

# Al-Māturīdī on the Cause (*sabab*) and Human Action between *Kalām* and *Uṣūl al-Fiqh*

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## 1 Introduction

Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944) was an influential Ḥanafī scholar from Samarqand in Transoxiana. He is best known for his theological work—he gives his name to one of the two major schools of Sunnī *kalām*—as well as his Qur’anic exegesis. Corresponding to this, only two of his works seemingly survive: his theological summa, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, and his *tafsīr*, *Ta’wīlāt al-qur’ān*. Yet these two disciplines did not exhaust al-Māturīdī’s repertoire. From his terse use of legal theoretical concepts within his *tafsīr*<sup>1</sup> and from the writing of ‘Alā’ al-Dīn al-Samarqandī (d. 539/1144) who takes him as the exemplar of a distinct Samarqandī tradition within the discipline, we know that he also theorised in *uṣūl al-fiqh*.<sup>2</sup> Al-Samarqandī mentions that his two main books in this field are *Kitāb ma’ākhidh al-sharā’i fī uṣūl al-fiqh*<sup>3</sup> and *Kitāb al-jadal fī uṣūl al-fiqh*.<sup>4</sup> Although both are lost to us, they were still in circulation in al-Samarqandī’s time, and he takes the opportunity to regularly cite and quote

1 For example, see the discussion of his approach to *naskh* (‘abrogation’) in Ramon Harvey, “Al-Māturīdī on the Abrogation of the *Sharī’a* in the Qur’an and Previous Scriptures,” in *Imām Māturīdī ve Te’vīlātü’l-Kur’ān*, ed. Hatice K. Arpaguş, Mehmet Umit and Bilal Kır (Istanbul: M. U. İlahiyat Fakültesi Vakfı Yayınları, 2019), 511–24, esp. 517–22.

2 See Aron Zysow, *The Economy of Certainty: An Introduction to the Typology of Islamic Legal Theory* (Atlanta, GA: Lockwood Press, 2013), 66, 75; Aron Zysow, “Mu’tazilism and Māturīdism in Ḥanafī Legal Theory,” in *Studies in Islamic Legal Theory*, ed. Bernard G. Weiss (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 223–65, esp. 238.

3 On this reading of the title, see Zysow, “Mu’tazilism and Māturīdism in Ḥanafī Legal Theory,” 238–39, n. 14.

4 ‘Alā’ al-Dīn al-Samarqandī, *Mizān al-uṣūl fī natā’ij al-‘uqūl*, ed. ‘Abd al-Malik ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sa’dī, 2 vols (Mecca: Jāmi’at Umm al-Qurā, 1984), vol. 1, 2–3. Other books ascribed to him in this genre are probably either alternative titles for the above, such as *Kitāb ma’ākhidh al-sharā’i fī l-fiqh*, or mistaken attributions, such as *Uṣūl al-dīn*. See Mustafa Cerić, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam: A Study of the Theology of Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944)* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1995), 36–37. On the latter text, see Ramon Harvey, *Transcendent God, Rational World: A Māturīdī Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 12, n. 10.

from them. This means that, as demonstrated by Aron Zysow, there is enough extant material on al-Māturīdī's views about legal theory to make connections to his theological work and to draw conclusions on the continuity between the two.<sup>5</sup>

My objective in this chapter is to excavate al-Māturīdī's use of the term *sabab* (cause) within his surviving *kalām* and *uṣūl* materials as it is used for theorising human action. In the first section I will introduce the main features of the term *sabab* before the time of al-Māturīdī. In the second section I will explore the way that he uses it to underpin the metaphysics of free choice (*ikhtiyār*) in his *kalām* system. Here I will also show that al-Māturīdī develops a concurrentist rather than occasionalist theory of causality. I will then turn in the third section to a specific function that the *sabab* plays in the normative fulfilment of God's commands within his *uṣūl* work.<sup>6</sup> In the fourth section I will examine applications of this *uṣūl* principle in his *tafsīr*. Finally, I will reflect on what this topic can tell us about the systematic intentions of al-Māturīdī on human action in these genres.

## 2 Use of *Sabab* in Theology and Law up to the Fourth/Tenth Century

The Arabic word *sabab* (pl. *asbāb*) means 'a rope' and specifically one that is used to achieve some end, such as climbing up palm trees, or accessing water. By extension, *sabab* became used for anything that is a means, occasion or cause for another thing.<sup>7</sup> In the field of *kalām*, *sabab* was a common term for discussion of the causal relationship between human actors and their actions,

5 See Zysow, *The Economy of Certainty*, 66–72, 75–86, 271–72; Zysow, "Mu'tazilism and Māturīdism in Ḥanafī Legal Theory."

6 Mohamed Eissa makes a sustained comparison between four Shāfi'ī jurists on what he calls natural causality, the 'cause' (*sabab*) of natural human actions, and juridical causality, the 'cause' (*'illa*) of 'deontic qualifications', i.e., rulings of the *sharī'a*, in the context of *qiyās* (legal analogy). See Mohamed Eissa, *The Jurist and the Theologian: Speculative Theology in Shāfi'ī Legal Theory* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2017), 95–120. On the *uṣūl* side, this concerns a related, albeit slightly different question than the present study, which (using what is quoted from al-Māturīdī's legal writings) looks instead at actions as the 'deontic cause' of the fulfilment of God's obligations.

