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# PHILOSOPHICAL DEBATES ON SEEING GOD IN MEDIEVAL *KALĀM* THEOLOGY

Safaruk Zaman Chowdhury\*

**Abstract:** This article offers a systematic philosophical study of the medieval Islamic debate over the possibility of seeing God (*visio dei*, *ru'yat Allāh*), a doctrine that reveals an intersection of theology, epistemology and theories of perception. Moving beyond purely scriptural exegesis, the study reconstructs the major Mu'tazilī rational objections to Divine vision, focusing on their materialist theories of optics and their uncompromising commitment to Divine transcendence (*tanzīh*). In response, it analyses the counterarguments of Ash'arī theologians, such as al-Ash'arī, al-Bāqillānī, al-Juwaynī, al-Anṣārī and al-Rāzī, highlighting their methodological developments: from early occasionalist models of Divine action to later sophisticated critiques of Mu'tazilī extramission theories of vision. This study shows how later Ash'arīs redefined vision as a direct, non-physical act of Divine creation, thereby preserving the possibility of seeing God without compromising His transcendence. Furthermore, it demonstrates how the adoption and adaptation of Avicennian intromission models of optics allowed thinkers like al-Rāzī to refine their metaphysical and epistemological frameworks. In doing so, the doctrine of *visio dei* in early kalām theological discourse emerges not merely as a theological point of faith but as a site of rich philosophical engagement with logic, metaphysics and natural philosophy.

**Keywords:** *ash'arīs, kalām, mu'tazila, transcendence, vision*

## INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of the beatific vision or possibility of seeing God (*visio dei*, *ru'yat Allāh*) remains one of the most contested theological doctrines in the development of early Islamic theology. Despite its centrality to medieval Sunnī *kalām* theology, there is little sustained philosophical analysis of this doctrine in contemporary Islamic studies. Much of modern western (Anglo-European and Anglo-American) scholarship tends to focus narrowly on historical exegesis of Qur'ānic verses or subsumes the doctrine under broader surveys of theological difference, often leaving unexamined the deeper philosophical and

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epistemological issues it raises.<sup>1</sup> This article seeks to intervene by offering a systematic and critical engagement with a segment of the classical debates over the possibility of seeing God attending to the logical structure of the arguments and the underlying theological and philosophical ideas as well as the theories of vision that medieval Muslim theologians and philosophers brought to bear on the question.<sup>2</sup>

At the heart of the dispute around this doctrine lies a fundamental issue: is it possible, in principle, for God – who is not spatial, corporeal or bound by material constraints – to be seen? This question touches on deep philosophical concerns about the nature of existence, limits of human perception and epistemic modalities through which knowledge of the Divine can be acquired. For the majority of Sunnī theologians, particularly the Ash‘arīs, affirming the possibility of seeing God was seen as an essential aspect of faith, rooted in the plain sense of scripture. In contrast, the Mu‘tazila and later many philosophers rejected the possibility, arguing that seeing necessarily implies spatial relations, directionality and corporeality – all of which are incompatible with Divine transcendence (*tanzīh*).

The medieval Islamic literature treated this doctrine across several closely interconnected dimensions. First, there were the scriptural and exegetical dimensions, where both sides marshalled Qur’ānic verses and prophetic reports (*aḥādīth*) to affirm or deny the possibility of seeing God. Particular attention was given to verses, such as 6:103, 7:143 and 75:22–23, with intricate debates about proper interpretation of terms like *idrāk* (apprehension), *naẓar* (looking), *ibṣār* (seeing) and *ru‘ya* (vision).<sup>3</sup> Second, there were the rational and philosophical dimensions, where theologians sought to demonstrate the possibility or impossibility of the vision of God through purely rational arguments. This involved a variety of techniques, including syllogistic reasoning, appeal to metaphysical first principles concerning God’s nature and the development of counterexamples to the idea that vision must always imply spatial or bodily conditions.<sup>4</sup> Third, and most interestingly for this study, there was sustained reflection on the theories of vision – on what it means to see and what conditions must be fulfilled for seeing to occur. Different *kalām* schools adopted competing models of visual perception, including: (1) extramission theories (where vision involved the emission of rays from the eye), and (2) intromission theories (where vision involved the

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<sup>1</sup> On the exegetical analysis in English written works, see Anthony K. Tuft, “The Origins and Development of the Controversy over *Ru‘ya* in Medieval Islam and its Relation to Contemporary Visual Culture” (PhD diss., University of California, 1979), 55–127; Lutpi Ibrahim, “The Problem of the Vision of God in the Theology of Az-Zamakhsharī and al-Bayḍāwī,” *Die Welt Des Orients* 13 (1982); Abu Bakar Ibrahim, “The Qur’ān and the Beatific Vision in Muslim Rationalist and Traditionalist Theologies,” *Hamdard Islamicus* 27, no. 1 (2004); W. Wesley Williams, “*Tajallī wa-Ru‘ya*: A Study of Anthropomorphic Theophany and *Visio Dei* in the Hebrew Bible, the Qur’ān and Early Sunnī Islam” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2008), 76–100; Fatih Han, “Al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025) on the Impossibility of Seeing God,” in *Islamic Sensory History*, ed. Christian Lange and Adam Bursi (Brill, 2024). For more references, see all three publications.

<sup>2</sup> An exception is Yasser Ahmed Qureshy’s doctoral work titled “The Onto-Epistemology of *Ru‘yat Allah* in the Classical Ash‘arī School” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2020). However, I was unable to obtain it at the time of writing due to it being embargoed until 2027.

<sup>3</sup> Ja‘far al-Subḥānī, *Ru‘yat Allāh Fī Daw‘ al-Kitāb wa-l-Sunna wa-l-‘Aql al-Sarīḥ* [Seeing God In Light of the Qur’ān, Sunna and Clear Reason] (Dār Ma‘shar, n.d.), 53–61, 83–88.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 34–42.

reception of emanations from objects). Understanding these theories is critical because how theologians conceived the mechanics of vision directly influenced their theological stance on the doctrine. For instance, if vision necessarily involved rays, bodies and directionality, then seeing God – who transcends all these – would seem impossible. If, however, perception could be framed more abstractly, as a direct and unmediated awareness of an existent, then the possibility of seeing God might be maintained without compromising Divine transcendence. This article will thus seek to recover some of the richness and complexity of these medieval debates, demonstrating that the question of seeing God in classical Islamic thought was not a simple matter of scriptural proof-texts, but one that demanded deep metaphysical, epistemological and scientific reflection.

