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The Unresolved Paradox: Critiquing Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite Solutions to Free Will and Divine Justice

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Abstract. This study critically analyzes and addresses the long-standing theological dilemma in Islamic thought: the two distinct approaches employed by the Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite schools in reconciling human free will and God's divine justice. Ultimately, it can be argued that neither school fully resolves this complex philosophical and theological dilemma. The objective of this research is to evaluate how each school constructs and defends its position on moral agency while maintaining God's omnipotence and justice. A comparative analytical methodology is applied by using secondary literature on both schools' theological texts. It dissects their doctrinal systems, such as the Mu'tazilites' emphasis on human agency in producing actions (*khalq al-af'al*) and the Ash'arite doctrine of acquisition (*kasb*), to assess their conceptual consistency and practical implications regarding moral responsibility and divine justice. The findings reveal that the Mu'tazilites challenged the concept of absolute divine omnipotence, even as they aimed to defend human moral agency by granting humans' independent causal power. Meanwhile, the Ash'arites developed the concept of *Kasb* within their strict endorsement of God's absolute sovereignty. Despite being subtle, this conception can reduce the freedom of will of humans to merely a formal rather than a practical capacity to do an act. Ultimately, neither school proposed an approach that solves the paradox without introducing new theological problems while upholding both divine justice, omnipotence, and human free will. Modern theological

discourse could consider alternative conceptions of causality, time, or divine knowledge, or embrace the paradox as an essential feature of the divine-human relationship.

Keywords: Free will, Divine justice, Mu'tazila, Human agency, Moral responsibility, Asharites.

INTRODUCTION

Over the centuries, Muslim theologians have been preoccupied with two principal concerns: first, God, His existence, and nature; and secondly, God's actions concerning His creation, specifically humankind. These two thematic concerns have also given rise to other related issues, such as anthropomorphism and the conceptualization of divine attributes and their ontological foundation, as well as the thorny questions of theodicy and human freedom versus determination. Islamic theology's development and evolution throughout history have been influenced by a wide range of diverse factors.

The foundational scripture of Islam, the Qur'ān, is not just a theoretical argument; it remains the most revered and trusted source for Muslims addressing doctrinal issues. It presents, in various forms, some of the core ideas that define Islamic theology and have been embraced by the majority of Muslim scholars over the centuries. Beyond the revealed text, there is a broader historical, religious, and theological context that has influenced the development of Islamic doctrinal thought over time. Changes in doctrine can be seen in how topics that Muslim theologians consider, and still do consider, controversial are either overlooked or acknowledged in the Qur'ān, often in a vague manner. These include debates like determinism versus human free will, which were intensely contested in the first and second centuries of Islam. Several Islamic theological schools have provided a wide range of often conflicting responses to these questions as they tried to organize doctrinal understanding. Notably, the rise of two major schools offering different but influential attempts at resolution specifically, Mu'tazila and Ash'ari—will be discussed in this study.

This study critically examines how the Ash'arites and the Mu'tazila attempted to resolve the paradox of divine omnipotence and human responsibility. However, they both contributed to the rigor of Islamic theology and offered significant frameworks for it. This paper argues that neither school truly resolves the paradox without raising further new challenging issues, particularly when applied to modern ethical questions like the problem of evil and suffering. The recurring challenges with these fundamental problems in Islamic thought will be highlighted by examining the core tenets and the responses (criticisms) they have encountered.

Many studies have examined the two schools of Mu'tazila and Ash'arism in relation to the issues of divine justice and free will, either independently or in conjunction. One important contribution is the paper of Mohamed Azam Mohamed Adil (2021), titled "Mu'tazila in Western Scholarship: Their Origin, Originality and Legacy" (2021), which explains the Mu'tazilite movement from a Western academic approach. According to Adil, though Mu'tazilite scholars influenced by Greek

philosophy still put forward unique theological perspectives, especially concerning human responsibility and divine justice. The author highlights their key role in establishing a coherent moral theology that puts human responsibility front and centre, and believes that divine justice includes the freedom for everyone to choose their actions.¹ This study builds upon historical insights from Justice to provide a critical evaluation of whether this framework is logically consistent when addressing the tension of divine justice.

