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Ibn Taymiyya on Human Nature and Belief in God: Using the Cognitive Science of Religion to Study the Fiṭra

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Abstract: Ibn Taymiyya proposes his unique epistemology by employing the concept of the fiṭra. When his statements describing the fiṭra are collected, we see that Ibn Taymiyya has presented a detailed view of human nature and how that nature relates to God and the universe as a whole. His fiṭra-centric theory of human nature can be usefully compared to other theories, not only within the Islamic tradition but also in theories of the self found in other religions or even contemporary scientific theories. As of yet, Ibn Taymiyya's work has not been studied through the lens of Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR). Ibn Taymiyya is an ideal candidate for applying CSR research to Islamic thought in order to reach broader insights about theories of human nature within the Islamic scholarly tradition. CSR findings are relevant to Ibn Taymiyya's work specifically because Ibn Taymiyya claims that certain human emotions, intuitions, and behaviors are inborn and universal. By applying CSR, we can conclude that some aspects of Ibn Taymiyya's theological perspective are grounded in deeper and more universal features of human cognition that are not specific to the particularities of his biases, his milieu, political pressures of his time, etc.

Keywords: Ibn Taymiyya; fiṭra; CSR; cognitive science of religion; Islamic theology



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1. Introduction

The late Medieval Muslim scholar Ibn Taymiyya has been the subject of intense academic scrutiny in contemporary times. Much of the research on his scholarship has focused on his dynamic and highly influential approach to classical Islamic fields, including theology, jurisprudence, and philosophy (Hallaq 1991; Rapoport 2010; von Kügelgen 2013; Tamer 2013; Vasalou 2016; El-Tobgui 2018). Others have focused on his influence on modern Islamist political movements, while others are more interested in his overarching theory of Islamic politics or his critiques of Christianity (Michel 1999; Hoover 2007; Hassan 2010). Many contemporary scholars focus on his defense of traditionalism through the use of complex arguments and the deployment of various epistemological and ontological distinctions in order to critique the Islamic theo-philosophical schools of kalam (Hallaq 1993; Özervarli 2013; Michot 2013; El-Tobgui 2020; Turner 2021). Overall, these academic works and others emphasize Ibn Taymiyya's relevance as being due to the prominence of his works and his ideas in contemporary political, theological, and legal debates throughout present-day Muslim societies.

Throughout his writings, Ibn Taymiyya concerns himself with questions of epistemology (Hallaq 1991; El-Tobgui 2020; Turner 2021). What is the nature of knowledge? How do humans acquire knowledge? How are we to guarantee the veracity of our knowledge, especially our knowledge of God and other theological matters? Ibn Taymiyya situates his epistemology in stark juxtaposition to other Islamic theological schools that ground knowledge of God primarily within the domain of reason, i.e., 'aql (Hallaq 1991, p. 50). According to the proponents of these distinct schools of Islamic theology, including the Ash'aris, Maturidis, Mu'tazila, and the Falāsifa, the most certain and infallible way to establish epistemic certainty is through abstract reasoning, with a special emphasis on deduction,

and necessary or a priori knowledge. They believed that the application of abstract reason was the soundest way to establish knowledge of God. Ibn Taymiyya rejects this claim and argues that the most immediate and certain knowledge that human beings possess is innate (Hallaq 1991, pp. 53–56; von Kügelgen 2013, p. 253; El-Tobgui 2020, pp. 150–55; Turner 2021). This innate knowledge is known as the *fiṭra*, which can be translated as “original normative disposition” (El-Tobgui 2020, p. 18).

Ibn Taymiyya dialectically proposes his unique epistemology by employing this concept of the *fiṭra* in idiosyncratic ways. When his various statements describing the *fiṭra* are collected, we can see that Ibn Taymiyya has presented through his body of work a detailed view of his understanding of human nature at its essence and how that nature relates to the universe as a whole and God as its creator. His *fiṭra*-centric theory of human nature can be usefully compared to other theories, not only within the Islamic tradition but also in theories of the self found in other religions or even contemporary scientific theories. This article is concerned with the latter.

Many academic works have tackled Ibn Taymiyya’s epistemology and his notion of the *fiṭra*, but no work has yet analyzed his views with reference to modern biological and psychological sciences. In particular, the cognitive science of religion (CSR) is of utmost relevance to Ibn Taymiyya’s contentions. CSR investigates how human cognition is tied to religious experience (Guthrie 1993; Atran 2002; Barrett 2011; Bering 2011; Johnson 2016). CSR maintains that certain aspects of human psychology, including cognition, emotions, intuitions, behaviors, etc., are either inborn or develop naturally as children mature across all humans universally (Atran 2002; Barrett 2004; Kelemen 2004; Petrovich 2019). CSR suggests that these universals rooted in human biology explain why religions that have developed independently from each other historically nonetheless share surprising commonalities despite their many differences. These commonalities are products of the underlying biological and psychological mechanisms shared by all human beings. Psychological experiments suggest, for example, that such mechanisms generate intuitions which emerge in young children and persist into adulthood (Boyer 2001; Barrett 2011; McCauley 2011; Haidt 2012; Norenzayan 2013; Tomasello 2016). These intuitions include beliefs that spirit beings exist, i.e., beings which possess a mind but lack physical bodies, that God exists and is a supremely powerful spirit being who created the universe, that the soul exists, that there is life after death, and that bad things happen to those who commit injustice and good things happen to those who do good deeds (Boyer 2001; Atran 2002; Barrett 2004; Bloom 2007; Bulbulia 2007; McCauley 2011; Johnson 2016).

Applying CSR to Ibn Taymiyya

As of yet, Ibn Taymiyya’s work has not been studied through the lens of CSR. Recently, scholars have analyzed different aspects of Islamic practice and theology as well as individual Islamic theologians, in light of CSR research (Atran 2010; Svensson 2012, 2014, 2017; Nakissa 2020a, 2020b, 2021). Ibn Taymiyya is an ideal candidate for applying CSR research to classical Islamic thought in order to reach broader insights about comprehensive theories of human nature that can be located within the Islamic scholarly tradition. CSR findings are relevant to Ibn Taymiyya’s work specifically because Ibn Taymiyya claims that certain human emotions, intuitions, and behaviors are inborn and universal. Ibn Taymiyya is making robust claims concerning human biology and psychology while latching onto distinct aspects of human nature that contemporary research is also keen to investigate. This overlap invites academic comparison.

Arguably, CSR is more relevant to Ibn Taymiyya than other Islamic theologians in history because of Ibn Taymiyya’s focus on the *fiṭra* and his placement of the *fiṭra* at the center of his Islamic epistemological and ontological frameworks. Other theologians discuss *fiṭra* as well, but Ibn Taymiyya foregrounds the notion of the *fiṭra* in ways that are unique to him (as discussed in this paper). Within the major Islamic theological schools, e.g., Ash‘arite, Maturidite, and Mu‘tazilite, the concept of ‘aql, rather than *fiṭra*, is the focus, specifically a notion of ‘aql that emerges through the robust and extended engagement of

Muslim theologians with the Greek philosophical tradition (Hallaq 1991; von Kügelgen 2013; El-Tobgui 2018). For these theologians, *ʿaql* is the faculty humans use to engage in a formal process of systematic inference on the basis of necessary and a priori knowledge, whereas *fiṭra* concerns intuitive knowledge that does not require systematic and formal inference (Abrahamov 1993; Hallaq 1993; Nakissa 2020b). By emphasizing the *fiṭra*, Ibn Taymiyya, in effect, shifts the theological debate away from the domain of systematic philosophical deduction, with all its idiosyncrasies and reliance on the Greek philosophical tradition, and moves it into the realm of what he considers to be universal human nature. This implies that nature is a source of religious knowledge such that even young children and the common masses could access certainty about God and His attributes, whereas other theological schools held that certainty could only be achieved through rationalistic proofs that only those educated in *mantiq* (logic), metaphysics, and the analyses of necessary and a priori knowledge—i.e., a trained philosophical elite—could navigate. Of course, none of this is to say that Ibn Taymiyya held *ʿaql* and *fiṭra* to be completely distinct; in actuality, Ibn Taymiyya and other theologians, like the Ashʿarite theologian al-Ghazali, believed *ʿaql* to be a part of the *fiṭra*, or at least, emergent from it (Nakissa 2020b). Nonetheless, given that CSR is centrally concerned with universal human nature and its connection to religiosity and theology writ large, as opposed to the nuances of Greek philosophy and its particular conception of human reason, this makes Ibn Taymiyya’s ideas more directly amenable to CSR analyses than the ideas of theologians in other schools (which is not to say that CSR is not applicable to those other schools as well). Said more succinctly, other theologians make relatively few claims about human nature, whereas Ibn Taymiyya makes many claims about human nature that can be analyzed through CSR.

