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**Ibn Taymiyya's Theory of Exegesis:
Rejecting the *Ḥaqīqa-Majāz* Dichotomy**

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1

Abstract

This thesis examines a crucial pillar of Ibn Taymiyya's exegetical methodology: his fierce critique and rejection of the *ḥaqīqa-majāz* dichotomy in Quranic exegesis. In doing so, I particularly investigate the epistemological and theological motivations for his rejection of the dichotomy. In the first part of the thesis, I discuss some of the difficulties in the perennial task of textual analysis, especially when attempting to decipher divine intent in the Quran (Chapter 2). Then, I set the stage by introducing the *ḥaqīqa-majāz* dichotomy, the linguistic feat that it attempts to explain in *kalām al-'arab*, and the way it serves as the intellectual apparatus for the application of *ta'wīl* to Quranic exegesis (Chapter 3). Subsequently, I look at popular approaches to *ta'wīl*, especially amongst Ibn Taymiyya's interlocutors, including the rational theologians and the Muslim philosophers, in order to depict Ibn Taymiyya's intellectual milieu (Chapter 4). In the second half of the thesis, I examine Ibn Taymiyya's critique of the dichotomy and *ta'wīl* in detail, which includes a metaphysical and rational critique, and I also introduce his alternative interpretive model—a contextual theory of interpretation (Chapter 5). Only at this point does it become clear that Ibn Taymiyya's project is motivated by theological concerns, in particular those pertaining to the anthropomorphic verses (Chapter 6). I then discuss Ibn Taymiyya's method of approaching the anthropomorphic verses and provide a general explanation of his exegetical methodology, which maintains a serious commitment to the methodology of the *salaf* (Chapter 7). I conclude with philosophical reflections over the *tashbīh-tanzīh* issue by revisiting the question of the limits of language in conveying divine reality (Chapter 8).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction

The Quran, the sacred text of Islam, has been subject to great interpretive debate since the death of the Prophet.[1] This has stemmed, in part, from the complex nature of exegesis, or the interpretation of scripture. Exegesis (*tafsīr*) of the Quran is arguably the most intricate science of Islam because it requires the exegete to be trained in several areas including grammar, rhetoric, poetry, *sīrah* (biography of the prophet), *ʿilm al-ḥadīth* (the science of prophetic narrations), and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence).[2] In addition to possessing subject knowledge, perhaps even mastery, of these disciplines—which themselves are open to debate—the interpreter must be cognizant of prejudices that he is bound to unconsciously impose onto the text during interpretation. Because of this difficulty in the task of interpretation, there are myriads of approaches to Quranic exegesis; individual verses are often explained from multitudinous—sometimes conflicting and contradictory—perspectives. Despite fourteen centuries of exegetical contemplation over the Quran, attempts to interpret it have not dwindled. Rather, one notes an increased diversity in exegetical approaches as reformist and progressive trends of Islam debate the meaning of Quranic verses in light of modern sciences and philosophies.[3]

Within the general strand of Sunni Islam, Ibn Taymiyya, a well-known medieval theologian, offered an interpretive methodology by which he championed the "apparent"[4] reading of scripture. As part of the great Sunni discursive tradition, Ibn Taymiyya's exegetical approach was polemically inspired; it addressed many pre-existing theological debates,

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[1]Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur'anic Exegesis: Genesis and Development* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 38.

[2] Peter Heath, "Creative Hermeneutics: A Comparative Analysis of Three Islamic Approaches," *Arabica* 36, no. 2 (July 1989): 173.

[3] For examples of modern exegetical works, see Sayyid Qutb's *Fī Ẓilāl al-Qur'ān* (translated by Adil Salahi as *In The Shade of the Qur'an*); Muhammad Abduh & Muhammad Rashid Rida's *Tafsīr al-Manār*; and *Quran: A Reformist Translation* (translated by Edip Yuksel, Layth Saleh al-Shaiban & Martha Schulte-Nafeh).

[4] My (interchangeable) usage of literal and apparent refers to the *ḥaqīqa* sense of a word or what is often considered the *ẓāhir* of the text. This refers to what is usually or immediately understood by speakers of the language, which will be further explained in Chapter 5.

particularly those concerning the nature of God's essence and attributes. This included debates over the highly contested verses that describe God in seemingly anthropomorphic ways. According to Ibn Taymiyya's interlocutors, these verses, if understood literally or apparently, rendered the divine similar to His creation. In response to this conundrum, Ibn Taymiyya offered a unique, intellectual paradigm; he (in)famously rejected the *ḥaqīqa-majāz* dichotomy, ubiquitously found in books of Arabic rhetoric (*balāghah)* and commonly accepted as a linguistic classification amongst Muslim scholars, linguists, and exegetes. In rejecting the dichotomy, Ibn Taymiyya shed light on the influence of ideology in general and Hellenistic philosophy in particular on the existing exegetical literature. Specifically, Ibn Taymiyya was critical of the influence of certain Aristotelian and Neoplatonic notions on Quranic exegesis, especially those ideas that contradicted his own epistemology, conception of rationality, and metaphysical beliefs.

To merely recognize the influence of ideology on exegesis is no feat. It was and still is common for Muslim intellectuals to express theological positions and individual philosophies in the form of Quranic commentary. This is notable in the works of Muhammad Abduh and Sayyid Qutb, for instance.[5] Because Muslims believe that the Quran is of divine origin—thus textually inerrant—any ideology propelled through its verses may gain, by default, a seal of approval if left unchallenged. At times, however, such ideological expositions required excessive interpretive feats in order to reconcile the apparent meaning of the Quran with the rather peculiar doctrines that some exegetes intended to defend. Such interpretations, however, pose a threat to the purity of the text and the intention of its divine author. If Quranic exegesis is the attempt to

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[5] Walid A. Saleh. *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Qur'ān Commentary of Al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1035)* (Leiden: Brill Academic Pub, 2004), 2.

explain divine intent, then such interpretive gymnastics may be regarded as violations of an objective interpretation.

In an endeavor towards preserving the objective meaning of the Quran and removing the influence of the interpreter's prejudices, Ibn Taymiyya rejected the *ḥaqīqa-majāz* dichotomy because he argued that it was the backdoor to extra-Quranic principles that compromised the supremacy of the text. He instead proposed to derive certain interpretive principles from the text itself and the practices of the early *salaf* (pious ancestors), which included the companions of the Prophet and his immediate successors.[6] In analyzing Ibn Taymiyya's interpretive principles, therefore, we are able to derive a specific exegetical model for interpreting the Quran. Simultaneously, a review of this model also reveals his philosophical approach to language and interpretation, the infinite nature of the Quran, and the controversial debates surrounding God's attributes—the so-called anthropomorphic verses. Ibn Taymiyya's exegetical project, thus, not only offers insight into a unique approach to textual analysis, but it also highlights the role of epistemology and ideology in exegesis and the limits of human language.

2. The Difficulties of Interpreting Scripture: Speaking on Behalf of God

The Arab logicians defined *al-insān* (the human) as *al-ḥayawān al-nāṭiq*, literally the "speaking animal," recognizing that language is the highest manifestation of human rationality. Language, spoken or written, is the primary medium through which human beings communicate intentions and thoughts. The speaker's intent is conveyed to the listener through a complex series of sounds that have significance based on convention. Despite humans possessing such a powerful ability, communicative attempts fail and errors of interpretation commonly occur.

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[6] Ovamir Anjum writes, "the designation *salaf*…is applied to the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad and the following two or three generations, referred to here as the 'early salaf,' and secondarily, as an honorary extension, to those greats in the following few generations who have been canonized as having perfectly preserved and embodied the example of these early Muslims, designated here as the 'later salaf'…" For further information, see Anjum, "Cultural Memory of the Pious Ancestors (*Salaf*) in al-Ghazālī," *Numen* 58, no. 1-2 (2011): 345.

These errors are of two types; either in elucidation, when the speaker fails to speak clearly, or in interpretation, when the listener misinterprets the speaker's intent. In a unique interpretive scenario, a third kind of "error" is also possible: the meaning that the speaker intends cannot be conveyed via *human* language. This implies that the intended meaning is suprahuman because all that is human, or based on empirical experiences, can theoretically be conveyed through human language. Naturally, any attempt to communicate that which is beyond human experience and comprehension is equivalent to colliding against the boundaries of language itself. This third type of "error" exclusively occurs in the interpretation of divine texts. The proposition that a text is divine renders it, to a certain degree, as beyond human comprehension; there are certain divine secrets that are, by nature, incommunicable.

Nevertheless, interpreting divine texts is at least partially similar to interpreting ordinary texts. Even if the divine so chooses to communicate with human beings with the utmost clarity, all interpreters must nonetheless face an "interpretative gulf."[7] It is this interpretive gulf that the interpreter attempts to cross, one way or another, in order to uncover the intended meaning of the author. Every act of interpretation is thus a relationship formed between the text and the interpreter; this relationship develops within the boundaries of this interpretive gulf. An objective interpretation of a text takes for granted that this gulf is a contained "body of water," even if the paths seem to be confusing and the obstacles many. Exegetes aim to reach the shore—the intended meaning of the text.

The fourth caliph of Islam, ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, eloquently expressed: "This Quran is but lines written between two covers, it does not speak, rather it is but men who speak for it."[8] This remark highlights the interpretive difficulties that arise during textual interpretation of the Quran.

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[7] Jonathan A.C. Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy* (London: Oneworld Publlications, 2014), 84.
[8] Ibid., (translation not mine).

In the same vein, the *Phaedrus,* a famous Socratic dialogue, anticipates some of the common issues associated with knowledge conveyed through the written word and attempts to interpret the content of a written text. According to Socrates, the written word is "most solemnly silent."[9] When asked to defend itself against incorrect interpretations, "it always needs its father's support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support."[10] It is for this reason that the *community* that receives and attempts to derive meaning from a text plays a significant role in the interpretive process.

It is this idea of an ideal interpretive community that forms the basis of Ibn Taymiyya's approach to exegesis. The ideal interpretive community—in the case of the Quran—includes the companions of the Prophet and the *salaf* in general. Despite the likelihood—or perhaps inevitability—that interpretive communities influence the exegetical process, this does not lead one to conclude that communities are forever in exegetical chaos, incapable of deciphering authorial intent or at least agreeing on a reasonable interpretation. Rather, this only means that the established boundaries of a text are the works of linguistic communities.[11] "Linguistic communities" refers to the idea that only the community that speaks the language of the text has genuine access to its meanings. Communities establish the "boundaries" of a text in the sense that the words of a particular speaker cannot mean anything outside of the linguistic community and the rules of the language. In reality, these boundaries refer to the (meaningful) linguistic possibilities of words within a language rather than the limits of a particular text. Nevertheless, interpreters must work much more diligently than merely recognizing these boundaries; they must carefully examine, and ultimately select from, the multiple linguistic usages of words

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[9] Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (trans.), "Phaedrus" in *Plato: Complete Works*, by Plato, ed. John M. Cooper (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 552.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad*, 84; Heath, "Creative Hermeneutics," 177.

within a community in order to decipher authorial intent. Boundaries are important, lest it be claimed that a text is simultaneously saying anything or everything—effectively nothing. The boundary of a text is corollary of any attempt to objectively interpret a text. This is indeed an important assumption in Quranic exegesis.

Exegesis of the Quran is, as Ibn Taymiyya cites on the authority of *Masrūq* (d. 682 AD), "*al-riwāyah 'an Allah.*"[12] In other words, exegesis is to speak on behalf of God Himself. Hence, Ibn Taymiyya sternly condemns those who elucidate (*yufassir*) the Quran based on mere personal opinion (*ra'y*).[13] Unlike the notion of the irrecoverability of authorial intent in modern hermeneutics, which argues that a text can be divorced from its author, the standard assumption in Quranic exegesis is that authorial intent is indeed recoverable.[14] In fact, attempts to interpret the Quran with the post-modern notion of divorcing textual meaning from authorial intent have been rejected by most Muslim intellectuals.[15] This of course is the anticipated reaction from a community that prides itself on having preserved the literal word of God.[16] For a community that perceives the very recitation of the Quran, its interpretation, and implementation as the manifestation of God's will on earth, the ideals of post-modern literary theory have naturally found very little reception except in the works of a few.[17] As for Ibn Taymiyya, the very purpose of the Quran is to direct humans towards guidance in all matters pertaining to salvation. Thus, it's meaning must be available to all, at all times and places.

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[12] Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿ fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya*. 1st. Edited by ʿAbd Al-Rāḥmān ibn Muḥammad ibn Qāsim and Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Rāḥmān ibn Muḥammad. 37 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Raḥma, 2002), 13:374. Ibn Taymiyya cites *Masrūq* as the source of this statement. In completion, *Masrūq* stated, "*It-taqū at-tafsīr, Fa innamā huwa al-riwāyah 'an Allah.*"

[13] Ibid., 13:370.

[14] This was based on the theological assumption that God would preserve His message (See Quran 15:9). If it were granted that Quranic authorial intent is irrecoverable, this would render the very revelation of the Quran as an act without purpose (*'abath*).

[15] See footnote #1 in Robert Gleave, *Islam and Literalism: Literal Meaning and Interpretation in Islamic Legal Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 3.

[16] This refers to the doctrine of textual inerrancy, that the Quran is "literally" the word of God (*kalām Allah*).

[17] Certain exegetes have been influenced by modern hermeneutics and attempted a literary analysis of the Qur'an. For this, see Nasr Abu-Zayd's *The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Quran*.

Because early Muslims were cognizant that communities determine the boundaries of their respective texts and that codification of exegesis was necessary to prevent exegetical confusion, they formulated standard approaches to exegesis, giving it a formal methodology.[18] As the science of exegesis (*'ilm al-tafsīr*) developed, different and sometimes competing approaches to exegesis were advocated by the divergent schools of thought in grammar, rhetoric, theology, and the other sciences of Islam. Particularly, one cannot ignore the influence of theological schisms on exegetical methodologies.[19] Some exegetes took advantage of Quranic exegesis and viewed the Quran as the most effective way of legitimizing and spreading ideology—whether that be a particular theological belief or epistemological system. On the other hand, others were more interested in numerating the innumerable and extracting the various meanings from the ocean of meanings the Quran contains. This motivation arose from the Quran's proclamation of its own inexhaustibility.[20] It is for this reason that commentators of the Quran never ceased discovering new exegetical *insights* throughout the centuries.

In a post-modern world "running dangerously low on apodictic truths," the entire concept of an objective interpretation is regarded with great skepticism.[21] Despite the Quran's self-proclaimed inexhaustibility of meanings, recoverability of the intent of the speaker of the Quranic text was an assumed premise of Sunni Islam. The science of exegesis, palpably a methodological approach, would not have emerged without this key assumption. In the Taymiyyan paradigm, attempts to uncover authorial intent of the Quran were not perceived as

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[18] Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad,* 84.

[19] Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur'anic Exegesis,* 55-83. The author explains the way theological systems, and even political ideas, influenced Quranic exegesis and this led to the creation of unique genres of exegesis.

[20] See Quran 31:27. Also See Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*, 1. A similar idea is also expressed by Shaykh al-Akbar ibn 'Arabī in describing the Quran as an "ocean without shore," referring to the unlimited and inexhaustible capacity of the Quran to provide meaning for "divers with powerful breath." For this, see Michel Chodkiewicz's *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn 'Arabī, the Book, and the Law*.

[21] Ovamir Anjum, *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought: The Taymiyyan Moment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 150.

limits on the text itself. Ibn Taymiyya, often accused of a stark literalism[22], attempted to balance

his exegetical approach with the doctrine of the Quran's inexhaustibility.[23] While the theological

doctrine of the Quran's inexhaustibility was always to be affirmed, Ibn Taymiyya was

nevertheless a champion of the apparent (*ẓāhir*) meaning of scripture, a meaning that was also

readily available to the multitude and not limited to an elite class of philosophers, scholars, or

saints.[24] Apparent meaning in this context refers to a meaning that immediately strikes the

members of a linguistic community and is contextually appropriate. In Ibn Taymiyya's context

the term "apparent meaning" is not used, as it usually was, in opposition to a "hidden (*bāṭin*)

meaning," which was often only available to a specific elite. Ibn Taymiyya reformulates these

concepts so that they rise above these dichotomies while still using the terminologies of his

opponents. This was in accordance with the prevalent usage of mainstream scholars. He

concedes to using such terminologies as long as the conceptual baggage is negated, especially

when the term has Quranic usage.

In order to preserve the intent of the speaker (*murād al-mutakallim*)—of dire importance

to the Muslim community—the various sciences of grammar (*naḥw*), morphology (*ṣarf*), rhetoric

(*balāghah*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), the principles of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) and prophetic

narration (*ḥadīth*) were codified. One of the key goals of the codification of the sciences of

language, specifically grammar and rhetoric, was to preserve the language of the original

community of the Quran (*kalām al-ʿarab*). Since languages change over time, it was necessary

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[22] Gleave, *Islam and Literalism*, 22-23. Gleave clarifies that Ibn Taymiyya is anything but a literalist. Ibn Taymiyya's feud was not with metaphorical interpretation per se; rather, Ibn Taymiyya's criticism was epistemological in nature. For this project, he argued for a contextual approach to interpretation (see Chapter 5.3).
[23] A common criticism of literalism is that it disregards the multi-faceted nature of a text. The doctrine of inexhaustibility is that since the Quran is viewed as divine speech relevant to all times and places, it must also be meaningful beyond a single interpretation. As this will be later resolved, Ibn Taymiyya offers a paradigm in which he champions the apparent meaning of the text while also maintaining the doctrine of inexhaustibility.
[24] Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 10.

that a specific version of Arabic be preserved for Quranic exegesis. Despite such efforts, debates of exegesis occurred on both the macro and micro-level. While difference of opinions can be seen in various Quranic commentaries (macro-level), exegetes also debated the minute issues of grammar and rhetoric (micro-level). These minute debates contributed to a divergence in approaches to exegesis. Within the science of rhetoric, for instance, is found the division between the *ḥaqīqa*—the literal or apparent meaning—and the *majāz*—the metaphorical or figurative meaning.[25] This dichotomy has been at the heart of *tafsīr* scholarship[26] and it is this famous dichotomy that Ibn Taymiyya attacked.

3. Components of Quranic Exegesis

3.1 *Kalām al-'Arab*

Two particular notions were widely accepted within medieval Sunni approaches to Quranic interpretation; namely, *kalām al-'arab* and the *ḥaqīqa-majāz* dichotomy. The latter was conceptually derived from the former because it was assumed that the dichotomy expressed a linguistic phenomenon in *kalām al-'arab*. In fact, the Quran was directly, although not exclusively, revealed to a community that had already established the linguistic practices by which this text would be interpreted.[27] The linguistic practices of the Arabs thus were fundamental for correct interpretation. It is common to find authors in *tafsīr* collections using the phrase, "the Arabs used to say" (*kānat al-'arab taqūl*) in order to adduce evidence for interpretive claims.[28] *Kalām al-'arab* ultimately determined the usage of a word in its various contexts; these multiple contexts established the maximum possible linguistic meanings and

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[25] Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad,* 86.
[26] Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur'anic Exegesis*, 13.
[27] Wolfhart Heinrichs, "On the Genesis of the *Ḥaqîqa-Majâz* Dichotomy," *Studia Islamica*, no. 59 (1984): 112-113.
[28] Gleave, *Islam and Literalism,* 85.

usages of a particular word.[29] Effectively, a word could not mean anything outside of the

established usage of the Arabs. Through the sciences of grammar and rhetoric, the Arab linguists

aimed to preserve *kalām al-'arab* primarily in order to facilitate interpretation of the Quran. The

science of rhetoric, which captures certain features unique to *kalām al-'arab*, is where one finds

the *ḥaqīqa-majāz* dichotomy. Linguists invented names, such as *ḥaqīqa* and *majāz*, for concepts

they assumed to be natural features of *kalām al-'arab*. However, if analyzed, these concepts

would reveal themselves to be later inventions retrospectively projected onto *kalām al-'arab* in

order to comprehend the various linguistic practices of the Arabs in a logical and coherent way.

The *ḥaqīqa-majāz* dichotomy principally served to describe a linguistic phenomenon perceived

to be a crucial part of *kalām al-'arab*.

3.2 The *Ḥaqīqa-Majāz* Dichotomy

The *ḥaqīqa-majāz* distinction played a significant role in medieval Quranic exegesis.

However, before turning to examples of particular exegetes and their usage of *majāz*, and finally

to Ibn Taymiyya's criticism of the dichotomy, it is crucial to understand the contended

conceptual division within *kalām al-'arab* that the dichotomy served to explain. The notion of

majāz essentially stems from the proposition that there is an abstract language distinct from

actual language use within a community.[30] Legal theorists of the Islamic tradition (*uṣūlīs*)

distinguished between a so-called *al-ma'nā al-waḍ'ī* —the conventional meaning of a word—

and its *isti'māl*—usage within a context. A *waḍ'ī* meaning was defined as that which made "an

expression as a sign for a meaning."[31] A particular act of *waḍ'*, or signification, granted an

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[29] This is what I later refer to as the "upper limit of language."
[30] Mohamed M. Yunis Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics: Sunni Legal Theorists' Models of Textual Communication* (London: Curzon Press, 2000), 8.
[31] Ibid., 16.

individual linguistic element a meaning in the language community.[32] However, it must be noted that this was merely a theoretical tool by which Arab linguists argued that words referred to particular meanings when uttered in isolation. The meaning, which occurred to the mind when a word was uttered in isolation, came to be known as the *waḍ'ī* meaning. Although the link between a word and its meaning was usually arbitrary, the relationship formed after the act of signification (*waḍ'*) rendered the connection intrinsic. *Isti'māl*, on the other hand, "refers to the production of an expression by intending either its literal meaning (in the case of literal usage [*waḍ'ī* meaning]) or non-literal meaning on the strength of a 'relation' between the literal and non-literal meaning (in the case of figurative usage)."[33] This meant that in actual language usage a word could refer to other than its conventional meaning if used figuratively.

