


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Ibn Taymiyya on theistic signs and knowledge of God

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Abstract

This article aims to draw on the ‘Qur’anic Rationalism’ of Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) in elucidating an Islamic epistemology of theistic natural signs, in the lens of contemporary philosophy of religion. In articulating what Ibn Taymiyya coins ‘God’s method of proof through signs (*istidlāluhu ta’ālā bi’l-āyāt*)’, it seeks aid in particular from the work of C. Stephen Evans and other contemporary philosophers of religion, in an attempt to understand the relevance and force of this alternative to natural theology within the Islamic tradition. In doing so, it aims to respond to existing criticisms of Ibn Taymiyya’s perspective in the literature, and to consider the implications of a Taymiyyan reading of theistic natural signs, on the epistemic function of Qur’anic *āyāt* as theistic evidence.

Keywords: Ibn Taymiyya; theistic natural signs; Reformed epistemology; Islamic philosophy; religious epistemology; natural theology

Introduction

The Qur’anic text presents itself as a revelation from God to humanity, comprising a tapestry of various divine disclosures or simply, verses, referred to as *āyāt*. The term *āya* (pl. *āyāt*) refers to ‘a sign, token, or mark, by which a person or thing is known’ (Lane & Poole (1955), 135). In the Qur’anic context, the term *āya* or *āyāt* takes on two meanings: (a) as the signs of God manifest in the divine speech and revelation itself, and (b) as the signs of God evident in the natural world (cf. Ibn Taymiyya (1979), 7:302). Both categories of signs are thought to be truly indicative of that to which they point: the reality and unity of the divine. But it is to the latter set of signs that we turn our attention towards in this article.

In her *Logic, Rhetoric and Legal Reasoning in the Qur’an: God’s Arguments*, Rosalind Ward Gwynne writes that ‘a sign [i.e. *āya*] itself is not an argument but a piece of evidence that supports various forms of argument, explicit or implicit’, and that ‘Muslims built an immense structure of theological and philosophical argument on the basis of such Qur’anic evidence’, citing well-known Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd (d. 1198 CE) as a prime example (Gwynne (2004), 26). In his well-known philo-theological treatise devised for popular consumption, *al-Kashf ‘an Manāhij al-Adilla fi ‘Aqā’id al-Milla*, Ibn Rushd outlines two arguments for God’s existence which he takes to be grounded in the *āyāt* of the Qur’an which refer to natural phenomena as indications of the Divine, and which he takes to be the primary means by which the common believer attains knowledge of God. These two arguments are referred to as *dalil al-ināya* or the argument from design/providence and

dalil al-ikhṭirā' or the argument from creation/invention (cf. Ibn Rushd (1998)). Ibn Rushd cites a number of Qur'anic verses in support of both arguments,¹ and thus gives the impression that a proper Qur'anic epistemology of treating signs as theistic evidence should construe them as the basis from which one formulates arguments typical of natural theology.

In contrast to Ibn Rushd, who drew upon the signs inherent in Qur'anic verses to formulate arguments for God, the fourteenth century Damascene Islamic theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328 CE) offers an alternative approach to seeing how *āyāt* – by which I mean both Qur'anic verses and signs in the natural world – may function as theistic evidence. The remainder of this article attempts to explore this alternative, particularly focusing on how Ibn Taymiyya views the broader signs in the natural world as theistic evidence, although, as we shall see, this will have important implications for how we might view the Qur'anic *āyāt* as engaged in its own distinctive sign-based discourse. In doing so, the article attempts to situate Ibn Taymiyya's 'inference through signs (*istidlāl bi'l-āyāt*)' within the framework of his distinctive *fiṭra*-based epistemology, and draws upon insights from contemporary analytic philosophers of religion in articulating the force of this approach. We ought to begin, however, by laying down the epistemological grounds on which Ibn Taymiyya's inference through signs is grounded.

The Taymiyyan epistemological background

Ibn Taymiyya's epistemology has sometimes been described as empiricist (cf. Heer (1988)). Indeed, for Ibn Taymiyya, of the three primary sources of knowledge, which are sense perception (*ḥiss*), reason ('*aql*'), and report (*khābr*; i.e. testimony), sense perception is most fundamental, by grasping the particulars which reason requires to do its work of abstraction and inference, and is said to be superior to testimony, in its grasping of these particulars directly (1979, 7:324).² However, the centrepiece of Ibn Taymiyya's epistemology is the concept of *fiṭra*.

According to Ibn Taymiyya, '*fiṭra* is the original nature of man, uncorrupted by later beliefs and practices, ready to accept the true notions of Islam' (Ibn Taymiyya (1995), 4:245–246). Carl Sharif El-Tobgui, suggests that in Taymiyyan terms, *fiṭra* is 'perhaps best rendered as by the term "original normative disposition"' (El-Tobgui (2020), 260). This normativity of *fiṭra* perhaps refers to the idea that human nature, *qua* human nature, *ought to*, and indeed will, accept certain beliefs, provided that, as Mehmet Sait Özerverli remarks, the 'original and distinctive qualities' of one's *fiṭra*, are 'left unaffected by his or her family or social environment' (Özerverli (2013), 47). *Fiṭra*, then, is not a faculty for knowing in its own right, but instead, the operative focal point to which all other faculties turn for direction; a disposition which, in turn, steers our faculties towards truth. Ibn Taymiyya insists that God

made the *fiṭra* of His servants disposed to the apprehension and understanding of the realities [of things] and to know them. And if it were not for this readiness (i.e. *fiṭra*) within the hearts/minds (*qalb*) to know the truth, neither speculative reasoning would be possible, nor demonstration, discourse or language. (Ibn Taymiyya (1979), 5:62)³

