Historical Outline

10th Century: the Kalam Tradition. Sources: Sayf al-Dīn al-Amidī (1156/7-1233); ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (c.961-1037/8). The Liar is seen as one of several counterexamples to the definition of a declarative sentence.

13th Century: the Maragha School. Figures: Athīr al-Dīn al-Abhari (1200-1265), Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (1201-1274), Kāṭib al-Quzwinī (d.1276), Saʿād ibn Maṇṣūr ibn Kammūna (d.1284); Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Samarqandī (1240-1304). The Liar is seen as a “difficult fallacy” (mughalaṭa ṣaʿba) that raises questions about the nature of truth and falsehood, and the relationship between a sentence and what it is about.

Abhari: “We should not concede that if it is false then one of his sentences is true. For its being true is to be the conjunction of its being true and being false.”

Ṭūsī: “If the declarative sentence is the same as that-about-which-it-declares, then it cannot be conceived to be true and false. For agreement cannot be conceived except as between two things, and we cannot conceive them as opposed. For if one thing is affirmed, then nothing will be denied, and if one thing is denied, then nothing can be conceived to be affirmed.”

14th Century: Saʿād al-Dīn Masʿūd ibn ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Taftazānī (1322–1390). The Liar comes up in the midst of a polemic against the view that goodness and badness are knowable by reason.


Our Project

Translate and reconstruct the entire tradition. “The Early Arabic Liar” covers the Kalam tradition, Abhari, and Ṭūsī; “Taftazānī on the Liar Paradox” covers Taftazānī; next step is to tackle the treatises written by Dashtakī and Dawānī.

Taftazānī’s Text

Source: Taftazānī, Sharḥ al-maḥāṣid (Commentary on the Aims of [Kalām]). Chapter: “No Judgment for the Intellect On Goodness and Badness.” (Book not translated; complete chapter not translated.)

Goodness and badness are in our view shariʿiyān, but for the Muʿtazila are rational (ʿaqlī) […] For us the intellect does not judge whether an action is good or bad based on God’s judgment, rather this action is good because God commanded it and it is bad because God forbade it, without taking in consideration that the intellect judges it to be good or bad intrinsically […] For the Muʿtazila, an action is good or bad […] in the judgment of God, and the intellect necessarily cognizes its goodness or badness, such as the goodness of the beneficial truth and the badness of the harmful lie…

Taftazani presents several arguments against the view that goodness and badness are rational in this sense (these are rough partial translations, but hopefully suffice to give you a sense of the text).

1. If an act is good or bad rationally, then God would necessarily punish those who commit bad acts or abandon their religious duties, regardless of whether the divine command (shariʿ) existed or not […] But this is invalid, for it contradicts what God says, “And never would We punish until We sent a messenger” (Quran Isra verse 15).

2. If goodness and badness is judged by reason, no act of human is rationally good or bad. [Argument: acts are good and bad, as judged by reason, only if free; human actions are determined, and so not free.]

3. If the badness of lying is intrinsic, then by necessity there is no case in which this would be undermined. But this is not true, for what if you have to lie to save the prophet from death? Then you
must, and thus the lie becomes good. One might object that in this case lying is still bad, but not saving the prophet is worse than lying, and thus one must do the lesser evil. Thus the requisite good is the saving of the prophet, not the lying. I reply that, given that the lying is the cause and the reason for the requisite saving, it is also required, and thus it becomes good.

4. If goodness (ḥasan) and badness (qubh) are intrinsic, then this entails the gathering of two contradictories, as in the case of the one who says, ‘I will lie tomorrow’. [This is the argument that leads to the Liar Paradox. See below for full translation]

5. If an act is good or bad intrinsically, then it is necessary that an accident exists in virtue of being an accident, and that is invalid. For the goodness of an act would be external to it, because one may cognize the act without cognizing its goodness or its badness, even though that it is an existent thing and does not subsist by itself, and this is the meaning of ‘accident’. With respect to not subsisting by itself, this is obvious, and as far as why it is an existent thing, this is because its contradiction is the non-goodness and that is negative. [Long complicated discussion of negation and contradictory accidents; relation between the non-possible, possible, and the necessary; good, non-good, bad, non-bad, etc.]

