

Approved for publication in *Philosophy and Jurisprudence in the Islamic World*, ed. Peter Adamson (Berlin: De Gruyter).

Foundations of Ibn Taymiyya's Religious Utilitarianism¹

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Sophia Vasalou in her recent monograph on the theological ethics of the Damascene theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) insightfully observes that his view of God's morality resembles the utilitarianism of the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham (d. 1832). According to Ibn Taymiyya, God in His wise purpose weighs up the good and the evil in order to choose the preponderant good, and the good that God does in the world far exceeds the evil. Vasalou writes, "Ibn Taymiyya's account of God's morality echoes nothing if not the axiom of utilitarianism articulated by Bentham: 'It is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong'."² Findings of my own work on Ibn Taymiyya's theology reinforce and extend the aptness of Vasalou assessment: God creates the world in the best possible way; God creates evil and metes out punishment to deter, instruct, purify, and spur on to repentance; and God's mercy and wise purpose preclude chastising anyone in Hell-Fire forever. The goal towards which God creates and commands is universal human salvation and total worship of God that gives God His full due as God.³ The greatest happiness that God maximizes for the greatest number is fundamentally religious in character.

Utilitarian thinking has also been observed in Ibn Taymiyya's ethical and jurisprudential deliberation. Michael Cook notes Ibn Taymiyya's exhortation to weigh up the

¹ I am grateful to Ali-Reza Bhojani and Christopher Woodard for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter. The research for this chapter was funded by the British Academy.

² Sophia Vasalou, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theological Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 171-172 (quotation on 172).

³ Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), especially 26-29, 190-206, 211-228; Jon Hoover, "Islamic Universalism: Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya's Salafi Deliberations on the Duration of Hell-Fire," *The Muslim World* 99.1 (Jan. 2009), 181-201; Jon Hoover, "A Muslim Conflict over Universal Salvation," in *Alternative Salvations: Engaging the Sacred and the Secular*, ed. Hannah Bacon, Wendy Dossett, and Steve Knowles (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 160-171; and Jon Hoover, "Reconciling Ibn Taymiyya's Legitimation of Violence with His Vision of Universal Salvation," in *Violence in Islamic Thought*, vol. 2, *From the Mongols to European Imperialism*, ed. Robert Gleave and István Kristó-Nagy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming). Vasalou, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theological Ethics*, 137-196, correctly highlights the centrality for Ibn Taymiyya of wise purpose, benefit, and God's right to worship in giving rise to God's commands, but she incorrectly concludes that he does not explain why God punishes. While Ibn Taymiyya does sometimes say that God's wise purposes cannot be known, he does in other places give reasons, and the fundamental aim of punishment is engendering religious devotion.

benefits (*maṣāliḥ*) and detriments (*maḥāsib*) of acts in order to choose the greater of two goods or the lesser of two evils. Cook relates an anecdote to illustrate the point. During a Mongol invasion of Syria, Ibn Taymiyya visited the camp of the Mongols and found them drunk. One of his comrades wanted to rebuke the Mongols for drinking alcohol, but Ibn Taymiyya countered that they should be left to drink. If the Mongols were to stop drinking, they would be able to inflict even more harm on the Muslims. Cook also observes that Ibn Taymiyya has none of the traditional Ḥanbalī uneasiness about political power. Public offices are fundamentally religious in character, and Ibn Taymiyya insists that these offices be given to the candidates best able to do the job, neither those too scrupulous to engage political reality effectively, nor those who ignore morality in the name of political expediency.⁴

Yahya Michot has highlighted and translated a number of texts bringing out utilitarian reasoning in Ibn Taymiyya. In a study of texts on the ethics of quitting bad company, Michot speaks of Ibn Taymiyya's "profound utilitarianism" and shows how he calls for weighing up the benefits and detriments in each situation. One should ordinarily abandon the company of the disobedient and the perverse to avoid corruption, but not if there is preponderant benefit in staying in contact or even greater detriment would ensue from leaving.⁵ In other passages translated by Michot, Ibn Taymiyya argues against insurrection because the detriment entailed always exceeds the detriment of leaving an unjust ruler in office, and, in the course of discussing the prophet Joseph in Egypt, he gives instruction on choosing the preponderant benefit when faced with competing obligations.⁶ Also, at the end of a treatise on the caliphate, Ibn Taymiyya identifies benefit-detriment analysis and adapting the law to circumstances as the way of the Prophet himself.⁷ We will return to this treatise below.

⁴ Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 154-157. On Ibn Taymiyya's counsel not to forbid wine to the Mongols, see further Yahya Michot, *Muslims under Non-Muslim Rule* (Oxford, UK: Interface Publications, 2006), 96-97 n 2. Vasalou, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theological Ethics*, 92, hesitates to call Ibn Taymiyya ethics on the human level "utilitarian," explaining that he does not frame his concern as the greatest good for the greatest number in the fashion of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (d. 1873). However, Vasalou undermines this caution elsewhere by noting that Ibn Taymiyya frequently has the benefit of the community or the world as a whole in view such "that it is public interest rather than individual self-interest that Ibn Taymiyya isolates as the ultimate foundation for ethical norms" (p. 101; see also pp. 23, 45-46, 48-52, 100-102).

⁵ Yahya Michot, *Muslims under Non-Muslim Rule*, 14-17, 20, 85-100 (quotation on 20); Michot, *Muslims under Non-Muslim Rule*, 20, also takes Ibn Taymiyya's utilitarianism, prudence, and pragmatism as evidence that he is a "theologian of moderation." I evaluate this portrayal in Jon Hoover, "Ibn Taymiyya between Moderation and Radicalism," in *Reclaiming Islamic Tradition: Modern Interpretations of the Classical Heritage*, ed. Elisabeth Kendall and Ahmad Khan (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 177-203.

⁶ Yahya Michot, *Ibn Taymiyya Against Extremisms* (Beirut: Dar Albouraq, 2012), 220-226 (on 222), and 257-269 (on 263-264).

⁷ Michot, *Muslims under Non-Muslim Rule*, 50-53 n 3; Michot does not mention the fact that the treatise from which he translates deals with the caliphate. Caterina Bori also speaks of Ibn Taymiyya's "highly utilitarian" stance in "One or Two Versions of Al-Siyāsa al-Shar'iyya of Ibn Taymiyya? And what do they tell us?" ASK

The consistency of Ibn Taymiyya's utilitarianism across the divine and human levels is remarkable within the Ash'arī-dominated context of his time because Ash'arī voluntarism does not admit of God acting for purposes or according to any recognizable moral criteria. The aim of the present investigation is to explore the conceptual foundations of utilitarianism in Ibn Taymiyya's theology, jurisprudence, and ethics: first how he overcomes Ash'arī voluntarist objections to formulate a coherent theology of a God acting toward utilitarian ends, and then how he justifies utilitarian ethical and jurisprudential deliberation at the human level, especially in view of his conviction that revelation has already indicated everything of human benefit.

I will consider how Ibn Taymiyya upholds God's purposive activity against Ash'arī voluntarism through exposition of his treatise *al-Īrāda wa al-amr* dating to 714/1315. This treatise has the advantage of tackling the major issues directly and comprehensively, even if not as fully as in some of Ibn Taymiyya's other works. This study of *Īrāda* will show that Ibn Taymiyya's divine utilitarianism is grounded in a perpetually dynamic vision of God that is made conceptually possible by integrating features of the medieval Islamic philosophical tradition (*falsafa*).⁸

The second part of the study takes up Ibn Taymiyya's ethics and jurisprudence. Vasalou argues in her recent monograph that Ibn Taymiyya's claims to rational discernment of ethical value are very thin because revelation in fact specifies the full range of human benefit. The centrality of *maṣlaḥa*—benefit, utility, and welfare—in Ibn Taymiyya's ethics is ultimately a rationalization of the revealed law in the interest of piety that flows out of the belief that reason and revelation coincide. While Vasalou is correct on this key point, she does not push through to Ibn Taymiyya's conviction that utilitarianism itself is the way of the Prophet, as noted already by Michot, and that this opens the door to substantive ethical and jurisprudential reflection in the face of dilemmas thrown up by sin and human weakness. I will illustrate this through exposition of Ibn Taymiyya's treatise on the caliphate. This will make apparent that the character of human utilitarianism is in certain respects similar to the utilitarianism of God.

Working Paper 26 (Bonn: Annemarie Schimmel Kolleg, 2016), 7, 23, <https://www.mamluk.uni-bonn.de/publications/working-paper/ask-wp-bori.pdf>, last accessed 30 January 2018.

