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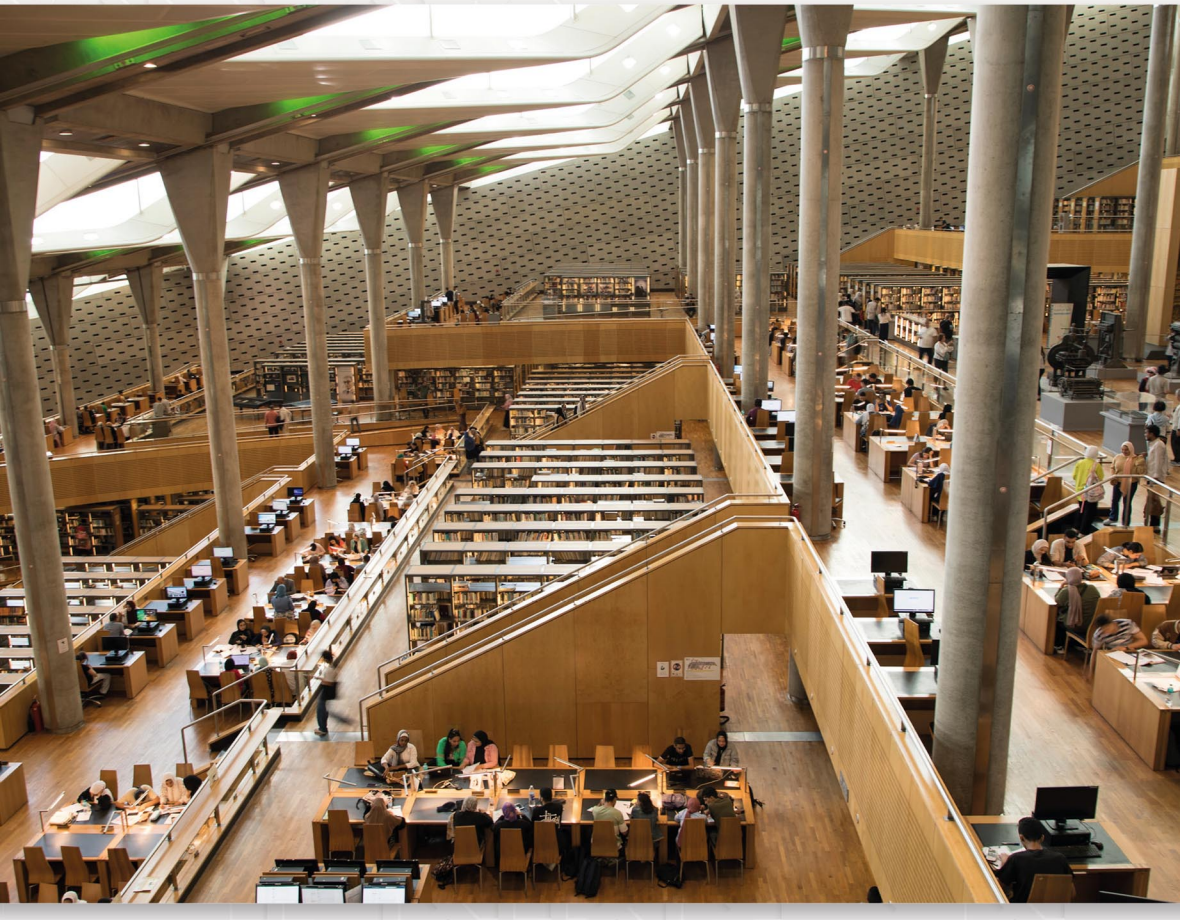

Analytic Islamic Epistemology

Critical Debates

EDITED BY SAFARUK CHOWDHURY AND RAMON HARVEY

ANALYTIC ISLAMIC EPISTEMOLOGY

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ANALYTIC ISLAMIC EPISTEMOLOGY

Critical Debates

EDITED BY
SAFARUK CHOWDHURY AND
RAMON HARVEY

EDINBURGH
University Press

For seekers of knowledge

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Cover image: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 11 August 2023, Alexandria, Egypt.
Photograph by MarinaDa.
Cover design: Stuart Dalziel

Edinburgh University Press Ltd
13 Infirmary Street, Edinburgh EH1 1LT

Typeset in 11/13 Minion 3 by
IDSUK (DataConnection) Ltd, and
Printed and bound in the UK using 100% renewable electricity by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 3995 3312 6 (hardback)
ISBN 978 1 3995 3314 0 (webready PDF)
ISBN 978 1 3995 3315 7 (epub)

EU Authorised Representative:
Easy Access System Europe
Mustamäe tee 50, 10621 Tallinn, Estonia
gpsr.requests@easproject.com

This book is printed using paper from well-managed forests, recycling and other controlled sources

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Notes on Contributors

M. Ashraf Adeel is Professor of Philosophy at Kutztown University. He is the author of *Epistemology of the Quran* and *How Do We Deal with Conflicts Between Different World Views If They Are Based on the Same Evidence?*

Erik Baldwin is Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at Indiana University, Northwest. He is the author of *Fully Informed Reasonable Disagreement and Tradition Based Perspectivalism* and the co-author (with Tyler McNabb) of *Plantingian Religious Epistemology and World Religions* and *Classical Theism and Buddhism*.

