

It is important for Islamic thought to reassert itself clearly and define the parameters upon which a modern Islamic epistemology can be built. The work of the philosophers of the West cannot be ignored, and their criticism should be used to recreate not disparage, the vigor of Islamic philosophy that has been lost over the past few centuries.

26  
651

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Groundwork

# On Islamic Philosophy

An examination of issues in epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophy of religion in the context of modern Western philosophy

Note About the Research:  
This project represents a culmination of one year of research during the period of 1998-1999. The work was done both at the International Islamic University, Malaysia and the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The author may be contacted at: [aftab@umich.edu](mailto:aftab@umich.edu)

RELATIVE TO ITS WESTERN COUNTERPART, ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY HAS remained largely dormant for the past few hundred years. The intellectual rigor of Islamic thought has waned and contemporary Muslim thinkers are faced with the enormous challenge of re-interpreting and integrating the tremendous intellectual achievements of the West with those of earlier Islamic thinkers and the Qur'an.

This endeavor is of crucial importance to any hope for a new Islamic intellectual renaissance. The rise of Western science and philosophy has posed serious challenges to the fundamental principles of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics espoused by the classical thinkers of Islam. These issues need to be addressed. As Muhammad Iqbal, perhaps the first modern Muslim philosopher to focus on these problems in any comprehensive manner, writes:

**With the reawakening of Islam, therefore, it is necessary to examine, in an independent spirit, what Europe has thought and how far the conclusions reached by her can help us in the revision and if necessary, reconstruction, of theological thought in Islam.<sup>1</sup>**

The current undertaking will by no means meet the challenge put forth by Iqbal. It will, however, attempt to at least lay out some of the issues in Islamic epistemology, metaphysics and philosophy of religion. The difficulty of studies in this field is compounded by the fact that there is very little academic material available on Islamic philosophy, and much of what there is remains to be translated from their original languages. Even when translations are available, many of the issues in philosophy have changed over time and it is unclear how to relate the medieval debates with the modern ones. In short, there is a significant period of intellectual lapse on the Islamic side, between the Middle Ages and today. Despite these problems, there is a need to present intellectual thought in Islam in an easy to understand yet rigorous manner that

27  
851

may be able to contribute toward the development of cross-cultural studies between Western and Islamic philosophy. Both traditions have much to gain from each other.

It is important to understand the basic framework and essential tools used by Islamic philosophers in order to critique and build upon their works. Modern Western philosophy has already dismissed many of the claims of medieval thinkers. It is now worth evaluating if the earlier claims merit re-examination.

It is peculiar that many of the modern Western arguments have close analogues in the earlier Islamic thinkers. Some have suggested that perhaps this shows the influence of Islamic thought on European philosophy. Many of the classic works of Islamic philosophy were translated into Latin from Arabic at the beginning of the European Renaissance. These, along with translated Greek manuscripts, greatly influenced the development of early Western thought. This influence is best seen in the works of Descartes and Aquinas. In any case, I think, the material is best viewed as a progression of thought from the Greeks onto the Muslims and then to Europe, and not as two isolated or opposed points of view.

There are three major rational arguments for the existence of God that have had a significant influence on the history of philosophy of religion. These are namely, the Cosmological, Teleological and Ontological arguments. This paper will examine these three major arguments as they are presented in Western philosophy and compare them with arguments for the existence of God presented by ancient and modern Islamic philosophers. It will also attempt to clarify the role of philosophy in Islamic thought and the ways in which Muslim philosophers have attempted to reconcile faith and reason. Another strategy of argumentation for God's existence, only recently proposed in contemporary Western philosophy, is proof from religious experience. This approach has deep roots in Islamic philosophy and will be examined in the final part of this paper.

## PHILOSOPHY & ISLAM

Al-Kindi (Alkindus, 800-873 CE), widely recognized as the first Muslim philosopher, called philosophy the most exalted science — of all the disciplines, philosophy alone was thought to ask fundamental questions about universal concerns. Al-Kindi adopted a somewhat Platonic understanding of philosophy as *philo-sophia* — the love of wisdom.<sup>2</sup> Al-Kindi and most Muslim philosophers agree philosophy cannot reach as far as revelation. Hence, our actions should be in primary accord with the teachings of Islam, and philosophy ought to be considered as an independent discipline.

Al-Ghazzali (Algazel, 1058-1111) was a highly influential orthodox Muslim thinker who rebuffed many of those who claimed

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that they could prove God by reason alone. He thinks that the kind of reasoning used by philosophers would never result in the proof of the existence of God. Al-Ghazzali found serious failings in the philosophers of his era. He writes, "they have abandoned all the religious duties... [that] Islam imposes on its followers."

