MORAL AGENCY ACROSS TRADITIONS: KANT AND AL-ZAMAKHSYARI ON FREE WILL AND HUMAN MORALITY FOR SUSTAINABLE FUTURES

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Abstract:

This article examines free will and moral agency through a cross-tradition dialogue between Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics and Muʿtazilite rational theology as articulated by al-Zamakhsharī. Using library research and a comparative-philosophical analysis, it maps how both frameworks relate free will, morality, and human accountability before the moral law and divine justice. The core finding is a functional isomorphism between Kant's triad—autonomy (rational free will as the condition of moral action), immortality (the soul's eternity as the horizon of the highest good), and God (the guarantor of the moral order)—and al-Zamakhsharī's Muʿtazilite triad: *luthf* (divine enabling toward moral choice), *al-Waʿd wa al-Waʿīd* (promise-and-threat as a guarantee of justice), and Allah as the source of moral truth and justice. Despite divergent metaphysical commitments, both converge in portraying the human being as a free yet accountable agent. This synthesis proposes a cross-tradition normative ground for future-oriented moral agency—characterized by reason-responsiveness, intergenerational accountability, and a commitment to expanding the horizon of future morality.

Keywords: *Immanuel Kant, al-Zamakhsharī, moral agency, future-oriented morality.*

Abstrak:

Artikel ini menelaah kehendak bebas dan agensi moral melalui dialog lintas tradisi antara etika deontologis Immanuel Kant dan teologi rasional Muʿtazilah sebagaimana dirumuskan al-Zamakhsyari. Dengan metode studi pustaka dan analisis filosofis-komparatif, penelitian ini memetakan bagaimana kedua kerangka mengonseptualisasikan relasi kebebasan, moralitas, dan pertanggungjawaban manusia di hadapan hukum moral dan keadilan Ilahi. Temuan utama menunjukkan adanya isomorfisme fungsional antara triad Kant—autonomy (kebebasan rasional/otonomi sebagai syarat tindakan bermoral), immortality (keabadian jiwa sebagai horizon kebaikan tertinggi), dan God (Tuhan sebagai penjamin tatanan moral)—dan triad al-Zamakhsyari dalam kerangka Muʿtazilah: *luthf* (anugerah Ilahi yang memberdayakan pilihan moral), *al-Waʿd wa al-Waʿīd* (janji-ancaman sebagai jaminan keadilan), serta Allah sebagai sumber kebenaran dan keadilan moral. Meski berangkat dari komitmen metafisis yang berbeda, keduanya berkonvergensi pada penegasan manusia sebagai agen yang bebas sekaligus akuntabel. Sintesis ini menawarkan dasar normatif lintas tradisi bagi pembentukan agensi moral yang berorientasi masa depan—ditandai oleh responsivitas terhadap nalar, akuntabilitas lintas generasi, dan komitmen pada pengembangan horizon moral masa depan.

Kata Kunci: *Immanuel Kant, al-Zamakhsyari, agensi moral, moralitas masa depan.*

INTRODUCTION

Islamic studies is a vast and multifaceted field that requires a variety of approaches to grasp the complexity of its religious, cultural, historical, and ethical dimensions. In the attempt to understand the diverse aspects of Islam, scholars have developed a range of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary methodologies. Peter Connolly identifies several major approaches, including anthropological, feminist, phenomenological, philosophical, psychological, sociological, and theological perspectives. This article adopts the philosophical approach within Islamic studies. According to Connolly, there are at least four main positions in the long-standing debate over the relationship between philosophy and religion: (1) philosophy as a form of religion, (2) philosophy as the servant of religion, (3) philosophy as a space for faith, and (4) philosophy as an analytical tool for religion. To these, one may add a fifth: (5) philosophy as the study of reasoning within religious thought (Connolly 2001). The philosophical approach is particularly relevant to the present study, as it allows for a rational and critical exploration of concepts such as free will, moral responsibility, and divine justice—themes that lie at the intersection of Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics and al-Zamakhsyari's Mu'tazilite theology. By examining these two thinkers, this study seeks to open a cross-traditional dialogue on the foundations of moral agency and their significance for shaping sustainable moral and human futures.

The first position, philosophy as religion, is represented by thinkers such as Plato, Plotinus, Porphyry, Spinoza, Iris Murdoch, and process philosophers like Hartshorne and Griffin. This view holds that philosophical reflection on ultimate reality—God or the divine—offers profound insight into human existence and the moral order of the world. Metaphysical contemplation, in this sense, serves as a path to discern what is highest and most fundamental in reality, thereby providing a framework of values that guides human life.

The second position, philosophy as the servant of religion, is illustrated by figures such as Aquinas, John Locke, Basil Mitchell, and Richard Swinburne. They regarded philosophy as a means to clarify and defend religious belief, particularly within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Through natural theology, philosophy seeks rational justification for divine action in history and for God's governance of the world. Yet reason remains subordinate to revelation: for Aquinas, revelation conveys truths unattainable by reason alone, while Locke argued that reason sets the standard by which revelation's authenticity must be tested. This interplay between faith and reason continues to shape contemporary debates in the philosophy of religion (Swinburne 1992).

These two positions reveal a persistent tension between rational inquiry and divine revelation, a tension that lies at the core of both Kant's and al-Zamakhsyari's thought. Whereas Kant redefined the autonomy of reason as the basis of moral obligation, al-Zamakhsyari rooted rational reflection within the moral justice of God. Understanding this spectrum—from philosophy as independent reflection to philosophy in service of revelation—helps situate the dialogue between Western deontological ethics and Islamic Mu'tazilite theology in the shared pursuit of moral agency grounded in rational responsibility.

The third position, philosophy as a space for faith, includes thinkers such as William Ockham, Immanuel Kant, Karl Barth, and Alvin Plantinga. This approach recognizes the limits of human reason in comprehending the divine, yet affirms philosophy's capacity to prepare the ground for faith. Philosophical reflection, in this

sense, does not replace revelation but clarifies its rational horizon, acknowledging that reason alone cannot exhaust the mystery of God.

