

I *believe* this is the last pre-publication version of the published article. I wrote it a long time ago, so the transliteration is a little chewed up.

Subject and body in Baṣran Mu'tazilism
Or: Mu'tazilite kalām and the fear of triviality

I

In this paper I want to offer some reflections on the practice of reading Mu'tazilite texts, and in particular on the broader and difficult questions which have to do with deciding on what is the right distance to keep from the texts one studies. This is the question I have captioned as the fear of triviality. Though my questions are broad, I will be asking them narrowly of the Mu'tazilites (which means that Ash'arite and other forms of *kalām*, for all the affinities between them, will receive little mention). To make the issues concrete, I will be framing my remarks around a discussion of a particular dispute – to be precise, of a moment within that dispute – current among Mu'tazilite *mutakallimūn*, concerning the question 'what is man' (*'mā huwa al-insān'*). In pursuing my questions, my aim will be, not so much to advocate a definite view of how one ought to approach Mu'tazilite *kalām*, but rather to describe a particular approach and the difficulties and worries which attend it – both because I think they are interesting difficulties, but also because clarifying them might help in forming a judgment as to whether some such approach is sustainable.

II

The stage for looking at these questions has to be set by adumbrating some important elements in the interpretive activity which Mu'tazilite texts excite. One of these elements concerns the formal features of the texts; the other concerns their substantive features, and with both the interest lies in the implications they have for the distance one keeps from the texts.

What is distinctive about their form is that in a great part of their surface, many of the Mu'tazilite texts we know preserve the appearance of having issued by accretion through the practice of disputation and the *ad hoc* responsiveness that arises through it. This remark would not settle on all Mu'tazilite works with equal comfort. Distinctions need to be made between works which bear more of an oral character and stand closer to the praxis of disputation, as against works which have the closure and order of written products. 'Abd al-Ġabbār's (d. 1025) *Muġnī*, which presently forms the most extensive source for our knowledge of the school, would fall rather in the first category, as would Abū Rašīd al-Nīsābūrī's *al-Masā'il fī'l-khilāf bayna al-Basriyyīn wa'l-Baġdādiyyīn*, while a work such as Mānkḏīm's (d. 1034) *Šarḥ al-uṣūl al-khamṣa* would be nearer the latter, its paced composure more representative of a work which has imagined the reader.

The plethora of hypothetical arguments and counterarguments which fill the pages of many works of *kalām*, the ‘if one says, we will say’ motif with which the dispute wends its vibrant way through ever-subtler byways – these are features too familiar to readers of *kalām* to need further comment. What is more worthwhile is to attempt to state more explicitly the practice of reading which this practice of writing begets. While in a general sense it could be said that a natural concomitant of textual interpretation is to commit the reader to the grip of a holistic view of knowledge – it is impossible to know anything until we know everything, that is until we know all the relations into which a single idea enters – holistic convictions are more likely to be excited by those Mu‘tazilite texts which stand closer to the living encounter within which theology was produced, taught and defended. The reason for this has to do with the relative difficulty of satisfying them: the thematic discontinuities which mark Mu‘tazilite works mean that the contents are never signposted in a reader-friendly way that makes it easy to seek, and to find. While indeed expository sections are a help in finding one’s way around a topic, often the Mu‘tazilite view of a question will need to be soldered together by mining the arguments and counterarguments which carry the disputation forward. Given the fact that a single idea *does* enter into relations with many other elements of the system, and given the crucial importance of preserving consistency throughout the system – which means that counterarguments constantly cross-reference the system to challenge its capacity to remain consistent – often thematically related topics will exist in wide dispersion, and the exact location of the material one requires will be hard to predict in advance, demanding a measure of serendipity to light upon it.

If this feature serves to submerge one into the texts, what submerges one even further is the fact that often, when a clear Mu‘tazilite exposition of an issue will be lacking, one’s task will not be confined to gathering the evidence, but will extend to systematising it. One will need to forge connections where none had been made explicit by the theologians themselves, giving rise to a reading practice so fastidious that one could give twenty words in explanation of the two one finds in the text, and drawing one deeper into the role of a commentator scribbling in the margins and ghost-writing the deeper narrative of Mu‘tazilite thought.

This reading practice is related to the second, ‘substantive’ aspect of Mu‘tazilite writing, which both serves to encourage it further yet at the same time renders it problematic. The demand for fastidious commentary arises not merely out of the dispersion of the evidence or the absence of a clearly articulated Mu‘tazilite standpoint, but also from the fact that the standpoint from which the issues are conceived often seems utterly unfamiliar, other, unexpected. There may be different types of expectation with which one approaches a text, some less wisely formed than others, but a modicum of expectation is inevitable if one is to believe he has understood what is being talked about at all. And this unfamiliarity intensifies the need for a fastidious commentary which would dispel the peculiarities and ideally not merely *describe* the standpoint but also explain it.

From this position, in which one is struck by the strangeness of the Mu‘tazilite thought-world, it is only a short step to taking up an evaluative attitude towards it. The Mu‘tazilite perspective often seems – not merely different – but (unsettling as it is to admit this to oneself) inadequate to its subject; one might say, ‘naïve’. This step certainly is a short one if, as has been suggested, one cannot ‘make sense of something’ without *granting* that it makes sense – i.e. if one cannot separate

understanding from evaluating.¹ Yet the distinction should not be pressed too hard; and it would seem that the most attentive efforts to make sense of Mu'tazilite theology on its own terms, such as the efforts of Richard Frank, proceed on the assumption that we can separate the two.² And in taking up an evaluative attitude to the Mu'tazilite thought-world, there is the confidence that one has *first* succeeded in making sense of it and *then* proceeded to weigh its merits. It is here that one feels the pinch of the interpretive predicament: for how close an engagement with the texts can one justify to oneself when not an adherent of the belief-system one is trying to understand? There are certain lengths of interpretation which seem unjustifiable if one's sole gain is nothing in the way of what's true, but only a speculative belief about what a given individual thought or 'would have thought if'. Here one finds the germ of the fear of triviality which figures in the title of this paper, which is the fear that the objects one so fastidiously pursues lack the intellectual value which would justify one's efforts. The notions of 'value' and 'justification' deployed here are chafing ones, and I will need to return to them later.

The reader of Mu'tazilite texts, then, is forced to do a lot of talking; and in talking so much, and in such detail, to fill the gaps between the raised points of Mu'tazilite thinking, the engagement with the system into which the reader is called is exacting enough to call forth regular re-evaluations of the activity. Above all: if one is talking so much, to *whom* is one talking? Is one a spokesman? Is this a story which can be told? Which anyone else would care to hear? And why would anyone want to, if it is not believable?

Here, hoping I have named some of the most important knots in one's encounter with the Mu'tazilites, I would like to put them aside in order to resume them again at a later point for further comment, and turn my attention to a particular episode of Mu'tazilite thinking which will make these issues concrete. In the moment in the debate over 'what is man' which we will look at, many of the interpretive predicaments discussed above come together: one encounters a perspective that seems to cast the 'subject' in an unfamiliar shape, and one falls into the texts in an effort to piece the story together. But having rotated to the right position one is then brought up short against elements of the story that one can't help considering in an evaluative light, and one is confronted with the fear of triviality. This raises questions about the role of the criteria of value one brings to the task in creating the difficulty. At the same time, it is a showcase for the strategies one might be tempted to use in salvaging the value of one's interpretive work, exemplifying the possible pitfalls of a reading practice which has the reader talking at such length.

¹ This, at least, is how one might take Cora Diamond's remarks in her 'Ethics, imagination and the *Tractatus*', in A. Crary and R. Read, eds., *The New Wittgenstein* (London and New York, 2000), esp. 156-7 (the view she is presenting is one which she ascribes to Wittgenstein). Her way of making the point is more precisely this: one cannot say of someone that *he thinks that p* if one considers *p* to be nonsense (as against, 'he said, "*p*"' – where *p* might be inarticulate gibberish); if one does say this, *p* must be a sentence in one's own language which one understands. Of course in this connection one would need to mark a distinction in terms of the different kinds of subject matter within *kalām*: there are areas in which questions of evaluation are simply not relevant – such as the Mu'tazilites' views of the physical world, where an antiquarian or 'non-communicative' approach is clearly the only option.

² It is then a *further* question whether they have made sense of the texts by coming to identify with their point of view so closely that, while not simply producing it in apostrophised form, they have set aside the challenge of making themselves comprehensible to an audience whose point of view is distant from that of the Mu'tazilites. *Should* they wish to do so? This is a question in whose long shadow this paper is written.

