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Problems in Contemporary Islamic Philosophy of Religion

Edited by
Imran Aijaz

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Guest Editor

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About the Editor

Imran Aijaz

Imran Aijaz is a professor of philosophy in the Department of Language, Culture, and the Arts at the University of Michigan–Dearborn. His research focuses primarily on analytic philosophy of religion and Islamic philosophy. Across these two areas, he is interested in the topics of faith and reason, religious epistemology, religious diversity, and religious pluralism. He also has an interest in ancient philosophy and its reception by Jewish, Christian, and Islamic thinkers in the Middle Ages. Aijaz's book *Islam: A Contemporary Philosophical Investigation* (Routledge 2018) brings reflection on many of these topics to bear on the philosophy of religion. He has also published several articles on these topics in a variety of academic journals and books.

Preface

This Reprint brings together eight contributions addressing central problems in contemporary Islamic philosophy of religion. These contributions engage with a range of topics familiar within the philosophy of religion, such as religious epistemology, the relationship between reason and revelation, the metaphysics of theism, the problem of evil, salvation, and religious disagreement, while situating these debates within, or in critical dialogue with, the Islamic intellectual tradition. Taken as a whole, the contributions illustrate the growing maturity of Islamic philosophy of religion as a field that participates directly in global philosophical conversations rather than functioning merely as an extension of confessional theology or apologetics.

A unifying feature of the Reprint is its commitment to a distinctly philosophical approach. The contributions approach Islamic sources, concepts, and theological claims as material for philosophical analysis and evaluation. In doing so, the Reprint exemplifies the Islamic philosophy of religion as a second-order enterprise, not constrained by the internal norms of Islamic belief and practice, even as it remains informed by them.

At the same time, the Reprint does not exclude work that defends positions broadly congruent with Islamic belief. Rather, it reflects an approach that welcomes both sympathetic and critical perspectives, provided they meet standards of philosophical rigor and clarity. Several contributions engage with classical Islamic thinkers alongside contemporary analytic philosophy, while others develop original proposals that may challenge inherited assumptions within both Islamic and non-Islamic frameworks.

The Reprint is intended for philosophers of religion, scholars of Islamic thought, theologians, and students interested in how Islamic thought can illuminate enduring philosophical problems and how philosophical inquiry, in turn, can reshape contemporary thinking about Islam. By bringing these diverse contributions together, the Reprint aims to broaden the scope of the philosophy of religion and to demonstrate the value of Islamic philosophy of religion as an intellectually independent field of inquiry.

Imran Aijaz
Guest Editor

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Article

Ibn Taymiyya's Fiṭralism and Alvin Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Contemporary philosophers and epistemologists as well as scholars of Islamic studies have not failed to notice some striking similarities between aspects of the Islamic notion of the "fiṭra" (humanity's archetypal nature) articulated by the medieval Hanbalī traditionalist jurist and theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d.728/1328) and the account of the *sensus divinitatis* (an innate, direct perception of God) espoused by the reformed philosopher Alvin Plantinga (1932–present). This article systematically compares both these notions and more by first situating them within the antecedent historical factors and developments leading up to their emergence in their respective intellectual milieu, the theological anthropology espoused by both thinkers and the religious epistemology of each respective thinker. The article will also discuss salient differences between each doctrine and their broader parent epistemologies and will examine major objections raised against them. The comparative study reveals not only a rich source of Islamic religious epistemology to be mined by diligent researchers but the exciting application of philosophical analysis to the thought of Ibn Taymiyya. Finally, the article argues that Ibn Taymiyya's account of the *fiṭra* faces some problematic epistemological conundrums, one of which will be explored in detail.

Keywords: fiṭra; foundationalism; Ibn Taymiyya; reformed epistemology; sensus divinitatis

1. Introduction

This article explores the epistemologies of two formidable intellectuals, who, although separated by seven centuries, nevertheless share similar sensations and intuitions about the religious nature of belief, evidence, and justification: Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya (d.728/1328), a 13th century Syrian scholar and polymath who had a firebrand apologetic project and Alvin Plantinga (1932–present), one of the major architects of the renaissance of Christian philosophy and apologetics in the 20th century. Although the article is comparative, more weight of analysis and discussion will be given to the concept of 'fiṭra' within Islamic theology and its account by Ibn Taymiyya as the central pillar of his epistemology, with an objection that can be raised against it. This analysis will be followed by an outline of Plantinga's religious epistemology and its core components, which are reformed epistemology, proper functionalism, and the basic and extended Aquinas/Calvin models. A brief criticism of that model will also be mentioned. This will then lead to an exploration of some areas of comparison between both epistemologies to highlight several points of interest. Both Ibn Taymiyya and Plantinga were immensely concerned with knowledge, how it relates to God and religious living. Both have robust accounts of how they thread all these elements into a consistent thesis and framework, and this article will explore aspects of that.

2. The Islamic Concept of the Fiṭra

The noun "fiṭra" (nature, innate, native, disposition) is from the trilateral root verb *f* / *ṭ* / *r* meaning, among other things, 'to create', 'to bring into existence', 'to originate' and 'to cause for the first time' (Lane 1877, Bk. 1, part 6, pp. 2415–16). The complexity of the term *fiṭra* as a concept reflects in the numerous ways it is translated and used in European languages: 'inborn religion', 'religious innocence', 'natural constitution', 'Allah's kind way of creating', 'predisposition towards Islam' and 'man's nature' to mention just a few (Straface 1992, fn. 29; Holtzman 2010, p. 184, fn. 11 for the various usages). Pre-modern Muslim scholars discussed *fiṭra* from the Islamic primary references, giving rise to broadly seven divergent views:

a. Submission (*islām*) as the paradigm outlook where the inner nature submits to the will of God (Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr 1987, vol. 18, p. 72).
b. The religion of Islam (*Islām*) itself (al-ʿUkbarī 1987, vol. 2, pp. 174–76, no. 205–206, part 9).
c. Humanity's archetypal metaphysical nature (*ṭabīʿa*) that possesses a propensity to seek out virtue, truth and the supernatural (Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr 1987, vol. 18, p. 72).
d. Origination (*badāʾa*), i.e., to bring something into being for the first time according to a plan (Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr 1987, vol. 18, pp. 78–79).
e. The primordial covenant (*mīthāq*) that God took from all human beings in their disembodied state (Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr 1987, vol. 18, pp. 78–81).[1]
f. God determining or creating from eternity within each person knowledge and denial (*maʿrifa wa inkār*) as well as belief and disbelief (*īmān wa kufr*) and when the primordial covenant took place, each person accepted and affirmed their preordained state of knowledge/denial and belief/disbelief (Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr 1987, vol. 18, pp. 93–94).
g. God determining from pre-creation, every person's afterlife state of disbelief or misery (*kufr*, *shaqāwa*) or belief, happiness (*īmān*, *saʿāda*), meaning their salvific jeopardy or safety respectively (al-Murtaḍā 1954, vol. 2, p. 82).

The key texts that formed the material for theological deliberations on the *fiṭra* include:[2] (1) verses of the Qur'ān, primarily 30:30:

> So set thy face to the religion, a man of pure faith-
>
> the *fiṭra* of God with which He created humankind.
>
> There is no changing God's creation.
>
> That is the right religion; but most men know it not –
>
> turning to Him (Arberry translation).

(2) the familiar *fiṭra* reports (and its variations) found in the canonical Ḥadīth collections such as the most familiar one where the Prophet Muḥammad is attributed as saying:

> Every child is born with the *fiṭra* (*mā min mawlūd yūladu illā ʿalā al-fiṭra*); it is his parents who make him a Jew or a Christian or Majūs, the same way as animals give birth to non-mutilated cubs. Do you think that they are mutilated before you mutilate their noses? [The Companions said]: Oh, Messenger of God, what do you think about those of them who die young? He said: God knows what they would have done [had they lived].[3]

This Prophetic report on the *fiṭra* and others produced intense discussions that overlapped with a number of theological doctrines including God's predestination (*qadar*), divine Omniscience (*ʿilm*), free will and determinism (*al-ikhtiyār wa-l-jabr*) and guidance and misguidance (*al-hudā wa-l-ḍalāl*). Ibn Taymiyya also threaded these doctrines into his ac-

count of *fiṭra* as part of his epistemology, anthropology and overall exposition of an optimistic ethical vision. The details of his doctrine of *fiṭra* will be explored in the next section.

3. Ibn Taymiyya on the Fiṭra

It is with Ibn Taymiyya that we undoubtedly receive one of the most extensive and highly elaborate treatments of the notion of *fiṭra*. Yet, despite his deep concern for and the centrality of the *fiṭra* in his overall theological anthropology and theological epistemology, Ibn Taymiyya surprisingly did not compose a separate work on it. His discussions are scattered across various responsa, analyses, comments, explanations and annotations. This section will present in a systematic way Ibn Taymiyya's doctrine of the *fiṭra*. It is not an exhaustive explication but sufficiently explains the contours of the doctrine.

Ibn Taymiyya in a long passage summarises his position regarding the *fiṭra*. Below is a translation of that passage:

> Every human being is born in the nature of Islam. If this nature is not subsequently corrupted by the erroneous beliefs of the family and society, everyone will be able to see the truth of Islam and embrace it. The Prophet said, "All human beings are born with *fiṭra,* the original nature (of Islam). It is then their parents who make them Jew, Christian or Zoroastrian." What he meant is that there is a certain nature with which God created man, and that is the nature of Islam. God endowed mankind with this essential nature the day He addressed them saying, "Am I not your Lord?" and they said, "Yes, You are" (7:172). *Fiṭra* is the original nature of man, uncorrupted by subsequent beliefs and practices, ready to accept the true ideas of Islam. Islam is nothing but submitting to God, and to none else; this is the meaning of the words, "There is no god except God."
>
> Elucidating this concept, the Prophet said, "Man is born with a perfectly sound nature (*fiṭra*), just as a baby animal is born to its parents, fully formed without any defect to its ears, eyes or any other organ." He thus emphasized that a sound heart is like a sound body, and a defect is something alien which intervenes. Muslim, the famous compiler of *ḥadīth,* has recorded in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* from ʿIyāḍ Ibn Himar that the Prophet once quoted God's words: "I created my people faithful to none but Me; afterwards the devils came upon them and misled them. They forbade them what I had permitted, and commanded them to associate with Me ones I had never authorized."
>
> The *fiṭra* is to the truth as the light of the eye is to the sun. Everyone who has eyes can see the sun if there are no veils over them. The erroneous beliefs of Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism act like veils, preventing people from seeing the truth. It is common experience that people whose natural sense of taste is not spoiled love sweets; they never dislike them unless something spoils the sense of taste.
>
> However, the fact that people are born with *fiṭra* does not mean that a human body is actually born with Islamic beliefs. To be sure, when we come out of the wombs of our mothers, we know nothing. We are only born with an uncorrupted heart which is able to see the truth of Islam and submit to it. If nothing happens that corrupts the heart, we would eventually become Muslims. This power to know and to act which develops into Islam when there is nothing to obstruct it or affect its natural working is the *fiṭra* on which God has created man (Ibn Taymiyya 2004, vol. 4, pp. 245–47; 1973, vol. 2, pp. 338–46; 1979–1981, vol. 8, pp. 358–468).

We can summarise Ibn Taymiyya's position on the doctrine of the *fiṭra* (DF) as a set of claims, which are stated below and explained:[4]

(DF_1) God created human beings with a specific nature and this is the *fiṭra*.

God has made the *fiṭra* constitutional (riveted into the very nature of human beings). This not only means that there is an imprint, impression or signature of God's handiwork, but it has been enabled to recognise its cause, i.e., a tracking towards its Maker. DF_1 leads to the claim:

(DF_2) The *fiṭra* of human beings includes an innate disposition to recognise God.

Thus, *fiṭra* for Ibn Taymiyya is equivalent to 'Islām', which in this sense is the natural state of full submission only to God and nothing else. This excludes specific theological doctrines and laws revealed to the Prophet (Ibn Taymiyya 2004, vol. 4, pp. 245–49; 1979–1981, vol. 4, pp. 460–61; Gobillot 2000, pp. 41–42). It also means that belief that God exists is not propositional even though that reality is expressed in the testification of faith: 'lā ilāha illā Allāh' (Ibn Taymiyya 2004, vol. 4, pp. 245–46; 1979–1981, vol. 4, p. 279).[5] With this innate recognition comes a capacity to incline towards God and be attracted towards Him in submission. This gives us Ibn Taymiyya's third claim:

(DF_3) The *fiṭra* of human beings includes an innate capacity to incline towards and submit to God.

However, this pure, default and pristine human tilt towards God, is not immune from corruptibility and so we have:

(DF_4) The human *fiṭra* to recognise God can be impeded but not eliminated,

In other words, although the *fiṭra* is constitutional and tracks its way to God, it is nevertheless susceptible to improper function. It can be prevented from functioning the way it has been created by God, namely, to recognise and return to Him. From this, we get:

(DF_5) The impediments to the human *fiṭra* are external and internal.

Where 'external' means environmental factors like upbringing, culture and society, incorrect modes of acquiring knowledge, indoctrination or unreliable processes of reasoning and 'internal' refers to (accumulated) cognitive deviancies like false beliefs, incorrect ideas, or unsound doctrines and their regimentation in the mind and heart over time. The sixth claim is:

(DF_6) The human *fiṭra* is an intuitive instrument of knowledge,

This suggests that human intuitions are *a priori*, that is to say, human nature contains all the necessary pre-conditions for judgments and understanding—independent of direct experience. It is also non-inferential and immediate. (Madjid 1984, pp. 65–72 quoting Ibn Taymiyya's Naqḍ al-Manṭiq, pp. 26–30). I will return to this and its implication in the next section.

For Ibn Taymiyya then, given (DF_1–DF_6), all human beings are created by God with an unalterable and totalising natural constitution that positively recognises the existence of a Creator as well as its own weak and needy nature.[6] Although this human *fiṭra* is unalterable, it can nevertheless be obscured or impeded from its proper function by external factors like indoctrination, upbringing and social environments antithetical to religiosity in general and hostile to Islam specifically. Such environments result in disabling the *fiṭra* as an intuitive instrument designed by God to be a belief-forming mechanism aimed at truth and morality (Madjid 1984, p. 61; Anjum 2012, pp. 221, 223; Qadhi 2013, p. 273). What essentially activates the *fiṭra* are two things: (1) the external phenomenon of the world that

impinges on the senses, engendering awe and wonder that corroborates with the innate *fiṭra* intuitions and (2) God's communication brought by Prophets and Messengers. This communication contains reminders that are remedies for humankind's state of alienation from its own *fiṭra*. It is not surprising then that Ibn Taymiyya is highly unenthusiastic about a strong natural theology that so heavily preoccupied the *kalām* theologians. He states:

> No prophet has ever addressed his people and asked that they should first of all know the Creator, that they should look into various arguments and infer from them His existence, for every heart knows God and recognizes His existence. Everyone is born with the *fiṭra*; only something happens afterwards which casts a veil over it. Hence, when one is reminded, one recalls what was there in one's original nature *(fiṭra*). That is why God sent Moses (and Aaron) to Pharaoh. He said, "Speak (to him) in soft words; he might recall" (20:44); [that is, he might recall] the knowledge inherent in his original nature regarding his Lord and His blessings on him, and that he depends upon Him completely. This may lead him to faith in his Lord, or cause him "to fear" (20:44) punishment in the Hereafter in case he denies Him. This, too, may lead to faith (Ibn Taymiyya 2004, vol. 16, p. 338).[7]

Thus, the myriad phenomena of the external world, the human intellect (reason) as well as divine communiqués relayed by Prophets and Messengers act as agents complimenting and corroborating the fact or reality already internally embedded and acknowledged by the human *fiṭra*.

Ibn Taymiyya explicitly opposes any notion of humans having a "virgin disposition inclined neither towards the truthful nor the harmful" (Lamotte 1994, p. 59; El-Tobgui 2019, pp. 260–61) as well as any suggestion that human beings are born as a *tabula rasa*, which was a view held by the Andalusian Ḥadīth specialist Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr (d.463/1070). In summary, the latter's view—clearly libertarian—is as follows (Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr 1987, vol. 18, pp. 70–71; al-Ghusn 1996, pp. 435–38):

1. The word 'fiṭra' mentioned in the Prophetic narration "all babies are born according to the *fitra*", is interpreted not as referring to Islam (meaning submission) but suggesting a 'specific nature' (*khilqa*) that is wholesome and good but nevertheless devoid of any innate belief/disbelief, knowledge/ignorance.
2. Belief/disbelief are not pre-determined by an immutable divine decree but are acquired through an actual human choice and cognitive activity.
3. Belief/disbelief is determined by the external environment one is exposed to, e.g., parental upbringing, satanic insinuations, etc.
4. Belief/disbelief is possible only when one attains the age of legally determined moral capacity (*taklīf*) based on the Qur'ānic verses such as, 'We never punish until We have sent a messenger' (17:15), 'You will be rewarded only for what you do' (37:99) and 'Every soul will be held in pledge for its own deeds' (74:38).

In one section, Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr mentions the impossibility of having innate belief (*īmān*) or disbelief (*kufr*). He explains:

> They said: if children are created according to an original innate nature with disbelief or belief, they would never be able to alter that but we may find them believing and then disbelieving. They also said: it is rationally impossible that when a child is born it intellectually discerns belief and disbelief because God brought them out in a state devoid of comprehending anything. God says, "It is God Who brought you out from the wombs of your mothers while you knew

> nothing". Whoever does not have knowledge of anything, can neither have belief or disbelief nor knowledge or rejection (Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr 1987, vol. 18, pp. 70).

Hence, Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr argues that human beings have no innate predisposition for recognising truth, guidance or belief. Human nature is *amoral*, or neutral, albeit whole and sound. Therefore, *fiṭra* is not equivalent to Islam (Mohamed 1995, p. 134). It is the environment that shapes the trajectory of human choice whether to believe or disbelieve or be receptive to guidance or misguidance and not an immutable divine decree and determination (ibid., pp. 134–35). The motivation for this view was a rejection of the hard determinism from senior early figures like ʿAbd Allah ibn al-Mubārak (d.181/797) who believed in the divine immutable determination of belief and disbelief within a person and ipso facto the determination of their salvation or damnation (ibid., p. 125). For Ibn Taymiyya, however, the *fiṭra* is not—contra Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr it seems—this neutral, abstract *potentia* or inert divine impression, but it is both a positive tendency towards acknowledgment and affirmation of God's existence as well as an *a priori* criterion for truth that carries a default privilege and normativity (ibid., p. 142). Ibn Taymiyya's *fiṭra* innatism is a response to Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr's suggested neutrality. One of his main objections against the *tabula rasa* view is that if there is no innate knowledge of God, i.e., no natural normative state of humanity, then there is no way that human nature *ought to be* and *ought to function*. If this is the case, then the Prophet's ḥadīth mentioning the deviations of other religions would not make sense; especially in the case of a newborn who is subsequently indoctrinated into the religion of his parents as a child. There would be no moral nor salvific significance in it because there would be no departure from the way human nature ought to be and function; it would only be a circumstantial matter related to the child's upbringing (Holtzman 2010, pp. 174–75). However, perhaps the disagreement with Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr is overstated (Qadhi 2013, pp. 278–79; 2021, p. 9, fn. 22). Though Ibn Taymiyya may disagree with the former by asserting that humanity has a created *fiṭra* that has the potential to be contaminated, he nevertheless does agree with him in favouring a non-deterministic account of how it can become corrupted through disbelief and misguidance or indeed remedied with correct belief and guidance. It is through human choice and acts and not divine coercive foreknowledge that one either believes or disbelieves and thereby affects their created *fiṭra* (Holtzman 2010, pp. 176–78).

In the next section, I will outline how Ibn Taymiyya's notion of *fiṭra* is presuppositional in its nature and how this raises a specific epistemological conundrum for him.

4. The Fitra Epistemology and 'Fiṭralism' of Ibn Taymiyya

The focus of this section is on Ibn Taymiyya's epistemology and whether or not his account of the *fiṭra* is presuppositional in nature and if this is the case, what challenges this raises regarding the coherence of his presuppositional system.

In the previous section, I examined the various interpretations of *fiṭra* by early Islamic scholars as well as Ibn Taymiyya's own view of it. One doctrine we will now return to is:

(DF_6) The human *fiṭra* is an intuitive instrument of knowledge.

This doctrine needs unpacking. I think Ibn Taymiyya is claiming more than the *fiṭra* being a simple instrument of knowledge among say the five senses, memory or testimony; rather it appears that he is over-endowing it, i.e., allowing it to do *too* much. He seems to suggest that not only do all epistemic virtues measure up to the dictates of the *fiṭra*, but all sound reasoning must accord with it. We could say that compliance with the *fiṭra* rubrics promotes the original values determined by God for the human purpose of recognising, loving and 'returning' to Him. Failure to comply with the *fiṭra* rubrics leads to the sub-

optimal realisation of those values. However, failure to comply also entails much more: human cognitive failure. We are not thinking and feeling in the way we are *supposed* to. The *fiṭra*, therefore, is what enables us to be cognitive agents the way God intended. What I will do now is briefly list the core tenets of Ibn Taymiyya's *fiṭra*-epistemology followed by what I am arguing is a form of presuppositionalism and then state a major objection that can be raised against that. Ibn Taymiyya's *fiṭra*-epistemology contains the following core tenets (summarised from al-Qarnī 2003, pp. 65–172; Qadhi 2013, pp. 250–83; 2021, pp. 12–26; El-Tobgui 2019, pp. 253–76; Samrīn 2020, pp. 437–62):

a. The *fiṭra* is a supra-rational source of knowledge.
b. The *fiṭra* is embedded in the human psyche.
c. The *fiṭra* contains a set of a priori knowledge.
d. The *fiṭra*-based knowledge claims are immediate and intuitive (non-inferential).
e. The *fiṭra* justifies beliefs and knowledge claims.
f. The *fiṭra* is a verification criterion for beliefs.
g. The *fiṭra* is a verification criterion for itself (self-authenticated).
h. The *fiṭra* engenders certainty of belief.
i. The *fiṭra* is its own evidence for some belief or claim.
j. The *fiṭra* is a receptive capacity
k. The *fiṭra* is akin to set of powers.
l. The *fiṭra* is an orientation towards correct beliefs and virtues.
m. The *fiṭra* is not identical to the intellect but subsumes it.
n. The *fiṭra* gives knowledge of the laws of logic.
o. The location of the *fiṭra* is the heart.
p. The proper function of the *fiṭra* can be impeded.

This list of core tenets (not seemingly consistent) on the *fiṭra* makes it not only an epistemic instrument, a means by which knowledge is acquired nor is it only an innate receptivity capacity for truth, but both an entire cognitive architecture as well as a totalising package of fundamental ideas and concepts necessary for truth and knowledge organisation, acquisition, recognition and evaluation. For Ibn Taymiyya, this *fiṭra* must be innate and presupposed and not argued for in any human cognitive activity, i.e., there is no justification needed for the presupposition of the *fiṭra* because its normativity is derived from it being anthropologically constitutional, prior and created in human beings and is thus its own authority. The *fiṭra* characterised in this way is what I mean by the term 'Fiṭralism'.[8] One serious implication I see of this kind of presuppositional epistemology at work here is that there are no religiously neutral concepts and ideas like cause, effect, etc. as these are situated within a divinely-directed and divinely-created *fiṭra*. In other words, there can never be any common ground between a believer and non-believer to prove knowledge claims. In fact, one could not even prove one's own claims as true. Before spelling that out the worry, let me state what I take to be two claims that Ibn Taymiyya no doubt upholds:

Claim 1: Rational agents like human beings are bound to/by a cognitive schema by which they understand and interpret the world. Ibn Taymiyya accepts this because of his innatism, where humans are not born as a complete *tabula rasa* but have innate beliefs.

Claim 2: There are no common or neutral grounds by which rational agents understand and interpret the world or adjudicate intellectual disputes aimed at discovering truth (there cannot be because it is all mediated by their cognitive schema).

Given both these claims, I formulate a problem with this kind of an IT-type *fiṭra*-epistemology. By 'IT' I mean Ibn Taymiyya and by '*F*' I mean the fiṭralism just outlined above. Formally, the objection is as follows:

1. IT knows his *F*-schema to be true [assumption].
2. The *F*-schema of IT is the total claims that he accepts as true and which are used to understand and interpret the world in which he exists.
3. For IT to know that his *F*-schema is true he must have immediate access to reality to assess whether any claims based on the *F*-schema correspond with reality.
4. If IT understands and interprets the world only through his *F*-schema, then he cannot have immediate access to reality in order to assess whether any claims based on the *F*-schema correspond with reality.
5. Therefore, IT cannot know his *F*-schema to be true [conclusion].

We are led to a contradiction between the conclusion and premise 1, the initial assumption. Let me give some detail to each premise of the argument to clarify what they suggest. Premises 1 and 2 are clear from the views about the *fiṭra* discussed in the article so far. Paradoxically, Ibn Taymiyya even argues for the existence of God from the *fiṭra*—which for him is a belief stronger than necessary truths (like mathematical truths) acquired via reasoning (Ibn Taymiyya 2004, vol. 2, p. 72). Premise 2 specifically captures the nature and role of the *fiṭra* within his epistemology. It is that totalising criterion and package of ideas that include a priori and necessary truths. Premise 3 is reasonable. It is a correspondence theory of truth. Ibn Taymiyya does not reject this (to my knowledge). Premise 4 is the crux of the argument. Ibn Taymiyya cannot confirm the claims based on his *F*-schema from an independent, unbiased, objective and neutral criterion because there are not any. There is only the *F*-schema. Ibn Taymiyya cannot step outside the box and assess from without because there *is* no 'outside the box'. In order to check his schema with reality, he has to use the very schema he would be trying to examine. The conclusion of the objection just follows given the premises. If the premises are true, Ibn Taymiyya is in an epistemological predicament. He would be trapped in his own presuppositional framework—his *fiṭralism*—because for him there would be no way of knowing if there is anything else beyond it. Nazir Khan in his article on Ibn Taymiyya's epistemology explicates this presuppositional method. He comments, for example, that for Ibn Taymiyya "certainty (*yaqīn*) is not pursued through the accumulation of philosophical justifications but rather is anchored internally through spiritual recognition and the dictates of the *fiṭra*" (Khan 2020, citing Naqḍ al-Manṭiq, p. 49). He adds that "conceptual truths that frame meaningful representations of reality are rooted in the *fiṭra* and serve as ontological building blocks that are indispensable for the mind" (ibid.). And elsewhere, highlighting Ibn Taymiyya's broader rejection of kalām evidentialism explains that Ibn Taymiyya espouses "that the very concepts of proof, truth, reason, purpose, and existence only surface in the mind as a result of a natural human primordial consciousness and that to deny this is simply to render reality unintelligible" (ibid.). This hard presuppositionalism therefore would lock Ibn Taymiyya into a schema that does not allow him to assert or indeed verify whether his own schema corresponds with reality. His endowing the *fiṭra* with such an all-governing epistemological framework, in effect, leaves nothing beyond his *F*-Schema.

According to a powerful objection raised by a reviewer, this critique I propose against Ibn Taymiyya's *fiṭra*-based epistemology relies implicitly on internalist epistemic assumptions—namely, that for one to know that one's foundational interpretive framework (the "*F*-schema") is true, one must have independent access to reality to verify its correspondence. The reviewer rightly notes that such a condition is not necessary if Ibn Taymiyya is understood as an epistemic externalist. From an externalist perspective, a belief-forming process or faculty (such as the *fiṭra*) may yield knowledge so long as it is reliable, even if the subject lacks internal access to the grounds of its reliability. This objection is significant because it challenges the internalist premise (specifically, premise 3

in my argument), and points to recent scholarship that reads Ibn Taymiyya through an externalist lens, e.g., Turner (2025).

Considering this, and in dialectical spirit, I have revised both the framing of Ibn Taymiyya's fiṭralism and the structure of my original critique. First, I could reframe Ibn Taymiyya's epistemology in strictly internalist terms, where I can interpret the *fiṭra* as a dispositional and teleological capacity: a natural orientation embedded in human nature that inclines the soul toward epistemic and moral truths. The *fiṭra* on this reframing would not be a totalising presuppositional cognitive architecture nor a repository of innate propositional beliefs or a purely rational a priori faculty (I of course did not argue these last two points). Rather, it would be a non-propositional, affective and intuitive disposition that—when unobstructed—yields recognition of self-evident truths. This account of *fiṭra* coheres well with a moderate form of epistemic externalism, where knowledge does not require reflective access to its grounds, but arises from properly functioning faculties in appropriate conditions. Second, I could revise the core tenets of my fiṭralism accordingly, removing any suggestion that the *fiṭra* is itself 'evidence' or that it delivers innate propositional content. Instead, it would be characterized as a truth-conducive orientation that can render certain truths immediately compelling or self-evident, particularly when supported by prophetic reminders and social reinforcement.[9]

With this clarification in place, I can now reformulate my original argument in a way that does not rely on internalist epistemic access. Instead, the revised challenge focuses on a deeper structural concern: epistemic circularity.

Formally Refined F-Schema Argument (Circularity Objection)

Let:

- F = the *fiṭra*, a God-given faculty that generates foundational beliefs.
- S = the epistemic subject (i.e., Ibn Taymiyya or any human knower).
- $R(F)$ = the claim that the *fiṭra* is reliable (i.e., truth-conducive or conducive to monotheistic beliefs).

(1) S holds that the *fiṭra* (F) produces true beliefs and thus forms the basis of justified belief (i.e., $R(F)$).

(2) S justifies $R(F)$ based on the deliverances of the *fiṭra* itself (i.e., beliefs generated by F are taken as evidence that F is reliable).

(3) Therefore, the justification for $R(F)$ is based on F, i.e., on the very faculty whose reliability is in question.

(4) This is a form of epistemic circularity (bootstrapping): S assumes the reliability of F to justify the reliability of F.

(5) Epistemic circularity is generally considered insufficient for non-question-begging knowledge or warrant.

(6) Therefore, S cannot non-circularly know or justify that the *fiṭra* is reliable (i.e., S cannot know $R(F)$).

This structure is agnostic regarding internalism or externalism. Even if one adopts externalism (as it can be argued Ibn Taymiyya does), the meta-question remains: on what grounds can one know or justify that one's fundamental interpretive faculty (here the *fiṭra*) is itself truth-tracking? If the only possible evidence comes from within the system it is meant to validate, then any such epistemology risks epistemic circularity—a classic problem also found in foundationalist and Reformed epistemologies. This bootstrapping critique is not unique to Ibn Taymiyya; similar challenges have been raised against Reformed Epistemology, particularly in the form of the "Great Pumpkin Objection" (see below Section 5). Nevertheless, it highlights an unresolved tension in any epistemology that

grounds warrant in a faculty that is also the condition of all interpretation. If *fiṭra* is the lens through which all truth is seen, then its reliability cannot be independently verified—it must be taken on trust, divine design, or pragmatism.

5. Alvin Plantinga's Religious Epistemology

In this penultimate section, I will outline the core components that form the religious epistemology of philosopher Alvin Plantinga with some criticisms. This will be followed by the final section which is a comparison between Ibn Taymiyya's *fiṭra*-epistemology and Plantinga's religious epistemology.

Alvin Plantinga is arguably one of the most influential philosophers of religion. In the analytic tradition, it is hard to find a serious rival. He has contributed penetrating treatments of questions related to areas of metaphysics, modal logic, philosophy of mind and theology. My concern here will be on his novel insights in the field of epistemology and the specifically religious (Christian) epistemology he defends, which has had a reverberating impact on all those after him pursuing a thoroughly Christian epistemology of revelation. Plantinga's religious epistemology consists of three components: (1) his reformed epistemology, (2) a proper functionalist theory of warrant and (3) his basic and extended Aquinas/Calvin models. The former two components are philosophical and the third is particularly Christian in application. Given the limited space, the explication I will give here is neither exhaustive nor detailed; it merely captures in broad strokes epistemological ideas and arguments Plantinga proposed and subsequently developed at various stages of his career over nearly five decades in response to various objections, personal clarifications and progression of thought.[10]

Reformed Epistemology: Stated simply, reformed epistemology is the thesis that belief in God is rational without the need for evidence or argument. The label finds its origins in the Reformed or Calvinist circles represented by, in addition to John Calvin, theologians like Karl Barth, Herman Bavinck, G. C. Berkouwer, Herman Hoeksema and Abraham Kuyper, who all rejected natural theology as misguided (for a meticulously researched account of this, see Sudduth 2009, pp. 9–40). The main goal behind reformed epistemology is to block the claim of *evidentialism* that theistic belief like belief in God is appropriate, rational and reasonable if and only if it is based on sufficient evidence like arguments or propositional evidence. Plantinga argues that there are many beliefs that are rational to believe in even if we cannot furnish any good arguments for them. Examples include belief in one's self, memory beliefs, other minds and the past. We hold them but do not reason our way to them via propositional evidence, i.e., arguments (here meaning inferential, where an derives or draws from one proposition, the conclusion, from other propositions, the premises). If this is the case with such beliefs then the same holds for the belief that God exists. It is rational without propositional evidence. This is Plantinga's parity argument or argument from analogy (Beilby 2005, pp. 34–38, 97–99; Baldwin and McNabb 2019, pp. 3–5). Moreover, in true reformed fashion, he radically insists that belief in God requires no need for arguments at all (natural theology). That is not to say arguments are not useful; it is that they are neither necessary, definitive nor universally convincing (Manning 2013, pp. 207–10).

Plantinga's second line of attack is against *classical foundationalism* (Plantinga 2000, pp. 93–99). Although he is not against foundationalism simpliciter, he does reject the classical foundationalist constraint that beliefs that are neither self-evident (like logical and mathematical truths), evident to the senses (like perceptual experiences) or certain (like incorrigible beliefs) cannot be categorised as epistemically *properly basic beliefs*. A belief is considered 'basic', on the one hand, for a person if it is not based on any other beliefs in

that person's noetic structure. Derived or 'non-basic' beliefs, in contrast, are beliefs that are held on the basis of other beliefs in a person's noetic structure. Labelling beliefs as 'basic' or 'non-basic' is a reference to the modality of their acceptance, i.e., whether they are accepted immediately or inferentially; it says nothing about their epistemic status. On the other hand, a properly basic belief, in rough terms, is one that is not inferred from evidence or an argument but is grounded in the rational and appropriate product of a person's experience or something similar. To give an example, my experience of seeing my injured hand contains my belief 'I see my injured hand', which is *basic* because it is not inferred from evidence or an argument and it is *properly* basic because my experience really and solidly grounds it. According to classical foundationalism, the belief that God exists or beliefs related to God are not properly basic. They require supporting evidence and argument. Plantinga argues that the conditions specified under classical foundationalism are too narrow and would exclude many foundational or basic beliefs from our noetic structure like physical objects endure in an external-to-mind world, the future will resemble the past, reliability of memory and the example just cited about the injured hand (Plantinga 2000, pp. 94–97; Baldwin and McNabb 2019, pp. 6–8). Finally, Plantinga objects to classical foundationalism on the grounds that there is no argument that evidentially supports it according to its own conditions of being self-evident, evident to the senses and certain. In other words, classical foundationalism is self-refuting (Plantinga 2000, pp. 94–97. See also Klein 2009, pp. 304–6).

Proper functionalism: In general terms, proper functionalism refers to a set of epistemological views about whether our beliefs (or doxastic states) have some positive epistemic status (like being an item of knowledge or justified belief) due to being formed by our cognitive faculties functioning properly. Central to Plantinga's account of proper functionalism is the notion of *warrant*, which is an epistemic property that makes the difference between something being a mere belief to being knowledge. It is his alternative to the concept of *justification*. Warrant is generated when the belief-forming and belief-maintaining faculties are not only functioning but functioning *properly*—the way they *ought to* function. This means that there is a design plan as well as a conducive environment that gears all cognitive equipment to optimal use. Ultimately, Plantinga argues that a supernatural creator-designer—God—has set out an overall design plan that includes human cognitive faculties conducive to knowledge acquisition (Beilby 2005, pp. 82–97; Baldwin and McNabb 2019, pp. 14–20).[11] According to Plantinga, a person S is warranted (justified) in believing something, *p*, if and only if S's belief in *p* is (i) formed by way of his cognitive faculties functioning the way they are designed to, (ii) within an environment for which the cognitive faculties can optimally operate, (iii) were the cognitive faculties have been designed for the production of true beliefs and (iv) a good design plan that ensures true beliefs are formed by properly functioning faculties within a conducive environment (Plantinga 1993, pp. 3–47). There is no accessibility condition (like introspection or reflection) or awareness condition (like mental states) on the warrant, meaning that a person does not need to have some *internal* reason justifying the beliefs that they have. To give an example, if I believe that I can see a bird perched on the branch of a tree in my garden and my cognitive faculty (here visual perception) is functioning properly then I am warranted in my belief. However, if there is actually no bird perched on the tree branch, and I am merely wishing there was one, or if the environment is not conducive for my visual perception, e.g., if it is pitch dark, then I will not be able to see the bird. I would in this instance lack warrant for my belief. This will be the case regardless of my internal states as a knower, i.e., even if I have no access to the actual justification for my belief or my justification being grounded in my psychology. Therefore, warrant is an *externalist* epistemological view.[12]

The Aquinas/Calvin models: There is an apologetic thrust in Plantinga's epistemological works that aim to defend the rationality of general theistic belief by demonstrating that it has warrant and more specifically Christian doctrines and beliefs that also have warrant. To this end, Plantinga proposes two models that can show this based on the ideas of Aquinas (A) and Calvin (C); hence the A/C models for short. A 'model' is a possibly true framework that can describe how any of the target propositions under the model can be possibly true. Plantinga proposes a *basic* A/C model and an *extended* A/C model. The basic A/C shows how general theistic belief is warranted and the extended A/C model is supposed to show how specifically Christian belief is warranted for Christians in an epistemically basic way. According to the *basic* A/C model, all persons have knowledge of God by a special cognitive belief-forming faculty or disposition that Calvin, building on the ideas of Aquinas, called the *sensus divinitatis* (Sudduth 2009, pp. 53–63). Plantinga's adoption and construal of it is as an innate cognitive faculty that, given certain appropriate circumstances and its proper function, the *sensus divinitatis* occasions immediate and non-inferential theistic beliefs like God's existence, His nature and activities (Plantinga 2000, pp. 168–98). Theistic beliefs are warranted based on the *sensus divinitatis*—and thereby considered knowledge—because they satisfy all the conditions of warrant: the beliefs are basic (non-inferential), properly basic (grounded in experience), produced via a reliable cognitive faculty (*sensus divinitatis*) that is designed (by God) for forming true beliefs given the right sorts of triggers or stimuli (Plantinga 2015, pp. 37–40).

According to the *extended* A/C model, Plantinga argues for how specifically Christian belief is properly basic and warranted, given humankind's fallen and sinful nature that has left them affectively and noetically impaired and alienated from God. It has also left the *sensus divinitatis* damaged and sub-optimal, although not entirely eliminated. God rescued humankind from this fallen condition with a way to renew and be saved. This is attained, Plantinga believes, via a three-tiered cognitive process: (1) inspired scripture: the divine provision of a dispensation containing the path to salvation. (2) internal testimony: the holy spirit working in a person's heart by mending his human sinful nature and the cognitive deficiencies as a result of that. This awakens a person to the truths of the Gospels and enables them to embrace it. (3) production of faith: the holy spirit testifies to the truth of the Bible to a person and prompts him to have faith (knowledge) in it (Plantinga 2000, pp. 241–89; Beilby 2005, pp. 179–215; Baldwin and McNabb 2019, pp. 20–23). Plantinga calls the synergy between Scripture and the holy spirit in the production of faith as the *internal instigation of the holy spirit* (IIHS). Christian belief is warranted on the extended A/C model because it satisfies the conditions of warrant: the specific Christian beliefs are basic (non-inferential), properly basic (grounded in religious experience), produced via a reliable faculty (the IIHS) that is designed (by God) for forming true beliefs in accordance with the Bible given the rights sort of triggers or stimuli (like a star filled night sky) (van Kralingen 2018, pp. 24–40).

Despite the significant influence of Plantinga's religious epistemology—particularly his argument that belief in God can be properly basic—his position has not been without criticism. One major line of critique targets the epistemic isolation and parochialism of Plantinga's *sensus divinitatis* model. Critics argue that if belief in God is warranted simply because it stems from a divinely implanted faculty functioning properly in an appropriate epistemic environment, then similar claims could be made by adherents of other religions or even highly implausible belief systems. This leads to what is often called the "Great Pumpkin Objection", suggesting that any belief—however fantastical—could be considered warranted if it is basic and formed under allegedly proper conditions. While Plantinga responds by invoking the notion of a truth-aimed *design plan* and

defeater-defeated conditions, his critics contend that such responses lack intersubjective verifiability and result in epistemic relativism, especially in pluralistic contexts (Kim 2012, pp. 66–81). Another frequently cited criticism concerns the alleged circularity at the heart of Plantinga's model. Since the epistemic warrant of belief depends on it being produced by cognitive faculties designed by God, the justification of belief in God ultimately presupposes the very being whose existence is in question. This circularity, some argue, renders the model question-begging and incapable of providing a truly independent justification for theism. More recent critiques emerging from the cognitive science of religion (CSR) add another layer of difficulty for Plantinga's model. Kvandal (2020), for example, introduces what he calls the "God-Faculty Dilemma". This dilemma challenges the coherence of positing a *sensus divinitatis* as either a natural or supernatural faculty. If it is natural, it should be detectable, falsifiable, and subject to the same empirical scrutiny as other cognitive systems. However, no such faculty has been identified through empirical means. If it is supernatural, then it lies beyond scientific or rational analysis, making it epistemically insulated and inaccessible to non-theists. Either way, the faculty fails to meet the standards of a publicly assessable warrant. Moreover, findings in CSR suggest that the human mind may be naturally predisposed to hyperactive agency detection and teleological reasoning, tendencies that may lead to belief in gods or spiritual forces. While Plantinga sees the *sensus divinitatis* as aimed at truth through divine design, CSR researchers argue that such beliefs may be evolutionary by-products rather than properly functioning truth-tracking faculties. This perspective undermines the claim that belief in God is reliably produced or epistemically privileged. Compounding this is the pluralism problem: if all humans are endowed with such a faculty, why do they arrive at radically different theological conclusions? Plantinga's answer as—that sin has corrupted the *sensus divinitatis* in non-Christians—appears ad hoc and untestable, raising concerns about theological bias and epistemic exclusivism.

In light of these criticisms, Plantinga's religious epistemology remains a profound yet contested model. While it offers a bold defense of the rationality of theistic belief, especially within the Reformed tradition, its conceptual and empirical challenges continue to provoke debate across philosophy, theology, and the cognitive sciences.

6. Taymiyyan and Plantingan Theological Epistemologies: A Comparison

In this final section, I examine some interesting points of agreement and equally interesting points of disagreement between Ibn Taymiyya's *fiṭra* epistemology and Plantinga's religious epistemology. I will briefly look at three areas: foundationalism, evidentialism and innatism. From the comparison, I also underscore some broader observations embedded in the way Ibn Taymiyya and Plantinga construct the relation between God, revelation and humans as knowing agents that within their respective faith traditions and the complexities arising out of that relation.

There are several broad and obvious similarities between the epistemologies of Ibn Taymiyya and Plantinga outlined in the previous two sections. I will briefly outline each area of comparison. First, both are anti-foundationalists and anti-evidentialist. To put it in crude terms, *foundationalism* is a theory of justification holding that all justified beliefs ultimately rest on *non-inferentially justified* beliefs in order to terminate an infinite regress of justifications because if we do not, then in order to believe anything at all, we would require an infinite number of infinitely long chains of reasoning (Fumerton 2002, pp. 210–16). Candidates of non-inferential justification include (1) self-evident and necessary propositions, (2) everything immediate to the senses and (3) certainty (incorrigibility), where the

latter includes belief types such as *indefeasibility* (beliefs subjectively and objectively immune from doubt), *indubitability* (beliefs impossible to doubt by the knower like their own conscious states), *infallibility* (beliefs that could not have been mistaken) and *inimitability* (beliefs justified to the highest degree possible). 1–3 form bedrock beliefs upon which all our beliefs must rest (Reed 2022). Excluded from that, however, is belief in God. *Evidentialism* is roughly the view that evidence is required for our doxastic attitude to have any positive epistemic standing. In other words, it is not possible for beliefs to be justified, warranted or rational in the absence of supporting evidence. According to evidentialism, belief in God would require either propositional evidence or argumentation. Given this, it would also mean that Ibn Taymiyya and Plantinga are epistemic *non-evidentialists* (On this in contemporary epistemology, see Pedersen and Moretti (2021, pp. 1–24)). For Plantinga, he accepts the following two theses:

(a) There is sufficient evidence for belief in God: in fact, he has proposed several sophisticated arguments for that belief and does not entirely reject the usefulness of arguments within a natural theology (Plantinga 2018, pp. 461–79).
(b) It is rational to accept theistic beliefs without sufficient evidence: even though there may be reasons to support belief in God, the theist is not beholden to the evidentialist demand for epistemological propriety by supporting it with evidence.

Plantinga reads the evidentialist as claiming irrationality in the theist's belief unless he can provide evidence or arguments for that belief. Neither evidence, nor argument are necessary for theistic belief to be rational because, as already outlined above, Plantinga considers theistic beliefs not to be within the family of beliefs that are evidence-essential (like science), but in the family of beliefs that are properly basic like testimony, memory, introspection, perception, etc. (For an excellent early discussion and critique of Plantinga's anti-evidentialism, refer to Kretzmann 1992, pp. 17–38).

Ibn Taymiyya on the other hand objects to the requirement stipulated by his interlocutors—the *mutakallimūn* and philosophers—that the premises in the arguments for the existence of a maker and originator of the world (*ṣāniʿ*, *khāliq*), must meet the foundationalist-evidentialist standard—namely, they must be self-evident, necessary and certain—otherwise belief in God would not be knowledge and would be unjustified and thereby deficient (Izutsu 1965, pp. 119–30). This *kalām* deontologism burdens a believer with a very high view of epistemic duties, namely, one must not arrive at belief in God unless one has the strongest degree of justification of the foundationalist-evidentialist sort. Ibn Taymiyya argues that such a requirement is neither scripturally imposed nor intellectually cogent. The former because belief in God is naturally ingrained and intuitive and so the Qurʾān neither stipulates the need for apodeictic demonstration (*burhān*) for belief nor does it sanction any obligation to seek out such proofs and the latter because the arguments presented by the *mutakallimūn* are (a) technical, difficult, convoluted, (b) have little sound theological appeal and (c) are not typically the sources of a believer's religious conviction and confidence (*īmān*). However, like Plantinga, Ibn Taymiyya does accept that God's existence can be proven with propositional evidence, that is, inferentially (Ibn Taymiyya 1973, "Kalām ʿalā al-Fiṭra", vol. 2, p. 341; Hallaq 1991, p. 57).