As for Ibn Taymiyya himself, he was one of the major scholars of the Hanbalite school of Islamic Law and theology in the fourteenth CE/eighth century AH, teaching in Damascus. He has often been portrayed by contemporary scholarship as a polarizing reactionary who responded to an Islamic theo-philosophical tradition that, in his view, had strayed too far from the traditional roots of Islam as practiced by the first three generations of Muslims after the Prophet Muhammad (Hoover 2007; von Kügelgen 2013). This is not a wholly inaccurate portrayal of Ibn Taymiyya and his overall mission. However, situating Ibn Taymiyya’s arguments in context of the universal features of human biology discussed in CSR research can further nuance our understanding of his work. By applying CSR, we can see that certain crucial aspects of Ibn Taymiyya’s theological perspective and his conception of human nature are grounded in deeper and more universal features of human cognition that are not specific to the particularities of Ibn Taymiyya’s biases, his milieu, political pressures of his time, etc. The purpose of comparing Ibn Taymiyya to CSR is, thus, to substantiate the claim that aspects of Islamic theology may stem from natural human biology and psychology, rather than purely cultural influence and historical context. This is, of course, not unique to Islam, much less to Ibn Taymiyya’s understanding of Islam; the theologies of other religions also seem to stem in part from natural human biology and psychology. This is one of the central theses of CSR about all religions.

To be more explicit, we can ask, what is the benefit of using CSR to study Ibn Taymiyya? CSR helps explain the source of some of Ibn Taymiyya’s main theological commitments. For example, Ibn Taymiyya is committed to the idea that children are inclined to believe in God. Where does Ibn Taymiyya get this idea? One explanation is that he has simply inherited this belief from Islamic institutions that promulgate this belief through institutional power. Another explanation could be that children are, as a factual matter, inclined to believe in God, and Ibn Taymiyya observed this himself with children or, through introspection, he realized this about his own childhood beliefs, etc. This latter explanation—which is not mutually exclusive with the first explanation—would be supported by CSR research that speaks to the question of whether or not children are naturally inclined to believe in God. If children are so inclined, then this could possibly explain the source of Ibn Taymiyya’s view or, at the very least, this would nuance our understanding of Ibn Taymiyya’s theology and why he believed the things he so strongly believed. Ultimately, we learn something

about Ibn Taymiyya and a potential source of his theological commitments by analyzing those commitments in light of contemporary empirical studies found in the field of CSR.

It should be noted that this article does not attempt to flesh out all the granularities of Ibn Taymiyya's worldview nor all the details of his conception of human nature. This article presents a panoramic view of pertinent CSR studies as they can be applied to one central component of Ibn Taymiyya's conception of human nature, namely the *fiṭra*.

The remainder of this paper contains three main sections. In Section 1, I discuss the general notion of *fiṭra* and its place within Ibn Taymiyya's epistemology and ontology of human nature, specifically the *fiṭra*'s role in ethics, reason, and *tawātur*. Section 2 dives deeper into Ibn Taymiyya's characterization of the *fiṭra* and its role in producing knowledge of God, including God's attributes. Section 3 is dedicated to elaborating the role of the *fiṭra* in what Ibn Taymiyya believes to be the best proof for the existence of God. Throughout these sections, I compare Ibn Taymiyya's theories of the *fiṭra* and human nature with relevant research studies in contemporary CSR.

2. Discussion

2.1. The *Fiṭra*

Some contemporary research has commented on the notion of *fiṭra* and its place within Islamic theology (Adang 2000; Holtzman 2010; Özervarli 2013). Within this research, the word *fiṭra* itself has been variously translated as “natural disposition”, “constitution”, “original nature”, or “original normative disposition”.

The concept of *fiṭra* is based upon specific texts within Islamic scripture. The main text is the *ḥadīth* where the Prophet is reported to have said: “Every baby is born upon the *fiṭra* (‘ala al-*fiṭra*). Then his parents make him a Jew, Christian, or Zoroastrian. Just as an animal gives birth to another animal which is perfect [in form]. Do you see any part of it mutilated?” Many Islamic theologians who cite this *ḥadīth* in elaborating the notion of *fiṭra* also cite the verse in the Quran: “And turn your face to the true religion—God's *fiṭra*, upon which He has created humankind (faṭara al-nās ‘alayhā).” (30:30). Additionally cited is the verse: “And [mention] when your Lord took from the children of Adam—from their loins—their descendants and made them testify of themselves, [saying to them], “Am I not your Lord [Rabb]?” They said, “Yes, we have testified.” [This]—lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, “Indeed, we were of this unaware.” (7:172).

Theologians such as Ibn Taymiyya contend that this latter verse refers to a primordial event prior to the establishment of humanity on Earth, where God gathered before Him the souls of all the human beings who would ever exist, and He asks these souls about His Lordship over them, to which they all testify (Vasalou 2016, p. 258). The verse indicates that this primordial testification serves as proof on the Day of Judgment against any person who claims they were unaware of God or His Lordship. According to some theologians, the combination of the *ḥadīth* and these verses suggest that the memory of this testimony is somehow embedded within the souls of all humans and that children are born with this memory in the form of an innate knowledge of God, or an innate predisposition to believe in God (Hoover 2007, pp. 40–41). This forms the basis of the *fiṭra*. In other words, the embedded memory of this primordial event is somehow the underpinning of the “original normative disposition” known as the *fiṭra*. The notion of the *fiṭra* by Islamic scholars had significant implications for not only theological debates but also legal discussions, e.g., the status of dead children of polytheists and whether they should be buried in Muslim or non-Muslim graveyards (Adang 2000, pp. 395–400).

Ibn Taymiyya's overall epistemology heavily relies on the notion of *fiṭra* (i.e., the “original normative disposition”) (Vasalou 2016; El-Tobgui 2020). Ibn Taymiyya agrees with other theologians that the *fiṭra* is an innate faculty endowed by God that inclines or predisposes a human to believe in God and to feel certain normative intuitions (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 7, p. 426). Ibn Taymiyya explicitly says that the *fiṭra* is not loaded with the entirety of Islamic theology. Rather, the *fiṭra* inclines one to belief in and submission to God and the truth more generally (Ibn Taymiyya 2004, vol. 4, p. 247). The *fiṭra* is also

necessary, according to Ibn Taymiyya, in facilitating certain cognitive functions, such as the ability to make inferences or use language (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 5, p. 62). For Ibn Taymiyya, the *fiṭra* is the grounding of all human epistemic channels, viz., *ḥiss* (sense perception), *khābar* (testimonial reports), and *‘aql* (reason) (El-Tobgui 2020, p. 18). In essence, the *fiṭra* precedes other epistemological channels, and because propensity to accept God and worship Him is at the core of the *fiṭra*, this makes God’s existence the most epistemically immediate truth humans can possibly access. Importantly, the *fiṭra* is also a faculty that can be corrupted, primarily through environmental factors, especially one’s upbringing and social circumstances more broadly (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 7, p. 73).