For Ibn Taymiyya, it is in virtue of *fiṭra* that a human's 'knowledge of truth ... and the recognition of falsehood' is grounded (Ibn Taymiyya (2014), 49), and that 'children are born with sound *fiṭra*, which if left sound and intact, will make them choose knowledge (*ma'rifa*) over its denial' (Ibn Taymiyya (1979), 8:385). Therefore, as El-Tobgui remarks, in Ibn Taymiyya's view, 'the proper functioning of *all* our epistemic faculties ... is

predicated in *all* cases on the health and proper functioning of the *fiṭra* (as El-Tobgui (2020), 271). Of crucial significance here is the *externalist* epistemology that it implies: a faculty-based approach to knowledge acquisition. Elsewhere I have suggested that this Taymiyyan epistemology may be in some sense comparable or at least *compatible* with Plantingian proper functionalism (cf. Turner (2019)). Perhaps a more precise way of construing it, though, is that it is broadly compatible with a form of virtue epistemology; one which emphasises the knower's subjective capacities to understand and grasp the truth, more so than mere 'evidence' internal to the subject.⁴ So, we may tentatively conclude that knowledge – or perhaps to put it in contemporary terms – warrant, in the Taymiyyan scheme, is achieved just so long as one's cognitive faculties, predicated on *fiṭra*, are functioning properly.

This epistemological background is crucial when considering the way in which knowledge of God can be attained. For one thing, it means that Ibn Taymiyya allows that certain beliefs be sufficient for knowledge independent of inference. This is roughly what he refers to as '*ilm ḍarūrī* (necessary knowledge; cf. Ibn Taymiyya (1979), 3:309). Importantly, such beliefs are inclusive of theistic ones according to Ibn Taymiyya, for he states that, 'the affirmation of the Creator and His perfection is innate (*fiṭrīyya*) and necessary (*ḍarūrīyya*) with respect to one whose *fiṭra* remains intact' (Ibn Taymiyya (1995), 6:73). In other words, the existence of God may be *known*, without recourse to argumentation. If so, then what role do theistic signs play, in one arriving at theistic knowledge according to Ibn Taymiyya?

The Taymiyyan alternative: inference through signs

In treating Ibn Taymiyya's inference through signs as in some sense an alternative, I mean to point out that, not only does it differ from the sort of approach we have alluded to in the work of Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd, it also contrasts greatly with the general approach towards proving or pointing to the existence of God in the Islamic tradition. Typically, Muslim theologians (*mutakallimūn*) have insisted that because knowledge of God is not necessary (*ḍarūrī*), and is instead acquired (*muktasab*), it must be grounded in inference (cf. Frank (1989); Abrahamov (1993); Heer (1993); Uslu (2007)). Therefore, they have usually devised sophisticated proofs for God's existence (cf. Shihadeh (2008); Erlwein (2019)).

For Ibn Taymiyya, such long-winded philosophical methods are not necessary.⁵ As Anke von Kügelgen puts it, in contrast to traditional inferences employed to prove God's existence, Ibn Taymiyya draws on an alternative which he coins, 'God's method of proof through signs' (*istidlāluhu ta'ālā bil-āyāt*), the consequence of which he considers to be 'an immediate – that is a *fiṭrī* knowledge – insofar as the signs indicate the existence of one Creator' (von Kügelgen (2013), 323). The concept of a sign (*āyā*) as 'proof for God's existence on Ibn Taymiyya's view, then, is intrinsically linked to *fiṭra*. Indeed, this is what Ibn Taymiyya explains when he writes that 'proving the existence of God by way of signs (*āyāt*) is obligatory. This is the way of the Qur'an, and inherent in the *fiṭra* of His servants', adding that, 'the sign (*āya*) indicates the object itself of which it is the sign. Every created being is a sign and a proof of the Creator Himself' (Ibn Taymiyya (1995), 1:48).

For Ibn Taymiyya this method is radically different from the methods of the *falāsifa* (philosophers) because according to him, 'the difference between a sign (*āya*) and a syllogism (*qiyās*) is that the sign entails the entity of which it is the sign' (Ibn Taymiyya (2005), 194), whereas the (categorical) syllogism championed by the *falāsifa* only proves a universal concept in the mind, which shares something in common between a multiplicity of existents. For Ibn Taymiyya, *istidlāl bi'l-āyāt* is the prophetic way: 'it was the method of the prophets – may God bless them – in proving the existence of God to [make] mention of His signs (*āyāt*) ... [and] God's method of proof through signs are plentiful in the Qur'an'

(*ibid.*, 193–194). Ibn Taymiyya also stresses the point that, through means of natural signs, God's existence is proven, that is, His particular nature rather than an abstract concept of a Necessary Being, say, stripped of distinct knowable qualities: His signs point to Him individually and prove His essential nature as the One Being upon whom all else depends:

His signs entail Him individually and whose conceptualization precludes plurality in Him. Everything else other than He is evidence of His Self and signs of His existence ... no contingent existent can be actualized without His very self being actual. All contingent existents are entailed by Him; they are evidence and a sign of Him. (*ibid.*, 197)

But this 'inference' through signs is not to be conceived as an inference of any traditional kind. It does not appear to work on the basis of clear steps or premises. Indeed, this is what Ibn Taymiyya seems to suggest where he writes that,

affirming one's knowledge of the Creator and prophecy does not depend on any syllogistics (*al-aqyisa*). Rather, this knowledge is attained from the signs (*āyāt*) that prove a specific matter that is not shared by others. These matters are known by means of necessary knowledge (*bi'l-'ilm al-ḍarūrī*) which does not require discursive reasoning (*naẓar*). (*ibid.*, 401)

Perhaps, then, we might conceive of Ibn Taymiyya's inference through signs along the lines of what John Henry Newman (d. 1890) coined a 'natural inference'. According to Newman, this

natural mode of reasoning is, not from propositions to propositions, but from things to things ... [and the] antecedents commonly are not recognized by us as subjects for analysis; nay, often are only indirectly recognized as antecedents at all. Not only is the inference with its process ignored, but the antecedent also. (Newman (1909), 330–331)

For Newman, this inference is predicated upon a particular 'instinct' or 'instinctive perception' (*ibid.*, 260).