Connected to the issue of what counts as proper justification just discussed is the divide between what has come to be known as epistemological *particularism* and *methodism*. Both terms were originally introduced and defined by Roderick Chisholm in his modern reformulation of the 'Problem of the Criterion', a difficulty raised by scepticism that traces back to Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (On this see Lemos (2021, pp. 177–97)). Chisholm introduces the problem with two questions: (1) what do we know and (2) how are we to decide what we know. From the view of epistemological particularism, you as-

sume an answer to (1) and then use that to answer (2). In other words, you decide what things you know to be self-evidently true, necessary or certain and then procced to identify and learn from the paradigmatic cases of knowledge what its necessary and sufficient conditions are (ibid., pp. 178–79). Inversely, the epistemic methodist assumes an answer to (2) and uses that to answer (1). That is, you first discover what the necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge are and then apply them to particular beliefs to see if they meet the criteria to be considered as knowledge (ibid., pp. 179–81). Arguably, both Ibn Taymiyya and Alvin Plantinga are broadly epistemological particularists in this sense. Both maintain that we ought not to commence any knowledge inquiry having assumed some robust methodology for arriving at true belief or knowledge. Neither belief nor knowledge is the terminus after an evidentially supported sequence of arguments. They are the assumed departure point. Ibn Taymiyya for example accepts, in addition to *fiṭra*-based knowledge, both immediate, spontaneous and non-inferential knowledge (*badīhī*) and necessary knowledge (*ḍarūrī*). They are prior epistemic provisions to arrive at paradigmatic cases of knowledge and do not stand in need of any defense or justification. Similarly, as already explained above (see Section 5), Plantinga rejects the criterial conception of justified belief, where we have properly basic beliefs that are not believed on the basis of other beliefs. These beliefs are already part of our noetic structure.

A final point of comparison between Ibn Taymiyya and Plantinga is their subscription to a form of religious *innatism*. This is the notion that human beings have prior, initial conditions for their cognitive life that are not acquired through interaction with the environment and the world. This would make them, in a loose sense, *theistic nativists*. Each hold that belief in God is not only obvious, but native to (lodged into) our very noetic infrastructure. For Ibn Taymiyya, belief in God is impressed into the very *fiṭra* and for Plantinga, the *sensus divinitatis* is a set of dispositions that enable the formation of belief in God. Thus, there is an interplay between inherent facts about human nature and the environment or external world. We not only *sense* what is around us (the sensible), we *make sense* of what is around us (intelligibility). For Ibn Taymiyya, the *fiṭra* is the means by which we ground our comprehensive understanding of key matters like morality and truth. We come preloaded with knowledge and recognition of morality and truth that can, and inevitably does, become obfuscated. Intelligibility, therefore, is explained by the activity of the *fiṭra*. However, despite this, as far as I can see, neither the *fiṭra* nor the *sensus divinitatis* are held as hermeneutical instruments, meaning they are not a source with which scripture is interpreted, like reason is. More specifically, neither are taken as a hermeneutic criterion for adjudicating conflicting interpretive positions nor have they been the basis for which a set of cohesive hermeneutical canons were devised. If we take Ibn Taymiyya as an example, we do not find in his Qur'ānic methodology of interpretation any reference to the *fiṭra* as a level of interpretation. In other words, we do not see Qur'ānic verses interpreted in light of the *fiṭra* as a central notion.

Finally, both Ibn Taymiyya and Plantinga appear to imply that human endowed innateness through the fiṭra and *sensus divinitatis,* respectively, is not merely a brute and arbitrary endowment; rather, it is structured with the particular purpose of aiding humans in their pathway to living out a religious life whose principles and parameters are defined by revelation. Hence, there is an overall teleology to their innatism. For Ibn Taymiyya, the primordial covenant between disembodied humanity and God involves a pretemporal act of recognition and affirmation—an intuitive assent to divine lordship (*rubūbiyya*) that is etched into the very structure of the human soul. This metaphysical moment grounds the *fiṭra*'s ongoing orientation toward truth and piety and anticipates the eventual encounter with revelation as a divine reminder rather than novel information. For Plantinga, the

sensus divinitatis functions as a cognitive faculty implanted by God to produce true theistic belief in appropriate conditions—belief that, while damaged by sin, is intended to be reawakened through the operation of the Holy Spirit and the reception of revealed Scripture. In both thinkers, then, innate religiosity is not epistemically inert but teleologically directed: it is meant to culminate in a life of submission to divine truth and participation in the revealed path to human flourishing and ultimate salvation.

7. Conclusions

Ibn Taymiyya and Plantinga both reveal interesting parallels in their respective epistemologies. Although there are deep differences (obviously and inevitably), the degree of similarity and overlap underscores how there are perennial epistemological questions as they relate specifically to theological doctrine. Some of these questions include how we know fundamental theological truths like God's existence, what counts as evidence, what is the nature of justification, and how we define rationality. Ibn Taymiyya and Plantinga have clearly maneuvered themselves into an anti-foundationalist and anti-evidentialist position that, although within the Christian tradition of the last half-century (at least) has received rigorous philosophical explication, little kindred development of this position has taken place within contemporary Islamic theology or philosophy.[13] However, with the current formation of the field of Islamic analytic epistemology thoroughly underway,[14] there may be an invitation for fresh forays into the long-standing *kalām* evidentialist fortress or further interest in the *fiṭra* epistemology articulated by Ibn Taymiyya, whether that be its merits or limitations. This article made preliminary comparative explorations between Ibn Taymiyya and Alvin Plantinga with a focus on Taymiyyan fiṭralism and one possible challenge such a theological epistemology may face. Nevertheless, justifiably, one can be sanguine about the prospects of alternative epistemological accounts to foundationalism emerging in the near future.

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Notes

1 This is based on the Q. 7:172:

And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam,
from their loins, their seed, and made them testify
touching themselves, 'Am I not your Lord?'
They said, 'Yes, we testify'" (Arberry).

This was also the view of the ḥadīth compiler Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī (d.275/889); for which see his *Sunan* (no. 4716): "in our opinion, it means that covenant which God had taken in the loins of their fathers when He said: 'Am I not your Lord?' They said: 'Yes'..." For other opinions, see Ibn Qutayba (1983, pp. 55–59).

2 For larger studies outlining the Islamic notion of *fiṭra*, refer to Mohamed (1996); Gobillot (2000); al-Qarnī (2003); ʿAbd Allāh (2014). Summaries on this notion include MacDonald (1991, vol. 2, pp. 931b–32a); Kahteran (2008); Adang (2000, pp. 392–94); Hussain (2010, pp. 142–46); Hoover (2016, pp. 104–6); Hiester (2016, pp. 24–110) and more recently Arif (2023) and Harvey (2024).

3 Al-Bukhārī (no. 1385) and Muslim (no. 2658) in their *Ṣaḥīḥs*.

4 For Ibn Taymiyya's views on the *fiṭra*, see the following references: Haque (1982); Gobillot (1984, pp. 9–53); Hallaq (1991, p. 54 ff); Lamotte (1994, pp. 51–73); Mohamed (1995, pp. 129–51); Hoover (2007, pp. 39–44); Holtzman (2010, pp. 163–88); Griffel (2012); von Kügelgen (2013, pp. 297–303); Qadhi (2013, pp. 234–83); Vasalou (2016, pp. 251–61); Hiester (2016, pp. 93–110); Turner (2021a, 2021b, pp. 1–6); El-Tobgui (2019, pp. 260–64); Irshad (2023).

5 Ibn Taymiyya describes the innate disposition of *fiṭra* in many different ways, including: (i) as a sound heart that is receptacle to the truth (*salāmat al-qalb*); (ii) a power to know and act (*quwwa ʿilmiyya*); (iii) a primordial monotheism (*ḥunafā'*); (iv) the original human nature (*fiṭra*); (v) full submission to God (*islām*) and (vi) something necessarily a priori (*ḍarūrī*).

6 Ibn Taymiyya's view of the *fiṭra* is in fact more general. This unalterable constitution that is predisposed to recognise the existence of a Creator extends to all objects of creation, whether inanimate (rocks and minerals) or animate (plants and trees). All things then have a *fiṭra*. Thus, we may add to his doctrine list:(DF_7) For any created entity x, there is a corresponding unalterable *fiṭra* F for x.

7 He elaborates on this point in *Kitāb al-Nubuwwa*, pp. 430–31, tr. by Hoover (2007, p. 44).

8 On a piece that suggests this kind of presuppositional nature of the *fiṭra* that I am arguing (although the term is not used), refer to Khan (2020). For a reply to that, see Mihirig (2020).

9 Due to space, I cannot restate the revised phrasing of the tenets of fiṭralism a–p and claims 1 and 2 of my original argument in light of this reframing.

10 For a neat and simple summary of these components, see Plantinga (2008, pp. 6–14). For details and references, refer to Beilby (2005, pp. 33–99); Baldwin and McNabb (2019, pp. 3–27).

11 Due to space, I have omitted discussion of Plantinga's Evolutionary Arguments Against Naturalism (EAAN) that attempts to demonstrate how naturalism does not have the conceptual resources to ground an intelligible account of proper function. For this and objections to EAAN, refer to Slagle (2021, pp. 47–195).

12 On the internalism and externalism accounts of justification, see Pappas (2014).

13 A notable exception is Jamie B. Turner, who directly adopts the label reformed epistemology and applies it to the case of Ibn Taymiyya, whom he interprets as espousing a signs epistemology, see Turner (2020, 2021a, 2021b).

14 Inaugurated by the *Beyond Foundationalism* project in Islamic Analytic theology, thanks to a John Templeton Foundation grant. See https://www.cambridgemuslimcollege.ac.uk/research/beyond-foundationalism/ (accessed on 6 January 2025).

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Reason and Revelation in Ibn Taymiyyah's Critique of Philosophical Theology: A Contribution to Contemporary Islamic Philosophy of Religion

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Abstract: This paper addresses the longstanding tension between reason and revelation in Islamic religious epistemology, with a focus on the thought of Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328). It aims to reassess his critique of philosophical theology (falsafa and kalām) and explore his constructive alternative to rationalist metaphysics. The study adopts a descriptive–analytical methodology, combining close textual reading of Darʾ Taʿāruḍ al-ʿAql wa al-Naql and *Naqd al-Manṭiq* with conceptual analysis informed by contemporary religious epistemology and philosophy of religion. The findings reveal that Ibn Taymiyyah advances a triadic epistemological model centered on revelation (naql), reason (ʿaql), and innate disposition (fiṭrah). He refutes the autonomy of reason, redefines logic as a tool rather than a judge, and repositions fiṭrah as an intuitive foundation for belief. His approach emphasizes the harmony of sound reason with authentic revelation and challenges the epistemic assumptions of speculative theology. By presenting a comparative table of rationalist and Taymiyyan epistemologies, the study demonstrates how Ibn Taymiyyah's framework anticipates key themes in Reformed Epistemology and the cognitive science of religion. The conclusions suggest that his vision offers a coherent, theocentric paradigm for religious knowledge that is highly relevant to the contemporary philosophy of religion and Islamic theology.

Keywords: Ibn Taymiyyah; reason and revelation; Islamic epistemology; fiṭrah; tawḥīd; falsafa; kalām; Reformed Epistemology; religious knowledge; philosophy

1. Introduction

1.1. Reason and Revelation: A Foundational Tension

The tension between reason (ʿaql) and revelation (waḥy) represents one of the most enduring and contested questions in the philosophy of religion. Across religious traditions, this dialectic has shaped theological doctrines, hermeneutical strategies, moral reasoning, and epistemological frameworks. In the Islamic tradition, this question has been central to centuries-long debates—between philosophers and theologians, traditionalists and rationalists, literalists and allegorists.

Some classical Muslim exegetes even interpreted the Qur'anic narrative of Iblīs's refusal to prostrate before Adam as an early paradigmatic expression of this tension. According to this view, Iblīs's rebellion stemmed from privileging speculative rationality over divine command—an archetypal error in subordinating revelation to reason (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah 2020, vol. 2, p. 633).

1.2. Epistemological Stakes in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion

In modern philosophical discourse, questions surrounding the justification of belief, the nature of religious knowledge, and the authority of revelation continue to dominate. Debates over whether religious belief should be grounded in rational argument or can be justified as properly basic and whether scriptural sources can stand as legitimate epistemic authorities are far from settled.

Within this context, the Islamic tradition offers a wealth of untapped epistemological resources. Particularly, the thought of Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328) provides an alternative framework that neither dismisses reason nor subjects revelation to it. Instead, he proposes a triadic epistemology grounded in naql (revealed text), ʿaql (functionally sound reason), and fiṭrah (innate disposition). His thought thus offers a robust counter-model to both philosophical rationalism and fideistic traditionalism.

1.3. Aims and Scope of the Study

This study examines Ibn Taymiyyah's critique of philosophical theology—particularly falsafa and kalām—as a constructive intervention in the ongoing debate about the relation between reason and revelation. Far from a mere polemical rejection of speculative metaphysics, his writings—most notably Darʾ Taʿāruḍ al-ʿAql wa al-Naql and Naqd al-Manṭiq—articulate an epistemological model grounded in scriptural primacy, rational coherence, and the epistemic role of fiṭrah.

The study also explores how Ibn Taymiyyah's views on the limits of Aristotelian logic, his affirmation of tawḥīd in its three dimensions (lordship, worship, and names and attributes), and his defense of divine authority, can offer insights into contemporary philosophical debates. These include discussions on the sources of religious knowledge, the nature of belief justification, and the interplay between reason, tradition, and intuitive awareness.

Furthermore, this study approaches Ibn Taymiyyah's epistemological project not as a personal innovation but as a conscious recovery of the foundational principles upheld by the Prophet Muhammad, his Companions, and the early generations of Muslims (al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ). His critique of philosophical theology is consistently framed as a return to the epistemic integrity of the earliest Muslim community—marked by its affirmation of revelation's primacy, reason's instrumental role, and fiṭrah's intuitive function as a divinely endowed faculty.

Revelation (naql) in Ibn Taymiyyah's framework encompasses both the Qurʾan and the authentic Sunnah, as transmitted and interpreted by the Prophet's Companions and the early generations (Salaf). This collective understanding forms an integral part of what counts as revealed knowledge.

Accordingly, this paper seeks to explore how Ibn Taymiyyah understands the interplay between reason and revelation, and to examine the philosophical relevance of his epistemological framework in the context of contemporary Islamic thought. This guiding inquiry informs the structure and argument of the study and anchors its engagement with classical sources and modern philosophical discourse.

1.4. Literature Review

The relationship between reason and revelation has garnered increasing scholarly attention within Islamic philosophy, theology, and legal theory. Classical figures such as al-Ghazālī, Ibn Rushd, and, more recently, Ibn Taymiyyah have been central to this debate. Al-Ghazālī, for instance, famously prioritized revelation over speculative reason in Tahāfut al-Falāsifah, a position that has shaped subsequent Sunni theology by asserting the ultimate authority of waḥy over rationalist epistemologies. In contrast, works like *Reconsidering*

between Reason and Revelation in Islamic Legal Philosophy by Hidayat (2024) emphasize the complementary interplay between the two in shaping Islamic legal reasoning, arguing that while revelation remains primary, reason serves as a contextualizing tool essential for understanding divine guidance in changing times.

Contemporary scholarship has also revisited the relevance of Islamic theology (ʿilm al-kalām) in responding to modern intellectual challenges such as atheism, secularism, and scientific materialism. A growing body of literature underscores the integrative potential of reason and revelation in sustaining theological relevance in pluralistic and rationalist contexts (*Journal of Islamic Thought and Philosophy* 2024). In this discourse, Ibn Taymiyyah's epistemology—grounded in a triadic structure of naql, ʿaql, and fiṭrah—emerges as an underexplored but promising model.

El-Tobgui's comprehensive study *Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation* (El-Tobgui 2020) has been pivotal in highlighting the methodological richness of *Darʾ Taʿāruḍ al-ʿAql wa al-Naql*, yet stops short of systematically engaging Ibn Taymiyyah's work within contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. Similarly, while some studies have noted Ibn Taymiyyah's role in Islamic education and law (Lalahwa et al. 2024), they tend to position him as a jurist or polemicist rather than a constructive epistemologist.

The logical critique in Ibn Taymiyyah's epistemology has also received scholarly attention. Sobhi Rayan (2011) offers a focused analysis of Ibn Taymiyyah's objections to Aristotelian syllogism and formal logic, highlighting his emphasis on contextual meaning and real cognition over metaphysical abstraction. Rayan's work complements broader treatments by showing how Ibn Taymiyyah's epistemological realism manifests in his rejection of rigid logical structures and his preference for linguistic and experiential understanding.

Recent scholarship by Jamie B. Turner has advanced the philosophical reading of Ibn Taymiyyah's epistemology by framing his thought within the context of Reformed Epistemology and design-based theism. Turner highlights Ibn Taymiyyah's emphasis on theistic signs, intuitive knowledge, and the role of fiṭrah as foundational to religious belief, offering a constructive bridge between classical Islamic theology and contemporary analytic philosophy of religion (Turner 2021; 2022).

One recent contribution that is particularly relevant to this study is "The Ontological Capture of the Divine: Genealogies of God in Modern Thought", which explores how modern philosophical theology has constrained classical conceptions of the divine. Its findings resonate with Ibn Taymiyyah's critique of ontological abstraction and reinforce the distinctiveness of his theocentric epistemology.

This study addresses the gap by offering a structured philosophical reading of Ibn Taymiyyah's epistemological project, positioning it within current debates on belief justification, the rationality of faith, and sources of religious knowledge. By doing so, it contributes to the broader endeavor of developing a distinctly Islamic philosophy of religion grounded in textual fidelity, rational coherence, and ontological clarity.

1.5. Central Research Question

As outlined in the introduction, this study is guided by the following question:

How does Ibn Taymiyyah conceptualize the relationship between reason and revelation, and to what extent does his epistemological model contribute to contemporary Islamic philosophy of religion?

This question shapes the structure of the paper and directs its comparative and analytical orientation.

2. Methodology and Analytical Framework

This study employs a descriptive–analytical methodology, integrating historical contextualization with conceptual analysis drawn from both classical Islamic thought and contemporary philosophy of religion. The descriptive dimension aims to reconstruct Ibn Taymiyyah's epistemological critique of philosophical theology (ʿilm al-kalām and falsafa), with special attention to his most mature articulations in Darʾ Taʿāruḍ al-ʿAql wa al-Naql and Naqd al-Manṭiq. These texts are not only polemical but serve as foundational philosophical interventions into questions of knowledge, truth, and belief justification.

The analytical dimension investigates the internal coherence and broader philosophical implications of Ibn Taymiyyah's model—particularly its reliance on fiṭrah as a basic epistemic faculty, its redefinition of reason's function, and its insistence on the compatibility of revelation with sound intellect. Rather than reading Ibn Taymiyyah as a traditional theologian responding to doctrinal controversies, the study treats his work as an alternative epistemological paradigm capable of contributing to current debates in religious epistemology, metaphysics of religion, and theological reasoning.

Building on this framework, the research centers on a close, critical reading of two of Ibn Taymiyyah's most philosophically substantive works:

Darʾ Taʿāruḍ al-ʿAql wa al-Naql (The Refutation of the Conflict between Reason and Revelation), in which he systematically deconstructs the assumption of inherent contradiction between ʿaql and naql, arguing instead for a principled harmony between sound intellect and authentic revelation (Taymiyyah 1991).

Naqd al-Manṭiq (Refutation of Logic), where he challenges the foundational assumptions of Aristotelian logic—specifically definition (ḥadd), syllogism (qiyās), and universals (kulliyyāt)—and proposes an alternative rooted in real-world cognition and prophetic methodology.

These texts form the basis for assessing the structure, language, and purpose of Ibn Taymiyyah's thought, including his critique of logic, his affirmation of tawḥīd, and his philosophical rehabilitation of fiṭrah as a legitimate and universal source of religious knowledge.

The study draws conceptually from contemporary discussions in religious epistemology, the logic of theological reasoning, and the philosophy of religion, particularly within the Islamic tradition. It engages critical questions such as:

What constitutes a valid source of religious knowledge?

How can belief be justified without falling into either fideism or rationalism?

What is the role of intuition and innate cognition (fiṭrah) in acquiring religious truth?

To what extent can Ibn Taymiyyah's framework interact with or critique dominant paradigms in Western thought?

This analytical lens does not presuppose the truth or falsehood of specific theological claims but treats Ibn Taymiyyah's epistemological project as a philosophical model—open to comparative evaluation, conceptual refinement, and integration into global discourses on religion, reason, and revelation.

A key epistemological pillar of this framework is the concept of fiṭrah, which this study approaches not merely as a theological postulate but as an epistemic faculty analogous to what Reformed Epistemologists describe as a "properly basic belief". The analysis examines Ibn Taymiyyah's understanding of fiṭrah as a universal, innate awareness of God, moral values, and existential purpose—one that functions independently of syllogistic reasoning while remaining in harmony with both revelation and sound reason.

Ibn Taymiyyah's unwavering commitment to naql as the supreme source of know ledge—when rightly understood—is assessed in relation to modern debates about scriptural authority, textual hermeneutics, and the epistemic weight of revealed discourse.

The study analyzes Ibn Taymiyyah's views on hermeneutical authority: who has the right to interpret revelation, on what basis, and through what tools? His critique of allegorical overreach and his support for a principled, contextual, and grammatically faithful reading of texts are examined through the lens of both classical and modern theories of interpretation.

The research contrasts Ibn Taymiyyah's critique of reason as an autonomous judge with his model of reason as a calibrated tool—one that is effective when illuminated by revelation. His distinction between sound reason (ʿaql ṣarīḥ) and speculative metaphysics is key to understanding how he preserves the function of intellect without subjecting revelation to its judgment.

3. Discussion

3.1. Ibn Taymiyyah's Epistemological Model: Foundations and Framework

Ibn Taymiyyah's engagement with the philosophical and theological traditions of his time—particularly falsafa and kalām—cannot be reduced to a mere dialectical exercise in refutation. Rather, it reflects a deliberate epistemological repositioning rooted in the worldview of early Muslim scholars, who approached reality through the lens of divine revelation. His critique extends beyond isolated doctrines or logical inconsistencies to the foundational assumptions underpinning philosophical theology.

Importantly, Ibn Taymiyyah does not present his epistemological model—based on the triad of revelation, reason, and fiṭrah—as an innovation or personal opinion. Instead, he explicitly attributes this framework to the earliest generations of Muslims, particularly the Prophet Muhammad, his Companions, and the early generations of Muslims (al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ), who are regarded in Islamic tradition as the most authoritative exemplars of religious understanding and practice.

He consistently affirms that the harmonization of reason and revelation, the epistemic authority of the Qur'an and Sunnah, and the role of fiṭrah in knowing God and affirming tawḥīd in all its dimensions (lordship, worship, and divine names and attributes) are not his own inventions but the legacy of prophetic guidance and the consensus of the early Muslim community. By doing so, Ibn Taymiyyah positions himself not as a founder of a new theology but as a restorer of an authentic Islamic epistemology rooted in divine guidance and practiced by the best generations of Islam.

In Darʾ Taʿāruḍ al-ʿAql wa al-Naql, Ibn Taymiyyah argues that the perceived contradiction between reason and revelation is not inherent but rather the outcome of a rationalist methodology that imposes metaphysical frameworks onto divinely revealed truths. He asserts that sound reason and authentic revelation are in perfect harmony and that any apparent contradiction arises from either misinterpretation of the texts or flawed rational inference. He writes:

> "Sound reason does not contradict authentic transmitted revelation, but rather confirms and supports it. Revelation does not include what pure reason finds impossible; it may include what is beyond reason, but not what is contrary to it".
>
> (Ibn Taymiyyah 2004, vol. 1, p. 74)

This critique is not merely negative, but also constructive: Ibn Taymiyyah develops an alternative epistemological framework in which revelation serves as the foundation, reason functions as a necessary yet limited tool, and fiṭrah (natural human disposition) is upheld as a fundamental source of moral and metaphysical knowledge. He reaffirms this view by stating:

> "Everything indicated by the Qur'an and Sunnah is in agreement with sound reason, and sound reason does not contradict authentic revelation". (Ibn Taymiyyah 2004, vol. 12, p. 81)

Far from rejecting reason, Ibn Taymiyyah considers it essential, though not autonomous. He compares it to vision, which requires external light to function—just as reason needs the illumination of revelation to operate effectively. He explains:

> "Reason is a condition for acquiring knowledge and perfecting action. But it is not self-sufficient. It is like eyesight in the eye: it needs the light of faith and the Qur'an, just as the eye needs the light of the sun or fire. If left alone, it cannot perceive what is beyond its capacity. . . The prophets brought what reason cannot independently comprehend, not what it knows to be impossible". (Ibn Taymiyyah 2004, vol. 3, p. 339)

Ibn Taymiyyah also critiques both extremes: the rationalists who subordinate revelation to reason and the mystics who disregard reason altogether. As he notes:

> "Many theologians rely solely on reason, making revelation subservient to it, while many Sufis deny reason and consider spiritual states unattainable except through its absence. Both extremes are blameworthy". (Ibn Taymiyyah 2004, vol. 3, p. 338)

Thus, Ibn Taymiyyah's epistemological project is neither anti-rational nor fideistic. It calls for reordering the hierarchy of knowledge: revelation at the apex, reason in service, and fiṭrah as foundation. This integrative vision—what may be called a Sunni realist epistemology—asserts that sound reason, when guided by divine light, becomes a reliable tool, while untethered speculation leads only to confusion.

A central pillar of Ibn Taymiyyah's epistemological vision is his meticulous analysis of the concept of *taʿāruḍ*—the perceived conflict between reason (ʿaql) and revelation (naql). While many theologians and philosophers have treated such conflicts as real and irresolvable, Ibn Taymiyyah offers a fundamental distinction between true contradiction and perceived or imagined contradiction. He asserts that any genuine contradiction between sound reason and authentic revelation is epistemologically impossible because both originate from the same divine source: one through creation, the other through instruction.

All apparent contradictions, he contends, can be traced back to epistemic error. These errors may arise from misreported texts, misunderstood meanings, false rational premises, or illegitimate mystical claims. In Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā, he provides a comprehensive diagnosis:

> "What came from the Prophet in this matter and others is all truth, each part confirming the other. It aligns with the natural disposition of creation (fiṭrah), sound reason, and upright intent. It does not contradict genuine reason, sound intention, upright nature, or the authentic transmission from the Messenger. The only one who imagines contradiction is he who believes in a false report, or misinterprets a text, or assumes something to be rational when it is sheer ignorance, or takes a so-called unveiling (kashf) as revelation when it is in fact delusion. . ." (Ibn Taymiyyah 2004, vol. 6, p. 580).

This framework leads Ibn Taymiyyah to reframe the problem entirely. For him, taʿāruḍ is not a metaphysical reality but a hermeneutical illusion—a sign not of contradiction between truth and truth, but of an error in perception or methodology. In Darʾ Taʿāruḍ, he famously asserts that if a contradiction is found, either the narration is weak, the interpretation flawed, or the reasoning unsound (Ibn Taymiyyah 2004, vol. 1, pp. 130–32).

His critique, therefore, is not limited to the content of philosophical theology but extends to its epistemic foundations. He challenges the rationalist presumption that unaided reason can serve as the supreme arbiter of revealed truth, and he rejects mystical

claims that sidestep both reason and revelation. Instead, Ibn Taymiyyah upholds a unified model of knowledge grounded in revelation, reason, and fiṭrah, wherein each confirms and supports the other.

This vision, rooted in the Salafi tradition, not only restores confidence in the coherence of religious knowledge but also provides a methodological tool for evaluating all claims of contradiction. It is a call to epistemic humility: to question not the revealed text but the human apparatus that fails to comprehend it rightly.

In Ibn Taymiyyah's epistemology, fiṭrah—the innate human disposition—is not merely a theological concept but an essential cognitive foundation for religious knowledge. It is a divine imprint that orients every human being toward the recognition of truth: belief in God, the acceptance of prophetic guidance, and the affirmation of moral and spiritual realities. This natural disposition precedes formal instruction and rational proof, functioning as a pre-reflective epistemic anchor that prepares the mind and heart to receive revelation.

Ibn Taymiyyah repeatedly affirms that revelation is in full agreement with this *fiṭrah*. He maintains that prophetic guidance never contradicts sound reason or innate human nature, and that any perceived contradiction arises from misinterpretation, false assumptions, or epistemic error (Ibn Taymiyyah 2004, vol. 6, p. 580).

This integrated view positions *fiṭrah* as part of a triad of mutually reinforcing sources of truth: sound reason, innate disposition (*fiṭrah*), and authentic revelation. It is not merely compatible with revelation—it is predisposed toward it. Revelation, in turn, awakens and completes what the *fiṭrah* already inclines toward, thereby eliminating any need for speculative proofs in establishing core religious beliefs.

This resonates with the concept of properly basic beliefs in contemporary epistemology, particularly in the works of Alvin Plantinga. According to Reformed Epistemology, belief in God is not inferred from other propositions but is instead considered rationally warranted by default, provided that the believer's cognitive faculties are functioning properly within an appropriate epistemic environment (Plantinga 2000). Similarly, Ibn Taymiyyah asserts that belief in God and in the truthfulness of the Prophet arises from the proper functioning of the *fiṭrah*; any deviation from this natural disposition, he argues, stems from social corruption, flawed intellectual premises, or moral disorientation.

For Ibn Taymiyyah, then, fiṭrah plays both a cognitive and moral role: it facilitates the recognition of truth and fosters the will to accept it. This dual function allows it to operate as an epistemic bedrock—one that grounds the human capacity for religious certainty without dependence on external validation through syllogism or speculative philosophy.

In this way, Ibn Taymiyyah not only anticipates key themes in contemporary religious epistemology but articulates a uniquely Islamic model of knowledge that is holistic, intuitive, and divinely calibrated.

Building on this insight, the discussion can be further enriched by engaging contemporary empirical research in the cognitive science of religion (CSR), which explores how belief in God may be grounded in natural cognitive mechanisms. Rather than relying on Justin Barrett's HADD theory, which has been interpreted by some as suggesting that belief in God is a false positive, this study turns to Kelly James Clark's analysis in *God and the Brain: The Rationality of Belief* (Clark 2019). Clark argues that belief in God can be both natural and rational, emerging from properly functioning cognitive faculties under the right conditions. This aligns more closely with Ibn Taymiyyah's view of fiṭrah as a God-given capacity for recognizing divine truth, one that is clarified by revelation and supported by reason. Engaging such empirical models helps articulate the philosophical robustness of fiṭrah while distinguishing it from mere cognitive bias or cultural conditioning.

This intersection between traditional religious epistemology and modern cognitive research invites a cross-disciplinary dialogue on whether fiṭrah reflects a universal human

disposition or remains a theologically framed construct. Incorporating such perspectives may help enhance the philosophical grounding of fiṭrah as an epistemic foundation while clarifying its distinction from cultural conditioning and socialization.

In Ibn Taymiyyah's epistemological vision, reason holds an indispensable yet subordinated role. It is not the judge over revelation (naql), but rather its interpreter and servant. Ibn Taymiyyah affirms the utility of sound reasoning as a tool for understanding, applying, and defending divine truths, but firmly rejects the notion that reason is autonomous or sufficient to establish certainty in metaphysical or theological matters. This positioning led him to launch one of the most comprehensive critiques of Aristotelian logic in Islamic intellectual history.

Ibn Taymiyyah's critical engagement with logic was not based on ignorance or superficial dismissal. On the contrary, he had a deep familiarity with the discipline and initially assumed the truth of many of its propositions. He reflects on this evolution in al-Radd ʿala al-Manṭiqiyyīn, stating:

> "I always knew that Greek logic was unnecessary for the intelligent and unhelpful to the slow-witted. But I used to think that its propositions were true, since many of them appeared to be so. Later, however, I discovered that a number of its propositions were in fact false". (*Ibn Taymiyyah, al-Radd ʿala al-Manṭiqiyyīn).

This candid admission reveals that his critique emerged from critical examination rather than reactionary rejection. Over time, Ibn Taymiyyah concluded that Aristotelian logic—particularly its reliance on definition (al-ḥadd), syllogism (al-qiyās), and universals (al-kulliyyāt)—was not only methodologically flawed but also epistemologically disruptive when applied to religious inquiry.

Ibn Taymiyyah critiques the notion of definition (ḥadd) as formulated in Greek logic, particularly the claim that non-self-evident concepts can only be known through definitions based on genus and differentia. In Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā (Ibn Taymiyyah 2004, vol. 9, p. 44), he argues that such a claim is inherently flawed since the one who defines (ḥādd) must already possess knowledge of the thing being defined (muḥaddad). If he knows it without a definition, the claim is false; if he knows it through another definition, the same problem reoccurs, leading to circularity or infinite regress. Ibn Taymiyyah thus maintains that real understanding arises not from formal definitions but from prior familiarity, linguistic usage, and experiential context.

This critique is consistent with his broader epistemology, which favors linguistic realism and contextual meaning over abstract metaphysical formulations. As Sobhi Rayan (2011) notes, Ibn Taymiyyah "emphasized the contextual and conventional nature of language over the rigid metaphysical structures presumed in Aristotelian logic," and rejected formal definition as a reliable means of attaining knowledge.

Similarly, he critiques syllogistic reasoning as both unnecessary and misleading. Most human knowledge, he argues, is acquired not through formal logic but through recurrent experience, sensory perception, linguistic clarity, and innate intuition. His rejection of Greek logic was also aligned with the broader scholarly tradition among Muslim theologians and jurists. He writes:

> "The purpose here is to note that Muslim dialecticians have always written against them (the Greek logicians), not only in logic but also in other subjects, pointing out their errors in both definition and syllogism, just as they demonstrated their errors in theology and elsewhere. None of the Muslim dialecticians ever gave attention to their methodology". (*Ibn Taymiyyah, al-Radd ʿala al-Manṭiqiyyīn, p. 337).

His objection to universals is likewise rooted in epistemic realism. Ibn Taymiyyah denies that abstract concepts have an independent ontological status. Instead, he sees

them as mental constructs that emerge through abstraction from particular instances. Overreliance on such constructs, he warns, leads to detachment from reality and misapplication in religious discourse.

At its core, Ibn Taymiyyah's critique of Aristotelian logic is both methodological and theological. He argues that logic, as inherited from Greek philosophy, imposes an external epistemic framework onto revelation, thereby threatening its clarity, sufficiency, and accessibility. True certainty (yaqīn), he contends, is attained through a combination of authentic transmission, sound reasoning, linguistic clarity, and a preserved fiṭrah.

Table 1 summarizes key epistemological distinctions between the dominant philosophical rationalist model and Ibn Taymiyyah's integrated model based on revelation (naql), reason (ʿaql), and fiṭrah.

Table 1. Key epistemological distinctions: philosophical rationalism vs. Taymiyyan model.

Epistemological Dimension	Philosophical Rationalism (Falsafa/Kalām)	Taymiyyan Epistemology (Naql, ʿAql, Fiṭrah)
Source of Truth	Autonomous reason	Revelation as supreme; reason as subordinate tool
Role of Reason	Independent judge	Guided instrument under revelation
View of Revelation	Subject to rational evaluation	Inherently coherent and supreme
Methodology	Deductive syllogism and metaphysical speculation	Textual coherence, fiṭrah, empirical reason
Knowledge of God	Derived from abstract philosophical arguments	Rooted in fiṭrah, revelation, and reason
Status of Fiṭrah	Marginalized or overlooked	Foundational epistemic source
Authority Framework	Philosophers and speculative theologians	The Prophet, Companions, and the righteous predecessors (salaf)

This emphasis on epistemic integration—rather than isolation—anticipates certain developments in later Western thought, particularly in pragmatic and linguistic philosophy. For instance, Ibn Taymiyyah's rejection of purely abstract, decontextualized metaphysical reasoning resonates with the later critique by Ludwig Wittgenstein, who emphasized the embeddedness of meaning in language use and rejected the idea of fixed essences discoverable by logical analysis (Wittgenstein 1953). Similarly, the pragmatic tradition—exemplified by thinkers such as William James and John Dewey—regarded knowledge as a function of its practical consequences and rooted understanding in lived human experience (James 1907; Dewey 1938). Ibn Taymiyyah's emphasis on fiṭrah, empirical signs, and revelation as integrated and experientially grounded sources of knowledge parallels these developments in its refusal to isolate reason from the totality of human cognition. Rather than elevating reason above all else, he recalibrates it as one component among several—an indispensable but situated tool, bounded by the limits of language, culture, and divine guidance.

This also exemplifies Ibn Taymiyyah's broader project: to restore revelation to its central epistemological position and to position reason as a limited yet vital instrument in the pursuit of divine knowledge.

For Ibn Taymiyyah, the knowledge of God (maʿrifat Allāh) is neither contingent upon speculative reasoning nor reliant on complex theological argumentation. Rather, it is a self-evident truth inscribed within the fiṭrah—the innate disposition with which all human

beings are created. This awareness of the Divine is not acquired through syllogistic proofs but is embedded in the very nature of the human soul.

In Darʾ Taʿāruḍ al-ʿAql wa al-Naql, Ibn Taymiyyah affirms that the acknowledgment of God is an intrinsic, universal reality. He writes:

> "It is known that the foundation of acknowledging the Creator and affirming Him is firmly settled in the hearts of all humans and jinn. It is among the necessary concomitants of their creation and is inherent within them—just like their need for food and drink, which is also essential to their nature". (*Ibn Taymiyyah, Darʾ Taʿāruḍ al-ʿAql wa al-Naql, vol. 8, p. 438)

This grounding in *fiṭrah* provides a radically different epistemic model from that of the *mutakallimūn* and philosophers, who sought to establish the existence of God through cosmological or ontological proofs. While Ibn Taymiyyah does not reject rational reflection, he regards such arguments as confirmatory at best—and often prone to abstraction and detachment from the Qur'anic mode of reasoning. The Qur'an, he notes, does not present syllogistic demonstrations of God's existence but instead calls attention to signs in creation, moral intuition, and the futility of idolatry.

Revelation, then, does not impose external truths upon a neutral intellect; rather, it resonates with and reawakens the knowledge already present within the fiṭrah. Ibn Taymiyyah illustrates this harmony through a vivid analogy:

> "Fiṭrah in relation to truth is like eyesight in relation to the sun. Everyone with eyes, if left without a veil, will naturally see the sun. False beliefs—like those of the Jews, Christians, and Magians—are veils that block the eyes from seeing the sun". (Ibn Taymiyyah 2004, vol. 4, p. 234)

Here, fiṭrah is not merely a passive receptacle but an active epistemic faculty. When unobstructed by cultural distortion or philosophical confusion, it naturally inclines toward the truth of God's existence. The task of revelation is not to manufacture belief, but to remove the veils—intellectual, spiritual, or social—that obscure what is already known within.

In sum, Ibn Taymiyyah offers a model of theistic knowledge that is rooted in human nature, clarified by revelation, and supported—but not founded—by reason. This triadic structure—fiṭrah, naql, and ʿaql—ensures that the recognition of the Divine remains accessible, coherent, and grounded in both scriptural fidelity and existential experience.

At the heart of Ibn Taymiyyah's theological framework lies a dynamic and integrative conception of tawḥīd—not as an abstract metaphysical doctrine, but as the foundation of knowledge, worship, and moral purpose. Distinct from the abstractions of philosophical theology and the syllogistic constructions of speculative kalām, Ibn Taymiyyah grounds tawḥīd in a triadic unity: lordship (rubūbiyyah), worship (ulūhiyyah), and names and attributes (asmāʾ wa ṣifāt).

This dimension affirms that God alone is the Creator, Sustainer, and Controller of all that exists. Ibn Taymiyyah stresses that belief in divine lordship is both intuitive in the fiṭrah and reinforced by reason and revelation. He identifies three primary epistemic pathways to recognizing rubūbiyyah:

The signs within the self (*āyāt al-anfus*)—human dependency, cognition, and moral instinct.

For Ibn Taymiyyah, cognition (*ʿaql*) and moral instinct (*gharīzah akhlāqiyyah*) are not neutral faculties, but internal signs (*āyāt*) embedded by the Creator to guide the soul toward truth. Human cognition—our innate capacity to grasp causality, recognize purpose, and infer from effects to causes—reflects a rational structure that points beyond the self to a necessary, originating cause. This intellectual orientation, when uncorrupted, naturally leads to the acknowledgment of God. Similarly, the moral instinct—our deep-seated recognition of justice, accountability, and the intrinsic wrongness of certain acts—suggests

the presence of a moral lawgiver. In Ibn Taymiyyah's framework, these internal faculties are not merely functional but teleological: they are designed to support the soul's recognition of its dependence on, and obligation toward, its Creator.

The signs in the cosmos (āyāt al-āfāq)—order, causality, and purpose observable in the natural world.

Prophetic miracles (āyāt al-anbiyāʾ)—empirical signs with rational evidentiary force confirming the truth of revelation.

According to Ibn Taymiyyah, these signs are not merely suggestive but compelling to the sound intellect. Revelation does not override reason but brings it to clarity. He criticizes speculative arguments like the proof from the origination of accidents (ḥudūth al-aʿrāḍ) as both scripturally foreign and philosophically questionable:

> "Every method which contradicts the Sunnah is false both rationally and scripturally. . . Many believed it was the method of Abraham, but this is a misconception". (Ibn Taymiyyah 2004, vol. 16, p. 270).

This form of tawḥīd demands exclusive devotion to God—inwardly and outwardly—in all acts of worship. For Ibn Taymiyyah, this is the core of Islamic monotheism, and the point where most theological errors emerge. Importantly, he asserts the rational coherence of this principle: that true lordship entails exclusive worship. This makes rubūbiyyah a rational premise for ulūhiyyah.

Ibn Taymiyyah also affirms that reason itself confirms the legitimacy of the Qur'anic argumentation in calling people to worship God alone. This includes:

The use of Qur'anic analogies (amthāl) that expose the irrationality of polytheism.

The appeal to logical consequence: if God alone creates and provides, He alone must be worshipped.

He thus demonstrates that tawḥīd al-ulūhiyyah is not only revealed but grounded in rational necessity and existential coherence. The call to exclusive worship is therefore both divinely mandated and rationally justified.

In defending the divine names and attributes, Ibn Taymiyyah follows the methodology of the salaf, which he deems superior both scripturally and rationally. His approach is marked by:

Affirmation without distortion (taḥrīf) or denial (taʿṭīl).

Avoidance of anthropomorphism (tashbīh) while affirming the reality of God's names and attributes as befitting His majesty.

For example, when the Qur'an refers to God's "hand" (*yad*) or His "settling upon the Throne" (*istiwā*), Ibn Taymiyyah affirms these attributes as real and meaningful, without interpreting them away metaphorically (*taḥrīf*) or denying their occurrence (*taʿṭīl*). At the same time, he avoids *tashbīh*—the claim that such attributes resemble those of creation. He holds that these attributes are to be affirmed *as God affirmed them for Himself*, without delving into their modality (*bi-lā kayf*) and while maintaining His absolute transcendence. This balanced approach seeks to preserve both the clarity of revelation and the rational coherence of divine uniqueness.

He emphasizes that the path of the salaf is not a rejection of reason, but a return to a sound epistemology that unites the dictates of revelation with the clarity of uncorrupted reason. In his words and method:

Scriptural affirmations of God's names and attributes do not contradict sound reason, but rather fulfill it. For Ibn Taymiyyah, this harmony is rooted in the rational principle that perfection, when understood without anthropomorphic limitation, is both intelligible and necessary for a being worthy of worship. . .

Scriptural affirmations of God's names and attributes do not contradict sound reason, but rather fulfill it. For Ibn Taymiyyah, this harmony is grounded in the rational principle

that perfection—when understood in a manner befitting divine transcendence—is both intelligible and necessary for a being worthy of worship. Attributes such as knowledge, power, will, mercy, and wisdom are not arbitrary or anthropomorphic projections; rather, they represent rationally coherent aspects of perfection that reason affirms as essential to the concept of a supreme Creator. Ibn Taymiyyah argues that negating these attributes—under the pretense of safeguarding transcendence—results in a conception of God that is void of meaning and incompatible with both revelation and reason. He maintains that sound reason does not require stripping God of His names and attributes, but instead demands their affirmation in a way that acknowledges His uniqueness and majesty. In this view, revelation does not introduce irrational notions but articulates divine perfections in a manner that completes and confirms what reason, guided by fiṭrah, is already predisposed to recognize.

Revelation-based principles regarding God's names and attributes are logically consistent and more reliable than philosophical abstractions.

In this sense, Ibn Taymiyyah presents a model of tawḥīd that is holistic, coherent, and actionable. It is revealed in the texts, known in the fiṭrah, and validated by sound reasoning—a theological framework that challenges the inherited assumptions of both philosophers and speculative theologians, while offering a prophetic paradigm rooted in both faith and clarity.

3.2. Contemporary Relevance and Philosophical Engagements

Although Ibn Taymiyyah lived in a premodern Islamic context, his epistemological and theological contributions bear striking relevance to many of the central debates in contemporary philosophy of religion. His critique of speculative theology, prioritization of fiṭrah, and emphasis on the harmony between reason and revelation position him as a valuable interlocutor in several ongoing philosophical conversations.

Contemporary philosophy of religion has witnessed a growing interest in Islamic epistemological frameworks, especially concerning the rationality of belief and the legitimacy of revealed knowledge. Aijaz (2018) provides a detailed philosophical investigation of these themes, highlighting both internal theological reservations and external intellectual challenges in reconciling faith with reason in Islam. His work explores objections to philosophizing about Islamic doctrines, as well as arguments for and against the rationality of Islamic belief in light of contemporary concerns such as religious diversity, the problem of evil, and the nature of divine names and attributes.

Within this broader discourse, Ibn Taymiyyah's model—though developed in a premodern context—offers a powerful and coherent counterpoint. This triadic model also finds resonance with recent studies by Jamie B. Turner, who has analyzed Ibn Taymiyyah's use of theistic signs, his appeal to intuitive knowledge, and his critique of rationalist metaphysics through the lens of Reformed Epistemology. Turner presents Ibn Taymiyyah as advancing a common-sense theism grounded in fiṭrah, revelation, and rational clarity—an approach that offers significant contributions to contemporary Islamic philosophy of religion (Turner 2023). Rather than subjecting revelation to rational scrutiny or dismissing reason altogether, he advances a hierarchical but harmonious epistemological framework wherein:

Revelation (naql) serves as the supreme source of divine knowledge,

Reason (ʿaql) functions as a calibrated instrument for understanding and affirming revelation,

Fiṭrah (innate disposition) provides the existential and cognitive grounding for both.

This triadic model anticipates many contemporary calls for epistemological pluralism in religious knowledge, while preserving a theocentric coherence rooted in divine authority.

Ibn Taymiyyah's contribution thus remains highly relevant for contemporary debates on the interplay between reason and revelation in Islamic and global philosophical thought.

Ibn Taymiyyah's emphasis on the role of fiṭrah in grounding belief parallels contemporary discussions in Reformed Epistemology, particularly in the works of Alvin Plantinga and William Alston, where properly basic beliefs are considered justified without inferential evidence (Plantinga 1983).

For Ibn Taymiyyah, belief in God is not a conclusion drawn from argument, but a pre-rational recognition confirmed by experience, revelation, and reflection. His claim that belief in God is more secure than logical syllogisms positions him as a forerunner of epistemologies that give weight to moral intuition, lived experience, and dispositional cognition.

In modern discourse, the debate over whether religious knowledge comes from reason, experience, revelation, or community tradition remains unresolved. Ibn Taymiyyah's epistemology is distinctive in its triadic foundation:

Revelation (naql) as the final authority and clearest expression of divine will.

Reason (ʿaql) as a functional instrument for understanding, not overriding, revealed truth.

Fiṭrah as the internal compass that inclines the soul to truth, worship, and moral awareness.

In addition to its theoretical significance, Ibn Taymiyyah's triadic epistemology holds considerable practical relevance for Islamic education and interfaith dialogue. In the context of education, this model offers a framework for integrating classical sources with critical reasoning and innate moral awareness. It can inform curriculum development in fields such as Islamic theology (uṣūl al-dīn) and worldview studies by grounding pedagogy in a balanced epistemic hierarchy where revelation maintains primacy, reason operates in service, and fiṭrah anchors intuitive moral and spiritual truths (Al-Attas 1993).

