

Typologies of Scepticism in the Philosophical Tradition of Kalām

by

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Abstract: This article examines the role of scepticism in the Islamic philosophical tradition. It begins with a treatment of the origins and purpose of these discussions in classical kalām (c. 800–1100 CE). Then it moves on to the more mature discussions treating five forms of scepticism in the post-classical period (c.1200–1800 CE), with the aim of demonstrating how they construed scepticism, the arguments for and against it, and what purposes scepticism played in their system. Three of these types of scepticism are unrestricted, meaning that their denial of knowledge is universal. The other two types are restricted to a denial of inferential knowledge, either entirely, or in certain subjects such as metaphysics and natural philosophy. The discussion will focus on two of the most widely studied works of kalām: Sa’d al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī’s *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʿid al-Nasafīyya* and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Dawānī’s *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʿid al-ʿAḍudiyya*, including some of their super-commentaries.

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Introduction

THE major schools of kalām, or Islamic “theology”, were by and large non-sceptical; the Muʿtazilīs, Ashʿarīs and Māturīdīs all took it to be axiomatic that the world exists and that we can know something about it. Some of that knowledge occurs non-inferentially, as in the case of sense perception, introspection (e.g., “I am happy”) and widely transmitted reports (e.g., “Mecca exists”); and some of it occurs inferentially through a conscious process of reasoning (e.g., “the world is contingent, every contingent needs a cause; therefore the world needs a cause”). There is a general congruence on these matters between classical kalām (roughly the ninth to eleventh centuries) and modern kalām (roughly the twelfth to nineteenth centuries).¹ Since the existence of the external world is non-inferentially known and axiomatic, they cannot technically adduce any arguments for it, for doing so would force them either to tacitly accept that it was, after all, an

1 This distinction between early/late or ancient/modern kalām is well known in the medieval kalām tradition. The most typical description of this transformation was the deeper engagement with Peripatetic philosophy and the adaptation and development of its conceptual apparatus. For classical description of this distinction, see Ibn Khaldūn (1958, vol. 3, pp. 48–55), Wisnovsky (2004, pp. 65–100) and Shihadeh (2005, pp. 141–179).

inferential premise, or trap themselves in an infinite regress of premises. As a result, they did not believe that one could actually “refute” scepticism, and held that debate, properly speaking, is premised on at least the possibility of agreement on some common premises in order for a fruitful discussion to take place.² This is somewhat difficult to do if the opponent does not concede the existence of their interlocutor.

Nevertheless, they did offer justifications for their position, and, likewise, they offered justifications for showing the untenability of the various sceptical stances. Thus, we find that they developed strategies to defeat scepticism which involve pointing to logical or performative self-contradictions. They concede, however, that if the sceptic holds that the principle of non-contradiction itself is illusory, or that it is only true if you believe it to be true, then pointing out contradictions, logical or performative, cannot ultimately undermine their view. In this basic sense, not much has changed. In a recent study of contemporary analytic philosophy, the vast majority of (mostly Western) philosophers described themselves as non-sceptical.³ Similarly, the methods in dealing with some forms of scepticism share some resemblance. The late American philosopher Richard Rorty, for example, whose views resemble some forms of ancient scepticism, was accused of performative self-contradiction by his interlocutors, such as Putnam, Apel and Habermas.⁴

Even though we find many routine and dismissive discussions of unrestricted scepticism, a careful reading of the kalām tradition shows that from the earliest period scholars had formulated their understanding of sense perception, testimony and inference with this kind of scepticism in mind.⁵ For example, sceptics are

2 Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad*, p. 16, lines 15–19; Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, p.70; Balkhī, *Kitāb al-Maqālāt*, p. 78; Sa’d al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-Aqā’id*, vol. 1, p. 39; Jurjānī, *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif*, vol. 1, p. 188.

3 See Bourget and Chalmers (2014). By the researchers’ admission, there is a heavy Anglocentric bias (the names of the authors here may hint at this). Nevertheless, 81.6 per cent of respondents said they were non-sceptical realists regarding the external world vs. 4.8 per cent who were sceptics, which was the highest majority found in all 30 questions, followed by 75.1 per cent who believed in scientific realism.

4 See Rorty’s “Universality and Truth” in Brandom (2000). Rorty argues in a manner similar to one group of sceptics against the idea that “reality has an intrinsic nature”, while his opponents accuse him of “performative self-contradictions”. To be more exact, Rorty holds that *democratic politics* does not stand in need of believing there is a single truth to any matter, nor that truth is correspondence to reality, nor that man by nature has a desire for truth.

5 For some short classical refutations of the unrestricted forms of scepticism, see Baghdādī (d.429/1037), *Uṣūl al-Dīn*, pp. 6–7; Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, pp. 69–76; Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Fiṣal*, vol.1, pp. 43–45. In a recently published work by the aforementioned Baghdādī, *Iyār al-naẓar*, the author states that a number of early figures from the city of Baṣra were in fact sceptics about the capacity of human reason to acquire inferential knowledge, and authored works in order to demonstrate that, two of whom he mentions by name: *al-Ḥaddād al-Ḥaṣrī* and *Ibn Abī al-Awjā’*. *Al-ḥaṣrī* wrote a work known as ‘*The Destroyer*’ (lit. *Al-Jārūf*), because it was meant to destroy all philosophical schools. Two early Mutazilī

often cited adducing arguments from error in sense perception in order to show that our knowledge of the external world is unreliable or impossible. One need not take their *conclusions* seriously in order to understand that one ought to have an account of sense perception that can safely explain error and the possibility of error. These engagements with scepticism took on a life of their own within the schools of kalām and led to the raising of their own problem cases for knowledge, some of which were common to all schools, such as how one ought to distinguish between dreams or hallucinations and wakefulness; and some which were specific to only some, such as problem cases relating to norm-violations, which Muʿtazilī thinkers directed against the Ashʿarīs. The recent publication of some early Muʿtazilī works gives us additional context for understanding the impact of scepticism on the work of Ashʿarī and Māturīdī.⁶

With the rise of the post-classical kalām tradition, this trend becomes more sophisticated, but it still follows the same general trend: (i) we do not see much attention paid to the extreme forms of unrestricted scepticism (which will be discussed in part I) and (ii) we find very detailed discussions of the reliability of non-inferential knowledge, especially sense perception and *a priori* first principles. In what is perhaps the most important post-classical handbook on kalām, *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif*, we find that the authors spend 63 pages discussing the reliability of non-inferential knowledge, and only three pages on the three forms of unrestricted scepticism.⁷ That these groups were not given much time is only because they ultimately held that not much could be said to the sceptic aside from pointing out their self-contradictions. On the other hand, their immense efforts in discussing the sources of error and the various doubts surrounding the reliability

philosophers, *Ibn al-Rāwundī and Ibn Surayj wrote refutations. Baghdādī, Iyār al-naẓar*, 157-158; the discussion on the possibility of inferential knowledge is quite extensive and continues throughout pp. 157-172. Baghdādī also provides fairly lengthy discussions of all the forms of scepticism discussed in this article, but due to constraints of time, I have not discussed them here.

6 The most relevant text is Balkhī, *Kitāb al-Maqālāt*. Kaʿbī spends a significant amount of time discussing scepticism in both of these works and he cites earlier Muʿtazilī thinkers who had compiled refutations of scepticism. His work provides additional information to the range of sceptical views that were known during that period, and furthermore, it presents his own critique of his occasionalist opponents (which would apply to Ashʿarī and Māturīdī), trying to prove that occasionalism entails scepticism about sense perception and other forms of knowledge. This in turn explains why Ashʿarī had to justify his lack of scepticism in sense perception, even though he admits that there could in fact be an elephant in his presence but that God had not created its perception in him. We know of at least three different treatises written by Ashʿarī against Balkhī, and all of them are related to epistemology. Māturīdī likewise spends a considerable amount of time engaging with Balkhī in his *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*.

7 Jurjānī, *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif*, vol. 1, pp. 123–188. This discussion is an expanded and more detailed discussion of the typology of scepticism originally presented by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in his *Muḥaṣṣal* and its critical commentary by Naṣr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī. For an excellent overview of this discussion, see Fatoorchi (2013, pp. 213–250).

of sense perception and other forms of non-inferential knowledge tell us that they were concerned with the problems raised by scepticism.⁸

This study is divided into two main parts. In section 1, I will present a brief historical overview of engagement with scepticism in the kalām tradition before Ghazālī (d.505/1111).⁹ This introduction aims to highlight the extent to which scepticism was a problem and a source for important developments in epistemology, especially with regard to how one ought to establish the reliability of sense perception against doubts derived from errors, hallucinations and dreams. Debates with sceptics appear to have occurred very early on between Muslim theologians and their sceptical or Buddhist interlocutors in Central Asia, and these very same debates would reverberate in the post-classical period, but not without some changes. Since this study is concerned with filling a lacuna in the history of scepticism and medieval philosophy, it is important to show that the concern with scepticism and especially the reliability of non-inferential forms of knowledge is not something that originates in the Peripatetic tradition, nor is it unique to the post-classical kalām tradition known for its engagements with Avicenna. Rather, it is something that begins with the classical kalām tradition, and then is further enriched in the post-classical tradition, which benefited immensely from critical engagement with Peripatetic philosophy.

After the overview of classical kalām approaches to scepticism, section 2 will first present a brief note on post-classical approaches to ontology and epistemology, especially the elusive notion of *nafs al-amr* or objective reality. We must clarify what kind of ontology and what kind of epistemology is being defended before we delve into the details of the arguments and strategies. Without such an introduction, it will be difficult to appreciate what precisely is at stake in the

8 As we shall see below, the solutions they present to some of these problems require us to rethink whether or not this tradition was in fact foundationalist in the traditional sense, and if it is, what kind of foundationalism they espoused. It was, at the very least, not one that took empirical sense data to be its foundation: there is unanimous agreement that sense data alone cannot justify itself, and it stands in a relation of epistemic dependency on other propositions, e.g., Jurjānī, *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif*, vol. 1, pp. 142–145.

9 Most scholars interested in the history of scepticism and the history of Islamic philosophy are aware of the great Muslim thinker Ghazālī (d.505/1111), not only for his own sceptical episodes during different phases of his life, but also for his anticipation of the Humean critique of causation and the objectivity of morals. Nevertheless, and without detracting from Ghazālī's contributions, it is important to point out that the history of scepticism in Islamic thought began before him, as did the critique of natural causation and the objectivity of morals, just as it continued after him. This is all to say that when it comes to the philosophical problem of scepticism as such, Ghazālī's contribution is both remarkable and worth studying, but when attempting to account for the historical development of the problem in Islamic intellectual history, much more needs to be done. In an attempt to contribute to this history, this study aims to sketch an outline of the treatment of philosophical scepticism within the mainstream Ash'arī and Māturīdī schools of kalām.

arguments for and against the various types of scepticism, and how these authors formulate their version of the correspondence theory of truth. The remainder of section 2 will discuss the forms of scepticism that originate in external interlocutors, that is, schools of philosophy outside the kalām tradition. These varieties, in turn, are divided into two types: (i) three forms of unrestricted scepticism and (ii) three forms of restricted scepticism (although I will only discuss two). The unrestricted forms of scepticism are ones which either deny reality altogether; or deny that reality has any intrinsic nature; or are in complete doubt about everything, even their own doubt – although, in different ways, all three of these forms of scepticism denied all knowledge, both non-inferential and inferential. Meanwhile, restricted forms of scepticism only denied some or all forms of *inferential* knowledge, but did not deny reality altogether, nor all and any knowledge whatever. In each section, I will provide a critical explication of these sceptical modes and the strategies employed in engaging with them with reference to the post-classical period.