2.1.1. Ethics

Beyond belief in God and a general drive to seek truth, Islamic theologians, including Ibn Taymiyya, also note that the *fiṭra* comes with moral content (Vasalou 2016, p. 36). More specifically, the *fiṭra* provides human beings with an innate sense of right and wrong along with the innate motivation to do what is right and avoid doing what is wrong. According to Ibn Taymiyya, justice and good actions are “beloved” to the *fiṭra* and produce pleasure whenever they are attained. Injustice and wrongdoing, however, produce pain and unpleasant feelings due to the *fiṭra* (Ibn Taymiyya 2005, p. 423). He also remarks:

“Souls innately love justice (*‘adl*) and its partisans and hate oppression (*dhulm*) and its partisans, and this love located in the *fiṭra* is what is meant by justice being good, and this detestation is what is meant by oppression being evil” (Ibn Taymiyya 2005, p. 429).

This innate love located in the *fiṭra* seems to include consequentialist-seeming prescriptions, i.e., moral prescriptions on the basis of the harms versus the benefits of certain actions. For example, Ibn Taymiyya says: “The good and evil of human actions is a matter of the benefit and harm that actions involve” (Ibn Taymiyya 2005, p. 422). However, the innate love in the *fiṭra*, as Ibn Taymiyya characterizes it, also includes deontological prescriptions—i.e., rule-based prescriptions and prescriptions that appeal to the inherent goodness or evil of an action divorced from considerations of harm versus benefit—as well as the capacity to make aesthetic judgments about fragrances, sounds, etc. He writes:

“Whatever love is within a person for that which is good, true, or praiseworthy, he does it due to whatever is inside himself of love for it, not for God and not for any partners other than Him. For example, that he loves to treat well the needy, he loves clemency for criminals, he loves knowledge (*‘ilm* and *ma‘rifa*), and the realization of truths, and he loves truthfulness, honesty, and fulfilling promises, trustworthiness, and maintaining ties of kinship, because all of this is widespread in creation, whether [those] in a state of pre-Islamic ignorance (*jahiliyya*) or within a state of Islam. [...] And this is the state of most souls (*nufus*) because God created within them love of knowledge (*‘ilm* and *ma‘rifa*) and realization of truths. And He has also created within it [the soul] love for truthfulness, justice, and fulfilling promises. And He has created within it love of excellence towards and mercy with people, so a person does these things not to get closer to anyone of creation or to seek someone’s praise or for fear of vilification, but rather because the living enjoy these perceptions and movements and take pleasure in them and experience joy and happiness in them, just as they take pleasure in hearing beautiful sounds or seeing joyous/beautiful sights and in good fragrances” (Ibn Taymiyya 1982, p. 445).

Here, Ibn Taymiyya is not talking about conscious decisions because, of course, people can intend to commit these actions for the sake of God or for the sake of garnering the praise of others, etc. Rather, he refers to what is happening at the instinctual level as this universal drive for truth, justice, goodness to others, maintaining family ties, etc., that God has created within all souls. Ibn Taymiyya likens these ethical instincts to the pleasure universally experienced by those who hear, see, or smell pleasant things.

Research in CSR and moral psychology also point to the innate nature of certain universal ethical instincts. Different natural moral intuitions emerge in young children as

they mature over time (Haidt 2012; Tomasello 2016). Key components of adult morality seem to be developed or at least present in children's psychology by the age of four (Dahl and Killen 2018). These intuitions are associated with different parts of the mind and are termed by some researchers as modules. These modules interact and come together in different combinations in constituting moral systems, such as the developed moral systems found in religious traditions (Haidt 2012; McKay and Whitehouse 2015; Graham et al. 2013; Curry et al. 2019). This scholarship shows that contemporary moral psychologists agree on the naturalness of several categories of moral intuitions that are found universally in humans, though there is still disagreement on how exactly to distinguish and delineate these intuitions within an overarching theory of moral psychology. Nonetheless, consequentialist moral reasoning as well as deontological moral reasoning are both understood to be innate tendencies within human psychology.

When Ibn Taymiyya says that the drive for increasing benefit and decreasing harm (i.e., consequentialism) is natural and that the love for justice and maintaining family ties, etc., in and of themselves, (i.e., deontology) is innate; he is committing himself to a multifaceted moral theory that contemporary moral psychology research very much affirms. Specific innate moral intuitions that Ibn Taymiyya mentions in the passage above that contemporary researchers have identified include, for example, the intuition that dishonesty is wrong, as is violating promises or oaths (Parkinson et al. 2011; Hofmann et al. 2014). Furthermore, it is an innate moral intuition that taking care of family and kin is good (Nowak 2011, pp. 95–112; Curry et al. 2019).

CSR scholarship also acknowledges certain aesthetic intuitions as well as innate disgust reactions (Haidt 2012; Tybur et al. 2013). Humans naturally feel a strong sense of disgust in reaction to certain types of substances, such as feces, vomit, blood, etc., or behaviors, such as incest, zoophilia, etc. These reactions are universal irrespective of cultural or religious background (Haidt 2012, pp. 146–53). In terms of aesthetics, some research indicates that humans also have an innate attraction to lush green scenic environments in nature (Hartmann and Apaolaza-Ibáñez 2010). Cross-cultural research shows that certain floral smells are universally appreciated by humans (Jo et al. 2013; Diessner et al. 2021). So here, again, Ibn Taymiyya's claims about the universality of such disgust reactions or aesthetic preferences are supported by contemporary empirical findings. If Ibn Taymiyya had claimed, for example, that being disgusted by feces and vomit are not inherent but rather are learned through culture and that their vileness can only be known through revelation from God, then CSR research would fully discredit such a claim. The fact that Ibn Taymiyya was correct in his claims about metaethics and the source of human morality indicates that he employed some kind of introspection or some kind of reflection on human nature as a wider phenomenon beyond the limits of strict revelational knowledge in order to arrive at those claims.

2.1.2. Reason

Ibn Taymiyya sees reason and *fiṭra* as complimentary. In fact, according to his conception, reason is grounded in the *fiṭra* itself (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 7, p. 38; 2005, p. 368). Without the *fiṭra*, there could be no rationality or an ability to discern truth from falsehood, rendering the sense of reason completely powerless (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 8, p. 41). In this way, the *fiṭra* is the engine that drives inferential reasoning and the human intellect more broadly.

