

Reason and Revealed Law in Mu'tazilite Ethics

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The Mu'tazilah and 'Abd al-Jabbār

The proper understanding of Mu'tazilite⁽¹⁾ ethical theory is not possible without deep study of their principle, the rationalism, and its relationship to the revelation, because it holds that the values of both human acts and divine acts are knowable as a rule by human reason⁽²⁾. I wish to outline the basic conception of the Mu'tazilite ethics and to make clear the points of the oppositions and the efforts for the speculative concordances between the reason and the revealed law through the study on 'Abd al-Jabbār, a great scholar belonging to the later Mu'tazilah.

'Abd al-Jabbār (A.D.935?~1024?)⁽³⁾ is considered as a head of the Mu'tazilite school in his days and worked as a chief-judge for the Buwayh government in Rayy. Most of his books are lost forever or might be hidden in some old library. Though 69 titles of his works are known, manuscripts of 13 of them have survived, and 7 of them were published as printed copies. Among them, the *Mughnī fī abwāb al-tawhīd wa-l-'adl*⁽⁴⁾ is the longest and exhaustive studies on Mu'tazilite theology. He is said to be not an outspoken original thinker but to be a good follower to the former Mu'tazilah. On the foundations made by his great predecessors he compiled and built the comprehensive theological system. But almost nothing of the predecessor's works has survived in other manuscripts except in his books, it is difficult to judge whether his contribution to the Mu'tazilite theology was original or not. Studying what he illustrates us in his books, we find his critics to those predecessors and his own reactions and positions different from the early and medieval Mu'tazilah⁽⁵⁾. As we will see, he attempted to make up accordance and synthesis between the human reason and divine order and sought the religious conclusions on the basis of the Mu'tazilite tradition.

Perfection of the reason

What is the criterion of good and evil brought forth endless controversies in the Islamic ethics between the rationalists and the conservative groups; the former insisted that it could be known through the human reason (*al-'aql*)⁽⁶⁾, and the latter confined the authoritative criterion only to the revelation and its derivatives

(*al-sam'*; *al-shar'*). The rationalists, the Mu'tazilah, maintain that the good and evil is inherent in the nature of the act itself and can be understood by the reason. For them the criterion of good and evil must be intrinsic and objective.

According to the Mu'tazilite rationalism, the values of both human and divine actions are knowable in principle by human reason. Based on these traditional Mu'tazilite ethical principles, 'Abd al-Jabbār elaborated his own ethics. He brought situational and prudential perspective into the judgment of ethical good-evil, taking into account various aspects and level of the actual acts⁽⁷⁾.

Here, we have to ask what is the role of revelation in this ethics. As an example of position of the traditionalist, I want to show what al-Ash'arī holds for the ultimate and fundamental principle. To Ash'arī, what is good and what is evil are given solely in God's command and His prohibition⁽⁸⁾. The knowledge of the good - evil and the obligatory can be acquired only by God's revelation that is given in the teaching of the Prophet and in the Scripture. This principle is never given in immediate intuition of human being, or human reason, as according to the Mu'tazilite position.

By the Ash'arite, the revelation is the decree of God that claims man absolute obedience to God, and the reason of man cannot but obey it. The revelation cannot be understood with the rational argument or speculative inquiry. Everything is decided by the revealed law, *al-Shar'*. To Ash'arī, as God could decide a good thing in its inherent nature to be evil if He wishes, man cannot judge good or evil by the inherent nature. Here, the criterion of good and evil is not intrinsic or objective. This position is realized to man as the divine decree (*qadar*) and fate (*qadā'*)⁽⁹⁾. In this position, *qadar* and *qadā'* is thought in relation with God's eternal omnipotence, and the causality is denied. It seems that there is no room for the reason to work⁽¹⁰⁾.

On the contrary to this position about the priority of the revelation, most of Mu'tazilah, such as Abū al-Hudhayl and Al-Jubbā'ī⁽¹¹⁾, insist that man should know, from the inherent nature of the thing, the existence of God, distinction of good-evil and the obligatory, if his reason is in normal maturity or perfection.