Furthermore, expanding this intellectual study, the study written by Rozi (2025) on *Reformulation of Mu'tazilah Theology and the Birth of al-Ash'ariyah Theology as Moderate Islamic Understanding* (2025). The writer analyzes the transition of Asharism from Mu'tazilite theology, particularly regarding ideas such as divine power, justice, human free will, and the compatibility of faith and reason. As a way to preserve both God's full power and some human agency.² This work emphasizes the Kasb doctrine as the Ash'arites' solution to what they considered the overreach of Mu'tazilite theology. While the paper provides a useful historical framework, it still raises the question whether the kasb doctrine genuinely resolves the paradox(tensions) or merely shifts the problem into new philosophical territory.

In 2022, Dallal wrote "Memories of Tomorrow: The Modern Relevance of the Mu'tazilah in the Writings of Aḥmad Amīn, Dallal explores modern interpretations of Mu'tazilite thought. through the writings of Amin. Scholar Dallal Amin advocates for a revival/adoption of Mu'tazilite principles for moral transformation and rational discourse in today's Muslim communities. This indicates that Neo-Mu'tazilism continues to influence Muslims in today's world.³ Yet, although Dallal is successful in his attempts at disclosing the ongoing relevance of Mu'tazilite ideals, his work never reaches the point of evaluating whether these beliefs still hold up after many philosophical inquiries. Toosi (2020) looks in detail at the school of Ash'ari theology and the importance it places on human reasoning in matters of ethics. The author argues that, despite being known as deterministic and anti-rationalist, there are parts of Ash'arite theology that allow people to apply their reasoning abilities to decisions about good and evil. Toosi admits that the teachings of Ash'arism have not fully resolved the issue of God's all-powerfulness versus human responsibility.⁴ These are just examples that highlight the diversity and depth of past scholarship.

While many studies have examined Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite views on free will and divine omnipotence, they often focus on historical development or general

¹ Ayub Ayub, "MU'TAZILA IN WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP: THEIR ORIGIN, ORIGINALITY, AND LEGACY," *Taqaddumi: Journal of Quran and Hadith Studies* 1, no. 2 (December 31, 2021): 80–91, <https://doi.org/10.12928/taqaddumi.vii2.4676>.

² Rozi, Fahrul, Mutohharun Jinan, Iyas Ali Nurani, and Aboubacar Barry, "Reformulation of Mu'tazilah Theology and the Birth of al-Ash'ariyah Theology as Moderate Islamic Understanding," *Journal of Contemporary Islamic Education* 5, no. 1 (2025): 57–68.

³ Alena Kulinich, "Memories of Tomorrow: The Modern Relevance of the Mu'tazilah in the Writings of Aḥmad Amīn (1886–1954)," *Asia Review* 12, no. 1 (April 30, 2022): 101–30, <https://doi.org/10.24987/SNUACAR.2022.4.12.1.101>.

⁴ Javad Fakhkhar Toosi, "The Ashari Theological School and the Authority of Human Reason in Ethics," *ICR Journal* 11, no. 1 (June 15, 2020): 110–25, <https://doi.org/10.52282/icr.viii.26>.

comparisons without directly addressing whether either school offers a logically coherent solution to the paradox, as we have seen before. Most works explain the doctrines descriptively but stop short of critically evaluating their internal consistency or ethical implications. This study fills that gap by offering a focused critique of both frameworks, questioning whether their theological models can truly reconcile divine control with human moral responsibility.

This research is based on a qualitative approach that implements a literature review. The secondary sources of information were used to gather data through recent scholarly articles and books by recent academics, and further academic literature that discusses the epistemological and philosophical premises of the Mu'tazila and Ashari schools of thought. Literature review allows having a critical interaction with the existing scholarship with the aim of recognizing the major themes, discussions, and conceptual frameworks.⁵

The data obtained were analyzed using descriptive and historical methods to track the intellectual evolution of the two schools and compare their philosophical orientations. It is appropriate to theological and philosophical questions because it focuses on the contextual interpretation of concepts and intellectual traditions.⁶ By integrating historical and interpretive perspectives, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how Mu'tazili rationalism and Ash'ari traditionalism shaped classical Islamic thought and continue to influence contemporary discourse.⁷

