

1 The Māturīdī Tradition

Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī

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In the year 333/944, the city of Samarqand in the heart of Transoxiana was the crown jewel of the Samanid Empire. The empire stretched across the eastern edge of what we now call Iran, most of Afghanistan, and several other Central Asian countries, notably Uzbekistan, where Samarqand is found today. The city had been the empire's capital, while the Abbasid Caliphate, seated at Baghdad, had retained enough power to keep the Samanids as vassals. But after the Samanid ruler Ismā'īl b. Aḥmad (r. 279–295/892–907) won independence from the caliphate, he chose to give the honour of serving as capital to Bukhara. Still, Samarqand remained a wealthy commercial and cultural hub containing institutes of learning and libraries stocked with books written in Persian, the official language, and Arabic, the common language of Islamic religious and philosophical scholarship. The year in question saw the funeral of a native of Samarqand who apparently had lived his entire life there. This individual was Abū Manṣūr Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944). Born in the outlying village of Maturid, Abū Manṣūr studied at the Ḥanafī madrasa Dār al-Jūzjāniyya, later becoming its most illustrious teacher.¹ Having achieved significant celebrity in Samarqand for both his learning and his intelligence, al-Māturīdī greatly influenced Islamic philosophical theology (*kalām*) as his theological legacy spread throughout Transoxiana and the Islamic world.²

Though al-Māturīdī's personal contribution to the conceptual development of Islamic theology has not always received its fair due, the impact of his ideas continues to be felt in the distinctive theological tradition of the Māturīdī school, one of the two main schools of *kalām* in Sunni Islam. Throughout the centuries, Māturīdism, whether in name or in substance, has been the default theological expression of adherents of the prominent Ḥanafī school of Islamic jurisprudence. Significant figures in this lineage include Abū al-Yusr al-Bazdawī (d. 493/1099), Abū al-Mu'īn al-Nasafī (d. 508/1115), Abū al-Barakāt al-Nasafī (d. 710/1310), and Ibn Kamāl Pāshā (d. 940/1534).

Given al-Māturīdī's influence, we might expect his writings to have been widely preserved. Yet from a dozen works that can reliably be attributed to him, only two are extant today.³ One is the voluminous *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān* (Interpretations of the Qur'ān), an early example of hermeneutical and theologically inclined Qur'ānic commentary. The other is the pioneering, though difficult, theological summa

Kitāb al-Tawhīd (The Book of Monotheism), which articulates Islamic belief in dialectical opposition to the ideas of other religions, Muslim sects, and philosophical schools. Whereas the former text has many manuscript witnesses, the latter has but a single surviving manuscript, adding to the complication of its already dense style. The lone transmission of al-Māturīdī's main theological text is matched by the lengthy time modern scholars have needed to edit and print his written legacy. The *Book of Monotheism* was first published in 1970 by Fathalla Kholeif, while it took until 2004 for *Interpretations of the Qur'ān* to be printed in full. Better editions of these two texts were published in 2003 and 2005–2011, respectively, with an editorial process spearheaded by Bekir Topaloğlu.⁴ Secondary literature on the thought of al-Māturīdī is likewise still at a relatively early stage, though it has gained considerable momentum in Turkey, especially in recent years, and there are signs that the same is beginning to happen within the Western academic world.

One might ask: Why should al-Māturīdī's ideas be studied as a potential framework for Islam and science? Why not use a later, more refined member of his theological tradition? Our answer is that al-Māturīdī best fits this volume's aim to provide different Islamic perspectives on a common set of questions. His works appear to represent the most original and distinctive expression of a uniquely Ḥanafī theological approach – one linked to the creedal and legal views of the school's eponym, Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767) – before the interaction with Ash'arism that defines the classical Māturīdī tradition and, in the process, has narrowed the differences between the two schools.⁵ By excavating his thought, we can provide a Māturīdī framework that displays a unique combination of positions while remaining within the contours of Sunnism. Al-Māturīdī develops his original constructive system by drawing from diverse intellectual sources in early Islamic thought. In addition to the famed theologian and jurist Abū Ḥanīfa, with whom al-Māturīdī explicitly aligns himself, these sources include his main regional rival Abū al-Qāsim al-Ka'bī (d. 319/931), the quasi-Mu'tazilī theologian al-Ḥusayn al-Najjār (d. ca. 220/835), and the first of the Muslim philosophers (*falāsifa*), Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī (d. ca. 259/873), as well as additional mediated sources of ancient philosophy. The original works of al-Māturīdī on which this chapter is primarily based are the following:⁶

<i>Arabic Title</i>	<i>English Title</i>	<i>Abbreviation</i>
<i>Kitāb al-Tawhīd</i>	The Book of Monotheism	KT
<i>Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān</i>	Interpretations of the Qur'ān	TQ

1.1 Epistemology

1.1.1 Sources of Knowledge

In *Interpretations of the Qur'ān*, al-Māturīdī states that “through knowledge, recognition of the realities, individualities, and forms of objects is conferred” (*ammā al-ilm bihi yūshalu ilā ma'rifat haqā'iq al-ashyā' wa-anfusihā*

wa-ṣuwarihā).⁷ This appears to be al-Māturīdī's only dedicated statement defining knowledge.⁸ Although unlikely to be verbatim, another statement about the nature of knowledge attributed to him comes from his successor Abū al-Muʿīn al-Nasafī, writing nearly two centuries later: “[Knowledge is] an attribute (*ṣifa*) by which the given object of thought (*madhkūr*) becomes clear (*yanjalī*) for the one within whom it arises.”⁹ Such definitions provide a basis for discussing different types of knowledge and ways to achieve them. Indeed, al-Nasafī commends his formulation for encompassing all examples of knowledge and excluding everything else.¹⁰

For al-Māturīdī, gaining knowledge is possible via three routes or means (*asbāb*): (1) sense perception (*ʿiyān*), (2) transmitted report (*khabar*), and (3) theoretical reasoning (*naẓar*).¹¹ He lists sense perception and reports as our first two means of understanding the world.¹² Sense perception is the most basic source of knowledge, shared by humans and animals alike. Through it, people learn what brings them harm, benefit, pain, and pleasure. In modern epistemology, reports are usually discussed under testimony, which is given less attention than reason and experience. Within Islamic theology, however, reports have invariably been classified as a central and independent source of knowledge, evaluated under transmission (*naql*), which covers both human statements and revealed scripture. The significance of reports is that they allow us to learn from circumstances we have not experienced firsthand.¹³

Al-Māturīdī maintains the traditional distinction between the solitary report (*khabar wāḥid*) and the mass-transmitted report (*khabar mutawātir*). The former represents those reports that have been conveyed only through limited chains of narration. For this reason, al-Māturīdī states that the information they transmit demands further investigation, which involves assessing each narrator's reliability along with the report's contents.¹⁴ Mass transmission (*tawātur*), by contrast, denotes an excess of independent chains, owing to which the event related is deemed to carry authoritative and undeniable strength as a source of knowledge.¹⁵ Here, al-Māturīdī largely agrees with the standard Sunni position on transmitted reports: taken as a whole, the various narrators are deemed unable collectively to communicate a falsehood. Indeed, this is what distinguishes the mass-transmitted report from the solitary one.¹⁶

In terms of its ultimate source, the most important kind of report is that which expresses revelation conveyed by a messenger sent by God. Al-Māturīdī discusses guidance received from messengers, along with compelling proofs of their authenticity, as a foundation (*aṣl*) that allows humankind to live together in peace and prosperity instead of falling into conflict on account of their varied needs and desires.¹⁷ Here, he stresses that understanding causal relations, specifically regarding the objects that allow humans to sustain themselves, is essential. He thus emphasises the importance of knowledge in two senses: first, as the foundation for human coexistence and cooperation and, second, for knowing how to maintain life and fulfil desires through objects in the world.¹⁸ It is a recognition that divine guidance is not merely an individual matter but a social one necessary for mutual human

flourishing. At the same time, al-Māturīdī describes each person as a microcosm of the world, which is constituted by opposing natures, so that one must use his reason to decide what is beneficial (see Section 1.3.4).

Lastly, reason denotes a faculty for questioning, confirming, and building on the other epistemic sources in that evaluating the reliability of perceptions or reports demands rational reflection. It is reason that judges the circumstances of a perception and clarifies its accuracy. Reasoning also determines whether a given report fulfils the criteria for reliability and whether a given claimant to divine messengerhood is genuine (see Section 1.3.6).¹⁹ Additionally, it allows humans to make inferences about matters such as God's existence, wisdom in creation, and morality.²⁰ In an admittedly cryptic statement, al-Māturīdī even seems to identify the world as partly constituted by reason (*al-ʿālam alladhī al-ʿaql minhu juzʿ*),²¹ indicating that its traces are immanent within the external world. Accordingly, he understands the world as intrinsically intelligible.

Another fundamental principle provided by the intellect is using the visible world to draw inferences about the unseen one (*dalālat al-shāhid ʿalā al-ghāib*).²² Al-Māturīdī notes that through perception, human beings access the world and learn what is beneficial and harmful to them, as well as what difficulties must be borne with patience.²³ From this, it is possible to make inferences about the unseen. Nevertheless, humankind often depends on transmitted knowledge since revelation is the only sure way to access what is beyond perception.²⁴ The latter is not always unambiguous, however, and al-Māturīdī notes that the exegete must suspend judgement in unclear or difficult areas.²⁵

Several points are noteworthy regarding al-Māturīdī's assessment of the sources of knowledge. First, he is apparently the earliest theologian in the extant Islamic tradition to systematically analyse the sources of knowledge within an independent section of a *kalām* treatise.²⁶ Furthermore, he includes this treatment in the introductory pages of his book, a practice that eventually became standard in Sunni *kalām*. As such, it appears that his epistemological appraisal was intended as a foundation for his discussions on various issues (*masāʾil*) pertaining to theology (*ilāhiyyāt*), messengerhood (*risāla*), and the divine decree (*qaḍāʾ*) and determination (*qadar*). As Topaloğlu points out, each of these topics receives an organised treatment and novel scholarly argumentation.²⁷

Second, among the different sources of knowledge, the exact process undertaken by the intellect or reason (*ʿaql*) remains somewhat unclarified. Al-Māturīdī states that the reality of things (*ḥaqāʾiq al-ashyāʾ*) can be comprehended by reason, which works as a differentiator (*mumayyiza*) of things requiring distinction and a unificator (*muʿallifa*) of those requiring connection according to their qualities (*maʿānīhā*).²⁸ Also, reason assesses all information received through perception and reports and, by discerning irregularities, can evaluate doubts. This, for example, can occur with ailments that cause us to distrust the accuracy of sense perceptions.²⁹ But this does not imply that reason is entirely limited to the input of these sources. As mentioned above, other remarks by al-Māturīdī put reason at the forefront of moral matters and religion (see Section 1.1.2). Hence, the type of

knowledge reason provides (as with perception and reports) is unique, assuming an interrelation between each source with reason as the final arbiter.

Third, al-Māturīdī states that sense perception provides immediate (*ḍarūrī*) knowledge and describes it as the “most distinguished source” (*akhaṣṣ al-asbāb*)³⁰ and the “highest path to knowledge” (*arfa’ ṭuruq al-‘ilm*).³¹ It appears unlikely, however, that he deems sensory knowledge surer than reports and reason overall. Al-Māturīdī here repeats conventional *kalām* statements on the status of perception, trusting the senses as the most reliable windows to the external world and opposing sceptics who doubt their input. Nevertheless, the immediacy of knowledge derived from the senses does not guarantee truth per se. For example, it may be irrefutable that one feels hunger without needing to eat or, similarly, that one has the impression of seeing a tree without actually seeing one. Accordingly, Hanifi Özcan interprets “immediacy” here as indicating primarily introspective knowledge.³² Indeed, to distinguish healthy from unhealthy perception, to differentiate introspective from objective knowledge, and to clarify when the senses are misleading, al-Māturīdī uses the example of an ailment that derails perception.³³ Furthermore, reason must provide certain knowledge, even if of a different type, since it verifies sense impressions and makes it possible to reach knowledge of the Creator from various signs in the world. Indeed, al-Māturīdī views monotheism (*tawḥīd*) as obligatory for rational beings (see Section 1.2.1).³⁴ Reason is thus prominent for providing a certainty parallel to that of the senses.

Finally, the place of spiritual inspiration (*ilhām*) among the sources of knowledge is somewhat controversial. That al-Māturīdī does not devote a separate discussion to *ilhām* implies that he did not regard it as a reliable epistemic source, at least for theology. Early in the *Book of Monotheism*, it is cited as a cause for disagreements on religious matters since each person follows his own purported inspirations and holds those of others to be erroneous.³⁵ Moreover, al-Māturīdī’s successor Abū Ḥafṣ al-Nasafī (d. 537/1142) explicitly excludes *ilhām* from the sources of knowledge in his creed, *‘Aqā’id al-Nasafī*, and it is reasonable to believe that this stance reflects al-Māturīdī’s influence. Yet in some places in the *Book of Monotheism*, al-Māturīdī cites forms of personal spiritual experience positively. For example, God motivates His servants to reflect through spiritual realisations (*khawāṭir*), grants them hatred of the devil and the will to obey Him, and reminds (*yudhakkir*) them of His wisdom.³⁶ Therefore, it may be best to read al-Māturīdī as rejecting *ilhām* as a source of knowledge for matters of public theological or legal import rather than categorically.³⁷

1.1.2 Moral Determination

Al-Māturīdī believed reason to be central to determining moral value. He held three major moral principles to be understood independently of access to revealed scripture. The first, finding and upholding the truth, is implicitly stated in al-Māturīdī’s writings.³⁸ The second, belief in God (*īmān*), relates closely to the first.³⁹ The third is gratitude towards one’s benefactor (*shukr al-mun‘im*).⁴⁰ Al-Māturīdī holds that,

as rationally accessible, morality is objective and that the truth of any moral proposition does not depend on human thought.

What validates a moral truth appears to depend on several factors. Some acts are good in themselves (*yaḥsunu li-naḥsihi*), that is, good without regard to their consequences, and al-Māturīdī seems to reason that, logically, the converse of whatever is good in itself is bad. However, for all moral items not good in themselves, one must examine their consequences to determine their value.⁴¹ In this regard, humanity must learn from experience, including revelation.⁴² Al-Māturīdī rejects strict divine command theory as adopted, for example, by the Ash‘arī school, namely, the position that God’s commands are the only means for humanity objectively to know right from wrong and good from bad. Yet he considers revealed knowledge crucial.

