Themed section

Towards New Perspectives on

Ethics in Islam

Casuistry, Contingency, and Ambiguity

Guest editor

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The Moral Obligation to Worship God Alone: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Analysis in the *Tafsīr*

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Abstract

This article examines how, in his *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) addresses the problem of the obligation to thank the benefactor (*wujūb shukr al-mun'im*) within the context of the Quranic command to worship God alone. The obligation to thank one's benefactor was a contentious problem among classical Islamic thinkers before Rāzī, and it was frequently discussed in *fiqh* and *kalām* works in the context of the ontology and epistemology of moral values and legal norms. Rāzī's analysis in the *Tafsīr*, however, sheds light on another way in which the "thanking one's benefactor"-problem was of relevance for classical Islamic thinkers: it is used to frame the rationale for monotheism in terms of the gratitude God deserves for being humans' provider. This aspect of the "thanking one's benefactor"-problem has not been highlighted in the secondary literature. This article discusses how Rāzī's analysis of God's sole deservedness of worship has theological, legal, and ethical/moral implications. The *theological* implications are found in the questions it raises about the notorious problem of causality. The *legal* implications become apparent in Rāzī's interest in the *ratio legis* of the Quranic command and in establishing that the obligation arises with God's sovereign decree. The *ethical* or *moral* implications, finally, are seen in his concern with how humans come to know of the goodness of monotheism and the repugnancy of polytheism. The article contextualises Rāzī's position in the *Tafsīr* against the background of the *fiqh* and *kalām* debates about the "thanking one's benefactor"-problem.

Keywords: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Quranic commentary, The obligation of thanking one's benefactor, Moral values, Legal norms, Monotheism

Introduction

The problem of the obligation to thank one's benefactor (*wujūb shukr al-mun'im*) preoccupied generations of classical Islamic scholars. Both legal (*fiqh*) and theological (*kalām*) works traditionally contain chapters dedicated to this problem. The interest in the obligation to thank one's benefactor emerged from a broader concern with the ontology and epistemology of legal norms as well as moral values. The "thanking one's benefactor"-problem developed into something of a *topos* for classical scholars when refuting their opponents' position and explicating their own.

In his famed Quranic commentary, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (*The Great Commentary*), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) also displays a concern with the "thanking one's benefactor"-

problem—yet, his interest in this question falls within a different context, i.e., monotheism. In commenting on the many Quranic verses that command monotheism, Rāzī makes use of the “thanking one’s benefactor”-problem in order to give an answer to the question why God alone should be worshipped. The rationale he provides is that God is humans’ benefactor and He is, consequently, deserving of gratitude in the form of worship. Rāzī’s analysis in the *Tafsīr* sheds light on one reason why the “thanking one’s benefactor”-problem was of importance to classical Islamic thinkers. This specific reason is not apparent in *fiqh* and *kalām* works, which also discuss the “thanking one’s benefactor”-problem. This article, therefore, highlights an aspect of the problem, which has not been investigated in the secondary literature.¹

To flesh this out, I will first outline how, in the *Tafsīr*, Rāzī’s approach to the problem of why God alone should be worshipped has theological, legal, and ethical/moral implications. In linking God’s sole deservedness of worship to His role as provider, Rāzī can be said to treat this question as having *theological* implications, insofar as it raises questions about the thorny issue of causation (i.e., do humans bring about their deeds, or is God the sole cause in the cosmos?). Rāzī also treats this question as a *legal* problem, and therefore makes an effort to determine the *ratio legis* of the Quranic command to worship God alone and to establish that the obligation arises with God’s sovereign decree. Finally, he is found to treat it as an *ethical* problem, insofar as he is concerned with how humans come to know of the goodness of monotheism and the repugnancy of polytheism. While his approach shall prove certain overlap between the concerns associated with the “thanking one’s benefactor”-problem in *kalām* and *fiqh* works and his concerns associated with the question of why God alone should be worshipped in the *Tafsīr*, it is important to note that Rāzī comes to put forward different positions. While in his legal analysis of the command to practice monotheism, Rāzī adheres to the tradition of his school (i.e., the Ash‘arīs), according to which obligations (such as the obligation to thank one’s benefactor) arise from Revelation, in his discussion of the ethical status of monotheism and polytheism, Rāzī puts forward a view in the *Tafsīr* that follows scholars in the later tradition, such as prominently Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), who emphasised that humans hold notions of moral values independent of Revelation. Rāzī for his part speaks of reason’s (*al-‘aql*) ability to recognise that monotheism is morally good and polytheism repugnant—insights which Revelation comes to confirm. This underscores how an ethical problem, such as the obligation to thank one’s benefactor, takes some nuance based on its impact on theological, legal and ethical matters.

¹ Special mention should here be made of two studies that deal extensively with the “thanking one’s benefactor”-problem, yet with different *foci* than the present article. Aron ZYSOW’s (2008) “Two Theories of the Obligation to Obey God’s Commands” discusses the role of the “thanking one’s benefactor”-problem in the context of the obligation on humans to obey God’s commands in the first place (another *topos* of the discussion). A. Kevin REINHART’s (1995) *Before Revelation* discusses the “thanking one’s benefactor”-problem in the context of the question whether legal norms and moral qualities exist before the advent of Revelation.

Identifying the Rationale: God as Creator and Benefactor

In his commentary on Quranic verses that contain the command to worship God alone, Rāzī displays a particular interest in identifying the reason why God alone should be deserving of worship. His interest in the rationale behind the command is prompted by his observation that the Quran itself frequently provides a rationale when it orders humans to worship God alone. One such place is Rāzī's commentary on Q. 6:102, which reads ﴿This is God ... the creator of all things, so worship Him...﴾.² He writes:

God's saying ﴿the creator of all things, so (fa-) worship Him﴾ proves that the command to worship Him is based on His being creator of all things. [This is so] because of [the particle] *fa-* which indicates a consequence (*fā' al-ta'qīb*) and ... a causal connection (*sababiyya*). So, this implies that His being the creator of all things is what necessitates that He is the object of worship. (al-RĀZĪ 1981: XIII, 128)

