8 A Metaphysical Inquiry into Islamic Theism[1]

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8.1 Introduction

The effervescent and dynamic history of Islamic theology in its formative years bears witness to organic, philosophical, intra-religious, and politically charged developments over the question of God's nature. Following the sudden and explosive expansion of Islamic civilization in the first 200 years since its advent, Muslims quickly developed a religious and political unity which saw them govern over large sways of disparate religious communities, with Muslims being a technical religious minority political ruling class. This rather distinct socio-political context in which Muslims found themselves gave rise to a whole host of developments in both religious and secular disciplines. To be sure, the religious diversity within the Umayyad and Abbasid empires did not impose or necessarily act as the primary influence upon these developments, but it and the combination of organic dialogue from within, followed by a touch here and there of politico-religious dogmatism (i.e., the *miḥna* of the Mu'tazila), led to a theological conversation which oversaw the flowering of distinct Islamic theological schools, and the advent of Muslim peripatetic philosophies.

This chapter aims to draw on the critical threads of those vibrant theological conversations within the formative years of Islamic thought in considering the different theological models of the Divine within the broader Islamic tradition under the purview of classical theism as it is understood today in the contemporary philosophy of religion. In doing so, it makes reference to the major strands within the theological (*'ilm al-kalām* & *atharī scripturalism*) and philosophical (*falsafa*) schools of the Islamic tradition. It aims to consider how these different trends, schools, and thinkers construct a model of God in light of the classical and neo-classical theistic model of God.

8.2 Muslim Scholastic Theology

Important schools of Islamic theological thought within Umayyad and Abbasid early Muslim society emerged from within the theo-philosophical discipline coined *'ilm al-kalām*. *Kalām* which is usually translated as Islamic scholastic or speculative theology, is the study of the fundamental doctrines (*'aqāid*) of Islamic belief. The main purpose of *kalām* was to establish the central theological tenets of Islam and defend them against other worldviews. It emerged in the eighth century partly due to Muslims engaging with other cultures and religious traditions living under Muslim rule[1].

One of the central issues scholars of *kalām* (*mutakallimūn*) were concerned with was properly understanding and articulating the nature God (Allah). In several passages the Qur'ān criticizes particular religious communities for failing to properly predicate those attributes which truly belong to God (cf., Qur'ān 39:67, 22:74). Therefore, the *mutakallimūn* thought it crucial to know, understand and articulate in proper philosophical terms, the nature of the divine attributes. An additional motivation for studying the attributes of God was in distinguishing Islamic monotheism from the Christian Trinitarianism, criticized in Qur'ān: "They have certainly disbelieved who say, "God is the third of three." And there is no god except one God. And if they do not desist from what they are saying, there will surely afflict the disbelievers among them a painful punishment." (4:73).

In many passages of the Qur'ān the oneness or unity of God (*tawḥīd*), as well as His transcendence (*tanzīh*) is heavily emphasized. The *mutakallimūn* drew particularly on the idea

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of transcendence of God in addressing theological literalist who either ascribed corporeal attributes to God (i.e., *mujassima*), or those who attributed anthropomorphic attributes to God (i.e., *mushabbiḥa*). These and similar worries led to the emergence of the dispute over the relationship between the essence of God (*zāt*) and the attributes of God (*sifāt*). Let's refer to this dispute as simply "the problem of the attributes."

The problem of the attributes was first introduced and discussed by the earliest school of *kalām*, namely the Mu'tazilite school. The Mu'tazilite school was essentially a theological movement which was founded in Basra during the 8th century by Wāsil ibn 'Atā' (d. 748 C.E.), which emphasized reason and human freedom (in a libertarian sense). The Mu'tazilites accepted that God may be predicated of attributes in some sense, but unlike their later Sunni theological counterparts, they denied that a distinction could be had between the essence of God and his attributes. For them God's knowledge/omniscience (*'ilm*), his power/omnipotence (*qudra*), his will (*irāda*), his speech (*kalām*) etc. are in fact (that is ontologically speaking) identical to the essence of God. In other words, there is no distinct attribute of knowledge, power, or will; God is powerful by/with his essence, has knowledge by/with his essence, has will by/with his essence (al-Shahrastānī 1993: 1: 44–46). But why did they insist on this equivalence between the essence and attributes? Well, the Mu'tazilites grounded this distinction in their most important theological principle: the principle: of *tawhīd* (unity and uniqueness of God).

There seem to be at least three distinct arguments in support of their position based on the principle of *tawhīd*. The first argument is hinted at by Wāsil ibn 'Atā' himself, who declares that whosoever accepts distinct attributes besides God, believes in two eternal beings and two gods, and hence is a polytheist (al-Shahrastānī 1993: 1:46). This idea was then developed by the later Mu'tazilites in a more rigorous fashion (al-Shahrastānī 1993: 1:44–45). Their argument can be summarized as follows:

1 If there are distinct attributes of God besides his essence, then they are either coeternal (*qadīm*) with his essence (*zāt*) or they have a beginning in time and hence are created (*hādith*).
2 God cannot have created attributes.
3 Therefore, if there are distinct attributes of God besides his essence, then they must be coeternal with his essence.
4 By the principle of *tawhīd* nothing can be coeternal with God's essence.
5 Therefore, the attributes of God cannot be distinct from his essence.

