Veneration of Muslim Saints in Late Medieval Egypt*, vol. 22, Islamic History and Civilization. Studies and Texts (Leiden & Boston: E. J. Brill, 1999), esp. Ch. 4, "Idolatry and Innovation: The Legal Attack on Ziyārat al-Qubūr," pp. 168-194.

the majority of the population of Damascus on account of his great personal integrity, religious scrupulousness, and fearless valiance in confronting the greatest social and political dangers of his day, all the way to the battlefield when necessary. Indeed, it is reported that from the time of his death until his burial, “the normal life of Damascus came to a virtual standstill.”²² After his funeral, attended by a large number of the city’s inhabitants including an unusually large number of women,²³ Ibn Taymiyya was buried in the Sufi cemetery at Damascus, where his tomb – despite his own disapproval of visiting graves – is still honored to this day.

II. Intellectual Profile

Mention has been made of the extraordinary breadth and depth of Ibn Taymiyya’s familiarity both with the text-based sciences – law, hadith, Qur’an, and the biographical literature of the Prophet, Companions, and early generations – as well as the rational sciences of *kalām* and *falsafa*, with both of which his writings exhibit an astonishingly deep familiarity.²⁴ Ibn Taymiyya also read widely and reflectively in the works of the Sufi tradition, including those of such early and later luminaries as Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), Junayd al-Baghdādī (d.

²² Swartz, “A seventh-century (A.H.) Sunnī creed,” 99 [referencing Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī’s *Dhayl ‘alā Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila* (Cairo, 1372/1952-53), II: 405-407].

²³ For an insightful treatment of Ibn Taymiyya’s emotional and psychological profile, and specifically his relationship to women, his relationship with his mother, the fact of his life-long celibacy, and related issues, see J. Yahya Michot, “Un célibataire endurci et sa maman : Ibn Taymiyya (m. 728/1328) et les femmes,” in *La femme dans les civilisations orientales ; et, Miscellanea Aegyptologica : Christiane Desroches Noblecourt in honorem*, ed. Christian Cannuyer, et al., *Acta Orientalia Belgica* (Bruxelles: La Société belge d’études orientales, 2001). A description of Ibn Taymiyya’s funeral, underscoring “l’importance de la participation féminine à ses obsèques” and citing, on the authority of Ibn Kathīr, the figure of 15,000 women in attendance on that day, can be found on the first page of Michot’s article (p. 165). Michot also cites (p. 167) a certain ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥarīrī al-Mutayyam (d. 731/1331) (quoted in Ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī’s *‘Uqūd*), who speaks of hundreds of thousands of weeping attendees, and “multitude upon multitude” of believing women.

²⁴ For an indepth and topical study on the versatility and synthetic originality of Ibn Taymiyya’s thought and methodology, specifically with regard to the question of the “Satanic verses” incident (*al-gharānīq*), see Shahab Ahmed’s rich discussion at Shahab Ahmed, “Ibn Taymiyyah and the Satanic verses,” *Studia Islamica* 87 (1998).

290/903), Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996),²⁵ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 564/1169), and Abū Ḥaṣṣ al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1235), not to mention Ibn Taymiyya's two co-Ḥanbalīs, the aforementioned 'Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī al-Harawī (d. 481/1088)²⁶ and the well-known 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 561/1166).²⁷ While Ibn Taymiyya expresses great admiration for such figures, repeatedly referring to them by laudatory epithets such as "our shaykh," he nevertheless denounces unflinchingly and unconditionally the later speculative mystical system of Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240) and his followers, such as Ibn 'Arabī's foremost disciple, Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274), as well as 'Abd al-Ḥaqq b. Sab'īn (d. 669/1269), 'Afīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (d. 690/1291), and other Sufis who adopted a similar metaphysical outlook, such as the hadith scholar and master poet 'Umar b. 'Alī b. al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1235).²⁸

²⁵ Whose famous work, *Qūt al-qulūb* ('Nourishment of the Hearts') was one of Ibn Taymiyya's favorite reads. (Laoust, "L'influence," 19).

²⁶ See Chapter 1, p. 70.

²⁷ On whose *Futūḥ al-ghayb* (*Revelations of the Unseen*) he even saw fit to write a partial commentary. See Thomas F. Michel, "Ibn Taymiyya's *Sharḥ* on the *Futūḥ al-ghayb* of 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī," *Hamdard Islamicus* 4, no. 2 (1981). For a discussion of Ibn Taymiyya's personal affiliation with the Qādirī Sufi order, see George Makdisi, "Ibn Taimīya: A Ṣūfī of the Qādirīya Order," *American Journal of Arabic Studies* 1 (1974). However, as noted by C. Bori, Makdisi's conclusions are now to be qualified by subsequent studies, such as: Michel, "Ibn Taymiyya's *Sharḥ*," ; Fritz Meier, "Das Sauberste über die Vorherbestimmung. Ein Stück Ibn Taymiyya," *Speculum* 32 (1981); and, Alexander D. Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabī in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 314, n. 5. [Cited in Caterina Bori, "Ibn Taymiyya *wa-Jamā'atu-hu*: Authority, Conflict and Consensus in Ibn Taymiyya's Circle," in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, ed. Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 46, n. 17].

²⁸ Ibn Taymiyya's reputation for being implacably anti-Sufi, though inaccurate and misleading when indiscriminately generalized, is not entirely without foundation, as he was indeed staunchly – and very vocally – opposed to discrete ideas and practices that had come to be widely associated with Sufism by his day. Useful studies on Ibn Taymiyya's critiques of such aspects of contemporary Sufism, responsible not only for the stereotype we have inherited of him today but also for a considerable amount of the opposition and tribulations he faced in his own day, include: Th. Emil Homerin, "Sufis and their Detractors in Mamluk Egypt: A Survey of Protagonists and Institutional Settings," in *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics*, ed. Frederick de Jong and Bernd Radtke (Leiden & Boston: E. J. Brill, 1999), esp. 231-235; Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabī*, 87-112 (Chapter 4: "Ibn Taymiyya's Formidable Challenge"); Thomas F. Michel, *A Muslim Theologian's Response to Christianity. Ibn Taymiyya's Al-Jawab al-Sahih*, 2 ed. (Delmar, New York: Caravan Books, 1999), Chapter 1: "The polemic against *wahdat al-wujud*," at 5-14 and Chapter 3: "The polemic against the Sufis," at 24-39; and, Muhammad Umar Memon, *Ibn Taimīya's Struggle against Popular Religion, with an annotated translation of his Kitāb Iqtidā' al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaḳīm li-mukhālafat aṣḥāb al-jaḥīm*, vol. 1, Religion and Society (The Hague: Mouton, 1976). See further the incisive comments of W. Hallaq in the introduction to Hallaq, *Greek Logicians*, esp. at xi-xiv.

H. Laoust has identified five main themes of Ibn Taymiyya's thought.²⁹ The first of these themes is Ibn Taymiyya's desire to found doctrine on the most objective basis possible, thereby limiting to the maximum extent the danger of deviations resulting from unfounded subjective opinion. Ibn Taymiyya confirms as the main sources of all religious knowledge the Qur'an and the Sunna (to be found not only in the collections of hadith, but also in the *sīra* literature), followed by consensus (whereby each instance of consensus is presumed to be supported by a text). The consensus of the Salaf is the only consensus we can come by with certainty, since after the first three generations, according to Ibn Taymiyya, the community became divided. Ibn Taymiyya stresses the notion that the "people of the Sunna and the community" (*ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamā'a*) always – by definition, so to speak – occupy a middle position between opposing extremes, just as Islam, he affirms, occupies a middle position when compared to the various excesses or extremes of other religions. On the specific question of the divine attributes, Ibn Taymiyya affirms that the position of the Salaf embodied the perfect balance between negationism (*naḥy*) and assimilationism (*tash-bīh*),³⁰ a question which we will examine in greater detail as our study progresses.

The second main theme of Ibn Taymiyya's thought is his insistence on the necessity for duly qualified scholars (never the untrained layman) to engage in ongoing *ijtihād* in interpreting and applying the law, and in seeking always, to the extent of their ability and training, to derive the law from the primary sources rather than according unimpeachable authority to later school doctrines or established opinions.³¹

The third theme concerns Ibn Taymiyya's endorsement of the reality and presence of *awliyā'* (Friends of God, or 'saints'), which Ibn Taymiyya confirms vigorously in numerous passages, as well as the miracles (*karāmāt*) and breaks in the natural order (*khawāriq*) that God brings about at their hands – and will con-

²⁹ See Laoust, "L'influence," 19-22.

³⁰ Ibid., 19-20.

³¹ Ibid., 20-21.

tinue to do so until the Day of Judgment – in the domains of knowledge, mystical illumination, or shows of divine power. Nevertheless, Ibn Taymiyya speaks out forcefully against what has sometimes been called the “cult of saints,” particularly when manifested in the form of traveling in pilgrimage-like manner for the purpose of visiting the graves of righteous individuals (*ziyārat al-qubūr*) with the intent of seeking divine aide and assistance through their intercession (the previously discussed *tawassul*, or *istighātha*, accepted as legitimate by most Sufis and a large number of jurists, yet condemned vigorously by Ibn Taymiyya).³²

The fourth principle concerns the political realm, wherein Ibn Taymiyya affirms that the closest *awliyā'* to God after the Prophet Muḥammad were the four rightly-guided caliphs, whose chronological order (Abū Bakr, then 'Umar, then 'Uthmān, then 'Alī) corresponds to their relative merit, a common position adopted by later Sunni scholars of various stripes. Ibn Taymiyya upholds the legitimacy of both the Umayyad and the Abbasid dynasties yet rejects the contention that the entire Muslim *umma* must ideally be under the temporal leadership of a single caliph at any given time. Rather, the members of any given local polity are bound to pay homage to the ruler in charge over them, as long as he is just and rules in accord with the Shari'a under the custodianship of the legal scholars. Ibn Taymiyya thus conceives of the Islamic *umma*, to borrow Laoust's expression, as a “spontaneous confederation of states”³³ all committed to the upholding of justice and the ordering of society in conformity with the dictates of the Law.³⁴

The fifth main theme of Ibn Taymiyya's thought concerns his insistence on adhering, in matters of worship, strictly to what has been positively commanded by God and demonstrated by the Prophet through his Sunna, a notion on the basis of which Ibn Taymiyya condemned a number of common Sufi practices, such as organized group *dhikr*, which he judged an impermissible “addition” to the ordinances of the Shari'a regarding the prescribed acts of ritual worship.

³² Ibid., 21.

³³ “une confédération spontanée d'Etats” (ibid., 22).

³⁴ Ibid., 21-22.

On the flip side, all actions classified as worldly transactions between men (*mu'āmalāt*) are, according to a widely accepted Islamic legal maxim, *ab initio* permissible, unless expressly prohibited by God through revelation.³⁵ It is of note in this respect that Ibn Taymiyya opposed what he saw as the exaggerated weight accorded to the principle of moral scrupulousness (*wara'*) used by many Ḥanbalī scholars in deriving the law.³⁶

Ibn Taymiyya was ultimately, nevertheless, a committed Ḥanbalī, an affiliation which implies as much a theological outlook as a legal methodology. In terms of law, Ibn Taymiyya followed very closely the principles of legal derivation exemplified by the school's eponym, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, whose methodology he believed to be, among those of the various schools of law, by far the one most closely in tune with the legal practices and spirit of the authoritative early community (*salaf*).³⁷ Ḥanbalī jurisprudence is characterized by a particularly strong emphasis on adherence to the revealed texts (Qur'an and Sunna) as well as the authority of the early community, and a comparatively more cautious attitude toward the use of analogy (*qiyās*) in deriving law. The relative weight accorded to textual versus rational legal indicators (*adilla*) in this schema is illustrated by the practice of Ibn Ḥanbal himself who, in the absence of a Qur'anic text, of a hadith directly from the Prophet, or of an (explicit or implicit) consensus view of the Companions (*ṣaḥāba*), would select from among differing opinions reported of the Companions – or, lacking this, of the Successors (*tābi'ūn*) – that which he found to be closest to the texts and spirit of the Qur'an and Sunna. Ibn Ḥanbal as a rule was willing to accept as legal evidence both the *ḥadīth mursāl* (in which a

³⁵ Ibid., 22. The maxim to which he refers here is: “*al-aṣl fī al-ashyā' al-ibāḥa*,” or ‘the original [ruling of] things is permissibility.’

³⁶ For Ibn Taymiyya's views on precaution (*iḥtiyāt*) and pious restraint (*wara'*) in legal rulings and his critique of the overapplication of these principles on the part of some legal scholars, see Al-Matroudi, *The Ḥanbalī School*, 103-107. Interestingly, it is against the perceived over-scrupulousness not of Ḥanbalīs, but of Sufis, in his locale that the famous Andalusian jurist Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī (d. 790/1388), just one generation after Ibn Taymiyya, advocated a similar moderating of *wara'* when applied to strict questions of legal derivation.

³⁷ Laoust, *Essai*, 76. Ibn Taymiyya is reported to have written a full-volume work on the preferability (*tafḍīl*) of the Ḥanbalī *madhhab* and its merits. [See Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh Ibn Rushayyiq, *Asmā' mu'allafāt Ibn Taymiyya*, ed. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid (incorrectly ascribed to Shams al-Dīn Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya), 2 ed. (Damascus: al-Majma' al-'Ilmī al-'Arabī, 1953), 27].

Successor attributes a hadith to the Prophet without mentioning the intervening Companion who related to him the hadith), as well as a hadith containing some defect in its chain, before resorting to analogy or any other non-textual, rational method of legal derivation. Only as a last resort and out of sheer necessity would he resort to analogy (*qiyās*), governed by strict conditions regarding the assimilation of the new case (*farʿ*) to the original one (*aṣl*).³⁸

Ibn Taymiyya's thought evidences overall a strong preference for the methodology of *ahl al-ḥadīth* over that of *ahl al-ra'y*, commending the way of Mālik in the Hijaz over that of contemporary Iraqi scholars and holding that it was Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal who had ultimately perfected Mālik's hadith-based methodology.³⁹ In certain places he praises the Ḥanbalī school for its strict adherence to the Qur'an and Sunna and to the opinions of the early Salaf.⁴⁰ Ibn Taymiyya also lauds the Ḥanbalī school for its relative unity of voice, describing its scholars as having fewer points of disagreement (*ikhtilāf*) among themselves than the adherents of the other schools of law.⁴¹ As prefigured in our "Taymiyyan pyramid" in the Introduction above,⁴² and as we shall discover further below, Ibn Taymiyya posits a strong correlation between truth and unanimity and identifies the amount of internal disagreement among the members of a given school – be it of law, of theology, or of any other discipline – as a tell-tale indication of that

³⁸ Al-Matroudi, *The Ḥanbalī School*, 32-35. Under 'analogy' may also be classed related principles of *ijtihād*, such as *istiḥsān* ('juristic preference'), *istiṣḥāb* ('presumption of continuity'), and *maṣlaḥa mursala* ('textually unregulated benefits'). For more on these principles see Hallaq, *History*, 107-115. For a treatment of Ibn Taymiyya's legal methodology in its details, see Henri Laoust, *Contribution à une étude de la méthodologie canonique de Taḳī-d-Dīn Aḥmad b. Taymīya* (Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1939), which includes an annotated translation, preceded by an extensive introductory analysis, of two of Ibn Taymiyya's most important works on legal methodology, *Ma'ārij al-wuṣūl ilā ma'rifat anna uṣūl al-dīn wa-furū'ahu qad bayyanahā al-rasūl* [*Staircases of Arriving at the Knowledge that the Prophet has Explicated both the Principles (uṣūl) and Particulars (furū') of Religion*] and *al-Qiyās fi al-shar' al-Islāmī* [*Analogy (qiyās) in Islamic Law*], commonly known as *al-Risāla fī al-qiyās*.

³⁹ Al-Matroudi, *The Ḥanbalī School*, 44. Ibn Taymiyya is reported to have written a 100-pg. treatise on the preferability (*tafḍīl*) of the method (*madhhab*) of the people of Medina. (Ibn Rushayyiq, *Mu'allafāt*, 28). He is also listed as having written a separate treatise on the merits (*faḍā'il*) of the Four Imams (Abū Ḥanīfa, Mālik, al-Shāfi'ī, and Ibn Ḥanbal) and the virtues specific to each one. (See *ibid.*, 27).

⁴⁰ Al-Matroudi, *The Ḥanbalī School*, 41.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² See Introduction, p. xv.

school's relative distance from the unitary normative truth. This attitude towards the unicity of truth is reflected in Ibn Taymiyya's adherence, with regard to the difference of opinion (*ikhtilāf*) among legal scholars, to the maxim that "truth is [to be found] in one [opinion]" (*al-ḥaqq fī wāḥid*), that is, while each *mujtahid* scholar may well be rewarded for his sincere effort to identify a legal ruling, only one of several conflicting solutions is actually correct in the objective sense of being *the* right answer from the perspective of God. This contrasts with the more catholic – but epistemically also more relativistic – position of the majority predicated on the maxim that "each *mujtahid* is correct" (*kull mujtahid muṣīb*); in other words, not only is each of the *mujtahids* who disagree on a point of law rewarded for his effort, but all of their diverse opinions are positively correct, even when they contradict each other.⁴³ We will see these various tendencies in Ibn Taymiyya's legal thought replicated in his approach to Qur'anic hermeneutics and, ultimately, his approach to questions of theology and philosophy as well. Another central tenet of Ibn Taymiyya's legal thought likewise reflected in his theology is the notion that an authentic text of revelation can never conflict with a valid rational analogy (*qiyās*) based on a correct instance of *ijtihād*. In other words, there can be no conflict between revelation and reason on the plane of legal rulings, just as there can be no such conflict in the realm of theology. Any apparent contradiction between reason and revelation in the legal domain is necessarily due either to an unsound analogy, to the use of an inauthentic text, or to the misconstrual or misapplication of an authentic one.⁴⁴

⁴³ Ibn Taymiyya is listed as having penned a separate treatise on this issue as well. (Ibn Rushayyiq, *Mu'allafāt*, 28).

⁴⁴ Al-Matroudi, *The Ḥanbalī School*, 27-30. The assumption of a factual existence of conflict between reason and scripture had been taken for granted in earlier jurisprudential treatises, such as the *Mustaṣfā fī 'ilm al-uṣūl* of the Shāfi'ite al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), the *Iḥkām fī uṣūl al-aḥkām* of the Ḥanbalite turned Shāfi'ite Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī (d. 631/1233), and even the *Rawḍat al-nāẓir wa-jannat al-manāẓir* of the avowed Ḥanbalite (and anti-Ash'arite) scholar Muwaffaq al-Dīn b. Qudāma (d. 620/1223). (Laoust, *Contribution*, 11). In his treatise *al-Risāla fī al-qiyās* (mentioned in n. 38 above), Ibn Taymiyya argues, among other things, against the possibility of real contradiction between a revealed text and a *valid* legal analogy – or other tools of legal rationalism, such as *istiḥsān* ('legal preference') or *maṣlaḥa* ('utility', 'interest'). For an overall treatment of Ibn Taymiyya's legal methodology, especially as it relates to and overlaps with his larger approach to theology and reason more generally, see Yossef Rapoport, "Ibn Taymiyya's Radical Legal Thought: Rationalism, Pluralism and the Primacy of Intention," in *Ibn*

Though Ibn Taymiyya was a faithful adherent of the methodology exemplified by Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, he nevertheless believed the Ḥanbalī school, over the course of its subsequent development, to have arrived at incorrect positions on certain issues and consequently sought to revise such rulings on the basis of a direct engagement with the primary sources of the Shari‘a – Qur’an, Sunna, consensus, and analogy – and in light of the statements and general principles of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal.⁴⁵ Ibn Taymiyya’s independence of mind and willingness to challenge even opinions that were widely or universally held within his own adopted school – if he judged them incorrect in light of the primary sources and the principles of the school’s Imam – engendered sharp criticism of some of his jurisprudential conclusions by other Ḥanbalī authorities.⁴⁶ As an example we may cite the aforementioned triple divorce formula, where Ibn Taymiyya seems to be the first Ḥanbalī (though not the first Muslim jurist altogether) to hold the position that the triple formula uttered in a single instance does not, in fact, result in an irrevocable “triple” divorce. Ibn Taymiyya’s stature as a scholar, however, assured that his opinions would continue to be taken seriously, and it is of note that since his time, Ḥanbalī legal works have, taking due note of Ibn Taymiyya’s stance on the issue, cited the existence of *ikhtilāf* in the Ḥanbalī school over the question of the triple divorce, with several later scholars even adopting Ibn Taymiyya’s conclusions in the matter.

Regarding matters of creed, Ibn Taymiyya also looked to the first three generations (those of the Salaf) as the sole standard by which to judge the correctness of belief, both in terms of the Salaf’s substantive doctrine as well as their specific methods of approaching the texts and bringing reason to bear upon the proper understanding thereof. Ibn Taymiyya did not condemn *kalām* – in the sense of disciplined reasoning about theological matters – outright, but rather

Taymiyya and His Times, ed. Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), esp. 193-199 (“Legal Theory: Correct Analogy and Qur’ānic Rationalism”).

⁴⁵ Al-Matroudi, *The Ḥanbalī School*, 56-57, 189-190, et passim. Also Laoust, *Essai*, 77-78.

⁴⁶ On opposition to Ibn Taymiyya from his own contemporary Ḥanbalī peers, see Bori, “Ibn Taymiyya *wa-Jamā‘atu-hu*,” 33-36 (‘Ḥanbalī Opposition to Ibn Taymiyya’) and *ibid.*, 37-41 for opposition to him from traditionalist (i.e., non-Ash‘arī) Shāfi‘īs as well.

distinguished between a “*kalām sunnī*,” so to speak, and a “*kalām bidʿī*,”⁴⁷ that is, between an orthodox and a heterodox way of reasoning about religious truths. A primary motivating factor in his opposition to *kalām* is that he saw it as divisive and schismatic, since schools often differed bitterly over points of doctrine based on their differing notions of what reason was presumed to entail and, just as commonly, on the basis of variant starting assumptions and basic axioms determined by the overall philosophical precommitments of the school in question. Ibn Taymiyya’s life project was, in a sense, to transcend school divisions by reuniting the community on a reintegrated theological platform based directly on the understanding and approach of the early Salaf, whom he held to be of necessity both more correct than later theologians and, corollary to this, characterized by a comparatively higher degree of consensus, if not outright uniformity, in their understanding of theological truth.

In addition to his study of theology, Ibn Taymiyya also scrutinized closely the doctrines of the *falāsifa* primarily with the view of refuting them, but also of understanding their origins. Indeed, M. Fakhry goes so far as to name Ibn Taymiyya “the last great theologian to follow in the footsteps of al-Ghazālī and al-Rāzī in the struggle against the philosophers.”⁴⁸ Ibn Taymiyya wrote, as we have seen, his scathing critique of Aristotelian logic, *al-Radd ‘alā al-manṭiqiyyīn*, while imprisoned in the tower at Alexandria. He forcefully advocated the old-style analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) of the jurists over the Aristotelian syllogism since made part and parcel of the “new” *kalām* through the work of al-Ghazālī. He likewise advocated for the jurists’ method of definition by description to the philosophical method of definition by genus and specific difference. Finally, Ibn Taymiyya was a strict nominalist, refusing to accord any reality whatsoever to abstract concepts or notions outside of the mind.⁴⁹ These and similar matters will occupy our attention primarily in Chapter 5 of this study.

⁴⁷ Laoust, “L’influence,” 18.

⁴⁸ Fakhry, *History*, 322.

⁴⁹ Laoust, “L’influence,” 19.

Ibn Taymiyya's own positive theology has been aptly termed "Qur'anic rational theology."⁵⁰ Considering the rise and spread of a rationalistic theology increasingly influenced by philosophical terms and categories, Ibn Taymiyya set himself the task, reminiscent of al-Ash'arī, of defending traditional doctrines by reformulating them within an alternative rationalist framework.⁵¹ M. Sait Özervarlı has observed, astutely, that Ibn Taymiyya, deeply immersed in the intellectual legacy of Islamic civilization and intimately familiar with its sundry movements and discourses, seems to have been "influenced by al-Ash'arī's critique of the Mu'tazilites, al-Ghazālī's of the philosophers, and Ibn Rushd's of the Ash'arites."⁵² Ibn Taymiyya was keenly aware, and highly mistrustful, of the "Avicennian turn"⁵³ that had occurred in later Ash'arī *kalām* as of al-Juwaynī and, especially al-Ghazālī one generation later, and therefore sought to articulate an alternative theology based more squarely on the revealed texts, while nevertheless fully engaging the philosophical tradition – unlike past traditionalist scholars who had clung to a strong theological textualism while deliberately eschewing any engagement with the philosophical tradition whatsoever. At the same time, Ibn Taymiyya was a strong proponent of the notion that revelation (in the form of the Qur'an and the Sunna) provides comprehensive knowledge not only of the principles (*uṣūl*), but also of the details (*furū'*), of the theological postulates upon which religion rests and that it does so by explicitly indicating both the premises *as well as* the rational methods – backed up by the most conclusive and certain of rational arguments and proofs – on the basis of which further details are to be worked out from these principles. Indeed, perhaps the most salient and ingenious feature of Ibn Taymiyya's thought and methodology is his attempt not to banish reason in favor of non-speculative traditionalism, but rather to rehabilitate reason, all the while preserving the obvious meaning of the texts of revelation by attempting to demonstrate that sound reason and authentic

⁵⁰ M. Sait Özervarlı, "The Qur'anic Rational Theology of Ibn Taymiyya and his Criticism of the *Mutakallimūn*," in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, ed. Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 78.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ See Wisnovsky, "One Aspect."

revelation never come into actual conflict since revelation, “all-inclusive and faultless, contains within itself perfect and complete rational foundations.”⁵⁴ It is on the basis of this insight that Ibn Taymiyya seeks to put forth a “philosophical interpretation and defense of tradition,”⁵⁵ developing thereby his own unique brand of what has appositely been termed “philosophical traditionalism.”⁵⁶

III. Character and Contemporary Reception

Ibn Taymiyya was a controversial figure in his own day and has remained one throughout the subsequent seven centuries right up to the current era. On the one hand, Ibn Taymiyya was universally recognized by his contemporaries – friend and foe alike⁵⁷ – as possessing an extraordinarily high degree of personal integrity and moral character, as well as a virtually unparalleled mastery of a vast range of religious and intellectual disciplines, in addition to his reputation for fastidious adherence to the teachings and practices of the Islamic religion. D. Little observes that “in spite of the fact that many authors attacked Ibn Taymiyya’s beliefs, there is hardly anyone who criticized his person.”⁵⁸ With regard to the historians, Little remarks: “Without exception, all of the historians, no matter what their position, training, and specialization show a distinctly favorable attitude toward Ibn Taymiyya’s words and deeds. So far as has been determined, only al-Dhahabî, Ibn Rajab, and Ibn Hajar record anything at all which might be construed as an uncomplimentary interpretation of Ibn Taymiyya’s character and activities, and the instances of this are rare even with these three authors.”⁵⁹ And while it is true that all of the Syrian scholar-historians happened to be followers or supporters of Ibn Taymiyya – drawn from the ranks of either fellow Ḥanbalîs like Ibn ‘Abd al-Hādî (d. 744/1343-44) and Ibn Rajab (d. 795/1393), or else of

⁵⁴ See Introduction, Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed, eds., *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, vol. IV, Studies in Islamic Philosophy (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 8.

⁵⁵ Jon Hoover, “Perpetual Creativity in the Perfection of God: Ibn Taymiyya’s Hadith Commentary on God’s Creation of this World,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 15, no. 3 (2004): 194.

⁵⁶ Rapoport and Ahmed, eds., *Ibn Taymiyya*, 12.

⁵⁷ Donald P. Little, “Did Ibn Taymiyya Have a Screw Loose?,” *Studia Islamica* 41 (1975): 99.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁵⁹ Little, “The Historical and Historiographical Significance,” 319.

traditionalist-oriented Shāfi'īs like al-Dhahabī (d. 739/1339) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) – it is nevertheless the case that even Ibn Taymiyya's worst enemies conceded the overall excellence of his character and the exemplary quality of his pious and God-fearing life.⁶⁰ He was also highly reputed for his constant concern for others (particularly society's less fortunate), his self-sacrifice, his clemency, his courage in the face of existential danger (such as the invasion of the Mongols), and his magnanimity – even when in a position to exact reprisals – towards all who had ever occasioned him any harm or borne him any malice.

Notwithstanding this overall plauditory assessment, it nevertheless appears to be a matter of consensus – even among those who were generally supportive of Ibn Taymiyya, such as al-Dhahabī – that he had an irascible temper,⁶¹ an abrasive personality, could be overweening, was often condescending towards his fellow scholars, tactless, and sanctimoniously convinced of the truth of his own views and opinions and dismissive of those who differed. A number of

⁶⁰ Consider, for example, the comment of the Mālikī qadi Ibn Makhlūf (d. 718/1318), who had largely been behind many of Ibn Taymiyya's troubles after his arrival in Egypt, to the effect that: "There is no one more righteous than Ibn Taymiyya; we should abandon our struggle against him." (Cited in Little, "Screw Loose?," 99, from Ibn 'Abd al-Hādī's *Uqūd*). Consider also the following, practically gushing, statement made to al-Dhahabī by Tāqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 756/1355), who was on the whole highly critical of Ibn Taymiyya's ideas and wrote several tracts attacking his doctrines, where he states: "As for what you [al-Dhahabī] say in regard to al-Shaykh Tāqī al-Dīn [Ibn Taymiyya], I am convinced of the great scope, the ocean-like fullness and vastness of his knowledge of the transmitted and intellectual sciences, his extreme intelligence, his exertions and his attainments, all of which surpass description. I have always held this opinion. Personally, my admiration is even greater for the asceticism, piety, and religiosity with which God has endowed him, for his selfless championship of the truth, his adherence to the path of our forebears, his pursuit of perfection, the wonder of his example, unrivalled in our time and in times past." (Cited in *ibid.*, 100, from Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī's *Durar*).

⁶¹ The following (admittedly humorous) anecdote, reported by al-Dhahabī, serves to make the point: "When Ibn Taymiyya was a little boy, studying with the Banū Munajjā, they supported something that he denied, whereupon they produced the text. When he had read it, he threw it down in fury (*ghayẓan*). They said, 'How bold you are to cast from your hand a volume that contains knowledge!' He quickly replied, 'Who is better, Moses or I?' 'Moses,' they said. 'And which is better—this book or the tablets on which the ten commandments were inscribed?' 'The tablets,' they replied. Ibn Taymiyya said, in words to this effect, 'Well, when Moses became angry, he threw down the tablets.'" (Cited in Little, "Screw Loose?," 106, from Khafīl b. Aybak al-Ṣafadī's [d. 764/1362] *al-Wāfī bi-l-wafayāt*). This anecdote admirably illustrates not only Ibn Taymiyya's fiery temper, but also his remarkable quickness of wit whereby the precocious genius of his mighty intellect leaps out from him, almost despite himself, in the form of a spontaneous and brilliant rejoinder even in the midst of a puerile and uncontrolled gesture of angry exasperation.

sources suggest that it was primarily Ibn Taymiyya's spikiness, unremitting capaciousness, and perpetual tendency to raise a public ruckus that guaranteed the unyielding, and often vicious, opposition of his detractors. No doubt certain of his views in and of themselves, idiosyncratic and sometimes directly opposed to what had become a broadly held consensus on certain theological and legal questions, would have been apt to assure no shortage of animated and contentious exchanges between Ibn Taymiyya and others, but his grating and obstreperous manner seems to have made it all the easier for Ibn Taymiyya's antagonists to lay into him full throttle.

Furthermore, while Ibn Taymiyya was beloved among the populace and certainly enjoyed the respect and admiration not only of some contemporary scholars but also of important statesmen and other public officials, he was by no means welcomed with open arms even by the majority of his own fellow Ḥanbalīs. Some fellow traditionalists took exception to the important role he accorded reason in understanding and interpreting revealed truths,⁶² while many objected to his idiosyncratic legal opinions in which, both methodologically and substantively, he broke ranks with accepted Ḥanbalī doctrine and practice. His close disciples numbered only around twelve and are conspicuous for having counted among their ranks members of different legal schools (a number of Shāfi'īs and at least one Mālikī).⁶³ This fact demonstrates how Ibn Taymiyya, and those who were attracted to him, saw his methodology as transcending those of the established schools of law and theology in an attempt to recover what they considered to be the idyllically unified understanding of the pristine early community (*salaf*). Ibn Taymiyya's approach is built on the interrelated premises that such a unified and unequivocal understanding (1) existed, (2) is identifiable and hence retrievable, and (3) that this understanding can be publically estab-

⁶² Al-Dhahabī, an anti-Ash'arite Shāfi'ī largely committed to a traditionalist, non-speculative approach to the revealed texts, comments that Ibn Taymiyya "repeatedly swallowed the poison of the philosophers and their works; the body becomes addicted to the frequent use of poison so that it is secreted, by God, in the very bones." (ibid., 101). Laoust, it is to be noted, has cast doubt on the authenticity of this quotation. (Laoust, *Essai*, 484).

⁶³ For a detailed discussion of Ibn Taymiyya's "inner circle," see Bori, "Ibn Taymiyya wa-Jamā'atu-hu."

lished as an objectively true reading of the Salaf's positions by following the methods which Ibn Taymiyya holds are alone capable of identifying and laying it bare (and which we will examine in detail in Chapters 4 and 5 of the present work).

A corollary of Ibn Taymiyya's stance – unsettling to many of his contemporaries – was that the existing legal and theological schools did not necessarily, neither severally nor even collectively, coincide with the (putatively) authentic (and verifiably so) views of the early Salaf and, by extension, those of the Prophet himself. Indeed, as we have noted above, Ibn Taymiyya favored Ḥanbalism – both legal and theological – because he believed Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal to have remained truest to the early ways of the Salaf and, as we have seen, he was not shy of critiquing later positions of the school that he judged to have deviated from Aḥmad's – and therefore the Salaf's – original understanding and method. Yet by Ibn Taymiyya's time, the older, more open rivalry among the various legal schools was in abeyance and the more catholic tendency of each school recognizing the validity of the others had come to gain general acceptance, perhaps aided, in the particular social and political context of the late 7th/13th - / early 8th/14th-century Mamluk state, by the political decision to recognize all four legal schools as equally valid via the simultaneous appointment of four chief judges in Cairo, one from each school.⁶⁴ This is reflected in the behest of Ibn Taymiyya's supporters, at the Damascus trials of 705/1306, for Ibn Taymiyya to agree to identify the theological stance expounded in his *'Aqīda al-Wāsiṭiyya* as the “Ḥanbalī” position, to exist in harmony with and mutual recognition of the predominantly Ash‘arī theological outlook of his opponents (somewhat like the mutual recognition of the legal *madhāhib*). Such a move, however, Ibn Taymiyya flatly refused to countenance, “insisting,” as Jackson observes, “that his was the view not of Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, but of the Prophet himself,”

⁶⁴ On the various factors motivating this move on the part of Egypt's Mamluk authorities, see Yossef Rapoport, “Legal diversity in the age of *taqlīd*: the four chief *qāḍīs* under the Mamluks,” *Islamic Law and Society* 10 (2003).

which “left his adversaries with only two choices: convert to his doctrine or destroy him.”⁶⁵

The foregoing considerations, coupled with the fact that Ibn Taymiyya’s close disciples were drawn from various schools of law, reinforce the view that what was primarily at stake here, as Jackson has observed,⁶⁶ was a struggle between new-style Ash‘arite *kalām* and theological traditionalism, a struggle that was taking place not only across *madhhab* lines, but *within* the various legal schools as well, particularly the Shāfi‘ī school, from whose ranks most contemporary Ash‘arīs hailed but which retained a significant number of scholars who continued to resist Ash‘arism in favor of an old-style non-speculative theological traditionalism. We have seen also that certain high-profile Ḥanbalīs – such as Ibn ‘Aqīl (d. 513/1119), (Abū al-Faraj) Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201), Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī (d. 716/1316) and, a bit later, Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Sa‘dī (d. 900/1494-5) – were also partial to rationalist *kalām* theology of the Ash‘arī type, but these were much more of an exception in the midst of a Ḥanbalī school the vast majority of whose members had always retained a staunch allegiance to a non-speculative, traditionalist stance. It is important to remember, however, that Ibn Taymiyya was opposed not only by the rationalistically inclined Ash‘arīs of his day on account of a “literalist” theology they held directly to entail anthropomorphism, but also, and certainly no less significantly, by a number of traditionalists themselves, who faulted him precisely for what they judged to be his *overreliance* on reason and philosophical method in establishing his brand of theological traditionalism and, more generally, for his blurring of the lines – dare one say *à la* Ash‘arism? – between the boundaries and methods of the traditional (*naqlī*) and the rational (*‘aqlī*) sciences.⁶⁷ Indeed, this combination of traditionalism and rationalism has been identified as “perhaps the most distinctive trait of Ibn Taymiyya’s religious thought.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Jackson, “Ibn Taymiyyah on Trial,” 56.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 48 (also citing G. Makdisi to the same effect, p. 48, n. 48).

⁶⁷ Özervarlı, “The Qur’ānic Rational Theology,” 80.

⁶⁸ Rapoport and Ahmed, eds., *Ibn Taymiyya*, 8.

IV. The Works of Ibn Taymiyya

Ibn Taymiyya was an extremely prolific writer, having penned several hundred works spanning hundreds of volumes. Ibn Taymiyya's student, Ibn 'Abd al-Hādī (d. 744/1343), reports that his shaykh had a gift for composing quickly, and that he often used to write from memory without needing to cite from written materials (a major reason why he was able to remain so productive even while in prison). Ibn Taymiyya, reports Ibn 'Abd al-Hādī, could write a short volume (*mujallad laṭīf*) in a single day and up to 40 folios, or 80 pages,⁶⁹ in a single sitting. On at least one occasion, he is reported to have composed an answer to an exceedingly difficult question (*min ashkal al-mashākil*) in eight quires (128 pg.),⁷⁰ likewise in a single session!⁷¹ Al-Shawkānī (d. 1250/1839) reports Ibn Taymiyya's contemporary, al-Sarmadī, as saying: "Among the wonders of our time is the memory (*ḥifẓ*) of Ibn Taymiyya; he used to read through a book once and it would be etched in his memory, such that he would quote it (*yanquluhu*) in his own writings [from memory, it is implied] in both its meaning (*ma'nā*) and wording (*lafẓ*)."⁷²

In terms of style, Ibn Taymiyya's prose is clear, precise, and easy to read; he is by no means given to the use of highly ornate or stylized language (one feels he hardly would have had the time!). Like his personality, his theology, and his lifestyle, Ibn Taymiyya's writing is down to earth, pragmatic, to the point. Though he often deals with themes of extraordinary complexity (especially in a work as philosophically complex as the *Dar' al-ta'āruḍ*), it is nevertheless clear

⁶⁹ I.e., the number of leaves (*waraqāt*), both recto and verso. Thus, a work consisting of ten leaves/folios (*waraqāt*) would, in contemporary terminology, be said to consist of 20 pages. The definitive work on Arab-Islamic bookmaking and manuscripts is Adam Gacek, *The Arabic Manuscript Tradition: A Glossary of Technical Terms and Bibliography* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2001) and its supplementary volume, Adam Gacek, *The Arabic Manuscript Tradition: A Glossary of Technical Terms and Bibliography, Supplement* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2008). A companion "handbook" to the original work and its 2008 supplement has also appeared as Adam Gacek, *Arabic Manuscripts: A Vademecum for Readers* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2009).

⁷⁰ A quire (*kurrās[a]*) was most often formed of four folded sheets of paper, yielding eight leaves/folios (*waraqā*), or 16 total sides (*wajh*), or "pages" in contemporary terminology.

⁷¹ See 'Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad b. Sa'd al-Ḥujayfī, *Manhaj Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyya fī al-ta'līf wa-marāḥiluhu al-muta'addida, ma'a fihris mu'jamī li-ashhar muṣannafātihi* (Riyadh: Dār Ibn Ḥazm li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī', 1420/1999) (quoting Ibn 'Abd al-Hādī's *'Uqūd*).

⁷² From al-Shawkānī's *al-Badr al-tālī 'bi-maḥāsini man ba'd al-qarn al-tāsi'* (cited in *ibid.*).

that his intention is to write in a manner accessible to the average man, and not just the scholarly elite. The only occasions on which he incorporates a slight embellishment of style into his writing are his intermittent use of *saj'*, or rhymed prose, either to mark the transition from one topic to another, or as a means of emphasis used to drive home a particular point with added force. Notwithstanding the limpidity of his language, Ibn Taymiyya's works are nonetheless characterized by a high degree of repetition, excursiveness, and tangentiality. Some digressions in the *Dar' al-ta'arūf*, for instance, go on for tens and tens of pages, sometimes more than a hundred. Rapoport & Ahmed have characterized Ibn Taymiyya's writing style as a "characteristically digressive, disjointed style that bears the marks of brilliant insights hastily jotted down."⁷³ Another scholar has blamed the relative dearth of serious studies of Ibn Taymiyya's sophisticated philosophical and theological thought on his "disorganized writing style, length, verbosity, and propensity for digression and repetition"⁷⁴ – all features which are prominently on display in the *Dar'* and which go a long way towards accounting for the difficulty and unwieldiness of the text.

An 8th-/14th-century work entitled *Asmā' mu'allafāt Ibn Taymiyya*, written by Ibn Taymiyya's personal scribe Ibn Rushayyiq,⁷⁵ lists a large number of works authored by Ibn Taymiyya spanning a wide range of disciplines and an enormous number of topics. The *Mu'allafāt* identifies Ibn Taymiyya's various

⁷³Rapoport and Ahmed, eds., *Ibn Taymiyya*, 4.

⁷⁴ Özervarlı, "The Qur'anic Rational Theology," 96.

⁷⁵ Hereafter referred to as the "*Mu'allafāt*." Several printed versions have ascribed this work, incorrectly, to Ibn Taymiyya's famous disciple, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350). The actual compiler, however, was Ibn Taymiyya's scribe (*kātib*), Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh b. Rushayyiq al-Maghribī (d. 749/1349). Ibn Taymiyya was reputed to have had very poor handwriting, such that even he often had trouble making out his own writing. For this reason, he employed Ibn Rushayyiq to produce legible copies of his various treatises, fatwas, *responsa*, etc. Ibn 'Abd al-Hādī reports in his *'Uqūd* that Ibn Rushayyiq was one of the closest personal associates of Ibn Taymiyya (*min akhaṣṣ aṣḥāb shaykhinā*) and the most keen on collecting his writings. Ibn Kathīr, in his *Bidāya*, confirms that Ibn Rushayyiq could read Ibn Taymiyya's handwriting more easily than the shaykh himself could, and that if Ibn Taymiyya had trouble deciphering something in a document written in his own hand, he would have recourse to Ibn Rushayyiq to read it for him. (On Ibn Rushayyiq, as well as the citations from *'Uqūd* and *Bidāya*, see al-Ḥujaylī, *Manhaj*).

works by format as either treatise (*risāla*, pl., *rasā'il*), “*qā'ida*”⁷⁶ (pl., *qawā'id*), tome (*mujallad*), book (*kitāb*, pl. *kutub*), topic (*mas'ala*, pl., *masā'il*), or *responsum* (*jawāb*, pl., *ajwiba*), and indicates their length usually by specifying the number of folios (*waraqa*) of which the work consists or, on occasion, the number of quires (*kurrās[a]*), or individual sides of a page (*wajh*). Full-volume works are sometimes specified as being a “thin volume” (*mujallad laṭīf*) or a “large tome” (*mujallad kabīr*). The *Mu'allafāt* lists Ibn Taymiyya's works by topic, divided into Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*), principles of religion / theology (*uṣūl al-dīn*), law (*fiqh*) and jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), letters of counsel (*waṣāyā*), scholarly licenses (*ijāzāt*) for the transmission of hadith, and personal letters (*rasā'il*) addressed to individual persons, families, or towns that contain, among other things, various discourses on matters related to religious knowledge. In the paragraphs below, we shall make brief mention of those works of Ibn Taymiyya that bear direct relevance to the topic of our study or which engage issues cited in the previous chapter as central topics in the background behind, and the debates concerning, the relationship between reason and revelation.

In addition to Ibn Taymiyya's famous and influential *Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-tafsīr* (*An Introduction to the Foundations of Qur'anic Exegesis*),⁷⁷ the *Mu'allafāt* lists 92 separate works of *tafsīr*, mostly *rasā'il* and *qawā'id* on individual verses, groups of verses, or suras.⁷⁸ A number of these treatises are listed as comprising up to 20, 30, 50, sometimes as many as 70 leaves; some form an

⁷⁶ The *Mu'allafāt* (passim) identifies some *rasā'il* of Ibn Taymiyya as being composed of several *qawā'id*, such as his treatise on the verse “am I not your Lord” (*a-lastu bi-rabbikum*), which consists of “three *qawā'id* [in] more than 70 folios,” (Ibn Rushayyiq, *Mu'allafāt*, 11; *ibid.*) or his treatise on the verse “Let not a fornicator marry ought but a fornicatress” in “two *qā'idās*” (*ibid.*, 14). The last three of the 92 items on the list of Ibn Taymiyya's Qur'an commentaries are given as a *qā'ida* on the virtues of the Qur'an, a *qā'ida* on the divisions of the Qur'an, and a *qā'ida* on parables and analogies (*amthāl*) used in the Qur'an.

⁷⁷ For a detailed study of this work and its implications for, and effect upon, the larger *tafsīr* tradition, see Walid A. Saleh, “Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics: An Analysis of *An Introduction to the Foundations of Qur'anic Exegesis*,” in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, ed. Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁷⁸ A collation of the various works Ibn Taymiyya wrote on *tafsīr* reveals that, all in all, he composed the equivalent of approximately 70 quires (1,120 pgs.) of *tafsīr*. (al-Ḥujaylī, *Manhaj*). Ibn Taymiyya's writings in *tafsīr* are now available as a single multi-volume collection, published recently as Iyād b. 'Abd al-Laṭīf b. Ibrāhīm al-Qaysī, *Tafsīr Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyya: al-jāmi' li-kalām al-Imām Ibn Taymiyya fī al-tafsīr*, 7 vols. (Dammam: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī', 1432/2011-12).

entire volume on their own. The verses on which Ibn Taymiyya chose to comment cover a large range of topics, including questions pertaining to creed, points of ritual, legal provisions, and questions touching on spirituality and the inner life of faith. Of particular interest to the topic of this study are Ibn Taymiyya's full-volume commentary on the phrase "and none knows its 'ta'wīl' save God;"⁷⁹ a treatise on the phrase "in it [the Qur'an] are 'muḥkam' verses;"⁸⁰ a treatise on the phrase "a Book whose verses have been made 'firm' (*uḥkimat āyātuhu*);"⁸¹ a 50-leaf treatise on the all-important phrase "there is none like unto Him;"⁸² and, a treatise on the verse "never is there a secret conversation among three but that He is their fourth,"⁸³ in which he discusses the question of God's immanence, or "with-ness" (*ma'iyya*), from all angles.⁸⁴ In addition, Ibn Taymiyya wrote a 20-leaf commentary on the famous Verse of the Throne (*āyat al-kursī*),⁸⁵ a full-volume work on Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ ("qul huwa Allāhu aḥad"),⁸⁶ as well as a *qā'ida* on the Qur'an's use of parables and analogies (*amthāl*), and a 20-leaf treatise on the difference between texts that are open to interpretation (*yutta'awwal*) and those that are not.

Regarding works on theological topics (*uṣūl*), the *Mu'allafāt* lists 165 separate works of various lengths and genres – *kutub*, *mujalladāt*, *rasā'il*, *qawā'id*, and *masā'il*, as well as *responsa* introduced variously as "jawāb" or "futyā." Among these titles figure a number of major, in some cases multi-volume, works, the most famous of which are: *Kitāb al-Īmān* (*The Book of Faith*) in one volume; *Dar' ta'arūḍ al-'aql wa-l-naql* on reason and revelation (10 vol.); *Bayān talbīs al-Jahmiyya fī ta'sīs bida'ihim al-kalāmiyya* (*Exposing the Deceit of the Jahmiyya in Establishing their Innovated Theological Positions*) in six volumes;⁸⁷ *Kitāb Minhāj al-sunna* (*The Way of the Sunna*) in refutation of

⁷⁹ From Qur'an (Āl 'Imrān) 3:7.

⁸⁰ Also Q. 3:7.

⁸¹ Qur'an (Yūnus) 11:1.

⁸² Qur'an (al-Shūrā) 42:11.

⁸³ Qur'an (al-Mujādala) 58:7.

⁸⁴ Ibn Rushayyiq, *Mu'allafāt*, 17.

⁸⁵ Qur'an (al-Baqara) 2:255.

⁸⁶ Sura 112, the third to last sura, of the Qur'an.

⁸⁷ "six large volumes" (*sitt mujalladāt kibār*) in al-Ḥujayfī, *Manhaj*.

the Shī‘a (4 vol.); and, *Kitāb al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-masīḥ* (*The Authentic Response to Those Who Have Altered the Religion of the Messiah*) in refutation of Christian trinitarian theology (2 vol.).⁸⁸ We have already alluded to the work *al-Ṣārim al-maslūl ‘alā shātīm al-rasūl* (*The Unsheathed Sword Against Him Who Insults the Prophet*), which Ibn Taymiyya wrote during his first bout in prison that resulted from his refusal to back down in the affair of the Christian who had allegedly insulted the Prophet, as well as the work *Kitāb Iqtidā’ al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm li-mukhālafat aṣḥāb al-jaḥīm*⁸⁹ on the various excesses of popular religion against which Ibn Taymiyya regularly inveighed.

Other comprehensive theological works include a full volume explicating the first part of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s famous theological work, *Muḥaṣṣal afkār al-mutaqaddimīn wa-l-muta’akhhirīn min al-‘ulamā’ wa-l-ḥukamā’ wa-l-mutakallimīn* (*The Harvest of the Thought of the Ancients and Moderns from Among the Religious Scholars, Philosophers, and Theologians*), and a two-volume commentary (*sharḥ*) on certain topics (*masā’il*) in al-Rāzī’s *Kitāb al-Arba‘īn fī uṣūl al-dīn* (*Forty Topics on the Principles of Religion*). Shorter theological treatises of a general nature include the aforementioned *al-‘Aqīda al-Ḥamawiyya* and *al-‘Aqīda al-Wāsiṭiyya*. Several other treatises, either on *uṣūl al-dīn* in general or on specific theological topics, likewise addressed to the populations of various cities and averaging 40 leaves each, include: *al-Risāla al-Tadmuriyya*, *al-Risāla al-Kīlāniyya*, *al-Risāla al-Ba‘labakkiyya*, and *al-Risāla al-Baghdādiyya* on the question of the createdness of the Qur’an; *al-Risāla al-Murrākushiyya* on the question of the divine attributes; and, a 50-leaf treatise on the creed of the Ash‘arīs, the Māturīdīs, and non-Māturīdī Ḥanafīs.

Works dealing with the all-important (for Ibn Taymiyya) question of God’s names and attributes, in addition to the abovementioned *Murrākushiyya*, include: a *qā’ida* on the Most Beautiful Names of God (*asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā*); a

⁸⁸ For a study, see Michel, *Muslim Theologian’s Response*. This work has also been taken up in Nancy N. Roberts, “Reopening of the Muslim-Christian dialogue of the 13-14th centuries: critical reflections on Ibn Taymiyyah’s response to Christianity in *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ li man baddala dīn al-masīḥ*,” *The Muslim World* 86 (1996).

⁸⁹ Translated in Memon, *Ibn Taimīya’s Struggle*.

treatise on the affirmation (*ithbāt*) of God's names and attributes; a 50-leaf fat-wa on the issue of God's "aboveness" (‘*uluww*’); a treatise known as the *Irbiliyya* on the question of God's "settling" (*istiwā*) and "descending" (*nuzūl*) and whether these are meant literally (*ḥaqīqatan*) or not; a further 20-pg. treatise on *istiwā* and a refutation of its interpretation as "dominion" or "overpowering" (*istīlā*);⁹⁰ and, a 40-leaf treatise on the separateness (*mubāyana*) of God and creation.

Other treatises touch upon questions of epistemology and/or rational methods of argument, including: a 100-leaf *qā'ida* on the notion that every rational argument adduced by an innovator (*mubtadi*) proves the invalidity of his position; a full-volume work on certain knowledge (*al-‘ilm al-muḥkam*); a three-volume work refuting the position that definitive proofs (*adilla qat‘iyya*) do not yield certainty (*yaqīn*);⁹¹ a treatise on the superiority of the knowledge of the early community (*salaf*) over those who succeeded them (*khalaf*); a *qā'ida* on the Qur’anic method of calling people to guidance and the difference between this method and that of the theologians and the Sufis; and, a *qā'ida* on the perceived contradiction between the texts of revelation and consensus (*ijmā*).

Works on purely philosophical themes (in addition to the extensive philosophical discursions of the *Dar’ al-ta‘āruḍ*) include: a work refuting Ibn Sīnā's *al-Risāla al-Aḍḥawiyya* in denial of physical resurrection after death;⁹² a thin volume on the "tawḥīd" of the philosophers following in the way of Ibn Sīnā; a short-volume *qā'ida* on universals; a *qā'ida* on the finite and the infinite; a "large volume" refuting the philosophers' assertion of the eternity of the world; and, last but not least, the aforementioned devastating attack on Greek logic, *Kitāb al-Radd ‘alā al-manṭiqiyyīn* (consisting of one "large volume").

Under legal works (*kutub fiḥiyya*), the *Mu'allafāt* lists 55 works, all *qā-wā'id* or *rasā'il*, in addition to a 4-vol. commentary (*sharḥ*) of the famous

⁹⁰ Al-Bazzār reports that Ibn Taymiyya composed the equivalent of 35 quires (560 pgs.) on the question of *istiwā*. (al-Ḥujayfī, *Manhaj*).

⁹¹ Listed in al-Ḥujayfī, *Manhaj* on the authority of al-Ṣafadī and Ibn Shākir.

⁹² For a detailed study, and a translation of Ibn Taymiyya's treatment of the *Aḍḥawiyya* in the *Dar’ al-ta‘āruḍ*, see Michot, "Mamlūk Theologian's Commentary."

Ḥanbalī jurist Ibn Qudāma’s (d. 620/1223) *Kitāb al-‘Umda fī al-fiqh*. The most important of these treatises for our purposes are: an 80-leaf *qā’ida* on the terms “literal” (*ḥaqīqa*) and “metaphorical” (*majāz*); a one-volume *qā’ida* on the preferability (*tafḍīl*) of the Ḥanbalī *madhhab* and the enumeration of its merits; a *qā’ida* on the fact that every righteous action has its basis in following the way of the Prophet; a 50-leaf *qā’ida* on the preferability (*tafḍīl*) of the *madhhab* of *ahl al-Madīna*; a *qā’ida* on *ijtihād* and *taqlīd*; a *qā’ida* on whether making an incorrect *ijtihād* constitutes a sin and whether the truth lies in only one of several conflicting conclusions of *ijtihād*; and, a *qā’ida* on whether or not it is obligatory for the common person (‘*ammī*) to make *taqlīd* of a specific *madhhab*.

Writings related to Sufism and the various topics typically associated with it are listed in the *Mu’allafāt* under the various works on *uṣūl al-dīn*. Some such works are critical of what Ibn Taymiyya considered to be excessive and unorthodox elements that had crept into Sufism, both in terms of doctrine and in terms of practice. Such works include: a volume each on *tawassul* and *istighātha*; a one-volume refutation of the monistic mysticism of Ibn Sab’īn and others, entitled *al-Masā’il al-Iskandariyya* and, relatedly, a *qā’ida* in refutation of the *ittiḥādiyya*, or “unificationist,” Sufis consisting of a small volume; and, finally, a 20-leaf *qā’ida* in addition to a complete volume on the prohibition of spiritual audition (*samā’*). In addition to these critical works, Ibn Taymiyya also wrote a number of other treatises by way of positive contribution to the literature dealing with standard topics of spiritual development, purification of the soul, and the internal life of faith. Such works include: the 60-leaf *al-Tuḥfa al-‘Irāqiyya* on the stations (*maqāmāt*) and states (*aḥwāl*) of the spiritual path and works of the heart (*a’māl al-qulūb*); a 60-leaf *qā’ida* on forbearance (*ṣabr*) and gratitude (*shukr*); a thin-volume *qā’ida* on contentment (*riḍā*); a thin-volume *qā’ida* on love of God (*maḥabbat Allāh*); a 50-leaf *qā’ida* on sincerity (*ikhlās*) and reliance on God (*tawakkul*); a *qā’ida* on the fact that the external religious law (*sharī’a*) and internal spiritual reality (*ḥaqīqa*) are correlative (*mutalāzimān*); a 30-leaf *qā’ida* on purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*); a 30-leaf *qā’ida* on detachment from the world (*zuhd*) and moral scrupulousness (*wara’*); and, a 40-leaf

qā'ida on the diseases of the heart and how to cure them. Other works include a 20-leaf *qā'ida* on proving the reality of the miracles of the *awliyā'* ('saints'); a treatise on the controversial statements of the famous Baghdādī mystic Abū 'Abd Allāh Ḥusayn b. Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922); and, a *qā'ida* on Junayd al-Baghdādī's (d. 297/910) definition of *tawḥīd* as "the singling out of the Pre-Eternal from the contingent" (*ifrād al-qadīm 'an al-ḥādith*).

Finally, mention must be made of several important compendia of Ibn Taymiyya's writings. The largest and most significant of these are: *Majmū'at al-rasā'il al-kubrā* (2 vols.); *Majmū'at al-rasā'il wa-l-masā'il* (2 vols.);⁹³ and, the enormous *Majmū' fatawā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya* (37 vols.). These works bring together a number of shorter works on various topics and are an invaluable resource for the researcher interested in exploring Ibn Taymiyya's rich thought and voluminous writings.

V. Ibn Taymiyya's Assessment of the Intellectual Heritage Bequeathed to Him

In the foregoing chapter, we attempted to sketch the various currents and cross-currents of the Islamic intellectual tradition, with special emphasis on the question of the relationship between reason and revelation as it developed across various disciplines up until the time of Ibn Taymiyya in the mid-7th/13th century. The preceding section of the current chapter complements this survey with a brief aperçu of Ibn Taymiyya's own immediate political and social circumstances, his basic biography, and the main outlines of his intellectual profile and scholarly output. Yet there remains one final step necessary in order for us to understand with precision what motivates Ibn Taymiyya in the *Dar'*, in what context *he* perceives the momentous struggle of reason and revelation, and what precisely he hopes to achieve through his monumental magnum opus. This step involves reconstructing, from various statements scattered throughout the *Dar'*, Ibn Taymiyya's own assessment of the development of the intellectual tradition

⁹³ Compiled and edited by the well-known 14th-/20th-century reformer Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1352/1935).

he inherited and with which he brought himself into such urgent and strident conversation. Once we understand exactly how the fundamental issues looked from the perspective of Ibn Taymiyya as can be gleaned from his own words, we will be in a position to attack the *Dar'* head on in the following chapter and begin to unravel the project its author has set forth for himself in it.

We recall the fundamental issue of the divine attributes and the question of how best to understand scriptural statements that affirm the completely unique, other, and incomparable nature of God while simultaneously describing Him in terms evocative of qualities and attributes partaken of by human beings. The necessity of affirming God's utter transcendence (*tanzīh*) had to be counter-balanced by the imperative to uphold the integrity of scripture (*ithbāt*) and the reality of the descriptions God gives of Himself therein. We have seen that over the course of Islamic history, different schools of thought adopted varying positions on how best to effect this reconciliation, some stressing the reality of the attributes to the point of falling into a crude and primitive assimilationism (*tashbīh*) and others insisting upon divine transcendence with such single-minded zealotry as to strip the Deity of any attributes whatsoever (*ta'ṭīl*), reducing the name "God" to an empty signifier denoting an abstract entity entirely inconceivable to the human mind (and hence unapproachable to the human heart as well).

Let us begin our mapping of Ibn Taymiyya's mindset by considering his understanding of the positions pertaining to the divine attributes upheld by the early community (*salaf*) – roughly the learned men and women of the first three generations of Muslims whom Ibn Taymiyya takes to be uniquely authoritative in their understanding and practice of the religion. Our goal in this section is not to offer an independent assessment of Ibn Taymiyya's depiction of the issues at hand, but only to present *his* understanding of them so as to be able, in the remainder of our study, to appreciate *his* response to the intellectual situation placed before him in the late 7th/13th and early 8th/14th centuries.

Now then, Ibn Taymiyya contends: (1) that the authoritative early community (*salaf*) were unanimous in their affirmation of *all* the attributes predicat-

ed of God in revelation in a manner consistent with a straightforward, plain-sense understanding of the texts, that is, without making *ta'wīl* or *tafwīd* of any of the divine attributes. In other words, they were full-fledged affirmationists (*muthbitūn*), with no positions indicating any form of negationism (*naḡy*) or reinterpretation (*ta'wīl*) (which amounts to negationism for Ibn Taymiyya) being reported of the very earliest generations;⁹⁴ (2) that the Salaf were unanimous in denouncing negationist positions once these started to arise with or around the time of Jahm b. Ṣafwān (d. 128/745-46) and his teacher al-Ja'd b. Dirham (d. 105/724); and, critically for Ibn Taymiyya's project, (3) that the early community actively defended and promoted affirmationist stances, and denounced negationist ones, by means of *rational argumentation* (in addition to citing purely scriptural evidence). This last point is key, for even the would-be negationist admits, as a rule, that the obvious sense of the texts would seem to imply affirmationism; hence his effort to reinterpret – that is, to make “*ta'wīl*” of – the text according to “rational” demands or, at the very least, to point out that the obvious meaning cannot have been intended due to the presence of a “rational objection” (*mu'arīḡ 'aqlī*). In the face of such a stance, merely citing scripture would be of no avail, for both the negationist and the affirmationist are, in fact, in agreement as to what the obvious sense of the text implies. The negationist's “rational objection” to the obvious sense of scripture can thus only be adequately met by rational arguments refuting the alleged rational objection and demonstrating the reasonability of the plain sense of the text in question. Ibn Taymiyya is very keen to establish that the early Salaf, whose positions and methods of deriving them he takes as uniquely normative, were in possession *both* of a sound – indeed, the soundest – understanding of the revealed texts *and* of robust and evincive – indeed, the most robust and evincive – methods of *rational* argumentation in defense of this understanding. They thus stood at the very top of the

⁹⁴ See, for instance, Ibn Taymiyya, *Dar'*, Vol. IV: p. 23, ln. 16 – p. 24, ln. 7. (Hereafter cited in the reduced format: *Dar'*, IV: 23, l. 16 – 24, l. 7).

