

what is not receptive of knowledge and ignorance is a metaphor that has no foundation. The same applies to using the term 'frivolous' to describe God (Great and Glorious is He) and calling His acts 'frivolities'.

The second proof regarding this issue—a proof that no one can escape—is that God (Exalted is He) obligated Abū Jahl to become a believer, though He knew that he would not believe, and related that he would not believe. It is as if He commanded him to believe that he would not believe. For part of what God's Messenger (may God bless him and grant him peace) related is that Abū Jahl would not believe, and he was commanded to believe the Messenger. Thus it was said to him: "Believe that you will not believe." And this is impossible.

The explanation of this proof is that it is impossible for something that is contrary to what is known to take place. It is not impossible by virtue of itself, but by virtue of something other than itself. What is impossible to take place by virtue of another is similar to what is impossible by virtue of itself. He who says that the infidels, who did not believe, were not required to believe has denied the revelation. And he who says that their belief in God is imaginable together with God's knowledge that it will never take place has disavowed reason. Thus every party is committed to saying that a command is imaginable while its fulfillment is unimaginable.<sup>64</sup>

It does not help to say that it is an object of power and the infidel had the power to do it.<sup>65</sup> According to us, there is no power prior to the act; the infidels had only the power to disbelieve, which is what proceeded from them. As for the Mu'tazilites, they believe that the power is not prevented from existing, but the power is not sufficient for the object of power to occur; rather it requires other conditions such as will. However, one of these conditions is that God's knowledge would not change into ignorance. Power is never sought for its own sake but for producing an act; yet how could an act be produced that would result in transforming knowledge into ignorance?

It has become clear that there can actually exist an act of obligating whose object is impossible by virtue of something other than itself. By analogy we

64. This is the desired conclusion, if one equates 'imaginable' with 'possible'. It asserts that it is possible for God to command something (i.e., to assign an obligation) whose fulfillment is impossible.

65. The 'it' here refers to God's command whose fulfillment is unimaginable. This statement says that regardless of what is known by God, in principle the unbeliever has the power to obey the command, even if he does not actually obey the command. In this sense God's knowledge that Abū Jahl will never become a believer does not negate Abū Jahl's power to become a believer. It is only that Abū Jahl will never exercise this power to become a believer, and hence nothing contrary to God's knowledge will ever take place. This is supposed to establish the opponent's view that God's command to Abū Jahl to become a believer is not beyond the power of Abū Jahl.

infer that there can be an act of obligating whose object is impossible by virtue of itself;<sup>66</sup> for there is no difference between the two obligations with respect to their being expressed, their being imagined to be required, or their being deemed good or bad.<sup>67</sup>

## Third Proposition

*We claim that God is able to bring suffering upon an animal that is innocent of any crime, and that He is not required to reward it.*

The Mu'tazilites say that this is impossible because it is bad. Hence, they are necessarily led to assert that if a bug or a flea is harmed by being smashed or swatted, then God (Exalted is He) is obligated to resurrect it and compensate it for it. Others affirm that their spirits would return through incarnation into other bodies, and would attain pleasure then that is equivalent to their previous pain. This is a doctrine whose corruption is clear. We, however, say that bringing suffering upon those who are innocent of crimes, such as animals, children, and the insane, is feasible; indeed, it has been witnessed and perceived.

There remains our opponent's statement, which is that God is obligated to resurrect the creature that is harmed and compensate it after that harm.<sup>68</sup> We return to the meaning of 'obligatory'. It has been shown that being obligated is impossible with respect to God (Exalted is He). If they explain this by intending a fourth sense of 'obligatory', then it is incomprehensible.

