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Intellectual Humility and the Ethical Challenge of Teaching Negative Theology in Kalām: A Comparison of Jahm b. Ṣafwān and Ḍirār b. ʿAmr's Models

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Abstract

Original Research

Negative theology in Kalām aims to preserve the unity and simplicity of the divine essence by refraining from affirming the attributes of God. However, teaching such theology raises a moral and epistemic question: How can one cultivate intellectual humility without dissolving meaningful theological discourse? This article investigates this dilemma by comparing the negative theological models of *Jahm b. Ṣafwān* and *Ḍirār b. ʿAmr*. Employing a conceptual and comparative methodology grounded in primary sources and virtue epistemology, this study demonstrates that Jahm's extreme rejection of predication leads to epistemic skepticism and the collapse of theological reasoning. In contrast, Ḍirār's approach grounds denial in a semantic strategy that preserves meaning and interpretive responsibility, offering a form of dynamic intellectual humility. The article concludes by proposing an educational model of "*dialogical authority*," wherein theological expertise and humility mutually reinforce one another. This model fosters a classroom environment in which students are encouraged to ask difficult questions, acknowledge epistemic limits, and participate responsibly in theological inquiry.

Keywords

Moral theology, negative theology, divine attributes, intellectual humility, epistemic skepticism.

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Introduction

Jahm b. Ṣafwān (d. 128/746) and *Ḍirār b. ʿAmr* (d. 200/815) are among the earliest theologians in kalām to have systematically addressed questions of ontology, semantics, and divine attributes. Jahm taught in the northeastern regions of Iran, likely never leaving Khurasan. Ḍirār, originally from Kufa, was first associated with the second generation of the Muʿtazilite school in Basra before moving to Baghdad. Despite never meeting Jahm–and even criticizing his doctrines–Ḍirār was later labeled a "*Jahmite*" by some of his opponents due to shared concerns over the radical transcendence of God and the consequent rejection of anthropomorphic or composite descriptions (Schöck, 2016, p. 55; see van Ess, 2017-2019, vol. 2, pp. 556-559; vol. 3, pp. 34-37).

While both theologians upheld divine transcendence and rejected all predicative descriptions of God, their approaches to negative theology diverged sharply. For Jahm, any predication–whether positive or negative–compromises divine simplicity and uniqueness. God lies entirely beyond the category of "thinghood" and, hence, beyond all meaningful predication. Consequently, all divine attributes semantically collapse into one undifferentiated notion: divinity itself. This results in theological silence, where no real conceptual distinction or analogical understanding of God is possible. Ḍirār, by contrast, while similarly denying essential and accidental predication, advances a more structured semantic model: All scriptural attributes must be read as negations of their contraries. To say "God is knowing" is to mean "God is not ignorant"; "God is powerful" means "God is not powerless." This strategy, while preserving divine transcendence, sustains the communicative function of theological language and maintains a connection with revelation and tradition (see Schöck, 2016, pp. 76–77; Thiele, 2016, p. 365; van Ess, 2017-2019, vol. 2, pp. 559-564; vol. 3, pp. 37-45).

At the same time, the comparison between Jahm and Ḍirār is not imposed artificially, but is grounded in the intellectual history of early kalām. Both are described as "among the first Muslim scholars to deal with issues pertaining to philosophy of nature, ontology, and epistemology" (Schöck, 2016, p. 55), and both rejected Aristotelian notions of substance, prime matter, and natural faculties by attributing all change and persistence in bodies to God's direct creative will. Their common stance led contemporaries like al-Naẓẓām to attack them together "because of their denial of the hiddenness (inkār al-kumūn) of natures and properties in things," and to label them "the adherents of the accidents (aṣḥāb al-aʿrāḍ)" (Schöck, 2016, p. 77). From this perspective, the polemical designation of Ḍirār as "Jahmite" by his adversaries is itself part of the historical evidence

that their thought was perceived as intellectually related. Precisely for this reason, the present study compares their respective models of negative theology–not to conflate them, but to show how two closely associated figures in the history of thought developed distinct strategies for safeguarding divine transcendence.

This article brings these two contrasting models of negative theology into conversation with a contemporary ethical and epistemological question: Can negative theology serve as an instance of intellectual humility, and if so, under what conditions does it do so virtuously? Does it exemplify the responsible acknowledgment of epistemic limitation, or does it risk collapsing into skepticism and silence? To address these questions, the present article engages the contrasting ontologies and semantics of Jahm and Ḍirār in light of current philosophical accounts of intellectual humility, particularly those articulated by Roberts and Wood (2007), Church and Samuelson (2017), Tanesini (2018), and Fortes et al. (2022).

While previous scholarship has offered descriptive accounts of these early theologians (see Schöck, 2016), little attention has been paid to the ethical implications of their models of divine predication, particularly from the perspective of contemporary virtue epistemology. This article fills that gap by reframing early Islamic debates on divine attributes in light of current philosophical concerns. By identifying the ethical and educational consequences of theological silence versus semantic engagement, the study introduces a new axis for evaluating historical kalām positions–not merely by their doctrinal outcomes, but by their epistemic virtues and vices.