Abū al-Hudhayl says;

“(Man is) never regarded as grown-up without the perfection of the reason (*kamāl al-'aql*). There is necessary knowledge in (the reason) that makes man possible to distinguish himself from donkey, the sky from the earth and so on. There is also power for acquiring the knowledge. The reason is the perception

(*ḥiss*) which we call reason with the meaning that (the perception) is object of the reason (*ma'qūl*).⁽¹²⁾

To Abū al-Hudhayl, the reason is knowledge necessary to distinguish the things, as well as it is conception involving the perception based on the corporal sentiment. "The perception is object of the reason" seems to mean that the perception is known and understood by the reason. It is obscure what Abū al-Hudhayl indicates with the word "perception (*ḥiss*)", however this word generally shows us natural wants or impulses. If he intends it as the rational perception, perception is included in the reason, for he means that perception can be grasped and understood correctly only by the reason. Al-Jubbā'ī's position is basically same as Abū al-Hudhayl's.

"According to (the Al-Jubbā'ī's group), the reason is knowledge. Why it is called reason is that man is able to restrict himself with it from what the insane could not do."⁽¹³⁾

"It is never possible that man should be imposed duty without his reason being perfect. Only with perfection of the reason, he becomes capable to acquire the knowledge on God."⁽¹⁴⁾

Al-Jubbā'ī says that man is never to be imposed duty by God until he comes to have enough power to acquire the knowledge about God with his perfection of the reason. Thus the reason has intimate connection with knowledge and we will study on this later. In both Abū al-Hudhayl and al-Jubbā'ī, the maturity of man is realized by perfection of the reason. 'Abd al-Jabbār also says on this matter.

"Through perfection of the reason (*kamāl al-'aql*), man knows what is regarded evil (*muqabbahāt*) or good (*muḥassanāt*), and some kind of obligations (*wājibāt*). And he also knows evilness of the wrongdoing (*qubḥ al-zulm*), ingratitude for a favor (*kufr al-ni'mah*), and lying, in which there are neither benefits (*naḥ'*) nor protection against the injury (*daf' al-ḍarar*). Beneficence and gracious act are known as good. That it is obligatory to thank for a favor or to pay the debt when asked to pay back is known. The moderate deed is also known good by perfection of the reason."⁽¹⁵⁾

Through perfection of the reason (*kamāl al-'aql*), man is given the basic moral

principles which enable man to determine his acts according to the nature and the value of specific actions. Perfection of the reason makes man mature and capable to judge and recognize the characteristics of individuals' acts. With this perfection of the reason, man becomes morally responsible for his deed. As God created man such, He imposes the duties upon man. Without this maturity, man is not responsible for his deed and not deserved to be imposed duty from God. In sum, man is conceived as an autonomous agent who seeks his own goodness in his actions and thus deserves to be imposed duty and obligation by God.

Then what is *kamāl al-'aql*? This word is often used in Mu'tazilite theology since Abū al-Hudhayl in order to express the state of the maturity of human reason. But it is used without enough explanations or argumentation for its definition.

Kamāl al-'aql means literally the perfection or completion of the reason⁽¹⁶⁾, because it is used as a standard for the moral judgment. The definition of this term is not clear, and it is obscure which state of the reason could be called *kamāl al-'aql*, or which kind of maturity is related to this word. All that we can say is; with this *kamāl al-'aql* man comes to be capable to make moral judgment. Then, *kamāl al-'aql* is required to man when he is to perceive the things around him, to understand their nature⁽¹⁷⁾ and to judge their moral values. It is said that when there is nothing to do with *kamāl al-'aql* in the object of consciousness, any knowledge about this object cannot occur to man even though he is with reason⁽¹⁸⁾. In order to be responsible for the duty imposed upon him, man should be with this perfection of the reason.

To man with full perfection of the reason, knowledge taken by the reason has always priority in fulfillment of the duty. But we have to consider that this reason is also created and given to man by God who creates the whole universe and the man.

