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Wrongdoing and Divine Omnipotence in the Theology of Abū Isḥāq an-Naẓẓām

1 Introduction: The Fragmentary Nature of Muʿtazilī Writings

The history of Islamic theology during the second and third centuries of the Muslim era (8.–9. century AD) is primarily a history of the Muʿtazila. The name of Abū Isḥāq an-Naẓẓām (died ca. 221/836) can then not go unmentioned; he was one of the principal thinkers of this intellectual movement. This does not mean that in all we hear about him he represents the accepted opinion of his school. On the contrary: the information we get is concerned in large part with his "deviations", that is, those idiosyncrasies characteristic of him and him alone. There are two explanations for the character of this information.

The early Muʿtazilīs were individual thinkers who liked to experiment – not only with divergent ideas but also with contrasting vocabularies and with new systematical structures; never again has Islam known such an openness for original, though sometimes untenable positions. Second – or rather first, for this is the point where we start – we have to take into consideration the character of our sources. They are mostly of a doxographical or polemic nature; they stress certain points and forget about others or take them for granted. They want to show where a certain theologian differed from his colleagues or where he went wrong, but they do not necessarily lead us to the nerve of his system. They shed light on the eccentric fringe, but they give us almost no texts which deal with the center of his thought or which let him speak for himself. And in any case, what we have are only fragments; we are usually not told how they fit together. We may reconstruct systematic coherence, but we must be aware of the fact that our reconstructions are hypothetical. We cannot even be sure that there was any "system" at all – in the sense that a certain *mutakallim* always and necessarily proceeded from an overall concept and not just reacted against isolated attacks by making isolated statements which perhaps roughly corresponded to his basic axioms but were
54 not planned in advance. We are dealing, after all, with | dialectical theologians for whom being proven right was at least as important as the objective truth.

With no one among these early thinkers are we in a better position than with an-Naẓẓām. We have a lot of material in which we not only get statements

 | DOI: 10.1163/9789004336483_085

but also reasons. But even here we lack any coherent account; an-Naẓẓām's reasons are hidden in a jungle of argument and counterargument, evasive justifications and willful distortions presented in dialectical debates which were summarized and as a result frequently distorted again. We have thus to invest a lot of philology and exegesis before we can come to any conclusions. A work like this is not the place to expound these philological or exegetical preliminaries; I must restrict myself to the conclusions. Unfortunately, philology and exegesis are sometimes the main thing; the conclusions then look rather normal and are not exciting at all. What we are able to reconstruct is, even under the relatively favorable circumstances described, only a bare skeleton. And the time for broad comparisons has not yet come.

2 The Limits of Divine Omnipotence According to an-Naẓẓām

An-Naẓẓām is known by the doxographers as the Mu'tazilī theologian who believed that God not only does not do evil but is also not able to do it.[1] A similar position had already been held by Origen in his *Contra Celsum*: "We say that God *is unable* to do evil; otherwise He would be able not to be God. For if God *does* anything evil He is not God."[2] Origen's argument gets its rhetorical persuasiveness from the fact that the last sentence is a quotation from Euripides.[3] This also explains why he moves so easily from denying God's capacity of performing evil to denying his actually doing so. The Mu'tazilīs, on

1 See Abû l-Ḥasan 'Alî b. Ismâ'îl Ash'arî, *Maqâlât al-Islâmiyyîn*, H. Ritter (ed.), Istanbul 1929–1933, p. 555. 1 f.; 'Abd al-Jabbâr b. Aḥmad, *al-Mughnî fî abwâb at-tawḥîd wal-'adl*, vol. VI, part 1: *at-Ta'dîl wat-tadjwîr*, Ahmad Fu'âd al-Ahwânî (ed.), Cairo 1962, p. 127, 4 f.; many later and derivative reports (e.g., Abû Muḥammad 'Alî Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Fiṣal fî l-milal wal-ahwâ' wan-niḥal*, vol. IV, Cairo 1317 H, p. 193, 13 ff.; Djuwaynî, *Ash-Shâmil fî uṣûl ad-dîn*, 'Alî Sâmî an-Nashshâr (ed.), Alexandria 1969, p. 372, 4 f.: Abū Ya'lâ Ibn al-Farrâ', *al-Mu'tamad fî uṣûl ad-dîn*, W.Z. Haddad (ed.), Institut de Lettres orientales de Beyrouth, Beirut 1974, p. 140, 4 f.; Ibn Abî d-Dam, in Khalîl b. Aybak Ṣafadî, *al-Wâfî bil-wafayât*, vol. VI, H. Ritter et al. (eds.), Leipzig/Wiesbaden 1931 ff., pp. 15, 18 f.).