⁸ For discussion of the issues in other Taymiyyan works in addition to *Īrāda* and references to competing voluntarist Ash'arī views, see Jon Hoover, "God's Wise Purposes in Creating Iblis: Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah's Theodicy of God's Names and Attributes," in *A Scholar in the Shadow: Essays in the Legal and Theological Thought of Ibn Qayyim Al-Ġawziyyah*, ed. Caterina Bori and Livnat Holtzman *Oriente Moderno* monograph series 90.1 (2010): 113-134 (116-119); Jon Hoover, "God Acts by His Will and Power: Ibn Taymiyya's Theology of a Personal God in his Treatise on the Voluntary Attributes," in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, ed. Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 55-77; and Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy*, 70-102.

God's utilitarianism rooted in God's perpetual dynamism

Ibn Taymiyya's *al-Irāda wa al-amr* runs to 78 printed pages in the eighth volume of the large collection of his works *Majmū' al-fatāwā*.⁹ Ibn Taymiyya says that the focus of this treatise—causality (*ta'līl*) in the will of God—encompasses everything theological, jurisprudential, and eschatological. It relates to theological issues of God's names and attributes and God's creation and determination of all things, to legal and moral questions surrounding God's command and prohibition, and to eschatological matters of reward and punishment. It is also at the core of controversies over God's power, justice, and love in theology and whether legal rulings derive from a wise purpose (*ḥikma*), a benefit (*maṣlaḥa*), and a cause (*'illa*), or from God's sheer will.¹⁰

The occasion of *Irāda* is a trilemma presented to Ibn Taymiyya in the year 714/1315. The three prongs of the trilemma are as follows. First, if God created without cause, God would be aimless, which cannot be true. Second, if God created for a cause and this cause were eternal, then the effect would likewise be eternal. That would mean that the world is eternal, which is also problematic. On the other hand, and third, if God created for a cause and this cause were originated in time, then it would follow that this cause must itself have a cause, and so forth into an infinite regress. However, the trilemma asserts, an infinite regress is impossible. Here is the trilemma given to Ibn Taymiyya in direct quotation:

Concerning the goodness of the will of God—Exalted is He—in creating creatures and bringing forth the human race. Does He create for a cause (*'illa*) or for other than a cause?

- 1) If it is said, “not for a cause,” He is aimless—Exalted is God above that.
- 2) If it is said, “For a cause,” and if you say that it is eternal (*lam tazal*), it follows necessarily that the effect is eternal.
- 3) And if you say that it is temporally originated (*muḥdatha*), it follows necessarily that it had a cause, but an endless chain is absurd.¹¹

⁹ In *Majmū' fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya* [MF], ed. 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad ibn Qāsim and Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad, 37 vols (Riyadh: Maṭābi' al-Riyād, 1961-1967), 8:81-158; and *Majmū'at al-rasā'il wa al-masā'il* [MRM], ed. Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, 5 parts (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-manār, 1341-1349/1922-1930). In both the MF and MRM editions, the treatise is titled *Aqwam mā qīla fī al-qadā' wa al-qadar wa al-ḥikma wa al-ta'līl*. It appears under the title *al-Irāda wa al-amr* in the earlier *Majmū'at al-rasā'il al-kubrā*, 2 parts (Cairo: Al-Maṭba'a al-'āmirā al-sharafiyya, 1323/1905), 1:318-386. In continuity with previous scholarship I use the title *al-Irāda wa al-amr*, but cite it from MF.

¹⁰ Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:81-82.

¹¹ Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:81.

At the end of *Irāda*, Ibn Taymiyya observes that not all three prongs of the trilemma can be false. At least one of the following must be true: 1) God is aimless; 2) the world is eternal; or 3) an infinite regress, or at least an infinite regress of effects, is possible. Ibn Taymiyya explicitly rejects the eternity of the world, but beyond that he is uncharacteristically reticent. He does not come down firmly in favor of God's aimlessness—an unflattering description of Ash'arī voluntarism—or for an infinite regress. Instead, he concludes that such questions must be approached gradually and investigated from all sides until the truth appears “to whomever God wills to guide.”¹² Perhaps Ibn Taymiyya was wary of repercussions from the Ash'arī-dominated establishment should he come out firmly against the first view. Nevertheless, the body of *Irāda* makes eminently clear that his sympathies lie with an infinite regress.

Early in the treatise, Ibn Taymiyya outlines the three groups that correspond to the three prongs of the opening trilemma. These are 1) the voluntarists who deny causality in God's will, which is the view of the Ash'arī *kalām* theologians, 2) the philosophers who affirm the eternity of the world, and 3) those who affirm that God creates and commands for a praiseworthy purpose. Among this last group are the Mu'tazilīs.¹³ We will start with the philosophers.

Ibn Taymiyya does not mention any philosophers by name, but he clearly has in view philosophers of a post-Avicennan ilk who think in terms of complete causality.¹⁴ He explains that the philosophers affirm both the eternity of the final cause of the world and the eternity of the efficient cause. The Originator of the world is thus a complete cause (*'illa tamma*), which means that it necessitates its effect without any delay in time. Otherwise, if the cause were not present in eternity in all its fullness, another cause would have been required to bring about the world. Then, another cause prior to that cause would have been required to bring it into existence, and so on in an infinite regress. Otherwise, the effect would have originated without a cause or a preponderator (*murajjih*), and for the philosophers preponderance without a preponderator is absurd.

Ibn Taymiyya retorts in *Irāda* that the philosophers' notion of a complete cause necessitates that nothing occur in time at all and that this is even more obviously false than an infinite regress of causes or preponderance without a preponderator. The philosophers' God as complete cause could never originate temporal events. This is because the effect of a complete

¹² Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:155-158 (quotation on 158).

¹³ Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:83-93.

¹⁴ Lukas Muehlethaler, “Revising Avicenna's Ontology of the Soul: Ibn Kammūna on the Soul's Eternity *a Parte Ante*,” *The Muslim World* 102.3-4 (2012): 597-616, notes that usage of the term “complete cause” is well established by the thirteenth century and discusses evidence from Abū Barakāt al-Baghdādī (d. c. 560/1165), Athīr al-Dīn al-Abharī (d. 663/1264), and Ibn Kammūna (d. 683/1284).

cause can never lag behind that cause in time. If something were to occur in time, it would originate without cause or something to originate it. To Ibn Taymiyya, this is absurd, and no attempt to introduce intermediaries into the system, as the philosophers do, will alleviate the problem. In making God a complete cause, the philosophers cannot explain how events occur in time.¹⁵

Moreover, Ibn Taymiyya argues, an infinite regress of temporally originating events should pose no difficulties to the philosophers because they posit the similar notion of eternal motion in the heavenly spheres. He also claims that an infinite regress of events fits better with divine revelation, as revelation indicates that the origination of the heavens and the earth in six days followed on from prior events and causes. Moreover, it is in fact better to say that God created this world for a prior cause that originated in time than to say that this world is eternal and devoid of originating events. Ibn Taymiyya claims that reason as well finds this more plausible. Reason also affirms that nothing occur in time without a prior cause, but it does not assert that an effect must proceed from its cause without any delay in time.¹⁶

On this question of infinite regress, Ibn Taymiyya opposes *kalām* theologians who insist that events must have a beginning. On causal priority, however, he comes down on the side of *kalām* against *falsafa* by insisting that God has a real will. He complains that the philosophers reduce God's will to God's knowledge even though they affirm divine final causality. For Ibn Taymiyya, a God who acts on behalf of a final cause (*'illa ghā'iyya*), or what he calls a desired wise purpose (*ḥikma maṭlūba*), must necessarily be possessed of a will.¹⁷ The final causality of God for Ibn Taymiyya is not merely a causality drawing creatures to God; it is also a causality orienting the operation of God's own will.

We now shift to the group affirming that God creates and commands for a cause or praiseworthy wise purpose. Ibn Taymiyya says that this view is held by Muslims from each of the four Sunnī law schools, as well as Mu'tazilīs, Karrāmīs, Ḥadīth experts, Sufis, Qur'ān exegetes, most of the ancient philosophers, and even some later philosophers like Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī (d. ca. 560/1165). Ibn Taymiyya's sympathies clearly lie with this group. Nonetheless, he singles out the Mu'tazilīs for censure. He criticizes the Mu'tazilīs for imposing human standards of good and bad on God, obligating God to do the best (*al-aṣlāh*) for humans, and limiting God's power and will.¹⁸ He also denounces the Mu'tazilīs for maintaining that

¹⁵ Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:84-87.

¹⁶ Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:87-88.

¹⁷ Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:88.

¹⁸ Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:91-92.