The fourth position views philosophy as the analytical study of religion, represented by Antony Flew, Paul Van Buren, R. B. Braithwaite, and D. Z. Phillips. Here, the focus lies in examining the logic and linguistic expressions of faith—how believers use language to speak meaningfully about God and moral life. The aim is not to prove or disprove belief but to elucidate how moral and spiritual claims function within a community of faith.

The fifth position, philosophy as the study of reasoning within religious thought, is a more recent development advanced by David Pailin, Maurice Wiles, and John Hick. It explores how human rationality and cultural context shape religious convictions and moral understanding. Faith, in this perspective, is not detached from reason but embedded in the interpretive frameworks of human experience (Hick 1988).

Within Connolly's schema, Kant represents the philosophical space of faith—he acknowledges the limits of speculative reason yet defends the autonomy of practical reason as the ground of moral obligation. Similarly, al-Zamakhsyari, in the Muʿtazilite tradition, locates faith within rational responsibility, insisting that divine justice presupposes human free will and accountability. Both thinkers, though emerging from distinct intellectual heritages, converge on the conviction that moral agency arises from the interplay of rational reflection and divine orientation (Cahyanto 2020, 2).

It is from this shared horizon that the present study investigates the concept of free will and moral responsibility across traditions, asking how the Kantian notion of autonomy and the Muʿtazilite conception of human free will can illuminate a universal framework for ethical sustainability.

In philosophical discussions, a distinction is often drawn between free will and free will. The term free will usually refers to the external capacity to act without coercion, particularly in political or social contexts, whereas free will concerns the internal faculty by which individuals make deliberate moral choices. Aristotle described voluntary action as something "up to us," emphasizing the agent's capacity to originate action (Pink 2004, 3).

The concept of free will occupies a central place in Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy. For Kant, free will is not merely a metaphysical possibility but the necessary condition of moral agency. Without free will, moral responsibility would be impossible, for moral obligation presupposes the agent's capacity to choose according to reason rather than inclination. Thus, Kant situates free will at the very heart of ethics: to be a moral being is to act autonomously under the guidance of reason, acknowledging the moral law as self-legislated rather than externally imposed (Muthmainnah 2018).

This understanding of free will as the foundation of moral responsibility establishes a crucial bridge between Western deontological ethics and Islamic rational theology, where human accountability similarly rests upon the recognition of volition and divine justice. It is within this shared concern for rational moral agency that Kant's philosophy and al-Zamakhsyari's thought can meaningfully converge.

In theology, the notion of human free will has long been a central concern. Within Islam, human free will is recognized as a foundational principle: God endows human beings with the capacity to choose between good and evil. This divine

endowment establishes moral accountability—humans are responsible for their choices precisely because they possess the ability to act otherwise.

The human desire for free will, often expressed as a longing for autonomy, is not merely an instinctive drive for independence but a manifestation of the moral potential that distinguishes humans from other creatures. In Islamic thought, free will is inseparable from *taklīf*—the moral responsibility that arises from divine command. Thus, free will in Islam is not absolute; it operates within the ethical boundaries of divine law, ensuring that human autonomy remains oriented toward moral and spiritual perfection (Nico 1988, 5).

This theological understanding of free will provides a crucial framework for interpreting al-Zamakhsyari's Mu'tazilite perspective, where rational free will and divine justice coexist. It also resonates with Kant's conviction that free will is the precondition of moral obligation, revealing a shared structure of moral agency across the two traditions.

Free will constitutes an intrinsic human potential — the capacity to choose and determine one's own actions. This potential is expressed through the emotional, sensory, and cognitive dimensions of human existence, yet its deepest meaning lies in the moral and rational sphere. Without free will, human beings would be incapable of development, self-realization, or ethical responsibility (Wentil 2022, 2).

Nevertheless, human free will is not absolute. It is conditioned by situational, cultural, and existential factors, and therefore always intertwined with limitation. These limitations do not negate free will but give it moral significance: they mark the boundaries within which human choice acquires meaning and accountability. Free will becomes the site where the tension between autonomy and constraint reveals the ethical dimension of human life.

The complexity of this notion explains why debates over human free will have persisted across philosophical and theological traditions. For Immanuel Kant, free will under moral law defines the essence of rational agency; for al-Zamakhsyari, free will within divine justice grounds human responsibility before God. Their differing frameworks converge on a shared conviction — that human beings, though finite, are endowed with the capacity to act morally and to bear the consequences of their choices.

Immanuel Kant argued that human free will does not mean that human actions are without cause. He also disagreed with the popular view of his time that human actions are free, but that this free will is determined by the character a person already possesses. Kant maintained that everything is bound by the law of cause and effect, yet human beings remain responsible for their actions (Acton and Moral 2003, 95).

In the context of Islamic thought, particularly within 'ilm al-kalām (theology), there are two schools that hold paradoxical views concerning the nature of human actions. The first group believes that human actions result from their own free will. They maintain that humans possess the ability to make choices and are responsible for their deeds (Nasir 2010, 170). According to this view, human beings are the creators of their own actions—they can do what they will and refrain from what they do not desire.

On the other hand, there is another group that believes human actions are entirely created by God. They hold that human beings possess neither power nor control over their deeds, as everything is determined by God. According to this view, humans are merely instruments moved by the divine will (Nasution 2008, 102).

Within the tradition of Islamic thought, the first group is known as the *Qadariyyah*, while the second is called the *Jabariyyah* (Syahrastani 1993, 115).