Finally, this article addresses a pedagogical challenge faced by contemporary scholars and teachers of theology: How to embody and cultivate humility in the classroom without compromising intellectual authority. The study proposes the model of "dialogical authority" as a solution–a form of intellectual leadership grounded in both theological expertise and ethical restraint. This model integrates the historical semantics of divine speech with contemporary educational praxis, offering practical strategies for teaching negative theology as a virtuous, rather than evasive, intellectual stance.

A final methodological note is necessary. With the exception of a fragmentary Kitāb al-Taḥrīsh attributed to Ḍirār, no writings of Jahm or Ḍirār are extant. What we know of their doctrines comes almost entirely through later doxographical accounts, which condense their views into a few sentences on physics, epistemology, and theology. As Schöck (2016, p. 55) underlines, such reliance on later sources is not a flaw but a constitutive feature of intellectual history and the history of ideas, where the task is to

reconstruct early debates through the lenses of later transmission. The use of al-Ashʿarī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, and others thus reflects the methodological necessity of engaging with doxographical traditions, while this article remains attentive to the historical distance between the original doctrines and their later representations.

The Negative Theology of Jahm b. Ṣafwān and Ḍirār b.ʿAmr

One of the most fundamental questions in early kalām was the problem of divine attributes: How can the relationship between God and the descriptive terms attributed to Him in the Qur'an be adequately analyzed and explained? The responses of the earliest theologians to this issue are typically classified on two levels. The first is the ontological level, which asks whether it is possible to describe God with reference to features or properties such as knowledge, power, and will, or whether any such description would entail unacceptable multiplicity and composition within God. The second is the semantic level, which concerns whether the descriptive and predicative language of the Qur'an, when applied to God, logically bears real meaning and predicative force, or whether these terms ultimately fail to establish any positive meaning about God at all (see Wolfson, 1959, p. 73; Schöck, 2016, p. 58).

Among the earliest thinkers to engage with this problem were *Jahm b. Ṣafwān* and *Ḍirār b. ʿAmr*, both of whom articulated a form of negative theology aimed at preserving the utter simplicity of God. These two figures represent the most radical responses in early kalām to the challenge of divine predication, each rejecting essential and accidental attributes while diverging sharply in their ontological and semantic strategies. Their importance lies not only in their historical influence but also in the conceptual clarity with which they formulated negative theology. In contrast to their extreme models, later Islamic thought has continued to explore more moderate versions of negative theology. [1]

1. For example, several Shiʿi hadiths speak of a theological stance referred to as *nafy al-ṣifāt* (the negation of attributes). While many Shiʿi scholars have reinterpreted these hadiths in ways that avoid radical implications, others have treated them as evidence for a milder form of negative theology that still maintains a link to traditional revelation. This article does not take a normative stance on whether negative theology should be adopted; rather, it investigates whether even the most uncompromising model–namely that of Ḍirār–can exemplify intellectual humility as a moral virtue. If so, such a position must also address the pedagogical challenge of how to teach it responsibly in a classroom setting. (For a detailed

This section focuses on a comparative analysis of the negative theologies of Jahm and Ḍirār, examining how their distinctive metaphysical premises led them to develop markedly different positions on the ontology and semantics of divine attributes. The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, it reconstructs *Jahm b. Ṣafwān*'s theory in terms of his ontological rejection of divine predication and the resulting collapse of theological language. Second, it presents *Ḍirār b. ʿAmr*'s more linguistically structured model, which, though equally committed to divine simplicity, preserves a communicative function for scriptural language through semantic negation. Finally, it offers a comparative analysis, evaluating how each model navigates the tension between transcendence and meaningful discourse.

Jahm b. Ṣafwān: Ontology, Semantics, and the Limits of Divine Predication

The core of *Jahm b. Ṣafwān*'s negative theology is his unique ontology of "*thingness*." For Jahm, the only genuine "objects of knowledge" (*al-maʿlūm*) are what he calls "existent bodies" (*al-jism al-mawjūd*). (al-Ashaʿarī, 1980, pp. 494–495). In his view, a "thing" (*shayʾ*) is not a universal genus but is defined strictly as "having a likeness, or being the like of another" (Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, 1420, vol. 27, p. 585). Every "thing" (*shayʾ*) thus belongs to the class of corporeal, composite, and contingent entities. God, in this schema, is categorically outside the realm of "things."

From this standpoint, the opposite of a "thing" for Jahm includes three possibilities: (1) the nonexistent (*al-maʿdūm*), (2) *lā shayʾ*–an existent that lacks all likeness, and (3) *ghayr al-jism*–that which is not composite. (al-Ashaʿarī, 1980, p. 346). All attributes, such as motion, color, and even states like being alive or having power, are conceived as accidents inhering only in bodies. Jahm's metaphysical division therefore distinguishes between: (a) composite existents (*al-jism al-mawjūd*); (b) non-existents and mental constructs (*al-maʿdūm*); and (c) the utterly simple, non-composite existent–God (*lā shayʾ, ghayr al-jism*).