In interfaith contexts, the emphasis on fiṭrah—as a shared human faculty—opens constructive pathways for dialogue with other traditions that likewise appeal to natural reason and moral conscience (Nasr 2002). Ibn Taymiyyah's model allows for principled engagement without relativizing Islamic doctrine, offering a theocentric epistemology that is both faithful and dialogically open.

While Wael El-Tobgui's Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation (El-Tobgui 2020) remains the most comprehensive academic study of Darʾ Taʿāruḍ al-ʿAql wa al-Naql, it primarily focuses on textual exegesis and historical contextualization, with limited engagement in comparative or constructive philosophical analysis. The work successfully demonstrates Ibn Taymiyyah's methodological opposition to kalām and Aristotelian logic, yet it refrains from fully exploring the systematic philosophical implications of his epistemological model. Moreover, El-Tobgui tends to frame Ibn Taymiyyah's project as a form of theological revivalism rather than a coherent and original epistemological intervention. This paper seeks to build upon El-Tobgui's philological contributions while critically extending the discussion toward a philosophical reassessment of Ibn Taymiyyah's model in light of contemporary debates in religious epistemology and philosophy of religion (El-Tobgui 2020).

This integrated model challenges reductionist accounts of religious knowledge—whether rationalist, fideist, or purely experiential—and provides a balanced framework that is still underexplored in contemporary philosophy of religion, especially from within Islamic perspectives.

In sum, Ibn Taymiyyah's thought opens important avenues for Islamic engagement with global philosophical debates. His legacy offers a compelling framework for answering today's most urgent questions about faith, knowledge, and reason—without sacrificing the theological depth of revelation or the epistemic integrity of rational inquiry.

While Ibn Taymiyyah's epistemological model offers a rich and compelling vision that bridges revelation, reason, and fiṭrah, it also invites a number of critical questions that remain relevant in the context of contemporary philosophy of religion. Engaging these questions does not diminish the significance of his project but instead highlights its potential for further refinement, comparative dialogue, and constructive adaptation. Ibn Taymiyyah places great emphasis on fiṭrah as a foundational source of religious knowledge. However, this raises important philosophical questions:

To what extent can fiṭrah be objectively identified, measured, or verified across cultures and histories?

How can one distinguish between fiṭrah and socially conditioned belief or cultural instinct?

Can the appeal to fiṭrah function as a universal epistemic criterion, or does it remain within the bounds of a theologically committed framework?

Addressing these questions is vital for any attempt to incorporate fiṭrah-based epistemology into broader interfaith or philosophical discourse.

Ibn Taymiyyah's critique of Aristotelian logic—particularly definition, syllogism, and universals—is bold and foundational to his project. However, questions arise concerning:

Whether Ibn Taymiyyah's rejection of formal logic risks overgeneralization—especially in light of contemporary advances in logic and epistemology—is a question that warrants careful consideration. These advances include the emergence of symbolic and mathematical logic, modal logic, and more recent developments in formal epistemology, such as Bayesian reasoning and probabilistic models of belief justification. These frameworks differ substantially from Aristotelian logic in both method and objective, and their rise has reshaped contemporary discussions on validity, inference, and the structure of knowledge. While Ibn Taymiyyah's critique remains focused on the classical syllogistic tradition, acknowledging these newer paradigms helps contextualize his arguments and opens space for further comparative inquiry.

Can an Islamic epistemology fully dispense with structured inference, or should it distinguish between different types and levels of reasoning?

Might his critique of logic need to be reassessed and selectively integrated, rather than wholly dismissed?

These reflections open the door to a more nuanced engagement with logic, not as a rival to revelation but as a potentially retooled tool of clarity and consistency.

As global academic discourse becomes increasingly dialogical, a key question emerges:

How compatible is Ibn Taymiyyah's framework with dominant paradigms in Western philosophy of religion?

His emphasis on properly basic beliefs, his rejection of overdependence on metaphysics, and his integration of intuitive knowledge align with several modern thinkers—such as Plantinga (1983, 2000), William Alston (1991), and Clark (2019)—who likewise advocate non-inferential justification of theistic belief and affirm the epistemic role of intuition and cognitive disposition in religious knowledge. Yet challenges remain, particularly in:

Translating concepts such as fiṭrah (innate disposition) and naql (revealed text) into categories intelligible and persuasive in post-Enlightenment contexts.

Engaging secular philosophical frameworks while maintaining theological commitments.

This tension presents a fruitful area for comparative philosophy and interfaith engagement.

Future Research Directions

Based on these critical reflections, several promising paths emerge for future inquiry:

Comparative studies between Ibn Taymiyyah and Reformed Epistemologists (e.g., Plantinga, Alston).

Reappraisals of logic in the Islamic tradition, beyond the confines of the classical logic debate.

Exploration of fiṭrah in dialogue with cognitive science of religion and moral psychology.

Constructing a Taymiyyan philosophy of religion that interacts meaningfully with contemporary global discourses.

In sum, Ibn Taymiyyah's intellectual legacy remains not only a historical inheritance but a living discourse, open to critique, development, and contribution to universal philosophical inquiry. Engaging his thought today requires both fidelity and innovation—a commitment to his foundational principles alongside a willingness to extend them into new intellectual terrains.

Another promising direction for future research is a comparative epistemological study between Ibn Taymiyyah's concept of fiṭrah and contemporary theories in the cognitive science of religion (CSR). While fiṭrah is grounded in Islamic theological anthropology as an innate disposition toward recognizing divine truths, CSR approaches—such as those developed by Barrett and Atran—examine belief in God and religious intuitions through the lens of evolved cognitive mechanisms. A structured comparison could explore areas of convergence and divergence between fiṭrah and constructs such as intuitive theism, teleological reasoning, and agency detection. This line of inquiry may help clarify the epistemic scope of fiṭrah in relation to scientific accounts of religious cognition and contribute to the growing field of integrative religious epistemology.

3.3. Ibn Taymiyyah's Critique of Aristotelian Definition (al-ḥadd) and Its Epistemological Consequences

Building upon his broader critique of Aristotelian logic, Ibn Taymiyyah focuses particularly on the concept of definition (al-ḥadd), which he sees as epistemologically fragile and methodologically inadequate.

Ibn Taymiyyah's critique of Aristotelian logic targets the foundational claim that non-self-evident concepts cannot be known except through precise definitions (al-ḥadd). In al-Radd ʿalā al-Manṭiqiyyīn, he systematically dismantles this assumption from multiple angles: epistemological, logical, and practical. First, he points out that the claim itself is not self-evident and lacks demonstrative proof—making it, by the logicians' own standards, inadmissible. Second, he argues that the definer must either already know the defined concept or else fall into circularity or infinite regress. Third, he highlights that most people—across all cultures and disciplines—acquire conceptual knowledge without recourse to such formal definitions. Fourth, he shows that even the most common definitions (such as man being a "rational animal") are contested and insufficient, undermining the supposed universality and precision of Aristotelian methodology (Taymiyyah n.d., pp. 24–28).

This summary of Ibn Taymiyyah's critique is closely aligned with the detailed analysis provided by Sobhi Rayan (2011), who systematically outlines these objections—particularly the issues of circularity, the instability of definitions, and the distinction between mental conception and empirical reality.

Ibn Taymiyyah also criticizes the difficulty and impracticality of formulating definitions that meet all logical criteria, noting that people clearly understand and communicate concepts through experience, language, intuition, and the fiṭrah—without ever needing logical definitions. He further contends that understanding the terms of a definition presupposes knowledge of their meanings, which leads back to intuitive or experiential knowledge, not logical construction. Finally, he observes that definitions can be invalidated or replaced through counterexamples, which presupposes prior conceptual knowledge of the defined entity—thereby proving that such knowledge is possible without definition.

Ibn Taymiyyah's critique of the Aristotelian definition does not merely aim to dismantle metaphysical abstraction; it opens space for a more inclusive and pluralistic epistemol-

ogy grounded in revelation, reason, and fiṭrah. This orientation closely parallels Alvin Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology, which likewise rejects classical foundationalism and defends the rationality of properly basic beliefs. Just as Plantinga challenges the Enlightenment demand for inferential justification in religious belief, Ibn Taymiyyah contests the philosophical requirement for definition as a gateway to conceptual knowledge. In both cases, the standard of rationality is being reconfigured—not abandoned—to accommodate a more primordial, intuitive, and theologically informed account of knowing. The resonance between fiṭrah and sensus divinitatis, while emerging from distinct intellectual traditions, underscores a shared commitment to recognizing the legitimacy of non-inferential theistic belief as both rational and epistemically warranted.

4. Results

This study has yielded several significant results regarding Ibn Taymiyyah's epistemological framework and its relevance to contemporary philosophy of religion. The findings can be summarized as follows:

4.1. Beyond Refutation: Constructive Epistemology

Ibn Taymiyyah's engagement with falsafa and kalām is not limited to polemical refutation. Rather, he articulates a constructive alternative rooted in the primacy of revelation, the functionality of reason, and the intuitive certainty of fiṭrah. His model offers an integrated vision of knowledge that avoids both rationalist reductionism and fideistic isolationism.

4.2. Fiṭrah as a Foundational Epistemic Faculty

The concept of fiṭrah emerges as a key epistemological anchor in Ibn Taymiyyah's thought, functioning analogously to "properly basic beliefs" in Reformed Epistemology (William Alston 1991). He treats fiṭrah as an innate, universal disposition toward recognizing divine truth, ethical intuition, and metaphysical order.

4.3. Recalibrating the Role of Reason

Ibn Taymiyyah redefines reason not as an autonomous judge over revelation but as a tool that, when rightly employed, affirms the truth of divine communication. His critique of Aristotelian logic demonstrates the limitations of deductive formalism when applied to religious truths without rejecting rational inquiry altogether.

4.4. Theological Core of Tawḥīd

The study reveals that Ibn Taymiyyah's approach to tawḥīd—in its three dimensions of rubūbiyyah, ulūhiyyah, and asmāʾ wa ṣifāt—forms the core of his philosophical theology. This tripartite model not only preserves scriptural integrity but also aligns with rational and intuitive principles of coherence and moral realism. The affirmation of God's lordship entails the existence of a purposeful moral order embedded in creation; the call to exclusive worship (ulūhiyyah) requires ethical submission to divine command; and the affirmation of divine names and attributes—such as justice, wisdom, and mercy—grounds moral values in a transcendent, objective source. Together, these dimensions establish a framework in which moral truths are not culturally constructed but divinely anchored.

4.5. Compatibility with Contemporary Discourse

Ibn Taymiyyah's epistemology offers a coherent response to key questions in the contemporary philosophy of religion, including the justification of belief, the nature of religious knowledge, and the role of intuition and revelation. His model is compatible with certain streams of analytic philosophy, while remaining distinctively theocentric. Furthermore, by grounding knowledge in divine revelation, innate disposition (fiṭrah), and

the moral attributes of God, the model undergirds a form of moral realism in which ethical values are not merely subjective or socially constructed, but anchored in the ontological reality of God's justice, wisdom, and mercy.

4.6. Open Questions and Future Potential

While Ibn Taymiyyah's framework is internally coherent, the study also identifies areas that invite further philosophical development—particularly regarding the objectivity and verifiability of fiṭrah (e.g., how it may be empirically distinguished from social conditioning), the selective rehabilitation of logic (e.g., integrating modern logical approaches such as modal logic, Bayesian epistemology, or defeasible reasoning into Islamic epistemology, while maintaining Ibn Taymiyyah's insistence on contextual, linguistic, and revelatory grounding), and the cross-cultural engagement of Islamic epistemology with global philosophical traditions (e.g., comparative analysis with virtue epistemology, religious phenomenology, or epistemic contextualism).

5. Conclusions

This study has examined Ibn Taymiyyah's critique of philosophical theology as a distinct epistemological intervention in the longstanding debate between reason and revelation. Rather than offering a merely polemical response to speculative thought, Ibn Taymiyyah develops a coherent and integrative framework grounded in the primacy of revelation (naql), the functionality of reason (ʿaql), and the epistemic centrality of innate disposition (fiṭrah). This triadic model provides a robust alternative to both rationalist metaphysics and fideistic theology, aligning closely with several themes in the contemporary philosophy of religion, including foundationalism, religious epistemology, and critiques of abstract metaphysics.

The findings suggest that Ibn Taymiyyah's model anticipates modern discussions on properly basic beliefs and epistemic justification, particularly through his elevation of fiṭrah as a foundational cognitive faculty. His critique of Aristotelian logic, far from rejecting rational inquiry, recalibrates reason as a tool subordinated to divine revelation. At the core of his epistemology is a holistic vision of tawḥīd—affirming God's lordship, the exclusive right to worship, and revealed names and attributes—in a way that is scripturally grounded, rationally coherent, and existentially compelling.

Beyond its theoretical value, Ibn Taymiyyah's epistemology offers significant practical implications. In Islamic education, it provides a pedagogical framework that bridges classical theology and contemporary inquiry. Courses in Islamic theology, philosophy, and worldview studies can benefit from this integrated model, cultivating scholars who engage in modern challenges while remaining rooted in revelation. In daʿwah and interfaith contexts, his emphasis on shared human intuitions and rational coherence fosters meaningful dialogue without compromising theological integrity. Such a vision is particularly relevant today, where the search for a grounded, authentic, and rational faith tradition is more urgent than ever.

In sum, Ibn Taymiyyah's epistemological legacy remains intellectually fertile and remarkably relevant. His synthesis of revelation, reason, and human nature offers a compelling foundation for contemporary Islamic philosophy of religion—one that invites further dialogue, development, and application across theological, educational, and philosophical domains.

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Article

Islamic Theism and the Multiverse

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Abstract: In this paper, we argue that under certain assumptions, Islamic theism moves in the direction of a multiverse. We present several arguments in two major categories. The first is based on the divine attribute of everlastingness: if God's everlasting attributes are expressed in the creation and the universe has a finite past, then God created a multiverse. The second category involves perfect being theology: if some of God's attributes express themselves in the creation, and God has every compossible perfection, then we should expect God to create a multiverse.

Keywords: multiverse; Islamic theism; kalam; philosophical theology

1. Introduction

One can scarcely study contemporary cosmology without hearing of the multiverse. By the multiverse we mean space–time regions that are causally disconnected from each other; universes which are separated spatially, temporally, or spatio-temporally. Some theists and atheists take the multiverse to be a threat to rational theism; they hold that multiverse theories are hostile to theism because, they claim, multiverse theories explain the fine-tuning of the universe without appealing to a designer; the multiverse, in this view, is an alternative to God in explaining fine-tuning. Therefore, if the multiverse were actual, it would render the existence of God superfluous[1].

Some philosophers, on the other hand, argue that the multiverse is not only not hostile to theism, the multiverse is useful to theism. For example, some theists deploy the multiverse in support of theodicies[2]. Others claim that God would create all the possible universes in which good surpasses evil, so the multiverse would be the best possible world; as such, the multiverse answers the best possible world objection[3].

As a multiverse-friendly theistic philosopher, I align myself with the view that classical Islamic theism, under certain assumptions, harmonizes well with the concept of a multiverse. By classical Islamic theism, I refer to the belief in a supreme being, known as God among other names, who is credited with creating the universe and is characterized as omnipotent and omniscient. I posit that God communicates His will to humanity through prophets, who then disseminate these revelations to their communities. The Quran, esteemed as the word of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, stands as the principal and definitive revelation that governs all dimensions of faith, practice, and morality, distinguishing Islamic theism from other classical theistic traditions. Additionally, I subscribe to the tenets of Perfect Being Theology (PBT), which defines a divine being as one possessing maximal greatness and an array of all compossible great-making properties. While I do not commit to any specific Islamic intellectual tradition such as the Mutikallemun (Ashari or Maturidi), Falasafa, or Sufism, my forthcoming arguments in favor of Multiverse Theism will be structured to appeal variably to these perspectives. I aim for these arguments to resonate across different Islamic schools of thought, providing each adherent with compelling reasons that align with their doctrinal positions. Although I may critique certain schools in specific sections, my overall approach seeks to include and respect alternative viewpoints.

Since all but one of our arguments is applicable to classical Islamic theism, we will use the term "Multiverse Theism" to refer to the thesis that affirms both classical Islamic theism and the multiverse hypothesis.

When we use the word "multiverse", we are not referring to any particular model. We remain agnostic about the features of the multiverse hypothesis except for those implied by our arguments.

We aim to demonstrate that given classical Islamic theism, Multiverse Theism is both plausible and non-ad hoc. The Muslim theologian, we will argue, has independent and even plausible reasons to believe in a multiverse. As such, if the multiverse were to become well-established scientific theory, it should (weakly) confirm classical Islamic theism. The multiverse theory, then, is neither a defeater of rational belief in God nor an ad-hoc, late-comer construction brought in to "save" theism "once again" from the advance of science. Indeed, in the Quran we read of the theological grounds, perhaps unknowable until the science of Einstein and quantum mechanics, for belief in the multiverse. In Quran 65.12 we read:

> God it is who has created seven heavens, and similar number of earths. The commandments come down among them slowly, that you may know that God is able to do all things, and that God surrounds all things in knowledge.

While this text does not provide unequivocal support for the multiverse, it is highly suggestive of a large number of multiple "heavens and earths" (taking "seven" as metaphorical for the number of perfection) and its presence in Islam's founding text is sufficient to undermine the claim that the multiverse is theologically ad hoc[4].

Moreover, in Quran 1, and in the daily prayers of Muslims from the beginning, we read, and countless Muslims recite: "Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds." While "worlds" is typically restricted to the celestial bodies in our universe, it could suggest, of course, the existence of other, spatio-temporally unrelated worlds (universes)—the stuff of the multiverse. Indeed, the Quran repeatedly refers to Allah as the Lord of the Worlds.

Additional theological support for Multiverse Theism is based on not untypical Islamic understandings and extensions of some essential divine attributes. Islam's theological case for the multiverse can be divided into two major categories. The first is based on the divine attribute of everlastingness. Some medieval Muslim philosophers, for example, argued that some of God's attributes express themselves in the created world, and since these attributes are everlasting, the universe must be everlasting[5]. Everlasting attribute arguments combine this medieval insight with the recently established fact that our universe has a finite past to support a multiverse. The second category involves perfect being theology. If some of God's attributes express themselves in the creation, and God has every compossible perfection, then we should expect a maximal divine creation. In short, God's attributes combine to make a theological case for a multiverse.

I hope our study will serve as a valuable contribution to the already burgeoning interest in Islamic cosmologies. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a pioneer in this field, explored various cosmologies that emerged within Islamic civilization, including those of Ikhwan al-Safa, al-Biruni, and Ibn Sina (Nasr 1993). Julien Decharneux has examined the links between the cosmology of the Quran and various cosmological traditions of Late Antiquity (Decharneux 2023). Damien Janos has focused on the cosmology of al-Farabi, specifically his cosmological method and the interplay between astronomy, physics, and metaphysics (Janos 2012). Alnoor Dhanani has reconstructed the theories of matter and space of the Mutakallimun from the tenth and eleventh centuries, offering valuable insights into Basrian Mutazili Cosmology (Dhanani 1993). Ian Richard Netton has investigated God and cosmology in Islamic philosophy through innovative approaches using modern literary modes of criticism derived from structuralism, post-structuralism, and semiotics (Netton 1994). Additionally, William C. Chittick has presented Sufi reflections on cosmology, highlighting the unique contributions of Sufism to Islamic thought (Chittick 2007; Chittick 1989).

2. Arguments from the Creator Attribute of God

2.1. The Argument from the Everlasting Creator Attribute of God

The first argument is based on the creator attribute of God. In classical Islamic theism, God is the creator and sustainer of everything. In Islamic theism, being creator (al-Khāliq) is an essential attribute of God (Quran 6:102, 13:16, 36:81, 39:62, 40:62, 59:24); God, the creator, created everything, without example, from nothing.

Using the creator attribute, we can formulate the following argument in support of the multiverse:

1. God is everlastingly the creator.
2. In order to possess the creator attribute, one must have created something.
3. God created our universe (with its finite past).
4. But God was the creator before He created our universe (from 1 and 3).
5. Therefore, God created another universe before our universe (from 2 and 4).
6. Therefore, theism suggests a multiverse[6].

Since these arguments make a host of metaphysical assumptions, some of which we will shortly address, we do not offer this as a deductively valid argument from classical Islamic theism to Multiverse Theism. As such, the argument cannot be said to imply the multiverse. But, given 1–5 are not implausible considerations, classical Islamic theism suggests they comport well with the multiverse.

The first premise holds that being creator is an essential attribute of God, implying that God is always the creator (if a being were not the creator, it would not be God). This claim can be understood in two ways. First, this claim might be taken to mean that God is eternal, that is, that God exists in timeless eternity with all the events in his life experienced all at once, timelessly; as eternal, God has all of God's attributes timelessly, including the creator attribute. Second, this claim might be taken to mean that God is everlasting—that God has always existed and always will exist, yet God experiences temporal succession; God's thoughts and experiences have temporal location[7]. The first premise of the argument, as we understand it, assumes that God is everlasting (as will all of the arguments in the first category)[8].

The second premise asserts that to manifest the attribute of a creator, one must have engaged in the act of creation. The designation "creator" inherently implies the activity of creating—bringing into existence something that previously did not exist. This foundational definition necessitates that an entity must have participated in an act of creation to be accurately termed a creator. Consequently, the possession of the creator attribute is inherently contingent upon the successful completion of a creative act. It is critical to distinguish between potential and actualization. Merely possessing the potential to create does not confer the creator attribute; only actual creation does. For instance, an individual may possess all the necessary tools and skills to paint (potential), but until they have actually produced a painting, they cannot be recognized as embodying the attribute of a painter.

The third premise posits that the universe, having been created by God, possesses a finite past. This assertion is generally accepted among theists. In the context of Islamic theism, particularly within the orthodox theological traditions of the Ash'ari and Maturidi schools, it is held that the universe was brought into existence ex nihilo, by divine command. Consequently, it is inferred that the universe is characterized by a finite past[9].

The rest of the argument follows from these three premises. Since God is everlastingly the creator, he must be the creator before he created our universe. And if a being must have created something in order to possess the creator attribute, God must have created something before he created our universe.

There are several objections to the above argument. First, one might claim that God created non-spatial and non-temporal objects, i.e., abstract objects, before He created our universe. In other words, God was the creator before he created our universe not because He created a prior universe or set of prior universes, but because he (eternally) creates

abstract objects. This objection assumes Theistic Activism[10], a controversial position due to bootstrapping objections[11]. Moreover, it seems to me that creation requires a temporal sequence—a "before" and "after". Abstract objects, however, if they are non-temporal objects as implied in the objection would seem to be a problem. Without a temporal framework, the notion of "before" and "after" does not apply. This implies that the creation of abstract objects is incoherent. Therefore, the objection fails.

Even if abstract objects eternally depend upon God for their existence, we could recreate (pun intended) the argument in terms of the creation of physical objects. After all, when the Islamic scriptures hold that God created the heavens and the earth and all they contain, they were (likely) not thinking of abstract objects. God creates, we read, every creature in the heavens and the earth, our innermost being, what has been made, humans (God's handiwork), male and female, his people, his new people (sanctified people in the New Creation), and life. So, the Islamic theist could either (a) restrict the doctrine of creation to God's temporal creation of the heavens and the earth (and so deny that God creates, in this sense, abstract objects) or (b) claim two ways of being creator. God is Creator1, which means that God eternally creates abstract objects and necessary truths, and God is Creator2 which means, following the Scriptural witness, God temporally creates (perhaps out of nothing) the heavens and the earth. If the distinction holds, the reconstructed argument would be more precisely The Argument from the Creator2 Attribute.

Moreover, the notion that God eternally created abstract objects before transitioning to the creation of concrete universes appears peculiar when considering other divine attributes such as all goodness, which we will discuss in forthcoming sections. The concrete universe encompasses the realization of potentialities such as material beauty, life, and the moral development of sentient beings—qualities that are not pertinent to abstract objects. Consequently, God's creation of the physical universe satisfies various dimensions of divine goodness and creative expression. Therefore, His Creator2 attribute, which pertains to the creation of physical entities, seems to hold greater significance than the speculative Creator1 attribute, associated with the creation of abstract entities.

Second, one may reject the second premise, holding that in order to instantiate the creator attribute, God need not have created anything. God is the creator, in this view, simply by virtue of being able to create; being able to create is sufficient for instantiating the creator attribute. However, this claim fails to distinguish the attribute of creator from the attribute of Omnipotence, God's power to create. We can imagine a being who is omnipotent but who never creates anything, but we would not call such a being the creator. It seems that creators, by definition, must have created.

Or one might deny the third premise. One might argue that the universe is eternal, and that God is the creator because God sustains it or recreates it every second of its eternal existence. While this is not incompatible with classical Islamic theism simpliciter, it is incompatible with, for example, the Muslim belief that the only everlasting being is God [12]. The claim that God is creating a single universe everlastingly would be compatible with Islamic theism if there were a temporal multiverse, an eternal succession of temporally finite universes, of which ours is the current end-state. In this view, no universe is everlasting, only God is an everlasting being. This recreation model, then, suggests a temporal multiverse. Given this assumption, the conclusion of the argument stands.

One may express concern that the proposition that God is the sole everlasting entity could conflict with our primary argument. Consider the following objection[13]: the premise that God is the only everlasting being suggests a temporal point t before which God exists and no other entities (including other universes) do. This notion appears incompatible with the concept of everlasting creation and potentially undermines the validity of the argument from God's attribute as an everlasting creator. However, asserting that God is the only everlasting being does not necessarily mean that we can identify a specific time t at which God was the sole existent entity. This directly results from God's nature as an everlasting creator; hence, at any given time t, God would have already created some universe, which we might refer to as universe(t). Does this imply that God is not the only everlasting being?

I believe not. For any specified t and corresponding universe(t), there exists a preceding moment 1t − 1 at which this universe did not exist, yet God did. There are no universes that are beginningless and existent for any arbitrary time. Every universe has a starting point, whereas God does not. In other words, God exists prior to each given universe and is its creator. While it is true that there are infinitely many universes corresponding to any time t, this is not problematic as long as each universe has a beginning and a prior moment when it did not exist.

One might think that this argument implies an everlasting multiverse, so there are two everlasting beings, God and the multiverse. However, the multiverse is not a being in it its own right, it is simply a label for a collection of universes; it is not something above or beyond its constituent, individual, finite universes. As such, it is not a being with properties. So, there is no being that is co-everlasting with God. I would like to present several arguments supporting the contention that the multiverse does not constitute an entity in itself. Mereology, the philosophical study of parts and wholes, posits that for multiple entities to form a coherent whole, there must be relational or interactional properties that bind these entities together. In the paradigm of the multiverse, the universes are predominantly causally disconnected from each other. Consequently, there are neither interactions nor relational ties among them. Therefore, they do not constitute a new unified entity. Additionally, according to the principle of Occam's Razor, theories should not multiply entities beyond necessity without providing additional explanatory power. The hypothesis that the multiverse, beyond the individual universes, constitutes a real entity introduces an unnecessary layer of metaphysical complexity. Conversely, recognizing the multiverse simply as a categorical label for various, disconnected universes adheres to the principle of parsimony, thereby avoiding the introduction of superfluous structure or connections where none are observed or required[14].

Islamic conceptions of God as essentially the creator, when taken together with the God as everlasting and a rejection of Theistic Activism involving everlasting creation, are highly suggestive of a multiverse. Or, if God is Creator1 with respect to abstract objects, the argument could be reconstructed with God is Creator2 with respect to the heavens and the earth, mutatis mutandis, which would have the advantage of fitting better with the more common-sense claims of Islam's revealed texts.

2.2. The Argument from the Best Creator

The creator attribute of God, when combined with perfect being theology, can also be used to develop an Islamic argument for Multiverse Theism:

1. God has every great-making attribute at its maximum.
2. God is the creator.
3. A being who creates all of the universes worth creating would be a better creator than one who creates a single universe.
4. Therefore, God creates all of the universes worth creating, i.e., a multiverse.

The first premise is a restatement of perfect being theology and the second premise is an assertion of classical Islamic theism. As the most perfect being, God has every compossible great-making property to its highest degree. Therefore, if God is essentially the creator, God is not only creator, God is the best possible creator.[15]

The third premise expresses the intuition that a being who creates more than one thing that is worth creating[16] is a better creator[17] than a being one who creates a single thing, ceteris paribus; the creation of the best possible creator must be unsurpassable. But our universe is surpassable because we can imagine a creation with two universes (say, ours and another), and with three universes, and with four universes. . .., all the way up to the multiverse (which includes our universe and other morally valuable universes). The multiverse—with more moral agents, more energy and space and time, and just more stuff—is better than any single universe. Since the multiverse is better than our universe simpliciter, the creator of the multiverse would be better than the creator of a single universe. QED.

I added the following warning: "A potential objection could assert that only a single universe is worth creating, thereby challenging the third premise. This objection will be addressed in the subsequent section".

In conclusion, perfect being theology, in combination with the creator attribute of God, suggests a multiverse.

3. Arguments from the Moral Attributes of God

3.1. The Argument from the Moral Perfection of God

According to classical Islamic theism, God is all good[18]. Given God's essential goodness, one would expect God to maximize, as much as logically possible, the moral and aesthetic goodness of reality. Based on this intuition, many theists such as Ibn Sina (Ibn Sina 1968–1971, pp. 158–60), Al Ghazali (al-Ghazali 2001, pp. 47–50), Ibn Taymiyya (Hoover 2004), Ibn Arabi (Chittick 1989, pp. 289–301) and Leibnitz (Caro 2020) claimed that God has created the best possible world. Avicenna, likely the originator of the best possible world tradition in Islamic thought, held that God is "a cause in Itself of good and perfection in as much as that is possible" (Ibn Sina 1960, p. 415). His critic, Al Ghazali, also seems to adopt the position: "There is not in possibility more wonderful than this world, because of the perfected existence of all realities within it" (Ormsby 1984, p. 106). Although not widely accepted by the Ashari school of theology, which dominates Muslim thinking, this position seems to be adopted by Sufi's partly due to the influence of the mystical writings of Sufi Ibn Arabi (Ormsby 1984, pp. 103–7). Some recent philosophers, motivated by this intuition, argue that the best possible world is a multiverse (Kraay 2010, pp. 355–68). Similarly, Paul Draper has argued that given a theistic God who has limitless creative resources and is perfectly good, we should expect that God would create a multiverse (Draper 2004, pp. 311–21). In this section, we develop and defend an Islamic version of this argument in support of Multiverse Theism.

Defenders of a theistic multiverse who develop their case based on the perfect goodness of God, typically argue that God would create all of the universes which involve more goodness than evil (according to some non-arbitrary cutoff). We are neutral on what this cutoff should be. We simply define, without precise specification, the universes that God would choose to create in order to increase the value of the reality as "universes worth creating". The argument from God's moral perfection for the multiverse is formulated as:

1. God is all good.
2. God is omnipotent.
3. All good beings would want to increase the value of reality.
4. A universe worth creating would increase the value of reality.
5. An omnipotent being can create any universe worth creating.
6. Therefore, God would create any universe worth creating.
7. Therefore, there is more than one possible universe.
8. Therefore, God would create more than one universe.
9. Therefore, God would create a multiverse.

Given the assumption of classical Islamic theism, the first two premises are uncontroversial. The third premise seems to follow by definition from God's essential goodness. The fourth premise assumes, uncontroversially, that values are additive; in other words, if we have two different universes, their total value is equal to or greater than the value of each universe separately. The fifth premise follows from the definition of omnipotence (assuming that universes are consistent internally, and assuming universes that are compatible with true counterfactuals of freedom)[19]. The sixth premise follows from the previous premises. The seventh premise seems reasonable: surely, there is no reason to assume that only a single universe is worth creating. Suppose universe U1 is worth creating, now consider a second universe, U2, identical to U1 but with one more neutrino particle. Since an extra particle does not reduce the value of a universe, U2 would be at least as worthy of creation as U1. From the sixth and seventh premise, it follows that the multiverse exists.

Let us again consider some objections. First, a critic might deny the existence of objective values or deny the claim that objective values can be attached to reality. This objection, however, is not very attractive to Muslims who believe that God is objectively good, which implies that objective values exist or that God ascribes objective value to reality. Of course, a critic might reject objective values because they reject the existence of God; but our argument begins with the assumption of classical Islamic theism and classical Islamic theism affirms or implies the objective values of God and God's created things.

It is also important to acknowledge that some extreme forms of Divine Voluntarism, possibly present within certain interpretations of the Ashari school of Islamic theology—a variant of classical Islamic theism—might challenge the third premise. Consequently, adherents of this specific theological perspective may find the argument less compelling. I intend to offer some concise critiques of this form of extreme divine voluntarism in the following section.

The denial of objective values would likewise undermine atheism's arguably best case against theism—the problem of evil. If objective values cannot be attached to universes, then God, without violating God's essential goodness, could have created universes that include any kind or amount of evil.

A Muslim, however, might deny the claim that God's decision to create is constrained by maximizing value. After all, God is, so it seems, also maximally free and could create in accord with non-axiological criteria (or none at all). There are two problems with this objection. First, it is hard to imagine another, non-axiological criterion according to which an all-good God would create; would an essentially good being ignore, say, moral value and just create worlds with an even number of things or the preponderance of the color purple? God might be free to do so, but an essentially good being, so it seems, would not. God's freedom, on this view, is best understood as constrained by God's essential attributes. Secondly, whatever serves as God's non-axiological criterion would still give rise to a multiverse; the argument, so it seems, could easily be modified, mutatatis mutandis, in terms of this new criterion. There is an infinite number of possible universes with even numbers of things or in which the color purple dominates. Whatever God's criteria—axiological or non-axiological—we would expect a multiverse.

Another possible objection is to claim that all of the criteria used by God, which He seeks to maximize, are uniquely satisfied by our universe. Hence, God created a single universe, the best given all of God's criteria, rather than a multiverse. Again, this seems difficult to sustain because we can imagine a universe that is an exact copy of our universe but with just one more neutrino; wouldn't that universe be equal to or better than ours? And so worthy of creation? Given the range of such possibilities, it is hard to imagine that just one universe could uniquely satisfy God's criteria. One might argue that our universe is so precisely fine-tuned that even a minimal alteration, such as the addition or subtraction of one neutrino, would cause it to collapse. This critique presumes a stringent level of fine-tuning, where every aspect of the universe is critically balanced. While some physicists and philosophers contend that our universe appears fine-tuned for life, it is exceedingly improbable that such minor adjustments would indeed lead to collapse. Furthermore, it is important to note that neutrinos primarily interact through gravity and have very small masses. Moreover, calculations regarding the fine-tuning of the universe suggest that it can support life within a range of physical constants, rather than a single precise value. This indicates that many potential universes could feasibly sustain complex structures and life forms (Barnes 2012).

One might argue that while the universe would not collapse with such a minor change, its overall value (in terms of being worth creating) might change[20]. In the vastness of the universe, a single neutrino represents an incredibly tiny fraction of the total matter and energy. The emergent properties of the universe, which play important roles in aesthetics and moral values—such as the formation of complex structures, the evolution of life, and the existence of consciousness—arise from the interactions of countless particles and forces over vast scales of space and time. These properties are not sensitive to the

presence or absence of an individual neutrino. The processes that lead to these emergent phenomena involve large numbers of particles and substantial interactions, rendering the impact of a single neutrino effectively insignificant. This conclusion aligns with the principles of statistical mechanics, which describe how macroscopic properties emerge from the collective behavior of many particles. Moreover, the fine-tuning as presented in the objection, implies that no matter where God chooses to place the neutrino, the universe would suddenly become not worth creating, even though there is no increase in evil and the universe remains macroscopically indistinguishable from its previous state. It is difficult to perceive how such a universe could be considered less valuable, let alone not worth creating.

In summary, the theistic conception of an all-good and omnipotent God, when allied with the assumption that objective values can be attached to universes and are additive, suggests the multiverse hypothesis.

3.2. The Argument from No Perfect Universe

Fahreddin al-Razi argued that the world we live in is not the perfect world, because the perfect world—like the largest number—is impossible (al-Razi 1987, p. 107). When something admits of no intrinsic maximum, the largest or best or most perfect are impossible. God could always add more righteous people to any given world (simultaneously making the world bigger per person) and so make it better. Gaunilo's perfect island, then, is in principle impossible because whatever island one thinks is perfect, it would be better with one more tree, a little larger size, and/or one more person. Hence, they argue, the concept of "the perfect world" is incoherent. Such a view has been defended by contemporary thinkers such as Plantinga (Plantinga 1974, p. 61), Swinburne (Swinburne 1979, pp. 114–15), Forrest (Forrest 1981, pp. 49–54), Schlesinger (Schlesinger 1977), Reichenbach (Reichenbach 1982, pp. 121–29) and (Rubio 2020).

One cannot deny the obvious: if God were to choose a world, no matter which world he creates, there would always be a better one.

William Rowe claims that this creates a problem for perfect being theism (Rowe 1994) because it implies that God is morally surpassable—no matter which world God creates, God could have done better. And if God is morally surpassable, God is not the greatest possible being.

Interestingly, Rowe's argument can be modified to form an argument for theism, that is, for Multiverse Theism:

1. For any given universe, there is a better possible universe.
2. If God were to create a single universe, his work would be morally surpassable.
3. God is the greatest possible being.
4. If God were the greatest possible being, then God's work would not be morally surpassable.
5. God's work is not morally surpassable.
6. Therefore, God did not create a single universe.
7. God created at least one universe.
8. Therefore, God created a multiverse.

The first premise applies "the no best world" intuition to universes; it claims that there is an infinite spectrum of increasingly better universes. The second premise follows from the first: given that there is an infinite spectrum of increasingly better universes—no matter which universe is created, there is always a better one that God did not create. The third premise is PBT, and the fourth premise seems to be a reasonable consequence of PBT. The fifth premise is a consequence of the third and fourth premises, and the sixth premise is a consequence of the second and fifth premises. The sixth premise, combined with the premise that God created our universe, suggests that God created a multiverse (again, although we spell the argument out as deductively valid, we concede the difficulty of demonstrating the truth of all of its premises or being aware of all relevant but unconsidered premises).

Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder (Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder 1994, pp. 260–68) deny the fourth premise and argue that a perfect being's work can be morally surpassable. They imagine two perfect beings who use a random machine to choose which universe to create. Now assume that the second being's creation is better than the first being's creation. Did the latter surpass the former? Given that both used the same process—a random creation machine—they argue that there are no grounds to hold that the second being surpassed the first being. Hence, a morally surpassable creation does not imply that a perfect being can be surpassed.

Their argument seems to assume that God was limited to creating a single universe. Indeed, they hint at this in their discussion of the second omnipotent being who is faced with creating a world "and did not create them all." If omnipotent beings could have created them all (all of the morally desirable universes), then restricting themselves to a single universe suggests some sort of defect on the part of divine goodness. If restricted to single universes, then perhaps omnipotence did the best omnipotence could. But if the multiverse is possible, perhaps not. Any single universe would be morally surpassable by the multiverse, which, so it seems, the greatest possible being should create.

Another possible objection is to modify Rowe's claim and argue that there is no best possible multiverse because, for any multiverse, there is always a better one. While this objection would work for some physical multiverse models, it will not for a theological multiverse considered in this argument. Because this multiverse would include all the universes worth creating, there would be no better multiverse.

Let us consider one more objection[21], assuming our universe is w1 and there exists a better universe, w2, such that w1 < w2. According to the premises of the argument from no perfect universe, God must also create w2. We now face a decision: which of the following options is preferable? (1) Creating both w1 and w2, or (2) creating two instances of w2? If our argument holds true, God has chosen option (1) by creating both our universe and w2, the latter being superior to ours. However, it appears that option (2) would be better than option (1). Thus, it could be argued that God should have chosen option (2).

This objection, while recognizing the concept of Multiverse Theism, does not undermine the main thesis of our paper. Instead, it presents an intriguing dilemma: given the existence of many (potentially infinitely) superior universes, why should God create our universe, w1? This question could be partially addressed by other arguments given in this paper. Additionally, under the assumption that no best universe exists, for any given universe w, there is always a better universe w+, thus this objection could also apply to w. Essentially, no universe is exempt from this challenge.

However, I contend that this objection ultimately fails. First, it conflicts with Leibniz's Law, also known as the identity of indiscernibles. This ontological principle posits that no two distinct entities can possess all properties identically. Therefore, if this law holds, it would be impossible to have two identical w2 universes. Second, even if we dismiss Leibniz's Law, one might argue that while w2 > w1, and even if God created an infinite number of w2, the combination of infinitely many w2 plus w1 is still superior. Hence, there is a rationale for God to create our universe w1 as well. Thus, even under these considerations, the objection does not succeed.

3.3. Argument from Highest Justice

Our next argument is based on the just attribute of God. In classical Islamic theism, God is thought to be essentially and perfectly just. God is fair to every being and perfectly dispenses justice in the afterlife. Surely God could have created beings besides humans, beings with free will, beings who could be morally good and enjoy their existence. One might argue that it was unjust to create us and not to create them. This seems so because there seems to be no moral reason to prefer us and not to prefer them. Since God would bring ultimate justice to reality, God probably created other moral agents in different universes. This argument can be summarized as:

1. God is perfectly just.

2. Therefore, God creates all of the moral agents worth creating.
3. Other human-like beings besides us would have been worth creating (with free will, intellect, moral goodness, etc.).
4. It would be unjust to create us and not to create them (there is no moral reason to prefer us over them).
5. God created us.
6. Therefore, God created a multiverse.

Point (2), we concede, may be impossible (because "moral agents worth creating" may not admit any intrinsic maximum), the premises are relatively uncontroversial. Nonetheless, we can clearly imagine many different human-like beings who are worth creating, hence there could have been many other beings/persons worth creating beside those in our universe (3).

While the third premise is prima facie attractive, it makes a controversial assumption. It assumes, again not uncontroversially, that God has moral responsibilities or moral obligations toward non-existing beings. This assumption can be attacked in two ways.

Firstly, a critic may posit that God is not obligated towards any being. This perspective is notably upheld by Asharism, which advocates for extreme Divine Moral Voluntarism[22]. However, this stance encounters several fundamental issues commonly associated with Divine Voluntarism. Initially, the assertion that God bears no moral responsibility towards us risks diminishing and negating God's moral attributes, rendering them superficial. Secondly, if Divine Voluntarism were accurate, it would imply that God could arbitrarily alter His decisions, potentially condemning a virtuous individual, who adheres to His commands, to Hell. This scenario could extend even to His prophets. Such a notion starkly contradicts the principle of divine justice. Lastly, extreme Divine Moral Voluntarism could lead to theological skepticism. If God is not morally accountable, He could deceive humanity, thereby undermining any basis for trust in scriptural assertions and eliminating any rational grounds for belief in scripture. Even if one thought that God had no obligations, one might think that it would nonetheless be good for God (as just) to do various things. God does them, not because God is responsible to some higher moral authority or out of obligation, God does them because God is good and God's goodness finds expression in creation in various ways. So even denying that God has obligations and responsibilities, or that divine justice must be understood in terms of obligations and permissions, God's justice might express in manifestations of goodness. Understanding divine justice in terms of expressions of goodness might be sufficient for advancing this argument.

Second, the critic might claim that one has no moral responsibility toward non-existing beings. But it seems that there are cases where we seem to be morally responsible toward non-existing beings. For example, we seem to be responsible toward non-existing people of the past and non-existing people of the future.

Let's prime our intuitions with some simple (but possibly philosophically objectionable) examples. People of the past: we should, for example, respect the grave of deceased people, honor wills, and take into account the wishes of deceased ancestors for our lives, etc. People of the future: we are obligated to leave a healthy planet for future generations, and I would be responsible for my action if I were to plant a bomb which would destroy London in 100 years.

On the assumption of presentism, these would be moral responsibilities toward non-existing beings. Given these intuitions and given presentism, we have responsibilities for non-existing beings.

Of course, this response is not sufficient to counter the objection. Our sense of obligation toward deceased people may be parasitic on their (past) existence or may reduce completely to feelings towards loved ones. And maybe presentism is false.

And while we may be responsible to future existents, it doesn't follow that we are or even could be responsible toward all merely possible people. For example, even supposing we have responsibilities toward future existents, we don't seem to have responsibilities toward merely "possible people" who will never exist. As Rivka Weinberg argues, "[i]f a

hypothetically possible person will never exist then there is no real subject for interests at all" (Weinberg 2013, p. 473).

Consider a couple which decides not to have a child. Do they act immorally toward a particular non-existent child (or to every possible child)? It seems not. If we had such obligations, each couple would be obliged to birth an infinite number of non-existent children! Assuming "ought implies can", if we can't fulfill obligations to all merely possible people, then we have no obligation to do so. Thus, even if we have obligations towards future generations, we cannot have obligations to all merely possible people.

God, of course, can do vastly more than humans can do. And while it is false that "can implies ought", God's infinite abilities may affect God's obligations (supposing God has obligations). So, while we may not have obligations to countless possible people, perhaps God does because God can fulfill such obligations. Omnipotence, after all, does have its advantages.

In order to assess this objection we need to determine when we really do have a moral responsibility toward non-existing beings. It seems to us that two conditions must be met in order to be morally responsible toward non-existing beings. First, the existence of these beings must be possible at some space–time point and the moral community[23] we belong to must be able to causally interact with that being. We are not responsible to Indiana Jones because we have no power to bring him into existence, hence he is not part of our world and there is no way he can interact with our moral community. God, on the other hand, has the causal power to create any coherent non-existent "being", and he can interact with any being. Therefore, for God, any compossible being satisfies the first condition. However, the first condition is not sufficient for moral responsibility. It successfully eliminates our moral irresponsibility toward, say, Indiana Jones, however, the child that couple is considering satisfies this condition as well, yet they seem to have no responsibility toward that child.

So, in order to have a moral responsibility toward a non-existing being, we must, second, be able to bear the consequences of that responsibility. In other words, the demand of this responsibility cannot be very high. The couple, after conceiving a child, bears immense material and emotional responsibility. They are obligated to give up considerable portions of their time, money, etc. If they are unwilling to assume these responsibilities because they lack the necessary resources, their decision not to bring children into the world would be morally permissible.

Since God is omnipotent, God can meet the demands of many non-contradictory obligations. None of his creative actions would cause him any difficulty. Thus, God seems to satisfy the second condition as well. If our analysis is correct, the second objection fails. Hence, the third premise seems to be correct.

Consider a final reason to think that God has moral responsibility toward non-existing "beings." In all theistic religions, God promises ultimate justice in the afterlife by punishing evildoers and rewarding the righteous. But assuming presentism and that dead people no longer exist[24], this belief seems to require one to believe that God has moral responsibility toward non-existing beings. Most finite beings will die before judgment day. If God didn't have a moral responsibility toward non-existing beings, God need not keep his promise of ultimate judgment. But this conflicts with our moral intuitions.

Even if God were to have no moral responsibility towards non-existing beings, God's Justice suggests that He would create all the beings worth creating. This is so because as the number of beings increase, God's justice increases, too. As a result, one can claim that God as the Supreme Just being will create all the beings worth creating so that He can bring more justice to reality.

To conclude, the theistic conception of Just God, combined with the assumption that He has a moral responsibility toward non-existing beings, leads to Multiverse Theism.