Throughout history, these two schools of thought were often utilized as political tools to preserve and strengthen power. A concrete example can be found in the history of the Umayyad dynasty in Islamic civilization. The Umayyads, as recorded in many historical sources, employed the Jabariyyah doctrine to maintain their dominance (Majid 1996, 19). They used this belief to justify their actions and to suppress rebels who opposed their rule. In many cases, the Umayyads invoked Jabariyyah ideas to legitimize repressive acts—even violence and executions—arguing that everything occurred according to the will of God (Wijaya 2016). Meanwhile, the Qadariyyah view at that time tended to support the opposition, particularly the Abbasid faction (Ramadhani 2022). The Umayyads, therefore, adopted Jabariyyah convictions to quell uprisings while asserting that they were merely fulfilling God's will. In this way, the Umayyads exploited religious doctrine to provide justification for their authoritarian rule.

To understand the relationship between human will and the absolute power of God, a deeper analysis is required. Human free will, in essence, is not absolute, as it is limited by material factors, space, time, and personal conditions. Although humans may possess unlimited desires, their ability to realize all of these desires is constrained by physical and material limitations (Amsal 1997, 129). However, when viewed within a metaphysical context—particularly in the realm of religion—humans possess a greater degree of free will. In this realm, physical limitations no longer apply, and individuals have the free will to choose whether to believe in God or not. Within this spiritual dimension, no external law can restrict human free will in matters of faith or religious practice.

Immanuel Kant understood that the existence of God can be perceived through morality. According to him, within the human heart and soul lies an inherent moral sense. Human beings have a moral duty to refrain from wrongdoing and to perform good deeds. Kant emphasized that this moral command is absolute, universal, and independent of any beneficial consequences that may result from such actions. Humans must do what is good because it is a moral obligation, and they must avoid evil for the same reason. For Kant, good and evil are not learned through worldly experience but are innate within human nature from birth (Siswanto 1998, 91).

Kant also identified three moral postulates that affirm the existence of God (Siswanto 1998, 66). First, autonomy — he argued that human free will is necessary for moral action. Free will is not merely a matter of belief but the capacity to act independently of external influences, enabling individuals to take responsibility for their actions. Second, immortality — Kant maintained that the human soul must be immortal in order to attain perfect happiness, which represents the highest good; this serves as an indication of God's existence. Third, a personal God — God functions as the ultimate judge who evaluates human morality throughout one's life. Ultimately, through the domain of morality, Kant argued that we can arrive at an understanding of the existence of God.

Similarly, al-Zamakhsyari, a renowned Muslim scholar known for his adherence to the Muʿtazilite school of thought, was one of its most devoted and enthusiastic proponents. The Muʿtazilite perspective in Islamic theology is often associated with the belief that human beings possess significant power and free will, aligning it closely with the Qadariyyah view. Both the Muʿtazilah and the Qadariyyah

emphasize human free will in making choices and taking responsibility for one's actions. They reject deterministic views that claim everything has been absolutely predetermined by God.

Within the Mu'tazilite framework, several key Qur'anic verses are often cited as the foundation for the concept of human free will in action. According to this perspective, all human deeds are the result of human will alone, without interference from any other authority, including God. They believe that human beings have complete free will to choose between good and evil, and that God does not intervene in determining human choices. As a result, divine reward or punishment corresponds to the free choices made by human beings.

From a historical standpoint, Immanuel Kant was a major philosopher who emerged in the late eighteenth century. He was born on April 22, 1724, in Königsberg, a small city in East Prussia. Kant's intellectual life can be divided into two major phases: the pre-critical and the critical periods. It was during the critical period that Kant's thought underwent a fundamental transformation (Bertens 1976, 59). Through his critical philosophy, Kant radically reshaped the landscape of modern philosophy.

Meanwhile, al-Zamakhsyari—whose full name was Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd ibn 'Umar al-Zamakhsyari al-Khuwārizmī Jārullāh—was born on the 27th of Rajab, 467 AH, in Zamakhshar, a region that is now part of modern Uzbekistan, formerly within the Soviet Union. His birth coincided with the golden age of the Seljuk Dynasty under the reign of Sultan Jalāl al-Dunyā wa al-Dīn Abī al-Fatḥ Malikshāh, who ruled from 481 to 504 AH (1070–1092 CE). During this period, the grandeur and prosperity of the Seljuks reached their zenith, comparable to the golden ages of the Roman or Arab civilizations. Commerce and industry flourished, while literature and various branches of knowledge experienced significant growth. One of the prominent figures of this era was Niẓām al-Mulk, who served as vizier until 485 AH (1092 CE) (Fajar 2020).

This article explores the concept of human free will and moral responsibility through a cross-traditional lens, focusing on Immanuel Kant and al-Zamakhsyari. It compares how these two thinkers conceptualize the relationship between free will, rationality, and morality, and examines how their respective approaches contribute to the understanding of moral agency—the human capacity to act ethically and to bear responsibility for one's choices.

By analyzing Kant's deontological moral philosophy and al-Zamakhsyari's Mu'tazilite rational theology, the study seeks to identify both the convergences and divergences in their interpretations of free will as the foundation of human morality. Ultimately, this research argues that engaging these two intellectual traditions in dialogue not only deepens our understanding of moral free will but also offers valuable insights for shaping sustainable moral futures grounded in rational responsibility and ethical justice.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive approach, focusing on conceptual and interpretive analysis of moral ideas in the works of Immanuel Kant and al-Zamakhsyari. The qualitative method emphasizes individual meaning and the exploration of complexity in understanding the interrelation between human free will, moral responsibility, and divine authority (Creswell 2014, 4).

The research is primarily library-based, involving a systematic review of relevant primary and secondary sources. The purpose of this method is to identify, interpret, and compare the central concepts of free will and morality within two distinct intellectual traditions (Sugiyono 2013, 148).

