



# In Pursuit of Conviction II: Proving God's Existence

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## Introduction

Throughout history, theologians and philosophers have enumerated the many evidences and proofs for God's existence. In response, atheist philosophers have attempted to critique these arguments and provide their own proofs for non-belief. Departing from this project that relegates God's existence to an abstract hypothesis requiring philosophical arguments, this treatise explores an alternative epistemology that conceptualizes belief in God as a fundamental human need and ontological necessity.<sup>1</sup>

In the previous article, we examined how human beings are guided to God and His revelation first through the primordial spiritual intuition embedded within our nature. But what is the ontological and epistemological framework that makes that belief justified? It is that faith in God serves as the anchorage to any meaningful conception of reality or of our lives. For indeed, the idea that spiritual intuition is what leads us to God can be readily misconstrued to suggest that faith has no firm grounding beyond a subjective feeling. To the more astute reader, however, what should become evident is how faith functions as an ontological necessity—the bedrock of what constitutes meaning.<sup>2</sup>

Faith in God is the necessary building block of all that makes up meaningful human experience. Three dimensions of human life are explored: spiritual, intellectual, and moral. Muslim tradition and scholarship have identified these as core aspects of the human experience.<sup>3</sup> The manner in which these dimensions of life are experienced by each and every one of us is through the first-person perspective, which is the subject matter of phenomenology, rather than the

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<sup>1</sup> Ontology is the study of existence, being, and the very nature and constituents of reality. Content in the field includes the examination of such questions as the nature of causality, the existence of numbers, the relationship between explanations and abstract concepts and the objects to which they relate, and so on. What is required in order for us to maintain coherent notions about existence indicates an ontological necessity.

<sup>2</sup> Philosopher Harry Gene Blocker writes on the meaning of meaning, “the logical root of meaning can be traced to the sense of purpose and a system of purposeful relations. When people speak of the meaningfulness of things, they are usually talking either about (a) the purposive way things seem to hang together or (b) the purpose which this system has as a whole. Correspondingly, meaninglessness can mean either (a) the breakdown of this system or (b) the realization that the purpose for the system as a whole is a human projection having no foundation in reality.” Blocker, H. G. *The Meaning of Meaninglessness* (1974), pp. 33-40.

<sup>3</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim. (2009). *Rawdatul-Muhibeen*. Cairo, Egypt: Dar Alam al-Fawa'id, p.14. For a full discussion see Khan N. (2015). Tawheed - A life worth living. Accessed on <https://spiritualperception.org/a-life-worth-living/>.

third-person perspective which is the artificial manner in which we are often accustomed to deliberate on life. A phenomenological analysis demonstrates humanity's absolute need for God, regardless of whether they profess belief in Him. This approach enables the reader to appreciate that the justification for God's existence is firmly rooted in the epistemology of meaning, the phenomenology of our lived experiences, and our dire need of Him, rather than potentially contestable rational proofs. Therefore, believing in God becomes synonymous with the choice to pursue meaning in life using our innate human capacities. Faith in God is intimately connected to the core of our being, and its strength is based on the purity of our spiritual, intellectual, and moral dimensions.

## Human beings are in need

*O humankind, you are those that need Allah with much destitution, while Allah is The Self-Sufficient, the Praiseworthy. (Qur'an 35:15)*

The Qur'an describes dependence on God as a key feature of the human condition. Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 AH) opens his monumental spiritual work *Tareeq al-Hijratayn* with the aforementioned verse followed by the declaration that the human being's need of God is an essential existential reality, and the voluntary recognition of one's dire need (*faqr*) of God is the most basic realization at which the human soul must arrive.<sup>4</sup> The phenomenology of *faqr* which Ibn al-Qayyim articulates situates us within the first-person perspective at the heart of human nature through which all lived experiences are filtered.

It is true that the main driving factor of all human behavior is the fulfillment of their needs. This is the building block of Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs:

*Any motivated behavior, either preparatory or consummatory, must be understood to be a channel through which many basic needs may be simultaneously expressed or satisfied.*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim. (2007). *Tareeq al-Hijratayn*. Makkah, Saudi Arabia: Dar Alam al-Fawa'id, pp.12-16. He contrasts this view with the notion that God's role with respect to creation is limited to a cause-effect relationship, either originating their existence as an occurrence in time (*huduth*) or affirming a contingent possibility (*imkan*), whereas Ibn al-Qayyim sees these as mere signs of the more essential ontological dependence of creation upon the Creator.

<sup>5</sup> Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370.



The needs described by Maslow include physical, social, and psychological. The obvious physical needs for food, drink, and shelter ensure the survival of our biological substance.<sup>6</sup> Beyond that, Maslow recognized that human beings possess a psyche that requires certain factors for its sustenance and balance, including a sense of belonging and esteem.<sup>7</sup> Though there are criticisms of the hierarchy itself,<sup>8</sup> there is no dispute regarding the idea that human needs drive human behavior. Other fields, such as history and anthropology, also recognize human needs as fundamental to human psychology. In fact, one can summarize all of human history as simply the story of how humans have endeavored to fulfill their needs across time and place.

*Anthropogenic changes are assessed at the scale of human needs, rather than in terms of ecosystem structure and function.*<sup>9</sup>

Maslow's model, as well as others that have extended his theory, places the fulfillment of spiritual needs at the top of the hierarchy. Self-actualization and self-transcendence are often the ultimate needs of human beings represented in these models.

*Maslow defines growth as the continuous development of talents, capacities, creativity, wisdom, and character; the various processes which bring the person toward ultimate self-actualization.*<sup>10</sup>

Although widely shared versions of Maslow's model show self-actualization as the ultimate need, this does not reflect his own amendment that put the need for self-transcendence beyond it.<sup>11</sup> Self-transcendence is about living for something greater than one's self, thereby finding meaning and purpose in one's existence. This need emerges from a realization of one's inherent inability to find fulfillment

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Bouzenita, A. I., & Boulanouar, A. W. (2016). Maslow's hierarchy of needs: An Islamic critique. *Intellectual Discourse*, 24(1).

<sup>9</sup> Briggs, J. M., Spielmann, K. A., Schaafsma, H., Kintigh, K. W., Kruse, M., Morehouse, K., & Schollmeyer, K. (2006). Why ecology needs archaeologists and archaeology needs ecologists. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 4(4), 180-188.

<sup>10</sup> Sengupta, S. S. (2011). Growth in human motivation: Beyond Maslow. *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, 47, 102-116.

<sup>11</sup> Koltko-Rivera, M. E. (2006). Rediscovering the later version of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: Self-transcendence and opportunities for theory, research, and unification. *Review of General Psychology*, 10(4), 302.

through themselves or this worldly life. Hence, when a person searches for the fulfillment of their needs, they are ultimately searching for a means to connect themselves with a Transcendent Reality (or God). As quoted earlier, the Qur'an asserts that the only true fulfillment of human needs in a holistic sense is with God.

According to Maslow and other psychologists, needs are organized in a hierarchical manner.<sup>12</sup> This means that they should be fulfilled sequentially and not out of order. According to this, one cannot start their spiritual journey unless all lower needs are met first (biological, social, etc.). From the Islamic perspective, all needs are fulfilled through the all-encompassing pursuit of *Tawheed*, which represents faith in the Oneness of the Divine and dedicating one's whole self in devotion to Him. All human needs are integrated harmoniously and fulfilled through this pursuit of dedicating one's whole self in service to the Divine Will.

## **The need for God and the need for meaning**

This article will explore faith in God from the phenomenological perspective of human needs, rather than a philosophical inquiry into His existence. This is a more fruitful approach to truly understand what it means to have faith in God from the perspective of the individual.

A person may object to this endeavor from the outset and point out that the perceived need for an idea or being, does not rationally necessitate that it truly exists. This objection, however, does not apply to the concept of God because, as we will demonstrate in the article, the level of need we have for God goes beyond the moral, spiritual, and psychological and extends into the domain of the intellectual. In other words, faith in God is required for truth, logic, and rationality itself to have any real meaning and ontological grounding. Even the concept of meaning itself is rooted in a belief in God as we will explore later in this article. Along similar lines, our very notion of self-identity and individuality also requires faith in God. Thus, demonstrating our need for God at this ultimate level confers

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<sup>12</sup> Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370.

complete certainty in His existence, given that we cannot meaningfully live, rationally think, or even individually be without believing in Him.

