Ibn Taymiyya on Universals: Nominalism, Textual Hermeneutics, and the Question of Scientific Rationality

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Abstract: It is frequently asserted that Ibn Taymiyya's (d. 728/1328) denial of extramental universals commits him to an anti-abstractionist literalism and, ultimately, to hostility toward scientific rationality. This article argues that the assertion rests on a conflation of three logically independent theses a metaphysical thesis about universals, a hermeneutical thesis about textual meaning, and an epistemological thesis about the sources of knowledge and that once these are disentangled, the inference to antagonism toward science does not follow. Working from *al-Radd ʿalā al-Manṭiqiyyīn* and *Darʾ Taʿāruḍ al-ʿAql wa al-Naql* and using conceptual analysis together with a historically disciplined philosophical hermeneutics, the study advances three findings. First, Ibn Taymiyya's position on universals is better described as a moderate conceptualism than as radical nominalism, and on the narrow question of the universal's mode of existence it stands closer to Avicenna than is usually recognised. Second, his critique of syllogism is driven by an epistemological preference for sense, experience, and reasoning from particulars; he is therefore a defender of induction rather than his opponent, and the widespread characterisation of him as anti-inductive inverts his actual position. Third, and consequently, the genuine difficulty in his thought is not hostility to empirical inquiry but a justification gap: having denied that shared nature exists extramentally, he lacks a metaphysical warrant for the inductive generalisations upon which he himself relies a difficulty he shares with the

empiricist tradition from Hume onward. Reframing the problem in this way is more faithful to the texts and relocates Ibn Taymiyya from the position of an adversary of science to that of an early participant in a problem internal to empiricism itself.

Keywords: Ibn Taymiyya; universals; nominalism; induction; philosophy of science; textual hermeneutics.

1. Introduction

Few figures in Islamic intellectual history have been read as tendentiously as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328). In a substantial body of contemporary writing a good deal of it produced in Indonesia his critique of Aristotelian logic is treated as evidence of a global hostility to reason, and from that premise a further step is quickly taken that his thought is structurally incapable of supporting scientific rationality. The inference has hardened into a commonplace, repeated in survey articles, undergraduate theses, and popular polemic alike, until it functions less as a conclusion than as a settled datum from which other conclusions are drawn. This article takes that further step to be unwarranted and argues that the reasoning usually offered in its support does not survive scrutiny.

It is worth being precise about the shape of the commonplace, because its very familiarity has protected it from examination. The reasoning proceeds as a chain. Ibn Taymiyya denies that universals exist outside the mind; therefore, it is said, he denies the legitimacy of abstraction; therefore, he reads scripture with a flat literalism; therefore, he cannot license the generalisations on which knowledge depends; and therefore, at the end of the chain, he cannot underwrite the sciences. Each link is presented as though it were an entailment, and the passage from the first to the last is made to seem a matter of simple consistency. The reader who accepts the opening premise is carried, apparently without further cost, to the closing verdict. It is the smoothness of the passage that this article means to interrupt.

The scholarly ground on which such readings once stood has in fact shifted decisively, and it has done so over the past three decades. Wael Hallaq's translation and study of al-Suyūṭī's abridgement of *al-Radd ʿalā al-Manṭiqiyyīn* established that Ibn Taymiyya's attack on the syllogism is not an outburst of anti-rationalism but a sustained *empiricist* critique of the Aristotelian theory of definition and demonstration an argument that, in Hallaq's striking phrase, in many respects prefigures the British empiricists.[1] Carl Sharif El-Tobgui's line-by-line study of the ten-volume *Darʾ Taʿāruḍ al-ʿAql wa al-Naql* has shown that the governing thesis of that work is reconciliatory that sound reason and authentic revelation cannot ultimately conflict, and that Ibn Taymiyya's aim is to reconstitute a 'pure reason' in harmony with revelation rather than to abolish reason as such.[2] Jon Hoover has demonstrated the systematic and rationally articulated character of his theology,[3] while Yahya Michot, Shahab Ahmed,

[1] Wael B Hallaq, ed., *Ibn Taymiyya Against the Greek Logicians*, trans. Wael B Hallaq (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), xi.

[2] Carl Sharif El-Tobgui, *Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation: A Study of Darʾ Taʿāruḍ Al-ʿaql Wa-l-Naql*, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 5.

[3] Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 19.