2 See Origenes, *Contra Celsum* V 23: φαμὲν δὲ καὶ ὅτι οὐ δύναται αἰσχρὰ ὁ θεὸς, ἐπεὶ ἔσται ὁ θεὸς δυνάμενος μὴ εἶναι θεός· εἰ γὰρ αἰσχρόν τι δρᾷ θεὸς, οὐκ ἔστι θεός; quoted by R.M. Frank in 'The Divine Attributes According to the Teaching of Abû l-Hudhayl al-'Allâf,' in *Le Muséon* 82 (1969), p. 488 n. 122 and by G. Hourani in 'Islamic and non-Islamic Origins of Mu'tazilite Ethical Rationalism,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 7 (1976) p. 85, with a slightly different translation.

3 See Euripides, *Bellerophon*, frag. 292, v. 7, in *Fragmenta Tragicorum Graecorum*, A. Nauck (ed.), Leipzig 1889: εἰ θεοί τι δρῶσιν αἰσχρόν, οὐκ εἰσὶν θεοί.

the contrary, soon clearly stressed the difference between these two positions. Certainly, said an-Naẓẓām's colleague and contemporary al-Murdār, God will never *do* evil because this would contradict the perfection of his nature, but this does not mean that he does not always remain *able* to do it; otherwise we would unduly curtail his omnipotence. Since God's capacity is without limits, it also encompasses evil. We must avoid only one thing, namely envisaging, just for the pleasure of intellectual experimentation, the possibility that he might ever really act this way. This would be as indelicate as if we were to speculate about the possibility of fornication on the part of a person like the first caliph Abū Bakr who, as the closest confidant of the Prophet, commands our common respect.[4] We are dealing with a problem of taste rather than of principle; in
55 principle, | God remains "powerful over everything", as says the Koran in so many places. This was the attitude of the majority. The Baṣrian theologians of the fourth and fifth century A.H. (10.–11. century AD), who became so important for the final scholastic formulation of Muʿtazilī doctrine, only denied, as had done al-Murdār, God's actual volition, not his capacity.[5] In the long run, an-Naẓẓām's doctrine did not have much of a chance.

As usual, the structure of his reasoning is known to us in its rough outline, but not in its original form and coherence. We have to rely upon the remarks of certain opponents summarized by a critic of the Muʿtazila about one generation after an-Naẓẓām's death, a man by the name of Ibn ar-Rēwandī,[6] and upon the defense of his ideas by the Muʿtazilī doxographer al-Khayyāṭ who is usually well informed.[7] From these testimonies we are able to infer the following argumentation:[8] God performs, says an-Naẓẓām, his actions merely for their own sake, that is, for their internal value. This, however, is thinkable only with respect to equitable and good actions; it would be absurd with regard to unjust and evil ones. For we may do justice for the sake of its being good, but we never do injustice for the sake of its being bad. If somebody performs injustice he does so for two other reasons: he either follows (1) a personal need (*ḥāja*) insofar as he tries to reap profit or to avert personal harm, or (2) he does not know

4 See Ashʿarī, *Maqâlât*, p. 555, 9 ff.; ʿAbd ar-Raḥîm b. Muḥammad Khayyâṭ, *al-Intiṣâr*, A.N. Nader (ed. and transl.), Beirut 1957, p. 53, 15 ff.

5 See below p. 1178 and n. 12.

6 For him see *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., vol. III, p. 305 f., art. 'Ibn al-Rāwandī' (by G. Vajda), and my article 'Ibn ar-Rēwandī, or the Making of an Image' in: *Al-Abhath* 27, Beirut 1978–1979, pp. 5–26. [= below, p. 1343 ff.]

7 For him see *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., Vol. IV, pp. 1162–1164, art. 'al-Khayyāṭ'.

8 What follows is largely an interpretation and a rearrangement of Khayyâṭ, *Intiṣâr*, p. 38, 2 ff. Cf. also the short proof quoted in *Muġnî* VI$_1$, p. 127, 7 f.

what he is doing or what kind of heavy, possibly eternal punishment is awaiting him. This cannot be said of God: he does not have any need, nor is he, of course, ignorant of what he is doing.

What is characteristic about this theory is that it centers around God's activity, not his essence. In Islamic theology, God is not φύσει ἀγαθός; this idea is only found in philosophical works influenced by Neoplatonic thought, like the *Liber de Causis* (which was called in Arabic *Kitāb al-Īḍāḥ fī l-khayr al-maḥḍ, Liber de expositione bonitatis purae*). For the Muʿtazilīs, as well as for all other Muslim theologians, God was not "good" but merely *muḥsin* "doing what is good". God's relation towards injustice was normally discussed together with the question whether he is able to "lie," to make a false statement; accordingly it was put, right from the beginning, into the context of his acting and dealing with his creation – or, to use a distinction invented by the Muʿtazilites themselves, into the realm of his "predicates of action" (*ṣifāt al-fiʿl*) instead of his "predicates of essence" (*ṣifāt adh-dhāt*). An-Naẓẓām believed that there are actions that are ethically good or bad in themselves,[9] and he seems to have thought that those which are bad in themselves form a separate class (*jins*) which cannot be the object of God's choice, neither his choice to perform them nor even his choice not to perform them.[10] God only performs the good, and he chooses it for its own sake.