A final prefatory remark regarding section 2: although I have referred to a wide array of texts in this article, due to restrictions of space, I have chosen to focus my discussion in the relevant sections on a specific text that is most relevant to the problem at hand, and (hopefully) most representative of the post-classical kalām tradition, broadly conceived. Thus, the discussion of the unrestricted forms of scepticism will be centred on Taftāzānī’s (d.791/1390) *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id*; and the discussion of the restricted forms of scepticism will focus on the arguments presented in Dawānī’s (d.908/1502) *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id*. I have selected these two works because, first, they provide a comprehensive summary of the arguments found in earlier works, and second, they were among the most widely studied texts of kalām in the past 600 years, especially in the Ottoman Empire and Mughal India.¹⁰

1. The Early Tradition

There is a notable lack of research on scepticism in Islamic philosophy.¹¹ Some orientalist, such as Van Ess, have suggested that early kalām discussions of scepticism “added nothing” to what was available in Aristotle, and that both Muslim sceptics and anti-sceptics were equally “naïve”, because “the intellectual

10 For an idea of just how widely studied they were: Wisnovsky (2011) records that at least 54 different glosses were written on Taftāzānī’s text by authors from places as diverse as North Africa, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and India between 1400 and 1900, and similarly, some 40 different glosses authored on Dawānī’s commentary; see Wisnovsky (2011, pp. 180–2, 183–4) and El-Rouayheb (2015a, pp. 39–40).

11 Three recent papers that discuss scepticism from a philosophical perspective are Fatoorchi (2013, pp. 213–250), El-Rouayheb (2015b, pp. 411–429) and Kukkonen (2010, pp. 29–59).

climate was not yet prepared for scepticism”.¹² These analyses, I think, are based on a rather loose understanding of scepticism and doubt.¹³ As far as “healthy” philosophical doubt is concerned, it was common in classical kalām to affirm that doubt was a condition for inquiry, or at least that if one is to fulfil the moral obligation of inquiry into truth, one must detach oneself from any commitment to one’s previously held beliefs, the beliefs of one’s forefathers or community, or the beliefs one holds to reap worldly gains.¹⁴ The question that concerns us in this article, however, is not doubt vs. certainty in the common philosophical sense, but scepticism in the strict sense: such as the denial of the external (and internal) world, or the denial that reality has any intrinsic nature, or the denial of all or some forms of knowledge, be they non-inferential or inferential.

Furthermore, there is a tendency in orientalist scholarship to assume a Greek origin for most philosophical discussions in the Islamic tradition, even when there is no positive evidence for it. Based on some of the earliest sources in the kalām tradition on scepticism, we find that there was a strong association between those known as the “*sufisṭā’iyya*” (“the sophists”) and the *Samaniyya* (the Buddhists), the *Dahriyya* (loosely “materialists”), and the *Thanawiyya* (Manicheans, Zoroastrians and Dualists), which points to an Iranian or Central Asian origin.¹⁵ Indeed, the scholars who appear to be the most concerned with scepticism are those who lived in the formerly Buddhist-majority and Zoroastrian cities of Balkh and Samarqand in Central Asia, such as Balkhī (i.e., Ka’bī) and Māturīdī respectively, in contrast to Iraq-based scholars such as Ash‘arī and Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā’ī

12 Van Ess (2018).

13 For a more recent study of scepticism in the sense of religious doubt, see Heck (2006). Heck rightly points out that very little has been written on scepticism in Islam, but the studies he points out are still concerned with scepticism in this sense of religious doubt and certainty, or the use of philosophical doubts to undermine the views of an opponent. The concerns of this article, however, are sceptical doubts about reality entirely, or that it has an intrinsic nature, and not the rather common usage of doubt about whether or not God exists, or whether or not the world is caused, and so on.

14 See, for example, Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad*, p. 250; Juwaynī (d.478/1085), *al-Shāmil fī Uṣūl al-Dīn*, pp. 120–121. The view that the first moral obligation was to have doubt is attributed to the Mu‘tazilī theologian, Abū Hāshim (d.321/933). For more on Abū Hāshim and his father Abū ‘Alī, see Schmidtke (2008).

15 The Central Asian scholar Māturīdī discusses the “sophists” and the Samaniyya in the same sections in his *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd* because they seemed to share some of their sceptical aspects; see *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, 222–225. As for the “sophists”, their entry into early kalām discussions on epistemology remains somewhat obscure. See Crone (2016, p. 124). It could be that *Dahriyya* was a general category which included Buddhists, Manicheans and Dualists, rather than being a specific sect or historical group distinct from these categories.

(d.303/915) where Buddhist influence was weaker.¹⁶ It was enough of a concern for the early kalām movement that we have evidence that there was at least one text dedicated to opposing scepticism which compiled all the Mu‘tazilī refutations of scepticism into a single work.¹⁷ Recent scholarship has begun to investigate the relationship between the schools of kalām and Buddhism,¹⁸ while a rather convincing recent study by Beckwith (2012) has argued that Pyrrhonian scepticism itself was an early form of Buddhism.¹⁹

In this section, I will attempt to sketch the early engagement with scepticism by looking at the work of (1) the Mu‘tazilī thinker Abū l-Qāsim al-Ka‘bī al-Balkhī (d.319/931),²⁰ (2) the founder of Ash‘arī thought, Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d.324/936),²¹ and (3) the founder of Māturīdī thought, Abū l-Manṣūr al-Māturīdī

16 Compare the Mu‘tazilī thinker Balkhī, *Kitāb al-Maqālāt*, pp. 71–79, 549–576, with his Iraqi contemporary Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā‘ī in a similar work: *Kitāb al-Maqālāt*, p. 295. In his detailed study of Māturīdī, Rudolph has argued, however, that the focus that Māturīdī displays on the dualists and materialists requires explanation, but he eventually decides that while the Zoroastrian and Manichean presence was definitely a factor, there is no evidence to suggest that there is a special regional flavour to his work. Furthermore, he dismisses Ibn al-Nadīm’s suggestion that Buddhism was important in Central Asia as overestimated, and argues ultimately that “Buddhism barely left a trace on *kalām*”. These theses must be revised in light of more recent research. See Rudolph (2015, pp. 151–152, 166–179).

17 Balkhī, *Kitāb al-Maqālāt*, p. 551. Balkhī also discusses another compilation by Warrāq (d.247/861) known as *Kitāb Maqālāt al-Mulhidīn*, which also contains reports about debates with sceptics; see Balkhī, *Kitāb al-Maqālāt*, pp. 78–9. The same report from Warrāq’s text does not mention the name of the theologian, but later sources would cite this story and identify the man as the famous jurist, Abu Hanifa (d.150/767). In any case, these reports and debates identify the Dualists/Manicheans, the “*mulhidīs*” (*lit.* unbelievers) and the *dahrīs* as being the targets of many of these arguments (for more on these groups, see Crone, 2016). This may indicate further that the origins of the clash with scepticism in the Islamic tradition probably has little to do with the Greek tradition, not least since the translation of Greek literature had barely started, and there is little evidence that kalām scholars had seriously engaged with it until at least a century afterwards. It is true, however, that Central Asian scholars did appear to be familiar with Aristotle’s corpus rather early, and we find a description of Aristotle’s categories from his work in logic in Māturīdī’s *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, pp. 215–216, but the discussion is related to categories and metaphysics, and does not show much resemblance to the discussions on scepticism. It could be the case that Greek philosophy was already known to Buddhist philosophers in Central Asia, as there was a sizeable Greek population living in Balkh.

18 For an excellent summary of the secondary literature in addition to new research in this area, see Xiuyuan (2018, pp. 944–973).

19 See Beckwith (2015); for a fascinating study on the engagement between Islamic thought and Central Asian Buddhist civilization, see also his *Warriors of the Cloisters* (Beckwith, 2012). These studies are the few that I know of that have seriously investigated the relationship between Islamic thought and Buddhist philosophies in Central Asia. In my opinion, the fact that we find so much in common between early kalām and many of these Buddhist schools, and that Buddhist philosophers were very active on the eve of the Muslim conquests of Central Asia, provides a more plausible source for the emergence of the kalām tradition than speculations regarding the Stoics or the Epicureans.

20 For more on Balkhī, see El Omari (2016). Omari’s book was published before the edition of Balkhī’s *Maqālāt* and ‘*Uyūn wa l-masāil*, and thus her work attempts to reconstruct his views based on testimonies and other extant texts. No discussion is made of scepticism.

21 For more on Ash‘arī and his philosophy, see McCarthy (1953) and Frank (2005).

(d.333/944).²² What we note in these early discussions are the three main strategies for defeating scepticism: (i) the appeal to the self-evident fact that we do have some knowledge; (ii) to show that, in turn, the arguments presented by sceptics are unsuccessful in undermining that knowledge; and (iii) that the sceptical position entails a performative self-contradiction. Furthermore, as I alluded to earlier, the sceptical arguments against the reliability of inference and sense perception sparked a series of independent discussions of these problems that were taken quite seriously; thus, it would be a mistake to judge that because they were never serious about becoming sceptics themselves, they did not take the problems raised by scepticism seriously.

1.1 Scepticism in Early Kalām

There are clues that indicate a bustling anti-sceptical cottage industry developing at the turn of the third/ninth centuries in Islamic theology, particularly among Mu'tazilī theologians. We learn of the possible origins of these engagements with scepticism through reports by later authorities regarding early debates between Muslim *mutakallimūn* (lit. “speakers”, often rendered: theologians²³) and various “speakers” of other communities. Some, like the early Buddhists and Dualists (*thanawiyya*), cast doubt on the powers of reason to obtain knowledge of God or prophecy, and claimed that the limits of human knowledge were limited only to what is in principle perceptible.

In an early report by Ibn al-Nadīm, we learn that Abū l-Hudhayl al-‘Allāf (d.227/841)²⁴ engaged in debates with a dualist named Sāliḥ b. ‘Abd al-Quddūs, who had authored a book entitled *Kitāb al-Shukūk* (*The Book of Doubts*); according to its author, anyone who reads it will come to doubt that anything exists at all.²⁵ Upon hearing the news of the death of Sāliḥ’s son, ‘Allāf is reported to have visited him only to find him mourning that his son had passed

22 For more on Māturīdī, see Rudolph (2015) and Cerić (1995).

23 The term “theologians” does not quite capture the full sense of *mutakallim*, for in the original sense of the term, and indeed even now, the *mutakallim* is one tasked with doing the foundational philosophical work for their cognitive community. For a Muslim *mutakallim*, doing foundational work for a political and legal community that bases its legitimacy in prophethood and Divine revelation means that they must provide justification for a belief in God and prophecy, which makes the term theologian appropriate to them; but they must also work out everything else that these beliefs depend on, including studies of epistemology, ontology, natural philosophy, value, politics and hermeneutics. Furthermore, they were *mutakallims* (lit. “speakers”) because they spoke on behalf of their communities with the “speakers” of other communities. In that sense, kalām did not have any illusions about their own research programme, and were quite explicit about their normative purposes. This is in contrast with the Islamic Peripatetics, who sometimes give the impression as if they were speaking on behalf of pure Reason itself, untainted by any kind of normative dimensions.

