



The Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America  
 17th Annual Imams' Conference  
 Houston – United States

# Atheism and Skepticism

**Nazir Khan**

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

"الأراء في هذا البحث تعبر عن رأي الباحث وليس بالضرورة عن رأي أمجا"  
 Opinions in this research are solely those of the author and do not represent AMJA.



**The Qur'an on the skeptical mindset .....6**  
**Objections examined .....8**  
**Conclusion.....9**

In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Grantor of Mercy

Atheists claim that religion is merely 'belief without evidence' and that there is no proof that God exists. Yet, a deeper study of the concept of proof itself reveals the gross contradictions inherent in atheism and an underlying logical fallacy so dire as to cause the very edifice of knowledge and rationality to collapse. Intriguingly, this epistemological collapse is analyzed in works authored seven centuries ago by the Damascene theologian Ibn Taymiyyah (d.728H/1328CE).<sup>[1]</sup> Drawing upon texts from the Qur'an and the Sunnah, as well as the works of earlier scholars, Ibn Taymiyyah illustrates that for reality to be intelligible at all, human rationality must proceed in consonance with certain epistemic foundations rooted in the fundamental nature of the human being. Proof, evidence, and rational argument are only of benefit when someone has the basic foundations to establish knowledge in the first place, Ibn Taymiyyah explains.<sup>[2]</sup>

Consider the following: why do we demand proof for some concepts and not for others? The answer goes back to epistemology, the academic discipline which addresses the question, "How do I know that something is true?" Whether or not someone is justified in believing something without proof leads to a deeper question of whether or not they have a coherent epistemology. One would readily acknowledge that people are justified in believing in certain things without demanding proof for them, like the existence of good and bad, cause and effect, truth and falsehood, the reliability of their senses and memories, and so on. More importantly, one should recognize that to demand proof for such things would be perfectly nonsensical. In the history of Islamic thought, the term for those who denied such obvious realities was *safsatah* (lit. sophistry, the term was used for radical skepticism). While denying the senses was recognized to be a type of *safsatah* before, Ibn Taymiyyah pointed out that atheism is ultimately just another form of *safsatah* because belief in God is the foundation that underlies all other concepts necessary to make sense of reality.<sup>[3]</sup>

Imagine a person who believes everything around him is an illusion (in philosophy this view is termed solipsism), that the world is just a dream, or a virtual reality experience. How would you convince him otherwise? Instead of saying "Prove to me that God exists", the solipsist demands "Prove to me that *you* exist". As demonstrated by the so-called 'brain-in-a-vat' thought experiment, there is no philosophical argument that can prove that one's brain is not hooked up to a sophisticated apparatus that creates the illusion of the world around us. So why don't people doubt the existence of the world? People recognize that this is a type of irrational skepticism. The problem is not a lack of proof that the world exists, the problem is that the solipsist thinks that the existence of the world is something to be doubted in the first place. The epistemology which underlies atheism and agnosticism is one which applies such radical skepticism to belief in God; it views the notion of God as something to be doubted in the first place and for which proof must be demanded. Just as the solipsist is a 'reality-skeptic', the 'atheist' is merely a 'God-skeptic'. The Qur'an identifies the fallacy of this entire mindset:

---

[1] Elsewhere, I have conducted a study of Ibn Taymiyyah's approach to atheism and skepticism through an analysis of 100 direct citations of his works (including 57 from his work *Dar' ta'arud al-'aql wa-l-naql*). <https://yaqeeninstitute.ca/read/paper/atheism-and-radical-skepticism-ibn-taymiyyahs-epistemic-critique>

[2] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar' ta'arud* 3:310.

ولهذا اتفق الغلاء على أن كل شبيهة تعرض لا يمكن إزالتها بالبرهان والنظر والاستدلال وإنما يخاطب بالبرهان والنظر والاستدلال من كانت عنده مقدمات علمية وكان ممن يمكنه أن ينظر فيها نظرا يفيد العلم بغيرها فمن لم يكن عنده مقدمات علمية أو لم يكن قادرا على النظر لم تمكن مخاطبته بالنظر والاستدلال

[3] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar' ta'arud* 8:38.

"Have you not received the stories of those who were before you: the people of Nuh, 'Âd, Thamûd, and those after them, whom God alone knows their number. Their messengers came to them with clear proofs, but they put their hands over their mouths and said, "We totally reject what you have been sent with, and we are certainly in alarming doubt about what you are inviting us to."

Their messengers said, "Can there be any doubt concerning God, Creator of the Heavens and Earth?"

(Qur'an 14:9-10).