One could also argue that the view of God having distinct attributes contradicts the transcendence of God, as it implies that His attributes are similar to Him in that they are also eternal. The Mu'tazilites believed that attributing distinct attributes to God is analogous to the Trinity or to some kind of Dualism, and therefore commits the same theological error which violates pure monotheism.

The Second argument is also based on the uniqueness and transcendence of God (al-Jabbār 1996, 162). If we accept that God has distinct properties from His essence, then He becomes like other material objects in the world. Every object in the universe has distinct attributes which are other than their essence, as such if God has attributes separate from His essence He will be like any other (contingent) material entity. But given His uniqueness this is unacceptable, so His attributes must be distinct from His essence. The Third argument is similar to the second one. The idea here is that every object's essence in the universe depends on their attributes to exercise power. We are able to write this line of text given our attributes of power and knowledge. But this cannot be accepted for God, because this would mean that His essence depends on something external to Him in order for Him to exercise any power.

Yet, what exactly does it mean to say God's attributes are equivalent to His essence? If we say that God's essence is His power, and His essence is His knowledge, does that not it imply that His power is same as His knowledge? The Mu'tazilites took different philosophical

approaches in order to try and make sense of this problem. Let us analyze the three most historic examples.

The first approach was to use negative theology and interpret attributes as negations (*ta'tīl*). This approach has been attributed to Abū'l Hudhayl al-'Allāf (d. 850 C.E.), and Ibrahīm al-Nazzām (d. 845 C.E.). On this approach, when we say that "God is omnipotent," we mean that "God is not incapable," by saying "God is omniscient," we mean "God is not ignorant," etc. More precisely, when we say that God is omnipotent we negate any incapability from Him, when we say He is omniscient we negate any kind of ignorance from His essence. (al-Ash'arī 1980, 166–167; 485).

The second approach was to take an extreme position and accept nominalism about the attributes of God. This approach is usually attributed to Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī (d. 916 C.E.). In this approach, the adjectives used for God are our characterizations or our words. In other words, when we use the word omniscient about God, we are not actually doing anything beyond describing and naming Him; we are not attributing an attribute to Him (Gardet 1965, 570.).

The third approach was taken up by Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā'ī (d. 933 C.E.), and can be termed his "theory of aspects (*aḥwāl*)." According to this theory, there is a third concept besides essence and attributes, what he calls aspects. Aspects are interesting because according to Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā'ī they are thought to be ontologically situated between existent things and non-existent things. This is so because they do not have independent existence from an essence, that is, they do not have an independent reality. He seems to suggest that aspects connect attributes to an essence. Since they do not have independent existence, he believes that they are neither eternal nor created. One cannot even say that they exist, nor that they do not exist. The notion of existence or eternity only applies to things that *do* have independent existence. But we cannot say that they do not exist either, because in another sense they do given that they are related with an essence and make possible knowledge and discourse about the essence of God (al-Shahrastānī 1993, 1:82).

The Mu'tazilites approach to the problem of the attributes was opposed by the Sunni schools of *kalām*. The Sunni *kalām* tradition is constituted by two distinct theological schools: the Ash'arite and Maturidite schools. The Ash'arite school was established by Abū'l-Hasan al-Ash'arī (d. 936 C.E.) in Baghdad, while the Maturidite school was established by Abū Mansūr al-Māturīdī (d. 944 C.E.) in Samarkand. Sunni schools of *kalām* held that the attributes of God are distinct and additional to the essence of God. God is powerful by/with His omnipotence, He knows via His omniscience, etc. They denied the Mu'tazilite claim that God knows or exercises power with His essence. They also acknowledged the eternity of God's attributes, for them no attribute of God has a beginning in time.

But in order to meet the aforementioned Mu'tazilite argument based on the principle of *tawhīd* they denied that attributes exist as separate things. For them attributes of God while distinct from God's essence, do not have separate existence from the essence of God. They would usually say that God's attributes are eternal together with the essence of God to reinforce this point (al-Māturīdī 2001, 6). They insisted that the trinity is completely different to their conception of God, and assumed the existence of single essence, while the trinity involves three distinct persons each with a unique essence.

Sunni schools of *kalām* were also careful not to fall into anthropomorphism. As such they insisted that when interpreting Quranic verses, one should keep in mind the following principles:

i God is not an object, i.e., he is not composed of parts, He is a complete unity (*wāhid*).
ii God is not in space.
iii God does not possess accidents (*a'rād*), nor is he an accident.
iv Direction cannot be attributed to God.
v God does not change.

The position of the Sunni schools was developed as a response to the Mu'tazilite conception of God. Hence, they supported their position by attacking the Mu'tazilite assimilation of essence and attributes of God. The Sunni schools' prime argument in this context can be summarized as follows:

1 God has a single essence and many attributes.
2 If God's attributes are the same as His essence, then either God's attributes are part of His essence, or are they are identical to His essence.
3 They cannot be part of His essence, since this will imply that God's essence is a composite object which goes against His unity.
4 They cannot be the same with His essence, since this will imply that essence and attributes are the same thing, but given their plurality this is impossible.
5 Therefore, God's attributes cannot be the same as His essence.

