

# THE ASH'ARITE DOGMA: THE ROOT OF THE ARAB/MUSLIM ABSOLUTISM<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

*There are three major categories upon which all of the world's civilizations are established, namely, God, Man and World. The differentiation of worldly civilizations and the diversity of systems of knowledge are due to the way of drawing up the relation whereby the three categories are arranged. Some scholars assumed that these categories are communicated and totally correlated each other, in a way that each cannot be realized except in its connectivity to the others. While some others thought that the three categories should be separated and disconnected, in a way that each of the three is realized as an absolute and dominant one while the two others are marginal and dependent ones.*

*Needless to say, while the first perception provokes the values of tolerance and the acceptance of the other, the second one motivates absolutism and the negation of the other. Unfortunately the Ash'arism, not only a dogma but —and more importantly— a stable and dominant way of thinking, is stimulated by the second perception based on an absolutism and the negation of the other. It departs from that historical fact that this paper argues that absolutism, manifested in political, religious and cultural aspects of nowadays Muslims life, can be related to the dominance of Ash'arism all over the Muslim world.*

**Keywords:** Ash'arite dogma, absolutism, Muslim theology

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## A. Introduction

Absolutism is the real substance of the Arab (or perhaps Muslim) politics in the modern era. It is the very root that feeds all despotic and authoritarian practices, which prevail in the political domains of the Arabs and Muslims. The serious dilemma is that, the Arabs/Muslims are now under the tremendous pressure from the outside world –notably from the superpower- to rehabilitate their political order through the implementation of democracy and respect for human rights. The driving reason behind this demand is the urgent need to drain the sources of what some have –mistakenly or rightly- called Islamic terrorism. Apart from the true intention of this demand, reformation and change in the Arab/Muslim world become nonetheless the interests of the outside power.

At this juncture, the Arab/Muslim world is trapped between two things; between the pressure for change and reform, and between the incapability to overcome its inherent predicament that hinders its aspiration for political shift. Thus, it is awkwardly suffering from falling between the horns of the two dilemmas.

Attempts have been made to get away from the Arab/Muslim decadence, but these have come to a meaningless outcome. This failure might be caused by the fact that these attempts followed the strategy of replacing an old practice with a modern one, without considering the discourse that stands behind this practice and dictates it. The suggested Western recipe of reformation for the Middle East adopts this strategy. It looks at the impasse of the Arab reality merely in its outward political representation, and ignores its deep cultural root, which found its most flashy projection in absolutism. Absolutism of this kind however, cannot be uplifted by means of the Western recipes only. Delving into a classical Muslim legacy is necessary; a legacy that still strongly dominates people's consciousness –ruling and ruled- with its evasive systems and hidden roots that perpetuate absolutism. Applying a Western democratic recipe without looking at this classical legacy is destined to another failure because this will merely replace an old practice with a new one, holding the absolutist discourse constantly alive. This new practice will surely be absorbed –as past events witnessed- within the structure of the dominant discourse to the extent

that it will become a decorative mask through which this discourse extends its life.

The intention of this essay is to initiate a serious step towards a critical investigation of the discourse of absolutism. The essay suggests that this discourse finds its most profound roots in the dogmatic system of the Ash'arites. Taking for granted that this system is not only theological, the thesis argues that it was vulnerably usable for ideological and political purposes. The analysis particularly focuses on tracing the deep structure of the Ash'arite system that regulates some specific issues in a hope to touch some of its ideological functions.

## **B. The Structural Formulation of the Asha'rite Dogma**

The entry to the formulation of the Ash'arite system relies principally in understanding the Ash'arite perception of the concept of the relationship between the three circles of existence, namely God, man and the world. The differences between all intellectual and civilizational systems are in fact, due to their perception of this relationship. In terms of the Ash'arite formulation of this relationship, it is characterized by its abstract and formal form. In this formulation, a concretization of one circle is deemed possible without any consideration to the other two circles, simply because it is impossible to formulate a creative relationship between the three circles – themselves formal- in the light of what is abstract and formal. On that basis, the Ash'arites negate the idea of the relationship between the three circle due to the difference and contrast between them that goes beyond any formal and abstract intellectual construct. To say the least, the Ash'arites came to the conclusion –by virtue of this formality and abstraction- that the only possible relationship between them is a “dictating and subjugating relationship” and not “interactive and assimilative one”.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of relationship differs in accordance to the difference of the logical domain within which relationship is dealt with. With regard to the formal logic, the concept of relationship does not acquire any meaning or essential significance. The reason being that substance –as a foundation for any relationship- differs from all categories and accidents, which do not exist except through being its qualities. Therefore, the essence of the possible relationship between substance and categories is the

In any case, the true relationship (true in the sense that it is necessary and not superficial) between any elements that can influence one another, has no place whatsoever in the Ash'arite system of thought. In truth, it is not easy to explain the Ash'arites' system of thought in the absence of a clear understanding of their negation of this relationship –as a necessary connection- between God, man and the world.

Concomitant to their negation of this relationship is their intention to widely open the domain of the “dominance of the absolutes”.<sup>3</sup> The aim of their system of thought and the cause of its formulation were principally to exhibit the dominance of the divine absolute at the expense of both man and the world. That is why their system was crystallized as a complete reiteration of the concept of God, to the extent that the world seems to be void of anything but God. This resulted in the dislodging of the objectivity and necessity of the world and the activity of man. Hence, for the Ash'arite, the world and man are empty and fragile existence without value. Accordingly, the true existence of God necessitates the marginality of any other existence.

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dominance of the former over the latter and the subjugation of substance over all categories. On the other hand, in the domain of the dialectic logic, accidents become the forms of substance or the manifestations of existence that appear out of substance. And although substance may pose itself as an accident, the truth is that it simply puts another substance because what emerges out of it, is itself. In other words, that which substance poses as an accident is in fact another substance. See, Walter Stace, *Falsafah Hegel*, trans. by Imām 'Abdul Fattāḥ Imām (Cairo: Dār al-Thaqāfah li al-Ṭibā'ah wa al-Nashr, 1980). From here, the possible relationship becomes the interactive relationship between two substances within which one substance is determined by the other. Accordingly, all despotic systems of thought –be they are civilizational or religious- are crystallized through first of all, an abstract perception about the relationship between the three circles of existence, while all tolerant systems of thought are in contrast crystallized through a dialectic perception of that relationship.

<sup>3</sup> Although the Ash'arites were interested only in showing that in the face of the dominance of the divine absolute, an objective existence of the world and an active existence of man collapse, this presupposition leads -intentionally or unintentionally- to the magnification of the dominance of the political absolute in a world where there is no longer true existence except for an “absolute” Lord or ruler. That is why the Ash'arism remained forever –from its very inception- the winning doctrine of the authority.

It might have been understood from that brief description that the sacrifice of the objectivity of the world and the activity of man for the sake of the dominance of the divine absolute, is the most passive results that the Ash'arite system of thought has ever produced. Fortunately, this result is in a collision with one of God's purposes of creation. God has never created the world and man to institutionalize His dominance, but to constitute the knowledge of Himself, as He Himself states.<sup>4</sup> The knowledge of Himself –and not the dominance over the other- is the real content of the relationship between God, man and the world. And that is what the Ash'arites could not realize due to their prevailing perception of the absolute dominance of God over man and the natural world.

This absolutist structure, whose aim is to emphasize the dominance of the (divine or political) absolute, becomes even more apparent when the elements of the Ash'arite system of thought are structurally analyzed. The structure of this system –it is important to note- is not discoverable only through the “realization of its external and sensitive relationships”;<sup>5</sup> a relationship that merely verifies the affinity between the elements of the system, but through the disclosure of the internal rational system that regulates all its elements. Interestingly however, although the disclosure of this internal system –the structure that is- cannot be verified except through the elements of the system, these elements in their turn cannot be explained except through their affiliation to this structure.<sup>6</sup> Putting this in mind, the

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<sup>4</sup> God says in the *Hadīth Qudsī*, “I was a hidden treasure, and I want to be known, then I created the creatures by which I was known”. From this *Hadīth*, it seems that He was hidden not only from others but also from Himself, because by then there was no one that He can be hidden from. In other words, this “treasure” is hidden from an essence which knew -from eternity- the necessity of the other to display its creative presence, and not from other which has no existence yet. Thus, God might not only will to be known by the other, but also to know His own true essence through the other.