Despite bringing them clear proofs, the people still chose to disbelieve in the messengers and remain in doubt. Thus, it is erroneous to think that doubt is the result of someone not receiving enough proof or evidence. Even if someone receives all the proof and evidence in the world they may still be in a state of doubt because their underlying mindset is one of radical skepticism. One who carefully contemplates the nature of existence would surely recognize that if the universe is nothing other than collections of particles and particle interactions, then human consciousness is but a delusion, and with it, all concepts of value, purpose, meaningful suffering, truth and so forth, collapse into meaninglessness. No meaningful explanation of existence can be constructed if existence itself is inherently meaningless.

Ibn Taymiyyah draws our attention to the famous story of Prophet Musa and Fir'awn. Fir'awn denied the existence of the Creator (Qur'an 28:38, 26:29, 79:24, 40:36-37). Prophet Musa was not instructed to first use philosophy to try to prove God's existence and then ask Fir'awn to worship God, instead he was told simply to invite Fir'awn towards *taqwa* (Qur'an 26:10-11). Ibn Taymiyyah highlights the following portion of the dialogue between Musa and Fir'awn:

Fir'awn (Pharaoh) said, "And what is The Lord of the worlds." [Musa] said, "The Lord of the heavens and the earth and whatever is between them (both), if you have [any] certainty." (26:23-24)

Ibn Taymiyyah explains that Fir'awn's question was rhetorical, an expression of Fir'awn's denial of God rather than an earnest question about the nature of God. In response to Fir'awn's denial of God, Musa explains that God is that reality too well-known to be denied, too manifest to be doubted — "if you have [any] certainty". Ibn Taymiyyah notes that Musa did not say, "if you have certainty in this or that" but rather left it unqualified, because whatever it is that you have certainty in, God is the first certainty, that which grounds all other certainties. And if someone were to respond to this by denying that they have certainty in anything, Ibn Taymiyyah points out that such a viewpoint is the position of universal skepticism which no one can truly follow since by necessity the human mind must accept some knowledge to be true.<sup>[4]</sup>

Ibn Taymiyyah's point can be illustrated as follows. What happens when we try to follow the path of radical skepticism consistently and start to doubt everything? Our mind loses the concepts that are necessary to make sense of reality. How do you explain events around you if you don't believe in cause and effect? How do you choose some beliefs over others if you don't believe in truth and falsehood? How do you proceed from one idea to another if you don't believe in the validity of reason? How do you choose some actions over others if you don't believe in right and

[4] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmū' al-fatāwā*, (Mansoura: Dār al-Wafā', 2001), 16:192. Cf. Bayan Talbis al-Jahmiyyah, 1:524-5.

فلما سأل جحدا أجايبه موسى بأنه أعرف من أن ينكر وأظهر من أن يشك فيه ويرتاب فقال رب السموات والأرض وما بينهما إن كنتم موقنين ولم يقل موقنين بكذا وكذا بل أطلق فأبي يقين كان لكم بشيء من الأشياء فأول اليقين يقين بهذا الرب كما قالت الرسل لقومهم أفي الله شك وإن قلتم لا يقين لنا بشيء من الأشياء بل سلينا كل علم فهذه دعوى السفسطة العامة ومدعيها كاذب ظاهر الكذب فإن العلوم من لوازم كل إنسان فكل إنسان عاقل لا بد له من علم

wrong? How do we even know that our thoughts have any meaning at all? Radical skepticism causes everything to unravel in our minds.

In the history of philosophy, the Greek philosopher Pyrrho of Elis (d.270BCE) is typically associated with this form of extreme universal skepticism. Pyrrho is said to have been so distrustful of his own senses that his students had to prevent him from walking into dogs or walking off cliffs. He doubted that what his eyesight conveyed to him about any object was a true picture of the properties of that object in external reality. Of course, such skepticism ultimately leads only to absurdity. Consider for instance one hypothetical illustration of what it might look like to live one's life as a pyrrhonian skeptic:

**Wake up:** Did I really just wake up, or am I just imagining it? How do I know I ever slept in the first place? How do I know sleeping and being awake aren't actually the same thing?

**Get out of bed:** How do I know this is actually a bed? How do I know I am standing? I could still be sitting or lying down for all I know. How do I know I was ever in this so-called "bed" to begin with?

**Look around room:** How do I know this is even a room? How do I know it is mine? How do I know I am actually looking? I may not even have eyes, and how do I know that eyes are even able to perform the action that is supposedly called "looking"?