## RATIONAL ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE POSSIBILITY OF SEEING GOD

The Mu‘tazila offered rational arguments for the impossibility of seeing God. This section includes examination of their core rational arguments followed by the next section, which includes analysing some of the responses to them by their arch theological adversaries, the Ash‘arīs.<sup>5</sup> According to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), four core rational arguments are presented by the Mu‘tazila, which can be distilled from their major writings.<sup>6</sup> The clear aim behind these arguments is to demonstrate the lack of philosophical basis for upholding the belief that God can be seen. Therefore, such a doctrine should be rejected. I will state all four arguments in a semi-formal way followed by an explanation of each that includes key metaphysical and theological principles underpinning them.<sup>7</sup>

### Argument #1: From Spatial Opposition (*dalīl al-muqābala*)

1. Sight can only perceive material things (i.e., things that have colour, shape and occupy a direction in space).

<sup>5</sup> For a doxography of early *kalām* views on the Islamic doctrine of seeing God, see Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn wa Ikhtilāf al-Muṣallīn* [The Doctrinal Positions of Muslims and their Disagreements], ed. Muḥyī al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd (Maktaba al-Nahḍa al-Miṣriyya, 1950), 1:263–65. Also, see the discussion in Ḥasan al-Shāfi‘ī, *al-Āmidī wa Ārā’uhu al-Kalāmiyya* [Al-Āmidī and his Theological Views] (Dār al-Salām, 1998), 367–76.

<sup>6</sup> See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Kitāb al-Arba‘īn Fī Uṣūl al-Dīn* [The Forty Principles of the Foundations of the Religion] (Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2009), 209–10.

<sup>7</sup> The names of each Mu‘tazilī argument against seeing God that I use here are taken from al-Rāzī. These names are not arbitrary but tied to the central concept or mechanism around which the reasoning revolves. Each label typically identifies the crucial logical condition that the Mu‘tazila argue is *missing* in the case of seeing God, thereby rendering vision of Him impossible. Argument #1 is named after the requirement that the object of sight must be “*muqābil*”, i.e., opposite or in front of the observer in a specific spatial relation. The word *muqābala* names the crucial condition the argument focuses on, which is the necessity of spatial alignment in vision. Argument #2 enumerates a list of conditions that must be absent for vision to take place – things that would otherwise block or prevent sight (*mawānī* = preventers). The argument centres on the conditions that ‘prevent’ or ‘permit’ vision, i.e., what must not exist for vision to occur. Since these do not apply to God, He remains inaccessible to vision. Argument #3 depends on classical theories of optics (especially pre-modern theories), which held that, for something to be seen, its form must be “imprinted” (*inṭibā*) on the eye. The core claim is that vision requires *inṭibā* and this cannot happen in God’s case. As for Argument #4, it may not always be named in classical works as a distinct *dalīl*, but it is often folded into the above arguments, especially Argument #3, since colour and shape are part of what is imprinted on the eye.

2. God is not a material being (i.e., He has no colour, shape or spatial location).
3. Therefore, God cannot be seen by sight.
4. Therefore, God cannot be seen in this world or the Hereafter.<sup>8</sup>

This first Mu‘tazilī argument is rooted in a fundamentally empiricist conception of sight and a strong commitment to Divine transcendence. The premise begins with a seemingly intuitive observation: human vision is only capable of perceiving things that are material – things that occupy space, possess colour or shape and can be located in a particular direction. This understanding aligns with our everyday sensory experience: we see bodies and physical forms, and all acts of vision are mediated through the interaction between the eye and spatial characteristics of the object seen. Based on this, the Mu‘tazila reason that, because God is not a material entity, He does not possess any of the characteristics that could be registered by the physical eye. He is not extended in space, does not have colour or shape, and is not confined to a direction or location. Therefore, human sight, by its nature, cannot apprehend God. The conclusion they draw is not just that God cannot be seen now (in this world), but that He cannot be seen at all – not even in the Hereafter. The underlying principle is that vision depends on materiality, and since God is categorically non-material, vision of God is categorically impossible. This argument is a direct application of their broader theological method, which often prioritises strict *tanzīh* (Divine transcendence, above-ness and

<sup>8</sup> ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Asadābādī, *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-Khamsa* [Commentary on the Five Fundamental Principles], ed. ‘Abd al-Karīm ‘Uthmān, 3rd ed. (Maktaba Wahba, 1996), 248: “He [‘Abd al-Jabbār] began with the argument from spatial opposition, which can be formulated as follows: One of us only sees by means of a sensory faculty, and the one who sees through a sense faculty can only see a thing if it is directly in front (*muqābil*), or located within something in front, or in the judgment of being in front. But it has been established that God - Exalted is He - cannot be in front, nor within what is in front, nor in the judgment of being in front.”

وبدا منها بدلالة المقابلة وتحريمها إنَّ الواحد ممَّا راء بحاسَّة، والرَّائي بالحاسَّة لا يرى الشَّيء إلا إذا كان مُقَابِلًا أو حالًا في المُقَابِل، أو في حُكْم المُقَابِل، وقد ثبَّت أنَّ الله تعالى لا يجوزُ أن يكون مُقَابِلًا ولا حالًا في المُقَابِل، ولا في حُكْم المُقَابِل

See Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *Al-Iqtisād Fī-l-Itiqād* [The Moderation in Belief] (Dār al-Baṣā’ir, 2009), 275. He presents a version of this argument in a syllogism: “if it is said: being visible necessitates that the thing is either an accident or a substance, both of which are impossible [for God]; and the structure of the syllogism is [as follows]: if He is visible, then it implies He must be in a direction relative to the observer - and this consequent (being in a direction) is impossible - therefore, that which leads to it (i.e., visibility) is also impossible.”

فإن قيل : فكونه مرئيًا يوجب كونه عرضاً أو جوهرًا وهو محال، ونظم القياس : أنه إن كان مرئيًا فهو بجهة من الرائي وهذا اللازم محال، فالمفضي إلى لزومه محال.

1. If God is seen, then He must be in a direction (*ft jiha*) relative to the seer.
  2. It is impossible for God to be in a direction relative to the seer [as this would imply He is either an accident or a substance].
  3. Therefore, it is impossible for God to be seen.
- In logical form, this is a simple *modus tollens* (denying the consequent). Let  $p$  = ‘God is seen’ and  $q$  = ‘God is in a direction’

$$\begin{aligned} p &\rightarrow q \\ \neg q & \\ \therefore \neg p & \end{aligned}$$

The first premise asserts a conditional connection: if a person affirms vision, they must affirm spatial directionality. The second premise denies that God has spatial directionality. The entailment is that such a person must deny the possibility of vision. Al-Ghazālī is summarising the Mu‘tazilī objection before he proceeds to respond. He makes it clear that one part of the Mu‘tazilī argument (that being seen entails directionality) he accepts for the sake of argument (*musallam*), but he critiques whether this necessity entails the impossibility of seeing God. I discuss al-Ghazālī’s reply in little more detail under al-Rāzī’s response to Argument #2.

incomparability) to the extent of rejecting any scriptural language or theological concept that risks anthropomorphism.<sup>9</sup>

Argument #2: From Prevention (*dalīl al-mawānī*)

1. Conditions for seeing to occur only apply to bodies (*ajsām*) and physical objects.
2. God is not a body and is not spatially located (like a physical object).
3. Therefore, the conditions for seeing to occur do not apply to God.
4. Therefore, He cannot be seen through sensory perception.<sup>10</sup>

The second Mu'tazilī argument builds on the first but shifts the emphasis slightly toward the necessary preconditions for sight to occur.<sup>11</sup> According to this line of reasoning, sight is not merely a passive experience, but a complex event that depends on several conditions like the presence of a sound sensory faculty (e.g., a functioning eye), an appropriate distance between the viewer and viewed (neither too close nor too far), the absence of any barriers, and crucially, the positional alignment or orientation of the object such that it is directly opposite to the viewer or in the “judgment of being opposite to” (*ḥukm al-muqābala*). These preconditions are not arbitrary; they are, in view of the Mu'tazila, based on our systematic experience of the world and they govern all acts of vision. The claim is that such conditions can only apply to bodies – physical entities that occupy space and can be positioned relative to the observer. But God is not a body, is not situated in space and cannot be assigned a direction or position. Therefore, none of the conditions required for vision can be fulfilled in relation to God. From this, the Mu'tazila conclude that seeing God – whether in this life or the next – is not just empirically impossible, but logically incoherent, because the foundational conditions of vision do not apply to Him. This argument reinforces the Mu'tazilī commitment to upholding the unity and incorporeality of God by rejecting any ascription of spatiality or relational positioning to Him.<sup>12</sup>

Argument #3: From Impression (*dalīl al-inṭibā*)

1. For something to be seen by the human eye, an image or form of the thing must be imprinted (*inṭibā*) on the eye.
2. God transcends all forms, images and likenesses.