But, asked an-Naẓẓām's opponents, is this really true? First, does it ever 56
happen that somebody performs justice for its own sake? Yes, answered an-Naẓẓām. Even man, who as a matter of fact always thinks about his profit or harm, is nevertheless aware of the fact that justice is good in itself and lets himself be instigated by this insight. God, however, is beyond all deficiencies and does not calculate any profit at all. Second, continued his opponents, is it not true that if God knows what he is doing and if he does not perform justice

9 Besides other ones which are ethically good or bad simply by virtue of God's command or prohibition. They do not concern us here since they are only relevant for man. Cf. Ashʿarî, *Maqâlât*, p. 356, 6 ff.

10 I owe the ideas in this paragraph to some of the comments made by R.M. Frank during the symposium, which I reproduce almost verbally, though in a rearranged and shortened form. Especially the interpretation given in the last sentence is entirely his own. It is based on an analysis of the position held by the later Baṣrian Muʿtazilites which I cannot repeat here. For contrasting it with an-Naẓẓâm's approach, Frank draws on two statements about Abû l-Qâsim al-Kaʿbî (died 319/931) who made some of an-Naẓẓâm's axioms his own and whom I have adduced as a possible witness for an-Naẓẓâm's later thinking (cf. p. 1187). The passages are found in Abû Rashîd Saʿîd b. Muḥammad an-Naysâbûrî, *al-Masâʾil fî l-khilâf bayna l-Baṣriyyîn wal-Baghdâdiyyîn*, M. Ziyâda and R. as-Sayyid (eds.), Institut de Lettres orientales de Beyrouth, Beirut 1979, p. 354, 22 f. and p. 210, 18 ff.

for an immediate profit, he should have performed it from eternity onward? For his knowledge is eternal, and justice has been equally good for its own sake from eternity onward; only immediate profit would have bound it to a specific moment. Yet it must be bound to specific moments, for justice realizes itself, as we saw, in action, and action is only possible if there is an object. The object of God's justice, however, namely man and the world he is living in, did not exist from eternity onward. Thus, God cannot perform justice for its own sake alone. An-Naẓẓām pointed out, in reply, that God uses his justice in free decision, and free decision implies free choice of the moment. It seems that he explained this by focussing upon the difference mentioned above between predicates of action and predicates of essence:[11] knowledge is an essential predicate of God and as such an eternal attribute, whereas justice, as a predicate of action, is not eternal and therefore is only realized when God wants to realize it. But then it is realized for the sake of justice itself.

In concentrating upon justice instead of injustice, neither argument seems to address the point with which we started. For what was regarded as decisive in an-Naẓẓām's doctrine were the conclusions he drew concerning God's relationship towards injustice, and in this respect those Baṣrian theologians who later on believed that God *is* able to do injustice but will never do it tended to use the same argument he had used: "it is established that God *knows* that evil is evil and that He has no *need* of it. And anyone in this condition does not choose evil at all."[12] Similarly, an-Naẓẓām's observation that God's knowledge of an event does not imply its immediate realization was not at all characteristic of his approach alone; rather, it had been almost a commonplace of Muʿtazilī theology from the very first. We get the impression that, in the beginning, the discussion turned around an-Naẓẓām's theory as a whole and that, as far as injustice was concerned, an-Naẓẓām, while successfully refuting his opponents, did not yet see that his argumentation was valid for their position as well as his own. He seems to have been the first to develop the way of reasoning we mentioned, and in spite of the opposition he encountered right from the beginning, his basic assumption was in the long run accepted by his adherents
57 and opponents alike. To put | it in somewhat simpler terms, this assumption is that just as there are two possible reasons for wrongdoing, namely egotism or ignorance, there are also two possible reasons for well-doing, namely egotism or knowledge, and if action results from knowledge, then well-doing comes

11 This is, at least, what seems to be implied in Khayyâṭ's remark *in Intiṣâr*, p. 39, 1 ff.

12 See *Muġnî* VI$_1$, p. 177, 3 ff.; translated by G. Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism: The Ethics of ʿAbd al-Jabbâr*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1971, p. 101.

about for its own sake. The conflict between the majority of the Muʿtazila who only denied God's volition of evil, and an-Naẓẓām who denied his capacity for evil as well can obviously not only be explained from this side.