The above argument wouldn't work against Mu'tazilites who are nominalist about attributes, such as Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī. Most of the Sunni *mutakallimūn* actually criticized the Mu'tazilites on this point, charging them with denying the attributes of God i.e., *ta'tīl*. For them this stance is not acceptable because it goes against scripture: How can God be omniscient if He does not know (anything)? Saying God is omniscient but he does not know is like saying that an object is red but it does not have redness. According to these Sunni theologians, the Mu'tazilite view implies that "God" and "God is omnipotent" are saying the same thing. But they argued this is absurd. (Ibn Hazam 1982, 2:295).

Let us now summarize more generally the conceptions of God defended by different schools of *kalām*. The Ash'arites emphasized the absolute will and omnipotence of God[2]. Nothing can limit his power and will. As such, they subscribed to a strong divine voluntarism. There are no objective moral values which can limit the will and power of God. Good is what God commands and evil is what He forbids. God is just and merciful by definition. The truth of moral values depends on the will of God, if He decides to make lying good, then it will be good. God has a unique nature that transcends human reason and understanding. Also, His will is completely free, there is nothing which constraints it, thus His commands and actions cannot be predicted by human reason. Therefore, moral duties can only be learned from scripture and only humans who are exposed to scripture can be held responsible for their actions. We should note that while the Ash'arite school stresses the incapability of human reason to understand the will of the God, they do value reason. Reason is thought to be our God-given faculty and should be employed in gaining knowledge. The Ash'arite schools' emphasis on God's power also leads to an occasionalist divine action model. God is said to be the only efficient cause in the universe, even simple acts such as lifting a finger are caused directly by God. Despite the fact that everything is directly caused by God, Ash'arites believe that humans are responsible for the results of their actions, which God chooses to perform with them. When God performs some action using them, they acquire (*kasb*) the act. The Ash'arite school is the most popular theological school historically speaking, and as a result many tend to see it as "the Islamic conception of God." But there are evidently other conceptions of God in the Islamic theological and philosophical traditions.

The Mu'tazilite conception of God emphasized justice rather than omnipotence[3]. Therefore, they embraced the existence of objective morality and defended a sort of natural law theory or ethical rationalism as opposed to divine voluntarism. For the Mu'tazilites, God's will is limited by those moral values existent in the world. Both humans and God are responsible for making moral judgments. While humans, due to their limited reason, can sin and act immorally, an omniscient God who is devoid of such limitation can never act in any immoral fashion. While scripture is an important expositor of moral values, human reason is capable of discovering moral values on its own (which brings into question the need for revelation). Hence, humans are responsible for their actions even if they do not receive revelation.

The Mu'tazilite insistence on justice rather than omnipotence resulted in another sharp

difference from Ash'ari school. They embraced libertarian freedom about human agents. According to Islamic teachings, this life is a test in which our deeds are weighed and we either deserve paradise or hell based on our actions (cf., Qur'ān 29:2–3). Mu'tazilites believed that this test can only be fair and just if we humans have complete control over our actions in a libertarian sense. Mu'tazilites therefore denied occasionalism, and believed that we both intend and cause our actions. Mu'tazilites like the Ash'arite school, also stressed the importance of using reason to demonstrate the existence of God and prophethood of Muhammad (*pbuh*).

The Maturidite conception of God emphasized the wisdom of God over absolute omnipotence.[4] They appear to defend some kind of divine command theory akin to a contemporary modified divine command theory. According to them, God is wise, and as such His commands and actions reflect His wisdom. Justice is a direct result of the wisdom of God. Morality is rooted in the commands of God, but they are not arbitrary and follow from divine wisdom. Human reason cannot completely grasp God's decisions, nevertheless, it can know moral values independent of scripture. Thus, while reason can grasp the existence of God and some moral values we need revelation, because human de- sires can divert the intellect and may need correction. We also need revelation to get to know things of God that are above our intellect. Maturidites were moderate evidentialists: while they believed that reason can demonstrate the existence of God and prophethood, not everyone has an intellectual duty to do so. As such, not everyone is responsible to demonstrate the existence of God. The Maturidite school was occasionalist like the Ash'arite school, but their insistence on wisdom and objective justice required libertarian freedom. Therefore, according to the Maturidite school human intentions are exceptions, and they are not caused by God. God creates all the possibilities, but humans intend on one of these possibilities, and God realizes that intention. Therefore, when I intent to lift my finger, this intention is free and is not caused by God. However, I have no power to lift my finger, God lifts it.

In summary, the conception of God present in the tradition of *kalām* is one that straddles between classical and neo-classical theism.[5] For where the Mu'tazilite thinkers emphasised God's transcendence through a doctrine of divine simplicity – equating God's essence and attributes as one and the same, the Sunni *mutakallimūn* of the Ash'arite and Maturidite traditions differed. Although they resolutely affirmed God's unique otherness by typically reinterpreting anthropomorphic scriptural verses or merely ascribing their intended meanings to God without anthropomorphic affirmation, and they rendered the divine outside of space-time—they did not affirm a doctrine of *divine simplicity* in the Mu'tazilite sense. Rather, they sort to uphold the doctrine that God is one in essence, while qualified with a multiplicity of divine attributes which are neither the same as nor wholly distinct from His essence.

