



Atheism and Radical Skepticism: Ibn Taymiyyah's Epistemic Critique

NAZIR KHAN

YAQEEEN™
INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC RESEARCH

Author Biography

Dr. Nazir Khan MD FRCPC is the President of Yaqeen Canada and the Director of Research Strategy at Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research. He is a Neuroradiologist and Assistant Professor at McMaster University. He has also served as an Imam for many years and has memorized the Qur'an and received traditional certification (*ijāzah*) in the study of the Qur'an, Ḥadith and Islamic theology (*'aqīdah*) from various scholars across North America. He has taught Qur'anic studies classes, workshops, and seminars and is a consultant for the Manitoba Islamic Association Fiqh Committee. Dr. Khan completed his residency at the University of Manitoba and a fellowship in Diagnostic Neuroradiology at the University of Calgary. His expertise in both medical sciences and Islamic theology uniquely positions him to address challenging contemporary questions regarding faith, reason, and science.

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Introduction¹

Epistemology is the academic discipline that addresses the question, “How do I know what I know?” In other words, it studies how knowledge is established, what makes a belief justified, what constitutes proof, and so on. Often surface-level polemics are in fact representative of deeper epistemological issues. This is certainly the case with debates over the existence of God. Before answering the demand, “Prove to me that God exists,” one must first examine what actually constitutes proof, what needs to be proven, and whether the one requesting proof has a coherent notion of proof to begin with. The present essay extracts and analyzes the common epistemological thread that runs through three seemingly disparate discussions: the problems of philosophical skepticism in the Hellenic and Hellenistic periods in Ancient Greece,² the critique of *safsatah* (sophistry) as it relates to philosophical proofs for the existence of God in the writings of the Muslim theologian Ibn Taymīyyah (d. 728 AH/1328 CE), and the core epistemic area of contention in contemporary debates between theists and atheists.

Living in what has been described as an era of doubt or the ‘Age of Atheists,’³ people are far more skeptical towards religion and view faith derisively as ‘belief without evidence,’ or beliefs lacking justification. Faith’s ultimate justification, however, is encountered through the meaningfulness of its own message and not through the pursuit of philosophical argumentation. The essential idea at the core of this essay is the following: **philosophical proof is not required in order to believe in God**, nor to justify one’s belief in God.⁴ That doesn’t mean that people

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² The Hellenic period typically refers to 507–323 BCE and the Hellenistic period refers to 323–31 BCE.

³ Peter Watson, *The Age of Atheists: How We Have Sought to Live Since the Death of God*, 2nd ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014). The phrase appears only in the title, but trends in belief are discussed on pp. 17–29. For the particularly brutal fashion in which the attempted erasure of God from human consciousness has occurred during the “Bolshevik crusade for scientific atheism,” refer to pp. 200–219.

⁴ Amongst Christian philosophers, most notably Alvin Plantinga, the idea that proof is not necessary is often termed *reformed epistemology*. Kelly James Clark, “Reformed Epistemology,” in *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, ed. George Kurian (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012),

are not to be persuaded by some sort of explanation or justification, only that the justification offered must primarily focus on Islam's theocentric message regarding the purpose and meaning of life rather than on syllogistic cosmological, teleological, or ontological arguments. People can entertain doubts about all sorts of things; just as a person does not need philosophical proof to rescue them from the idea that 'the physical world does not exist' or that 'moral values do not exist,' they do not need philosophical proof to escape atheism. There is a fallacy, then, in thinking that we must necessarily doubt and demand proof for something before it can be established as veritable truth—a fallacy one can term the 'Pyrrhonian fallacy' after the radical skepticism of the Ancient Greek philosopher Pyrrho of Elis (d. 270 BCE), who is discussed in detail later in the essay.

The use of philosophical proofs to substantiate doctrines of faith was common in the discipline of *kalām*,⁵ becoming a central feature of the discourse.⁶ However, the eminent Ash'arī theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505 AH) explained that it was not the means of securing certitude for many people since this was not its original aim. Rather, according to him, *kalām* was intended as a discourse for the rational defense of doctrine that demonstrated the logical contradictions of heterodox groups.⁷ In his spiritual autobiography, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*, al-Ghazālī describes how he overcame his own struggle with Pyrrhonian doubt through spiritual experience and enlightenment rather than philosophical argumentation.⁸

<https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470670606.wbecc1149>. See also Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵ *Kalām* is defined as the discourse using philosophical proofs to establish and defend religious doctrine; see 'Aḥud al-Dīn al-Ījī, *al-Mawāqif fī 'ilm al-kalām* (Beirut: 'Ālam al-Kutub, n.d.), 7. There have been ample academic discussions over how this discourse came to acquire the appellation of "*kalām*" (which literally means "speech"). See, for example, Harry Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 63 and Alexander Treiger, "Origins of Kalam," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2016), 33.

⁶ Rodrigo Adem describes this as "[*kalām*'s] most central thesis: that religion, and in particular belief in God and the prophets, must be established on the basis of purely rational proofs in order to be valid." Rodrigo Adem, "The Intellectual Genealogy of Ibn Taymīya" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2015), 62.

⁷ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1988), 33. al-Ghazālī acknowledges that some people may have found certainty through *kalām* but explains what was true regarding his situation and the situation of many others.

⁸ He explains that he sought to obtain certitude by going back to the foundations of knowledge—sensorial perception and rationality—only to find that he was able to cast doubt on these as well, resulting in him experiencing two months in which his mental state was that of a radical skeptic though he did not verbalize it or affirm it creedally.

The most voluminous and vociferous intellectual opposition to the use of philosophical argumentation to establish religious doctrine was to come in the writings of Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymīyyah. As numerous academics have noted, Ibn Taymīyyah's writings demonstrate that he is not an unthinking anti-rational literalist, but rather a deeply analytical and systematic rationalist, intimately familiar with the vast philosophical tradition drawn upon by his opponents.⁹ He advocated for a logically coherent epistemology that gave scripture its due reverence rather than what he perceived to be rendering it subservient to fallible man-made ideologies.¹⁰ Perhaps Ibn Taymīyyah's most salient contribution has been to refocus debates over the interpretation of scripture back to their epistemological roots, namely, the presumption that theological doctrines must be substantiated by philosophical argumentation in order to be regarded as true.

According to the Qur'anic epistemology elaborated by Ibn Taymīyyah and his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah (d. 751 AH), a person's faith in God is fully justified and meaningfully grounded without need for logical deductive argumentation.¹¹ It is instead justified because it is the only meaningful outlook that emerges naturally from a person's *fiṭrah* (innate disposition)—just like belief

(*wa dāma qarīban min shahrayn ana fihimā 'alā madhab al-saḡṣaṭah bi-ḥukm al-ḥāl lā bi-ḥukm al-nuṭq wa-al-maqāl*). Al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh*, 29. An analysis of his doctrine of *kashf* (spiritual unveiling) is beyond the scope of this article.

⁹ In fact, due to the extensive and intricate nature of the rational arguments Ibn Taymīyyah uses in his critiques of *kalām*, some have labeled his discourse a *kalām* of its own, although this ignores the epistemological differences between him and his interlocutors.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Adem, "Intellectual Genealogy," 541 and Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 20. See also Nicholas Heer, "The Priority of Reason in the Interpretation of Scripture: Ibn Taymīyyah and the Mutakallimūn," in *Literary Heritage of Classical Islam: Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of James A. Bellamy*, ed. Mustansir Mir (in collab. with J. E. Fossum) (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993).

¹¹ The most extensive studies undertaken so far of Ibn Taymīyyah's epistemological framework include Carl Sharif El-Tobgui, *Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation: A Study of Dar' ta 'āruḍ al-'aql wa-l-naql* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 253–76 and, particularly on his conceptualization of the *fiṭrah*, Yasir Kazi [Qadhi], "Reconciling Reason and Revelation in the Writings of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328): An Analytical Study of Ibn Taymiyya's *Dar' al-ta 'āruḍ* " (PhD diss., Yale University, 2013), 232–92. In addition, the significance of Ibn Taymīyyah's ideas within epistemological debates on belief in God has been discussed in Jamie B. Turner, "An Islamic Account of Reformed Epistemology," *Philosophy East and West*, December 13, 2019, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/pew.0.0193> and, previously, in Wael Hallaq, "Ibn Taymiyya on the Existence of God," *Acta Orientalia* 52 (1991): 66. However, the present essay offers a detailed examination of Ibn Taymīyyah's epistemic approach to atheism with reference to his writings on radical skepticism, which has not been hitherto undertaken.

in the existence of good and evil, causality, numbers, truth, existence itself, and so on.¹² To deny a core pillar of one's *fiṭrah* leaves a person without a coherent system of interpreting existence in a meaningful way and, if taken to its logical conclusion, one's beliefs dissolve into endless doubt as in *safsaṭah*—a term used in the Islamic tradition to designate radical (Pyrrhonian) skepticism. These terms will be further unpacked and explored in the course of this essay.

Three works of Ibn Taymīyyah are of particular significance in noting his views on philosophical justification: the gargantuan ten-volume work entitled *Dar' ta 'āruḍ al-'aql wa al-naql* (Repudiating the Conflict between Reason and Revelation), his work on Aristotelian epistemology entitled *al-Radd 'alá al-manṭiqiyyīn* (Refutation of the [Greek] Logicians), and his work entitled *Naqḍ al-manṭiq* (Nullifying [Greek] Logic).¹³ Over the course of a sustained epistemological critique, Ibn Taymīyyah traces his interlocutors' methodology of argumentation back to a philosophy prone to radical skepticism and doubt, in order to advance the case for scripturalist (*atharī*) theology.¹⁴ He argues that those who took up the path of philosophical argumentation to attain certainty were often the ones most afflicted by uncertainty, confusion, and doubts, and in many cases, they ended up acknowledging a stalemate on arguments.¹⁵

¹² For a review of the range of perspectives and writings on the *fiṭrah* by Muslim scholars throughout history, see Yasien Mohamed, *Fitrah: The Islamic Concept of Human Nature* (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1996), 35–69.

¹³ This is the title with which the work was originally published; however, the editor of its most recent edition, 'Abd al-Rahmān b. Ḥasan Qā'id, suggests that Ibn Taymīyyah's smaller work on Greek logic did not survive and that this unnamed work is a separate one that has been referred to as *al-Intiṣār li-ahl al-athar* (Supporting the people of narration). See Ibn Taymīyyah, *al-Intiṣār li-ahl al-athar, al-maṭbū' bi-ism naqḍ al-manṭiq*, ed. 'Abd al-Rahmān b. Ḥasan Qā'id (Mecca: Dār 'Ālam al-Fawā'id, 1435/2014), 24 (editor's introduction). For simplicity and clarity, this work will be referred to in this essay by its conventional title *Naqḍ al-manṭiq*; all citations are in reference to the edition cited here.

¹⁴ The longstanding scripturalist trend in theology has been referred to variously as *atharī* (an adjective referring to *āthār*, or narrated statements from early Muslim scholars), *Ḥanbalī* (an ascription to the theology championed by Imam Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal), *aṣḥāb al-hadīth* (companions of hadith or hadith folk), and *salafī* (an ascription to the *salaf al-ṣāliḥ*, or pious predecessors in the early Muslim community). In *Naqḍ al-manṭiq*, Ibn Taymīyyah affirms ascribing to the methodology of the *salaf* (213) and explains that the relative scarcity of theological dispute amongst the Ḥanbalīs was due to the abundance of clear statements from Imam Aḥmad on creedal matters (235). For further discussion on these labels, see Adem, "Intellectual Genealogy." See also Christopher Melchert, "The Piety of the Hadith Folk," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 3 (2002): 425–39 and H. Lauzière, "The Construction of Salafiyya: Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42, no. 3 (2010): 369–89.

¹⁵ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Naqḍ al-manṭiq*, 41–43. This "stalemate" is termed *takāfu' al-adillah*, meaning equipollence or the equal weight of evidence on both sides. Referred to as *isostheneia* in Greek, it was an important concept used by the ancient skeptics.

Dubiously demanding proof

In order to appreciate the importance of skepticism in epistemology, one may consider a hypothetical debate with a solipsist.¹⁶ The solipsist would argue that the world around them is not real but merely an illusion conjured by their own mind. Thus, instead of saying “Prove to me that God exists,” the solipsist demands “Prove to me that *you* exist.” And undoubtedly, no philosophical proof would be sufficient to persuade the solipsist to abandon this viewpoint. If one were to argue based on physical sensations of the external world, the solipsist would point out that these sensations may be conjured in the mind. As the infamous ‘brain-in-a-vat’ thought experiment illustrates, there is no proof that your brain is not sitting in a jar connected to wires that feed you the precise physicochemical stimulations to create a fully vivid experience of living in a ‘real’ world.¹⁷ Popular culture has featured the doubts of solipsism in different ways, whether in the notion that real life may be indistinguishable from a dream (as in the 2010 film *Inception*), the idea that one’s memories may have been replaced with false memories about who they are (as in the 2012 film *Total Recall*), or the notion that human beings are living inside a computer simulation (as in the 1999 film *The Matrix*). In each of these cases, it would be impossible to demonstrate either by logical deductive argument or by empirical evidence that external reality is as one perceives it or remembers it. The Swedish philosopher Nick Bostrom argued that, given the possibility for a technologically mature civilization to create billions of computer simulations of other minds and, therefore, the relative scarcity of non-simulated minds to simulated minds, it is far more probable that you are living in a computer

¹⁶ Clive Borst writes, “Doctrines and threats of solipsism are much older than the introduction of the term ‘solipsism’ to mark them. The term derives from the Latin *solus ipse*. This means literally ‘self alone,’ and less literally either ‘I alone exist’ or else ‘I alone am conscious,’ yielding, in the first case, a more idealist form of solipsism querying the existence of an independent material world and, in the second case, a more materialist form allowing for the (possible) existence of a material world but again not countenancing the existence of other minds or centers of consciousness.” Clive Borst, “Solipsism,” in *A Companion to Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 747.

¹⁷ For a more detailed discussion of its implications, see Gary Ebbs, “Skepticism, Objectivity, and Brains in Vats,” in *Debating Self-Knowledge*, Anthony Brueckner and Gary Ebbs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 28–54.

simulation constructed by a technologically mature civilization than living as a physical being in nature.¹⁸ A similar view has been promoted by the billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk.¹⁹

Solipsism is philosophically irrefutable but does it merit serious consideration by the average person, let alone an intellectual response? Most people do not take seriously those doubts that undermine the epistemological foundations for a meaningful understanding of reality. Just as the degree to which our logical reasoning or perceptions correspond to reality can be doubted, there can be an endless number of doubts that occur to the human mind concerning even the most objectively well-grounded structures of one's epistemology. Ibn Taymīyyah writes:

Indeed, empirical matters witnessed by the senses, as well as the rational sciences constructed upon them, have been subject to numerous rational doubts that oppose what is known by perception or intellect. And much of this is of a sophistic nature which many or most people find difficult to solve or to clarify its unsoundness. Instead, to refute it, they rely on the fact that this doubt undermines that which is known by perception or necessity, so it does not merit a response. So their response to it would [simply] be that it contradicts that which is indubitably known. On that basis, [one] recognizes it as false in principle, even if he does not address its incorrectness in a detailed fashion.