<sup>9</sup> See Tuft, “The Origins and Development,” 175–96.

<sup>10</sup> 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Asadābādī, *al-Mughnī Fī Abwāb al-Tawḥīd* [That which is Sufficient for the Tenets Concerning Unity and Justice], vol. 4 (“On Visio Dei”), ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ḥilmī and Abū al-Wafā al-Ghunaymī (al-Mu'assasa al-Miṣriyya al-Āmma li-l-Ta'līf wa-l-Anbā' wa-l-Nashr, 1965), 4:64–69.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Rāzī conveniently presents eight conditions for vision (*ibṣār*) to occur in observable experience (Al-Rāzī, *Kitāb al-Arba'in*, 209):

The sensory faculty (e.g., the eye) must be sound and functioning.

The object must be of the kind that can be seen.

The object must not be extremely far.

The object must not be extremely close.

The object must be directly in front of the viewer or in the position of in-frontness (*ḥukm al-muqābala*).

The object must not be too subtle or imperceptibly fine (*laṭīf*).

There must be no barrier between the observer and the object.

The object must not be extremely small.

<sup>12</sup> Tuft, “The Origins and Development,” 197–211.

3. Therefore, God cannot be seen by the human eye, because the necessary condition for vision (a visual imprint) is not possible in His case.<sup>13</sup>

The third Mu‘tazilī argument appeals to a more technical understanding of how sight functions, particularly rooted in late antique and early Near Eastern theories of optics.<sup>14</sup> The central claim is, for something to be seen by the eye, it must produce a form or likeness (*ṣūra* or *mithāl*) that is imprinted (*intibā‘*) on the eye. This imprinting is thought to be essential to visual perception: the eye receives the form of the object, and from this, the visual impression is formed in the mind. This model of vision presupposes that the object of sight must possess features that can be “transferred” to the seeing subject – specifically, form, shape and orientation. However, the Mu‘tazila insist that God transcends all such forms and likenesses. He is not composed of parts, He has no shape and there is nothing that resembles Him. Consequently, He cannot produce an image or form that could be imprinted on the eye. Since this imprinting process is a necessary precondition for human sight, the conclusion is that God cannot be the object of human visual perception.<sup>15</sup> What is significant is that the Mu‘tazila are not only upholding the doctrine of Divine transcendence (*tanzīh*), but also grounding their argument in empirical models of how vision operates. For them, to claim that God can be seen would imply that He has a form (which would violate Divine uniqueness) or that visual perception can occur without imprinting, which would be a violation of the (then) established understanding of how sight works. Thus, seeing God is ruled out as theologically problematic and philosophically untenable.

#### Argument #4: From Colour and Shape (*dalīl al-lawn wa-l-shakl*)

1. Whatever is seen must have colour and shape.
2. God has neither colour nor shape.
3. Therefore, God cannot be seen.<sup>16</sup>

This is a variant of argument #3, drawing on inductive generalisation from all known cases of vision. The Mu‘tazila position relies on the empirical fact that all *known* visible things are

<sup>13</sup> Al-Rāzī, *Kitāb al-Arba‘īn*, 210: “Everything that is seen must necessarily have its form and representation imprinted in the eye. But God, exalted is He, is far above image and likeness. Therefore, it is necessary that His being seen be impossible.”

<sup>14</sup> For the ancient and pre-Islamic theories of vision, see David C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler* (The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 1–17; A. Mark Smith, *From Sight to Light: The Passage from Ancient to Modern Optics* (The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 25–155.

<sup>15</sup> See Al-Asadābādī, *al-Mughnī*, 4:59-69, 113-114; Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan b. Aḥmad ibn Mattawayh, *al-Tadhkira Fī Aḥkām al-Jawāhir wa-l-‘arād* [The Reminder Concerning the Judgments on Substances and Accidents], ed. Daniel Gimaret (Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale [IFAO], 2009), 1:719–37. See as well the translations of original Arabic *kalām* sources regarding vision theories in James Weaver, “Al-Nazzām (d. ca. 230/845) on the Physics of Sensory Perception,” *Islamic Sensory History*, ed. Christian Lange and Adam Bursi (Brill, 2024); David Bennett, “Al-Ash‘arī (d. 324/935-6) on Mu‘tazilite Claims about the Senses and Sense Perception,” in *Islamic Sensory History*, ed. Christian Lange and Adam Bursi (Brill, 2024).

<sup>16</sup> Al-Rāzī, *Kitāb al-Arba‘īn*, 210: “Everything that is visible must necessarily have colour and shape. The proof for this is inductive reasoning (*al-istiqrā‘*). But God - Exalted is He - is transcendent above that, so it follows that He cannot be seen.”  
والله تعالى منزّه عن ذلك، فوجب أن لا يُرى. ودليله: الاستقراء. أن كل ما كان مرئياً، فلا بد له من لون وشكل

characterised by colour and shape. Since God transcends all attributes of form, He cannot be assimilated into the category of the visible. Thus, this argument reinforces their core metaphysical principle: God's utter dissimilarity from creation entails that He cannot be the object of physical vision.

## RATIONAL ARGUMENTS FOR THE POSSIBILITY OF SEEING GOD

Having outlined the four core Mu'tazilī objections to the rational possibility of seeing God, I now present some of the (counter)arguments offered by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d. 324/935) and followers of his tenets like Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1012) and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. I will first present two philosophical arguments by al-Ash'arī and one by al-Bāqillānī for establishing the general rational possibility of seeing God followed by al-Rāzī's responses to each of the four Mu'tazilī objections. I will conclude the final section of the article with an examination of one point of contention in this doctrinal dispute around the extramission theory of vision adopted by the Mu'tazila to support their arguments. By analysing the critiques of two other towering Ash'arī intellectuals, Abū Ma'ālī al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085) and his student Abū al-Qāsim al-Anṣārī (d. 512/1118), it becomes clear that the Ash'arī strategy against the Mu'tazila is not merely to assert the possibility of seeing God but to dismantle their (meta)physics of vision altogether. What also emerges is a methodological development in that al-Ash'arī and al-Bāqillānī respond to the Mu'tazilī denial of seeing God ultimately through a general occasionalist framework, arguing that vision need not be the product of natural causes but is an accident created directly by God in the perceiver at the moment of perception. They dismiss the Mu'tazilī reliance on physical preconditions for sight as unnecessary and theologically restrictive. However, later Ash'arī theologians, such as al-Juwaynī and al-Anṣārī, expectedly remained faithful to occasionalism, but now engaged more deeply to support it by severely criticising the extramission model of vision adopted by the Mu'tazila. Although it is not clear that either adopted an intromission model of vision, what is clear is that al-Rāzī incorporated the prevailing Avicennian modified Aristotelian intromission model of vision.<sup>17</sup> All three thinkers – with dialectical aims – incorporate elements of the philosophical optics from their time, especially ideas like perception involving likenesses (*mithāl*) and non-directional reception, to refine the metaphysical plausibility of seeing God without compromising Divine transcendence or the Qur'ānic affirmation of God being seen in the Hereafter.