The Aristotelian thinker Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1128 — 1198) held philosophy to be nothing more than the study of beings and reflection upon them. Faith in Islam and the practice of philosophy are intimately connected for Ibn Rushd. He found that the Qu'ran makes the study of philosophy obligatory for all believers. It asks of men, "have they not studied the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and whatever things God has created?" In another passage, the Qu'ran encourages mankind to "Reflect, you have vision." Here God urges the reader to study the world — to discover how and why objects and beings exist. Ibn Rushd concludes that God compels man to try to obtain demonstrative knowledge of His existence. However, prior to having such demonstrative knowledge, man must first learn and master dialectical, theoretical and logical knowledge. That is, for man to learn about the world, he must know the foundations of reasoning. Hence, not only is philosophy necessary, but philosophy is commanded by the divine.<sup>3</sup>

Ibn Rushd admits that, like any scholarly discipline, philosophy may have the potential for harm. The danger of philosophy, however, is no greater than that which results from the study of medicine or law. Moreover, although it may be possible to misuse philosophy for other purposes; since the study of philosophy is commanded by God Himself, it is obligatory.<sup>4</sup>

The modern philosopher Muhammad Iqbal sees no contradiction between faith and reason. Iqbal (1877-1938) is considered the poet-philosopher of twentieth century Islam and his work has been a key impetus in the revival of Islamic thought. He was born in (what is now) Pakistan and studied in Britain and Germany. This expatriation offered Iqbal unique cultural and theoretical insights into both Islamic and Western philosophical traditions. He thinks that thought and intuition both arise from the same source; thought and intuition are not in opposition to each other, but rather are complimentary. Reason aims at achieving knowledge of the physical world and existence; the intuition of religious experience aims at transcending this world and achieving knowledge of the ultimate. Iqbal then thinks that it is necessary for Muslims to engage themselves in the study and science of philosophy in order to redefine an Islamic culture now confronted with a more "advanced" Western civilization. If Muslim thinkers fail in this challenge, then Muslim thought risks assimilation into Western philosophy.

This debate is not unique to Islam; similar concerns have emerged in the history of Christian thought as well. While religious tensions were building barriers to analytical thought in Europe, reason was flourishing in Muslim lands. As the Churches influenced waned, the pendulum of history swung toward Enlightenment and the West. Today it is common for Christian theologians to use philosophy to justify their positions, as has historically been the case among certain Muslim groups. The difficult task, however, is to uphold theist conclusions on purely philosophical grounds in the face of a challenge from radical skepticism.

## Cosmological Arguments

The cosmological argument was first introduced by Aristotle and later refined by the celebrated Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas. In the Islamic tradition, the argument was adopted by Al-Kindi, as well as Ibn Rushd. The argument has several forms - the basic first-cause argument runs as follows: Every event must have a cause, and each cause must in turn have its own cause, and so forth. Hence, there must either be an infinite regress of causes or there must be a starting point or first cause. Aquinas and Al-Kindi reject the notion of an infinite regress and insist that there must be a first cause, and the first cause must be God, the only uncaused being.

Another form of this argument is based on the concept of a *prime-mover*. Ibn Rushd advocates the Aristotelian argument that every motion must be caused by another motion. However, it is necessarily the case that there must be a first motion. The conclusion thus follows that there must be an initial prime-mover, a mover that caused motion without itself being caused.

Islamic thought is split with regard to the cosmological argument. There is an affirmative Aristotelian response strongly supporting the argument and a negative response that is quite critical of it. Among the Aristotelian thinkers are Al-Kindi and Averroes; Al-Ghazzali and Iqbal may be seen as being in opposition to the argument.

Al-Kindi is one of the first Islamic philosophers to attempt to introduce a purely empirical argument for the existence of God. In fact, his chief contribution, in his *On First Philosophy* is the *dalil al-huduth*, the cosmological argument for the existence of God.<sup>5</sup> One of the variations revolves around the principle of *tarjih*. *Tarjih* holds that prior to the existence of the universe it was equally likely for it to exist or not to exist; the fact that the universe does exist implies that it required a determining principle which would cause its existence to prevail over non-existence. This principle of determination is God.<sup>6</sup> One can easily draw an analogy to Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason.<sup>7</sup>

There are difficulties with this kind of an account of the universe. It seems to lead to the conclusion that all truths are necessary. That is, if everything exists because the reasons for its existence supercede the reasons for its non-existence, then everything *necessarily* exists. Since the superiority of its potential existence over its non-existence provides the required determining principle (as for Kindi) or sufficient reason (as for Leibniz), for it to exist, it then appears that the creation of the universe was not contingent upon the will of God, but is as necessary as the existence of God Himself. This seems implausible.

Al-Kindi's second argument draws its inspiration from Islamic and Aristotelian sciences. He argues that only God is indivisible, and everything other than God is in some way composite.