And if one were to say, "These matters of indubitable knowledge cannot be confirmed [as truth] without rebutting whatever sophistic arguments challenge them," then no person would be able to confirm any knowledge about anything, since there is no end to what occurs in the minds of some people of sophistic arguments (*al-ḥujaj al-sūfistā 'īyah*).²⁰

He goes on to explain that the believer's certitude in the truth of what God's infallible messenger has communicated, in general, is in fact even greater than their

¹⁸ Nick Bostrom, "Do We Live in a Computer Simulation?" *New Scientist* 192, no. 2579 (November 19, 2006), 38–39.

¹⁹ Mike Wall, " 'We're Probably Living in a Simulation,' Elon Musk Says," *Space.com*, September 7, 2018, <https://www.space.com/41749-elon-musk-living-in-simulation-rogan-podcast.html>.

²⁰ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta' āruḍ al-'aql wa-al-naql*, 10 vols., 2nd ed., ed. Muḥammad Rashād Sālim (Riyadh: Jāmi'at al-Imām Muḥammad b. Sa'ūd al-Islāmiyyah, 1411/1991), 5:254.

certitude in any individual piece of information relayed by their fallible empirical or rational faculties.²¹ This can be readily understood when one recognizes that all meaningful conceptualizations of reality are ultimately secured and anchored in the ontological foundation provided by the Islamic worldview.

Skepticism beyond solipsism

The solipsist practices a form of radical skepticism, entertaining doubt concerning the existence of physical reality, whereas the vast majority of people are perfectly content to affirm that the world around them is real without any need for proof. But there is, in fact, no shortage of matters that can be subjected to doubt, suspicion, and distrust. Someone can doubt events in history like the existence of dinosaurs or the moon landing, or doubt empirical knowledge (like the flat-earth theorists), or doubt the veracity of contemporary events and believe in conspiracy theories (like those who affirm that the world is controlled by 'lizard people').²² One can become extremely distrustful in all of their relationships, believing that everyone is attempting to deceive them. One can doubt morality and contend that the categories of 'good' and 'evil' are nothing more than mere mental constructions without any external reality. As the contemporary philosopher Richard Garner writes:

Just as atheists claim that the beliefs of theists about the objective existence of a god are in error, moral error theorists claim that the beliefs of moral realists about the objective existence of moral rules, prohibitions, virtues, vices, values, rights, and duties are also in error, and for the same reason—what they are talking about doesn't exist.²³

²¹ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar' ta' āruḍ*, 5:255–56.

²² Olga Oksman, "Conspiracy Craze: Why Twelve Million Americans Believe Alien Lizards Rule Us," *Guardian* April 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/apr/07/conspiracy-theory-paranoia-aliens-illuminati-beyonce-vaccines-cliven-bundy-jfk>.

²³ Richard Garner, "Morality: The Final Delusion?," *Philosophy Now* 82 (2011): 18–20. If one believes in moral error theory, what is one to do about moral discourse? While moral fictionalism espouses pretending moral values exist, Garner himself advocates moral abolitionism, arguing that we should attempt to eliminate the discourse of morality altogether.

Even logic itself can be subjected to doubt, for no logical proposition can establish the truth of logic itself without circularity; the same is true of every cherished mathematical axiom.²⁴ The notion of causality—that the world is organized and ordered in such a manner that there are causes and effects—is also something that we take for granted. Certainly, there is no philosophical proof that can establish the existence of causality itself, and yet it is a necessary conceptual foundation in order to construe the world around us in a meaningful manner.²⁵ If one were to attempt to eradicate all notions of causality, logical entailment, numerical order, and magnitude from one's mind, one would be unable to make sense of anything, let alone arrive at a meaningful construal of reality as a whole. Ludwig Wittgenstein spoke of such concepts as serving as metaphorical 'scaffolding of our thoughts,' or the 'hinge' upon which our epistemic 'door' must turn, and he described the futility of endless doubt thus:

If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty.²⁶

²⁴ Indeed, Hartry Field argues that a "default entitlement" to such axioms is the only philosophical justification that can be proffered. He writes, "Many of our beliefs and inferential rules in mathematics, logic, and methodology can be argued for from more basic beliefs and rules, without any circularity. But this is not so for the most basic beliefs and rules: we must be, in a sense, entitled to them by default." Hartry Field, "Recent Debates about the A Priori," in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, ed. Tamar Szabo Gendler and John Hawthorne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1:81.

²⁵ Skepticism towards causality has been a major focus of scholarly discussion surrounding the views of David Hume, who pointed out the lack of rational justification for causal inference in spite of its necessity for the sound operation of our minds. As James Hill explains, "Our belief systems are saturated with causal inference and we would be prisoners of our own minds if we doubted all causal relations." James Hill, "Hume's Theory of Causation: Is There More Than One?" *Teorie Vědy / Theory of Science* 33, no. 2 (2011): 233–49. See also Graciela De Pierris, "Hume's Pyrrhonian Skepticism and the Belief in Causal Laws," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39, no. 3 (2001): 351–83.

²⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. D. Paul and G.E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), §115. See also Duncan Pritchard, "Faith and Reason," *Philosophy* 81 (2017): 101–18. Pritchard writes:

What is particularly interesting in this context is that there is quite a lot of evidence that Wittgenstein's remarks on hinge commitments were heavily influenced by the work of John Henry Newman, and in particular his defence of the rationality of religious belief in *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. In this work, Newman opposes a Lockean conception of our basis for religious belief. Locke famously argued in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that "reason must be our last judge and guide in everything." Accordingly, he maintained that religious beliefs should be put before the tribunal of reason just like any other (10).

The futility of radical skepticism is thus readily evident. The meanings of thoughts that occur in one's mind can also be doubted, for what proves that one's thoughts carry the meanings with which one associates them? Why should electrochemical impulses be imbued with meaning at all? Viewing one's own thoughts as meaningless entails dilapidation of any fruitful cognitive activity.

Denying firmly grounded realities with rhetoric and specious argumentation is the essence of radical skepticism for Ibn Taymīyyah, who states that rejecting God is the worst form of *safsatah* (radical skepticism), albeit less common. This term is explained in greater detail below (see 'the meaning of *safsatah*'). Ibn Taymīyyah notes that most people do not embrace *safsatah* with regard to all matters (as Pyrrhonian skeptics do), but rather it presents itself to some people, or to many people in only some aspects.²⁷ Thus, we find that people are able to compartmentalize their radical skepticism—the moral abolitionist²⁸ may not be a conspiracy theorist, the anti-vaxxer may not be a flat-earth theorist, and the atheist may not be a solipsist. Scientism, which denies the reality of that which lies beyond our empirical perception, is but one form of radical skepticism. As Ibn Taymīyyah explains,²⁹ it is irrational to claim that nothing exists beyond what one perceives since there is no person who does not rely on receiving information from others, nor is there anyone who does not rely on logical reasoning for knowledge beyond what is directly perceptible. And there is no civilization except that it must

²⁷ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta'āruḍ*, 3:133. In addition to explicit denial of God's existence, he discusses the broader notion of supposing one does not need God (*al-istighnā' 'an al-Sāni'*).

²⁸ Some moral abolitionists believe that people should be actively dissuaded from believing in moral values. Joel Marks writes, "Finally I reached a point where I felt that, far from needing to hide my amorality from the world, I should share it with the world. It would be a gift. At the very least, it was important—perhaps the most important thing in the world! I also saw the humor in my situation: it was not lost on me that I was becoming an unbelieving proselytizer." Joel Marks, *Ethics Without Morals: In Defence of Amorality* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 14. Other moral abolitionists believe that one should not only abolish asserting moral judgments but also abolish asserting the truth of moral error theory and the desirability of moral abolitionism; "the main reason for the strong [non-assertive moral abolitionist] approach is to obtain something like Pyrrhonian impassivity with respect to morality, a therapeutic release from belief in and concern with as much normativity as possible." Jason Dockstader, "Nonassertive Moral Abolitionism," *Metaphilosophy* 50, no. 4 (2019): 481–502.

²⁹ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' Ta'āruḍ*, 5:130–1. Note that while he repudiates the view that all that exists must be perceptible to us in this world, he affirms instead the view that all that exists is *in principle perceptible*, even if it be only in the afterlife (*al-mawjūd huwa mā yumkin al-iḥsās bihi wa law fī al-ākhirah*). See also, Ibn Taymīyyah, *Bayān talbīs al-jahmīyah* (Medina: Maktabah Malik Fahd al-Wataniyyah, 2005), 2:341.

know of its history through reports rather than direct perception. Hence, according to Ibn Taymiyyah, scientism would be yet another form of *safsaṭah*.

The spectrum of skepticism

Many of the aforementioned approaches that cast doubt on that which others consider matters of certitude are collectively lumped together under the umbrella term 'skepticism.' The above attitudes can be considered examples of 'radical skepticism'; however, one must first clarify the usage of the term 'skepticism' as it is often used ambiguously and even within academic literature has a variety of definitions. For instance, the term *scientific skepticism* is used to refer to doubting any claims or assertions that lack empirical evidence. On the other hand, the term *philosophical skepticism* is used to refer to the view that it is impossible to have certain knowledge about something; it is impossible for us to know the truth of the matter. Sometimes skepticism may be used to describe a *subjectivism* and/or *anti-realism* that denies that there is any objective truth to be known in the first place.³⁰ This can be seen as an extension of the doubt of thinking it is impossible to know whether something is good or bad, to wondering whether there is even a right answer to the question in the first place; it is simply doubt carried one level up from the metaphysical to the *meta-metaphysical* question.

The varieties of skepticism are so numerous that some have identified six dimensions by which they may be classified: **domain** (general or limited), **character** (theoretical, prescriptive, or practicing), **object** (epistemological or conceptual), **origin** (antecedent or consequent), **degree** (mitigated or unmitigated), and **persistence** (constant or variable).³¹ These are outlined in Table 1 along with examples.

³⁰ In this vein, Leo Groarke writes, "Sceptical arguments are put forward as an attack on realist truth, countering the notion that we can transcend our subjective outlook by arguing that our beliefs are necessarily relative to human nature and perception, the culture that we live in, philosophical commitments, and so on. This reasoning culminates in the decision to suspend judgment on the truth of any claim, but here as elsewhere the concern is truth in the realist sense." Leo Groarke, *Greek Skepticism: Anti-Realist Trends in Ancient Thought* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 20.

³¹ Don Garrett, "'A Small Tincture of Pyrrhonism': Skepticism and Naturalism in Hume's Science of Man," in *Pyrrhonian Skepticism*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 68–98.

Table 1

The six dimensions of skepticism with explanation and examples:

		Examples		
Name of dimension	Explanation of each dimension	Solipsism	Moral fictionalism	Academic skepticism
Domain	General: skepticism applied to everything Limited: applied only to a particular topic	Limited (world)	Limited (morality)	General (countering all dogma)
Character	Theoretical: There is a lack of justification for X Prescriptive: One should not believe in X Practicing: I doubt X	Theoretical (lack of justification)	Theoretical ("Morals don't exist but it's useful to believe in them")	Theoretical (there is no proof one way or another)
Object	Conceptual: X is unintelligible. Epistemic: X is unproven.	Epistemic	Epistemic	Epistemic
Origin	Antecedent: <i>a priori</i> doubt Consequent: doubt after investigation or examination	Antecedent (no proof for it in the first place)	Consequent ("All morals are subject to disagreement.")	Consequent ("There are strong arguments on both sides")
Degree	Unmitigated: no basis to believe in X Mitigated: insufficient basis to believe in X	Unmitigated	Mitigated	Mitigated (insufficient justification)
Persistence	Variable: skepticism increases or decreases Constant: remains the same	Depends on the individual skeptic and whether there is a fluctuation in doubts or a change in perspective, views, ideas and focus of attention.		

The domain of skepticism embodied by the atheist is limited (to the proposition 'God exists' or that religious beliefs are true). For some atheists, the object of their skepticism is epistemological rather than conceptual; that is, they challenge the existence of God without challenging the concept itself as unintelligible. Indeed, some of the most vocal representatives of the New Atheist movement³² even view the concept of God to be a hypothesis amenable to scientific falsification³³ (which

³² For a helpful overview, see Whitley Kaufman, "New Atheism and Its Critics," *Philosophy Compass* 14, no. 1 (2018).

³³ For instance, Richard Dawkins writes, "God's existence or non-existence is a scientific fact about the universe, discoverable in principle if not in practice." Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Mariner Books, 2008), 72–73. Victor Stenger writes, "By this moment in time science has advanced sufficiently to make a definitive

would make the *origin* of the skepticism *consequent* to scientific inquiry according to the above classification).

The distinction between atheism and agnosticism is that the former is an ontological position (“There is no God”) while the latter is an epistemological position (“I don’t know if there is a God” or “It is impossible for us to know if there is a God”). However, owing to the ambiguity of the prefix ‘a-’ in ‘atheism’ with the potential for denoting either *negation* or *absence*, many have attempted to define atheism in a manner that conflates the boundaries between atheism and agnosticism, such as defining it as a ‘lack of belief in the existence of God,’ thus resulting in what has been termed a *semantic fusion* between atheism and agnosticism.³⁴ However, the motivation behind this expansion of the definition is that both the atheist and the agnostic share a common pathway in their arrival at their conclusion.³⁵ Skeptical of the theist’s case for God’s existence, they fall back on what is held to be the default commitment—for the agnostic, it is to suspend judgment, while for the atheist the default presumption is negation while the burden of proof is on the theist. Note that if the same “burden of proof” presumption were extended to other categories, the logically consistent atheist would also attempt to be a solipsist, moral error theorist, and so forth, and similarly one would expect the logically consistent agnostic to suspend judgment on such matters as well. Thus, both the agnostic and the atheist practice skepticism limited to the domain of belief in God. The important difference between the two is in the degree of skepticism, the former being mitigated and the latter being unmitigated.

statement on the existence or nonexistence of a God.” Victor Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007), 11.

³⁴ Shoaib Ahmed Malik, “Defining Atheism and the Burden of Proof,” *Philosophy* 93, no. 2 (2018): 279–301.