24 For more on ‘Allāf, see Van Ess (1983a).

25 Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, p. 204.

away before reading his new book on scepticism. ‘Allāf is said to have quipped that Sālīḥ ought to induce doubt in himself regarding the death of his son, or at least induce doubt in the fact that he never read his book of doubts.²⁶

‘Allāf is also reported to have authored a refutation of scepticism, in addition to a refutation of *mulḥids* (materialists of some kind) and Buddhists/Dualists/Manicheans, all of which may have contained anti-sceptical arguments. In addition, Māturīdī reports that ‘Allāf’s rival Nazzām (d.231/845)²⁷ and his student Ibn Shabīb (d. mid-third/ninth centuries)²⁸ had likewise engaged with sceptics in their time, and began to extend sceptical arguments by positing new problem cases of their own.²⁹ These discussions, alongside discussions of the possibility of the Beatific vision, led to a standard discussion on the nature of sense perception, how to explain error in sense perception, and how we ought to explain what it is that we see in dreams and mirrors.³⁰

1.2 Early Strategies Against Scepticism

As I alluded to already, there is a general agreement between early and later theologians that dialogue with an unrestricted sceptic is impossible for the basic reason that dialogue, reasoning and argument must depart from some point of agreement. But in the event that the opponent does not concede anything at all – not even their own existence – then there is little that can be said. Ash‘arī writes:

Those who deny all forms of knowledge with their tongues are not worthy of debate, because debate is meant to clarify what is unknown to the senses by inferring from what is sensible, so, whoever denies entirely what is sensible cannot be argued against.³¹

Similarly, Māturīdī writes that:

26 Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, p. 204.

27 For more on Nazzām, see Van Ess (1983b, 2012a) and Nyberg (2012).

28 On Ibn al-Shabīb, see Van Ess (2012b).

29 Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, pp. 222–225. Ibn al-Nadīm reports several works by Nazzām that could have contained these arguments: a refutation of the *dahriyya* (most likely referring to the Buddhists/Sumaniyya), a refutation of the Dualists, and a refutation of “various types of atheists” (see *al-Fihrist*, p. 206). The number of books with similar titles among early Mu‘tazilīs is quite high, and we can assume Balkhī had some access to them. He also includes some anecdotes regarding debates with sceptics. Either way, what these sources tell us is that the source of these sceptical arguments does not appear to be Greek; rather, it appears to be Iranian and Central Asian. See Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, pp. 204–222. Of course, sometimes we cannot tell if a book contains a discussion of scepticism just on the basis of the title. We could not have known from the title of Balkhī’s work, *al-Maqālāt*, for example, that it contained a refutation of scepticism until it was published.

30 See, for example, Balkhī, *Kitāb al-Maqālāt*, pp. 478–487; Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, p. 223; Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, pp. 382–387, 433–434; Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad*, pp. 15–17, 278–282.

31 Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad*, p. 16, lines 15–19.

There is a consensus that one who holds such a view cannot be debated, for he does not affirm his own denial nor his own presence – and debate is either regarding the quiddity of a thing or its existence, and he denies both, and denies his own denial.³²

Meanwhile, the Mu‘tazilī master Balkhī argues thus:

And the *sūfistā’iyya* (i.e. the sceptics) said: “there is no reality and there is no knowledge,” so according to me [i.e., Balkhī] they are not to be spoken to nor argued against, for in arguing with them is to concede the statement of those who say: that every proof stands in need of another proof, and that is only because the sceptics denied observable facts which are perceived non-inferentially, which form the basis of knowledge and which do not stand in need of proof, so whoever goes to prove their validity has (tacitly) accepted that [these non-inferential truths] require proof.³³

Balkhī explains that earlier *mutakallimūn* did not argue against the sceptics because they conceded this point, but only to show that their opponents’ view was in error.³⁴ Similarly, Māturīdī adds that although such figures are not to be argued against, we may instead point to some of their performative self-contradictions in order to demonstrate that, at the very least, they do not really believe what they say. Māturīdī provides some explanations for the behaviour of some sceptics:

Satan has convinced the denier of external reality with cases in which things appear to one [differently] from what they actually are, in order to prevent him from knowledge of God, such as error in sight, or what appears to one in dreams, or by things which are far away, or what is too small to see. But Satan does not set his trap [for such men] in order to prevent them from seeking their pleasures, and prohibiting the self from its desires, or protecting it from harmful things, and protecting themselves from entering the flames or the seas. For if he was truly ignorant of these matters, he would not be able to survive, for he would fall into dangers, and neglect the consumption of food. Thus, it is shown that what he claims is only driven by his love of pleasures and inclination to desires.³⁵

The sceptic may respond by stating that his behaviour only indicates that he prefers some appearances to others, and not that he takes them to be real. But I think Māturīdī is aware that his statement is not meant to refute so much as it is to point out that the sceptic does not believe what he says he believes, for everyone – by virtue of being rational, having functional senses, and conditions being normal – is made to believe that things are in some way or another. The evidence that this is the case is, again, that we observe people acting accordingly. Something, at least, ought to explain the differences among illusions.

When it comes to sceptics who accept non-inferential knowledge but only deny reason’s capacity to acquire inferential knowledge, the performative self-

32 Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawhīd*, p. 70.

33 Balkhī, *Kitāb al-Maqālāt*, p. 78.

34 Balkhī, *Kitāb al-Maqālāt*, p. 78.

35 Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawhīd*, p. 75.

contradiction is somewhat easier to point out. This appears to have been the case with some early Buddhists and Dualists, who only accepted non-inferential forms of knowledge (such as sense perception) and analogies drawn from sense perception about other physical entities that were in principle perceptible.³⁶ Here, the strategy adopted by all three of our figures is to point out that the following claims, namely that (i) inferential knowledge is not possible or (ii) inferential knowledge regarding imperceptible entities is not possible, are both claims which can only be known inferentially. It is evident, they argue, that such claims cannot be known by sense perception, and they are also not a basic fact of reason. Thus, if one has come to know them to be true by means of inference, they have simultaneously contradicted themselves.³⁷ Māturīdī writes: “There is no option for one who denies reflection (*nazar*) except reflection itself.”³⁸

Ash’arī presents two examples of how one may use an opponent’s question against them, and both examples he chooses are sceptical ones. (1) If the sceptic asks: “Have you established the proofs of reason by means of reason?” one may respond by stating: “Have you denied [the proofs of reason] by means of reason or something else?”³⁹ (2) Likewise, if a sceptic tells their interlocutor: “Did you not hold another position and argue on behalf of it, and now, when its error has become apparent to you, you have abandoned it? So how do you know that what you hold now is not an error?” Then one may respond by stating: “The same objection pertains to you in your very question and applies to you in the same way, for it is possible for you to abandon your position and attack what you once held.”⁴⁰

Balkhī provided a very similar answer when he was asked by his Samarqandian student, Ja’far b. Muḥammad, “If I see a man holding to the same opinion for 50 years, holding fast to it, and believing it will save him, and with which he approaches his Lord and Creator, then he abandons it, and believes that truth is something else, and that what he believed was false, then: how can I be secure that I am not [also in error]?”⁴¹ Such objections, according to Balkhī, apply equally to both parties, and whenever an objection applies equally to both parties it is invalid.⁴² In other words, one can reformulate the sceptical question back against the sceptic, and thereby one can at least defeat their argument before

36 For more on Buddhist epistemology in relation to kalām, see Xiuyuan (2018, p. 946).

37 Balkhī, *Kitāb al-Maqālāt*, pp. 77–78.

38 Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, p. 73.

39 Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad*, p. 307, lines 8–11.

40 Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad*, p. 307, lines 11–16.

41 Balkhī, *Kitāb al-Maqālāt*, p. 71.

42 Balkhī, *Kitāb al-Maqālāt*, pp. 71–72.

presenting a positive case for the reliability of proper reasoning.⁴³ Balkhī offers similar arguments against those who believe inferential knowledge is only possible in arithmetic and geometry, which we will revisit later.

1.3 The Reliability of Sense Perception

Everyone in the *kālam* tradition is in agreement that errors sometimes occur in sense perception; or at least, to be more precise, we make mistakes in our judgements regarding perceptible things. Examples they cite in this regard include things such as the fact that large objects appear small at a distance, or that some entities appear to be static when they are in fact moving or changing, or that certain things taste sweet to some while bitter to those with jaundice, or that sometimes we think we are seeing something, but we are in fact hallucinating or dreaming. Some figures also noted a discrepancy between our powers of perception and the powers of animal vision (such as nocturnal predators) and hearing (such as bats). According to Māturīdī, Nazzām and Ibn Shabīb (mentioned above) appear to have dealt with these problems case by case by providing various naturalistic explanations.⁴⁴

Māturīdī presents a solution which denies the notion that sense perception errs at all; rather, sense perception does precisely what it is supposed to do, and it is mind ultimately that makes judgements on what it receives through the senses in accordance with what it knows. He argues as follows:

The basis for this problem (i.e. error) and its like is that perceptual knowledge (*ilm al-ḥiss*) changes relative to changes in the states of the senses. The subject of sensing knows of his own defect (*āfa*), so he knows the defect is an obstruction (to perception). Thus, by means of his senses, he is cognizant that [his perception] is contrary to reality when the defect is present, and [he is cognizant] of its reality without [the defect] ... and all of that is known by means of the senses, so there is no means to contradict sense.⁴⁵

Māturīdī's argument has two main elements. The first is that the very fact that we can identify "errors" implies that we know when sense perception gives us the "correct" image and when it does not. In other words, the error is not in the sense faculties, but rather, it is in one who judges that a given perception is true. It is the subject, by means of its *knowledge* (conceptual knowledge primarily), that judges whether the appearance corresponds to the entity itself, or does not. In both cases, it is the subject that judges in accordance with its conceptual knowledge and its sense impressions, and thereby knows whether what appears to be the case is in fact the case. This view tells us that, at the very least, Māturīdī does not subscribe to a naive empiricism that gives sense perception an independence

43 Balkhī, *Kitāb al-Maqālāt*, pp. 72–73.

44 Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, pp. 223–225.

