The Metaphysics of Reality and Objective Truth: Sa'D Al-Dīn Al-Taftāzānī on Nafs Al-Amr

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the epistemological framework of the influential Ash'arite theologian Saʿd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d.792 H), focusing on his theory of nafs al-amr (the thing as it is) as a foundation for objective truth. It analyzes al-Taftāzānī's critique of preceding models, particularly that of Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī and elucidates his argument that truth is a correspondence between a judgment and a mind-independent reality. The study demonstrates how this framework effectively counters sceptical and nihilistic challenges by validating the authority of the senses, intellect, and testimony, while also providing a coherent mechanism for establishing truth in metaphysical and abstract domains. Ultimately, the article positions al-Taftāzānī's project as an effective classical Islamic response to epistemic crises of relativism and agnosticism, underscoring its enduring relevance for contemporary philosophical and theological discourse.

Keywords: *Islamic philosophy, metaphysics, nafs al-amr, Saʿd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī*

INTRODUCTION

The adoption of thinking that no longer believed human knowing could hope to contact an intelligible (*maʿqūl*) rather than purely physical structure underlying the world, is one the most important epistemic revolutions that reshaped Europe throughout the 16th to the 18th centuries[2]. According to Spiker, his analysis suggests that this epistemic problem stemmed from the rise of empirical knowledge which subsequently 'overthrew' the metaphysical knowledge to an extent that Thomas Carlyle has stated:

> "*Our whole metaphysics itself from Locke's time downwards has been physical; not a spiritual philosophy, but a material one[3].*"

The impossibility of knowing the reality of things as they are, especially for intelligible things (*maʿqūlāt*), has been composed in the modern western philosophical discussion. For Spiker, one of the most responsible western philosophers for this crisis is Immanuel Kant (d.1804) throughout his series of attacks against traditional metaphysics. Spiker says:

> " *In the wake of the attacks of Kant, and the assumptions made by both friend and foe of Kant in the analytic and continental traditions that he spawned, concerning the rightness of what were really (as we will see) Kant's assumptions about the impossibility of traditional metaphysics, it ceased to be the chief arbiter within an integrated framework of the sciences in the Western university. Metaphysics thus turned into that*

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[2]   Hasan Spiker, *The Metacritique of Kant and The Possibility of Metaphysics,* (Abu Dhabi: Tabah Foundations, 2022.), 4.

[3]   Ibid, cross-reference with *Signs of the Times* in Thomas Carlyle, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays in Seven Volumes,* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1872.), 2:237.

strange curiosity that it remains, hidden away in an ever-shrinking philosophy department[4]."

Therefore, abstract things, aesthetic opinions, universals, moral judgements and other entities that do not exist in extramental reality are no longer could be known certainly. Does good and evil are really there? If such, how do we even know it truly? This symptom of agnosticism is deeply rooted in modern society, which Robert Pasnau have described it as 'metaphysical chaos', as a result from their effort to abandon Aristotelian metaphysics and to adhere to a 'new' effective framework in understanding the reality and yet just to be more chaotic than ever. Pasnau states:

"*In place of the entrenched Aristotelian ontology of complete, individual substances, composed out of parts of various kinds organized by a governing substantial form, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries spin off wildly in all directions. Ordinary objects are rejected as mere phenomena and replaced, variously, with world-sized substances, microscopic substances, scattered substances, or no substances at all. For those who take delight in train wrecks, such chaos can serve only to enliven the subject, and indeed this period in the history of philosophy has been the subject of massive scholarly attention. By contrast, although the Aristotelian worldview is metaphysically extravagant in its own ways—as we have seen in extensive detail, it ultimately arrives at a far less glamorous ontology, postulating substances of a sort that are both familiar and natural. Post-scholastic authors abandon the arcane metaphysical parts of scholastic thought, yet they thereby find themselves forced into theories that are, in their conclusions, every bit as extravagant[5].*"

While the crisis of linking between the physical realm and the metaphysical realm seems to be an existential crisis in the modern western tradition, did the same happen in the rich Islamic tradition of theology (*Kalām*), philosophy (*Falsafah*) or even mystics (*Taṣawwuf*)? If such, how did their classical and influential scholars respond to this crisis hence establishing a decisive foundation of objective reality and its link with human cognitive apparatus (eg.senses and intellect)? For answering this two main questions, this study intends to scrutinize the epistemological and theological framework of one of the main influential Ash'arite theologians, Sa'ad al-Dīn Mas'ūd bin 'Umar al-Taftāzānī (d.792 H)[6], regards to understanding the essence of reality, by examining his position on *Nafs al-Amr* (thing as it is) and how did he respond to others theories about *nafs al-amr* and his solution to know any judgement related to the metaphysical realm. This study will emphasize on his opinion in his magnum opus, *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid* and his commentary on *al-'Aqā'id al-Nasafiyyah.* By knowing his position and his solution to the problem that we have raised prior, it is potentially can be the last piece of the puzzle in unravelling our contemporary philosophical problems such as the gender-identity fluidity crisis, proving the existence of God by non-empirical evidence and much more.