In Taymiyyan terms then, this might be to suggest that Ibn Taymiyya's *istidlāl bi'l-āyāt* could be seen as a sort of 'natural' inference or *istidlāl*, in which an apprehension of the antecedent – in this case the signs of God in the natural world – results in an immediate grasping of the consequent (i.e. theistic belief). For Ibn Taymiyya, *istidlāl bi'l-āyāt* clearly works from things to things, as is evident in his saying that 'the very knowledge of the indicant entails the knowledge of the very thing indicated, just as the sun is the sign of daylight' (Ibn Taymiyya (2005), 194). Moreover, this knowledge is only actualised, on the grounds that one's 'instinct' or rather disposition (*fiṭra*), is intact and prepared for this recognition.

Knowledge of God by way of his signs

As we have seen then, for Ibn Taymiyya, the pristine way to reach knowledge of God is in reference to the many signs which indicate His existence and particular nature. Whether those signs be what he refers to as '*āyāt al-anfus*' (signs within one selves) or '*āyāt al-āfāq*', signs within the horizon and cosmos (Ibn Taymiyya (1979), 3:108). Evidently, according to Ibn Taymiyya, such knowledge is *fiṭrī*: a natural product of sound cognition. Thus, this knowledge is thought to be rooted in the sound cognition of one's *qalb* (heart/mind): the head of all cognition (cf. Ibn Taymiyya (1995), 9:308) and the locus of *fiṭra*, which

guides all faculties to their true north. Hence, through the apprehension of God's signs, 'when the *fiṭra* is left unspoiled, the *heart/mind* knows God, loves Him and worships Him alone' (Ibn Taymiyya (2018), 26).

Significantly, according to Ibn Taymiyya, 'the signs of God are always known through sense perception' (1995, 2:48), which as Wael Hallaq (1991, 63) notes, includes both its 'internal' and 'external' dimensions (*al-bāṭin wa'l-zāhir*).⁶ Above we spoke of interpreting Ibn Taymiyya's inference through signs in terms of a 'natural inference', and this may well be an accurate way of construing it, yet, the emphasis on sense perception here also allows us to view things in additional light. In his 'Perceiving Design', Del Ratzsch – drawing on the ideas of Thomas Reid (d. 1796) – argues that belief in a designer from the apparent design in nature, can be formed *non-inferentially*, akin to the way in which we form our ordinary perceptual beliefs. Crucially, he suggests that some disposition to form these beliefs is integral to this outlook, or as he puts it, 'built into our cognitive nature' (Ratzsch (2003), 129). Concerning Reid's view, he concludes that, 'Reid must be read as holding the view that ... recognition of a mark as a mark of design is perceptual.' (*ibid.*, 130). In following Ratzsch, we might think that Ibn Taymiyya holds a similar position concerning the connection between our disposition (*fiṭra*) to form theistic beliefs – upon an apprehension of the signs in nature – and our sense perceptual faculties. That is, given our *fiṭri* disposition to form beliefs about God, our sense perceptual faculties may be geared up to form *non-inferential* beliefs about God from perceiving His signs in nature. This knowledge, in the Taymiyyan view, arises through the proper function of *fiṭra* (in conjunction with the relevant cognitive faculties), upon an apprehension of these signs, whereby one grasps the necessary concomitance between sign and signified, as 'the created beings that indicate the Creator (*al-dalāla 'alā al-khāliq*) ... [are] concomitant with its Creator, [so] it's not possible that they exist without the existence of their Creator, just as He cannot exist without His knowledge, power, will, wisdom, and mercy' (Ibn Taymiyya (2005), 245).

However, although we have suggested that an apprehension of these signs occurs through sense perception, it may also include signs tied more intimately to 'reason', through a pondering or rational reflection. Perhaps then theistic belief may be elicited upon a ponderance of the natural world, through an apprehension of the sheer contingency of all that exists other than God, for 'it is known that, apart from God, all contingent existents entail the essence of the Lord, may He Be exalted; they cannot exist without the existence of the essence of the Lord' (*ibid.*, 195). Indeed, for Ibn Taymiyya pointing to God's signs to prove His existence constitutes 'the rational *fiṭri* methods (*al-ṭuruq al-'aqliyya al-fiṭriyya*) which the Quran adopts' (Ibn Taymiyya (1995), 1:49) and hence 'the rational methods that people endowed with reason know by their *fiṭra*' (Ibn Taymiyya (1980), 76). Therefore, although it may always be the case that in some manner sense perception (external and/or internal) is involved in the apprehension of signs, that need not exclude reason ('*aql*'), which may be at the heart of reflection upon God's signs as well.

This also need not mean that the process includes discursive reasoning (*naẓar*) just because reason is involved in the reflecting. Rather, it may be as we have suggested above a form of 'natural inference', or perhaps something closer to what Robert Audi has described in an altogether different context as, a 'conclusion of reflection' (Audi (2009), 45). As Michael Bergmann explains, such reflections need not be based on 'inferences from premises but instead emerge *non-inferentially* from an awareness of a variety of observations, experiences, and considerations over a (perhaps long) period of time' (Bergmann (2017), 37). These conclusions of reflection may include a variety of experiences, memories, and considerations, but may also perhaps include what Ibn Taymiyya refers to as simply 'preliminary intellectual reflection (*bidāya al-'uqūl*)' (Ibn Taymiyya (2005), 297), that is, what results from the most basic and initial impressions of reason

(‘*aql*’) itself. Hence, one may entertain in one’s mind the collection of *āyāt* in one’s self and the world ‘out-there’, sensing the utter contingency of all physical existents including the universe, and thus, upon such reflections over these different signs, when *fiṭra* is sound, the *qalb* as the seat of all cognition, comes to know that God exists in properly basic fashion. Finally, we may speculate that, the proper basicity of theistic belief attained from this process may be conceived along the lines of some version of a faculty-based virtue epistemology

We may thus summarize the *istidlāl bi’l-āyāt* as follows (Figure 1):

Istidlāl bi’l-āyāt (inference through signs): [1] signs (*āyāt*) are apprehended through sense perception (SP) (and reason (‘*aql*’) in at least some if not all circumstances). [2] *Fiṭra* – when sound – allows what has been received through the subjects’ cognitive faculties to be processed properly. [3] The cognitive process functions properly, and so one will immediately come to hold a corresponding theistic belief sparked by the apprehension of God’s signs, settled in one’s mind/heart (*ḥaṣala fī qalbihi*), and in turn, one will hold a properly basic (PB) theistic belief.