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In his analysis, Rāzī focuses on the role of the particle *fa-* which he describes as indicating that the command to worship God is causally connected to the statement that God is the creator of all things. Rāzī could have stopped at this observation, but in several instances in the *Tafsīr* we find him venturing into a theological investigation of the vexed question of causality. This question arises for him precisely because it is God's role as creator that is invoked as the rationale for worship of Him. I have discussed this problem in detail elsewhere (ERLWEIN 2019b), but here an indication of the direction of his investigation should be given: if the rationale for the command to worship God is that God is described as creator, Rāzī wonders whether this implies that humans, too, might be worshipped, if they are described as creators of their actions? In an attempt to avoid this sacrilegious conclusion (resting on analogical reasoning), Rāzī rejects the theological position espoused by his Mu'tazilī peers that humans are in fact creators of their actions.³

A similar concern with both the rationale for monotheism and the problem of causality (resulting from the rationale) characterises Rāzī's commentary on Q. 7:59. The verse relates how Noah admonished his people by saying ﴿... "My people, worship God: you have no god other than Him. ..."﴾. Rāzī explains:

The prophet mentioned first ﴿worship God﴾ and second ﴿you have no god (*ilāh*) other than God (*Allāh*)﴾, and the second clause is like the cause (*ka-l-'illa*) of the first clause, for if they do not have another god than Him, [it means that] all beneficial and good things they have come from God, and ultimate giving of provisions necessitates ultimate glorification (*niḥāyat al-in'ām tūjib niḥāyat al-ta'zīm*). Worship of God is an obligation only due to the knowledge (*fā-innamā wajabat 'ibādat Allāh li-ajl al-'ilm*) that there is no god other than God. (al-RĀZĪ 1981: XIV, 155-156)

² All translations of Quranic verses are from HALEEM 2004 (with occasional modifications).

³ For studies on the Mu'tazilī and Ash'arī positions on humans as agents, see GIMARET 1980; ABRAHAMOV 1989; FRANK 1966, 1983, and 2007. On analogical reasoning in law, see HASAN 1976 and 1986.

The rationale here identified by Rāzī for God’s sole deservedness of worship is slightly different⁴ than the one at Q. 6:102: there it was God’s role as “creator of all things”, now it is God’s unique description as “god”. He then explains this description as referring to God’s role as giver of provisions and blessings. As in his previous analysis, Rāzī is once more concerned with stressing that it is God alone, to the exclusion of other possible entities, who is causally responsible for the existence of provisions. Yet, what makes this particular part of his commentary interesting to us is also that it gives a first indication of how Rāzī connects the question why God alone should be worshipped with the problem of the obligation to thank one’s benefactor.

Legal Analysis: Ratio Legis and Command

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Rāzī’s interest in the rationale behind the command to worship only God has a *legal* dimension as well, insofar as he analyses the rationale in terms of the legal cause or *ratio legis* of the command. This was the case in both aforementioned quotes (i.e., at Q. 6:102 and Q. 7:59), but is most explicit in the latter. Commenting on Noah’s call to monotheism, as related in the verse, Rāzī stated: “the prophet mentioned first ﴿worship God﴾ and second ﴿you have no god (*ilāh*) other than God (*Allāh*)﴾, and the second clause is like the cause (*ka-l-illa*) of the first clause”. The term ‘*illa*’, which was used in different disciplines to denote differing conceptions of “cause”, is here used in the specific sense of the *ratio legis*.⁵ Having identified God’s role as benefactor as the *ratio legis* of the command to worship only God, Rāzī explains that this implies that the obligation on humans depends on the attainment of knowledge that God actually is their benefactor and god (i.e., “worship of God is an obligation only due to the knowledge that there is no god other than God”). This idea is made clearer in Rāzī’s subsequent remark:

From this, another question branches out: before we know whether there is only one god (*ilāh*) or whether there are more than one, we cannot know whether our benefactor (*mun‘im*) who gives us all kinds of blessings is this entity or that entity. As long as we are ignorant about this ... worship [of any entity whatsoever] is not appropriate. This entails that knowledge of the oneness [of the god, i.e., that only God is described as “god”] is a condition (*shart*) for knowing that worship is appropriate. (al-RĀZĪ 1981: XIV, 156)

⁴ “Slightly different” since, for Rāzī, all blessings are certainly divine creation, but the reverse is not the case, i.e., not all of creation is treated as provisions for humans. Provisions (*ni‘ma*) are defined as “the benefit (*manfa‘a*) which is produced from the viewpoint of doing something generous (*ihsān*) for another” (al-RĀZĪ 1981: III, 31), but it is also true that “humans [are] in this world in a state of happiness or pain” (al-RĀZĪ 1981: I, 188).

⁵ The *mutakallimūn*, for instance, used ‘*illa*’ to refer to a cause by virtue of the essence, as distinguished from the concept of the agent (*fā‘il*) who is endowed with will and choice. This is different from the conceptions of the legal cause or ‘*illa*’ as understood by most jurists. Compare OPWIS 2012, esp. the section “Causality in Theology and Law” (397-405); SHEHABY 1982; ERLWEIN 2019a: 108, 146.

The idea expressed here is that obedience to the command to worship God alone has to be preceded by the intellectual understanding that it is God, none other, who provides for humans. This is the “condition” attached to the obligation, and the condition is expressed in the *ratio legis*. Consequently, in Rāzī’s view, obedience to the Quranic command does not count for anything if it is enacted blindly and without any understanding. Rāzī’s position bears an implicit rejection of the practice of *taqlīd*, i.e., the blind following of authorities in religious matters.⁶ In other places in the *Tafsīr*, Rāzī is more explicit about his rejection of *taqlīd* in connection with the sole worship of God. An example is his commentary on Q. 2:133, which relates how the prophet Jacob, with death approaching, asks his sons: ﴿... “What will you worship after I am gone?” ...﴾. Contrary to the way other scholars understand the verse, Rāzī reads Jacob’s question as an indication of the falseness of *taqlīd*:

Those who uphold *taqlīd* say: “Jacob’s sons were content with *taqlīd*, and Jacob did not reject it. This proves that *taqlīd* is enough.” The Ismailis say: “... [Jacob’s sons] did not say: ‘we worship the god who is proven by reason.’ Rather, they said: ‘we worship the god whom you worship and your fathers worshipped.’ This proves that the way to knowledge is instruction (*ta’līm*) [by religious authorities, i.e., the imam].” (al-RĀZĪ 1981: IV, 83)

Rāzī for his part is eager to deny that acting in obedience to the command to worship God alone is valid if based on authority, without prior speculation about, and knowledge of, the crucial *ratio legis* (i.e., the insight that God is to be described as humans’ god and provider). He consequently stresses that the reply given by Jacob’s sons (“we worship your god and the god of your fathers”) is intended as “we worship the god who is *proven* by your existence and the existence of your fathers” (emphasis added), rather than indicating blind adherence to the practice of their father. “This points to [the requirement of] reasoning, not *taqlīd*”, Rāzī emphatically concludes (al-RĀZĪ 1981: IV, 83). In the case of the command to practice monotheism, the *ratio legis* is also a religious tenet, which is traditionally established in the discipline of *kalām*. In this, the specific *ratio legis* in question is distinguished from other *rationes legis*, which are identified by the *fuqahā’* on the basis of the Quran and which are not subject to rational investigation in *kalām*.