3 Opposition to an-Naẓẓām's Theory

There was, as a matter of fact, another dimension to this discussion. Up to now, we proceeded from the assumption that the opposition against an-Naẓẓām arose within the Muʿtazila itself. There are good reasons for that, but this is not exactly the way our source describes the situation. There, his opponents remain unidentified, and what is more interesting: from time to time non-Muʿtazilī adversaries turn up, people who did not even belong to the Muslim community at all. The Dayṣānīya,[13] for example, were a group of dualists who took their name, although apparently not all their doctrine, from Bardesanes, the famous Christian gnostic who had died at Edessa six centuries before, in 222 A.D.; whereas the Manicheans[14] started from a similar dualist approach and varied from the Dayṣānīya, as far as the relationship between good and evil was concerned, only in certain minor, though characteristic details. Both denominations had gained some influence in Iraq after Zoroastrian predominance had collapsed with the arrival of Islam, and both had obviously become partners and dangerous competitors to the Muslim intellectuals who conversed with them in the newly founded capital of Baghdad (and had perhaps already done so in older centers of learning like Baṣra). We know that an-Naẓẓām attacked them, but he also learned a lot from their world-view and their way of combining theology, i.e., dualist theology, with physics and cosmology. However, the arguments raised against his theory of divine justice which we mentioned before do not seem to have been formulated by them; for one of these proofs (the last one mentioned) presupposed that justice is not eternal insofar as it only comes into existence with its object, namely man, and this is a Muʿtazilī rather than a dualist axiom. The pieces on the dialectical chessboard were obviously distributed in a slightly more complex way. It is true that those who formulated the arguments against an-Naẓẓām were members of his own school, i.e., Muʿtazilites,[15] but in order to lend greater strength to their refutation they maliciously pointed out the parallels between his system and | that of those 58

13 See *Intiṣâr*, p. 38, 11.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 39, 6 ff.

15 Either Ibn ar-Rêwandî or the "opponents" to whom he refers.

dualists he had tried to refute himself. They were certainly right insofar as he could not have developed his ideas without taking the dualist approach into account.

This can be best demonstrated in the case of the Manicheans, for an-Naẓẓām tried to refute them with a proof very similar to the one he had used in order to support his own system. The Manicheans assumed that Light and Darkness, the two eternal principles of Good and Evil, are first separated and then mix with each other; the result of this mixture is the sublunar world. But, asked an-Naẓẓām, why do they mix? If they are separated by their own nature they can never mix except by losing their nature. If they mix by a decision of their own, how can we be sure that Light does not decide *against* the Good, or Darkness *against* the Evil?[16] Now, admittedly, God as conceived by an-Naẓẓām also chooses the good and justice out of his own free decision. So, asked an-Naẓẓām's Muslim opponents, why should it not be possible that Allah, too, is able to choose evil, for the same reason an-Naẓẓām had used against the Manicheans?

This is where an-Naẓẓām introduced, as a distinction, an idea with which we are already familiar:

> I notice that wrongdoing only proceeds either from somebody who is instigated to do it by a defect (*āfa*) or a need, or from somebody who does not know it (to be wrongdoing). Ignorance and need, however, point to the fact that he to whom these (features) are attributed is contingent; God is exalted far above that. What assures me that God does not do anything evil is the fact that these things which point to the contingency of him to whom they are attributed cannot be predicated of God. The Manicheans, on the contrary, are not able to argue as I do, for they claim that Light obtains profit and averts harm, that it is liable to defects and overwhelmed by Darkness to such an extent that it becomes ignorant of everything. Since this is the case they are not able to prove that evil and wrongdoing cannot proceed from it. This, if they claim (at all) that Light possesses capacity of decision …[17]

The conclusive difference between Light in Manicheism and God in Islam has thus to be seen in the fact that God does the good for the sake of itself

16 Cf. *Intiṣâr*, p. 39, 6 ff.; for a detailed exposition of a Manichean doctrine in a Muslim source, cf. *Muġnî* V, p. 10, 3 ff. (after an-Naubakhtî), translated in G. Monnot, *Penseurs Musulmans et Religions Iraniennes*, J. Vrin, Paris 1974, p. 152 f.

17 *Intiṣâr*, p. 39, 13 ff.

whereas Light does it in order to avert a nuisance, namely to be overwhelmed by Darkness. And whoever does not do the good for its own sake is able to decide on the side of evil. Thus, only God, i.e., God as conceived by an-Naẓẓām, cannot do evil; Light can – in spite of what the Manicheans used to say. An-Naẓẓām tries to outdo the Manicheans; this explains the rigor of his own position.