III

I called it an episode or a moment, but in fact the aspect of the debate which I will be focusing on plays a fairly central role in the discussion and it is probably the most important argument employed to support the position advocated by the later Baṣran Mu'tazilites, whose views reach us through vol. 11 of 'Abd al-Ġabbār's *Muġnī* (entitled *al-Taklīf*) and Ibn Mattawayh's (d. 1076) *al-Maġmū' fi'l-muḥīt bi'l-taklīf*.³ The debate in which this moment takes its place is the question captioned as '*mā huwa al-insān*', which we would naturally translate as 'what is man'. About this debate I hope to have more to say elsewhere, but here I want to confine myself to characterising briefly the perspective through which it is conducted, where the most important task will be to ensure that this is not confused with the perspective through which it is *not* conducted. The latter is the one which even a passing acquaintance with formulations of an Aristotelian timbre might naturally have put one in mind of: the *mā huwa* would be conceived as a question about the definition of man considered as a kind of being, which would involve discussing those attributes which human beings possess and sorting them modally: these are necessary, these contingent. (The more precise form of the Aristotelian answer would be in terms of the genus to which an entity belongs and the specific difference which distinguishes it). 'This, then, is the kind of being really man is'. Questions about the implications of this view of man for death and immortality would be lurking doggedly in the background.

To describe this as an 'Aristotelian' formulation is perhaps to imply that only the reader who has intentionally cultivated a philosophical education would give such content to the question. Whereas it does not seem presumptuous to anticipate that this is how most readers with a Western education would naturally understand it. And this is to say that most readers who believed themselves to have identified the shape of the subject would be surprised by the shape into which the Mu'tazilites actually moulded it. For in fact the Mu'tazilites parsed this question in a way that seems to be the precise inverse of that which the Aristotelian would have imagined, construing it as a question that asks to know something not at the level of *attributes*, but at the level of the *subject* that bears them. The name 'man' (*insān*) itself is revealed to be redundant in the discussion, and the focus is instead on the attributes 'living' (*ḥāy*) and 'capable of voluntary action' (*qādir*), the twin qualifications that figure prominently in the Mu'tazilite treatment of man as a being subject to the Law (*mukallaḥ*). The question 'what is man' is then construed as a question about the subject of which attributes (*sīfāt* or *ahkām*) such as these are predicated.⁴

It is an interesting question whether one should see this construal as a *misconstrual* of their opponents' positions, such as those of Mu'ammār ibn 'Abbād al-Sulamī (d. 830) and al-Nazzām (d. circa 835-45), which would not seem to be pitched

³ 'Abd al-Ġabbār, *Al-Muġnī fi abwāb al-tawḥīd wa'l-'adl*, XI: *al-Taklīf*, 309ff, and Ibn Mattawayh, *Kitāb al-Maġmū' fi l-Muḥīt bi-l-Taklīf* (Paraphrase du Muḥīt du Qādī 'Abd al-Ġabbār), ed. J. J. Houben, revised by D. Gimaret, (Beirut, 1981), vol.2, 241ff.

⁴ A more detailed description of the perspective from which the question was conceived will hopefully form the subject of a forthcoming study. For discussion of the Baṣran view of man, see Majid Fakhry, 'The Mu'tazilite view of man', in *Recherches d'Islamologie: Recueil d'articles offert à Georges C. Anawati et Louis Gardet par leurs collègues et amis* (Leuven, 1977); Richard Frank, *Beings and their Attributes* (Albany, New York, 1978), chap. 2; 'Abd al-Karīm 'Uthmān, *Nazāriyyat al-taklīf* (Beirut, 1971) 305 ff; and Marie Bernand, *Le problème de la connaissance d'après le Muġnī du caḍī 'Abd al-Ġabbār* (Algiers, 1982), 109-21, though none of these works address the issue entirely. Note: for the sake of convenience, I will sometimes be abbreviating the translation of *qādir* ('capable of voluntary/autonomous action') as 'capable'.

at this level (Mu‘ammar: man is an indivisible atom to which spatial or corporeal attributes do not apply; Naz□z□ām: man is a spiritual substance diffused throughout the body). Such a misconstrual would perhaps reflect the natural inability of a given metaphysical scheme to understand a conflicting scheme in any but its own terms.⁵ What makes the question interesting is partly that it can provide a way of responding to a possible charge that to experience the Mu‘tazilite standpoint as unfamiliar, other or unexpected (as was suggested above), one must be importing standpoints from intellectual spheres that are inappropriately removed from the Islamic scene. The standpoint seems surprising even if one looks at it from a perspective internal to this scene.

What is important is that the rejection of these opposing positions was conducted by construing them as claims about what the subject of predications consists in, and in particular as claims about what the subject is *not* – that it is not the totality or aggregate (*ḡumla*) of the person but something inside him (Naz□z□ām’s ‘diffused spirit’) or something outside him (a polemical construal of Mu‘ammar’s non-spatial indivisible atom). So this is the position which the late Bas□ran Mu‘tazilites defend: that ‘man’ – or, what amounts to the same, the attributes which are predicated of man (living, capable of voluntary action, willing, perceiving and so on) – is predicated of the totality. In ‘Abd al-Ġabbār’s words, ‘it is the totality which is qualified as being living and capable’. And in Ibn Mattawayh’s: ‘man is this totality which we see, not something outside it or something permeating it’.⁶

I will have more to say about the nature of this totality in a moment, but what should be noted is that this position can be seen as a fundamental expression of the theory of modes (or states: *ah□wāl*) developed by Abū Hāšim as this applies to human beings, and in particular to the theorem which concerns the special properties or characteristics (*ah□kām*) of the accident of life. For a main contention in Abū Hāšim’s ontology was that, when accidents of life came to inhere in a set of atoms, they effected a unification of these parts and thereby constituted them as a single entity, as a totality which has the ‘status of a single thing’ (*fī h□ukm al-šay’ al-wāh□id*). What this means is that the attributes of life and of all other attributes ontologically posterior to life are all predicated of the entire individual and not of the separate parts in which they inhere. The accident of will may inhere in my heart, but it is not my heart that is willing – it is I as the whole person. Similarly with believing, the capacity for voluntary action or perceiving (though, following Abū Hāšim, the latter was not believed to be effected through the inherence of an accident).⁷

⁵ This is a question most rewardingly raised by simultaneously taking into account the Mu‘tazilites’ engagement with the Aristotelian formulation, which ‘Abd al-Ġabbār discusses in *Taklīf*, 361-3, and Ibn Mattawayh in *Maḡmū’*, vol.2, 256-7. As an aspect of the encounter of these Mu‘tazilites with Greek philosophy, these sections make for intriguing reading; and one of the most important elements to be considered in assessing this encounter is the fact that the Aristotelian definition of man as a mortal, rational animal is discussed in the sections which address the meaning of the word ‘man’ at a *linguistic* level. For the views of Mu‘ammar and Naz□□□z□ām on the subject, see the synopsis in ‘Abd al-Ġabbār, *Taklīf*, 310-1, also Abu’l-H□asan al-Aš‘arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn wa-ikhṭilāf al-mus□allīn*, ed. Hellmut Ritter, 2nd ed. (Wiesbaden, 1963), 329ff, and ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baḡdādī, *Al-Farq bayna al-firaq*, ed. Muḡammad Muḡyī al-Dīn ‘Abd al-H□amīd (Cairo, n.d.), 154-5 for Mu‘ammar’s view of man, and 135-6 for Naz□□□z□ām’s (delivered with Baḡdādī’s characteristic polemical cadence).

⁶ *Taklīf*, 313 and *Maḡmū’*, vol. 2, 241.

⁷ For the Bas□rans’ view of perception, see Frank, *Beings and their Attributes*, 153-6. The unity of the living substrate is discussed in the context of the debate over man in ‘Abd al-Ġabbār, *Taklīf*, 328-9 and Ibn Mattawayh, *Maḡmū’*, vol. 2, 245-6, where the direct pertinence of this theorem is made clear. One of the difficulties which are said to have motivated their opponents’ views of man is the conviction that

There is no doubt that part of the impetus for the Mu'tazilite view derived from an attention to the phenomena which needed to be preserved – though the theological instrumentality and dialectical nature of their thinking prevents us from pronouncing with certainty about the order of their intellectual ends, and specifying whether a given argument was the *reason* why they held a given position or merely a *means* to defend it. The phenomena that were significant for this part of Mu'tazilite theory included observed facts about the unity of psychological states such as willing and believing.

It could not be the case that each part should be qualified as living [rather: it is the totality that is living] because then the totality would not conduct itself according to one will and one intention. (*Taklīf*, 320)

What this suggests is that the ontological theorem about the unifying properties of life both *explained*, and thus could be *proven* through appeal to, the evidence of observation and common experience. And we shouldn't let the fact pass unremarked that it was similarly an appeal to experience, but to an experience of the *disunity* of the self, that guided Plato's very different metaphysical conclusions about the soul's different parts. (Here one wonders: was this a difference in temperament – in the psychological phenomena available to reflective thought – or a difference in the attention to these phenomena which a particular reflective mode encouraged?)⁸

This appeal to phenomena already harbours the questionable conceptual turn which interests me here, but it is easier to examine it as it appears in the main argument the Basīrans use to support their position on the topic of *insān*, which also involves an appeal to the empirical, though in a different way. In order to make sense of the argument, it is necessary to make clear a further point about what it meant to identify anything as a subject of predications. The subject to which attributes apply is at the same time the strict object of our knowledge when we know that an entity is qualified by these attributes; what is in question is the *dhāt* (the 'essence' or 'thing-itself' as Frank calls it) which we know in knowing something about something.⁹ One way to put this is by saying that when we know that an entity is willing or moving or alive, the object of our knowledge would seem best described in the form of 'x-as-F'

the bearer of the attributes had to be a *single* entity, a conviction which held them in its grip in the absence of a theory which would explain how the many parts (*ağzā'*) of the body could function as a single subject of predications. On this topic, see also Frank's *Beings and their Attributes*, esp. chap. 2, and his earlier article 'Abū Hāshim's theory of "states": its structure and function', in *Actas do IV Congresso de Estudos Árabes e Islâmicos, Coimbra-Lisboa 1 a 8 de setembro de 1968* (Leiden, 1971).