8.3 Muslim Scriptural Theology

In outlining the position of Muslim scriptural theology concerning the metaphysics of the divine, we will orient the discussion toward the 14th Century Damascene theologian Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328 C.E.). The reason being, is that Ibn Taymiyya more so than any other theological representative of this tradition, elucidated this scripture-centered theology in the conceptual framework of Muslim scholastic theology (*kalām*). In a sense, Ibn Taymiyya represents the intellectual heights of this tradition, as he is arguably the first and finest Traditionalist to really expound the tenets of Islamic Traditionalism in the conceptual language of the philosophical-theologians. Moreover, as Sherman Jackson notes, after Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855 C.E.) Ibn Taymiyya is "the most influential Traditionalist theologian in Muslim history … [And] remains the prism through which all modern under- standings, Muslim or non-Muslim alike, of the Traditionalist legacy is invariably filtered" (Jackson 2009, 135).

Ibn Taymiyya's scripture-centered conception of God begins with his understanding of divine oneness or unity (*tawḥīd*). Concerning the latter, Ibn Taymiyya holds that there is a

divine unity and uniqueness present in the affirmation of the particular names and attributes of God. This position is captured in the following Qur'ānic verse (42:11): "there is nothing like him: He is the All Hearing, the All seeing." Ibn Taymiyya (1999, 68–9) lists a number of Qur'anic verses in order to establish the transcendence or otherness (*tanzīh*) of God, whilst negating univocal comparison to Him:

> *No one is comparable to Him*. (112:4)
>
> *So worship Him: be steadfast in worshipping Him? Do you know of any equal to Him*? (19:65)
>
> *So do not set up comparisons to God: God knows and you do not*. (16:74)
>
> *So do not attribute to God equals while you know*. (2:22)

Roughly, the idea is that although hearing and seeing may be predicated of God, the nature of the divine hearing and seeing is of such a kind that it stands out from all creation. Thus, an affirmation of the divine oneness, uniqueness, and particularity is upheld when predicating attributes to the divine nature. Indeed, it is a matter of faith that one does not compare His attributes with those of His creation, "for He, glory be to Him, has no likeness, no comparison, and no partner/associate" (1999, 59). Ibn Taymiyya resolutely insists that God is "unlike anything else with respect to all of his qualities" (Ibn Taymiyya 1999, 85), and that "there is nothing in His essence of His creations and nothing in His creations of His essence" (Ibn Taymiyya 1995, 2:126).

The second of these categories emphasizes God's sovereign unity or *tawḥīd* in the realm of worship and servitude: that God is be revered and worshiped not in tandem with any other, but as one without partner or associate to rival His holiness and majesty. In simple terms, it is the idea then that God and God alone, without associate or intermediary, is the proper object of our worship. Ibn Taymiyya sometimes refers to this aspect of God's oneness as *tawḥīd al-ilāhiyya* i.e., unity of the Godhead, (1995, 2:45). He stresses that the word *ilāh*—which is principally found in the declaration of faith that is the bedrock of Islamic belief: "there is no deity (*ilāh*) worthy of worship except God"—is to be rendered in the sense just indicated (1995, 3:101). That is to say, *ilāh* is not to be understood as simply denoting *tawḥīd al-rubūbiyya*, but also *tawḥīd al-ulūhiyya*. That God is not merely singled out as one in being the one Creator, but crucially for Ibn Taymiyya also as "the one worshipped" (*al-ma'būd*), (1995, 10:70).

Finally, the aspect of *tawḥīd* referred to as *al-rubūbiyya* denotes the sovereign ownership, lordship, sustenance, and creative power that God holds over all creation. To uphold this element of God's unity Ibn Taymiyya states "is to acknowledge that God created all things and that there do not exist two makers of the world, equal in their attributes and agency" (ibn Taymiyya 2010, 116). *Tawḥīd al-rubūbiyya* thus relates to God's creative acting, volition, power, and will over His creation. God as creator (*al-khāliq*) is the ultimate source of all that is: "There are no creatures on the earth, nor anything in the heavens, except that Allah is its Creator, glory be to Him. There is no Creator other than Him, nor is there a Lord besides Him" (ibn Taymiyya 1999, 107). God has ultimate power (*qudra*) over all things: "He, glory be to Him, has power over all things that exist and do not exist" (ibn Taymiyya 1999, 107). God's omnipotence is an essential property of God's *rubūbiyya* from eternity: "He has power from eternity, and shall have it forever and ever." (Ibn Taymiyya 1995, 8:30).