God's wise purpose is something "created and disjoined from Him" (*makhlūqa munfašila 'anhu*)¹⁹ and that God created the world for the wise purpose of benefiting creatures "without any judgement redounding from that to Him and without any act or attribute subsisting in Him."²⁰

The Mu'tazilīs are concerned to protect God's absolute unity, and, like the Ash'arīs, they hold that God cannot be a locus or substrate for temporal origination. Thus, the Mu'tazilīs locate God's purpose, which is temporally originated, outside God's essence. God's purpose is disjoined from God, and it does not subsist in Him. Furthermore, according to the Mu'tazilīs, God cannot gain anything from acting for a purpose because God has no need of anything. Ibn Taymiyya rejects this Mu'tazilī God as indifferent and disinterested and therefore imperfect. For Ibn Taymiyya, acting well toward others is praiseworthy, and praise and benefit naturally redound to agents of good acts. Moreover, Ibn Taymiyya writes, "Anyone who commits an act in which there is neither pleasure, nor benefit, nor profit for himself in any respect, neither sooner nor later, is aimless, and he is not praised for this."²¹ Pure altruism is irrational; the only acts that are rational are those that involve some kind of benefit and profit for the agent of the act, and not just the recipient.²² The full theological import of this ethical egoism becomes more apparent in Ibn Taymiyya's comments on his third group, the voluntarists.

In *Irāda* Ibn Taymiyya identifies the voluntarists as those who affirm that God creates and commands out of sheer will without cause. Ibn Taymiyya tells us that this position is held widely among Sunnī *kalām* theologians and legal scholars, al-Ash'arī (d. 324/935) and his followers, and Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) and the *Zāhirīs*. Ibn Taymiyya outlines the main voluntarist arguments near the beginning of *Irāda* and provides counterarguments later in the treatise. The first voluntarist argument is as follows. If God had created the world for a cause, He would have been imperfect beforehand, and creating on account of that cause would have perfected Him. Putting it another way, positing a cause for creation implies that God was perfected by that cause, which means that He was previously imperfect.²³ Ibn Taymiyya's counters that it is in fact rational that an agent be perfected by His act. To say that God is perfected by His acts is no different from saying that God is perfected by His attributes or His essence. Moreover, an agent who brings things into existence with a wise purpose, that is, a cause, is in fact more perfect than one who does not, and it is the essence of perfection that

¹⁹ Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:89.

²⁰ Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:89.

²¹ Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:89-90.

²² Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:89-91, 125-126, 149-151.

²³ Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:83.

things come into existence at their proper time, not before.²⁴ With this, Ibn Taymiyya defangs the voluntarist argument by turning an alleged imperfection into a perfection. A God who acts for causes and wise purposes is eminently more perfect than one who does not. Nonetheless, this would still appear to imply need in God inasmuch as He acts to gain benefits that He did not previously enjoy. Also, it would seem to make God dependent on creatures and created things for the expression of His perfection through wise acts. I will take up these problems further below.

The second voluntarist argument expands on the latter two positions in the opening trilemma of *Irāda*. If God had created for a cause that was eternal, the effect would have been eternal as well. The *kalām* theologians reject an eternal cause and effect as impossible. Conversely, if God had created for a cause that originated in time, this would cause two problems. First, it would entail some kind of temporal change in God, and it would turn God into a locus or substrate (*maḥall*) for temporarily originating events (*ḥawādith*). Second, it would entail an infinite regress of causes because each originated cause would require a prior cause to bring it into existence and so on into the infinite past.²⁵ Ash‘arīs and others seek to avoid these problems by positing God’s will as a single eternal attribute whose very nature it is to specify one thing over another and to bring the world into existence at the appointed moment. Ibn Taymiyya sets out arguments against this. An eternal divine will simply cannot specify one thing over another without a cause giving rise to that specification (*takhṣīṣ*). To deny specifying causes is to throw causality in general into doubt, and that would undermine cosmological proofs for the existence of God.²⁶ The alternative view, explains Ibn Taymiyya, is that God’s wise purpose and God’s act occur by means of God’s will and God’s power, and all of these things—God’s wise purpose, God’s acts, God’s will, and God’s power—subsist in God’s essence just as all other divine attributes subsist in God’s essence.²⁷

On the question of infinite regress, Ibn Taymiyya asserts that everyone agrees that causes cannot regress forever. However, an infinite regress of conditions and effects (*al-shurūṭ wa al-āthār*), that is, an infinite regress of temporally originating events, is permitted. According to Ibn Taymiyya, this is in fact equivalent to the statement of the Salaf, the early Muslims, “God has been speaking from eternity when He wills. Acts and other [things] linked

²⁴ Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:146-147; a fuller description of these arguments is given in Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 100-101.

²⁵ Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:83-84.

²⁶ Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:147-148.

²⁷ Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:149.

to His will and His power have been subsisting in Him from eternity.”²⁸ In *Irāda* Ibn Taymiyya also notes that people holding this view say that *kalām* arguments against an infinite regress are weak.²⁹ Ibn Taymiyya does not provide detailed refutations of these arguments in *Irāda*, but he does do so in his later work *Minhāj al-sunna*.³⁰

By now, it is clear that Ibn Taymiyya in *Irāda* favors a dynamic view of God in which it is of God’s perfection to act by will and power for wise purposes from eternity. All of these elements—God’s act, God’s will, God’s power, and God’s wise purpose—subsist in God’s essence, and God’s acts and wise purposes regress into the past without beginning. These are equivalent to events (*ḥawādith*) subsisting in God’s essence, which in other texts Ibn Taymiyya prefers to call God’s voluntary acts and attributes.³¹ Also, in other texts, Ibn Taymiyya works out the implications of this theology for creation. Since God has been creating one thing or another from eternity, there has always been one created thing or another in existence. No single created thing is eternal without beginning. However, the genus of created things has no beginning.³²

Back in *Irāda*, a good part of the middle of the treatise is devoted to the problem of evil, God’s creation of the human act, and the interplay between human responsibility and God’s predetermination of all things. Ibn Taymiyya’s reflections on evil clarify the utilitarian character of God’s acts as he underlines that God sends messengers to bring preponderant benefit. Ibn Taymiyya writes, “The messengers—God bless them—were raised up to obtain benefits and perfect them and to strip away detriments and reduce them to the extent possible.”³³ Similar logic also applies more broadly to things like rain. Rain is certainly profitable overall even if it sometimes destroys homes and disrupts travelers. Ibn Taymiyya states the general rule as follows, “Something whose profit and benefit in general is an intended good and beloved mercy even if some people are harmed by it.”³⁴ In short, God in His wise purpose maximizes benefit in all that He does. Ibn Taymiyya affirms in texts that are probably later than *Irāda* that God creates this world in the best possible way and that evil is essentially

²⁸ Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:152, 154-155 (quotation on 152).

²⁹ Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:152-153.

³⁰ Ibn Taymiyya, *Minhāj al-sunna al-nabawiyya fī naqḍ kalām al-Shī‘a al-Qadariyya*, ed. Muḥammad Rashād Sālim, 9 vols. (Riyadh: Jāmi‘at al-Imām Muḥammad ibn Su‘ūd al-Islāmiyya, 1406/1986), 1:432-438; the arguments are explicated in Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy*, 91-95.

³¹ For elaboration, see Hoover, “God Acts by His Will and Power,” and Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy*, 84-88, 95-96.

³² See Jon Hoover, “Perpetual Creativity in the Perfection of God: Ibn Taymiyya’s Hadith Commentary on God’s Creation of this World,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 15.3 (Sept. 2004): 287-329; and Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy*, 88-91.

³³ Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:93-94 (as translated in Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy*, 186).

³⁴ Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:94 (as translated in Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy*, 186).

nonexistent—it is nothing but the lack of good.³⁵ This approach to theodicy is distinctively Neoplatonic and Avicennan, and further resonances with Avicennism become even more apparent when we move to Ibn Taymiyya’s attempt to ward off the charge that God needs creatures in order to be perfect.