Another place where Rāzī analyses the rationale behind the command to worship God alone in terms of the *ratio legis* is his commentary on Q. 19:36. The verse relates Jesus’s words ﴿“God is my lord and your lord, so worship Him ...”﴾. Rāzī explains the verse in the following way:

When he said ﴿“God is my lord (*rabb*) and your lord ...”﴾—that is: there is no lord for created things other than God—he pointed to [God’s] oneness [in being the only lord].

As for his saying ﴿“... so (*fa-*) worship Him”﴾, it has already been established within the context of the science of the principles of jurisprudence that coordination between a ruling and the description, which is [characterised as] suitable, indicates a causal connection (*tartīb al-ḥukm ‘alā al-waṣf al-munāsib ma‘shar bi’l-‘illiyya*), and here the

6 For studies on *taqlīd*, see ABRAHAMOV 1993; FRANK 1989; SHIHADAH 2005.

command to worship [God alone] is in relative conjunction with the mention of the description of God's lordship (*fa-hāhunā al-amr bi'l-'ibāda waqa'a murattaban 'alā dhikr wasf al-rubūbiyya*). This proves that worshipping God is only obligatory for us (*innamā talzamunā*) because of His being our lord, and this proves that worshipping God is obligatory only (*innamā tajīb*) because of His being creation's benefactor, both in terms of the roots and the branches of provisions. (al-RĀZĪ 1981: XXI, 220-221)

Rāzī here makes explicit reference to works on the principles of jurisprudence and indicates that his present analysis of the *ratio legis* for the command to worship God alone follows the more general explanations in these legal works. Turning to his most famous legal work, *al-Maḥṣūl*,⁷ Rāzī discusses in detail the legal cause or *'illa*. For our purposes it should be noted that, in the *Maḥṣūl*, he stresses that every legal ruling (*ḥukm*) has—and indeed has to have—a *ratio legis*, for otherwise the ruling would be arbitrary and mere folly (*'abath*), and this is below God. Furthermore, the *ratio legis* is to be derived from the Quran (i.e., the description or *al-waṣf*) and it is indicated by the particle *fa-*. This particle and its legal relevance are precisely what Rāzī focused on in his analysis in the *Tafsīr*, as we have seen. He adds that no different, or additional, *ratio legis* than the one stated may be sought or postulated. The reason for this is that it would entail that the ruling remains valid when the *ratio legis* is “non-existent” (*ma'dūm*), i.e., in a situation where the additional *ratio legis* is not actually stated. Since non-existent things cannot function as anything for Rāzī (this being essentially a theological position), the *ratio legis* that is stated is the only one (al-RĀZĪ 1997: V, 147). Finally, Rāzī holds the view that the connection between the *ratio legis* and the ruling is informed by “suitability” (*munāsaba*). In the *Maḥṣūl* he gives the following example: some Shāfi'ī jurists argued that selling wine is prohibited, in analogy to selling dogs, which they considered prohibited. What connects the original and the derived case is the notion of “uncleanness” (*najas*), which functions as the *ratio legis* for the verdict “prohibited” in both cases. Rāzī is critical of this reasoning: uncleanness refers to a state in which prayer is prohibited, so this state may be the *ratio legis* for the prohibition to continue one's prayer, but it is, consequently, not suitable as the *ratio legis* for the prohibition to sell dogs or wine (al-RĀZĪ 1997: V, 162-163).⁸

Rāzī's discussion, in the *Maḥṣūl*, of the *ratio legis*, and especially the notion of suitability, are relevant for situating the aforementioned quote from the *Tafsīr*, i.e., “coordination between a ruling and the description, which is [characterised as] suitable, indicates a causal connection, and here the command to worship [God] is in relative conjunction with the mention of the description of God's lordship.” In line with his discussion in the *Maḥṣūl*, in the *Tafsīr* Rāzī makes the point that the *ratio legis* of the command to practice monotheism—i.e., God's being humans' benefactor—is characterised by suitability. (Here, it should not be

7 Shihadeh dates the *Maḥṣūl* to 578/1180, which means that it was completed before Rāzī started writing the *Tafsīr* in around 595/1199 (SHIHADAH 2006: 7, 10).

8 Compare OPWIS 2012: 403-404. Kamali renders *al-waṣf al-munāsib* “a proper attribute” and speaks of “a proper and reasonable relationship” between *ratio legis* and legal verdict (KAMALI 2003: 191).

forgotten that in this context Rāzī made explicit use of the term *‘illa*.⁹) This is so since, for him, worship means nothing else than showing gratitude for blessings one received,¹⁰ and since God is humans’ sole benefactor, this divine characteristic is suitable as the *ratio legis* for the command in question. Furthermore, Rāzī stresses, in line with his explanations in the *Maḥṣūl*, that there cannot be another *ratio legis* and “worshipping God is only obligatory for us because of His being our lord”.

Now, by describing the connection between the *ratio legis* and the legal verdict as characterised by suitability, Rāzī rejects the idea that legal verdicts associated with actions are arbitrary; that is to say, there is something about God (namely His role as benefactor), to the exclusion of other entities, that “causes” the obligation to worship Him. Conversely, if an entity does *not* have this characteristic, the command to worship can not apply. Yet, this is not to say that, for Rāzī, the causal connection (i.e., *sababiyya*, *‘illiyya*) is characterised by necessity. (This is the distinction made by scholars such as Ghazālī between legal causes and rational causes.¹¹) God is not *compelled* in any way to command that He should be worshipped exclusively, even if the fact remains that He is humans’ sole benefactor. Rather, it is His sovereign decree to connect His role as benefactor as the *ratio legis* to the command to practice monotheism.

