Notes on al-Ash'ari and Spinoza

In describing the theological disputes that arose in the 9th century Abbasid Caliphate between the Hanbalis and Mu'tazilites, the tendency of Western scholars of Islam is to characterize the divide as one between scriptural literalism on one hand and rational exegesis of the Qu'ran on the other, as well as between a belief in predestination assured by the agency of an anthropomorphized God, and a belief in free will.[12] In this telling, the former Mu'tazilite scholar al-Ash'ari, born in 974 in Abbasid Basra, is said to have articulated a theology that opposed the rejection of faith and the rational de-anthropomorphization of the Mu'tazilites in favour of the Hanbalis while still borrowing from *kalam*, the Mu'tazilite rational style of argumentation, framing him as a kind of syncretic descendant of the two schools.[3] Based on a reading of the original theological writings I argue that the anthropomorphized/de-anthropomorphized distinction between the Hanbali and Mu'tazilite understandings of God is misleading, and that instead both traditions share a common assumption concerning the nature of God as a discrete being separated only by differing degrees of literalism. The failure of Western academics to grasp the inner content and philosophical significance of historical monotheism, and reduce religion in general to a kind of contentless anthropological artefact of all social formations, is reflected in their treatment of Al-Ash'ari's theology, which – rather than being a simple hybrid – dialectically resolves the faith/reason antinomy arising from the shared imaginary of a discrete God through the articulation of a theology of divine immanence.

The Mu'tazilite theological perspective was that God forms a transcendent essence separate from secular reality, while the Hanbali one posited a literal being endowed with attributes like

1 Vernon Egger, *A History of the Muslim World to 1750: The Making of a Civilization* (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2018), 146.
2 Ibid 149
3 "Al-Asharī on the Qurān, the word of God, as uncreated" in *Classical Islam: a Sourcebook of Religious Literature*, ed. Norman Calder, J. A. Mojaddedi, and Andrew Rippin. (Routledge, 2013),

consciousness, will etc. intervening in the world. Consider Abd al-Jabbar's separation of Hashem's essence and actions in his treatise on Mu'tazilite theology, *al-Mughni:*

> Knowledge of divine justice relates to knowledge of God's actions. In order that we may validly discuss His actions, knowledge of His essence must precede, for discussion of His actions is discussion of something which is other than Him.[4]

This distinction, while more sophisticated than Hanbali literalism, means that the Mu'tazilite perspective is still bound up in metaphysical dualism, in part to resolve the contradiction of theodicy as in the above example. This lends itself to the idea to a completely abstracted idea of God as merely the prime temporal mover of things – "[..] this aim cannot be achieved without knowledge of the origination of bodies and their dependence on an originator, together with the establishment of God as their sole originator".[5] This is an impersonal God, but still *a* God nonetheless. A strange concept of divine unity – the monotheistic revolution, recall, is not only that there is one God, but that Adonai *is* One, as Spinoza would say infinite and indivisible. Al-Ash'ari addresses the abstract theology of the Mu'tazilites in the following *kalam*:

> If the Qurʾān was created, it would have been addressed by the word 'Be' and so come to be. But if God spoke to speech, saying, 'Be,' then speech is preceded by speech and this leads to one of two conclusions. Either the situation must be interpreted as showing that the speech of God is uncreated, or every speech comes into existence through speech, leading to infinite regress. The latter is impossible; and granted this impossibility, it is sure that God has a speech which is uncreated.[6]

This line of argumentation refers to the ongoing debate between the Mu'tazilites and Hanbalis over whether the Qu'ran (God's word) is created or uncreated – for the Mu'tazilites, it was created since it was a secular document issued from a given historical situation, hence open to a revisionism that emphasized a strictly rational basis for the ethical (one which may have also been useful to the Abbasids in negotiating the compromises between scripture and the constraints of power, hence their adoption of Mu'tazilite theology), and for the Hanbalis it was uncreated since it was a divine document handed down from the heavens whose meaning had to be obeyed in the most literal sense.[7] The