<sup>17</sup> Equally important is what a younger Ash'arī contemporary of al-Rāzī – Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī (d. 631/1233) – had to say, though I omit it here due to space. It has been extensively discussed in Laura Hassan, "Sense Perception in Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī: A Theologian's Encounter with Avicennan Psychology," *Philosophical Problems in Sense Perception: Testing the Limits of Aristotelianism*, ed. David Bennet and Juhana Toivanen, Studies in the History of Philosophy of Mind, vol. 26 (Springer, 2020); Jon McGinnis, "Setting One's Sights on Sight: Observations on Sense Perception in Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī," *Philosophical Problems in Sense Perception: Testing the Limits of Aristotelianism*, ed. David Bennet and Juhana Toivanen, Studies in the History of Philosophy of Mind, vol. 26 (Springer, 2020).

Starting with al-Ash‘arī, his two rational arguments stated in *al-Ibāna* are:<sup>18</sup>

Argument 1: From Existence to Visibility

1. Whatever exists is, in principle, visible (only non-existent things are unseen).
2. God exists.
3. Therefore, it is possible to see God.<sup>19</sup>

Al-Ash‘arī argues that visibility is a property that applies to everything that exists and non-existence alone is what renders something unseeable. Since God undeniably exists, it logically follows that it is not impossible for Him to be seen. This does not mean that everything that exists *must* be seen, but its visibility is not impossible in principle. The fact we do not currently see God is irrelevant to whether vision is possible; what matters is that His existence places Him within the category of what can *possibly* be perceived, unlike a non-existent object (*al-ma‘dūm*). Given this, al-Ash‘arī emphasises that visibility is not tied to being physical, created or finite, since we often see things (like light or colour) that are neither bodily nor composed of accidents. Therefore, God’s immaterial and eternal nature does not preclude the possibility of Him being seen.

The second argument al-Ash‘arī offers is interesting and I have divided it into two parts:

Part 1 – God sees Himself:

1. Whoever sees others also sees himself.
2. God sees others.
3. Therefore, God sees Himself.

Part 2 – Others seeing God:

1. Whoever sees himself can possibly be seen by others.
2. God sees Himself.
3. Therefore, it is possible for others to see God.<sup>20</sup>

This argument works by drawing analogies from perception and self-awareness. The first step asserts that whoever sees other things must also see themselves, and since God is affirmed in revelation to be One who sees all things, He must also see Himself. The second step follows naturally: if God sees Himself, then it is possible that He could allow others to see Him. This mirrors how knowledge works – just as God knows Himself and can make us

<sup>18</sup> For al-Ash‘arī’s arguments for the doctrine *visio dei*, see Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī, *al-Ibāna ‘an Uṣūl al-Diyāna* [The Elucidation on the Fundamentals of the Religion], ed. Bashīr Muḥammad ‘Uyūn (Maktaba Dār al-Bayān, 1989), 58–71; Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī, *al-Luma‘ Fī al-Radd ‘alā Ahl al-Zaygh wa-l-Bida‘* [Flashes in Refutation of the Heretics], ed. Ḥasan al-Shāfi‘ī (Dār al-Ḥukamā’ li-l-Nashr, 2021), 165–75. For analysis of his views on the doctrine of seeing God, refer to Muḥsin al-Tlilī, “‘Aqīda Ru’yat Allāh Fī Kalām Abī al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī” [The Belief in Seeing God According to the Statements of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī], *Hawliyyāt al-Jāmi‘a al-Tūnisiyya* 49 (2005).

<sup>19</sup> Al-Ash‘arī, *al-Ibāna*, 66; Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī, *al-Inṣāf Fī Mā Yajibu I’tiqāduhu Wa Lā Yajūzū al-Jahl Bihī* [The Balanced Account Regarding what must be Believed and what cannot be Ignored], ed. Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī (al-Maktaba al-Azhariyya li-l-Turāth, 2000), 175. On this argument, refer to Tuft, “The Origins and Development,” 133–66.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Ash‘arī, *al-Ibāna*, 66. For more on this argument, refer to Tuft, “The Origins and Development,” 127–32.

know Him, He sees Himself and can make us see Him. Here, al-Ash‘arī equates the *modality* of vision with that of knowledge, but without implying similarity or limitation. Thus, if God’s knowledge of Himself does not undermine His transcendence, neither does the possibility of His vision or of others seeing Him. The argument hinges on the idea that there is no intrinsic limitation preventing God from making Himself visible, just as there is no limitation preventing Him from making Himself known.

The third argument, that of al-Bāqillānī, establishes the logical possibility of seeing God and clearly brings together some of the well-established Ash‘arī theological and metaphysical tenets.<sup>21</sup> He states:

If they say: “Then allow that God could create in you the perception of a tiny gnat, even while your eyes are perceiving an elephant beside it,” We will say to them: This is indeed possible, according to us, within God’s power – exalted is He. If they then say: “So allow that, at this very moment, there are elephants, camels, and flowing rivers right in front of you - and yet you don’t see them, even though you see things smaller than that,” We will say to them: Were we not compelled by necessary knowledge that such things do not exist, we would indeed allow it. And we are not obliged today to doubt that God has already done everything within His power, just as we are not obliged to doubt that today He could create a human without parents, a horse without mating, fire that does not burn anything, dates not from a palm tree, or milk not from an udder. And that He could have resurrected the dead throughout the lands, or that He took us up last night to the celestial realm (*malakūt al-samāwāt*) and then returned us to our beds. And that He could have resurrected everyone we ever parted from – whether for a day or an hour – among our relatives and friends a thousand times and brought them back to life again. And since all of that is within God’s power, your objection is nullified.<sup>22</sup>

As already explained, Mu‘tazilī arguments against seeing God often follow this structure:

1. All instances of vision we know involve certain natural conditions: colour, shape, spatial direction (*jiha*) and confrontational positioning (*muqābala*).
2. God lacks all of these.
3. Therefore, vision of God is impossible.

This is an inductive move based on *nomic necessity* – drawing necessity from how vision operates in the created world, i.e., from the laws of nature or sense experience. They equate impossibility with the violation of natural patterns, assuming that if something has never occurred within nature, it is impossible. Al-Bāqillānī, following al-Ash‘arī, clearly rejects this identification. For him, impossibility is only what entails a logical contradiction (like a square

<sup>21</sup> For analysis of al-Bāqillānī’s arguments for the doctrine of seeing God in the Hereafter, see Muḥammad Ramaḍān ‘Abd Allāh, *Al-Bāqillānī Wa Ārā’uhu al-Kalāmīyya* [Al-Bāqillānī and His Theological Views] (Maṭba‘a al-Umma, 1986), 561–92.