The skeptic may respond by simply stating that he is willing to dispense with any real notions of rationality, meaning, self, morality, and anything else that is in need of faith in God. They may claim that they are happy to live life presuming that our existence is fundamentally pointless, the unintended consequence of material elements that exist reasonlessly, and that our conscious awareness and sense of self is itself an illusion brought about by blind interactions of the material elements.

The response to this is a Qur'anic one that highlights the central element of choice in the selection of one's paradigm:

*Say: The Truth is from your Lord, whoever wants (to believe) let him believe and whoever wants (to disbelieve) let him disbelieve. (Qur'an 18:29)*

Meaningful truth can ultimately only be found with God, as will be demonstrated in this article. Once this point is understood, then we have the choice to accept it along with the responsibility it entails, or reject it and absolve ourselves from any responsibility by denying any sense of real purpose. This verse tells us that faith is not an abstract intellectual exercise; it is a choice human beings must make in this world. The choice is whether a person accepts what life reveals to them through their intellectual tools, moral instincts, and spiritual intuitions. All of these fundamental aspects of humans—intellectual, moral, and spiritual— find their fulfillment in the Divine Reality if we take them seriously.

The dilemma is whether we should take them seriously. Taking them seriously means that we affirm ourselves, our experiences, and what we witness in this world, and we assume full responsibility for them. Claiming that these domains of a human being are mere epiphenomena or illusions means that we negate ourselves, our experiences, and what we witness in this world. At its root, the choice is whether we believe in meaning or reject it.

The absurdity of choosing meaninglessness in this dilemma of faith can be summarized in the following line of thinking:

*[W]hat does it actually mean to believe in meaninglessness? The belief in meaninglessness is itself meaningless, and therefore not a belief at all. Accordingly, there really is only one option—the meaningful. There was no battle to begin with. For an entity that fathoms meaning, there is no escape but to find a meaningful outlook on life.*<sup>13</sup>

With this framework in mind, we can appreciate the significance of understanding our profound need for God. Recognizing this ultimate necessity places our belief in God at a higher place of conviction than any other belief we may hold. The article will now proceed to explore each aspect of the human being—spiritual, intellectual, and moral—and how it finds its fulfillment in the Divine Reality.

## 1) The spiritual necessity of God

### The need for value

Before a person even decides to embark on the tumultuous journey of life, they need to know if their life is worth living. This spiritual necessity is the most fundamental of all needs and requires fulfillment above even the most basic physiological needs. Why else would one decide to commit to a life of need, dependency, pain, hardship, and inevitable separation through death and loss? Victor Frankl, the famous German psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, explains,

*Man's main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain, but to see a meaning in his life. That is why man is even ready to suffer, on the condition, to be sure, that his suffering has meaning.*<sup>14</sup>

Recognizing one's life as having an inherent value and worth that outweighs the cost of living in this world of trial and tribulation is the most fundamental of all needs. The question is: where does one find such value to their life?

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<sup>13</sup> Khan N. (2015). The real battle: Meaningful vs meaningless. *Spiritual Perception*. Accessed on <https://spiritualperception.org/the-real-battle-meaningful-vs-meaningless/>

<sup>14</sup> Kaplin, A., & Anzaldi, L. (2015). New movement in neuroscience: A purpose-driven life. *Cerebrum: The Dana Forum on Brain Science*, 7.



## Finding value in purpose

The value of one's life is based on what one believes to be their fundamental purpose. This is because value is a relative term that is determined in relation to a goal or objective. For instance, the value of an employee is based on their utility in achieving the goals of a company. The value of a team player is based on their ability to take their team toward their goal. Therefore, the value of your life is based on its relation to the ultimate purpose of life itself. It is inconceivable to understand the value of anything if there is no objective in relation to it. Therefore the quest to find value in one's life is rooted in one's quest to discover the purpose of life.

Atheists often object to the idea of God being necessary for meaning and purpose in life by simply giving imagined examples of hypothetical purposes or meaning that a person's life *could* serve in the world. This only serves the purpose of rendering life a game with arbitrarily fashioned aims and rules. And when the game is no longer fun, one can choose not to play. According to the worldview of atheistic naturalism, this world emerged as the unintended byproduct of blind material forces and thus, by definition, without purpose. Imagine a group of people arguing over which word the sound of a creaking door most resembled. It is pointless to confer semantic meaning on the sound emitted by the haphazard interaction of particles in the door hinge when it is known that meaning can only be generated by the purposively articulated sounds of speech in a word. According to naturalism, all your conscious experiences—including emotions, hopes, thoughts, values, fears, ideas and actions—are no more meaningful than the haphazard creaking of particles which give the illusion of a meaningful word. Meaning requires purpose, and so it is with life.

*And We did not create the heaven and the earth and that between them aimlessly. That is the assumption of those who reject faith. (Qur'an 38:27)*

The materialist view renders not only the concept of purpose incoherent but also the concept of values. It strips the world of an ultimate objective, which is a necessary foundation for values to be nested in. Indeed, the iconoclastic

philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer famously said, “It would be better if we did not exist at all.” It is necessary to view the world as existing for a reason in order for a person to assign value to their life. The value of our life is thus found in relation to its role in the grand scheme of existence.

## Is there a purpose to life?

Some maintain that there is no purpose to life at all since it emerged through blind forces of nature without any intention or reason. This proposition can be examined from both an intellectual and practical perspective. We will demonstrate the intellectual incoherence of denying purpose later in the article. At this junction, we will focus on the impractical consequences of the denial of life having any purpose.

People with such a view on life cannot justify the pain of existence with their lifestyle and attempt to numb this dissonance with hedonistic pleasures. The question of the purpose of one's life is so significant to human beings that it seems to be hard-wired into our brains. A study of the neuroscience of well-being revealed that more activity in the area of the brain associated with goal-oriented behavior was associated with higher levels of positive affect and wellbeing.<sup>15</sup>

The consequences of living a life without any purpose are a nihilistic dread and misery that lead to absurd choices and behavior such as the man attempting to sue his own mother for giving birth to him. The plaintiff in this court case said,

*There's no point to humanity, So many people are suffering. If humanity is extinct, Earth and animals would be happier. They'll certainly be better off. Also no human will then suffer. Human existence is totally pointless.*<sup>16</sup>

This argument is difficult to refute if one shares his godless worldview. This nihilism is the ideological consequence of atheism. Life without purpose becomes a crime perpetrated against the people who are cursed to live it. This concept is self-destructive and ultimately seeks to end human life. This is why the most

<sup>15</sup> Urry, H. L., Nitschke, J. B., Dolski, I., Jackson, D. C., Dalton, K. M., Mueller, C. J., ... & Davidson, R. J. (2004). Making a life worth living: Neural correlates of well-being. *Psychological Science*, 15(6), 367-372.

<sup>16</sup> Piper, K. (2019, February 7). This man is trying to sue his parents for giving birth to him. *Vox*, Retrieved from: <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2019/2/7/18215586/india-man-suing-parents-giving-birth-antinatalism-raphael-samuel>

fundamental of needs is the spiritual need for purpose. When life has a purpose, it turns from being a painful, cursed burden into an opportunity for growth and achieving the highest state of living through a spiritual connection with God, The Transcendent. Human life, like a flower, blossoms despite the winds and waves, shining its beauty and radiance for the benefit of others. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ gave a parable of the believer to this effect,

*The example of the believer is like the fresh stalk, the leaves of which move in whatever direction the wind blows and, when the wind becomes still, it stands straight. Such is the example of the believer being affected by hardships. And the example of the one who rejects faith is like a cedar tree that remains hard and straight until Allah cuts it down whenever He wills.<sup>17</sup>*

## Requirements for a purpose in life

### i) Transcendence

Popular convention in the contemporary secular age is to encourage everyone to make their own purpose in life. Such a proposition undermines the very concept of purpose due to the lack of transcendence. The purpose of something is a transcendent quality that is based on its role in relation to things outside of itself. Furthermore, the notion of the purpose of life is only coherent if it is determined by the One who brought life into existence. As mentioned earlier, if a person holds that there was no being that created the world, then the concept of purpose becomes meaningless. When a person decides to 'make their own purpose,' they are merely stating a preference for how they wish to live their life. Preference is a subjective wish based on personal whims and desires, whereas purpose is an objective responsibility based on a transcendent determination. The Qur'an describes the former as *dhann* (conjecture; assumption) and the latter as *haqq* (truth; purpose; responsibility):

*They only follow dhann and what their egos desire even though guidance has come to them from their Guardian Lord. (Qur'an 53:23)*

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<sup>17</sup> *Sahih al Bukhari*, Hadith 7466.