45 Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, p. 223.

from concepts.⁴⁶ The sensings alone do not yield knowledge, but only by means of this combination of concepts, sense impression and judgement. We find a similar analysis in Ash'arī, as reported by Ibn Fūrak:

[Ash'arī] said: It may be that [what appears as a perception] is only a type of imagination or illusion, and is not an actual seeing (*ru'ya*) nor perception (*idrāk*), such as what one sees in sleep, or what one imagines to be the motion of the shore when he is seated in a (moving) ship, or when he sees the rotation of his surroundings when he himself is spinning, but all of that is a mere imagining and illusion.⁴⁷

What kind of solution does Ash'arī present? The basic principle at play is his position that “it is not possible to perceive what we have absolutely no knowledge of”.⁴⁸ Ash'arī uses the term perception (*idrāk*) exclusively for veridical perceptions, distinguishing them from imaginings or seemings. So, what this appears to mean is that if we do not know that something is the case, then it is impossible for us to perceive that something is the case. Similarly, if our judgement is false, then we are merely imagining (and not perceiving) it to be the case. This is not to mean that one's judgement is prior to one's perception, but that one's conceptions of the perceptible object are needed for one to make a judgement regarding what is provided by the senses.⁴⁹ Thus, automatically, there is the raw sensory image that occurs by means of sense, and then one judges that image in accordance with the concepts available to oneself; if the image, as interpreted by one's concepts, corresponds to how one knows it to be the case, then one's perception is veridical, and if not, then not. Thus, there is a type of co-dependence between the concepts of the mind and the contents of sense that entails a concomitance between *knowing that something is the case* and *seeing that something is the case*. Ibn Fūrak explains Ash'arī's position as such:

[Ash'arī] held that perception (*idrāk*) cannot be detached (*lā yanfak*) from knowledge of the perceptible (*al-mudrak*), and knowledge (*ilm*) attaches to its object as it truly is; thus, if one's face appears long when reflected in a sword, and in a large mirror to be very large, then that is a type

46 One may argue that Māturīdī (and Ash'arī, as we shall see) avoid Sellars's “Myth of the Given”, or at least the empiricist version of this myth. See Sellars (1997).

47 Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad*, p. 278, lines 20–22.

48 Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad*, p. 18, line 3. The Arabic is: *lā yajūz an nudrika mā lā na'lamuhu bi-hāl*.

49 This of course raises the question of where those concepts come from to begin with, and although this is a very important question, it would take us too far afield, for the answer will be quite complicated. For Ash'arī, a major component of the answer is language; he will often mention throughout his work that the meanings of our concepts are defined by the language-users (*ahl al-lughā*). In turn, however, he also believes that language, at least, originates as a Divine convention. Furthermore, his understanding of language or the linguistic includes meanings just as much as it includes utterances. Presumably then, we can get a large number of our concepts by merely learning a language as children, and, in some kind of dialectic with reality, mediated by reasoning, reports and sense data, we can modify those concepts, or we can arrive at new ones.

of illusion and imagining, and thus, it cannot be a (true) perception and cognition of that object, because it is such that [its appearance] is distinct from how it is known to be.⁵⁰

In general, then, Ibn Fūrak cites Ash'arī's principle in distinguishing between mere appearances and proper perceptions as such:

[Ash'arī] held that the criterion to distinguish between what is a perception and what is (merely) an appearance ... is to return to what we said, namely, that the seen correspond to its object, and that the percept correspond to the object that is perceived, in a manner that it is known (to the subject) by necessity; and if it is different (from how it is known to be), then that is a mere imagining.⁵¹

Now, the process of making the correct judgement can differ from case to case; sometimes it will be evident that what appears to the senses is simply not the case. For example, if I saw my own head in my lap, I would know immediately that I was hallucinating or dreaming or otherwise, for it is impossible (although it is imaginable) for me to be looking at my own head detached from itself (for it would involve that somehow I have two heads, and two sets of eyes, and that one of them is gazing at the other; but I only have one head, so what I am seeing cannot be my actual head).⁵² In other cases, one may have to make some kind of inference. Whatever the details may end up being, what is given in sense is never enough for knowledge, and so, the concepts by means of which we judge the data of sense form an essential part of our knowledge of the external world.

There is no doubt that more can be said on the problem of perception in early kalām; indeed, there remains much more to be uncovered regarding scepticism in general during this period and how it evolves in the post-classical period. After the assimilation of Avicenna's works into the kalām tradition, most notably his logic, the terms in which these discussions occur change in important ways. For instance, the development of two related concepts in the post-classical period, namely, mental existence (*al-wujūd al-dhihnī*) and the concept of objective reality (*naḥs al-amr*), plays an important role in the way later thinkers conceive of the various sceptical views.⁵³ My purpose so far has been to point out some of the strategies

50 Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad*, pp. 278–279.

51 Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad*, p. 279, lines 2–4.

52 Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad*, p. 280, lines 2–4. More generally, Ash'arī and Māturīdī held that one knows intuitively (non-inferentially) that there is a difference between waking states and dreaming states or hallucinations, because the conditions of both are quite starkly different in experience. This is against an earlier view held by some Mu'tazilīs that the difference between dreaming states and waking states was inferential.

53 Although usage of the term “existence in the mind” is ubiquitous in the works of Ibn Sīnā, and usage of the term “in itself” (*fi naḥsihi*) is likewise found even in the earliest kalām texts, neither of these terms is thoroughly theorized until much later. In Ibn Sīnā, for example, mental existence is deployed more or less as an explanation of cognition. But with the engagement of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, mental existence is identified as having two distinct theses: one about the types of objects that exist, and another

developed in the early period to deal with scepticism and to show how these discussions spawned an analysis of perception with an eye to explain error and investigate our intuitive belief that our senses are reliable. It was these discussions in classical kalām that formed the initial motivation for the response to scepticism in the post-classical period, albeit different in many important ways.

2. The Post-Classical Tradition

2.1 Unrestricted Scepticism in Taftāzānī's *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id al-Nasafiyya*

'Umar al-Nasafi (d.537/1142)⁵⁴ begins his classical kalām primer, *al-'Aqā'id al-Nasafiyya*, with the following statement:

Said the people of truth: the realities of things exist, and knowledge of them is realized, contrary to the *sūfistā'iyya*.⁵⁵

This statement gives us a bird's eye view of what the debate will entail. First, Taftāzānī provides an explanation for the terms true/real (*ḥaqq*) and realities (*ḥaqā'iq*).⁵⁶ Truth (*ḥaqq*) is a judgement with correspondence to reality (*al-ḥukm al-muṭābiq lil-wāqī'*). The details of his theory of correspondence are somewhat complicated. One crucial term is the notion of *wāqī'*, or reality, which Mulla

about what the nature of knowledge is. The first of these two ends up playing a crucial role in the theory of *nafs al-amr*, which roughly corresponds to a truthmaker theory. This ontological aspect of mental existence can be accepted as part of the metaphysical theory of *nafs al-amr* without accepting Avicenna's theory of cognition, and thus mental existence as a metaphysical theory among later authors becomes decoupled from Avicenna's original theory about cognition. Problems with this notion led Tūsī to write a short treatise on *nafs al-amr*, where he hoped that the affirmation of a universal intellect would provide us with objective grounding for all universal truths. This treatise of his, and his theory, was heavily engaged by later authors, with several critical commentaries published as independent texts and as parts of other longer summae in metaphysics, theology and logic. Some of these have been published. See Fūda, *Thalāth Rasā'il*; Tūsī, *Risālat ithbāt al-'aql al-mujarrad*.

54 Nasafi was a Hanafi jurist, hadith scholar, historian and theologian who lived in Samarqand, present-day Uzbekistan. He is the author of an important bio-bibliographical work known as *al-Qand fi dhikr 'ulamā Samarqand*. Nasafi is most well-known for the creed he produced, known as the *'Aqā'id al-Nasafiyya*, which was derived from Abū Mu'tin al-Nasafi's larger kalām work, *Tabsirat al-Adilla*. Both of these works were authored in the classical kalām tradition of Māturīdī. Taftāzānī, aside from being a post-classical author who engaged deeply with the works of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Ibn Sīnā, was a theologian of the Ash'arī school. It thus provides students a primer with which to engage four schools: classical and post-classical Ash'arism alongside classical and post-classical Māturīdism. Taftāzānī's commentary is perhaps the most widely studied and glossed kalām text in a tradition which continues today.

55 Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id*, vol. 1, pp. 24–34, top enclosed column within brackets.

56 Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id*, vol. 1, p. 24, top enclosed column.

Aḥmad al-Jundī (fl. tenth/sixteenth century)⁵⁷ explains as being synonymous with another key concept, *naḥs al-amr*:

That is, the existent (*al-thābit*) and realized in itself (*naḥs al-amr*), independent of the consideration of any mind, or the supposition of any thinker, and [*naḥs al-amr*] is what is represented (*al-maḥkiy 'anhu*) in speech, and it is referred to by the contents of a proposition.⁵⁸

Jundī explains that the best candidate for what *naḥs al-amr* (*lit.* the thing itself) refers to is the subject (i.e., of a proposition), because the subject term for any true proposition is what ultimately grounds the truth of that proposition.⁵⁹ By extension then, the “domain of objective reality” refers to the totality of all objectively existent entities, namely, the entities which are the referents of the subject terms of all true affirmative propositions (i.e., those things which ground the truths of all true affirmative propositions).

Correspondence, likewise, implies a relation between a statement and a state of affairs, reality, that is, *naḥs al-amr*. The relation is a reciprocal one, and it may be that one can consider the relation insofar as reality corresponds to a proposition, or that the proposition corresponds to reality. In either case, the lynchpin for correspondence is that the relation signified by the proposition (i.e., the relation between S and P in “S is P”) is something which exists in reality. The later Indian glossator ‘Abd al-Ḥakīm al-Siyālkūtī (d.1067/1657) provides a good summary:

In speech which signifies the occurrence of a relation between two things, either in affirmation or negation – irrespective of its occurrence to the mind – there must exist between the two things an affirmative or negative relation, because either “this is that” or “[this] is not that,” and that relation is what is occurrent (*al-wāqī'*) in extramental and objective reality (*fi l-khārij wa naḥs al-amr*); and the meaning of [the relation's] existence and realization is that it is real (*thābita*), irrespective of any mind's consideration of it, and not that the relation *itself* exists in extramental reality.⁶⁰

There are quibbles about the details, but there is general agreement on how this is supposed to work.⁶¹ Declarative sentences and propositions signify a relation

57 Despite the popularity of his gloss on Taftāzānī's work, the historical Jundī remains somewhat of a mystery figure. His gloss, at least insofar as the question of scepticism is concerned, is distinguished by an uncanny focus on the theory of *naḥs al-amr*, which comes as no surprise given that he has written a full commentary on Ṭūsī's treatise on the topic. For more on him and the publication of his treatise, see Ṭūsī, *Risālat Ithbāt al-'aql al-mujarrad*, pp. 76–79, 120–161.