⁸ One also wonders, however, how this selective focus on psychological unity, which was needed to support this particular aspect of their thought, squared with the focus on its *disunity* which was invoked in another sector of their thought – namely, their account of the nature of the religious law (*taklīf*). It was a crucial contention of the Basīrans that a conflict of motives (*taraddud al-dawā'ir*) – between doing the right thing and not doing it – was essential in realising the *difficulty* (*mašaqqa*) of obedience which provided the grounds for one's deserving reward by obeying. See e.g. 'Abd al-Ġabbār, *Taklīf*, 509: '[reward] is not deserved merely if one does not do an act because it is evil, but one must not do it because it is evil *while having a motive to do it*...so that the requisite difficulty be realised, by which he may deserve reward.'

⁹ For some illuminating remarks on the Basīrans' notion of the *dhāt* in the context of their epistemological and ontological views, see Frank, *Beings and their Attributes*, chap. 2 (p26: 'it is the thing (*šay'*) or "essence"/ thing-itself (*dhāt*) that strictly speaking is the object of our knowing and the subject of our predications'). See also his 'Al-ma'dūm wal-mawjūd: the non-existent, the existent and the possible in the teaching of Abū Hāshim and his followers', in *Mélanges: Institut Dominicain d'Études Orientales du Caire*, 14 (1980), esp. 193 n.40.

(and not, for example, as the propositional ‘x is F’). I know Zayd-as-willing, or Zayd-in-the-state-of-willing. The way in which the Mu‘tazilites put it invokes the terms of epistemological priority and posteriority. ‘Knowledge of an attribute is dependent upon [or posterior to: *yatba*] knowledge of the subject to which it applies.’ (Ibn Mattawayh, *Mağmū*, vol.2, 241). And in ‘Abd al-Ġabbār’s words:

The affirmation of the attribute (*sīfa*) requires the affirmation of the subject to which it applies (*mawsūf*), for it is impossible that one may know the former without yet knowing the latter. It is for this reason that the knowledge of a thing’s attribute is made derivative to the knowledge of its self (or ‘of the thing itself’: *dhāt*.) (*Taklīf*, 312)

To say, then, that the totality (*ğumla*) was the subject of attributes for human beings was to say that it was the totality that we knew when we knew something about human beings – i.e., when we knew any of their attributes (or, to be precise, any attribute which either *was* life or was ontologically dependent on life).

We are now in a position to look at the argument in question, which can be very simply described. It is usually cast in terms of first-person knowledge, though it is not meant to be restricted to it.¹⁰ We know many of our own attributes or states necessarily (*bi’l-darūra*, roughly indicating immediate knowledge which does not require proof), as when we find ourselves in a state of willing or believing. But since knowledge of an entity’s attributes is impossible unless one knows the subject to which they apply, its epistemological status cannot be derivative or posterior to the status of attributes, and the subject must be likewise necessarily known. Thus, the subject of predications must be the totality (*ğumla*) of the human being. Some of ‘Abd al-Ġabbār’s locutions make even shorter work of the issue: ‘one finds himself (to be in a state of) willing, perceiving or believing, and thus knows that what is qualified by these attributes is his totality and not any other thing.’ (*Taklīf*, 313)¹¹

The logical passage strikes one as something of a leap. Whence the ‘thus’ that signposts this transition? The general idea seems to be roughly the following. When I know about myself that I am in a given psychological state, the thing-I-really-know is the totality. The opacity of the transition has to do with the as yet unexplained concept of the ‘totality’, and its success depends on how this is to be understood. But before going on to explain this, it is worth pointing out how the argument was thought to combat positions such as Nazẓām’s and Mu‘ammar’s. Both positions, in the view of these Basrans, render ordinary knowledge virtually unattainable. Nazẓām’s spirit and Mu‘ammar’s atom are esoteric entities which people have to establish by

¹⁰ Ibn Mattawayh denies this restriction explicitly in *Mağmū*, vol.2, 241, where he says that the epistemological process in question is ‘not confined to the states he finds himself in to the exclusion of the states he finds others in, because in many cases he may know necessarily that another is willing or believing’. This point is an important one for grasping the epistemological orientation of the Basrans, whose beliefs about the transparency of the subject to himself (the subject has immediate self-knowledge) might lead one to expect to see this coupled with beliefs about the isolation of the subject which would align them with a Cartesian perspective. This would be far from the Basran Mu‘tazilites’ intentions, as this remark already suggests. One may be transparent to others just as one is transparent to oneself; the idea of a ‘hidden’ private world would be out of keeping with their indifference to the mental which might be taken as one of the conclusions of this study.

¹¹ Literally: ‘one finds *himself/ his self* willing, perceiving or believing’, where ‘self’ is feminine and ‘willing, etc’ agrees with it in gender (*yajidu al-wāhid minnā nafsahu murīda mudrika mu’taqida*). The heart of the argument can be pursued through a cluster of passages, especially the following: ‘Abd al-Ġabbār, *Taklīf*, 312-3, 317, 326, 328-9, 348-9, and Ibn Mattawayh, *Mağmū*, vol.2, 241-2.

proof and argument. Yet life goes on in the meantime, and we continue to be capable of ordinary judgements as to the attributes by which entities are qualified – which, on *their* view, combined of course with the *later Basārans'* epistemology, should be impossible. 'All people', asserts 'Abd al-Ġabbār, 'know their own states even if it has never crossed their mind that man is a simple spirit or an accident inhering in the heart'.¹² Why pass up something that is known and evident prior to reflection (*qabla al-nazā'ar*) in favour of something that is doubtful (*maškūk fīhi*)?

The difficulty with the transition can now be made plain: the totality seems to be construed mainly in terms of a physical entity. The clues for this are numerous. The first and most important one is to be found in the alternative formulation which the Basārans give of their view:

The living, capable being (*al-hāy al-qādir*) is this corporeal body (*šakhs*) which is structured in this particular way by which it is distinguished from other animals, and is the one to whom commands and prohibitions, and blame and praise are directed. (*Taklīf*, 311)

A lot hinges on how we interpret the term *šakhs* here, and it definitely is not to be understood as the 'individual' of modern-day Arabic. Frank variously translates: individual, corporeal individual, body.¹³ My choice of 'body' (adding 'corporeal' for clarification) is based partly on the indications of the lexicographers, but the semantic range reported by the latter is such that it might be felt that it does not determine the Mu'tazilite usage in isolation. Mu'tazilite use of the term speaks more clearly, as when the Mu'tazilites speak of Nazā'ām's spiritual substance as something 'inside' the *šakhs* (Nazā'ām had elsewhere described it in terms of the body: *jasad*) and talk of the latter's view of action as one in which the spiritual substance would have to be subjugating and governing the *šakhs*.¹⁴ But these observations aside, the

¹² 'Abd al-Ġabbār, *Taklīf*, 349. The same line of thought is expressed in passages such as *ibid*, 317, 332, 348-9, and Ibn Mattawayh, *Maġmū'*, vol.2, 242, 243, 247-8.

¹³ Frank, *Beings and their Attributes*, index; cf. Bernand, *Le problème de la connaissance*, 112.