7 E. W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2003), vol. 1, p. 1285. Al-Māturīdī gives the definition of 'rope' (*ḥabl*) for *sabab*, which he attributes to the dialect of Hudhayl. Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-qur'ān*, ed. Ertuğrul Boynukalın and Bekir Topaloğlu, 18 vols (Istanbul: Dār al-Mizān, 2006), vol. 9, 354.

although in the early period *‘illa* was often used interchangeably with it.<sup>8</sup> *Sabab* makes an appearance in this context in the works of the Imāmī Shī‘ī theologian Hishām b. al-Ḥakam (d. 179/795–6) and also in those of Ḍirār b. ‘Amr (d. 200/815), an independent thinker with links both to the circle of Abū Ḥanīfa and the early Mu‘tazila.<sup>9</sup>

With respect to al-Māturīdī’s specific theological milieu, we should consider his reception of philosophical ideas from the circle around Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī (d. ca 259/873),<sup>10</sup> as well as his selective appropriation of some concepts associated with the Mu‘tazila. Al-Kindī takes up the four kinds of causes recognised by Aristotle, a distinction not associated with *kalām* proponents in the early period.<sup>11</sup> He also makes use of both the terms *‘illa* and *sabab*. For instance, al-Kindī writes:

It has been shown that all things have a first cause (*‘illa*), which does not share with them a genus, shape, similarity, or association. Rather [the cause] is higher and nobler than they, and prior to them, and it is the cause (*sabab*) of their coming-to-be and their stability.<sup>12</sup>

A philosophical doctrine relevant to causation held in common by the *falāsifa* and several Mu‘tazilī theologians concerns the action of natures (*ṭabā‘ī*). In the thought of al-Kindī and some of the Mu‘tazila, including the Transoxianan Abū l-Qāsim al-Ka‘bī (al-Balkhī) (d. 319/931), these are the primary qualities of heat, cold, moisture and dryness that comprise bodies.<sup>13</sup> Despite some differences in the way that these figures theorised about the causal operation of

8 See L. Gardet, “Illa,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition*, ed. P. Bearman, T. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. Van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs, 12 vols (Leiden: Brill, 1986–2004); Özgür Koca, *Islam, Causality, and Freedom: From the Medieval to the Modern Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 2, n. 1.

9 See Josef van Ess, *Theology and Society in the Second and Third Centuries of the Hijra, Volume 1*, trans. John O’Kane (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 433–34 for Hishām, and Josef van Ess, *Theology and Society in the Second and Third Centuries of the Hijra, Volume 3*, trans. Gwendolin Goldbloom (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 37 and 50 for Ḍirār.

10 See Ramon Harvey, “Philosopher of Samarkand: Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī’s Theory of Properties,” in *Pluralizing Philosophy’s Past*, ed. Amber L. Griffioen and Marius Backmann (London: Palgrave, 2023), 77–90, at 78–79.

11 Josef van Ess, *Theology and Society in the Second and Third Centuries of the Hijra, Volume 4*, trans. Gwendolin Goldbloom (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 545.

12 Peter Adamson and Peter E. Pormann, *The Philosophical Works of al-Kindī* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 40. Also see 182 and 237, n. 73.

13 Adamson and Pormann, *The Philosophical Works of al-Kindī*, 188; Racha El Omari, *The Theology of Abū l-Qāsim al-Balkhī/al-Ka‘bī* (d. 319/931) (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 176.

natures, the common feature was that a given nature would always result in the production of characteristic effects, for instance the burning of objects exposed to fire.<sup>14</sup> I will discuss al-Māturīdī's own doctrine of natures and how it fits into his theory of human action below.

The use of *sabab* within legal writing in the sense of the cause or occasion for a certain ruling (*ḥukm*) was in place by the fourth/tenth century, although again some authors preferred *illa*. As well as in al-Māturīdī's texts, the term can be found in *al-Fuṣūl fī l-uṣūl* by Abū Bakr al-Jaṣṣāṣ (d. 370/981), which is the earliest surviving comprehensive Ḥanafī text of *uṣūl al-fiqh*. For instance, al-Jaṣṣāṣ writes: "the occasioning factor (*illa*)<sup>15</sup> is a cause (*sabab*) for what is based on it."<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the origin and early history of the *sabab* remains obscure.<sup>17</sup> The question is made especially difficult by the parallel non-technical use of *sabab* for a reason or means, combined with the fragmentary sources available for works of legal theory in the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries.<sup>18</sup> It therefore remains a desideratum for wider research in the field.

### 3 The Metaphysics of *Sabab* in al-Māturīdī's *Kalām*

Al-Māturīdī deploys the term *sabab* (pl. *asbāb*) in several ways within *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*. For instance, he prominently uses it to discuss three "means" of knowledge in his epistemological introduction,<sup>19</sup> as well as relying on its common linguistic meaning. Here, I am only considering his technical use of it as "cause". This specific sense of *sabab* is intimately connected to his discussion of the accident of power (*qudra*).

14 El Omari, *The Theology of Abū l-Qāsim al-Balkhī/al-Ka'bī* (d. 319/931), 179–81. This general point was also upheld by al-Ka'bī, albeit unlike some earlier Mu'tazilis he did not think that natures were directly causally active, but rather that they defined the natural characteristic (*khāṣṣiyya*) to which a body characteristically reacts (see 179).

15 For this translation, see Bernard G. Weiss, *The Search for God's Law: Islamic Jurisprudence in the Writings of Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī* (revised edition, Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 2010), 546.