66. Literally, by analogy we infer what is impossible in itself.

67. The cases that al-Ghazālī considers in this section all concern divine commands whose fulfillment is impossible by virtue of conditions extraneous to the commands themselves. For instance, God requires an unbeliever to believe in Muḥammad's message while He knows that he will never believe, or God requires one to perform an act, and then rescinds His command before the act can be performed. Al-Ghazālī says that there might be divine commands that are impossible to fulfill by virtue of *their own essence*. The two types of commands are analogous in many ways. They both can be spoken by God, they are both requirements, and they both can be deemed good or bad, from our point of view. Recall that, according to al-Ghazālī, an obligation is a type of speech that is a requirement residing in one's mind and is addressed to someone who is lower in rank than the addresser. Whether the obligation cannot be fulfilled by virtue of itself or by virtue of another is irrelevant to this definition. Thus if God can assign an obligation whose fulfillment is impossible by virtue of a condition extraneous to it, then He can equally assign an obligation whose fulfillment is impossible by virtue of something intrinsic to it. It is worth noting that the latter assertion is denied by almost all Islamic theologians, including most of the Ash'arites.

68. Literally, this obligates Him to resurrect and reward after that.

If they claim that refraining from [this compensatory act]<sup>69</sup> is contrary to His being wise, then we say that if by 'wisdom' it is intended, as previously stated, the knowledge of the order of things and the power to produce this order, then there is nothing in [refraining from this act] that is contrary to wisdom. If another sense is intended, then the only form of wisdom that is due to God is what we mentioned; anything other than that is a meaningless expression.

It might be said that this leads to His being unjust, whereas God says: *Your Lord is never unjust to His servants.*<sup>70</sup> We say that injustice is inapplicable to God due to pure negation, just as being oblivious is inapplicable to a wall and being frivolous to the wind. For injustice is imaginable on the part of someone whose act might affect what belongs to another, yet this is unimaginable with respect to God (Exalted is He), or on the part of someone who is under the command of another and acts in a way that is to contrary to this command. A man is not imagined to be unjust in whatever he does regarding his own property, so long as he does not contradict the commands of the revelation; [if he did], he would be unjust in this sense. Thus injustice is inapplicable to someone who cannot be imagined to infringe upon the property of another or to be under the command of another. This is because the necessary condition for injustice is absent; it is not because such a one lacks something in himself.<sup>71</sup>

Let this subtle point be understood, because it is the cause of the misunderstanding.<sup>72</sup> If injustice is given a meaning other than this, then it is incomprehensible; and hence no affirmation or negation applies to it.

## Fourth Proposition

*We claim that it is not obligatory for God to care for the well-being of His servants, but He may do whatever He wills and decree whatever He wants.*

Thus we contradict the Mu'tazilites, who placed restrictions on the acts of God (Great and Glorious is He) and made it obligatory for Him to care for

69. The expression 'this compensatory act' refers to the act of resurrecting and compensating the innocent creature for the harm that was inflicted on it during its life.

70. Qur'ān, 41:46.

71. The point is that God cannot be unjust—not because he lacks power or free will, but because everything belongs to God (hence God's acts do not affect the property of another) and everything is subservient to God (hence God cannot be under the command of another).

72. The original is an idiomatic expression: 'it is the cause for the slippage of the foot' (*mazallat al-qadam*).

the well-being [of His servants]. As previously stated, the same thing that proves that nothing is obligatory for God (Exalted is He) also proves the falsity of this view. In addition, observation and reality prove its falsity; for we will show them acts of God (Glorious is He) that will force them to concede that they do not serve the interests of His servants.

Let us suppose that there are three children: one of them died a Muslim in his youth, another reached maturity, became a Muslim, and died a Muslim in his maturity, and the third became an infidel in his maturity and died while in the state of infidelity. Justice, for them,<sup>73</sup> would require that the mature infidel reside forever in hellfire, and that the mature Muslim have a higher rank in paradise than the Muslim youth.

The Muslim youth might say: "O Lord, why did You give me a rank lower than his?" God might say: "Because he reached maturity and obeyed me, and you did not obey me by performing acts of worship, since you did not reach maturity."<sup>74</sup> He might say: "O Lord, You made me die before reaching maturity; my best interest would have been for my life to have been extended until I reached maturity, so that I might have obeyed you and attained his rank; why did You deny me this rank forever, when You were able to make me qualified for it?" God would have no answer but to say: "I knew that if you had reached maturity, you would have sinned rather than obeyed me, and then you would be subject to My punishment and wrath; so I saw that this low rank in paradise was more proper and better for you than punishment." The infidel might then call from the abyss and say: "O Lord, did You not know that if I reached maturity, I would be an infidel? Had you made me die in my youth and placed me at that low rank in paradise, I would have loved that and it would have been better for me than Your condemning me forever to hellfire; so why did You make me live when death was better for me?" There would be no answer available for God at all.<sup>75</sup>