¹⁴ The use of the term body (*ġasad*) in discussing Nazā'ām's view is exemplified in 'Abd al-Ġabbār, *Taklīf*, 310 (Aš'arī uses the term *badan*: *Maqālāt*, 331) and the same view is later discussed using *šakhs*: *Taklīf*, 315 ('if man was something in this *šakhs*...'; the spatial 'in' would in itself suffice to make the connection clear, and cf. also the reference to a *mawdū'i*). On p317 'Abd al-Ġabbār speaks of 'governing the *shakhs*' in terms which again suggest the corporeal and the spatial (most clearly again in the reference to a *mawdū'i*); cf. p332 (*šakhs*=*aġzā' kathīra*). And cf. Ibn Mattawayh's reference to *šakhs* in *Maġmū'*, vol. 2. 241, in terms similarly suggestive of spatiality: 'these people made out man to be something outside this *šakhs*' (and cf. 251). The signification of 'body' is prevalent in the lexicographical presentation of the term. See e.g. Murtadā al-Zabīdī, *Tāġ al-'arūs*, ed. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Ġarbāwī (Kuwait, 1979), vol. 18, 6-7 ('*la yusammā šakhs^{an} illā ġism mu'allaf...*'), though it is made clear in the same entry that the term has a derivative use in which it may be coterminous with *dhāt*, as in an example cited where it is used of God. But the dominance of the corporeal in the signification is clear from the fact that *šakhs* is included in Aš'arī's list of terms which the Mu'tazilites deny of God (*Maqālāt*, 155). Cf. Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Beirut, 1956), vol. 7, 45. Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyya (d. 1350), in the context of his discussion of the concept of corporeality in his *Kiṭāb al-Rūh*, quotes al-Asma'ī in his juxtaposition of the term *šakhs* with the terms *ġism*, *ġusmān*, *ġasad* and *ġuthmān* (Hyderabad, 1357 AH), 245. For all this, the derivative semantic range might seem to underdetermine the interpretation of Mu'tazilite usage (see the definitions given by E.W. Lane *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (Beirut, 1968), pt. 4, 1517. The range includes: 'self', 'person', 'being' and 'individual', in which capacity it would be synonymous with *nafs*). Peters' translation as 'person' (*God's Created Speech*, index) does not seem to be attuned to Mu'tazilite usage, and the same applies to Fakhry's translation as 'person' or 'individual' (e.g. 'Mu'tazilite view of man', 112, 114-5). For the same reason, the translation of the term in the

materiality of the *ḡumla* could be given away simply by the demonstrative ‘*this*’ with which the Mu‘tazilites pick it out (‘this corporeal body’), for in using it they are literally pointing to an entity that stands before us as an object of perception. Ibn Mattawayh does even better in spelling out the qualities of the totality as a material object of perception. Man, he writes, is ‘*this* totality’ which ‘*we see*’.¹⁵

Lest one feel disposed to doubt these indications, clarion evidence is provided by a certain strand of argumentation which recurs in various connections within the debate. It concerns a certain challenge directed against the view taken – that the totality is the subject of predications – in which it was pointed out that such a function could not be filled by an entity which was not *stable*, but underwent increase and decrease. The challengers had in mind some rather mundane facts about human beings: sometimes we lose weight, sometimes we gain some; and yet we still manage to know things about ourselves. But on the Basīran account, could we even recognise ourselves from one day to the next if the totality which we are lost an inch off its circumference or diminished by a single gram? The answer ‘Abd al-Ḡabbār gives – which is that the totality *qua* totality remains the same, even if its parts undergo change – is of less immediate interest than the clarification which the notion of the totality receives.¹⁶ What is at issue is, beyond the shadow of a doubt, a material entity.

The difficulty then in the breezy transition of the argument is that it relies on the possibility of passing from first-person statements to statements about what we would call ‘mental’ features or states (like willing and believing) to statements construed in terms of a material entity or an entity considered under the aspect of materiality. What these Mu‘tazilites seem to think is that our first-person statements or beliefs about our own mental states somehow or other involve a reference to this material object; that my knowledge of the truth of an indexical proposition such as ‘I am (in a state of) willing’ involves a reference this material totality. In fact, the basic idea seems to be that, in some mysterious way, the ‘I’ *is* the material totality. It is clear from other statements of both ‘Abd al-Ḡabbār and Ibn Mattawayh that they believe that to maintain that the subject of predications is the totality of man is to maintain that *he* is the subject of predications, as against its being something or someone other than him (*ḡayruhu*): ‘I act’ and ‘the totality acts’ are considered in some sense conceptually equivalent.¹⁷

The idea at work is given an even more piquant inflection in Ibn Mattawayh’s formulation of the argument.¹⁸ Trusting in a method of elimination to carry his argument forward, and confident that the range of possibilities is circumscribed, Ibn Mattawayh seems to invite us to consider what else could fill the particular blank in our knowledge (as it were) where a subject must be filled. ‘For we know we are in a state of willing or believing necessarily, and therefore the subject must be known necessarily. So what is the subject?’ It is as though the Mu‘tazilites picture us shining a torch in the storage room of our minds, holding up a piece of paper on which our instructions read: ‘Look for an entity which you know necessarily’, adding for caution

Mu‘tazilite creed as ‘individual’ which W. M. Watt gives (*The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Oxford, 1998), 246-7) seems incorrect.

¹⁵ Ibn Mattawayh, *Maḡmū’*, vol. 2, 241 (already cited above); cf. 247.

¹⁶ See ‘Abd al-Ḡabbār, *Taklīf*, 348-9.

¹⁷ E.g. ‘Abd al-Ḡabbār, *ibid*, 321: ‘it has been established that man conducts himself in action, and that his conduct occurs according to his intention and his motives. Now only two possibilities can hold: either *he* is the one disposes things and conducts himself in action, or it is something *other* than him (*ḡayruh*). *If it is he who disposes things, that is the view we affirm...*’

¹⁸ His formulation has already synopsised above: *Maḡmū’*, vol. 2, 241.

– lest we come up with someone quite unexpected (for there are other beings we know necessarily – such as the bodies of *others* whom we perceive!), ‘and who is you’. What is implicit in the instructions is that the answer ‘But *I* am the one who wills!’ is not a valid response, and the ‘I’ needs to be further specified. In the statement ‘I am willing’, there is still something to be asked concerning the subject of the attributes which is *not* given by the subject as it is given by the first person ‘I’. Yet here one must ask: once this is assumed, how do we know that, when we cast about and look around us to see what kinds of things we necessarily know, what we find is the exact thing which fills the particular blank in our knowledge where a subject must be satisfied? The mischief seems to be that we have no way of knowing whether the content we find is the right one. Why should *any* necessarily known entity which I find in my epistemological repository have a greater or lesser claim to being the content of the first person subject?

But this is a different set of questions than the one I want to be focusing on for the moment, starting with a clarification of the epistemology involved in this transition. Talk of the shining of torches and the searching of storage rooms is likely to produce the impression that the epistemological process envisioned was a lengthy one. Was this how it was conceived? If I am right in thinking that the passage is made without full self-consciousness that there is anything that needs to be explained, it is doubtful that the question can receive a proper answer. To the extent that it can, certainly Ibn Mattawayh’s presentation of the issue suggests that the process must be to a degree a reflective one. For while we know necessarily that we are in a state of willing or believing, and while we know the material totality necessarily, we do *not* know necessarily that the ‘we’ reduces to the totality.

‘Abd al-Ġabbār’s comments pull in different directions. On the one hand, there is an abundance of statements passing directly from self-attributions to the idea that the subject is the totality, apparently inadvertent to the fact that one has gone from one piece of knowledge to a different one. One notable exception to this trend is a set of remarks in which the passage appears to be marked as a species of knowledge derived by proof (*istidlāl*).¹⁹ It is expressed as a direct defence of the ontological theorem that a plurality of discrete parts (*aġzā*) can be qualified by an attribute as a single whole or totality.

One finds himself willing or believing, and one also finds pain in a certain part of his body,²⁰ and he distinguishes between the two cases, because he knows that the pain is specific to that part, whereas he does not know this state to be specific to a certain part, and at that he knows that his being willing does not redound to a part, but is rather something that specifically qualifies the totality. (*Taklīf*, 329)

The argument is a curious one, though perhaps its oddity does not appear on its sleeve. At bottom, it is an exercise in introspection: we find ourselves in pain and the

¹⁹ Another (apparent) exception is more directly connected to the concerns of the next section and will be discussed there.

²⁰ The English sounds ungrammatical. ‘Finds *himself* in pain’ would seem more natural here. But this would conceal the precise point which ‘Abd al-Ġabbār is making. Another note on translation: it has not been possible to give a single translation for the term *ikhtisās*, and I have used ‘is specific to’ for all instances except the last, where it is ‘specifically qualifies’. This difference in meaning seems central to the fact that this is an argument at all and a ‘proof’: one goes from the observation of experience to the ontological thesis about the substrate which attributes qualify.

pain is *somewhere*. We find ourselves in a mental state like willing or believing and the willing *isn't* somewhere in particular. If there is any departure from the obvious at all for the argument to qualify as an *argument* at all, it lies in this comparison between the two types of self-finding. Yet notice two interesting things. One is the assumption underlying the comparison: in order to compare physical sensations and mental states in this way, one has to assume that mental states can also be *looked for* at all, in the body in particular. This assumption is implicated in the confusion between contraries and contradictories which the argument involves: from the fact that we cannot identify in our body the specific part in which willing or believing are located, it infers that it must be located in the whole. But this does not allow for the possibility that the concept of *location* should not apply at all.

The second thing is partly a recapitulation of the first by way of stressing that it is the *body* which is the field of one's search. And here one can mark again the transition which 'Abd al-Ġabbār effects between 'one believes, I believe' to 'the totality believes'. Thus even where the mode of knowledge is signposted as one acquired by proof, the transition does not seem to be argued for, but is rather assumed. I will be returning again below to one of the elements touched upon in this passage.