Taymiyyan pyramid,⁹⁵ in perfect and harmonious conformity with both authentic revelation *and* sound reason.⁹⁶

But how, in Ibn Taymiyya's understanding, did we get from this situation to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's articulation of the Universal Law six centuries later? Much as modern historians of Islamic intellectual history, Ibn Taymiyya, relying largely on al-Shahrastānī's *Kitāb al-Milal wa-l-niḥal* as well as al-Ash'arī's *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, dates the first negationist (*jahmī*)⁹⁷ positions to arise "after the first century [of the *hijra*], towards the end of the generation of the Successors,"⁹⁸ when the proto-Mu'tazila⁹⁹ took the position that neither accidents (*a'rāḍ*) nor temporally originating events (*ḥawādith*) supervene in God (*taḥullu bihi*), by which Ibn Taymiyya says they meant that there could not subsist in Him (*taqūmu bihi*) either any attribute (*ṣifa*), such as 'knowledge' or 'power,' nor any action (*fi'l*) or state (*ḥāl*), such as 'creating' or 'settling' (*istiwā'*, i.e., upon the divine throne). Before this, affirms Ibn Taymiyya, there are no statements or positions of negationism (*naḥy*) regarding the divine attributes or the inherence in God of acts or states contingent upon His volition¹⁰⁰ recorded or known of anyone among the Muslim community. When, however, this position arose and was championed by the early Mu'tazila, the authoritative scholars of

⁹⁵ Introduction, p. xv above.

⁹⁶ Ibn Taymiyya feels compelled to lay stress on the early community's expertise in and regular recourse to rational argumentation in defense of the rational plausibility of scriptural dicta due to the contention by later thinkers (such as al-Rāzī and others) that they were too occupied with establishing and expanding the frontiers of the Islamic lands and setting up its basic institutions to be bothered with a careful and considered reflection upon, and rationally mature understanding of, the texts of revelation. Their role, rather, was merely to transmit these texts and to establish and protect the political domains of Islam, which would afford later thinkers, relieved of the burdens of warfare and administration, the material luxury and intellectual leisure then to work out the real meanings of the texts and to establish for them an exegesis based on properly grounded rational foundations.

⁹⁷ See *Dar'*, VII: 72, l. 21 – 73, l. 1, where Ibn Taymiyya speaks of the foreign origins of negationism (*tajahhum*) and how it was adopted from past atheist nations (*malāḥidat al-umam al-munkirīn li-l-ṣāni'*), whom Ibn Taymiyya brands "the most ignorant of sects and the least endowed with intellect." It is not clear whether by "past atheist nations" here Ibn Taymiyya is referring to the Greeks or, as is more probable, to the likes of the "materialists" (*dahriyya*) or the (possibly Buddhist) Sumāniyya of Tirmidh and Samarqand briefly encountered in the previous chapter (see p. 21 above, as well as n. 78, p. 22 and n. 88, p. 24).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, IV: 24, l. 8-10.

⁹⁹ Such as al-Ja'd b. Dirham, Jahm b. Ṣafwān, and others.

¹⁰⁰ "*al-umūr al-ikhtiyāriyya al-qā'ima bi-dhātihī*"

the early community (*a'immat al-salaf*) were prompt to denounce it, “as is known and reported of them in a *mutawātir* fashion.”¹⁰¹ This initial denial of the divine attributes and actions led to the Mu‘tazilite position of the createdness of the Qur’an on the grounds that if the Qur’an were held to subsist in God’s essence (*law qāma bi-dhātihī*), this would entail that there could, in fact, subsist in Him actions and attributes, a position that has been denied at the outset. The early community and its authoritative scholars (*al-salaf wa-l-a’imma*) were likewise unanimous in denouncing this position too, reports Ibn Taymiyya.¹⁰²

Now, explains Ibn Taymiyya, all those who opposed the Mu‘tazila on this count initially upheld the subsistence in God both of attributes and of actions and speech contingent upon His will, until the time of Ibn Kullāb (d. 240-1/853-5)¹⁰³ and his followers, who made a distinction between so-called “essential attributes” such as ‘life’ and ‘knowledge’ held to be intrinsic to the divine essence, on the one hand, and so-called “volitional attributes” that are contingent upon God’s will and power, on the other, claiming that these latter cannot “subsist” in Him, as this would entail the supervention within the Divine Being of a succession of temporally originating events (*ta‘āqub al-ḥawādith ‘alayhī*), an impossibility according to Ibn Kullāb’s doctrine. Ibn Kullāb was then succeeded by Ibn Karrām (d. 255/869). This latter, Ibn Taymiyya reports on the authority of al-Ash‘arī’s *Maqālāt*, along with “the majority of Muslims (*ahl al-qibla*) before him”¹⁰⁴ – including various factions of *mutakallimūn* from the Shī‘a and Murji’ites, such as the Hishāmiyya, and the disciples of Abū Mu‘adh al-Tūmanī and Zuhayr al-Atharī and others” – were opposed both to the Mu‘tazila and to the

¹⁰¹ *Dar’*, IV: 24, l. 14-15. The term “*mutawātir*,” a technical term primarily in the sciences of jurisprudence and hadith, refers to any report that is “highly recurrent” or “mass transmitted” by such a large number of disparate individuals as to preclude their collusion upon the forgery of said report. For a discussion of the centrality of the concept of *tawātur* not only to hadith, but to Islamic conceptions of epistemology more generally, see Bernard Weiss, “Knowledge of the Past: The Theory of *Tawātur* According to Ghazālī,” *Studia Islamica* 61 (1985). Also see Wael Hallaq, “On Inductive Corroboration, Probability, and Certainty in Sunnī Legal Thought,” in *Islamic Law and Jurisprudence*, ed. Nicholas Heer (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1990), esp. 9-24 on *tawātur*.

¹⁰² *Dar’*, IV: 24, l. 16-18.

¹⁰³ On whom see Chapter 1, Section VII, esp. p. 40.

¹⁰⁴ *Dar’*, IV: 25, l. 7-8.

followers of Ibn Kullāb. All such groups, affirms Ibn Taymiyya, held the position that temporally originating events could subsist in God,¹⁰⁵ and some among them even held the explicit position that God could move and that He has been speaking from eternity when He willed.¹⁰⁶

The very next generation saw the rise of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d. 324/936), whom Ibn Taymiyya credits with having launched a major effort to shore up the early community’s normative understanding of the revealed texts concerning God’s attributes and actions. It is of note that one hardly finds a single critical, let alone pejorative, statement about al-Ash‘arī in ten volumes of text. Rather, Ibn Taymiyya lauds al-Ash‘arī generously and commends him for his efforts to defend in rational terms the received doctrine of the early community. He nevertheless ascribes to al-Ash‘arī two specific shortcomings that, while barely noticeable in al-Ash‘arī’s own doctrine, planted the seeds for an eventual excrescence of major problems in the centuries that followed. The first is that, although Ibn Taymiyya goes so far as to consider al-Ash‘arī and “the likes of him,” such as Ibn Kullāb, to be among the “*mutakallimat ahl al-ḥadīth*” (‘hadith scholars specialized in *kalām*’) and the “best among the various factions and closest to the Book and the Sunna,”¹⁰⁷ he nevertheless maintains that while al-Ash‘arī (as is typical, he tells us, of those specialized primarily in rational theology) possessed detailed expertise in *kalām*, his knowledge of the particulars of the hadith and Sunna was much more general and, in the end, not sufficient for him always to know precisely what the early positions of the Salaf were that

¹⁰⁵ “*qālū bi-qiyyām al-ḥawādith bihi*”

¹⁰⁶ “*lam yazal mutakalliman idhā shā’*” [My translation of this expression follows the usage of Jon Hoover in Jon Hoover, “God Acts by His Will and Power: Ibn Taymiyya’s Theology of a Personal God in his Treatise on the Voluntary Attributes” in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, ed. Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 58.] For a detailed history and explication of the nuances of the term “*lam yazal*” as used in Islamic theological discourse, see Richard M. Frank, “‘Lam yazal’ as a Formal Term in Muslim Theological Discourse,” *MIDEO (Mélanges de l’Institut dominicain d’études orientales du Caire)* 22 (1995).

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., VII: 462, l. 5-6. See also ibid., II: 308, l. 8-10, where Ibn Taymiyya states that “since al-Ash‘arī and those like him were closer to the Sunna than [other] factions of *mutakallimūn*, he is closer in affiliation (*intisāb*) to Aḥmad [ibn Ḥanbal] than are others, as is evident in his works.”

were to be defended.¹⁰⁸ Reminiscent of a comment made by al-Qāḍī Abū Bakr b. al-‘Arabī (d. 543/1148) with respect to his teacher, al-Ghazālī,¹⁰⁹ Ibn Taymiyya maintains that al-Ash‘arī too, having spent so many years immersed in Mu‘tazilism, was not able to extricate himself from it fully, with the result that there remained in his doctrine – unwittingly, to be sure – what Ibn Taymiyya calls “remnants of the principles of the Mu‘tazila.”¹¹⁰ Such “remnants” include, for instance, al-Ash‘arī’s (and Ibn Kullāb’s) conceding the validity of the argument for the existence of God from accidents (*ṭarīqat al-a‘rāḍ*) and the argument from the composition of bodies (*ṭarīqat al-tarkīb*)¹¹¹ – topics which, Ibn Taymiyya concedes, are “difficult even for those with more knowledge of the hadith and Sunna than al-Ash‘arī had.”¹¹² And so it was that each successive generation of Ash‘arites was pulled further and further back towards Mu‘tazilī-style negationism as they sought to apply al-Ash‘arī’s own doctrine consistently and to tease out systematically all the implications and entailments of their master’s initial

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., VII: 35, l. 10 – 36, l. 6. See especially VII: 35, l. 16ff for how al-Ash‘arī and his main (early) followers (*a‘immat atba’ihi*), such as al-Bāqillānī and Abū Ishāq al-Isfarāyīnī, wanted to “champion the well-known positions of the scholars of Sunna and hadith (*ahl al-sunna wa-l-ḥadīth*) while at the same time conceding to the negationists (*jahmiyya*) [certain] rational principles which they deemed to be valid, and [since] they did not have the detailed expertise in the Qur’an and its meanings, as well as the hadith and the positions of the Companions, possessed by the leading scholars of Sunna and hadith, they formed a doctrine (*madhhab*) that was a composite of these two [approaches], with the result that both parties (i.e., the negationists and the people of hadith) accused them of contradiction.” See also ibid., II: 307, l. 12 – 308, l. 2, where Ibn Taymiyya remarks that the “foremost authors (*a‘yān al-fuḍalā’ al-muṣannifīn*) [i.e., on creed],” such as al-Shahrastānī, al-Qāḍī Abū Bakr b. al-‘Arabī, al-Juwaynī, al-Qāḍī Abū Ya‘lā, Ibn al-Zāghūnī, Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī, Muḥammad b. al-Haytham, et al., often mention many positions on an issue taken by various groups, yet they neither know nor cite the established position of the early community (*salaf*) and of authorities (*a‘imma*) such as Aḥmad (ibn Ḥanbal), despite the fact that the generality of scholars affiliated with the Sunna / Sunnism (*‘ammat al-muntasibīn ilā al-sunna*) from all various groups (*ṭawā’if*) claim to follow the authoritative imams such as Mālik, al-Shāfi‘ī, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, Ibn al-Mubārak, Ḥammād b. Zayd, and others.

¹⁰⁹ See ibid., I: 5, l. 8-10, where Ibn Taymiyya quotes Abū Bakr b. al-‘Arabī as saying: “Our shaykh (al-Ghazālī) penetrated into the inner reaches of philosophy [lit., ‘of the philosophers’ (*buṭūn al-falāsifa*)] then wanted to come back out, but was not able to.”

¹¹⁰ “*baqāyā min uṣūl al-mu‘tazila*,” ibid., VII: 462, l. 8. Synonymous expressions include: “*baqāyā min al-tajahhum wa-l-i‘tizāl*” (ibid., VII: 97, l. 14-15); “*baqāyā al-tajahhum wa-l-i‘tizāl*” (ibid., VII: 106, l. 4-5); and, “*baqiyya min al-i‘tizāl*.”

¹¹¹ Ibid., VII: 97, l. 14-18 and 106, l. 5.

¹¹² Among those possessing “more knowledge of hadith and Sunna than al-Ash‘arī had” but who also fell into a similar trap, Ibn Taymiyya mentions al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī, Abū ‘Alī al-Thaqafī and Abū Bakr b. Ishāq al-Ṣibghī, all of whom, he says, are reported eventually to have retracted their positions. (See ibid., VII: 97, l. 18 – 98, l. 2).

positions. For a similar reason, while al-Ash‘arī and his immediate followers did not, according to Ibn Taymiyya, concede even the theoretical possibility of a contradiction between reason and revelation,¹¹³ later Ash‘arīs – such as al-Rāzī and al-Āmidī – who “took from the Mu‘tazila when they inclined towards negationist doctrines (*tajahhum*) and even towards philosophy”¹¹⁴ conceded not only the formal possibility, but also the actual occurrence of, real contradictions between reason and revelation, ultimately leading to the formulation of the Universal Law as a means of ironing out the ostensible incongruities.

So it is, explains Ibn Taymiyya, that with each successive generation of Ash‘arites, one witnesses ever increasing misgivings vis-à-vis the affirmation of first one, then another, attribute affirmed of God in revelation on the basis of alleged rational objections which al-Ash‘arī himself (and perhaps al-Bāqillānī, too, since Ibn Taymiyya also sees him as having remained quite close to the Sunna) did not catch, but which later thinkers uncovered in increasing number as they sought to apply consistently the full implications of his initial doctrine. Such slippage can likewise occur, says Ibn Taymiyya, as later followers think up more and more rational proofs to support their founder’s initial doctrine, rational proofs which entail (further) negation and which had not occurred to their founder.¹¹⁵ Such proliferation of increasingly negationist arguments is to be found not only among major Mu‘tazila figures of the 4th/10th and 5th/11th centuries,¹¹⁶ but among primary Ash‘arite authorities as well. In this manner, says Ibn Taymiyya, al-Ash‘arī himself and his immediate successor, al-Bāqillānī, unambiguously affirmed the so-called “revealed attributes” (*al-ṣifāt al-khabariyya*), including those that had become a point of contention, such as God’s face, hand, and His settling upon the throne. Indeed, affirms Ibn Taymiyya, al-Ash‘arī is not known to have ever held more than one position on this issue, “as agreed upon unanimously by those who transmitted his doctrine and as per his well-known works,”

¹¹³ Ibid., VII: 97, l. 6-7.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., VII: 97, l. 4-5.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., V: 247, l. 19 – 248, l. 2.

¹¹⁶ Ibn Taymiyya mentions here specifically Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī, Abū Hishām, Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā‘ī, ‘Abd al-Jabbār, “and others.” (ibid., V: 248, l. 3-5).

in which he not only affirms such attributes but also refutes the rational arguments of those, such as the Mu‘tazila, who argue that such texts cannot be understood “literally” but rather must be reinterpreted (*ta’wīl*) in order to skirt a rational objection or charge of *tashbīh*.¹¹⁷ However, just two generations after al-Bāqillānī, Ibn Taymiyya bemoans, al-Juwaynī negates such attributes, “in agreement with [the doctrine of] the Mu‘tazila and the Jahmiyya.”¹¹⁸ Concurring that such attributes could not be affirmed at face value, al-Juwaynī first adopted the position of *ta’wīl* in his *Kitāb al-Irshād*, then in a later work, *al-‘Aqīda al-Nizāmiyya*, upheld *tafwīd* instead, “mentioning that which indicates that the early community (*salaf*) unanimously held that *ta’wīl* was neither mandatory (*wājib*) nor [even] permissible (*sā’igh*).”¹¹⁹ Eventually we come to al-Ghazālī¹²⁰ in the 5th/11th century who, Ibn Taymiyya says, at times affirms the “rational attributes” in conformity with the Ash‘arite position and at times either negates them altogether or reduces them all to the single attribute of knowledge, in agreement with the doctrine of the philosophers. His final position on the issue, Ibn Taymiyya reports, was one of suspension of judgment (*waqf*), whereupon he then clung to the Sunna as the safest path and (allegedly) died while engaged in

¹¹⁷ *Dar’*, V: 248, l. 6-19.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, V: 249, l. 1.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, V: 249, l. 1-5. Note, however, that while al-Juwaynī indeed rejects *ta’wīl* as violating the stance and practice of the early community, he explicitly defends *tafwīd* precisely as having been the practice of the very same early authorities, whom he says it is incumbent upon later generations to follow. See, in particular, the quote from al-Juwaynī’s *al-‘Aqīda al-Nizāmiyya* at *ibid.*, V: 249, n. 2, where he says: “The authorities of the early community (*a’immat al-salaf*) refrained from *ta’wīl*, leaving the outer wording of the texts to stand as is and consigning their true meaning (*tafwīd ma’ānīhā*) to the Lord Most High. The opinion to which we consent and the rational stance we adopt in religious matters (*alladhī nartaḍīhi ra’yan wa-nadīn Allāh bihi ‘aqlan*) is to follow the early community (*ittibā’ salaf al-umma*), as it is preferable to follow [the early authorities] and to refrain from the generating of new doctrines [conflicting with theirs] (*fa-l-awlā al-ittibā’ wa-tark al-ibtidā’*).” Ibn Taymiyya, as we have seen, vehemently rejects the view that the authoritative early community practiced *tafwīd* in any form, insisting that they were all full-fledged affirmationists, affirming not only the wording of the revealed texts, but also the meanings most naturally understood from this wording on the basis of the known linguistic convention of the first community. The question of interpreting revelation in light of the linguistic convention of the first community shall be dealt with comprehensively in Chapter 4 below.

¹²⁰ We shall have occasion, in Section VI below (see p. 122ff), to consider at greater length Ibn Taymiyya’s relationship to al-Ghazālī and how he sees himself positioned with respect to his esteemed predecessor.

studying the books of hadith.¹²¹ Finally, by the 6th/12th and 7th/13th centuries, al-Rāzī and al-Āmidī, both major authorities of later Ash‘arism, have become so agnostic with regard to the reality and the knowability of the divine attributes affirmed in scripture – coupled with a proportionately decreasing confidence in the ability of revelation to serve as the basis for any certain (*yaqīn*), objective knowledge whatsoever, even in strictly theological matters – that they end up claiming not to have any proof whatsoever, be it rational or scriptural, for either the affirmation or the negation of the attributes,¹²² thus ending up essentially in a complete draw over a major point of theology addressed extensively in revelation and sharply contested by the leading philosophical and theological minds of the preceding six centuries.¹²³ Indeed, observes Ibn Taymiyya, al-Āmidī was unable to establish in his books the unity of God (*tawḥīd*), the temporal origination of the world (*ḥudūth al-‘ālam*), or even the very existence of God,¹²⁴ and was reported by a “reliable authority” (*thiqa*) to have said, “I applied myself assiduously to the study of *kalām*, but did not acquire anything [reliable] from it that differs from what the common people believe.”¹²⁵

The foregoing pertains to the *mutakallimūn* and Ibn Taymiyya’s depiction of the historical development of *kalām*. With regard to the philosophers, Ibn Taymiyya credits an extreme form of negationism with being responsible for what he understands of Ibn Arabī’s notion of the unity of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). The Bāṭinites (i.e., Ismā‘īlīs), however, exhibit the most extreme form of

¹²¹ *Dar’*, V: 249, l. 9-12 In another spot, Ibn Taymiyya says more specifically that al-Ghazālī “died studying [a copy of] the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī.” (See *ibid.*, I: 162, l. 8-11). Such reports of deathbed confessions from wayward doctrine are a trope and cannot be taken at face value without further corroboration.

¹²² *Ibid.*, V: 249, l. 6-8.

¹²³ See, for example, *ibid.*, V: 313, esp. l. 10-11 for how, regarding the most important and most basic aspects of religion, the major thinkers (*nuzzār*) are in “great confusion,” and also at *ibid.*, VII: 283, l. 10ff, where they are said to be in “confusion, uncertainty, and doubt.” Similar indictments are to be found in numerous instances sprinkled throughout the *Dar’*. For a list of quotes by major thinkers allegedly admitting they have gained essentially no guaranteed knowledge from their years of pursuing rational speculation (*nazar*) in the manner of the *mutakallimūn*, see *ibid.*, III: 262, l. 10 – 264, l. 2. This list includes, among others, Abū ‘Abd Allāh Afḍal al-Dīn al-Khūnājī (d. 646/1248), who was the top logician of his day.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, III: 263, l. 1-2.

¹²⁵ “*am‘antu al-nazar fī al-kalām wa-mā ‘stafadtu minhu shay’an illā mā ‘alayhi al-‘awāmm.*” (*ibid.*, VIII: 262, l. 15-16).

negationism, to the point where they end up refraining from predicating *anything* of God whatsoever. The result is a purely – and, Ibn Taymiyya argues, highly incoherent – negative theology where, ostensibly out of fear of falling into *tash-bīh* of any sort whatsoever, one may not even affirm that God exists (*mawjūd*) nor that He does *not* exist (*ghayr mawjūd*), nor may one predicate of Him that He is positively non-existent (*ma‘dūm*) nor that He is *not* non-existent (*ghayr ma‘dūm*). Ibn Taymiyya also mentions how those whom he dubs the “materialist (pseudo-)philosophers” (*al-mutafalsifa al-dahriyya*), such as Ibn Sīnā and al-Fārābī, claim that reason rules out the physical resurrection of the body on the Day of Judgment, with the now familiar prescription that texts apparently affirming such a resurrection must be subjected to the (alleged) dictates of reason and reinterpreted accordingly. When those among the Mu‘tazila who affirm bodily resurrection dispute with such philosophers over this matter, these latter reply to them with the same type of argument that the Mu‘tazila employ against the affirmationists, saying, essentially, “Our position on bodily resurrection is analogous to your position on the attributes,”¹²⁶ that is, if you are truly consistent, you should also deny bodily resurrection on the same grounds on which you have denied the divine attributes.

This, then, is the chronological progression, as Ibn Taymiyya sees it, from what he contends was the conscientious and no-holds-barred affirmationism of the early Salaf, buttressed by probative rational arguments and therefore in full conformity with pure reason (*‘aql ṣarīḥ*), to the outright negation of all divine names, attributes, and actions born of an ill-conceived response to alleged “rational objections” – a negationism which Ibn Taymiyya rejects not only as being in unmitigated opposition to any plausible reading of the texts of scripture, but also, and very significantly, in flagrant opposition to the most elementary and universal principles of reason itself.

Now, Ibn Taymiyya holds that, while all these developments – and increasingly grave deviations – were occurring among those formally involved in

¹²⁶ Ibid., V: 250, l. 10-14.

the business of theological and philosophical speculation, there always remained a group – many among the scholars and the majority among the common folk – that persisted in upholding, and also in defending rationally, the understanding of the revealed texts bequeathed to the *umma* by its earliest – and, once again, uniquely authoritative – generations. This group, according to Ibn Taymiyya, includes the majority of hadith scholars, a majority of legal scholars (*fuqahā'*) in the early centuries and quite a good number still in his day, as well as the majority of early ascetics and Sufis. Some among this group were so repulsed by the very nature and contentiousness of the discussions raging amongst the theologians and philosophers that they refused even to engage and were content in their hearts to carry on upholding faithfully what they knew to be the understanding of the early community. Ibn Taymiyya is keen to point out, however, that others of this group did indeed take it upon themselves to engage in theological debate in an attempt to provide an adequate *rational* defense of the received normative understanding of the Salaf. Ibn Taymiyya would, we may venture to affirm, be happy to include al-Ash'arī (though not, to be sure, the majority of later Ash'arites) among this group, albeit with the abovementioned caveat regarding the “remnant of Mu'tazilism” that marred al-Ash'arī's initial doctrine and that later festered, at the hands of his most astute successors, to what Ibn Taymiyya sees as the pseudo-philosophical, quasi-Mu'tazilism of a 6th/12th-century al-Rāzī or a 7th/13th-century al-Āmidī.

Most prominent among this group figures the revered eponym of Ibn Taymiyya's own legal and theological school, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), whom Ibn Taymiyya credits with having adduced, in establishing the fundamentals of the faith (*uṣūl al-dīn*), “a larger number of definitive proofs (*adilla qat'iyya*), based in both revelation and in reason, than all other major authorities.”¹²⁷ In making this case, Ibn Taymiyya appeals to Ibn Ḥanbal's wide-scale

¹²⁷ Ibid., VII: 154, l. 7-8. Ibn Taymiyya further states that Aḥmad “did not forbid appealing to a valid rational proof that yields knowledge of the desideratum (*yufḍī ilā al-maṭlūb*),” adding that he employed, in his disputations with the Jahmiyya and other groups opposed to the normative orthodox understanding of the early community, rational arguments such as are “well known in his writings and among his followers.” (ibid., VII: 153, l. 19 – 154, l. 1). See ibid., VII: 154, l. 17

authority among both scholars and non-scholars alike as the heroic champion of orthodoxy against the official state imposition of Mu‘tazilite doctrines during the Miḥna. Significantly, Ibn Taymiyya cites a number of statements from Ibn Ḥanbal in approval of rational argumentation – based, to be sure, on what he considers *pure* reason (*‘aql ṣarīḥ*) – and also a number of instances in which Aḥmad used rational arguments himself to refute this or that doctrine of a negationist. In this vein, Ibn Taymiyya cites on several occasions throughout the *Dar’* a lengthy quote from Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, in which this latter states:

Praise be to God who has appointed in every non-prophetic era (*fī kull zamān fatra min al-rusul*) remnants of the people of knowledge (*ahl al-‘ilm*) who call those who have strayed to right guidance and are forbearing in the face of what harm (they may receive from those they call); who bring back to life by the Book of God those who are dead (spiritually) and grant vision by God’s light to those who are blind. How many dead victims of the Devil have they brought to life! How many of those wandering in error have they guided aright! How comely, then, is the effect they have on people and how odious the effect of people on them! They exonerate the Book of God from the distortions of extremist sectarians (*al-ghāfilīn*), the misrepresentations (*intihāl*) of those who falsify religion (*al-mubṭilīn*), and the (unfounded) interpretations (*ta’wīl*) of the ignorant who have raised the banners of innovation (*bid‘a*) and unloosed the reins of discord (*fitna*). Such are they as oppose the Book and differ over it, united only in their abandoning of the Book. They discourse on God and the Book of God with no knowledge and speak in vague and ambiguous terms (*yatakallamūna bi-l-mutashābih min al-kalām*), fooling thereby the ignorant among men. We seek refuge, therefore, in God from the trials of those who lead astray (*fitan al-muḍillīn*).”¹²⁸

– 155, l. 8 for two specific examples of rational arguments (*qiyāsayn ‘aqliyyayn*) used by Aḥmad, closing with the statement that “Aḥmad makes inferences based on rational arguments (*yastadillu bi-l-adilla al-‘aqliyya*) in theological matters *so long as they are valid*.” (ibid., VII: 155, l. 9-10) [emphasis mine]. See also ibid., V: 180, ln. 1ff: “Since this is known by reason, Aḥmad said...” (“*wa-lammā kāna hādihā yu‘rafu bi-l-‘aql qāla Aḥmad...*”).

¹²⁸ According to Ibn Taymiyya, this passage appears in Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal’s work, *al-Radd ‘alā al-zanādiqa wa-l-jahmiyya* and is cited on several occasions throughout the *Dar’*. (See, for example, ibid., II: 301, l. 10 – 302, l. 8).

Ibn Taymiyya without a doubt sees himself as following in the footsteps of his revered forebear and, along with all the rightly guided defenders of the early doctrine mentioned above, clearly aspires to take his place in the cortège of those “remnants of the people of knowledge who call those who have strayed to right guidance” by providing, via his *Dar’ al-ta’arūḍ*, the definitive answer to the seemingly unsolvable “conflict” between reason and revelation that had been building up for so many centuries before his time.

VI. Previous Attempts to Solve the Conundrum of Reason and Revelation

Ibn Taymiyya was not, of course, the first Muslim thinker to attempt, on a grand and conclusive scale, to put an end to the conflict between reason and revelation once and for all. Notwithstanding the several individuals mentioned above whom Ibn Taymiyya credits with providing a rational defense of orthodox understandings regarding the divine attributes and other issues, there are two large-scale attempts by two major figures prior to Ibn Taymiyya who, each in his own way, attempted to provide a definitive solution to this most vexing of issues. These figures are: the towering jurist, theologian, and mystic “Proof of Islam,” Abū Ḥamid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111),¹²⁹ and the author of history’s perhaps best ever commentaries on the Aristotelian corpus, the preeminent philosopher and jurist Abū al-Walīd Muḥammad b. Aḥmad Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198).¹³⁰ Before taking up the details of Ibn Taymiyya’s attempted solution

¹²⁹ The main studies on al-Ghazālī relevant to the points under discussion here are: Binyamin Abrahamov, “Al-Ghazālī’s Supreme Way to Know God,” *Studia Islamica* 77 (1993); Chelhot, “Qisṭās,”; Michael E. Marmura, “Ghazali and Demonstrative Science,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 3, no. 2 (1965); Aydin, “Metaphorical”; and, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Fayyūmī, *al-Imām al-Ghazālī wa-‘alāqat al-yaqīn bi-l-‘aql* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-‘Arabī, 1986).

¹³⁰ The main studies on Ibn Rushd relevant to the points under discussion here are: Harry Austryn Wolfson, “The Double Faith Theory in Clement, Saadia, Averroes and St. Thomas, and its Origin in Aristotle and the Stoics,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* (1943); Muhsin Mahdi, “Remarks on Averroes’ Decisive Treatise,” in *Islamic Theology and Philosophy: Studies in Honor of George F. Hourani*, ed. Michael E. Marmura (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984); George F. Hourani, “Ibn-Rushd’s Defence of Philosophy,” in *The World of Islam: Studies in Honour of Philip K. Hitti*, ed. James Kritzeck (London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1959); and, Ṭarrād Ḥamāda, *Ibn Rushd fī Kitāb Faṣl al-maqāl wa-taqrīr mā bayna al-sharī‘a wa-l-ḥikma*

to the problem of reason and revelation, we shall first stop to ask how he evaluated – and how we might evaluate – what he is attempting to accomplish through the *Dar'* in light of his two great predecessors.

In reverse chronological order, let us begin with Ibn Rushd. The *Dar'* contains numerous lengthy citations from various works of Ibn Rushd.¹³¹ Ibn Taymiyya cites his Andalusian predecessor mainly for this latter's admission, as a leading philosopher, that the revealed texts convey nothing other than pure affirmationism and in no wise intimate even remotely the types of negationist *ta'wīl* given to them mostly by the *mutakallimūn*. For Ibn Rushd, the *mutakallimūn*'s arguments are clumsy, merely “dialectical” – in contrast to the (allegedly) rigorously demonstrative proofs of the philosophers – and, consequently, do not hold up, Ibn Rushd contends, on purely rational grounds. Furthermore, the attempt to deflect the apparent meaning of the revealed texts in favor of non-apparent figurative interpretations (*ta'wīlāt*) ostensibly derived through reason serves only to confuse the common man and undermine his confidence in the veracity and integrity of revelation. Ibn Taymiyya cites with much approval Ibn Rushd's insistence that revelation never be interpreted, at least not publicly, in any way other than what the obvious sense of the texts would seem to indicate. In this vein, he cites Ibn Rushd's critique of al-Ghazālī for having let too many people in on what should have remained a private discussion among a philosophical elite and for venturing to make positive figurative interpretations (*ta'wīlāt*) of various verses, then letting these loose, so to speak, amongst a dangerously wide section of the public. In fact, Ibn Taymiyya cites Ibn Rushd page after page with such apparent approval that one begins to wonder if he fully grasped what Ibn Rushd's ultimate position on the status of revelation as a purveyor of knowledge really was (though it is quite clear in other passages sprinkled

min al-ittiṣāl: aḥamm al-mawḍū'āt fī al-falsafa wa-l-fiqh wa-l-manhaj (Beirut: Dār al-Hādī, 2002).

¹³¹ Among the most significant of these is a lengthy citation from Ibn Rushd's *Manāḥij al-adilla*, along with Ibn Taymiyya's commentary, found at *Dar'*, VI: 212-249 (esp. 217-227). Other works of Ibn Rushd directly relevant to our theme are: *Faṣl al-maqāl*, *Manāḥij al-adilla*, and *al-Ḍamīma*.

throughout the work that the dyed-in-the-wool Aristotelian's overall position was, of course, not lost on him).¹³²

Though al-Ghazālī was much more a theologian than a philosopher and, in fact, dedicated his *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*,¹³³ one of his most famous works, to refuting just the type of philosophy triumphed by the likes of Ibn Rushd,¹³⁴ Ibn Taymiyya comes off, at best, as cool towards al-Ghazālī throughout the *Dar'*. Though respectful of al-Ghazālī's immense erudition and spiritual accomplishment¹³⁵ and ready, as usual, to recognize laudable and well-intentioned efforts to defend Islam against alien doctrines where due, Ibn Taymiyya nevertheless observes that, while al-Ghazālī refuted many of the false doctrines of the philosophers, he also capitulated to many of them as well, becoming thereby a sort of "interstice (*barzakh*) between them [the philosophers] and the Muslims,"¹³⁶ – so much so, says Ibn Taymiyya, that even the likes of the Andalusian mystical philosopher Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 581/1185), whom Ibn Taymiyya dubs one of the "mystically inclined of the heretics" (*ṣūfiyyat al-malāḥida*), could find affinity with (*yasta'nisu bi*) some of al-Ghazālī's doctrines.¹³⁷ With specific reference to the issue of reason and revelation, Ibn Taymiyya faults al-Ghazālī for having launched a purely destructive attack against the philosophers, contenting himself, as al-Ghazālī himself states in the introduction to the *Tahāfut*, to make use of any argument he could lay his hands on in order to expose the philosophers' incoherence – their "*tahāfut*" – regardless of whether or not the argument was

¹³² Ibn Taymiyya also wrote a separate treatise in refutation of Ibn Rushd. See Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Radd 'alā falsafat Ibn Rushd* (Miṣr: al-Maṭba'a al-Jamāliyya, 1910).

¹³³ See Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers / Tahāfut al-falāsifah: A Parallel English-Arabic Text*, translated, introduced, and annotated by Michael E. Marmura (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1997).

¹³⁴ Al-Ghazālī was, of course, responding most immediately to the '*falāsifa*' in the guise of Ibn Sīnā, whose impure and admixed Aristotelianism was the subject of considerable critique on the part of Ibn Rushd himself. But see Janssens, "Al-Ghazzālī's *Tahāfut*," as well as Richard M. Frank, "Al-Ghazālī's Use of Avicenna's Philosophy," *Revue des études islamiques* 55-57 (1987-1989). See now also Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹³⁵ See *Dar'*, I: 162, l. 8-9, where Ibn Taymiyya speaks of al-Ghazālī's "tremendous intelligence and piety (*ta'alluh*), his knowledge of discursive theology (*kalām*) and philosophy, and his traveling the path of abstemiousness, disciplining of the soul and *taṣawwuf*."

¹³⁶ Ibid., VI: 57, l. 3.

¹³⁷ Ibid., VI: 56, l. 14 – 57, l. 1.

valid in and of itself. In this manner, al-Ghazālī was satisfied, as Ibn Taymiyya puts it, to “confront falsity with falsity”¹³⁸ and, ultimately despairing of the ability of reason to reach any reliable conclusions in such matters altogether, resorted instead to mystical unveiling (*kashf*) and subjective spiritual experience (*dhawq*) as the surest means of coming to truth.¹³⁹

The contrasting view¹⁴⁰ that each of these three men held regarding the nature of knowledge and the most reliable means of gaining it is striking indeed and brings us right back to the central concern of this study. For Ibn Rushd, reason is the ultimate guide to what is true and not true, real and not real, about the

¹³⁸ See Ibn Taymiyya’s citation of al-Ghazālī’s *Tahāfut* at *ibid.*, VII: 164, l. 3-10. See also *ibid.*, VI: 223, l. 6-8, where Ibn Taymiyya cites al-Ghazālī, in his work *Jawāhir al-Qur’ān*, as admitting that the arguments used in the *Tahāfut* amounted to “(merely) dialectical arguments (*aqāwīl jadaliyya*),” and that the truth of the matter lies in the doctrine he expounded in the esoteric work, *al-Maḍnūn bihi ‘alā ghayr ahlihi* (*The Book to be Withheld from Those for Whom It is not Written*).

¹³⁹ See *ibid.*, V: 339, l. 12 – 340, l. 2, where Ibn Taymiyya quotes al-Ghazālī in his *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* to the effect that the moderate or middle path (*ḥadd al-iqtisād*) between the “wantonness” (*inḥilāl*) of excessive *ta’wīl* and the “rigidity (*jumūd*) of the Ḥanbalites” is “[a] fine and subtle [point] comprehensible only to those who have been granted success [and] who perceive things by a divine light, not by means of receiving transmitted knowledge (*samā’*). Then, when the hidden aspects of things are made manifest to them as they truly are (*idhā ‘nkashafāt lahum asrār al-umūr ‘alā mā hiya ‘alayhi*), they consider (*nazarū ilā*) the transmitted texts (of revelation) and the wording thereof, and whatever agrees with what they have witnessed (*mā shāhadūhu*) by the light of certainty they affirm (*qarrarūhu*) and whatever disagrees [with this] they interpret [by means of *ta’wīl*] (*awwalūhu*).” (Cited by the editor of the *Dar’*, Muḥammad Rashād Sālim, in *ibid.*, V: 339, n. 2 and V: 340, n. 2).

¹⁴⁰ Useful comparative studies include: Iysa A. Bello, *The Medieval Islamic Controversy between Philosophy and Orthodoxy: Ijmā’ and Ta’wīl in the Conflict between al-Ghazālī and Ibn Rushd*, vol. 3, Islamic Philosophy and Theology (Leiden & New York: E. J. Brill, 1989); Muḥammad Bin-Ya’ish, *al-Mawḍū’iyya wa-l-dhātīyya bayna al-Ghazālī wa-Ibn Taymiyya* (Tetouan, Morocco: Maṭba‘at al-Khalīj al-‘Arabī, 2000); Frank Griffel, “The Relationship between Averroes and al-Ghazālī as it Presents itself in Averroes’ Early Writings, especially in His Commentary on al-Ghazālī’s *al-Mustaṣfā*,” in *Medieval Philosophy and the Classical Tradition in Islam, Judaism and Christianity*, ed. John Inglis (Richmond & Surrey: Curzon Press, 2002); Ḥammū Naqārī, *al-Manḥajīyya al-uṣūliyya wa-l-manṭiq al-yūnānī: min khilāl Abī Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī wa-Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Taymiyya*, vol. 1, Bidāyat (Casablanca: al-Sharikah al-Maghribiyya li-l-Nashr Walāda, 1991); Josep Puig Montada, “Ibn Rushd versus al-Ghazālī: Reconsideration of a Polemic,” *Muslim World* 82, no. 1 (1992); Yūḥannā Qumayr, *Ibn Rushd wa al-Ghazālī: al-Tahāfutān, dirāsa, mukhtārāt* (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq (al-Maṭba‘a al-Kāthūlikiyya), 1969); al-Ṭablāwī Maḥmūd Sa’d, *Mawqif Ibn Taymiyya min falsafat Ibn Rushd fi al-‘aqida wa-‘ilm al-kalām wa-l-falsafah* ([Cairo]: al-Ṭ.M. Sa’d, 1989); Muḥammad Rashād Sālim, *Muqārana bayna al-Ghazālī wa-Ibn Taymiyya*, vol. 1, Maktabat Ibn Taymiyya, al-Qism 3: al-Dirāsāt (Kuwait: Dār al-Qalam, 1975); Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh Sharqāwī, *al-Sūfiyya wa-l-‘aql: dirāsa taḥfiliyya muqārana li-l-Ghazālī wa-Ibn Rushd wa-Ibn ‘Arabī* (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl; Cairo: Maktabat al-Zahrā’ 1995); and, Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Avicenna, Algazali, and Averroes on Divine Attributes* (Barcelona: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1956).

world. Objective human reason is (simplistically stated) what Aristotle took it to be and what reason reveals it to be, as discovered most reliably in the rigorous and disciplined process of formal syllogistic demonstration bequeathed to the world by the First Teacher, that most distinguished sage from Stagira. The purpose – and indeed the genius – of revelation is not to enunciate forthrightly the greatest metaphysical and ontological, let alone eschatological, truths of the universe, for the subtlety of these is well beyond the ken of the vast majority of ordinary men. Certain knowledge is what the philosophers, specifically the Peripatetics, have discovered through rational demonstration (*burhān*), a prize jewel accessible only to the gifted few and intended to be kept tightly within the circles of the intellectual elect, carefully guarded from falling into the hands of men who, not having been blessed with the mind of a philosopher, could but be confused thereby and, at worst, dangerously led astray. The ingenuity of revelation thus lies, for Ibn Rushd, not in the fact that it conveys to mankind precious and objectively true knowledge of things as they are, but rather in the preeminent adroitness with which it succeeds in symbolizing transcendent realities through images which, though not corresponding to reality in any objective sense, nevertheless accomplish the lofty moral objective of spurring man on to good deeds and to living his life piously in a manner as to ensure his ultimate success in the Hereafter.

Ibn Taymiyya, for his part, concurs with al-Ghazālī's skepticism regarding the Greek model of rationality adopted with such enthusiasm by so many of the intellectual elite among his Muslim coreligionists and, in fact, the whole point of the *Dar'* is to deconstruct this (to his mind) very particular and parochial, not to say ultimately incoherent, configuration of rationality in an even more radically extirpative manner than al-Ghazālī himself had attempted to do. Yet Ibn Taymiyya takes al-Ghazālī to task for his ultimate loss of faith in any notion of a publicly shared, reliable reason altogether and his attempt instead to establish moral and cognitive certainty on the ultimately subjective footing of private spiritual experience.

As against al-Ghazālī, Ibn Taymiyya shares with Ibn Rushd this latter's confidence in the ability of reason to reach objective, true, and certain conclusions regarding many of the most fundamental truths about God, man, and the world but, of course, he stands at the polar opposite of Ibn Rushd's conception of the language of revelation as merely evocative and pictorial, rather than denotative and factual. It is the obvious sense of revelation, available and comprehensible to the elite and to the common man alike, that tells the real story, so to speak, providing a true, factual, face-value account of all the themes addressed therein (even if the ultimate ontic reality of such transcendent matters as they are in and of themselves remains, of necessity, beyond the reach of our contingent and perforce liminary human faculties). On this reading, it is the ostensibly rational deductions of the philosophers and theologians that, as we shall see, end up being for Ibn Taymiyya little more than a figment of their own imaginations – mental constructs that not only contradict revelation, but, as al-Ghazālī himself had so astutely demonstrated in the *Tahāfut*, fall apart on strictly rational grounds as well, once rational investigation of them has been truly pushed to the limit. In addition, Ibn Taymiyya censures Ibn Rushd specifically for, as he sees it, having demoted the value of revelation to one of a strictly pragmatic moral-ethical phenomenon having essentially nothing to do with the (higher) epistemic function of conveying to man objective knowledge about the reality of his existence and that of the various realms that God has created – empirical/seen (*shāhid*) and transcendent/unseen (*ghā'ib*), the present world (*dunyā*) and the life of the Hereafter (*ākhirā*). It is not, to be sure, that the philosophers prize knowledge less than action; in fact, quite the opposite is true, only that they do not look to revelation as a source of knowledge, limiting the utility of the revealed texts to their pragmatic side alone.¹⁴¹ Ibn Taymiyya, of course, both recognizes and assigns great value to the practical moral guidance afforded by reve-

¹⁴¹ See *Dar'*, V: 359, l. 1-7 and V: 359, l. 13 – 360, l. 5 for the related point that what the philosophers' position here actually implies is that those (namely, the philosophers) who teach knowledge, the nobler of the two, are, by implication, nobler and more beneficial to mankind than those (namely, the prophets) who only taught man the lesser of the two.

lation,¹⁴² yet is nonetheless adamant in declaring that the most noble, lofty, and ultimately beneficial aspect of revelation is, precisely, the *knowledge* it provides human beings about God, themselves, and the ultimate significance of their worldly lives as a tilling ground for the abode of eternity that lies beyond.¹⁴³

For Ibn Rushd, then, reason alone can come to know truth, and reason proper is what Aristotle conceived it to be: the demonstrative faculty operating deductively in terms of Aristotelian syllogistics. For al-Ghazālī, reason may well be what Aristotle conceived it to be, but that being the case, is of little use in reaching any true knowledge of matters most ultimate. For Ibn Taymiyya, reason is capable of reaching definitive conclusions on the most important of matters, but precisely because it is *not* what Aristotle, and all who followed in his wake, conceived it to be. Al-Ghazālī's project, at least as far as reason is concerned, would seem to be purely deconstructive: the pretensions of philosophical mental acrobatics are systematically dismantled, but then reason, as if it could not be any other than what the philosophers deemed it to be, is discarded altogether as a means for ascertaining the truth. Ibn Taymiyya conceives of his own project as going well beyond al-Ghazālī's, as he attempts to "counter falsehood with truth"¹⁴⁴ and to settle the issue of the vexed relationship of reason to revelation definitively by demonstrating that true, pure reason (*'aql ṣarīḥ*) positively *agrees with* and corroborates revelation and can, moreover, be plausibly demonstrated to do so. In as far as al-Ghazālī conceived of his own work in the *Tahāfut* in purely deconstructive and negative terms – laying the philosophers' heretical doctrines to waste, but without erecting in their stead a solid *rational* structure capable of demonstrating the inherent *rational* plausibility and consistency of

¹⁴² In fact, one of Ibn Taymiyya's main motivations in attempting to slay the negationist snake once and for all is the fact that the philosophers' highly abstract notion of an irretrievably remote deity makes it nearly impossible for one to relate to God personally or to cultivate the religiously vital senses of love and awe of the Divine necessary for one to worship Him in any meaningful way and struggle to keep His commandments. See, for example, *ibid.*, VI: 323-324 for a statement on Ibn Taymiyya's motivations for and objectives in writing the *Dar'*.

¹⁴³ See *ibid.*, V: 358, l. 1-3, where Ibn Taymiyya states that what the Qur'an addresses in terms of knowledge is quantitatively greater and qualitatively more noble than what it addresses in terms of works (*al-khiṭāb al-'ilmī fī al-Qur'ān ashraf min al-khiṭāb al-'amālī qadran wa-ṣifatan*).

¹⁴⁴ "*yuqābilu al-fāsid bi-l-ṣaḥīḥ*"

revelation – then the *Dar'*, at least in terms of the ambition its author harbors for it, would seem to go a significant step beyond al-Ghazālī's more circumscribed enterprise. Like Ibn Rushd, Ibn Taymiyya seeks no less than a full resolution to the intractable standoff between reason and revelation – albeit, to be sure, on terms as radically opposed as conceivable to those proposed by his arch-Peripatetic Andalusian predecessor.

The remainder of this study will examine in detail just how Ibn Taymiyya goes about attempting to accomplish his projected tour de force, then evaluating the measure of his success. An affirmative verdict on the viability of Ibn Taymiyya's project would be of major significance, not only in terms of the ideas themselves, but also in terms of current scholarly inquiry, obliging us henceforth no longer to stop at al-Ghazālī's (negative) project of demolishing the philosophers' system, but to include from now on the final and decisive chapter of the saga represented by Ibn Taymiyya's audacious undertaking. This undertaking, as we have intimated, purports to be not only more fundamentally eradivative than al-Ghazālī's (since Ibn Taymiyya rejects even more than what al-Ghazālī did, including the very logic of Aristotle on which the entire philosophical edifice was built), but also – and significantly so – comprises a conscientiously constructive, or rather *re*-constructive, project that aims: (1) to demonstrate that there does in fact exist something out there called pure sound reason (*'aql ṣarīḥ*) and to establish in positive terms what precisely it is; and, (2) to show that this pure reason demonstrates *not only* that the philosophers' doctrines are false, incoherent, and positively irrational, *but also* that what revelation reveals is, in diametric opposition to this, true (of course), but also coherent and *positively rational*. Ibn Taymiyya, as we have seen, insists that merely “refuting falsehood with falsehood” may be instructive in as far as it demonstrates how the philosophers and theologians end up collectively refuting each other's arguments, but this only goes as far as to prove that all these groups are wrong. It is decidedly *not* sufficient, insists Ibn Taymiyya, for *establishing in rational terms what is actually true and correct*, which can only be done by “confronting the invalid

with the valid and the false with the true, which conforms to both authentic revelation (*ṣaḥīḥ al-manqūl*) and pure reason (*ṣarīḥ al-ma‘qūl*).”¹⁴⁵

The terms on which Ibn Taymiyya bids to resolve the age-old conflict between reason and revelation in Islam are enormously ambitious. While previous attempts to defuse this tension stereotypically demanded that revelation yield to the deliverances of a rationality largely conceived along Greek lines and constructed, in the final analysis, on the backbone of Aristotelian logic – a conception of rationality that had been taken for granted for centuries before him (even by the more textually conservative of theologians) as constitutive of reason *per se* – Ibn Taymiyya decides to go a distinctly different route. Simply reinterpreting or suspending revelation is not only, for him, too facile a solution to the problem, but also one that he considers largely disingenuous, for the basic consequence of the Universal Law, as he sees it, is that ultimately reason alone is granted the right to arbitrate, even on matters that fall outside its proper domain. With each new instance of figurative interpretation (*ta’wīl*) or suspension of meaning (*tafwīḍ*), the integrity of revelation as a source of knowledge is further eroded, until its epistemic function as a purveyor of truth is largely, if not entirely, eclipsed by a “reason” whose own deep-set incongruities conspire to preclude it as well from yielding any bona fide knowledge, particularly of God and related matters theological. Sunk to the bottom of the Taymiyyan pyramid,¹⁴⁶ caught between a debilitated revelation shorn of its prerogative to convey truth and a dilapidated reason scattered in the winds of incessant schismatics and hobbled by incurable misgivings, the Muslim intellectual landscape of the early 8th/14th century, to Ibn Taymiyya’s mind, cried for a resolution. Yet our author’s prescription does not consist in simply turning the tables on reason and bidding it to silence wherever and whenever revelation has spoken. Not only would the intrinsic intellectual dissatisfaction of such a “solution” render it perpetually unstable, it would also, for Ibn Taymiyya, violate the very imperative of revelation itself with its recurrent appeal to “reflect,” “consider,” “reason,” and “ponder,” to say

¹⁴⁵ To this effect, see for example *Dar’*, VII: 165.

¹⁴⁶ See Introduction, p. xv.

nothing of its own deployment of rational argumentation in recommending the plausibility of its doctrine to an originally skeptical audience. Ibn Taymiyya, rather, seeks the solution elsewhere; namely, in the elaboration of a (re)integrated epistemology in which conflict between reason and revelation is not merely staved off by the terms of a truce in which each party enjoys supremacy in a separate domain of exclusive magisterium, nor yet in which the historical tension between the two is artificially defused by subjugating one to what is deemed to be the terms of the other, nor even one in which the two (merely) coexist “side by side” in blissful harmony. Rather, Ibn Taymiyya’s goal is nothing less than the full (re)integration of reason and revelation into a coherent epistemology in which a rehabilitated intuitive reason and an unaffected, straightforward reading of scripture are, as if flowing from a common font, fully corroborative and mutually reinforcing.

A mighty tall order indeed. Precisely how Ibn Taymiyya attempts this feat and with what success will command our attention for the remainder of our study.

CHAPTER 3

ON THE INCOHERENCE OF THE “UNIVERSAL LAW” & THE THEORETICAL IMPOSSIBILITY OF A CONTRADICTION BETWEEN REASON AND REVELATION

I. Ibn Taymiyya on the Universal Law and the Reality of Metaphorical Interpretation (*Ta'wīl*)

In the year 606/1209, fifty-four years prior to the birth of Ibn Taymiyya, the great Persian Ash'arite theologian, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, passed away, leaving behind a massive body of writings. Many of these writings were theological tracts aimed specifically at buttressing the position of the more conservative Ash'arite school of theology against the more rationalistically inclined Mu'tazilites. In one of his more influential theological treatises, *Asās al-taqdīs*, al-Rāzī enunciates a so-called “universal law,” a statement representing a plea for truce on the part of Ash'arite theologians in the ongoing battle between revelation and reason. By al-Rāzī's time, this “universal rule” had won the approving nod of the majority of his Ash'arite colleagues, whose school of thought was steadily becoming the standard, accepted formulation of Islamic theology in rationalistic terms throughout much of the Islamic domains.

The Universal Law, as formulated by al-Rāzī, states:

“If scriptural and rational indications, or revelation and reason, or the obvious outward meaning of the revealed texts and the definitive conclusions of rational thought – or other such ways of phrasing it – are in conflict, then either: (1) they must both be accepted, which is impossible as this would violate the Law of Non-Contradiction [claiming both *p* and *-p*]; (2) they must both be rejected, which is also impossible as this would violate the Law of the Excluded Middle [claiming neither *p* nor *-p*]; (3) precedence must be given to revelation, which is impossible since revelation is *grounded in* reason, such that if we were to give priority to the former over the latter [that is, to revelation over reason], this would amount

to a rejection of *both* reason *and* [by extension] that which is grounded by reason [i.e., revelation]. One must, therefore, (4) give precedence to reason over revelation, then either make figurative interpretation of scripture (*ta'wīl*) [to accord with reason], or negate the apparent meaning of scripture but refrain from assigning to it a definite, particular metaphorical meaning (*tafwīḍ*).”¹

Ibn Taymiyya cites an alternate formulation of this law by al-Rāzī in another work, *Nihāyat al-‘uqūl fī dirāyat al-uṣūl*, where al-Rāzī adds a significant detail – central to Ibn Taymiyya’s overall concern in the *Dar’* – namely, that “(the truth of) revelation can only be established through rational means, for it is *only through reason* that we can establish the existence of the Creator and know (the authenticity of) revelation.”² Ibn Taymiyya laments that al-Rāzī and his followers have made this into a “universal law” (*qānūn kullī*) when interpreting scripture as it relates to God’s attributes and other issues where they deem reason to be in contradiction with what scripture affirms.³ Some of them add to this the notion that scriptural indicants or proofs (*adilla sam‘iyya*) are, in fact, inherently incapable of engendering certainty and therefore cannot be relied upon in matters of religious knowledge.⁴ Others before them, Ibn Taymiyya tells us, had already articulated this “universal law,” such as al-Ghazālī, who employed it in his book *Qānūn al-ta’wīl* in answering questions posed to him by students of his such as al-Qāḍī Abū Bakr b. al-‘Arabī. This latter articulated an alternative formulation of the law based on the method followed by al-Ghazālī’s teacher, al-Juwaynī, and those before him, such as al-Bāqillānī. In sum, explains Ibn Taymiyya, every school of thought has established for itself an analogous rule, taking to be true

¹ *Dar’*, I: 4.

² *Ibid.*, V, 330-331.

³ Ibn Taymiyya would certainly agree with the characterization of al-Rāzī by the editor of the *Dar’*, Muḥammad Rashād Sālīm, who in an explanatory footnote classifies al-Rāzī as “one of the Ash‘arī authorities who mixed the Ash‘arī school of thought with philosophy and Mu‘tazilism.” (See *ibid.*, I: 4, n. 3).

⁴ See, for example, the continuation of al-Rāzī’s statement of the Universal Law in *Nihāyat al-‘uqūl* cited above at *ibid.*, V: 331-335, where he states explicitly that “scriptural indicants cannot be relied upon in matters of religious knowledge (*al-adilla al-‘aqliyya lā yajūz al-tamassuk bihā fī al-masā’il al-‘ilmiyya*).”

and objective knowledge that which they deem their reason has come to know, then subordinating revelation to this alleged “knowledge” and (re)interpreting it accordingly.

Such reinterpretation of scripture as prescribed by the Universal Law has conventionally been carried out in one of two principal ways, either through figurative interpretation (*ta’wīl*), normally defined as assigning to a revealed text a meaning other than its overt or obvious (*ẓāhir*) sense in accordance with a conclusion reached through reason, or through suspension of meaning (*tafwīḍ*), normally defined as declaring the obvious meaning invalid but refraining from providing any specific alternative interpretation, conferring (*tafwīḍ*) its true meaning unto God. Before taking up Ibn Taymiyya’s attempted refutation of the Universal Law, it will prove useful first to explore what exactly he understands the *ta’wīl* and *tafwīḍ* prescribed by the Law to entail and why, therefore, he is so exercised by their use in the interpretation of revelation.

Two Methods of Tabdīl, or “Alteration of Meaning”

One species of altering meaning is dubbed by Ibn Taymiyya “*al-wahm wa-l-takhyīl*,” literally, “instilling delusion and (false) imaginings.” This method presupposes revelation to consist mainly of images and metaphors which, by design, do not correspond to the actual reality of metaphysical matters such as the nature of God, angels, and other unseen realities, or the eschatological realities of heaven and hell. Rather, revelation, on this view, purposely induces men to conceive of God as consisting of an enormous body, to believe in the literal resurrection of bodies after death, physical rewards and punishments in the afterlife, and so on, as it is in the moral interest (*maṣlaḥa*) of the common people to be addressed in such a way that they fancy such things to be true. So although these images are, strictly speaking, false – in the sense that they do not convey a factual representation of such matters as they are in and of themselves – their falsehood is justified by considerations of utility, on the grounds that this is the only possible way by which the common mill may be called to religion successfully

and for the ultimate otherworldly benefit consequent upon their acceptance of religion to be achieved. Among others, Ibn Taymiyya faults Ibn Sīnā for endorsing this species of the principle of “alteration of meaning” (*tabdīl*) in his treatise *al-Risāla al-Aḥḥawīyya*.⁵

An alternate method of transferring meaning is dubbed by Ibn Taymiyya “*al-taḥrīf wa-l-ta’wīl*,” which may be roughly translated as “altering meaning through reinterpretation.” This method admits that the prophets who brought revelation did not intend their respective audiences to believe anything other than what is true in and of itself, only that what is true in and of itself is precisely that which we come to know through the use of our reason, as opposed to, say, through an essentially straightforward reading of the texts of revelation. We must then proceed to make various figurative interpretations (*ta’wīlāt*) of the texts in order to reread revelation in accordance with what reason has established to be true. Such interpretations, according to Ibn Taymiyya, typically involve interpreting words according to other than their conventionally acknowledged meanings (*ikhrāj al-lughāt ‘an ṭarīqatiḥā al-ma’rūfā*) and drawing upon far-fetched metaphors and unlikely figurative usages (*gharā’ib al-majāzāt wa-l-isti’ārāt*). In most of what this group subjects to such interpretation, Ibn Taymiyya avers, the intelligent among them may very well know with certainty that the Author of revelation did *not* intend by His words that which they have interpreted them to mean.

If this is so, we may wonder, then why resort to figurative interpretation in the first place? One common motive, explains Ibn Taymiyya, for such people resorting to *ta’wīl* is to obviate what they judge to be a contradiction. They carry this out, in Ibn Taymiyya’s view, by interpreting a given word according to what a given speaker *could*, in the abstract, plausibly mean by that word, but do not seek to determine the meaning intended by the actual speaker – in this case God – who spoke it in the particular instance in question or to interpret the speaker’s words in the light of relevant circumstantial evidence (*mā yunāsibu ḥālahu*). For

⁵ On Ibn Sīnā’s *Aḥḥawīyya*, see Michot, “Mamlūk Theologian’s Commentary.” For Ibn Taymiyya’s full discussion of the method of “*wahm & takhyīl*,” see *Dar*, I: 8-11.

this reason, most people who perform *ta'wīl* do not claim absolute certitude for the interpretation they provide, but rather can do no more than to state that it is possible for the word, abstracted from any context, to carry such and such a meaning. As for whether the meaning in question is indeed the meaning intended in any particular occurrence of it in a text, it usually turns out to be the opposite. That is, adjures Ibn Taymiyya, it can normally be determined in a definitive manner from the context and the state of the speaker that it is, in fact, *not possible* for the speaker to have meant that (particular) meaning by that (particular) expression in that (particular) context. In summary, then, the method of *tahrīf & ta'wīl*, according to Ibn Taymiyya, is adopted by a large number of *kalām* theologians and others, and it is upon this method that, he asserts, all theologians who oppose the outward meaning of some of the texts of revelation have built their various schools of thought.⁶

To summarize, then, one category of responses to the alleged contradiction between reason and revelation consists of altering (*tabdīl*) the apparent meaning of a revealed text, and this in one of two ways: either (1) by allowing the outward meaning to stand as is while affirming that the real, inner meaning has been deliberately obscured to serve the moral benefit of the common man unschooled in philosophy (i.e., the method of “*wahm & takhyīl*”), or (2) by reinterpreting the outward sense of revelation so as to accord with the conclusions of one’s reason on the grounds that revelation itself has endorsed this procedure for arriving at the truth. These two approaches, Ibn Taymiyya sums up, are the ones adopted by the majority of the philosophers (*falāsifa*).

*The Position of “Presumed Ignorance,” or “Tajhīl”*⁷

Ibn Taymiyya prefaces his mention of the second method often used to resolve a putative conflict between reason and revelation with a brief discussion of the word “*ta'wīl*,” which he says has come to possess three distinct meanings: (1)

⁶ For Ibn Taymiyya’s full discussion of the method of “*tahrīf & ta'wīl*,” see *Dar’*, I: 12-13.

⁷ See *ibid.*, I: 15-17 for Ibn Taymiyya’s full discussion of *tajhīl*.

that to which a matter tends or in which it ends up, the final outcome of a matter (*mā ya'ūlu al-amru ilayhi*), even if the matter in question is in agreement with the obvious lexical sense (*madlūl*) and connotation (*mafḥūm*) of the word; (2) the explanation of words and the clarification of their meanings, even if the meaning does not depart from the obvious, outer meaning of the text, which, Ibn Taymiyya tells us, was the technical sense in which the term “*ta'wīl*” was used by the early scholars of *tafsīr*, such as Mujāhid and others; and, finally (3) deflecting a word from its primary, “literal” sense to a secondary, “metaphorical” meaning on the basis of relevant textual evidence.⁸ The particularization and restriction of the word “*ta'wīl*” to this third sense is to be found, according to Ibn Taymiyya, only in the works of (some) later scholars to the exclusion of the exemplary early generations (i.e., the Salaf and those after them). As for the Companions, the Successors, and all the early authorities, such as the Four Imams (Abū Ḥanīfa, Mālik, al-Shāfiʿī, and Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal) and others, they do not use the term “*ta'wīl*,” according to Ibn Taymiyya, in this third, later acceptance, but rather in the first or the second sense only. Thus, when a group of later scholars imagined that by the word “*ta'wīl*” in verses such as Qurʾan (Āl ʿImrān) 3:7⁹ was meant this particular technical meaning and punctuated the verse with a stop such as to read “and none know its *ta'wīl* but God,” they were compelled to believe that such verses bore meanings other than the meaning most naturally understood from them (*tukhālifu madlūlahā al-mafḥūm minhā*), with the inevitable conclusion that the actual meaning intended was known only to God and, by consequence, *not* known even to the Prophet himself or, by extension, to any of the Companions or Successors, let alone to later generations of Muslim scholars and common people. This position entails, by implication, that the Prophet used to recite verses such as “The Merciful settled upon His throne,”¹⁰ or “To Him as-

⁸ “*ṣarf al-lafẓ ‘an al-iḥtimāl al-rājiḥ ilā al-iḥtimāl al-marjūḥ li-dafil yaqtarinu bi-dhālika*” (ibid., I: 14, l. 4-5).

⁹ Qurʾan 3:7 is the famous verse that speaks most explicitly about *ta'wīl* and which served as the primary textual evidence adduced by all later practitioners of “*ta'wīl*” understood in the sense of metaphorical or figurative interpretation. This verse, and Ibn Taymiyya’s treatment of it, will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

¹⁰ Qurʾan (Ṭāhā) 20:5.

cends the goodly word,”¹¹ or “His two hands are (generously) outstretched,”¹² in addition to other verses and hadith in which particular divine attributes are mentioned, without actually grasping the true meanings of these phrases, as such are said to be known exclusively by God alone. This, Ibn Taymiyya remarks, is what such thinkers believed to have been the way of the Pious Forebears (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*).