Yossef Rapoport, and Anke von Kügelgen have, from different directions, complicated beyond recovery the picture of a thinker uniformly and simply opposed to the philosophical sciences.[4]

What that scholarship has not done, so far as the present authors are aware, is to isolate and test the *inferential chain* itself to ask, link by link, whether the passage from Ibn Taymiyya's metaphysics of universals to the conclusion that his epistemology is incompatible with science is valid at any of its junctures. It is one thing to show, as these scholars have, that Ibn Taymiyya was a more careful and more rational thinker than the caricature allows; it is another to show *why* the caricature does not follow even from premises its defenders would accept. That is the narrower and more strictly philosophical task this article sets itself. The distinction matters, because a reader might grant every point of the recent scholarship and still suppose that a nominalist metaphysics must, in the end, embarrass a commitment to science. The chain must be broken at the joints, not merely outweighed by countervailing testimony.[5]

The article accordingly asks three questions. *First*, what precisely is Ibn Taymiyya's position on the ontological status of universals, and does the Latin scholastic label of 'nominalism' fit it without distortion? *Second*, what is the actual relation between that metaphysical position and, on the one hand, his hermeneutics of scripture, and on the other, his epistemology of the sciences is either relation one of entailment, or something looser? *Third*, does the resulting position, once accurately described, entail antagonism toward scientific rationality; and if it does not, what if anything is the genuine philosophical difficulty that it does face? The third question matters as much as the first two, for it would be a hollow victory to clear Ibn Taymiyya of a charge only to leave the impression that his epistemology is untroubled. It is not untroubled. But the trouble lies elsewhere than his critics suppose.

The contribution of the article is correspondingly threefold. Analytically, it separates three theses that the existing literature routinely runs together, and shows by counterexample that they are logically independent of one another. Exegetically, it corrects a specific and consequential misreading the characterization of Ibn Taymiyya as 'anti-inductive' which not only misdescribes his position but inverts it, and which does so, remarkably, in the teeth of the very source most often cited in its support. Constructively, it proposes what may be termed the justification-gap thesis: that the real difficulty in Ibn Taymiyya's epistemology is not that he refuses induction but that his metaphysics, having dispensed with real shared natures, leaves the induction he does practice without an evident warrant. This is a serious problem; but it is not a symptom of obscurantism. It is, on the contrary, the classical problem of induction, and Ibn Taymiyya shares it with Hume and with every consistent empiricist since which is to say that it is a problem internal to empiricism, and that to have arrived at it in the eighth Islamic century is a mark of philosophical consistency rather than of hostility to inquiry. Reframing the matter in this way does more than defend a medieval theologian against an anachronistic charge; it relocates him within a conversation that is still open.

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[4] Yahya Michot, "A Mamlūk Theologian's Commentary on Avicenna's Risāla Aḍḥawiyya, Part I," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 14, no. 2 (2003): 149–203.; Yahya Michot, 'A Mamlūk Theologian's Commentary on Avicenna's Risāla Aḍḥawiyya', Journal of Islamic Studies 14, no. 2 (2003): 149–203, dan no. 3 (2003): 309–63; Shahab Ahmed dan Yossef Rapoport, ed., Ibn Taymiyya and His Times (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1–20.

[5] Anke von Kügelgen, "Ibn Taymyas Kritik an Der Aristotelischen Logik Und Sein Gegenentwurf," in *Logik Und Theologie: Das Organon Im Arabischen Und Im Lateinischen Mittelalter*, ed. Dominik Perler and Ulrich Rudolph (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 167–225.

2. Methods

This is a study in the history of philosophy, and it proceeds by conceptual analysis governed by historically disciplined hermeneutics. Two commitments follow, and both bear on how the argument may legitimately be assessed.

First, on interpretation. The study adopts Gadamer's account of understanding as the negotiation of historical distance rather than its abolition,[6] but constrains it by Quentin Skinner's stricture that a thinker may not be credited with a doctrine he could not, in principle, have recognised as his own.[7] This constraint bears directly on the enquiry. 'Nominalism' is a term of Latin scholastic art; applying it to a Damascene Ḥanbalī of the eighth/fourteenth century is an act of comparative concept-transfer, legitimate only if the term is stipulated narrowly and the risk of anachronism is acknowledged. The term is therefore used here in a minimal sense *the denial that universals possess existence outside the mind* without importing the wider commitments of Ockham or Buridan.[8]

Second, on sources. The principal text for Ibn Taymiyya's critique of logic is *al-Radd ʿalā al-Manṭiqiyyīn*; al-Suyūṭī's abridgement, *Jahd al-Qarīḥa*, is a derivative witness and is used here only through Hallaq's annotated translation, with that status marked. *Naqd al-Manṭiq*, frequently cited in the secondary literature as though it were the primary work, is a compilation of contested standing and is not relied upon.[9] For the reason–revelation problem the study uses *Darʾ Taʿāruḍ al-ʿAql wa al-Naql*; for scattered remarks on the sciences, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*. Where a formulation carries argumentative weight, the Arabic is supplied. The procedure has four steps: stipulating and distinguishing the three theses at issue; determining, from the texts, which of them Ibn Taymiyya actually holds; testing whether the inferences among them are valid; and stating and answering the strongest objections to the reading advanced here.