In his work *Dar' Ta'arūḍ*, Ibn Taymiyya sets out to properly define reason in order to prove that there can never be a true conflict between what he terms *ʿaql ṣarīḥ*, or pure reason, and *naql ṣaḥīḥ*, or authentic revelation (Ibn Taymiyya 1979; El-Tobgui 2020). In this work, Ibn Taymiyya takes aim at Islamic theological schools, such as the Ashʿarite school, that had maintained that, in cases where the conclusions of reason conflicted with scripture, reason must be given epistemic priority whilst revealed scripture must be interpreted as figurative in order to avoid the contradiction. According to the Ashʿarite scholars, like Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, this was the soundest approach to reconciling reason and revelation

simply because it is the rational mind that tells people to believe in revelation in the first place (El-Tobgui 2020, pp. 132–37). The Quran itself often claims that its divine authority is apparent and indubitable for those who “possess reason,” i.e., *’ulul ’albāb* (see, for example Quran 2:269 or 38:29). Therefore, the rational faculties should be understood as the bedrock of human epistemology and the ultimate determinant of truth and falsehood, such that even revelation should be reinterpreted from its plain meaning if it were to contradict reason (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 1, pp. 12–17). Ibn Taymiyya essentially dedicates all ten volumes of his *Dar’ Ta’arud* to attack this claim. Without attempting to reproduce all the details of his arguments, it is useful to note several broad themes with which Ibn Taymiyya is centrally concerned. First, key to his argumentative strategy is dislodging reason from this position of primacy and replacing it with the concept of *fiṭra*. The *fiṭra* is, for Ibn Taymiyya, the ultimate epistemic grounding, as we have seen. This does not mean that reason is superfluous. Reason remains a significant epistemological channel for Ibn Taymiyya, but it must be acknowledged that reason is not infallible (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 3, pp. 309–10). This is a byproduct of, among other things, the fact that the *fiṭra* itself is not infallible. As mentioned previously, Ibn Taymiyya notes that the *fiṭra* can be corrupted, along the same lines as mentioned in the famous *ḥadīth* about the *fiṭra*. Therefore, if the very core of human epistemology can suffer from defects due to corrupting influences, then how much more so is reason, which itself relies on the *fiṭra*, susceptible to impairment?

A second major theme for Ibn Taymiyya, in the *Dar’* as well as his *al-Radd ‘alā al-Mantiqiyīn*, is demonstrating how what may at first appear to be reason is not true reason, or pure reason, as he terms it. Ibn Taymiyya launches an armada of arguments in order to deconstruct the syllogistic logic other theologians prior to him had used in their proofs for the existence of God (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 7, p. 351; Hallaq 1991). The goal for Ibn Taymiyya, however, is not to advance an anti-rationalist position in Islam. Rather, he wants to strip away the false philosophies that have attached themselves to reason and have falsely claimed to be the products of reason in order to purify the faculty of reason and restore it as a trustworthy and potent epistemic channel, just as God had intended. This pure reason can never conflict with authentic revelation (as opposed to inauthentic revelation, i.e., fabricated *ḥadīth*, corrupted scriptures from past nations, etc.). This is because God is the source of both reason and revelation and it is not befitting to suppose that God would endow humans with a faculty that, even when operating correctly, could conflict with His divine scriptures, sent for the guidance of humanity (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 1, pp. 157–58; 2005, p. 131). The correct understanding, according to Ibn Taymiyya, is that these two sources of knowledge and truth can never conflict, and any apparent conflict is only due to some mistake or corruption within one’s rationality or due to mistakenly thinking some inauthentic text is actually authentic revelation. Outside of such errors, pure reason and authentic revelation could never conflict (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 4, p. 227). This is Ibn Taymiyya’s guarantee. Critical for Ibn Taymiyya is that reason remains authentic to the *fiṭra* (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 5, pp. 281–314). As long as rational discourse remains rooted in the *fiṭra*, which in turn is rooted in acknowledgment of God and the normative instinct to obey Him, then reason and human intellect more broadly can be trusted to not only align with but also confirm the veracity of divine revelation.

Ibn Taymiyya’s notion of sound reason is dedicated to functions such as abstracting universal concepts on the basis of particulars, making inductive inferences, or making deductive inferences from necessary axioms, which are recognized by the *fiṭra* (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 1, p. 286, vol. 7, p. 113, vol. 3, p. 261). All these functions of reason, according to Ibn Taymiyya, are ultimately grounded in the *fiṭra*.

It is interesting to contrast Ibn Taymiyya’s understanding of the relationship between reason and *fiṭra* with what contemporary cognitive science regards as the tension between intuitive and analytic thinking (Evans and Frankish 2009; Evans and Stanovich 2013). Intuitive thinking is spontaneous, unreflective, and immediate and is thought to be driven by basic human intuitions. Analytic thought, in contrast, is deliberate, structured, and effortful. Some researchers within CSR have claimed that the specific theologies of different

religions are the products of analytic thinking. This is why theology typically departs from what is known as “natural religion,” which is the product of intuitive thinking (Barrett 2011, pp. 130–70; McCauley 2011, pp. 145–218; De Cruz and De Smedt 2015, pp. 41–60; Nakissa 2020b). For example, many religions maintain that the world is the product of a Creator’s will and power. This belief is understood in CSR as emerging due to intuitive thinking, as it stems from the natural intuition in God discussed above. However, other aspects of theology, such as the belief in a Triune God in Christianity or the belief in Divine Decree (qadar) in Islam, depart from intuitions and intuitive thinking and require more systematic and structured analytic thinking in order to conceptualize and articulate (Nakissa 2020b). Such theological tenets may in fact be counterintuitive, which is why analytic thinking, rather than intuitive thinking, is required to maintain them. Ultimately, CSR conceives of the theology as arising from both intuitive and analytic thinking in overlapping ways.

In some respects, this does have parallels with Ibn Taymiyya’s conception of the *fiṭra*. Ibn Taymiyya acknowledges that there are certain aspects of Islamic theology that do not proceed from the *fiṭra* or even from pure reason. These Islamic theological tenets cannot be arrived at through the proper function of the *fiṭra* (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 8, pp. 460–61). Rather, they can only be acquired through revelation, which reaches an individual believer through authentic reports (khabar). So, in at least a minimal sense, it could perhaps be said that Ibn Taymiyya considers these revealed theological tenets to be a-rational or, even, a-*fiṭrī*. However, would Ibn Taymiyya go so far as to consider revelation to include theological tenets that actually conflict with the *fiṭra* and with reason? Again, this is what CSR research claims, namely that religions often have tenets that contradict fundamental intuitions and intuitive thinking. According to Ibn Taymiyya, however, this is not possible. He says:

“[Prophetic commandments] were brought forth to perfect the *fiṭra* and firmly establish it, not to replace it or change it. They command only what agrees with what is right to rational minds which pure hearts accept with receptivity” (Ibn Taymiyya 1991, pp. 431–32; as cited in Anjum 2012, p. 226).

From this, we see that, while Ibn Taymiyya staunchly opposes the idea of a rational conclusion contradicting something found in revelation, he is equally staunch in opposing the idea of God revealing a tenet of belief that would contradict pure reason. Whereas CSR claims that theology can be and often is contrary to intuitions and intuitive thinking, Ibn Taymiyya flatly rejects this. So this is another major area where the Taymiyyan paradigm departs from CSR’s conception of psychology and the nature of religious belief.

However, we see an even larger division between Ibn Taymiyya and CSR in the area of “dual process theory.” Dual process theory claims that there is an inherent trade-off between analytic thinking and intuitive thinking (Barrett 2011, pp. 44–53; Evans and Frankish 2009; Evans and Stanovich 2013). As a person’s analytic thinking becomes stronger, the influence of intuitive thinking on overall cognition grows weaker. It is claimed by dual-process theorists that this trade-off is simply an inescapable fact about human psychology. Furthermore, the proportion of analytic versus intuitive thinking that a person does varies on the basis of different psychological and environmental factors, such as education (Evans and Stanovich 2013, p. 229). The psychology of modern Westerners is characterized by a dominance in analytic thinking over intuitive thinking. This is attributed to the emphasis that modern liberal education places on “critical thinking” and a scientific worldview (Haidt 2012; Henrich 2020). CSR research shows that analytic thinking and the scientific worldview that is associated with it are negatively correlated with religious belief (Bahçekapili and Yilmaz 2017). According to dual-process theorists, analytic thinking erodes religious commitment in many ways, but two ways are salient for our purposes. First, specific intuitions that people naturally have, such as a belief in a Creator, can be critically analyzed and assessed on the basis of scientific evidence. Given that the belief in God for many people is primarily intuitive in nature and not scientific, this critical analysis can end up undermining the intuition and, in turn, weakening faith. Second, as noted above, as analytic thinking becomes the dominant mode of cognition for a person, intuitive thinking falls off proportionately as a consequence. This means that religious faith also

attenuates as a side effect given faith's strong reliance on intuition. This attenuation would presumably occur even if a person were not consciously skeptical of religious beliefs or actively critiquing them.