For Ibn Taymiyya an integral aspect of God's *rubūbiyya* concerns His divine will (*mashī'a*) and active volition (*irāda*). First, God's universal divine will is to be understood as being central to His dominion over creation: "whatever God Wills comes to pass, and whatever He does not will does not come to pass, and that whatever is in the heavens or on the earth, of movement or stillness, only occurs by the will of Allah, glory be to Him. Nothing occurs in His dominion if He does not intend it" (Ibn Taymiyya 1999, 107). Second, Ibn Taymiyya

marks out a distinction between God's divine will (*mashī'a*) and active volition (*irāda*), but he also further divides the latter. He refers to God's active volition in one of two ways, as either: (a) *irāda dīniyya shar'iyya*—by which he means religious/deontological, and (b) *irāda kawniyya qadariyya*—by which he means ontological/determinative (Ibn Taymiyya 1995, 18:132). Regarding the first sense (a), it refers to instances of God's active volition which are tied to "God's love and approval." Ibn Taymiyya states that this aspect of God's volition is the subject of numerous verses in the Qur'ān such as, "He does not will difficulties for you (2:185), and "He wills to purify" (Ibn Taymiyya 1995, 18:132). By contrast the second sense (b) refers to the "creative volition of God" (1995, 18:132). It is this aspect of God's active volition (*irāda*) which most closely resembles His divine will (*mashī'a*) and picks out a central feature of God's *rubūbiyya*, for "Every particle of the universe is the object of His will (*irāda kawniyya qadariyya*), and there is nothing there which is not its object, be it good or evil, right or wrong. This will comprehends what is not comprehended by *irāda dīniyya shar'iyya*" (1995, 18:132).

Ibn Taymiyya's traditionalist theology depicts God as one explained in terms of three categories of *tawḥīd*, and seeks to affirm the apparent reading of the Qur'ānic text. Such a reading gives us a picture of God as possessed with multiple names and attributes, and it denotes God's active engagement in time in the world. Much can be derived from this scripture-centered metaphysics of God, none more so perhaps than what it means for the relationship between God's essence and attributes, and the very nature of those attributes. Ibn Taymiyya asserted that "quiddity [of God] is identical with its reality and its existence. As the existence (*wujūd*) of a particular created being out there is identical with its essence (*dhāt*) or reality (*haqīqa*), God is all the more identical with His existence (*wujūd*) in which nothing else participates, and which is same as His quiddity that exists in itself" (ibn Taymiyya 1979, 1:29). In this passage, Ibn Taymiyya appears to affirm a doctrine of simplicity to all beings, by suggesting all it is true in all cases that the existence of a thing and the essence of a thing are really one and the same. On the face of it, that reads strikingly odd, but in fact, it is drawn out from Ibn Taymiyya's broader empiricist epistemology, and nominalist metaphysics. For he contends that,

> There is no divine Essence out there without any attributes; in fact there is not a single essence out there stripped of all attributes … there cannot be any essence which is not a essence having an attribute such as knowledge, power, etc., neither in language nor in thought … not that they are over and above the divine Self, not at all. On the contrary, the divine Self is ever qualified with those attributes which are inseparable from it. Neither are the attributes without the Essence, nor is the Essence without the attributes (Ibn Taymiyya 1995, 17:161–2).

In other words, there is no ontological distinction between the attributes and essence of any particular being instantiated in reality. In that sense, Ibn Taymiyya affirms divine simplicity, but in a radically different sense in which it is understood by what we label *classical theism*. Roughly speaking, Ibn Taymiyya argues the following then against those who seek to draw out an ontological distinction between the essence and attributes of God, and His creation:

1 The distinction between essence and attributes is merely conceptual.
2 Merely conceptual distinctions are not ontological distinctions.
3 Therefore, the distinction between essence and attributes is not an ontological distinction.

Given that there is no *ontological* distinction to be had between a thing's essence and its attributes, all we have when we are considering any particular existent is the thing in question with all its attributes which are ontologically inseparable from it, without it ceasing to be. Crucially, Ibn Taymiyya's empiricism also allows him to reject metaphysical parts as being genuine parts of God in the sense of their being separate from the whole or their instantiating the whole in such a way that the essence is dependent upon them.

For Ibn Taymiyya the notion of a "composite (*al-tarkīb*)" has a particular meaning, denoting

a body (*jism*) composed of parts (*ajzā'*) where the parts were separate and subsequently joined (Ibn Taymiyya 2005, 266). For instance, the composition of medicines, foods, clothes, houses, etc., where their constituent parts were separate and then joined through a continual series of "attaching" (*rukkib*), leading to the complete composition. A composite thing may also be something that exists while its parts may be separated from it – e.g., a human being's persisting through the severing of its limbs. To describe God as "knowing," "powerful," and the like, is not to attribute composition to God. Ibn Taymiyya argues, for instance, that what we may render "intellectual parts (*al-ajzā' al-'aqliyya*)" as *aspects* or *attributes* of a thing which describe it in epistemic terms (as when humans are categorized as "rational animals"), these "parts" exist only in the mind but not in extramental reality. In contrast, "parts" in the real sense only refers to things perceptible, i.e., material parts. As such, according to Ibn Taymiyya it is evident that God is not "composed (*murakkab*)" (Ibn Taymiyya 2005, 267). The upshot of this then is that Ibn Taymiyya wants to maintain a clear distinction between attributes (*ṣifāt*) and parts (*ajzā'*).