6. If the act is good or bad intrinsically or by its attributes, then God is not a chooser in making the judgment [of good or bad], and this by necessity is invalid. […] [If goodness and badness are intrinsic, then] God must judge based on the preponderant reason, in a way that it cannot be otherwise. [This] negate[s] from God the ability to choose […]

7. If the goodness or badness of an act is that for which God commands it or forbids it, then the goodness or badness precedes God […]

The Fourth Argument in Full

[1.] If goodness (ḥasan) and badness (qubh) are intrinsic, then this entails the gathering of two contradictories, as in the case of the one who says, ‘I will lie tomorrow’. For either he is telling the truth, which must be both a good in virtue of his truthfulness and a bad in virtue of entailing lying tomorrow; or he is lying, which must be both a bad in virtue of the lying and a good in virtue of entailing refraining from lying tomorrow. And thus, it is possible to have the gathering of two contradictories in saying, ‘I will lie tomorrow.’

[2.] For, in virtue of the lying it is bad and in virtue of entailing the truth of the original sentence it is good. Or, it is [only] good, but then badness cannot be intrinsic to lying. Or, it is [only] bad, but then refraining from lying becomes a good together with entailing the falsity of the original sentence, and so is a bad. And the ground of this entailment is the restriction of the ‘tomorrow’ saying in this case [alt: one?]. And thus it can be either true or false, and either way, this entails the gathering of goodness and badness in it. And the ground for all this is that goodness must be good, and that badness must be bad, and that each good or bad is intrinsic.

[3.] And this problem can be set up in such a way that truth and falsehood are in one sentence (kalām), and thus goodness and badness are gathered. For if we consider a proposition (qadiya) whose purport is to declare of itself the non-being (‘adam) of truth, then truth and falsehood are entailed in it, as when you say that the sentence (kalām) I now speak is not true, for its truth entails the non-being of its truth and vice versa.

[4.] And this can be expressed in the form of ‘tomorrow’ and ‘yesterday’ sentences (kalām). For if one says that the sentence (kalām) I speak tomorrow is not true, or that nothing I speak tomorrow is extrinsically true, and then tomorrow he limits what he says to ‘the sentence (kalām) I spoke yesterday is true,’ then the truth of either the ‘tomorrow’ sentence or the ‘yesterday’ sentence entails the non-being of the truth in both cases, and vice versa.

[5.] This is a fallacy that has perplexed the minds of the most intelligent and smartest people. For this
reason I call it the problem of the mute root (jadhr aṣamm). I have reviewed many claims, and found nothing that quenched my thirst, and I have contemplated it many times, but nothing came to me except the littlest bit of a little bit, namely:

[6.] Truth and falsehood, in the same way they are conditions for judgment (ḥallan li-l-ḥukm)—as affirmative and negative properties, required of all propositions—can be judgment [lit. “that-which-is-judged-of-something”] (ḥukman), i.e., that which is judged is predicated of something indirectly, as when we say, this is true and that is false. And they are not contradictory to each other unless we consider them as two conditions for one judgment, or two judgments upon one subject, as opposed to if we consider one of them as a condition for judgment and the other as a judgment. For what differentiates the subject is either some explicit difference, as in our saying, “the sky is beneath us’ is true (or false),” or something hidden, as in the specific proposition that belongs to this problem.

[7.] For if we suppose it to be false, then nothing other than the truth of its contradiction is entailed, that is, our saying, of this speech, that it is true [alt: that is, our sentence, ‘this speech is true’], so then truth occurs as a judgment of the specific [proposition], not as a condition for its judgment; rather the condition for its judgment is falsehood, as we supposed, and truth is the affirmative property which is a condition for the judgment of the opposite [proposition], and a judgment for the original specific [proposition], and thus it is impossible to gather two conditions for one judgment or two judgments upon one subject.

[8.] And likewise, if we assume it to be true, then one may deny the contradiction of the truth and falsity which necessitate each other by referring one of them to the judgment of the specified [proposition] and the other to the judgment of its subject.

[9.] However, the correct judgment regarding this proposition is to give up on a solution and admit the incapability of [solving] this paradox.