This is made explicit by Rāzī in discussing the prohibition of associating other entities in worship with God (*shirk*). His commentary on Q. 19:36, which relates Jesus’s command to worship God alone, makes it clear that the rationale for the prohibition of polytheism is the same as the rationale for the command to worship only God:

Abraham said, when he prohibited his father from worshipping idols: ﴿He said to his father, “Father, why do you worship something that can neither hear nor see nor benefit you in any way?”﴾ (i.e., Q. 19:42)—that is: since they are of no benefit for humans, their worship is not permissible (*lam tajuz*). Based on this verse it is established that since God is His servants’ lord (*rabb*), His worship was made an obligation (*wujiba*). (al-RĀZĪ 1981: XXI, 221)

Yet, Rāzī also stresses that God *could* have commanded polytheism, if He had wanted so. He is emphatic that “God’s rulings are not caused (*mu‘allala*) [by some extrinsic factor compelling God] at all” and “God declares obligations and pronounces rulings as He wishes” (al-RĀZĪ 1981: VII, 143). This is made explicit in his commentary on Q. 46:3. In this passage Rāzī is concerned with the prohibition of polytheism in the form of idolatry. He reiterates the already familiar notion that God is humans’ benefactor, which is the rationale for His sole deservedness of worship as He deserves gratitude. This leads him to conclude—putting the words into a hypothetical interlocutor’s mouth—that “the only option that remains [for idolaters] is to say: we do not worship the idols because they should be deserving of worship

9 Namely in his commentary on Q. 7:59 discussed above: “the prophet mentioned first {worship God} and second {you have no god other than God}, and the second clause is like the cause (*ka-l-‘illa*) of the first clause.”

10 Compare statements such as “if you want to worship God, then thank Him. Thankfulness is the head of worship” (al-RĀZĪ 1981: V, 10), in explaining Q. 2:172, {...eat the good things We have provided for you and be grateful to God, if it is Him that you worship}.

11 Al-GHAZĀLĪ 1993: V, 314-316: *al-‘illa al-shar‘iyya* and *al-‘illa al-‘aqliyya*.

[since their inability to bestow blessings indicates that they are not], rather we only (*innamā*) worship them because the [true] god, the creator, the benefactor *commanded* (*amara*) us to worship them” (emphasis added). Rāzī’s reply to the interlocutor’s suggestion—on behalf of the practitioners of idolatry—is the following:

God [Himself] mentioned the reply to this: He said: ﴿... “Bring me a previous scripture or some vestige of divine knowledge...”﴾ (i.e., Q. 46:4). To explain this reply: [as a general rule,] it cannot be known that this command [to worship idols] has come unless from inspiration and the sending [of prophets]. We [consequently] say: ... either the affirmation of this [command to worship idols] is based on the inspiration Muḥammad received—but this is known to be false! Or its affirmation is found in one of the divine books that came down to previous prophets—but this is also known to be false! [...] When all these options turn out to be false, it is established that engaging in worshipping idols is a false practice and a corrupt belief. (al-RĀZĪ 1981: XXVIII, 4)

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Rāzī’s reasoning implies this: in rejecting the idolaters’ position that God Himself commanded polytheism, on the basis that God never uttered this command in any of His Scriptures, Rāzī implicitly entertains the possibility that God could have commanded polytheism. He does not reject this position as a matter of principle; only a glance at Revelation can settle this question (“it cannot be known that this command [to worship idols] has come unless from inspiration”). If God had commanded the practice of *shirk*, this might in Rāzī’s understanding have required a different *ratio legis* than the one put forward for its prohibition, or it might have required a different approach to the connection between ruling and *ratio legis* altogether. This leads to two crucial insights: first, for Rāzī, God connects *rationes legis* and legal rulings freely as He wishes, even if the rulings and *rationes legis* which He actually stipulates are characterised by suitability. And, secondly, knowledge of obligations and prohibitions derives from divine Revelation and cannot be attained in its absence.

To be sure, Rāzī is certainly not the only, much less the first scholar to apply the question of the obligation to thank one’s benefactor to the question of why God alone is deserving of worship. He himself notes in the *Tafsīr* that “our companions” identified God’s description as creator and benefactor as “the legal cause (*sabab*) for the obligation of worship” (al-RĀZĪ 1981: II, 95). The same notion can be found in ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s (d. 415/1025) *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsa*, who asks: “if they do not know that God is a benefactor in the first place, how can they know ... of His deservedness of worship, which means [showing] absolute gratitude [for blessings received]?” (‘ABD al-JABBĀR 1996: 83-84). However, it should be noted that the reverse is not the case: traditionally, in works of *fiqh* and *kalām*, the “thanking one’s benefactor”-problem was not discussed with a view to the command to practice monotheism. Rāzī’s concern in the *Tafsīr* with how the obligation of monotheism and the prohibition of polytheism arise and are known, is, however, the same concern we find in *fiqh* and *kalām* discussions of the “thanking one’s benefactor”-problem.

The many details of this discussion left aside, of interest to us is its general trajectory: on the one hand, there were the Mu‘tazilī scholars, who argued that certain obligations can be known by reason. Examples are “returning something that was entrusted, fulfilling one’s

religion, and thanking for blessings” (‘ABD al-JABBĀR 1996: 70) as well as “worshipping God” (‘ABD al-JABBĀR 1965: XV, 27). These obligations are knowable by reason as they are connected to moral qualities (i.e., goodness and reprehensibility), which belong as real attributes to the actions in question, and these are discernible by reason (‘ABD al-JABBĀR 1965: XV, 19).¹² On the other hand, there were the Ash‘arī scholars, who held the view that reason has no access to knowledge of legal norms associated with actions (i.e., their being prohibited, permitted, or commanded). Legal norms are not connected to moral qualities of actions, which reason could somehow discern. They arise with God’s proclamation of them, and consequently “a thing’s being obligatory, prohibited, or permitted is only established by the revealed law.” This implies that “thanking the benefactor is not obligatory before the arrival of the revealed law” (al-RĀZĪ 2009: 239).¹³