<sup>5</sup> Zakariyyā Ibrāhīm, *Mushkīlat al-Binyah*, (Cairo: Dār Nahḍah Misr, nd), p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> This does not mean at all that this structure is *a priori* existence, which comes before the elements of the system. Just as the elements realize the structure, so also the structure realizes the elements. Thus, dialectism, and not a priorism, is the content of the relationship between structure and its elements.

absolutist structure of the Ash'arite system is not merely a product of a simple realization of the superficial relationship that joins the elements of the system, because it is the internal rational system that regulates this relationship and acquires for it its rationality and interpretation. In other words, a simple observation of the external affinities between various issues that the Ash'arites have dealt with, notably the issues of God, man and nature, will not lead to the disclosure of the structure of Ash'arite system. What will lead to this is an internal rational system that these issues essentially revolve around. It is here –and only here– that the structure of the Ash'arite system can be disclosed.

### C. The Internal System of the Dogma

A serious analysis of the Ash'arite dogma reveals an internal cohesion between God, world, and human; a cohesion, which crosses beyond the mere external and fragile connection between these three elements of existence to the inner and deep structure of the system. Around this structure these elements revolve and acquire their rationality and interpretation. When one goes beyond the particularity of understanding to the totality of interpretation<sup>7</sup>, he would realize an internal system which regulates the various particular elements of the Asha'rite dogma. This internal system is the structure that cannot be realized away from these elements. To understand it, a serious analysis of issues such as divine attributes, natural and human world must be carried out. An analysis such as this can certainly lead to the revelation of the profound structure of the Asha'rite system that these issues revolve around. While the absolutist feature of this structure can in fact be easily seen, the structural analysis of these issues will further show emphatically that above-mentioned feature *is* indeed absolutist.

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<sup>7</sup> By understanding we mean a rational process based on the most precise description of the structure of single issue like divine attributes for example, and by interpretation we mean a process aims at joining a specific single structure, which is a part to another comprehensive structure, which is a whole. For more details on this meaning of understanding and interpretation see Lucian Goldman, *ʿIlm Ijtīmā al-Ādāb*, trans. by Jābir Uṣfūr (Majallah Fusūl, vol I, edition 2, January 1981), pp. 104-5.

To begin with, the Ash‘arites affirmed that divine attributes are eternal (*qadīmah*) and augmented (*ẓā‘idah*) to the divine essence. The ground for this premise is that it is impossible for a being, which lacks knowledge, power, hearing, and sight to be a creator and director (*mudabbir*) of the world.<sup>8</sup> That is why it is said that, “whomsoever does not have these attributes has indeed the opposite ones, and these opposite ones are defects and shortcomings that preclude the perfection of action”.<sup>9</sup> Thus, “the name of Allah cannot be applied to an essence that has been emptied from divine attributes”.<sup>10</sup> On that note, to negate attributes means to negate essence. And in this way, it becomes necessary that “God has undeniable attributes to which His divine acts signify. In the same way that His divine acts signify Him being Knowing, Powerful and Willing, they also signify Knowledge, Power and Will (as His attributes) because there is no difference as regard to the connotation of His acts in the phenomenal world (*shāhid*) and the noumenal world (*ghā‘ib*)”.<sup>11</sup> In a nutshell, an attribution requires attribute in the same way that an attribute requires attribution.<sup>12</sup>

In truth, the affirmation of divine attributes as eternal and augmented to the divine essence is necessarily linked to the absolutist structure of the Ash‘arite system. Investigating the divine attributes, the Ash‘arites gave way to the inquiry of the natural and human issues as related directly to the affirmation of the attributes as both eternal

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<sup>8</sup> Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Asfara‘īnī, *al-Tabsīr fī al-Dīn*, edited Sayyid ‘Izzat al-Ḥusayn (Cairo: Maṭba‘ah al-Anwār, 1940), p. 37.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99

<sup>10</sup> Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazzālī, *al-Iqtīṣād fī al-‘Iṭiqād*, (Cairo: Maktabah al-Ḥalabī, nd), p. 70.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, vol I, p. 128. Cited from Aḥī Sāmī al-Nasshār, *Nash‘at al-Fikr al-Falsafī*, (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, vol I, 1977), p. 431. It seems that the “analogy of the noumena on the phenomena” is what the proponents of the attributes of God depend their argument upon. That is to say “if it is seen that knowing being is knowing because of his knowledge, then it follows that the unseen Knowing (God) is also Knowing because of His knowledge. On this basis the proponents of the attributes of God affirm will and speech as attributes of God. See al-Juwaynī, *al-Burhān*, vol 2, part 3. Cited from Aḥī Sāmī al-Nasshār, *Manāḥij al-Baḥṭh ‘Inda Mufakkirī al-Islām* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1978), p. 108.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Juwaynī, *al-Burhān*. Cited from al-Nasshār, *Manāḥij al-Baḥṭh*, p. 108.

and augmented. In all this, the Ash'arite construction of the attributes is based on what seems to be a particular perception concerning human and natural world as an empty and fragile existence completely submissive to the absolute and unrealizable will and power of God. This means that –in the Ash'arite system- the efficacy and positivity of the divine attributes cannot be achieved except in their encounter with the natural and human world which is passive and inactive.

Furthermore, the absolutist structure of the Asha'rite system may be shown as manifested most clearly in the issue of the divine attributes and attribution, especially when the (Ash'arite) perception concerning the relationship between the attribution and attribute is compared to the Mu'tazilite perception of the same issue. The attribute according to the Asha'rites, is "something present in that which has an attribute (*mausūf*) and which acquires for it –that is *mausūf*- the attribution."<sup>13</sup> Attribution in the meantime is a "saying of an attributer (man) that God is Knowing, Living, Powerful, and Beneficent. This attribution is not the attribute of God, which is the cause of Him being Knowing, Powerful, and Willing".<sup>14</sup> Here, attribute is *a priori* and objective entity immanent within the divine essence and is anterior to the attribution. This means that attribute is distinguishable from attribution, which follows the attribute and the saying of the attributer (man) as well. As a result, attribute according to the Asha'rites is immanent entity within the divine essence, and at the same time it is independent from any creation or action. It is absolute regardless of its activity.<sup>15</sup> Taking this into account, it is possible to say that, "the power of God exists in eternity, while He does nothing with it".<sup>16</sup> And since the attribution springs from the attribute, which is eternal and immanent within the divine essence,<sup>17</sup> the attribution carries a posterior characteristic while the attribute an anterior one. All this reveals that

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<sup>13</sup> Abū Bakr al-Baqillānī, *al-Tambīd*, edited by Yūsuf Makarḥī (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-Kāṭūlikiyyah, 1957), p. 213.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>15</sup> It becomes clear that attribute –described in this way- is identical to what is known as the "Platonic ideals".

<sup>16</sup> Al-Baqillānī, *al-Tambīd*, p. 35.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.



the attribution is marginal and subsidiary in the Asha'rite system. To remember this is always important so as to know the absolutist structure of this system. The attribution forever requires the presence of the "other", which is very essential in the process of that attribution, since it is this process that assumes whether the "other" describes himself to the "essence", or that the "essence" describes itself to the "other".<sup>18</sup> Thus, the Asha'rite perception of the attribution -which necessitates the presence of the other- as posterior to the attribute, which is immanent within the divine essence reflects the posteriority and marginality of the other, who in this context is man. This directly means that it is possible within Ash'arism to eliminate man from a system, and at the same time to accentuate the dominance of the divine essence; an essence that does not exercise its activity except in an absolute way.

Speaking in a broad generality, those who tried to formulate a more balanced and dialectic relationship between the three elements of existence (God, man, and the world) have realized that the Ash'arite absolute perception of the divine essence and its attributes gives rise to the apparent difficulties concerning the content of the divine essence and some of the essential issues of belief.