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Historical Background

The Mu'tazila was a current school of thought that flourished in Iraq in the third/ninth century, reaching a peak of development between the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries. Baghdad served as its focal point, and more significantly, Basra, where prominent theologians (Abu'l-Hudhayl al-'Allaf, Ibrahim al-Nazzam, Bishr al-Mu'tamir, al-Jubba'i, Abu Hashim Ibn al-Jubba'i, and many others) sharing certain crucial views gathered around them groups of disciples and admirers.⁸ The originality of the school is controversial among scholars. First, it was originally founded by Wasil ibn 'Ata, who was a student of al-Hassan al-Bashri. He left his master's group because they disagreed on the status of a grave sinner. According to al-Sharastani's *al-Milal wa an-Nihal*, al-Hasan al-Bashri was questioned regarding the status of a grave sinner and whether he was considered a believer or an unbeliever. During the discussion on the status of a grave sinner, Wasil ibn Ata interrupted the

⁵ John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018).

⁶ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

⁷ Nasr, S. H. (2006). *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origin to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy*. State University of New York Press.

⁸ Massimo Campanini, "The Mu'tazila in Islamic History and Thought," *Religion Compass* 6, no. 1 (January 2012): 41–50, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2011.00273.x>.

conversation and proposed that a grave sinner was neither a believer nor an unbeliever, placing them in an intermediate position known as *al-manzila bain al-manzilatain*. After that, he left the study circle, and was followed by some other students, to which al-Hasan responded, "Wasil has withdrawn (*i'tazala*) from us." It is from this comment that the originality of the name is claimed.⁹

However, this account is contested, by a Scholar known as *Sull'origine del nome di Mu'tazilites*" (Nallino 1940) by the Italian Arabist Carlo Nallino, argued that the name was originally political, referred to those during the political schism of Caliph Ali and Muawiyya, the governor of Damascus, who withdraw themselves and chose the separate, middle path, to distance themselves from both groups. Originally started as a political connotation and later evolved to denote a specific theological school.¹⁰

The account of originality has faced several criticisms from modern scholars due to the presence of several accounts. For instance. Montgomery Watt finds it problematic for the following reasons: To begin with, there are various versions of the story. According to one version cited by Ibn al-Qutayba, Amr bin Ubaid was the one, not Wasil, who left al-Hasan's study circle. Furthermore, Ibn an-Nadim related the story of Qatada rather than al-Hasan, that when al-Hasan passed away and Qatada led his circle (*majlis*), Amr and a group of students withdrew from him, and Qatada referred to them as the *Mu'tazila*. Second, Wasil is not mentioned at all in early sources like the writings of Ibn Sa'ad, Ibn Qutayba, and Ibn Batta; instead, Amr is identified as a *Mu'tazilite*. Thirdly, there is no proof that Wasil or Amr used Greek ideas or reasoning techniques, which were unique to *Mu'tazila* theology.¹¹ Well, the debate concerning the origin of the *Mu'tazilites'* movement lies beyond the scope of our present study. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that what may have begun as a political stance eventually evolved into a prominent theological school within Islamic thought.

Mu'tazilite scholars flourished under the patronage of the 'Abbasid Caliphate, which was centred in Iraq, particularly under caliph Ma'mun. The Caliph al-Ma'mun (r. 813-833) introduced the controversial *mihnah* ('the inquisition') in 833, elevating the *Mu'tazilite* doctrine of the createdness of the *Qur'ān* to the rank of an official dogma. This policy resulted in the persecution of scholars and state officials who disagreed with/ opposed it, and at the same time led to resistance from the population of Baghdad. After the reign of Al-Mutawakkil (r. 847-861), the Caliph repealed the *Mihnah* order and fundamentally altered his religious policy. As a result, *Mu'tazilite* intellectuals lost their clout in the court and were prosecuted, at least for openly promoting *Mu'tazilism*.¹²

The theological identity of *Mu'tazila* was defined through their five core principles upon which all *Mu'tazilites* agreed, and it has been used as the basic

⁹ Ayub, "MU'TAZILA IN WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP."

¹⁰ W Montgomery (William Montgomery) Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1973).

¹¹ Watt.