58 Jundī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id*, vol. 1, p. 24, middle enclosed column.

59 Jundī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id*, vol. 1, p. 25, middle enclosed column.

60 Siyālkūtī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id*, vol. 2, p. 124, enclosed column.

61 The glossators on these sections of Taftāzānī's commentary spend an enormous amount of time working out the details of the terms of: truth (*sidq* and *ḥaqq*), reality (*naḥs al-amr*), quiddity (*ḥaqīqa*), correspondence, conception, proposition, assent and judgements, most of which can be sidestepped for the purposes of this article. Nevertheless, it indicates to us that the problem of scepticism functioned as a space to meditate on these problems at a highly technical level.

that holds or does not hold between a subject and a predicate (e.g., “this is that” or “this is not that”). For such propositions to be true, the relation they signify (“the thatness of this”) must hold independently of any mind’s consideration of it. Siyālkūtī explains that this does not mean that the relation *per se* exists in some kind of reified sense (because it is a relation), but that it is real in the sense that it is extractable from an existent thing (i.e., the *relata*), and thus it originates in that entity and exists independently of one’s thinking about it.

So much for truth reality, and correspondence. Taftāzānī moves on to describe what the term “reality” (*ḥaqīqa*) means: it is roughly a synonym of quiddity: “the reality of a thing and its quiddity is that in virtue of which something is itself”.⁶² The meaning of Nasafī’s statement according to Taftāzānī is thus:

The intended meaning is that what we believe to be the realities of things, and name them with names, such as man, horse, sky, and earth, are things which exist in objective reality, as in our statement “the necessary being exists.”⁶³

Some glossators, such as Jundī, Siyālkūtī and ‘Iṣām al-Dīn al-Isfarāyīnī (d.943/1536–7),⁶⁴ are quick to point out that this is a statement against the sceptics, and not a statement about the existence of universals in the external world, not least since most theologians rejected that view.⁶⁵ Thus, since Taftāzānī lists examples that are both particular (the earth, the necessary being) and universal (man, horse), his point was not to make a statement about universals, but merely a statement that the things that we believe to be picked out by our concepts, such as the earth and the sky, are things which in fact exist objectively, independently of our beliefs about them.⁶⁶

Lastly, Taftāzānī explains the final claim by Nasafī, namely, that “knowledge of these realities has obtained”.⁶⁷ This does not mean that knowledge of *all* realities has obtained, but some knowledge, enough to contradict the universal

62 Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id*, vol. 1, p. 27, top enclosed column.

63 Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id*, vol. 1, pp. 30–31, top enclosed column.

64 For more on al-Isfarāyīnī, see El-Rouayheb (2018).

65 Jundī, *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id*, vol. 1, p. 30, middle enclosed column; Siyālkūtī, *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id*, vol. 2, p. 135, middle enclosed column and margins; Isfarāyīnī, *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id*, vol. 4, p. 43, middle enclosed column. The meaning of *quiddity* (*lit.* the “what-it-is”) is that implied by the law of identity, i.e., J is J, for the commentators are explicit that by *quiddity* they only mean that by virtue of which a thing is itself and is not something else. In the same sense, J is J implies that there is a J-ness by virtue of which that which is J is J. It should not be understood, as the language may imply, anything more significant than this; more specifically, the commentators explicitly point out that this is not a discussion on the existence of universal essences; rather, this is strictly a statement that basically means: “there are things”.

66 For a summary description of what the view entails, see the gloss by the late Ottoman scholar Kayyımzade Abdullah Efendi (Kanqarī) (d.1259/1843), in *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id*, vol. 2, p. 137, in the margins. On Kankırī, see Bursalı Mehmed, *Osmanlı Müellifleri*, vol. 1, p. 272.

67 Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id*, vol. 1, 34, top enclosed column.

negation of knowledge held by some of the sceptics, which we will come to next. The three claims being defended then are as follows:

- (i) Things exist (against the nihilist claim that nothing at all exists)
- (ii) The things which exist have a reality to them, that is, an intrinsic nature which exists independently of our beliefs about them (against the relativist claim that there is no intrinsic nature to reality which is independent of our beliefs about it)
- (iii) And that we have knowledge of some of these realities (against the agnostic claim that knowledge is not possible, and so, they remain in doubt about everything, including whether there is a world or there is not, and whether it has an intrinsic nature or does not, and so on)

By means of the three theses we now come to the three groups of unrestricted sceptics: (i) the nihilists (*al-ʿinādiyya*), who denied the existence of absolutely everything;⁶⁸ (ii) the relativists (*al-ʿindiyya*), who denied that reality has any intrinsic nature (if it exists at all), and thus truth and falsehood are relative to human beliefs and conventions;⁶⁹ and (iii) the agnostics (*al-lā-adriyya*), who doubted everything, including their own doubts.⁷⁰

Jundī elaborates on the nihilist view in the following manner:

(And some deny the realities of things) i.e., *themselves*, meaning that they are completely negated in objective reality, and quiddities have no difference or distinction from one another, and none of them exist in the domain of objective reality, not by themselves, nor by their existence, for there is no positive affirmation except that there is a negative one to contradict it, rather, all things are imaginings and delusions with no reality to them, like a mirage which the thirsty man imagines to be water.⁷¹

In other words, just as the nihilist denies the existence of any concrete entity, they also deny the existence of any abstract entity, which is what Jundī refers to when he says “not by themselves, nor by their existence”. The latter is supposed to refer to actually existent entities, while the former refers to those entities which are distinct in themselves in an abstract sense, even if they do not actually exist (Jundī uses the example of “the phoenix” here). Their claims even extend to the principle of non-contradiction (PNC), making it particularly difficult to argue

68 Taftāzānī and Jundī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʿid*, vol. 1, p. 35, top and middle columns respectively.

69 Taftāzānī and Jundī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʿid*, vol. 1, p. 35, top and middle enclosed columns respectively.

70 Taftāzānī and Jundī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʿid*, vol. 1, p. 35, top and middle enclosed columns respectively.

71 Taftāzānī and Jundī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʿid*, vol. 1, p. 35, top and middle enclosed columns. Siyālkūfī follows Jundī’s description rather closely, but he elaborates on the view of the relativists in response to other glossators, as we shall see below.

with them (hence the label “the obstinate ones”).⁷² Jundī anticipates the possible objection that the nihilist position is incoherent, and states the following:

Let it not be said: [absolute nihilism] entails a real contradiction, such as to allow the denial of a contradictory pair (i.e., that both “x is existent” and “x is not existent” are false), for if there is no real relation, there is neither affirmation nor negation, and that does not entail a violation of the principle of non-contradiction. Besides: the principle of non-contradiction is just another delusion for the nihilists.⁷³

Basically, Jundī wants to anticipate the claim that absolute nihilism is incoherent because it entails a real contradiction. In response, he first points out that a contradiction is only possible if something exists, such that a real contradiction can hold between the existence of that thing and its non-existence. But if absolutely nothing exists, then there can be no actual contradiction (i.e., in reality), and therefore absolute nihilism is a logically coherent position. Furthermore, even if nihilism did in fact entail a logical contradiction, the nihilist denies the principle of non-contradiction either way, dismissing it as just one among many other false principles.

The nihilist and the relativist agree that there is no objective reality, but the relativist differs in that they accept a subjective reality produced by the beliefs of individual agents or communities.⁷⁴ Siyālkūtī presents the following description of the relativist view after following Jundī in his description of the nihilists:

72 The glossators make a point of distinguishing nihilism from monism, which is to claim that every contingent being reduces to a single origin that is real and exists externally, such that there is no actual multiplicity or distinction whatsoever, except insofar as they are appearances of the same singular reality, which is only known to those with true mystical experience of the Divine.

73 Jundī, *Sharḥ al-Aqā'id*, vol. 1, p. 35, middle enclosed column.

74 Interestingly, the glossators concede this view of knowledge and reality is shared by the sciences that study normative objects, for example, grammar, and, according to some legal theorists (such as Ash'arī and Ghazālī, for example), law. Indeed, they explicitly divide sciences into “real sciences” and “normative sciences”, where real sciences study objects that exist in objective reality, while normative sciences study objects that exist in a normative or subjective reality, meaning sciences that study things that are dependent on the conventions of human beings for their meaning or existence. For example, grammar, they argue, studies the normative conventions of a specific group of language users (e.g., of the Arabic language), and therefore, grammatical judgements such as “in a genitive construction, the modified noun comes first, and the modifier comes second” is true in Arabic, but is false in Persian. Thus, it is not that the judgements *within* a particular grammar are relative to each individual inquirer into the science, but that its judgements are not universal to all languages and instead are true or false relative to the conventions agreed upon by the relevant language users. Similarly, legal theorists who held that every qualified independent jurist is correct in their legal judgement (a view referred to as *taswīb*) argued that there is no objectively true legal norm, but rather, what is true in this sense is whatever is good and that is whatever a qualified jurist arrives at. This is related to another view on whether the good is intrinsic or not; most theologians held that the good was not intrinsic, and that instead the good (in the sense of what deserved praise and reward in the afterlife) is in obedience to revealed law. Since the law dictates that one obeys qualified legal experts who do not violate consensus, then whatever they say must also be good. Therefore, the only way one can object to a legal norm is to

The relativists deny [realities'] existence and distinctness in themselves independently of our beliefs: that is, if we considered [reality] independently of our beliefs, the realities would be entirely negated from objective reality, because their distinctness from each other would not remain. But they say that they exist and are affirmed in [reality] following our beliefs or by means of them, precisely how the validators (*muṣawwiba*) held in validating the positions of every juriconsult (*mujtahid*), and the case in the principles of the Arabic language, for it is not among the real sciences which are true in themselves independently of the language of the Arabs, but, it has reality by means of [the spoken language], and that is why [its judgements] are described as being true and false. Thus, beliefs according to them do not emerge from meanings as it is with us, for we say: “we find this bitter because it is bitter in itself”, and they say: “we find this bitter because we have found it to be so.” From this it is clear that what they mean by saying every community (*ā'ifa*) is true with respect to itself according to them, it is because the existence of things in themselves follows from beliefs, and thus, the beliefs of all individuals correspond to reality and are thus true.⁷⁵

Siyālkūtī's analysis here appears to be based on 'Iṣām al-Dīn's suggestion that relativism may have emerged as a consequence of the view in legal theory (*taṣwīb*, the *muṣawwiba*) against the standard account that people in different states perceive things in contradictory ways.⁷⁶

Jundī anticipates the following argument against the relativist:

- (i) The belief that “truth is relative” is either objectively true, or true relative to one's belief.
- (ii) If it is objectively true, then they have contradicted themselves.
- (iii) If it is true relative to another belief, then: that other belief is either objectively true, or it is true relative to a further belief.
- (iv) So, either that regress ends at an objectively true belief as well, entailing a contradiction; or it entails a vicious regress, which is absurd.⁷⁷

state that it was not produced by following the proper rules that are passed down authoritatively from the Lawgiver, even if their individual interpretation is semantically sustainable by the strictly linguistic import of a given legal text. See Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id*, vol. 2, p. 144.

⁷⁵ Siyālkūtī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id*, vol. 2, p. 144. Siyālkūtī wavers between *ā'ifa* (group, community) and *shakhs* (individual) in his description of the relativists, but given his comparison with the grammar of various languages and the laws of various schools of law still being described as true or false, or good and bad, indicates that he believes the relativist view is not individualistic, but is relativistic with respect to various “cognitive communities”, to borrow a term from one of the reviewers. For the discussion between legal theorists on whether or not there is an objectively true legal norm, and whether two rational or legal proofs can or cannot be of equal strength, see al-Ijī et al., *Sharḥ al-Mukhtaṣar*, vol. 2, pp. 298–300.