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[4]   Ibid, 5.
[5]   Robert Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes 1274-1671,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.), 633.
[6]   He was a student to the prominent Ash'arite theologian, 'Aḍud al-Dīn al-Ījī (d.756 H), the author of *al-Mawāqif fī 'Ilm al-Kalām.* Refer Mohd Saiful Aqil Naim Saful Amin, *Hujah Ilmu Kalam Dalam Al-Quran: Pembelaan Imam Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī Terhadap Ilmu Kalam Berdasarkan Tafsir Mafatih al-Ghayb,* (Kuala Lumpur: Rawdah al-Hikmah: 2025.), 61-62.

DISCUSSION ON NAFS AL-AMR BEFORE AL-TAFTĀZĀNĪ IN ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY

The question being *qua* being (being as itself) could be traced further before al-Taftāzānī whether in the Greek civilization or even in the early Islamic intellectual tradition without any doubt. However, due to the limited spaces in this study, this study will not discuss every single theory related to *nafs al-amr* that was introduced before. This study will focus on two main thinkers that were prior to al-Taftāzānī: i) Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d.672 H) and ii) Shams al-Dīn al-Samarqandī (d.722 H).

As stated by Murat Kaş, the debates on nafs al-amr stemmed from the problem of the external correspondences of predications and mental propositions. These debates lead to a sphere of problems where numerous approaches are put forth and for which there is an agreement on the judgment that trueness "corresponds with reality"[7]. To unravel this problem, al-Ṭūsī provides an expounding explanation in his autonomous treatise on assenting the Separate Intellect (*Risālah fī Ithbāt al-ʿAql al-Mufāriq),* which according to Muhammat Maşuk Aktaş, was the first autonomous treatise on *nafs al-amr*[8]. From his treatise*,* al-Ṭūsī elucidates *nafs al-amr* as in an entity that acts as a place for laws (*al-aḥkām*) and intelligible entities (*maʿqūlāt*). The entity is known as the Active Intellect (*al-ʿAql al-Faʿʿāl/ʿAql al-Kull*) or known as the Throne (*al-ʿArsh*) in the Quranic context. Hence, every proposition and statement is considered to be true if it corresponds to the intelligible entities in the Active Intellect[9]. For al-Ṭūsī, *nafs al-amr* cannot understood as an independent being (*mawjūd qāʾim bi nafsih*) because it is either entails: i) it is a physical being (*dhū waḍʿ*) or ii) it is an abstract being such as Platonic forms (*al-Muthul al-Aflāṭūniyyah*), which both are impossible to occur in reality. So, *nafs al-amr* is a being that represented in other (*mutamaththil bi al-ghayr*), which the other is also either physical being or non-physical being. Al-Ṭūsī insists that other entity must be a non-physical being, which is not subjected to time or space, and impossible to be destroyed or changed, hence it is an immaterial being that has existed eternally (*azalī abadī*). This entity is the Active or Separate Intellect, which is also recognized as the *nafs al-amr*. Subsequent to its divine reality, those intelligible entities that are represented in *nafs al-amr* have existed eternally and not subjected to time and space[10].

This analysis makes clear that Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī unequivocally champions the correspondence theory of truth, positing that a proposition is true if and only if it corresponds to a mind-independent reality. However, al-Ṭūsī's formulation is not a mere epistemological rule, it is a philosophical system built upon a specific and demanding metaphysical foundation. As observed by Agniezka Erdt, the architecture of Ṭūsī's argument rests on two pivotal pillars. First, he establishes a rigorous ontological distinction as a prerequisite for correspondence. For al-Ṭūsī, a representation cannot correspond with itself; truth requires a relationship between entities of fundamentally different ontological types. This principle gives rise to his unique trifurcation of reality into three distinct truth-making domains:

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[7] Kaş, Murat. "Apprehension and existence, appearance and reality: the reception of Nafs Al-Amr debates after the 13th century." *Ilahiyat Studies* 12, no. 1 (2021): 39.

[8] Aktaş, Muhammet Maşuk. "An Examination of Authenticity and Content: Demonstrating The Epistle on Nafs al-amr Attributed to Jurjanı as Having Been Taken from al-Samarqandı's al-Maʿarif." *Nazariyat: Journal for the History of Islamic Philosophy & Sciences/Nazariyat Islam Felsefe Bilim Tarihi Arastirmalari Dergisi* 8, no. 2 (2022), 90.

[9] Al-Dawwānī, Muḥammad bin Asʿad, *Sharḥ Risālah Nafs al-Amr,* in *Thalath Rasāʾil fī Nafs al-Amr,* ed. Saʿīd Fūdah, (Amman: Aslein Studies & Publications, 2017.), 52-64.

[10] Ibid.

1) The domain of external, concrete existence (*al-wujūd al-khārijī*).
2) The domain of mental existence (*al-wujūd al-dhinī*).
3) The foundational domain of the "fact itself" (*nafs al-amr*)-the ultimate ground of truth.