Fig. 1. The general cognitive process of an *istidlāl bi’l-āyāt* to knowledge of God, when *fiṭra* is sound.

Wael Hallaq and the problem of circularity

However, it has been suggested that this notion of an inference through signs which Ibn Taymiyya proposes, as outlined above, is somewhat problematic: both contradictory within his own thought and epistemically circular. It is to this critique we now turn. Wael Hallaq (1991) devotes a significant amount of attention to Ibn Taymiyya’s inference through signs, but suggests that there is a difficulty with Ibn Taymiyya’s assertions regarding *fiṭra* and knowledge of God, namely that the idea appears somewhat circular. First, he argues that it is circular because Ibn Taymiyya apparently asserts that we come to knowledge of God by way of *fiṭra*, and yet it is God who implanted *fiṭra* within us: hence we need to assume God’s existence in some premise before concluding that He exists. Second, Hallaq argues that Ibn Taymiyya impinges on the validity of his argument, by adding the theological assertion that *fiṭra* knows the existence of God even before apprehending theistic natural signs, and that in order to know that the signs signify God’s existence, one must know God before being able to recognise that these are His signs. This, Hallaq suggests, appears to be circular and given what Ibn Taymiyya seems to have said in other places, also somewhat contradictory. So, he states that,

it turns out that while *fiṭra* apprehends God through the immediacy and necessity (*ḍarūra*) of the sense perception of Signs, such apprehension is said to be implanted in *fiṭra* by God Himself without the medium of Signs. This last assertion clearly injects in Ibn Taymiyya’s argument a strong element of circularity. (Hallaq (1991), 65–66)

How might one respond to Hallaq’s contentions? Let us begin with the first of two charges that Ibn Taymiyya’s approach seems epistemically circular, which has it that he suggests that we know God via *fiṭra*, but that it is God who created us upon it,

hence somehow assuming His existence in a premise antecedent to the conclusion. Now, this would of course be problematic if (1), it was supposed to be an argument aimed at demonstrating God's existence, and (2), if one was in what Bergmann coins a 'question doubting' context (Bergmann (2006), 199),⁷ in this case concerning the truth of the conclusion that God exists. For if Ibn Taymiyya was attempting to demonstrate God's existence, he may be implicitly putting himself into a 'question doubting' context, where one cannot rely on the truth of that which is in question. But that is not what seems to be going on when Ibn Taymiyya says for instance that, the 'recognition of the Creator is innate [and] necessary (*fiṭrī ḍarūrī*)' (Ibn Taymiyya (1995), 16:328). Ibn Taymiyya is merely starting from the supposition that God exists as a piece of knowledge that he *already holds*, and then from that knowledge explaining *how* it arises or has *come to be known*. Therefore, Ibn Taymiyya is not liable to the charge of epistemic circularity in any 'malignant' sense.

But what about the problem that Ibn Taymiyya appears to be contradictory by asserting, on the one hand, that we know God by *fiṭra* through the medium of signs, but then on the other hand, that we in fact know Him prior to the signs in order to recognize that they are His? It ought to be made clear that it is not as Hallaq suggests, that on occasion Ibn Taymiyya presents *fiṭra* as a faculty for knowing that created things must have a creator, and on other occasions, that *fiṭra* refers to inborn knowledge of the creator. As Ovamir Anjum explains, 'this second view ... is explicitly rejected by Ibn Taymiyya' (Anjum (2012), 221). Anjum notes – in referring to Ibn Taymiyya's main disciple, Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 1350 CE) – how Ibn Taymiyya's use of *ma'rifa* in the relevant passages as opposed to '*ilm*, demonstrates that such knowledge can only refer to knowledge which is acquired (*muktasab*), that is non-basic, and given other explicit passages from Ibn Taymiyya himself, it is clear that the knowledge within *fiṭra* does not refer to knowledge implanted within human beings since birth (*ibid.*, 222).

However, this still does not explain what Ibn Taymiyya means when he suggests that *fiṭra* knows God prior to perceiving His signs. Indeed, Ibn Taymiyya does state that '*fiṭra* knows the Creator without these signs; that knowledge is inherent in it. Had it not known Him before these signs, it could not have known that they are His signs' (Ibn Taymiyya (1995), 1:47). So how ought we to understand this passage? First, note that, as we have seen, knowledge of God inherent in *fiṭra* is not something implanted. Second, Hoover – commenting on some of Hallaq's contentions – explains that, according to Ibn Taymiyya,

it is possible that inner voices (*khawāṭir*) in the soul alert it to the true religion without external teaching, and, apart from corrupting influences ... [In addressing] the problem of circularity, the shaykh still has resort to external determinative causes. He says that these inner voices arise through the inspiration of an angel or other causes (*asbāb*) that God originates. (Hoover (2007), 41–42)

Now, it is not altogether clear how this would deal with the charge of circularity, because these 'external determinative causes' are still *asbāb* which 'God originates' and hence presuppose His existence. However, what Hoover does help us to understand here more clearly is how knowledge of God (at least in a partial sense) can arise within *fiṭra* in the absence of a connection to God's signs, which is not at the same time implanted knowledge, and can account for what Ibn Taymiyya means when he states that '*fiṭra* knows the Creator without these signs'. But perhaps one can simply dismiss this apparent problem of circularity, by recognizing the distinction between knowledge in *potentia* and in *actuality*. Indeed, Hoover explains that, '[f]or Ibn Taymiyya, the *fiṭra* is the religion of Islam, but in *potentiality rather than in actuality*' (Hoover (2016a), 106). So,

we may speculate, then, that the ‘prior knowledge’ of God before the apprehension of signs simply refers to a kind of potentiality to recognize God, where God not only provides the signs, but also a kind of natural ability to read the signs as coming from Him. In this case – where the prior knowledge is taken to be a kind of knowledge of God one has in *potentia*, in one’s ability to recognize God when God prompts one to know Him – there is no circularity.⁸

Thus, having addressed the main critique of Ibn Taymiyya’s thesis in the literature, in the next section, we will attempt to draw on C. Stephen Evans’s ideas on ‘theistic natural signs’, and consider how some of those ideas may help us further understand the utility and epistemic value of Ibn Taymiyya’s thesis, and also where epistemic space may be left for more traditional theistic arguments.

