

Why Islamic ‘Traditionalists’ and ‘Rationalists’ both ought to accept Rational Objectivism

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Abstract: Islamic ‘Traditionalists’ and ‘Rationalists’ have much in common. They agree that the *Qur’an* is divine revelation and acknowledge the authority of the *Sunna*, accept the value of logical reasoning and argumentation, recognizing the validity of basic logical principles and laws, and affirm that basic empirical and historical facts ought to be taken into consideration when interpreting the *Qur’an*. They disagree in that Rationalists accept but Traditionalists deny that human reason can discern objective moral truths independent of divine revelation. I present an argument for Rationalism that makes use of premises that are equally acceptable to Traditionalists and Rationalists alike.

Introduction

Some Islamic philosophers maintain that knowledge of right and wrong is based on divine revelation and that moral obligations are defined in terms of what is commanded or prohibited by God.¹ Others affirm that moral knowledge need not be based on divine revelation and that we can grasp objective grounds that make an action either morally obligatory or prohibited.² Following Oliver Leaman and Binyamin Abrahamov, I refer to the former view as ‘Traditionalism’ and to the later as ‘Rationalism’. Traditionalists maintain that religious knowledge derives from the *Qur’an* and the words and deeds of the prophet Mohammad, the *Sunna*, which are recorded and transmitted by reliable witnesses in the *Hadith*, the authority of which is established by the consensus (or *ijmā*) of jurists and scholars.³ Concerning religious matters, Traditionalists rely on these sources whenever possible.⁴ Abrahamov defines Rationalism as: ‘the tendency to consider reason the principal device or one of the principal devices to reach the truth in religion, and the preference of reason to revelation and tradition in dealing with some theological matters, mainly when a conflict arises between them’.⁵ Rationalists are

committed to Moral Objectivism, defined by George Hourani as the view that: ‘the justice of human and of divine acts is a real characteristic of the acts; and it is knowable in principle and often known in fact by natural human reason’.⁶ Traditionalists are committed to Theistic Subjectivism, the view that: ‘the value of an action is defined by relation to certain attitudes or opinions of a mind in the position of judge or observer, such as wishing and not wishing, commanding and forbidding, approving and disapproving’.⁷ Of course, the relevant observer or judge is God.

In this article I present Traditionalists with an argument for Moral Objectivism. I proceed in a dialectical fashion. First, I present an argument in favour of Theistic Subjectivism and consider Rationalist objections to it. After a bit of back and forth, we shall arrive at an impasse. I argue that this impasse may be overcome because, despite their many differences, Traditionalists and Rationalists accept many of the same starting points. Both agree that the *Qur’an* is divine revelation and acknowledge the authority of the *Sunna*, both accept the value of logical reasoning and argumentation and recognize the validity of basic logical principles and laws, and both agree that basic empirical and historical facts ought to be taken into consideration when making judgements about how best to interpret the *Qur’an* (such as when testing whether a chain of testimony (*isnad*) is genuine, deciding whether a particular analogy (*qiyas*) is apt, or arriving at consensus (*’ijma*) about a matter). This common ground makes it possible to formulate an argument for Moral Objectivism the premises of which are equally acceptable to Traditionalists and Rationalists alike. (Note that while I am sensitive to the history of Islamic philosophy, I do not argue whether this or that school or a particular school accepts Rationalism or Traditionalism. However, I will on occasion make use of the views and arguments of historical and contemporary philosophers and theologians.)

Theistic Subjectivism and the Argument from Omnipotence

One argument for Theistic Subjectivism is the argument from omnipotence. The *Qur’an* states that God is the creator of all things (Surah 6:102), has power over all things (Surahs 2:148, 2:284, 3:165, 16:77, and 2:149), and has the power to do all that he wills (Surah 2:22). Propositions are things. Thus, God has power over them; specifically, he can make them true or false at will. (Cf. Surah 36:82: ‘Verily, when He intends a thing, His command is, ‘Be’, and it is.’⁸) This obviously entails the truth of Theistic Subjectivism.