The definition of the reason

The mature man who is endowed with perfection of the reason could control his deed according to the basic moral principles. This is the fundamental of the Mu'tazilite ethics. It is called rational moral system, for the human reason is the essential criterion of the nature and the value of human actions. Then, we come to the question what is the definition of human reason. Reason ('*aql*) is called "the aggregate of each specific knowledge" by 'Abd al-Jabbār.

"The reason is an expression of the aggregate of each specific knowledge (*jum-*

lah min al-'ulūm al-makhṣūṣah)⁽¹⁹⁾, and when it occurs to the responsible man (*mukallaf*), he becomes possible to perform the imposed act."⁽²⁰⁾

Why he define the reason as "the aggregate of each specific knowledge"? I think that it is because the reason (*'aql*) supports totally the knowledge required in performing the duty imposed by God. With this reason, man could judge what his natural impulse urges him to do and could control himself not to do the evil acts. As we saw the position of Abū al-Hudhayl's on the relation between the reason and knowledge, both two are connected each other firmly.

About the reason, 'Abd al-Jabbār explains;

"The reason (*'aql*) is expressed in two ways; in one, the reason restricts man from proceeding his soul (*nafs*) toward what his natural impulse wants but what is regarded evil in his reason. The similarity to this is the knowledge about the cord (*'aql*) that binds she-camel not to walk about as she wants. In the other, with this reason, all other knowledge concerning comprehension and argumentation is confirmed. Whereas the confirmation of all other knowledge, that is related to comprehension and argumentation, is required, it looks like the foot-cord (*'iqāl*) of the she-camel necessary to keep her at a certain spot".⁽²¹⁾

In the word *'aql*, we see two roles; one is to judge human natural instincts or desires and to restrict man to walk toward what is regarded evil in the light of inner reflection. The other is to introduce the capacity of comprehension and argumentation in him and to establish the knowledge that enables him to search and think so that man might not lose the right way. In 'Abd al-Jabbār, "the aggregate of each specific knowledge" seems to be an expression posed to show what supports totally the concrete knowledge that the responsible man (*mukallaf*) should know in the special level, *taklif*, that is imposition of duty by God.

Reason and Revelation

Man is created by God, in a gratuitous and unconditioned act, capable of understanding the characteristics of his acts; which an act is obligatory or praiseworthy or blameworthy. Man is also placed under moral obligation as God imposes duties upon him, so that he might merit in fulfillment of these duties. It is the foundation of the ethics in Islam that the man is to be judged hereafter according to what he has done in this world. On the resurrection God will create man anew as same as

created first time in this world and will reward him⁽²²⁾. Thus man is required to be responsible being (*mukallaf*) who could complete the duties God imposes on him.

Imposing of duty by God (*taklīf*) falls under two categories: the moral obligation acquired and imposed universally according to the reason (*al-taklīf al-'aqlī*) and the obligation imposed according to the revelation (*al-taklīf al-sam'ī*)⁽²³⁾. In this *al-taklīf al-sam'ī*, the message transmitted by the Prophet from God is absolute and the teaching of the Prophet is infallible.

We understand that the human reason is produced by God and given to man as his fundamental function. Without the reason man should not be called responsible man (*mukallaf*). Man cannot fully understand the duties God imposes upon him without normal maturity of his reason, that is perfection of the reason (*kamāl al-'aql*). However, without the revelation the moral obligation is never completed. To explain this thinking, 'Abd al-Jabbār says as follows.