⁷⁶ Isfarāyīnī et al., *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id*, vol. 4, pp. 49–50. Isfarāyīnī's suggestion is interesting because it means that he seriously considered the existence of this form of scepticism or relativism within Islamic history and not as a relic of a previous time.

⁷⁷ Taftāzānī and Jundī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id*, vol. 1, p. 35.

On behalf of the relativist, Jundī argues that the regress need not be vicious, for it is a strictly conceptual regress (*tasalsul fi l-umūr al-ʿtibārīyya*).⁷⁸ Furthermore, even on the supposition that it was a vicious regress the relativist may respond by stating that such a regress is only absurd relative to one’s belief that it is; indeed, the relativist may also choose the contradiction option and claim that such contradictions are only absurd for those who believe them to be so.⁷⁹

The issue of regress reappears in the discussion of the absolute agnostic who, it is alleged, is in a state of radical doubt, denying knowledge of anything at all. This person even doubts their own state of doubt; therefore, if *S* doubts that *x*, and *S* also doubts that “*S* doubts that *x*”, *S* must also doubt that “*S* doubts that *S* doubts that *x*”, and so on. Now if someone says that this kind of agnosticism entails a vicious regress, Jundī responds that it simply does not, for it is a regress that is dependent upon the subsequent considerations of the doubter, and such a regress is unproblematic. Indeed, there seems to be no contradiction possible for the agnostic either, leading a number of authors, following Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, to state that the agnostics were the “best of the sceptics” (*afḍal al-sūfīṣṭāʿīyya*).⁸⁰ ʿIṣām al-Dīn explains as follows:

For the basis on which [the nihilists/relativists] denied the objective reality of things does not imply their denial, but rather, doubt: for the existence of an equally strong objection to every proposition does not entail certainty that both are false, but rather, doubt – unless one says it indicates negation when supported by another weaker premise, namely, “that which has no proof for its existence must be negated.” In any case, [the agnostics] are the best of them because they do not rely on such weak premises ... and it may be said that the doubter is superior to the ignoramus, and easier to guide to the true path.⁸¹

A similar sentiment is held by Taftāzānī in his much longer kalām work, *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid*:

And it is obvious that the nihilists and the relativists fall into self-contradiction, as they have conceded the truth of affirmation or negation, not least because of what they have claimed through argument, as opposed to the agnostics, for they insisted on hesitation and doubt in everything one may turn to, even their own status of being in doubt.⁸²

The idea here is that since the agnostic makes no affirmation or denial, they cannot fall into a contradiction on the question of knowledge or otherwise. Therefore, the agnostic may defend themselves against the accusation of self-

78 Taftāzānī and Jundī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʿid*, vol. 1, p. 35.

79 Taftāzānī and Jundī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʿid*, vol. 1, p. 35.

80 Isfarāyīnī et al., *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʿid*, vol. 4, p. 51; see the top margin where Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s views are quoted by Velīyuddīn.

81 Isfarāyīnī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʿid*, vol. 4, pp. 50–51.

82 Jundī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʿid*, vol. 1, p. 37.

contradiction, as opposed to the nihilist and relativist, who both appear to make some kind of affirmation or negation, and therefore make a claim to knowledge.

2.2 *The Main Arguments Against Unrestricted Scepticism*

As we have seen, it is quite difficult to refute a sceptic who denies, relativizes or doubts the veracity of the principle of non-contradiction. In what follows, we will look at some common strategies to deal with their claims. Following Taftāzānī, the strategies can be divided into three categories: (1) arguments that justify the non-sceptical position; (2) arguments that attempt to show the sceptical position to be incoherent, either by presenting an argument against them or by defeating the sceptical arguments; and (3) practical arguments that try to reveal that the sceptical position entails a performative self-contradiction. But as I have stated earlier, Taftāzānī et al. are not optimistic about a strict refutation of scepticism, but they can at least show that their own position is coherent and self-evidently true. However, the attempts appear to have taken their toll on some authors: after a long discussion of the arguments against scepticism, the glossator Siyālkūfī comments that “this is [the best] I’ve got, and perhaps what is with others is better than this.”⁸³ Nevertheless, most figures, against Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, consider these discussions to be fruitful, as we shall see later on.

Aiming to oppose all three forms of scepticism, Taftāzānī presents the first argument in favour of the non-sceptical position. In doing so, he is drawing on the epistemic assumption basic to the tradition; that is, that the obtaining of knowledge is non-volitional and necessary. Knowledge, whether mediated through inference, testimony, sense perception, introspection, or otherwise, ultimately obtains not by means of anyone’s choice; when the conditions for knowledge obtain, the knowledge cannot – honestly – be doubted. We look around and given that conditions are normal, we are simply made to believe things; some of those beliefs, if they have met certain conditions, are what we call knowledge. This assumption forms the premise of Taftāzānī’s argument:

- (1) We are certain, by necessity, that some things exist: either by sense perception or by argument.
- (2) Therefore, some things exist.⁸⁴

This is not an argument strictly speaking, but falls into the category known as a *tanbīh* (*lit.* a calling of attention, or caution). Since we gain knowledge of the existence of some particular things by sense perception, and other things by

83 Siyālkūfī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʿid*, vol. 2, p. 150.

84 Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʿid*, vol. 1, p. 36.

inference, we can conclude with the more general claim that “something exists”. The truth of this type of statement is meant to be self-evident. The caution may be effective in defending against scepticism, but it does so by elaborating its own assumptions as found in experience instead of really engaging the sceptic.

Taftāzānī then presents a dialectical argument with the aim of pointing out the contradiction in the position of the nihilist (or the nihilist *and* the relativist).⁸⁵ He argues thus:

If the negation of things has not obtained, then [some realities] have obtained. And if [negation] has obtained, then negation is one reality among realities, because it is a type of judgment, and thus, something of reality has obtained, and thus it is false to deny all (realities) without qualification.⁸⁶

Since it was held that the nihilists and the relativists differed from the agnostics in that they affirmed something, namely, that nothing at all exists, or that reality has no intrinsic nature but is rather a product of belief, they are both committing themselves to at least some knowledge. But knowledge in the form of an assent to either proposition (i.e., that nothing exists, or that reality is dependent on belief) is to affirm the existence of at least one reality, namely, negation as assent. Jundī points out, however, that this argument assumes that these sceptics care about the principle of non-contradiction, but they evidently do not. Similar to what we have mentioned above, these sceptics can either say that (i) even our negation is non-existent, or that it is only relatively true, or (ii) that the principle of non-contradiction is equally illusory (*min jumlat al-mukhayyalāt*) or that contradiction is only absurd if you believe it to be so.⁸⁷

2.3 Arguments for Scepticism

Let us now look at some responses to sceptical arguments. On behalf of the agnostics, Taftāzānī adduces the following argument:

- (1) Some non-inferential propositions are obtained by sense perception.
- (2) Sense perception often errs; for example, a cross-eyed person sees a single thing as two, and jaundice causes sweet things to taste bitter.
- (3) Other non-inferential propositions known as primary propositions (*awwaliyyāt*) (e.g., the whole is greater than the part; or every contingent entity requires a cause) are likewise disagreed upon, indicating that some inquirers have erred.

85 Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id*, vol. 1, p. 36. Here Taftāzānī claims that the argument only works against the nihilists, but in his later and longer summa, *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid*, he appears to say that it is aimed at both of them, and the glossators take him to task for this. See Jundī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id*, vol. 1, p. 37, middle enclosed column.

86 Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id*, vol. 1, p. 36.

87 Jundī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id*, vol. 1, p. 36.

- (4) Theoretical or inferential knowledge is in turn dependent on non-inferential knowledge;
- (5) Therefore, if non-inferential knowledge is suspect, so is the theoretical knowledge upon which it is based.
- (6) Therefore, all judgements, inferential and non-inferential, are doubtful.⁸⁸

This is the general line of reasoning presented in favour of the relativist position and the agnostic position; Taftāzānī adds that this is how the sceptics explain the plethora of disagreement among humanity; disagreement is caused by rampant error in the case of the agnostic, and it is caused by the lack of an objective basis for belief by the relativist.⁸⁹ In response, Taftāzānī formulates the following:

- (1) The fact that sense perception errs at times due to *particular* causes does not negate our certainty regarding sense perception when the causes of errors are absent;
- (2) Disagreement over non-inferential or self-evident principles may occur due to a lack of acquaintance with the terms or misconstrued conceptions, but this does not negate the immediacy of these principles when they are conceived correctly;
- (3) Lastly, the plethora of disagreement due to unsound arguments does not entail the falsehood of all theoretical judgements.⁹⁰

In reply (1), Taftāzānī argues that identifying an error in sense perception presupposes knowledge of how to distinguish between which perceptions are correct and which err; one can identify those criteria that have caused the error. If so, we can be confident in our sense perception in the absence of those sources of error. Even so, the glossators point out that Taftāzānī's presentation of the argument here contains a concession to a common misconception that the senses err; rather, it is the mind that errs in its judgements regarding what is found in sense perception.⁹¹ Following Ṭūsī, Taftāzānī states otherwise in his longer work:

Yes, when the Imām (i.e. al-Rāzī) stated that "since it has been established that the judgment of sense errs, then there must be a higher judge that distinguishes its truths from its errors, thus,

⁸⁸ Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id*, vol. 1, pp. 37–38.

⁸⁹ The nihilist strategy is often described as presenting a series of antinomies and claiming that for every argument in favour of a thesis, there is an equally strong argument against it. The best way to explain this unhappy result is to claim that there is in fact nothing that exists at all, for if it did, it would tilt the scales in one direction or the other.

⁹⁰ Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id*, vol. 1, pp. 38–39.