Responses

Dawānī on Taftazānī’s solution:

Since he pointed to its weakness, we leave [his proposed solution] aside to discuss the others, and we should not explore what is in it.¹

Dashtaki:

Since the weakness in [his] solution is apparent to ‘the people of understanding’³ and [he] admits that he has departed from the right path, for the sake of brevity, we leave aside the details.⁴

Shams al-Din Muhammad b. Aḥmad al-Khafrī (1550):

Since the weakness in [his] solution is apparent—it is necessary that the one and only subject of this proposition is itself, which entails the gathering of truth and falsity in one proposition, which is impossible—Taftazānī admits that he has departed from the right path.⁵

¹ To understand what Taftazani is saying here (and our translation), it helps to understand the grammar of the verb “to judge” (ḥukm) in Arabic, and how it differs from the grammar of English. The verb takes the predicate as its direct object, and the subject as an indirect object. So, when in English, I judge [Zayd]DIRECT OBJECT to be [lying]INDIRECT OBJECT, in Arabic, I judge [lying]DIRECT OBJECT of [Zayd]INDIRECT OBJECT. ‘ḥukman’ is a nominalization of the verb, ‘ḥukm’. It is ambiguous: it might pick out the judgment as a whole, or it might pick out the direct object of the judgment—that is, the predicate. Here Taftazani makes it clear that he intends to be picking out the direct object of the judgment. Hence our labored translation, ‘that-which-is-judged-of-something’.

² 12 Treatises on Liar Paradox in Shirāz School, p. 67.

³ ‘li-ūlā al-albāb’ (Qurʾān verse 2, 179),

⁴ 12 Treatises on Liar Paradox in Shirāz School, p. 5.

⁵ 12 Treatises on Liar Paradox in Shirāz School, p. 276
Taftazānī borrows many of his arguments in this chapter from Fakhr al-Dīn Al-Rāzī’s al-Maṭalib al-ʿāliya. In al-Maṭalib al-ʿāliya, Rāzī mounts a direct attack on truth and falsehood.

Truth is taken to be the agreement between a declarative sentence and that about which it declares, and falsity, the non-agreement between a declarative sentence and that about which it declares. And it is well-known that truth and falsity are two species under the genus, declarative sentence (khabar). And declarative sentence [is a species] under the genus of speech (kalimah), and a speech is taken to be an vocalization (lafẓ) composed of a successive sequence of syllables.

And what exists of [a declarative sentence] is always nothing but a single syllable, and when [that syllable] is completed, the second syllable occurs, and so on, in this arrangement, until the last syllable of the word (kalimah) occurs, and at this point the word (kalimah) is complete. Based on this, the word (kalimah) does not exist at all at any time or circumstance, and all that exists of it [at any time or circumstance] is a single syllable. And a single syllable is not a single speech (kalām).

If this is established, then we say: a single syllable is not a declarative sentence (khabar), and it is neither true nor false, and it is impossible for it to be what necessitates goodness or badness. With respect to the totality of a word (kalimah), it does not exist at all, and that which does not exist at all cannot be the cause of something’s being good or bad. By this proof, we establish that it is impossible for the speech (kalām) to be good or bad, for it cannot be true or false.

The difference is that you [Muṭalib al-ʿalīya] say that being true necessitates the attribute of goodness, and being false necessitates the attribute of badness. We say that the truth is the totality, and this totality does not exist at all, and it is impossible for what does not exist to be a necessitator of an actual fixed attribute, and that claim [i.e., the claim that truth is a necessitator of an actual fixed attribute] is in contrast to what you say.

Instead, we say when we hear this sequence of syllables—which they agree make us aware of some meanings—without doubt we understand some of these meanings, and at this point we form a belief about something. If the speech (kalām) is false, then it becomes clear to us that our act is wrong (ḥāṭil). And there is no other meaning of what is to be false except this. And thus the difference [between us and the Muṭalib al-ʿalīya] becomes evident.⁶

Primary Texts

Ahad Qarāmaleki, 12 Treatises on Liar Paradox in Shirāz School. Tehran, Iranian Institute of Philosophy, 2007
Baghdādi, Uṣūl al-dīn (Beirut, 1981) 13, 217

Secondary Sources