73. The pronoun 'them' refers to the Mu'tazilites.

74. Literally, after reaching maturity.

75. This example is based on the "problem of the three brothers," with which, according to the tradition, Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī al-Ash'arī—the founder of the Ash'ariyya school of Islamic theology—challenged the Mu'tazilite master Abū 'Alī Muḥammad al-Jubbā'ī (see note 34 of the Second Treatise for further elaboration). As mentioned previously, al-Ghazālī is an Ash'arite, and for him this example serves, therefore, as a conclusive refutation of the Mu'tazilites' doctrine that divine justice is based on desert. (Since al-Ghazālī thinks that the three cases described in the example are not only possible but actual, he uses it to show that God does not care about the well-being of all people and that such caring is not incumbent upon Him.) A Mu'tazilite, however, could deny that this example presents events that could actually happen. A Mu'tazilite might say, for example, that when the Muslim youth inquired about the reason for his having been assigned a rank in paradise lower than that of the mature Muslim, God could have responded that He knew that had He extended the youth's life and allowed him to reach maturity, the youth would indeed have obeyed God and performed

It is common knowledge that these three divisions exist, and this example shows conclusively that serving the best interest of all God's servants is not obligatory for God, nor does it happen.

## Fifth Proposition

*We claim that if God (Exalted is He) assigns obligations to His servants and they obey Him, then it is not obligatory for Him to reward them; rather if He wants to, He may reward them, punish them, or even annihilate them and never resurrect them; that He does not care whether He forgives all the infidels and punishes all the believers; and that this is not impossible in itself, nor does it contradict any of the divine attributes.*

This is so because for God to assign obligations is for Him to deal with His slaves and possessions [as He wants].<sup>76</sup> As for rewarding, this is another, independent act. To say that it is obligatory in any of the three senses is incomprehensible. Also, it is meaningless to speak of it as being good or

acts of worship, but even so, he would have been deserving of exactly the same rank that he now occupies in paradise and not that of the mature Muslim, since the latter is still more righteous than the youth would have been. The Mu'tazilite could conclude, in other words, that in all three cases, the people received what they deserved. Nevertheless, the Mu'tazilite would now have to grant that children who die in their youth might be given ranks in paradise higher than the ranks of observant and righteous Muslims who die in maturity, in the event that God determines that, had they lived to maturity, they would have become more observant and righteous than the Muslims who lived to maturity. (This implication, we note, constitutes a revision of certain strains of Mu'tazilism, but it is *not* a revision of their common doctrine of the intermediary position, for the intermediary position, the state of being neither believer nor infidel, is the position of a Muslim who commits a major sin and not that of a child who dies in his youth.) The Mu'tazilite would also have to deny that the Muslim youth as described in al-Ghazālī's example, that is, one who, had he lived to maturity, would have been a sinner or an infidel deserving of eternal damnation, could actually exist. Only thus would a Mu'tazilite be able to maintain that reward and punishment are always dispensed on the basis of desert. Since not all parts of the Islamic tradition support such a conclusion, a Mu'tazilite would have to offer nonliteral interpretations of texts that support the contrary conclusion. An Ash'arite, however, faces the same problem and would have to resolve it the same way. In reality, all Islamic legal, theological, and philosophical schools (including literalist schools, such as the Zāhiriyya) have relied on nonliteral interpretations to reconcile their doctrines with texts that appear on their face to contradict them.

76. The original is *taṣarruf*, which is a noun meaning, among other things, "conduct," "behavior," and "dealing." In this context, however, the word carries with it the connotation of "acting freely as one wishes." Thus I believe that what al-Ghazālī intends is that God's assigning obligations (*taklīf*) to mankind is an exercise of His right to deal (*taṣarruf*) with His slaves and possessions (*'abidih wa-mamālikih*) in any way He pleases.

bad.<sup>77</sup> If another meaning is intended, then this too is incomprehensible, unless it is said that this would make His promise false, yet this is impossible. We believe that it is necessary in this sense and we do not deny it.<sup>78</sup>

It might be said: "It is bad to assign obligations and yet refrain from rewarding when one is able to reward."