⁹¹ Jundī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id*, vol. 1, p. 38; Isfāryānī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id*, vol. 4, pp. 54–55.

sense is not the first judge,” [Ṭūsī] responded by stating that “sense does not judge at all, rather, the judge in all things is the mind.”⁹²

Having said so, as Taftāzānī and Ijī both point out, this kind of reply from Ṭūsī is helpful in understanding something about sense perception, but it transfers the locus of error from sense perception to reason, which is arguably even worse. Thus, the response to these kinds of doubts regarding sense perception is to say that the occurrence of error sometimes does not mean error all the time, especially since our knowledge of error implies a capacity to know what is true by the very same faculties of sense perception.⁹³ This is precisely the same line of reasoning we saw in Ash‘arī and Māturīdī, who held that errors in sense perception can only occur within a regime of generally veridical perceptions and conceptual knowledge. As we saw earlier then, these arguments are insufficient for undermining sense perception, because sense by itself is insufficient for making a judgement. Rather, knowledge by means of sense perception occurs only with the addition of certain other factors, such as normal conditions of perception, the object being within the limits of those senses, conceptual knowledge of the perceived entities, and so on.⁹⁴

It is important to note that Taftāzānī points out that the causes of error are *particular*. The only other kind of cause of error would be have to be “general” or “pervasive”, but for which we do not have any cause to believe exists (in fact, if this is a ubiquitous or pervasive error, it would be difficult to see how it could ever be detected). Thus, in the absence of any evidence of general error, the fact that we are sometimes absolutely certain that we do perceive certain things and make judgements about them is sufficient to be certain of their general reliability. ‘Iṣām al-Dīn adds that the very notion of error only makes sense in relation to the notion of truth, and so the acknowledgement of error itself due to known causes is reason itself to think they are otherwise reliable.⁹⁵ Siyālkūtī summarizes the response as follows:

The gist of this argument is a denial of the statement “it is possible that there is a general source for a general error” by stating “we do not concede”, for the immediacy of intellect is certain that it is false in some cases, as in your perception of the sweetness of honey with nomological certainty, without any room for doubt; and the [logical] possibility of its occurrence does not negate the said nomological certainty, as is the case in the *nomi*c sciences (*al-‘ulūm al-‘ādīyya*). For we are certain that the mountain of Uḥud has not transformed into gold with complete certainty, in spite of the [logical] possibility of its transformation into gold.⁹⁶

92 Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid*, p. 21.

93 Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid*, p. 21.

94 Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid*, p. 21.

95 Isfarāyīnī, *Sharḥ al-Aqā‘id*, vol. 4, pp. 54, 56.

96 Siyālkūtī, *Sharḥ al-Aqā‘id*, vol. 2, p. 151, i.e., such that God would change the mountain into gold.

In this very response to the objections against the reliability of sense perception, Siyālkūtī also presents something that can be used to deflect objections against Ash'arī occasionalism more generally. Thus, one may present the following objection to the Ash'arīs: If there is no necessary causal connection between observable causes and effects, and instead God creates what appear to be causes and effects in temporal succession, how do we know that the perceptions that are created in us are the right ones?⁹⁷ Again, the answer is similar to that above: it is possible, logically speaking, that our perceptions are wrong, but there does not appear to be any reason to believe that they are *actually* wrong. Our *nomie* or habitual certainty, as Siyālkūtī points out, is not undermined by logical possibilities alone, especially if the matter in question is nomologically impossible (e.g., a violation of an empirically verified regularity). Thus, we may summarize the two responses as follows: (i) it does not follow from the *occurrence* of error that all sense perceptions are suspect; and (ii) it does not follow from the *possibility* of error that all our perceptions are suspect.

2.4 The Performative Self-Contradiction in Scepticism

If the usual arguments do not work, Taftāzānī suggests one final strategy, which can be found at least as early as Aristotle, and which we might call a practical argument. Taftāzānī makes the following statement at the end of his discussion on the sceptics:

The truth is that there is no way to debate with them [fruitfully], especially the agnostics, for they do not concede a single premise from which we can infer another; rather, the way to deal with them is to punish them with fire such that they concede [that something is real] or simply burn.⁹⁸

Now one may read such statements as being a kind of expression of frustration, but I think that it actually serves a strategic purpose. As we saw earlier, these arguments are drawn from Māturīdī's discussions in *Kitāb al-Tawhīd*, and it was clearly meant to point out that the behaviour of the sceptic indicates that he does not believe what he says. Thus, we can formulate the argument as such: the sceptic claims that nothing is real, yet he behaves no differently from anyone else. The only time he invokes his sceptical tools is when he wants to avoid doing things that others want him to do. Thus, if he truly believes that nothing at all exists, he should have no qualms about stepping into the flames. If one responds by saying the fact that there is no reality beyond illusory appearances does not mean we cannot prefer some appearances to others, then one may respond by stating this tacitly accepts that at least appearances are in fact distinct from one

97 For a related discussion on whether or not God can deceive us, see El-Rouayheb (2015b).

98 Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id*, vol. 1, p. 39.

another, which is very difficult to explain if there is absolutely nothing in existence. The same goes for the agnostic: they cannot be in doubt about the fact that one appearance is different from another, which undermines their claim of complete suspension of all judgement. As we shall see in the next section on restricted forms of scepticism, a similar (but less painful) version of this practical argument will be deployed.

To sum up the discussion on unrestricted scepticism: (i) we find there is a general congruence between the strategies adopted in classical and post-classical kalām, but that the discussions in the post-classical works are more detailed and sophisticated; (ii) the strategies involved are fourfold: (a) positive justifications for the non-sceptical position, (b) dialectical arguments against the sceptical position, (c) deflection of sceptical arguments against the non-sceptical position, and (d) pointing out the performative self-contradiction in sceptical behaviour. Strictly speaking, both the classical and post-classical traditions did not believe that they had refuted unrestricted scepticism, but they believed that they had done enough to defuse the threat with the strategies above. Furthermore, the sceptical arguments had the added benefit of leading to detailed discussions on the nature and reliability of sense perception, independently of any direct debate with the sceptics. At this point, let us turn to the discussion of restricted forms of scepticism.

2.5 Restricted Forms of Scepticism in Dawānī's Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id al-'Aḍudiyya Nazar, meaning “inquiry” or “reflection”, is an essential element in the kalām corpus; when used as a heading, “*nazar*” corresponds to what we would now call epistemology. Kalām manuals typically begin by settling epistemological questions, e.g., what the nature of knowledge is, what the sources of knowledge are, and how we arrive at knowledge. The most relevant of these topics to us here is whether or not inquiry can yield knowledge, especially metaphysical knowledge, to counter objections against the possibility of their entire enterprise. They report a general agreement that reflection can yield a belief of some sort, but the key here is to discuss whether any of it can be called knowledge.⁹⁹ In these discussions, three forms of restricted scepticism were normally considered: the Samaniyya (i.e., the Buddhists), the Muhandisūn (*lit.* the Geometers) and the Ismā'īliyya.¹⁰⁰ Since the latter group has been dealt with sufficiently in the secondary literature, I will only focus on the first two.¹⁰¹ These are restricted forms of scepticism because they do not deny knowledge entirely, but only

99 Dawānī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id*, p. 218.

100 See, for example, Ṭūsī, *Talkhīṣ al-Muḥaṣṣal*, pp. 49–51; Jurjānī, *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif*, vol. 1, pp. 218–241; al-Ḥāmidī and Sanūsī, *Hawāshī' alā Sharḥ al-Kubra*, pp. 19–26; Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid*, vol. 1, pp. 25–31; Bayḍāwī and Iṣfahānī, *Sharḥ Ṭawālī' al-Anwār*, pp. 28–31.

101 For example, see Kukkonen (2010). It should be noted that suggestions that Aristotelian logic was adopted because of the threat of Ismā'īlī scepticism, as seen in Van Ess (2018), are fanciful at best.

some or all forms of inferential knowledge. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Dawānī (d.908/1502)¹⁰² presents us the following brief on the Samaniyya:

The Samaniyya denied that reflection yields knowledge, [Jurjānī] said in *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif*: “they believed in the transmigration of souls (*al-tanāsukh*) and that there is no means to knowledge but the senses,” I say: perhaps they believed one could have an opinion (*ẓann*) regarding transmigration and not knowledge of it, for transmigration is not sensible and the means of knowledge are restricted to sense.¹⁰³

Ḥusayn al-Khalkhālī (d.1012/1604)¹⁰⁴ adds that “perhaps they only claim opinion regarding the limitation of knowledge to sense, and not knowledge of it, for the restriction of knowledge to sense is not something sensible either”.¹⁰⁵ Although they get a fair amount of attention in *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif*, they do not earn their own refutation by Dawānī here. The late Ottoman scholar Ismāʿīl Gelenbevi (d.1205/1791)¹⁰⁶ makes the following comment:

They have ten objections in their rejection [of inferential knowledge], all of which are discussed in longer works, and the commentator (i.e., Dawānī) has not discussed any of them as much as he has discussed the other two groups (i.e., the Geometers and the Ismāʿīliyya) because their position is hardly worthy of consideration, because [the fact that reflection] yields knowledge in geometry is so clear that no rational person could deny it.¹⁰⁷

We may also suggest that Dawānī did not specify the arguments attributed to the Samaniyya because the argument he would present against the Geometers would work equally well against the Samaniyya and thereby save him some time. Nevertheless, Gelenbevi indicates that the above discussion proves that the Samaniyya did not deny that reflection yields opinion, but only knowledge. As a result, they can avoid the charge of self-contradiction, which Gelenbevi formulates as such:

102 For more on the life and works of Dawānī, see Pourjavady (2011, pp. 4–16). Dawānī was such an influential figure that I believe the periodization of the post-classical period should reflect it, at least in the Eastern Islamic lands. There is hardly any text in logic, kalām or falsafā written after 1500 that does not engage with him.

103 Dawānī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʾid*, p. 218. In his gloss, Ismāʿīl Gelenbevi adds that “sense” should be taken to include the inner senses and introspection as well. A more likely view is that they did not deny any form of non-inferential knowledge, including experience and intuitive propositions; in which case, they may be able to claim that the arithmetical propositions claimed to be from reflection are in fact a form of non-inferential knowledge.

104 For more on Khalkhālī, see El-Rouayheb (2015b, pp. 45–46).

105 Khalkhālī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʾid*, p. 218, in the lower margin.

106 For more on Ismāʿīl Gelenbevi, see Özervarlı (2015) and El-Rouayheb (2019, pp. 227–233; 2011, p. 196).

107 Dawānī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʾid*, p. 218, second enclosed column.

- (i) If the claim that “reflection does not yield knowledge” is known by inference, then they have contradicted themselves;
- (ii) If it is known non-inferentially, then it entails that the vast majority of inquirers have denied something non-inferential, which is absurd.¹⁰⁸

The response against this type of argument is to pick the first option (i) and deny that they claimed knowledge at all. Rather, reflection yielded an *opinion* regarding reflection, and thereby they avoid the charge of self-contradiction, i.e., that they at once deny inferential knowledge while they effectively affirm it in making their case about inferential knowledge. Nevertheless, avoiding the charge of self-contradiction is still a far cry from being right. As alluded to earlier, one can demonstrate the falsity of their claim through the fact that reflection, at the very least, yields knowledge in arithmetic and geometry (for example, that the area of a square is *base x height*, or that $10 \times 10 = 100$). Therefore, it is false to make the universal claim that reflection only yields opinion.

Dawānī then informs us that the Geometers denied that reflection yields knowledge in metaphysics (*ilāhiyyāt*).¹⁰⁹ This is somewhat inaccurate: with reference to Taftāzānī and Jurjānī, Gelenbevi points out that their claim is actually that inquiry does not yield knowledge in any subject other than arithmetic and geometry, that is, in anything other than quantity and number (*al-kam wa l-ʿadad*).¹¹⁰ In explication of their view, Dawānī adduces the following argument:

The closest thing to man is his own reality, and it is unknown to him in its essence, that is, whether it is a substance or an accident, immaterial or material, and all arguments have equally repelled one another, and no argument has been affirmed securely without counter or refutation. This proves that [human beings] are incapable of knowing their own selves, so how are they to come to know the Creator and His attributes?¹¹¹

Simply put: humanity has failed in ascertaining the reality of itself, and not for a lack of trying. This is indicated by the fact that there is so much disagreement over the question; and if we are incapable of even knowing that, how do we expect to know what is even more distant, perhaps, the most distant from us?