To appreciate better the force of this argument, it is worth saying more about how the truth-value of a moral proposition could be determined by an act of will. Consider first how a (human) person could make a non-moral proposition true. Suppose S raises her hand at time *t*. By raising her hand at *t*, S makes the proposition ‘S raises her hand at *t*’ true at *t*. Note that if S did *not* raise her hand at *t*, S would have made the proposition ‘S raises her hand at *t*’ false at *t*. We humans are relatively weak creatures; our ability to bring about states of affairs,

and hence our power over the truth-values of propositions describing them, is rather limited. We do not have the ability to make moral propositions true or false at will. However, God can make true or false innumerable many propositions. Traditionalists maintain that God can, either simultaneously or by a second act of creation, attach moral values to states of affairs, thereby establishing our moral obligations either to bring about or to prevent them. These two creative acts can be understood in terms of either logical or temporal priority. For example, consider how God could make true the moral proposition 'the poor ought to be fed and orphans ought to be taken care of.' God's 'first' creative act would be to create humans such that they require food, clothing, and shelter in order to flourish. His 'second' creative act would be to will that we should help those who lack adequate food, clothing, and shelter so that they may flourish. In sum, Traditionalists maintain that there is no necessary connection between God's 'first' and 'second' creative acts, which goes to show that moral principles are not necessarily true.⁹ While this is difficult to imagine, they maintain that it is possible for God to create humans just like us but issue different commands regarding their moral obligations towards people who lack adequate food and shelter.¹⁰

Rationalist critiques and Traditionalist replies

Rationalists think the argument from omnipotence fails because it assumes that God's omnipotence is absolutely unlimited. If God's power is absolutely unlimited, God could make any proposition true or false at will. It follows that God could have made ' $2 + 2 = 5$ ' true and 'squares have four sides' false. But it is nonsensical to suppose that mathematical and logical propositions could have contrary truth-values. Because their denials lead to logical contradictions, we should conclude that mathematical and logical propositions are necessarily true and acknowledge that not even God has power over their truth-values.

A Traditionalist might counter that just because we cannot conceive how God could have power over the truth-values of mathematical and logical propositions, it does not *follow* that God lacks that power. After all, there are many things that we humans are unable to conceptualize on account of our cognitive limitations. Even highly educated people may have difficulty understanding quantum mechanics or string theory; some of us are completely in the dark about these subjects. But that does not show that quantum mechanics and string theory are incomprehensible *in themselves*. There is, therefore, room to argue that even if the notion that God has power over the truth-values of mathematical and logical propositions is *incomprehensible to us*, God's having and exercising that power is not *incomprehensible in itself*. It follows that it is not incoherent to suppose that God could have made ' $2 + 2 = 5$ ' true.¹¹ This argument provides support for a kind of modal scepticism. Specifically, it motivates doubt about whether our inability to conceive purportedly necessarily true statements as having contrary truth-values has any bearing on their modal status.

Rationalists may grant that human reason is limited and concede that many things are beyond our ability to understand or comprehend. But they will reject scepticism about the modal status of necessarily true propositions and maintain that that which is beyond the reach of human reason cannot contradict necessary truths of reason. They may offer the following counter-argument. If God's power is absolutely unlimited, then God has power over the truth-value of the proposition 'God exists'. But if God has power to make 'God exists' false, then God can cause himself not to exist. But God cannot do that, for God is ever-enduring and ever-living (see Surahs 28:88, 55:27, 2:255, 3:2, and 20:111). This straightforwardly implies that it is metaphysically impossible for God to cease to exist. It follows that God cannot make the proposition 'God exists' false. Likewise, God does not have power over the truth-values of propositions that are logically entailed by his being merciful, holy, compassionate, and the like. A similar argument supports the claim that God does not have power over the truth-values of necessarily true logical and mathematical propositions and relations. For example, a main tenant of Islam is monotheism. If there is only one God, then there cannot be two or more Gods. These statements presuppose the truth of mathematical propositions such as ' $1 + 1 = 2$ ', ' $1 \neq 2$ ', ' $2 > 1$ ', and so on. It follows that the view that God has power over the truth-values of necessarily true mathematical and logical propositions is rationally untenable.¹²

At this juncture, Traditionalists may concede that God does not have power over the truth-values of necessarily true mathematical and logical propositions but maintain that he has power over the truth-value of moral propositions all the same. For instance, they may argue that moral propositions are not descriptive but rather make prescriptions the denials of which do not involve logical contradictions.¹³

Rationalists may counter that God has power over the truth-values of moral propositions if and only if he has power over the truth-values of logical and mathematical propositions. But since God does not have power over the latter, it follows that he does not have power over the former. Of course, Traditionalists will reject this argument because they do not accept the biconditional. Rationalists owe Traditionalists a good reason for accepting it. Rationalists have tried to provide arguments along these lines. Among them is Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar (935–1025).