For Jahm, "God is *lā shayʾ* (not a thing)," and as such, He cannot be described, conceived, or known by any attribute or predication: He is "neither described nor known by any attribute; no action is done to Him; He has neither end nor limit; He is not apprehended by reason. He is entirely face, entirely knowledge, entirely hearing, entirely sight, entirely

study of the Shiʿi hadith-based doctrine of "*nafy al-ṣifāt*" see Berenjkar & Zarepour, 2021, entire article).

light, entirely power. Nothing dual exists in Him; He is not described by two different attributes; He has neither above nor below, no directions or sides, no right and no left; He is neither light nor heavy, has no color and no body; He is neither known nor intelligible. Whatever comes to your heart as something you know–He is other than that" (Ibn Ḥanbal, 2003, pp. 98-99). The Jahmites connect their ontology directly to epistemology: God is not a composite, not a body, and not a thing, and thus is not knowable (*maʿlūm*) or conceivable (*maʿqūl*). In their view, to know "what" something is, reason must abstract attributes from a sensible object, but this presupposes multiplicity or similarity, which cannot apply to the utterly simple divine reality. Thus, "whatness" cannot be predicated of God. Only "that" God exists is knowable by intuition (*bi-l-takhmīn*), based on the need for a true agent behind every act (see Schöck, 2016, p. 64; al-Malṭī, 1968, p. 96; al-Dārimī, 2010, p. 182).

Based on these ontological and epistemological commitments, Jahm's answer to the problem of divine attributes can be stated as follows:

a) **Ontological answer:** For Jahm, only "existent bodies" are "things." God, by definition, is not a "thing," nor a composite, nor an existent body. Any attribute that can be abstracted or ascribed presupposes multiplicity, composition, and likeness. Since God is none of these, He is not susceptible to any description–whether affirmative or negative, essential or accidental.

b) **Semantic answer:** Language and predication, including Qur'anic terms, ultimately refer to "things" (i. e., existent bodies and composites). God, who is *lā shayʾ*, cannot be the referent of such terms in their proper, predicative sense. Thus, when scripture attributes knowledge, power, or hearing to God, these do not function as true predicates; rather, they are identity statements pointing only to undifferentiated divinity, not introducing distinction or plurality.

Yet this ontology was not born in an abstract vacuum but in the charged socio-political and religious context of Khurāsān. Sources emphasize that Jahm was "always, as his opponents saw it, engaged in subversive activities; even in the heat of battle Ḥārith b. Surayj's troops … tried to win over the opposing side by means of moral and religious arguments. Jahm was a *qāṣṣ* … He only pointed out that Jahm had never attended a scholar's lecture, or gone on the pilgrimage." (van Ess, 2017-2019, vol. 2, p. 556). In the same vein, grievances about social injustice shaped the reception of his theology: "Twenty thousand *mawālī* served in the army without their

names being entered in the paylist (*bilā ʿaṭāʾ wa-lā rizq*), and just as many converts were forced to continue to pay the poll tax." (van Ess, 2017-2019, vol. 2, p. 554). Against this backdrop, Jahm's radical insistence that "there is no 'God's plan'; God's actions are omnipresent, but they do not reveal anything" (van Ess, 2017-2019, vol. 2, p. 562) resonated with disenfranchised converts who found in divine transcendence a language of protest. His theology thus functioned both as a metaphysical claim–that God is *lā shayʾ* and beyond all predication–and as a political-theological response to oppression, anthropomorphism, and contested religious authority.

Ḍirār b. ʿAmr: Ontology, Semantics, and the Limits of Divine Predication

The metaphysical foundation of *Ḍirār b. ʿAmr*'s negative theology is his radical redefinition of corporeal reality. According to Ḍirār, "the body (*al-jism*) is accidents (*aʿrāḍ*) that have been composed and brought together, so they have subsisted and remained, and thus became a body that can bear accidents when they inhere (*yaḥillu*), and can undergo change from one state to another" (al-Ashaʿarī, 1980, p. 305). In this account, bodies are nothing but bundles of accidents; there is no underlying substance (*jawhar*) or prime matter. The very notion of a "body" denotes both the aggregate of essential accidents and the genus of corporeality, so that the proposition "the body is accidents" expresses a complete overlap of subject and predicate.

Ḍirār distinguishes between "inseparable" (*ghayr mufāriq*) and "separable" (*mufāriq*) accidents (al-Ashaʿarī, 1980, p. 305). Inseparable accidents–such as life and death, colors and tastes, heaviness and lightness, roughness and softness, heat and cold, wetness and dryness, and solidity (*al-ṣamad*)–are those that bodies are never without, or without their contraries. By contrast, separable accidents–such as power (*qudra*), pain (*alam*), knowledge (*ʿilm*), and ignorance (*jahl*)–do not belong to bodies as such and can be replaced by their opposites.

Crucially, Ḍirār maintains that "the existence of accidents independent of the body is impossible;" accidents do not come into being independently and later combine to form a body. Rather, their aggregation and the coming-into-existence of the body are simultaneous, and the independent existence of undetermined or separate accidents is self-contradictory. (al-Ashaʿarī, 1980, p. 305). Not only do inseparable accidents lack independent existence, but even separable accidents such as power, pain, knowledge, and ignorance exist only within bodies and have no being apart from them.

The denial of independent existence for accidents has significant

consequences:

- If an accident perishes and its contrary appears, the body persists, so long as the majority of its parts remain; when the majority are annihilated, the body itself perishes. (al-Ashaʿarī, 1980, p. 306).
- Motion occurs not in accidents, but only in the body as a whole, which is an aggregate of accidents.
- The perishing of an accident and the appearance of its contrary can take place while the body is in motion or at rest.
- There is no underlying prime matter or inherent natural potency in bodies; all that exists are the actual compositions and manifestations of accidents. (al-Ashaʿarī, 1980, p. 330).