The primary sources of this study are Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and al-Zamakhsyari's *Al-Kasysyāf ʿan Ḥaqāʾiq al-Tanzīl wa ʿUyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujūh al-Taʾwīl*. The secondary sources include scholarly works in philosophy, theology, and ethics related to both thinkers. The data are analyzed through comparative philosophical and moral-hermeneutical analysis to examine the relevance, correlation, and convergence between Kant's deontological ethics and Muʿtazilite rational theology in shaping *moral agency* and contributing to *sustainable moral futures*.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
The Concept of Human Free Will in Immanuel Kant's Deontological Ethics

Human beings evaluate one another based on the actions they perform. Such actions may be regarded as good or bad depending on whether the person intentionally and consciously chooses to perform them. The human will underlying these actions is therefore a crucial factor in ethical or moral judgment (Poedjawiyatna 1990, 14). Thus, in assessing whether an action is morally good or bad, one must consider the nature of the will that motivates it.

Kant argued that the universe, including humanity, operates according to laws (Acton and Moral 2003, 93). Human beings possess impulses that may cause them to act instinctively; however, they are also rational creatures, endowed with the capacity to think and to comprehend the consequences of their actions. Kant maintained that the human will is *practical reason*—the faculty that enables individuals to think, deliberate, and understand the implications of their behavior. When humans act in accordance with practical reason, they act on the basis of rationality rather than mere impulse (Acton and Moral 2003, 94).

In his book *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant refers to the moral law as a "fact of pure reason," which is intrinsically connected to the concept of free will (Kant 2005, 25). When a person claims to have a moral duty, Kant seeks to demonstrate that free will is a real phenomenon, while scientific knowledge of the universe and human beings can be explained through strict causal principles.

Human beings, when acting as moral agents, occupy a position distinct from their role as part of the natural world. From a psychological perspective, human actions may appear determined by heredity and environmental factors; yet, as moral agents, individuals possess the capacity to make free choices (Acton and Moral 2003, 100).

The concept of free will in Kant's thought does not imply that human actions are without cause. Rather, it signifies that such actions are free in the sense that they are not randomly determined by external stimuli, but are governed by the individual's established moral character (Kant 2005, 26).

Kant's ideas regarding the three postulates briefly mentioned in the introduction—God, Autonomy, and Immortality—are, according to him, located in reason rather than in actual reality. He claims that these ideas are required within the context of morality. They serve to fill a "gap" in the framework of theoretical knowledge, and their justification lies in the superiority of practical reason. Kant argues that morality requires the idea of free will, which is quite different from the

ideas of God and immortality. Therefore, he states that free will (autonomy) is essential to the formation of the moral law, whereas the ideas of God and Immortality are needed only within the context of practical reason (Acton and Moral 2003, 24).

Practical reason, in its purity, provides reinforcement for the concept of transcendental free will (Acton and Moral 2003, 94). This free will has an absolute meaning that is required for the understanding of speculative reason when speculative reason employs the concept of causality. In this context, reason shows that free will can be understood as something impossible in terms of causality, which does not threaten the integrity of reason or lead it into skeptical doubt. The law of reason posits a cause that is independent of all empirical conditions and regulates human action in a different way, rather than merely forming part of the causal chain of that action. In other words, human actions are related to an already determinate human character, such that reason is entirely free, even though all the empirical aspects of action must be connected with the failures of reason.

Kant explains that human beings need not always behave in accordance with reason, because humans do not possess a perfect will. This means that people are not invariably inclined to do what is good by nature. This principle arises from reason functioning in the practical domain, and it manifests itself as moral demands. Humans can fail to comply with these moral demands—which is the basis of evil actions—yet this in no way nullifies the moral obligation to keep striving to fulfill them (Roth 2003, 252).

Kant holds that all human actions are, in essence, subject to the moral law; nevertheless, individuals remain responsible for their deeds, which shows their capacity to act freely. With great emphasis, Kant underscores the importance of the moral law, for, in his view, morality is something inherent in the human heart and mind—an inner voice or principle that is inherent, a priori, and absolute (Tafsir 2004, 167). Therefore, morality constitutes a most striking reality within the human person, producing an unavoidable sense in judging right and wrong, and that sense remains decisive.

Within the categorical imperative—which symbolizes acting morally—moral action arises from within the agent; it is not an externally imposed absolute rule, and it manifests practical reason (Tjahjadi 1991, 75). Kant states that a good action is one that can be willed as a universal rule applicable to everyone (Harun 2005, 76). The aim of ethics is to discover and provide the foundations for rules of right and good conduct. Kant argues that universal ethics must rest on a priori elements related to good will, namely that a will is good not because of the outcomes it produces but because the action is right and conforms to duty—for example, the command "do not spread hoaxes" (Muhsin 2022, 72). The goodness of the will in such a command does not depend on the goodness of its results; rather, it rests on the fact that the good will expressed by the command is genuinely good.

The inward awareness forms an autonomous will that moves action. Kant makes this ethical system the highest moral foundation. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he maintains that everything that occurs in the natural world follows the law of causality; if this is so, then experience of the objective world would be impossible. Therefore, to affirm the existence of free will, Kant needs to distinguish impulses that arise from animal instinct from rational motives (Kant 2005, 96). The category of rational motivation is crucial for understanding human behavior. Attempts to explain human action solely by causal laws are unsatisfactory; this

indicates that rational motives are not empirical events and thus cannot be said to be causally linked to other events.

Immanuel Kant's view of the nature of free will of the will gives rise to a tension between the observable natural world and the moral world. This seems to leave little room for the study of human history as an empirical science, even though human actions are treated as the object of empirical inquiry. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant states that if we possessed adequate understanding of human motives, we could predict human actions with precision, just as we predict an eclipse. In his essay "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Standpoint," Kant speaks of human actions as manifestations of free will, asserting that individual choices affect particular events, while the course of human history as a whole is subject to higher laws (Kant 2005, 99).