*And most of them only follow dhann while dhann cannot compete with haqq at all. (Qur'an 10:36)*

## ii) Intention

The second requirement for a coherent purpose of life is the belief that someone or something intended life to exist. If life is the *unintended* consequence of a sequence of material events, then it is, by definition, without purpose or meaning. Simply affirming a transcendent reality or higher power is insufficient if this entity does not possess a will with an intention. If this world and our lives were brought into being with no intention, then the concept of purpose becomes meaningless once again. Consider an example that further elucidates this point. Imagine that a person randomly throws 10 coins onto a table. Although that person was the one who caused the coins to be put on the table, there is no purpose or reason behind their arrangement. This is because their placement was not based on any will or intention. Lack of intention results in a lack of purpose. People who affirm a higher power but do not relate their purpose in life to this higher power's intention undermine the very concept of purpose, and thus Deism is impotent as an ontological foundation for meaning.

The Qur'an is filled with expressions of the clear existence of intention behind creation:

*He created the heavens and the earth with the Ultimate Purpose (Haqq). (Qur'an 16:3)*

*...And they reflect regarding the creation of the heavens and the earth (saying), "Our Lord, You did not create this aimlessly..." (Qur'an 3:191)*

*And We didn't create the universe and the earth and everything in between for fun. If We had desired to have some amusement, We would have derived it from Ourselves, but We did not do that. (Qur'an 21:16-17)*

## iii) Revelation

The third requirement flows from the first two. If there is a transcendent entity that intended this world and our lives to exist, our purpose in life lies in that intention.

Therefore, discovering our purpose in life requires wisdom that is sourced in communication between human beings and the Transcendent. The Qur'an also explains that human beings do not have the epistemic authority (*sultan*) to know their purpose if they lack access to The Transcendent:

*Or do they have a stairway (to heaven) upon which they listen? Then let their listener bring a clear sultan. (Qur'an 52:38)*

*What is wrong with you? How do you judge? When will you learn? Or do you have a clear sultan? (If that is the case), then bring your scripture if you are being truthful. (Qur'an 37:154-157)*

The concept of revelation from God to humankind is a historically documented phenomenon that serves as the foundation for many of the world's religions. Examining the scriptures that claim to be revelations from God is an essential undertaking that enables us to differentiate genuine revelation from delusions or false claims. This idea will be explored further in a future article in this series. The main point to be established in this article is simply that revelation from God is required for a person to possess the epistemic authority necessary to know their purpose in life.

Claiming that the experience of revelation is not real or has never occurred renders our purpose in life unknowable. This is a common claim by the anti-religious voice, as captured in the Qur'an:

*And they did not appraise Allah with a true appraisal when they said, "Allah did not reveal anything to a human being." (Qur'an 6:91)*

Interestingly, the Qur'an links the denial of revelation to diminishing the perfection of God. If He truly created us for a specific purpose, then He must have communicated it to us in some form. Claiming that He didn't challenges His Wisdom, Mercy, and Love. It challenges His Wisdom as it would mean He created us for a reason but failed to give us access to that knowledge. This would undermine the purpose He created us for since ignorant humans would not be able to fulfill it. It challenges His Love and Mercy by making our value and worth as human beings unknown in the face of incredible hardship and suffering in life.



The only alternative to revelation would be instinctive knowledge hard-wired into our brains that informs us of our purpose. Although we do possess inherent knowledge on a lot of issues related to the question of purpose, including an innate understanding of morality and God, we do not have a coherent picture of the path required to fulfill our purpose. As the Qur'an asserts,

*Just as We have sent among you a messenger from yourselves reciting upon you Our signs, purifying you and teaching you knowledge of the scripture and wisdom, and teaching you what you couldn't have ever known. (Qur'an 2:151)*

Therefore, revelation is the only thing that informs us of our ultimate purpose in life and the road we must take to fulfill it.

#### **iv) Permanence**

Lastly, one's purpose in life must also have permanent and eternal consequences; otherwise, it would undermine any value or worth. The Qur'an exhorts humanity to place full faith in Him, highlighting His Permanence and Eternality: "And rely upon The Living who does not die, and proclaim His purity with His praise" (Qur'an 25:58).

If this entire existence and our lives will inevitably come to an end, then the collective striving and toiling of humanity and life as a whole were all for no consequence. This strips life of any inherent worth or meaning, as there is nothing greater that it relates to and one's actions and decisions ultimately have no real consequence in the grand scheme of reality. An action that has no long-term impact, consequence, or effect is ultimately bereft of meaning and significance.

From the Islamic paradigm, our lives are consequential and, thus, meaningful. The consequences are rooted in the concepts of resurrection and reckoning after death. The circle of life and rebirth that is ever-present in nature, according to the Qur'an, also applies to our consciousness.

*So see the effects of Allah's Mercy how He brings life to the earth after it had died. Certainly, that (same One) will give life to the dead. (Qur'an 30:50)*

The Qur'an relates this resurrection to our purpose in life, "Then did you think that We created you uselessly and that to Us you would not be **returned**?" (Qur'an 23:115). If the decisions we make in this life will have eternal consequences, then even the smallest choices are imbued with infinite meaning. This grants our lives an immeasurable amount of value that provides us with the strength necessary to overcome the challenges of this world.

The requirements of the purpose of life are contained in all six articles of faith. The Transcendent requirement is fulfilled through faith in Allah. The Intention requirement is detailed in the theology of God's Attributes but specifically emphasized as an article of faith in Divine Decree (*Al-Qadar*). The Revelation requirement is fulfilled through faith in the Angels, Books, and Messengers. Lastly, the Permanence requirement is fulfilled through faith in the hereafter. It is through the lens of faith provided by Islam that a person is able to discover their purpose in life and thereby realize the value of their life.

## Finding purpose elsewhere

Despite the necessity of attaching one's purpose to the Transcendent, Eternal, Creator through His revelation, many people search for value in the domain of the ephemeral world. One of the most common, seemingly harmless ways is through relationships. But searching for worth and purpose through social relationships intrinsically is inadequate as those relationships do not possess the qualities of transcendence or permanence. It is dangerous due to the ever-present possibility of betrayal and is unjustified due to the inevitable permanent separation through death that would render all life pointless once the person passes on. This concept was captured eloquently in the speech of Abu Bakr after the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ passed away,

*Whoever worshipped Muhammad, know that he has died, but whoever worships Allah, then know that He is The Living and will never die.*<sup>18</sup>

The fact is that all worldly things that people cling to for stability in the chaos of life will eventually break or depart, leaving those poor souls to fall into the dark

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<sup>18</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Hadith 4453.

crevice of this world. The breaking of these handholds takes the form of betrayal, separation, or just weakness and incompetence in the face of life's challenges. But there is one handhold that illuminates the darkness and is available to us no matter how far we have fallen. The Qur'an beautifully explains,

*Let no one force another to adopt a way of life. Without a doubt, Truth is clear from Falsehood. So whoever rejects false gods and puts their faith in Allah, then they have grasped the firm, trustworthy handhold that will never break. And Allah is All-Hearing, All-Knowing. Allah is the Ally of those who believe, taking them out from the darkness into the light. (Qur'an 2:256)*

## Finding purpose through God

*And I have not created Jinn and Humankind except for them to lovingly devote themselves (to God) through worship. (Qur'an 51:56)<sup>19</sup>*

One must direct their gaze beyond the universe to find value and worth in their life. The Transcendent Divine Reality, Eternally Living Owner of Beauty and Grace is the only true source of value and worth for human life. Recognizing our life as a gift from God and that we are tasked with the mission of reflecting the Light of God's Divine Qualities on to this world of darkness through seeking to make ourselves and this world a better place provides us a limitless fountain of meaning that fills the human spirit with immense worth and value.