Two points now need to be raised in connection with the concept of the 'totality' before proceeding any further. The first point is again epistemological, and concerns the fact that its being a material object was connected above to its being an object of perception – it is '*this*' thing which we *see*. Yet there is clearly something peculiar in this formulation. It makes perfect sense if one is thinking about the knowledge one has of *other people*, but the paradigm for most of the remarks we have seen has been self-knowledge and first-person ascriptions ('we find ourselves willing'). But what interpretation can one put on the idea of *perceiving oneself*? And in what sense can one be said to *point* to oneself? Yet the act of ostension does not seem to be an incidental one in the approach and, with one exception,²¹ all the

²¹ The exception in question is a passage of 'Abd al-Ġabbār's in *Taklīf*, 382, which explicitly rejects the suggestion that perception (*idrāk*) of oneself is necessary for self-knowledge. The point 'Abd al-Ġabbār is making here is that it is an integral aspect of intellectual maturity (of *kamāl al-'aql*) that one know the state he is in, such as his being willing or unwilling or believing. He then says: 'the best view to take is that this knowledge is not dependent upon perception, because even if he did not perceive his-self (*nafsahu*), he would know that it is characterised (*ikhtisāṣahā*) by being perceiving or believing'. Given all that has been said above, it seems clear that the *nafs* in question is identical to the *dhāt* (Peters' remarks on the relation between *dhāt* and *nafs* supports this assumption: see *God's Created Speech*, 148-9, though see 'Abd al-Ġabbār's *Muġnī*, V: *Al-Firaq ghayr al-Islāmiyya*, ed. Mahmūd Muhammad al-Khudayrī (Cairo, 1965), 252-3, for a remark on a certain semantic difference between the two which prevents the application of the latter to God). So what is one to make of this statement? The difficulty is compounded by an important opacity that besets the remarks on self-knowledge made by Mānkḏīm in his discussion of the varieties of necessary knowledge (Mānkḏīm Ṣāṣḏīw, *Ṣarḥ al-usūl al-khamsa*, ed. 'Abd al-Karīm 'Uthmān (Cairo, 1965), 50-1). Mānkḏīm distinguishes between several subdivisions of necessary knowledge: one is direct (*mubtada*'), the other occurs 'by means of something' (the main example is perception, which is a means for a knowledge of perceptibles), or alternatively 'by something akin to a means'. In the *first* category Mānkḏīm places our knowledge of our own states. Yet what is surprising is that in the second sub-category – where 'something akin to a means' is needed – the main example given is the relationship of priority between a subject of attributes and its attributes: we first need to know the subject (the *dhāt*) and only then can we know the attribute or state (*ḥāl*). Yet aren't these two statements in flat contradiction? In the light of the epistemological picture drawn above, it would seem that the second categorisation must be the correct one. But if one could trust the clarity of Mānkḏīm's categorisations despite this critical difficulty, one would have to say that perception is specifically excluded from the epistemology of self-knowledge. And yet what is one to make of the fairly clear indications that point in the opposite direction? It is perhaps important, then, to take due note of the 'even if' which 'Abd al-Ġabbār uses ('even if he did not perceive his-self, he would know...'). The implication may be that, in actual fact,

evidence would seem to indicate that perception was indeed the mode of necessary knowledge which the Basīrans had in mind. One way of responding to this curiosity might be to take it as an indication of the fact that the principal epistemological subject with which the Muʿtazilites were working was simply not the first person.²²

The second point is ontological, and concerns what it means to talk of the totality as a ‘material’ thing. Strictly speaking, ‘material’ or ‘bodily’ (*ḡismī*) is not an attribute one seems to predicate of the totality in the Basīran scheme, the reason being that attributes predicable of the totality must be ontologically posterior to the accident of life – but of course sticks and stones are as material as human bodies. Ibn Mattawayh expresses this with the remark that ‘materiality (or bodiliness: *ḡismiyya*) redounds to the parts’.²³ Yet while it is not ascribed to living bodies, nor, however, is it predicable of individual atoms, for a given quorum of atoms is required in order to constitute a body through composition (*taʿlīf*). But whatever we make of this restriction – if such it is – and even if the attribute of materiality turned out to apply, not to bodies, not to atoms, but to atomic agglomerates falling beneath the threshold of life, nonetheless the totality in question is clearly constituted by material parts which are essentially spatial, insofar as the atoms that constitute them essentially occupy space.²⁴

IV

The above points have given some of the most important co-ordinates for the position at stake, but whatever the oddities involved in the perceptibility of the totality, and whether or not it can be strictly be described as material – all of this is immaterial, so to speak, to the point to which we must return, which concerns the treacherous passage from the ‘I’ to the many physical parts that constitute the totality. And the steepness of the gap which has been passed over unremarked raises vertiginous shivers for the commentator, who must now conceal from himself his own reaction of discomfiture at entertaining the censorious thought that this misstep in reasoning was too evident to have justifiably passed unnoticed. It is hard not to see this reduction of the mental to the physical as a reflection of intellectual mettle – as an indication of a fundamental philosophical naivety. Yet this is a judgment which it became hard to

one does perceive oneself. The hypothetical condition might then be excellently consistent with Mānkḏīm’s discussion, for there the latter makes a point of remarking that it is *possible* that things could happen differently and we could know perceptibles without perception as the ‘means’ of knowledge. For an exposition of necessary knowledge based on this passage, see Peters, *God’s Created Speech*, 53-5, and references.

²² And yet this view of their epistemological position could not be an unqualified one: for in the mode of reasoning deployed to attain the knowledge of divine attributes, it is always our knowledge of our own attributes that is the primary paradigm.

²³ Ibn Mattawayh, *al-Muhīr biʾl-taklīf*, ed. ʿUmar al-Sayyid ʿAzmī (Cairo, 1965), 131: *al-ḡismiyya tarḡiʾu ʾilaʾl-abʾād*, reading *tarḡiʾu* instead of *yarḡiʾu*. The logic here seems to be: what *can* be predicated of something less than a totality, isn’t specifically predicated of the totality *qua* totality. But Ibn Mattawayh’s interest here is less to pursue the logic of this predication as to argue that life does not entail materiality, in order to affirm God as an entity that is living without being material. This work is volume 1 of the work hitherto cited as *Maḡmūʾ*, and I will be citing it hereafter as *Muhīr*.

²⁴ For the nature of bodies and accidents in the Basīran scheme, see Frank’s above-cited works as well as Alnoor Dhanani, *The Physical Theory of Kalām: Atoms, Space, and Void in Basrian Muʿtazili Cosmology* (Leiden, 1994). The precise number of atoms required for the composition of a body are given by Ibn Mattawayh as eight: see his discussion of the relationship between atoms and bodies in *al-Tadhkira fī ahkām al-ḡawāhir waʾl-aʾrād*, ed. Sāmī Nasr Lutf and Faysal Budayr ʿAwn (Cairo, 1975), 47-8.

pass on the endeavours of the *mutakallimūn* without tremors of conscience after the period of self-searching which the study of *kalām* underwent not too long ago, when such judgments were recognised as springing, in many cases, from standards expressive of assumptions about the superiority of the Greek philosophical tradition. This is the assumption identified elegantly by Frank when he warned us against thinking ‘that the *kalām* of the early and classical periods was, so to speak, a sort of theological ugly toad that, by the kiss of a philosophical princess of unquestionably hellenistic lineage, was transformed into a more or less handsome prince’.²⁵

One may grant that these aesthetic extremes might be the result of looking through a highly opinionated set of spectacles. Yet on the other hand, what is to be done about the fact that, whether as a private person or a scholar, one prefers to court princes instead of homely and undistinguished young men, sparkling princesses instead of grey spinsters? That is to say, in a world full of goods amongst which one may choose, it is natural that when one chooses which thinkers or texts to give one’s energy to, one should wish to be guided as far as possible by the intellectual value one perceives in them. And to discover the signs of such philosophical naivety leaves one with the dispiriting thought that one has entered a state of matrimony only to become a housewife condemned to menial domestic tasks, excluded from work that would be more meaningful and from a richer communication with the partner of one’s life.

This extended metaphor sketches out in broad strokes the nature of the fear of triviality with which the commentator has to wrestle. In this dispiriting line of thought, it is clearly the notion of ‘intellectual value’ and the standards used in evaluations which need to be addressed. And what may be said with respect to this particular episode of Mu‘tazilite thinking is that the judgment one pronounces on it is tied to a *particular* history of philosophical thought. Not the Greek tradition this time, but rather something like the Cartesian conception of persons in whose long shadow much of Western philosophy has been pursued until recently. This is the conception which has made the gap between the mental and the physical come to seem so steep that the commentator goes into a swoon when he sees it so carelessly crossed. But is there any good reason, one may ask, why the Cartesian *res cogitans* provide standards by which Islamic theological approaches to the person can be assessed as proficient or deficient?²⁶

In fact, it may be pointed out, perhaps *al-dā’ huwa al-dawā’* in this instance, and one only needs to look towards philosophical critiques of the Cartesian conception to see how the gap between the ‘I’ and the body can be closed – indeed, how it was never as wide as was thought. One may mention in this connection Wittgenstein’s remarks about our usage of the indexical ‘I’ (or ‘my’), where he recognised a use as object, and a use as subject. The first use is exemplified by statements such as ‘My arm is broken’, ‘I have grown six inches’, ‘I have a bump on my forehead’, while the latter by statements such as ‘I see so-and-so’, ‘I hear so-and-so’, ‘I try to lift my arm’, ‘I have toothache’.²⁷ The difference which Wittgenstein wanted to mark between these two types of statement concerned the possibility of

²⁵ Frank, *Beings and their Attributes*, 2.