The Dayṣānīya had to be treated differently. They assumed that Light touches Darkness right from the beginning; there is no initial separation.[18] | Nevertheless, they agreed with Manicheism that the struggle between the two elements, "mixture" in their terminology, starts later, in time. But, says an-Naẓẓām, this eternal contact with Darkness is a defect which, according to their mythology, can only be mended by "mixture". Mixture certainly is a long and painful process, but it is an intermediary stage which as such is inevitable, and it would be wise to start it as early as possible. So why does Light postpone its attack? The Dayṣānīs pretend that Light is wise; wisdom is one of its eternal attributes. But then it should have put this attribute into action from eternity onward.[19] The argument fails to appreciate the mythological character of Dayṣānī thought, but logically it is quite valid; it is a good example of Islamic rationalism. An-Naẓẓām's Muslim opponents, however, for whom the Dayṣānīs had probably already ceased to be a living reality, quelled their admiration and rather drew attention to a dangerous parallel between the heretics and their victor. Inasmuch as the time-lag between Light's wisdom and its decision to mix with Darkness is like the time-lag between God's knowledge and his decision to apply justice, why then did an-Naẓẓām not draw the same consequence for his own system?[20] We do not know an-Naẓẓām's answer, but we may be sure that he found one, probably on the line of what his defender al-Khayyāṭ said: God possesses free will whereas the two elements of the Dayṣānīya are forces of nature. Or: God may well be as determined in his eternal knowledge as Light is in its eternal wisdom, but justice is a predicate of Divine action, and God is free to act whenever he wants.[21] The Dualists did not have such a distinction. 59

18 *Ibid.*, p. 38, 11 f.; *Muġnî* V, p. 17, 3 ff. and Monnot, p. 166.

19 *Intiṣâr*, p. 38, 21 ff.; this is at least how Khayyâṭ explains an-Naẓẓâm's argumentation.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 38, 9 ff.: "If the Eternal knows from eternity onward that justice is good and that whatever He does happens because of His knowing it to be good, and if this according to you does not necessarily postulate the thesis that He has been practicing (it) from eternity onward, then what is the difference between you and the Dayṣânîya …?" I understand *mâ* in *mâ fa'alahû* as a relative pronoun. It might be easier to interpret it as a negation, as Nader does in his translation; but then the preceding *li-'ilmihî* has to be given a concessive meaning for which the *li-* does not seem to be appropriate.

21 *See Intiṣâr*, p. 39, 1 ff.

An-Naẓẓām's Muslim opponents may then have felt that he simply failed to take the last step: if God is free to act, why should he not be free to do evil? What still seemed stringent and logically necessary in the refutation of the Manicheans here appeared, in the refutation of the Dayṣānīs, as a final residue of dualist determinism. If God cannot do evil, says a later – and malevolent – heresiographer with respect to an-Naẓẓām's position, he acts like a force of nature.[22]

Once one had arrived at this point it was easy to saddle an-Naẓẓām with further absurdities. If God cannot but do justice, why should he be praised for it?[23] And if he cannot do evil, whatever he does should be good for those who are affected by his actions; so he is obliged to grant the inhabitants of Paradise eternal bliss instead of making them die in the end, for bliss is better for them than death. The fact that Paradise lasts eternally, beyond the mere retribution for works of obedience on earth, would thus not be a token of Divine favor and grace, but a "must" grounded in God's nature.[24] The argument was not as
60 bizarre and farfetched as it looks. It alludes to the | doctrine of an early Muslim theologian, Jahm b. Ṣafwān, who had pretended that Paradise and Hell, like creation altogether, are a mere interlude in God's eternal existence; in the end he will again be the Only and the One he was in the beginning.[25] Compared with this position, an-Naẓẓām not only seemed to say that this *will* not be the case as all Muslim theologians used to hold against Jahm, but also that it *cannot* be the case.

Both objections show the difference of perspective between an-Naẓẓām and his opponents. The opposition started from God's nature and then stated a certain limitation of his omnipotence – a subjective perspective, as it were. An-Naẓẓām concentrated on the object, the character of justice and wrongdoing: God should be praised because he performs justice for its own sake and *thus* cannot but do it.[26] Eternal bliss gets its binding force because it has been predicted by God in his revelation and *then*, as a published decision of God, cannot but happen.[27] It is true that an-Naẓẓām believed this world to be the best of all worlds; "nothing is more optimal (*aṣlaḥ*) than the favor (*luṭf*)

22 *Maṭbūʿ ʿalâ l-fiʿl*; cf. ʿAbd al-Qâhir b. Ṭâhir Baghdâdî, *al-Farq bayna l-firaq*, M. Badr (ed.), Cairo 1910, p. 117, 2 ff. and M. Muḥyî d-Dîn ʿAbd al-Ḥamîd (ed.), Cairo n.d., p. 134, 14 ff.

23 *See Intiṣâr*, p. 42, 6 ff. > Baghdâdî, *Farq*, p. 117, 5 ff. / p. 134, 17 ff.

24 *Intiṣâr*, p. 22, 1 ff.

25 For Jahm b. Ṣafwân cf. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., vol. 11, p. 338 and R.M. Frank, 'The Neoplatonism of Ǧahm ibn Ṣafwân' in: *Le Muséon* 78 (1965), 395–424. For his doctrine on Paradise and Hell cf. Ashʿarî, *Maqâlât*, p. 148, 11–149, 3.