The Ash'arite slogan that God for example "knows things before their existence as what they are after their existence in particular time and space and so forth,"<sup>19</sup> with His eternal and augmented knowledge results necessarily in the assumption of some kind of change in God's essence, which is undoubtedly related to the change of His knowledge immanent within that essence. It is indeed difficult "to imagine that

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<sup>18</sup> This is true except if one is saying that the divine essence in eternity describes itself for itself. But this contradicts -it seems- with what has been said about the essence that it is in eternity is a "hidden treasure", who created creations to be known. On the other hand, if Ibn 'Abbād al-Mu'tazilī -for fear of being accused of polytheism- has asserted that "God cannot be said to have known Himself in eternity because that will lead to the distinction between the Knowing and the Known (*ma'lum*)" see Abdul Kaṣīm al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*, ed. by 'Abdul 'Azīz al-Wakīl, (Cairo: Mu'assasat al-Ḥalabī, 1968), vol I, p. 68, then it cannot be similarly said that: God described Himself in eternity because that will lead to the distinction between the attributer and the attributed.

<sup>19</sup> Abū al-Walīd ibn Rushd, *Faṣl al-Maqāl Fīmā Bayna al-Ḥikmah wa al-Sharī'ah min al-Ittiṣāl*, (Beirut: Dār al-Ilm li'l-Jamī', 1935), p. 37.

knowledge of thing before its existence is the very same knowledge after its existence”.<sup>20</sup> This is because the existence of things after being non-existent means that a change has taken place, which is manifested in the “movement of thing from its non-existence to existence, or from potentiality to actuality”.<sup>21</sup> Since “knowledge must follow an existent, and an existent is sometime potential and sometime actual, knowledge of potential existent and actual existent must be different”.<sup>22</sup> In this whole process, a change in knowledge has taken place and should necessarily be applied to the divine essence. Some in fact like al-Jahm Ibn Safwān has recognized that change of the divine essence as the result of the affirmation of knowledge as its eternal attribute, is a matter of necessity. Seeking to maintain that the divine essence is unchangeable, al-Jahm holds that “it is not permissible that God knows thing before its creation because that would mean inevitably that His knowledge of thing prior to its creation would either remain or not. It is not possible that it remains because after the thing is actually created, God’s knowledge that He will create it cannot remain. That is due to the fact that God’s knowledge after the creation of thing is by necessity not His knowledge before its creation, otherwise His knowledge would turn into ignorance. And that is impossible to Him, the All-knowing. On the other hand, if His knowledge that He will create thing did not remain after its actual creation, then the knowledge would have changed and change is impossible for Him”.<sup>23</sup> All this encourages al-Jahm to believe that “God’s knowledge is as contingent as His creatures”.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Ibn Rushd, *al-Kashf ‘an Manābij al-Adillah fī Aqā'id al-Millat*, (Beirut: Dār al-Ilm li'l-Jamī, 1935), pp. 77-8.

<sup>23</sup> Al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal*, vol. I, p. 87.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87. It seems that the insistence of al-Jahm to take further his view about the contingency of God’s knowledge into the view of His divine essence as an abode of contingencies and change, is the one that leads him into believing that His knowledge is contingent out of –and not in– His essence. See *Ibid.*, p. 87. But the fact remains –and this is important– that His knowledge –according to al-Jahm– is no longer *a priori* thing. It is rather a contingent thing, which continuously changes because events change. And as His knowledge is related to events in this way, that in turn belittles –to a great extent– His absolutist character.

In addition, the affirmation of God's knowledge as eternal and at the same time augmented (to the divine essence) necessitates that "God eternally knows a man who did not –and will not- exist, and knows believers who have never existed and non-believers who are not yet created".<sup>25</sup> God knows eternally what His creatures will do, and He is eternally "monitoring the hidden depth of their heart, the movement of their soul and the secrets of their mysteries with His eternal knowledge that He is attributed with since eternal eternity, and not with an impermanent knowledge, which is imbued in His divine essence by means of change and transformation".<sup>26</sup>

So, it might have become clear from here that human beings were known (by God) either as believers or non-believers before they were created.<sup>27</sup> That is to say that, "human beings are known by His attribute (i.e., knowledge) before their existence that they will be either in hellfire or in paradise".<sup>28</sup> Human beings do nothing except that which God has predetermined eternally by His knowledge that they will do. Consequently, human acts became nothing but a monotonous repetition -for what God knows eternally- void of creativity and innovation. Taking this into mind, it would then become strange that God punishes or rewards human beings for the acts that He imposes upon them according to His eternal knowledge. Hishām Ibn al-Hakam comments that "if God eternally knows what human beings are going to do, then the notion of human responsibility will become meaningless".<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islamiyyīn*, ed. by Muhammad Muḥyiddīn 'Abdul Ḥamīd, (Cairo: Maktabah al-Nahḍah al-Misriyyah, 1950), vol I, p. 223.

<sup>26</sup> Aḥmad Maḥmūd Ṣubḥī, *Fī Ilm al-Kalām*, (Alexandria: Mu'assasah al-Jāmi'iyyah, 1982), vol II, p. 148.

<sup>27</sup> Umar al-Khayyām has recognized the impasse that this view contains manifested in the clear contradiction between the eternal knowledge of human acts (especially when these acts are caused by His knowledge) on the one hand, and between human accountability, reward and punishment on the other. Khayyam says: "God knows before my creation that I will drink wine and not be able to give it up. And if I prevent myself from it, God's *a priori* knowledge about me then turns to be an ignorance"

<sup>28</sup> Al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt*, p. 223.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

From here the Mu'tazilaites maintained that human acts should necessarily be taken beyond the divine knowledge, which is *a priori* in the eternity so as not to sabotage His divine justice. Accordingly, it is impossible in line with this argument that "human being is considered a believer or infidel before his creation and even after it as well".<sup>30</sup> Thus, the divine knowledge is linked to the human acts (as a pure creation of man), while human acts as a man's acquisition is not linked to the *a priori* divine knowledge. To put it differently, human activities are the most important condition for the knowledge of his own essence whether he is a believer or non-believer. So, the view that there is an eternal knowledge transcending any human activity, which is to do with the idea of, "the believers and the non-believers who have not yet been created", is -on the one side of the coin- in agreement with the absolutist tendency, but on the other it is also in apparent contradiction with His divine justice. Naturally, the affirmation of God's attributes as absolute and out of any limitation leads to the "incompatibility of those various divine attributes in their relation to one another".<sup>31</sup>

Be that as it may, the Ash'arite perception of the attributes as absolute and out of any limitation ended up in some kind of confusion and contradiction. For example, the affirmation of knowledge as an eternal and absolute attribute gives rise to the necessity of assuming a type of change which takes place within the divine essence as a result of the change of knowledge immanent within it. Moreover, the proposition that the eternity of divine knowledge concerning what human beings are going to do, is at odds with the divine justice. Bearing this in mind, the absolutist Ash'arite system can be seen as transgressing firstly, the divine essence –assuming its change- and secondly, the divine attributes -assuming its contradiction.

While the Ash'arite perception of the divine attributes as absolute and out of limitation can be seen as transgressing both the divine essence and divine attributes, it can also be seen as having based itself upon a

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>31</sup> Hassan Hanafi, *Dirāsāt Islāmīyyah* (Cairo: Maktabah al-Anglo al-Misriyyah, 1981), p. 51.

severe infraction of the real nature of both the world and human.<sup>32</sup> This becomes apparent when the attribute of divine power is subjected to an analysis. The absolutization of this attribute paved the way for the negation or/and at least the fettering of human effectiveness, while on the other hand caused the breaking down of the objectivity of the natural world and the uniformity of its laws.