Rationalism and moral objectivism

According to Qadi al-Jabbar, objective moral values have aspects or features, called grounds, which make them right or wrong and good or bad. He maintains that propositions such as 'all wrongdoing is evil' are necessarily true and knowable by a sort of rational insight or intuition. For example, we know that an act is wrong if it is an instance of lying or willing evil, since lying and willing evil have aspects we can intellectually see to be wrong.¹⁴ Objective grounds of

goodness include justice, benefit, truthfulness, and willing what is good. Qadi al-Jabbar writes:

It is known immediately that a lie, with no benefit and no repulsion of injury greater than it . . . when a free and capable person performs [it is] deserving of blame . . . We describe what is in this state as 'evil', and by this expression we inform of this ground in it.¹⁵

Qadi al-Jabbar offers a general characterization of wrongdoing. He writes: 'The essential nature of wrong is an injury without benefit exceeding it or repulsion of harm greater than it, which is not deserved and not thought to have any of these [good-making] aspects.'¹⁶ Drawing on Qadi al-Jabbar's views, Rationalists may argue that since we are aware of the grounds that make actions objectively good or bad, we can have knowledge of our moral obligations independent of revelation.

Traditionalists do not think that appeals to moral intuitions have evidential force and reject the claim that actions have objective grounds that make them objectively good or bad. For instance, al-Ghazali explicitly argues against the claim that actions have objective grounds.¹⁷ At this juncture, one might formulate an argument aimed at convincing Traditionalists that Qadi al-Jabbar's views are correct. Alternatively, one might try to show that al-Ghazali's arguments fail. Developing such arguments in detail would require an extended defence of the existence of the grounds of good and bad moral actions as well as a defence of the reliability of moral intuitions, tasks that are beyond the scope of this article.¹⁸ In any case, Traditionalists are unlikely to be convinced by such arguments given their antecedent commitments. To overcome this apparently unbreachable impasse, we need an argument for Moral Objectivism that makes use of premises that Traditionalists will accept. Towards that end, in the next section I introduce a principle of logical supervenience that is equally acceptable to Traditionalists and Rationalists. In the subsequent section, I read a few *Qur'anic* passages in light of this principle and argue that we can immediately infer from the texts that it is possible to acquire knowledge of objective moral truths in a broadly empirical manner.

Logical supervenience and moral objectivism

On the basis of their shared commitment to fundamental logical laws and principles, both Rationalists and Traditionalists should accept the following principle of logical supervenience:

Principle of Logical Supervenience (PLS): One set of facts supervenes on another if and only if there cannot be a difference in the first set unless there is a difference in the second.

Rationalists and Traditionalists should accept this principle because denying it would lead to logical contradictions, as we shall see in due course.

According to PLS, higher-level facts supervene on lower-level facts in that higher-level facts are made true *in virtue of* or *as a logical consequence of* lower-

level facts being true. For example, if my cognitive faculties are functioning properly and the relevant environmental factors are standard (i.e. the lighting conditions are good, there are not any obstructions, I am not hallucinating, and so on), then, given the sorts of things that shoes and monitors are, if someone throws a shoe at my monitor it will break and the pixelated words on its surface will disappear. In short, pixelated words on a monitor screen do not survive the destruction of the screens on which they appear; higher-level facts about the way the words on a monitor screen appear supervene on lower-level facts about the way the pixels are arranged on its surface.

Traditionalists may object that this argument begs the question because it presupposes Aristotelian views about natures and properties, whereas Traditionalists favour a metaphysical system consisting of atoms and accidents the existence and activity of which rests solely on God's will.¹⁹ However, this objection fails because even if we assume that the universe is a system of atoms and accidents that undergoes change only because God continually re-creates it, as some Traditionalists maintain, there would nevertheless be things that behave in characteristic ways that may be subsumed into nominal conceptual kinds or types due to their having shared features. For example, whether or not humans have essences or natures, only some things are truthfully referred to as humans, namely, those things that have all and only those features associated with humans. The fact that humans have these characteristics is what allows us to say truthfully that humans are bipeds, have hearts that pump blood, and so on. Everyday language shorn of particular metaphysical commitments should not be objectionable to Traditionalists, and Rationalists may accept it for the sake of argument.

