

Do God's Actions Have Motives?

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Why does God do what He does? The answer to this question may enhance one's understanding of God. Regardless of whether one believes in God, were His existence to be supposed, the question of why He creates is of importance. Within the Islamic tradition we find three different answers from three different schools of thought: 1) the Mu'tazilīs, who held that the motive behind all of God's actions and commands is to do what is best for man individually, not collectively; 2) the Ashā'rīs, who held that God's actions do not have motives but they manifest wisdom; 3) and the Māturīdīs, who held that the motive for all of God's actions is either wisdom or benefit for man. One can discern that each one of these groups were trying to resolve the tension between God's transcendence and the implications of a motive. In attempting to do so, the Māturīdīs achieved the right balance. While the Mu'tazilī stance provided a working answer for God's motive in His laws, it however fell short in explaining certain eschatological and ontological issues. As for the Ashā'rīs, their zeal to affirm God's transcendence led them to negate motives for God's actions altogether.

The Mu'tazilī Position

The Mu'tazilīs held that the motive for all of God's actions and commands is the benefit of man. In fact, the very creation of man was to benefit man. 'Abd al-Jabbār b. Aḥmad (d. 415/1025) states, "If it is said, 'what is the first of God's blessings upon you?' Then say, 'He created me as a living being so He can benefit me.'"¹ Moreover, even *taklīf* (the burden of following the divine law) is for the benefit of man. Were it not for this benefit, man would not

be presented the opportunity of earning rewards and thereby entering paradise. While explaining the reason for this burden, 'Abd al-Jabbār states, "then nothing remains except that the purpose of that *taklīf* is to present us the opportunity of reaching a level that cannot be reached except through *taklīf*."² Since *taklīf* provides an opportunity for reward, it is beneficial for man. Thus, God's motive for *taklīf*, the Mu'tazilī will argue, is benefit for man.

This motive of benefitting is not restricted to those of God's actions that pertain to man only, but encompasses or relates to the grand cosmological scale as well. The overarching motive of benefit encompasses God's interaction with all of His creation, those burdened with *taklīf* as well as those that are not. Thus, even pain is beneficial because God necessarily grants benefits that balance out the pain. Secondly, pain serves as admonition and a source of reflection. Had the pain simply been balanced out without the added benefit of reflection for those burdened, the pain would be pointless and nothing God does is pointless.³ Hence, in Mu'tazilī philosophy, God does not engage in *'abath* (vain actions). Therefore, all His actions must be beneficial. Further, God must do what is most beneficial. To understand this last point, one must first understand the Mu'tazilī paradigm of *'adl* (divine justice).

The Mu'tazilī Paradigm of 'Adl

To fully appreciate this discussion, a familiarity with the Mu'tazilī definitions of three key concepts is required: *wājib* (necessary/obligatory), *qubḥ* (evil), and *'adl* (justice). *Wājib* is defined as, "that which if not done by one capable of doing it, would be blameworthy."⁴ In other words, it is *wājib* because not doing it while having the capability to do it would be evil. This definition is more of an ethical definition than an ontological definition. It is to be noted

here that when the Ashā'irīs and Māturīdīs discuss what is necessary for God, they define necessity in ontological terms, whereas when it comes to whether particular rulings of law are necessary or not, their definition of necessity resembles the definition of the Mu'tazilīs. This difference in definition plays a critical role in how the three groups understand the relationship between God and motives, as will be seen later.

The Mu'tazilīs define *qubh* as, "that which if done by one capable of doing it, makes him blameworthy."⁵ They also defined it as, "every leaving of an action that prevents the necessary from manifesting."⁶ By putting the two definitions together, evil can either be committing an action or leaving it, if the end result makes one blameworthy. To understand the first definition, the Mu'tazilīs hold that the capability of doing an action is the same as the capability of not doing it. So, if one is capable of doing an action, he is also capable of not doing the same action. Hence, if one did an action with the capability of doing it, meaning it was a voluntary action, he also had the capability of not doing it. Since he had the capability to not do it, yet he still did it, it will be evil. The second definition can be understood by way of an example. If a man has the capability to assist the poor and not doing so would make him blameworthy, it is necessary for him to assist the poor. If he leaves that action (assisting the poor), it prevents the necessary (him assisting the poor) from manifesting. Therefore, his not assisting the poor is evil. The close connection between the understanding of *qubh* and *wājib* is evident from this definition.