Ibn Taymiyya tags the foregoing group of scholars “*ahl al-taḍlīl wa-l-tajhīl*,” namely, those who hold the position of imputing “lack of right-guidedness and ignorance,” a position which implies that the prophets themselves were left without guidance (as to the true meaning of revelation) and were ignorant of what God meant by those expressions with which He has described Himself in His revealed books. Some among this group claim that what is meant by such expressions is other than the apparent meaning and that no one – not even the prophets – knows what God meant by them, in the same manner as all beings are ignorant of when the Final Hour shall come.¹³ Others hold that such expressions are to be left to stand according to their outward meaning (*tujrā wa-tuḥmalu ‘alā ḡāhirihā*), yet with the admission that this meaning is not the “true” meaning, as this latter is known only unto God. These people, says Ibn Taymiyya, contradict themselves, as they simultaneously uphold that such expressions have a figurative sense (*ta’wīl*) different from their apparent meaning, yet that they should be left standing according to their outward, non-intended sense. Ibn Taymiyya remarks that the Ḥanbalī theologian Ibn ‘Aqīl (d. 513/1119), in his anti-*ta’wīl* tract *Dhamm al-ta’wīl*, criticized his teacher and fellow Ḥanbalite, al-Qāḍī Abū Ya‘lā (d. 458/1066), for holding precisely this position.¹⁴ Yet both

¹¹ Qur’an (Fāṭir) 35:10.

¹² Qur’an (al-Mā’ida) 5:64.

¹³ In the famous Hadith of Gabriel (related by Muslim in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* and appearing as the very first hadith in Muḥyī al-Dīn Yaḥyā b. Sharaf al-Nawawī’s [d. 676/1278] famous collection of 40 hadith, *al-Arba‘īn al-Nawawīyya*), the Prophet responds to Gabriel’s questioning about the Final Hour with the response that “the one asked has no more knowledge of it than the one asking.” That no mortal has any knowledge of when the Hour will occur is established beyond question in several verses of the Qur’an, such as Q. (al-A‘rāf) 7:187: “They ask thee about the (final) Hour – when will be its appointed time? Say: ‘The knowledge thereof is with my Lord (alone): none but He can reveal as to when it will occur.’” See also, for instance, Q. (al-Aḥzāb) 33:63.

¹⁴ *Dar’*, I: 16.

these groups share in common the view that the Prophet did not make clearly known what was meant by the texts that they make out to be problematic or ambiguous (*mutashābih*), or (merely) symbolic.¹⁵

What makes things worse, Ibn Taymiyya continues, is that every group declares a different category of verses to be problematic. Thus, those who negate the divine attributes known exclusively through revelation (*al-ṣifāt al-khabariyya*) declare the texts which speak of these to be ambiguous, in contrast to the attributes knowable through reason (*al-ṣifāt al-‘aqliyya*), counting these as clear and unambiguous. Such goes as well for those who negate God’s “being above” creation (*‘uluww*) and the possibility of literally seeing Him on the Day of Judgment (the infamous question of the “*ru’yā*”). Those who negate the attributes altogether but uphold the divine names, such as commonly found among the Mu‘tazila, predictably hold *all* texts relating to the attributes to be ambiguous, while declaring those dealing with the names to be clear. And those who negate – as is typical of the philosophers – the very notional reality (*ma‘ānī*) of the divine names, or the resurrection of the body after death, or the descriptions given in revelation of heaven and hell, correspondingly declare the various texts which treat of these matters to be “ambiguous” and “problematic.” Those who negate the divine decree (*qadar*)¹⁶ classify as ambiguous verses that affirm God to be the creator of all things, while upholding the apparent meaning of verses related to command and prohibition, reward and punishment. On the contrary, those who take a strict predestinarian position¹⁷ hold verses dealing with reward and punishment, and even those conveying commands and prohibitions, to be “ambiguous” or merely symbolic. In short, concludes Ibn Taymiyya, every faction declares verses that contravene its own positions to be “problematic,” then proceeds to state that the Prophet neglected to clarify the meanings of such “ambiguous” passages. Some such groups, as we have seen, hold that this is because

¹⁵ We will discuss in detail the issue of *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* verses in the Qur’an and what Ibn Taymiyya understands to be meant by Q. 3:7 in Chapter 4.

¹⁶ A reference to the creed of the early Qadarīs and its later incarnations, particularly among the Mu‘tazila.

¹⁷ A reference to the early Jabrīs, following the extreme determinist views attributed to Jahm b. Ṣafwān.

even the Prophet himself did not know the true meanings of such verses (the principle Ibn Taymiyya refers to as “*tajhīl*”), while others hold that he knew them but purposely refrained from clarifying them to the community (the procedure Ibn Taymiyya dubs “*taḍfīl*”). Rather, the Prophet, on the this reading, deferred the conveyance of the true meaning of such verses to later scholars to explicate them on the basis of rational proofs born of their efforts (*ijtihād*) in the science of interpretation (*ta’wīl*).

II. The End Result of Metaphorical Interpretation¹⁸

We have made frequent mention of the notion of a “conflict” between reason and revelation, specifically with respect to what each allegedly says regarding the nature of God. We have also indicated that the claim of conflict typically takes the form of an assertion that revelation, taken in its obvious sense, seems to affirm of God certain characteristics that reason has judged cannot be properly ascribed to Him, as doing so would, reason is held to have determined, result either in: (1) violating one or more premises of a rational argument meant to prove the existence of God and/or the plausibility of authentic revelation, or else (2) likening God to created things in a manner that would compromise His unique divinity, a phenomenon known as *tashbīh*, which can be translated as “likening” or, more technically, “assimilationism.” The Universal Law, we have indicated, dictates that any such conflict be decided in favor of reason, with revelation being reinterpreted accordingly, since it is reason that is said to “ground” our knowledge of revelation’s authenticity. Before taking up the details of Ibn Taymiyya’s attempt to rebut the Universal Law in the following sections, we will be well served first to get a clearer picture of what exactly is at stake for Ibn Taymiyya with respect to the alleged conflict between reason and revelation. What, in other words, is so odious about interpreting (or as Ibn Taymiyya would have it, reinterpreting) revelation through *ta’wīl* that Ibn Taymiyya felt obliged to write ten full volumes in refutation of the Universal Law? We shall answer this

¹⁸ Based on Arguments 30 and 32.

question by considering Ibn Taymiyya's portrayal in the *Dar'* of what he sees as the process and inevitable result of increasingly profligate forms of textual reinterpretation.

First we shall consider in generic terms what, exactly, it means for a rational proof (*dalīl*) to contradict the obvious sense of revelation and, therefore, for our knowledge of God and the truth of revelation to be contingent upon a rational proof that contradicts some of the particulars affirmed by revelation.¹⁹ In formal terms, the issue may be presented as follows:

- A group, *G*, has devised the following proof, *P*, for the existence of God.
- Proof *P* is based on the following premises, *x*, *y*, and *z*, and the inference runs as follows: Since *x*, *y*, and *z*, therefore \rightarrow conclusion: God exists.

This, then, is proof *P*. Very well. Yet we notice that while the proof is meant to establish the existence of God, premise *y* (for example) entails the negation of a specific divine attribute, *A*, affirmed in revelation. The proof depends on this premise (and many groups hold that their proof for the existence of God is the only watertight, fully conclusive one), *but* the premise entails $\neg A$, with the corollary that affirmation of *A* would violate premise *y*, thereby vitiating the argument altogether. The specific attribute *A*, therefore, gets “sacrificed,” so to speak, in the interest of saving the overall proof for God's very existence. This gets translated as a “rational objection” to attribute *A*, which is then dealt with, as dictated by the Universal Law, either by metaphorical interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of the texts affirming the attribute in question or by suspension of judgment (*tafwīḍ*) regarding what the true import of such texts might be.

The plot thickens, however, when we discover that attribute *A* is not only affirmed by numerous, unquestionably authentic texts of revelation, but was also consciously and unanimously upheld by the authoritative early community and the major early authorities of the faith regarded by all various groups of Muslims as exemplary and authoritative, and that said attribute only began to be denied or

¹⁹ See Argument 30 at *Dar'*, V: 286-288. For an explanation of Ibn Taymiyya's “Forty-Four Arguments” that constitute the backbone of the *Dar'*, see Section IV below, “Ibn Taymiyya's Project: Refuting the Universal Law,” p. 158ff.

interpreted away in, say, the 2nd (or 3rd or 4th) century with the rise of the specific argument in question (proof *P*) or its immediate antecedents. Ibn Taymiyya has a distinct sense that something is amiss. What is *known* through revelation beyond the shadow of a doubt to be the case, namely, the reality and factual existence (*thubūt*) of attribute *A*, is (allegedly) contradicted by what is *known* to be the case on the basis of an ostensibly apodictic rational proof. Yet Ibn Taymiyya is adamant that two pieces of bona fide *knowledge* can never stand in actual contradiction, since reality forms one unitary and coherent whole and since knowledge, by definition, conforms to how things actually are in and of themselves, and so cannot harbor a contradiction at its very heart. We are, however, *certain* that revelation indeed affirms attribute *A*, and since revelation, as Ibn Taymiyya insists, constitutes a source of objective knowledge about the world, it follows that if a rational proof *P*, be it for the existence of God or for anything else, depends upon or entails *-A*, then there must, of necessity, be something wrong with proof *P*. Perhaps there is something amiss with premise *y* itself. Perhaps the premise is thought to entail a conclusion that it does not, in fact, entail. Perhaps the inference drawn from the proof as a whole is false, the result of an invalid deduction. Determining *what* precisely has gone awry in any given case remains to be determined, and it is here that Ibn Taymiyya's detective work begins.

Ibn Taymiyya presents us with a live example of this phenomenon in a dense two-page section in Volume V of the *Dar'*.²⁰ The issue at hand in this passage has to do with establishing the existence of God on the basis of a proof that is seen to entail the negation of the divine attributes to one degree or another. It is claimed, Ibn Taymiyya informs us, that our knowledge that the Prophet was truthful – and that revelation, by consequence, is authentic – is contingent upon arguments that entail negation of the divine attributes (*ṣifāt*) and the divine decree (*qaḍā' wa-qadar*), that is, the reality of God's being and of His actions as affirmed in revelation. How does such a judgment come about? First, it is

²⁰ See, in the course of Argument 30, *ibid.*, V: 286, l. 6 – 287, l. 14.

claimed, our knowledge of the authenticity of the Qur'anic revelation is dependent upon divine miracles that vouch for the truthfulness of the Prophet in his claim to have received his message from on high. This, in turn, is dependent upon the fact that God does not support impostors with divine miracles, as doing so would be morally reprehensible (*qabīḥ*) and God does not perform morally reprehensible acts. Furthermore, knowledge that God does not perform morally reprehensible acts derives from the fact that He stands in no need of them and is knowledgeable of their reprehensibility, coupled with the premise that one who both knows that an act is reprehensible and simultaneously stands in no need of committing it does not, in fact, commit it. Next, God's freedom from needing to perform the act follows from the fact that He is not a body, but negating corporeality of Him requires the denial of His attributes and acts. This is so, the argument goes, because any entity of which one may predicate attributes and acts necessarily consists of a body. Now, our knowledge that God is non-corporeal rests upon the proof that bodies are temporally originated (*dalīl ḥudūth al-ajsām*), while God is beginninglessly eternal. The result of this concatenation of premises is that if, for instance, the argument for the temporal origination of bodies should fall apart, a dramatic domino effect ensues in which one premise after another collapses, demolishing the argument altogether and leaving us with no convincing deductive proof that the Prophet was, in fact, truthful. So much, then, for the authenticity of revelation.

Yet more devastatingly still, the proof from the temporal origination of bodies, we are told, is the very proof upon which we depend to demonstrate that the world is not eternal (*qadīm*) but originated in time (*ḥādīth*) and, by extension, that it must therefore have an atemporal, necessarily existent originator (*muḥdīth*), namely, God. And if proving the temporal origination of the world is, as many groups claimed, the only fully conclusive method of proving the existence of the Originator, then the failure of any link in the delicately crafted chain of inference would, undermining the argument as a whole, leave us effectively with no rational proof whatsoever for the very existence of God, the proof of whose reality it is the primary task of the whole enterprise of theology to fur-

nish. In this manner, the argument concludes, the knowledge of both the existence of God and the authenticity of the revelation He is said to have sent is directly contingent upon the negation of God's attributes and actions, such that if revelation is found to contain statements the obvious sense of which affirms that God indeed possesses attributes and performs actions, it is not possible to affirm the overt implication (*mūjab*) of such statements, as doing so would undercut the very argument by means of which we have demonstrated that God exists and that revelation is, in fact, authentic.²¹ It is therefore obvious, we are forced to conclude, that it was never the original intent of revelation to affirm in any factual sense God's attributes or acts. We may be confident that this is so since affirming them has been judged by reason to be rationally impossible, and revelation cannot possibly affirm that which reason knows to be impossible. Passages of scripture that appear to endorse a factual affirmation of the reality of such matters can, therefore, safely be concluded not to have been meant "literally," but rather to conceal a true inner meaning at variance with the face-value affirmationism implied by their overt wording. At this point, the argument concludes, we have no recourse but to interpret the text in question metaphorically (*ta'wīl*) or to deny its outward import while suspending judgment regarding its true inner meaning (*tafwīḍ*).²²

The foregoing, then, is a typical example of negating the divine attributes and acts as affirmed in revelation in order to save a would-be proof for the existence of God. The second main motivation for denying certain of God's attributes – or the divine attributes in general – is, as we have mentioned, to avoid *tashbīh*

²¹ See similar at *ibid.*, II: 302, l. 9 – 303, l. 2, where Ibn Taymiyya states that those who deny that which subsists in God (such as His speech) and that which is connected to, or dependent upon (*yata'allahu bi*), His will and power (such as His actions) are motivated to do so only because they believe that the temporal originatedness of the world (*ḥudūth al-'ālam*) and, consequently, the existence of God, the Creator, can only be demonstrated by the argument from the temporal origination of bodies (*dalīl ḥudūth al-ajsām*), which in turn can only be established by affirming that anything in which subsist attributes or temporally consecutive actions (*af'āl muta'āqiba*) is likewise temporally originated. This induced them to negate the subsistence both of attributes and of actions in the divine essence, believing that Islam itself could be defended, and the claims of the materialists (*dahriyya*) and other philosophical schools refuted, in no other manner than this one.

²² *Ibid.*, V: 286, l. 9 – 287, l. 14.

– “likening” or “assimilating” – that is, likening God to created things.²³ Typical of this species of argument, Ibn Taymiyya tells us,²⁴ is that made by the late 4th–/10th-century Persian Ismā‘īlī (“*Bāṭinī*”) missionary and Neoplatonic philosopher Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī (d. *ca.* 331/970) in his work, *al-Aqālīd al-Malakūtiyya*.²⁵ This is the very type of argument, says Ibn Taymiyya, by which al-Sijistānī and other extreme “negationists” (*nufāh*) are able to get the better of all the various groups falling along the spectrum from the very slight negationism of early Ash‘arism through the Mu‘tazila down to the more comprehensive and systematic negationism of the philosophers. The reason they are able to do this, explains Ibn Taymiyya, is that *all* such groups have concurred with the full-fledged negationists, such as the Bāṭiniyya, on the legitimacy, in principle, of making figurative interpretation (*ta’wīl*) of the revealed texts by conceding to them the necessity of negating “what is called *tashbīh*” of any kind whatsoever.²⁶ In this manner, any group that affirms any of the divine names or attributes, such as “the Living” (*al-ḥayy*), “the Omniscient” (*al-‘alīm*), “the Omnipotent” (*al-qadīr*), etc. is confuted by the claim that all such predications equally and ultimately entail assimilation (*tashbīh*). How is this so? The negationist, explains Ibn Taymiyya, contends that the class of “living things” and the class of “existent things” each admit of a logical division into that which is beginninglessly eternal (*qadīm*) and that which is originated in time (*muḥdath*). The fact that the basis of division (*mawrid al-taqṣīm*) is shared between the two categories entails composition (*tarkīb*), which constitutes for the negationist a particularly noxious form of assimilation, namely, that of corporealism (*tajsīm*). It further entails assimilationism in a more general sense since, according to the argument, if that which is eternal (God) and that which is temporally originated (the universe) are both said to be “existent,” then they are similar to each other (*ishtabahā*) in that they are

²³ The term “anthropomorphism,” by which ‘*tashbīh*’ is often translated, is too restrictive here as it only implies likening God to human beings, whereas *tashbīh*, as we shall see in the current example, refers to the likening of God to *any* created thing – to anything, in short, that is other than God Himself.

²⁴ See *Dar’*, V: 323, l. 5 – 324, l. 17.

²⁵ Ibn Taymiyya’s presentation and critique of al-Sijistānī’s position is found in Argument 32 (specifically at *ibid.*).

²⁶ “*wāḥiqūhu ‘alā nafy mā yusammā tashbīhan bi-wajh min al-wujūh.*” (See *ibid.*, V: 323, l. 7-8).

both subsumed under what is connoted by the term “existence” (*ishtarakā fī musammā al-wujūd*), a fact which inexorably amounts to assimilationism. And if it be further held that, say, one of two existing entities (namely, God) is further characterized by the fact of being necessarily existent by virtue of itself (*wājib bi-nafsihi*), then this entity shares with the other, non-necessary entity in whatever is connoted by the term “existence” (*musammā al-wujūd*) yet is simultaneously distinct from it from the point of view of its necessity, and that aspect in which it resembles the non-necessary entity (i.e., existence) is distinguished from that aspect wherein it differs from that entity (i.e., its necessity). This leads to the conclusion that the necessarily existent by virtue of itself (*al-wājib bi-nafsihi*) is “composed” of that in which it shares with the other entity (existence) and that which makes it distinct (its unique necessity), and whatever is composed (*murakkab*) in any form, we are told reason has determined, is of necessity temporally originated (*muhdath*) and not beginninglessly eternal, contingent (*mumkin*) rather than necessary (*wājib*). This deleterious result of God’s essence being “composed” of two parts, “existence” and “necessity,” is said to stem from the fact that such a “composed” entity would be contingent upon (lit., “stand in need of”) each of its parts (*muftaqir ilā juz’ihi*) and, the argument continues, since a thing’s part is necessarily other than the thing itself, it follows that the necessarily existent is dependent upon (*muftaqir ilā*) something other than itself. But that which is dependent for its existence on something other than itself cannot simultaneously be held to be necessarily existent by virtue of itself (*wājib bi-nafsihi*), enjoying inherent necessity by virtue of no more and no other than its own self. It follows, therefore, that if God is truly God by virtue of His self-necessary, beginninglessly eternal existence, then He must be entirely and utterly simple and in no manner “composed,” even if such “composition” merely be a matter of His possessing an entity that is qualified by attributes (and it bears repeating that among the attributes being denied by this argument is the attribute of existence itself!).

In this manner, concludes Ibn Taymiyya, the extreme negationist is able to drag whoever has conceded to him his invalid starting principles (*uṣūl fāsida*)

to an outright negation of the very existence of the Necessarily Existent, whose factual reality (*thubūt*) is known by rational necessity to every rational individual. The Bāṭinite loses in the end, however, for he has brought upon himself the rather serious objection that if, in his desperate attempt to escape assimilationism, he holds that God is neither existent, nor living, nor dead, then he has not escaped assimilationism at all, but rather fallen into an even more egregious form of it, for he has now likened God not to any *existent* thing, but rather to that which is *non-existent*. If he then attempts to skirt this dilemma by claiming that God is neither existent *nor* non-existent, he then brings upon himself the unanswerable objection that: “You have established in logic that for any two identical propositions that differ only in affirmation and negation, it necessarily follows that if one of them be true, the other is false.”²⁷ Thus, if it is true that He exists, then it is false that He does not exist, and vice versa.” In accordance with the Law of the Excluded Middle, there is no escape from the fact that one or the other of these propositions *must* be the case. Pushed hopelessly into a corner, the Bāṭinite’s final recourse is to declare, “I do not affirm *any* of the foregoing propositions. I hold neither that ‘He is existent,’ nor that ‘He is not existent,’ nor that ‘He is non-existent,’ nor that ‘He is not non-existent.’” This, observes Ibn Taymiyya, is the ultimate position of the atheists (*malāḥida*).²⁸ By violating the most elementary laws of logic²⁹ – here the Law of the Excluded Middle – such a

²⁷ That is, if the proposition ‘*p* exists’ is true, then its inverse, ‘*p* does not exist’ must necessarily be false, and vice versa. Holding both to be true simultaneously (i.e., holding ‘both *p* and *–p*’) constitutes a violation of the Law of Non-Contradiction, while holding both to be false simultaneously (i.e., holding ‘neither *p* nor *–p*’) contradicts the Law of the Excluded Middle.

²⁸ The term “*mulḥid*” (pl., *malāḥida*), which in modern Arabic usage normally denotes an “atheist,” is used by Ibn Taymiyya more often than not in the sense of “heretic” to denote someone holding a position considered so fundamentally at odds with basic Islamic teachings as to take him out of the faith (or very nearly so), even if such a person does not necessarily renounce belief in the very existence of God. Given the context in which the term is used here, however, the term “atheist” in the literal sense of denying the very existence of God is precisely what Ibn Taymiyya seems to have in mind.

²⁹ With “logic” here understood not as formal Greek syllogistics, which Ibn Taymiyya rejects, but as constitutive of just that kind of natural, intuitive, straightforward – in other words, “*ṣarīḥ*” – reason that, as we shall discover throughout this study, he champions forcefully. The laws of non-contradiction and the excluded middle lie also, in any case, at the basis of the Greek logic his opponents allegedly prize as the ultimate mechanism of disciplined rational inference, allowing Ibn Taymiyya to get their goat, so to speak, by reducing their position to absurdity on the basis of the very principles they themselves claim to espouse.

person, says Ibn Taymiyya, has ended up falling into a thornier bind than the one from which he was attempting to escape. Moreover, pursues Ibn Taymiyya, as far as assimilationism is concerned, such a person has sought to escape likening God to any existent or non-existent thing by, in the end, likening Him to that which is not merely possible but non-existent (such as, say, a unicorn) but, even worse, to that which is logically inconceivable and utterly devoid of even purely mental reality (such as a “four-sided triangle,” for example). That which is “neither existent nor non-existent” not only has no ontological reality whatsoever, but is not even logically conceivable, and is therefore a worse thing to be likened to than that which is at least conceivable, even if predicated not to exist. This, then, is an example of denying some or all of the attributes affirmed of God in revelation on the basis of a rational argument proffered in order to avoid assimilationism at all costs, yet which ends up falling apart by violating the most elementary laws of logic and, in the end, results in the worst kind of assimilationism possible, that of likening God to that which is both ontologically impossible and logically inconceivable.

These, concludes Ibn Taymiyya, are typical of the arguments put forth by the various groups of negationists, all of whom: (a) admit the theoretical possibility of a bona fide contradiction between reason and revelation; (b) concur that in the event of such a contradiction reason be given priority over revelation; and (c) proceed to interpret away the obvious sense of revelation – that sense which conflicts with their allegedly unimpeachable rational arguments and conclusions – through various degrees of metaphorical interpretation until, eventually, the texts of revelation become completely eviscerated of any meaning whatsoever and denied all possibility of conveying any factually true propositional content concerning God, the afterlife, or any other of a host of metaphysical – or “unseen” (*ghāʾib*) – realities. The practical implication of their position, explains Ibn Taymiyya, is that it is not possible to accept all of revelation as true, but rather to accept only parts of it as true while rejecting other parts of it as, essentially, false – false in the sense that the meaning most naturally implied by the wording of the revealed texts is presumed *not* to conform to the external, objective reality

of the matters they address. Therefore, concludes Ibn Taymiyya, their rational arguments serve, at best, to establish the truth of revelation only in this very partial and deficient manner, with the result that they proceed to deny of revelation whatever conflicts with their rational conclusions – a process which can, at the hands of the most extreme of the negationists, be carried all the way to what amounts to an outright denial of the very existence of God, the Necessarily Existent upon whom the existence of all other existent entities is utterly and entirely dependent.

This, then, is what Ibn Taymiyya sees as the inescapable outcome of a consistent and rigorous application of the Universal Law and the *ta'wīl* it prescribes as a means of accommodating revelation to the putative rational objections raised against discrete parts of its objective content.

III. Faulty Rationality and its Discontents: Reason in a Cul-de-Sac³⁰

Yet if such is the verdict of reason, one may ask, does there exist any other way out but to interpret metaphorically through *ta'wīl*, or “neutralize” through *tafwīḍ*, the “problematic” passages of scripture in order to safeguard the rational integrity – and to a large extent, therefore, the believability – of revelation? Ibn Taymiyya answers this question regarding the possibility of an alternate way in the affirmative and, in fact, dedicates the bulk of the *Dar' al-ta'arūf*'s ten volumes to demonstrating that all of the alleged rational objections brought to bear against a straightforward reading of scripture (and particularly as pertains to God and His nature) actually fall apart on purely rational grounds. What is claimed to be reason itself breaks down as one moves further and further away from the true, natural, inborn “pure reason” (*'aql ṣarīḥ*) endorsed by revelation and exemplified by the early Salaf.

Ibn Taymiyya begins his case with the observation that the principle according to which a person should give precedence to the deliverances of his own

³⁰ Based on Argument 9 (*Dar'*, I: 156-170).

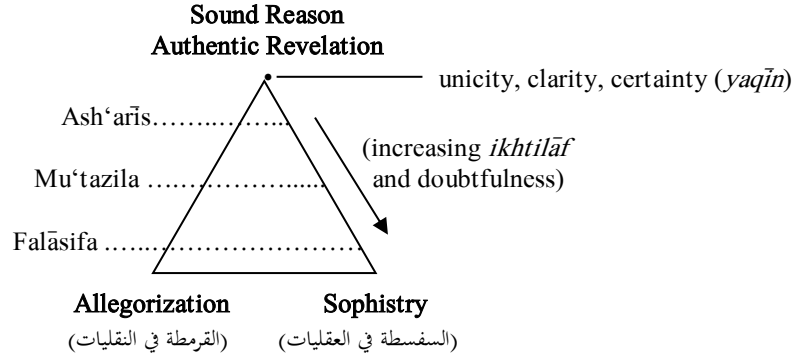
rational faculty over the obvious meaning of the revealed texts is a position not governed by a universally applicable rule (*qawl lā yanḍabiṭ*), since each *kalām* theologian or philosopher – all of whom are in dispute with each other over what they call “rational knowledge” – claims that he knows by rational necessity or through the process of rational investigation a fact whose opposite his contender claims also to be known by rational necessity or through investigation. For instance, both those who negate (some of) the divine attributes and the divine decree (*qadar*) – Ibn Taymiyya singles out here the Mu‘tazila and those who have followed them from among the Shī‘ites – and those who affirm these claim to do so on the basis of allegedly conclusive rational arguments. Indeed both groups, according to Ibn Taymiyya, define the quintessential fruit of “pure discursive theology” (*‘ilm al-kalām al-maḥḍ*) as that which can be known purely through reason alone unaided by revelation. Among matters that most *mutakallimūn* (particularly Ash‘arite) considered rationally demonstrable without consideration of revelation are matters such as the reality of God’s speech, God’s creation of human acts, and the possibility of seeing God in the Hereafter. It is these issues, which they claim can be known independently through pure unaided reason, that they claim to be knowable in a definitive fashion, accusing those who oppose their views on these matters of having contravened the very teachings of the Islamic faith itself – and this despite the fact that both of the contrary positions may be held by men of extraordinary intelligence and mental acumen. Moreover, such disputes and the upholding of diametrically opposed positions occur even with respect to issues explicitly addressed by revelation, such as God’s attributes and decree. As for issues generated in ages subsequent to the age of revelation – such as philosophical questions pertaining to the status of the individual atom (*al-jawhar al-fard*), the identity of bodies (*tamāthul al-ajsām*), the perdurance of accidents (*baqā’ al-a‘rāḍ*), etc. – the divergences among the various groups can hardly be enumerated, yet each group claims to possess conclusive rational proof of the truth of its own position.

Moreover – and this is a cardinal tenet of Ibn Taymiyya’s doctrine on reason and revelation – the further a school of thought is from the Sunna,³¹ the greater is the internal disagreement among its adherents as to what the dictates of reason actually are. This point is essential. For Ibn Taymiyya, reason and revelation *coincide* in a very fundamental sense, with the natural result that the more a faction moves away from what reason *and* revelation essentially overlap in affirming, the more that faction experiences internal dissention, divergence of opinion, and incoherence purely in terms of rational thought itself, in addition to finding itself at increasingly greater odds with revelation. In other words, one is either fully in line with both pure reason and an essentially straightforward reading of revelation, or one drifts away from *both* reason *and* revelation and ends up not only contradicting revelation and explaining it away through an increasingly liberal application of the principle of *ta’wīl*, but also simultaneously falling prey to increasingly intractable rational contradictions, divergences, and improbabilities at the same time.³²

This principle can be best illustrated in the form of the “Taymiyyan pyramid” encountered in the Introduction (p. xv), which we reproduce here once again for more convenient reference:

³¹ Ibn Taymiyya’s use of the term “Sunna” is perhaps closest to the Greek-derived English term “orthodoxy,” literally “correct belief.” I shall retain, however, Ibn Taymiyya’s original term, since it renders more transparent precisely what “correct belief” is for our author and how it is to be determined. Whereas “orthodoxy” normally implies a body of doctrine backed up by the ecclesiastical authority of an institutional church – an institution that has no direct equivalent in Islam – “correct belief” for Ibn Taymiyya, as for the mainstream Islamic tradition as a whole, is, as we shall explore in greater depth in the following chapter, synonymous with the beliefs and practices of the first three generations (*qurūn*) of Muslims – that of the Companions (*ṣaḥāba*), the Successors (*tābi‘ūn*), and the Successors of the Successors (*tābi‘ū al-tābi‘īn*) – and particularly the very first generation comprised of the Prophet’s own companions. As we shall discover, Ibn Taymiyya’s insistence that sound reason and authentic revelation always concur and never contradict entails, as a corollary, that the first generations were in possession simultaneously of a uniquely normative – and hence quintessentially “orthodox” – understanding of sacred scripture *and of* the soundest rational methods used for understanding and reasoning about matters divine.

³² See *Dar’*, I: 157, l. 4-5.



Truth is that point of unicity, clarity, and certainty (*yaqīn*) at which the testimony of sound reason and that of authentic revelation are fully concordant. According to the pyramid, then, the Mu'tazila, for example, exhibit greater internal discord than the affirmationists among the *kalām* theologians such as the Ash'arīs, as evidenced by the extent of disagreement between the Mu'tazilite school of Basra and that of Baghdad – though adherents of the former, Ibn Taymiyya tells us, are closer to the Sunna (i.e., “orthodoxy”) than the latter and are therefore more internally united than their opponents from Baghdad. The Shī'a evidence even greater internal discord than the Mu'tazila, since they are even further removed from sunnaic orthodoxy. As for the philosophers, Ibn Taymiyya chides, it is almost impossible to find anything upon which they collectively agree. In point of fact, their internal divergences and differences are greater than those that separate from each other the three different religious communities of Muslims, Jews, and Christians.³³ Indeed, says Ibn Taymiyya, their differences concerning astronomy alone – which is an arithmetic, mathematical subject that figures among the most objective and accurate of their sciences – are greater than the differences among any of the various sects of the Muslims. The same applies to what they hold in the domain of physics regarding whether bodies are

³³ Ibn Taymiyya is apparently referring here not to the internal divergences within each faith community, but rather saying that the divergences and differences that separate the three communities from each other are still less than those that divide the philosophers against each other, in other words, that Muslims, Jews, and Christians – despite the (often fundamental) differences which separate them – are nevertheless in agreement with each other on a considerably greater number of issues than are the philosophers, all of whom claim, despite their wild divergences of opinion, to have arrived at the various doctrines they hold through pure reason on the basis of rationally demonstrable and unimpeachable proofs and arguments.

composed of matter and form, indivisible atoms (*al-ajzā' allatī lā tanqasim*), or neither. Such matters have stumped even the most capable of speculative thinkers and the most perspicacious among the leaders of various schools, such as the Mu'tazilite Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī (d. 436/1044), the Ash'arites al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085) and "Abū 'Abd Allāh b. al-Khaṭīb" [i.e., Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī] (d. 606/1209), and others, who were stymied over the question of the individual atom (*al-jawhar al-fard*), sometimes suspending judgment on the issue and at other times adopting two contradictory positions, either in the same book or in two separate treatises – all the while claiming that the position they adopt, when they do adopt one, is supported by apodictic, demonstrative rational proof that definitively rules out the contrary position. This is as far as mathematics and the natural sciences are concerned. As for metaphysics, the leading philosophers themselves aver that they are unable to reach any kind of certitude with respect to it whatsoever. Rather, their discourse on metaphysical matters reduces to no more than the weighing of various probabilities and hazarding to make varying judgments of likelihood and probability.³⁴

Furthermore, whenever a group claims that rationally derived conclusion *C* is opposed to revelation, their opponents – also preeminent rationalists – claim that pure reason has, in fact, established the invalidity of *C*. Therefore, says Ibn Taymiyya, none of what is said to be rational knowledge that contradicts revelation contains anything which even the rationalists themselves can collectively declare with conclusiveness to be a valid and agreed upon rational conclusion. What is claimed to be solid rational knowledge is at times undermined by the very admission of those who propound it that it is less than definitive, sometimes by the patent contradictoriness of what is said that leaves no room for

³⁴ *Dar'*, I: 156, l. 4 – 159, l. 5. Ibn Taymiyya refers his reader to a number of sources to back up his point regarding the disarray of the philosophers, including al-Ash'arī's *Maqālāt ghayr al-Islāmiyyīn* and al-Qāḍī Abū Bakr b. al-'Arabī's (d. 543/1148) *Daqā'iq*, both of which, he explains, contain many times more in the way of the disputes and differences among the philosophers than al-Shahrastānī (in his *Kitāb al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*) and others have mentioned.

doubt as to its speciousness, and sometimes by the opposition of other rationalist thinkers.³⁵

Ibn Taymiyya makes an important point here, namely, that if people disagree as to what constitutes valid rational knowledge, the argument of a particular faction that follows a particular school of thought would not count as proof against another faction following another doctrine. In such cases, therefore, one can only settle the matter in dispute by reverting to the sound inner nature, that inborn disposition (*fiṭra*) and sound intuition that has not been altered by various beliefs (*i'tiqād*) or subjective whims (*hawā*) that distort this innate *fiṭra*. Otherwise, we would end up in a state of pure subjectivism,³⁶ with each man putting above revelation his own opinion on the basis of what his rational faculty has deemed to contradict revelation. And if even the most capable of speculative thinkers and the foremost philosophers spend their days and nights in search of firm rational knowledge and are unable to come up with a single conclusion of pure natural reason upon which they agree and which simultaneously contradicts revelation – but rather end up either in confusion and doubt, or in mutual dissension and dispute among various factions – then how much more chaotic would the situation be if every individual were to put his own subjective opinions and conclusions above revelation?³⁷

To underline the specious nature of much of *kalām* discourse, Ibn Taymiyya appeals to several of the major “speculative thinkers” (*nuzziḥār*) themselves in witness of the futility of their life-long efforts to attain theological certainty through the practice of dialectical theology. We read, for example, the following

³⁵ Ibid., I: 168, l. 9-14.

³⁶ Ibn Taymiyya's appeal to a “sound inner nature” (*fiṭra*) here may seem equally inconcrete and subjectivist, but it must be remembered that he is not appealing to the *fiṭra* for knowledge of the detailed propositional content of religion, but rather: (1) for the general truths about God, man, and the world (which were not really under dispute among the parties concerned to begin with), but also, and more directly relevant to the current context, it seems, (2) a sound inner disposition (*fiṭra*) marked by faithful confidence in the truth of God's Word and a humble readiness to hear it, understand it, and accept it wholeheartedly. We shall deal with the epistemic status and function of the *fiṭra* in greater detail in Chapter 5, as well as in the conclusion.

³⁷ *Dar*, I: 168, l. 15 – 169, l. 9.

two lines by al-Shahrastānī emphasizing how the speculative thinkers are left in the end with nothing but confusion and perplexity:

I have made the rounds of the gatherings of the learned (*ma'āhid*)
And cast my eyes upon the haunts of erudition (*ma'ālim*);

Yet never did I see but men perplexed, with their chins in their hands
Or gnashing their teeth in regret.³⁸

Ibn Taymiyya also cites three lines of poetry allegedly from al-Rāzī's *Aqsām al-ladhdhāt* to a similar effect,³⁹ followed by a passage in which al-Rāzī states, in a manner very reminiscent of al-Ghazālī in his *Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*, that he has contemplated the methods of both the philosophers and the *kalām* theologians and has not found either to be of any ultimate benefit, and that he has found the most reliable way to be that of the Qur'an, which states, for example, by way of affirmation of the divine attributes: "The Merciful has settled upon the Throne"⁴⁰ and "To Him ascends the goodly word and He raises up righteous deeds,"⁴¹ yet simultaneously states, by way of negating any notion of commensurability or essential comparability between God and His creation: "Nothing is like unto Him,"⁴² "Their knowledge encompasses Him not,"⁴³ and "Do you know

³⁸ *Dar'*, Vol. I, p. 159, ln. 7-11. The editor (at *ibid.*, I: 159, n. 2) also cites a two-line response to al-Shahrastānī from the latter-day Yemeni scholar Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-Amīr al-Ṣan'ānī (d. 1182/1768) who retorted:

Perhaps your rounds have missed the learned circle (*ma'had*) of the Prophet,
And every man of knowledge (*'ālim*) who encountered him;

For he who is led by the guidance of Muḥammad is never perplexed,
Nor can he be found gnashing his teeth in regret.

³⁹ The editor of the *Dar'* states that he was unable to find this passage in any of al-Rāzī's books that were available to him, either printed or in manuscript form. The book, *Aqsām al-ladhdhāt*, from which Ibn Taymiyya reports that he is quoting the passage, exists, according to the editor, in manuscript form in India and is not mentioned among al-Rāzī's works by Carl Brocklemann. (See *ibid.*, I: 160, n. 4).

⁴⁰ Qur'an (Ṭāhā) 20:5.

⁴¹ Qur'an (Fāṭir) 35:10.

⁴² Qur'an (al-Shūrā) 42:11.

⁴³ Qur'an (Ṭāhā) 20:110.

of anything like unto Him?,”⁴⁴ closing with the statement that “whoever experiences what I have experienced, will come to know what I have come to know.”⁴⁵

Ibn Taymiyya also quotes nine lines of similar import from Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd (d. 656/1258), “one of the foremost Shī‘ite thinkers with Mu‘tazilite and philosophical leanings.”⁴⁶ He also points out that the illustrious Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī (d. 631/1233) in most of his books suspends judgment on many of the central issues of theology, declaring spurious the arguments of various sects but remaining in the end perplexed and unable to take a position himself.⁴⁷ Similar is the case of the celebrated 7th-/13th-century logician and qadi of Persian origin Abū ‘Abd Allāh Afḍal al-Dīn al-Khūnājī (d. 646/1248), best known for his logical treatise *Kashf al-asrār ‘an ghawāmiḍ al-afkār fī al-manṭiq*, who was reported to have said on his deathbed: “I die having learned nothing but that the possible is dependent upon the impossible (*al-mumkin muftaqir ilā al-mumtani*’); yet dependency (*iftiqār*) is a negative property, thus I die having learned nothing at all.”⁴⁸

Indeed, says Ibn Taymiyya, even al-Ghazālī, despite his tremendous intelligence and pious devotion, his knowledge of discursive theology and philosophy, and his traveling the Sufi path of abstemiousness and disciplining the soul, nevertheless ended up suspending judgment on such matters and referred, in the final analysis, to the method of private unveiling and spiritual intuition (*kashf*), though at the very end of his life, reports Ibn Taymiyya, he returned to the way of the people of hadith and was occupied, upon his death, with the study of al-Bukhārī’s *Ṣaḥīḥ* collection of authentic Prophetic reports.⁴⁹ Also as a result of the futility of the rational methods used in discursive theology, explains Ibn Taymiyya, one finds that al-Ghazālī refutes the methods and arguments of the philosophers but does not affirm any particular method of his own. Rather, as he himself says in his famous work, *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*: “I at times take them to

⁴⁴ Qur’an (Maryam) 19:65.

⁴⁵ *Dar’*, I: 159-160.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, I: 161.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, I: 162, l. 3-4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, I: 162, l. 4-7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, I: 162, l. 8-11.

task (*ulzimuhum*) from the position of the Mu‘tazila, at times from the position of the Karrāmites, and at other times from the position of those who suspend judgment (*al-wāqifa*), yet I refrain from defending any particular position myself.”⁵⁰

It has also been related, Ibn Taymiyya informs us, that a group of leading *mutakallimūn* used to speak of the “equivalency of proofs” (*takāfu’ al-adilla*), claiming that the various arguments advanced to prove a particular point all cancelled each other out, making it impossible to determine truth from falsehood on rational grounds with respect to the question at hand. Ibn Taymiyya relates in this context that it was reported to him that a certain Ibn Wāsil al-Ḥamawī (d. 697/1298), who had studied with the foremost authority of his time and region in the fields of discursive theology and philosophy, used to say, “I lie in bed at night and pull the covers over my eyes and weigh against each other the proofs of this group and of that group until morning comes with neither position having proved to be the stronger one.”⁵¹

Ibn Taymiyya contrasts with the drastic agnostic pessimism expressed in the numerous quotations above the calm assuredness of those who know and who cling resolutely to the “original, pristine, orthodox, scripturally revealed prophetic method.”⁵² Such men are thoroughly familiar both with this method and with the doctrines that are claimed to be in contradiction with revelation, (such as the claim of the createdness of the Qur’an or the purely symbolic reality of the Divine Attributes), whereupon they can easily recognize the invalidity of such doctrines by virtue of the deliverances of what Ibn Taymiyya calls “pure natural reason” (*al-ma‘qūl al-ṣarīḥ*), which is always found to be *in full conformity* with what is affirmed by authentic revelation (*al-manqūl al-ṣaḥīḥ*). However, those who delve into the elements of philosophy and discursive theology said to contradict revelation without possessing full knowledge of the contents and var-

⁵⁰ Ibid., I: 163, l. 5-8. (This quote from the *Tahāfut* cited at ibid., n. 5). Ibn Taymiyya’s critique of al-Ghazālī here is perhaps unjustified, at least with respect to the *Tahāfut*, as al-Ghazālī himself explicitly defines this work as fulfilling a purely deconstructive purpose and in which he has no designs to establish or defend a systematic doctrine of his own.

⁵¹ Ibid., I: 165, l. 3-4.

⁵² “*al-ṭarīqa al-nabawiyya al-sunniyya al-salafiyya al-Muḥammadiyya al-shar‘iyya*” (ibid., I: 163).

ious concomitant implications (*lawāzim*) of the revealed texts, as well as of the doctrines alleged to be at odds with them, are unable to arrive at any certain knowledge in which they can feel confident, but rather end up in confusion and perplexity. The most preeminent of them are even at a loss to provide fully conclusive arguments for the existence of the Creator Himself, a topic of central concern to Ibn Taymiyya in the *Dar'* which merits a separate study on its own. Some, he says, end up in contradiction, like al-Rāzī, while others are forced to suspend judgment on the matter, like al-Āmidī. Indeed, such thinkers often mention a number of positions of various schools claiming that truth lies in one or the other of them (though without necessarily being able to determine which one), while *all* the various positions mentioned, declares Ibn Taymiyya confidently, can in fact be demonstrated on the basis of pure natural reason (‘*aql ṣarīḥ*’) to be false and without rational foundation.⁵³

IV. Ibn Taymiyya’s Project: Refuting the Universal Law

If, as Ibn Taymiyya sees it, the rational processes at work have led to such an abusive “interpretation” of scripture *and simultaneously* to a rational cul-de-sac in which reason itself breaks down, then wherein does he think a solution could lie? This is the question to which Ibn Taymiyya has dedicated the entirety of the *Dar'* and to which we shall now turn our full attention. Ibn Taymiyya’s project in the *Dar'*, at its most essential, consists in undermining and refuting the very Universal Law itself, along with the premises and assumptions it takes for granted, since he considers this Law the primary culprit in having brought about the intellectual and religious disarray he inherited at the turn of the eighth Islamic century. It bears stressing that, for Ibn Taymiyya, the project of undoing the Universal Law is imperative in order not only to salvage the integrity of revelation, but to rescue reason as well, as *both* have been, in his view and in light of the Taymiyyan pyramid diagrammed above (p. 153), dangerously compromised

⁵³ See *ibid.*, I: 164, n. 1.

primarily by a faulty and abusive use of the rational faculty that he seeks to redress and rehabilitate – to the ultimate benefit of both revelation *and* reason.

In order to refute the Universal Law, Ibn Taymiyya puts forth no fewer than 44 “arguments” (lit., ‘aspects,’ *wujūh*) – located primarily in Volumes I and V of the *Dar’* – as to why the Law, as it came to be formulated, is logically unsound and, therefore, theoretically baseless. As is typical of the writings of Ibn Taymiyya, a number of these 44 arguments overlap with each other, some seemingly forming an expanded or summarized version of others. Furthermore, the arguments as Ibn Taymiyya has presented them do not follow any specific logical order, but rather are given one after the other as so many discrete objections to the Universal Law. For the purposes of the presentation below, therefore, rather than simply listing the arguments in the order in which Ibn Taymiyya has presented them, we have grouped them by theme and argument, paraphrasing in each of the following sections a coterie of arguments that share a unifying theme or that seem intended by their author to accomplish a common objective. The first three of the following sections,⁵⁴ covering specific criticisms meant to accomplish three identifiable discrete goals and to shift the inherited paradigm of reason and revelation in three distinct ways, are followed by a more general section⁵⁵ in which we present the gist of a number of more generic arguments that Ibn Taymiyya levels against the overall coherence and logical validity of the Universal Law. A final section⁵⁶ then showcases some of the purely scripture-based arguments Ibn Taymiyya deploys against the Law that are meant to complement and support the primary rational arguments against it that form the backbone of the *Dar’*. The presentation below, together with Sections II and III above, accounts in a comprehensive manner for 38 of Ibn Taymiyya’s 44 arguments. The remaining six arguments⁵⁷ turn out upon analysis not to be mere “arguments” at all, but rather extended disquisitions on highly complex substantive philosophical and theological problems, some of which run on for several hun-

⁵⁴ Sections V, VI, and VII.

⁵⁵ Section VIII.

⁵⁶ Section IX.

⁵⁷ Namely, Arguments 17, 18, 19, 20, 43, and 44.

dred pages. Selected portions of these six arguments, in addition to further relevant sections of the 38 arguments presented below, will be introduced and analyzed in subsequent chapters of this work treating of the more specific theological and philosophical issues Ibn Taymiyya takes up in the *Dar' al-ta'arud*.

V. On Reason “Grounding” Our Knowledge of Revelation⁵⁸

Ibn Taymiyya endeavors to undermine the Universal Law’s main premise, namely, that if precedence be given to revelation over reason, this would amount to a rejection of the very thing that grounds it – namely, reason – which would fatally undercut revelation itself. By “grounding” here is meant that reason is the basis on which rests our knowledge of the truth and validity of revelation; that is, reason is said to ground revelation not ontologically, but epistemologically.

Ibn Taymiyya begins by challenging the philosophers’ and theologians’ notion of what it means for our knowledge of revelation to be “grounded” in reason. “We do not concede,” he declares, “that if precedence be given to revelation, this would amount to impugning the very thing which grounds revelation – namely, reason – which would be tantamount to undercutting revelation as well,” for if it is the knowledge that we acquire through reason that constitutes the epistemological grounding upon which our knowledge of revelation rests and which indicates to us the truth and validity of revelation, then we say: not *everything* known through reason is of that which grounds and indicates the validity and authenticity of revelation. The various objects of knowledge apprehended through reason are innumerable, and knowledge of the validity and truth of revelation is contingent, at most, upon that by which the veracity of the Messenger and his prophetic mission can be determined. Relevant (rational) knowledge here would be, for example, proof of the existence of God and His vindication of the

⁵⁸ The question of the manner in which revelation is “grounded” in reason is taken up primarily in Arguments 3, 24, and 29.

truthfulness of the Prophet through miracles, and the like.⁵⁹ This principle, Ibn Taymiyya tells us, is upheld by the majority of those *mutakallimūn* who adopt an affirmationist stance with respect to the divine attributes, for they hold that knowledge of the veracity of the Messenger is rendered *necessary knowledge* upon the manifestation of corroborative miracles. In this case, that rational knowledge upon which confirmation of the Messenger's veracity depends is easily come by, notwithstanding the fact that there are numerous and diversified methods by which his veracity can, in fact, be established.⁶⁰

Now, if the rational knowledge which is claimed to contradict revelation is *not* part of that rational knowledge upon which hinges our rational judgment that revelation is authentic, then impugning it would not, in fact, be tantamount to impugning that knowledge upon which revelation is grounded, for impugning *some* objects of what is categorized as rational knowledge (‘*aqliyyāt*’) does not amount to impugning *all* of them, just as impugning discrete items of what falls under the category of revealed knowledge (*sam‘iyyat*) does not undermine the category of such knowledge as a whole.⁶¹ Conversely – and critical for Ibn Taymiyya's project – the truth of certain *particular* discrete objects of what is taken to be rational knowledge does not entail the truth of *every* such object, just as the authenticity of discrete elements of the category of revealed knowledge (such as, for example, the authenticity of discrete hadith reports) does not entail the truth of every item claimed to be of this category (such as, for example, hadith reports found to be weak or inauthentic). In consequence, the validity of those

⁵⁹ It is very significant that Ibn Taymiyya explicitly classifies knowledge of the existence of God, the reality of prophecy and the possibility of miracles all as propositions subject to verification through the use of reason. In other words, he agrees that revelation *is*, in a fundamental manner, grounded in reason, for it is by reason alone that we can test and confirm the most basic claims of revelation, that without which scriptural revealed religion could simply not exist. It would be important, therefore, for a separate study to examine in depth Ibn Taymiyya's rational proofs for the existence of God and the possibility of miracles (as against those of the theologians and philosophers), and, in doing so, to define precisely what it is he means by that “reason” which is capable of doing so in a manner definitive enough to lend the fundamental claims of scripture a baseline of rational plausibility. A detailed analysis of such proofs, however, lies beyond the scope of the current work.

⁶⁰ *Dar’*, I: 89, l. 14 – 90, l. 7.

⁶¹ Rejecting, for instance, a particular hadith report as inauthentic would not, of course, entail that *all* hadith reports are inauthentic.

rational conclusions upon which knowledge of the authenticity of revelation rests does not entail the necessary validity of all rational conclusions (*ma‘qūlāt*)⁶² – not least those that contradict revelation – nor, conversely, does the invalidity of discrete rational conclusions entail the invalidity of those particular rational conclusion which do, in fact, serve to ground knowledge of the authenticity of revelation.⁶³

The principal error of those who prone adherence to the Universal Law, explains Ibn Taymiyya, is that they make all forms of rationally grounded knowledge one category with respect to validity and invalidity, whereas a positive judgment regarding the validity of revelation, as we have seen, merely requires the validity of that part of rationally grounded knowledge concomitant (*mulāzim*) to it, not the validity of that part which runs counter to or negates (*yunāfi*) it.⁶⁴ And since people are in agreement that what is termed “rational knowledge” (*‘aqliyyāt*) comprises both true and false propositions, it is thus proved that giving precedence to revelation over *what is said to fall under the general category of rational knowledge* is not tantamount to undermining anything that serves to ground our rational judgment of the authenticity of revelation.⁶⁵

Ibn Taymiyya entertains a possible objection to this conclusion, namely, that “we only give priority over revelation to that rational knowledge by which we know the validity of revelation.” To this he responds that he shall demonstrate that *none* of the so-called *‘aqliyyāt* said to contradict revelation include that rational knowledge upon which knowledge of the authenticity of revelation is contingent. Therefore, everything said to be a product of reason (i.e., every

⁶² We have chosen to render “*ma‘qūlāt*” here as “rational conclusions” as opposed to “rational knowledge” advisedly, since whatever is really “knowledge” would, by definition, be true and authentic, for otherwise it would be no knowledge at all, but rather mere conjecture. In other words, it is only those “*ma‘qūlāt*” which are true that can be said to constitute rational knowledge, just as only those “*sam‘iyyāt*” which are authentic can be said to constitute revealed knowledge.

⁶³ *Dar’*, I: 90, l. 8-15.

⁶⁴ “*wa-ma‘lūm anna al-sam‘ innamā yastalzimu ṣiḥḥat ba‘ḍihā al-mulāzim lahu lā ṣiḥḥat al-ba‘ḍ al-munāfi lahu.*” (ibid., I: 91, l. 4-5).

⁶⁵ Ibid., I: 91, l. 3-9.

“*ma‘qūl*”) which opposes revelation is extrinsic to the set of (valid) rational conclusions that serve to ground (knowledge of) revelation, with the result that impugning any of these (extrinsic) deliverances of reason does not, in fact, undermine the foundations of revelation. This, in fact, should be little cause for controversy since, Ibn Taymiyya tells us, most people are in agreement that knowledge of the existence of God and the veracity of the Messenger – that is, that rational knowledge upon which knowledge of the authenticity of revelation *does* depend – are *not* contingent upon what some claim to be rational knowledge that contravenes revelation. Those who have formulated and instituted (*al-wāḍi‘ūna li*) the Universal Law, such as al-Ghazālī, al-Rāzī, and others, themselves concede that the knowledge of the veracity of the Messenger is not contingent upon any putative rational conclusions that are at odds with revelation. In fact, a great number of them, including al-Ghazālī himself, in addition to al-Shahrastānī, al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 502/1108-9), and others, hold knowledge of the existence of God to be inborn, necessary knowledge (*fiṭrī ḍarūrī*).⁶⁶ Speculative thinkers such as al-Rāzī and al-Āmidī likewise grant that knowledge of the existence of God could come about in a necessary fashion (*bi-l-iḍṭirār*), in which case knowledge that the Creator is powerful and knowledge of the veracity of the Messenger upon the manifestation of miraculous signs surpassing the ability of mankind to oppose or match them are likewise known by necessity. In addition, Ibn Taymiyya continues, it is known that revelation is itself replete with rational arguments for the existence and almightiness of the Creator and His corroboration (through miracles and signs) of the veracity of His Messenger. Not only does that which revelation affirms of these matters not contradict, but rather congrues with (*yuwāfiq*), the rational foundations on the basis of which we come to know the authenticity of revelation, but indeed, revelation itself provides far more numerous – and, we are to understand, far more evincive – *rational arguments* for such matters than we find in the books of the speculative thinkers themselves. Even the majority of those who hold knowledge of the

⁶⁶ See *ibid.*, I: 92, n. 3, where the editor provides a quote from al-Shahrastānī’s *Nihāyat al-iqdām* to this effect.

Creator to come about only through deliberate reflection (*naẓar*) – as opposed to instinctively (*bi-l-fiṭra*) – concede, critically, that of the various speculative methods available for arriving at a knowledge of the truthfulness of the Messenger there indeed exist such as do not contradict anything affirmed in the revealed texts.⁶⁷

In establishing this point,⁶⁸ Ibn Taymiyya reverses the Universal Law to show that the opposite principle – that is, prioritizing revelation over reason in case of conflict – can be argued and defended in an exactly analogous manner, with the implied conclusion that if it is rationally incoherent either to put reason above revelation or revelation above reason, then the truth (which is always and intrinsically coherent) must lie in the fact that there can be no real contradiction between these two sources of knowledge, the precise point the entire *Darʿ* is concerned to prove. The opposite rule would state: “If reason and revelation contradict, then revelation must be given priority over reason, since reason has adjudged revelation veracious in everything it contains, whereas revelation has *not* judged reason to be correct in all the various conclusions to which it might come, nor is our knowledge of the authenticity of revelation dependent upon (*mawqūf ʿalā*) all of the several conclusions to which reason may have come.”⁶⁹

This position, says Ibn Taymiyya, is better advised (*awjah*) than the previous position of granting a blanket priority to reason over revelation, since reason indicates the truth of revelation in a general and unrestricted sense (*dalāla ʿamma muṭlaqa*). This is like the hypothetical case of Layman *A* who knows a

⁶⁷ Al-Rāzī himself, Ibn Taymiyya informs us, is one of those who concur, as is evidenced by his discussion of *takfīr* in his *Nihāyat al-ʿuqūl*, where he concludes that “it has been established that the knowledge of the principles (*uṣūl*) upon the validity of which depends (our knowledge of the authenticity of) the messengership of Muḥammad (may God bless him and grant him peace) is patent and evident knowledge (*ʿilm jalī ṣāḥir*), and scholars have only discussed these principles on account of their responsibility to remove the doubts raised by those who would seek to invalidate them (*al-mubṭilūn*). (Otherwise), it is firmly established that the foundations of Islam are patent and clear, and that the proofs which establish them are mentioned in a comprehensive manner (*ʿalā al-istiṣāʿ*) in the Book of God, free of anything erroneously imagined to oppose them.” *Darʿ*, Vol. I, p. 96, ln. 5-10. For Ibn Taymiyya’s full citation of al-Rāzī’s discussion of *takfīr* in his *Nihāyat al-ʿuqūl*, see *Darʿ*, Vol. I, p. 93, ln. 6 – p. 96, ln. 10.

⁶⁸ The next six paragraphs (that is, everything having to do with the court and witness example) are drawn from Argument 6.

⁶⁹ *Darʿ*, I: 138, l. 1-3.

particular man to be a reliable jurisconsult and refers Layman *B* to him for legal advice. Now, if Layman *A* then differs with the jurisconsult's ruling on a particular legal ruling, it would nevertheless be incumbent for Layman *B* to adhere to the opinion of the jurisconsult on the matter in question over that of Layman *A*, who is the source of his knowledge that the jurisconsult was reliable to begin with. This is so because Layman *A*, by producing convincing evidence of the competency of the jurisconsult, establishes thereby the necessity of following this latter's opinion on particular legal matters over that of anyone else, including Layman *A* himself, who formed the basis of Layman *B*'s knowledge of the jurisconsult's competency. Layman *B*'s acceptance of Layman *A*'s proof in favor of the jurisconsult's competency in nowise obligates him to accept Layman *A*'s opinion in all matters, nor, conversely, does his error – that is, his disagreement with the jurisconsult – on a particular point of law entail that he was incorrect in his identification of the jurisconsult as competent in the field of issuing legal *responsa*. This holds even with the knowledge that it is conceivable for the jurisconsult to err in a given legal opinion; so what of the Prophet, who is known by reason – if he truly be a prophet – to be infallible in matters of conveying revelation from God? It follows, concludes Ibn Taymiyya, that the principle by which all agree that Layman *B* is obliged to hold the opinion of the jurisconsult in higher regard than the opinion of Layman *A* on discrete legal points applies with even greater rigor to the necessity of granting priority to the words of an infallible prophet over the conclusions of one's own decidedly fallible reasoning.⁷⁰

This is especially true, elaborates Ibn Taymiyya, as the disparity between a prophet on the one hand and the most intelligent and knowledgeable of ordinary men on the other is manifestly greater than the disparity, say, between the master craftsmen of various trades and ordinary folk unschooled in the same trades. In fact, the difference involved is no less than a *categorical* one, since, theoretically, any ordinary man could, by dint of sustained personal effort, attain masterly knowledge of a given field, whereas prophecy is *not* to be attained

⁷⁰ Ibid., I: 138, l. 1 – 139, l. 5.

through personal striving, but rather bestowed by God upon those whom He has elected to prophecy.⁷¹ Related to this, Ibn Taymiyya points out, we regularly trust and follow the prescriptions of doctors – regardless of the pain and inconvenience often occasioned by the remedies they prescribe and despite our knowledge that they often err and that their putative cures may even lead to our death – even when, at times, our own intuitions about how to restore our health may be at odds with the doctor’s orders. So what, then, of cases in which our mere conjecture – “rational” or otherwise, we understand – conflicts with what we *know* to have been revealed on the tongue of a prophet, whom we *know* through rational arguments to be infallible in his transmission of revelation to us from God?⁷²

A further scenario illustrative of this point involves witnesses in a court of law. Parallel to the case of the alleged contradiction between reason and revelation, one might argue, for instance, that if witnesses at court were to testify to a man’s upright character, yet that man were subsequently to turn around and declare them (the witnesses) to be liars, then believing the man in his impugning of the original witnesses’ truthfulness would entail undercutting our knowledge of his uprightness (since we depended, in our determination that the man is indeed upright, on their favorable assessment of his character). Ibn Taymiyya’s response to this is that the scenario hypothesized here is not equivalent to the issue under discussion (i.e., with respect to reason and revelation), since if the man impugns the witnesses’ truthfulness in a categorical sense, this would only be the proper equivalent of revelation being opposed to rational proofs *categorically*, which no one claims it to be. If, however, he merely challenges their testifying to a *particular* individual’s uprightness, then this would not, by the consensus of rational thinkers, contradict their vouching for his own integrity

⁷¹ Ibn Taymiyya is citing here the orthodox theological position on the purely God-given and “unacquired” nature of the prophetic office, as opposed to the *falāsifa*’s interpretation of prophethood as an essentially natural faculty analogous to the bursts of inspiration from beyond that may result from the personal spiritual efforts of a practicing sage or mystic. For more on various conceptions of prophethood in Islam, see Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁷² *Dar*, I: 140-141.

(*tazkiyatuhum lahu*), for it is not a condition of one who vouches for a given witness's integrity that such a person never err in all the various instances in which he might similarly vouch for other witnesses. His erring, therefore, with regard to a particular instance of testimony does not entail that he is also wrong in his corroboration of a particular person's uprightness or in any other particular testimony he may provide. In fact, the testimony even of an upright witness may, at times, be rejected if, say, he is the opposing party in a lawsuit or is suspected of harboring enmity towards a party to the dispute, yet this would not impugn his various other instances of testimony. Likewise, if revelation opposes reason in certain discrete points of contention between the two and attributes this to reason having erred and gone astray on the points in question, this would not amount to impugning everything that reason can come to know, nor reason's testimony that revelation is, in fact, authentic and truthful (and, consequently, a reliable source of factually true, objective knowledge, even when such knowledge contradicts other discrete conclusions that have been reached by reason).⁷³

Similarly, if a man whose uprightness has been established by a witness (*al-mu'addal*) were to say, "He who testified to my uprightness bore false testimony in such-and-such a particular instance," this, too, would not be equivalent to the (alleged) contradiction between reason and revelation, since the texts of scripture do not indicate that those involved in the rational sciences who have raised certain doubts (*shubah*) that contravene revelation have done so through willful falsehood. Even if we suppose for the sake of argument that a *particular* person or faction has at some point engaged in deliberate fabrication, the rational proofs that oppose revelation are nonetheless not, as a category, characterized by intentional mendacity.⁷⁴

It becomes clear from all this, concludes Ibn Taymiyya, that likening the (alleged) opposition of revelation to reason does not constitute an argument for giving priority to the opinions and conclusions of rational thinkers over the une-

⁷³ Ibid., I: 142, l. 5 – 143, l. 5.