In the *Tafsīr*, Rāzī addresses the same set of questions associated with the “thanking one’s benefactor”-problem. It is worth taking his discussion into account as it sheds light on his stance when it comes to the command to worship God alone. For instance, in commenting on Q. 1:2, he states: “people disagree about whether the obligation to thank [one’s benefactor] is established (*wujūb al-shukr thābit*) by reason or Revelation.” He continues that some people—whom he leaved unidentified, but whose position is clearly that of the Ash‘arīs—argue that the obligation derives from Revelation. This is to say, they hold that, ontologically speaking, this obligation arises with Revelation, and it is consequently knowable only through Revelation. Their argument in defence of this position goes back, according to Rāzī’s account, to Scripture itself, namely Q. 17:15 ﴿... nor do We punish until We have sent a messenger﴾ (al-RĀZĪ 1981: I, 231). The proponents of the opposite view—evidently the Mu‘tazilīs—hold that the obligation to thank one’s benefactor “exists before and after the advent of the law (*shar‘*)”, and they quote Q. 1:2, ﴿Praise belongs to God...﴾, as their proof-text. The significance of this verse is its categorical ascription of praise to God. This means, they argue, that “praise is His right (*ḥaqq*) and is owed to Him absolutely”, and this in turn entails “[His] deservedness (*istiḥqāq*) before the advent of the law” (al-RĀZĪ 1981: I, 232). Reason not only recognises that receiving blessings requires showing gratitude, but also judges that God, who is proven to be humans’ benefactor, is consequently deserving of gratitude. The Quran is seen to endorse what unaided reason already recognised, when it declares gratitude to God an obligation. For Ash‘arīs, no such obligation follows from reason’s insight that God is humans’ benefactor. The latter position is precisely the one championed by Rāzī in the *Tafsīr*, as we have seen.

12 For a study of ethics in ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s thought, see HOURANI 1971. Compare also Rāzī’s detailed discussion of the arguments presented by the Mu‘tazilīs in his *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya* (1987: III, 341-358).

13 For studies on traditional Ash‘arī divine command theory/divine voluntarism and the Mu‘tazilī objectivist position, see HOURANI 1985a, esp. Chapters “Ethical Presuppositions of the Qur’ān” (23-48) and “Two Theories of Value in Early Islam” (57-66), and 1985b; JACKSON 1999; VASALOU 2008; REINHART 1995, esp. Part IV (125-175) on Mu‘tazilī moral ontology and epistemology.

Ethical Analysis: the Moral Quality of Monotheism

While Rāzī rejects the view that, in the absence of Revelation, humans can come to know of the *obligation* to worship God alone, he holds a different view regarding the *moral quality* of this action. In the *Tafsīr*, he speaks of reason's (*al-ʿaql*) ability to recognise not only the fact that God is humans' benefactor, but also that He is deserving of worship (arguably an ethical category), and that practicing monotheism is good and practicing polytheism is reprehensible.

God's Deservedness of Worship

That reason has the ability to recognise the fact, as Rāzī has it, that God is humans' benefactor is a tenet we have come across before. In rejecting adherence to authorities (*taqlīd*), Rāzī assigned this task to reason. One rational argument he presents to prove the divine attributes "creator" and "benefactor" takes the following form: all existents are either necessary or possible. The necessarily existent refers to God, while the possibly existent describes all other things. The possibly existent needs, in order to enter existence, one who tips the scales in favour of existence (*murajjih*). This leads to the conclusion that all possible things exist by God's creation and that "all kinds of blessings that occur to humans only do so because of God" (al-RĀZĪ 1981: I, 164).¹⁴

Now, besides the factual insight that God is humans' benefactor, Rāzī ascribes to reason the insight that this characterisation makes God *deserving* of worship.¹⁵ This can be inferred from several statements in the *Tafsīr*. For instance, in his commentary on Q. 1:2, Rāzī is concerned with the statement that all praise belongs to God. He explains that one benefit associated with this verse is that "just as much as His saying ﴿Praise belongs to God...﴾ proves that there is none who is to be praised except for God, *reason* (*al-ʿaql*) proves the same thing" (emphasis added). Rāzī then lists several points to be considered. One of them is that every benefactor seeks, by the act of bestowing blessings on another, some gain for himself. Through this personal gain, he is able to attain some degree of perfection. God, however, is perfect in Himself and does not require anything in order to reach perfection. His act of bestowing blessings on humans is, consequently, out of sheer generosity. One cannot but conclude that this implies that "only He is deserving (*yastahiqq*) of praise". Another consideration Rāzī puts forward is that all blessings, in being "existents", are possible in themselves. Their actualisation therefore depends on God's creative act. Since the Quranic term *ḥamd* in Q. 1:2 refers to nothing else than praise for the bestowal of blessings, Rāzī concludes, "it is necessary to say that only God is deserving (*yastahiqq*) of praise". The whole discussion ends with Rāzī emphasising that "based on these reason-based proofs (*barāhīn*), the correctness of His saying ﴿Praise belongs to God﴾ has been established" (al-RĀZĪ 1981: I, 226).

What is the significance of these considerations? It is that Rāzī is explicit in affirming that the human faculty of reason is able to understand that God is deserving of praise. Reason arrives at this insight through recognition that God is the cause of all blessings humans

¹⁴ On the notion of particularisation or "tipping the scales" (*takhṣīs*) in *kalām*, see DAVIDSON 1968.

¹⁵ For a discussion of the concept of "deservedness" in Muʿtazilī ethics, see REINHART 1995: 153-155; VASALOU 2008, Chapter 4 "The Baṣran Muʿtazilite Approach to Desert" (67-115). Vasalou emphasises (at 64-66) the moral dimension of the notion of deservedness, against Reinhart who denies this dimension.

receive. Rāzī's position implies that reason recognises some kind of link between the proposition that God is sole benefactor and the proposition that, as a consequence, He is deserving of praise. Importantly, this insight does, then, *not* depend on Revelation. When stating that "based on these reason-based proofs, the correctness of His saying ﴿Praise belongs to God﴾ has been established" (see above), Rāzī uses an insight gained from reasoning to vindicate the correctness of Scripture. This means that the recognition of God's being benefactor and His resultant deservedness of worship is independent from Revelation.