3. Results and Discussion

Three Theses That Must Be Distinguished

The claim that Ibn Taymiyya is anti-scientific is almost always assembled from three quite different assertions presented as though they were one. Setting them out separately is not pedantry; it is the whole of the argument, for the entire case against him depends on their being run together, and the entire case for him depends on their being pulled apart.

The metaphysical thesis (nominalism) holds that universals *humanity*, *redness*, *triangularity* have no existence outside the mind, and that what exists extramentally are particulars only. It is a claim about what there *is*. The hermeneutical thesis (literalism) holds that the meaning of a text is exhausted by its apparent (*ẓāhir*) sense and that figurative interpretation (*taʾwīl*) is illegitimate. It is a claim about how texts *mean*. The epistemological thesis (empiricist particularism) holds that knowledge derives from sense, experience, and

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[6] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, ed. Joel Weinsheimer & Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, n.d.), 291.

[7] Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 53.

[8] Claude Panaccio, *Ockham on Concepts* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 20; D M Armstrong, *Nominalism and Realism: Universals and Scientific Realism*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 12–17.

[9] The summary referred to is *Jahd al-Qarīḥa fī Tajrīd al-Naṣīḥa* by al-Suyūṭī, translated in Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya Against the Greek Logicians*. Naqd al-Manṭiq.

testimony concerning particulars rather than from the intellectual apprehension of abstract essences. It is a claim about how we *know*. Three different subject matters being, meaning, and knowledge and three theses that a careless reading fuses into a single supposed 'literalist temperament'.

These three theses are logically independent, and the point can be made decisively by counterexample rather than by assertion. Consider each pairing in turn. *Nominalism does not entail literalism*: William of Ockham was a thoroughgoing nominalist about universals, and no scriptural literalist the medieval nominalist tradition was perfectly at home with allegory and the fourfold sense of scripture.[10] *Empiricism does not entail literalism*: David Hume was a radical empiricist about the sources of knowledge, and nothing whatever compelled him toward, or indeed permitted him, a literalist reading of sacred texts.[11] And the converse fails as well: *literalism does not entail nominalism*, since many seventeenth-century Protestant literalists, insistent on the plain sense of scripture, were robust metaphysical realists about kinds and essences. If the three properties can be present severally without one another nominalism without literalism, empiricism without literalism, literalism without nominalism then no one of them entails any other, and the 'temperament' that the anti-science reading treats as a single thing is in truth a bundle of separable commitments held together, at most, by psychological association.

It follows that the crucial question cannot be settled from the armchair. From the bare proposition that a thinker is a nominalist, nothing follows about whether he is a literalist; from either, nothing follows about whether he is an empiricist; and from any or all of them, nothing follows about whether he is hostile to science for that would require yet a fourth inference, from empiricism or nominalism to anti-science, which we shall see in due course is the weakest link of all. Whether the three theses in fact cohere *in Ibn Taymiyya* whether he holds all three, and if so how they are related in his thought is therefore not a truth of logic to be deduced but an empirical question about his texts, to be settled by reading them. That reading is the business of the sections that follow.

One further clarification is needed before we proceed, because a natural rejoinder must be met. It might be said: perhaps the three these are not related by strict, logical entailment, but they are related by something weaker and, in practice, no less binding a common *temperament* or intellectual disposition that inclines a thinker who holds one toward the others. Ockham may have allegorised, but there is nonetheless a family resemblance among suspicious-of-abstraction, distrustful-of-figures, and reliant-on-particulars minds, and Ibn Taymiyya's critics might reasonably invoke it. We shall grant the observation, but with a decisive qualification: an affinity is not an inference, and no verdict about a specific thinker can be reached by appeal to a general disposition. If nominalism and literalism tend, in the empirical majority of cases, to co-occur, that is a matter for the sociology of ideas; it tells us where to look, not what to find. The question 'Is Ibn Taymiyya's epistemology hostile to science?' can only be answered by an examination of what Ibn Taymiyya says. What this section has done is to remove the *short-circuit* by which many critics have thought they could

[10] William of Ockham, *Summa Logicae*, ed. Gedeon Gál and Stephen F Brown, vol. 1, Opera Philosophica (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1974); See Panaccio, *Ockham on Concepts*, 21.

[11] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 108.

bypass that examination and arrive at their verdict by inference from the metaphysics alone. The short-circuit is broken.