The context is a passage toward the end of *Irāda* discussing God’s love for humans and human love for God. Ibn Taymiyya links love to obedience, praise, and worship. Humans express love for God by doing what God commands, and God in turn loves humans who obey Him, praise Him, and laud Him. However, God’s love, praise, and laudation of Himself are always far greater than any love, praise, and laudation that humans could give Him. In fact, they are so much greater that God ultimately has no need of the human contribution. Ibn Taymiyya writes, “[God] praises Himself, lauds Himself, and glorifies Himself—Glory be to Him, Exalted is He. He is the Sufficient-in-Himself (*al-ghanī bi-naḥsihī*). He does not need anyone else. On the contrary, everything other than Him is in want of Him.”³⁶ When God rejoices, loves, and is well pleased with His servants, it does not mean that God needs them. On the contrary, it is in fact God who created in them what He loves. Ibn Taymiyya puts it this way: “[God] is not perfected by another. It is He who created them, and He it is who guided them and helped them so that they did what He loves, is well pleased with, and rejoices at. These beloved things occurred only by His power, His will, and His creation.”³⁷ Focusing on God’s self-love, Ibn Taymiyya writes, “What God loves of worship of Him and obedience to Him follows from love for Himself, and love of that is the cause of [His] love for His believing servants. His love for believers follows from love for Himself.”³⁸

Joseph Bell in his book *Love Theory in Ḥanbalite Islam* noted already in 1979 that Ibn Taymiyya’s impulse here is Neoplatonic and finds much resonance within Sufism. We may add that it is also Avicennan inasmuch as God’s self-love gives rise to the world as a necessary concomitant.³⁹ The similarities, however, end there. Whereas the First Principle of Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, d. 428/1037) is eternal in a timeless sense, Ibn Taymiyya envisions the life of God as profoundly historical. God by virtue of His perfection is ever active without beginning and without end. Yet, Ibn Taymiyya’s theology is not the modern process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne in which the fate of God is dependent upon the fate

³⁵ For elaboration, see Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy*, 224-228.

³⁶ Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:140-145 (quotation on 145).

³⁷ Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:145.

³⁸ Ibn Taymiyya, *Irāda*, MF 8:144. For further discussion of these texts, see Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy*, 99-100.

³⁹ Joseph Norment Bell, *Love Theory in Later Ḥanbalite Islam* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1979), 71-73; Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy*, 70-76.

of the world.⁴⁰ For Ibn Taymiyya God is the indestructible creator of all things. The perfect and self-sufficient historical process of God's inner life has as its necessary concomitant the best possible creaturely history, a drama in which God is always maximizing human benefit through what He creates and what He commands. This is furthermore the vision of God supported by both revelation and reason.

All considered, Ibn Taymiyya's theology is highly successful at rooting the utilitarian rationality of both God's creation and God's revelation all the way down into God's essence, and it is his temporalization of the Avicennan notion of God's self-love that makes this possible. Additionally, Ibn Taymiyya at the beginning of *Irāda* indicates that considerations of cause and benefit pervade theological, ethical, and legal discourse, and the body of *Irāda* illustrates this in theology. This provides Ibn Taymiyya's own warrant for looking to utilitarianism as a key to his thought more generally. The question now is how Ibn Taymiyya integrates utilitarian reasoning into the derivation of God's law.

Religious utilitarianism as the way of the Prophet

Given that Ibn Taymiyya clearly differs from Ash'arīs over the roles that purpose, benefit, and causality play in the will of God, it is curious that his views on ethical value are in fact very close to those of later Ash'arism. As Vasalou explains, Ibn Taymiyya sidelines both the Mu'tazilī deontology in which good and bad are objective qualities of acts themselves and the subjectivist aspect of Ash'arī ethics that conceives good and bad as functions of God's command and prohibition. Instead, acts are good or bad and just or unjust by virtue of their outcomes, that is, whether they yield pleasure or pain, benefit or harm. Ibn Taymiyya's approach to ethical value is decidedly consequentialist, and he is indebted in this directly to the later Ash'arī Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) and more distantly to al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and Avicenna.⁴¹

We first take up the puzzle of how later Ash'arīs fit ethical and legal consequentialism together with denial of purpose in God's will. To address this and to fill in important background to Ibn Taymiyya, I turn to a 2014 essay by Ahmed El Shamsy on wisdom in God's

⁴⁰ For an introduction to process philosophy's theological aspects, see Donald Viney, "Process Theism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2014, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/process-theism/>, last accessed 19 December 2017.

⁴¹ Vasalou, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theological Ethics*, 11-136; and Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 34-44. For an overview of Mu'tazilī and Ash'arī ethical theory and especially Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, see Ayman Shihadeh, "Theories of Ethical Value in *Kalām*: A New Interpretation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 384-407; and more fully Ayman Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 45-107.

law.⁴² El Shamsy explores the paradox that Shāfi'ī jurists of Mu'tazilī inclination do not draw on benefit to derive legal rulings while those of Ash'arī proclivity do.

El Shamsy identifies two tenth-century Shāfi'ī jurists influenced by Mu'tazilism: al-Qaffāl al-Shāshī (d. 365/976) and Abū Bakr Aḥmad ibn 'Umar ibn Yūsuf al-Khaffāf (d. not known). Al-Qaffāl and al-Khaffāf adopt the Mu'tazilī notion that God's purpose in the law is to promote human benefit (*maṣlaḥa*), effectively embedding the law within theology. For these Mu'tazilī-inspired Shāfi'īs, reason knows acts to be obligatory, forbidden, or permissible. Acts that fall within the category of permissible in reason may be further specified by the revealed law, and such legal rulings follow deductively from God's wisdom. A God who is wise and powerful will realize human benefit, and human benefit is then the cause of those factors or causes that give rise to specific legal rulings. In other words, "God's wisdom gives rise to laws that serve the benefit of His creatures."⁴³

El Shamsy explains that these tenth-century Shāfi'īs justify the validity of legal analogy with benefit but do not use their theories of benefit to derive new legal rulings. Their aim is simply to provide an apologetic against those who would denigrate the rationality of God's law. The precise benefits of specific rulings are not knowable even though the law is known to be beneficial in general. This reminds El Shamsy of the tenth-century Ḥanafī jurists Abū al-Ḥasan al-Karkhī (d. 340/952) and Abū Bakr al-Jaṣṣās (d. 370/980) and their distinction between the cause of a specific ruling on the one hand and the cause of benefit (al-Jaṣṣās) or the wise purpose (al-Karkhī) on the other. The cause of benefit or the wise purpose in a rule is not known in detail and cannot be used to establish the rule. The rule is established only by the legal cause, which is merely a sign or marker that God has given to indicate His ruling. Even though benefit is not considered when deriving specific rulings, the theological conviction remains that God in His wisdom brings about human benefit through the law.⁴⁴

El Shamsy then takes up al-Ghazālī who turns the tables to integrate benefit into legal theory by moving it "out of the realm of theology and into the realm of law."⁴⁵ Unlike his Mu'tazilī-inspired Shāfi'ī predecessors, al-Ghazālī does not deduce the beneficial character of the law from God's attribute of wisdom. Rather he derives it inductively from the existing rulings of the divine law itself. In other words, he works from the bottom up instead of the top

⁴² Ahmed El Shamsy, "The Wisdom of God's Law: Two Theories," in *Islamic Law in Theory: Studies on Jurisprudence in Honor of Bernard Weiss*, edited by A. Kevin Reinhart and Robert Gleave (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 19-37.

⁴³ El Shamsy, "Wisdom," 22-25 (quotation on 25).

⁴⁴ El Shamsy, "Wisdom," 27-29.

⁴⁵ El Shamsy, "Wisdom," 30-34 (quotation on 34).

down. For al-Ghazālī as an Ash‘arī theologian, God is not subject to objective ethical standards, and God’s actions are not motivated by purposes or considerations of benefit. However, this does not prevent human beings from using reason to study the law and to infer that it promotes benefit.⁴⁶ With this in mind, al-Ghazālī examines the rulings established in the law to discern its fundamental principles, and then he uses these principles to extend the law to other cases. For example, al-Ghazālī investigates the purpose of prohibiting intoxicants and discerns that it is protection of the intellect. Protecting the intellect is then taken to be one of the fundamental purposes of the law (*maqāṣid al-sharī‘a*); the other four purposes are protecting life, progeny, property, and religion. When the various purposes of the law have been established, they may be used as criteria to judge the suitability or appropriateness (*munāsaba*) of particular characteristics to be legal causes and then draw these causes into a coherent framework of human benefit. According to El Shamsy, al-Ghazālī successfully turns benefit into an instrument of legal reasoning by banishing considerations of benefit from the realm of theology.⁴⁷

El Shamsy stops with al-Ghazālī, but if we move forward another century, we find that Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī elaborates much the same approach. Al-Rāzī in his *al-Maḥṣūl fī ‘ilm uṣūl al-fiqh* concedes that God’s acts and rulings are not “caused by motives and purposes” (*mu‘allala bi-l-dawā‘ī wa al-aghṛād*). Nonetheless, al-Rāzī contends that there is a certain regularity about the revolutions of the celestial spheres, the movements of the constellations, and the fact that fire burns what it contacts. The repetition of these movements and events is not necessary (*wājib*) but rather a matter of God’s custom (‘*āda*). In all probability (*ẓann*) these movements and patterns of activity will continue on in the future as they have in the past. In a similar manner, inductive examination of God’s law reveals regular patterns of coincidence between rulings and benefits that will in all probability remain stable so as to form the basis