Although the legal theorists had recognized several types of acts of *waḍ'*, what is of more importance is the assumed relationship between *waḍ'ī* and non-*waḍ'ī* usage, which would is the foundation of the *ḥaqīqa-majāz* dichotomy. Some of the *usūlis* posited that the *waḍ'ī* meaning was a kind of literal meaning that occurred to the mind immediately (*al-ma'nā al-mutabādir*) when a word was uttered in isolation. This *waḍ'ī* meaning came to be called the *ḥaqīqa* meaning or usage of a word.[34] According to Ibn al-Ḥājib, *ḥaqīqa* "is the vocable which is used in [accordance with its] primary (or first) coining (*waḍ' awwal*)."[35] *Majāz*, on the other hand, was a usage that could only be produced by some indicator (*qarīnah*), requiring an imposing context unlike the *ḥaqīqa*, which retained a meaning even in isolation. A case of *majāz* occurred when the *ḥaqīqa* was assumed to not be the intent of the author and was therefore to be discarded. This act of rejection could be justified because the *ḥaqīqa* sense was deemed to contradict *logically*

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[32] Ibid., 18.
[33] Ibid., 29.
[34] Gleave, *Islam and Literalism*, 36.
[35] Ibid., (translation not mine).

14

known facts, the listener's assumptions of the world, or another verbal context or usage.[36]

According to al-Rāzī,[37] a famous Ashʿarī scholar, the *majāz* sense requires that the *ḥaqīqa* sense be entirely "impractical."[38] Once the interpreter unequivocally recognizes that the *ḥaqīqa* sense of a word is not the intent of the author, he relies on a contextual indicator to discover the intended meaning.

It must be noted that *majāz* is not merely the Arabic expression of the English metaphor. *Majāz* requires that there be a particular connection between the *ḥaqīqa* and *majāz* sense of a word.[39] As Ibn al-Ḥājib stated, *majāz* "is a [vocable] used not [in accordance with its] primary assignment [*wadʿ*], in a manner which is sound, and there must be a *connection*."[40] To illustrate this point, one can think of the classical Arabic example of referring to an individual as a lion (*asad)*. This is done to emphasize the attribute of courage, naturally found in lions, in a human who incidentally, like the lion, possess courage. When the word "lion" is uttered to refer to a brave individual—and not literally to a ravenous animal (this being its *waḍʿī* meaning)—it is used in a *majāz* sense. Similarly, a man can insultingly be referred to as a donkey (*ḥimār*) if he appears to possess the attribute of mental infirmity (*balādah*), commonly associated with donkeys.[41] This transfer from the default *ḥaqīqa* usage to a *majāz* usage only occurs with the presence of an indicator (*qarīnah*), which could be contextual or rational. The legal theorists recorded many possible instances in which *majāz* occurs and the way the interpreter goes about recognizing *majāz* usage. They also provided methods by which the interpreter recognizes the intended linguistic meaning, since the *majāz*, while only having drawn the interpreter away from

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[36] Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics*, 73.
[37] Henceforth to be referred to as Rāzī.
[38] Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics*, 75.
[39] Gleave, *Islam and Literalism,* 40.
[40] Ibid., (emphasis added).
[41] Gleave, *Islam and* Literalism, 41.

the *waḍʿī* meaning, still requires an indicator to guide the interpreter towards the intended meaning from the various possible linguistic meanings.

The *ḥaqīqa-majāz* dichotomy was not merely a theoretical concept developed by Arab linguists and the *uṣūlīs*. It also played a direct role in Quranic exegesis, especially in debates of *ta'wīl* (metaphorical interpretation). In explaining al-Ghazālī's[42] notion of *ta'wīl*, Whittingham cites Ghazālī's assertion that "every *ta'wīl* is a diversion (*ṣarf*) of the expression from the real meaning (*ḥaqīqa*) to the *majāz*."[43] *Ta'wīl* was the interpretive act by which the interpreter moved from the *waḍʿī* to the *non- waḍʿī* meaning, or from the *ḥaqīqa* to the *majāz*. According to Rāzī, *ta'wīl* is acceptable only when there is "strong evidence" to divert the meaning away from its *waḍʿī* meaning.[44] Jaffer cites Rāzī's claim: "We claim that diverting the verbal expression from the preponderant [meaning] to the non-preponderant [meaning] may take place only through decisive evidence. That decisive evidence may be either verbal or *rational*."[45] *Ta'wīl*, it seems, was applied when, for logical or rational considerations, the *ḥaqīqa* sense did not produce a "coherent" meaning.

Ta'wīl seems to be an innocuous interpretive tool applied to the Quranic text. However, it is also deeply connected with the interpreter's epistemological and metaphysical assumptions. It is for this reason that one notes that a variety of theological groups, such as the Muslim philosophers, the Muʿtazilites, and the Ashʿarīs—like Ghazālī and Rāzī themselves—all equally applied *ta'wīl* yet came to radically different interpretations. This indicates that *ta'wīl* was not merely an interpretive tool that relied on textual considerations. Rather, as Rāzī indicates, there

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[42] Hence forth to be referred to as Ghazālī.
[43] Martin Whittingham, *Al-Ghazālī and the Qur'ān.* Ed. Ian R. Netton, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 32 (translation not mine).
[44] Tariq Jaffer, *Rāzī: Master of Qurʾānic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 78.
[45] Ibid., 79 (emphasis added).

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must be some "decisive evidence" that allows a non-preponderant meaning to be taken as the intended meaning of the author over a preponderant meaning. Various attempts to define "decisive evidence" led to the formation of various epistemological systems; this ultimately influenced the application of *ta'wīl*. Jaffer himself hints at the relationship between *ta'wīl* and issues of epistemology, particularly theological reflections and debates over God's nature and attributes. It is primarily the epistemological component of *ta'wīl*, and not *ta'wīl* per se, that Ibn Taymiyya eventually criticized. It is perhaps appropriate to say that epistemological inclinations in fact necessitated *ta'wīl*, which in turn required the *ḥaqīqa-majāz* dichotomy to first be in place. Before addressing the particulars of Ibn Taymiyya's criticism of the dichotomy, it is incumbent to look at popular approaches to Quranic exegesis in medieval Islam and the role of *ta'wīl* in these approaches. By doing so, we will also begin to highlight Ibn Taymiyya's intellectual milieu in order to better understand his critique of the dichotomy.

4. Various Approaches to Quranic Exegesis: Application of the Dichotomy

Muslim exegetes were always keen on not haphazardly dismissing the apparent meaning of scripture; mere whim could not determine its fate. Nonetheless, exegetical controversies—carefully disguising intricate epistemological debates—uniquely occurred when exegetes attempted to grapple with the verses that seemed to describe God in anthropomorphic ways.[46] Muslims theologians had long before established the theological and Quranic principle of *tanzīh*. This was the Muslim believer's commitment to negating *tashbīh*—any anthropomorphic description of God—and establishing the doctrine of transcendence—that God is unlike anything else. This concept was derived from the Quranic proclamation: "there is nothing unto Him."[47] *Ta'wīl*, therefore, saw particular development and application in what Jaffer has referred to as

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[46] Jaffer, *Rāzī,* 58.
[47] Quran, 42:1.

theological reflection over the *tanzīh*-problem.[48] In order to resolve a number of theological controversies, *ta'wīl* was utilized in order to reject the apparent meaning of scripture. Not only was it applied to verses describing God's nature and attributes, but also, for the Muslim philosophers, *ta'wīl* was applicable to Quranic verses describing the unseen, such as the descriptions of paradise and hellfire, and used in defense of metaphysical claims such as the co-eternity of the world with God.[49] Positing certain Quranic verses as cases of *majāz* requiring *ta'wīl* allowed the anthropomorphic verses to be reinterpreted according to their various linguistic possibilities. As such, *tanzīh* was always affirmed and anthropomorphism (*tashbīh)* always negated. This was based on the assumption that the apparent meaning of scripture—particularly the apparent sense of the anthropomorphic verses—could not be reconciled with a specific conception of God's absolute transcendence that developed under the influence of Hellenistic reasoning. Although *ta'wīl* was used in a variety of theological contexts, it suffices to examine its role amongst the rational theologians and the Muslim philosophers.

4.1 The Rational Theologians (*al-mutakallimūn*): the Ash'arīs

Since *ta'wīl* relied on *majāz* for its conceptual framework, any act of *ta'wīl* depended on the interpreter's conception of *majāz*, specifically the determination of when the *ḥaqīqa* was to be rejected. The rational theologians, which included groups such as the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arīs, had a detailed theological approach that dictated when the *ḥaqīqa* was to be denied. Ash'arism particularly gained prominence amongst Sunni traditionalists and produced famous theologians such as Ghazālī (1058-1111 AD) and Rāzī (1150-1210 AD), revered scholars of this tradition. It is to their conception of *ta'wīl* that we now direct our attention.

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[48] Jaffer, *Rāzī,* 58.
[49] Averroës, *Decisive Treatise and Epistle Dedicatory,* trans. Charles E. Butterworth, (Utah: Brigham Young University, 2001), 9.

Ta'wīl, in its verbal form (*awwala*), linguistically refers to "bringing something to its origin."[50] The theologians argued that it was through *ta'wīl* that one was brought to the original or intended meaning of a verse. *Ta'wīl* was necessary, as Ghazālī argued, because God at times chose to speak via metaphors and symbols. This was not problematic because it was claimed that the Arabs also spoke in this way, and the Quran was to be interpreted according to the precedent of the Arabs. Therefore, the goal of the interpreter was to uncover the linguistically correct meaning in the case that the *ḥaqīqa* sense of the word was deemed impossible for whatever reason. This interpretive technique, later termed *qānūn al-ta'wīl*, was founded on the epistemological assumption that a rational demonstration (*burhān al-'aql*) could never be false and that the Quran could never contradict such evidence. Since the rational theologians established the veracity of revelation based on demonstrative evidence[51], the text could never contradict such evidence, lest it undermined its own epistemological foundation. This was equivalent to the fallacy of using a method to conclude that the method itself was flawed or led to false conclusions.

Qānūn al-*ta'wīl* was frequently applied to the seemingly anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Quran. In order to preserve the doctrine of God's ultimate transcendence (*tanzīh*), the apparent meaning of scripture was rejected for a rationally coherent, metaphorical meaning.[52] For instance, Ghazālī argued that when the Quran attributes a hand (*yad*) to God's essence, it is rationally known that there is no external existence that can be referred to as "God's hand." No such entity, in fact, exists.[53] To interpret God's *yad* as a "literal" hand, an attribute (*ṣifah*)

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[50] Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 107.
[51] The kalām theologians have many evidences for establishing the existence of God and the veracity of the Prophet and the Quran. One of them is commonly known as the kalām cosmological argument. For more, see William L. Craig's *The Kalām Cosmological Argument*, (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2000).
[52] Ibid., 149.
[53] Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 107.

attributed (*iḍāfah*) to an entity, would compromise the doctrine of God's transcendence. The rational theologians argued that attributing a *yad* to God would imply that God was composite (*murakkab)*, or composed of different elements; namely, the *yad* and that which is other than the *yad*, resulting in a duality in God's essence. Based on what one finds in humans, anything in possession of a *yad* was deemed composite. It was thought that this implied an ontological similarity (*ishtirāk*) between the creator and the created. Theologically, however, God was neither divisible nor anything like His creation; this had to be negated.[54] Nonetheless, the Ash'arīs were committed traditionalists. An entire dismissal of verses describing God as possessing a *yad,* or the argument that these verses were meaningless descriptions (*ta'ṭeel*), was also not a possibility since scripture had affirmed such attributes on numerous occasions. Rather, *ta'wīl* was used to metaphorically re-interpret these verses. In accordance with *kalām al-'arab, yad* could linguistically refer to a variety of meanings. For example, it could refer to *qudrah* (capability or power)*, qabḍ* (grasping)*, or basṭ* (releasing) amongst other possibilities. For Ghazālī, since *yad* implies "that with which one seizes something and makes something, with which one gives and takes," he considered this to be the true meaning of the passage.[55] God indeed does have a *yad*—this of course could not be denied—but the intent of God by such a description is not a reference to the *ḥaqīqa* sense of the word; rather, the reference is to His power and the capacity to give and take.

Other theologians of the Ash'arī tradition also applied *ta'wīl* to additional verses, such as those describing God's anger and love. The rational theologians argued that anger according to its conventional meaning referred to a human kind of anger, implying a number of deficiencies

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[54] Other attributes and acts of God, such as those that expressed movement, time, and space, also had to be reinterpreted. The demonstrative evidence that allowed the rational theologians to establish the existence of God and the veracity of the Quran also required them to negate God of certain attributes. Otherwise, the theologians would undermine their own foundational principles.

[55] Ibid.

including the movement of bodily emotions or the desire to seek revenge. Because of such

negative implications, Ghazālī argued that God's anger must therefore refer to his ability to

punish rather than an actual anger.[56] Similarly, others equated God's love to His will to resolve

issues of theodicy.[57] Particular theologians such as Ibn 'Aqīl and al-Juwaynī even rejected the

possibility of the believer loving God.[58] In fact, Ibn Taymiyya included this in his critique of the

rational theologians. He had accused the Ash'arīs of rejecting the basic and intuitive idea of

man's ability to love God since, according to the Ash'arīs, this would imply an affinity between

the Creator and the created, as is often seen in the relationship between the lover and the

beloved. To resolve this issue, the Ash'arīs reinterpreted the believer's love for God as a love for

His divine law.[59]

Despite the prevalent use of *ta'wīl* in exegesis, Sunni exegetes were very well aware of

the dangers of unrestricted *ta'wīl*. Epistemological theories not only determined but also limited

the applicability of *ta'wīl* to particular scenarios in order to prevent complete interpretive chaos.

For Ghazālī, as well, there were limits to *ta'wīl*. Ghazālī argued that Quranic descriptions must

indeed always refer to something. Even if the apparent meaning of scripture was rejected, it must

be maintained that the meanings of the Quran refer to *some* external existent. Explicit denial was

equivalent to saying that God invented concepts and stories that had no relation to reality.

According to Ghazālī, an explicit denial would render the claimant an unbeliever. For this reason

it was maintained that while *ta'wīl* could be used to discover deeper, hidden (*bāṭin*) meanings of

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[56] Ibid., 108.
[57] Equating God's love to His will was an attempt to explain how an infinitely beneficent God could create evil. By equating God's love to His will, there remained only God's will, and it was not seen necessary to make any reference to God's love. For this see Joseph Norment Bell, *Love Theory in Later Hanbalite Islam,* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979) 46-49, 74-91, and see Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism,* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 72-76.
[58] Bell, *Love Theory in Later Hanbalite Islam*, 53.
[59] Ibid., 48.

the text, these *bāṭin* meanings could not contradict the outward, apparent sense of the text.[60]

Clearly, Sunni traditionalists thought it necessary to draw the hermeneutical boundaries of the text. On the other hand, it was the philosophers who were more than willing to challenge these established boundaries and argue that certain parts of scripture—or scripture in its entirety— were merely myths.

According to Ghazālī's framework, *ta'wīl* functioned on the basis of epistemic systems that offered various formulations of "demonstrative evidence." *Ta'wīl* was the tool of the interpreter if the *ḥaqīqa* reading of the text could not be the author's intent due to rational considerations, such as the "production of a demonstration (*qiyām al-burhān).*"[61] Due to apodictic evidence, the apparent meaning of scripture could be rejected in search for the true, intended meaning. Ghazālī's approach to *ta'wīl* is much more intricate than can be demonstrated here. For our purposes, it is worth noting that epistemological formulations determined the sense of the text that was considered the author's intent—whether the apparent or the metaphorical— and the method by which the interpreter was supposed to designate the correct metaphorical meaning. It also becomes clear from Ghazālī's approach, as mentioned before, that *ta'wīl* was crucial in resolving the *tashbīh*-problem. At this point, it behooves the reader to examine Rāzī's approach to exegesis. Rāzī represents a significant development within Asha'rism, although not a radical departure from the overall rationalist tradition.

If there remains any doubt of the link that exists between exegesis and epistemology, Rāzī's exegetical methodology indisputably puts the matter to rest. Rāzī further developed *'ilm al-ta'wīlāt* (the science of interpretation) as a systematic approach to resolving the *tashbīh*-issue and other epistemological conflicts with the apparent meaning of scripture in order to create a

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[60] Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology,* 113.
[61] Ibid., 112 (translation not mine).

method by which acts of *ta'wīl* could be controlled and properly guided. Rāzī developed the Ghazālian paradigm that he inherited from his predecessors. He aimed to form a coherent application of *ta'wīl* by which demonstrative evidence would always be reconciled with scripture. Demonstrative evidence (*burhān*) was ultimately defined by concepts and terms borrowed from Aristotelian logic and metaphysics. For example, Rāzī famously criticized certain Quranic expressions as rational impossibilities, such as God being in a direction (above) and ascending His Throne. *Ta'wīl* was not only optional at this point but also absolutely necessary for the "intelligent" believer.[62] Rāzī, like Ghazālī, had also famously criticized his earlier Ashʿarī predecessors for not properly and exhaustively accounting for all rational evidences; by this way, he explained away the early Ashʿarīs' conservative and limited application of *ta'wīl*.[63]

Despite numerous similarities, Rāzī's approach was quite distinct from his Ashʿarī predecessors. As Jaffer notes, Rāzī "succeeded in importing philosophical concepts and methods into Quranic exegesis (*tafsīr)*, sometimes directly and at other times through the intermediary of Islamic theology (*kalām)*."[64] It was Rāzī that engineered the project of fully incorporating philosophy into exegesis.[65] Whether or not this claim is historically factual is irrelevant. Rāzī's exegetical methodology does indeed emphasize the significance of epistemology in *tafsīr*. Since it was argued that demonstrative evidence is powerful enough to steer Quranic interpretation away from its apparent meaning, the interpreter's epistemological approach determined what qualified as apodictic evidence. It was due to differing epistemological paradigms that the rational theologians and philosophers often differed with one another in interpretive issues.

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[62] Jaffer, *Rāzī,* 74.

[63] Regarding the issue of God's attributes, the early Ashʿarīs reinterpreted a limited number of attributes while later Ashʿarīs had a more "liberal" application of *ta'wīl*. The later Ashʿarīs argue that this was due to the fact that theological controversies grew in number throughout the centuries, so *ta'wīl* was increasingly applied in order to resolve those issues. They also claim that the later generation of Ashʿarīs merely gave form to the spirit of the earlier generations.

[64] Jaffer, *Rāzī*, 68-69.

[65] Jaffer, *Rāzī*, 69.

Reason—*as presented through the demonstrative sciences*—was an infallible source of knowledge that never erred. It could not be called into question because it was ultimately that which established the veracity of revelation itself.[66] Revelation could not speak except through the filter of reason. Scripture could not challenge all that was established as indubitable evidence by the philosophical enterprise. Rather, scripture was always to be reinterpreted if any clashes occurred. This was due to the philosophical claim that it was reason that had originally established the veracity of scripture. As a result, Anjum states, "the system that had been recruited to *defend revelation*, in other words, had silenced, or at least severely limited, revelation itself."[67] However, the traditional Ashʿarīs, like Ghazālī and Rāzī, were against relegating scripture to the level of complete myths.[68] This would, for the Muslim philosophers, be the real sacrifice of arguing for the compatibility of Hellenistic philosophy with divine scripture. They were, unlike the Ashʿarīs, willing to stretch the hermeneutical boundaries to whatever extent necessary. If scripture was to be read in coherence with the absolute truths of the philosophers, then it was to suffer in a number of interpretive scenarios. This is clearer in the exegetical practices of the philosophers such as Ibn Rushd and Ibn Ṭufayl. The case of the philosophers will also further delineate the differing conceptions of apodictic evidence.

4.2 The Muslim Philosophers: Ibn Rushd and Ibn Ṭufayl

Ibn Rushd (1126-1198 AD), popularly known as Averroes, was an important Muslim scholar and philosopher. Besides having written an extensive jurisprudential manual for the

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[66] Yahya J. Michot, "A Mamlūk Theologian's Commentary on Avicenna's *Risāla Aḍḥawiyya*: Being a Translation of a Part of the *Darʾ al-Taʿārud* of Ibn Taymiyya with Introduction, Annotation, and Appendices Part I.," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 14, no. 2 (May 2003): 157.

[67] Anjum, *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought,* 149-150.

[68] Heath, "Creative Hermeneutics," 190-200. It is as Heath says, "He [the philosopher] adopts what he wants or needs from each [tradition and philosophy] to *create* his own symbols." It seems that the essential difference between the philosophers and the Ashʿarīs was that the philosophers saw no boundaries to philosophizing religion. For the Ashʿarīs, however, the rational systems they erected were ultimately in defense of revelation. As for the philosophers, truth was that which was established by the philosophical enterprise; accordingly, revelation was only useful for the commoners.