3.4. The Argument from the Highest Love

According to classical Islamic theism, God is perfectly loving or the most loving being. In Islamic theology, perfect love is one of the 99 essential attributes of God, known as

Al-Wadud (Quran 11:90, 85:14). The perfect loving attribute of God taken together with Perfect Being Theology implies that we cannot imagine a more loving being than God. But this, again, implies that God creates all the beings worthy of love. Here is the summary of the argument: God is the most loving/perfect loving (Al-Wadud), i.e., God loves all beings worth loving[25]. In more formal terms:

1. We cannot imagine a more loving being than God.
2. In order to truly love, an object of love must exist at some time t or timelessly.
3. A being B1 who loves more beings than a being B2 (with the same degree of love) is more loving than B2.
4. If God were not to create all the beings worthy of love, we could imagine a more loving being than God.
5. God creates all the beings worthy of love.
6. Not all beings worth loving exist in our universe.
7. God created a multiverse.

The first premise is the theological claim that God is the perfect loving being. The second premise follows from the first premise and PBT. The third premise states that a being can love another being only if that being exists. We should note that one can love a non-existing being that existed in the past, like my love of my grandfather, or love a non-existing being that will exist in the future, such as a mother's love of her unborn child. The third premise claims that one cannot truly love a being that never existed and never will exist. The fourth premise assumes that love is additive; in other words, a person who loves more people (assuming the same degree of love) is the more loving being. This seems reasonable because we think that a person who loves, say, her entire family is more loving than a person who loves just one of her children. The fifth premise follows from the third and fourth premise—if God did not create all the beings worthy of love, we could think of a being who is more loving (by, ceteris paribus, creating one more person). The sixth premise follows from the third and fifth premise. Since we cannot imagine a more loving being than God and since loving requires the existence of the beloved, we can conclude that God creates all beings worth loving. In conclusion, since not all the beings worthy of worship exist in our universe, it follows that God created a multiverse.

This argument, of course, is speculative and open to many objections. One possible objection is to deny the third premise and insist that one can love non-existing beings. Some people, for example, claim to love merely fictional characters. It seems to us that while you can have affection toward non-existing beings, that feeling should not be called love. This is so because it seems that proper love involves sharing; in other words, giving to the other what of one's own is good for him. And this requires the existence of the beloved.

4. Arguments from the Lord Attribute of God

In this final section, since the general structure of these arguments is clear, we will develop arguments that are species of an everlasting and a Perfect-Being-Theology argument. We will just present and defend them quickly and without response.

One of the essential names of God in Islamic tradition is Ar-Rabb, often translated into English as "The Lord". Of course, this is not special to Islam; in all of the theistic religions, God instantiates the attribute, Lord. Aquinas notes that one can argue for the eternity of the world from the "Lord from eternity" attribute of God (Davidson 1987, p. 64). Aquinas's argument can be repurposed as an argument for Multiverse Theism. This argument can be summarized as:

1. God is everlastingly the Lord.
2. A being can be a Lord only if there is a subject over whom he has authority.
3. God created our universe, i.e., our universe has a finite past.
4. God was the Lord before He created our universe.
5. Thus, God must have created some other universe before our universe.
6. Therefore, theism implies a multiverse.

Similar to the argument based on the everlasting attribute of God, this argument assumes the everlasting model of God and that our universe has a finite past. The second premise seems reasonable, as the title Lord seems by definition to imply a subject over whom one has authority. Finally, abstract objects do not seem to be suitable candidates for subjects with respect to whom God can be designated as Lord. "Lord" implies subjects who can respond in obedience to an authority.

One can also develop a PBT argument from the Lord attribute of God as well. God, as a greatest conceivable being, is also the greatest conceivable Lord. Moreover, the Lord, who rules over a greater number of subjects, is the greater Lord. Hence, if God is the greatest Lord, we would expect him to create all the possible beings whose existence is consistent with God's other attributes. And this implies the existence of a multiverse. The argument can be formulated as:

1. God is the greatest conceivable being.
2. God is the greatest possible Lord.
3. If being, B1, is in authority over more subjects than being, B2, then B1 is a greater Lord than B2.
4. If God did not create all beings worth creating, we could imagine a greater being than God.
5. Therefore, God created all beings worth creating.
6. Not all beings worth creating exist in our universe.
7. God created a multiverse.

Again, the first two premises are statements of PBT. The fourth follows from the third, and the fifth follows from the previous premises. The sixth seems to be trivially true. The only controversial premise is three. But three is just a slightly stronger claim than the second premise in the previous argument. Intuition suggests that a being with more subjects is the higher Lord.

5. Conclusions

We have offered several arguments that try to show that classical Islamic theism suggests, or maybe even implies, Multiverse Theism. While we initially offered textual support from the Quran, we explored more deeply a case made from various divine attributes. The arguments follow two different patterns. One group tries to show that the eternity of some of God's attributes suggests Multiverse Theism: the everlasting creator and everlasting lord attributes of God, combined with the finite age of our universe, suggest Multiverse Theism. The second strategy involves arguments that combine the insights of Perfect Being Theology with God's attributes: God's attributes of creator attribute, moral perfection, justice, love, and lordship, when combined with perfect being theology, suggest a multiverse. From such patterns of reasoning, other arguments suggest themselves. For example, if omnipresence is correlated with the size of the actual physical space of our universe, then perfect being theology combined with omnipresence leads to a multiverse.[26]

We concede that each of the arguments makes philosophically and theologically controversial assumptions. For example, we reject divine eternity, speak of non-existent beings, assume (sometimes) that God has obligations and reject theistic activism (and that's just for starters). Perhaps most startingly, we assume that God can create an infinite number of universes and an infinite number of people (compossible with God's nature). However, we are not offering theistic proofs of the multiverse. Rather, we are bringing to bear reasonable (or not demonstrably unreasonable) theological and philosophical intuitions to bear on the discussion. You might, then, think of these arguments as suggestions. Given the premises and some not unreasonable, but probably not totally satisfactory, rejections of various objections, classical Islamic theism suggests the multiverse. This is likely all that can be reasonably expected of such arguments.

Taken together, these arguments certainly call into question the typically unquestioned theological assumption of a single universe. And they offer rich and mostly unexplored

ground (worlds) for theological reflection on the divine attributes; the divine attributes may require countless universes to find their proper expression.

Finally, these arguments should put to rest the claim that the multiverse is a defeater for theism. We claim that both the divine eternality and PBT arguments combine to show that Multiverse Theism is not an ad hoc position (for the theist). Indeed, we have offered a host of considerations that suggest the multiverse is strongly suggested by traditional divine attributes.

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Notes

1 For physicists defending this claim see: (Susskind 2005; Green 2011; Tegmark 2014). For philosophers defending the claim that fine-tuning can be explained via multiverse see: (Leslie 1989; Smart 1989; Parfit 1998, pp. 24–27; Bradley 2009, pp. 61–72).

2 For a defense of a multiverse theodicy see: (Turner 2003, pp. 1–17).

3 For a response based on the multiverse against the problem of no best world see: (Kraay 2010, pp. 355–68).

4 It is imperative to acknowledge that there exist several potential interpretations of the referenced verse (Quran 65:12) that do not necessarily pertain to the concept of a multiverse. The Directorate of Religious Affairs in Turkey, in their exegesis of the Quran, outlines various possibilities regarding the term "seven earths." These interpretations include the cosmological perspective prevalent during the Prophet's era, a reference to the seven continents, an allusion to seven distinct planets, or the notion of seven layers of the earth. Additionally, it is recognized that the numeral "seven" may symbolize perfection or multiplicity rather than representing a literal quantity (Karaman et al. 2020, pp. 396–97).

5 For detailed presentation of these arguments see (Davidson 1987, pp. 49–85).

6 This argument implies a temporal multiverse, in which one universe exists before another universe, which exists before another universe, ad infinitum.

7 The everlasting model of God need not assume that God is in physical time. God may have his own temporal life, outside of physical time. So, when we say that our universe has a finite past in the third premise, we mean it has a finite past with respect to God's (metaphysical) time. Since, we believe, finite physical time implies finite metaphysical time, we develop the argument in terms of physical time.

8 Although God as everlasting was not popular in medieval philosophy, it is among contemporary philosophers of religion. Contemporary philosophers find it difficult to understand how a timeless, eternal God could know A-theoretic propositions about the present and act in space–time. For a review of arguments for and against the everlasting model of God see: (Ganssle 2001). The everlasting view had adherents among Muslim theologians in medieval philosophy, most notably some Mutazilite theologians and Ibn Taymiyya. For detailed study of Ibn Taymiyya's conception of God and creation see: (Hoover 2004).

9 It is also noteworthy that certain Islamic theists, such as Ibn Rushd and Ibn Sina, have advocated for models of the universe that posit its eternity. Their stance is influenced, in part, by Aristotelian science. However, as I have argued in previous works, contemporary scientific understanding appears to endorse the concept of a universe with a finite past.

10 For a defense of Theistic Activism see: (Morris and Menzel 1986, pp. 353–62).

11 For the bootstrapping objection to Theistic Activism see: (Gould 2011, pp. 255–74).

12 If we express the argument in terms of physical time, the eternal universe objection conflicts with orthodox cosmological models in modern cosmology.

13 I extend my gratitude to the anonymous referee for highlighting this potential objection.

14 The remark that universes are prior to the multiverse needs additional defense, since some models of multiverse seems to imply that there are meta-laws above the universes. For example, universes in the Quantum Mechanical multiverse are connected by and evolve according to the universal wavefunction. This can be used as an argument against the claim that universes are prior to the multiverse.

15 This accords with the Islamic understanding of God, as the best creator. "So blessed be Allah, the best of creators" (Quran 23:14).

16 Intuitively, it seems that not every creation is not worth creating, such as evilverses and universes in which there is just evil or evil suppresses goodness.

17 We should note the adjective better refers to the creative power of, rather than the axiological degree of the creation.

18 In Islamic theism, this is reflected in God's name, Al-Barr (Quran 52:28).

[19] We concede that omnipotence is restricted to the logically possible. Moreover, we concede, given libertarian freedom, that it is up to free creatures (not God) what they freely do in certain circumstances. So, following Plantinga, we concede that there are universes worth creating that God, though omnipotent, cannot create.

[20] I thank the anonymous referee for providing this objection.

[21] I extend my gratitude to the anonymous referee for raising this objection.

[22] We should note that Asharite theology holds that what is good or bad is entirely dependent on God's will. There is no inherent good or evil outside of what God decrees. This is what I mean by extreme Divine Voluntarism. Note that this is different than modified divine command theories such as the one championed by Robert Merrihew Adams (Adams 1987, pp. 97–122). Adams argues that moral truths exist and are grounded in the nature of God. Adams posits that God's commands are rooted in His perfectly good and loving nature. This makes morality dependent on God's nature rather than His will alone. Hence Adams' modified divine command theory posits that there are objective moral values, this is not true for extreme divine voluntarism. Since modified divine command theory acknowledges the existence of objective moral values in God's nature it is consistent with the claim that God has moral responsibility towards its creation. This responsibility is rooted in God's inherently good and loving nature. Because God's nature is the standard of goodness, His actions towards creation are guided by this moral character.

[23] The moral community can be defined as a set of beings with moral characteristics which interact with at least one other being in the set.

[24] This argument will not for some theist traditions who deny that death people will cease to exist till they are resurrected. There are different opinions about this issue in Islamic tradition.

[25] Some Christians think that no sinful human being is worth loving. For them this argument should be (and can be) restated in terms of God's undeserved love rather than human worth. Most Muslims will think that God only loves people who deserve to be loved.

[26] Omnisubjectivity is a supposed attribute of God's defended by Linda Zagzebski. She claims that God has an ability to know what it is like for each of God's creature to be themselves; He shares our first-person perspectives with us. Again, if omnisubjectivity is a great making property, since it is obviously dependent on the creatures themselves, one can again argue that combined with perfect being theology it leads to a multiverse.

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The Problem of Evil, God's Personhood, and the Reflective Muslim

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Abstract: Is it correct to think of God as a perfectly good personal agent? Not so, argue John Bishop and Ken Perszyk. Bishop and Perszyk, in their most recent work, *God, Purpose, and Reality: A Euteleological Understanding of Theism* (2023), outline a series of challenges that bring into question this concept of God—i.e., as a perfectly good personal agent, who is unique, unsurpassably great, all-powerful, and all-knowing. I aim to critically evaluate one of these challenges, namely the Normatively Relativised Logical Argument from Evil (NRLAFE). The NRLAFE has God's perfect goodness as its target. Bishop and Perszyk argue that people who are committed to certain values about what constitutes right relationship amongst persons, might reasonably judge God as lacking perfect goodness. They also contend that the relevant values will likely be endorsed by theists. My aim in this paper is twofold: first, I aim to assess the Bishop-Perszyk argument from evil, in light of the tradition of Islamic Theism. The tradition of Islamic Theism is as broad as it is deep, and within the tradition there are a variety of ways in which God has been conceptualised. This includes debates as to whether we can view God as a personal agent. Second, I contend that we have available to us, from within and beyond the tradition of Islamic Theism, a set of resources that: (a) permit us to understand God as being a personal agent; and (b) allow us to resist the NRLAFE while endorsing the value commitments that Bishop and Perszyk have in mind. The perspective I bring to this paper is that of a reflective Muslim—i.e., a person of the Islamic faith who acknowledges that people of other religious and non-religious persuasions are as educated and concerned with seeking truth and avoiding error as they themselves are.

Keywords: problem of evil; God; Islamic philosophy

1. Introduction

This paper has as its focus a novel argument from evil formulated by John Bishop and Ken Perszyk.[1] In their most recent work, *God, Purpose, and Reality: A Euteleological Understanding of Theism* (2023), Bishop and Perszyk argue that, relative to certain normative assumptions, we may judge a personal God as not worship-worthy. The argument may be characterised as follows:

P1. To be worthy of worship, an all-powerful personal God must have perfect, flawless personal goodness.

P2. Being good as a person requires being morally good, and moral goodness includes goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons.

C1. If an all-powerful personal God is to be worthy of worship, then God's perfect goodness must imply perfect moral goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons (from P1 and P2).

P3. Relative to certain normative assumptions, God lacks perfect moral goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons.

C2. An all-powerful personal God is not worthy of worship (from C1 and P3).

In the section to follow, we will consider each premise and the relevant supporting arguments. Following this, we critically engage with the argument by exploring notions of

divine personhood, divine goodness, and the normative assumptions at play. Our discussion will also draw on aspects of Islamic Theism to explore and evaluate the central themes and assumptions that underpin the Bishop-Perszyk argument. I contend that we have grounds to doubt the reasonableness of their argument from evil. The perspective I bring to this paper is that of a reflective Muslim whose reflections have led to an acknowledgment that, people of other religious and non-religious persuasions are as educated and concerned with seeking truth and avoiding error as they themselves are.[2]

2. The Bishop-Perszyk Argument from Evil

P1. To be worthy of worship, an all-powerful personal God must have perfect, flawless personal goodness.

There are a few terms in the first Premise that need defining. Bishop and Perszyk employ the standard view of God commonly found in analytic accounts of theism, that is; God is unique, unsurpassably great, all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good personal agent (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 11). Furthermore, to describe God as personal is to broadly acknowledge that:

> . . .God is an intentional agent, with personal attributes, who is related interpersonally to other personal intentional agents. (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 10)

Divine goodness is here characterised, in P1, as personal goodness that is flawless and perfect. This leads us to the second premise, which casts personal goodness as moral goodness.

P2. Being good as a person requires being morally good, and moral goodness includes goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons.

As stated, within standard analytic accounts of theism, God is taken to be perfectly good. Bishop and Perszyk argue that if God is taken to be a personal agent, then divine goodness has to be understood as (or as essentially including) moral goodness, since this is how we would normally construe the goodness of a person. They contend:

> . . .if God is a person, God's unsurpassably great goodness is the perfect goodness of a person. Being good as a person requires being morally good, and moral goodness includes goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons. (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 27)

Moral goodness is here understood as including relational goodness; personal moral goodness requires goodness in relation to, and with, other persons.

C1. If an all-powerful personal God is to be worthy of worship, then God's perfect goodness must imply perfect moral goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons (from P1 and P2).

Premises One and Two, taken together, lead us toward the conclusion that a personal agent who is worthy of worship, must possess perfect moral goodness. Perfect moral goodness is understood to imply perfect moral goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons. Accordingly, God's relationship to, and with, other persons must exhibit perfect moral goodness on God's part.

P3. Relative to certain normative assumptions, God lacks perfect moral goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons.

Bishop and Perszyk contend that it is reasonable to affirm the view that God lacks moral goodness. They argue that people who are committed to certain values about what constitutes right relationship amongst persons might reasonably judge that P3 is true. They also contend that the relevant value commitments will likely be endorsed by theists (Bishop and Perszyk 2011, p. 110). This premise is key to the overall argument and a careful exploration of its motivations is needed.

An initial issue is perfect moral goodness, and as Bishop and Perszyk observe, it becomes most pressing when we consider the problem of evil—i.e., that the personal God cannot be both all-powerful and all-good given the existence of evil (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 29). When speaking of evil, they have in mind horrendous evil in the sense given to

this term by Marilyn McCord Adams—'evils the participation in which (that is, the doing or suffering of which) constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole' (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 31; and Adams 1999, p. 26). Some have argued that God may have a morally adequate reason for permitting (and, ultimately causing) all the evil that exists (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 29). For example, God may be justified in permitting evil, since evil is a logical consequence of granting created beings morally significant free will. Such an approach may go a significant way toward addressing the problem of evil; however, for Bishop and Perszyk, there is a lingering question:

> . . .the problem of defending the consistency of the omnipotent personal God's goodness and the existence of evil might seem to be resolved, yet the question may remain whether the kind of goodness that this apparent solution shows to be compatible with existing evil, is *goodness enough* for the goodness of the uniquely worship-worthy God. (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 30)

We may frame the question as follows: is it reasonable to view an all-powerful person who allows (and ultimately causes) evil as having the required goodness to be the fit object of worship? (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 30). Perhaps, in a similar vein to Adams, we could counter that God can defeat evils by bringing participants in horrors into the joy of eternal personal relationship with himself, such that victims of evil come to view their lives as good on the whole (Adams 1999, pp. 20–21). Bishop and Perszyk, nevertheless press their concern, namely:

> It seems clear that Adams assumes that, while God would have caused injustice in his relationships with created persons if he had merely balanced off their sufferings against greater goods, God will introduce no defect in his relationships if those sufferings are defeated. . .But we think this assumption may be contested. If God first caused or permitted created persons to suffer horrors and then compensated them even 'incommensurably'- God would be responsible for what might be judged a less than fully just and loving relationship with those other persons. (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 31)

Bishop and Perszyk here make it explicit that they regard the exercise of personal omnipotence first to sustain horrendous sufferings and then (wonderfully) to redeem them as being morally flawed (Bishop and Perszyk 2011, p. 122). There is also the issue of trust:

> God would have an unavoidably manipulative relationship with created persons, whilst they, for their part, could hardly give God their final trust, being naturally wary of compensations bestowed by one who once caused them such suffering. (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 31)

Adams' reflections on this issue reveal a similar set of concerns, and in response to Bishop and Perszyk, she writes:

> . . .there is the leftover question of whether and/or how God means to be good to us after the worst has already happened. John Bishop and Ken Perszyk have pressed a still deeper question: whether a God who set us up for horrors by creating us in a world like this has exhibited perfectly loving relationality toward us. . . whether a God who sets us up for horrors by creating us in a world like this is trustworthy, whether God's track record in putting us in harm's way and not rescuing us takes God out of the category of people to whom it is reasonable to entrust oneself as to a parent or intimate friend. (Adams 2017, p. 25; quoted by Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 32)

Bishop and Perszyk are not claiming that everyone will endorse the third premise, nor that it is rationally compelling. Rather, relative to certain commitments, which may themselves be reasonably held by theists, it is reasonable to affirm the view that God lacks perfect moral goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons. The central normative assumption may be understood as follows—*moral perfection must include acting*

perfectly well in relationship with other persons, and that this strategy (of first permitting and sustaining horrors and then compensating the participants) would not amount to acting perfectly well in relation to those persons caught up in horrors.[3] Why, we may ask, would it amount to not acting perfectly well—one reason is that it *would be flawed because God would seem to be contriving or manipulating his relationship with created persons, rather than engaging in a mature, mutually respectful, and mutually trusting inter-personal relationship*.[4]

The following analogy may help us better appreciate the normative assumption at play. Consider the case of a young girl who is very ill. Her father elects to put her through a course of medical treatment that is painful, it also takes a heavy toll on her emotional and psychological health. The father accompanies his daughter during her treatments, assuring her of its necessity. He also promises her that once the treatments are over, they will take timeout and do all the things his daughter enjoys. And, indeed, once the daughter recovers, the father does as he has promised. Now, imagine, after many years, the daughter, now a young woman, discovers that there was an alternative course of treatment available. This alternative would not have been painful, nor would it have taken a heavy emotional and psychological toll. Her father was aware of this treatment, and it would have been available to her if he had consented (there were no financial constraints at play either). Yet, the father chose the other painful option. During and after her illness, the father was always available to his daughter and seemed deeply loving toward her. Yet, on reflection, the daughter, now a young woman, may rightly view their relationship as contrived and manipulative; she would also likely lose trust in him. She may also come to view her father as being less than good and less than loving.

A similar response may arise when we think about a personal God who allows and sustains horrors and then goes on to compensate for and defeat these horrors. Perhaps, God could have created a world with significantly morally free creatures with no horrors; if such a world is not possible, then God would also have the option of not creating one. We witness horrors, and many experience horrors. A personal, all-powerful God could have held back from creating a world such as ours. Bishop and Perszyk may argue that personal omni-God's relationship with us can be seen to be contriving and manipulative, and one that makes it hard to trust. Accordingly, the moral cost of horrors seems extraordinarily high. Such a God, if he did exist, would be seen to lack perfect moral goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons.

C2. An all-powerful personal God is not worthy of worship (from C1 and P3).

Once we grant C1 and Premise Three, it follows that a personal God is not worthy of worship. Bishop and Perszyk also observe that their argument is not an argument for atheism; rather, it helps open up a space where we may explore alternative concepts of God, or at least alternatives that jettison notions of God as a personal agent. They note,

> Personal-omniGod theorists may, of course, sincerely avow that they do not share the normative assumptions that generate this conclusion—assumptions about what God's personal goodness would have to be if God is to be worship-worthy. But they ought not to deny that those normative assumptions may be held reasonably, nor that, when they are held, give rise to serious—and, for some, decisive—doubts about the worship worthiness of the personal omniGod. (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 34)

As I shall argue, there are grounds for reasonable doubt about various aspects of the Bishop-Perszyk argument. We may very well share their value commitments, yet we may also reasonably doubt the application of these commitments to judgments about divine goodness. First, however, let us consider the concept of a personal God within Islamic theism.

3. God and Personhood

The Bishop-Perszyk argument from evil, just outlined, clearly has as its target the concept of an all-powerful God as a personal agent. An initial question for the reflective

Muslim is whether Islamic theism allows for the concept of a personal God? At face value, this would seem to be the case. Within the Quran, God is described as:[5]

- Having knowledge and awareness—Allah comprehends all things in His Knowledge (Q. 65:12), and Allah is well aware of all that you do (Q. 3:153);
- Performing actions—Allah is the All-Wise Creator (Q. 36:81);
- Free in actions—when He intends a thing, His Command is, "be," and it is! (Q. 38:82);
- Able to enter into relationships—Allah took Abraham as an intimate friend (Q. 4:125).[6]

The Quran also describes God as having a face (Q.2:115), hands (Q.48.10), shin (Q. 68:42), and a throne (Q. 2:255). Whether we understand these descriptions literally or as metaphors, they seem to lean toward a personal view of God. There is also the Quranic view that there is nothing else like God (*laysa kamithlihi shay*—there is nothing like unto Him, Q. 42:11). This can also be seen to be consistent with the view that God is a personal agent, a unique personal agent. Matters are less clear-cut when we delve deeper into Muslim scholarship on this issue. For example, Mohammad Saleh Zarepour writes that, 'from the viewpoint of many Muslims, God is not a person' (Zarepour 2021, p. 121); similarly, Muhammad Legenhausen observes that among Muslim thinkers, the belief that God is a person is a minority position:

> . . .there is no . . . unanimity among Muslim theologians and philosophers in the claim that God is not a person. There have been Muslim theologians who have held that God quite literally sits upon his throne in heaven. Nevertheless, within the fold of Islam (at least among theologians), belief in a personal God is a minority position. (Legenhausen 1986, p. 307)

How do we reconcile the language of the Quran with the view that God is not a person? Writing on the issue of God and Evil from a Muslim perspective, Tim Winter notes that the language of the Quran makes God accessible for the majority. He observes that for true thinkers, such language can be understood as metaphor and does not indicate that God is a person; to do so risks idolatry. He writes:

> While theodicies of various kinds may helpfully serve pedagogic ends. . .they exist only for the majority of the faithful, who need a God made accessible by some straightforwardly anthropopathic descriptions. True metaphysicians find them unnecessary and shift the focus away from the God of 'resemblance' (tashbīh) proclaimed in those scriptural passages which so profusely name Him, to the God of 'otherness' (tanzīh) announced in other texts such as 'Nothing resembles Him ' (42:11). . . and the seemingly humanising lexis of scripture and mysticism exists not to indicate an actual 'personhood ' in God but to provide a context for a set of salvifically effective and needful human responses to divine initiatives and commands. This apophasis secures the final victory over the animism of ancient Arab idol-worship; a right understanding of the Second Commandment, famously dear to Islam, obviates any theodicy, and indeed makes it nearly blasphemous. (Winter 2017, p. 246)

Winter's stance is thought-provoking—i.e., that the way scripture leads us to think of and relate to God does not necessarily define Who or What He Is. While Winter is eloquent in strongly expressing these views, other Muslim thinkers have argued that God is a superpersonal being, namely, God is personal though not a person (Zarepour 2021, p. 129).[7] For instance, Zarepour contends that:

> . . .God is a personal being but not a person. In the same manner, as I am a person, but I share many attributes (e.g., weight and size) with subpersonal beings (e.g., trees and cars), God is a superpersonal being but He shares many attributes (e.g., speech and will) with persons like us. (Zarepour 2021, p. 129)

I accept that we may make a distinction between God being personal and God being a person. For the purposes of this paper, I use the terms person and personal interchangeably. The reason for doing so is that the Bishop-Perszyk argument is unaffected by this distinction;

the argument would apply whether we view God as a person or superpersonal—both concepts understand God as literally having personal attributes.

As we reflect on the argument from evil defended by Bishop and Perszyk, we could embrace the prevailing Muslim view that God is not a person, thereby defusing the argument. If we do not view God as a personal agent, then the first premise carries no weight, since there is no commitment to a personal God as being worthy of worship. We still would need to be cautious, even if we jettison viewing God as being personal, there may be other variations of the problem of evil that may come up (Bishop 2021; Bishop and Perszyk 2023, Chp. 5). Muslim thinkers are very much up to the challenge. Here, I have in mind Khalil Andani, who has recently argued for an Islamic Neoplatonic theodicy in which he contends that evil is not created by God (Andani 2023). Andani's theodicy is not committed to viewing God as a personal agent; however, it does present God as creating only what is absolutely perfect and good.

We may step back from the view that God is a person; nevertheless, there are likely to be other forms of the argument from evil that may arise. At this juncture, I suggest it may be premature to abandon the view of a personal God. I acknowledge that such a view within Muslim tradition is not the standard view and very much in the minority; however, this in-and-of itself is not a good reason to reject such a view of God. There is also the spectre of idolatry that Winter alludes to. Bishop and Perszyk share a similar concern, noting that 'taking God to be, literally and metaphysically, a person may seem suspiciously like an idolatrously anthropomorphic construction of the divine in our own image' (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 23). There are two points, by way of a response, that may be made here: (1) to say that God is a personal agent is not equivalent to the claim that divine personhood corresponds wholly to human personhood, and (2) our primary cue for considering God to be a personal agent is that it is consistent with scripture, we are not extrapolating divine personhood from human personhood.

We may also acknowledge that personal language about God as used in scripture can be read as metaphor; nevertheless, we may contest Winter's view about true metaphysicians resisting the claim that God is to be understood as a person. The literature on this issue reveals several respected thinkers who are at home with the view of God as a personal agent.[8] There is available to us a second strategy that may also defuse the Bishop-Perszyk argument, and that involves questioning human personhood.

This strategy is likely to be seen as radical; nevertheless, once we deny that human beings are persons, then the Bishop-Perszyk argument falls away. Bishop and Perszyk take it for granted that human beings are persons, if human beings are not persons, then moral duties owed only to persons will not apply to them. I acknowledge this is a radical move, however, some would regard denying divine personhood as being equally radical. As noted above, talk of divine personhood is conceivably metaphor, perhaps talk of human personhood can also be understood as metaphor—albeit a very useful and even necessary metaphor. Questioning human personhood may strike us as counter-intuitive, yet such a view seems consistent with certain Sufi views on human nature.[9] Some Sufi Muslims have held the view that the self is an illusion:

> . . .that the human soul is kept apart from God only by the illusion of the self and only by love can self be overcome. . . (Waugh 2005, p. 35)

Rumi seems to have been sensitive to this possibility, he invites his readers to, 'journey from the self to the Self and find the mine of gold, and to leave behind what is sour and bitter and move toward the sweet' (Star 2008, p. 71). We may also wonder if God is the only real person and if we carry only the image of personhood. A mountain is three dimensional, yet its image is two dimensional, or perhaps one dimensional. Similarly, human personhood exists as an image of the divine person; thus, we lack full personhood. If this is the case, then it may be idolatrous to view ourselves as persons.[10] Interestingly, Martha J. Farah and Andrea S. Heberlein draw on the findings of neuroscience to argue that our perceptions around human personhood is an illusion akin to visual illusions, and

that 'it is the result of brain mechanisms that represent the world nonveridically under certain circumstances' (Farah and Heberlein 2007, p. 45).

In summary, we have considered the question of whether Islamic theism allows for the concept of a personal God. We may respond by noting that most Muslim thinkers accept personal language when speaking about and addressing God; however, they may not necessarily view God as a person. Importantly, viewing God as a personal agent need not be seen as being inconsistent with Islamic theism. We have also considered some challenges to the idea of a personal God, from within and beyond the tradition, for example: that such a commitment is a minority view, not the view of true metaphysicians, and that it risks idolatry. These challenges can be met. I acknowledge there are other significant challenges related to transcendence, immanence, and divine simplicity, these also need to be addressed; however, such a task is beyond the scope of this paper.[11]

We may then present four possibilities that are open to the reflective Muslim, these are as follows:

(1) Not understanding God literally as a personal agent, such a stance would be unaffected by the argument presented by Bishop and Perszyk. There may nonetheless be other applicable iterations of the argument from evil—especially if we continue to understand God as sustaining all of creation while also being perfectly good and loving.
(2) Affirm that God is a personal agent and deny human personhood; such a move would also defuse the Bishop-Perszyk argument. Although there are likely to be other applicable iterations of the argument from evil.
(3) Set aside personhood, saying that neither God nor human beings are literal persons. This view would also defuse the Bishop-Perszyk argument. There may, however, be other applicable versions of the argument.
(4) Understanding God as an all-powerful and perfectly good personal agent and affirm human personhood: endorsing this view places us squarely in the sights of the Bishop-Perszyk argument from evil.

These are then the four possibilities open to the Reflective Muslim.[12] The first three possibilities are unaffected by the Bishop-Perszyk argument from evil. The fourth possibility is the target of the argument. There are other *controversial* possibilities that may also serve to defuse the argument; for instance, one may take God to not be all-powerful, or not all-knowing, or not perfectly morally good. I am, however, sympathetic to understanding God as being all-powerful and a perfectly good personal agent; accordingly, I will need to consider the reasonableness of the Bishop-Perszyk argument. To this end, the sections to follow will delve deeper into the theme of divine goodness and the normative assumptions at play.

4. Divine Goodness

As with views on the personhood of God, there are several possible approaches to the issue of divine goodness. Our aim in this section will be to evaluate divine goodness as it is presented by Bishop and Perszyk. According to Bishop and Perszyk, divine goodness is to be understood in terms of moral goodness. They contend:

> . . .if God is a person, God's unsurpassably great goodness is the perfect goodness of a person. Being good *as a person* requires being *morally* good, and moral goodness includes goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons. If God is a person, then, God's perfect goodness must imply perfect moral goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons. (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 27)

This characterisation of divine goodness gives rise to six significant concerns.The first concern with this view is that it seems to presume a close correspondence between divine personhood and human personhood. We may acknowledge that being a good human person requires being morally good, but why suppose our view of a good human person

would also apply to God? There is considerable asymmetry between God and human beings. God is held to be all-powerful, all-knowing, the creator and sustainer of all that exists; human beings, on the other hand, hold none of these attributes. In addition, our awareness and understanding of our own personhood develop and evolve over time, we also view our sense of self as being contingent and somewhat vulnerable; none of this would apply to God. These differences suggest that divine personhood would be significantly different from human personhood. Admittedly, none of the 'asymmetries' mentioned entail that God's goodness as a person is not (or does not include) moral goodness. We may, nevertheless, argue that it seems rather swift to assume that if we understand God as being personal, divine goodness must then be understood in terms of moral goodness. It seems hasty to assume that characteristics we normally associate with human personhood, would also be characteristics of divine personhood. There may be other ways to understand personal divine goodness; however, the question for Bishop and Perszyk is twofold: why must we understand personal divine goodness in terms of moral goodness, and more importantly, is moral goodness the only, or best way of understanding personal divine goodness? There may be other ways to understand divine goodness; for example, in a recent work, Elif Nur Balci examines the Mu'tazila tradition and its understanding of the problem of evil as a helpful structural framework for comprehending horrendous evil and the concept of a good God (Elif Nur Balci 2022). I further elaborate on these possibilities at the end of this paper.

The second concern relates to the applicability of moral categories to God. Consider the normative assumption Bishop and Perszyk have in mind- i.e., to reject as morally flawed the exercise of personal omnipotence first to sustain horrendous sufferings and then (wonderfully) to redeem.

This assumption relies on a moral judgment, namely, that it is morally flawed because God would seem to be contriving or manipulative in his relationship with created persons rather than engaging in a mature, mutually respectful, and mutually trusting interpersonal relationship. Such a judgement is understandable within the context of interpersonal human relationships; however, God is not simply an individual within a community of individuals; God is held to be the being upon whom every other entity is dependent for their very being. While we may acknowledge that God is a person, we would also view God as being significantly different from human persons. The moral cost would indeed be too high for a human person to allow and sustain horrors. It is questionable whether the moral judgments we employ among human persons would also apply to God. Or whether, indeed, there are any external standards of morality or ethics that God is obliged to meet. There is then reasonable doubt about applying human moral judgements in relation to a personal God's perfect goodness.[13]

The third concern relates to divine goodness being judged in terms of what would constitute a just and loving relationship. Given the context of interpersonal relations among human persons, we often make moral judgements about the nature of our relationships. There are, however, grounds to doubt whether human interpersonal relationality would be an appropriate basis from which to judge the divine-human relationship. There are important differences; for example, human relationships such as friendship and romantic love, more often than not, involve peers. Our relationships with family or friends will also involve change as individuals grow and mature over time. A divine-human relationship could never be a relationship between peers, it may deepen over time; however, growth and maturity will only be applicable to the human dimension of the relationship. An all-powerful, personal God is also seen as the source of life and our very being, as one in whom we hope to find ultimate peace and love; we do not usually view our family, friends, and partners in this way. The judgments, accentuated by Bishop and Perszyk, about the necessity of mature, respectful, and mutually trusting interpersonal relationship, seem reasonable for interpersonal relationships among peers but not necessarily suitable for the divine-human relationship. Think here of the case involving the unwell young girl; perhaps the treatment with no side effects had a very high mortality rate. The father may

not have spoken to his young daughter about this possibility, knowing that it would only complicate matters for her—hence, what seems contriving and manipulative is really an act of deep love and care.

The fourth concern relates to the risk of cognitive idolatry. This concern relates to the standard of goodness that is implicit in the Bishop-Perszyk argument. For example, in response to the Free Will Defence, Bishop and Perszyk argue that the question remains as to whether:

> . . .the kind of goodness that this apparent solution shows to be compatible with existing evil *is goodness enough* for the goodness of the uniquely worship worthy God. (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 30)

And at a later point, they argue that:

> If God first caused or permitted created persons to suffer horrors and then compensated them—even 'incommensurably'—God would be responsible for what might plausibly be judged a less than fully just and loving relationship. (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 31)

Implicit in the approach Bishop and Perszyk have taken is the view that for God to be worthy of worship, God must be judged to possess enough goodness, justice, and love. They judge a personal God who allows and sustains horrors as falling short of this requirement. As outlined above, there are significant concerns in relation to how Bishop and Perszyk formulate and apply the notion of goodness to a personal conception of God.

There is also a deeper, interlinked issue here, and it relates to how Bishop and Perszyk view personhood. They maintain that,

> . . .being a person is conceptually a matter of being a person amongst persons, in relation with other persons, and (in certain ways, and under certain conditions) answerable to other persons. (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 33)

It is true that 'no man is an island,' and that, in general, we are not self-sufficient and very much reliant on others. Nevertheless, I suggest we may fairly doubt this conceptual claim. It does not seem to be conceptually true that being 'a person is conceptually a matter of being a person amongst persons, in relation with other persons.' We can bring to mind *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, the central character from Ibn Tufayl's novel, who, as an infant, lands on an uninhabited island (Ibn Tufayl 2015). His personhood is not diminished by him being the only person on the island. Or imagine the first human ancestor who became self-aware; if there were no others with this capacity, they may have felt alone, but they would nevertheless still be a person. A thought experiment may be helpful here; imagine waking up one morning and discovering that everyone else in the world had disappeared. Would you stop being a person at this point simply because there are no other persons present? The intuition here is that we would still regard ourselves as a person.

God is also likely to be an exception; God may be held to be a person who is self-sufficient. We can imagine a personal God who exists prior to there being any other persons, there does not seem to be any conceptual difficulty involved here. If God is an exception, it is also questionable whether God would be answerable to other persons in the same way human persons are. Accordingly, the concept of personhood and the standard of goodness Bishop and Perszyk have in mind risk a form of cognitive idolatry.[14] They have a concept in mind that a personal God is required to meet, however, that concept may be too narrow so as to be aligned with the discovery of truth.

The fifth concern also relates to the relativised approach that Bishop and Perszyk employ. As noted above, they argue that, relative to certain normative assumptions, God would be responsible for what might plausibly be judged to be a less than fully just and loving relationship with created persons. Accordingly, the goodness that we observe is not *goodness enough* for the goodness of the uniquely worship-worthy God. Perhaps we could imagine a world in which there is suffering, but not horrendous suffering. Given such a world, it might still be argued that, relative to certain normative assumptions, God would be responsible for what might plausibly be judged as being less than perfectly morally

good. After all, it is morally flawed to cause and sustain suffering and then to redeem it. Now imagine another world in which there is no suffering. An argument could still be made that, relative to certain normative assumptions, God would be judged as less than perfectly morally good. After all, it is morally flawed to shield a person or community from the consequences, even painful consequences, of their own free actions. Now, one may agree that there is always a normatively relativised argument at hand and that *conceptually*, a personal God could never be perfectly morally good. Such a move would miss the key insight here, and that is on the Bishop-Perszyk approach, perfect moral goodness becomes elusive—much like a perpetually shifting goal post. The concern here is that a relativised approach leads us into a self-sealing argument. There could never be any counter-evidence, since we could always find ways to view a state of affairs as being flawed. To be fair, Bishop and Perszyk do not present their argument in this way since their focus is horrendous evil. This may give rise to an intriguing and perhaps provocative question: are there horrendous evils?

There is a *hadith* that suggests a change of perspective when we are in the presence of God, once in heaven, our perspective on suffering will change. The *hadith* is as follows:

> . . .[a] person from amongst the persons of the world be brought who had led the most miserable life (in the world). . .he would be made to dip once in Paradise and it would be said to him. O, son of Adam, did you face, any hardship? Or had any distress fallen to your lot? And he would say: By Allah, no, O my Lord, never did I face any hardship or experience any distress.[15]

If such a deep transformation takes place in God's paradise, then it is possible that those who suffered horrors may, in retrospect, cease to view their experiences as cases of horrendous evil. Bishop and Perszyk may object that, this scenario also seems morally flawed. God acts first to allow and sustain horrors, then acts to alter our perception of these horrors. By way of a response, we may note that the definition of horrendous evil turns on a *prima facie* judgment, namely, that it 'constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole'. The post-mortem transformation is such that, victims of horrors come to view their lives as a great good to them on the whole, they realise their lives were always a great good. Accordingly, the *prima facie* reason for doubt dissipates in God's heaven. This is not to deny that evil and suffering occurred; rather, we revise our judgment of that evil and suffering and no longer view them as being horrendous in nature. Bishop and Perszyk could argue that there remains a normatively relativised argument even in the absence of horrors; this approach, however, will strike our concern outlined earlier—i.e., that a relativised approach leads us into a self-sealing argument.

The sixth concern relates again to the standard of goodness. There seems to be an implicit assumption, on the Bishop-Perszyk approach, that *God's goodness (if he is a personal being) includes acting morally well in developing and participating in inter-personal relationships (i.e., not taking actions on one's own part which will impair one's relationship with others).*[16] Such an assumption needs further clarification, as there are cases where we may distinguish between the moral goodness of an agent and the outcome of an action taken by the agent. Bruce Langtry explains this distinction as follows:

> An agent may be motivated by a desire to bring about a good state of affairs, and this desire may be fulfilled, but the moral goodness of the action and of the agent may diverge far from the quality of the result. For example, the quality of the result can vary with luck and with the interference of other people, without there being any variation in the moral goodness of either the action or the agent. (Langtry 2008, pp. 73–74)

The key insight here is that the moral status of an outcome does not necessarily reflect the moral standing of the agent whose actions led to that outcome. Think here of a mother who entrusts her son with a large sum of money to invest wisely; the son breaches that trust and skips town with that money. Or the son loses that money after his investments

go bad. Neither the son's betrayal nor the investments going bad would impinge on the moral character of the mother. It may be argued that God would be immune to external factors such as luck and malign conspirators. We can appeal here to morally significant freewill as possibly a morally sufficient reason for the existence of evil and horrors. This would then allow us to contend that God remains perfectly morally good, since evil and horrors are an outcome of this form of freewill. Accordingly, a contrived and manipulative relationship, if viewed as the outcome of God allowing and sustaining freewill, need not be seen to impinge on God's moral goodness.

In summary, we have considered six concerns with the way Bishop and Perszyk understand and judge divine goodness. These concerns, if justified, also serve as grounds to doubt P2—i.e., *being good as a person requires being morally good, and moral goodness includes goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons*. This claim may be true about human persons, but is it also true if we construe God as a personal being? A reflective Muslim may acknowledge that there are reasonable grounds to doubt the claim that the perfect goodness of a personal God, must be understood in terms of moral goodness. There are also grounds for doubt that our moral categories are also applicable to God. In addition, P2 presupposes an unnecessarily constrained understanding of personhood. The concerns highlighted also provide grounds to doubt P3—*Relative to certain normative assumptions, God lacks perfect moral goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons*. That is, a relativised approach may not provide a meaningful basis from which to judge divine goodness; and the horrors that the normative assumptions relate to may not turn out to be horrors on the whole. We may also doubt that the outcomes of divine action allow us to judge the degree to which God is morally good. Given these concerns, we have grounds to doubt the overall reasonableness of the Bishop-Perszyk argument.

Our discussion of divine goodness has touched on the normative assumptions and value commitments at play within Islamic and Abrahamic theism. The section to follow aims for a deeper consideration of these normative assumptions and commitments and the tempering effect they may have on the Bishop-Perszyk argument.

5. Normative Assumptions and Value Commitments

Bishop and Perszyk appeal to normative assumptions to motivate their argument from evil. The central normative assumption at play involves rejecting as morally flawed the exercise of personal omnipotence, first to sustain horrendous sufferings and then (wonderfully) to redeem. This normative assumption serves as the basis for judging whether a personal God is worthy of worship. We may acknowledge that the values that underpin this assumption are reasonable and at home within Abrahamic theism—i.e., the need for mature, mutually respectful, and mutually trusting interpersonal relationships. There are, however, within Islamic and Abrahamic theism a variety of normative assumptions and value commitments at play.

We may speak of a family of Abrahamic normative assumptions that are hierarchical and contextual in nature. For instance, the love of God and love for our neighbours are arguably the most important value commitments within Abrahamic theism. These are closely followed by values about the importance of life and the prohibition against killing. The prohibition on killing also permits exceptions in cases of self-defence; nevertheless, it is a normative assumption that carries much weight. In addition, this assumption is applicable to human beings; it is not a value commitment that God is expected to hold. As is often the case, Abrahamic theists hold that life and death are God's prerogative alone. Understood in this way, we can observe an interplay among a variety of normative assumptions and value commitments.

Within Islamic theism, there are also key value commitments such as patience (*sabr)*, trust in God (*tawakkul*), and forgiveness (*maghfira*) that hold deep value, especially when faced with evil and suffering. These commitments may also serve as grounds for reasonable doubt with regard to the approach Bishop and Perszyk have taken. If there are a family of commitments at play within Abrahamic theism, then such commitments can potentially

act to parry the thrust of the Bishop-Perszyk argument from evil. Consider the example of Farid Ahmed, whose wife was gunned down in cold blood during Friday prayers, along with fifty others, in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019. Ahmed forgave the gunman; he spoke about the importance of peace, love, and forgiveness and that he did not want to have 'a heart that is boiling like a volcano.'[17] It is likely that Ahmed would agree that it is wrong to cause and allow horrors and that we need an attitude of caution toward those who perpetrate horrors. Yet he does not judge God according to these commitments; his hope and trust in God remain deep and profound.

The example of Farid Ahmed shows that our normative assumptions do not exist in isolation; rather, they reside within a family of assumptions and values, and there is an interplay among them. We then have grounds to doubt the reasonableness of the normative assumption that Bishop and Perszyk have in mind, even though we can affirm the value commitments that underpin this assumption. The reason being that, within Abrahamic theism, God is not necessarily seen as being bound by the assumptions and commitments that we may hold.

Given our discussion above, we have grounds to doubt the truth of P3—i.e., *Relative to certain normative assumptions, God lacks perfect moral goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons*. We may acknowledge that the value commitments at play are reasonable; nevertheless, the normative assumption that they underpin seems inconsistent with the spirit of Abrahamic theism. There is one further value commitment that, I suggest, could also serve to temper the approach taken by Bishop and Perszyk, and that is intellectual humility. As I shall contend, it is a value commitment that is reasonable and at home within Islamic theism.

6. Intellectual Humility

For the purposes of this paper, I take 'intellectual humility' to mean the following: (a) recognising that judgements based on our normative assumptions and value commitments are fallible, and (b) recognising that the quality of our judgements, based on our assumptions and commitments, are dependent on the information available to us. Intellectual humility arises from acknowledging the limitations of our cognitive capacities. There are times when our value-based judgements will be mistaken, and the correctness of our judgements are contingent on the background information available to us.