¹² Kulinich, "Memories of Tomorrow."

criterion for evaluation, whether a person is Mu'tazilite or not, i.e., the name was eventually restricted to those who accepted the five principles. These five principles in their usual order include: (1) *tawhid* (unity), (2) *adl* (justice), (3) *al-wa'd wa-l-wa'id* (the promise and the threat), (4) *al-asma' wa-l-ahkaém* (names and judgements), or *al-manzila bayn al-manzilatayn* (the intermediate position), (5) *al-amr bi-l-ma'rif wa-n-nahy 'an al-munkar* (commanding the right and forbidding the wrong).¹³ These principles serve as the only Mu'tazilites' foundation in their theology. Although the Mu'tazila established five major concepts, the study will concentrate on the Doctrine of Divine Justice and Free Will because they are essential to comprehending how divine omnipotence and human responsibility can be reconciled.

The Doctrine of divine justice (A'dl) and Free will (Ikhtiyar) Mu'tazilite school of thought

Mu'tazilites' principle of justice stands as the most regarded fundamental principle, which logically contains / foundations of all other principles except the principle of Unity (Tawhid). The principle asserts that God is just and therefore cannot commit/be the source of evil or act arbitrarily. The principle was formed and theorized to conform to the freedom and responsibility of human beings, and the rejection of political and theological fatalism present under the Umayyad caliphate, that all events are predestined by God and therefore inevitable. As it was reported by 'Abd al-Jabbār, the Mu'tazilites articulated the principle of divine justice "in opposition to the fatalists *mujbira*, who ascribed to Allah all evil (*qabīh*).¹⁴

Mu'tazila held that good and evil exist and are objectively known and distinguished through human reason apart from revelation, and in that sense, it may also be used to determine the goodness of justice. They described justice by what is understood and rationalised by the human mind, and using their principle of "analogy of the invisible to the visible", they identified divine justice as it is made for people. They ascribed the quality of needlessness to divine essence and, from the quality of needlessness, deduced the necessity of absolute divine justice, which is based upon His absolute needlessness or self-sufficiency.¹⁵ In that sense, Mu'tazilites argued that it would be unfair of Allah if he had predetermined all human actions, and so he couldn't fulfill his promise of rewards and punishments justly on the day of judgement since he is the creator of all deeds.¹⁶ The Mu'tazilites limit God's omnipotence in a specific way, not because he lacks power, but because it is incompatible with his nature (just). The Mu'tazilites even used some verses from the Quran to support their arguments of reasoning as well.¹⁷

¹³ Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*.

¹⁴ Mariam al-Attar, "(Culture and Civilization in the Middle East) Mariam al-Attar - Islamic Ethics_ Divine Command Theory in Arabo-Islamic Thought-Routledge (2010)" (Routledge, 2010).

¹⁵ al-Attar. 59

¹⁶ Zayyanu Altine and Adam Yusuf Adam, "An Analysis of the Emergence, Development and Doctrines of the Mu'tazilites in The Light of Islamic Perspectives," *South Asian Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 1 (2019).

¹⁷ Some of these verses are al-Qur'ān 12:10, 40:31, 10:44 and 21:47.

In correlation with divine justice, free will becomes a component of divine justice, in a way, of being considered a minor doctrine of Mu'tazila. Free will has led Mu'tazila to be named Qadariyya, proponents of Human Free will, due to their total acceptance of the theory of indeterminism.¹⁸ The Mu'tazilites agree that Humans are morally responsible for their actions, as they create actions through their power and will. This implies that human freedom is essential to Allah's justice and to a man's ability to be held responsible for his moral character. The justice of Allah and the freedom of man to do as he pleases are complementary. Man has to be held responsible for his deeds in this life so that he can be judged accordingly in the hereafter. Otherwise, the punishment and rewards of the doers will be meaningless.¹⁹ In other words, given that man is the author of his actions, God must reward him for his good conduct, and he has the right to do so. Al-Shahrastani states: "The Mu'tazilites unanimously maintain that man decides upon and creates his acts, both good and evil, that he deserves reward or punishment in the next world for what he does." In this way, the Lord is protected from being linked to any wrongdoing, wickedness, or act of disbelief or sin. For He would be right if He produced justice, and He would be wrong if He made injustice.²⁰ On this foundation, they deny that God is the cause of evil and injustice in the world since doing so would render God unfair, and that in his wisdom, God does not ask people to do evil; instead, he simply wants what is best for them. And God's sending prophets to lead the society is a part of his well-wishing.²¹

In other words, it's in the power of human beings to either believe in Allah and be obedient to him or become an unbeliever and commit sins, and that Allah has nothing to do with these acts. Similarly, this principle of God doesn't do evil at all, raising the question of how to account for illnesses and disasters, which are thought to have been created by God. Due to their adherence to the principle of justice, as we will describe below.

