

The background of the entire page is a complex, repeating geometric pattern in shades of blue, gold, and white, characteristic of Islamic art. It features intricate star and polygonal designs, with some circular medallions containing Arabic calligraphy. The pattern is dense and covers the entire surface.

# Rationality and Language in Islamic Thought

[7-8 November 2017]  
[A6 - 117]

## Mohammed Rustom - Humanities Senior Research Fellow

While there is great merit in studying the technical intellectual disciplines of the Islamic sciences in atomistic fashion and in isolation from one another, much is lost in this kind of an approach. For one thing, the nomenclature of each discipline, such as legal theory or rational theology, is distinct and discipline-specific. By exclusively focusing on the particulars of each discipline, we are prone to lose sight of the significant overlap between these specialized fields on the one hand, and their shared concerns and relatively common goals on the other. What is common to every intellectual perspective in Islamic thought, be it logic, mysticism, philosophy, theology, or legal theory, is their representatives' insistence on the efficacy of language and rationality as the basis for their inquiry. Some mystical writers, for example, attempted to argue against the limits of language and our normal thought structures in attaining knowledge of ultimate realities. But they did this on logical grounds. The philosophers, on the other hand, built entire intellectual edifices off of their reliance on the unmediated intellect's ability to know. And, while many scholars of rational theology argued for the need to interpret scripture metaphorically when scripture seemed to contradict reason, some legal theorists insisted that the literal reading of scripture itself was the avenue by which a plurality of intentions on the part of the divine author could be ascertained. This workshop will therefore highlight the various interdisciplinary avenues through which rationality and language have interacted with one another in Islamic thought.



**Rationality and Language in Islamic Thought**  
**Humanities Building, Room 117**  
**November 7<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

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**November 6<sup>th</sup> 2017**

- 4:30 pm            Meet at Welcome Center
- 5:00                **Refreshments**, Saadiyat Beach
- 7:00                **Dinner**, Torch Club

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**November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

- 7:45–9:00 am        **Breakfast**, Torch Club
- 9:00–9:10            *Welcoming Remarks*  
Martin Klimke
- 9:10–9:20            *Introduction*  
Mohammed Rustom
- 9:30–10:30          *Ibn Ṭufayl and the Language of Thought*  
Taneli Kukkonen
- 10:30–11:30         *Language as Power: Literary Interpretations of the Quran in Early Islam*  
Tehseen Thaver
- 11:30–12:30 pm     *In the Footsteps of Avicenna? The Uṣūlī Debate on Argumentum e Contrario*  
Nora Kalbarczyk
- 12:30–2:00          **Lunch**, Torch Club
- 2:00–3:00            *Conceptions of Body and Spirit in Early Islamic Theology*  
Ayman Shihadeh
- 3:00–4:00            *Change Through Continuity: Ibn ʿĀshūr’s al-Taḥrīr wa’l-Tanwīr*  
Hadia Mubarak

- 4:00–5:00      *Epistemic Colonization in Quranic Studies*  
Joseph Lombard
- 5:00–6:00      *Textualist Interpretation and Apodictic Law in Ibn Ḥazm*  
A. David K. Owen
- 6:00–7:00      *Futuwwa as Situated Virtue in the Thought of Ibn al-‘Arabī*  
Cyrus Zargar
- 7:00              Meet at Welcome Center
- 7:30              **Dinner**, Abd El Wahab Restaurant

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**November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

- 7:45–9:00 am      **Breakfast**, Torch Club
- 9:00–10:00      *‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī’s Sufi Theology in Context*  
Ramzi Taleb
- 10:00–11:00      *The Thought Experimental Method: Avicenna’s Flying Man Argument*  
Peter Adamson (via Skype)
- 11:00–12:00      *‘Ayn al-Qudāt’s Theory of the “Detached Letters”*  
Mohammed Rustom
- 12:00–2:00      **Lunch**, Torch Club