³⁵ This is likely the most common subconscious motivation. Shoaib Malik also comments on other more deliberate motivations: “Moreover, as I have already demonstrated, lack of belief in God and the denial of God’s existence are two separate positions (the first being a neutral standpoint). Why is it, then, that some atheists are so insistent on incorporating the epistemological ‘lack of belief’ under the term ‘atheism’? It seems there is an advantageous gain in widening the net of atheism as a more inclusive position because it could help gain social and political currency” (Malik, “Defining Atheism,” 299). He notes that the census numbers for “atheism” effectively double based on definitions.

As Ibn Taymīyyah explains, someone may be a radical skeptic in denying a known truth in one domain even as they affirm the truth of other matters.³⁶ Skepticism applied to a limited domain will always be accused of being inconsistent in failing to apply the same evidentiary standards to other matters. But there are few skeptics who apply skepticism globally, doubting everything, termed *Cartesian skepticism*; “So those who work hard to refute Cartesian skepticism are attacking an empty castle.”³⁷ What we have earlier encountered as ‘solipsism’ is a limited manifestation of *Cartesian skepticism*, which doubts all knowledge, including the existence of the external world. This is a type of skepticism that Rene Descartes articulated and opposed³⁸ by arguing that, even if an evil demon has manipulated one’s senses, the one thing one cannot doubt is that one has a mind that is thinking. He thus expressed perhaps the most famous philosophical statement, *Cogito ergo sum*, in essence, “I think, therefore, I must exist.” After all, it would seem that the very fact that I am doubting that the world exists, must prove that I have a mind that is able to doubt.³⁹ However, even this conclusion can be doubted. The same evil demon that manipulates the senses could easily manipulate the mind into thinking it is doubting or engaging in mental states that it is in fact not engaged in (mental state skepticism). For instance, what if the thoughts in one’s mind are merely echoes or shadows of the thoughts occurring in the demon’s mind, and one’s mind possesses no autonomous thought of its own? Herein one encounters an infinite regress of skeptical thoughts. The philosopher Jessica Wilson writes:

Given that I might be dreaming, hallucinating or sadly deceived into thinking that I am skeptical about the external world, then again by parallel reasoning, I should be skeptical about whether I really am in the state at issue—that is, I should be skeptical about whether I am skeptical about

³⁶ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Bayān talbīs al-jahmīyah*, 2:341.

³⁷ Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “Introduction to Pyrrhonian Skepticism,” in *Pyrrhonian Skepticism*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4.

³⁸ “Descartes himself was not a Cartesian skeptic. He was an antiskeptic. Nevertheless, there is good reason to speak of ‘Cartesian skepticism,’ since Descartes clarified and struggled against the stance we have called ‘Cartesian skepticism.’ ” Steven Luper, “Cartesian Skepticism,” in *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Duncan Pritchard and Sven Bernecker (New York: Routledge, 2011), 416.

³⁹ While Descartes regarded the subjective inner experience as indubitable, Immanuel Kant believed that this inner experience necessarily depended on the existence of an outer experience. Barry Stroud, “Kant’s ‘Transcendental Deduction’” in *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason: A Critical Guide*, ed. James R. O’Shea (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 114–15.

whether the external world exists. Now there's no stopping. For I might similarly be dreaming, hallucinating or sadly deceived into thinking that I am skeptical about whether I am skeptical about whether the external world exists, so that I should now be skeptical about whether I am skeptical about whether I am skeptical about whether the external world exists. And so on.⁴⁰

Such skepticism “leads to a vicious regress, whose only principled and unproblematic resolution requires going back to and rejecting the very first skeptical step.”⁴¹ The chain of skepticism undermines any attempt at knowledge. Perhaps the Cartesian slogan would more aptly have been *Dubito ergo sum stultus*—I doubt, therefore I remain foolish.

Proof and the Pyrrhonian precipice

As a philosophical methodology, skepticism has had a vast and variegated history since the ancient Greeks, recurring as a theme in debates from ethics to metaphysics, being championed since the Hellenistic period by the Pyrrhonists and the Academic skeptics⁴² but being utilized in some shape or form by almost every major group including the dogmatists.⁴³ Philosophical skepticism is often traced back to the ancient Greek philosopher Pyrrho of Elis (d. 270 BCE). His extreme skepticism became the fodder of a variety of amusing fables and legends. Pyrrho is said to have been so distrustful of his own senses that his students had to prevent him from walking into dogs or walking off cliffs.⁴⁴ Given that no belief could escape doubts concerning its justification, Pyrrho believed that the only way to live was to suspend judgment in its entirety. That Pyrrhonian skepticism taken to its

⁴⁰ Jessica Wilson, “The Regress Argument against Cartesian Skepticism,” *Analysis* 72, no. 4 (2012): 668–73, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/analysis/ans117>.

⁴¹ Wilson, “Regress Argument,” 672.

⁴² D. E. Machuca, “Ancient Skepticism: Overview,” *Philosophy Compass* 6, no. 4 (2011): 234–45.

⁴³ Groarke, *Greek Scepticism*, 31–32. For an overview of the subject of skepticism, see Allan Hazlett, *A Critical Introduction to Skepticism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

⁴⁴ Bett writes, “Diogenes (9.62) reports Antigonos as saying that Pyrrho’s lack of trust in his senses led him to ignore precipices, oncoming wagons and dangerous dogs, and that his friends had to follow him around to protect him from these various everyday hazards.” Richard Bett, “Pyrrho,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2018, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/pyrrho/>.

ultimate conclusion results in absurdity did not go unnoticed. Galen (d. 210 CE) mockingly asked “whether the Pyrrhonist expects us to stay in bed when the sun is up for lack of certainty about whether it is day or night, or to sit on board our ship when everyone else is disembarking, wondering whether what appears to be land really is land.”⁴⁵ Evidently, it would be impossible even to structure one's thoughts coherently under the constant self-infliction of such Pyrrhonian doubts without devolving into an abyss of meaninglessness.

Arcesilaus, one of the skeptics of Plato's academy (also known as the ‘Academic skeptics’) possibly influenced by Pyrrho, adopted skepticism as a methodology, seeking to cast doubt upon any arguments in favor of a particular philosophical stance.⁴⁶ However, the Academic skeptics were criticized by the most influential Pyrrhonian skeptic, Sextus Empiricus (d. ca. 210 CE), as being not skeptical enough since they demonstrated a commitment to the fundamental unknowability of propositions.⁴⁷ Thus, Arcesilaus can be seen as having many beliefs about what it means to know or not know something, whether a particular proposition is known or unknown, and what constitutes sufficient reason to believe in a proposition.⁴⁸ The dutiful Pyrrhonist must strip away even these notions in the quest to suspend all judgment entirely.

Although it sounds extreme, Pyrrhonian skepticism is but the logical ramification and practical consequence of the skeptical frame of thought under which most of the schools of Hellenistic philosophy labored.⁴⁹ Groarke writes:

⁴⁵ M. F. Burnyeat, *Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism? Explorations in Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 205–35.

⁴⁶ Numenius writes, “Arcesilaus persisted in refuting everything, just like a Pyrrhonian except for the name.” Cited in Christopher Craig Dupuis, “The Influence of Pyrrho of Elis and the Pyrrhonian Praxis of Aporetic Language” (master's thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2014), 69.

⁴⁷ This is called the “dogmatic interpretation” of the Academic skeptics. “The fundamental issue regarding Arcesilaus' skepticism is whether it should be understood as a philosophical position or as a strictly dialectical practice with no doctrinal content.” Harald Thorsrud, “Arcesilaus: Socratic Skepticism in Plato's Academy,” *Lexicon Philosophicum: Hellenistic Theories of Knowledge*, special issue (2018): 195–220.

⁴⁸ See Casey Perin, “Making Sense of Arcesilaus,” in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 45, ed. Brad Inwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 326.

⁴⁹ Jacques Brunschwig and Geoffrey E. R. Lloyd, eds., *Greek Thought: A Guide to Classical Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 938.

Scepticism is best understood as the product of a community of individuals within a particular intellectual milieu, and not as a perspective invented by individuals (say, Pyrrho or Arcesilaus). Indeed, the differences between sceptics and competing schools of thought are fewer than we think and Greek scepticism can be profitably viewed as a natural (one may say, inevitable) response to problems that are the focus of discussion in all of Greek epistemology.⁵⁰

Hellenistic philosophy is deeply entrenched in the skeptical sentiment that if one cannot defeat one's philosophical interlocutor via recourse to indubitable proof or unshakable empirical fact, then one has no justification for believing what he or she holds to be true. Socrates was seen by many as the archetypal skeptic; the most famous quote attributed to him (paraphrased from Plato's *Apology*) is the statement, "The only thing I truly know is that I know nothing."⁵¹ Moreover, he was skeptical towards non-definitional knowledge; true knowledge was about having the right philosophical definitions and if you could not define something, you did not really have knowledge of it.⁵²

Prefiguring ideas of solipsism, Aristippus (d. 356 BCE) and the Cyrenaics were criticized for an epistemology that could not prove whether one's own teacher existed.⁵³ Aristotle and the peripatetics were skeptical of claims that were not substantiated by syllogistic argumentation, while Epicureans and Stoics argued that the empirical senses were the basis of true knowledge.⁵⁴ Each group of Hellenistic

⁵⁰ Groarke, *Greek Scepticism*, 29.

⁵¹ In this regard, he was an influence on Arcesilaus (d. 241 BCE), under whose direction the academy of Plato became overtly skeptical in its approach. Known as the "Academic skeptics" or "skeptics of Plato's academy," Arcesilaus and his followers directed their efforts towards simply refuting all claims made by any of their opponents. According to Cicero (d. 43 BCE):

Arcesilaus, the pupil of Polemo, was the first to derive this principal point from various of Plato's books and from Socratic discourses—that there is nothing that the senses or the mind can grasp. . . . He is said to have belittled every criterion of mind and sense, and begun the practice—though it was absolutely Socratic—not of indicating his own opinion, but of speaking against what anyone stated as his [i.e., the speaker's] opinion.

De Oratore 3.67, as cited in A. A. Long, "Plato and Hellenistic Philosophy," in *A Companion to Plato*, ed. H. H. Benson (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 425.

⁵² Socrates, as seen throughout Plato's dialogues, challenges any knowledge that is not grounded in a clear definition by asking questions of the form "What is X?"

⁵³ Groarke, *Greek Scepticism*, 74n26.

⁵⁴ Robert Sharples, *Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics: An Introduction to Hellenistic Philosophy* (London and New York: Psychology Press, 1996), 11–12.

philosophers drew for themselves an arbitrary and unsubstantiated standard of what they considered to be acceptable proof and they applied radical skepticism towards anything that fell short of that standard. It was Pyrrho who presumably saw through the arbitrary standards and subjected them to the very same epistemic skepticism. In that sense, Pyrrho was only being consistent in attempting to take doubt to its natural conclusion.

Ibn Taymīyyah was familiar with the ideas of the Pyrrhonists and the Sophists,⁵⁵ and he leveraged their skepticism to demonstrate the failure of philosophical argumentation to secure certitude, as well as to illustrate the ultimate outcome of his opponents' epistemology, and the need for recourse to a firmer foundation rooted in the Qur'an. Those who chose the path of philosophical argumentation to establish matters of faith had to grapple with the phenomenon of radical skepticism. While the Mu'tazilah broadly endorsed the notion that the first obligation upon a human being is rational examination of evidences (*naẓar*), some like Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā'ī (d. 321 AH) stated that the first obligation is, in fact, to doubt (*awwal al-wājibāt al-shakk*).⁵⁶ Yet, as witnessed by al-Ghazālī, the path of doubt did not secure certitude but rather only fueled further doubts, epistemically leading to the point of Pyrrhonian skepticism. This was the link that was to form a central focus in Ibn Taymīyyah's extensive epistemological analysis.

The meaning of *safsatah*

Radical skepticism was universally repudiated by Muslim theologians of all trends. Yet, Ibn Taymīyyah identifies radical skepticism as the ultimate outcome of the methods of his interlocutors who were entrenched in the pursuit of philosophical arguments for God, arguing that their methodology leads not to certitude but to

⁵⁵ Georges Tamer, "The Curse of Philosophy: Ibn Taymiyya as a Philosopher in Contemporary Islamic Thought," in *Islamic Theology, Philosophy and Law: Debating Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya*, ed. Birgit Krawietz and Georges Tamer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 336.

⁵⁶ al-Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-maqāṣid* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1971), 1:121.

doubt (*shakk*) and confusion (*ḥayrah*).⁵⁷ Muslim theologians discussed radical skepticism with the terms *safsatah*, *sūfistā'iyah*, and *musafsiṭin* (Arabicizations of the Greek terms sophistry, sophisticism, and sophists respectively), terms that are discussed frequently in Ibn Taymīyyah's writings. Where does the term 'sophist' originate? Though perhaps initially signifying nothing more than 'wise teachers' in Athenian society, it became a designation for those individuals who engaged in clever rhetoric at the expense of sound logic, capable of making a weak argument appear stronger, investing in winning debates over discovering the truth, and expressing skepticism towards objective knowledge.⁵⁸

Indeed, 'Sophist' was the label Plato used to describe Socrates' foremost adversaries, men like Protagoras (d. 420 BCE), Antiphon (d. 411 BCE), Gorgias (d. 390 BCE), Prodicus (d. 395 BCE), and Thrasymachus (d. 399 BCE), although there existed no clear line to prevent Socrates himself from being derided as a Sophist in the words of Aristophanes (d. ca. 386 BCE) and Aeschines (d. 314 BCE).⁵⁹ Protagoras captured a form of relativism or anti-realism in his famous, albeit much-misunderstood, statement "Man is the measure of all things." He expressed skepticism of knowledge of the Divine saying, "Where the gods are concerned, I am not in a position to ascertain that they exist, or that they do not exist."⁶⁰ While Protagoras' relativism led him to conclude that all things are equally true, for Gorgias it led to seeing all things as equally false.⁶¹ Both, however, embraced a skepticism that endorsed a form of nihilism and solipsism:

⁵⁷ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta'āruḍ*, 1:164.

⁵⁸ Patricia O'Grady writes, "A very simple definition of sophists, and one that is devoid of Plato's dogmatism and malevolence, is this: sophists were freelance, mostly non-Athenian independent teachers who traveled throughout Ancient Greece from city to city making their living out of the new demand for education." She also writes, "Antagonism towards the Sophists developed when their skills were put to winning, rather than to discovering truth. . . . The once complimentary term came to be applied in a derogatory way, a usage which it retains to a considerable extent to this day." Patricia F. O'Grady, *The Sophists: An Introduction* (Bristol: Classical Press, 2008), 12, 15.

⁵⁹ W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 3, part 1, *The Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 33–34.

⁶⁰ Robin Waterfield, *The First Philosophers: The Presocratics and Sophists*, Oxford World's Classics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 211.

⁶¹ Baldwin R. Hergenhahn, *An Introduction to the History of Psychology*, 6th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2008), 42.