How does this compare to Ibn Taymiyya's view on reason and *fiṭra*? At first glance, we might think that there is a serious conflict here. As we have seen, for Ibn Taymiyya, *fiṭra* and reason fit like hand in glove. It is precisely the innate intuitions from the *fiṭra* that drive rational capabilities in the first place, so true conflict or even dissonance between them would be impossible on the Taymiyyan view. However, taking a step back, is the analytic mode of thinking discussed in dual process theory the same *ʿaql ṣarīḥ* championed by Ibn Taymiyya? This is not obvious. On the one hand, Ibn Taymiyyan does consider pure reason to include the type of inferential reasoning, whether inductive or deductive, that coincides with what modern psychologists consider the analytic mode of thinking (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 10, p. 74). That being said, Ibn Taymiyya often emphasizes that reason can easily go astray if it becomes detached from a sound and healthy *fiṭra*. He remarks: "Reason (*ʿaql*) is built upon sound and healthy *fiṭra*" (Ibn Taymiyya 2005, p. 368).

Perhaps Ibn Taymiyya could be read as suggesting the importance of balance between inferential reasoning and the other intuitions that are part and parcel of the *fiṭra*, and if that balance is disturbed by a prioritization of deductive inference or the use of inferential reasoning in areas where it is not suited—e.g., taking inferential conclusions and projecting them onto matters of the Unseen, such as the attributes of God—then theological heterodoxy or disbelief is the inevitable result. This interpretation of Ibn Taymiyya may have some parallel with the conclusions of dual process theory, though, admittedly, a precise correlation is more difficult to establish without further investigation.

2.1.3. Tawātur

Another critical component of Ibn Taymiyya's epistemology is the concept of *tawātur*. *Tawātur* can be translated as "recurrent mass transmission". Traditionally, Islamic scholars invoked the concept of *tawātur* to justify the authenticity of *ḥadīth* reports as well as the authenticity of the Quran itself (El-Tobgui 2020, p. 267). The traditional claim is that, if a report is mass transmitted through a certain threshold of separate chains of transmission, then it would have been impossible for that report to have been fabricated. In other words, it would be vanishingly improbable for that many people to come together and agree on a lie. Therefore, if a report does meet that threshold in terms of number of disparate narrators who meet certain other characteristics that guarantee they could not have all colluded, then the report should be seen as indubitably authentic. These mass transmitted reports are labeled as *mutawātir*. The Quran as a whole is considered *mutawātir* as well as a certain number of *ḥadīth*. *Ḥadīth* scholars in the Islamic tradition differed on the total number of these *mutawātir ḥadīth* because they differed slightly on the exact parameters of *mutawātir* (El-Tobgui 2018, p. 15).

Carl Sharif El-Tobgui has shown that Ibn Taymiyya takes the notion of *tawātur* and applies it beyond just the domain of *ḥadīth* authentication (El-Tobgui 2018, 2020, pp. 268–75). For Ibn Taymiyya, *tawātur* can serve as a guarantor of other epistemic faculties, including our sense of perception and our rational inferences. The fact that people from a wide variety of independent cultures and religions can all agree to certain logical axioms, such as the Principle of Noncontradiction or the Law of the Excluded Middle, etc., as well as certain observable truths about the external world, not to mention the reliability of the senses in general, makes all these axioms and observations *mutawātir* in this Taymiyyan usage. Just as it is impossible to reasonably doubt the authenticity of *mutawātir ḥadīth* narrations, similarly it is impossible to reasonably doubt the beliefs that are universally attested across humankind. What makes this "pan-human" concordance possible, according to Ibn Taymiyya, is the fact that human beings have all been created by God "upon" the *fiṭra*.

“The benchmark for [what are] *fiṭrī*, necessary propositions is the people of sound *fiṭra*, i.e., whose *fiṭra* has not been changed by inherited beliefs or delusions” (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 6, p. 14).

Once again, the *fiṭra* and what it constitutes of human nature is, for Ibn Taymiyya, the keystone to all human knowledge.

Turning now to CSR, we find two separate comparisons that can be made with Ibn Taymiyya’s usage of the concept of *tawātur*. Research shows that humans copy the behaviors and adopt the beliefs that are expressed by majorities within their social groups (Richerson and Boyd 2006, pp. 120–26; Mesoudi 2011, pp. 71–76; Henrich 2016, pp. 43–53). According to this research, adopting the beliefs and behaviors of the majority confers a distinct survival advantage, as those organisms which “follow the herd”, so to speak, or imitate more mature or more successful members of their species tend to be more fit in terms of natural selection. This evolved tendency impacts human psychology and, according to contemporary studies, is what makes humans strongly inclined to follow traditions and adopt the practices, rituals, and beliefs of their social group, even when following those traditions provides no discernible benefit to their followers and may, in fact, prove to be quite costly from the standpoint of the individual follower (Henrich 2020, pp. 68–82). CSR research and a wide range of psychological experiments show that the mere fact that a belief is widely accepted carries epistemic weight for people, regardless of any other reason that may corroborate or disqualify that belief (Gervais et al. 2011). The scientific consensus is that consensus, in and of itself, figures heavily in human epistemology.

The second level of comparison that can be made to Ibn Taymiyya is the overarching methodological approach of CSR itself. CSR research makes inferences about human nature through an inductive analysis of people across space and time. Insofar as CSR investigates our nature by searching for and studying universals in human belief and practice, then it is necessarily concerned with *tawātur*-like considerations, in the sense of cross-cultural, cross-geographic, cross-civilizational patterns of convergence.

Of course, there are areas of convergence across cultures that Ibn Taymiyya would not consider part of, or emerging from, the *fiṭra*. For example, many cultures and civilizations historically engaged in idol worship and believed in some form of polytheism. Both CSR and Islamic theological perspectives would agree that polytheism is far more common historically than monotheism. Does the fact that numerous independent civilizations historically professed polytheism provide evidentiary weight to the belief in polytheism, i.e., the existence of a multitude of gods? Ibn Taymiyya would, of course, strongly reject this, but it is not immediately clear how he would escape the logic of the same *tawātur* that he employs for his own purposes elsewhere. Perhaps, Ibn Taymiyya would claim that the belief in one all-powerful Creator is confirmed by *tawātur*, but there is also a universal human tendency to deviate from monotheism and associate partner gods with that Creator, i.e., what is called *shirk* in the Quran and Islamic theology more broadly. Furthermore, he could argue that the specific set of gods that each civilization or culture worships is not universally agreed upon, so there is not, in fact, *tawātur* on any particular version of polytheism and, therefore, the specific theological claims of any particular polytheistic religion could not be confirmed through *tawātur*. This is a hypothetical response from Ibn Taymiyya, but a focused textual analysis would be needed to further pinpoint how he could respond to such a challenge to his *tawātur*-grounded epistemology.

2.2. Knowledge of God

Now, let us delve deeper into how the *fiṭra* is connected to knowledge of God, according to Ibn Taymiyya. We have already seen that he considers knowledge of God to originate through the *fiṭra*, but a question can be asked here. If children are born “upon” the *fiṭra*, as the famous *ḥadīth* states, does this mean that children possess an innate knowledge of God at birth, or is it the case that the *fiṭra* does not actually contain the content of knowing God but rather simply provides children with the faculty to recognize God, which they do early in their lives? According to this latter view, the *fiṭra* is more like the sensory organs.