To understand al-Māturīdī’s metaethical thought, we must consider the distinction between a priori and a posteriori knowledge. The good in itself is determined by reason a priori, considered in abstraction from everything other than itself. As for a posteriori moral knowledge, al-Māturīdī understands the nature (*ṭab’*) of human beings to turn intuitively towards that which appears beneficial,⁴³ but reason often judges the moral value of an act only after attaining relevant empirical information, including the dictates of scripture and revelation.⁴⁴ Thus, in addition to what is good in itself, the intellect identifies what is good on account of considerations other than itself (*li-ghayrihi*), such as its consequences. Hence, in al-Māturīdī’s thought, reason judges what is moral, whether based on logical, intuitive, or empirical knowledge.

This focus on experience relates to an important dimension of al-Māturīdī’s metaethical thought (see Section 1.3.3) that we may term the doctrine of aspect.⁴⁵ He states that the moral value of any act depends on the “context” or “aspect” (*wajh*) from which it is evaluated.⁴⁶ Thus, while a certain state or event may be good for some party, it may simultaneously be bad for another.⁴⁷ For example, rain may be good for the farmer but a catastrophe for the builder. Similarly, a particular herb may both nourish and poison.⁴⁸ But there is a more profound point to be made here. These multiple aspects make it impossible to regard something as totally good or totally bad, even though we may maintain the objectivity of moral values and principles. Indeed, the doctrine of aspect encompasses not only moral acts that fall within the purview of empirical knowledge but also those known to be good in themselves. In a striking example, al-Māturīdī applies this to unbelief (*kufr*). Though unbelief is intrinsically evil and folly, he discerns a positive quality: “Do you not see that the statement of unbelief is a falsehood (*kadhib*), yet in revealing the folly of its claimant, it is a truth (*ṣidq*)?”⁴⁹ Here, we learn that even an inherent evil can nevertheless be good in accurately indicating some other feature, such as an individual’s inability to see or accept the truth.

Al-Māturīdī also reflects on the goodness of moral virtues. These are regularly noted in relation to actions indicating religious or spiritual devotion. Chief among them are mindfulness of God, consciousness of divine blessings, and devotion to the divine law and prophetic example. In the *Book of Monotheism*, al-Māturīdī

does not analyse what makes a virtue moral⁵⁰ but notes the character that befits a believer. For example, he argues that God's promise (*wa'd*) of eternal reward is fulfilled for those who "realise faith with the character (*akhlāq*) that belongs to it."⁵¹ Al-Māturīdī's thought thus encompasses virtue ethics, particularly in explaining the human being's personal connection and closeness to the divine.

Based on al-Māturīdī's writings, the sources of moral truth fit neatly into the threefold classification of the sources of knowledge in general. As noted in [Section 1.1.1](#), these three sources – senses, reports, and reason – work in tandem. In the case of morality, the senses teach us what is likely to lead to pleasure and pain; reports convey knowledge about the experiences of others as well as revelation; and reason infers general results from experience, identifies the best ways to achieve our moral goals, and determines the morality of specific actions.

Finally, moral obligation must be explained. Al-Māturīdī explicitly states that only God can make something obligatory (*farḍ*) or prohibited (*ḥarām*). This does not deny intrinsic rational imperatives such as to believe in God: disbelief and associating partners with God (*shirk*) deserve a penalty according to reason and wisdom.⁵² Moreover, even without revelation, the intellect can comprehend core moral principles and incumbent obligations.⁵³ Hence, rational moral obligation must be distinguished from revealed valuation of human acts since in al-Māturīdī's system, God holds us responsible for obeying the moral demands known through each.⁵⁴ As divine sovereign, God alone possesses the intrinsic, personal authority to command and prohibit.⁵⁵ In fact, His making humanity responsible for their actions is one way for them to know Him. For humans, knowing God and showing Him gratitude entail obeying His commands and prohibitions.⁵⁶

The question arises whether al-Māturīdī is ultimately a divine command theorist like his famous contemporary Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d. 324/935-6) or a rational objectivist like the Mu'tazilīs. No simple statement appears appropriate in this regard. On the one hand, al-Māturīdī connects certain moral fundamentals to reason in both content and obligation. Reason may distinguish right from wrong and good from bad, but it does so in conformity with nature, including human need, desire and fear, and pleasure and pain.⁵⁷ These provide the empirical data reason uses to reach ethical conclusions. Consequently, the natural law theory of ethics seems best to describe al-Māturīdī's moral thought.⁵⁸ The natural world guides reasoning and provides a repository of knowledge for moral judgements aligned with fundamental human needs and aspirations. On the other hand, God is the ultimate sovereign and, by His will, makes choices that constitute morality and command certain behaviours (see [Section 1.3.3](#)). This duality forms the basis for a multifaceted picture of moral determination, which is crucial since human reason alone often struggles to reach definitive moral conclusions.⁵⁹ In other words, divine directives remain essential despite the ability of reason to grasp basic moral principles.⁶⁰ Revelation confirms rational principles and supplements our knowledge in areas that otherwise remain ambiguous, serving as another foundation for moral thought.⁶¹

1.2 God

1.2.1 God's Existence

Al-Māturīdī pays significant attention to rationally establishing God's existence. His general approach involves numerous overlapping arguments without uniquely emphasising any single one. Hence, there has been considerable discussion over how his various arguments should be classified and understood.⁶² Here, we offer an overview of his contribution to natural theology.

All al-Māturīdī's arguments for the existence of God rely on observation from the world. This is consonant with his fundamental theological outlook based on inference from perceptual experience to the transcendent divine reality (see [Section 1.2.2](#)). He develops versions of the *kalām* cosmological argument, an early statement of a contingency argument, various teleological arguments, including analogical arguments from design, and a novel argument from the existence of evil.⁶³ He does not specify individual functions for each kind of argument but rather develops a comprehensive response to the Dahriyya (Eternalists), who argued that the world has always existed and, thus, that there is no explanatory need for a creator.⁶⁴ Al-Māturīdī argues for the impossibility of an infinite regress of time, concluding that a world with a temporally finite past requires an eternal creator, though he is careful not to deny the endlessness of the hereafter.⁶⁵ He also infers the existence of God from the basic "neediness" (*iftiqār*), or contingency, of changing phenomena.⁶⁶ Considering particular details of the world's intelligibility, purpose, and meaning, al-Māturīdī argues further that it must be the work of a wise and powerful Creator (see [Section 1.3.2](#)).⁶⁷ One of al-Māturīdī's most original arguments reasons from the presence of evil in the world, taking the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*. He suggests that if the world were to exist by itself, it would exhibit only the best possible states. Therefore, evil in the world allows an inference to God.⁶⁸

1.2.2 Transcendence and Immanence

Islamic theologians agree that God transcends His creation. The crucial question is the extent of that transcendence and the space remaining for God's "immanent action" within the world, which is linked to the possibility for scriptural language to refer to the divine nature. Al-Māturīdī explicitly develops a methodological approach to deal with this twofold problem. His theological system allows inference (*dalāla*) from the observed world to God in two modes: a contrastive one, in which he asserts God's transcendent difference (*khilāf*) from the created order, and an analogical one (*mīthl, qiyās*) to affirm distinct attributes.⁶⁹ Al-Māturīdī states that the former is clearer (*awḍaḥ*).⁷⁰ This is because transcendence within his system is achieved through straightforward negation, whereas divine immanence – construed here as God's personal interaction with creation – relies on His attributes. While this solution bears similarity to that of other Islamic theologians around his time, such as the Basrans 'Abd Allāh Ibn Kullāb (d. ca. 240/854-5) and al-Ash'arī, al-Māturīdī's method is original and deserves consideration on its own terms.⁷¹

On scriptural grounds, the dual procedure described above closely follows Q. 42:11: “Naught is like unto Him (*laysa ka-mithlihi shayʿ*), yet He is the Hearer, the Seer.”⁷² Al-Māturīdī comments on this verse as follows:

It indicates that God Most High does not resemble created things and that there is not for Him a likeness or resemblance among them in any aspect, neither with respect to attribute nor with respect to self. He transcends all the meanings of created things and their attributes.⁷³

Like other Sunni *kalām* proponents, al-Māturīdī negates of God any aspect of change or contingency. He also says that God is beyond space and time.⁷⁴ What remains is that God is “a thing unlike things” (*shayʿ lā ka-l-ashyāʿ*).⁷⁵ This means that God is a particular existent (*ʿayn*)⁷⁶ with attributes (*ṣifāt*) but that He cannot be characterised by the whatness (*māʿiyya*) of created things, namely, body (*jism*) and accidents (*ʿrāq*).⁷⁷ For God’s transcending creation, al-Māturīdī follows a method he names verification (*taḥqīq*) or affirmation (*ithbāt*) – though in *kalām* it is more commonly termed incomparability (*tanzīh*, lit. “purification”).⁷⁸ This method allows him to reject simultaneously anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*), as practised by some Islamic thinkers in the formative period,⁷⁹ and the negation of distinct attributes (*taʿīl*). This latter judgement is applied to the Muʿtazilī position of divine simplicity, as well as to those who professed an even more radically transcendent theology, such as Jahm b. Ṣafwān (d. 128/745-6).⁸⁰ Al-Māturīdī thus holds God to possess distinct attributes, such as knowledge and power, not identical to Himself and yet unlike corporeal properties.

Al-Māturīdī thinks that for humans to know about God and His various attributes, it is necessary to work from analogy with the created world. This method should take into account the above considerations of transcendent difference. The result is an analogical theory of reference by which God and some of His attributes can be known by reason alone. Following the famous position of Abū Ḥanīfa, al-Māturīdī thinks that every person is responsible to know the existence of God even in the absence of revelation.⁸¹ His reasoning on this point is as follows:

Since God created a creation that indicates His oneness and wisdom, it is not possible that the creation could fail to know that. Otherwise, His [act of] creation would be futile. Lifting such an obligation would lead to a cessation of the wisdom of this creation, as it would merely result in annihilation. One who builds something only for it to be destroyed is frivolous, not wise.⁸²

Scripture provides a complementary source of knowledge about God’s properties for al-Māturīdī, confirming the conclusions of sound reason and providing additional information. It both furnishes a link to what is otherwise beyond human knowledge and depends on that knowledge to be comprehensible.⁸³ This means that a full account of God’s attributes requires revealed scripture to supplement one’s natural faculties.

1.2.3 Essence and Attributes

Al-Māturīdī lived during the formative period of *kalām*, which shapes his approach to the relationship between the divine essence or entity (*dhāt*) and attributes (*ṣifāt*). Theologians emphasised God’s unity (*tawhīd*), which usually meant denying composition (variously construed) within the divine nature. But this left the problem of how to account for attributes that God possesses according to scripture, such as speech and wisdom.⁸⁴ As a thinker within the Ḥanafī theological tradition, al-Māturīdī is committed to the concept of a distinct reality for God’s attributes. He understands them as ontic properties that are genuinely possessed by God and hence rejects divine simplicity. Considering the relationship between God and His attributes, al-Māturīdī writes before the entrenchment of the idea of the essence as a substratum (*maḥall*) possessing superadded (*zā'id*) attributes.⁸⁵ Thus, when he distinguishes between God as a concrete particular or substance (*ʿayn*) and His attributes (*ṣifāt*), he does not treat God’s essence as a bare entity stripped of qualities. Rather, God’s essence is *constituted by* His distinct attributes. Thus, he writes that God knows and has power “essentially” (*bi-dhātihi*) because for him, these predications are grounded in the attributes defining God’s essential nature.⁸⁶

At the same time, al-Māturīdī supports a version of the *kalām* formula popularised by, though predating, Ibn Kullāb that God is neither His attributes nor other than they. His understanding of this formula differentiates the attributes from one another – for instance, God’s wisdom is distinct from His speech – but affirms that each is neither identical to God nor other than He (that is, non-identical to Him).⁸⁷ Instead, this is for al-Māturīdī a permissible application of the suspension of judgement (*waqf*).⁸⁸ In the context of divine speech, which occasioned one of the earliest and bitterest disputes over the divine attributes, al-Māturīdī states the following: “It is said: [God’s speech] is not God nor other than He (*laysa huwa Allāh wa-lā ḡhayrahu*), so it is a suspension of judgement, and it is the truth based on what has been established for the [attributes of] knowledge and power.”⁸⁹

Al-Māturīdī gives special prominence to the divine attribute of wisdom (*ḥikma*). In fact, a constant refrain in the *Book of Monotheism* is that God never acts without wisdom.⁹⁰ Al-Māturīdī provides various elaborations on what this means for the nature of creation, particularly on the subject of divine teleology (see [Section 1.3.2](#)), emphasising that God’s wisdom is eternal and absolute. Crucially, there is no external criterion that God’s wisdom must meet: it is the ultimate source for all possible valuation.⁹¹ This means that, for al-Māturīdī, God’s actions find an explanatory foundation in His wisdom, which is the underlying standard for the operation of His other attributes, such as His will.

For al-Māturīdī, all God’s actions, without exception, are essential attributes (*ṣifāt al-dhāt*).⁹² Against Muʿtazilī and Ashʿarī theologies, God’s actions are seen as eternal, distinct aspects of the divine nature. Thus, al-Māturīdī holds that God’s existentiatio or creative action (*takwīn*) is distinct from the things that He creates. Additionally, in contrast to the later consolidated position of the Māturīdī school, he does not define the category of the active attribute as consisting of God’s creative action alone. Rather, he understands all divine actions as eternal attributes,

including speech.⁹³ The picture that emerges is that although God is changeless – as change is a feature of temporal entities – He acts in timeless eternity with temporal outcomes.