What this section has established is therefore only negative, but it is indispensable: the anti-science verdict cannot be reached by inference from the metaphysics alone, and any argument that purports so to reach it has smuggled in premises it has not defended. The burden of proof has been relocated, and it now rests where it belongs in the text. If Ibn Taymiyya is to be convicted of hostility to science, he must be convicted from his own words on science, and not from a syllogism that runs 'nominalist, therefore literalist, therefore anti-scientific'. The remainder of this article, accordingly, takes up the three theses in the order in which they are most fruitfully examined metaphysics, then epistemology, then hermeneutics and asks in each case what Ibn Taymiyya says, what it commits him to, and what it does not.

Ibn Taymiyya on the Existence of the Universal

The formulation most often cited holds that the universal (*al-kullī*) has no *wujūd fī al-khārij* no existence in the external, extramental world and subsists only in the mind.[12] At first glance this looks like a plain declaration of nominalism, and it is on the strength of such formulations that the label has been attached. Two observations complicate the picture, and the second is considerably more damaging to the standard reading than the first.

The first observation concerns translation, and it is easy to state but easy to miss. To say that a universal has no existence *fī al-khārij* is emphatically not to say that it is meaningless, useless, or cognitively idle. It is a claim about the *mode of existence* of the universal about where and how it is not a claim about its semantic worth or its cognitive utility. The frequent gloss, according to which Ibn Taymiyya 'rejects abstraction' or 'denies universal concepts', smuggles in a conclusion far stronger than the Arabic will bear. A denial that the universal subsists in the external world is entirely compatible with a robust affirmation that the mind forms universal concepts, reasons with them, and generalises by their means. The one is an ontological thesis; the other an epistemological and psychological fact; and the slide from the first to a denial of the second is precisely the sort of illicit passage the previous section was designed to expose.

The second observation is the awkward one, awkward because it turns the standard reading against a figure the tradition does not usually classify as a nominalist. On this narrow point the mode of existence of the universal Ibn Taymiyya is *not far from Avicenna*. In the *Ilāhiyyāt* of the *Shifā'*, Avicenna holds that the nature considered in itself (*al-ṭabīʿa min ḥaythu hiya hiya*) is in itself neither universal nor particular, and that universality accrues to it only as it exists in the mind; the universal *qua* universal has no subsistence in the extramental world.[13] If the denial of extramental universals is what makes a thinker a nominalist, then Avicenna the arch-metaphysician of the Islamic tradition, the very target of Ibn Taymiyya's polemic turns out to be embarrassingly close to being one. That consequence is a *reductio* of the criterion: a test for nominalism that catches Avicenna is not measuring what it claims to measure.

[12] Ibn Taymiyya, *Al-Radd ʿalā Al-Manṭiqiyyīn*, ed. ʿAbd al-Ṣamad al-Dīn al-Kutubī (Bombay: Al-Maṭbaʿa al-Qayyima, 1949), 25.

[13] Ibn Sīnā, *The Metaphysics of the Healing* (*Al-Shifā': Al-Ilāhiyyāt*), trans. Michael E Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 148.

What, then, *genuinely* separates Ibn Taymiyya from Avicenna? Not the location of the universal, on which they largely agree, but a cluster of deeper commitments: his refusal of the real distinction between essence and existence; his rejection of 'mental existence' (*al-wujūd al-dhihnī*) as a distinct ontological mode standing between the word and the thing; and his insistence that what the mind grasps in forming a concept is nothing over and above the resembling particulars themselves, apprehended together.[14]These commitments do real work, and they are genuinely distinctive; but they do not add up to a *flatus vocis* nominalism for which the universal is a mere noise. They add up to what is better called a moderate conceptualism: universals are concepts, formed from the mind's registering of resemblance among particulars, possessing no independent reality of their own yet genuine as concepts and fully serviceable in thought. Anke von Kügelgen has argued, rightly in our view, that Ibn Taymiyya's aim is not to abolish the universal but to deny it any *explanatory autonomy* to refuse it the role, which Avicenian metaphysics assigns it, of an essence that governs its instances from behind.[15] The interim result is therefore that the metaphysical thesis holds, but only in a qualified form: Ibn Taymiyya denies extramental universals, yet he does not deny concepts, generalisation, or the utility of abstraction. Everything the anti-science reading needs, it has still not been given.