²⁶ And this criticism would stand even if we were to grant something similar to what was said above in connection with the Aristotelian understanding of the question ‘what is man’ – that it wouldn’t be merely the philosophically literate who would respond with puzzlement at the Mu‘tazilites’ thinking, and that the surprise might register with a more ordinary crowd. One can still demand the capacity for self-criticism with respect to such ingrained cultural assumptions, and indeed contact with different forms of thought is one way to learn to practice it.

²⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford, 1958), 66 ff.

misidentification which each of them allowed, and he suggested that the possibility of error did not enter the use of the ‘I’ as subject. By contrast, empirical error was possible with respect to the object use, for they involve the claim that what is being said is true of *this particular body*; in such statements, ‘I’ could well be replaced by ‘this body’. These remarks were part of an effort to target the Cartesian conception of the ‘I’ as referring to a bodiless ego.

It is salutary to keep such criticisms in focus, because they loosen the hold which familiar ways of thinking may have on us. Yet in this instance, it is not a case of using a particular way of thinking about the relation between the mental and the physical as a norm to assess the Mu‘tazilite account of it. The difficulty with the Mu‘tazilite view is not that it failed to construe the first person pronoun as a referring name and that it did not conceptualise the person on the model of a bodiless Cartesian ego, to which the ‘I’ would refer. Nor, though, is it that the Mu‘tazilites took it to refer to the body. In this, they were unlike later *mutakallimūn* and traditionalists who talked about the ‘I’ in terms of reference (such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210), who followed Ibn Sīnā’s lead in this respect, and took it as a reference to something separate from the body).²⁸ The difficulty with their position is that the Mu‘tazilites appear to take no notice of the indexical in terms that would make it necessary to raise questions about how it relates to anything else. Their passage is problematic precisely in not being marked as one – and it is as a reflection on the qualities of their thinking that one should find this discomfiting. One does not need to be a Cartesian to experience the discomfiture.

What I am interested to look at now is where one goes next with such a reaction, and in particular, how one acts out a certain inclination to evade the implications which such a reaction would have for one’s relation to the thinkers one studies. The inclination is a very natural one, for it stems from a natural reluctance to acquiesce to the loss of meaning. And such loss would seem unavoidable if one’s view of the difficulty stopped short at a diagnosis which simply ascribed to our theologians a deliberative art of inadequate sophistication and deficient polish. There is something brute about this conclusion which threatens to trivialise one’s subject matter and seems capable of draining its meaningfulness at a single stroke. Attempts to locate *explanations* for the difficulty – the apparent deficiency – spring from a wish to resist this threat. One seeks to dispel the bruteness of the judgment by explaining the worrisome feature in ways that would invest it with a kind of meaningfulness beyond what a verdict of mere logical ineptitude would permit.

I want to follow this impulse through in connection to the episode of Mu‘tazilite *kalām* which I have just been describing. One possible and uncomplicated way of accounting for this transition from the ‘I’ to the physical totality – a passage that expresses the assumption that there is only one subject being talked about – would connect it to their ontological theorem concerning the unifying functions of the accident of life. The main idea has already been mentioned; as may be recalled, it was that life unified the individual substrates in which it inhered and constituted them as a single entity, with the result that the attribute of life and those attributes which were

²⁸ See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Al-Taḥṣīn al-kabīr*, (Beirut, 1978), vol. 5, 434 ff, and *Muḥāsasat al-afkār al-mutaqaddimīn wa’l-muta’akhhirīn*, ed. Taha ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf Sa’d (Beirut, 1984), 327 ff (‘*alladhī yuṣīru ilayhi kull insān bi-qawlihi “anā”...*’). For an indication of the Avicennan background of this turn of thought, see Michael Marmura, ‘Ghazali and the Avicennan proof from personal identity for an immaterial soul’, in Hackett, et al, eds., *A Straight Path: Studies in Medieval Philosophy and Culture* (Washington, D.C., 1988); cf. Tariq Jaffer, ‘Bodies, souls and resurrection in Avicenna’s *ar-Risāla al-adhāwiyya fī amr al-ma’ād*’, in David C. Reisman, ed., *Before and After Avicenna* (Leiden, 2003).

ontologically dependent on it applied to the totality of the being and not to the individual parts. Psychological concepts – such as will, belief, intention – were attributes of this sort, requiring the prior inherence of life. It is perhaps somewhere in this piece of reasoning that the passage between subject and object comes to be seen as an obvious one: for the accidents of life inhere in the *body* (the body as material object); but the unifying effect they have is one which we *experience at a mental level* (at the level of subjects). It is because of the unifying powers of life that we experience ourselves as having a single will or motive. ‘Abd al-Ġabbār’s relevant remark has already been quoted: ‘it could not be the case that each part should be qualified as living [rather: it is the totality that is living] because then the totality would not conduct itself according to one will and one intention’ (*Taklīf*, 320; note again the reference to the *totality* acting). The point is put in a way better calculated to excite our sense of the absurd when it is said that in such a case it would be possible that ‘the heart would want to speak and the tongue refuse, or that the heart would want to walk and the foot refuse’ (*Taklīf*, 341).

A second way of accounting for the transition is suggested by a passage in vol. 12 of ‘Abd al-Ġabbār’s *Muġnī (al-Nazā‘ar wa’l-ma’ārif)*²⁹ in which he discusses the relation between the words heart (*qalb*) and self (*nafs*). It will be recalled that the latter word, in its reflexive meaning as –self, is found in several of the formulations of the argument discussed above: ‘one finds himself (*nafsahu*) willing or believing, and knows that the totality is what is qualified by these attributes’. Sometimes the attribute is found agreeing in gender with the *nafs* (*murīda*) – as though the latter was the subject – while other times it agrees in gender with the real subject (*murīd*).³⁰

‘Abd al-Ġabbār’s immediate concern in this passage is with the definition of knowledge, where he gives a constitutive role to ‘*sukūn al-nafs*’ – the restfulness or peace one experiences ‘in himself’ when possessed of true knowledge. It is in this context that he raises the question whether this restfulness would be best ascribable to the heart (*qalb*) instead of the *nafs*. The main element of his response rests on an implied contrast between the former and the latter in terms of part and whole. The passage, which I will quote in full, runs as follows:

As for the definition [of knowledge] as the restfulness of the heart..., it would be an unsound one. For one does not understand the same thing when one ascribes the restfulness to the heart as when one speaks of the restfulness of the self (*nafs*)...When the restfulness is ascribed to the self (*nafs*), what is intended is the totality (*ġumla*), for one uses the word ‘*nafs*’ to refer to it. Don’t you see that one says: ‘My self is at peace with [or at rest at] what you say’ (*qad sakanat nafṣī ilā mā qultah*) and ‘My self is willing or loath in this matter’ (*nafṣī fī hādhā al-amr rāġiba aw zāhida*) (*Al-Nazā‘ar wa’l-ma’ārif*, 22).

²⁹ *Al- Muġnī, XII: al-Nazā‘ar wa’l-ma’ārif*, ed. Ibrāhīm Madkūr (Cairo, n.d.).

³⁰ See e.g. respectively ‘Abd al-Ġabbār, *Taklīf*, 313, and Ibn Mattawayh, *Maġmū’*, vol. 3, 241. One may hold this up to the grammar of the totality, where at the side of statements such as ‘*al-murīd huwa al-ġumla*’, one finds a plethora of statements in which one says ‘*al-ġumla murīda, qāsīda*, etc’. Despite the assignment of feminine gender, it seems crucial that their ontology should mark a distinction between the meaning of ‘the *totality* is willing’ and ‘the *parts* are willing’, though both would be gendered in the feminine, for this distinction went to the heart of their affirmation of the unity of living entities despite their material plurality. See e.g. the passage in *Taklīf*, 357.

The circumlocution in the possessive ('my self') does not sound felicitous, and it would come more naturally for us to say instead 'I am at peace', and 'I am willing or loath', but it is important to preserve it in the translation in order to have a clear view of the structure of the conceptual field. Whatever else one might make of this difference in locution, what is more important is to attend to the intriguing suggestion 'Abd al-Ġabbār seems to make here that the relationship between the 'self' and the totality is one of signification: 'one uses the word "nafs" to refer to it'.

The statement sounds tantalisingly close to an explicit account of the relationship between the two levels (subjective and objective), and the statement that follows it has the tantalising appearance of a reason adduced in justification of this view. Yet that this is not the account one might have hoped for should be clear once the sequence is unpacked. The identity of the self and the totality has not been argued for, but once again assumed, as should have been signalled by the fact that the totality is not mentioned again in the statements seemingly adduced for justificatory purposes. The statement 'my self is willing' is only a ground for the claim 'the self refers to the totality' if we already know that the totality is the subject to which willing is ascribed. It is because he assumes that the *ġumla* is *rāġiba* and *murīda* that '*nafsī rāġiba*' shows for 'Abd al-Ġabbār that the *nafs* is the *ġumla*.