Al-Māturīdī uses this doctrine for two theological purposes. On the one hand, he thinks that it can explain how God creates and maintains the creation. In this vein, he remarks that those who hold that God does not have an eternal attribute of existence fail to verify God as responsible for the world's existence.⁹⁴ On the other hand, the affirmation of real divine action allows God to be described truthfully in scripture. Though al-Māturīdī shares this view on the eternity of God's creative action with Ḥanafī and other Sunni traditionalists, he is historically notable for providing an early defence of the doctrine according to his *kalām* principles.⁹⁵

1.3 God's Relationship to the Natural World

1.3.1 Divine Action Model

Seeking to provide a detailed account of al-Māturīdī's theory of divine action is not easy. We have attempted here to produce an adequate interpretation by tracing a consistent pattern from his difficult and sometimes opaque texts on the topic. A good point of departure is the distinction al-Māturīdī draws between God's action, which is by free choice (*ikhtiyār*), and the compelled (*muḍṭarr*) action in His creation that occurs by nature (*ṭab'*).⁹⁶ When discussing the divine attributes, al-Māturīdī explains free choice in general terms as action that is not under the dominance of another, as this would remove the possibility to perform an action or its opposite. In the case of God, free choice is action that never departs from divine wisdom and is capable of both bringing about creation from nothing and returning it to non-existence.⁹⁷ When contrasting free choice with compelled action, al-Māturīdī gives the example of the human act of choosing God's protection (*wilāya*) on account of one's belief (*īmān*) and His enmity (*'adāwa*) on account of one's disbelief (*kuf'r*), stating that the same is true of God's acceptance or rejection.⁹⁸ Al-Māturīdī writes:

It is well known that the creation engages in supplicating and beseeching God Most High for victory, that He empowers and assists [them], helping one and forsaking another, and that everyone with power acts by the power He originates. None of that is achieved by compulsion, and there is nothing strange about that. This indicates that the world exists by His free choice.⁹⁹

God's action is free in the fullest sense because nothing else can restrict Him with respect to the world He chooses to create. Yet, according to al-Māturīdī, His freedom is not arbitrary or capricious. God's selection from the possibilities available to Him always accords with His eternal attribute of wisdom.

Using the language of modality, we can then understand God's creation of the world at different levels. God's existence and attributes, including His wisdom, are absolutely metaphysically necessary and could not be otherwise in factual reality.

Al-Māturīdī writes, “It is obligatory for Muslims to profess His existence as a necessity.”¹⁰⁰ Based on divine wisdom, certain general aspects of the world are metaphysically necessary in a secondary sense, which is dependent on that which is absolutely metaphysically necessary. Examples include the impossibility of a person being both living and dead or in two places simultaneously¹⁰¹ or of an effect not following from its efficient causal conditions.¹⁰² Finally, any actual aspect of the world, though intrinsically metaphysically possible, is conditional upon God’s choice to create it rather than another alternative.¹⁰³

As we shall discuss in [Section 1.5.2](#), al-Māturīdī understands human action in terms analogous to, though in important ways different from, the action of God. Everything lacking free will acts in a compelled fashion owing to the mix of natures by which it is composed (see [Section 1.3.4](#)). Thus, he writes that any cause that can bring about only a single characteristic effect operates by nature.¹⁰⁴ This is contrasted with action that operates by free choice and can cause an effect or its opposite. Al-Māturīdī gives the following examples of causes and their necessarily linked effects: extraction (*ikhrāj*) with coming out (*khurūj*), removal (*izāla*) with disappearance (*zawāl*), striking (*darb*) with pain (*alam*), being pleasurable (*mulidhdh*) with experiencing pleasure (*ladhdha*), and action with tiredness (*ta‘ab*) and hardship (*‘anā*).¹⁰⁵ Hence, al-Māturīdī holds a causal position of conditional necessity: causes necessitate their effects, but only when all the right conditions are in place.¹⁰⁶ For instance, a strike necessarily causes pain, but only if it is of sufficient force and the person receiving it has the normal human capacity to feel pain, and so on.

Even if not always clarified, al-Māturīdī’s core intuition is that the causal operation of the world is by God’s power and, crucially, His guiding wisdom. His model can be interpreted as a form of concurrentism. That is, God is the sole creator who timelessly existentiates everything in its time, and what He creates are the causally powerful natures that constitute all created objects. God has structured creation such that it gives things in general, and humans in particular, causal efficacy in their actions.

Here, we must carefully define what we mean by “causal efficacy,” especially to distinguish al-Māturīdī’s concurrentist position from the occasionalism that dominates the classical Sunni *kalām* tradition.¹⁰⁷ Causal efficacy is a body’s action realising a given effect necessarily upon the presence of the right conditions within the body and its environment. Al-Māturīdī understands bodies to be bundles of natures with specific dispositions to act that God creates in various interacting configurations (see [Section 1.3.4](#)). As their action is compelled, they cannot select the effect they cause; rather, such effect occurs automatically in a specific situation according to which nature dominates. As al-Māturīdī states, “We find heat rising by its nature,”¹⁰⁸ which means that, for instance, God, in His wisdom, creates the less dense nature of steam vis-à-vis cooler air that manifests the intrinsic disposition to move upwards and necessarily does so under normal conditions. On an occasionalist model, there is no dispositional power within the steam. This entails that since the body lacks causal efficacy, it is possible that God not create the effect despite the presence of all relevant conditions. This represents a real metaphysical

difference between the two positions, even if such irregularities are never observed in the world.

1.3.2 *Teleology*

Teleological ideas arguably constitute one of the defining features of al-Māturīdī's theology, often appearing in connection with divine wisdom. Al-Māturīdī outlines divine wisdom in terms of a threefold scheme. Wisdom is placing every thing in its proper place (*wad' kull shay' mawdī'ahu*), giving each thing its due share (*hazz*), and not discounting the right (*haqq*) of anyone or anything. Each of these aspects is presented as denoting a hitting of the mark (*iṣāba*), which is also the meaning of justice (*'adl*).¹⁰⁹ He does not offer substantive rules for what wisdom requires but notes a few formal features, such as acting with purpose and according to knowledge.¹¹⁰ Divine wisdom can be inferred through analogy with the causes that determine things within the world.¹¹¹ Moreover, wisdom is perhaps the most important aspect of his understanding of divine action. Al-Māturīdī writes that divine wisdom requires the creation of everything at a station appropriate to it.¹¹² He also stresses that none of God's acts can be unwise: God does nothing purposelessly, and He does not engage in futile actions, that is, actions whose aim will not be realised.¹¹³ Al-Māturīdī frequently notes the harmony (*ittisāq*) of the world's objects, whether inherent or relational, as indicative of the wisdom and purpose of their design.¹¹⁴

Most Islamic theologies grant a central place to the Qur'ānic idea that humanity was created for a purpose.¹¹⁵ The underlying themes here are primarily worship of God and the testing of humankind. This is reflected in al-Māturīdī's view that God created the world as an arena of trial for human beings¹¹⁶ and his repeated statement that it would fall outside the bounds of wisdom for God to create the world only to destroy it.¹¹⁷ He understands the former claim to be related to the latter: without guidance to help humans know their Creator and the moral responsibility laid upon them, creation would have no meaning.¹¹⁸ Indeed, al-Māturīdī states that objects of harm and benefit are signs of what may await humanity in the hereafter, guiding them to choose their actions accordingly.¹¹⁹ He also directly ties teleological thinking to the sound operation of reason, with some statements associating reason and wisdom directly.¹²⁰ This underscores that reason is our main faculty for understanding, at least partially, divine wisdom and the purpose of the world.¹²¹

Beyond a purpose for the entire cosmos, specific aims within creation are indicated by al-Māturīdī's view that the objects of this world each have their own nature (*ṭabī'a*) (see [Section 1.3.4](#)). These natures allow him to assign a role to each thing since inherent tendencies provide a basis for identifying goals for each thing within the natural order. Thus, al-Māturīdī argues that the propensities impelling each thing towards specific actions require knowledge and wisdom behind their creation; otherwise, organising inanimate, let alone animate, beings would not have been possible. When humans examine their own bodies, they lack knowledge of how they function and cannot construct their like. Thus, a being with great knowledge must be responsible for the world's design, which he deems can only be God.¹²² Accordingly, al-Māturīdī presents several teleological arguments within

his natural theology, relying not only on the diversity of natures but also on the dependence of things, change in the world, and analogy with man-made artefacts.¹²³ Perhaps for this reason, very few overt statements about chance occurrences appear in his works. If everything has a purpose, one might find little room for randomness, serendipity, and accident (but see [Section 1.3.5](#)).

Sympathetic approaches to teleology continue to have a foothold in natural science. In biology, for example, opinion is divided between those who eliminate teleological language, those who use it descriptively, and those who hold that it has a natural basis in the traits of cells and organisms.¹²⁴ Al-Māturīdī's understanding of teleology takes up the Aristotelian view that the telos of an organism is an immanent property it possesses and that its development is based on inherent principles. Thus, al-Māturīdī appears closer to naturalist thought and the functionalist tendencies that still influence modern views.¹²⁵ However, since al-Māturīdī holds that any telos is divinely directed rather than resulting from natural selection or feedback mechanisms, his explanation ultimately appeals to theological concepts.

1.3.3 *Metaethics*

Al-Māturīdī's metaethics presents the reader of *kalām* with an intriguing web of considerations. In a section of the *Book of Monotheism* addressing dualism, he states that God is the creator of the substance (*jawhar*)¹²⁶ of good and evil and the actions of creation accordingly.¹²⁷ He further explains that good and evil can be attributed neither to God nor to His actions but rather to the real performer of the given action, namely, the human agent.¹²⁸ From his concurrentism, a good or bad action is caused on the worldly level by the choice to use the accident of power to effect a certain action rather than its opposite (see [Section 1.5.2](#)).¹²⁹ Al-Māturīdī provides further clarity when discussing the concept of divine determination (*qadar*). First, God in His wisdom makes everything what it is in terms of its good (*khayr*) or evil (*sharr*), beauty (*husn*) or ugliness (*qubh*), wisdom (*hikma*) or folly (*safah*).¹³⁰ These are accidental properties that are part of the natures of bodies (see [Section 1.3.4](#)). Thus, moral properties constitute objective facets of the world.¹³¹ The second aspect of divine determination is the explanation (*bayān*) of created things in terms of relational aspects: time (*zamān*) and place (*makān*), truth (*haqq*) and falsity (*bāṭil*), reward (*thawāb*) and punishment (*'iqāb*).¹³² So, whereas the first aspect qualifies the intrinsic nature of created entities, the second gives them their extrinsic context within the spatiotemporal order and, hence, their ultimate meaning and consequence.¹³³

Central to al-Māturīdī's understanding of metaethics is the doctrine of opposites. Everything in the world exists with properties that put it at odds with other things. This theory in Islamic theology likely originates from Greek philosophy and its quest to uncover nature's fundamental principles. Thus, for example, al-Māturīdī writes early in the *Book of Monotheism*, "The basic structure of the cosmos (*'ālam*) is constituted by divergent natures and opposed states,"¹³⁴ and elsewhere, "The cosmos and all its forms are tied to varied times (*awqāt*) and attached to different states (*aḥwāl*) and attributes (*ṣifāt*)." ¹³⁵ Similarly, al-Māturīdī notes the four basic

properties of matter: heat, moisture, dryness, and coldness¹³⁶ and opposite pairs, including light and dark, pain and pleasure, sickness and cure, good and bad.¹³⁷ Such contraries, according to J. Meric Pessagno, suggest more than one level of meaning: light and dark may be metaphysical, pleasure and pain physiological or psychological.¹³⁸ Crucially, without opposites, nothing would be meaningful and morality would not be possible, for there must be a choice between options in order for people to be held accountable, and these options are constituted by the different states, qualities, and effects of worldly objects.¹³⁹ In this sense, al-Māturīdī views morality as worldly rather than transcendent.

Al-Māturīdī also observes that good and evil have aesthetic as well as moral dimensions and remarks that good is normally created as beautiful, while evil appears ugly.¹⁴⁰ The wide application of ethical terms is indicated when he contrasts negative qualities, such as lowliness, need, deficiency, evil, conflict, and corruption, with positive traits.¹⁴¹ All this shows that al-Māturīdī accepts an inclusive range of contraries as evidence of divine wisdom.¹⁴² Overall, he has a broad theory of opposites that is central to his thought, with every kind of attribute matched by its counterpart.

This brings us to another subject of al-Māturīdī's metaethics: the centrality accorded to wisdom, which appears frequently and in passages on fundamental issues. For example, al-Māturīdī states that God neither created the world simply to be destroyed nor created humankind to perish through conflict or deprivation. Rather, He provided various goods for people to live and religion as a basis for peace and success (see [Section 1.1.1](#)) in a world that is the site for a moral examination with everlasting significance (see [Section 1.3.2](#)). However, al-Māturīdī refrains from claiming to know the divine mind, consistent with his cautious outlook on human knowledge. Specifically, he uses wisdom to describe the realisation of events even if their wisdom remains unexplained. Similarly, divine wisdom includes justice and purpose, but al-Māturīdī rarely specifies what justice entails in particular cases. Nevertheless, divine wisdom is a comprehensive category that includes beneficence (*ihsān*) and grace (*fadl*) alongside justice (*ʿadl*).¹⁴³ Thus, while al-Māturīdī claims that humans lack the knowledge to comprehend all events, each of these principles can serve as a potential basis for explanation.¹⁴⁴ This has important theodicean implications: based on divine wisdom, God gives rewards and blessings without limit, as per His grace, and when He sanctions, He never exceeds what a person deserves, as per His justice.¹⁴⁵ We can even say that with al-Māturīdī, the divine attribute of wisdom emerges as a foundational principle for Islamic ethics.

Situating al-Māturīdī's metaethics neatly within modern categories is difficult. Any hint of utilitarianism is overridden by his stress on rational and divinely commanded goals, though he mentions the avoidance of pain and inclination towards pleasure frequently. His emphasis on fulfilling inherent human needs and desires ultimately places him close to natural law ethics (see [Section 1.1.2](#)). His theory of opposites aligns with aretaic notions and virtue ethics, although his comments on virtues are too sparse to be considered central or systematic. Again, the main concept is divine wisdom, which endows the world with rational order and morality with objective reality. Thus, al-Māturīdī's sources of ethical knowledge go beyond

revealed commands, notwithstanding God's role as sovereign Lawgiver and Creator (see Section 1.1.2). This position has been viewed favourably for representing the complexity needed to make sense of the varied dimensions of morality.¹⁴⁶ All in all, al-Māturīdī's thought is best summarised as presenting a natural law theory open to virtue ethics, with distinct deontological and subjectivist elements.