The Critique of the Syllogism: Against Deduction, For Induction

Here the standard reading does not merely overstate; it inverts. This is the pivot of the article, and it deserves to be set out with care, for the correction is not a refinement but a reversal. Ibn Taymiyya's argument against the Aristotelian syllogism (*al-qiyās al-ṣūrī*) has two prongs, and both are, unmistakably, *pro-empirical*.[16]

The first prong is that the syllogism is epistemically sterile. Its conclusion is already contained, implicitly, in its premises; to draw it is to make explicit what one already possessed, not to acquire anything new. The syllogism, on this view, transmits knowledge but does not generate it. The second prong is more penetrating, and it is the one that matters for our purposes. The universal premise of any syllogism 'every human is mortal', in the worn example is itself established, if it is established at all, only by *istiqrā'*, induction from observed particulars: we know that all humans are mortal because we have observed humans dying and have generalised. But then the syllogism *presupposes* induction and cannot ground it. The apparatus that the logicians advertised as the royal road to certain knowledge turns out to be parasitic upon a prior empirical procedure induction whose own credentials the logicians never pause to examine. The demonstrative edifice rests on an inductive foundation it does not acknowledge.

Against the syllogism, then, Ibn Taymiyya sets not irrationalism but a different and, as he thinks, more honest inventory of the sources of knowledge and every item on it is empirical. There is sense perception (*ḥiss*); there is experience (*tajriba*); there is massively transmitted testimony (*tawātur*), the concurrence of many independent reports that could not all have colluded in error;[17] and there is reasoning by analogy from one particular to another (*qiyās al-*

[14] El-Tobgui, *Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation: A Study of Dar' Taʿāruḍ Al-ʿaql Wa-l-Naql*, 173.

[15] von Kügelgen, "Ibn Taymyas Kritik an Der Aristotelischen Logik Und Sein Gegenentwurf," 200.

[16] Ibn Taymiyya, *Al-Radd ʿalā Al-Manṭiqiyyīn*, 130.

[17] Bernard G Weiss, *The Search for God's Law: Islamic Jurisprudence in the Writings of Sayf Al-Dīn Al-Āmidī* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992), 273.

tamthīl), which he regards as capable of yielding certainty once the relevant respect of similarity has itself been secured. It is on the strength of exactly this profile that Hallaq compares Ibn Taymiyya's critique to John Stuart Mill's inductivist attack on the syllogism in the *System of Logic* a comparison Hallaq is scrupulous to present as heuristic, a likeness of argument and not a claim of influence.[18]

The consequence is decisive, and it dismantles the anti-science reading from within. To describe Ibn Taymiyya as 'anti-inductive' is not a venial slip of terminology; it is a straightforward reversal of his position. He is anti-deductivist more precisely, anti-syllogistic and he is so *precisely because* he is an inductivist, because he trusts the generalisation drawn from observed particulars more than the deduction spun from contested universals. An argument that convicts him of hostility to science on the ground that he rejects induction therefore convicts him of the exact opposite of what he held; it has mistaken his target. And the mistake is not idle, for it obscures a striking alignment. Modern empirical science is itself built upon observation, experiment, and inductive generalisation from particulars. The very feature of Ibn Taymiyya's thought that was supposed to prove him science's enemy his privileging of the particular and the observed over the abstract and the deduced is, on inspection, the feature that ranges him on the side of the empirical sciences and against the Aristotelian apparatus they too would eventually discard. The irony is not incidental; it is, as the final sections will argue, the key to his real place in the history of the problem.

Textual Meaning: Contextualism Rather Than Literalism

The hermeneutical thesis requires separate treatment, precisely because as the first section established it does not follow from the metaphysical one. That Ibn Taymiyya denies extramental universals tells us, by itself, nothing about how he reads a text; the two must be examined independently, and when the hermeneutics is examined on its own terms it proves markedly less crude than the label 'literalism' suggests.

Ibn Taymiyya and, more systematically, his student Ibn al-Qayyim rejects the *ḥaqīqa/majāz* (literal/figurative) division *itself*. The ground of the rejection is twofold: that the division is a late technical construction, unknown to the earliest Muslim community and absent from the usage of the Arabic in which the Qur'an was revealed; and that, in practice, it functions as an instrument for *evacuating* scriptural predicates of their content for declaring a troublesome expression 'figurative' and thereby licensing its reinterpretation away.[19] It is easy, and it is common, to read this rejection as naive literalism: if there is no figurative meaning, then everything must be taken 'literally', wooden-headedly, at face value. The temptation should be resisted, because it mistakes the character of the position entirely.[20]

As Mohamed Ali has shown in the fullest study of the matter, the rejection of *majāz* is not the refusal of non-literal meaning but the refusal of a particular *theory* of it and it is accompanied by a positive alternative. On that alternative, meaning is fixed not by a context-

[18] Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya Against the Greek Logicians,* , xxxix–xliv; the point of comparison with the inductivist critique of Mill on the syllogism—developed and stated to be heuristic see, John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive* (London: Longmans, 1843).

