

Essays and Articles about Islam, Atheism and Philosophy

Autors: Jamie
Turner, Yusuf
Ponders, Dr Osman
Latiff & Hamza
Andreas Tzortzis

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Does Islam Curtail Freedom?

This essay philosophically unpacks the idea of freedom. It argues that freedom is the absence of coercion, and the absence of coercion is when one's rights are not being violated. This implies that if something curtails freedom, one must ask what rights are being violated, which raises the fundamental question of what conception of rights are true or most coherent. If the Islamic tradition grants rights to individuals and groups, then the accusation that it restricts freedom, is misplaced.

Everyone wants to be free and our desire for freedom is what makes us human. The word freedom is obviously powerful and is often used in many contexts. When referring to morality, common expressions, such as, "I'm free to do what I want as long as I don't harm anyone", are used. In the political domain, freedom is used as a marker for a civilised nation; repressive regimes are not associated with the word. Our intuitions tell us that freedom is our birth right, it is something good and, if necessary, it should be fought for. In our secular age, the word freedom is also used as a challenge to religion, particularly Islam. The religion is perceived to restrict freedom; it is "backwards", "undemocratic", "medieval" and must be reformed.

However, what does *freedom* actually mean? Notwithstanding our common usage, political slogans and personal feelings, and taking into consideration the real world consequences of the word, we need to unpack the idea of freedom and analyse it philosophically. This will help us respond to the accusation that Islam curtails freedom. Before I respond, it is important to note that this essay will not attempt to unravel misrepresentations of Islamic law, refute misconceptions about God's commands, or clarify misunderstandings of specific aspects of Islam—all of which are referenced to justify the view that Islam restricts freedom. This essay will take an analytical approach to the idea of freedom and show how freedom can only be understood through a particular conceptual prism.

Freedom and coercion

The coherent and uncontroversial definitions of freedom are centred on the absence of coercion. Therefore, in order to respond to the accusation that Islam restricts freedom, the notion of coercion needs to be understood. The empirical theories define coercion in the following way: a person has no other reasonable alternative or choice but to act in accordance with what another person (or entity) has asked for.¹ According to non-empirical² theories of coercion, the person may have no other reasonable option but still remains uncoerced.³

Non-empirical account of coercion

The late Harvard University professor, Robert Nozick argued for a non-empirical account of coercion. Nozick was concerned with the notion of whether a person's actions are voluntary in the context of facing "severely limited options".⁴ To apprehend whether a person's actions are coerced an understanding of "what limits his alternatives" is required.⁵ For example, if the limiting factor is an act of nature, then the person's actions are not coerced. Take into consideration a person who decides to go for a walk. Along his journey he faces a fork in the road. He wants to continue his journey in the direction to his left. However, someone calls his mobile phone to inform him that towards the direction he wants to take is a tornado that, if faced, can be life threatening. Consequently he has no other option other than to turn back. Nozick argued that someone is coerced

to do something if it is based on other people's actions "placing limits on one's available opportunities".⁶ Other people's actions would be deemed coercive if they did not have the right to act in a particular way.⁷

Nozick developed an intelligent argument to illustrate that if people have acted in accordance with their rights, and their actions still happen to limit another person's alternatives (or makes their alternative options unreasonable or undesirable), their actions are not coercive. He articulated his argument in the following way:

There are 26 men and 26 women who are seeking spouses. Both sex groups are ranked. One group has been ranked A to Z, the other A' to Z'. The ranking is based on their marital appeal. A and A' decide to marry each other. However, B has also considered A' as the person they would most like to marry. Given that A' is now married, B marries B'. The action of A has obviously limited their alternatives, but since there is another person they still would consider in marriage, their actions are not coerced, or in Nozick's terminology, "not made involuntary".⁸ Eventually this concludes with Z and Z' marrying. Z and Z' have no other alternative other than to marry each other, but their marriage is still voluntary; no coercion has taken place,

"The fact that their only other alternative is (in their view) much worse, and the fact that others chose to exercise their rights in certain ways, thereby shaping the external environment of options in which Z and Z' choose, does not mean they did not marry voluntarily."⁹

Nozick maintained that since the other people have made decisions based on their right to choose whom they wish to marry, and there were no violations of anyone's rights, Z and Z' have not been coerced,

"A through to Y each acted voluntarily and within their rights... A person's choice among differing degrees of unpalatable alternatives is not rendered nonvoluntary by the fact that others voluntarily chose and acted within their rights in a way that did not provide him with a more palatable alternative."¹⁰

Empirical account of coercion

Political philosopher Serena Olsaretti disagreed with Nozick. She argued for an empirical conception of coercion. She postulated that when a person has no other reasonable choice, their freedom is curtailed. Olsaretti objected to Nozick's argument by arguing that he misrepresented the issue about Z and Z' choices. She maintained that Z and Z' were uncoerced in choosing to get married and argued that this is not the problem that needs to be addressed. Rather, the issue at hand is whether Z married Z' free of coercion,

"The doubt is not whether they *married* voluntarily. Rather, the doubt, is whether they married *that particular partner*, that is, whether they voluntarily chose to marry that particular partner that they married."¹¹

Olsaretti altered Nozick's thought experiment to include that not getting married would lead to unreasonable and negative alternatives such as "strong social ostracism attached to being unmarried".¹² We could worsen the scenario by imagining that not getting married would lead to death. Olsaretti maintained that in such a scenario the choice of opting out is not possible, therefore Nozick's view that there is no coercion as long as everyone has acted in accordance with their rights, is untenable.¹³

The empirical account is incoherent

Political philosopher Alan Wertheimer argued against the empirical account of coercion by stating that the outcome of a choice proposal is based on the context. The concern that the possible alternatives of a particular proposal are unreasonable, is irrelevant. What matters is whether or not the proposal is an infringement of one's rights. For example, consider a patient has to undergo a life-saving operation. The medical staff propose that the patient has to undergo surgery to ensure their survival. In order for the surgery to happen the patient has to sign a consent form. In this context, the patient has no other option other than to sign the form. The consequences of not doing so would lead to an untenable situation; death. Under the empirical account, the patient is coerced to sign the consent form and undergo surgery because the alternative option is undesirable. However, when this scenario is considered under the rights based approach the problem is solved. Even though the patient has no other reasonable option other than to sign the consent form, he still does so without coercion. If the surgeon were to operate without consent then that would be tantamount to physical assault or abuse. From this example, and many similar ones, we see that it is not as simple to say that someone has been coerced if the alternatives to a proposal are unreasonable. Coercion is about the violation of rights.

Freedom is about rights

In light of the above discussion, what is significant about the notion of coercion is our conception of rights. Take into consideration two distinct conceptions of rights: negative and positive. Negative rights "do not impose an obligation on others to provide you with something"¹⁴ and they are restricted to "life, liberty, and property".¹⁵ Positive rights entail that people should be "provided with certain things".¹⁶ This implies that people have obligations to each other. These obligations do not only involve not interfering with other people's rights, but ensures "that one gets whatever one has the rights to".¹⁷ An example of positive rights include the right to basic support to ensure the essential needs of food, shelter and clothing.

Those that advocate for negative rights, like the libertarians, make the claim that there cannot be any positive rights. They argue that positive rights curtail freedom due to their obligation or imposition on people to facilitate others people's rights. Their reasoning is based on the view that freedom is the absence of coercion. However, the notion of coercion for the libertarian is based on the rights that people have,

1. Freedom is the absence of coercion
2. The absence of coercion is when rights are not violated
3. Therefore, freedom is when rights are not violated

The libertarian conception of freedom is when there is an absence of coercion and coercion is when rights have been violated. This presupposes the negative view, which means that the premises of the libertarian's argument require as much justification as the conclusion, committing the fallacy of *circulus in probando* (circular reasoning).

4. The negative view is the correct view on rights
5. Therefore, preserving someone's negative rights protects their freedom

In light of 2 and 3, 4 and 5 presents a circular argument because it presupposes the negative view. Someone would have to agree that the negative view of rights for the argument to work. This highlights that what is required is justification for 4; the negative view on rights.

Conversely, if someone adopts a positive view of rights and since freedom is when rights are not violated, the positive view can never be seen as a restriction of freedom. Therefore, those that

advocate a positive conception of rights, like the socialists, also face the same problem. Since coercion is the violation of one's rights, they cannot claim the libertarian view of rights curtails freedom, without justifying their view first,

4'. The positive view is the correct view on rights

5'. Therefore, preserving someone's positive rights protects their freedom

Again, in light of 2 and 3, 4' and 5' form the circular argument. The argument here presumes the positive view. Since 1 maintains that freedom is the absence of coercion, and 2 postulates that coercion is when rights are violated, 4' and 5' form a circular argument because the positive view has to be justified before it can be claimed to protect someone's freedom. In summary, the negative and positive views on rights (by extension, any conception of rights) require justification before anything can be said about protecting someone's freedom.

The simple conclusion so far is that freedom is not necessarily about choice, it is about rights.

Does Islam curtail freedom?

The discussion so far leads to the following key questions: *who has the correct conception of rights? Is it those that advocate negative rights, like the libertarians, or those that call for positive rights, like the socialists? Or is it the religious conceptions of rights?*

"Indeed, We have honoured the children of Adam."¹⁸

Since coercion involves the violation of rights, then one's view on freedom will change based on a different conception of rights. So if the Islamic tradition grants rights to individuals and groups, then the accusation that it restricts freedom, is misplaced. The discussion that needs to be had is on which conceptions of rights are correct. Inevitably, the discussion will move away from misplaced accusations to exploring the basis for the Islamic conception of rights. If the basis for Islam's conception of rights is coherent and true, then it follows Islam's view on rights is true, and it implies that Islam preserves one's freedom.

According to the Islamic intellectual tradition God's existence is a self-evident truth, that can also be affirmed through rational investigation, and it God who grants us rights. These rights are correct because they come from the One who is maximally perfect. God has the totality of knowledge and wisdom—God has the picture, we just have a pixel—and is the source of goodness and is perfectly just.

"He is the source of all goodness."¹⁹

To unpack this however requires a separate discussion. Notwithstanding, the argument presented in this essay has shown that one cannot claim Islam restricts freedom without presupposing a particular conception of rights. Merely assuming their truth commits the fallacy of circular reasoning. The one who has made the claim must be able to show why their conception of rights is true.

References

¹ Alan Wertheimer. *Coercion*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 192.

² I have used the term non-empirical to denote conceptions of coercion different from the empirical accounts of coercion.

³ Alan Wertheimer. *Coercion*, 192.

- ⁴ Robert Nozick. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), 262.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid, 263.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ibid, 263 – 264.
- ¹¹ Serena Olsaretti. *Liberty, Desert and the Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 130.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid, 131.
- ¹⁴ Andrew Bradley. “Positive Rights, Negative Rights and Health Care.” *Journal of Medical Ethics* 36, no. 12 (2010): 838.
- ¹⁵ Bans Parkan. “On Multinational Corporations and the Provision of Positive Rights.” *Journal of Business Ethics* 85 (2009): 76.
- ¹⁶ Andrew Melnyk. “Is There a Formal Argument against Positive Rights?” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 55, no. 2 (1989): 205.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ *The Qur’an*, Chapter 17, Verse 70.
- ¹⁹ *The Qur’an*, Chapter 52, Verse 28.

Divine Link: Dependency and God's Existence

This essay articulates the argument from dependency for God's existence. Also referred to as the argument from contingency, this argument postulates that the universe and everything we perceive is dependent (contingent) and it can only be explained by an eternal, independent and necessary being.

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Imagine you walk out of your house and on your street you find a row of dominoes that stretch far beyond what your eyes can see. You start to hear a noise that gets slightly louder as time passes. This noise is familiar to you, as you used to play with dominoes as a child; it is the sound of them falling. Eventually, you see this amazing display of falling dominoes approaching you. You greatly admire how the basic laws of physics can produce such a remarkable spectacle; however, you are also saddened because the last domino has now fallen a few inches away from your feet. Still excited about what has just happened, you decide to walk down the street to find the first domino, hoping to meet the person responsible for producing this wonderful experience.

Keeping the above scenario in mind, I want to ask you a few questions. As you walk down your street, will you eventually reach where the chain of dominoes began? Or will you keep on walking forever? The obvious response is that you will eventually find the first domino. However, I want you to ask *why*. The reason you know that you will find the first domino is because you understand that if the domino chain went on forever, the last domino that fell by your feet would never have fallen. An infinite number of dominoes would have to fall before the last domino could fall. Yet an infinite amount of falling dominoes would take an infinite amount of time to fall. In other words, the last domino would never fall. Putting this in simple terms, you know that in order for the last domino to fall, the domino behind must fall prior to it, and for that domino to fall, the domino behind it must fall prior to it. If this went on forever, the last domino would never fall.

Sticking with the analogy, I want to ask you another question. Let's say, walking down the street, you finally come across the first domino which led to the falling of the entire chain. What would your thoughts be about the first domino? Would you think this domino fell 'by itself'? In other words, do you think the falling of the first domino can somehow be explained without referring to anything external to it? Clearly not; that runs against the grain of our basic intuition about reality. Nothing really happens *on its own*. Everything requires an explanation of some sort. So the first domino's fall had to have been triggered by something else—a person, the wind or a thing hitting it, etc. Whatever this 'something else' is, it has to form a part of our explanation of falling dominoes.

So to sum up our reflections thus far: neither could the chain of dominoes contain an infinite number of items, nor could the first domino start falling for no reason whatsoever.¹

This above analogy is a summary of the argument from dependency. The universe is somewhat like a row of dominoes. The universe and everything within it is dependent. They cannot depend on something else, which in turn depends on something else, forever. The only plausible explanation is that the universe, and everything within it, has to depend on someone or something whose existence is in some ways independent from the universe (and anything else for that matter). Put differently, this thing must not be 'dependent' the way the universe is, because that would just add one more domino to the chain, which would then require an explanation. Therefore, there must be an independent and eternal Being that everything depends upon. Simple as this sounds, in order to understand this argument, I will have to define what I mean by 'dependent'.

What does it mean when we say something is dependent?

Firstly...

It is something that is not necessary.

The word ‘necessary’ has a specific, technical meaning in philosophy. Contrary to popular use, it does not indicate something you need. Rather, when philosophers say something is necessary, they mean that it was impossible, inconceivable for it to not have existed.² I understand why this may be a bit of a difficult concept to grasp. This is because nothing in our empirical experience is ever necessary. We can, however, get an adequate understanding of what ‘being necessary’ means by thinking about the opposite. A thing or object not being necessary implies that it does not have to exist. In other words, if it is conceivable that a thing could have not existed, it is not necessary. The chair you are presumably sitting on is clearly not necessary—we can imagine a thousand different scenarios where it might not have existed. You may not have chosen to buy it, the manufacturer may not have chosen to make it, or the dealer may not have chosen to sell it. Clearly, your chair very easily could not have existed. Now this possibility of ‘not-having-been-there’ is a key feature of dependent things. Something that has this feature requires an explanation for its existence. This is because for something that might not have existed, you can easily ask: *Why does this thing exist?* That perfectly legitimate question calls for an explanation. It cannot be that the thing exists on its own, because there is nothing necessary about its existence. To say that the thing somehow explains itself would be to deny the property of dependence we just discussed. Thus, the explanation must be something external to it. An explanation in this context means an external set of factors that provide a reason for why something exists. Going back to our chair analogy, the collection of a number of factors—e.g., the manufacturer making it, the dealer selling it, and you buying it—form the explanation for the chair’s existence. Therefore, if something requires an external set of factors, it means that it is dependent on something other than itself. Consequently, its existence is dependent on something external. This is a basic, intuitive and rational form of reasoning. This is because questioning something that exists that could not have existed, is the mark of a rational mind.

Think about what scientists do. They point to different features of reality and ask—why is this flower a certain way? Why does that bacteria cause this disease? Why is the universe expanding at the rate that it is? What gives these questions legitimacy is the fact that none of them are necessary; all of them might not have been the way that they are. To facilitate a greater understanding of this concept, consider the following example:

Waking up in the morning, you go down the stairs and walk into the kitchen. You open the fridge and on top of the egg box you find a pen. You obviously do not close the fridge door and conclude that the pen’s existence is necessary. You do not think that the pen in the fridge got there by itself. You question why the pen is on top of the egg box. The reason you ask this question is because the pen’s existence on the egg box is not necessary. It requires an explanation for its existence and for the way that it is. The explanations can vary, but the fact that an explanation is needed means that the pen is dependent. The pen requires an external set of factors to provide a reason for why it is placed in the fridge, and why it is the way that it is. For instance: the fact that the pen was made, and your son bought the pen from a stationary shop, and then put the pen in the fridge provides the external set of factors responsible for the pen. The pen is therefore dependent on these external factors, and these factors explain the pen’s existence.

Secondly...

Its components or basic building blocks could have been arranged in a different way.

This is because there must have been something external to that thing which determined its specific arrangement.³ Let me elaborate with an example:

You are driving home and you pass a roundabout. You see a bunch of flowers arranged in the following three words: 'I love you'. You can conclude that there is nothing necessary about the arrangement of the flowers. They could have been arranged in another way—for example, the words 'I adore you' instead of 'I love you' could have been used. Alternatively, the flowers could have not been arranged at all—they might have been randomly scattered. Since the flowers could have been set in a different way, some force external to them must have determined their arrangement. In this case, it could have been the local gardener or the result of a local government project. This point holds true for pretty much everything you observe. The components of everything, be it an atom or a laptop or an organism, are composed in a specific way. Furthermore, each basic building block does not exist necessarily. The basic components of something cannot explain themselves and therefore require an explanation (see the first definition above).

Thirdly...

It relies on something outside itself for its existence.

This is a common sense understanding of the word. Another way of explaining that something is dependent is by stating that it is not self-sustaining. An example includes a pet cat. The cat does not sustain itself; it requires external things to survive. These include food, water, oxygen and shelter.

Finally...

It has limited physical qualities.

These can include shape, size, colour, temperature, charge, mass, etc. Why is this so? Well, if something has a limited physical feature, that feature must be limited by something external to itself, such as an external source or external set of factors. The following questions highlight this point: *Why does it have these limits? Why is it not twice the size, or a different shape or colour?* The thing did not give itself these limitations. For example, if I picked up a cupcake with its limited physical qualities of size, shape, colour and texture, and claimed that it existed necessarily, you would think I was foolish. You know that its size, colour and texture have been controlled by an external source: in this case, the baker. Things with limited physical qualities did not give rise to them. There must be an explanation to explain the existence of these limited physical qualities.

It is reasonable to assert that all things with limited physical qualities are finite; there must have been something prior that was responsible for their qualities. This means that all limited physical objects at one point had a beginning, because it is inconceivable that limited physical objects are eternal. This is due to the fact that an external source or set of factors must have existed prior to any limited physical object and caused its limitations.

Imagine if I picked up a plant and claimed that it was eternal. How would you respond? You would laugh at such an assertion. Even if you didn't witness the plant's beginning, you know it is finite because of its limited physical qualities. However, even if limited physical objects (including the

universe) were eternal, it would not change the fact that they are dependent and do not exist necessarily. This argument works regardless of whether or not objects are eternal or have a beginning.

Applying the above comprehensive definition of what it means to be dependent leads us to conclude that the universe and everything within it is dependent. Reflect on anything that comes to mind—a pen, a tree, the sun, an electron, and even a quantum field. All of these things are dependent in some way. If this is true, then all that we perceive—including the universe—can be explained in one of the following ways:

1. The universe and all that we perceive are eternal, necessary and independent.
2. The universe and all that we perceive depend on something else which is also dependent.
3. The universe and all that we perceive derives their existence from something else that exists by its own nature and is *accordingly eternal and independent*.

I will take each explanation and discuss which one best explains the dependency of the universe and everything within it. The universe and all that we perceive:

1. Are eternal, necessary and independent

Could the universe and everything that we perceive exist eternally and depend on themselves? This is not a rational explanation. The universe and all the things that we perceive do not necessarily exist; they could have not existed. They also have limited physical qualities. Since they could not give rise to their own limitations, something external must have imposed these limitations on them. The universe and all the things we perceive do not explain themselves by virtue of their own existence, and their components could have been arranged in a different way. Therefore, they are dependent, and dependent things do not exist independently.

Even if the universe were eternal, it still stands that there must have been an external set of factors that gave rise to its limited physical qualities. In addition, the universe's components or basic building blocks could have been arranged in a different way, and the universe could have not existed. The universe cannot explain itself by virtue of its own existence. With these considerations, we can safely reject the view that the eternity of the universe somehow provides an explanation for its existence (this point is explained further below).

2. Depend on something else which is also dependent

The existence of the universe and all that we perceive could not depend on something else which is also dependent. Since the universe and all that we perceive do not explain themselves, then postulating another dependent thing to explain them does not explain anything at all. This is because the dependent thing that is supposed to explain the universe and everything that exists, also requires an explanation for its existence. Therefore, the only way to explain things that are dependent is by referring to something that is not dependent and therefore necessary.

Despite this, someone may argue that the existence of all we perceive depends on something else, which in turn depends on another thing, *ad infinitum*. This is false. For instance: *Could this universe be explained by another universe, which in turn is explained by another universe, with the series of explanations continuing forever?* This would not solve the problem of requiring an explanation. Even if there were an infinite number of universes all dependent on each other, we could still ask: *Why does this infinite chain of universes exist?* Whether or not the universe is eternal, it still requires an explanation for its existence.

Consider the following example. Imagine there are an infinite number of human beings. Each human being was produced by the biological activity of their parents, and each of these parents was in turn produced by the biological activity of their parents, *ad infinitum*. It would still be perfectly reasonable to ask: *Why are there any human beings at all?* Even if this chain of human beings had no beginning, the fact remains that this chain requires an explanation. Since each human being in the chain could have not existed and possesses limited physical qualities, they are dependent and not necessary. They still require an explanation. Just saying the chain of human beings is infinite does nothing to change the need for an explanation.⁴

This option also assumes that an infinite regress of dependencies is possible. However, this is inconceivable. To illustrate this point, imagine the existence of this universe was dependent on another universe, and the existence of that universe was also dependent on another universe, and so on. Would this universe ever come to be? The answer is no, because an infinite number of dependencies would need to be established before this universe could exist. Remember, an infinite number of things do not end; therefore, this universe could not exist if there were an infinite set of dependencies.

3. Derive their existence from something else that exists by its own nature and is accordingly *eternal and independent*

Since everything we perceive is dependent in some way, then the most rational explanation is that the existence of everything depends on something else that is independent, and therefore eternal. It has to be independent because if it were dependent, it would require an explanation. It also has to be eternal because if it was not eternal—in other words, finite—it would be dependent as finite things require an explanation for their existence. Therefore, we can conclude that the universe, and everything that we perceive, depends upon something that is eternal and independent. This is best explained by the existence of God.

The argument from dependency is supported by the Islamic intellectual tradition. The concept of an independent Being that is responsible for bringing everything into existence is highlighted in various places in the Qur'an. For example, God says:

“God is independent of all that exists.”⁵

“O mankind! It is you who stand in need of God, whereas He alone is self-sufficient, the One whom all praise is due.”⁶

The classical exegete Ibn Kathir comments on the above verse: “They need Him in all that they do, but He has no need of them at all... He is unique in His being free of all needs, and has no partner or associate.”⁷

Islam's intellectual tradition produced the like of Ibn Sina (known in the West as Avicenna), who articulated a similar argument. He maintained that God is *Wajib al-Wujud*, necessarily existent. Ibn Sina argued that God necessarily exists and He is responsible for the existence of everything. Everything other than God is dependent, which Ibn Sina described as *Mumkin al-Wujud*.⁸ The argument from dependency has also been adopted—and adapted—by many other influential Islamic scholars, some of whom include Al-Razi, Al-Ghazali and Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni.

Al-Ghazali provides a concise summary of this argument:

“There is no denying existence itself. Something must exist and anyone who says nothing exists at all makes a mockery of sense and necessity. The proposition that there is no denying being itself, then, is a necessary premise. Now this Being which has been admitted in principle is either necessary or contingent... What this means is that a being must be self-sufficient or dependent...”

From here we argue: If the being the existence of which is conceded be necessary, then the existence of a necessary Being is established. If, on the other hand, its existence is contingent, every contingent being depends on a necessary Being; for the meaning of its contingency is that its existence and non-existence are equally possible. Whatever has such a characteristic cannot have its existence selected for without a determining or selecting agent. This too is necessary. So from these necessary premises the existence of a necessary Being is established.”⁹

In summary, according to Islamic theology, God is:

- Independent
- The Being that everything depends on
- The One that sustains everything
- Everlasting
- Self-sufficient
- *Wajib al-Wujood* (necessarily existent)

I will now address some of the key objections against this argument.

The universe exists independently

A typical atheist contention is: *If we are saying that God is independent and necessary, why cannot we say the same thing for the universe?* This is a misplaced contention for the following reasons. Firstly, there is nothing necessary about the universe; it could have not existed. Secondly, the components of the universe could have been arranged in a different way. Whether one considers these components to be quarks or some type of quantum field, it still raises the question: *Why are they arranged the way that they are?* Since a different arrangement of quarks or fields could have existed instead of the collection that does exist, it follows that the universe is dependent.¹⁰ Everything we perceive within the universe has limited physical qualities; this includes the galaxies, stars, trees, animals and electrons. They have a specific shape, size and physical form. As such, these things that we perceive around us—the things that make up the entire universe—are finite and dependent.

The universe is just a brute fact

Another contention suggests that we should not ask any questions about the universe. During his famous radio debate with Father Copleston, the philosopher Bertrand Russell said, “I should say that the universe is just there, and that’s all”¹¹. This position is frankly an intellectual cop-out. Consider the following hovering green ball analogy:¹²

Imagine you were walking in your local park and you saw a hovering green ball in the middle of the children’s playground. How would you react? Would you walk by and accept it as a necessary part of the playground? Of course not; you would question why it exists and how it is the way that it is. Now, extend the ball to the size of a universe. The question still remains: *Why does the ball exist and why is it the way that it is?* Hence, the validity of questioning why the universe is the way that it is.

Furthermore, this contention is absurd because it undermines science itself. Within the scientific community is a field of study dedicated to trying to explain the existence and basic features of the universe. This field is called cosmology. This is a perfectly legitimate field of scientific enquiry, and to label the universe as a ‘brute fact’ does a disservice to an established scientific practice.

Science will eventually find an answer!

This objection argues that what has been presented in this chapter is a form of the ‘God of the gaps’ fallacy. It argues that our ignorance of scientific phenomena should not be taken as proof of God’s existence or Divine activity, because science will eventually provide an explanation. This is a misplaced objection because the argument from dependency does not aim to address a scientific question. Its concern is with metaphysics; it seeks to understand the nature and implications of dependent things. This argument can be applied to all scientific explanations and phenomena. For example, even if we were to theorise many universes as an explanation for natural phenomena, they would still be dependent. *Why?* Because the components of these explanations could be arranged in a different way and cannot be explained by virtue of their own existence, or they require something else outside of themselves to exist and have limited physical qualities. Therefore, they are dependent, and—as discussed in this chapter—you cannot explain a dependent thing with another dependent thing. If members of the scientific community claim to have found something that is independent and eternal, and in turn explained the existence of the universe, I would ask for proof. Interestingly, the minute they provide some empirical proof would be the moment they contradict themselves, because things that can be sensed have limited physical qualities, therefore qualifying as dependent.

Science cannot ever discover anything independent and eternal, not only because it would be empirical, but also because science only works on observable dependent things. Therefore, it makes no sense to say that science would discover an unscientific object! Let’s take a moment and think about what science is. Science, as a discipline, is in the business of providing answers and explanations. Only dependent things can have explanations. With this in mind, we realise the scope of science is restricted to the realm of dependent objects. Therefore, science can only provide an answer that would relate to another dependent object. It cannot address the metaphysical nature of this argument. As we have explained, you cannot explain a dependent object with another dependent object, because that dependent object would also require an explanation (and if you recall, we have already discussed that there cannot be a thing that depends on something else to exist, which in turn depends on still another thing, *ad infinitum*). Since the explanation is something that is independent and eternal, science can never enter into the discussion because it has a limited scope of empirical, dependent things.

“You’ve assumed God exists”

The argument in this chapter has not assumed God. The argument has not made up the idea of necessity in order to lead to God. Rather, the dependency of the universe and everything that we perceive has led to the idea that there must be an eternal, independent being that exists necessarily. This conclusion makes sense of the Islamic definition of God. The ideas of necessity and dependency are well known and discussed in philosophy (the use of the word dependency in this argument is usually referred to as contingency in philosophy). They are not made up concepts to try and sneak the God explanation via the backdoor.

“Doesn’t God require an explanation?”

The argument presented in this chapter has concluded that there must be an eternal, independent being that exists necessarily. This makes sense of the Islamic conception of God. A necessary being

doesn't require an explanation. Technically, such a being doesn't require an explanation that refers to something external to it (unlike dependent things). Rather, a necessary being is explained by virtue of its own existence. In other words, it was impossible for it to have not existed. Therefore, it doesn't require an explanation external to itself.

The Fallacy of Composition

The fallacy of composition is a fallacy of reasoning that mistakenly concludes that the whole must have the same properties as its individual parts.¹³ However, making such a claim is not always fallacious. It could be that some wholes contain the properties that exist within its individual parts; however it is not always the case. For example, a wall (the whole) is made of bricks (individual parts). Bricks are hard, therefore the wall is hard. This is true. Conversely, take into consideration a Persian rug. The rug (the whole) is made up of threads (individual parts); it would be false to conclude that since the individual threads are light the rug is also light.

With respect to the above, the objector may argue that it does not logically follow the universe is dependent because it is made up of dependent parts. Nevertheless this is a misplaced objection. From our experience dependent things always form dependent wholes. For example, a house is made up of dependent materials and a house is dependent. It has limited physical qualities, it could have not existed and its fundamental building blocks could have been arranged in a different way. Similarly the universe is made up of dependent things therefore it is dependent. The onus of proof is on the objector to show that dependent things do not make up dependent wholes.

Before I end this essay, I advise reading the book *Necessary Existence* by Professor Alexander R. Pruss and Professor Joshua L. Rasmussen.¹⁴ The book addresses similar and other academic objections to this argument. I also recommend reading Mohammed Hijab's book *Kalam Cosmological Arguments* for an in-depth Islamic perspective.¹⁵

Ending on a spiritual note

This understanding of God is not just an intellectual exercise; rather, it should instil a deep sense of yearning and love for God. In this chapter, we have concluded that God necessarily exists and everything can only exist because of Him. In this sense, we as human beings are not only dependent on God in the philosophical sense, but also in the normal use of the word; we couldn't be here without Him, and everything that we have is ultimately due to Him alone.

The following marvellous short story teaches us that, since we are ultimately dependent on God, and our success in this life and the hereafter lies with His boundless mercy, we should submit to God and accomplish His will:

“One day I set out to tend my fields, accompanied by my little dog, sworn enemy of the monkeys which ravaged the plantations. It was the season of great heat. My dog and I were so hot that we could scarcely breathe. I began to think that one or other of us would soon fall in a faint. Then, thank God, I saw a Tiayki tree, the branches of which presented a vault of refreshing greenery. My dog gave little cries of joy and turned towards this blessed shade.

When he had reached the shade, instead of staying where he was, he came back to me, his tongue out. Seeing how his flanks were palpitating, I realised how completely exhausted he was. I walked towards the shade. My dog was full of joy. Then, for a moment, I pretended to continue on my way. The poor beast groaned plaintively, but followed me none the less, his tail between his legs. He was obviously in despair, but determined to follow me, whatever might come of it. This fidelity moved

me profoundly. How could one fully appreciate the readiness of this animal to follow me, even to death, although he was under no constraint to do so? He is devoted to me, I said to myself, because he regards me as his master and so risks his life simply to stay beside me. ‘Oh my Lord,’ I cried, ‘Heal my troubled soul! Make my fidelity like that of this being whom I call, contemptuously, a dog. Give me, as You have given to him, the strength to master my life so that I may accomplish Your will and follow—without asking, Where am I going?—the path upon which You guide me! I am not the creator of this dog, yet he follows me in docility, at the cost of a thousand sufferings. It is You, Lord, who has gifted him with this virtue. Give, O Lord, to all who ask it of You—as I do—the virtue of Love and the courage of Charity!’ Then I retraced my steps and took refuge in the shade. Full of joy, my little companion lay down facing me so that his eyes were turned to mine, as though he wished to speak seriously to me.”¹⁶

References

- ¹ Many concepts of the argument presented in this chapter have been adapted from and inspired by the Islamic scholarly tradition and contemporary Christian philosophical work.
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- ² For an in-depth discussion on necessity please see Pruss, R. and Rasmussen, J. L. (2018). *Necessary Existence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 11-32.
- ³ This section is inspired by and adapted from Craig, W. L. (2011). *Contingency Argument for God – Part 4– William Lane Craig*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lb275fbEpic> [Accessed 20th October 2019].
- ⁴ Analogy adapted from Wainwright, W. J. (1988). *Philosophy of Religion*. 2nd Edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.
- ⁵ The Qur’an, Chapter 3, Verse 97.
- ⁶ The Qur’an, Chapter 35, Verse 15.
- ⁷ Ibn Kathir, I. (1999). *Tafsir al-Qur’an al-‘Adheem*. Edited by Saami As-Salaama. 2nd Edition. Riyadh: Dar Tayiba. Vol 6, p. 541.
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- ⁹ Al-Ghazali, A. (1964). *Fada’ih al-Batiniyya*. Edited by Abdurahman Badawi. Kuwait: Muasassa Dar al-Kutub al-Thiqafa, p. 82.
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- ¹¹ Godwin, S. J. (no date). *Transcript of the Russell/Copleston radio debate*. Available at: http://www.scandalon.co.uk/philosophy/cosmological_radio.htm [Accessed 4th October 2016].
- ¹² Adapted from Craig, W. L. (2011). *Contingency Argument for God – Part 2 – William Lane*

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¹³ Parts of the answer to this objection has been adapted from and inspired by Rasmussen, J. (2017). *8 best objections to the “contingency” argument (episode 10 of 20)*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asCqyTCaoNM>. [Accessed 20th October 2019].

¹⁴ Pruss, R. and Rasmussen, J. L. (2018). *Necessary Existence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁵ Hijab, M. (2019). *Kalam Cosmological Arguments*. Independently Published.

¹⁶ Eaton, G. (2001). *Remembering God: Reflections on Islam*. Lahore: Suhail Academy, pp. 18-19.

Prophetic Mercy and Empathy as a Social Outlook

The essay explains the concepts of mercy and empathy mean as exemplified by the actions and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

We often make an assumption that the average man might be naturally confrontational or hostile to Islam and Muslims. We all, of course, process media information in different ways; there are those who might be more susceptible to stereotyping than others depending on their background information, demographics and genuine concerns. When the prisoner Thumāma ibn Uthāl (God be pleased with him) decided to accept Islam, he said to Prophet Muhammad ﷺ that there was nothing he despised more than “your land, but now your land has become the most beloved of lands to me”.¹ This means that his *othering* of Islam and Muslims affected not only his perception of the Prophet ﷺ, but also of the land associated with the Prophet ﷺ. The Prophet’s ﷺ blessed face, his religion and city were all a point of concern for Thumāma, but Prophet Muhammad’s ﷺ transformative character and forbearance opened a new space of understanding for the prisoner. Though he initially assumed that the Prophet ﷺ could in fact have him killed, he also knew that his release from captivity was a possibility.

In our engagement with others, we should remember that we as humans are mostly comforted by similar things — displays of kindness and mercy. God describes Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as an embodiment of merciful character: “And We have not sent you (O Muḥammad) except as a mercy to the worlds.”² Mercy, compassion and empathy are interlinked features of the best of what all people seek. We prefer mercy over harshness, forbearance over rage, kindness over cruelty. The Prophet ﷺ instructed that kindness be applied in every situation, once teaching his wife ‘Ā’isha (may God be pleased with her): “Kindness is not found in something except that it makes it beautiful, and it is not removed from something except that it makes it tarnished.” God describes Himself with the most beautiful names of *Al-Raḥmān*, *Al-Raḥīm*; the Merciful, Gracious, Bestower of Mercy. God commands mercy in every situation and will deal with us in relation to our dealings with others. The Prophet ﷺ explained,

“The merciful will be shown mercy by the Most Merciful. Be merciful to those on the earth and the One in the heavens will have mercy upon you.”³

Ibn al-Qayyim explained the Prophet’s ﷺ words:

“And God (exalted is He) is merciful, and He loves the merciful ones, and He veils the sins of people and He loves those who veil the sins of others ”Whoever pardons others, God will pardon him; whoever forgives others, God will forgive him; whoever excuses others, God will excuse him; whoever shows excellence unto others, God will deal excellently towards him. As you do so shall be done unto you, so be how you choose for indeed God will be unto you as you are unto His servants.”⁴

In order for the truth of empathic concern to be realised and to offset tendencies of othering and dehumanisation, it is a holistic appreciation of mercy that needs to be realised. In everything around us, among humans and animals there is a part of that mercy which God bestowed upon creation. This is something the Muslim must never lose sight of. All people, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, have something of mercy – of kindness, compassion, empathy, love, and so our approaches, interactions and communication must be inspired by the same spirit of mercy. The Prophet ﷺ instructed us to have a general mercy for all, to look upon creation with an eye of compassion:

“‘You will never have faith until you love each other. Shall I tell you what will make you love each other?’ They said, ‘Of course, O Messenger of God.’ The Prophet said: ‘Spread peace between yourselves. By the one in whose hand is my soul, you will not enter Paradise until you are merciful.’

They said, ‘O Messenger of God, all of us are merciful.’ The Prophet said: ‘Actually, it is not mercy between yourselves, but rather it is mercy in general, it is mercy in general.’”⁵

Defining Empathy and a Prophetic Empathy

“Empathy is the capacity to share the happiness or sadness, the emotions and feelings of another person. This ability leads to understanding, to compassion and to a wide range of other connections between people. There are two ways that we are able to experience empathy: one, because we have been in the situation that the other person has. We know from personal experience how it feels, and the other is because we can imagine how they feel. Our ability to imagine may come from a similar experience of our own, from a story of a friend or family member who has had that experience or from the observations of what happens to a stranger. And although empathy can be a way of sharing someone else’s joy or happiness, the empathy that connects difficulties is the one that’s most likely to move us to action. Understanding the troubles of others can bring a focused response, a focused kind of help by trying to right a wrong, by trying to fix a problem, or simply by sharing an understanding. These actions can be as simple as a smile or as complex as an international relief effort in Haiti.”⁶

What Dr. Lisa Rossbacher touches upon is the idea that human codes of behaviour exist in a universal sense, between all humans, and therefore feeling for others is reflective in both a physical and figurative way. It invokes feelings of one’s own vulnerability and with a recognising that the dominant emotions prevalent in war – fear – is universal to all humans including enemy populations. It is “in the acknowledgement of one’s own vulnerability lies the beginning of empathy.”⁷ This ‘overlapping’ of one’s self onto another’s experience stems from the relationship between feelings of trust or empathy and morality. One can imagine the pain or pleasure or future bearing of a person’s life through a consideration of one’s own pain and pleasure, and thus prevents us from acting solely on self-interest to provide an incentive to perceive one’s self from the vantage point of others.⁸ Naomi Head notes that despite the philosophical richness of empathy in the discourses of Western thinkers such as Adam Smith, Rousseau, Hannah Arendt and Martha Nussbaum, focus on empathy in International Relations theories have not received much attention.⁹

It is in the imagining of the unknown who dwell in unknown spaces that makes the action of empathy a challenging, yet necessary prospect. How might we transport ourselves, our experiences, feelings and thoughts into a life and landscape of the unknown, too bare and bleak to be understood? What names might we assign the nameless, what voice unto the voiceless and what life might we render unto the buried? It is in trying to imagine, sometimes the unimaginable, that empathy begins to figure. This can be seen here in an account of Viktor Frankl in which he juxtaposes the deeply melancholic and fear-evoking with the intensity of relief expressed through the joy of prisoners on a journey from Auschwitz to Dachau, Viktor Frankl is unequivocal in emphasising the remarkably unique nature of his experience:

“Take as an example something that happened on our journey from Auschwitz to the camp affiliated with Dachau. We had all been afraid that our transport was heading for the Mauthausen camp. We became more and more tense as we approached a certain bridge over the Danube which the train would have to cross to reach Mauthausen, according to the statement of experienced traveling companions. Those who have never seen anything similar cannot possibly imagine the dance of joy

performed in the carriage by the prisoners when they saw that our transport was not crossing the bridge and was instead heading “only” for Dachau.”¹⁰

Christina Twomey’s analysis of a series of photographs documenting the Congo atrocity from 1904-13 are very insightful in the context of this study. A series of photographs were taken in 1904 by Christian missionaries working in Belgian King Leopold’s Congo Free State. The photographs depict the brutal abuse meted out against the Congolese people, showing mutilation, flogging and chaining. During this time in Congo, villages were required to harvest a specific quantity of rubber for Belgian franchises. Failure to meet the targets could result in torture and even a massacre of the village’s inhabitants. A campaign to end the brutality was organised by the British-based Congo Reform Association (1904-13) who utilised photographs as evidence of abuse collected in books written by sympathisers.