This point is so important that to put it in a different way is worthwhile. The assumption that God's power is absolute and is out of any limitation is the one that obliged the Ash'arites to negate human creativity. God's power, according to them, is "an eternal attribute immanent within the divine essence, united without multitude, and related to all things subjected to it (*maqdūrāt*)".<sup>33</sup> These *maqdūrāt* furthermore, are referred to as "all possible things (*mumkin*) which have no end".<sup>34</sup> Thus, God's power extends to include the whole possible things of the world to the extent that, "any movement in the cosmos cannot be indicated at except in manner that it is a subject of that power".<sup>35</sup> Human actions, in this way, are classified within these possible things subjected to the absolute power of God. The reason being that, as al-Ghazzālī says "there is a strong evidence that every possible being is a subject to God's power. Every contingent is possible, and human action is contingent, so it is possible. If it is not related to God's power, then it is no longer possible".<sup>36</sup> From here "Abū al-Ḥasan al-Asha'ri claimed" as al-Rāzī reported "that there is no any effect of human capacity in his action. Both human capacity and his action are from God".<sup>37</sup> Thus, the negation of human creativity and his capacity<sup>38</sup>

<sup>32</sup> It seems accordingly, that the transgression against the world and human leads undoubtedly to the transgression of God, which means that belittling the world implies belittling God in the same way that ruining human being implies ruining God.

<sup>33</sup> Al-Āmidī, *Ghāyat al-Murām fī 'Ilm al-Kalām*, edited by Ḥasan Maḥmūd 'Abdul Laṭīf (Cairo: al-Majlis al-A'lā li'l-Shu'ūn al-Islāmiyyah, 1971), p. 85.

<sup>34</sup> Al-Ghazzālī, *al-Iqtisād*, p. 43.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47

<sup>37</sup> Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Muḥassil Afkār al-Mutaqaddimīn wa al-Muta'akhirīn*, ed. by Ṭāhā 'Abdul Raūf Sa'ad (Cairo, Maktabah al-Kulliyāt al-Azhariyyah, nd), p. 194.

<sup>38</sup> This is in contrast to the Mu'tazalite position of relating God's absolute power to His divine justice. See De Boer, *Tārīkh al-Falsafah fī al-Islām*, translated by Abu Reydah, (Cairo: Matba'ah Lajnat al-Ta'lif wa al-Tarjamah wa al-Nashr, 1938), p. 53.

is the essence of the Ash'arite perception of divine power. There have indeed been an attempt by the Ash'arites themselves to escape from this rigid determinism to the more flexible concept through adopting the theory of acquisition.<sup>39</sup> But this attempt is a total failure.

In advocating this dogma, the Ash'arites found that the world is not large enough to have two capacities where each of them may operate in a special area. In other words, the absolute presence of God's power is possible only in the complete absence of human's capacity.<sup>40</sup> This

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<sup>39</sup>The Ash'arites knew that "in believing that there is no impact for human capacity on his act, have broken down the demands of divine law". See Abū al-Ma'ālī al-Juwaynī, *al-Aqīdah al-Niẓāmiyyah*, ed. by Aḥmad Ḥijāzī al-Saqā, (Cairo: Maktabah al-Kulliyāt al-Azhariyyah, 1987), p. 44. In this way they sought to affirm an insignificant amount of influence of man's capacity on his act. Hence, al-Ash'arī's theory of acquisition led to the belief that God is the creator of all acts, and that humans are acquirers of their acts by means of contingent capacity created for them. "God", in al-Ash'arī's view, "runs His cannon in a way to create human act –if human wants it or is prepared for it– after or below or with the contingent capacity (which in itself is also created). This act is known as acquisition. It is the creation, innovation and invention of God, and the acquisition of human with his created capacity. See al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal*, vol I, p. 97. Although many attempts have been made to modify and improve this theory so as to be more acceptable, it is still pregnant with many serious dilemmas, which made it at the end a coercive theory. Among these dilemmas are: (1) that human acts remain forever the creation of God, and (2) that human capacity –accepting that it is the creation of God– is nothing but the capacity to act (*fi'lun*) and not to abstain (*tarkun*) from it. Human capacity is not an original substance in man, but a mere accident added to him, because accident –according to the Ash'arites– does not remain in two times. That is to say, human capacity does not last. It ceases when an act that comes with it ceases. See al-Juwaynī, *al-Irshād*, ed. by Muḥammad Yūsuf Mūsā, et al (Cairo: Maktabah al-Khangī, 1950), p. 217-8. Thus, human capacity remains a ceased accident *vis-à-vis* an absolute and unlimited power. However, the danger of this dogma becomes apparent when it (dogma) transcends the religious sphere to the domains of politics and ideology.

<sup>40</sup>The Mu'tazalites –on the contrary– believed that the activity of God's power is not manifested in a reasonable manner except in the shade of a relative presence of human capacity. Therefore, they made conditions for human accountability (*taklīf*), which is one of the aspects through which God's power may be achieved in human domain, "the necessity of the *mukallaf* to have the capacity (to perform the obligation) before the time in which the obligation is put forward upon him so that the performance of the obligation may become valid in a manner in which he is obliged". See al-Qāḍī 'Abdul Jabbār, "Kitāb al-Taklīf", *al-Mughnī*, ed. by Muḥammad 'Alī al-Najjar et al, (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyyah al-Āmah li'l-Ta'līf wa'l-Nashr, 1965), vol XI, p. 367.

dogma reflects the treatment of human existence as passive and fragile. And the logical result of that dogma is that any human activity in the areas of knowledge and morality is denied. In truth, it is hard -according to the Ash'arites- to build any morality within the unadulterated human limits. The reason is that, if the foundation of moral life lies in the observation of moral rule, then this rule -according to the Ash'arites- cannot be discovered by human mind. This rule instead, is given by the divine rule. Human in his turn must only submit and obey.<sup>41</sup> Hence, the origin of the Ash'arite morality and its goal stems from the divine. Therefore the Ash'arites completely reject that "human mind can be the only means of knowing the right and ugly action".<sup>42</sup> That is because actions in themselves do not contain any specific character or quality that justifies their morality, i. e., rightness or ugliness. Actions as such, are out of the area of moral judgment due to their emptiness of any moral quality.<sup>43</sup> Thus the evaluation of action's morality -right or ugly- is not the area of human mind but it is the prerogative right of God only. The moral judgments -like the Ash'arite accidents- are only something added to action from without. And if God is the one who adds accidents to substances and joins them, then "the moral judgment

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<sup>41</sup> This is despite the fact that the Ash'arite are able to discover -as the Mu'tazalites have done partially- the strong relation between the moral rule as God's given and the moral rule as human construct. That is so because if there is a rule given by God, then God Himself has undeniably implanted in every human a piece of that given rule. On this basis, the listening of this inner voice or reason leads to the discovery of the given commands ordained by God through revelation. But the Ash'arites -in their loyalty to the dogma of the absolute power- have not realized anything of morality except a rule of obedience and submission given by God. This might explain that morality in our contemporary consciousness is related to submission and blind obedience, and not to insight and conscious commitment.

<sup>42</sup> Al-Baḳillānī, *al-Tambīd*, p. 105.

<sup>43</sup> In this regard, al-Shahrastānī gives us an example that "if we assume that man is created in the state of a complete intuition and perfect mind at once without behaving himself according to the moral standard of certain people, or without parental education, or without any knowledge of divine rule and finally without learning from a teacher, then two things are presented to him that (1) two are more than one, and that (2) it is bad to lie, undoubtedly he will not be bothered about the first, and will be about the second". See al-Shahrastānī, *Nihayat al-Iqdām fi 'Ilm al-Kalām*, ed. by Alfred Gyum (no place, no publication, no date), p. 352.



in its turn can only be attached to human action by God's decree."<sup>44</sup>

Rightness –as some of early scholars explained- means “that which is decreed by God in praising its doer. Ugliness in the meantime means that which is decreed by God in vilifying its doer”.<sup>45</sup>

Just as the relationship between substances and accidents in physics is external and temporal, so also the relationship between moral judgments and human actions. This is to enable God –if He wills- to praise what He previously vilified or to vilify what He previously praised. On this account, the Asha'rite ethics is based on “the revelation of God's decree”,<sup>46</sup> and not on the nature of human being. Within this context, the Ash'arite ethics champions the emptiness of human being and the insignificance of his affairs. It negates human completely for the sake of the divine.

If it seems difficult for the Asha'rites to establish a moral system grounded on what is human, then it would equally be difficult for them to construct an epistemological system based solely on human faculties. Indeed, they maintain that “thinking which leads to knowledge is obligatory”,<sup>47</sup> but this obligation is not a product of the analysis of human essence and his rational nature. It is rather a product of God's command.<sup>48</sup> As one of them says, “the condition of the obligation (of knowledge) is the affirmation of revelation”.<sup>49</sup> Hence, knowledge is not an essential activity of human being *per se*, but an activity which, owes for its very essentiality to the transcendental authority.

