

since it is an integral part of the divine order of the world established by the supreme Artisan. In short, what we have in Averroes is an epitome of what Brague calls an *episteme* of digestion: philosophy understands revelation insofar as revelation is swallowed up into the cosmic order.

It is evident from what we have seen in this chapter, that the nature, operation, and place in the cosmic order of the human intellect is of critical importance for Averroes (and al-Ghazali) in understanding the proper nature and function of revelation. What the nature and role of the human intellect is, according to these prominent Muslim thinkers, will tell us much about how Islam understands (or fails to understand) the nature and role of reason vis-à-vis revelation, which will be topic of our next chapter.

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01 Kasım 2013

YAZILANIN SONRA GELEN DOKÜMANI

Robert J. Dobie, *Thinking Through Revelation Islamic, Jewish, and Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2019, s. 53-56.
ISAM 04 273382

CHAPTER 2



IS REVELATION REALLY NECESSARY?

Revelation and the Intellect in
Averroes and al-Ghazali

As we saw in the last chapter, Averroes argues that philosophy and the religious law accord in leading to the perfection of the human intellect, which is the proper end of philosophy and the highest goal of the religious law. Hence, problems concerning the nature of the intellect and its perfection are central to Averroes's philosophical and religious thought. Indeed, his doctrine of the intellect would be what most medieval Christian and Jewish philosophers and theologians thought of when they heard the name "Averroes."¹

1. As Remi Brague reminds us, the *Decisive Treatise* constitutes an almost infinitesimal portion of Averroes's *oeuvre* and a rather unrepresentative portion at that. His main preoccupation is with philosophical truth, which means, of course, the philosophy of Aristotle. Key to the realization of the truth, however, is the perfection of the intellect, a project for which Aristotle gives very little guidance, and what little guidance he gives is cryptic and obscure. See Brague, *Au moyen du moyen âge*, "Averroès est-il un gentil?" 397-412. Averroes, therefore, had to strike out on his own, whether he realized it or not. And the relation of the religious law to the perfection of the intellect will play, again whether he realized it or not, an important role in his development of Aristotle's thought on the intellect. Indeed, his teaching on the intellect would be constitutive of "Averroism," a school of philosophical thought taking its inspiration from Averroes's commentaries on Aristotle and popular among medieval and early modern Christian and Jewish thinkers (though absent in the Islamic world).

3.3 THE FUNCTION OF REVELATION IN THE PROCESS OF NORM-CONSTRUCTION

So far, we have seen that different epistemological and metaphysical theories resulted in different conceptions of divine speech. In this section, we take this debate to its conclusion by examining how revelation was seen as necessary for the attainment of normative judgments.⁶¹ The question of the normative effects of divine revelation was most immediately at stake in what scholars referred to as the question of the "first obligation." Admittedly, the term "first obligation" is vague and can (and did) have several meanings. It is within this ambiguity that the range of positions pertaining to the role of divine revelation in our acquisition of normative knowledge became evident. To put it briefly, scholars who embraced a type of natural-law approach to revelation meant by it the first obligation to be made known to us by God, whereas scholars who viewed revelation as necessary for normative knowledge (thus adopting a divine-command conception of obligation) meant the first obligation that can be known to human minds. For divine-command theorists, therefore, the very possibility of attaining knowledge of nonsubjective norms depended upon the arrival of revelation, while revelation played no such role for natural-reason theorists. For the latter, there can be no order of priority for norms of action, since normativity follows from a set of natural processes of acquisition of knowledge that are independent of divine speech. For the divine command theorists, the prerevelation world is one in which knowledge of universalizable norms is utterly impossible. Debating the question of what constituted the first obligation, therefore, was an indirect way of establishing the first link in a chain of reasoning that pertained to the sources of norms. The question of first obligation

⁶¹ Whereas the epistemological foundations of the disagreement on the place of revelation in normative reasoning are often acknowledged, scholars focusing on the natural law side of the discussion often reach the unwarranted conclusion that the opposition of cognitivism and skepticism that we are explaining in this section is reflective of a supposed tension between "reason" and "revelation." For example, M. Ibrahim argued that "Another theological dispute resulting from 'Abd al-Jabbār's view on immediate knowledge is with the Ash'arites. 'Abd al-Jabbār considers that basic ethical rules knowledge is included in immediate knowledge. His inclusion of this knowledge in immediate knowledge implies man's ability to know good and evil with reason alone. However, this inclusion is rejected by the Ash'arites since they exclude ethical rules from immediate knowledge." Mohd Radhi Ibrahim, "Immediate Knowledge According to al-Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar." *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 23(1) (2013): 113.