To be sure, what Rāzī does *not* explain is how precisely it is that there *is* a link between an entity's role as benefactor and this entity's deservedness of praise, gratitude, and worship. Some places in the *Tafsīr* give the impression that Rāzī frames the link between being a benefactor and deserving gratitude as resting on human convention, which then becomes a paradigm for humans' relationships with God. Consider the following example: listing the various kinds of blessings God bestows on humans, Rāzī explains that the verse ﴿How can you disbelieve in God...﴾ (i.e., Q. 2:28) is a rebuke of those who fail to show gratitude to God. That the verse has this intention becomes clear, Rāzī suggests, once it is taken into consideration that "the more a father increases the blessings he bestows on his child by educating him, teaching him, and so on—the more grave it is considered when the child shows disobedience towards his father" (al-RĀZĪ 1981: II, 163). Rāzī might here simply be making a rhetorical point by invoking an experience and idea his audience would be familiar with—or there is more to it and he might be employing the principle, frequently made use of by the *mutakallimūn*, that the observable realm (*al-shāhid*) reveals something about the transcendent realm (*al-ghā'ib*).¹⁶ This principle would imply that there is an analogy between humans' relations among each other and humans' relations with God, insofar as gratitude is presented as the appropriate reaction to having received blessings.¹⁷ In any case, in the *Tafsīr*, Rāzī does not seem to be very concerned with explaining just how it is that bestowing blessings and deservedness of gratitude are linked.

Goodness of Monotheism

In addition to reason's ability to grasp that God is humans' sole benefactor and, therefore, deserving of praise, gratitude, and worship, Rāzī admits reason's ability to discern the moral

16 For the principle that the *ghā'ib* can be known on the basis of the *shāhid*, see RUDOLPH 1997, Section "Der Schluß vom Sichtbaren auf das Unsichtbare" (295-298); OPWIS 2019.

17 Zysow explains that the Baghdadi Mu'tazilīs held the view that God imposes obligations (*taklīf*) on humans in order to bring about their well-being, in analogy to how loving parents impose obligations on their children. Similarly, just as children owe their parents gratitude, so humans owe God gratitude (ZYSOW 2008: 400). While there might be an analogy between the human and the divine realms regarding the link between gratefulness and blessings, Rāzī is adamant that this kind of analogy does not exist in another, related aspect: humans seek a personal gain and perfection through bestowing blessings on others; God does not have this sort of motive as He is perfect in Himself (al-RĀZĪ 1981: I, 226). Note that Juwaynī, in his *al-Burhān*, already mentions the argument according to which God is owed gratitude in analogy to the way things are in the *shāhid*: "The opponent could say: the connection [between bestowing benefits and deserving gratitude] is known by people possessed of reason in the *shāhid*, and they assert that gratitude is obligatory in the *shāhid*, and they then make it an obligation also for the *ghā'ib*—this, however, is clearly false, for if what they say were granted to them, it would entail that the one who is thanked derives some benefit, but the Lord is high above benefits and harms, as has become clear!" (al-JUWAYNĪ 1978: 95-96).

qualities of polytheism and monotheism: the former is evil, the latter is good. He deals with this problem in his commentary on Q. 16:51-53. The verse reads:

﴿God said, “Do not take two gods”—for He is the only god—“I alone am the one that you should hold in awe.” / Everything in the heavens and the earth belongs to Him... Will you heed anyone other than God? / Whatever good things (*ni‘ma*) you possess come from God...﴾

Rāzī begins with noting that the admonition ﴿“Do not take two gods (*ilāhayn*)”﴾ contains the prohibition (*nahy*) of practicing *shirk*. *Shirk* is understood to refer to the conviction that there are other entities besides God who share in His title of “god” (*ilāh*) (al-RĀZĪ 1981: XX, 49). This title entails a number of things for Rāzī; in the current context, however, what is at stake is that this title refers to the already familiar notion of God’s role as humans’ benefactor. With this definition in mind, Rāzī states a few pages later that the practice of “associating other entities with God (*ishtirāk*)” means denying that provisions come from God [alone]” (al-RĀZĪ 1981: XX, 53). Consequently, we find Rāzī stating quite emphatically that “belief in the existence of two deities (*ilāhayn*) is a belief considered repugnant by reason (*mustaqbah fī l-‘uqūl*)”. This is why “none from among those who possess reason (*al-‘uqalā*)” believes in the existence of two deities”. The Quranic admonition ﴿“Do not take two gods”﴾, Rāzī finally adds, “is intended to affirm its repugnancy and to declare reason correct when it understands what is evil about it” (*al-maqṣūd min takrīrihi ta’kīd al-tanfīr ‘anhu wa-takmīl wuqūf al-‘aql ‘alā mā fīhi min al-qubḥ*) (al-RĀZĪ 1981: XX, 49).

Now, the way by which reason hits upon the repugnancy and evilness of polytheism is this: Rāzī adduces four rational arguments to make his point. It suffices to mention only one of these reason-based arguments: if two entities are assumed to be deities, it means that each of them is necessarily existent in itself and also shares with the other one the necessity of existence. This implies that each would be composed of parts, but every such thing is possible in terms of its existence. A contradiction arises. The necessarily existent can hence not be more than one entity. This means that there is only one deity.

The way by which reason recognises, according to Rāzī, the repugnancy of polytheism raises three interrelated questions: the first question is how Rāzī imagines that reason gets from a *factual* insight based on the kind of rational arguments he adduces (i.e., there is only one entity who is described as ‘god’, and that is God) to a *moral* insight (i.e., *shirk* and polytheism are, consequently, evil and repugnant)? He does not say much. As opposed to his Mu‘tazilī peers, Rāzī does not hold that the moral qualities associated with actions are real attributes belonging to these actions, which reason is able to recognise. This is clear from all his other works discussing the problem.