"The extent of obligation never differs either by reason nor by revelation. For, the biggest difference between the two is that they are two modes for understanding the obligatoriness (*wujūb*). The difference of the two never affects the obligation itself or the factor of obligation. We insist that the relation of the obligatoriness of obligation (*wujūb al-wājib*) to the reason shouldn't change its factor. Because, what we take from this argument is that it is the first for the reason to know the obligatoriness of obligation. In other words, the reason could know what shows the obligation to be obligatory. Therefore, it is not necessary that the obligation learned by the knowledge (*wājib 'ilmī*) should be different from the obligation known by the revealed law (*wājib shar'ī*)."⁽²⁴⁾

Here he uses the terms; *wājib 'ilmī* and *wājib shar'ī*. These words correspond to *taklīf 'aqlī* and *taklīf sam'ī* respectively. Thus, for 'Abd al-Jabbār, the reason and the revelation are the two modes or methods to know and to learn the obligation or duty. Though one is known by the reason and the other is known by the revelation, the meaning, the sense, the extent and the state of the obligation never differ between the two. We know that *wājib 'ilmī* (obligation by the knowledge) is the basis for *taklīf 'aqlī* that imposes the duty universally without revealed law. And *wājib shar'ī* (obligation by the revealed law) is the basis for *taklīf sam'ī* that imposes the duty by the revealed law. And 'Abd al-Jabbār says there is no difference between these two modes, because *taklīf*, imposing of duty, is in any means under the control of God.

Then, what is the role of the revelation for imposing the duty? About this point, 'Abd al-Jabbār says that some kinds of judgment for good-evil are gained by the reason through their own characters, but others are taught only by the revelation⁽²⁵⁾. Even though the acts imposed as duties have no special distinction in the revelation and the reason, there are some duties that cannot be known by the reason in any way but can be taught only by the revelation. The command of those acts is transmitted by the Prophet from God, and is given only in the Scripture and the teaching of the Prophet.

It is not clear which kind of acts belongs to this type known only by the revelation. As we see, they are most of religious rites, both public and private, and domestic affairs. According to 'Abd al-Jabbār, the revelation never contradicts to what the reason understands but prescribes certain act of religious rites which couldn't be acquired by the reason. God sent the Prophet in order to teach us the holy command for those acts with the authority of the Prophet, for they can never be understood rightly by the reason. Here the revealed law is no more conditional and supplemental.

"It is fixed in the reason of a man with reason (*'aql*) the obligatoriness (*uwjūb*) of defending a injury from himself. It is also fixed that what urges him to the obligation (*wājib*) and averts him from wrongdoing should be obligation without fail. On the contrary, what averts him from the obligation and urges him to wrongdoing should be evil (*qabīh*) without fail. If this is correct, we could say that among the acts there are some kinds with which we come to perform the obligations and avert the evil acts, when we do that act, and there are also other kinds of acts with which we come to be on the opposite. Here, in the extent of the reason, there is no capacity to know its nature and to distinguish what is welfare and benevolence from what is not. Therefore, it is inevitable that God teach us the nature of these acts, lest the purpose of the *taklīf* should end in failure. Thus, when there is no way to teach us (about the nature of the acts) but sending us the Prophet with the miracle sign that proves the truth of the prophet, it should be done".⁽²⁶⁾

Then, we come to know that the reason is not always perfect and ultimate, and sometimes it should be completed by the revelation, even though it is in full maturity as called *kamāl al-'aql*. There are two ways for man to know the obligatory: by reason and by revelation, and there is no difference between the two,

but the reason requires the assistance of the revelation. Thus, the revealed law is inevitable for man to carry out the duty imposed by God.

'Abd al-Jabbār insists on the absolute significance of the Messages from God, just as we saw above, though the revelation seems to either supplement the deficiencies of human reason, or to specify it. Being a Mu'tazilite scholar, he maintains the reason as a universal and absolute criterion for good and evil of the human acts⁽²⁷⁾. Here, the ethical principle is based firmly upon the human reason, however, we should consider that this principle is included in the whole framework of the creation of Almighty God. As God's creation is for the sake of the benefit to his servant, man, then, the two categories: the reason and the revealed law, never oppose each other but co-operate in order to give the ultimate reward to man hereafter.⁽²⁸⁾

Here, the human reason is not intrinsic or natural by itself in the microcosmic order as according to the philosophers⁽²⁹⁾. It is under the holy decree, created in man for his benefit. The realization of this benefit, the highest ultimate benefit to the creature, requires the existence of the responsible being (*mukallaf*) who could complete the duties God imposes on him. For, *taklif* is always under God's control.