Kant's position situates itself within the empirical world, whereas the world of knowledge—what he calls the noumenal world—includes a free will of the will that is possible and must be acknowledged by those who accept the authority of the moral law. Rationality is, in essence, free and autonomous; rational agents fundamentally experience themselves as possessing free will and autonomy. Kant does not attempt to supply a deep metaphysical proof of free will. Rather, our acceptance of moral obligation and our recognition of ourselves as free individuals who obey the moral law in accordance with practical reason is how we come to understand free will. From a theoretical standpoint, free will is treated as a possibility, and there is no requirement for conclusive theoretical proof. From a practical standpoint, free will of the will can be ascribed to all rational beings.

In short, for Kant, human free will of the will cannot be demonstrated theoretically but must be affirmed on moral grounds. Determining whether the will is free in the context of human action is, for all practical purposes, taken as a given. The focus lies on acknowledging moral duty and believing that we are free to fulfill it, as well as on accepting rational moral guidance that obligates us to follow it. In matters of morality, it is permissible to regard as true something that may run counter to views derived from the natural world.

Kant distinguishes two kinds of morality: heteronomous morality and autonomous morality (Tjahjadi 1991, 89). Heteronomous morality is present when a person fulfills duty for external reasons—such as reward or fear of punishment by others. Autonomous morality occurs when a person recognizes moral duty and obeys it because it is good in itself, not because of external incentives or threats. When one adheres to moral principles without reliance on external factors, this is called moral autonomy, which, according to Kant, constitutes the highest principle of morality.

The Concept of Human Free Will in al-Zamakhsyari

Al-Zamakhsyari, a major scholar in Islamic intellectual history, produced a monumental work known as *Tafsīr al-Kashshāf*. This exegetical work has become one of the principal references for understanding the Qur'an and has played an important role in Qur'anic exegesis (Ibrahim 2018). In it, al-Zamakhsyari articulates his insights into the meanings and interpretation of the Qur'an, explaining its verses through the disciplines of Arabic linguistic principles, rational analysis, and theology (Fajar 2020). For this reason, some have characterized the work as a Mu'tazilite theological tafsir (Mulyaden, Hilmi, and Yunus 2022).

From a young age, al-Zamakhsyari possessed a strong understanding of

Muʿtazilism, owing to the fact that his highly respected teacher in Khurasan was a Muʿtazilite. It is therefore unsurprising that Muʿtazilite influence was profound in the development of al-Zamakhsyari's thought. The social and intellectual milieu of Khurasan—which emphasized rationality in facing the hardships of life—also contributed to the spread and ready reception of the Muʿtazilite school. As a result, al-Zamakhsyari grew into a scholar highly skilled in logic and independent reasoning (Ahmad, Ilyas, and Qureshi, n.d., 2). Consequently, his exegetical output inevitably reflects his theology; tafsir, after all, mirrors the ideology of its author, since interpretation is always grounded in the writer's subjective thinking. Hence, in interpreting religious texts, understanding an author's background is a crucial step. It helps identify the perspectives likely to be reflected in a given exegetical work, as well as the nuances of inclination or interest that may be present. By grasping the author's background, we can more accurately assess the factors that shape a given interpretation of scripture. This is a highly important aspect of tafsir studies, aiding us in recognizing the context and motivations behind particular exegetical positions (M. Taufiq Hidayat and Yusuf Rahman 2022, 54).

The Muʿtazilah—also known as the "Islamic rationalists"—prioritize reason in addressing various issues, especially those related to theology. They hold that reason can be used to understand universal aspects such as the existence of God, His attributes, the concept of *tawḥīd*, divine justice, and the general notions of good and evil. Revelation, in their view, has a specific role: it assists reason by providing guidance on when and how to carry out practical obligations such as prayer (*ṣalāh*), fasting, and almsgiving (*zakāt*). These practical details cannot be discerned by reason alone (Nasution 2008, 40). Thus, the Muʿtazilah seek to place reason as the primary basis for understanding revelation, with revelation itself functioning to affirm or strengthen the conclusions reached by reason.

Reason constitutes the core of human nature; accordingly, God entrusts human beings with responsibility. God loves what is good, so humans are created for the good, and therefore the duties God assigns to them are likewise oriented toward the good. When God imposes obligations upon human beings, He also provides the means necessary for fulfilling them. One such means granted by God for making choices is reason. ʿAbd al-Jabbār states that knowledge of the rightness or wrongness of human actions depends on the capacity for rational deliberation (Abd al-Jabbar 1965, 173).

According to the Muʿtazilah, if human beings did not possess free will, how could their actions be morally assessed? If human acts were not the result of their own choices, would it be just to punish them for matters beyond their control? The Muʿtazilah argue that humans do have free will, which is why they can be commanded to enjoin good and forbid wrong. In their view, this indicates that human beings are free to make their own choices. The Muʿtazilah maintain that human good and evil deeds—obedience or disobedience to God—originate in a person's own will and desire. By His power, God grants humans capacity **(***al-istīṭāʿah***)**, so that they possess the free will to do or to refrain from doing something (Syahrastani 1993, 71).

The Muʿtazilah believe that human beings possess free will in their actions, meaning they have the power to perform good or evil deeds. According to this view, whether a person receives guidance or goes astray depends entirely on the individual's own ability and desire. Thus, whether someone becomes a Muslim or a disbeliever is influenced by that person's capacity and will. In other words, whatever

happens to a human being—good or bad—is the result of their own effort and volition. From this perspective, God has neither predetermined nor pre-ordained human actions from the outset, and such acts are not part of His fixed plan.

This concept is in fact similar to what is known as the Qadariyyah view, which the Muʿtazilah also uphold. However, al-Zamakhsyari encountered difficulty in explaining Qur'anic verses that clearly state all human actions are created by God. He therefore sought a formulation to avoid contradiction with those verses. One of his attempts was to employ the concept of Luthf as a kind of safeguard or interpretive key—namely, God's beneficence toward human beings in their actions.