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reveals two approaches to revelation: (a) as a mere promoter of normativity, and (b) as an introducer of the very possibility of ethics.

3.3.1 Revelation as Promoter of Normative Knowledge

If one accepts the Mu'tazilī view that revelation is introduced into a world in which natural values are available to human minds, one would have to justify the relevance of divine revelation in the process of norm construction. This is a problem that Mu'tazilīs faced, and that continues to concern contemporary ethicists who attempt to combine the divine-command and natural-law approaches. In this section, we will see that the Mu'tazilī justifications of the relevance of revelation ranged from the claim that it made normative judgments more accessible, to the more robust view that absolute, unconditional obligations are impossible without revelation.⁶² Generally, we can see a gradual shift in time toward a stronger role of revelation within the Mu'tazilī school, just like, as we will see, an increased degree of nuance can be observed in Ash'arī theories as well. The argument that reasoning based on individual observation ('*ʿaql*) and that based on divine reports (*sam'*) are both valid sources of knowledge has been clearly articulated by 'Abd al-Jabbār in *al-Mughnī*:

What we say about revelation-based knowledge is similar to what we say about pure reasoning: they both represent a premise for obligation. The existence of a premise is only known through a divine message in revelation-based matters, and is known by reflection in the case of pure reasoning. To that extent, they are different, although they share the necessity of there being a reason that justifies obligation, without which no moral judgment would have been justified, as previously explained. Whenever we say that God has made something obligatory, we mean that God has *made it known* to us that it is obligatory, or has made it knowable through the action's attributes . . . Thus, God Most Exalted has differentiated between proofs. In some cases, He made obligations known through pure reasoning, through habits, or trustworthy reports, in other cases He made them

⁶² Kambiz GhaneaBassiri offers a helpful explanation of the Mu'tazilī position on revelation in the following terms: "'Abd al-Jabbār, being a Muslim theologian, did not disagree with Ibn al-Bāqillānī about the enduring significance of divine revelations, nor did he dispute the validity of the Qur'ān as an accurate source of divine commands. My concern here is not with the ways in which the two theologians established the validity of the Qur'ān as a source of divinely revealed commands. Rather, my aim is to show how necessary knowledge serves as a theological argument for Ibn al-Bāqillānī's assertions that justice is whatever God commands." Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, "The Epistemological Foundation of Conceptions of Justice in Classical Kalām: A Study of 'Abd Al-Jabbār's *Al-Mughnī* and Ibn Al-Bāqillānī's *Al-Tamhīd*," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 19(1) (2008): 71-96.

01 Kasım 2019

MADDE YAYIMLANDIKTAN SONRA GELEN DOKÜMAN

Vahy
210037

MADDE YAYIMLANDIKTAN
SONRA GELEN DOKÜMAN

01 Kasım 2023

I

What Do We Know without Revelation?

The Epistemology of Divine Speech

A noteworthy feature of the classical Islamic discipline of *kalām*, which, in its mature form, came to encompass a range of topics in philosophical theology, ontology, and meta-ethics, is its pronounced interest in epistemology. It is a common characteristic of the major *kalām* compendia to begin with an investigation of the sources, objects, and methods of acquisition of knowledge. This was an established disciplinary tradition, but also indicative of a specific worldview. Scholars who engaged in the complex of traditional theological-legal sciences believed in the primacy of the study of knowledge. The world consisted of items of information to be learned, or knowable things (*ma'lūmāt*), which meant that understanding the process of gaining knowledge itself must logically come before anything else can be understood. For us to acknowledge the primacy of epistemology in classical Islamic thought is a first step to escaping the perception of debates on the place of revelation as polemics between rationalists and traditionalists. In this chapter, we will see that the two main approaches to revelation as a source of practical norms were firmly anchored in two distinct theories of knowledge.

These two general approaches, represented here by the Mu'tazilī and Ash'arī schools, are comparable to common trends in contemporary theological ethics. Classical Islamic debates on the role of divine revelation in the formulation of normative judgments occurred, in large part, along similar lines to what we would refer to as natural law and divine command theories.² A significant strand of the Mu'tazilī school advanced, in different

² The assertion that Mu'tazilī thought exhibits many of the features of natural law theories has been widely made by scholars of Islam. This characterization of Mu'tazilī thought will

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to offer a detailed survey or historical account of the intricate differences and subtle developments of those debates across time and within various Islamic schools of thought. What may appear to the historian as a tendency to homogenize is in fact an effort to abstract, which is crucial to inquiries in ethics and legal theory.