Theistic natural signs and Pascalian constraints

In his *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments*, C. Stephen Evans argues that behind the traditional theistic arguments lie ‘theistic natural signs’, which point to God’s reality, and that their fundamental epistemic value may be viewed in the context of these underlying natural signs. He conceives of these signs as bringing God into one’s awareness and producing *non-inferential* beliefs about Him. A theistic natural sign is one that God has ‘set up’ so to speak, and put in place such that His creatures may apprehend them, and in turn, come to acquire true beliefs about Him. Importantly, Evans argues that for a theistic natural sign ‘to be a natural sign at all, there must be some in-built propensity, when the sign is encountered, to form some relevant judgement as a result of the encounter with the reality mediated by the sign’ (Evans (2010), 38). In other words, there must be a natural capacity or inclination within God’s creatures so that they can recognize His signs.

The plausibility of this approach from one perspective, according to Evans, is its ability to satisfy what he coins ‘Pascalian constraints on knowledge of God’ (*ibid.*, 17); what we might expect from God by way of evidence, if He does indeed exist. The first of these constraints are what he refers to as a ‘Wide Accessibility Principle’. Roughly, the idea is that it is conceivable that God would make knowledge of His existence ‘widely available, not difficult to gain’ (*ibid.*, 13). For given that God created human beings such that they may enter into a ‘relationship’ with Him, know Him, and worship Him, He would want to make the possibility of this ‘relationship’ open to all humans. The second constraint Evans refers to is the ‘Easy Resistibility Principle’, meaning that, ‘though knowledge of God is widely available, it is not forced on humans’ (*ibid.*, 15), such that those who do not want to enter into a special relationship with God will find it *easy* to reject Him and His existence as a whole.

It seems to me that Evans’s conception of theistic natural signs neatly ties into the Taymiyyan conception of *istidlāl bi’l-āyāt*. First, Evans’s notion of a ‘theistic natural sign’, as the basis of an immediate belief in God, neatly overlaps with what Ibn Taymiyya refers to as an *āyā* which points to God’s existence. Second, as Evans puts it, the ability to grasp the concomitance between theistic sign and God presupposes a ‘natural disposition to become aware of that reality’ (*ibid.*, 93), which sounds strikingly similar to what Ibn Taymiyya speaks of in terms of *fiṭra* as a disposition for theistic belief: ‘*fiṭra* has a potency to know and believe in the Creator’ (Ibn Taymiyya (1979), 8:458).

Perhaps more interesting though, is the plausibility of an overlap in terms of the aforementioned ‘Pascalian constraints’. Perhaps a Taymiyyan ‘Wide Accessibility Principle’ may be found in his saying that, ‘the more people need to know a thing, the easier God has made it for the minds of people to know the [corresponding] evidences (*adilla*) of it’ (Ibn Taymiyya (2005), 299). Clearly, knowledge of God is more of a necessity than any

other sort of knowledge for Ibn Taymiyya. Further, we may infer that the ‘Easy Resistibility Principle’ can be teased out of a Taymiyyan epistemology as well. In earlier work, Evans refers to what may be taken as the above principle in terms of a person ‘resisting’ the evidence of God’s signs, due to them lacking ‘the proper kind of ‘subjectivity’ (Evans (1990), 72). He continues by adding that, such evidence ‘can point the sincere seeker in the right direction securely, but also allows the one who is rebelling against God to convince himself that religion contains no truth’ (*ibid.*, 73). In simple terms, it is evidence which is only ‘powerful for him who has ears to hear and eyes to see’ (*ibid.*, 75). As we have seen, for Ibn Taymiyya it is *only* when one’s *fiṭra* is unimpaired that knowledge of God may be attained from an apprehension of His signs. Such impediments upon *fiṭra* may arise due to certain desires (*hawā*) or personal motives (*gharaḍ*), which obstructs them from the truth (cf. Ibn Taymiyya (1979), 6:271). Hoover also notes that ‘ignorance and heedlessness play a detrimental role’ in the corruption of *fiṭra* according to Ibn Taymiyya, as well as ‘pride, ill purposes, and divided love for God’ (Ibn Taymiyya (2007), 43). Therefore, the ability of non-theists to resist the signs of God before them, is due to their underlying nature (*fiṭra*) or will to believe, being in some sense impaired on the Taymiyyan perspective.⁹

These interesting parallels and compatibility between Ibn Taymiyya’s and Evans’s theses further reinstate the plausibility of contemporary Muslim philosophers drawing on Ibn Taymiyya’s theological epistemology. Moreover, they highlight the novelty of views grounded in medieval theological thought and open up space for further comparative work. But *crucially*, they also emphasize the cross-religious accounts of a ‘Reformed epistemology’ (by which I mean simply that God can be known apart from argumentation). But what room may be left for traditional theistic arguments in a Taymiyyan epistemology of theistic signs?

Corruption of fiṭra and signs as a basis for theistic arguments

Above we outlined Evans’s thesis regarding ‘theistic natural signs’, but we left out a crucial component. Evans argues that one can convert the theistic natural signs into propositional evidence. That is, one could ‘reflect on a natural sign and make it the basis for an argument’ like the cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments, drawing on these various signs and using them as ‘data’ which postulates God as the best or only explanation (Evans (2018), 109). So, to what extent might a similar postulation be the case concerning Ibn Taymiyya’s own thesis on signs and knowledge of God?