<sup>22</sup> Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī, *Kitāb al-Tamhīd* [The Introduction] (al-Maktaba al-Sharqīyya, 1957), 279: قيل لهم: هذا جائز عندنا في قدرة الله تعالى فإن قالوا: فاجيزوا أن يخلق الله فيكم إدراك ذرة و عيونكم من إدراك فيل إلى جنبها؟ فإن قالوا: فاجيزوا الساعة ذلك، وشيئاً في أن بحضرتكم فيل، وجمالاً وأنهاراً جارية، وأنتم لا ترون ذلك، وإن كنتم ترون ما هو أصغر منه وليس يجب أن نشك اليوم في أن الله تعالى قد فعل كل مقهور عنده، كما قيل لهم: لولا أنا مضطرون إلى العلم بأن ذلك ليس بموجود لأجزنا. . نشك في أنه قد خلق اليوم إنساناً لا من أبوين و فرساً لا من نتاج، و ناراً غير محرقة لشيء، و تمر لا من نخل و لبنا لا من ضرع لا يجب أن وأنه قد أمات كل من فارقتاه يوماً أو . و عرج بنا البارحة إلى ملكوت السموات، ثم ردتنا إلى مضاجعنا . وأنه قد أحيا الأموات بسائر الأقطار، – وإن كان ذلك أجمع مقهوراً لله تعالى – فيطل بذلك ما سألتكم عنه. ساعة من أقاربنا وأصدقائنا ألف مرة ثم أحياهم بعد ذلك

circle), not what contravenes observed natural regularities (‘*ādāt*). Because the vision of God does not entail logical contradiction, even if it violates known laws of vision (e.g., direction, imprinting, form etc.) it is logically possible, and since God is omnipotent, He can actualise it. This is not just theological special pleading, but a methodological assertion about the nature of God and modality: *Whatever does not entail contradiction is within God’s power*. Hence, nomic impossibility  $\neq$  absolute impossibility. Al-Bāqillānī argues that, just because something is not part of our current natural experience, it does not mean it is impossible. It may just be non-actual, not non-possible. When the Mu‘tazila argue to the effect that ‘if you say God can make Himself seen, you must also say He can make elephants appear next to you that you don’t see,’ al-Bāqillānī’s response is to grant the logical possibility of that absurd-sounding scenario and remark, ‘Yes, if God willed that, He could do it. But He has not – and we know He has not because we have necessary knowledge (‘*ilm ḍarūrī*) that there are no such elephants.’ In other words, what makes the Mu‘tazilī objection feel absurd is not that it is *logically impossible*, but that it is not *actual*. That does not make it impossible, only *non-actual*. This shift undercuts their argument’s force.<sup>23</sup>

What al-Bāqillānī’s response assumes is a broader Ash‘arī principle: The ‘laws’ of nature are contingent, not necessary. God can break, override or suspend them at will. Therefore, any objection based on regularities (i.e. vision does not work other than in the natural way) does not hold at the level of God’s power. This radical occasionalism (that natural causes do not necessitate their effects) is the metaphysical foundation for saying the *visio dei* is possible, because it entails no contradiction, and God can create the perception directly. Thus, in typical Ash‘arī fashion, al-Bāqillānī distinguishes between impossibility by contradiction and impossibility by custom. He denies the latter has any binding force over Divine action. Al-Bāqillānī’s method is to affirm that, if something is logically possible – even if it’s contrary to all known empirical experience – it is firmly within God’s power and therefore cannot be denied simply on the basis of observed natural law. A modal formalisation of this Ash‘arī–Mu‘tazilī dispute over the possibility of seeing God will help capture where the specific difference lies. Let us state the symbols first:

$\wedge$  = and (conjunction)

$\neg$  = not (not)

$\rightarrow$  = if then (conditional)

$\leftrightarrow$  = if and only if (biconditional)

$\vdash$  = entails

$\Box_L$  = Logical necessity (in all logically possible worlds)

$\Box_N$  = Nomic necessity (in all worlds consistent with the actual laws of nature)

$\Diamond_L$  = Possibility relative to logic

$\Diamond_N$  = Possibility relative to natural law (nomic possibility).

<sup>23</sup> See al-Bāqillānī, *al-Inṣāf*, 182–84.

$\Box_L$ ,  $\Box_N$ ,  $\Diamond_L$  and  $\Diamond_N$  can be used just like standard modal operators but now represent distinct modes of possibility/necessity. The two key propositions are:

$p$  : the proposition ‘God can be seen (by created beings)’

$q$  : the proposition ‘the object of vision has colour, shape and spatial direction’

The Mu‘tazilī argument is  $\Box_N(p \rightarrow q) \wedge \Box_L(\neg q) \vdash \Box_N(\neg p)$ . That is, if it is nomically necessary that, if something is seen, it has colour, shape and spatial direction and if it is logically necessary that God lacks colour, shape and spatial direction, then it follows that, given the laws of nature and God’s nature, He cannot be seen. Their impossibility claim is nomic, not purely logical. On the other hand, the Ash‘arī challenge – as per al-Bāqillānī – is:

1.  $\neg\Box_L(\neg p) \vdash \Diamond_L(p)$
2.  $\forall\phi (\Diamond_L(\phi) \rightarrow \text{God can actualise } \phi)$
3.  $\Diamond_L(p) \rightarrow \text{God can actualise } p$ .

They reject the elevation of  $\Box_N$  to absolute metaphysical or logical necessity. To conclude this analysis, the Mu‘tazila treat the empirical laws governing vision as metaphysically necessary ( $\Box_N$ ), so any violation is impossible ( $\neg\Diamond_N$ ). But the Ash‘arīs operate with a sharper distinction between natural necessity and logical necessity, holding that only what logically entails contradiction is truly impossible ( $\neg\Diamond_L p \leftrightarrow \Box_L\neg p$ ). Since the vision of God does not entail contradiction, it is logically possible ( $\Diamond_L p$ ) – even if it lies outside the boundaries of natural order – and hence within the scope of Divine omnipotence.