Alternatively, Traditionalists might object that it is logically coherent to suppose that pixelated words displayed on a monitor screen can survive the destruction of the screen on which they appear. If God is omnipotent, so the objection goes, God has the power to cause the pixelated words to remain presented in space after the destruction of the monitor. I readily concede that after the destruction of the monitor screen God could cause someone to perceive pixelated words in the same spatial regions, but I deny that those words would be identical to the pixelated words once displayed on the screen. Pixelated words presented in space are one thing; pixelated that appear on a monitor screen are another. The monitor screen and pixelated words that appear on its surface are objects to be met with in space, whereas pixelated words that appear in space are presented in space but are not objects to be met with in space. The relevant concepts are not identical, so the pixelated words presented in space cannot be identical to the pixelated words that appeared on the monitor screen.²⁰ Consider another example involving clay. By taking bits of clay and appropriately manipulating them, one may shape them into a pyramid. Fixing the relevant lower-level facts about the bits of clay thus-and-so fixes higher-order facts about its shape. It is logically incoherent for a lump of clay that is spatially arranged thus-and-so *not* to have the geometric shape it does in virtue of its constitutive parts being so arranged. In a

similar fashion, I argue that by attending to the characteristic way in which humans are in the world at the 'lower-level' we are able to discover truths about what is objectively good or bad for us at the 'higher level'.²¹

Start with the obvious truism that there are facts about which things are good for humans to eat. In order for there to be higher-level facts of this sort, there must be lower-level facts about what happens when we eat things. For example, for the higher-order fact 'tomatoes are good for humans to eat' to be true, lower-level facts such as 'the chemical organization of tomatoes provides humans with nutrition and sustenance' must be true, too. Put another way, higher-level facts about what is good for humans to eat can be made false *only if* the relevant lower-level biological facts on which they supervene are made false as well. We may draw similar conclusions about our psychological well-being. For instance, it could have been true that humans require very little in the way of rearing and guidance. As things stand, however, we judge and rightly so that it is wrong for parents to keep their children locked away in a closet or basement because doing so deprives them of the physical and emotional contact necessary for their psychological health and well-being. In like manner, Rationalists may argue that objective moral judgements may be grounded in carefully reasoned reflection on obvious empirical facts.

One might object that while it is extremely difficult to see how eating dirt and sandpaper could possibly be good for us, it does not follow that eating such things will necessarily have negative effects. Perhaps God could make eating dirt and sandpaper as nutritious as eating tomatoes and broccoli. Be that as it may, I have argued that unless God changes the characteristic ways in which humans and vegetables behave at the 'lower level', God could not make it true that eating dirt and sandpaper is good for us or make it false that eating tomatoes or broccoli is bad for us at the 'higher level'.

An argument for moral objectivism acceptable to both Rationalists and Traditionalists

Traditionalists may object that these arguments beg the question because they rely on rational reflection and assume that reason is able to discern what is good and bad apart from divine revelation. While I am not convinced that these arguments make use of rational reflection in a way that would be objectionable to (all) Traditionalists, it is obvious that they do not appeal to revelation. In order to address this concern, it is necessary to formulate an argument for Moral Objectivism the premises of which are clearly acceptable to all Traditionalists. Such an argument will appeal to *Qur'anic* revelation and that which logically follows from it together with obviously true empirical facts. Following these constraints, I shall read a couple of passages of the *Qur'an* in light of PLS and argue that the texts presuppose or immediately entail that we can acquire moral knowledge independently of divine revelation. Both Traditionalists and Rationalists should recognize the force of this argument. There are many passages we might look at. We shall consider two.

In Surah 43:10–43:13, we read:

(Yea, the same that) [i.e., God] has made for you the earth spread out . . . that has created pairs in all things, and has made for you ships and cattle on which ye ride, in order that ye may sit firm and square on their backs, and when so seated, ye may remember the (kind) favour of your Lord, and say ‘Glory to him who has subjected these to our (use) . . .’