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<sup>44</sup> Al-Baḳillānī, *al-Tambīd*, p. 105.

<sup>45</sup> Al-Juwaynī, *al-Irshād*, p. 258.

<sup>46</sup> Al-Baḳillānī, *al-Tambīd*, p. 114.

<sup>47</sup> Al-Juwaynī, *al-Irshād*, p. 8.

<sup>48</sup> It has become clear for the Mu'tazalites that rational thinking is necessary for the affirmation of revelation, and not vice versa. The Mu'tazlites, addressing the Ash'arites, say, “if you negate that the obligation of thinking is not based on mind, then that leads to the nullification of the (rational) argumentation of the prophets against their people. In fact, whenever the prophets called their people toward their message, and asked them to think about their miracles, then the people say, “thinking is not obligatory except through revelation, which is not yet affirmed”. See al-Juwaynī, *al-Irshād*, p. 9.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.



To move further, the Ash'arite epistemological disqualification is not satisfied with confining itself in the notions of rightness and ugliness of human actions. It also extends itself to the wide range of what might be termed "necessary knowledge". As one of them claims "when humans came to the world in a sudden way, they did not have any knowledge by which they could differentiate between foods and medicine or killing poisons. Nor did they have any intuition, which enables them to know what they need. Knowledge of this sort cannot be arrived at by means of reason."<sup>50</sup>

Deeper analysis of those words reveals that for the Ash'arites, there is no any role for both reason and experiment in knowledge because, "knowledge of this kind is not attained through reason, and that humans in order to know it are in need of divine revelation, and that their duty is to base the principle of medicine for example, on revelation and on the tradition of the prophets".<sup>51</sup>

There is no doubt from here that knowledge of this sort discloses the permanent absence of what is human, and the complete presence of what is absolute.

Finally, the disqualification of knowledge within human conditions is related –in the last analysis- to the nature of the Ash'arite ontology. This ontology in fact –so long as it relies on the divine intervention and the continuous creation of things at any moment- does not recognize any kind of knowledge except that which comes through the divine intervention. Thus, the Ash'arite system of thought moves from a man void of the capacity to know by himself to a world empty from the possibility to exist by itself. In this regard, the impoverishment of both man and world aims to inculcate the absolute activity of –again- the divine power. This takes us to the point that the Ash'arite system adopts -in the areas of both ethics and knowledge- the perception of the divine as active only when elements of existence –notably human and world- are absent.

The pre-dominance of the absolutist structure of the Ash'arite system, which is manifested in the complete obliteration of human

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<sup>50</sup> Al-Baqqillānī, *al-Tamhīd*, p. 127.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

capacity for the sake of the absolute power of Lord, becomes apparent especially when any issue of reality is dealt with. If some argue that the issue of human affairs such as the pricing of goods for example, is not debatable because the prices are determined by the changing conditions of man (this is the view of the Mu'tazilites),<sup>52</sup> the Ash'arites believe that "price is linked to what is beyond human choice".<sup>53</sup> They maintain that the changing price –be it higher or lower- is "God's act because it is He who creates the desires of people to buy (or not to buy) and provides circumstances for monopoly. Thus, the scarcity or the abundance of goods does not condition price. Price is conditioned by God, who has made creatures to have a need for foods, and foods are useless and unthinkable without this created need".<sup>54</sup> Hence, the Ash'arite determinism reaches its extreme in the negation of human capacity even in issues that cannot be thought of without the active presence of man in history.<sup>55</sup>

The Ash'arite denial of human capacity for the sake of the absolutization of Lord's power had resulted –in the areas of some fundamental issues such as the pre-determined time for death (*ajāl*) and provision (*riḡq*)- in religious and moral offences. As regard to the issue of *ajal*, the Ash'arites asserted that, "whoever is killed, has indeed died according to his pre-determined time (*ajal*). This means that whosoever is killed, his death is being known by God eternally, and that which has been known by His eternal knowledge must inevitably happen".<sup>56</sup> Undoubtedly, the Ash'arites in considering that the murdered is dead according to his pre-determined time, attempted to avoid recognizing any activity of any power other than that of the absolute divine power.

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<sup>52</sup> Al-Juwaynī, *al-Irshād*, p. 367.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Al-Baḡillānī, *al-Tambīd*, p. 330.

<sup>55</sup> It seems that the Ash'arite emphasis on this metaphysical and unworldly aspect on the issue of price has a direct implication on the apparent justification –on the social level- of the monopolistic and exploitative trend, which accumulates as more profit as possible by bringing the issue of price into the grip of the unknown power on which man has no power whatsoever.

<sup>56</sup> Al-Juwaynī, *al-Irshād*, p. 362.

The Mu'tazilites on the other hand, argue that if that is truly the case then "one whose reason is sound, would not see that there is any role of the murderer in killing the murdered, because what the Ash'arites say (concerning the *ajal*) implies that the real murderer of the murdered is the Lord of the world (God)".<sup>57</sup> On this ground therefore, one may see that -according to the Ash'arites- a moral or judgmental responsibility of the murderer in his murder is being dropped.

The Ash'arite position that "the murdered is dead according to his pre-determined time", may also be seen as sacrificing the original content of some religious texts and legal judgments, especially concerning death penalty for the murderer. That is to say, if death penalty for the murderer comes under the general rule of "soul for soul", this means that death penalty is "to take the murderer's soul off his body just as he took the soul of the murdered off his body. And if what the Ash'arites say is true -that the murdered is dead because of his pre-determined time- then "in court for example, the judges can only sentence the murderer by wounding him and then release him afterward without sentencing him to death, and leaving him to wait his pre-determined death. In truth, God does not mean what the Ash'arites mean. Instead, He -as the Qur'an indicates- wants the judges to take the murderer's soul off his body just as he took the soul of the murdered off his body, and kill him as a punishment of his deed".<sup>58</sup> Thus, death penalty for the murderer means that the murdered is not dead by God's pre-determined decree, but because of the deed of the murderer. It means that in murder there is an active role of the murderer as opposed to the role of the absolute divine power.

Apart from this religious and legal argumentation, the Mu'tazilites also presented a logical evidence against the Ash'arites who negate human role in death by murder. They say that the Ash'arite position concerning God's role in the death of all people in all cases raises the question of a person who committed suicide. "Did such a person indeed kill himself while still having his soul in his body, or did he die

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<sup>57</sup> Yahyā b. al-Ḥusayn, "al-Radd wa al-Iḥtijāj 'alā al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyah", in Muḥammad Imārah (ed.), *Rasā'il al-'Adl wa'l-Tawḥīd*, (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1971), vol II, p. 162.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

because of his time to die, which has been pre-determined by God, has come at the time of his suicide? If they said that such a person murdered himself while still having his soul in his body, then they acknowledged that the self-murderer is responsible for his own act. But if they said that he killed himself after the coming of his pre-determined time, then it is unacceptable because any person whose pre-determined time to die has come is dead and therefore unable to kill himself. That is, it is impossible for a dead to commit a murder”.<sup>59</sup> Thus, the Ash’arite dogma of pre-determined death suffers from moral, religious and logical defects, and necessitates that we attribute the role of murder in man and not in God.

With regard to the issue of provisions (*arḡāq*), the negation by the Ash’arites of human capacity for the sake of the absolute divine power means that “whoever ate or drank something for example, has done so from the provision of his own, be that provision is religiously permissible or not”.<sup>60</sup> If the Ash’arites say that, “when a person steals something to eat, he may be said to have eaten the provision of another person”,<sup>61</sup> then it means that they affirm the capacity of human to steal. But they also often say that, “everything that one steals from other, is a provision for him from God”.<sup>62</sup> All this means that (1) human being has the capacity to steal. (2) God “feeds and provides those who steal, but condemns these provisions as religiously prohibited (*ḥarām*), then proceeds to punish the thieves for their acceptance of what He provides, and keeps them away from taking His reward. This is an aggression against God the All-merciful, and attributing Him as unjust and unfair”.<sup>63</sup> Hence, the Ash’arite denial of human capacity results in the negation of divine justice.