[19] Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Mukhtaṣar Al-Ṣawāʿiq Al-Mursala ʿalā Al-Jahmiyya Wa Al-Muʿaṭṭila*, ed. Sayyid Ibrāhīm (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2001), 91.

[20] Mohamed Mohamed Yunis Ali, *Medieval Islamic Pragmatics: Sunni Legal Theorists' Models of Textual Communication* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), 130.

independent 'original' sense from which figures then deviate, but by *usage* (*istiʿmāl*) and *context* (*siyāq*): a word means what its speakers use it to mean in the setting in which they use it.[21] This is, in effect, a use-theory of meaning, and it is a good deal more sophisticated than the doctrine it replaces. Ibn Taymiyya does not deny that language can be used non-literally that a lion can stand for a brave man; he denies that a stable, theory-bearing *boundary* between the literal and the figurative can be drawn in advance and then deployed as a general licence for theological revision. What he opposes is not metaphor but the *Universal Law* by which his opponents proposed to override the plain deliverances of scripture wherever reason, as they conceived it, required.

What, then, is the relation between the metaphysical and the hermeneutical theses? Not entailment the counterexamples of the first section forbid it, and Ockham, the nominalist allegorist, stands as living proof that one may deny extramental universals and interpret figuratively without the least inconsistency. The relation is rather one of *elective affinity*: a thinker who is suspicious of abstract entities posited *behind* particulars will tend, by temperament, to be suspicious also of abstract meanings posited *behind* the words men actually use. The two suspicions rhyme; they form a single cast of mind, a shared distrust of postulated intermediaries standing between us and what is concretely given. But a rhyme is not a proof, and an affinity is not an inference. The hermeneutics must stand or fall on its own evidence, and it will not bear the argumentative weight the anti-science reading loads upon it.

One further point must be entered against that reading, and it is textual. The target of the *Darʾ Taʿāruḍ* is not reason as such: its governing thesis is that a genuinely *demonstrated* rational truth and an *authenticated* revealed text cannot finally conflict, and that where an apparent conflict arises, the fault lies either in a defective demonstration or in a misattributed text.[22] Note the two conditions carefully, for they are what distinguishes the work from the caricature. Reason is not being told to be silent; it is being told to be *rigorous*. Revelation is not being told to override reason; it is being told to identify itself properly, by authenticated chains of transmission and by soundly established meanings. What the argument rules out is not the exercise of reason but the pretence to demonstration where only opinion is available, and not the deliverances of revelation but the projection of ambiguous or forged reports as though they were canonical. Between a genuine demonstration and an authenticated text, the conflict cannot arise; between a shaky argument dressed up as demonstration and a doubtful report treated as authenticated, conflict is common, and the work is a manual for locating the flaw in the pair rather than dissolving one term in favour of the other. Reason is not subordinated; it is held to its own proper standards. Any account that presents the work as a demand for the capitulation of reason to revelation has, quite simply, not read it.

Does This Entail Antagonism to Science?

The strongest version of the anti-science argument runs as follows. Science traffics in laws; laws are universal generalisations; a universal generalisation is true only if there are real, mind-independent kinds for it to be about; a thinker who denies real kinds therefore has no account of what makes scientific laws true, and his position, consistently held, undermines

[21] Ali, 135.

[22] El-Tobgui, *Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation: A Study of Darʾ Taʿāruḍ Al-ʿaql Wa-l-Naql*, 205.

science. It is a serious argument and deserves a serious answer. Three objections tell against it, and together they are decisive.

The first is that metaphysics is not methodology. The argument slides between two distinct questions whether universals *exist*, and whether scientists *generalise* and treats an answer to the first as though it settled the second. It does not. One may answer *no* to the existence of mind-independent universals and *yes* to the practice of generalisation, and this is precisely the standing position of scientific nominalism. Quine and Goodman undertook an explicit constructive-nominalist reconstruction of scientific discourse;[23] van Fraassen defends the entire enterprise of empirical science while withholding belief in unobservable entities; Field reconstructs Newtonian gravitational theory without quantifying over abstract objects at all.[24] Whatever one finally makes of these programmes, their mere existence as serious, technically elaborated research programmes pursued by philosophers of science in good standing refutes the claim that nominalism and science are incompatible. The incompatibility asserted by the anti-science argument is not a discovery but an assumption.[25]

The second objection is historiographical. In the standard narrative of the emergence of modern science, Ockhamist nominalism is frequently assigned a *facilitating* rather than an obstructive role. By stripping nature of substantial forms and real essences, the nominalists removed the very apparatus that had made nature intelligible *a priori*, and thereby left the natural world to be interrogated by observation and experiment rather than deduced from definitions.[26] We do not endorse this narrative without reservation; it is contested, and Edward Grant among others has cautioned against its overstatement.[27] But and this is the point it does not need to be *true* for our purpose. It needs only to be *available*. For if it is so much as a respectable historical possibility that nominalism *assisted* the birth of empirical science, then the inference from nominalism to anti-science cannot be automatic, and an argument that treats it as automatic has failed to reckon with the most obvious objection to itself.