16 Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *al-Fuṣūl fī l-uṣūl*, ed. 'Ujayl Jāsim al-Nashamī, 4 vols (Kuwait: Wizārat al-Awqāf wa-l-Shu'ūn al-Islāmiyya, 1994), vol. 4, 9.

17 See Zysow, *The Economy of Certainty*, 232, n. 447.

18 See Ahmed El Shamsy, "Bridging the Gap: Two Early Texts of Islamic Legal Theory," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 137, no. 3 (2017), 505–36, esp. 505–6.

19 Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, ed. Bekir Topaloğlu and Muḥammad Aruçi (second edition, Istanbul: Maktabat al-Irshād, 2010), 69.

Before studying relevant passages in greater detail, I will briefly summarise al-Māturīdī's divine action model. Al-Māturīdī demonstrates a simultaneous commitment to divine omnipotence and creative agency over every aspect of the world and to the reality of causes, whether compelled by the natures of things or chosen by humankind. The former aspect of divine activity is well-known and documented, but the latter aspect of worldly activity has been subject to some debate.<sup>20</sup> My treatment of al-Māturīdī's causal theory below reflects my understanding that al-Māturīdī does not see his system as occasionalist. This is because he identifies causes (*asbāb*) with metaphysically efficacious aspects of the created world: the accident of volitional power (*qudra*) in human voluntary choice and the interaction of involuntary natures (*tabā'ī'*). It is in this context that he secures the place for human moral actions in terms of his notion of free choice (*ikhtiyār*), to do an act of obedience or an opposite act of disobedience.

Al-Māturīdī's divine action model can, therefore, be understood as concurrentist. Unlike occasionalism, which arrogates causal participation in the effects seen within the world to God alone, concurrentism upholds causal participation for both God and created entities.<sup>21</sup> For al-Māturīdī, this can be framed through the following propositions:

1. God timelessly creates every aspect of the spatiotemporal world, including all accidents constituting bodies.<sup>22</sup>
2. Accidents constituting bodies (as spatiotemporal loci for the outcome of God's creative activity) are nothing but powers that necessarily cause their effects under the right conditions.<sup>23</sup>

20 See Nazif Muhtaroglu, "Al-Māturīdī's View of Causality," in *Occasionalism Revisited: New Essays from the Islamic and Western Philosophical Traditions*, ed. Nazif Muhtaroglu (Abu Dhabi: Kalam Research & Media, 2017), 3–21, esp. 12–16. In my view, Muhtaroglu errs in not considering all the texts in *Kitāb al-tawḥīd* discussing the *sabab* and related matters, as well as al-Māturīdī's polemical engagement with the Mu'tazilī position exemplified by al-Ka'bī. This leads him to dismiss the possibility that al-Māturīdī understands created things to act with causal efficacy based on incorrect assumptions about his metaphysical position.

21 Concurrentist divine action models often receive criticism for an alleged instability, which leads to their collapse into occasionalism. For further detailed discussion on al-Māturīdī's model and a defence against this charge, see Ramon Harvey and David Solomon Jalajel, "Al-Māturīdī's Divine Action Model: A Distinctive Concurrentist Account of Causality," *Journal of Islamic Philosophy*, 16, no. 1 (2025), 63–106.

22 See al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, 110–13.

23 See al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, 83–84, 348–49.

Therefore:

3. Bodies have their aggregate causal powers necessarily from the cumulative created outcomes of their constituent accidents.

To see how his overall stance is expressed within the technical debates of *kalām*, I shall turn to a section mainly concerned with an analysis of divinely granted human volitional power.<sup>24</sup> In this section, al-Māturīdī addresses the position that an accident of volitional power (*qudra*) for an act of obedience (*ṭāʿa*) could have equally been “spent” in an act of disobedience (*maʿṣiya*), as opposed to requiring another distinct accident of *qudra*. He mentions that this is the view of Abū Ḥanīfa and a group of the Muʿtazila, whereas it is opposed to the Basran theologian al-Ḥusayn al-Najjār (d. ca 230/845) and other unnamed proponents.<sup>25</sup> Al-Māturīdī argues that this position is used by the Muʿtazila as the basis for their well-known doctrine that power precedes the act.<sup>26</sup> It would seem that he has in mind an argument that if divinely granted power is suitable for acts that either enact obedience or disobedience, then it must

24 The section is just marked as *Masʿala* (‘Enquiry’) in the manuscript and runs continuously until *Masʿal fi l-irāda* (‘Enquiries on the Will’). See Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī, “Kitāb al-tawḥīd,” Cambridge University Library, Cambridge, MS Add.3651, 137v; 150v. The editors of the printed edition have subdivided it into several shorter subsections. Al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, 349–75.

25 Al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, 349. The subsequent Ḥanafī Māturīdī Abū l-Yusr al-Bazdawī (d. 493/1097) adds the Ḥanafī al-Bishr al-Marīsī (d. 218/833) and Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (d. 324/935–36) to those opposed to Abū Ḥanīfa’s position and ‘Abd Allāh b. Kullāb (d. ca 240/854–55) to its supporters. Abū l-Yusr al-Bazdawī, *Al-Muyassar fi l-kalām al-musammā uṣūl al-dīn*, ed. ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad Ismāʿīl and Muḥammad Ḍarḡham (Cairo: Dār Nūr al-Yaqīn, 2024), 435. That this doctrine can be reliably traced to Abū Ḥanīfa is confirmed by its quotation in the creed *al-Fiqh al-akbar* by Abū Ḥanīfa’s student Abū Muṭīʿ al-Balkhī (d. 199/814), though the term used is *istiṭāʿa* (‘capacity’). Abū Ḥanīfa al-Nuʿmān b. Thābit, *al-ʿĀlim wa-l-mutaʿallim riwāyat Abī Muqātil ʿan Abī Ḥanīfa raḍīya Allāhu ʿanhumā wa-yalihi risālat Abī Ḥanīfa ilā ʿUthmān al-Battī thumma al-fiqh al-absaṭ: Riwāyat Abī Muṭīʿ ʿan Abī Ḥanīfa raḥimahumā Allāh*, ed. Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Anwār, 1949), 43. For an account of the Ashʿarī position in comparison with the Muʿtazilī one, see Weiss, *The Search for God’s Law*, 62.