Based on these ontological and epistemological commitments, Ḍirār's answer to the problem of divine attributes can be stated as follows:

a) Ontological answer: Ḍirār holds that the body is nothing but a bundle of accidents, and no underlying substance exists. All accidents, whether inseparable or separable, exist only as elements within bodies. God, by contrast, is absolutely simple, non-composite, and transcendent–utterly unlike corporeal entities, and not subject to composition. Thus, attributing qualities or properties to God in any positive, real sense would necessarily introduce multiplicity and composition into the divine essence, thereby compromising divine unity. Therefore, God is ontologically beyond all predication by attributes, whether essential or accidental, and cannot be described in the way corporeal entities are described.

b) Semantic answer: Ḍirār's semantic approach to divine attributes is equally rigorous. For him, all Qur'anic attributes ascribed to God are to be interpreted strictly as negative statements. The meaning of 'God is knowing' is that He is not ignorant, the meaning of 'He is powerful' is that He is not powerless, and the meaning of 'He is living' is that He is not dead. (al-Ashaʿarī, 1980, p. 166). This form of negative theology denies the assertion of any positive, independent quality in God; all so-called attributes are only denials of their contraries.

Yet this ontology and semantics were not formed in isolation but within the vibrant intellectual and socio-political milieu of the early ʿAbbāsid era. Ḍirār was deeply enmeshed in the circles of the Barmakids, where he encountered figures such as the *rēsh gālūthā* and the chief *mobād*, which

"may have given him the idea to write his ten-chapter text against members of foreign religions (*ahl al-milal*)." (van Ess, 2017-2019, vol. 3, p. 39). He was "much in demand" and left "more writings than any theologian before or after him until the time of the early scholastics Jubbāʾī and Kaʿbī" (van Ess, 2017-2019, vol. 3, p. 38), composing polemics not only against "free thinkers and heretics," (van Ess, 2017-2019, vol. 3, p. 39), but also against Murjiʾites, Khārijites, extreme Shīʿites, and even the Jahmites, while at the same time sparing his Muʿtazilite colleagues and displaying solidarity with them. His negative theology thus emerged not only as a metaphysical claim that "the body is ultimately a bundle of accidents" (van Ess, 2017-2019, vol. 3, p. 41) and God is utterly transcendent, but also as a political-theological intervention shaped by inter-religious disputation, critiques of sectarianism, and the struggle to preserve divine unity against both anthropomorphist excesses and heretical reductionism.

Comparative Analysis

The negative theologies of *Jahm b. Ṣafwān* and *Ḍirār b. ʿAmr*, while sharing the overarching goal of preserving the absolute simplicity and unity of the divine, are grounded in distinct metaphysical premises that generate markedly different approaches to the ontological and semantic dimensions of the divine attributes problem.

For Jahm, the fundamental ontological commitment is that only "existent bodies" (*al-jism al-mawjūd*) qualify as "things" (*ashyaʾ*), and that the realm of things is coextensive with the world of corporeal, contingent composites. God, accordingly, is defined as *lā shayʾ* _ not a thing, not a composite, not an existent body _ and thus is wholly outside the category of "thingness." By contrast, *Ḍirār b. ʿAmr* articulates a metaphysics in which bodies are nothing but bundles of accidents (*aʿrāḍ*) aggregated in a specific configuration, with no underlying substance (*jawhar*) or latent potency. The body's ontological status is exhausted by the actual composition and persistence of these accidents; neither inseparable nor separable accidents exist independently from the body, even conceptually.

This divergence in metaphysical foundations leads to significant differences in the ontological treatment of divine attributes. Jahm's radical simplicity entails that God cannot be ascribed any attributes–whether essential or accidental, positive or negative–without introducing multiplicity or composition. Since all language and thought about attributes presupposes thingness, and God is not a thing, any predication about God is rendered meaningless. Only the existence of God can be known, and even

this is achieved through intuition rather than conceptual abstraction. For Ḍirār, on the other hand, the denial of underlying substance and latent power in bodies logically entails that any attribution of qualities or properties to God–who is absolutely simple and non-composite–would compromise divine unity by introducing multiplicity. Thus, God is ontologically beyond all predication by attributes, whether essential or accidental, and cannot be described using the language or qualities of bodies.

The semantic strategies of the two theologians reflect their respective ontologies. Jahm's solution is a form of semantic collapse: all descriptive and predicative expressions used for God in scripture or elsewhere "collapse into a single, undifferentiated meaning–divinity itself" and do not allow for any real predication, concept formation, or analogical understanding of God. Scriptural attributions such as knowledge, power, or hearing do not function as genuine predicates; they are merely identity statements indicating divinity, without conveying any distinguishing content. For Ḍirār, the semantic strategy is a strict form of negative theology: every so-called divine attribute must be interpreted exclusively as the denial of its contrary. As he explicitly states, 'God is knowing' means only 'God is not ignorant;' 'God is powerful' means only 'God is not powerless;' and 'God is hearing and seeing' means only 'God is not deaf nor blind.' Thus, all positive predicative language about God in the Qur'an serves solely to negate imperfection, never to affirm positive, independent qualities in God.[1]