Second, and more profoundly, the very coherence of this model depends on the viability of the first domain, *nafs al-amr*[11]. Here, al-Ṭūsī's epistemology is revealed to be deeply anchored in his metaphysics. The existence and structure of *nafs al-amr* are not self-evident but are derived from prior commitments concerning divine intellect. His articulation of *nafs al-amr* invites various criticisms even from his disciple, Ibn al-Muṭahhar al-Ḥillī (d. 726 H) and also from al-Taftāzānī as we will see in the next section. As noted by al-Ḥillī, al-Ṭūsī's *nafs al-amr* framework faces a significant problem that, unless resolved, threatens to render it self-refuting. The problem is the Peripatetics need to accept that the Separate Intellect is the place for universal laws (*al-aḥkām al-kulliyyah*) whether they are true or false. If the true proposition is the proposition that corresponds to the laws at the Separate Intellect, then some of the false mental propositions also considered to be true. Al-Ḥillī says:

فقال رحمه الله: المراد بنفس الأمر هو العقل الفعال فكل صورة أو حكم ثابت في الذهن مطابق للصور المنتقشة في العقل الفعال فهو صادق و إلا فهو كاذب. فأوردت عليه أن الحكماء يلزمهم القول بانتقاش الصور الكاذبة في العقل الفعال لأنهم استدلوا على ثبوته بالفرق بين النسيان و السهو فإن السهو هو زوال الصورة المعقولة عن الجوهر العاقل و ارتسامها في الحافظ لها و النسيان هو زوالها عنهما معا و هذا يتأتى في الصور المحسوسة أما المعقولة فإن سبب النسيان هو زوال الاستعداد بزوال المفيد للعلم في باب التصورات و التصديقات و هاتان الحالتان قد تعرضان في الأحكام الكاذبة. فلم يأت فيه بمقنع[12].

Trans: *He (al-Ṭūsī), may God have mercy on him, said: "What is meant by nafs al-amr is the Active Intellect. Therefore, any concept or judgment established in the mind that corresponds to the forms imprinted in the Active Intellect is true; otherwise, it is false." I then raised an objection to him: "This position necessitates that the philosophers -who hold this view- must also accept that false forms are imprinted in the Active Intellect. This is because they argue for its existence based on the distinction between forgetting (nisyān) and error/absent-mindedness (sahw). They state that error is the removal of an intelligible form from the rational substance while it remains imprinted in the faculty that preserves it. Forgetting, however, is its removal from both[13]. Now, this distinction is conceivable for sensory*

[11] Erdt, Agnieszka. "A third realm ontology? Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī and the nafs al-amr." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 33, no. 3 (2025): 456.

[12] Al-Ḥillī, al-Ḥasan bin Yūsuf, *Kashf al-Murād fī Tajrīd al-Iʿtiqād,* (Qom: Manshūrāt Shukūrī, n.d.), 63.

[13] Kamāl al-Ḥaydarī locates the root of this problem in the Peripatetic concept of intellectual recollection (*al-ʿawd*). This doctrine, which conceptualizes the Active Intellect as an ontological repository (*khizānah*), holds that the rational substance retrieves forgotten knowledge from it. A critical implication follows: the phenomenon of recalling a previously forgotten false judgment demonstrates that the

forms. But for intelligible forms, the cause of forgetting is the loss of the mind's preparedness, caused by the disappearance of whatever facilitates knowledge, be it in conceptualization or assent. Crucially, both of these states (forgetting and error) can occur with false judgments." In answering my question, he did not bring any convincing answer[14].

A few decades later, we can see that the discussion *nafs al-amr* has been expanded more than ever in the Islamic philosophy tradition. A prominent Maturidite theologian, Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad bin Ashraf al-Samarqandī through his *al-Maʿārif,* which is his very own commentary on his theological summa *al-Ṣaḥāʾif al-Ilahiyyah,* provides an extensive explanation on *nafs al-amr* and how it acts as the truth-maker criterion. His tenet on *nafs al-amr* is distinct from al-Ṭūsī's tenet in several details. Al-Samarqandī states that there are two types of realization of things: i) which assumed to be realized in our mind (*farḍ ʿaqlī*) and ii) which is realized without depending on any assumption (*ḥaqīqī bilā farḍ ʿaqlī*). The second type of realization is what is called *nafs al-amr.* Explaining further about the essence of our proposition which is said to be true in the *nafs al-amr,* al-Samarqandī says:

حقيقي: وهو ما يكون خارجَ القوى الدرّاكة، سواء وجد الفرض والعقل أو لم يوجد.

وهو الذي يقال: إنّه في نفس الأمر[15].

Trans: *This is that which exists independently of the perceiving faculties, regardless of whether the assumption and the intellect exist or not. It is that which is described as thing as it is. This denotes an existence that is independent of all cognitive faculties. Its reality is not contingent upon the presence of a hypothetical observer or an actual intellect. It is, therefore, exist in its reality, whether it is assumed to exist or not. To put it in an easier way, let us see how al-Jurjānī through his Ḥāshiyah al-Tajrīd elucidates the meaning of 'our statement is true in the nafs al-amr'. Al-Jurjānī says:*

وأما نفس الأمر، فمعناه: نفس الشيء في حدّ ذاته. والمراد بالأمر هو الشيء نفسُه.

فإذا قلنا مثلًا: "الشيء موجود في نفس الأمر"، كان معناه أنّه موجود في حدّ ذاته.

ومعنى كونه موجودا في حد ذاته أنّ وجوده ذاك ليس باعتبار المعتبِر وفرض الفارض، بل

لو قطع النظر عن كلّ اعتبارٍ وفرضٍ كان موجودًا[16].