One of the photographs that would become instrumental to the aims of the Association’s campaign was taken by the missionary Mrs. Alice Seeley Harris whilst working for the Congo Balolo Mission. The context of the photograph concerns a man, Nsala, who approached Mrs. Harris’s missionary station carrying the hand and foot of his daughter wrapped in a parcel of leaves. The hand and foot were all that remained after sentries had eaten the girl as a punishment upon her village for failing to reach their rubber targets. The pictures were important in authenticating the experiences of victims.

In this picture, together with the image of a severed hand and foot, it is the father’s grief as he stares at the remains of his daughter that is evocatively unsettling. Nsala had brought the remains of his daughter to Alice and her colleague Edgar Stannard to validate the brutality. Stannard’s response is one that speaks precisely of the imagined storying and the crucial role of empathy in actively pursuing change to a circumstance: “We were sickened as we looked, and thought of the innocent little child, and pictured her running about but a short time before. We tried to enter a little into the feelings of the unhappy father.”

Twomey considers the way Alice’s own personal loss may have provided a stimulus for a heightened empathic outlook. She may have been reliving her own loss, as whilst in England in 1901 she had given birth to a daughter, Margaret. When she returned to Africa in 1902 she left her eight-month-old daughter behind.¹¹ Could this temporary separation with her own children act as a stimulus to her empathy? It is hard to tell, but one can surmise that the feelings of guilt for the father and gratitude for her own children are likely emotions in such a setting. That is, one can associate someone’s loss with one’s own personal tragedy or life experience. The latter lies at the heart of empathetic discourse.

Empathy as Perspective Taking

Though there can never be a full understanding of the context and factors that make up another person’s life circumstances or what a person must have ‘felt’ in that circumstance, there is nonetheless a realisation, through critical self-reflection of one’s own vulnerability, what one had felt (mediated by the gradients of memory) at a similar moment. It need not mimic the circumstance, setting, value of gender or time in history, but is existential in as much as ‘feeling for’ contributes to our very own make up of ‘self’. When the Muslim speaks with others, he or she should be able to insert their own empathetic considerations onto the addressee. Mothers are able to ‘feel’ out of their own maternal considerations, fathers too can appreciate the challenges and joys of fatherhood. People in a society can relate to the same kinds of social concerns like street crime, rise in housing costs, university tuition fees, retirement and loneliness.

Empathy is the ability to share in the emotions of another person, in his or her happiness or sadness.

This can be done through perspective taking, recalling a time wherein we had been in the same or similar situation. We knew how such an experience felt and can appreciate how that other person is feeling. Such cognitive processing can produce strong emotions of compassion, of sympathy and so many other connections between people. We might even associate with another's feelings due to what we know of them and due to the degree of closeness to them. This is shown beautifully in the following narration:

“The Prophet ﷺ said, ‘A man felt very thirsty while he was on the way, there he came across a well. He went down the well, quenched his thirst and came out. Meanwhile he saw a dog panting and licking mud because of excessive thirst. He said to himself, ‘This dog is suffering from thirst as I did.’ So, he went down the well again and filled his shoe with water and watered it. God thanked him for that deed and forgave him. The people said, ‘O God’s Messenger! Is there a reward for us in serving the animals?’ He replied: ‘Yes, there is a reward for serving any living being.’”¹²

The Prophet ﷺ was concerned about people learning to have empathy for others. That is, we are able to perspective-take, to note how others feel in different situations. The tradition is edifying in so many ways. It teaches us to consider human emotions, sensitivities and boundaries in our relationship with others. It reminds us that in our human instincts and tendencies, we are similar at many levels and in particular with respect to feelings for ‘our’ selves. Absolute binaries of self and otherness are challenged in this tradition in that it places the self and others, ‘people’, and ‘their mothers/daughters/sisters...’ in a frame of togetherness. The frame of togetherness and the perspective-taking is illustrative in the following narration:

“A young man came to the Prophet ﷺ, peace and blessings be upon him, and he said, “O Messenger of God, give me permission to commit adultery.” The people turned to rebuke him, saying, “Quiet! Quiet!” The Prophet said, “Come here.” The young man came close and he told him to sit down. The Prophet said, “Would you like that for your mother?” The man said, “No, by God, may I be sacrificed for you.” The Prophet said, “Neither would people like it for their mothers. Would you like that for your daughter?” The man said, “No, by God, may I be sacrificed for you.” The Prophet said, “Neither would people like it for their daughters. Would you like that for your sister?” The man said, “No, by God, may I be sacrificed for you.” The Prophet said, “Neither would people like it for their sisters. Would you like that for your aunts?” The man said, “No, by God, may I be sacrificed for you.” The Prophet said, “Neither would people like it for their aunts.” Then, the Prophet placed his hand on him and he said, “O God, forgive his sins, purify his heart, and guard his chastity.” After that, the young man never again inclined to anything sinful.”

In another narration, the Prophet ﷺ said to him, “Then hate what God has hated, and love for your brother what you love for yourself.”¹³

When we refuse the points of connectedness among us, we are in the process of denying our own humanity and the humanity of others. Arriving at such a place makes any violation against another all the more possible.

There are other narrations that espouse the same message, communicating the importance and of the empathic practice. The Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said,

“None of you has faith until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.”¹⁴

And, “The servant does not attain the reality of faith until he loves for people what he loves for himself of goodness.”¹⁵

In the aforementioned narration, the Prophet ﷺ mentioned ‘people’ in place of ‘brother’ and there are other narrations that also read like this. Many scholars in fact interpreted “brother” in such traditions to indicate a universal type of brotherhood, including all of humanity. Imam al-Nawawī for example comments on this tradition, highlighting the greater religious love a Muslim would have to share Islam with everyone in the human brotherhood – both Muslims and non-Muslims:

“This is interpreted as brotherhood in general, such that it includes the disbeliever and the Muslim. So he should love for his brother, the disbeliever, what he loves for himself which is his entering Islam, just as he should love for his brother Muslim that he remains in Islam. For this reason, it is recommended to supplicate for the disbeliever to be guided. The meaning of love here is an intention for good and benefit, and this meaning is religious love, not human love.”¹⁶

Imbuing the sentiments of affinity and fellow-feeling find an important place in the Islamic tradition, which are intrinsically linked to adopting a comprehensive empathy for others. Empathy is a very important Islamic attribute. Understanding the life experiences and thus motivations of another can provide us with much clarity about another’s way of thinking, insecurities, fears and joys. Our empathising with another can take different strands. Sometimes due to our own fears, prejudices and apprehensions of another, we are unable to show real empathy. Other times we show ‘witness empathy’, an empathy wherein we are cognisant of our own vulnerability and seek to alleviate the harm and suffering of another.

“By the Morning Brightness”

This is shown beautifully in Sūrah al-Ḍuḥā in which the Prophet ﷺ, having undergone unease at the six-month delay in revelation was met with the revelation of this new hope-inspiring chapter. The chapter is consoling the Prophet ﷺ, a reminder of God’s favours upon him and a promise of a better future. Before we continue our discussion of this Sūrah, let us remember the great relevance of this Sūrah for a people, including ourselves, so often beset with anxieties, uncertainties and depression. Our vision as Muslims is to show the profound relevance of the Qur’ānic message with whom we engage. The Qur’ān is relevant at an intrinsically human level and speaks to us and also speaks to our addressees before we speak among ourselves.

“By the morning brightness

and by the night when it grows still,

your Lord has not forsaken you [Prophet], nor does He hate you.”¹⁷

Upon reminding the Prophet ﷺ that God had indeed provided him succour, shelter and provision, the verses follow on to instructions about how others should be treated:

“Did He not find you an orphan and shelter you?

Did He not find you lost and guide you?

Did He not find you in need and make you self-sufficient?

So do not be harsh with the orphan

and do not chide the one who asks for help;

talk about the blessings of your Lord.”¹⁸

The empathy bearing in the aforementioned verses is in relation to what the Prophet ﷺ experienced as a young man. That personal circumstances of poverty and/or loneliness can be understood in relation to how others are to be perceived and treated teaches us the importance of having a field of affective and cognitive insight in our relation with others.

Ibn Kathīr explains the injunctions to the Prophet ﷺ as an instruction to treat others in relation to a recalling of the Prophet’s ﷺ own life experiences as a young man. He explains:

“So do not be harsh with the orphan” by commenting “remember when you were an orphan.”

“And do not chide the one who asks for help” by commenting “remember when you were poor” and “to be unto the orphan like a merciful father.” Qatada said that it means “to treat the poor with mercy and softness.”¹⁹

There are many things we can do to foster communication based on paradigms of empathy. The task

is to try and see the world from another's point of view. The Prophet ﷺ once said that when he leads the prayer, he intends to pray a lengthy prayer, "and then I hear a child crying so I shorten my prayer as I know his crying will distress his mother."²⁰ The Prophet ﷺ was cognisant of the needs of others and could understand the world of mother and child in relation to what could distress them at that point. The audible distress of another person actualised a kind of witness empathy in the Prophet ﷺ seeking to alleviate both the mother and child's distress. The latter is similar to when someone has offered to buy you a hot drink on a cold day, or buy you food when you had been hungry, or someone embraced you on a day when you had been feeling down. As recipients of another's kindness, we are not always alert to the motivations and intentions behind another person's goodness, but we do feel a sense of his action corroborating with something we had been feeling at that precise moment. What another person sees of us is not always known to us, but the interchange of unspoken emotions at that point can be transformative. Empathy is to see another.

To be empathic, one is required to be non-judgemental and look at the 'human being before him or her. Remember that each person is valuable in their own right and to afford people this recognition is crucial. Sometimes, based on a person's life experience they might have been victims of discrimination whereby their humanness was questioned or denied. If a person is judgemental and considers the other as a stereotyped 'Other', it is unlikely he or she will be able to feel for that person and try and understand things from that person's point of view or life experience. The Prophet ﷺ gave to each person an individual consideration, to such an extent that his companions would say that they felt the most important in the Prophet's ﷺ company. Even though the Prophet ﷺ may be around others, he made the one he communicated with feel as though he was acknowledged the most. A beautiful example of the way the Prophet ﷺ immediately responded empathically upon seeing a group of barefoot and destitute people entering into Madina is shown in this narration:

"Mundhir ibn Jarīr reported on the authority of his father: While we were in the company of the Messenger of God ﷺ in the early hours of the morning, some people came there (who) were barefooted, naked, wearing striped woollen clothes, or cloaks, with their swords hung (around their necks). Most of them, nay, all of them, belonged to the tribe of Mudar. The colour of the face of the Messenger of God ﷺ underwent a change when he saw them in poverty. He then entered (his house) and came out and commanded Bilal (to pronounce Adhān). He pronounced Adhān and Iqāma, and he observed prayer (along with his Companion) and then addressed (them reciting verses of the Holy Qur'ān): "O people, fear your Lord, Who created you from a single being" to the end of the verse," God is ever a Watcher over you" (4:1). (He then recited) a verse of Sūrah al-Ḥashr: "Fear God. and let every soul consider that which it sends forth for the morrow and fear God" (59:18). (Then the audience began to vie with one another in giving charity.) Some donated a dinar, others a dirham, still others clothes, some donated a sa' of wheat, some a sa' of dates; till he said: (Bring) even if it is half a date. Then a person from among the Anṣār came there with a money bag which his hands could scarcely lift; in fact, they could not (lift). Then the people followed continuously, till I saw two heaps of eatables and clothes, and I saw the face of the Messenger glistening, like gold (on account of joy). The Messenger of God ﷺ said: He who sets a good precedent in Islam, there is a reward for him for this (act of goodness) and reward of that also who acted according to it subsequently, without any deduction from their rewards; and he who sets in Islam an evil precedent, there is upon him the burden of that, and the burden of him also who acted upon it subsequently, without any deduction from their burden."²¹

The men, certainly 'Othered' by different standards and in different settings, were brought into the conversation by the Prophet ﷺ and sheltered by his care. Troubled by what he saw, the Prophet's ﷺ face changed, meaning his displeasure and sympathy were visible on his blessed countenance. Not only was the Prophet ﷺ moved by what he saw, he called the Muslims together to remind them of the witness empathy they were required to exhibit. The Qur'ānic verse he chose to recite is further revealing – a reminder that God created us from a single soul. All of us are the same in that our origin is one. On the plain of Arafat, the Prophet ﷺ explained: "All of you are from Ādam and

Ādam was from dust.”²² The charitable response of the companions was reassuring and in witnessing the scene the Prophet’s ﷺ face “became glistening like gold” in approval.

Feeling for the other

Empathy is also about communicating your understanding of another person’s feelings. It provides great relief when someone else identifies with your feelings and you know that your distress or concern is worthy enough to be listened to. It goes a very long way, when speaking with someone who is recounting a personal story, tragedy, or sharing good news, to reassure them, or to acknowledge their difficulties or happiness. In such circumstances, you may express their importance by simply uttering “It sounds like you had a really difficult time. Tell me more about it/how did you cope?” The simple saying of “tell me more...” about a happy or a sad description puts the person in a place of importance. It then makes your words, guidance and instruction better received and appreciated.

Some of the most evocative accounts of empathy emerge in the most precarious situations. With realisation of a sense of finality or in the context of an act of defiance, humans can be propelled into enacting behaviours that are not typical even in the said circumstances. These might be viewed as indeed atypical in so much as the contexts to which they belong and the sense of self-sacrifice found in them. The ‘sharing’ in another’s pain, the ‘imagining’ of that pain is, as Rossbacher defined, the foundation of empathy.

Tzvetan Todorov draws upon several examples of Holocaust victims who, faced with death, chose to pre-empt their own ‘subsequent’ deaths by dying alongside others. Todorov describes the case of J. Kosciuszkowa who describes a mother who gave birth in Auschwitz. Though she had hidden the baby for five months, when he was found and taken from her, she chose to go with him, “clutching her son to her breast, she carried him into the gas chambers.”²³

Another case Todorov mentions is that of a Dutch woman who, when her husband was selected for the gas chambers, chose to go with him.²⁴ The way that we interpret empathy, its actualisation, significance and effect will vary depending on different situations. David Guez, a Jewish individual forced into hiding during Nazi rule of North Africa commented on the brave role played by Arab Muslims during the Holocaust. He describes an Arab gentleman who would afford him an extra loaf of bread: “sometimes it was simply an extra loaf of bread that made the greatest difference to us.”²⁵

Empathy, as Rossbacher commented can be as simple as a smile – though a smile in a precarious moment in which there is an absence of all that would socially abjure the symbol of a smile is a profound empathising. An illustration of the significance of something as simple a smile in the context of alienation and Othering, of even mass suffering and genocide of *Others* is seen in a remarkable rescuing initiative of Pastor Andre Trocme. In 1942 when deportation of Jews began in France, in the village of Le Chambon, France, Pastor Andre Trocme and his wife Magda became increasingly concerned to help in the effort to rescue Jews fleeing deportation to concentration camps. With other parishes, the Trocme’s encouraged their congregations to shelter Jews and for their cities to become cities of refuge. They set up a number of “safe houses” where Jews could hide, and Jewish children under false identities were enlisted in the cities’ schools. Many refugees were thereafter helped to escape to Switzerland following an underground-railroad network. The example that follows below of a refugee describing Andre Trocme helps us to identify empathy seeking in human encounters. The effect can be lasting and transformative.

“Another refugee replied, when I asked her what kind of man he was: “That smile...that smile...the smile of that man, that smile...He did not have to say anything, just ‘Ça va?’ and that was enough.”

Still another said that upon arriving at the presbytery she was greeted with immense warmth, as if he would fold her in his arms and protect her lovingly against any harm. A few minutes after she met him, he offered to lend her money, which she did not need. A little later, she found out that he had almost no money himself.”²⁶

The refugee comes to imagine a consequence of compassionate display and in the description, the attachment between the pair is not a product of a complex relationship but one described through gestures and symbols. For the refugee, Trocme becomes iconic, saviour-like and embodying. It is in a smile, a statement and an imagined touch that the Other can transpose Trocme’s empathy within herself. Todorov explains that ‘sometimes a look sufficed’.

David Rodman recalls that as a convoy of prisoners were marched to a forced-labour camp in Poland, a young man came out to see them and looked at the prisoners with a “noble face [that] expressed deep sorrow and compassion...I know exactly next to which he stood. I still can see the look of suffering on the young man’s face, the exact color of his shirt...It impressed me that someone felt for me and cared because I suffered.”²⁷ These examples stem from an imagining of how another person feels and one cannot fully understand the complexities of each human encounter, especially in such precarious moments. No human encounter is simple and “no quantity of meaning, no matter how sincerely ascribed, can void the subjective quality of each meeting.”²⁸

Timothy Snyder in his chapter entitled ‘The Righteous Few’ considers the rescuing of Jews during the Holocaust as a social and emotional transition, describing the initial uncertainty and alienation to “encounters in grey”, and the simple meeting with others as “encounters in black”. This willingness to self-sacrifice, he maintains, is due to an imagined mental storying about what their own lives might have been like if they were in such precarious situations and further, how the victims’ lives might be different if their situations were to change. This is empathy. Not simply the feeling what it means to be another, but also the feeling of one’s own incompleteness, a realisation of one’s own vulnerability in light of another, which Snyder makes reference to when describing: “The risk to self was compensated by a vision of love, of marriage, of children, of enduring the war into peace and into some more tranquil future.”²⁹

Snyder further cites an example of an elderly Ukrainian couple, Marko and Oksana Verbievka who came upon a Jewish girl from Nowograd-Wolyńsk in Volhynia. She had previously survived a shooting in which her parents were murdered and thereafter sought refuge with a woman who subsequently took to abusing her. Finally, the older couple took her in and upon listening to her ordeals they cried in sympathy. Oksana reassured her, “Be at peace, little child, forget all this; you will be a daughter to us, we have no children, everything will be yours.” After a moment Oksana remarked “But you won’t abandon us later, will you?”³⁰ This encounter coalesces a sense of grieving in both parties, the girl and the couple. Acting to secure safety for herself in the present, the couple’s empathy emanates from the memories of a childless past and also perhaps through the juxtaposing of the girl’s youthfulness with their own aging. That “you will be a daughter to us” reflects an incentive for the couple’s empathising; the girl could be used for help on the couple’s farm. The encounter speaks very much of the couple’s imagined storying of their own vulnerability without the young girl in a sense of the present and their imagined past. They empathise with the girl when equating her with a child they never had, and thus the girl’s suffering might be akin to an imagining of their ‘own child’s’ ‘suffering. One need not speak of an unspoken empathy since empathy, unlike visual codes, which might deliberate on sympathetic tendencies, are not required.

Empathy as Imagined Storying

Empathy is an imagined storying and the actors can be very much one’s own. The storying is told

on one's own canvas. If re-humanising requires the ability to empathise then the fine points we recognise in our own physical and emotional being need to be considered in other people.

The best example of the way simple gestures can have a transformative effect on the lives of others, and draw people closer to God comes from the Prophet ﷺ. He taught that da'wa is the entirety of you. Words well-spoken can have a lasting impact. It is often the 'how' of what is said that transcends the 'what' of whatever was said.

After the conquest of Makkah, one of the Makkans, Fuḍāla ibn Umayr, though having nominally accepted Islam, was keen on revenge, and had vowed to assassinate the Prophet ﷺ. As the Prophet ﷺ was performing ṭawāf (circumambulation of the Ka'ba), Fuḍāla had hidden his sword under his clothing and was preparing himself for the dastardly deed he was about to commit. Instantly, he found himself within reach of the Prophet ﷺ. The Prophet looked up at Fuḍāla and asked, "What is it that you were saying to yourself?" Fuḍāla brushed off the question by saying he was simply praising God. The Prophet ﷺ smiled at Fuḍāla and said, "Ask God to forgive you," placing his hand on Fuḍāla's chest. Fuḍāla would later say, "By God, from the moment he lifted his hand from my chest, there remained nothing of God's creation except that he was more beloved to me than it."³¹

To further emphasise the great importance of leaving an impression and displaying integrity of character on others, the Prophet ﷺ smiled and displayed patient forbearance when Abu Bakr (God pleased with him) abstained from responding to an individual who was insulting him. When, however, Abu Bakr resorted to meeting the man's words with similar retorts, the Prophet ﷺ became angry and left. He ﷺ later explained, "An angel was with you, responding on your behalf. But when you said back to him some of what he said, a devil arrived, and it is not for me to sit with devils."³²

There is here a great learning for the Muslims. Sometimes people react to Muslims the way media has prepared them to react – with fear and ignorance. Images of women in burqa, sensationalist headlines, stories of immigration, war, conflict, as well as, isolated stories of misconduct, are amplified in the media and have a strong bearing on people's perceptions of others. So too were the Makkans of Quraysh interested in exhilarating a campaign of slander against the Prophet ﷺ and his companions, but the Prophet ﷺ was keen to show and teach that the believers should not lose sight of their focus in conveying the call to Islam in such hostile environments.

There is a point about survival or even saving face in such environments, and another about leaving a beautiful message about Islam, through words or character. In the example of Abu Bakr, we are reminded that shayṭān is ever keen that any goodness we might have set out to achieve is derailed when a person stoops to the level of those who he is insulted by. Our actions and behaviour ought to be driven by Islamic principles of beautiful conduct.

Fitting with the way God described the Prophet ﷺ, "you are but a mercy to the worlds"³³, and "upon an exalted [standard] of character"³⁴. It was the standard of the Prophet ﷺ to show forbearance and nobility when insulted and attacked. It was those key verses in Sūrah al-Fuṣṣilat that marked the transformation in a people who had not previously encountered a holistic message centred on belief in One God, living a life aware of a Day of divine accountability and with a strong emphasis on displaying a great standard of character towards others:

"Good and evil cannot be equal. [Prophet], repel evil with what is better and your enemy will become as close as an old and valued friend."³⁵

The Prophet ﷺ was rigorous with his companions to ensure that they do not overburden others even in leading people in lengthy prayers and in not overloading and causing distress to their animals. He wept upon seeing a camel that was heavily weakened, he put his hand on its head and comforted it and then told his companion: "Do you not fear God about this beast that God has given in your possession? It has complained to me that you keep it hungry and load it heavily which fatigues it."³⁶. It would aggrieve him that people were stricken by poverty, lacked basic essentials and were

struggling through life. God describes him in the Qur’ān:

“A Messenger has come to you from among yourselves. Your suffering distresses him: he is deeply concerned for you and full of kindness and mercy towards the believers.”³⁷

When the Prophet ﷺ embarked towards Tā’if in the hope that its people would perhaps be receptive to the Islamic message, the process of othering in Makkah through the labeling of the Prophet ﷺ a ‘mad man’, a ‘sorcerer’, ‘bewitched’, influenced the attitude of the people of Tā’if. They resorted to pelting him with stones, to ridicule and cursing him. At this junction in the Prophetic mission, we reflect on the way he exhibited a remarkable forbearance and patience. ‘Ā’isha (may God be pleased with her) reported that she once asked the Prophet ﷺ, “Have you encountered a day harder than the Day of Uḥud?” To which the Prophet ﷺ said the hardest day was the day he went to Tā’if. He related the happening:

“Your tribe has abused me much, and the worst was the day of ‘Aqaba when I presented myself to ‘Abd Yalayl b. ‘Abd Kulāl, and he did not respond to what I sought. I departed, overwhelmed with grief, and I could not relax until I found myself at a tree where I lifted my head towards the sky to see a cloud shading me. I looked up and saw Gabriel in it. He called out to me, saying, ‘God has heard your people’s saying to you and how they have replied, and God has sent the Angel of the Mountains to you that you may order him to do whatever you wish to these people.’ The Angel of the Mountains greeted me and said, ‘O Muḥammad, order what you wish, and if you like, I will let the two mountains fall upon them.’ I said, ‘No; rather, I hope that God will bring from their descendants people who will worship God alone without associating partners with Him.’”³⁸

A most beautiful example of the way the Prophet ﷺ reacted to those intent on othering him through a caricaturing of his name is shown here:

“Arwā b. Ḥarb (also known as Um Jamīl, the wife of Abu Lahab) would follow the Prophet ﷺ around to hurt and humiliate him and used to taunt him, ‘Mudhammam (the dispraised) we have denied, and his religion we have loathed, and his command we have defied!’ Instead of responding to her, he would simply find solace in saying to his Companions, ‘Don’t you see how God diverts from me the curses and insults of Quraysh? They insult Mudhammam, and they curse Mudhammam, while I am Muḥammad (the Praised One)!’”³⁹

The Prophet’s ﷺ name was of course ‘Muḥammad’ (the praised one) and the wife of Abu Lahab hoped that by inverting his name to ‘Mudhammam’ (the dispraised one), the Prophet ﷺ would fall into disrepute among the townsfolk. Yet the Prophet ﷺ showed magnanimity in his ignoring the woman’s words, knowing that his words and character would far deeper penetrate the fabric of his society and our global world, as well as knowing that the name ‘Muḥammad’ would forever invite praise and salutations.

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“I Can’t Breathe”

This article addresses the killing of George Floyd that occurred on May 25th 2020 and explains the concept of othering, how it dehumanises its victim and what is the solution to racism.

The killing of George Floyd on May 25th 2020 tugged at our collective conscience. With every waning breath and dying plea ‘I can’t breathe’ screamed in its silence and we gasped together. The coalescing of brutal indifference of state power with a forlorn plea for mercy, for understanding, for pity, for empathy, placed us all in an unavoidable frame of witnessing. History was on repeat. On July 17th 2014, 43-year-old Eric Garner was killed in a chokehold by a New York City Police Department officer, whilst repeating “I can’t breathe” at least eleven times. Unlike Floyd, Garner was not physically still when he held up his hands, protesting his innocence to the NY police officers who encountered him. His positioning was one of trying to create space between him and the officers. He was threatened within his space and violated.

The three words spoken by Garner and later by Floyd, “I can’t breathe” topped the list of the most notable quotations of 2014 according to the Yale Book of Quotations. But it is the first of his words, it is the simple but highly evocative pronoun “I” which draws us, through a consideration of a range of imagined tones to a perspective-taking with George Floyd and Eric Garner. As Ben Zimmer describes, “To intone the words “I can’t breathe,” surrounded by thousands of others doing the same, is an act of intense empathy and solidarity. The empathy comes from momentarily stepping into the persona of Eric Garner at that instant the life was being choked out of him. It is a kind of rhetorical tribute to inhabit his subject position, taking on the pronoun “I” and repeating the words he helplessly repeated eleven times.”¹ Words reminisced, like the singing of popular songs of deceased artists or the chanting of words during pilgrimage rituals, or during memorials, all contain a sense of empathic solidarity through mimicry.

One way in which the body becomes the main medium that facilitates empathy for another as it symbolically did in the kneeling protests is found in the figurative expression of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem ‘The Haunted Oak’. In this, the bodies of lynch victims and the tree share a vulnerability through the apprehending of a shared pain. Dunbar’s poem, written and published in 1900, could have been based on one of the dozens of lynchings that occurred that year. However, it was more closely inspired by a story that Dunbar heard through an elderly black man concerning his nephew in Alabama who had been lynched on an oak tree by a gang of whites.

According to the story, the leaves on the tree used for the lynching began to wither, yellowed and fell off, and the bough shrivelled and died. The tree emerges in Dunbar’s poem as a participant, a witness. The personified tree – an active, intimate spectator – is unable to withstand the memory of the horrors it witnessed and writhes in pain:

I feel the rope against my bark And the weight of him in my grain I feel in the throe of his final woe
The touch of my own last pain.²

We, like the Oak tree, feel the merging of self and other identities through modes of empathy and critical self-reflection, examined through tragedy. The ‘weight’, ‘feel’ and ‘touch’ the Oak tree experiences symbolise the burdens we confront from the Othered victims of our world. The self-imagining and identifying with the other is akin to Anna Letitia Barbauld’s poem on pregnancy, ‘To a Little Invisible Being Who is Expected Soon to Become Visible’:

“She longs to fold to her maternal breast
Part of herself, yet to herself unknown;
To see and salute the stranger guest.”³

Both poets speak from an insider's perspective – the baby is part of the mother and so too is the lynched victim part of the tree. Both mother and tree have an empathic identification with their 'others' and their emotional states become identical for that moment. The idea is provocative in its challenging us to imagine what is 'unimagined' in public consciousness, to construct an imagined scene of death, destruction, fear and outrage. Where there is an imagined 'here' and there', there needs to be an imagined place-making and storying. What we do not see is what we must 'see'.

No human being is seen to be part of an entirely homogenous entity. The Qur'ān makes clear that human beings ascribe to different nations and tribes and have differing behaviours. The Prophet (peace be upon him), in his interactions and dealings underwent a range of experiences with those who had not initially embraced Islam. Many of them were not hostile to him and his companions and he reciprocated with an exemplary compassion and empathy. He saw in each a potential for the acceptance of Islam – a potential for change.

One of the most infamous cases in America of racist brutality was found in the killing of Emmett Till, a young African American boy on holiday from Chicago to Mississippi, came to change the scope and outlook of the Civil Rights Movement. Though countless blacks had been killed in the early decades of the twentieth century, lynched or beaten to death, the killing of Emmett became an icon of white racism and brutality, galvanising the support of both blacks and whites. When his mutilated body was discovered in the Tallahatchie River, the police were eager that it remained sealed. Such a prospect was quickly rejected by his mother Maya Till who wanted to 'see' her son. Further, against police and state advice, she chose to have his funeral service in an open casket so others could also 'see' and bear witness to the racism that had killed her son. 'This is what you did to my son. I want the world to see what you did', she said. It was the sight of the disfigured Emmett lying in his coffin that brought home the truths of racism.

"We buried Emmett. The state of Mississippi said that that was not Emmett. They said: that it was impossible for a body to deteriorate that much in that length of time. But what they didn't say, they didn't bring out that the body was badly beaten, that the river water had burst the skin and it had peeled off the body. The water was hot, the beating was brutal. Then to beat him, they didn't hear his cries. They didn't touch them whatsoever. This one little colored boy that did hear them said that he heard screams coming from that barn about an hour and a half. He cried for God, he cried for his mother, he pleaded with them. But they were having such a good time, so they didn't consider that he was a human being."⁴

It is insightful for us at this stage for us to re-consider the well-known account of John Howard Griffin, a white American author who temporarily altered the pigment of his skin in order to experience and understand first-hand the life of a black man in the Southern states of America. He described his experience in the international bestseller 'Black like Me'. The book recounts numerous incidents of the Othering of Black people, of the arousing of hatred and suspicion toward Griffin who, for the whites, was an African American. His experience is very telling of the psychology of dehumanisation prevalent in the Southern states during that time. He writes:

"I learned within a very few hours that no one was judging me by my qualities as a human individual and everyone was judging me by my pigment. As soon as white men or women saw me, they automatically assumed I possessed a whole set of false characteristics (false not only to me but to all black men). They could not see me or any other black man as a human individual because they buried us under the garbage of their stereotyped view of us. They saw us as "different" from themselves in fundamental ways: we were irresponsible; we were different in our sexual morals; we were intellectually limited; we had a God-given sense of rhythm; we were lazy and happy-go-lucky; we loved watermelon and fried chicken. How could white men ever really know black men if on every contact the white man's stereotyped view of the black man got in the way? I never knew a black man who felt this stereotyped view fit him. Always, in every encounter even with "good whites," we had the feeling that the white person was not talking with us but with his image of us."⁵

The concluding line here is very telling – “was not talking with us but with his image of us.” Othering is a caricaturising of another, a false-creation. As these examples outline, it obscures, demoralises and generates an irrational fear of another, leading to hatred, abuse and savagery.

The Qur’ān is clear in calling mankind to honour the deep appreciation of diversity in creation, to promote righteousness, and to challenge what inflames our destructive passions. It encourages us to reflect on the wonder of Allāh’s distinct creation:

“Another of His signs is the creation of the heavens and earth, and the diversity of your languages and colours. There truly are signs in this for those who know.”⁶

“People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognize one another. In God’s eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all-Knowing, all-Aware.”⁷

The verse above is essential in undercutting and offsetting binary distinctions fuelled by hate. It uproots the desire to sow division and dissension, and to castigate one group as inferior and unworthy. It instead draws attention to the marvel within human differences. The verse teaches that seeking to be honoured, or being honoured, or ennobled is beautiful and yet though man might seek to inflate himself he might degrade another of a greater dignity, respect and worth. The verse emphasises that it is ultimately Allāh Who confers dignity upon man; our human framing of worth and greatness can often be skewed and lacking.

In the Prophet Muḥammad’s ﷺ last sermon during his Hajj in the tenth year of Hijra, he made clear that all people are equal irrespective of ethnicity or colour and that the only thing that differentiates them is their acknowledgement, belief, fear, trust and love of Him (*taqwa*). It is this that would motivate them to good actions and make them cognisant of their personal and social responsibilities. The Prophet ﷺ declared:

“There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab and for a non-Arab over an Arab; or for white over the black or for the black over the white except in piety. Verily the noblest among you is he/she who is the most pious.”⁸

“Othering” is a process of constructing another people as radically different to one’s own group usually on the basis of racist discourses. Once the Prophet’s companion Abu Dharr insulted Bilal with reference to his mother, saying, “O son of a black woman!” Bilal went to the Prophet ﷺ, and he told him what he said. The Prophet ﷺ became angry by what he heard. Later, Abu Dharr came to visit the Prophet, but he was unaware of what Bilal told him. The Prophet ﷺ turned away from him and Abu Dharr asked, “O Messenger of Allāh, have you turned away because of something you have been told?” The Prophet ﷺ said, “Have you insulted Bilal by his mother? By the One who revealed the Book to Muḥammad, no one is better than another except by righteous deeds.”⁹

Contrary to the accentuating of such ‘Otherising’ differences, the Prophet’s sermon and his words to Abu Dharr emphasises that there can be no idea of a superior race or the castigating of others as inferior. Self and other is pronounced in equal terms as “Arab” and “non-Arab”, as “black” and “white”; the binaries of subordinates and dominants collapses in the Prophetic frame. People are called on to accept diversity in what we think divides us. The idea is to concentrate not on the outer and superficial, but on the inner and transcendental. It is to be remembered that the Prophetic sermon begins with a call to the greater human body, “O People”, and that the divisions noted by the Prophet ﷺ are offset by a pursuit of personal and behavioural excellence in service of the One God, which can be acquired by any person irrespective of colour and ethnicity.

We, us, humanity, are a collective effort. Attempts at disfiguring and erasing of others from the human frame requires us all to reach across and bridge. We are to give a voice unto others – victims of war, genocide, social outcasts, the structurally dispossessed, victims of racism. In November 2015 Aboriginal David Dungay pleaded ‘I can’t breathe’ 12 times before he died while being restrained by five guards in a Sydney jail. “I can’t breathe” were also the final words of 24 year old

Adama Traoré, a Malian *French* man who died in custody after being restrained and apprehended by *police* in 2016. His sister Assa Traoré spoke of her brother and George Floyd: “They died in the exact same way. They carried the weight of...three cops on them. They had the same words. And that was the end for George Floyd. That was also the end for Adama Traoré.”¹⁰ And there are so many others. We are to remember that the cost of suffering is measured not only in terms of physical destruction but of lives that have been lost, of psychological and spiritual damage, of the creating of countless ‘others’. We must challenge global media narratives and representations that otherise or exclude fellow humans from a collective state of worthiness, that unleash on others the stigma of devalued, dehumanised, identities. It is upon us to play important roles in building societies that connect people, that bridge. Bridging allows us to open spaces, to foster understanding, communication and an enhancing of the collective human spirit.

Let us remind ourselves that it is against our humanness to exhibit racism towards others, it is against what Allāh created naturally within us, which is to see, admire and respect each other. There needs to be a newfound attempt to see each other without the stereotypes, the walls, the distance both physical and cultural, that mar our perceptions of each other. The South African North Natal tribes have a beautiful greeting phrase, “Sawu bona” which literally means “I see you.” Another member of the tribe would reply “Sikhona” which literally means “I am here.” The implication of such a greeting is encapsulated in the idea that you see me in the now, as I am, without any hate or prejudice. You see my humanity.

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Affluence and Atheism: Is there a Correlation?

This essay explores the view that some types of disbelief is related to a self-assurance and reliance in their affluence. It highlights the Qur'anic perspective on the correlation between the rejection faith and provides psycho-spiritual solutions to this malaise.

The Qur'an reveals an interesting exposition of some people's opposition to faith. It shows that the setting of wealth and children as benchmarks for success and stature can consequently act as impediments to effective engagement with the divine instructive. Such people are described as finding great security and self-assurance in their affluence, which can become a means for their religious and moral indifference:

“Never have We sent a warner to a community without those among them who were corrupted by wealth saying, ‘We do not believe in the message you have been sent with.’ They would say, ‘We have greater wealth and more children than you, and we shall not be punished.’”¹

The Qur'an furthermore details examples of human transgressions committed by peoples who felt ease and comfort in the habitats they had furnished for themselves. Whilst relishing in the splendour of their newfound opulence they exhibited a state of hubris that undercut their self-awareness and acknowledgement of the susceptibility and vulnerability of man in every space, setting and time he briefly occupies. The Qur'an questions,

“Do the people of these towns feel secure that Our punishment will not come upon them by day, while they are at play?”²

Connor Wood in his article, *Does Atheism Arise From Wealth* noted that “materially comfortable people have more energy to expend on negotiating their social worlds.”³ As Hugh McLeod has revealed the beginning of the leisure industry, of music halls, of “the multitude of political organisations and social clubs potentially replaced the church in many of its social functions.”⁴ There is a drawing together here of a newfound material comfort, of opportunity and the advancement of such social worlds. Secularists, unlike the religious, can be comfortable with ambiguous social roles, Wood argues, because they can afford to be.⁵ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has argued that “to the extent that most of one's psychic energy becomes invested in material goals, it is typical for sensitivity to other rewards to atrophy. Friendships, art, literature, natural beauty, religion and philosophy become less and less interesting.”⁶ Knowing what this generates in a person, i.e. how one might explain feelings that arise from safety and comfort generated by affluence and self-autonomy is a matter described in some detail in the Qur'an. The Qur'an anticipates behaviours congruent to attitudes and patterns of human behaviour, and in light of this article it draws on mental states from gluttony to grandiosity which arise out of feelings of self-sufficiency and privilege.