26 Al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, 349. Al-Māturīdī draws a distinction between use of the term *qudra* for sound means (*salāmat al-asbāb*) and healthy organs (*ṣiḥḥat al-ālāt*), which are blessings from God that precede the action, and for the power that is only with the act (*li-l-fiʿl*). Al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, 342. For further analysis of this passage, see J. Meric Pessagno, “Irāda, Ikhtiyār, Qudra, Kasb: The View of Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 104/1 (1984), 177–91, esp. 184–85; and Ulrich Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand*, trans. Rodrigo Adem (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 305–6.

be given (and used) in advance of the moment of action so that the act itself takes place independently of God. The Mu'tazila were especially concerned with this point to avoid, as they saw it, the attribution of evil and unjust actions to God. Al-Māturīdī rejects this inference and instead argues for the coherence of volitional power given at the moment of action for either of the two possible outcomes.<sup>27</sup>

To understand how this discussion connects to causation and the concept of *sabab*, it is useful to jump to a later part of the same section. Here, al-Māturīdī records al-Ka'bī attempting to draw a distinction between *qudra* and *sabab* with the proposition that whereas an action must be simultaneous with its cause (*sabab*), it does not need to be simultaneous with its accident of power.<sup>28</sup> The picture is thus one in which the actor "spends" the accident of power prior to causing the instantiation of the action as an effect.<sup>29</sup> Rather than the concurrentism that al-Māturīdī upholds, this would free the human being to act as a secondary cause independently of divine causal participation.

Al-Māturīdī responds to this stance by denying that such a gap can be opened between the concept of *qudra* and *sabab*:

The summary of [the position] is that the action has a time of non-existence, which is before [its realisation], a time of cessation, which is after it, and a time of existence, which is during it. God must see it with its states, as [al-Ka'bī] mentioned, and nothing else. Likewise, this is the case for the times and places in which actions occur and also for causes (*asbāb*). Power (*al-quwwa*) is the same as this, He sees it as non-existent before [its realisation in the action], ceased after it, and existent with it.<sup>30</sup>

From this we can conclude that at least as far as the analysis of human action goes, al-Māturīdī understands volitional power and cause to be coextensive notions. Further remarks in *Kitāb al-tawhīd* support this reading. He states: "volitional power, which is the cause of the action in reality ... (*al-qudra allatī hiya sabab al-fi'l fi l-ḥaqīqa*)."<sup>31</sup> In another place, he frames the relationship

27 He makes several metaphysical arguments against the Mu'tazili doctrine that power precedes the action. See Al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawhīd*, 346–48; Pessagno, "Irāda, Ikhtiyār, Qudra, Kasb," 186–87.

28 Al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawhīd*, 357.

29 See Richard M. Frank, "The Structure of Created Causality, according to al-Ash'ari: An Analysis of the *Kitāb al-Luma'*, §§ 82–164," *Studia Islamica*, 104 (1966), 13–75, esp. 19, n. 4.

30 Al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawhīd*, 359.

31 Al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawhīd*, 412. Also see al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-qur'ān*, vol. 16, 115.

as follows: “volitional power (*al-quḍra*) is created for the action and it is the cause (*sabab*) of it being freely chosen (*mukhtāran*) and not compelled (*muḍṭarran*).”<sup>32</sup>

This leads neatly back to the initial passage that I cited on the use of power for either obedience or disobedience. Here, al-Māturīdī goes on to mention that “the foundational principle is that everything that is suitable for something, but not suitable for its opposite, occurs by nature (*bi-l-ṭabʿ*), not by choice (*bi-l-ikhtiyār*). Were power not suitable for them both it would be something that operates by nature, not by choice.”<sup>33</sup>

Al-Māturīdī is mainly focused on theological questions, such as the relationship between divine and human action, so his physical ontology must be inferred from indications throughout his work. Given my focus in this chapter, I will not provide a detailed reconstruction of this aspect of his thought. To advance the present discussion, however, it is important to recognise that he understands bodies as bundles of causally powerful accidents of various kinds. What he refers to as natures (*ṭabāʾiʿ*) are accidents that act with specific dispositional powers to cause effects within the makeup of their bundle and to cause aggregate effects on other bodies.<sup>34</sup>

The distinction that al-Māturīdī draws in the present context is that volitional power, a momentary accident granted to human beings that can be used for obedience or disobedience, underpins free moral choice, whereas the dispositional natures of entities lead to their characteristic actions, for instance “we find heat rises by its nature and cold descends.”<sup>35</sup> He even sees the human body as composed of natures that will tend to compel a person to certain involuntary or habitual acts, such that it is only reason (*ʿaql*) that allows one to instead make truly conscious choices.<sup>36</sup>

Al-Māturīdī thus applies his causal account to two kinds of entities. First, there are natural entities that causally act without any aspect of choice according to the aggregate dispositional powers of their constituent accidents. Of course, such natures are not held by him to lie in any respect outside of

32 Al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, 321.

33 Al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, 349.

34 See Harvey, *Transcendent God, Rational World*, 89, and further discussion on 90–93. This builds on the view of Rudolph. See Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunni Theology in Samarqand*, 259–60. I argue, *pace* Rudolph, that al-Māturīdī does not restrict the concept of natures to the four elemental qualities. For further detailed reconstruction of al-Māturīdī’s physical ontology, see Harvey and Jalajel, “Al-Māturīdī’s Divine Action Model,” 74–78.