I. I DIVINE REVELATION IN LEGAL AND MORAL THOUGHT

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the rationality of the reliance on divine revelation as a source of law and morality is widely doubted across various fields. In the study of Islam, this manifests in an apparent celebration of premodern natural law tendencies as a distinct expression of rationalism in an otherwise revelation-dominated tradition.²³ This stance regarding the reliance on revelation as a source of guidance, which we will refer to as divine command theory, rests on a deep presumed opposition between “reason” and “revelation,” an opposition that, we will see throughout this book, is not necessarily applicable to Islamic theological debates on divine speech.

The expression “divine command theory” covers a wide range of models that deal with divine speech and commands as conducive to the formulation of values and judgments. Generally, those theories, as their own proponents almost invariably admit, have not been particularly popular in recent scholarship. Much of the efforts to find a place for divine speech in norm-formation have been focused on elucidating the ways in which divine revelation accords with some notion of natural goodness. A prominent example of the tendency of divine command theorists to adopt certain compromise with natural law views can be

²³ A sound critique of this assumption was leveled by Oliver Leaman, who argues along lines similar to those in this book that “commentators sometimes see [the development of Ash’arism today] as a victory for an anti-rationalism which has retarded Islam’s development. This, however, is an entirely misleading view. For one thing, even the critics of *Kalām* defended their arguments rationally ... It might even be argued that it is those who are not normally seen as rationalists who are in fact the most concerned with reason, since they are prepared to be critical of reason and argue (but note the term here, argue) that we should acknowledge its severe limitations. So the ‘traditionalists’ are able to view the use of reason critically, unlike their ‘rationalist’ opponents, something which might be considered an even more rational strategy than that of their adversaries, who evince an uncritical enthusiasm for rationality itself.” Oliver Leaman, “The Developed *Kalām* Tradition” in T. J. Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 85–6.

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Omar Farahat, *The Foundation of Norms in Islamic Jurisprudence and Theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. ISAM DN. 273967.

found in some of the work of Robert Adams.²⁴ The same tendency can be seen in the study of Islam. Works that advance some conception of natural law are treated as works of particular philosophical interest.²⁵ Several theological ethicists have attempted to formulate more robust versions of divine command theories. Notably, William Alston insisted that the “good” as applied to God and His speech should not be understood along the same lines as human morality.²⁶ Adams’ and Alston’s efforts were the precursors of a significant rise in the interest in theories of divine command ethics, as seen in the work of John Hare, among others.²⁷

The works of Adams and Alston give us a helpful understanding of the range of views available on the question of the place of divine speech in moral (and, in the Islamic case, legal) thought. Adams represents what I consider an attenuated form of divine command theories. In “A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness,” Adams makes the argument that the view that the wrongness of actions follows from their contradiction to divine commands is defensible if we presuppose that a “loving God” makes those commands. Adams’ concern was to defend the place of divine speech in moral reasoning against the objection that following divine commands would require committing acts of senseless cruelty if God commanded them. To resolve this problem, Adams advocated the use of a natural precondition that can be used to scrutinize divine commands based on human standards of love and benevolence. This could be regarded as a partial concession to natural law theories. Alston, on the other hand, advanced a more robust form of divine command theories. In “Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theorists,” Alston argued that God’s goodness cannot be measured by human standards, and that we generally ought to follow God’s commands because of His authority as creator. John Hare makes a similar move in

²⁴ Especially Robert M. Adams, “A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness” in Gene H. Outka and John P. Reeder (eds.), *Religion and Morality: A Collection of Essays* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1973), 318–47.

²⁵ As stated in George Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism: The Ethics of ‘Abd Al-Jabbār* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 1–3. In fact, Hourani further declares that not only Muslim, but most “medieval thinkers have not been found to have contributed very much to philosophical ethics.”

²⁶ William P. Alston, “Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theorists” in William P. Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

²⁷ Hare, *God’s Call*; Hare, *God’s Command*. See also Baggett and Walls, *Good God*.

01 Kasım 2013
MADDE YAYIMLANDIKTAN
SONRA GELEN DOKÜMAN