*Allah, there is nothing worthy of worship except Him, The Living, The Sustainer of All. Neither sleep nor drowsiness overtakes Him. To Him belongs everything in the heavens and in the earth. Who can intercede except with His permission? He knows what is before them and what will come after. And they cannot apprehend even a drop of His Knowledge except with His Will. His Kursi extends over the heavens and the earth. Protecting them does not tire Him and He is The Transcendent, The Magnificent. (Qur'an 2:255)*

Experiencing the greatness of Allah through powerful descriptions of His Qualities is empowering when viewed through the lens of His Love and Compassion toward

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<sup>19</sup> For a larger discussion on the concept of 'ibadah (worship) see:  
<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/mohammad-elshinawy/why-does-god-ask-people-to-worship-him/>

us. When we ask ourselves if we deserved to be born or if our life is worth something, we are swiftly answered by the Guardian Lord of the Universe who calls us to be with Him,

*O Humankind, lovingly devote yourself through worship to your Guardian Lord, Who created you and those before you, so that you may attain taqwa (caution and alertness, being fearful of God). (Qur'an 2:21)*

*And follow the path of those who turn to Me. (Qur'an 31:15)*

The Owner of Might and Grandeur wants us to achieve an everlasting paradise, where all our dreams will come true.

*And Allah calls to the Home of Peace and guides whom He wills to the straight path. (Qur'an 10:25)*

*Is that better or the Garden of Eternity which has been promised to the pious? It will be for them a reward and their final destination. They will have whatever they wish, abiding in it eternally. That is a binding promise on your Lord. (Qur'an 25:15-16)*

Experiencing this Love can fill the holes in our hearts with the light of faith. Ibn al-Qayyim explains,

*In the heart, there exists an anxiousness that nothing can calm but drawing nearer to Allah. In it is a desolate feeling that cannot be removed except by experiencing His Loving Company in solitude. In it is sadness that will not leave except with the joy of knowing Him and genuinely devoting oneself to Him. In it is a worry that is not made tranquil except by focusing on Him, fleeing from His punishment toward Him. In it is a fire of regret which cannot be extinguished except by satisfaction with His commands, prohibitions, destiny, and patiently gripping on to all that until the time it meets Him. In it is a strong desire that will not cease until He is the Only One Who is sought. In it is a hole that cannot be filled except by His Love, turning to Him, always remembering Him, and being sincere to Him. Were a person to be given the entire world and everything in it, that would never fill the hole.<sup>20</sup>*

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<sup>20</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim (2013). *Madaarij as-Saalikeen*. Al-Mansoorah, Egypt: Maktabah Fiyaadh, p. 987.

Therefore, faith in God is truly the essential pillar on which all other needs rest. From this faith, we see branches sprout forth that provide fruits of fulfillment for all domains of human existence. Understanding faith as a tree with branches that intersect with all levels and layers of human life in all its complexities is a Qur'anic and Prophetic allegory that enables us to understand the mystery of faith.

*Have you not considered how Allah presents an example, (making) a pure word like a pure tree, whose roots are firmly fixed and its branches (high) in the sky? It produces its fruit at all times by permission of its Lord. And Allah presents examples for people that perhaps they will recognize. (Qur'an 14:24-25)*

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said,

*Faith has over seventy branches—or over sixty branches—the uppermost of which is the declaration: “None has the right to be worshipped but Allah”; and the least of which is the removal of a harmful object from the road, and modesty is a branch of iman.<sup>21</sup>*

Faith in God is not meant to be limited to rituals but to be extended from the highest of human concerns like the declaration of one's existential purpose to the minutiae of life such as removing a thorny branch from the footpath. All our needs can be fulfilled by the fruits that arise from this tree of faith.

Fulfillment of all of the necessities of human life is, in fact, rooted in faith in the Divine. Without this essential ingredient, we would not be able to fulfill the most basic physical, psychological, and intellectual needs we encounter as we live out the story of our life. The body, mind, and soul are dependent on God, whether we realize it or not. As we will see throughout the course of this article, even those who profess disbelief in God implicitly trust and have faith in the presence of His Divine Names and Attributes out of necessity.

*So is it other than the way of Allah that they seek while whoever is in the galaxies and the earth have submitted to Him, willingly or out of compulsion, and to Him shall they all return. (Qur'an 3:83)*

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<sup>21</sup> *Sahih Muslim*, Hadith 60.



## 2) The intellectual necessity of God

The intellect is one of the fundamental human faculties. Human beings naturally develop a sophisticated cognitive apparatus that allows them to process ideas, thoughts, and sensorial experiences in order to arrive at coherent and meaningful internal representations of reality. Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 AH) notes that every human being would invariably prefer to have their mind populated with true beliefs and beneficial desires rather than false beliefs and harmful desires.<sup>22</sup> So how then does a human being justify his or her beliefs as true representations of reality?

There is a well-known philosophical problem in epistemology known as Münchhausen's trilemma. A person is asked to provide proof that a proposition is true, after which they are asked how they know that proof itself to be true. At this stage, they are confronted with choosing one of the following three basic options:<sup>23</sup>

- Option 1: Every proof itself requires another proof, in which case they require an infinite number of proofs to justify a belief as true (infinetism).
- Option 2: All proofs go back to a certain indubitable premise which itself does not need to be proven or justified (foundationalism). For instance, for some people that foundation may be rationalism; for others, it may be empiricism.
- Option 3: The proofs justify one another in a circular fashion, with the last proof being justified by the first (coherentism).

Of course, all three options are problematic and would seem to suggest that no one can ever obtain certainty in anything, for no belief could justifiably be regarded as true if there is no escape from Münchhausen's trilemma. Humans would never be able to possess knowledge about anything. Without a superior epistemology that can escape the trilemma, all human beliefs amount to nothing more than unsubstantiated presumptions; and that superior epistemology is embedded within the Divine revelation. "They follow nothing but conjecture and their own wishful

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<sup>22</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah. *Dar Ta'arud al-'Aql wal-Naql*. Edited by Muhammad Rashad Salim, second edition (Riyadh: Al-Imam University 1991), vol. 8, p. 458.

<sup>23</sup> There are also some permutations that combine these options but do not significantly impact the trilemma. See, for instance, Tramel, P. (2008). Haack's foundherentism is a foundationalism. *Synthese*, 160(2), 215-228.

thinking, even though true guidance has come to them from their Lord” (Qur'an 53:23).

On closer scrutiny, there is something rather dubious about Münchhausen's trilemma—in order for the trilemma to even be posed, it requires presupposing certain ontological concepts, such as truth, meaning, justification, belief, proof, sequence, relation, distinction, and so on. Where did these concepts come from, and if they too are unjustified, should they likewise be discarded? If all concepts are discarded, then how can the mind conceptualize any meaningful thought at all? As mentioned above, it is logically incoherent to affirm a belief in meaninglessness, since the very act of affirming a belief necessitates a commitment to meaning. Thus, to proclaim a 'belief' in meaninglessness becomes an absurd paradox.