Trans: *As for nafs al-amr, its meaning is: the thing itself in its own essence. Here, al-amr (the thing) refers to the thing itself. For example,*

Active Intellect must necessarily store not only true intelligibles but also false ones. See Kamāl al-Ḥaydarī, *Madkhal ilā Manāhij al-Maʿrifah ʿInda al-Islāmiyyīn,* (Qom: Dār Farāqid, 1426 H.), 105.

[14] The same criticism was raised by al-Sayyid al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī (d.816 H) in his *Ḥāshiyah al-Tajrīd,* which we believe that it was originally from al-Ḥillī himself. See al-Jurjānī, ʿAlī bin Muḥammad, *Ḥāshiya al-Tajrīd ʿalā Tasdīd al-Qawāʿid fī Sharḥ Tajrīd al-ʿAqāʾid,* ed. Ashraf Alṭāsh, (Istanbul: Markaz al-Buḥūth al-Islāmiyyah (İSAM), 2020.), 1:202.

[15] Al-Samarqandī, Muḥammad bin Ashraf, *al-Maʿārif fī Sharḥ al-Ṣaḥāʾif,* ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Sulaymān, (PhD dissertation, Jāmiʿah al-ʿUlūm al-Islāmiyyah al-ʿĀlamiyyah, Amman, 2012.), 111.

[16] Al-Jurjānī, ʿAlī bin Muḥammad, *Ḥāshiya al-Tajrīd ʿalā Tasdīd al-Qawāʿid fī Sharḥ Tajrīd al-ʿAqāʾid,* ed. Ashraf Alṭāsh, (Istanbul: Markaz al-Buḥūth al-Islāmiyyah (İSAM), 2020.), 1:201.

> *when we say, 'The thing exists fī nafs al-amr, it means that it exists in its own essence. The meaning of its existing in its own essence is that this existence is not relative to any observer's abstraction or anyone's hypothetical assumption. Rather, even if we were to disregard all perspectives and assumptions, it would still exist.*

Hence, when we say "Firdaus is a student in Nilai" and this statement if it is true, it simply means that Firdaus is indeed a student that lives in Nilai whether some people think the otherwise or not, whether indeed is known to anyone or not even known to anyone. Firdaus, as he is, is a student that lives in Nilai.

Al-Samarqandī also did not agree with al-Ṭūsī's notion of *nafs al-amr* (the Separate Intellect) where he says that it entails the non-existence of the Necessary God and the other Celestial Intellects due to the impossibility of their existence in the Separate Intellect[17]. Therefore, it is concluded from this discussion that al-Samarqandī also adhere to the Correspondence Theory -which he accepts that a true proposition is what corresponds to the reality/*nafs al-amr*- but he did not agree with al-Ṭūsī in terms of identifying *nafs al-amr* as the Active Intellect. Rather, he assents that *nafs al-amr* is thing as itself, where its realization is independent of any assumption or abstraction, hence it is not an independently exist entity, as assented by al-Ṭūsī and also Plato through his form doctrine[18].

AL-TAFTĀZĀNĪ ON NAFS AL-AMR AND OBJECTIVE TRUTH: WHAT IS TRUTH? HOW DO WE KNOW IT?

Through his commentary on *al-ʿAqāʾid al-Nasafiyyah,* al-Taftāzānī defines truth as an assent that corresponds to reality (*al-ḥukm al-muṭābiq li al-wāqiʿ*)[19]. While in his *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid,* he explains further on the condition of such correspondence to occur in reality. Al-Taftāzānī states:

و لا يشترط في صحة المطابقة لما في الأعيان، إذ قد لا يوجد فيها الطرفان، و لا يكفي المطابقة لما في الأذهان، اذ قد يرتسم فيها الكواذب، بل المعتبر المطابقة لما في نفس الأمر، و معناه ما يفهم من قولنا: هذا الأمر كذا في نفسه، أي في حد ذاته، مع قطع النظر عن حكم الحاكم[20]

> Trans: *A valid correspondence (for truth) is not conditional upon matching external reality (al-aʿyān), for both corresponding elements (which are the subject and the predicate) may not exist therein. Nor is correspondence with mental conceptions and assents (al-adhhān) sufficient, as falsehoods may be represented therein. Rather, the valid criterion is correspondence with the thing as it is (nafs al-amr). This means what is understood from our statement, 'This thing is such-and-*

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[17] Al-Samarqandī, Muḥammad bin Ashraf, *al-Maʿārif fī Sharḥ al-Ṣaḥāʾif*, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Sulaymān, (PhD dissertation, Jāmiʿah al-ʿUlūm al-Islāmiyyah al-ʿĀlamiyyah, Amman, 2012.), 112.

[18] Plato,

[19] Al-Taftāzānī, Masʿūd bin ʿUmar, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqāʾid al-Nasafiyyah,* ed. Anas ʿAdnān al-Sharfāwī, (Damascus: Dār al-Taqwā, 2020.), 106.

[20] Al-Taftāzānī, Masʿūd bin ʿUmar, *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid,* ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ʿAmīrah, (Beirut: ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 1998.), 1:218.

such in itself', that is, in its own essence, when disregarding any observer's judgment.