Understood in this way, intellectual humility rests comfortably within the tradition of Islamic theism. We may here refer to the Quranic narratives about Moses and the enigmatic person of Khidr to explore this further. Moses is instructed by God to meet with Khidr. Having met with him, Moses accompanies him on a journey—Khidr; however, warns Moses that he will see things that may disturb him and that he is not to ask questions. As the narrative unfolds, Moses observes Khidr behaving in ways that strike him as immoral,

> So they set out, but after they had boarded a ship, the man [Khidr] made a hole in it. Moses protested, 'Have you done this to drown its people? You have certainly done a terrible thing!'. (Q 18:71)

After a series of such episodes, Moses loses patience with Khidr and questions him about his behaviour. Khidr's response is intriguing; he explains:

> As for the ship, it belonged to some poor people working at sea. So I intended to damage it, for there was a ⌜tyrant⌝ king ahead of them who seizes every ⌜good⌝ ship by force. (Q 18:79)

The act of damaging the ship saves it from being plundered. Moses' moral outrage most likely subsides at this point. He may have come to see Khidr as acting in the best interests of the ship owners and perhaps even the passengers. The owners and passengers would have been outraged as well, much like Moses. Khidr had put their livelihood and lives at risk; however, what becomes clear is that his actions are in their best interests. The ship owners get to keep their ship and their livelihood while allowing for a means of transport for travelers. The outrage experienced by Moses is reasonable and understandable,

yet he is also mistaken in his judgment. There is more at play than Moses is aware of, and once we see the broader picture, our judgement of Khidr may shift from outrage to one of curiosity and perhaps even admiration for his wisdom.

The Khidr narrative invites us toward intellectual humility, namely, recognising our epistemic limitations, viewing our value judgements as fallible, and considering the correctness of our judgments as dependent on the information available.[18] If we are comfortable with endorsing intellectual humility, we then have grounds to temper the metaphysical application of the value commitments that Bishop and Perszyk have in mind. We feel outrage and also heartbreak at the suffering we witness in our world. Evil and suffering are real, as is our recognition of injustice and the perversion of good. It is nevertheless a separate question, nevertheless, as to whether we are in a reasonable epistemic position to assess whether God exhibits perfect moral goodness (if indeed we understand divine goodness as moral goodness). Given intellectual humility, we should be very cautious about doing so.

If indeed there is a personal God, we would have to acknowledge a sizable epistemic gulf between God and created beings—we cannot so to speak, 'step into God's shoes', or have a 'God's eye view'. Without a jury of peers, could we really put God's character on trial? Even among peers, Abrahamic theism endorses caution about judgments of character. Given intellectual humility, there are reasonable grounds to doubt that we are in an epistemic position to assess God's character. We simply may not have the requisite cognitive capacities and access to the relevant information that would allow for a reasonable assessment to be made. If we accept the importance of Intellectual Humility, we then have grounds to doubt our standing to judge P3 to be true.

7. Conclusions and Reflections

We have covered much ground, and in thinking through the Bishop-Perszyk argument from evil, a reflective Muslim has a number of options before them. A reflective Muslim may not hold God to be a person or personal being; as such, their commitments will be unaffected by the Bishop-Perszyk argument. It is also possible that a reflective Muslim who believes in a personal God may begin to rethink their concept of God in light of what Bishop and Perszyk have to say. Alternatively, a reflective Muslim may be unmoved by the Bishop-Perszyk argument, and if my discussion of the issues is correct, we have grounds for doubting the reasonableness of their argument from evil.

There are six issues at play within the Bishop-Perszyk argument from evil that allow room for reasonable doubt. We may summarise these issues as follows:

1. The Bishop-Perszyk argument presupposes human personhood. There are strands of Muslim thought and contemporary science that cast doubt on this idea. We have a sense of self, yet our sense of personhood may not be veridical and may, in a way, risk idolatry.
2. Bishop and Perszyk cast divine goodness of an all-powerful personal God as moral goodness. There are several issues with understanding divine goodness in this way. It may be the case that goodness in relation to human personhood is best understood as moral goodness, although it remains to be seen as to why divine personal goodness also needs to be understood in this way. Similar questions arise as to whether our moral categories, norms of inter-personal relationships among humans, and the interdependency of persons necessarily apply to God.
3. The relativised approach taken by Bishop and Perszyk in order to judge divine goodness is concerning. As noted above, a normative commitment always seems to be at hand to doubt divine goodness, even when there is no suffering. The risk with this approach is that divine goodness becomes an ever-shifting goal post, and the relativised approach becomes self-sealing. In addition, the horrors that the normative assumptions relate to may not turn out to be horrors on the whole.
4. The Bishop-Perszyk argument involves judging God's moral goodness in relation to God allowing and sustaining morally significant freewill, the associated horrors, and

then acting to redeem them. There is, however, reasonable doubt as to whether the consequences of divine action correspond to the degree to which God is morally good. The moral status of an outcome does not automatically reflect the moral standing of the agent whose actions led to that outcome (even if the outcome is a relationship that is contrived and manipulative).

5. Bishop and Perszyk appeal to normative assumptions and value commitments as part of their argument. We may acknowledge that the value commitments at play are reasonable and at home within Abrahamic theism. These commitments, as I have argued, are not privileged within Abrahamic theism as they are within the Bishop-Perszyk argument. Bishop and Perszyk employ these value commitments in a way that is not wholly in keeping with the spirit of Abrahamic theism (since our value commitments are not necessarily seen as being applicable to God). Accordingly, we may accept the value commitments at play yet doubt the reasonableness of the relevant normative assumption.
6. There is also the issue of intellectual humility. If my argument is accepted, then considerations of epistemic humility serve to significantly attenuate our standing to judge divine goodness (especially if we assume that divine goodness is moral goodness).

These issues, whether taken individually or collectively, serve as grounds to doubt the reasonableness of the Bishop-Perszyk argument. While we may set-aside the Bishop-Perszyk argument from evil, we also need to be cognisant of other possible philosophical and theological challenges that wait in the wings for those who are open to viewing God as a person or personal being. These challenges, I believe, can be met, although further work will be needed. Importantly, a reflective Muslim need not abandon their commitment to a personal God, if they have such a commitment, in virtue of this argument from evil. A reflective Muslim may also have good reason to remain open to a personal concept of God. The Quran, at face value, permits viewing God as a personal being. Faith and its associated phenomenology lean toward a personal, relational view of God.

Reflecting also on suffering and appropriate responses to suffering, I believe, invites and perhaps requires a personal response. This is especially true for victims of horrors; it is through a deeply personal response to their plight that healing may begin. If indeed there is a God—a God who responds to evil and suffering, then such a God would need to be able to respond in a way that is deeply personal and compassionate. Moreso, if God is to be considered worthy of worship. There is also the issue of divine goodness and whether we need to construe it as moral goodness. It seems to me that there may be other ways of thinking about divine goodness (e.g.,) aesthetic goodness and prudential goodness. There is also phenomenological goodness, whereby God's presence is itself a source of goodness. Think here of Psalm 16:11: *Your presence fills me with joy and brings me pleasure forever.* Perhaps we could think of divine goodness as God acting from love, where love can be taken to include two desires, one for the good of the beloved and one for union with the beloved. Understood in these ways, divine goodness need not be seen to bind God to any obligations or duties and paves the way for a more profound understanding of divinity—i.e., God as freely choosing to act from love. These considerations are by no means decisive, and a full defense must wait for another day—*inshaAllah*.

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[2] I employ the Reflective Muslim approach in some of my other publications, Ali (2013, 2018, 2023).

[3] In personal correspondence with John Bishop.

[4] *Ibid*.

[5] I use https://quran.com/ to source translations of Quranic verses by Mustafa Khattab (2015) and Abdul Haleem, accessed on 2 December 2023.

[6] 'To say that God is personal is to acknowledge the following things: God has knowledge and awareness; God performs actions; God is free in the actions he performs; and God can enter into relationships with persons other than himself' (see Peterson et al. 2009, p. 77). For a fuller discussion of God within Muslim tradition, see Doko and Turner (2023); see also Celene Ibrahim (2022), Ali (2016), and Aijaz (2015).

[7] Zarepour also approves of Roger Pouivet, who writes, 'there is nothing absurd in saying that God is personal but not a person. . . [I]t is possible for God not to be a person without that meaning He has no intelligence, will, omniscience, freedom and love' (Zarepour 2021, p. 129; Pouivet 2018, p. 14).

[8] Al Ghazali (Griffel 2009, p. 280): 'For al-Ghazali, God is *not* the cause of the world but its creator. God is a personal agent who freely chooses and who precedes his creation, for instance.'; Richard Swinburne (1996, p. 3): 'Theism claims that God is a personal being—that is, in some sense a *person*'; Alvin Plantinga (1984, p. 265): '*God* is the premier person, the first and chief exemplar of personhood. . .'; Elenore Stump (2013, p. 31): 'Since there is one mind and will in God, in our sense of 'person', God is a person too'; Marilyn McCord Adams (2016, p. 138): 'Many personal omniGod devotees—I among them—have claimed that loving relationality between God and horror-participants could not only "swamp," but even defeat horrors.'

[9] A summary of personhood within Muslim thought, see J. Walbridge (2017). See also Janos (2017) on Al Farabi's discussion of oneness; see also Inati (2000) for a discussion on Ibn Sina's view on God and Evil; and see also Kamal (2016) for an exploration of the view of Mulla Sadra on the individuation of being (*al-tashakhus*) and God.

[10] Viewing the self, or human personhood as an illusion to be overcome, may also serve as the basis for a potential theodicy. In the aftermath of horrors, there is also the real possibility of what is termed Post Traumatic Growth—i.e., *positive psychological change that many individuals experience after a life crisis or traumatic event*. The broken and shattered self makes way for a transformative journey. See Stump (2010) for a fuller discussion of this in relation to the problem of evil.

[11] For a summary of these arguments, see Chapter One of Bishop and Perszyk (2023).

[12] There is the possibility of a fifth option, and that is to suspend belief in whether God is a person.

[13] See also Legenhausen (2024), who suggests that God may be understood as a moral agent; however, God does not act for reasons and does not engage in practical reasoning.

[14] Bishop and Perszyk have in mind a Lockean forensic account of personhood. The forensic aspect involves understanding a person as 'a being having legal rights and obligations.' (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, footnote 45, p. 33).

[15] Sahih Muslim 2807: Book 52, Hadith 42: https://sunnah.com/muslim:2807, accessed on 4 February 2024.

[16] In personal correspondence with John Bishop.

[17] The Farid Ahmed story has also received significant media attention see: https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/495317/watch-christchurch-mosque-attack-survivor-talks-of-the-art-of-forgiveness, accessed on 4 February 2024.

[18] For an exploration of the person Khidr within Muslim thought, see (Omar 2022).

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Article

Intellectual Humility and the Argument from Evil: A Reply to Zain Ali

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Abstract: This is a response to Zain Ali's critique in this journal of our presentation of a 'right relationship' normatively relativised 'logical' Argument from Evil. Our argument aims to show that the existence of horrendous evils (as defined by Marilyn Adams) is incompatible with the existence of the personal omniGod (a person or personal being who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good), given certain reasonable judgments about what a personal God's perfect goodness would imply about the way God relates to those caught up in horrendous evils. We reply to Ali's main criticism that our assumptions about divine goodness are unjustified, and show a lack of intellectual humility. We defend the claim that, if God is a person, then God's goodness is moral goodness according to our best human theory of what that implies. We accept that God's situation as creator and sustainer of all that exists may justify 'divine exceptionalism': God's personal moral goodness may be consistent with ways of relating to others that would fall far short of perfection in human-to-human relationships. But in that case, we argue, intellectual humility may be better served by accepting that God is so exceptional that God should not be understood as a person at all, which is the prevailing Muslim view, as Ali himself acknowledges.

Keywords: problem of evil; Marilyn Adams; divine goodness; intellectual humility

We are grateful to Zain Ali for his thoughtful critique from the perspective of a reflective Muslim of our 'Normatively Relativised Logical Argument from Evil' (NRLAfE) (Ali 2024). Before responding, we will draw attention to the key features of our argument, as we recently set it out in Bishop and Perszyk (2023, pp. 29–34).[1]

1. A Normatively Relativised, 'Logical', Argument from Horrendous Evils

First, our argument purports to show, not that God does not exist, but that God *according to a certain conception* does not exist. That conception is of God as personal omniGod (that is, a person or personal being, who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good). This relativization to a specific conception of God is a general feature of all Arguments from Evil (AfEs), which must proceed on the basis of (perhaps implicit) specific assumptions about what it would be like if God did exist.

Second, our purports to show that there is no God according to the personal-omniGod conception only on the assumption that certain specific normative claims hold true about what God's goodness implies. Again, this normative relativization is a general feature of AfEs, which must all maintain that some facts about evil are either incompatible with, or at least (highly) unexpected in the light of, God's goodness.[2]

Third, our argument purports to show that certain facts about evil are inconsistent with the personal omniGod's existence. To use the established terminology, our argument is a 'logical' Argument from Evil ('LAfE'), rather than one that claims to show only that our total available evidence makes it (highly) improbable that God exists (known as an 'Evidential' Argument from Evil ('EAfE')). LAfEs remain embarrassing to theists who may

be reasonably unfazed by the improbability of God's existence which a successful EAfE yields, because they rely on claims to special revelation to motivate their acceptance that God exists.

Fourth, our argument accepts that an Argument from Evil based on the mere fact that there is some evil will not succeed. To have a chance of success, an LAfE must focus on some more specific fact or facts about evil and claim that those facts are incompatible with God's existence. But not just any more specific facts will do here, e.g., that people stub their toes, get paper cuts, and tell little white lies. Our focus, rather, is on *horrendous* evils, in Marilyn Adams' sense of the term—that is, 'evils the participation in which (that is, the doing or suffering of which) constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole' (Adams 1999, p. 26).

Fifth, our argument concedes that, *prima facie*, the personal omniGod may have morally acceptable reasons for causing or allowing horrendous evils to occur, since that may be unavoidable even for an omnipotent agent if some outweighing good is to be achieved (for example, goods which presuppose the existence of morally significantly free beings). Following Adams again, however, our argument makes the normative assumption that, to be perfectly good, the personal omniGod would need to be *good to* each participant involved in horrors, not simply 'balancing off' those evils with an outweighing good, but 'defeating' them through bringing all the participants involved in horrors into the incommensurably great joy of everlasting life with God. We think that holding that God acts according to this scenario (we will call it 'the Adams scenario') is the only kind of reply theists have available, short of taking God's goodness to be consistent with a more utilitarian account that would allow a perfectly good personal God to leave some horrendous evils undefeated. The Adams scenario takes on the burden of an understanding of eternal life as post-mortem personal existence in which, moreover, major developments can take place to defeat horrors. Both philosophical and theological objections to that understanding are possible, but our argument does not pursue them.

Instead, sixth, our argument expands the normative assumption made by Adams: we say that it may reasonably be held that the personal God's goodness implies, not only that God will be good to each historical person, but also that God will relate to other persons in ways that are consistent with sustaining right relationships amongst persons. And we conclude that it is reasonable to hold that a person who first allows people to suffer horrendous evils and then, post-mortem, ultimately brings them into an everlasting relationship with himself, would not have acted in accordance with the ethics of right interpersonal relationships in so doing. Relative to that normative assumption, then, the existence of horrendous evils, even when supposedly defeated by the personal God according to the Adams scenario, is not consistent with God's being perfectly, morally, good. Perfect personal, moral, goodness requires acting always in right relationship with other persons; plausibly, God's first allowing horrendous evils and then defeating them post-mortem is not consistent with so acting; plausibly, then the existence of horrendous evils is inconsistent with God's being perfectly morally good.

Finally, seventh, our 'right relationship' argument does not—as the 'plausibly' modifiers just used indicate—claim to be generally decisive; rather, it aims for the more modest conclusion that those who reasonably make the relevant judgments about what constitutes right interpersonal relationships, have reasons (that may be decisive *for them*) for concluding that, given horrendous evils, the personal omniGod does not exist. That modest conclusion is powerful enough, however, to show that the existence of the personal omniGod is open to reasonable doubt. In particular, theists who make the relevant normative judgments have reason for rejecting the personal omniGod conception of who or what God is, and for holding an alternative understanding of the concept of God. Thus, for these reflective theists, the Argument from Evil (on our version) serves as a prolegomenon to a discussion of what alternative understanding of God's existence might be held. That is the way we deployed our argument in Bishop and Perszyk (2023), where we defended eu-

teleological metaphysics as a coherent and religiously adequate alternative to 'personalist' understandings of theism that hold that God is, quite literally, a person or a personal being.

In this response to Ali, we will focus on what we take to be his central objection to our argument, namely, that the evaluation we make of God's goodness in relation to participants in horrors is unjustified, and, indeed, shows a lack of intellectual humility. Ali does raise some independent objections, but we will set these aside here, noting briefly our reasons for doing so. First, Ali correctly observes that our NRLAfE cannot apply if there is no person-to-person relationship between God and humans because humans are not persons (see Ali 2024, p. 6). Ali motivates this startling suggestion by appealing to the idea that 'the self' is an illusion (as held by some Sufi Muslims, but familiar in Buddhism, and also to readers of David Hume). The question whether there is such a thing as the self is, however, a question about *what it is to be* a human person; rejecting a 'substantial' self, then, need not amount to denying that humans are persons. Second, Ali objects that our 'normatively relativised' approach will make perfect divine goodness 'an ever-shifting goal post' because 'a normative commitment always seems to be at hand to doubt divine goodness even when there is no suffering' (Ali 2024, p. 13). It is, of course, true that there can be (unlimitedly) many NRLAfEs (relative to the judgment that perfect goodness would make this patch of grass greener, an omnipotent personal God falls short, for example). For an NRLAfE to be at all plausible, however, the normative judgment to which it is relativised must be one to which some reflective theists or would-be theists are committed. As we have explained above, and will explore further in what follows, our argument rests on a *quite specific* normative evaluation, which we think many will find reasonable, as to how well God relates overall to participants in horrendous evils if God is a personal being in personal relationship with them.

2. Personal Divine Goodness and Moral Goodness

In his discussion of the notion of divine goodness (Ali 2024, Section 4), Ali first raises the concern that our argument assumes that personal divine goodness must be moral goodness, when alternative understandings may be available. In fact, of course, we agree that divine goodness is not moral goodness. On a 'non-personalist' account of theism, such as our own euteleological account, since God is not a personal being the idea that God is good in the way that a person is good does not get a grip—indeed, the more basic idea that God is 'a' being who 'has' goodness as a property does not get a grip either.[3] But when God is understood literally as a personal being, we think it is *conceptually* necessary to accept that the personal God's goodness is (or includes) moral goodness. According to our contemporary 'forensic' concept of a person, persons are agents who, when properly functioning under the right conditions, have moral responsibility for their actions and omissions, with both their behavior and their character accordingly open to moral evaluation. (Human persons may sometimes be beyond evaluation for their moral goodness—but that will always depend on some impairment that could not affect a personal God.)[4]

It might be urged that, although God's goodness is moral goodness, the standards applicable to God may differ from those our best human theory of personal morality prescribes. That is the second concern Ali raises in discussing divine goodness. But unless God's moral goodness is at least goodness according to our own highest moral ideals, we lack a proper sense of what it means to ascribe perfect moral goodness to God. That would be problematic, since our worship of God, if God is a person, needs to be based on God's perfect moral goodness if it is not to reduce to mere submission to God's superior power. Commenting on our claim that God's actions under the Adams scenario might reasonably be judged to be morally flawed because God would seem to be contriving or manipulating his relationship with created persons, Ali says: '[s]uch a judgement is understandable within the context of interpersonal human relationships; however, God is not simply an individual within a community of individuals, God is held to be the being upon whom every other entity is dependent for their very being' (Ali 2024, p. 8).

In our view, however, this 'metaphysical size-gap' between God and creatures (to use an expression from Marilyn Adams)[5] implies that God is not a personal being, since we take it that relating (or being capable of relating) to other persons in community is conceptually essential to being a person. Ali questions whether this is indeed a conceptual truth, citing (i) the 12th Century Andalusian philosopher, Ibn Tufayl's, tale about a child raised by a doe on an uninhabited island who comes to discover the truth about human existence in God's creation; (ii) 'the first human ancestor who became self-aware' (and was thus a person before anyone else was); (iii) the thought experiment of imagining waking up one morning to find that everyone else has disappeared; and, finally, (iv) the case of 'a personal God who exists prior to there being any other persons' (Ali 2024, p. 9). In response to these cases we think we may safely reply, either ((i) and (ii)) that it begs the question against us to regard the case as a real possibility, or else ((iii) and (iv)) that the case, though possible, is no counter-example because the capacity to relate to others in community is possessed despite the absence of other persons.[6]

3. Dominating Power and Healthy Relationships

We will assume, then, that the personal omniGod's goodness *is* moral goodness according to our own best theory of the highest morality (derived, as theists believe, from God's self-revelation of God's goodness). Why, though, would it be reasonable to think that there is something morally flawed about God's permitting horrors and then defeating them through bringing all caught up in them into ultimate heavenly joys? Our argument claims that God's relationship with those creaturely persons would fall short of ideal mutually loving healthy interpersonal relationship. Might that not, though, be the fault of creaturely persons, with God having done nothing wrong? (Ali raises this concern, quoting a remark of Bruce Langtry's, pointing out that a person's action's having a flawed outcome does not necessarily reflect badly on that person's character. See Ali 2024, p. 10.)

We agree that the personal God might, *prima facie*, remain morally perfect in bringing about and sustaining imperfect personal relationships when their imperfection is due to wholly human wrongdoing. That view is implicit in our accepting that a free will defense establishes a presumption that God may be both good and all-powerful despite 'moral' evil (evil caused by the actions of morally significantly free creatures). As noted at the outset, however, we follow Adams in holding that a free will defense that articulates an adequate reason that God could have for permitting horrors cannot by itself vindicate God's perfect goodness. To be perfectly good, God must also act to defeat the horrendous evils that result from the abuse of free will. God will be morally justified in putting up with moral evil for the sake of free will and the higher goods that presuppose it only if God also 'mops things up' with perfect justice and kindness, making sure that horrors that would otherwise render lives overall not worth living do not, ultimately, have that destructive effect. Adams emphasizes that the personal omniGod has infinite loving resources with which to achieve this victory over evil.

We object, however, that if God acts according to the Adams scenario (allowing horrors but defeating them post-mortem), then *in the very setting up of a created order in which God knows that this scenario must play out*, God knowingly brings about an unhealthy overall relationship between the person God is and the persons caught up, as victims and perpetrators, in horrors. True, God is not directly responsible for the wrongful actions of the perpetrators of horrors, but God *is* personally ultimately responsible for creating and sustaining in existence persons some of whom he knows will (or will very likely) perpetrate horrors. Indeed, the actions God takes to defeat horrors post-mortem are to be seen as motivated by God's accepting ultimate personal responsibility for horrors. We say, though, that, if God were a morally perfect personal being, God would recognize that setting up a world in which horrors occur and are defeated post-mortem would be setting things up for a way of personally relating with participants in horrors that was inevitably flawed. Ironically, the ideal loving relationships that God aims to bring about could be achieved amongst creatures only if *God's* own personal relations with participants

in horrors ultimately fall short of that very ideal. A morally perfect personal God would thus—reluctantly, as we may imagine—turn away from creating a world with significantly morally free creatures, and, if he created at all, would create a world without horrendous evils. The existence of horrendous evils, we then conclude, shows that there is no personal omniGod.[7]

But where *exactly* is the flaw that allegedly makes the personal God's relationships with creaturely persons less than fully healthy? Ali's discussion presses us to explain further. As Ali's example of the father who causes his daughter to suffer painful medical treatment and then compensates her when she is cured makes clear (see Ali 2024, p. 4), our morality allows that we may sometimes have good reason to cause or allow suffering we could have prevented. If the daughter's illness is serious and cannot be cured by less painful methods, then putting her through painful treatment is justified, and sparing her the suffering with the result that she remains ill, unjustified. A loving father would certainly support his daughter while she is suffering and do whatever he could to counter its adverse impacts on her life (the father in Ali's example does both these things). This kind of everyday example does not, however, parallel what the personal God does on the Adams scenario. On that scenario, there is a person, P (God) who, unilaterally and without mutual consent, sets up and sustains relationships with other persons in which P first (for the sake of outweighing 'higher' goods) causes or allows those persons to be involved in horrendous evils, and then provides 'defeating' compensation that ensures their lives are ultimately a great good to them as a whole.

Ali quotes a *hadith* on the changed perspective those who have suffered horrendous evils have once they attain eternal life with God (see Ali 2024, p. 10). Read literally, this *hadith* teaches that sufferers would deny before God that they had ever suffered or been distressed if they could only 'dip once in Paradise'. As Ali himself makes clear, however, there can be no suggestion that, from the eternal point of view, horrendous evils did not really occur or were merely inconvenient. What is claimed to be true is that, from the eternal point of view, the potential of horrendous evils to render lives not overall worth living may be defeated. Our NRLAfE need not dispute the bold theist claim that a life marred by horrific suffering can yet ultimately be fulfilled in eternal union with God—for that claim as such does not commit itself, either on the question whether God is literally a person, or on the question whether a suffering person's ultimate participation in God's eternity involves that person's everlasting continuation as a finite personal being in some supernatural paradisiacal world.[8]

The claim of our NRLAfE is only the claim that, *when one understands God as a personal being*, and the saving acts of God as involving personal relationships with suffering creaturely persons, then one has a Person who acts (in the Adams scenario) as P does. And we say that one may reasonably judge that any person who acts as P does relates to the other persons concerned in such a dominatingly high-handed and manipulative way that P's relationships with those other persons fall short of the ideal for good healthy personal relationships—even though P had apparently good reason to allow the horrors, and then to defeat them, and even though P attempts to 'make everything come right in the end' by defeating those horrors. P's way of relating to other persons on this scenario, in other words, seems to exhibit a pattern uncomfortably like the cycles of harming and reconciling found in some abusive intimate partnerships, or, even, the pathology of Munchausen syndrome by proxy, where a person with power over others secretly inflicts harm on them so as to gain approval for skill and virtue in making good on that harm.

4. Divine Exceptionalism

Sympathizers with Ali's critique may here object that we are unaccountably ignoring a vitally important, but blatantly obvious, feature of God's personal situation as creator of all else that exists—namely, that it is necessarily absolutely unique. They may complain that, in judging that God relates less than healthily to other persons in the Adams scenario, we are improperly projecting our dislike of high-handed and manipulative behavior in

human-to-human personal relationships onto God's uniquely situated relationship, as the supreme person, to all other created persons.

Notice that those who make this important objection may accept that God is a person in community and that God's goodness must be perfect moral goodness in relation with other persons according to our own best account of what that requires. Their objection rests on a claim we will call *divine exceptionalism*—namely, that God's necessarily and absolutely unique situation in the network of interpersonal relations permits types of action which would not be morally admirable in the human case.[9] As a personal being, God is indeed a member of the same moral community of persons as creaturely persons are, and subject to the same moral standards (standards ultimately grounded on God's very own nature); yet—the idea is—those same standards imply that God's situation as personal creator is a uniquely morally exceptional one. Ali canvasses this idea of divine exceptionalism when he says that our judgments 'about the necessity of mature, respectful and mutually trusting inter-personal relationship, seem reasonable for interpersonal relationships among peers, but not necessarily suitable for the divine-human relationship' (Ali 2024, p. 8).

This is a telling objection. If God is a person, then it is incontrovertible that God is a uniquely exceptional person. If the personal omniGod acts according to the Adams scenario, then, God does so in the very act of creating a world that can achieve the highest forms of goodness, yet only at the cost of permitting horrendous evils—whose overall destructive effect on creatures' lives God nevertheless successfully overcomes! God's exercise of ultimate overall controlling power over others for their own (ultimate, and post-mortem) good may thus be claimed not to introduce any diminution in God's personal moral perfection. Of course, we rightly deplore humans who exercise power over others in dominating ways, accusing them of being over-bearing, manipulative, or patronizing—of 'trying to play God'! Such behavior is ruled out by the standards of our moral community. And God *is* a member of that community. But God is the supreme person on whom all else depends for its very existence. Thus, God's unilateral exercise, for the sake of the overall good, of an ultimate personal power of control (prior to any possible consent from creaturely persons) cannot be morally flawed: God *must* 'play God'![10]

We will not attempt a rebuttal for this exceptionalist claim, since it suffices to point out that the modest role we have claimed for our argument is not undermined by it. As we noted at the outset, the incompatibility between horrendous evils and the personal omniGod's existence depends on affirming a certain normative judgment—in effect, the judgment that a personal God would *not* be an exception to the general judgment that persons bring about less than perfect interpersonal relationships with others if they act in anywhere near as dominating a way as God does under the Adams scenario. Our 'right relationship' NRLAfE thus depends on judging that a perfectly good personal God *would not* be willing to 'play God' according to the Adams scenario. Personal omniGod theorists typically find that they attenuate the concept of a person in applying it to God—for example, when they deny (as they almost universally do) that God has a body.[11] In the exceptionalist response to our argument, we see this same tendency to attenuate the concept of a person emerging in the moral sphere: God is a personal moral agent, but a uniquely exceptional one for whom actions may be consistent with perfect moral goodness, even though actions of that same general type would be flawed when done by creaturely persons. If such attenuation is necessary for the view that God literally is a person or personal being, it is reasonable to ask why it would not be preferable to admit that God is *so exceptional a person* that, really, *God is not a person at all*. We will pursue that question further by considering Ali's remarks on intellectual humility and the risk of cognitive idolatry.

5. Intellectual Humility—And Who Has More of It

Ali comments on Q42:11 ('that there is nothing like unto Him') that 'this can be seen as consistent with the view that God is a unique kind of personal agent' (Ali 2024, p. 5). The general view in Islam, as Ali himself admits, is that God's not being like anything else rules out God's literally being a person, even though ascriptions to God of personal, and

indeed, embodied, attributes are found in the Qur'an and—on certain Islamic views, such as those of the Hanbali traditionalists (e.g., Ibn Qudāma)[12]—are to be accepted without questioning how they can apply. Understanding God as a person, in personal relationship with creaturely persons, may thus 'risk idolatry', even though (for example) it is a revealed truth that God made a friend of Abraham and Moses. We think that the only way to avoid contradiction here—but an effective one—is to allow that personal attributions to God convey truths yet *without conveying understanding of what makes those truths true.* God sits on the throne, befriends Abraham and Moses, yes, indeed: but we are not to 'read off' from those truths an understanding that what makes them true is the existence of a person (unique, but of the same general kind as the persons we are) possessing the relevant personal attributes. Ali, however, thinks that we may understand God to be a person; we avoid idolatry by keeping in mind that God is *a unique* person amongst persons. This divine exceptionalism exempts God from potentially adverse moral judgments that might otherwise apply. This recognition that God's person is unique and uniquely situated is required of us, Ali thinks, as a matter of intellectual humility.

Intellectual humility, as Ali says, is the virtue of 'acknowledging the limitations of our cognitive capacities' (Ali 2024, p. 12). It is not making oneself lower than one actually is—'humbling oneself'—rather, it is a matter of accurate self-knowledge. Ali writes:

If indeed there is a personal God, we would have to acknowledge a sizeable epistemic gulf between God and created beings—we cannot so to speak, 'step into God's shoes', or have a 'God's eye view'. Without a jury of peers, could we really put God's character on trial? [. . .] We simply may not have the requisite cognitive capacities and access to the relevant information that would allow for a reasonable assessment to be made (Ali 2024, p. 13).

Ali thus concludes that the normative judgment we make in our argument oversteps our proper cognitive limitations and thus lacks intellectual humility. We think we are interpreting him fairly as diagnosing that the judgment he regards as hubristic results from our failure to respect divine exceptionalism. But, then, we may retort that those who, like Ali, continue to hold that God is literally a person or personal being, are not going far enough in recognizing just how exceptional God is. Maybe it would lack intellectual humility not to make allowance for the unique status of God as a person amongst persons—but perhaps there is a more basic lack of intellectual humility in supposing that God is aptly understood as a person or personal being *at all*. The dialectic we embark on in proposing our NRALfE, then, can be seen as bringing it to light that, for it to be meaningful for us to regard God as a person, we have to treat God's goodness as moral goodness according to the highest standards of personal, relational, morality that we know—and that this way of regarding God (with its accompanying construal of divine omnipotence and omniscience as the unlimited powers of a personal being) leads to the high paradox that such a God would, if he existed, *refrain* from creating a world of significantly morally free creatures. The remedy is to admit that our thinking about God as literally a personal being has led us into a muddle—a muddle that is hardly surprising if we have gone beyond our proper cognitive limitations in taking God actually to be a person. Cognitive repentance is in order! We find authentic intellectual humility in recognizing that the Alpha and the Omega, source and goal of all that is, was, and ever shall be, transcends all that belongs to the created world. We may yet believe (by faith, on the basis of purported special revelation) that personal and interpersonal existence is a key locus for the fulfilment of God's purposes in creation, but, to avoid cognitive idolatry, we must deny that God is himself a node (even a uniquely great one) in that great complex of interpersonal relationships.

Who has the greater intellectual humility, the one who understands God as a person, but a quite unique one, or the one who says that God must be wholly beyond personhood? Those who agree with Ali in taking the former view that regarding God as a uniquely exceptional person is intellectual humility enough can point, we think, to two important kinds of motivation for their view. Our case for the more radical view of what intellectual humility requires can then be strengthened if we are able to show these motivations not to be well founded.

> The first motivation is that any alternative to understanding God as the personal omniGod will be open to some form of the Argument from Evil, so we may not get any further ahead by shifting to some non-personalist alternative. And the second motivation is, that, anyway, we cannot make coherent sense of the central religious practices of worship and prayer unless we understand God as a personal being. Now, we agree that we cannot make sense of worship and prayer unless it is apt for us humans to relate in personal ways to God, and to use personal language in addressing and in speaking about God. That does not entail, however, that we must understand that God actually is a person.[13] In our book defending a non-personalist, euteleological theism we argue (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, Ch. 6) that worship and prayer make sense on a 'non-personalist' view of God. As well, we consider (Ch. 5) how evil can exist in the creation on a euteleological understanding, arguing that that understanding is not undermined by any 'logical' version of the Argument from Evil. We will not elaborate further here, however. We will be content to conclude that—since this issue of what intellectual humility requires is at least moot—we have responded adequately to Ali's objections to our claim that, for those who make a certain reasonable judgment about what the perfect moral goodness of a personal omnipotent and omniscient God would imply about ideal interpersonal relationships, the existence of horrendous evils implies that there is no such God.

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Notes

1 We first proposed this kind of argument in Bishop and Perszyk (2011), and revisited it in Bishop and Perszyk (2016).

2 Evidently, one could regard this normative relativization as subsumed under the former relativization to a certain specific conception of God, since any such conception that can give rise to an AfE will be a conception of a good God, and some assumptions about what God's goodness entails must at least be implicit.

3 Our euteleological account endorses an apophatic interpretation of the classical theist doctrine of divine simplicity, which has the consequence that God is not some particular thing among other things which have properties and are instances of various specific kinds. For discussion, see Bishop and Perszyk (2023, pp. 21–6, 53–4, 121–2).

4 Describing the concept of a person as 'forensic' is due to John Locke (Locke [1690] 1979, bk II, ch. 27, §26), and suggests that personhood is a status conferred ultimately by established community practices rather than grounded metaphysically in anything like a substantial self. This makes it clear that the Sufi doctrine that such a self is an illusion (adverted to earlier) may be held consistently with accepting that humans are persons.

5 Adams uses this expression in a number of places. See, for example, (Adams 1999, pp. 49, 94f, 103–4; Adams 2013, p. 22).

6 Case (i) may be impossible as a matter of human psychological development, but, it may be replied, it can still be coherently imagined, as it is in Ibn Tufayl's *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*: granted, but then we will hold that what is coherently imagined is the case of someone who becomes a person without relating to other persons in community but nevertheless has the capacity to do so (as *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan* evidently does in Ibn Tufayl's story). Similarly with case (ii), if it is insisted—contrary, we think, to the logic of the evolutionary emergence of higher capacities such as consciousness and self-awareness—that there would have been a distinct first case of a being with such higher capacities.

7 Note that, if we are right in claiming that a person must conceptually have the capacity to relate to other persons in community, our argument shows that there could be a person who was perfectly morally good, omnipotent and omniscient, only if that person never created other morally significantly free persons and so never exercised a key capacity essential to his nature. Our argument also implies that a perfectly good personal God could never achieve his purpose of bringing about the existence of

ideally mutually loving personal relationships. Something has gone badly wrong, then, vis-à-vis the classical theist conviction that God's good purposes in creation are fulfilled—and (we say) the problem is that thinking of God in this far too literal way as a supreme person or personal being is a serious mistake.

8 For a discussion of how the promise of eternal life may be understood if God is not a personal being and human participation in eternal life is not an infinite prolongation of finite personal existence, see Bishop and Perszyk (2022). We think that the approach to the question of eternal life on a 'non-personalist' understanding of God that we take in that article, though we there apply it explicitly only to a Christian context, would also be worth pursuing from an Islamic perspective.

9 This exceptionalist claim has the support, for example, of Richard Swinburne, who writes that 'God as the author of our being has rights over us that we do not have over our fellow humans' (Swinburne 2004, p. 257).

10 Marilyn Adams argues that, due to the 'metaphysical size-gap' between them, God cannot have obligations to creaturely persons. Adams likens God to a feudal lord or patron who is good to his peasant farmers or clients through acts of grace and as a matter of honour, rather than out of any obligation to respect their rights (see Adams 1999, Ch. 6). Thus, assuming that relating to others as lords to serfs, or patrons to clients, does not conform to our highest ideals of personal relationships (even though it may fit certain role-limited relationships), Adams is pursuing a divine exceptionalist line. We are inclined to think that, even a feudal overlord would not be acting well if he related to others in ways analogous to God's on the Adams scenario—that is, we think that Adams might need to pursue divine exceptionalism somewhat further than she actually does.

11 For further discussion of the view that only a limited range of personalistic, psychological, action predicates apply literally to God, see William Alston (1989) (e.g., Essay 2). By Alston's own admission, the concept of personhood gets stretched farthest when philosophers endorse the classical doctrine that God is timeless and immutable (not to mention infinite and 'simple') and yet still maintain that God is a person.

12 Commenting on how we should understand anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Qur'an and Prophetic traditions, Ibn Qudāma writes:

We believe in these traditions, we acknowledge them, and we allow them to pass intact as they have come down to us, *without being able to understand the how of them, nor to fathom their intended sense*, except in accordance with [God's] own description of Himself; and He is, according to His own description, the Hearing, the Seeing, boundless and immeasurable. His attributes proceed from Him and are His own. We do not go beyond the Koran or the traditions from the Prophet and his Companions; *nor do we know the how of these*, save by the acknowledgment of the Apostle and the confirmation of the Koran (Makdisi 1985, p. 9; emphasis ours). Our thanks to Imran Aijaz for providing this reference.

13 As Imran Aijaz points out, many of the classical Islamic philosophers agree with this point. Aijaz writes, for example (Aijaz 2024, p. 198, note 3):

Classical theists in general would not deny the importance and role of *personalist language* in conveying truths about God. Al-Fārābī, for instance, explains that to *cognize* the principles of beings (philosophical truths about reality) is to understand them as they really are and to have their essences imprinted in one's soul. By contrast, to *imagine* these principles is to have images, representations, or imitations of them imprinted in one's soul. Since, according to him, most human beings are incapable of intellectual cognition of the principles of beings, religion presents the alternative of imagination:[R]eligion is but the impressions of these things or the impressions of their images, imprinted in the soul. Because it is difficult for the multitude to comprehend these things themselves as they are, the attempt was made to teach them these things in other ways, which are the ways of imitation (Al-Fārābī 1967, pp. 40–41).

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Bridging the Mackie–Plantinga Debate on Evil with Ibn Arabi's Metaphysics

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Abstract: This study examines how Ibn Arabi's metaphysics can address key challenges in the contemporary philosophical debate on the problem of evil. John Mackie famously argues that the existence of an omnibenevolent and omnipotent God is logically incompatible with the existence of evil, suggesting that theism must relinquish one of these divine attributes to resolve this contradiction. Alvin Plantinga, through his Free Will Defense, demonstrates that no logical contradiction undermines the coherence of the theistic conception of God. Although Mackie concedes this point, he contends that Plantinga's defense does not sufficiently explain why God permits evil. With the resolution of the logical problem of evil, the evidential problem has gained prominence in the theistic debate, where Plantinga's defense remains inadequate. While Plantinga invites theists to explore potential theological reasons for God's allowance of evil, he acknowledges that this approach may not yield strong philosophical results. In contrast, Ibn Arabi's metaphysical framework offers a more comprehensive solution. By integrating ontology, epistemology, and metaphysics to establish a coherent relationship between God, the universe, and humanity, Ibn Arabi renders Mackie's logical critique irrelevant. Furthermore, his approach fills the gaps left by Plantinga's defense, offering a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between God and evil.

Keywords: God; problem of evil; free will defense; theodicy; metaphysics; analytic philosophy; Islam; John Mackie; Alvin Plantinga; Ibn Arabi

1. Introduction

The existence of suffering and evil in the world poses a significant challenge to the belief in a perfectly good, all-knowing, and omnipotent God. If God possesses perfect knowledge, it follows that He would be aware of all the terrible events occurring in the world. If God has limitless power, He should be capable of preventing or eradicating such evils. Furthermore, if God is morally perfect, one would expect Him to act to alleviate or eliminate this suffering. Yet, despite these attributes, suffering and evil persist on a vast scale. This apparent contradiction between the existence of evil and the belief in a perfectly good God is what has come to be known as the problem of evil.

The problem of evil is commonly divided into two distinct forms: the logical problem of evil and the evidential problem of evil. The logical problem asserts that the coexistence of God and the undeniable presence of evil in the world is logically impossible. This argument points to a fundamental contradiction between the two. In contrast, the evidential problem does not claim logical incompatibility, but instead argues that the extent and nature of observable evil make it highly improbable that a benevolent, omnipotent God exists. While both forms address the issue of evil, the logical version focuses on identifying a contradiction, whereas the evidential version relies on empirical observations to question the likelihood of God's existence (Howard-Snyder 2013, p. 19).

Given the extensive literature on both forms of the problem of evil in philosophy, this study aims to outline the debate on the logical problem of evil through the Mackie–Plantinga framework, while incorporating the metaphysical insights of the philosopher and mystic,

Ibn Arabi (d. 1240). In the first section, I will present the key elements of the debate between Mackie and Plantinga. Next, I will explore Plantinga's argument that a philosophical investigation can be rationally grounded on theistic foundations, addressing contemporary criticisms of the problem of evil. In the following sections, I will demonstrate how Ibn Arabi's metaphysical cosmology renders Mackie's propositions irrelevant by providing a complex account of the relationship between God and evil, an issue that Plantinga sidesteps due to the absence of a philosophical resolution. Additionally, I will analyze the differences and challenges between Ibn Arabi's epistemology and contemporary analytic epistemology, including Plantinga's partial critique of traditional epistemology in analytic philosophy through his engagement with Mackie. Finally, I will reflect on Ibn Arabi's potential role in this ongoing philosophical debate.

2. The Preliminary Line Between Mackie and Plantinga

2.1. Mackie's Argument

One of the most prominent arguments against the existence of God in contemporary philosophy is Mackie's logical formulation of the problem of evil. In *The Miracle of Theism*, Mackie provides a comprehensive critique of natural theological arguments that seek to establish the existence of God. He contends that these arguments are fundamentally flawed (Mackie 1982). In his article *Evil and Omnipotence*, Mackie argues that the existence of evil not only poses a challenge to the existence of a theistic God, but also renders the concept logically contradictory. In other words, he argues that the natural theological explanations provided by theists are ineffective in addressing the problem of evil. For Mackie, the existence of evil creates a logical contradiction with the existence of a theistic God, leading him to conclude that "no rational proof of God's existence is possible" (Mackie 1955, p. 200). In his view, the logical argument from evil delivers a decisive blow to belief in the existence of a theistic God, even for those who remain unpersuaded by other counterarguments against God's existence. Mackie defines the problem as follows:

> The problem of evil, in the sense in which I shall be using the phrase, is a problem only for someone who believes that there is a God who is both omnipotent and wholly good. . . (Mackie 1955, p. 200)

And the propositional form of the problem is as follows:

> God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, such that if any two of them were true, the third would be false. But at the same time, all three are essential parts of most theological positions: the theologian, it seems, must adhere to all three and yet cannot consistently do so. (Mackie 1955, p. 200)

Mackie further elaborates by explaining: ". . .the problem will not arise if one gives up at least one of the propositions that constitute it" (Mackie 1955, p. 201). Thus, he concludes that religious beliefs are not merely unsupported by rational evidence, but are "positively irrational" (Mackie 1955, p. 201). Similarly, H.J. McCloskey frames the issue by stating, "Evil is a problem for the theist in that a contradiction is involved between the fact of evil, on the one hand, and the belief in the omnipotence and perfection of God on the other. God cannot be both all-powerful and perfectly good if evil is real" (McCloskey 1960, p. 97).

For Mackie, the existence of evil raises challenges that undermine other beliefs held by the theist.[1] He argues that the theist "must now be prepared to believe, not merely what cannot be proved, but what can be disproved by other beliefs he also holds" (Mackie 1955, p. 200). The "other beliefs" referenced by Mackie pertain to two fundamental attributes of God: omnipotence and complete goodness. Mackie reiterated this challenge, asking, "The question is whether God's being what the theist calls wholly good and omnipotent is compatible with the existence, which he recognizes, of what he calls evil" (Mackie 1962, pp. 153–54). Mackie explains this logical inconsistency as follows: "It is a logical problem—the problem of clarifying and reconciling a number of beliefs; it is not a scientific

problem that might be solved by further observation, nor a practical problem that might be solved by decision or action" (Mackie 1955, p. 200).

Mackie also critiques the solutions traditionally proposed by theists. He dismisses responses that suggest the problem of evil is beyond human comprehension, framed as a mystery or secret, or that it should be addressed practically rather than debated philosophically, deeming them invalid. Mackie argues that a theist might adopt one of the following "adequate solutions": (1) God is not wholly good; (2) God is not omnipotent; (3) evil does not exist; (4) divine goodness is not necessarily opposed to evil; or (5) an omnipotent God cannot do everything (Mackie 1955, pp. 201–2).

While Mackie considers these solutions adequate, he acknowledges that they introduce significant inconsistencies from a theistic perspective. Mackie notes that this presents a dilemma for theists, who are likely to accept these solutions only in a "half-hearted" manner. He asserts that no theist can fully abandon belief in God's omnipotence. Even if they appear to do so, they will ultimately return to defend it (Mackie 1955, p. 202). McCloskey similarly contends that few Christians would accept these solutions, as they compromise the core integrity of their religious beliefs. Nevertheless, Mackie argues that weakening the theistic belief through these solutions strengthens theism against the problem of evil (McCloskey 1960, p. 98).

Mackie contrasts these "adequate solutions" with what he terms "fallacious solutions". He defines fallacious solutions as pseudo-solutions that seek to eliminate the logical contradictions without sacrificing any of the three propositions central to the problem of evil (Mackie 1955, p. 202). Among the solutions Mackie critiques as fallacious, which are frequently presented by theists, are the following: (1) the notion that goodness cannot exist without evil; (2) the claim that evil is necessary to achieve greater goods; (3) the argument that a universe containing evil is better than one without it; and (4) the attribution of evil to human free will. Mackie dismisses these solutions as irrational and incapable of withstanding scrutiny (Mackie 1955, pp. 203–12). Alvin Plantinga's counterargument appears to emerge from within these "fallacious solutions" that Mackie critiques.