A subtle yet critical difference emerges when these theological frameworks are applied to the question of agency and action. Jahm's metaphysics leads directly to a radical occasionalism: "there is, in reality, no action by anyone except God alone; He is the agent, and actions are attributed to people only metaphorically", just as movement is attributed to a tree or the sun, though God is the true agent behind all motion and rest. (al-Ashaʿarī, 1980, pp. 279, 589). Human power and will are not intrinsic or

1. Methodological clarification: This article does not categorically *ascribe* "epistemic silence" to Jahm as a thesis he himself avows. Rather, it argues conditionally: *if* the reconstructed premises attributed to Jahm by the doxographical record are granted–namely, that God is *lā shayʾ* (wholly beyond thinghood) and that all predicative attributions reduce to an undifferentiated divinity–*then* the implications for discourse about God amount to a principled silence with respect to predication. Crucially, this silence is not a simplification or a denial of theological meaning; it is the functional outcome of Jahm's overriding motivation to preserve absolute *tanzīh*. It disciplines language (by blocking anthropomorphic and composite descriptions), protects divine simplicity, and affirms God's existence and agency without collapsing into global skepticism. On this reading, "epistemic silence" names the normative boundary-condition generated by Jahm's premises, not an evaluative dismissal of the depth or purpose of his theology.

lasting capacities but accidents created by God at the moment of the act. There is no independent faculty or lasting potency within the human agent prior to the act; human beings are not true agents, and their actions are ascribed to them only figuratively. In contrast, Ḍirār's theory of action is more nuanced. He posits a "*dual-agent*" model: acts are created by God, but a single act has two agents–God as creator, and the human as acquirer. While God is the true agent, humans too are in reality agents of their own acts, and the capacity to act (*istiṭāʿah*) is present before and during the act as an inseparable accident of the human being (al-Ashaʿarī, 1980, p. 281). This mediating view positions Ḍirār between the total denial of human agency in Jahm's system and the Muʿtazilite affirmation of independent human action.

These differences in the theory of action reinforce the broader contrast between the two systems. Jahm's model leads to a theology in which God is so utterly transcendent and undifferentiated that not only are divine attributes rendered meaningless, but all creaturely agency is also dissolved into divine activity; human beings are reduced to sites for the manifestation of God's will. Ḍirār's system, however, while still committed to divine simplicity and negative theology, allows for a more robust conceptual space for created agency. By distinguishing between the creator and the acquirer of acts, and by positing a lasting human capacity, Ḍirār preserves both divine transcendence and a meaningful, albeit dependent, form of human participation in action.

In sum, both Jahm and Ḍirār articulate negative theologies rooted in rigorous metaphysical commitments to divine simplicity and transcendence. Yet their accounts differ profoundly in how they understand the nature of bodies, the status of attributes, the logic of predication, and the scope of agency. Jahm's system collapses all distinction and agency into the divine, nullifying both predication and real human action. Ḍirār's model, while equally wary of multiplicity in the divine, develops a negative theology that preserves semantic meaning in scriptural language and safeguards a real, though derived, agency for creatures. These differences highlight not only the subtlety of early Islamic theological debate but also the enduring significance of metaphysical choices for the structure and practical implications of negative theology.[1]

1. While this article does not aim to provide a full survey of later critiques of Jahm and Ḍirār, it is worth noting that early Muʿtazilite thinkers such as al-Naẓẓām explicitly challenged their ontology of accidents. Al-Naẓẓām famously accused the so-called *aṣḥāb al-aʿrāḍ* of falling into a slippery slope: if the sweetness of honey and the sourness of vinegar exist only at the moment of perception, then so too must the colors of objects–blackness, whiteness, redness, yellowness, greenness–exist only when observed (Jāḥiẓ, 2003, vol. 5, p. 4). He

Intellectual Humility: A Framework from Virtue Epistemology

In recent virtue epistemology, intellectual humility has come to be regarded as a foundational trait for responsible belief-formation, open-mindedness, and intellectual growth. It is not simply the absence of dogmatism or the presence of epistemic caution, but a positive disposition marked by accurate self-assessment, responsiveness to evidence, and a commitment to fair engagement. It involves an active awareness of one's cognitive limitations as well as a principled willingness to revise beliefs in light of superior reasons or new data (see, e.g., Roberts & Wood, 2007, pp. 7–21; Church & Samuelson, 2017, pp. 7–9; Tanesini, 2018, pp. 213–215; Fortes et al., 2024, p. 103).

For the purposes of this article, intellectual humility will be treated not only as a broad epistemic virtue but also as an operational criterion for evaluating theological models. Operationally, I define intellectual humility through two conditions: (1) the agent's recognition of epistemic limits together with a readiness to revise beliefs in light of superior reasons, and (2) the agent's active commitment to engage meaningfully with reasons, texts, and interlocutors. Any model of negative theology that fails to meet either of these conditions will be regarded here as lacking genuine intellectual humility.

What Is Genuine Intellectual Humility?

Intellectual humility is typically characterized as a virtuous mean between two epistemic vices: arrogance and diffidence. It reflects the capacity to neither overestimate nor underestimate one's intellectual strengths. The literature identifies two central components:

1. **Epistemic Self-Awareness**: A disposition to acknowledge the limits of one's knowledge, remain alert to the possibility of error, and revise beliefs when warranted. (Roberts & Wood, 2007, p. 11; Church & Samuelson, 2017, p. 95).
2. **Openness to Others**: A sincere readiness to engage with disagreement, consider alternative viewpoints, and respond fairly to criticism (Fortes et al., 2024, p. 103; Tanesini, 2018, p. 213).