Kindi describes his concept of God:

**He has no matter, no form, no quantity, no quality, no relation; nor is He qualified by any of the remaining categories (*al-maqulat*). He has no genus, no differentia, no species, no proprium, no accident. He is immutable... He is, therefore, absolute oneness, nothing but oneness (*wahdah*). Everything else must be multiple.<sup>8</sup>**

Al-Kindi depended on this distinction for many of his arguments for the existence of God. In Al-Kindi's theory, only God's unity is necessary; that of all others is contingent upon God. Hence, all other beings single or multiple must emanate from the ultimate essential being. Kindi accepts that the material world cannot exist *ad infinitum* because of the impossibility of an actual infinite. The material world is not *eo ipso* eternal, because of the impossibility of an infinite duration of time; since our conception of time is contingent upon the existence of finite bodies and motion. As such, the world requires a creator - or rather a generator (*mudhith*) in Kindi's scheme - who could generate the world *ex nihilo*. (Fakhry 74-79)

Islamic scholarship, like its western counterpart, offers numerous criticisms of cosmological arguments. Ghazzali was unconvinced by the first-cause arguments of Al-Kindi. In response to them he wrote:

**According to the hypothesis under consideration, it has been established that all the beings in the world have a cause. Now, let the cause itself have a cause, and the cause of the cause have yet another cause, and so on *ad infinitum*. It does not behoove you to say that an infinite regress of causes is impossible.<sup>9</sup>**

More recently, Muhammad Iqbal also rejects the argument stating, "Logically speaking, then, the movement from the finite to the infinite as embodied in the cosmological argument is quite illegitimate; and the argument fails in total." For Iqbal, the concept of the first "un-caused cause" is absurd. He continues:

**It is, however, obvious that a finite effect can give only a finite cause, or at most an infinite series of such causes. To finish the series at a certain point, and to elevate one member of the series to the dignity of an un-caused first cause, is to set at naught the very law of causation on which the whole argument proceeds.**

It is for these reasons that modern philosophers almost unanimously reject the cosmological argument as a legitimate proof for the existence of God. Kant, for example, also repudiates any cosmological proof on the grounds that it is nothing more than an ontological proof in disguise.

He argues that any necessary object's essence must involve existence; hence, reason alone can define such a being. The cosmological argument, devoid of any empirical premises, begins to resemble its ontological counterpart.

Al-Kindi's argument has been taken up by some contemporary Western philosophers and named the Kalam Cosmological Argument. Among its chief proponents is Dr. William Craig.<sup>10</sup> This argument proposes to show that the universe necessarily must have had a beginning. A contrast is drawn between two concepts, the *potential* infinite and the *actual* infinite. A potential infinite is a concept of an infinite series, to which more things can be added. For example, there may be an infinite number of integers, however in any single closed set, the number of integers is finite. An actual infinite would be a closed set containing all possible integers. Such a set is impossible, since there are an infinite number of integers. Once a set is defined, another integer can always be added to it. Ramey quotes the famous mathematician David Hilbert:

...The actual infinite is nowhere to be found in reality. It neither exists in nature nor provides a legitimate basis for rational thought—a remarkable harmony between being and thought...

This forms an essential part of the argument. It demonstrates that an infinite regress could not exist; thus, the universe cannot possibly be actually infinite. The argument goes on to show that if the universe could not be actually infinite or eternal, it must have a first-cause or creator, a God.

How can God, an “uncaused and infinite being” exist? Al-Kindi's answer is quite interesting. He states that it is not fair to ask this question of God, since God is not an actual infinite. God is not a set or collection of things, He is one. God is an absolute unity, and hence on Al-Kindi's scheme God should not be thought of as “infinite.”<sup>11</sup> It is not clear, however, if the Kalam argument successfully shows the impossibility of an infinite. A common response points out that there is no difficulty in imagining an infinity that begins at the present and continues into the future. It then follows that it is entirely conceivable for the same infinity to extend in to the past as well.<sup>12</sup>

## Teleological Arguments

The version of the argument from design is best known in contemporary philosophy as it is presented by William Paley (1805) in his *Natural Theology*. He offers us the analogy of the watch. Suppose that while walking in a deserted remote location you come across a watch. Upon examining this device you may ask yourself, “How did this object come into existence?” Surely it could not be by pure chance; its design is intricate and complex. You would be more likely to think that the watch was a product of an intelligent designer - that is, there must be a watchmaker. Paley argues that the universe is even more complex and manifestly designed than the watch. Such extraordinary design is evident in many phenomena, from planets and galaxies to human cells and atoms. Therefore the universe must have an intelligent creator. This form of the argument can be seen as an inference to the best explanation. That is,

given the remarkable phenomena of the universe, the best possible explanation for this must be the existence of God.