Furthermore, he rejects the notion that because God as traditionally conceived in light of scripture would be "composite" according to the Muslim philosophers (in the sense that God's essence contains multiple attributes), this would mean that God exists through something other than His essence, i.e., that God would then be a contingent entity in virtue of subsisting through attributes. His rejection of this reasoning is grounded in the idea that it makes no sense to speak of a "part" being "other than a thing"—e.g., God's attribute's being other than His essence, when the thing in question concerns something which cannot exist without those "parts," and when they themselves cannot have any independent reality without being instantiated in some whole. So, it doesn't make sense to say, for instance, that God would have to exist through other things, i.e., through His attributes, if He was "composed" of attributes, because His attributes are necessarily concomitant to His essence (*ẓātihī*), and as such it's impossible for them to be really ontologically "other" in the sense that they may be separable and hence through which He may exist (Ibn Taymiyya 2005, 270). Thus, God ultimately exists by His essence, which is qualified with attributes and which are themselves "necessary (in) being (*wājib al- wujūd*)." God is not composed of parts, and His attributes are not ontologically separable from His essence.

As we have seen, Ibn Taymiyya affirmed a multitude of attributes of God: power, will, oneness, wisdom, knowledge, and love. But he also infamously affirmed attributes spoken of in the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth, which come across as strikingly anthropomorphic: the hand, eyes, laughter, speech, descent, and ascent of God. In doing so, Ibn Taymiyya was charged with holding a blasphemous and heretical theology (for which he was taken to trial in the state-religious court). Ibn Taymiyya maintained that he was not a corporealist and that affirming such attributes is to be done with careful qualification, but how was this qualification made? It is done in reference to a theological principle known as *balfaka*. This principle which is shorthand for *bi'lā kayf* meaning "without how," captures the *amodal* response to God's divine attributes. That is to say, one can affirm these attributes to God without inquiring into the modality or how-ness (*kayfiyya*) of these attributes, and yet at the same time deny any univocal comparison between, for instance, God's hand and that of a human hand (Ibn Taymiyya 1995, 6:363). Central to his affirmation of these attributes to God is his theory of language and metaphysics. For one thing, Ibn Taymiyya denied the existence of extra-mental universals. This enabled him to strike a complete ontological distinction between God's hand and a human hand because what is shared between the meaning in each instance of the word 'hand' is not some *real* universal property of "hand-ness," but rather the common overlap (*mushtarak*) is merely conceptual, and its ontological manifestation is particular to the thing in question (Ibn Taymiyya 1995, 5:83).

In the midst of these radical approaches to the conception of God in Islam, Ibn Taymiyya went further than perhaps anyone in the tradition in emphasizing the temporality of God acting, willing, speaking, and creating since eternity past (Ibn Taymiyya 1995, 18:237). On the one hand, the *mutakallimūn* held that the world had a beginning in time, created *ex nihilo* by

God. On the other hand, the *falāsifa* held that the world is an eternal emanation from God. Ibn Taymiyya's position comes as third alternative between the two, and seeks to maintain the createdness and total dependence of the world on God, but also to uphold the temporal dynamism of God as described in the Qur'an. Roughly, his position is that God's creative activity is eternal, and yet that which God brings about through His eternal creative activity began to exist at a point in time (Ibn Taymiyya 1995, 18:228).

Ibn Taymiyya argued that there is no scriptural basis for the view that God's creative activity had a beginning in the past and that there is both a scriptural and rational basis for thinking that God's creative activity is eternal (Ibn Taymiyya 1995, 18:228). He asserted that to suggest God's creative activity had a be- ginning in time (as he alleges that the *mutakallimūn* do) would require that, in order for God to become an agent when not originally being one, some prior cause must necessitate the change in God's state. However, that would mean something external to God caused a change in Him and violate His *rubūbiyya*. Therefore, there could not have been a beginning to God's creative activity (Ibn Taymiyya 1995, 18:226–7). At the same time, neither can it be acceptable from Ibn Taymiyya's point of view to say that the world is an eternal emanation flowing from God, because causal agency means that a cause precedes its effect *in time*, since things which come to be, come to be in time. Hence, he rejects the philosopher's notion of "essential/metaphysical causality." Rather, God in his perfection perpetually creates in eternal dynamic fashion. In this context then, Ibn Taymiyya marks out a distinction between on the one hand, a temporally successive infinite regress of created effects (*tasalsul al-āthār*), and, on the other, an infinite regression of efficient causes (*tasalsul al-'ilal*) (ibn Taymiyya 1986, 1:436–438). He rejects the latter as a logical impossibility, whilst affirming the former on the grounds that God is continuously acting by His will and power.

For Ibn Taymiyya this *temporal dynamism* of God's nature and perpetual creative activity is rooted in what he takes to be a proper reading of the Qur'ānic text (Ibn Taymiyya 1995, 6:222–3). It is *prima facie* evident from the Qur'ān that God has successive creative acts in time:

> *Surely We created you. Then (thumma) we formed you. Then we said to the angels, "Prostrate to Adam", and they prostrated. (7:11).*
>
> *... He created him (Adam) from dust; then (thumma) said to him, "Be," and he was. (3:59).*
>
> *Perhaps God will bring about after that a [different] matter.* (65:1).