An interesting study by Nigel Barber provides evidence of a correlation between modes of ease and comfort people experience in life and an eventual disinclination to hold to a belief in a supreme, higher power.⁷ People's turning to religion, he argues, is tied to difficulties they experience in life. Undoubtedly, the facing of imminent dangers like risk of death can awaken vulnerability and dependence within a person. The Qur'an provides many examples of this human tendency. History, too, is replete with examples of communities that found solace in beseeching God in moments of crisis and in the attempt to make better sense of the crises to which they were exposed. Barber points out that in social democracies where there are less fears and uncertainties about the future and more agencies and institutions and social welfare programs which facilitate care and comfort

for the vulnerable and which seek to mitigate risks of illness and early deaths this leads to people feeling more in control of their lives, and in turn feeling less in need of religion.⁸

In light of this, a decade of dramatic social and cultural change in the western world in relation to newfound social opportunities and their bearing on religion was the 1960s. The affluence of the 1960s had an instrumental effect on challenging existing social structures that afforded people a sense of belonging and identity and most people were able to enjoy what had previously been luxuries.⁹ These included social class, political allegiances and sectarian identities. The post-war decade was met with rapid rise in increasing incomes for large parts of Western-European households which drastically shifted the dynamics of social living, of access to mobility, of what 'community' meant, on access to credit. In turn, families were afforded more time to spend together at home. It became standard for families to enjoy time watching television together, to think about homeownership and as McLeod posits, for the "home to become a major source of identity and satisfaction."¹⁰ Though the initial burgeoning of social values systems in the home are a good thing, new ideals of freedom and individual self-fulfilment slowly began to see the rise of a more assertive and insubordinate youth, challenging existing social structures and being drawn to an ethos of individual freedom. From changes in clothing styles, hairstyles, to the taking of illegal drugs and a break from conventions of sexual morality and a relaxing of censorship in the media it was the church that was faced with major challenges in being able to relate to a generation now riding the tide of self-centred individualism. This was reflected in a big drop in baptisms.¹¹ Feminism too was soon to become a major social force as well as the movement for homosexual rights. Many began to leave the churches as Britain became a more permissive society.

Janel Eccles notes that the atheism which resurfaced during the cultural revolution – subsequent to the nineteenth-century influence of atheists Robert Owen, Charles Bradlaugh and later Bertrand Russell and A.J. Ayer (see also Bagg and Voas¹²) – had been dubbed 'humanism'. With the founding of the British Humanist Association (BHA) in 1967 atheist tendencies became more readily accepted, and this at a time of increasing affluence when employment prospects were strong and the British population had become far more independent and self-autonomous.¹³ St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton posit the following:

"The most important factor in weakening the influence of the churches is the centripetal pull of the urban milieu. There is a bewildering diversity of denominations and of types of churches within a denomination. The movies, ball games, social clubs and policy stations [illegal betting agencies] offer competing forms of participation, and throw doubt on all absolute conceptions of sin. The group controls of the small town are absent. The prosperous 'wicked' are a perpetual challenge to the 'poor saints'."¹⁴

Notwithstanding the newfound affluence of this period there were many other factors that might explain the waning religiosity. During this period large numbers of people lost the habit of regular religious worship¹⁵ and the previously 'Christian' societies had become largely pluralist societies.¹⁶ This accordingly resulted in a lack of homogeneity in beliefs and ethics.¹⁷ What the rise of affluence denotes is what Dutch sociologist, Leo Laeyendecker, in his study of *The Postwar Generation and Establishment Religion in the Netherlands*, termed the long-term process of modernisation. For many, especially young people, throwing off the restraints of Cold-War austerity was met with and embracing of a new hedonistic youth culture coupled with growing affluence.¹⁸

Caroline Gregoire has shown that psychologists who examine the influence of wealth and inequality on human behaviour have ascertained that wealth is able to powerfully influence our thoughts and actions in inadvertent ways, irrespective of one's economic circumstances.¹⁹ The Qur'an forewarns of the dangers present in mentally autonomising one's wealth and achievements – it not only warns of behavioural patterns of pride, arrogance and vanity which are likely to ensue but underscores the perils of ingratitude, delusion of self-grandiosity and disbelief which culminates. An example of

such dangers is reflected in a powerful Qur'anic narrative in chapter 18 of an affluent individual who was given two beautiful gardens and a host of other niceties:

“Tell them the parable of two men: for one of them We made two gardens of grapevines, surrounded them with date palms, and put corn fields in between; both gardens yielded fruit and did not fail in any way; We made a stream flow through them, and so he had abundant fruit. One day, while talking to his friend, he said, ‘I have more wealth and a larger following than you.’ He went into his garden and wronged himself by saying, ‘I do not think this will ever perish, or that the Last Hour will ever come – even if I were to be taken back to my Lord, I would certainly find something even better there.’ His companion retorted, ‘Have you no faith in Him who created you from dust, from a small drop of fluid, then shaped you into a man? But, for me, He is God, my Lord, and I will never set up any partner with Him. If only, when you entered your garden, you had said, ‘This is God’s will. There is no power not [given] by God.’ Although you see I have less wealth and offspring than you, my Lord may well give me something better than your garden, and send thunderbolts on your garden from the sky, so that it becomes a heap of barren dust; or its water may sink so deep into the ground that you will never be able to reach it again.”²⁰

The affluent individual loses himself in his stupor of wealth and the ephemeral pleasure of gardens and wealth result in his eventual straying. Though one cannot presuppose that wealth and comfort always act as a catalyst for self-promotion and hedonism, what they ought to do is generate an acknowledgement of a higher power, Generous and Able, who affords to His creation the splendour they come to enjoy – “This is God’s will. There is no power not [given] by God.” The newfound freedoms of the 1960s or more presciently of our more contemporary time – technological advancements, ease of travel, of online shopping, of computer-generated realities – would draw marvel not exclusively at man’s achievement but instead and more applicably at the One who provided man with the ability, time, life and mind to pursue such endeavours. To demonstrate the ignorance of man descending into such self-fixation Allah reminds the reader that it is He who bestows – “For one of them We made two gardens” or “We had granted him such riches.”²¹ The Qur’an offsets the hubris that a Godless culture of self-autonomy can be predisposed to generate. A culture of unregulated power and independence is likely to draw man away from considering his or her temporalities – akin to Percy Shelley’s *Ozymandias*. In the poem the pharaoh’s words “Look on my works, ye mighty and despair!”²² are disastrously ironic as they fail to resonate; the bare and empty sand stretches far and wide and his magnificent “works” no longer exist.

Such a point is also noted by Sanchez De Toca who commented: “Affluence and secular culture provoke in consciences an eclipse of need and desire for all that is not immediate. They reduce aspiration toward the transcendent to a simple subjective need for spirituality, and happiness to material well-being and the gratification of sexual impulses.”²³ The non-immediacy De Toca draws on can stem from a lifestyle generated by individualistic self-sufficiency wherein facilitation of comforts and ease can buffer, only temporarily, the exposition of human vulnerabilities man is perpetually faced with. The man described in the Qur’an who was given two gardens is described as having betrayed his better conscience – “he wronged himself” – in part, by overlooking the palpable and most obvious. Muslim commentators explain that the abundance of fruit might symbolise “wealth, gold and silver,”²⁴ that he believed “the garden will not be ruined and nor will it cease to exist”²⁵ and that he “lacked in certainty about the coming of the Hour.”²⁶ His fixation on his affluence was so great that he posited that the remarkable spectacle of growth and sustenance would not cease. He was amiss in considering that his fortune – a by-product of countless ecological happenings – could not have taken place independent of a higher power. The output of natural growth of palm trees, rivers and fruits ought to have generated within him spiritual growth of gratitude and marvel at the workings of God. Secondly, so immersed in the spectacle, the affluent individual, parading a sense of self-entitlement believed that “I do not think this will ever perish, – or that the Last Hour will ever come— even if I were to be taken back to my Lord, I would certainly find something even better there.” The affluent individual’s friend reminds him of the basic,

essential and existential questions he had failed to peruse – “Have you no faith in Him who created you from dust, from a small drop of fluid, then shaped you into a man?” The sequential happenings in his world is of paramount importance for reflection. Just like the man’s treasures are not the result of an instantaneous happening without cause and purpose and sequence, so too is man’s creation a reflection of cause and purpose. His friend’s advice is further purposed to instil in the affluent individual a sense of humility. The Qur’an reminds:

“Was there not a period of time when man was nothing to speak of? We created man from a drop of mingled fluid to put him to the test; We gave him hearing and sight.”²⁷

And:

“Mankind, what has lured you away from God, your generous Lord, who created you, shaped you, proportioned you.”²⁸

In the Qur’anic description from chapter 18 the affluent individual struts in his self-importance and is consumed by egotistic desire to propel his self-importance over and above his associate. That he is more affluent is his first assertion – the visually observed need be stated! And so too his following, his social networks, his clansmen of a greater number and social importance. The affluent individual felt safe in his prominence and his denial of the Last Hour speaks of a feeling of privilege in his self-sufficiency as he circumvents moral accountability through his denial of the Last Hour.

His example reveals that disbelief is not confined to a denial of the existence of God but also through a denial of a final judgement. Such a denial presupposes self-autonomy and deliberation outside of moral restraints that challenge and steer an individual into acceptable behaviours and practices. In the man’s attitude it is pride and vanity; these feelings of self-importance reflect the way he considered achievement and affluence a product of his own making, as if to say such deliberate effort on his part ought to bequeath moral laxity and freedom from anybody else’s involvement and oversight. Though he might concede the existence of a higher power, he does not acknowledge the sovereignty of that higher power nor feel challenged to observe moral restraints in recognition of impending accountability.

Though psychologists like Rollo May have long surmised that “Finding the center of strength within ourselves is in the long run the best contribution we can make to our fellow men”²⁹, the gluttonous individualism in the examples highlighted in Qur’an is the type that becomes antithetical to social interdependence and cuts at the values of humility, self-vulnerability and most importantly at the recognition of a higher power. Instead, it is the kind that breeds egocentric, atomistic and narcissistic self-superiority. Furthermore, though any correlation between affluence and irreligiosity can be attributed to a number of factors, what is suggested here is that feelings of self-sufficiency and autonomy have the potential to cloud a person’s realisation of existential factors of temporalities, spatial identities and purpose. To know that all that is experienced in life will one day come to an end should necessitate not only a self-questioning but also draw out feelings that correspond with appreciation and humility. It can appear that, in some cases, the affluent can in turn use not only their wealth as an indicator of fortuitous grace but can in turn position the religious as inherently less wealthy and seemingly dependent on metaphysical external factors – to the peril of material progress. Where the religiously minded are want to reliance on a higher power such practice is judged by the faithless as stemming from a lacking in the locus of internal support; the comfort and privileges the affluent can enjoy arise from a deliberating on physical and material effort and its consequences. The faithless can unfairly presuppose about the religious a waning desire for material benefit and progress.

This, of course, is plainly unsupported. What the Qur’an offsets are examples of villainous hubris caused by such feelings of self-sufficiency by drawing on examples of individuals bestowed with wealth and power and whose privilege served to generate holistic enrichment as opposed to individualistic cravings. Such archetypes were cognisant of the workings of a higher power and

were compelled by mind and conscience to exhibit gratitude for the comfort, security and wealth they were able to enjoy. The Prophet Sulayman (Solomon) for example once marvelled at the extraordinary happenings around him. Clearly a demonstration of his earthly authority and dominion it is in the recognition that such feats are no cause to relish in self-indulgence but instead to show recognition to the Provider and Bestower that is reflected beautifully.

“When Solomon saw it set before him, he said, ‘This is a favour from my Lord, to test whether I am grateful or not: if anyone is grateful, it is for his own good, if anyone is ungrateful, then my Lord is self-sufficient and most generous.’”³⁰

All humans of course – atheists, nonreligious and religious – experience emotions at what is beautiful or inspiring. Research conducted by Jesse Preston Fatih Shin, has shown that the nonbelieving and nonreligious are deeply moved by moments of awe and beauty with common themes directed at nature and humanity, just as religious people are.³¹ It is not that atheists or the faithless are indifferent to all that is good. The Qur’an posits impediments to a recognition of truth, and highlights affluence as one such potential impediment. What affluence ought not to do is not only undercut social interdependence but more pressingly to undercut dependence on the Provider and Sustainer of all. As Nicolas Baumard points out, psychology research shows that “Affluence also allowed more time for existential pondering: maybe we have some greater moral responsibility; perhaps life has a purpose.”³²

It is to be noted that affluence does not predispose arrogance and disbelief. Not all wealthy people are dissuaded from acknowledging and worshipping God due to ease and comfort facilitated by affluence. It is also difficult to ascertain a generic correlation between affluence and atheism both in relation to individual wealth and aggregate wealth. Some of the wealthiest and poorest nations have very low reported rates of atheism but there are instances, times and places in which such a correlation exists. The Qur’an draws on examples of affluent believers and disbelievers and highlights that the way one perceives of himself, his world, and his wealth is the greatest determinant. As noted, it warns of behavioural patterns of pride and egoism which can breed ingratitude, self-grandiosity and disbelief in a person.

“When We give people a taste of Our blessing, they rejoice, but when something bad happens to them- because of their own actions- they fall into utter despair. Do they not see that God gives abundantly to whoever He will and sparingly [to whoever He will]? There truly are signs in this for those who believe.”³³

This article has shown that the Qur’an identifies man’s transgression as a consequence of his inner malaise. The examples highlighted reflect a wilful ignorance associated with rejection of God and generated by feelings of pride and self-autonomy. In a very telling verse, the Qur’an explains:

“But man exceeds all bounds when he thinks he is self-sufficient.”³⁴

In challenging the pseudo self-autonomy of man the Qur’an reminds its readers that people reach particular beliefs and behaviours as a result of what has not been corrected in their internal state. As shown, feelings of self-superiority, of egocentric hubris, have a damaging effect on one’s mind and actions and the Qur’an consequently reminds us that man’s tragedy is in foregoing the checking and remedying of this internal state, what the Qur’an figures as the most essential part of the human self.

The Qur’an for example stresses on the imperative for self-purification and situates this, at one point, in immediate relation to an obstinate arrogance exhibited by the ancient civilization of Thamud (8th century B.C). The initial verses draw attention to the human state:

“By the soul and how He formed it and inspired it [to know] its own rebellion and piety! The one who purifies his soul succeeds and truly lost is he who buries it [in darkness]. In their arrogant cruelty, the people of Thamud called [their messenger] a liar.”³⁵

The exposition of the initial verses set in place the condition of man as one bound by both positive and negative inclinations, and that the consequence of overlooking the imperative of seeking those virtuous inclinations and instead flaunting indifference can result in the “arrogant cruelty” the subsequent verse underlines. Such a structural ordering in the verses is profound in its instructiveness. Allah also reminds us that like any nation, the Thamud vanished in the passing of time. All of the opulence and grandiosity came to a sudden end, and all humans will undergo the same fate. It is therefore a display of delusory mindlessness that anyone struts in the pretence of self-sufficiency. Through an acknowledging of one’s weak and humble origin, one’s utter dependence and the inevitability of death the Qur’an calls us to consider the majesty of God:

“People, it is you who stand in need of God – God needs nothing and is worthy of all.”³⁶

The Qur’an reminds us that it is through internalising this true reality of ourselves and the human condition that the human can overcome such short-sightedness that betrays his better self. An acknowledgement and appreciation of God however, will engender divine mercy and guidance and call on us to be in awe of His Majesty, to effectively engage in the world around us in relation to a newfound cognisance of the signs and wonders which each remind us of His presence.

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³⁶ The Qur'an, Chapter 35, Verse 15.

Cracks in the Mirror: Idolatry in Celebrity Culture

This essay provides a Qur'anic framework that explains the psychopathological tendency of idolising celebrities and icons. It argues that the adoration of such pseudo-characters is manifestation of man's inability to not worship and that this inbuilt drive must be directed to the One who is worthy of our love and submission.

The Qur'an informs its readers that man can exhibit a destructive psychopathological tendency of seeking temporary comfort and validation in pseudo-characters and icons, the pursuit of which symbolises an illusory closeness and affinity with those who come to represent them. This article considers the social malaise of an oftentimes over-adoration of society's pseudo-characters, explaining the social phenomenon through a Qur'anic framework. Much of the described phenomenon is predicated on an image-based culture in which symbolic codes of happiness, of wealth and success are emblematically tied to an existential question of purpose and being; the ontological bearing permeates and taps into many areas and even functions of life. Singular successes and losses experienced by the pseudo-character permeate into cultural displays saturated by media consumption and any closeness in wealth and status between celebrity and its seeker takes form in the ephemeral and illusory.

The term 'celebrity' comes from the Latin adjective 'celebrer', meaning 'being famous'. The term can thus relate to anyone who is admired and famous for something. Shakespeare wrote that some people are born great, some achieve greatness and others have greatness thrust upon them.¹ What is unique in this time, as American journalist and historian Neal Gabler explains, is that one would only need to pay a publicist to make oneself look great. "No society", he writes, "has ever had as many celebrities as ours or has revered them as intensely. Not only are celebrities the protagonists of our news, the subjects of our daily discourse and the repositories of our values, but they have also embedded themselves so deeply in our consciousness that many individuals profess feeling closer to, and more passionate about, them than about their own primary relationships."² Celebrity status is built on the refining and promoting of image – a carefully-concocted idea about a person that he or she is something special and elevated. The image is relayed to a world in search of something bigger than itself and the celebrity comes to take centre stage. Celebrities become objects of extreme devotion. American Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Chris Hedges describes the inflated culture of celebrity and its pervasive appeal as one reminiscent of emperor worship:

"Our culture builds temples to celebrities the way Romans did for divine emperors, ancestors, and household gods. We are a de facto polytheistic society...In celebrity culture, the object is to get as close as possible to the celebrity. Relics of celebrities are coveted as magical talismans. Those who can touch the celebrity or own a relic of the celebrity hope for a transference of celebrity power. They hope for magic."³

The Qur'an reminds us that instead of satisfaction and peace such devotion instead results in isolation and emptiness, isolation from God and isolation from oneself: "O you who believe, do not be like those who forgot Allah and so forgot themselves".⁴ The truth of God's existence and the fact that He is worthy of our worship is already known through one's innate disposition (fitrah) or is discovered due to the fitrah's affinity for the truth. However, the fitrah can be clouded by

socialisation and other external influences, and the role of our lives therefore is to ‘remind’ us of the truth that we already knew or to discover the truth that is inline with our innate nature.

To illustrate this point, imagine I am cleaning my mother’s loft. As I move old bags around and throw away unwanted objects, I find my favourite toy that I used to play with when I was five years old. I am reminded of something that I already have knowledge of. In my mind I think: “Oh yeah. I remember this toy. It was my favourite.” The truth of believing in God and the fact that He is worthy of our worship is no different. Rational arguments serve as spiritual and intellectual awakenings to realise the knowledge that is contained in our fitrah. Other ways the fitrah can be unclouded include introspection, reflection, spiritual experiences, as well as negative circumstances we face in our lives. These ‘ways’ are mentioned in the Qur’an. For example, the Divine book promotes questioning and thinking deeply about such things, and these help to uncloud the fitrah:

“Thus do We explain in detail the signs for who give thought.”⁵

“Indeed in that is a sign for a people who give thought.”⁶

“Or were they created by nothing? Or were they the creators [of themselves]? Or did they create the heavens and the Earth? Rather, they are not certain.”⁷

The Qur’an also alludes to the fact that negative circumstances awakening within people the knowledge contained in their fitrah, the fact that God is a reality and deserves worship:

“And when waves come over them like canopies, they supplicate God, sincere to Him in religion.”⁸

In Islam worship entails knowing God, loving Him, obeying Him and directing all aspects of worship to Him alone. From this a universal logic can be derived – that the object of worship is the thing you want to know the most, the thing you love the most and obey, and the thing that you direct acts of worship (like gratitude) towards the most. The great Muslim theologian Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya explained it succinctly thus: “Whoever knows his Lord, loves Him.”⁹

This logic can be applied to a fanboy or girl who adores their singer idol. They want to know them the most as indicated by the buying of magazines, following on social media, etc. Also they love them, as they express the language of love by words of affirmation, wanting to spend time with the idol (even if it’s online watching or listening), etc. They also obey the idol. If the idol said “spinach is good for you” and started posting images of him or her eating the green leaf, they would buy spinach (this is why some are called influencers). Also, they express acts of worship like gratitude to them by affirming that their existence is what gives them some meaning in their lives.

This echoes what the Qur’an says: “God puts forward this illustration: can a man who has for his masters several partners at odds with each other be considered equal to a man devoted wholly to one master? All praise belongs to God, though most of them do not know.”¹⁰

What this is essentially telling us is that if we do not worship God, we end up worshipping something else. Martin Lings explains “man cannot not worship; and if his outlook is cut off from the spiritual plane, he will find a God to worship at some lower level, thus endowing something relative with what belongs only to the Absolute.”¹¹ These things enslave us and they become our masters. The Qur’anic analogy is teaching us that without God, we have many ‘masters’ and they all want something from us. They are all ‘at odds with each other’, and we end up in a state of misery, confusion and unhappiness. However, God, who knows everything, including our own selves, and who has more mercy than anyone else, is telling us that He is our master, and that only by worshipping Him alone will we truly free ourselves from the shackles of the things we have taken as unworthy replacements. The Qur’an explains that:

“But as for him who shall turn away from remembering Me – his shall be a life of narrow scope.”¹²

It is in the state of wilful distraction from devotion to the Creator and Sustainer to the extreme adulation of others that humans enter into what the Qur’an describes as *ghafla* – a desirous heedlessness, a preoccupation and diversion with the superficial at the expense of what is more pressing and what will further bear more significantly in the attaining of innermost satisfaction. Man’s betrayal here is one that is self-based, in that it relates to his innate disposition – that there is a form of knowledge in this God-created nature which includes acknowledgement of Him and the fact that He is worthy of our adoration. This however becomes clouded and man’s affinity for this truth becomes dormant.

We live, writes Gabler, in the “Kleenex age of fame”; celebrity culture produces and reproduces, stages and heralds and then casts away. An insatiable public appetite for sensation and spectacle, and one that is immediate reflects a craving for the instantaneous and unpredictable. The objects from whom they seek such cravings are not always able to fulfil and nor always required, but instead thrown away like tissue paper – as in Gabler’s metaphor. The celebrity in this light is a pseudo-personality and the mediated events constructed around them become pseudo-events.¹³ Stories of celebrities recycle themselves in myriad forms in an endless flow of text and visual media coverage and these have an inexorable effect on moulding the identity of audience and celebrity.¹⁴ The spectacle of image is what gives the celebrity oxygen and both are interdependent on one another.

Emperors of ancient times, often deified, were keen on asserting their importance through dazzling spectacle and display wrought together as elaborate testimony of their special place and privilege. Subjects who could find no real way into such sacred spaces attempted to do so through closeness with the emperor. That closeness was crucial in validating the subject’s own importance amongst his or her peers. Further still, to own a part of an item once having belonged to the emperor could accentuate a transference of divine status. In today’s hyper culture of celebrity, a stretching of a hand towards the celebrity positions the seeker in globalised and virtual time and place. That he or she was there. To be afforded a touch or to own an item a celebrity once owned or even once touched is precisely that transference of celebrity status.

Celebrities capture consumers’ attention and imagination through performances and details of their private lives, thus becoming an important component of social culture.¹⁵ This is perhaps most prevalent in Japanese social culture in which Japanese celebrities appear in nearly every TV and print ad, and advertise various products. Such celebrities are pop stars, reality TV stars, athletes,

movie stars and others. Patrick W. Galbraith and Jason G. Karlin describe the surreal full-blown national hysteria over the Japanese girl band AKB48 and what it says of the culture of the “power of ‘idols,’” a word used in Japan to refer to highly produced and promoted singers, models, and media personalities. Idols can be male or female, and tend to be young, or present themselves as such; they appeal to various demographics, and often broad cross sections of society. Idols perform across genres and interconnected media platforms at the same time.”¹⁶ The inspiration behind AKB48 was to form a girl group which could perform daily so fans can always see them live. Galbraith and Karlin describes the national mania of ‘the idol project’:

“On 9 June 2011, news of nuclear contamination in earthquake-stricken Japan took a backseat to the AKB48 General Election in the mass media. The third election of its kind for the all-girl idol group formed in 2005, it was a massive promotion and marketing blitz. In addition to fan-club members, anyone who had purchased their 21st single, “Everyday, Kachusha,” could vote. In a week, it sold 1,334,000 copies, a new record for a single sold in Japan. The results of the General Election were announced during a live ceremony at the Budokan, where some of the most famous musical acts in the world have performed. The ceremony was also streamed live to 86 theaters (97 screens) in Japan, everywhere from Hokkaido in the north to Okinawa in the south, and in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea (Barks Global Media 2011a). Fans were desperate for a seat— be it at the actual venue or the theaters— but tickets sold out almost instantly. This was more than just fanaticism. It was a media event and a public spectacle.”¹⁷

Akio Nakamori explains how the ‘idol’ phenomenon in Japan, which began in the 1970s, has grown astonishingly and that the Japanese nation is in fact ruled by the principles of idolatry wherein its most important cultural products are idols.¹⁸ The crux of such a culture of idolatry is predicated on mass consumerism, on hypercapitalism. The consumer is positioned as a fan and the idol represents an objectified fantasy. Galbraith and Karlin outline that such media sensationalised stars are not required to be greatly talented but are very much part of the ‘Kleenex age of fame’ – interchangeable and disposable commodities; “idols are produced and packaged to maximize consumption.”¹⁹

It is in the objectification of celebrities and celebrity icons that propel them into a world of idolisation. Audiences consume “the image and fame of celebrities through weekly celebrity magazines and introjection of celebrity values that has become aligned to their individual self.”²⁰ What makes the modern-day celebrity so compelling yet unreachable is the hyper-emblazoned spectacle around the person, together with the myriad of jobs and functions he or she performs. It is of course the media consumption of audiences that generates such fascinations. Social media for example is replete with images of celebrities with thousands of comments from the public entertaining questions about their clothing, shades of lipstick they are wearing or what type of false lash extensions they have in the picture. Further still, the popularity of juicing, cleanses, detox diets, beauty and anti-aging products and practices can be linked directly to celebrity endorsements.²¹ Audiences give power to celebrities through such displays of adoration and the acceptance of totem-like symbols that each celebrity represents and symbolises, and these, manufactured for public consumption at many levels of culture and economy. Such totems become unmistakable and influence the way young people come to view of themselves. Nazi Parveen explains that the media allure of celebrity imaging has a damaging effect on young people’s mental health who are exposed to an ‘unobtainable’ body image in the online world. She shows that 58% of 11 to 16-year-olds identified celebrity culture as the main influence.^[22] Boorstin explains that “Images are the pseudo-events of the ethical world. They are at best only pseudo-ideals. They are created and disseminated in order to be reported, to make a “favourable impression.” Not because

they are good, but because they are interesting. We suffer unwittingly from our idolatry. The more images we present to people, the more irrelevant and perverse and unattractive they find us.”²³

Islam places sympathetic realism – fame and achievement – in the context of God’s divine grace. The Qur’an stresses on man’s utter dependence on God-given provisions which come to facilitate his functionality. That existence itself introduces us to the wonders of life, beyond the possibility of enumeration, is the starting point. Every moment of existence is a breath-taking experience of sensory perception, of conscience, of simultaneous working of mind, heart, body and soul. All together. To recognise a blessing is to first pay tribute to the inspiration which produced the recognition, and every single day at every single moment such overwhelming gratitude need be felt.

It is normal, even desirable to praise people due to their sporting skill, eloquence, strength or any other attribute. We do so even though they do not benefit us in any direct way. Similarly, God deserves extensive praise by virtue of His perfect names and attributes, and not as a result of how He decided to manifest them in our lives. If we can praise people who have limited and flawed attributes, what does it mean about how we must praise God whose names and attributes have no deficiency or flaw? We further note that the talents and skill in any individual stem from a successive flow of happenings and abilities insomuch as God sustains the individual through health, mind and life. Ibn Qayyim explains this well:

“If a person contemplates on every perfection in existence he will notice it being an indication of divine perfection, and the indication of the perfection of His creativity. This is similar to the way that every knowledge in existence is a reflection of divine knowledge, and every power a reflection of His divine power.”²⁴

The Qur’an sheds light on an individual who, though gifted with great wealth, succumbed to a delusory state of self-indulgent vanity. His community, reminding him of the divine presence and favour which made possible his riches, was ignored:

“Seek the life to come by means of what God has granted you, but do not neglect your rightful share in this world. Do good to others as God has done good to you. Do not seek to spread corruption in the land, for God does not love those who do this.”²⁵

“but he answered, ‘This wealth was given to me on account of the knowledge I possess.’ Did he not know that God had destroyed many generations before him, who had greater power than him and built up greater wealth?”²⁶

What the pseudo-personality of Qārūn, described in the above verses, did was project a self-image of importance. The Qur’an describes that he did this through both a verbalised declaration and an actualised strutting before his people and in so doing captivated some of his audience who longed to be like him. For an instance that distance between spectator and spectated was marginalised as they too sought to stretch out their hands.

“He went out among his people in all his pomp, and those whose aim was the life of this world said, ‘If only we had been given something like what Qarun has been given: he really is a very fortunate

man,”²⁷

The Qur’an describes that there are some “who take others as rivals with Allah, loving them as they should love Allah”.²⁸ Such a fascination with the ‘image’ stems from man’s tendency to adore and adulate what appears larger, more-than, and almost unattainable. Al-Ṭabarī explains the verse as suggestive of unbelievers in their worship of idols, and the false gods of polytheists worshipped alongside Allah. He also explains that it refers to the leaders of such unbelievers who were obeyed in disobedience to Allah.”²⁹ Al-Qurtubī highlights how such pseudo-personalities become objects of worship, love, reverence and obedience.³⁰ There is no intimation from them that they share with God in creating and providing for His creation but in their excessiveness of reverence they took them as partners with Allah. Al-Baghawī explains that “they love idols as they love God because they shared them with God, so they equated God with their idols in love.”³¹

The Qur’an reminds us that an idol is someone or something that occupies the place of God in your life. God is He to whom one turns with love, hope, trust and from whom purpose and values are understood. The false idols of celebrity, of social position, of self-aggrandizement, of wealth, take the place of God in one’s life and provide man a false sense of identity, meaning, value, purpose, love, significance and security. Allah reminds us, “Weak is both the seeker and the sought after.”³² The Qur’an informs us that man can be thoughtlessly side-tracked in paying homage to displays of achievement and spectacle and altogether fall short in recognition of the wondrous happenings around him, each of which call attention to the marvel of God’s Majesty. God calls on us to consider:

“[And] is there any, besides the Most Gracious, that could be a shield for you, and could succour you [against danger]? They who deny this truth are but lost in self- delusion!”³³

“Who can provide for you if He withholds His provision? Yet they persist in their insolence and their avoidance of the Truth.”³⁴

“Who is it that answers the distressed when they call upon Him? Who removes their suffering? Who makes you successors in the earth? Is it another god beside God? Little notice you take!”³⁵

“Who is it that guides you through the darkness on land and sea? Who sends the winds as heralds of good news before His mercy? Is it another god beside God? God is far above the partners they put beside him!”³⁶

“Who is it that made the earth a stable place to live? Who made rivers flow through it? Who set immovable mountains on it and created a barrier between the fresh and salt water? Is it another god beside God? No! But most of them do not know.”³⁷

“Who created the heavens and earth? Who sends down water from the sky for you- with which We cause gardens of delight to grow: you have no power to make the trees grow in them- is it another god beside God? No! But they are people who take others to be equal with God.”³⁸

Who is it that creates life and reproduces it? Who is it that gives you provision from the heavens and earth? Is it another god beside God?' Say, 'Show me your evidence then, if what you say is true.'³⁹

Chris Hedges comments on the way illusion often replaces reality in our world. He writes: "We risk being the first people in history to have been able to make their illusions so vivid, so persuasive, so "realistic" that they can live in them. We are the most illusioned people on earth. Yet we dare not become disillusioned, because our illusions are the very house in which they live; they are our news, our heroes, our adventure, our forms of art, our very experience."⁴⁰ In a remarkable testament to the veracity and integrity in the Prophet Muhammad's character he was once approached by a Makkan individual who shuddered in awe when he gazed upon the Prophet. It was not a moment of egocentric privilege that emerged from the encounter but instead a profound display of humility and a displacing of 'image' with a call to ideals. The Prophet, though spectacular in his beauty, on seeing the man overcome instructed him instead: "Relax, for I am not a king. I am the son of a woman from Quraysh who used to eat dried meat".⁴¹ The moment was poignant and demonstrative in its offsetting of a culture of self-aggrandisement. Prophets of course far exceed the worth of temporal rulers like kings but the Prophet used the occasion to demonstrate something transformative in his message of calling his people to the worship of the One God. Though people will continually and rightfully be in awe at both the image and ideals, person and persona of the Prophet Muhammad, the Qur'an calls on the faithful to be in uttermost awe at the Supreme Being who sent him.

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Divine Certainty: A Qur'anic and Philosophical Argument for God

This essay provides a convincing qur'anic and philosophical argument for the existence of an uncreated creator who willed the universe to come into existence. The essay argues that this creator is uniquely one, eternal, transcendent, powerful and knowing. It also addresses popular and academic objections.

*The content of essay was originally published in the book, *The Divine Reality: God, Islam & The Mirage of Atheism* (2016, 2019).

Imagine you find yourself sitting in the corner of a room. The door that you entered through is now completely sealed and there is no way of entering or exiting. The walls, ceiling and floor are made up of stone. All you can do is stare into open, empty space, surrounded by cold, dark and stony walls. Due to immense boredom, you fall asleep. A few hours pass by; you wake up. As you open your eyes, you are shocked to see that in the middle of the room is a desk with a computer on top of it. You approach the desk and notice some words on the computer screen: *This desk and computer came from nothing.*

Do you believe what you have read on the screen? Of course you do not. At first glance you rely on your intuition that it is impossible for the computer and the desk to have appeared from no prior activity or cause. Then you start to think about what could possibly have happened. After some thought you realise a limited number of reasonable explanations. The first is that they could have come from no causal conditions or prior activity—in other words, nothing. The second is that they could have caused or created themselves. The third is that they could have been created or placed there by some prior cause. Since your cognitive faculties are normal and in working order, you conclude that the third explanation is the most rational.

Although this form of reasoning is universal, a more robust variation of the argument can be found eloquently summarised in the Qur'an. The argument states that the possible explanations for a finite entity coming into being could be that it came from nothing, it created itself, it could have been created by something else created, or it was created by something uncreated. Before I break down the argument further, it must be noted that the Qur'an often presents rational intellectual arguments. The Qur'an is a persuasive and powerful text that seeks to engage its reader. Hence it positively imposes itself on our minds and hearts, and the way it achieves this is by asking profound questions and presenting powerful arguments. Associate Professor of Islamic Studies Rosalind Ward Gwynne comments on this aspect of the Qur'an: "The very fact that so much of the Qur'an is in the form of arguments shows to what extent human beings are perceived as needing reasons for their actions..."¹

Gwynne also maintains that this feature of the Qur'an influenced Islamic scholarship:

"Reasoning and argument are so integral to the content of the Qur'an and so inseparable from its structure that they in many ways shaped the very consciousness of Qur'anic scholars."²

This relationship between reason and revelation was understood even by early Islamic scholars. They understood that rational thinking was one of the ways to prove the intellectual foundations of Islam. The 14th century Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyya writes that early Islamic scholarship "knew that both revelational and rational proofs were true and that they entailed one another. Whoever gave rational... proofs the complete enquiry due them, knew that they agreed with what the messengers informed them about and that they proved to them the necessity of believing the messengers in what they informed them about."³

The Qur'anic argument

The Qur'an provides a powerful argument for God's existence: "Or were they created by nothing? Or were they the creators [of themselves]? Or did they create the heavens and Earth? Rather, they are not certain."⁴

Although this argument refers to the human being, it can also be applied to anything that began to exist, or anything that emerged. The Qur'an uses the word *khuliqu*, which means created, made or originated.⁵ So it can refer to anything that came into being.

Now let us break down the argument. The Qur'an mentions four possibilities to explain how something was created or came into being or existence:

- Created by nothing: "or were they created by nothing?"
- Self-created: "or were they the creators of themselves?"
- Created by something created: "or did they create the heavens and the Earth?", which implies a created thing being ultimately created by something else created.
- Created by something uncreated: "Rather, they are not certain", implying that the denial of God is baseless, and therefore the statement implies that there is an uncreated creator.⁶

This argument can also be turned into a universal formula that does not require reference to scripture:

1. The universe is finite.
2. Finite things could have come from nothing, created themselves, been ultimately created by something created, or been created by something uncreated.
3. They could not have come from nothing, created themselves, or have been ultimately created by something created.
4. Therefore, they were created by something uncreated.

The universe is finite

A range of philosophical arguments shows the finitude of the universe. The most cogent and simplest of these arguments involves demonstrating that an actual physical infinite cannot exist. The type of actual infinite that I am addressing here is a differentiated type of infinite, which is an infinite made up of discrete parts, like physical things or objects. These physical things can include atoms, quarks, buses, giraffes and quantum fields. The undifferentiated type of infinite, however, is an infinite that is not made of discrete parts. This infinite is coherent and can exist. For instance, the infinity of God is an undifferentiated infinite, as He is not made up of discrete physical parts. In Islamic theology, He is uniquely one and transcendent.

The most persuasive and intuitive arguments to substantiate the impossibility of an actual infinite, come in the form of thought experiments. Now the concern here is with the impossibility of the physical infinite being actualised. This is different from mathematical infinities. Although logically coherent, these exist in the mathematical realm, which is usually based on axioms and assumptions. Our concern is whether the infinite can be realised in the real physical world.

Take the following examples into consideration:

1. Bag of balls: Imagine you had an infinite number of balls in a bag. If you take two balls away, how many balls do you have left? Well, mathematically you still have an infinite number. However, practically, you should have two less than what is in the bag. What if you added another two balls instead of removing them? How many balls are there now? There should be two more than what was in the bag. You should be able to count how many balls are in the bag, but you cannot because the infinite is just an idea and does not exist in the real world. This clearly shows you cannot have an actualised infinite made up of discrete physical parts or things. In light of this fact, the famous German mathematician David Hilbert said, "The infinite is nowhere to be found in reality. It neither exists in nature nor

provides a legitimate basis for rational thought... the role that remains for the infinite to play is solely that of an idea.”⁷

2. Stack of cubes with different sizes: Imagine you had a stack of cubes. Each cube is numbered. The first cube has a volume of 10cm^3 . The next cube on top of that has a volume of 5cm^3 and the next cube is half of the previous cube. This goes on *ad infinitum* (again and again in the same way forever). Now go to the top of the stack and remove the cube at the top. You cannot. There is no cube to be found. Why? Because if there was a cube to be found at the top it would mean that the cubes did not reach infinity. However, since there is no cube at the top, it also shows—even though the mathematical infinite exists (with assumptions and axioms)—that you cannot have an actualised infinite in the real world. Since there is no end to the stack, it shows the infinite—that is made up of discrete physical things (in this case the cubes)—cannot be physically realised.

Conceptually, the universe is no different to the bag of balls or the stack of cubes I have explained above. The universe is real. It is made up of discrete physical things. Since the differentiated infinite cannot exist in the real world, it follows that the universe cannot be infinite. This implies that the universe is finite, and since it is finite it must have had a beginning.

The scientific research that relates to the beginning of the universe has not been discussed here because the data is currently underdetermined. Underdetermination is a “thesis explaining that for any scientifically based theory there will always be at least one rival theory that is also supported by the evidence given...”⁸ There are around 17 competing models to explain the cosmological evidence. Some of these models conclude that the universe is finite and had a beginning and others argue that the universe is past eternal. The evidence is not conclusive. The conclusions might change when new evidence is observed or new models are developed.

Now we are in a position to apply the four logical possibilities to explain the beginning of the universe and discuss each one.

Created from nothing?

Before I address this possibility, I need to define what is meant by ‘nothing’. Nothing is defined as the absence of all things. To illustrate this better, imagine if everything, all matter, energy and potential, were to vanish; that state would be described as nothing. This is not to be confused with the quantum vacuum or field, a concept I will explain later. Nothing also refers to the absence of any causal condition. A causal condition is any type of cause that produces an effect. This cause can be material or non-material.

Asserting that things can come from nothing means that things can come into being from no potential, no matter or nothing at all. To assert such a thing defies our intuitions and stands against reason.

So, could the universe have come into existence from nothing? The obvious answer is no, because from nothing, nothing comes. Nothingness cannot produce anything. Something cannot arise from no causal conditions whatsoever. Another way of looking at it is by way of simple math. What is $0 + 0 + 0$? It is not 3, it’s 0.