1.3.4 Physical Ontology

Al-Māturīdī does not programmatically outline his physical ontology within the *Book of Monotheism*. This has made it necessary for scholars to produce their own reconstructions, leading to conflicting interpretations.¹⁴⁷ A starting point for discussion is al-Māturīdī's treatment of his distinction between created substances and qualities – bodies and accidents¹⁴⁸ – and his refusal to affirm that bodies are composed of “*kalām* atoms.”¹⁴⁹ Writing at a time in which atomism had not yet become the standard view among proponents of *kalām*, al-Māturīdī's ontological views can be located within a tradition stemming from Ḍirār b. ‘Amr (d. 200/815) and continued by al-Ḥusayn al-Najjār,¹⁵⁰ though his own forays into this domain reflect his characteristic theological caution.¹⁵¹

Al-Māturīdī holds that the basic objects of our experience are composite bodies. To account for the experiential qualities and causal activity of such bodies, it is necessary to posit discrete property instances as their underlying constituents. These properties can be termed accidents in a general sense and grouped into three categories: (1) dispositional accidents (or natures), (2) relational accidents, and (3) vital accidents. The first are the causally powerful natures (*ṭabā'ir*) that make up the basic parts (*ajzā'*) of bodies, such as their colour and shape.¹⁵² Though this idea is shared with some Mu'tazilīs and some of the *falāsifa*,¹⁵³ al-Māturīdī distinguishes himself by maintaining that God concurrently creates every causal outcome (see Section 1.3.1). He also does not follow earlier philosophical thought in limiting such natures to the four primary elements. This gives greater flexibility to his use of the term to characterise a range of qualities with dispositions to act in specific ways and to be joined into aggregate bundles.¹⁵⁴

Al-Māturīdī consistently treats natures differently from familiar “*kalām* accidents” like motion, stillness, separation, joining, endurance, and annihilation. His discussion of these relational properties, which always track changes in the body composite, suggests that he sees them as mental judgements.¹⁵⁵ This further implies that natures can exist for successive instances of time when comprising a body characterised by an accident of endurance.¹⁵⁶ The final class of accidents is vital properties in animate beings, such as life, knowledge, power, hearing, and seeing. These “sublime attributes” (*ṣiḡāt 'aliyya*) account for the dynamic experiential qualities of human beings, distinguishing them from inanimate entities.¹⁵⁷

Al-Māturīdī uses his physical ontology for theological ends. Most notably, he argues that the inherent tendency of natures to separate from one another means that they could not have been composed nor have persisted together except through an external factor.¹⁵⁸ This factor is God, who alone creates them in time-bound sequence. While this proof relies on a teleological observation of harmony among

elements and objects, it does not require them to remain unchanging. Rather, the changing mix of accidents is precisely how bodies shift from state to state.¹⁵⁹

1.3.5 *Chance*

For al-Māturīdī, God's action cannot involve randomness or chance because all His actions are purposive, following his construal of divine wisdom and will. When talking about chance in this section, we shall discuss two related issues. First, the denial of chance with respect to divine action means that God's acts are independent and free. Indeed, al-Māturīdī states that all divine actions occur without an external cause (see [Section 1.3.1](#)). Second, we must ask whether God can create randomness. This parallels the question whether humans have a power of choice in their actions that makes them, in a sense, autonomous from causal determination (see [Section 1.5.2](#)). In this case, however, apparent chance and randomness may occur precisely on account of natural laws.

Before considering this possibility, we must distinguish between epistemic and ontological kinds of chance. Epistemic chance concerns the capacities and status of the individual. Events may appear random or accidental because the observer does not have all the information needed to predict them. Consider, for example, earthquakes. Forecasting an earthquake's precise time, location, and strength is speculative since not all the relevant factors are known, though it remains conceivable that such knowledge will someday be possible through scientific and technological advancements. Alternatively, it may be that the necessary information is simply unknowable, that is, that humans will never be able to access it even in principle. In either case, events seem subject to chance as we do not know all the causal factors on which their realisation depends.

Al-Māturīdī can easily accept these types of chance. First, he often states that humans are limited in their knowledge of the natural world (see [Section 1.5.1](#)) and that some things are entirely unknowable to them, such as God's knowledge.¹⁶⁰ Second, neither type of chance pertains to God – not merely because He knows all conditions and events needed to predict what will occur with complete accuracy but because He transcends time and His eternal knowledge already encompasses all things.

Unlike these epistemological considerations, ontological chance concerns the workings of things themselves. An event occurs by chance ontologically if either (1) it has no physical cause or (2) it has neither a physical nor a metaphysical cause. Accommodation of the first proposition in al-Māturīdī's scheme poses an interesting question. In one sense, it is uncontroversial since, for al-Māturīdī, the creation of the world from nothing is an act of God with no physical cause. However, once natural laws are established from the first moment of creation, if the outcomes of divine action occur only in concurrence with physical causes, then chance in the first sense becomes impossible (see [Section 1.3.1](#)). The question then is whether al-Māturīdī rules out purely metaphysical acts with physical consequences – that is, created effects with no created cause – within the universe post-creation. His texts are somewhat ambiguous on this point, as discussed below (see [Section 1.3.6](#)).¹⁶¹

The second proposition – neither physical nor metaphysical cause – is even more contentious. Given that al-Māturīdī accepts that human beings have choice over different alternatives (see [Section 1.5.2](#)), he agrees that some events are indeterminate in this sense. However, indeterminate does not mean uncaused. If a Māturīdī framework admitted things with no cause at all, this would undermine a key argument for the existence of God, namely, the *kalām* cosmological argument. This argument rests on the twin premisses that everything originated requires a cause and that everything in the universe (*‘ālam*) is originated.¹⁶² The argument collapses if some originated things have no cause.¹⁶³

The more interesting suggestion here, then, remains indeterminism, the view that a single cause may produce more than one possible effect, giving events epistemic unpredictability and ontological openness within a specific range of potentialities. As noted, al-Māturīdī champions this view for human beings, who act within a range of options. The question is whether this applies to other types of causes. Notably, the contrast between compelled and free action is about knowledge and choice, not causal efficacy.¹⁶⁴ This leaves open the possibility that physical entities without minds (which are hence unfree) could cause indeterministic effects.

Al-Māturīdī holds that physical entities have specific natures shaping what they do, and he states that natures are compelled to cause only their specific dispositional effects.¹⁶⁵ This seems to be based on Aristotle’s theory of motion, interpreted to mean that each natural cause has only one potential type of effect. So, *ceteris paribus*, cold objects produce coldness, hot objects heat, and so on.¹⁶⁶ For al-Māturīdī, then, indeterminate effects may be possible, but only if congruent with the object’s nature.¹⁶⁷

Another consideration is that all God’s actions accord with divine wisdom, including the creation of the world. However, it seems conceivable that God could create ontologically indeterminate natural laws for specific aims. This could allow al-Māturīdī’s view of nature to incorporate certain explanations of quantum mechanics, such as the Copenhagen interpretation, or indeterministic models such as chaos theory and the butterfly effect.¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, since God’s direction of all events does not eliminate human freedom, the same could apply to indeterministic aspects of nature. These might be explained as God choosing in timeless eternity from among possible worlds the one He wishes to realise. That is, each effect’s precise realisation is decided by divine choice, though it nonetheless has a physical cause.¹⁶⁹ Whatever the case, al-Māturīdī’s writings do not appear to rule out the metaphysical possibility of ontological indeterminacy as discussed here.

Since God has chosen not to control human decisions (see [Section 1.5.2](#)), how individuals are affected by others’ choices becomes a matter of existential chance that links lives and events. This forms the basis for moral and religious “luck” and raises questions about God’s plan for each individual.¹⁷⁰ It appears that divine determination (*qadar*), which al-Māturīdī conceives of as God’s realisation of events (see [Section 1.3.3](#)),¹⁷¹ leaves people free while maintaining God’s personal plan for and relationship with them. Based on al-Māturīdī’s view of wisdom (see [Section 1.3.2](#)), key life events may be arranged by God specifically so that mere chance does not decide a person’s fate.¹⁷²

1.3.6 *Ontology of Miracles*

The primary question regarding miracles is how al-Māturīdī accommodates them within his wider metaphysical system. The only extant systematic treatment of miracles by al-Māturīdī is found in the *Book of Monotheism* within the section on messengerhood. Like other Islamic theologians, he proposes that miracles, primarily referred to as signs (*āyāt*),¹⁷³ confirm the truth of the message delivered by God's messengers and can only be produced by one who is omniscient, wise, and powerful.¹⁷⁴

Al-Māturīdī proposes that God's genuine messengers have two distinguishing marks (*a'lām*). He writes:

One of them is the appearance of their states in such a way that intellects have no doubt about them and reject imagined suspicions concerning them. This is due to their people accompanying them in youth and adulthood and finding them pure, sincere, and pious in their midst. It is not possible to put [the general people] on the same level [as the messengers] in that, and their upbringing could not have achieved it. Thus, the appearance and existence of [the messengers'] states amongst them are firm and widespread. So, it is known intuitively that it is [due to] the preservation of one who knows that He will place them in a noble station and entrust them with the unseen and [its] secrets. This is what inclines the nature (*tabī'a*) to accept them and the intellect to deem good all their affairs. Hence, their rejector stubbornly rejects after cognisance, either because of habit and custom opposing that, or because of honour and nobility in the world, or because of desires and acquisitions. Were it not for this, every heart would incline towards someone [even] less than this in rank and status. *And there is no power except with God.*

The second is the bringing forth of signs that are outside the natures of the people of insight regarding that subject and to the likes of which it is impossible to aspire or whose essence it is impossible to attain through study. Additionally, were it possible for someone to attain such through study and exhaustive effort, [it would be] the messengers, considering their origins and how they were raised, [yet] they did not do that. It is thus manifest that they acquired this from God, who ennobled them with it as He made them trustees of His revelation.¹⁷⁵ [The messengers] also possess qualities by virtue of which they surpass sorcery, as the origin of the knowledge of sorcery was from heaven,¹⁷⁶ but the people forgot its origin and transmitted it through study. Such is the case for all means of earning, professions, and crafts. Whenever someone has been honoured by knowledge attained without its normal path [that is, by being granted messengerhood], we know that he has been singled out for a great affair.¹⁷⁷

What is striking about al-Māturīdī's treatment is his naturalism compared to later Sunni conceptions of miracles as a disruption of (divine) custom (*kharq al-'āda*).¹⁷⁸ The signs brought by messengers fall outside the ability of experts to explain within

their disciplines, but not outside the natural capacities God has placed in creation. They are distinguished from similar wonders – as achieved by sorcery – by the impeccable moral character of the messenger, known by widespread report, and by his lack of study into how to produce the effect in question. These two factors ensure, in al-Māturīdī’s view, that only divine ennoblement can explain miraculous occurrences.¹⁷⁹

A fuller understanding of the metaphysical implications of this stance comes from al-Māturīdī’s response to objections that had already been raised against it. He cites critiques from Abū ‘Īsā al-Warrāq (d. late third/ninth century), a Shī‘ī theologian from Baghdad¹⁸⁰ who argued that the public lacks knowledge of nature’s workings and thus cannot distinguish a genuine sign from a clever trick. The latter asks: “Are they not merely onlookers amazed by a jester? Is sorcery to them any different from magnetism?”¹⁸¹ Al-Māturīdī rejects this claim. Miracles are not just rare events; they are wondrous acts that constitute a specification (*takhṣīs*) of or a departure (*khurūj*) from the messenger’s human nature and are unique to him.¹⁸² This is not a radical break in the world’s causal order but a distinctive feature of it.¹⁸³ Al-Māturīdī asserts that knowledge of such signs is possible only when disclosed by the one who knows them, namely, God.¹⁸⁴ He offers several responses to the epistemic concern raised. First, there are limits to human understanding; even al-Warrāq cannot claim full knowledge of natures!¹⁸⁵ Second, the messengers’ moral excellence lends credibility to their claims.¹⁸⁶ Finally, miracles are inimitable: either they challenge others who fail to replicate them, such as the Qur’ān,¹⁸⁷ or they are such that they cannot even be attempted, such as the splitting of the moon.¹⁸⁸ Thus, even if a miracle’s effect could, in principle, be learned, its evidentiary power remains because it is known that the messenger did not acquire it through conventional means.

The treatment of miracles in the *Book of Monotheism* is complicated by certain texts within *Interpretations of the Qur’ān*. While some of al-Māturīdī’s exegetical expressions align with his main theological work,¹⁸⁹ others heavily emphasise divine agency, leaving a question mark over the prophet’s causal role in the miracle. Consider his interpretation of Q. 21:69, God’s command to the fire to “be coolness and peace for Abraham.” Al-Māturīdī states that this means that “He made it [the fire] in its disposition (*khilqa*) cool and peaceful for Abraham specifically. As for other than him, it remained as it was in its nature in terms of burning and heat.”¹⁹⁰ The authors of the present chapter offer different readings of such statements. For Özaykal, they reveal that when dealing with miracles, as in the context of his exegetical work, al-Māturīdī espouses an additional level to his explanation of divine action and accepts that God originates miracles – in this case the cooling nature of the fire – without any prior worldly cause being needed. For Harvey, this text within *Interpretations of the Qur’ān* is best read in light of the extended treatment in the *Book of Monotheism*, discussed above. On this interpretation, al-Māturīdī understands the worldly cause of the miracle as a divine endowment in the person of Abraham that prevents the fire from having its usual burning effect on him. Hence, God’s action brings into existence all things in their temporal locations from nothing, and miracles have a concurrent cause within the world.

Similar differences in interpretation are possible over several other texts pertaining to prominent prophetic miracles in *Interpretations of the Qurʾān*. In his commentary on Moses’s drawing of water from the stone in Q. 2:60, al-Māturīdī states that God “originated [the water] from nothing because that rock was neither the nature nor the source of the water.”¹⁹¹ In discussing Jesus’s statement in Q. 3:49: “I will create (*akhluqu*) for you out of clay the shape of a bird. Then I will breathe into it, and it will be a bird by God’s leave,” he writes that the creation of the bird cannot be attributed to Jesus but that it is only manifested at his hands.¹⁹² Both cases can be taken as rejecting or maintaining prophetic causality for these miraculous events. Finally, there are several places in which al-Māturīdī mentions that it is only because the messengers are of the same kind as the people to whom they are sent that their addressees can know that the signs they bring fall outside of human nature or capacity.¹⁹³ Again, this may be read as implying either that miracles are beyond human nature altogether, and thus not caused by the messengers, or that they can be caused only by humans who are ennobled by God.

Overall, al-Māturīdī’s treatment of miracles is complex. In the *Book of Monotheism*, he stresses that miracles stem from special natures that God grants to His chosen prophets, enabling them to present signs in support of their missions. This theological position should be read in the context of the prior philosophical and theological milieu rather than that of later Sunni occasionalism. While *Interpretations of the Qurʾān* repeats some of these ideas, a greater emphasis on divine power introduces ambiguity over whether his treatment stays within, or reveals an additional element to, this theological framework.