In the West, Münchhausen's trilemma remains as insoluble to modern philosophers as it was to their Hellenistic predecessors. But where philosophers have floundered for eons, Qur'anic exegetes elegantly succeed. The Qur'an espouses a teleological dimension to truth—the Qur'an uses the Arabic term *haqq* to signify both truth and purpose and likewise uses the term *batil* to signify both falsehood and something devoid of purpose.<sup>24</sup> Truths serve a function in rendering reality meaningful. Drawing upon the Qur'anic epistemology of the *fitrah*, Ibn Taymiyyah astutely notes that there are certain basic ontological building blocks that the mind must possess by necessity in order to have any meaningful conception of reality whatsoever: “What all human beings recognize is that there are some mental conceptualizations and affirmations which are primordial concepts and not themselves in need of proof by definition or syllogism, or else it would entail circularity or infinitism.”<sup>25</sup> What Ibn Taymiyyah identifies is that there is a category of concepts that serve as ontological anchors for any meaningful conceptualization of reality, and these are integral to the human being's acquisition of knowledge through the natural course of development. Human infants naturally develop notions of causality, numerical quantity, morality, purpose, and so forth,

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<sup>24</sup> See for instance Qur'an 16:3 and 38:27. Also, refer to Ibn Taymiyyah, *Naqd al-Mantiq*. Dar al-Kotob al-Ilmiyah, Beirut 1999, p131.

<sup>25</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah, *Naqd al-Mantiq*. Dar al-Kotob al-Ilmiyah, Beirut 1999, p. 166.

and any attempt to discard these ontological building blocks would entail the deterioration of coherent and meaningful representations of reality. Adopting a paradigm of skepticism and demanding proof for the ontological anchors themselves only results in the collapse of the entire intellectual enterprise of meaning.

Every human being must necessarily search for a paradigm that provides a meaningful conception of the fundamental aspects of existence. The Qur'an states, "These are the signs of God that We recite to you in truth (*bil-haqq*). So in what narrative after God and His signs will you believe?" (Qur'an 45:6). The Qur'anic exegete al-Alusi (d. 1270 AH) said, "And this indicates that there is no meaningful explanation (*bayan*) more meaningful than this explanation [i.e., the Islamic paradigm], nor sign (*ayah*) stronger as a proof than this sign."<sup>26</sup> The most powerful epistemology of proof is one that functionally serves to construct an understanding of reality that yields the greatest meaning.

## Does the existence of God require philosophical proof?

Contemporary discussions regarding faith in God are almost exclusively broached through a dialectical approach that attempts to provide syllogistic arguments for or against the theoretical existence of the Divine Reality. Viewed from this lens, the idea of God becomes a mere hypothesis that is destined to be debated for millennia into the future as it has already been for millennia in the past. Such an endeavor has proven fruitless in terms of reaching any real understanding of what it means to have faith in God. It has also led to the erroneous idea that theists believe in a "God of the Gaps," since the proof of His existence has been relegated to simply inserting Him in a causal link stemming from a Newtonian mechanistic explanation of the world.

The classical theologian, Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 AH), famously remarked in his widely acclaimed discourse on Islamic spirituality, *Madaarij as-Salikeen*,

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<sup>26</sup> Al-Alusi. *Ruh al-Ma'ani fi Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Adhim wa Sa'al-Mathani*. Dar Ihya Turath al-Arabi, Beirut n.d. Vol. 25, pp. 141-142.

*Knowledge (of God) according to them (spiritual masters) is innate rather than something that requires proof...This is why none of the messengers were ever sent to their nation in order to prove the existence of a Creator, rather their calling was to the devotion to and unity of the Divine.<sup>27</sup>*

Ibn al-Qayyim viewed faith in God to be a necessity and found the notion of having to prove God's existence an absurdity,

*And how can the proof (for God) be valid if His existence is more obvious than the supposed proof?<sup>28</sup>*

Modern cognitive science has also asserted that belief in God does not arise from extensive philosophical deliberations, inferences, or other rational processes but through a separate primary “god-faculty” that is beyond the reach of reason.<sup>29</sup> Kelly Clark, a philosopher who writes extensively on the cognitive science of religion, states that belief in God is “a natural product of our common cognitive faculties, and in this sense, religious belief is ‘natural.’”<sup>30</sup>

From this perspective, the difficulty encountered by theologians and philosophers attempting to prove the existence of God to the atheist is akin to the difficulty a person would have in trying to prove their own existence to a solipsist (someone skeptical about the existence of reality). If such a self-evident truth is questioned, there is little common ground that can be established for any fruitful dialogue. One may try and direct the skeptic to clear audio-visual-tactile sensation for proof of one's existence. However, the solipsist can easily dismiss such proof by introducing the possibility of hallucination or even extend this doubt to questioning external reality itself as an illusive matrix.<sup>31</sup>

This hyper-skeptical attitude is described in the Qur'an in response to the requests for miracles to prove that Muhammad ﷺ was a prophet. It is mentioned that

<sup>27</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim. (2013). *Madaarij as-Saalikeen*. Al-Mansoorah, Egypt: Maktabah Fiyaadh, p. 720.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Clark, K. J., & Barrett, J. L. (2010). Reformed epistemology and the cognitive science of religion. *Faith and Philosophy*, 27(2), 174-189.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> For a more complete examination of the epistemological failings of skepticism, refer to Khan, N. (2017). Shakk - The Epistemology of Doubt. <https://spiritualperception.org/shakk-1-the-epistemology-of-doubt/>

even the most powerful empirical sign would be futile in convincing a cynical skeptic,

*And (even) if We opened to them a gate from heaven and they continued therein to ascend, they would say, 'Our eyes are hallucinating, or we've been affected by magic.' (Qur'an 15:15)*

How can one begin to try and prove these self-evident truths that are being called into question? Since syllogistic reasoning and philosophical inquiry on their own are unable to bring closure to these issues, the only portal of entry remaining is faith.

## Reality of faith

It may sound strange that belief in the existence of other people requires faith. But faith from an Islamic perspective is the most fundamental epistemic decision that a human being can make in response to what they witness in the world. Thus, faith becomes the highest level of conviction a person can achieve, rather than belief in the absence of evidence. The more an idea is related to the core of our being, the further it is from the grasp of rational and empirical pursuits and the closer it is to the all-encompassing reality of faith. Therefore, as we will see in the forthcoming discussion, the most self-evident of truths are the ones that require the strongest of faith, including the truth of God's existence.

The theological term for faith, *Iman*, linguistically carries the connotation of trust, security, and safety. This is a fascinating etymology because preceding any knowledge acquisition is the necessity of epistemic trust. This 'trust' or 'faith' must be directed at one's own empirical senses and rational faculties in order to render them valid avenues to knowledge and truth. There are no logical proofs for the validity of logic since that would involve circular reasoning. You have to *trust* that your logic provides a true representation of reality in order for your logic to be of any benefit to you. Similarly, there are no empirical proofs for the validity of our sense-perception since validity is not an entity that can be observed. Therefore, reason and empirical sense must be taken on epistemic faith and trust, because



without this faith we would be unable to formulate any meaningful interpretation of reality.

## Faith in God

Prior to contemplating whether to trust our senses or logic, there is an even more fundamental notion that must be recognized through faith. It is the idea that this world and one's life are *about* something. Such a universal and fundamental belief about ourselves and the universe we inhabit uncovers how we view faith in God. In reality, believing that the universe and our lives are about something is nested in the Divinely Destined origin of reality. This is the only possible source of the true 'aboutness' or existential 'intentionality' of our lives and the universe. Thus, the starting point of all knowledge is faith in God's Divine Intention (*Al-Qadar*).

*He created the heavens and earth with a purpose; Transcendent is He above all they associate with Him. (Qur'an 16:3)*

The world and our lives can only be about something if there is a reason for their existence. There can only be a reason for our existence if there is an intention behind it. Finally, there can only be an intention behind it, if there is One who intended—God. Everything we learn about the natural world, history, anthropology, medicine, and every other conceivable art or science is a testament to the meaning that exists in the world, which is a testament to the One who endowed this world with meaning and truth to be discovered, bringing color and light to the cold dark matter of the universe.

## Finding intelligibility through God

If the world had not been divinely ordained, then it must have emerged through random blind forces of 'nature.' This would strip away the aboutness of the entire world and our lives.

*And We did not create the heaven and the earth and everything between them randomly. That is the assumption of those who reject faith (Qur'an 38:27)*

Thus, our conscious experience of realities like meaning, knowledge, value, truth, and falsehood become mere illusions of the mind. Why would value exist in a world that has been formed by random and blind forces? There is no good and bad in randomness, only alternative arrangements of atoms and molecules. Similarly, why would meaning have any real existence except as an illusion of the human mind? Words become arbitrary means of categorization invented by our species. Lastly, why would any real notion of identity or self exist if we were nothing but an amalgamation of atoms and particles, only with different arrangements than others? We, as individuals, would no longer exist, only our bodies.