Anthony Robert Booth is Professor of Ethics and Epistemology at the University of Sussex. He is the author of *Islamic Philosophy and the Ethics of Belief* and *Analytic Islamic Philosophy*.

Safaruk Chowdhury is a visiting lecturer at Cambridge Muslim College. He is the author of *A Ṣūfī Apologist of Nīshāpūr* and *Islamic Theology and the Problem of Evil*.

Kelly James Clark is Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at Istanbul's Ibn Haldun University. He is the author of *God and the Brain*, *Return to Reason*, and *Raging Fire of Love*.

Amir Mohammad Emami is a PhD candidate in Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter.

Hannah C. Erlwein is a postdoctoral researcher at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin. She is the author of *Arguments for God's Existence in Classical Islamic Thought*.

John Greco is the Robert L. McDevitt, K. S. G., K. C. H. S. and Catherine H. McDevitt L. C. H. S. Chair in Philosophy at Georgetown University. He is the author of *Achieving Knowledge* and *The Transmission of Knowledge*.

Ramon Harvey is Senior Lecturer in Islamic Studies at Cambridge Muslim College. He is the author of *The Qur'an and the Just Society* and *Transcendent God, Rational World*.

Laura Hassan is an Associate of the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Oxford. She is the author of *Ash'arism Encounters Avicennism*.

Jon Hoover is Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Nottingham. He is the author of *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism* and *Ibn Taymiyya*.

K. Scott Oliphint is Professor of Apologetics and Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary. He is the author of *Covenantal Apologetics*, *Reasons for Faith* and *Know Why You Believe*.

Harith Ramli is a lecturer in Islamic History at Usul Academy.

Aaron Spevack is a researcher in Islamic Philosophy and Theology and Muslim Chaplain at Brandeis University. He is the author of *The Logic of al-Fanārī* and *The Archetypal Sunni Scholar*.

Jamie B. Turner is a PhD candidate at the Birmingham Centre for Philosophy of Religion, University of Birmingham.

Ayşenur Ünügür-Tabur is a postdoctoral researcher due to begin a Marie-Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of Birmingham. She is the author of *Divine Free Action in Avicenna and Anselm*.

David Worsley is Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of York.

PART V

Islamic Epistemology Today: Disciplinary, Scriptural and Social Discourses

CHAPTER 13

Advice for Muslim Epistemologists

Kelly James Clark

Consternation

After accepting the invitation to speak on Muslim epistemology, it quickly occurred to me that I know nothing about Muslim epistemology. I know lots of Muslims and lots of epistemologists but next to nothing about their intersection. Moreover, I am keenly aware that, if I were to claim that 'al-Ghazālī says *p*' and 'Ibn Sīnā says *q*', much better-trained Islamic scholars will tell me that actually al-Ghazālī denies *p* and Ibn Sīnā rejects *q*; and that would be the end of that. I am quite sure that this would be true also of any claims I would make about Ibn ʿArabī, al-Kindī, Rumi and every other Muslim philosopher. Therefore, I decided: I would not discuss Muslim philosophers at all.

I also thought that I better not talk about Muslim philosophy and Islamic thought in general. As an anti-essentialist about religion, I do not think the category 'Muslim philosophy' has a unique referent. After all, there are countless Muslims (representing often vastly different conceptions of Islam) who have had countless theological thoughts, and the intersection of those thoughts is likely the empty set. Even if I were to restrict myself to, say, 'orthodox Muslims' and 'thought-written-down' – that is, to 'proper' Muslims who wrote texts designated as 'philosophical' – I suspect that any claims thusly grounded would be rejected by a great many contemporary Muslim thinkers. Restricting myself to epistemology: I am quite certain that there is no consensus in Muslim philosophy or Islamic thought on epistemological principles. While I have often heard, 'Muslims are evidentialists', I have also heard of remarkable exceptions. Hence, I shall not be making any claims about Islam, Muslims, Islamic philosophy, or Islamic epistemological thought *in toto*. It is better for me not to speak of any claims of Muslim philosophers or Islamic thought at all.

You might sense my desperation. How can a Christian epistemologist who has determined at the outset not to discuss any Muslim philosophers, Muslim philosophy or Islamic thought offer any meaningful advice

to Muslim epistemologists? As I read more of the invitation to participate in this project, I saw its promise: 'A historic opportunity for developing Islamic epistemology as a contemporary academic discourse'. That fixed my inspiration. How can I help my Muslim brothers and sisters engage in contemporary academic epistemological discourse?

I am quite sure, and I do not mean this as a criticism, that current practices by most contemporary Muslim scholars (at least the ones whom I know) preclude developing Islamic epistemology as a contemporary academic discourse. Let me be more precise – I think I understand how the current practices of most Muslim scholars preclude their engagement by contemporary non-Muslim epistemologists. Most contemporary Muslim philosophers align themselves with a thinker or a tradition, taking on the modes of discourse particular to that thinker and tradition. But contemporary epistemology is more idea than tradition-focused; its methods are more logical and conceptual than historical. Since contemporary Muslim philosophy is often more concerned with history and tradition than conceptual analysis, one may ask: how can contemporary Muslim philosophers mine their various traditions for insights and communicate them effectively to contemporary academics?