⁴⁶ El Shamsy, “Wisdom,” 32-33, suggests that al-Ghazālī’s empirical and inductive approach to discerning benefit in the divine law takes inspiration from his interaction with Galen’s elaboration of the usefulness of the various parts of the human body. Rather than asserting that God in His wisdom necessarily created the parts of the human body to be useful, al-Ghazālī works inductively from the beneficial design of the human body to elucidate God’s wisdom. El Shamsy works out the methodological parallel between al-Ghazālī’s ethics and teleological proof for God directly in “Al-Ghazālī’s Teleology and the Galenic Tradition: Reading *The Wisdom in God’s Creations (al-Hikma fī makhlūqāt Allah)*,” in *Islam and Rationality: The Impact of Al-Ghazālī. Papers Collected on His 900th Anniversary. Vol. 2*, ed. Frank Griffel (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 90-112. Similarly, Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 225-234, shows that al-Ghazālī in his *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* does not derive the goodness of the world from the nature of God. Instead, he examines the wonders of the created world to arrive at the conclusion that this is the most wonderful world possible and that this reveals God’s wisdom.

⁴⁷ El Shamsy, “Wisdom,” 30-32. See also the discussion of “suitability” in al-Ghazālī in Felicitas Opwis, *Maṣlaḥa and the Purpose of the Law: Islamic Discourse on Legal Change from the 4th/10th to 8th/14th Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 80-88.

for determining the suitability of various characteristics to be legal causes. However, these legal causes are in no way caused by divine purposes. Moreover, al-Rāzī argues, it is sufficient to have only probable knowledge of the suitability of legal causes since probability is sufficient to establish a point of law. Certainty is not required.⁴⁸

We are now in position to examine Ibn Taymiyya's critique of later Ash'arīs like al-Ghazālī and al-Rāzī. His deductive and theological approach to the rationality of the law stands behind his accusation that the later Ash'arīs contradict themselves: they detect benefit in God's law inductively but deny that it derives from purpose in God's will.⁴⁹ Ibn Taymiyya also criticizes the Ash'arīs for grounding the suitability of the legal causes in God's custom rather than God's direct legislation, and he maintains that God explicitly legislates in order to attract benefit and repel detriment. Benefit and purpose in the law are not merely coincidences of God's legislative custom. Ibn Taymiyya writes,

Those among the later [Ash'arīs] who uphold suitability (*munāsaba*) say that what is suitable is taken into consideration in the revelation. They draw inferences on the basis of coincidence (*iqtirān*) only, not on the grounds that the Legislator ruled what He ruled in order to obtain benefit sought by means of the ruling or to repel detriment.⁵⁰

Ibn Taymiyya also rejects a further feature of later Ash'arī legal theory: the unattested or unstated benefit (*al-maṣlaḥa al-mursala*). Al-Ghazālī developed the category of unstated benefit to indicate benefits not mentioned in the revelation. This would appear to expand the use of benefit to derive new law extensively. However, not just any unstated benefit is suitable to be a legal cause. Al-Ghazālī restricts suitability to those unstated benefits that conform to the five purposes of the law, namely, preservation of religion, life, intellect, progeny, and property.⁵¹ Ibn Taymiyya criticizes the concept of unstated benefit from two directions. From one direction, deriving new law on the basis of unstated benefits is tantamount to legislating

⁴⁸ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Maḥṣūl fī 'ilm uṣūl al-fiqh*, ed. Ṭaha Jābir Fayyāḍ al-'Alwānī, 6 vols. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-risāla, 1992), 5:172-179, especially 179. See also the discussions of this text in Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, 99-101 (with translation of al-Rāzī, *Maḥṣūl*, 5:179); Opwis, *Maṣlaḥa and the Purpose of the Law*, 118-121; and Vasalou, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theological Ethics*, 163-164. The classic study on the requirement of only probability to establish points of law is Aron Zysow, *The Economy of Certainty: An Introduction to the Typology of Legal Theory* (Atlanta, GA: Lockwood Press, 2013).

⁴⁹ See for example Ibn Taymiyya, "Jawāb ahl al-'ilm wa al-īmān anna 'qul huwa Allāh aḥad' ta'dilu thulth al-Qur'ān" [*Thulth*], MF 17:5-205 (177).

⁵⁰ Ibn Taymiyya, *Thulth*, MF 17:200. See further Zysow, *The Economy of Certainty*, 196-204, for the doctrine of *munāsaba* and brief mention of Ibn Taymiyya's criticism of it.

⁵¹ See Opwis, *Maṣlaḥa and the Purpose of the Law*, 67-88, on al-Ghazālī and unattested or unstated *maṣlaḥa*.

rulings that God did not authorize—this is unacceptable. From the other, legally sanctioned benefit is not limited to the so-called five purposes of the law. According to Ibn Taymiyya, many people working within this narrow framework neglect other legally prescribed benefits. The law includes all real benefits in both worldly and religious affairs, and there are in fact no benefits left unstated in revelation. If a benefit is a true benefit, revelation will have indicated it, and those who think otherwise are unaware.⁵² Ibn Taymiyya expresses the principle thus:

The principle overall is that the law (*sharīʿa*) never neglects a benefit (*maṣlaḥa*). Indeed, God—Exalted is He—has perfected the religion for us and completed the blessing. The Prophet—May God bless him and give him peace—has indeed spoken about everything that will bring us closer to the Garden of Paradise....One of two possibilities must obtain for the rational person who believes that something is a benefit even though the revelation (*sharʿ*) does not relate it. Either the revelation indicates it and the person looking into it does not know it, or it is not a benefit even though he believes it to be a benefit. Benefit is profit that accrues and predominates, and often people imagine that something is profitable in religion and in this world, when in fact its profit is outweighed by harm. As He—Exalted is He—said about wine and gambling, “Say! In these two is a great sin and profits for the people. Their sin is greater than their profit” (Q. 2:219).⁵³

This passage makes readily apparent that Ibn Taymiyya is an apologist for the all-encompassing rationality of the law. The question then is whether Ibn Taymiyya’s deductive approach to benefit in God’s law and his claim that the law encompasses all benefits obviate substantive appeal to benefit in deriving specific rulings, much as it did for tenth-century Muʿtazilī-inspired Shāfiʿīs. Does Ibn Taymiyya merely comb the revelation for all possible

⁵² Ibn Taymiyya, *Qāʿida fī al-muʿjizāt wa al-karāmāt*, MF 11:311-362 (342-346); and Ibn Taymiyya, *Qāʿida sharīfa fī al-muʿjizāt wa al-karāmāt*, MRM 5:3-36 (22-24). Discussions of Ibn Taymiyya’s views on unstated or unattested benefit include Vasalou, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theological Ethics*, 202-205, 209-211; Opwis, *Maṣlaḥa and the Purpose of the Law*, 186-190; Yossef Rapoport, “Ibn Taymiyya’s Radical Legal Thought: Rationalism, Pluralism and the Primacy of Intention,” in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, 191-226 (198-199); Abdul Hakim I. Al-Matroudi, *The Ḥanbalī School of Law and Ibn Taymiyyah: Conflict or Conciliation* (London: Routledge, 2006), 78-80; and Henri Laoust, *Essai sur les doctrines sociales et politiques de Taḳī-d-Dīn Aḥmad b. Taimīya* (Cairo: Imprimerie de l’institute français d’archéologie orientale, 1939), 245-250. Opwis, *Maṣlaḥa and the Purpose of the Law*, 187, translates the beginning of Ibn Taymiyya’s discussion of unstated benefit from MRM 5:22, and, as she notes (p. 187 n. 46), Laoust, *Essai*, 246-247, also translates parts of this text but garbles the translation and says incorrectly that Ibn Taymiyya affirms the existence of unstated benefits.

⁵³ Ibn Taymiyya, *Qāʿida fī al-muʿjizāt wa al-karāmāt*, MF 11:344-345. Ibn Taymiyya writes elsewhere, “The law (*sharīʿa*)...encompasses the benefits of this world and the hereafter” (MF 19:308).

indications of benefit and not think substantively beyond the text? Felicitas Opwis and Sophia Vasalou present opposing views on the question.

