

APPRAISAL OF HUMAN ACTS DISCOURSE AMONG ASHĀ'IRAH SCHOLARS

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper attempts to illuminate the different opinions of Ashā'irah scholars namely, Al-Bāqillānī, Al-Juwaynī and Al-Ghazālī on the subject of human acts. The discourse of human acts emerges from the argument of God's attributes *qudrah* and *irādah*. It was first discussed by Jabariyyah and Qadariyyah which was then eventually elevated by the Mu'tazilah in understanding human acts.

Methodology: This study is a qualitative study in nature that employs document analysis method. The comparative analysis will be done in order to examine similarities and differences found in the discussion of the Ashā'irah scholars.

Main Findings: As a whole, the four scholars anticipated in different arguments. It can be summed that Al-Ash'arī and Al-Ghazālī hold that human acts are still considered as acts of God considering all actions are created by Him. Meanwhile, Al-Bāqillānī and Al-Juwaynī maintained human acts to be free from God's acts.

Applications: The discussion of this study serves as an important mean in comprehending the discourse of the Ashā'irah tradition on the concept of human acts.

Novelty/Originality: This paper examines the arguments and proofs based on the Ashā'irah scholars which will look into their respective writings on the discourse of human act.

Keywords: Human acts, Ashā'irah scholars, Abu Hasan al-Ash'arī.

INTRODUCTION

Discourse on the human act is very closely related to the concept of predestination as these actions depends on the Divine will to certain group of scholars. The relationship between man and God's actions eventually forms a crucial problem in speculative moral philosophy (Oviedo, 2019). The discourse of human act in Islam stems from the Arabic phrase known as *af'al al-'ibād*; *af'al* plural of *fi'l* which means action and *al-'ibād* plural of *'abd* refers to man. Thus *af'al al-'ibād* can be understood as human action. In Kalam discourse, the argument of human act denotes the relation of man's action to God's. This argument was first coined by Ja'ad bin Dirham who was among the pioneer of Jabariyah. Jabariyah was extreme in claiming that every single thing occurs with the force of God. In correspondence, rise the sect of Qadariyah who opposed the belief of Jabariyah and opined that man holds freedom of act (Wolfson, 1976). The arguments were later widely discussed by other kalam groups as well such as the Zaidiyah, Ibādhiyah, Ashā'irah, and Māturīdīyah (Abu Zahrah, N.d).

According to al-Zuhayli (2009), the term Ashā'irah refers to a group of scholars who employ methods of proposition established by Abu al-Hasan Al-Ash'arī which went through series of review and modification until Al-Sanūsī's time. It can be seen that the Ashā'irah's arguments were dominant in Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah. Kamaludin (2010) categorizes Ashā'irah into two; *mutaqaddimīn* (earlier) and the *mutakhhirīn* (later).

The *mutaqaddimīn* basically proposed their arguments supported with the Quranic verses and the Prophets' sayings without giving much space for reason to analyze. They are namely, Al-Ash'arī, Abū Hasan 'Alī Ibn Ismā'il Ibn Ishāq, Al-Bāqillānī, Abū Bakr Muhammad al-Tayyīb, Al-Baghdādī, 'Abd al-Qāhir Ibn Ṭāhir and Al-Juwainī, Imām al-Ḥaramayn Abū al-Ma'ālī 'Abd al-Mālik Ibn 'Abd Allah. Meanwhile, the Ashā'irah *mutakhhirīn* were Al-Ghazālī, Abū Ḥamid Muhammad Ibn Muhammad and Al-Sanūsī, Muhammad bin Yūsuf. Their methods differ and not compelled to the method of Al-Ash'arī per se. According to Abu Zahrah (2009), the Ashā'irah tradition employed both *naqlī* and *'aqlī* propositions and strongly affirmed what is stated in the Quran and Hadith. *Ta'wīl* method will only be employed if the verses denote deficiencies towards God.