35 Al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, 184.

36 Al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, 67, 76.



God's power. Like everything else, God creates them with His timeless creative action—it is just that what He thereby creates are the very causally active powers that comprise worldly entities.<sup>37</sup> For al-Māturīdī, such natures cannot receive *qudra*, as this is not suitable for their “compelled” action. Rather, once the bundle of accidents that makes up a body are exposed to a certain causal condition, the effect described by their aggregate dispositional powers necessarily occurs.<sup>38</sup> For example, the bundle of accidents that makes up a body of glass has the disposition to shatter once hit by a sufficiently strong force. When a stone is thrown at a window and the causal condition is met, the aggregate natures of the bundles involved must act to realise the resultant effect of shattering. This may result in the body being split into several smaller bodies. Note that under this account of causality, the bodies in question undergo substantial change over time; there is not a mere seamless replacement of intact glass with shattered pieces, as an occasionalist picture would understand it.<sup>39</sup> Rather, stability and change can be accounted for by persistence and flux in the accidents comprising the bodies.<sup>40</sup> This also puts al-Māturīdī at odds with later figures within his tradition who would not only adopt atomism, but would forcefully insist on the momentary existence of all accidents.<sup>41</sup>

Second, created volitional agents, human beings and other entities with free will, which includes the *jinn* at least,<sup>42</sup> possess a degree of choice in causing effects. Al-Māturīdī points to our intuitive certainty that we freely choose our actions as evidence for this distinction.<sup>43</sup> Ontologically, this is accounted for by God's creation of an accident of *qudra* that is the *sabab* (‘cause’), of one act rather than an alternative at the same moment that it is given. The human being's use of *qudra* as a choice function for the causal result of the chosen act is termed ‘free choice’ (*ikhtiyār*).<sup>44</sup> Although it is perfectly possible, and even likely, for a person to have an intention that precedes a given action, freedom

37 See Harvey, *Transcendent God, Rational World*, 176–79.

38 Al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, 349. This necessity comes from God's creation of any given nature. Within the context of al-Māturīdī's wider theological system it is ultimately underpinned by the concept of divine wisdom. As al-Māturīdī discusses elsewhere, even miraculous events are understood through the idea of specific, rare natures. See Ramon Harvey and Kayhan Özyakal, “Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī,” in *Seven Classical Perspectives for Islam and Science*, ed. Shoaib Ahmed Malik (Abingdon: Routledge) (forthcoming).

39 See Ulrich Rudolph, “Occasionalism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 347–63, esp. 355–56.

40 Al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, 211.

41 See al-Bazdawī, *Uṣūl al-dīn*, 24–26.

42 See Al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt al-qurʾān*, vol. 14, 285.

43 Al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, 307.

44 See Pessagno, “Irāda, Ikhtiyār, Qudra, Kasb,” 183.

is ultimately the immediate selection of the specific act that the accident of *qudra* is to cause.<sup>45</sup> This means that, unlike accidents classified as natures, the causal result of the accident of *qudra* is not fully determined by the prior interactions of accident bundles.

With an understanding of the metaphysics of al-Māturīdī's causal theory in place, it is now possible to address how he uses it to underpin his ethics. In the same passage that has been my primary focus in this section, he writes:

The foundational principle of [the present question] is that as every cause of action (*sabab min asbāb al-fi'l*) is suitable for something and its opposite, so is volitional power (*al-qudra*). In addition, if the power is not suitable for both matters [i.e., either something or its opposite], the power to do the opposite action would be missing. One is sometimes ordered to do something and at other times prohibited from it. So, it is necessary that [one] power serves for something and its opposite. This means that command and prohibition are based on capacity (*al-wus'*) and power.<sup>46</sup>

In other words, the significance of human obedience to the divine command is secured by the fact that the volitional power granted by God, which is used to fulfil it, could be used to flaunt it. Moreover, just as a single accident of power cannot be simultaneously the cause of two opposite actions, it can never be the case that something is both commanded and prohibited at the same time. In some cases, however, the same action is alternately commanded and prohibited. For instance, fasting is commanded on the last day of Ramadan but prohibited on the day of Eid. Moreover, each moment one fasts, the power that could be used to eat is spent in the choice to refrain from it. The two options are mutually exclusive, because volitional power is conceived as an accident that can only act as the cause for one performed action at any given moment. This binary aspect of commands and prohibitions will be developed further below.