⁷⁴ Ibid., I: 143, l. 6-10.

quivocal texts of revelation in any way. Even if one were to concede, for the sake of argument, that the two situations were equivalent, this still would not lead to an automatic prioritization of reason over revelation. If a judge,⁷⁵ by way of example, were to hear a person whose probity has been vouched for (‘*uddila*) impugn the truthfulness, on particular matters, of the witnesses who have testified to his probity, this would not entail the prioritization of those who have vouched for his probity to begin with. It could be that they are correct in vouching for the man’s integrity yet wrong in that matter in which he accused them of error, or wrong on both counts, or mistaken in their vouching for his integrity but, in fact, correct in the question on which he accused them of being wrong – regardless of whether their error in any of these cases is deliberate or accidental. In such a case, the most a judge could do would be to refrain from taking a position until he is able to investigate the matter more fully and reach a decisive conclusion, not rejecting the word of those who have vouched for the man’s probity simply because he has impugned their truthfulness on other discrete matters. So even if such a scenario were equivalent to the case of the (alleged) contradiction between reason and revelation, the most the situation would require would be to refrain from taking an immediate position as to which source, reason or revelation, should be prioritized in the particular instance at hand, *not* to grant automatic priority to reason over revelation.⁷⁶

In addition to the rational arguments advanced above based on the analogy of a courtroom scenario, Ibn Taymiyya also casts the issue in terms of a hypothetical that renders the religious implications of the matter immediately transparent. Imagine, he bids us, if someone had come to the Prophet during his lifetime and said to him, “This Qur’an, or Wisdom (*al-ḥikma*), that you have transmitted to us contains many elements that contradict what we know through our reason, yet we have only come to know your truthfulness through our reason as well. Thus, if we accept *everything* of which you inform us, despite the fact that

⁷⁵ This example illustrates how, as W. Hallaq has mentioned, “[Ibn Taymiyya’s] worldview was considerably coloured by his characteristically juristic thinking.” (Hallaq, *Greek Logicians*, xxxvi).

⁷⁶ *Dar’*, I: 144, l. 1-10.

reason contradicts some of it, then that would undermine the very thing – namely, reason – by which we have come to affirm your veracity. We therefore hold to be true the positions derived from our reason that stand in contradiction to the plain meaning of what you have brought and from which we turn away, gaining therefrom neither guidance nor knowledge.”⁷⁷ It is clear, says Ibn Taymiyya, that the Prophet would not have accepted this stance from such a person as constituting authentic belief in revelation. Indeed, if this were conceivable, it would then be possible for anyone simply to withhold consent from any discrete part of revelation he should desire, for people differ in their intellectual capacities, various objections that can be raised against any given proposition are numerous, and Satan continually insinuates doubt-inducing misgivings into men’s hearts. This being the case, he (Satan) could throw into any particular man’s heart insinuations that contradict the generality of the declarative and imperative content of revelation. This, Ibn Taymiyya explains, is precisely what has happened in the case of the Bāṭinīs, who abandoned much of both the propositional content of revelation and of its moral-legal imperatives, claiming reason to be at odds with the plain, straightforward import of the revealed texts on a great many points of theology and legal-ritual practice. They may also claim, in the way of the people of *wahm & takhyīl* (“instilling delusion and false imaginings”) discussed in Section I above, that the obvious outer meaning of the revealed texts is only intended for the general public. Once a person reaches the “truth” of the matter – which, of course, contradicts the obvious outer meaning of revelation – he then becomes absolved both of affirming the propositional content of revelation as well as of observing its ritual and legal ordinances. Both these positions, Ibn Taymiyya remarks, are declared by the generality of the Muslim community to transgress of necessity the universally acknowledged bounds of the Islamic faith. A similar judgment holds for positions according to which the negation of the divine names and attributes is required by sound reason as well. All such heterodox stances (*ilhād*), affirms Ibn Taymiyya, are rooted in nothing other than al-

⁷⁷ Ibid., V: 214, l. 16 – 215, l. 3.

lowing the personal reasoning and opinions of men to oppose what God has sent down by way of revelation through His prophets and messengers.⁷⁸

In summary, then, Ibn Taymiyya endeavors through the set of arguments presented above to undermine the Universal Law's main premise, namely, that if precedence be given to revelation over reason, this would amount to a rejection of the very thing that grounds revelation – namely, reason – thereby fatally undercutting revelation itself. Ibn Taymiyya challenges the philosophers' and theologians' notion of what it means for our knowledge of revelation to be “grounded” in reason by arguing, in essence, that what we call “reason” does not, as many fancy, constitute one undifferentiated category, such that impugning *any* of the various conclusions reason is thought to have reached would amount to undermining all of them. Rather, Ibn Taymiyya contends, the various discrete conclusions reached through the rational faculty are innumerable, and our knowledge of the validity of revelation is contingent, at most, upon only those discrete elements of rational judgment by which, for example, we may ascertain the veracity of the Prophet and the authenticity of his prophetic mission. If this be the case, then imprecating other discrete conclusions of reason (such as those that contradict certain discrete assertions of scripture) does *not*, as most theologians and philosophers held, automatically compromise the very rational faculty itself and each one of its sundry conclusions, not least of which the rational basis by virtue of which we conclude the authenticity of revelation.

VI. Knowledge vs. Conjecture: Conclusiveness Is What Counts⁷⁹

The refutation of the Universal Law, Ibn Taymiyya declares, consists in showing the falseness of its premises. The Law, as enumerated in Section I above, is based on three premises:

⁷⁸ Ibid., V: 214-216 (which comprises the entirety of Argument 24).

⁷⁹ Ibn Taymiyya's development and discussion of the dichotomy “knowledge vs. conjecture” is located primarily in Points 1, 2, 4, and 5.

- (1) the actual existence (*thubūt*) of a contradiction between reason and revelation;
- (2) a limiting of the theoretically possible options in dealing with the alleged contradiction to only the four mentioned, namely: (a) accepting both contradictory statements simultaneously; (b) rejecting both simultaneously; (c) prioritizing revelation over reason as a rule; or (d) prioritizing reason over revelation as a rule;
- (3) the invalidity of the first three alternatives in Premise 2, therefore:

Conclusion: the necessity of the fourth possibility, namely, giving priority as a rule to reason over revelation and reinterpreting revelation accordingly.

Ibn Taymiyya rejects all three of these premises as invalid. His attempt to prove the falsity of Premise 1 is the mission of the entire *Dar'* and will be treated in greater depth in the course of subsequent chapters. Here Ibn Taymiyya concentrates on undermining Premise 2, which he does by refusing to concede the four-fold division of the premise – namely, accepting both allegedly contradictory indicants, rejecting both, giving unqualified precedence to the rational proof, or giving unqualified precedence to the scriptural indicant. Instead, he holds, it may be that the rational proof is to be given priority in some instances, while the scriptural indicant is to take precedence in others. How is this so? Ibn Taymiyya explains: If two proofs or indicants contradict each other, regardless of whether they are both scriptural, both rational, or one of them scriptural and the other rational, it must be either that they are both conclusive (*qaṭ'ī*), that they are both inconclusive (*ẓannī*), or that one is conclusive and the other inconclusive. Should it turn out that they are both conclusive (*qaṭ'ī*), then it is theoretically impossible that they should contradict regardless of whether they both be rational, both be scriptural, or one rational and the other scriptural. This is because if an indicant or proof (*dalīl*) is conclusive, then by definition that which it indicates or proves must necessarily be the case and it is impossible that its indication of it

be false.⁸⁰ It follows, therefore, that if two conclusive indicants were to be contradictory, or if one of them were to contradict that which is indicated or established by the other, this would entail a violation of the Law of Non-Contradiction, which is impossible. Rather, for any two indicants believed to be conclusive and that are also surmised to contradict one another, it must necessarily be that one of them is not, in fact, conclusive, or that the respective propositions they establish are not, upon closer scrutiny, in actual contradiction.

Now, continues Ibn Taymiyya, should it turn out that one of the indicants is conclusive to the exclusion of the other, then priority must be given to the *conclusive* indicant by the consensus of all rational individuals (‘*uqalā*’), *regardless of whether it comes from scripture or reason*, since mere supposition cannot override certainty. If both indicants are merely presumptive and inconclusive (*ẓannī*), then one must investigate which of them is more strongly founded and therefore more probative (*rājiḥ*), then prioritize the stronger one over the weaker one by virtue of its superior probative value – regardless, once again, of its epistemological origin (whether scriptural or rational).⁸¹ It follows from this, therefore, that the claim that one must give precedence in an absolute manner either to the scriptural or to the rational proof on pain of violating either the Law of Non-Contradiction or the Law of the Excluded Middle is a false claim, for there indeed exists a possibility other than the four mentioned above, namely, that precedence be given to whichever of the two indicants is either conclusive or, barring conclusivity, more probative than the other, regardless whether scriptural or rational. This last procedure, asserts Ibn Taymiyya, is the correct one.⁸²

The only possible objection to this rule, says Ibn Taymiyya, would be to maintain that a scriptural indicant can *never* be conclusive. But this argument, quite apart from the fact that it lacks validity,⁸³ is of no use, for in this case, the

⁸⁰ “*al-dalīl al-qaṭʿī huwa alladhī yajibū thubūt madlūlihi wa-lā yumkinu an takūna dalālatuhu bāṭilā*” (*Darʿ*, I: 79, l. 5-7).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, I: 78-79.

⁸² *Ibid.*, I: 87, l. 5-11.

⁸³ Ibn Taymiyya’s stance here runs contrary to the principle espoused by al-Rāzī, namely, that it is impossible to establish the fundamentals of religion (*uṣūl al-dīn*) in a conclusive (*qaṭʿī*) manner through textual evidence, since reasoning (*istidlāl*) from scripture is dependent upon presumptive

indicant given priority would still be prioritized on account of its being conclusive, not on account of its being rational, nor on account of its “grounding” of revelation, whereas those who adhere to the Universal Law have made the primary basis on which they give priority to the rational indicant its alleged grounding of revelation, a position that does not stand up to scrutiny.⁸⁴ Any rational person, Ibn Taymiyya explains, would agree that if a conclusive and an inconclusive indicant contradict, then the conclusive one must be given preference. But demonstrating that a scriptural proof cannot be conclusive would be to accomplish the impossible (*dūnahu kharṭ al-qatād*).

Moreover, it is agreed upon by all that a number of elements of religious belief – such that various acts of worship are obligatory and that various forms of moral license and wrongdoing are prohibited, that the Creator is one, that resurrection after death is real, etc. – constitute fundamental aspects that are known of necessity to be part and parcel of the faith (*ma‘lūm bi-l-iḍṭrār min al-dīn*). Now, if someone were to claim that a definitive rational proof contradicting *these* matters had been established and that it was therefore necessary to give precedence to said rational proof on the basis that it is reason that “grounds” revelation, such a prioritizing of reason would be tantamount, by universal

(*ẓannī*) – that is, less than fully conclusive (*qat‘ī*) – factors. Such “presumptive” factors include, for al-Rāzī: the transmission of the lexicon, syntax, and morphology of the language; verification of the absence of figurative usage (*majāz*), implicit signification (*iḍmār*), particularization of a general term (*takhṣīs*), polyvalence (*ishtirāk*), or transposition of meaning (*naql*); and, beyond such linguistic and hermeneutic concerns, establishing that there exists no valid rational objection (*mu‘ārid ‘aqlī*) to the texts’ obvious sense (*ẓāhir al-naṣṣ*). Debilitatingly, however, al-Rāzī holds that the knowledge that no rational objection exists is, in fact, impossible to come by, since it is always conceivable that there might exist an intrinsically (“*fī nafs al-amr*”) valid rational objection to what the Qur’an states which simply has not occurred to the person encountering a given Qur’anic verse or hadith report. See pp. 11-14 of the editor’s introduction to the *Dar’* for references to passages in various other works of al-Rāzī’s that carry the same import. Ibn Taymiyya mentions (at *ibid.*, I: 22) that he had written a work refuting these very objections some thirty years earlier, and that he mentioned some of this refutation in his discussion of al-Rāzī’s *Muḥaṣṣal* in a book he had entitled *Sharḥ awwal al-Muḥaṣṣal* (as listed in Ibn Rushayyiq, *Mu‘allafāt*, 19). The editor of the *Dar’* reports this work as being lost (see note at *Dar’*, I: 22, n. 4). Ibn Taymiyya states that in the *Sharḥ*, he had responded to al-Rāzī’s allegations that arguments deduced from scripture could never be definitive and that he had argued, to the contrary, that such arguments can indeed yield certitude. In the *current* book (i.e., the *Dar’*), his goal is to refute the notion of the “rational objection” and to nullify the position of those who claim that rational proofs and arguments are to be given unqualified priority over scriptural indicants.

⁸⁴ *Dar’*, I: 80, l. 1-5.

agreement, to nothing less than belying the Prophet himself and the truthfulness of the revelation he transmitted, which amounts to open disbelief. In response to this objection, Ibn Taymiyya tells us, such groups typically appeal to the simple impossibility of there being a valid rational proof that contradicts such matters as are known to belong to the established, integral fundamentals of the faith. But by this, reasons Ibn Taymiyya further, it becomes clear that it is impossible for *anything* that has been established by a *conclusive* (scriptural) proof to be contradicted by a *conclusive* (rational) proof. Many are they, however, who fall into this error, making assumptions which entail certain concomitants, and then proceeding to affirm these concomitants without, however, realizing that the assumption itself is invalid and that an invalid assumption may entail invalid concomitants.⁸⁵

Ibn Taymiyya then drives two related arguments from a slightly different angle, this time revolving around the issue – common in legal discussions of the authenticity and meaning of the texts of revelation (Qur'an and hadith) – of textual integrity or authenticity (*thubūt*) and meaning (*dalāla*). According to the first of these two arguments,⁸⁶ reason either possesses *knowledge* of the authenticity of the prophetic mission and, by consequence, *knowledge* that that which was revealed through him is true in and of itself (*thubūt mā akhbara bihi fī nafs al-amr*), or it does not. If the truth of revelation is not *known* to the rational faculty, then there cannot be a contradiction between any of the discrete content of revelation and a given rational conclusion *known* to be true, since that which is not *known* to be the case – in this scenario, revelation – cannot be, in the mind that does not know it, in contradiction with that which is *known* to be the case by the mind in question. And if the rational proposition in question is also not *known*, then there cannot, *a fortiori*, be a conflict in this case either, since it is impossible that two unknowns should be held to contradict each other. In short, if the mind knows (a) that the revelation is indubitably authentic and (b) that

⁸⁵ “*al-taqdīr al-mumtani‘ qad yalzamuhu lawāzīm mumtani‘a.*” For this argument, see *ibid.*, I: 80, l. 6 – 81, l. 3.

⁸⁶ Argument 4.

revelation has asserted (*akhbara bi*) some proposition *P*, then knowledge of the truth and factuality (*thubūt*) of *P* is entailed necessarily by the combination of (a) and (b), just as other known propositions are entailed necessarily by a combination of their premises if these latter be true.⁸⁷

Ibn Taymiyya then goes on to spell out the implications of someone saying “Do not believe in the factual reality (*thubūt*) of what revelation has informed you of, since your believing so is incompatible with (*yunāfi*) that by which you have come to know of its veracity, i.e., reason.”⁸⁸ In fact, remarks Ibn Taymiyya, it is the notion that one should, while accepting revelation as true and authentic, feel free to belie any particular proposition found therein that is most definitely incompatible with the reason that has led us to knowledge of the truth of revelation, potentially undermining our confidence in *anything* revelation may assert, since if it is possible that revelation may be in error in any given instance, it is surely possible for it to be erroneous in other, innumerable instances as well.⁸⁹ The upshot of all this is that one who approaches the texts in such a manner does not gain any knowledge from them whatsoever regarding those attributes of God known through revelation (*ṣifāt khabariyya*), nor even – for some of them – about the Day of Judgment, since they believe that such statements contain elements which are to be accepted at face value in addition to elements whose obvious meaning is to be declared inapplicable and consequently subjected to figurative interpretation (*ta’wīl*), and yet they have no rule or principle from revelation itself by which to make this crucial distinction.⁹⁰ One group says, “Affirm whatever your reason affirms,” and every faction, naturally, differs in their opinion as to what reason does and does not dictate, while another group

⁸⁷ *Dar’*, I: 134, l. 1-9.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, I: 134, l. 10 – 135, l. 8.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, I: 135, l. 9-13.

⁹⁰ It is important to note here that many thinkers *did* in fact propose certain texts of revelation as containing directions to carry out precisely this type of rational weighing of reality and the figurative interpretation (*ta’wīl*) of revelation accordingly. This is most obviously the case, perhaps, with Ibn Rushd, but is also assumed, perhaps to a lesser degree, by a number of theologians as well. (We recall al-Ghazālī’s notion, in his *al-Qistās al-mustaqīm*, of the *mīzān* mentioned in the Qur’an being equivalent to the various figures of Aristotelian syllogistic reasoning.)

says, “Affirm whatever you come to know through spiritual unveiling (*kashf*).” As far as metaphysics and knowledge of things divine, revelation might as well have never been sent down. In fact, says Ibn Taymiyya, were revelation not to have been revealed, this would have been easier and more convenient for such people than its being revealed, since they do not derive knowledge of anything from it in any case, yet have to tax themselves with the added effort of explaining away what revelation does say, either through declaring its face value to be false (*takdhīb*), declaring its meaning to be unknown and/or unknowable to other than God (*tafwīd*), or explaining it (away) through figurative interpretation (*ta’wīl*).⁹¹

If it be said that it is inconceivable that what a prophet asserts by way of revelation should contravene reason, as he is above this and this is impossible with respect to him, this would amount to an admission that it is, in fact, impossible for scriptural and rational indicants to contradict. It might then be said that what is really meant is the impossibility of there being a contradiction between reason and that which is merely *thought* to be a scriptural proof but actually is not, or that which amounts to a merely conjectural indicant on account of the less than certain nature of some of its premises, be this either on the level of its chain of transmission (*isnād*) in the event, say, of a mendacious or inaccurate narrator, or on the level of the wording of the text itself (*matn*) in the event, say, of a polyvalent term carrying more than one meaning. In this case, the response would be that if the term “scriptural indicant” is applied to that which does not actually constitute a (reliable) indicant in and of itself (*mā laysa bi-dāḥil fī nafs al-amr*), then it could likewise be the case that some of what has been called “rational evidence” but that contradicts revelation could, *mutatis mutandis*, also turn out, upon closer inspection, not to constitute a proof in and of itself (*fī nafs al-amr*). In this case, such proofs – even if they be referred to as “rational demonstrations” (*barāhīn ‘aqliyya*) or “definitive rational proofs” (*qawāṭi‘ ‘aqliyya*) and declared apodictic by those who advance them, despite the fact that they do

⁹¹ *Dar’*, I: 135, l. 14 – 136, l. 4.

not constitute proofs in and of themselves or are only conjectural – if such proofs contradict a scriptural indicant which deserves to be called a “proof” on account of its premises being both valid and patently well-known, then it is incumbent to give priority to the scriptural proof in this case – by virtue, once again, of its superior epistemic warrant, not because of its origin in the category of statements collectively referred to as “revelation.” This is true of necessity, Ibn Taymiyya assures us, and in accordance with the consensus of rational thinkers.

It is thus manifest, Ibn Taymiyya concludes, that whatever explanation is given for one category of proof or evidence – scriptural or rational – enjoying automatic preponderance, it is possible to reverse this explanation and apply it in an equal manner to the other category as well. This is due to the invalid practice of according automatic priority to that which does not warrant such priority, either by the dictates of scripture or those of reason. It is thus manifest, he argues, that giving automatic priority to one *category* of proof over another is invalid. Rather, one must investigate the two specific pieces of evidence found to be in contradiction on a particular point and take as preponderant whichever one is definitive (*qaṭʿī*), or whichever one is more probative (*rājiḥ*) if both are less than fully conclusive, regardless of whether the indicant thus preferred be the scriptural or the rational one. In this manner, claims Ibn Taymiyya, the fallacious principle which has served as a means for various forms of heterodox doctrines is vitiated and recused.⁹²

If the previous argument turned around the question of whether or not revelation is known to be authentic – that is, a question of textual integrity (*thubūt*) – Ibn Taymiyya completes this series of arguments⁹³ by starting from the assumption that the authenticity (*thubūt*) of revelation is indeed known, then considering whether revelation can be established to have addressed in a definitive manner the issue where a conflict with reason is alleged to have arisen or not – a question of *dalāla*. Assuming revelation to be authentic, then either: (1) it is known that revelation affirms the issue under debate, or (2) it is merely conjec-

⁹² Ibid., I: 136, l. 5 – 137, l. 8.

⁹³ See Argument 5.

tured to do so, or (3) it is neither known nor conjectured to affirm the issue at hand. Now, if it is *known* that revelation has informed us of the matter, then it is impossible that there should be in reason anything incompatible with (*yunāfi*) that which is *known*, whether the thing be known by means of scripture or by any other means, for if something is *known* either to be the case (*thubūt*) or not to be the case (*intifāʾ*), then it is not possible that a proof should be established which would contradict this. If, however, something is only conjectured to be the case based on scripture, then it *is* possible for something in reason to contradict it, in which case it is incumbent, once again, to *give priority to knowledge over conjecture*, not on account of its being rational or scriptural, but on account of its being *knowledge*, just as it is incumbent to give priority to what is *known* by revelation over what is merely *conjectured* to be the case by reason. If the rational proof here itself is merely conjectural and falls short of conclusive certainty, then if the two proofs are of equivalent probative value, the matter remains irresolvable; otherwise, priority is given the one that enjoys the greater epistemic warrant. And if revelation contains neither that which can be considered knowledge nor even mere conjecture on the point in question, then there is nothing in revelation for reason to contradict in the first place. This proves once again, asserts Ibn Taymiyya, that according automatic priority to reason in all circumstances is misguided and rationally indefensible.⁹⁴

In conclusion, then, Ibn Taymiyya seeks to replace the binary “reason vs. revelation” with the alternative binary “knowledge vs. conjecture.” He does so by arguing that discrete arguments based on either what is considered reason or what is considered authentic scripture run the entire scale of epistemic warrant from “certain” to “fallacious” and that, therefore, precedence must in every case be given to whatever argument on a given question happens to be more probative, *regardless* from which of the two sources of knowledge, reason or revelation, we have it. Once Ibn Taymiyya has essentially equated the two sources – reason and revelation – epistemically while simultaneously subjecting each dis-

⁹⁴ *Darʿ*, I: 137, l. 9-18.

crete element of both categories to a common test of probity, he completes this second maneuver against the Universal Law by declaring that the issue is *not*, as everyone seems to have assumed, reason vs. revelation, but rather knowledge vs. conjecture, certainty vs. uncertainty, more probative vs. less probative indications of truth.

Taken together, then, Arguments 1 through 5 – addressing what it means for reason to “ground” revelation and establishing the crucial binary “knowledge vs. conjecture” – as opposed to “reason vs. revelation” – aim to undermine the main premises upon which the Universal Law is built.

VII. Not “Reason vs. Revelation” but “Scripturally Validated vs. Scripturally Non-Validated”

Ibn Taymiyya’s insistence that the relevant distinction to be made is between knowledge and conjecture, rather than between reason (as a category) and revelation (as a category), has immediate implications for the epistemological status as well as the religious-moral evaluation of various arguments and proofs. In Argument 15,⁹⁵ Ibn Taymiyya elaborates a fundamental distinction, by means of which he attempts to shift the entire frame of reference in the debate concerning reason and revelation. According to Ibn Taymiyya, the real issue is not a question of “scriptural” vs. “rational” (*sharʿī* ≠ *ʿaqlī*) proofs and methods, which is how the debate had almost always been framed by virtually all parties up until his time, but rather a question of “scripturally validated” vs. “scripturally non-validated” (*sharʿī* ≠ *bidʿī*) proofs and methods. Scripturally validated (*sharʿī*) proofs, in turn, comprise *both* revealed (*samʿī*) and rational (*ʿaqlī*) indicants. The *sharʿī-bidʿī* binary is based, for Ibn Taymiyya, on the fact that an indicant’s being classed as “scriptural” or “rational” is not in and of itself a property that entails praise or blame, validity or invalidity. Rather, this merely reveals the way in which the thing in question has come to be known – either by way of reason or

⁹⁵ See *ibid.*, I: 198-200, for Argument 15 and the full presentation of Ibn Taymiyya’s novel binary “*sharʿī* vs. *bidʿī*” in place of the more usual “*ʿaqlī* vs. *naqlī*” (or “reason vs. revelation”) dichotomy.

by way of revelation – even though, when revelation is the source, reason must also be used in conjunction with it.⁹⁶

The binary that results from this reclassification of indicants and proofs is no less than fundamental to Ibn Taymiyya’s thought and methodology. The counterpart of a scriptural (*sharʿī*) indicant, he tells us, is not a rational one, but rather an innovated (*bidʿī*) one, one that lacks *scriptural validation*, for it is “innovation” (*bidʿa*), and not “reason,” that stands opposite of “scripture” (*shirʿa*).⁹⁷ Being “scripturally validated” (*sharʿī*) is a positive attribute of an indicant or proof, whereas being “innovated” (*bidʿī*) – not in the sense of merely being new, but of lacking scriptural validation – is a negative qualification, for whatever stands opposed to true revelation (*sharʿīʿa*) is of necessity invalid and false. Now, a scripturally validated (*sharʿī*) indicant may consist of *either* a revealed text *or* a conclusion reached through reason, for a proof’s being “scripturally validated” can mean one of two things, either: (1) that revelation has positively affirmed and explicitly indicated it (*kawn al-sharʿ athbatahu wa-dalla ʿalayhi*), or (2) that revelation has permitted it and declared it valid and licit (*kawn al-sharʿ abāḥahu wa-adhina fīhi*), that is, either by way of affirmation or of approbation.⁹⁸

Now, if one uses “scriptural” (*sharʿī*) according to the first meaning – i.e., that which scripture has positively affirmed and indicated – then it is possible that the indicant or proof in question *also* be knowable through the use of reason, with the role of scripture here being to point it out (*dalla ʿalayhi*) and call attention to it (*nabbaha ʿalayhi*). In this case, the indicant is classified as a “scripturally validated *rational* indicant” (*sharʿī-aqlī*). Ibn Taymiyya cites as examples of scripturally validated rational indicants things such as the various parables (*amthāl*) mentioned in the Qurʾan and other arguments for the oneness of God and the authenticity of the Prophet, the affirmation of God’s attributes, and the

⁹⁶ In order, Ibn Taymiyya seems to imply, to determine that something is actually a part of authentic revelation and, having done so, properly to understand the import thereof. In other words, reason is employed in the determination of both the authenticity and reliability (*thubūt*) of the revealed texts and the meaning (*dalāla*) thereof, as we have discussed in the preceding section.

⁹⁷ “*idh al-bidʿa tuqābilu al-shirʿa*” (*Darʿ*, I: 198, l. 6).

⁹⁸ See *ibid.*, I: 198, l. 3-9.

events accompanying the final resurrection. All these, affirms Ibn Taymiyya, are proofs whose truth is known by reason – consisting as they do of rational demonstrations and syllogisms (*barāhīn wa-maqāyīs ‘aqliyya*) – yet they are also classified as scripturally validated in the sense mentioned here by virtue of being mentioned in and explicitly affirmed by the Qur’an. If, on the other hand, a given scripturally validated indicant is known exclusively through the texts of revelation, then it is classified as a “scripturally validated *revealed* indicant” (*shar‘ī-sam‘ī*). In summary, then, valid scriptural indicants are categorized as either “scriptural-rational” (*shar‘ī-‘aqlī*) or “scriptural-revealed” (*shar‘ī-sam‘ī*), that is, scripturally validated rational indicants or scripturally validated revealed indicants.

Many *kalām* theologians, Ibn Taymiyya insists, have made the error of presuming that the category of scriptural indicants consists exclusively of this second type of indicant (*shar‘ī-sam‘ī*) – namely, that which can *only* be known through the texts of revelation – and that revelation is only capable of functioning as an indicant (*dalīl*) of something in this manner, that is, purely by informing us of matters of which we could otherwise have no knowledge. For this reason, they separate the “fundamentals of faith” (*uṣūl al-dīn*) into two categories, rational and scriptural, and define the rational strictly as that which *is not*, and *cannot be*, known by means of revelation (and, conversely, define the scriptural strictly as that which is not, and cannot be, known by means of reason). Yet they are erroneous in doing so, Ibn Taymiyya insists, for the Qur’an also uses, indicates, and draws attention to rational indicants, even though some of what is classified as “rational indicants” does comprise that which can be inferred by reason on the basis of empirical evidence,⁹⁹ as the Qur’an itself indicates in verses such as: “We shall show them Our signs in the horizons and in themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the Truth. Is it not sufficient that your Lord is witness to all things?”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ “*wa-in kāna min al-adilla al-‘aqliyya mā yu‘lamu bi-l-‘iyān wa-lawāzimihī*” (ibid., I: 199, l. 9-10).

¹⁰⁰ Qur’an (Fuṣṣilat) 41:53. See ibid., I: 198, l. 9 – 199, l. 12.

If, however, one uses the term “scriptural” or “scripturally validated” (*shar‘ī*) according to the second meaning mentioned above – i.e., that which scripture has permitted and deemed licit (though has not itself positively affirmed or established) – then this category, according to Ibn Taymiyya, comprises several subcategories, namely: that which has reached us of the authenticated prophetic Sunna; that to which the Qur’an has drawn attention and indicated in terms of rational proofs and arguments; and, finally, that which can be inferred on the basis of our empirical observation of existent things (*mā dallat ‘alayhi wa-shahidat bihi al-mawjūdāt*), elevating hereby empirical observation to the category of ‘*shar‘ī*,’ or ‘scripturally validated,’ evidence as well.¹⁰¹

To summarize, then, an indicant that is scripturally validated (*ḍalīl shar‘ī*) may not be contradicted by or subordinated to one that is not scripturally validated (*ghayr shar‘ī*). As for indicants that are either rational (‘*aqlī*) or have the nature of a transmitted report (*sam‘ī*) but which are not scripturally validated (*shar‘ī*),¹⁰² such indicants may sometimes outweigh countervailing evidence and sometimes themselves be outweighed, sometimes valid and sometimes invalid.¹⁰³ As for the statements of authentic revelation, both declarative and imperative, these may not be overridden or contradicted (*yu‘arad*) by anything. As for what men say, this can always potentially be opposed by something else of the same category (*bi-naẓīrihi*), for such statements, after all, may be true just as they may be false. Unfortunately, however, there are those who include in the category of “scriptural proofs and indicants” (*adilla shar‘iyya*) that which does not belong to it (i.e., specious and invalid rational arguments), as there are those who exclude from it that which is, in fact, a proper subcategory of it – such as, we may assume, scripturally validated rational (*shar‘ī-‘aqlī*) proofs, an important category of *shar‘ī* indicants which Ibn Taymiyya blames the *kalām* theologians for having

¹⁰¹ See *ibid.*, I: 199, l. 13-14.

¹⁰² Such as, for example, a historical or other sort of “report” or piece of information that is neither affirmed, nor denied, nor addressed by revelation in any way.

¹⁰³ As in the case of rational arguments containing false premises or built on invalid inferences, or hadith texts transmitted as putative revelation but found, upon investigation and criticism, to be inauthentic.

made the fundamental error of excluding from the category of scriptural proofs.¹⁰⁴

In conclusion, then, Ibn Taymiyya completes his bid to redefine the very terms of the debate on reason and revelation through proposing now a third conceptual shift: namely, that proofs are not diametrically opposed in terms of being “scriptural” (*shar‘ī*) versus “rational” (*‘aqlī*), but rather in terms of being “scripturally legitimated” (*shar‘ī*) versus “scripturally non-legitimated” (*bid‘ī*). The category of scripturally legitimated (*shar‘ī*) proofs, Ibn Taymiyya argues, comprises *both* the authentic texts of revelation properly comprehended *and* valid rational arguments built on sound premises. Ibn Taymiyya thus attempts to divide what passes for “reason” against itself into two categories – valid/true and invalid/false – and to absorb the first part, i.e., that which is valid,¹⁰⁵ into the larger umbrella category of “scripturally legitimated” (*shar‘ī*) proofs. Through his rigorous insistence on the epistemic quality of a proof to the exclusion of all other considerations – including whether the proof originates in revelation or in reason – Ibn Taymiyya attempts to circumvent the rigid categories of “reason” taken as all of a piece and “revelation” taken as all of a piece, subjecting instead every discrete element of *both* categories to a common test of epistemic warrant, then asserting that revelation approves and legitimates everything that is true and certain and abjures everything that is false and unfounded – regardless whether it originates in reason or what is claimed to be divine revelation.

* * *

To summarize, then, Ibn Taymiyya, as we have seen in Sections V, VI, and VII above, makes three fundamental moves in his attempt to refute the Universal Law. He first implodes the fixed categories of “revelation” and “reason” by lining up all the discrete elements of both on a par. He then insists that each discrete element, whether from reason or from revelation, be individually investi-

¹⁰⁴ See *Dar’*, I: 200, l. 8ff.

¹⁰⁵ What exactly constitutes valid and invalid reasoning and rational proofs for Ibn Taymiyya will be taken up in a subsequent project.

gated for its probative value, thus replacing the binary “reason vs. revelation” (‘*aql-naql*) with the binary “knowledge vs. conjecture” (‘*ilm-ẓann*) or “more certain vs. less certain” (‘*rājiḥ-marjūḥ*) indicants of truth. Finally, he subsumes valid rational argumentation based on sound premises under the larger category of “scripturally validated” (‘*sharṭ*) proofs, making of them a new category he terms “scriptural-rational” (‘*sharṭ-‘aqlī*), the counterpart of the “scriptural-revealed” (‘*sharṭ-samṭ*). By these three maneuvers, Ibn Taymiyya seeks to tear down the canvas altogether, so to speak, and to redraw from scratch the very terms of the debate surrounding reason and revelation in medieval Islam. He attempts this tour de force by first poking holes in all the major assumptions upon which the Universal Law is based, and then redefining the categories themselves in terms of which the whole question of “reason and revelation” had been conceived and debated up to his time.

VIII. Further Arguments Regarding the Rational Contradictoriness of the Universal Law¹⁰⁶

The following section presents a number of disparate arguments advanced by Ibn Taymiyya, arguments that cannot easily be grouped into sub-categories but the majority of which are composed of succinct statements that, taken together, provide a good idea of the nature and content of nearly half of Ibn Taymiyya’s 44 arguments against the Universal Law.

Argument 8:

The majority of issues, Ibn Taymiyya tells us, in which a contradiction between reason and revelation is alleged turn out to be recondite and ambiguous matters which perplex even many of the speculative thinkers themselves – issues such as God’s names, attributes, and actions, reward and punishment after death, heaven and hell, God’s throne (‘*arsh*) and chair (‘*kursī*), and other such matters pertaining to the unseen – matters on which the minds of most speculative thinkers are in-

¹⁰⁶ Based on Arguments 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 21, and parts of 29. Belonging to this group of arguments also are Arguments 28, 31-35, 37, 39, and 42.

capable of reaching firm knowledge purely by means of their own rational reflection. The result, according to Ibn Taymiyya, is that most people who have ventured into such territory based on mere opinion derived through their own rational reflection end up either in dispute and disagreement with each other, or else remain at a loss and perplexed (*mutahawwikūn*).¹⁰⁷

Ibn Taymiyya then goes on to make the point that most such thinkers exhibit unqualified deference toward the main figures of their particular school of thought, accepting whatever their leader has claimed to be the dictates of sound reason even if, at times, they arrive at different conclusions based on their own reflection. Among the followers of Aristotle, for example, are many who may come to different conclusions than their master in the fields of logic, physics, and metaphysics,¹⁰⁸ yet refrain from opposing what he said due to their high opinion of and deference to him, giving their master (Aristotle) the benefit of the doubt and attributing the variance of their own conclusions with his to their own mental deficiency and lack of understanding.¹⁰⁹ This same attitude of deference to the master of one's school of thought – out of deference towards his status even when one's own reason has led one to variant conclusions – is to be observed among the followers of all the major schools of thought found among Muslims.¹¹⁰ Not only do most of these doctrines contain much that contradicts the Qur'an, the Sunna, and the consensus of the community (*ijmā'*), but also a

¹⁰⁷ *Dar'*, I: 150, l. 7 – 151, l. 11.

¹⁰⁸ Ibn Taymiyya often cites pre-Islamic thinkers, both Greek and Hellenistic, who disagreed with Aristotle's logic and larger philosophy, either in whole or in part.

¹⁰⁹ This, remarks Ibn Taymiyya, despite the fact that rational thinkers operating on the basis of pure reason know that the science of logic, for example, contains much that is indubitably false and inaccurate. As for what Aristotle and his followers – such as Alexander of Aphrodisias, Proclus, Themistius, al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, al-Suhrawardī, Ibn Rushd and others – have said in the realm of metaphysics, this contains such patent error, Ibn Taymiyya contends, and such enormous deficiency as are clear to the generality of rational human beings. Indeed, he laments, their discourse on the subject of metaphysics is beset by well nigh incalculable contradictions.

¹¹⁰ This whole line of argument ties in to Ibn Taymiyya's larger stance against blind *taqlīd*, be it in legal or intellectual matters, as evidenced by his willingness to oppose, as we have seen in Chapter 2, a number of widely held views in his own day, be it against theologians, philosophers, and Sufis, but also in the field of law. It is interesting to note how part of the aspersions Ibn Taymiyya casts on the theologians, and even the philosophers (*ahl al-burhān*), is that they too, no less than any other group, are guilty of blind deference to the revered founding fathers of their various doctrines and schools of thought, even if this require that they contravene the word of God Himself (not to mention the deliverances of their own duly exercised rational faculties).

great deal of positions that *contradict pure reason as well*. This is true, Ibn Taymiyya asserts, of the followers of the major Mu'tazilite thinkers,¹¹¹ as well as those who are "closer to the Sunna."¹¹² The same applies to the followers of those *mutakallimūn* who affirm the divine attributes, such as the Kullābīs, the Karrāmites, and the Ash'arīs, and even among the followers of the Four Imams – Abū Ḥanīfa, Mālik, al-Shāfi'ī, and Ibn Ḥanbal – and the leading ascetics and early Sufi figures. In all such cases, the followers may, through their own rational reflection, come to the conclusion that some of what their leader said was wrong, yet they defer to his opinion because they believe him to possess a stronger intellect, more knowledge, and greater righteousness than they, despite the fact that they know that he is not infallible and that it is, therefore, possible for him to be mistaken.

Yet – and this is the crucial point for Ibn Taymiyya – none of the followers of these various authorities say, "Where my own rational conclusions contradict the position of the leader I follow, I will give unconditional priority to my own conclusions." Rather, he would normally investigate the matter more carefully and, since he knows it is possible for his leader to be mistaken, perhaps adopt a variant position if it turns out, upon closer scrutiny, that the position at variance with what his leader held is the correct, or at least the more likely, position. How, then, can it be claimed that authentic revelation – the Qur'an and the authenticated Sunna – contains things that every common man knows through his own reason to be false and for each man to give precedence to his own opinion in matters of the unseen, matters which the vast majority of those who have spoken of them based on nothing but their own considered opinion have gone astray, even as each man is aware of the deficiency of his own intellect and the confusion into which adherents of his very own school, not to mention those of

¹¹¹ He mentions here specifically Abū al-Hudhayl (d. 235/849), al-Nazzām (d. 221/836), Abū al-Qāsim al-Ka'bī (d. 319/931), Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī (d. 303/916) and his son Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā'ī (d. 321/933), Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī (d. 436/1044), "and others." (*Dar'*, I: 153).

¹¹² Among whom he mentions al-Najjār [al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad] (d. 220/835 or 230/844-5) and Ḍirār b. 'Amr (d. c. 200/815), whose followers include Muḥammad b. 'Isā Burghūth (d. 240/855 or 241/856), "who debated Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal," and Ḥafṣ al-Fard (d. c. mid-3rd/9th century), "who debated al-Shāfi'ī." (ibid., I: 153-154).

other schools, have fallen with respect to such matters? In summary, remarks Ibn Taymiyya, the authentic texts of revelation turn out, upon careful investigation, not to be contradicted by any clear, unambiguous conclusion of reason, but rather are opposed only by that which contains much ambiguity and confusion, and that which is *known* to be true cannot legitimately be opposed by that which is ambiguous and confused and is therefore not, by contrast, *known* to be true.¹¹³

Argument 11:

Much of what people refer to as proofs – whether rational or (even) scriptural – does not, in fact, constitute proof, but rather is only surmised to. Everyone, from the Companions on down to the later speculative thinkers – both affirmationists and negationists – agree that the texts of revelation indicate (*tadullu ‘alā*) affirmation of the divine names and attributes, details pertaining to the hereafter, etc. The dispute only arises as to whether or not anything found in reason dictates that the texts should be read as conveying a “true” metaphorical or non-literal meaning at variance with what the straightforward exegesis of them would suggest. Ibn Taymiyya’s point here is that all parties agree as to what the texts of revelation mean in their obvious outward sense, while there is vast disagreement among speculative thinkers as to what constitutes valid rational knowledge. Thus, that whose indication and meaning (*dalāla*) are known and agreed upon (i.e, the texts of revelation) cannot legitimately be opposed by that whose indication and meaning are not known or agreed upon, but rather are the subject of much dispute and uncertainty (namely, the so-called “*ma‘qūlāt*,” or putative conclusions of reason).

One should know, says Ibn Taymiyya in conclusion, that those who are on the truth (*ahl al-ḥaqq*) do *not* impugn (*yaṭ‘anūna fī*) rational proofs as a category nor that which reason *knows* to be valid, but rather they only impugn that which the opponent (*al-mu‘ārid*) claims to be in contradiction to revelation. Yet with respect to all such claims, Ibn Taymiyya assures us, not a single one of

¹¹³ Ibid., I: 151, l. 12 – 155, l. 16.

them is supported by an intrinsically valid proof (*dalīl ṣaḥīḥ fī nafs al-amr*), nor even a proof accepted by a majority of speculative thinkers, nor again a proof that has not itself been undermined and refuted by reason itself.¹¹⁴

Argument 12:

All of the deliverances of reason that are alleged to contradict revelation can actually be demonstrated by reason itself to be invalid. Now, that which is known by reason to be invalid cannot be used either to oppose other conclusions similarly derived from reason, or to oppose revelation. This is a general principle which Ibn Taymiyya promises he shall demonstrate in detail when he turns to the specific arguments propounded by those who contravene orthodox belief (“the Sunna”) and demonstrate, through reason itself, their speciousness and contradictory nature.

Argument 13:

Those aspects of revelation that are claimed to contradict rational evidence – such as affirmation of the divine attributes, the details of the afterlife, etc. – are known of necessity to be part and parcel of the religion of Islam (*ma‘lūm min al-dīn bi-l-ḍarūra*) and thus cannot coherently be held to be false once one has accepted the truthfulness of the Prophet and the concomitant authenticity of the revelation he has brought. And whoever may claim that the Prophet did not, in fact, deliver such teachings as part and parcel of the Islamic revelation, his claim would be known of necessity to be false, since those elements he denies are, by definition, known *of necessity* to be an intrinsic and inseparable part of the teachings of the Islamic faith.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Ibid., I: 192, l. 5 – 194, l. 8.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., I: 195, l. 1-5.

Argument 14:

The aims and intentions of the Prophet (*maqāṣiduhu wa-murāduhu*) are well known by, and have been recurrently transmitted (i.e., through *tawātur*) amongst, those who have intimate knowledge of his life and that of his Companions and Successors and who are intimately familiar with the revelation he brought (that is, experts in Qur’anic exegesis and in the Sunna and hadith of the Prophet). In other words, Ibn Taymiyya explains, the *meaning* of the revelation has been transmitted in the same massively recurrent (*mutawātir*) fashion as have been the wording of the Qur’anic text, the obligatory nature and modality of performing the five daily prayers, fasting the month of Ramadan, and other such matters, without collusion (*tawāfu*) or mutual influencing (*tashā’ur*). Now, it is known, continues Ibn Taymiyya, that massively recurrent transmission of the *mutawātir* type yields certain knowledge, regardless of whether that which has been transmitted recurrently be the wording (*lafẓ*) of a text or its meaning (*ma’nā*). Examples of things we know to be true with certainty by virtue of our having come to know them through massively recurrent transmission include: the courageousness of Khālīd b. al-Walīd (d. 21/642); the excellence of the poetry of Ḥassān b. Thābit (d. 54/674); the fact that Abū Hurayra (d. 59/678) transmitted hadith from the Prophet; the fact that the Four Imams were knowledgeable in *fiqh*; the justice of the “two ‘Umars,” ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 23/644) and ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (d. 101/720); the various military expeditions of the Prophet; Galen’s (d. c. 200 or 216) preeminent knowledge of medicine; Sībawayhi’s (d. c. 180/796) mastery of Arabic grammar, etc. Now, if someone were to make a claim in the field of medicine or grammar that contradicted what the expert scholars of those fields know to be true from the works, say, of Galen or Sībawayhi, respectively, his claim would be known to be invalid. Similarly, anyone who claims something about the content of revelation – in terms of the meanings of the Qur’an or the intentions and objectives (*maqāṣid*) of the Prophet as known through his Sunna – that contradicts what the scholars most intimately familiar with these sources know to be true of them, his claim likewise would be even more patently invalid

than in the previous case, since it runs counter not merely to what giants like Galen and Sībawayhi have concluded, but to what has been brought by the Messenger of God, who is divinely protected from error (*maʿṣūm*) in his transmission of revelation from God and in his prophetic function as a living exemplar of the divine message through the Sunna.

The upshot of this, concludes Ibn Taymiyya, is that one know that what has been transmitted from the Prophet consists of two categories: (1) his words and actions, and (2) the *meanings* of his words and the *objectives* behind his actions.¹¹⁶ Both of these categories consist of some elements that are known by *tawātur* both to scholars and to the general public, other more specialized elements that are known by *tawātur* among the scholars only, and yet other, even less commonly circulated elements known only by particular individuals and which may be unknown to, or considered suspect (*maznūn*) or even fabricated (*makdhūb*) by, those lacking the specific knowledge required. This principle holds across disciplines, such as Qurʾanic exegesis, hadith criticism, grammar, medicine, law, and discursive theology and philosophy as well.¹¹⁷

Argument 21:

It is impossible for two declarative statements of revelation to contradict each other, though one may explain and clarify the meaning of the other. As for imperative statements, some may be subject to abrogation (i.e., one of two imperative statements that would be in contradiction if both were simultaneously affirmed), but here again, insists Ibn Taymiyya, only revelation can abrogate revelation. Whoever seeks to abrogate God's Law on the basis of his own opinions and whims becomes guilty thereby of outright heresy (*ilhād*), just the same as one who rejects the declarative statements of revelation with his own opinion or speculation.¹¹⁸ Ibn Taymiyya accuses the "Qarāmiṭa"¹¹⁹ of having done both,¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Once again, the issue of language and meaning is of critical importance to Ibn Taymiyya's overall methodology and will be taken up in detail in the next chapter.

¹¹⁷ *Dar'*, I: 195, l. 6 – 198, l. 2.

¹¹⁸ See this paragraph at *ibid.*, V: 208, l. 5-9.

and further excoriates other heterodox groups (*malāhida*) for having gone so far as to claim prophethood for themselves or that which they consider even higher than prophethood, whether sainthood (*wilāya*) or philosophy, through which many of the philosophers claim access to a higher truth than that brought by the prophets and messengers.

Blameworthy innovation (*bid'a*) is cut from the same cloth as disbelief, which is why opposition to revelation on the basis of the mere opinions of men is a branch of disbelief (*min shu'ab al-kufr*), even if the one who does so is a firm believer in the teachings of revelation other than those in which he claims there to be a contradiction between his rational opinions and revelation. And if opposing revelation with the mere opinions of men is a branch of disbelief, it follows that if revelation is true, then all such arguments upon which such opposition is based are false and vain.¹²¹

IX. On the Universal Law's Incoherence with the Epistemology of the Islamic Faith¹²²

The large majority of Ibn Taymiyya's "44 Arguments" against the Universal Law, as we have seen above, take the form of rational critiques of the coherence and logical implications of the Law in which our author attempts to show that the Law as formulated cannot hold up on logical grounds. A number of arguments, however, consider the implications of the Universal Law from the perspective of revelation and within the larger religious context of the Islamic faith. These arguments leave aside the question of the logical and rational viability of the Law on its own terms and focus instead on the extent to which Ibn Taymiyya considers the Law to cohere (or not) with the overall epistemological structure of Islam, in the name of which he launches his massive critique and seeks to redress the troubled relationship between reason and revelation that he inherited. The

¹¹⁹ He seems to be referring to the Ismā'īlīs. (See *ibid.*, V: 208, l. 9-11).

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ For this paragraph, see *ibid.*, V: 209, l. 13-18. For the entire twenty-first Argument, see *ibid.*, V: 204-209.

¹²² Based on all or a part of Arguments 3, 10, 15, 22, and 23. Belonging to the same family of arguments are Arguments 26, 38, 40, and 41.

following section presents the main arguments Ibn Taymiyya makes along these lines.

From Argument 3:

Anyone having the slightest familiarity with the content of the message brought by the Prophet, Ibn Taymiyya declares, knows in a necessary fashion (*bi-l-idtirār*) that he did *not* call people to faith by arguing from accidents or the negation of attributes, nor did he mention that the Creator was “neither ‘above’ the world nor distinct from it (*mubāyin lahu*),” or that He is neither inside the world nor outside it, nor did he mention the negation of “body” in the technical, philosophical sense of the word or any other term synonymous with it, nor the impossibility of an infinity of past or future events, or other such things as are said by them – neither explicitly nor implicitly – nor did he mention anything which could plausibly be construed to imply or entail any of this. In fact, all people – specialists and non-specialists alike – possess knowledge to the effect that the Prophet did not mention such matters, and their knowledge of this is even more patent and obvious than their knowledge of a host of other details relating to what the Prophet said and did in the course of carrying out his prophetic mission as recorded in the books of Sunna – such that he only made pilgrimage one time after the Hijra; that he did not mandate the call to prayer for the prayers of the two yearly feasts; that he would never pray the five obligatory prayers alone, but rather, unless he was ill, would always lead the Muslims in them as a group, etc. Yet, if anyone were to try to pass off falsified hadith reports or start deducing arguments to the contrary, the scholars, who by dint of their intimate familiarity with the texts, know the truth of these matters in a necessary fashion (*‘ilman ḍarūriyyan*), would immediately recognize of necessity the falsehood of such claims, just as they would recognize the falsehood of arguments that consist of mere sophistry, even before taking pains to resolve the specific objections raised by such arguments. Hence, whoever employs such rational methods of argumentation or publicly endorses (*akhbara al-umma*) the position of negationism, the

falsehood of his position would be known of necessity in an even more blatant manner than the falsehood of one who claimed the contrary of any of the issues mentioned above relating to the Prophet's daily practice. This is known, Ibn Taymiyya concludes, by anyone possessing even the slightest knowledge of the conditions of the Prophet's life, let alone those possessing an intermediate level of knowledge of such matters, to say nothing of those who are heirs to the Prophet,¹²³ namely, the scholars who possess comprehensive knowledge of his words and deeds.¹²⁴

From Argument 15:

The Author of revelation, Ibn Taymiyya argues, has made illicit the use of arguments that are false in and of themselves – such as an argument that is false due to the falsity of one of its premises – just as He has forbidden falsehood and lying in general, not least with regard to Himself. This is indicated by the verse: “Was not the covenant of the Book taken from them, that they would not ascribe to God anything but the truth?”¹²⁵ God has also forbidden the use of arguments on account of the fact that the one using them is doing so without knowledge, as we read in verses such as: “And pursue not that of which thou hast no knowledge,”¹²⁶ or “and that ye say of God that of which ye have no knowledge,”¹²⁷ or “Ah! Ye are those who fell to disputing (even) in matters of which ye had some knowledge! But why dispute ye in matters of which ye have no knowledge?”¹²⁸ Finally, God has forbidden the use of arguments merely for the purpose of disputation after the truth of a matter has already been clarified, as indicated in the verses: “They dispute with thee concerning the truth after it was made manifest”¹²⁹ and “But the unbelievers dispute with vain argument, in

¹²³ From a prophetic hadith, which states in part: “the scholars are the heirs of the prophets” (“inna al-‘ulamā’ warathat al-anbiyā”).

¹²⁴ *Dar’*, I: 105, l. 8ff.

¹²⁵ Qur’an (al-A‘rāf) 7:169.

¹²⁶ Qur’an (al-Isrā’) 17:36.

¹²⁷ Qur’an (al-A‘rāf) 7:33.

¹²⁸ Qur’an (Āl ‘Imrān) 3:66.

¹²⁹ Qur’an (al-Anfāl) 8:6.

order therewith to weaken the truth.”¹³⁰ The implication here is obvious: Ibn Taymiyya interprets these verses, originally addressed to the Meccan pagans, as being applicable also to latter-day philosophers and theologians, whose premises and arguments he considers specious and whom he therefore believes to be “speaking of God without knowledge” on the basis of “vain argument,” disputing with each other “concerning the truth after it was made manifest” (i.e., through the clear language of the Qur’an and Sunna), and therefore weakening and undermining, rather than strengthening and reinforcing, the truths plainly revealed to the community on the tongue of His final prophet.

From Argument 21:

Putting the rational opinions of men above revelation is tantamount to belying the prophets and opens the door to disbelief. Ibn Taymiyya paraphrases al-Shahrastānī as saying, at the beginning of his famous heresiographical work *al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*, that the root of every evil lies in opposing revelation with mere opinion and putting one’s own biases and whims above the revealed texts.¹³¹ Ibn Taymiyya then cites five fairly lengthy Qur’anic verses in support of this notion.¹³² He explains that revelation is divided into two types of speech: imperative (*inshā’ī*) and declarative (*ikhbārī*). The key to happiness and success consists in believing wholeheartedly in the declarative part and obeying unreservedly the imperative part, while the key to misery lies in opposing both with one’s own opinion (*ra’y*) and biased whim (*hawā*) and giving priority to these over the declarative and imperative dictates of revelation. Those among the *mutakallimūn* and speculative thinkers who have strayed, explains Ibn Taymiyya, have done so with respect to the declarative part by opposing what God has declared regarding Himself and His creation with their own reasoning and opinions. Those who have strayed among the ascetics (*ahl al-‘ibāda*) and the legal scholars (*ahl al-fiqh*) have done so with respect to the imperative aspect of revelation by oppos-

¹³⁰ Qur’an (al-Kahf) 18:56. For the argument presented here, see *Dar’*, I: 199, l. 15 – 200, l. 7.

¹³¹ Ibid., V: 204, l. 1-4.

¹³² See ibid., V: 204, l. 8 – 205, l. 15 for these verses.

ing what God has commanded with their own “*sharī‘a*” based on their personal opinions and whims. The main point here, says Ibn Taymiyya, is that opposing revelation in either of these two aspects with one’s own opinions and caprices is what disbelievers do, as shown in numerous Qur’anic verses,¹³³ in addition to a hadith stating: “Vain disputation (*mirā’*) with respect to the Qur’an is disbelief.”¹³⁴ These statements, says Ibn Taymiyya, apply to any of those who enter into disputation about the Qur’an and give preference to their own opinions above its plain meaning, even if only inadvertently, i.e., by taking positions which, in effect, give priority to *their* reason – understood as their own biased and misguided reason and not, of course, pure reason proper (‘*aql ṣarīḥ*) – over the texts of revelation. This applies even to someone who holds a position that leads to argumentation and doubt merely by entailment (*man qāla mā yūjibu al-mirya wa-l-shakk*), let alone someone who explicitly claims that his reasoning and opinion are to be given priority over the texts of the Qur’an and Sunna.

Argument 22:

According to this argument, God censures those whom He censures among the disbelievers on account of their turning away from the path of God and seeking crookedness in it. Ibn Taymiyya cites four Qur’anic passages¹³⁵ in illustration of this idea. All these verses concern those who turn, or divert others, away from God’s path, which Ibn Taymiyya defines as that with which God has dispatched His messengers, both in terms of the propositional content thereof and the imperative religious and ethical commands and prohibitions of revelation. One who tells people not to believe in or obey the prophets even in an abstract sense (*man nahā al-nās nahyan mujarradan*) is guilty of doing this, so what of someone who calls people not to believe in that which has been revealed to the prophets, arguing that his own reasoning contradicts it and is to be given priority over it? Furthermore, anyone who claims that sound reason, which it is incumbent upon men

¹³³ Ibid., V: 206, l. 6-14.

¹³⁴ “*al-mirā’ fī al-Qur’ān kufī*” (ibid., V: 206, l. 14-15).

¹³⁵ These are Qur’an (Ghāfir) 40:4-5 and Q. (al-Kahf) 18:56.

to follow, contradicts revelation and that “God’s path” consists in following such “reason,” has “sought crookedness” in the path of God,¹³⁶ since he is seeking to rectify the alleged crookedness (of revelation) and redress its diversion from the truth by means of explaining revelation “correctly” on the basis of his own reasoning, implying that the divinely revealed path (*al-sabīl al-shar‘iyya al-sam‘iyya*) transmitted on the authority of the Prophets is not straight but crooked, and that the straight path is the one newly innovated by those who contravene the methods and explicit propositional content of revelation.

Argument 23:

In this argument, Ibn Taymiyya cites many verses about how the Prophet has been sent to make a clear declaration (*balāgh mubīn*) of truth and to guide people to a way that is straight, and that if the obvious meaning of what he brought were contradicted by sound reason, then he would not have fulfilled these functions, having mislead people rather than guiding them aright. If the position of the negationists is correct, remarks Ibn Taymiyya, it is patently known that the texts of revelation do not indicate this negationism in such a way as to have led people to it in a clear and unambiguous way. Quite to the contrary, says Ibn Taymiyya, what revelation indicates is nothing but clear and unambiguous affirmationism with respect to God’s attributes in a manner so patent as to be admitted by the generality of people to indicate such in a conclusive and definitive manner. Even the Mu‘tazila and other like “negationists” concede that such is the obvious and apparent meaning of scripture, so if negationism is correct, although the texts clearly endorse an affirmationist stance, this would make the Prophet equivalent to someone who knew the truth but suppressed it, manifesting instead its polar opposite. Such a position, Ibn Taymiyya concludes, stands in open contradiction to the tenets of the message brought by the Prophet, the

¹³⁶ “*fā-qad baghā sabīl Allāh ‘iwajan*,” reminiscent of several Qur’anic verses, namely, Q. (Āl ‘Imrān) 3:99, (al-A‘rāf) 7:45 & 86, (Hūd) 11:19, (Ibrāhīm) 14:3, and (al-Kahf) 18:1.

contradiction being so clear as to count among those elements that are “known by necessity to be part and parcel of the religion” of Islam.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ *Dar'*, V: 211-214.

CHAPTER 4

ṢAḤĪḤ AL-MANQŪL, OR 'WHAT IS REVELATION?'

“Never did We dispatch an envoy but with a message in the language of his people, that he might make it clear to them”

Qur'an (Ibrāhīm) 14:4

I. Introduction

We have spoken in previous chapters of an alleged conflict between reason and revelation. Yet the notion that “reason” might contradict “revelation” means very little until we determine precisely how each of these two entities is defined and exactly what each is allegedly saying that is deemed to contradict the other. When philosophers, theologians, and others assert a contradiction between reason and revelation, this typically entails that what are taken to be the unimpeachable conclusions of reason are found to be incongruent with the “literal” (*ḥaqīqa*) or “outward” (*ẓāhir*) sense of the revealed texts – most importantly, for Ibn Taymiyya, what those texts assert about the nature and attributes of God. Such thinkers, as we have seen, essentially take reason and its deliverances as primary, requiring that the language of the revealed texts be (re)interpreted in congruence with reason. In other words, for the philosophers and rationalistic *mutakallimūn*, the meaning of revelation is ultimately determined not by anything inherent in the texts themselves, but on the basis of allegedly certain and universal rational conclusions reached independently of the texts. Such conclusions can – and, in fact, often do (to a greater or lesser extent depending on the school in question) – contradict the plain sense of revelation, which is then declared to harbor a “true” meaning understood, expectedly, to be precisely that which has been derived through reason. This tendency is exhibited in its most extreme form by the *falāsifa*, for whom, as we re-

call, revelation is reduced to the status of an ethical motivator for the masses by means of pictorial representations while essentially being denied any real role as a purveyor of metaphysical, ontological, or even theological truths – truths that, in the final analysis, can be known (by the elect few) solely through reason and reason alone. Less extreme manifestations of this tendency mark not only the Mu'tazilite school as a whole, but even later new-school Ash'arī orthodoxy as represented, for instance, by the enthusiastically rationalistic Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī.

In diametric opposition to this tendency, Ibn Taymiyya insists that the true meanings of the revealed texts are, in one manner or another, entirely embedded within the language of those texts themselves – obviating (or at least minimizing) the need to appeal, for a proper understanding of revelation, to any factors or considerations extrinsic to the texts, including – indeed, especially – the deliverances of abstract rational speculation as practiced by the philosophers and theologians. We have seen in previous chapters that Ibn Taymiyya's overriding concern in the *Dar'* is to defend a plain-sense understanding and straightforward affirmation of the divine attributes affirmed of God in revelation, motivated by an impetus to stave off at any cost the negation (*naḥy*) or neutralization (*ta'ṭīl*) of any of the said attributes on the part of the rationalists. This, he affirms insistently, was the consensus approach and understanding of the Salaf and for that reason remains uniquely authoritative throughout time. We recall further that the “rational objections” raised by various schools usually involve the claim that a given revealed attribute (such as the possession of a hand or face, or the act of descending or settling on the throne), if affirmed of God in accordance with the obvious sense (*ẓāhir*) of the texts, would entail a “likening” (*tamthīl*) or “assimilation” (*tashbīh*) of God to created beings, thus infringing upon the radical uniqueness of His divinity and His utter dissimilarity from anything tainted by createdness, contingency, or limitariness of any kind. Yet if Ibn Taymiyya's project consists essentially in affirming and defending a plain-sense reading of scripture while attempting to confute the “rational objections” alleged to disqualify such a reading, does this make of him no more than the simple-minded

and crass literalist his detractors have so often made him out to be? Ibn Taymiyya for his part – and for all his insistent and unabashed affirmationism – in no wise sees himself as a *mushabbih*, or “assimilator,” and in fact is explicit in his condemnation of any view or doctrine that he considers to entail *tashbīh* or *tamthīl*. But how, then, does he propose to base the interpretation of revelation exclusively on textual and linguistic factors without falling prey to a reactionary and unbending literalism? How does he purport to disavow *ta’wīl* in favor of the “apparent sense” (*ẓāhir*) of the texts without succumbing to the odious assimilationism of *tashbīh*? How, finally, does he attempt to make a plausible case for the hermeneutical independence of the texts from the conclusions of abstract reason without undercutting his larger project, which consists not of excluding reason, but of rehabilitating it and demonstrating its inherent congruence with revealed scripture?