It is proven that Ashā'irah scholars developed their arguments on divine and human acts over a period of times since Abu Hasan al-Ash'arī. Nevertheless, the arguments of the Al-Ash'arī scholars somewhat differ from one to another due to the modification made by his successor's overtimes. Thus, this paper attempts to examine the diverse strands of arguments among Ashairah scholars namely Al-Bāqillānī, Al-Juwaynī, Al-Ghazālī, and Al-Sanūsī.

ARGUMENTS OF THE ASHĀ'IRAH SCHOLARS ON HUMAN ACTS

The polemic on the discourse of human act emerges from the very basic humanistic question on whether it is created by a man or God. According to Hadariansyah (2009), during the time when Al-Ash'arī was still in full support of the

Mu'tazilah's ideas, he admitted that human act was created by man through his inner acquisition (*kasb*). Nevertheless, when he departed from the Mu'tazilite's strands of thought, he denied the previous argument. This clearly demonstrates the transition of argument emerges in Asha'rah's line of arguments. It is iterated in his writing of *al-Ibānah 'an Usūl al-Diyānah* that:

“One is incapable of doing something before God, and we are incapable of fleeing away from Him and His knowledge, and there is no creator other than God and all human acts are created by Him.”

This demonstrates that according to [Al-Ash'arī \(n.d\)](#), man is incapable of doing any act before God creates it. In fact, man's capability to do something is created by God. This is different from what he understood earlier claiming that man creates his own action that follows by one's acquisition (*kasb*) or his own power. The conversion of the idea by Al-Ash'arī was based on the Quranic proof chapter 37: 96, “*But Allah has created you and your handwork!*” This verse according to Al-Ash'arī clearly highlights man's acts as God's creation. [Hadariansshah \(2009\)](#) explains, Al-Ash'arī in interpreting the term ‘your handwork’ in the previous verse as ‘your acts’. Thus, the verse undoubtedly demonstrates man's action as a creation of God.

Now, the notion of God creating every human acts seems similar to what Jabariyah understood. Jabariyah claimed that man does not possess any freedom to choose because every action is determined by God which is also known as determinism in the argument of moral philosophy. The encounter between Al-Ash'arī and Jabariyyah was recorded in Al-Ash'arī's book *al-Luma' fi Radd 'ala Ahl al-Zaigh wa al-Bida'* that mentions the theory of acquisition in differentiating between Al-Ash'arī and Jabariyah. The theory of acquisition serves as a means to connect human act with the act of Divine which denotes every human act is attempted by man himself but is created by God. [Al-Ash'arī \(1955\)](#) mentioned in his writing: “*Herewith, in every action acquired, the real acquirer is Allah.*”

Therefore, in sum, the difference between Ashā'irah and Jabariyah lies within the theory of acquisition that intersects with God's creation of human acts. Meanwhile, Jabariyah adopted more extreme understanding of determinism by denying any human acts and affirmed every action are created directly by God.

Discourse on the theory of acquisition among Ashā'irah began to emerge with diverse interpretations later on. [Al-Bāqillānī \(1993\)](#) for instance, considered acquisition as a power that is attempted by the man himself. According to him in his writing *al-Inṣāf* (1993: 45),

“It is compulsory to know that man possesses acquisition and (his acts) are not determined but are acquired through his own act of obedience or deviation.”

From the above discussion, the difference between Al-Bāqillānī and Al-Ash'arī is obvious. According to Al-Bāqillānī, an act is acquired by man himself. Meanwhile, Al-Ash'arī believed that every acquired action are created by God. Al-Bāqillānī's argument was based on Quranic verse 2: 286:

“On no soul doth Allah Place a burden greater than it can bear. It gets every good that it earns, and it suffers every ill that it earns.”

According to [Al-Bāqillānī \(1993\)](#), the human will gain rewards from the acquired good deeds. Similarly, bad deeds will cause one to get punishments. This shows that man is responsible for his own deeds which are inconsistent with the Quran 7: 41,

“Mischievousness has appeared on land and sea because of (the deed) that the hands of men have earned, that (Allah) may give them a taste of some of their deeds: in order that they may turn back (from Evil).”