The technical definition for *'adl* according to the Mu'tazilīs is, "that all of His actions are good, that He does not commit evil, and that He does not fail to fulfill what is necessary upon Him."⁷ The last part of the definition is what ties the discussion together. If God can do what is best for man and not doing so would be blameworthy, it is necessary for Him to do what is best

for man. Since God is just, He must do what is best for man, which is where the motive lies. ‘Abd al-Jabbār builds this argument based on three premises: God knows that evil is evil, He is not in need of evil, and He knows that He is not in need of evil. From these premises, ‘Abd al-Jabbār concludes that the one who has these conditions would never commit evil. This is based off what is observed from human nature. He gives an example of a person given a choice between lying and saying the truth. If he is promised the same reward for both he would always choose the truth given that he recognizes that lying is evil. The fact that he is awarded the same reward for both lying and saying the truth ensures that he is not in need of the evil and that he knows that he is not in need of it because he is promised the same reward before he makes the choice. ‘Abd al-Jabbār further expounds that the only reason that people usurp land is either because they do not know that it is evil or because they believe they will need it in the future. So, in their case, they do not know they are not in need of evil. If they knew they would not need it, they would not commit the evil.⁸ In other words, God knows that not doing what is best for man is evil, He is not in need of withholding from man what is best for man, and He knows that He is not in need of withholding from man what is best for man. Therefore, He will necessarily do what is best for man.

Objections to the Mu‘tazilī Argument

Objections to this argument have been made by both the Ash‘arīs and the Māturīdīs. These objections can further be divided into those that stem from a difference in epistemological principles and objections directed at the argument itself. As it was alluded to before, the epistemological objection begins with the understanding of *wājib*. Whereas all parties agree that no one can necessitate something for God, nor can He necessitate something

for Himself as that would violate His volition, the Mu'tazilīs and the Māturīdīs do believe that there are things God will necessarily do and things He will necessarily not do because of His wisdom. Abū al-Mu'īn Maymūn al-Nasafī (d. 508/1114), a Māturīdī theologian, clarifies that when using the word *wājib* for God, the ontological meaning of it being necessitated upon Him is not intended. Rather, it is necessary in the sense that it will happen without fail because God does not go against wisdom. Al-Nasafī further notes that this conclusion will only be arrived at by those who hold good and evil to be objective as a premise.⁹ Although similar to the Mu'tazilīs, it is slightly different. Perhaps one way to group the two approaches is to say that for God to do something that is not wise would be evil, and God cannot commit evil. The Ash'arī paradigm differs from the Māturīdī and Mu'tazilī models because it fundamentally contradicts their understanding of evil and wisdom. According to both the Mu'tazilīs and Māturīdīs, evil is an intrinsic quality that can be recognized by the intellect independent of revelation. It is this premise that the Ash'arīs disagree with. According to them, good and evil are values that can only be determined by revelation. Nothing God does is evil, because if He wishes, he could switch the values and make evil good, and good evil. Moreover, evil is only evil because it is forbidden, and no one can forbid God because everything is His dominion and He can do in His dominion as He pleases.¹⁰

As a result of this difference, the Ash'arī understanding of wisdom (*ḥikma*) is fundamentally different from that of the Mu'tazilīs and Māturīdīs. Wisdom, according to the Māturīdīs, is any action that leads to a praiseworthy goal (*'āqiba ḥamīda*). According to the Mu'tazilīs, wisdom is either benefit for oneself or benefit for another. According to the Ash'arīs, wisdom is any action that follows the intent of the doer.¹¹ These definitions embody each

group's position. All the groups believe that it is impossible for God to do something foolish, but understand foolishness to be the opposite of how they define wisdom. The Ash'arī definition incorporates their understanding of evil not being intrinsic. Hence, wisdom, like evil, is not intrinsic to the action, but rather based upon the intent of the doer. The Mu'tazilīs and Māturīdīs both agree that wisdom is intrinsic regardless of the doer. However, the Māturīdī definition is more general and encompasses the Mu'tazilī definition. The Mu'tazilī definition coupled with their understanding of *'adl* forms their position of it being necessary for God to do what is best for man.