# **Rationality and Language in Islamic Thought**

## **NYUAD Institute Workshop**

**November 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

While there is great merit in studying the technical intellectual disciplines of the Islamic sciences in atomistic fashion and in isolation from one another, much is lost in this kind of an approach. For one thing, the nomenclature of each discipline, such as legal theory or rational theology, is distinct and discipline-specific. By exclusively focusing on the particulars of each discipline, we are prone to lose sight of the significant overlap between these specialized fields on the one hand, and their shared concerns and relatively common goals on the other. What is common to every intellectual perspective in Islamic thought, be it logic, mysticism, philosophy, theology, or legal theory, is their representatives' insistence on the efficacy of language and rationality as the basis for their inquiry. Some mystical writers, for example, attempted to argue against the limits of language and our normal thought structures in attaining knowledge of ultimate realities. But they did this on logical grounds. The philosophers, on the other hand, built entire intellectual edifices off of their reliance on the unmediated intellect's ability to know. And, while many scholars of rational theology argued for the need to interpret scripture metaphorically when scripture seemed to contradict reason, some legal theorists insisted that the literal reading of scripture itself was the avenue by which a plurality of intentions on the part of the divine author could be ascertained. This workshop will therefore highlight the various interdisciplinary avenues through which rationality and language have interacted with one another in Islamic thought.

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## Participants and Paper Topics

**Peter Adamson** is Professor of Late Ancient and Arabic Philosophy at the LMU in Munich. He received his BA from Williams College in 1994 and his PhD from the University of Notre Dame in 2000. In addition to hosting the highly-acclaimed “History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps” podcast series ([www.historyofphilosophy.net](http://www.historyofphilosophy.net)), Professor Adamson’s publications include *Al-Kindī* (Oxford University Press, 2007), *Studies on Plotinus and al-Kindī (Variorum Collected Studies)* (Routledge, 2015), and *Philosophy in the Islamic World* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

### *The Thought Experimental Method: Avicenna’s Flying Man Argument*

One of the few passages in Arabic philosophical literature to have received sustained and sophisticated analysis is the so-called Flying Man argument at the end of the first chapter of Avicenna’s (d. 1037) treatment of the soul (*Shifā’*: Nafs I.1). Interpreters have largely found the argument to be fallacious. Apparently, Avicenna asserts that a human being created without access to his senses could still know that he exists, and infers from this that the self is incorporeal. This seems to involve moving from a transparent to an opaque context (compare: “I am not aware that I am seeing the morning star, only that I am seeing the evening star, therefore the evening star is not the morning star”). In this paper, we will argue that this charge turns out to be irrelevant once we understand the epistemological foundations of the thought experiment. Our interpretation is grounded in the immediate context of the flying man passage, in which Avicenna is carefully distinguishes between essential and merely relational features of the soul – which he thinks are the features picked out by Aristotle’s attempted definition of soul as the form of the body. As we argue on the basis of a survey of his logical writings, Avicenna is convinced that one can, through mere “mental inspection,” verify the constituent features of an essence. Thus, according to his wider epistemology, the Flying Man argument is adequate to rule out connection to body as an essential feature of the soul. At most, this connection could be an extrinsic concomitant, which is precisely what the Aristotelian “definition” manages to state.

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**Nora Kalbarczyk** received her Ph.D. thesis, centered around the *Maḥṣūl fī ‘ilm uṣūl al-fiqh* by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, in 2016 as a part of the British-German collaborative research project (Ruhr-University Bochum/University of Cambridge), “Major issues and controversies of Arabic Logic and Philosophy of Language.” She is currently Research Associate at the Centre for Christian-Muslim Encounter and Documentation (CIBEDO) of the German Bishops’ Conference. Her fields of research include Arabic philosophy and Islamic legal theory.

### *In the Footsteps of Avicenna? The Uṣūlī Debate on Argumentum e Contrario*

Recent years have witnessed a rising interest not only in the momentous philosophical oeuvre of Avicenna (d. 1037) but also on the impact his thinking had upon subsequent generations of scholars in the Islamic world. To be sure, Ibn Sīnā’s thought and language diffused into later scholars’ works, and gradually merged into the Islamic scholarly disciplines where they had

various functions to fulfill. One of these disciplines was Islamic legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*). This paper intends to show how the debate on the *argumentum e contrario* (*mafhūm al-mukhālaḥa* or *dalīl al-khiṭāb*) was informed by Avicennian philosophy of language and logic. I will start by outlining the controversial aspects of the *argumentum e contrario* in general before focusing on Fakhr al-Dīn ar-Rāzī's (d. 1210) reasoning against it, the Avicennian worldview that informs, and the modifications upon Rāzī's own position in subsequent commentary literature. At some point in time we even see a shift in *madhhab* stances on this issue: the modified argument of the Shāfi'ī scholar Fakhr al-Dīn ar-Rāzī against the *argumentum e contrario* evolves into a standard argument which Ḥanafī opponents of it used against its Shāfi'ī proponents.