What this aggression ultimately necessitates is that human acts must rather be seen as the product of his own choice and that he has the capacity to do things in order that God may be purified from the

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>60</sup> Abdul Qāhir al-Baghdādī, *Usūl al-Dīn*, (Istanbul: Matba’ah al-Daulah, 1928), p. 144.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Yahya b. al-Husayn, “al-Rad wa al-Ihtijāj”, p. 172.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

accusation of being unjust. In truth, in affirming human capacity as necessary for his own acts lies an affirmation of divine power in a way more logical and more just.

#### **D. Absolutism: From Anthropology to Ontology**

If the absolutist structure of the Ash‘arites’ system of thought appeared clearly in their investigations of human issues, its appearance in their investigations of ontological issues is even more clearer. In other words, while this absolutist structure is apparent in human issues -in the total negation of human capacity and in the unlimited absolutization of divine power- it becomes more apparent ontologically in the total negation of the productivity of nature.

Speaking generally, the Ash‘arites negate any independence or objective natural laws which regulate all natural events in the world. Every natural event –according to them- is categorized as possible governed not by natural law but by divine power, which “encompasses not some of the possible beings as the Mu‘tazilites claimed, but all of them”.<sup>64</sup> In truth, the reliance of the natural events on the divine power reaches a point of abstract generality that it is not possible to indicate at any movement in the cosmos except within the events, which come about under the impact of this comprehensive power. That is because –according to the Ash‘arites- belief in an objective and constant law regulating the natural events is at odds with the completeness of divine power, its continuous intervention in nature, and its inclusiveness of “all possible and innovated things among the celestial and terrestrial beings, as well as the essences and attributes”.<sup>65</sup> All this reveals that the Ash‘arites did not hesitate to break down the system of nature on the one hand, and that there is an essential and intrinsic correlation between the Ash‘arite view of nature and the absolutist structure of their system, on the other.

Interestingly, the Ash‘arite teaching about nature was not grounded in the aspiration to know and rule the nature, but in the

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<sup>64</sup> Kamāl al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Ḥanafī, *Ishārāt al-Murām min Ṭibādāt al-Imām*, ed. by Yūsuf ‘Abdul Rāziq, (Cairo: Ṭabā‘at al-Ḥilbī, 1949), p. 133.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

tendency to display the principles of the Ash'arite dogma. "The (Ash'arite) theologians", it is said, "wanted to display the impact of the divine power in its most important subject, which is the cosmos, after the absolute active impact of this power upon the human existence has been affirmed. That is why, there is no need for the Muslims to understand and interpret the natural phenomenon, except in a way that supports the belief that it is the sole product of God, and not that of nature".<sup>66</sup> Hence, nature in the Ash'arite system of thought functions only to "assist human reason to discover God and explaining His reality".<sup>67</sup>

In fact, the Ash'arite position in reducing the natural world to indivisible parts is a prelude to the affirmation of the finite things being under the universal knowledge and absolute power of God. The Ash'arite argument goes that "comprehensive knowledge is not possible except with the finite things, and finite things are not imaginable except when they are divided as indivisible part".<sup>68</sup> On the other hand, the Ash'arite view about the accidents (*al-a'rād*) being incapable of existing twice intends clearly to accentuate the unique and prerogative right of divine power to act in the natural world. To say that nature can exist twice would lead the Ash'arites to the contradictory premise that "nature is active and that its act is everlasting".<sup>69</sup>

Thus the Ash'arite investigations of natural issues were dyed by a solid dogmatic trait; a trait that made the Ash'arite natural principles a matter of acceptance and submission, and not thinking and criticism. From here, one of the staunch Ash'arites like al-Baghdādī, saw in al-Nazzām al-Mu'tazilite's criticism of the indivisible part a reason for his accusation as an infidel.<sup>70</sup> Every contemplation on nature which aims to achieve an objective explanation of natural issues, and not merely a teleological justification of them, is unacceptable according to the Ash'arites. For them, teleology –or divine manifestation– and

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<sup>66</sup> De Boer, *Tārīkh al-Falsafah*, p. 68.

<sup>67</sup> Muḥammad Ābid al-Jābirī, *Takwīm al-Aql al-'Arabī*, (Beirut, Dār al-Ṭalī'ah, 1984), p. 29.

<sup>68</sup> Aḥī Sāmī al-Nashār, *Nash'at al-Fikr*, vol I, p. 273.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 477.

<sup>70</sup> Al-Baghdādī, *al-Farq Bayn al-Firaq*, (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīdah, 1973), p. 316.

not understanding –or scientific discovery- is the end of their contemplation on natural issues. At this point, nature is not an independent phenomenon understandable within its own boundaries.<sup>71</sup> It is rather an imperfect and fragile entity that cannot be explained except in a way that treats it as a mere manifestation of an absolute power. Thus, the Ash'arites propagate a perception of natural world as based on separation and division. Natural world then, needs a continuous assistance and intervention from without; a view which once again accentuates the absolute, dominating and intervening power at the expense of the uniformed and constant natural law.

Fragmentation and emptiness appear clearly in the Ash'arite perception of the natural world especially when this world is understood as, “a mass of separated parts in a way that one of these parts does not have anything to do with the other”.<sup>72</sup> Natural world accordingly suffers –all the way- from imperfection, degeneration, and stagnation. And all this cannot be uplifted except through the intervention of the absolute power that joins one part to another and creates the act of all parts. Substances and accidents then, are the components of the natural world for the Ash'arites. They are the “two categories through which we can conceive the realized things in the

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<sup>71</sup> In fact, the Ash'arite perception of nature is consistent with the ancient perception of it, which always runs parallel to the metaphysical principles of a system in whose perspective nature is understood. From here comes the difference of the understanding of nature in accordance to the difference of the metaphysical systems. From here too comes the difference between the Platonic and Aristotelian understandings of nature on the one hand, and the difference between the Ash'arite and Farabian understanding of it on the other. On this premise, the Ash'arites have never been –as some have assumed- “excellent pioneers of modern science”. See Alī Sāmī al-Nashār, *Manāhij al-Baḥth*, p. 127. All this because the epistemological structure of the Ash'arite science –if any- agrees with the structure of the ancient science, both being the product of certain metaphysical assumptions. Although a contemporary scientific theory necessitates –for the purpose of interpretation and understanding- an assumption of metaphysical premises, one cannot argue that there is a substantive difference between the metaphysical assumptions, which –for its acceptance- requires certain perception of nature, and between nature, which –for its understanding- requires certain metaphysical assumption.

<sup>72</sup> De Boer, *Tārīkh al-Falsafah*, p. 70.

natural world”.<sup>73</sup> In spite of the philosophical echo of the two categories however, they contain –according to the Ash’arites- some implications, which are different from the implications that the philosophers understood. If substance according to the philosophers is “the self-constituent and self-concretized thing by its essence”,<sup>74</sup> then according to the Ash’arites thing cannot exist –or concretize- due to itself, because everything exist and concretize due to God. Therefore, substance according to them is the ultimate end of body’s division, or it is -to be more precise- the indivisible part of body. Undoubtedly, “if substances or bodies do not exist due to themselves, then there is enough space for the direct intervention of divine power, not only to create things *ex nihilo* but also to combine, merge and gather substances and parts, or to separate and divide them”.<sup>75</sup>

On the other hand, the perception that substance cannot be self-constituent leads to the premise that the unity or existence of body is an external and artificial phenomenon. By this virtue, body becomes a subject of eradication and demise, since it is empty from any internal basis for its unity and existence. Here the absolute divine power appears once again as the one who preserves the unity and existence of body.

Now, the belief that substance does not have the ability to self-concretization or self-constituency yields ultimately to the ontological problem of the world’s persistence (*baqā*) in existence. It is not possible to imagine the world in existence as persistent by itself in the light of what has been said concerning substance, which cannot be self-constituent. The perception that substance is not self-constituent means that, “substances do not persist in existence due to themselves but due to something else added to them by God”,<sup>76</sup> something, which

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>74</sup> Majma al-Lughah al-Arabiyyah, “al-Mu’jam al-Falsafī”, *Janhar* (Cairo: no publisher, 1979), p. 64.