One of the reasons that this is so intuitive is because it is based on a rational (or metaphysical) principle: being cannot come from nonbeing. To assert the opposite is what I would call counter discourse. Anyone could claim anything. If someone can claim that the entire universe can come from nothing, then the implications would be absurd. They could assert that anything could come into being without any causal conditions at all.

For something to arise from nothing it must have at least some type of potential or causal conditions. Since nothing is the absence of all things, including any type of causal condition, then something could not arise from nothing. Maintaining that something can arise from nothing is logically equivalent to the notion that things can vanish, decay, annihilate or disappear without any

causal conditions whatsoever.

Individuals who argue that something can come from nothing must also maintain that something can vanish from no causal conditions at all. For example, if a building completely vanished, such individuals should not be surprised by the event, because if things can come from no causal conditions at all, then it logically implies that things can vanish by means of no causal conditions as well. However, to argue that things can just vanish without reference to any causal condition would be rationally absurd.

A common contention is that the universe could come from nothing because in the quantum vacuum particles pop into existence. This argument assumes that the quantum vacuum is nothing. However, this is not true. The quantum vacuum is *something*; it is not an absolute void and it obeys the laws of physics. The quantum vacuum is a state of fleeting energy. So it is not nothing, it is something physical.⁹

Professor Lawrence Krauss's 'nothing'

Professor Lawrence Krauss's book, *A Universe from Nothing*, invigorated and popularised the debate on the Leibnizian question: "Why is there something rather than nothing?"¹⁰ In his book, Krauss argues that it is plausible that the universe arose from 'nothing'. Absurd as this may sound, a few presuppositions and clarifications need to be brought to light to understand the context of his conclusions.

Krauss's 'nothing' is actually something. In his book, he calls nothing "unstable"¹¹, and elsewhere he affirms that nothing is something physical, which he calls "empty but pre-existing space"¹². This is an interesting linguistic deviation, as the definition of nothing in the English language refers to a universal negation, but it seems that Krauss's 'nothing' is a label for something. Although his research claims that 'nothing' is the absence of time, space and particles, he misleads the untrained reader and fails to confirm (explicitly) that there is still some physical stuff. Even if, as Krauss claims, there is no matter, there must be physical fields. This is because it is impossible to have a region where there are no fields because gravity cannot be blocked. In quantum theory, gravity at this level of reality does not require objects with mass, but does require physical stuff. Therefore, Krauss's 'nothing' is actually something. Elsewhere in his book, he writes that everything came into being from quantum fluctuations, which explains a creation from 'nothing', but that implies a pre-existent quantum state in order for that to be a possibility.¹³

Professor David Albert, the author of *Quantum Mechanics and Experience*, wrote a review of Krauss's book, and similarly concludes:

"But that's just not right. Relativistic-quantum-field-theoretical vacuum states — no less than giraffes or refrigerators or solar systems — are particular arrangements of simple physical stuff. The true relativistic-quantum-field-theoretical equivalent to there not being any physical stuff at all isn't this or that particular arrangement of the fields — it is just the absence of the fields! The fact that some arrangements of fields happen to correspond to the existence of particles and some do not is not any more mysterious than the fact that some of the possible arrangements of my fingers happen to correspond to the existence of a fist and some do not. And the fact that particles can pop in and out of existence, over time, as those fields rearrange themselves, is not any more mysterious than the fact that fists can pop in and out of existence, over time, as my fingers rearrange themselves. And none of these poppings — if you look at them aright — amount to anything even remotely in the neighbourhood of a creation from nothing."¹⁴

Philosophical distinctions

Interestingly, Professor Krauss seems to have changed the definition of nothing in order to answer Leibniz's perennial question. This makes the whole discussion problematic as Krauss's definition blurs well-known philosophical distinctions. The term 'nothing' has always referred to non-being or

the absence of something.¹⁵ Therefore, the implications of Krauss's 'nothing' is that it could be reasonable for someone to assert the following:

"I had a wonderful dinner last night, and it was nothing."

"I met nobody in the hall and they showed me directions to this room."

"Nothing is tasty with salt and pepper."¹⁶

These statements are irrational statements and therefore amount to meaningless propositions, unless of course someone changes the definition of nothing. It is no wonder that Professor Krauss hints that his view of nothing does not refer to non-being. He writes: "One thing is certain, however. The metaphysical 'rule,' which is held as ironclad conviction by those with whom I have debated the issue of creation, namely that 'out of nothing, nothing comes,' has no foundation in science."¹⁷

This clearly means Krauss has changed the meaning of nothing to mean something, because science as a method focuses on things in the physical world. Science can only answer in terms of natural phenomena and natural processes. When we ask questions like: *What is the meaning of life? Does the soul exist? What is nothing?* The general expectation is to have metaphysical answers—and hence, outside the scope of any scientific explanation.

Science cannot address the idea of nothing or non-being, because science is restricted to problems that observations can solve. Philosopher of science Elliot Sober verifies this limitation. He writes in his essay *Empiricism* that "science is forced to restrict its attention to problems that observations can solve."¹⁸ Therefore, Professor Krauss has changed the meaning of the word "nothing", in order for science to solve a problem that it could not originally solve. Perhaps this outcome should be accepted as a defeat as it is tantamount to someone not being able to answer a question, and instead of admitting defeat or referring the question to someone else, resorting to changing the meaning of the question.

It would have been intellectually more honest to just say that the concept of nothing is a metaphysical concept, and science only deals with what can be observed.

Inconclusive research and popularising linguistic gymnastics

Putting all of this aside, Professor Krauss admits that his 'nothingness' research is ambiguous and lacks conclusive evidence. He writes, "I stress the word *could* here, because we may never have enough empirical information to resolve this question unambiguously."¹⁹ Elsewhere in his book he admits the inconclusive nature of his argument: "Because of the observational and related theoretical difficulties associated with working out the details, I expect we may never achieve more than plausibility in this regard."²⁰

In light of this, Professor Krauss should have just said the universe came from something physical like a vacuum state, rather than redefining the word nothing. But Krauss seems to be adamant in popularising his linguistic gymnastics. During our debate: *Islam or Atheism: Which Makes More Sense?* I referred to his book to explain that his nothing is something, like some form of quantum haze. However, he reacted and said that his nothing is "No space, no time, no laws... there's no universe, nothing, zero, zip, nada."²¹

Krauss seemed to have deliberately omitted an important hidden premise: there is still some physical stuff in his nothing, something which he clearly admitted to in a public lecture. He said that something and nothing are "... physical quantities."²²

In summary, Professor Krauss's nothing is something. The universe came from something physical which Krauss calls "nothing", and therefore failing to answer Leibniz's question: *Why is there something rather than nothing?* In reality, Krauss only answers the question: *How did something come from something?* That is a question that science can answer, and which does not require linguistic acrobatics.

God's existence is not undermined by Krauss's view on nothing. All that he has really presented to us is that the universe (time and space) came from something. Therefore, the universe still requires an explanation for its existence.

“Causality only makes sense within this universe; therefore, the universe may have come from nothing.”

Historical and academic discussions on the notion of causality include David Hume's objection that causality is a concept derived from our experiences. If Hume is right about causality, then we are not justified in postulating that the concept of causality exists or makes sense outside of our experiences. Since the argument in this essay refers to events outside of our experience—how the universe came into existence—causality cannot be used to explain these events. In other words, the universe could have come from nothing, because the notion of causality may only make sense within the universe and cannot be applied to anything outside of it. If we have no experience of the beginning of the universe or what happened prior to its existence, then we should simply stay silent on the matter.

This objection falsely assumes that causality is a concept based on experience. Causality is *a priori*; knowledge prior to experience. It is a metaphysical concept, that is required in order for us to understand our experiences in the first place. We bring it to all our experience, rather than our experience bringing it to us. It is like wearing yellow-tinted glasses, everything looks yellow not because of anything out there in the world, but because of the glasses through which we are looking at everything. Without causality, we would not be able to have a meaningful understanding of the world.

Take the following example into consideration; imagine you are looking at the White House in Washington DC. Your eyes may wonder to the door, across the pillars, then to the roof and finally over to the front lawn. You can also reverse the order of your perceptions; you can first start to look at the lawn, then to the roof, the pillars and finally the roof. Now contrast this to another experience, you are on the river Thames in London and you see a boat floating past. You can only see the front of the boat before you see the back, and you cannot reverse the order of that experience as the boat floats past. When you looked at the White House you had a choice to see the door first and then the pillars and so on. You could also reverse the order of your perceptions. However, with the boat you had no choice. The front of the boat was the first to appear, and you could not reorder your perceptions by trying to see the back before you saw the front. What dictates the order in which you had these experiences? Why is it that you know when you can order your perceptions and when you cannot? The answer is the concept of causality. There are logical causal connections occurring in your mind while you are perceiving the White House and the boat.

The point to take here is that you would not have been able to make the distinction that some experiences are ordered by yourself and others are ordered independently, unless you had the concept of causality. In absence of causality, our experiences would be very different from the way that they are. They would be a single sequence of experiences only: one thing after another. Causality is independent of experience because we would not be able to experience anything without it. Therefore, it logically follows that causality exists prior to our experience of the universe.

If you cannot have something from nothing, then how did God create from nothing?

This contention is false, as it implies that God is nothing. God is a unique agent with the potential to create and bring things into existence through His will and power. Therefore, it is not the case of something coming from nothing. God's will and power were the causal conditions to bring the universe into existence.

Something coming from nothing is impossible, because nothing implies non-being, no potential and no causal conditions. It is irrational to assert that something can emerge from an absolute void without any potential or prior causal activity. God provides that causal activity via His will and

power. Even though the Islamic intellectual tradition refers to God creating from nothing, this act of creation means that there was no material stuff. However, it does not assume that there were no causal conditions or potential.²³ God's will and power form the causal conditions to bring the universe into existence.

Self-created?

Could the universe have created itself? The term 'created' refers to something that emerged, and therefore it was once not in existence. Another way of speaking about something being created is that it was brought into being. All of these words imply something being finite, as all things that were created are finite. Understanding the concept of creation leads us to conclude that self-creation is a logical and practical impossibility. This is due to the fact that self-creation implies that something was in existence and not in existence at the same time, which is impossible. Something that emerged means that it once was not in existence; however, to say that it created itself implies that it was in existence before it existed!

Consider the following question: *Was it possible for your mother to give birth to herself?* To claim such a thing would suggest that she would have to be born before she was born. When something is created, it means it once did not exist, and therefore had no power to do anything. So to claim that it created itself is impossible, as it could not have any power before it was created in order to create itself. This applies to all finite things, and that includes the universe too. Islamic scholar Al-Khattabi aptly summarises the fallacy of this argument: "This is [an] even more fallacious argument, because if something does not exist, how can it be described as having power, and how could it create anything? How could it do anything? If these two arguments are refuted, then it is established that they have a creator, so let them believe in Him."²⁴

Andrew Compson, the current chair of the British Humanist Association, once engaged in a public debate with me at the University of Birmingham. I presented the Qur'anic argument for God's existence. His response to my assertion that self-creation is impossible was that self-creation can be found in single-celled organisms, also known in biology as asexual reproduction.

Andrew's objection is false on a few grounds. Firstly, what he referred to in single-celled organisms is not self-creation, but rather a mode of reproduction by which offspring arise from a single organism and inherit the genetic material of that parent only. Secondly, if we logically extend his example to the universe, it assumes that the universe always existed, because for asexual reproduction to occur you need a parent that existed prior to the offspring. Therefore, his objection actually proves the point I was making; the universe once never existed, so it could not bring itself into existence.

You may be thinking that this objection is absurd, and it was not necessary to discuss it. I agree. However, I included this to show how unreasonable some atheist counter-arguments can be.

Created by something else that was created?

For argument sake, let's answer "yes" to the following question: *Was the universe created by something else created?* Will that satisfy the questioner? Obviously not. The contentious person will undoubtedly ask, "Then, what created that thing?" If we were to answer, "Another created thing", what do you think he would say? Yes, you guessed right: "What created that thing?" If this ridiculous dialogue continued forever, then it would prove one thing: the need for an uncreated creator.

Why? Because we cannot have the case of a created thing, like the universe, being created by another created thing in an unlimited series going back forever (known as an infinite regress of causes). It simply does not make sense. Consider the following examples:

- Imagine that a sniper, who has acquired his designated target, radios through to HQ to get permission to shoot. HQ, however, tells the sniper to hold on while they seek permission from someone higher-up. Subsequently, the person higher-up seeks permission from the guy

even higher up, and so on and so on. If this keeps going on forever, will the sniper ever get to shoot the target? Of course not! He will keep on waiting while someone else is waiting for a person higher up to give the order. There has to be a place or person from where the command is issued; a place where there is no one higher. Thus, our example illustrates the rational flaw in the idea of an infinite regress of causes. When we apply this to the universe we have to posit that it must have had an uncreated creator. The universe, which is a created thing, could not be created by another created thing, *ad infinitum*. If that were the case this universe would not exist. Since it exists, we can dismiss the idea of an infinite regress of causes as an irrational proposition.²⁵

- Imagine if a stock trader at the stock exchange was not able to buy or sell his stocks or bonds before asking permission from the investor. Once the stock trader asked his investor, he also had to check with his investor. Imagine if this went on forever. Would the stock trader ever buy or sell his stocks or bonds? The answer is no. There must be an investor who gives the permission without requiring any permission himself. In similar light, if we apply this to the universe, we would have to posit a creator for the universe that is uncreated.

Once the above examples are applied to the universe directly, it will highlight the absurdity of the idea that the universe ultimately was created by something created. Consider if this universe, U1, was created by a prior cause, U2, and U2 was created by another cause, U3, and this went on forever. We wouldn't have universe U1 in the first place. Think about it this way, when does U1 come into being? Only after U2 has come into being. When does U2 come into being? Only after U3 has come into being. This same problem will continue even if we go on forever. If the ability of U1 to come into being was dependent on a forever chain of created universes, U1 would never exist.²⁶ As Islamic philosopher and scholar Dr. Jaafar Idris writes: "There would be no series of actual causes, but only a series of non-existents... The fact, however, is that there are existents around us; therefore, their ultimate cause must be something other than temporal causes."²⁷

Created by something uncreated?

So, what is the alternative? The alternative is a first cause. In other words, an uncaused cause or an uncreated creator. The 11th century theologian and philosopher Al-Ghazali summarised the existence of an uncaused cause or an uncreated creator in the following way: "The same can be said of the cause of the cause. Now this can either go on *ad infinitum*, which is absurd, or it will come to an end."²⁸

What the above discussion is essentially saying is that something must have always existed. Now there are two obvious choices: God or the universe. Since the universe began and is dependent, it cannot have always existed. Therefore, something that always existed must be God. In the appendix to Professor Anthony Flew's book *There is a God*, the philosopher Abraham Varghese explains this conclusion in a simple yet forceful way. He writes: "Now, clearly, theists and atheists can agree on one thing: if anything at all exists, there must be something preceding it that always existed. How did this eternally existing reality come to be? The answer is that it never came to be. It always existed. Take your pick: God or universe. Something always existed."²⁹

Thus, we can conclude that there exists an uncreated creator for everything that is created. The power of this argument is captured in the reaction of the companion of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ Jubayr ibn Mut'im. When he heard the relevant verses of the Qur'an addressing this argument he said, "my heart almost began to soar."³⁰ The scholar Al-Khattabi said that the reason Jubayr was so moved by these verses was because of "the strong evidence contained therein touched his sensitive nature, and with his intelligence understood it."³¹

What has been established so far is that there must be an uncreated creator. This does not imply the traditional concept of God. However, if we think carefully about the uncreated creator, we can form conclusions that lead to the traditional understanding of God.

Eternal

Since this creator is uncreated, it means that it was always in existence. Something that did not begin has always existed, and something that has always existed is eternal. The Qur'an makes this very clear: "God, the Eternal Refuge. He neither begets nor is born."³²

Who created God?

A typical response to the eternality of the Divine is the outdated atheist cliché: *Who created God?* This childish contention is a gross misrepresentation and misunderstanding of the argument I have been elucidating in this essay. There are two main responses to this objection.

Firstly, the third possibility that we discussed concerning how the universe came into being was: *Could it be created by something created?* We discussed that this was ultimately not possible because of the absurdity of the infinite regress of causes. The conclusion was simple: there must have been an uncreated creator. Being uncreated means God was not created. I have already presented a few examples to highlight this fact.

Secondly, once we have concluded that the best explanation for the emergence of the universe is the concept of God, it would be illogical to maintain that someone created Him. God created the universe and is not bound by its laws; He is, by definition, an uncreated Being, and He never came into existence. Something that never began cannot be created. Professor John Lennox explains these points in the following way:

"I can hear an Irish friend saying: 'Well, it proves one thing- if they had a better argument, they would use it.' If that is thought to be a rather strong reaction, just think of the question: Who made God? The very asking of it shows that the questioner has created God in mind. It is then scarcely surprising that one calls one's book *The God Delusion*. For that is precisely what a created god is, a delusion, virtually by definition—as Xenophanes pointed out centuries before Dawkins. A more informative title might have been: *The Created-God Delusion*. The book could then have been reduced to a pamphlet—but sales might just have suffered... For the God who created and upholds the universe was not created—He is eternal. He was not 'made' and therefore subject to the laws that science discovered; it was he who made the universe with its laws. Indeed, the fact constitutes the fundamental distinction between God and the universe. The universe came to be, God did not."³³

Transcendent

This uncreated creator cannot be part of creation. A useful example to illustrate this is when a carpenter makes a chair. In the process of designing and creating the chair, he does not become the chair. He is distinct from the chair. This applies to the uncreated creator as well. He created the universe and therefore is distinct from what He created. The theologian and scholar Ibn Taymiyya argued that the term, "created", implied that something was distinct from God.³⁴

If the creator was part of creation, it would make Him contingent or dependent with limited physical qualities. This, in turn, would mean that He would require an explanation for His existence, which would imply He cannot be God.

The Qur'an affirms the transcendence of God. It says, "There is nothing like unto Him."³⁵

Knowing

This uncreated creator must have knowledge because the universe that He created has established laws. These include the law of gravity, the weak and strong nuclear force, and the electromagnetic force. These laws imply there is a lawgiver, and a lawgiver implies knowledge. The Qur'an says, "Indeed God is, of all things, Knowing."³⁶

Powerful

This uncreated creator must be powerful because He created the universe, and the universe has immense energy, both usable and potential. Take, for instance, the number of atoms in the observable universe, which is around 10^{80} .³⁷ If you were to take just one of these atoms and split it, it would release an immense amount of energy—known as nuclear fission. A created thing with usable and potential energy could not have acquired that from itself. Ultimately, it came from the Creator, who in turn must be powerful.

If the creator did not have power, it would mean that He is unable, incapable and weak. Since the universe was created, it is a simple proof that He must have ability and power. Now just imagine the immense power of the Creator by reflecting on the universe and all that it contains. The Qur'an asserts the power of God:

“God creates what He wills for verily God has power over all things.”³⁸

The omnipotence paradox

The Islamic position regarding God's ability is summed up in the following creedal statement found in *The Creed of Imam Al-Tahawi*. It states, “He is Omnipotent. Everything is dependent on Him, and every affair is effortless for Him.”³⁹

However, a common objection to God's power is the omnipotence paradox. This concerns the ability of an All-Powerful Being to limit its power. The question that is raised is: *If God is omnipotent, can He create a stone He cannot move?*

To answer this question, the meaning of ‘omnipotence’ needs to be clarified. What it implies is the ability to realise every possible affair. Omnipotence also includes the impossibility of failure. The questioner, however, is saying that since God is All-Powerful, He is capable of anything, including failure. This is irrational and absurd, as it is equivalent to saying “an All-Powerful Being cannot be an All-Powerful Being”. Failure to achieve or do something is not a feature of omnipotence. From this perspective, the ability of God to “create a stone He cannot move” actually describes an event that is impossible and meaningless.

The question does not describe a possible affair, just as if we were to say “a white black crow” or “a circle triangle”. Such statements describe nothing at all; they have no informative value and are meaningless. So why should we even answer a question that has no meaning? To put it bluntly, the question is not even a question.

In his discussion of the Qur'anic verse, “God has power over all things”,⁴⁰ classical scholar Al-Qurtubi explains that God's power refers to every possible state of affairs: “This [verse] is general... it means that it is permitted to describe God with the attribute of power. The community agree that God has the name The-Powerful... God has power over every possibility whether it is brought into existence or remains non-existent.”⁴¹

To conclude, God can create a stone that is heavier than anything we can imagine, but He will always be able to move the stone because failure is not a feature of omnipotence.⁴²

Will

This uncreated creator must have a will for a number of reasons.

Firstly, since this creator is eternal and brought into existence a finite universe, it must have chosen the universe to come into existence. This creator must have chosen the universe to come into existence when the universe was non-existent and could have remained so. Something that has a choice obviously has a will.

Secondly, the universe contains beings that have a conscious will and volition. Therefore, the one who created the universe with living beings that have a will must also have a will. One cannot give something to a thing that one does not contain or have the ability to give rise to it. Therefore, the Creator has a will.

Thirdly, there are two types of explanations we can apply to the creation of the universe. The first is a scientific explanation, and the second is a personal one. Let me explain this using tea. In order to make tea, I have to boil some water, place the tea bag in the cup and allow it to infuse. This process can be explained scientifically. The water must be 100 degrees Celsius (212 degrees Fahrenheit) before it reaches boiling point, it has to travel across a semipermeable membrane (tea bag), and I have to use my glycogen stores to enable my muscles to contract to move my limbs to ensure all of this takes place. Obviously, a trained scientist could go into further detail, but I think you get the point. Conversely, the whole process can also be explained personally: the tea has been made because I wanted some tea. Now let's apply this to the universe. We do not have observations or empirical evidence on how the Creator created the universe; we can only rely on a personal explanation, which is that God chose for the universe to come into existence. Even if we had a scientific explanation, it would not negate a personal one, as shown in the tea example.⁴³

The Qur'an affirms the fact that God has a will: "Your Lord carries out whatever He wills."⁴⁴

Islamic scholar Al-Ghazali presents an eloquent summary of the implications of God having a will. He asserts that everything that happens is due to God's will and nothing can escape it:

"We attest that He is the Willer of all things that are, the ruler of all originated phenomena; there does not come into the visible or invisible world anything meagre or plenteous, small or great, good or evil, or any advantage or disadvantage, belief or unbelief, knowledge or ignorance, success or failure, increase or decrease, obedience or disobedience, except by His will. What He wills is, and what He does not, will not; there is not a glance of the eye, nor a stray thought of the heart that is not subject to His will. He is the Creator, the Restorer, the Doer of whatsoever He wills. There is none that rescinds His command, none that supplements His decrees, none that dissuades a servant from disobeying Him, except by His help and mercy, and none has power to obey Him except by His will."⁴⁵

One

There are various reasons why the creator must be one. These include:

- The argument from exclusion;
- Conceptual differentiation;
- Occam's razor;
- The argument from definition.

Argument from exclusion

This argument maintains that the existence of multiple creators is impossible because there can only be one will. Since the Creator is eternal and brought into existence the universe which began at a point in time, it means that the Creator chose the universe to come into existence; choice implies a will. Questioning how many wills can exist leads us nicely to discuss this argument in detail.

For the sake of argument, let's say there were two creators. Creator A wanted to move a rock, and creator B also wanted to move the same rock. There are three possible scenarios that can arise:

1. One of the creators overpowers the other by moving the rock in a different direction from the other.
2. They both cancel each other out, and the rock does not move.
3. They both move the rock in the same direction.

The first scenario implies only one will manifests itself. The second scenario means that there is no will in action. This is not possible because there must be a will acted upon, as we have creation in existence. The third scenario ultimately describes only one will. Therefore, it is more rational to conclude that there is only one creator because there is only one will.

If someone argues that you can have more than one entity and still have one will, I would respond

by asking: *how do you know there is more than one entity?* It sounds like an argument from ignorance, because there is no evidence whatsoever for such a claim. This leads us to the next argument.

Conceptual differentiation

For two creators to exist, they must be different in some way. For example, if you have two trees, they will differ in size, shape, colour and age. Even if they had identical physical attributes, there would be at least one thing that allows us to distinguish that they are in fact two trees. This can include their placement or position. You can also apply this to twins; we know there are two people because something makes them different. This could even be the mere fact that they cannot occupy the same place at the same time.

If there were more than one creator, then there must be something to differentiate between them. However, if they are the same in every possible aspect, then how can we say there are two? If something is identical to another, then what is true of one is also true for the other. Say we had two things, A and B. If they are the same in every way, and nothing allows us to differentiate between them, then they are the same thing. We can turn this into a hypothetical proposition: If whatever is true of A is true of B, then A is identical to B.

Now let us apply this to the Creator. Imagine that two creators exist, called creator X and creator Y, and that whatever is true of creator X is also true of creator Y. For instance, creator X is All-Powerful and All-Wise; so, creator Y is All-Powerful and All-Wise. How many creators are there in reality? Only one, due to the fact that there is nothing to differentiate between them. If someone were to argue that they are different, then they would not be describing another creator but something that is created, as it would not have the same attributes befitting the Creator.

If someone is adamant in claiming that there can be two creators and they are different from each other, then I simply ask, "How are they different?" If they attempt to answer the question, they enter the realm of arguing from ignorance, because they will have to make up evidence to justify their false conclusion.

Occam's razor

In light of the above, we might find a few irrational and stubborn people who still posit a plurality of creators or causes. In light of Occam's razor, this is not a sound argument. Occam's razor is a philosophical principle attributed to the 14th century logician and Franciscan friar William of Occam. This principle enjoins: 'Pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate'; in English 'Plurality should not be posited without necessity.' In other words, the simplest and most comprehensive explanation is the best one.

In this case, we have no evidence that the Creator of the universe is actually a combination of two, three or even one thousand creators, so the simplest explanation is that the Creator is one. Postulating a plurality of creators does not add to the comprehensiveness of the argument either. In other words, to add more creators would not enhance the argument's explanatory power or scope. To claim that an All-Powerful creator created the universe is just as comprehensive as claiming that two All-Powerful creators created it. One creator is all that is required, simply because it is All-Powerful. I would argue that postulating multiple creators actually has reduced explanatory power and scope; this is because it raises far more problems than it solves. For example, the following questions expose the irrationality of this form of polytheism; how do many external beings co-exist? What about the potential of any conflicting wills? How do they interact?

A popular objection to this argument is that if we were to apply this principle to the pyramids in Egypt, we would absurdly adopt the view that they were made by one person, because it seems to be the simplest explanation. This is a misapplication of the principle, because it ignores the point about comprehensiveness. Taking the view that the pyramids were built by one person is not the simplest and most comprehensive explanation, as it raises far more questions than it answers. For

instance, how could one man have built the pyramids? It is far more comprehensive to postulate that it was built by many men. In light of this, someone can say that the universe is so complex that it would be absurd to postulate that only one creator created it. This contention, although valid, is misplaced. A powerful Being creating the whole universe is a far more coherent and simple explanation than a plurality of creators, because a plurality of creators raises the unanswerable questions stated in the previous paragraph. Nevertheless, the critic may continue to argue that it wasn't one person that created the Pyramids, but an All-Powerful creator. The problem with this is that nothing within the universe is an All-Powerful Being, and since the Pyramids are buildings, and buildings are built by an efficient cause (a person or persons that act), then the Pyramids must have been created by the same type of cause. This leads us back to the original point, that more than one of these causes was required to build the Pyramids.

The argument from definition

Reason necessitates that if there were more than one creator, the universe would be in chaos. There would also not be the level of order we find in the cosmos. The Qur'an has a similar argument: "Had there been within the heavens and Earth gods besides God, they both would have been ruined."⁴⁶

The classical commentary known as *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* states: "Heaven and the Earth would have lost their normal orderedness since there would have inevitably been internal discord, as is normal when there are several rulers: they oppose one another in things and do not agree with one another."⁴⁷

However, one might point out that since more than one person made your car—one person fitted the wheels, and someone else installed the engine and another person installed the computer system—maybe the universe was created in the same way. This example indicates that a complex object can be created by more than one creator.

In order to respond to this contention, what has to be understood is that the most rational explanation for the origins of the universe is the concept of God and not just a 'creator'. There may be an abstract conceptual possibility of multiple creators, as highlighted by the car example, but there cannot be more than one God. This is because God by definition is the Being that has an imposing will that cannot be limited by anything external to Him. If there were two or more Gods, they would have a competition of wills, which would result in chaos and disorder. The universe we observe is governed by mathematical laws and order; therefore it makes sense that it is the result of one imposing will. Interestingly, the objection above actually supports Divine oneness. In order for the car to work, the different people who were responsible for making it had to conform to the overall 'will' of the designer. The design limited the wills of those responsible for making the car. Since God, by definition, cannot have His will limited by anything outside of Himself, it follows that there cannot be more than one Divine will.

However, one may argue that multiple Gods can agree to have the same will or they can each have their own domain. This would mean that their wills are now limited and passive, which would mean they are not Gods any more by definition.

The 12th century Muslim thinker and philosopher Ibn Rushd, also known as Averroes in the western tradition, summarises this argument:

"The meaning of the... verse is implanted in the instincts [of man] by nature. It is self-evident that if there are two kings, the actions of each one being the same as those of the other, it would not be possible [for them] to manage the same city, for there cannot result from two agents of the same kind one and the same action. It follows necessarily that if they acted together, the city would be ruined, unless one of them acted while the other remained inactive; and this is incompatible with the attribute of Divinity. When two actions of the same kind converge on one substratum, that substratum is corrupted necessarily."⁴⁸

These are some of the arguments that can be used to show that God is one; however this topic—once truly understood—will have some profound effects on the human conscience. If one God has created us, it follows that we must see everything via His oneness and not our abstracted perspectives of disunity and division. We are a human family, and if we see ourselves this way, it can have profound effects on our society. If we love and believe in God, then we should show compassion and mercy to what He has created. Just like what the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said:

“Those who are merciful will be shown mercy by the Most Merciful. Be merciful to those on the Earth and the One in the heavens will have mercy upon you.”⁴⁹

A Note on Causality, Time and The Big Bang

Some objectors argue that causality only makes sense with time. They maintain that since time began at the Big Bang, we cannot claim something caused the universe because there was no ‘before’ at the beginning of the Big Bang. In absence of time, there is “no cause or effect, because cause comes *before* effect.”⁵⁰

There are a few problems with this objection.⁵¹

- The view that causality can only make sense with time requires proof. In philosophy there is no consensus on the definition and nature of causality. There are various approaches that attempt to define and understand causality and causal relations. One such approach is simultaneous causality. This is the view “that causes always occur simultaneously with their immediate effects.”⁵² One could argue that the universe and its cause occurred at the same time. The following thought experiment explains such causal relation. Imagine an eternal ball on an eternal pillow. The ball causes the indentation of the pillow, but the cause (ball) does not come before the effect (indentation in the pillow); as time not a factor due to the eternity of the objects.⁵³ In the context of this argument, it could be that the moment God brought the universe into existence *was* the moment the universe came into being. This type of causation is atemporal. This means that the cause (in this case, God’s will and power) occurred prior causally but not prior temporally (in time). The cause and affect occurred simultaneously.
- It assumes there is a consensus on the notion of time in science. There are different notions of time in quantum mechanics and general relativity. To assume that there is one conception of time misrepresents the literature.⁵⁴
- This objection is self-defeating. If causality cannot exist without time then the Big Bang should be rejected. Given that at the point of the Big Bang’s singularity there was no time, but a boundary to time, and the boundary is obviously causally connected to the rest of the universe, then how can this causal relation makes sense with no time? If the objectors accept that the boundary is causally connected to the rest of the universe, they should also accept the same atemporal causal relation when God decided to manifest His will and power to create the universe.⁵⁵ If they maintain that causality doesn’t make sense outside of time, they will have to reject the causal relation between the boundary of the singularity to the rest of the universe, which is tantamount to rejecting the existence of the universe. The objector can argue that some physicists maintain that the universe has no boundary. This however is a contentious issue with no consensus.⁵⁶

Given that there isn’t a consensus on the nature of causality and the concept of time is contested, the objection above is not an undercutting defeater to the argument presented in this essay.

Although there are other objections to the argument presented in this essay, they do not qualify as defeaters. This means that even if these objections could not be responded to, the argument would still maintain its rational force. Nevertheless, there are some questions that challenge this argument, including: *If the Creator of the universe is eternal, why did the universe begin to exist when it did, instead of existing from eternity? If God is maximally perfect and transcendent, what caused Him to*

create at all? Does God require creation in order to possess attributes of perfection? These questions have been intelligently addressed in a paper entitled *The Kalam Cosmological Argument and the Problem of Divine Creative Agency and Purpose*.⁵⁷

In this essay, we have seen that the Qur'an provides an intuitive and powerful argument for God's existence. Since the universe is finite, it had a beginning. If it began, then it can be explained as coming from nothing, creating itself, being ultimately created by something created or being created by something uncreated. The rational answer is that the universe was brought into being by an uncreated creator who is transcendent, knowing, powerful, has a will and is one.

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The Pathology of Flamboyant Denial

The rise of technology, of cinematography, of state power and individual autonomy has furthered man's potential of narcissistic grandiosity, of arrogance, self-entitlement and exploitative behaviours. In light of this, this article will consider the behaviourism of the flamboyant denier, drawing on anticipated behaviour of antagonists, their tendencies and pathology as described in the Qur'an.

“In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.”¹

This opening observation in Guy Debord's seminal work underscores the inherent duplicities in pseudo-events represented through spectacular image-making. With all its successes, the post-modern rise of technology, of cinematography, of state power and individual autonomy has furthered man's potential of narcissistic grandiosity, of arrogance, self-entitlement and exploitative behaviours. In light of this, this article will consider the behaviourism of the flamboyant denier, drawing on anticipated behaviour of antagonists, their tendencies and pathology as described in the Qur'an. There is nothing new nor remarkable in flamboyant denial; patterns of disbelief and indifference are one and the same; God has provided sufficient examples to discern such attitudes and tendencies. The Qur'an characterises such denial as paying no heed to the divine instructive, seeking “to refute the truth with false arguments and make fun of My messages and warnings.”²

Flamboyant denial and indifference

The 19th and 20th centuries brought rapid changes in the culture of cinematography and picture-making. The horrific lynching of black men in America during this period brings to light the pathology of indifference and denial that the culture of spectacle creates. The lynchings were initially discrete events, hidden from public view. However, over time, with the rise of cinematography and ‘image-making’, they became public and publicised events. This exposed the flamboyant indifference of the lynchers, as it revealed their lack of sympathy. It exhibited their flamboyant denial, refusing to accept their humanity, forsaking the universal moral truth that all humans have a right to dignity and safety.

The execution of Will Mack in 1909 that occurred in Brandon, Mississippi was attended by up to a crowd of more than 3,000 people. They arrived on trains and buggies while vendors sold soda pop, ice cream, peanuts and watermelon. The sobriety of the occasion for Black people was grotesquely juxtaposed with the collective indifference of attendees and the flamboyance of the occasion. Pre-lynching and post-lynching pictures of victims sought to create a twisted pictorial narrative – dread and fear was altogether fulfilled with humiliation in death. 6,000 people attended the execution of Charles Johnston in Swainsboro, Georgia in 1893, an event which hosted shows as side attractions. Such lynchings and executions resemble modern theatrical entertainment, events of thrilling amusement. Nowadays the smartphone has allowed multitudes to attend, create and publicise similar events of public abuse, humiliation and death. Far removed from such haunting scenes of murder, yet nevertheless symptomatic of similar trends in iconography, American Christian evangelist Warren Wiersbe draws on a telling exposition of contemporary Christian preaching:

“A subtle change took place; many churches almost ceased to be congregations to worship God and became audiences gathered to watch men. Believers who used to be participants in sacred liturgy became spectators at a religious performance. “Sanctuaries” dedicated to the worship of God

became “auditoriums” where the goats laughed and the sheep languished. We began to worship what A.W. Tozer called “the great God entertainment.”³

The Qur’an and flamboyant denial

The Qur’an reveals that man sometimes basks in moments of playful recklessness. Playful, insomuch that enjoyment has the force of temporarily removing him from a heart and mind that is otherwise solemn, and reckless insomuch that the playful is void of any moral restraint. The playfully reckless thus comes to exhibit a kind of vainglory in his self and mannerism. This is reflected clearly in the character of the Pharaoh unto whom Prophet Mūsa (Moses) was sent.

The narrative of Prophet Mūsa and Pharaoh is the most oft-repeated in the Qur’an. Pharaoh’s denial of the message delivered to him by Prophet Mūsa was not a silent dismissal, an impassive refusal, but instead a glorying in his arrogance, a spectacular display of flamboyant denial. The Qur’an draws repeatedly on this human tendency – of the coupling of denial with an evocation of the flamboyant. The Qur’an describes the staging of his spectacle:

“but he denied it and refused [the faith].

He turned away and hastily

gathered his people, proclaiming,

‘I am your supreme lord,’

so God condemned him to punishment in the life to come as well as in this life

there truly is a lesson in this for anyone who stands in awe of God.”⁴

Such grandiose narcissism is typified by a sense of interpersonal dominance and spectacular arrogance. The Pharaoh was equipped with the apparatus that made all the more possible his flamboyant declaration and the gathering was right for the occasion.

In recent years there has been an amplifying of open displays of Islam rejection, Qur’an desecration and insult.⁵ A very recent example involved a prominent Christian YouTuber David Wood who tore out and ate a page of the Qur’an. This, in a manner entirely predictable, was followed up by others (ex-Muslims) who put on display the same action. The allure of click-bait was all too unavoidable.

In similar fashion a video published on YouTube on 16th September 2015, entitled ‘Christians ripping up Koran at university’, shows a man standing before a crowd, allegedly at an American university campus and giving a speech on the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, Islam, and the Qur’an. Challenged by the crowd, the speaker gets increasingly agitated and begins to tear out pages of the Qur’an that he is carrying. The act of ripping pages from a copy of the Qur’an and chewing them, of throwing the Qur’an to the floor, burning of the Qur’an and other acts of desecration are the kinds also reported from prison camps run by the US military in Guantanamo Bay and Iraq, where prison guards have allegedly used copies of the Qur’an for target practice.⁶

According to the 5th edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, cluster B of the ten personality disorders include Narcissistic Personality Disorder and Histrionic Personality Disorder. The report describes those who exhibit a histrionic personality disorder as “flamboyant and theatrical, exhibiting an exaggerated degree of emotional expression yet simultaneously, their emotional expression is vague, shallow, and lacking in detail.”⁷ The Qur’an informs its readers that such arrogant denial, stage-setting and flamboyancy is not a new phenomenon. It was instead well anticipated. Seventy-eight times is the verb *tawalla* (to turn away) used in the Qur’an with its derivatives *‘ataw* (exceeding all bounds), *‘utuwwan* (with insolence) and *‘itiyyan* (extreme

rebellion). The Qur'an declares:

*“Great arrogance have they assumed in regard to themselves, and have transgressed all limits in their rebellion.”*⁸

Several verses of the Qur'an draw on the trait of arrogance displayed by rejectors of the divine message. The Qur'an informs its readers,

*“Indeed, they were, when it was said to them, ‘(There is) no god except Allah,’ were arrogant.”*⁹

And,

*“The disbelievers say, ‘Do not listen to this Quran; drown it in frivolous talk: you may gain the upper hand.’”*¹⁰

Qur'anic commentators al-Baghawī and al-Sa‘dī explain this verse by commenting that it means “To speak with words that have no benefit or purpose, to make noise to throw people off”¹¹, with “idle talk, vanity and poetry.”¹² The side-attractions are what create the noise and fanfare around a highly important discourse. The way a staged spectacle of suffering gave rise to a culture of bystanding and indifference as in the cases of Black lynchings, throwing an audience off by introducing distractions, of “frivolous talk”, was one of the methods of the disbelievers to circumvent the most pressing of concerns. Furthermore, the Qur'an describes “and whenever they pass by them, they wink at one another [derisively];”¹³ Al-Sa‘dī describes that “with their insolence and mockery you see them content and unbothered by their opposition to faith.”¹⁴ The Qur'an further exposes, “Time and time again My messages were recited to you, but you turned arrogantly on your heels, [and,] impelled by your arrogance, you would talk senselessly far into the night.”¹⁵ God had long anticipated the behaviours of the antagonistic. If they were not disposed to reading the Qur'an, the Qur'an indeed read them.