Thus, my advice to Muslim philosophers aims at what it might mean for a Muslim scholar to understand and participate in 'contemporary academic discourse'. I know this is, in one sense, 'academic writing 101'. In another sense, it is a concession to the fact that many philosophy PhD programmes do not teach writing. They seem to think that writing is caught (since not taught). When I am involved in projects that teach writing to advanced graduate students and early-career philosophers, I am often told: 'Well, they never taught us that in grad school. This is so helpful'. In the spirit of helpfulness, I will outline, as questions, the broadest issues involved in Muslim engagement in contemporary academic discourse – the 'what', the 'who' and the 'why'. I will conclude with a brief reflection on what being a creature might mean for epistemology.

What?

Let us start with the 'what'. Before any writing begins, authors need compelling answers to the following two questions: (1) What exactly is your thesis? And (2) does it contribute something interestingly new to the current debates? Let us start with the first.

(1) What exactly is your thesis?

It may seem obvious that a philosophical paper of any sort, let alone one which contributes to contemporary debates, should have a clear thesis.

Yet often I cannot locate a clear thesis in drafts of papers that I am asked to read. Let me be very clear: at the end of the first or second paragraph (maybe later on in the introduction, if the author is really clever and has a really good reason) there should be a single, clear, declarative sentence that begins with 'In this paper, I will argue . . .', which says, clearly and unambiguously, what the author will argue.

I sometimes get to the end of the first paragraph and then to the end of the second and the third, all the way to the end of the introduction, and I have no idea what the point of the paper is. It can get worse. I have read entire papers where there is no thesis statement anywhere; I get all the way to the end and have no idea what the point of the paper was. I suspect you have, too!

If I cannot locate a clear thesis, I often ask: 'Would you please tell me – in a single sentence – what your thesis is?' Authors often launch into a long, unfocused discourse on all of the things they have written, which I have just read, maybe giving more background to the general topic, to no discernible point; I will stop them and say: 'No, one sentence. One simple, declarative sentence where you say, "I will argue that . . ."' I ask them to take a second, write it down, share it. Then it dawns, the author has no idea what the point of all their rhetoric is.

Thus, I encourage the author to start over, to start where every paper should start – with a clear sense of the paper's point. Frankly, I find it vastly easier to write a paper if I know what my thesis is! Knowing your thesis at the outset directs research, guides arguments and aids in writing. Without a thesis, a paper simply rambles and jumbles and tumbles.

(2) Does your thesis contribute something interestingly new to the current debates?

Of course, not just any thesis will do. If you want to be part of the 'historic opportunity for developing Islamic epistemology as a contemporary academic discourse', your thesis will need to engage topics in contemporary academic epistemological discourse. Unless you are Keith Lehrer, Bertrand Russell, or Roderick Chisholm, your topic should not be 'epistemology' or 'knowledge'. If you cannot think of a more specific topic, or if you do not know who Lehrer, Russell and Chisholm are, you are probably not yet prepared to contribute to the current debate. After all, debates have histories that contribute to and even determine both focused topics and accepted modes of discourse. Lehrer, Russell and Chisholm, major contributors to twentieth-century epistemology, need to be mastered for both contemporary topics and modes of discourse. They have wrestled with foundationalism, coherentism, reliabilism, the Gettier problem and the myth of the given (among many other topics). You cannot be part of the current debate

until *you* have wrestled with Lehrer, Russell and Chisholm on foundationalism, coherentism, reliabilism, the Gettier problem and the myth of the given (among many other topics). Imagine trying to contribute to contemporary physics without mastering the topics and mathematical methods of Einstein, Bohr and Schrödinger. Likewise, you cannot contribute to contemporary epistemology unless you master the topics and the logical and conceptual methods of contemporary epistemologists.

Some readers may think that Lehrer, Russell and Chisholm are 'so yesterday'. And they would be right. The work of those thinkers led to, again among many others, Linda Zagzebski, Jennifer Nagel and Jennifer Lackey (highlighting the contributions of outstanding women). And they, in turn, explored new topics: Bayesian epistemology, virtue epistemology, knowledge-first epistemology, alief and belief, disagreement, testimony and countless other topics. In order to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past – of trying to revive, for example, moribund epistemologies such as classical foundationalism or coherentism – Muslim thinkers who wish to be taken seriously in the contemporary context need to be fully conversant with twentieth- and twenty-first-century epistemological debates.

I suspect that Muslims who wish to be epistemologists might have more interest in religious epistemology than epistemology *simpliciter*. But you cannot do excellent contemporary religious epistemology unless and until you are deeply conversant in contemporary epistemology *simpliciter*. Consider the work of just three of the twentieth century's great religious epistemologists: Alvin Plantinga, William Alston and Nicholas Wolterstorff. Each of them mastered and then advanced debates in contemporary epistemology at its highest levels before entering into discussion of the rationality of belief in God. Alston, for example, published his ground-breaking book *Divine Nature and Human Language* (1989) long after his *Philosophy of Language* (1964). Plantinga advanced his non-argument religious epistemology (1983) after grappling with theistic arguments (1967), whereas his work on modality preceded his work on the problem of evil (both published in 1974). Wolterstorff's work on Locke and the ethics of belief (1996) anticipated his development of the ideas and relevance of Thomas Reid for contemporary epistemology (2004). And all the above figured into Plantinga's thinking as he wrote his three-volume series on warrant (1993 and 2000). Plantinga, Alston and Wolterstorff entered into and advanced our understanding of rationality-justification-warrant, Thomas Reid, internalism-externalism, classical foundationalism, *de facto versus de jure* objections, defeaters, *prima facie versus ultima facie* justification and Proper Functionalism.