The answer to these and similar questions requires that we piece together and elaborate a Taymiyyan theory of the meaning of revelation, for prior to taking up the question of whether revelation asserts anything that conflicts with reason, we must naturally first know what it is that revelation affirms. What, then, are the overriding principles of Ibn Taymiyya’s hermeneutics of revelation as elaborated and employed by him in the *Dar’ al-ta’arūf*? In brief, Ibn Taymiyya’s approach to the interpretation of revelation – and indeed of language generally – can be said to rest upon the twin pillars of context (*siyāq, qarā’in*) and convention (*urf*), backed up by the discrete interpretive utterances of the Salaf and predicated on the preeminent clarity and lack of ambiguity implicit in revelation’s repeated characterization of itself as “clear” and “manifest” (*mubīn*).¹

In the following sections, we shall first examine Ibn Taymiyya’s notion of the contextual interpretation of language, which is a paramount feature of his hermeneutics. This will necessarily involve us in a brief preliminary discussion of the question of whether or not language contains metaphor (*majāz*), Ibn Taymiyya-

¹ “*Mubīn*” for Ibn Taymiyya essentially means: fully self-explaining, without need for recourse to extra-textual sources such as abstract reason. See the paragraph at *Dar’*, V: 373-374 for a good statement about why it must be the case that revelation is clear and manifest in the sense understood by Ibn Taymiyya.

ya's alleged denial of which has gone a long way in earning him the reputation of unsophisticated literalist he early acquired among circles not directly and intimately familiar with his work. But if Ibn Taymiyya is found to reject *ta'wīl* along with the notion of metaphor presupposed on its behalf by the philosophers and later theologians, then what of the famous Qur'anic verse (Q. 3:7) concerning *muḥkam* (supposedly "clear") and *mutashābih* (supposedly "ambiguous") verses claimed to endorse, alternately, *ta'wīl* or the related procedure of *tafwīd*? And how does Ibn Taymiyya attempt to get away with rejecting the notion of metaphor as traditionally understood while, once again, avoiding crass literalism? An exploration of these and related questions will be followed by an examination of several illustrations of Ibn Taymiyya's contextual hermeneutics as brought to bear on representative "problematic" texts from the Qur'an and hadith normally deemed unsalvageable without recourse to *ta'wīl* as understood by the later tradition.

The latter portion of the chapter will take up the second principal pillar of Ibn Taymiyya's interpretive theory, grounded in the prizing of linguistic convention (*'urf*) over rational speculation in fixing the interpretation of words and texts. In this vein, we shall first explore Ibn Taymiyya's theoretical reasons for the prioritization of convention in the interpretation of scripture, then consider the various ways in which language conventions change over generations and across various technical specializations, giving rise to "vague and ambiguous terms" (*alfāz mujmala mushtabiha*) that Ibn Taymiyya holds responsible for numerous grave distortions in the understanding of scripture. Such importance does Ibn Taymiyya attach to this notion of "ambiguous terms" that he goes so far as to contend that "the majority of disagreements among rational thinkers can be reduced to a question of vague and ambiguous terminology."² Correspondingly, Ibn Taymiyya asserts that a proper clarification and analysis of terms is often sufficient to settle a significant number of theological and philosophical disagreements. After a discussion of the method Ibn Taymiyya employs for disam-

² *Dar'*, I: 233, 299.

biguating such expressions, we shall close with an illustration of this method in practice via Ibn Taymiyya’s analysis and his deconstruction of the key terms “*wāḥid*” (‘one’), “*tawḥīd*” (‘oneness of God’), and “*tarkīb*” (‘composition’) so hotly contested in Islamic theological and philosophical circles prior to and during his time.

II. *Ta’wīl* and the Meaning of Qur’an 3:7

Ibn Taymiyya, as we have mentioned, claims that revelation is fully independent in conveying its meanings with certitude, yet this contention fails to answer the question of how it is we can determine what those meanings are. In fact, one may contend, we know from the texts themselves that they contain metaphorical usages, that some texts are clear and others ambiguous, and that the ambiguous passages have a non-apparent meaning that can be determined through the application of *ta’wīl*. Not so, Ibn Taymiyya would argue; the texts do not, in fact, endorse what is meant by “*ta’wīl*” in the (later) usage of the philosophers and *mutakallimūn*. Ibn Taymiyya seeks to substantiate this view by calling to witness numerous early authorities vouching for only two meanings of *ta’wīl*, to the exclusion of the third technical (*iṣṭilāḥī*) meaning that involves deflecting a word from its apparent (*ẓāhir*) to a non-apparent, or metaphorical (*majāz*), meaning. Furthermore, Ibn Taymiyya contends, an inductive survey of the stated positions (*aqwāl*) of the Salaf reveals that the early authoritative generations did not engage in *ta’wīl* in the manner of the later philosophers and theologians, but rather that they resolutely affirmed the obvious sense of the texts, albeit while admitting that the modality, or the “how,” of certain unseen realities – most prominently, the divine attributes – indeed lay beyond the ken of full human intelligibility. Moreover, Ibn Taymiyya maintains, the Salaf did not even engage in *tafwīḍ* with respect to the meanings of Qur’anic verses. If anything, they made *ta’wīl* and *tafwīḍ* of the *modality*, or the “how” (*kayfiyya*), of certain matters asserted in scripture, but never, according to Ibn Taymiyya, of the *meaning* (*ma’nā*) or the (straightforward) explanation (*tafsīr*) of what is being asserted.

The Meaning of “Ta’wīl”

The majority of later Islamic theological and philosophical writings, and indeed the majority of Western academic studies, take for granted that the Qur’an, by its own declaration, is composed of two main types of verses, “clear” and “ambiguous,” and that these latter are susceptible of a “metaphorical interpretation” at variance with their apparent sense and in which their true significance lies. Support for this view is normally sought in Qur’an (Āl ‘Imrān) 3:7, which speaks of “*āyāt muḥkamāt*,” declared to be the “mother of the Book” (*umm al-kitāb*), and “others that are *mutashābih*,” castigating those who, on account of a waywardness in their hearts, follow the *mutashābihāt*, seeking thereby to arouse discord and to discover the “*ta’wīl*” of said verses.³ The remainder of verse 3:7, read with a pause alternatively in one or the other of two critical junctures, declares the *ta’wīl* of such verses to be known either by God alone, or by God “and those firmly grounded in knowledge” (*al-rāsikhūna fī al-‘ilm*), presumably those possessing knowledge in religion, the *‘ulamā’*.⁴ Later scholars normally conclude that if the verse is read such that the *ta’wīl* is known only by God, then the appropriate stance of the believer in the face of a *mutashābih* verse is *tafwīd*, namely, declaring the apparent sense inoperative while refraining from offering a specific alternative explanation of what the verse might mean. Those who read the verse such that the “*rāsikhūna fī al-‘ilm*” are also said to know the *ta’wīl* generally understand this as an invitation for specialized religious scholars – those “firmly grounded in knowledge” – to search for and suggest possible al-

³ For a fairly detailed discussion of the rise of *ta’wīl* and different positions taken on the meaning of Qur’an 3:7, see al-Kattānī, *Jadal al-‘aql wa-l-naql*, I: 549-553.

⁴ The full verse reads: “He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book. In it are verses that are ‘*muḥkam*’; they are the mother of the Book. Others are ‘*mutashābih*.’ But those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part thereof that is *mutashābih*, seeking discord and searching for its *ta’wīl*; but none knows its *ta’wīl* except God. And those firmly grounded in knowledge say: ‘We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord;’ and none shall grasp the message but men of understanding.” The alternate punctuation of the recited verse yields: “but none knows its *ta’wīl* except God and those firmly grounded in knowledge; they say ...” Though English translations generally render the word “*muḥkam*” by “clear,” “*mutashābih*” by “ambiguous” (or even “allegorical”) and “*ta’wīl*” by “interpretation,” we have purposely left these terms untranslated since their exact significance is precisely what is at issue for Ibn Taymiyya and forms our main concern in the current section.

ternative, metaphorical meanings of the verse in question. It is normally stipulated that the non-literal or metaphorical meaning suggested must conform to the known conventions of the Arabic language. Further, it is generally considered prudent for the interpreting scholar to refrain from claiming certain knowledge that a given suggested meaning is definitively what the verse means, but rather, more modestly, simply to suggest that such a meaning may possibly be the intended one, while admitting that the true meaning intended by God is ultimately known with certitude by Him alone. Yet the Qur'an does not indicate precisely which verses are *muḥkam* and which are *mutashābih*. The later tradition nonetheless generally identifies the putatively “ambiguous” verses as those whose apparent meaning (*ẓāhir*) has been determined, typically on the strength of a so-called “rational objection” (*mu'arīḍ 'aqlī*), to be impossible, thus necessitating an abandonment of the apparent meaning in favor of either *ta'wīl* or *tafwīḍ*. Precisely which verses were to be counted as *mutashābih* and therefore open to interpretation was, naturally, the subject of much debate, fueled by various schools' contending doctrines regarding the nature and dictates of reason and the scope of its prerogative to adjudicate over the meaning of the revealed texts.

Ibn Taymiyya, for his part, rejects out of hand this definition of *ta'wīl* and the procedure of metaphorical interpretation practiced under its umbrella.⁵ He counters that the eventual standard definition of *ta'wīl* as “the deflection of a word from its preponderant meaning to a non-preponderant meaning on the basis of a relevant proof (*li-dalīl yaqtarinu bihi*)”⁶ represents a technical usage originating only in the academic convention of the later philosophers and theologians and unknown to the Salaf and the early scholars of *tafsīr*, in whose language the Qur'an was revealed and in light of whose conventions it must therefore be un-

⁵ For Ibn Taymiyya's main discussions of *ta'wīl* (and *tafwīḍ*), see Argument 16 at *Dar'*, I: 201-208; Argument 27 at *ibid.*, V: 234-241; and also *ibid.*, V: 380-382 (part of Argument 41).

⁶ “*ṣarf al-lafẓ 'an al-iḥtimāl al-rājiḥ ilā al-iḥtimāl al-marjūḥ*” (cited at *ibid.*, V: 235, l. 3-4 and again at *ibid.*, V: 382, l. 13-14). The addition “*li-dalīl yaqtarinu bihi*” is found at *ibid.*, I: 206, l. 7. An alternatively worded definition is given by Ibn Taymiyya in another spot, namely: “*ṣarf al-lafẓ 'an al-ma'nā al-madlūl 'alayhi al-mafhūm minhu ilā ma'nā yukhālifu dhālik*” (*ibid.*, I: 206, l. 3-4), which reduces, for him, to “deflecting the texts from what they properly connote” (*ṣarf al-nuṣūṣ 'an muqtaḍāhā*) (*ibid.*, V: 380, l. 7), and shortly thereafter, “*ṣarf al-nuṣūṣ 'an muqtaḍāhā wa-madlūlihā wa-ma'nāhā*” (*ibid.*, V: 382, l. 2-3).

derstood. This being the case, Ibn Taymiyya argues, it is entirely illegitimate to read the later technical sense of “*ta’wīl*” back into the Qur’an as if it could possibly have been the meaning intended by the Book’s Author and understood by its initial recipient audience. But what, then, is the meaning of “*ta’wīl*” if not the widely accepted sense of “metaphorical interpretation” taken for granted by the later tradition?

Ibn Taymiyya calls upon a wide range of evidence to establish that the word “*ta’wīl*” – as employed by the 7th-century inhabitants of the Hijaz, whose language habits form the linguistic matrix presupposed by revelation – originally carried only two possible meanings,⁷ neither of which has anything to do with the third, specialized meaning acquired by the word when adopted as a technical term by latter-day theologians and philosophers. The first of these meanings, according to Ibn Taymiyya, is “explication” (*tafsīr*) and “clarification” (*bayān*), which Ibn Taymiyya defines in turn as a straightforward explanation of the apparent sense, or simply the “meaning” (*ma’nā*), of revelation “as found in the work of al-Ṭabarī and others,” and in another spot, “knowledge of what is meant by speech such that it can be contemplated, grasped by the mind, and understood.”⁸ The second original meaning carried by the word “*ta’wīl*” in the convention of the Companions and the Salaf refers to the “ultimate reality of that to which the speech pertains” (*ḥaqīqat mā ya’ūlu ilayhi al-kalām*⁹). In another spot, Ibn Taymiyya renders this second meaning as “the reality of a thing, like its ‘how’ (modality), which is known only unto God,”¹⁰ and in yet another spot, he further clarifies that the “*ta’wīl*” of those verses pertaining to God and the unseen realities (particularly of the Last Day) represents the “very (ontological)

⁷ For these two meanings as exhausting the original definition of “*ta’wīl*,” see *ibid.*, V: 234, l. 9-13.

⁸ “*ma’rifat al-murād bi-l-kalām ḥattā yutadabbara wa-yu’qala wa-yufqah*” (*ibid.*, V: 382, l. 10-11).

⁹ In another spot: “*al-ḥaqīqa allatī ya’ūlu ilayhi al-khiṭāb*” (*ibid.*, V: 382, l. 4-5).

¹⁰ “*ḥaqīqat al-shay’ ka-l-kayfiyya allatī lā ya’lamuhā illā Allāh*” (*ibid.*, VII: 328, l. 10-11). See also *ibid.*, V: 382, l. 8-12. An alternative wording, “*al-ḥaqīqa allatī hiya nafs mā huwa ‘alayhi fī al-khārij*,” is found at *ibid.*, IX: 24, l. 8-9.

reality” (*nafs al-ḥaqīqa*) of the topics mentioned in such verses.¹¹ With respect to God, this refers to the quintessential reality of His essence and attributes (*kunh dhātihi wa-ṣifātihi*), which is only known unto Him.¹²

Ibn Taymiyya establishes this dual definition of “*ta’wīl*” primarily on the strength of statements by the Companions and early *mufasssirūn* explicitly defining “*ta’wīl*” as such, as well as on the basis of *tafsīr* given by the Companions and early *mufasssirūn* of Qur’anic verses other than 3:7 that also employ the term “*ta’wīl*.” In establishing the meaning of “*ta’wīl*” among the early *mufasssirūn*, Ibn Taymiyya appeals to Mujāhid, the “leader of the exegetes” (*imām ahl al-tafsīr*), who is said to have asked Ibn ‘Abbās to provide him the “*tafsīr*” of the entire Qur’an, which he did (*wa-fassarahu lahu*).¹³ It is further reported, Ibn Taymiyya informs us, that Mujāhid used to maintain that those firmly grounded in knowledge (*al-rāsikhūna fī al-‘ilm*) know the “*ta’wīl*” of the Qur’an, meaning, Ibn Taymiyya comments, the *tafsīr* thereof, like that bequeathed to Mujāhid by Ibn ‘Abbās.¹⁴ It is also *ta’wīl* in the sense of *tafsīr* that, Ibn Taymiyya reports, is endorsed by Ibn Qutayba and others who uphold that those firmly grounded in knowledge (and not only God alone) are capable of knowing the “*ta’wīl*” of the *mutashābih* verses. In addition to Mujāhid and Ibn Qutayba, the position of placing the pause in verse 3:7 after the *rāsikhūna fī al-‘ilm*, such that they too (in addition to God) are said to know the *ta’wīl* of the *mutashābihāt*, was likewise reported of Ibn ‘Abbās, Muḥammad b. Ja‘far, and Ibn Ishāq, among others.¹⁵ The alternative position – that of setting the pause after “*Allāh*,” such that the *ta’wīl* is only known unto God – was reported also to have been held by Ibn ‘Abbās, in

¹¹ “*wa-ammā ta’wīl mā akhbara Allāh bihi ‘an nafsīhi wa-‘an al-yawm al-ākhir fa-huwa nafs al-ḥaqīqa allatī akhbara ‘anhā*” (ibid., I: 207, l. 4-5). See also ibid., V: 382, l. 4-7 and ibid., IX: 24, l. 8-9 (“*al-ḥaqīqa allatī hiya nafs mā huwa ‘alayhi fī al-khārij*”).

¹² “*wa-dhālika fī ḥaqq Allāh huwa kunh dhātihi wa-ṣifātihi allatī lā ya‘lamuhā ghayruhu*.” (ibid., I: 207, l. 5). See also ibid., V: 382, l. 6-7, where Ibn Taymiyya explains that “the *ta’wīl* [of verses] pertaining to God is none other than His own Holy Self [or essence] qualified by His exalted attributes.” (“*wa-ta’wīl mā akhbara bihi ‘an nafsīhi huwa nafsuhu al-muqaddasa al-mawṣūfa bi-ṣifātihi al-‘aliyya*”).

¹³ *Dar’*, V: 381, l. 16. Mujāhid is reported to have said: “I read (‘*araḍtu*) the *muṣḥaf* to Ibn ‘Abbās from beginning to end, stopping him at every verse and asking him about it.” (See *Dar’*, I: 208, l. 7-8).

¹⁴ See *Dar’*, V: 381, l. 15-17.

¹⁵ Ibid., I: 205, l. 13-15.

addition to such eminent early authorities as Ubayy b. Ka‘b, Ibn Mas‘ūd, ‘Ā’isha, and ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr, among others.¹⁶ According to Ibn Taymiyya, whenever the verse was read with the pause after “*al-rāsikhūna fī al-‘ilm*,” the *ta’wīl* that the firmly grounded in knowledge were declared to know was always interpreted by the Companions and the Salaf as none other than (straightforward) *tafsīr*, such that whoever had knowledge of the *tafsīr* of the Qur’an could be said, synonymously, to have knowledge of its *ta’wīl*.¹⁷ In contrast, whenever the verse was read with the pause after “*Allāh*,” the *ta’wīl* of which none but God is said to have knowledge was, Ibn Taymiyya tells us, consistently interpreted by the Companions and the Salaf in accordance with the second of the two acceptations of the term cited above, namely, knowledge of the ontological reality (*ḥaqīqa*) and the modality (*kayfiyya*) of the unseen, whether this pertain to matters such as the events of the Day of Judgment or to matters such as the essence and attributes of God. This bialternating interpretation of the term “*ta’wīl*,” Ibn Taymiyya maintains, was determined and imposed by none other than the Companions’ shared understanding of the “conventional language known amongst them,” which admitted of only the two previously mentioned meanings as indicated in their own statements and those of the early *mufasssīrūn*, to the exclusion of the “specialized technical meaning of *ta’wīl*” as developed and employed by the later philosophers and theologians.¹⁸ For Ibn Taymiyya, then, it is not a question of *ḥaqīqa* (“literal”) versus *majāz* (“metaphorical”), as for the later tradition, but rather “*ḥaqīqa*” (in the sense of the ontological reality and modality of a thing’s external existence) versus “*ma’nā*” (in the sense of straightforward lexical significance). Unlike the *ḥaqīqa-majāz* distinction, the *ḥaqīqa-ma’nā* pair are not mutually exclusive contraries, but rather two distinct and complementary aspects of any given reality – the one semantic and notional, the other existential and ontological.

¹⁶ Ibid., I: 205, l. 12-13.

¹⁷ “*wa-mithl hādihā al-ta’wīl ya‘lamuhu man ya‘lamu tafsīr al-Qur’ān*.” (ibid., V: 381, l. 14).

¹⁸ “*kānū yatakallamūna bi-lughatihim al-ma’rūfā baynahum wa-lam yakun lafẓ al-ta’wīl ‘indahum yurādu bihi ma’nā al-ta’wīl al-iṣṭilāḥī al-khāṣṣ*.” (ibid., I: 206, l. 2-3).

In addition to the early authorities of *tafsīr*, Ibn Taymiyya calls to witness several other reports (*āthār*) of the Companions in order to round out and complete his mapping of the original semantic field covered by the word “*ta’wīl*.” He explains that “*ta’wīl*,” when used with respect to imperative speech (command or prohibition), is the actual doing of the thing commanded or refraining from the thing prohibited.¹⁹ In support of this meaning, he cites Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna, who reportedly said: “*al-sunna ta’wīl al-amr wa-l-nahy*,” which is apparently to be taken to mean that proper conformity to the prophetic sunna entails a careful observance of the commands and prohibitions of the Islamic faith. A further report from ‘Ā’isha as well as one from ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr provide supplementary evidence for this meaning of “*ta’wīl*.”²⁰ Ibn Taymiyya’s point in citing this array of evidence is that in no known circumstance of the term’s use among the Companions and early Salaf was the word “*ta’wīl*” ever employed to indicate suspension of a word’s apparent, well-known signification (*zāhir, rājih*) in favor of deflection to a non-apparent (*mu’awwal, marjūh*) or metaphorical (*majāz*) meaning, but rather was always used either in the sense of “explanation” (*tafsīr*), or in the sense of the ultimate reality of a thing or the final outcome of an affair. It is for this reason, explains Ibn Taymiyya, that Mālik, Rabī‘a, and others used to say, with respect to phrases such as “*al-Raḥmānu ‘alā al-‘arsh istawā*”²¹ or “*thumma ’stawā ‘alā al-‘arsh*”²²: “God’s settling [on the throne] is known (*al-istiwā’ ma’lūm*), but the modality of it is unknown (*al-kayf majhūl*).”²³ In other words, the lexical signification (*ma’nā*) of the phrase “*istawā ‘alā al-‘arsh*” – according to the speech convention of the Arabs – is known (*ma’lūm*), but the modality of how such an action pertains to God, who is utterly dissimilar to any created being, is unknown to us (*huwa al-majhūl lanā*).²⁴ It is the metaphysical and ontological modality – and therefore the ultimate “reality” (*ḥaqīqa*) – of God’s settling that, according to Ibn Taymiyya, constitutes the

¹⁹ “*huwa nafs fi’l al-ma’mūr bihi wa-tark al-manhī ‘anhū*” (ibid., I: 206, l. 18-19).

²⁰ See ibid., I: 206, l. 19 – 207, l. 3.

²¹ Qur’an (Ṭāhā) 20:5.

²² Qur’an (al-A‘rāf) 7:54.

²³ See *Dar’*, I: 207, l. 6; ibid., V: 382, l. 9; ibid., VII: 328, l. 11.

²⁴ Ibid., V: 235, l. 2.

ta'wīl that is known only unto God, *not* the lexical significance of the phrase “*istawā ‘ala al-‘arsh*,” the *ta'wīl* of which, under this aspect, is known to us as well. Were the lexical signification of the verse, understood according to the linguistic convention of the Salaf, *not* known to us, Ibn Taymiyya argues, then the verse would simply have no determinable meaning for us whatsoever, an eventuality precluded by the fact of revelation’s signature clarity (*bayān*) and lack of ambiguity. In support of this stance, Ibn Taymiyya appeals to Ibn al-Mājjishūn, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, “and others of the Salaf” who used to say, “We do not know the ‘how’ (*kayfiyya*) of what God has stated about Himself, even though we *do* know its explanation (*tafsīrahu*) and its meaning (*ma’nāhu*).”²⁵ Indeed, says Ibn Taymiyya, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī reportedly stated that “No verse did God reveal except He desired that it should be known what He meant by it.”²⁶ Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, correspondingly, “explicated (*fassara*) all of the *mutashābih* verses in the Qur’an and clarified what was meant by them.”²⁷ By contrast, the third, technical meaning of “*ta'wīl*” involving deflection to metaphorical interpretation was, according to Ibn Taymiyya, considered by the Salaf and early authorities to be “invalid and devoid of any reality (or truth)” (*bāṭil lā ḥaqīqa lahu*)²⁸ and amounts indeed, Ibn Taymiyya concludes, to “distorting words from their true intended meanings”²⁹ and “disavowing God’s names and (revealed) verses.”³⁰

²⁵ Ibid., I: 207, l. 6-8. See also ibid., V: 234, l. 14-16, and further at ibid., V: 235, l. 1-2, where Ibn Taymiyya explains that “knowledge of [the meaning of] “*istiwā’*” (“settling”) is a question of *tafsīr*, which is the *ta'wīl* of which we have knowledge. As for the modality [thereof] (*al-kayf*), this is the *ta'wīl* of which only God has knowledge and which is unknown (*majhūl*) to us.”

²⁶ “*mā anzala Allāh āya illā wa-huwa yuḥibbu an yu‘lama mā arāda bihā*” (ibid., I: 208, l. 9-10).

²⁷ Ibid., I: 207, l. 9-11.

²⁸ Ibid., V: 382, l. 15.

²⁹ “*taḥrīf al-kalim ‘an mawāḍi‘ihi*,” borrowed from several Qur’anic passages indicting past communities for distorting their respective scriptures. See, for instance, Qur’an (al-Nisā’) 4:46 and Q. (al-Mā’ida) 5:13.

³⁰ “*al-ilḥād fī asmā’ Allāh wa-āyātihī*,” an allusion to Qur’an (al-A‘rāf) 7:180 and Q. (Fuṣṣilat) 41:40.

III. The Centrality of Context and Ibn Taymiyya's "Contextual *Ta'wīl*"

We have seen in the preceding section that, according to Ibn Taymiyya, the texts of revelation do not allow for *ta'wīl* (or even *tafwīḍ*) in the sense employed by later thinkers, which presumes the presence of metaphorical meaning arrived at by diverting from a primary (*ḥaqīqa*) significance to a secondary, metaphorical (*majāz*) meaning. Are we then to understand that, for Ibn Taymiyya, there is no such thing as metaphorical usage, either in language as a whole or in the texts of revelation in particular – in other words, that there is no such thing as the equivalent of what is meant by *ta'wīl* in the later tradition? Answering this important question requires a careful examination of Ibn Taymiyya's views on the centrality of *context* in determining the meaning of language and texts – with *linguistic* factors determinative throughout – as opposed to primary vs. secondary meanings, with *reason* playing the decisive role in determining which meaning is intended.³¹ Ibn Taymiyya advances, in effect, a two-pronged argument concerning context, one addressing the use of language *per se* and the other addressing the specific case of the language and texts of revelation.

Regarding the former, when Ibn Taymiyya argues that there is no "metaphor" (*majāz*) in language – and hence no *ta'wīl* as understood by the later tradition – he is not arguing that words can mean one and only one thing, or that they must always be taken in their "literal" sense – that sense which the tradition normally refers to as the primary or literal (*ḥaqīqa*, *ẓāhir*, *rājiḥ*) meaning of the word. Rather, he maintains that the distinction between "literal" and "non-literal" meanings is, in fact, an artificial one, a mental construct entirely divorced from the way language actually functions in the real world. How is this so? Ibn Taymiyya, for his part, is fully aware of the fact that many words in a given language can be – and often are – used to connote a number of different meanings, admitting a homonymy in language that, however, he would be loath

³¹ For a detailed discussion of closely related themes, see Mohamed Mohamed Yunis Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics: Sunni Legal Theorists' Models of Textual Communication* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), Ch. 4, "Ibn Taymiyyah's Contextual Theory of Interpretation," pp. 87-140.

to classify as “metaphorical.” He realizes and accepts, for instance, that the conventions of the Arabic language allow that the word “*yad*” (‘hand’) may, in many contexts, be used to mean quite other than the five-fingered appendage of flesh and bone found at the ends of human arms. Depending on context, for example, it may be used to mean “help” (as in English: “Can you give me a hand?”), or perhaps “collusion” (as in English: “She certainly had a hand in this!”). What Ibn Taymiyya rejects, however, is the notion that words possess – entirely independently of context – particular “literal” or “real” or “primary” meanings, which we then in certain circumstances – often motivated by rational considerations – are compelled to abandon in favor of “secondary,” “non-literal,” or “metaphorical” meanings. Rather, *all* meaning, for Ibn Taymiyya – and in *each and every instance* of language use – is determined by context, as judged in light of the known, communally shared conventions of the language in question. The English word “hand” or the Arabic word “*yad*” simply cannot be said to connote any particular meaning outside of any context whatsoever – as an isolated item, say, in a vocabulary list or written up randomly on a chalkboard. Rather, in every actual instance in which the word “hand” (or ‘*yad*’) is used, it is perforce employed within a particular context and in the backdrop of a particular linguistic convention, and what the speaker means by the word in any given utterance can, *in every case*, only be determined by considering that context and in light of that convention. In other words, even if it so happens that the word “hand” is used to mean “five-fingered fleshy appendage” in the great majority of instances in which a given speech community might use the word, that still would not make of this particular meaning the would-be “preponderant” (*rājih*) or “real” (*ḥaqīqa*) or “literal” / “apparent” (*ẓāhir*) sense of the word “hand,” with the meanings “help,” “collusion,” etc. being classed as secondary (*marjūh*) or metaphorical (*majāz*) meanings. This is so, once again, because in every instance, Ibn Taymiyya maintains, we are only able to determine what is meant by any word through considering the context in which it has been used. Thus, if one were to say, “I shall wash my hands before dinner,” the real, literal, *ḥaqīqa* meaning of “hand” *in this instance* would indeed be the five-fingered appendage at-

tached to the end of my arm. If, however, one were to ask, “Can you please give me a hand?”, then the real, literal, *ḥaqīqa* sense of “hand” *in this instance*, as determined definitively and unambiguously by the context, would be no meaning other than “help” or “assistance.” Indeed, a person who, upon being asked to “give me a hand,” proceeded to cut off his metacarpus at the wrist and offer up his actual physical hand, would simply be diagnosed as chronically incapable of judging context and/or woefully ignorant of the universally shared conventions of the English language. He would in no wise be justified were he to accuse his interlocutor of having abandoned clear speech in favor of a vague, or even slightly ambiguous, turn of phrase. Furthermore, since “help” is the *only* meaning that any English speaker would understand in the context in question, then “help,” according to Ibn Taymiyya, would be the apparent (*ẓāhir*), “literal” sense of the word *in this particular instance*. Using the word “hand” to mean “help” would not count as “metaphorical” for Ibn Taymiyya since, once again, *all* possible connotations of a given word are *ḥaqīqa* (“real”) and *ẓāhir* (“apparent”, “literal”) in their respective *contexts*.³² Deflection of meaning (*ṣarf al-ma‘nā*), always negative in Ibn Taymiyya’s paradigm, would involve a deflection away from whatever meaning has been determined – by context, convention, and related texts – to be the apparent sense in favor of some other meaning that cannot be defended on the basis of the texts, presumably out of a desire to satisfy or accommodate an alleged “rational objection” to the primary (and in this sense “*ẓāhir*”) meaning as determined by the relevant factors of context, convention, and related texts. Such a deflection can, in fact, only be carried out on the basis of a “scriptural proof or indicator” (*dalīl shar‘ī*), by which Ibn Taymiyya presumably means another text of revelation that throws light on, and qualifies the interpretation of, the text in question.³³

³² Ibn Taymiyya states explicitly, as a matter of principle, that “when contextual evidence makes clear the meaning of a word, then *that* [meaning] is the apparent (or “literal”) sense [i.e., in *that* context].” (“*al-lafẓ idhā qurina bihi mā yubayyinu ma‘nāhu kāna dhālika huwa ẓāhirahu*”) (*Dar*, V: 236, l. 2).

³³ *Ibid.*, V: 233, l. 9-11.

The foregoing principle of contextual interpretation applies to language use in general, representing Ibn Taymiyya's account of the intrinsic mechanism by which meanings are expressed via human language at all times and in all places. Now, revelation, which represents an expression of meaning addressed to human beings in the language of Arabic, necessarily conforms to the same universal linguistic principles delineated above. That is, the texts of the Qur'an and Sunna, just like any other instance of communication via human language, necessarily convey their intended meanings through words (*alfāz*), the meanings of which are determined, in each and every instance, as a function of immediate context (*qarā'in, siyāq al-kalām*) judged in light of the shared linguistic convention (*'urf*) of their original target audience, namely, the Prophet Muḥammad and his immediate Companions. We have seen previously that Ibn Taymiyya lays great stress on the fact that revelation, by its own declaration, is eminently clear (*mubīn*) and devoid of any ambiguity that would obscure its message or impede the communication thereof to its intended recipients. Given his theory of meaning and the preeminent role played therein by context, Ibn Taymiyya understands the translucent clarity of revelation to rest on a further principle: namely, that the texts of revelation, taken collectively, always contain within them *explicit* indications of the meaning intended by "ambiguous" passages.³⁴ We may denote this principle by the (admittedly unwieldy) term "semantically explicit self-contained intertextuality," as a function of which the revealed texts acquire both their signature clarity and, in a major move Ibn Taymiyya makes against the rationalists, their full independence from any external factor – particularly the deliverances of abstract rational speculation – in conveying the meanings intended by them.

³⁴ See, for instance, *ibid.* V: 239, l. 18 – 240, l. 2, where Ibn Taymiyya states: "*al-tafsīr alladhī bihi yu'rafu al-ṣawāb qad dhukira mā yadullu 'alayhi fī nafs al-khiṭāb, immā maqrūnan bihi wa-immā fī naṣṣ ākhar.*"

A. Ibn Taymiyya's Contextual *Ta'wīl* in Practice

How the principle we have called semantically explicit self-contained intertextuality functions for Ibn Taymiyya is best illustrated by examining actual instances of its application, instances in which Ibn Taymiyya attempts to sidestep the straight literal meaning of “problematic” texts while nevertheless remaining firmly on the ground of his linguistic principles and avoiding recourse to purely rational considerations. A simple example is the following hadith, reported on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbās: “The Black Stone is God’s right hand on Earth; whosoever shakes it and kisses it, it is as if he had shaken and kissed the right hand of God.” Though Ibn Taymiyya is skeptical of the authenticity of this hadith,³⁵ he nonetheless considers it a report whose literal wording, or obvious sense (*ẓāhir*), renders its meaning clear and thus stands in no need of an external indicant (such as a rational objection) to deflect it from its (putative) outward sense via *ta’wīl* (e.g., in order to avoid the implication that the Black Stone is a divine attribute, namely, God’s hand).³⁶ Ibn Taymiyya maintains that this hadith is explicit (*ṣarīḥ*) in affirming that the Black Stone is, in fact, *not* the hand of God. This is so first because the predicative statement “The Black Stone is God’s right hand” is restricted by the qualifier “on Earth.” Though Ibn Taymiyya does not say so explicitly, the implication here seems to be that, as it is known on the basis of other texts that God is not contained within the earth in any manner, the qualification that the Black Stone is God’s right hand “on Earth” immediately alerts the listener that the predication here is not to be taken “literally.” The second reason, according to Ibn Taymiyya, is that the hadith states explicitly that whoever greets (*ṣāfaḥa*, lit. ‘shakes the hand of’) the Black Stone, it is merely *as if* (*fa-ka-annamā*) he had shaken the hand of God. Now, explains Ibn Taymiyya, the known fact that the thing compared (*mushabbah*) in a simile is other than the object to which it is likened (*mushabbah bihi*) renders the hadith explicit (*ṣarīḥ*)

³⁵ On the status of this hadith, see *ibid.*, V: 236, l. 8-9; *ibid.*, V: 239, l. 5-6; *ibid.*, III: 384, l. 9, and editor’s note at *ibid.*, III: 384, n. 2.

³⁶ “*min al-akḥbār mā yakūnu ẓāhiruhu yubayyinu al-murād bihi lā yaḥtāju ilā dalīl yaṣrifuhu ‘an ẓāhirihi*” (*ibid.*, III: 384, l. 5-6).

in affirming that the act of greeting the Black Stone (the “*mushabbah*”) is, in fact, *not* synonymous with the act of shaking the right hand of God (the “*mushabbah bihi*”), which amounts to an explicit denial that the Black Stone is literally God’s right hand, be it on Earth or elsewhere. For these reasons, the hadith requires no *ta’wīl*, or (re)interpretation, at variance with its *obvious sense* (*zāhir*).³⁷ Indeed, affirms Ibn Taymiyya, there are numerous such examples, from both the Qur’an and the hadith, where the text itself makes clear that the invalid (*bāṭil*) meaning is not the one intended, relieving us of any need, in order to disavow this meaning, for a “separate proof or an interpretation (*ta’wīl*) predicated on a deflection of the explicit wording (*lafẓ*) from its [naturally understood] import and connotation.”³⁸ And while Ibn Taymiyya would not necessarily deny that reason on its own may also recognize as incoherent the notion that a created element of the world could be an attribute of a transcendent and perfect God, we are nevertheless in no way dependent on reason’s judgment of this impossibility for our knowledge that this is what *revelation* is affirming.

It is important to reiterate, with regard to the foregoing hadith and similar texts, that Ibn Taymiyya is by no means saying that all linguistic utterances are to be taken “literally,” but rather that in all instances, as we have mentioned, the correct intended meaning is included within the texts themselves and (readily) discernible from them, doing away with the need for proofs and arguments of a purely speculative or theoretical nature derived from sources extrinsic to the revealed texts. It bears to be stressed that when Ibn Taymiyya insists upon a firm adherence to the “*lafẓ*” – to the explicit wording of a text – he is *not* advocating anything that can be described as a strict “literalism.” It is crucial to retain that for Ibn Taymiyya, the *lafẓ* is never conceived of as a naked word assigned primordially to the denotation of a specific, disembodied “primary” meaning. Rather, what Ibn Taymiyya refers to as the “*lafẓ*” is always, we must recall, the *lafẓ* (1) as it appears in a given context, (2) as understood according to the linguistic

³⁷ “*lam yaḥtaj ilā ta’wīl yukhālifu zāhirahu*” (ibid., III: 384, l. 12-13).

³⁸ “*fa-lā yaḥtāju nafy dhālika ilā dalīl munfaṣil wa-lā ta’wīl yukhrijū al-lafẓ ‘an mūjabihī wa-muqtaḍāhu*” (ibid., III: 385, l. 1-2). For Ibn Taymiyya’s discussion of the “*ḥajar al-aswad*” hadith, see, *inter alia*, ibid., III: 384, l. 5 – 385, l. 2.

conventions of the Salaf, and (3) as interpreted in light of other relevant texts. There is simply no such thing as a *lafẓ* in the abstract, as no *lafẓ* for Ibn Taymiyya possesses any determinable meaning whatsoever outside of a particular, contextualized instance of use. As we have seen above with the example of the word “hand” (‘*yad*’), Ibn Taymiyya does not admit of any “primary” (*rājiḥ*) or “*ḥaqīqā*” meaning that can simply be assumed by default unless a rational (or even textual) objection should come to confirm that such meaning cannot have been the one meant. So while Ibn Taymiyya certainly purports to be a strict *textualist*, he is by no means a strict *literalist* in the way this term is normally understood. The true “literalist” would be the one who recognized words to have such primary, disembodied default meanings, then insisted that a word can only be taken to denote this one meaning whenever and wherever used, regardless of such factors as context, convention, and intertextuality, let alone the presence of a “rational objection.”

B. Ta’wīl on the Basis of Intertextuality

Further insight into Ibn Taymiyya’s “contextual *ta’wīl*” – particularly that aspect of it that we have been referring to as the principle of “intertextuality” – can be gained by examining instances of *ta’wīl* engaged in by Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal which Ibn Taymiyya cites approvingly as paradigmatic examples of proper engagement with the texts. Ibn Taymiyya cites one such example from Ibn Ḥanbal’s work, *al-Radd ‘alā al-zanādiqa wa-l-jahmiyya*. The instance in question involves Aḥmad’s response to those among the “Jahmiyya” who deny that God is separate from (*mubāyin li*) the world but claim, rather, that He is everywhere, that is, in all places such that no place is ever devoid of Him nor is He ever in one place to the exclusion of another. The implication here is that God Himself – that is, God in His very essence – is not distinct from the world but rather inherent in every place within it. Those holding this view appeal for support to Qur’an (al-An‘ām) 6:3: “And He is God in the heavens and in the earth,”³⁹ interpreting

³⁹ “*wa-huwa Allāhu fī al-samāwāti wa-fī al-arḍ*” [Qur’an (al-An‘ām) 6:3].

this to mean that God inheres with His essence in the heavens and earth. Aḥmad's ultimate response to this contention is that the true meaning of the verse is: He is the God *of those* in the heavens and the God *of those* on the earth, while He Himself is above the throne, encompassing *with His knowledge* everything beneath the throne (i.e., all of creation). No place is devoid of God's knowledge, nor is His knowledge in one place to the exclusion of another.

Yet how does Ibn Ḥanbal arrive at this conclusion, which seems a great deal more detailed and specific than the verse itself? He makes a textual appeal to numerous other verses describing God as being “in the heavens” (*fī al-samā*)⁴⁰ and “above” (*fawq*), in other words not inherent in creation in any way.⁴¹ He also appeals to a number of verses showing that everything “down” (*asfal*) is blameworthy and ignoble (*madhmūm*).⁴² He combines this with a commonsense appeal to the effect that we know instinctively that God, in His exaltedness and majesty, could not possibly inhere in numerous filthy and ignoble places, such as our innards or those of a pig or other such squalid quarters. So much, then, for God not being inherent in the earth (*fī al-aṣḥ*) or any part of creation. Aḥmad concludes from this that Q. 6:3, “And He is God in the heavens and in the earth,” must be taken to mean that He is the God *of those who are in* the heavens (such as the angels) and *of those who are on* the earth (such as men, birds, etc.). Yet His lordship over them entails that, though He is separate and distinct from them, He cannot but have full knowledge of them. This is confirmed by Qur'an (al-Ṭalāq) 65:12: “that you may know that God has power over all things and that God has encompassed all things with His knowledge.”⁴³

The two foregoing instances of *ta'wīl* given by Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal provide, then, an example of what we have called the principle of intertextuality. While it

⁴⁰ Which he interprets to mean not contained within the physical heavens, but rather, distinct from all created things (i.e., from the creation as a whole) and distinctly above it, reading “*fī al-samā*” – derived from the verb *samā, yasmū* (“to be high, lofty”) – in this case as synonymous with an expression like “*fī al-‘uluww*.”

⁴¹ These verses are: Qur'an (al-Mulk) 67:16, 17; (Fāṭir) 35:10; (Āl ‘Imrān) 3:55; (al-Nisā') 4:158; (al-Anbiyā') 21:19; (al-Naḥl) 16:50; (al-Ma'ārij) 70:3; (al-An'ām) 6:18; and (al-Baqara) 2:29.

⁴² See for example Qur'an (al-Ṭin) 95:5 and (Fuṣṣilat) 41:29.

⁴³ “*li-ta'lamū anna 'Llāha 'alā kulli shay'in qadīrun wa-anna 'Llāha qad aḥāṭa bi-kulli shay'in ilman*”

is true that Ibn Taymiyya is normally at pains to show that single verses and hadith contain their own self-exonerating elements of clarification, he does nevertheless allow, as we have seen here, that disparate texts of revelation can act to elucidate each other. This is precisely why we have referred to his theory as one of “intertextuality.” The critical point for Ibn Taymiyya, in the end, is that all the texts of revelation, taken collectively and considered in light of one other, are always fully autonomous and self-sufficient in conveying – explicitly – the meanings intended to be taken from them. This latter premise explains why we have qualified Ibn Taymiyya’s principle of intertextuality as being both *semantically explicit* – as all meanings are indicated in an explicit (*ṣarīḥ*) fashion when revelation is considered as a whole – and *self-contained* – since the collectivity of revealed texts stands in no need of an independent source, such as speculative reason, to endorse, qualify, or modify any of the (explicitly indicated) meanings contained therein.

C. Ta’wīl on the Basis of the Positions of the Salaf

In addition to immediate context and the principle of intertextuality in the explication of the revealed texts, Ibn Taymiyya also recognizes, as a third authoritative determinant of meaning, the reported statements (*aqwāl*) of the Companions and early Salaf, especially when these statements converge to form a consensus (*ijmā’*) or quasi-consensus. We thus sometimes find the “*ta’wīl*” of a verse explicitly justified on the basis that it figures among the “*aqwāl* of the Salaf” or that the Salaf were in unanimous agreement as to the verse’s meaning and interpretation. We may cite as an example Qur’an (al-Ḥaḍīd) 57:4: “And He is with you wheresoever you may be.”⁴⁴ Ibn Taymiyya cites Abū ‘Umar al-Ṭalamankī (d. 429/1038) who, in his book *al-Wuṣūl ilā ma‘rifat al-uṣūl*, reports a “consensus among the Muslims of *ahl al-sunnā*” that this verse, as well as similar verses in the Qur’an (*wa-naḥw dhālika min al-Qur’ān*), refer not to God’s person or essence (*dhāt*), which is “above [and not inside] the heavens,” but rather to His

⁴⁴ “*wa-huwa ma‘akum aynamā kuntum*”

knowledge.⁴⁵ A similar verse is Qur'an (al-Mujādala) 58:7: “Never is there a secret conversation among three but that He is their fourth.”⁴⁶ On the meaning of this verse, Ibn Taymiyya cites Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr (d. 463/1071), who states that “the learned (*‘ulamā*) among the Companions and Successors, from whom knowledge of *ta’wīl* is taken, affirm unanimously, with respect to the *ta’wīl* of this verse, that God is upon His throne and that His *knowledge* is in all places, and no one whose opinion is considered authoritative has contradicted them in this.”⁴⁷ This understanding is further backed up by a statement of Mālik b. Anas, reported of him as well as of numerous other authorities both before and after him through “rigorously authenticated chains of transmission” (*asānīd ṣaḥīḥa*), to the effect that “God is in the heavens (*fī al-samā*),⁴⁸ but His knowledge is in all places.”⁴⁹

As we have seen, the specific interpretations cited above with respect to verses stating that God is God “in the heavens and the earth” are ultimately justified by appeal to a consensus view (*ijmā*) of the Salaf. But if this is the case, one may very well raise the question: How did the Salaf know that this was the meaning? Was it because the Prophet had explicitly informed them that this was the correct interpretation of these verses? Was it because of the Salaf’s preeminent understanding of the Arabic language that they could understand this meaning from the language of the verses directly and immediately? Was it by comparing, even if implicitly, such verses with other verses affirming God’s transcend-

⁴⁵ *Dar’*, VI: 250, l. 15 – 251, l. 3.

⁴⁶ “*mā yakūnu min najwā thalāthatin illā huwa rābi’uhum*”

⁴⁷ “*ajma’a ‘ulamā’ al-ṣaḥāba wa-l-tābi’īn alladhīna ḥumila ‘anhum al-ta’wīl qālū fī ta’wīl qawlihi ta’ālā ... huwa ‘alā al-‘arsh wa-‘ilmuhu fī kull makān wa-mā khālafahum fī dhālika aḥad yuḥtajju bi-qawlihi.*” (*Dar’*, VI: 255, l. 7-11).

⁴⁸ As mentioned above, “*fī al-samā*” (‘in the heavens’) is explained by Ibn Taymiyya to be synonymous with “*fī al-‘uluww*,” stressing the fact that God is not *in* the heavens – that is, inherent in and confined by the created universe – but rather *above* them – that is, outside of and transcendent to creation. The main point here about stressing that God Himself is “above the heavens” while it is His *knowledge* that is “in all places” is to avoid the theologically (and rationally) precarious suggestion that God could inhere in, and thus be limited by, His creation (but that His knowledge nonetheless encompasses all things). The objection of the later Ash‘arites, that holding God to be “above” creation would entail corporealism (*tajsim*) by implying that He is subject to “direction” (*al-jihā*), is a related but separate point which we shall deal with more closely in the following chapter.

⁴⁹ *Dar’*, VI: 262, l. 1-4.

ence, coupled with their emerging appreciation of the overall worldview and theology of the Qur'an? Though Ibn Taymiyya does not address these questions directly – at least not in the context of the verses currently under consideration – it would seem safe to assume that any of the three, or a combination of them, could be at work in the case of any given report of the Salaf's positions (*aqwāl*). Yet however it may be that the Salaf came to endorse a particular view, the point for Ibn Taymiyya is that if a particular understanding or interpretation of revelation has been transmitted from the Salaf (*ma'thur 'an al-salaf*), their opinion becomes a binding and authoritative determinant of textual meaning. If the Salaf are known to have understood a verse “non-literally” – such as their understanding that only God's knowledge and not God Himself is “in the heavens and earth” – then such is legitimately to be taken as the meaning of the verse. If, on the other hand, the Salaf are known to have understood a verse according to its apparent (*ḥaqīqa*) sense – such as their affirmation that God is indeed “above” the heavens “*ḥaqīqatan*” – then such is likewise to be taken as the only legitimate interpretation of the verse in question. What Ibn Taymiyya opposes is that latter-day philosophers or theologians should put forth a “metaphorical” or otherwise non-apparent interpretation based on factors extrinsic to the revealed texts, such as speculative rational – or as Ibn Taymiyya would certainly say, “putatively” rational – considerations, particularly if these contradict the straightforward reading of a given text as transmitted on the authority of the early Salaf.

IV. The Salaf and the Authority of Their Linguistic Convention (*'urf*)

In the preceding section, we examined Ibn Taymiyya's views on the centrality of context in determining the meaning of linguistic utterances in general and of the texts of revelation in particular. Yet we have also mentioned a further crucial element of Ibn Taymiyya's hermeneutics, namely, that of the larger, well-known linguistic habits and conventions (*'urf*) of the speech community to which a given utterance is directed. Any utterance directed to a community of human beings is, of necessity Ibn Taymiyya insists, subject to due consideration of both con-

text and convention, including the words of divine revelation, for even though the source of the linguistic product in this case is God, the Author of revelation, He nevertheless addresses His revelation to human beings, clothing it in a particular human language operating within a living speech community on the basis of established conventions predating the advent of revelation in the language. This is simply another way of saying that revelation came to the Prophet and his Companions in their own language, and that if they were to understand it, if it were to be clear (*mubīn*) to them – which the Qur'an persistently affirms that it is – then it could only be that it was sent in conformity with their established patterns of language use. This fact lies at the basis of Ibn Taymiyya's insistence that revelation always be understood and interpreted according to the known linguistic conventions (*'urf*) of the Salaf. Indeed, linguistic convention (*'urf*) forms the larger backdrop against which the previously discussed principle of contextual interpretation becomes possible. If I am able to judge from context that a statement such as "Can you please give me a hand with the yard work?" is really a request for assistance (and not the person's actual hand), it is only because of my broader familiarity with the *conventions* of current-day English speakers that I am able to judge successfully that "hand" in such a context in reality means "help." Absent an adequate familiarity with the larger linguistic convention of the relevant speech community, we would have no grounds on which to select precisely which one of the possible meanings of a word is the intended one in a given context.

Yet in some cases, revelation impinges upon the previously established linguistic convention and related conceptual categories and modifies them, shifting the meanings and implications of existing terms, altering their moral and ethical content or shifting the moral evaluation thereof, if not redefining them altogether, or introducing new terms and usages that inaugurate new conventions in the language corresponding to novel conceptual innovations.⁵⁰ For this reason, it

⁵⁰ The definitive works on this issue remain Toshihiko Izutsu's masterly studies, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* and *God and Man in the Qur'an: Semantics of the Qur'anic*

is necessary not only to consider the wider context of the pre-existing convention that forms the linguistic backdrop of revelation, but also the total worldview of revelation, taking into account new meanings, terms, and conventions that revelation itself has introduced. Nevertheless, Ibn Taymiyya's key contention remains the same, namely, that in all cases, the meaning of revelation can always be determined in a self-referentially independent manner, that is, based on the texts themselves interpreted in light of the larger linguistic context as well as the specific terminological and conceptual innovations inaugurated by revelation itself. Any putative conclusions of abstract reasoning must be judged in light of what revelation has been discovered, on its own terms, to be saying, rather than revelation being reinterpreted to conform to what reason is believed to have discovered by its own lights. We speak deliberately here of the "putative conclusions" of abstract reasoning and of what reason is "believed to have discovered," since for Ibn Taymiyya, it is never the case that *pure* reason (*'aql ṣarīḥ*) is found to have determined as true anything that stands in conflict with the texts of the Qur'an and the authenticated Sunna.

The Salaf's Authority in Knowledge and the Understanding of Revelation

Central to Ibn Taymiyya's worldview is the notion that the Salaf were not only the most pious of Muslim generations, but also the most knowledgeable and possessed of the best and most perfect *understanding* of the faith, quite apart from their exemplary practice thereof. In establishing this view, he appeals, *inter alia*, to a statement by 'Abd Allāh b. Mas'ūd (d. 32/652-3), who describes the Companions as possessing "the purest hearts, the deepest knowledge, and (exhibiting) the least in unnatural strain and affectation (*takalluf*)" of all Muslim generations.⁵¹ These three qualities – purity of heart, clarity and depth of intellect, and, as a natural accompaniment to both, straightforwardness and a lack of undue

Weltanschauung. See also M. M. Bravmann, *The Spiritual Background of Early Islam: Studies in Ancient Arab Concepts*.

⁵¹ "*abarr ḥādhihi al-umma qulūban wa-a'maquhum 'ilman wa-aqalluhum takallufan*" (*Dar'*, V: 69, l. 13-15).

strain and affectation (*takalluf*) – are qualities that Ibn Taymiyya holds in very high esteem and which, as will become apparent over the course of this study, he makes the cornerstone of his entire epistemic system. A further statement in deference to the Companions’ perspicacity, paraphrased from al-Shāfi‘ī’s *Risāla*, declares the Companions “superior to us in every rational matter and science and merit, and in every means by which knowledge is gained or truth is grasped; what they opine for us is of greater worth than what we opine for ourselves.”⁵² Ibn Taymiyya adds to these accolades his own contention that “every individual knows that the Companions, the Successors, and the Successors of the Successors are the most perfectly gifted in intellect of all people.”⁵³ And it is precisely these first three generations, from that of the *ṣaḥāba* to that of the *tābi‘ū al-tābi‘īn*, that Ibn Taymiyya defines as the “Salaf” and whose linguistic convention and understanding of the texts he takes as uniquely authoritative for all later generations.

As we saw briefly in Chapter 3, Ibn Taymiyya is particularly concerned to shore up the unique authoritativeness of the Salaf in light of the later contention that the Salaf and early authorities (*al-salaf wa-l-a’imma*) were content merely to believe in and uphold the wording of the revealed texts (*alfāz al-nuṣūṣ*), while turning away from a deep contemplation and profound understanding of their meanings.⁵⁴ This assumption led to the eventual assertion that the methods employed by the later scholars (*al-khalaf*) in interpreting the texts evinced a greater knowledge and deeper understanding thereof, while the way of the Salaf – based on an (allegedly) unreflective affirmationism devoid of sophistication and nuance – represented merely the “safer” way.⁵⁵ Ibn Taymiyya charges that the later thinkers were induced to adopt such a position due precisely to their belief that a proper understanding of the texts requires an extensive application of rationalistic *ta’wīl* (in the third, technical sense discussed above), an

⁵² “*innahum fawqanā fī kull ‘aql wa-‘ilm wa-faḍl wa-sabab yunālu bihi ‘ilm aw yudraku bihi ṣawāb wa-ra’yuhum lanā khayr min ra’yinā li-anfusinā*” (ibid., V: 73).

⁵³ Ibid., V: 72, l. 1-2.

⁵⁴ Ibid., V: 378, l. 6-8.

⁵⁵ This is often expressed in the pithy formula: “*ṭarīqat al-khalaf aḥkam* (or “*a’lam*”) *wa-ṭarīqat al-salaf aslam*.” See ibid., V: 378, l. 9-10.

enterprise from which the authorities of the Salaf were found to be conspicuously innocent. These later thinkers, Ibn Taymiyya explains, tended to view the Salaf as having been all too aware that numerous words in revelation could carry many different meanings, and that since there was always a danger of error in assigning one particular such meaning to a verse over another, they preferred to follow the safer (*aslam*) way by simply upholding the wording (*lafẓ*) of such texts while refraining from endorsing definitively any particular interpretation of their meaning (*ma'nā*).⁵⁶ Ibn Taymiyya is keen to exonerate them of this charge by demonstrating that the Salaf and early authorities: (1) affirmed in a straightforward manner the divine attributes specified in the texts; (2) contemplated and understood deeply the full import of these texts; and (3) actively refuted the views and methods of the “negationists” (*nufāh*) once these began to creep up,⁵⁷ demonstrating them to be contrary *both* to the texts of revelation as authentically understood by the earliest generations *and* to the dictates of sound reason as well. As such, the way of the Salaf, for Ibn Taymiyya, was both the safest (*aslam*) *and* the most intellectually rigorous (*a'lam wa-aḥkam*) at one and the same time.⁵⁸

In establishing what he purports to be the early community's full-fledged and consistent affirmationism, Ibn Taymiyya appeals to a number of early *tafsīr* works which have the advantage, for him, of being based primarily on the specific interpretations transmitted from (*ma'thūra 'an*) the Prophet, as well as the Companions and Successors – precisely those generations he considers uniquely

⁵⁶ Ibid., V: 378, l. 15-18.

⁵⁷ All earlier and later (non-Mu'tazilite) *mutakallimūn* agree, in fact, that the Companions and early Salaf performed this function – and were right in doing so – in the face of the early sects inspired by the likes of Jahm b. Ṣafwān, including the Mu'tazila. An Ash'arī, for instance, would hold the same opinion here as Ibn Taymiyya and congratulate the Salaf for honorably discharging such a vital task. But from an Ash'arī perspective, the *ta'wīl* engaged in by the later Ash'arite school (the so-called *muta'akhkhirūn*) has nothing to do with the brazen negationism of the early sectarians. Ibn Taymiyya, for his part, insists that many of the operative principles and assumptions between early negationism and later Ash'arism are, in fact, one and the same, just that the Ash'arīs do not push things as far as the Mu'tazila, who in turn do not go quite so far as the earlier sectarians or the philosophers.

⁵⁸ *Dar'*, V: 378, l. 19 – 379, l. 5. For some examples given by Ibn Taymiyya of how the Salaf were aware of and addressed a number of the theological issues raised by later groups, albeit with terminology different from the technical language of the later schools, see *ibid.*, VIII: 53.

authoritative.⁵⁹ Such works of *tafsīr*, Ibn Taymiyya contends, in addition to other early works containing statements (*āthār*) from the Prophet, the Companions, and the Successors (*al-kutub al-muṣannafa fi al-sunna*), serve to establish unambiguously the universal affirmationism (*ithbāt*) of the early community.⁶⁰ In fact, he reports that their affirmationism is established through an overwhelming abundance of reports, from both the *tafsīr* literature and other works, that have been transmitted in no less than a *mutawātir* fashion and in which one cannot find so much as a “single letter” (*ḥarf wāḥid*) that agrees with the position of the early negationists.⁶¹ Such reports in combination attest to a consensus (*ijmāʿ*) of the Salaf on the necessity of full affirmationism with respect to the divine attributes. Furthermore, Ibn Taymiyya contends, the Qurʾan itself does not contain a single explicit denial of any attribute of God.⁶² What it does contain are verses denying that God has any likeness, particularly the verses “There is none like unto Him”⁶³ and “There is none comparable unto Him.”⁶⁴ Yet these verses, Ibn Taymiyya contends, do not deny the very *existence* of God’s attributes, but ra-

⁵⁹ He mentions specifically the very early works of ‘Abd b. Ḥumayd (d. 249/863), Sunayd b. Dāwūd (d. 226/841), ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī (d. 211/827), and Wakīʿ b. al-Jarrāḥ (d. 197/812), then the *tafsīr* of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ibrāhīm Duḥaym (d. 245/859-60), (‘Abd al-Raḥmān) Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 327/938-9), (Abū Bakr) Ibn al-Mundhir (d. 319/931), Abū Bakr ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (d. 363/974), Abū al-Shaykh al-Iṣbahānī (d. 369/979), and Abū Bakr b. Mardawayhi (d. 410/1020), and similar works subsequent to these, such as the *tafsīr* of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm b. Rāhawayhi (d. 238/853), Baqī b. Makhḥad (d. 276/889), “and others.” For this listing, see *ibid.*, II: 21, l. 10 – 22, l. 7. See also *ibid.*, VII: 107-8 for a much more extensive list, as well as Ibn Taymiyya’s *Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-tafsīr*, 36-37, 51, 62-64.

⁶⁰ See *ibid.*, II: 20ff for the explicitly affirmationist statements of numerous early authorities, which is relevant to Ibn Taymiyya’s demarcation of who the early figures are whom he calls to witness in defining the approach of the “Salaf and early authorities” (*al-salaf wa-l-aʿimma*).

⁶¹ See *ibid.*, VII: 108, l. 11-15 where he speaks of “*al-tafsīr al-thābita al-mutawātira ‘an al-ṣaḥāba wa-l-tābiʿīn*” and “*al-nuqūl al-mutawātira al-mustafīda ‘an al-ṣaḥāba wa-l-tābiʿīn fī ghayr al-tafsīr*.”

⁶² Though he does not say so explicitly in this particular passage, it is clear that Ibn Taymiyya means here that the Qurʾan does not deny of God what he refers to as “attributes of perfection” (*ṣifāt al-kamāl*). The Qurʾan does, however, deny of God attributes that entail deficiency or imperfection, such as the attribute of injustice, which is negated of God on several occasions in verses such as “*wa-mā rabbuka bi-ḡallāmin li-l-‘abīd*” (‘And verily your Lord is in no wise unjust to [His] slaves’). [Qurʾan (Fuṣṣilat) 41:46]

⁶³ “*laysa ka-mithlihi shayʾ*” [Qurʾan (al-Shūrā): 42:11]

⁶⁴ “*wa-lam yakun lahu kufūwan aḥad*” [Qurʾan (al-Ikhlās) 112:4]

ther deny of them any essential similarity or parity (*mumāthala*) with those of created beings.⁶⁵

V. Analysis of Terms to Detect and Correct for Semantic Shift

We have encountered in Chapter 2 a quotation from Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal⁶⁶ to the effect that those who proffer abusive interpretations of scripture and false religious doctrines “discourse on God and the Book of God with no knowledge and speak in vague and ambiguous terms (*yatakallamūna bi-l-mutashābih min al-kalām*), fooling thereby the ignorant among men (*yakhda‘ūna juhhāl al-nās bi-mā yushabbihūna ‘alayhim*).⁶⁷ As it turns out, a significant portion of Ibn Taymiyya’s critique against the philosophers and theologians (Mu‘tazila and later Ash‘arī) is directed against their (mis)use of language, a task in which he cites that he has already been preceded by al-Ghazālī.⁶⁸ Throughout the *Dar’*, Ibn Taymiyya consistently inveighs against the use of “vague and ambiguous terms” (*alfāz mujmala mutashābiha*) and even goes so far as to state that “the majority of disagreements among rational thinkers boil down to a question of vague terminology,”⁶⁹ which results in untold harm (*fasād*) done to both reason and religion. In fact, he states, every reprehensible innovation (*bid‘a*) in belief and alleged conflict between reason and revelation goes back essentially to the use of vague and ambiguous terms, terms that carry a range of various meanings and implications that are often not fully understood or clearly conceptualized by those using them. Such terms – complete with the implicit meanings and as-

⁶⁵ *Dar’*, VII: 111, l. 2-9. For a more extensive treatment of Ibn Taymiyya’s conception of what it means for there to be “nothing like unto God,” see *ibid.*, V: 83-85.

⁶⁶ See above, p. 121.

⁶⁷ For Ibn Ḥanbal’s original quote see, *inter alia*, *Dar’*, I: 221, l. 11 – 222, l. 2.

⁶⁸ See, for instance, *ibid.*, III, 389 and *ibid.*, VI: 295, where he mentions al-Ghazālī “and others.”