Like the performance of David Wood the unrelenting, defamatory portrayals of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ by Charlie Hebdo are a glaring example of the pathology of flamboyant denial and rejectors of the Divine message. A symbolic stalwart for liberalism, Charlie Hebdo is pawed by a liberal elite who are under no illusion that absolute freedom of speech does not exist unless it suits the ruling paradigm or ideology. Flamboyant denial is a pathology rooted in supercilious ego. The contemptible decision of Charlie Hebdo to depict the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ with derision is their own failing. Not only is it a reflection of the government of France's sheer hypocrisy of its liberal standards to choose to offend one people and safeguard the sensibilities of others but it is a telling reflection of their ignorance. Their mocking is not based on any truth, is unnuanced, immoral and lacks civility and virtue since to equate the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ with terrorism is quite simply preposterous. The drawing by the Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard, published in Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten in 2005, which caricatured the Prophet ﷺ with a bomb in his turban with the Islamic creed (shahāda) inscribed on it calls us to question why he was portrayed in such a crude way. The false depictions are alien to his abundant displays of compassion, mercy, empathy, courage and how these attributes were used both to convey the message of monotheism with unflinching resolve and thus deliver billions of people out from the servitude to their own egos, lusts and false gods to the servitude of the Lord and Sustainer of all. Together with this, to foster

goodwill and compassion with those he interacted with, the mighty and privileged and also the weak, poor and othered outcasts is demonstrative of the major impact he had on the world and a major reason so many continue to find faith in Islam.

Hope not hate

Unlike the culture of hate espoused by the flamboyant deniers, the Qur'an instead provides hope for its readers. It challenges man for his state of obstinacy, clarifies doubts, stresses on true belief and virtuous action and provides a way out of the constraints of disbelief into a life of guidance and fulfilment. Throughout the Qur'an we are reminded of God's countless favours unto His creation, the provision of health, sustenance, opportunities are all purposed for our knowing of and loving of God, and finding contentment in a life purposed for His remembrance. Even for those who had been antagonistic and then exchanged that life to one focused on finding peace with God are called to take solace in God's forgiveness. The Qur'an described townsfolk who had savagely murdered believers, described in *Surah al-Burūj*, and notwithstanding the horrors of their crimes, the Qur'an evokes true transformative repentance as a way of finding protection in the next life:

“For those who persecute believing men and women, and do not repent afterwards, there will be the torment of Hell and burning.”¹⁶

The Qur'an calls on those who had lived hedonistic lives of purposeless and temporary self-fulfilment to not lose hope in the prospect of entering heaven. By proposing instead a transformed life founded on repentance, faith and righteousness the Qur'an reminds its readers of the Mercy of God. Consider the following verses:

“Yet they were succeeded by generations [of people] who lost all [thought of] prayer and followed [but] their own lusts; and these will, in time, meet with utter disillusion.”¹⁷

“Excepted, however, shall be those who repent and attain to faith and do righteous deeds: for it is they who will enter paradise and will not be wronged in any way.”¹⁸

And:

“Except those who repent, believe, and do good deeds: God will change the evil deeds of such people into good ones. He is most forgiving, most merciful.”¹⁹

The haughtiness exhibited by the people to whom Prophet Nūḥ was sent resulted in the Prophet complaining to God about the deviousness of his people. Ibn Kathīr explains that they attempted to avoid him at every instance “to refrain from following the truth and submitting to it.”²⁰ The sequence of verses in the chapter demonstrate the tenacity of spirit of Prophet Nūḥ and his perseverance and sincere attempts at conveying the message. What stands out is the hope that pervades the prophetic call in chapter 71 of the Qur'an. With their flamboyant denial on full display and whilst growing in their insolence, Prophet Nūḥ's call was simple: *“I said, ‘Ask forgiveness of your Lord: He is ever forgiving.’”²¹*

*“He said, ‘My Lord, I have called my people night and day,
but the more I call them, the further they run away:
every time I call them, so that You may forgive them, they thrust their fingers into their ears, cover
their heads with their garments, persist in their rejection, and grow more insolent and arrogant.
I have tried calling them openly.
and, behold I preached to them in public; and I spoke to them secretly, in private;
I said, ‘Ask forgiveness of your Lord: He is ever forgiving. He will send down abundant rain from
the sky for you;
He will give you wealth and sons; He will provide you with gardens and rivers;
What is amiss with you that you cannot look forward to God’s majesty’.”²²*

The desecrating of the Qur’an, the conceited denial of Islam, the contemptuous insulting of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ are all symptomatic, less so of the speed and spectacle involved in image-making and uploading but more so of an absence of spiritual perception. The Qur’an calls on man to focus on his very self. We reflect on Mūsa and Hārūn in their mission to call Pharaoh to God. The information God provides us is astonishing for how it describes that the initial theatre of struggle between the tyrant and the Prophet ﷺ, actually is first, an internal one. Though the apparatus of propagation in Prophet Mūsa’s case is staged with spectacle (“gathering his people, proclaiming”²³) with the presence of magicians on a day of festivity, the objective and preparation was entirely intended for spiritual renewal and reformation. It is in the overcoming of one’s inner ego that sincerity can take root. God first instructs Prophet Mūsa to go unto Pharaoh who had “exceeded all bounds”:

*“Go to Pharaoh, for he has exceeded all bounds,
and ask him, ‘Do you want to purify yourself [of sin]?
Do you want me to guide you to your Lord, so that you may hold Him in awe?’”²⁴*

These verses emphasise the great need for spiritual purification as a remedy for human wrongs. Pharaoh of course had been active in the murder and persecution of a great multitude of people but God’s instruction to Prophet Mūsa was to allow Pharaoh to consider his own human disposition and his need to believe and revere the One who created and sustains all beings.²⁵ The Qur’anic call is thus one of hope and deliverance from the constraint of nihilistic emptiness, reminding its readers that God only wants goodness for His servants – “We only send messengers to bring good news and to deliver warning, yet the disbelievers seek to refute the truth with false arguments and make fun of My messages and warnings.”²⁶

The Prophetic response

In the Prophet’s ﷺ time in Makkah a woman named Arwā b. Ḥarb (also known as Um Jamīl, the wife of Abu Lahab) would follow the Prophet ﷺ around to hurt and humiliate him and used to taunt him, “Mudhammam (the dispraised) we have denied, and his religion we have loathed, and his command we have defied!” Instead of responding to her, he would simply find solace in saying to his Companions, ‘Don’t you see how Allāh diverts from me the curses and insults of Quraysh? They

insult Mudhammam, and they curse Mudhammam, while I am Muhammad (the Praised One)!”²⁷. The Prophet’s ﷺ name was of course ‘Muhammad’ (the praised one) and the wife of Abu Lahab hoped that by inverting his name to ‘Mudhammam’ (the dispraised one), the Prophet ﷺ would fall into disrepute among the townsfolk. Yet the Prophet ﷺ showed magnanimity in his ignoring the woman’s words, knowing that his words and character would far deeper penetrate the fabric of his society and our global world, as well as knowing that the name ‘Muhammad’ would forever invite praise and salutations.²⁸ The followers of the Prophet ﷺ were in turn called to remain faithful to the God-centric focus and moral paradigm of his teachings. Allah instructs in the Qur’an:

“The servants of the Lord of Mercy are those who walk humbly on the earth, and who, when the foolish address them, reply, ‘Peace’;

those who spend the night bowed down or standing, worshipping their Lord,

who plead, ‘Our Lord, turn away from us the suffering of Hell, for it is a dreadful torment to suffer!

It is an evil home, a foul resting place!’

They are those who are neither wasteful nor niggardly when they spend, but keep to a just balance;

those who never invoke any other deity beside God, nor take a life, which God has made sacred, except in the pursuit of justice, nor commit adultery. Whoever does these things will face the penalties:”²⁹

Let us remember that situations like these when Islam and its symbols are brought into public scrutiny are situations wherein lies great reward for Muslims to share the message of Islam with others. The same way that any defence of the caricatures of the Prophet ﷺ are a defence of the Islamophobia that produced them, the defence of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and his message is a reflection of one’s *imān* (faith), and inspire a calling to intellectually defend and share Islam with others. Oftentimes our compassionate engagement with non-Muslims and sharing with them the beautiful life and message of the Prophet ﷺ does much to reverse stereotypes at this grassroots level. Makkans of Quraysh were the most relentless in smearing the Prophet’s reputation while his companions were the most eager to share his message. Let us further remember that these situations are a test for us all, and in reacting the right way – with knowledge and wisdom we can use the opportunity to show the truth of Islam and brilliance in the character of the Prophet ﷺ – reassured here by God and called upon to continue his prophetic mission:

“We are well aware that your heart is weighed down by what they say. Celebrate the glory of your Lord and be among those who bow down to Him: worship your Lord until what is certain comes to you.”³⁰

References

¹ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, Black & Red: 1983), p. 2.

² The Qur’an, Chapter 18, Verse 56.

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Integrity Crisis* (Oliver-Nelson Books: 1988), p. 46.

⁴ The Qur’an, Chapter 79, Verses 21 to 26.

⁵ Jonas Svensson, ‘Hurting the Qur’an – Suggestions Concerning the Psychological Infrastructure of Desecration’, *The Finnish Society for the Study of Religion*, Temenos Vol. 53 No. 2 (2017), p.

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⁶ ‘Report into the Systematic and Institutionalised US Desecration of the Qur’an and other Islamic Rituals Testimonies from Former Guantánamo Bay Detainees’ 26th May 2005.
<https://www.cage.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/USQuranDesecration.pdf>.

⁷ <https://www.mentalhelp.net/personality-disorders/cluster-b/>.

⁸ The Qur’an, Chapter 25, Verse 21.

⁹ The Qur’an, Chapter 37, Verse 35.

¹⁰ The Qur’an, Chapter 41, Verse 26.

¹¹ <https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/saadi/sura41-aya26.html#saadi>.

¹² <https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/baghawy/sura41-aya26.html#baghawwy>.

¹³ The Qur’an, Chapter 83, Verse 30.

¹⁴ <https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/saadi/sura83-aya30.html#saadi>.

¹⁵ The Qur’an, Chapter 23, Verses 66 to 67.

¹⁶ The Qur’an, Chapter 85, Verse 10.

¹⁷ The Qur’an, Chapter 19, Verse 59.

¹⁸ The Qur’an, Chapter 19, Verse 60.

¹⁹ The Qur’an, Chapter 25, Verse 70

²⁰ <https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/katheer/sura71-aya7.html#katheer>.

²¹ The Qur’an, Chapter 71, Verse 10.

²² The Qur’an, Chapter 71, Verse 5 to 13.

²³ The Qur’an, Chapter 79, Verse 23.

²⁴ The Qur’an, Chapter 79, 17 to 19.

²⁵ Osman Latiff, *On Being Human: how Islam addresses othering, dehumanisation and empathy* (Sapience Institute, 2020), p. 5.

²⁶ The Qur’an, Chapter 18, Verse 56.

²⁷ Sunan an-Nasa’i 3438.

²⁸ *On Being Human: how Islam addresses othering, dehumanisation and empathy*, p. 113.

²⁹ The Qur’an, Chapter 25, Verses 63 to 68.

³⁰ The Qur’an, Chapter 15, Verse 97 to 99.

Who Shoulders the Burden of Proof? Reformed Epistemology & Properly-Basic Islamic Belief

This essay attempts to outline both a coherent epistemic theory of knowledge, and stipulate its relationship to religious belief. In doing so, the essay argues for the following thesis: that specifically Islamic belief held in a basic way, can be sufficient for knowledge without resorting to rational argumentation, and that the those who believe in Islamic theism do not shoulder the burden of proof.

It is typically taken for granted, perhaps even assumed as a sort of self-evident principle, that the burden of proof for a believer in God – at least as far as his belief in God is concerned – rests well and truly on his shoulders to demonstrate. But what does it mean for the theist to inherit this burden (assuming for the moment that he does)? Perhaps it means something like the following: a claim to knowledge about God, could never be knowledge as such, *unless* there was some overwhelmingly strong evidence the theist has for that belief B. That is, evidence by way of good argument(s). Hence, B can only be known N, if and only if there is a good argument A in support of B. In simple terms, for B to be N we need A! That is, only when we have good argument(s) for our belief in God, could we ever be appraised with the “knowledge” of our belief in Him. Call this “the evidentialist objection to theism”.¹ It’s put more properly perhaps like this:

- Belief in God is justified (or warranted)² only by way of good argument.
- But there is no good argument for belief in God.
- Therefore, belief in God is not justified (or warranted).

Proponents of this sort of objection think that theistic arguments alone constitute the proper or *only* “grounds” for belief in theism. But let us pause for the moment and consider a question: aren’t there certain beliefs which we hold, beliefs we would be content on calling knowledge or otherwise rational in upholding, without any arguments that ground these beliefs as such? Can you think of one, or two perhaps? Or is it simply that *all* of our rational beliefs so to speak, are upheld *only* by way of argument?

Take the belief in other minds for instance. We believe (or at least I hope we do!) in other conscious persons like ourselves. Indeed, it is literally without doubt that we recognise at least our own conscious experience, but for the vast majority of us, we also believe that other human beings – evidently similar to us – are also conscious and not mere artificial robot like machines. Consider also the belief in the reality of the external world “out-there”, it is pretty clear to most of us that the world “out-there” is not a matrix simulation or mere dream, but rather like we think it is when we’re of sound mind. And what about our belief in the past? We certainly give weight to our memories and things which appear to have occurred before the present moment. We don’t normally think that the world was created five minutes ago, with memories we think correspond to events that happened many years ago, were actually just implanted upon our coming to be a few minutes before now, and never really occurred. We have other beliefs too, like the belief in the non-fallaciousness of our rational faculties. That is, we believe our rational thinking processes, are more or less working toward the production of, or with a capacity to, reach true beliefs about the world. If we didn’t believe this then we couldn’t even stake a claim on our doubts about it, for how would we know that the faculties relied upon to reach such doubts are in any way accurate?

If the penny hasn’t dropped now so to speak, then I’ll try to make the point I’m getting at more explicit. Let us return to our “evidentialist objection” and specifically the first premise, namely that, “belief in God is justified (or warranted) only by way of good arguments.” You see, the sorts of

beliefs noted above i.e. in other minds, memory, the external world and the non-fallaciousness of our faculties, are all beliefs which we would normally take to be rational (or even knowledge we possess), and yet we don't seem to have any good arguments for them. Could we have good arguments for them even if we wanted to? And if we do, do we ourselves believe these things by way of arguments in any case? It appears that the answer to these questions is more or less a resounding no. Surely, I cannot prove by way of good argument that the world wasn't created five minutes ago, or that I know I have an objective memory of such and such an event in the past simply because I remember it, for that would be to rely on the very faculty (my memory) which is in question!. Similarly, I cannot prove by way of good argument that there are all these other minds like my own, or demonstrate the non-fallaciousness of my faculties by argument without already assuming it. So, if we can hold all sorts of beliefs justifiably, the sorts of beliefs which are intuitive to us without arguments, what's so peculiar about our belief in God? Why must this particular belief (arguably intuitive in its own right) be taken with such contempt that it isn't immune from the same sorts of epistemic demands as these other beliefs?

In order to address such questions, this essay will attempt to defend the thesis of "Reformed Epistemology" (the idea that religious belief can be rational without arguments),³ with particular focus on the thought of Islamic theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). Drawing on his concept of *fiṭra*, *istidlāl bi'l āyāt* (inference through signs), and general epistemic framework.⁴ The essay will not only explore the ways in which belief in God can be rational *without* recourse to arguments, but also explore how this can be extended to Islamic belief as well. However, in order to construct our "Taymiyyan" reformed epistemological account, we will need to build this model from the ground up: starting with the necessary tools of basic epistemic concepts, then outlining the plan and constructing the model in application to belief in God, before finally brushing off the finishing touches in unique Islamic milieu. Only then will our model stand as complete. So put on your thinking cap, and let's start by gathering our tools.

Gathering our conceptual toolkit:

As is already evident from the questions this paper aims to address, we are dealing fundamentally with issues of epistemology (i.e. the study of knowledge and its related concepts),⁵ applied to a specifically religious context. So what we aim to do, is to grasp and understand the following conceptual tools which will help us to construct our model of reformed epistemology. Namely, the concepts of: (1) the tripartite theory of knowledge and the Gettier problem, (2) the meaning of warrant and justification, (3) proper functionalism, and (4) basic & non-basic beliefs. At face value it seems like a lot to take in, however this need not be the case, as the meaning of these concepts is for the most part fairly straight forward, and by enriching our tapestry of concepts in this way, we'll be in a much better position to flesh out a model of reformed epistemology that stands up to scrutiny. Let us begin then with (1): the tripartite theory of knowledge.

Let's say you have a belief. You believe that all elephants in Africa are pink in colour. Could this belief qualify for knowledge, and if not, why not? Well, it appears it misses an obvious ingredient necessary for knowledge, namely truth! Given that elephants in Africa are evidently not pink in colour, this mere belief you hold about elephants is not going to be sufficient for knowledge, unless the belief is also true. But, is true-belief alone sufficient to account for the nature of knowledge? Consider another belief you might hold: say you believe that Accrington Stanley will beat Manchester United 5-0 away from home in the FA Cup quarter-final. And let's suppose that, lo and behold, this turns out to be the case. So (1) you had a *belief* and (2) that belief turned out to be *true*, but did you actually *know* that Accrington were going to win 5-0 before the game kicked off, especially given the sheer gulf in class between the two teams?

Most people would probably be inclined to say no. It appears you fell into the fortunate path of epistemic luck: you acquired a true-belief, but you didn't have *adequate grounds* for that belief.⁶

You were missing something. Perhaps what you were missing was *justification*. You didn't have any justification (reason or evidence) that sufficiently grounds this true-belief. Consider then a third belief you might have. Let's say you believe it's raining outside, and suppose that indeed it is *actually* raining outside. But unlike your belief about the football match, let's say you do have some strong *justification* for this belief. By *justification* we mean primarily, that you've reached a certain conclusion based on grounds which connect the belief and the evidence together and/or you have fulfilled your epistemic duties: you have looked into the evidence and considered reasons for or against your position let's say.⁷ So, perhaps in this case your justification is that you see the rain outside of your window and hear the pitter-patter sound of the raindrops bouncing off them. In this case perhaps you've found the magic ingredient to turn your mere true-belief into knowledge. This is known as the tripartite theory of knowledge, bearing the three conditions: (1) belief, (2) truth, and (3) justification. It gives us a helpful introduction to understanding the nature of knowledge and the discipline of epistemology itself. However, more importantly as we will come to see, we now have good reason to think that this account of knowledge doesn't escape the problem of epistemic-luck that we have already encountered, and in considering how to fix this problem, it will enable us to consider a better account of knowledge in the contemporary literature, which very closely parallels Ibn Taymiyya's own epistemic account.

So, is it correct then to say that knowledge just *is* justified-true-belief (JTB)? Well, most epistemologists are now fairly confident that this isn't the case. It was Edmund Gettier's famously short paper, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"⁸ on the problem of the JTB account, which brought out the contemporary position and the oft spoken about "Gettier Problem(s)" which has caused the demise of the JTB theory. Let's consider a simple case of a "Gettier Problem". Suppose you had just entered into the waiting room at your local dentist. You rushed inside breathing heavily, panicked that you might have missed your appointment, and given that your watch is currently under repair at the jewellers, you're quite unsure as to the time. You quickly sit yourself down and look up at the clock hanging on the wall opposite, both clock hands paired together are striking twelve, you breathe a sigh of relief knowing that your appointment isn't for another fifteen minutes yet, you sit, and wait patiently... Let's take a step back for the moment then, and suppose that indeed it was twelve o'clock as the clock suggested when you arrived into the waiting room. So, you had a belief B, namely that it is twelve o'clock, and this belief was indeed true T, and you had justification J, by way of the evidence brought to your senses upon observing the clock. Therefore, you had JTB. But let's suppose that as a matter of fact, the clock was not actually working, not ticking at all, and it just so happened that both clock hands remained on twelve when you observed them. Then, in the end you were just quite fortunate.⁹ And although you had JTB, given that you'd fallen upon it by way of epistemic luck, it just doesn't seem as if you *knew* in this case; you had JTB, but yet you lacked knowledge.

So, it appears that the JTB account isn't an adequate way of framing the conditions for knowledge, yet again there seems to be something missing. Various attempts have and still are being offered to account for what these precise conditions look like, but arguably the strongest account of knowledge which does away with the "Gettier Problems", and radically changes the way in which we consider the philosophical account of knowledge and its related concepts, is a thesis coined, "proper functionalism". And it is this account of knowledge, which with striking consistency appears to fit into the Taymiyyan framework, which we will adopt to address our specifically religious concerns. But before we consider this alternative, we have to take a step back and note an important distinction between the epistemic concepts of "justification", and what we will come to primarily consider in the remainder of this paper, "warrant". As mentioned previously, "justification" is about duties which one fulfils concerning the grounds and evidence which support the belief in question. For instance, suppose you believe that you see a tree outside in your garden, and hence you base this belief upon that *seeming* delivered by your senses suitably matching it, and you have done your level-best (if the case need arise) to deal with any counter-objections that challenges this belief, we can say that you have "justification". However, as we have also come to

see, “justification” coupled with a true-belief, is not sufficient for knowledge.

Therefore, we will refer to a concept other than justification to get at what captures those conditions which together are necessary and sufficient for knowledge, and this we refer to as “warrant.” Warrant is simply defined as, “that special property that turns true belief into knowledge”. But notice that this doesn’t mean we ought to completely cast aside justification. For it is just one of many terms of “positive epistemic appraisal”. (Concepts such as justification, warrant and rationality are all important concepts of positive epistemic appraisal which differ from each other). But let us turn now to our alternative theory of knowledge (i.e. that which confers warrant on our beliefs).

We have seen already that we hold numerous, and even quite important beliefs, not on the basis of arguments: beliefs about other minds, the past, the external world and so on. And if we can’t *know* these beliefs by way of arguments, yet we’re pretty certain we *do* know them, what we’re implying (epistemically) is that we have to, and do in fact, trust the available cognitive faculties and equipment which we have been designed with (for the theist of course this design is the result of God’s creative will, not a mere naturalistic process).¹⁰ And hence, to know, or to have “warrant”, fundamentally concerns the output and functioning of our cognitive faculties.

Let’s consider your belief that it’s raining outside again. The belief you have is obviously one which is an immediate product of your cognitive faculties, primarily in this case your perceptual faculties (i.e. eyesight and hearing). The belief isn’t the result of premises you run in your head down to a conclusion, but is of an immediate kind. You trust that you are “warranted” in cases like these because, among other things, you don’t suspect there is anything untoward with your faculties, they all appear to be working as normal, and the sight of the raindrops on the window comes to you as clear as crystal. But suppose you were suffering from some sort of cognitive malfunction: you had a strange disorder which entailed the formation of squirrel hallucinations let’s surmise. Suppose you looked out into the garden, and spotted what seemed to you to be a squirrel (a consequence of your strange cognitive malfunctioning), when in fact there wasn’t one there at all. Your belief would obviously have little by way of warrant for you. The problem being of course, that your faculties were playing tricks on you by not accurately conveying reality due to cognitive malfunction. Perhaps one may argue that this isn’t a good example, not merely because it is “unrealistic”, but because what prevented warrant in this case wasn’t the cognitive malfunction as such, it was simply because there was a lack of truth to the belief. Then, let’s alter it a bit. Suppose this time when you formed your belief that there was a squirrel in the garden (in the form of some hallucination due to cognitive malfunction), it just so happened that there was in fact a squirrel in the garden when you formed your belief. In this case, your belief doesn’t lack warrant because it isn’t true, but lacks warrant because it is simply a case of “epistemic luck”, grounded in that cognitive malfunction. Thus, given the need to relate warrant to the function and output of our cognitive faculties (for we have nowhere else to turn!), a necessary condition of warrant is that these faculties be “functioning properly” i.e. the way they have been designed in normal circumstances to do so. If not, examples like the one outlined above, give us reason to think that our beliefs would not be warranted if they resulted from malfunctioning cognitive faculties.

But, what if our faculties were not aimed at acquiring true-belief, but something else, like survival let’s say (indeed this would appear to be the case if we accepted Darwinian naturalism).¹¹ If your faculties are functioning as they have been setup to do so, and yet those faculties are not aimed at the acquisition of true-belief, then perhaps all your beliefs are not really true, but instead simply help you achieve some other aim. If this was so, then your belief that it’s raining outside would seem to lack “warrant”, because the belief isn’t necessarily true, but rather just aids your survival. Therefore, it can’t just be that “warrant” only occurs from (1) proper functioning faculties, but it must also occur from (2) faculties aimed at true beliefs. Yet, there must be something else, for let’s suppose your cognitive faculties aimed at truth were functioning properly when you formed a belief of, say, the beautiful coastal-beach scenery outside of your hotel window, but on this occasion, it

just so happened that your hotel room had a high-tech television fixated on the wall which gave a remarkably realistic depiction of the scene. In this case, you'd lack "warrant" not because of conditions (1)-(2), but rather, because something has disturbed your "cognitive environment", your cognitive faculties and environment were not properly attuned, you'd been! So, we must add this as condition (3) to secure our account of "warrant". Roughly speaking then, we can say that a belief is warranted, if and only if, it is produced by properly functioning truth tracking cognitive faculties, in environments to which those faculties have been designed to apply. Together these conditions roughly make up the theory of warrant coined "proper functionalism."¹²

One might insist that this theory of warrant is wrong not to include an "access" condition.¹³ That is, one needs to "access" the reasons for him or herself as to why the belief in question is warranted, such that these reasons contribute in conferring warrant upon one's belief. But as is already clear from our discussion of a wide range of beliefs, we simply do not have direct access to all of the conditions (reasons, arguments etc.) which would confer warrant upon our beliefs. There simply is no good (non-circular) argument that would give me reason to believe in the outputs of my memory without relying on it in the first place for instance. But nevertheless, it does seem that I have warrant for most of my memory-based beliefs. Therefore, the conditions of warrant centred on proper function, seem to make more sense of the way in which knowledge is arrived at in our case, and does not require an "access" condition.¹⁴ Finally, before applying the concepts we have learnt thus far to our model of reformed epistemology, we ought to say something briefly about the nature of beliefs and belief building (noetic) structures.¹⁵

Related beliefs can form chains. Suppose upon hearing your doorbell chime, you form the belief that someone is at your door. Here you have acquired a small chain of belief A to belief B. Belief B (that there is someone at your door), is a belief held on the basis of another, namely belief A. But belief A (that the doorbell chimed), is not held on the basis of another belief, a, it just came to you in the immediate sense upon hearing. Beliefs like this one – not held on the basis of another – are called "basic beliefs". Beliefs held on the basis of others are called "non-basic (inferential) beliefs". Basic beliefs then could be beliefs like our ordinary sense perceptual beliefs (i.e. seeing something in front of you), self-evident logical beliefs (i.e., that A cannot be B and not-B at the same time), beliefs by way of testimony (i.e. believing your wife's testimony that the meal is ready and waiting), beliefs by way of memory (i.e. remembering your breakfast this morning). What is common to our basic beliefs is that they come to us in immediate fashion, and are not held on the basis of others; not held by way of argument or inference. This is crucial to note, for in responding to the evidentialist charge against theism, what we are arguing for here is that belief in God, can be (and indeed is for most believers), a basic belief. But more importantly we will be arguing that this belief is not merely basic, but also "properly basic" with respect to warrant i.e., it is a basic belief (not held on the basis of others) which is warranted for the believer.

Now, clearly not just any old basic belief can be "properly basic". If all of a sudden you found yourself with the belief that next week it's going to rain every other day, few would think that this belief could be warranted in the basic way i.e., properly basic without recourse to some form of inference or other beliefs you have. By contrast, if you found yourself with the belief that it is raining outside today, such a belief we tend to think can be properly basic for you. But then what marks the difference? The difference evidently relates to our particular belief-forming abilities or otherwise put, the various (sub) faculties that we have (i.e., sense perception, memory, reason) geared toward the production of certain kinds of beliefs. Indeed, we have the ability to tell without recourse to arguments that there is a computer in front of us, or beliefs about one's thoughts/mental states (i.e., "I am experiencing pain"), or certain memory-based beliefs ("I had cereal for breakfast"), but perhaps we're not able to tell things about what the weather will be like on alternate days next week, or come to know the thoughts of others in a basic way without recourse to inference from other beliefs because we don't have those sorts of belief-forming abilities. Thus, our cognitive design-plan i.e., the nature of our faculties when functioning as they ought, stipulate

what's rational for us to accept in the basic way, or otherwise what must be inferred on the basis of other beliefs.¹⁶ In the case of basic beliefs formed by the appropriate faculty functioning properly and aimed at truth in environments to which such a faculty has been designed to apply, then these beliefs can be properly basic for us.

So, let us now attempt to draw on these ideas and concepts that we have learnt in this section, in establishing the grounds on which our belief in (Islamic) theism, can be among our properly basic beliefs.

Outlining the Plan & Constructing the Model:¹⁷

So far then, we've been gathering the epistemic tools to allow us to properly formulate a robust model of "reformed epistemology" in Taymiyyan-Islamic milieu. We have learnt primarily that "warrant" i.e. the special property that turns true belief into knowledge, is obtained only where a belief is produced by properly functioning truth tracking cognitive faculties, in environments to which those faculties have been designed to apply. And we have seen that the concern of the reformed epistemological model is to demonstrate how belief in God can be properly basic with respect to warrant i.e. known without recourse to arguments, in a similar fashion to other beliefs we have made mention of under the rubric of properly basic (i.e., belief in other minds etc.). In this section, we will attempt to apply these epistemic concepts in addressing the evidentialist objection to theism, and in constructing an Islamic model of reformed epistemology, focusing first on how a believers' belief in God can be warranted in a properly basic way.

Let us consider a basic outline of the model broken down into five main points:

- God as Creator, has instilled within human beings different faculties in order to acquire true beliefs about Him and the created world.
- God created all human beings upon a natural constitution (*fiṭra*) which urges them to recognise Him, to know Him and to worship Him.
- *Fiṭra* has been set to work in tandem with other cognitive faculties for the production of true beliefs. When one's *fiṭra* functions as it should, it 'triggers' within the heart/mind (*qalb*) an immediate awareness of God.
- The proper function of these faculties culminating in theistic belief, arises from the apprehension of the many 'signs' (*āyāt*) of the created world, allowing one to experience knowledge of God in a basic way.
- Therefore, through the epistemic role of *fiṭra* in conjunction with the *qalb*, upon the apprehension of God's 'signs', belief in Him is reached immediately without recourse to arguments.

Following an elaboration on the above points, we will try to show how the conclusion is consistent with a proper function account of warrant and how this warrant account is consistent with Taymiyyan epistemology, such that one's belief in God may be warranted in a properly basic way.

The Qur'an makes the theological position of premise (1) explicit. For instance, we read:

*It is God who brought you out of your mothers' wombs knowing nothing, and gave you hearing, sight and hearts [i.e., thinking minds] that you might be thankful.*¹⁸

Thus, human beings are said to have entered into the world without any prior knowledge, but through their God given faculties, they are able to acquire knowledge such that they can come to know God and henceforth worship Him. So premise (1) is pretty evident then from an Islamic perspective, and so we can swiftly move on.

At the centre of this model and Ibn Taymiyya's epistemology more generally, is the notion of *fiṭra*, so it is crucial to further elaborate on its meaning. At the lexical level, the term *fiṭra* "comes from the Arabic radicals: *fa ṭa ra*, the verbal noun being *faṭrun*... [which] literally means: the causing of

a thing to exist for the first time and the natural constitution with which a child is created in his mother's womb".¹⁹ Hence, it refers to something that has been created and instilled within all humans upon their very coming into being. This is made clear from the Qur'an itself, where we read:

*So [O Prophet] as a man of pure faith, stand firm and true in your devotion to the religion. This is the natural disposition [fiṭrat Allāh] that God instilled in mankind – there is no altering God's creation – and this is the right religion, though most people do not realize it.*²⁰

This verse highlights at least two key notions embedded within *fiṭra*: The first is in reference to a natural constitution upon which God created man. The second is that *fiṭra* is something innate. The prophetic tradition also contains reference to *fiṭra* and allows us to further decipher its meaning:

*Narrated [by] Abu Hurayra: God's Messenger (ﷺ), said 'No child is born except upon a natural constitution (fiṭra), and then his parents turn him into a Jew or a Christian or a Magian.'*²¹

This *ḥadīth* reiterates the notion that each human being is born upon a natural constitution, but also gives us the idea that when one's surrounding environment does not corrupt this constitution, through it, human beings will acquire certain beliefs about the world naturally. In explaining the meaning of *fiṭra* in the aforementioned tradition, Ibn Taymiyya states the following:

*What he [the Prophet] meant is that there is a certain nature with which God created man, and that is the nature of Islam. God endowed all human beings with this essential nature the day He addressed them saying, 'Am I not your Lord?', and they said, 'Yes, we have testified', [Qur'an 7:172]. Fiṭra is the original nature of man, uncorrupted by later beliefs and practices, ready to accept the true notions of Islam.*²²

Fiṭra then, is a state or potency disposed to the recognition of God, and primed toward the worship of Him alone. Thus, in normal circumstances human beings would naturally subscribe to belief in Islam (simpliciter), which Ibn Taymiyya describes as essentially that, "there is none worthy of worship except God".²³ Ibn Taymiyya further elucidates these ideas, by explicitly stating that *fiṭra* indeed has within it, this potency to know God and moral goodness. He states: "It has been shown that in the human being's natural disposition [i.e., *fiṭra*], there exists a potency to believe in truth and to intend the beneficial ... *fiṭra* has a potency to know and believe in the Creator ... *fiṭra* [also] has a potency for His Oneness (*tawḥīd*)".²⁴ So, for Ibn Taymiyya, *fiṭra*, is "perhaps best rendered as by the term 'original normative disposition.'"²⁵ That is, not simply a natural constitution or original disposition stagnant and ambiguous, but one rich with normative content: a potency that is "both moral and cognitive [i.e. epistemic]".²⁶ But it is also important not to think that this need mean that *fiṭra* is an independent faculty in the same sense in which we think about reason or our senses, but rather, as the focal-point to which all our cognitive faculties turn to for direction: *fiṭra* steers them in the direction of truth. Thus, in coming back to premise (2), namely that God created human beings upon *fiṭra* with the urge to recognise Him, and in conjunction with premise (1), that God created within human beings cognitive faculties in order that they may know Him, it follows that God has created human beings upon a common nature which predisposes them toward the knowledge and recognition of Him.

Now, in his epistemic scheme Ibn Taymiyya acknowledges a number cognitive faculties, such as the faculty of sense perception (*ḥiss*), reason ('*aql*) and the heart/mind (*qalb*) more generally as the centre of all cognition.²⁷ In the case of *fiṭra* however, as suggested above, it is not construed as being an independent faculty in the same sense. Ibn Taymiyya suggests that the residing place of *fiṭra* is the heart/mind. He writes: "[God] made the *fiṭra* of His servants disposed to the apprehension and understanding of the realities [of things] and to know them. And if it were not for this readiness (i.e., *fiṭra*) within the hearts/minds (*qalb*) to know the truth, neither speculative reasoning would be possible, nor demonstration, discourse or language".²⁸ Ibn Taymiyya continues by adding that, "just as God made the physical bodies ready to be nourished with food and water,

and had it not been for that, it would not have been possible to nourish and nurture them [i.e., the bodies], and just as the physical bodies have the faculty to distinguish between suitable nourishment and its opposite, so is there in the heart a faculty to distinguish truth and falsehood that is greater than that”.²⁹ That ‘faculty’ residing in the heart/mind then is *fiṭra*. But, in what sense are the heart/mind and *fiṭra* cognitively related? And what bearing does it have on the way in which theistic belief can arise for the believer? Consider the following:

Qalb —→ *Fiṭra* —→ Properly Basic Theistic Belief

The diagram above aims to highlight the cognitive relationship between the *qalb* and *fiṭra* for the production of belief in God. First, consider the *qalb*’s epistemic function: Ibn Taymiyya writes: “If it [the *qalb*] were left in the condition in which it was created, void of any remembrance and free of any thought, then it would accept knowledge free of ignorance and see the clear truth about which there is no doubt; consequently it would believe in its Lord and turn to Him in repentance.”³⁰ Similarly, he writes that, “the *qalb* in itself is not receptive except to the truth [i.e. including theistic truths]. When [nothing] is placed in it, it receives only that for which it was created.”³¹ The implication then, is that one can come to know of God simply by the proper function of the *qalb*. But how is this connected to *fiṭra*? Ibn Taymiyya asserts that “when the *fiṭra* is left unspoiled, the heart knows God, loves Him and worships Him alone”.³² *Fiṭra* – when functioning properly then – is said to enable the *qalb* to come to knowledge of God in a “basic” way. Therefore, through the natural workings of *fiṭra* upon the faculty of the *qalb*, man is able to know God. And hence, as Ibn Taymiyya puts it, “the affirmation of a Creator and His perfection is innate and necessary with respect to one whose *fiṭra* remains intact”.³³ Elsewhere adding that, “the acknowledgement of God’s existence, and knowledge of Him, and loving Him, and unifying Him, are *from the fiṭra, and firm in the qalb*.”³⁴ Hence, one can know in the faculty of the *qalb* that God exists in a basic manner, but such knowledge can only be achieved when one’s *fiṭra* is functioning properly. Thus, given the above and that premises (1) through (3) outline the epistemic manner in which theistic belief may be acquired in a basic way, we ought to now consider how such belief may in fact originate.

It appears that these basic beliefs about God may arise through an apprehension of God’s ‘signs’. Thus, we must introduce at this point, Ibn Taymiyya’s theory of signs (ToS). The ToS is related to the Qur’anic term *āya*. The word *āya* is said to be a “‘sign’ in the sense of a token of God’s power and will.”³⁵ For Ibn Taymiyya – as Anke von Kügelgen notes – an *āya* has a special role in being a ‘proof’ of God, it is in his understanding “‘God’s method of proof through signs’ (*istidlāluhu ta’ālābil-āyāt*), and [he] considers it an immediate – that is a *fiṭrī* knowledge – insofar as the signs indicate the existence of one Creator”.³⁶ Thus, the notion of signs (*āyāt*) as a ‘proof’ is intrinsically tied to *fiṭra*.

Ibn Taymiyya asserts that, “proving the existence of God by way of signs (*āyāt*) is obligatory. This is the way of the Qur’an, and inherent in the *fiṭra* of His servants”.³⁷ In other words, acquiring belief through God’s *āyāt*, is the proper (and natural or *fiṭrī*) way in which knowledge of Him occurs. But how exactly does a ‘sign’ function as a proof of God, or as an adequate ground for theistic belief? The Qur’an makes mention of ‘signs’ in many of its verses. In fact, the Qur’an itself is made up of signs: each verse of the Qur’an is an *āya*. Consider some Qur’anic instances:

*The night, the day, the sun, the moon, are only a few of His signs.*³⁸

*There are truly signs ... in the alternation of night and day, for those with understanding.*³⁹

*There are signs in the heavens and earth for those who believe.*⁴⁰

In these Qur’anic verses, one finds mention of events or phenomena that act as ‘signs’ of God, such that upon their apprehension and contemplation, the truth of God’s existence and attributes to which they point become manifest. Ibn Taymiyya explains that God sends prophets to convey these signs

to human beings in order to awaken ones *fiṭra*.⁴¹ He writes: “No Prophet has ever addressed his people and asked that they should first of all know their Creator, that they should look into various arguments and infer from them His existence. Everyone is born with the *fiṭra*, only that something happens afterwards which casts a veil over it.”⁴² Thus, ‘signs’ function as a “proof” only through their intrinsic connection to *fiṭra*. When *fiṭra* is sound – in conjunction with our other cognitive faculties – it apprehends these signs, and produces basic beliefs about God. These ‘signs’ are vast in the created world, and can be in terms of what Ibn Taymiyya describes as “*āyāt al-anfus*”: signs within one selves, or “*āyāt al-āfāq*”: signs within the horizon and cosmos.⁴³ Such signs can produce a powerful sense of God’s existence and presence. This may occur upon observing the splendour and glory of the night sky, in pondering the vastness of the universe, or even upon observing the mercy of a mother toward her child. Through an apprehension of these various ‘signs’, one can acquire belief in God in an immediate and basic way. Therefore, in what we have gathered from premise (1) through (4), it seems to follow from premise (5) of the model, that through the epistemic role of *fiṭra*, in conjunction with *qalb* and upon apprehension of God’s ‘signs’, basic belief in His existence can arise in an immediate manner without recourse to arguments.