Therefore, developing a thesis that contributes something interestingly new to the current debates in religious epistemology, which have advanced beyond Plantinga, Alston and Wolterstorff, requires mastering Lehrer, Russell, Chisholm, on the one hand, and Plantinga, Alston and Wolterstorff,

on the other – and all of the related concepts, arguments and assumptions. And, if you had three hands, moving on to Zagzebski, Lackey and Nagel (among many others) and their insights and inspirations.

If this sounds daunting, and it should, then imagine my trepidation when asked to write a paper in Islamic epistemology. The entry requirements to understanding a single Muslim thinker, say al-Ghazālī, are astonishingly high, requiring years of instruction in al-Ghazālī's writings, pre-Ghazālian thinkers, al-Ghazālī's history and personality, al-Ghazālī's milieu, Arabic, Aristotle and 1,000 years of commentary on his ideas. How could I possibly think that I, lacking such an education, could develop a thesis that contributes anything interestingly new to Ghazālian discussions? I greatly admire historical philosophical scholars, in part because they endured daunting entry requirements to contribute to their field. Contemporary epistemology has very different but no less daunting entry requirements. It may take a generational shift for Muslim scholars to begin acquiring the skills necessary to contribute to current debates in epistemology. I will discuss why after covering 'who'.

Who?

If Muslim academics would like to see Islamic thought taken seriously in contemporary academic debates, they must accommodate their scholarship to their audience. After setting a thesis, any writer must determine their target audience. There are countless audiences, almost as many as there are people and 'people groups', and the skilled writer adapts her paper to her audience. I often ask authors: 'So, who is your audience for this paper?' Yet I too often read drafts of papers by scholars of all stripes that are either audience-insensitive or audience-unaware.

One of my audiences is the general public. When it is, I avoid using any technical philosophical jargon. I spend a lot more time showing rather than telling (illustrating rather than declaiming or arguing). I use short, simple declarative sentences. I assume the vocabulary and education of, say, juniors in high school. For example, I wrote the following for the *Huffington Post*:

> Why don't moderate Muslims denounce terrorism?
>
> They do. But it doesn't make the news. Bad news, such as terrorist attacks, is news. Good news is not.
>
> Let me concede: just as there are perversions of Christianity (the KKK and the Crusades), there are perversions of Islam (ISIS and Al-Qaeda). Each of these perversions can claim legitimation for their views within their Holy Writ and tradition. And, so, such views can claim to be Christian or Islamic. Taken as sacred, such views can inspire followers to unspeakable acts of violence.

> But just as followers of Jesus claim (rightly, so it seems to me) that Christianity, properly understood, opposes slavery, most wars, and the wholesale slaughter of Jews and Muslims in the Holy Land, so, too, followers of Muhammad claim (rightly, so it seems to me) that Islam, properly understood, opposes radicalisation, offensive warfare and terrorism.[1]

I wrote more, of course, but I want the academic reader of this article to see that good philosophical writing needs to identify its audience clearly and then write to them/it – that is, use modes of discourse that successfully communicate to that audience. You might wonder where the philosophy is in this blog. Because going into the details would detract from the point, let me just state that in those few paragraphs I have communicated, without philosophical jargon, much of what I have learned in the past two decades in cognitive science, religion and violence, rhetoric, Qur'anic studies and theology. The blog was on the front page of the *Huffington Post* for more than twenty-four hours and was read by millions.

Audience-identification, of course, requires a great deal of audience-understanding and, then, author-accommodation to the modes of discourse and understanding of one's audience. Let me commend writing to the general public to at least some Muslim scholars. It is a discipline which the philosophical community owes its various publics.

Failures of audience-identification abound in academic papers. Suppose, for example, an author reads a paper on Heidegger to philosophers in general. Perhaps that author has learned a lot from Heidegger and is excited to share what she has learned with the philosophical community at large. Yet, as can happen with specialists, she fails at accommodating to her audience by assuming that modes of discourse that are familiar to Heidegger scholars are, with just a little tweaking, accessible to philosophers in general. Hence, throughout her paper, she drops such linguistic gems as *Dasein*, *apophantic*, being-in-the-world, being-toward-death and *Ereigneis*; she thinks the following definition adequate for audience-understanding: '*Gelassenheit* is the spirit of *disponibilité* before What-Is which permits us simply to let things be in whatever may be their uncertainty and their mystery'. She then uses the term *Gelassenheit* repeatedly, as though her single definition was sufficient for subsequent comprehension. I do not mean to demean Heidegger or Heidegger scholars by this not-so-imaginary example. I only mean to note that philosophers in general are not sufficiently versed in Heidegger terminology to grasp such papers. The author missed or misidentified her audience.

1 https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-dont-moderate-muslims_b_8722518 (accessed 28 January 2024).