Mālikī school of thought, Ibn Rushd is famously known for his *The Decisive Treatise*, a short

treatise arguing for the harmony between Aristotelian philosophy and religion.[69] This treatise

provides a useful insight into Ibn Rushd's employment of *ta'wīl*. As will be explained, his

application of *ta'wīl* was starkly different from that of the rational theologians. There were

certain limits that the rational theologians were unwilling to challenge due to their commitment

to Sunni traditionalism and scripture. The Muslim philosophers, however, rather "liberally"

applied *ta'wīl* and had no hesitation in violating the limits that the rational theologians

considered sacred. Ibn Rushd uniquely wrote this treatise in the format of a *fatwā*, proposing a

legal opinion, in which he argues for the permissibility of studying philosophy.[70] It is not

farfetched, nor an exaggeration, to argue that Ibn Rushd—himself a highly trained philosopher—

was perhaps defending the very enterprise of philosophy against not only the anti-rationalists but

also the conservatism of the rational theologians. Ibn Rushd had criticized the rational

theologians for having a rather arbitrary and bipolar relationship with reason and revelation. The

rational theologians, despite their serious reliance on the Aristotelian sciences, formed certain

limits to prevent the over-rationalization of scripture. For them, reason had its place. Thus, it

seems that *ta'wīl* for the philosophers was not only significant for reconciling the apparent

meaning of scripture with certain philosophical doctrines, but also the justification of *ta'wīl*, as a

valid exegetical tool, was simultaneously the defense of philosophy itself and the philosophizing

of scripture.

In Ibn Rushd's work, one notes the many philosophical imports brought to Quranic

exegesis, but there is one that reigns above all else: the supremacy of Aristotelian thought. Ibn

Rushd's interpretive project begins from the idea "that Aristotle had founded the main

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[69] Catarina Belo, *Averroes and Hegel on Philosophy and Religion*. (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013) 24.
[70] Ibid., 21.

disciplines of knowledge, namely logic, physics and metaphysics, and had committed no significant errors, where nothing significant could be added to his ideas and writing."[71] He regarded Aristotle as having formulated detailed systems of knowledge; nothing could contradict the First Philosopher. Although Ghazālī also had a commitment to the rational sciences—especially Aristotelian logic— the Ghazālian approach to *ta'wīl* was dissatisfying to the "true" rationalist. Ibn Rushd rightly noted that the complicated rational evidences offered by the Ash'arīs for the existence of God and the veracity of scripture could not be swallowed by the Muslim multitude. Consequently, he formulated a unique way of maintaining a dual commitment to the apparent meaning of scripture and the metaphysical doctrines inherited from the Greek masters. For this purpose, Ibn Rushd offered the idea of different types of assent for the different classes of people.[72] Instead of applying interpretive feats to *particular* verses of scripture in order to reconcile rationality with the apparent sense of scripture, Ibn Rushd argued that revelation speaks to *different types of people in different ways*. He explained that an individual could only truly believe if he assents based on persuasion. Persuasion, however, occurs in a variety of ways since intellectual capabilities vary from individual to individual; one could not reasonably expect all individuals to assent (or be persuaded) based on abstruse, rational evidences. Thus, Ibn Rushd made the case that revelation spoke to three distinctive classes of beings: the philosophers, the rational theologians, and the multitude.[73] Each class assents to revelation in a different way, appropriate to its own intellectual capability or lack thereof. This tripartite division seems to be

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[71] Ibid., 7.

[72] Ibid., 38.

[73] The "multitudes" or the "masses" is a highly controversial concept pregnant with a number of implications. I take the position that esoteric truths (whether philosophical or mystical) *require* positing a hierarchy within society, thus leading to social divisions between "elite" and the "masses." In a philosophical hierarchy, one posits that the commoners do not possess the intellectual capabilities for philosophy; in a mystical hierarchy, one posits that the commoners do not posses the spiritual capability to know God like the elite. This intellectual and spiritual incompetence will be better expressed in Ibn Ṭufayl's philosophical novel. For more information on the link between esotericism and elitism in the works of Ghazālī, see Ovamir Anjum's *Cultural Memory of the Pious Ancestors (Salaf) in al-Ghazālī*.

inspired by Aristotle's division of three types of discourses or syllogisms: demonstrative, dialectical, and rhetorical.[74] Respectively, the demonstrative discourse was solely for the philosophers, who have access to a "more spiritual understanding of divine nature."[75] The dialecticians, or the rational theologians, were trained in the rational sciences to at least some extent, a degree above the commoners. However, Ibn Rushd criticized them for their inconsistency in their application of Hellenistic reasoning and their lack of rigorous application of the methodology of the philosophical masters. The rhetorical class, unlike the other two classes, was regarded as the class of the multitude; most people were thought not to possess rational training—and too incompetent to be trained as well. They must satisfy themselves with "material or physical perception of the religious reality."[76] This class, however, would have no serious desire of knowing God in a deeper way in the first place.[77] Although Ibn Rushd does seem to be inspired by Aristotle's tripartite division of syllogistic discourse, this does not necessarily mean that Aristotle argued for a hierarchical division within society that corresponds to these various discourses. While Aristotle did offer such divisions within his works, there is no serious evidence that this is the kind of usage Aristotle intended. The three discourses—the demonstrative, the dialectical, and the rhetorical—are not for three different kinds of constitutions or groups. For Aristotle, these three discourses work in tandem, and at times individually, depending on the content of the logical proposition rather than the nature of the audience.[78]

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[74] The three types of syllogism in this context refer to the *content* of the syllogism. However, formal logic is more concerned with *form* of a syllogism and the way in which one produces a valid syllogism that leads to certitude.
[75] Belo, *Averroes and Hegel on Philosophy and Religion,* 40.
[76] Ibid., 39.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid., 43.

Whether or not Ibn Rushd authentically interpreted Aristotle is a minor point of discussion for our purposes. It is more pertinent to examine the consequences of Ibn Rushd's framework. Although the Muslim philosophers dealt with the same interpretive issue as the rational theologians—reconciling scripture with rational systems—their methods starkly differed. For Ibn Rushd, the solution was to posit that revelation speaks to people in different ways in order to logically explain the conflict between philosophical truths and the apparent sense of scripture. He effectively argued that revelation was ultimately in *need* of philosophical inquiry in order to be able to express the highest form of truth. Theoretically speaking, a community devoid of philosophers would never have access to the highest level of interpretation. This is a natural corollary of an epistemological system that posits that only the philosophers are qualified to apply *ta'wīl* due to their training in the rational sciences. For this reason, Ibn Rushd maintained that the application of *ta'wīl* was limited to the philosopher.[79] Based on his notion of persuasion and assent—clearly an epistemological framework offered by the philosopher—Ibn Rushd relegated the role of scripture to being a mere complement to the absolute truths offered by the philosophical enterprise. The purpose of scripture was to simply induce the assent of potential believers. Consequently, scripture does not impart true knowledge, particularly regarding matters of the unseen like God, His attributes, and the afterlife. If it ever does, then it is only when the philosopher is at work, performing acts of *ta'wīl*. According to this paradigm, revelation was nothing more than an effective myth for the multitude.[80]

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[79] Ibid., 39.

[80] The idea of the Noble Lie or Noble Myth is famously mentioned in Plato's *Republic*. It seems to me that even as Plato offers the idea of communicating the noble myth for a high and noble purpose, he describes the difficulty that people would experience in swallowing the myth. As Socrates begins to explain the "Phoenician story," there is an atmosphere of sheer embarrassment. Plato mentions on the tongue of Glaucon, "It isn't for nothing that you were so shy about telling your *falsehood*" (emphasis added). For Ibn Rushd to then argue that the effective myth was employed by a divine entity was considered a theological blasphemy by many Muslim thinkers. It is in light of this criticism that when I use the term "myth," I intend to convey the negative and problematic implications of this concept. For more, see Nehamas and Woodruff, "Phaedrus," 971-1223.

A similar concept is demonstrated in a less technical yet socially popular style in Ibn

Ṭufayl's *Hayy Ibn Yaqzān.* Ibn Ṭufayl's philosophical tale is the story of the young Hayy who is

raised by a doe on a remote island. Unaided by society, language, and "mass religion," Hayy,

through his own philosophical curiosity and spiritual training, "encounters the Truth."[81] After his

spiritual endeavors and enlightenment, Hayy encountered Absāl—a righteous believer from

another island who had been bestowed with a divine text from a God-sent prophet. It was first

through Absāl and then his community that Hayy was introduced to a society that possessed

mass religion and positive law. However, Hayy never fully comprehended the revelation that this

society received and their acclaimed prophet. Despite his frustrations, he eventually concluded

that this prophet "must have been a messenger sent by His Lord."[82] Nonetheless, he did not—and

could not—grasp "why did this prophet rely for the most part on symbols to portray the divine

world, allowing mankind to fall into the grave error of conceiving the Truth corporeally."[83] And

how could Hayy understand after having already experienced the Truth without the aid of any

linguistic medium (i.e. scripture)? It is here that Hayy is introduced to the discourse of the

rhetorical class, as mentioned in Ibn Rushd's paradigm. He struggles to grasp the rationale for

the anthropomorphistic language found in revelation. Hayy argued that if the multitude—the

people of the island—knew the truth, they would no longer need these laws nor religious rituals

to comprehend the divine.[84] Nonetheless, Hayy eventually came to the rather modest concession

that there was no hope of conveying the philosophical-mystical truth to the multitude. They

possessed an "inborn infirmity" and "they wanted to know Him in some human way."[85] He came

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[81] Ibn Ṭufayl. *Hayy Ibn Yaqzān: A Philosophical Tale*, trans. Lenn Evan Goodman (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 152.
[82] Ibid., 161.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.,162.
[85] Ibid., 163.

to terms with the human condition; "he saw that men are no better than unreasoning animals" and that they required positive law, lest they would devour one another.[86] This tale however does not end so abruptly. Although Hayy returns to his former life of isolation, realizing the reality of the society "blessed" with a prophet and revelation, he admits that the truth Absāl acquired was *similar*—but never the same—to the Truth he acquired. To many readers of Ibn Ṭufayl, the final moments of the tale are not satisfying. It is perhaps that Hayy's acceptance of the society's form of truth, one dependent on a prophet and revelation, seems to be a pretentious bow towards organized religion.[87] One can speculate a variety of motives—philosophical, political, and historical—for such an ending to the text, but these are not significant for present considerations.

Ibn Rushd and Ibn Ṭufayl, despite their differences in exegesis, provide similar paradigms. Even though the role of *ta'wīl* is not immediately clear in Ibn Ṭufayl's novel, his approach to scripture is quite similar to that of Ibn Rushd in that he suggests different levels of realization of scripture based on the varying levels of intellect and spirituality found amongst individuals. It is therefore crucial to pay attention to the role of scripture in exegetical paradigms that relied on *ta'wīl*.

Ta'wīl arguably altered the epistemological status of scripture in a variety of ways. As noted before, different rational systems produced differing applications of *ta'wīl*. This afforded scripture a rather precarious role in *tafsīr* as it struggled to maintain its own supremacy. At times it seems that scripture for the philosophers was merely a mouthpiece for expressing philosophical truths; nevertheless, scripture retained at least a nominal advantage over philosophical discourse because it appealed to all levels of society, not just the philosophers. While philosophical discourse induced the assent of the philosophers, such complicated

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[86] Ibid., 164.
[87] Ibid., 48. This is the view of Goodman, the translator of the text.

explanations would place the multitude at the cliff of disbelief, if they were to ever wander about such knowledge. Hence, the Muslim laity was expected to refer to the apparent meaning of scripture and to submit to its corporeal images and parables. However, Ibn Taymiyya criticized the philosophers for providing the laity with a reading of scripture that was explicitly inferior to the epistemologically superior and truth providing discourse of the philosophers. As for the paradigm of the rational theologians, the philosophers had criticized them for a bipolar relationship with tradition and philosophy. They argued that the rational theologians were not faithful to the Greek enterprise and did not fully account for all rational evidences. According to the Muslim philosophers, that lack of consistency was the greatest issue with the rational theologians. While the rational theologians criticized the philosophers for effectively allowing scripture little to no status in their interpretive paradigm, the philosophers in return criticized the theologians for not rigorously applying the rational sciences. Ibn Taymiyya, however, in reaffirming the supremacy of scripture, launched an assault against *ta'wīl* in both paradigms.

The discussion of the various approaches to exegesis within the Sunni tradition, particularly the usage of *ta'wīl*, allows for a clearer understanding of the role of epistemological paradigms in exegesis, which is at the basis of Ibn Taymiyya's contentious attitude towards the *ḥaqīqa-majāz* dichotomy. Debates of epistemology primarily centered around the role of philosophy within the Islamic tradition and whether it could be justified as a legitimate enterprise despite its numerous conflicts with the apparent meaning of scripture. It is in light of these various applications of *ta'wīl* and the respective epistemological debates that the "Taymiyyan intervention" is offered.[88]

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[88] Anjum, *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought,* 182. Anjum, in referring to the powerful influence Ibn Taymiyya had on the Islamic tradition, refers to him as an intervention. By this, he means that Ibn Taymiyya's influence "went far beyond Ḥanbalism. Every aspect of the classical Islamic tradition, it is no exaggeration to suggest, was either transformed or profoundly challenged by his intervention."

5. Ibn Taymiyya's Theory of Language & Interpretation

For the purpose of this analysis, I will, in addition to Ibn Taymiyya, rely on the works of his well-known student, Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah[89], especially regarding an explication of the *ḥaqīqa-majāz* dichotomy. In many ways, Ibn Qayyim was an important and faithful defender of the Taymiyyan doctrine. Because of the clarity and systemic nature of Ibn Qayyim's writing style, many readers of Ibn Taymiyya find a better and more methodical elucidation of the Taymiyyan model in Ibn Qayyim's works.

Ibn Taymiyya's interpretive model is often dismissed as a literalist and anti-rationalist approach to Quranic exegesis. For this reason, it is not given the attention it truly deserves in discussions on Quranic exegetical methodology and philosophy of language.[90] Nonetheless, after even a cursory inspection of Ibn Taymiyya's written works that deal with interpretive methodology, one realizes that his approach, contrary to popular opinion, is indeed nuanced. In fact, Ibn Taymiyya offers a linguistic theory that has some resonance with modern pragmatism. Thus, to describe him as a literalist is extremely misleading. Ibn Taymiyya not only offered a unique linguistic theory but also a contextual approach to interpretation from which he argued for particular methods of understanding scripture, including the verses that describe God in seemingly anthropomorphic ways. Throughout Islamic intellectual history, many interpretive debates revolved around the best way of interpreting God's self-representation within scripture—verses describing His essence, attributes, and actions—which, at least from a purely linguistic standpoint, was always amenable to various theological readings.

As is obvious from the previous sections, the *ḥaqīqa-majāz* paradigm and *ta'wīl* were important concepts for the majority of traditional Sunni scholars writing on Quranic exegesis.

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[89] I will henceforth refer to Ibn al-Qayyim as Ibn Qayyim.
[90] Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics,* 87.

Although there were critics of the dichotomy, for the most part it enjoyed an esteemed status in books of Quranic exegesis and Arabic rhetoric.[91] Nevertheless, Ibn Taymiyya was more than willing to challenge the cherished position the *ḥaqīqa-majāz* dichotomy enjoyed amongst Muslim exegetes.[92] His critique of the dichotomy was part of his overall critique of the theoretical sciences (*uṣūl*) of Islam.[93] However, Ibn Taymiyya was not only (nor primarily) concerned with linguistic issues pertaining to the dichotomy. Although the works of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim offer much material for philosophers of language[94], they do not necessarily write on such issues for the sake of contributing to discussions on language, although much can be gained in this respect as well. Rather, as Hallaq has pointed out, Ibn Taymiyya had a profound ability to recognize the "fundamental principles upon which the most complex systems of thought are erected."[95] Thus, little distracted by the peripheral linguistic arguments, Ibn Taymiyya attacked the intellectual apparatus behind the dichotomy and *ta'wīl* of the Quran. Specifically, he criticized the ideological underpinnings of the dichotomy—the metaphysical and epistemological systems upon which the dichotomy was formulated. Although Ibn Taymiyya's critique is indeed supported by a unique linguistic theory, ideology was at the heart of the issue. He aimed to, on the most fundamental level, "undo the influence of the corrupting intellectual trends, be they foreign or indigenous." By means of his critique, Ibn Taymiyya shed light on the

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[91] Abdul Rahman Mustafa in "Ibn Taymiyyah & Wittgenstein on Language," *The Muslim World* 108, no. 3 (July 2018): 476 notes that a scholar named Abū Isḥāq al-Isfarā'īnī (d. 418/1027) had his reservations about the theory of metaphorical meaning.

[92] For more on Ibn Taymiyya's passionate defense of his personal views despite opposition from many contemporary scholars, see *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, eds. Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed, (New York: Oxford University Press).

[93] Anjum, *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought,* 178.

[94] For such recent and insightful research, see Abdul Rahman Mustafa, "Ibn Taymiyyah & Wittgenstein on Language," 465-491.

[95] Wael B. Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya Against the Greek Logicians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), xiv. Although Hallaq particularly writes about Ibn Taymiyya's refutation of the Greek logicians and his criticism of the categorical syllogism, one notes a similar ability in all his criticisms in any particular field. Specifically, the dichotomy was, for Ibn Taymiyya, at the heart of the incorrect application of *ta'wīl* and a deviation from the method of the early Muslims in exegesis. In this way, attacking the dichotomy was as important as attacking the categorical syllogism. Both were at the center of systems of thought that Ibn Taymiyya sought to deconstruct.

ideological implications of the dichotomy, which may not have been transparent to many traditional exegetes.[96]

In the battlefield of ideologies, Ibn Taymiyya's concerns were epistemological and metaphysical, which in turn influenced theological discussions, specifically controversies over God's attributes. The theological significance of Ibn Taymiyya's critique is indicated by a cursory look at Ibn Qayyim's *al-Ṣawā'iq al-Mursalah*[97]—a large portion of which is dedicated to a detailed refutation of the application of *majāz* to the Quran. He contended that *majāz* was not merely the tool of theologically deviant groups such as the *Shī'ah*, *Bāṭinites* (esotericists), and Mu'tazilites, all of whom even Ghazālī had prolifically refuted in his writings. Rather, the *majāz-ta'wīl* paradigm was at the core of the Ash'arī interpretive project, the group that Ibn Taymiyya was most concerned with and perceived to be the greatest theological influence and threat. Although Ibn Taymiyya intellectually benefited from the Ash'arīs and found them closest to the *sunna* (the prophetic tradition) in comparison to other groups, he found it utterly necessary to provide an intellectual critique because of their widespread methodological influence.[98] In fact, Ibn Taymiyya's true interlocutors were the Ash'arī s more than the philosophers. The philosophers were less of a threat because they effectively reduced scripture to the level of mere myths, which was already rejected by most Muslim scholars.[99] It was the rational theologians that accepted scripture with the caveat that it could not say that which contradicted their epistemic system. Specifically, Ibn Taymiyya emphatically condemned Ash'arī obsession with

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[96]As this thesis attempts to show, it is not farfetched to argue that the dichotomy was formulated so that certain ideologies and epistemic systems could be read into the Quran. No serious exegete would champion a particular interpretation—whether it be founded on Hellenistic rationality or not—without first developing the literary tools necessary for making such hermeneutical leaps possible.

[97] Since the entire *al-Ṣawā'iq* is not available, reference is solely made to the summarized edition: Muḥammad Ibn Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-Ṣawā'iq al-Mursalah 'alā al-Jahmiyyah wa al-Mu'aṭṭilah l-ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya*, ed. al-Ḥasan ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-'Alawī. 4 vols. (Riyādh: Aḍwā' al-Salaf, 2004). See also Yasir Qadhi, "'The Unleashed Thunderbolts' of Ibn Qayyim al-Gawziyyah: An Introductory Essay," 145.

[98] Anjum, *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought*, 186-189.

[99] Heath, "Creative Hermeneutics," 193-194.

absolute tanzīh (God's transcendence), which for him only developed under influence of

Hellenistic reasoning. In the pursuit of establishing God's absolute dissimilarity to His creation,

the Ash'arī s subjected the seemingly anthropomorphic descriptions of God to *ta'wīl*. According

to Ibn Taymiyya, this negatively impacted the believer's conception of God's attributes. And

how could one properly worship God, as one ought to, without a correct conception of His

attributes? The *ḥaqīqa-majāz* dichotomy was certainly at the center of this debate.

The aim of the following sections is to elucidate Ibn Taymiyya's approach to language

and interpretation, which simultaneously incorporates his critique of the *ḥaqīqa-majāz*

dichotomy. Particularly in the next section, I will examine some of the concepts that revolved

around the conventional theory of meaning, the intellectual foundation of the dichotomy, and

then transition to Ibn Taymiyya's critique of this theory based on its metaphysical underpinnings

and internal incoherencies. Then, I will offer Ibn Taymiyya's conception of language and his

contextual theory of interpretation.