But what about the question of warrant? In what sense could this model fulfil the (proper function based) account of warrant that we have discussed in the previous section? To begin with, given that this model is Taymiyyan in orientation, we ought to say something in terms of how this warrant account is consistent with Taymiyyan epistemology. As we have explained above, for Ibn Taymiyya *fiṭra* is the focal point for all our cognitive faculties, for as he suggests, if it were not for the *fiṭra* in the hearts/minds of people, neither discourse, inference, language and hence cognition more generally would be possible. Moreover, he writes elsewhere that, it is on the basis of sound, properly functioning *fiṭra* that mans “knowledge of truth and his confirmation of it, and the recognition of falsehood, and his rejection of it”⁴⁴ is grounded. And in another place he states that, “when truth is accessible to one’s mind, the *fiṭra* will naturally accept it ... but when it is false, it naturally turns away from it.”⁴⁵ As Carl Sharif el-Tobgui puts it, in Ibn Taymiyya’s epistemic scheme then, “the proper functioning of *all* our epistemic faculties ... is predicated in *all* cases on the health and proper functioning of the *fiṭra*”.⁴⁶ Therefore, it is the proper functioning of sound *fiṭra* in conjunction with our natural cognitive faculties, which guarantee’s the warrant upon one’s belief or otherwise put, sifts out those beliefs sufficient from knowledge from those which aren’t. As Ibn Taymiyya states, “children are born with a sound *fiṭra*, which if left sound and intact, will make them choose knowledge (*ma’rifā*) over its denial, and faith (*īmān*) over disbelief.”⁴⁷

Thus, it is not difficult to see how this Taymiyyan scheme can meet the proper function conditions of warrant discussed above. But before we make that explicit, let us once again consider a few examples of beliefs – the sorts of which we have discussed above – that we would all generally consider to be properly basic in ordinary circumstances, in order to get clearer on how one can be warranted in their basic beliefs about God. As we saw earlier, a basic belief like our memory-based and sense perceptual beliefs, achieve warrant only when they are produced by properly functioning truth tracking cognitive faculties, in environments for which those faculties have been designed to apply. Thus, if our beliefs about what we had for breakfast or the state of the weather outside at present, are produced in that way, (i.e. produced by our faculty of memory or sense perception which is not malfunctioning or tricked in some sense, and is aimed at generating true beliefs), then our beliefs would have warrant. Of course, if we acquire some reason to suspect that we lack warrant, because say, someone has shown our belief to be *defeated* (perhaps because our faculties, say, our eyesight, isn’t working as it’s supposed to and we had forgotten to put on our glasses!). But in normal circumstances it seems that these basic beliefs do have warrant for us when accepted in the basic way, without arguments, and so they are “properly basic” with respect to warrant. So... what about our belief in God?

Well, on the Taymiyyan-Islamic model that we have outlined, basic belief in God is elicited through the contact and apprehension of His various signs in the world, which result from the proper

function of *qalb* in conjunction with *fiṭra*, designed by God to successfully acquire true beliefs in suitable environments for this to occur. Thus, our Islamic model can demonstrate how belief in God can be warranted in accordance with a proper function account of warrant, akin to many of our other basic beliefs.

Brushing off the Finishing Touches:

So far we have seen how, according to a Taymiyyan model, belief in God as described to us in the Qur'an can have warrant in a properly basic way. To complete the model, we will attempt to see how it may be extended for Islamic belief more specifically. An extension of the standard model is conceived primarily in reference to the ToS and the Qur'an. According to Ibn Taymiyya, there are two broad categories of signs (*āyāt*): "the signs which indicate [the existence of] the Lord may He be exalted are – [1] His spoken signs that He mentions in the Quran, and [2] signs of His creative acting which He created in the souls and the cosmos (*al-anfus wa'l-āfāq*)."⁴⁸ Thus, the Words of God as found in His revelation, act as signs of Him of a more intimate kind: revealing to us His beautiful names, acts and purposes for humanity. Similarly, the primary disciple of Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350), writes:

*"In the Qur'an, God invites His servants to know Him through two ways: one by contemplating the creation, the other by pondering over the Qur'an and contemplating its meanings. The first are His signs that are seen and witnessed; the second, His signs that are read and understood."*⁴⁹

Hence, just as the Qur'an points us toward a variety of signs in the created world, the revelation itself contains signs of a more intimate nature. Through apprehending and contemplating the signs of God that are "read and understood", belief in the truth of these 'signs' may be elicited by sound *fiṭra*, such that the believer can have a basic belief in the existence of the Author behind them. Therefore, basic belief in the revelatory truth of the Qur'an can be arrived at in a similar fashion to which general theistic belief can be acquired: through the proper function of the *qalb* in conjunction with one's *fiṭra*. Indeed, as Ibn Taymiyya states, "the *fiṭra* requires the religion of Islam. It demands knowledge of it and love of it."⁵⁰

Thus, we may bring the standard model together with these additional points of extension to complete the full Taymiyyan model:

- – (5)
- Just as God has made available an immediate apprehension of His existence through His many 'signs' in the created world, so too has He permitted more intimate knowledge of Him through the 'signs' in His revelation.
- Upon apprehension of these revelatory 'signs' that are "read and understood", human beings can acquire basic beliefs in the truth of God's revelation, and hence the truth of His religion.
- This immediate belief in the truth of Islam arises through the natural workings of *fiṭra* in conjunction with the heart/mind upon apprehension of these 'signs' (that is, the verses of the Qur'an).
- Therefore, full-fledged Islamic belief can be acquired in immediate and basic fashion, without recourse to arguments. And warranted in conformity with the conditions of proper functionalism

Consequently, on this extended Taymiyyan model both belief in God and Islamic belief can be elicited through an apprehension of God's various signs in the world, *and* those contained in His revelation. These basic beliefs are the result of the heart's reflection (which includes *aqal*), in conjunction with sound *fiṭra*, designed by God to acquire true beliefs, without the need for formal arguments. Therefore, this model shows us how belief in God and by extension Islam itself, can be warranted in accordance with a proper function account of warrant. However, obviously the model is predicated on the conditional "if Islam is true", but then why should a person suspect that it is *in*

fact true?

As we have suggested previously, as human beings we have limited cognitive equipment, we are not necessarily able to prove by way of conclusive argument that there really are other persons, or that our memories correspond to an objective past, and in any case, this is just not the way we come to recognise these things, rather they occur to us immediately by the natural workings of our cognitive faculties. And yet, we're pretty sure we do know all these things. We simply rely on our cognitive faculties and trust their output.⁵¹ In fact, this is something we cannot help but do! But then what about our belief in God and Islam? Well, if it seems to us in a variety of different circumstances, that God – as He has described Himself to us in the Qur'an – does exist, perhaps circumstances not too dissimilar from those in which we form beliefs about a whole host of other things we hold to be warranted in the absence of arguments, why ought our theistic (Islamic) belief be so different, especially when we see no good reason to abandon this belief? Thus, given that on the Islamic model we have offered, it is clear that our belief in God *can* meet the conditions for warrant in some comparable epistemic sense to which our memory-based and sense perceptual beliefs are warranted, the firmness of trust in our cognitive faculties for these ordinary basic beliefs appears to be naturally extendable to the case of our theistic and even Islamic belief! Such that we're justified in suspecting these beliefs are indeed warranted. Like those more mundane beliefs, in the absence of any defeater for our theistic/Islamic belief, the believer is justified in holding his or her belief in God and Islam to be warranted.⁵²

Finally, we may return to question of the burden of proof and the evidentialist objection to theism, with which we initiated this essay. Given our Islamic model of reformed epistemology grounded in a proper functionalist account of warrant, if successful, the atheist can no longer maintain that the theist must first demonstrate by way of arguments the truth of his theistic (and Islamic) belief if he is to be justified and/or warranted. On the contrary, providing Islam is true, then indeed it would appear that the model we have outlined gives us reason to think that the Muslim would indeed be warranted in the absence of arguments. And as we have also suggested, he is justified in taking that to be so, in the absence of defeaters, in much the same way in which he takes his other basic beliefs to be warranted. Thus, if the atheist wishes to insist that the Muslim is somehow unwarranted in accepting his Islamic belief in the basic way, he ought to show that Islamic belief itself is *not* true. But then the burden of doing so lays in his court, not that of the Muslim.

Double-Checking the Model:

To complete the paper and the model itself, we ought to consider at least one major contention. Indeed, one might respond to what we have said thus far in a number of ways, but we do not have the time to address all of these contentions. Perhaps one major concern might be the likelihood that one could mirror a similar sort of model on proper functionalist lines, within different religious traditions, and hence strip their warrant (by way of this defeater), which must in the end be settled only by way of arguments.

As a preliminary point, the contention that religious diversity in this way serves as a *defeater* for our basic belief in Islam appears to rest on an assumption, namely an "equal weight principle" about epistemic peers (i.e. person A and person B are equally reasonable, having access to the same evidence concerning the issue at hand). Roughly speaking, the idea is that, in the face of our religious disagreements because we are epistemic peers, in the absence of some argument to doubt the judgement of our peers, we should give equal weight to our peers' religious opinion just as much as we give to our own. But why ought we accept such a principle? Well, first, even if we do accept this principle, that is, even if we accept that it is correct in theory that we should give equal weight to the judgements of our epistemic peers, equal to the amount we give ours, we could still deny that those of other religious faiths are *actually* our epistemic peers. Certainly, if our Islamic belief is produced by the proper function of *fiṭra* which we have been literally hardwired with for

the production of this belief, and the truth of Islamic belief appears within us so firm such that we are overwhelmingly confident the conditions for warrant in our case are being fulfilled, we wouldn't (and perhaps shouldn't), regard other religious folk as our epistemic peers on this matter. It is easy to imagine for instance, how this may pan out in a case between ourselves and a radical sceptic: we'd hardly grant that he or she is our epistemic peer concerning our knowledge of something in our direct consciousness, which he or she suggests we ought to doubt, and we wouldn't typically think an argument is needed here either.⁵³ Indeed, if we remember from the prophetic tradition about *fiṭra* itself, those veiled from the attaining the natural consequences of *fiṭra* culminating in Islamic belief, have succumb to the veiling of certain social environments which literally prevent their *fiṭrī* dispositions from being formed as they ordinarily would. So why then would the Muslim regard followers of those other traditions as his or her epistemic peer, when it comes to the beliefs and experiences he has formed concerning the truth of Islamic theism? However, there still looms a more critical stumbling block for the equal weight principle itself: it appears that an "equal weight principle" is in fact self-defeating. For if people A believe p , namely that the "equal weight principle" is true and people B believe $\sim p$, that the principle is not true, then by this principle itself, people A would lack warrant and have to suspend their judgement on whether it is true or not, or otherwise accept it as an arbitrary subjective preference which others may simply reject.⁵⁴

That being said, one may (for other reasons not hitherto mentioned), think that arguments are still in some sense necessary for the believer to secure his belief with warrant. Perhaps the suggestion is simply that although a persons' Islamic belief may be initially warranted in a properly basic way, upon acquiring a defeater from some version of the "problem of religious diversity", the believer must have some reason or argument to defeat the defeater, not merely having recourse to the strength of his "nonpropositional" evidence (i.e. the strength of his experiential seemings that their belief is warranted). A view along these lines, has elsewhere been coined "Bi-Evidentialism".

Roughly speaking, it makes a distinction between first and second order belief states.⁵⁵ So, one may argue that at the first or initial belief state, Islamic belief is warranted in a properly basic way for a person. Then, at the second order level, one acquires a defeater for their belief about their belief at the first or lower level. Such a defeater gives the person reason to suspect that their belief at the lower level is not warranted. In order to remain warranted at that initial state, one must have a reason or argument to think that the belief acquired at the second level, does not give one reason to refrain from taking their first order belief to be warranted, and hence defeats the defeater. Therefore, one can continue to hold their belief in the basic way once more. If this strategy is successful, the believer need only have reasons to think that the defeater itself fails, not necessarily requiring *positive* reasons for his own Islamic beliefs. However, in this case, the warrant of one's belief would be based partially on immediate and partially on inferential grounds. Nevertheless, much more needs to be said about these strategies, including the possibility of re-working this Taymiyyan model along the lines of what Stephen Wykstra has coined "Sensible Evidentialism",⁵⁶ (as well as other important moves which could be made, some of which I am currently in the process of developing in research papers for forthcoming publication in *shā' Allāh*).

Conclusion:

At the beginning of this essay we saw how some people often challenge theistic belief: they assert that only arguments can ground belief in God, and that because such arguments are entirely lacking (or so they say...), belief in God is not justified, or more importantly not warranted. We can now see how this objection is misplaced. For one thing, it assumes that arguments are a necessary condition for warrant itself, which as we've seen, is simply not the case: we have a whole host of beliefs which can be warranted in the absence of any arguments. Hence, in considering a more reasonable account of warrant primed on the proper function of the cognitive faculties we all rely on, we have seen how in unique Islamic milieu, our theistic and Islamic belief, can meet the

necessary conditions for warrant, standing as a “properly basic” belief without recourse to arguments.

Thus, we may summarise the basic ideas of this essay then, in the following points:

1. Warrant is that “special property” which turns mere true belief into knowledge.
2. Warrant is achieved when a belief is produced by properly functioning truth tracking faculties, in environments to which those faculties have been designed to apply.
3. It is easy to see how warrant as thus described, can confer upon many of the beliefs we hold in the absence of arguments, like the belief in memories, other persons and the real world. But this can also be the case for our belief in God.
4. For if God exists, He created us with a special faculty known as *fiṭra* which works in tandem with our entire cognitive apparatus to produce true beliefs about Him.
5. Through an apprehension of God’s various signs (*āyāt*) in the creation, we can obtain basic belief in His existence. When our *fiṭra* functions according to how it was designed, this belief will fulfil the conditions for warrant, such that we have warranted properly-basic belief in God, in the absence of arguments.
6. Similarly, upon an apprehension of God’s revelatory signs that are “read and understood”, we can have properly basic warranted Islamic belief.
7. In the absence of any defeater, the believer will typically have justification to suspect that God does in fact exist, and that we are warranted in our Islamic belief in a similar sense in which warrant confers upon our other basic beliefs.

As a final point of conclusion, although this model has drawn primarily upon the ideas of Ibn Taymiyya, this is not to suggest that it captures the wide range of all his ideas on the topic of knowing God and by extension Islam. Rather, it has been primed to focus on just *one* aspect of his thought, namely knowledge by way of *fiṭra*. However, Ibn Taymiyya also allows for knowledge of God by way of *ḥusn al-nazar* (sound reasoning). He acknowledges in particular, that this may be needed for one whose *fiṭra* has become to some extent corrupted. For instance, he writes that, “the establishment and recognition of the Creator is innate [and] necessary in the souls of all people (*fiṭrī ḍarūrī fī nufūs al-nās*), even though some people have done something to corrupt their nature such that they need an inference (*nazar*) to achieve knowledge [of God]. This is the opinion of the majority of people, as well as the skilled debaters (*ḥadhāq al-nuẓẓār*), that knowledge of God is sometimes achieved by necessity [i.e. in “basic” immediate fashion] and other times by inference.”⁵⁷ Indeed, as Wael Hallaq also notes when commenting on Ibn Taymiyya’s approach to obtaining knowledge of God, he states that, “Ibn Taymiyya makes it quite clear in a key passage that while God’s existence is known principally by *fiṭra*, it is possible that His existence may be known by *nazar*, that is, inference or speculation.”⁵⁸ Therefore, we may have taken an equally “Taymiyyan” approach to refute the “evidentialist objection”, by choosing to attack premise two (namely, the idea that there are no arguments for God’s existence), but to this we shall have to leave for another occasion.

References

¹ See Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God.” In *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, 16-93 (1983), for a discussion on this objection and how it is grounded in classical foundationalism which he shows to be self-defeating. It is also a formidable critique of Anthony Flew’s famous paper, “The Presumption of Atheism” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 2, 1 (1972): 29-46.

² The term warrant and the difference between it and justification is discussed in more detail below.

³ For a thorough introduction to Reformed Epistemology, please see the following: [1] Alvin Plantinga. “Reformed Epistemology.” In *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Charles

Taliaferro, Paul Draper, and Philip L. Quinn, 674-680. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2010. [2] Michael Bergmann. "Rational Religious Belief Without Arguments." In *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, edited by Louis Pojman & Michael Rea, 534-549. Wadsworth, 2012. [3] Clark, Kelly James. "Reformed Epistemology." *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, 2011. [4] Andrew Moon. "Recent Work in Reformed Epistemology." *Philosophy Compass* 11, no. 12 (2016): 879-891. [5] Tyler McNabb. *Religious Epistemology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

⁴ For the most in-depth study of Ibn Taymiyya's thought in English on his general epistemology, refer to Carl Sharif el-Tobgui's, *Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation*, Brill (2020). For discussions on Ibn Taymiyya's theory of signs refer to Hallaq, Wael. "Ibn Taymiyya on the existence of God." *Acta Orientalia* 52, (1991): 49-69, and my own paper, "An Islamic Account of Reformed Epistemology." *Philosophy East and West* (2019), [Pre-Print: doi:10.1353/pew.0.0193].

⁵ For succinct introductions to epistemology see, [1] <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology/>, [2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_Y3utleTPg, [3] Crumley II, Jack S. *An Introduction to Epistemology*, (2009), and [4] Feldman, Richard. *Epistemology* (2003). For a solid introduction to specifically religious epistemology see, Dougherty, Trent, and Tweedt, Chris. "Religious Epistemology." *Philosophy Compass* 10, no. 8 (July 2015): 547-559.

⁶ One might think that this example is suspect because it involves a belief predicting future events, hence this addition of "future" into the equation sets it up to fail. However, we can easily change the scenario to eliminate this factor and still get the same result. Suppose for instance, instead of watching the football match, you went out somewhere, say, the cinema. Whilst watching the movie, the game came to an end. When you leave the cinema you remember that there was that specific match being played earlier, thereafter you form your belief that Manchester United *lost* 5-0, (now you have a belief about the past). You then check to find out, that, you had as it so happened, formed a true-belief. Nevertheless, this true-belief, as we have suggested, couldn't be sufficient for knowledge. See Richard Feldman *Epistemology* (2003), pp. 14-15 for this point.

⁷ The idea that *justification* takes a 'deontological' meaning primed on the fulfilment of epistemic duties, seems to be the predominant way in which it has been used in Western philosophy. See Plantinga, Alvin. *Warrant: The Current Debate*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, and Plantinga, Alvin. "Justification in the 20th Century." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50 (1990): 45-71.

⁸ Gettier, Edmund. "Is justified true belief knowledge?" *Analysis* 23, no. 6 (1963): 121-123.

⁹ This Gettier case is based on a Bertrand Russell's own pre-Gettier example in: Russell, Bertrand. *Human Knowledge: Its scopes and limits*. Routledge, 2009: 170-1.

¹⁰ Please refer to Plantinga, Alvin. "Theism, Naturalism, and Rationality", In *Homo Religiosus?: Exploring the Roots of Religion and Religious Freedom in Human Experience*, edited by Timothy Samuel Shah and Jack Friedman, 120-39, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), for a succinct account of how belief in God can be rational without argument and how theism is central to grounding rationality where naturalism falters.

¹¹ For more on this point, consider Plantinga's 'Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism (EAAN)', see Plantinga, Alvin. *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

¹² Technically speaking, proper functionalism has a fourth condition, namely that there is a high objective probability that the faculties aimed at true-belief do in fact acquire true beliefs successfully. In other words, it'd be no good having properly functioning true-tracking faculties, which only give us one true belief out of a hundred. For given the lack of success precluded by such faculties the one belief that we land on that is in fact true, would arguably be another case of

epistemic luck. For a more thorough academic defense of proper functionalism see, Boyce, Kenneth, and Plantinga, Alvin. "Proper Functionalism." In *The Continuum Companion to Epistemology* edited by Andrew Cullison, 124-140. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012. And more importantly, Plantinga, Alvin. *Warrant and Proper Function*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Refer to McNabb's (2020) monograph referenced above for an easy-to-follow introduction.

¹³ The idea that a theory of warrant or justification requires an "access" condition vis-à-vis not requiring it, marks the difference between *internalist* and *externalist* theories concerning warrant and justification, where the former requires an "access" condition and the latter accounts need not. The proper functionalist account of warrant is based on conditions external to a subjects' conscious reflection or access, and hence is *externalist*.

¹⁴ Consider Michael Bergmann's dilemma for *internalist* accounts requiring the "access" condition on justification (and/or warrant). Bergmann (2006) argues that the motivation for an *internalist* account rests on the notion that the subject is aware of the conditions which confer justification (or warrant) on one's beliefs. Distinguishing between "strong" and "weak" awareness, Bergmann argues that the former refers to the idea that the subject is reflectively aware of the justificatory reasons or conditions as being relevant in some sense to the truth or justification (or warrant) of one's beliefs. Weak awareness is a conceiving of some reasons but not in seeing them as relevant to the truth or justification (or warrant) of one's beliefs. Evidently, the latter offers no advantage over an *externalist* view, and the former appears to lead to radical scepticism where no belief is justified! For the awareness of a justifier being relevant to the truth or justification (or warrant) of a belief, would involve some conceptualization which would itself then require meeting an awareness condition for justification, and so would that, and the next and so on *ad infinitum*. In the end, this dilemma gives us a strong reason to prefer an *externalist* account.

¹⁵ A noetic structure is roughly, the set of propositions a subject believes together with the epistemic relations which hold among the subject and these propositions he believes. For example, some of the beliefs a subject may hold are held on the basis of other beliefs, whereas others are merely basic. One's noetic structure accounts for how certain beliefs are related and which is nonbasic or basic for instance. A noetic structure may also include the degree of firmness or credence that we give to some beliefs over others, and where certain beliefs appear to be more important for our structure of beliefs than others, say.

¹⁶ By "rational" we mean roughly: *proper function rational*. That is, a belief which is the product of properly functioning faculties, not subject to some form of cognitive malfunction. *Proper function rationality* includes both "internal" and "external" rationality. The former refers to the proper functioning of one's belief performing abilities 'downstream from an experience' and the latter refers to the proper functioning of one's belief performing abilities 'upstream from an experience'. For more detail on these notions of rationality see chapter 4 in Plantinga, Alvin. *Warranted Christian Belief*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

¹⁷ For a more detailed account of this model please see my paper from which this has been adapted, Tuner, Jamie. "An Islamic Account of Reformed Epistemology." *Philosophy East and West* (2019), [Pre-Print: doi:10.1353/pew.0.0193].

¹⁸ Qur'an 16:78.

¹⁹ Yasien Mohamed, Fitrah: *The Islamic Concept of Human Nature* (London: Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd, 1996). 13-14.

²⁰ Qur'an 30:30.

²¹ Şahîḥ al-Bukhārī (Beirut: Dār Ṭawq al-Najāt, 2001), vol. 6, 114.

- ²² Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū‘ Fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad b. Taymiyya* (Mujamma‘ al-Malik Fahd, 1995), vol. 4, 245-46.
- ²³ *Ibid.* 246.
- ²⁴ Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya, *Dar’ ta’āruḍ al-‘aql wa-l-naql*. (Riyadh: Dār al-Kunūz al-Adabiyya, 1979), vol. 8, 458-9.
- ²⁵ Carl Sharif el-Tobgui (2020), p. 228.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.* 260.
- ²⁷ See *Majmū‘ Fatāwā* (1995) vol. 9, 308 on the centrality and function of *qalb*. Also see *Dar’ ta’āruḍ al-‘aql wa-l-naql* (1979) vol. 7, p. 324 on the brief general division of the sources of knowledge in his epistemic scheme.
- ²⁸ *Dar’ ta’āruḍ al-‘aql wa-l-naql* (1979) vol. 5, p. 62.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.* vol. 5, p. 62.
- ³⁰ *Majmū‘ Fatāwā* (1995) vol. 9, 313.
- ³¹ *Ibid.* vol. 9, 313.
- ³² Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya, *Amrād al-qulūb wa-shifā’uhā* (Cairo: al-Maṭba’a al-Salafiyya, 2018), 26.
- ³³ *Majmū‘ Fatāwā* (1995) vol. 6, 73.
- ³⁴ *Majmū‘ Fatāwā* (1995) vol. 16, 461.
- ³⁵ Afnan H. Fatani, “AYA,” *The Quran: an Encyclopedia*, in Oliver Leaman, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 85.
- ³⁶ von Kügelgen, Anke. “The Poison of Philosophy: Ibn Taymiyya’s Struggle For and Against Reason. In *Islamic Theology, Philosophy and Law: Debating Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya*, Alina Kokoschka, Birgit. Krawietz, and Georges Tamer. De Gruyter: Berlin/Boston, 2013, 323.
- ³⁷ *Majmū‘ Fatāwā* (1995) vol. 1, 48.
- ³⁸ Qur’an 41:37
- ³⁹ Qur’an 3:190
- ⁴⁰ Qur’an 45:3
- ⁴¹ Here it is important to note that, there may be debate concerning *fiṭra* in Ibn Taymiyya’s thought, as to whether it is simply a disposition to know without prior knowledge, or instead holds some primordial knowledge within it from its very instantiation. Following Ovamir Anjum (2012) I’m committed (at least at present), to the position that *fiṭra* for Ibn Taymiyya does not refer to something which already contains within it primordial knowledge, but instead acts as a natural potency to acquire certain kinds of beliefs. Those beliefs then would be appropriately termed, “*fiṭrī* beliefs”, not because they are prior to experience, but because they are a natural acquisition of *fiṭra* functioning properly. See Ovamir Anjum: *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought: The Taymiyyan Movement*. Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 221-222.
- ⁴² *Majmū‘ Fatāwā* (1995) vol. 16, 338.
- ⁴³ *Dar’ ta’āruḍ al-‘aql wa-l-naql* (1979) vol. 3, p. 133.

⁴⁴ Ibn Taymiyya, Taqī al-Dīn. *al-Intiṣār li-ahl al-athar (naqḍ al-mantiq)*. (Mecca: Dār ‘ālam al-Fawā’id, 2014), 49.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 49.

⁴⁶ Carl Sharif el-Tobgui (2020), p. 271.

⁴⁷ *Dar’ ta ‘ārūḍ al-‘aql wa-l-naql* (1979) vol. 8, p. 385.

⁴⁸ Ibid. pp. 533-4.

⁴⁹ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *al-Fawā’id* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 2001), 42-43.

⁵⁰ *Dar’ ta ‘ārūḍ al-‘aql wa-l-naql* (1979) vol. 8, p. 383-4.

⁵¹ On this point, I anticipate potential sceptical objectors. On the general theme of how Muslims may approach scepticism particularly within a Taymiyyan lens, refer to Dr. Nazir Khan’s article: “Atheism and Radical Skepticism: Ibn Taymiyyah’s Epistemic Critique”.

<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/nazir-khan/atheism-and-radical-skepticism-ibn-taymiyyahs-epistemic-critique>

⁵² It is my personal view that justification is perhaps best construed in the terms articulated by the “phenomenal conservativist” (PC) theory of justification. PC roughly has it that, if it seems to S that *p*, then S thereby has at least *prima facie* justification for believing that *p*. Thus, in the absence of some special considerations, if it strongly seems to S that the second-order epistemic belief *p*, namely that their basic belief in Islamic theism is indeed warranted, then they are at least *prima facie* justified in holding that to be the case in the absence of some defeater.

⁵³ An example of how this sort of strategy may pan out can be found in the following paper by Michael Bergmann: “Religious Disagreement and Epistemic Intuitions,” *Philosophy* 81 (2017), 19-43.

⁵⁴ A defence of this sort of argument can be found in Joseph Kim’s *Reformed Epistemology and the Problem of Religious Diversity: Proper function, Epistemic Disagreement, and Christian Exclusivism*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, (2011).

⁵⁵ The distinction between higher and lower level beliefs takes into account the second order epistemic beliefs we form about our beliefs. The idea is that, at the initial or lowest level, we simply form a belief which is or is not justified/warranted for us given certain conditions. Then, reflecting on that belief we move up a level and form a second related epistemic belief such as, “that belief of mine is a justified/warranted belief”. Again – depending on the fulfilment of certain conditions – that second order epistemic belief may or may not be justified/warranted for you, and so on.

⁵⁶ The notion of “Sensible Evidentialism” was initially developed by Stephen Wykstra in his “Towards a Sensible Evidentialism” in William Rowe & William Wainwright (ed.) *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*. Harcourt College Publishers, pp. 426-37 (1989). The idea is roughly that the warrant of certain beliefs does indeed depend upon evidence (of an inferential kind), but it’s not that each individual need access the evidence for themselves, but rather that the evidence be ‘somewhere’ within the epistemic community.

⁵⁷ Majmū‘ Fatāwā (1995) vol. 16, 458.

⁵⁸ Hallaq, Wael. “Ibn Taymiyya on the existence of God.” *Acta Orientalia* 52, (1991), 57.

Nihilism as a Poison - Part 1: The Death of Meaning

In part one of a two part series, Yusuf Ponders introduces the reader to the problem of nihilism, its causes and its effects on society. The essay explores nihilism's relationship with meaninglessness, indifference to truth and amorality. Part one concludes with an introduction to part two: how Islam can be an effective antidote to the poison of nihilism.

Whatever motivates nihilism, that is, the feeling that life and the universe have no meaning or purpose, can also motivate depression and suicide. As a result of the focus in my work on nihilism, I have had many people reach out to me and express their suffering from it. More often than not it is expressed as being overcome with a feeling, rather than something explicitly thought out and reasoned. Therefore, in this series, I intend to make a few of the motivating factors of nihilism clear and lead the reader to practical solutions which will help keep nihilism at bay; or alternatively, point towards a path which will help those who already suffer from it, to overcome it. I will do this over two essays. The first essay will focus mainly on addressing nihilism as a sickness, with a short section on Islam as an antidote at the end. The second essay will focus more explicitly on Islam as a solution to nihilism.

In order to do this in my first essay, I will take a number of steps. First, I will be defining what nihilism is. I will then explain why the subject of nihilism is an important one that should be at the heart of our concerns, and why we should be giving this issue our careful attention. Upon establishing the importance of this, I will elaborate on its relation to the higher values held by a society. Through this, I hope to give the reader a clearer understanding to work with throughout the rest of the essay.

Furthermore, once I have shown that the possibility of nihilism opens up through the collapse of higher values, I will be able to transition into giving a particular example of nihilistic deterioration with regards to *truth*. I intend to outline how a particular kind of valuing truth can lead to undermining the value for truth itself, and therefore lead a society into what is referred to as a “post-truth era”. I wish to demonstrate how the transition from the former era to the latter allows for the conditions to arise which lead to a societal [mental] exhaustion, which in turn leads to an increase in forms of escapism in order to avoid having to face “the burden of consciousness”. That is, the burden of having to face up to the task of figuring out what it means to live, what is going on in the world, and where one fits into all of this exactly. I will explore how these forms of escapism are overabundant in our society, and how they overwhelm us, and as a consequence, we become mentally paralysed and incapable of making any genuine internal progress

Nihilism is both an individual as well as a collective sickness that we are all having to face either directly or indirectly. These threats to meaning are present whether we like to think so or not. Turning a blind eye to the conditions that I will be outlining in sections to come does not make them go away. We must face it head on by first of all recognising its existence, only then we can attempt to overcome it. This sickness will be diagnosed.

The symptoms of this sickness will be assessed in this essay from this point onwards. Looking first at the effects of nihilism on ideas and thinking. Technology and scientific advancement are often praised as a way in which we will transcend many of these issues, however, I wish to show that counter to this opinion, technological advancements, rather than being something to praise, can be seen as facilitating this escapism through what is termed “Techno-Hypnosis”.

This essay will then look at the effects of nihilism on people and society. It will identify issues arising out of the lack of a collective aim, and the increase in societal fracturing we see throughout

the world. All of this has necessary effects on how we think of morality, moral duty, and meaning, for which I intend to explore and highlight the major issues I see us facing as a result of what has been outlined.

I will then summarise the main points of the essay so far, with regards to establishing an understanding of nihilism. I will then introduce us to some thinking in preparation of my second essay. I will identify how many people try to flee the nihilism they are experiencing by picking and choosing elements from many different religions they find useful, while paradoxically rejecting religion as “backwards” or “dogmatic”. That is, I wish to show how the nihilist (whether they know themselves to be one or not), as much as they push away from religion, do not escape religiosity. They try to belittle such concepts as “faith”, yet are caught making numerous leaps of faith themselves.

I will conclude this first essay with a brief explanation as to why I see Islam as a valid solution to the many issues I will cover herein. This will not be a comprehensive explanation, as I will save this for the second essay. However, I did not want to leave the reader with nothing. And so, I hope, God willing, what I write here will be sufficient at temporarily quenching the thirst of those interested in what I begin to offer as a solution to the problems I shed light on in this essay. So, let us begin.

Beginning to Understand Nihilism

The Philosophy of Nihilism

The human being is driven by many needs such as sustenance, shelter, community, but we are also heavily driven by purpose. Insofar as nihilism is the explicit denial that life has any purpose, it is necessarily so, that nihilism denies our humanity. This has the danger of expressing itself in a variety of ways, and so to avoid its consequences we need to work hard at understanding it intimately.

Nihilism can come in many forms, but generally speaking, it can be described as *the rejection of all meaning, purpose, and the disintegration of traditional morality*.¹ David Matheson defines nihilism as maintaining that “no lives are, all things considered, worth living”;² and Raif Donelson further describes a particular form of nihilism as holding that “life is somehow meaningless, hollow” and again, “not worth living”. As we can see from these descriptions, nihilism is not an optimistic worldview, but a pessimistic one.

Friedrich Nietzsche, who is considered the father of the philosophy of nihilism, adds to this concept by saying that “there is no goal, no answer to the question: why?”; and further builds on this by saying, “what is the significance of nihilism? – that the highest values devalue themselves.”³ The feature of “not having a goal”, and of the “highest values devalue[ing] themselves” will be the central focus of my essay.

Before I continue with this central focus, in the following section of this essay, it is important to understand why Nihilism should be of interest to us, as humans. I will now touch on this a little to help us to place ourselves in relation to this discussion on Nihilism.

The Importance of Nihilism

It is crucial that we clarify exactly why it is we should care. Why should we spend our time looking into it at all? The reason I say that concern is necessary is that the feeling of nihilism will very possibly strike you at some point in life, if it has not already. However, if you are lucky enough to never be affected by it, the chances are that at the very least somebody you know and love will. Alternatively, you may not know that you have been affected by it because the word “nihilism” is a strange one that you are not familiar with; it is not often heard by the average person or brought up in day to day conversation. It may very well be the case that upon reading this essay you come to

realise that you have in fact experienced what I am going to describe; you just did not know there was a philosophical term for it. In any case, I wish to convince you that it is important, and that it does require *our* attention. If we fail in this regard people's lives are at stake, and potentially their afterlife.

The philosopher Albert Camus, in his book *The Myth of Sisyphus*, opens his book by saying “[t]here is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide.”⁴ The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who was well known for his pessimism, made some anti-natalist⁵ remarks which follow this “anti-life” theme; the notion that life is just not worth beginning. Although this certainly is not to say that he is promoting suicide as an answer, he does state quite clearly that we should not even bother bringing life into being:

“If children were brought into the world by an act of pure reason alone, would the human race continue to exist? Would not a man rather have so much sympathy with the coming generation as to spare it the burden of existence? Or at any rate not take it upon himself to impose that burden upon it in cold blood.”⁶

Schopenhauer's work was a massive influence on Nietzsche, and definitely a contributing factor to the work he produced on pessimism and nihilism. However we cannot lay the development of these ideas only at the feet of these two philosophers. One may be able to argue that it is the many philosophical ideas themselves that have been littering the field, which have slowly evolved into nihilism; ergo, giving rise to this anti-life sentiment that can be expressed in their nature as either anti-natalist, suicidal, or both. This theme has built momentum over the years, and you see its fruition in the sheer numbers of people that are ending their lives today. The World Health Organisation released an article stating that close to 800,000 people end their lives worldwide *every year*; and for every successful suicide there are many more failed attempts.⁷ To put this into perspective, this is like finding out that every year a city the size of Leeds, UK has committed suicide, and a number of other cities (2 to 4 of them) have attempted to do so but failed; suggesting severe unhappiness, and the general idea that life is not worth living for a very large number of people. On top of this you also have people who consider it, desire it, but do not attempt to end their lives; but in any case, they still consider life not worth living, to warrant taking such drastic action. Furthermore, data quality and collection methods are lacking in many countries around the world, so the figures might in fact be much worse than the data we have at present suggests. The numbers are very high, and this is concerning. Lastly, the connection between this problem and the issue of nihilism is the idea that life is meaningless, without purpose, and not worth living.

In Martin Heidegger's book *Being and Time*, he outlines the idea that what makes *Dasein* [the human being], distinct from other beings is that its very existence is an issue for it.⁸ That is, unlike other beings, the human being must decide what *kind* of a being it is going to be. The human being must decide *how to be*. Will this person decide to work towards being an engineer, an artist, a lawyer, a doctor or a philosopher? It must project itself into the future, set goals, and work towards attaining these goals. The human being drags the ideal out from the realm of mind and into the world, into reality. Other beings do not have to concern themselves with such things. The lion, the bird, the fish and the insect do not need to figure out how to be, they just *are what they are*, and they just *do what they do*. There is very little room or reason for an existential crisis.⁹ The human being on the other hand could have everything one desires, they could have attained all earthly needs and wants in abundance, yet they can still become depressed and suicidal. The human being cannot help but ponder over the meaning of life. We strive for purpose not for the sake of it, but because it is an integral part of our very being! This is why the issue of nihilism is important, and why we should be concerned with it.

Nihilism's relevance to goals and values.

Let me begin by explaining what a value is, and then by giving an example that explains how the

highest values undermine themselves, as this is often a source of confusion for those first hearing it. When talking about “value”, what is meant is something which is considered of relative worth, utility, or importance.¹⁰ We can talk of material things having value, but we can also talk of ideas or principles having it too. When talking about higher values, what I am making reference to here are the principles or standards which individuals or collectives hold as the most important, and feel they have a duty to maintain or nurture for themselves or their society. They are what a community considers as *the* most important things, and can be what unites them as a people, or what they collectively consider to be of great worth and utility. Religion is a great example of this; in the muslim world, Islam, that is, the worship of God, is *the* highest value.