From this verse, it can be understood the calamity that befalls man are due to man's own bad deeds. According to Al-Bāqillānī, man's acquired acts are his own action. Nevertheless, man does not create his own action but it is created by God ([Al-Bāqillānī. 1993](#)).

Al-Juwaynī, the successor of Al-Bāqillānī who holds similar opinion with that of Al-Bāqillānī argued that human act is acquired by man himself but man is not the creator of the act. The acquired act denotes the capability of human to act upon himself. Ahmad Mahmūd Ṣubḥī in explaining Al-Juwaynī's concept forwards an analogy in understanding human act and act created by God. A sound man will definitely be capable to differentiate between two motions, first the motion of a trembling hand (necessary) and the act of moving hand by choice. By purposely moving one's hands demonstrates that one is capable of making movement. Nevertheless, the power comes from God and not human ([Subhi. N.d](#)).

According to Al-Juwaynī, apart from creating man, God creates ability and power for them. In fact, God has created power even before a man attempts to do something. When a man is doing something, he is just using the power that has been endowed by God. This can be understood that Al-Juwaynī affirmed man acts upon his own will along with the innate ability which God has created for man. Next, Al-Ghazālī, despite being the student of Al-Juwaynī, he differs from Al-Bāqillānī and Al-Juwaynī. Al-Ghazālī posed similar argument with Ash'ari. He explained that man's acquisition and acts are both created by God ([Al-Ghazālī. 1962](#)).

In sum, it can be deduced that the strands of thought among Ashā'irah scholars regarding human act can be categorized into two.

Al-Bāqillānī and Al-Juwaynī considered human acts solely to be their act and not created by God. Contrarily, Al-Ash'arī and Al-Ghazālī affirmed human acts to be created by God.

THEORY OF *KASB* (ACQUISITION) AMONG ASHĀ'IRAH SCHOLARS

Theory of *kasb* is the cornerstone in the argument of human act among Ashā'irah scholars. Man's acquisition serves as a mean in harmonizing God's act with human act. According to Ash'ari, man is endowed with ability and choice to act according to God's will ([al-Bazdawi. N.d](#)). In fact, the nature of servitude of man requires man to be fully dependant to God's will and power. This entails to the understanding human not as *fā'il* (creator) but only as *kāsib* (acquirer). In this context, al-Shahrastānī in his magnum opus *al-Milal wa al-Niḥal* defined *kasb* as human act that resulted from Allah's will through His *sunnah* and the created power that is created upon the occurring of a particular act.

According to Al-Ash'arī in his book *Maqālat al-Islāmiyyīn*, *al-iktisāb* denotes an occurrence through a mediated power that is created by God which result to an act. The term *al-iktisāb* stems from the root word *kasb*. Similarly in his other book *al-Luma'*, al-Ash'arī explained that human acts are created by God. This is likewise mentioned in the Quran 37: 96, "But Allah has created you and your handwork!."

Al-Ash'arī affirmed that there is no other creator of *kasb* except Allah ([Ash'arī. 1955](#)). In other words, God is the one who decides the existence of *kasb* and human acts. Thus, *kasb* can be understood as something that is acquired from the acquirer through the created acquisition.

Al-Ash'arī further categorized human acts in two forms, firstly *iḍtirār* (necessary acts), secondly *kasb* (human acts by choice). Both connote two aspects. The necessary act consists of the one who performs the motion and physical aspect that moves. The one who performs the motion is God while the body that moves is man. The motion takes place in a physical form that is impossible for God to posit in a place. As for acts carried out by choice, Al-Ash'arī described the one who instills acquisition to man is God and man has the acquisition which is acquired ([Ash'arī. 1955](#)). It can be understood that in Ash'ari's argument, man has acquisition but it is acquired and that which brings about the acquisition are created by God. His opinion clearly resonates proof from Quranic verse 76: 30, "But ye will not, except as Allah wills; for Allah is full of Knowledge and Wisdom."