Gorgias's position, as well as Protagoras's, exemplified **nihilism** because it stated that there can be no objective way of determining knowledge of truth. The Sophist position also exemplifies **solipsism** because the self can be aware of nothing except its own experiences and mental states. Thus, Gorgias reached his three celebrated conclusions: Nothing exists; if it did exist, it could not be comprehended; and if it could be comprehended, it could not be communicated to another person.⁶²

The trend of skepticism that was certainly exemplified by the Sophists also manifested throughout many strands of Hellenistic philosophy, from the Cyrenaics to the Peripatetics, and most dramatically in the Pyrrhonian skeptics and the Academic skeptics.⁶³ The interwoven themes of sophistry and skepticism are vital in order to understand how they relate to the usage of the term *safsaṭah* or *sūfistā'iyah*. Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 333 AH), the eponymous founder of the Māturīdī school of *kalām*, devotes a section in his *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd* to clarifying the error of the *Sūfistā'iyah*, those who claim that the human being's rational and sensorial faculties are unreliable and consequently that there is no knowledge, only opinions and beliefs.⁶⁴ He mentions the early Mu'tazilī Ibn Shabīb's (d. 230 AH) attempts to dispute with them by demonstrating the inherent contradiction in their claim to *know* that there is nothing to *know*, before expressing his own view regarding the futility of disputation with this group. The early Ash'arī theologian and heresiologist 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 429 AH) explains that *sūfistā'iyah* entails denying knowledge, or denying the reality of all things; there are some who have doubt about the existence of real entities (*alladhīna shakkū fī wujūd al-ḥaqā'iq*), while others believe that the reality of matters is contingent upon one's beliefs about them and that all beliefs are correct despite being mutually contradictory.⁶⁵ One can readily see how this definition is inclusive of Pyrrhonian skeptics as well as the subjectivists and anti-realists from the Athenian Sophists.

⁶² Hergenhahn, *Introduction to the History of Psychology*.

⁶³ On the influence of the Sophists on Pyrrhonian skepticism, see Groarke, *Greek Scepticism*, 49–52.

⁶⁴ Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, ed. Bekir Topaloğlu and Muhammed Aruçi (Beirut: Dār Ṣadr, 2010), 222–25. See also Ulrich Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand*, trans. Rodrigo Adem (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 151.

⁶⁵ 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī, *al-Farq bayn al-fīraq* (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Sīnā), 280.

Similarly, Abū al-Maʿālī al-Juwaynī (d. 478 AH) distinguishes between four separate groups of Sophists—those who deny the possibility of knowledge, those who deny the demonstrability of knowledge, those who deny the human capacity to attain knowledge, and those who affirm that mutually contradictory beliefs all constitute veritable knowledge.⁶⁶ Thus, it is important to recognize that the term *safsatah* in the writings of Muslim theologians is not specifically limited to those particular Athenian thinkers labeled ‘sophists,’ although it is inclusive of many important epistemic trends that emerged from their group. This will become increasingly evident as we consider the responses to *safsatah* in the writings of Ibn Taymīyyah.

Atheism and *safsatah*

For Ibn Taymīyyah, *safsatah* involves a spectrum, and those who deny God—belief in Whom he explains is the most firmly established of matters in the *fiṭrah*—are engaging in worse skepticism than those *musafsiṭūn* who oppose the dictates of empirical perception and rationality, or oppose massively attested (*tawātur*) reports about the existence of cities and events which they have personally not witnessed (such as a person denying the existence of Toronto or the occurrence of World War II).⁶⁷ Speaking on the impossibility of the *fiṭrah* violating the law of non-contradiction by affirming the truth and falsehood of something simultaneously, Ibn Taymīyyah states that it would “strike at the foundations of all knowledge in its entirety” (*mabādiʾ al-ʿulūm kullihā*) and “there would remain no knowledge by which truth is recognized from falsehood, and this is inclusive of all *safsatah*.”⁶⁸ Here we find the understanding that *safsatah* cripples the epistemological structures that undergird and anchor all coherent knowledge of reality.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Abū al-Maʿālī al-Juwaynī, *al-Burhān fī uṣūl al-fiqh* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2011), 20.

⁶⁷ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Darʾ taʾāruḍ*, 8:38 (“a *ʿzam safsatah min ghayrihī min anwāʾ al-safsatah*”). See also his discussion in *Darʾ*, 3:133, cited earlier.

⁶⁸ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Darʾ taʾāruḍ*, 6:15.

⁶⁹ Although there are some similar observations to this point made some six centuries after Ibn Taymīyyah by Ludwig Wittgenstein, Ibn Taymīyyah provides the epistemic alternative through the *fiṭrah* and revelation. On the

Ibn Taymīyyah states that even though atheism (*inkār al-Ṣāniʿ*) was never a popular viewpoint adopted by an entire nation of the known civilizations, it is upheld by some people to varying degrees, whether outwardly as in the case of Pharaoh (*Firʿawn*) who deep down recognized but refused to acknowledge the truth of God, or both outwardly and inwardly as in the case of the ruler who disputed with Prophet Ibrāhīm.⁷⁰ However, Ibn Taymīyyah says this does not negate that recognition (*maʿrifah*) of God is firmly ingrained in the *fiṭrah*, established by necessity. For indeed, Ibn Taymīyyah says, atheism is a type of *safṣaṭah* or radical skepticism, which is a general condition many people fall into whether intentionally or unintentionally by contesting foundations known intuitively (*qaḍāyā badīhiyah*) or matters recognized by the *fiṭrah* (*al-maʿarif al-fiṭriyah*) in empirical and mathematical matters, as well as in theology.⁷¹

Ibn Taymīyyah notes that *safṣaṭah* involves opposing necessary knowledge (*ʿilm ḍarūrī*), like opposing the idea that knowledge is distinct from the knower.⁷² At its extreme, it may entail rejection of logical or empirical fundamentals such as regarding one as equal to two or regarding sweetness and bitterness as identical.⁷³ When the falsity of a claim is recognized by the most primordial cognitive instincts in one's consciousness (*badīhah*), it is not possible to establish evidence in favor of that claim because doing such would entail violating necessary (*ḍarūrī*) knowledge, which entails *safṣaṭah*.⁷⁴ The point of God's sending a divine scripture is not to engage in the futile debates of sophistry, but rather to guide humanity to the pinnacle of virtue in their spiritual and moral affairs.⁷⁵ The objections of sophists are upon scrutiny revealed to be mere delusions (*wahm*) and imagination

other hand, "Given the elusive nature of Wittgenstein's remarks on skepticism, there is still little to no consensus on how they should be interpreted or, more generally, whether Wittgenstein's remarks alone can represent a valid response to radical skepticism." Nicola Claudio Salvatore, "Wittgenstein: Epistemology" in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/witt-ept/>.

⁷⁰ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta'āruḍ*, 7:403. In this regard, he also labels Pharaoh and his followers as radical skeptics (Ibn Taymīyyah, *Bayān talbīs al-jahmīyah*, 2:341).

⁷¹ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta'āruḍ*, 7:404.

⁷² Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta'āruḍ*, 10:241.

⁷³ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta'āruḍ*, 7:39–40.

⁷⁴ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta'āruḍ*, 6:11.

⁷⁵ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta'āruḍ*, 8:90.

(*khayāl*), or rooted in nothing other than unsubstantiated opinions of philosophers blindly imitated by later generations, despite contradicting the natural rational faculty ingrained in the human *fiṭrah* (‘*uqūl banī Ādam allatī faṭarahum Allāhu ‘alayhā*).⁷⁶

In his work *al-Radd ‘alā al-manṭiqiyyīn*, Ibn Taymīyyah notes that to make all knowledge contingent upon philosophical definition would result in the impossibility of knowledge itself since all definitions can be problematized; and to invalidate all knowledge is the greatest manifestation of *safsaṭah*.⁷⁷ Ibn Taymīyyah often parallels the irrationality of *safsaṭah* with respect to rational matters with the irrationality of the esoteric Qarāmīṭah in their approach to scripture—both groups deny realities that are self-evident, whether in the world around them or in the words in front of them (*safsaṭah fī al-‘aqlīyāt, qarmaṭah fī al-sam‘īyāt*).⁷⁸ In other words, the degree of *safsaṭah* and *qarmaṭah* manifested by a heterodox group is directly proportional to the degree to which it departs from the Prophetic guidance (*sunnah*). As the last verse of the Qur’an’s opening chapter indicates, the root of every misguidance is either obstinance or ignorance, the former being the quality of one who deliberately persists in radical skepticism.⁷⁹

The epistemology of primordiality

The antidote to the aforementioned radical skepticism, per Ibn Taymīyyah, is recourse to the commonsense recognition that there are foundational structural elements in the conceptual architecture of the human mind that are innate (*fiṭrī*), intuitive (*badīhī*), and necessary (*ḍarūrī*) and upon which the acquisition of further knowledge is dependent. Ibn Taymīyyah frequently uses these three terms as overlapping and interconnected concepts, for instance deploying the compound

⁷⁶ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar’ ta’ āruḍ*, 7:37–38.

⁷⁷ Ibn Taymīyyah, *al-Radd ‘alā al-manṭiqiyyīn* (Lahore: Idārat Turjumān al-Sunnah, 1976), 1:8.

⁷⁸ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar’ ta’ āruḍ*, 8:59. He also mentions the fact that dialogue using evidence is futile with the follower of *safsaṭah* or *qarmaṭah* because such a person denies manifest realities in the natural and scriptural realms respectively. See *Naqḍ al-manṭiq*, 159.

⁷⁹ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar’ ta’ āruḍ*, 8:323.

phrase ‘primordial necessary innate knowledge’ (*al-‘ulūm al-badīhīyah al-ḍarūrīyah al-fiṭrīyah*) to describe the basic intuition of causality.⁸⁰ However, the subtle distinctions among these terms are worth continued academic study and further research because of their epistemological ramifications.

Badīhī refers to that which arises spontaneously in the mind as a result of the completeness of one's conceptualizations; the deeper one's level of contemplation, the more expansive and comprehensive one's primordial consciousness becomes.⁸¹ Thus, a matter may emerge in the primordial consciousness of one person but not another, and the more extensive one's ability to conceptualize all aspects of a matter, the greater the number of matters that arise immediately within one's consciousness.⁸² Thus, *badīhī* does not merely refer to *a priori* logical axioms (although it is certainly inclusive of them) but relates more to the spontaneity and immediacy with which concepts emerge in the mind, which in turn are reflective of the depth of one's contemplation, the fortitude of one's capacity for abstraction and conceptualization, and one's intellectual and educational attainment. Whether something is *badīhī* or *nazarī* (inferential) is not an inherent property of the proposition, but a description of the origin of a thought's emergence within the human psyche as a consequence of its encounter with reality; Ibn Taymiyyah illustrates this with reference to the various ways in which people were able to recognize Musaylimah as a false prophet.⁸³

Fiṭrī (the adjective derived from *fiṭrah*) entails the natural state predisposition upon which God created the human being, with a yearning to love Him and recognize Him,⁸⁴ even though the *fiṭrah* can become corrupted and perverted.⁸⁵ In addition to the spiritual inclination towards God, the *fiṭrah* also provides the basis for all other values and conceptualizations in the human mind including compassion, justice,

⁸⁰ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar' ta'āruḍ*, 3:288.

⁸¹ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar' ta'āruḍ*, 1:30–31. See also *Naqḍ al-mantiq*, 332.

⁸² Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Radd 'alā al-mantiqīyīn*, 1:363–64 and 1:416–17.

⁸³ Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Radd 'alā al-mantiqīyīn*, 1:363–64.

⁸⁴ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar' ta'āruḍ*, 7:426.

⁸⁵ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar' ta'āruḍ*, 6:67. Ibn Taymiyyah also states, “and this love of God intensifies according to one's knowledge of Him and the soundness of one's *fiṭrah*. And it diminishes with diminished knowledge and the pollution of one's *fiṭrah* with corruptive vain desires” (*Dar' ta'āruḍ*, 7:73).

and honesty, as well as metaphysical and logical notions like change, temporality, and causality.⁸⁶ *Fiṭrī* knowledge of moral judgments pertaining to particulars in the world actually precedes universal abstractions about categories.⁸⁷ The *fiṭrah* contains the conceptual architecture (such as individuation and counting) that allows us to interpret our sensory encounters with the world in a manner that is meaningful.⁸⁸ Ibn Taymīyyah acknowledges the fallibility of sensorial perception but argues that perceptual errors are detectable and the basic rule is to regard our senses as trustworthy given that they are rooted in the *fiṭrah* upon which we have been created.⁸⁹ The *fiṭrah* even directs us to recognize the need to follow the guidance of the companions of the Prophet ﷺ, who were the direct recipients of the message of Islam and his teachings.⁹⁰

Ibn Taymīyyah writes that what is necessitated by the *fiṭrah* “requires no proof because it is the most firmly rooted of recognized truths (*ma‘ārif*), the most established of all forms of knowledge, and the foundation of all foundations (*aṣl al-uṣūl*).”⁹¹ This also demonstrates the mistake in labeling Ibn Taymīyyah’s usage of the *fiṭrah* as a form of circular reasoning because this charge erroneously assumes that Ibn Taymīyyah is attempting to advance a syllogism based on the *fiṭrah* (e.g., God exists because the *fiṭrah* tells us He does, and we know the *fiṭrah* exists and is reliable because God tells us so).⁹² In reality, Ibn Taymīyyah is not advancing a syllogism at all because he is negating the entire Aristotelian/*kalām* paradigm which presupposes the epistemic requirement of syllogistic reasoning. He is instead noting that the very concepts of proof, truth, reason, purpose, and existence only surface in the mind as a result of a natural human primordial

⁸⁶ For instance, in *al-Radd ‘alā al-mantiqīyīn*, Ibn Taymīyyah mentions that “souls are innately compelled to love justice and its supporters, and to despise injustice and its supporters, and this love located in the *fiṭrah* is what is meant by it (justice) being good, and this detestation is what is meant by it (injustice) being evil” (*al-Radd*, 1:429). See also the commentary on this provided by Ovamir Anjum, *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought: The Taymiyyan Moment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 224.

⁸⁷ Ibn Taymīyyah, *al-Radd ‘alā al-mantiqīyīn*, 1:316.

⁸⁸ Ibn Taymīyyah, for instance, mentions that the knowledge of counting is primordial intuitive sensorial knowledge (*min awā’il al-‘ulūm al-badīhiyah al-ḥissīyah*); Ibn Taymīyyah, *Bayān talbīs al-jahmīyah*, 4:126–27. For the connection between sensory perception and *fiṭrah* see also El-Tobgui, *Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation*, 264.

⁸⁹ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Naqḍ al-mantiq*, 45.

⁹⁰ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Naqḍ al-mantiq*, 202.

⁹¹ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Majmū‘ al-fatāwā* (Mansoura: Dār al-Wafā’, 2001), 2:50.