What is crucial for this study is that these components provide concrete

illustrated the folly of this view with an ironic parable about a hunchback who fell into a well and lost his hump, only to develop a worse ailment, saying: "what came is worse than what went" (ibid., p. 5). For al-Naẓẓām, the denial of latent natures while rejecting *kumūn* (the hidden presence of fire in wood) undermined coherence: if one abandons intrinsic properties in bodies, one must abandon all forms of inner qualities. His insistence on *kumūn* thus stood as a pointed critique of the accident-based ontologies of both Jahm and Ḍirār.

evaluative criteria. A model demonstrates intellectual humility only if (a) its practitioners remain epistemically self-aware in acknowledging the limits of theological language, and (b) it institutionalizes openness to interpretive engagement rather than collapsing into silence or indifference. By explicitly applying these two tests, the following analysis will distinguish between humble and non-humble approaches to negative theology.

Thus, intellectual humility should be understood as a positive epistemic virtue, one that supports intellectual honesty, moral responsibility, and the ethical pursuit of truth. (see also Baehr, 2011, pp. 19–24; Zagzebski, 1996, pp. 242–250; Eslami, 2024, p. 19).

The Epistemic Potential of Negative Theology

Theological traditions that emphasize the limits of human knowledge–especially negative theology–are often taken to support a posture of humility in religious belief. Such traditions emphasize that human beings are incapable of fully comprehending or describing the divine essence, and that theological language, however necessary, remains analogical, metaphorical, or provisional. This recognition of epistemic limitation can motivate both restraint in theological assertion and respect for interpretive pluralism.

Yet not all forms of negation constitute intellectual humility. A theological stance that negates claims without a corresponding commitment to understanding, engagement, or revision does not count as virtuous humility. The distinction between virtuous silence and epistemic diffidence is critical here. The former arises from a morally responsible acknowledgment of limits; the latter reflects a retreat from epistemic responsibility altogether.

Accordingly, for negative theology to exemplify intellectual humility, it must preserve some kind of conceptual space for meaning, dialogue, and critical reasoning. The absence of dogmatism must be balanced by interpretive accountability and intellectual engagement (Roberts & Wood, 2007, pp. 13–14; Church & Samuelson, 2017, p. 97).

Evaluating Two Models of Theological Negation

The models developed by *Jahm b. Ṣafwān* and *Ḍirār b. ʿAmr* illustrate the contrast between intellectual humility and epistemic defeatism. Jahm's metaphysical stance–according to which God is not a "thing" and lies beyond all categories of being–leads to a complete collapse of predication.

All scriptural attributes, whether affirmative or negative, are reduced to a single, undifferentiated affirmation of divinity without conceptual distinction. Language about God becomes void of predicative content, and theological discourse loses its capacity to differentiate, engage, or explain.

Although such a stance appears modest, it undermines the very preconditions of responsible belief. When there is nothing left to interpret, no predicate to affirm or deny, and no reason to prefer one articulation over another, theology ceases to function. This is not intellectual humility but epistemic quietism–a vice marked by the surrendering of cognitive responsibilities associated with belief and inquiry.

By contrast, Ḍirār's model offers a structured and semantically disciplined form of negative theology. He maintains that all attributes ascribed to God in scripture are meaningful only as denials of their opposites. Statements such as "God is knowing" or "God is powerful" are interpreted as "God is not ignorant" and "God is not powerless". This strategy does not merely negate; it reformulates. It preserves the dialogical and referential function of theological language, even while denying an ontological resemblance between God and creation.

This form of negative theology exemplifies genuine intellectual humility: it combines epistemic restraint with a commitment to meaning, interpretation, and engagement. The denial of positive predicates does not entail a withdrawal from discourse; instead, it grounds that discourse in a principled awareness of language's limits.

Agency, Responsibility, and the Conditions for Virtue

The distinction between these two theological models becomes even sharper when viewed through their respective accounts of human agency. Jahm's radical occasionalism denies real causal power to human beings; actions are created solely by God, and are ascribed to humans only metaphorically. In this framework, the believer is no longer a responsible epistemic agent but merely a passive recipient of divine activity. As virtue epistemology maintains, intellectual humility presupposes active participation: it requires the subject to think, evaluate, respond, and engage. (Baehr, 2011, pp. 30–33).

Ḍirār's dual-agency model, by contrast, preserves the human agent's role. While God creates the act, the human being acquires it and possesses a lasting capacity to act before and during the performance of the action. This framework affirms epistemic responsibility within the limits of divine sovereignty. It enables humility without passivity: it envisions a subject

who knows their limits yet remains obligated to think and act within them.

Responsible Negation and the Conditions for Intellectual Virtue

Negative theology can foster intellectual humility only to the extent that it integrates denial with engagement, limitation with responsibility, and silence with interpretive attentiveness. The theological model of *Ḍirār b. ʿAmr* achieves this integration. While fully committed to divine transcendence and the negation of predication, it also preserves the meaningfulness of language, the possibility of scriptural reasoning, and the moral and epistemic dignity of the believing subject.

