



THE PHILOSOPHY OF ANTIPHILOSOPHY IN ISLAM

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Original scientific article – Received: 22/08/2022 Accepted: 11/11/2022

ABSTRACT

In this article, I will examine Aristotle's protreptic argument for the necessity of philosophy as it was deployed by Al-Kindi. I will show how a Muslim critic of philosophy, primarily one who is aligned with the theological outlook of Ibn Hanbal, can reasonably reject the protreptic argument as Al-Kindi presents it. The argument can, however, be reworked in a way to circumvent common criticisms of it presented by Hanbalī-style opponents of philosophy. Indeed, I will argue that, once the argument is properly clarified with reference to what constitutes 'philosophy', its soundness is incontrovertible. In closing, I will briefly discuss why Muslim critics of philosophy need not see the protreptic argument as threatening, as the inevitability of philosophy does not necessitate a commitment to all sorts of philosophical positions, however problematic these may be for Islamic doctrine.

Keywords: *Islam; philosophy; Islamic philosophy; antiphilosophy; protreptic argument; Aristotle; Al-Kindi; Ibn Hanbal.*

1. Introduction

In his *On First Philosophy* (Ar. *fī al-falsafah al-ūlā*), Abu Yusuf Ya‘qub ibn Ishaq Al-Kindi (d. 870 CE), the ‘Philosopher of the Arabs’, includes a brief defense of philosophy (Ar. *falsafa*). As part of his defense, he offers the following argument:

[A]cquisition of this is required necessarily (even) according to the tongues of its adversaries; for they must say that acquisition of this is either necessary or not necessary. If they say that it is necessary, then its pursuit is necessary for them. If, on the other hand, they say that it is not necessary, it is necessary for them to bring a cause of this, and to give a demonstration of this; and the presentation of cause and demonstration are part of the possession of knowledge of the real nature of things. Pursuit of this acquisition is, therefore, required by their own tongues, and devotion to it is necessary for them. (Ivry 1974, 59)

This protreptic argument for the necessity of philosophizing is not a new one (henceforth, all references to the ‘protreptic argument’ will be to this argument). It is an argument that is historically traceable to Aristotle’s use of it in the *Protrepticus*.¹ The main purpose of this article is to discuss and defend Al-Kindi’s protreptic argument in an Islamic context.

Here is how I shall proceed. First, I will show how the argument, as it stands, can be reasonably rejected by Muslim adversaries of philosophy. Next, I will discuss how the argument can be revised in a way that makes it a good argument, one that has force and plausibility. As part of my discussion of the reformulation, I will consider and respond to some objections that may be raised against it. Finally, I will conclude with a few remarks that I hope will assuage Muslim opponents of philosophy who may feel that they simply cannot accept the argument, even if it appears convincing.

2. Problems with the Protreptic Argument

I will confine my discussion of the protreptic argument to an Islamic context, focusing on *antiphilosophy* in Islam. By ‘antiphilosophy’, I roughly mean *a repudiation of philosophy altogether*; when framed Islamically, such repudiation is held to be warranted as a consequence of

¹ For an extended discussion of this argument and its historical context, see Castagnoli (2012, 51-59).

accepting the truth and authority of the Islamic religion. The preeminent Islamic figure cited in most accounts and defenses of Islamic antiphilosophy is Ahmed Ibn Hanbal (d. 855) whose dogmatic views, as Wesley Williams rightly observes, “would eventually become the shibboleth of Sunni ‘orthodoxy’” (Williams 2002, 442). The foundation of Ibn Hanbal’s position on religious matters is that uncritical submission to religious (Islamic) authority (Ar. *taqlīd*) is obligatory for Muslims:

Whoever asserts that he does not approve of uncritical faith (...) and that he will not follow others in matters of faith, that one has made a sinful utterance in the eyes of God and His Apostle (may God bless him and grant him salvation). By such an attitude he aims at the invalidation of tradition, the degrading of knowledge and *sunnah* [sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad]. He is concerned only with subjective opinion, speculative theology (*kalām*), innovation and dissension. (Cragg and Speight 1980, 126)