2.2. Plantinga's Defense

In his 1974 work *God, Freedom, and Evil*, Plantinga refutes Mackie's formulation of the logical problem of evil. He challenges the contradiction Mackie identifies between God's omnipotence and the existence of evil by arguing that omnipotence does not include the ability to create logically impossible states of affairs. Plantinga first clarifies that, when theists speak of God's omnipotence, they do not mean that God can do logically incoherent things. Secondly, he challenges Mackie's assumption that a good God would necessarily eliminate all evil. According to Plantinga, this claim is not necessarily true (Plantinga [1974] 2002, p. 35). He explains this through the concept of free will:

> A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, an else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but He can't cause or determine them to do only what is right. For if He does so, then they aren't significantly free after all; they do not do what is right freely. To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so. As it turned out, sadly enough, some of the free creatures God created went wrong in the exercise of their freedom; this is the source of moral evil. The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness; for He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good. (Plantinga [1974] 2002, p. 30)

Plantinga's theory, known as the "Free Will Defense", argues that "there may be a very different kind of good that God can't bring about without permitting evil" (Plantinga [1974] 2002, p. 29). In other words, "the fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong,

however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness; for He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good" (Plantinga [1974] 2002, p. 30). Thus, God cannot achieve certain goods without allowing the possibility of evil. In regard to this defense, an action is considered free only when no conditions or principles determine whether a free choice is made. Plantinga expresses this idea as follows:

> What is relevant to the Free Will Defense is the idea of being free with respect to an action. If a person is free with respect to a given action, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain from performing it. . . It is within his power, at the time in question, to take or perform the action and within his power to refrain from it. (Plantinga [1974] 2002, p. 29)

Mackie acknowledges the formal success of Plantinga's argument, but raises further concerns:

> Since this defense is formally possible, and its principle involves no real abandonment of our ordinary view of the opposition between good and evil, we can concede that the problem of evil does not, after all, show that the central doctrines of theism are logically inconsistent with one another. But whether this offers a real solution of the problem is another question. (Mackie 1982, p. 154)

In other words, while Mackie concedes that the logical consistency of theism has been upheld, he argues that Plantinga's defense does not address more practical concerns, namely why God permits evil in the first place. Plantinga himself clarifies that the Free Will Defense does not seek to answer why God permits evil, but rather to show "what God's reason might possibly be" (Plantinga [1974] 2002, p. 28). Elsewhere, Plantinga distinguishes a defense and a theodicy:

> What is relevant to the logical problem—the question whether the theist is guilty of inconsistency—is a defense: an argument to show that the propositions in question, contrary to the atheological allegation, are not in fact inconsistent. A theodicy, on the other hand, is an attempt to 'justify the ways of God to man'. Less impertinently, it is an attempt to answer the general question, why does God permit evil? Or the attempt to answer the question, with respect to a particular and perhaps peculiarly appalling kind of evil, why does God permit that evil? (Plantinga 1986, p. 122)

Although Plantinga stresses that the Free Will Defense is not intended to answer the question of why God permits evil, he argues that providing such an answer does not, contrary to Mackie's belief, present a significant philosophical challenge (Plantinga 1986, p. 123). Nonetheless, the question of "Why does God permit evil?" remains a difficult issue for theism. The evidential form of the problem, developed by W.L. Rowe, is widely cited in contemporary philosophy. Rowe contends that the evidential problem of evil presents a formidable challenge for theism. He states:

> There remains, however, what we may call the evidential form—as opposed to the logical form—of the problem of evil: the view that the variety and profusion of evil in our world, although perhaps not logically inconsistent with the existence of the theistic God, provides, nevertheless, rational support for atheism. (Rowe 1979, p. 335)

It is not my aim to delve into the arguments presented by Rowe and his supporters. Rather, I intend to emphasize that while the Free Will Defense successfully addresses the logical problem of evil, it remains ineffective against the evidential problem of evil, because it lacks a theodicy. As a result, this defense offers only a minimal response to the broader problem of evil. From Plantinga's perspective, anyone might naturally question why God permits evil. However, he argues that attempting to construct a theodicy would place the theist in a difficult and complex position. Plantinga uses the analogy of "Paul mowing the lawn" to illustrate this complexity from the theist's point of view:

> I believe that there is a connection of some sort between Paul's deciding to mow the lawn and the complex group of bodily movements involved in so doing. But what connection, exactly? Does his decision cause these bodily movements? If so, how? The decision may take place long before he so much as sets foot on the lawn. Is there an intermediary causal chain extending between the decision and the first of these movements? If so, what sorts of events make up this chain and how is the decision related, let's say, to the first event in it? Does it have a first event? And there are a whole series of bodily motions involved in mowing the lawn. Is his decision related in the same way to each of these motions? Exactly what is the relation between his deciding to mow the lawn—which decision does not seem to be a bodily event at all—and his actually doing so? No one, I suspect, knows the answer to these questions. But does it follow that it is irrational or unreasonable to believe that this decision has something to do with that series of motions? Surely not. In the same way, the theist's not knowing why God permits evil does not by itself show that he is irrational in thinking that God does indeed have a reason. To make out his case, therefore, the atheologian cannot rest content with asking embarrassing questions to which the theist does not know the answer. (Plantinga [1974] 2002, p. 11)

The unknowability of the reasons behind God's allowance of evil, as illustrated by the "Paul mowing the lawn" analogy, leads Plantinga to conclude that pursuing a theodicy is unlikely to produce any philosophical results. Indeed, he argues that any discussion of theodicy "shows little or nothing relevant to the rationality of belief in God" (Plantinga [1974] 2002, p. 10). Plantinga is correct in this regard, but the problem of evil is not solely about the inconsistency between the existence of evil and the existence of God. In fact, atheists in analytic philosophy began addressing the argument from evil with an inductive approach, particularly in the late 20th century. From this perspective, the existence, extent, and seemingly unnecessary nature of evil, provide rational evidence that influences the probability of belief in a theistic God. Atheological arguments claim that, based on empirical observations, the real presence of evil suggests that a benevolent and omnipotent God, as theism asserts, cannot exist (Duncan 2007, p. 9).[2]

At this point, it is worth noting that N. Pike takes the issue of knowing God's reasons for permitting evil more seriously in his article *Hume on Evil*. Pike argues that questioning whether sufficient reasons exist for God to permit evil poses a significant challenge to theistic arguments (Pike 1963). In this sense, Mackie's critique of the shortcomings in Plantinga's Free Will Defense appears justified. While Plantinga's framing of why God might permit evil, such as the Paul analogy, may seem "too complicated" (Plantinga [1974] 2002, p. 10), it does not render theism "irrational" or "unreasonable" (Plantinga [1974] 2002, p. 11). However, this complexity can seriously undermine the validity of theism, especially when considered from the perspective of someone who has directly experienced evil. Plantinga himself acknowledges that neither the Free Will Defense nor any theodicy can provide meaningful comfort to a person who has personally suffered from evil:

> Neither a defense nor a theodicy, of course, gives any hint as to what God's reason for some specific evil—the death or suffering of someone close to you, for example—might be. And there is still another function—a sort of pastoral function. . . Probably neither will enable someone to find peace with himself and with God in the face of the evil the world contains. But then, of course, neither is intended for that purpose. (Plantinga [1974] 2002, pp. 28–29)

While Plantinga's position holds merit, the comfort for someone who has suffered from evil cannot rely solely on "pastoral care". There is also a need for an explanation that can philosophically persuade theists like me. Ibn Arabi's cosmological perspective provides a broad explanatory framework that addresses the question, "Why does God permit evil?" In this regard, Ibn Arabi accomplishes two key things: first, within his system, a Mackiean-

style logical problem of evil does not arise. Second, Ibn Arabi offers a comprehensive metaphysical worldview that aids in understanding the divine reasons for the existence of evil. However, before exploring Ibn Arabi's theory in depth, it is important to highlight the philosophical differences between Mackie and Plantinga. Understanding these differences will help us move closer to Ibn Arabi's worldview.

3. Metaphysical Ruptures in the Debate on Evil and a Plantingian Exit

Mackie's argument focuses on two main points: (1) there is evil in the world and (2) a God who is presumed to be good and omnipotent does not eliminate this evil. Upon closer examination, both points are grounded in empirical observation. This approach has two features: (1) the inconsistency between the existence of evil and the existence of a good and omnipotent God stems from observations confined to the empirical world and (2) therefore, Mackie's argument relies on a distinctly modernist epistemological framework. To elaborate: Mackie's argument is built on a dichotomy between the existence of God and the existence of evil. His view that these two concepts are inherently incompatible is tied to his understanding of the relationship between God and evil within the constraints of a purely secular epistemology. It is within this framework that Mackie determines what is rational or irrational regarding the problem of evil.

The challenges in Mackie's argument arise from the divisive nature of modern philosophy's perspective on humanity, reason, and the world, complexities that this article cannot fully address. Discussions on this topic abound outside of analytic philosophy. For example, K. Surin notes that in every contemporary discussion of the problem of evil, whether implicitly or explicitly, there exists a conception of God constrained by the principles of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophical theism (Surin 1989, p. 4). This conception portrays a God with no meaningful relationship to existence, who is merely expected to act according to human expectations. M.A. Gillespie contrasts modern philosophy's view of evil with the medieval understanding, arguing that the problem of evil did not exist in the same way during the Middle Ages. He contends that modernity approaches evil by detaching it from its religious, moral, and metaphysical contexts (Gillespie 2006, pp. 16–17). In contrast, the pre-modern worldview reveals a necessary metaphysical unity between moral and religious beliefs, making the problem of evil inseparable from these metaphysical relationships.

S. Hauerwas adds that the question, "Why doesn't a good God prevent evil?" is not one that those whose lives are shaped by the Gospel would ask. Historically, he argues, medieval Christians did not seek solutions to the problem of evil because, for them, such a problem did not exist (Hauerwas 2004, pp. 52–53; also see Hauerwas 2006). S. Neiman similarly connects contemporary analytic philosophy's discussion of the problem of evil to this modern thesis, stating:

> Contemporary analytic discussion of the problem of evil... remains squarely confined to the marginalized field of the philosophy of religion. Thus, historical discussion, where it does occur, is focused largely on Leibniz and Hume, whose treatment of the problem of evil remained within traditional religious discourse. (Neiman 2015, p. 290)

Within analytic philosophy, the most prominent response to Mackie's modernist epistemology comes from the reformist epistemological school, which includes Plantinga. Mackie's dichotomy arises from his adoption of the supposed scientific ideals of objectivity and clarity, which he rigidly applies to traditional analytic philosophy, assuming they should be universally convincing (Plantinga 2004). This approach is linked to Plantinga's critique of the "evidentialist" view, which argues that belief in God can only be rationally accepted when supported by appropriate evidence. As is well-known, this perspective has been challenged by theist reformist philosophers, including Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff (Koistinen 2022, pp. 46–61). In addressing Mackie, Plantinga questions the meaning of the logical component in the problem of evil, as follows:

> Is a belief rational if and only if it is among the deliverances of reason? Or is rationality, instead, to be construed as a matter of epistemic duty fulfillment, as Roderick Chisholm suggests? Or should it perhaps be thought of as a matter of coherence, construed in Bayesian fashion or some other way—as with Lehrer, for example? . . .Mackie doesn't say. These questions are hotly debated by contemporary epistemologists. The answers to them, furthermore, are of obvious and intense relevance to Mackie's project. Nevertheless, he doesn't discuss the questions at all; he doesn't ask what rationality is, or what it is to be rational; he proceeds as if all this is perfectly clear. This gives the whole discussion an air of superficiality or ungroundedness. (Plantinga 1986, p. 128)

My aim here is to chart a path towards the rationality of Ibn Arabi through Plantinga's critiques. In facilitating this, Plantinga's essay *Advice to Christian Philosophers* (Plantinga 1984) plays a key role, by instilling confidence in theistic philosophers, while simultaneously criticizing Mackie-style rationality. In this essay, Plantinga argues that Christian philosophers can develop their theistic methodologies, which need not be convincing to everyone. Such characteristics do not render theistic thought worthless or meaningless. Theists can approach philosophical questions from theistic premises. Additionally, Plantinga highlights elsewhere that every epistemological inquiry, whether theistic or not, is underpinned by a pre-existing ontological foundation. He states, ". . .if we trace the epistemological question back, we find. . .an ontological question grinning residually up at us from the bottom of the mug" (Plantinga 1991, p. 309). This simply means that the origin of rational knowledge or belief is directly connected to a more fundamental belief about existence and reality. In this case, Mackie's propositions on the logical problem of evil cannot be fully understood without considering his view on the nature of human beings, God, and the universe, and the ontological relationships he establishes between them. However, Mackie does not explain the type of ontology his argument is based on. Therefore, theists need not take Mackie's accusation of irrationality seriously, because our view of what kind of beings humans are also determines which beliefs we regard as rational.

In a similar vein, Van Inwagen warns that philosophical arguments are not "free-floating bits of text". They are always grounded in a broader context (Van Inwagen 2008, p. 37). Neiman, in discussing the problem of evil, also points to the same issue. According to Neiman, the problem of evil is closely related to how we understand our place in the world (Neiman 2015, p. 26). For example, Plantinga clearly states that humans are created in the image of God, that we have a natural tendency to know God, and that we are rationally inclined to accept that we owe our existence to a Creator (Plantinga 1991, p. 309). Therefore, Mackie's limited and vague concept of rationality in his logical argument cannot impose its boundaries on our understanding of evil in the world. A worldview understood through a theological perspective can construct its epistemological principles rationally. Plantinga begins his book *God and Other Minds* with a similar approach: "In this study, I set out to investigate the rational justification of belief in the existence of God as He is conceived in the Hebrew-Christian tradition" (Plantinga 1990, p. xv).

Plantinga's critiques and contributions within the analytic philosophy of religion serve as a crucial starting point for integrating Islamic philosophical thought into contemporary philosophical discussions. While Plantinga's defense of free will is primarily aimed at refuting Mackie's claim that belief in a theistic God is irrational, his broader philosophical critiques inspire efforts to offer more robust responses to the problem of evil from a theistic perspective.

Before delving into Ibn Arabi's approach to this issue, I will first examine the core elements of his metaphysical framework in the sections that follow.

4. Ibn Arabi and His Methodology of *Tahqiq*

Ibn Arabi, born in 1165, in the Iberian Peninsula, is regarded as one of the most influential thinkers in Islamic philosophy. While he is often recognized today as an Islamic

mystic, this should not diminish the philosophical depth of his ideas.[3] During his time, mysticism and philosophy were regarded as interconnected methodologies. Ibn Arabi's thought represents a harmonious synthesis of both. For him, the simultaneous use of philosophy and mysticism necessitates recognizing the inseparable connections between the perceived object, the perceiving subject, the universe they inhabit, and God, who brings all into being (Chittick 2010, pp. 23–24). Within this framework, understanding something solely based on its outward appearance is foreign to Ibn Arabi's works. Instead, any epistemological inquiry into a phenomenon must consider its broader connections. Thus, four fundamental themes are consistently intertwined in Ibn Arabi's thought: God, the universe, the human soul, and the relationships among humans. Humans are expected to understand themselves, the world, and God, as part of this unified whole and to make this understanding central to their way of life. Every element of Ibn Arabi's epistemology is deeply rooted in the ontological relationships between God, the universe, and humanity (Chittick 2010, pp. 27, 79). As a leading expert on Ibn Arabi, William Chittick articulates his perspective:

From Ibn al-'Arabi's standpoint, if we want to verify the real, objective world and come up with a valid theory of how things hold together, we need to go beyond appearances and surface relationships. We need to penetrate verities and principles and essences (Chittick 2000, p. 586).

In this context, Ibn Arabi advises us not to focus on how things appear in the material world. Instead, it is crucial to ask: What is the position of that thing within the divine system, rather than how it merely seems to us? Ibn Arabi calls this process *tahqiq* (verification), which is the method he uses to attain knowledge. The methodology of *tahqiq* is etymologically rooted in the Arabic word *Haqq*, which refers to God. God is *Haqq*, the absolute truth. This term can also be applied to things outside of God, indicating correctness, truthfulness, appropriateness, or what that thing inherently deserves. Ultimately, truth in all its forms is connected to God and, since true reality is God, the truth of anything can only be understood through its relationship to the divine (Chittick 2000, p. 582; also see İbn Arabi 2006b, vol. 4, chap. 45, pp. 168–69, 278; İbn Arabi 2008b, vol. 8, chap. 165, pp. 26–29; İbn Arabi 2012b, vol. 18, pp. 39, 54).

If we consider something apart from the realm of divine reality, we separate it from God, placing God on one side and the object on the other. This abstraction removes the object from its true domain of meaning. In such a case, the object cannot provide us with genuine knowledge (see İbn Arabi 2008a, vol. 7, chap. 154, p. 415). This not only results in ignorance regarding the object itself, but also distorts the divine, cosmic, and human contexts that elucidate its reality (Chittick 2000, p. 593; also see İbn Arabi 2006b, vol. 4, chap. 42, p. 70, chap. 43, p. 80). Moreover, for Ibn Arabi, the truth of a thing is not just about the thing itself; it also imposes a personal obligation and inner responsibility on the human who encounters it. This responsibility originates from God. Since God is the absolute *Haqq*, He has rightful claims over all His creations (Chittick 2000, pp. 582–84).

The *Quran* states, "Our Lord is the One Who has given everything its distinctive form, then guided it" (20:50). This verse should be understood within the context of God's act of creation and His subsequent guidance to His creations. When God reveals the truths of His creations, He also provides them with divine guidance on how to realize and attain that truth. This guidance is described as a grace bestowed upon all beings in the *Quran*. However, embracing this grace is entirely dependent on human free will. Humans are designed to return to *Haqq* by fulfilling the demands of the reality revealed to them through their free will. Thus, understanding one's reality is fundamentally about comprehending one's relationship with God. Ibn Arabi's theory of divine names plays a crucial role in establishing and deepening this relationship.

5. The Theory of Divine Names

The question of how existence is connected to God is a central theme in Ibn Arabi's cosmology. It would be a mistake to interpret Ibn Arabi's cosmological perspective as a

study of the universe based on objective or empirical observation, as in modern cosmology. Instead, Ibn Arabi's cosmology investigates the signs through which God reveals Himself in the created universe (Chittick 1998, p. 3; see also İbn Arabi 2007c, vol. 5, chap. 56, p. 80; İbn Arabi 2007d, vol. 6, chap. 79, p. 188). In this context, the divine names serve as tools for understanding the connection between God and the cosmos. Ibn Arabi does not view the divine names merely as a form of relationship between God and His creations; he also considers them as keys that initiate the creation of the world. This is because each reality corresponds to a divine name that suits it. This means that everything brought into existence is associated with a particular name in terms that resemble the relationship between a servant and their master (De Cillis 2013, p. 183).

Within this framework, Ibn Arabi places humanity within a spiritual and metaphysical anthropology. The question of humanity's place in the cosmos is understood through Ibn Arabi's ontological distinction between necessary and possible being. According to this view, the only true and necessary being is God, whose existence is absolute. Everything else is merely a reflection of His essence (Chittick 2016, pp. 43–44; see also İbn Arabi 2008c, vol. 9, chap. 216, p. 272; İbn Arabi 2007a, vol. 1, chap. 3, pp. 121–22). Chittick defines it as follows: "Existence is the most real and concrete of all entities because it underlies every object, every subject, every concept, and every relationship. Ultimately, existence is God" (Chittick 2000, p. 587; see also İbn Arabi 2006b, vol. 4, chap. 45, p. 168).

The relationship between God, as the necessary, and possible beings is mediated through God's names, which also represent His actions (see İbn Arabi 2007d, vol. 6, pp. 258, 421; İbn Arabi 2008a, vol. 7, chap. 90, p. 20). In the *Quran*, God is typically known by ninety-nine names (İbn Arabi 2007d, vol. 6, chap. 87, p. 367). Examples such as life, knowledge, will, power, speech, generosity, and justice illustrate how God manifests in the universe. These divine names act as intermediaries, linking events in the world and the cosmos to God. Although these names are inseparable from God and can only be fully understood within their proper context and relationships, it is through them that humans can comprehend their connection to God. In other words, the divine names serve as essential reference points for acquiring knowledge about the universe (Chittick 2016, pp. 45–47).

In Ibn Arabi's thought, all possible beings in the universe are connected to divine names. God manifests Himself to these beings through all His names. However, God is most fully realized in human existence (İbn Arabi 2007c, vol. 5, chap. 59, p. 176). While God's manifestation in the universe is fragmented, His manifestation in humans is complete and perfect. "The human soul is, in fact, the spirit of God" (*Surah 32:9*) (see İbn Arabi 2007d, vol. 6, chap. 83, pp. 291, 366). In this sense, humans possess the greatest number of divine attributes. A child cannot grow without manifesting divine attributes, such as life, knowledge, will, power, speech, hearing, and sight. What is crucial here is the extent to which a person embodies these attributes, as this is what distinguishes humans from other creatures. The more these divine qualities are present in a person, the more they resemble God and, thus, the more morally perfect they become (İbn Arabi 2007d, vol. 6, chap. 88, p. 403; İbn Arabi 2007b, vol. 2, chap. 52, pp. 338–39; İbn Arabi 2010a, vol. 12, chap. 358, p. 286).

Ibn Arabi describes the human who most fully embodies God's attributes as the perfect human (*insan-ı-kamil*), an archetype representing the ultimate ideal, toward which humanity should aspire. His philosophy is fundamentally dedicated to the realization of this potential (Coates 2002, p. 4). Human existence is inseparable from this divine potential. By creating Adam in His own image, God entrusts humanity with all His names, a sacred trust that confers both the responsibility to reflect God's all-encompassing name and the capacity to realize the profound depth of their spiritual station and the dignity of their role as vicegerents. By pursuing both desire and genuine knowledge, humans are empowered to transcend the constraints of their earthly condition (De Cillis 2013, pp. 201–3).

In Ibn Arabi's comprehensive metaphysical framework, the perfect human serves as a bridge or intermediary, linking the inner dimensions of the One True Reality with its outward manifestations (Coates 2002, p. 3). As a person draws closer to God, he/she

refines his/her being. Traits such as greed, impatience, injustice, cowardice, and arrogance are not only moral failings, but also ontological deficiencies, reflecting the dimming light that should emanate from God to humanity (Chittick 2016, pp. 58–59).

For Ibn Arabi, worshiping God represents the highest level of self-realization. However, one cannot truly recognize God without first purifying their soul. As a person matures, their spirit continually evolves, becoming more aware of the divine realm through an ongoing journey of self-discovery and realization. The human spirit is inclined toward both elevation and descent, holding within it the potential for infinite growth in either direction. This development signifies the transition from darkness to light and, thus, humans are always in a state of growth (Chittick 2016, pp. 52–61; see also İbn Arabi 2010b, vol. 13, chap. 26, pp. 223, 228; İbn Arabi 2011a, vol. 14, chap. 384, p. 212, chap. 410, p. 377; İbn Arabi 2007b, vol. 2, chap. 24, p. 293). The divine names also establish an order that constitutes the entire moral system (İbn Arabi 2006b, vol. 4, chap. 41, pp. 22, 30, chap. 42, p. 48, chap. 51, p. 361). This order cannot be fully understood from a purely human perspective. This encompassing order is the very essence of the *Haqq*, which cannot be fully named or known in an absolute sense. If a person fails to follow and understand the divine names within this order, they are destined to live in the darkness of misnaming and misunderstanding concepts (Chittick 2010, p. 131).

Can a person escape the duty of becoming a perfect human? In other words, can the human being, in whom God manifests perfectly, ontologically alter this duty? Ibn Arabi's answer is no. In such a scenario, truths would be inverted: the *Haqq* would become like the created and the created would become like the *Haqq*. Therefore, there is no way to destroy or alter these immutable truths. "The immutable truths cannot be made possible; the servant remains the servant, the Lord remains the Lord; truth is truth, and the created is the created" (Chittick 2016, p. 74; see also İbn Arabi 2012a, vol. 17, chap. 34, p. 311).

The relationship between beings in Ibn Arabi's cosmology and, ultimately, with God is closely tied to the concept of Tawhid, or the oneness of God (İbn Arabi 2006a, vol. 3, chap. 31, p. 107; İbn Arabi 2008a, vol. 7, p. 69). The intellect, which seeks to understand everything through the lens of Tawhid, is not swayed by the temporary contingencies of the universe (İbn Arabi 2008a, vol. 7, chap. 91, p. 304). The formula of Tawhid teaches that there is no deity other than God and there is no absolute *Haqq* apart from Him. In essence, nothing exists outside of the *Haqq.*

6. The Place and Conceptualization of Evil in Ibn Arabi's Cosmology

In Ibn Arabi's cosmology, where the divine names manifest as expressions of God's essence, what are the implications of the emergence of evil? How is evil conceptualized within a worldview that regards all existence as a mere reflection of the divine? Within this framework, does evil originate not from created beings, but rather from God Himself? If so, does this imply that God embodies evil? Engaging with these questions invites us to a nuanced and intellectually enriching exploration of Ibn Arabi's philosophy.

In Ibn Arabi's metaphysical framework, only God, the necessary being, possesses true existence. All that exists originates from and is sustained by God, the ultimate reality (Coates 2002, p. 3). For Ibn Arabi, nothing in the world is truly separate or independent from God, who embodies absolute reality and pure goodness in His essence. God is the source of goodness and everything He creates is inherently good and beautiful (De Cillis 2013, p. 189; İbn Arabi 2011b, vol. 16, chap. 507, p. 55). Citing Quranic verse (4:78), "Say: All is from God", Ibn Arabi underscores the notion that all existence, equated with God, is fundamentally aligned with pure goodness (İbn Arabi 2008d, vol. 10, chap. 270, p. 25). In terms of this view, there is no basis for distinguishing between types of evil, metaphysical, natural, or moral, as commonly discussed in modern philosophical discourse (Akti 2019, p. 201). Mirroring Neoplatonist thought, Ibn Arabi attributes evil to the realm of generation and decay, which is marked by an ontological deficiency or lack of being. As Ibn Arabi poetically articulates, the inherent nature of all things is, in its potentiality, sufficient to

"stain" them, introducing accidental evil. However, at its core, evil does not possess true existence (De Cillis 2013, p. 188).

From this perspective, Ibn Arabi's reflections on evil continually invoke this foundational understanding, underscoring the notion that evil lacks true existence. While he acknowledges that what we perceive as evil appears present in the world, he interprets it as a contextual manifestation, dependent on particular conditions rather than inherent reality. As he explains:

You should understand that what we call good and evil is related to certain factors. A thing is considered good or evil either because it has been revealed by the prophets of the Truth, or because it aligns with one's temperament, or because it is connected to the fulfillment of a specific purpose, in which case it is regarded as good. However, when a person looks beyond these relative conditions, what remains are the fundamental truths of existence, which are not defined by good or evil. This is the conclusion reached through fairness and deep reflection. . . The source of all of this is, in its essence, the necessary existence, which is pure goodness and contains no evil (İbn Arabi 2008d, vol. 10, chap. 270, p. 25).

In Ibn Arabi's system, another commonly misunderstood form of evil is what is often perceived as natural evil, which he categorizes as relative evil. For instance, he does not regard natural events, like earthquakes, as inherently evil. Rather, he interprets these occurrences as expressions of God acting freely within His creation and, thus, they cannot be deemed unjust or morally wrong (İbn Arabi 2007a, vol. 1, chap. 3, p. 102). Such natural phenomena should be viewed as integral to the universe's progression toward perfection. In Ibn Arabi's view, all of God's names are actively involved in the unfolding of the universe; thus, God's presence encompasses not only names associated with beauty and goodness, but also those tied to majesty and severity. This perspective allows the cosmos to reflect the entirety of divine attributes and to acknowledge only selective names would lead to an incomplete understanding of the divine (Akti 2019, p. 205). Therefore, while evil lacks absolute existence, it maintains a contextual presence in the world. To deny this relational reality would render certain divine names inactive and, thus, Ibn Arabi recognizes the contextual and relational reality of what is perceived as evil.

The association of evil exclusively with possible beings invites a deeper exploration of the intricate relationship between possible beings, God, and evil. Ibn Arabi's additional metaphysical insights are particularly illuminating in this context. He explains, "A possible being. . . has one face turned toward existence and another toward nonexistence. Possible beings are good when they turn toward the Real (Haqq) and are evil when they turn toward nonexistence" (İbn Arabi 2007b, vol. 2, chap. 312, p. 67). In another passage, he further elaborates: "When a possible being is in its homeland of nonexistence, it hears the Real say to it, 'Be', and it rushes toward existence" (İbn Arabi 2008c, vol. 9, chap. 230, p. 327). This metaphysical and cosmological framework, which Ibn Arabi consistently applies, underpins his interpretation of evil, even in its relative and contextual manifestations.

Within this framework, evil is associated with the state of the possible being prior to its attainment of existence, an ontological condition that Ibn Arabi conceptualizes as *ayan-ı sabite*, the state of fixity. For Ibn Arabi, as with all possible beings, each human being, while in this state of fixity, possesses enduring and unchanging realities that remain constant as they transition into existence. These intrinsic truths, predetermined by God, accompany them into the manifest realm of existence (Akti 2019, pp. 218–19). Chittick elucidates this concept, explaining, "Each is at God", for God is identical with the thingness of each. No intelligible thing or existent thing arrives newly at Him. On the contrary, He witnesses the entities of all things between fixity and existence (wujud). So, fixity is His storehouse and existence is everything that arrives newly at us from the storehouse (Chittick 1998, p. 36).

Thus, humanity's capacity for committing evil is an inherent, immutable aspect of creation itself, established by God from the outset and beyond the scope of alteration. This raises a critical question: Does the intrinsic connection of contingent beings to evil, arising from their orientation toward nonexistence, imply that God is, therefore, an evil being? Ibn Arabi decisively refutes this implication, asserting:

> Allah says: When I say, 'All things are from Allah', the one who understands this knows that Allah refers to the knowledge that all things come from Him, and such a judgment does not imply that evil comes from Him! When the Prophet understood this truth, he said: 'All goodness is in Your hand. Evil does not reach You'. (İbn Arabi 2011a, vol. 14, chap. 383, p. 202)

Ibn Arabi similarly clarifies:

> Allah has neither commanded evil nor willed it. However, He has decreed its existence and defined it. We can explain that He did not will it by saying: For something to be evil is not its intrinsic reality, but rather Allah's judgment upon it. Allah's judgment on things is not created. What has not been created through His creative act cannot be willed. (İbn Arabi 2007a, vol. 1, chap. 3, p. 114)

From this perspective, one can understand that God did not will evil directly, rather He decreed that it would manifest when the essential truth carried by existence in its state of fixity was brought into the realm of being. This raises a profound question: Where does this immutable truth originate during being's state of fixity? Given that everything in Ibn Arabi's philosophy is ultimately connected to God, we can infer that this truth, too, was granted by God. This is one of the most intricate aspects of Ibn Arabi's metaphysical system. Everything, including the aspect of beings that leans toward non-being and is associated with evil, originates from God, yet everything that emanates from God is inherently good. Although this may appear paradoxical, it can be interpreted as follows: in the state of fixity, prior to the emergence of a possible being into existence, evil exists only as a potential. God did not directly will evil into existence, but rather decreed its possibility as a potential characteristic. The question of why God allows this potential to exist returns us to Ibn Arabi's view that the possibility of evil is an essential element in the perfection of each possible being. This potential serves as a necessary tool in the journey of each being toward its ultimate perfection.

7. The Issue of Human Responsibility and the Limits of God

If a person emerges from the state of non-being according to the immutable truth of their state of fixity, does this imply they are compelled to follow their intrinsic truth? This question touches upon one of the most intricate aspects of Ibn Arabi's thought. In his system, every being that comes into existence necessarily adheres to its inherent nature. This necessity is rooted in the notion that God's knowledge of these beings, prior to their manifestation in the world, is unchanging. In other words, once God has conceived a possible being's essential nature, He does not subsequently alter its condition. Thus, upon entering existence, a being is beyond divine intervention concerning its present or future states (De Cillis 2013, p. 180).

In terms of this framework, the compulsion of a being to its inherent truth can be interpreted as an ontological return to God, with every being fulfilling the essential role designated by its divine blueprint (Chittick 2016, pp. 54–55; see also İbn Arabi 2007a, vol. 1, chap. 4, p. 130; chap. 9, p. 273; İbn Arabi 2007b, vol. 2, chap. 24, p. 282). Everything returns to God, but most return in the same state in which they were created. For example, the angel Gabriel says of himself and the other angels, "We are indeed the ones lined up in ranks for Allah" (37:165) (see İbn Arabi 2008a, vol. 7, ch. 106, p. 425), indicating that their state of return is fixed. Ibn Arabi asserts that this is true for all beings, except humans. A pear tree does not return as an apple tree; it returns as a pear tree. Humans have the potential to return to their original unity with God in a changed state due to their free will, which angels lack. Although every choice ultimately leads back to God, the path one takes is left to the individual. A person can either follow divine revelation or succumb to their desires. The face of God that turns toward humans upon their return is diverse. If we view this through the lens of divine attributes, we see that God is merciful, but He also shows wrath. He is forgiving, yet vengeful. Each of these names reflects a different aspect of God

and the nature of the divine face a person encounters depends on their will (İbn Arabi 2011a, vol. 14, chap. 27, p. 44).

At this point, we might ask whether a person's journey in terms of their return to God is predetermined or whether they are left entirely free? In Ibn Arabi's thought, there is no definitive answer to such questions, as they stem from viewing humans and God as distinct entities (see İbn Arabi 2007c, vol. 5, chap. 64, p. 308; chap. 67, p. 379; İbn Arabi 2007d, vol. 6, chap. 72, p. 47; İbn Arabi 2008a, vol. 7, chap. 91, p. 67). In terms of this system, the answer can be both yes and no. On the one hand, it is accurate to say that humans initially express their freedom genuinely. God has sent prophets to guide humans in using this freedom correctly. In this way, human freedom reflects the freedom of God, as humans are created in His image. Humans do not come into the world fully equipped with all divine attributes, rather they embark on a journey of infinite possibilities to actualize God's names. This journey leaves them open to divine graces that can shape and influence their freedom (see İbn Arabi 2012a, vol. 17, chap. 34, pp. 274, 293). As a result, the *Quran* instructs believers to pray in every prayer, "Guide us along the Straight Path" (1:6) (see also İbn Arabi 2010a, vol. 12, chap. 23, pp. 77, 96).

On the other hand, humans experience a form of compulsion in their actions. While this compulsion appears paradoxical, suggesting that humans act freely despite it (Chittick 1998, pp. 186–87), it can be understood as the driving force that enables them to choose between good and evil. Ibn Arabi captures this notion, stating, "Everyone is compelled in their choice and decision. In reality, there is no compulsion in action, nor is there true choice. . . Learn this well!" (İbn Arabi 2007d, vol. 6, chap. 84, p. 301). From this, we can infer that humans are compelled to acquire the capacity to choose between good and evil, although this compulsion should not be misinterpreted as an obligation to choose evil. While humans are not entirely free, given that they are compelled to make a choice, they retain freedom in determining the nature of the choice they ultimately make.

Understanding free will in Ibn Arabi's thought requires us to confront a crucial question: Could not an omnipotent and absolutely good God have endowed humans with a will that always chooses the good? Or could a God who possesses absolute power and goodness not prevent the consequences of human actions that result in evil? This brings us back to the concept of the "state of fixity" in beings. Chittick points to an important Quranic verse that Ibn Arabi references: "When God says in the Quran, 'If We had willed, We would have given every soul its guidance'" (32:13); Ibn Arabi interprets this as meaning, "This means 'We did not will'. . . because the possible being, in terms of its essence, is receptive to both guidance and misguidance. Therefore, the possible being is the place of division, and division occurs within it" (İbn Arabi 2007b, vol. 2, chap. 15, p. 17).

From this, Ibn Arabi understands that God's initial determination of possibility for each being is unalterable. How, then, should we reconcile God's inability to alter His initial determination regarding possible beings with His absolute power? In Ibn Arabi's metaphysical cosmology, the self-assigned role that God assumes introduces a form of limitation, not only concerning possible beings, but also regarding God Himself. God allows the human being to enter existence with a specific state of fixity, one that requires striving toward the ideal of the perfect human. This ideal is essential because human perfection facilitates the fullest manifestation of God's names in the world. To attain this state, human beings must engage in the process of choice. God's inability to alter His decree concerning the human being, thus, signifies a limitation of His own, although Ibn Arabi distinguishes between this type of limitation and the limitations inherent in contingent beings (Chittick 1998, p. 187).

In Ibn Arabi's view, God is transcendent and free all limitations or constraints. He says: "God is capable of everything possible, impossible, or utterly impossible. His power is all-pervasive, His bounty is wide" (İbn Arabi 2008a, vol. 7, chap. 11, pp. 364–65). An intriguing question arises here: How should we understand the concept of God being "compelled" to do something? Ibn Arabi clarifies this idea by saying: "Here, the One who compels is the One who is compelled, for nothing other than God's own knowledge

compels Him. In the possible being, the compulsion comes not from the being itself but from something else" (İbn Arabi 2010a, vol. 12, chap. 23, p. 19). God's lack of limitations does not prevent Him from choosing to limit Himself; in fact, God's act of creating the universe is inherently tied to His decision to impose such limitations (see İbn Arabi 2007b, vol. 2, chap. 26, p. 378). God has chosen to limit Himself and has entered into a covenant with humanity. The *Quran* expresses this covenant: "Your Lord has taken upon Himself to be Merciful" (6:54) (see also, İbn Arabi 2006b, vol. 4, chap. 48, p. 242). This was not imposed upon Him by any other. In limiting Himself toward His creations, God acts with mercy and hidden compassion, saying, "Fulfil your covenant and I will fulfill Mine" (2:40). In this sense, God has made commitments both to humanity and to Himself. Humans are provided with evidence throughout the universe that attests to the truth of His word; thus, God has revealed these truths for their benefit. All these aspects are understood within Ibn Arabi's framework as expressions of God limiting Himself for the sake of His servants. But this "for the sake of" is not understood as for the sake of one's immediate desires. As Ibn Arabi established above, the relationship between God and man ultimately shapes the issue here (Chittick 2016, p. 146; see also İbn Arabi 2008b, vol. 8, chap. 119, p. 404; İbn Arabi 2011a, vol. 14, chap. 27, p. 79).

8. Logic and Its Limits According to Ibn Arabi

Up to this point, I have emphasized a kind of spiral relationship among God, being, the universe, and evil, within Ibn Arabi's metaphysical cosmology. In this section, it is important to clarify how Ibn Arabi employs reason and constructs the logic underpinning these relationships to render them more accessible to the contemporary reader. First and foremost, it should be noted that Ibn Arabi's pursuit of knowledge is not confined to understanding the object itself (De Cillis 2013, p. 189). In his system, epistemology and ontology are fundamentally inseparable. In other words, an epistemological question regarding the logical possibility of something cannot be answered without considering its ontological status within the larger order of existence. This is because, for Ibn Arabi, the central concern is God as the true being and His relationship with the world. The act of reasoning itself, constrained by logical principles, is situated within this relationship. Thus, for Ibn Arabi, acquiring knowledge about anything is inherently subjective, it cannot occur in a context where the knower and the known are entirely independent of each other. Within the metaphysics of the Unity of Being (Wahdat al-Wujud), there exists only one being and only one knower. Consequently, it is essential for the knower, while reflecting on his or her direct experiences, to recognize the true knower and the known within this unified reality (Coates 2002, pp. 4–5).

Ibn Arabi's approach to knowledge and logic distances him from modern epistemology. While both frameworks seek a comprehensive understanding, Ibn Arabi's tradition emphasizes the roots and principles of what is to be known, incorporating all other sciences and maintaining a connection between the knowing subject and the known object. In contrast, modern science focuses on phenomena, applications, and events in the world, aiming for "objectivity" (Chittick 2010, pp. 162–63). However, there is little attempt to understand the nature of the subject, which is essential for true knowledge of the object. According to Ibn Arabi, the claim to "objective" knowledge without considering the subject is to be entirely dismissed. Understanding the subject who possesses knowledge is paramount; without a true understanding of essence, it is impossible to attain genuine knowledge of the universe (Chittick 1998, p. xii).

Ibn Arabi perceives reflection and reason (*nazar* and *'aql*) as fundamentally limited in their capacity to grasp divine realities and the ultimate nature of existence. He regards reason as a practical tool for navigating the mundane aspects of life, but sees it as a "shackle" when one seeks metaphysical insight (Almond 2003). According to Ibn Arabi, reason alone cannot access the full depth of divine mysteries, as it is confined by dualities and rigid categories that cannot comprehend the unity and paradoxes intrinsic to the divine. Nevertheless, Ibn Arabi insists that we must seek to understand who and what we truly

are. The Arabic term *wujud* (existence) also means "to find" and, for Ibn Arabi, this process of finding oneself is ultimately about knowing God. He expresses this as follows:

> As for the power of reflection in knowing God, man can always think about what is available to him. What is available to him he has learned from the senses and the principles of reason. . . .Allah has bestowed on the intellect the knowledge of Himself. Thus, the intellect grasps the bestowed knowledge not in terms of its intellectual power, but in terms of being an intellect. . . Therefore, it cannot bring evidence or proof to that knowledge, because that knowledge is beyond what the intellect perceives. . . Therefore, anyone who wants to know God with his intellect in terms of thought and theoretical research has gone astray. What he should do is prepare for what Allah will bestow in this regard. (İbn Arabi 2007a, vol. 1, chap. 9, pp. 262–63)

Ibn Arabi's metaphysical perspective on understanding God and His actions does not require abandoning the basic concepts and categories of ordinary human thought. Instead, he offers a reoriented worldview on how to approach understanding the world and recognizing its limits. In terms of this view, human rationality holds value, but its insights are inherently relative and limited. Human concepts and categories are inadequate for grasping the true nature of reality. Ibn Arabi's reflections on the limitations of reflective thought underscore this, highlighting that intellectual thought can only access a very restricted portion of reality (Coates 2002, p. 12). He explains:

> The mind, with its incomplete idea, confines its Lord to its own limits. The mind is limited and imprisoned by the knowledge it has acquired. (İbn Arabi 2010a, vol. 12, chap. 23, p. 165; İbn Arabi 2010b, vol. 13, chap. 25, p. 20) . . .God can only be known through discovery and observation in the way we have mentioned. In terms of theoretical proofs, not He Himself can be known, but His judgment can be known. The intellect can only know the property of the necessary being, such as 'the dependence of the possible on itself,' through its own evidence. This is the intellect's knowledge of Him. The level of perception above this is known through pleasure, but it is not said or explained. (İbn Arabi 2010a, vol. 12, chap. 24, p. 286)

According to Ibn Arabi, when the human intellect becomes the sole arbiter of truth, it disrupts its own function as a center of judgment and, ultimately, becomes largely ineffective in terms of meaningful understanding. In regard to this restricted role, the intellect becomes a "one-winged" faculty, unable to transcend the confines of its own limited truths (Coates 2002, p. 133).

9. Discussion and Conclusions

Traditional metaphysical questions, such as those concerning the nature of being in Ibn Arabi's thought, demand and facilitate a profound reorientation of our cognitive approach, unlocking a vast spiritual and epistemological landscape, previously unimaginable (Coates 2002, p. 11). Coates observes that for many Western scholars, Ibn Arabi's philosophy presents a foreign cognitive structure, akin to engaging with an entirely alien worldview. A central issue in comparative studies, then, is determining what constitutes a sufficient explanation of rationality, especially when navigating diverse perspectives (Coates 2002, p. 77)[4] This inquiry relates directly to understanding why Ibn Arabi's views appear to counter the logical problem of evil argument. Throughout this paper, I have aimed to present Mackie's logical problem of evil, alongside a metaphysical examination of the concept of evil in Ibn Arabi's cosmology. The primary challenge has been bridging two radically distinct worldviews around shared questions: Why does an absolutely powerful and good God not prevent evil in the world? Does this failure to prevent evil logically contradict His divine attributes?

Mackie's formulation of the logical problem of evil is fundamentally foreign to Ibn Arabi's worldview. As discussed, Ibn Arabi articulates a metaphysical framework that

positions us within an expansive ontological backdrop. Within this metaphysical narrative, a logical problem of evil, at least in the Mackiean sense, does not arise, as Mackie's formulation assumes a reality where God, humans, and the universe exist independently of each other, a concept that Ibn Arabi would not accept. This contrast is essential to understanding the limitations of Mackie's argument, as his formulation sidesteps metaphysical assumptions, focusing solely on the internal consistency of specific divine attributes with empirical reality.

The common thread linking Mackie and Ibn Arabi is their shared aim to conceive of God as omniscient, omnipotent, and absolutely good. Yet, while Mackie's God cannot be reconciled with the existence of evil in the empirical world, Ibn Arabi's God is perfectly compatible with it. This is because Ibn Arabi's conception of knowledge transcends the empirical epistemological boundaries of this world. Mackie's portrayal of God as an omnipotent agent implies that God must assume ultimate responsibility for evil in the objective world; if God indeed possesses these attributes, He must eliminate all evil. This framework positions God as a powerful, distant subject, whose relationship with the universe is mechanistic and detached.

The implicit framework within Mackie's argument contrasts with Ibn Arabi's metaphysical understanding, which inherently affirms that all things are connected to the absolute being, God. Mackie's approach operates within a framework that favors isolated distinctions, possibly explaining why it overlooks holistic alternatives that might reshape our perception of evil's existence in relation to the divine nature. The fragmented view Mackie constructs within the analytic tradition inevitably gives rise to the problem of evil. This perspective is not unique to Mackie; indeed, the Western intellectual tradition has often emphasized divisions between knower and known, object and subject, mind and body, and creator and creation (Coates 2002, p. 15). Corbin articulates this limitation poignantly: "The great failing of so-called modern thought. . .is relentlessly set upon closing up all the outlets which could lead beyond this world" (see Coates 2002, p. 18). From this vantage point, it can be argued that fragmented metaphysical approaches fail to provide a sufficient or comprehensive perspective (Coates 2002, pp. 11–12).

Ibn Arabi comprehends all things through the unifying principle of tawhid (unity), bringing everything together in a single center. A fundamental difference between Mackie's logical problem of evil and Ibn Arabi's worldview lies in Mackie's tendency to overlook the interconnectedness of all things, concentrating solely on the existence of evil in isolation. This perspective, as evidenced in the problem of evil, fails to consider the deeper metaphysical and ontological relationships that Ibn Arabi underscores, where evil cannot be comprehended independently, but is intricately embedded within the broader divine and cosmic order. Ibn Arabi's interpretation of evil must be understood within these interconnected frameworks. His tradition asserts that it is impossible to understand the object without also understanding the subject that interacts with it. In this context, no real distinction is allowed between the knowing subject and the known object. Ignoring the truth of the knowing subject reduces the world to a mere collection of objects and entities, open to manipulation for disjointed purposes (Chittick 2010, pp. 79, 164–65). The cornerstone of Ibn Arabi's philosophy of mystical knowledge is the human species' purpose of returning to the original vision of unity, which, in existential terms, can be understood as the fundamental human project. For Ibn Arabi, returning to this total vision of original unity (known as tawhid or oneness) is the epistemological gold standard (Coates 2002, p. 9). All human rationality is built upon this foundation.

While Plantinga's defense of free will effectively addresses Mackie's argument, it remains within the boundaries of Mackie's logical framework. Plantinga's approach moves beyond these limits only by suggesting that pastoral care can help those who have suffered from evil to find meaning in it. However, he also contends that philosophical inquiry cannot advance further in this area. Ibn Arabi aligns with Plantinga in asserting that worldly reason has intrinsic limitations. However, Ibn Arabi develops his metaphysical cosmology specifically to address these limitations of human reason. As he states, "The only way to

understand God and, consequently, God's actions, is through God imparting knowledge to him" (Coates 2002, p. 46). In Ibn Arabi's view, human reason, apart from the inspired intellect, is only a small facet of reality, functioning as a veil that confines and restricts both reality and the thinker within its own rational constructs (Coates 2002, pp. 43–44).