<sup>75</sup> Ahmad Maḥmūd Ṣubḥī, *Fī Ilm al-Kalām*, p. 213.

<sup>76</sup> Harvy A. Walfson, *The Philosophy of Kalam* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 526. In our inquiry about the notion of the eternity of substance and accident, we rely in fact on this book. This is because in our view, this book contains the most acute and comprehensive treatment about the issue in hand.



God creates so that substances can persist in existence every moment.<sup>77</sup> On that note, substance does not have a real existence. It has rather an external, fragile and superficial existence added to them by God every moment. Similarly, on that same note, the world does not have a real existence. It has rather a superficial and empty existence based on the continuous creation of God. The concept that the Ash'arites propagate concerning substance therefore, leads to the perception that the world exists in a superficial and unreal way. Its existence -like human act- is metaphorical and unreal. Both exist only insofar as God wants them to exist through His creation.

Up to this point, it has become clear that the Ash'arite perception of substance is essentially linked to the intention of paving the way for the dominance of divine power, which creates and preserves creatures in existence. It may equally have become clear that their perception of accident displays the activity of this divine power in a more universal and apparent way. In fact, the Ash'arites believe that accidents are "attributes that appear in bodies and substances, and disappear at the second time of their existence".<sup>78</sup> According to this definition, accident is a kind of existence destined for disappearance and demise.<sup>79</sup> Having said that, this definition is likely linked to the Qur'an as its origin as well as to the Ash'arites' perception of time. Time, they maintain "ends to indivisible parts or timeless moments, like bodies".<sup>80</sup> Time therefore, is "a sum total of separated moments

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<sup>77</sup> In fact, the idea of persistence itself becomes subsequently a "thing" like accident which exists in something else. See *Ibid.*, p. 524. Because the persistence of accidents—according to the Ash'arites—cannot be perceived, this persistence—which is accident—cannot be perceived except through another persistence. And the rule of the second persistence is just like the rule of the first one *ad infinitum*. Hence, the logical crisis—in which the Ash'arites stuck themselves in—and which is manifested in the no-end circle (*tasalsul*) *ad infinitum*, must be seen as the natural result of their negation of the self-constituency of substance, and therefore of the creativity of nature.

<sup>78</sup> Al-Baqqillānī, *al-Tamhīd*, p. 18.

<sup>79</sup> The Ash'arites found in the Qur'an bases for their definition of accident as destined to disappearance and demise. The Qur'an says, "You want the accident ('*arad*) of the world, and God wants the hereafter (*ākhirah*) (8/67)". It also says, "They say: this (disappearing) cloud is falling unto us as a rain" (46/24).

<sup>80</sup> De Boer, *Tārīkh al-Falsafah*, p. 70.

or atoms, each takes place after the other without any affinity between them”.<sup>81</sup> The part (or atom) of time –it follows– is considered an independent unit without any relation with the part that comes before or after it. That is why, the Ash’arites treated time as separated atoms, and not joined moments. Undoubtedly, this perception of time conduces necessarily to the assumption of emptiness or non-existence among these separated points. Emptiness or non-existence in other words, stands in between the two of the Ash’arite time of atoms.<sup>82</sup> From here it is not possible for accident to exist in two times, because there is between one part of time and another, a gap which must impose itself upon the accident. What is noteworthy is that, the Ash’arite analysis of time presumably ended up in the logical induction of the nihilistic aspect of accident –and subsequently of substance too. That is, the Ash’arites perceived that non-existence –of both accidents and substances– is a logical necessity, and not an act of divine activity.

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<sup>81</sup> Alī Sāmī al-Nashār, *Nash’at al-Fikr*, vol I, p. 475.

<sup>82</sup> The Ash’arites attempted to transcend this metaphysical crisis by saying that time jumps from one moment to another. But it seems that this metaphysical solution as it were, leads to an ideological crisis. In fact, time is based upon the idea of “jump”; that is a cancellation of any relationship –be it necessary or logical– between the past moment and the next one because of which the notion of man’s progress may be said to lose its basis and meaning. Accordingly, this physical assumption of time –on the ideological level– leads to the impossibility of the emergence of consciousness in its historical form, because this consciousness is based essentially on the necessity of the continuity of historical moments in a way that an horizon for the attainment of historical experience may be opened up. This is a raw material of historical consciousness. And because progress is particularly possible through the emergence of consciousness in its historical form, this idea of progress in a contemporary Arabic and Islamic discourse is characterized by a great amount of uncertainty and ambiguity. That is because progress is not a product of historical experience and consciousness, but a jump from one moment to another in history; a moment which is possibly borrowed from its past-self (bygone traditionalism) or from its present-other (contemporary traditionalism). However, both traditionalism agree that progress is a jump from one moment in history to another without an intensive analysis of a current historical situation. And it is from here that both views gain their traditionalism at once and at the same time. Finally, the hegemony of the Ash’arite system whose structure is centered around the idea of elimination and not assimilation, made progress in our contemporary discourse a negation of a moment in history for the sake of another, or at best, a preservation of both moments together in an artificial co-existence.

This undoubtedly, is linked to the Ash'arite teaching that divine power is related to creation and not to non-existence because, "the non-existence of events –be they substances or accidents- take place due to themselves, and not due to divine power since the effect of that power is only existential. Hence, divine power is not related to non-existence".<sup>83</sup> And because the Ash'arites assume that "the world needs not a creator in the case of having existed due to itself",<sup>84</sup> it follows consequently that "the continuous creation" of God must be affirmed, since "the reason for the need of the creator is creation".<sup>85</sup> But interestingly, continuous creation is not possible except through the affirmation of the continuous nihilisation that takes place prior to the continuous creation. In this whole scenario, the Ash'arites were forced to bring non-existence into the world's entity as a logical necessity and not as an act of divine activity in order that God's act does not appear absurd. Nonetheless, the fact remains that this non-existence is considered -in the Ash'arite ontology- simply as a prelude to the affirmation of divine activity, and not as a reflection of the evolutionary nature of existence as in Hegel.

In truth, the belief in the continuous creation was the most important result that the idea of the world's non-existence has produced. The reason being that when an accident turns to be non-existent, another accident must be recreated otherwise the world will cease to exist. And if the non-existence of the accident is self-caused, its recreation and appearance at certain time is not –in contrast- self-caused. Nor is it –as philosophers assume- caused by "a sequence (of reasons) which necessitates its appearance at certain time".<sup>86</sup> This appearance of accident is rather caused by "the All-mighty God, who determines by His will the time of creating the accident as it is possible for Him to create the accident before the time of its creation (determined by Him) or after it".<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, according to the

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<sup>83</sup> Muḥammad Nawawī b. 'Umar al-Jāwī, *Sharḥ al-Dur al-Farīd fī 'Aqā'id Ahl al-Tanḥīd*, last edition, (Cairo: Maktabah al-Ḥalabī, 1954), p. 21.

<sup>84</sup> Al-Sayyid al-Sanad, *Sharḥ al-Manāqif*, (Cairo, Maṭba'at al-Bū'lāq, 1266 H), p. 199.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

Ash'arites there is no any slightest influence in the creation of accidents, as they are created merely by His Will without any observation to the requirements of law and wisdom. It goes without saying therefore, that the continuous creation of accidents is linked to substances and to the whole existence because to think of the demise of accident without the nullification of substance is not possible. Substance is nullified when accident becomes non-existent. From here, if accident cannot persist in existence for two times, "substances similarly, cannot persist in existence for two times for substances are just like accidents in this regard".<sup>88</sup> The logical sleight of hand in this whole argument is that, because the demise of accident causes the nullification of substance, the persistence of substance in turn requires by necessity the recreation by God of accident. To put it differently, the recreation of accident is the cause of substance's persistence in existence. As the Ash'arites maintain, "accident is the condition for the persistence of substance in existence. And since the existence of accident is constantly renewed, recreated and is in need of cause, substance is also in need of that cause -in order that it can exist- through the mediation of the cause needed by its condition, which is accident".<sup>89</sup> This means that the continuous creation of accident is the continuous creation of substance too.