I turn now to al-Rāzī’s responses to the four objections and explain each of them as they appear in his *kalām* work *Kitāb al-Arba‘īn*.<sup>24</sup>

**Response to Argument #1:** In this reply, al-Rāzī’s response to the Mu‘tazilī objection is to disentangle vision from embodied constraints. To recap, the Mu‘tazila had argued that, for vision (*ru‘ya*) to occur, eight conditions must be met – including that the object must be material, located in a spatial direction and perceptible to the physical eye. From this, they concluded that, since God does not fulfil these conditions – being immaterial, beyond space and direction – He cannot be seen. In his rebuttal, al-Rāzī first refuses to concede the Mu‘tazila claim that vision must occur whenever the (eight) conditions are satisfied. He presents two original and subtle arguments to show that the empirical presence of these conditions does not logically entail that vision must follow. The first argument is based on the case of partial perception. Al-Rāzī notes we often perceive large objects as small, such as when we see a mountain or distant figure. If we are truly seeing the whole of that object, he

<sup>24</sup> For other discussions by al-Rāzī on the topic of seeing God, see Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Maḥāṭib al-Ghayb* [The Keys to the Unseen] (Dār al-Fikr, 1981), 13:130–140; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-Āliya Min al-‘Ilm al-Ilāhī* [The Lofty Enquiries in Metaphysics], ed. Aḥmad Ḥujāzī al-Saqā (Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1987), 2:81–87; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Ma‘ālim Uṣūl al-Dīn* [Signpost for the Foundations of the Religion] (Dār al-Kutub al-Arabī, 2004), 71–78; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Ishāra Fī Uṣūl al-Kalām* [Pointers to the Foundations of Theology], ed. Muḥammad Ṣubḥī al-‘Āyidī and Rabī‘ Ṣubḥī al-‘Āyidī (Markaz al-‘Ulūm li-l-Buḥūth wa-l-Dirāsāt, 2007), 92–109; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Nihāyat al-‘Uqūl Fī Dirāyat al-Uṣūl* [Reason’s Utmost in Comprehending the Foundations of Religion], ed. Sa‘īd Fūdāh (Dār al-Dhakhā‘īn, 2015), 3:5–154.

argues, we should perceive its true size, not a miniature impression. On the other hand, if we are not seeing all its parts, then by definition we are not seeing the object fully. Yet all parts of that object are equally near, equally visible and fulfil the same sensory conditions. Why, then, do we not perceive them all equally? He pre-empted a common optical rebuttal: one might say the perception depends on the angles of the light rays forming a triangle between the observer and object. Since the two outermost rays are longer than the central line of sight, the object appears smaller due to this geometric difference. But al-Rāzī refutes this by noting that such minor differences in distance (say, by a handspan or so) do not prevent vision in other cases. Therefore, this small variation cannot account for why we do not perceive each part equally. This proves that, even when all the Mu‘tazila visual conditions are present, sight of the whole is not guaranteed. Thus, the necessity of perception on condition fulfilment is broken.<sup>25</sup> The second argument he gives is from the pile of dust problem. Al-Rāzī offers another example: when we look at a handful of dust, we clearly perceive it as a whole. But this handful is composed of many tiny, individual particles. If seeing one particle was dependent on seeing the others, it would entail an infinite regress (since each would depend on another). If, instead, each particle is independently visible, then we should be able to see them individually even when they are separated – but we cannot. We perceive the dust collectively, not in isolation. Thus, either option leads to contradiction or absurdity. This shows again that, even when the supposed preconditions are met, sight does not necessarily follow.<sup>26</sup>

After challenging the general principle that the eight conditions necessitate vision, al-Rāzī turns to the specific case of seeing God. He argues that, even if it was granted that in the case of worldly, material objects these conditions make vision necessary, it does not follow that the same must hold for God. Why? Because God’s essence is utterly distinct in reality and quiddity (*ḥaqīqa* and *māhiyya*) from created things, and things that differ in essence cannot be assumed to share the same necessary attributes. Therefore, just because the eight conditions produce vision in created bodies does not mean they do – or should – in the case of God. He strengthens his point by noting that some of the eight conditions (e.g., directionality and physicality) are completely inapplicable to God. If these cannot apply to Him, then clearly the analogy between created vision and Divine vision breaks down. It follows that vision of God may operate under entirely different principles, as determined by God. Finally, al-Rāzī delivers a striking critique: the Mu‘tazila are guilty of assuming a universal rule of perception that even they do not consistently uphold. Moreover, he claims that this counter – distinguishing between vision in the realm of the seen (*shāhid*) and vision in the unseen (*ghā’ib*) – has not been explicitly recognised by the Mu‘tazila or even by many Ash‘arīs. He presents it as a neglected but decisive distinction.<sup>27</sup>

In this more refined response, al-Rāzī shows that the Mu‘tazila argument from preconditions collapses under its own weight. It mistakenly treats contingent empirical

<sup>25</sup> Al-Rāzī, *Kitāb al-Arba‘īn Fī Uṣūl al-Dīn* [The Forty Principles of the Foundations of the Religion], ed. Aḥmad Ḥujāzī al-Saqā (Maktaba al-Kulliyya al-Azhariyya, 1986), 301.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 302–3.

patterns as metaphysical necessities, and it wrongly assumes that what applies to the world of bodies must apply to the transcendent God. By offering empirical counterexamples and a metaphysical distinction, al-Rāzī carves out a space in which Divine vision remains logically possible, even if it defies our sensory expectations. The vision of God is not a matter of optics but of Divine will and metaphysical possibility, thus stands beyond the grasp of purely naturalist reasoning

**Response to Argument #2:** The second Mu‘tazilī objection against the possibility of seeing God claims that every visible object must be directly opposite (*muqābil*) the viewer or in a functionally equivalent position, i.e., occupying a specific spatial direction or location in relation to the perceiver. Since God, in Islamic theology, is categorically free from space and direction, the Mu‘tazila conclude He cannot be the object of vision. Al-Rāzī challenges this objection from two angles, each of which exposes fundamental flaws in the Mu‘tazilī method and assumptions. Al-Rāzī begins by insisting on a critical principle in logical discourse: before presenting evidence, one must clearly define the point in dispute. In this case, the central question is this: ‘Can a being that is completely beyond space and direction be seen?’ Now, if the Mu‘tazila claim that the impossibility of seeing a non-spatial being is known by self-evident (*darūrī*) knowledge, al-Rāzī rejects this outright. As he had already demonstrated in earlier discussions, there is no rational compulsion – no necessary or intuitive principle – that requires every visible thing to be spatial or directional. Alternatively, if the Mu‘tazila say this is a speculative (*naẓarī*) truth that must be proven through argument, then al-Rāzī demands to see such proof. But their only evidence appears to be the repeated assertion that every visible object must be opposite the viewer – that is, in a direction. Yet this claim is nothing more than a reformulation of their conclusion. Saying that “everything visible is in a direction” then concluding “therefore, anything not in a direction is not visible” is simply to restate the original claim with different words. From a logical viewpoint, al-Rāzī notes, this amounts to what logicians call reversal of the contrapositive (*‘aks naqīḍ*), which does not provide independent justification. The Mu‘tazila are, in effect, assuming the thing they are trying to prove. Thus, the objection lacks any genuine inferential value.<sup>28</sup>

In the second part of his reply, al-Rāzī makes a now familiar but crucial move: he questions the scope of empirical principles. He concedes that, in the case of created things (*al-shāhid*) – i.e., the world we see and live in – being opposite or spatially located may be necessary for visual perception. But why should this empirical regularity apply to God (*al-ghā’ib*), who is categorically unlike creation? To extend this rule from worldly vision to Divine vision is, al-Rāzī argues, to mistake contingency for necessity. Just because a condition (like spatial opposition) is observed regularly in our experience does not mean it applies universally, especially to a being of an entirely different metaphysical category. Here, al-Rāzī recalls and builds on his redefinition of vision from earlier discussions: *ru’ya* (seeing), in his account, is not an inherently physical or optical event. It is a form of cognitive unveiling (*inkishāf*), in which the essence of the object is disclosed to the knower. In the case of vision, this *inkishāf* may be mediated through the senses, but the underlying concept is