The third objection is textual, and it is the most direct. Ibn Taymiyya does not, in fact, condemn the empirical and mathematical sciences. His polemic is aimed at the *metaphysics* of the *falāsifa* at their doctrines of an eternal cosmos and necessary emanation and at their epistemological claim that the syllogism is the *sole* instrument of certain knowledge. Medicine, arithmetic, and the observational disciplines he treats as legitimate forms of knowledge, and his own epistemology, resting as it does on *ḥiss* and *tajriba*, leaves ample room for them.[28] To convict him of hostility to science, one would need to produce texts in which he attacks empirical inquiry as such. Those texts have not been produced, and the reason they have not is that they do not exist. The inference therefore fails at every joint: the conclusion

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[23] W V O Quine and Nelson Goodman, "Steps Toward a Constructive Nominalism," *Journal of Symbolic Logic* 12, no. 4 (1947): 105–12.

[24] Bas C van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 40.

[25] Hartry Field, *Science Without Numbers: A Defence of Nominalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 19.

[26] Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 117; Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 145.

[27] Edward Grant, *The Foundations of Modern Science in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 142.

[28] Michot, "A Mamlūk Theologian's Commentary on Avicenna's Risāla Aḍḥawiyya, Part I," 149.; Majid Fakhry, *Etika Dalam Islam* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1996), 219.

that has dominated the literature is not merely unproven but stands against the weight of the evidence, which points the other way.

The Justification Gap

It does not follow that all is well. There is a genuine and serious problem in Ibn Taymiyya's epistemology, but it is not the one his critics have identified, and stating it correctly is the constructive contribution of this study.

The problem is this. Induction moves from the proposition that *these observed Fs are G* to the proposition that *all Fs are G*. What licenses the move? The classical realist answer is that the observed particulars share a *real nature*, a universal genuinely present in each, and that it is this shared nature which grounds the leap from some to all. But Ibn Taymiyya has denied himself exactly this answer. For him there is no shared nature *fī al-khārij*; there are only resembling particulars and 'resemblance' is precisely what stands in need of explanation, since to call two things resemblant is already to have generalised. He therefore practises induction, indeed makes it the very foundation of knowledge, while lacking the metaphysics that would warrant it. This is the justification gap.

Two things should be said about it at once. First, the gap is not idiosyncratic, and it is no peculiar embarrassment of Ibn Taymiyya's. It is the *classical problem of induction*, and it arises for any consistent empiricist who declines to posit real universals. Hume formulated it with permanent clarity: no observation of past regularities can, without circularity, license confidence about unobserved cases, since the inference relies on the very uniformity it purports to establish. Goodman sharpened it further with the 'new riddle', showing that the evidence underdetermines which generalization we are entitled to project.[29] Ibn Taymiyya thus stands, three and a half centuries early, at the entrance to a problem that empiricism has never fully resolved. To have reached it is not a mark of obscurantism; it is a mark of consistency the price, honestly paid, of taking the seriously.

Second, he is not left wholly without resources, though whether they suffice is a further question. His theology supplies an account of natural regularity as the *sunna* or *ʿāda* of God the stable, habitual course God has instituted in creation and an account of the *fiṭra*, the God-given constitution that disposes the mind to infer reliably from what it observes.[30] Between the two, an outline of an answer begins to emerge. The regularity is real not because there is a shared essence knitting particulars together from within, but because there is a Legislator who has willed the course of creation to run stably; and the reliability of the inference from observed to unobserved is real not because our minds latch onto an intelligible essence but because we have been constituted for the world we are in. If this is right, then induction is licensed neither by nature's intrinsic structure nor by the mind's intellectual grasp of it, but by a theological correspondence between the divinely-ordered world and the divinely-constituted knower.

Whether this amounts to a philosophical *justification* of induction, or only to a theological *assurance* of its reliability, is a question this article cannot settle and commends to future work; the two are not the same, and much turns on the difference. A justification

[29] Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 59.