Is there anything that might make this assumption less brute? One possibility is signalled by 'Abd al-Ġabbār's talk of 'referring' as the relationship of the two terms ('one uses the word "nafs" to refer to the totality'). While one could see this as an unwarranted assumption of synonymy, the prominent role which the resources of language play in Mu'tazilite thinking should give one ground for pause. The strategic influence of the grammatical tradition in the early Basran masters' ontological speculations (and above all in Abū Hāsim's innovations with the theory of *ahwāl*) has been already highlighted by Richard Frank in his work.³¹ Equally important, however, is the use which the Mu'tazilites make of lexicographical resources. In discussions of notions as wide-ranging as that of place (*makān*), body (*ġism*), human being (*insān*), or the quality of being resurrected (or recreated: *mu'ād*), the meanings of these terms in classical Arabic – and thus the givens of language as presented by the lexicographers – have an important justificatory use, even if they never provide the final word (nor can they, given the primacy given by the Mu'tazilites to the mind over language).

Given this background, one may wonder whether to attach more than a superficial significance to a certain facet of the lexicographers' presentation of the word '*nafs*'. One of the distinctions drawn is between the use of the term to signify *rūh* (a use which I will set aside here); and its *reflexive* use, as in the statement 'So-and-so killed himself' (*qatala fulān nafsa*). The reflexive use is glossed by the lexicographers with the remark that here 'what is intended is the totality and reality of a thing' (*yurādu bihi ġumlat al-šay' wa-hāqīqatuh*).³² The appearance of what is a strategic Mu'tazilite term of art – the notion of the totality, the *ġumla* – in the explanation could simply be a coincidence. In that case, it would be a very interesting coincidence indeed. Alternatively, one might see this as one of the intellectual

³¹ See especially chap. 2 of his *Beings and their Attributes*.

³² See Murtadā al-Zabīdī, *Tāġ al-'arūs*, ed. Mahmūd Muhammad al-Tanāhī (Kuwait, 1976), vol. 16, 561. Cf. Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Beirut, 1956), vol. 6, 233. It may heighten the interest of the connection to remark that the authority cited by al-Zabīdī is the grammarian Abū Ishāq al-Zaġġāġ (d. 923), who had in common with Abū Hāsim al-Ġubbā'ī the fact that both were students of al-Mubarrad (d. 900) (as reported in Ibn al-Murtadā's *Tābaqāt al-Mu'tazila*, ed. S. Diwald-Wilzer (Beirut, 1961), 96).

filaments which contributed to the Mu'tazilite fusion of the mental and the physical – though nothing in this linguistic given contained the germ of the physical interpretation which the Mu'tazilites developed for the notion of the totality.

For my purposes, perhaps the most interesting explanation of the passage would be yet a third, which obeys a stronger urge to render deficiency meaningful by construing the suspect logical transition between the subjective and the objective (or material) perspective as betokening something more than *merely* the degree of sophistication achieved by the Mu'tazilites in the technology of reasoning. Instead, one wants to take this slack to be a *revealing* one, construing it as a reflection of something more substantive in the Mu'tazilite view of the person – and in particular, of the pervasive materialism that finds expression in this view. It could be said that it is this materialism that is reflected in this failure to differentiate between the two subjects – the 'I' and the body – as well as, more broadly, in the primacy given to the physical in the characterisation of the mental.

The Mu'tazilites' – and more narrowly, the Basīrans' – materialism emerged clearly in their refusal to countenance a more variegated range of ontological kinds – a refusal which was one of the important questions at stake in the debate over man. The Basīrans' rejection of Nazīzām's view of man as a spiritual substance was at the same time a disavowal of an ontology which recognised different *kinds* of atoms (so that this substance would be different from ordinary material atoms). Their view of the person as nothing more than the material sum of atoms and inhering accidents came out most starkly in the account given of death and the resurrection (*i'āda*) that will occur at the end of time. Death took place when the structure (*binya*) of the atomic aggregate sustained a degree of damage that made the inherence of accidents of life impossible.³³ With death, the person ceased to exist – there was no spirit or soul to survive him – and with perhaps the exception of a short interval of consciousness which was recognised by those who believed in the torture of the grave (this would seem to include 'Abd al-Ġabbār and his disciple Mānkḏīm), the stretch between death and resurrection was one in which we are to imagine only the atomic parts of the person subsisting in wide dispersion.³⁴

More interesting for sharpening our picture of the materialism in question is the fact (itself a corollary of the view taken in the dispute over man) that the criterion of personal identity furnished by the Basīrans to secure that the person resurrected would be the same that had existed at some previous time made it a function of the identity of the material parts. It is these parts – and to be precise, the fundamental minimum of parts which constitutes the totality – that had to be recreated on the Day of Judgment. While there was internal debate over this criterion, none of the competing options included an account of identity which would make attributes of a psychological type (such as willing or believing) paramount.³⁵ For all that the account

³³ The need of life for a specifically structured substrate is expressed in many places in the discussion of man. See e.g. Ibn Mattawayh, *Muhīṭ*, 131: 'the substrate is not disposed for the possibility of the inherence of life in it except insofar as it possesses a specific structure (*binya makhsūs*)'.

³⁴ Despite what is known about the Mu'tazilites' disavowal of the torture of the grave, 'Abd al-Ġabbār and Mānkḏīm's remarks seem to indicate that they, at least, recognised the eventuality of such torment and therefore the necessity of a temporary return to life, for 'the torment of inanimate matter is an impossible and inconceivable thing'. See Mānkḏīm, *Šarḥ*, 730-4, 731-2 quoted. Cf. 'Abd al-Ġabbār, *Taklīf*, 466, where the implication seems to support a belief in a period of consciousness in which one is tormented in the grave or one sees one's future situation in paradise. The topic would require a more concerted treatment, however, than such fragmented indications permit.

³⁵ The most important expositions of the topic of resurrection (or 'recreation') are to be found in 'Abd al-Ġabbār, *Taklīf*, 432-81, Ibn Mattawayh, *Maġmū'*, vol. 2, 285-316, and idem, *Tadhkira*, 208-47. The

provides for, it would be possible for a person's fundamental bodily parts to be recreated with a radically different personality attached. This view is of course very different, not only from the account of personal identity prevalent in contemporary philosophy, which stresses a person's psychological features, but also from the view taken by heirs of Greek philosophy in the Islamic world.³⁶

This is the background – one that shows the physical eclipsing the mental in importance – against which one may read the Basīrans' treatment of psychological concepts, and the interesting ways in which the mental is characterised in physical terms or made dependent on the physical. We have already touched upon an instance of this dependence. This emerged in connection to a passage of 'Abd al-Ġabbār's, in an argument which made the interesting assumption that mental states such as willing or believing were no different from sensations of pain in that one could seek them in the body. The assumption that a location could be sought for mental states, surprising as it seems, might thus be seen as an expression of the strong materialist outlook dyed into the Mu'tazilite conception of the human.

Equally surprising to our own sensibilities would be an aspect of their position which flows directly from their account of the accident of life and the accidents (and corresponding attributes) that are ontologically posterior to it. One question to which the Basīrans had to address themselves concerned the criteria which enabled one to infer the inherence of an accident of life in a given part of the body. The criterion they identified was simple. In 'Abd al-Ġabbār's words:

Since it is necessary that there should be a characteristic (or property: *hukm*) specific to life as a class which distinguishes it from other accidents, and since there is no characteristic...by which it is distinguished except the possibility of perception, we must rule that every substrate with which we can perceive heat, cold and pain contains life (*Taklīf*, 335.)

It is, then, physical sensation that provides our way of identifying the parts of our body in which life inheres. (Other types of perception – such as seeing or hearing – were excluded on the grounds that they required a specially structured substrate as an added condition.)³⁷

It is this criterion which made the Basīrans (who apparently had never suffered from a headache) conclude that the brain probably was not a substrate for

view summarised in the text is one which we find defended by 'Abd al-Ġabbār and Ibn Mattawayh. Abū 'Alī and Abū Hāšim had voiced a variety of different views, including the view that identity was guaranteed by the recreation of the identical accident of life (*hayā*) or of the identical accident of composition or construction (*ta'līf*). Again, this is a topic which I hope to be treating elsewhere.