Consider another piece of philosophical writing:

> *Qian* and *kun* are not the ideals, as there is imbalance and disharmony with the excess of yang and yin, respectively. Ideal states of affairs are found in hexagrams 11 and 63. In hexagram 11 (*Tai* [Peace]) the trigrams *qian* and *kun* are complementary coequals. In this ideal state the female is in ascendancy: *kun* is above, and *qian* is below. In this hexagram, heaven and earth embrace; heaven is on earth [. . .] *Tai* symbolizes springtime, a time of harmony when the forces of nature unite to bring forth abundance. Curiously, for a patriarchal society, when *qian*, the masculine, is above and *kun*, the feminine, is below as in hexagram 12 (*Pi* [Obstruction]), there is disorder and decline. Heaven has retreated from the earth, which is falling below. *Qian* and *kun* are disordered [. . .] and their improper relation produces stagnation and decay [. . .] The other most significant state of affairs is hexagram 63 (*Jiji* [Ferrying Complete]), with its alternating lines of yin and yang.[2]

How many of you have any idea what is being discussed here? What if I told you that it is from a paper on Chinese philosophy? Does that help? What if I told you that it is a discussion of the hexagrams in the *I Ching*, which were often used for fortune-telling? Still baffled? Confession: I wrote this in 2004, but not for you. I wrote it with a sinologist in a paper aimed at sinologists. As sinologists, the audience would already know the Chinese terms, the basic ideas of the *I Ching*, the historical situation of early Chinese texts and the roles of gender in early China. And you probably do not. But you were not my audience.

Many, most if I am honest, papers by Muslim scholars read to me like that paragraph on Chinese thought. I do not know Arabic (so citing long texts or even short phrases in Arabic is wasted on me), and I am not conversant in the basic ideas of the Muʿtazilīs or the Ḥanafīs; I am not aware of the socio-historical situations of the texts of al-Ghazālī or Ibn Sīnā, and I do not know the philosophical assumptions of this or that tradition. Finally, Islam is not my form of life (I am trying to understand it, but always as an outsider). Thus, if I read that al-Ghazālī is not a Muʿtazilī or that Ibn Sīnā affirms *al-fayḍ al-ilāhī*, I understand about as much as you understood of my Chinese paragraph.

If your audience consists of Muslim scholars who are educated in Islamic philosophy, then your modes of discourse are on target. But if your hoped-for-audience is contemporary secular scholars, then they are

2 Clark and Wang, 'A Confucian Defense of Gender Equity', p. 400.

woefully off target. This is not a Muslim-specific criticism: I often feel the same way when I read a paper by Aquinas scholars when it contains too much Aquinas-specific, medieval modes of discourse to be understood by contemporary philosophers (or at least by me).

Let me say this very clearly: I think some Muslim scholars should write papers at the highest levels of historical scholarship. Such papers will, of course, be accessible only to scholars who have attained to the highest levels of historical education. Most of that audience will likely be Muslims but there are some notable non-Muslims who will profit as well: Frank Griffel, for example, and Taneli Kukkonen. But the audience for such papers, like the audience for highly technical Aquinas papers, will be small. So be it. Some Muslims should advance Muslim historical scholarship at that level and for that audience.

But if you want to bring Islamic ideas into contemporary academic debates, learned modes of inquiry may require unlearning. For example, you will need to disassociate ideas from thinkers or traditions. Contemporary analytic epistemology is more interested in, say, justified true belief as a definition of knowledge than whether Plato or Russell first identified it (and what exactly they said about it). As you develop your thesis, ask yourself: Is there a concept or an argument or an insight in, say, al-Ghazālī that might contribute to debates in contemporary epistemology? If so, then use contemporary modes of epistemological inquiry – modal logic, Bayesianism, conceptual analysis, examples and counter-examples ('Chisholming', we used to affectionately say), and contemporary philosophical terms of art – to develop the argument. Do not use Aristotelian logic, Arabic, long textual quotations, outdated cultural examples, 'name-dropping' and medieval terms of art. I mention 'name-dropping' because names are often used as a shorthand for a philosophical idea, school of thought or critique; as such, when the name/concept pair does not resonate in the mind of the contemporary scholar, name-dropping creates an obstacle to understanding.

While you may think your insight so worthy of attention that contemporary scholars should work harder to get on board with traditional modes of Islamic scholarship, they will not. Although philosophers may espouse pluralism, most will not take the time and effort to decode a paper that seems as if it is in a foreign idiom. You need to do the translation work for them. Since it is the 'ideas' of al-Ghazālī, say, that may be of interest contemporary epistemologists, remove every obstacle that prevents their comprehension of what those ideas are.

I think there are interesting insights in early Chinese thought, but when communicating to contemporary philosophers, I try to motivate and inspire and inform using modes of discourse with which they are familiar. I try to remove all unnecessary obstacles to understanding.