He also says:

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بل المعتبر في صحة الحكم مطابقته لما في نفس الأمر، و هو المراد بالواقع و الخارج، أي خارج ذات المدرك و المخبر. و معناه ما يفهم من قولنا، هذا الأمر كذا في نفسه، أو ليس كذا أي في حد ذاته، و بالنظر إليه مع قطع النظر عن إدراك المدرك، و إخبار المخبر. على أن المراد بالأمر الشأن و الشيء، و بالنفس الذات[21]

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> Trans: *Rather, the criterion for the validity of a judgment is its correspondence with what is it as itself (nafs al-amr), which is what is meant by 'reality' (al-wāqiʻ/al-khārij), that is, independent to the perceiving and reporting person. Its meaning is what is understood from our statement, 'This thing is such-and-such in itself,' or 'is not such-and-such' meaning, in its very essence, when considering it while completely disregarding the perception of any perceiver and the report of any reporter. It should be clarified that al-amr here means 'the thing' and al-nafs means 'the essence' or 'the self'."*

Based on these texts, it is known that al-Taftāzānī's opinion on *nafs al-amr* is aligned with al-Samarqandī's opinion as both of them view *nafs al-amr* as thing as itself, without any dependency on any judgement or opinion. Al-Taftāzānī also did not agree with al-Tūsī's tenet by stating that understanding *nafs al-amr* as the Active Intellect is not able to be agreed upon due to the fact that the true assent still occurs even from a person that did not know or even believe in the Active Intellect[22]. Hence, truth, according to al-Taftāzānī, is an assent that corresponds to the reality of its subject (*mawḍūʻ*) as it is.

As for the second question, how do we think a particular assent is true and correct, corresponds to its reality? In his commentary on *al-Nasafiyyah,* al-Taftāzānī agrees with al-Nasafī's division of sources of knowledge, which are the senses (*al-ḥawās*), the intellect (*al-ʻaql*) and true testimony (*al-khabar al-ṣādiq*). For him, those who deny the authority of these sources are not worth to be entertained by us, the believer of its authority[23]. Even so, he did provide two types of answer to the doubts that were raised by the Sophists regards to the authority of sensory judgement and rational reasoning whether it is inferential (*naẓarī*) or non-inferential (*badīhī*). Al-Taftāzānī classifies the first type of response as a "verified response" (*taḥqīq*), grounding it in the premise that we have immediate, certain knowledge of some truths. This includes knowledge gained sensorily (e.g., one's own existence or the presence of a friend) and intellectually through reason.

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[21] Ibid, 1:219.

[22] Ibid, 1:220.

[23] The same opinion can be found in his kalam compendium, *Tahdhīb al-Kalām.* Al-Taftāzānī says:

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وكونه مفيدًا للعلم في الجملة ولو في الإلهيات وبدون النظر ضروري، والمنكِر معانِدٌ.

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> Trans: And its (rational reasoning) nature of producing knowledge in a general sense even in metaphysical matters and without prior examination is self-evident. And whoever denies this is *muʻānid* (obstinate).

ʻAbd al-Qādir al-Sanandajī through his commentary, *Taqrīb al-Marām Sharḥ Tahdhīb al-Kalām,* describes "*muʻānid*" as an individual whose assertions should be dismissed and are not deserving of a hearing. See al-Sanandajī, ʻAbd al-Qādir, *Taqrīb al-Marām Sharḥ Tahdhīb al-Kalām,* ed. Muḥammad Amīn Sayyid, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʻIlmiyyah, 2017.), 30.

He posits this as a self-evident, non-inferential principle that is epistemically foundational and not itself in need of demonstration. As for the second type of response which is classified by him as a "for the sake of debate response" (*ilzām*), which he intends to show their position to be incoherent and self-refuting. Al-Taftāzānī argues that if the negation of things (as proposed by the nihilist/*al-ʿinādī*) has not obtained, then some realities have obtained which is what being asserted by al-Taftāzānī. If the negation has obtained, then negation is one reality among realities due the fact that negation (*al-nafy*) is a type of judgment, hence, something of reality has obtained[24]. However, even if this response manages to point out the incoherence of the nihilists' view, some scholars -such as Mullā Aḥmad al-Jundī- say that it is not enough to entertain them, as they did not even accept the principle of non-contradiction[25]. As Abdurrahman Mihirig elucidates, al-Jundī points out a flaw in this argument: it presupposes that these skeptics accept the principle of non-contradiction, which they patently do not. They could simply respond by asserting that (i) even our negation of their claim is non-existent or only relatively true, or (ii) that the principle of non-contradiction itself is illusory (*min jumlat al-mukhayyalat*), and that contradiction is only absurd if one believes it to be so[26]. For this reason, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Farhārī (d.1239 H) in his gloss on al-Taftāzānī's commentary, *al-Nibrās Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id al-Nasafiyyah,* says that the *muḥaqqiqūn* among the *mutakallimīn* prohibit others in engaging with the sophists because a particular debate (*munāẓarah*) is intended to assent a conclusion (*ithbāt al-maṭlūb*) or to point out the incoherence of the opposition's statement (*ilzām al-khaṣm*). Both intentions are impossible to be achieved due to the fact they reject the axiomatic knowledges, hence providing us no common ground at all[27].