This passage affirms that God created some animals such that we can domesticate them and use them for transportation. From this we immediately infer that God must have considered and harmoniously fashioned numerous relations between these animals and humans. For instance, we may immediately infer that if God had made humans much larger or horses and camels much smaller, or if he had made these animals too difficult to domesticate, humans would not be able to use them for transportation. This is tantamount to recognizing that the higher-level fact ‘humans can ride horses and camels’ supervenes on lower-level facts about humans, horses, and camels, such as ‘humans are bipeds’ and ‘horses and camels have broad backs that can support the weight of humans’, and the like. Additionally, in Surah 16:72 we read, ‘And Allah has made for you mates of your own nature, and made for you, out of them, sons and daughters and grandchildren, and provided for you sustenance of the best . . .’ God’s providential care (i.e. his providing us with ‘sustenance of the best’) involves his making fruits, grains, vegetables, and animals such that they are nourishing to humans. This implies that higher-level facts about what is good for humans to eat supervene on lower-level facts such as ‘humans can digest tomatoes’ and ‘tomatoes are not poisonous’.

These Surahs support the view that humans can discern some goods independently of divine revelation, at least in part and to some extent. There are, then, reasons to think that the *Qur’an* supports the view that at least some substantive and significant moral propositions can be known apart from revelation. As a matter of fact, we readily draw connections between what is good for us biologically and what is good for us psychologically and morally. We can determine which foods are good for us to eat and which foods are not; we are able to make basic moral judgments about what we should feed our children without appeals to revelation. That this is so accounts for widespread agreement about basic moral judgments, such as ‘parents ought to care for their children’.

Note that this conclusion comports with the broadly Aristotelian view that we can know many things on the basis of experience and empirical observation, a view accepted by the likes of al-Kindi, al-Fārābi, and ibn Ṭufayl. These and other classical Islamic philosophers maintain that some humans have special gifts of genius. There are prophets, such as Mohammad and Moses, and there are philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle. For a person to have either sort of genius is a gift from God. As such, if we are willing to accept engineers’ testimony about how to build bridges, and if we are willing to accept physicians’ and doctors’ judgements about the effects of various medicines, then we ought not to reject

Aristotle's genuine discoveries about human flourishing.²² It is worthwhile, then, to consider what else Aristotle has to say about these matters.

Aristotle thought that by engaging in careful reasoning based on observations of human behavior we are able to acquire knowledge of human flourishing (*eudaimonia*). Given our rational capacities and our ability to engage in theoretical and practical reasoning, we can know that human flourishing involves employing our emotional and rational capacities excellently in a way that accords with reason. We can also know that human flourishing requires cultivating the virtues, i.e. states or dispositions that enable us to engage in activities of the soul that accord with reason excellently. All this presupposes an ability to grasp immediate entailments and to reason in accord with valid argument forms.²³ Aristotle's account of human flourishing reads as an elaboration of or commentary on common-sense moral knowledge. Indeed, classical Islamic philosophers tended to read Aristotle as though he were commentating on truths that were also taught in the *Qur'an*.²⁴

Conclusion

We know a great deal about our characteristically human way of being in the world. Specifically, we are able to discover objective truths about what is good for us independent of revelation. I concede that were God to make human biology and/or psychology differently, our good would be other than it in fact is. Likewise, God could have made our environment more pleasant to live in. But if God were to have made our characteristic way of being in the world significantly different, he would not have created *humans* but rather some other creature with its own particular way of flourishing. This is consistent with the view that 'higher level' facts about what is and what is not conducive to human flourishing, including facts about which features of human acts are good-making or bad-making, do not float free but logically supervene on various 'lower-level' facts. These logical relations are necessary and cannot be coherently severed. Because God's power does not extend to doing that which is logically incoherent, it follows that it is impossible for God to assign truth-values to 'higher level' (i.e. logically supervenient) facts about what is morally good or bad without also assigning certain correspondent and logically consistent 'lower-level' (i.e. logically subvenient) facts. That this is so gives Traditionalists a reason to accept Moral Objectivism.²⁵