Al-Kindi makes reference to such teleological proof (*dalil al-'indyah*) for the existence of God. He argues that “the orderly and wonderful phenomena of nature could not be purposeless and accidental.”<sup>13</sup> This is consistent with the Qu'ranic verse “Not for (idle) sport did We create the heavens and the earth and all that is between!”<sup>14</sup> The teleological argument analyses the material world and infers from it an artificer, a self-conscious being that created this extremely complex world for a purpose. That creator is God. Muhammad Iqbal criticizes this argument in the following terms:

At best, it [the teleological proof] gives us a skillful external contriver working on a pre-existing dead and intractable material the elements of which are, by their own nature, incapable of orderly structures and combinations. The argument gives us a contriver only and not a creator; and even if we suppose him to be also the creator of his material, it does no credit to his wisdom to create his own difficulties by first creating intractable material, and then overcoming its resistance by the application of methods alien to its original nature. The designer regarded as external to his material must always remain limited by his material and hence a finite designer...<sup>15</sup>

Iqbal is demonstrating that any argument from design rests on understanding the universe as of extraordinary complexity and meticulous arrangement. It is this notion that compels the observer to infer that there must be an intelligent designer. This view is consistent with the watchmaker example presented by Paley. However, the case of the watch and the case of the universe differ. Unlike the case of the watch, where its builder assembled the complex machine given pre-existing material, the material of the universe itself was created by God. Thus, there is no point in finding it extraordinary that God would be able to organize pre-existing intractable material in such an elegant fashion. The only reason we would have to think such would be if it were a profoundly difficult task to arrange the universe. But then why would God first create a difficult task for Himself and then go on to resolve the difficulty by arranging into a sophisticated pattern? In addition, if He is only an arranger, God would be limited in what He could create. This, to Iqbal, does not seem consistent with the Islamic concept of an omnipotent God. Iqbal writes, perhaps in response to Paley, “There is really no analogy between the work of the human artificer and the phenomena of Nature.”<sup>16</sup>

Most Muslim philosophers have attempted to get around this vexatious problem by simply recognizing the Qu'ranic emphasis on the uniformity of nature, accepting it as such and thus avoiding this problem. The above problem of induction gave rise to modern skepticism and remains a fascinating unsolved puzzle.

## Ontological Arguments

The modern Western form of the ontological argument was made famous by Anselm and Descartes. The argument rests on the premise that existence is a predicate that a being could have or lack. A summary of Anselm's argument is as follows:

1. God is a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.
2. A being than which nothing greater can be conceived of exists in our thought.
3. Either a being than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in thought alone and not in reality, or a being than which nothing greater can be conceived exists both in thought and in reality.
4. If the greatest conceivable being existed in thought alone we could think of another being existing in both thought and reality.
5. Existing in thought and reality is greater than existing in thought alone. (A being than which nothing greater can be conceived — God — exists in thought and in reality.)

Without any reference to the world, Anselm argues for the existence of God. A key feature of these kind of arguments is that they try to show not only that God exists, but that he necessarily exists. It would be impossible to think of God without it existing. Descartes famously writes,

**From the fact that I cannot think of a mountain without a valley, it does not follow that a mountain and a valley exist anywhere, but simply that a mountain and a valley, whether they exist or not are mutually inseparable. But from the fact that I cannot think of God except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God.**

Hence, to even make the concept of God intelligible, God must exist. This argument has been widely criticized.

The closest Islamic parallel to this Cartesian ontology can be found in the thought of the ninth century philosopher Avicenna. He shared Descartes methodology of doubt and proposed a somewhat similar ontological argument for the existence of God.<sup>17</sup> Avicenna also held God to be a necessary being. However, his argument — unlike Descartes' — does not make a claim to pure rationalism. Avicenna believed that we possess a direct intuitive apprehension of the reality and existence of this necessary being. He believed that it would be impossible to think concretely without the existence of such a being. Averroes, however, insisted that there can be no rational proof for God's existence and it can only be grasped via the medium of intuition.

The God that Avicenna argues for is a Necessary Being - a being that necessarily exists, and everything else besides is contingent and depends upon this being for its existence. God has no

essence besides his existence. His essence (Ar. *mahiyyah*; L. *quidditas*) is just His existence. Since God is the only being in which essence and existence are to be found together, the essence of all other beings precedes their existence. Thus God is absolutely simplicity; He has no further attributes.<sup>18</sup>

In his book *al-Shifa*, Avicenna explains that since the Necessary Being has no genus, no *differentia*, it is both indefinable and indemonstrable. As such "neither its being or its actions can be an object of discursive thought, since it is without cause, quality, position or time."<sup>19</sup> All other entities do not exist necessarily or essentially, rather they are merely contingent beings (beings *per accidens*). The characteristics of God offered by Avicenna drew major criticisms from the contemporary Muslim orthodoxy, who found his definition incompatible with Islamic doctrine. The Qu'ran says that "not a particle remains hidden from God in the heavens or on the earth." Then how could God be omniscient if He has no attributes?