**Walk over into bathroom:** Is this really a bathroom? There's no proof of that. How do I know I'm not still in the bedroom? How do I know that the bedroom ever existed in the first place? How do I know the bathroom even exists? How do I know I exist? How do I know that thing I may or may not have seen in that other room was the kind of object that is supposedly referred to as a "bed"?<sup>[5]</sup>

Evidently, a Pyrrhonist would not be able to live normally under the constant self-infliction of such doubts; indeed, it would be impossible to even structure one's thoughts coherently without devolving into an abyss of meaninglessness. And yet, the very same skeptical attitude is selectively applied when convenient to reject the existence of the Divine.

During one public debate witnessed by this author between a theist and an atheist, the former challenged the latter and asked 'What would you need to see as proof to believe in God?', whereupon the atheist replied, 'I would need to see God directly.' After a moment of further thought, the atheist then stated, 'Actually, even then I would just think that I were having a bad hangover'. In other words, there is no conceivable proof that would convince such an individual because they have already decided that nothing could possibly constitute proof. Ironically, this precise attitude is captured in the Qur'an:

"And even if We opened to them a gate from the heaven and they were to continue ascending thereto, They would say, "Our eyes have only been dazzled. Rather, we are a people affected by magic." (Qur'an 15:14-15)

Indeed, in order to escape belief in God, humans have fabricated the most fanciful of illusions behind our origins from panspermia to alien computer simulations, and so on.

### **The Qur'an on the skeptical mindset**

---

[5] Pyrrhonism, RationalWiki, <https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Pyrrhonism>, accessed Jan 1, 2020.

The Qur'an does not focus on the superficial level of atheist argumentation about the existence of God, but rather the Qur'an addresses the underlying epistemological and psychological root from which atheism and other forms of denial of the Divine manifest; in other words, it addresses the skeptical mindset. In a fascinating passage, the Qur'an enumerates all the nonsensical criteria the Quraysh came up with and demanded prior to affirming faith in Prophet Muhammad:

And they say: "We shall not believe in you (O Muhammad), until you cause a spring to gush forth from the earth for us; Or you have a garden of date-palms and grapes, and cause rivers to gush forth in their midst abundantly; Or you cause the heaven to fall upon us in pieces, as you have pretended, or you bring Allah and the angels before (us) face to face; Or you have a house of gold or you ascend into the sky. And [even then], we will not believe in your ascension until you bring down to us a book we may read." Say, "Exalted is my Lord! Was I ever but a human messenger?" (Qur'an 17:90-3).

All these notions of proof are entirely made up, being nothing more than frivolous demands that illustrate an egotistical refusal to humble oneself enough to show gratitude and devotion towards one's Creator. There is no deficiency in the evidences for God's existence, but rather there is a spiritual deficiency on the part of those whose self-aggrandization leads them to the worship of their own whims and desires.

In the story of Prophet Musa, his people said to him "**O Musa, we will never believe in you until we see God directly...**" (Qur'an 2:55). This is in essence, the slogan of skepticism and non-belief. "We will never believe until... (insert demands)." And the biggest telltale sign of this being an elaborate excuse and contrived ruse is that when the demanded proof actually materializes, it still does not engender faith in the mind of the skeptic. The Qur'an states, "**And even if We had sent down to you, [O Muhammad], a written scripture on a page and they touched it with their hands, the disbelievers would say, "This is not but obvious magic."**" (Qur'an 6:7).

To summarize, the Qur'anic critique of skepticism, we note that:

- Skepticism is inconsistently applied (eg. an atheist is not a solipsist or moral error theorist when these positions are the fruits of the very same evidentiary principles).
- Skepticism is self-defeating and self-refuting.
- All forms of philosophical skepticism are premised upon some form of whimsical and entirely arbitrary assumptions about what is and is not proof.
- Skepticism as one's default approach is a telltale sign that there are in fact deeper cognitive, emotional, and spiritual reasons why someone distrusts the message they are being presented with.
- Skepticism fails to lead to a growth in knowledge

Drawing upon the Qur'anic discourse, Ibn Taymiyyah astutely notes that there are certain basic building blocks that the mind must possess by necessity in order to have any meaningful conception of reality whatsoever:

*"What all human beings recognize is that there are some mental conceptualizations and affirmations which are primordial concepts and not themselves in need of proof by definition or syllogism, or else it would entail circularity or infinitism."*<sup>[6]</sup>

---

[6] Ibn Taymiyyah, Naqd al-Mantiq. Dar al-Kotob al-Ilmiyah, Beirut 1999, p. 166.