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**Taneli Kukkonen** is Professor of Philosophy at NYUAD. He is the author of *Ibn Ṭufayl: Living the Life of Reason* (Oneworld, 2014) and over thirty research articles on the Aristotelian and Platonic traditions in antiquity and the middle ages, with a particular emphasis on classical Arabic philosophy.

#### *Ibn Ṭufayl and the Language of Thought*

Within classical Arabic Aristotelianism, the question of a “language of thought”—conversely, the issue of the rationality of ordinary linguistic use—was handled through the reception of Aristotle's two foundational treatises on the subject, the *Categories* and *On Interpretation*. Ibn Ṭufayl's (d. 1185) *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān*, an extended philosophical fable about a boy growing up isolated and outside the bounds of an ordinary linguistic community, offers a test case of the positions staked out earlier by al-Fārābī (d. 950), Avicenna (d. 1037), and al-Ghazālī (d. 1111). The remarks made by Ibn Ṭufayl are rendered all-the-more interesting by the fact that he has to put forward his views in a resolutely non-technical manner, thus wedding the substance of what he has to say to the language in which his thoughts are presented.

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**Joseph E. B. Lombard** is Associate Professor of Arabic and Translation Studies at the American University in Sharjah and General Editor of *The Study Quran* (HarperOne 2015). A specialist in Quranic Studies, Sufism, Islamic philosophy, and comparative theology, he is the author of *Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, Remembrance, and the Metaphysics of Love* (State University of New York Press, 2016), *Submission, Faith and Beauty: The Religion of Islam* (Zaytuna College, 2009), and editor of *Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition* (World Wisdom, 2010).

#### *Epistemic Colonization in Quranic Studies*

This paper examines the manner in which the legacy of colonialism influences the analysis of the Quran in the Euro-American academy. While Muslim lands are no longer directly colonized, intellectual colonialism continues to prevail in the privileging of Eurocentric systems of knowledge production to the detriment and even exclusion of modes of analysis that developed and have been employed in the Islamic world. This form of intellectual hegemony results in multifaceted epistemological reductionism that denies efficacy to the analytical tools developed

by the classical Islamic tradition. Such presumed superiority of Euro-American analytical modes has become a constitutive and persistent feature of Quranic Studies. Its persistence presents obstacles to a broader discourse in the international community of Quranic Studies scholars. Only by acknowledging the legacy of epistemic colonialism can we move towards more inclusive approaches in which multiple modes of analysis are incorporated, thereby allowing scholars from variegated intellectual backgrounds to build a more transnational field of Quranic Studies.

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**Hadia Mubarak** is a Research Fellow at the NYUAD Institute and Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Guilford College. Her research examines the intersection of modernity and Quranic exegesis (with particular reference to gender) in twentieth-century North Africa.

*Change Through Continuity: Ibn ʿĀshūr’s al-Tahrīr wa-l-Tanwīr*

This paper focuses on a modern Quran commentary (*tafsīr*) that has received little attention in Western scholarship, namely *al-Tahrīr wa-l-Tanwīr* by the Tunisian legal scholar and scriptural exegete Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir ibn ʿĀshūr (d. 1973). This paper argues that Ibn ʿĀshūr’s *tafsīr*, in contrast to revivalist and modernist exegetical trends in the twentieth century, is not simply a by-product of modern hermeneutical efforts to reconcile the Quran with the demands of modernity. Rather, it represents an attempt to demonstrate the relevance of classical hermeneutical devices, primarily with respect to the fields of philology and law, to the modern period. As a case study, this paper explores Ibn ʿĀshūr’s unprecedented interpretation of *wa-ḍribūhunna*, often translated as “strike them” (fem. suffix), in Q 4:34.

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**A. David K. Owen** is a doctoral candidate in Arabic and Islamic Studies in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University. His thesis analyzes Ibn Ḥazm’s proposals for the use of formal logic in Islamic juristic methodology. David holds a B.A. and M.A. from Columbia University, was awarded the Prince Al Waleed Bin Talal Fellowship for Islamic Studies at Harvard, and most recently served as a Fulbright Scholar for research in Mauritania, Morocco, and Spain.