26 *Intiṣâr*, p. 43, 2 ff. and before.

27 *Ibid*., p. 22, 6 ff.

wrought by God". But it nevertheless remains a favor, it is not a mechanical "must". And there are innumerable favors of equal value which God could also have wrought; he could not have done anything less optimal, but he retains an infinite choice. He cannot choose anything evil, but when choosing something good he has innumerable options all of which are equally optimal. He is not like fire which can perform only one thing, namely heating, because it is "natured" (*maṭbūʿ*) like that.[28]

The comparison with fire was old. "God is not involuntarily good the way fire is warming", Clement of Alexandria had said, "He does not do good out of necessity but out of free choice …"[29] And, pursued an-Naẓẓām, if he always chooses the best for his creatures it is because he cannot be "stingy",[30] and if he always performs justice for its own sake it is because he is perfect, exempt from any shortcoming or "defect" (*āfa*).[31] This catchword, "defect", may lead us further in our analysis. We remember having heard it mentioned already: a "defect" was discovered by an-Naẓẓām in the principle of Light advocated by the dualists, for Light is overwhelmed by Darkness.[32] As far as an-Naẓẓām's own system is concerned, however, the "defective" agent *κατ' ἐξοχήν* was man who is responsible for most of the wrongdoing which cannot be performed by God. With this we come to the logical complement of what has been treated up to now, namely to an-Naẓẓām's anthropology.

4 Free Choice and 'Defect' (*āfa*) in Man and God

The "defect" in man is his body. The body oppresses the soul and confines | it like 61
a prison;[33] in his essence, man is to be identified with his soul, but the activities of the soul are always affected (hampered, or modified, or conditioned) by the body. This looks like an idea taken over from Platonism, but the impression quickly changes when we hear that the soul is a material principle, a "subtle body", a kind of *pneuma* permeating all limbs. And there are more of these "bodies": colors, e.g., smells, noises, things which materially penetrate man

28 Cf. Ashʿarī, *Maqâlât*, p. 576, 5 ff.; also *Intiṣâr*, p. 25, apu. ff.

29 Cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* VII 42. 4 and 6: οὔτε γὰρ ὁ θεὸς ἄκων ἀγαθὸς ὃν τρόπον τὸ πῦρ θερμαντικόν … οὔκουν ὁ θεὸς ἀνάγκῃ ἀγαθοποιεῖ, κατὰ προαίρεσιν δὲ εὖ *ποιεῖ*. I owe this reference to R.M. Frank.

30 Cf. *Maqâlât*, p. 576, 10.

31 Cf. *Intiṣâr*, p. 42, pu. f. and 28, 4 ff.

32 See above p. 1180.

33 Cf. *Maqâlât*, p. 331, 10 f.

from outside and other ones which are already part of him, such as his qualities. I have described this concept somewhere else,[34] and I do not want to go into detail here. Suffice it to say that the key-notion in this system is the idea of mixture, an idea which we encountered already when talking about the dualists and which was, as a matter of fact, developed in their milieu although it was ultimately derived, as it seems, from the Stoic concept of κρᾶσις δι' ὅλου.

The example which best illustrates this mixture of different material elements in man is sense perception. We hear a sound because it arrives at the ear as a material body and then mixes with the soul which itself is also a material body. Before penetrating the soul the sound was not an isolated, unmixed entity either, for then it was mixed with the air which it had affected when being produced by some event of nature or by a speaker.[35] The soul is what is common to all sense perceptions; as such it forms the *sensus communis*.[36] But only the body differentiates between all perceptions; the "defect" explains their individual character. If we ask why the eye sees but does not hear, we cannot but answer that it allows colors to enter while keeping sounds out; its impediment or "defect" reacts like glass which can be permeated by colors and not by sounds. In the same way, the sense of hearing is mixed with, and thus obstructed by, a kind of darkness which gives free way to sounds but not to colors.[37] Functioning is an interplay of different elements or ingredients of a "mixture"; this explains both its existence as well as its limitations.

If left alone the soul would function by itself. But for the same reason it would not be free in the real sense of the word; the soul, so it seems, reacts, as a material body, always in the same way.

> The soul (*rūḥ*) dwells in this (definite) body insofar as this (body) is a defect for it and instigates it to make a choice (*bāʿith lahū ʿalā l-ikhtiyār*). If (the soul) were without it it would act by secondary causality (*tawallud*, i.e., by mechanically influencing other agents) and by necessity.[38]

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34 Cf. J. van Ess, *Theology and Science: The Case of Abû Isḥâq an-Naẓẓâm*. Ann Arbor 1978 (The Second Annual United Arab Emirates Lecture in Islamic Studies); French version, in *REI* 46, (1978), p. 191 ff.; *Encyclopedia of Islam* ²V 384 f., article 'Kumūn'.