A Higher Value Undermining Itself

One may find an example within the “Christian west”¹¹ with *Truth*. Truth was made a higher value to the point that it began to undermine the very foundations that gave rise to it in the first place. But how did it become a higher value? Prior to Christianity, Europe was mostly polytheistic in its worship, dedicating themselves to multiple gods. Now although there certainly were instances of the gods acting truthfully, there were also examples of them acting in very questionable ways. The Greek god Zeus for example, is notorious for raping women. There are also numerous examples of lying by both the ancient gods and heroes of the past.¹² There was such an emphasis on cheating, lying and deception in ancient polytheistic religions that Socrates himself, in Plato’s *Republic*, had to discuss censoring them for this very reason. In the preliminary writing to the chapter, the following was stated as a commentary by the editor on what was to follow in Plato’s dialogue:

“It must also be remembered that the Greeks had no Bible, and what the Bible has been to us as a source of theology and morals, poets were to the Greeks. And if Plato seems very preoccupied with the morals and theological aspect of the poets it is because it was from them the ordinary Greek was expected to acquire his moral and theological notions.”¹³

This issue was notably something the ancients had to deal with, as pantheons of gods in ancient religions always contained a plethora of different characters, many of whom were at odds with each other. Socrates despised these stories so much, due to their nature, and the problems that I have alluded to here, that he said:

“And they shall not be repeated in our state, Adeimantus, nor shall any young audience be told that anyone who commits horrible crimes, or punishes his father unmercifully, is doing nothing out of the ordinary but merely what the first and greatest of the gods have done before.”¹⁴

Socrates is one of the most well-known and well-respected western philosophers in history,¹⁵ and he was quick to point this problem out. Now with the rise of Christianity, a solution to this problem became present in the Bible. Lying became “an abomination to The Lord”; on the other hand “those who act faithfully are His delight”.¹⁶ In another part the believer is commanded to become “a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”¹⁷ Truth became a central emphasis of the doctrine, and the followers were warned of severe punishment for going astray. Unlike the previous religions, where the many gods acting in abhorrent ways opened up the potential for this to be justified, Christianity warned that “a false witness will not go unpunished, and he who breathes out lies will perish.”¹⁸ Truthfulness became present as an explicit command by *the* highest value – God. As a consequence of this, His commands were necessarily to be valued as well.

However, with what Nietzsche referred to as the “death of God” (the loss of faith) in the western world, motivation for this moral underpinning was lost, and with that, the foundation to their ability to claim something is good absolutely. Their valuing of truth became “free floating” as it were, and it was assumed to be “self-evident” by the average person, and many academics. However, philosophy is known for leaving nothing unquestioned; it explores everything and leaves no stone

unturned. Eventually, the false assumption that truth is a *necessary* higher value in a secular world—independently from the command of God—began to crumble. This becomes especially evident when people became more focused on worldly things, and began to be more concerned with philosophical ideas like utilitarianism.¹⁹ When values are being rooted in sensations like pleasure and pain, this becomes a paradigm through which truth can be seen, in certain circumstances, as an evil, *necessarily*. If truth ever happens to get in the way of the greatest amount of pleasure for the greatest amount of people, what motivation remains to value truth? If it happens to be the case that a grand lie is best suited for providing such an end, truth will very quickly be abandoned for something more satisfying. However, this is not something that would just occur overnight. Christianity has been around for so long that its moral system has become somewhat ingrained into society, and many of its moral axioms are taken as a given.

Nihilism's Impact Today

The Rise of the “Post-Truth” Era

It is this historical movement, especially from the beginning of the enlightenment period, through to the widespread loss of faith, that can be said to have led to what is now described as the “post-truth” era. Expressing concern, the Guardian newspaper writes: “In our new normal, experts are dismissed and alternative facts flagrantly offered. This suspicion of specialists is part of a bigger problem.”²⁰ We have entered a strange period in time where the commitment to truth, inherited from Christian roots, has revealed a seemingly unavoidable scepticism which spawns out of the issues surrounding the nature of having to have trust in what we refer to as “the experts”. Trust is a central feature of any society, as the average citizen does not have the time or ability to understand the (often very esoteric) nature of the fields that experts study. They must therefore have faith in them in order for any relationship between the two parties to function productively. That is, of course, so long as these experts are in fact trustworthy. This relationship always leaves open the possibility of trust being abused via manipulation and corruption, as the laymen do not have the knowledge or the ability to recognise when this trust has been violated to then be able to call it out. This is an ever-present threat in *all* societies. The issues surrounding corruption and dishonesty have become more apparent because of direct access to sources like the internet. Organisations such as *Wikileaks* (and others) have released a plethora of information exposing the corruption that is commonplace within governments and corporations alike. Such revelations have had a huge impact on the overall trust in the US government, for example, with the percentage of people who trust them dropping from nearly 80% in the 60’s to less than 20% in the present day.²¹ If one scandal after another is constantly being uncovered and publicised all over the internet, it is understandable that this would have major effects on the levels of trust.

Societal Exhaustion

It is understandable that with the conditions that I have outlined thus far, that this could lead to the rise of what I will call a *societal exhaustion*. That is, the collective mental fatigue and confusion brought about by there being too many varying opinions on too many subjects all of which are expressed by too many different “experts”. This makes many people feel incapable of finding the truth, and so in large numbers give up on being able to attain it, or fall into some form of relativism.

Many of the ideas that the majority of people in a society have taken for granted for centuries have now been put into question. In academia, all of that which was previously taken for granted has been dissected, and the discussion for the justification or dismissal of such ideas has become increasingly complex and esoteric. Furthermore, when these discussions take place in the public sphere it often becomes heated and controversial. As if the mental energy required to cover such topics was not demanding enough, throwing anxiety into the mix does not help matters improve.

This is especially the case for those who have jobs to hold, families to spend time with, and rest to have, etc, all while having very little time to cover these “hot topics” extensively enough to grasp them. These subjects can be difficult for dedicated academics. Let alone the general public, who are expected to absorb all of this during a fiery discussion on evening television after a long day at work. The issue here is further amplified when those on either side of the debate are trying to get the intended audience to incline towards the position they are propagating, and not for a position of admitting one’s inability to comprehend the problems at hand in the little time one has been given to explore it. Therefore, if the public does incline to one position or the other, they are not doing so out of knowledge, but rather out of being persuaded via the most appealing rhetoric. Truth under these conditions becomes democratic in a very problematic way, because the populous is being led to hold opinions, not knowledge.

All of this is coupled with the fact that we have *all* been overwhelmed by the mass of information available on the internet. This relatively new resource is so large that it is beyond the capacity of the collaborative efforts of everyone on the planet to be able to process comprehensively. This inability to process the information would necessarily make establishing what the truth is all the more difficult. Furthermore, we may know more now than we have ever known before about the natural world, but every answer has brought with it many more questions. Paradoxically, we now know that we *do not know* much more than we have ever previously been able to imagine. In the pursuit of truth, instead of making life and the world more intelligible or clear, there are very good grounds for the argument that this pursuit has only made it all the more confusing and murkier; intensifying its mystery, complexity, and leaving the average person less sure about themselves and their place in the universe. Hence why it can be said that the higher value (truth), has undermined itself.

Overwhelmed by Overabundance

I will also explore how this can motivate the onset of nihilism. In the 1970’s, author Alvin Toffler made mention of some of the predictions people had about the trajectory of the future. He points to the thought of a few individuals who saw the rise of a more standardised culture, and makes special mention of the thought of Jacques Ellul:

According to Ellul, man was far freer in the past when “Choice was a real possibility for him.” By contrast, today, “The human being is no longer in any sense the agent of choice.” And, as for tomorrow: “In the future, man will apparently be confined to the role of a recording device.” Robbed of choice, he will be acted upon, not active. He will live, Ellul warns, in a totalitarian state run by a velvet-gloved Gestapo.²²

Now although I can be sure that many people would still think Ellul was onto something here, I think Toffler had a very good counter argument. Contrary to Ellul, Toffler thought the issue for the future had less to do with the absence of choices, but rather the overabundance of choices to the extent that it causes paralysis. He says that “[t]hey may turn out to be victims of that peculiarly super-industrial dilemma: overchoice.”²³ Furthermore, he goes on to explain this concept by adding that it gives rise to “the point at which the advantages of diversity and individualization are cancelled by the complexity of the buyer’s decision-making process.”²⁴ He happily admits that diversity and individualization may very well have its advantages, people may feel a sense of uniqueness about themselves which helps to make the choices feel special for example; however, if the complexity of the choice becomes too much, the amount of stress this causes might completely nullify any positive feelings that may have had the chance to arise. Now here he is talking about purchasing items, but this can just as easily be applied to ideas, or subject areas for research. In order to learn about something, you must first choose which path of learning you wish to take. However, in order to do that one must first sift through the available options, which are countless. We see this issue express itself very often within the atheistic/agnostic apologetics circles when they reject all religions on the basis of the sheer number of them. It is this which will help to highlight the absurdity behind the naive belief that more freedom, and the more choices to exercise that

freedom with, is necessarily good. To the contrary, it can in fact cause paralysis and the inability to make a choice altogether, out of fear of picking the wrong one. Furthermore, it can also cause dissatisfaction and the inability to enjoy what was picked, simply because of the ever-present possibility of having not made the best choice.

I want to make something clear. It is very well the case that a limited choice can be better than no choice at all in a number of circumstances. I do not deny this. However, it certainly does not follow from this that endless choices are necessarily better than a limited amount of choice. The psychologist Barry Schwartz goes on to confirm Toffler's predictions in his book *The Paradox of Choice*.²⁵ In his TedTalks presentation, inspired by his book, he outlines the 'official dogma' as follows, and I paraphrase: "The aim is to maximise welfare, which means to maximise freedom and choice. More freedom means there will be more choices, and more choices means there will be greater welfare."²⁶ He claims this is false, listing a number of reasons why too much choice makes people miserable. Firstly, they can suffer from regret and/or anticipated regret; secondly due to the costs of opportunity on things, like time and resources; thirdly due to an inflation of expectations that is caused by the increase of choice; and last of all, self-blame. If it is *you* that has made the wrong choice, who else is there to blame but yourself?

Now as I've already briefly mentioned, if we take into consideration the huge number of religions there are, political decisions that need to be made, ethical theories one can subscribe to, or all the other things that the modern person is faced with choosing from, it is not difficult to see why picking the choice of not choosing might seem so attractive (even if somewhat paradoxical). Furthermore, linking this back to Nietzsche, we now have the foundation from which this pathological state of nihilism might arise from. This choice paralysis described by Toffler and Schwartz maps on very well to the characteristics of the psychological exhaustion the average person might experience in the face of this information overload. This in turn gives rise to the feeling of "The Absurd" that many of the existential philosophers were famous for discussing. For Albert Camus, this was the utter failure of the world to meet our expectations, or the result of the ideals that we have in our minds not successfully mapping onto reality. For Thomas Nagel it was better described as the conflict between the seriousness with which we took our lives, and the ever-present possibility of considering all of which we take seriously as "arbitrary or open for doubt."²⁷

Nihilism as a Sickness

So far I have I have discussed several important issues. First of all, I discussed what is meant by the term "nihilism", and how higher values relate to this. I have also delved into concepts such as higher values, post-truth, and societal exhaustion. I now wish to transition into a discussion on how the nihilistic state of being should be understood, namely as a sickness; a sickness of meaninglessness and insignificance. Having understood some of the causes and developments of this sickness, and by explaining this diagnosis a little more in this section, I will explore further in the following sections the effects of this sickness. First by looking at the effects of this sickness on ideas and thinking, and then on people and society.

Nietzsche referred to nihilism as "an intermediary pathological state."²⁸ This portrays the condition more as a temporary mental disorder that one must overcome, rather than as a philosophical choice made after careful deliberation. It is not characterised by a fully informed rational exploration, but by an exhaustion and the "immense generalisation, the inference *that life has no meaning whatsoever*."²⁹ It is not necessarily the result of logical deduction.

Most people that experience life as meaningless have not gone through the process of writing it down analytically to work out its validity and soundness. It arises as an experience, as something felt. Many of these people have likely not been trained in the field of logic and reasoning, and so it would be unreasonable to have expected them to be so rigid with this type of approach in the first place. This is not to disparage the average person who goes through this experience, nor the way in

which they approach it. I think it would be unfair (and also rather elitist) to expect everyone in the world to act like academic philosophers in every regard, and to do so intuitively and without the training. Life is hard and it can beat down the best of us at times, and no amount of rigorous training in university can always equip you to overcome these issues. Not only that, if the person in question here is not well inclined to such tasks, making them go through such a process might only worsen their condition rather than to alleviate it. If someone is struggling with a sense of meaninglessness and helplessness, throwing too much philosophical jargon around is not necessarily going to be the best course of action. We must endeavour to navigate this carefully, and be sure to carve out a clear path to higher ground where the some careful deliberation can take place.

The onset of nihilism is induced as Nietzsche describes: it is a pathological state caused by mental exhaustion, but it is something that *can* be overcome; not something we should aim to exasperate. Nietzsche himself saw nihilism as something to overcome, necessarily. As they say, nature abhors a vacuum. But all of this begs a question: What causes the feelings of the meaninglessness of life to arise in the first place?

The author Philip Phenix, in his book “Realms of Meaning”, points out a number of factors which are a threat to the experience of meaning and significance. He says the “perennial threat to meaning is intensified under the conditions of modern industrial civilisation”,³⁰ and he lists four particular factors which lead to this intensification. That is:

1. The spirit of criticism and scepticism which dominate the domains of science and philosophy, among many other fields.
2. The tendency towards depersonalisation and the fragmenting of complex societies due to industrialisation and alienation.
3. Overabundance of both *things* and *information*, inevitably overwhelming the modern citizen.
4. Rapid rates of change which leave a constant feeling of impermanence and lack of security.³¹

According to Phenix, all of these factors contribute to an overall increased sense of meaninglessness, and the experience of a lack of significance. Unfortunately, all of this can also further contribute to rates of suicide, depression and substance abuse in a society,³² which likely only further adds to the sense of nihilism that prevails over all those who are affected by the increase of such things occurring around them. This is a nasty feedback loop to say the least. You might also notice that the four factors listed here are much more relevant today than they were in the 1960’s when Phenix published his book. Although they were still very relevant then, the conditions he has outlined have only intensified as time has progressed.

Let us now take a further look at the effects of Nihilism on ideas and thinking today. The specific intensification of the sickness of nihilism, taking hold, that this essay explores is as described in number 3 (above) by Phenix, i.e. the overabundance of both things and information, which overwhelms the modern citizen, leaving only the experience that all things are meaningless and insignificant.

The Effects of Nihilism on Ideas & Thinking

Truth & Techno-Hypnosis

It was naively thought that this pursuit for as much truth as possible would necessarily be a benefit for society. However, it seems mainly to have led to a thirst for advances in technology which make life more convenient, and also advances and increases in our leisure opportunities, without ever asking if this should necessarily be considered a benefit nor consider its potentially negative consequences. One such type of consequence is the *techno-hypnosis* offered through technological

escapism as outlined in the work of the author Nolen Gertz in his book *Nihilism & Technology*.³³ This is linked to what Nietzsche referred to as “self-hypnosis”, wherein the human being turns to technology in order to zone out. That is, to avoid life and to avoid being human. Many people appear to have developed a desire to avoid the *burden of consciousness*, to avoid thinking too deeply about the big questions in life and on existence. Instead, we turn to things like Netflix, YouTube, or social media to facilitate this self-inflicted hypnosis. The task of trying to figure out exactly what is going on is daunting and has no end in sight, so engaging in petty tasks which distract us from such burdens is a very effective way of avoiding giving focus to the burdens of consciousness altogether. One need only look at what pop culture is pouring out to meet the demands of the public desire to zone out: reality TV shows, prank YouTube channels, the gaming industry, etc. All of this [and more] offers a great deal of mind-numbing entertainment for the needs of the modern populous. We mined the world for information, and have amassed more than we ever thought possible, yet the average person is still more enamoured by illusion and fantasy. They appear to be more ready and eager to escape reality, not immerse themselves in it. We set out in search of truth and became overwhelmed and confused by it, so now the average person seeks comfort elsewhere by hiding from it.

The issue here is that this technological escapism hardly offers the individuals who engage in it the opportunity to feel any significance, or any genuine sense of meaning in their lives. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, it is heart breaking that one of the leading causes of death today in young people is suicide. On average someone ends their life once every 40 seconds; and for every person that has successfully killed themselves, there are even more who have attempted suicide.³⁴ Alongside this, rates of depression and anxiety are on the increase, and it is said that “[p]arallel lines of evidence indicate that modernization is generally associated with higher rates of depression.”³⁵ So we have more truths than ever before, and we have now obtained truths about how the industrialised collection of these truths has led to conditions which increase the general standards of living, yet also paradoxically lead to increases in suicide and deteriorating mental health, and thus, a reliance on effective means of escaping having to face these problems by immersing ourselves in technological escapism. This gives rise to further questions: If we are so busy trying to escape the burden of consciousness via technology, does this have any effect on our sense of duty to the society we find ourselves in? Does this escapism from reality not also mean to escape from our community? Is society, and the people that make it up, not necessarily a part of the reality we are avoiding?

Society & Moral Duty

It follows that if we see the world as something that we need to escape, we are necessarily escaping the people that populate that world as the two are intimately connected. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger, in his work *Being & Time*, describes the human being³⁶ as a being that is a “Being-in-the-world”. That is, we do not simply exist in the world like a *thing* or an *object* exists in it. The way you or I exist in the world is not equivalent to the way chocolates exist in a box, or water in a glass. To describe the human being in such a way completely misses something fundamental that makes the human distinct. Describing this issue, William Large says:

To think of our world in this way would be to confuse our way of Being with the Being of things, which is precisely what we should not do. I do not exist in the same way as the glass does. There is no doubt that I can be treated that way. In a certain way of looking at things, I too can appear as a thing. Seen in a photograph, I might seem to a casual observer to be merely in a room in the same way that water is in a glass. Even here, it is possible to look at the picture in a different way. The expression of my face might tell you how I felt at the time. Perhaps I look miserable or uncomfortable. Perhaps my world was not quite right with me. The expression ‘my world’, and the fact you understand it in a certain way, already tells you there is quite a difference between me and the water in the glass. In what sense can we say the water has its own world? Yet it is very easy for

us to think about ourselves and others in this way. What else am I asking about when I meet you in the street and say “How are you?” Am I not asking about your world?³⁷

We recognise this of ourselves, fundamentally, and of others. The very nature of our being demands we recognise this fact. We have our worlds, our perspectives, our unique subjectivities. A further thing that Heidegger recognises in his work is that attached to this notion of “Being-in-the-World” is also the idea that we are a “Being-with-Others”. That is, we have an inescapable relation to the way we are in the world with others, and “it is a part of what it means to be me”.³⁸ I cannot escape the Other. Even when alone, we are only alone in so far as we recognise the Other is absent.

Now if the human being is trying to escape the burden of consciousness by escaping the world into artificial forms of entertainment, then they are necessarily escaping their relation to other human beings which are intimately tied to our experience of the world. One may argue in retort to this that there are still others present in this escape, be that the actors in films, or characters in games. However, the important difference here is any relation with such others is artificial and permanently one way. They may impact us and we may see them, hear them; but it does not happen the other way around.

In this escape from the world, and inevitably the escape from others, one is potentially removing the sense of duty towards the community as well. With the rise of convenience technology there is a rise in the physical isolation of others. Cars isolate us from each other on our journeys, and leave us stuck in our own little bubbles. Public transport is filled with people glued to their mobile devices with earphones in, occupying our sight and hearing and letting the Other fade away into the peripheral. There is a decrease in communal religious gatherings in the West,³⁹ which are rapidly being replaced with weekend binges fuelled by alcohol and drugs. In the UK alone, there are over half a million dependent drinkers,⁴⁰ and in a survey reported by the Independent, 68% of those questioned described their neighbours as “strangers” and 73% said they did not know their neighbour’s names.⁴¹ People don’t know the names of the people who live next door, but they know the names of the celebrities that populate their shows, and probably know more about their lives than people who live close enough to hear you scream for help were you ever in trouble. This is a huge problem, but a very telling one with regards to our relationship to technology, and our sense of duty to those around us.

Earlier on in this essay I made a particular focus on truth as a higher value to show that societies must orient themselves according to the things that they value the most. That may be truth, but it could also be the good of the community, or pleasure, freedom, reason, security, etc.⁴² Once the values have been established, the society must then move towards the goals that help them achieve the manifestation of those values. These concepts and ideas become the foundation for everything that begins to develop out of these communities. However, they are ultimately underpinned by the belief that such values are a *moral duty* upon the individuals that make up the community itself, and that which binds them together as a united people. In order for truth to be a higher value, it must be seen as good! That is, it must be something desired, and considered to be beneficial in one way or another. However, if at any point truth is shown to be detrimental, what motivation remains to hold truth with such high regard? What moral duty binds the people to truth when it ceases to benefit them?

From the perspective of a society that has lost faith in their foundational traditions, and who have removed God from their social sphere, the motivating factors that necessarily commit people to truth— such as fear of eternal punishment— are no longer present. The same can be said with regards to the fear of punishment for the sin of committing suicide. In a secular world, the loss of God in the hearts of people is accompanied by a rise in doubts and scepticism. This also opens the door to thoughts of what one is potentially missing out on. If there is no afterlife, no ultimate accountability, why should someone necessarily care about justice, truth or the community at large? Especially if these things require great sacrifice, get in the way of experiencing of intense pleasure,

and doing what one *really* wants to do. Take the words of the popular YouTube channel *Kurzgesagt* for example, where in a video on the subject of “Optimistic Nihilism” they say:

“You only get one shot at life, which is scary, but it also sets you free. If the universe ends in heat death, every humiliation you suffer in your life will be forgotten. **Every mistake you made will not matter in the end. Every bad thing you did will be voided. If our life is all we get to experience, then it’s the only thing that matters.** If the universe has no principles, the only principles relevant are the ones *we* decide on.”⁴³ [Emphasis mine]

The above quote was taken from a video that has so far received nearly 11 million views and over 644 thousand likes, along with tens of thousands of comments of praise; it can hardly be said to be an insignificant movement that is not worthy of attention. Nihilism has clearly taken a hold of popular consciousness, and videos such as the one I have referenced are attempts to combat this reality. However, I would like to draw attention to the fact that the quote itself expresses some troubling remarks. These remarks have inferences that help us to better understand the core of this philosophy. If every mistake you make will not matter, then why worry about making mistakes? If every bad thing you did will be voided, then why not do bad things? If our life is the only thing that matters, then why should one necessarily care about other people? Recently there was a video going viral on social media of a man who covered a kitten in fuel and set it on fire, only to watch (and record) it run around in the dark hopelessly until it burned to death. If the perpetrator of this heinous crime was to watch *Kurzgesagt*’s video, would it help convince him that he should feel guilt or remorse for what he did? Or rather, would it only increase his sense of security that in the end every bad thing he did “will be voided” and that he has nothing to worry about? After all, this optimistic nihilism has “set him free”. I do not think *Kurzgesagt* had such people in mind when making this video, but nonetheless, such viewers are certainly going to find them relieving, if not comforting.

Furthermore, commitment to truth for such individuals would not necessarily be beneficial at all. If truth is an obstacle for benefit or gain, then the attachment to truth would quickly be shown to be a pragmatic one. That is, it would be accepted on the basis that it works. It is important to note and emphasise here that I am in no way claiming that all people who become secular, and who embrace nihilism, would necessarily become psychopaths like the gentleman I have mentioned above. This is clearly an absurd conclusion. The point of mentioning this is simply to outline that the creators of this video have taken a very naive and idealistic approach to nihilism and towards their perception of their audience. They have clearly not considered the potential implications of this thought process and failed to justify why one should necessarily be empathetic towards others at all. What they have espoused is fertile grounds for a selfish philosophy, or other systems of thought centred around the will to power.

The Effects of Nihilism on People & Society

A Fractured Society

The emphasis on valuing freedom and individuality in the Western world has led to portions of the society moving in very different directions on a number of different subjects. As an example, a study by pew research has shown that from 1994 to 2014, the US has become more divided as time has moved forward.⁴⁴ There is significantly less political overlap, or common agreement between different parties, now, than there was over 20 years ago. This appears to be expressing itself in a variety of different ways. The US at the moment is suffering from a myriad of different problems, and it is not the only place. A people can only move forward together, towards something collectively, if they can agree on what to aim at and how to achieve it. Historically, that collective aim would be encapsulated by the tradition. Now, however, with an emphasis on the rejection of tradition and a focus on more self-centred philosophies, how can there be any collective aim other than to collectively aim at not necessarily collectively aiming? A strange aim indeed. It is akin to

having a car that has a steering wheel for each seat, each connected to its own wheel. This would not be that big of an issue if everyone was aiming at the same destination, synchronised their movements and agreed on which route to take to get there. However, if everyone is aiming at different things, has different ideas of how to attain them, and agreed before setting off on their journey that they will aim independently, then this car is going to have all of its wheels pointing in different directions. The result will be that no one is going to get to where they want to go, or they are going to end up crashing into a wall. I would argue this same principle applies to whole communities, to states, and to nations. If they cannot be united upon fundamental issues, where can they be expected to take themselves except towards disunity and upheaval? The only real question at this point is: “when?”

Now I have no knowledge of the future, so any timescale given would be guess work. The consequences of what I have spoke of in this essay may come to fruit in my lifetime, or it could come to its conclusion at some point beyond my death. Alternatively, the societies in question could, at some point, come to realise the error in their ways. We can take the example of the people of the prophet Yūnus (Jonah, AS) who were on the brink of destruction but they were able to change their ways just in time. This may very well occur to the modern societies that suffer from what I have outlined, and its consequences would be diverted; the people could begin to aim together and mend the fractures. However, this change may not occur at all. In which case, only God can really say when such fracturing will take its toll, and how that will play out exactly.

In Nietzsche’s book *The Gay Science*, in one of the most famous aphorisms he has written titled, “The Madman”, he touches on something quite descriptive of what I have outlined here. He describes a man who is known to the townspeople as crazy. He runs into the market square and interrupts the general populous going about their day and minding their own business. He demands to know where God is, and in response they ridicule him. Nietzsche is here trying to show how the modern person has lost their faith in God, and see it akin to children’s tales, something to laugh at and mock. However, the madman does not take kindly to their mocking him, smashes his lantern on the floor and rebukes them. He makes it very clear that something terrible has occurred and that they do not yet realise the gravity of the situation. At which point he says his infamous line:

“‘Where is God?’ He cried; ‘I’ll tell you! *We have killed him* – you and I! We are all his murderers. But how did we do this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down? Aren’t we straying as though through an infinite nothing? Isn’t empty space breathing at us? Hasn’t it got colder? Isn’t night and more night coming again and again?”^[45]

The killing of God in this paragraph is not meant in a literal sense, but rather it is symbolic of the loss of faith in the western world. He then talks about the idea of becoming unchained from the sun and drifting out into an infinite void with no sense of direction. The sun is that which everything centres on. So long as we were “chained” to it, we had something that united us, and which gave us direction and light to see. It was a focal reference point. However, upon this “unchaining” it has projected us out into the abyss. That is to say, in a Godless world there is nothing left to keep us centred, give us direction, or light our way. This being ‘thrown out into the darkness’ does not necessitate that we float off together either. Each member of the modern society can be left to float in different directions away from one another. It is this that I say is expressive of the modern, secular and liberal society. An emphasis on freedom and individual unique expression for their own sake, in conjunction with overabundance of choice, information, and the loss of faith in God, is enough to not only unchain us from the sun, but from each other. Ergo, we have the motivating forces in play for the fracturing of society. Everyone is aiming at different ends. What the modern western society considers its highest values necessarily lead to its people drifting apart from one another, and becoming alienated.

Morality, Meaning & Leaps of Faith

Now let us consider morality and meaning. What role do they play in the modern society which has made a lot of effort to remove God from the social sphere and how does this effect the mental state and morality of its citizens? Questions on such things as abortion, suicide, sexual identity, race relations, cultural expression, acceptable social behaviours, the role of government or authority and so on, have a variety of opinions associated with them within the secular western world. If a people cannot be united upon simple things, one cannot expect them to be united on larger issues; especially without a guiding principle. If a tradition which binds the people in a society together has been abandoned and replaced with a focus on vague ideas of freedom and personal expression, coupled with such notions as moral relativism or subjectivism, it is no wonder that we see increases in polarisation. If the community at large has valued things which lead that community in countless different directions, can you really expect anything other than increasing political polarisation? As time passes and the differences towards these ideas develop, evolve and expand while increasing in complexity, it appears inevitable that the modern secular societies have gotten themselves into the position they have. It appears perfectly reasonable for the average person to look at this quagmire and feel completely overwhelmed and out of their depth. Is it any wonder that such an environment might be the perfect breeding grounds for a societal nihilism? That is, the conditions of which the feeling of meaninglessness can become more wide spread.

This now takes us on to a very interesting observation by Nietzsche on the issues with morality following from the death of God, where the people affected by it have yet to recognise the gravity of the situation. On this he says the following:

“They are rid of the Christian God and now believe all the more firmly that they must cling to Christian morality. [...] In England one must rehabilitate oneself after every little emancipation from theology by showing in a veritably awe-inspiring manner what a moral fanatic one is. That is the penance they pay there.

We others hold otherwise. When one gives up on the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality from under one's feet. This morality is by no means self-evident: this point has to be exhibited again and again, despite these English flatheads. Christianity is a system, a whole view of things thought out together. By breaking one main concept out of it, the faith in God, one breaks the whole: nothing necessary remains in one's hands. Christianity presupposes that man does not know, cannot know, what is good for him, what evil: he believes in God, who alone knows it. Christianity is a command; its origin is transcendent; it is beyond all criticism, all right to criticism; it has truth if God is the truth – it stands and falls with faith in God.

When the English actually believe that they know “intuitively” what is good and evil, when they therefore suppose that they no longer require Christianity as a guarantee of morality, we merely witness the effects of the dominion of the Christian value-judgement and an expression of the strength and depth of this dominion: such that the origin of English morality has been forgotten, such that the very conditional character of its right to existence is no longer felt. For the English, morality is not yet a problem.”⁴⁶

Commitment to higher values are themselves necessarily moral commitments. The commitment is made because a people believe it is the right thing to do; a duty because *it is good*, followed by those in society who *are good*. However, as Nietzsche shows very astutely here, when the morality which has its foundations in the Abrahamic tradition is separated from a belief in God, this also separates it from the necessary moral commitments associated with it. These moral conclusions are by no means necessarily “intuitive”.

The modern secular world has yet to ask why it sees truth as a higher value, or why the society should see itself as having a duty to uphold truth as a necessary value at all. Seeing truth in such high regard is a consequence of the Christian roots of the West. But if Christianity has lost its grip, then the *absolute* commitment to truth must be justified. The same goes for morality, for reason

itself, and to any of the values the society holds. But this raises countless other questions, to which there is an abundance of opinions, and even more information. To who's authority do we abide by? How do we justify and establish this authority that once belonged only to God? As Nietzsche says, "[d]o we ourselves not have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it?" What do we do when it becomes apparent that such a thing is absurd to wish for? Furthermore, in a world no longer chained to a uniting principle, to what degree do we apply freedom practically in a society and to what degree do we give it up for the sake of security and comfort? All of this takes a lot of time, effort, resources and energy to explore; and many laymen just simply do not have any of this to spare in order to adequately cover these subjects enough to make a justified conclusion on the matters as a whole. What is left for the finite human individual other than to make leaps of faith with many, if not most subject matters, in this regard?

It is clear that leaps of faith are absolutely necessary, be that for the theist or the atheist. Time is constantly steaming ahead and there is nothing we can do to stop that. The necessity to make choices will constantly arise and you need to act when this occurs. Unfortunately, one is not always blessed with time to dwell on it philosophically with a team of trained experts. It may be somewhat afforded to the university student in a seminar, but this is not how life plays out for most people. Take the classical thought experiment that involves deciding whether or not to pull the lever to prevent the train from killing several people, but instead sacrificing only one. Discussions on this one example alone can fill volumes of books, which would take a lot of time to read and contemplate. However, if this very example were to occur, you would have to make a decision now! No thinking about it endlessly is permitted under such circumstances; the train is barreling down the tracks and if you do not act now, it will be too late. Do you pull the lever? Do you even have time to ask that question, or do you act intuitively on an impulse? This is life. Sometimes you may fail to make a choice, but the outcomes in some circumstances are identical to one of the choices you could have made. Failing to decide actively whether or not to pull the lever has the same outcome as choosing not to pull it and letting the five tied to the track perish. Obviously, life is not always as extreme as this particular thought experiment, but the underlying theme of having to act now and without the liberty of much contemplation is a common occurrence in daily life.

Last of all, this is not to say everything is a leap of faith, nor is it an attempt to put all knowledge into question. It is simply an attempt to be honest with regards to the limits of the human being. We are not all knowing. We are however, riddled with blind spots and ignorance. Acknowledging this does not necessitate epistemological nihilism as it is itself a knowledge claim. If you admit this, you simultaneously admit you also know something with certainty, and therefore admit knowledge is possible. The point of this is just to acknowledge the necessary starting point for all human beings, in reflecting on how our finite nature effects our relationship with the world, our community and our place within them. In a faithless society which sees itself as free from God, and with a focus on vague conceptions of freedom, individualism, materialism, consumerism, and hedonism, there is nothing to bind us necessarily to each other. In the analogy Nietzsche gave, we not only drift away from the sun, but we drift away from almost everything and everyone.

Furthermore, separately from questions of meta-ethics and talks of what morality is ontologically speaking, the decision must first be made regarding the question of who we put in charge of seeking solutions to these moral problems in the first place. However, modern society finds itself in a strange predicament. We have very large populations living in condensed areas. The city of London has nearly 9 million people residing in it.⁴⁷ These numbers are so large you can't even fathom what this would look like as a crowd. To offer some perspective, Wembley Stadium, the largest stadium in London, can hold 90,000 people! You would need 100 of these stadiums to hold the population of the entire city. This is huge! How does this group of people decide who should run the city in a way that doesn't require leaps of faith, or trust in large groups of people one does not know? It's impossible. Faith and trust in strangers who have faith and trust in strangers is inevitable. A city of 9 million people cannot know each other intimately enough to say they know the people who run their city "well enough" so that it doesn't constitute faith, if many of them don't even know who their

next door neighbours are (a growing problem in modern society).

The reality is that our condition is such that we have no choice but to initiate systems of faith that we believe best mediate these epistemological issues. This is not to say we should just throw them all out of the window and cease to use them because we found that “dirty word” to be one which is inescapable. Faith is an inescapable part of life. I accept and understand that. However, I see it is a growing issue that many fail to see the necessity of faith in everyday life on many occasions and naively neglect this fact. Ironically, some people have faith in the idea that they don’t have faith; or that faith is somehow synonymous with being naive and lacking critical thinking skills. This is far from the truth.

Summary

So far in this essay I have done a number of things. First of all, I explained what nihilism is exactly. I gave a number of definitions, and focused in on Nietzsche’s explanation of nihilism being motivated by higher values undermining themselves. I then explained why the subject of nihilism is an important one, and why it requires our attention. I made a connection between it and suicide, and did so with the intention of showing that if you want to solve the problem of suicide, you need to confront the issues surrounding life’s meaning, or the experience of its meaninglessness.

In order to illustrate this, I led you through the example of Truth as a higher value, and how a naive approach to it led to its own undermining and the rise of the “post-truth” era. I then made the connection between the rise of this era with the rise of the societal exhaustion caused by a lack of trust in the “experts” and people in authority as the commitment to truth slowly begins to reveal more and more corruption.

I then lead to the observation that in most cases being affected by nihilism is more akin to a sickness than a rational deduction. Although it does have those who defend it in terms of reasoned analysis, most who are stricken with nihilism do not take a logical route, but are rather led there via their circumstances. I finish by pointing out four major factors that facilitate the threat to meaning, and hone in on one in particular, the issue of overabundance. Although the focus of overabundance is usually spoken about in terms of a material approach, I took this idea and focused on the issues surrounding the overabundance of information. With reference to the work of the authors such as Toffler and Schwartz, I have shown how the concept of “overchoice” equally applies here and that it has a profound effect on the current zeitgeist.

After diagnosing this sickness as meaninglessness and insignificance, I look at the effects of this sickness, i.e., its symptoms. I do this first looking at the effects of nihilism on thinking and idea, and then on people and society. I show how this is motivated by what Nolen Gertz calls techno-hypnosis, which is the active attempt to escape the burden of consciousness and the dread caused by being overwhelmed by everything one is faced with. Despite our access to more things and information, suicide and depression are on the increase; specifically, as a direct result of the modern predicament. From here I move on to the issue of a society becoming fractured because of its commitment to ideas centred on individualism and freedom. The more a society obsesses over such ideas, the more it necessarily removes that which brings a people together, only further exasperating the conditions that facilitate nihilism. Nihilism is taking its hold, and this has led to it leaking into popular culture. I showed with reference to some viral videos how this is certainly the case, and how such thinking has led to such confusion that very peculiar views on morality have risen out of it.

I will now begin to develop our understanding towards a cure for this sickness. I will explore the cyclical condition of this sickness by which despite those effected by nihilism rejecting religion and traditional values, they end up looking to them for ideas and practices to make up for the void they have been left with. I call this the Nihilist yearning. I will conclude this essay by offering some understanding of Islam as an antidote to nihilism. I will make a brief overview of some of the active

ingredients of the cure for this sickness.

I certainly think that a deeper exploration of this subject area is critical and that it will help us to understand how nihilism has managed to take as much of a hold on society as it has done, and, God willing, help us to understand how to overcome it. I hope to have contributed to this at least in some way, to the best of my ability, by the end of the second essay.

The Nihilist Yearning

In an article written by Alain de Botton on the subject of why he believes that Science could “at last, properly replace Religion”, he writes how “we are – in a glorious and redemptive way – what we always feared: nothing.”⁴⁸ Despite this being a clear oxymoron, individuals like this perpetuate the significance of the insignificance of the human being, and therefore perpetuate Nihilism even further. The author runs a popular YouTube channel called The School of Life which has nearly **6 million** subscribers! He is also the author of a book called “Religion for Atheists: A non-believer’s guide to the uses of religion”, which admittedly takes a positive look at religion, but is still underpinned by atheism and the nihilistic tendency of reducing the human being to nothing, as insignificant, and then tries to lead the reader to a sense of self-determined purpose and significance. Which is effectively telling someone there is no water, and then leading them to a water hole with no water in it in order for them to get a drink.

Despite their commitment to nihilism and their inclination to atheism they are still seeing the benefit of religion. They pick and choose what suits them from it to make up for what they have come to lack in their rejection of it. We see similar trends in the New Atheism movement with characters like Sam Harris increasingly making attempts to take what he sees as beneficial from religion as can be found throughout his book entitled “Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion”; going as far as incorporating religious practices with a new atheist twist. Interestingly, in an article written by the guardian, Harris is quoted saying: “We need to live our lives with more than just understanding facts,” he says. “Not being wrong is not the ultimate state of being for people in this life.”⁴⁹ And related to this same idea, in an interview with the online publication NewScientist, Alain de Botton was asked the following:

“Your opening gambit in your new book, [*Religion for Atheists*](#), is to say, of course religions are not true, and you leave it at that. Does the question not interest you?”

To which de Botton answered:

No, because I think most of us don’t make up our minds in a rational way. You don’t say “I’m an atheist because I’ve looked at all the evidence and this is what I think.” Similarly you don’t say “I’m religious because I’ve surveyed all the evidence.”⁵⁰

How interesting. We have here what can be described as an appeal to a leap of faith. That is, to commit to something without necessarily having all the available evidence. It seems to be conceded here that it’s a necessary move for those who choose to incline to the ideas stated, especially when they have goals that undermine themselves and no definite thing to aim at. The only other options are heedless hedonism to avoid confrontation with these issues, or suicide, which as we see from the statistics I have already shared in this essay is becoming increasingly more troubling.

As Nietzsche encapsulates perfectly in his aphorism of *the madman* that I quoted above in the section titled “A Fractured Society” (footnote 45), where he boldly claims that we are the murderers responsible for the “death of God”, this has resulted in our becoming a *rootless people*. He describes this act as analogous to, and I paraphrase, ‘drinking up the sea’ or ‘wiping away the horizon with a sponge’. That is, he is trying to get across the point that we have somehow achieved the impossible. He further expands on this point by saying that we have somehow ‘unchained the earth from its sun’, and now have to deal with floating through an abyss without a perspective; with no points by which to orient ourselves with.⁵¹

I find this to be a very poetic way of describing the loss of a foundation for a people when they have disconnected themselves to that which grounded them; like a tree that destroys its own roots with the hope of becoming a greater tree, only to collapse under its own weight and rot. Prior to “the death of God”, what offered the people meaning and direction was their tradition; their belief in a higher purpose and power. But upon losing that, what was left to ground them? Nothing. As is explained towards the end of the ‘madman’ quote, is there still an up or a down? How do you determine value anymore? With the loss of any religion or tradition, you necessarily lose the values which were underpinned by it. Some may bury their heads in the sand and try to ground it in other things while desperately attempting to keep a hold of those values, but up to now all we seem to have been able to do is create an increasingly polarised society. This polarisation appears to be fuelled by an emphasis on individuality and freedom of personal expression over communal values. Although paradoxically, this emphasis has itself become a communal value; it has become another higher value that undermines itself.