⁶⁹ “*akthar ikhtilāf al-‘uqalā’ min jihat ishtirāk al-asmā’*” (*ibid.*, I: 233, 299). See also *ibid.*, I: 274-75, where Ibn Taymiyya states that authentic rational proofs, or “indicators” (*adilla*) of knowledge, can never be in contradiction, and that those among later theologians who claim an equivalency of proofs (*takāfu’ al-adilla*) or end up in perplexity (*ḥayra*) over an issue do so on account of faulty reasoning and inference (*istidlāl*), due either to their personal inability or to the invalidity of their arguments, and that “one of the greatest causes of this is vague terms of ambiguous meaning” (“*wa-min a‘zam asbāb dhālika al-alfāz al-mujmala allatī tashtabihu ma‘ānīhā*”).

sumptions that they carry – are accepted on account of the truth that they contain, but then end up serving as the basis for an eventual contradiction of revelation on account of the falsehood they also contain, but which most people are unable to pick up on as a result of their multi-layered ambiguity.⁷⁰ This results from a wholesale adoption of such terms without a careful analysis of their various meanings, then affirming or negating the term as such (along with the various meanings and implications attached to it), rather than analyzing the term then judging the truth or falsehood of each individual meaning separately.⁷¹ In light of this rampant terminological confusion and the fact that revelation is primarily a phenomenon of language (a revealed text), and since rational discourse itself can also only be conducted through the use of language, Ibn Taymiyya is of the view that a great many of the philosophical and theological issues debated, as well as the (in his view abusive) interpretations often given of scripture in an attempt to make it concord with the putatively rational conclusions reached through such debates, can in fact be resolved through a careful, methodical dissection both of the various terms used in revelation and of the terms in which the rational arguments allegedly at odds with revelation are expressed. Once the various meanings implied in a given term have been patiently separated and the measure of truth and falsehood (as judged both by reason and revelation) of each meaning is clarified, then the confusion (*shubha*) surrounding a given question can be cleared up, whereupon the alleged conflict between revelation and reason reveals itself to have been a mere chimera.⁷²

But what is the origin of such ambiguity? Ibn Taymiyya explains that the ambiguity in question most often arises when the experts of a given discipline adopt common words as technical terms by means of which they communicate with each other, in the manner of craftsmen who use everyday words in a specific technical sense in reference to particular aspects of their trade. Such terms, explains Ibn Taymiyya, are agreed upon through a particular group convention

⁷⁰ Ibid., I: 208-209.

⁷¹ See *ibid.*, IX: 152, l. 14-17.

⁷² Ibid., IV: 227, l. 9-12.

(*alfāz ‘urfiyya ‘urfān khāṣṣan*), and what is meant by them is other than what is understood from them in light of the original linguistic convention of the larger speech community (*ghayr al-mafhūm minhā fī aṣl al-lughā*). An example would be the term “body” (*jism*), which is used in revelation in accordance with the normal linguistic convention in reference to, say, the body of a human being or an animal. The term is not, however, used with reference to God, either by way of affirmation or negation, and when the philosophers apply it to God (by way of negation), they do so according to other than the acknowledged conventional meaning of the term, that is, on the basis of their particular convention (*‘urf khāṣṣ*) which defines “body” sweepingly as any entity of which it is possible to predicate distinct attributes (that is, distinct from each other and from the essence of the entity in which they inhere). For instance, maintaining that God is not a “body” (*jism*) is true and valid according to the linguistic convention of the Arabs, since the word “*jism*” as used in the Qur’an⁷³ and in the linguistic convention of the Arabs has very specific meanings, none of which are applicable to God. But when *they* say that God is not a “*jism*” and mean this according to their technical usage of the term “*jism*,” which is broad and wide-ranging and essentially includes any entity of which it is possible to predicate attributes or qualities, then negating that God is a “*jism*,” when *defined in this manner*, would indeed involve a contradiction of revelation, since when *they* negate God’s being a “*jism*,” they are actually negating a great deal more than what the word as used in the Qur’an and according to the convention of the Arabs actually means.

Such vague and ambiguous terms fall into several categories. First, there are words that are used both in revelation and in common everyday speech, but which the philosophers (and *mutakallimūn*) employ in a modified technical sense, which results in ambiguity and confusion (*ishtibāh wa-ijmāl*), particularly when a direct appeal is made to revelation in support of the philosophical views expressed by means of the terms in question. We have seen the example of the word “*jism*” (‘body’) above. A second, very central term in which an analogous

⁷³ The word “*jism*” appears twice in the Qur’an at Q. (al-Baqara) 2:247 and (al-Munāfiqūn) 63:4. The close synonym “*jasad*” appears four times and the synonymous term “*badan*” twice.

semantic shift has occurred is the all-important word “*wāḥid*” (‘one’), which we shall investigate in greater detail as a case study below. Another category consists of words that do not appear in revelation, but that do exist in the everyday language of the Arabs, albeit, once again, with widely shared conventional meanings radically at odds with the technical definitions given to them by latter-day philosophers and theologians. Examples of such terms include words like “*tar-kīb*” (‘composition’), “*juz*” (‘part’), “*iftiqār*” (‘dependency’), and “*ṣūra*” (‘image’, ‘form’). Additional terms cited by Ibn Taymiyya include much of the basic vocabulary of philosophical discourse, such as: “*jawhar*” (‘substance’ or ‘atom’), “*araḍ*” (‘accident’), “*dhāt*” (‘essence’), “*ṣifa*” (‘attribute’), “*taḥayyuz*” (‘spatial locatedness’), “*jiḥa*” (‘direction[ality]’), “*illa*” (‘cause’), “*ma‘lūl*” (‘effect’), “*wujūb*” (‘necessity’), “*imkān*” (‘contingency’), “*qidam*” (‘eternity’), “*ḥudūth*” (‘temporality’), and others.⁷⁴

In addition to the use of vague and ambiguous terms, Ibn Taymiyya also cites confusions that arise from a misconstrual of grammar that can occur due to a failure to account for the *actual* manner in which the language is conventionally used. The example he gives is the manner in which many speculative thinkers (*nuzzār*) seem to interpret the use of certain past participles in Arabic. He says that such thinkers often use a passive participle and then, as if deducing directly from the morphological form as opposed to the actual usage, claim that there must be an agent involved. For example, they might draw the conclusion that, if God is said to be “*makhṣūṣ*” (roughly, ‘characterized’), say, by a particular attribute, then anything that is *makhṣūṣ* must have a *mukhaṣṣiṣ* (a ‘particularizer’ or ‘characterizer’), which would mean that God, in order to have attributes, would be dependent on a *mukhaṣṣiṣ* external to Himself. Ibn Taymiyya, however, argues that in the *actual* conventional use of the Arabic language, certain passive participles have come to be used in a purely intransitive sense, meaning only that the thing is qualified by a certain characteristic or attribute, not that the attribute in question has been conferred upon it by an external agent. Thus, what is

⁷⁴ *Dar*, I: 222, l. 11-15.

morphologically the passive participle of the transitive verb “*khaṣṣa*,” ‘to specify’ – that is, the word “*makhṣūṣ bi*” – is, in the actual linguistic convention of the Arabs, used as the equivalent of the active participle of the mediopassive verb “*ikhtaṣṣa bi*,”⁷⁵ meaning simply ‘to be characterized or specified by,’ i.e., ‘having or possessing the character of.’ This use of the passive participle is similar to the meaning involved when one speaks, for instance, of handwriting being “*maqrū*,” i.e., ‘legible, liable to be read,’ or of food being “*mahḍūm*,” i.e., ‘easily digestible, liable to be easily digested.’ Many of the terms used by the speculative thinkers (*ahl al-naẓar*), Ibn Taymiyya contends, fall into this category, including the all-important terms “*mawjūd*” (‘existent’, ‘existing’), “*makhṣūṣ*” (‘particularized’ or ‘characterized [by]’), “*mu’allaf*” (‘made up [of],’ ‘constituted [by]’), “*murakkab*” (‘composed [of]’), and “*muḥaqqaq*” (‘realized’, ‘real, actual’). When using such terms, they do not necessarily mean – and, when applied to God, definitely do *not* mean – that an external agent has conferred the given quality on the entity characterized by it. But many have misinterpreted these and similar terms by construing them strictly on the basis of their morphological pattern while disregarding their *meaning* as determined by their *actual usage* in the known convention of the language’s speakers. The problem here is that they have taken the morphological form of the word rather too “literally,” so to speak, mistakenly prioritizing abstract linguistic forms and generalizations made about them over the more relevant criterion of their actual use in the known linguistic convention of the relevant speech community. Ibn Taymiyya considers this one more example of the speculative thinkers (*ahl al-naẓar*) forcing language into their own intellectual mold, grafting the conclusions of their rational speculations onto the pre-existing linguistic convention. Ibn Taymiyya, once again, maintains that due consideration of convention is apt to clear up the issue under investigation and, typically, undercut the doctrines and assumptions that have come to be attached to it through the speculations of the *nuzziyār*.

⁷⁵ Note that Form VIII of this particular verb (*ikhtaṣṣa*) carries the transitive meaning of Form I as well, as evidenced in a verse such as: “*wa-’Llāhu yakhtaṣṣu bi-rahmatihi man yashā’*” (“God chooses for His special mercy whom He will”). [Qur’an (al-Baqara) 2:105]

VI. A Case Study: The Terms “*wāḥid*,” “*tawḥīd*,” and “*tarkīb*”

Ibn Taymiyya discusses at length the specific example of the all-important words “*wāḥid*” (‘one’) and “*tawḥīd*” (‘oneness of God’, ‘monotheism’) and as well as the related notion of “composition” or “*tarkīb*.” As we have seen in Chapter 1, the early Mu‘tazila, influenced by the Aristotelian distinction between “essence” and “attributes,” came to understand “oneness” – particularly that of God – in much the same way as Aristotle did, that is, in terms of complete and perfect simplicity. That which is truly “one” (*wāḥid*), according to this technical philosophical usage (*iṣṭilāḥ*), is that whose essence is completely simple (*basīṭ*) and entirely undifferentiated (*lā yu‘lamu minhu shay’ dūna shay’*), and in consequence, necessarily devoid of any attributes distinct from essence. If God were to possess attributes, on this view, He would no longer be truly “one” – in the sense of perfectly simple and undifferentiated – but rather “composite” (*murakkab*), that is, “composed” of His essence and His attributes. On this understanding, then, the affirmation of divine attributes – even the ones apparently affirmed unambiguously in revelation – would lead to a contradiction with the even more fundamental principle – also affirmed emphatically by revelation – that God is, first and foremost, One (*wāḥid*). Operating on the assumption that affirming the divine attributes would indeed compromise God’s oneness (*tawḥīd*), the philosophers and the Mu‘tazila presume that if revelation is to be considered consistent (both with itself and with reason), it cannot in reality be held to affirm *both* God’s oneness and His possession of a host of myriad attributes, since oneness and the possession of attributes are mutually exclusive and therefore contradictory. On the basis of philosophical principles requiring that God be one, not to mention the Qur’an’s own emphatic emphasis that “God is one,” the philosophers and the Mu‘tazila maintain that the internal and rational consistency of revelation can only be maintained if the alleged “attributes” are interpreted metaphorically and not as “real” – in other words, as mere names (*asmā’*) that do not correspond to any actual extant qualities (*ṣifāt*) by which the divine essence (*dhāt*) may be said to be qualified. From another angle, they argue that whatever

possesses attributes can only be a body (*jism*), that all bodies are divisible (*mun-qasim*), and that anything that is divisible likewise cannot be said to be “one.” Here, then, is an example of a conclusion – namely, that an entity that is truly “one” cannot be qualified by attributes – that has allegedly been reached through reason, but which is also asserted to concur with revelation, since revelation also emphatically declares the uncompromising oneness of God (*tawḥīd*). The declaration of oneness is taken to be more fundamental than revelation’s simultaneous apparent affirmation of divine attributes, and so these qualities are interpreted not as real attributes, but as mere names in order to avoid the implication that revelation, by affirming attributes of a God who is “one,” is in contradiction either with itself or with the dictates of reason.

Now, the question of the rational coherence (let alone necessity) of the view that something that is truly “one” must be perfectly simple – and therefore devoid of attributes so as not to be “composite” – will be taken up in the next chapter, dedicated to Ibn Taymiyya’s rational critique of the philosophers’ ontology and epistemology. Here, however, we explore the linguistic side of Ibn Taymiyya’s endeavor, in which he is concerned to determine whether, from a purely linguistic point of view, it is plausible to identify revelation’s insistent affirmation of God’s oneness (*tawḥīd*) with the philosophers’ and Mu‘tazilites’ notion of oneness as pure simplicity, with the non-reality of the divine attributes entailed thereby. A Mu‘tazilite would presumably have argued for the validity of this identification on the basis that if reason has discovered “one” to mean “simple” and if God and His revelation are rationally coherent and not absurd or nonsensical, then Qur’anic statements to the effect that God is one “must” obviously have been meant as a declaration of God’s perfect simplicity – and concomitant lack of real attributes. For Ibn Taymiyya, by contrast, revelation can reasonably be interpreted to mean only what the Prophet and his Companions can plausibly be held to have understood from its wording as received and comprehended within the context of their own linguistic milieu and thought world. The question for Ibn Taymiyya then – and prior to any rational investigation or critique on his part of the philosophers’ notion of oneness – is first to identify what the word

“one” meant in the linguistic convention (‘*urf*) of the Prophet and his Companions, coupled with what the assertion of God’s oneness in the Qur’an would have meant to them – in fact, *must* have meant to them – as a function both of their prior linguistic convention and of the theology and overall worldview of the Qur’an itself as it impinged upon and modified this convention.

Starting with the linguistic meaning of “one” (*wāḥid*), Ibn Taymiyya asserts that this word in the Arabic language (and in fact all languages, he avers⁷⁶), as determined by its *actual use* among the language’s speakers, can only be found to have been applied to that which, in the terminology of the philosophers and Mu‘tazila, is considered “divisible” and a “body” – in other words, an entity qualified by particular attributes. He remarks that Arabic speakers speak of “one man” (as opposed to two men or three men), where the “one man” in question is a full-fledged bodily entity with various attributes, is divisible (i.e., his limbs can be severed and separated from him), and so forth. The Arabic word “one” in “one man,” therefore, simply designates a lack of plurality of entities (in this case, men), *not* the lack of qualities or attributes proper to and inseparable from the (one) entity itself. To be “one” in the conventional use of the Arabic language thus simply means to be a single instantiated particular entity (rather than a plurality of entities), necessarily and inescapably qualified by whatever range of attributes are inherent to the species or class to which the entity in question belongs. Ibn Taymiyya further calls to witness a number of Qur’anic verses where the word “one” is invariably used to refer to a single whole entity, invariably qualified by attributes of some sort or another.⁷⁷ In no circumstance, Ibn Taymiyya argues, is the term “one” in Arabic found to have been used by its speakers in the idiosyncratic and highly restricted technical sense of the philosophers and the Mu‘tazila. Such a usage would, in fact, have been quite impossible, since

⁷⁶ Despite his strong empiricism and the importance he gives to the specific contextualized use of a particular language (in this case Arabic), Ibn Taymiyya nevertheless hints here at the existence of universally shared notions and conceptions that are the same for all individuals and across cultures, regardless of the specific languages in which they are expressed. In fact, at another spot in the *Dar’*, he speaks specifically of “the meaning that does not change according to the difference in languages” (*al-ma‘nā alladhī lā yakhtalifū bi-’khtilāf al-lughāt*).

⁷⁷ For the relevant verses cited by Ibn Taymiyya in this context, see *Dar’*, VII: 115-116.

the distinction between “essence” and “attributes” which it presupposes was unknown to the Arabs and formed no part of their intellectual framework.⁷⁸ And yet, God spoke to them in *their* language in terms that *they* could have understood only as a function of *their* native frame of reference.

More than this, Ibn Taymiyya contends that what the philosophers refer to as “one” in their technical discourse – namely, a perfectly simple essence unqualified by any attributes whatsoever – is a notion of which most people have no conception (*laysa huwa shay’an ya’qiluhu al-nās*)⁷⁹ and of whose existence they have neither theoretical knowledge (*‘ilm*) nor practical experience (*khibra*) such that their conventional language should contain a term to express it. It goes without saying, he maintains, that a word widely shared (*mashhūr*) among people – both average users of the language (*al-‘āmma*) and specialists of a particular discipline (*al-khāṣṣa*) – cannot legitimately be construed to carry a meaning only conceived by and known amongst the specialist few.⁸⁰ In other words, since language is shared by all members of the speech community equally, it must be assumed to presuppose the shared conceptions (*taṣawwurat*) common to all, not those of a philosophical elite (or any other group of specialists), particularly since revelation is explicitly directed to all people alike. Moreover, Ibn Taymiyya contends, people know by the lights of their natural, inborn faculty of reasoning that such an entity as the philosophers call “one” (i.e., devoid of any attributes whatsoever) could, at most, be conceived of theoretically in the mind but could not in any way exist as such in external reality.⁸¹ And even if one were, for the sake of argument, to allow for the existence, or the possibility of existence, of such an entity in external reality, one would still have to substantiate that such an entity is properly designated by the term “one” (*wāḥid*) in the known speech convention of the 7th-century Arabs to whom the oneness of God in the Qur’an was initially proclaimed. Since, however, the word “*wāḥid*”

⁷⁸ For an exhaustive treatment of Ibn Taymiyya’s critique of the philosophers’ theory of essences, see Hallaq, *Greek Logicians*, esp. at xiv-xxvii.

⁷⁹ *Dar’*, VII: 116, l. 12-14.

⁸⁰ “*al-lafẓ al-mashhūr bayn al-khāṣṣ wa-l-‘āmm lā yakūnu musammāhu mim mā lā yataṣawwaruhu illā al-khāṣṣa*” (*Dar’*, VII: 120: l. 17-18). Also *ibid.*, VII: 118, l. 8-9 and 120: l. 3-6.

⁸¹ “*bal ‘uqūl al-nās wa-ḥikmahum majbūla ‘alā inkārihi wa-nafyihī*” (*ibid.*, VII: 116, l. 15).

in actual Arabic usage is known to connote nothing of the specialized technical meaning of “one” as used by the philosophers and Mu‘tazilite theologians, it is not legitimate to appeal to such verses as “Your God is one God” (*wa-ilāhukum ilāhun wāḥid*)⁸² or “Say: He is God, [who is] One” (*qul huwa ’Llāhu aḥad*)⁸³ as textual support for the denial of the divine attributes. Ibn Taymiyya concludes that projecting the later technical philosophical meaning of the word “one” back onto terms like “*wāḥid*” or “*aḥad*” as used in revelation constitutes not only a falsification of (*fīr*ya ‘*alā*) the revealed texts, but also a distortion and disruption of the manner in which language itself functions as a tool for the communication of meaning among its speakers on the basis of a necessarily transparent and commonly shared linguistic habitus.⁸⁴ Indeed, as we read in the Qur’an itself, never did God dispatch an envoy but with a message in the *language of his people* so that he might make it (the message) clear to them.⁸⁵

So much, then, for the usage of the term “one” in the common speech of the Arabs to whom the Qur’an was initially revealed. But what of the particular use, if any, of the word “one” as employed by revelation specifically in relation to God? The oneness of God (*tawḥīd*) affirmed by revelation, Ibn Taymiyya explains, entails the affirmation not simply that God is numerically singular (i.e., that there is only one God and no others), but more specifically the affirmation of exclusive divinity (*ilāhiyya*) of God and God alone, which entails that there is no other would-be “*god*” (*ilāh*) rightfully deserving of worship save Him. To put it differently, the point of the Qur’an’s insistence on *tawḥīd* is not merely to assert that God is one, but that He is one *God*. Ibn Taymiyya cites a hadith and a number of Qur’anic verses to support this conception of what it means to declare that God is “one.”⁸⁶ This understanding, he tells us, stands in contrast to the definition that many *mutakallimūn* have given of the word “*tawḥīd*” when they define it as consisting (merely) of God’s oneness in His essence, having no part

⁸² Qur’an (al-Baqara) 2:163.

⁸³ Qur’an (al-Ikhlās) 112:1.

⁸⁴ *Dar’*, VII: 120, l. 7-8.

⁸⁵ “*wa-mā arsalnā min rasūlin illā bi-lisāni qawmihi li-yubayyina lahum*” [Qur’an (Ibrāhīm) 14:4].

⁸⁶ For a listing of the relevant verses, see *Dar’*, I: 224-225.

(*juzʿ*) or counterpart (*qasīm*), oneness in His attributes, wherein He has no like (*shabīh*), and oneness in His actions, in which He has no partner or co-sharer (*sharīk*). Yet this tripartite division of *tawḥīd* into oneness of essence, of attributes, and of acts only partly overlaps with the *tawḥīd* affirmed by revelation, which includes, as we have seen, a believer’s explicit affirmation, both in word and in deed, of God’s singular *divinity* (*ulūhiyya*) and unique right to be worshipped.⁸⁷ In this manner, Ibn Taymiyya concludes, the latter-day *mutakallimūn* fail to include in the meaning (*musammā*) of the word “*tawḥīd*” this aspect of divinity and rightful worship which is essential to it, while at the same time smuggling into it a range of other meanings – based on the private and idiosyncratic technical usage of the philosophers – that entail a contradiction of the plain sense of revelation through a negation of the divine attributes unambiguously affirmed therein.

We have seen in the preceding two paragraphs that the Qur’an uses the terms “*wāḥid*” and “*tawḥīd*” with respect to God both in terms of a common everyday meaning (namely, that there is only one entity who is God and not several), as well as in terms of a novel meaning inaugurated by revelation (namely, that this numerically singular God is alone deserving of worship). A problem arises, however, when a word is used in a technical sense by a particular group and infused with meanings not originally part of the semantic field assigned to it by its original users. For, as we have seen above, when the philosophers and Muʿtazila affirm that God has “no parts, no counterpart, and no like,” this is true, concedes Ibn Taymiyya, and conveys indeed a (rationally and scripturally) valid meaning, namely, the impossibility that God should separate into parts (*yatafarraq*), degenerate (*yafsud*), or disintegrate (*yastahīl*), for He is indeed both “*aḥad*” (singularly and emphatically One) and “*ṣamad*,” this latter qualification carrying the meaning, for physical objects, of that which is solid and has no hollow center, as well as the more abstract meaning of a “master or lord whose sovereignty and power are complete and perfect.”⁸⁸ Yet they then superimpose upon

⁸⁷ See Ibn Taymiyya’s treatise *Tawḥīd al-ulūhiyya* and related treatise *Tawḥīd al-rubūbiyya*.

⁸⁸ “*al-sayyid alladhī kamula suʿduduhū*” (*Darʿ*, I: 228, l. 6).

this correct meaning a negation of God's being separate (*mubāyin*) from and "above" the universe (*'uluwwuhu 'alā khalqihī*), and other such attributes that they deny on the grounds that affirming them would entail that God is composite (*murakkab*) and therefore divisible (*munqasim*), rendering Him in this manner "like" (*shabīh*) unto created things. Yet those knowledgeable of the Arabic language and the context of revelation, Ibn Taymiyya insists, know that such meanings are simply *not* designated by the terms "composition" (*tarkīb*), "divisibility" (*inqisām*), or yet "similarity" (*tamthīl*, *tashbīh*) in the commonly understood Arabic language in which the Qur'an has been revealed.

As for the precarious term "*tarkīb*" ('composition'), Ibn Taymiyya cites several common everyday meanings of this word, including: (1) that which has been put together or assembled by something else (*mā rakkabahu ghayruhu*); (2) that which was disaggregate and subsequently came together (*mā kāna muftariqan fa-jtama'a*); or (3) that which can be disassembled or taken apart (*mā yumkinu tafriq ba'dihi 'an ba'd*),⁸⁹ such as a man, an animal, or a plant.⁹⁰ Now, it is no doubt true, remarks Ibn Taymiyya, that God is not "composite" in any of these commonly understood senses. The philosophers (and particularly Ibn Sīnā), however, have adopted the word "composition" (*tarkīb*) as a technical term and endowed it with a number of meanings additional to its original connotations, among which is the notion that God must be devoid of all attributes so as not to be "composed" of His essence (*dhāt*) and His would-be attributes (*ṣifāt*).⁹¹ This conclusion is based on the premise that "Every composite entity (*kull murakkab*) is dependent upon (*muftaqir ilā*) its parts (*ajzā'ihī*)" or, alternatively, "dependent upon other than itself (*ghayrihi*)" – on the assumption that a thing's constituent parts are "other than" the thing itself taken as a composite whole.⁹² On this understanding, God's would-be attributes are taken to be "parts" (*ajzā'*) that are "other than" (*ghayr*) God Himself and upon which He would be "dependent"

⁸⁹ In another spot, Ibn Taymiyya uses the words "that whose parts can be separated" (*mā yaqbalu tafriq ajzā'ihī*) (ibid., III: 16, l. 3-4).

⁹⁰ Ibid., I: 280, l. 14-18. Also ibid., III: 16.

⁹¹ For a listing of the five technical usages the philosophers have added to the original meaning (*musammā*) of the word "*tarkīb*," see ibid., III: 389 – 390, l. 3. Also ibid., V: 142.

⁹² Ibid., III: 16, l. 1-2.

(*muftaqir*) if He were indeed to possess attributes. Not only would the possession of attributes, on this view, make God “composite” and not “one” (in the specialized philosophical sense of perfectly simple), but His alleged “dependency” on “other than” Himself would equally negate His perfection and divine self-sufficiency.

In this manner, Ibn Taymiyya remarks, the philosophers have negated God’s ontological reality (*ḥaqīqa*) and attributes (*ṣifāt*) thinking that, in doing so, they were preserving the unity (*tawḥīd*) of His essence (*dhāt*).⁹³ In reality, however, the distinction between essence and attributes, Ibn Taymiyya insists, is a purely mental one, as the various attributes of a given entity can only be separated out by the mind for the purpose of rational analysis, yet can never exist as such – that is, separate from essence – in the outside world.⁹⁴ In external reality, there can exist only the thing’s essence as qualified by the various attributes and properties concomitant to it.⁹⁵ In short, according to Ibn Taymiyya, while the mind may make a *logical* distinction between essence and attributes, the *ontological* reality of any existent entity necessarily comprises both its essence and concomitant attributes as one (ontologically) inseparable and indivisible whole. On this analysis, then, the philosophical maxim that “Every composite entity is dependent upon its parts” or “on what is other than it”⁹⁶ can, once the rational meanings have been stripped from the technical jargon of the philosophers, be translated, tautologously, as: “Any entity qualified by a necessary attribute concomitant to it can only exist along with its necessary attribute.”⁹⁷ And this meaning, Ibn Taymiyya asserts, is true (in fact it is tautological) and conforms both with a sound rational analysis of the issue as well as with the numerous

⁹³ Ibid., V: 141, l. 17-19.

⁹⁴ And it is only in this notional sense that one may legitimately describe an attribute as “other than” the entity as a whole or, indeed, “other than” – in the sense of distinct from – any of the entity’s other discrete attributes. (See *ibid.*, I: 281, l. 6-17).

⁹⁵ “*laysat lahu ḥaqīqa ḡayr al-dhāt al-mawṣūfa [bi-ṣifātiḥā al-lāzima laḥā]*.” (*ibid.*, I: 281, l. 7 and *ibid.*, III: 16-17 *passim*).

⁹⁶ “*kull murakkab muftaqir ilā ajzā’ihi, aw ilā ḡayrihi*.” For Ibn Taymiyya’s discussion of the word “*ḡayr*,” see *ibid.*, I: 281 and *ibid.*, III: 16-17.

⁹⁷ “*al-mawṣūf bi-ṣifa lāzima lahu lā yakūnu mawjūdān bi-dūn ṣifatihi al-lāzima lahu*” (*ibid.*, III: 16, l. 11-12).

scriptural dicta that unambiguously affirm specific attributes of God – quite in spite of the fact that the philosophers have chosen to refer to the inseparable attributes of an entity as “parts of” or as being “other than” the entity itself, or to describe the ontological concomitance (*istilzām*, *talāzum*) between the entity’s essence and its attributes as the “dependence” (*iftiqār*) of the former upon the latter, or to refer to the fact of an entity’s being qualified by necessary attributes concomitant to it a form of “composition” (*tarkīb*). Ibn Taymiyya’s point is that if *these* are the specialized, technical meanings the philosophers have given to the common terms “part,” “other,” “dependence,” and “composition,” then there is no rational or scriptural reason to deny the statement that God is “composed” (of His essence and attributes) and therefore “dependent” on “parts” that are “other than” Him on *this interpretation* of the terms – quite apart from the fact that such idiosyncratic meanings do *not* conform to what these words mean in the widely shared convention of Arabic speakers⁹⁸ and are therefore likely to be misleading and to give rise to numerous confusions and errors, both in terms of rational analysis and of scriptural interpretation. In the end, any given question must be decided on the basis of a sound rational analysis and a sound scriptural exegesis, once the terms of the discussion have been carefully analyzed and their various meanings separated, fully clarified, and judged for scriptural (as well as rational) integrity on an individual basis.

We have seen above the example of a term used in revelation (“*wāḥid*”) as well as a closely related term not used in revelation (“*tarkīb*”), both of which have undergone a significant semantic shift through being infused with unprecedented meanings reflecting a novel conceptual framework alien to the intellectual and linguistic habits of the early Muslims. This novel conceptual and linguistic schema is then read back into revelation by latter-day philosophers and theologians such that the uncontroversial statement “God is one and non-composite” – understood according to the original convention to carry the (scripturally af-

⁹⁸ Ibn Taymiyya explicitly states that “referring to this meaning as ‘composition’ is a convention that they (i.e., the philosophers) have established (*waḍʿ waḍaʿūhu*) and which does not conform to the (conventional) language of the Arabs or the language of any other community.” (ibid., I: 281, l. 2-3).

firmed and rationally coherent) meaning that there exists only one single entity who is God and who alone deserves to be worshipped, and who was neither “assembled” nor is subject to disaggregation – is now taken to carry the (scripturally indefensible and rationally incoherent) meaning that “God, who is perfectly simple, is pure being (*wujūd mutlaq*) possessed of no attributes whatsoever.” That such a notion of “God” is radically at odds with the plain meaning of scripture – understood according to the linguistic convention of its original recipients – is beyond question, since the terms “*wāḥid*” (‘one’), “*murakkab*” (‘composite’), and related terms carried, at the time of revelation, none of the highly specialized meanings invested in them by later philosophers attempting to express the assumptions and entailments of a foreign worldview in the Arabic language. Yet Ibn Taymiyya goes beyond asserting the mere scriptural incompatibility of such a notion of “God,” arguing that it is rationally indefensible as well, since “pure being” and a “pure essence” unqualified by any attributes, and the like, are, he insists, purely logical constructs which can only exist in the mind.⁹⁹ Therefore, a statement such as “God is one and non-composite” can responsibly be neither affirmed nor negated categorically until all of its constituent terms have been carefully dissected, whereupon one should then proceed to affirm and deny the individual *meanings* thus identified, regardless of the *terms* used to express them, for “consideration is given to realities (*ḥaqā’iq*) and meanings (*ma’ānī*), not to the mere words [by which they are expressed].”¹⁰⁰

VII. Conclusion

We began this chapter with a Qur’anic citation which reads: “Never did We dispatch an envoy but with a message in the language of his people, that he might make it clear to them (*li-yubayyina lahum*).”¹⁰¹ In a sense, this chapter – and indeed Ibn Taymiyya’s entire linguistic philosophy and hermeneutical ap-

⁹⁹ This topic will be taken up in greater detail in the following chapter.

¹⁰⁰ “*al-‘ibra fī al-ḥaqā’iq wa-l-ma’ānī lā fī mujarrad al-alfāz.*” See similar at *ibid.*, I: 282, 296, 299; *ibid.*, III: 237; and *ibid.*, IX: 291.

¹⁰¹ Qur’an (Ibrāhīm) 14:4.

proach – can be seen as a commentary on, and an elaboration of, this and similar verses. The fundamental fact of revelation is that it consists of a communiqué from God on high to His human creatures here on Earth. The message is vital, the communication essential, and the stakes for human welfare in this world and the next exceedingly high. If men are to be imparted the truth about themselves and their Creator and held morally accountable for this truth in an eternal after-life, then certainly, Ibn Taymiyya reasons, God would not fail to communicate to them with utmost clarity and determinacy the content of those beliefs and actions for which they will be held eternally responsible. We have paired the terms “clarity” and “determinacy” here purposely, for Ibn Taymiyya takes as axiomatic the existence of a strong correlation – or as he might say, a “*talāzum*” – between clarity on the one hand, and a determinacy approaching univocity (particularly in broad theological, as opposed to legal, matters) on the other. For Ibn Taymiyya, effective communication is that which leaves the recipient with no doubt regarding the content of the missive and the intentions of the dispatcher. A highly indeterminate text open to a multitude of contradictory readings¹⁰² would represent, for Ibn Taymiyya, a consummate failure in effective communication, leaving each reader to foist his own subjective opinions onto an effectively silent concatenation of ambivalent vocables. A text that can mean anything means, in fact, nothing.

Working, then, from the premise of the preeminent clarity and intelligibility of revelation, Ibn Taymiyya proceeds to elaborate a thoroughly language-based hermeneutic which views the collective repository of revealed texts as fully independent and self-sufficient in their conveyance of a unified, coherent, and comprehensible worldview and theology. The transparency and self-sufficiency of the texts relieve the exegete of any need for reliance on extra-textual sources in comprehending revelation, particularly the notoriously contentious and paro-

¹⁰² We say here specifically “contradictory readings,” since Ibn Taymiyya does allow that the words and verses of revelation can, to a limited degree, legitimately carry several meanings, but these, he insists, are always complementary, highlighting various aspects of one and the same reality, rather than contradictory. For a more detailed analysis, see Saleh, “Rise of Radical Hermeneutics,” 131-136.

chial “rational conclusions” (‘*aqliyyāt*) of the divers schools of philosophy and speculative theology. Ibn Taymiyya’s interpretive method, as we have seen, builds off of a larger linguistic epistemology which posits that the meaning of *any* linguistic utterance is solely determinable through a careful consideration of context, judged against the backdrop of the known linguistic convention of the speech community to which the language is directed. Context and convention work together to isolate, usually in a definitive manner, which of the various meanings connoted by a given word is meant in any given instance. Ibn Taymiyya’s insistence on the inherent and hence inescapable contextuality of *any* linguistic utterance (revelation or otherwise) renders redundant the traditional distinction between putatively “literal” (*ḥaqīqa*) and “metaphorical” (*majāz*) meanings presupposed by the kind of “third-wave” *ta’wīl* beloved to the philosophers and theologians but which Ibn Taymiyya insists was vehemently rejected by the early Salaf. If the apparent sense (*ẓāhir*) of any utterance is determined strictly as a function of context, then there can never be any need to “deflect” a word from its supposed primary meaning to a would-be secondary, “non-literal” one. Given the central importance Ibn Taymiyya gives to context, we have qualified his hermeneutics as a kind of “contextual *ta’wīl*,” an appellation which he would no doubt accept in as far as “*ta’wīl*” here be taken strictly in its original sense of “*tafsīr al-ma’nā*.”

Yet if we are to judge what a particular word must mean in a given context, we can only do so if we are thoroughly familiar with the wider linguistic conventions of our speech community which dictate that such-and-such a word *conventionally* carries such-and-such a meaning when used in such-and-such a context. Absent this experiential familiarity with the discrete conventions of a defined linguistic community, we would have no basis on which to pass an accurate judgment on the contextualized meaning of an utterance. Given that the Qur’an was revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad and his Companions in the form of 7th-century Classical Arabic familiar to them, it is, naturally, their linguistic convention (and related conceptual framework) that must be considered the final determinant of what revelation could have meant to them. And what revelation

meant to *them* is, for Ibn Taymiyya, what revelation means period. To entertain the possibility that revelation could have a “real meaning” at odds with the understanding of the Salaf, only to be uncovered generations later via the idiosyncratic conventions of a foreign society whose vocabulary, assumptions, and intellectual habits are *other than* those presupposed by Qur’an would, for Ibn Taymiyya, not only amount to a fatal contradiction of the Qur’an’s own self-proclaimed “clarity,” but would entail the categorical negation of the very essence of language and the designs and functioning of linguistic communication, be it divine or otherwise.¹⁰³

It is clear from the investigation conducted in this chapter that Ibn Taymiyya is seeking to effect a shift away from an approach to the revealed texts that prioritizes abstract speculation and that endeavors to fit revelation into the mold of a preset worldview allegedly derived on the basis of “pure reason” towards an approach thoroughly grounded in language and in which the revealed texts are fully self-sufficient in the conveyance of theological and other truths to humankind. In the following chapter, we turn our attention to how Ibn Taymiyya seeks to deconstruct the basic assumptions of *falsafa* in order to reestablish the connection – and the harmony – between authentic revelation (*naql ṣaḥīḥ*) and his reconstructed notion of pure reason (‘*aql ṣarīḥ*’).

¹⁰³ Once again, this should not be taken to mean that Ibn Taymiyya necessarily rejects the prerogative of later generations to entertain their own personal or collective insights regarding the texts, so long as these insights are complementary to – and never in contradiction with – the meanings we can determine to have been understood by the Salaf.

CHAPTER 5

Ṣarīḥ al-Ma‘qūl, or ‘What is Reason?’

“Shall we, whenever a man comes to us more disputatious than another,
abandon what Gabriel has brought to Muḥammad (pbuh)
on account of such a man’s controversy?”

(Mālik b. Anas)¹

I. Introduction

For Ibn Taymiyya, the question of the alleged conflict between reason and revelation in medieval Islam boils down, as we have seen, almost exclusively to a question of how to understand revealed texts that concern the Divine Attributes. In the last chapter, we explored Ibn Taymiyya’s approach to language and textual interpretation in order to uncover his methodology for determining precisely what it is that revelation says. In the current chapter, we explore the main elements of Ibn Taymiyya’s ontology and epistemology, both of which are central in his bid to demonstrate the possibility of maintaining a plain sense understanding of scripture – in accord with what he claims to be the universal practice of the Salaf – without running into rational contradictions or falling into assimilationism (*tashbīḥ*) of the type that would compromise God’s majesty, uniqueness, and utter dissimilarity from all created things. Once we have examined Ibn Taymiyya’s principal ontological and epistemological views, we shall then present and evaluate, by way of conclusion, his use of the various tools he has developed to attempt to resolve, once and for all, the centuries-long conflict between reason and revelation that constitutes the subject of the *Dar’ al-ta‘arūḍ*.

¹ “*a-wa-kullamā jā’anā rajul ajdal min rajul taraknā mā jā’a bihi Jibrīl ilā Muḥammad (ṣallā Al-lāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam) li-jadal hādihā?*” Cited at *Dar’*, I: 191, l. 2-3.

In a relatively brief passage in Volume VII of the *Dar'*, Ibn Taymiyya lays out, in an uncharacteristically explicit and theoretical fashion, the main outlines of a comprehensive epistemological system, in which he identifies three fundamental sources of knowledge: (1) sense (*ḥiss*), which comprises both an outer (*ẓāhir*) and an inner (*bāṭin*) dimension; (2) reason (*‘aql*), including both necessary *a priori* knowledge (*badīhiyyāt ḍarūriyya*) and that which can be derived through rational reflection and inference (*al-i‘tibār bi-l-naẓar wa-l-qiyyās*); and (3) report (*khābar*), or transmission, which includes, but is not limited to, the texts of revelation.² In the pages below, we shall “unpack” the passage in question by providing a detailed description of each individual source of knowledge and the various principles underlying its proper functioning and use. This exercise will then be followed by an examination of the common principles Ibn Taymiyya believes to underlie and ground these various sources of knowledge equally, primarily the notions of *fiṭra* and *tawātur*.

Yet before delving into Ibn Taymiyya’s views on reason and the acquisition of knowledge (that is, his epistemology), we will be well served first to explore his understanding of ontology. Ontology and epistemology lend themselves to a joint treatment since knowledge (a question of epistemology) is, for Ibn Taymiyya, first and foremost a question of knowing what exists “out there” (a question of ontology), that is, knowing what entities or kinds of entities enjoy substantive, extra-mental existence in the outside world.³ Furthermore, Ibn Taymiyya’s critique of the ontology espoused by the philosophers (and some theologians) is central to his project in the *Dar'* and must, therefore, be adequately accounted for if his attempted deconstruction and reconstruction of reason proper is to be adequately appreciated. That is, Ibn Taymiyya not only critiques the philosophers’ mishandling of reason but also, more fundamentally, their presumptions concerning the very nature of reality itself, that reality about which they purport to be reasoning. Finally, since a major pillar of Ibn Taymiyya’s

² Ibid., VII: 324.

³ See, for example, ibid., VI: 98, l. 4, where he says: “*wa-laysa al-maqṣūd al-awwal bi-l-‘ilm illā ‘ilm mā huwa thābit fī al-khārij.*”

ya's project rests on his contention that the philosophers are the victims of massive confusion regarding what exists "out there" versus what exists only in the mind, considerations of ontology and epistemology must be treated in tandem if an adequate understanding of Ibn Taymiyya's fundamentally epistemological project – namely, of resolving the alleged conflict between reason and revelation, particularly with regard to the Divine Attributes – is to be made possible. Once we have probed Ibn Taymiyya's understanding of what reality consists of, we will be in a position to account for his views on the various ways in which we gain knowledge of that reality. We will then be in a position to discuss, in our conclusion, how Ibn Taymiyya marshals the various elements of his ontological and epistemological (as well as linguistic) reforms in an attempt to dissolve certain key elements of philosophical thought which he holds to be both rationally indefensible and, at the same time, primarily responsible for the alleged contradictions between "reason" and revelation that he has set himself the task of refuting.

II. 'What Exists?' Ibn Taymiyya's Account of Reality

A recurrent theme which Ibn Taymiyya stresses repeatedly throughout many of his writings is the necessity of differentiating sharply between that which has purely mental existence (such as universal concepts and notions existing in the mind) and that which exists "out there" in external reality (*fī al-khārij*). Ibn Taymiyya often denotes this distinction by means of an alliterative pair of terms whereby mental notions are said to exist "*fī al-adhḥān*" (lit., "in [our] minds") while any externally existing entity (*ʿayn*) is said to exist "*fī al-aʿyān*" (lit., "as entities"), that is, as a self-standing external entity. The various notions that exist in the mind are said to be "*maʿqūl*" (mental, notional, logical), while that which exists in the extra-mental world is, for Ibn Taymiyya, invariably "*maḥsūs*" (empirical, or perhaps "perceivable"). It is critical to grasp that in Ibn Taymiyya's schema, *maʿqūl* (mental / notional) and *maḥsūs* (empirical / perceptible) are mutually exclusive and logically exhaustive categories. Thus, something exists

either as a concept in the mind (like universals, abstract number, etc.) *or else* as a perceivable entity in the external world (‘*ayn maḥsūs fī al-khārij*) – only one or the other and never both together. We shall first present a synopsis of Ibn Taymiyya’s account of what exists “out there” (*fī al-a‘yān*) and how we can come to know it, then take up the question of what subsists in the mind (*fī al-adhhān*) in a subsequent section dedicated to the nature and functioning of reason.

The Realm of A‘yān: Seen and Unseen

We begin our discussion with the realm of empirical reality (the *maḥsūs*), the existing entities (*a‘yān*) of which are divided into two distinct sub-realms, the realm of the seen (‘*ālam al-shahāda*) and the realm of the unseen (‘*ālam al-ghayb*). The term “*shahāda*,” a Qur’anic term⁴ whose literal signification is “that which is visible,” applies collectively to the entities that are present (*shāhid*) and perceptible to us now through our various external senses (*ḥiss ṣāhir*), such as sight, hearing, touch, etc. Such entities include essentially all the various objects we see, hear, taste, feel, and smell in our daily lives, as well as the various events which we witness personally. The term “*ghayb*,” also a Qur’anic term,⁵ applies to anything that exists but that is not perceptible to – i.e., is “absent” (*ghā’ib*) from – our external senses. Now, of the entities that are perceptible to us as part of our witnessed (*mashhūd*) external reality, some possess both an outward (*ṣāhir*) aspect as well as an inward (*bāṭin*) aspect. The outward aspect, such as the body of a human being, is perceived, naturally, through the external senses (*ḥiss ṣāhir*). The “inner” perceived (*maḥsūs*) aspects proper, say, to a human are defined by Ibn Taymiyya to include the subjective experience of internal physical states such as hunger and satiety, as well as emotional or psychological states, such as joy, anger, pain, and the like.⁶ And while a person’s inner aspect (*bāṭin*) is not

⁴ See Qur’an (al-Taghābun) 64:18, (al-Baqara) 2:185, (al-Anbiyā’) 21:61, (Yūsuf) 12:80.

⁵ See Qur’an (Yūsuf) 12:52, 80; (al-An‘ām) 6:59.

⁶ Abstract relational and intentional realities, such as amity and enmity, do not count as *maḥsūs* for Ibn Taymiyya, but rather are classified as “notions” (*ma‘ānī*), and thus enjoy mental existence in the mind. Thus, while the desire and bloodlust a wolf might feel upon eyeing a lonely sheep are, like anger and pain, *maḥsūs* realities that the wolf experiences through *ḥiss bāṭin*, the sheep’s

itself empirically perceivable to others, it nevertheless remains in essence “perceptible” (*maḥsūs*),⁷ specifically to the person himself through his own “internal perception” (*ḥiss bāṭin*).⁸ Notwithstanding these inner states inhering in what are otherwise outwardly perceivable entities, the vast majority of what exists in the *ghayb* consists of various self-standing entities (*a’yān qā’ima bi-anfusihā*) and events that are, like all existing entities and events, in and of themselves perceptible (*maḥsūs*), though not (normally) perceivable to us through our external senses (*ḥiss ṣāḥir*). Nevertheless, Ibn Taymiyya does allow that of the various entities existing in the *ghayb*, we *can* perceive, through a type of *ḥiss bāṭin*, the existence of both our soul and of God. As for all other entities and events that exist in the *ghayb* – most notably angels and *jinn*, and various eschatological events such as the life of the grave, the events of the resurrection and Day of Judgment, heaven and hell, etc. – to the extent we can know anything about them at all, it is only through what Ibn Taymiyya identifies as our second major source of knowledge after (inner and outer) perception, namely “report” (*khabar*), which we shall treat in greater detail further below.

Now, the fact that entities existing in the *ghayb* are not amenable to our empirical verification through *ḥiss ṣāḥir* in no way negates their factual existence as objectively real, self-standing entities in and of themselves. In fact, of the two realms, it is the *ghayb* that appears to be the more fundamentally real, and it is of note that in every instance in which the terms “*ghayb*” and “*shahāda*” are mentioned together in the Qur’an, it is invariably the *ghayb* which is mentioned first (it is always “*al-ghayb wa-l-shahāda*,” never “*al-shahāda wa-l-ghayb*”). Yet we must not imagine the realm of the *ghayb* and that of the *sha-*

perception that the wolf harbors enmity towards her or constitutes an enemy to her is, in essence, a relational judgment (*ḥukm*) and, as such, exists as a mental or notional phenomenon in the mind of the sheep. The fear, however, induced by the notional judgment of the wolf’s enmity towards her is an internal (and hence *ghā’ib*), perceptible (*maḥsūs*) reality experienced by the sheep through *ḥiss bāṭin*. (See *Dar’*, VI: 44, 52).

⁷ Ibn Taymiyya states explicitly that “[a person’s] inner state (*bāṭin*) is not perceptible to us upon seeing his outer form, *not* because it is inherently imperceptible (*lā li-‘adam imkān iḥsāsihi*), but rather because his inner state is veiled (*lākin li-‘ḥtijāb bāṭinihi*) or on account of another reason (*aw li-ma‘nā ākhar*). Ibid., VI: 32, l. 15 – 33, l. 2.

⁸ Ibid., VI: 108, l. 10-13.

hāda to be hermetically sealed off from one another in any categorical fashion. Of the two realms, the *ghayb* is the more comprehensive and seemingly less restricted, with the intelligent beings inhabiting it – such as the angels and *jinn* – appearing to have full access to our empirical realm (that of the *shahāda*), though the reverse does not normally hold true. The interrelational nature of the *shāhid* and *ghā'ib* realms is further underscored by the fact that prophets, for instance, are quite regularly given empirical access to various realms of the unseen world, whereby they are able to perceive entities such as angels and *jinn* and hear what they are saying.⁹ Conversely, elements of the *ghayb* occasionally impinge upon our empirical (*shāhid*) realm, such as the occasion on which the angel Gabriel is reported to have appeared to the Prophet Muḥammad at the time of the first revelation of the Qur'an, or the account in the well-known “Hadith of Gabriel” in which this latter appears in the realm of the *shahāda* in the form of a man who interacted with the Prophet and Companions directly.¹⁰

Finally, the soul (*rūḥ*), a self-standing entity (‘*ayn*) existing in the *ghayb* yet associated with our physical body for the duration of our worldly life, is able to perceive things that the body cannot perceive, similar to the manner in which a person might experience things imperceptible to other people during a state in which he is “disconnected” to a degree from his normal bodily perceptions, as in dream.¹¹ Upon death, the soul becomes even more definitively disconnected from the body and thus can sense and can see (*tuhiss wa-tarā*) things that it cannot sense and see currently while still connected with the body. If, Ibn Taymiyya urges, we realize that the soul can perceive things that the body cannot, and that

⁹ Ibid., VI: 108, l. 18 – 109, l. 1. The Qur'an contains numerous passages in which prophets are depicted as having direct interaction with the ‘*ālam al-ghayb*. See for example, Qur'an (al-Naml) 27:16-44 and Q. (Ṣād) 38:36. Similarly, there exist many hadith reports in which the Prophet is reported to have been given access to the realm of the *ghayb*, such as seeing and hearing angels or *jinn* on discrete occasions, seeing and hearing events transpiring a great distance away, or, most notably, his traveling on the occasion of the Heavenly Ascension (*mi'rāj*) through the seven heavens and being granted, among other things, glimpses into future scenes of paradise and hell (on the interpretation that the *mi'rāj* was a real event – *ḥaqīqa* – and not merely a dream vision, or *ru'yā*).

¹⁰ See ibid., VI: 32-33 for this paragraph in general.

¹¹ Ibn Taymiyya seems to be speaking here, with respect to the perception of the *rūḥ*, of the kind of spiritual unveiling, or *kashf*, in which discrete elements of the *ghayb* are disclosed to a person as a matter of divine favor.

some people can perceive with their bodies and souls that which others cannot, we would realize that the avenues and modalities of perception (*ṭuruq al-ḥiss*) are, in fact, numerous and not limited simply to what the majority of people are able to perceive in the realm of the *shahāda* via their bodily senses, as such senses are apt to perceive only *some* of what exists in the external world. It is in this expanded sense that Ibn Taymiyya maintains the view that every self-standing entity (*kull qā'im bi-nafsihi*) is, in one way or another, perceivable (*yumkin al-iḥsās bihi*).¹²

It emerges from the foregoing that the distinction between the *shāhid* and *ghā'ib* realms, for Ibn Taymiyya, is not an absolute ontological distinction as much as it is a relative (and ultimately epistemological) one determined by the particular range and limitations of normal human sense perception. *All* things in existence – that is, all the *a'yān* of the *shāhid* and *ghā'ib* realms – are perceptible (*maḥsūs*) in their own right, only that *some* of them are perceptible to us in the current world (*al-dunyā*) through our external perception, while others have been placed categorically beyond the reach of our senses (even when radically extended by, for example, the use of modern microscopes, telescopes, and the like). From a purely ontological perspective, both realms are equally existent, real, “out there” (*fī al-khārij*), and are both equally populated by inherently perceptible, self-standing entities (*a'yān maḥsūsa qā'ima bi-anfusiḥā*) existing in their own right, distinct from and independent of other existent and self-standing entities.¹³

Beyond this ontological dimension, the notion of “*ghayb*” likewise comprises a temporal aspect, reflected in Ibn Taymiyya’s definition of the *ghayb* as “that which is imperceptible to us *now* in the current world” (*ghayr mashhūd la-*

¹² *Dar'*, VI: 110, l. 2-8.

¹³ The fundamental ontological distinction to be made, as we shall see eventually, is the distinction between the necessary, uncreated, eternal, and indestructible existence of God, on the one hand, and the contingent, created, temporal existence of everything other than God (both *shāhid* and *ghā'ib*), on the other. These qualities (necessity vs. contingency, eternity vs. temporality, etc.) are inherent to the entity in question and therefore hold true in an absolute sense, i.e., they are not relative to us as human beings as is the case with the fact that some created, contingent realities happen to be perceptible to us in the current world (and are thus “*shāhid*”) while others happen not to be (and are thus “*ghā'ib*”).

nā al-ān fī al-dunyā).¹⁴ So in addition to those entities that exist concurrently with us but in the unseen realm, the *ghayb*, from the perspective of its temporal aspect, also comprises all events that have occurred in the realm of the *shāhid* but in the past or that will occur in the *shāhid* realm in the future. For although such events partake ontologically of the realm of the *shahāda* (i.e., their occurrence takes place in our realm of time and space and in a manner analogous to the events we witness in our current *shāhid* reality), they are nevertheless not perceptible *to us* right *now*. Use of the word “*ghayb*” with reference to future events to occur in the *shāhid* realm is evidenced in a phrase such as “*lā ya‘lamu al-ghayb illā Allāh*”¹⁵ (lit., ‘Only God knows the *ghayb*’), which is functionally equivalent to English “Only God knows the future.” The use of “*ghayb*” in reference to past *shāhid* events appears, for instance, in Qur’an (Hūd) 11:49, where, after a long passage detailing the events of the life of Noah, God addresses the Prophet Muḥammad with the words: “That is from the news of the unseen (*anbā’ al-ghayb*) which we reveal to thee (O Muḥammad).”¹⁶

Finally, in addition to its ontological and temporal dimensions, the *ghayb* further comprises a spatial dimension, whereby even those things that exist contemporaneously with me in the realm of the *shahāda*, but which are not immediately present to *my* sense perception *now*, are considered “*ghā’ib*” with respect *to me*. Under this aspect of the *ghayb* would fall essentially all places, persons, and events currently existing in the world but of which I myself do not currently have direct empirical experience through external perception (*ḥiss zāhir*). With the destruction of the current order of existence (*al-dunyā*) and the creation of a new one (*khalq jadīd*)¹⁷ at the end of time, the distinction between the *shahāda* and the *ghayb* will be abrogated, the veil currently concealing the latter from the

¹⁴ See similar at *Dar’*, VI: 107, IX: 15.

¹⁵ reminiscent of Qur’an (al-Naml) 27:65, which states: “Say: None in the heavens and earth knows the unseen save God, and they perceive not when they shall be resurrected” (*qul lā ya‘lamu man fī ‘l-samāwāti wa-l-arḍi ‘l-ghayba illā ‘Llāhu wa-mā yash‘urūna ayyāna yub‘athūn*).

¹⁶ “*tilka min anbā’i ‘l-ghaybi nūḥīhā ilayk*.” See similar at Qur’an (Āl ‘Imrān) 3:44 and Q. (Yūsuf) 12:102.

¹⁷ See Qur’an (al-Isrā’) 17:49.

former lifted, and all previously *ghā'ib* entities – including God¹⁸ – shall become directly perceivable (*mashhūd*) and experienced immediately through *ḥiss zāhir*. At that time, Ibn Taymiyya affirms, what we used to merely know about with certainty (‘*ilm al-yaqīn*’) will dramatically come to be witnessed and experienced directly (‘*ayn al-yaqīn*’).¹⁹

Let us briefly recapitulate before moving on. Ibn Taymiyya begins by drawing a fundamental distinction between that which has purely mental (*ma‘qūl*) existence and that which enjoys outside “perceivable” (*maḥsūs*) existence, describing the former as existing “*fī al-adhhān*” and the latter as existing “*fī al-a‘yān*.” The various entities (*a‘yān*) that enjoy objective external existence are themselves divided, with respect to our empirical access to them, into two distinct realms, that of the *shahāda* and that of the *ghayb*. The realm of the *shahāda* comprises that which is perceptible to our external senses (*ḥiss zāhir*) at the current moment. The term “*ghayb*” is normally used in reference to the vast realm of the unseen, that which, with few exceptions, is categorically veiled from human sense perception in this world. Through a type of “internal perception” (*ḥiss bāṭin*), we experience inner physical and psychic states like hunger, fear, etc. It is through inner perception also that we are able to sense the existence of our souls and of God. The soul itself, in turn, possesses a capacity for seeing and perceiving things, through *ḥiss bāṭin*, which the body cannot. In addition to God and the soul, the *ghayb* also contains numerous other self-standing entities, most notably angels and *jinn*. The word “*ghayb*” is used likewise to refer to the various eschatological events that will occur after the destruction of the current order (the *dunyā*), such as the Day of Judgment and the realities of heaven and hell. The realm of the *ghayb*, from another angle, likewise includes all past and future events in the *shāhid* realm, as well as all currently existing objects and events in the realm of the *shāhid* that are not the object of a given indi-

¹⁸ A reference to the famous “*ru‘ya*,” alluded to in Qur’an (al-Qiyāma) 75:22-23: “[Some] faces that day will be radiant / Gazing upon their Lord.”

¹⁹ This distinction between “‘*ilm al-yaqīn*’” (the ‘knowledge of certainty’) and “‘*ayn al-yaqīn*’” (the ‘eye of certainty’) is a direct allusion to Qur’an (al-Takāthur) 102: 5-7: “Nay! If you only knew with knowledge of certainty (‘*ilm al-yaqīn*’) / You will surely see the Hellfire / Then will you surely see it with the eye of certainty (‘*ayn al-yaqīn*’).”

vidual's direct empirical perception at the current moment. The distinction between *shahāda* and *ghayb* thus comprises an ontological, a temporal, and a spatial dimension, and is ultimately a relative distinction with respect to a given perceiving subject's empirical access to it or lack thereof. What I perceive right now through my external senses is *shāhid* (to me). All else, from this perspective, is *ghayb*.

The ontological affirmation of an unseen realm that lies inherently and irrevocably beyond our current sense perception raises an important epistemological question: How may we come to know of the existence of such a realm and the realities of which it is populated? Indeed, how is it that we come to know anything at all?

III. 'How Do We Know What Exists?' The Primary Sources of Knowledge: *Hiss* and *Khabar*

If we have spent so much time in the preceding section elaborating Ibn Taymiyya's account of the seen and the unseen realms, it is primarily because for Ibn Taymiyya, as we have mentioned, to know is first and foremost to have knowledge of what exists "out there" (*fī al-khārij*) as self-standing entities in the external world (*fī al-a'yān*). Only after accounting for *what* exists (a question of ontology) can we then turn to consider precisely *how* it is that we come to know what exists (a question of epistemology). A second reason, as we have previously suggested, is that a great deal of Ibn Taymiyya's critique of philosophical discourse on the alleged conflict between reason and revelation can be reduced precisely to a question of confused ontology, namely, the charge that the philosophers have fatally confused that which has ontological existence in the external world with that which has purely logical existence in the mind.²⁰ After exploring

²⁰ The philosophers in fact claim, Ibn Taymiyya tells us, that the *ghayb* mentioned in revelation refers to that which is *ma'qūl*, while the *shahāda* refers to the empirical world available to the external senses. See *Dar'*, VI: 33 and *ibid.*, VI: 107. Also *ibid.*, IX: 14-15, where Ibn Taymiyya affirms that revelation, in fact, has not differentiated between *ghayb* and *shahāda* on the basis that the one (the *ghayb*) is mental (*ma'qūl*) while the other (the *shahāda*) is empirical (*maḥsūs*), as the philosophers surmise, but rather that one (the *shahāda*) is *visible to us now*, while the other (the *ghayb*) is absent from our empirical perception (*ghā'ib 'annā*) at the current time, though

below in greater depth exactly how it is we come to know of what exists “*fī al-a’yān*,” we will then consider, in the following section, Ibn Taymiyya’s account of the mental realm, that is, what exists “*fī al-adhhān*.”

A. The First Source of Knowledge: Ḥiss (perception)

Ibn Taymiyya has often been referred to as an empiricist, and indeed he identifies the primary and most fundamental source of human knowledge as perception (*ḥiss*). As we have seen above, *ḥiss* comprises both an external (*ẓāhir*) and an internal (*bāṭin*) dimension. It is through *ḥiss ẓāhir* – primarily our five senses – that we come to know the objects of the empirical world around us, that world which he have identified as the realm of the *shahāda*. It is through our internal sense (*ḥiss bāṭin*) that we experience various subjective emotive and psychic states, and through which we can also perceive the existence both of God and of our own souls. Our souls, in turn, may perceive through *ḥiss bāṭin* certain unseen (*ghā’ib*) realities that are veiled to the external senses. Other than God, our souls, and that which our souls may perceive, we have no access to anything else in the *ghayb* through our inner perception (nor, by definition, through *ḥiss ẓāhir*). Anything else existing in the *ghayb* that we can know about can only be known to us through a second, critical source of knowledge, namely, “report” (*khavar*).

B. The Second Source of Knowledge: Khavar (report)

Sense perception, for Ibn Taymiyya, is the most immediate, necessary, and undeniable source of knowledge. It is the source of all knowledge we have about our empirical world, and in a fundamental sense lies at the base of all knowledge that we can have altogether (even that knowledge more proximately mediated to

still in itself fundamentally capable of being perceived (*yumkin al-iḥsās bihi*) (ibid., VI: 107). Otherwise, anything existing in either of these two realms – in other words, anything existing “out there” at all, since the realms of the *ghayb* and the *shahāda* exhaust all objective external existence – is, of necessity, in some sense “perceivable,” or *maḥsūs* (which is not necessarily to say “physical”). Mental notions and categories, the stuff and contents of the mind – i.e., that which is *ma’qūl* – are an entirely separate category for Ibn Taymiyya and have nothing to do with the “*ghayb*” spoken of in revelation.

us via reason or report). Yet for all its immediacy, poignancy, and undeniable concreteness, sensory knowledge is, in the end of the day, also extremely limited, for it only comprises what each of us has personally witnessed himself. It is indeed difficult to imagine a reality in which we had no knowledge of anything other than what we have come to know through our own limited direct perception. Indeed, a moment's reflection will reveal that the vast majority of what we in fact do know about our world, both present and past, is known to us through quite another source, or rather, a collection of sources that can be grouped together under the term "report" (*khavar*). Literally *everything* we know about the objects and events of the world other than those we have personally witnessed – including past eras of human history as well as currently existing lands and people in far-off places, not to mention the *ghayb* proper – is ultimately based on some type of "reporting" or transmission. For this reason, Ibn Taymiyya describes report as being more general and more comprehensive (*a'amm wa-ashmal*) than sense perception, although sense perception – particularly that of sight – is more complete and perfect (*atamm wa-akmal*). Indeed, as the Arabic saying goes, "hearing of a thing is not like seeing it" (*laysa al-mukhbar ka-l-mu'āyan*). It nevertheless remains true that we can come to know via report many times that which any given individual could possibly witness personally, and in this sense, it can be said that it is through *khavar* that we are able to escape imprisonment in the vivid but narrow confines of what is perceptible to us in the current moment. And since "what is perceptible to us in the current moment" is the very definition of the *shāhid*, it follows that anything we come to know through *khavar* necessarily falls within the realm of the *ghayb* in one manner or another. Nevertheless, it turns out that even *khavar* itself is grounded ultimately in sense perception (*ḥiss*), for anything accurately reported to us concerning any event, person, or place must originally have been experienced by *somebody* through his senses, and then subsequently transmitted to others in the form of a report. At the other end of the transmission process, it is also through our own senses that we are able to receive reports – primarily, for Ibn Taymiyya, through our sense of hearing, or *sam'*.

The Arabic word “*sam‘*,” of course, refers not just to hearing (reports) in general, but also to hearing a very specific and special type of “report,” namely, revelation. Revelation constitutes a “report” (*khavar*) in as far as it consists of “that of which the prophets have brought [us] news concerning the unseen” (*al-ghayb alladhī akhbarat bihi al-rusul*).²¹ The “reports” that constitute revelation are, like any other report, ultimately based in *ḥiss*, and this from two angles. First, revelation initially impinges upon our world as a recited text which is first received, then subsequently transmitted, through *sam‘*, one of our primary external senses. Second, in as far as revelation is reporting to us primarily about the *ghayb*, it is reporting to us about entities, realities, and events that are inherently perceptible (*maḥsūs*), even if they are (normally) veiled to our senses in the current world and/or have not yet come to pass. Even God Himself, for Ibn Taymiyya, is “*maḥsūs*” (as all existent realities must be that are not merely concepts subsisting in the mind), in the sense that we can perceive Him through *ḥiss bāṭin* in the current world and through *ḥiss ḡāḥir* in the world to come. In sum, then, it is through *khavar* that we come to know a great deal about our world, what it currently contains and what has previously existed or occurred in it. Similarly, everything we know about the actual parallel realm of the *ghayb* (i.e., that realm of existence which is permanently absent, or *ghā’ib*, from the empirical experience of human beings in the *dunyā*) is likewise known to us through *khavar* – in this case, the special set of *akhbār* that constitute divine revelation. Such things include information (*akhbār*) concerning the angels and *jinn*, heaven, hell, the Primordial Covenant (*al-mīthāq*)²² and the creation of man, the life of the grave and the events of the Last Day, etc. It also includes, naturally, everything of which revelation informs us regarding the nature of God – most importantly, for Ibn Taymiyya, His qualities and attributes.