45 This is contrary to the interpretation offered in Philip Dorroll, "Māturīdī Theology in the Ottoman Empire: Debating Human Choice and Divine Power," in *Osmanlı'da İlm-i Kelām: Âlimler, Eserler, Meseleler*, ed. O. Demir, V. Kaya, K. Gombeyaz and U. M. Kılavuz (Istanbul: İSAR Yayınları, 2016), 219–38, esp. 225. Dorroll suggests that al-Māturīdī argues for the precedence of *ikhtiyār* to the creation of power on the basis of a passage in al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawhīd*, 352. But what al-Māturīdī points to in the cited location is the possibility of the successive renewal of a certain choice instead of its alternatives. For a translation of the passage and detailed discussion of this point, see Pessagno, "Irāda, Ikhtiyār, Qudra, Kasb," 183–84, 187.

46 Al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawhīd*, 349.

When al-Māturīdī touches on commands and prohibitions in his *kalām* it is usually to provide the underlying theological reasoning for why God gives them and how human beings can choose to obey or disobey them. This is because the discipline of *kalām* looks at the metaphysical conditions that enable human beings to act with choice in response to divine obligations, of which the most important is the pairing of obedience and disobedience. This leads to the framing adopted by al-Māturīdī in which he typically writes of using volitional power to realise a given action or its opposite, by which he means those acts related in general to these two kinds of response to divine commands. What matters for underpinning *ikhtiyār* in a more specific normative sense, however, is that the same accident of volitional power would have been effective for any alternative action. It is not as if one is always confronted by a pair of options. As his *uṣūl* discussion clarifies, when the focus turns to the value of acts themselves, the multiple possibilities in any given scenario become important in accounting for the rich variety of ethical responses available to the human being. It is also crucially within the discipline of *uṣūl al-fiqh* that one can explain in detail how God's commands and prohibitions can be expressed as statements of legal value, such as obligations, which actions "cause" to be fulfilled or violated.

#### 4 The Normativity of the *Sabab* in al-Māturīdī's *Uṣūl*

Unlike *kalām*, in which we can draw from the entire text of al-Māturīdī's *Kitāb al-tawhīd*, when it comes to his own views on *uṣūl* we are reliant on the few texts preserved by 'Alā' al-Dīn al-Samarqandī in his *Mizān al-uṣūl*, as well as specific principles that he brings to his exegesis. For the present investigation into the *sabab*, there are three relevant passages in this text, all drawn from the section on *amr* ('command'), which record, or paraphrase, al-Māturīdī's words. What is preserved is only a fraction of the typical coverage of this section within works of *uṣūl*, and so only a partial picture can emerge of what al-Māturīdī may have thought. Nevertheless, fragmentary reconstruction is better than no reconstruction at all.

Before looking at these materials, it is useful to articulate what scholars of *uṣūl al-fiqh* were attempting to do when theorising about commands. As pointed out by David Vishanoff, they typically saw their role as providing rubrics for performing legal translation of the divine address, especially as found within the Qur'an. This means that commands in the imperative need to be expressed as indicative statements of "act *a* by person *p* under circumstance *c* has the

legal value *v*.”<sup>47</sup> The specific topic that al-Māturīdī addresses in the surviving materials concerns what can be called a reciprocity rule between commands and prohibitions. Simply put, any divine command that can be expressed as one performing a certain act *a* to fulfil an obligation *o* is necessarily equivalent to refraining from a corresponding act *not-a* by which one would have otherwise fulfilled a forbiddance *f*, and vice versa. For instance, the command to fast in Ramadan is expressed by the obligation to perform the act of fasting, and this is equivalent to refraining from eating, drinking and sexual relations, which are forbidden. In order to further explore the implications of this theoretical construct, I will present a translation of the aforementioned source materials:<sup>48</sup>

1. Shaykh Abū Manṣūr, may God have mercy on him, unrestrictedly treated the prohibition of something as a command to refrain from it—as a command for [an act] refraining from and preventing [that act]<sup>49</sup>—and there are [multiple] causes (*asbāb*) for refraining from it, which are for ease (*musāhala*) and facilitation (*tawassuʿ*).<sup>50</sup>

2. The correct view is what Shaykh Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī, may God have mercy on him, says: “the opposite of something is refraining from [that act], but refraining can be due to a single cause (*sabab*) or due to causes (*asbāb*). The command is a prohibition of refraining from [that act], and the prohibition from something is the command to refrain from it. Then, if it is refrained from due to a single cause, that cause is described with obligation and forbiddance. And if it is refrained from due to causes, each of them is described individually according to its state.”<sup>51</sup>

3. Shakyh Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī, may God have mercy on him, says: “there is no distinction between the command and the prohibition, as each of them has an opposite in reality, which is refraining from [that act]. So, the command to do an action is a prohibition of its opposite (and

47 David R. Vishanoff, “The Ethical Structure of Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī’s Legal Theory,” in *Islamic Law and Ethics*, ed. David R. Vishanoff (Herndon, VA: IIIT, 2020), 1–33, at 19–20. The letters have been italicised.

48 I have put these passages in the most useful order for introducing their ideas, rather than the order that they appear in al-Samarqandī’s book.

49 This parenthetical remark comes after the phrase mentioning causes (*asbāb*) in the text, but it makes better syntactical sense to translate it here.