35 J. van Ess, op. cit., p. 14.

36 'Abd Allâh b. Muḥammad Nâshi', *al-Kitâb al-ausaṭ*, edited by J. van Ess in *Frühe Muʿtazilitische Häresiographie*. J. van Ess (ed.), F. Steiner, Wiesbaden, 1971, pp. 113, 13 ff.

37 See *Maqâlât*, p. 342, 3 ff. (after a report by al-Jāḥiẓ); for the reference to an-Naẓẓâm, cf. *ibid.*, p. 343, 3 ff.

38 See *Maqâlât*, p. 334, 2 ff.; *rûḥ* and *nafs* are identical for an-Naẓẓâm.

Capability of action (*istiṭāʿa*) is not, as other Muʿtazilīs said, an independent and separate ingredient of man's nature; according to an-Naẓẓām it is given | 62
with man's essence itself, i.e., with his soul.[39] But "man cannot, by himself, be capable to do what he normally does (*min shaʾnihī an yafʿalahū*) as long as there does not arise a defect in him. (This) defect is (identical with) the incapability of acting (*ʿajz*); it is different from man (himself)."[40] Like sense perception, free will is thus a result of limitation; capability is in need of incapability in order to present a choice. And since incapability derives from the body, it is not identical with man, who is soul.

We would be glad to hear more about this strange theory. We recognize that it shares certain axioms common to all Muʿtazilī thinking. Free will is interpreted as free choice; liberty always develops with respect to alternatives in that man either does something or omits it. But an-Naẓẓām speaks not about omission (*tark*) but about incapability which mixes with capability; the discussion is transferred into the realm of physics instead of jurisprudence. How does the "mixture" of soul and body, of capability and incapability, produce a choice? Another passage suggests that "incapability" was perhaps not so much a separate ingredient but only an abbreviated expression for all those "bodies" which form, together with the corporeal soul, the phenomenological appearance of man: colors, tastes, smells, etc. All of them are "defects" to the soul, and "the souls are mixed with these defects so that trial and appropriate test ensue in this world."[41] Trial and test, this means the choice between good and evil for which man gets his retribution in the hereafter. Without "colors, tastes, smells, etc." the soul would thus not only act according to its nature, but obviously also do only the good. Or, as an-Naẓẓām used to put it: one and the same class (*jins*) cannot produce two different kinds of action.[42] Fire always burns, and snow always cools; similarly the soul which is a "class" by itself and always remains so[43] cannot produce more than one kind of action, namely the good. If man performs, as we know by experience, good and evil alike it is because of the unity of his person, not because of his soul.[44]

The difficulties of such a construction could not be overlooked. What about the hereafter, for instance? Trial and test are over then, man no longer has

39 *Ibid.*, p. 229, 3 f. and p. 334, 1; also p. 478, 12.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 229, 5 ff. The editor proposes to read *qad yajûzu* or *innamâ yajûzu* instead of *lâ yajûzu*; but this is not necessary and would not give a better sense.

41 See *Intiṣâr*, p. 34, 14 ff.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 30, ult. ff.; also Baghdâdî, *Farq*, p. 119, 15 ff. and p. 136, 16 ff.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 34, 12 f.

44 This is what seems to be implied in the remark, *ibid.*, p. 30, apu. ff.

and needs a choice, and we should assume that the soul is given a chance to leave its "prison". On the other hand, the Muslim concept of Paradise is rather corporeal, and it is not easy to see how man should be able to eat and drink in Paradise if his soul is not further "mixed" with the body, with smells and tastes, etc. As a matter of fact, this is flatly admitted by al-Khayyāṭ when he tries to defend an-Naẓẓām; he seems to acknowledge that Ibn ar-Rēwandī was right when he said that, according to an-Naẓẓām, only some of the "defects"
63 are taken away in the hereafter whereas other ones have to remain | in order to keep man functioning.[45] He only adds – if I understand him correctly – that these "defects" are no longer defects.[46] Man remains man even in Paradise, a human and somehow defective being; only God is perfect.[47]

This brings us to a second problem – and back to our main topic: How does all this fit with an-Naẓẓām's concept of God's justice? Man is free because of his "defects", and only because of his defects; God, on the contrary, is free by being exalted above all defects. Did an-Naẓẓām want to say that choice and freedom of decision have to be understood differently in both cases, man's freedom meaning freedom for sin and evil, God's freedom meaning decision for good and justice? Or did he simply not have a "system" and discovered God's freedom only when he wanted to escape the parallels with the dualist concept brought to light by his opponents? We do not know; we are working with fragments. But we can attain a certain probability. An-Naẓẓām pretended, says al-Khayyāṭ,

> that injustice and lie only proceed from a defective body. If somebody attributes to God the capability of performing them he describes him as a defective body. For if somebody is capable of something it is not self-contradictory that this (also) proceeds from him; and if these two, (i.e., injustice and lie) were to proceed from him this would prove that he is a defective body.[48]

45 *Ibid.*, p. 34, 10 ff. and 17 ff.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 34, 16 f.