4 "Abd al-Jabbār on knowledge" in *Classical Islam*, ed. Calder, Mojaddedi and Rippin.
5 Ibid.
6 "Al-Ash'ari on the Qu'ran, the word of God, as uncreated" in *Classical Islam*, ed. Calder, Mojaddedi and Rippin.
7 Egger, *A History of the Muslim World to 1750,* 147

apparent contradictions between Hanbali and Mu'tazilite theology are then just epiphenomenal counterparts, the concrete affirmation and abstract negation, of the shared imaginary of God as a discrete being, even if for the Mu'tazilites this was not a literal anthropomorphization, because of this strict insistence on the separation of God's essence from the secular world. With this hermeneutic in mind, what is at stake in al-Ash'ari's claim that the Qu'ran is uncreated, and relatedly that speech is an eternal attribute of Hashem, is the question of divine immanence, that is to say of sensual reality as the articulation of Hashem's being (distinguished from the pantheism of the *world-as-God* in that Hashem is not reducible to our necessarily finite understanding of phenomenal attributes, or to the finite idea of a material world, and that in fact it is an impossibility for us to conceive an adequate idea of Hashem *except as that which is impossible to conceive of adequately,* i.e. infinite in essence and attributes). In less abstract terms, the apparent contradiction between the secular human origin of the Qu'ran and its divine nature is resolved by the clarification of this "secular" human origin *as* the self-articulation of Hashem's nature, and which is therefore an eternal, i.e. uncreated, attribute of Hashem *because* of its finite historical appearance and not in spite of it.[8] As to why the Qu'ran in particular and not all human language represents Hashem's word, in spite of this divine conception of history encompassing all things, it represents (one of) the finite emergence(s) of a symbolic representation within Hashem's unique and infinite unfolding that points to this unity and infinity itself, a kind of historical asymptote, the kind of thing Alain Badiou is referring to when he speaks of the possibility of knowing infinities as a finite being.

> It is not permissible that God's saying to all things, 'Be,' can itself be the things themselves. This would necessarily entail that all things are identical with the word of God. Anyone who says this has produced a great lie, because he is required to conclude that everything in the world – men, horses, donkeys and everything else – is the word of God. The error is obvious. Since this argument is impossible, it is correct to say that God's saying to a thing, 'Be,' is different from the things themselves. And if it is not amongst created things, then God's word must be excluded from the category of 'created'.[9]

8 If Hashem is by definition the substrate of all phenomenal existence, any concrete historical determination is an articulation of a possibility inscribed for eternity in the singularity of Hashem's unfolding, and always virtually latent.

9 "Al-Ash'ari on the Qu'ran, the word of God, as uncreated"

What exactly is meant by Hashem "saying to all things 'Be'"? This can't refer to Hashem being the proximate cause of things as the Mu'tazilites claim, nor is this an endorsement of scriptural literalism. A slight leap is required here to clarify the oblique meaning: al-Ash'ari is saying that Hashem's nature inheres (speaks) in all things, yet things by themselves cannot be said to express Hashem's nature. Through a slight reversal one could say that all things subsist in the univocality of Hashem (what Spinoza calls modes), but finite modes in themselves are not eternal attributes of Hashem (a term common to the Ash'arites and Spinoza) – except insofar as they express those attributes contingently. The Qu'ran (and any other such text) does so, in pointing recursively to Hashem's nature while also subsisting in creation, representing "His Word by His words 'that he may hear the word of God'" as the *hadith* related by al-Ash'ari goes. "His Word" is Hashem's speech in the abstract, that is to say the eternal attribute of speech and its symbolic reference in Hashem's nature; "His words" refers to the Qu'ran, the historical incarnation of this symbolic reference ; "that he may hear", that is to say, in the unfolding nature of Hashem, the appearance of this symbolic reference also constitutes Hashem's self-reflexive perception (since the mind is a finite mode of Hashem). The rich tortuousness of this passage is a clear sign that it would be a mistake to read this as an endorsement of the Hanbalis on the uncreatedness of Hashem's word because of their nominal similarity, as do many Western scholars: their position was much more straightforward, viz. that God literally wrote the Qu'ran and passed it on to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and is therefore not a human creation – a return to paganism (if not polytheistic) that seeks the immediate causes of things in God.[10]

The antinomy between a literal active God and an abstract passive one further maps perfectly onto the predestination/free will argument, as well as the methodological distinction between faith and theological rationalism. Immanence here clarifies al-Ash'ari's concept of *kasb* (acquisition), which