For Ibn Taymiyya, although knowledge of God is principally attained through *fiṭra* (upon an apprehension of God’s signs) in an immediate manner, it may be possible that one arrives at this knowledge by way of argument, and in fact, this may be necessary for those whose *fiṭra* has become impaired. Ibn Taymiyya writes that,

The establishment and recognition of the Creator is innate [and] necessary in the souls of all people (*fiṭrī ḍarūrī fī nufūs al-nās*), even though some people have done something to corrupt their nature (*fiṭra*) such that they need an inference (*naẓar*) to achieve knowledge [of God]. This is the opinion of the majority of people, as well as the skilled debaters (*ḥadhāq al-nuẓẓār*); that knowledge of God is sometimes achieved by necessity [i.e. in ‘basic’ fashion] and other times by inference. (Ibn Taymiyya (1995), 16:328)

In reference to the above passage, Hallaq explains that according to Ibn Taymiyya, ‘individuals who are devoid of such [sound] *fiṭra* may still be able to come to the knowledge that God exists, though their knowledge is not considered of a first order. This is

perfectly in agreement with Ibn Taymiyya's epistemological postulate that inferred knowledge (*naẓari, muktasab*) occupies a rank inferior to immediate necessary knowledge (*darūri*)' (Hallaq (1991), 57). Thus, Hallaq recognizes that for Ibn Taymiyya, inference to the existence of God is possible, but he also notes how this takes a second rank position epistemically. Therefore, Ibn Taymiyya appears to uphold something like the following: 'a noetic structure N_1 in which theistic belief is properly basic is epistemically superior to a noetic structure N_2 in which theistic belief is nonbasic' (Sudduth (1995), 29). The issue for Ibn Taymiyya then, is evidently that the superior method is that which leads to immediate necessary knowledge, namely the inference through signs, but he also chastises the theologians/philosophers for narrowing the route to knowledge of God. Ibn Taymiyya on the contrary insists that there are many paths to this knowledge:

Many thinkers (*nuzzār*) adopt a certain method of inference and argue that no other method can lead to the knowledge required. This negative statement has no validity, though their own method may be valid. The more people need to know a thing, the easier God has made it for the minds of people to know the [corresponding] evidences (*adilla*) of it. The evidences of the Creator, His Unity, and the signs of prophecy and their evidences are very many and ways for people to know them are very many. Most people, however, do not need many of these ways. (Ibn Taymiyya (2005), 299)

Thus, although rational speculation is not necessary in theory to prove God's existence, it is possible and in fact may be necessary for those whose *fiṭra* has been corrupted, and as such, some could acquire this knowledge without inference (*naẓar*), while others need it.¹⁰ Therefore, it would appear that Evans's thesis concerning theistic natural signs and knowledge of God overall is strikingly similar to that of Ibn Taymiyya and vice versa: for indeed, knowledge by way of apprehending God's signs can be immediate and produce basic theistic beliefs, but it just may be that some people can (and may have to) infer God's existence through means of a more traditional philosophical argument, which draws on those signs and takes them as the basis for those arguments. On the Taymiyyan scheme, this is predicated on the habits and methods of individual people (cf. *ibid.*), but more primarily on the health of one's *fiṭra*.

What is also significant in this context is the flexibility and relativity which Ibn Taymiyya recognizes in the distinctions between basic (*darūri*) and non-basic or acquired (*muktasab*) knowledge depending on the cognitive state of the subject in question. Ibn Taymiyya considers 'knowledge, whether self-evident [i.e. basic] or inferential (*naẓariyya*) ... a relative, relational matter. What may be self-evident (*badihiyya*) for some people may be inferential for others' (*ibid.*, 55). Indeed, there are differences in the intellectual capacities of human beings, and the role of *fiṭra* here is also instrumental, as Ibn Taymiyya states, 'the foundation of reason (*'aql*) is based upon sound and healthy *fiṭra*' (*ibid.*, 368).

However, it is important to note that for Ibn Taymiyya, not just any old inference would be sufficient, and perhaps some of the arguments employed by the philosophers/theologians of the Islamic tradition would fail to meet the standards of a proper inference on his terms. Ibn Taymiyya speaks of *ḥuṣn al-naẓar* (sound rational inference) as the product of *'aql ṣariḥ* (pure reason). A case in point would be from the very premise that the temporal origination (*mujarrad al-ḥudūth*) of things in our experience requires an originator, likewise so the temporal origination of the world itself needs an Originator (cf. Ibn Taymiyya (1979), 8:319). This sort of sound rational inference is built on pure reason and undergirded by *fiṭra*, as Ibn Taymiyya points out elsewhere: 'It is known by the *fiṭra* which God created His servants upon and by the purity of reason (*ṣariḥ al-'aql*), that what

is temporally originated cannot come into being without an originator' (Ibn Taymiyya (1999), 3:202). Consider then, how *ḥuṣn al-naẓar* may impact knowledge of God, given that one's *fiṭra* has become impaired (Figure 2):

[1] Signs (*āyāt*) are apprehended through sense perception (SP) (and reason ('*aql*) in at least some if not all circumstances). [2] *Fiṭra* - in a state that is unsound - negatively impacts the cognitive process, such that the subject fails to arrive at properly basic theistic belief. Rather, one has perhaps at best a vague *theistic seeming*. [3] Consequently, one draws upon a sign (*āya*) they have apprehended and constructs a sound rational inference (SRI) from it, establishing the existence of God, and hence settled in the *qalb*, is a non-basic (NB) theistic belief.