Such verses are the basis upon which Ibn Taymiyya affirms to God what he coined "voluntary attributes (*al-ṣifāt al-ikhtiyāriyya*)" (1995, 6:217). These attributes of God are specifically those that are linked to God's will; they are manifest through God willing. For Ibn Taymiyya these attributes are God are among others His speech, hearing, sight, will, love, good pleasure, mercy, and anger (1995, 6:226–7). They are said to "subsist in His essence by His will and power," and as such are both a divine attribute of action (*ṣifāt fi'l*) and a divine attribute of essence (*ṣifāt zāt*). He argues that an act of speaking is not separate from a speaker but subsists in the essence of the one to which the speaking is attributed, so God's act of speaking—through his will and power—subsists in His essence. He adds that "speech as an attribute is a perfection (*kamāl*)," and so it is a perfection that one speaks by one's will; therefore, it is proper to attribute this to the essence of God (Ibn Taymiyya 1995, 6:219). Ibn Taymiyya holds that to think otherwise and to hold that God's attributes are timelessly eternal doesn't allow for any meaningful interaction between God and the world. Instead, God's attributes of love and anger, hearing and seeing as taught in the Qur'ān are all sufficient to demonstrate to us God's temporally sequential interaction with the world and His creation.

A crucial component of Ibn Taymiyya's traditionalist theology is also his conception of a perfect being theology, according to which the *al-ṣifāt al-ikhtiyāriyya* are integral to the view of a dynamic and perfect God. Unlike the *mutakallimūn* and *falāsifa* who saw God's timelessness as central to His perfection, Ibn Taymiyya rejects that as a view of a God motionless and abstract in favor of a view of God as personal and perpetually relational to the world He creates. Ibn Taymiyya argues that a perfection (*kamāl*) occurs at its proper time. For

instance, he says, when God spoke to Moses God's wisdom (*hikma*) made it such that He spoke at a particular time which was the most perfect for the situation, and so only at that very existent moment in time does God act, since to act prior to the right moment would be an imperfection (1995, 6:241). So, the fact that God's voluntary attributes manifest sequentially in time is a sign of His perfection. Moreover, he argues that an essence speaking by its will is greater or more perfect than one that cannot do so, and hence we must attribute to God these attributes which allow that by His very essence, He speaks or acts by His own will and power.

This unique vision of God in the Islamic tradition sees Ibn Taymiyya being as true as he possibly can to the apparent readings of the scripture, as well as what he takes to be the honest dictates limited human reasoning. The conception of God is thus one neoclassical, in that God is temporal and predicated with proper attributes that are not identical to His essence, although they are not thought to be non-identical either. God is affective through His constant relationship with His creatures, whom He protects or forgives, loves or admonishes as the time permits, willing and acting through sequential moments in time.

8.4 Muslim Peripatetic Philosophy

The primary representative of the philosophical tradition within Islamic history is Abū 'Alī Husayn Ibn Sinā or Avicenna, to whom we now turn. At the heart of Ibn Sīnā's metaphysics of the God is a pivotal ontological distinction concerning the nature of existence. For Ibn Sīnā, being or existence (*wujūd*) itself, taken in a sense to be the most fundamental starting point of all ontological inquiry immediately impressed upon us, can be divided into three primary categories: a) necessary (*wājib*) i.e., that which must exist by a necessity of its nature, b) contingent (*mumkin*) i.e., that which may or may not exist, and c) impossible (*mumtani'*) i.e., that which by its nature necessarily could not exist (cf., Ibn Sīnā 2005, 29–30).

Drawing on this most primary ontological and metaphysical distinction concerning existence, Ibn Sīnā developed a novel argument known as the "Demonstration of the Truthful" (*burhān al-ṣiddīqīn*). This argument intends to show that there must exist at least one necessary existent being (*wājib al-wujūd*). In setting out this argument, Ibn Sīnā deploys a second crucial metaphysical distinction, namely between essence/ quiddity (*māhiyya*) and existence (Ibn Sīnā 2005, 30). Contingent existent things are things whose essence do not guarantee their existence; the essence of the thing in question is ontologically separable from existence. Since contingent existent things can exist or fail to exist, if they do exist then given that by the essence of its nature it does not have to exist, there must be some external cause which "preferred" its existence over its non-existence. On the other hand, a necessary existent is a being whose essence guarantees its existence; its essence is ontologically inseparable from its existence, and hence it does not require an external cause for its existence.

But is there such a thing as a necessary being? Ibn Sīnā's answer is yes. In order to see this he urges us to imagine the sum of all existing contingent beings. There are two possibilities: either the sum itself is a contingent being, or else it's a necessary being. If it is necessary then a necessary being exists. If it is contingent than there must be some external cause which caused it to exist. This cause again though must be either contingent or necessary (for it cannot be impossible, since impossible things cannot exist). Yet, it cannot be contingent since then it will be a part of the whole make up of contingent beings and hence will not be an external cause of that set of contingents. Therefore, it must be a necessary being; so at least one necessary being exists (cf., Marmura 1980, 350).