This leads to the second interrelated question: in what sense, then, is polytheism “evil”? What is it about polytheism that reason grasps as “repugnant”? Rāzī’s Ash‘arī predecessors held that, like legal norms, the moral qualities of actions are established by God’s utterance, and they indicate whether God commands or prohibits an action. Juwaynī (d. 478/1085), for instance, stated categorically in his legal work, *al-Burhān fī uṣūl al-fiqh*, that “declaring something evil or good belongs to the judgement of the revealed law (*al-sharī‘a*). Both notions refer to commands and prohibitions. Nothing that falls under God’s ruling is thus evil in itself (*bi-‘aynihī*), just as nothing is good in itself” (al-JUWAYNĪ 1978: 87). Later Ash‘arī scholars, most notably Ghazālī, approached the issue of the moral values of actions somewhat

differently. As Ayman Shihadeh explains, these scholars developed an interest in “ordinary moral language” (SHIHADDEH 2006: 53) and the question how it is that humans have notions of morality without explicit recourse to Revelation.¹⁸ Following his school’s tradition, Ghazālī declared in his legal work, *al-Mustasfā min ‘ilm al-uṣūl*, that “reason cannot declare anything good or evil ... as there is no judgement of actions before the arrival of the law” (al-GHAZĀLĪ 1993: I, 177)—yet, he also discussed in some detail that humans have a natural tendency to declare actions good or evil. He insisted, however, that it would be a mistake to infer from this—as Mu‘tazilīs do—that actions in themselves have moral qualities, which human reason can discover. Rather, the moral qualities humans assign to actions indicate nothing more than a personal inclination (*gharaḍ*), resulting from the human tendency to label as “good” what appears desirable or beneficial and as “evil” what appears undesirable and harmful (al-GHAZĀLĪ 1993: I, 184).¹⁹ This notion of moral value is, however, not relevant for coming to know how God evaluates actions; only a glance at Revelation can settle this question. Rāzī, for his part, follows the tradition of his predecessors, especially Ghazālī, in works other than the *Tafsīr*. For one, he agrees that the terms “good” and “evil” are used equivocally. The main interest of scholars is in “what is connected with what the lawgiver has said”, which implies that “the goodness and evilness of things ... is only established by the law”. Still, “good” and “evil” are also used to refer to (1) what conforms, or does not conform, to a person’s objective (*gharaḍ*); to (2) a perfection, such as knowledge, or imperfection, such as ignorance; to (3) whatever is permitted (*mubāḥ*) (in the case of the label “good”); and lastly to (4) what the law expresses praise or blame for (al-RĀZĪ 2009: 226-227).²⁰

So, let us return to our question: in what sense, then, does reason come to recognise polytheism as “evil”, as Rāzī holds in the *Tafsīr*? The difficulty of answering this question lies in the fact that Rāzī simply does not say much. Obviously, he cannot use the label “evil” here in the sense that it is evil according to God, for his point is precisely that reason, independent of Revelation, arrives at the insight of the repugnancy of polytheism. There is no mention either of polytheism’s repugnancy insofar as it constitutes a lack of perfection (for the practitioner of polytheism?), and the notion of permissibility (i.e., *mubāḥ*) seems irrelevant too. What, then, about the application of the label “evil” to what goes against people’s objectives? Following Ghazālī, in several of his works Rāzī links the notion of people’s objectives to the notion of the attainment of benefits and the avoidance of harm, both of which are “good”. Now, one could easily think that when Rāzī states in the *Tafsīr* that practicing *shirk* seems to be evil to him who ponders over it, he means to say that it

¹⁸ Jackson already spoke of a redirection of “ethical discourse away from ontology to psychology” under Ghazālī (JACKSON 1999: 190).

¹⁹ Compare also the section on Ghazālī in REINHART 1995: 70-76. Makdisi already emphasised that to identify the proponents of reason with the Mu‘tazilīs and the proponents of Revelation with the Ash‘arīs is, in this context, too narrow and overlooks that certain traditionist scholars, such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), accorded to reason the ability to know of the moral qualities of certain actions, independent of Revelation (MAKDISI 1983). For Ghazālī’s use of the notion of a human disposition, see GRIFFEL 2012. For the significance of this notion in Ibn Taymiyya’s thought, see VASALOU 2016.

²⁰ Compare the *Maḥṣūl* where Rāzī mentions what agrees or does not agree with a person’s nature (*tabʿ*); a perfection or imperfection; and what is connected with praise or blame (al-RĀZĪ 1997: 123-124).

seems to be evil *insofar* as it prevents people from attaining benefits. This is to say, if people realise that God is humans' true benefactor, they also realise that turning in worship and gratitude to other entities (i.e., committing *shirk*) could lead to the disadvantageous situation that God might inflict harm on them, in addition to the consideration that these other entities are not able in the first place to bestow blessings on humans. In this sense, engaging in *shirk* would run counter to the objective of attaining benefits, and it is understood to be evil in this sense. Maybe this is what Rāzī has in mind—but he certainly does not spell it out in the present context. Taking into account another place in the *Tafsīr*, however, might help settling this question. Rāzī takes Q. 2:158—which speaks about the *hajj* and *umra*—as an opportunity to divide God's obligations on humans (*taḳlīf*) into three categories:

- (1) "that which reason in itself judges to be good" (*mā yahkum al-ʿaql bi-ḥusnihi fī awwal al-amr*), and here Rāzī explicitly mentions the "thanking one's benefactor"-problem: "if one is reasonable (*ʿāqil*), one knows that mentioning the benefactor in praise and gratitude as well as persisting in thanking him is a good thing according to reason (*amr mustahṣan fī l-ʿuqūl*)";
- (2) "that which reason in itself judges to be evil, but it is acknowledged as good because of the arrival of the law. ... It is evil according to reason because God does not bestow a benefit by it and the servant suffers under it [such as pains]";
- (3) "something where neither good nor bad is found, rather it is considered to be free from benefit and harm [such as walking between Ṣafā and Marwa during the *hajj*]". (al-RĀZĪ 1981: IV, 173-174)

What is important about this passage is that, in the *Tafsīr*, too, Rāzī appears to link reason's judgment that something is good or evil, or not, to the attainment of benefits and harms. Reason, then, judges thanking the benefactor as a good thing insofar as it is connected to the attainment of benefits—on the part of humans, to be sure, not God, who is above this.²¹ We, then, seem justified to read Rāzī's statement that reason knows *shirk* to be evil in light of these explanations: polytheism is recognised as evil because it leads to some sort of disadvantage for humans.