In a 2010 monograph on benefit (*maṣlaḥa*) in the Islamic tradition, Opwis outlines Ibn Taymiyya's rejection of unstated benefit, and she clarifies that he does not follow later Ash'arīs in using benefit to identify causes in legal analogies.⁵⁴ However, she also notices that Ibn Taymiyya permits anything not prohibited to meet the needs of humans for their livelihoods and that he sometimes sets aside prohibitions on the basis of benefit, need, and necessity. For example, carrion is normally forbidden, but he allows a Muslim to eat it if necessary to avoid starvation. He also permits risk in sales to avoid the greater detriment of usury; thus, a pregnant animal may be sold even though the value of the offspring is not yet known. Opwis concludes from such examples that Ibn Taymiyya uses benefit in a substantive manner to derive new rulings.⁵⁵ She sums up, "Ibn Taymiyya's interpretation of *maṣlaḥa* follows a substantive rationality that is more inclusive than that of al-Ghazālī and includes anything that brings about benefit and averts harm; every benefit that is not prohibited in the law is permitted; and in cases of need, *maṣlaḥa* can even overrule explicit prohibitions."⁵⁶ Opwis furthermore perceives danger in Ibn Taymiyya's method, as his "reasoning lacks guidelines which assure some measure of accountability in the law-finding procedure." This results in an "intellectual elitism" that criticizes the rulings of others but provides no criteria by which to measure its own.⁵⁷

In contrast to Opwis, Vasalou finds claims to substantive legal rationality in Ibn Taymiyya very thin. She explains that, in the majority of his examples illustrating the need to weigh up benefit and harm, "the preferred action has been established on scriptural grounds" and that consideration of benefit occurs "within the regulating framework of scripture."⁵⁸ Vasalou does note that Ibn Taymiyya presumes permissibility in customary acts when no textual indicants prohibit them, but she counters that he also requires positive demonstration that no prohibition exists. In the end, it is the revealed law that determines what is beneficial for human beings.⁵⁹ Vasalou argues that this is indeed the way it has to be in light of Ibn Taymiyya's theology. God in his wise purpose and justice sought to benefit humankind with prophecy, and we humans "should be able to believe that *our* sense of good and the *Lawgiver's* sense of good coincide."⁶⁰ In other words, it is Ibn Taymiyya's faith conviction that the

⁵⁴ Opwis, *Maṣlaḥa and the Purpose of the Law*, 185-190.

⁵⁵ Opwis, *Maṣlaḥa and the Purpose of the Law*, 184-185.

⁵⁶ Opwis, *Maṣlaḥa and the Purpose of the Law*, 198.

⁵⁷ Opwis, *Maṣlaḥa and the Purpose of the Law*, 198-199.

⁵⁸ Vasalou, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theological Ethics*, 207 and 209, respectively.

⁵⁹ Vasalou, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theological Ethics*, 207-220.

⁶⁰ Vasalou, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theological Ethics*, 221-229 (quotation on 228).

revealed law encompasses all human benefit, and he takes it upon himself to buttress this conviction with rational argument. Vasalou observes that Ibn Taymiyya's legal reflection uses reason to defend the all-encompassing benefit of the law much as his theological production is an apologetic for the rationality of revelation.⁶¹

Vasalou would appear to bring us back to viewing Ibn Taymiyya after the fashion of the tenth-century Shāfi'īs al-Qaffāl and al-Khaffāf, with benefit playing no substantive role in the derivation of legal rulings. It is certainly clear that Ibn Taymiyya does not integrate benefit into a formal system of legal cause derivation along the lines of al-Ghazālī and al-Rāzī. However, there is more to Ibn Taymiyya's legal discourse on benefit than apologetics, and taking the perspectives of both Opwis and Vasalou together provides important insights. They are two sides of the same coin of a revelation-based authorization to engage in utilitarian ethical and jurisprudential reasoning.

To unpack this, I first revisit a passage that Vasalou uses to show how Ibn Taymiyya retains the priority of scriptural texts even while speaking directly about weighing up benefits and detriments. The text is found in Ibn Taymiyya's treatise on commanding the right and forbidding the wrong,⁶² and the question at hand is whether to intervene in the moral affairs of others. Here are the key parts of the passage in translation. It is divided into four paragraphs to facilitate reference:

If benefits and detriments and good things and evil things contradict or compete with each other, then it is necessary to give preponderance to the preponderant of them....If commanding and prohibiting involve obtaining benefit and repelling detriment, what opposes [carrying out this obligation] must also be examined. If the benefits lost or the detriments obtained are greater, it is no longer commanded. On the contrary, it is forbidden if its detriment is greater than its benefit.

⁶¹ Vasalou, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theological Ethics*, 229-250. Rapoport, "Ibn Taymiyya's Radical Legal Thought, 193-199, also underlines the parallels between Ibn Taymiyya's insistence that human benefit and the rulings of the law coincide, his assertion that a legal analogy never contradicts a revealed text, and his claim that reason and revelation never contradict in matters of theological doctrine.

⁶² I will cite the treatise from Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Ḥisba*, MF 28:60-178, of which it forms a part (pp. 121-178); *Ḥisba* is translated in Ibn Taymiyya, *Public Duties in Islam: the Institution of Ḥisba*, trans. Muhtar Holland (Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1985). The treatise has also been published separately as Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar*, ed. Ṣalāh al-Dīn al-Munajjad (Beirut: Dār al-kitāb al-jadīd, 1984), and it appears as well in Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Istiqāma*, ed. Muḥammad Rashād Sālim, 2 parts (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1420/2000), 2:198-311. Cook, *Commanding Right*, 151 n 48, examines the complex textual history of the treatise in detail and suggests that it may have originally been part of *al-Istiqāma* although, as Cook explains, this suggestion is not without difficulties.

However, the extent of the benefits and the detriments must be considered according to the scale of the law (*sharī'a*). When someone can follow the texts, he should not deviate from them. If not, he should exercise independent reasoning (*ijtahada bi-ra'yihī*) to come to a knowledge of similar and corresponding cases. However, it is rare that texts will be lacking for those who are expert in them and their indications of legal rulings.

If therefore, an individual or a group [faces a situation] combining right and wrong such that they cannot differentiate between the two and such that they have to do both or omit doing both, it is not permissible to command [only] the right and prohibit [only] the wrong. On the contrary, one has to investigate. If the right is greater, it is commanded, even if it necessarily entails wrong of lesser import. Wrong is not prohibited if it necessarily entails losing right greater than it. Indeed, prohibiting in that case would be tantamount to blocking the way of God....

Falling under this category is the indulgence of the Prophet—God bless him and give him peace—toward ‘Abd Allāh ibn Ubayy and his like from among the leaders of hypocrisy and immorality, in view of their supporters [being large in number]. Putting an end to [Ibn Ubayy’s] wrong by punishing him would necessarily have entailed putting an end to something right that was greater than that, namely, the fury and fervor of his people [for advancing the cause of religion]. People would also have found it distasteful had they heard that Muḥammad had killed one of his Companions [in punishment].⁶³

Vasalou in her argument draws only on the first two paragraphs above. She quotes most of the first paragraph as a “remarkable methodological statement” of Ibn Taymiyya’s call to use one’s own judgement in balancing utility in commanding and forbidding.⁶⁴ She then quotes much of the second paragraph to show that Ibn Taymiyya closes the door on “the prospect of a more substantive evaluative judgement.” Texts are decisive in weighing up benefit and detriment, and those who know the texts well will not be lacking for guidance.⁶⁵

⁶³ Ibn Taymiyya, *Ḥisba*, MF 28:129-131; Ibn Taymiya, *Public Duties*, 80-81 (my translation differs). The first part of this text is translated in Baber Johansen, “A Perfect Law in an Imperfect Society: Ibn Taymiyya’s Concept of ‘Governance in the Name of the Sacred Law’,” in *The Law Applied: Contextualizing the Islamic Shari‘a. A Volume in Honor of Frank E. Vogel*, ed. Peri Bearman, Wolfhart Heinrichs, and Bernard G. Weiss (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 259-293 (283-284).

⁶⁴ Vasalou, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theological Ethics*, 207.

⁶⁵ Vasalou, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theological Ethics*, 209.