We say:

If you mean by 'bad' that which is contrary to the needs of the one who obligates, then the Obligator is too exalted and sanctified to have needs. However, if you mean by it that it is contrary to the needs of the one who is obligated, then this would be acceptable. But God is not prevented from performing an act that is bad for the one who is obligated; for what is bad and what is good for the one obligated are on a par with respect to God.<sup>79</sup>

Moreover, if we press their corrupt belief, we do not concede that he who employs his slave is usually obligated to reward him, because a reward is compensation for a service; this would annul the benefit of having slaves.

77. Literally, and there is no meaning for good or bad.

78. The Arabic word I translated as 'necessary' is *wājib*. As was indicated previously, *wājib* means both "obligatory" and "necessary." So al-Ghazālī is saying here that since God promised to reward those who fulfill their religious obligations, it would be necessary for Him to reward them; otherwise, His promise would be false and that is impossible. It is tempting to read *wājib* here as 'obligatory', and argue that because of God's promise, He is "obligated" to fulfill His promise and reward His obedient servants. Al-Ghazālī, however, argued repeatedly that no act of God is obligatory, for an obligatory act, by definition, is an act such that if one refrains from performing it, a definite harm in this life or in the hereafter would befall him. It is clear that this definition is inapplicable to any act of God. Al-Ghazālī seems to think that the fulfillment of a promise, or at least the intention to fulfill one's promise, is part of the definition of a promise. Hence it would be logically impossible for one to make a promise with the intention to break it (in this case, one did not make a promise even if he thought that he did). God's promises, therefore, must be made with the intention of being fulfilled, and since God realizes all His intentions (for He is all-powerful and immutable), it is logically necessary (but not obligatory) that God fulfill all his promises. In this sense, God's rewarding His obedient servants is necessary, though not obligatory. Al-Ghazālī will return to this issue in the Seventh Proposition of this treatise and offer a different argument for the impossibility of God's promise to be false. He will argue that it is impossible for God's speech to contain lies; and since His promise is made through speech, it cannot be a false promise.

79. There are two points here; both have been addressed previously. Al-Ghazālī believes that whether an act is good or bad has to do with whether it is in accordance with or contrary to one's needs and desires (purposes). The first point is that, since God has no needs, the two notions are inapplicable to His acts. (Al-Ghazālī does say, however, that it is correct to say that whatever God does is good, because this usage of 'good' has nothing to do with needs; the statement simply means that there are no repercussions or blame for whatever God does in His kingdom.) The second point is that although, according to this definition, it is indeed bad for the one who is obligated not to be rewarded for fulfilling the obligation, it is not incumbent upon God to serve the interest of His servants.



A slave is obligated to serve his master simply because he is his slave; if he serves in order to be compensated, then this is not a service.

Among their startling statements is their saying that it is incumbent upon God's servants, because they are His servants, to be grateful as a fulfillment for their obligation for receiving His blessings, and that it is incumbent upon Him to reward them for their gratefulness. This is absurd. For the one whose right is fulfilled has no obligation to compensate. If that were the case, then the reward would require a new gratefulness, and this gratefulness would require a new reward, and there would be an infinite regress. Hence, the servant and the Lord would each be bound by the other's right forever, which is absurd.

More repugnant than this is their statement that God (Exalted is He) is obligated to punish eternally and to condemn to hellfire forever whoever disbelieves in Him, and that, indeed, whoever commits a major sin and dies before atoning would be condemned to hellfire forever.<sup>80</sup> This shows ignorance of generosity and magnanimity, and of reason, habit, revelation, and all matters. We say that habit dictates and reason indicates that to overlook and forgive is better than to punish and avenge. People's praise for the forgiver is greater than their praise for the avenger, and to pardon is deemed good by them more assuredly. How is it, then, that to pardon and be gracious are deemed bad and a prolonged retribution is deemed good?