[30] On the *sunna* and *ʿāda* of God and the regularity of nature, see John Hoover, "A Typology of Responses to the Philosophical Problem of Evil in Islamic and Christian Traditions," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21, no. 3 (2003): 30.

would show that the inductive move is rationally warranted from within, on grounds a non-theist could recognise; an assurance would say only that *given* the theistic framework, the inductive move is reliable. Some readers will regard the second as a philosophically thinner result than the first, and they may be right. But the narrower point stands, and it is enough for the present purpose: the question is a live and genuine one, it is the same question a Berkeley or a Reid would recognise, and it becomes entirely *invisible* the moment one persists in the error of describing Ibn Taymiyya as an enemy of induction. Only when he is correctly seen as its committed practitioner does the real difficulty that he practises what his metaphysics does not obviously underwrite come into view at all. What the critics took to be the disease turns out, on closer inspection, to be a symptom of Ibn Taymiyya's honest engagement with a problem the entire empiricist tradition would face.

Objection 1. *Ibn Taymiyya attacks the natural philosophy of the falāsifa directly. Is that not hostility to science?* It is hostility to a particular *metaphysics* of nature eternal celestial causation, substantial forms, the necessitarian cosmos and to the epistemological claim that these are demonstrable. Rejecting Aristotelian natural philosophy is not rejecting empirical inquiry; the seventeenth century rejected it a good deal more thoroughly, and in the name of science.

Objection 2. *Contemporary literalist movements descending from Ibn Taymiyya reject evolution, modern cosmology, and even public-health science. Does this not vindicate the anti-science reading retrospectively?* No, and the objection is a textbook genetic fallacy compounded by guilt by association. Resemblance is not descent: to establish that a modern attitude is *inherited* from a fourteenth-century position, one must exhibit a chain of textual transmission, not a similarity of temper. The scholarship on Salafism is moreover emphatic that the movement is internally heterogeneous and that its relation to Ibn Taymiyya is highly selective.[31] And to attribute to a historical thinker the later uses to which his name is put is what Skinner calls the 'mythology of doctrines', which a responsible history of philosophy must refuse.[32] Any claim of causal descent is accordingly withdrawn: it may be true, it has not been shown, and it forms no part of the argument advanced here.

Objection 3. *'Nominalism' is a Latin category. Its application here is anachronistic.* Conceded in part, which is why the term was stipulated narrowly at the outset and why the analysis concludes that 'moderate conceptualism' is the more accurate description. The comparison earns its keep as an analytical instrument, provided it is not mistaken for a historical claim about influence. Objection 4. *Hallaq's comparison with Mill is itself anachronistic, and this study leans on it.* Fair, and Hallaq himself is explicit that the comparison is heuristic. But the argument does not depend on it; it depends only on what the text of *al-Radd* says that the universal premise is grounded in *istiqrā'*. Strike the Mill comparison and the argument stands unaltered.

4. Conclusion

This study set out to test an inference and found it invalid. Ibn Taymiyya denies that universals exist *fī al-khārij*, but he does not deny concepts, generalization, or abstraction as a cognitive operation; his position is best described as a moderate conceptualism, and on the narrow

[31] Bernard Haykel, "On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action," in *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 33.

[32] Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas."

question of the universal's mode of existence it stands uncomfortably for the standard reading not far from Avicenna's. His metaphysics, his hermeneutics, and his epistemology are three distinct theses that are not related by entailment: his rejection of the *ḥaqīqa/majāz* distinction rests upon a contextualist theory of meaning, not upon his metaphysics of universals; his critique of the syllogism rests upon an inductivist epistemology, not upon literalism. The three exhibit an elective affinity a common distrust of postulated intermediaries and nothing stronger.

It follows that the anti-science conclusion does not hold, and that the characterization of Ibn Taymiyya as anti-inductive inverts his actual view: he rejects the syllogism precisely because he privileges sense, experience, and reasoning from particulars. The genuine difficulty in his thought is the justification gap he relies upon induction without metaphysics that grounds it and that difficulty is the standard problem of induction, shared with Hume and with empiricism generally. It is a philosophical problem, not a pathology, and it locates Ibn Taymiyya not outside the history of empirical rationality but near its beginning.

This research has several limitations. First, it works from *al-Radd* in part through Hallaq's translation of al-Suyūṭī's abridgement, and from *Darʾ Taʿāruḍ*; a fuller treatment would require systematic engagement with the Arabic *Radd* in its entirety and with the relevant volumes of *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*. Second, the comparative use of the category of nominalism, though stipulated narrowly, remains an instrument of analysis rather than a historical claim, and its limits should be borne in mind. Third, the question left open above whether *sunnat Allāh* and *fiṭra* can discharge the justificatory burden that real universals would otherwise carry is not settled here, and it is upon this question that the standing of Ibn Taymiyya's epistemology ultimately turns. It is commended to further study.

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