50 Al-Samarqandī, *Mizān al-uṣūl fī natāʾij al-ʿuqūl*, vol. 1, 224.

51 Al-Samarqandī, *Mizān al-uṣūl fī natāʾij al-ʿuqūl*, vol. 1, 222.

its opposite is refraining from it). [It is] not that [one performs] the act of refraining from it by a single specific action, like motion is refrained from by a single specific action, which is stillness. Refraining from it can be by many actions, such as the command to stand is a prohibition of its opposite, which is refraining from it. That can be by many actions, such as sitting, reclining, lying down and more. In the same way, the prohibition of an action is the command to do its opposite, which is refraining from it, and that [is performed] by the kinds of actions that we have mentioned.”<sup>52</sup>

The first point to draw from these passages is that al-Māturīdī holds the view, also associated with Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013) in his *uṣūl* work *al-Taqrīb wa-l-irshād*, that commands and prohibitions are two sides of the same coin.<sup>53</sup> That is, any command immediately and automatically expresses a corresponding prohibition and vice versa. Vishanoff connects this to al-Bāqillānī’s Ash’arī position of God’s speech as a single *ma’nā* (‘meaning, attribute’).<sup>54</sup> I would suggest that there is a difficulty in this line of reasoning due to the position held by al-Bāqillānī and Ash’arīs after him, such as Abū l-Ma’ālī al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085). This difficulty is that, while they understood divine speech as a single attribute, they referred to differentiated meanings and commands within it.<sup>55</sup> Al-Māturīdī treats divine speech as a class of divine action and openly discusses its plural meanings.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, since the *uṣūl* texts that we have from him, as quoted above, do not draw a connection to his theology of God’s speech, I will not discuss this question further here.

The second point, and the main subject of my inquiry, derives from the reciprocity rule that has already been outlined. The fact that every command or prohibition corresponds to refraining from an opposite act has an interesting consequence. Whereas the commanded or prohibited act is defined by the

52 Al-Samarqandī, *Mizān al-uṣūl fī natā’ij al-‘uqūl*, vol. 1, 208–9.

53 David R. Vishanoff, *The Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics: How Sunni Legal Theorists Imagined a Revealed Law* (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 2011), 174. In his later work, al-Bāqillānī apparently modified his view to the command logically entailing but not constituting a prohibition of what is opposite to it. See Vishanoff, *The Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, 174, n. 114. Al-Māturīdī seems to have shared the earlier view found in his *al-Taqrīb*. On this point, see Weiss, *The Search for God’s Law*, 378.

54 Vishanoff, *The Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics*, 174–75.

55 Omar Farahat, *The Foundation of Norms in Islamic Jurisprudence and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 111–12.

56 Al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, 116–17, 121. See Harvey, *Transcendent God, Rational World*, 197, 200–1, 209.

specific linguistic form within revelation, its opposite is left unrestricted. This leads to two kinds of cases. Sometimes, there is only a single way to refrain from the opposite act, and therefore only one action can be the 'cause' (*sabab*) to refrain from it and thereby fulfil the obligation. An example of this is motion, which is left by stillness. This binary metaphysical scenario is one familiar from al-Māturīdī's *kalām*.<sup>57</sup> In other cases, and it seems from his treatment that al-Māturīdī considered this common, several actions are available as causes. He explains that the reason there are several ways to fulfil the command is due to divinely granted ease. Hence, by formally defining fulfilment of commands and prohibitions through the action of refraining from their opposites and by not restricting the different possible ways to do so, he builds a degree of inherent flexibility into his treatment of the legal implications of the divine address.

Moreover, the selection by human beings of which of these various possibilities to perform is metaphysically grounded in their *ikhtiyār*. This means that, as well as the basic choice to obey or disobey the command or prohibition, there is a further "normative choice" between a range of acts to fulfil the legal obligation. The implication is that al-Māturīdī does not merely understand the divine address to tell human beings precisely what to do but dignifies them with selecting the means to "cause" their compliance with the Law. This also gives theoretical space for other ethical frameworks, such as an account of the cultivation of the virtues, to be layered upon the core account of obligation towards God's commands.<sup>58</sup> To return once more to the example of fasting in Ramadan, a believer fulfils the prohibition of eating (and so on) by refraining from it with the free selection between a range of other acts. While sleeping through most of the day will fulfil the obligation of fasting, it does so in an inferior way in terms of virtue and reward to reciting the Qur'an. What is important for the present study is that, springing from al-Māturīdī's concurrentist divine action model, these are genuine choices that are causally efficacious in realising the attendant legal obligations. This amounts to a consistent system that vouchsafes human responsibility in normative engagement with God's commands and prohibitions.

The key point that al-Māturīdī draws from this analysis is that by recasting the relationship of the human agent to acts of legal value in terms of refraining from corresponding acts, it becomes possible to account for how the actions performed instead are the 'cause' (*sabab*) for this refraining and thereby the

57 Al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawhīd*, 79–80.

58 See Ramon Harvey, "Whose Justice? When Māturīdī Meets MacIntyre," in *Justice in Islam: New Ethical Perspectives*, ed. Ramon Harvey and Daniel Tutt (Herndon, VA: IIT, 2023), 50–76, at 64–65.

fulfilment of the obligation. Al-Māturīdī's discussion within the discourse of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, then, does not look at the metaphysical dynamics of how freely willed decisions play out as aggregates of the created accidents that constitute volitional agents, as is the case within *kalām*. Rather, the focus within *uṣūl* is strictly upon the normative actions that result from that process and how they are, in turn, causes for the introduction of fulfilled accidents of obedience or disobedience into the volitional agent bundle. Though this deontic effect of human acts of obedience and disobedience is invisible, according to al-Māturīdī's ontology it must be a real aspect of each person's accident bundle—the way that one participates in the normative goodness and badness within the world.