In this excerpt, Ibn Hanbal states that disavowing *taqlīd* in religious matters is a sin and that it belies the authority of the *Sunnah*. By eschewing *taqlīd*, he says, one runs the risk of innovating in religious matters. It is this notion of ‘innovation’ (Ar. *bid’ah*) that is central to Ibn Hanbal’s rejection of rational speculation, even if this speculation is subservient to Islam as is the case with *kalām*.² *Kalām*, as Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) defines it, is

a science that involves arguing with logical proofs in defense of the articles of faith and refuting innovators who deviate in their dogmas from the early Muslims and Muslim orthodoxy. (Rosenthal 1958, 34)

Given its apologetic function, it seems that *kalām* ought to be welcomed by Muslims as a ‘safe’ and useful discipline to deploy as needed in discussions about religious matters. For Ibn Hanbal, however, this point simply cannot override his fundamental objection to it: *kalām* is an innovation in religion since it was never endorsed by the Prophet.³

² Many ‘traditionalist’ Muslims, including those who follow Ibn Hanbal, often cite sayings of the Prophet Muhammad that warn about the seriousness of innovation, e.g., “The worst of things are those that are newly invented; every newly-invented thing is an innovation and every innovation is going astray, and every going astray is in the [Hell] Fire” (Sunan an-Nasa’i 1578).

³ For a detailed presentation of this objection to *kalām*, see Ibn Qudama’s treatise *Censure of Speculative Theology* (Makḍisi 1985). For a critical evaluation of Ibn Qudama’s objection, see Aijaz (2018, Ch. 2).

Followers of Ibn Hanbal (Ar. *Hanābilah*) raise the same objection to *falsafa*.⁴

Does Al-Kindi's protreptic argument succeed in showing Islamic adversaries of philosophy like the Hanābilah that they must rationally acquiesce to philosophy simply in virtue of objecting to it? I don't think so. I won't canvass all the various ways in which the argument might be criticized.⁵ Instead, I will restrict my evaluation of it to considering how a thoughtful Hanbalī critic will most likely object to it. He will probably point out that the following premise of the argument is dubious:

If adversaries of philosophy say that the pursuit of philosophy is not necessary, it is necessary for them to bring a cause of this, and to bring a demonstration of this (which amounts to philosophizing).

In rejecting this premise, the Hanbalī critic may offer this explanation and justification:

As a faithful Muslim, I do indeed say that the pursuit of philosophy is not necessary. Indeed, I hold the bolder claim that it is *necessary not* to philosophize given the mandates of Islam as laid out in the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. My explanation and justification for this—what you call bringing a 'cause' and 'demonstration'—is simply that I submit to the authority of the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. In examining these sources of authority in

⁴ For example, here is the Egyptian Hanbalī theologian and jurist Al-Bahūtī (d. 1641) on philosophy: "The opposite of shar'ī knowledge [i.e., knowledge based on the Shariah] is knowledge that is haraam [forbidden] or makrooh [detestable but not forbidden]. Haraam knowledge is like 'ilm al-kalaam [speculative theology] in which they argue on the basis of pure reason or speak in a manner that contradicts sound, unambiguous reports. If they speak on the basis of reports only or on the basis of texts and rational thought that is in accordance with them, then this is the basis of religion and the way of ahl al-sunnah [People of the Sunnah]. This is what is meant by the words of Shaykh Taqiy al-Deen. In his commentary, he explains that (...) *Haraam knowledge (...)* includes (...) *philosophy, magic (sleight of hand), astrology and geomancy, as well as alchemy and natural sciences*" (as quoted by Islam Question & Answer 2006; emphasis mine).