⁹² See, for instance, Wael Hallaq, “Ibn Taymiyya on the Existence of God,” 66 and Kazi, “Reconciling Reason and Revelation,” 312.

consciousness and that to deny this is simply to render reality unintelligible. Ibn Taymīyyah writes that when something is established in the *fiṭrah*, it becomes “embedded in the nature (*jibillah*) and imprinted in the minds [of people] (*nufūs*), such that one cannot restrain oneself from its dictates, nor is it even possible to discard it from oneself.”⁹³

Darūrī is that knowledge that is not acquired from other human beings but rather is ingrained in their minds, even though one's psychological fixations and misapprehensions may prevent one from affirming it as such.⁹⁴ Carl Sharif El-Tobgui summarizes Ibn Taymīyyah's epistemological outlook thus:

On the basis of the empirical knowledge provided to it by the senses, the mind abstracts universal concepts that it holds as mental representations of external reality. As the knowledge of the mind is purely cognitional (*ilmī*) and notional (*ʿtibārī*), the rational faculty is unable to establish the factual existence of any externally existent entity (although it can, once more, affirm the existence of God on the basis of an innate, internal *sensus divinitatis*). Reason nevertheless comes embedded with the innate (*fiṭrī*) and necessary (*darūrī*) knowledge of certain fundamental axioms (*badhiyyāt*), on the basis of which we are able to confer rational assent (*taṣdīq*) or form logical judgements (*aḥkām*) with respect to existing entities. The mind possesses necessary knowledge of the external reality mediated to it by the senses, of its own innate logical principles, and of whatever information has reached it by way of reports (*akhbār*) that have been passed down through recurrent mass transmission (*tawātur*) (such as, most importantly, the Qur'ānic text and a limited number of *mutawātir ḥadīth* reports). The principle of *tawātur*, however, is not limited to guaranteeing the authenticity of verbal reports. It also serves as the ultimate guarantor of the necessary knowledge mediated to the mind by the senses, as well as of the axiomatic principles of reason and of the *fiṭra* more generally, in the event that any of these sources of widely-shared, necessary knowledge should come to be undermined, impugned, or subjected to systematic doubt. Such doubt is typically the result of doctrines that have been derived through discursive reasoning (*nazar*) on the basis of dubious premises that, Ibn Taymiyya contends,

⁹³ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta'āruḍ*, 6:105.

⁹⁴ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta'āruḍ*, 7:422.

unambiguously contradict the necessary knowledge attested to by any of the sources mentioned above.⁹⁵

While epistemic skepticism is ultimately futile and only serves to dismantle one's conceptualizations and cause one to spiral into endless doubt,⁹⁶ the Qur'anic epistemology allows for the acquisition of meaningful conceptions through the synergy of the human *fiṭrah* with the rational and empirical faculties.

Is there any epistemic merit to philosophical proofs?

In a famous passage in the Qur'an, God states:

Were they created by nothing, or were they themselves the creators? Or did they create the heavens and the earth? Rather, they do not possess certitude (Qur'an 52:35-6).

While proponents of *kalām* took this as an allusion to a cosmological argument, Ibn Taymīyyah saw it differently. The very fact that the Qur'an expresses this in the form of a rhetorical question (*bi-ṣīghat istifhām al-inkār*) demonstrates that this is a matter that is already a primordial conclusion firmly established in one's *fiṭrah* that one cannot genuinely deny (*fiṭrīyah badīhīyah mustaqirrah fī al-nufūs lā yumkinu aḥadan inkāruhā*).⁹⁷ Thus, the Qur'an is not engaged in propounding a syllogism to substantiate belief in God but rather it is invoking rational contemplation (*tafakkur*) to awaken spiritually quiescent souls to a reality they already recognize deep within. The role of rational contemplation in the soul's recognition of God is one of re-discovering a reality deeply embedded in one's *fiṭrah* (*innamā huwa lil-tanbīh 'alā mā fī al-fiṭrah*).⁹⁸ Ibn Taymīyyah cites

⁹⁵ El-Tobgui, *Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation*, 275–6.

⁹⁶ A useful analogy, offered by Wittgenstein, is that of a student who constantly interrupts the teacher by questioning the existence of things, questioning the truth of every event in history, and questioning the meaning of words so that the teacher is unable to make any progress in teaching anything. This is akin to someone looking for an object in a room and continually opening the same drawer. "He has not learned to look for things. And in the same way, this pupil has not learned how to ask questions." Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, § 310–16.

⁹⁷ Ibn Taymīyyah, *al-Radd 'alā al-manṭiqiyyīn*, 1:253.

⁹⁸ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta'āruḍ*, 3:126.

approvingly the following words of the Persian Ash'arī theologian al-Shahrastānī (d. 548 AH):

Sound human nature attests by the necessity of its nature and the primordially of its thought that there is a Wise, All-Knowing, and All-Powerful Maker; “Is there any doubt concerning God, the Originator of the Heavens and Earth?” (Qur'an 14:10).⁹⁹

In a subsequent passage, al-Shahrastānī also states that as a soul journeys in its nearness towards God, it acquires greater recognition of its existential need for Him, and increases in its spiritual perception of the Divine signs in the horizons and in its own psyche, and thus God is the source by which it witnesses the phenomenal world and not vice versa; “I came to know of entities through God, rather than knowing God through other entities” (*'arāfu al-ashyā' bi-rabbī wa mā 'arāfu rabbī bi al-ashyā'*).¹⁰⁰ In a similar vein, Ibn Taymīyyah approvingly quotes at great length the writings of the Ḥanafī scholar Abū Muḥammad ibn 'Abdik al-Baṣrī (d. 347 AH),¹⁰¹ who taught that God Himself is to be considered the *dalīl* (proof) rather than the *madlūl* (that which is being proven),¹⁰² that Prophet Ibrāhīm's discourse with his people about the celestial bodies was not intended as a philosophical argument but as a contemplation to awaken the *fiṭrah* and remind them of the primordial covenant (*al-mīthāq*),¹⁰³ and that knowledge of His Lordship (*rubūbiyah*) is more foundational (*ḍarūrī*) than a person's knowledge of their own existence (a subtle parallel between atheism and solipsism).¹⁰⁴ Similarly, Ibn al-Qayyim wrote that the Creator's existence is more self-evident and manifest than the inference of any proof used to establish it.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁹ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta' āruḍ*, 3:129. See also Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb Nihāyat al-iqdām fī 'ilm al-kalām* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqāfah al-Dīniyyah, 2009), 119.

¹⁰⁰ al-Shahrastānī, *Nihāyat al-iqdām*, 121.

¹⁰¹ The text only mentions “Abū Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Baṣrī”; however, the editor, Muḥammad Rashād Sālim, surmises that the figure in question could be Abū Muḥammad b. 'Abdik al-Baṣrī (d. 347 AH), as no other biographical entry can be found for a similar name. See *Dar' ta' āruḍ*, 8:494, n. 1.

¹⁰² Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta' āruḍ*, 8:507.

¹⁰³ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta' āruḍ*, 8:516, referring to Qur'an verses 6:76–80.

¹⁰⁴ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta' āruḍ*, 8:525.

¹⁰⁵ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *Miftāḥ dār al-sa'ādah* (Mecca: Dār 'Ālam al-Fawā'id, 2010), 2:796.

Not only does Ibn Taymīyyah believe that syllogistic reasoning is not required to justify belief in God, but he argues that it does not yield the epistemic fruits its proponents claim. This is true because the syllogism depends on a major premise that is, in fact, a universal abstraction that exists only as a category in the mind.¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, the external world is comprised only of particulars. Consequently, a conclusion based on a universal premise can only rightfully apply to another universal category (e.g., the genus of 'unmoved mover') rather than to a particular entity.¹⁰⁷ So philosophical proofs for God's existence ultimately fall short of pointing particularly towards God Himself rather than a generic category. Moreover, with the passage of time, syllogisms grew longer with more premises to prove premises that were earlier taken for granted,¹⁰⁸ because people continued to raise more doubts as *safsatah* entails a bottomless pit.¹⁰⁹

What is actually happening when people engage in syllogistic reasoning (*qiyās al-shumūl*) is that the real source of their epistemic growth in knowledge is analogical reasoning (*qiyās al-tamthīl*) which allows them to transfer their knowledge about known particulars to the new case in question.¹¹⁰ Ibn Taymīyyah is certainly prescient in his repeated emphasis on analogy as the most important element in cognition and knowledge construction.¹¹¹ In a work entitled *Surfaces and Essences: Analogy as the Fuel and Fire of Thinking*, American cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter and French psychologist Emmanuel Sander engage in a lengthy discussion in support of a strikingly similar thesis:

A central thesis of this book is that analogy-making defines each instant of thought, and is in fact the driving force behind all thought. Each mental

¹⁰⁶ For a more detailed discussion of Ibn Taymīyyah's critique of the extramental existence of the universal, see Wael Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya against the Greek Logicians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), xxii–xxiv.

¹⁰⁷ Ibn Taymīyyah, *al-Radd 'alā al-manṭiqiyyīn*, 1:344–45.

¹⁰⁸ On the evolution of philosophical proofs in response to doubts, see for instance Hannah C. Erlwein, *Arguments for God's Existence in Classical Islamic Thought: A Reappraisal of the Discourse* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019). One aspect that evolved, for instance, is the relationship between proving the createdness of accidents and the createdness of the world as a whole, which has been examined in Ayman Shihadeh, "Mereology in *Kalām*: A New Reading of the Proof from Accidents for Creation," *Oriens* 48 (2020), 5–39.

¹⁰⁹ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta 'āruḍ*, 3:286–88.

¹¹⁰ Ibn Taymīyyah, *al-Radd 'alā al-manṭiqiyyīn*, 1:211–12 and *Naqḍ al-manṭiq*, 337.

¹¹¹ See also Ibn Taymīyyah, *Naqḍ al-manṭiq*, 282 where he mentions that the majority of human knowledge is the result of analogical reasoning.

category we have is the outcome of a long series of analogies that build bridges between entities (objects, actions, situations) distant from each other in both time and space.¹¹²

The authors argue that knowledge growth occurs when one identifies the most relevant *surface-level* features of a novel concept, in order to construct an analogy based on inferred deeper *essence-level* similarities with a familiar concept. For Ibn Taymīyyah, analogies (*amthāl*) and signs (*āyāt*) are the two key elements in the Qur'anic epistemological repertoire (a full exposition of which would warrant its own dedicated essay).¹¹³ The Qur'an utilizes *āyāt* and *amthāl* as rational instruments (*maqāyīs 'aqlīyah*) and certain proofs (*barāhīn yaqīnīyah*) that guide the heart and direct the mind to recognize the reality of God in a manner far superior to the methods of the philosophers.¹¹⁴ Ibn Taymīyyah draws an interesting analogy with the way that words involve a relationship between a concept and a particular string of phonemes or graphemes. Learning the signs of God is not a matter of learning proofs for an entity of which one has no knowledge, but rather is akin to learning new vocabulary to designate a meaning of which one is already innately cognizant; these signs serve as a source of spiritual perception (*tabṣīrah*) to secure and deepen one's conviction in that which one already knew via the *fiṭrah*, in case one is confronted with doubts.¹¹⁵ Thus, they reacquaint the individual with the source of meaningfulness. Scriptural signs arise from God's speech while natural signs manifest in God's creation witnessed in the natural world or within human beings themselves.¹¹⁶ Note that the Qur'anic epistemology comprises not only intellectual growth but also spiritual and moral growth, for the more a person strives to attain virtue and purify their heart, the more perceptive of the Divine signs they become.¹¹⁷ While historically some groups have emphasized either

¹¹² Douglas R. Hofstadter and Emmanuel Sander, *Surfaces and Essences: Analogy as the Fuel and Fire of Thinking* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 135. They also write: "What we mean by this thesis is that each concept in our mind owes its existence to a long succession of analogies made unconsciously over many years, initially giving birth to the concept and continuing to enrich it over the course of our lifetime" (3).

¹¹³ For more information on Ibn Taymīyyah's theory of signs, see Turner, "Islamic Account of Reformed Epistemology," 18–23.

¹¹⁴ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta 'āruḍ*, 7:351.

¹¹⁵ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta 'āruḍ*, 8:531.

¹¹⁶ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta 'āruḍ*, 8:533–34.

¹¹⁷ See for instance Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta 'āruḍ* 8:518, quoting Abū Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Baṣṭī.

worship or rationality to reach truth, Ibn Taymīyyah argues that both are necessary pillars of an Islamic epistemology.¹¹⁸

Ibn Taymīyyah acknowledges that syllogisms that express a cosmological argument for the existence of God may contain a kernel of truth, such as the basic intuition of causality (i.e., that everything that begins to exist must have a cause). However, this intuition, while embedded in the syllogism, does not result from it. Moreover, the syllogism takes a circuitous path to prove something that is usually self-evident and straightforward.¹¹⁹ Using syllogisms to prove God's existence is like the comical example of a man reaching around his head with the opposite arm to indicate the location of his ear,¹²⁰ or it is like lean camel meat placed on the top of a mountain—too arduous a climb to reach, and not particularly desirable to begin with.¹²¹ If anything, learning about the inadequacy of these philosophical approaches only increases one's conviction in the way of the Prophet, peace be upon him.¹²²

Nonetheless, Ibn Taymīyyah acknowledges that some people may be so accustomed to such circuitous and abstruse philosophical approaches that they are unsatisfied with anything simple in appearance; therefore, with such a person, one could engage in philosophical *kalāmī* methods (*al-ṭarīq al-kalāmīyah al-manṭiqīyah*) due to such a person's inclination, not because the desired knowledge is actually contingent upon such a method.¹²³ Lengthy and complicated

¹¹⁸ “This is why many of the leaders in worship and *taṣawwuf* instructed adherence to a practice of *dhikr* (remembrance of God), and they made that a gateway for arriving at truth, and this is good if they accompany it with *tadabbur* (contemplation) of the Qur'an and Sunnah and following that (i.e., avoiding innovations).” Ibn Taymīyyah, *Naqḍ al-manṭiq*, 60.

¹¹⁹ In general, he characterizes it as “wasting time, abundant delirium, and fatiguing of minds.” Ibn Taymīyyah, *al-Radd 'alā al-manṭiqīyīn*, 1:362.

¹²⁰ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta' āruḍ*, 3:72. There is also a colloquial expression in Arabic that rhetorically asks one who is taking a circuitous and cumbersome approach to a simple matter, “Where is your ear, O Juḥā?” The character Juḥā (who may have been a real person named Abū al-Ghuṣn Dujayn al-Fizārī) is the subject of a variety of amusing tales and folklore; “Mullah Nasruddin” is the corresponding figure in the Persianate and South Asian Muslim world.