Thus, the resultant typology of the Ash'arite analysis about existence leads to the premise that the most simple element in existence is unable to continue to persist except by "relying at all times and in all conditions upon the divine intervention".<sup>90</sup> It follows that the natural world does not enjoy any productivity or subjective activity. Indeed, in some cases the Ash'arites believe that accident –and therefore substance- may be active and productive without any intervention from without. But they say this only –and only- in connection to the demise and nullification of accident. That is to say, accident is only active for its own demise and nullification, while for its existence and persistence it remains in need of divine activity. The perception that nature is passive and dead –as the Ash'arites propagate- finds its endorsement

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<sup>88</sup> De Boer, *Tārīkh al-Falsafah*, p. 71.

<sup>89</sup> Al-Sayyid al-Sanad, *Sharḥ al-Manāqif*, p. 199.

<sup>90</sup> Afī Sāmī al-Nashār, *Nash'at al-Fikr*, vol I, p. 476.

and explanation in their perception of divine absolute power as the only active player in the world.

To continue, if the belief in the continuous creation of the world has become –in the Ash'arite ontology- something necessary for the explanation of the extension of the world into existence, it is equally necessary –within their epistemological theory- for the explanation of the possibility of this world to be known. That is to say, the divine guaranty for the existence of the world is necessary so that this existence can be known. That is because, the continuous creation of the world does not mean –according to the Ash'arites- a continuous preservation of that world with one act of God, but it means an endless process of creation and recreation of the world by God's renewal act in every moment. Accordingly, existence is not a property of one and constant world even though God through His act wills so, but to sequences of infinite worlds. Although, the same world is created every moment, it is not one world, “but a sequence of worlds succeeding one another to the extent that they seem to us –through this succession- as if they are one world”.<sup>91</sup> Undoubtedly, such a world –void of steadiness and necessity- is the one, which is not possible to be known for certain except through the transcendental intervention.<sup>92</sup> So the ontology, which is guaranteed by divine intervention gives birth –on the level of

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<sup>91</sup> De Boer, *Tārīkh al-Falsafah*, p. 71.

<sup>92</sup> In fact this kind of assumption seems to be the inevitable result of any theory about existence which sacrifices the objectivity of the world for the sake of the absolute. It is well-known that the Sophist tendency –especially that which is represented by Gorgias- has come to an extreme agnostic conclusion about the possibility of knowing the world. And that was after its successful destruction of the objectivity of the world for the sake of man, who –under certain circumstances- became an absolute to whom everything must be measured. The Ash'arites in their turn, -had they not found a guarantee in the absolute- would have come to the same agnostic conclusion after having dislodged the world of its steadiness and necessity for the sake of the absolute power. The possibility of human knowledge therefore, remains essentially linked to the theory of existence on the one hand, and to the possible relationship between its three circles (God, the world and man) on the other. A more balanced relationship between these three circles however, leads to the affirmation of the possibility of human knowledge, while knowledge under the dominance of the transcendental conditions is not possible except through the transcendental intervention.

knowledge- to an epistemology guaranteed by the divine.<sup>93</sup> It means that if divine intervention is an ontological necessity, then it is also an epistemological demand. And it is this particular issue that displays the Ash'arite negation of the activity of both world and man, and the accentuation of the absolute divine essence as the sole power in existence.

Now, if the absolutist structure of the Ash'arite system is manifested in an apparent way in our examination of the elements of the natural world, it is equally manifested clearly in our analysis of the relationships between these elements. In other words, "if substance cannot be separated from accident", and "accident cannot exist without substance"<sup>94</sup> since accident does not stand in existence by itself, and does not stand in another accident,<sup>95</sup> then the relationship between substance and accident is not regulated by any totality or universality. That is because certain accident is related to a certain substance, in a way that "it cannot in itself be related to another substance".<sup>96</sup> To give an example, "a blackness which is related to its particular location is not at all the same blackness of other location".<sup>97</sup> On this basis there is no total meaning or category that includes more than one substance or one part among parts present outside, because all parts are caught in the grip of an absolute power that joins or separates them. Thus, the absoluteness of the dominant structure of the Ash'arites' system becomes apparent in their investigation of nature.

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<sup>93</sup> In fact, epistemological concepts of certain system in most cases run parallel to the ontological concepts included within that system. That is because of the fact that the two concepts belong to a certain structure around which that system revolves. From here the essentiality of the connection between the epistemological concept and ontological perception ensues in a way that the ontology—being in itself self-dependent—conduces to self-dependent epistemology. It is from here that a philosopher like Descartes needed—in order to jump outside the solitude of his own ego- to a "Lord", who guarantees the truth of his knowledge of existence, or even the very persistence of that existence. Similarly, the Ash'arites—apart from not having a comprehensive theory of knowledge- have nonetheless ontological perceptions, which would have led to an epistemological formulation of the same nature like that of Descartes'.

<sup>94</sup> De Boer, *Tārīkh al-Falsafah*, p. 69.

<sup>95</sup> Al-Baghdādī, *al-Farq*, p. 317, and al-Sayyid al-Sanad, *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif*, p. 197.

<sup>96</sup> Afī Sāmī al-Nashār, *Nash'at al-Fikr*, vol I, p. 475.

<sup>97</sup> Al-Sayyid al-Sanad, *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif*, p. 202.

Finally, it might have become clear from this that there is a structure that regulates the elements of the Ash'arite investigation of the issues relating to the divine, human, and the natural world. It is indeed possible to formulate a comprehensive system capable of binding all these issues together despite their apparent differences; a system, which finds its explanation only –and only- in its affiliation with the absolutistic structure. Indeed, this structure is absolutistic because it pre-imposes the presence and activity of the divine in an absolute way, at the expense of the marginality and passivity of human and nature.

Final marks must be made. The absolutist structure of the Ash'arites' teaching is linked admittedly to their incapability of realizing the content of the relationship between the three cycles (God, human, and the world) in an interactive and assimilative way, as opposed to a dominating and exclusive manner. This means that the world according to the Ash'arites has only one side that dominates and eliminates others. And in addition to the theoretical aspects that this structure has, the fact that this structure reflects the vision about the real world is something undeniable. That is to say, it is not possible to isolate this formulation of the absolutist structure from the social and political views of the Ash'arites. It has been proven so far that the Ash'arites have a system, which revolves around a certain structure of specific characters and which dictates all their theological issues. It follows that the task of any sub-inquiry upon an Ash'arite particular issue can only be confined to that which discovers the presence of the total structure within this specific issue; an issue that must be relegated under a total system that bestows upon it its rationality and explanation. So, it is necessary to remove the partiality of any particular issue and - on the ground that science is essentially linked to the total and not to the particular- put that particular issue under the umbrella of the total system so that it may become a scientific issue. It goes without saying at the end, that an investigation of any particular issue –such as prophecy- is accordingly, a negation of its particularity. That is because it is –in depth- an attempt to place that particular issue under the dictate of the total system, which bestows upon it its rationality and explanation.

## **E. Conclusion**

This investigation does not only aim to bring the partial and fragmented Ash'arite issues under the umbrella of the concept of discourse, but also aims to interrogate and ultimately to control absolutism, which employs the theological rhetoric to veil its ideological content. The line of argument that the essay follows is that, in its employment of the theological rhetoric, absolutism aspires –in addition to the concealment of its ideological content- the attempt to ascend itself to the world of sacredness in order that it may become immune of any criticism and unquestionable in its perpetuating domination.

The essay would suggest that the only way to get out of the crisis that the Arab/Muslim world faces is to replace the tradition of absolutism with the culture of consciousness. This means that any attempt to reform and change must start from the deconstruction of the Arab and Muslim mind/discourse, and not from the critique of their practice and politics only. Apart from this suggested attempt, it is not ironical that absolutism would reproduce itself under the masks of the Western –or even Muslim- initiatives of reform and change. But this does not mean that the political reform must be postponed until the intellectual deconstruction is achieved. The works of the politicians in their political reform must be accompanied by the efforts of the intellectuals in their deconstruction of the mind and discourse of the Arabs and the Muslims.



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