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 303.

broader. Now, he adds a refinement: the nature of *inkishāf* must be consonant with the nature of the object unveiled. If what is seen is spatial, then the unveiling occurs in a spatially conditioned way. But if the object is not spatial – like God – then the unveiling must be non-spatial as well. The act of seeing conforms to the metaphysical structure of the seen (*al-inkishāf yajibū an yakūna ‘alā waḥd al-makshūf*), not the other way around. So, al-Rāzī concludes: if God is not in a place, then the vision of Him will not be spatial in nature, and the absence of spatial opposition is no barrier at all to the possibility of such a vision.<sup>29</sup> Through these two lines of response, al-Rāzī unseats the second Mu‘tazilī objection from its logical form and metaphysical foundation. He shows that the Mu‘tazila offer no valid inference – only a reformulated assertion – and their empirical assumptions have no force when applied to a transcendent, non-spatial Divine being. Most notably, al-Rāzī offers a theology of vision rooted not in the physics of light and space, but in a philosophical account of disclosure that adapts to the ontological status of the object seen. This allows him to preserve the absolute transcendence of God, while also maintaining the possibility of beatific vision – not as physical seeing, but as a pure, non-spatial unveiling granted by God in the Hereafter.

In his *al-Ishāra Fī Uṣūl al-Dīn*, al-Rāzī has a different response. First, he notes that a person looking into a mirror sees their own face, despite the fact that the face is not facing itself. This undermines the claim that *muqābala* is an essential condition for vision. Second, al-Rāzī critiques the Mu‘tazilī optical explanation based on ray emission (*shu‘ā’*) and reflection (*in‘ikās*). If their theory was correct, reflection would only occur on perfectly smooth surfaces (*amlas*). Yet reflections clearly occur on imperfect surfaces such as water, which has pores and disturbances, indicating that perfect physical contact or strict facing is not necessary for vision. He generalises this point further: reflections happen even on rough or porous surfaces, and vision can occur despite movement and distortion in the medium. Observing that light reflects off walls, water and other irregular surfaces, he concludes that spatial facing is not a metaphysical requirement for seeing. Instead, the phenomena the Mu‘tazila treat as necessary are contingent on the ordinary course of nature, not rational necessity. Al-Rāzī’s final move is to argue that, since *muqābala* is not an essential condition even in this-worldly vision, it cannot be invoked as a necessary precondition for seeing God. The act of vision, especially when created directly by God, need not be constrained by spatial mechanics. Thus, the Mu‘tazilī objection collapses and the possibility of the vision of God remains intact.<sup>30</sup>

Al-Rāzī’s illustrious teacher Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) also offers an interesting example of how seeing an object does not necessarily require directionality. Al-Ghazālī confronts the Mu‘tazila assumption that sight necessarily implies spatial direction, i.e., that for something to be seen, it must exist in a place or direction relative to the observer. He challenges this by reversing the claim: even the Mu‘tazila admit that God sees Himself, yet God is not spatially located in relation to Himself. So, seeing does not entail

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 303–4.

<sup>30</sup> Al-Rāzī, *al-Ishāra*, 106–9.

directionality. To bolster this point, he uses a mirror analogy: when you see your reflection in a mirror, you are not actually located where the image appears (e.g., two cubits behind the mirror). The image is not in the wall, the air nor another body behind the mirror. So, where is the image? It is not in any physical location in the mirror – and yet you see it. The only logical conclusion is that the seen image is not a real body external to the viewer, but a form instantiated in the perceiver’s sensory apparatus, caused of course by God. Hence, something can be seen without occupying a direction or physical space, undermining the Mu‘tazilī condition. Therefore, just as we see ourselves in a mirror without the image occupying a spatial position, it is possible for God to cause the vision of Himself without Him being located in space. In this way, the *logical* possibility of seeing God is preserved.<sup>31</sup> His argument can be formalised in the following way:

#### Part 1 – Against the Mu‘tazilī Premise

1. All vision requires the object to be in a spatial direction relative to the seer (the Mu‘tazila claim).
2. When a man sees his image in a mirror, the image is not spatially located (neither behind, within nor around the mirror).
3. Nevertheless, the man sees his image.
4. Therefore, vision does not necessarily require the seen to be in a direction.
5. The Mu‘tazila claim is false.

#### Part 2 – Application to Divine Vision

1. God sees Himself – a fact even the Mu‘tazila affirm.
2. God is not in a direction relative to Himself.
3. Therefore, vision of God can occur without spatial direction.
4. What applies to God’s self-vision can apply (logically) to His vision by others if God causes it.
5. Therefore, it is possible to see God without Him being in a place or direction.
6. Therefore, seeing God is logically possible.

Al-Ghazālī is not denying that directionality is involved in worldly, sensory vision, but he is denying that this must always be the case. By analogy, if the mirror image can be seen without spatial presence, and if God sees without direction, then the Mu‘tazilī principle is shown to be contingent, not necessary.

**Response to Arguments #3 and 4:** In response to the Mu‘tazilī claim that God cannot be seen because all vision requires the imprinting of a form (*inṭibā‘*) or presence of colour and shape, al-Rāzī uses his response for Argument #3 that questions the assumed materialist model of vision on which the Mu‘tazila base their objection. Instead of treating vision as a mechanical process limited by the laws of optics, as explained, al-Rāzī reframed it as a kind of cognitive unveiling or *inkishāf*. Vision, then, is not the imposition of materiality onto a thing, but the *disclosure of a thing as it truly is*. Thus, al-Rāzī maintains that vision of God is

<sup>31</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtiṣād*, 275–80.

not logically impossible, because its possibility does not depend on fulfilling the physical conditions required in ordinary ocular vision. Rather, God can create in the soul a unique *inkishāf* – a non-empirical form of vision – that discloses His essence in a way fitting to His transcendent being.<sup>32</sup> In doing so, al-Rāzī deflects arguments #3 and #4:

- The imprinting argument fails because it falsely assumes that all vision is passive and image-based.
- The colour and form argument collapses because it presumes those attributes are *intrinsic* to the act of being seen, rather than *contingent on the object's nature*.

This redefinition paves the way for a more flexible and metaphysically grounded understanding of Divine vision, where *seeing* God is understood not as a physical act through the eyes (ocular), but as a Divinely granted, direct cognitive encounter with God's presence.<sup>33</sup>

## THE CRITIQUES OF AL-JUWAYNĪ AND AL-ANṢĀRĪ

As shown from the analysis above, what is clear from their arguments is that the Mu'tazila held a materialist theory of vision: according to them, sight occurs only when rays are emitted from a healthy sensory organ (the eye), travel unobstructed in a straight line and reach the object of perception where they either terminate or reflect. On this extramission theory, vision is possible only under strict spatial, directional and physical constraints. It was on this basis that they denied the possibility of seeing God: He is not a body, does not occupy space and cannot be localised in a direction. Therefore, they reasoned, He cannot be seen. Two of the later Ash'arī stalwarts, al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085) and his student al-Anṣārī (d. 512/1118), mounted a multi-faceted critique of this theory.<sup>34</sup> Al-Juwaynī's strategy was to deny that the emission of rays is necessary for vision to occur. Instead, he argued that perception (*al-idrāk*) is a real accident, directly created by God without any need for intermediary mechanical processes. Just as knowledge is an accident that does not require embodiment, so too can perception exist without spatial structure. The empirical phenomena typically associated with vision – such as distance, barriers or failure of sight at extremes – are explained not by strict causal necessity but by Divine habitual custom (*āda*). The Mu'tazila, he contended, confused regular patterns in nature for metaphysical or nomic necessities, a fundamental philosophical error.<sup>35</sup> If God was to suspend this habitual order, al-Juwaynī maintained, it would be entirely possible for vision to occur without the emission of rays, through barriers, across infinite distances or without physical proximity. This insight is crucial for defending

<sup>32</sup> No doubt, this response is built on al-Ghazālī's account of spiritual perception and the possibility of seeing God – Al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtisād*, 281-285. This argument will be fully addressed by the present author in a forthcoming paper.