## 5 Normative Human Action within *Uṣūlī* Discourses in al-Māturīdī's *Tafsīr*

The above points can be further elaborated with reference to material found in al-Māturīdī's *Ta'wīlāt al-qur'ān*. It is in his *tafsīr* that al-Māturīdī both justifies the studied *uṣūl* principle through the Qur'anic text and applies it as part of his exegetical repertoire.

Commenting on Q. 8:45, "Believers, when you meet a force in battle, stand firm ...," he refers back to the earlier verse Q. 8:15, "When you meet the disbelievers in battle, do not turn and flee ..." He observes that in Q. 8:45 the phrase 'stand firm' (*fa-thbutū*) lets it be known that in the prohibition of turning and fleeing there is a command to stand firm and vice versa. Here he implies that the context of the preceding verse and use of the particle *fā'* to connote an already received instruction establishes the general principle that in the prohibition of something there is a command for its opposite and vice versa.<sup>59</sup> In this case, the obligation can only be fulfilled by a single *sabab*: standing firm, which is taken as identical to refraining from fleeing.

Al-Māturīdī approaches several other Qur'anic texts in a similar way. One of these is Q. 55:9: "Weigh with justice and do not fall short in the balance." Here he mentions the principle that commanding something prohibits its opposite and then states that the verse's explicit combination of the command and the prohibition is for emphasis on the topic of weighing fairly.<sup>60</sup> On Q. 2:16, "Their trade did not profit," he says that the negation of something obligates

59 Al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-qur'ān*, vol. 6, 237.

60 Al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-qur'ān*, vol. 14, 258.

affirming its opposite—that is, the hypocrite’s trade of guidance for error is loss-making.<sup>61</sup> Again, on Q. 93:10, “Do not turn away the beggar,” al-Māturīdī considers that what is meant is that such a prohibition is a command for the opposite, whereupon he refers to Q. 2:16.<sup>62</sup> Reading these cases in light of the greater technical elaboration in the quotations preserved from his works of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, it is implicit that when the choice is made to perform (or refrain from the opposite of) any of these normative actions, that act becomes the cause for deontic fulfilment of a specific obligation expressed by the divine address.

## 6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored al-Māturīdī’s concept of ‘cause’ (*sabab*) in two main genres, *kalām* and *uṣūl* (though this latter includes *uṣūlī* comments within his *tafsīr*). In his *kalām*, the focus was on his theological elaboration of the Ḥanafī doctrine that God creates an accident of volitional power that is “spent” at the very moment that the human being acts for one of two opposite kinds of result, obedience or disobedience. This volitional power (*qudra*) is the concurrent cause (*sabab*) of the action’s created existence. He contrasts this distinctive account of human choice (*ikhtiyār*) with an analysis of divinely created natural causality, in which the nature (*ṭabʿ*) of things compels their action. Whereas the first aspect of his treatment bequeathed an important legacy within the subsequent Māturīdī tradition,<sup>63</sup> albeit often reinterpreted through the lens of occasionalism, his approach to natures was quickly abandoned and replaced with atomism.<sup>64</sup>

Turning to al-Māturīdī’s contributions to *uṣūl al-fiqh*, of which we have only limited sources, I showed that though the *sabab* in *uṣūl* has an analogous function in terms of being a kind of cause, it is identified with the human act, rather

61 Al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt al-qurʾān*, vol. 2, 43.

62 Al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt al-qurʾān*, vol. 17, 250.

63 This point goes beyond the scope of the current chapter. For further discussion, see Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand*, 305, n. 347; Dorroll, “Māturīdī Theology in the Ottoman Empire,” 229–30; Nazif Muhtaroglu, “An Occasionalist Defence of Free Will,” in *Classic Issues in Islamic Philosophy and Theology Today*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka and Nazif Muhtaroglu (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 45–62, esp. 49; Philipp Bruckmayr, “The Particular Will (*al-irādat al-juzʾiyya*): Excavations Regarding a Latecomer in *Kalām* Terminology on Human Agency and Its Position in Naqshbandi Discourse,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 13 (2011), 1–24, esp. 3, 12.

64 Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand*, 248–9; Harvey, *Transcendent God, Rational World*, 93.



than the volitional power that makes it possible. Hence, al-Māturīdī uses the concept of *sabab* to articulate how human actions are the normative or deontic causes for the fulfilment of obligations derived from the divine address, especially in terms of whichever action is used to refrain from the opposite of a command or prohibition.

This lets us better understand the purpose of each of these genres to our theologian. Al-Māturīdī concentrates in his *kalām* on the metaphysical conditions for the human being to freely choose obedience or disobedience without compromising his commitment to God's creation of human volitional power as cause and the performed action as effect. His *uṣūl* picks up the account from this point to treat the action as a deontic cause for the fulfilment of a divinely stipulated obligation or forbiddance as derived from a divine command or prohibition. This means that he takes *uṣūl al-fiqh* to be concerned with the normative standings of divine obligations, rather than their metaphysical possibility as genuine choices. Moreover, by equating the fulfilment of each command to an act of refraining from its converse prohibition and vice versa, and by arguing that in most cases there are various ways to cause this deontic effect, he embeds a "normative choice" into the human response to the divine address. At a deeper level, we can see that al-Māturīdī's dual role for the *sabab* is what makes the test of command and prohibition meaningful and wise. According to his system, a choice to obey God is to cause an act by which one selects how to refrain from disobedience to Him. And each such choice could have genuinely been otherwise. God's power and creative activity are absolute, but human power within its proper scope is sufficient for us to freely make the existential choices that constitute our destinies.

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