A second, more profound question follows: How can we know the truth of abstract propositions whose subjects or predicates have no direct correlate in extra-mental reality? For instance, how do we establish the truth of the principle that "two contradictory things cannot coexist" when such a scenario never occurs in the external world? In other words, to what does this proposition correspond? In his *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid,* al-Taftāzānī does raise a similar question, where he says:

فإن قيل: كيف يتصور هذا فيما لا ذات له، و لا شيئية في الأعيان كالمعدومات سيما الممتنعات؟

Trans: *If it is asked: 'How can this [i.e., correspondence with nafs al-amr] be conceived for that which has no essence (dhāt), nor objective thingness (shay'iyyah) in external reality (al-aʿyān), such as non-existents (al-maʿdūmāt) particularly impossible things?*

Answering this question, al-Taftāzānī provides three main principles that needs to be understood precisely to avoid any misunderstanding regards this problem. Firstly, al-Taftāzānī clarifies that the correspondence is a correlation (*iḍāfah*), with is suffices to be realized by two distinct subjects in our mind[28]. Secondly, the intellect during its process

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[24] Al-Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id al-Nasafiyyah,* 110.

[25] Al-Jundī, Aḥmad, *Ḥāshiyah ‘alā Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id al-Nasafiyyah,* in *Majmūʿ al-Ḥawāshī al-Bahiyyah,* (Cairo: Dār Mīrāth al-Nubuwwah, 2019.), 1:36.

[26] Mihirig, Abdurrahman Ali. "Typologies of Scepticism in the Philosophical Tradition of Kalām." *Theoria* 88, no. 1 (2022): 35.

[27] Al-Farhārī, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz bin Aḥmad, *al-Nibrās ‘alā Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id al-Nasafiyyah,* (Fetih: Maktabah Yāsīn, 2012.), 71.

[28] Al-Taftāzānī says:

أن المطابقة إضافة يكفيها تحقق المضافين بحسب العقل

of relating between both (the subject and the predicate), whether they are beings (*mawjūdāt*) or non-beings (*maʿdūmāt*), perceives a particular correlation between both, either it is an affirming correlation (*nisbah ījābiyyah*) or a negating correlation (*nisbah salbiyyah*). This correlation is entailed by necessity (*al-ḍarūrah*) or a decisive demonstration (*al-burhān*)[29]. Thirdly, the correlation is entailed by necessity or a decisive demonstration based on the subject of the proposition itself, independently of any judgement by a perceiver[30].

Based on these three integral principles, we posit that they can serve as the criterion for establishing the correspondence of abstract propositions. When these principles are fulfilled, the correspondence can be perceived. For instance, the proposition "two contradictory things cannot coexist" is true because it corresponds to reality. This correspondence is achieved by relating the concepts of "two contradictory things" and "existence" in our mind. Without any prior reasoning, we know it is impossible for them to coexist because this is a non-inferential and self-evident principle. This exemplifies how the correspondence of abstract truths is known by necessity. As for inferential abstract propositions, such as "A phoenix possibly exists," we ascertain its truth by relating the concept of a "phoenix" to "existence." By examining a rational proof -for example, that it shares the same ontological law as other types of birds- it is confirmed that its existence is possible, just as a peacock is a contingent entity. Thus, in this case, correspondence is established through a demonstrative argument. It is therefore safe to conclude that -according to al-Taftāzānī- such correspondence for abstract propositions can be established even without extra-mental particulars (*afrād khārijiyyah*), provided there is proof (*dalīl*) for it, assuming the proposition is indeed inferential.

HOW AL-TAFTĀZĀNĪ'S THEORY SECURES OBJECTIVE TRUTH?

Al-Ṭaftāzānī's framework of *nafs al-amr* provides a coherent metaphysical foundation for securing objective truth, offering a powerful counter-argument to contemporary relativistic epistemologies. Primarily, the theory presents a decisive negation of all forms of truth relativism. This stands in direct opposition to postmodern tenets, such as those advanced by thinkers like Judith Butler, who argue that reality -exemplified by gender

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   Trans: Correspondence is a relational property (*iḍāfah*) for which the realization of its two relata suffices in mind.

   See al-Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid,* 1:221.

[29] Al-Taftāzānī says:

<div dir="rtl">

و لا خفاء في أن العقل عند ملاحظة المعنيين، و المقايسة بينهما سواء كانا من الموجودات أو المعدومات، نجد بينهما بحسب كل زمان نسبة إيجابية أو سلبية تقتضيها الضرورة أو البرهان، فتلك النسبة من حيث إنها نتيجة الضرورة أو البرهان
</div>

   Trans: There is no obscurity in the fact that when the intellect contemplates two meanings and makes a comparison between them, whether they are existents or non-existents, it finds between them, at every moment, a positive or negative relation necessitated by either self-evidence (*al-ḍarūrah*) or demonstration (*al-burhān*). See Ibid.

[30] Al-Taftāzānī says:

<div dir="rtl">

فتلك النسبة من حيث إنها نتيجة الضرورة أو البرهان بالنظر إلى نفس ذلك المعقول من غير خصوصية المدرك و المخبر، هي المراد بالواقع و ما في نفس الأمر
</div>

   Trans: Thus, this relation, insofar as it is the result of necessity or demonstration with respect to that intelligible itself, without any particularity of a perceiver or reporter, is what is meant by 'reality' (*al-wāqiʿ*) and 'what is in the fact of the thing itslef (*mā fī nafs al-amr*)." See Ibid.

identity- is fluid[31] and socially constructed rather than grounded in any objective, mind-independent fact[32]. From such a perspective, truth is not a matter of correspondence with reality but is reduced to a consensus or personal belief, a proposition is deemed "true" if it coheres with an individual's or a community's subjective framework (*muṭābaqah al-khabar limā fī al-dhihn*).