5.1 The Conventional Theory

According to the conventional (*waḍ'ī*) theory of meanings, "certain utterances and words

were assigned to signify certain objects."[100] This theory maintains that after an act of

signification there is an essential relationship between a word and its meaning. Whether this act

of signification was (originally) performed by God, humans, or some combination thereof is a

highly contested issue[101] and is irrelevant for our purposes. According to the conventional

theory, the word "lion" for instance, when uttered in isolation without any conditions,

immediately refers to the mental image conjured in one's mind of a ravenous animal. In reality,

this image is formed by a process of abstraction that draws from one's particular experiences of

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[100] Mustafa, "Ibn Taymiyyah & Wittgenstein on Language," 469.
[101] Ibid.

distinct lions in the external world. The mind retains the common and most notable features amongst distinct particulars. This abstract, mental image is however unique to the mental life in that the image itself is devoid of the particular characteristics that are necessarily found in external existents. Because there is no external entity except with features particular to it, this mental image in reality corresponds to nothing in the external world. Similarly, after experiencing black objects in the external world, the mind forms a concept of blackness. Therefore, the word "black," uttered without any qualification (i.e. without saying "a black cat"), inherently refers to the mental concept of black. It was additionally argued that since the most *common* usage of lion during communicative acts is in reference to a ravenous animal, this came to be its conventional meaning. The usage of lion to refer to a meaning other than a ravenous animal would thus be considered contrary to convention and was deemed a metaphorical usage. The conception of common usage as an indicator of conventional meaning is also, it seems, based on the principle of abstraction.[102]

The conventional theory addresses two important philosophical inquiries. Firstly, Muslim scholars attempted to explain the origins of language and the relationship between words and their meanings. Secondly, they attempted to reconcile the finite nature of language (in words) yet its ability to refer to things and produce meaning ad infinitum. In addressing the first question, the distinction between the *ḥaqīqa* and *majāz* arose as a conclusion to the proposition that words (usually) refer to a meaning in a primary sense (*ḥaqīqa*) and refer to other meanings in a secondary, metaphorical (*majāz*) sense—as already demonstrated by the example of the lion. As for the second dilemma, Rāzī formulated that words, in fact, do not refer to individual, external objects; rather, words refer to inner concepts, by which the individual cognizes particular,

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[102] This will be later explained in Section 5.2.1.

36

external objects.[103] Thus words, due to convention, inherently refer to mental concepts. Although words even in this model at the end of the communicative process refer to particular external entities, it was actually the proposition that *words in isolation* refer to mental abstractions that would be eventually challenged by Ibn Taymiyya. For example, the word "black," uttered in isolation, is meaningful according to the conventional theory because it refers to the mental concept of black. It was on the basis of an Aristotelian theory of universals that Muslim linguists could argue that words refer to mental abstracts. It is this metaphysical conception that Ibn Taymiyya challenges.

The conventional theory contains the philosophical premises of atomism and foundationalism. Atomism, in a linguistic paradigm, refers to the idea that there are certain meanings that are simple and unqualified. A foundationalist epistemic theory posits that there are certain foundational, or basic beliefs, that give epistemic status, or justification, to other beliefs; certain facts of knowledge are known *a priori*. Similarly, foundationalism, in a linguistic sense, refers to the idea that meanings are predetermined.[104] An atomic conception of language argues that words uttered in isolation—without any qualifications or restrictions—have significance. This meaning is foundational, or predetermined; words necessarily refer to certain meanings. This allegedly predetermined relationship between words and meanings is based on the metaphysical assumption that there are universals that underlie all particulars. In other words, there is an essential (abstract) relationship between a word and its meaning before particular usage.

According to this model, since words can refer to meanings, or mental abstracts, without any context, the conventional theory posits an abstract language that exists prior to actual

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[103] Ibid., 480-481.
[104] Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics*, 88.

communicative situations. Consequently, a class of metaphorical usage is created because a speaker in a communicative situation can use a word to refer to other than its "inherent" meaning. In transitioning to Ibn Taymiyya's critique and model, it is appropriate to compare the conventional theory to a realist theory of universals in contrast to Ibn Taymiyya's usage and context-based model. It comes as no surprise that Ibn Taymiyya's interpretive model is closer to a nominalist theory that prioritizes the particular at the expense of the universal.[105]

5.2. Ibn Taymiyya's Criticism

Ibn Taymiyya's model prioritizes particular utterances within unique contexts against the Aristotelian influenced model, which allots meaning to words regardless of context (atomism). Ibn Taymiyya's criticism of the conventional theory is multi-faceted. It suffices for our purposes to examine two major aspects of this critique. Firstly, this includes a metaphysical assault, consisting of an attack against a realist theory of universals and the Aristotelian definition (Section 5.2.1). Secondly, Ibn Taymiyya critiques the coherency of the dichotomy, arguing that it is ultimately irrational (Section 5.2.2). A critique of the dichotomy is equivalent to attacking the conventional theory because the former relied on the latter as its conceptual foundation. Thus, Ibn Taymiyya argues that the *ḥaqīqa-majāz* dichotomy is both established arbitrarily and is a false dichotomy because of the incorrect ramifications of adopting such a paradigm. Ibn Taymiyya focuses on attacking the realist theory of universals because he sees it as intellectual foundation of the conventional theory of meaning. By attacking the building blocks of the theory as well the *ḥaqīqa majāz* dichotomy, Ibn Taymiyya is able to pave way for a contextual theory of interpretation (Section 5.2.3).

5.2.1 A Metaphysical Critique

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[105] Ibid., 90.

In response to a model that posits an abstract language supported by a theory of universals, Ibn Taymiyya, in contrast, begins by arguing for an empirical approach to language. Fatīḥah Mirāḥ—in her research titled *Language & Meaning: Between Ibn Ḥazm and Ibn Taymiyya*—captures Ibn Taymiyya's empiricist impulse towards language when she states that language is "a reflection (*in'ikās*) of the world."[106] Ibn Taymiyya reflects over the natural way a child learns his mother tongue. He discovers that it is through usage and communicative situations that a language is mastered rather than through ostensive definitions—definition by pointing. The latter assumes a relationship between an unqualified word, devoid of any context, and a meaning.[107] In other words, the proper definition of a word provides a vivid concept of its meaning to the listener. But what does this mean for a theory of meaning? Ibn Taymiyya argues, based on lived experience, that humans first experience reality by interacting with objects and forming concepts and then learn of the words that correspond to these objects—not the reverse. Essentially, he claims that if a speaker uses a particular word and there is no opportunity for the listener to realize its meaning by his own senses, then he will not understand its meaning by recourse to the Aristotelian definition of the word.[108] Rather, empirical experience is necessary. This was in response to the claim that if words are properly defined, they provide knowledge of concepts. But for Ibn Taymiyya, neither concepts nor the corresponding words precede experience. Words used to describe experienced objects are thus as unique as the object in its contextual experience. It is only in exceptional situations that words precede usage, as when specialists develop technical terms based on a given conceptual need.[109] Words for Ibn Taymiyya, contrary to the conventional theory, only have significance within communicative

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[106]Fatīḥah Mirāḥ,*"Al-Lughah wa al-Ma'nā: Bayna Ibn Ḥazm wa Ibn Taymiyya"* (PhD diss., Constantine: Université des Frère Mentouri Constantine, 2007-2008), 90.
[107] Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics*, 102.
[108] Mirāḥ,*"Al-Lughah wa al-Ma'nā: Bayna Ibn Ḥazm wa Ibn Taymiyya,"*89-90.
[109] Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics*, 103.

situations—not in isolation—because words correspond to particular experiences rather than mental conceptions. In return, these particular experiences can only be expressed through communicative and contextual utterances—not by words in isolation. Ibn Taymiyya's approach reflects the idea that language is organically conceived in usage rather than in an abstract, universal form.

In attacking the philosophical notion of atomism, Ibn Taymiyya argues that nothing less than a predication is meaningful.[110] Accordingly, the most basic unit of speech is a sentence, the result of any act of predication.[111] Words, when uttered in isolation, in fact, do not have meaning, unless there is an assumed non-linguistic context.[112] Thus, proper speech (*kalām*) for Ibn Taymiyya is a complete, communicative utterance. Because Ibn Taymiyya thinks that the function of language is communication, single words cannot possibly constitute an act of speech. Ibn Taymiyya, however, is only able to make such a claim based on his critique of the Aristotelian legacy. It is only then that he is able to re-conceptualize language and argue for an alternative theory of meaning and ultimately interpretation.

In first deconstructing the theory of convention, Ibn Taymiyya attacks the realist theory of universals, which is at the heart of the Aristotelian definition. Ibn Taymiyya argues that universals are mere mental constructs that only exist in the mind; ontologically, they have no external existence.[113] In the actual world, there are only particulars that are conditioned with specific qualities that render them entirely distinct from others of its class. Hallaq argues that Ibn Taymiyya went as far as saying that "…externally existing individuals are so distinct and different from another that they cannot allow for the formation of an external universal under

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[110] Ibid., 98.
[111] Ibid., 96.
[112] Imagine yelling "fire" in a crowded theatre. The word "fire" uttered in isolation is only meaningful because a non-linguistic context (the crowded theatre) fulfills the function of contextual clues or predication.
[113] Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya Against the Greek Logicians*, xxi.

which they are subsumed."[114] In other words, any claim to genuine universals is false because the human mind is incapable of forming *absolute* universals.[115] Evidently, the mind can still make abstractions by finding common properties between external particulars. However, these abstractions cannot be raised to the level of universals that partake with this external reality.[116] These false universals, thus, cannot impart certitude; judgments made on external particulars by recourse to these false universals are always less than perfect. Ibn Taymiyya's critique of universals finds great sympathy from the camp of the Skeptics. They pose the challenge that there is always the possibility that a new particular is discovered that can challenge the universal. This critique depends on the fact that humans are essentially incapable of accounting for all particulars; therefore, all attempts at abstraction are flawed. In the Taymiyyan paradigm, only scripture, in fact, can make universal claims.[117]

Based on his critique of universals, Ibn Taymiyya thus attacks the Aristotelian definition (*ḥadd*). He sees the process of abstraction from particular cases to be the culprit in both the theory of universals and the Aristotelian definition. Although the Aristotelian definition was (and is) widely accepted amongst Muslim logicians, Ibn Taymiyya criticizes it because he is keenly aware that it rests on an entire epistemology.[118] A proper Aristotelian definition (*ḥadd tamm*) attempts to express the quiddity of an object by offering the genus (*jins*) in addition to the differentia (*faṣl*), or differentiating quality, between a thing and those of its class.[119] Ideally, a proper definition of man is a "rational animal." A less than ideal definition of man would be a "laughing animal," laughter being an accidental attribute unlike rationality, an essential attribute.

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[114] Ibid., xxii.
[115] Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics*, 90.
[116] Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya Against the Greek Logicians*, xxiii; Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics*, 91.
[117] Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya Against the Greek Logicians*, xxxix.
[118] Ibid., xv.
[119] Ibid.

This method of defining man, or any entity, is based on abstraction. Universals are drawn from particulars when the mind abstracts the common and salient features (i.e. rationality and animal nature) from a multitude of particulars (i.e. individual human beings). The mind forms a concept that, in reality, is devoid of the characteristics that are unique to the particular instantiations of objects in the external world. With a similar mechanism it was argued that if a particular word most commonly refers to a given object, then this is its conventional meaning; all other usages are merely metaphorical expressions. A single word refers to a single meaning by a process of abstraction that looks at the most common usage. The mind, after the process of abstraction, forms a mental concept of a word. For example, the word "man" in isolation provides the mind the concept of a rational animal. Likewise, the word "lion" most commonly refers to a ravenous animal. Thus, when the word lion is uttered in isolation, an abstract image of a lion occurs to the listener's mind. This mental concept, like the universal, is devoid of the unique qualities of its referent in the external world. In reality, however, particular experiences do not include interactions with "rational animals" or lions as described by the mental image. Each experience is distinct and cannot be represented by a mental concept.

According to Ibn Taymiyya, this can be countered in two ways. Firstly, the mental image conjured by the word "lion" is merely an abstraction that has no external referent because there exists nothing that actually corresponds to this mental image. In the external world, there are only specific lions with their unique qualities. The word "lion" in isolation merely refers to a mental concept that has no external reference. For the word lion to be meaningful, it must be qualified the same way all lions in the external word are qualified. Secondly, Ibn Taymiyya argues that the word "lion" is never uttered in isolation in order to communicate something meaningful. This is similar to Ibn Taymiyya's critique of universals: they are not expressive of

external reality. Likewise, words in isolation that refer to mental abstractions of particular experiences are not expressive of external reality. Since universals only relate to external reality through individual particulars, words are only expressive when they are used contextually. Individual words without a context are therefore incapable of signifying any inherent meaning. Only when individual words are qualified by a context do they refer to particular objects. Since all external objects are unique and qualified, all linguistic expressions must also be qualified through contextual usage.[120]

On a philosophical level, definitions, according to Ibn Taymiyya, merely reflect mental realities, not external existents. The Aristotelian definition particularly introduces metaphysical notions of essence, essential attributes, and accidental attributes that, for Ibn Taymiyya, solely express the experience of a particular community. Because the mental abstractions captured by an Aristotelian definition are merely indicative of what is relevant to a community, they are not necessary. For example, unlike the English language, one can imagine a (linguistic) community that has distinct terms for different colored tables, rather than merely qualifying the universal "table" with various colors (i.e. green table or yellow table). If a community uses the word "table" for brown tables and "teeble" for green tables, this reflects the particular interest a community has with this object, namely the *color* of tables.[121] The Arabic language, in fact, contains this phenomenon. The Arabs have different words for the various stages of dates (*tamr*) while the English language recognizes only one word.[122] Similarly, Eskimos have several terms for describing their frosty environment; their language reflects their lived experience. From the aforementioned examples, it is clear that the Aristotelian definition, and the universals that it expresses, echoes the particular experience and metaphysical reality of the Greeks. One cannot

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[120] Ibid., xxiii.
[121] Ibid., xviii.
[122] Ibid., xix.

assume that the Aristotelian definition expresses universal facts of reality. If the experience of the Greeks is universalized, this falsely posits a necessary connection between the Aristotelian definition and external reality. These experiences are merely conventional matters that cannot be used to make universal claims.

Furthermore, Ibn Taymiyya adds epistemological dimensions to his critique of the theory of universals. The Muslim logicians had argued that apodictic knowledge could only be achieved through syllogistic reasoning. Only when one has formulated a proper Aristotelian definition can he predicate one concept to another and produce new knowledge through the syllogism.[123] However, Ibn Taymiyya is entirely skeptical of the utility of the Aristotelian definition (and the syllogism). He argues that neither definitions produce new concepts nor do syllogisms produce *new* knowledge, let alone certitude. Ibn Taymiyya claims that "there is nothing in the conclusion [of the categorical syllogism] that is not already found in the premises."[124] Similarly, on a linguistic level, definitions merely refer to concepts that one already possesses. Ibn Taymiyya argues that for a word to refer to a single concept, one must already know its meaning according to convention and the usage of a community. To the contrary, the proponents of conventional meaning had argued that a conventional definition, like the Aristotelian definition, is concept providing.[125] Ibn Taymiyya maintains that the speaker in any particular communicative act must already know the object he is referring to before using a coined word to refer to it. In other words, all members in a communicative act must know the rules of language usage, which are not provided through conventional definitions. The listener particularly must already have a conception of the object before a conventional definition is even useful. In both logic and language, Ibn Taymiyya prioritizes the particular case. Just like an Aristotelian definition does

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[123] Ibid., xv.
[124] Ibid., xxix.
[125] Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics*, 95-96.

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not provide a new concept of an external referent without the listener having already conceptualized the referent through particular experience, a single word has no reference except in an actual communicative situation.

5.2.2 A Rational Critique

After attacking the philosophical premises behind the conventional theory, Ibn Taymiyya directs his attention to the incoherency of the *ḥaqīqa-majaz* dichotomy. In this regard, Ibn Taymiyya attacks the origins of the dichotomy and argues that the dichotomy is arbitrarily established. He also adds that the dichotomy inevitably leads to ludicrous conclusions that even its proponents would have to reject. This includes the absurd idea that the entirety of language is *majāz*, a proposition that could be easily rejected.

Since the dichotomy is ubiquitously found in books of Arabic rhetoric and Quranic exegesis, it is assumed to be a natural part of *kalām al-'arab*. Ibn Taymiyya's first line of attack is questioning the dubious origins of the dichotomy: does it actually emerge from an (organic) analysis of *kalām al-'arab* in order to explain a naturally occurring linguistic feat? The response to this question is found in Ibn Qayyim's *al-Ṣawā'iq*.[126] Ibn Qayyim argues that the *ḥaqīqa-majāz* dichotomy is a foreign concept invented by later scholars. Ibn Taymiyya credits the first systematic usage of the word to Abū 'Ubayda Ma'mar ibn al-Muthannā (d. 209AH/825AD), who was neither pre-Islamic nor from the early *salaf*. However, even Abū 'Ubayda's usage of *majāz* was not in diametric opposition to *ḥaqīqa*, which is what ensued with later generations of scholars.[127] Additionally, while Ibn Taymiyya does document that the revered Aḥmad ibn

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[126] Ibn Qayyim's *al-Ṣawā'iq* comprises an important section on majāz, which is divided (by the editor) into numbered arguments. As I use particular arguments, I will make reference to the particular number corresponding to the argument (i.e. argument eleven). Also, during my own writing, Mariam Ovadia's *Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya and the Divine Attributes* (Brill, 2018) was published. Ovadia summarizes Ibn Qayyim's main arguments against majāz and more.

[127] Heinrichs, "On the Genesis of the Ḥaqîqa-Majâz Dichotomy," 117-123.

Ḥanbal (d. 241AH/855AD)—eponymous founder of the Ḥanbalī school of thought—used the

term *majāz*, his usage likewise did not have the same implications that the term later came to be

associated with. The epitome of the *uṣūl al-fiqh* literature and also the eponymous founder of the

Shāfʿī jurisprudential school, Muḥammad Idrīs al-Shāfʿī (d. 204AH/820AD), similarly did not

use the concept of *majāz* in opposition to *ḥaqīqa*.[128] There is also significant evidence that this

distinction originally emerged amongst Muʿtazlite circles, a theological movement founded by

Wāṣil ibn ʿAṭā (d. 130AH/748AD).[129] For Ibn Taymiyya, establishing the origins of the

dichotomy as foreign to mainstream Sunni Islam was a polemical move that would have won the

hearts of many. Such a tactic is also part of his commitment to the *salaf*. By establishing that the

ḥaqīqa-majāz dichotomy was a post-*salaf* distinction, a conceptual accretion that emerged later

on, he immediately reduced its credibility. This implies that the dichotomy is unfaithful to the

linguistic practices of the early *salaf*. He further argued that the famous grammarian Sibawayh

(d. 180AH/796AD) and other famous linguists such as al-Farrāʾ (d. 207AH/822AD) also had no

application of this dichotomy.[130] Sibawayh was a well-known grammarian whose name would

have immediately garnered reverence and support. Such arguments are religious appeals to

authority, among them the revered members of the *salaf*. Ibn Taymiyya's project depends on the

assumption that the further one is removed from the early generations of Muslims, the more

likely one is to commit theological and interpretive errors. [131] Ibn Taymiyya does not criticize the

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[128] Heinrichs cites Ibn Taymiyya's *Kitāb al-Īmān* in "On the Genesis of the Ḥaqîqa-Majâz Dichotomy," 115-117; See also Ahmed El Shamsy's book review of Robert Gleave's *Islam and Literalism* in *Islamic Law and Society* 22, no. 1-2 (2015): 151, in which he notes that Gleave did well to point out that Ibn Taymiyya recognized "the rupture between al-Shāfʿī and subsequent jurists on the subject of literal meaning. He argued that the assertion of a primordial *waḍ'* *and the* natural division of language into *ḥaqīqa and majāz* represented a later, unhelpful introduction of *theological thought* into legal theory" (emphasis added).
[129] Heinrichs, "On the Genesis of the Ḥaqîqa-Majâz Dichotomy," 116.
[130] Qadhi, "'The Unleashed Thunderbolts' of Ibn Qayyim al-Gawziyyah," 145.
[131] While this could refer to a spatial-temporal distance, Ibn Taymiyya instead seems to refer to a "distance" or gap between the *salaf* and the later scholars (*mut'akhirūn*) in methodology and principles of religion (*usūl al-dīn*). This would, by default, also include principles of exegesis.

later generations of scholars for merely having invented terminologies. Rather, he argues that, depending on the intent of an individual, either some unknowingly used these terminologies without any awareness of the ideological ramifications or they were intentionally created for justifying foreign ideologies. In either case, this impacts Quranic exegesis. By garnering the support of early authoritative figures, Ibn Taymiyya establishes that while his methodology corresponds to the conceptual models employed by the *salaf*, the proponents of the dichotomy introduced foreign methodologies.

Secondly, one of the most powerful critiques against the notion of *majāz* is the inability of its proponents to provide a thoroughly objective criterion by which one can distinguish between *ḥaqīqa* and *majāz*. Ibn Qayyim objects that the proponents of *majāz* have "no rational, religious, linguistic or utilitarian basis" on which to make the distinction.[132] He argues that, in fact, it is impossible to provide an objective criterion by which one can divide the usage of words into *ḥaqīqa* or *majāz*, or conventional and non-conventional. In other words, Ibn Qayyim is certain that the divisions made by the proponents are entirely arbitrary (*taḥakkum maḥḍ*). In the eleventh argument,[133] Ibn Qayyim contends that if one cannot distinguish between a *ḥaqīqa* meaning and a *majāz* meaning by an objective criterion (*faṣl*), it must be concluded that it is haphazardly established.[134]

The proponents of *majāz* had argued that one of the ways of distinguishing between *ḥaqīqa and majāz* is by reference to the *waḍʿī* meaning of a word, which occurs immediately to the mind when a word is uttered in isolation.[135] Meanings that are non-immediate require interpretive effort to decipher and are deemed to be metaphorical usages. In the eighth argument,

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[132] Qadhi, "'The Unleashed Thunderbolts' of Ibn Qayyim al-Gawziyyah," 145.
[133] An argument and its number refer to the count of the argument as it appears in Ibn Qayyim's *al-Ṣawāʿiq*.
[134] Ibn Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-Ṣawāʾiq al-Mursalah*, 2:710.
[135] Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics,* 70-71.