Avicenna does try to explain how his description would be compatible with God having knowledge of the world. Avicenna's reply is that in knowing Himself, God is capable of knowing everything that emanated from Him. Since God does not have sense-perceptual knowledge, He cannot know the particulars, but rather knows only the essences or universal principles. According to Avicenna this does not exclude Him knowing the specifics of any given event. Knowing all the antecedents and consequences in the causal chain, God is able to place a particular event in time and differentiate that event from all other events. Hence, Avicenna's theory does not preclude God's knowledge of the specifics.<sup>20</sup>

Another key characteristic of Avicenna's ontology is his belief that the universe is eternal. This belief was also unacceptable to the Islamic orthodoxy. Avicenna thought that God's creative ability was linked to His intellectual nature and thus flowed eternally from God out of a rational necessity. Although the universe exists as independent from God, its existence is still contingent upon God. This can be seen as refinement, or rather an "Islamization" of the Aristotelian view that God and the universe were two distinct beings which did not interact with each other.

## Arguments from Religious Experience

There have been philosophical arguments presented for the existence of God which are non-analytical and do not rely on purely logical or empirical premises. Beginning with Al-Ghazzali, there is a strong push in classical Islamic philosophy to resolutely advance this view - and at the same time to deny the legitimacy of purely rationalist arguments for God's existence. Later, Muhammad Iqbal is party to this strategy. However, Iqbal, in concert with his organic world-view, also explores possibilities of reconciliation between reason and religious experience.

The principles for an Islamic epistemology are laid out in the Qu'ran. Three avenues for knowledge are defined:<sup>21</sup>

1. **Certainty by Sense-Perception** (*ain al-yaqin*) or empirically derived knowledge
2. **Cognitive Certainty** (*ilm al-yaqin*) or knowledge by pure reason
3. **Absolute Experienced Certainty** (*haqq al-yaqin*), or knowledge by intuition.

These are sometimes called “modes of knowledge.” A Sufi philosopher explains:

**The sensory mode is experienced through we eat and smell, the cognitive is through knowledge, whether self-evident or acquired, while the intuitive is similarly divided: It can either be self-evident or acquired. However, he who has access to intuitive, which is to say divine knowledge, knows instinctively what other must acquire through the exercise of their cognitive faculties.**<sup>22</sup>

It is this last form of knowledge - the intuitive - at which the arguments from religious experience aim. There is some disagreement on the significance of intuitive knowledge; one should ask the question, even if intuitive knowledge is necessary, is it sufficient for an Islamic epistemology of metaphysics? Ghazzali argues in the affirmative. However, modern philosophers like Iqbal and Al-Attas assert that intuitive knowledge must work in concert with other epistemologies as well.

## Al - Ghazzali

The first major critic of philosophy in the Islamic tradition was Abu Hamid ibn Muhammad al-Ghazzali. Ghazzali felt that no formulation of an epistemology based on human reason could possibly offer a sufficient account of metaphysical theology.

He was an influential Islamic scholar that became interested in philosophy after studying a variety of quarreling Muslim intellectual movements. He then decided

**even if** to embark on a project to determine the answers to two questions: What is **INTUITIVE** certain knowledge? And is such knowledge possible by humans?<sup>23</sup>

**KNOWLEDGE** To accomplish his goal, Ghazzali, much like Descartes, engages in methodological doubt. Unlike Descartes, however, Ghazzali reaches a much more radical conclusion about our ability to have “certain knowledge.” He begins by defining what he means by “certain knowledge.” Ghazzali writes:

**NECESSARY,** **is it** **SUFFICIENT** **for an** **ISLAMIC METAPHYSICS?** **The search after truth being the aim which I propose to myself, I ought in the first place to ascertain what are the bases of certitude. In the second place I ought to recognize that certitude is the clear and complete knowledge of things, such knowledge as leave no room for doubt, nor any possibility of error.**<sup>24</sup>

The kind of knowledge Ghazzali is then seeking is such that the object of knowledge is known in a manner which precludes all possibilities of doubt.

According to Ghazzali, there are only two sources of knowledge that are available to us: sense-perception, and pure reason. He writes:

**We cannot hope to find truth except in matters which carry their evidence in themselves, i.e. in sense-perception and necessary principles of thought; we must, therefore first of all establish these two on a firm basis.**<sup>25</sup>

As a first step, Ghazzali concludes that the only knowledge that could qualify as “certain” would be of the kind that would fit the above description - knowledge of sense-perception or self-evident or necessary truths.<sup>26</sup> Next, Ghazzali examines the extent of knowledge that these avenues allow. He quickly realizes that sense-perception cannot be a source of certain knowledge as it is often untrustworthy. Ghazzali offers examples: shadows appear to be stationary, though in reality they move over time; planets appear coin-sized though astronomical evidence points to the contrary.