1.4 Hermeneutics

1.4.1 General Principles

Al-Māturīdī is among the earliest scholars in Islamic history to author an extant detailed commentary on the Qurʾān. In *Interpretations of the Qurʾān*, he places special emphasis on theological hermeneutics, seeking to address key questions arising from the text by applying his system of thought. The closest he comes to outlining his hermeneutics is in a short note distinguishing “explanation” (*tafsīr*) from “interpretation” (*taʾwīl*).¹⁹⁴ He describes explanation as a more definitive understanding, “the reality of the [divine] intent (*ḥaqīqat al-murād*),”¹⁹⁵ available only to the Prophet Muḥammad’s Companions, who witnessed the events surrounding revelation. He contrasts this with interpretation, practised by the jurists (*fuqahāʾ*) and, by extension, the scholars in general. Coming later, they must avoid definitive claims about the Qurʾān’s meaning and instead only offer possible interpretations.¹⁹⁶ He adds that God knows best the wisdom placed in His book.¹⁹⁷ These comments are consonant with al-Māturīdī’s hermeneutic method. Though he sometimes uses Companion reports to explain verses, his more distinctive contribution is to provide interpretations, for which his multi-volume text is named. Here, he imports his *kalām* framework into exegesis.¹⁹⁸

To illustrate the relationship between al-Māturīdī’s theological and his exegetical works, we can consider three kinds of Qurʾānic texts: (1) verses expressing core

theological principles, (2) verses raising theological problems requiring exegetical resolution, and (3) verses amenable to theological explanation and usable as evidence. A case of (1) is Q. 42:11: “Naught is like unto Him, yet He is the Hearer, the Seer” (see Section 1.2.2). Al-Māturīdī consistently cites this verse in the *Book of Monotheism* to reject resemblance between God and created things.¹⁹⁹ An example of (2) is Q. 41:10 regarding creation: “[...] and [He] apportioned its means of sustenance therein in four days, alike for all who ask.” This verse seems to portray God as acting within time rather than atemporally. Al-Māturīdī resolves this by asserting that the time period applies only to the created outcomes, not to the divine act itself.²⁰⁰ The same theological concepts are discussed in the *Book of Monotheism* without mentioning this verse.²⁰¹ Finally, with respect to (3), we may consider Q. 2:117: “[He is] the Originator of the heavens and the earth. When He decrees a thing, He but says to it, ‘Be!’ and it is (*fa-innāmā yaqūlu lahu kun fa-yakūn*).” Al-Māturīdī interprets such verses as affirming his doctrine of existentiatio and adduces them in the *Book of Monotheism* as scriptural support.²⁰²

1.4.2 God’s Names and Attributes

Al-Māturīdī deals with divine names, whether mentioned in the Qur’ān or not, on the basis of a consistent theological principle. As human expressions naming God, the names themselves are part of creation. Their referent falls into two categories: (1) God’s entity, for names such as Allāh, the Merciful (al-Raḥmān), the One (al-Wāḥid), and the Eternal (al-Qadīm), and (2) God’s attributes, for names derived from specific qualities like the Omniscient (al-‘Alīm) and the Omnipotent (al-Qādir).²⁰³

Al-Māturīdī’s approach to ambiguous (*mutashābih*) verses aligns with his broader theological framework. Qur’ānic locutions that might linguistically suggest anthropomorphism, such as Q. 7:54 (and elsewhere): “[...] then [He] mounted the throne (*istawā ‘alā al-‘arsh*),” cannot have a bodily or accidental meaning. These verses must be given an alternative interpretation (*ta’wīl*),²⁰⁴ but we cannot know which interpretation is correct. Hence, the statement is affirmed, but its true meaning is consigned to God’s knowledge.²⁰⁵ This is similar to the theological practice known as consignment of meaning (*tafwīd al-ma’nā*). Al-Māturīdī explicitly describes this as a suspension of judgement (*waqf*), linking it to God’s testing of people. He cites the disconnected letters (*ḥurūf muqatta‘a*) that begin various chapters of the Qur’ān as an example.²⁰⁶ As in other areas where he invokes suspension of judgement (see Section 1.2.3), the truth of the matter is known to God even though it transcends human comprehension.²⁰⁷

1.4.3 Scripturally Attested Miracles

The miracles performed by messengers within scripture are accepted by al-Māturīdī at face value, with metaphysical explanations grounded in his established principles and hermeneutics (see Section 1.3.6). In a notable passage in *Interpretations of the Qur’ān*, al-Māturīdī argues that for each miracle of a previous prophet, the Prophet Muḥammad produced an opposite, equal, or superior one of the same

kind. Solomon’s conducting of a one-month journey in the span of a single morning and afternoon is matched by Muḥammad’s accomplishment of the two-month voyage from Mecca to Jerusalem and back in a single night. David’s shaping of iron is surpassed by Muḥammad’s splitting of the moon. If Moses caused springs to gush forth from rock, Muḥammad made water flow from between his fingers. Finally, Jesus brought the dead to life, while a roasted sheep warned Muḥammad saying, “I am poisoned, partake not of me!”²⁰⁸ Like the subsequent Sunni tradition, al-Māturīdī also affirms the working of marvels by saints, so long as they confirm the truthfulness of messengers. On this point, he gives the examples of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the companion of Solomon.²⁰⁹

1.5 The Human Being

1.5.1 Human Nature and Uniqueness

How we characterise al-Māturīdī’s account of the human being depends on our interpretation of his physical ontology. As discussed in [Section 1.3.4](#), we argue that for him, bodies are directly formed from accidents, some of which are enduring natures. But al-Māturīdī also writes that “the human being is disposed to have a nature and an intellect such that what the intellect finds good is not what the nature desires and what it finds bad is not that from which the nature is repelled.”²¹⁰ In this context, he sees the human being as a microcosm of the world, with the intellect (*‘aql*) regulating conflicting natures just as God stabilises a creation composed of unstable parts.²¹¹ How can we account for the intellect in al-Māturīdī’s ontology? It seems that, like for other experiential faculties such as hearing and sight, he considers the intellect a momentary vital accident within the corporeal person, expressing the faculty of understanding and judgement.²¹² He opposes it to our instinctual natures, which lack free choice (*ikhtiyār*) – the ability to dispose of one’s power (*qudra*) to do or not to do something – whereas reasoning enables this.²¹³

Another key element of the human being is the soul or spirit (*rūḥ*). Al-Māturīdī comments on Q. 17:85: “They ask thee [O Muḥammad] about the spirit (*rūḥ*). Say, ‘The spirit is from the command of my Lord, and you have been given of knowledge but little.’” He explains that while we witness our faculties of seeing, hearing, speaking, grasping, walking, and comprehending, we do not perceive the underlying determinant cause (*ma’nā*) of these actions.²¹⁴ For al-Māturīdī, this unseen cause is the perceptual spiritual faculty (*al-naḥs al-rūḥānī al-darrāk*).²¹⁵ Like other early *kalām* theologians, he does not think that the spiritual faculty falls outside of physical ontology.²¹⁶ Even as part of the unseen world (*ghā’ib*), it remains created and thus composed of aggregates of accidents. Since it persists, these accidents must be enduring natures, albeit ones generating the accidents that constitute experience.

A key aspect of al-Māturīdī’s treatment is distinguishing varied functions within the concept of the soul that are connected to earlier philosophical ideas. In addition to consisting of perceptual faculties, the soul is what gives life to the body.²¹⁷ Technically, the body is animated by the accident of life (*ḥayāt*), which occurs only when

the animating spirit (*rūḥ al-ḥayāt* or *rūḥ al-nafs*) is present.²¹⁸ Though this is typically united with the perceptual spiritual faculty in waking life, different states show that they are distinct. Citing Q. 6:60, which states that God “takes back your souls by night” (*yatawaffākum bi-l-layl*), al-Māturīdī suggests that only the various senses, each associated with a separate spiritual faculty,²¹⁹ are taken in sleep, not the animating spirit since that occurs only upon death.²²⁰ Elsewhere in *Interpretations of the Qurʾān*, he argues that a soul can know a place about which it has never previously been informed during sleep.²²¹ It thus leaves the body, experiencing pleasure and pain while the body remains alive.²²² This supports the doctrine of the punishment of the grave, experienced by the perceptual spiritual faculty and not the animating spirit,²²³ which is extinguished at death by the angel of death or other angels.²²⁴

A corollary question is whether this vision of the soul applies to non-human animals. Al-Māturīdī certainly thinks that all animals possess an animating spirit. For instance, he interprets *anām* (creatures) in Q. 55:10 as “every possessor of a spirit.”²²⁵ On “worldly inhabitants” (*al-ʿālamīn*) in Q. 1:2: “Lord of the worlds (*rabb al-ʿālamīn*),” he discusses a difference of opinion between those who think it refers to every spirit-possessing animal living on earth and those who think it refers to every spirit-possessing entity on earth and elsewhere.²²⁶ Since animals have sensory faculties similar to humans, al-Māturīdī’s principles imply that they also possess spiritual faculties and some degree of consciousness. The human distinction lies in a developed intellect, which gives human beings (and *jinn*)²²⁷ moral responsibility.²²⁸ Thus, the human–animal difference is one of intellectual nature, not a fundamental ontological divide.

This interpretation is supported by al-Māturīdī’s reading of Q. 7:172, often taken to allude to a primordial covenant made by all human souls:

And when thy Lord took from the children of Adam, from their loins, their progeny (*dhurriyyatahum*) and made them bear witness concerning themselves [or: their souls] (*alā anfusihim*), “Am I not your Lord?” they said, “Yea, we bear witness”—lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, “Truly of this were we heedless.”

Though commonly understood as an event in which God addressed all human souls prior to their worldly lives, al-Māturīdī finds this reading problematic, especially since we cannot recall it. He interprets it as referring instead to intelligent contingent creatures bearing witness to their Creator and the responsibility to recognise Him during their worldly lives.²²⁹ His rejection of a primordial event in favour of an alternative interpretation was followed by his student Abū al-Ḥasan al-Rustughfanī (d. ca. 345/956), though not by many others in the subsequent tradition.²³⁰ It underscores al-Māturīdī’s commitment to grounding human accountability in inter-subjective and rationally accessible worldly life rather than in a pre-life event that can be known only through revealed scripture or spiritual unveiling. Thus, while al-Māturīdī believes in a soul that survives death, the uniqueness of humans and *jinn* for him lies in their rational faculties, which enable them to take on the moral responsibility to know and to worship God.

1.5.2 *Free Will*

Free will is an area in which al-Māturīdī makes a significant contribution, analysing voluntary human action in several respects.²³¹ He distinguishes between the sound means and healthy organs (*salāmat al-asbāb wa-ṣiḥḥat al-ālāt*) that a person must possess beforehand and the free choice (*ikhtiyār*) at the moment of action that triggers its emergence into existence.²³² His commitment to the simultaneity of time-bound cause and effect reflects the early *falāsifa*'s reception of Aristotelian ideas.²³³ Yet his main task is articulating human action that generates moral responsibility while preserving divine omnipotence and freedom (see [Section 1.3.1](#)).²³⁴ On this point, he notes that God grants capacities for action to whomsoever He wills. Through them, the intellect recognises the obligation of gratitude towards the benefactor (*shukr al-mun'im*) and the forbiddance of ingratitude towards the benefactor (*kufrān al-mun'im*). In fact, one can fulfil divine commands and avoid prohibitions on this basis alone. Free choice at the moment of action, however, is what grounds reward and punishment.²³⁵

The missing ingredient here is God's active role. Al-Māturīdī draws on the ideas of Abū Ḥanīfa²³⁶ to argue that God creates an accident of power (*qudra, quwwa*), also termed capacity (*istiṭā'a*), which enables a person to choose to cause a given act or its opposite at the precise moment of action.²³⁷ Upholding the counterfactual possibility of doing otherwise with the same power is, for him, the only way to vouchsafe the non-compelled status of action.²³⁸ His ultimate epistemic justification is that we have immediate, necessary knowledge that we choose our actions freely.²³⁹ Regarding timing, al-Māturīdī insists that this momentary power must be simultaneous with the chosen act to qualify as its cause.²⁴⁰ He criticises his Mu'tazilī opponent al-Ka'bī for distinguishing between power and cause and mistakenly allowing the former to precede the latter.²⁴¹ Rather, the accident of power causes its selected effect at the same moment it is brought into existence by God's timeless creative act.

Like his analysis of compelled natural action, al-Māturīdī's position on free human action can be designated as a distinct concurrentist theory. He begins with the bodily capacities needed for action. Involuntary acts, like those during sleep, can be explained solely by the natures composing the body. Free acts involving the intellect, however, are parsed in terms of the causal employment of the accident of power. Hence, God creates this accident at the moment of action, the human being chooses to realise an act or its opposite, and God creates the chosen act in accordance with His wisdom.²⁴² As an act that exists on account of both human choice and divine creation, it is an acquisition (*kasb*) for which the agent bears moral responsibility. In al-Māturīdī's words, "The act belongs to the servant through acquisition, while it belongs to God through creation."²⁴³ This expression is reiterated with the specification of acquisition in connection to freedom of choice (*ikhtiyār*).²⁴⁴ In this, the created power, the human choice, and the acquired action are all simultaneous. Al-Māturīdī's model contrasts with occasionalism, which insists upon arrogating causal efficacy to God alone and struggles to preserve genuine human choice between alternatives.²⁴⁵

Al-Māturīdī carefully maintains that God's empowerment of free agents does not diminish His power or sovereignty. God and humans are concurrent agents, with God's timeless act required at every level: creating the power to act freely, creating each act, and creating each act's effect. Thus, God's action is necessary for any event in every circumstance. Yet in free action specifically, God's will is a necessary but insufficient condition since the human will is also required for the act to be truly free.²⁴⁶ In sum, al-Māturīdī makes an ambitious attempt to reconcile free will and its moral significance with causality and divine omnipotence. The coherence of his system depends on placing divine wisdom at its heart since it underpins the genuine causal efficacy of the agent expressing his free will.