The eye, for example, facilitates the acquisition of knowledge through the sense of sight, yet there is no in-built knowledge that comes with the eye when humans are born. In an analogous way, is the *fiṭra* the faculty by which humans sense God without being a vessel containing the knowledge of God upon a person's birth? In fact, Ibn Taymiyya seems to suggest this by making precisely this analogy with eyesight in explaining the *fiṭra* (Ibn Taymiyya 2004, vol. 4, p. 247).

Some commenters on Ibn Taymiyya argue that he understands the *fiṭra* as containing specific theological and normative content including knowledge of God (Hallaq 1991, p. 55). Others interpret Ibn Taymiyya differently and attribute to him the view that the *fiṭra* is purely a faculty—distinct but similar to the faculty of reason (*ʿaql*)—that does not contain certain innate propositional knowledge of God (Turner 2021, p. 7; Anjum 2012, p. 221). Still others maintain that Ibn Taymiyya is ambivalent on the issue (von Kügelgen 2013, p. 299). Considering his writings on the *fiṭra* collectively, it seems that Ibn Taymiyya actually endorses both views of the *fiṭra*, viz., that it contains innate propositional knowledge of God as well as being an innate faculty or predisposition to recognize God. For example, Ibn Taymiyya remarks:

“[Allah] made bodies amenable to nourishment via food and drink, and if it were not for that, it would not be possible to nourish and nurture them. Just as there is in bodies a power (*quwwa*) that differentiates between nourishing and harmful food, in the hearts there is an even greater power that differentiates between truth and falsehood” (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 5, p. 62).

This would support a faculty theory of the *fiṭra*. However, elsewhere, Ibn Taymiyya is quite insistent that the *fiṭra* is also knowledge that is embedded within, not only human beings but also all of creation. He says:

“[Allah] is known (*maʿlūm*) necessarily by reason (*wajib ʿaqlān*). Allah has fixed it [this knowledge] in the *fiṭra* of His creation, including the moving and the non-moving, the speaking and the non-speaking, the animals and the inanimate objects. As mentioned previously, all of these creations are glorifying His praises and have knowledge of him. In every thing He has a sign (*āya*) that He is One and alongside the evidence (that the creation has of God) of His Oneness, it also glorifies His praises and testifies to Him and prostrates to Him. Additionally, the totality of the creation, except for the disbelievers among humans and jinn, glorifies His praises. Additionally, the glorification of each thing is in accordance with its type. Were it not that everything glorified His praises and extolled Him and exalted Him with that which we do not understand ourselves, and which nobody knows except the One who made it pronounce it, then He would not have told us, and that proves His greatness.” (Ibn Taymiyya 2008, vol. 2, p. 341).

Ibn Taymiyya continues at length, explaining how animals and even stones, tracts of land, and mountains have knowledge of God. He cites numerous Quranic verses and *ḥadīth* to justify his claims, most notably verse 17:44: “The seven heavens and the earth and whatever is in them exalt Him. And there is not a thing except that it exalts [Allah] by His praise, but you do not understand their [way of] exalting. Indeed, He is ever Forbearing and Forgiving”.

Ibn Taymiyya argues that this praise requires having prior knowledge of the One being praised and that prior knowledge is what God embeds within His creation, even parts of the creation that do not appear to us to have rational capabilities, such as birds, and even those parts of creation that do not apparently have life, such as mountains, stones, tracts of land, or the sky (Ibn Taymiyya 2008, vol. 2, p. 341). Interestingly, Ibn Taymiyya in these passages also characterizes these parts of the creation as having reason (*ʿaql*) and understanding (*fahm*). Given this characterization, it would be somewhat inaccurate to term the *fiṭra* an “instinct” or an “intuition” because, for Ibn Taymiyya, the *fiṭra* is actually more ingrained or more innate than even basic human instincts. The *fiṭra* is something that precedes human biology, psychology, or even the human soul itself. Indeed, the *fiṭra*

is more akin to something that is stitched into the very fabric of creation. Ibn Taymiyya's characterization of the *fiṭra*, therefore, escapes categorization into purely a discussion of epistemology or purely ontology or purely ethics. The locus of all these domains, according to Ibn Taymiyya, is the *fiṭra*. The *fiṭra*, at once, constitutes the stamp of God on His creation but also a stamp that comes packaged with the knowledge of God and, furthermore, sparks a normative urge within that creation to glorify and submit to Him.

Of course, CSR scholarship is not concerned with such broader metaphysical claims. However, according to CSR, certain religions such as Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism, among others, maintain that children are born with a psychological makeup that predisposes them to believe in God (Barrett 2011, p. 161; De Cruz and De Smedt 2015, pp. 195–96). Some CSR scholars also recognize that young children across religious backgrounds do believe in a creator God (Bloom 2007; Kelemen 2004; Barrett 2012). According to CSR, children are born “natural theists” as opposed to being naturally atheists or non-theists. This conclusion is based on the fact that belief in God as the originator of the world is found in young children regardless of the religious background or instruction of their parents (Petrovich 2019).

CSR claims that belief in God is naturally emergent within the human mind. This is tied to what is termed “mindreading.” According to CSR, humans have a natural propensity to believe in spirits such as a Creator God but also other gods, angels, demons, animistic spirits that dwell within nature, spirits of dead ancestors, etc. (Boyer 2001; Atran 2002; Barrett 2004; Bloom 2007; McCauley 2011). CSR maintains that the tendency to believe in such beings evolved from a mindreading capability that all humans have (Boyer 2001, pp. 93–167; Atran 2002, pp. 51–79; Barrett 2011, pp. 73–95; Bering 2011, pp. 39–110). Mindreading simply refers to the ability to make inferences about other minds on the basis of observable phenomenon. For example, a child can infer that his mother intends to feed him because she walks to the refrigerator. A spouse can infer that his wife is feeling depressed because of the way she is slouched on the couch, and so forth. Mindreading is understood to be evolutionarily adaptive, meaning the ability to accurately infer the content of other minds provides a reproductive or survival advantage. The stronger the mindreading capability, the stronger the associations that are made between observable, physical phenomena and non-physical, non-observable minds. However, over time, this ability to mindread could become “promiscuous” in the sense that it could incline humans to extrapolate the existence of underlying minds in control of physical phenomena in their environment more generally. For instance, fishermen who are unable to catch fish might believe that this indicates that the spirits that control the ocean are displeased with them. The woman who misses her flight might think that this is “the universe” that is “sending her a message.” The mindreading ability tends to perceive agency, intention, emotion, etc., behind such observable phenomena in the same way that it perceives them in response to the actions and physical states of other human beings. CSR claims that the mindreading ability evolved into intuitions about God and spirits more generally. This explains the widespread belief in immaterial spirit beings found in virtually every human culture, even cultures that predate the emergence of agrarian civilization (Norenzayan 2013, pp. 15–19).

CSR scholarship maintains that the intuition in an all-powerful, all-knowing Creator is distinct from the intuition in spirits generally. This is in large part due to the relationship between causation and beliefs about God. CSR scholarship holds that human psychology predisposes the mind to think about causation in specific ways (Kelemen 2004; De Cruz and De Smedt 2015, pp. 85–108; Petrovich 2019). Children and adults alike naturally seek out causes for the objects and phenomena they observe around them in the world. There is a desire in children and adults for complete causal explanations, especially explanations that can elucidate the ultimate causes behind what is observed (Petrovich 2019, pp. 13–22). Children seem to be inclined to view God as both the ultimate cause and the unique cause for the world, even children who also believe in other gods or spirit beings in addition to their belief in the one creator God. Along these lines, some CSR studies have claimed that the human mind may even be predisposed to monotheism in the sense of one unique

creator God as responsible for bringing about and controlling the universe (Barrett 2004, pp. 87–90; Petrovich 2019, pp. 106–92).