This verse affirms that man's will is what God wills. Nothing will occur unless with God's will. According to Al-Ghazālī in *al-Luma'*, when one wants to go to Makkah for instance, he will only be able to go by God's will. God's will must precede man's will as He is the creator of every occurrence. This indirectly denotes God's will is inherent within every man's will ([Ash'arī. N.d](#)).

Ash'arī's theory of acquisition is a medium to find the middle path between Jabariyah and Qadariyah. Acquisition leads one to understand the moral philosophy in between predestined belief and free will. With the acquisition theory, man possesses freedom of will but still within the virtue of God's will, compulsion but there is still freedom of will.

The understanding of Al-Ash'arī in the striking middle path through *kasb* is to divert from the understanding of Jabariyah and Qadariyah. This theory certainly acts as a mean of conciliation in having the true interpretation of moral philosophy in Islam, taking into consideration proofs from the Quran. Ash'ari's theory of *kasb* without any doubt contributes positively to the discourse on human act in the latter generation.

For instance, Ash'arī's successors, Al-Bāqillānī and Al-Juwaynī in *al-'Aqīdah al-Nizāmiyyah* that opposed to Ash'ari's opinion. Both claimed that human acts are produced by men. According to Al-Bāqillānī and Al-Juwaynī, man's necessary acts are from God while acts upon choices are from men themselves. Thus, *kasb* can be deduced as man's acquisition which constitutes power that is created by God. Al-Bāqillānī tends to prove that man is capable to produce acts at times and not at other time ([Al-Bāqillānī N.d](#)).

The discourse in Al-Bāqillānī's time was more crucial than Ash'arī. Al-Bāqillānī found that man is not capable of an act without having the power endowed unto him. The acquisition within the human is not something that is permanent. If it is permanent, the degree of power or capability must be consistent which is impossible as his ability only exist when the act takes place. If man possesses the acquisition before the act, the existence of God is then considered futile which is impossible ([Al-Bāqillānī N.d](#)). In sum, it can be deduced that God creates the acquisition within man and man is given freedom to utilize it accordingly. Man is given intellect to choose his own acts. This opinion pronounced by Al-Bāqillānī certainly aims to distinguish his opinion from the determinist opinion of Jabariyah.

In understanding the concept of power, Al-Bāqillānī insisted that God creates the acquisition from non-existence. The power is then carried out through the realization of human act just like the movement of a ring on a finger is realized with the movement of hand. This corresponds to the Quran verse 65: 7,

"Allah puts no burden on any person beyond what He has given him. After difficulty, Allah will soon grant relief."

The above verse proves that there is no power before any act occurs. Besides, there are other verses describing the concept of ability for instance 2: 184,

“(Fasting) for a fixed number of days; but if any of you is ill, or on a journey, the prescribed number (Should be made up) from days later. For those who can do it (With hardship), is a ransom, the feeding of one that is indigent. But he that will give more, of his own free will, it is better for him.”

This verse tells us the responsibility of incapable men in completing a necessary task and is required to pay fidyah. Thus, this shows the inexistence of power in human (Al-Bāqillānī N.d). It can be concluded that Al-Ash‘arī firmly held that man’s acts are created by God which Al-Bāqillānī then reread and improvise through adding the belief that man possesses freedom in his act. Al-Bāqillānī described *kasb* as man’s power during the occurrence of an act. As *kasb* is an act of choice and freedom thus it does not contain any sort of determinism. This indirectly proposes that man has their effective role towards his act. God creates the movement. Meanwhile, God creates the power within man and the motion such as sit, walk and speaking are the act of man (al-Shahrastānī. 1992).