Mutatis mutandis, I suggest the same translation process for Muslim epistemology. Consider now the following paragraph on the relevance of the philosophy of G. E. Moore to contemporary scepticism:

> [I]n giving his proof, Moore knows full well that the sceptics will not be satisfied with it. Moore is not trying to give the sceptics something that they will be satisfied with. Moore's point, rather, is that we do not know that external things exist by proving this. On the contrary, we know that external things exist by perceiving them, and therefore sceptics are misguided in wanting a proof in the first place. When Moore gives his proof, therefore, his tongue is in his cheek [. . .] It is not that Moore does not understand the sceptics' question, or that he does not understand what sceptics want when they request a proof that external things exist: he understands perfectly well what the sceptics are requesting, and he is challenging a variety of assumptions behind that request.[3]

This paragraph assumes little of its audience of contemporary epistemologists. It assumes that they know of Moore and his famous proof of an external world; and, if they have had a modicum of training in contemporary philosophy, they do (or should). It is void of technical terms of art and technical logical machinery. Of course, 'sceptics' and 'external things', as Moore uses the terms, are philosophical terms of art. But they are both well known to and well understood by philosophers. Thus, the reader should be able to easily grasp that Moore is not trying to refute the sceptic; rather, Moore is rejecting the sceptic's demand for a proof of the external world. This text, from John Greco, is, I think, a model of contemporary philosophical prose. Greco's writing invites the reader into important ideas, develops clear and concise arguments, and aims at definite and important conclusions. Write like that!

Finding models of excellent philosophical writing is key to learning how to write in your own clear and compelling voice. In addition to Greco, as well as the other authors that I have already mentioned, I commend Thomas Nagel, Jennifer Nagel, Simon Blackburn, Eleonore Stump, Colin McGinn, Susan Wolf and Peter van Inwagen. Not all of their writing is easy – like contemporary physics, contemporary philosophy is not easy – but their writing makes it as easy as it can be.

Not every piece by these philosophers is equally audience-sensitive. While I think Alvin Plantinga is a master of prose when his audience is contemporary philosophers, he has been considerably less successful at communicating to non-philosophers. His *The Nature of Necessity*, which

3 Greco, 'How to Reid Moore', p. 546.

was aimed at professional philosophers, advanced the discourse on modal semantics and then applied modal logic to both the problem of evil and the ontological argument. His free will defence is universally recognised as a decisive refutation of the logical problem of evil. Yet his *God, Freedom and Evil*, aimed at educated laypersons, was considerably less successful. Although Plantinga worked hard to accommodate his audience, his modes of discourse were simply too difficult and unfamiliar for his intended audience. Not to toot my own horn, but my *Return to Reason* proved better at communicating Plantingian epistemology to non-philosophers (hence, its affectionate nickname *Plantinga for Dummies*).

There are lots of audiences that Muslim scholars might wish to reach. I have mentioned four so far – the general public, educated laypersons, contemporary epistemologists and historical Islamicists. None of these audiences is better than any other. And they are all equally difficult to communicate to. It is easier to miss than to hit any of those targets. But if your intended audience is contemporary epistemologists, Muslim scholars need to become entirely conversant in the issues, scholars and modes of discourse of contemporary epistemology. Then they need to identify a clear and unambiguous thesis that should prove of interest to that audience. Finally, to hit their target, they need to write in the modes of discourse that are the *lingua franca* of that audience.

Why?

Why this paper, with this thesis, for this audience now? I want to reflect for a moment on why some Muslim scholars *de facto* engage in contemporary epistemology. I have noticed that some Muslims' attitudes towards epistemology are similar to those of some of my Christian brothers and sisters, attitudes that are reflected in their understanding of the nature of epistemology. Hence, I want to offer a critique of a conception of epistemology that is impaired, I think, by religious fervour. I will conclude with what I think the best understanding of epistemology is.

I find, and I am admittedly painting with a very wide brush here, that much epistemological reflection among contemporary Muslim philosophers involves a combination of Muslim apologetics and what I shall call 'Cartesianism'. While apologetics, the project of proving one's religious beliefs, is well-known, Cartesianism, as I am defining it, is less well known. Cartesianism, again as I am defining it, is the epistemological project of developing an algorithm for separating the known from the unknown (much like the hope that a Theory of Truth would provide an algorithm for separating the True from the False).

I recall giving a talk on belief in God as properly basic – that is, that a theist could be rational without the support of an argument – in a Muslim-majority

country. I used contemporary cognitive science of religion to show that we have a 'God-Faculty' – that is, something like what Alvin Plantinga calls the *sensus divinitatis* (an innate sense of the divine). I went on to argue, following Plantinga, Thomas Reid and G. E. Moore, that beliefs produced immediately (that is, without the support of an argument) by the God-Faculty are or could be rational. I also conceded that unbelief could be rational. My claim that atheism could be rational was a bridge too far. Members of the audience heatedly asked: 'What do you say to atheists? How can you be a theist and think atheists are rational? So what if belief in God is rational in your sense? What are we going to say to the atheists? Send us an evidentialist next time! We don't need an epistemology like yours'. It was clear that they wanted, and felt they needed, an epistemology that uniquely proved their religious beliefs and disproved all others. They wanted a Cartesian algorithm that separated the Known (their Muslim beliefs) from the Unknown (atheist's beliefs). And they were deeply disappointed that I had failed to deliver it.