¹²¹ This is the description used by Ibn Taymīyyah's student Ibn al-Qayyim in *al-Sawā'iq al-mursalah* (Riyadh: Dār al-‘Āshimah, 1408 AH), 1:335. The phrase itself is borrowed from a wife's description of her husband in the famous hadith describing the story of Umm Zar' (*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2448a, <https://sunnah.com/muslim/44/135>).

¹²² Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta' āruḍ*, 2:206.

¹²³ Ibn Taymīyyah, *al-Radd 'alā al-manṭiqīyīn*, 1:255. He also mentions that familiarity with some abstruse sciences that are intrinsically sound, such as mathematical disciplines, is actually a religiously desirable goal according to the

methods may sometimes have benefit for the person engaged in *safsatah*.¹²⁴ He also explains that philosophical argumentation may be useful in deconstructing the false religious beliefs or ideologies one may have grown up with or blindly followed out of ignorance; it can move them away from the falsehood of others even if it may not help them attain conviction in the truth.¹²⁵ The ways in which people may arrive at conviction in the truth and come to know God and believe in Him are numerous (*fa-ṭuruq al-ma'ārif mutanawwi'ah fī nafsihā*); they may attain faith through witnessing signs all around them in creation and in their own lives.¹²⁶ The *fiṭrah* perfected by revelation, however, is sufficient for the epistemic justification of faith.¹²⁷ While the *fiṭrah* can become corrupted by spiritual disease just as the body is susceptible to physical disease, the remedy can be found in the Qur'anic discourse,¹²⁸ familiarity with the prophetic guidance,¹²⁹ and in scrutinizing the deficiencies of one's own epistemology (such as reliance on unsubstantiated man-made ideologies).¹³⁰

Ibn Taymīyyah's writings allude to a distinction between the *psychological processes* by which a person attains faith and the *epistemic justification* that establishes the veracity of their faith.¹³¹ There are various factors that influence a person's psychological constitution (culture, parenting, societal influences, personality, previous life experiences, etc.) and can either facilitate or serve as

scholars of the Sunnah since it strengthens the mind akin to exercising for the body. See also Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta'āruḍ*, 3:105.

¹²⁴ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta'āruḍ*, 3:197. "*Fa-mithlu hadhā al-taṭwīl wa-al-ta'qīd qad yakūnu fīhi manfa'ah li-man yusafsiḥ wa yu'ānid.*"

¹²⁵ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Naqḍ al-mantiq*, 286–287: "*fa-awrathahum al-mantiq tark mā 'alayhi ulā'ika min tilka al-'aqā'id.*" In a similar vein, Toni Vogel Carey argues that philosophy progresses only by destroying old arguments, doubting current knowledge, or clarifying concepts. Toni Vogel Carey, "Is Philosophy Progressive?," *Philosophy Now*, 59 (2007): 19–21.

¹²⁶ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta'āruḍ*, 8:46.

¹²⁷ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta'āruḍ*, 8:238.

¹²⁸ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta'āruḍ*, 3:306. On the corruption of the *fiṭrah*, see also Kazi, "Reconciling Reason and Revelation," 277.

¹²⁹ Ibn Taymīyyah explains that one of the causes of corruption of the *fiṭrah* is a lack of familiarity with the Sunnah and with hadith. *Naqḍ al-mantiq*, 202.

¹³⁰ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta'āruḍ*, 7:37–38.

¹³¹ This is akin to the distinction between *production by reason*, *epistemic merit*, and *rational support* as discussed by Don Garrett, "A Small Tincture of Pyrrhonism," 80. Ibn Taymīyyah draws an interesting connection between theology and epistemology by discussing the angelic and satanic sources of belief production; see *Naqḍ al-mantiq*, 47–57.

potential impediments in one's journey towards God, as well as a person's own degree of spiritual preparedness which will determine their capacity to identify and accept the truth. Thus for some people, additional factors (*asbāb*) are required to augment their *fiṭrah* in the discovery of truth.¹³² Ibn al-Qayyim, for instance, contrasts the faith of the first believers—the Prophet's close friend Abū Bakr and his wife Khadīja—with others whose faith did not reach their level; the former accepted Islam on the basis of the perfection, beauty, and purity of its message and the integrity and moral character of the Messenger, while the latter embraced the faith only after they witnessed miracles, or because they witnessed the Prophet ﷺ vanquish his enemies; and those with lesser faith adopt it initially because they were born to parents who were already believers.¹³³ Those with the strongest level of faith are least likely to abandon it and are more secure in their faith. Yet, irrespective of how a believer arrives at faith, it is the *fiṭrah* that provides epistemic justification for that faith. Once a believer has attained certitude in God, the degree to which this belief accords with their *fiṭrah* provides all the epistemic justification needed in order to know that anything contrary to that faith is baseless even without possessing the means to rationally demonstrate or articulate it;¹³⁴ the believer does not need to know the specifics of philosophical terminology to know that Islam is the truth.¹³⁵

The problem with considering the existence of God to be a theoretical proposition in need of justification, demonstration, and substantiation is that it commits a fundamental epistemological fallacy. It uses that which is less evident to prove that which is more evident.¹³⁶ It places the epistemic weight of God lower than the epistemic weight of those features of creation being cited as proof. But as a matter of fact, the Divine is the most assured of certainties, and His existence forms the ontological basis upon which all other existence is rendered intelligible and meaningful. Knowledge of God is thus the basis of having an intelligible

¹³² Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar' ta' āruḍ*, 8:460: “*bal yaḥtāju kathīr minhum fī huṣūli dhālika ilā sabab mu'īn lil-fiṭrah.*”

¹³³ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Miftāḥ dār al-sa'ādah*, 2:889–91.

¹³⁴ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar' ta' āruḍ*, 5:299.

¹³⁵ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar' ta' āruḍ*, 3:300.

¹³⁶ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar' ta' āruḍ*, 9:161: “*wa-hiya ṭarīqah athbatū bihā al-jalī bi-al-khaṭī wa-arādū bihā īdāḥ al-wāḍiḥ.*”

epistemology; it serves as the basis for all other knowledge (*wa-al-‘ilm bihi aṣli-kulli ‘ilm*).¹³⁷ Rather than being a mere theoretical proposition, it is the very axis of one's epistemology. Thus, knowledge of the Divine is that very illuminating “light upon light” described in the Qur’ānic passage (24:35) which, Ibn Taymīyyah explains, refers to the light of revelation combined with the light of natural disposition (*fiṭrah*) and rationality (‘*aql*).¹³⁸

Ibn Taymīyyah has an interesting exposition of the dialogue between Prophet Mūsā and Pharaoh.¹³⁹ The question posed by Pharaoh, “What is the Lord of Universe?” is not a serious inquiry concerning the nature of the Divine, but rather a rhetorical expression of his denial of faith, “What is this entity which you call the Lord of the Universe?” Prophet Mūsā's reply is “The Lord of the Heavens and the Earth, if you are of those with certainty” which, as Ibn Taymīyyah observes, connects faith in God with certainty in general:

He did not say those with certainty in this or that, but rather left it unqualified, so whatever it is that you have certainty in, the first certainty is certainty in this Lord, as the Messengers have said ‘Is there any doubt concerning God?’ And if you were to say that we have no certainty in anything and we negate all knowledge, then this is the claim of universal skepticism (*al-safsatah al-‘āmmah*) and it is manifest falsehood for indeed every human being necessarily possesses knowledge.¹⁴⁰

As Ibn Taymīyyah explains, it was Pharaoh's desire for earthly ascendancy and his corruption that veiled him from this reality. Expounding on the Qur’anic phrase, “They forgot God so He caused them to forget themselves” (Qur’an 59:19), Ibn Taymīyyah explains the link between the loss of self-knowledge and neglecting

¹³⁷ Ibn Taymīyyah, *al-Radd ‘alā al-manṭiqiyyīn*, 1:131.

¹³⁸ See Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar’ ta ‘āruḍ*, 7:284, where he says that it is the light of clear reason (*ṣarīḥ al-ma’qūl*) combined with the light of authentic scripture (*ṣaḥīḥ al-manqūl*). Similarly, Ibn al-Qayyim writes that it is the light of revelation (*waḥy*) combined with the *fiṭrah* or the intellect (‘*aql*), or the light of religion (*sharī‘ah*) combined with the *fiṭrah*. See Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Ṣawā‘iq al-mursalah*, 3:851–52 and Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Wābil al-ṣayyib* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1999), 1:53.

¹³⁹ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Majmū‘ al-fatāwā*, 16:191–93.

¹⁴⁰ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Majmū‘ al-fatāwā*, 16:199.

God and, conversely, the link between knowledge of the self and rediscovery of one's inner recognition and love of the Creator.¹⁴¹

Ibn Taymīyyah, the *fiṭrah*, and Agrippa's trilemma¹⁴²

The intellect is one of the fundamental human faculties. Human beings naturally develop a sophisticated cognitive apparatus that allows them to process ideas, thoughts, and sensory experiences in order to arrive at coherent and meaningful internal representations of reality. Ibn Taymīyyah notes that every human being would invariably prefer to have their mind populated with true beliefs and beneficial desires rather than false beliefs and harmful desires.¹⁴³ So how then do human beings justify their beliefs as true representations of reality? Can they provide justifications for their beliefs that are impervious to doubt?

The ancient Pyrrhonian skeptic Agrippa (d. c. 2nd century CE) is reported to have articulated five modes, or ways of thinking, that induce doubt and skepticism. How can anyone claim certain knowledge when, as the first mode observes, people disagree over matters, and as the third mode observes, everyone's judgment is relative?¹⁴⁴ Supposing that someone does try to provide a rational justification for their view, we then arrive at the well-known epistemological problem posed by the remaining three modes, which present three options (hence, referred to as Agrippa's trilemma.)¹⁴⁵ The three options can be summarized as follows:¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Majmū' al-fatāwā*, 16:199.

¹⁴² This section parallels an abbreviated discussion on Münchhausen's trilemma in an earlier article. Zohair Abdul-Rahman and Nazir Khan, "In Pursuit of Conviction II: Humanity Needs God," *Yaqeen*, October 11, 2019, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/zohair/in-pursuit-of-conviction-ii-humanity-needs-god/>.

¹⁴³ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta' āruḍ*, 8:458.

¹⁴⁴ These initial two modes thus represent the skeptic's rejection of the viewpoint being advanced by his opponent, hence sometimes termed the "material modes" or the "challenging modes," while the remaining modes, which comprise the trilemma, entail the skeptic's inquiry into the justification of the opponent's viewpoint and are hence termed the "formal modes" or the "dialectical modes." See J. B. Bullock, "The Challenges of the Modes of Agrippa," *Apeiron* 49, no. 4 (2016): 5.

¹⁴⁵ Also commonly known as Münchhausen's trilemma.

¹⁴⁶ There are also some permutations that combine these options but do not significantly impact the trilemma. See, for instance, P. Tramel, "Haack's Foundherentism is a Foundationalism," *Synthese* 160, no. 2 (2008): 215–28.

Option 1: Any belief offered as a justification must itself be justified, and hence an infinite regress of proofs is required (*regressive mode*).

Option 2: One's belief is justified by a foundational assumption that itself does not require further justification (*hypothetical mode*).

Option 3: One's beliefs justify one another in a circular or reciprocal fashion (*reciprocal mode*).

The challenge posed by these three modes thus aims to annihilate all knowledge because one cannot possibly provide a justification for any belief without succumbing to the trilemma. Indeed, the Agrippan modes, representing “the most powerful weapons of the Pyrrhonian argumentative arsenal,”¹⁴⁷ have confounded contemporary epistemologists no less than their ancient Hellenistic predecessors. In order to be justified in one's belief, one must believe either in an infinite series of proofs (infinetism),¹⁴⁸ or in a set of fundamental premises one accepts without justification (foundationalism), or one must embrace a type of circular reasoning (coherentism).¹⁴⁹ Whichever dissatisfying option one selects leads only to Agrippa's first mode of disagreement rearing its head again and asking the foundationalists why they are not coherentists and vice versa, thus revealing their selection to be arbitrary and unjustified. It would thus seem that the Pyrrhonist has constructed an epistemological impasse from which no human can possess certain knowledge about anything.

Yet, a number of fascinating lines of potential response emerge either directly from Ibn Taymīyyah's writings or from his epistemological framework. First, he makes a phenomenological case; the person who argues for the need to have philosophical justification for knowledge about universals “has not examined the states of his

¹⁴⁷ Diego E. Machuca, “Agrippan Pyrrhonism and the Challenge of Disagreement,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 40 (2015): 23–39.

¹⁴⁸ And no finite mind can possess an infinite series of justifications for belief or even justify the existence of an infinite series. A detailed response is offered in Stephen Wright, “Does Klein's Infinitism Offer a Response to Agrippa's Trilemma?,” *Synthese* 190 (2013), 1113–30.

¹⁴⁹ For a discussion of the problematic nature of these options identified by Hellenistic philosophers, see P. D. Klein, “Epistemic Justification and the Limits of Pyrrhonism,” in *Pyrrhonism in Ancient, Modern, and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. D. Machuca, The New Synthese Historical Library, vol. 70 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012).

mind” (*lam yamtaḥin aḥwāla nafsihi*) for if he had, he would have discovered (in his mind) knowledge about universals as well as conceptualizations that are not dependent on syllogistic argumentation.¹⁵⁰ Second, as Ibn Taymīyyah notes, certainty (*yaqīn*) is not pursued through the accumulation of philosophical justifications but rather is anchored internally through spiritual recognition¹⁵¹ and the dictates of the *fiṭrah*.¹⁵² After all, Agrippa's trilemma presupposes a notion of truth (there must be true and false beliefs for the trilemma to work in the first place) just as it presupposes the ability to distinguish concepts and ascertain rational justifications, the ability of human mental states to carry meaning, and so forth, all of which are rooted in the human *fiṭrah*'s construals of reality. Thus, even in the process of attempting to cast doubt on knowledge, the trilemma inevitably betrays a commitment to fundamental beliefs rooted in the *fiṭrah*. One cannot pursue skepticism towards knowledge without undermining one's skepticism in that very process.

Third, the Qur'anic narrative provides the most powerful epistemological rescue from Agrippa's trilemma, arising from its conceptualization of truth. The Qur'anic term for truth, *ḥaqq*, is used to signify that which has a *purpose*; likewise, the term *bāṭil*, which is the antonym of *ḥaqq*, signifies that which is not only false but also devoid of purpose.¹⁵³ Thus, in the Qur'anic paradigm, there is a **teleological dimension to truth** that serves the function of rendering reality meaningful. These truths are not mere trivial theoretical statements about physical reality that are subject to empirical verification, like affirming that Venus is the second planet from the sun, or that Antarctica is fourteen million square kilometers in area. Rather, the truths of revelation serve as ontological foundations that form the basis

¹⁵⁰ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Naqḍ al-manṭiq*, 339.