Furthermore, Ibn Arabi's concept of the knowing subject is not that of an ordinary individual. The truly moral person has successfully embodied the divine attributes, seeing everything through the lens of *Haqq* and giving each thing its rightful place. Such a person has internalized the divine laws present in the universe to such an extent that they can accurately observe the relationships between themself and the objects around them (Chittick 2016, p. 64). Ibn Arabi also acknowledges that even the morally perfect human cannot understand everything. Every perspective on the comprehension of God and the universe holds only a partial truth. Human perception and understanding are constantly evolving. The only absolute is God; everything apart from Him is a realm of possibilities. While logic alone cannot fully grasp how God manifests in the universe, it can help approach that understanding. The spiritual journey of the morally perfect individual opens a door to the reality of existence as God manifests it. Though he/she cannot fully comprehend how God's essence reveals itself in existence, they can attain a profound understanding of it. Ibn Arabi describes this understanding, gained through divine insight, as a form of knowledge that transcends logical reasoning. It involves encountering divine manifestation and opening the heart to infinite wisdom (Chittick 2016, pp. 64–66; see also İbn Arabi 2008d, vol. 10, pp. 74, 302; İbn Arabi 2010a, vol. 12, pp. 104, 195; İbn Arabi 2007a, vol. 1, pp. 262–63; İbn Arabi 2011a, vol. 14, pp. 344, 354–55; İbn Arabi 2007b, vol. 2, p. 376).

Mackie's approach implicitly restricts the problem of evil by focusing exclusively on logical consistency, disregarding broader theological or experiential perspectives. From this, we can infer that his argument centers on three key points: God's goodness, God's omnipotence, and the existence of evil. For Mackie, the contradiction is inherent within these attributes themselves, rather than within a wider theological or experiential context. By concentrating on this internal logical contradiction, Mackie implies that external explanations, such as theological justifications or empirical insights, are irrelevant to the logical problem at hand. He asserts that the problem of evil is "a logical problem, the problem of clarifying and reconciling a number of beliefs". This statement underscores his position that the resolution lies solely within the realm of logical coherence, rather than in moral, empirical, or theological considerations. Thus, Mackie's approach could be seen not as a rejection of other perspectives outright, but as a commitment to addressing the issue through purely logical analysis.

He categorizes some proposed solutions from within theism as adequate and others as fallacious, yet he does not specify the criteria that determine their adequacy or fallaciousness. Moreover, he fails to clarify what is meant by logical argumentation or rationality, a critique that Plantinga rightly raises. In contrast, as understood in Arabi's methodology of *tahqiq*, nothing seems more ridiculous than the suggestion that truth is only what is seen, or that humans have all the tools necessary to meet all the depths of the universe and solve all its mysteries (İbn Arabi 2007a, vol. 1, pp. 262–64; İbn Arabi 2008a, vol. 7, pp. 20–21).[5] While *tahqiq* functions as a system that places all existing entities in their rightful contexts, Mackie's analytic philosophy seeks to understand something by detaching it from its underlying order. This reveals a fundamental difference between the two approaches.

Plantinga's critique of Mackie's misunderstanding of God's omnipotence is likely one that Ibn Arabi would agree with. Plantinga's defense of free will, which argues that God's power cannot logically entail the impossible, aligns with Ibn Arabi's perspective. However, what Plantinga means by "logical" in this context remains somewhat unclear. While he does not limit the definition of a logical belief to one that must convince everyone or be universally accepted, we still do not see the possibility of theistic rationality grounded in a broader existential framework, such as that found in Ibn Arabi's cosmological understanding. His cosmology is concerned not only with beliefs meaningful to theists, but also

with deeper questions about what we can expect from God and what God expects from us. This cosmological perspective could further strengthen Plantinga's position against Mackie's argument.

It is also important to note that, because Ibn Arabi does not employ an analytical method, he cannot respond to Mackie's logical argument in the same manner. However, this absence does not suggest a weakness in Ibn Arabi's thought. Rather, his framework operates outside the mode of understanding employed by Mackie. Therefore, he could not engage directly with Mackie, but would likely assert that Mackie fails to grasp the true essence of the argument. Chittick highlights Ibn Arabi's distance from modern thought, but despite this detachment, his *tahqiq* methodology could still be incorporated into contemporary modes of thinking and understanding. Chittick suggests that doing so could help overcome the challenges inherent in modern theories (Chittick 2000, p. 592).[6]

In this context, I contend that Plantinga's defense can be integrated and further developed within Ibn Arabi's cosmological framework. In Plantinga's argument, what prevents God from contradicting His attributes by allowing evil is His decision to grant humans free will. Plantinga could potentially borrow from Ibn Arabi's cosmology regarding the relationship between God and evil, which he finds complex and, therefore, did not include in his theory. For example, Plantinga's claim that God limits Himself in the face of free will, though somewhat narrow, aligns closely with Ibn Arabi's idea of divine self-limitation, due to the cosmic connection between humans and God.

Additionally, Plantinga's analogy between Paul's decision to mow the grass and God's decision to permit evil further brings him closer to Ibn Arabi's thought. However, Plantinga's analogy does not sufficiently explain the relationship between Paul and his decision to mow the grass. This leads to the conclusion that the reason God permits evil is ultimately unknowable, which is also the point Plantinga seeks to convey. If Ibn Arabi were to handle the same example, he would likely connect Paul's decision to mow the grass to the environment in which he finds himself. Thus, the readers of this analogy, who have achieved moral perfection, would probably better understand Paul's actions through metaphysical reasoning rather than analytical thought and, as a result, would not ask the same questions that Plantinga poses.

Understanding the world always begins from a specific starting point and this starting point shapes both the direction and the aim of the understanding. However, some starting points fail to lead the researcher anywhere. Mackie's logical problem of evil is one such argument. It does not provide meaningful insight into understanding evil in the world. Similarly, Plantinga's defense of free will, while successful in refuting Mackie's claims, leaves many questions about the problem of evil unanswered. In contrast, Ibn Arabi's cosmology acknowledges the ambiguity of human perception and offers a flexible framework that situates us within a web of metaphysical relationships when grappling with the concept of evil. Unlike the debate between Mackie and Plantinga, which seems self-contained and unproductive, Arabi's cosmology invites deep and vivid reflection on the meaning of evil that extends outward. In this view, Ibn Arabi argues that true knowledge of God requires experiential insight, which is accessed through the heart rather than the mind. This experiential, or "tasted" (dhawq) knowledge, moves beyond the analytical distinctions that reason imposes, pointing toward a more direct, personal, and mystical awareness. The article likely discusses how Ibn Arabi's perception aligns with deconstructive thought, which similarly questions the stability of rational categories and the assumption that reason alone can capture truth. This resonance with deconstruction helps to illustrate his idea that rational thought, while necessary for structured inquiry, ultimately becomes an obstacle when it comes to experiencing divine truth directly.

Ibn Arabi frequently offers a profoundly intricate worldview, one that can feel almost insurmountable in its complexity (Coates 2002, p. 32). In *The Sufi Path*, Chittick expresses a concern and a hope that deeply resonate with my own perspective, articulating them as follows:

> I have. . . avoided making connections between Ibn al-'Arabi's ideas and those of other Sufis, other Muslim intellectual authorities, other religious traditions, and the contemporary world, since these are fields of investigation which know no limits. Perhaps others will be inspired to follow up the obvious leads. (Chittick 1989, p. xx)
>
> This study has sought to explore one of these leads.

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Notes

1 For similar ideas in contemporary philosophy, see Mill (1957); Flew (1955); Ducasse (1953).

2 For contemporary examples of this debate, refer to Sterba (2019).

3 From this point onward, I interpret Ibn Arabi through his masterwork *Futuhat al-Makkiyya,* published in 18 volumes in Turkish, and the works of William Chittick, the foremost commentator on Ibn Arabi. Volume and page numbers are cited according to Demirli's book. A Turkish translation of the book can also be accessed here: https://archive.org/details/MuhyiddinIbnArabiFutuhatIMekkiye18_201812/Muhyiddin%20ibn%20Arabi%20-%20Futuhat-i%20Mekkiye%20-%201/ (accessed on 15 December 2023).

4 For a different contextualization of the epistemological differences of Islamic theology, see (Batak 2008, 2024; Kaya 2019, 2020a, 2020b; Akay Dag 2022). See also for an example of a response from Islamic thought to the contemporary problem of evil Balci (2022).

5 This is also highlighted in *Quran* 2:3 and 2:255.

6 For another example of the transfer of Ibn Arabi's philosophy to the Western tradition, see Alpyağıl (2008).

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Article

Who Will Be Saved: The Right or the Upright?

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Abstract: There is a growing body of literature on the Islamic theology and philosophy of salvation. This literature can be loosely grouped into three main groups: there are those that link the right path of salvation to a specific Muslim group, others that link it to believing in the Prophet Muhammad regardless of the theological group that a Muslim may follow, and there are those that link it to the belief in God and doing good. Despite this variety, what largely unites those various interpretations is that they all emphasize the "rightness" of one's theological path, i.e., asking the question, what is the "right" track to God? However, what received scant attention so far is the question of "uprightness" as opposed to "rightness", i.e., Is salvation primarily about being "right" (*muḥiqq*), or rather about being "upright" (*ṣādiq/mukhliṣ*)? Drawing on Q. 5:116-119, which presents a conflict between "rightness" and "uprightness" embodied in Jesus' conversation with God regarding the fate of those who did not have the right theology, and taking its cues from Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) who attempted to rejuvenate Islamic theology through spirituality, this article takes "uprightness" as the primary requisite for one to attain salvation and argues that the Quran, despite the emphasis it places on pursuing the "right" path, gives primacy to the "uprightness" of one's position instead. Uprightness in the article is used in reference to the quality of being honest, responsible, and moral, as opposed to being merely "right" or "correct" theologically.

Keywords: salvation; Quran; denomination; Prophet Muhammad; God; rightness; uprightness

1. Introduction

The question of salvation is not only common but is also essential to many, if not all, faith traditions. In the modern world, where people intermingle in every nook and cranny, the question gained more momentum and led to the emergence of a new field of study that is specifically dedicated to generating and consolidating conversations about this question, namely the field of theology of religions.

However, much confusion exists not only as to what Islam teaches about salvation but also whether or not salvation is a central question to it. While Mohammed H. Khalil, the author of *Islam and the Fate of the Others* (2012), argues that salvation is "arguably the major theme of the Qurʾan" (Khalil 2012, p. 1), Ismāʿīl al-Fārūqī (d. 1986) takes the opposite direction, contending that "In the Islamic view, human beings are no more 'fallen' than they are 'saved'. Because they are not 'fallen', they have no need for a savior. But because they are not 'saved' either, they need to do good works—and do them ethically—which alone will earn them the desired 'salvation'" (al-Faruqi 1979, p. 9).

However, regardless of the disagreement implied between the two positions, both positions emphasize the Muslim's need to be following the "right" track. Traditionally, defining this "right" track was the primary business of Islamic theology, where theologians stipulated the necessary requirements for salvation and the indispensable means for escaping hell (Abdelnour 2022a; Abdelnour 2022b). While Muslim theologians did disagree on the theological requirements for salvation, the necessity of the "rightness" of the track as such was barely compromised.

This article finds issues in this approach and charts a more holistic path. While it commends the emphasis it places on the "rightness" of one's track, it condemns its marginalizing of one's "uprightness". A common response is that "uprightness" is not the strict business of theology as such but rather that of Sufism/spirituality. Nevertheless, separating those two realms somehow generated two types of discourses: one that is often seen as being more epistemic and systemic, while the other is seen as being more sympathetic and sanctifying when the Quran does not seem to be endorsing this duality, as shall be seen later. This article attempts to chart a new approach to the question by linking theology to Sufism, certainty to sincerity, and rightness to uprightness. It argues that prioritizing "rightness" over "uprightness" or "certainty" over "sincerity" largely reduces Islam's aim to "salvation" alone and forsakes another important goal that Islam aims to achieve, i.e., sanctification. Without shedding some light on the concept of sanctification, the Quran's theology of salvation reduces Islamic theology to a code of creedal beliefs, and hence, its emphasis on good works alongside right faith does not make much sense. In doing so, it shifts the focus from being on the "certainty" of the rightness of one's path to being on the "uprightness" of one's position.

To structure the discussion and see where we are in the literature, three questions will be explored: What has been going on in terms of how Muslims understood salvation? Why has this been going on? What ought to be going on? As the questions themselves suggest, the first one is descriptive in nature, the second is interpretative, and the third is normative and, hence, prescriptive.

2. What Has Been Going on? And Why?

Muslims' considerable engagement with the question of salvation resulted in a diversity of views. Those views can loosely be categorized into three key views. First, the denomination-centered salvation. Second, the Prophet-centered salvation. Third, the God-centered salvation. We will briefly look at each of those views and offer some critical insights as we go; then, we will end this article by proposing the concept of "uprightness" as an alternative analytical tool to mere "rightness".

2.1. The Denomination-Centered Salvation

The first view takes its cue from a tradition attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, who says, "There will befall my community what befell the children of Israel. The children of Israel divided into seventy-two religious groups and my community will divide into seventy-three religious groups, one more than they. All of them are in hellfire except one religious group" (Ibn Mājah n.d., *Sunan*, fitan 68). In light of this tradition, many theological groups within the Islamic tradition claimed to be the saved group.

Perhaps nothing better exemplifies this orientation than the work of the early Ashʿarite theologian Abū Manṣūr ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037). In his *al-Farq bayna al-firaq wa-bayān al-firqah al-nājiyah minhum* (*Characteristics of Muslim Denominations and Identifying Those To-Be-Saved*), he uses the concept of *al-firqah al-nājiyah* (the to-be-saved denomination) to identify this group and denigrate its opponents. Explaining the importance of this denomination-centered framework, he wrote to his questioner, "You asked me to draw the distinction between the religious group that saves, the step of which does not stumble and from which grace does not depart, and the misguided groups which regard the darkness of injustice as light and the belief in truth as leading to perdition; these are condemned to everlasting fire and shall find no aid from God (al-Baghdādī 1988, p. 21). While one would naturally expect al-Baghdādī to be referring to world religions by this description, he, in reality, is referring to intra-Muslim theological schools.

Having set the context of this question, al-Baghdādī engaged in a lengthy answer where he stated that there were groups that professed the two primary creeds of Islam, i.e., There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His Prophet, yet despite this, they are not of the saved community as such. As he enumerates the tenets of salvation, he cites points of contention among Muslim theological schools, chief among these is, by way of

excluding the philosophers from the plan of salvation, the belief that the world is created, and, by way of excluding the Ismailis, the belief in the infallibility of figures beyond the Prophet Muhammad. While the heresies of the Muʿtazilites and the Khawārij are less severe (hence, they would be entitled to be buried in the Muslim cemeteries and to pray in Sunni mosques), no prayer should be allowed over their dead bodies, nor any animal slaughtered by them is a lawful food, nor may they marry a Sunni woman, and vice versa if the woman subscribes to their belief (al-Baghdādī 1988, pp. 29–31).

While this view is not mainstream today, it is still alive across the Muslim world to varying degrees, more particularly in the Wahhabi tradition, which contends that "he who grasps this seventy-three scheme, grasps the essence of Islam" (Duwayyish 2002, 1424 H, p. 152). They get their cues from Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), who, like al-Baghdādī, dedicated an entire book to the identification of this group, namely, his *Kitāb iqtiḍāʾ al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm mukhālafat aṣḥāb al-jaḥīm* (*The Book of Discerning the Straight Path from the Companions of Hell)* (Abdelnour 2024).

However, this view is problematic for various reasons. First, it goes against the Quranic philosophy of individuality when it comes to salvation, as opposed to collectivity, which is emphasized in Q. 19:95. The verse states, "Every one of them will come to Him singly on the Day of Judgment". In his *Reconstruction of the Religious Thought in Islam*, Muḥammad Iqbāl (d. 1938) contended that this verse must be taken as an evident insight into the Islamic philosophy of salvation. Whatever one's fate is, they will always come to God as individuals, not as groups (Iqbal 2012, p. xxi). Henceforth, thinking about salvation in terms of groups and denominations somehow goes against the Islamic overarching narrative.

On the contrary, a quick perusal of Islam's spiritual tradition, Sufism, swiftly reveals the individualistic nature of one's journey to God and, hence, to salvation, as opposed to this collectivizing one. By this, I refer to the axiom that says, "The ways of access to God are as many as the number of human breaths". The 13th-century Khwarezmian scholar Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d. 1221) records this principle as the first foundational principle in one's journey to experiencing God (Najm al-Dīn Kubrā 2014, p. 15).

Another issue with this denomination-centered framework is that it does not offer much engagement with the Quran. It assumes that traditions attributed to the Prophet have the capacity to qualify the generalities of the Quran and particularize its fluidities. In his *Miftāḥ al-Jannah fī al-iʿtiṣām bil-Sunnah* (*The Key to Paradise is in Adherence to the Sunnah*), Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505) cites al-Awzāʿī (d. 774), who states, "the Sunnah came to be a judge over the Book [the Quran]; it is not the other way round" (al-Suyūṭī 1987, p. 24). The problem with this paradigm is that it subdues the primary and the most authentic source of the Islamic tradition, i.e., the Quran, to the Sunnah, which, despite its undeniable importance to the Islamic tradition, not only cannot match the Quranic authenticity but it is also much more contextually contingent, while the Quran primarily speaks in principles and goes far beyond historical contexts.

2.2. The Prophet-Centered Salvation

Nevertheless, al-Ghazālī (1993, d. 1111) charted a new path by replacing the centrality of *al-firqa al-nājīya* with the centrality of the Prophet Muhammad and, hence, furnished a more inclusivist understanding of the Islamic plan of salvation. In his *Fayṣal al-tafriqa bayna al-Islām wa-a'l-zandaqa* (*The Decisive Criterion between Islam and Masked Infidelity*), al-Ghazālī problematized this denomination-centered framework (see Abdelnour 2021, pp. 86–101) and instead placed the Prophet Muhammad at the middle of the discussion. Discussing the fate of non-Muslims, he wrote,

> I am referring here to those who reside in the far regions of Byzantium and Anatolia who have not come in contact with the message of Islam. These people fall into three categories: (1) A party who never heard so much as the name 'Muḥammad'. These people are excused. (2) A party among those who lived in lands adjacent to the lands of Islam and had contact, therefore, with Muslims, who knew his name, his character, and the miracles he wrought. These are the

> blasphemous Unbelievers. (3) A third party whose case falls between these two poles. These people knew the name 'Muḥammad', but nothing of his character and attributes. Instead, all they heard since childhood was that some arch-liar carrying the name 'Muḥammad' claimed to be a prophet, just as our children heard that an arch-liar and deceiver called al-Muqaffaʿ falsely claimed that God sent him (as a prophet) and then challenged people to disprove his claim. This group, in my opinion, is like the first group. Even though they heard his name, they heard the opposite of what his true attributes were. And this does not provide enough incentive to compel them to investigate (his true status). (Jackson 2002, p. 126)

In the above quotation, al-Ghazālī's concern is not Muslim denominations but rather non-Muslims. Given that all Muslim denominations accept the Prophet Muhammad, they are somehow included in Islam's plan of salvation. The question that now became pressing is the fate of non-Muslims who do not accept the Prophethood of Muhammad. Do they qualify for salvation? Al-Ghazālī classifies non-Muslims into three main camps based on how they related to the Prophet Muhammad. The first camp is that of those who never heard of him. This camp will likely be forgiven as their ignorance of Muhammad is through no fault of their own and for the fact that they have not rejected him out of arrogance. On the contrary, the second camp encompasses those who have heard of him, learned about his character, and examined his miracles; yet, they reject him and resist his message out of arrogance. Al-Ghazālī argued that this group has no excuse, for their resistance is not based on innocence but rather on stubbornness. In the middle, there is the third camp, which includes those whom Muhammad's name has reached, yet they do not know much about his true personality. Al-Ghazālī believed such people would likely be excused like the first camp, for while they had heard of Muhammad, what they heard did not really encourage them to understand and accept his message.

*A Comparative History of Catholic and Aš*ʿ*arī Theologies of Truth and Salvation* (2021) shows how al-Ghazālī's modified framework gained currency across the Sunni tradition and that it largely influenced the shape of the pre-modern Sunni theology of salvation. Within the same framework, in his *Islam and the Fate of Others* (2012), Khalil studies the positions of four major classical Muslim theologians who centralized Prophet Muhammad in their understanding of salvation: al-Ghazālī as a Sunnī theologian; Ibn Taymiyyah as an Atharī (traditionist) theologian; Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240) as a Ṣūfī theologian; and Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) as a modern Salafī theologian. While they differ in the details of their positions, they all centralize the Prophet Muhammad in God's plan of salvation and view Islam through the lens of the abrogation theory, i.e., believing that Islam abrogated non-Islamic faith traditions (Abdelnour 2023).

Despite the relative openness that this paradigm promised, it had its own issues. Chief among these is the fact that the Quran seems to centralize God instead. Q. 3:64 states, "Say, 'O People of the Book, come to a word that is common between us and you—that we will not worship except God and not associate anything with Him and not take one another as lords instead of Allah.' But if they turn away, then say, 'Bear witness that we are Muslims [submitting to Him]'". The verse, as it stands, places God, not the Prophet Muhammad, as a meeting point between the People of the Book. More distantly, this paradigm does not engage much with verses that leave much space for a more inclusive plan of salvation, e.g., Q. 2:62, which says, "Indeed, those who believe and those who are Jews or Christians or Sabeans—anyone who believes in God and the Last Day and does good—will have their reward with their Lord, and no fear will there be for them, nor will they grieve". However, this is understandable given that promotors of this paradigm often read the Quran in the light of the Sunnah, as stated earlier in the denomination-centered section.

2.3. The God-Centered Salvation

The advent of modernity, which brought Muslims to much deeper contact with non-Muslims, acted as a precursor to a deeper conversation about the question of salvation.

Chief among thinkers who engaged with this question is the renowned Egyptian reformer Muhammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905), who constituted a critical milestone in the discussion. With the centrality of the Quran to ʿAbduh's thought, he appealed to various Quranic references that placed God in the middle of the equation. A common scriptural reference in his works is Q. 4:123–125, which says,

> Paradise is not earned by your wishful thinking nor by that of the People of the Book. Whoever does a wrong will be recompensed for it, and he will not find besides God a protector or a helper. And whoever does good deeds, whether male or female, while being a believer—those will enter Paradise and will not be wronged, even as much as the speck on a date seed. And who is better in religion than one who submits himself to God while being a doer of good and follows the religion of Abraham, inclining toward truth?

Unpacking those verses, ʿAbduh provides the context in which those verses are revealed and ends up with a number of important conclusions. As for the context, he cites various early authorities saying that these verses were revealed in Medina following a disagreement between a group of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, with each group asserting their monopoly on paradise. Henceforth, the verses were revealed to challenge each group and offer a more God-centered view of salvation. Stemming from this, ʿAbduh calls such attitudes ones of "theological racism". While we are familiar with skin-based racism, ʿAbduh applies this concept equally to religion/theology. Namely, one can be theologically racist. What follows from this is a more emphasis on good acts, as Q. 4:124 makes clear, whether performed by male or female, given that they are accessible to anyone and do not require any form of unearned privilege. What is more is that instead of defining Muslims and Islam as the religion of the Prophet Muhammad, ʿAbduh argues that Muslims have largely altered the meaning of Islam and confused *islām* here with Islam. Namely, they have understood the references to Islam as ones that refer to themselves as the followers of the Prophet Muhammad, when the term should be understood in its broadest sense, i.e., submitters to God, as it is more consistent with how the Quran uses the term (Abdelnour 2021, p. 143).

Many other theologians and Quran commentators have made similar arguments. The previously quoted work, *A Comparative History of Catholic and Aš*ʿ*arī Theologies of Truth and Salvation* (2021, pp. 149–57), explains how Al-Azhar, ʿAbduh's alma mater, received his paradigm shift and how it charted a new path to understanding what it means to be a Muslim according to the Quranic definition. Similarly, Fazlur Rahman argues along the same lines in his masterpiece *Major Themes of the Qurʾān* (1994) and Khaled Abou El-Fadl in his *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (Abou El Fadl 2005).

Having said that, one may safely argue that the common thread among the above three paradigms is an emphasis on "rightness", i.e., having a certain absolutist belief in the rightness of one's chosen position. While "rightness" is naturally linked to religious truth and, hence, understandably important, those positions, to various degrees, end up measuring salvation according to some formalistic measures, which leaves little room for concepts that are not less important to Islamic theology, i.e., uprightness and honesty, which are accessible to God alone.

In arriving at those conclusions, I take my cues from al-Ghazālī. By the end of his *Fayṣal al-tafriqa bayna al-Islām wa-a'l-zandaqa*, he, despite his Muhammadan-centered view, which he promoted in the same book, reminds us of the limits of our definition of what is "right". After grappling with the subtleties of theology and the limits of orthodoxy and borders of heresy, he wrote, "Think, then, of God's mercy as being as vast and as all-encompassing as it actually is. And do not measure divine issues with the adumbrative scales of formal reasoning" (Jackson 2002, p. 129). He then goes on to advise his readers to know that the Hereafter is ever so close to this world. Namely, like the vast majority of people in this world enjoy health and material well-being, so, too, will it be scarce for one to dwell in the Hellfire forever, "compared to the number of those who will be saved outright and those who will ultimately be taken out of the Hellfire" (Jackson 2002, p. 129). He then

links this position to divine mercy, stating that if such was not the case, there would be no meaning to the statement of the Prophet that says, "The first thing God inscribed in the First Book was, 'I am God. There is no god but Me. My mercy outstrips my wrath' (Jackson 2002, p. 129). He then ended the conversation saying, "So delight in the good news of God's mercy and unconditional salvation if you combine faith with good deeds, and of unmitigated perdition if you are devoid of these" (Jackson 2002, p. 129).

Another observation is that the previous discussions seem to have reduced the Quranic view of salvation to its negative function, i.e., being saved from hellfire. As a natural concomitant to that, it sidelined its positive function, i.e., *tazkiyah* (sanctification), which is no less central. When the Quran speaks of the function of the Quran and that of the Prophet Muhammad, it does not limit it to mere salvation from hellfire, but rather, and probably more primarily, as one of sanctification. A case in point is Q. 62:2, which states, "It is He who has sent among the unlettered people a Messenger from themselves reciting to them His verses, *sanctifying* them and teaching them the Book and wisdom—although they were before in clear error". According to the Quran, this sanctification is not only a matter of the Here and for the Here, but also of the Hereafter. Q. 3:77 says, "Indeed, those who exchange the covenant of God and their own oaths for a small price will have no share in the Hereafter, and God will not speak to them or look at them on the Day of Resurrection, nor will He *sanctify* them; and they will have a painful punishment".

3. What Ought to Be Going on? From Rightness to Uprightness!

Those who endorse exclusivist views of salvation, as well as those who endorse inclusivist ones, equally appeal to the fifth chapter of the Quran. Endorsers of the inclusivist paradigm often cite Q. 5:48, which clearly states that it was God's intention to diversify our paths of salvation for us all to vie in virtue. Proponents of exclusivist positions often cite verses such as Q. 5:13, which states that the People of the Book have tampered with their scriptures, and, hence, such scriptures can barely be trusted. Even more dangerously, verses 72 and 73 of the same chapter have commonly been understood by exclusivist interpretations to be placing Christians out of the monotheistic camp due to their flawed understanding of God. It is worth citing the whole passage here:

> 72 They have certainly disbelieved who say, "Allah is the Messiah, the son of Mary" while the Messiah has said, "O Children of Israel, worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord." Indeed, he who associates others with Allah—Allah has forbidden him Paradise, and his refuge is the Fire. And there are not for the wrongdoers any helpers. 73 They have certainly disbelieved who say, "Allah is the third of three." And there is no god except one God. And if they do not desist from what they are saying, there will surely afflict the disbelievers among them a painful punishment. 74 So will they not repent to Allah and seek His forgiveness? And Allah is Forgiving and Merciful. 75 The Messiah, son of Mary, was not but a messenger; [other] messengers have passed on before him. And his mother was a supporter of truth. They both used to eat food. Look how We make clear to them the signs; then look how they are deluded. (Saheeh International 2011)

The above quotation from the Quran deals with the important question of taking gods besides God. One may observe here that the Quranic passage views this as a form of shirk, inviting those who believe in Jesus and Mary in this way to look at Jesus and his mother as mere humans who have been privileged with prophethood and sainthood but not as divine figures. I used here one of the most popular Quran translations today, *Sahih International*, which views those problematic aspects as ones that would render those who believe in this not only mistaken in their beliefs but rather as deniers of God completely. Instead of translating the verbs *kafara* in 72 and 73 as "defied" (which is Muhammad Abdel Haleem's choice in his Quran translation Abdel Haleem 2004), it rather translated it as "disbelieve".

Nevertheless, with the Quran's critique of such beliefs, the questions that remain to be asked are, "How does the Quran view the fate of those who remain committed to such mistaken creeds according to the Quran's own internal logic? Do they have a

chance of salvation?" It is here where the key contribution of this article lies. Here, I invite Muslim theologians to consider a passage at the end of this chapter, which seems to endorse uprightness, as opposed to rightness, as God's criterion for judgment on the Day of Judgment. These are verses 116–119 of the fifth chapter, which say,

> 116 When God says, 'Jesus, son of Mary, was it you who said to people, "Take me and my mother as two gods alongside God"?' he will say, 'May You be exalted! I would never say what I had no right to say—if I had said such a thing You would have known it: You know all that is within me, though I do not know what is within You, You alone have full knowledge of things unseen—117 I told them only what You commanded me to: "Worship God, my Lord and your Lord." I was a witness over them during my time among them. Ever since You took my soul, You alone have been the watcher over them: You are witness to all things 118 If You punish them, they are Your servants; if You forgive them, You are the Almighty, the Wise.' 119 God will say, 'This is a Day when the *upright* will benefit from their *uprightness*. They will have Gardens graced with flowing streams, there to remain forever. God is pleased with them and they with Him: that is the supreme triumph'. (My own translation)

Here, we are presented with a situation where Jesus is encountered by God on the Day of Judgment, and Jesus is asked whether he asked his followers to associate him and his mother as partners with God. After absolving himself from this charge, Jesus leaves the decision to God. What is more enlightening and of particular relevance here is that God introduces a new criterion that goes beyond the specific subtleties of truth, i.e., uprightness. Namely, the question on the Day of Judgment will primarily be whether one was "upright" in their faith or not. While all Quran translators translate *ṣādiqīn* here as "the truthful ones", I find this a remote translation/interpretation, for the Quran commonly uses the term *ṣidq* in reference to uprightness or honesty, not in reference to the truth as such. Additionally, if the Quran leaves the final decision to "truth" (rightness) here as opposed to "uprightness", verse 119 would be superfluous, given that the Quran already stated its own unfavorable view of those creeds.

Centralizing uprightness as opposed to rightness should naturally help address and redress religious fanaticism, as it encourages theists to avoid entitling certain people to paradise or assigning others to hell by emphasizing that such judgments are God-alone matters, as may be understood from the end of Q. 5:48, "To God you will all return, so God will let you know that in which you differed". Similarly, Q. 5:118 may attest to this, where after absolving himself from Trinitarianism, Jesus says to God, "If You should punish them—indeed they are Your servants; but if You forgive them—indeed it is You who is the Exalted in Might, the Wise". Commenting on this, Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373) wrote, "This statement implies that [we must] defer judgment to God -the Almighty" (Ibn Kathīr 1999, p. 223).

Along the same lines goes the Sunna. Muslims reported that the Prophet Muhammad was once told of a man saying, "I swear by God that God will not forgive so and so". In response, God said, "Who is this who swears that I will not forgive so and so? On the contrary, I have forgiven so and so and have made your deeds to come to nothing" (al-Nawawī 1930, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Book 45, *ḥadīth* 178). Al-Bukhārī (d. 870) reported that a Medinan Muslim woman with the name of Umm al-ʿAlā' narrated that the Meccan Muslim emigrants were distributed among the Medinan Muslims by drawing lots, and her household had a man with the name of ʿUthmān ibn Maẓʿūn in their share and he was granted a stay with them in their house. When ʿUthmān suffered a fatal disease and died in their house, the Prophet came to see him off. In the presence of the Prophet, Umm al-ʿAlā' (addressing the dead body) said, "May God be Merciful to you! I testify that God has now honoured you." The Prophet immediately said, "How do you know that God has honoured him?" Umm al-ʿAlā' replied, "On whom else shall God bestow His honour [if not on a devout Companion like ʿUthmān]?" The Prophet replied, "As for him, by God, certainty has come to him. By God, I wish him all good (from God). By God, although I am

God's Apostle, I do not know what God will do to me". Umm al-ʿAlā' commented, "By God, I will never assert the righteousness of anybody after that" (al-Bukhārī 1997, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Book 91, *ḥadīth* 21).

On the other hand, uprightness tends to lead to a sense of curiosity and openness to learning from the other, while rightness alone tends to lead to a sense of complacency with what one knows. Ibn Mājah (d. 887) narrated that the Prophet Muhammad had said, "Wisdom is the lost property of the believer, so wherever he finds it, he is most deserving of it" (Sunan Ibn Mājah, Book 37, *ḥadīth* 70). On the contrary, centralizing rightness seems to have led many contemporary Muslims to a sense of complacency in how they understand a central Islamic concept such as the concept of *fiṭrah* "natural disposition". To give some context, the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said, "Every child is born on the *fitra* (uprightness), and it is his parents who make him a Jew or a Christian" (al-Bukhārī 1997, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Book 82, *ḥadīth* 6). Many contemporary Muslim preachers equate the notion of *fitra* with Islam. Hence, many converts today dismiss the term "converts", using "reverts" instead, driven by the conviction that the so-called "converts" were originally born Muslims and their affiliation with religions other than Islam was more of a deviation, leading to a common conviction among Muslims that "unless there is a cause for deviation, their fiṭra will lead humans to become Muslims" (Griffel 2012, p. 3). On the contrary, al-Ghazālī, driven by his burning aspiration for sincerity and uprightness, did not exclude Islam from this prophetic statement and took this report as his prime motive for the pursuit of truth outside the fold of Islam. In his *al-Munqiḏ min al-ḍalāl* (*The Deliverer from Error*), he wrote,

> I saw that Christian youths always grew up to be Christians, Jewish youths to be Jews and Muslim youths to be Muslims. I heard, too, the 70 Tradition related of the Prophet of God according to which he said, "Everyone who is born is born with a sound nature; it is his parents who make him a Jew or a Christian or a Magian." My inmost being was moved to discover what his original nature really was and what the beliefs derived from the authority of parents and teachers really were. The attempt to distinguish between these authority-based opinions and their principles developed the mind, for in distinguishing the true in them from the false differences appeared. (Watt 1996, p. 21)

Within this context, the Quran considers it a sin of arrogance to be certain of one's salvation in the Hereafter. Q. 46:9 establishes this in the following way, "Say, "'I am not the first Messenger. I do not know what will be done to me or to you. I follow only what has been revealed to me and my duty is only to give clear warning". The Prophet Muhammad further confirms this when he says, "None can enter Paradise through his good deeds alone". The Prophet's companions said, "Not even you, oh Prophet of God". He said, "Not even myself, unless Allah bestows His favour and mercy on me". He then said, "So be moderate in your religious deeds and do the deeds that are within your ability: and none of you should wish for death, for if he is a good doer, he may increase his good deeds, and if he is an evil doer, he may repent to Allah" (al-Bukhārī 1997, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Book 75, *ḥadīth* 33). God's standard is too high, and man's sinfulness is not only inevitable but also too great. Thus, every good work of the human is tainted with sin, and the best of his efforts would naturally fail to be good as God defines. Hence, instead of relying on one's deeds, which are inherently flawed, God invites us to have trust in His mercy and to stay hopeful and optimistic, knowing that He is loving and forgiving. Hence, we access salvation from God not primarily by works but by our faith in Him. All these meanings can primarily be cultivated within the context of uprightness and sincerity, not self-styled rightness.

What remains to be asked, however, is what the value of good works is. Within this framework, doing good deeds is primarily a "sign" of our thankfulness to God and our recognition that we accept Him and His grace. As the popular proverb goes, a human being is like a tree whose fruits are the signs of being alive, and doing good deeds is the sign of faithful living. Hence, there is a dialectic relationship between faith and doing righteous deeds; receiving salvation requires good deeds, and good deeds are signs of coming close

to grasping salvation. Al-Ghazālī, in his short treatise, *Ayyuhā al-walad* (O My Beloved Disciple), explained the dynamic between faith and good deeds in a most poetic way. It is worth quoting him at length here,

> O disciple, be neither destitute of good deeds nor devoid of spiritual states, for you can be sure that mere knowledge will not help. It is as though a man in the desert had ten Indian swords and other weapons besides the man being brave and a warrior, and a huge, terrifying lion attacked him. What is your opinion? Will the weapons repel this danger of his from him without their being used and being wielded? It is obvious they will not repel unless drawn and wielded! Likewise, if a man studied a hundred thousand intellectual issues and understood them, but did not act on the strength of them, they would not be of use to him except by taking action . . . [E]ven if you studied for a hundred years and collected a thousand books, you would not be eligible for the mercy of God the Exalted except through action . . . [F]aith is a verbal declaration, consent by the heart and action in accordance with the [five] pillars; and the evidence of deeds is incalculable; even though the worshipper attains Paradise by the bounty and grace of God the Exalted, nevertheless [this is] constituent to him being predisposed through obedience to him and worship of him, since "The Mercy of God is near to those who do good". (al-Ghazālī 2005, pp. 8–10)

4. Conclusions

This article challenges the common epistemic separation between theology and Sufism with regard to the question of salvation. Muslim theologians have often disagreed on the minimum requirements for salvation, but they always emphasized the element of "rightness" when it comes to theology. Hence, *takfir* was rampant among various Muslim schools of theology, as opposed to Muslim schools of law. Al-Shāfiʿī's (d. 820) advice to his student al-Muzanī (d. 878) confirms this, "Stick to the study of Islamic law and avoid Islamic theology, for to be told you are mistaken is much safer than being told you are a kafir" (al-Shaʿrānī 2018, p. 15). On top of that, there existed a common presumption that theology addressed the mind alone while Sufism addressed the heart. Hence, both subjects barely worked together in terms of defining a believer theologically. *The Higher Objectives of Islamic Theology* (2022, pp. 31–36) addresses this disconnection more fully and shows how this separation does not fully capture the Quranic philosophy of salvation.

Taking my cues from the Quran, I appeal to Q. 5:116–119, which somehow shows a conflict between "rightness" and "uprightness" embodied in Jesus' conversation with God on the Day of Judgement regarding the fate of those who did not understand their theology correctly. Resolving this, this article highlighted the concept of "uprightness", which is mentioned in Q. 5:119, as opposed to "rightness", as the most indispensable requirement for salvation and sanctification. In doing so, this article hopes to have helped reconnect some of the institutes of Islamic theology to those of Islamic spirituality, a disconnection that has largely contributed to the drying out of the sources of Islamic theology.

While the classical position emphasized that, in the absence of right faith, an individual's good deeds and good intentions lack religious merit (Khalil 2013, p. 46), this article contends that "uprightness" instead should take the front seat. Ideally, one should strive to combine both, but one's attempt is not futile if he/she does not understand it correctly, especially given the limitations that accompany one's journey in the pursuit of truth (Abdelnour 2022b, pp. 63–65).

Finally, this article largely dispels the popular claim that Islam teaches salvation solely by deeds and shows how this understanding is a flawed one. If the Quran proposes works-based salvation, salvation would probably be impossible, as our good works can never be good enough to meet the divine standard, let alone the fact that humans are inherently prone to sinning and susceptible to missing the right track, if not in belief, then in practice.

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Islamic Insights on Religious Disagreement: A New Proposal

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Abstract: In this article, I consider how the epistemic problem of religious disagreement has been viewed within the Islamic tradition. Specifically, I consider two religious epistemological trends within the tradition: Islamic Rationalism and Islamic Traditionalism. In examining the approaches of both trends toward addressing the epistemic problem, I suggest that neither is wholly adequate. Nonetheless, I argue that both approaches offer insights that might be relevant to building a more adequate response. So, I attempt to combine insights from both by drawing a distinction between inferential and noninferential reflective responsibility. Given this distinction, I argue that it may be possible for a theist to remain steadfast in upholding their tradition-specific theistic belief, without having to hold that belief by way of inference; but nevertheless, having to be sufficiently reflectively responsible in forming their theistic belief noninferentially.

Keywords: Islamic philosophy of religion; epistemology of disagreement; religious disagreement; reformed epistemology; theistic evidentialism

1. Introduction

Religious believers of differing religious traditions disagree as to the nature of God, His revelation, and His purposes for humankind. Similarly, religious believers disagree with non-believers as to whether God exists at all. Yet, in many such cases of religious disagreement, it often appears that either party to the dispute is just as intellectually virtuous and evidentially familiar as the other. The presence of religious disagreement between people of similar epistemic standing (i.e., epistemic peers) is thus often considered by contemporary philosophers to be a potential threat to the epistemic rationality or justification of one's theistic belief (including atheistic belief). Let us call this the epistemic problem of religious disagreement.[1]

It is my aim in this article to contend with this problem. Specifically, I seek to consider the problem in reference to how it has been viewed within the Islamic tradition. In doing so, I will refer to two broad religious epistemological trends within Islamic thought: Islamic Rationalism and Islamic Traditionalism. I will point to how the former corresponds to a broadly theistic evidentialist perspective, whereas the latter amounts to a reformed epistemological view. I argue that Muslim rationalists can be understood as adopting a limited form of conciliationism and Muslim traditionalists as upholding steadfastness. In considering both perspectives as it bears on the issue of religious disagreement, I contend that neither is wholly adequate but that both contain important insights that enable us to put forth a more adequate response. In drawing on the insights gleaned from both Islamic Rationalism and Islamic Traditionalism, I offer a response to the epistemic problem of religious disagreement based on a distinction between inferential reflective responsibility (IRR) and noninferential reflective responsibility (NIRR). I argue that this distinction can enable us to see how believers may remain steadfast in upholding their tradition-specific theistic beliefs, even if they do not base such beliefs on theistic arguments or inference.

My approach then will be as follows. In Section 2, I sketch out the main preliminaries of the discussion concerning epistemic peerhood, responding to peer disagreement, and the epistemic problem of religious disagreement. In Section 3, I outline the Islamic Rationalist

view, highlighting both reasons for and against this perspective. In Section 4, I do the same for Islamic Traditionalism. In Section 5, based on the previous two sections, I attempt to combine the central insights of both views toward addressing the epistemic problem of religious disagreement. I also consider an objection to the view. In Section 6, I conclude.

2. Two Preliminaries

I want to initiate our discussion then by laying out two important preliminaries before turning toward the relevant Islamic theistic perspectives on the epistemic problem of religious disagreement.

2.1. Epistemic Peerhood and Disagreement

The matter of disagreement among epistemic peers prompts two immediate questions: (a) the characterization of an epistemic peer, and (b) the epistemological consequences when such peers disagree. In attending to the first question, I take it that epistemic peers roughly denotes the following (cf., Simpson 2013):

> **EP**: epistemic agents similarly well-qualified—in terms of epistemic virtue and evidential familiarity—to form judgements with respect to some issue.

It is essential to clarify the intended meaning here. First, epistemic agents being similarly well-qualified in terms of epistemic virtue and evidential familiarity does not necessarily mean that they possess the *exact same* degree of virtue or evidential familiarity. For if we interpret EP as referring to epistemic agents who are exact equals in this respect, then it would lead to an implausible consequence that disagreement bears *too little* epistemic impact upon one's beliefs in the actual world (cf., Lackey 2014, pp. 302–3). This is because it is hard to imagine cases in the actual world where persons do possess the *exact same* degree of virtue and evidence (cf., King 2012, pp. 253–58).

Second, the fact that epistemic agents are similarly well-qualified in virtue and evidence does not necessarily mean that epistemic peerhood should be defined too broadly either. For if we were to define epistemic peers as agents similarly well-qualified in a very broad sense, it would lead to the implausible consequence of disagreement bearing *too much* epistemic impact upon one's beliefs in the actual world. For in such a case, even individuals who are one's epistemic inferiors might be treated as epistemic peers. Thus, EP indicates that only epistemic agents similarly well-qualified in virtue and evidential familiarity with respect to the *specific* issue under dispute count as epistemic peers.

It is also crucial to clarify the notions of epistemic virtue and evidential familiarity deployed here. By epistemic virtue, I mean to denote a kind of virtue that might enable one to acquire true beliefs, e.g., sound reasoning, accurate perception, intellectual carefulness, truth-seeking, open-mindedness, honesty, humility, and courage (cf., Roberts and Wood 2007). By evidential familiarity, I mean to refer to a familiarity with the relevant evidence that bears on the truth of some proposition. This may include arguments or inferences, as well as private experiences or rational insights. What is relevant here is not possessing the exact same kind of such evidence but rather, that the epistemic quality of such evidence is on a par.

I turn my attention now toward question (b), regarding the epistemological implications of EP on disagreement. Let us suppose there are two epistemic agents, S_1 and S_2, who are epistemic peers in the sense of EP. Suppose that both S_1 and S_2 disagree about some issue by forming contrary beliefs that *p* and that *not-p*, and both are aware of their disagreement. A potential implication of this disagreement is that both S_1 and S_2 should either decrease their confidence in or completely withold their beliefs. Philosophers who accept this implication uphold a position referred to as "conciliationism" (cf., Christensen 2009). According to this position, S_1 and S_2 should be conciliatory towards each other by adjusting their original beliefs, given their disagreement. In contrast to this position, however, the position referred to as "steadfastness" (at least in its strongest version) stipulates that epistemic peers are not required to reduce their confidence levels or abandon their original belief, and they may remain steadfast in upholding it (cf., Kelly 2005).[2] Between these

two opposing positions, there are more dynamic or hybrid views that see the issue as context-relative and varied from case to case.[3]

2.2. The Epistemic Problem of Religious Disagreement

Having explained EP and explored the broad spectrum of responses to peer disagreement, I now shift focus toward examining how disagreement between epistemic peers unfolds in the context of religious disagreement. In doing so, I want to consider the following argument from religious disagreement (cf., Dormandy 2023, p. 209):

(1) There are people who hold theistic beliefs incompatible with mine, and yet they appear roughly as epistemically virtuous and evidentially familiar as me (RD-evidence).
(2) RD-evidence, when considered against my total evidence, speaks against my theistic belief.
(3) If premises (1)–(2) are true, then I ought to reduce my confidence in my theistic belief or if not, give it up completely.
(4) Therefore, I ought to reduce my confidence in my theistic belief or if not, give it up completely.

Let us analyze this argument. Premise (1) asserts that concerning the truth of one's theistic belief, one has epistemic peers who uphold beliefs that are incompatible with one's own. In the context of this article, I will take this to refer to different forms of theistic belief, such as Islamic, Christian, and Jewish theistic belief, and I shall also take it that oneself and one's peers refer to "reflective theists" (i.e., intellectually sophisticated adult theists).[4] The apparent fact that one has epistemic peers who hold contrary theistic beliefs to one's own constitutes one's RD-evidence. By evidence, I mean some reason (i.e., argument, intuition, seeming, etc.), that justifies a certain doxastic attitude taken toward a proposition. Premise (2) states that one's RD-evidence, when considered against one's total evidence (i.e., all the relevant first order/higher order evidence), speaks against one's belief (at least to some degree). Premise (3) suggests that the combination of premises (1) and (2) means that one should either lower one's confidence or give up one's belief altogether, given one's RD-evidence. Hence, (4) concludes that one indeed ought to reduce their confidence or simply give up their belief, given the truth of (3).