The Māturīdīs object to wisdom being restricted to benefit, because some of God's actions are outright harmful for man, or at the very least not what is best for him. Some of the most common objections along this line of reasoning are that God knew when He burdened the disbeliever with *taklīf* that he would not accept, and that is explicitly harmful for him. Another objection is that it would have been better for all of mankind to be placed in paradise without being burdened with *taklīf* as a means to reach paradise.¹² Since God's actions cannot be foolish, the wisdom in creating man was something other than benefitting man.

In response to the first objection, there are two groups amongst the Mu'tazilīs: those of the Baghdad school and those of the Basrah school. The Basran Mu'tazilīs say that what God does is best for man with the caveat of religious matters. What they mean by that is although in the final outcome it is not better for the disbeliever to be burdened, it is better for him to have a religion than not have a way of life. The Baghdādī school applies no caveat, and claims that it is indeed better for the disbeliever to be burdened because it gives him the opportunity for reward.¹³ Both of these responses fail to give a satisfactory answer. One can imagine a scenario

that contradicts both answers. Imagine that two individuals appear before God. One of them is a child who passes away before reaching the age of *taklīf*, and the other is an adult disbeliever. The adult asks God, “Why did you burden me when you knew I would not be able to fulfill the burden?” According to the Basran school, God would reply, “because it was better for you to have a way of life even if it was at the cost of your salvation.” According to the Baghdādī school, God would reply, “because it was better for you to have the opportunity of earning reward than attaining salvation.” Regardless of which of the two answers God replies with, the child will ask God, “Why did you take my life before I reached the age of *taklīf*?” What answer will God give? God cannot respond that it was better to take the child’s life before the age of being burdened, because if the child reached that age, he would disbelieve. For if that were true, God should have taken the life of the adult disbeliever before reaching that age as well. In sum, the case of the child who passes away prematurity contradicts the answer provided by both schools. If it were better to have a way of life or an opportunity of reward at the cost of certain damnation, then God should not have taken the life of the child whom He knew would disbelieve post-maturity. It would have been better to let the child live. That means that God did not do what was best for the child. This contradicts the Mu‘tazilī principle that God has to do what is best for man.

The Mu‘tazilī response to the second objection is that reward is an enormous benefit. It does not befit something that great to be given without being worthy or deserving of it. That is why it cannot be given from the start and must be earned through *taklīf*.¹⁴ This answer is not sustainable because faith (*īmān*), which is the greatest blessing, is given to many from the start without earning it. Were it true that everything great must be earned, God would not give faith

to some from the start, but would make them earn it. Furthermore, man's obedience to God is a right due upon him. One does not deserve a reward for fulfilling a right upon him. God rewards man out of His grace, not that man earns reward.¹⁵ So with or without *taklīf*, the reward is not earned. In brief, the Mu'tazilī paradigm can offer a viable answer for the motive for God's laws by claiming benefit for man, a principle with which the Māturīdīs would agree, but it does not provide a plausible explanation of certain eschatological or ontological aspects such as *taklīf*.

The Ash'arī Position

The Ash'arīs hold that motives cause neither God's actions nor His commands. Sa'īd Fūda, while explaining the Ash'arī position, defines a number of key terms. To begin with, he defines motive as an incentive for the purpose of benefit, whether that benefit is for the self or for someone else. In this matter they are similar to the Mu'tazilīs where they do not perceive of a motive beyond benefit. Next, rather than defining what *'abath* is, he states what it is not. He states that it is not the lack of motive. Furthermore, he renders it synonymous to foolishness implying that wisdom is the opposite of vain. So according to the Ash'arīs, God's actions are not vain because they are wise, and by wise they mean they occur according to His intent and His knowledge as mentioned earlier.¹⁶ This is an epistemological difference between the Ash'arīs, the Māturīdīs, and Mu'tazilīs. The latter two understand foolishness to be the opposite of wisdom, and having a purpose to be the opposite of vain. Based on this difference, the position of both the Māturīdīs and the Mu'tazilīs is that God's actions have motives, albeit they differ in what the motives are.