The former Mu'tazilah claimed the role of human natural reason as unique source of ethical knowledge independent of the divine law. This is the reason why they were long challenged by the adversaries against the rationalism such as al-Ash'arī, Ibn Ḥazm and Shahrastānī who wrote and left to our days some informations about Mu'tazilite rationalism, though those adversaries' works were too short to be very informative. By the study of 'Abd al-Jabbār's theory with his own works, we come to understand that he tries to establish the universal ethics which could be available even in our days, as well as the eschatological ethics based on the pious religious faith. Moreover, we might say that even as a Mu'tazilite scholar, he succeeded in making up the rational ethics, that is different from the traditional Mu'tazilite ethical systems, in accordance with the revealed law.

Today, the efficacy and the meaning of religion is asked again in order to restore the humanity and regain the spiritual freedom. The studies of 'Abd al-Jabbār and the Islamic rational ethics in his days have deep significance for understanding of the relationship between God and man, and will give us the perspective of moral responsibility in the monotheistic religion today.

Notes

Abbreviations used in the notes.

M. : 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Al-Mughnī fī abwāb al-tawḥīd, wa-l-'adl*, 16 volumes, Several editors, Cairo, 1960-69.

M.6a : First part of 6th volume of *Mughnī*

M.11 : 11th volume of *Mughnī*

M.13 : 13th volume of *Mughnī*

Maq. : Al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmīyīn*, edited by Helmut Ritter, Wiesbaden, 1963.

Sh. : 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsah*, edited by 'Abd al-Karīm Uthmān, Cairo, 1965

- (1) The Mu'tazilite is a great theological school which created first speculative dogmatics in Islam. The word "*Mu'tazilah*" means the people who withdraw, but this naming has almost nothing to do with their theory. It arose under same constellation as the Shī'ah movement in Basra in the middle of 6th century AD. From 827AD to 848AD their doctrine was accepted as the official theological position of the Califate in Baghdad. After this short period, they remained speculative theologians withdrawing from the political stage. They established rational theology under the deep study of the Greek philosophical tradition that the human reason is the source of real knowledge. They fought and argued on the basis of the five principles (*al-uṣūl al-khamsah*): these principles are: 1) God' unity, 2) God's justice, 3) God's promise and threat, 4) the intermediate position, 5) the command to do what is approved and the prohibition to do what is reprehensible. These five principles are summarized into two main claim; the strong belief in God's absolute unity, and the belief in the God's perfect justice. Their theories are disapproved by the Muslim majority and most of their works are fallen out and lost forever long before modern times. For further information, *The Encyclopaedia of Islām*, 3rd volume, pp.787-793, *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islām*, pp.421-427; Albert Nader, *Le systèm philosophique des Mu'tazila* (Beyrouth, 1956); Montgomery Watt, *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam* (London, 1948) pp.61-92.
- (2) George F. Hourani, "Islamic and Non Islamic Origins of Mu'tazilite Ethical Rationalism" (*Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics*, Cambridge, 1985) pp.67-68.
- (3) His full name is 'Imād al-Dīn Abū al-Ḥasan 'Abd al-Jabbār bn Aḥmad bn al-'Abd al-Jabbār al-Hamadhānī al-Asadabādī. To get the trustworthy informa-

tion about his biography is very difficult. He was born around 932 AD at Asad Ābād in Hamadhān (now in northwestern part of Iran) as a Persian. He started his study in the Ash'arite school in his birth place, then he went to Basra where he studied Mu'tazilite theory. Around the year 971 AD he was invited to Rayy by a Buwayh minister and was appointed chief-judge in the country. He worked there till the death of his patron, the minister, but he stayed at Rayy studying and teaching until he died in around 1023 AD.