Ibn Qayyim attacks this claim on two fronts. Firstly, he argues that words are never uttered in isolation because they have no meaning without context; rather, there are only contextual usages. Ibn Qayyim, by means of this critique, attempts to dismantle the notion of immediacy—the idea that an immediate meaning occurs to the mind when a word is uttered in isolation. In reality, the proponents of *majāz* could merely adduce specific usages of words in particular contexts; there are no communicative acts that rely on single words. Because there is no criterion to distinguish the immediate meaning of a word, if one claims during a communicative act that a certain meaning is *majāz* and an interlocutor disagrees and claims otherwise, then both claims are of the same value since.[136] It is important here to note that Ibn Qayyim hopes to convey that the meaning that immediately occurs to the mind in no way *necessarily* indicates the *waḍ'ī* or *ḥaqīqa* sense of a word because meaning is ultimately determined by contextual clues and not by an inherent relationship between a word and a meaning.

Secondly, Ibn Qayyim claims that for a word to refer to one meaning primarily and another meaning secondarily, there must have been two events of coining (*wad'*). In this regard, Ibn Qayyim responds in the first argument, "All of this is only true if it is known that Arabic words were first coined for specific meanings and then used for such meanings. Then, these words were coined for additional meanings after the first coining and its [respective] usage…Your argument of *majāz* is not complete without [proof of] these four points—[the first coining and usage, and the second coining and usage]. And you possess nothing other than a usage of a word with a particular meaning."[137] One cannot claim priority of one usage over another through any rational method. It is impossible, Ibn Qayyim claims, to make an evidence-based claim that a word was first coined and primarily used for a particular meaning (i.e. lion for

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[136] Ibn Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-Ṣawā'iq al-Mursalah*, 2:708.
[137] Ibn Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-Ṣawā'iq al-Mursalah,* 2:701-702 (translation mine).

ravenous animal) and then only later and secondarily used for a metaphorical meaning (i.e. lion for a brave individual). For this purpose, no serious proof can be offered because an argument of this type requires historical evidence of the origins of language. Later generations can merely speculate rationally but never come to a decisive conclusion because of the difficulty, or even impossibility, of such a task. And because no evidence can be offered for independent *ḥaqīqa* and *majāz* usages, the dichotomy is an arbitrary distinction.

While the offered methods of differentiating between the *ḥaqīqa* and *majāz* sense of a word may have been convenient (and convincing) ways of simplifying the process for the proponents of *majāz,* Ibn Qayyim maintains that all such methods are arbitrary. His argument is premised on the Taymiyyan idea that words uttered in isolation are equivalent to gibberish. For Ibn Taymiyya, there is no *communicative* utterance except that there is always some kind of context, even if the context is not explicit. Context for Ibn Taymiyya is not merely linguistic (*lafẓiyyah*); there can also be a non-linguistic context (*ghayr lafẓiyya*). [138] In this way, "fire" uttered in a crowded theater may seem to be a word uttered in isolation. However, it is in the context of the theatre and a community's habitual use of the word "fire" in isolation to indicate danger that renders the meaning clear and obvious when shouted in a crowded theatre. Clearly there is an imminent threat and the abbreviated statement—uttering the word in isolation— suffices because of contextual clues that are non-linguistic.

In the tenth argument, Ibn Qayyim concludes, based on the previously cited evidences, that "Certainly, this a false division (*taqsīm fāsid*). It is not determined (*lā yanḍabiṭ*) by a correct criteria. It is for this reason that what is commonly considered by some as *majāz* is considered by others as *ḥaqīqa*."[139] There is no standard criterion by which one can distinguish between *ḥaqīqa*

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[138] Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics,* 98-102.
[139] Ibn Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-Ṣawā'iq al-Mursalah*, 2: 708 (translation mine).

and *majāz*. Ibn Qayyim attributes this to the disagreements amongst the proponents of *majāz* themselves and their failure to come to an agreement. Ibn Qayyim points out that what some people considered *majāz* others considered *ḥaqīqa* and vice-versa. It seems, to Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim, that since the dichotomy is based precarious and untenable assumptions, it is arbitrary and cannot be claimed to an internal mechanism of *kalām al-'arab*.

Finally, Ibn Qayyim contends that the proponents of *majāz* risked a great slippery slope: reducing the entirety of language to *majāz*. If the dichotomy is adopted, it can be argued that the *ḥaqīqa* sense is rarely—if ever—the intended meaning of the author, even in the most rudimentary instances of communication. This is exemplified in Ibn Qayyim's eighteenth argument. He reasons that even in an elementary act of communication—such as "I struck 'Umar"—the proponents are compelled to consider this speech act a case of *majāz*.[140] For the proponents, the *ḥaqīqa* of this utterance implies that 'Umar is struck *entirely*. The word "'Umar," according to its *waḍ'ī* definition, refers to the *entire* person of 'Umar, namely his entire body. However, this is obviously not the intended meaning. Since the proponents of *majāz* posit a *waḍ'ī* meaning for the individual words of a sentence, the listener initially forms a false interpretation of the sentence and then later corrects the misinterpretation (after rational considerations) by a kind of mental *ta'wīl*. However, to the contrary, all listeners of a linguistic community instinctively recognize that what is intended is that someone merely hit a *part* of 'Umar and not 'Umar entirely (*innmā ḍarabto ba'ḍahu la jamī'ahu*).[141] Because the *waḍ'ī* model requires the listener to first understand that 'Umar was struck *entirely* and then conclude that 'Umar was only struck partially (i.e. on his arm), the supporters of *majāz* would be required to admit that even such a basic communicative act is only understood by reference to its *majāz*.

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[140] *Innmā ḍarabto 'Umar.*
[141] Ibn Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-Ṣawā'iq al-Mursalah*, 2: 837.

Additionally, some Ashʿarī scholars even debated whether certain Quranic commands and even the proclamation of faith[142] itself was metaphorical based on their classification system between a *ḥaqīqa* and *majāz*. However, for theological reasons, the Ashʿarīs were committed to the idea that the legal commands in the Quran could not be metaphorical.[143] However, according to these conceptual models, there was, in reality, little left in language that was not *majāz*.

Ibn Qayyim hardly agrees with this conclusion; it is wholly problematic. He argues that it is ludicrous to imagine that the Arabs first assigned a *waḍʿī* meaning to the individual units of the sentence "I struck ʿUmar" so that it could ever mean other than what is commonly understood from the contextual utterance. Rather, Ibn Qayyim maintains that people of all languages and tongues understand only *one* meaning from this statement, and no (rational) individual initially—or ever—during the interpretive process thinks that this utterance refers to literally hitting every part of ʿUmar—the outward and the inwards parts included (*ẓāhirahu wa bāṭinahu*).[144] Additionally, what is to become of language and communication if the most mundane of sentences—utterly basic and clear in meaning—were considered *majāz*? This would render most (if not all) communicative acts, including the Quran, *majāz* and in need of *taʾwīl* for even the most apparent verses. In fact, this was the position of the famous Arab linguist, Ibn Jinnī (d. 392AH/1002AD). He claimed that most of not only the Quran but also language is *majāz*.[145] This is obviously problematic because the majority of scholars, not just Ibn Taymiyya, consider the *ḥaqīqa* as "epistemologically superior and logically prior" to the *majāz* meaning.[146] The *majāz* is an interpretive leap that requires interpretive effort; this of course increases the possibility of mis-interpretation. Even according to Rāzī, there is a consensus amongst the

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[142] *Lā ilāha illa Allah.*
[143] Mustafa, "Ibn Taymiyyah & Wittgenstein on Language," 476.
[144] Ibid., 2:839.
[145] Ibid., 2: 771.
[146] Gleave, *Islam and Literalism,* 19-20; See also Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics,* 130 for a similar argument.

scholars to giving priority to the *ḥaqīqa* over *majāz*. In light of this, the position of Ibn Jinnī is untenable.

To summarize, Ibn Qayyim argues that the *ḥaqīqa-majāz* dichotomy is a slippery slope that leads to the claim that most linguistic acts of communication, if not all, are *majāz*, a claim that even many proponents of *majāz* were uncomfortable with accepting. The *ḥaqīqa* meaning of a word is considered epistemologically superior and logically prior. Therefore, the interpreter is on shaky ground when referring to the *majāz* sense of an expression. Arguing that language is mostly *majāz* also opens the doors for endless *ta'wīl*. For Ibn Taymiyya, *ta'wīl*, because of its ideological underpinnings, was akin to correcting the language, and thus the meaning, of scripture. Endless *ta'wīl* empowers the interpreter to read almost any meaning into scripture, undermining the supremacy of the text.[147] This cannot be reconciled with an objective interpretation of scripture that attempts to decipher God's message.[148] Ibn Taymiyya fears exactly this. He recognizes that the dichotomy allows the interpreter unlimited access to choose from the various linguistic possibilities while intentionally disregarding the contextually necessary meaning.

5.3. Ibn Taymiyya's Contextual Theory of Interpretation

In elucidating Ibn Taymiyya's conception of language, Mirāḥ asserts that language is "a tool of communication (*ittiṣāl*)."[149] The primary—but not exclusive—function of language is communication. "It is not," she argues, "a tool of deceit (*talbīs*), deception (*tadlīs)*, and ambiguity (*ishtibāh*)."[150] Additionally, Yunus states, "[for Ibn Taymiyya], expressing intentions

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[147] This of course is unique to Ibn Taymiyya's intellectual reformation in that he is critiquing particular epistemological systems that were imposed onto Quran by use *ta'wil*. These systems, in fact, challenged the supremacy of the text because it was no longer able to say certain things; certain interpretive possibilities were precluded due to ideology, not contextual concerns.

[148] Gleave, *Islam and Literalism*, 36-38.

[149] Mirāḥ,*"Al-Lughah wa al-Ma'nā: Bayna Ibn Ḥazm wa Ibn Taymiyya,"* 89.

[150] Ibid.

is the ultimate goal for communication."[151] In this paradigm, language is primarily

communicative and because of the nature of this definition, if language is to fulfill its function, it

must communicate *clearly*. In other words, language is for clear communication. Particularly

regarding Quranic interpretation, Ibn Taymiyya argues that the need for clarity is even greater.

Because the Quran conveys guidance regarding the unseen and imparts theological and legal

knowledge that the believer desperately requires for eternal salvation, clarity is crucial. For this

reason, Ibn Taymiyya argues that the Quran is a clear text.[152] Since God possesses the ability to

speak perfectly clear and considering the importance of the communicative message of the

Quran, the contextually necessitated and apparent meaning is always God's intent. As will

become clearer, this is also in accordance with Ibn Taymiyya's contextual theory of

interpretation

Once Ibn Taymiyya dismantles the foundational premises of the conventional theory of

meaning, as well as its metaphysical and epistemological underpinnings, he offers his contextual

theory of interpretation as an alternative. This model develops in contrast to any linguistic theory

that holds metaphysical conceptions sympathetic to a foundationalist conception of words and an

atomic conception of language that prioritizes an abstract language over language usage. Ibn

Taymiyya logically rejects the theory of *waḍ'*, the *ḥaqīqa-majāz* dichotomy, and ultimately

ta'wil because of such philosophical premises. Instead, any language theory for Ibn Taymiyya

must emerge from an empirical analysis of language that reflects lived experience. Thus, Yunus

says, "Ibn Taymiyyah argues that since language is used as a means to express the contents of

the external world, there must be a correspondence between the structure of reality and the use of

language in such a way that the structure of reality is reflected in the language. Consequently,

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[151] Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics,* 116.
[152] This is also a scripture-based argument. See Quran verses: 26:2; 27:1; 5:15; 12:1; 15:1; 28:2; 36:69; 43:2; 44:2.

since there is no abstract thing in the external world but all entities are conceived to be qualified in some way, it follows that there would be no unqualified expression in language to signify it."[153] While Aristotle was interested in the indivisible units of language and logic as well as the essential and formal relationship between thought and reality, Ibn Taymiyya instead emphasizes language usage. The complexity of language is not an atomic phenomenon. It does not exist at the level of individual words. Because the purpose of language is predication, this complexity only exists at this level. Therefore, an atomic analysis of language must not begin with individual words; rather, it must begin with meaningful utterances.

Ibn Taymiyya's contextual theory has great resemblance to Wittgenstein's model.[154] And because—I think—Ibn Taymiyya's approach to language is not unique to divine texts, his approach can thus be appreciated by a general audience of philosophy of language, even outside an Islamic discourse. Ibn Taymiyya argues for an interpretive paradigm that carefully considers the context of any utterance and the habit of the speaker, which includes knowledge one has of the speaker, his habits and methods of speaking, and the purpose of the speech act itself.[155] Authorial intent in this model is thus built on two important notions: the principle of immediacy (*tabādur*) and the habit of the speaker (*'ādat al mutakallim*).

5.3.1 The Meaning is Always Immediate: the principle of *tabādur*

Ibn Taymiyya's methodology does not recognize a word's ability to primarily and secondarily refer to meanings; thus, there is no literal and metaphorical usage. There are only contextual usages and the contextually necessitated meaning is necessarily clear and immediately known. Ibn Taymiyya argues that if and when the speaker of any discourse is interested in *ifhām* (principle of the speaker's disposition to make his intention manifest), then language *must* be

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[153] Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics,* 114.
[154] See Mustafa, "Ibn Taymiyyah & Wittgenstein on Language."
[155] Mustafa, "Ibn Taymiyyah & Wittgenstein on Language," 483.

clear.[156] Based on this, Ibn Taymiyya argues that the (eloquent) speaker is always clear and provides sufficient *contextual clues* for the listener (or interpreter) to uncover authorial intent.[157] When there are enough contextual clues, the correct meaning strikes the listener's mind immediately.

Ibn Taymiyya's emphasis on *tabādur* (immediacy) is in contrast to the proponents of *majāz*. Regarding the statement, "I saw a lion (*asad*) on the pulpit,"[158] the proponents argued that the hearer first understands the word "lion" according to its *waḍ'ī* meaning (a ravenous animal). However, due to contextual and/or rational considerations, the lion's *waḍ'ī* meaning is precluded as the communicative intent. As a result, the listener is diverted to other linguistic possibilities and realizes that "lion" in this context refers to a brave individual. On the other hand, according to the Taymiyyan model, from the very outset of the communicative act, there is only *one* meaning for this statement due to contextual considerations. The mind does not first posit a *waḍ'ī* meaning—which in this case is not consistent with authorial intent—only for it to be discarded for a non-immediate meaning. The meaning is always apparent (*ẓāhir)* and immediate (*mutabādir)* because of contextual considerations.[159] Similarly, in the statement, "Zayd is a lion (*asad*)," who in their right mind could image a meaning other than "Zayd is brave?"[160] Because the *waḍ'ī* meaning is considered immediate and logically prior, positing a *waḍ'ī* meaning for *asad* compels the hearer to initially assume that the speaker's intent is that Zayd is "literally" a ravenous animal. The proponents of *majāz* had themselves established the idea that the *waḍ'ī* or *ḥaqīqa* meaning is epistemologically superior and must be always taken into consideration first.

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[156] Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics,* 125. The principle of the speaker's disposition to make his intention manifest has also been referred to as *bayān al-mutakallim.*
[157]Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics,* 126.
[158]*Ra'aytu asadan 'alā minbar.*
[159] Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics,* 126-127.
[160] Qadhi, "'The Unleashed Thunderbolts' of Ibn Qayyim al-Gawziyyah," 145.

They were thus compelled to say that the hearer first misunderstands before truly understanding authorial intent. Only when the listener realizes that the *waḍʿī* meaning is impossible, he applies *taʾwīl* and diverts to a metaphorical meaning.

In response, Ibn Taymiyya argues that the proponents of *majāz* contradict the empirical experience of language users. The listener does not first posit the incorrect meaning—in the case that the intent of the author is indeed contrary to the supposed *waḍʿī* meaning—and subsequently realize the correct meaning. In any act of clear communication, this is unnecessary and the hearer immediately comprehends the speaker's intent due to the presence of sufficient contextual indicators. Indeed, individual words have various linguistic possibilities because they can be used in a variety of contexts. The totality of linguistic possibilities of a word is derived from its various usages in multiple contexts. However, one need not consider all linguistic possibilities. After contextual consideration, the correct linguistic meaning is obvious. The various linguistic meanings of a word are indeed interpretive possibilities but are not all necessarily suitable for a given context. Contextual indicators restrict the amount of linguistic possibilities that can be interpretive possibilities. However, in the case that there are not sufficient contextual clues, the speaker can reasonably be accused of ambiguity.[161] On a theological level, this could never be attributed to the divine, lest He be accused of intended ambiguity—or worse deception. Ibn Taymiyya argues that this is exactly what the philosophers effectively argued. For him, an obvious corollary of the interpretive system of the Muslim philosophers and the rational theologians was that scripture offered myths that required the philosopher or metaphors that required the rational theologian. *Taʾwīl* in these interpretive paradigms served as a solution to the blunder of conflating the various linguistic possibilities for actual interpretive possibilities. In a theory of interpretation that depends on contextual considerations, *taʾwīl* is not necessary.

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[161] Ibid.,131.

Ibn Qayyim further elucidates the notion of clarity. He asserts that, "When the intent by speech is to indicate to the listener and to make him understand the intent of the speaker from his speech, and to explain the meanings that are within him [the speaker], and to indicate [to the listener] these [meanings] by the most efficient method, then this [process] is based on two matters: (1) the clarity or clarification of the speaker (*bayān al-mutakallim*), and (2) the capability of the hearer to understand (*tamakkun as-sāmiʿ min al-fahm*)."[162] A speaker's act of communication is clear when he uses the appropriate words and context to convey the meanings he intends, satisfying the condition of *bayān al-mutakallim*—the ability of the speaker to communicate clearly. Successful communication, as Ibn Qayyim states, requires that the speaker use the most efficient method. This means that the speaker understands that the words and expressions he uses convey immediate meanings based on common usage within a linguistic community. In applying this to the Quranic context, Ibn Qayyim continues, "… and then, if it was the case that God and His messenger intended from His speech other than its *ḥaqīqa* and *ẓāhir,* which is [immediately] understood by the one spoken to (*mukhāṭab*), then God would have tasked the listener with understanding His intent by that which does not indicate it but rather indicates the opposite."[163] Ibn Qayyim describes that the speaker always contextually uses words that indicate his intent in a way that the hearer of the *same community* is accustomed to hearing.[164] To illustrate this point, the Quran commonly attributes to God attributes such as a hand (*yad*) and a face (*wajh*) and actions such as descent (*nuzūl*) through the heavens. The rational theologians had argued that such descriptions must be taken figuratively and reinterpreted respectively as His power, essence, and the descent of His mercy. However, Ibn

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[162] Ibn Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-Ṣawāʿiq al-Mursalah*, 1: 104 (translation mine).
[163] Ibid., 104 (translation mine).
[164] In this case, only someone who is competent in *kalām al-ʿarab* would understand the linguistic references contained within Arabic.

Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim argue that not only are such re-interpretations not the immediate meanings that strike the listener, they are also not contextually indicated.

Ibn Qayyim also cites his mentor Ibn Taymiyya (*qāl shaykh al-islam*) in listing a number of negative implications that are inevitable if one makes the case for metaphorical interpretation of scripture. Ibn Taymiyya believes that if one argues that God intends for Him to be understood contrary to the immediate and apparent meaning, then this implies a number of false premises: namely that God revealed in scripture that which on an apparent level misguides people and causes them to fall into anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*) and that God has disregarded the clear exposition of truth and rather chose to speak through symbols and puzzles that can only be deciphered after great effort.[165] According to Ibn Qayyim, imposing the *majāz-ta'wīl* paradigm thus "necessitates one of three charges: that the one speaking was not sincere in speaking with the clearest possible meanings, or was not knowledgeable of what he was saying, or was not capable of speaking with the most precise wordings."[166] Any successful and sincere act of communication must avoid these three pitfalls. It is no wonder that Ibn Qayyim accuses the existence of *ta'wīl* as compromising the function of language itself—clear communication.[167] However, it must be noted that Ibn Taymiyya's conception of apparent meaning incorporates all the rhetorical devices that are genuinely a part of *kalām al-'arab*. Apparent meaning, in this framework, is not a theory of literalism in contradistinction to metaphorical meanings; rather, it is inclusive of all such linguistic feats. In this way, an utterance that highlights an individual's bravery by comparing him to a lion is not metaphorical because there is only one meaning that is apparent and immediate from such an utterance.

5.3.2 *'Ādat al-Mutakallim* (The Habit of the Speaker)

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[165] Ibn Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-Ṣawā'iq al-Mursalah*, 1: 106.
[166] Qadhi, "'The Unleashed Thunderbolts' of Ibn Qayyim al-Gawziyyah," 139-140.
[167] Ibid., 140.