But the world contains all manner of various “reports,” and if we are so beholden to such reports for so much of what we claim to know about the world, how can we distinguish authentic reports – those which Ibn Taymiyya refers to

²¹ Ibid., IX: 14, l. 16.

²² See Qur’an (al-A‘rāf) 7:172.

as “*khābar ṣādiq*,” or ‘true report’ – from dubious ones? With respect to religious texts that convey knowledge of the *ghayb* – namely, the Qur’an and the prophetic hadith reports – Ibn Taymiyya’s views are entirely standard in the context of the Islamic scholarly tradition. Any hadith report that can be determined to be “authentic” (*ṣaḥīḥ*) according to the developed criteria of classical hadith scholarship counts, for Ibn Taymiyya, as *khābar ṣādiq* and can be taken as a reliable indicator of truth about reality. Absolute certainty of the veracity of a report’s content is, however, reserved to those texts that have reached us through the process of *tawātur*, or “recurrent mass transmission,” whereby a report has been transmitted from its origin on such a wide scale and from so many disparate and unrelated sources as to preclude the possibility of it having been forged through “collusion” or conscious agreement (*tawāfu*). Islamic textual criticism considers the entire text of the Qur’an to be *mutawātir*, in addition to a (widely disagreed upon) number of hadith reports. The concept of *tawātur*, as is known, comprises not only the category of “*mutawātir lafẓī*,” in which the precise wording of the report in question has been transmitted in massively recurrent fashion, but also the (numerically more significant) category of “*tawātur ma‘nawī*,” in which a common *meaning* is guaranteed through *tawātur*, despite insignificant differences in the precise wording of the reports that converge upon this meaning.²³ It is of note that it is the same principle of *tawātur* – albeit not through the mechanism of formal hadith reports involving the *sanad*, etc. – that we have come to know, for example, the legendary generosity of Ḥātim al-Ṭā‘ī (d. 578 c.e.) or, for that matter, the extraordinary life and circumstances of the Prophet Muḥammad, on the basis of which the authenticity of his claim to prophecy can be substantiated.²⁴

Apart from the transmission of texts, there is also a sense in which the principle of *tawātur* operates at a discipline-specific level to guarantee the authenticity of the knowledge cultivated in a particular field of study – specifically

²³ For Ibn Taymiyya’s discussion of the use of various classes of hadith, and the different positions that have been held with respect to them, see *Dar’*, III: 383-384.

²⁴ See *ibid.*, VII: 215-216.

fields in which epistemic authenticity is directly linked to the faithful transmission of an early normative doctrine, as is the case in the majority of the Islamic religious sciences.²⁵ Authoritative *tawātur* in such cases is to be judged by – and often only exists with respect to – those most thoroughly versed in a particular field. In this manner, certain opinions of Sībawayhi (d. ca. 180/796) may be *mutawātir* for the professional grammarian, though not for the non-specialist public. A similar situation obtains in fields such as medicine, as well as in the various Islamic religious disciplines. In this vein – and in light of his overall theological concerns in the *Dar’ al-ta’arūf* – Ibn Taymiyya takes the opportunity to remark that the various reports (*akhbār*) we have from the Companions on theological issues (*uṣūl al-dīn*) are, in fact, far stronger and greater in number than many of the legal (*fiqh*) issues that are also *mutawātir* and which everyone accepts without quarrel. In other words, we have here a particularly important subset of *mutawātir* reports that complement the set of *akhbār* constituting the Qur’an and Sunna, namely, the *mutawātir* transmission of the positions and understandings – both in legal matters but especially in creed – of the early authoritative generations of Muslims, the *salaf al-ṣāliḥ*. This subcategory of *tawātur* is, incidentally, related to our discussion in Chapter 4 of the linguistic convention – and the specific known interpretations (*aqwāl*) – of the Salaf, to which Ibn Taymiyya accords such primacy in his hermeneutics of revelation and, indeed, in his overall theory of language and meaning. As we saw in that chapter, Ibn Taymiyya regards the linguistic convention of the Salaf, and indeed the Arabic language itself, as having been passed down in a *mutawātir* fashion just like any other field of inquiry, at least with respect to those who have specialty expertise knowledge in the matter by having acquainted themselves intimately with the Companion’s linguistic convention and that of the surrounding linguistic substrate (e.g., through the study of poetry and the like). Indeed, Ibn Taymiyya speaks of that which is “necessarily known regarding the Arabic language” (*al-ma’lūm bi-l-*

²⁵ For this discussion, see *ibid.*, VII: 32ff.

idṭirār min lughat al-‘arab), a necessity which derives through none other than the *mutawātir* transmission of the language through time and space.

Ibn Taymiyya raises one final question which we must take up before we can leave the question of *khavar* as a major source of our knowledge about the world. How, he asks with respect to various kinds of reports (*akhbār*), can we be sure that mass transmission alone yields authentic knowledge when in fact we observe that many sizeable communities, such as Christians and Jews, have massively transmitted among themselves doctrines and reports that Muslims consider to be false? Ibn Taymiyya answers this query with the response more or less standard in the science of hadith, namely, that the mass transmission must be known to have begun from the very origin of the report in question. Barring this, it is always possible, and in fact common among all sectors of humanity, that certain opinions of originally obscure origin subsequently become generalized amongst a population and end up being further propagated and passed down by them in a manner that subsequently (and only subsequently) takes on the characteristics of *mutawātir* transmission. For Ibn Taymiyya, however, many – perhaps the majority – of the beliefs (*i’tiqādāt*) that people come to hold in this manner are simply instances of false *tawātur*. This is so because the beliefs in question are very often conceived and articulated by an (often elite) minority in society, which then propagates and campaigns for the new views until they become generally accepted, at which point they take on the staying force and virtually unquestioned authority of a *tawātur* report or notion, a phenomenon to which Ibn Taymiyya gives the name “*ishtihār al-qawl ‘an taqlīd*,” that is, the popularization of a position on the basis of imitation. The minority in question first formulates and adopts the view through “conscious agreement” (*tawātu’, muwāṭa’a*) among themselves, subsequent to which others, who have taken the opinions of the group as authoritative, simply adopt the view in question through “imitation” (*taqlīd*) then further propagate it until it reaches the level of *ishtihār*, if not outright *tawātur*, among some at a certain point in the future.

To summarize the foregoing, then, external reality is made up of innumerable discrete entities (*a’yān*), some of which we have current empirical ac-

cess to (the *shahāda*) through our external senses (*ḥiss ẓāhir*) and some of which are hidden from our senses (the *ghayb*). We know the *shahāda* in a straightforward manner through our external sense perceptions (*ḥiss ẓāhir*). Whatever we know of the *ghayb* we know primarily through the vehicle of report (*khābar*).

But if this is Ibn Taymiyya’s account of the various realms and entities that exist “out there” (*fī al-a’yān*), what is his account of the *ma‘qūl*, that which exists, on his view, purely in the mind (*fī al-adhhān*)?

IV. The Realm of the Mind: What Exists *fī al-adhhān*?

A. Universals

We began this chapter by drawing attention to the fundamental distinction Ibn Taymiyya makes between the realm of the “*a’yān*” (external existence) and that of the “*adhhān*” (mental existence). The conception of mental (*dhihnī*) vs. extra-mental (*khārijī*) existence delineated above has direct consequences for Ibn Taymiyya’s critique of the philosophers’ understanding of universals, a critique which represents a principal lynchpin in his overall project of deconstructing *falsafa* and reconstructing in its place what he holds to be truly sound reason (‘*aqīl ṣarīḥ*). Ibn Taymiyya maintains that it is a matter of necessary knowledge that all existents fall into one of two mutually exclusive categories: that which exists as an independent, self-standing entity in the external world (*mawjūd fī nafsihi*) and that which exists as a concept in the mind (*mutaṣawwar fī al-dhihn*).²⁶ We have also discussed, in the preceding section, Ibn Taymiyya’s contention that all externally existent entities (*a’yān mawjūda fī al-khārij*) are, of necessity, in some sense “perceivable” (*maḥsūs*). Ibn Taymiyya advances this thesis primarily against the philosophers’ notion that certain ontologically extant realities exist “out there” as purely mental or notional entities. The philosophers targeted by Ibn Taymiyya are those who in general view universals as having independent ontological existence in the external world, apart from any extant particulars as-

²⁶ Ibid., V: 135.

sociated with them. Thus, in addition to the set of all existing individual human beings, there exists “universal man” (*al-insān al-kullī*, *al-insān al-muṭlaq*). The existence of “universal man” is posited to be ontologically independent of the extant particulars, while the particulars are said, on the Platonic view, to “participate” (*tashtarik*) in the universal or, on the Aristotelian view, to inhere in each of the particulars. It is by virtue of their participation in the universal that the particulars can be said to belong to one and the same species (*nawʿ*). How, then, do the philosophers account for the distinction between similar, though not completely identical, entities, such as the distinct individuals of one and the same species, or yet individuals belonging to different species subsumed under a common genus? To explain this difference, the philosophers hold that every individual is clearly distinct from every other individual and therefore different from it in certain respects, due to a difference in the specific attributes particular to each entity that coexist in it alongside the common universal. Thus, between any two individuals, say, of a common species, there exist elements in which they share (*mā bihi al-ishtirāk*), namely the universal with all its concomitant attributes (*lawāzim*), as well as elements that serve to differentiate them (*mā bihi al-ikhtilāf*), namely, the accidental qualities or attributes not forming part of the essence and which may differ from individual to individual within a species. For example, we may posit the existence of two horses, a palomino thoroughbred stallion and a roan-coated Arabian mare. Both are horses and thus (on the Aristotelian reading) participate in the universal notion of “horse.” This being the case, they both possess four legs, a mane, a tail, and other such attributes that are concomitant to universal horseness. Like all bodies, they also participate in the attribute of universal “color,” though each possesses a different specific color. As both horses exist, they participate in universal “existence” (*al-wujūd al-kullī*), while each exists as a distinct entity by virtue of a particular existence specific to it (*wujūd muʿayyan yakhuṣṣuhu*). What is essential here is that for the philosophers, not only does there exist between any two similar though non-identical entities a common factor (*qadr mushtarak*) and an element of differentiation (*qadr mumayyiz*), but the existence of the shared commonality is conceived as

involving an *ontological*, and not merely a notional, co-sharing (*ishtirāk*). That is, there is held to be an actual ontological sharing in one and the same universal with respect to those *shared aspects* common to more than one individual. It is this notion of a real, ontological “sharing” that has led the philosophers to deny *any* positive attributes of God, since sharing of any sort for them would imply an ontological similarity between the two entities sharing in the common universal, a conclusion which flows from the philosophers’ erroneous attribution of objective ontological external existence to the universal concepts that Ibn Taymiyya insists inhere only in the mind. To free God from any similarity (*tashbīh*) with created entities, therefore, the philosophers are forced to adopt a radically negationist theology of attributes predicated on the denial of any and all positive predications whatsoever (*salb al-umūr al-thubūtiyya*).

In the face of this realist conception of universals, Ibn Taymiyya stridently and repeatedly insists that the philosophers have committed a fundamental error by confusing logical with ontological reality. The only things existing in the external world, he insists, are the discrete extant particulars themselves, i.e., every actually existing horse, or human, or anything else. From the similarities evident among, for instance, individual horses, the mind abstracts from the empirically observed particulars the universal notion of “horse” under which it classifies and subsumes all extant members of the class (in this case, horses). We note, however, that “horse” as a universal is precisely a *notion*, a concept, and as such, exists *only in the mind* and possesses, independent of its particulars, neither existence nor reality in the external world. Another way of stating this is that what exists in the mind as a universal concept exists in the external world only in the form of individual instantiated particulars. As the universal itself exists only in the mind, the particulars can be said to “participate” in the universal only in a purely logical, not ontological, sense – that is, only in the sense that they are subsumed under the universal concept which exists in the mind, not in the sense that they all partake of some externally existing independent entity, the would-be (ontologically extant) universal of the

philosophers.²⁷ Indeed, Ibn Taymiyya insists that just as there is no externally existing universal in which the individuals of a species participate (the Platonic model), similarly, there is no sense in which the universal inheres, in a substantive ontological sense, in the individuals (the Aristotelian model). Rather, each existing member of a given species – in fact each existing entity period – is qualified by a separate existence unique to it and in which nothing else shares (ontologically speaking) in any way. The only “sharing” that occurs is their common subsumption *by the mind* under a universal concept which, being no more than a concept, exists only *in the mind*.²⁸

How, then, does Ibn Taymiyya conceptualize the nature of the similarity observed among existent entities subsumed under a common universal? For any two things that exist, he explains, there is necessarily that which they have in common (*qadr mushtarak, jāmiʿ*) and that by which each is distinguished from the other (*qadr mumayyiz, fāriq*). No matter how different the two things may be overall, they nevertheless share in common, at the minimum, the fact that they exist, that each exists by virtue of an independent ontological reality (*ḥaqīqa*) that is coterminous with its essence (*dhāt*), self (*nafs*), and quiddity (*māhiyya*) and that is different from, and independent of, the ontological reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of every other existing entity. Anything in which two distinct entities can be said to share is, necessarily, a universal or absolute notion (*maʿnā muṭlaq*) that exists only in the mind. Thus, two animals are said to share in common a universal animality (*ḥayawāniyya muṭlaqa*) that exists as a universal concept in the mind only. Each one is however distinct from the other by virtue of the particular, externally existent animality specific to it (*al-ḥayawāniyya allatī takhuṣṣuhu*)²⁹ and in which none other has any *ontological* share, or *ishtirāk*, whatsoever. Notwithstanding, there does exist among externally existing objects a measure of resem-

²⁷ See, *inter alia*, *ibid.*, IV: 254. For Ibn Taymiyya’s critique of both the Platonic and Aristotelian notion of universals, see *ibid.*, I: 216.

²⁸ “*lā shirka fī al-aʿyān al-mawjūdāt al-juzʿiyyāt*” (*ibid.*, V: 139). See also *ibid.*, IV: 253, l. 16-17, where Ibn Taymiyya states: “*laysa fī al-mawjūdāt shayʿāni mā yattafiqāni fī shayʿ bi-ʿaynihi mawjūd fī al-khārij* [such as a would-be externally existent universal in which several objects partake in terms of their ontological reality and makeup], *wa-lākin yashtabihāni min baʿd al-wujūh*.”

²⁹ *Ibid.*, V: 140.

blance and similarity (*tashābuh wa-tamāthul*), as well as a measure of difference and contrariety (*ikhtilāf wa-taḍādd*). Yet the perception of this resemblance and difference is a judgment operated by the mind after it has abstracted the qualities of each thing, then compared and contrasted them for the purpose of classification. The essential point for Ibn Taymiyya is that the mere existence of similarity in certain respects does not involve any *ontological* sharing or commonality between the two entities, since actual sharing for him is a strictly ontological category and it is clear that the two entities in question are ontologically distinct entities, each fully individualized (*mu‘ayyan, mushakhkhaṣ*) and independent of the other. Ibn Taymiyya in fact compares universal notions to common nouns (*alfāz ‘amma*) in the manner in which each relates to the entities subsumed under it. The applicability of universals to their particulars, he explains, is parallel to the universality or general applicability of common nouns (*‘umūm al-alfāz wa-l-ishtirāk fihā*) to the various objects denoted by them. Just as no ontological commonality or sharing (*ishtirāk*) exists between two human beings on account of the fact that the common noun “human” applies to both of them, similarly, their sharing in the *meaning* (*ma‘nā*) denoted by the word – i.e., all the concomitants of universal “man” which both necessarily exhibit – is purely a matter of mental cognition and of mental recognition for the purposes of classification. In external reality (*fī al-khārij*), although the meaning of the term “human” applies to both, each is nevertheless independent of the other in its specific existence (*wujūd mu‘ayyan*) and ontological reality (*ḥaqīqa mu‘ayyana*) and in no wise “shares” with the other in any externally existing reality whatsoever. In short, every existent entity is itself and does not share ontologically in anything with any other entity. Any two existent entities are said to be “different” (*mukhtaliḥ*) if “difference” is meant as the counterpart (*qasīm*) of (ontological) sharing (*ishtirāk*). With respect to the two entities exhibiting qualities or possessing attributes denoted by a single name – as in both being “blue,” for example – then any two entities will, naturally, be more or less “similar” (*mutashābih*) or “different” (*mukhtaliḥ*) depending on the number of qualities they share in common. Two instances of white, for example, would not be “different” in this second (no-

tional and qualitative) sense, although they are different in the first (ontological) sense, since each instance of white – existing, as they do, as two distinct instances of the color inhering in two distinct entities – is ontologically distinct from the other and shares with it nothing in terms of its ontological constitution or the reality of its external existence.

Ibn Taymiyya expands upon these notions in his commentary on a passage of Ibn Sīnā's *Ishārāt wa-tanbīhāt* in which Ibn Sīnā argues for the existence of non-empirical entities (*wujūd mā laysa bi-mahsūs*) on the basis of the existence of universals.³⁰ Ibn Taymiyya counters that universal notions are abstracted by the mind from perceived particulars and, as such, exist only in the mind. In other words, we imagine Zayd and 'Amr and notice many fundamental similarities between them. The mind abstracts these similarities into a universal “man,” yet this and all universal concepts are but accidents subsisting in the mind of the rational agent who has abstracted them (*a'rāḍ qā'ima bi-l-dhāt al-'āqila*), and therefore do not have any independent existence in the external world. Ibn Taymiyya maintains that the impossibility of a universal existing in the external world as a universal is a proposition which is known of necessity (*bi-l-iḍṭirār*) to be the case.³¹ Indeed, that which is called a “natural universal” (*kullī ṭabī'ī*),³² such as the universal notion of “cat,” only exists in the external world in particularized and specific manner.³³ Furthermore, there exists no necessary concomitance (*talāzum*) between the universals, as concepts in the mind, and externally existing entities (*al-mawjūdāt al-khārijīyya*), for there may exist various discrete entities in the external world that a person perceives without, however, abstracting or consciously conceiving of a universal concept subsuming them. Conversely, one may conceive in the mind universal notions (*kullīyyāt ma'qūla*) that do not correspond to any externally existing reality but are only hypothesized by the

³⁰ See Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt*, [3, 4/435-437 – cited at *ibid.*, V: 128, n. 2].

³¹ *Ibid.*, VI: 92, l. 9-11.

³² See *ibid.*, III: 39, where Ibn Taymiyya identifies the “natural universal” (*al-kullī al-ṭabī'ī*) with the “universal unconditioned by universality” (*al-kullī al-muṭlaq lā bi-sharṭ al-iṭlāq*), i.e., conceived such that it can apply to actual extant particulars in the world. (Further on this at *ibid.*, IV: 254-55).

³³ “*lā yūjadu illā mu'ayyanan juz'īyyan*” (*ibid.*, VI: 92, l. 11-12).

mind (*muqaddarāt dhihniyya*),³⁴ such as what Ibn Taymiyya refers to as “inherently (i.e., logically) impossible species” (*al-anwā’ al-mumtani’a li-dhātihā*), which would presumably include things like the incoherent notion of a “square circle” or a “four-angle hexagon.” It follows from this that one may never infer that a thing exists, or even could possibly exist, in the external world from the mere fact that it can be coherently conceptualized in the mind.³⁵

B. Essence and Existence, Essence and Attributes

A related aspect of Ibn Taymiyya’s doctrine of universals involves the relationship between a thing’s essence (*dhāt*, *ḥaqīqa*) and its existence (*wujūd*). The philosophers in general, following Aristotle, posit an independent quiddity or “essence” (*māhiyya*) to which “existence” (*wujūd*) is superadded, resulting in the ontological instantiation of the particular object at hand. Any extant object then, on this view, exists in the world as a result of the accident of existence having been conferred upon its pre-existing essence. Yet here again, Ibn Taymiyya insists that “essence” in the sense of a thing’s quiddity – its “what-it-is-ness,” or ‘*māhiyya*’ – is a notional reality which, as such, exists only in the mind. As for an externally existing object, its essence (*dhāt*) and reality (*ḥaqīqa*) are none other than its existence (*wujūd*), including all of the various attributes concomitant to it and without which it would not exist. Just as the universal is a concept ex-

³⁴ See *ibid.*, VI: 98.

³⁵ For this paragraph in general, see *ibid.*, V: 134. But one may ask here: If something is logically incoherent (like a “four-angle hexagon”), then how can it even be conceived? Are we to understand Ibn Taymiyya as simply saying that we can *speak* of such a thing although we cannot properly conceive of it (as opposed, say, to the fact that we *can* conceive of a unicorn, which, though not actually existent, is nonetheless a logically coherent notion)? As an example of something that is inherently and self-evidently impossible (*mumtani’ li-dhātihī*), Ibn Taymiyya mentions, in another context, the Ash‘arī doctrine that God is “neither inside nor outside” the universe – a proposition that can be expressed in words, and perhaps even “conceived” to some degree, though Ibn Taymiyya would hold that the notion itself is inherently contradictory and therefore “inherently impossible” (*mumtani’ li-dhātihī*). Perhaps it is best to understand Ibn Taymiyya as holding that such notions can be *hypothesized* (*tuqaddar*) in the mind, even if intrinsically incoherent. Their impossibility (*imtinā’*) would reside in the fact that they could not exist in external ontological reality – precisely because they are logically incoherent. Ibn Taymiyya specifically mentions (at *ibid.*, VI: 98) the contention that God is “neither inside nor outside” the universe being something the mind can hypothesize (“*min al-muqaddarāt al-dhihniyya*”), even though it is “absurd” (*bāṭil*), and presumably therefore also “impossible” (*mumtani’*) in his terminology as well.

isting in the mind, so too are the separability of essence and existence and the separability of essence and attributes. In other words, the mind can conceive of a thing's essence (its quiddity) separately from its existence, but just like the universal, the essence so conceived is an abstraction of the mind on the basis of a particular existent (or make-believe object, such as a unicorn). As for the actually existing object, its essence (or self) (*dhāt*) and its reality (*ḥaqīqa*) are synonymous with its factual, individual, particularized existence in the external world with all the concomitant attributes which qualify it and in which it does not share anything ontologically with any other existent object. Ibn Taymiyya thus conflates, in a sense, *that* a thing is with *what* that thing is, holding these two considerations to be separable only in the mind. In the real world, a thing both *is* (“*inniyya*”) and is *something* (“*māhiyya*”) at one and the same time with no objective *ontological* distinction between its *inniyya* (its being, or “that it is”) and its *māhiyya* (its quiddity, or “what it is”).

It follows from this stance that the existence of an entity is in no way superadded to a pre-existing essence. Essence and attributes can be conceived of as separate in the mind, but do not exist as such in the external world (*fī al-khārij*). Ibn Taymiyya identifies this as a major area in which the philosophers have falsely taken logical distinctions as indicative of ontological reality. That is, they take the logical distinctions of the mind as “primary,” in a sense, and simply assume a direct correspondence between logical categories or distinctions and the ontological reality of externally existing entities (*ḥaqā'iq*).³⁶ This prioritization of logical notions and mental categories and the assumption that they directly map onto ontological reality – which we may refer to as the philosophers’ “intellectualization” of reality – forms a major target of Ibn Taymiyya’s critique in the *Dar’* against the axiomatic assumptions upon which the “rational” method of philosophical speculation is constructed. As we have seen, Ibn Taymiyya argues against the philosophers that it is the very existence (*wujūd*) of an entity, along with all its concomitant attributes and qualities, that is identical with that enti-

³⁶ Ibid., III: 79.

ty's quiddity (*māhiyya*) and comprises its fundamental (ontological) reality (*ḥaqīqa*) in the external world, i.e., as it factually exists "out there" (*fī al-khārij*), independently of our mental conception of it.³⁷ Another way of stating this is that a thing's quiddity (*māhiyya*) is none other than its very existence (*wujūd*).³⁸ In other words, the question of *what* a thing is – a question of "*māhiyya*" (literally "what-it-is-ness") – is answered by considering its factual existence (i.e., "that it is"), and particularly not only *that* it exists, but more relevantly, *how* it exists, with all of its ontologically inseparable concomitants (*lawāzim*).³⁹

As an illustration of this principle, we may cite Ibn Taymiyya's critique of the philosophers for having posited the independent external existence of intellectual substances (*jawāhir ma'qūla*) alongside perceptible bodies (*ajsām maḥsūsa*), such as the famous Aristotelian distinction of matter and form.⁴⁰ While Ibn Taymiyya does not deny that extant objects consist of matter existing in a particular form, he denies, predictably, that the abstract form enjoys an ontological existence separate from and independent of the matter and which is then superimposed upon the matter, resulting in the instantiation of the object at hand. Rather, Ibn Taymiyya insists, the only thing that actually exists – i.e., that has an independent ontological reality as a real entity existing "out there" (*fī al-khārij*) – is the form-endowed material object itself.⁴¹ The form is in no way separable from the substantive existence of the object, and can only be conceived of separately from its material constitution as an abstracting function of the mind. This abstraction of form from matter for the purposes of mental consideration is perfectly valid and legitimate, so long as one remains clear that the abstracted form as such only exists *in the mind* as a *mental notion* and must never be construed as enjoying, as an abstracted form, any kind of independent ontological existence or reality in the outside world. This parallels the philosophers' affirma-

³⁷ "wujūd kull shay' 'ayn māhiyyatihi fī al-khārij" (ibid., III: 248).

³⁸ For this formulation, see ibid., V: 103, l. 7-8 and 104, l. 7, and similar at ibid., I: 293, l. 14-15 ("bal māhiyyatuhu hiya ḥaqīqatuhu wa-hiya wujūduhu"). See also ibid., V: 102-104 for a discussion of the relationship between quiddity (*māhiyya*) and existence (*wujūd*) more generally.

³⁹ Ibid., III: 328.

⁴⁰ Ibid., V: 174.

⁴¹ Ibn Taymiyya says here "a body and its accidents" (*[lam] yūjad fī al-khārij illā al-jism wa-a'rāduhu*). (ibid.)

tion of universal concepts as existing independently, but in association with (*muqarinatan li*), the individual instantiated objects they subsume, whereas in reality, Ibn Taymiyya counters, the only thing existing in the external world is the individual entities (*a'yān*) themselves along with the attributes (*ṣifāt*) inherent in them.⁴² The question of universals will be taken up in detail in a separate section further on.

We may also cite here Ibn Taymiyya's critique of Ibn Sīnā for comparing the association (*muqārana*) of the soul with the body to that of universals with their particulars. Ibn Taymiyya refutes this confusion based on the fact that, unlike universal concepts existing solely in the mind, the soul is in itself a particular entity (*'ayn mu'ayyan*), exists in its own right in external reality (i.e., is not merely a mental concept), and is, as all externally existing entities, perceivable (*maḥsūs*). The soul's association (*muqārana*) with the body is a case of two particular, externally existing entities being connected to one another, and which therefore can also separate from each other (*tajrīd*, i.e., *tajrīd al-rūḥ 'an al-badan*), as happens upon the death of the body. This, Ibn Taymiyya insists, is entirely different from the contention that universals inhere in or are associated with their particulars in the same manner as the soul may be said to indwell in or to be associated with the body. As we have seen above, universal concepts are only abstractions of the mind that do not inhere in their particulars in any way, and their disassociation or stripping (*tarjīd*) from their particulars is a function carried out by the mind, which is not equivalent to the soul – which is a self-standing, perceivable entity – being separated from the body. The confusion here, according to Ibn Taymiyya, results from the fact that the philosophers have taken the terms “association” (*muqārana*) and “dissociation” (*tajrīd*) with respect to universals on the one hand and the soul on the other as synonymous (*bi-l-ishtirāk*), failing to distinguish between the *ontological* dissociation of the soul from the body (two self-standing perceivable realities) in contrast to the *logical* extraction (*intizā'*) of universals from their particulars carried out by the mind.

⁴² Ibid.

So while it is true that we may apply the words “association” and “dissociation” correctly to both the soul vis-à-vis the body and to universals vis-à-vis their particulars on the basis of *ishtirāk ma‘nawī*, we must nevertheless realize that the nature, or reality (*ḥaqīqa*), of the association and dissociation in each case is commensurate with the nature, or reality, of the entities to which they pertain: ontological association and dissociation in the case of an extant and ontologically distinct body and soul, logical association and dissociation with respect to the logical category of universal notions as they pertain to the particulars under which the mind subsumes them. Ibn Taymiyya identifies the confusion here as resulting from an *ishtirāk* in terminology in which a common meaning is understood from the same word applied to two different entities, but without realizing that the word applies *differently* to each entity in a manner commensurate with the entities’ essence and ontological reality (*ḥaqīqa*), implying therefore no *essential* similarity between the two entities simply on account of the same term, with the same meaning, being applicable to both of them. For Ibn Taymiyya, once again, the “real story,” so to speak, is not the meaning or abstracted notion existing in our minds, but the real, factual, particularized, individual existence (*wujūd*) of the thing in question, which is what is constitutive of – in fact synonymous with – its ipseity (*dhāt*) and essential ontological reality (*ḥaqīqa*). This translates, in the case under discussion here, into the fact that one of the elements to which the terms “association” and “dissociation” legitimately apply – namely, the soul – exists ontologically as a self-standing entity (‘*ayn*) in the external world, while the other element – namely, the universal – is but a logical notion subsisting strictly within the mind.

V. The Structure of Reason (‘aql)

What, then, is the structure of reason (‘*aql*) and how does it function in the acquisition of knowledge? Ibn Taymiyya defines reason as an “instinct in the mind/heart” (*gharīza fī al-qalb*) essentially endowed with the capacity to perform three vital functions: (1) the universalization of particulars, enabled by the abil-

ity of reason to recognize relevant similarities between particular existents and to abstract these into universal concepts, (2) issuing judgments in the form of predicative statements (*taṣdīqāt* / *aḥkām*) relative to existent particulars, and (3) drawing inferences of various sorts, by means of which new knowledge is derived (essentially, by transferring a given “judgment,” or *ḥukm*, to a new subject or entity). We have already spoken extensively above about the first vital function of reason, namely, to form universal concepts on the basis of the extant particulars delivered to it by the senses. As we have mentioned several times in our discussion of Ibn Taymiyya’s account of ontology above, the universal notions – particularly the “natural universal” (*al-kullī al-ṭabīʿī*) that subsumes extant objects – are derived from the particulars and are like still-frame snap shots of their essential qualities, recording and representing ontological reality to the mind. They form, in a sense, the raw data about the world which the mind is then able to process and reason about. As we shall discover, this universalizing function of the mind, for Ibn Taymiyya, also plays a crucial role in allowing us, in conjunction with *khavar*, to access the realm of the *ghayb*, in the sense of being able to comprehend and conceive what we are being told of the *ghāʾib* realm through the transmission of reliable report (*khavar ṣādiq*).

In addition to the knowledge of externally existing objects appropriated and registered by the mind in the form of universal concepts, the mind also disposes of certain logical axioms and relational principles which are implanted in it in an *a priori* (*badīhī*) manner. Related to, though not identical with, *a priori* knowledge is that which Ibn Taymiyya refers to as necessary (*ḍarūrī*) knowledge, a type of knowledge which he often qualifies interchangeably by the term “*fiṭrī*” (roughly, ‘innate’), or by the compound term “*ḍarūrī-fiṭrī*.” While all *a priori* knowledge is, by definition, both innate (*fiṭrī*) and necessary (*ḍarūrī*), it is not the case that all necessary knowledge is *a priori* or innate, since Ibn Taymiyya recognizes a number of other sources of necessary knowledge as well. Finally, and to complicate matters further, *fiṭrī* knowledge only partially overlaps with *a priori* and *ḍarūrī* knowledge as it is, in itself, a considerably wider and more subtle category, as we shall discover below.

A. On A Priori Knowledge

We have discussed above Ibn Taymiyya's strident insistence that universals (*kullīyyāt*) are strictly conceptual or notional realities subsisting in the mind, and that the mind abstracts them from the existing particulars mediated to it through the senses. Without the particulars, there are, quite simply, no universals. This is most obviously the case with the "natural universal" (*al-kullī al-ṭabī'ī*), which we have described as a sort of "snap shot" that the mind takes of a particular class of entities in the external world. Yet there is another kind of universal Ibn Taymiyya discusses, namely, the universal rules of logic, such as the Law of Non-Contradiction, the Law of the Excluded Middle, the Law of Identity, etc. Ibn Taymiyya repeatedly refers to such universals as being *ḍarūrī* (necessary), but he also applies to them a term which he does not use nearly as liberally as "*ḍarūrī*" (or "*ḍarūrī*" coupled with "*fiṭrī*"). While such fundamental rules of thought are, of course, necessary (*ḍarūrī*) for Ibn Taymiyya, he repeatedly refers to them as being "*badīhī*," or "*min al-badīhiyyāt*," or "*min badā'ih al-'uqūl*." The use of the term "*badīhī*" correlates strongly with the notion of *a priori* knowledge, and we may tentatively conclude, on the basis of his use of this term, that Ibn Taymiyya indeed regards such universal logical notions as *a priori* in the true sense, that is, in the sense of being present both in and to the mind *prior to* any encounter the mind may have with the external world through the senses. In another passage, he refers to "certain, necessary, *a priori* (?) knowledge" (*'ilm ḍarūrī yaqīnī awwālī*), which he defines as "not depending on theoretical reflection or inference or demonstration (*burhān*), rather [such knowledge] constitutes the very premises and axioms upon which syllogistic demonstrations are built."⁴³ In support of this understanding, we may cite, for example, Ibn Taymiyya's characterization of the Law of the Excluded Middle as being "the most patently impossible of things *fi badīhat al-'aql*."⁴⁴ In another passage, he describes the knowledge of the impos-

⁴³ "*'ilm ḍarūrī yaqīnī awwālī lā yatawaqqafu 'alā al-naẓar wa-l-istidlāl wa-lā yatawaqqafu 'alā al-burhān bal huwa muqaddimāt al-burhān wa-uṣūluhu allatī yubnā 'alayhā al-burhān*" (ibid., III: 317, l. 16-18).

⁴⁴ "*aẓhar al-umūr al-mumtani'a fī badīhat al-'aql*" (ibid., III: 362).

sibility of an infinite regress of agents (*al-tasalsul fī al-fā'il*) as being “innate” (*fiṭrī*) and “necessary” (*ḍarūrī*) – terms we have seen before – but then makes the further point that all premises in a given argument must ultimately be based on “primordial *a priori* knowledge that God initiates in [a person’s] heart / mind” (*‘ulūm badīhiyya awwaliyya yabtadi’uhā Allāh fī qalb [al-insān]*).⁴⁵ The pairing of the term “*badīhī*” with “*awwālī*” (‘initial’, ‘initially there’) would seem, to my mind, to constitute incontrovertible proof that Ibn Taymiyya considers such logical universals to be truly *a priori*. This conclusion would seem inescapable particularly in light of the latter part of the phrase, in which he states that God “*yabtadi’u*” this knowledge in the mind, which would only seem to mean that God places this knowledge in the mind *ab initio* (“*ibtidā’an*”), in other words, that He *initiates* this knowledge in the mind, i.e., *prior to* and *independently of* the mind’s subsequent empirical encounter with the world.

Yet Ibn Taymiyya seems to contradict this conclusion – namely, that the mind possesses certain knowledge in an *a priori* fashion – in another passage, where he states that judgments (*al-qaḍā’ bi-anna*) such as: “Black and white are contraries (*yataḍāddān*)” or “Motion and rest are contradictory (*yatanāqaḍān*)” or “A body cannot be in two places at one and the same time” are akin to “all universal propositions which originate in *ḥiss*.”⁴⁶ Granted the Arabic phraseology here is somewhat ambiguous, and one is not altogether sure whether he means “are like all universal propositions that originate in *ḥiss* (to the exclusion of those universal propositions that do *not* originate in *ḥiss*), or whether he means “are like all universal propositions, which originate in *ḥiss* (i.e., as all universal propositions do).” In a further passage, however, Ibn Taymiyya cites propositions of an even more abstract nature than the foregoing, such as that any existent thing is either necessary or contingent, eternal or temporal, self-standing (*qā’im bi-nafsihi*) or inherent in another (*qā’im bi-ghayrihi*), that any two existent things are either contemporaneous with one another or exist at different

⁴⁵ Ibid., III: 309, l. 16. See also *ibid.*, VI: 276, l. 17-18, where he speaks of “*al-qaḍāyā al-mubtada’a fī al-nafs*.”

⁴⁶ “*ka-sā’ir al-qaḍāyā al-kulliyya allatī mabādi’uhā min al-ḥiss*” (see *ibid.*, VI: 88, l. 9-12). See also the related discussion at *ibid.*, VI: 88-89.

times, either distinct (*mubāyin*) from one another or co-located (*muḥāyith*), and others.⁴⁷ In commenting on propositions of this nature, Ibn Taymiyya states very explicitly that “if we formulate in our minds a universal judgment applicable to all external existents or all mental notions, such as [the propositions listed], our knowledge of these universal, generally applicable propositions is mediated by what we know of external existents.”⁴⁸ Based on this statement, it would seem that *all* universal notions – even logical ones – are, for Ibn Taymiyya, ultimately abstracted from sense data. Yet Ibn Taymiyya is adamant that such logical propositions are “*ḍarūrī*,” “*fiṭrī*,” often even “*badīhī*,” terms which he *never* applies to the “natural universals” that correspond to the various species.

How, then, to resolve this apparent contradiction? The answer seems to be that what is derived from the particulars is the specific *content* of the propositions mentioned – that black and white, for example, or motion and rest are opposites, that a thing is either self-standing or exists in something else (like an accident), etc. What is *logically* necessary and therefore *a priori*, however, is the universal relational judgment that two opposites, whatever they may be, cannot co-exist, or cannot qualify one and the same entity simultaneously, or any other such derivative formulation of the Law of Non-Contradiction. In other words, it is the abstract law itself that is *a priori* for Ibn Taymiyya, it would seem, but not the specific, particularized instances in the world to which the law would apply. The knowledge that, say, black and white (as opposed to, say, red and green) are opposites, is not *logically* necessary and can therefore only be discovered from our observation of the particular colors of our empirical reality. What *is* logically necessary – and, it would seem, *a priori* (*badīhī*, *awwalī*) for Ibn Taymiyya – is the judgment that any two colors (or anything else) that are opposites are necessarily subject to the Law of Non-Contradiction. In other words, what the mind knows in an *a priori* manner is the universal logical rule, as can be stated in universal terms, that: for every *x* and *y* where *x* and *y* are opposites, then *x* and *y*

⁴⁷ Ibid., VI: 127, l. 1-8.

⁴⁸ “*idhā ḥakamnā bi-‘uqūlinā ḥukman kullīyyan ya‘ummu al-mawjūdāt aw ya‘ummu al-ma‘lūmāt mithl qawlinā ... kāna ‘ilmunā bi-hādhihi al-qaḍāyā al-kullīyya al-‘amma bi-tawassuṭ mā ‘alimnāhu min al-mawjūdāt*” (ibid.).

cannot simultaneously co-exist or, say, qualify one and the same entity simultaneously. This is the universal logical rule that is known *a priori* and that holds in all possible worlds. The fact, once again, that, in the contingencies of our particular world, *x* happens to be “white” (and not red) and *y* is “black” (and not green) – this is something we can only know from what we have observed in the world by means of our senses.

In sum, then, the built-in, *a priori* knowledge of the mind – which Ibn Taymiyya also refers to as being “innate” (*fiṭrī*) and “necessary” (*ḍarūrī*) – is the knowledge of necessary logical relations and abstract principles (such as the Law of the Excluded Middle, etc.) that would apply to things in the event that they should exist. Yet our knowledge of what actually does exist can never be derived from reason, but rather can only be gained from the senses (and from *khavar*). The legitimate judgments of reason, therefore, are always theoretical and relational, never existential. Reason can never establish the factual existence of anything,⁴⁹ but once it has been provided with the knowledge of extant particular realities either through *ḥiss* or through *khavar*, it can and does formulate judgments (*aḥkām, taṣdīqāt*) about existing realities in accordance with the abstract logical principles that have been embedded in it in an *a priori* manner. This particular function of the mind, though seemingly too obvious as to warrant mention, is in reality an eminently important function for Ibn Taymiyya, in that it lies at the basis of all thought and the construction of all knowledge. In fact, Ibn Taymiyya relies extensively on the everyday, obvious, innate principles of the mind in the course of his own argumentation against the philosophers and *mutakallimūn*. That is, he very often refutes – or attempts to refute – various

⁴⁹ With the sole exception of God, but then this is not really an exception at all, for the rational inference from *ḥudūth* that God must exist is based, in the end, on a (rational) consideration of the fact that a non-necessary and contingent world – such as we know ours to be through our (empirical) experience of it – can only be coherently accounted for by positing the existence of a necessary, all-powerful, transcendent Creator so as to avoid an infinite regress of causes, the impossibility of which Ibn Taymiyya holds to be known as a matter of (logical) necessity (*ḍarūratan*). From this angle, then, the rational inference of the existence of God can be seen as simply one more case of reason applying its innate and incontrovertible logical principles (in this case, the impossibility of the infinite causal regress) to the existential data concerning our contingent and non-necessary world that has been mediated to it through the senses.

positions on the grounds that, when taken to their logical conclusion, they end up contradicting one of these very basic, axiomatic rules of thought, and therefore can be known by virtue of pure reason (*‘aql ṣarīḥ*) to be necessarily invalid (*fāsid*) and false (*bāṭil*).

Thus far, we have become acquainted with two main functions of reason: (1) universalizing the particulars of the empirical realm, and (2) applying the innate rules of logic in order to pass judgments on how given extant particulars must, logically speaking, relate to one another. We have also seen that the innate logical knowledge embedded in the mind in an *a priori* fashion is alternately referred to by Ibn Taymiyya as being “*badīhī*” (primary, *a priori*), “*fiṭrī*” (innate), or *ḍarūrī* (necessary). When applied to the kind of *a priori* knowledge discussed above, these three terms are basically equivalent and interchangeable. Yet neither the concept of “*fiṭra*” nor the concept of “*ḍarūra*” is simply reducible to the “*badīhiyyāt*,” or *a priori* axioms. In other words, while *fiṭra* and *ḍarūra* both overlap with *badīha*, as we have seen above, each also comprises further elements that distinguish them from each other and from the *a priori* axioms embedded in the mind. Let us look at each briefly in turn.

B. Fiṭra: The “Original Normative Disposition”

Ibn Taymiyya’s conception of the *fiṭra* is a subtle one, and is perhaps best captured by the term “original normative disposition.” The term “*fiṭra*” has often been translated as “innate disposition,” and while the *fiṭra* for Ibn Taymiyya is no doubt innate, this term does not fully capture – or at least does not underscore to the appropriate degree – the strong sense of normativity Ibn Taymiyya accords to this “innate disposition.” This *fiṭrī* disposition, in turn, derives its normativity to a substantial degree from the fact of its “originality,” that is, the fact that the *fiṭra* is that which is “there first,” that which is originally present (at least *in potentia*) in a person’s constitution and which is ultimately determinative of what a human being is (or ought to be). Ibn Taymiyya derives this normative understanding of the original *fiṭra* in part from the famous prophetic hadith

which states that “every child is born on the *fiṭra* (understood here as pure monotheism),” and is only subsequently diverted by its parents (or surrounding milieu) from this original potential to various compromised forms of religion that represent a departure from the *fiṭra*.⁵⁰ The fact that the *fiṭra* is a morally normative concept, and does not simply include just any of the various appetites, drives, and inclinations often thought of as “natural” in a human being, is illustrated by the incident in which the angel Gabriel, on the occasion of the Prophet’s night journey to Jerusalem (*isrāʾ*), presented the Prophet with a vessel of milk and a vessel of wine, bidding him to choose between them. When the Prophet instinctively inclined to the milk over the wine, Gabriel responded that “you have chosen the *fiṭra*, and had you chosen the wine, your community (*umma*) would have gone astray.” That man originally enters the world in a pure state is, finally, explicitly affirmed by the Qur’an itself, where we read: “We have indeed created man in the best of molds,”⁵¹ a state which, if subsequently lost, can only be regained through the ethical practice of monotheism through full submission to God (“Then do We abase him [to be] the lowest of the low / Except such as believe and work righteous deeds, for they shall have a reward unfailing”⁵²).

While it is neither possible here, nor directly relevant to our immediate concerns, to provide a detailed account of Ibn Taymiyya’s understanding of the *fiṭra*,⁵³ we may note that, in terms of its relevance to the question of reason (*ʿaql*) and reasoning (*naẓar*), Ibn Taymiyya describes sound *fiṭra* (*al-fiṭra al-salīma*) as the (intuitive) faculty by which one judges the soundness of premises and the arguments based on them.⁵⁴ Finally, Ibn Taymiyya maintains that God has made the *fiṭra* of people susceptible of perceiving and knowing the truth(s) (*idrāk al-*

⁵⁰ For Ibn Taymiyya’s main discussion on the *fiṭra*, including the “*kull mawlūd yūladu ʿalā al-fiṭra*” hadith, and related issues, see *Darʿ*, VIII: 359-535. See also *ibid.*, III: 70-72.

⁵¹ Qur’an (al-Ṭīn) 95:4.

⁵² Qur’an 95:5-6.

⁵³ For a more indepth discussion of Ibn Taymiyya’s conception of the *fiṭra*, see Wael B. Hallaq, “Ibn Taymiyya on the Existence of God,” *Acta Orientalia* 52 (1991): esp. 54ff. See also Livnat Holtzman, “Human Choice, Divine Guidance and the *Fiṭra* Tradition: The Use of Hadith in Theological Treatises by Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya,” in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, ed. Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). Ibn Taymiyya also wrote a separate treatise on the *fiṭra*, entitled *al-Risāla fī al-fiṭra*.

⁵⁴ See *Darʿ*, VII: 37, l. 17-19.

ḥaqā'iq wa-ma'rifatuhā) – by means, it would seem, of a healthy and functioning intuitive capacity.⁵⁵ Were it not for this inherent susceptibility of the *fiṭra*, he explains, there would be no theoretical reasoning (*naẓar*) or inference (*istidlāl*), nor even any possibility of speech or discourse (*khiṭāb wa-kalām*). Ibn Taymiyya likens this susceptibility of the *fiṭra* to recognize rational and inferential truths to the susceptibility of the body to receive and benefit from nourishment through food and drink. Indeed, just as the body is endowed with an innate capacity to distinguish – “intuitively,” as it were and with no reflection – between healthy and noxious foods, similarly there exists in the heart/mind (*fi al-qulūb*) an even greater capacity to distinguish – again, intuitively and unreflectively – what is true from what is false.⁵⁶ This holds, however, only on the condition that the intuitive functioning of the healthy *fiṭra* has not been tampered with, perverted, or otherwise rendered inoperable. Such deformations of the *fiṭra* with respect to reason (*‘aql*) and reasoning (*naẓar*) can occur, for example, by overriding the intuitive judgments of native sound reason by unfounded parochial doctrines and habituating oneself to such modes of thinking over a long period until they become second nature, distorting or displacing the sound judgments of one’s original *fiṭra*. The rational *fiṭra* may also be perverted through various other cognitive and ethical defects, such as a stubborn adherence to one’s opinion regardless of countervailing evidence (*hawā*), rejecting what has manifestly been proven true due to the presence of personal interest (*gharaḥ*), not recognizing truth due to a faulty supposition (*ẓann*), and others.

⁵⁵ Ibn Taymiyya speaks, instructively, of “*uqūl banī Ādam allatī faṭarahum Allāh ‘alayhā*.” (ibid., VII, 38). God is said to have “*faṭara*” the “*uqūl*” of humans in a particular manner, a statement which makes it quite evident that *fiṭra*, for Ibn Taymiyya, closely overlaps with what we might call intuitive or *a priori* knowledge, and fundamentally with reason (*‘aql*) itself. Nevertheless, as we shall see, the concept of the *fiṭra* goes beyond conceptions of cognitive faculties narrowly defined to include an important spiritual and ethical dimension to which we shall return in our conclusion.

⁵⁶ Ibid., V: 62, l. 8-15.

C. *Ḍarūra* (Necessity)

We have seen that, with respect to Ibn Taymiyya's discussion of the innate, *a priori* logical principles embedded in the mind *ab initio*, the terms "*badīhī*" ('*a priori*', 'axiomatic'), "*fiṭrī*" ('innate', 'intuitive'), and "*ḍarūrī*" ('necessary') are basically equivalent. Yet just as *fiṭra* comprises dimensions that go beyond *a priori* logical axioms, so too is the concept of "*ḍarūra*," or necessity, not simply reducible to the *badīhiyyāt*. While all *a priori* and axiomatic principles count, naturally, as necessary knowledge, Ibn Taymiyya identifies other types of necessary knowledge apart from these. In addition, then, to the rational and intuitive necessity (*ḍarūra fiṭriyya* '*aqliyya*') discussed above, Ibn Taymiyya explicitly mentions an "empirical necessity" (*ḍarūra ḥissiyya*),⁵⁷ by which he simply means to affirm the position that our external senses (so long as they are not impaired) yield knowledge of the particulars they perceive in a necessary fashion, such that our sensory knowledge of the world is as obvious and unreflective as it is indubitable and can only be denied, for Ibn Taymiyya, on pain of sophistry. He also mentions what we may call "linguistic necessity" or "linguistically necessary knowledge,"⁵⁸ presumably based on a native speaker's perfect familiarity with the precise linguistic conventions of his speech community (a topic which we have treated at length in Chapter 4). Third, Ibn Taymiyya admits as necessary knowledge the result of any valid process of inference based on necessarily true premises, for if the premises are necessary (as they must be) and the induction itself proceeds from premises to conclusion in a valid manner, then the resultant knowledge, once the mind has gone through this process, impresses itself on the mind as being a necessary and ineluctable conclusion.⁵⁹

Yet in addition to *ḍarūrī* knowledge based on *a priori* intuitions, sense data, linguistic convention, and valid rational inference, there remains one more

⁵⁷ See *ibid.*, III: 317, where he mentions "*ulūm[ihi] al-ḥissiyya al-ḍarūriyya*."

⁵⁸ See, for instance, *ibid.*, VII, 113, l. 19, where Ibn Taymiyya prefaces an argument he is making on the basis of the known meaning of a given word with the phrase: "*na'lamu bi-l-iḍṭirār min lughat al-'arab*."

⁵⁹ See *ibid.*, IX: 28-29, where Ibn Taymiyya states: "*wa-in kāna al-'ilm alladhī ḥaṣala bi-'ktisābihi wa-naẓarihi huwa muḍṭarr ilayhi fī ākhir al-amr, fa-lā yumkinu al-'ālim al-'ārif ba'd ḥuṣūl al-ma'rifa fī qalbihi bi-dalīl aw bi-ghayr dalīl an yadfa'a dhālika 'an qalbihi*."

major source of necessary knowledge, namely, *tawātur*. We have already encountered the concept and epistemic function of *tawātur* with respect to our second main source of factual knowledge about the world after *ḥiss*, namely, report (*khābar*). As we saw in that section, all of our knowledge about anything that is *ghā'ib* (defined as “not available to our senses now”) ultimately comes to us by way of report. As we have seen, this holds for any (non-religious) knowledge we may have of past historical events or places we have never visited, as well as, naturally, (religious) knowledge of the *ghayb* proper, that unseen realm categorically veiled from human sense perception in this world. We saw that Ibn Taymiyya accepts as “*khābar ṣādiq*” (‘truthful report’) any hadith that has reached us through an authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) chain of transmission, as determined by conventional Muslim hadith scholarship. Yet we have also seen that even in the case of sunnaic reports in the form of hadith, absolute certainty of the content can only be claimed if the *khābar* in question has been transmitted through *tawātur* (even if only *tawātur ma'nawī*). Regarding non-sunnaic instances of transmission, be they historical or otherwise, it is likewise *tawātur* that, in the end of the day, can alone guarantee ultimate authenticity. The counterpart of the certainty afforded to us by *tawātur* in reports is that, as of the moment that such reports come to be experienced as *mutawātir* by a knowing subject, the content of those reports simultaneously becomes *ḍarūrī* knowledge for that person. In fact, *tawātur* itself is often defined as that (generally unspecifiable) number of reports necessary and sufficient to engender in the heart/mind of the knower an unshakeable conviction that the content reported must be true. It is in this sense that *tawātur* is, for Ibn Taymiyya, one of the fundamental sources of necessary knowledge. In this, Ibn Taymiyya follows faithfully in the tradition of Islamic jurisprudence and Muslim textual transmission, especially that of hadith.

At this juncture, however, Ibn Taymiyya surprises us with the insight that the underlying logic of *tawātur* is, in fact, operable on a scale much wider than the domain of historical (including sunnaic) reporting to which it has conventionally been confined. Ibn Taymiyya, for his part, calls into service the notion of *tawātur* as the final guarantor of authenticity for practically all the other

sources and avenues of knowledge in his epistemological panoply that we have investigated over the course of the current chapter, including *fiṭra*, *badīha*, and even *ḥiss*. We shall examine the most important of these applications of the principle of *tawātur* in the following section.

D. Tawātur as the Final Guarantor of Epistemic Authenticity

Ibn Taymiyya takes the principle of *tawātur*, or “recurrent mass transmission,” well known primarily as the final guarantor of authenticity in the hadith sciences, and extends it, making it the guarantor of his entire epistemic system.⁶⁰ Although the category known as “hadith reports” can and does contain errors in the form of falsified hadith, we can, according to the theory, nevertheless be certain of a hadith’s authenticity if it has been transmitted through *tawātur*, defined as transmission of a text, from its origin and at every subsequent stage, by disparate sources in such mass as to preclude the possibility of the report in question having being forged through “collusion” or conscious agreement (*tawāṭuʿ*). Now, empirical and *a priori* rational knowledge differ, admittedly, from the case of *mutawātir* reports for the simple fact that knowledge of both categories is immediate and imposes itself directly, with no need whatsoever for confirmation through corroboratory reports. Thus, when we say that the principle of *tawātur*, for Ibn Taymiyya, applies to sensory knowledge and the axiomatic principles of reason, we must not understand him to be saying that our certainty of such knowledge is *dependent* on *tawātur* in the manner in which our certainty of the content of reports depends on *tawātur*.⁶¹ We can certainly claim empirical knowledge of that which we ourselves experience empirically, without waiting for it to be confirmed for us by the rest of humanity. Similarly, the intuitive *a priori* principles lodged in the mind impose themselves as true directly and not through confirmatory *mutawātir* reports. An abandoned child growing up alone

⁶⁰ See *Darʿ*, VI: 286-287.

⁶¹ And *tawātur* alone, as we have seen, for although Ibn Taymiyya accepts reports that have been determined “truthful” or accurate (*ṣādiqa*), such as the category of *ṣaḥīḥ* hadith reports, it is nevertheless *tawātur* alone which can guarantee such transmitted knowledge as definitively certain (*yaqīnī*). For more on *tawātur*, see Hallaq, “On Inductive Corroboration,” esp. 9-24.

on an deserted island – a Ḥayy ibn Yaḡzān, for instance – would certainly still have access both to empirical and to necessary rational certitude. Ibn Taymiyya’s point, rather, is that in the event that such *ḡarūrī* knowledge should somehow fall prey to doubt, then the *tawātur* of humanity as a whole must be summoned to witness as a corrective. Such doubt, for Ibn Taymiyya, may be induced by a number of factors. Primary among these is the prolonged exposure to specious philosophical or theological doctrines that are based on dubious, often highly recondite, arguments whose conclusions entail a negation or contradiction of what is known to be true by necessity. We may illustrate Ibn Taymiyya’s appeal to *tawātur* in such cases by way of the following example.

In his theological treatise *Lubāb al-arbaʿīn*,⁶² Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī asserts the well-known Ashʿarī doctrine that God is neither in a direction (*jīha*) nor in a place (*makān*), which entails the corollary that He can be said neither to interpenetrate (*yudākhl*) or be cosubstantive with (*sārī fī*) the universe, nor to be distinct (*mubāyin*) and separate from it. This doctrine is recommended as a means of avoiding the attribution of directionality or place to God for fear of falling into corporeality (*tajsīm*), a particularly offensive species of assimilationism (*tashbīh*). Al-Rāzī reports that those who oppose this doctrine (such as Ibn Taymiyya and the Ḥanbalīs) claim as a matter of *a priori* knowledge (*ʿilm badīhī*) that of any two existing entities, it must be the case *either* that one inheres in (*sārī fī*) the other, as an accident inheres in a substance, *or else* that the two are distinct and separate (*mubāyin*) from each other, as is the case of two independent substances. Al-Rāzī counters the claim of *a priori* knowledge in this instance with several arguments. First, he argues that if the logical exhaustiveness of the stated disjunction were truly *a priori* (*badīhī*), it would not have been possible for a large number of thinkers to deny it, as do, in fact, all schools of thought “save the Ḥanbalīs and the Karrāmiyya.”⁶³ Second, while the universal concept of “man,” for instance, subsumes extant individuals each having a particular location (*ḡayyiz*) and magnitude (*miqdār*), the universal itself is not confined by any

⁶² See *Darʿ*, VI: 9-12 for Ibn Taymiyya’s citation of and response to al-Rāzī on this point.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, VI: 209, 245, 266.

location or magnitude. And while it is true that universal man or “man as such” (*al-insān min haythu huwa*) is a concept existing only in the mind, it is nevertheless not impossible, al-Rāzī argues, for the mind to conceive of such a thing, a fact which thus prevents the proposition of the opponent from being taken as *a priori*. Last, while the mind readily judges, for instance, affirmation (*ithbāt*) and negation (*naḡy*) to be contradictory and mutually exclusive opposites, such is not the case, al-Rāzī argues, with respect to two extant entities being either cosubstantive or distinct from one another. In fact it is quite possible for the mind to conceive of yet a third possibility – namely, that the two entities are *neither* cosubstantive *nor* distinct from one another. Reason, al-Rāzī argues, is unable to form an immediate judgment as to the possibility of this third proposition in the absence of a demonstration (*burhān*), a fact which precludes any automatic judgment of its impossibility from being considered truly *a priori*.

In response to this argument, Ibn Taymiyya appeals ultimately to what he argues is innate, axiomatic (*badīhī*) – and therefore necessary – knowledge on the basis, essentially, of *tawātur* – widespread transmission among human beings of a common piece of knowledge in the absence of any possibility of “collusion” or conscious agreement (*tawātuʿ*) on their part. Ibn Taymiyya insists that we all know – in an innate, immediate, and intuitive (*fiṭrī, badīhī*) fashion – that of any two existing entities, it must necessarily be the case *either* that one interpenetrates the other *or* that they are separate and distinct from each other, on pains of violating the Law of the Excluded Middle. Given that these propositions are both mutually contradictory and logically exhaustive, there exists no third possibility; the “middle” is excluded. This being the case, either one or the other of the two propositions *must* be true; denying them both simultaneously would entail a logical – and consequently also an ontological – impossibility, akin to holding a thing both to exist and not to exist simultaneously. Such knowledge is common to the members of all nations *whose innate nature has not been altered*.⁶⁴ We have here, essentially, the theory of *tawātur* as applied to widespread

⁶⁴ “*hādha amr muttafaq ‘alayhi bayna al-umam allatī lam tughayyar fiṭratuhā*” (ibid., VI: 12, l. 9). A little further on, he specifies that the standard point of reference concerning “innate,

attestations of what various individuals report to be innate (*fiṭrī*) and/or necessary (*ḍarūrī*) knowledge to them. Ibn Taymiyya states explicitly that we may claim “knowledge of the factual reality (*thubūt*) of what people report in a *tawātur* fashion with respect to empirical and necessary knowledge”⁶⁵ – with necessary (*ḍarūrī*) here seemingly used in the sense of what is innate (*fiṭrī*) or *a priori* (*badīhī*). Intentional mendacity (*ta‘ammud al-kadhib*) on the part of a large number of disparate individuals absent collusion or deliberate agreement (*tawāfu‘*) is virtually impossible as judged in light of the conventional workings of the world (*yamtani‘ fī al-‘āda*). Ibn Taymiyya further affirms that mere error (*khaṭa‘*) is also impossible with respect to a large number in matters of empirical and necessary (rational) knowledge, since it would be impossible for all of them to concur fortuitously on one and the same error.⁶⁶

Yet if our knowledge of the Law of the Excluded Middle is innate and axiomatic (*badīhī*), it would seem surprising that it could be “overridden,” particularly by a disputed premise that is *not* known by necessity – here the contention that affirming God to be distinct (*mubāyin*) from the universe entails *tashbīh*.

necessary propositions” (*qaḍāyā fiṭriyya ḍarūriyya*) is “those who possess a sound *fiṭra* / innate disposition that has not been changed due to inherited beliefs or preconceived biases” (*ahl al-fiṭar al-salīma allatī lam tataḡhayyar fiṭratuhā bi-l-i‘tiqādāt al-mawrūtha wa-l-ahwā’*). Just after he mentions “those who have not been subjected to a change in their innate disposition (*fiṭra*) as a result of presumption (*ẓann*) or whim / arbitrary personal opinion (*hawā’*).” (ibid., VI: 14, l. 6-8 and l. 9-10). See also at ibid., VI: 271 where Ibn Taymiyya mentions “*shubḥa*” (doubt, point of doubt) then comments, regarding the denial of God’s transcendence and “aboveness” (*‘uluww*) [i.e., with respect to creation] and His being distinct from creation (*mubāyana*), that no one concedes such a denial to the negationists (*nufāh*) by dint of his *fiṭra* (*bi-fiṭratihī*), once it has been properly understood, but rather such concession can only come about through the prolonged presence of a doubt (*shubḥa*) in the mind, especially if the person in question is also subject to the vagaries of whim and arbitrary personal opinion (*hawā’*) or has some other ulterior motive or bias (*gharaḍ*) (“*innamā yuwāfiqūhum ‘alayhi man qāmat ‘indahū shubḥa min shubḥ al-nufāh, lā-siyyamā in kāna lahu hawā’ aw gharaḍ*”). With the introduction of “ulterior motive” or “bias” (*gharaḍ*), paired here with “whim” or “stubbornly clinging to arbitrary personal opinion” (*hawā’*), in addition to “imitation” (*taqlīd*) and mere (unreflective) habit (*‘āda*), we now have a total of seven basic motives – some cognitive, some moral – for suppressing the *fiṭra*. To sum them up, the “seven deadly sins” of the *fiṭra* are: (1) (unexamined) inherited beliefs (*i‘tiqādāt mawrūtha*); (2) whim or stubborn personal opinion (*ahwā’*); (3) misconception (*ẓann*); (4) doubt or misgiving (*shubḥa*); (5) ulterior motive or bias (*gharaḍ*); (6) mere (unreflective) habit (*‘āda*); and, (7) blind imitation (*taqlīd*). For more on the suppression of the *fiṭra* through these various motives and mechanisms, see ibid., VI: 271-272.