*The naturalist tries to build his whole outlook of reality based on what can be directly observed and tested—whatever constitutes ‘empirical evidence.’ But as a consequence of his a priori commitment to exclude anything beyond the immediacy of his own empirical lens, he ends up with a puzzling picture of a pointless world of purposeless particles. There is no good or evil, right or wrong, pleasure or pain, knowledge or ignorance—only different arrangements of particles, which are all equally aimless and bereft of any significance. Values, ideas, meanings—nay, even consciousness itself, must be nothing more than the delusions of collections of particles we call ‘people,’ which presume their own consciousness and individuated existence. Everything in existence which is conceived to have meaning is—at its very root and essence—ultimately, meaningless. Nothing matters and nothing means anything at all. This conclusion all stems from the initial choice made to dismiss the spiritual instinct that life is inherently about something greater.<sup>32</sup>*

All these self-evident truths that every sane individual takes as givens are called into question the moment we attempt to remove God from our worldview. Thus, faith in Him is a necessity for us to traverse the ocean of inexhaustible meaning that is to be discovered from the world and inside ourselves.

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<sup>32</sup> Khan N. (2015). The real battle: Meaningful vs meaningless. Accessed on <https://spiritualperception.org/the-real-battle-meaningful-vs-meaningless/>

*We will show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth. (Qur'an 41:53)*

Faith in God is necessary for meaning itself to exist in this world. This is not a “God of the gaps” argument, as we are not attempting to justify God’s existence through inserting Him in a mechanistic conception of the world. Rather, we are postulating that the very essence of explanation itself requires faith in a Divine entity to render any notion of meaning coherent. No conceptualization is coherent without meaning; meaning is the very bedrock of ontology. Unlike the “God of the gaps,” there is no empirical discovery that can challenge this unbreakable bond between Meaning and the Divine, as it is a metaphysical connection forged beyond this world, never to be broken.

*They cannot encompass anything from His Knowledge except what He wills. (Qur'an 2:256)*

The Truth of God is as clear and evident as the meaning that naturally arises from our tongues through language. According to the Qur'an, the language we speak testifies to this reality,

*By the Lord of the Universe and the Earth, it is the Truth, just as sure as it is that you are speaking. (Qur'an 51:23)*

The manner in which meaning surfaces within the human mind, the capacity of the mind to fathom meaning, and the concordance between meanings conceptualized in the mind and the external reality are some of the most powerful testaments to the ontological reality of the Divine. Why and how the intellect exists as a conscious representation of reality is a tremendous puzzle to any naturalistic conception of reality. Indeed, the theologian Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. 333 AH) identified this as an epistemic foundation to recognize God that comes even before recognition of the Divine signs in the natural realm and through the revealed guidance. He writes that God clarified to us that He is the sole Deity and Lord, and the only One deserving of our worship via the following three methods: (i) The modality (*kayfiyyah*) and quiddity (*mahiyyah*) of the human intellect cannot be grasped by

the intellect itself;<sup>33</sup> (ii) the manifestations of the Divine in the created natural realm of signs; and (iii) the revealed guidance which informs us of His Lordship and sole right to be worshipped.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to the origins of the meanings which emerge in their mind, such meanings are only properly developed and shaped when their purpose is recognized and equipped with the proper cognitive tools. Thus, the intellectual dimension of the human being flourishes in the company of true spirituality.

### 3) The moral necessity of God

#### The moral instinct

Human beings seem to have a fascination with ethics and morality. They have an innate and instinctive desire to ensure the world around them is arranged in a manner that is morally justified. Psychologist Steven Pinker remarks,

*According to Noam Chomsky, we are born with a 'universal grammar' that forces us to analyze speech in terms of its grammatical structure, with no conscious awareness of the rules in play. By analogy, we are born with a universal moral grammar that forces us to analyze human action in terms of its moral structure, with just as little awareness.*<sup>35</sup>

There has been a lot of work in the field of developmental psychology that has looked at infant and toddler behavior in relation to conventional moral virtues.<sup>36</sup> The results are astonishing. Take for instance the preference for justice which can be seen in infants as young as 8 months, and the expressions of compassion that start to emerge in one-year-olds. These are all constitutive elements of the

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<sup>33</sup> The quiddity (*mahiyyah* = *ma bihi huwa huwa*; i.e., that by which something is what it is) of intellect would subsume what is referred to by contemporary philosophers and neuroscientists as the 'hard problem of consciousness' famously described by David Chalmers in *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996).

<sup>34</sup> Al-Maturidi. *Ta'wilat Ahl al-Sunnah - Tafsir al-Maturidi*. Edited by Majdi Muhammad Surur Baslum. Dar al-Kotob al-Ilmiyah 2005. Vol. 7, pp. 26-27.

<sup>35</sup> Pinker, S. (2008, January 13). The moral instinct. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/13/magazine/13Psychology-t.html>

<sup>36</sup> Bloom, P. (2013). *Just babies: The origins of good and evil*. New York, NY: Broadway Books.

primordial nature the Qur'an terms the *fitrah*, which includes all our basic spiritual, moral, and rational intuitions about the world.

## Moral realism is incompatible with naturalism

The belief in and commitment to acting in accordance with moral virtues necessitate certain ideas about the world. The first is that there is a way that the world *should* be. Valuation is inescapable. The second is that these moral imperatives represent the ideal course of reality that everyone should submit to. Both of these ideas are nonsensical from a worldview of atheism and naturalism. If the world is the sum total of random blind forces, then it is nonsensical to consider notions of *ideal* or how the world *should* be. There can be no *should* or *ideal* if there was no intention behind the formation of the world.

There can only be preferences, which are amoral by their very nature. They represent mere whims and desires about how a person subjectively wishes to see the world. Richard Garner, a contemporary atheist philosopher argues that fellow atheists have no grounds to believe in morality and should dispense with it altogether (a position he terms moral abolitionism):

*Just as atheists claim that the beliefs of theists about the objective existence of a god are in error, moral error theorists claim that the beliefs of moral realists about the objective existence of moral rules, prohibitions, virtues, vices, values, rights, and duties are also in error, and for the same reason—what they are talking about doesn't exist.<sup>37</sup>*

In recent times there has been a push by New Atheists like Sam Harris to create a system of values based on a naturalistic view of the world using science.<sup>38</sup> We have already demonstrated the absurdity of this notion, owing to the fact that values are meaningless in a materialistic worldview—there is no substantive reason to prefer one arrangement of the material particles in the universe over another and according to naturalism, all of existence reduces to mere alternations in the

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<sup>37</sup> Garner, R. (2011). Morality: The final delusion? *Philosophy Now*, 82, 18-20.

<sup>38</sup> Harris, S. (2011). *The moral landscape: How science can determine human values*. New York, NY: The Free Press.



arrangement of particles. Harris himself admits to this point when responding to critiques of his book:

*My purpose was to show that moral truths exist and that they must fall (in principle, if not in practice) within some (perhaps never to be complete) understanding of the way conscious minds arise in this universe.*<sup>39</sup>

He also admits that moral truths exist as intuitions independent of any scientific investigation:

*We have certain logical and moral intuitions that we cannot help but rely upon to understand and judge the desirability of various states of the world.*<sup>40</sup>

After conceding these points, Harris is simply advocating for the use of science to determine how to *apply* values we hold deep inside. However, he refuses to realize that value must be nested in belief in God and that disbelieving in God results in the denial of value. Richard Garner explains that the secular morality advocated by New Atheists will be unable to sustain itself intellectually and eventually will lead to the denial of morality outright:

*An atheist's eventual embrace of a moral error theory will be facilitated, if not forced, by the ease with which arguments used to undermine theism can be recycled to criticize the analogous beliefs of secular moralists.*<sup>41</sup>

## **Morality comes from beyond this world**

In order to truly believe in moral virtues and advocate for their implementation in the world, one requires faith in the moral nature of the universe. This is the notion that the universe has not only been arranged physically according to qualities of rationality, wisdom, and power but also morally according to qualities such as love, justice, and compassion.<sup>42</sup> This is rooted in faith in the Divine ordering of the

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<sup>39</sup> Harris, S. (2014 June 6). Clarifying the landscape: A response to Ryan Born. Retrieved from, <https://samharris.org/clarifying-the-landscape>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Garner, R. (2011). Morality: The final delusion?