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), presenting the Ash‘arī argument, states that whoever has a motive is in need of that motive to reach perfection. Whoever is in need of something other than himself is deficient in his being. God is not deficient in His being; therefore, He cannot have motives.¹⁷ Al-Rāzī’s argument is a compact version of a more detailed argument. The detailed version is that if God has a motive for an action, then the acquisition of that motive is either better for him than not acquiring it, or it is not better for him. If the acquisition of that motive is not better for Him, He will refrain from that action. If the acquisition of that motive is better for Him, then prior to the acquisition of this motive He was deficient. If it is then argued that the acquisition of that motive is better for man not God, the argument will circle back to whether the acquisition of that motive for the sake of man is better for God or not.¹⁸

Responses

The Māturīdī response is that it is possible that God’s motive be beneficial for man even if He derives no benefit from it. It is also possible that the acquisition of the motive not be better for God or for man, but that the acquisition of the motive be better because of an intrinsic value found within the motive itself. Muḥammad b. Ashraf Shams al-Dīn al-Samarqandī (d. 690/1291) explains that God can either do an action or leave it. One of the two options will necessarily be better. God will necessarily choose the better option. This “betterness” is not because it is better for Him, but rather that doing that action or leaving of that action is intrinsically better or it is better for man.¹⁹ A number of insights can be drawn from al-Samarqandī’s remarks. First, his explanation is built upon the premise that actions are

intrinsically good or evil. Second, al-Samarqandī, being a Māturīdī, expands the scope of motives beyond benefit to an ontological scale.

The Māturīdī Position

The Māturīdīs believe that the motive for God's actions is benefit for man and wisdom.²⁰ By expanding it to include wisdom, they provide a better explanation for eschatological and ontological issues such as punishment for disbelievers, God's creation of disbelief, and why people are burdened with *taklīf*. Al-Nasafī, in explaining why God commands a disbeliever to believe, first clarifies that the purpose of the command is not that the disbeliever actually believe because that would entail God contradicting His knowledge. Rather, He commands them because he knows they will disobey. Once they disobey, putting them in hell is just. Hence, the overarching wisdom was the manifestation of justice. God knew He was going to fill hell, but, by using the medium of *taklīf*, that became the manifestation of justice. Hence, the motive of *taklīf* was the manifestation of justice. The manifestation of justice is intrinsically better than not manifesting justice. Since the motive was to manifest justice, God need only to give man that by which he qualifies for *taklīf*, not what is best for man. Anything beyond that is from His grace and not necessary upon Him.²¹

The ability to explain such eschatological and ontological realities without running into contradictions or invalidating the endeavor for objective moral truth is what makes the Māturīdī position preferable. Furthermore, the link between God's laws and natural law as espoused in the Māturīdī paradigm affords classical Islam a universal platform to discuss rational ethics.

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- ¹ ‘Abd al-Jabbār b. Aḥmad, *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsa fī ‘ilm al-kalām* (Kuwait: Kuwait University, 1998), 65.
- ² ‘Abd al-Jabbār b. Aḥmad, *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsa* (Cairo: Maktaba Wahba, 1992), 510.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 485.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 302-303.
- ⁹ Maymūn al-Nasafī, *Tabṣirat al-adilla*, 1st ed. (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Azhariyya li-l-Turāth, 2011), 1:670-671.
- ¹⁰ ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Uthmān Afandī, *al-Masālik fī al-khilāfiyyāt*, 1st ed. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2007), 115-121.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 159.
- ¹² al-Nasafī, *Tabṣirat al-adilla*, 1:992-993.
- ¹³ ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-uṣūl*, 133-134.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 511.
- ¹⁵ al-Nasafī, *Tabṣirat al-Adilla*, 2:1022-1023.
- ¹⁶ Sa‘īd Fūda, *Tahdhīb sharḥ al-sanūsī*, 2nd ed. (Oman: Dār al-Rāzī, 2004), 65-66.
- ¹⁷ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal afkār al-mutaqaddimīn wa-l-muta’akḥirīn* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Kulliyāt Al-Azhariyya, 1978), 205.
- ¹⁸ Shams al-Dīn al-Samarqandī, *al-Saḥā’if al-ilāhiyya* (Riyadh: Dār al-Falaḥ li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī‘, 1985), 470.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 468.
- ²⁰ Afandī, *al-Masālik fī l-Khilāfiyyāt*, 152.
- ²¹ al-Nasafī, *Tabṣirat al-Adilla*, 2:1013.