⁵ Various criticisms of the protreptic argument can be given depending on how exactly its proponent wants its recipient(s) to understand it. As D. A. Rohatyn observes, the statement that philosophy is necessary can be construed in several different ways: "Is philosophy indispensable? Is philosophy inescapable? Is it a "must"? Is it a necessity? These are all equally ambiguous questions. Indispensable? To whom? When? And what for? Inescapable? By whom? And for how long? A "must"? In the same sense as "you must go to see XYZ playing Hamlet"? Not quite. A "necessity"? Of what? Of life? Of individual existence? For the survival of the species? For the flourishing of a culture? For the aspirations of a civilization? If the answer to any or all of these questions is negative, that does not mean that we should cease being interested in philosophy. But if any or all can be defended, that is, given a positive reply, then it may be asserted that we have an obligation to do, or to continue doing, philosophy. A simple yes or no answer is premature, for the questions each admit of a variety of interpretations" (Rohatyn 1975, 9).

Islam, it is clear that the pursuit of philosophy is an innovation and is therefore forbidden.

In responding this way, the Hanbalī critic won't see himself as having articulated a piece of philosophy. He may ask why we should think that simply giving an account of and basis for a (religious) conviction constitutes engaging in philosophy. If this is all there is to philosophy, he might further object, how is it to be distinguished from other important disciplines in Islam that are generally recognized by Muslims as distinct from it, such as jurisprudence (Ar. *fiqh*)? Is the Muslim jurist doing philosophy if, say, he gives a sermon at the mosque in which he urges Muslim women to dress modestly and to cover their heads? What these concerns show is that, for the proponent of Al-Kindi's protreptic argument and its Hanbalī detractor to make progress in attempting to resolve their dispute, it will be necessary for them to be clear about precisely what is meant by 'philosophy'.

Al-Kindi defines philosophy in an Aristotelian manner, writing that it is "knowledge of the true nature of things, insofar as is possible for man" (Ivry 1974, 55). He also follows Aristotle in stating that to know something is to know its (four) causes (Ivry 1974, 56; see Aristotle, *Physics*, Bk. II, Part 3). On this matter, a Hanbalī critic can agree that it is important to know the true nature of things and to know about their causes, but he can also maintain that this knowledge is inextricably linked to and solely obtained by the authority of the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. He may say, for instance, that it is important for humanity to read and study the Qur'an, so they know that God is the Creator of all things (39:62) and that everything in the universe glorifies Him (17:44, 22:18, 16:48-49). He may go on to insist that *this* way of acquiring knowledge about the true nature of things (i.e., deferring to the authority of God's revelation in sacred texts) is consistent with rejecting autonomous (theologically independent) inquiry (especially metaphysical speculation) that characterizes the Aristotelian conception of philosophy embraced by Al-Kindi (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Bk. I, esp. Parts 1 & 2). It is difficult to see without further explanation how this sort of response from the Hanbalī critic still amounts to philosophy as Al-Kindi understands it. After all, the Hanbalī critic insists that knowledge of the true nature of things is inseparable from the Qur'an and *Sunnah*, whereas Aristotle makes it clear in his discussion of philosophy, a discipline that he characterizes as a "free science", that it is not wedded to the authority of any specific religion (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Bk. I, esp. Part 2).

Since Al-Kindi's treatment of the protreptic argument does not include any further elaboration or discussion of it that might be used to respond to such concerns, I submit that the argument, as it stands, may be reasonably rejected by a thoughtful Hanbalī critic.

3. Revising and Defending the Protreptic Argument

As my discussion in the previous section shows, the definition of philosophy plays an important role in Al-Kindi's protreptic argument. A thoughtful Hanbalī critic may reasonably reject the argument while maintaining that his rejection of it, and of philosophy as a whole, does not constitute philosophy. If the critic knows his Aristotle, he may point out that Al-Kindi's position is reliant on an Aristotelian interpretation of what it means to give a 'cause' and 'demonstration', and that he (that is, the Hanbali critic) simply rejects this interpretation. I believe that this is a fair criticism of Al-Kindi's argument. It seems to me, however, that the argument can be revised and presented in a way that makes it much more compelling and immune to this criticism.