I think, and again this is just my impression, that many Muslims seek an epistemology that offers an infallible guide to the foundational certitudes that ground all justified beliefs (usually their own). But, and this is why a new generation of Muslim scholars needs to wrestle with twentieth-century epistemology, there is good, unovercomable I think, reason to believe there is no such foundation. If there is such a foundation, it is sparse, and such a sparse foundation cannot support the rich panoply of what we know and believe. If there is no infallible epistemological foundation in general, then there is no infallible epistemological foundation for more substantive metaphysical or religious claims. Metaphysical arguments rely essentially on intuition, and studies have shown that humans have a remarkably diverse set of competing metaphysical intuitions; intuitions have come to seem like little more than cultured hunches.[4] Moreover, metaphysical arguments are liable to *post hoc* rationalisations – reasons offered for what one already believes (prior to and independent of those reasons).[5] Therefore, if your 'why' concerning epistemology is to prove Islam and refute atheism, then I think your 'why' is impossible.

Finally, I think the combination of Cartesianism and apologetics is conducive to unduly confident pronouncements about one's own beliefs, on the one hand, and unsympathetic and condescending rejections of the

4 See Cappelen, *Philosophy without Intuitions*. There is increasing empirical evidence that intuitions vary according to, for example, cultural background, socio-economic status and affective state. See Weinberg *et al.*, 'Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions', pp. 429–60; Weinberg *et al.*, 'Meta-Skepticism', pp. 224–46; Machery *et al.*, 'Semantics, Cross-Cultural Style'; Nichols and Knobe, 'Moral Responsibility and Determinism', pp. 663–85; Swain *et al.*, 'The Instability of Philosophical Intuitions', pp. 138–55.

5 See Kornblith, *On Reflection*.

rationality of others and their beliefs, on the other. A great deal of religious epistemology of the Cartesianism/apologetics variety is disguised intellectual arrogance, for example, arrogant rejections of atheism and arrogant defences of one's own belief tradition. Arguments, such as they are, are often 'clinched' with an arrogant and condescending horse laugh or snort (among one's believing friends) at the unbeliever's expense. Again, I find this practice as much among Christians as among Muslims.

I think pride, even in defence of religion, is a vice. Moreover, I think sincere epistemological reflection should lead to epistemic empathy and intellectual humility. I will reflect on the spiritual side of intellectual humility in the final section. I will here discuss briefly why epistemological reflection should engender humility.

First, there is the negative induction concerning substantive philosophical progress. That should give us pause. Some of the best thinkers in human history have thought long and hard about God, free will and immortality; yet, there is still widespread disagreement among the best contemporary thinkers about God, free will and immortality. There seems to be no philosophical method, no Cartesian algorithm, for settling philosophical disputes.

Second, the best explanation of widespread philosophical disagreement seems to be that our human cognitive equipment is not well-suited to settling philosophical truth. Our cognitive equipment seems better suited at making existential decisions in the here and now – 'will it rain tomorrow', 'is that an enemy or a friend', 'is that plant poisonous' – than thinking about abstract eternal verities.

Third, one way of telling that our cognitive equipment is not suited to grasping the world is that human intuitions differ (and there seems to be no non-question-begging epistemological method for adjudicating disagreement about intuitions). Insofar as philosophical arguments reduce to intuitions, then, philosophical agreement seems interminable. I think recent work in experimental philosophy and of Edouard Machery and Hilary Kornblith is especially poignant here.[6]

Since the best explanation of a historical lack of philosophical consensus is the limitations of our human cognitive equipment (demonstrated empirically by intractable disagreement about intuitions), epistemological reflection should lead to epistemic empathy and intellectual humility (not to intellectual arrogance and condescension).

If epistemology, then, cannot provide a Cartesian algorithm for separating the Known from the Unknown, of what use is it? I suggest that epistemology is the attempt to understand what we know and how we know (cognitive success and failure). As John Greco has argued, best practice

6 See Machery *et al.*, 'Semantics, Cross-Cultural Style', B1–B12.

in epistemology is explanation, not vindication.[7] It explains how, when things go right, we know *x* and *y* and *z* (or instances of *x* and *y* and *z*). Thus, I suggest, following Chisholm's particularism, that we begin with paradigmatic cases of knowledge and then analyse how such knowledge might be possible.

What, then, are paradigmatic cases of knowledge? That is, what are the sorts of things humans know? Following, Reid, Moore and Greco, I think we know that there is a world independent of our minds, a world of material stuff with a distant past and an expected future; I am in this world along with other people, and we, throughout history, have jointly worked to refine our beliefs about the world, sometimes systematically in what we have come to call 'science'. Therefore, I think we know of the external world including (some of) its past and its future; I think I know that I am a minded, physical thing capable of knowing other minded, physical things; I think we remember some bits of our own past and have hopes for human futures; finally, I think we know, among other many other things, various items of contemporary science. How to explain such items of knowledge?