Furthermore, this is true with respect to someone who is harmed by being sinned against and whose rank is lowered by being disobeyed. But unbelief and faith, and obedience and disobedience, are on a par with respect to God (Exalted is He). Insofar as His divinity and loftiness are concerned, they are equivalent.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, even if one follows the path of retribution and deems it good, how could he deem good an eternal and everlasting punishment as retribution for a single word uttered in one moment?<sup>82</sup>

80. The second clause is a partial statement of one of the five principles that constitute the common core of Mu'tazilism. It is the doctrine of the intermediary position. According to the tradition, this was the doctrine that inaugurated the Mu'tazila as a distinct school of Islamic theology. As explained previously, the doctrine concerns the status of a Muslim who commits a major sin and dies without atoning for his sin. There were two views: one held that such a person was an infidel and the second that he was a believer. Wāṣil ibn 'Aṭā' (AH 80/699 CE–AH 131/748 CE), the founder of the Mu'tazila school, decreed that such a person was neither a believer nor an infidel, rather he was a grave sinner (*fāsiq*), which is an intermediary position between that of a believer and that of an infidel; and that a grave sinner will be condemned to hell for eternity, but he will be tormented at a lesser degree than an infidel.

81. The pronoun 'they' refers to unbelief and faith, obedience and disobedience.

82. The "single word" is a declaration of unbelief in God. This is a translation of the reading in the Jeddah edition. The reading in the Ankara edition may be translated as follows: 'Moreover, how could one deem it good to follow the path of retribution and, in addition to

A mental asylum is more suitable than gatherings of scholars for one whose intellect leads him to deem good such an extreme response. Rather we say that if one follows the very opposite of this path, it would be more reasonable and more in accordance with the regularity of deeming things good or bad—the regularity according to which the "estimation" and imagination make their judgments, as previously explained.

We, in fact, say that it is deemed bad for a man to punish someone for an old crime that is difficult to deter, except<sup>83</sup> for two reasons. One of them is that punishment should deter and serve an interest in the future. Punishment is thus deemed good out of concern lest a future purpose go unfulfilled. Therefore if there is no future interest to be served by it, punishment merely for the sake of retribution for what has passed is bad, because there is no benefit in it for the one punished or for any other person. Rather the perpetrator is harmed by it, so that not inflicting harm on him is good. Inflicting harm is deemed good only if it engenders a benefit. Since there is no benefit, and what has passed cannot be corrected, punishment here is the extreme of badness.<sup>84</sup>

The second reason is that we say:

If the victim is harmed and feels resentment and intense rage, then this rage is painful, and extinguishing it relieves the pain. Also, it is more befitting for the perpetrator to be the one to feel pain. When the perpetrator is punished, the pain of the sensation of rage is removed from the victim, but it is now felt by the perpetrator; and this is more proper. Although this too is a reason, it is indicative of a deficiency of the victim's intellect and of his being controlled by anger.

However, making punishment obligatory, when it serves no future interest for anyone known to God (Exalted is He) and does not prevent harm from befalling the victim, is the extreme of badness. This is more reasonable than one's statement that refraining from punishment is extremely bad.

At any rate, the whole discussion is fallacious. For being subject to an obligation posited by the estimative faculty on the basis of imagined needs

this, to deem good an eternal and everlasting punishment as a retribution for a single word uttered in one moment?

83. I followed the Ankara edition in including 'except' (*illā*). The Jeddah edition leaves it out.

84. It is interesting to note that al-Ghazālī's conception of punishment is that of deterrence rather than of retribution. This should not be unexpected after the decidedly consequentialist treatment he gives of 'obligatory', 'good', and 'bad'. In the following paragraph, he will consider a type of a retributive justification for punishment, but he will ultimately reject it as revealing a shortcoming in the intellect of the victim. Even in considering the validity of the "retributivist" case, however, the reasoning al-Ghazālī employs has more to do with consequences than with desert.



is inapplicable to God, who is too sanctified to have needs. But we wanted to refute what is corrupt with what is corrupt to show that what they imagine is fallacious.<sup>85</sup>

## Sixth Proposition

*We claim that if the revelation had not come, it would not be incumbent upon mankind to know God (Exalted is He) and to thank Him for His blessings.*

Thus we contradict the Mu'tazilites, who say that the mere intellect makes this obligatory.