This, however, seems to be at odds with certain other statements Rāzī makes: he argues that humans cannot actually be sure, in the absence of Revelation's statement, that showing gratitude to God alone (i.e., avoidance of *shirk*) will result in the attainment of benefits. He makes this point in the *Maḥṣūl*, in arguing against the Muʿtazilī position that reason can know of the obligation to thank one's benefactor. The details of his train of thought left aside, it is important to note that he states that the individuals expressing their gratitude to God for blessings they received from Him might in fact arouse God's anger with this action. Thanking the benefactor would in this case be harmful, he argues, and reason is consequently incapable of deciding whether it is obligatory or not (assuming that reason could only declare obligatory what is linked to the attainment of benefits) (al-RĀZĪ 1997: I, 148-150). If this is the case, i.e., that humans are unable to know whether practicing monotheism or polytheism will incur God's wrath or arouse His approval, it is questionable how considering benefit and harm

²¹ Compare n. 17.

should allow reason to arrive at the insight that *shirk* is evil—on what basis should reason decide this question if it cannot read God's mind?

How is this apparent contradiction to be resolved? In my view, this cannot be resolved. Rāzī cannot hold that reasonable people judge *shirk* to be evil insofar as it leads to disadvantages for them, and at the same time argue that reasonable people must conclude that they do not actually know whether God approves of their display of gratitude to Him alone (i.e., monotheism), thus risking to experience harms.

This finally leads to the third interrelated question: is it, then, according to Rāzī *proper reason* that recognises the repugnancy of polytheism? It is noteworthy that, in his commentary on Q. 16:51-53, he spoke of “*reason* hitting upon that which is evil when it comes to *shirk*” (*wuqūf al-‘aql ‘alā mā fīhi min al-qubḥ*; emphasis added), and that he adduced four *rational* arguments in order to illustrate how reason arrives at this insight. Similarly, in his commentary on Q. 2:158 (i.e., where he introduced the threefold division of *taklīf*), he spoke of “that which *reason* in itself judges to be good” (emphasis added), and explicitly mentioned the goodness of thanking one's benefactor. Yet, Sherman A. Jackson has pointed out that “al-Rāzī, like al-Ghazālī, held the appetitive self and not reason to be the true repository of moral judgements” (JACKSON 1999: 194). Shihadeh explains that when Rāzī speaks of the goodness and evilness of some action as being “rational” (*‘aqlī*), he does *not* mean that the human faculty of reason grasps some moral quality belonging to this action (as Mu‘tazilīs would argue); rather, he means that the *‘aql* perceives pleasures and pains, and his statement is intended “only in the sense of being based on internal perceptions, grasped and reckoned by the mind, not in the sense of being rationally intuited” (SHIHADÉH 2006: 67-68). Before Rāzī, Ghazālī already emphasised that it is not the human faculty of reason, but human nature (*al-ṭab‘*) from which ideas of morality arise (al-GHAZĀLĪ 1993: 179-199). Since Rāzī never explains how precisely the *‘aql* gets from the *factual* insight about God's being humans' sole benefactor to the *ethical* insight that polytheism is reprehensible, and since he does not expound upon the way in which polytheism appears reprehensible to the *‘aql*, it also remains somewhat unclear what role precisely reason and rational arguments, on the one hand, and personal inclinations and feelings of pleasure and pain, on the other hand, play in this.²²

Revelation as Confirmation

Most humans, who follow reason where it leads them, will conclude, according to Rāzī, that only God is to be worshipped. Revelation's function, then, is simply to underscore this insight already gained by reason. We found this idea expressed in Rāzī's commentary on Q. 16:51-53, where he stated that the Quranic proclamation “Do not take two gods” “is intended to affirm the repugnancy of *shirk* and to declare reason correct (*takmīl wuqūf al-‘aql*) when it understands what is evil about it”. Through this proclamation, the Quran “intends to alert (*tanbīh*) to the fact that there is a contradiction between [the notions of] divinity and duality” (al-RĀZĪ 1981: XX, 49-50).

²² As an interesting historical note, Zysow notes that the Zaydī scholar, Ḥasan b. Husayn al-Ḥūthī (d. 1388/1968-9), held the view that “[r]eason can discern that requiring a benefactor is right (*ḥasan*), but not that it is an obligation” (ZYSOW 2008: 404).

The same idea was expressed in Rāzī's commentary on Q. 2:158 above, where he introduced the three classes of God's obligations on humans. In the first class are those actions which reason by itself judges to be good. The one example Rāzī explicitly mentioned was thanking and praising one's benefactor. He then added that this example is also alluded to in Q. 2:152, ﴿So remember Me; I will remember you. Be thankful to me, and never ungrateful﴾. Rāzī here presents the Quran as *matching* reason's moral assessment of the action of thanking God in His role as benefactor (which means worship of God). This is at variance with other actions and things, such as the experience of pain and poverty, which humans tend to judge evil, but which Revelation declares to be good (as "the wisdom that is in them becomes clear, i.e., that they are trials and tests" (al-RĀZĪ 1981: IV, 174)).

In addition to the case of monotheism, there are other cases, too, according to Rāzī, where Revelation comes to agree with the moral assessments already reached by reason. He puts forward this view in discussing the dispute over whether the *basmala* is a verse belonging to *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa*, or whether it is prefixed to it. In his defence of the former position, Rāzī adduces a whole arsenal of rational proofs. One of these rational proofs invokes the notion that God, in being creator and eternal, is prior (*sābiq*) to everything else in existence. Based on this factual insight, it is "necessary in accordance with the judgement based on suitability that is intellected by reason (*bi-ḥukm al-munāsaba al-ʿaqliyya*)" that God is mentioned in recitation before everything else. The idea Rāzī expresses is that a factual insight, based on rational arguments, about God's priority to everything else provides the scholar with a suitable rationale for arriving at the judgement that the *basmala* must be the first verse of *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa*. This judgement does not derive from Revelation but is made based on rational considerations. Yet, Revelation *endorses* it, for Revelation would not come to reject something reason judges to be the right thing and good: "if the view that He has to be mentioned first is good according to reason (*ḥasan fī l-ʿuqūl*), it is necessary that it is [also] expressed by the law (*muʿtabar fī l-sharʿ*), for Muḥammad said: 'That which the Muslims consider good (*ḥasan*) is [also] good in God's eyes.'" (al-RĀZĪ 1981: I, 205). However, even if in such cases as the goodness of monotheism Revelation matches reason's insight, the knowledge that this is the case is once more dependent on Revelation's explicit endorsement and cannot be attained in its absence (which is also why Rāzī refers to a Prophetic saying, a form of revelation, to substantiate his point).

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