Critiques of Mu'tazilites

The Mutazilites' critique lies in limiting God's omnipotence in a specific way, not because he lacks power, but because it is incompatible with his nature (just). Still, the question arises if everything was created by God alone (al-Khāliq), then where does human power to create come from? This was believed to create a dualism in creation, meaning both God and humans could be independent creators and make him a partner with God, which went against the strict belief in only one God (Tawhid).²² Similarly, sticking to the idea that God needs to act justly, the Mu'tazila, in effect, took away God's absolute freedom and anthropomorphized Him within the

¹⁸ Sharif, M. M. (1963). *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, Kempten, Germany, Allgauer Heimatverlag GmbH.

¹⁹ Mukarran Jahan, "An Analysis of Mutazilite Philosophy {Paper," November 7, 2020.

²⁰ M. M. Sharif, ed., "Chapter 10, Part 1: Theologico-Philosophical Movements," in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Al-Islam.org, 1963), [Page number if applicable, e.g., 250], <https://al-islam.org/history-muslim-philosophy-volume-1-book-3/chapter-10-mutazalism>.

²¹ Saeed, *Islamic Thought _ An Introduction*.

²² Sabine Schmidtke, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2016).

grasp of human judgment. Many accused them of trying to judge God using human ethics, since they believed that God Himself decides what justice is. An Ash'arite believes God is not limited by rules set from outside; He is always right simply because He does what He does.²³ It was because of these differences within Islamic theology that the Ash'arite school emerged with different views and ideas, as will be presented below, an approach that centred God's will over a reasonable standard of justice.

Asharite's school of thought

Abu al-Hassan Ali ibn Ismail al-Ashari (d. Baghdad circa 330/941) played a significant role in the third/ninth century, following which the school of theology was named after him. He lived in Baghdad but started in Basra, where he started as a Mu'tazilite before shifting and began teaching his doctrines against Mu'tazilism. The Asharite school was developed in response to key disagreements with the Mu'tazilites over some issues related to God's attributes, the idea of speech, and the Mu'tazilites' positions on free will, divine law, defining evil, and science.²⁴

While Mu'tazilism subordinates Revelation and sticks to reason, the Asharite school seems to use rational thought (reason) and dialectics to uphold the principle of their faith while preserving the supremacy of Revelation. It took a moderate stance between the traditionalists, who denied the function of reason with regard to the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth, and the Mu'tazilites, who had subordinated revelation to reason. Thus, the school served as a link for peace between the traditionalists and the highly rationalist Mu'tazilites. Asharites in the question of good and evil rejected that man has the intellectual capacity to distinguish between good and evil, as claimed by Mu'tazila. So, they posited that what is morally good is whatever Allah commands. That evil is whatever he forbids²⁵ This entails that even in the question of justice, justice is defined according to God's will, which is simply because God does it as he wants and not because it conforms to any external independent ethical standards made by humans

Regarding free will, al-Ashari took a middle path between those who took the deterministic view of human acts, such as the Jabrites and the Mu'tazilites, who believed human beings possessed free will and power to act by developing a theory of human acts. According to Asharites, all that occurs in the world is the result of Allah's will because God's omnipotence cannot be limited in any manner, as stated by Mu'tazilites. Consequently, God must create and govern human behaviour, which is a part of these earthly occurrences.²⁶

However, safeguarding human responsibility, al-Asharites adopted a doctrine that is known as kasb (acquisition). whereas they made a distinction between two types of human acts. Kasb and idtiraran. Idtiraran refers to the acts that are necessary

²³ Tim Winter, "Evil and Suffering," *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology, University of St Andrews*, n.d., <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Islam/EvilandSuffering.pdf>.

²⁴ Saeed, *Islamic Thought _ An Introduction*. 52.

²⁵ Schmidtke, *Between Cordoba and Nisābūr: The Emergence and Consolidation of Ash'arism (Fourth–Fifth/ Tenth–Eleventh Century)*.