<sup>42</sup> Hallaq, W. (2009). Groundwork of the moral law: A new look at the Qur'ān and the genesis of Sharī'a. *Islamic Law and Society*, 16(3/4), 239-279.

world at these two levels, “Certainly to Him belongs the creation and the command” (Qur’an 7:54) and

*We have raised the heavens and placed the balance so that you do not transgress (and stay) within the balance. (Qur’an 55:7-8)*

Even Steven Pinker, a staunch atheist who attempts to reconcile morality with a godless world, cannot avoid relying on metaphysical explanations, invoking the concept of the platonic world of forms as the ontological grounding of good and evil.<sup>43</sup> However, this merely begs the question and does not provide any explanation. Where do these ideals come from and what is their relation to the reality we experience? If they are to be taken as eternal ideals existing external to the material universe that have somehow burdened humanity with the task of their implementation, then this is, by definition, a supernatural God.

Therefore, believing in moral virtues necessitates ontological grounding which is only ultimately realized through faith in God. From the Islamic worldview, moral virtues such as compassion, justice, love, kindness, and generosity stem from the Divine Names and Attributes of God that humanity is meant to emulate. Anyone who works for these moral virtues is actually working in the path of God through His Attributes. Those who claim to reject God may actually believe in some of His Attributes and effectively submit to them by acting in accordance with them at least to the extent that their understanding of them aligns with God’s.

Human rights activists who claim to disbelieve in God are working for His cause by striving to implement His qualities on this earth. The Qur’an describes a type of unacknowledged submission to Him as we have previously quoted.

*So is it other than the way of Allah they desire, while to Him have submitted [all] those within the heavens and earth, willingly or unwillingly, and to Him they will be returned? (Qur’an 3:83)*

The unacknowledged submission in this verse has been understood by some commentators in the context of the pagan Arabs who ‘submitted’ to the idea that

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<sup>43</sup> Pinker, S. (2008, January 13). The moral instinct. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/13/magazine/13Psychology-t.html>

God was the sole Creator, despite their insistence on affirming multiple gods in worship.<sup>44</sup> They accepted the Divine essence (*dhaat*) while denying God's attribute of *uluhiyyah*—His sole right to be worshipped. This concept of affirming one aspect of the Divine Nature and negating other aspects can perhaps be extended to the modern manifestation of secular humanists who affirm the Divine qualities (*Sifaat*) of morality, justice, compassion, and beauty in the world but deny the Divine Essence (*Dhaat*), which is the ontological source.

## Islamic theology and Euthyphro's dilemma

Pinker tries to object to the moral necessity of God by claiming that Divinely-sourced morality results in a philosophical dilemma.<sup>45</sup> Are these morals arbitrarily determined by God? If so, He could command us to torture children and that would be considered good. But this would go against our moral conscience and intuition, rendering them illusions. Or are these morals external restraints on God that He must abide by Himself? If this is the case, it would challenge His Omnipotence and violate His Divinity.

This argument about morality, often termed *Euthyphro's dilemma*,<sup>46</sup> is far from novel and has been debated for millennia. In fact, it is a familiar theological discussion to any student of Islamic theology—is something good because God commanded it, or did God command it because it is good? Muhammad Ash-Shahrastani (d. 553 AH) documents in his work on comparative theology the controversy surrounding *Tahseen wa Taqbeeh* (deeming things good and evil) as well as the concept of *al-Hikmah wa Ta'leel Fee Af'aal Allah* (the Wisdom and Reason behind God's Actions).<sup>47</sup> The Ash'ari (and Maturidi)<sup>48</sup> approach to the

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<sup>44</sup> At-Tabari. *Jami' al-Bayan fee Tafseer al-Quran*, Accessed [online](#).

<sup>45</sup> Pinker, S. (2008, January 13). The moral instinct. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/13/magazine/13Psychology-t.html>

<sup>46</sup> This comes from the name of a character who engages with Socrates in the dialogue written by Plato. Euthyphro tells Socrates that he is attempting to prosecute his father over a crime, to which Socrates responds by interrogating Euthyphro regarding the definition of piety, and he enquires as to what makes a matter good and beloved to the gods.

<sup>47</sup> Shahrastani, M. (1992). *Al-Milal wa Al-Nihal*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al Kotob Ilmiyya, vol. 1, p. 88.

<sup>48</sup> The Maturidi approach agreed with Mu'tazilah in epistemology but with the Ash'ari view in ontology. In other words, what determines whether an action is good or bad is nothing other than Divine instruction; however, God has rendered the intellect capable of recognizing the moral value of actions in some matters. Rudolph, U. (2014). *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, p. 297.

question of morality, which in contemporary terms is called *Divine command theory*, resembles the first option posited by Pinker.<sup>49</sup> The Ash'aris asserted that moral values are defined only in terms of what God commands.

*All (moral) obligations are based on revelation (sam'iyya), and the intellect ('aql) has no role in discerning between right and wrong.*<sup>50</sup>

Imam Fakhr ad-Deen Ar-Razi (d. 606 AH), one of the most influential Ash'ari thinkers, writes in his theological work, *Muhassal Afkaar al-Mutaqaddimeen*,

*The judgment of goodness in this world is not established except with revelation (shar') and nothing can judge over revelation.*<sup>51</sup>

The Mu'tazili approach resembled the second option, claiming that actions are intrinsically characterized as good or bad and that God must abide by ethical values when He acts.<sup>52</sup> Al-Qadhi Abdul-Jabbar (d. 415 AH), the famous Mu'tazili theologian, states in his comprehensive work on theology, *Al-Mughni fee Abwaab at-Tawheed wa al-'Adl*, regarding the moral imperatives of the Qur'an,

*The command is based on its connection to goodness and benefit ... The prohibition is based on its connection to evil. And so, based on its connection to evil, it is something that leads to corruption or prevents benefit.*<sup>53</sup>

The Hanbali approach to moral theology, which received its most elaborate articulation by Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 AH) and his student Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 AH), advanced a centrist view that ontologically rooted morality in the Divine Names and Attributes themselves and at the same time affirmed our epistemological capacity to know certain fundamental moral truths independent of revelation.<sup>54</sup> With respect to ontology, the very existence of the concepts of justice,

<sup>49</sup> Pinker, S. (2008, January 13). The moral instinct.

<sup>50</sup> Ar-Razi, M. (1905) *Muhassal Afkaar al-Mutaqaddimeen wa al-Mutakhireen*. Cairo, Egypt: Al-Matba'ah Al-Husayniya, p. 148.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Johnston, D. (2004). A turn in the epistemology and hermeneutics of twentieth-century usul al-fiqh. *Islamic Law and Society*, 11(2), 233-282.

<sup>53</sup> Abdul Jabbar, A.H. (2011). *Al-Mughni fee Abwaab at-Tawheed wa al-'Adl*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar ul Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, vol. 9, p. 82.

<sup>54</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah notes that the moral quality of some actions is rationally discernible; however, human accountability for those matters is contingent on receiving guidance from God. On the other hand, there are other

compassion, truth, and so on, exist in reality as a reflection of the Divine Nature. With respect to epistemology, we know the basics of whether something is good or evil from the inclinations in our *fitrah* which we subsequently extend through our intellect (‘*aql*).