Let's start the revision by reconsidering the definition of philosophy, which I think is central to making the protreptic argument succeed. Although Aristotle is certainly a paradigmatic example of a philosopher, philosophy itself need not be defined specifically in accordance with his understanding of it, or, indeed, with any mention of Aristotle at all. Consider how there are several equally (if not more) prestigious philosophers who lived before Aristotle and whose works are also regarded as paradigmatically philosophical (e.g., Plato). Philosophy, as many philosophers have maintained, should be understood primarily with respect to its methodology as opposed to its history. While there is no consensus among philosophers about how philosophy should be defined in an exact sense, there is broad agreement (among contemporary analytic philosophers, anyway) about its key features. In their account of philosophy, Monroe C. Beardsley and Elizabeth L. Beardsley (henceforth 'the Beardsleys') discuss some of these features. Explaining how philosophical questions arise, they write:

Philosophical questions grow out of a kind of thinking that is familiar to all of us: the thinking that we do when we ask ourselves whether something that we believe is reasonable to believe. "Reasonable" has a broad, but definite, meaning here: a reasonable belief is simply a belief for which a good reason can be given (...). The search for good reasons for our beliefs,

and for good reasons for the reasons, can be carried as far as we wish. If it is carried far enough, the searcher finds himself confronted by questions of a peculiar kind: the questions of philosophy. (Beardsley and Beardsley 2018, 3-4)

To illustrate, the Beardsleys give an example of hearing from a friend that a certain man who violated the law should be sent to jail. Even if you agree with this friend, you may still find yourself wondering whether your position is correct by reflectively working backward from it and thinking about the chain of supporting reasons:

Why does the man deserve to be sent to jail? Because he committed a crime, of course. Yes, but why should he be sent to jail for committing a crime? Because to disobey the laws of the state is wrong. *But why?* Just because certain people you don't even know, perhaps people who died years before you were born, passed a law against, let us say, spitting in the subway or disorderly conduct, how does that obligate you to obey the law? This line of questioning, as we can foresee, will, if carried far, lead into some perplexing questions about the moral basis of the law, the tests of right and wrong, and the purposes of government and society. For example, we may discover that in approving the jail sentence we are assuming that the existence of a government is so important to maintain that governments have the right, under certain conditions, to deprive any citizen of his liberties. This assumption is a philosophical belief. And when we ask whether or not it is true, we are asking a philosophical question. (Beardsley and Beardsley 2018, 5)

The Beardsleys explain that the line of questioning about the man's deserving jail may unfold in a different manner. Why should the man be punished if he committed an illegal act? Because, it may be said, he is responsible for his actions. But why think that he is responsible? Because he freely committed the act, one may answer. That is, the man committed the act despite being able to refrain from committing it; like everyone else, the man had 'free will'. Belief in free will is another example of a philosophical belief (Beardsley and Beardsley 2018, 5).

The Beardsleys further discuss what characterizes a question as philosophical. Most philosophical questions, they explain, are highly general. They are about a broad class of things, e.g., 'Do all human beings have free will?' Other philosophical questions are highly fundamental.

They are about core beliefs that underlie and support a wide range of other beliefs, e.g., ‘Does God exist?’ (Beardsley and Beardsley 2018, 5-6). The Beardsleys note that, although they do not know how to set up rules to determine just how general or fundamental a question must be to be deemed philosophical, philosophical questions nevertheless arise eventually if the regress of supporting reasons for a belief is pursued long enough:

[I]f the demand for good reasons is pressed, beginning with any belief, it will gradually pass beyond the scope of various special fields of knowledge and investigation, and at some point it will bring to light a question that many philosophers would be interested in and would recognize—perhaps with joy, and perhaps, if it is a very tough one, with uneasiness—as their very own. (Beardsley and Beardsley 2018, 7)

This seems to me to be exactly right. To be sure, one can have a more comprehensive discussion about the substance and contours of philosophy, pointing out its other characteristics, such as, for instance, a style of writing that includes and emphasizes clarity, precision, and argumentative rigor. A full exploration of what constitutes philosophy is, however, not needed for the purposes of my discussion. The Beardsleys’ basic account of it provides sufficient material to revise and restate Al-Kindi’s protreptic argument in a way that makes it immune to the criticisms I discussed in the preceding section.