¹⁵¹ Ibn Taymīyyah frequently cites an anecdote of al-Rāzī and a Mu'tazilī theologian presenting their intractable disagreement before Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d. 618 AH), who told them that through spiritual insights (*wāridāt*), he was able to attain the certainty that eluded them in their philosophical debates. Ibn Taymīyyah, *Bayān talbīs al-Jahmīyah*, 2:184–86; *Naqḍ al-manṭiq*, 64–65; and *Dar' ta' āruḍ*, 7:430–32. See also El-Tobgui, *Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation*, 295–96.

¹⁵² Ibn Taymīyyah, *Naqḍ al-manṭiq*, 49.

¹⁵³ See, for instance, Qur'an 16:3 and 38:27. On this issue, Ibn al-Qayyim writes, “*Bāṭil* refers either to something false that does not exist or to something that exists but has no benefit.” Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *Ighāthat al-lahfān* (Mecca: Dār 'Ālam al-Fawā'id, 2011), 429. See also Ibn Taymīyyah, *Naqḍ al-manṭiq*, 274. This can be taken further by arguing that both usages are actually fundamentally linked conceptually.

of all meaningful notions of value, virtue, purpose, worth, guidance, and so forth. The philosopher John Whittaker makes the following distinction:

[T]he point of presenting religious beliefs as revelations is to present them as conceptual truths—as practical axioms of life, as ruling principles that frame new conceptions of worth, happiness, and selfhood—and this puts them into a different logical category than the basket that holds hypothetical claims.¹⁵⁴

Conceptual truths that frame meaningful representations of reality are rooted in the *fiṭrah* and serve as ontological building blocks that are indispensable for the mind. As Ibn Taymīyyah astutely observes in a direct allusion to Agrippa's trilemma:

This is something that [*ahl al-kalām*] and all human beings recognize—that there are some mental conceptualizations and affirmations that are primordial concepts (*badīhī*) and not themselves in need of proof by definition or syllogism, or else it would entail circularity or an infinite regress.¹⁵⁵

Ibn Taymīyyah thus demonstrates that there is a category of concepts that serve as epistemological anchors for any meaningful construal of reality. Indeed, proponents of *kalām* and all classical foundationalists also uphold the viewpoint that necessary knowledge (*ʿilm ḍarūrī*) provides the basis for acquired knowledge (*ʿilm muktasab*); there are self-evident truths that serve as foundations through which other truths are known. However, classical foundationalists who set reason as the basis for all knowledge cannot falsify the doctrine of solipsism or similar manifestations of radical skepticism.¹⁵⁶ Other foundationalists who include sensory perception alongside reason as the basis for knowledge cannot establish the existence of moral truths or any sort of valuation for that matter. Such foundations

¹⁵⁴ John Whittaker, "The Logic of Authoritative Revelations," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 68, no. 1–3 (2010): 167–81.

¹⁵⁵ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Naqḍ al-manṭiq*, 339; *al-Radd ʿalā al-manṭiqiyyīn*, 1:13–14.

¹⁵⁶ While foundationalism is the view that basic beliefs justify nonbasic beliefs, classical foundationalism adds two requirements. First, nonbasic beliefs have to be logically deduced from basic beliefs. Second, the basic beliefs must be infallible, that is, it must be logically impossible for them to be erroneous. The second requirement falls subject to solipsism and other varieties of radical skepticism examined earlier. The problem with classical foundationalism is that the vast majority of seemingly self-evident beliefs are deemed unjustified. See Noah Mercelino Lemos, *An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 51–55.

are not impervious to the doubts that lead to epistemological nihilism. This failing of classical foundationalism is precisely what precipitated the Pyrrhonian doubts that al-Ghazālī described at the beginning of *al-Munqidh*. As we have seen, Ibn Taymīyyah argued there is no truth more evident than the truth of the Divine, a truth that does not require any empirical or rational substantiation because it serves as the anchor by which these faculties are meaningful in the first place. Ibn Taymīyyah is also explicit in his rejection of epistemic *internalism* (the view that one must be aware of one's justification for a belief in order to possess knowledge). In keeping with *externalism*, he explains that one may know something without being aware of knowing it; however, with contemplation, one may uncover such knowledge, depending on the soundness of one's insight.¹⁵⁷

In his analysis of Ibn Taymīyyah, Jamie Turner draws upon Alvin Plantinga's concept of *proper functionalism*, where a belief can truly be considered a foundation—that is, a *properly basic* belief—if it has warrant which occurs when a belief is formed by properly functioning cognitive faculties that are aimed at the production of true belief in congenial environments. Turner notes that for Ibn Taymīyyah the proper functioning of the sound *fiṭrah* confers warrant on foundational beliefs and allows it to apprehend the signs (*āyāt*) of God:

According to the Taymiyyan model, upon the proper function of the heart in conjunction with the *fiṭra*, both of which have been designed to successfully acquire true beliefs about God when placed in suitable environments for this to occur, they will produce basic belief in Islam which can be said to be *warranted* in a *properly basic* way. As outlined above, it is specifically upon contact with the 'signs of God' that basic belief in Him, and subsequently His religion, can be *warranted* in accordance with Plantinga's account of proper functionalism.¹⁵⁸

Ibn Taymīyyah relates his ruminations on the *fiṭrah* to his observations on developmental psychology. He notes that a human infant when perceiving a movement or sound is naturally compelled to look for its source (a causal

¹⁵⁷ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Majmū' al-fatāwā*, 16:195.

¹⁵⁸ Jamie Turner, "Islamic Account of Reformed Epistemology," 25.

expectation); similarly, it is from the *fiṭrah* of the human being to expect a builder behind the emergence of a building.¹⁵⁹ This expectation is indicative of a necessary and fundamental ontological truth—things do not exist *reasonlessly*. He also notes that children know that God is in the Heavens¹⁶⁰ and it is from the *fiṭrah* to know that He is All-Hearing and All-Seeing.¹⁶¹

Ibn Taymīyyah's empirical observations appear to have stood the test of time. In the contemporary discipline known as cognitive science of religion, there is a wealth of knowledge from experimental studies describing the natural human tendency to perceive causal relations,¹⁶² to seek purpose behind occurrences including life events,¹⁶³ to perceive agency in the world around us (referred to as the Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device), and so on.¹⁶⁴ There is a natural tendency to believe in God, while atheism “requires some hard cognitive work to reject or override the intuitions that nourish religious beliefs.”¹⁶⁵ Experimental psychologist Justin Barrett writes:

That belief in gods begins in childhood and typically continues into adulthood places it in the same class as believing in gravity, the permanence of solid objects, the continuity of time, the predictability of natural laws, that causes precede effects, that animals bear young similar to themselves, that people have thoughts and wants that motivate and guide their actions, that some things are morally right or wrong, that their mothers love them, and

¹⁵⁹ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta 'āruḍ*, 8:114. See also *Dar' ta 'āruḍ*, 8:305, where he mentions that a child hit on the head knows by the *fiṭrah* that someone is responsible for this and does not need a philosophical argument.

¹⁶⁰ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta 'āruḍ*, 2:59.

¹⁶¹ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta 'āruḍ*, 10:76.

¹⁶² For instance, preschool-age children act according to an assumption of deterministic causal relations, accepting stochastic causal inferences only when the former do not match occurrences. Laura E. Schulz and Jessica Sommerville, “God Does Not Play Dice: Causal Determinism and Preschoolers' Causal Inferences,” *Child Development* 77, no. 2 (2006): 427–42.

¹⁶³ Konika Banerjee and Paul Bloom, “Why Did This Happen to Me? Religious Believers' and Non-Believers' Teleological Reasoning about Life Events,” *Cognition* 133, no. 1 (2014): 277–303.

¹⁶⁴ Justin L. Barrett and Jonathan A. Lanman, “The Science of Religious Beliefs,” *Religion* 38, no. 2 (2008), 109–124; Deborah Kelemen and Cara DiYanni, “Intuitions about Origins: Purpose and Intelligent Design in Children's Reasoning about Nature,” *Journal of Cognition and Development* 6, no. 1 (2005): 3–31. For a demonstration in a primarily atheistic culture, see Elisa Järnefelt, Liqi Zhu, Caitlin F. Canfield, Marian Chen, and Deborah Kelemen, “Reasoning about Nature's Agency and Design in the Cultural Context of China,” *Religion, Brain and Behavior* 9, no. 2 (2019): 156–78.

¹⁶⁵ Ara Norenzayan and Will M. Gervais, “The Origins of Religious Disbelief,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 17, no. 1 (2013): 20–25.

numerous other ideas about the world... I favor the approach that regards our minds as basically trustworthy to deliver true beliefs and that our naturally arising “childish” beliefs should be regarded as true until we have good reason to suspect them as being problematic. It is not clear to me that we can do otherwise and still function as normal, sane human beings.¹⁶⁶

Modern developmental psychology recapitulates the Islamic tradition's elaboration of the epistemic role of the *fiṭrah*. One can even reconstruct the ‘natural religion’ that emerges in childhood as comprising belief that the natural world has been purposely designed and belief in invisible and immortal supernatural beings¹⁶⁷ that possess emotions, thoughts, and perspectives.¹⁶⁸ These positive inclinations are rooted in human nature.¹⁶⁹ Human infants naturally develop notions of causality, numerical quantity, morality, purpose, and so forth and any attempt to discard these epistemological building blocks would entail the deterioration of coherent and meaningful representations of reality. If we are naturally compelled to believe something in order to have any meaningful representation of reality, then casting doubt upon that leads to epistemological nihilism. Adopting a paradigm of skepticism and demanding proof for the foundations themselves only results in the collapse of the entire intellectual enterprise of meaning. Ibn Taymīyyah writes:

The proof that leads to knowledge via rational investigation must be one that goes back to foundations known necessarily from the *fiṭrah* (*muqaddimāt ḍarūrīyah fiṭrīyah*). For verily all knowledge that is not necessary (*ḍarūrī*) must ultimately go back to knowledge that is necessary (*ḍarūrī*).

¹⁶⁶ Justin Barrett, *Born Believers: The Science of Children's Religious Belief* (New York: Atria Books, 2012), 172–73.

¹⁶⁷ This is how Barrett identifies a childhood inclination for belief in “gods,” but the psychological findings can just as easily be identified with belief in angels and devils under a monotheistic tradition.

¹⁶⁸ Barrett, *Born Believers*, 137. Barrett also notes that he received emails from Muslims notifying him that this thesis is standard teaching in Islam; however, he dismisses this by stating that the psychological research does not suggest that “children are born to believe in orthodox Muslim, Jewish, or Christian theology” (151). However, the dominant understanding in the Islamic tradition is actually quite explicit that the *fiṭrah* is only a natural inclination towards God, not the idea that a person is aware from birth of the theological doctrines of Islam. See Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta' āruḍ*, 8:460–61.

¹⁶⁹ It may be argued that there are also many undesirable behaviors that come naturally to children, such as bullying, selfishness, and temper tantrums. However, this misses a crucial distinction. There is a *childlike* way of construing reality and providing a moral conscience of what is right and what is wrong, and this is termed the *fiṭrah*. Then there are *childish behaviors* and impulsive urges, which are termed the *nafs* and are recognized to be wrong by the *fiṭrah*.

This is because if rationally inferred (*naẓarī*) knowledge is always established on the basis of other rationally inferred (*naẓarī*) knowledge, this would lead to temporal circularity or an infinite regress of causal effects on a thing that has a beginning [i.e., the human being]. And both options are known to be false by necessity and the agreement of the intellectuals through several ways... So there must be primordial *a priori* knowledge (*ʿulūm badīhiyyah awwalīyah*) that God initiates in one's heart and the point of all proofs is to go back to that.

Furthermore, this necessary knowledge can be subjected to *shubuhāt* (specious objections) and whisperings such as the *shubuhāt* of the *sūfistāʾīyah* (Sophists) in empirical matters or primordial matters... *Shubuhāt* in this foundational knowledge cannot be responded to with proofs since the whole point of proofs is to go back to them. So if *shakk* (doubt) occurs in them, the path to rational inference and investigation has been severed.

This is why it is not possible to debate one who denies sensory or necessary knowledge. Rather, if he is simply recalcitrant and obstinate, he is penalized until he recognizes the truth. But if he is mistaken due to a corruption that his senses or mind have encountered due to his inability to understand such foundations or something similar, then he is to be treated with that [epistemology] that satisfies the conditions of knowledge for him and eliminates its obstacles. And if he is incapable of that due to a corruption in his natural physiology, he is treated with natural medications, or *duʿāʾ*, or *ruqyah*, or spiritual reorientation (*tawajjuh*), or something similar. Otherwise, he is abandoned.¹⁷⁰

Here, Ibn Taymiyyah lays out a clear explanation for the need for epistemological foundations. But rather than offering an arbitrary form of foundationalism that the Agrippan trilemma undermines, he explains that the axiomatic knowledge of reality is structured according to the concepts God initiates in the mind via the *fiṭrah*, concepts with which one cannot dispense while still hoping to have a meaningful construal of reality.¹⁷¹ To depart from meaningful conceptualizations by negating necessary knowledge entails *safsatah*. The antidote to Pyrrhonian doubt is not to entertain it with verbose philosophical argumentation but to

¹⁷⁰ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Darʾ taʾāruḍ*, 3:309–10.

¹⁷¹ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Darʾ taʾāruḍ*, 10:74.

consider its underlying psychospiritual etiology—willful blindness and recalcitrance, corrupted epistemic foundations, or a physiological explanation. Through reorienting oneself to one's own existential condition, pursuing a meaningful outlook on life, and seeking God with true spiritual yearning, a person is able to acquire the firmest foundations of conviction.

The human being needs a paradigm that offers a meaningful conception of the fundamental aspects of life. As Ibn Taymīyyah explains, the starting point of knowledge is for human beings to sincerely and genuinely search for answers and guidance from their Creator.¹⁷² The Qur'an states, "These are the signs of God that We recite to you in truth (*bi-al-ḥaqq*). So in what narrative after God and His signs will you believe?" (Qur'an 45:6). The Qur'anic exegete al-Ālūsī (d. 1270 AH) said, "And this indicates that there is no meaningful explanation (*bayān*) more meaningful than this explanation [i.e., the Islamic paradigm], nor sign (*āyah*) stronger as a proof than this sign [i.e., the Qur'ānic discourse]."¹⁷³ The most powerful epistemology of proof is one that furnishes an understanding of reality that yields the greatest meaning.

Pyrrhonian skepticism and the epistemology of disagreement

The nature of skepticism has been further elucidated through recent academic interest in the epistemology of disagreement. As Markus Lammenranta notes, the connection between skepticism and disagreement is captured in the first and most important of the five modes of Agrippa.¹⁷⁴ The impetus for suspending judgment arises precisely because one encounters a disagreement that is undecidable.