Having discarded knowledge of the senses as a path to certainty, Ghazzali considers knowledge of necessary truths. Ghazzali and Descartes both agree that knowledge by sense-perception is unreliable, but Ghazzali makes the further claim that knowledge by pure theoretical reason alone is also unreliable. Descartes, on the other hand, had built his entire epistemology on the basis of the viability of knowledge by pure reason. Ghazzali, though, thinks that this is also not a credible source of knowledge. If he could not trust one kind of knowledge, why trust the other? Ghazzali thought there was no reason to prefer one over the other.<sup>27</sup> There were questions that made him doubt the utility of necessary principles: Is ten really more than three? Can something be and not be at the same time? Can something be both necessary and impossible? He thought reason alone could not provide satisfactory answers to these questions.<sup>28</sup> Hence, making an analogy between the two modes of knowledge, Ghazzali denies knowledge of necessary proposition as well.<sup>29</sup> For obvious reasons, his argument here is quite controversial and Iqbal strongly criticizes Ghazzali on this count.

Ghazzali is now in a position where he has convinced himself that neither of the two avenues of knowledge open to him are reliable. He is confused and considers the possibility that life could be a dream. He was in a state of continuous doubt, unable to ground anything in truth and existence. Ghazzali suffered from this *aporia* as if it were a physical malady. Until he realized a “light which God infused into his heart, which is the key to most species of knowledge.”<sup>30</sup> This Ghazzali found similar to how the Prophet Muhammad describes revelation, “the dilation of the heart, whereby it becomes prone to the reception of Islam.” Ghazzali was then able to transcend everyday experience and realize the ultimate reality through spiritual experience. What Ghazzali is suggesting is the “possibility of a form of apprehension higher than rational apprehension, that is, apprehension as the mystic’s inspiration or the prophet’s revelation.”<sup>31</sup> This new form of knowledge is what he calls intuition. It is distinct from knowledge by the senses or by intellect; intuitive knowledge is only possible through divine facilitation.

## Iqbal’s Critique of Ghazzali

Muhammad Iqbal is quite critical of Ghazzali’s characterization of knowledge. He finds Ghazzali to be mistaken in abandoning reason and embracing mysticism as the exclusive path to experience of the infinite. Iqbal writes of Ghazzali:

He failed to see that thought and intuition are organically related and that thought must necessarily simulate finitude and inconclusiveness because of its alliance with serial time. The idea that thought is essentially finite, and for this reason unable to capture the Infinite, is based on a mistaken notion of the movement of thought in knowledge.<sup>32</sup>

For Iqbal, there is no inherent reason a finite being cannot grasp the reality of an infinite being. Thought is dynamic and is revealed over time. Iqbal further explains how the infinite can come into the comprehension of a finite being. Using a Qu'ranic metaphor, the infinite according to Iqbal is

A kind of 'Preserved Tablet', which holds up the entire undermined possibilities of knowledge as a present reality, revealing itself in serial time as a succession of finite concepts appearing to reach a unity which is already present in them. It is in fact the presence of the total Infinite in the movement of knowledge that makes finite thinking possible.

Thus, the continuous revealing of the infinite over a finite temporal period allows the finite intellect to grasp the essence of the infinite God. It is not that at any point the finite intellect will be able to fully comprehend the limitless and infinite, but rather that it is the potential of thought to be itself without limit that allows it to have an understanding of the limitless, at least in principle. Dr. Naquib Al-Attas, a contemporary Muslim philosopher and disciple of Al-Ghazzali's school, explains the concept of intuition as understood by him:

We maintain that all knowledge of reality and of truth, and the projection of a true vision of the ultimate nature of things is originally derived through the medium of intuition. The intuition that we mean cannot simply be reduced to that which operates solely at the physical level of discursive reason based upon sense-experience, for since we affirm in man the possession of physical as well as intelligential or spiritual powers and faculties which refer back to the spiritual entity, sometimes called intellect, or heart, or soul, or self, it follows that man's rational, imaginal and empirical existence must involve both the physical and spiritual levels.

Here he reaffirms both physical (material) and spiritual (metaphysical) levels as necessary for intuition. However, special emphasis is placed upon the spiritual. This concept of intuition is a major theme both within higher Islamic philosophy and mysticism. It holds that the ultimate reality can be directly and spontaneously experienced and truth can become self-evident with complete clarity.

when seeking the divine, we CANNOT and DO NOT rely upon "OTHERS." The clue to the ULTIMATE reality must be contained within the EGO. The individual SELF must be the ONLY WAY to certain knowledge.