Reading all four paragraphs together adds nuance. The structure of the passage does indeed express Ibn Taymiyya's confidence that the law encompasses all benefits, but in a certain fashion. Twice over, in the first and third paragraphs, Ibn Taymiyya instructs readers to weigh up benefits and detriments before commanding or prohibiting an action. After the first instruction, he directs readers to subject their actions to the scale of the law, as there will almost always be a relevant text. Yet, if they cannot find a text, they should resort to independent reasoning on the basis of similar cases. Then, in the fourth paragraph, Ibn Taymiyya grounds the instruction to weigh up benefit and detriment in the precedent of the Prophet's indulgent dealings with 'Abd Allāh ibn Ubayy. Here, the precedent simply establishes the utilitarian principle. It does not indicate the ruling for a specific case in Ibn Taymiyya's time and place. The import of this passage is both that the revealed law is the measure of true benefit and that the law provides a principle for ethical and jurisprudential reasoning in utilitarian calculation. Textual indicants may not be clear or ready to hand for every specific situation, and this requires weighing up the benefit and detriment of an action for religion.⁶⁶

The centrality of utilitarian reasoning to Ibn Taymiyya's ethics and jurisprudence becomes even clearer in a text that Vasalou does not consider: his treatise on the caliphate, which I will dub *Khilāfa* and which runs to 15 pages in volume 35 of *Majmū' al-fatāwā*.⁶⁷ In *Khilāfa*, Ibn Taymiyya joins together substantive and apologetic aspects of his legal methodology, and a review of this treatise will serve to illustrate how he both deploys the weighing up of benefit and detriment as a substantive legal and ethical source and then again grounds such utilitarian reasoning in the practice of the Prophet. This treatise is also of interest because it shows how Ibn Taymiyya addresses the difficulty that the ideal caliphate of the "rightly guided" no longer existed in his time. It will become apparent that part of Ibn

⁶⁶ Yahya M. Michot, "L'autorité, l'individu et la communauté face à la *sharī'a*: quelques pensées d'Ibn Taymiyya," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 54 (2012): 261-286 (263-266), translates passages from *Minhāj al-Sunna*, 6:410-416, in which Ibn Taymiyya distinguishes between universals, such as the commands to pray and give alms, and particulars, such as the direction of prayer in a specific place and the alms due on a specific item. Texts, according to Ibn Taymiyya, cannot rule on particulars, only on universals; analogy (*qiyās*) and independent reasoning (*ijtihād*) are required to ascertain the rulings on specific instances. This dovetails with the distinction I am making here between utilitarianism as an ethical and jurisprudential principle rooted in the revealed texts and the need to weigh up benefits and detriments in the conduct of day-to-day affairs.

⁶⁷ Ibn Taymiyya, *Khilāfa*, MF 35:18-32. Mona Hassan, "Modern Interpretations and Misinterpretations of a Medieval Scholar: Apprehending the Political Thought of Ibn Taymiyya," in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, 338-366 (339-346), which is reprised in Mona Hassan, *Longing for the Lost Caliphate: A Transregional History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 111-114; and Ovamir Anjum, *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought: The Taymiyyan Moment* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 252-259, draw on this treatise to correct Henri Laoust's assertion, often repeated in secondary literature on Islamic political theory, that Ibn Taymiyya denied the obligatory character of the caliphate. For Laoust's view, see his *Essai*, 281-283.

Taymiyya's resort to utilitarian reasoning stems from his conviction that sin and weakness plague the human condition and must be taken into account.

Ibn Taymiyya begins *Khilāfa* with a prophetic tradition stating that “the caliphate of prophecy” (*khilāfat al-nubuwwa*) will last thirty years before kingship (*mulk*) sets in. He links the “caliphate of prophecy” to the four “rightly guided caliphs” (*al-khulafā' al-rāshidūn*)—Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, and 'Alī—and the beginning of kingship to the reign of Mu'āwiya. Ibn Taymiyya allows that there were more caliphs than just the first four “rightly guided,” and he permits calling kings “caliphs” as well, even if they do not attain the perfection of the prophetic caliphate.⁶⁸ Ibn Taymiyya maintains that the “caliphate of prophecy,” or what he also calls the “practice of the caliphs” (*sunna al-khulafā'*), is fundamentally a matter of obligation for the Muslim community. Kingship is only permissible in case of need (*ḥāja*) deriving from a lack of knowledge or power. Kingship is not permissible in itself, and it involves a failure to uphold part of the religion. Ibn Taymiyya also mentions the view that a caliphate tarnished by kingship (*shawb al-khilāfa bi-l-mulk*) is permissible and two extreme positions that he clearly rejects. One is that of the Khārijīs, Mu'tazilīs, and others for whom kingship is never permissible, even in case of need. The other extreme is to permit kingship absolutely without reference to the practice of the caliphs.⁶⁹

The challenge facing Ibn Taymiyya is bridging the moral distance between the continuing obligation of the “caliphate of prophecy” and the reality of kingship in his day. He observes that omitting the “caliphate of prophecy” when it is in fact possible is blameworthy and subject to punishment, but, he asks, is it a major sin (*kabīra*) or a minor sin (*ṣaghīra*)? Ibn Taymiyya claims that the texts of the Qur'an and the Sunna favor the view that this depends on whether the king's good deeds outweigh his evil deeds and whether his good deeds exceed the good deeds of someone who commits no evil deeds at all. Failure to fulfil the obligation of the “caliphate of prophecy” is not necessarily a major sin.⁷⁰

This matter of weighing up the good deeds and the evil deeds of those exercising kingship leads Ibn Taymiyya to the broader question of how to assess good deeds that will not be committed unless accompanied by evil deeds. This phenomenon, he says, appears in two forms. In the first, the good deed is impossible without the evil deed, in which case the evil deed is in fact no longer evil. This so-called evil deed is obligatory or recommended if it is

⁶⁸ Ibn Taymiyya, *Khilāfa*, MF 35:18-20.

⁶⁹ Ibn Taymiyya, *Khilāfa*, MF 35:22, 24-27.

⁷⁰ Ibn Taymiyya, *Khilāfa*, MF 35:27-28. For elaboration of Ibn Taymiyya's view that a politically and militarily potent leader who commits some injustices and sins is better than a supposedly upright but impotent leader, see Yahya M. Michot, “Ibn Taymiyya's Critique of Shī'ī Imāmology,” *The Muslim World* 104.1-2 (2014): 109-149.

essential to the performance of another obligatory or recommended deed. If the detriment of the so-called evil deed is less than the benefit of the good deed, then the so-called evil deed is not forbidden, as when someone eats carrion to survive or wears silk to protect against the cold.⁷¹ Ibn Taymiyya complains that many people fail to understand the logic of needs and detriments. They ignore the needs that make some forbidden acts permitted, or they fail to see that detriment may render recommended or obligatory acts forbidden, as in the case of ritual prayer for someone who is ill or ritual purification for someone on the verge of death. Ibn Taymiyya applies this reasoning to restate the permissibility of deviation from the prophetic caliphate in case of inability to adhere to some of its practices. Sometimes the obligations of political or administrative authority can only be fulfilled by means of some lesser harm.⁷²

The second form in which good and evil deeds mix, according to Ibn Taymiyya, is when a good deed could be committed without an evil deed but only with difficulty. In reality people cannot bring themselves to commit this good deed without also engaging in something prohibited to help them through, something “whose sinfulness is less than the profit (*manfa‘a*) of the good deed.”⁷³ Ibn Taymiyya observes that this form of good deed occurs frequently across all sectors of society ranging from rulers and scholars to Sufis and the general populace. He cites a number of examples:

An example is someone who cannot bring himself to achieve the benefits of administrative authority in commanding the right and prohibiting the wrong, carrying out the prescribed punishments (*hudūd*), securing the roads, undertaking *jihād* against the enemy, and distributing resources, without engaging in some prohibited things like expropriating some of the resources, domineering the people, showing favoritism in distribution, and other such capricious behaviors. It is likewise in *jihād*. He is not able to bring himself to undertake *jihād* without a certain kind of rashness. In scholarship he is not able to bring himself to study the science of jurisprudence and the foundations of religion without certain kinds of prohibited things like [exercising his own] opinion (*ra‘y*) and [engaging in] rationalist theology (*kalām*), and he cannot bring himself to

⁷¹ Anjum, *Politics, Law, and Community*, 126-127, 188, argues that al-Ghazālī’s attitude to politics is pessimistic and cynical for accepting the legitimacy of imperfect rulers to avoid anarchy by analogy to the necessity of eating carrion to avoid death, whereas Ibn Taymiyya’s approach is optimistic and “as far as it could be from Ghazālī’s attitude of ‘eating carrion’” (p. 188). Given that Ibn Taymiyya also invokes eating carrion as an analogy for thinking about political ethics, as here in *Khilāfa*, Anjum clearly overstates his case.

⁷² Ibn Taymiyya, *Khilāfa*, MF 35:28-29.