²⁶ Schmidtke.

to occur, and human beings cannot refrain from performing such motions, for instance, trembling. He then argues that since these necessary acts imply our weaknesses ('ajz), then all other unnecessary acts need to involve our power (Quwwa or Qudra), and label them with the term Acquisition (Kasb/iktisab).²⁷ So here he differentiates between the creation (*khalq*) and acquisition (*kasb*) of an action. According to the Ash'arites, God is the creator of actions (i.e., He has the creative power (*qudrah*)) and man is the acquirer (*muktasab*). So, the power in a man to act is a derived one (*ḥādithah*) from God, which cannot create anything, and it is created by God and is activated at the time of action. He also creates the power in him to exercise free choice (*ikhtiyār*) between two options— right and wrong.²⁸ Al-Ash'arī asserts that we are responsible for these "acquired" acts, even though we are powerless to act differently.²⁹ It appears that al-Ash'arī used the argument that we behave following our will and desires whenever we carry out an "acquired" deed to defend man's moral responsibility in the absence of freedom. It can be concluded that for Asharites, justice is whatever God wills.

Critique of Asharism

The Asharites' stances focus on God's omnipotence and transcendence, unlike Mu'tazilism, while upholding the principle of tawhid, but they still have some criticism regarding the true nature of human agency. A primary critique is its inclination towards a determinist stance/ fatalism and undermining genuine Human agency. Although the doctrine aims to unite God's omnipotence with human accountability, as seen before in their doctrine of Kasb (acquisition), critics argue that if everything was created directly by God and humans just take the results, then the choices made by people are controlled by God. This resulted in the accusation that Ash'arism supports the theory of determinism.³⁰ The human choice that they claimed to have over morality is not real (illusory), and nothing individuals do can matter since he is the acquirer and God is the creator.

Grounded on the same criticism of leaning toward determinism, if God is the creator of human action and humans are the recipients of the actions created by God, then the question that arises here is on what basis God is going to judge people for reward and punishment? Let's first refer to one of the verses, "*Whoever does righteousness, whether male or female, while he is a believer - We will surely cause him to live a good life, and We will surely give them their reward [in the Hereafter] according to the best of what they used to do.*"³¹ This verse implied that Faith and good deeds lead to a better reward in the Hereafter as well as a good life in this world, and vice versa. For this stance, Ethical thinkers argued that if God punished someone for what

²⁷ Schmidtke.

²⁸ Saeed, *Islamic Thought _ An Introduction*.

²⁹ Schmidtke, *Between Cordoba and Nisābūr: The Emergence and Consolidation of Ash'arism (Fourth–Fifth/ Tenth–Eleventh Century)*.

³⁰ Richard M. Frank, *Al-Ghazali and the Ash'arite School* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

³¹ Quran (16:97), surah An-Nahl.

God had set up, it would be unfair because the human didn't freely choose it. It called into question the basic belief in God's justice and responsibility to people who use reason.³² Moreover, their claim that God's justice is determined by his will, not limited³³ by this it raises big issues about making God's actions arbitrary. Without any commonly accepted natural rules of good and evil that even God abides by, concepts such as divine goodness, wisdom, or justice may not be clearly understood by all or could seem unpredictable as a result, we are unable to understand divine justice as humans better.

Contemporary echoes: the problem of evil and suffering

The theological tension between Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite doctrines still persists today, most often related to the Problem of Evil and Suffering. When societies are faced with big natural disasters, indiscriminate famine, and incredible hardship for no deliberate reason, both theories show interesting but contested views.

Starting with Mu'tazilite-leaning perspectives, which emphasize a rational, just God who cannot do injustice, and evil is attributed to Humans, the question arises: how can an all-just God allow suffering, especially when it is not directly caused by Human choice, such as earthquakes, floods, etc.? The rational approach provided by them is difficult to explain. Although Mu'tazilites might argue, as already argued by Abd al-Jabbār al-Hamadānī (d.1025) in defending their opinion that illness and disasters created by God are good, although at first sight they seem to be bad as they involve pain and suffering.³⁴ However, this explanation stretches the limit of rational justice when suffering appears disproportionate or indiscriminate. As explained by El-Bizri, Mu'tazilites might still be unable to explain the uncertainty of divine actions or human pain without bringing in some mystery from metaphysics, which means they can only come so close to avoiding the theological ambiguities they tried to fix. He states that this puts rationalist theologies in a tough position: either they bend their moral thinking to explain strange suffering events or they accept that some of God's actions remain beyond human understanding, as Ash'arite occasionalists do.³⁵ That some aspects of divine wisdom remain unknowable. This underlines the very clarity and certainty that Mutazilite theology sought to uphold.