The above argument constitutes the basis of what I refer to as the epistemic problem of religious disagreement. In what follows, I want to consider how Muslim thinkers have engaged with this sort of problem. In doing so, I'll first consider what I take to be the conciliationism of Islamic Rationalism, and second, the steadfastness of Islamic Traditionalism. By Islamic Rationalism, I am referring to the strand within Islam known as *kalām* (i.e., *ʿilm al-kalām*). By Islamic Traditionalism, I mean the strand within Islam referred to as *atharī* (i.e., *ahl al-āthār).* This distinction, however, deserves some qualification. As Sherman Jackson (2009, pp. 31–32) points out, it is not as if Muslim traditionalists were anti-reason or that Muslim rationalists were anti-scripture or tradition; rather, each had different conceptions of reason and its place in theology. In my view though, I think there might be a distinction between the two in terms of one laying greater emphasis on reason or rational arguments, at least in the context of religious epistemology. Nevertheless, let us begin by considering the Islamic Rationalist engagement with the epistemic problem of religious disagreement.

3. Islamic Rationalist Conciliationism

3.1. Islamic Rationalist Religious Epistemology

The Islamic Rationalist tradition of the *kalām* theologians in the religious epistemological sense is essentially theistic evidentialist (cf., Doko and Turner 2023).[5] Roughly, this means that such theologians took something like the following to be true:

> **TE:** *S*'s theistic belief that *p* is epistemically justified/a piece of knowledge for *S* only when *S*'s belief that *p* is based on sufficiently supporting evidence *e*.

However, many Muslim rationalists also seem to have taken a more specific or qualified version of theistic evidentialism to be true (i.e., strong theistic evidentialism), where TE is qualified in something like the following way (Doko and Turner 2023, pp. 154–56; Frank 1989):

> **STE:** *S*'s theistic belief that p is epistemically justified/a piece of knowledge for *S* only when *S*'s belief that *p* is based on sufficiently supporting evidence *e*, where (i) *e* is propositional and (ii) *S* is aware that *e* supports *p*.[6]

Let us gain some clarity on STE. According to this theistic evidentialist principle, for a theistic belief (i.e., "that God exists") to be epistemically justified or indeed a piece of knowledge for someone, they must base that belief on propositional evidence which sufficiently supports the belief in question—by which I simply mean some theistic argument (e.g., cosmological argument) or combination of such arguments (i.e., a cumulative case theistic argument)—and where the person is aware of how the relevant propositional evidence supports their belief (i.e., aware of how or simply that the premises support the conclusion). But how exactly did Muslim rationalists arrive at this view?

First, they drew a distinction between noninferential knowledge (*ʿilm ḍarūrī*) and inferential knowledge (*ʿilm muktasab*), (cf., Ibrahim 2013, p. 102).[7] This distinction thus carved out a foundationalist epistemology in that some of our knowledge was deemed to be noninferential. Crucially, however, theistic knowledge (or justified belief) was not considered to be among what we can know (or justifiedly believe) noninferentially (Heer 1993, pp. 187–88); rather, only beliefs that are evident to the senses (*al-ḥissiyyāt*), logically self-evident (*al-badīhiyyāt*), or mass reported (*mutawātir*) were considered by Muslim rationalists to be among our noninferential knowledge (cf., Abrahamov 1993). In this sense, they roughly upheld what Dewey Hoitenga (1991, p. 181) refers to as "medieval foundationalism". The result of this foundationalism meant that theistic belief could not in principle be thought to comprise part of our noninferential knowledge (or justified belief). Second, and related to their foundationalism, Muslim rationalists stipulated an epistemic duty concerning theistic belief: the duty or obligation to acquire theistic belief through discursive reasoning (i.e., *wujūb al-naẓar*), (cf., Spevack 2020, pp. 237–42; Adamson 2022, pp. 7–11). This epistemic duty amounts to another way of stating STE, insofar as justification and knowledge with respect to theistic belief consists in fulfilling a certain epistemic duty, which is fulfilled when one reasons discursively and grounds their theistic belief on sufficiently supporting evidence in terms of (i) and (ii). Hence, the Muslim rationalists' arrival at theistic evidentialism.

This religious epistemological outlook embraced by Muslim rationalists, particularly in relation to this epistemic duty to reason discursively, bears an important relation to our issue concerning the epistemic problem of religious disagreement. For one thing, this epistemic duty appears to eliminate the possibility of being justified in upholding one's theistic belief by way of private religious experience (e.g., by spiritual inspiration—*ilhām*; or spiritual unveiling—*kashf*) or through testimonial evidence gleaned from following authorities in one's socio-religious milieu (i.e., *taqlīd*). This implies that settling religious disagreement over theistic belief must in principle be settled on argumentative grounds or by way of publicly accessible evidence. But it also seems to me that it is not simply the foundationalism or theistic evidentialist principle of STE that motivated Muslim rationalists to uphold this view; in fact, it seems to me that the very problem of religious disagreement itself had important bearing on why they formed this religious epistemological outlook.

3.2. Religious Disagreement and Limited Conciliationism

Muslim rationalists did consider the epistemic problem of religious disagreement, but in a more restricted or limited form than that captured in the above argument in Section 2.2. Consider, for instance, the kind of epistemic problem of religious disagreement spoken of in the following passages of two early Muslim rationalists. The first is from Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 944 CE), and the second is from Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 1025 CE):

> [1] We find that all people, with their different religious opinions and sects, agree on one statement, namely, that whatever one holds to be true, is valid, and, as a result, that whatever others than him hold, is invalid … Therefore, it is taken for granted that *taqlīd* [i.e., blind social imitation/following] excuses its embracer from holding the opposite view on the same question. This, however, only accounts for the multiplicity of the number. The only way out of this is if one of them has his ultimate argument based on intellect (*ʿaql*) by way of which his truth can be known and if he has proof by way of which he can persuade fair-minded people to accept his truth (quoted in Ceric 1995, pp. 67–68; cf., Kam 2022, pp. 36–37).[8]

> [2] The learned man knows that there are people who are wrong in their speculation (*yukhṭiʾu*) and others who are right (*yuṣību*), however each of them claims that he is right. Why, then, is the *taqlīd* of one of them better than the other? Why is the *taqlīd* of the believer of God's unity better than the *taqlīd* of the unbeliever? … What is the proof that the learned man must speculate [i.e., reason] in order to obtain the knowledge of God? … [because he knows] there are systems which are right and others which are wrong. (quoted in Abrahamov 1998, pp. 58–59)

What these two passages appear to illustrate is the importance that the epistemic problem of religious disagreement has played in Muslim rationalist thinking about the epistemic duty to reason discursively. Particularly instructive is the first passage from al-Māturīdī. This passage highlights the centrality of reason (*ʿaql*) as the ultimate guarantor amid religious disagreement, as well as evidence which may persuade others, i.e., publicly accessible evidence. Indeed, al-Māturīdī (Kam 2022, pp. 40–41) goes on to add that private religious experience in the form of "spiritual inspiration" (*ilhām*) is unfit as a sure basis for one's theistic belief, just as is blindly following one's socio-religious community (i.e., *taqlīd*). The second passage from ʿAbd al-Jabbār seems to emphasize the issue of epistemic luck in the context of disagreement. In this case, the one who fails to reason discursively lacks some form of "symmetry breaker" by way of a rational argument to tip the scales of truth in one's favor. For without such a rational argument, where one merely follows his or her socio-religious milieu, acquiring a true theistic belief is a matter of the sheer luck and contingency of one's upbringing. But such epistemic luck precludes knowledge.

It seems to me that the main epistemic problem Muslim rationalists were concerned with relate to the social contingency of religious belief, private/public evidence, and epistemic luck. In other words, they were concerned that basing theistic belief on one's religious socio-milieu or private religious experiences would prevent one's theistic belief from receiving positive epistemic appraisal because its truth seems to be a matter of mere epistemic luck (Adamson 2022, pp. 7–11). This is apparently so because of the evidential symmetry or epistemic parity shared between various religious believers of different stripes holding conflicting theistic beliefs, with only one of them being right. So, Muslim rationalists sought to resolve this problem by stipulating an epistemic duty which amounted to acquiring a symmetry breaker in terms of some publicly accessible evidence (i.e., theistic argument), tipping the evidential and epistemic scales in one's favor and eliminating any concern over epistemic luck. For if one believes justifiedly through some sound theistic argument, then one is rightly appraised or credited with the epistemic success of forming a true theistic belief.

What this suggests, however, is that Muslim rationalists affirmed a limited form of conciliationism with respect to religious disagreement. Unlike the argument from religious disagreement presented above, these thinkers had in mind a different version of the argument where premise (1) concerned theistic belief being based on something other than theistic arguments. In other words, where that premise looked something more like the following:

> (1*) There are people who hold theistic beliefs incompatible with mine, and yet they appear to be my epistemic peers because they similarly hold their beliefs on the basis of either (a) socio-religious imitation (i.e., taqlīd) or (b) private religious experience/evidence (i.e., *ilhām*; *kashf*). (RD-evidence).

It is the truth of this premise, in combination with something like (2) and (3), which Muslim rationalists would appear to take as entailing something like the conclusion (4). In essence, I think that they appeared to have upheld conciliationism but in a limited way, where one ought to be conciliatory in cases where there is something like symmetry in private or testimonial evidence (broadly construed). Hence, there is an apparent epistemic need for a symmetry breaker through means other than these forms of evidence that are publicly accessible. Clearly, Muslim rationalists had a rather straightforward solution to the epistemic problem of religious disagreement they had in mind as per premise (1*), for they proposed that one can simply reject the premise by wielding a theistic argument. In this case, one's theistic belief would not be held similarly on the basis of either (a) or (b); rather, it would be based on some evidence that breaks the symmetry, thus doing away with the RD-evidence.

Admittedly, there does seem to be something right about the idea of needing a symmetry breaker in terms of publicly accessible evidence. As Hamid Vahid (2014, p. 91) explains in the context of peer disagreement, if one is to remain justified, then "the initial epistemic symmetry between peers has to be broken at some point along the way". Similarly, Kirk Lougheed (2018) considered remaining steadfast in the face of peer disagreement in terms of possessing some "evidential asymmetry" between oneself and one's peer. So, the Muslim rationalists seem to have been onto something here. For, plausibly, being justified in holding steadfast to one's initial theistic belief requires that one has some evidential asymmetry that tips the evidential scales in one's favor, sufficient to demote one's epistemic peer. It might also be plausible to defer solely to publicly accessible evidence because it precludes the concern of either party to the dispute harking bias by deferring to one's socio-religious authorities or favoring one's own private evidence over that of their peers, especially when the disagreement itself gives one prima facie grounds to question one's private or community-specific evidence.

Perhaps, however, there is also another central epistemological insight here that underlies something close to Muslim rationalist thinking, which concerns epistemic luck and epistemic credit.[9] Consider that if one forms a true belief by way of luck, then one does not deserve any epistemic credit for the success of acquiring that true belief (cf., Greco 2003, p. 123; Pritchard 2016, p. 5). By contrast, if one forms a true belief by exerting the relevant intellectual effort in acquiring a true belief, then one deserves epistemic credit for the success of having acquired it (Greco 2003, p. 123; Greco 2010, pp. 71–75; Pritchard 2016, p. 64). It seems to me that Muslim rationalists were concerned that failing to reason discursively in acquiring theistic belief, even where that belief is true, still precludes one from epistemic credit because it is merely a matter of epistemic luck that one acquires that true belief. So, it is only when one has exerted intellectual effort or responsibly exercised one's reflective capacities in considering the relevant evidence at hand that one can be epistemically credited when acquiring some true belief. It is just this that is perhaps what is at the root of the problem in cases of holding theistic belief based on social imitation or private religious experiences. For in these cases, one has not exercised reflective responsibility in terms of logical reasoning or argumentation, sufficient to deserve epistemic credit. I think this view has something going for it, particularly in the context of philosophical or religious beliefs held by reflective thinkers. So, we will return to this key epistemological insight of Muslim rationalists later in Section 5.

3.3. The Limits of Limited Conciliationism

I have argued that the conciliationism of Muslim rationalists is of a limited kind. Indeed, Muslim rationalists did not believe that we should be conciliatory once we have fulfilled our epistemic duties and appropriately acquired (Islamic) theistic belief. However,

they did seem to think being conciliatory is the epistemic consequence in cases where one fails in their epistemic duties due to grounding one's theistic belief in something like socio-religious imitation/community-specific testimony or private religious experiences. For here, the problem of evidential symmetry and epistemic parity between similarly positioned theists rids them of their epistemic justification (and by extension knowledge).

The trouble with this limited conciliationist view, though, is that Muslim rationalists seem to think we can escape the impasse of private religious experience or socio-religious imitation through publicly accessible evidence; however, it is not so clear that they have established that the symmetry breaks down once the dispute moves to such evidence. In other words, it fails to address the epistemic problem of religious disagreement encapsulated in the argument of Section 2.2. Perhaps one thinks it is unfair to criticize a view that did not explicitly critique the argument I am considering, but it is not unreasonable to point out that some of the thoughts they left us with are clearly limited in application to new and similarly relevant problems. So, it seems a legitimate concern.

To see the problem more clearly, consider two reflective theists with conflicting theistic beliefs. Suppose S_1 satisfies the STE principle and so is at least prima facie justified in upholding her Islamic theistic belief on relevant publicly accessible evidence, and thus also well positioned to reject premise (1*). Let us also suppose that S_2 satisfies STE and so justifiedly rejects premise (1*), but forms a contrary Christian theistic belief (e.g., that God is one but tri-personal). Let us further suppose that both believers are aware of each other's disagreement, the publicly accessible evidence upon which both beliefs were formed, and that they are epistemic peers as per EP (see Section 2.1). The question now remains: do S_1 or S_2 display evidential symmetry and epistemic parity? At least prima facie, the answer seems to be yes. But if that is right, then the mere fact that S_1 forms her belief on some publicly accessible evidence (i.e., a selection of Islamic theistic arguments) does not in itself appear to constitute an evidential symmetry breaker required for her to demote S_2. This then is the problem of the limited conciliationism of Muslim rationalists: whence the need for theistic arguments? In other words, what significant epistemic difference do they make when one is aware of religious believers who also form conflicting theistic beliefs by way of argument? When considered in terms of evidential asymmetry, it seems the epistemic difference such arguments make is not as significant as Muslim rationalists seem to have thought.

So, we are left with a problem concerning the Islamic Rationalist view, which in effect means that the epistemic problem of religious disagreement we are concerned with remains. Perhaps the Islamic Traditionalist view can offer some resources to help.

4. Islamic Traditionalist Steadfastness

4.1. Islamic Traditionalist Religious Epistemology

Unlike in the case of Islamic Rationalism, Islamic Traditionalism is less systematic in that it does not consist of a clearly unified religious epistemological trend within Islamic thought; instead, it consists more of a spectrum of views which share important commonalities concerning reason and tradition. I want to offer two examples of Islamic Traditionalist approaches in religious epistemology, one which essentially defends *taqlīd* or socio-religious following, and the other private evidence in the form of religious experience, at least broadly construed. Despite this slight difference between these two traditionalist approaches, there is an important sense in which they converge: both are reformed epistemologically. By this, I simply mean that they uphold something like the following (cf., Moon 2016):

> **RE:** *S*'s theistic belief that *p* may be epistemically justified/a piece of knowledge for *S*, even where *S*'s belief is not based on some argument that supports *p*.

Insofar as Muslim traditionalists uphold something like RE, they stand opposed to the Islamic Rationalist principle of STE. The two thinkers I want to draw on as examples of Islamic Traditionalism are Ibn Hazm (d. 1064 CE) and Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328 CE). In referring to the former, I will briefly illustrate how Islamic theistic belief might be construed

as potentially justified or known on testimonial grounds. In reference to the latter, I will try to show how Islamic theistic belief might be considered justified or known based on religious experience.

Ibn Hazm (2014, pp. 4:28–36; cf., Izutsu 2006, pp. 155–62) takes aim at those who chastise Muslim believers for upholding their Islamic theistic belief on grounds other than by way of argument or inference (*istidlāl*). In brief, he puts forward several counterarguments against the Islamic Rationalist view which amount to arguing for why a Muslim believer may be justified in upholding their belief on noninferential grounds. I will consider just two of the points most relevant to our discussion. First, he makes a distinction between socio-religious imitation (*taqlīd*) condemned by the Qur'an on the one hand, and religious faith (*īmān*) on the other. In my view, his distinction amounts to one between good socio-religious imitation vs. bad socio-religious imitation (cf., Ibn Hazm 2014, pp. 4:29–30). It is only the latter which is to be condemned because it amounts to following those who God has not sanctioned us to follow. Second, he essentially rejects the foundationalism of the Muslim rationalists by arguing that they are wrong to restrict knowledge to either noninferential knowledge by way of the senses and inferential knowledge by way of rational argument (Ibn Hazm 2014, p. 4:32). Instead, he suggests that there are many ways of acquiring theistic knowledge, including intellectual intuition (*badīhat ʿaql*) or God directly bestowing it upon a person (Ibn Hazm 2014, p. 4:32).

Turning now to Ibn Taymiyya, he also upheld something like the principle of RE above, but primarily by arguing that we can acquire theistic knowledge through a natural (*fiṭrī*) theistic disposition/faculty that we have by virtue of our God-given nature (*fiṭra*) as humans (cf., Turner 2021). Roughly, he states that we have a natural ability to know God, such that when it works as it ought to, we will naturally form belief in God and submit to Him (cf., Ibn Taymiyya 2004, p. 6:73). This natural theistic knowledge is activated through one's recognition of theistic signs in the natural world (i.e., *āyāt al-fiʿliyya*), as well as in the Qur'an (*āyāt al-qawliyya*) (cf., Ibn Taymiyya 1979, p. 7:302; Turner 2022). As I pointed out in my (Turner 2021), the view is externalist insofar as the acquisition of theistic knowledge is principally the result of our cognitive nature and its related faculties working properly, as it was designed to by God, in the appropriate cognitive environments. Though Ibn Taymiyya (1979, p. 6:271) does acknowledge circumstances in which our fiṭrī theistic disposition/faculty may fail to work as it ought to, still when it does, theistic knowledge will ensue.

4.2. Islamic Traditionalist Steadfastness

Muslim traditionalists, whether adhering to views similar to those of Ibn Hazm or Ibn Taymiyya, appear to dismiss the epistemic problem of religious disagreement as understood by Muslim rationalists and by extension, the contemporary version we are concerned with in this article. According to Ibn Hazm, faith in the Prophet and, in effect, the testimony of one's Islamic religious community is sufficient to have knowledge of Islamic theistic belief, while Ibn Taymiyya stipulates that one can acquire Islamic theistic knowledge by way of our *fiṭrī* theistic disposition/faculty, at least when situated in the right cognitive environment. In both cases, it does not appear that they regarded the mere fact of religious disagreement as a threat to the epistemic status of one's Islamic theistic belief. This is especially so given their rejection of any need to engage in discursive reasoning to validate one's theistic beliefs in the way that Muslim rationalists have suggested one ought to. So, Muslim traditionalists will want to say that the epistemic problem of religious disagreement, as per the argument from (1)–(4), is in some way unsound. But how would they go about arguing this?

It seems to me that they might challenge the second conjunct of premise (1), that other religious believers appear roughly as epistemically virtuous and evidentially familiar as me. Perhaps one strategy that they may be seen to deploy is what Katherine Dormandy (2023, p. 211) refers to as "divine-help epistemology". This idea consists of a positive thesis, to the effect that God has especially enabled one's personal cognition or that of one's

community to form true beliefs about Him, and a negative thesis, that one's interlocutor or their community in some sense lacks that divine help. Concerning the negative thesis, one idea might be that a person is suffering from some form of noetic impediment brought about by the sinful actions of the person or the broader community. Therefore, just as one is epistemically advantaged by divine help (broadly construed), one's interlocutor is epistemically disadvantaged by the absence of such help. It is possible to see this idea in both Ibn Hazm's and Ibn Taymiyya's thinking. For instance, Ibn Hazm suggests that when one follows or imitates the person or community that God has not commanded one to follow, this is condemnable; but when one follows God's prophet, it is praiseworthy. In Ibn Taymiyya's case, he speaks of socio-religious environments as acting as veils preventing the truth from being known, as well as individual actions which cause one's *fiṭrī* theistic disposition/faculty to become blocked or impaired (cf., Ibn Taymiyya 1979, p. 6:271; 2004, p. 4:257). So, in essence, divine help is lacking. This makes at least some sense, in that it may, in fact, be the case that the difference between knowing God or not is essentially divine-help and the avoidance of certain noetic impediments. So, as long as one has that help and avoids such impediments, maybe they would know God and gain some reason to demote their peers.

Another way to think about this steadfast approach is to see it as taking the opposite strategy to what we have associated with Muslim rationalists about giving greater weight to certain kinds of evidence. The Muslim traditionalists might be thought of as giving epistemic priority to "partialist" forms of evidence over "impartialist" forms.[10] By the former, I mean evidence which is private, not wholly shareable, specific to one's community, and/or affected by one's religious biases (Dormandy 2018, p. 66). By the latter, I mean evidence which is public, shareable, and analogous to evidence in science (Dormandy 2018, pp. 63–64). The result of this prioritization may be that the impartialist evidence in the form of RD-evidence does not, all things considered, count against one's total evidence given the greater weight allotted to one's partialist evidence. So, traditionalists can reject premise (2) of the above argument. This arguably makes sense, for it may be that the most salient forms of theistic evidence are of a more experiential or community-centered type, for these are the sorts that are acquired through special divine help. So, it would be wrong-headed to prefer weaker forms of impartialist evidence.

4.3. The Problems of Traditionalist Steadfastness

Despite some plausibility in the steadfastness of Islamic Traditionalism, it faces its own difficulties.

First, there is the problem of evidential symmetry between theists who hold their belief either on broadly testimonial grounds or through religious experience that cannot be so easily dismissed in the way that the above steadfastness suggests. Consider again two theists, S_1* and S_2*. Suppose that S_1* forms her Islamic theistic belief by forms of partialist evidence, e.g., her readings of scripture, instruction from her religious teachers, her sense of God's presence during acts of worship. Suppose similarly that S_2* forms her Christian theistic belief by the same kinds of partialist evidence. Let us further suppose that they are both aware of their disagreement and report their evidential insights to each other. Imagine that they both also adopt a divine-help epistemology and give greater weight to their partialist evidence. The problem seems to be that the levels of evidential symmetry and epistemic parity between the two preclude both from being justified. For even if they have some incommunicable evidential insight, each is at least aware that one's peer has such an insight as well and can recognize it as bearing evidential force. So, the worry is that one has reason to question one's own insights or experiences as sufficient indicators that one's belief is true (cf., Feldman 2007).

Second, this approach also falls prey to the problem of neglecting the importance of exercising our reflective capacities responsibly in forming theistic belief. As we will see in the next section, and have already alluded to above, receiving epistemic credit particularly concerning controversial philosophical issues like theism seem unlike our

ordinary sensory beliefs in the demand for responsible reflective thinking, including engaging theistic arguments. So, as in the case of Islamic Rationalism, it seems to me that the Islamic Traditionalist response to the epistemic problem of religious disagreement is not wholly satisfactory. However, I think that both retain important insights which, when taken together, might enable us to construct a more adequate response to the problem.

5. Combining Insights

In light of our discussion above, I want to carve out a way of responding to the epistemic problem of religious disagreement, and hence the argument laid out in Section 2.2, by drawing on important insights present in both the limited conciliationism of Muslim rationalists and the steadfastness of Muslim traditionalists. When taken together, I'll argue that these insights provide a plausible way of responding to the epistemic problem of religious disagreement that combines the two approaches.

5.1. Inferential and Noninferential Reflective Responsibility

In combining the central insights of Islamic Rationalism and Islamic Traditionalism, I first want to draw a distinction between two different kinds of reflective responsibility. Recall that a central insight for Muslim rationalists was the idea that theistic belief must be the result of exercising our reflective capacities responsibly. In their view, this can only be done when one grounds one's theistic belief in inferential terms (i.e., on some theistic argument). By contrast, Muslim traditionalists reject the necessity for inference; rather, a central insight of their view is that we can have justified theistic belief or knowledge noninferentially. In order to bridge these two opposing views in the context of religious disagreement, I offer the following distinction between (a) inferential reflective responsibility and (b) noninferential reflective responsibility. When applied to some subject *S*, we can render them in the following terms:

> **IRR**: Inferential reflective responsibility is exercised where *S* has carefully considered the relevant evidence that directly bears on *p*, and where *S* forms her belief that *p* by a conclusion of inference.

> **NIRR**: Noninferential reflective responsibility is exercised where *S* has carefully considered the relevant evidence that directly bears on *p*, and where *S* forms her belief that *p* by a conclusion of reflection.

I take it then that the main distinguishing factor between inferential and noninferential reflective responsibility is principally as to whether *S* forms her belief that *p* by way of a "conclusion of inference" or a "conclusion of reflection".

The distinction between these two types of belief formation has been drawn out by Robert Audi (2004, pp. 45–48). According to Audi (2004, p. 45), conclusions of inference refer to beliefs formed on the basis of premised propositions noted as evidence. An example of a conclusion of inference then would just be some belief based on an argument (e.g., a simple modus ponens/tollens). A conclusion of reflection, though, refers to a belief grounded in a kind of intuitive judgement "formed through rational inquiry or searching reflection" (Audi 2004, p. 45). This form of reflection emerges from thinking about the matter in question as a whole or in a more global sense, as opposed to from specific evidential premises. As Audi puts it, "drawing a conclusion of reflection is a kind of wrapping up of the question, akin to concluding a practical matter with a decision. One has not added up the evidence and inferred their implication; one has obtained a view of the whole and thereby broadly characterized it" (Audi 2004, pp. 45–46).

Audi (2004, pp. 45–46) gives the example of reflecting upon a poem or a letter and wrapping up that reflection with a proposition about the poem, which emerges from thinking about the poem as a whole but not from one or more relevant evidential premises. For instance, it may be that upon one's reading and reflection, one senses a subtle artificiality or stilted quality in the language of the poem and thus concludes or wraps up this reflection with a belief in some relevant proposition (e.g., the language is artificial).[11] Epistemically

speaking then, whereas conclusions of inference are inferential, conclusions of reflection are noninferential. However, that is not to say that the latter is non-reflective; on the contrary, both forms of conclusions result from an exercise of one's reflective capacities, and both are formed responsibly when *S* carefully considers the relevant evidence bearing on the truth of some proposition *p*. By "careful consideration", I mean exhibiting the virtue of intellectual carefulness (i.e., being mindful of the salient aspects of the relevant evidence and thoroughly considering the evidence as fairly as possible, but not being overly scrupulous).[12]

To see the difference between these two forms of belief formation in the context of our discussion, let us consider some examples concerning theistic belief. Examples of conclusions of inference abound in philosophy of religion. Take any version of the cosmological, teleological, or ontological arguments. Holding theistic belief on any of these would constitute holding it by a conclusion of inference. Broader cumulative cases where one grounds their theistic belief abductively by noting various data about the world that theism best explains would also be based on a conclusion of inference. As for grounding theistic belief on a conclusion of reflection, helpful in this regard are Michael Bergmann's (2017, pp. 36–37) comments. He notes that theistic belief might be based on theistic seemings grounded in various experiences, observations, and considerations over, perhaps, a long period of time (including considerations over relevant theistic arguments), and where the remnants of these considerations are retained in memory, enabling one's theistic seemings to emerge upon reflection. In this case, although one's theistic belief is based on various considerations and experiences, it is nonetheless noninferential. For instead of taking aspects of one's reflection as evidential premises, here, one wraps up their reflection in a holistic fashion with the proposition that theistic belief is true as opposed to grounding it on specific premises.

5.2. Reflection, Disagreement, and Skepticism

To understand what relevance the above distinction has on the issue at hand, let me make three points. First, I think that the central Muslim rationalist insight is correct, that given religious disagreement, for a reflective theist's belief to be justified, it requires an exercise of reflective responsibility. Second, that if epistemic peers S_1 and S_2's conflicting theistic beliefs are based on an exercise of reflective responsibility, then it is wrong to think that both or either peer must completely withhold their theistic beliefs because this entails an implausible form of skepticism. However, third, an exercise of reflective responsibility required for justification—contra Muslim rationalists—does not entail the need for a theistic argument, hence satisfying IRR. It may be based on noninferential grounds thus supporting the Muslim traditionalist insight. Specifically, it is sufficient that it satisfies merely NIRR. Let us consider these points in turn.

That exercising reflective responsibility for reflective theists is (all things considered) necessary for justification can be argued by pointing out that justified theistic belief or knowledge is "upper-end" as opposed to "lower-end". By the latter, I mean roughly justified beliefs or knowledge of the more mundane or ordinary kind (i.e., perceptual or memorial beliefs); by the former, those which are less ordinary, such as in philosophical, scientific, or religious domains (cf., Roberts and Wood 2007, pp. 109–10). The idea here is that whereas in lower-end cases, reflective responsibility is hardly necessary—which may be explained by it being more obviously involuntary in the doxastic sense—on the other hand, upper-end cases are far more in the "realm of the voluntary" and thus require an exercise of our reflective capacities (cf., Greco 1997), at least for reflective theists, all things considered. In other words, forming tradition-specific theistic beliefs, even if by religious experience, seems less like ordinary perceptual beliefs in terms of their doxastic involuntariness; belief formation here typically involves our own added reflection, interpretation, and consideration. As Duncan Pritchard points out,

> . . . whereas this sort of [doxastic] 'directness' is the norm in the perceptual case, it is more naturally thought of as the exception to the norm in the religious case.

> Indeed, whereas perceptual beliefs seem to be, in the main, 'forced' upon us, religious beliefs often seem to be formed in a far less compelling fashion . . . the more common way of conceiving such belief is in terms of being 'nudged' or 'invited' towards a certain doxastic commitment. (Pritchard 2005, p. 191)[13]

Pritchard (2005, p. 192) goes on to add that although some "agent might gain a warrant for his perceptual belief without engaging his reflective capacities at all, religious beliefs seem to directly implicate such capacities". This does not mean that one ought to endorse the thesis of doxastic voluntarism; rather, the suggestion here is merely that religious belief—at least among reflective theists—typically stands somewhere within the realm of the voluntary (to borrow John Greco's phrase). Furthermore, even if we do have something like a fiṭrī theistic disposition/faculty, Robert Roberts and Jay Wood (Roberts and Wood 2007, pp. 108–12) point out that the reliability of our cognitive faculties (especially in "upper-end" cases) might require reflective-like intellectual virtues, such as being truth-seeking; intellectually careful; courageous and open-minded, otherwise such faculties may not be sufficiently reliable in securing a high degree of justification. So, the Muslim rationalist insight here at least seems plausible, that an exercise of reflective responsibility is necessary. (I think this might also be what explains our intuition as to why S_1* and S_2* are unjustified, namely, that they satisfy neither IRR nor NIRR).[14]

Earlier, we questioned the Muslim rationalist view by wondering what the need for theistic arguments is amid peer disagreement with another theist who holds their beliefs on conflicting theistic arguments. We have at least a partial answer, that it enables S_1 and S_2 to satisfy IRR and so, prima facie, S_1 and S_2 can receive epistemic credit for their theistic beliefs. But then, does that prima facie epistemic credit not see itself wholly removed in the context of peer disagreement? For in this case, S_1 and S_2 are aware that both form contradictory theistic beliefs whilst being similarly reflective and evidentially familiar. I think the answer is no. To see why, consider that the dispute between S_1 and S_2 in important epistemic ways resembles disputes between reflective thinkers in a whole host of other domains, such as metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, politics, science, literature, and history. It resembles many disputes in those domains because epistemic peers within areas like philosophy base their beliefs in various propositions or theories on philosophical arguments. Thus, if we were to conclude that full conciliation is required when peers in philosophy dispute, given that there is widespread dispute, it seems to entail that we must embrace some implausible version of philosophical skepticism. In other words, where we would have to maintain that we and others lack justification for a great many substantive philosophical claims that are, by our lights, plausibly true.[15] Intuitively, this seems false. We can put this in terms of the following argument:[16]

(5) If peer disagreement in philosophy based on opposing philosophical arguments means that one ought to withhold their philosophical beliefs, then this entails philosophical skepticism.
(6) But philosophical skepticism is false.
(7) Therefore, peer disagreement in philosophy based on opposing philosophical arguments does not mean that one ought to withhold their philosophical beliefs.

The conditional captured in (5) seems obvious enough in that if the antecedent holds, it seems clear this would entail skepticism about many, if not most, of our philosophical views. But is (6) really true? Intuitively, it seems to be that it is. At least, it seems more plausibly true than that peer disagreement entails that epistemic peers in philosophy lose all their justification for most of their philosophical beliefs. So, the conclusion seems plausible. The result of this argument if it holds is that if S_1 and S_2 are sufficiently reflectively responsible in forming their theistic beliefs on philosophical arguments, then despite apparent peerhood, they do not thereby gain some reason to wholly give up their beliefs and thus lose their epistemic justification (at least not completely). But then, we return to the question of the need for these theistic arguments. The question this time is: can S_1 or S_2 be sufficiently

reflectively responsible even if they do not form their theistic beliefs by way of theistic arguments or, in other words, by a conclusion of inference? I think they can.

5.3. IRR, NIRR, and Epistemic Significance

To see why, we need to return to the distinction between principles IRR and NIRR. Recall that as per IRR, one is reflectively responsible in an inferential sense where one bases one's belief on some conclusion of inference and where one carefully considers the relevant evidence directly bearing on the truth of p. NIRR, on the other hand, states that one is noninferentially reflectively responsible where one acts as one does in satisfying IRR but this time bases one's belief on some conclusion of reflection. In the previous two sections, we established that (a) exercising reflective responsibility is necessary for reflective theists, and (b) where S_1 and S_2 exercise reflective responsibility in a way that satisfies IRR, they can receive epistemic credit for that belief, which is also not wholly eradicated because of their peer disagreement (due to the problem of philosophical skepticism).

However, I think that it is sufficient for S_1 and S_2 to receive the epistemic credit of justification by exercising reflective responsibility in a way that satisfies NIRR but not IRR; that is, I think it is sufficient that they merely satisfy NIRR. Note then a shift here toward the Muslim traditionalist view, whilst also maintaining the Muslim rationalist insight that exercising reflective responsibility is necessary. For what I am saying here is that there can be a noninferential basis for justified theistic belief, whereas Muslim rationalists deny that outright. A brief remark or two on this is thus in order. It does not seem plausible to me to uphold the broadly medieval foundationalism of the Muslim rationalists, where only a few restricted beliefs may be properly basic with respect to justification or knowledge. Plausibly, if one has a basic belief about very many things—including religious things—and that belief is, say, based on a relevant seeming, the result of intellectual virtue, or properly functioning faculties (depending on one's view of justification/warrant), then that belief can receive at least prima facie epistemic credit. To quote William James (1982, pp. 423–24), "our senses, namely, have assured us of certain states of fact; but mystical experiences are as direct perceptions of fact for those who have them as any sensations ever were for us". In other words, if our senses or strong perceptual seemings give us prima facie justification about mundane objects, then the same applies to other areas including the religious. So, if a reflective theist bases her theistic belief on noninferential grounds, she can at least in principle receive some epistemic credit, even if not all things considered. This then tips the hat toward Muslim traditionalists, at least in regard to what counts as part of one's evidential base.

Having cleared the ground somewhat, I now want to offer a reason for thinking that satisfying NIRR is sufficient for epistemic credit in the context of religious peer disagreement among reflective theists, and that IRR is not necessary. In essence, my argument is the following: if S_1 and S_2 deserve epistemic credit upon satisfying IRR, then because IRR and NIRR are not significantly epistemically different, they also deserve such credit when satisfying NIRR. To see why, consider that if S_1 or S_2 exercise reflective responsibility as per NIRR and thus form their theistic belief on a conclusion of reflection, then both would have nonetheless formed a kind of "inferential disposition". An inferential disposition refers to a type of "disposition to believe" (cf., Audi 1994). Roughly, by a disposition to believe I mean a proclivity for S to believe some proposition p if S considered the thought that p. For example, although I might not occurrently believe or previously have believed that 98.184 is a larger number than 98, I have a disposition to believe that proposition given my prior beliefs (Audi 1994, p. 419). An inferential disposition is thus a disposition to believe some proposition on the basis of other propositions that one believes. For instance, if I believe that Arthur Grimshaw (d. 1913 CE) is an artist and that he famously painted many oil paintings of Leeds, that may dispose to me infer that a particular oil painting of Leeds is his, if I entertained the proposition that it is upon seeing an oil painting of Leeds.

Now, in the context of forming conclusions of reflection, Audi (2004, p. 47) points out the following: "where one arrives at a conclusion of reflection, one could figure out

why and then formulate, in explicit premises, one's basis for so concluding". So, to put it another way, although in forming a belief by a conclusion of reflection, one is not thereby forming it inferentially. This is not to say that one lacks a disposition to form such a belief by a conclusion of inference. Indeed, in forming a belief by a conclusion of reflection, one may still thereby form an inferential disposition. That is, one may acquire an inferential disposition to believe some proposition or, in other words, a disposition to believe by a conclusion of inference. Hence, my claim here is that if a reflective theist like S_1 or S_2 forms Islamic theistic belief, say, by a conclusion of reflection and satisfies NIRR, such a theist would acquire an inferential disposition such that if and when prompted to form her believe by a conclusion of inference, she could readily do so. To see this, consider the following passage from the famous Muslim intellectual and convert Muhammad Asad (d. 1992 CE):

> An integrated image of Islam was now emerging with a finality, a decisiveness that sometimes astounded me. It was taking shape by a process that could only be described as a kind of mental osmosis—that is; without any conscious effort on my part to piece together and 'systematize' the many fragments of knowledge that had come my way during the past four years. I saw before me something like a perfect work of architecture, with all its elements harmoniously conceived to complement and support each other, with nothing superfluous and nothing lacking—a balance and composure which gave one the feeling that everything in the outlook and postulates of Islam was in its proper place. (Asad 1999, p. 301).

Although this passage might not be a perfect fit for a conclusion of reflection, it is good enough. Asad describes his newly found picture of Islam as taking place through a kind of mental osmosis (i.e., a gradual assimilation of ideas). In other words, perhaps, through various experiences, reflections, observations, and considerations over a long period of time (à la Bergmann).[17] It is through such experiences and reflections that a conclusion as to the truth of Islam appears to emerge for Asad. For our purposes, let us imagine Asad's reflection concerns the relevant body of evidence needed to responsibly arrive at the conclusion and that he did so with intellectual care. We can imagine that this also includes various contrasting theistic arguments. However, it is not that Asad consciously (or even tacitly) made note of particular evidential premises by which he inferred the conclusion that Islamic theism is true; rather, it just had that feeling of truth arising from his various reflections.

However, even though Asad suggests he made no effort to piece together the fragments of knowledge that relate to his conclusions, it seems to me that given sufficient prompting someone like Asad could, at least to some significant degree, stand back and reflect upon such fragments and formulate them into evidential premises from which an inference to Islamic theism could be made. In other words, although Asad might be taken to have formed Islamic theistic belief by a conclusion of reflection and satisfied NIRR, he would probably have also acquired a relevant inferential disposition. So, given this disposition to believe inferentially, he could satisfy IRR if and when he was prompted to do so. In my view, this seems to suggest that the epistemic significance of satisfying IRR instead of NIRR is not all that great, such that if a reflective theist amid peer disagreement deserves epistemic credit when satisfying IRR—as we have already suggested—so too does she deserve epistemic credit in merely satisfying NIRR.

If what I have just suggested is right, we now ought to consider how it applies to the epistemic problem of religious disagreement encapsulated in the argument outlined above (in Section 2.2) from (1) to (4). The focus here is on premise (2). Recall that this premise is that one's RD-evidence, when considered against one's other total evidence, speaks against one's theistic belief. We have already argued above that if a reflective theist satisfies IRR when forming their tradition-specific theistic belief, it is implausible to think that their RD-evidence speaks against their belief to such an extent that it rids them of epistemic credit entirely, such that they ought to give up their belief. This means that such persons like S_1 or S_2 can remain steadfast in the sense that they are not epistemically obliged to withhold their theistic belief. Yet, as we have just pointed out, what holds for the one who satisfies IRR similarly holds for the one who satisfies NIRR. Therefore, if S_1 and S_2

form contrary theistic beliefs in a way that satisfies NIRR, despite an awareness of peer disagreement, they may still nonetheless be credited with epistemic justification, at least prima facie. So, premise (2) is false and the argument collapses.

5.4. A Partial Solution?

There is, however, an obvious objection here. The objection is that even if what I have just said is correct, it does not thereby show that S_1 or S_2 are not required to hold their belief less firmly and hence does not show that premise (2) is false. In other words, the argument above from (1) to (4) remains because the combination of (2) and (3) is compatible with only one of the disjuncts of (3) being true (i.e., that one ought to either reduce credence or give up the belief completely). So, the solution I have offered is only a partial one, leaving open the possibility that S_1 and S_2 should reduce their confidence in their theistic belief or hold it less firmly (i.e., that one acquires a partial but not full defeater).[18]

I think there are at least two ways one could respond to this objection. One is to simply bite the bullet by conceding that the solution is only partial, so that both S_1 and S_2 should hold their theistic beliefs less firmly, but then point out that a lower degree of belief-firmness is still compatible with a degree of justification/warrant sufficient for knowledge. If so, then the problem, perhaps, does not matter all that much. Indeed, I think that it may well be the case that partial defeat—some reason(s) which makes it such that one ought to hold their belief less firmly but not completely give it up—is compatible with a degree of justification/warrant sufficient for knowledge.[19] Another way to respond to this objection, however, is to argue that S_1 and S_2 do not even acquire partial defeat. One way in which one might argue this point is by defending some version of epistemic permissivism. Roughly, this is the idea that a body of evidence permits more than one justified doxastic attitude based on that evidence (cf., Kelly 2014). It is, of course, beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to fully defend this view now but let me at least try to motivate it. Consider the following scenario:

> Prof. Smith and Prof. Jones were reputable scholars in their field and experts in the literary work, genre, and biographical details of Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Over the years, Smith and Jones would often gather at their local café to both read and discuss Dostoyevsky's novels, perhaps reminiscent of meetings between J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. On occasion, the two professors engaged in a dispute as to the precise meaning of certain passages in Dostoyevky's writings. Specifically, the two disagreed over what Dostoyevsky himself intended by such passages. Although Smith and Jones argued vehemently that the passage meant either A or it meant B, their disagreement was amicable; though they both regarded the other as wrong, they did nonetheless consider the other as reasonable.

The point of this scenario is to elicit the intuition that both Prof. Smith and Prof. Jones were reasonable in holding to their interpretation as to the intended meaning of a passage from Dostoyevsky, and in regarding the other as reasonable despite also thinking that they are wrong. It seems to me that reasonable disagreement of this sort abounds in various areas of inquiry (cf., Rosen 2001, pp. 71–72; Moffett 2007). But what can account for this? I think it might be accounted for in terms of evidential ambiguity or underdetermination (cf., Jackson and LaFore 2024). That is, where there is a sort of gap between the information or evidence within our purview and the facts out there in the world (Baker-Hytch 2024, p. 9). Where there exists this evidential gap and it is neither too remote nor too proximate, we are left with a state of epistemic permissivism.

If it is right then to think that some situations are epistemically permissive, and that the dispute between S_1 and S_2 is an example of such a case, then it may well be that the satisfaction of NIRR (or IRR) ensures that their epistemic justification is not even partially defeated.[20] Therefore, this would mean that premise (2) of the above argument is false in this case.

6. Conclusions

In sum, I have suggested that religious peer disagreement is a potential threat to the justification of one's theistic belief. I referred to this concern as the epistemic problem of religious disagreement. In drawing on key insights from the Islamic Rationalist and Islamic Traditionalist religious epistemologies, I offered a response to this epistemic problem grounded in a distinction between inferential reflective responsibility (IRR) and noninferential reflective responsibility (NIRR). I argued that if successful, it shows how reflective theists may be steadfast in upholding their tradition-specific theistic belief despite peer disagreement, and even if they only do so noninferentially.[21]

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Notes

1 For an overview of various views on the epistemic problem of religious disagreement, cf., Thune (2010b), Kraft (2012), Pittard (2015), and De Cruz (2018).

2 A weaker version of steadfastness might allow for a reduction in confidence without any doxastic change.

3 These are sometimes referred to as "dynamic" or "total evidence" views, e.g., cf., Kelly (2010) and Lackey (2010). For a discussion of all three broad perspectives, cf., Frances and Matheson (2019).

4 Here, I am drawing on Philip Quinn's use of the term reflective theist, cf., Quinn (1985).

5 On theistic evidentialist and other approaches to religious epistemology in general, cf., Dougherty and Tweedt (2015).

6 To re-emphasize, as Doko and Turner (2023) rightly point out, it is not the case that *all* Muslim rationalists uphold this strong version of theistic evidentialism. However, this does seem to be the paradigmatic view among such theologians.

7 With respect to general epistemology, there does seem to be a consenus on these matters among the Muslim rationalists. Cf., Wensinck (1965, pp. 252–63), Peters (1976, p. 53), Abrahamov (1993), Ibrahim (2013, p. 102), Wilmers (2018, p. 152), Mihirig (2022, p. 13).

8 Emphasis mine.

9 On the relevance of epistemic luck and Muslim rationalists' condemnation of *taqlīd*, cf., Adamson (2022, pp. 7–11).

10 On the distinction between partialist and impartialist evidence, cf., Dormandy (2018, pp. 62–67).

11 John Pollock and Joseph Cruz (Pollock and Cruz 1999, p. 62) offer an example of reflection and subsequent conclusion that seems similar to Audi's idea, using the example of an abstract painting. As Pollock points out, it is not the case that, upon reflection, one needs to form beliefs and thereby infer from them. So, the conclusion of reflection may be noninferential.

12 For more on the notion of intellectual carefulness, cf., King (2021, pp. 58–80).

13 Interestingly, this seems to be a point of difference that Muslim rationalists make about beliefs evident to the senses and religious or theistic beliefs, that only the former is in some sense "necessary" (*ḍarūrī*) or doxastically irresistible (cf., Abrahamov 1993).

14 This is partly what I take to be the intuition motivating conciliation in the disagreement of Peter and Khadijah in Imran Aijaz's (2024) article.

15 An oft-cited example relevant to this point concerns the disagreement in metaphysics between David Lewis and Peter van Inwagen, cf., van Inwagen (1996).

16 For a similar outline and defense of this kind of argument, cf., Thune (2010a). On a related problem for the full conciliation view concerning self-defeat, cf., Bergmann (2009) and Thune (2010a).

17 Indeed, if one reads Asad's (1999) autobiography, prior to this statement of his, he had already accumulated very many experiences, considerations, experiences, and reflections leading to his eventual conversation.

18 On the distinction between partial and full defeaters, cf., Plantinga (2000, p. 362).

19 It is worth noting here that belief firmness being reduced by way of partial defeat, as already noted, need not mean one lacks knowledge, neither does it need to imply that one ought to shun full conviction in religious faith. On this, cf., Basil Mitchell's (1978, pp. 122–30) discussion of a kind of "principle of tenacity".

20 An important point to note: I think that epistemic permissivism might apply in one sense but not another. Alvin Goldman (1988) makes a distinction between weak and strong justification. The former refers to holding a belief blamelessly, and the latter refers to forming a belief on something ike reliable grounds or methods. In my view, it may be that some body of evidence permits different justified doxastic attitudes in the weak but not strong sense. So, in upholding the view of epistemic permissivism, one

need not commit themselves to the view of religious pluralism. On the contrary, one might be a religious exclusivist in holding that there is only one unique justified doxastic attitude in the strong sense.

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