

ANTI-DUALISM DEBATES BY THE MU'TAZILLIS

Dr. Kersey Antia, Apr 20, 2019; updated May 11, 2019

The extent of Mu'tazilli involvement in the debate against dualism is well illustrated by Tamar Rudavsky (*Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence in Medieval Philosophy: Islamic Jewish and Christian Perspectives*, Edited by Tamar Rudavsky, Synthese Historical Library, Vol. 25. Dordrecht, Boston and Lancaster: D. Reidel Publishing Co. 1985.)

There are instances of discord among the early Mu'tazilli theologians on the question of whether God is capable of wrongdoing. For instance, Al-Nazzam held that God not only does not do evil (wrongdoing, injustice) but is not able to do it. This view stood in contrast to that which came to prevail among the Mu'tazillis (at least in Basra), which was that God, while never actually doing evil, is able to do it.

Van Ess tries to understand al-Nazzam's viewpoint from within the setting of inter-religious dialectic between Mu'tazillis and non-Muslim dualists. After reviewing al-Nazzam's argument for his position, Van Ess notes that this argument contains points which were generally accepted by Mu'tazillis and that it therefore does not adequately explain the opposition of the majority of Mu'tazillis to al-Nazzam's position. There he places the whole debate in the setting of argumentation with the dualists and finds that al-Nazzam's Mu'tazilli opponents were dissatisfied with his anti-dualist polemic. Al-Nazzam tried to establish the superiority of the Islamic conception of God over the dualist conception of Light but in so doing did not go far enough in affirming God's freedom. This freedom demanded an ability to do evil; to deny this ability was to admit a "residue" of dualism into one's thinking, whereas to permit it will go against the very grain of dualism.