Conversely, the Ash'arite viewpoint, which prioritises God's will and hidden wisdom, provides a clearer answer (but perhaps less satisfying to the human mind) as to why suffering exists. In this perspective, events like evil and suffering, whether people cause them or they happen naturally, are simply decreed by God. Because God is above human concepts of good and evil, all God's decisions are automatically just.

³² Michael E. Marmura, "Ghazālī's Chapter on Divine Power in the *Iqtisād*," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 4, no. 2 (1994): 279–315,

³³ M. E. Marmura, "Avicenna's Theory of Prophecy in the Light of Ash'arite Theology," in *Medieval Studies in Honor of A. H. Hourani*, ed. M. S. Seale (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964), 121–138.

³⁴ Heemskerck, Margaretha T. *Suffering in the Mu'tazilite Theology: 'Abd Al-Jabbār's Teaching on Pain and Divine Justice*. Vol. 41. Brill, 2000., n.d.

³⁵ Nader El-Bizri. "God, Evil and Ethics in Islamic Thought." In *Islamic Theological Themes*, ed. John Renard, University of California Press, 2009.

It causes people to deeply believe in God's power and wisdom, using a strong feeling of patience (*sabr*) to support themselves when unpleasant events happen. Yet this perspective also raises modern concerns. If God's will is portrayed as ultimately beyond reason and thus, he acted as he wanted without need of explanation, believers may perceive his actions as arbitrary, and potentially weakening their faith, see God as unfair to them. Critics argue that such an outlook might discourage proactive ethical behaviour: If all suffering comes from God, why should we intervene at all? to believe that helping fight injustice, poverty, or disease is unnecessary, which might cause them to stop supporting humanitarian work and social activism.³⁶

It sometimes seems that God acts unfairly, and good motives are less clear to people, possibly affecting their faith. Besides, if all outcomes are determined by God, some people might start to believe that helping to fight injustice, poverty, or disease is unnecessary, which could cause them to stop supporting humanitarian work and social activism.³⁷ Thus, both Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite doctrines, while internally coherent within their respective frameworks, encounter renewed tension when applied to contemporary issues such as climate disasters, refugee crises, pandemics, and systemic injustice. The enduring question remains: can divine justice be both rationally intelligible and spiritually comforting in a world filled with seemingly unjust suffering?

CONCLUSION

The classic dilemma of how to reconcile divine omnipotence with human free will has developed into a permanent conceptual headache in this elaborate tapestry of Islamic thought. As this analysis has shown, both the Mu'tazila and Ash'arites, while offering profound and distinct theological solutions, ultimately found themselves unable to fully resolve this fundamental tension without introducing new complexities. In their sincere attempts to observe divine justice, the Mu'tazila were proponents of a strong idea of human agency (*al-Ikhtiyar*), holding that human beings are indeed the cause of their actions. Nevertheless, this position fell into great objections as the absolute creative power of God would arguably be suppressed, and that of a dualism of creation might have been inferred. Asharites, on the other hand, opposed this very strongly and argued that God is the sole Creator of every activity in their notion of *Kasb* (acquisition). They were also charged with adopting a deterministic position, though, which called into doubt the validity of free choice in humans as well as the true basis for accountability. Therefore, the fundamental problem can be stated as follows: How can God be truly omnipotent if humans have free will and accountability, and all actions are predestined by God? The historical conflict between these two influential schools emphasizes how difficult it is to disprove this paradox. Instead, it pays homage to the levels of complexity that go into examining both human nature and divine attributes. This ongoing query

³⁶ George F. Hourani, "The Basis of Ethics in Islamic Theology," *Studia Islamica* 16 (1962): 13–39.

³⁷ George F. Hourani, "The Basis of Ethics in Islamic Theology," *Studia Islamica* 16 (1962): 13–39.

demonstrates how dynamic theological thought is constantly attempting to connect Jesus' earthly awareness with the infiniteness of the Divine.

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