Ibn Taymiyya similarly understands these notions of God’s oneness and His unique role as Creator of the universe [tawhīd] to be innate as stemming from the *fiṭra*.

Attributes of God

If the *fiṭra* contains knowledge of God, does it also contain knowledge of specific attributes or characteristics of God? In various places, Ibn Taymiyya distinguishes between attributes of God that are known through revelation versus those that are innately and necessarily known through the *fiṭra*. For example, the belief that God is All-Hearing and All-Seeing, i.e., Omniscient, originates in the *fiṭra* along with the belief that God is all-powerful (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 10, p. 76).

Along those same lines, CSR research shows that children have an innate tendency to conceptualize God as omniscient and omnipotent. Numerous robust cross-cultural studies demonstrate that this conceptualization of God is not the product of socialization or the influence of parents. Rather, children naturally develop a conception of God with certain attributes, such as omniscience and omnipotence (Boyer 2001, pp. 155–60; Barrett and Richert 2003; Barrett 2004, pp. 77–84; De Cruz and De Smedt 2015, pp. 41–60; Norenzayan 2013, pp. 23–29). Even in societies where there is no dominant religion with the idea of a creator god, children in such societies express belief in a creator god before socialization causes them to adopt the beliefs of the majority (Petrovich 2019).

A critical question about the attributes of God concerns whether God, ultimately, has a human-like body? Throughout the Sunni Islamic tradition, we find a strong theological disapproval of anthropomorphic conceptions of God, including in the work of Ibn Taymiyya, who also considers this to be *fiṭrī*, necessary knowledge (Williams 2002). In concordance with this, some cross-cultural CSR studies have shown that children’s innate concept of God is non-anthropomorphic in character (Barrett and Richert 2003; Petrovich 2019).

Interestingly, Ibn Taymiyya claims in several places that all people recognize that God is greater than them and, in fact, is located above them in the heavens. He says, “As for [God] being above His creations and separate from them, then this is known by the necessary *fiṭra* that all the children of Adam share altogether” (Ibn Taymiyya 2004, vol. 4, p. 45). Ibn Taymiyya explains elsewhere that this is why all people look up to the sky when praying to God for assistance. He writes, “The turning of the hearts towards the one being supplicated to [i.e., God] upwards is a matter of *fiṭra* and rationality, agreed upon by all the nations without dissent. But as for prostration, it is a matter of Islamic Law that is done out of obedience to a Commander, like facing the Ka‘ba is done in worship, in obedience to the Commander.” (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 7, p. 25). In *Dar’ Ta‘āruḍ*, he claims that it is due to the *fiṭra* that this understanding of God’s elevation is recognized by all people, including non-Muslims (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 6, p. 12). Elsewhere, Ibn Taymiyya notes that children know that God is in the Heavens (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 2, p. 59).

Some CSR studies also indicate that people irrespective of religious and cultural backgrounds have a natural intuition that God is located above them and above the sky. The universality of this belief in verticality cannot be explained through cultural influence, since these religions are sufficiently independent. How, then, is the same belief shared by these religions independently of each other? According to some CSR research, this belief is a natural human intuition that is tied to what is understood to be an evolved tendency of people to view authorities and dominant figures as being elevated in a spatial sense (Burgoon and Dunbar 2006, p. 291). In other words, elevation is associated with dominance in the human psyche, and this instinctive belief also applies to God. Many Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic religions associate God with verticality, and research shows that this is an innate, universal conceptual disposition in human beings (Meier et al. 2007).

2.3. *Istidlāl Bi'l-āyāt*

While the healthy *fiṭra* contains knowledge of God, the sound *fiṭra* as a faculty also continuously confirms the existence of God through what Ibn Taymiyya terms *istidlāl bi'l-āyāt*, or Inference through Signs (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 8, p. 531). *Āyāt* in Islamic theology can refer to verses of the Quran or things in the world that people can observe or experience (Turner 2021, p. 1). According to the Quran, things such as the sun, moon, and stars are all *āyāt* in the sense that they point to their Creator. In verse 13:3 of the Quran, we read: “And it is He who spread the earth and placed therein firmly set mountains and rivers; and from all of the fruits He made therein two mates; He causes the night to cover the day. Indeed in that are signs for a people who give thought.” Ibn Taymiyya considers Quranic verses such as this one as promoting *istidlāl bi'l-āyāt* (Ibn Taymiyya 2005, p. 151). For Ibn Taymiyya, God Himself is giving humanity instructions in these verses on how they can confirm for themselves the existence of God and the truth of Islam more broadly. He says:

“Proving the existence of God by way of signs (*āyāt*) is obligatory. This is the way of the Qur’an, and inherent in the *fiṭra* of His servants [...] the sign (*āya*) indicates the object itself of which it is the sign. Every created being is a sign and a proof of the Creator Himself” (Ibn Taymiyya 2004, vol. 1, p. 48; as cited in Turner 2021, p. 3).

Of course, humanity should have knowledge of God innately due to the *fiṭra*, but for those with a corrupted *fiṭra* or those who have a sound *fiṭra* but desire to strengthen or deepen their certainty (*yaqīn*) in and devotion to God, then pondering these *āyāt* is the God-sanctioned prescription (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 8, pp. 531–34). Ibn Taymiyya argues that this method of *istidlāl bi'l-āyāt* for establishing the existence of God is far superior to the methodology of other Islamic theological schools, which borrowed Aristotelian cosmological and contingency arguments in order to deductively prove the existence of God (Ibn Taymiyya 2005, p. 194). For one, *istidlāl bi'l-āyāt*, unlike the *kalam* cosmological and contingency arguments, is repeatedly endorsed by God Himself in the Quran, at least according to Ibn Taymiyya. Secondly, *istidlāl bi'l-āyāt* is a method of proof that does not require adopting the dubitable and, in Ibn Taymiyya’s view, incoherent philosophical premises and concepts of the ancient Greek philosophers. Thirdly, *istidlāl bi'l-āyāt* is natural because it is rooted in everyone’s *fiṭra*, and as such, it is universally accessible and does not require the intellectual sophistication that these other proofs require. Last but certainly not least, for Ibn Taymiyya, the philosophical proofs involve premises that either implicitly or explicitly contradict a plain and authentic reading of revelation. For example, the Quran and *ḥadīth* describe God as committing actions, moving through space, etc., but the *kalam* cosmological argument requires that God, as the perfect unmoved Mover, be unchanging, immobile, and beyond space and time. From Ibn Taymiyya’s perspective, this proof might be perfectly valid and even inescapably compelling, but at the end of the day, it can only prove a theoretical, conceptual god, one that has no bearing on the God who actually exists and who has described Himself in revelation (Ibn Taymiyya 2005, pp. 344–45). To prove the existence of the specific God described in the Quran, only *istidlāl bi'l-āyāt* can do the job. Additionally, as a bonus, *istidlāl bi'l-āyāt* inspires awe of God, which can lead a person not only to recognize the existence of God but also to feel inspired to worship Him and obey Him. As Ibn Taymiyya sees it, the relatively dry philosophical proofs cannot provide that (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 8, p. 518).