1.6 Science

1.6.1 Scientific Outlook

Working principally as a theologian, al-Māturīdī's main goal is to clarify points of philosophical theology in opposition to Muslim and non-Muslim groups. His treatment of the natural world is primarily to support theological claims but also shows conceptual overlap with scientific enquiry.²⁴⁷ First, al-Māturīdī holds that nature is composed of elements with intrinsic capacities and that each object has specific dispositions (see Section 1.3.4). For instance, he points out that creatures differ in function according to their constitutions: certain types fly, others swim, and yet others walk upon the earth.²⁴⁸ Similarly, his critique of the theory of four elements, while resisting purely naturalist explanations of the world, still affirms the reality of natures within a theological framework (see Section 1.3.3). Hence, his endorsement of natures provides a foundation for explaining the observable behaviour of objects and offers a basic framework for scientific enquiry independently to explore natural laws or principles (see Section 1.6.2).

Second, al-Māturīdī displays an empiricist leaning and a scepticism towards unobservable entities, such as basic substrata. While many of his predecessors assumed that an object's properties inhere in a substratum, al-Māturīdī avoids affirming the latter's existence since we perceive only qualities, not an underlying base.²⁴⁹ Similarly, he uses the notion of Aristotelian categories as a theoretical explanation of existing objects for a polemical argument to reject the idea of underlying prime matter (*hayūlā*) since the latter falls under none of these explanatory concepts.²⁵⁰ This reveals the notion of prime matter to be ontologically redundant as well as empirically unjustified.²⁵¹

Third, al-Māturīdī's arguments for free will and the existence of God again reflect an empiricist bent. For free will, he begins from the basic human awareness that we sense ourselves as free rather than compelled, using this to reject metaphysical arguments denying freedom.²⁵² He also applies a principle of inference to the best explanation to reach theological conclusions based on empirical evidence. This method assesses theories based on criteria from natural philosophy: empirical coherence, logical consistency, explanatory power, and parsimony. Using these, he rejects purely naturalistic accounts of the cosmic order and uses the concept

of natures to infer the existence of God (see [Section 1.3.2](#)). This shows that al-Māturīdī employs natural philosophy within theology, demonstrating an openness to science as he understands it. Essentially, his approach suggests that science, philosophy, and theology share basic principles of enquiry, such as the aforementioned theoretical criteria, to infer metaphysical truths.²⁵³

More broadly, al-Māturīdī's acceptance of inherent natures and causal capacities implies that the world is a causal system worthy of study. Al-Māturīdī states that human beings must understand the means to preserve life and peace while fulfilling the needs that their natures impose on them.²⁵⁴ In other words, humanity is created within a world governed by natural laws with which individuals and societies must engage and contend. This implies a range of investigative fields: technologies for food production, construction, medicine, and law enforcement – all dependent on scientific pursuit. Indeed, al-Māturīdī states that such knowledge is so essential that God's messengers have guided humanity to acquire it.²⁵⁵ At the same time, he warns against the presumption that we can find the natural cause for all phenomena. Some areas remain beyond our comprehension, and he even likens such an endeavour to an attempt to gain authority (*taḥakkum*) over God.²⁵⁶ Thus, al-Māturīdī expresses scepticism about the human ability to acquire exhaustive knowledge of all physical causes.

1.6.2 Methodological Naturalism

In contemporary philosophy of science and religion, it is common to distinguish between philosophical naturalism (PN) and methodological naturalism (MN). PN asserts that nature is all that exists and that every phenomenon – including consciousness, rationality, and morality – must ultimately be explained in purely naturalistic terms. As such, PN is a metaphysical position that excludes the supernatural as non-existent or explanatorily irrelevant. While PN is a modern category, al-Māturīdī's theological worldview clearly contrasts with it. His arguments for the existence of God, the contingency of the cosmos, and the marks of divine wisdom in nature (see [Sections 1.3.1–1.3.4](#)) challenge the claim that nature is self-explanatory or ontologically self-sufficient. For al-Māturīdī, the cosmos points beyond itself to a wise and purposeful Creator. Hence, his metaphysics cannot accommodate PN's core assumptions.

MN, by contrast, is not a metaphysical stance per se but a research strategy. It refers to the scientific practice of explaining natural phenomena exclusively through natural causes without appealing to supernatural or metaphysical explanations. MN is standard in modern science and serves a pragmatic function, namely, to generate testable, coherent, and empirically grounded explanations of the physical world. As a methodology, MN is metaphysically neutral and can, in principle, be adopted by both theists and non-theists.

MN is often divided into intrinsic methodological naturalism (IMN) and pro-visory methodological naturalism (PMN).²⁵⁷ IMN maintains that science must always exclude theological or metaphysical explanations as a matter of principle. On this view, references to divine agency are inadmissible, regardless of evidence or context. PMN, by contrast, treats this exclusion as a practical rule to be set aside

if naturalistic accounts fail or they reach conceptual limits. Thus, theological or metaphysical appeals are not ruled out but considered when naturalistic explanations appear inadequate.

A pertinent question is which form of MN al-Māturīdī's theology could accommodate. In terms of IMN, we may note that al-Māturīdī holds that natural phenomena can be understood on their own terms owing to their regularity and causal consistency and that empirical investigation is essential for human survival and even moral knowledge (see [Section 1.6.1](#)). In such cases, theology need not be invoked, and nature is studied according to its own internal principles. Importantly, IMN does not deny the supernatural or metaphysical; it simply states that such factors fall outside the scope of empirical science. It works on the assumption that natural phenomena have causes that science can seek to uncover. This basic feature of IMN, combined with al-Māturīdī's recognition of physical causality, suggests that his thought can support this form of MN.

At the same time, al-Māturīdī explicitly maintains that some aspects of nature require reference to divine action, especially its wise arrangement, as found in his arguments for the existence of God (see [Section 1.3.4](#)). In such cases, scientific theories need supplementation by theological reasoning, based on available evidence. This is especially clear in his argument from the concept of natures and their causal patterns to the inference of God as their creator and sustainer (see [Section 1.3.2](#)). Even where physical causes are in principle discoverable, naturalistic explanations can be unsuccessful purely on their own terms owing to a lack of empirical evidence, logical consistency, coherence, explanatory power, or parsimony. Al-Māturīdī frequently critiques implausible natural explanations, offering empirical evidence that contradicts them. For example, he observes that the four elements alone cannot account for the visible appearances of objects since objects can have similar appearances regardless of their elemental makeup.²⁵⁸ Likewise, he rejects the sufficiency of the four states of matter to explain cosmic order, which, he argues, shows signs of intelligence, wisdom, and aesthetic design absent in natural causes. Additionally, al-Māturīdī can be read as denying that known material causes fully account for God's action, for example in bestowing knowledge, which He can grant directly to whomsoever He wills.²⁵⁹ These critiques target not science itself but premature claims of completeness in physical explanation. Such observations suggest that a scientist working in al-Māturīdī's framework could adopt PMN. Here, religious considerations matter in two respects. First, the object of enquiry may be partly defined by religious criteria – for example, investigating a claimed miracle. Second, theological concepts are admissible when they offer key explanatory value. In this scenario, theological reasoning combines with, rather than replaces, scientific enquiry and intervenes when significant conceptual or empirical gaps persist despite rigorous naturalistic investigation.

Concluding Summary

Much can be learned from Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī for grounding scientific and philosophical thought within Islamic theology. Undoubtedly, he is a nuanced

thinker with sometimes obscure texts. Yet by tying diverse elements into a coherent whole, he makes his system versatile and avoids one-sided extremes in many areas. Al-Māturīdī draws on basic concepts from Greek philosophy, likely via Mu'tazilī and Arabic philosophical sources, as well as the Qur'ān, hadith, and prior Ḥanafī tradition. The remarkable array of sources with which he engages and rival theories that he opposes explains the complexity of his thought on God, nature, human beings, and their interrelations.

For al-Māturīdī, God is neither within time nor within space yet acts in timeless eternity to realise effects in creation. Likewise, God is knowable through inference – especially reasoning from His effects – and possesses distinct properties accessible to us via analogy. Al-Māturīdī's articulation of God's relationship to the world is a mosaic of different concepts and theories united under the overarching concept of divine wisdom. According to his divine action model, natures with inherent causal power and conscious agents with free will are concurrent with God's *ex nihilo* creative act. The place of teleology in al-Māturīdī's explanation of God's relationship to the natural world is difficult to exaggerate. Everything in the world possesses dispositional natures with a divine purpose. At the level of the macrocosm, this manifests in natural laws, which constitute a universe arrayed with signs of divine wisdom. While recognising that the connection of each detail of the world to God's purpose may not be within the reach of human reason, al-Māturīdī highlights the intelligibility of the creation through opposites, especially those of benefits and harms and of good and evil. These make the world a place of trial for humanity, especially given the rational obligation to come to knowledge of God and to act in accordance with the moral value placed in the created order. The messengers that God sends to humanity are an essential aspect of His wise purpose for the world, though how al-Māturīdī deals specifically with miracles in light of his divine action model is open to more than one interpretation. As the microcosm, the human being is part of nature and subject to its laws but also distinguished in ethical significance and responsibility. Al-Māturīdī brings together ideas such as independent natures, conflicting physical contraries, and substantive human free will into a coherent whole that is always linked to divine omnipotence, omniscience, and wisdom. Though the soul remains part of physical reality, it is the seat of conscious perception and the basis for continued personal identity after death according to his ontology. He distinguishes between human beings and animals based on the former's possession of a higher intellect that grounds moral duty. This, in turn, underpins the possibility of the exercise of genuine free will in response to divine commands and prohibitions.

Al-Māturīdī's scientific outlook endorses investigation into a world that intrinsically possesses natural properties, encouraging the effort for survival and civilisational development. The natural world provides material for theological conclusions, which are derived from consistent patterns in observed reality. In the context of scientific method, there are cases where al-Māturīdī refrains from including theological factors in explaining things, thus following a naturalist line yet without ever allowing any worldly phenomenon to escape its ultimate explanation as a divine creation. His synthesis of ideas might be deemed overly complex

compared to the more austere occasionalist approach that dominated much of the subsequent Sunni tradition. But perhaps this complexity, with its ambiguities and finely balanced tensions, many of which we have explored in this chapter, grants al-Māturīdī's thought the ability to encompass the diverse nature of the physical world without trivialising it. It also furnishes attractive resources for modern theological approaches to nature and science with implications that are still being worked out. By observing natural laws, human beings can fathom aspects of the wise intent that manages creation and use their intellect to choose to enact the good that God has made possible therein. Such activity should accompany any Māturīdī programme for scientific and philosophical enquiry.

Notes

- 1 Besides the names of some of his teachers and students, we possess very few details about al-Māturīdī's life. On what can be gleaned, see [Ceric \(1995, 17–35\)](#), [Rudolph \(2015, 125–47\)](#), and [al-Damanhūrī \(2018\)](#). For extensive overviews of al-Māturīdī's life, works, and legacy, see [Kutlu \(2011, 23–64\)](#), [Korkmaz \(2017, 27–56\)](#), and [Düzgün \(2018\)](#). Additional points about context are discussed in [Dorroll \(2016, 120–25\)](#). On his most prominent student, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Rustughfanī, see [Harvey \(2021b, 95–101\)](#).
- 2 See [Madelung \(1971\)](#); [Bruckmayr \(2009\)](#).
- 3 For information on the missing texts, see [Rudolph \(2015, 180–83\)](#).
- 4 For more details, see [Saleh \(2016, 204, n. 1\)](#) and [Harvey \(2021a, 13, n. 12\)](#). Another Arabic edition of the *Book of Monotheism*, edited by Aḥmad Sa'd al-Damanhūrī, has also recently appeared. See [al-Māturīdī \(2023\)](#).
- 5 For a comprehensive survey of the relationship between the Māturīdī and Ash'arī schools in a historical context, see [Kalaycı \(2017\)](#).
- 6 From the various publications of al-Māturīdī's texts, the acclaimed edition of the *Book of Monotheism* prepared by Bekir Topaloğlu and Muhammed Aruçi (2010) has been chosen for this chapter, alongside the critical edition of *Interpretations of the Qur'ān* produced by Bekir Topaloğlu et al. (2005–2010). To present both the fundamentals and the intricacies of al-Māturīdī's thought, extensive use has been made of both texts. Complementing this effort, we have also used a variety of secondary sources, mostly in English and in Turkish. It is impossible, however, to encompass all scholarship on al-Māturīdī in a single chapter. Moreover, the field has not come to a definite agreement on how to interpret many aspects of his theological system and, given the ambiguity of his writings, especially the *Book of Monotheism* in numerous places, may never do so. Consequently, when seeking to explore al-Māturīdī's engagement with the present volume's core themes, we have mainly presented our own readings of the above primary sources while occasionally mentioning other possible interpretations. Where there has been significant disagreement between the chapter's authors, this has been noted in the relevant sections, specifically on divine action ([Section 1.3.1](#)) and miracles ([Section 1.3.6](#)).
- 7 TQ, 11:125.
- 8 Compare TQ, 5:156.
- 9 [Al-Nasafī \(1990, 1:11\)](#). On the development of the definition of knowledge within the Māturīdī tradition, see [Brodersen \(2022, 122–27\)](#).
- 10 [Al-Nasafī \(1990, 1:11\)](#).
- 11 KT, 69. For detailed discussion of al-Māturīdī's epistemological framework, see [Harvey \(2021a, 12–28\)](#), as well as [Chowdhury and Harvey \(2025\)](#).
- 12 KT, 70–72.
- 13 KT, 70.