*Textualist Interpretation and Apodictic Law in Ibn Ḥazm*

How does Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064), the most prominent jurist of the Zāhirī school, conceive of rationality’s relationship to language? Scholarly answers to this question have mostly drawn from Ibn Ḥazm’s legal theory and apologetics. This paper focuses on Ibn Ḥazm’s writings on logic, especially the *Taqrīb* and its appendix on the terminology of the sciences. Ibn Ḥazm’s *Taqrīb* is a broad overview of the *Organon*, written in accessible language and with numerous examples of logic’s applicability to law. To begin, I offer a brief overview of Ibn Ḥazm’s treatment of language in the *De Interpretatione* section of the *Taqrīb*, and of recent scholarship on Ibn Ḥazm’s treatment of legal interpretation. I argue that textualism is a better fit than literalism for the application of logic to law which Ibn Ḥazm proposes in the *Taqrīb*. Evidently, Ibn Ḥazm’s vision of the *sharīʿa* as a unified, apodictic science is inconceivable if legal

interpretation is limited to literal readings of the scriptural canon. If all of the above is true, however, at least two difficulties arise. The first of these is Ibn Ḥazm's rejection of the "explanations" or "occasioning factors" (*ʿilal*) adduced by grammarians and jurists in analogical arguments. If law is (or ought to be) an apodictic science, what knowledge can jurists aspire to as regards the causes of legal determinations? Second, how can an apodictic model of the law of God account for our experience of human error and legal change?

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**Mohammed Rustom** is Senior Research Fellow at the NYUAD Institute and Associate Professor of Islamic Studies at Carleton University. He is the author of the award-winning book *The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mullā Ṣadrā* (State University of New York Press, 2012), co-editor of *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (HarperOne, 2015), and author of *Inrushes of the Spirit: The Mystical Theology of ʿAyn al-Quḍāt* (State University of New York Press, 2019).

*ʿAyn al-Quḍāt's Theory of the "Detached Letters"*

One major aspect of the thought of the famous Sufi martyr ʿAyn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī (d. 1131) is his unique understanding of the Quran's mysterious "detached letters" (*al-ḥurūf al-muqattaʿa*). For ʿAyn al-Quḍāt, the detached letters are not limited to the twenty-nine Quranic chapters in which they are to be found. Rather, the entire Quran consists of detached letters. He argues that we normally see each Quranic verse as a combination of words, and each word as consisting of letters. This is because we are on the plane of forms and written expressions. But in reality, the Quran descended from the "world of the mystery" (*ʿālam al-sirr*), which is the plane of meaning that is above and beyond forms, writing, and rational articulation. In that world, ʿAyn al-Quḍāt insists, the entire Quran subsists as so many individual, detached letters. In this world of ours, these letters form together, giving us clusters of words and sentences, and effectively the entire written Quranic text. During the downward descent of the detached letters, some of them did not descend fully—they therefore stand apart from the letter combinations which make up most of the Quran. These suspended letters are what we normally refer to as the detached letters. Their presence is an indication of a more originary form of the Quran, and they are the keys to unlocking the Quran's true meanings. Yet ʿAyn al-Quḍāt does not stop there. He goes to great lengths to explain that the more we are able to penetrate the Quran by penetrating our souls through the science of wayfaring (*sulūk*), the more do we come to see the attached letters of the Quran as detached from one another. If we ascend higher, we then see the detached letters in an even more primitive state, that of dots (*niqāṭ*). And beyond these dots, if we continue to ascend, we will reach the ground of obliteration, where neither letters nor dots remain.

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**Ayman Shihadeh** is Reader in Arabic Intellectual History at the Department of History, Religions and Philosophies at SOAS University of London. He studied at SOAS and Oxford, and specialises in medieval Arabic philosophy and Islamic theology. He is author of *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī* (Brill, 2006), editor of *Sufism and Theology* (Edinburgh



University Press, 2007), and author of *Doubts on Avicenna: A Study and Edition of Sharaf al-Dīn al-Masʿūdī's Commentary on the Ishārāt* (Brill, 2016).

### *Conceptions of Body and Spirit in Early Islamic Theology*

This paper will offer a broad interpretation and classification of anthropological theories in early Islamic systematic theology (that is, late-eighth and ninth-century Kalam), and will then show how one theory became dominant in classical Kalam (roughly in the tenth and eleventh centuries). The paper will argue that anthropological theories were, first and foremost, dictated by more fundamental theological doctrines, particularly doctrines concerning the nature of God and general ontology, but also took account of scriptural eschatology.