Significant to Ibn Taymiyya’s understanding of *istidlāl bi'l-āyāt* is that the process of apprehending a sign and then recognizing the Creator happens immediately and non-inferentially (Turner 2021, p. 5). To grasp the sign is, at once, to recognize the Creator of that sign in the same moment, and to deny the Creator would, therefore, be tantamount to denying what your own eyes see before you. Ibn Taymiyya remarks:

“The created beings that indicate the Creator [...] [are] concomitant with their Creator, [so] it’s not possible that they exist without the existence of their Creator,

just as He cannot exist without His knowledge, power, will, wisdom, and mercy” (Ibn Taymiyya 2005, p. 245; as cited in Turner 2021, p. 5).

This is how Ibn Taymiyya construes the epistemic immediacy of *ayat*, and, of course, this immediacy can only be experienced by those with a sound *fiṭra*. Another passage that conveys what Ibn Taymiyya means here is as follows:

“The knowledge that a temporally originated thing necessarily has an originator is an innate (*fiṭrī*) and necessary knowledge. And along these lines God says in the Quran: “Were they created by nothing or were they themselves the creators?” [Quran 52:35]. [...] God is saying, Were they created without a creator who created them or are they the creators of themselves? And what is known by the *fiṭra* that God endowed [*fatara*] his servants with pure reason that the originator does not originate any temporal thing without something prior that originated it. Indeed the temporal origination without an originator that originates it is known to be false by reason of necessity, and this is an innate matter within all Children of Adam even in their childhood. If a child is hit, he will [automatically] ask, “Who hit me?” If it were said to him, “No one hit you,” his mind could not believe that the blow had taken place without a doer” (Ibn Taymiyya 2003, vol. 1, pp. 410–11).

The child in Ibn Taymiyya’s example does not need to engage in any inferential reasoning process to instantaneously recognize that the blow he has suffered came at the hands of another. This recognition is supplied by the *fiṭra*. In the same way, the *fiṭra* facilitates a person’s immediate recognition that the world and its contents are the creations of a Creator. This explains Ibn Taymiyya’s citing of the Quranic verse: “Were they created by nothing or were they themselves the creators [of themselves]?” The verse asks a question that Ibn Taymiyya views as rhetorical, and it is rhetorical because the answer is immediately obvious to anyone with a healthy *fiṭra* (Ibn Taymiyya 2005, p. 253). Created things must necessarily have a creator, and since people did not create themselves, that leaves God as the only possible answer. As Wael Hallaq notes, “This necessary relationship between the Creator and created beings is entrenched in the soul to a much greater extent than the knowledge of mathematical and logical principles” (Hallaq 1991, p. 61).

To put Ibn Taymiyya in Kuhnian terms, the natural state of human perception of the world around them is theory-laden, and that theory happens to be creationism. In other words, humans cannot help but see the world as the handiwork of a supreme Creator.

It should be noted here that Ibn Taymiyya’s claims about how humans innately understand causality and temporal origination, i.e., contingency, might sound like he is endorsing a cosmological or contingency argument for the existence of God, such as those supplied by the *mutakallimun*. However, as we have seen, Ibn Taymiyya spends a great deal of effort to critique these *kalam* arguments and claim that they are fundamentally flawed. So is this not an inconsistency on Ibn Taymiyya’s part? However, in the *Dar’*, Ibn Taymiyya explains:

“Knowledge of the temporal origination (*ḥudūth*) of that which comes into being and inferring the existence of the Creator from this [knowledge] does not require that [we] know [for instance] whether a drop of sperm is made up of individual substances or matter and whether that [substance and matter] are eternal or temporally originated [as the *mutakallimun* claim]. Rather, the mere fact of the origination (*mujarrad ḥudūth*) of that whose temporal origination we witness [is sufficient to] indicate [or prove] that it has an Originator, just as the temporal origination of all things that come into being indicates [or proves] that they have an Originator” (Ibn Taymiyya 1979, vol. 8, p. 319; as cited in El-Tobgui 2020, p. 275).

Ibn Taymiyya is acknowledging here that, yes, the fundamental intuition that temporally originated things (i.e., contingent things) require a Creator is indeed natural, rational, and *fiṭrī*. Even children have this intuition, he claims, such as the boy who is struck and

immediately looks around for the attacker. However, acknowledging the reality of this fact about temporal origination needing an originator does not require us to endorse the full kalam arguments and all their speculative premises. Ibn Taymiyya is saying, in other words, that these kalam arguments come with extra ontological baggage that cause problems elsewhere, e.g., in theology and interpreting revelation. Therefore, why take on that baggage, especially since we can get the desideratum—viz., establishing the existence of God—directly from the intuition itself? The intuition itself is sufficient to prove the existence of God and, if that were not enough, the intuition is universal, *fiṭrī*, and does not require committing oneself to speculative and arcane theo-philosophical argumentation that also undermines other areas of Islamic belief.

Parallel to all this, CSR scholarship discusses natural teleological reasoning, i.e., the tendency to view objects as purposefully created by an agent. Psychological studies indicate that children are heavily teleological in understanding of the world in that they intuitively believe in a God who has purposefully created everything in the world. This creationist belief arises in children across cultures and across religious backgrounds of the children (Atran 2002, p. 74; Barrett 2004, pp. 75–90; Kelemen 2004; Petrovich 2019). This innate tendency to view the world and its contents as purposefully created artifacts persists into adulthood, but the intuitions can be repressed due to scientific education, which emphasizes non-teleological explanations for natural phenomena (Bloom 2007, pp. 149–50; Kelemen and Carey 2007; McCauley 2011, pp. 220–21; Kelemen et al. 2013; De Cruz and De Smedt 2015, pp. 68–69). It should be noted that this “intuitive creationism” is automatic in the sense that children do not engage in inferential reasoning to arrive at the conclusion that, for instance, mountains and trees were created by God (Heywood and Bering 2014). A person might engage in teleological inference by looking at the human body and by comparing that to a complex machine, such as a watch. If the watch has a maker, then it stands to reason that the more complex human body has a maker as well. This would be an example of a teleological inference by analogy. However, this type of step-by-step reasoning is not present for children or adults who nonetheless view natural phenomena as purposefully created by God. Rather, they sense this createdness immediately as if the createdness inheres within the object or natural phenomenon in question. This conforms to Ibn Taymiyya’s theory of *istidlāl bi’l-āyāt* and its connection to *fiṭra*.

3. Conclusions

CSR scholarship provides a new cross-disciplinary window through which to study Islamic theology. Given the concern of many Islamic theologians for human nature, fundamental human intuitions, the structure of human reason, etc., CSR can shed light on broader themes and connections that conventional analyses may miss. For example, conventional analyses of Ibn Taymiyya’s work situates him within a specific discursive tradition, as influenced by certain political institutions, reacting to various historical forces operating in his time. However, Ibn Taymiyya, like all people, was also the product of human biology and psychology, and his theological beliefs were touched, if not outright generated, by the same innate tendencies and psychological predispositions that CSR is at pains to investigate in humanity at large. It should not come as a surprise, then, that many of Ibn Taymiyya’s views on human nature match broader themes and insights elucidated within CSR scholarship, while at the same time being distinct and divergent from them in significant ways. The source of some of Ibn Taymiyya’s beliefs can thus be explained as arising from universal biological and psychological tendencies shared by all humanity (rather than being purely the product of culture, institutional power, historical context, etc.). Of course, this is not to say that Ibn Taymiyya’s beliefs about the *fiṭra* are purely the products of natural biology. Obviously, culture, institutional power, historical context, etc., all have a significant part to play. However, the story is incomplete without recognizing the natural biological and psychological universals that undoubtedly influenced Ibn Taymiyya’s thought, universals which the field of CSR elucidates. By bringing CSR to bear, we can thus expand and nuance our understanding of Ibn Taymiyya and his work. Similar

comparative studies can be conducted for other influential Islamic thinkers and schools of thought, using CSR findings to investigate larger questions on the development of Islamic theology and practice over time.

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