⁷³ Ibn Taymiyya, *Khilāfa*, MF 35:30.

study the science of the legislated rites of worship and the knowledge that is commanded without a certain kind of monkishness (*rahbāniyya*).⁷⁴

With this last example—the scholar who indulges in a bit of monkishness—Ibn Taymiyya may well have himself in mind, and Yahya Michot takes this passage to be the key to unlocking the mystery of his celibacy. Ibn Taymiyya never married even though he believed that a Muslim man should do so, and Michot suggests that he saw this as a perverse side effect of his devotion to piety and scholarship.⁷⁵

Ibn Taymiyya continues in *Khilāfa* explaining that this phenomenon of indulging in evil deeds to make more beneficial deeds bearable is widespread among kings and others and that it has caused considerable strife and confusion. However, even though the revealed law does not authorize or excuse such evil deeds, it does command rulers to do good deeds, and they should do those good deeds even if that involves committing evil deeds of lesser import. Ibn Taymiyya gives the example of *jihād*: “Emirs are commanded to undertake *jihād*, even if it is known that they will not undertake *jihād* without a certain kind of injustice whose detriment is less in comparison to the benefit of *jihād*.”⁷⁶ Moreover, explains Ibn Taymiyya, rulers should not be prohibited from evil deeds if prohibition might dissuade them from performing good deeds that yield benefit outweighing the detriment of those evil deeds. Sometimes permitting an evil deed leads to greater good all around. Ibn Taymiyya cites an example concerning the second Sunnī caliph: “Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb employed an immoral person because of the preponderance of benefit in using him, and he put an end to his immorality through his strength and justice.”⁷⁷ At other times, omitting prohibition of a wrong averts another wrong that would be even more detrimental. As an example, Ibn Taymiyya notes that a king who converts to Islam should not be prohibited from drinking wine if prohibition would lead him to apostatize. Nevertheless, Ibn Taymiyya observes, there will also be times when prohibitions must be made plain to achieve other ends. It all depends on the circumstances, and for Ibn Taymiyya the precedent for such prudent discernment is found in the Prophet: “Because of [the diversity of the circumstances], the position of the Prophet—May God bless him and give him peace—

⁷⁴ Ibn Taymiyya, *Khilāfa*, MF 35:30.

⁷⁵ Yahya Michot, “Un célibataire endurci et sa maman: Ibn Taymiyya (m. 728/1328) et les femmes,” *Acta Orientalia Belgica* 15 (2001): 165-190 (186-187; p. 186 translates Ibn Taymiyya, *Khilāfa*, MF 35:30, into French).

⁷⁶ Ibn Taymiyya, *Khilāfa*, MF 35:31.

⁷⁷ Ibn Taymiyya, *Khilāfa*, MF 35:31-32.

varied regarding his command, his prohibition, his *jihād*, his pardon, his carrying out of the prescribed punishments, his harshness, and his mercy.”⁷⁸

This final appeal to the Prophet in *Khilāfa* could be interpreted to give divine sanction to unbridled utilitarianism as normative Islam: the commands and prohibitions of the law are subject to prudential strategizing and even expendable. This is the worry of Opwis. However, such a reading misses the role of human failure in Ibn Taymiyya’s deliberations. The Muslim community is indeed obligated to fulfill the “caliphate of prophecy” and prohibited from eating carrion and drinking wine. The greatest benefit is to be found in observing such obligations and prohibitions. However, Ibn Taymiyya in *Khilāfa* discusses what to do when that is not possible due to sin and human weakness. What is to be done is to make the best of a sinful world by weighing up benefits versus detriments in order to advance the cause of religion and draw closer to the revealed law in the best way possible. This too finds its support in revelation: it is the way of Prophet. Opwis is right that Ibn Taymiyya deploys benefit substantively in his juristic and ethical reasoning, and Vasalou is also correct that Ibn Taymiyya traces all benefit back to revelation. Their two views may be reconciled by seeing that for Ibn Taymiyya revelation sanctions substantive utilitarian reasoning oriented toward the greater good of the Muslim community and ever fuller obedience to the commands of God. This utilitarian reasoning is not independent of an ultimate aim revealed by God, but it does require making substantive judgments about the relative benefit of adhering to legal rulings in the many circumstances that fall short of that ultimate aim. It is the rule for how to proceed when following God’s law is not fully possible.

Conclusion

Our study of Ibn Taymiyya’s *Irāda* has yielded two major results concerning his theology. First, the Avicennan notion of God’s self-love giving rise to the world as a necessary concomitant provides Ibn Taymiyya the philosophical resources to portray God as the self-interested, perpetual creator of the world. Second, his temporalization of this God’s essence enables him to depict God as a dynamic utilitarian agent maximizing benefit for both Himself and human beings through the historical process. Some things like rain may cause harm to some people for a time, but God creates preponderant good and the best possible world overall.

⁷⁸ Ibn Taymiyya, *Khilāfa*, MF 35:32. Yahya Michot, *Muslims under Non-Muslim Rule*, 52-3, translates and comments upon the last three paragraphs of *Khilāfa*, MF 35:31-32.

Shifting to Ibn Taymiyya's ethics and legal reflection, he affirms that God's revealed law encompasses all human benefit pertaining to both this world and the hereafter and that maximum human benefit is to be found in total obedience to the law. However, human ignorance of relevant revealed texts and human sin and weakness mean that it is not always possible to adhere to the law perfectly, and so utilitarian calculations must be made between competing courses of action to ascertain the best way to advance religion. Ibn Taymiyya in his treatise on the caliphate and his treatise on commanding the right and forbidding the wrong stipulates weighing up the benefits and detriments of acts so as to attain the greatest benefit or avert the greatest detriment, and he grounds this in the example of the Prophet.

Ibn Taymiyya states at the beginning of *Irāda* that the issue of causality pervades everything to do with theology and law. Moreover, the treatise makes apparent that his view of causality is utilitarian in orientation, and it rejects Ash'arī voluntarism in God's will. It thus comes as no surprise that we can observe marked parallels between God and humans in their utilitarian agency. Ibn Taymiyya's God does the best possible creating and commanding in a world beset with evils. Likewise, humans should follow the Prophet in choosing preponderant benefit for religion as they act in a world beset by ignorance, sin, and weakness. Ibn Taymiyya does not resolve the problems of evil, sin, and human weakness in the texts considered in this study, but, if we fill out the implications of his arguments for universal salvation, these problems will find ultimate resolution in the hereafter when God will bring everyone to obey and worship Him alone, when benefit will be full and complete for all.

As a theologian, ethicist, and jurist, Ibn Taymiyya provides an Avicennan-informed apology for the utilitarian rationality of God's creation and God's command. What God creates is the best possible, and what God commands through the revealed law encompasses all benefit. This law not only specifies obligations and prohibitions; it also provides the Prophet's exemplary utilitarianism as the operative principle when perfect obedience to obligations and prohibitions is too difficult or impossible. Ibn Taymiyya thus places great weight on human calculation for ascertaining the best course of action in everyday circumstances. Such calculations are of course subject to the limitations of human knowledge of both texts and actual benefits and thus lead to differing judgements about the most beneficial way to promote religious flourishing.⁷⁹ This observation applies even to Ibn Taymiyya's own corpus, as it has

⁷⁹ Ibn Taymiyya urged respect for difference in independent reasoning in some texts. See especially Ibn Taymiyya, *Raf' al-malām 'an al-a'imma al-lām*, MF 20:231-290; translated in Abdul Hakim Al-Matroudi, "The Removal of Blame from the Great Imāms: An Annotated Translation of Ibn Taymiyyah's *Raf' al-malām 'an al-a'immat* [sic] *al-lām*," *Islamic Studies* 46.3 (2007): 317-380; and Michot, "L'autorité, l'individu et la communauté."

often been noted that his writings are occasional and circumstantial in character and that his views are not easily systematized.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, modern research is increasingly bringing out consistencies of theme, purpose, and vision in his thought. Ibn Taymiyya's diverse interventions reflect a religious utilitarianism ever seeking the most effective way to point readers toward what he believed to be in everyone's best interest—full obedience to God—and he supports this with a theology of God's utilitarian activity working toward that same goal.

⁸⁰ See Vasalou, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theological Ethics*, 16-19, for a full discussion of the circumstantial character of Ibn Taymiyya's writings with references to other voices on the issue. Vasalou also seeks explicitly to highlight the diversity and seeming inconsistency of Ibn Taymiyya's various claims and formulations through the dialectical rhetorical strategy of her presentation (see pp. 6-7). Nonetheless, she rightly discerns through the course of her monograph recurring themes and consistent patterns of thought in Ibn Taymiyya's writings on ethics.