Al-Ṭaftāzānī's model refutes this position by fundamentally rejecting the identification of *nafs al-amr* with the intellect or mind. He articulates this critical distinction with the following argument:

<div dir="rtl">

و لا يكفي المطابقة لما في الأذهان لأنه قد يرتسم فيها الأحكام الغير المطابقة للواقع،

فلزم أن يكون قولنا: العالم قديم حقا و صدقا، لمطابقته لما في أذهان الفلاسفة، وهو

باطل قطعا[33]

</div>

> Trans: *Nor is correspondence with what is in the mind sufficient, because judgments that do not correspond to reality may be imprinted within it. Consequently, it would necessarily follow that our statement, 'The world is eternal' is true and veridical because it corresponds to what is in the minds of the philosophers, and this is certainly false.*

This passage demonstrates the logical conclusion of subjectivist truth theories: they would force us to accept patently false statements as true simply because they are believed by a particular group. By highlighting this absurdity, al-Ṭaftāzānī's framework rigorously upholds the principle that truth is objective. It is not determined by what any person or culture considers to be true, but by a proposition's alignment with a reality that exists independently of human perception and cognition.

Secondly, truth is knowable through three primary sources -the senses, the intellect, and authentic testimony- each operating within its proper epistemic domain. When a proposition pertains to the empirical world, its truth can be apprehended through sensory perception. This, however, raises the critical question posed earlier in this study: how can our cognitive apparatus, which is inherently limited to the physical world, attain knowledge of the metaphysical realm? According to al-Taftāzānī's framework of *nafs al-amr* (the fact of the matter), this crucial connection is facilitated by the intellect and by authentic testimony, most authoritatively, the transmitted reports of the Prophet PBUH, namely the Quran and the Hadith. Concerning abstract judgments and propositions, such as those pertaining to ethical values or non-empirical entities like God Himself, their truth is known by establishing a correspondence between the proposition and its *nafs al-amr*. As al-Taftāzānī elucidates, this correspondence is apprehended through one of two modes: either through self-evident intuition or through demonstrative proof.

From this analysis, the framework emerges as distinctive for its consonance with Quranic

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[31] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990.), 24.

[32] Mohammad A. Shomali, *Ethical Relativism: An Analysis of The Foundations of Morality*, (London: Islamic College for Advanced Studies Press, 2001.), 49-60.

[33] Al-Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid,* 1:221.

teachings that urge humankind to base their belief even in the unseen upon rational inquiry. Allah SWT says:

$$﴿الَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْغَيْبِ وَيُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنْفِقُونَ﴾$$

Trans: *Who believe in the Unseen and perform prayer and spend out of what we have provided for them.*

(al-Baqarah:3)

A prominent Ash'arite theologian, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.606 H) explains the meaning of "believing in the unseen" in his encyclopaedic exegesis, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*. Al-Rāzī states:

الغيب هو الذي يكون غائبًا عن الحاسة. ثم هذا الغيب ينقسم إلى ما دلّ عليه دليل،

وإلى ما ليس عليه دليل. فالمراد من هذه الآية مدح المتقين بأنهم يؤمنون بالغيب الذي

دلّ عليه دليل، بأن يتفكروا ويستدلوا فيؤمنوا به. وعلى هذا، يدخل فيه العلم بالله تعالى

وبصفاته والعلم بالآخرة والعلم بالنبوة والعلم بالأحكام وبالشرائع. فإنّ في تحصيل هذه

العلوم بالاستدلال مشقة، فيصلح أن يكون سببًا لاستحقاق الثناء العظيم[34].

Trans: *The Unseen (al-ghayb) refers to that which lies beyond the grasp of the senses. This unseen reality is further distinguished between that for which evidence exists and that for which no evidence exists. The intent of this Quranic verse is to praise the muttaqīn for their faith in the unseen that is supported by evidence, meaning they arrive at belief through reflection and rational demonstration. Accordingly, this encompasses knowledge of God Almighty and His attributes, knowledge of the Hereafter, knowledge of prophethood, and knowledge of legal rulings and divine statutes. Since the acquisition of these knowledges through rational inference entails considerable intellectual effort, it rightfully constitutes grounds for deserving such magnificent praise.*

This explanation aligns seamlessly with al-Taftāzānī's epistemological solution for knowing abstract, unseen propositions, as previously discussed. Within his framework, the truth of a metaphysical claim is not contingent upon empirical or physical evidence but is secured through its correspondence to the *nafs al-amr*, which is itself accessible to rational inquiry. Consequently, affirming the truth of a proposition such as "God exists" does not require sensory validation. The very nature of the subject matter places it beyond the empirical domain. Instead, its truth is established through demonstrative rational proofs. Once such a proof is presented and understood, it generates certain knowledge (*'ilm*), which suffices as a justified ground for belief. The intellectual effort required to comprehend these proofs is precisely what merits the divine praise accorded to the *muttaqīn*, those who believe in a rationally grounded unseen.