The discourse of human act and acquisition was then continued by Al-Juwaynī in *al-‘Aqīdah al-Nizāmiyyah*. Al-Juwaynī suggested man have an efficient role in creating his own act (Al-Juwaynī . 1992). Man is given the right to choose and apply reasons endowed by God in realizing his act. Al-Juwaynī also agreed with Al-Bāqillānī that God has created the power to acquire before the acquisition itself takes place. Nevertheless the power is considered as ‘ard and ‘ard is not eternal. Therefore due to its non-eternal essence, it does not possess any self-exist ability without the intervention of God (Al-Juwaynī . 1992).

The acquirer acquires a thing because acquiring take place in virtue of his created power over it. The true meaning of acquisition is that the thing proceeds from the acquirer in virtue of a created power. Al-Juwaynī in his reproduction of Ash‘arī’s theory of acquisition finds that man possesses freedom with the power that is created by God to do anything as he wills. This certainly demonstrates the effective role played by man in developing his power to produce an act that he wills. Nevertheless, it must be affirmed that the power is created by God and is relevant to what is understood by the concept of *sunnatullāh* (God’s system in governing the world) in empowering man as the vicegerent of earth.

Such deliberation was also affirmed by Al-Juwaynī’s successor, Al-Ghazālī. According to him, God is the one who creates the human act and his power. A human act is a result of God’s power. Thus, it is illogic to comprehend that man creates his own power of acquisition (Al-Ghazālī). Nevertheless, Al-Ghazālī further discussed the possibility of having two powers within an act; God’s power and man’s acquisition. Al-Ghazālī affirmed that the power of God is associated with the nature of creation (*khalq*) while the power of human is acquisition (*kasb*) that is then realized through human act (Al-Ghazālī. 1962).

The understanding of such discussion of God as the creator of *kasb* was also adopted by Al-Sanusi which can be found in his writing of *al-Muqaddimat* and *Sharh al-Kubra*. Al-Maraghi in interpreting Al-Sanusi’s writing on *kasb* in his *‘Aqīdah al-Sughra* stated that if God wills to create the act of choice (*ikhtiyari*) such as standing, sitting and walking, He will create the sense of awareness in human mind and complement the act with reasons which will correspond to the choice made by man (Al-Sāwī. n.d).

Man’s inclination thus complements God’s will. The inclination and choice, as well as the act, can only be realized through the acquisition created by God which is considered as the attribute of *wujudiyah* related to the act of choice (*fi’il al-ikhtiyārī*) which denotes as act that is complemented with power apart from the *asbāb al-‘ādiyah* (material cause).

Hence, the theory of *kasb* is vital in understanding the function of *al-qudrah al-hādithah* (the created power) and *fi’il al-ikhtiyārī* (the act of choice). Acts of choice are thus referred to the living beings similar to how head, hands, and legs are referred as the creation of God.

The act of choice in referring to God is comprehended as His creation and if referred to man is understood as *kasb*. The analogy is like a rental house when referred to the landlord is understood as his possession. Ironically if it is referred to the tenant can be perceived as one who obtains benefits of the other. This complements the relation between God’s mediation and the act of man. Nevertheless according to Islamic rule of moral (*ādāb*) one must only associate good acts to God. While bad acts should be associated with man’s own ignorance.

CONCLUSION

It is important to note that the discourse of human act was extensively discussed by the Ashā‘irah scholars namely Al-Ash‘arī himself followed by his successors Al-Bāqillānī, Al-Juwaynī and Al-Ghazālī. On the whole, the discourse of human acts among the Ashā‘irah scholars can be seen possessing diverse viewpoints. For instance, Al-Ash‘arī and Al-Ghazālī both agreed that human act is created by God which denotes human act as act of God. Meanwhile, Al-Bāqillānī and Al-Juwaynī signified human act as their own act that has no relation to God. What binds them together was their views that hold the power of acquisition is created by God as mentioned in several Quranic verses. In sum, despite being categorized as Ashā‘irah scholars, their views diverse in response to the discourse in their respective times. Nevertheless, their arguments did not contradict but further support and enhance Ash‘arī’s initial argument. The modification of the latter somehow complemented the earlier ones until it is widely accepted by the Muslim world.

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