Ibn al-Qayyim explains,

*Allah has predisposed His creation to (intuitively) know that truth and justice are good, along with beauty, modesty, and gratitude. He has also predisposed His creation to (intuitively) know that the opposite of all the above is evil. This capacity is related to their fitrah (human nature) and ‘aql (intellect), just like sweetness and bitterness is known through taste sensation, or like perfume and foul odor is known through smell sensation ... Our moral sense is just as intuitive as our empirical senses in distinguishing between the good and the bad, the pure and the filthy.*<sup>55</sup>

Our moral sense is a reflection of the Divine Nature and is tied to our spiritual journey. We love justice because justice is a Divine quality, and we naturally love the Divine. Therefore, love for morality is synonymous with love for God. In fact, our love for, and commitment to, morality are merely extensions of our innate love and aspiration for the Divine. The early 20th-century Turkish Muslim thinker, Said Nursi explains this point,

*Humanity is created with a capacity to be able to receive the manifestations of all Divine Names and attain all perfections.*<sup>56</sup>

Elsewhere he writes,

*By means of the miniature measure it contains, Selfhood slowly comes to understand the true nature of the Divine Attributes and Names.*<sup>57</sup>

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matters which have no intrinsic moral quality but only become morally praiseworthy or blameworthy after the Divine command. Ibn Taymiyyah. (2005). *Majmu al-Fatawa*, Mansoura, Egypt: Dar Al-Wafa, vol. 8, pp 256-7.

<sup>55</sup> Jawzi, I.Q. (2013). *Madaarij as-Saalikeen*. Al-Mansoorah, Egypt: Maktabah Fiyaadh, p. 197.

<sup>56</sup> Nursi, S. (2013). *The words: The reconstruction of Islamic belief and thought*. Clifton, USA: The Light, Inc., p. 354.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

This integration of morality with spirituality solves the confusions mentioned by Pinker. God commanding what is good and forbidding what is evil is neither arbitrary nor an external force compelling Him to act.

God acts according to His nature and He would not contradict His own qualities. If He did, they would, by definition, cease to be His qualities. God's nature cannot be considered arbitrary since arbitrariness is a product of this world and human limitation. When something is arbitrary, it means a decision was made without any particular rationale or reason due to limitations in the comprehension or processing of the consequences and implications of the decision. This does not exist in the Divine reality where His existence is defined by *Hikmah* (wisdom) and *'Ilm* (absolute knowledge). He has no limitations that would allow room for arbitrariness.

Someone may ask, what determined God's nature and qualities to be the way that they are? This question is nonsensical as it assumes a temporal concept of causality, which does not exist in a reality that transcends time. Moreover, such a question would ultimately lead to *Tasalsul* (infinite regress of causes), a philosophical absurdity. Ibn Taymiyyah says,

*That would necessitate an infinite regress. Because if His action had a cause, then that cause would require another cause.*<sup>58</sup>

A person may apply this concept to the issue of wisdom or morality as a reason for God's actions and claim that it involves the same absurdity. However, Ibn Taymiyyah responds by explaining how a wisdom behind an action is not etiological (temporally-based) but teleological (purpose-based). This means that the reason for the action is based on a future set of events rather than an infinite causal chain into the past.

*This is an infinite chain of events into the future rather than into the past. When He does an action for a wisdom, that wisdom is achieved after the action. Then from that particular wisdom that is achieved, another wisdom is intended from that, and it continues into eternity. So that wisdom that is*

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<sup>58</sup> Taymiyyah I. (1986). *Minhaj as-Sunnah*. Riyaadh, Saudi Arabia: Jami' Al-Imam Muhammad Bin Sa'ud Al-Islamiyya, vol. 1, p. 145.



*achieved is intrinsically loved and also a means for a second wisdom. So Glorified is He, the One who brings forth from His wisdoms what He loves and makes them means for more of what He loves.*<sup>59</sup>

Regarding the second option, it is absurd to consider God's qualities as 'higher' than Him, such that He becomes compelled to act in accordance with them. The qualities are part of His Being, which, by definition, means that He acts in accordance with them. But this does not entail that He is compelled or obligated in any way by anything outside of Himself. Ibn Taymiyyah writes,

*Ahl al-Sunnah (people following Islamic tradition) agree that He created everything as Lord and Owner. Everything He wills becomes and anything He does not will does not become and no one else can place restrictions that He must abide by.*<sup>60</sup>

God acts and commands based on His Will, as is mentioned throughout the Qur'an, "And such is the case that Allah does whatever He Wills" (Qur'an 3:40), "Certainly Allah does whatever He Wills" (Qur'an 22:18), "He Forgives whoever He Wills and Punishes whoever He Wills, and Allah is the Determiner of all things" (Qur'an 2:284).

And this Will is characterized by His Qualities of *Hikmah* (wisdom), *Rahma* (compassion) and *Adl* (justice) as alluded to in several verses, "He Forgives whoever He Wills and Punishes whoever He Wills and Allah is The Most Forgiving and Most Compassionate" (Qur'an 3: 129), "God Commands justice, benevolence, and giving to one's relatives and He forbids indecency, wretchedness, and transgression" (Qur'an 16:90), and "Declare that my Lord commands absolute justice" (Qur'an 7:29).

## Finding morality through God

In summary, morality can only exist coherently if viewed through the lens of faith in God. A person who is committed to moral virtues, advocating and striving to live his or her life in accordance with them is, in fact, submitting to the Will of the

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>60</sup> Taymiyyah, I. (1999). *Iqtidaa Seerat al-Mustaqeem*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar 'Aalim al-Kitab, vol. 2, p. 310.

Divine. Criticisms against the moral necessity of God have been shown to be unwarranted through a theological analysis of the issue. Thus, our moral sense that starts to manifest as early as infancy is a reflection of our need and love for the Divine Names and Attributes. When we experience moral outrage at injustice and cry out for peace, compassion, and love, it is our souls that are crying out and longing for the Divine Presence in our world. We all naturally want God in our lives; even those who reject His existence can't help but desire His Divine Qualities.

## **Recognizing God through your lived experience**

There is no proof that can make the existence of God more obvious than it already is for those who reflect deeply on their lived experience. Our spiritual experience that craves purpose, value, and worth can only find its fulfillment in the Transcendent Reality of God. Our intellectual journey that seeks to discover meaning in the world, finds its ontological grounding in the Divine origins of the universe. There is no other obvious reason why the world should be comprehensible or lend itself to our explanatory endeavors, which is what makes science a sensible enterprise. Our moral journey seeks to actualize qualities that can only find their reality in the Divine Essence. Therefore, by simply living life we are testifying to our desire for God.

The alternative is to attempt the impossible—to embrace a view of meaninglessness within a mind that cannot escape meaning. It is to deny that meaning, purpose, and reason exist at the most fundamental level of reality, while meaningful conceptions of reality, logic, and morality are supposed to be suspended in an ontological void without any foundation. The spiritual, intellectual, and moral dimensions of life necessitate a purposeful journey towards God, yet some refuse to embark on the journey of meaning and choose to stay stranded on the island of nihilism.

Indeed, faith in God is ultimately a choice that people must make in their lives. It involves a commitment to love, serve, and strive towards Him. It isn't a theoretical proposition, nor the outcome of abstract philosophical or empirical deliberation,

analyzing data for and against His hypothesized existence. Nor is it a decision that is merely made on a whim. It takes courage and conviction to pursue a meaningful existence that tasks us with the Divinely ordained mission to serve as agents of piety and virtue on earth, a worldview that renders us accountable for every moment of our conscious choices. Indeed, it is a choice that comes from the depths of our being. The choice to live by faith or without it is a reflection of the purity of perception within our souls. The deeper our introspection and capacity for reflection on the spiritual, intellectual, and moral dimensions of life, the sharper our spiritual perception. The more we live our lives for the pursuit of transient bodily pleasures without any higher purpose or meaning, the more obscure our vision.

*Declare that the Truth is from your Lord. So whoever chooses, let him have faith and whoever chooses, let him repress faith. (Qur'an 18:29)*

We are in essence compelled to faith by virtue of our need for God. A relationship with Him is the most important relationship we have in this world—it fulfills our spiritual needs for purpose and worth, our intellectual needs for knowledge and meaning, and our moral needs for establishing justice and compassion. There is simply no substitute for God. Humankind stands in absolute need of the presence of the Divine in their life:

*O humankind, you are those that need Allah with much destitution, while Allah is Free of need and Worthy of All Praise and Thanks. (Qur'an 35:15)*