## Muhammad Iqbal

Iqbal offers his account of the possibility of religion in the last lecture of the reconstruction titled *Is Religion Possible?* For Iqbal, religion is not something isolated from philosophy. He advocates an integration of the two, at times suggesting that the psychology has not reached an advanced enough level to be able to incorporate spiritual experience as part of a scientific theory of knowledge. Iqbal thinks that, given adequate methods, the ultimate reality is within human grasp. He writes that:

The truth is that the religious and the scientific processes, though involving different methods, are identical in their final aim. Both aim at reaching the most real. In fact, religion... is far more anxious to reach the ultimately real than science.<sup>33</sup>

One of the major objections to proofs from religious experience has been that religious experience is incommunicable - not transferable from one person to another - and as such has no value as evidence. That is, person A may see the truth of a proposition whereas person B may not, and there is no way for person A to demonstrate to person B how he came to believe a certain thing. Iqbal does not think that this is a problem. Rather, precisely this "problem" is the foundation of his worldview. He had an organic view about the universe as a whole and people as we encounter them. In our everyday life we see other individuals as mere functions, and only deal with them in so far as their conceptual relation to us is concerned. We do not pursue them any further for any sense of an ultimate reality. Thus, when seeking the divine, we cannot and do not rely upon "others." The clue to the ultimate reality must be contained within the ego. The individual self must be the only way to certain knowledge.

It may be that what we call the external world is only an intellectual construction, and that there are other levels of human experience capable of being systematized by other orders of space and time - levels in which concept and analysis do not play the same role as they do in the case of our normal experience.<sup>34</sup>

RELIGION  
IS NOT...  
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FROM  
PHILOSOPHY

The incommunicability of religious experience is an essential part of what makes it different from “normal experience”:

**Strictly speaking, the experience which leads to this discovery is not a conceptually manageable intellectual fact; it is a vital fact, an attitude consequent on an inner biological transformation which cannot be captured in the net of logical categories.**<sup>35</sup>

Intuition is then a valid form of knowledge-yielding experience. This does not, however, mean that intuition is divorced from reason. Iqbal explains that, although real, we do not have the tools at our disposal to evaluate this process of “inner biological transformation.” The scientific method we have today is insufficient to apply to these kinds of experiences, since scientific “concept and analysis” may not be applicable to this sort of experience as they are to physics. Dr. Al-Attas, advocating a similar view states:

**Belief has cognitive content; and one of the main points of divergence between true religion and secular philosophy and science is the way in which the sources and methods of knowledge are understood.**<sup>36</sup>

At this level of experience, “the act of knowledge is a constitutive element in the objective reality.”<sup>37</sup> Iqbal thought God could not be removed from his creation. Not in the pantheistic sense, but in that the ultimate reality cannot stand as an other to the universe or person (as Avicenna thought). Rather, they are intertwined, and in looking within ourselves for this higher level of experience, the ultimate reality would be revealed unto the individual. As Iqbal explains, this higher level of experience is not at the sensory or representational level. It is better described as a feeling rather than as concepts. He writes: “It is rather a mode of dealing with Reality in which sensation, in the physiological sense of the word, does not play any part.”<sup>38</sup>

This, for Iqbal, is the mystic experience that ultimately leads to certain knowledge. This knowledge is

**Irresistible and like bright sunshine forces itself immediately to be perceived as soon as the mind turns its attention to it, and leaves no room for hesitation, doubt or examination, but the mind is perfectly filled with the clear light of it.**<sup>39</sup>

It should be mentioned that although Iqbal offers the above explanation of the way in which an individual may access the ultimate, he draws his inspiration from Einstein and Nietzsche. Einstein’s theory of relativity gave Iqbal hope that his theory about the relation between the finite and the infinite was viable. Relativity blurred the line between traditional conceptions of what was physical and what was metaphysical, exposing their underlying connections. Nietzsche’s emphasis on individuality

deeply impressed Iqbal; he thought that Nietzsche was on the right track, but had been distracted by the way that the naturalisms of Schopenhauer, Darwin and Lange explained away the existence of God. Hence, Nietzsche was a failure. But he had realized an essential truth. That is, what ultimately matters is the ego, the *self*, and nothing else. Thus it is not important if reality is not transferable from one person to another. What matters is the “I” and not the “other.”