Jahm's model, by contrast, represents a cautionary limit-case. When negation is pushed to the point of erasing all conceptual differentiation and denying all interpretive agency, intellectual humility gives way to defeatism. The challenge, then, is not whether negative theology can support humility, but whether it can be taught and embodied without surrendering the very conditions that make humility a virtue rather than a void.

The Ethical Challenge for the Teacher: The Dilemma of Authority and Humility

Even when negative theology (in Ḍirār's sense) fosters genuine intellectual humility, it presents a profound ethical challenge in the context of teaching and professional life. In higher education, there is an expectation that professors and experts will embody "epistemic authority" and "intellectual leadership." Yet, in many cases, especially when teaching or facing students' questions, professors may be forced to admit a lack of knowledge or ability in a given subject. This puts them at an ethical crossroads: on the one hand, they have to maintain scholarly authority; on the other, they have to practice honesty and the acceptance of their own epistemic limitations (intellectual humility).

If humility is conceived only as a withdrawal from authority, or as a mere admission of ignorance, it ceases to be a virtue and becomes a defect. However, virtuous humility manifests when the absence of these negative states is replaced by, or balanced with, a positive value or virtue (Eslami, 2024, pp. 6-7). True intellectual humility in a teacher is not incompatible with confidence, creativity, or intellectual boldness. Rather, the most intellectually humble thinkers in the history of thought have often been exceptionally energetic and bold in their knowledge, but their confidence

and courage did not depend on arrogance, domination, or pride.

The ethical dilemma, then, is how a teacher–especially one who adheres to negative theology–can teach theology authentically while also displaying both epistemic humility and appropriate intellectual authority. The answer lies in cultivating an attitude that "accurately tracks the positive epistemic status of one's own beliefs" and models for students the courage to admit limits without undermining the integrity and value of religious knowledge. There is nothing necessarily incompatible with intellectual humility and dogmatically holding to religious beliefs that are load-bearing group-loyalty identifiers… it is at least possible to be in a situation where one can be dogmatic about one's religious beliefs while being intellectually humble (Church, 2018, p. 235).

A Constructive Model: Virtuous Negative Theology from Ethical Dilemma to Educational Practice

The most fruitful approach to negative theology in an educational setting is to cultivate a form that is not merely privative or skeptical, but fundamentally virtue-based. At its best, Ḍirār's negative theology exemplifies this stance: it is not simply a gesture of epistemic withdrawal, but a conscious, ethically grounded affirmation of both humility and meaningful engagement.

This model views humility not as the suspension of all conviction, but as the disciplined posture of one who recognizes the limits of reason and language regarding the divine, yet remains open to meaning, dialogue, and transformation. With this framework in place, we now turn to a constructive model of virtuous negative theology grounded in the following pedagogical and ethical principles:

Principle 1: Affirming the Possibility of Epistemic Virtue

Genuine intellectual humility in theological education is realized when a person is able to hold beliefs with a proportionate confidence–rooted in robust justification and responsible study–while remaining genuinely open to criticism, revision, and the possibility of error. This is not an abdication of epistemic authority; rather, it is a commitment to pursue understanding in a manner that is both rigorous and responsive. Such humility is best embodied not in silence or perpetual skepticism, but in the readiness to revise one's views when warranted, and in the capacity to communicate this openness as a positive, dynamic quality to others.

Principle 2: Dialogical Authority-Balancing Expertise and Humility

The model of "dialogical authority" reframes the traditional image of the teacher as either an infallible expert or a passive facilitator. Instead, the educator in this paradigm embraces her role as an intellectual leader, but one whose authority is inseparable from her humility. This means modeling expertise and confidence in areas where knowledge is well-founded–such as the principle of divine unity or the tradition's central theological claims–while at the same time publicly acknowledging areas of complexity, ambiguity, and legitimate difference. The teacher's willingness to admit the limits of her knowledge, far from diminishing her authority, becomes a central component of her credibility and inspires students to develop similar virtues in their own intellectual lives.

For instance, when a student asks: "If God cannot be known in essence, why should we believe in Him at all?", the teacher may respond by situating the question within the historical kalām tradition: "This is a classical dilemma–the Ashʿarīs offered one answer, the Muʿtazilīs another. Let us examine their arguments together and see how each frames the issue." In this way, the teacher both demonstrates mastery of the sources and invites students into dialogue, embodying authority and humility simultaneously.

This dialogical authority is characterized neither by the abdication of leadership, nor by an authoritarian insistence on dogma, but by the cultivation of a classroom ethos where inquiry is both guided and genuinely open-ended. Students learn that living with unresolved questions and interpretive ambiguity is not a weakness, but a necessary condition for growth and maturity in theological thought.

Principle 3: Modeling Intellectual Courage Without Self-Centeredness

Virtuous negative theology further demands the cultivation of intellectual courage–a readiness to pursue difficult questions, entertain critical debate, and respectfully dissent–without lapsing into intellectual self-centeredness or dogmatism. The courageous teacher is able to defend well-grounded theological boundaries while still inviting students to explore alternatives and consider challenges. This balance resists the twin dangers of authoritarianism (which suppresses honest questioning) and relativism (which collapses all boundaries), forging instead an environment where robust yet humble inquiry thrives.