With the Beardsleys’ account of philosophy in hand, let’s have a closer look at the Hanbalī critic’s response to Al-Kindi’s protreptic argument. We can see how his anti-philosophical stance does, if sufficiently queried for justification, reveal itself as philosophical despite his claims to the contrary. There are several different ways in which this can happen, and here I will offer one of them as an example. Consider this hypothetical dialogue between a proponent of Al-Kindi’s protreptic argument (whom I will simply call the ‘Philosopher’) and the Hanbalī critic (I will introduce the dialogue from the critical point in the dialectic involving the Hanbalī critic’s claim that philosophy is not necessary):

Hanbalī critic: The pursuit of philosophy is not necessary (indeed, it is necessary not to philosophize).

Philosopher: Why think that?

Hanbalī critic: Because the Qur'an and *Sunnah* prohibit engaging in philosophy.

Philosopher: Really? But many Muslim thinkers believe otherwise, insisting that there is no incompatibility between these religious sources and philosophy.

Hanbalī critic: These Muslims are sinning by engaging in something that is prohibited by the Qur'an and *Sunnah*.

Philosopher: But where exactly is the prohibition on philosophy, *falsafa*, in the Qur'an and *Sunnah*?

Hanbalī critic: There is no explicit discussion of it in these sources, but, you see, this is precisely the problem. The Qur'an and *Sunnah* are silent about philosophy.

Philosopher: But if the Qur'an and *Sunnah* don't say anything about it, why should I take this to mean that philosophy is prohibited and sinful?

Hanbalī critic: Because to engage in something that the Prophet did not engage in is innovation, and innovation is a sin.

Philosopher: But the Prophet did not engage in many things that Muslims today generally do not consider sinful, even if they are 'innovations': computer programming, calligraphy, neuroscience, flying an airplane, etc.

Hanbalī critic: Yes, but these 'innovations' do not touch on fundamental matters of religion, such as belief in the existence of God, Revelation, Prophets, etc.

Philosopher: Ah, so now you are making a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable forms of innovation. Alright, why should we think that philosophizing about fundamental matters of religion is an unacceptable innovation?

Hanbalī critic: Because fundamental matters of religion should be simply accepted, without asking how (Ar. *bila kayf*).

Philosopher: *But why?*

There are several possible criticisms of the Hanbalī critic's response here, some of which do not have a direct bearing on the immediate question of whether the response itself constitutes philosophy. Still, I think that two of these are worth mentioning because they show how the Hanbalī critic may create *new* problems for himself if he offers the sort of response presented in the dialogue above. First, the claim that one ought to reject innovative disciplines discussing fundamental matters of religion will, if used to object to philosophy, exclude Islamic disciplines that are generally agreed upon by Muslims as perfectly appropriate; the claim is too restrictive, that is. This point is part of Ibn Rushd's (d. 1198) reply to those who object to philosophy in the way that the Hanbalī critic does:

It is not for someone to say, "Now, this kind of reflection about intellectual syllogistic reasoning is a heretical innovation, since it did not exist in the earliest days [of Islam]". For reflection upon juridical syllogistic reasoning and its kinds is also something inferred after the earliest days, yet it is not opined to be a heretical innovation. (Butterworth 2001, 4)

Another criticism of the Hanbalī critic's response is that it violates the very principle it relies on to object to philosophy. As Al-Ash'ari (d. 936) puts it in his defense against the Hanbalī objection to *kalām* (an objection that proceeds in exactly the same manner as the objection to *falsafa* I'm discussing):

It is also true that the Prophet never said: "If anyone should inquire into that and discuss it, regard him as a deviating innovator". So you are constrained to regard yourselves as deviating innovators, since you have discussed something that the Prophet did not discuss, and you have accused of deviation him whom the Prophet did not so accuse. (Renard 2014, 152)