The notion of the habit of the speaker (*'ādat al-mutakallim*) cannot conceptually be divorced from the principle of immediacy; they are intricately connected. Ibn Taymiyya argues that authorial intent should be deciphered based on the habit of the speaker. It is based on this that one determines the particular way in which an author intends for his words to be understood. It is only once the interpreter cognizes the habit of the speaker based on his contextual usage and habitual usage of words is authorial intent finally rendered clear. In this regard, Ibn Qayyim states, "if a usage is continuously used in a particular way, then a *ta'wīl* that opposes the apparent meaning is impossible because *ta'wīl* is [applied] to an individual occasion that occurs in contrast to its similars. *Ta'wīl* is thus applied so that the peculiar case is made to be like its similars."[168] Here, Ibn Qayyim emphasizes the idea that if it is known from the habit of the speaker that words are commonly, or more often, used in particular ways and the hearer is accustomed to this particular usage, when a peculiar or ambiguous case is presented, the correct meaning is understood by the most common usage of the word in accordance with the speaker's habit. This is illustrated through a basic example. If person A habitually refers to people who eat excessively as "fat" rather than using the word in reference to people who carry excessive weight—commonly posited to be its conventional meaning—then this is A's habitual way of speaking. Whenever A refers to person B as "fat," the obvious meaning is that person B eats excessively—in fact, he may not even be overweight. This is known by the habit of A as well as additional contextual clues. The contextual clue in this situation could be a basic test of reality. One may notice that person A, during the act of communication, is not facing a person carrying excessive weight; in fact, person B is very thin. The habit of A necessitates that one cannot accuse person A of incorrect word usage. Person A relies on a particular linguistic meaning from the various linguistic possibilities of "fat," and A's habitual usage of this linguistic meaning

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[168] Ibn Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-Ṣawā'iq al-Mursalah*, 1:131 (translation mine).

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constitutes his personal habit. After the listener cognizes the habit of A, the hearer cannot reasonably make the argument that person A can also possibly mean by "fat" one who carries excessive flesh. In this case, he absolutely does not. Although this is indeed a linguistic possibility—this would be supported by a quick glance at the English dictionary—the habit of the speaker necessitates that this is *not* in anyway an interpretive possibility. The very context and habit of A eliminates all but one linguistic possibility.

Ibn Qayyim furthers his argument with scriptural examples, thereby arguing for an authentic way of interpreting the anthropomorphic verses. One of the most contested anthropomorphic verses in the Quran includes the description of God's ascent (*istiwā'*) over His throne.[169] For the rational theologians, this verse poses a double issue: spatiality and temporality. As for spatiality, God cannot be described as ascending since the act of ascent occurs through space. God, for epistemological reasons, is deemed free of any spatial implications. As for temporality, there are other verses in the Quran that describe the same act of ascent with additional details that imply temporality. For example, Quran 7:54 states, "Lo! Your Lord is Allah Who created the heavens and the earth in six Days, then (*thumma*) mounted (*istiwā'*) He the Throne."[170] The *thumma* before the act of ascent (*istiwā'*) specifies that God's ascent temporally succeeds another act, namely the creation of the heavens and the earth. This would imply that God acts within time. The rational theologians, however, were keen on negating *all* spatio-temporal descriptions of God. Therefore, the rational theologians applied *ta'wīl* to these

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[169] See Quran 20:5. This phrase also occurs in six additional occasions in the Quran; see 7:54, 10:3, 13:2, 25:59, 32:4, 57:4.

[170] In translating this verse, I have relied on Marmaduke Pickthall. This is because Pickthall's translation better illustrates the theological issue at hand. Muhammad Asad, on the other hand, considers the *thumma* in this verse to be metaphorical, citing, "The conjunctive particle thumma which precedes this clause does not always denote order in time ("then" or "thereupon"). He also adds, "As regards the term 'arsh (lit., "throne" or "seat of power"), all Muslim commentators, classical and modern, are unanimously of the opinion that its metaphorical use in the Qur'an is meant to express God's absolute sway over all His creation." For more, see Muhammad Asad, trans. *The Message of the Qur'an* (London: The Book Foundation, 2008).

anthropomorphic descriptions. In objecting to this particular application of *ta'wīl,* Ibn Qayyim's

argument is in fact linguistic. The rational theologians opted to interpret God's ascent (*istiwā'*) as

control over His kingdom (*istawlā*). Ibn Qayyim however claims that it is not possible that every

verse in which God is described with the act of *istiwā'*—which occurs seven times throughout

the Quran[171]— the intent is the *majāz* meaning of *istawlā*. Of course, *istawlā* is indeed a

linguistic possibility. Ibn Qayyim thinks that such an interpretation, "...would be correct

(*yaṣiḥḥu*) if the majority of occurrences were with the term *istawlā*, and then a peculiar case

occurs [in which *istiwā'*] is used. The peculiar case would be thus rejected to mean *istiwā*. It

would [in such a case] be correct to apply *ta'wīl* by the meaning of *istawlā*."[172] Ibn Qayyim's

argument is as follows. *Majāz* is supposed to be a quantitatively lesser occurrence and not the

default method of speaking during clear communicative acts. It is not imaginable that God

intends *majāz* in all or even a majority of cases in the myriads of verses that He describes

Himself with spatio-temporal implications. When certain peculiar and ambiguous cases occur

that are amenable to reinterpretation, the interpreter should examine the habit of the speaker in

order to determine authorial intent. Ibn Qayyim essentially argues it would be strange and

illogical to say that a word could be used several times in the Quran (i.e. God's ascent) and that

God intends by all such occurrences a meaning that conflicts with the obvious meaning as

dictated by the context.

In fact, sometimes these anthropomorphic descriptions do in fact refer to God's power or

mercy. For example, Quran 48:10 states, "…the hand (*yad*) of God is over their hands."[173] Even

for Ibn Taymiyya, the term *yad* in this verse does not refer to God's hand. However, such an

interpretation is only justifiable for *contextual* reasons, which considers the verse in light of

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[171] In his commentary of 7:54, Asad mentions that this phrase is used seven times throughout the Quran.
[172] Ibn Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-Ṣawā'iq al-Mursalah*, 1:132 (translation mine).
[173] Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 48:10.

historical events that occurred during the revelation of the verse (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). This explicitly demonstrates that Ibn Taymiyya's objection of Ash'arī *ta'wil* is due to ideological reasons since he was willing to admit certain Ash'arī interpretations as long as they are supported by the context. Nevertheless, Ibn Taymiyya argues that there are many verses in scripture in which ideological interpretations of the anthropomorphic verses conflict with a contextual interpretation.[174] In this case, one must submit to the context rather than the dictates of a foreign epistemic system.

The habit of a speaker is a unique method of interpreting a text based on the author's own terms. An author's personal habit throughout the text ultimately determines the principles by which the text is deciphered. For Ibn Qayyim, the Quran as well as prophetic speech themselves establish their habitual references when using particular words. Even if it is narrated that a single Arab poet—considered a part and parcel of *kalām al-'arab*—used a word in a certain way, this usage does not, and never can, take precedence over Quranic and Prophetic usage (*isti'māl*).[175] For this reason, Ibn Qayyim states, "If then it is affirmed by authentic transmission that a poet intended a meaning by a word, this particular usage is not more worth considering than Prophetic usage..."[176] The habit of the speaker precludes unmediated reliance on philology (all the possible linguistic meanings) as a means of interpretation. To better illustrate this, one can imagine the limits of the Arabic language as the border of a circle. This can be referred to as the "upper limit of language." By this term, I mean all the possible linguistic meanings that can be intended by a particular word in accordance with *kalām al-'arab*. A particular word can refer to several meanings contained within the circle because of precedent, or established usages, within *kalām al-'arab*. During any communicative act, a speaker refers to *a* particular meaning. Although

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[174] For this argument, see Quran 38:75.
[175] Ibn Mawṣilī, *Mukhtaṣar al-Ṣawā'iq al-Mursalah*, 4:1409-1410.
[176] Ibid., 4:1410 (translation not mine).

awareness of the upper limit of the Arabic language allows one to know the various linguistic possibilitie*s* (*iḥtimālāt)*, it is the habit of the speaker that guides the interpreter towards the intended meaning. For example if the word *yad* can simultaneously refer to hand (*yad*), grasping (*qabḍ)*, giving (*'aṭā')*, releasing (*basṭ)*, and capability and power (*qudrah)*, the Quranic use of hand depends on God's habit of speaking and a verse's particular context. The Quran intends certain meanings—and not others—especially when referring to matters of the unseen. Thus to decipher the intended meaning, the interpreter must first grasp the habit of the speaker rather than liberally applying any linguistic meaning via *ta'wīl*, especially when *ta'wīl* is motivated by incorrect epistemological frameworks. It is only the divine—in matters of the unseen—who can speak, and reference must be always made to the Quranic habit of speaking in order to decipher God's intent. No external epistemology can be referred to instead of *'ādat al-mutakallim*.

Ibn Qayyim's statement concerning prioritizing a poet's usage of a word over prophetic usage is better illustrated by examining a line of classical Arabic poetry, which has been fundamental in a significant theological debate that occurred in the early centuries of Islam. Early Muslim theologians had debated the ontological status of the Quran in what has been termed as the issue of the createdness of the Quran (*khalq al-Qur'ān*).[177] Is the Quran that is read by believers, in its linguistic form containing Arabic letters and words, truly the uncreated speech of God? Of course there is great scriptural evidence that the Quran is God's speech (*kalām Allah*) and there are a number of verses in the Quran that affirm that God spoke to the prophets.[178] However, these theological verses in scripture would later become highly contested. Was the Quran literally God's eternal speech, as many of the Ḥanbalis including Ibn Taymiyya argued, or was it, as the Ashʿarīs argued, a created speech that was merely an expression (*'ibārah*) of God's

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[177] Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics,* 30.
[178] See Quran 4:164.

internal, pre-linguistic speech (*kalām nafsī*)?[179] The rational theologians argued that it was irrational to believe that the Quran that contains words from a human language is an eternal speech because human languages themselves came into existence at a fixed time. As a result, they divided speech into an internal meaning (*kalām nafsī*) and the expression (*'ibārah*) used to communicate this meaning. While an internal, pre-linguistic meaning could be eternal (outside of time and space), a linguistic expression could not be eternal.

However, there was an obvious issue: the intuitive meaning of *kalām* in Arabic is a linguistic speech. The Ash'arī s thus had to find a linguistic precedent in *kalām al-'arab.* In response to this dilemma, the Ash'arī s argued that *kalām* in the Arabic language in fact did have (at least) two linguistic meanings. It can refer to both an internal speech as well as the linguistic utterance used to express an internal meaning. God's eternal speech, therefore, can only refer to the former. In adducing evidence for their position, the Ash'arīs cited a famous stanza from a pre-Islamic, Christian poet al-Akhṭall, who says:

> *"Inna al-kalām lafī al-fu'ādi wa innamā*
> *ju'ila al-lisānu 'alā al-fu'ādi dalilan"* [180]

According to the Ash'arī s, Al-Akhṭall allegedly uses the word *kalām* in the first line in reference to an internal speech because he refers to *kalām* as being in the heart. Because the Arabs had such precedent, the Ash'arī s attempted to ague that what the Quran actually means when it refers to itself as God's eternal speech is that it is an eternal, internal speech. Not ironically, this meaning also agreed with the epistemic system that the Ash'arīs proposed.

However, Ibn Taymiyya in his *Kitāb Al-Iman* offers a corrective via his contextual approach to language.[181] He criticizes the rational theologians for using a mere single line of

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[179] Mirāḥ,*"Al-Lughah wa al-Ma'nā: Bayna Ibn Ḥazm wa Ibn Taymiyya,"* 78, 119.
[180] Mirāḥ,*"Al-Lughah wa al-Ma'nā: Bayna Ibn Ḥazm wa Ibn Taymiyya,"* 97; Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya*, 7:138-139; For more on the perspective of the Ash'arīs, also see Ibrahīm Al-Bājūrī, *Ḥāshiyah al-Imām al-Bayjūrī 'alā Jawharah al-Tawḥīd* (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 2017), 130.

poetry in order to abstract a definition of *kalām* and place it into an entirely different (and inappropriate) context. In reality, Ibn Taymiyya argues, this was solely done to find evidence for a particular metaphysical formulation of the ontological status of the Quran. He objects that this is not an authentic way of interpreting scripture. In this vein, because Ibn Taymiyya rejects the method of abstraction used to form definitions, one cannot merely extract a definition from its particular context and then apply it to an entirely distinct context. This corresponds with Ibn Taymiyya's critique that particulars in the external world are so distinct from another that, in reality, they cannot be placed under a universal. Ibn Taymiyya argues that the rational theologians merely cite a restricted and contextual usage of the word *kalām* that is irrelevant to the verses of the Quran that discuss this particular theological issue. Thus, a single usage cannot be cited as evidence for the distinction between an internal speech and its external expression. In fact, Ibn Taymiyya argues, if one merely considers the Al-Akhṭall's stanza in light of its context—particularly the lines of poetry before it—one would realize that the term *kalām* is also used by the same poet for an external, linguistic speech. In this order, al-Akhṭall, before the aforementioned lines of poetry, says:

> *"La yuʿjibannaka min athīri lafẓihi*
> *ḥatta yakūn maʿ al-kalām aṣīlan"*[182]

Ibn Taymiyya claims that the usage of *kalām* in these lines is actually the general and unrestricted meaning (*muṭlaq*) of *kalām,* which can be applied to other contexts. Ibn Taymiyya argues that with a proper (contextual) understanding of al-Akhṭall's statement, one realizes that in reality he believes that the term *kalām* also includes a linguistic utterance—not merely an internal speech. Rather, when al-Akhṭall claims that *kalām* is found in the heart, by this he

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[181] Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿ fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya*, 7:120-153.
[182] Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿ fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya*, 7:139.

intends that the origin of speech (*aṣl al-kalām*) is a meaning in the heart. However, it is not truly

considered speech unless an utterance of the tongue corresponds with this internal "speech." Ibn

Taymiyya adds that this is the intuitive understanding of the term *kalām* when used by not only

Arabs but also all nations and civilizations.[183] If *kalām* is ever conditionally used in reference to

an internal speech, then there must be contextual reasons for doing so—not ideological. Ibn

Taymiyya believes that by citing such evidence from pre-Islamic poets, the rationalists were also

retrospectively projecting conceptual distinctions onto a language and a people that had little

concern for such philosophical debates. Therefore, the bipartite distinction of speech is indeed a

foreign conceptual distinction. Additionally, Ibn Taymiyya comments that al-Akhṭall was a

Christian poet, a believer in the Trinity, and the Christians, he says, "had erred in the meaning of

speech (*fī musammā al-kalām*)."[184] Even if this conceptual distinction is what al-Akhṭall in fact

intended, Ibn Taymiyya argues that this cannot be admitted as reliable evidence for deciding the

fate of a serious theological debate. This is because a conceptual distinction that emerged in a

foreign theology cannot determine the ontological status of the Quran. To sum up this argument,

Ibn Taymiyya correctly recognizes that the Ash'arī interpretation of al-Akhṭall's poetry is not

merely motivated by an innocuous approach to language; rather, it is an entire

reconceptualization of *kalām al-'arab*.

As has been already discussed, since the purpose of language is clear communication and

the Quran conveys guidance, Ibn Taymiyya assumes that God's speech is clear guidance. Ibn

Taymiyya argues that by reference to the habit of the speaker, not only the Quran but also other

texts are rendered clear. For Quranic exegesis, by generally looking at *kalām al-'arab* and

specifically looking at Quranic and Prophetic precedent, one can decipher the habit of the

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[183] Ibid.

[184] Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya*, 7:140.

speaker. According to this paradigm, the Quran is therefore best interpreted by internal, linguistic mechanisms rather than external ideologies.

5.3.3 Final Remarks on Ibn Taymiyya's Theory

In returning to the larger discussion on Quranic exegesis, Ibn Taymiyya's theory of interpretation, in contrast to the *majāz-ta'wīl* paradigm, emphasizes the self-sufficiency of scripture. How could it be, argues Ibn Taymiyya, that believers only truly understand the nature of God's essence and attributes, as described in the Quran, after Greek philosophical thought clarifies the matter?[185] Because the philosophers thought that it was their sole duty to extract the true meanings of scripture, they went above and beyond what scripture provided, relying on the "upper limit of language" and various linguistic feats, in order to reconcile their philosophical views with what the Quran plainly declares.[186] This plain and apparent sense of scripture is always the contextually determined meaning. It is well known that *kalām al-'arab* determines the correct usage of the Arabic language and that Quranic exegesis relies on the linguistic practices of the Arabs. However, it is *not* the case that a speaker simultaneously intends all possible linguistic meanings of a word within a particular speech act. Instead, contextual clues provided by the speaker, rather than extra-textual considerations, direct the interpreter to the correct linguistic meaning.

On the other hand, *ta'wīl* is the selection of a meaning from the various linguistic possibilities based on considerations other than contextual clues, specifically rational considerations disguising complex epistemic systems. Ibn Taymiyya does not try to limit the possible linguistic meanings of a word. That words can be used in different ways in various contexts is an undeniable reality of language. For Ibn Taymiyya, however, authorial intent is best

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[185] Qadhi, "'The Unleashed Thunderbolts' of Ibn Qayyim al-Gawziyyah," 139.
[186] Ibid.

deciphered by reference to contextual clues rather than the selection of a linguistic meaning that agrees with an ideology imposed on the text by the interpreter. By virtue of this argument, Ibn Taymiyya establishes that there is always a correct interpretation and precludes the claim that all linguistic possibilities can indeed be interpretive possibilities. However, Ibn Taymiyya's conception of language is not uncontested and his approach is formulated in response to other great thinkers. Over a century before him, the famous thinker and philosopher Ibn ʿArabī (1165-1240 AD) had formulated that, "As far as the Word of God is concerned, when it is revealed in the language of a certain people, and when those who speak this language differ as to what God meant by a certain word or group of words, *each of them—however different their interpretations may be—effectively comprises what God meant*…God knows all these meanings, and there is none that is not the expression of what he meant to say to this specific person…"[187] Accordingly, one linguistic meaning cannot be chosen *at the expense* of another; thus, all linguistic possibilities are interpretive possibilities. In this schema, no "limit" is put on the text nor God; the innate and ineffable meanings of the Quran can be manifested because no linguistic possibility is ever excluded. Ibn Taymiyya's philosophical response to this paradigm and how he also attempts to maintain the ineffable and infinite nature of the Quran will be discussed later in Section 7.2. For now, it suffices to know that an exegete's conception of language influences his exegetical method.

6. The Implications of Rejecting the *Ḥaqīqa-Majāz* Dichotomy

Proponents of *majāz* employed *ta'wīl* in order to resolve the alleged conflict between rational evidences and the apparent sense of scripture. How could, the rational theologians wondered, a transcendent God ascend upon a throne and descend to the lowest heavens? This *could not be* the intent of a scripture whose veracity was originally established by rational

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[187] Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore*, 30. (translation not mine) (emphasis added).

evidences based on the Aristotelian sciences. A (rational) conception of God—similar to the Aristotelian First Mover—did not permit such anthropomorphic descriptions. *Ta'wīl* thus became a legitimate interpretive practice because it proved to be of great utility as it allowed exegetes to argue for the coherence between the scripture of Islam and Hellenistic reasoning. The Muslims philosophers also debated how the Muslim laity was to relate to scripture. If the true meaning of scripture could only be deciphered and understood by the philosophers, what was the value of scripture in the lives of lay individuals, considering that most people were untrained in the rational sciences? It was crucial to explain the way in which the Quran spoke to different segments of society, particularly addressing the various degrees of intellect (*tafāwut fi al-'uqūl*). These interpretive difficulties were ultimately resolved by incorporating various philosophies and intellectual systems into the interpretive process, sometimes inspired by Aristotelian logic and metaphysics and on other occasions inspired by neo-Platonic ideas.[188]

The *majāz-ta'wīl* paradigm however led to many hermeneutical conflicts. For Ibn Taymiyya, the rational theologians, as well as the Muslim philosophers, had relegated scripture to an epistemologically inferior position. Ghazālī's conception of *ta'wīl*—although not exclusive to him—was that revelation could not contradict what the intellect established with certitude. Therefore, if the apparent meaning of revelation contradicted pure rationality, scripture must be reinterpreted.[189] Eventually, "revelation was to generally lose its authority against any proposition that reason could 'establish.'"[190] As seen also in the works of the Muslim philosophers—Ibn Rushd for example—the intellect was the source of apodictic truth, providing absolute certainty to the philosopher, while revelation merely spoke in myths for the multitude. It was ultimately the philosopher that unlocked the true meanings of scripture through a set of

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[188] See Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya against the Greek Logicians*, xi-lviii.
[189] Anjum, *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought,* 148.
[190] Ibid.,

interpretive techniques. Ibn Taymiyya argues that such an interpretive approach not only renders the text subservient to external intellectual systems but also renders God a liar. "To be more charitable," explains Brown, "God was concealing the true breadth and depth of the Truth and all its aspects."[191] The difficulty that arises from this approach is the philosophically elitist system that it produces. Eventually, no one other than the philosopher is capable of designating which parts of scripture are non-myths, not requiring *ta'wīl*. The philosophers and the rational theologians both relied on the rational sciences to facilitate the application of *ta'wīl*—even though their methods and conclusions seriously differed. Consequently, scripture was entirely subjected to the "whims" of another system of truth, one that Ibn Taymiyya argues is both rationally incoherent and cannot be reconciled with scripture. One is led to contemplate: what is the precise role and authority of scripture in such an interpretive paradigm? It was the un-privileging of revelation that struck a real nerve in Ibn Taymiyya; both the reduction of revelation to the status of a mere mouthpiece for enunciating various philosophical doctrines by the philosophers and the silencing of scripture on issues of God's attributes by the rational theologians. Scripture itself could not convey demonstrative evidence like the detailed philosophical systems, hindering its epistemic status; what could rescue revelation?