- 14 KT, 71–72. For the Hanafī school of Islamic law (*fiqh*), which al-Māturīdī follows, the solitary report is not narrated with sufficient frequency to be termed famous (*mashhūr*), a category that is usually considered below the level of mass transmission (*tawātur*). Al-Māturīdī does not use the language of *mashhūr* in his theological discourse.
- 15 KT, 71–72.
- 16 For a systematic presentation of al-Māturīdī’s approach to prophetic reports and his use of mass transmission specifically, see [Gengil \(2021, 192–200, 207–23\)](#). For further nuances in al-Māturīdī’s position on mass transmission in the light of debates in the literature, see [Harvey \(2021a, 21–26\)](#).
- 17 KT, 66–67.
- 18 This focus on the civilisational role of the messenger recalls the political philosophy found famously in the works of al-Māturīdī’s contemporary al-Fārābī (d. 339/950), who deems the best society to be one ruled by a prophet-legislator. See the comparisons in [Rudolph \(2008, 5, 7–8, 13–14\)](#).
- 19 KT, 72–73, 254.
- 20 KT, 73.
- 21 KT, 67.
- 22 KT, 93. He often uses *dalāla* instead of *qiyās* in this context.
- 23 KT, 302.
- 24 KT, 302. See also KT, 93.
- 25 KT, 302. He frequently uses the expression “there is no need for us to know that” (*lā hāja binā ilā ma’rifat dhālika*) or similar in his *tafsīr*, for example, on the question whether “*sab’an min al-mathānī*” (lit. “the seven oft-repeated”), mentioned in Q. 15:87, should be understood as referring to Sūrat al-Fātiḥa (Q. 1). TQ, 8:58. This is also a theme within his wider thought (see [Sections 1.2.3](#) and [1.4.2](#)).
- 26 [Cerić \(1995, 74–79\)](#). It is likely that he builds upon earlier, now lost, Mu’tazilī treatments of epistemology. See [Rudolph \(2015, 232\)](#).
- 27 [Topaloğlu \(2002, 117–19\)](#).
- 28 KT, 353. *Ma’ānīhā* can also be translated as “their determinant causes.” Al-Māturīdī describes reason more explicitly using the language of the ancient explanation for *nous* when he states that it “joins what is to be joined and separates what is to be separated” (KT, 67). It seems that the earliest advocate of this doctrine was the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaxagoras (d. ca. 428 BCE). For his statements in this regard, see especially DK 59B4 and 59B14–17 in the Diels-Kranz collection of pre-Socratic sources ([Diels and Kranz, 1974](#)).
- 29 KT, 223.
- 30 KT, 302.
- 31 KT, 72.
- 32 [Özcan \(2015, 110–11\)](#).
- 33 KT, 75, 223–24.
- 34 While Özcan’s claim (2015, 123–27) that speculative reasoning vis-à-vis the unseen may lack certainty is correct, his further claim that the input of the senses is, by comparison, more certain appears mistakenly to limit perception to introspective knowledge.
- 35 KT, 69. See [al-Bazdawī \(2003, 20\)](#).
- 36 KT, 205, 467–68.
- 37 See [Harvey \(2021a, 15, 19–20\)](#).
- 38 KT, 74, 237, 254.
- 39 See, for example, KT, 485–86.
- 40 KT, 342.
- 41 KT, 274–75.
- 42 KT, 303–4.
- 43 TQ, 17:222.

- 44 See [Harvey \(2018, 37\)](#). Al-Māturīdī therefore writes in this context that what appears beneficial to one’s nature may oppose what one’s reason deems good. It is this latter judgement that takes precedence in his approach to moral determination, reflecting his rationalistic outlook. See KT, 76.
- 45 This doctrine is evidently derived from theologians of the Mu’tazilī school. See [Shihadeh \(2016, 384–407\)](#).
- 46 KT, 88.
- 47 KT, 298.
- 48 KT, 88, 156.
- 49 KT, 321.
- 50 It is likely that al-Māturīdī had limited access to the ethical legacy of Greek philosophy or possibly (though less likely) was not interested in extrapolating a philosophical basis for an Islamic virtue ethics.
- 51 KT, 441.
- 52 TQ, 14:111.
- 53 KT, 252.
- 54 KT, 303–4, 477–78; [Özaykal \(2024a, 135–45\)](#).
- 55 KT, 297; TQ, 4:293.
- 56 KT, 167–68. See also [Evkuran \(2016, 122, 128–29\)](#), [Özaykal \(2017, 251–62\)](#), and [Alper \(2017, 195–98\)](#).
- 57 KT, 175–77, 245, 256.
- 58 See [Harvey \(2023b, 62–63\)](#) and [Özaykal \(2024a\)](#).
- 59 KT, 248, 297–98, 300.
- 60 KT, 252–53.
- 61 For a detailed study of al-Māturīdī’s ethical and metaethical thought in relation to divine command theory and ratiocentric ethics, see [Özaykal \(2017\)](#).
- 62 See [Cerić \(1995, 144–49\)](#), [Rudolph \(2015, 262–64\)](#), [Erlwein \(2019, 61–76\)](#), and [Harvey \(2021a, 108–12, 119–20\)](#).
- 63 KT, 83–85.
- 64 He responds to the Dahriyya explicitly in KT, 209–20.
- 65 KT, 77–83.
- 66 KT, 83–84.
- 67 KT, 84–85. See [Harvey and Jalajel \(2024\)](#).
- 68 KT, 83. There is ongoing discussion about exactly how to interpret this argument. See [Pessagno \(1984b, 73–74\)](#), [Erlwein \(2019, 71–74\)](#), [Harvey \(2021a, 110–11\)](#), and [Harvey and Jalajel \(2024, 79–81\)](#).
- 69 See KT, 93–94, 108–9, 112, 118, 136.
- 70 KT, 92; [Harvey \(2021a, 60–61\)](#).
- 71 For a thorough examination, emphasising the originality of al-Māturīdī’s method of Qur’ānic interpretation within the Sunni tradition, see [Mavil \(2017\)](#).
- 72 Almost all renditions of the Qur’ān into English miss the possibility of translating *wāw* (lit. “and”) as “yet,” which is appropriate in this theological context. A notable exception is *The Study Quran* (as here), which has been selected as the standard translation for this volume.
- 73 TQ, 13:172–73.
- 74 KT, 173.
- 75 KT, 105; TQ, 13:173.
- 76 KT, 105. He also sometimes uses the term *jawhar* for the same concept when applied to created things. KT, 88, 109; [Rudolph \(2015, 245\)](#).
- 77 KT, 89.
- 78 KT, 91; [Cerić \(1995, 157–58\)](#).
- 79 KT, 90–91. See [van Ess \(2018b, 416–18\)](#).
- 80 KT, 91, 130; [Harvey \(2021a, 74–76, 145\)](#).

- 81 See [al-Nāṭiḡīf \(2016, 1:446\)](#).
- 82 KT, 167.
- 83 KT, 91. See [Harvey \(2021a, 144–45\)](#).
- 84 Earlier Mu'tazilī thinkers argued that God's oneness was secured by treating God as a "simple" essence. Attributes were given a deflationary reading, collapsing their conceptual status to other entities, whether as qualities identical to the divine essence by Abū al-Hudhayl (d. between 226/840 and 235/850) ([al-Ash'arī 1950, 2:157](#)), as negations of corresponding deficiencies by al-Nazzām (d. between 220/835 and 230/845) ([al-Ash'arī 1950, 2:159](#)), as quasi-existent states (*ahwāl*) by Abū Hāshim (d. 921/933) ([Thiele 2016, 368–69](#)), or as scriptural epithets by al-Ka'bī (KT, 119). It is this latter approach that al-Māturīdī is most invested in rebutting, given his local rivalry with al-Ka'bī. See [Rudolph \(2015, 158–59\)](#), [Harvey \(2021a, 197–99\)](#), and [Harvey \(2023a\)](#).
- 85 [Harvey \(2021a, 147–50\)](#).
- 86 KT, 112. This usage, with its terminology similar to that of Abū al-Hudhayl, proved confusing to the later Māturīdī theologian Abū al-Mu'īn al-Nasaḡī, who insists that he cannot mean to deny distinct attributes. [Al-Nasaḡī \(2011, 1:433\)](#). See [Harvey \(2021a, 150–1\)](#).
- 87 KT, 118–19. For parallel use of the word *ghayr* to mean "other than" in the phrase "not He nor other than He" (*lā huwa wa-lā ghayruhu*) used in a different context, see TQ, 11:266. See also [Harvey \(2021a, 150–52\)](#). Regarding Ibn Kullāb, see [al-Ash'arī \(1950, 1:232\)](#). Compare with the ideal school positions expressed diagrammatically in [van Ess \(2018a, 1487\)](#).
- 88 In the field of *kalām*, this is commonly termed *tawaqquf*. Note that al-Māturīdī's usage of suspension of judgement in this case is not a "negative" statement of ignorance or indecision over which option is correct but a "positive" denial of both contradictory options to express the nature of God's unity.
- 89 KT, 122. See [Harvey \(2021a, 202\)](#).
- 90 See, for example, KT, 164, 192, 202–3, 296.
- 91 KT, 163, 175; [Özaykal \(2017, 159–63, 196–97\)](#); [Harvey \(2021a, 161–62\)](#).
- 92 KT, 115; [Harvey \(2021a, 143–44\)](#). This approach seems to go back to Abū Ḥanīfa, who affirms God's pleasure (*riḡā*) and anger (*ghaḡab*), stating that one should "describe Him as He describes Himself." [Abū Ḥanīfa \(1949, 56\)](#). On the similarities and differences between Abū Ḥanīfa and al-Māturīdī in this regard, see [Avcı \(2022, 104–7\)](#).
- 93 KT, 116–17; [Harvey \(2021a, 197\)](#).
- 94 KT, 110; [Harvey \(2021a, 177\)](#).
- 95 See KT, 110–12 and [Harvey \(2021a, 175–79\)](#).
- 96 KT, 108, 348.
- 97 KT, 108.
- 98 KT, 348.
- 99 KT, 109.
- 100 KT, 90. A standard language for necessity and for God as necessarily existent (*wājib al-wujūd*) was introduced into the *kalām* tradition by the reception of ideas most famously associated with Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037). From al-Māturīdī's successors, Abū al-Yusr al-Bazdawī seems to be the first to make use of the new terminology. See [al-Bazdawī \(2003, 27\)](#) and [Wisnovsky \(2004, 94–95\)](#). The treatment that follows reflects a working out of the implications of al-Māturīdī's views about God's necessity.
- 101 KT, 225.
- 102 KT, 348. See [Section 1.5.2](#).
- 103 See the discussion in [Harvey \(2021a, 134–35\)](#). In contemporary theological discourse, this raises the question of modal collapse. This is the contention that a consequence of God's absolute necessity is the necessity of the world in its entirety, meaning that there is only one possible world. See [Mullins \(2016, 137–38\)](#). The argument uses the

- contemporary modal notion of a logically possible world, which usually includes God, unlike in Islamic theology, which defines the world as other than God. This idea also differs from the scientific concept of multiple universes, which Islamic theology would treat as aspects of one world. Modal collapse has been claimed to make the world eternal, eliminate human free will, and prevent divine responsiveness. Although an extension of al-Māturīdī's ideas would be needed, one may claim that he implicitly acknowledges the possibility of God choosing to create something else. See [Harvey \(2021a, 186–88\)](#). This would depend on drawing a distinction between God's choice to create the actual world and His merely possible choice of alternatives in the modal semantics of possible worlds. It is plausible to develop an account along these lines that averts modal collapse without conceding actual change or inessentiality in the divine attributes.
- 104 KT, 349. See the possible nuances to this position explored in [Section 1.3.5](#).
 105 KT, 348.
 106 [Anjum and Mumford \(2018, 84\)](#).
 107 See [Rudolph \(2016, esp. 357\)](#). For a related discussion of the positions in the Latin Christian tradition, see [Platt \(2020, 33–37\)](#). We should note that the complete picture of God's action in al-Māturīdī's thought is open to debate. Briefly, a question concerns whether every effect within the visible world (subsequent to the initial moment of its existence) has a prior worldly cause. The main candidates for events that might escape this condition are the miracles of messengers and saints. The authors of this chapter differ in their interpretation of al-Māturīdī's system on this point. Harvey argues that al-Māturīdī holds even miracles to have worldly causes, whereas Özaykal argues that he makes an exception for them. See the discussion in [Section 1.3.6](#).
- 108 KT, 184.
 109 KT, 102, 164, 193.
 110 These formal principles can be seen in his statements on wisdom and critical descriptions of futile actions. See KT, 164, 295–300.
 111 KT, 353.
 112 KT, 395.
 113 KT, 109. The opposite of wisdom for al-Māturīdī is folly (*ṣafah*), which is to act foolishly or in disregard of one's knowledge. See KT, 164, 298.
 114 KT, 94, 198, 236. The combination of wisdom and harmony in opposed elements (see [Section 1.3.4](#)) indicates some Aristotelian roots of al-Māturīdī's natural theology. For more immediate likely influences, see [Harvey \(2021a, 163–64\)](#).
 115 See, for example, Q, 21:16, 23:115–16, 44:38, and 51:56.
 116 See KT, 67, 112–13, 166–67, 175–77, 245.
 117 See KT, 67–68, 167, 245; TQ, 2:511, 7:76, 8:109, 9:57, 11:106–7.
 118 KT, 167, 249–50.
 119 KT, 175–77, 249 and, for example, TQ, 2:289. See also [Özaykal \(2017, 192–205\)](#).
 120 For example, KT, 67.
 121 For an interpretation of reason's relation to the world's teleology, see [Harvey \(2021a, 70–71\)](#).
 122 KT, 123–27, 161, 210. Compare with KT, 74–75, for instance, where the connection is not made explicit.
 123 KT, 83–84. See also [Harvey \(2021a, 119–20\)](#) and [Harvey and Jalajel \(2024\)](#).
 124 [Allen and Neal \(2020\)](#).
 125 [Allen and Neal \(2020\)](#).
 126 For this usage, see [Rudolph \(2015, 245–46\)](#).
 127 KT, 239.
 128 KT, 239.
 129 Regarding al-Māturīdī's preference for using the term *ṣifa* (drawn from the verbal root used in the above passage) over *ʿarad*, see n. 148.