We prove the proposition by saying:

Does the intellect make it obligatory to reflect theoretically and to seek knowledge for the sake of a benefit obtainable from doing so, or in spite of its admitting that God's existence and nonexistence are on a par regarding immediate or later benefits? If you say that the intellect judges that [knowing God] is obligatory in spite of its admitting that there is absolutely no immediate or later benefit in it, then this is the judgment of ignorance, and not of the intellect. For the intellect does not enjoin acting frivolously; and everything that is devoid of all benefits is a frivolity. If, on the other hand, there is benefit in it, then it inevitably relates either to the one who is worshiped or to the worshiper. It is impossible for the benefit to relate to the one who is worshiped, since He is too exalted and sanctified to receive benefits. If it relates to the worshiper, then it must be either in this life or in the hereafter. As for this life, worship is pure toil in which there is no benefit. As for the hereafter, what is expected is a reward, but how does the worshiper know that he will be rewarded for it? Indeed, he might be punished for it. Hence, the judgment that he will be rewarded is foolishness that has no basis.<sup>86</sup>

It might be said:

It occurs to a person that he has a Lord, and if he thanks Him, He will reward him and bestow His blessings upon him, but if he shows ungratefulness for His blessings, He will punish him. It would never occur to him that

85. The point is that al-Ghazālī combats the corrupt Mu'tazilite view that God is obligated to reward and punish in accordance with desert with the corrupt view that God would only punish to fulfill a purpose. Since God is free from all needs and purposes, the view that He would only punish if the punishment fulfilled a purpose is itself "corrupt."

86. It is foolishness because, presumably, without revelation it is not known that there will be a reward for worshiping God. Acts of worship might be uncompensated or even punished. (See Fifth Proposition.)

it is possible to be punished for being grateful. And to guard against harm that is "estimated" by the intellect<sup>87</sup> is comparable to being at guard against a known harm.

We say:

We do not deny that the nature of a rational person makes him inclined to guard against harm, whether it is "estimated" or known. It is not forbidden to call such an inclination "obligatory," for there should be no quarrel over terminology. But our discussion concerns whether it is more proper to perform an act rather than to refrain from it on the grounds that there will be reward or punishment, when it is known that being grateful and being ungrateful are on a par with respect to God (Exalted is He). He is unlike any one of us, for we are comforted by gratefulness and praise, are moved by them, and enjoy them; and we are pained by ungratefulness and hurt by it.

If it becomes clear that both attitudes are on a par with respect to God (Exalted and Blessed is He), then preferring one of the two is impossible. Indeed, the opposite might occur to him, that is, he might [think that he would] be punished for being grateful for two reasons. One of them is that his preoccupation with being grateful subjects his mind and heart to toil and steers them away from pleasure and appetite, though he is a created servant, endowed with appetites and made able to enjoy them. Perhaps, his purpose is to indulge in pleasures and to make use of God's blessings, and not to toil in that in which there is no benefit for God (Exalted is He). This possibility is more likely.

The second is to compare himself to the one who wants to offer thanks to a king; and thus he investigates the king's qualities, manners, residence, the bedroom he shares with his wife, and all his hidden secrets as a repayment for the king's bounties upon him. It will be said to him: "With this type of gratefulness you deserve to have your head severed. What benefit does this nosiness bring you?"<sup>88</sup> And who are you to investigate the secrets of the kings, their qualities, their deeds, and their manners? And why do you not busy yourself with what pertains to you?" Hence the one who seeks knowledge of God (Exalted is He) must know<sup>89</sup> the subtleties regarding His attributes and His acts, His wisdom and the purposes of His acts. Only someone of high status is qualified for all of this; how does a servant of God know that he is deserving of such a status?

87. That is, the estimative faculty of the intellect deems it harmful.

88. Alternatively, why are you consumed with this nosiness? Both translations are liberal. The literal translation is 'What have you with this nosiness?'

89. The expression 'must know' is the translation of the reading in the Jeddah edition. The reading in the Ankara edition may be translated as "is as he must know."