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**Ramzi Taleb** is a doctorate candidate in Islamic Studies at the University of Toronto. His dissertation centers on the Quranic commentaries and metaphysical teachings of ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jazāʿirī (d. 1300/1883).

### *ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jazāʿirī's Sufi Theology in Context*

This lecture will provide a detailed outline of the significant though largely overlooked theoretical Sufi worldview of the famous Algerian scholar and freedom fighter ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jazāʿirī (d. 1883). Particular attention will be placed on how al-Jazāʿirī conceived of the subject matter and scope of Sufi metaphysics against the backdrop of two distinct contexts: the long-established Sufi tradition which preceded him on the one hand, and nineteenth century colonial discourse and the rising tide of Islamic rationalism which it had inspired on the other.

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**Tehseen Thaver** is Assistant Professor of Religion at Bard College. She received her PhD in Religious Studies from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2014. Her work centers on questions of Quranic exegesis and religious identities in early and medieval Islam, and she also has interests in the intersection of secularism, Sufism, and religious authority in contemporary Turkey. Professor Thaver is currently working on a book entitled *Ambiguity, Hermeneutics, and the Formation of Religious Identity in Early Islam*.

### *Language as Power: Literary Interpretations of the Qur'an in Early Islam*

This talk will address the question of how the critical relationship between language and revelation was articulated and contested in the early Muslim exegetical tradition, specifically in tenth century Buyid Baghdad. The significance of this question was particularly evident at this time when the authority of knowledge traditions rooted in logic and indebted to Greek philosophy were aggressively challenged by scholars who valorized language as the primary discipline for accessing norms in Islam. Debates over the relative merits of “logic” and “language” were widespread, and scholars were pushed to articulate and demonstrate the efficacy of their positions. Our specific focus here will be on the Arabic Quran commentary of a

prominent Twelver Shī'ī theologian, poet, and historian of tenth century Baghdad, al-Sharīf al-Rādī (d. 1015), who took a distinctly literary approach to interpreting the Quranic text. Al-Rādī's commentary was concerned with Quranic "ambiguity," and he underlined the primacy of language as the fundamental source for understanding pertinent Quranic verses. What understanding of language informed al-Rādī's hermeneutical moves? And second, in what way were al-Rādī's invocation of varied grammatical rules and his construction of literary arguments embedded in a particular epistemological and theological conception of the normative relationship between language and reason? These are among the central questions which will guide our inquiry.

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**Cyrus Ali Zargar** is Associate Professor of Religion at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois. He received his PhD in Near Eastern Studies from the University of California, Berkeley in 2008. Professor Zargar is the author of *Sufi Aesthetics: Beauty, Love, and the Human Form in the Writings of Ibn 'Arabi and 'Iraqi* (University of South Carolina Press, 2011) and *The Polished Mirror: Storytelling and the Pursuit of Virtue in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism* (Oneworld, 2017).

*Futuwwa as Situated Virtue in the Thought of Ibn al-‘Arabī*

Often translated as "chivalry," *futuwwa* has a difficult and sometimes contradictory history of usage in Islamic ethical thought. Originating in the tribal hero, the term came to refer to a young man who abides by a strict standard of moral conduct and yet engages in illegal activity, especially robbery. As the term became significant in Sufi thought, it acquired layers of spiritual significance and an etiological connection to the prophet Abraham. Nevertheless, the figure of the rebellious young man never ceased to affect Sufi notions of *futuwwa*, even when it became a comprehensive virtue corresponding to the perfection of character traits. Ibn 'Arabī's (d. 1240) detailed exposition on *futuwwa* navigates these contradictions, trying to reconcile antinomian implications of this virtue with his larger vision of the law-abiding saint. In doing so, he comments not only on existing Sufi writings on *futuwwa*, but also on the cosmological implications of human ethical perfection. Since virtue is determined by God, it is two things at once: it is a mere determination, lacking ontological reality; but it is also real in the sense that judgments concerning what is virtuous have been decreed by God, in His all-comprehensive wisdom. In this regard, the virtues resemble words in Ibn 'Arabī's theory of language: Words (and virtues) come to exist in a context of relativity and seemingly disordered human events, when in fact they ultimately reflect God's wisdom and omniscience. For this reason, words, names, attributes, and virtues allow humans to know the good by conveying divinely determined truths.