I think the two most spectacular failures of explaining these cases of human knowledge are classical foundationalim[8] and coherentism.[9] But I press on. I think the best explanations of how we know such things are found in the writings of Thomas Reid, Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff and John Greco, who hold that we come equipped with a set of cognitive dispositions or faculties which, typically, immediately (without inference) produce beliefs in the external world, the past, other persons, an enduring self with living memories and so on.[10] I think very little of what we know is inferential (*contra* the assumption of classical foundationalism). Moreover, I think contemporary cognitive science provides empirical support for the Reid-Plantinga-Wolterstorff-Greco view.[11]

Sometimes, at least some persons at least some of the time reason to various beliefs – some mathematicians, for example, reason to highly advance theorems, and some scientists reason to some natural laws (we should not exaggerate how often they reason to a theorem or a natural law, however, as most of what most mathematicians and scientists believe is through testimony, through teachers, textbooks and scholarly articles). Hence, we need a good explanation of how reasoning in advanced mathematics and the various sciences works. To that end, we are equipped with natural

7 Greco, 'Knowledge of God'.
8 See Kvanvig, 'What is Wrong with Minimal Foundationalism'.
9 See Van Cleve, 'Why Coherence is not Enough'; Harman, *Thought*.
10 See Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*; Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology*; Greco, *Achieving Knowledge*; Greco, 'Knowledge of God'.
11 Clark, *God and the Brain*.

dispositions to abstract (what-if) thinking, basic counting skills, the inductive principle, basic reasoning principles and so on. Suffice it to say, most of such knowledge is the province of professionals. Most of us, most of the time, and I include mathematicians and scientists here, learn advanced mathematics and theoretical physics, if at all, from teachers and textbooks. We simply accept what our teachers or books tell us. We seldom rely on our own experiments when we hold that $e = mc^2$ or Boyle's law (this is probably for the best because most of our experiments, most of the time, do not work). We rely extensively on the testimony of others, another non-inferential source of knowledge. And that means that knowledge is not an individualistic project, it is deeply social and communal.

What, then, are our cognitive dispositions? How do our dispositions to reason and think abstractly make high-level mathematical and theoretical physical knowledge possible? What are the 'when things go right' conditions of knowledge? How does testimony work (again, when things go right)? And how is knowledge social? These topics are under intense scrutiny and lively debate among contemporary epistemologists.

Finally, I think we know that there is a God who created the heavens and the earth and all that they contain (including me and you). How is knowledge of God possible? I think the greatest advances in religious epistemology of the past century occurred when philosophers began with the assumption that we know God and asked how such knowledge might be explained (such philosophers also rejected the defensive project of assuming God's non-existence until it is proven).

The next generation of well-trained Muslim epistemologists might need to develop new and independent modes of Islamic thought. As noted, many Muslim philosophers are attached to a tradition and a thinker. But it is possible that, like al-Ghazālī in his day, a contemporary Muslim thinker will need to find his or her own, new ways to think about issues in contemporary Islamic philosophy. Just as there is no reason to think, and every reason to reject, that Augustine or Aquinas (or Augustinianism or Thomism) got it all basically right, there is no reason to think, and every reason to reject, that any Muslim thinker or tradition got it all basically right. Islamic thought, then, may need to build a wider tent.

Epistemology of Creatures

I will now think, as a Christian alongside my Muslim brothers and sisters, about what it means, epistemologically, to be a creature. I will be brief.

The Cartesian mode arguably assumes that we are more epistemic gods than epistemic creatures. The Cartesian approach to epistemology assumes that humans have the ability to rise above their contingency and see the Truth clearly. That is, it assumes that humans have a god-like ability to

transcend their creatureliness. God, I take it, 'sees' all Truth directly, unencumbered by body or disturbing passions. But we are not gods – we are born at a particular time in a particular place with all that entails epistemologically. We start epistemic inquiry grounded in our own unique contingencies. There is simply no denying that, if I had been born in second-century-BC China, fifth-century-CE North Africa, or twenty-first-century Iran, I would have had a very different set of religious and philosophical beliefs that would have seemed just as obvious to me as mine do now. Assuming I had sufficient leisure time for reflection and I had been asked to defend my Chinese, North African or Iranian beliefs, I would have invoked intuitions particular to those times and places. We are creatures in this epistemic sense: we are contingent, created by God at a particular time and place, given without our consent a host of beliefs and assumptions and intuitions about the nature of Ultimate Reality. We must accept, I think, our contingency as a gift.

In addition to contingency, we must accept our creaturely finitude. Again, unlike the Infinite who 'sees' the Truth directly unencumbered by body or disturbing passions, our cognitive equipment is mediated by body (brain) and passion. As epistemic creatures, we must rely on our finite, creaturely modes of inquiry and discovery. As finite creatures, we have limited abilities to access the truth about Ultimate Reality. We have cognitive equipment that works quite well in grasping what is necessary to survive and occasionally flourish in the here and now – we can see, hear, touch, taste and smell; we can learn from our family and community what they have learned from theirs about what to embrace and what to avoid (for example, bananas, on the one hand, and certain mushrooms, on the other); we have an increasingly better but far from infallible sense of what is right and wrong (it took hundreds of thousands of years before humans rejected slavery and endorsed the equal rights of women); and we can project into the future in various ways (to plan our crops, say, and develop some sort of science). But we are epistemically limited: hardly anyone can really grasp $e = mc^2$; no one, I believe, can grasp the extent and depth of the divine nature.

Moreover, and cognitive science seems to support this, God has given us cognitive equipment that is adequate to leading a good life, which includes knowing and relating to God and to God's other creatures.[12] We cannot know God's essence, but we can know enough of God to live a good life. Again, for that, we should be grateful. Unlike God, we cannot know everything. As creatures, we should be epistemically humble, gracious and even generous.

12 Clark, *God and the Brain*.

We are epistemically contingent and epistemically finite, thank God. We may want to be epistemic gods, but we cannot. Again, thank God. We should be grateful for how, when and why God created us.

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