Ibn Taymiyya objects that such interpretive approaches subject revelation to not only foreign intellectual systems but also rational incoherencies that can be corrected by the epistemological premises—and arguably system—offered by scripture itself.[192] Because *ta'wīl* is a *limitation* on revelation, Ibn Taymiyya aims to affirm the real status of revelation as epistemologically superior to all other forms of knowledge. His aim is to ultimately free

[191] Jonathan Brown, "The Fate of Non-Muslims: Perspectives on Salvation Outside of Islam," Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, last modified March 07, 2018, https://yaqeeninstitute.org/en/jonathan-brown/the-fate-of-non-muslims-perspectives-on-salvation-outside-of-islam/.
[192] Anjum, *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought,* 150.

revelation not from reason itself, but from incorrect reason, and to allow it to speak for itself on its own terms.[193] This is, for Ibn Taymiyya, the most authentic way of interpreting scripture. For this reason, Ibn Taymiyya focuses not only on showing the incompatibility of *majāz* with scripture but also the internal contradictions of the dichotomy. The dichotomy, a concept that was seen as a logical component of *kalām al-ʿarab*, Ibn Taymiyya exposes to be a flawed mental framework imposed onto Quranic exegesis.

The implications of imposing a foreign ideology on Quranic exegesis are many. I argue that Ibn Taymiyya's intricate criticism of contemporary epistemological, metaphysical, and linguistic models is ultimately motivated by theological concerns. Although such rational systems were originally formed to defend revelation against rational objections, they eventually negated crucial theological doctrines.[194] It was in attempt of reversing such damages in a post-*taʾwīl* world that Ibn Taymiyya rejects the dichotomy. This is buttressed by Ibn Taymiyya's theological exposition as expressed in his *Al-ʿAqīda al-Wāsiṭiyya*: "It is from belief in God [to] believe that which [God] has described Himself in His book [the Quran], and by that which the Prophet has described Him, without *taḥrīf,* nor *taʿṭīl*, nor *takyīf,* nor *tamthīl.*"[195] Ibn Taymiyya argues that in affirming God's self-representation in scripture, one must avoid: *taḥrīf*, or altering the literal word of scripture; *taʿṭīl*, denying the meanings of scripture; *takyīf,* or attempting to describe the modality of God's attributes; and *tamthīl*, or rendering God like His creation. Ibn Taymiyya's goal is to "allow" God to speak for Himself, without imposing philosophical abstracts onto divine speech. Metaphysical constructs imposed on the text limit the ways in which the divine can express Himself. On the contrary, Ibn Taymiyya grants the text, and concomitantly the divine, absolute authority over describing all matters of the unseen.

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[193] Ibid.
[194] Ibid., 196-227.
[195] Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿ fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya*, 3:130.

To further clarify, in light of Hellenistic reasoning, the apparent sense of scripture was viewed as implying an anthropomorphistic image of God—a body that moves through space and in time. Because time and space can only be affirmed of created things (*makhlūqāt*),[196] the apparent meaning of the anthropomorphic verses implies a similarity or sharing (*isthtirāk*) between the Creator and the created, also known as *tashbīh*. The Quran however prohibits *tashbīh*.[197] This similarity between the Creator and the created needs to be negated in order to maintain God's transcendence (*tanzīh*). Ibn Taymiyya asserts that the raison d'etre for the application of *ta'wīl* was in order to negate the similarity that the rational theologians (mentally) posited between the Creator and the created when affirming the apparent sense of scripture.[198] For example, it was assumed that if God is attributed with a *yad*, or hand, this implies similarity between God and humans, who also possess hands. However, Ibn Taymiyya argues that there is no *ishtirāk* between scripture's assertion that God has a *yad* (hand) or his *nuzūl* (descent) and human hands or human movement. Because of certain metaphysical concepts of essences and attributes and a theory of universals inherited from Hellenistic reasoning, the proponents of *majāz* could not escape this ontological similarity between the Creator and the created. However, Ibn Taymiyya contends that the issue of *ishtirāk* did not exist amongst the *salaf*. When they read these verses, they did not relate to divine speech in such a way, nor did they object to the anthropomorphic verses the way later rational theologians found these verses problematic. This was because the *salaf* read these verses based on an expertise of *kalām al-'arab* in its pure, unadulterated form. As a result, Ibn Taymiyya criticizes the rational theologians for assuming

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[196] The Ashʿarī's had argue that all things other than God are subject to *ḥudūth*, which includes spatio-temporal implications. This has to be negated of God.

[197] Quran 42:11. *Laysa ka mithlihi shay'*. Asad translates this as "…there is nothing like unto Him." Asad comments on this verse, "He is fundamentally…different from anything that exists or could exist, or anything that man can conceive or imagine or define."

[198] Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿ fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya*, 20:447-448.

certain metaphysical concepts to be impeccable. [199] The *ḥaqīqa-majāz* dichotomy was formulated in light of especially convincing philosophical concepts from Hellenistic reasoning and in response to theological issues that arose by first accepting and then fully absorbing these philosophical doctrines into the Islamic sciences. By criticizing the dichotomy, Ibn Taymiyya uniquely sheds light on the influence Hellenistic philosophy on Quranic exegesis. He therefore focuses on attacking a particular rational system that he consideres incompatible with the Quran's metaphysical worldview.

7. Ibn Taymiyya's Interpretive Principles

This section attempts to deal with the momentous task of summarizing some aspects of Ibn Taymiyya's exegetical methodology beyond his critique of the dichotomy. It has so far been established that Ibn Taymiyya is a fierce critic of the *ḥaqīqa-majāz* dichotomy. The reasons for this seem to be that the dichotomy enabled ideologically motivated interpretive gymnastics, which made the text subservient to incorrect rational systems. After serious critique of existing approaches to exegesis, it is only reasonable that Ibn Taymiyya offers an approach to interpreting the anthropomorphic verses particularly and the proper method of exegesis in general. This section will also shed light on the significance of the *salaf* in Ibn Taymiyya's exegetical methodology. In brief, Ibn Taymiyya's theological-exegesis, or approach to the anthropomorphic verses, is based on the principle of *qiyās al-awlā*, or the *a fortiori* argument.[200] As for his general exegetical methodology, Ibn Taymiyya regards transmitted exegetical material from the *salaf* as the most authentic way of interpreting the Quran. In this order, we first look at Ibn Taymiyya's *qiyās al-awlā*.

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[199] For a brief introduction of Ibn Taymiyya's metaphysical doctrines, see Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya Against the Greek Logicians,* introduction.

[200] Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism,* 56-62. This is Hoover's particular terminological usage.

7.1. *Qiyās al-Awlā*: How Best to Speak of God

Ibn Taymiyya's interpretive model is keenly concerned with speaking of God in the best way possible. Since numerous debates of language and theology focused on the issue of God's attributes, Ibn Taymiyya proposes a distinctive way of conceiving of God's attributes that he believes to be grounded in the Quran itself and the (interpretive) methodology of the *salaf*. He attempts to formulate an interpretive principle that emanates from the Quran itself, relying on epistemic and metaphysical systems internal to the text rather than foreign ideologies. In this endeavor, Ibn Taymiyya develops the notion of *qiyās al-awlā*. He explains, "if [an attribute of] perfection is affirmed of *al-muḥdath al-mumkin al-makhlūq* [an accidental, contingent, created entity], then it is for the Necessary Eternal Existent, the Creator, [affirmed] *a fortiori*."[201] This principle is dualistic in nature. In other words, any attribute that does not imply any sort of deficiency from any perspective, it is *a fortiori* (*awlā*) attributed to the Creator because it is a characteristic of perfection. Conversely, any attribute that implies any sort of deficiency from any angle is *a fortiori* negated of the divine essence. This is because "God has made it obvious that He is far worthier of being exonerated of imperfections than humans."[202] In fact, this is a form of *tanzīh,* which is also, like the rational theologians, a central concern for Ibn Taymiyya. A holistic application of *qiyās al-awlā* requires that the believer attribute *all* creaturely perfections to God and free Him of *all* creaturely imperfections.[203] In either case, the Creator is more deserving of both affirmation and negation.[204]

In hopes of establishing God's absolute transcendence (*tanzīh)* by negating any likeness posited between God and man*,* the rational theologians sought to reinterpret (*ta'wīl*) many of the

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[201] Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿ fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya*, 16:357 (translation mine).
[202] Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism,* 61.
[203] Ibid.*,* 59 (emphasis added).
[204] Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿ fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya*, 1:48.

seemingly anthropomorphic verses. However, Ibn Taymiyya affirms that the true methodology of the *salaf* in tackling this issue is the application of *qiyās al-awlā*.[205] Ibn Taymiyya claims to derive this principle from scripture itself, specifically the Quranic verse, "And to God is the highest similitude (*al-mathal al-a'alā*)."[206] This principle *rationally* affirms and negates certain attributes of the divine based on human empirical experience. For example, the very existence of created things indicates that God has the attribute of power and capability, without which there could have been no creation. Power and capability are clearly positive attributes in the creation, and God is only more deserving of being described with these attributes because they do not imply any sort of deficiency. Additionally, the level of perfection (*itqān*) in creation indicates that God is knowledgeable because one cannot create with such perfection except with knowledge of the object that is being created. Knowledge is, therefore, an attribute of perfection; the one with knowledge is *always* more perfect than the one without knowledge or with less knowledge. Ibn Taymiyya also adds that the fact that the divine created the creation once also implies that He can, without effort, do it again, referring to the theological principle of resurrection.[207] In this way, according to the simple notion of pure perfection, God can be rationally attributed with knowledge, power, and other essential attributes.

Ibn Taymiyya, by virtue of *qiyās al-awlā*, attempts to attribute to God the highest perfection, not only in conformity with the Quranic verse but also in conformity with what he considers "clear reason."[208] For example, the Quran mentions the story of prophet Abraham's question directed to his father as to why the father worships that which does *not hear, nor see,*

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[205] Rafīq Al-'Ajam, *Mawsū'ah Muṣṭalaḥāt Ibn Taymiyya* (Beirūt: Maktabah Libnān Nāshirūn, 2003), 391 (translation mine). Al-'Ajam cites this from Ibn Taymiyya's *Ar-radd 'alā al-Manṭiqiyyin*.
[206] See Quran 16:60: *wa lillahi al-mathal al-a'alā*
[207] Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism,* 60.
[208] At the core of Ibn Taymiyya's epistemology is the idea of *al-aql al- ṣarīh*, which has often been translated in the secondary literature either as "clear reason" or "sound reason." For more on Ibn Taymiyya's epistemology, see Yasir Kazi,*"Reconciling Reason and Revelation in the Writings of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328): An Analytical Study of Ibn Taymiyya's Darʾ al-Taʿāruḍ."* (PhD diss., Yale University, May 2013).

nor speak—referring to the idols. Abraham's rhetorical question indicates that these are natural imperfections in the creation; God must *a fortiori* be exonerated of such characteristics.[209] In this way, Ibn Taymiyya argues that any theological position that strips God of His attributes and posits Him as a pure essence—or only in negative terms (i.e. God is *not* ignorant, *nor* deaf, *nor* mute, and so on)—is contrary to the scriptural conception of the divine because it denies the principle that God must be spoken of according to pure perfection. This also includes the rational theologians, who, for Ibn Taymiyya, by rejecting the plain meaning of the seemingly anthropomorphic verses in favor of a metaphorical meaning, effectively denied certain attributes. It may seem that Ibn Taymiyya comes to conclusions similar to the rational theologians. In fact, Ibn Taymiyya does employ rational arguments in establishing God's perfection. The rational theologians had also concluded that God must be attributed with knowledge, power, and intent because of rational premises. However, Ibn Taymiyya's conception of rationality develops in contrast to the epistemological systems adopted by the rational theologians, even though the conclusions at times may be similar. In developing his own epistemic system, for every rational principle he draws upon, he argues that it emerges from scripture itself. Ibn Taymiyya does not shy away from the fact that *qiyās al-awlā* is ostensibly a rationalistic formulation. However, he is certain that his formulation is in deference to scriptural demands.

For Ibn Taymiyya, properly speaking about God is of the utmost significance because of its significance in the worship of God. If one has an incorrect conception of God and His attributes, then one cannot properly worship God. It is through an intimate knowledge of God's essence and attributes that humans enter into a relationship with Him. How can someone enter into a relationship with an unknown entity? To know God one must know His attributes. It is for this reason that Ibn Taymiyya wholly rejects Ashʿarī *ta'wīl* of God's attributes, especially the

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[209] Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism,* 63.

attribute of love. According to Ibn Taymiyya, based on certain philosophical notions inherited

from Hellenistic reasoning, some of the Ashʿarīs had argued that God could not love nor be

loved.[210] Ibn Taymiyya, however, thinks that love is not merely an accidental attribute of God;

rather it is one of the most crucial and essential attributes. How can one worship a God incapable

of loving and being loved? For the ultimate goal of establishing the proper worship of God

(*tawḥīd*), Ibn Taymiyya formulates a theological-interpretive paradigm. There is of course no

perfection in positing the divine as a pure essence stripped of all attributes; nor is there any

perfection in reinterpreting common-sensical attributes such as God's love or ability to be loved

as references to His reward and bounty.[211] Ibn Taymiyya thus vociferously rejects any *taʾwīl* of

God's attributes. This includes reinterpreting God's *yad* (hand) as referring to capability or

power, or reinterpreting His *nuzūl* (descent) to mean the descent of His mercy rather than God's

"literal" descent.[212] Although such metaphorical interpretations may seem innocuous, Ibn

Taymiyya does not concede to a single application of *taʾwīl* because of its foundational premises

and the threat it poses to scripture. For Ibn Taymiyya, it is unreasonable to speak of God in

contrast to the way He speaks of Himself. God's self-representation within scripture is the only

way of speaking of God and it is from and through this self-representation that he derives the *a

fortiori* argument.

7.2 The Safest Way to Quranic Exegesis

Ibn Taymiyya's general approach to exegesis develops in response to other hermeneutical

paradigms that he considers to have swerved to extremes by privileging external ideologies over

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[210] Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism,* 52, 64. Hoover summarizes and analyzes Bell's argument in *Love Theory in Later Hanbalite Islam.*
[211] Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism,* 66.
[212] Ibn Taymiyya's understanding of such "anthropomorphic" descriptions is that they should be interpreted according to the apparent meaning without delving into the modality (*kayfiyya*).

and above scripture.[213] Interpretive principles are a part and parcel of exegesis. They influence the manner in which the interpreter approaches the particulars of a text. These interpretive principles can include epistemological and metaphysical systems and the specific application of grammar and rhetorical feats. Because Ibn Taymiyya launches a detailed attack against particular forms of Hellenistic reasoning, it is only befitting that he then offer a method of exegesis that avoids such pitfalls.

It must be noted that an interpreter's conception of language influences the way in which he determines the types of interpretive practices that are acceptable and lead to "reasonable" meanings.[214] By reasonable, I refer to Khaled Abou El Fadl's idea of a meaning that is accepted by the *interpretive community*. For example, the Muslim philosophers' approach to exegesis never found great popularity and was eventually deemed heterodox, even though they indirectly influenced other exegetical methods. In other words, their method was rejected and considered unreasonable by the interpretive community. In applying El Fadl's definition to the thinker under examination, Ibn Taymiyya never refers to an abstract, universal community. For him, reasonable meanings are the ones accepted by the *ideal* interpretive community, namely the early *salaf*.

Ibn Taymiyya argues that sound knowledge is of two types; either it is in the form of a transmitted report (*naql*) from an infallible source (*ma'sūm*)—such as scripture or the prophet— or it is based on correct reasoning (*istidlāl muhaqqiq*)—either rational or experiential in nature, or both.[215] In accordance with this epistemological proposition, Ibn Taymiyya grounds his interpretive methodology in the statements of the prophet (*ḥadīth*) and the *salaf*. While the

[213] Heath, "Creative Hermeneutics," 203.

[214] Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islam Law, Authority, and Women,* (London: Oneworld Publics, 2014,) 197.

[215] Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya*, 13:329. See also Yasir Kazi, *"Reconciling Reason and Revelation in the Writings of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328),"* 125-126.

former is an infallible source of know ledge, the later is an extremely reliable one. This exegetical methodology is presented in Ibn Taymiyya's short treatise *al-Muqaddima.* In this text, he argues that the Prophet taught the Muslim community—namely the companions, especially those who were known for expertise in exegesis—the precise meanings of the Quran in totality.[216] It is already known that the literal words of the Quran were accurately transmitted to later generations of Muslims. Ibn Taymiyya adds to this proposition that the *meanings* of the text were also received in totality by later generations through authentic transmission. Since these transmissions are available to the Muslim community, they are the most authentic and authoritative sources of exegesis.

In developing an objective methodology, Ibn Taymiyya is starkly against drawing any universals by which the text is to be interpreted, except those taken from the text itself. He casts doubt on any human attempt to form universals from empirical evidence. It is as Hallaq states, "Ibn Taymiyya was an ardent sceptic, but a sceptic who was saved by religion. Our simple minds, he persistently held, cannot establish certainty and truth in the natural world. The only source of truth and certainty is revealed knowledge, knowledge conveyed to us by the prophet."[217] Because all human attempts at drawing universals are futile, the only universals that Ibn Taymiyya accepts are those that revelation itself affirms. In an exegetical context, this means that even interpretive universals must be taken from infallible sources such as scripture, the Prophet's words, and transmissions from the early *salaf.* It is only through this method that scripture can be interpreted without imposing upon it foreign ideologies.

In *al-Muqaddima,* Ibn Taymiyya hymns great praise for al- Ṭabarī's (d. 310AH/923AD) exegetical methodology, a classical Muslim exegete. In analyzing al-Ṭabarī's exegetical

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[216] Ibid., 13:331-333, 344.
[217] Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya Against the Greek Logicians* , xxxix. XXXIX.

approach, one realizes "that the hermeneutic that most respects a text determines it least."[218]

Similarly, Ibn Taymiyya criticizes those exegetes that allow foreign ideologies to determine a

text while ignoring the vast exegetical material transmitted from the immediate community of

the Prophet. As has been argued earlier, communities play significant roles in the interpretation

of texts. Therefore, Ibn Taymiyya defines the best method of exegesis as one that follows the

footsteps of the ideal Muslim community (the *salaf*). The concept of the *salaf* as the ideal

Muslim community is an accepted tenet of Sunni Islam, and by formulating his exegetical

method on their interpretive practices, Ibn Taymiyya (effectively) places himself above criticism.

Nonetheless, this should not lead one to conclude that exegesis must be entirely limited to

transmitted material. Some have, in fact, argued that Ibn Taymiyya's hermeneutic limits Quranic

exegesis to the prophetic word, or that which has been transmitted to the later generations from

the companions who learned interpretation directly from the Prophet. Walid Saleh argues that

Ibn Taymiyya "undermine[d] the previous consensus amongst Sunni commentators that

philology should be the foundation of the *tafsīr* enterprise (regardless of what may, in practice,

have been the case). The dismantling of this consensus is the main achievement of Ibn

Taymiyya's treatise…Philology was *dethroned*…"[219] However, this may not be absolutely true.

Others have found that Ibn Taymiyya not only relies on the *hadith* literature but also uses

philological, historical, and even Biblical arguments to make his arguments.[220] As has been

argued, Ibn Taymiyya did not attack philology; rather, he formulated the correct way of using

philology in exegesis, one that was not subject to ideological influences.

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[218] Heath, "Creative Hermeneutics" 204.

[219] Walid A. Saleh, "Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics: An Analysis of An Introduction to the Foundations of Qur'anic Exegesis," in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times,* ed. Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), *148*-149.

[220] Younus Y. Mirza, "Ibn Taymiyya as Exegete: Moses' Father-in-Law and the Messenger in Surat Ya Sin." *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017): 41.

Younus Mirza's dating of the *al-Muqaddima* is enlightening: it seems that the short

treatise may have been one of Ibn Taymiyya's early works. This leaves the interpreter with a few

possibilities. It is possible that Ibn Taymiyya outgrew the methodology proposed in the *al-*

Muqaddima. Mirza seems to believe that this is indeed the case, that it "was not Ibn Taymiyya's

final say on *tafsīr* ..."[221] Alternatively, it can also be said that Ibn Taymiyya merely elucidates

the "safer way" of conducting *tafsīr*, or a system that has the ability to unite the community of

believers on a general body of meanings of their sacred text. This seems to me equally plausible,

if not more. As is clear from the introduction of the *al-Muqaddima*, Ibn Taymiyya was requested

by "some brothers to write an introduction containing the *universal principles* (*qawā'id kulliyah*)

that specify the understanding (*fahm*) of the Quran and knowledge of its exegesis (*tafsīr*) and

meanings (*ma'ānīhi*), and that allow one to differentiate between truth and falsehood in

interpretation based on tradition (*manqūl*) and reason (*ma'qūl*). "[222] Notably, Ibn Taymiyya was

requested to elucidate the universal principles by which to interpret the Quran. Even in this

exchange, there is acknowledgment that universal principles determine the fate of any textual

analysis. However, the real question seems to be: where are these principles derived from? By

advising average believers to rely on transmitted material, Ibn Taymiyya hopes to prevent

readers and interpreters of the Quran from falling into theological and ideological deviations that

he argues are found in *tafsīr* books that rely on other sources in addition to, or at the expense of,

transmitted material.

Health's earlier comment regarding al-Ṭabarī's exegetical method invites great

philosophical curiosity for thinkers of the hermeneutical tradition. Concerning Ibn Taymiyya, I

find it of the utmost importance to examine the philosophical ramifications of his methodology,

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[221] Ibid., 43.