The term "Luthf" derives from the verbal noun *la-ṭha-fa*, meaning *rafaqa wa danā*—in this context, to treat with kindness, gentleness, and nearness. The expression "Laṭīfallāhu laka" indicates that God gently and kindly fulfills a person's hopes. God is called al-Laṭīf because He is supremely kind to His servants and grants their requests with goodness and gentleness. The name al-Laṭīf also reflects God as the One who knows the most subtle and profound matters (Al-Zamakhsyari 1977).

Within Muʿtazilite thought, Luthf is that which enables a person to choose to behave as a believer; without *Luthf*, a person may fall into the opposite. Yet this concept is not intended to negate human free will, which is one of the principal ideas in Muʿtazilite theology. According to ʿAbd al-Jabbār, the Luthf that God grants to a *mukallaf* (a morally responsible individual) is not a recompense but a consequence of the moral responsibility assigned to human beings. *Luthf* is given only to certain people—namely, those who have the potential or inclination toward faith (Matondang 2004, 29). It cannot be granted to those who reject faith, as stated in the Qur'an, Sūrat al-Anfāl (8):23:

وَلَوْ عَلِمَ اللّٰهُ فِيهِمْ خَيْرًا لَّأَسْمَعَهُمْ وَلَوْ اَسْمَعَهُمْ لَتَوَلَّوْا وَّهُمْ مُّعْرِضُوْنَ

"Had God known any good in them, He would surely have made them hear; and had He made them hear, they would still have turned away, being averse."

By adopting the concept of Luthf, al-Zamakhsyari avoids contradicting the principle of human free will. This relates to his exegesis of the Qur'anic verse in Sūrat Āl ʿImrān (3):8:

رَبَّنَا لَا تُزِغْ قُلُوْبَنَا بَعْدَ اِذْ هَدَيْتَنَا وَهَبْ لَنَا مِنْ لَّدُنْكَ رَحْمَةً إِنَّكَ اَنْتَ الْوَهَّابُ

"They pray, 'Our Lord, do not let our hearts deviate after You have guided us; and grant us mercy from Your presence. Indeed, You alone are the Supreme Bestower.'"

In interpreting this verse, al-Zamakhsyari essentially understands that the human heart is under God's control: God has the power to direct the heart according to His will. In other words, He may move a person's heart toward guidance or lead it toward error, as He wills.

However, al-Zamakhsyari adopts a different interpretive strategy to distance himself from that reading. He says:

لَا تُزِغْ قُلُوبَنَا لَا تُبْلِنَا بِبَلَايَا تَزِيغُ فِيهَا قُلُوبُنَا بَعْدَ اِذْ هَدَيْتَنَا وَأَرْشَدْتَنَا لِدِينِكَ. أَوْ لَا تَمْنَعْنَا أَلْطَافَكَ بَعْدَ اِذْ لَطَفْتَ بِنَا

"O God, do not test us with trials that would cause our hearts to incline toward error after You have guided us and directed us to Your religion; or, do not withhold from us Your *luthf* (gracious enabling) after You have already bestowed it upon us (Al-Zamakhsyari 1977, 339)."

In his exegesis of Q. al-Māʾidah (5):41, al-Zamakhsyari may also be facing a similar issue concerning the relation between human free will and divine intervention in determining good and evil actions:

وَمَنْ يُرِدِ اللَّهُ فِتْنَتَهُ فَلَنْ تَمْلِكَ لَهُ مِنَ اللَّهِ شَيْئًا ٱُولَٰئِكَ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يُرِدِ اللَّهُ أَنْ يُطَهِّرَ قُلُوبَهُمْ ا لَهُمْ فِي الدُّنْيَا خِزْيٌ وَّلَهُمْ فِي الْآخِرَةِ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ

"...Whomever God wills to put to trial, you will never be able to shield from God in any way. They are those whose hearts God did not will to purify. For them there is disgrace in this world, and in the Hereafter a tremendous punishment."

In interpreting this verse, al-Zamakhsyari seeks to offer an exegesis that does not align with the views or convictions of Ahl al-Sunnah. His aim is to render an interpretation consistent with the Muʿtazilite creed he espouses. In other words, he endeavors to construe the verse from a Muʿtazilite perspective—especially concerning human free will and divine decree—even if this may conflict with the understanding more commonly held by Ahl al-Sunnah.

وَمَنْ يُرِدِ اللَّهُ فِتْنَتَهُ تركه مفتوناً وخذلانه فَلَنْ تَمْلِكَ لَهُ مِنَ اللَّهِ شَيْئًا فلن تستطيع له من لطف اللَّه وتوفيقه شيئا ٱُولَٰئِكَ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يُرِدِ اللَّهُ أَنْ يمنحهم من ٱلطافه ما يطهر به قلوبهم لأنهم ليسوا من أهلها، لعلمه أنها لا تنفع فيهم ولا تنجع (إِنَّ الَّذِينَ لا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِآياتِ اللَّهِ لا يَهْدِيهِمُ اللَّهُ) (كَيْفَ يَهْدِي اللَّهُ قَوْماً كَفَرُوا بَعْدَ إِيمانِهِمْ)"

"Whoever God wills to be led to trial, He leaves him tried and forsakes him; you will not possess for him anything against God—i.e., you will not be able to obtain for him anything of God's *luthf* (gracious enabling) or *tawfīq*. They are those whom God did not will to grant of His kindness by which their hearts would be purified, because they are not suited for it; He knows it would not benefit them nor take effect. (Indeed, those who do not believe in God's signs—God does not guide them) (How would God guide a people who disbelieved after their faith?) (Al-Zamakhsyari 1977, 634)."

Hence, how could God guide those who previously fell into disbelief after having believed? Then how does al-Zamakhsyari interpret Q. al-Naḥl 16:104:

مَنْ يَّشَا اللَّهُ يُضْلِلْهُ وَمَنْ يَّشَأْ يَجْعَلْهُ عَلَى صِرَاطٍ مُّسْتَقِيْمٍ

"Whomever God wills, He leads astray; and whomever He wills, He places upon a straight path."