¹⁷² Ibn Taymīyyah, *Naqḍ al-mantiq*, 58.

¹⁷³ Nu'mān Khayr al-Dīn al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm wa-al-Sab' al-Mathānī* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n.d.), 25:141–42.

¹⁷⁴ See Markus Lammenranta, "The Role of Disagreement in Pyrrhonian and Cartesian Skepticism," in *Disagreement and Skepticism*, ed. Diego E. Machuca (New York: Routledge, 2013), 46–65.

Lammenranta also notes that in his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, René Descartes echoed the same Pyrrhonian reasoning:

Whenever two persons make opposite judgments about the same thing, it is certain that at least one of them is mistaken, and neither, it seems, has knowledge. For if the reasoning of one of them were certain and evident, he would be able to lay it before the other in such a way as eventually to convince his intellect as well.¹⁷⁵

According to Lammenranta, the argument from disagreement leads to skepticism because of an underlying *dialectical conception of justification*: “*S* is justified in believing that *p* if and only if *S* can defend *p* against appropriate challenges.”¹⁷⁶

According to this kind of theory, to be justified in my belief, I must be able to defend my belief to someone else. I can do this only if I have reasons or evidence that would convince the other party.¹⁷⁷

In other words, what is at the heart of skepticism is the notion that one is *not* justified in believing in something if one cannot provide enough arguments and evidence to convince one's opponent and defeat any possible objections. These objections need not even be based upon any tangible fact but may simply emerge in one's imagination of an alternate scenario that can equally account for the evidence invoked to justify a belief. Thus, imaginative scenarios in which human beings are part of a computer simulation of an advanced alien species suddenly become real objections to be contended with in order to have a rational justified belief that we exist in a physical world. For even the most assured matters of certainty, there can always be an imaginable objection lurking around the corner of the doubter's mind. Indeed, Ibn Taymīyyah affirmed that part of radical skepticism (*safṣaṭah*) is to consider the mere possibility of something in one's imagination as evidence for its possibility in external reality.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵ René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 11.

¹⁷⁶ Lammenranta, “Role of Disagreement,” 61.

¹⁷⁷ Lammenranta, “Role of Disagreement,” 52.

¹⁷⁸ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar' ta 'ārūḍ*, 3:365.

Seeing disagreement as a source of doubt has been described in the literature on the epistemology of disagreement as *conciliationism* (“upon learning that a peer disagrees with me about whether *p*, I cannot rationally continue to believe that *p* or to hold it to the same degree or with the same confidence”).¹⁷⁹ Moreover, Diego Machuca writes:

In order to resolve a peer disagreement over a given issue, the disputants must appeal to reasons which are independent of both their beliefs about the disputed issue and the reasoning on the basis of which such beliefs are formed.

...There is clearly a close connection between skepticism and disagreement since skepticism is always latent as a possible stance to adopt in any discussion of disagreement. For instance, on the dialectical conception of justification, the very existence of a dispute triggers a demand for justification: a competent and responsible cognizer should be able to defend his beliefs when these are challenged by his epistemic rivals.¹⁸⁰

Invoking disagreement was used by moral error theorists who denied the existence of objective moral values based on widespread disputes about morality.¹⁸¹ Furthermore, invoking the existence of disagreement as an impetus for doubt has been described by contemporary atheist philosophers as the ‘*strongest reason*’ to argue that belief in God is irrational.¹⁸² The fact that such a viewpoint entails general skepticism about all ordinary beliefs is hastily dismissed because (1) people generally agree on those beliefs and (2) those other beliefs are highly justified so we can justifiably dismiss others’ disagreement on them “even if we

¹⁷⁹ Diego E. Machuca, ed., *Disagreement and Skepticism* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3 (editor’s introduction).

¹⁸⁰ Machuca, *Disagreement and Skepticism*, 4, 7.

¹⁸¹ Machuca writes: “The most prominent example of the use of disagreement to undermine ethical realism is no doubt John Mackie, who based his “moral error theory” on two arguments: the argument from queerness and the argument from relativity, which is actually an argument from disagreement. Ethical skeptics usually conceive of this argument as an inference to the best explanation: they claim that the best explanation of the existence of persistent and widespread disputes about moral issues is that moral beliefs do not reflect an objective moral reality, but merely the perspectives of those holding such beliefs” (10).

¹⁸² Ali Hasan, “Is Theism Rational?” in *Theism and Atheism: Opposing Viewpoints in Philosophy*, ed. Koterski and Oppy (Michigan: Macmillan Reference, 2019), 126.

can't initially see exactly why.”¹⁸³ That such an answer is utterly unsatisfactory in escaping Pyrrhonian skepticism, solipsism, moral abolitionism, and so forth, seems to completely escape those who proffer it.

UFOs, leprechauns, unicorns, the Tooth Fairy, and Flying Spaghetti Monsters: When is skepticism reasonable?

Most individuals readily recognize that it would be absurd to be so skeptical of everything and anything that, for instance, one could never eat without suspicion that one's food had been poisoned nor enter a building without experiencing a paralyzing fear at the possibility of its collapse. Moreover, most individuals generally regard solipsism as fanciful and imaginative and unworthy of being seriously entertained. But surely, there must be a middle ground wherein some matters merit skepticism? After all, why is it that theists are so convinced of the non-existence of leprechauns, unicorns, and the Tooth Fairy?

The truth is that there are a great many claims and notions that the human being encounters on a daily basis, that one rightfully regards with skepticism and for which one demands proof. A meaningful picture of reality arises in the human mind as a result of the continuous influx of sensory perceptions (*ḥiss*) filtered by the constraints of the rational mind (*‘aql*) drawing upon primordial conceptions (*badīhīyāt*)—like causality, teleology, magnitude, spatial relations—ultimately rooted in human nature (*fiṭrah*). When this mind subsequently encounters something that ‘doesn’t quite make sense,’ an experience of cognitive dissonance arises because there is a conflict between the picture of reality that one possesses and the new piece of information one has received. In order to accept that new piece of information as valid and reconfigure one's existing worldview to accommodate it, one needs to have very good reason to believe it to be true. When something conflicts with basic notions of causality, or doesn't seem consonant with

¹⁸³ Hasan, “Is Theism Rational?”

established empirical and rational notions about the world, or appears contrary to basic moral sensibilities, such notions are rightly regarded with suspicion and distrust and viewed with a high degree of reasonable skepticism until overwhelming evidence has been established in their favor.

So why does it make sense to be skeptical about the existence of unicorns, UFOs, gnomes, goblins, and a host of other fictional entities? And how does this skepticism differ from being skeptical about the existence of God? Well, to start with, these are physical entities posited within the material world that conflict with our experience and observation. If however, a leading group of scientists announced that they had discovered the remains of several equine or horse-like creatures that displayed a bony projection surrounded by keratin arising from the head, consistent with a horn—our skepticism towards the historical existence of unicorns would reasonably diminish.

On the other hand, it does not make sense to be skeptical about the existence of good and evil (morality), cause and effect (causality), truth and falsehood, logic, nor does it make sense to be skeptical about the Divine. These are not physical entities, but rather ontological and phenomenological foundations upon which our very notions of existence and purpose are constructed and rendered meaningful. Take away any element and we no longer have a picture of the universe that makes sense; we no longer have a sensible conception about who we are and why we are meant to be. We have instead a pointless sea of particles that exist reasonlessly and whose configuration into the present world around us is as meaningless as if the particles happened to be configured in a disorganized array. There are certain cognitive structures embedded in our human nature (*fiṭrah*) that we use to filter our sensory experiences into meaningful chunks of knowledge that can aid us in our conceptualization of reality. It makes sense to doubt something that conflicts with the foundations of our ontology but it doesn't make sense to doubt the ontological foundations themselves.

There is a tremendous logical fallacy in juxtaposing, on the one hand, fictional physical entities posited in the observable natural world that violate commonsense

notions about reality like unicorns and leprechauns and, on the other hand, those conceptual foundations and ontological anchors that underpin any meaningful construal of reality—like God, causality, logic, numerical order, temporal sequence, morality, etc. The concept of a unicorn is that of a fictional physical beast whose existence or non-existence has no bearing on the foundational structure of our world, while the concept of causality is that of an ontological foundation without which no meaningful picture of reality can be construed. Similarly, without a Divine anchorage for all meaningful conceptualizations, all notions collapse into meaninglessness.

The meaning of meaningfulness

Every human being pursues an outlook, value hierarchy, or belief system that can render life meaningful. But what do we mean when we ask about the *meaning* of life? Philosopher Harry Gene Blocker writes:

We have already distinguished four main senses of meaning: (1) the place of X in a system, (2) human intention, (3) linguistic or symbolic (identity or translation) meaning, and (4) being-as.

...Interestingly, “the meaning of life” also falls into all four of these categories with a slightly different result in each case. We have emphasized the meaning of life as the interrelatedness of one’s actions in a total integrated pattern having a place in the larger life of the community. There is also the meaning of life as something which has taken on a recognizable shape, or at least negatively, the loss of which shape is experienced as meaninglessness. And there is also the meaning of life in the sense of the purpose for one’s life or for mankind as a whole which we found in Sartre, and this can lead to a sense of the meaning of life like that of translation meaning in which one expects the same kind of answer to the question “what is the meaning of life?” as to the question “what does *ja*’ mean?”

...Thus, the logical root of meaning can be traced to the sense of purpose and a system of purposeful relations. When people speak of the

meaningfulness of things, they are usually talking either about (a) the purposive way things seem to hang together or (b) the purpose which this system has as a whole. Correspondingly, meaninglessness can mean either (a) the breakdown of this system or (b) the realization that the purpose for the system as a whole is a human projection having no foundation in reality.

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Despite the centrality of the question ‘What is the meaning of life?’ to human pursuits, “it is only in the last few decades that analytic philosophers, in particular, have begun to pay any serious attention to the topic.”¹⁸⁵ Joshua Lewis Thomas observes that just as meaning in linguistics conveys the *sense* of a word, thus meaningfulness is a matter of having answers that *make sense* in addressing the salient questions of something’s origin, impact, purpose, and story. A meaning-framework is what allows one to process the constant stream of sensory information that flows into one’s consciousness in order to interpret and understand existence and the world.¹⁸⁶

The big questions of life tend to aggregate into three clusters—intellectual, moral, and spiritual. No matter what culture or ideology one is raised in, one seeks to answer questions such as ‘What makes my life worth living?’ (*spiritual*), ‘How do I live a good life?’ (*moral*), and ‘What is worth knowing?’ (*intellectual*). Pursuing truth means to search for the answers that serve a purpose in making sense of these fundamental questions. Every human being intuitively prefers a system of belief and value that is able to yield meaningful answers to questions in these three domains rather than answers that are incoherent and meaningless. Ultimately, the human being is confronted with a basic choice, between meaningfulness or meaninglessness.¹⁸⁷ For the one who adopts materialism, existence in its entirety is nothing more than interactions of a vast soup of purposeless particles. Moral values, thoughts, and ideas must be nothing more than the delusions of collections of particles, which presume their own consciousness and individuated existence.

¹⁸⁴ H. G. Blocker, *The Meaning of Meaninglessness* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974), 33–40.

¹⁸⁵ Joshua Lewis Thomas, “Meaningfulness as Sensefulness,” *Philosophia* 47 (2019): 1555–77.

¹⁸⁶ Thomas, “Meaningfulness as Sensefulness.”

¹⁸⁷ Refusing to follow the truth is an outcome of this choice as reflected in the fact that Ibn Taymiyyah pairs the term *musafsiṭ* (radical skeptic) alongside *mu’ānid* (stubborn). See Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar’ ta’āruḍ*, 8:323; *Bayān talbīs al-jahmīyah*, 2:341.

Everything in existence that is conceived to have meaning is—at its very root and essence—ultimately, meaningless. But even the declaration that existence is meaningless is itself intended as a meaningful claim, and hence meaning is inescapable.

In Islam, the three domains—spiritual, moral, and intellectual—are perfectly aligned and connected. As Ibn Taymīyyah explains, the way of the Muslims combines beneficial knowledge and righteous deeds and combines spiritual purity (*zakāʾ*) and intellectual perspicuity (*dhakāʾ*); this is the meaning of Islam being the path of truth and guidance.¹⁸⁸ Moral excellence, intellectual clarity, and spiritual purity are all unified in the Islamic journey towards God (much of this has been explored in a [previous essay](#)).¹⁸⁹ The paradigm of *tawḥīd* (Divine Oneness) presented by Islam successfully incorporates all of these three domains into an understanding that renders life meaningful, and thus it serves as an ontological anchor—a necessary grounding for all meaningful conceptions about life.¹⁹⁰ To subject ontological anchors to skepticism results only in the combustion of the very framework that renders meaningful those notions of truth and falsehood upon which the skeptical endeavor itself is predicated.

Conclusion

Far from being antiquated, the Islamic scholarly tradition contains an immense wealth of intellectual insights that have tremendous bearing on the conversations taking place today. This is particularly true with respect to conversations surrounding atheism and demands for philosophical or empirical proof of God's existence. The underlying fallacy behind such conversations is one shared by the ancient Pyrrhonian skeptics of Greece and stems from an incoherent epistemology

¹⁸⁸ Ibn Taymīyyah, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-Masīḥ* (Riyadh: Dār al-ʿĀshimah, 1999), 3:102–3.

¹⁸⁹ Zohair Abdul-Rahman and Nazir Khan, “In Pursuit of Conviction II,” *Yaqeen*, October 11, 2019, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/zohair/in-pursuit-of-conviction-ii-humanity-needs-god/>.

¹⁹⁰ A full exposition of how the paradigm of *tawḥīd* addresses the spiritual, intellectual, and moral questions of life will be the subject of another essay.

about what constitutes proof, what yields certitude, and what distinguishes concepts requiring substantiation from those concepts without which no meaningful construal of reality is possible.

Ibn Taymīyyah argues that, with a coherent epistemology, belief in God requires no philosophical proof. Yet, it is commonplace today to find attempts to address atheism by offering 'philosophical proofs' for the existence of God, perhaps inadvertently reinforcing the Pyrrhonian fallacy behind atheism—namely, that belief in God is something uncertain, to begin with, and in need of argumentation for substantiation. Instead, one need only present and explain the Islamic message, which automatically concords with the human *fiṭrah*. If one is open to the message and contemplates it, one's *fiṭrah* will guide one to embrace it; if not, no amount of evidence, argumentation, or justification will be of benefit. When we understand the Qur'anic approach, which presents faith as an ontological foundation, and the purposive nature of truth (*ḥaqq*), then it becomes clear that no meaningful construal of reality is possible without faith in the Divine as articulated in the Islamic paradigm. Faith in the Divine is the bedrock for everything else to be rendered meaningful. Rather than requiring substantiation, it substantiates all else.