The above argument is a prelude to Ibn Sīnā's philosophical theology. He goes on to demonstrate that necessary being must be unique, simple, immaterial, and it must possess intellect, power, generosity and goodness (Ibn Sīnā 2005, 257–91). He provides independent arguments for each attribute. Let's sketch out his main arguments for the simplicity and uniqueness of God. He adopts the project of deriving all attributes of God rigorously since he believes that God is a necessary being and, as such, that all of His attributes must be

necessary. For, if his had contingent attributes that would require some external cause or principle to account for its being, which is not possible for a being that is necessary.

First, Ibn Sīnā attempts to demonstrate that there is exactly one necessary being. As we saw in our discussion of the different trends within Islamic theology, the oneness of God (*tawḥīd*) is the most fundamental attribute of God. Hence, Ibn Sīnā himself also makes it fundamental to his philosophical theology. In doing so, he uses draws on a form of *reductio ad absurdum*. Assume that there are two distinct necessary beings which we can call X and Y. Since X and Y are different beings there must be an explanation that accounts for why they are different. An explanation of this cannot be X or Y, since in that case whoever is the explanation will be the cause of the other being. But nor can the explanation lie in some external being, since this will render both X and Y dependent on it, which contradicts their being necessary. Thus, it is impossible for there to be two distinct necessary beings Ibn Sīnā 2005, 34–38).

Ibn Sīnā's also offers a second argument for God's oneness. In this argument he again assumes that there are two distinct necessary beings X and Y as the basis for his *reductio* argument. Yet this time we can ask what makes these two beings exist together necessarily. If we assume that the nature of X explains this distinction, then X would be the cause of Y, but this would make Y a contingent being. Yet the same also applies if we locate the explanation of X in Y. Moreover, once again we cannot have it that an external cause explains there being exactly two necessary beings, since then both will be contingent. Hence it is not possible for two necessary beings to coexist (cf., Adamson 2013, 177–179).

He also contends that this one necessary being must also be simple, i.e., non-composite. Ibn Sīnā argues for this by adopting a strategy similar to the one drawn on above. If the necessary being is made up of parts then there must be something which separates them from each other. This means that these parts must have a cause, and would therefore be contingent. But the necessary being cannot be made up of contingent parts, because that would mean that he subsists through contingents and hence wouldn't be necessary after all. Hence the necessary being must be both one *and* simple. Significantly, due to simplicity of God, Ibn Sīnā ascribes to Him attributes only by way of negation or by way of relation (Adamson 2013, 179–181).

The necessary being must then also be immaterial, since matter is made up of parts. From immateriality Ibn Sīnā then argues that the necessary being must be pure intellect. Ibn Sīnā believes that it is matter that prevents proper intellectual apprehension. Thus, an entirely immaterial being which is always actualized apprehends without restriction. The object of this apprehension is God himself, so that God is both intellect and intellected (*'āqil wa-ma'qūl*). Yet God's knowledge is not understood in the manner of the scholars of *kalām*. Ibn Sīnā maintains that God knows all things at once only through his knowledge of his own being as the principle of their existence. He does not apprehend changeable particulars except *via* their universal form, since more proximate engagement with material particulars would compromise his changelessness. Necessary being also cannot change and move; hence it cannot be in space and time. Moreover, in his view, God cannot have contingent attributes or relations. Hence God cannot cause the universe freely; rather, it must have emanated from God necessarily. One may worry that this makes all of creation necessary, elevating it to God-like status in that respect. But for Ibn Sīnā, it is only God who is necessary *in himself*, whereas all things other than Him are made necessary through another (*wājib al-wujūd bi'ghayrihi*) viz., God (Ibn Sīnā 2005, 30–34).

Overall, Ibn Sīnā's conception of the divine is one that is forthrightly classical theistic: God is rendered wholly other through His utter meta- physical simplicity, timelessness, immutability, and impassibility.

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter has sort to understand the primary conceptions of the divine within the Islamic tradition. As such, reference was made to the main distinct trends within the theological

tradition: Muslim scholastic theology, Muslim scriptural theology, and Muslim peripatetic theology. We considered the unique treatments of the topic of God's nature with respect to His relationship to the world and space-time, as well as the relationship between His essence and attributes. The general conclusion of the chapter with respect to the particular models of God put forth by representatives of the differing schools of theology of Islam sees them as located within the camps of either classical or neoclassical theism.

Notes

1 For a detailed review of Kalām cf., Wolfson, 1976.
2 For Ash'arite theology cf., al-Ghazali, 1983.
3 For Mu'tazilite theology cf., 'Abd al-Jabbār, 1996.
4 For Maturidite theology cf., al-Māturīdī, 2001.
5 We take the distinction between classical and neoclassical theism to be roughly the following: classical theists affirm that God is (a) simple – without proper parts, (b) timeless – lacking temporal succession and location, (c) immutable – unchangeable both intrinsically and extrinsically, (d) impassible – is causally unaffectable; neoclassical theists are those who affirm that God is one and unique, but at least deny one of (a)–(d). Cf. Sijuwade 2021, 1–3.

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