Al-Zamakhsyari states that if God wills for a person to go astray, God leaves that person to his misguidance and does not grant him *luthf* (the gracious capacity to choose the good), deeming him unfit to receive it. Conversely, if God wills guidance for someone, He sets that person upon the right path by bestowing *luthf*, because in that case *luthf* will be beneficial to him.

Similarities and Differences in the Conceptions of Free Will in Immanuel Kant and al-Zamakhsyari

Immanuel Kant situates free will within deontological ethics, an approach that judges actions by principles of duty rather than by beneficial results. For Kant, the moral subject encounters the fact of reason—an immediate awareness that the moral law demands unconditional obedience. From this standpoint, free will is practical: the will counts as free when practical reason directs it to honor the moral law even when personal impulses, short-term interests, or habits pull the other way.

The free will Kant intends is not an empirical "free will from causes." It is

practical free will (autonomy), the capacity of the will to determine itself by the moral law self-legislated by practical reason. This rejects the idea that free will is merely "acting according to character." The point is the priority of moral reasons over empirical drives. Practical free will also presupposes transcendental free will: the rational self is not fully determined by natural causes, so acting from respect for the law is genuinely possible.

To explain moral worth, Kant separates heteronomous from autonomous morality. Heteronomy is present when duty is followed for external reasons such as reward, reputation, or fear of punishment. Autonomy is present when duty is fulfilled because duty itself deserves respect. Hence the key difference between acting merely in accordance with duty and acting from duty. Two speakers may both tell the truth; only truth-telling from respect for the law has moral worth.

Accordingly, free will is not an end in itself but the condition of possibility of moral agency. Moral agency includes the ability to respond to reasons, to frame maxims (principles of action fit to be expressed as general rules), and to bear accountability for one's deeds. Free will as rational autonomy makes duty universally binding while allowing responsibility to be attributed to the agent. A simple illustration is stopping at a red light on an empty road because the rule is fit to hold for everyone, not merely because surveillance is present.

To keep the moral order coherent—so that virtue is not futile and vice is not rewarded—Kant introduces two postulates of practical reason: God and the immortality of the soul. A postulate is not a theoretical proof but a rational-practical assumption required to sustain ethics, especially the highest good, the proportionality of virtue and happiness. This horizon provides a rational basis for commitment to duty despite imbalances within experience.

Kant's architecture can be summarized as the triad free will (as autonomy)–immortality–God. Free will secures the possibility of acting from the moral law; immortality supplies a lasting horizon for moral fulfillment; God functions regulatively and practically as a rational guarantee of moral order. Together they explain why prohibitions such as "do not lie" and "do not treat persons merely as means" bind any rational agent.

In al-Zamakhsyari's Mu'tazilī framework, the starting point is 'aql (reason) as the basis of divine justice and of taklīf (obligation). Obligation is just only if human beings possess the ability to evaluate and choose. Hence al-Zamakhsyari affirms human free will in action and holds that God endows al-istithā'ah (capacity) that precedes/accompanies the act, so the authorship of action genuinely remains with the human agent rather than with external compulsion.

To reconcile human free will with divine decree, al-Zamakhsyari advances luṭf, divine facilitation/kindness that enables the good without canceling agency. Luṭf has an epistemic side (opening knowledge of what is right) and a motivational side (strengthening the will to choose it). The agent is supported toward right choice, while the final decision remains a free decision.

Within the Mu'tazilī outlook, al-Wa'd wa al-Wa'īd (promise and threat) serves as a cosmological guarantee that the moral order is real and just. Importantly, al-Wa'd wa al-Wa'īd is not the source of value; the standard for right and wrong is 'aql. Promise and threat affirm consistent moral consequences, so goodness is not wasted and evil is not ignored. Human accountability is therefore reinforced rather than removed.

Despite different metaphysical grounds, both thinkers place free will at the

center of moral choice and duty-fulfillment. In Kant, God and immortality function as postulates of practical reason that sustain the possibility of the highest good. In al-Zamakhsyari, Allah stands at the center of the moral order, while ʿaql is the instrument through which the human agent discerns His will. The alignment sought here is functional, not a metaphysical equation.

Read across traditions, a functional isomorphism appears. Autonomy (practical free will) in Kant resonates with luṭf as an effective precondition for moral action. Immortality parallels al-Waʿd wa al-Waʿīd as an eschatological horizon that gives consequential weight to action. God corresponds to Allah as guarantor of moral order—regulative-practical in Kant and rational-theological/constitutive in al-Zamakhsyari. This triad affirms the human being as both free and answerable.

The implications for sustainable futures can be put into three practical criteria. Reason-responsiveness requires that actions and policies be justifiable by reasons acceptable across agents and contexts. Intergenerational accountability requires that maxims and moral choices be universalizable without undermining justice for future generations. Justice orientation requires that public action be tested by deontic consistency (Kant) and by a rational promise–threat scheme (Muʿtazilah), avoiding short-termism.

A question of comparability naturally arises: is autonomy (self-legislation by reason) truly comparable with rational theocentrism (divine justice encompassing human beings)? A sound answer avoids equating metaphysics and instead links functions. Practical reason in Kant and ʿaql in the Muʿtazilī tradition each provide a reason-giving framework that enables, binds, and evaluates action. Moral agency thus appears as free will bound by accountable reasons.

At the level of testing, Kant's universalizability asks whether a maxim can be willed as universal law without contradiction and without using persons merely as means. In al-Zamakhsyari, ʿaql operates within the horizon of divine justice, while luṭf supplies enabling conditions so that good choice is effective. Operationally, reasons for action ought to pass the universality test and align with al-Waʿd wa al-Waʿīd as a rationalization of consequences; meeting both marks them rationally and theologically sound.

Extending the Kingdom of Ends through time yields intergenerational accountability. Policy maxims that, if universalized, would erode the preconditions of moral life for future generations must be rejected—whether through ecological exploitation or entrenched social injustice. Within al-Zamakhsyari's horizon, this coheres with al-Waʿd wa al-Waʿīd, since justice is conceived as a commitment that surpasses a single lifespan.