It is also significant that Iqbal thought that if a sufficient understanding of the “mental” was achieved, it would be (at least theoretically) possible to use the science of psychology to garner a better sense of this “deeper experience.” This may be relevant to the concept in philosophy of mind known as the “anomalousness of the mental.” This principle states that there are no causal laws that relate to mental events. This explains science and psychology’s difficulty in grasping such concepts. Iqbal, however, thinks that it is at least theoretically possible to be able to achieve a working understanding of mental events. The theories of knowledge advocated by the proofs from religious experience may be considered externalist accounts. Externalism is the view that some of the justifying factors of belief need not be cognitively accessible and may be external to the mind of the individual. That is, a person can be justified in holding a belief even if they are not aware that they are in possession of all the reasons that make the position justified. Iqbal advocates a similar view, in that the reasons, although they may objectively exist, are difficult to determine by the individual.

Externalism often rests on the premise of reliabilism. That is, one way to know that something is true without knowing all the reasons for it being true is to consider if the information is received from a reliable source. For example, we may consider our vision and senses to be a reliable source to affirm the existence of the external world. In the same way, Iqbal and Ghazzali describe the experience of the divine in terms of the sense. If this experience is reliable and originating from God, then we could affirm the knowledge without knowing all the reasons that justify God’s existence. It appears, however, that what Iqbal wants to say is that the reasons for the justification of God are, in theory, accessible to humans, but in practice are much more difficult to determine compared to the direct mystic experience of the divine entity. This is consistent with the views of Al-Ghazzali on this issue.<sup>40</sup>

## The Potential of Islam

There is a strong tradition of rigorous Islamic thought on philosophical issues. Issues in Islamic metaphysics and epistemology are varied and complex. There are strong and useful similarities of thinking between Muslim and Western philosophy. Western philosophers have expanded upon many of the debates originating within the Islamic world, as the Muslims had earlier done with the work of Greek scholars. It would be a mistake to consider Islamic thought a relic of the past. Islamic philosophy is showing signs of significant recovery and with the emergence of an integrated worldview, it will be a practicable academic discipline.

The consensus among modern Muslim philosophers seems to have shifted away from the purely empirical arguments for God’s existence. The consensus of Islamic thinkers like Ghazzali, Al-Attas and Iqbal seem to prefer arguments from religious experience over the rational arguments.



Apart from the basic question of how faith and reason interact in epistemology, there are other issues of significance that need philosophical study. For instance, is there an Islamic response to the mind-body problem? Are we to reject the concept of the soul as Kant did since it is an obscure concept? Or can it be reinterpreted as the mind? If so, what constitutes the mind? Does Islam provide its own ethical framework? If so, what are its principles and does it resolve some of the difficulties of common Western ethical theories? These are just some of the questions, besides those of epistemology and metaphysics, that will face future Muslim philosophers.

Resolving these problems will have profound implications on the Islamic worldview and are prerequisite to any tangible and independent Islamic academic philosophy.

At the very least, it is important for Islamic thought to reassert itself clearly and define the parameters upon which a modern Islamic epistemology can be built. The work of the philosophers of the West cannot be ignored, and their criticism should be used to recreate, not disparage, the vigor of Islamic philosophy that has been lost over the past few centuries.

## Notes

1 Iqbal, 6  
 2 Kindi, 18-19  
 3 Ibn Rushd, 44-46. It should also be noted that the thrust of Ghazzali's argument is not against philosophy, but rather its us. His main concern is that the philosophers are drawing invalid conclusions from their arguments.  
 4 Ibn Rushd, 47  
 5 Nasr, 168  
 6 Kindi, 58  
 7 Russell, 568; Cassirer, 73  
 8 Sharif, 429  
 9 Tahafut, 90-91  
 10 Ramey  
 11 Fakhry, 77  
 12 Sharif, 503  
 13 Kindi, 61  
 14 Yusuf Ali, Qu'ran 21:16  
 15 Iqbal, 24  
 16 (Iqbal 24)  
 17 Shiekh, 77  
 18 Sharif, 501  
 19 Fakhry, 153-154  
 20 Al-Ghazzali was not satisfied with this account and criticized Avvicena stating that the theory would not allow for change in

divine knowledge with the introduction of temporality. (Sharif, 502)  
 21 Wan Daud, 65  
 22 Awliya, 160-161  
 23 Fakhry, 218; Sheikh, 85; Sharif, 583  
 24 Sharif, 588  
 25 Sharif, 589  
 26 Ghazzali  
 27 Fakhry, 219  
 28 Sharif, 589  
 29 Fakhry, 219  
 30 Fakhry, 219  
 31 Sharif, 590  
 32 Iqbal, 155  
 33 Iqbal, 155  
 34 Iqbal, 144  
 35 Iqbal, 145  
 36 Anees.  
 37 Iqbal, 145  
 38 Maruf  
 39 Hasan  
 40 Iqbal also advocates another proof for the existence of God based upon the Qu'ranic emphasis upon history. This can also be considered a reliabilist account, however, it has not been considered in this paper.

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