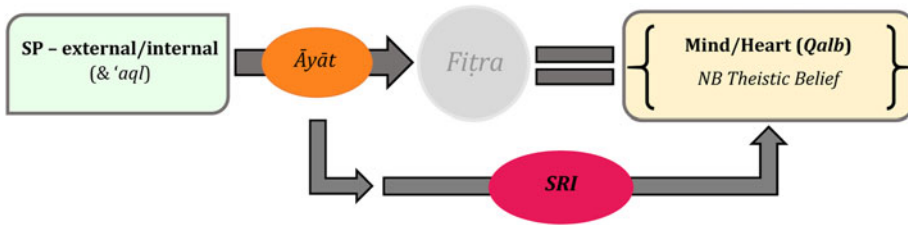


Fig. 2. The cognitive process of an *istidlāl bi'l-āyāt* to knowledge of God, when *fiṭra* has become impaired.

Yet, there is also another way to construe the scenario. Drawing upon the ‘combined warrant scenarios’ offered by Kevin S. Diller (2011), suppose one has some vague theistic seeming (due to an impaired *fiṭra*) that God exists, a seeming not strong enough for warrant. But then perhaps one learns of some inference for God, say a cosmological argument that goes something like this:

- (a) whatever begins to exist has a cause,
- (b) the universe began to exist,
- (c) therefore, the universe has a cause (i.e. God).

Upon hearing the inference - suppose from your trustworthy philosopher friend - *fiṭra*, in conjunction with the relevant cognitive faculties, is able to *see* through the initial vague theistic seemings and arrive at theistic belief. In this case, it is not that your theistic belief was based on the inference, but rather that the inference (in this context being some grasp of the cosmological argument and that your friend is trustworthy in such matters) acted as the impetus for your vague theistic seemings to become firm and in the end be sufficient for warrant, such that you have a properly basic theistic belief.¹¹ Consequently, one is able to revive the *fiṭri* disposition to believe in God in properly basic fashion, while drawing on inferences in some sense. Thus, the source of warrant is the proper function of one's faculties in producing firm theistic seemings, rather than the actual inferences themselves. In this case then, it might look something more like the following (Figure 3):

[1] Signs (*āyāt*) are apprehended through sense perception (SP) (and reason ('*aql*) in at least some if not all circumstances) giving one a vague *theistic seeming* due to *fiṭra*

being impaired. [2] Having had the seeming, you come to know about a cosmological proof for theism (*SRI*) from a trustworthy intellectual friend. [3] *Fiṭra* is revived such that you are now able to see the initially vague seeming in all its clarity, transferring the mode of acquisition back to the original *non-inferential* process, thereby arriving at a properly basic (PB) theistic belief.

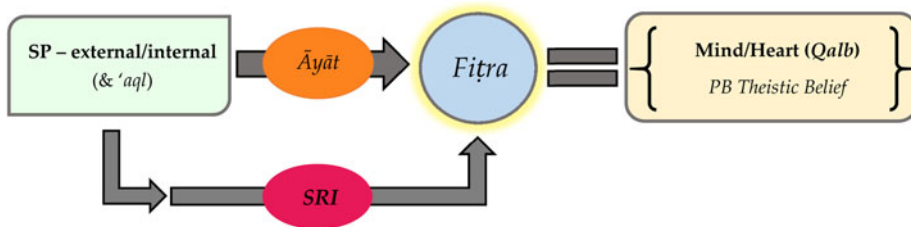


Fig. 3. The cognitive process of an *istidlāl bi'āyāt* to knowledge of God, when *fiṭra* has been revived.

Thus, we have seen in this section, how Ibn Taymiyya allows for more traditional inferences to knowledge of God and how one could draw on different *āyāt* to reach that knowledge by way of sound rational inference, and also how inferences can in some way help one to revive *fiṭra* and come to knowledge of God in a properly basic way. But what implication might a Taymiyyan epistemology of signs have for the Qur'anic discourse on theistic signs?

Qur'anic *āyāt* as divine-design discourse

According to Ibn Taymiyya, there are two broad categories of signs: 'the signs which indicate [the existence of] the Lord may He be exalted are, [1] His spoken signs that He mentions in the Quran, and [2] signs of His creative acting which He created in the souls and the cosmos' (Ibn Taymiyya (1979), 7:302). So, given what his epistemology of theistic signs in the natural world implies about knowledge of God, we may wish to ask what a Taymiyyan approach might imply for the role of Qur'anic signs functioning as theistic evidence (perhaps somewhat differently from the way in which Ibn Rushd perceived things).

It seems to me that, given a Taymiyyan epistemology of theistic signs applied to the Qur'an, we might end up with a view of Qur'anic *āyāt* functioning as theistic evidence, which runs close to what Alvin Plantinga has coined 'design discourse' (Plantinga (2011), 240–248). Plantinga's idea is that, rather than viewing teleological discourse in natural theology as the explication of inferences, we might rather see them as simply, 'directing our attention to the way we are inclined to form design beliefs in certain circumstances, and trying to get us in those circumstances' (*ibid.*, 247). Or rather, we might view the discourse as a 'wholly different style of argument: one where the arguer tries to help the arguee achieve the sort of situation in which the *Sensus Divinitatis* operates' (Plantinga (2018), 470), or roughly what Evans coins, 'an argument for ordinary people' (cf. Evans (2018), 108–122).

In other words, we may view the Qur'an – when engaged in alerting its audience to natural phenomena which are indicative of the divine¹² – not as offering inferences from design (or from other features in the world), or even pieces of evidence which supports or inspires those inferences (at least not primarily). Rather, it is to be seen as engaged in a 'divine-design-discourse', one that works to awaken *fiṭra* and open its sincere interlocutor to the truth behind the signs. This idea would seem to neatly map onto a

Taymiyyan understanding of a sign-based ‘inference’ in tandem with the Qur’an. Roughly, the idea might be that the Qur’an, in making reference to the natural signs in creation, acts as the external prompting, and grounds the circumstances in which the *fiṭrī* response to an apprehension of and reflection over these *āyāt* may be achieved. Indeed, it is Ibn Taymiyya’s view of prophecy more generally that it came to perfect *fiṭra*: encouraging believers towards the recognition, worship, and love of God (cf. Hoover (2007), 44).