10 "Abū Ubayd on faith" in *Classical Islam*, ed. Calder, Mojaddedi and Rippin.

slices in half the free will/predestination knot: Hashem does not determine the course of events in advance, since the being that knows everything and can therefore be said to be deterministic *is* the totality, and to introduce the question of determinism/predestination is to implicitly claim that world is composed of multiple substances (since knowledge of the future of the totality, or of some mechanical law of its unfolding, must reside in something other than this unfolding totality itself, which multiplicity of substance Spinoza formally proved to be contradictory in the Ethics [hence Laplace's demon is just an artefact of finite subjectivity]), but neither does it make sense to speak of the independence of beings from some deterministic background since all such beings, and all such backgrounds, are finite modes of the divine, and to speak of the action of beings is to speak of the free articulation (acquisition) of Hashem's nature – dissolving the antinomy between freedom and unfreedom into meaninglessness.[11] The critical thing to grasp in this perspective is the univocity of the world in its temporal and historical dimensions; that is to say, it must be seen from the perspective of the present as a unitary substance unfolding itself, and in its totality as an eternal and unchanging bloc (but from the perspective of finitude not a mechanical one).[12] The Ash'ari position on free will and

11 Egger, *A History of the Modern World to 1750*, 149.

12 As a quick aside, special relativity provides a proof of the univocity of the world from the temporal perspective (and unsurprisingly Spinoza was Einstein's favourite philosopher): if you ask not why the speed of light has such-and-such magnitude versus any other, which magnitude is merely an abstraction relative to our own perception in any case, but rather *why* such a magnitude exists at all in the first place, the only possible answer is that the world is composed, beneath its phenomenal differentiation, of a single substance, and this substance cannot have but one speed of propagation. The Lorentz transformations are the result of the internal movement of univocity being subject to its homogeneity of substance – the Nazis were then perhaps not mistaken in calling relativity "Jewish physics", although this only means that Nazi metaphysics, nothing more than the purified form of bourgeois thought, are a fundamental scientific error (not to mention their consequent worldview, politics, ethics etc.) which have seen their modern resurgence in e.g. the illusory search for quantum gravity (a correct understanding of general relativity is sufficient to conclude that the cause of things really resides in the relation of the totality and the particular and not in the generative particular), chimeric multiplicities of substance like dark matter & dark energy, and the tendential drift of Western society towards a rabidity so deep as to be observable at the

theology therefore represents not some imaginary middle ground between reason and faith, but the negation of the Mu'tazilites' abstract negation of the Hanbalis' literal God. The negation of the negation does throw one back into the realm of the concrete, albeit a concrete totality that by definition cannot reside in the imaginary except through partial and contingent revelation, hence al-Ash'ari's emphasis on the Qu'ran as more than a secular document, so it superficially resembles the literalist dogsh – I mean dogma of the Hanbalis while also relying on dialectical reasoning as do the Mu'tazilites, but in no meaningful way is it conceptually a middle ground between the two. Ash'ari reasoning is dialectical in the Hegelian and not merely the dialogical Platonic sense, the only way for us poor koopa troopas to Draw Nearer (and an example of what Badiou calls the *torsade,* the speculative twist of properly dialectical thought). This immanentist reading of Ash'ari theology against both the Mu'tazilites and Hanbalis is corroborated in the Ash'arite al-Taftazani's text on Hashem's speech written centuries after al-Ash'ari's life, when such arguments had perhaps been clarified or at least translated into terms clearer to us:

> Mu'tazila, since they were unable to deny that God speaks, claimed that He speaks only in the sense of bringing into existence sounds and letters in their places; or He speaks in the sense of bringing into existence the forms of writing on the preserved tablet, though they are not read there. There is some dispute amongst them on the last point. But you are aware that the concept 'one who moves' refers to one in whom movement subsists and does not mean one who brings movement into existence.[13]

Armed with this understanding, what possible path is there in a world whose quotidian machinery destroys the highest fruit of the divine, humanity, for the benefit of those whose only purpose, behind all the priestly artifice, is endlessly seeking their particular advantage?

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level of *quantum-foaming at the mouth*.

13 "Al-Nasafī and al-Taftāzānī on God's speech" in *Classical Islam,* ed. Calder, Mojaddedi and Rippin.