As for the last and not the least, al-Taftāzānī's framework directly counters nihilism by establishing an objective foundation for truth that is entirely independent of human perception or cognition. He defines truth as a judgment that corresponds to *nafs*

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[34] Al-Rāzī, Muḥammad bin 'Umar, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981.), 2:30-31.

al-amr, the thing as it is in itself. This means reality is not a construct of individual or collective minds. For the nihilist who claims that nothing can be known or that no objective reality exists, this framework presents a coherent alternative: truth is not what we believe to be true, but what aligns with a stable, external reality. By anchoring truth in nafs al-amr, al-Taftāzānī provides a metaphysical ground that prevents truth from collapsing into mere opinion, thereby offering a decisive refutation of the nihilist's claim that all assertions are equally unfounded.

The efficiency of al-Taftāzānī's model is evident in its ability to expose the logical incoherence of radical nihilism, which is quite a threat for Islamic faith[35]. In his "for the sake of debate" (*ilzām*) response, he argues that if a nihilist claims "nothing is real" or "no knowledge is possible," this very claim must itself be a reality or a piece of knowledge. If the negation is false, then some reality exists; if the negation is true, then the act of negation itself constitutes a reality that has been obtained. This traps the nihilist in a performative contradiction, demonstrating that their position cannot be consistently articulated without implicitly affirming the very objective reality they seek to deny. Thus, the framework shows that nihilism is self-refuting and philosophically untenable.

A key nihilistic challenge targets the knowability of metaphysical and abstract concepts (like good, evil, or universals), which lack a physical correlate. Al-Taftāzānī's framework efficiently counters this by explaining how correspondence to *nafs al-amr* functions for non-empirical propositions. He argues that the intellect can perceive a necessary correlation between concepts (such as "two contradictories cannot coexist") that is self-evident or demonstrable. This correlation itself, being necessitated by reason and independent of any observer, is the reality (*nafs al-amr*) to which the proposition corresponds. This allows the framework to secure objective truth in the metaphysical realm, effectively rebutting the nihilist's agnosticism about non-physical realities.

Finally, al-Taftāzānī's system is efficient because it identifies axiomatic, foundational sources of knowledge; the senses, the intellect, and authentic testimony that are immune to the nihilist's infinite regress of doubt. He classifies the belief in these sources as a "verified response" (*taḥqīq*), treating them as self-evident principles that are immediately certain and require no further proof. For instance, one's own existence or the presence of a friend is known with immediate certainty. By establishing these bedrock epistemic principles, the framework renders the nihilist's blanket skepticism irrelevant, as it refuses to entertain doubts about the very tools necessary for any rational discourse, including the act of doubting itself.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has elucidated Saʿd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī's sophisticated epistemological framework, centered on the concept of *nafs al-amr*, as a robust response to the problem of objective truth. By defining truth as a correspondence not merely with external particulars or mental conceptions, but with "the thing as it is in itself," al-Taftāzānī secures a foundation for reality that is resolutely mind-independent. This formulation successfully navigates the pitfalls of both simplistic empiricism and relativistic subjectivism, offering a coherent metaphysical ground for assertions in both the physical and metaphysical realms. His critique of alternative theories, particularly al-Ṭūsī's identification of *nafs al-amr* with the Active Intellect, further sharpens his

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[35] See Amin, Mohd Saiful Aqil Naim Saful, and Syed Mohammad Hilmi Syed Abdul Rahman. "Analisis Pengaruh Falsafah al-Sufastaʾiyyah dalam Filem Mentega Terbang Menurut Perspektif Falsafah Islam dan Ilmu Kalam: Analysis of the Influence of Sophism Philosophy in the Mentega Terbang Film According to the Perspective of Islamic Philosophy and Kalam." *Jurnal Usuluddin* 51, no. 2 (2023): 1-24 for more discussions on the threat of nihilism towards Islamic faith.

position, establishing *nafs al-amr* as the ultimate arbiter of truth, accessible through rational inquiry rather than being contingent on a specific cosmological doctrine.

The efficiency of this framework is particularly evident in its capacity to dismantle sceptical and nihilistic challenges. Al-Taftāzānī provides a two-pronged defense: a positive, foundationalist argument (*taḥqīq*) that validates the axiomatic authority of the senses, intellect, and authentic testimony, and a dialectical refutation (*ilzām*) that exposes the self-refuting incoherence of radical doubt. Furthermore, his explanation of how abstract and necessary truths -such as logical principles- correspond to *nafs al-amr* through intellectually perceived relations bridges the epistemic gap between the physical and the metaphysical. This provides a powerful intellectual tool to counter modern forms of relativism, which often deny the existence of objective realities in domains like ethics and identity, by demonstrating that truth is determined by reality itself, not by consensus or personal belief.

Ultimately, al-Taftāzānī's project, as analyzed here, demonstrates the enduring relevance of classical Islamic theology and philosophy in confronting perennial epistemological crises. His system does not merely offer a historical perspective but presents a viable paradigm for reclaiming a unified and objective understanding of reality. By grounding knowledge in *nafs al-amr* and outlining clear paths to its apprehension, this framework affirms the possibility of certain knowledge about God, the unseen, and moral truths, thereby fulfilling the Quranic injunction to believe in the *ghayb* based on rational evidence. It stands as a compelling intellectual heritage that can inform contemporary discourses seeking to transcend the metaphysical chaos of the modern age.

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