What Ibn Taymiyyah identifies is that there is a category of concepts that serve as ontological anchors for any meaningful conceptualization of reality, and these are integral to the human being's acquisition of knowledge through the natural course of development. Human infants naturally develop notions of causality, numerical quantity, morality, purpose, and so forth, and any attempt to discard these ontological building blocks would entail the deterioration of coherent and meaningful representations of reality. Adopting a paradigm of skepticism and demanding proof for the ontological anchors themselves only results in the collapse of the entire intellectual enterprise of meaning.

Every human being must necessarily search for a paradigm that provides a meaningful conception of the fundamental aspects of existence. The Qur'an states, "These are the signs of God that We recite to you in truth (*bil-ḥaqq*). So in what narrative after God and His signs will you believe?" (Qur'an 45:6). The Qur'anic exegete al-Alusi (d. 1270 AH) said, "And this indicates that there is no meaningful explanation (*bayān*) more meaningful than this explanation [i.e., the Islamic paradigm], nor sign (*ayah*) stronger as a proof than this sign."<sup>[7]</sup> The most powerful epistemology of proof is one that functionally serves to construct an understanding of reality that yields the greatest meaning.

### Objections examined

Lest anyone mistakenly think that Ibn Taymiyyah's view was anomalous in his views on this subject, it is worth noting that Ibn Taymiyyah was certainly not the first to point out that belief in God did not require philosophical proofs. For one, there is a lengthy tradition of Muslim scholarship aversive to the reliance on philosophical proofs to establish doctrines of creed.<sup>[8]</sup> Moreover, many scholars specifically discussing the issue of knowledge of God's existence articulated the exact same view, such as Abu'l-Abbas al-Qurtubi (d.656H) in his commentary on Sahih Muslim.<sup>[9]</sup> Indeed, Ibn Taymiyyah himself cites many scholars before himself from various schools of thought who held the same position. For instance, the Ḥanafī scholar Abū Muḥammad ibn 'Abdik al-Baṣrī (d. 347 AH) wrote that God Himself is to be considered the *dalīl* (proof) rather than the *madlūl* (that which is being proven).<sup>[10]</sup> The Persian Ash'arī heresiologist al-Shahrastānī (d.548H) argued similarly on the basis of the Qur'anic verse 14:10, "Can there be any doubt concerning God?", noting that knowledge of God is essential to make sense of everything else: "I came to know of entities through God, rather than knowing God through other entities".<sup>[11]</sup>

The independent Andalusian jurist Ibn Ḥazm (d.456H) wrote that rather than requiring proofs, most people believe because their souls settle upon the guidance, their hearts find tranquility in faith and they find no reason to contest it.<sup>[12]</sup> Abū Maṣū' al-Māturīdī (d.333H) explained that knowledge of God's Oneness and Lordship are rooted in the human fitrah (primordial nature).<sup>[13]</sup> Similarly, Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī also points out that knowledge of God is something known to the

[7] Al-Alusi. *Ruh al-Ma'ani fi Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Adhim wa Sa' al-Mathani*. Dar Ihya Turath al-Arabi, Beirut n.d. Vol. 25, pp. 141-142.

[8] See *Al-Ghunyah 'an al-kalām wa ahlihī* by Abu Sulaymān al-Khaṭṭabī (d.388H), *Dhamm al-kalām* by Abū Ismā'īl al-Harawī (d.481H), and *Tahrīm al-Nazar fi kutub ahl al-kalām* by Ibn Qudāmah al-Maqdisī (d.620H), for instance.

[9] Al-Qurtubī, *al-Mufhim* 6:675, cited and discussed in Abdullah al-Rumayyan, *Ārā' al-Qurtubī wal-Māziri al-tiqādiyah min khilāl sharhihimā li-sahīh muslim dirāsah wa tarjih*, Dar Ibn al-Jawzi: 1427H, 203-205.

[10] Ibn Taymiyyah, *DAR' TA'ĀRUḌ* 8:507.

[11] Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb Nihāyat al-iqdām fi 'ilm al-kalām* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqāfah al-Dīniyyah, 2009), 121.

عرفت الأشياء بربي وما عرفت ربي بالأشياء

[12] Cited in Ibn Taymiyyah, *DAR' TA'ĀRUḌ* 7:411.