³⁶ As examples of those who place the accent on a being's attributes, we may include Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and (the *sayyid šarīf* 'Alī ibn Muḥammad) al-Ġurġānī. See al-Rāzī's remarks – framed in the context of his discussion of resurrection and the afterlife – in *al-Arba'in fī usūl al-dīn* (Hyderabad, 1353 AH), 286, and al-Ġurġānī's remarks in his *Šarḥ al-mawāqif*, ed. Maḥmūd 'Amr al-Dimyātī (Beirut, 1998), vol. 8, 316 ff, especially 319-20, where he speaks of individuating properties ('*awārid mušakkkhisā*). Ghazālī's thought on the nature of man has emerged much more complex in the aftermath of recent interpretations, which would discourage our taking at face value the 'genre-specific' statements in his *Iqtisād* – which suggest that one's identity depends on the body (*al-Iqtisād fī 'l-i'tiqād*, ed. Ibrahim Agāh Çubukçu and Hüseyin Atay (Ankara, 1962), 214: 'a person is that particular person by reference to his body; he is not a single entity by reference to his accidents'). For a sensitive discussion of Ghazālī's view of the afterlife and human nature, see Timothy J. Gianotti, *Al-Ghazālī's Unspeakable Doctrine of the Soul: Unveiling the Esoteric Psychology and Eschatology of the Iḥyā* (Leiden, 2001).

³⁷ Cf. also 'Abd al-Ġabbār, *Taklīf*, 314-5.

accidents of life. Accordingly, neither did accidents of willing and knowledge inhere in it.³⁸ In itself, this piece of ontology is fascinating in what it might be taken to reveal at the level of cultural differences in self-perception, and in particular, how the latter might be affected by cultural givens such as scriptural data and systematic metaphysics. Yet there are types of self-perception which *we* would take to be so natural as to be above cultural particularity. True enough, the Qur'an associated understanding with the heart (*qalb*: e.g. 7: 179) and this association had been woven into the fact-base of *kalām* discussions (never exceptional in their physiological literacy). But surely – surely even medieval Muslims must have perceived themselves as looking out from their heads?³⁹ It is interesting to note in this connection that those Mu'tazilites, such as Abū Hāšim, who defended the view that the location of mental states could be known through rational means and not merely through such scriptural indications, relied on the interpretation of human gestures – such as that of pointing to the heart in connection with thought or desire – and thus on the probative force contained in (what we would consider in part) culturally determined symbols.⁴⁰

These fascinating implications cannot detain us however, and here what I am more interested to underline is the fact – a surprising one – that the capacity to experience physical sensation should be a precondition for the inherence of the accidents for mental states or attributes (such as willing or believing). Only in the parts of the body in which one can feel pain, heat or cold can belief or willing take hold. Thus, sensations experienced in the body stand behind the concept of belief; they are coded into the concept of the will. And though of course what is in question here is the substrate of inherence – the attribute will redound to the entire living being – the dependence of the mental on the physical is nonetheless a significant one which highlights again the hold of the body on these Mu'tazilites' imagination.

The above suggestions have been attempts to support a certain interpretation of the difficult transition between subjective and objective made by the late Basīrans – an interpretation which, reading it as a symptom of their overwhelming materialism, would render it meaningful and so allow one to retain a meaningful engagement with their thought. I can imagine one particular reaction to both this and the previous attempts to explain this aspect of the Mu'tazilites' thought, and that would be to wonder: but isn't all this reading a bit too *subtly*? It would not be that the level of detail has been excessive (that is probably not the case) but that an excessive weight of significance has been attached to certain aspects of the Mu'tazilite theory, and more has been read into them than may seem justified. If one's main justification is to escape triviality, that is clearly an interpretively unsound one. This worry of a misplaced significance is heightened by the fact that the aspects of their theory selected are not themselves surface features but ones which are obtained through tracing implications and – to resume some of the remarks in section II – by doing

³⁸ 'Abd al-Ġabbār, *ibid*, 365.

³⁹ For the role allotted to the heart in the Qur'an, see Louis Gardet, 'Kālb', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Leiden, 1954 -), vol. 4. Wittgenstein's work provides an excellent companion for thinking through these kinds of questions ('where does thinking take place?', 'what do we think with?'), although it characteristically refuses to deliver simple answers. See for example *The Blue and Brown Books*, especially 6-16, and the handful of remarks in *Zettel*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1967), § 605-609.

⁴⁰ Abd al-Ġabbār himself takes the line that revelation provides the main source of evidence on this question; Abū Hāšim seems to have changed his mind on this score. See the discussion in 'Abd al-Ġabbār, *al-Muġnī*, XI/2: *al-Irāda*, ed. Mahmūd Muḥammad Qāsim (Cairo, 1962), 26-30, and cf. the brief précis in Ibn Mattawayh, *Kitāb al-Majmū' fī l-Muḥīṭ bi-l-Taklīf*, ed. J. Peters (Beirut, 1999), vol. 3, 181.

quite a bit of talking for the Mu'tazilites between the raised points of their theory. On a general level the Mu'tazilites' materialism cannot be denied. But isn't there something gratuitous – perhaps even patronising – in seeing it 'revealed' in various facets, often arcane, of this or that argument? Isn't this sort of strained interpretation a reason to place under scrutiny the urge to escape triviality from which it springs?

A tentative response to the first question would be simply to say that, given the domination 'globally' of this materialist conception in Mu'tazilite thinking, it would not be entirely surprising that it should influence their reasoning at a local level or that one should find it expressed in the implications of their reasoning should one be motivated to trace them. Broader questions about the explanatory claims of such considerations could be asked, but they would be too broad for my ambit. But if the worry about 'gratuitousness' is a question about what one really knows about the Mu'tazilites when one has traced these implications – whether what the interpretive spade has turned up is anything *meaningful*, or whether (to pick up a polysemous word) the yield is a *trivial* one – here I, too, feel uncertain what to say. Most fundamentally, it is an uncertainty about whether the meanings which the spade has eked out of Mu'tazilite soil are adequate to the needs which prompted one to go digging.

The second point demands a more direct attention at last to questions concerning the evaluative principles underlying the interpretive approach that has been at work. For while one need not be a Cartesian in particular in order to be discomfited by the Mu'tazilites' turn of thought, one does need to be interested in engaging with one's subjects in a particular mode, one which does not envision the aim as being to produce a merely descriptive account of their thought or to treat it mainly by reference to the cultural setting in which it was indigenous. In that mode of working, the interest of one's subjects is seen to lie in part in how well one can relate their voices to a larger frame of reference, and their meaningfulness is seen as a function of the web of comparisons and juxtapositions into which their ideas can be drawn. But it is hard to do this where these ideas seem to be calibrated to standards so different as to seem deficient. It seems unavoidable to use the term 'philosophical' to designate this larger frame of reference, but as long as that is understood in an inclusive sense (certainly one in which Cartesian and Wittgensteinian approaches would be included despite being diametrically opposed) that should do no harm. Clearly it is not a case of suggesting this is the only mode of approaching the texts: there are many modes of engagement, each with its own standards.

But then the difficulties concerning the meaningfulness of one's interpretative work seem to be internal to this approach: one engages with the Mu'tazilites with a certain sense of what's valuable and meaningful, and when this threatens to drain the meaning from one's engagement because of perceived 'deficiencies' (the word is an uncomfortable one), one seeks to give them meaning by seeking to explain them or to read 'something deeper' into them. The problem begins with the fact that one puts himself in the first place in a position from which evaluations of the texts are possible. And of course, once one has done that, it is hardly surprising that one may have to fend off judgments such as that a given piece of thinking is 'trivial' or 'important', 'good' or 'bad'. The most important considerations in deciding the fate of such an approach are twofold: whether one's approach is sound at an interpretive level – which is what the worry about excessive subtlety (expressed above) was concerned with; and whether it seems worthwhile to pursue – and finally, the latter is a question that cannot be answered by one person for another.

Being internal, the difficulties would be removed by abandoning the approach altogether and allowing oneself a submersion unstructured by external vantage points of interest. Yet here the nature of one's fear of triviality can finally be grasped more clearly. For one cannot fall into the texts in such a way without fearing that the story one writes is so involved as to be hardly tellable – this being a fear that there is nobody who would be interested to hear it told. The particular plight of the reader of Mu'tazilite texts is that their language is so involved, and the potential audience for the storyteller who learns to speak it is so modest, that one is naturally attracted towards a mode of engagement that invokes a wider set of external vantage points and conceptual idioms in order to situate the story in a wider frame of interest. So the attempt to work with vantage points of interest that set a distance between oneself and the thought of one's subjects is dictated by a need to make sure one's language is shared by others. For one is not entirely free to decide what is meaningful, interesting and valuable 'for oneself' in complete detachment from others' judgments of value (including, here, intellectual value); justification – such as the justification of one's chosen activities – is not something one essentially gives to *oneself*. This means that, while the encounter with triviality may seem to result from adopting foreign vantage points, the fear of triviality may be instrumental in encouraging one to adopt them in the first place. And the latter is a result of the fact that the community of interest forming around the Mu'tazilites – one which would support a certain sense of their value that would not permit one to suffer the self-doubt of unshared values – is a relatively sparse one. Readers of the luminaries of Islamic philosophy are spared this task, because the danger of irrelevance is not as great. This has the Mu'tazilite reader talking somewhat too much and in too high a voice about problems of method, meaning and value. Yet what better and more tactical way to dispel one's fear that something is untellable than to tell it while talking about telling it?