47 With regard to animals which, as an-Naẓẓâm thought, are also granted Paradise if they perform the good (i.e., if they have done useful things) he held that they enter it only with their souls, "free from all defects," and that they will be given other "forms" as God likes (cf. ʿAmr b. Baḥr Jâḥiẓ, *al-Ḥayawân* III, ʿAbd as-Salâm Muḥammad Hârûn (ed.), p. 395, 1 ff.). But they are treated under a different perspective: an-Naẓẓâm does not primarily want to ensure their capability of enjoying the pleasures of Paradise, but tries to escape the consequence that Paradise is full of dangerous and voracious beasts.

48 See *Intiṣâr*, p. 28, 4 ff.

This statement seems to speak in favor of our first interpretation. Actions which are bad in themselves form a class of their own and can only be realized in connection with a "defect". God does not have this "defect", so he does not realize them. This does not mean, as we saw, that he does not have a choice; it merely means that his choice moves in the realm of the good.

The model we tried to reconstruct reminds us, to a certain extent, of a distinction worked out by the Byzantine theologian Maximus Confessor (580–662): man's "personal will" (θέλημα γνωμικόν) is a sign of his imperfection. His "natural will" (θέλημα φυσικόν) always tends towards the good; the perfect nature has no need of choice, for it *knows* naturally what is good. When we follow our "personal will", however, we limit our true freedom.[49] We do not hear much about an-Naẓẓām's ideas about human will. But we know that, again in contrast to the Baṣrian school, he denied God a separate will.[50] And al-Kaʿbī who here, as on other points,[51] agreed with him much more closely than did the Baṣrians, then added the comparison we are waiting for: human will functions in connection with man's ignorance or imperfect knowledge with respect to whether his intentions can and will be realized; God, on the contrary, is omniscient and can do without a separate will. Will is realization in his case.[52]

5 Conclusion: An-Naẓẓām's Legacy in Islamic Thought 64

In all this euphoria of reconstruction some scepticism remains. We would have expected an-Naẓẓām's opponents to point out the discrepancies we discovered between his anthropology and his concept of God. But there is no trace of anything like that. Criticism was apparently mainly directed against what an-Naẓẓām said about God; his anthropology was silently forgotten. This is perhaps characteristic for Islam: the main concern was God's omnipotence, even for the Muʿtazilīs. An-Naẓẓām's idea that God cannot do evil was accepted

49 See V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, J. Clarke, London 1957, p. 125.

50 Cf. W. Madelung, *Der Imam al-Qâsim ibn Ibrâhîm und die Glaubenslehre der Zaiditen*, de Gruyter, Berlin 1965, p. 165 f.

51 See above, n. 10.

52 See Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Karîm Shahrastânî, *Nihâyat al-iqdâm fî ʿilm al-kalâm*, A. Guillaume (ed.), Oxford 1931, p. 240, 2 ff. However, Kaʿbî believed that God can do wrong, at least in a merely theoretical sense. It would not be against reason, but all the proofs on which reason bases itself would have to be changed to their opposites, i.e., God would have to change the order of the universe (cf. Ashʿarî, *Maqâlât*, p. 557, 12 ff.).

by a few of his disciples, by ʿAlī al-Uswārī and al-Jāḥiẓ,[53] but it remained the great exception. The later Baṣrian masters did not take it over, as we saw,[54] and the great Abū l-Hudhayl, an-Naẓẓām's predecessor and uncle on whom they relied and who had paved the way for so many concepts discussed again by his nephew, had not believed in it either. Like them, he had said that God can do evil though he will never do it.

It is true that Abū l-Hudhayl had still used a formulation which shows that, in intention, he was not so far away from an-Naẓẓām: it is "absurd", he had said, self-contradictory (*muḥāl*) that God ever does evil.[55] But even this word gave the later Baṣrian theologians some misgivings and was therefore omitted. Origen was much too Greek for Islam, as Richard Frank has remarked.[56] Muʿtazilī theology was never more Greek than in an-Naẓẓām, and even there it looks quite peculiar, at least completely un-Aristotelian. Islamic theology is interested in man, not in nature – in the relation between human free will and God's omnipotence, not in future events and their determination by God's foreknowledge. It is not metaphysics or logic which gives us the key but jurisprudence and grammar – or, as in the case of an-Naẓẓām (which again is somewhat exceptional), physics. We have to adjust our perspective, but perhaps this is not bad for a change.

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53 See *Maqâlât*, p. 555, 1 f.

54 Even Kaʿbî did not join him here (cf. n. 52).

55 See R.M. Frank in: *Le Muséon* 82 (1969), p. 487. An-Naẓẓâm used the same expression (cf. above, p. 1176), Kaʿbî restricted it (cf. n. 52).

56 *Maqâlât*, p. 488.