[13] Al-Maturidi, *Ta'wilat* 8:271.

human being innately through the fitrah,<sup>[14]</sup> and that belief established on the basis of philosophical argument is in fact weak and vulnerable to doubts.<sup>[15]</sup> This was also the position of Nidhām al-Dīn al-Naysabūrī (d.850H).<sup>[16]</sup>

It is worth pointing out that Ibn Taymiyyah's argument from the fitrah is not a claim that people are born in the world with knowledge of the doctrines of Islam already implanted in their minds, a notion he dismisses by citing the verse 16:78, "And Allah brought you out of the wombs of your mothers while you knew nothing". Rather, his view is that if a human being grows up with a sound fitrah that has not been corrupted by his parents or society, then such an individual will come to affirm and love His Creator and accept the truths of Islam.<sup>[17]</sup>

An objection that is sometimes offered against belief in the fitrah is that if there were a natural tendency towards monotheism, one should not expect paganism to have been so prevalent throughout human history. This objection is dismissed by the slightest familiarity with the Qur'anic discourse – the Qur'an testifies that the majority of humankind have indeed engaged in *shirk* and strayed from their fitrah (30:43, 12:106, 13:1) and allowed it to be corrupted by following their unsubstantiated ideologies and vain desires (6:116, 53:23), deifying ancestors and worshipping idols (71:23, 6:74). Despite possessing a natural moral compass, humans frequently engage in its corruption.

Another misconception is that acceptance of the fitrah entails some sort of circular reasoning – as in, 'God told me I have a fitrah, therefore God exists.' However, this misconception arises from an elementary confusion between knowing **that** we believe something and knowing **why** we believe something. You don't need to be aware of your innate disposition or call it the 'fitrah' in order for it to function in leading you towards righteousness and God. Digestion occurs regardless of whether or not you believe you have a pancreas, but if asked to explain how digestion occurs one will need to invoke the roles of the anatomical structures involved. Furthermore, the argument being constructed by Ibn Taymiyyah is that there are certain conceptions that we must have – acceptance of causality, morality, logic, time, reality – in order to make sense of anything, and that God is the most fundamental of those concepts.

Just as one does not need philosophical proof to deny solipsism or moral abolitionism, one does not need to search for an irrefutable philosophical proof to believe that Islam is true or that God exists. Belief in Islam is justified because it is the only outlook that makes sense. What that means is that it is the only outlook that meaningfully furnishes an understanding of the fundamental spiritual, intellectual, and moral questions of life. Thus, when a person feels naturally inclined to accept Islam because it makes sense, that is simultaneously a rational process and a fitrah-based process. It is not the case that Ibn Taymiyyah's argument entails replacing rationality with the fitrah, rather Ibn Taymiyyah's point is to illustrate that true rationality can only proceed unimpeded when it follows the dictates of the fitrah.

## Conclusion

[14] See al-Ghazali, *Ihya Ulum al-Din* 1:137.

ولهذا بعث الأنبياء صلوات الله عليهم لدعوة الخلق إلى التوحيد ليقولوا " لا إله إلا الله " وما أمروا أن يقولوا لنا إله وللعالَم إله . فإن ذلك كان مجبولا في فطرة عقولهم من مبدأ نشوهم وفي عنفوان شبابهم

[15] Al-Ghazali, *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, 29.

[16] Al-Naysaburi, *Tafsir Ghara'ib al-Qur'an wa ragha'ib al-Furqan*, 4:175.

إنه كان من عقيدتي أن العلم بوجود الواجب في الخارج من جملة البديهيات وكان يستبعد ذلك كثير من أقا رني وأصحابي لما أروا أن الأقدمين ما زلوا يبرهنون على ذلك في الكتب الكلامية والحكمية

[17] Ibn Taymiyyah, *DAR' TA'ĀRUD* 8:383.

فليس المراد به أنه حين خرج من بطن أمه يعلم هذا الدين ويريد به فإن الله تعالى يقول : { والله أخرجكم من بطون أمهاتكم لا تعلمون شيئا } ولكن فطرته مقتضية موجبة لدين الإسلام لمعرفته ومحبته فنفس الفطرة تستلزم الإقرار بخالقه ومحبته وإخلاص الدين له وموجبات الفطرة ومقتضاها تحصل شيئا بعد شيء بحسب كمال الفطرة إذا سلمت عن المعارض

Many people engaging in *da'wah* today attempt to address atheism by offering 'philosophical proofs' for the existence of God, thus inadvertently reinforcing the 'Pyrrhonian fallacy' behind atheism - that belief in God is something uncertain to begin with and in need of substantiation. When we understand the Qur'anic approach which presents faith as an ontological and epistemological foundation, then it becomes clear that no meaningful construal of reality is possible without faith in the Divine. Thus, faith in the Divine is the bedrock for everything else to be rendered meaningful. Rather than requiring substantiation, it substantiates all else.