⁶⁵ “*wa-bi-mithl hādha ‘ulima thubūt mā yukhbiru bihi ahl al-tawātur mim mā yu‘lamu bi-l-hiss wa-l-ḍarūra*” (ibid., VI: 12, l. 16-17).

⁶⁶ “*wa-l-khaṭa‘ ‘alā al-jam‘ al-kathīr mumtani‘ fī al-umūr al-ḥissiyya wa-l-ḍarūriyya*” (ibid., VI: 12, l. 19 – 13, l. 1).

Yet we recall that the proper functioning of *all* our epistemic faculties – including both judging the soundness of the premises of an argument as well as simply retaining a meaningful awareness of the innate rational principles of the mind (i.e., the *badīhiyyāt*) – is predicated in all cases on the health and proper functioning of the *fiṭra*. It is precisely in this sense that Ibn Taymiyya, as discussed above, conceives of the *fiṭra* as undergirding all of our various cognitive and moral faculties and, when healthy, guaranteeing the veracity of their mutually corroborative witness to the truth. But as we saw above, the *fiṭra* is susceptible of both cognitive and moral corruption, the former induced by longstanding habituation to beliefs (*i'tiqād*) that contradict what is intuitively known to be true. In the event that the *fiṭra* has become impaired and a person insists on maintaining a doctrine that contradicts *ḍarūra* knowledge, an appeal may be made to the *mutawātir* agreement among human beings without collusion or deliberate agreement on the point in question as definitive proof of the proposition in question, thus acting as a corrective against the erroneous doctrine that contradicts it. In short, through this expanded notion of *tawātur*, Ibn Taymiyya seeks to insulate what he observes to be universally held, innate notions against the corrosive doubt engendered by specious claims pushed in the name of “reason” by an esoteric philosophical elite prepared to overturn what Ibn Taymiyya argues is necessary (*ḍarūrī*) knowledge on the basis of abstract mental constructs devoid of any proper philosophical grounding, let alone ontological reality.

The epistemological significance of Ibn Taymiyya’s vindication, through the mechanism of *tawātur*, not only of the integrity of human sense perception but, more importantly, of what can be observed to be universally shared innate, intuitive, *a priori* – and hence necessary – knowledge becomes clear when placed within his larger epistemological framework. Universally shared empirical experiences and innate intuitions – guaranteed, in the final analysis, by consideration of some type of pan-human *tawātur* – yield certain knowledge that cannot reasonably be subjected to doubt. Being both immediate and universal, they cannot be overturned or superseded by *derivative* rational conclusions reached by way of theoretical reasoning (*nazar*), particularly when – as Ibn Taymiyya contends is

normally the case – the processes of inference involved, as well as the assumptions and premises upon which they are based, are the province of a relatively restricted number of thinkers belonging to a particular school of thought, whose fundamental axioms have more often than not been accepted and propagated on the basis of imitation (*taqlīd*) and conscious agreement (*tawāfuʿ*). Even if comparatively large numbers of such thinkers should agree amongst each other on a position that conflicts with necessary knowledge – as al-Rāzī holds to be the case with respect to the possibility of two existing entities being neither cosubstantial with, nor distinct from, one another⁶⁷ – this would fall short of the overwhelming *tawātur* by which the opposite proposition can be established. In essence, Ibn Taymiyya insists that immediate and universally shared knowledge – gained through a combination of sense perception (*ḥiss*), *a priori* reason (*badīha*), and intuition (*fiṭra*) – cannot be trumped by what he considers the parochial conclusions derived speculatively by the adherents of a pre-committed school of thought.

Yet it is important to underscore that Ibn Taymiyya is in no manner delegitimizing reason or its (valid) inferential operations *per se*. In fact, he is concerned precisely to defend and legitimate the innate and *a priori* knowledge lodged in the mind against claims that such may be subject to vitiation by the derivative conclusions of *a posteriori* inference. Simultaneously, Ibn Taymiyya must also not be understood to be privileging the innate knowledge of the mind at the expense of that very same mind’s *valid* processes of reasoned inference (*naẓar*). Rather, he is simply affirming that the results of *naẓar* must be checked against the undeniably true deliverances of *ḍarūra*, *badīhat al-ʿaql*, and a (healthy) *fiṭra*, rather than the reverse.⁶⁸ When the two are thought to conflict, it

⁶⁷ We recall al-Rāzī’s assertion that all major Islamic theological schools hold this view with the sole exception of the (numerically limited) Ḥanbalis and Karrāmiyya.

⁶⁸ By taking, for example, what Ibn Taymiyya asserts to be necessary and immediate intuitive knowledge as mere “initial impressions,” which Ibn Sīnā, for instance, demotes to mere “*wahm*” and “*khayāl*” and which reason can allegedly then judge to be erroneous on the basis of subsequent inferential argument (*naẓar*) and the (faulty) assumptions and premises on which it is based, such as the assumption of an external ontological reality for mental notions such as universals, or in the case of al-Rāzī here, realizing that these exist only in the mind but nevertheless transferring the judgment (*ḥukm*) of what is in the mind to the external world,

is the process of reasoned inference and/or the axioms upon which it is based that have somehow gone wrong, not the obvious and widely-shared notions rooted in the innate principles of reason and guaranteed by the *fiṭra* – as per the rule that “necessary knowledge cannot be contradicted by derived knowledge” (*al-naẓariyyāt lā tu‘ārīḍ al-ḍarūriyyāt*).⁶⁹ Where such a conflict is found to arise, Ibn Taymiyya insists that a critical review of the terms in which the premises are stated (as per Chapter 4), as well as the assumptions and premises upon which the inference is constructed, will always reveal that it is the process of rational inference that has somehow gone astray. In the case of al-Rāzī’s argument presented above, the error involved is easy for Ibn Taymiyya to identify, being as it is a classic case of confusing what exists in the mind with what exists in external reality and assuming that the judgment (*ḥukm*) that applies to the one is automatically transferable to the other. Specifically, al-Rāzī’s error lies in assuming that the ability of the mind to formulate the proposition that two existent things might neither be cosubstantive with nor separate from one another automatically translates into the ontological possibility that such a thing could actually exist in the outside world, making it necessary to go through a process of reasoned inference to determine which of the three possibilities – cosubstantive with, distinct from, or neither – is correct.

In light of the foregoing, it is important to reemphasize that Ibn Taymiyya nowhere insists, nor yet even suggests, that reason should somehow “submit” to revelation, in the sense of relinquishing a conclusion that reason on its own terms continues to deem correct even subsequent to rigorous review, but which it is then called upon to simply “let go of” in order to concede to the dictates of *ḥiss* and *ḵabar* (specifically, revelation). On the contrary, Ibn Taymiyya holds – and attempts throughout the *Dar’* to prove – that the discordant inferential conclusion is always the result of faulty reasoning (what we may call “*sū’ al-naẓar*”), and that a thorough and properly grounded (linguistic and) rational re-analysis of

assuming that such a judgment can be transferred from the logical to the ontological plane of reality without further ado.

⁶⁹ *Dar’*, VI: 11.

the matter will always reveal where the original inference has gone wrong and establish that the conclusions of valid and true reason (‘*aql ṣarīḥ*’) in fact do not conflict either with our innate or empirical knowledge, on the one hand, or what we know to be the case from revelation, on the other. Thus, while reason may often be alerted to its errors by the other sources of certain knowledge and prompted thereby to correct itself, so to speak, it is never asked or expected to ignore its own (legitimate and valid) conclusions or to allow its own lights simply to be overridden by “competing” sources of knowledge, for we recall that Ibn Taymiyya takes it as a fundamental premise of his epistemology that reliable sources of true knowledge are always, of necessity, complementary and corroboratory, never in competition or conflict with one another.

VI. Conclusion

We have learned, over the course of this chapter, that reality consists of two realms, the *shāhid* and the *ghā’ib*, and that the mind acquires knowledge of what exists in the former by way of the external senses and of what exists in the latter primarily through *khābar* (as well as *ḥiss bāṭin* to a limited degree). On the basis of the empirical knowledge provided to it by the senses, the mind abstracts universal concepts that it holds as mental representations of external reality. As the knowledge of the mind is purely theoretical (‘*ilmī*’), the mind is unable to establish the factual existence of any externally existent entity (although it can, once again, infer the existence of God on the basis of a consideration of the temporal and non-necessary nature of the universe, coupled with its innate knowledge of the impossibility of an infinite causal regress).⁷⁰ Reason nevertheless comes embedded with the innate (*fiṭrī*) and necessary (*ḍarūrī*) knowledge of certain fundamental axioms (*badīhiyyāt*) on the basis of which it is able to form judgments (*aḥkām*, *taṣdīqāt*) of a predicative or relational nature with respect to existing entities. The mind possesses *necessary* knowledge of the external reality medi-

⁷⁰ That is, the argument from *ḥudūth*, i.e., the temporality, or temporal instantiation, of the world.

ed to it by the senses, of its own innate logical principles, and of whatever has reached it by way of *tawātur*. The principle of *tawātur*, furthermore, guarantees the authenticity not only of various kinds of reports (*akhbār*) – including, of course, revelation – but also serves as the ultimate guarantor of the necessary knowledge mediated to the mind by the senses, as well as of the axiomatic principles of reason and of the *fiṭra* more generally in the event that any of these sources of widely-shared, necessary knowledge have been undermined, impugned, or subjected to systematic doubt. Such doubt is typically the result of doctrines that have been derived through speculative reflection (*naẓar*) built upon dubious premises that, Ibn Taymiyya contends, unambiguously contradict the necessary knowledge attested to by any of the sources mentioned above.

Having laid out, over the course of the last two chapters, the fundamental components of Ibn Taymiyya’s attempted hermeneutical, ontological, and epistemological reform, we shall now turn to consider, in our concluding chapter, how he applies these tools in order to resolve once and for all the hitherto intractable “contradiction” between reason and revelation, particularly with regard to the affirmation of the Divine Attributes.

CONCLUSION

Reason Reconstituted: The Divine Attributes and the Question of Contradiction Between Reason and Revelation

I. Rational Inference and the Question of *Qiyās al-Ghā'ib 'alā al-Shāhid*

In Chapter 5, we discussed Ibn Taymiyya's charge against the philosophers that their reasoning about the world and metaphysical realities rests upon a fundamentally unsound ontology that confuses, on numerous levels, the realm of external ontological existence with the realm of notional or logical existence in the mind. Specifically, we have seen that the philosophers adopt a realist conception of universals on the basis of which they accord objective ontological status to notional realities (such as universals) that, Ibn Taymiyya insists, exist only in the mind. As such intellectual realities are, by definition, "unseen" (*ghayr mashhūd*) or "non-empirical" (*ghayr maḥsūs*), the philosophers identify them with the *ghayb* spoken of in revelation, in contrast to the *shāhid* realm of our ambient empirical reality. The result of this is a philosophical ontology that confines the empirical (*maḥsūs*) to the seen (*shahāda*) while reducing the unseen (*ghayb*) to the mental or intellectual (*ma'qūl*). Such a scheme entails – incoherently for Ibn Taymiyya – the affirmation of externally existent realities that are entirely notional and non-perceivable (e.g., universals). Worse, in as far as the *ghayb* is reduced to the *ma'qūl*, the philosophers' schema at the same time necessarily precludes the existence of any self-standing entities (*a'yān qā'ima bi-ānfusiḥā*) in the *ghayb*, entities that are inherently perceptible (though veiled from our senses at the current time) and that exist independently of human reason and human minds. It is on the basis of this ontology that the philosophers end up "intellectualizing" the various *ghā'ib* realities affirmed in revelation, such as in the identification of angels with the intelligences or the broader philosophical view that the events of the afterlife, including the pleasures of paradise and

the pains of hell, are merely graphic metaphors for what will essentially be experienced in intellectual, as opposed to sensory, terms in the hereafter.

This confusion in ontology has, predictably for Ibn Taymiyya, led to a parallel confusion in the rational inferences the philosophers make about the world. Such inferences may collectively be referred to as “*qiyās*,” a term which, for Ibn Taymiyya, comprises both the categorical syllogism (*qiyās al-shumūl*), operating on the basis of a universal middle term, and analogy (*qiyās al-tamthīl*), which involves the assimilation of two particulars based on a relevant shared attribute without the mediation of a common universal. In both cases, an inference is operated by transferring a judgment (*ḥukm*) either from the universal to the particular (in the case of the categorical syllogism) or from particular to particular (in the case of analogy).¹ The particular kind of inference relevant to the question of the Divine Attributes – and to the *ghayb* more generally – is known as “*qiyās al-ghā’ib ‘alā al-shāhid*,” that is, “inferring [something about] the unseen on the basis of the seen,” or, to put it in other terms, transferring a judgment (*ḥukm*) applicable to the realm of the *shahāda* to the realm of the *ghayb*. Ibn Taymiyya identifies essentially four different kinds of inference, or transfer of judgment, one might make about the unseen realm (“*al-ghā’ib*”) on the basis of the empirical realm (“*al-shāhid*”). These inferences concern: (1) factual existence (*thubūt*); (2) essential ontological reality (*ḥaqīqa*) or modality (*kayfiyya*);

¹ The classic example of the categorical syllogism is: “All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore, Socrates is mortal.” The judgment (*ḥukm*) of mortality is predicated of Socrates since he is subsumed by the middle term “man” and thus falls under the universal proposition, “All men are mortal.” A classic example of analogical reasoning, cited in Muslim juridical texts, is the following: “Grape wine (*khamr*) is forbidden because it intoxicates. Date wine (*nabīdh*) also intoxicates. Therefore, date wine is forbidden as well.” Here the judgment (*ḥukm*) of illegality is transferred from one particular (grape wine) to another particular (date wine) due to their sharing in a common *relevant attribute*, known as the ‘*illa*, or *ratio legis* – in this case, intoxication. Ibn Taymiyya argues that these two forms of inference are equivalent in substance and differ only in form. The analogical syllogism (*qiyās al-tamthīl*), for instance, can easily be rewritten as a categorical syllogism (*qiyās al-shumūl*) if the relevant attribute (that is, the ‘*illa*) has been correctly identified. Using our example of grape wine, date wine, and the attribute of intoxication, we can say: “All intoxicants are forbidden. Grape wine (or date wine) is an intoxicant. Therefore, grape wine (or date wine) is forbidden.” For Ibn Taymiyya’s discussion of the substantive equivalence of analogy and categorical syllogism in the *Dar’*, see *Dar’*, VII: 318, and more generally at 317-327 (esp. 322ff). For a comprehensive treatment of Ibn Taymiyya’s views on the subject, primarily as expressed in his treatise *Jahd al-qarīḥa fī tajrīd al-naṣīḥa*, see Introduction, Hallaq, *Greek Logicians*, xxvii-xxxix.

(3) meanings and notions (*ma‘ānī*); and (4) the logical principles and axiomatic truths of reason (*badīhiyyāt*). Ibn Taymiyya contends that making an analogy from the *shāhid* to the *ghā’ib* is illegitimate in the first two cases but mandatory in the second two. Why is this so?

Ibn Taymiyya maintains that it is invalid to make an analogy (*qiyās*) or transfer a judgment (*ḥukm*) from the *shāhid* to the *ghā’ib* in terms of either the factual existence (*thubūt*) or the essential ontological reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of something in the *ghayb*. This is so because existence and ontological reality are both *existential* categories, and reason, as we know from Chapter 5, is incapable of establishing the existence² or the ontological reality of anything in the *ghayb*.³ For its knowledge of what exists, reason is dependent, as we have seen, on perception (*ḥiss*) and/or report (*khbar*). It is only through one of these two channels that it can know *what* exists in external reality. For our knowledge of the essential reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of a thing, we are essentially dependent on *ḥiss* alone, since it is only through direct empirical experience, according to Ibn Taymiyya, that we can gain any sense of a thing’s ontological reality or its modality of being in the world. To put it another way, we can only know *what* exists through *ḥiss* or *khbar*, while we can only know something about the essential reality of *how* a thing exists through *ḥiss* alone. This being the case, it is illegitimate for reason automatically to assume the existence (*thubūt*) of something in the *ghayb* based on what exists in the *shahāda* without being specifically informed of its existence through one of the two sources of existential knowledge, *ḥiss* or *khbar*. It is likewise illegitimate, once it has been informed of the existence of something in the *ghayb*, for reason to assume a common essential reality (*ḥaqīqa*) or equivalent modality of being (*kayfiyya*) between what exists in the *shahāda* and what exists in the *ghayb*. When Ibn Taymiyya states that *qiyās al-ghā’ib ‘alā al-shāhid* is “one of the most invalid forms of *qiyās*” (*min afsad al-qiyās*) due to the “es-

² See *Dar’*, V: 254, where he says: “*lā siyyamā wa-l-umūr al-ghā’iba laysa li-l-mukhbarīna bihā khibra yumkinuhum an ya‘lamū bi-‘uqūlihim thubūt mā ukhbira bihi.*”

³ With the exception, once again, of God, as we have mentioned previously.

sential difference in the ontological reality [of things]” (*li-’khtilāf al-ḥaqā’iq*),⁴ it is *qiyās* primarily in this second sense – the sense of transferring a judgment concerning the essential ontological reality, or *ḥaqīqa* – that he has in mind. In short, since existence (*thubūt*) and essential reality (*ḥaqīqa*) cannot be *established* by reason, but can only be known through *ḥiss* or *khavar*, reason similarly has no right to *transfer* from the *shāhid* to the *ghā’ib* realm any judgment (*ḥukm*) that concerns either of these two things. Existence and essential reality in the *ghayb* can only be established by the same means used to establish them in the *shahāda*, namely, *ḥiss* and/or *khavar* for existence, and *ḥiss* alone for some kind of essential reality, or modality. Reason, for its part, can neither establish existence nor pass any judgment on essential reality or modality in the absence of *khavar* or direct empirical experience.

Now, where we *can*, and indeed *must*, make an analogy (*qiyās*) from the *shāhid* to the *ghā’ib* realms is in terms of the second two categories listed above, namely, the transference of meanings and notions (*ma’ānī*) and the application of fundamental logical and relational principles. What, for Ibn Taymiyya, is the precise nature of the correspondence between the *shāhid* and the *ghā’ib* realms on the plane of meanings and notions? We recall that universal notions existing in the mind are a mere representation, or “snapshot,” of the empirical realities which the senses have mediated to the mind. Just as a camera can only capture what is there in front of it, likewise the universal notions abstracted by the mind from the particulars are conditioned and determined by the existential reality of whatever they are abstractions of. Nevertheless, we can have some notional appreciation for *ghā’ib* entities that have been reported to us through *khavar* thanks to the names (*asmā’*) by means of which these entities are described to us, even if we have no direct empirical experience of them. This is so because names (or ‘nouns’) denote meanings (*ma’ānī*), which are, precisely, *notional* realities subsistent in the mind. Ibn Taymiyya in fact explicitly likens meanings (*ma’ānī*) to universals in as far as both are originally abstracted from particulars and reside

⁴ See this formulation at *Dar’*, III: 359.

as notions in the mind that are capable of subsuming, or being applied to, any number of extant particulars. Now, as the understanding and processing of meanings (and other universal notions) is precisely what the mind is made to do, we are able to comprehend – both semantically and notionally – *something* of those entities that resemble, *in some respects* (*min ba‘d al-wujūh*), what we know experientially in our own empirical realm.

We may illustrate this point by way of an example. If, say, we are informed through revelation that angels (existing in the realm of the *ghayb*) can see and we also know what it means for us in the realm of the *shahāda* to see – namely, to have visual cognizance of an object – then this shared meaning, which is based on *ishtirāk ma‘nawī* as we have discussed in Chapter 4, must be applied to both the *shāhid* and the *ghā‘ib* realms equally. Thus, if angels see, this can only mean that they, like us, possess visual cognizance of objects, since this is what the word “see” means. Were this meaning not meant to apply to the angels when predicated of them, then revelation would simply not have used this term in speaking of them. In other words, there is a meaningful semblance of similarity (*mushābaha, tashābuh*) between what seeing means in the case of angels in the *ghayb* and what it means in our case in the realm of the *shahāda*. Were it not for this shared meaning (*ma‘nā mushtarak*), the statement “Angels see” would have no appreciable meaning for us whatsoever and it would be nonsensical for revelation to have addressed us, concerning the angels, in these terms. It is of note, however, that we have not established the *existence* of the angels’ sight on the basis of any rational analogy (*qiyās*) or transference of judgment (*ḥukm*) from the *shahāda* to the *ghayb*. Rather, the existence (*thubūt*) of this reality is only known through *khavar*. Nor would we be justified in assuming a parallel in the essential ontological reality (*ḥaqīqa*) or the precise modality (*kayfiyya*) of the angels’ seeing, since we have no empirical experience of the angels themselves, let alone of the precise modality of their seeing. Nevertheless, we can know what it *means* for angels to see, even if we cannot know exactly *how* it is that they do so. And indeed, it is only by our transferring what it means to see – that is, the meaning, or *ma‘nā*, of seeing – from the *shahāda* to the *ghayb* that we can under-

stand anything reported to us about the *ghayb* in the first place. Affirming a common *meaning* (*ma'nā*) of *shāhid* and *ghā'ib* entities, while nevertheless admitting a substantive difference in the ontological reality (*ḥaqīqa*) or modality (*kayfiyya*) in which this meaning applies to each entity, is simply a rephrasing, in logical-rational terms, of our discussion in Chapter 4 where we distinguished between the “*ta'wīl*” of *ghā'ib* entities that we *can* know – namely, *ta'wīl* in the sense of “explication of meaning” (*tafsīr al-ma'nā*) – in contrast to the “*ta'wīl*” which we cannot know, namely, *ta'wīl* in the sense of modality or “*ḥaqīqat mā ya'ūlu ilayhi al-amr*.”⁵ Underscoring the ultimate dissimilarity in essential ontological reality between the empirical and the invisible realms, despite the common applicability of the names applied to both and the comprehensibility of the universal meanings carried by these names, Ibn Taymiyya cites a quotation from Ibn 'Abbās to the effect that: “The only commonality between what exists in this world and what exists in Paradise is the names [by which each is described].”⁶

Yet some of what exists in the *ghayb* does not fit into our conceptual framework at all because, to use Ibn Taymiyya's term, it has no counterpart (*naẓīr*) in our empirical realm whatsoever. Where unseen realities bear no meaningful resemblance to any element of our experience at all, they cannot be meaningfully named for us, since there are no notions (*ma'anī*) or universals abstracted from our current realm which could meaningfully apply to them. This is why, in addition to all the pleasures of Paradise, there exists, greater than all the rest, “that which no eye has seen nor ear has heard, nor has occurred to the heart of any man.”⁷ We note here not only the denial of analogous *empirical* experience (no eye has seen and no ear has heard the likes of it), but also the denial of any *notional* resemblance. Our minds, of course, can imagine (*yataṣawwar*) many things that do not, and even cannot, exist in the empirical realm, yet we still have the ability to imagine them; that is, they can exist as notions in our minds.

⁵ See Chapter 4 above, p. 202ff.

⁶ “*laysa fī al-dunyā mimma fī al-janna illā al-asmā'*” (see *Dar'*, VI: 124).

⁷ “*mā lā 'ayn ra'at wa-lā udhun sami'at wa-lā khaṭara 'alā qalb bashar*”

But that which is reserved for the inhabitants of Paradise has neither any empirical, nor any notional, resemblance to anything we know; it surpasses even our (relatively expansive) powers of imagination. Similarly, the soul (*rūḥ*) is not given any further name or description, but rather is simply described as “of the affair of your Lord,”⁸ underlying its particularly unique nature and its essential dissimilarity to anything else that we know. Finally, while many of the attributes of God that we have been informed of correspond to attributes of which we have some experience (e.g., mercy, anger, kindness, majesty, etc.), the core essence (*kunh*) of God remains entirely unknown to us, not even by means of correspondence, similarity, or approximation. The complete and utter uniqueness and incomparability of the Divine Essence is, presumably, why the Prophet is reported to have instructed his followers not to ponder on the “*kunh*” of God, but rather to ponder on His actions. Attempting to fathom God’s ultimate essence is, in fact, pointless as we can have no *understanding* of it whatsoever, for the simple reason that it is totally unlike – in *every* respect (*min jamī‘ al-wujūh*) – anything of which we have any experience, and therefore any knowledge.⁹

The second type of *qiyās* from *shāhid* to *ghā’ib* which Ibn Taymiyya declares not only legitimate but mandatory is the analogical application to both realms of the basic rules of logic and the innate axioms of reason, what he refers to as the *badīhiyyāt*. Such principles, being axiomatic and *a priori* as established in Chapter 5, neither derive from nor are dependent on empirical experience and, partly for this reason, are not confined to our realm of empirical reality. By their nature, logical principles hold true universally and without exception. Thus, if it is true in our empirical realm that a thing cannot simultaneously be and not be (an instance of the Law of Non-Contradiction), then the same must hold true in the unseen realm as well. In fact, our knowledge that this law holds true in our empirical realm is not based on anything we have observed in that realm. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine what it could even mean for us to have “observed” that something cannot both be and not be at the same time. Rather, we simply know,

⁸ Qur’an (al-Isrā’) 17:85.

⁹ See *Dar’*, VI: 123-127.

as a matter of logical necessity, that “be” and “not be” are mutually contradictory and logically exclusive opposites and that, by definition, they cannot hold true for any given entity at one and the same time. Being a question, for Ibn Taymiyya, of (necessary) logic rather than (contingent) ontology, this and similar principles hold true – in fact, *must* hold true – by self-evident logical necessity in all possible worlds, including, naturally, the world of the *ghayb*. Reason is therefore perfectly justified in applying such axioms to both realms since, once again, we are dealing with logical and relational phenomena and the passing of judgments on their basis, all of which is part and parcel of the rational faculty and, to a substantial degree, constitutive of its very essence. It is important to underscore the common applicability of logical axioms to both the seen and the unseen realms of existence, for Ibn Taymiyya very often attempts to reduce to absurdity his opponents’ theological positions – which, in the end, are positions regarding something in the *ghayb*, namely, God – on account of a violation of one or another of these fundamental and universally applicable rules of thought.¹⁰

Now, Ibn Taymiyya accuses the philosophers of speculating about the *ghayb* on the basis of the *shahāda* in the first two domains listed above, namely, existence (*thubūt*) and essential ontological reality (*ḥaqīqa*). Yet the inference from *shāhid* to *ghā’ib*, as we have seen, is illegitimate in these domains since reason cannot independently establish the factual existence or the existential modality of any entity. It is precisely because the philosophers, in his view, have treated *ghā’ib* entities as essentially analogous to *shāhid* ones, particularly in terms of essential reality (*ḥaqīqa*), that they then feel compelled to deny what *khabar* affirms of *ghā’ib* entities (particularly the Divine Attributes) so as to avoid the risk of likening God *in essence* (i.e., in His *ḥaqīqa*) to created things, which would be tantamount to *tashbīh*. But the philosophers’ belief that affirmation of the Divine Attributes would entail such an assimilation is a direct result of their false assumption of *shāhid*-to-*ghā’ib* comparability – in other words, of the false view that it is possible to make an analogy (*qiyās*) in terms of

¹⁰ Such as the notion, examined in Chapter 5, that one could coherently hold God to be neither one with nor separate from the universe, neither inherent in it nor transcendent to it.

essence, modality, and ontological reality between the seen and the unseen realms. They thus disavow the legitimate and required forms of *qiyās* from *shāhid* to *ghā'ib* – namely, the analogy necessarily involved in the affirmation of a common meaning (*ma'nā*) as well as the common application of universal logical principles – due to the implications they believe to be entailed by the illegitimate forms of *qiyās* in which they have unjustifiably engaged by assuming an essential ontological similarity between *shāhid* and *ghā'ib* entities bearing a common name.

To sum up, then, the type of analogy (*qiyās*) from *shāhid* to *ghā'ib* that Ibn Taymiyya holds to be both valid and necessary is a semantic and notional one on the basis of shared meanings, *not* an analogy related to factual existence (*thubūt*) or essential ontological reality (*ḥaqīqa*). Though reason is unable to deduce or infer the existence of anything in the *ghayb* (other than God), it nevertheless draws upon the universal meanings (*ma'ānī*) and notions (also *ma'ānī*) it has abstracted from the realm of the *shahāda* – in terms of which our very language is patterned, since it is through language that we name various existing objects – in order to understand *something* about *ghā'ib* entities on account of shared meanings (*ma'ānī mushtaraka*). Nevertheless, reason must realize that the ontological reality, or *ḥaqīqa*, of each entity is specific to the entity in question, and in that sense, entities in the *ghayb* are *essentially* dissimilar from those in the *shahāda* – that is, dissimilar *in essence*, which, for Ibn Taymiyya of course is equivalent to a thing's ontological reality, or *ḥaqīqa*. Finally, reason is called upon to treat all realms of existence analogously with respect to the fundamental rules of logic and, consequently, to apply these principles consistently to both the realm of the *shahāda* and to that of the *ghayb*.

II. Ibn Taymiyya's Reforms Applied: The Question of the Divine Attributes

We have seen over the course of our study that the philosophers in essence make an appeal to reason (*'aql*) to argue that we must make *ta'wīl* of the Divine Attributes as affirming them would, on their view, entail that God and creatures

participate ontologically in a common universal, negating God's unique and total dissimilarity from created beings and opening the door to *tashbīh*. Ibn Taymiyya, for his part, insists that we are able to understand God's attributes through their subsumption along with attributes present in our world under a common meaning (*ma'nā*) or notion (also *ma'nā*). Here arises a question, however. When Ibn Taymiyya says that we can only understand something if it possesses some resemblance to the created entities with which we are familiar, he explicitly uses the terms "*mushābaha*" and "*mumāthala*," both cognates of "*tashbīh*" and "*mithl*" (as in the verse "*laysa ka-mithlihi shay'*"), respectively. How, then, does Ibn Taymiyya understand *mushābaha* and *mumāthala* here in a manner that does not violate this verse? First, he explains, there is no escaping (*lā budda min*) *some* element of commonality (*qadr mushtarak*) between *any* two existing entities, so we should be forthright in admitting so. Denying this premise directly entails a denial God's very existence, since one could easily argue that if He were to exist and we were to exist, this would imply "*tashbīh*" through a common applicability to God and to us of the predicate "exists" (*al-ishtirāk fī ism al-wujūd*). This is precisely why the Bāṭiniyya, on Ibn Taymiyya's understanding (as we saw in Chapter 3), do *not* affirm God's existence nor, absurdly, do they affirm His non-existence (thus violating the Law of the Excluded Middle). Some later Sufi schools, on the other hand, draw the opposite conclusion, holding instead that *we* do not exist – another absurdity for Ibn Taymiyya of the order he routinely dismisses as "necessarily known to be invalid according to the basic principles of reason" ("*ma'lūm al-fasād bi-ḍarūrat al-'aql*" or "*bi-l-badīha*") and as "obstinately denying (what is obvious to) the senses and to reason" ("*mukābara li-l-ḥiss wa-l-'aql*").

But if there must be *some* element of commonality (*qadr mushtarak*) between all things that exist, including God and the created universe, where should one draw the line of acceptable "overlap"? At existence? At life, knowledge, and power? At mercy and retribution? Being separate from and "above" the universe? Possessing a hand? Ibn Taymiyya's answer to this question goes back to his conception of what we have been referring to as a

thing's "essential ontological nature," or "*ḥaqīqa*." This "essential nature," for Ibn Taymiyya, reduces in the end to a question of a thing's fundamental ontological status, and specifically to whether its being, or its existence, is necessary, eternal, perfect, and indestructible, on the one hand, or contingent, temporal, deficient, and subject to demise and non-existence, on the other. It goes without saying that the first set of qualities belong to God alone – and in fact constitute the principle elements by virtue of which He is God – while the second set of attributes apply to all entities other than God, whether they exist in the realm of the *shahāda* or that of the *ghayb*. It is these four fundamental qualities that, for Ibn Taymiyya, define the "essential ontological reality," or *ḥaqīqa*, of any existing thing. Now, as this fundamental essence, as we have learned, is entirely inseparable (outside of the mind) from a thing's attributes, it follows that whatever attributes possessed by an entity apply to that entity in a manner commensurate with its underlying ontological reality as defined by this limited set of crucial traits. Another way we may think about this is to say that all other attributes of a thing are "colored," or conditioned, by the ontological status (*ḥaqīqa*) of the essence in which they adhere, as determined by these four traits.

Let us illustrate Ibn Taymiyya's point by considering the attribute of knowledge. While "knowledge" *means* the same thing with respect to God and to humans, namely, cognition of a knowable, the knowledge predicated of human beings applies to them in a manner commensurate with their underlying essential reality, namely, contingency, temporality, deficiency, and impermanence. Like our very essence, the attribute of knowledge we possess is created, contingent, non-necessary, limited, imperfect, and ultimately abrogable altogether – as, for instance, through dementia or other memory loss, and eventually in a definitive manner through the death of the knower himself. God's attribute of knowledge, on the other hand, is fully commensurate with the essential reality of the (divine) essence in which it inheres and is therefore, like God Himself, necessary, unlimited (i.e., it encompasses all possible knowables), perfect, and indestructible. So while knowing *means* the same thing for us as it does for God (cognizance of a

knowable) and there thus exists a *notional* sharing between His knowing and ours, there is nevertheless a fundamental *ontological* distinction between the true reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of God's (perfect) knowing on the one hand and our (deficient, contingent, and limited) knowing on the other. It is precisely here that the fundamental – and, for Ibn Taymiyya, decisive – distinction lies between any and all of the attributes of God as compared to any and all of the attributes of created things. There is indeed “nothing like unto Him,” since He alone, along with all of His qualities, is necessary, eternal, perfect, etc. It is in this crucial respect, and not in any other, that there is no similarity (*mushābaha*) or likeness (*mumāthala*) – in fact we should specify, no *ontologically relevant* similarity or likeness – between God and anything else. There *is*, nevertheless – and necessarily so – a *type* of resemblance between God and creation on the purely abstract level of universal meanings (*ma'ānī*) without which, once more, we would simply not be able to have any comprehension whatsoever of anything absent from our senses. In this case, the resemblance obtains from the fact that both are qualified by the attribute of knowledge. We recall from our discussion in Chapter 4 that were it not for this shared meaning (*ma'nā mushtarak*), the phrase “God is All-Knowing” would simply mean nothing to us at all, as if, Ibn Taymiyya remarks, one were to say that God is “*kajz*” or God is “*dīj*,” or other such nonsensical statements constructed of meaningless words. Yet it is precisely because the very essence and reality of a thing coincides, for Ibn Taymiyya, with its concrete ontological existence and *not* with the notional reality of it as conceived in the mind, that Ibn Taymiyya feels confident in affirming all the attributes predicated of God in revelation without running the risk of falling into the *relevant kind* of *tashbīh*, which is to say ontological, and not merely notional, *tashbīh*. For Ibn Taymiyya, we make proper *tanzīh* of God not by wantonly denying of Him any and all attributes that can truthfully also be predicated of something else, but rather, in two distinct and very specific ways: (1) by affirming of His essence the four essential qualities mentioned above and negating of Him their opposites, and (2) by affirming of Him only what Ibn Taymiyya calls “attributes of perfection” (*ṣifāt kamāl*), such as life, power, knowledge, etc. and negating of Him their op-

posites (death, weakness, ignorance, and so forth). The first represents a *tanzīh* of God's essence, the second a *tanzīh* of His attributes.

This way of looking at things allows God to be comprehensible to us – that is, we can understand *who* He is in our minds/hearts – without, however, His being “like” us or comparable to us in any *ontologically relevant* way, that is, in any way that would compromise His divinity by implying anything of the deficiency (*naqs*) or contingency by which we and every other created entity are characterized. We can understand *who* God is precisely because we are able to understand the *meaning* – and thus the *ta'wīl* in the sense of “*tafsīr al-ma'nā*” – of the terms used to denote His attributes, but we can nonetheless never fathom the true (ontological) reality – the *ḥaqīqa* – of these attributes nor, *a fortiori*, of His innermost essence (*kunh*). This is so, as we have seen, because all existential knowledge is based on *ḥiss*, and we only have empirical experience of a created and contingent empirical reality, and so we have nothing – that is, no relevant actual *experience* in our world – on the basis of which to make an analogy (*qi-yās*) from it to the *ghayb*. And if this is true with respect even to the *created* entities of the *ghayb*, it is emphatically more so with respect to God, the necessarily existent Creator of all contingent being.

III. Concluding Reflections

The *Dar' ta'arud al-'aql wa-l-naql* represents Ibn Taymiyya's attempt to transcend the centuries-old conflict between reason and revelation that had been raging on the Islamic intellectual scene from as early as the beginning of the 2nd/8th century. Though reason and revelation each make various kinds of affirmations that could potentially come into conflict, we have seen that the main focal point of this debate in medieval Islam centered on the question of the Divine Attributes. The Qur'an and prophetic hadith ascribe to God a large number of discrete attributes, some or all of which are denied by various philosophical and theological schools of thought or interpreted in a metaphorical fashion (via *ta'wīl*) on the basis of rational objections to the alleged implications of a straightforward, “lit-

eral” affirmation of the attributes in question. Affirmation of the offending attributes is often believed to entail an unacceptable assimilation of God to created beings (*tashbīh*) or otherwise to infringe upon philosophical notions of an utterly simple divinity uncompromised by the “compositeness” allegedly entailed by the possession of particularizing attributes.

Ibn Taymiyya rejects in principle the type of rationalistic *ta’wīl* employed by the philosophers, the Mu’tazila, and later Ash‘arite theologians on the grounds that it does violence to the language of revelation and, no less significantly, stands in diametric opposition to the radical affirmationism he insists was the universal stance of the early authoritative community (*al-salaf wa-l-a’imma*). Beyond this, he instinctively rejects the purely abstract notion of God entertained by the philosophers for two main reasons, one ontological, the other moral and religious. Ontologically, as we have seen, Ibn Taymiyya insists that abstract notions can exist only in the mind, with the result that the more God is conceived as being abstract and wholly undefinable, the more He is reduced from the status of an objectively existent personal God to that of an amorphous mental construct existing solely in the mind of the philosopher. To Ibn Taymiyya’s mind, the philosophers’ God simply does not and cannot exist in external reality, a fact which explains his charge of *de facto* atheism against them,¹¹ however lofty their intentions may have been in attempting to safeguard our conception of the Deity from various anthropomorphisms and other unbecoming forms of assimilationism. The moral and religious implications of such an abstracted and ethereal view of God were naturally not lost on Ibn Taymiyya and, in fact, stand at the center of his motivations in attempting to refute philosophically inspired “negationism” once and for all. One cannot very well pray to a God incapable of hearing one’s prayer, nor yet draw close to a God who is unaware of one’s par-

¹¹ Ibn Taymiyya often refers to the philosophers as “*malāḥida*,” a term which is often closer, in classical usage, to “heterodox” or “heretical” than to outright “atheist” as normally implied by the term as used today. However, he often charges them with “*ta’ṭīl*,” viz. the comprehensive negation of God’s attributes which, Ibn Taymiyya maintains, is equivalent to the negation of God Himself. We also encounter the terms “*mu’aṭṭila*” and “*mu’aṭṭilat al-sāni’*,” sometimes in reference to the *falāsifa* as a whole, but more often to the “Bāṭiniyya,” as well as the “materialists” (*dahriyya*), the Samniyya, and other such groups.

ticular existence. The loss of intelligibility of God implicit in the philosophers' radically negative theology undermines our ability to relate to Him in any meaningfully personal manner, and therefore thwarts what Ibn Taymiyya holds to be the very purpose and pith of religion, namely, to *know* God (which requires that He be reasonably intelligible to us), then to love and to worship Him. As man's ultimate felicity is dependent precisely on his doing of these three things, any intellectual construct apt to foreclose his ability to do so must needs be seen as a barrier to the achievement of that very felicity of the human soul both philosopher and theologian ultimately seek.

Yet in his affray against the philosophers, Ibn Taymiyya is not content simply to assert the precellence of revelation over reason and bid this latter to dutiful silence wherever the former has spoken. Rather, he endeavors not merely to refute the individual arguments of the philosophers and theologians, but to demolish the very foundations – linguistic, ontological, and epistemological – on which their “negationism” is based. True to his empiricist methodology, Ibn Taymiyya starts from the consideration of one particular issue, that of the Divine Attributes. Yet in the process of attacking and deconstructing an enormous multitude of arguments over 4,046 pages of text, he implicitly builds up an alternative system of knowledge based on a reformed approach to language, a reconstructed ontology, and a broadly reconstituted notion of reason. Ibn Taymiyya secures a strong place in his new epistemology for *khavar ṣādiq* (“reliable report”) – particularly in the guise of authentic revelation (*naql ṣaḥīḥ*) – as a major source of objective knowledge about the world, both *shāhid* and *ghā'ib*. While relentlessly attacking the philosophers' realist ontology of universals, he nevertheless validates the abstracting and universalizing function of the mind, and in fact makes this function the cornerstone of our notional access to the *ghayb*, including the attributes of God. Ibn Taymiyya's insistent differentiation between the existential category of essential ontological reality (*ḥaqīqa*), on the one hand, and the notional categories of universal concepts (*kullīyyāt*) and meanings (*ma'ānī*), on the other, allows him to uphold the integrity and the intelligibility of the language used of God in revelation while simultaneously steering clear of

tashbīh, interpreted as the implication of any *ontologically relevant* similarity between the eternal, necessary, and perfect God and His temporal, contingent, and necessarily imperfect creatures. Ibn Taymiyya’s insistence on the ontological indivisibility of essence and existence, and particularly of essence and attributes, allows him to articulate a limited, ontologically relevant set of divine attributes (necessity, eternity, perfection, indestructibility) which, above all else, are what radically distinguishes God’s essential being from that of every other existing thing. Being of the essence, these qualities pervade the Divine Being, so to speak, and determine the ontological quality of all other attributes pertaining to God, shielding them from any charge of deficiency one might erroneously suspect of them based on the notional semblance they share with corresponding attributes found in human beings or other created entities. Ibn Taymiyya’s insistence on the universal applicability of the *a priori* logical principles lodged in the mind allows him to dismiss out of hand a number of “negationist” theses for running afoul of the elementary principles of rational thought. Ultimately, Ibn Taymiyya grounds the final integrity of his system, and indeed of all human knowledge, both in the cognitive-moral notion of the *fiṭra*, or “original normative disposition,” and in an expanded application of the principle of *tawātur*, against which all sources of knowledge and modes of cognition can ultimately be verified.

In broadening the sources of authentic knowledge, Ibn Taymiyya simultaneously widens the scope of the means and the steps by which knowledge can come to be lodged in a given individual’s mind.¹² Though true knowledge itself is perfectly objective, in the sense that it corresponds to (*yuṭābiq*) what is true and real in and of itself (*mā huwa thābit fī nafs al-amr*), the discrete process by which one acquires knowledge of any given knowable (*maʿlūm*) is nevertheless personal, situational, specific and individual. Typical of Ibn Taymiyya’s thought, there are no universal rules or necessary order of steps that apply to all cases. The various means of acquiring knowledge – perception (*ḥiss*), reliable report

¹² See *Darʿ*, VIII: 20-21 for Ibn Taymiyya’s discussion of this point.

(*khavar ṣādiq*), the *a priori* axioms of reason (*badīhiyyāt al-‘aql*), sound inference (*naẓar ḥasan*), various incarnations of the mechanism of *tawātur*, the possession of a sound cognitive-moral disposition (*fiṭra salīma*) – all stand objectively at every person’s disposal, yet there are often numerous different paths that can be tread, various corroborative combinations of these elements by which knowledge of a given reality can be procured for any given individual. What counts ultimately is the end result, namely, “the occurrence of knowledge in the mind/heart” (*ḥuṣūl al-‘ilm fī al-qalb*). Some knowledge is gained empirically, some through *khavar*, some through rational inference, some by intuition, and similar to the case of *tawātur*, the amount and kind of corroborative evidence necessary to bring about knowledge is not necessarily the same for each and every person. Confining knowledge in general to a particular order (*tartīb mu‘ayyan*) as do the philosophers, or confining knowledge of God and the authenticity of revelation to a particular order as do the theologians, or confining the means of progress along the spiritual path (*al-wuṣūl ilā Allāh*) to a particular order as do those who theorize Sufism, is misleading and abusive, for while there may be a set order in the mind when one *theorizes* about the acquisition of knowledge, the manner in which knowledge *actually* comes about in the real world (*fī al-khārij*) is rarely, if ever, constrained by the theoretical order projected by the mind. Indeed, Ibn Taymiyya remarks, the various ways of coming by knowledge, the conditions attendant thereupon, and the means (*asbāb*) and ordering of steps (*tartīb*) through which knowledge is attained are too diversified and comprehensive to be confined to only a few discrete pathways or methods (*ṭuruq*).¹³

Though Ibn Taymiyya does not say so explicitly himself, this idea of variegated yet mutually corroborative paths to knowledge of one and the same fact or reality is reminiscent of the transmission of *mutawātir* hadith reports, whereby different individuals may have one and the same hadith from a different conglomeration of sources. Each is justified in claiming knowledge of the hadith’s authenticity since he has received it from enough mutually corroborative sources

¹³ Ibid., VIII: 21, l. 1-6.

to experience within himself assurance (*tuma'nīna*) and firm conviction (*i'tiqād jāzim*) that the hadith is true. That is, each has justified and sufficient – though not necessarily identical – grounds to hold that knowledge of the hadith's authenticity has successfully “occurred in his heart/mind” (*ḥaṣala fī qalbihi*). As we have seen previously, the idea and method of *tawātur* run consistently throughout Ibn Taymiyya's epistemology, whereby he appeals to some notion of *tawātur* as the final justification even for knowledge that is essentially empirical, as well as knowledge that is of an intuitive or *a priori* nature. It is thus not surprising to discover – as we reflect upon the underlying themes of Ibn Taymiyya's approach to knowledge, inferences, and proofs – that he conceives of these in very much the same way across all domains. Beyond its thoroughgoing consistency, Ibn Taymiyya's epistemology represents an attempt to profile the sundry ways in which knowledge is *actually* engendered in the real world. Ibn Taymiyya presents this epistemology as an alternative – and to his mind, an antidote – to the various methods and categories of the philosophers. Not only is the way of the philosophers, in his view, arbitrarily restrictive – with a heavy, almost exclusive reliance on formal, demonstrative syllogism, or *burhān* – they are also anathema to him insofar as he considers them to be based on a purely abstract and idealized notion of what constitutes proof or a reliable indicator of knowledge.

Ibn Taymiyya's empirically grounded and widely cast epistemological framework underscores a larger commitment on his part to a broadly democratic vision of knowledge. Ibn Taymiyya censures the philosophers for presuming theoretical or speculative reason to hold pride of place in the epistemic hierarchy, sometimes to the point of allowing it to override more basic empirical or *a priori* knowledge, which is demoted in turn to mere “illusion” (*wahm*) or “imagination” (*takhyīl*) in order to accommodate the deliverances of abstract speculation. For Ibn Taymiyya, this state of affairs is entirely backwards, for it is precisely the immediacy and sheer self-imposition of these basic sources of knowledge that justify them and ground their authoritativeness. This principle holds for Ibn Taymiyya's larger concept of *'aql ṣarīḥ* as well. We have been referring to Ibn Taymiyya's notion of reason primarily as “sound” or “true”

reason, but his specific use of the term “*ṣarīḥ*” – as opposed, say, to “*salīm*” or “*ṣaḥīḥ*” – is not, I think, a mere play on words for the sake of alliteration when the term “*‘aql ṣarīḥ*” is paired with “*naql ṣaḥīḥ*.” Ibn Taymiyya’s use of the term “*ṣarīḥ*” (‘clear’, ‘pure’, ‘unadulterated’) is deliberate, for it is precisely “*ṣarīḥ*” reason which is “*ṣaḥīḥ*” reason, correct and valid.¹⁴ Sound reason and valid rational knowledge are guaranteed by the same immediacy and self-imposition as all other sources of knowledge – yet another instance of Ibn Taymiyya’s consistency across various domains of consideration. This explains why arcane, circuitous, highly speculative – and therefore highly contentious and disputed – premises and arguments necessarily arouse Ibn Taymiyya’s suspicion, since these qualities are the polar opposite of that set of qualities which guarantee the integrity of our knowledge in *all other domains*.¹⁵ Why then, Ibn Taymiyya seems to be asking, should rational knowledge, to the exclusion of all other avenues of knowing, form a singular exception to the rule of immediateness and intuitive clarity? For Ibn Taymiyya, it is simply inconceivable that the propositions held instinctively to be true in a natural and unaffected manner by multitudes of average human beings could be subjected to falsification on the basis of the recondite philosophical musings of the few, who even have trouble reaching agreement among themselves concerning the sundry conclusions of their speculative endeavors. Overriding the intuitions of the many in favor of the speculations of the few, he argues, would effectively destroy the possibility of any objective, publicly shared rational knowledge whatsoever.

The foregoing considerations highlight Ibn Taymiyya’s acute sense of “epistemological egalitarianism,” at least concerning broad principles and basic inferences. In Ibn Taymiyya’s equal opportunity epistemology, authentic

¹⁴ Consider the following phrase: “*al-ṭuruq al-fīṭriyya al-‘aqliyya al-shar‘iyya al-qarība al-ṣaḥīḥa*” (ibid., VIII: 314, l. 13). The various terms Ibn Taymiyya associates here – “innate” (*fīṭrī*), “rational” (*‘aqlī*), “scriptural” or “scripturally validated” (*shar‘ī*), “commonplace, familiar” (*qarīb*), and “valid, correct” (*ṣaḥīḥ*) – are very indicative of his overall views regarding the character of truth and of the pure reason (*‘aql ṣarīḥ*) by which it is ascertained, appropriated, and comprehended.

¹⁵ We recall from Chapter 4 his citation of ‘Abd Allāh b. Mas‘ūd’s characterization of the Salaf as possessing “the purest hearts, the deepest knowledge, and (exhibiting) the least unnatural strain and affectation (*takalluf*)” of all Muslim generations. (See Chapter 4, p. 222 above).

knowledge is available to everyone whose basic rational faculty and *fiṭra* are intact, not just an elite coterie of philosophers who maintain an entirely different conception of reality than the common man. He does, of course, admit that particular sciences, be they religious or secular, are necessarily cultivated by specialists who naturally know better and know more about the subject at hand than the non-specialist. This holds true in such domains as law, hadith, *tafsīr*, and grammar, but also in non-religious sciences like physics, astronomy, and medicine. Yet these individual sciences do not touch upon, nor purport to set the agenda for, a larger epistemological project aimed at defining what does and does not constitute ultimate truth and reality, as do the core philosophical disciplines of metaphysics, ontology, and epistemology. It is inconceivable for Ibn Taymiyya that foundational matters of such comprehensive reach, determinative to a large extent of a person's fundamental existential orientation, should be beholden to the musings of a small group of conflicted specialists. The basic facts about reality, the universe, God, and man are equal opportunity truths available to anyone whose *fiṭra* and reasoning have not fallen prey to corruption. Ibn Taymiyya holds this position with respect to both rational truths and theological truths, for the Qur'an is addressed to the commoner as well as the elite and, he insists, it conveys a unified and consistent doctrine capable of being comprehended by all, and in essentially the same terms. As in other fields of knowledge, some may be more knowledgeable than others about the details of the specialized religious sciences, but there can be no fundamentally different mode of reading the texts reserved for the elite (as is the case, say, for an Ibn Rushd). Once again, we can discern here a parallelism in the way Ibn Taymiyya treats rational knowledge and revealed knowledge, as both are integrated into an organic epistemology interfused by a high degree of consistency and correspondence among its various components. In the case of both religious and non-religious knowledge, the basic principles are self-evident and known to all, with details filled in by studied specialists. Yet the detailed knowledge of the specialist serves primarily to elaborate the already existing, publicly shared base of the knowledge in question and does *not*, for Ibn Taymiyya, represent a

situation in which the “true” knowledge possessed by the elite constitutes a fundamental departure from what is generally understood to be the case among the common run. Ibn Taymiyya’s contagiousness to the convoluted nature of the philosophers’ discourse and his disdain for what to him are their tortuous meanderings and abstruse doctrines should in nowise be taken to flow from a shallowness of wit on his part or an insufficient capacity truly to grasp and to come to terms with his opponents’ contentions. Indeed, his ability to pen a work such as the *Dar’ al-ta’arūf* establishes beyond a doubt that Ibn Taymiyya was no philosophical *ingénu*.

Of all the various elements of Ibn Taymiyya’s reconstituted rationality, perhaps the most intriguing, original, and also the most subtle, is his conception of the nature and function of the *fiṭra*. While it is impossible to do justice to our author’s understanding of the *fiṭra* in a few short paragraphs, our treatment of reason and rationality in Ibn Taymiyya would be incomplete were we not to offer, in closing, a few brief reflections on this central concept. We encountered the *fiṭra* in Chapter 5 primarily as a cognitive faculty which overlaps to a considerable degree with the intuitive or *a priori* knowledge lodged in the mind *ab initio*. Beyond this, however, Ibn Taymiyya also suggests that the *fiṭra* is that faculty by which we judge both the soundness of premises used in a demonstration and the soundness of the deductive arguments built upon these premises.¹⁶ Yet the *fiṭra* is more than this. We have suggested that an apt translation of the term “*fiṭra*” might be “original normative disposition,” and indeed Ibn Taymiyya’s variegated appeals to the *fiṭra* in diverse contexts urge that we regard *fiṭra* as a more general, underlying principle which has relevance to and informs the various other faculties we possess – not only cognitive, but moral-ethical and spiritual as well. In fact, it would be more accurate from Ibn Taymiyya’s perspective to say, not that *fiṭra* is a moral *and* cognitive faculty, but

¹⁶ See, for example, *Dar’*, VII: 37, where he states: “*wa-illā fa-man raja’a fī muqaddimātihā ilā al-fiṭar al-safīma wa-‘tabara ta’līfahā lam yajid fīmā yu’arīḍ al-sam‘iyyāt burhānan mu’allafan min muqaddimāt yaqīniyya ta’līfan ṣaḥīḥan.*” Here Ibn Taymiyya explicitly states that we must return to “sound *fiṭra*” to judge the premises (*muqaddimāt*) of the argument, as well as the construction (*ta’līf*) of the proof itself.

rather that it is a moral *cum* cognitive faculty, for the two ultimately cannot be definitively separated. Perhaps we can best approach Ibn Taymiyya's point here by considering the following anecdote.

Ibn Taymiyya relates that Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and a certain Mu'tazilite theologian with whom he had been debating were one day visiting a Sufi shaykh in Transoxania who claimed to have achieved certainty in knowledge (*'ilm al-yaqīn*).¹⁷ Al-Rāzī and his companion were surprised at the shaykh's claim since the two of them had been debating theology for years, constantly refuting each other's arguments but never able to break through to any indisputably certain conclusions on the topics of contention between them. When asked how he achieved this certainty in knowledge, the shaykh responded: "Divine disclosures (or gifts in the form of insights) (*wāridāt*) that come over the soul and which the soul is unable to deny."¹⁸ Ibn Taymiyya reports that the Mu'tazilite theologian, who had been complaining that doubts (*shubuhāt*) were burning up his heart, took to the way of the shaykh and eventually reached the stage where God blessed him too with similar gifts of divine insight (*wāridāt*), whereupon he declared that if upholding the apparent (*ẓāhir*) sense of "the Merciful has settled upon the throne"¹⁹ constitutes corporealism (*tajsīm*), then, by God, he is a corporealist. Ibn Taymiyya reports that this (former) Mu'tazilite, having returned to the way of affirmationism through the spiritual insights (*wāridāt*) vouchsafed directly to his heart, went on to become one of the most illustrious (Sufi) shaykhs of his day in the lands of Jurjān and Khwārizm. The point of this episode, and Ibn Taymiyya's approbatory citation of it, seems to be that certain knowledge (*'ilm al-yaqīn*) is achieved when the mind/heart (*qalb*) has come to experience whatever knowledge it possess as absolutely certain and entirely immune to doubt or refusal. As we mentioned above with respect to knowledge more generally, the achievement of this certitude does not necessarily have to follow a particular path or to be articulable via particular expressions or modes

¹⁷ For this anecdote, see *ibid.*, VII: 430-432.

¹⁸ "*wāridāt taridu 'alā al-nufūs ta'jizu al-nufūs 'an raddihā*" (*ibid.*, VII: 431, l. 7-8).

¹⁹ "*al-Raḥmānu 'alā 'l-'arshi 'stawā*" [Qur'an (Ṭāhā) 20:5].

of rational inference or analysis. In this case, the certain knowledge (*yaqīn*) gained and experienced by our theologian and his shaykh appears to stem directly from the *fiṭra*.²⁰ If the *fiṭra* has been corrupted – e.g., through the inculcation of erroneous doctrines that contravene necessary and intuitive knowledge, as was the case with the “negationism” of al-Rāzī’s companion – then there are various ways in which this *fiṭra* can be resuscitated and returned to its original state. This process might come about through sound rational argumentation (i.e., *ḥusn al-naẓar*, and not the purely speculative argumentation of the philosophers and *mutakallimūn*), or through spiritual purification (as in this case of our theologian with the burning heart), or through other means. The main point is that regardless of the means adopted, once the *fiṭra* has been rehabilitated to its natural, healthy state, it is often able simply to recognize the truth as such, in much the same way that the body possesses a capacity (*quwwa*) by which it instinctively distinguishes wholesome food from foul.²¹

The fact that the *fiṭra* is simultaneously a cognitive and a moral faculty introduces an important ethical and existential dimension into the process of knowing – a dimension which is always present implicitly, Ibn Taymiyya would argue, albeit usually unacknowledged. This conception of the *fiṭra* provides for a richer and more nuanced account of knowledge and the process of coming to know. But does the introduction of an ethical and moral aspect into the *cognitive* functions of the *fiṭra* – and of the intellect more generally – render knowledge, for all intents and purposes, hopelessly subjective? After all, the primordial *fiṭra* on which every child is born²² more often than not fails to be maintained in its original normative state. In practice, this original normative *fiṭra* is routinely reshaped – indeed corrupted – by the ambient beliefs and practices of one’s society. On this point, Ibn Taymiyya makes what to my mind is a remarkable observation for his time regarding the relativity of what passes for “reason” within a

²⁰ Ibn Taymiyya certainly holds that the position of the affirmationists (of the Divine Attributes) can be recognized as true as a matter of healthy *fiṭra*.

²¹ *Dar*, V: 62.

²² From the hadith: “Every child is born on the *fiṭra*” (*kull mawlūd yūladu ‘alā al-fiṭra*). See discussion above at p. 276ff.

given culture. He observes, almost in passing, that “every nation or society (*umma*) has *what it calls* ‘rational knowledge’ (*ma‘qūlāt*).”²³ In other words, he is telling us, a great deal of what passes for “rationality” at any given time or place is ultimately determined by the currently dominant presuppositions and mental habits of a people which, due to their near ubiquity, end up taking on the appearance and the force of necessary truths, simply given and taken utterly for granted. Ibn Taymiyya without a doubt views the *falāsifa* as being pre-committed (quite despite themselves) to an intellectual system characterized by a very particular – not to mention peculiar – view of reason and of reality, a system which they have in essence adopted not as a matter of pure rationality and the unbiased cogitations of objective reason, but rather as a matter of habituation to a transmitted doctrine based, in the final analysis, on the following (he says more dismissively the “imitation,” *taqlīd*) of their own earlier authorities – their own “Salaf,” we might say. For Ibn Taymiyya, the philosophers’ idiosyncratic views regarding the intelligible world, the various intellects, etc. derive so clearly from the parochial “*ma‘qūlāt*” of one particular “*umma*,” lacking any kind of objective proof or verifiability whatsoever from either *ḥiss* or *khabar*, yet illegitimately universalized and confounded with reason *per se*. But longstanding acclimatization to essentially unfounded beliefs about the world derived through pure speculation can eventually end by perverting the cognitive dimension of the *fiṭra*. Add to this the moral corruptibility to which all are susceptible to one degree or another, and the primordial *fiṭra* would seem to be hopelessly and irretrievably lost. Between culturally inflected notions of rationality and the capriciousness of our own selves, we would seem to be sunk in an intractable quagmire of parochialism and subjectivity. Yet Ibn Taymiyya is no postmodernist. Objective truth, he insists, not only exists, but is ascertainable. We have examined at length in the last chapter the various means at our disposal for acquiring knowledge about the world, both *shāhid* and *ghā’ib*: perception, report (particularly revelation), sound inference, etc. We have also described the *fiṭra*, for Ibn

²³ “*mā min umma illā wa-lahum mā yusammūnahu ma‘qūlāt*” (*Dar*, V: 243; also *ibid.*, V: 242).

Taymiyya, as underlying – and by so doing, informing and affecting the functioning of – these other sources. *Fiṭra* is to the moral-cognitive dimension of man as health is to his body. Good health entails the proper functioning of all our various sensory organs, limbs, etc. Bad health impairs them all alike. Indeed, Ibn Taymiyya defines true rational knowledge (*‘aqliyyāt*) as that which is intelligible (*ma‘qūl*) and recognizable as such to the healthy *fiṭra*.²⁴ This being the case, he suggests that one way of resolving intractable disputes over knowledge and truth (such as those between al-Rāzī and his Mu‘tazilite friend) is by seeking recourse to those of sound *fiṭra* (like the Sufi shaykh from Transoxania). Yet if the totality of our cognitive and moral faculties are dependent on the health of the *fiṭra*, and if the *fiṭra* itself is not immune to dereliction, then wherein lies the ultimate grounding, and guarantee, of our faculties?

The ultimate answer to this question brings us full circle. Ibn Taymiyya, we have remarked, views reason and revelation as ultimately co-implicative (*mutalāzimān*). Following reason, he insists, ultimately leads to an investigation and affirmation of the truth of revelation. Starting with revelation quickens reason, inciting us to reflection and exemplifying the optimal use of reason and rational proofs. Yet this concomitance between reason and revelation runs into a much tighter symbiosis on a deeper level. Revelation is addressed to an intelligence and cannot be properly understood in the absence of pure reason (*‘aql ṣarīḥ*) and sound inference (*naẓar ḥasan*), as we have explored over the course of the present work. Yet more significantly, reason itself, particularly through its groundedness in the moral-cognitive faculty of the *fiṭra*, cannot hope even to function properly and to make good on its own native potential without the guiding light of revelation and the ethical practice of religion to which this latter summons.

Here at the end of our path, we recall the very first page of the *Dar’*, where Ibn Taymiyya cites the Universal Law and its contention that, should reason and revelation ever conflict, then revelation must yield to reason since this latter grounds our rational assent to the authenticity of the former. While it re-

²⁴ Ibid., VII: 43.

mains true, for Ibn Taymiyya, that our knowledge of revelation's authenticity is (or at least has the potential to be) grounded in reason, he is adamant that pure reason (*'aql ṣarīḥ*) and authentic scripture (*naql ṣaḥīḥ*) never can conflict, as we have attempted to show in this study with respect to Ibn Taymiyya's main pre-occupation in the *Dar'*, the question of the Divine Attributes. Yet beyond this mutual implication and harmonious concordance, if it is true that reason, to a degree and from a particular angle, "grounds" (our knowledge of) revelation, it is nevertheless revelation that, in a deeper and more all-embracing manner – precisely through maintaining the moral and cognitive viability of the *fiṭra* – ultimately grounds, preserves, and promotes the proper offices of reason.

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