[222] Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya*, 13:329 (translation mine, emphasis added).

especially regarding the doctrine of the Quran's inexhaustibility. The initial concern that arises over this exegetical methodology is whether Ibn Taymiyya's methodology is any different from stark literalism. How does he maintain the widespread notion held by Muslim scholars that the Quran is a text that the scholars are never completely satiated of nor do its wonders ever find an end.[223] The Quran in the Islamic tradition is indeed a text, but a text unlike any other due to its divine origin. In the Taymiyyan framework, in what way does one understand the theological doctrine that Quran contains unending meanings[224] if all of what it says can be limited to secondary prophetic literature as compiled and transmitted by the early generations?

It is known that the Quran is beautifully poetic, inviting one towards unending reflection so that may one taste a few of its infinite meanings. Contemplation over the theological doctrine of the Quran's inexhaustibility immediately pushes against one's conception of language. In order to properly address this issue, one must first answer the question: what is the purpose of the Quran? The Quran proclaims that the Prophet is responsible only for *balāgh mubīn*, or 'clear communication."[225] The Quran, like other revealed books, thus conveys clear guidance and the messengers and prophets were sent in a similar vein. Since scripture and the prophets both guide, on account of this definition, the Quran de facto refers to extra-linguistic meanings, meanings outside of the text itself that can be deciphered.[226] Even though the Quran essentially communicates guidance, this does simply mitigate the text to a mouthpiece for information that is better explained in commentaries and other secondary material. Even al-Tabarī, when offering several suggestions from transmitted literature for the possible meanings of a verse, he leaves it

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[223] Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu' fatawa Shaykh al-Islam Ahmad ibn Taymiyya*, 13:330.
[224] See Quran 18:109.
[225] Navid Kermani, *God is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Quran,* trans. Tony Crawford (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 129.
[226] Ibid.

merely at that: these are only possibilities and reference must always be made to the text itself.[227]

Ibn Taymiyya also affirms that the Quran invites the reader to reflect over the text. However, he argues that this transmitted exegetical material is *not* a collection of spiritual reflections; rather, this material contains an understanding of its meaning (*fahm ma'ānīhi.*) Ibn Taymiyya fundamentally believes that transmitted material *is* the communicative message of the text that believers require for personal salvation. This material is an accurate description of God's message to humanity because the *salaf* received this knowledge directly from the Prophet. Only when the communicative message of the Quran is deciphered can believers begin to spiritually and philosophically reflect over the text. This ensures that such reflections are always in agreement with divine intent. Ibn Taymiyya rhetorically asks: how can one reflect over a text whose original intent and meaning is not first properly deciphered?[228]

It seems to me that the idea of personal reflection over the Quran after deciphering its communicative message emerges from Ibn Taymiyya's distinction between the intent of the speaker (*murād al-mutakallim*) and meanings that are attained by analogy (*al-i'tibār wa al-qiyās*). [229] Because of a lack of knowledge of this key distinction, Ibn Taymiyya maintains that many exegetes made errors by offering correct meanings and attributing them to verses that do not signify these meanings. Ibn Taymiyya refers to this as attributing a scripturally correct signified meaning to that which does not signify it (*fi al-dalīl lā fi al-madlūl*). [230] However, these scripturally correct meanings need not be entirely discarded. If the meaning is correct in that it agrees with the Quran and the Prophetic tradition, it can be admitted into t*afsīr* material as

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[227] Heath, "Creative Hermeneutics," 205.
[228] Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya*, 13:332.
[229] This technical distinction is introduced in a different text titled *Risalah fi 'ilm al-Bāṭin wa al- Ẓāhir*. See Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya*, 13: 241.
[230] Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya*, 13: 362. While Ibn Taymiyya particularly refers to the attribution of correct meanings to verses that do not indicate these meanings, Ibn Taymiyya *a fortiori* condemns incorrect meanings attributed to any verse.

meanings attained through analogy. It is possible that this is where personal reflection over the

Quran belongs in the Taymiyyan model. In this way, following the deciphering of divine intent

of any particular verse, the reader is invited to reflect over the text. Notably, these reflections are

by nature subjective. The reader interacts with the Quran by discovering its hidden treasures, in

accordance with his intellectual and spiritual capacity. This is, Ibn Taymiyya says, what the Sufis

have termed *ishārāt*, or that which is implicitly indicated by a verse.[231] These reflections,

however, should never be conflated with the actual intent of the author. Divine intent is the

communicative message that is determined by context. On the other hand, personal reflection

corresponds only to the limits of the one who reflects. In modern terminology, the differentiation

between the intended meaning and an analogical meaning can also be explained through Hirsch's

distinction between meaning and significance.[232] Hirsch states:

> "*Meaning* is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. *Significance*, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable…Significance always implies a relationship, and one constant, unchanging pole of that relationship is what the text means [meaning]. Failure to consider this simple and essential distinction has been the source of enormous confusion in hermeneutic theory."[233]

Murād in the Taymiyyan paradigm is similar to Hirsch's deployment of meaning while *i'tibār*

wa al-qiyās is similar to the notion of significance. Hirsch, like Ibn Taymiyya, makes the

criticism that a major issue in modern hermeneutics is the conflation between the two.

Significances are subjective and changing; they cannot be conflated with the unchanging,

communicative message of a text.

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[231] Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya*, 13: 240.
[232] Heath notes the remarkable utility of using Hirsch's terminology in explaining Quranic hermeneutics. I have found it also notably useful in explaining Ibn Taymiyya's exegetical methodology. See Heath, "Creative Hermeneutics," 179.
[233] E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 8.

Overall, Ibn Taymiyya's hermeneutic is in response to the perennial question of interpretation. He was indeed not alone in attempting to formulate an authentic interpretive model while also maintaining certain epistemological, metaphysical, and theological commitments. Muslim exegetes have long debated what sort of hermeneutic is best suited for deciphering divine intent in the Quran. While some have said that all possible linguistic meanings are intended meanings, others like Ibn Taymiyya argue for a context-based interpretive model that attempts to draw its interpretive principles from the *salaf's* understanding of the Quran. For Ibn Taymiyya, the *salaf* is a generation free from ideological influences. Therefore, in his advice to the lay believer, he argues that exegesis should primarily be taken from material transmitted from the *salaf.* In the final pages of the treatise, Ibn Taymiyya narrates the statement of Masrūq—in which he cautions people from making folly of *tafsīr*—"For verily it [*tafsīr*] is *al-riwāyah 'an Allah*."[234] The act of interpretation is literally to transmit on behalf of God: extreme caution must always be exercised. Relying primarily on transmitted reports from the early Muslims is perhaps the greatest manifestation of this exegetical caution. The companions of the Prophet—being the original audience of the Quran and having experienced the companionship of the Prophet—were theologically more qualified than all others to interpret scripture.

8. Mediating Between *Tashbīh* and *Tanzīh*

In this final section, I return to the issue of the anthropomorphic verses from the perspective of philosophical reflection over language. Language is not a flawless medium of communication, but it is indeed the primary way in which communication occurs. God also speaks to humans through this medium in which certain meanings cannot be perfectly communicated. Thus, errors in interpretation are inevitable. When words are made into textual significations and the speaker is no longer present to clarify his intent at any given moment, the

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[234] Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿ fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya*, 13:374 (translation mine).

process becomes even more fragile. While communication is a shared activity between a speaker and a listener, the interpreter during textual analysis is uniquely alone. Despite these linguistic and interpretive limitations that must be accounted for, the Quran asserts its own clarity[235] and Ibn Taymiyya affirms the universal ability of all humans to access the guidance embedded within the Quran. For Ibn Taymiyya, this translates into reading the Quran based on the apparent level and inn accordance with its context, a reading that he thinks cannot be reconciled with Aristotelian metaphysics, Neo-Platonic abstracts, and the speculative theology of the Muslim rationalists. In fact, Ibn Taymiyya argues that no believer needs to refer to "extramental universals" in order to access divine guidance.[236]

So far we have highlighted that issues of Quranic exegesis revolved around epistemological concerns. Muslim theologians particularly debated the best way to speak of God in accordance with scripture *and* rationality. Ibn Taymiyya argues that the most reliable way of speaking of God is by affirming that which is affirmed in scripture. The best way to understand this revealed scripture is through the interpretative techniques of the Prophet himself and his companions. Ibn Taymiyya's proposed method of exegesis, like the rational theologians, is coherent with his epistemological and metaphysical worldview. Thus, at the core of Ibn Taymiyya's epistemology is the concept of the *fiṭra*. The *fiṭra* is a "divinely placed moral compass in the human heart, [which] turns this [empirical] knowledge into ethical verities and inclines the human to the love of good, and, hence, of God."[237] Based on Ibn Taymiyya's epistemological notion of *fiṭra* —equally available to all individuals—the meanings of the Quran can be grasped by all individuals. The concept of *fitra* also coincides with Ibn Taymiyya's

[235] *Balāgh mubīn* or clear communication.
[236] Anjum, *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought,* 224; See also Hallaq, "Ibn Taymiyya on the Existence of God," 51.
[237] Anjum, *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought,* 224.

preference for the apparent meaning of scripture. Since the *fiṭra* is an epistemological tool by which all humans are capable of knowing God, therefore there must be a reading of the Quran that is also shared amongst all believers. For Ibn Taymiyya, this common-sense reading of scripture is preferable to any conceptualization of God motivated by Hellenistic reasoning, which can be rejected on two fronts: (1) based on (sound) rational objections as well as (2) the lack of coherency between Hellenistic philosophy and the Quranic worldview. The apparent reading of the Quran not only allows equal access to the text by people of different intellects—the perennial issue of the Muslim philosophers—but also takes into account the limitations of language and the way God communicates with His creation.

From amongst the debates that emerged due to the intersection of exegesis and epistemology, the *tashbīh-tanzīh* was perhaps the most significant debate in Islamic theology. Muslim theologians attempted to strike a balance between the principles of *tashbīh* (anthropomorphism) and *tanzīh* (transcendence). According to the rational theologians, in order to affirm God's absolute transcendence (*tanzīh*), *all* anthropomorphic implications must be negated of God. For Ibn Taymiyya, any deviation in approaching this particular theological debate is due to swerving away from the proper balance between the two extremes, *tashbīh* and *tanzīh*. As Swartz explains, "doctrinal error or heresy [for Ibn Taymiyya] results when one element of the truth is elevated to the level of the whole, so that the integrity and dialectical tension that ought to exist between the part of the whole are destroyed."[238] Ibn Taymiyya thinks that striking a balance between the two is key to resolving many epistemological and exegetical issues. However, this does not necessarily imply that one must draw a line at the very center of the dialectical tension between *tashbīh* and *tanzīh*. Rather, the goal is to find the proper balance

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[238] Ibid., 186. Anjum cites from Merlin L. Swartz, *Studies on Islam*, (Oxford University Press, 1981).

according to the demands of scripture itself. Even for this issue, the answer must come from scripture.

Language is such that to speak of God at all is by default succumbing to some level of *tashbīh*. If God is spoken of in *any* way through human language, He is described through terms and concepts that have an empirical basis, since human language conveys empirical experiences. The philosophers and rational theologians attempted to speak of God in a way that would avoid any trace of *tashbīh.* As a result, many of the rational theologians found it of paramount importance to reinterpret many of God's attributes or even completely deny them. For some, like the Muʿtazilites[239], any attribute affirmed of God is superadded to the divine essence, compromising His oneness. The epistemological premises that lead to such over-rationalization of God's essence determine the method by which an interpreter navigates and interprets the verses in which God's attributes are mentioned in the Quran.

Ibn Taymiyya however is well aware that it is impossible to entirely avoid *tashbīh*, even in God's own speech. To try to do so would lead one to preclude speaking of God at all. However, God speaks of Himself through language using various descriptions. Ultimately, the divine chose to describe Himself through positive descriptions—at times affirming His ascent, love, mercy, face, and hand. In this regard, Ibn Taymiyya argues that the mind cannot go beyond scripture nor can the mind interpret scripture based on its own rational principles. To view God through Aristotelian and Neoplatonic abstractions is ultimately a kind of "intellectual *tashbīh*."[240] This means presupposing that God must adhere to certain rational conceptualizations acquired from Hellenistic philosophy. In fact, *tashbīh* is unavoidable. A modern critique of rational

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[239] A group belonging to the rational theologians.
[240] Ovamir Anjum, personal communication, 2018.

religion—similar to Ibn Taymiyya's critique of excessive rationalization of the unseen—is now

appropriate. Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), American Christian theologian, writes:

> The religious group [the rational theologians] on the other hand recognizes that the whole of the created world is not self-explanatory. They see that it points beyond itself to a mysterious ground of existence, to an enigmatic power beyond all discernible vitalities, and to a "first cause" beyond all known causes. But they usually claim *to know too much* about this eternal mystery. Sometimes they sharply define the limits of reason, and the further limits of faith beyond reason, and claim to know exactly how far reason penetrates into the eternal mystery, and how much further faith reaches. Yet though they make a distinction between faith and reason, they straightway so mix and confuse reason and faith that they pretend to be able to give a rational and sharply defined account of the *character of God* and of the eternal ground of existence. They define the power and knowledge of God precisely, and explain the exact extent of His control and foreknowledge of the course of events. They dissect the mysterious relation between man's intellectual faculties and his vital capacities, and claim to know the exact limits of *physis, psyche and nous,* of body, soul and spirit. They know that man is immortal and why; and just what portion and part of him is mortal and what part immortal. Thus they banish the mystery of the unity of man's spiritual and physical existence. They have no sense of mystery about the problem of immortality. *They know the geography of heaven and of hell, and the furniture of the one and temperature of the other.*[241]

Niebuhr criticizes rational theology for going beyond the text and philosophizing that which

reason itself admits is not amenable to philosophizing. For Ibn Taymiyya, this is the fatal flaw of

the Muslim rational theologians. Excessive rationalization of scripture is an epistemological-

theological-interpretive model neither supported by scripture nor by the practices of the early

Muslims. Although the projects of Ibn Taymiyya and Niebuhr are different, they unite in their

overall critique of the excesses of rational theology.

In reconciling the divine command to render God unlike any created thing with the

absolute inevitability of *tashbīh* that occurs in language, Ibn Taymiyya argues that one is safe as

long as *tashbīh* occurs "within the bounds of scripture."[242] In other words, Ibn Taymiyya's

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[241]Reinhold Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), 153-154.
[242] Ovamir Anjum, personal communication, 2018.

theological vision is to affirm of God that which God affirms within scripture, with the inevitable level of *tashbīh* that this implies. This merely requires that one avoid affirming any modality (*bi-lā kayfiyya)* of God's attributes. As long as no modality of God's attributes is affirmed, the theological blunder of *tashbīh* is entirely avoided. To the believer who then objects that this is pure anthropomorphism, all that is to be said is that God is unlike any image conjured by the mind. The believer must affirm the attributes that God clearly affirms in scripture. The only type of *tashbīh* that the Quran explicitly prohibits is the mental conception of God as similar to a created entity. Scripture does not prohibit absolute *tashbīh* because this effectively precludes speaking of God in any affirmative sense. This endeavor towards absolute *tanzīh* was inspired by foreign philosophical abstracts, which for Ibn Taymiyya had no place in Quranic exegesis. In saying so, Ibn Taymiyya does not deny the role of the intellect; rather, he supports a scripture-based epistemology that recognizes the limits of the intellect and language. If the intellect attempts to then trace the essence of God and the "temperature of the hellfire," such attempts are futile and beyond its own grasp. As Anjum affirms, "contrary to the *mutakallimūn's* contention, theological knowledge regarding God and the afterlife is in even greater need of revelation because those truths are entirely beyond human reason…"[243] In matters of the unseen, the intellect must submit.

Words do not capture external realities; rather they merely point to certain realities that have been experienced or can be experienced. An issue arises when words try to point to realities beyond the intellect that are essentially un-experiencable— for instance, the metaphysical claims of scripture. These cannot be known in the same way external objects can be known. The rational theologians, however, dealt with the anthropomorphic verses based on their personal experience, which requires that God not be described by images that relate to their personal experience, or

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[243] Anjum, *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought,* 201.

distinctly human features such as hands and faces. Scripture, however, does not reveal the nature

of another reality in all its details; it merely points towards it for establishing theological tenants.

The human mind can neither lay claim to universals beyond its own sense-experience nor

transcend its limitations and uncover the secrets of the divine.

Heath draws attention to the fact that it was not only the mystics that grappled with the

question: "how does one explicate truths which are by nature ineffable."[244] It seems to me that

Ibn Taymiyya's answer, to some degree, is that this is not a possible task. Philosophers of

language from as early as Socrates realized the innate weakness of language; it is nearly *always*

deficient. In addition to this, certain meanings are too profound to be expressed. It is as the

British archaeologist Stanley Lane-Poole noted about the Quran, "…The thought is only half-

expressed; one feels the speaker has essayed a thing beyond words, and has suddenly discovered

the *impotence* of language…"[245] In other words, some meanings are simply beyond expression,

particularly those meanings that describe the divine essence. As Hirsch notes, interpretation is

not the attempt to enter the author's consciousness.[246] The text does not claim to express the

author's consciousness and all connections the author mentally makes; the interpreter need not

even think this a feasible task. In Quranic exegesis, this would be equivalent to the interpreter

raising himself to the position of God, to enter the mind of the all-knowing. Rather, the goal of

the interpreter is to understand the most probabilistic intended meaning that the author intends to

convey through his words. At times, this meaning "may touch the boundaries of man's

intellectual cosmos."[247] In such a scenario, the interpreter—whether a philosopher, a rational

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[244] Heath, "Creative Hermeneutics," 205.
[245] This is from Kermani, *God is Beautiful,* 96 (emphasis added).
[246] Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation,* 220-221.
[247] Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation,* 223.

theologian, or the simple layman—must find satisfaction in the statement: *Allahu A'lam* (God knows best). For Ibn Taymiyya, this is the essence of Islam and part of the demands of scripture.

In concluding this section, the Quran says that there is nothing like God. Avoiding *tashbīh* was the crucial concern of all Muslim theologians. God must be spoken of in a way in which He does not resemble anything of His creation. The question then occurs: how can God be understood? Humans cannot *fully* understand things that they have not experienced. An individual can define tables with the utmost precision in accordance with the Aristotelian definition; however, an individual will never have a useful, certain, and intimate knowledge without experiencing the table itself. The table can only be spoken of and described to the individual through prior empirical experience; otherwise, the description is useless and overly abstract to constitute knowledge. The Muslim theologians pondered: why is it that God describes Himself through attributes that resemble the creation when God's transcendence must always be affirmed? Some said that perhaps he speaks through metaphors. In response, Ibn Taymiyya heavily criticizes the rational theologians' obsession with *tanzīh* in dealing with this question. It was only due to the effects of Hellenistic reasoning that later Muslim theologians found it necessary to deny or reinterpret God's attributes, resulting in an imbalance in the dialectical tension between *tashbīh* and *tanzīh*. As part of his commitment to the *salaf,* Ibn Taymiyya argues that such theological objections and interpretive issues were non-existent amongst the early *salaf*. He perceives all such deviations as a super inclination towards one position: *tanzīh* or *tashbīh*. However, as Ibn Taymiyya argues, the fundamental Quranic principle that corrects this super-inclination and strikes a balance between *tashbīh* and *tanzīh* is *qiyās al-awlā*: to God is the greatest of similitudes. God must be spoken of in the best possible way. Even though it cannot be affirmed that God is like His creation (anthropomorphism), He must be regarded in the best

possible way. God is described by pure perfection according to the dictates of scripture and sound rationality. It is by drawing a balance between *tashbīh* and *tanzīh* that Ibn Taymiyya formulates a theology that is free from extra-Quranic influences and any other ideas that the intellect imposes on scripture that ultimately force the interpreter to reject the apparent sense of divine speech.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, I have attempted here to bring to light the complexity of Quranic exegesis; specifically, certain facets of interpretation that intersect with Islamic theology and epistemology while focusing on Ibn Taymiyya at all times. At the center of medieval Quranic exegesis was the application of *ta'wīl* founded on the *ḥaqīqa-majāz* dichotomy. Like many other groups, the Muslim philosophers and rational theologians both used *ta'wīl* for various purposes. In response, Ibn Taymiyya made great effort to first attack the intellectual foundation of *ta'wīl* and then its epistemological basis, motivated by a desire to establish the supremacy of scripture and delineate the proper way of speaking of God. This was because Ibn Taymiyya recognized that *ta'wīl* was a theological and epistemological rather than an interpretive tool. In filling the void created after his detailed polemics against the pre-existing conceptual foundations of Quranic exegesis, Ibn Taymiyya offered alternative methods of interpreting the Quran in general and the theological verses in particular.

In the aftermath of discussions over the complex issues of Quranic exegesis, epistemology, and Islamic theology, several issues of philosophy of language emerged. These philosophical issues revolved around the purpose or function of the Quran and the formation of a coherent interpretive theory of a text that is regarded by many—and by itself—as containing ineffable and inexhaustible truths. In this endeavor, I have provided brief comments, attempting

to formulate answers while paying close attention to the Taymiyyan spirit. While these philosophical insights are important and perhaps even more interesting than the details of the exegetical methodologies and the intersection and interaction of epistemology, theology, and interpretation in the Islamic tradition, I have chosen to primarily focus on the latter. Even in my selection of the Ashʿarīs and the Muslim philosophers (Ibn Rushd and Ibn Ṭufayl) for contextualizing the Taymiyyan exegetical project in Islamic intellectual history, there is room for concern and criticism. By doing so, I do not intend to over-emphasize certain schools of thought over others. In other words, my selection is *not* a historical assertion. Accordingly, this thesis invites others to look into the many unfinished threads, to better formulate Ibn Taymiyya's conception of and approach to the Quran, and to relate him to other important figures from the Islamic intellectual tradition.

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