Furthermore, Nietzsche also alludes to something incredibly interesting. In analysing the seriousness of the situation with regards to the loss of faith in God, he says: “Do we not ourselves have to become gods to appear worthy of it?” This doesn’t need to be taken in the literal sense, in that we need to become like the mythological characters found in the Greek or Roman pantheons for example, but it can be again looked at in terms of higher values. Where God was once that which occupied the highest place in our hierarchy of values, upon the loss of faith in a people he is replaced with the people themselves. Either the community is made the highest value as you see expressed in extreme forms of nationalism, or the individual makes themselves a god insofar as they see themselves as their own highest value. In making themselves the highest value, so are the related values that stem from this such as their desires, their wants and their needs. Echoing once again the words I previously quoted from the YouTube channel Kurzgesagt, “If our life is all we get to experience, then it’s the only thing that matters. If the universe has no principles, the only principles relevant are the ones *we* decide on.” Instead of the laws being dictated upon us by a higher and wiser being, namely God, we have been left with nothing but ourselves; which as de Botton has already alluded to above, is to be left with nothing. Furthermore, with human beings seemingly eager to differ with one another on every issue, coupled with the above mentioned issues of the specific values held by the West, the fracturing of society seems inevitable.

If religion, defined vaguely, is the accepted rulings given by an ultimate authority, and in a nihilistic framework there is no ultimate authority above one’s own,⁵² then the nihilist hasn’t escaped religion at all. They become the authors of their own religion. They are left to decide for themselves whether they wish to obey the authority of others or not, whether they are willing to experience the difficulties that follow the rejection of the authority of others, and what rituals they wish to perform. One need to look no further than the popular atheists to see the attempts to build a replacement community. They have their replacements for the high priests who have fans and are looked up to as ambiguous guides. Richard Dawkins is one such figure. His best selling book *The God Delusion* has sold millions of copies and receives countless praises by fans which seem to be completely unaware of the devastating critiques offered of his work by the likes of the philosopher of science Michael Ruse who said: “unlike the new atheists, I take scholarship seriously. I have written that *The God Delusion* made me ashamed to be an atheist and I mean it.”⁵³ As I stated at the beginning of this essay, the human being by its very nature is a purpose driven being.

The psychologist and philosopher Viktor Frankl says that “[m]an’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a “secondary rationalisation” of instinctual drives.”⁵⁴ As I have stated, the nihilism I have been focused on and concerned with throughout this essay is not only the philosophical notion of nihilism that has been reasoned, but also, the psychological condition, the pathological state, and the mental exhaustion that expresses itself as a feeling of meaninglessness. If Frankl is correct in his evaluation of mankind it follows that just as the sick person seeks a cure for their disease and yearns for it with all their being, then so too does the one

stricken by nihilism seek and yearn for meaning as their cure. With the decline of religious belief (specifically Christianity⁵⁵) around the world and with an increase in atheism/agnosticism, it makes sense that you would see the manifestation of a type of religious behaviour manifest in these communities in their attempts to flee their nihilism and fill the voids that have been left in their rejection of their previous traditions.

A Remedy to the Sickness of Nihilism

Islam as an antidote

Although the main focus of this essay has been to explain the issue and development of modern nihilism, I would like to conclude this with an invitation to look into Islam. The world can be a very overwhelming and confusing place. There is a lot going on and it can often be difficult to determine which direction you should begin your search. This will be by no means a comprehensive argument proving Islam to be true, but I do hope that it will at least be two things. First of all, a stepping stone towards motivating you to taking Islam seriously as a potential option for further enquiry; and second of all, a brief explanation as to why Islam can be an antidote to nihilism and help keep it at bay.

Let me begin by asking: why should one believe in the divine at all? Is it not more natural to take an atheistic position? The short answer is no, not at all. Belief in the supernatural comes very naturally to the human being. An article written by Paul Bloom (a “self-declared atheist”⁵⁶) titled *Religion is Natural*, makes the case that “recent findings suggest that two foundational aspects of religious belief—belief in mind-body dualism [the existence of a soul], and belief in divine agents—come naturally to young children”,⁵⁷ and this is the case even if the parents that raise them do not share this belief.⁵⁸ God says in the Qur’an:

And ‘remember’ when your Lord brought forth from the loins of the children of Adam their descendants and had them testify regarding themselves. ‘Allah asked,’ “Am I not your Lord?” They replied, “Yes, You are! We testify.” ‘He cautioned,’ “Now you have no right to say on the Day of Judgment, ‘We were not aware of this.’”⁵⁹

All of this adds credence to the Islamic idea of the *fitrah*, which is the notion that belief in God and the supernatural is innately ingrained into our very being.⁶⁰ Richard Dawkins even concedes that historically there has never been an atheist civilisation. When asked on Joe Rogan’s podcast, “has there ever been a civilisation that existed without a belief in a higher power?”, his response was “I don’t think there has, no.”⁶¹ The divine has been a constant feature throughout human history. Furthermore, Jamie Turner has put forward a convincing case defending the proposition that “theistic belief can be properly basic”, that is, that belief in God can be rational apart from argumentation. In fact, he has also argued that this can even be applied to full-fledged Islamic belief as well.⁶²

As God says in the Qur’an:

“So be steadfast in faith in all uprightness ‘O Prophet’—the natural Way of Allah which He has instilled in ‘all’ people. Let there be no change in this creation of Allah. That is the Straight Way, but most people do not know.”⁶³

God has placed in each and every human being, the ability to recognise His existence. God is not an elitist, and has not made it necessary for every human being to have to jump through endless and complex philosophical hoops in order to come to the realisation of His existence. Recognition of this fact should be just as accessible to the farmer as it is to the academic. God has sent the prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him), “as a mercy for the whole world”, not just a few clever people with the time and ability to tackle a plethora of abstract ideas. To suggest otherwise is unreasonable.

Another common tactic is the demand for direct empirical evidence of God's existence. I would like to give you a very simple example which should be sufficient to show the absurdity of such a request. Consider this: one day I make a computer game with self-aware artificial intelligence contained within it. They have an ingrained belief programmed into them which makes belief in a higher power beyond their world completely natural. However, one day, one of them begins to doubt and demands evidence for the creator. He insists that he limits what will be accepted as evidence to material things contained within the computer game. Is this not absurd? He is essentially demanding you show him the game developer inside the game. This is like demanding to see evidence of the painter of a painting, but limiting the evidence to the painting itself. Such unreasonable demands can never be fulfilled, and the inability to meet this demand is not sufficient for them to claim justification in their denial of that which comes innately to all of their societies, nor of that which is inferred by the existence of all things.

Next, one may ask if it is necessary to look into every religion that exists in order to determine which one is true. I will contend that it is not. Not only would this be impossible to do in the short time we have on earth, it would be completely pointless and unreasonable to demand this from anyone. You can overcome this quite simply by asking fundamental questions. If it turns out for example, that the monotheistic claim that an independent, necessary and eternal creator is more coherent than the polytheistic claim in multiple gods—all of whom have beginnings and are dependent upon something beyond them—then you can effectively dismiss all polytheistic religions. There would be no need to go through all of the different pantheons. Through this process of elimination, you can save yourself a lot of time and bat away these contentions that appeal to the large number of religions that are available as a reason to dismiss ALL religions.⁶⁴ It just simply does not follow, and it only shows a lack of consideration to a more reasonable approach through elimination.

So how does Islam combat nihilism? It offers the necessary tools which instil our lives with meaning. Allah says in the Qur'an [51:56], "And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me." The Islamic conception of worship is so broad that every action, if done in the name of God, becomes a form of worship. Everything that is done with the correct intention, is something that carries with it an infinite significance. It therefore invigorates the entire life of the believer with an overarching purpose from beginning to end, even in parts of life that would seem otherwise insignificant. Our lives are far from meaningless from the standpoint of Islam, and as previously mentioned, it offers confirmation of that which was instilled within each of us; the fitrah.

Furthermore, Islam offers us guidance and a structure for our lives. It fills our days with prayer, which offer a method of continual remembrance and gratitude to The One who made us and constantly provides for us. There have been studies which have shown that "gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness." And furthermore that "[g]ratitude helps people feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve their health, deal with adversity, and build strong relationships."⁶⁵ All of this coupled with the greater sense of significance in all of ones life would certainly offer a great counterweight to the forces of nihilism at play in wider society.

On top of this, the Qur'an demands from us to do good. Obligating us to "[e]stablish prayer and give charity." And then compliments this command by explaining that "[w]hatever good you send forth for yourselves, you will certainly find its reward with Allah. Surely Allah is All-Seeing of what you do."⁶⁶ That is, there is nothing you can do which will go unseen by your creator. Anything you do, whether privately or openly, will be accounted for.

Islam also applies certain restrictions which help to lead those who adhere to its rulings and fear God's punishment down a very particular path. This prevents one from engaging in behaviours which facilitate things like depression and criminal behaviour, which likely motivate the pessimism which contributes to the mental exhaustion characteristic of nihilism. The prohibition of intoxicants like alcohol and drugs removes the possibility of addiction to these substances, offering a barrier between you and the potential negative consequences of such behaviours which have been widely

documented. On this the Qu'ran says: "They ask you 'O Prophet' about intoxicants and gambling. Say, "There is great evil in both, as well as some benefit for people—but the evil outweighs the benefit."⁶⁷ This highlights that there may very well be a little benefit in, and the author is fully aware of this, but that none of that is worth the risks that come along with it.

It is important to mention that these restrictions are also an effective measure against the issue of *too much choice*, which I outlined earlier in this essay. The restrictions help to narrow the path enough so that we are not necessarily struck by the paralysis brought on by overchoice, while simultaneously protecting us from harm. We only have a certain amount of time in each day, so many days in a week, and life is short. Many of these hours are filled with sleeping, eating, and getting rest. The few hours we have spare after this can quickly be taken away if they are being used to satisfy addictions and problematic patterns of behaviour. Having such things being restricted opens up many productive opportunities that offer much more benefit to one's life. Take the game of chess as a brilliant example of strict restrictions giving order to a game, but not taking away from the countless possibilities still available. Each piece is limited to a very specific set of rules, and to go beyond that is impermissible. However, this does not prevent each game of chess being completely unique. Each game has the potential to develop in a variety of different ways, unlike any game before it. Thus is life. Having certain restrictions placed on it may seem like a lot to the one who happens to value the destructive practices that are being made impermissible. However, for the one who submits to them the benefits become very clear; especially to those who become Muslim after having come from outside of the faith, having had the opportunity to abundantly engage in such activities. God offers a perfect guidance to overcome these troublesome patterns of behaviour that keep people feeling like they are stuck in a never ending loop.

"There certainly has come to you from Allah a light and a clear Book through which Allah guides those who seek His pleasure to the ways of peace, brings them out of darkness and into light by His Will, and guides them to the Straight Path."⁶⁸

It also offers us a solution to the issues of moral nihilism also presented earlier in this essay:

"[...] the Quran was revealed as guidance for mankind, clear messages giving guidance and distinguishing between right and wrong."⁶⁹

Without a firm rope to grasp onto, mankind is left to float in the abyss without knowledge. We quickly and easily become lost, arguing amongst each other endlessly over mere speculations about what is right and what is wrong. We continually move the lines that distinguish one from the other, and continue to establish insufficient moral philosophies in an attempt to fill the void left by the loss of faith in our traditions. This continual bickering has led to the alienation and isolation of many members within modern society. It is also this, along with a heavy leaning towards the related philosophies that push naive and ideas of freedom and individuality, that contribute to the increased fracturing of our multicultural and increasingly diverse societies. However, with Islam, we are offered an opportunity to unite. As Allah says in the Quran:

And hold firmly to the rope of Allah and do not be divided. Remember Allah's favour upon you when you were enemies, then He united your hearts, so you—by His grace—became brothers. And you were at the brink of a fiery pit and He saved you from it. This is how Allah makes His revelations clear to you, so that you may be 'rightly' guided.⁷⁰

Islam offers the guidance that people are yearning for because of the void left in the loss of religion and tradition in the modern world. It gives people something to orient themselves with and have direction; a centre point to circumnavigate with each other. Furthermore, in line with the above quote from the Qur'an, a common note that people make upon going on a pilgrimage to Mecca is how unified the people become upon the religion. It effectively offers a solution to the fracturing I have made mention to so far. Malcom X makes a beautiful description of his experience during hajj, and how he saw that it effectively eradicated things like racial and class tensions that he was all too familiar with in the United States, and is still present today in many parts of the world. On this

subject, in *The New York Times* he says the following:

During the past seven days of this holy pilgrimage, while undergoing the rituals of the hajj [pilgrimage], I have eaten from the same plate, drank from the same glass, slept on the same bed or rug, while praying to the same God—not only with some of this earth’s most powerful kings, cabinet members, potentates and other forms of political and religious rulers—but also with fellow-Muslims whose skin was the whitest of white, whose eyes were the bluest of blue, and whose hair was the blondest of blond—yet it was the first time in my life that I didn’t see them as ‘white’ men. I could look into their faces and see that these people didn’t regard themselves as ‘white.’ Their belief in the Oneness of God (Allah) had actually removed the ‘white’ from their minds, which automatically changed their attitude and behaviour toward people of other colours. Their belief in the Oneness of God has actually made them so different from American whites, their outer physical characteristics played no part at all in my mind during all my close associations with them.⁷¹

Islam is a solution to many of the current issues we face as a modern society and more specifically, to *nihilism*. We do not need to suffer the ailments we currently face under a world governed mostly by worldly pursuits that can never be fully satisfied, driven by unrestricted materialism and hedonistic desires. The doors to this solution remain firmly open. Just as Islam was able to completely change an apparently insignificant and troubled society that lived in the middle of nowhere, into a flourishing and successful people that have reached every corner of the globe, it can also transform us. All it takes is for you, the reader, to take the step of seeing Islam for what it is: as a serious alternative to the current destructive path we walk upon globally. Islam continues to grow to this day at the fastest rates of any other religion, and not just by birthrates, but also by conversion.⁷² Islam is going to play a key role in the future, and I truly believe it makes perfect sense to step on the path of seeking knowledge about one of the greatest ways of life the world has ever seen. I hope and pray that this essay has played a part in helping you see this, and at least opened your hearts to the possibility of investigating it further.

Peace and blessings upon you all. May you find truth and order in this increasingly false and chaotic world.

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⁶² In short, this idea is grounded on the notion that we have, what has been coined, “basic beliefs”, i.e., beliefs that we don’t hold on the basis of any other beliefs. Given the fulfilment of certain epistemic conditions, these basic beliefs can be “properly basic.” That is, basic and rational. Turner has argued extensively for an application of these epistemic principles to theistic and Islamic belief in the following essay published by the Sapience Institute:

Turner J., ‘Who Shoulders the Burden of Proof? Reformed Epistemology & Properly Basic Islamic Belief’, *Sapience Institute*, 9 December 2020, <<https://sapienceinstitute.org/who-shoulders-the-burden-of-proof-reformed-epistemology-and-properly-basic-islamic-belief/>>, accessed 17 January 2021

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Does Euthyphro's Dilemma Undermine God's Commands?

Many atheists attempt to undermine the notion that objective morality is linked to God's commands by citing Plato's dilemma or Euthyphro's dilemma. The dilemma is presented as follows: *Is something morally good because God commands it, or does God command it because it is morally good?*

This dilemma poses a problem for theists who believe in an All-Powerful, independent God because it requires them to believe in one of two things: either morality is defined by God's commands or morality is external to His commands. If morality is based on God's commands, what is good or evil is arbitrary. If this is the case, there is nothing we as humans should necessarily recognise as objectively evil. This would imply that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with, say, killing children—just that God puts the 'evil' label on it arbitrarily.

The other horn of the dilemma implies that some sort of a moral standard is completely outside and independent of God's essence and nature, and even God is obligated to live by this standard. However, that would be clearly undesirable for the theist, since it would make him admit that God is not All-Powerful or independent after all; rather, He has to rely on a standard external to Himself.

This intuitively sounds like a valid contention. However, a little reflection exposes it as a false dilemma. The reason is due to a third possibility: God is good. Professor of Philosophy Shabbir Akhtar, in his book *The Qur'an and the Secular Mind*, explains:

“There is a third alternative: a morally stable God of the kind found in scripture, a supreme being who would not arbitrarily change his mind about the goodness of compassion and the evil of sexual misconduct. Such a God always commands good because his character and nature are good.”¹

What Professor Akhtar is saying is that there is indeed a moral standard, but unlike what the second horn of the dilemma suggests, it is not external to God. Rather, it follows necessarily from God's nature. Muslims, and theists in general, believe that God is necessarily and perfectly good. The maximal perfection of God means that God's names and attributes are to the highest degree possible, with no deficiency or flaw. As such, His nature contains within it the perfect, non-arbitrary, moral standard. This means that an individual's actions—for example, the killing of innocents—is not arbitrarily bad, because it follows from an objective, necessary, moral standard. On the other hand, it does not mean God is somehow subservient to this standard because it is contained in His essence. It defines His nature; it is not in any way external to Him.²

This response echoes the view of the classical Islamic scholar, Ibn al-Qayyim. He maintains that moral values are not based on the arbitrary commands of God:

“If [an act's] being good or evil or insalubrious or wholesome were only related to command and prohibition and permission and forbiddance this would be tantamount to saying: He commands what he commands and prohibits what he prohibits; he permits what he permits and forbids what he forbids. And what benefit is there in that? And how is this a sign of his prophethood? God's speech is innocent of that, and ought not to be thought of like that. For praise, acclaim, and the sign that prove his prophethood consist in the fact that what he commands, sound intellects testify to its being good; and what he prohibits, [sound intellects] testify to its undesirability and evil. What he permits, [reason] testifies to its being wholesome; and what he forbids, [reason] testifies to its being unwholesome. This is the invitation of the messengers, God's peace and blessings be upon them, in contrast to the invitation of falsifiers, liars, and sorcerers.”³

Notwithstanding the discussion so far, an atheist's natural response would be “You must know what good is to define God as good, therefore you haven't solved the problem”.

The response to this refers to God's perfection. In the Islamic tradition, God is believed to be a Being of maximal perfection. Since He is a perfect being, perfect moral goodness is part of His essential nature. One of His names is *Al-Barr*,⁴ which means the source of all goodness. God's moral commands are a derivative of His will,⁵ and His will does not contradict His nature.⁶ Part of God's maximal perfection is being morally perfect. His moral perfection is the standard for goodness. Therefore, what God commands is good because He is good, and He defines what good is:

“Say, ‘Indeed, God does not order immorality.’”⁷

The simple reply would be that God defines what good is. He is the only Being worthy of worship, which entails He is the most perfect and moral Being. The Qur'an affirms these points:

“And your god is one God. There is no deity [worthy of worship] except Him, the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful.”⁸

“He is God, other than whom there is no deity... the Pure, the Perfection... .”⁹

God's commands are the foundation of objective moral values and His commands are based on His perfect nature (moral ontology). However, this response to the dilemma does not in any way dismiss the fact that humans can affirm some moral values and know moral truths independently of God's commands (moral epistemology). We can have moral knowledge due to the presence of our God-given natural disposition accessible via our intellectual faculties.¹⁰ Ibn al-Qayyim eloquently asserts the role of our rational faculties and natural disposition “How often He says to them in His Book: “Do you not reason?” and “So you may reason.” He thus alerts them to what is already in their intellects and natures of the recognition of good and evil, and argues against them based on that, and declares that He has granted them [their reason and nature] so they benefit from them and discriminate between good and bad, truth and falsehood.”¹¹

In summary, Euthyphro's dilemma does not undermine God's commands. Moral values are ultimately derivatives of God's will, expressed via His commands, and His commands do not contradict His nature, which is perfectly good, wise and pure. Our natural dispositions contain knowledge of moral values which can be accessed via our rational faculties.

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² This response to the dilemma adopts the Hanbalite position on moral values and Divine commands. The rich Islamic intellectual tradition has produced various responses. These include the Ash'arite view. This view postulates that that moral goodness is arbitrarily based on God's commands. Ferhat Yöney explains this position:

“Early Ash'arite theologians argued that what is morally good or bad, right or wrong does not have any meaning apart from God's will or His commands and prohibitions. So what is morally good and bad and whether actions are morally right or wrong are determined solely by God's will or His commands and prohibitions. These theologians are happy to bite the bullet of the well-known arbitrariness objection...” [Ferhat Yöney (2019) *Islam, the Divine Command Theory, and Religious Fundamentalism*, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 30:4, 413-433, DOI: 10.1080/09596410.2019.1696024].

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⁵ “And such is the case that God does whatever He Wills” The Qur'an, Chapter 3, Verse 40; “Certainly God does whatever He Wills” The Qur'an, Chapter 22, Verse 18.

⁶ For example, “He Forgives whoever He Wills and Punishes whoever He Wills and Allah is The Most Forgiving and Most Compassionate” The Qur'an, Chapter 3, Verse 129; “God Commands justice, benevolence, and giving to one's relatives and He forbids indecency, wretchedness, and transgression” The Qur'an, Chapter 16, Verse 90.

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⁸ The Qur'an, Chapter 2, Verse 163.

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The theological basis for the natural disposition can be inferred from: “So direct your face toward the religion, inclining to truth. [Adhere to] the fitrah of Allah upon which He has created [all] people. No change should there be in the creation of Allah. That is the correct religion, but most of the people do not know.” The Qur'an, Chapter 30, Verse 30, and the authentic prophetic tradition in Sahih Muslim: “There is none born but is created to his true nature (Islam). It is his parents who make him a Jew or a Christian or a Magian... .” [<https://sunnah.com/muslim/46/34>]

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“Who created God?”

A common question that pops up in theist-atheist discussions is: ‘Who created God?’. From popular authors like Richard Dawkins to the common atheist internet activists, this question is absurdly thought to be a valid argument against the Divine. Skeptics may phrase the question in multiple ways: ‘If the universe needs a cause, then why doesn’t God need a cause?’ and ‘Who created the creator?’ In this answer, you will learn how this contention is misplaced.

There are four main ways to address this question:

1. Logical
2. Law of causality
3. Infinite regress
4. The Prophet’s ﷺ words on this topic

Logical

Some questions are loaded with assumptions and need to be unpacked before we address them. The question, ‘Who created God?’ assumes God is a finite created entity. Logically, this question does not make sense. God, by definition, in the traditional theological sense, is an uncreated, necessary, eternal being.

God must be eternal, and therefore uncreated, by virtue of His [necessary existence](#). In the theological and philosophical domains of knowledge the word ‘necessary’ means that it is impossible for something to have not existed. It also means that there are no external factors nor any external explanation that explain that thing’s existence. Maintaining that a necessary being is created implies it is finite. Finite things however are contingent (not necessary), as they require an explanation external to them to explain their existence. For example, a mobile phone has finite and limited physical qualities (such as size, weight, colour, etc.). The mobile did not give rise to its own limitations. There were a set of external factors or an external explanation that explains the mobile phone’s limitations. In light of this, claiming that God is created is really saying, “The necessary being is not necessary”. This statement is a contradiction, therefore meaningless.

A simpler way of looking at it is focusing on a key aspect of the definition of God: His uncreated and eternal nature. To question, “who created God?”, is to assert that He was created. However God, by definition, is not created. Logically it is the same as asking, ‘How many married bachelors are there in the world?’ The question implies a contradiction, therefore it is patently incoherent and meaningless.

Law of causality

To those who say the universe has a cause, so God must have a cause, have misunderstood the law of causality. The law does not say ‘everything has a cause’ but rather ‘everything that begins to exist has a cause’. The universe began, so we say it has a cause; God did not ‘begin’ so the question does not apply to him. Consider a ball that is in existence eternally, if someone said, ‘Who made that ball?’ the answer would be no one. The ball did not come into existence; it was always there, so there is no point in asking about the origin of the ball.

Professor John Lennox, in his book *God’s Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* exposes this false assumption:

“I can hear an Irish friend saying: ‘Well, it proves one thing – if they had a better argument, they would use it.’ If that is thought to be a rather strong reaction, just think of the question: Who made God? The very asking of it shows that the questioner has created God in mind...For the God who created and upholds the universe was not created – He is eternal. He was not ‘made’ and therefore subject to the laws that science discovered; it was he who made the universe with its laws. Indeed, the fact constitutes the fundamental distinction between God and the universe. The universe came to be, God did not.”¹

Infinite regress

For argument sake, let’s answer the ‘Who made God?’ question with another ‘God’. Will that satisfy the questioner? Of course not. The contentious person will obviously ask, ‘Who made that God?’. If we were to answer, ‘Another God’, what do you think he would say? Yes, you guessed right: ‘Who made that God?’. Now if this ridiculous dialogue continued forever, there would be no universe in existence in which we could even be having this discussion.

Why? Because we cannot have the case of God being made by another God in an unlimited series going back forever (known as an infinite regress)! It simply doesn’t make sense. Consider the following examples below:

Imagine a sniper who has acquired his designated target radios through to HQ to get permission to shoot. HQ, however, tells the sniper to hold on while they seek permission from higher up. So the guy higher up seeks permission from the guy even higher up and so on and so on. If this keeps going on, will the sniper ever get to shoot the target? Of course not! He’ll keep on waiting while someone is waiting for a person higher up to give the order. There has to be a place or person from where the command is issued; a place where there is no higher up. So, our example illustrates why there is a rational flaw in the idea that there might be creators creating creators ad infinitum. We can’t have creators creating creators forever, or else, just as the sniper will never shoot, the creation will never get created; there would be no universe to talk about. However, creation exists. The universe is here for us to see and experience, so, we can dismiss the idea of an infinite regression of causes as an irrational proposition. What is the alternative? The alternative is a first cause. An uncaused cause!

The 11th century theologian and philosopher al-Ghazali summarised the existence of an uncaused cause or an uncreated creator in the following way:

“The same can be said of the cause of the cause. Now this can either go on ad infinitum, which is absurd, or it will come to an end.”²

Another way to think about it is, imagine you want to take off 3 months from work and you ask your line manager if you can take off 3 months. He says that he can’t authorise that request and he will have to ask the department manager. However, the department manager also says that he can’t authorise the request, and he will ask the CEO. The CEO also says that he can’t authorise the request and he has to ask his wife. The CEO’s wife also says she can’t authorise the request and she will have to ask her cousin. If this series of asking about authorising the request goes on forever, will you ever get authorisation to take off 3 months? Of course not! The only way you can get time off is if someone gives permission and does not depend on anyone else for authorisation. In the same way, the only logical possibility is not there being an infinite regress of God’s creating God’s ad infinitum, but an eternal, uncreated God.

The Qur’an, which is the final revelation from God, has informed us also about the nature of God. The Qur’an affirms that God is uncreated and eternal. It highlights this by asking some simple, yet profound questions: ‘Were we created by nothing?’ ‘Did we create ourselves?’ ‘Or did we create the universe?’

“Or were they created by nothing? Or were they the creators (of themselves)? Or did they create heavens and earth (universe)? Rather, they are not certain.”³

These questions can be addressed to the existence of everything that has a beginning, including the universe (the overwhelming evidence suggests that the universe began). For the purposes of this answer, let’s focus on the third question: ‘Or did we created the universe?’

The Qur’an rhetorically implies that this is an impossibility. In its logical form, it basically is saying, ‘Can we (creatures who came into being) create the universe (something else that came into being)?’ In other words, can we explain things that were created with another thing that was created? Of course not, because we can also ask, ‘Then what created that thing?’

As we have already discussed, it highlights the absurdity of an infinite regress. Take the following example into consideration: if this universe, U1, was created by a prior cause, U2, and U2 was created by another cause, U3, and this went on forever, we wouldn’t have the universe, U1, in the first place. Think about it this way, when does U1 come into being? Only after U2 has come into being. When does U2 come into being? Only after U3 has come into being. This same problem will continue even if we go to infinity. If U1 depended on its coming into being on a chain of infinite created universes, U1 would never exist. As the Islamic philosopher and scholar Dr. Jaafar Idris writes:

“There would be no series of actual causes, but only a series of non-existents, as Ibn Taymiyyah explained. The fact, however, is that there are existents around us; therefore, their ultimate cause must be something other than temporal causes.”⁴

To illustrate this better, imagine if a stock trader on a trading floor at the stock exchange was not able to buy or sell his stocks or bonds before asking permission from the investor, and then this investor had to check with his, and this went on forever. Would the stock trader ever buy or sell his stocks or bonds? The answer is no. In similar light, if we apply this to the universe, we would have to posit an uncaused cause due to this rational necessity. The Qur’an confirms the uncreatedness of the creator, God:

“He neither begets nor is born.”⁵

What the above discussion is essentially saying is that something must have always existed. Now there are two obvious choices: God or the universe? Since the universe began and is contingent, it cannot have always been here. Therefore, something that always existed must be God. The philosopher, Abraham Varghese, in the appendix to Professor Anthony Flew’s book *There is a God*, explains this conclusion in a simple yet forceful way. He writes:

“Now, clearly, theists and atheists can agree on one thing: if anything at all exists, there must be something preceding it that always existed. How did this eternally existing reality come to be? The answer is that it never came to be. It always existed. Take your pick: God or universe. Something always existed.”⁶

The Prophet’s ﷺ words on this topic

There is an authentic prophetic statement that refers to the question of who created God: “Satan will come to one of you and he will say, ‘Who created this and that?’ until he says to him, ‘Who created your Lord?’ When it comes to this, let him seek refuge in God and stop such thoughts.”⁷ Another narration ends with “I have faith in God.”⁸

This prophetic statements clearly highlights how harbouring such thoughts about God have a spiritual basis too. When one has such thoughts are not necessarily due to any intellectual doubt. Rather, they can be due to underlying spiritual causes which can be dealt with by following the

teachings of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. In this case, seeking refuge in God and reaffirm one's faith in Him.

Notwithstanding the spiritual dimension of this prophetic teaching ﷺ, it has also been understood by scholars to mean that the question is logically invalid. For instance, the classical scholar Ibn Taymiyya wrote:

“It is known by necessity and human nature, for all who have sound nature among the children of Adam, that the question is invalid. It is not possible for the Creator of the creation to have a creator. If He had a creator, He would be created Himself and would not be the Creator of everything.”⁹

In conclusion, the outdated cliché, ‘Who created God?’ is a misplaced, incoherent and false contention.

References

¹ John C. Lennox. *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford: Lion Books, 2009), p. 183.

² Cited from Lenn E. Goodman. Ghazali's Argument From Creation (I). *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Jan., 1971), pp. 67-85.

³ *The Qur'an*, Chapter 52, Verses 35 to 36.

⁴ Dr. Jaafar Idris. Contemporary physicists and God's existence (part 2 of 3): A series of causes. Available at: <https://www.islamreligion.com/articles/491/contemporary-physicists-and-god-existence-part-2/>.

⁵ *The Qur'an*, Chapter 112, Verse 3.

⁶ Anthony Flew with Roy Abraham Varghese. *There is a God*. (New York: HarperOne, 2007), p. 165.

⁷ Narrated by Al-Bukhari.

⁸ Narrated by Muslim.

⁹ Dar' Ta'āruḍ al-'Aql wal-Naql 3/314.

Does Artificial Intelligence Undermine Religion?

Artificial intelligence (AI) has developed rapidly over the past few years. We have computers, phones and other hardware that can now display abilities and intelligence that makes humans look primitive. With this fast-moving area of technology many are postulating that AI can become conscious, and the implications are that it undermines religious narratives. If AI can be conscious then there is a physicalist explanation for what makes us human.¹ The concept of the soul in Islam, referred to as the *rūḥ* in Arabic, is something that we have little revealed knowledge about. However, what can be affirmed is the fact that it is of the “unseen”, coming from a transcendent reality. From this perspective, if the soul, which is the immaterial thing that animates the body, can now be replaced with a physical, materialistic explanation, then religion is undermined.²

The physicalist may argue that consciousness and the ability to experience subjective conscious states (also referred to as phenomenal states) can be explained by artificial intelligence—consciousness becomes analogous to a computer programme. However, there is a difference between *weak* AI and *strong* AI. Weak AI is a computer system’s ability to display intelligence. This can include answering complex mathematical equations or beating multiple opponents at a game of chess in less than an hour. Strong AI refers to computer systems actually being conscious. In other words, having the ability to experience subjective conscious states—which includes attaching meaning to things. Weak AI is possible and has already been developed. Strong AI is impossible. What follows are the reasons why.

The first reason, which is more of a general point, is that computers are not independent systems with the ability to engage in reasoning. A thing characterised as conscious implies being an independent source of rational thought. However, computers (and computer programmes) were designed, developed and made by human beings that are independently rational. Therefore, computers are just a protraction of our ability to be intelligent. William Hasker explains:

“Computers function as they do because they have been constructed by human being endowed with rational insight. A computer, in other words, is merely an extension of the rationality of its designers and users; it is no more an independent source of rational thought than a television set is an independent source of news and entertainment.”³

The second reason is that humans are not only intelligent—their reasoning has intentionality. This means that our reasoning is *about* or *of* something and that it is associated with meaning.⁴ Conversely, computer programmes are not characterised as having meaning. Computer systems just manipulate symbols. For the system, the symbols are not *about* or *of* something—all computers can “see” are the symbols they are manipulating, irrespective of what we may think the symbols are about or of. Computer programmes are just based on syntactical rules (the manipulation of symbols), not semantics (meaning).

To understand the difference between semantics and syntax, consider the following sentences:

- I love my family.
- αγαπώ την οικογένειά μου.
- আমি আমার পরিবারকে ভালবাসি.

These three sentences mean the same thing: I love my family. This refers to semantics, the meaning of the sentences. But the syntax is different. In other words, the symbols used are unlike. The first sentence is using English ‘symbols’, the second Greek, and the last Bangla. From this the following argument can be developed:

1. Computer programmes are syntactical (based on syntax);
2. Minds have semantics;
3. Syntax by itself is neither sufficient for nor constitutive for semantics;
4. Therefore computer programmes by themselves are not minds.⁵

Imagine that an avalanche somehow arranges mountain rocks into the words 'I love my family'. To make the claim that the mountain knows what the arrangement of rocks (symbols) mean would be untenable. This indicates that the mere manipulation of symbols (syntax) does not give rise to meaning (semantics).

Computer programmes are based on the manipulation of symbols, not meaning. Likewise, I cannot know the meaning of the sentence in Bangla just by manipulating the letters (symbols). No matter how many times I manipulate the Bangla letters, I will not be able to understand the meaning of the words. This is why for semantics we need more than the correct syntax. Computer programmes work on syntax and not on semantics. Computers do not know the meaning of anything.

John Searle's Chinese Room thought-experiment is a powerful way of showing that the mere manipulation of symbols does not lead to an understanding of what they mean:

"Imagine that you are locked in a room, and in this room are several baskets full of Chinese symbols. Imagine that you (like me) do not understand a word of Chinese, but that you are given a rule book in English for manipulating the Chinese symbols. The rules specify the manipulation of symbols purely formally, in terms of their syntax, not their semantics. So the rule might say: 'Take a squiggle-squiggle out of basket number one and put it next to a squiggle-squiggle sign from basket number two.' Now suppose that some other Chinese symbols are passed into the room and that you are given further rules for passing back Chinese symbols out of the room. Suppose that unknown to you the symbols passed into the room are called 'questions' by the people outside the room, and the symbols you pass back out of the room are called 'answers to questions.' Suppose furthermore, that the programmers are so good at designing the programs and that you are so good at manipulating the symbols, that very soon your answers are indistinguishable from those of a native Chinese speaker. There you are locked in your room shuffling your Chinese symbols and passing out Chinese symbols in response to incoming Chinese symbols... Now the point of the story is simply this: by virtue of implementing a formal computer program from the point of view of an outside observer, you behave exactly as if you understood Chinese, but all the same you do not understand a word of Chinese."⁶

In the Chinese Room thought-experiment the person inside the room is simulating a computer. Another person manages the symbols in a way that makes the person inside the room seem to understand Chinese. However, the person inside the room does not understand the language; they merely imitate that state. Searle concludes:

"Having the symbols by themselves—just having the syntax—is not sufficient for having the semantics. Merely manipulating symbols is not enough to guarantee knowledge of what they mean."⁷

The objector might respond to this by arguing that although the computer programme does not know the meaning, the whole system does. Searle has called this objection "the systems reply"⁸. However, why is it that the programme does not know the meaning? The answer is simple: it is because it has no way of assigning meaning to the symbols. Since a computer programme cannot assign meaning to symbols, how can a computer system—which relies on the programme—understand the meaning? You cannot produce understanding just by having the right programme. Searle presents an extended version of the Chinese Room thought-experiment to show that the system as a whole does not understand the meaning: "Imagine that I memorize the contents of the baskets and the rule book, and I do all the calculations in my head. You can even imagine that I work out in the open. There is nothing in the 'system' that is not in me, and since I don't understand

Chinese, neither does the system.”⁹

Lawrence Carleton postulates that Searle’s Chinese Room argument is invalid. He argues that Searle’s argument commits the fallacy referred to as the denial of the antecedent. Carleton maintains that Searle commits the fallacy because “we are given no evidence that there is only one way to produce intentionality”.¹⁰ He claims that Searle is assuming that only brains have the processes to manipulate and understand symbols (intentionality), and computers do not. Carleton presents the fallacy in the following way:

“To say, ‘Certain brain-process equivalents produce intentionality’ and ‘X does not have these equivalents’, therefore ‘X does not have intentionality’, is to commit the formal fallacy, ‘Denial of the antecedent.’”¹¹

However, Dale Jacquette maintains that Searle does not commit the formal fallacy if an interpretation of Searle’s argument is:

“If X is (intrinsically) intentional, then X has certain brain-process equivalents.”¹²

Jacquette believes that Searle’s argument is a concession to functionalism. He argues that functionalists “maintain that there is nothing special about protoplasm, so that any properly organized matter instantiating the right input-output program duplicates the intentionality of the mind.”¹³ Searle also seems to admit that machines could have the ability to understand Chinese. However he states that “I do see very strong arguments for saying that we could not give such a thing to a machine where the operation of the machine is defined solely in terms of computational processes over formally defined elements...”¹⁴

If computers cannot attach meaning to symbols, then what kind of conscious machine is Searle referring to? Even if one would postulate a robot (something that Searle rejects), it would still present insurmountable problems. Machines are based on “computational processes over formally defined elements”. It seems that the mere possibility of a machine having understanding (attaching meaning to symbols) would require something other than these aforementioned processes and elements. Does such a machine exist? The answer is no. Could they exist? If they could, they probably would not be described as machines if something other than “computational processes over formally defined elements” is required.

According to Rocco Gennaro, many philosophers agree with Searle’s view that robots could not have phenomenal consciousness.¹⁵ Some philosophers argue that to build a conscious robot “qualitative experience must be present”^[16], something that they are pessimistic about. Others explain this pessimism:

“To explain consciousness is to explain how this subjective internal appearance of information can arise in the brain, and so to create a conscious robot would be to create subjective internal appearance of information inside the robot... no matter how advanced, will likely not make the robot conscious since the phenomenal internal appearances must be present as well.”¹⁷

AI cannot attach meaning to symbols, it just manipulates them in very complex ways. Therefore there will never be a strong version of AI. Religion is not undermined.

References

¹ Physicalism is the view that consciousness can be reduced to, explained by, or identical to physical processes in some way.

² In the philosophy of the mind physicalism or materialism are synonymous terms, even though

they have different histories and meaning when used in other domains of knowledge.

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¹³ *Ibid*, 268.

¹⁴ Searle, John. (1980b) *Minds, Brains, and Programs*. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3, 422.

¹⁵ Gennaro, Rocco. *Consciousness*. (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 176.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.