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Notes

1. See Hourani (2007) and Leaman (2009).
2. See Leaman (2009) and Martin *et al.* (1997).
3. Abdullah Saeed provides the following background information about these terms. Literally, *sunnah* means 'the trodden path'. Later on, the term came to be used to refer to the normative practice of the Prophet Muhammad, including his words and deeds. The term *hadith* was originally used to refer to a new report or story. With the rise of Islam it came to be used to refer to information about the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad as reported by his companions, which were recorded and passed down to the Muslim community. See Saeed (2006), 33. For more on the *Sunnah* and the *Hadith*, see *ibid.*, ch. 3. For a more advanced study, see Usmani (2009).
4. Abrahamov (1998), ix.
5. *Ibid.*, ix–x.
6. Hourani (1971), 10.
7. *Ibid.*, 12–13.
8. Passages from the Qur'an are taken from *The Holy Qur'an* (1413 AH/1993).
9. For more this issue, see Leaman (2009), ch. 6.
10. Along these lines, Ibn Ḥazm (994–1064) held that since God has complete autonomy and power over all things, 'the categories of good and bad, reward and punishment are not necessary and do not confine God's actions'; accordingly, God could reward evil and punish good if he willed to do so. (See Pavlin

(1996), 109.) A staunch advocate of the Ḥanabali school of Islamic jurisprudence, Ibn Ḥazm rejected all philosophical and theological methods of discourse and affirmed that the *Qur'an* should be literally understood. (See Fakhry (1997), 100.)

11. Arguably, René Descartes defended something like this view. See Alanen (2006), 360–361 and Alanen (1991).
12. 'Ali ibn Abil 'Izz offers an argument along similar lines. He writes:

According to the Ahl as-Sunnah, Allah has power over all things and all possible things are in His power. As for the impossible in itself, such as one and the same thing existing and not existing at one time [a logical contradiction], it is actually a 'nothing'; it is inconceivable. No reasonable person would say that is a 'thing'. The same is true for the question of whether Allah can create one like Himself or whether He can kill Himself and other impossibilities. ('Ali ibn Abil 'Izz (1421 AH/2000), 62–63)

Note that these arguments also count against the argument in support of modal scepticism discussed above.

13. This argument echoes Hume, who argued that moral judgements are not demonstrable and thus are not necessary truths. (See Hume, (1976), 463–468.) In a similar fashion, Al-Ghazali (1058–1111) argues that moral judgements are neither demonstrable nor necessarily true. Regarding the claim that judgements about good and bad can be known to be necessarily known, he writes, 'how can you conceive of this while we are discussing it with you, whereas necessary [knowledge] is something wherein many rational beings do not dispute?' (Ḥammād (1987), 329).
14. Hourani (1971), 55–62.
15. *Ibid.*, 71.
16. *Ibid.*
17. See, for instance, Ḥammād (1987), 329 and Leaman (2009), ch. 6.
18. See Ross (2002) for a classic defence of moral intuitionism. For a contemporary defence, see Audi (2004).
19. See, for instance, Fakhry (1983), 33 and 34. Also see Leaman (2009), ch. 1, especially 94–106.
20. This argument bears some similarities to G. E. Moore's argument for the existence of an external world. See Moore (1993), 154–155.
21. For an alternative and complementary argument for the view that humans can acquire moral knowledge in a broadly empirical manner, see Foot (2001), ch. 5.
22. In *The Principles of Existing Things*, al-Fārābī follows Aristotle when he writes,

The faculty of reason is what enables man to acquire the sciences and the technical disciplines, to discern the difference between virtuous and vicious actions and ethical dispositions, to deliberate on what he should and should not do, and moreover to perceive what is beneficial and what harmful, what is pleasurable and painful. (McGinnis & Reisman (2007), 82)

Ibn Ṭufayl wrote a philosophical novel, *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*, named after the book's hero, Ḥayy, who finds himself on a deserted island since birth with no other human companions. Through observation and reflection, he manages to discover many important truths about his biological, moral, and spiritual good. (See Khalidi (2005), 99–154.)

23. Aristotle argues for these conclusions in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1097b25–1098a20.
24. For more on this point see Adamson (2005).
25. I'd like to thank an anonymous review for this journal for very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article. For helpful comments on still earlier versions, I'd like to thank Imran Aijaz, Daniel H. Frank, Shalahudin Kafrawi, Michael S. Pearl, and Michael Thune.