<sup>33</sup> Al-Rāzī, *Kitāb al-Arbaʿīn*, 304.

<sup>34</sup> Abū Maʿālī al-Juwaynī, *Kitāb al-Irshād Ilā Qawāṭiʿ Adilla Fī Uṣūl al-Iʿtiqād* [A Guide to the Conclusive Proofs for the Principles of Belief], ed. Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Raḥīm al-Sāyih and Tawfiq ʿAlī Wahba (Maktaba al-Thaqāfa al-Dīniyya, 2009), 144–49; Abū al-Qāsim al-Anṣārī, *al-Ghunya Fī ʿIlm al-Kalām* [The Sufficient Provision for the Science of Theology], ed. Muṣṭafā Ḥasanayn ʿAbd al-Hādī (Dār al-Salām, 2010), 2:719–38. See also, Tuft, “The Origins and Development,” 213–45.

<sup>35</sup> See the discussion above with al-Bāqillānī.

the possibility of seeing God in the Hereafter, which requires a non-physical, non-directional model of perception. He further leveraged the Ash‘arī atom-accident metaphysics: since accidents subsist individually within single atoms and do not transfer across them, the Mu‘tazilī claim that rays must physically contact objects to enable vision collapses. Perception can exist in an atomic locus without needing a continuum of physical contact.

Al-Anṣārī sharpened this critique with several important extensions. First, he attacks the physical assumptions of the Mu‘tazilī theory that stipulate the necessity of perfectly smooth surfaces for ray-reflection. He notes that reflections routinely occur on imperfect, porous or uneven surfaces like water and glass – materials that lack the polished smoothness supposedly required for ray return. If the Mu‘tazilī claim was correct, such surfaces should scatter rather than return visual rays, yet we know that reflection through these media occurs naturally and persistently. Even when disrupted or rippled, such surfaces still convey stable images, showing that reflection does not depend on their ideal physical properties.<sup>36</sup> Second, al-Anṣārī probes the internal inconsistency of the Mu‘tazilī atomism. If, as they assert, perception depends on rays physically contacting external accidents like colour or form, then their commitment to indivisible atoms (*al-jawhar al-fard*) collapses under the weight of its implications. Since atoms are not divisible and cannot transmit accidents to other atoms, there is no way for a ray to “gather” a visible form through contact with multiple atomic loci. Al-Anṣārī poses a clever dilemma: if a single atom stands between the eye and object, it should, under their theory, obstruct vision. Yet this does not occur, indicating their model fails even at the microphysical level it presupposes.<sup>37</sup> Third, he dismantles their modal assumption that rays must contact sensible accidents like colour to enable sight. By extension, he argues, they should affirm that accidents like smell, taste or heat – which are equally located in bodies – should also be seen if contact alone suffices for perception. This leads to an absurd consequence: if vision entails contact with sensible accidents, then taste and odour should also be visible, which they are not. This reduction highlights the failure of their theory to coherently define the boundaries and conditions of perception.<sup>38</sup> Fourth, al-Anṣārī rejects their claim that alignment or *muqābala* is a necessary condition for vision. Through numerous examples – including seeing reflections in mirrors, translucent objects and even dream imagery – he argues that vision occurs without physical opposition or spatial orientation. He cites how the eye can see the sky and stars at vast distances, and how an image in a mirror is seen without the face being in opposition to itself. If spatial direction was essential to vision, none of these cases would be explainable.<sup>39</sup> Fifth, he confronts the claim that vision is interrupted when ray emission is blocked, such as by barriers. He responds by noting that God can create vision directly, even when the usual pathways are disrupted, and that what we consider impediments to vision (e.g., darkness, barriers or distance) are not metaphysical necessities but instances of Divine custom (*‘āda*). He cleverly employs analogies to sound and smell – showing how these too can be blocked yet are still perceptible

<sup>36</sup> Al-Anṣārī, *al-Ghunya*, 2:735.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:733-34.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:734.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:736.

in altered contexts – undermining Mu‘tazila inference from empirical failure to the ontological impossibility.

The philosophical upshot of their arguments is deep. Vision is not a mechanical process dependent on the emission and reception of rays but is fundamentally an immediate act of Divine creation (*ikhtirā‘*) within the perceiver’s soul.<sup>40</sup> Barriers, distances and spatial constraints matter only as habitual regularities willed by God, not as metaphysical necessities. Thus, God’s transcendence (*tanzīh*) is preserved: He is not made spatial, directional or bodily, yet His vision remains possible through His creative act. In so doing, a-Juwaynī and al-Anṣārī sought to sever the Mu‘tazilī link between vision and spatial mechanics. Their critique not only defended the rational possibility of seeing God but also initiated a deep reworking of epistemology and optics within *kalām*. They reframed perception as a Divine act, independent of material structures, thereby safeguarding theological orthodoxy and logical coherence. Their work paved the way for later Ash‘arī theologians like al-Rāzī to incorporate more sophisticated philosophical models of vision – particularly the Avicennian intromission theory – while maintaining a robust occasionalist framework. In this way, the affirmation of the doctrine of seeing God is no longer merely a matter of transmitted texts (*sam‘*, *naql*) but becomes a conclusion grounded in systematic ontology, careful metaphysics and a refined philosophy of perception.

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined the theological, philosophical and optical debates surrounding the possibility of seeing God in classical *kalām* theology. It has shown that, while the Mu‘tazila denied the vision of God based on a materialist theory of perception requiring spatial confrontation and physical contact, the Ash‘arīs – especially figures like al-Juwaynī, al-Anṣārī and al-Rāzī – developed a more sophisticated model grounded in occasionalism and, later, appropriations of intromissionist optical theory. By severing vision from physical processes and framing it as a direct Divine creation of perception, they defended the possibility of seeing God without compromising Divine transcendence. This shift not only safeguarded the theological doctrine of seeing God but also contributed to a broader transformation in Ash‘arī epistemology, where speculative reason and physical theory were integrated into a coherent theological system. The vision of God thus stands not merely as a revealed belief, but as a rationally defensible possibility within a comprehensive metaphysical worldview.

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<sup>40</sup> On Avicenna’s arguments against Euclidean and Galenic extramission theories of vision, refer to Lindberg, *Theories of Vision*, 42–53.

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