Furthermore, the notion of divine-design discourse perhaps better resonates with an experiential approach that inspires not merely theistic affirmation or belief, but also urges the believer to stand in awe and wonder of these signs, and hence engage in praise of the very source of them (i.e. God). Thus, Ibn Taymiyya explains that,

The distinction between the Qur’anic and the *kalām* theological methods is indeed that God commands worship of Him ... He did not limit it to mere affirmation, as is the objective of the methods of *kalām* ... the Qur’an [in contrast] relates knowledge of Him and service to Him. So, it combines the human faculties of knowledge and practice ... [*kalām* methods] secures merely the affirmation and acknowledgment of God’s existence. (Ibn Taymiyya (1995), 2:12)

Finally, conceiving of these sorts of immediate beliefs elicited from signs as an ‘argument for ordinary people’ is significant. For one, it allows us to conceive of Ibn Taymiyya’s own thesis, that is, the Qur’anic method he interprets as the inference through signs, as being a wholly different sort of ‘inference’ in contrast to traditional theistic arguments, where, in alerting subjects to the signs of God, it can trigger immediate theistic beliefs when one’s *fiṭra* is sound. From this perspective, the Taymiyyan position would seem to suggest that the Qur’anic method for eliciting theistic beliefs as divine-design discourse is equally applicable to the philosopher as it is the layman, which of course resonates with the Qur’anic view as being a revelation to humanity, and hence *epistemically egalitarian*, as opposed to *esoteric*. This view may be seen as an extension of what Yahya Michot describes as ‘the self-sufficiency of the religious rationality manifested in scriptural literalism and common faith, and its validity for all, the elite as well as the crowd’ (Michot (2003), 171), in the Taymiyyan scheme. Thus, the philosophical methods of rational speculation are not necessary for most people. Rather, ‘authentic knowledge is available to anyone whose basic rational faculty and *fiṭra* are intact, not just an elite coterie of philosophers’ (El-Tobgui (2020), 293). And as we have seen, authentic knowledge of God is thought to be principally the consequence of perceiving the His signs manifest in the natural world.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, we mentioned Ibn Rushd, who drew on particular verses/signs (*āyāt*) from the Qur’an in articulating two arguments for God’s existence. In contrast, to Muslim philosophers like Ibn Rushd and the classical Muslim theologians (*mutakallimūn*), Ibn Taymiyya presents a unique alternative to construing how knowledge of God may be attained in the absence of argumentation: through an apprehension of theistic natural signs (*āyāt*). Significantly, this unique Taymiyyan approach gives us a fresh way to understand the epistemic function of Qur’anic *āyāt* as theistic evidence. Indeed, Ibn Taymiyya views his approach as the Qur’anic method of natural theology *par excellence* and hence, in opening space from which an Islamic natural theology grounded in the Qur’an allows for its subjects to uphold knowledge of God, despite the lack of inference, it opens space to exploring a Reformed epistemology within Islam.

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Notes

1. For example, Qur'an 78:6–16; 25:61.
2. This broadly empiricist epistemology is to some extent evident in his treatment of attaining knowledge of God through theistic signs, as it primarily relies on our immediate experience and perception, not abstract deduction.
3. The basis for the idea of 'corruption' by external influence for Ibn Taymiyya's notion of *fiṭra* is the famous report of the Prophet, 'Narrated [by] Abu Hurayra: God's Messenger said, "No child is born except upon a natural constitution (*fiṭra*), and then his parents turn him into a Jew or a Christian or a Magian"' (al-Bukhārī (2001), 6:114).
4. I would like to thank a referee of this journal for raising this point.
5. In fact, not only are the philosophical 'proofs' of God developed by the Islamic theologians unnecessary in Ibn Taymiyya's view, they are also theologically problematic (cf. Hoover (2016b), 636–637).
6. 'The internal [*bāṭin*] is represented by such phenomena as hate, fear, love, hunger; and the external [*zāhir*] by touch, smell and taste' (Hallaq (1991), 63).
7. Bergmann defines that context as (EC = epistemic circularity): 'where, prior to the EC-belief's formation, the subject is or should be seriously questioning or doubting the trustworthiness of X [i.e. the source of the belief] or the reliability of B's formation' (Bergmann (2006), 199). Bergmann has it that an epistemically circular belief formed in such a situation then is 'malignant'. In contrast, benign cases of EC occur in non-question doubting situations where: 'prior to the EC-belief's formation, the subject neither is nor should be seriously questioning or doubting the trustworthiness of X or the reliability of B's formation' (*ibid.*).
8. I would like to thank the referees for helping me 'drive this point home'.
9. For an interesting take on how the corruption of our disposition to form theistic beliefs could look from an epistemic perspective, cf. Vahid (2019).
10. Ibn Taymiyya also notes that one way to restore the *fiṭri* and necessary knowledge of God is through a purification of the soul through religious practices (cf. Ibn Taymiyya (1972), 2:341).
11. Diller presents what he coins an example of a 'combined warrant scenario', one of which runs parallel to the example I have just given. Diller's more mundane example is that of an individual who – whilst engaged in some activity inside their home – suddenly hears a sound which prompts them to look outside their window, finding a glimpse of someone in the shadows. At first they don't know what to think exactly, but then they remember it's around that time of day when the postman comes to deliver his letters to the home. Consequently, they form the warranted conclusion that that indistinct sound they heard was the letter coming through the letter box, and that figure in the shadows was the postman. Diller argues that it is possible to construe this in inferential terms. But crucially, it's also possible to view the scenario as one where the initial sense-perceptual *seeming* that there is some sound, can remain vague until this inferential reflection allows the *seeming* to be perceived much more clearly than it was at first. In doing so, these inferential judgements work as the catalyst for one's sense perception to grasp the *seeming* in full, and hence form a properly (partially?)-basic belief upon the grounds of the relevant *seemings*, even if inference was in some sense involved in the process.
12. Cf. Qur'an 3:190; 41:53; 16:66–67.

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