- (4) Al-Mughnī, the famous *Summa Theologica*, was known only by name for a long time till it was found in Sana', Yemen by the scientific expedition from the Ministry of Education of Egypt in 1951 among many manuscripts long forgotten in the old library. This manuscript of al-Mughnī was made in 1210 AD and contained 16 volumes, but the whole of 1-3rd, 10th, 18th, 19th volumes, and a part of 17th volume are not discovered.
- (5) Shiojiri Kazuko, "‘Abd al-Jabbār no ningenron" (*Bulletin of the Society for Near Eastern Studies in Japan*, Vol.33, No.1, 1990, pp.31-35)
- (6) The word 'aql is translated into "reason, intellect, intelligence or intuition". Here I take "reason", for this word is used only to describe the state of human mental functions in the Mu'tazilite doctrine, while "intellect" is often attributed to God's omniscience by the philosophers.
- (7) Shiojiri Kazuko, "‘Abd al-Jabbār no rinrisou ni okeru riei (naf') no gainen" (*Bulletin of the Society for the Near Eastern Studies in Japan*, Vol.32, No.1, 1989.)
- (8) al-Ash'arī, *Kitāb al-luma' fī radd 'alā ahl al-zaygh wa-l-bid'* (Beirut, 1953) §170; al-Juwaynī, *Kitāb al-irshād* (Beirut, 1985) p.228; al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtisād fī-l-i'tiqād* (Beirut, 1983), p.104.
- (9) The word *qadar* means divine fore-ordainment or predestination, and the word *qaḍā'* means conclusion or fulfillment, then comes to decree and destiny. To the Ash'arite, *qaḍā'* is God's order and will which is actually realized to each specific things, and *qadar* is God's pre-eternal will or overall concern. Al-Jurjānī, *al-Ta'rifāt* (Beirut, 1978), p.181.
- (10) Richard J. McCarthy, *Theology of Ash'arī* (Beirut, 1953); Daniel Gimaret, *La doctrine d'al-Ash'arī* (Paris, 1990)
- (11) Abū al-Hudhayl (d.849AD) was a scholar in Basra. Al-Jubbā'ī (849-915AD) was a teacher of al-Ash'arī, the founder of Ash'arite school, and was the head of the Basra school of the Mu'tazilah. His son, Abū Hāshim (890-933AD), was also a leading theologian of the Basra school.
- (12) Maq, p.480, 6-9.

- (13) Maq, p.480, 11-13.
- (14) Maq, p.481, 7-8.
- (15) M.11, p.384, 12-13.
- (16) Frank calls it normal maturity of intelligence. R.M. Frank, "Reason and the revealed Law: a Sample of Parallels and Divergences in Kalām and Falsafa" in *Recherches d'Islamologie* (Louvain, 1977).
- (17) M.11, p.383.
- (18) M.11, p.386.
- (19) Instead of "*jumlah min al-'ulūm makhṣūṣah*", we read "*jumlah min al-'ulūm al-makhṣūṣah*". The former means "the specific aggregate of the knowledge", but we take "the aggregate of the specific knowledge". In M.11, p.379, we see "*al-makhṣūṣah*".
- (20) M.11, p.375, 17-18.
- (21) M.11, p.386, 7-10.
- (22) Al-Qur'ān, 75/13-14, 79/10-14. Shiojiri, "'Abd al-Jabbār no 'ningenron"
- (23) M.13, p.182. Though 'Abd al-Jabbār seldom uses the word "*al-taklīf al-'aqlī*" and "*al-taklīf al-shar'ī*", in the usage of the terms I follow Frank. "Reason and Revealed law", pp.126-129. "Several Fundamental Assumptions of the Basra School of the Mu'tazila" in *Studia Islamica*, 33, pp.14-15.
- (24) M.6a, p.47, 2-7.
- (25) M.6a, p.37, p.58,
- (26) Sh, p.564, 5-14.
- (27) Shiojiri, "'Abd al-Jabbār no rinrisisou ni okeru rieki (naf) no gainen", pp.41-43.
- (28) Shiojiri, Ibid and "Islām no rinri" in *Islām no sikou kairo* (Tokyo, 1995), pp.106-111.
- (29) Frank, "Reason and the Revealed Law" pp. 129-35, Shiojiri, "Islām no rinri", pp.130-135.

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