Deontic guardrails and a rational consequence horizon work together. Kant underscores prohibitions on manipulation, instrumentalization, and lying as inviolable limits. Al-Zamakhsyari adds consequence-reasoning through al-Waʿd wa al-Waʿīd, closing moral-licensing loopholes in which one good deed is taken to license later wrongs. The common worry about heteronomy is answered by the Muʿtazilī point that ʿaql independently discerns value; promise–threat functions as cosmological guarantee, not as the source of value.

An analogical reading of luṭf as capability policy highlights a structural obligation to provide preconditions for genuinely choosing the good: character education, health, truthful information, and economic opportunity—a form of social luṭf that expands capabilities (resonant with Sen/Nussbaum). Without this, deontic demands risk becoming an unfair formality. Ethical sustainability therefore requires

two layers: do no wrong (Kantian guardrails) and enable the right (luṭf as institutional empowerment).

In institutional design, a three-step rubric offers clear guidance. A Maxim Test (Kant) demands transparent, universalizable reasons without contradiction (implying anti-corruption and anti-disinformation norms). A Luṭf Test (enabling) asks whether policy creates conditions under which citizens can genuinely meet duties (access to education and healthcare, digital literacy, affordable clean energy). An al-Waʿd wa al-Waʿīd Test (accountability) examines whether incentives and sanctions are rational, just, and proportionate, and whether they prevent moral hazard in the present and the future.

Persistent objections can be addressed briefly. The charge that Kantian deontology is rigid and cold is met by the distinction between strict and wide duties, which allows practical judgment, and by the appeal to moral self-respect and public reason, which explain motivation grounded in respect for a law self-legislated by rational agents. The charge that the Muʿtazilī view is elitist or covertly deterministic is met by stressing that ʿaql is a universal faculty, that luṭf expands effective free will rather than replacing it, and that al-Waʿd wa al-Waʿīd is pedagogical-cosmological, not heteronomous compulsion.

In pedagogy, the two frameworks can be combined fruitfully. Ethics instruction can train maxim-testing through case work and role-reversal in a Kantian spirit, while cultivating ethical ʿaql through Qurʾānic narratives in the spirit of al-Zamakhsyari. At an institutional level, social luṭf may take shape in inclusive public services, greener campuses, and an information ecology resilient to hoaxes. Success is measured by the ability to give defensible reasons and the willingness to own consequences, not by compliance alone.

In operational conclusion, Kant's triad (autonomy–immortality–God) and al-Zamakhsyari's triad (luṭf–al-Waʿd wa al-Waʿīd–Allah) compose a dual framework. One side supplies universal principles that constrain; the other supplies enabling and accountability structures. On this basis, moral agency across traditions moves beyond a theory of free will to a normative engine for policy, education, and public culture oriented toward ethical sustainability across generations.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined free will and moral responsibility (moral agency) through a cross-traditional dialogue between Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics and Muʿtazilite rational theology as articulated by al-Zamakhsyari. Using library research and comparative-hermeneutic analysis, the main finding indicates a functional isomorphism between Kant's triad (autonomy–immortality–God) and al-Zamakhsyari's triad (luthf–al-Waʿd wa al-Waʿīd–Allah). Though arising from different metaphysical horizons, both frameworks position the human being as a moral agent who is free yet accountable.

First, free will as a condition of moral agency. In Kant, rational autonomy renders duty universal and answerable; in al-Zamakhsyari, ʿaql and luthf function as divine enabling that makes good choice possible without annulling human agency. In both frameworks, free will is not an end in itself but a capacity-enabling condition for ethical appraisal, decision-making, and accountability.

Second, the horizon of consequences. Kant's notion of immortality is functionally parallel to the Muʿtazilite doctrine of al-Waʿd wa al-Waʿīd: both confer normative weight on moral consequences beyond immediate interests. Thus the

moral order does not fade into rhetoric; it has a rational-theological guarantee that goodness and justice are ultimately "made whole" within a wider horizon.

Third, normative implications for sustainable futures. This cross-traditional synthesis yields three operational criteria: (1) reason-responsiveness—reasons for action must be defensible across agents and contexts; (2) intergenerational accountability—maxims and policies must be universalizable without undermining the prerequisites of moral life for future generations; (3) justice orientation—actions are tested by deontic guardrails (Kant) together with rational and fair incentive–sanction design (Muʿtazilah). For implementation, we propose a three-step rubric: a maxim test (universalizability and non-instrumentalization), a luthf test (whether institutions truly enable citizens to do good), and a waʿd/waʿīd test (proportional accountability that prevents moral hazard).

Fourth, theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, this study shows that the Kant–al-Zamakhsyari dialogue does more than catalog metaphysical differences; it constructs an architecture of moral agency that can bridge modern rational ethics and Islamic rational theology. Practically, re-reading luthf as a capability policy (character education, public health, information literacy, economic opportunity) complements Kantian deontic guardrails: do no wrong while also enabling the right.

Fifth, limitations and directions for further research. Primary sources were focused on Critique of Pure Reason and al-Kashshāf; the analysis can be enriched by other Kantian texts (Critique of Practical Reason, Groundwork) and the Muʿtazilite corpus (e.g., ʿAbd al-Jabbār). Future work can test this framework against real policy cases (information integrity, social justice, environmental ethics, AI governance) and develop pedagogical indicators for assessing the capacity to offer reasons that are accountable across generations.

In closing, this cross-traditional dialogue affirms that reasoned free will and secured justice are two inseparable pillars of a sustainable future. By integrating rational autonomy (Kant) with divine enabling that upholds justice (al-Zamakhsyari), we gain a universal moral foundation that is not only intellectually coherent but also operational for guiding policy, education, and public culture toward ethical sustainability.

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