Before analysing Dawānī’s replies, it is important to note a premise in the argument of the Geometers, identified in the glosses by Gelenbevi:

Let it not be said: “their discussion here is about conception, whereas the issue at hand concerns whether reflection can produce *judgments* (i.e., assents), so there is no point in discussing the

108 Dawānī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʿid*, p. 218, second enclosed column.

109 Dawānī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʿid*, p. 218.

110 Dawānī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʿid*, p. 219, second enclosed column.

111 Dawānī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʿid*, vol. 1, pp. 219–20.

problem of conceiving the essence.” For we say: they believed that the judgment that “the reality of a thing is such” is dependent on conceiving that reality by its essence.¹¹²

We can reformulate the objection as follows: this argument you have presented to us, if it works at all, only proves that we are incapable of having *conceptual* knowledge of the *essence* of the soul; but we are only interested in arguing for the possibility that inquiry can yield *propositional* knowledge, which can get by on a bare minimum of conceptual knowledge. For example: it is plainly obvious to all conscious human subjects that at least what they call “soul” *exists*, and that all of them can refer to themselves by using the subject pronoun “I”. In other words, the argument presented by the Geometers is beside the point because it only points to the impossibility or the severe difficulty of having *conceptual* knowledge. In response to this kind of objection, Gelenbevī states that the implicit claim of the Geometers is that propositional knowledge (i.e., assents) are conditional upon conceptual knowledge of the essence.¹¹³ In other words, for one to know that “S is P”, one must first have a complete conception of the quiddity of S. Keeping this principle in mind, we can now turn to the main argument, where Dawānī presents the following responses:

The weakness of their argument is apparent, because (i) the great amount of disagreement does not indicate that knowledge has not obtained for a few; (ii) and the fact that the soul is nearest to the knowing subject does not entail that it is easier to cognize; (iii) and if it did entail [that it was easier to cognize], it does not follow from the lack of cognizing it that what is further from it cannot be cognized; and (iv) if this argument were successful, it would prove that knowledge in geometry would also be impossible.¹¹⁴

Dawānī’s retorts appear to show that the opponent has not presented a successful argument. The glossators, Khalkhālī, Shihāb al-Dīn al-Marjānī (d.1306/1889)¹¹⁵ and Gelenbevī, accept these counters in general, even while raising some minor doubts.¹¹⁶ One such objection is interesting, for it ties in with a

112 Dawānī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʿid*, vol. 1, pp. 219–20.

113 Knowledge in the Arabic philosophical tradition is divided into two types: conceptual knowledge and propositional knowledge. Conceptual knowledge (*taṣawwur*) reveals *what* a thing is, or at least distinguishes it sufficiently from other things, while propositional knowledge (or assent, *taṣdīq*) tells you *that* a thing is, merely, or in some particular way. The way to conceptual knowledge is definition, and the way to propositional knowledge is inference (deductive, inductive or analogical). Based on this basic division, the discipline of logic was divided into two main parts: conception (i.e., definition) and assent (argument). Nevertheless, some scholars have cast doubt on the coherence of this division in knowledge. For further information, see El-Rouayheb (2016) and Lameer (2006).

114 Dawānī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʿid*, vol. 1, pp. 220–221.

115 Shihāb al-Dīn al-Marjānī (d.1306/1889) was a Tatar scholar, philosopher, theologian and historian from Qazan, then in the Russian Empire, and later moved to Istanbul. For more on him, see Shagaviev (2020) and Spannaus (2020).

116 Dawānī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʿid*, vol. 1, pp. 220–221, second enclosed column.

discussion that occurs in legal theory. Against Dawānī's first retort, Gelenbevī presents a somewhat cryptic objection:

Even if disagreement does not entail [the lack of knowledge], the equal opposition of evidence does; and this can be deflected by stating that only the mutual opposition (of the evidence) according to the belief of the inquirer leads to this, but not according to the one countering. As for the first mutual opposition, it is denied.¹¹⁷

Roughly, Gelenbevī restates the first part of the argument by the Geometers by stating that if the arguments are all mutually strong (or weak), then knowledge would not obtain. Gelenbevī then replies by stating that this might entail the lack of knowledge, but only relative to the one who *believes* that the arguments are mutually strong. However, in actual fact, no two arguments with contradictory conclusions can be of equal strength. This again refers to the discussion on arguments in legal theory discussed above.¹¹⁸ As an aside, the appearance of these subtle references means that it is possible to interpret these traditions as thinking about some of their own sceptical issues by means of a long-gone opponent.

Now, one more strategy remains against the Geometers: to present one sound argument for a thesis in metaphysics or natural philosophy, which, by itself, would prove the secondary conclusion that metaphysical knowledge is possible. In line with this strategy, especially as it pertains to theology, they took aim at the implicit premise that any judgement pertaining to some quiddity *x* requires a complete conception of that quiddity. Take, for example, the following argument:

- (1) The world is contingent;
- (2) Every contingent requires a cause for its existence;
- (3) The world requires a cause for its existence.

Since these judgements pertain to metaphysics, we can infer that theoretical knowledge in metaphysics is possible. This brings us to the conception principle (namely, to make a judgement regarding some entity, one must conceive of its essence) of the Geometers and a way to circumvent it. One of the glossators, Gelenbevī, presents the following insight:

The truth [of the matter] is to say: judging that the reality of a thing [is such and such] is distinct from judging that a thing exists, or has knowledge, or has power, and so on for the rest of the attributes of perfection, and therefore, it is possible for one to lack any knowledge of [the reality of a thing] while knowing judgments of the second type with respect to the Necessary Being.¹¹⁹

117 Dawānī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id*, vol. 1, p. 220, second enclosed column.

118 See Ijī et al., *Sharḥ al-Mukhtaṣar*, vol. 2, pp. 298–300.

119 Ijī et al., *Sharḥ al-Mukhtaṣar*, vol. 2, p. 221.

So, at best it would seem that Dawānī's counterarguments only show that the Geometers have failed to show that inferential knowledge in metaphysics is impossible. Indeed, there are ways that the Geometers can be read as presenting an inductive argument, somewhat similar to Kant's frustrations with metaphysics: namely, pointing out an empirical fact that humanity simply has no metaphysical knowledge, and if they did, we would not see such wildly divergent views and the absence of progress that we see in other sciences. The easiest way to respond, then, would be to engage the opponent in at least one single argument, for only one counterexample is needed to upend the universal judgement that no metaphysical knowledge is possible. In the quotation above, however, Gelenbevi notes that the best way to respond to their arguments is to deny the strong version of the conception principle. They may agree, then, with Kant, that direct conceptual knowledge of non-spatial, non-temporal entities is at least very difficult, but this does not mean that we cannot have some minimal amount of propositional knowledge about non-spatial, non-temporal entities.

This is not particularly new, but it tells us something about how these figures understood their forays into metaphysics and theology.¹²⁰ The project is admittedly minimalistic: they concede that substantial conceptual knowledge of God or other non-spatial entities is not possible, at least under normal conditions, but a very minimal conception is good enough (e.g., a concept like "cause" or "necessary being") to be able to refer to that entity and make true affirmations of it (e.g., "there is a cause"). Indeed, there is general agreement that metaphysics is quite a difficult affair, and this does explain the massive amount of disagreement, even if it does not prove that it is impossible. In that vein, Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Sanūsī (d.895/1490)¹²¹ writes the following response: "[The Geometers'] argument only proves that it is difficult, and so much is conceded, without doubt, for the imagination veils the intellect, and falsehood appears similar to truth, and this is why the people of truth exercised extreme minimalism and caution in delving beyond what is necessary."¹²²

Conclusion

It is clear that scepticism, in a number of forms, has played an important role in the history and development of Islamic philosophy. From the very beginnings of the enterprise, at least partly due to their interactions with Buddhist and Dualist philosophers in Central Asia, the kalām tradition has addressed the question of

120 Ṭūsī, *Talkhīs al-Muḥaṣṣal*, p. 50.

121 For more on Sanūsī, see El-Rouayheb (2019, pp. 130–135).

122 Sanūsī, *Sharḥ al-Kubrā*, pp. 20–21.

scepticism. They were, as we have seen, largely non-sceptical, but this did not prevent them from developing strategies to respond to scepticism on the one hand, and to address the problems raised by scepticism on the other. It led them to rethink their formulations of non-inferential knowledge, especially sense perception. This in turn inspired them to raise their own sceptical doubts that emerged from their own metaphysical views, such as occasionalism.

This theme continued into the post-classical period, but became increasingly sophisticated, even if some of the general strategies remained the same. Thus, in the second part of this article, we examined three types of unrestricted scepticism and two types of restricted scepticism. The general strategies can likewise be categorized in the following manner: (1) positive arguments to justify the non-sceptical position; (2) dialectical arguments to prove that the sceptical position is incoherent or self-defeating; (3) defeating sceptical arguments in favour of scepticism; and (4) practical arguments to demonstrate one particular judgement, which is sufficient to defeat the general or universal claims of the sceptic. We have also seen that the *kalām* tradition, ancient and modern, did not hold that any of these strategies presented an outright refutation of scepticism, because the sceptic could always get out of it by simply being sceptical about the principle of non-contradiction.

But if the arguments they present are insufficient for outright refutation of the sceptic, one may ask: was there any point to the discussion? I think that an outright refutation is a high bar to set for a discussion to be useful. In general, the strategies proposed by the various authors we looked at are still needed to justify and at least critically examine the non-sceptical position and to prevent the sceptical arguments from threatening it. Some authors, however, were suspicious of this practice. The philosopher and theologian Ṭūsī famously argued that it was not just pointless, but dangerous to begin texts with a discussion on scepticism, for it may lead young students astray. In response to this, it is useful to look at Ṭūsī's reply:

The author of *Naqd al-Muḥaṣṣal* (i.e. Ṭūsī) said: “the truth is that beginning works of theology with these types of skeptical doubts leads seekers of truth astray,” while others said “Familiarity with these doubts and the ways in which they fail is beneficial in establishing them in what they seek, such that they do not succumb to any of them if it seemed agreeable to them at first glance;” and we say: discussing these false statements functions as waking students up from the slumber of imitation, and cautions them against simply accepting what at first seems obvious to the mind if they have not reflected on it carefully, for [calamities] so often befall the rational.¹²³

Thus, in addition to the benefits discussed above, discussing scepticism in philosophical and theological commentaries played an important pedagogical and

123 Isfarāyīnī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʿid*, vol. 4, p. 54, enclosed column.

ethical role for the kalām tradition: a sincere seeker of truth must not leave any stone unturned. This seems fitting for a tradition which from its very inception was premised on the rejection of imitation (*taqlid*) in theological and philosophical affairs, and extolled verification (*taḥqīq*). Scepticism is thereby an invaluable instrument for cultivating a spirit of verification.

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