- 130 KT, 396.
- 131 See KT, 274–75.
- 132 KT, 396.
- 133 See [Pessagno \(1984b, 70–71\)](#).
- 134 KT, 68.
- 135 KT, 83.
- 136 KT, 210, 234. These states of matter are closely connected to the four elements (*al-‘anāšir al-arba‘a*), namely, fire, water, earth, and air. Both the states and the elements are prominent in Greek philosophy and are later taken up by the Muslim philosophers. In al-Māturīdī’s time, they were considered by some Naturalists (*aṣḥāb al-ṭabā‘i*) as the basic explanation for the main features of the material world. For al-Māturīdī, however, they simply represent opposed natures that God has created.
- 137 See, for example, KT, 78–79. The philosophical precedent for this diverse assortment appears to be pre-Socratic. See, for example, DK59B4, 15 and 18.
- 138 See [Pessagno \(1984b, 63\)](#) and [Yavuz \(2012, 59–60\)](#). Compare with [Rudolph \(2015, 253–60\)](#).
- 139 See, for example, KT, 167, 175–76, 240, 245.
- 140 KT, 167, 301.
- 141 KT, 334.
- 142 KT, 215–16.
- 143 KT, 193; [Özaykal \(2017, 161–63\)](#). Alternatively, it is possible to read both beneficence and grace as expressing the same idea of God’s benevolence, as implied by [Rudolph \(2015, 299\)](#).
- 144 KT, 296–98.
- 145 See [Harvey \(2018, 24–25\)](#). For systematic developments of al-Māturīdī’s thought in theodicy, see [Özaykal \(2021; 2022b\)](#).
- 146 [Hare \(2015, 220–22\)](#).
- 147 See [Frank \(1974\)](#), [Dhanani \(2012\)](#), [Rudolph \(2015, 242–62\)](#), [Muhtaroglu \(2017\)](#), [Bulgen \(2019\)](#), and [Harvey \(2021a, 89–93\)](#).
- 148 He also uses the term *ṣifāt*, which he prefers given the Qur’ān’s use of *‘araḍ* to mean attractive things (Q. 4:94, 7:169, 8:67, 24:33). See KT, 83.
- 149 KT, 155–56; [Harvey \(2021a, 90\)](#). See [al-Nasafī \(2011, 1:190\)](#). For an alternative argument suggesting that al-Māturīdī’s final position was to support a kind of atomism, see [Bulgen \(2019, 262\)](#).
- 150 [Rudolph \(2015, 243\)](#). See [al-Ash‘arī \(1950, 2:6–7\)](#) and the translation by [Schöck \(2016, 70–71\)](#).
- 151 In a quotation from his lost *Maqālāt*, al-Māturīdī states that seeking ultimate ontological constituents is not needed for the core objective of theology, which, in the chapter in question, is to show the origination of the world. Therefore, there is no need to know whether an object exists as a thing beyond the accidents that cannot be separated from a given body or if it just is these accidents. [Al-Nasafī \(2011, 1:189–90\)](#). See also KT, 198, where he remarks that the essence, or nature, of a thing is affirmed only through its attributes.
- 152 KT, 88, 103–4. See KT, 81 for colour and KT, 185 for shape. Though al-Māturīdī considers that such natures may perhaps be construed as different substances with their qualities determined by the accidents that dominate within them, his own preference seems to be that they be taken as accidents. KT, 211. See the similar position of Ḍirār b. ‘Amr in [Schöck \(2016, 68–69\)](#).
- 153 [Rudolph \(2015, 253–57\)](#).
- 154 [Harvey \(2021a, 92\)](#).
- 155 KT, 206–7, 367.
- 156 KT, 89. See [Harvey \(2021a, 89–93\)](#).
- 157 KT, 170.

- 158 KT, 67, 84, 211. See [Harvey and Jalajel \(2024, 78–79\)](#).
- 159 KT, 211. See [Schöck \(2016, 72–73\)](#).
- 160 TQ, 5:165–66.
- 161 See also the brief comment in n. 107.
- 162 KT, 77–79. Compare with al-Māturīdī’s criticism of the Dahriyya (KT, 93–94).
- 163 Ironically, the only referent for which the said concept of chance is applicable on al-Māturīdī’s view appears to be God, as He is neither the product of a physical cause nor the product of a metaphysical cause.
- 164 KT, 108–9.
- 165 KT, 184, 215. For al-Māturīdī’s different uses of the term “nature” (*tabīʿa*), see [Uluç \(2017, 60–62\)](#).
- 166 The reason for including the *ceteris paribus* clause is Aristotle’s observation that certain circumstances may cause objects to produce effects “contrary to nature” (that is, effects not explained by their natures alone). See Aristotle, *Physics*, 8.4, 254b34–255a23 (2018, 146–47).
- 167 See, for example, KT, 84, 125. [Uluç \(2017, 80\)](#) makes the general connection to Aristotle’s theory of motion. For further details of Aristotle’s theory, see [Bodnar \(2018, esp. sect. 5\)](#).
- 168 For details of the Copenhagen interpretation, see [Faye \(2024\)](#). Compare with [Harvey’s \(2021a, 169–70\)](#) comments on al-Māturīdī’s thought in this regard.
- 169 It should be noted that, since eternal divine knowledge of each human action does not prevent a person from being free on al-Māturīdī’s view, indeterminate aspects of nature would conversely not prohibit divine knowledge of them.
- 170 The seminal studies on moral luck are by [Feinberg \(1970\)](#) and [Williams and Nagel \(1976\)](#). Revised versions of the respective authors’ contributions to the latter are [Williams \(1981\)](#) and [Nagel \(2002 \[1979\]\)](#). [Zagzebski \(1994\)](#) coined the phrase “religious luck,” examining the implications for theology and theodicy specifically.
- 171 [Pessagno \(1984b, 69–72\)](#); [Özaykal \(2022a, 149, n. 29\)](#).
- 172 [Özaykal \(2022b\)](#).
- 173 This is term used in the Qurʾān. See, for example, Q. 3:49, 7:73, and 20:22.
- 174 KT, 247.
- 175 Compare with the similar language used by [al-Kindī \(1950, 1:373\)](#). See [Adamson and Pormann \(2012, 286–87\)](#).
- 176 The likely reference here is to the two angels Hārūt and Mārūt mentioned in Q. 2:102, who are said to have taught the people sorcery. See TQ, 1:192.
- 177 KT, 260–61.
- 178 According to van Ess, it was al-Māturīdī’s rival al-Kaʿbī who brought the term *kharq al-ʿāda* into Ashʿarism. Al-Māturīdī belongs to an earlier, non-occasionalist understanding of the metaphysics of miracles. See [van Ess \(2018b, 712\)](#).
- 179 KT, 261; TQ, 6:16. He argues that this is in contrast to learnt sorcery, which produces temporary bedazzlement but does not even give its practitioners the worldly riches they desire. The enduring truth of prophetic signs is claimed only by those who are self-denying and take on personal risk in conveying the divine message. KT, 261. Compare with the view attributed to al-Najjār. [Van Ess \(2018b, 181\)](#).
- 180 For biographical discussion, see [van Ess \(2018b, 326–32\)](#).
- 181 KT, 257. See [van Ess \(2018b, 372\)](#).
- 182 KT, 257–58. Al-Māturīdī uses both the words *jawhar* and *tabʿ* in this passage for the idea of the nature of the world or the messenger. His alternative usage of *jawhar* with a meaning other than substance is discussed in [Rudolph \(2015, 245–46\)](#). Compare also with his criticism of a view he ascribes to the Bāṭiniyya (Ismāʿīlīs) that messengers can perform miracles at will, even in the absence of the permission of God, owing to their spiritual natures (*jawāhir rūḥāniyya*). TQ, 13:97. The distinction seems to go back to al-Māturīdī’s divine action model. As we have discussed above, al-Māturīdī does not accept that any action occurs in the absence of God’s concurrent causation.

- 183 This reading of al-Māturīdī has him anticipate a line of argument proposed by al-Ghazālī in his *Tahāfut*. See [Griffel \(2009, 157\)](#), as well as [van Ess \(2018b, 713\)](#).
- 184 KT, 258.
- 185 KT, 257, 259.
- 186 KT, 258, 259.
- 187 KT, 259. The example of the Qurʾān is clarified at KT, 262.
- 188 KT, 259.
- 189 See, for instance, his discussion of the distinction between prophetic miracles and sorcery in TQ, 6:16–17.
- 190 TQ, 9:299.
- 191 TQ, 1:140.
- 192 TQ, 2:309.
- 193 See TQ, 2:463, 5:337.
- 194 The editors of TQ note that this introduction is included in all the manuscripts of the text that they have seen except one. They therefore conclude that it is likely a genuine record of al-Māturīdī’s teaching. TQ, 1:3, n. 1.
- 195 TQ, 1:3.
- 196 This use of *taʾwīl* is not to be conflated with its theological usage in certain contexts to mean figurative interpretation.
- 197 TQ, 1:3.
- 198 Compare with the comments on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) in [Jaffer \(2015, 68–69\)](#). On al-Māturīdī’s critical (re)definition of the distinction between Qurʾānic explanation and interpretation, see [Gengil \(2021, esp. 145–84\)](#).
- 199 See KT, 89, 105, 121, 138, 160, 311, 315.
- 200 TQ, 13:111–12.
- 201 KT, 111.
- 202 TQ, 1:220; KT, 113.
- 203 KT, 128–29.
- 204 For a list of possible interpretations, see TQ, 5:374–77.
- 205 KT, 138.
- 206 KT, 138.
- 207 See also [Rudolph \(2015, 295–96\)](#) and [Mavil \(2017, 283–305\)](#).
- 208 TQ, 11:410.
- 209 TQ, 2:139. In the case of Mary, this likely refers to the provision of food to her in her private room in the Jerusalem Temple, as mentioned in Q. 3:37. For the companion of Solomon, this refers to the miracle of quickly retrieving the Queen of Sheba’s throne in Q. 27:40.
- 210 KT, 76.
- 211 KT, 67. This draws from al-Kindī. See [al-Kindī \(1950, 1:260\)](#). For a detailed discussion of al-Māturīdī’s views on the relation between nature and reason in the human being, see [Demir \(2020, 133–40\)](#).
- 212 TQ, 12:342. In his commentary on Q. 50:37, al-Māturīdī discusses the heart (*qalb*) mentioned in the verse in terms of the intellect (*ʿaql*) or understanding (*fahm*). He points out that there is a debate over whether the intellect is located in the head or in the heart because the intellect’s “light” connects to the latter, though he does not settle the question. TQ, 14:118.
- 213 KT, 349.
- 214 TQ, 8:350.
- 215 TQ, 10:71.
- 216 See [Shihadeh \(2012, 465–66\)](#).
- 217 [Lorenz \(2009\)](#). See TQ, 2:189, 8:349, and 12:342–44.
- 218 TQ, 5:84, 10:71. See the reference to the accident of life (*hayāt*) in KT, 78 and compare with the ideas of al-Kindī in [Adamson and Pormann \(2012, 27\)](#).

- 219 Al-Māturīdī reasons that since one can be, for instance, deaf but still see and speak, blind but still speak and hear, and mute but still hear and see, there must be a separate spiritual faculty for each. TQ, 5:84. For similar theories amongst scholastic philosophers in the Christian tradition, see [Pasnau \(2007, 12\)](#).
- 220 TQ, 5:84.
- 221 TQ, 10:71.
- 222 TQ, 12:343.
- 223 TQ, 10:71, 12:343. Al-Māturīdī and his student al-Rustughfanī are recorded as arguing that the dead person must have a kind of life to receive pleasure and punishment in the grave. [Al-Nasafī \(2011, 1:107\)](#). The closest we find to this in al-Māturīdī's Qur'ānic commentary is the note that martyrs are mentioned as being alive owing to the excellence of the pleasure they receive over others. TQ, 1:275. See also TQ, 13:60–61.
- 224 TQ, 5:88. Al-Māturīdī here opposes some Mu'tazilīs who apparently think that the spirits are all gathered in one place and then destroyed by God.
- 225 TQ, 14:258.
- 226 TQ, 1:14.
- 227 See TQ, 16:171.
- 228 See the distinction that Bruce Reichenbach draws between percept and concept formation, though in his case it is utilised for the properly dualistic argument that universal concepts could only be formed by an immaterial soul. [Reichenbach \(1978, 35–38\)](#).
- 229 TQ, 6:102–4. See [Harvey \(2024\)](#).
- 230 See [Harvey \(2021b, 112, n. 83\)](#) and [al-Bazdawī \(2003, 218\)](#).
- 231 The earliest detailed study of al-Māturīdī's texts on the question discussed in this section is [Pessagno \(1984b\)](#), who gathers and comments on many of the relevant passages in KT. Especially useful is the summary on p. 186. Later analysis is provided by [Yazıcıoğlu \(2017\)](#) and [Özaykal \(2024b\)](#).
- 232 KT, 342. For further discussion of the historical significance and influence of al-Māturīdī's formulation, see [Rudolph \(2015, 304–8\)](#).
- 233 [Normore \(2015, 196\)](#).
- 234 See [Pessagno \(1984b, 186\)](#).
- 235 KT, 342.
- 236 See [Abū Ḥanīfa \(1949, 43\)](#).
- 237 KT, 349. His account has significant parallels with that of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Theta 5. See [Aristotle \(2004, 264\)](#).
- 238 Here, he opposes some of the Mu'tazilīs, as well as other figures such as al-Ḥusayn al-Najjār, Bishr al-Marīsī (d. 218/833), and Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī. KT, 349. See [al-Bazdawī \(2003, 127\)](#).
- 239 KT, 307. See [Pessagno \(1984a, 181–84\)](#).
- 240 KT, 359. See also KT, 412, 321. See [Özaykal \(2024b, 20–23\)](#).
- 241 KT, 359.
- 242 It is important to recall that as God's creative action is eternal, what occurs in the analysed moment is, properly speaking, the effect of God's action.
- 243 KT, 309. See also TQ, 1:82 and, for further commentary, [Yazıcıoğlu \(2018, 61–70\)](#).
- 244 KT, 321. See also KT, 326, 482–83. See [Pessagno \(1984a, 188–90\)](#) and [Özaykal \(2024b, 16–20\)](#).
- 245 Many occasionalists in al-Māturīdī's era also held that God only creates an accident of power used for the acquisition of a specific action, in contrast to his notion of free choice between actions. See the figures mentioned in n. 238. Arguably, later occasionalists who retain a concept of free choice akin to that of al-Māturīdī cannot coherently rely on the idea that since such a choice is a relational state between the accident of power and the chosen act (which is implicitly al-Māturīdī's position too), it is uncreated and hence does not need to be accounted for. This is because relations hold between existent things, and what counts in selecting an effect is the causal efficacy of the accident of power towards the act.

- 246 Özyakal (2024b, 19–20, 32–33).
- 247 This prioritising of theology over natural philosophy may be called al-Māturīdī’s “*kalām* focus.” See Özyakal (2025, 319, n. 53).
- 248 KT, 224.
- 249 Al-Nasafī (1990, 52).
- 250 KT, 198.
- 251 KT, 215–16.
- 252 KT, 307, 321.
- 253 Özyakal (2025).
- 254 KT, 67.
- 255 KT, 68, 205–6.
- 256 KT, 224.
- 257 See Malik (2021, chap. 6) for a discussion of MN within the context of Islamic thought.
- 258 KT, 210.
- 259 TQ, 1:75–80. For an annotated translation of this passage, see Özyakal (2022a). See also al-Māturīdī’s statement that God creates and arranges as He wishes without causes (*kāna bi-tadbīr man yamliku ja’l kull ‘alā mā shā’ min ghayr asbāb*). KT, 210. As he is arguing against Naturalists, the sentence can be read to mean that God creates everything without the kind of “secondary” causes proposed by his opponents.

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