As an illustration, when a student critically challenges Ḍirār's model by suggesting that it still presupposes hidden positive predicates, the teacher

may reply: “That is an excellent objection; I need to think further about it myself. Why don’t we dedicate part of our next session to exploring this issue in the texts?” Such a move shows the courage to engage criticism honestly while refraining from arrogant dismissal, thereby embodying intellectual humility in practice.

Practical Strategies for the Classroom

Following the articulation of this model, it is essential to offer a set of practical strategies that can assist instructors in implementing it effectively within the classroom. These strategies are as follows:

1. Clearly Defining Epistemic Boundaries

At the beginning of each course or session, the instructor sets the tone by affirming the theological value of humility. Acknowledging that some questions may have no final answers is presented not as a sign of weakness but as an expression of epistemic responsibility.

2. Designing Collaborative Learning

The learning process is framed as a shared journey. The instructor serves not as the ultimate authority issuing final judgments, but as a guide who curates resources, poses meaningful questions, and fosters critical thinking.

3. Normalizing “I Don’t Know” as a Virtue

When confronted with difficult questions, the instructor openly says “I don’t know,” or “This issue remains disputed.” Such responses are not signs of failure, but invitations to collective inquiry. The instructor then engages students in evaluating both classical and contemporary responses.

For example, in a session on divine knowledge of future contingents, a student may ask: “How exactly does God know my free choices before I make them?” Instead of giving a premature solution, the teacher may answer: “This has been debated for centuries, and I cannot give you a definitive answer. But I can show you three major perspectives–Bahshamī, Māturīdī, and Avicennian–and we can compare their strengths and weaknesses together.” By doing this, the teacher models that admitting ignorance is an opening to shared inquiry rather than a confession of incompetence.

4. Balancing Humility with Confidence in Well-Grounded Beliefs

Some core beliefs–such as the unity and transcendence of God–rest on strong rational, textual, and historical foundations. Students are taught that humility does not entail the perpetual suspension of belief, but rather a rational and proportionate trust in what is well justified.

5. Explicit Engagement with Epistemic Virtues

Throughout the course, students are invited to reflect on virtues such as humility, courage, honesty, and fairness, and to connect them with theological reasoning. This ongoing reflection is key to nurturing a mature and ethically responsible theological community.

Ethical Outcome: Redefining Authority in kalām

Through this model, authority in theology is redefined: it is no longer in tension with humility, but reconstituted through it. The authentic teacher of negative theology is neither one who shuns authority nor one who clings to it dogmatically, but one whose credibility and trustworthiness are rooted in a courageous, honest, and dialogical pursuit of truth. This stance models to students the possibility of living with tension and ambiguity without cynicism or despair _ inviting them into the ongoing ethical and intellectual drama of seeking understanding before God.

In sum, the highest form of epistemic authority in negative theology is found not in suppressing doubt or masking ignorance, but in embodying the courage to seek, the humility to acknowledge limits, and the wisdom to lead others into genuine inquiry. The teacher who integrates rigorous expertise with virtuous humility does not merely transmit information, but cultivates in students the intellectual and ethical habits essential for responsible, lifelong engagement with the questions of theology.

Conclusion

This study has examined the complex relationship between negative theology and intellectual humility through a comparative analysis of the doctrines of Jahm b. Ṣafwān and Ḍirār b. ʿAmr-two foundational figures in early Islamic thought. By situating their models within the broader framework of Islamic metaphysics and semantics, we have clarified the differing ontological and

semantic commitments underlying each approach to the divine attributes. Jahm's theology, built upon a sharp metaphysical division between "things" and the utterly transcendent divine reality, leads to an extreme form of negative theology in which God lies beyond all forms of predication–whether affirmative or negative. While this preserves divine simplicity, it also risks epistemic paralysis by eliminating the conditions necessary for meaningful theological discourse. As our analysis has shown, this model fails to exemplify intellectual humility in the virtue-epistemological sense; instead, it collapses into epistemic diffidence, where conceptual engagement, responsibility, and interpretive participation are foreclosed.

In contrast, Ḍirār's model preserves divine unity and simplicity while simultaneously allowing for a disciplined form of scriptural engagement. His denial of any underlying substance or intrinsic power in created bodies leads to a semantic model in which all divine attributes are interpreted as negations of their opposites–preserving communicative meaning without affirming ontological plurality. This approach maintains the epistemic and ethical conditions for theological reflection by allowing for semantic distinction, interpretive responsibility, and conceptual humility. Crucially, Ḍirār's dual-agency theory of human action strengthens the moral framework of this model by affirming responsible participation in truth-seeking–a core component of intellectual humility. His theology thus reflects a form of humility that is dialogical rather than passive, epistemically rigorous rather than evasive, and structurally open to revision and self-assessment.

The comparative results of this study demonstrate that negative theology can support intellectual humility only when it is grounded in positive epistemic virtues: openness, dialogical engagement, interpretive courage, and a principled acknowledgment of cognitive limitation. Where these virtues are embodied–particularly in the educational sphere–negative theology is transformed from a logic of denial into a pedagogy of responsibility. The proposed model of "dialogical authority" offers a constructive framework for teachers and scholars who aim to integrate humility with theological leadership. Rather than viewing intellectual humility as the antithesis of conviction or expertise, this study affirms its vital role as a dynamic foundation for theological reasoning, academic character, and moral authenticity in both scholarship and classroom practice.

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