Al-Ash'ari's comments here are right on the mark. If it is indeed true that the Qur'an and *Sunnah* are silent about *falsafa* (or *kalām*), why should this silence be interpreted as *disapproval*?⁶ Wouldn't this interpretation violate the principle that the Hanbalī critic is using to object to it (i.e., that one should not engage in something that the Prophet did not engage in)? Al-Ash'ari's astute observation shows how the Hanbalī critic's objection to disciplines like *falsafa* or *kalām* can easily slip into a stance that is no longer operating strictly from the first-order theological perspective to

⁶ In his discussion of the Hanbalī objection to *kalām*, Al-Ash'ari offers this reply operating on the assumption that the Prophet did indeed remain silent about *kalām*. He also discusses two other replies to the objection that contest this assumption (see Renard 2014, 152-160).

which he claims to be committed (i.e., from a perspective that proceeds only in accordance with what the text of the Qur'an and *Sunnah* explicitly state).

I will now develop this second criticism of the Hanbalī critic's response in a way that buttresses Al-Kindi's protreptic argument. As we saw earlier in the Beardleys' account of philosophy, philosophical beliefs and questions about them are revealed if the regress of supporting reasons for a claim is pursued long enough. This happens when the line of questioning goes beyond the edges of the domain that the claim is typically affiliated with and into terrain that philosophers primarily lay claim to. By objecting to philosophy in the way presented in the dialogue above, the Hanbalī critic's reply satisfies these basic criteria. In responding to the philosopher, he is offering what he thinks are *good reasons* that support his position. Moreover, after just a few moves in the exchange, his chain of reasoning goes *beyond* the strict confines of what is stated in the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. One point in the dialogue where this happens is when the Hanbalī critic relies on the assumption (or some approximation of it) that *If the Prophet was silent about innovations involving fundamental matters of religion, then such innovations are prohibited (for Muslims)*. From this assumption, one can ferret out another more general assumption that relies on the cogency of arguments from silence in a historical context.

An argument from silence, as Timothy McGrew explains, is “a pattern of reasoning in which the failure of a known source to mention a particular fact or event is used as the ground of an inference, usually to the conclusion that the supposed fact is untrue or the supposed event did not actually happen” (McGrew 2014, 215). As McGrew also notes, the use of such arguments in history is controversial (*Ibid.*). The feasibility of arguments from silence in making historical inferences is often discussed by philosophers of history (and, on a more general level, by philosophers who focus on logic and epistemology). Here is how the English philosopher and historian R. G. Collingwood explains the central point of contention concerning their use:

The problem is this: can we say that a certain event did not happen because we are not told that it did? On the one side, it may be argued that we cannot, because our sources do not exhaust the whole of the events in their period, and any number of things may have happened about which they say nothing. But on the other side, it may be argued that all historians always do rely on the argument from silence when they accept a narrative based on a certain source because they have no other

sources and therefore cannot check the one which they possess; thus our account of any event for which we have only one authority would certainly have to be modified if we discovered a second authority. (Collingwood 2005, 388)

In (explicitly or implicitly) siding with those philosophers of history who accept the legitimacy of arguments from silence, it should be clear that the Hanbalī critic has committed himself to certain philosophical assumptions about logic and epistemology (among others) in historical settings. When we consider the commitment to these assumptions alongside his articulation of reasons to make his case against philosophy, the Hanbalī critic's response to the philosopher in the dialogue above can plausibly be seen as philosophical. How might a defender of the Hanbalī critic reply to resist this analysis?

One possible response is that my assessment of the Hanbalī critic's stance is incorrect if he simply does not *recognize* or *acknowledge* his response as philosophical. This response seems wrong. Suppose that the Hanbalī critic does not recognize or acknowledge his response as constituting philosophy. This does not show that the criteria for something to count as philosophy have not been met, unless one implausibly assumes *that philosophy needs to be recognized or acknowledged as philosophy in order for it to be so*. This assumption will be rejected by most philosophers. Consider, for instance, how those of us who teach philosophy will often point out to new students of the discipline that all of us are, in some sense, philosophers, whether we recognize this or not. On a more general level, the principle that *S's exercise, E, does not count as an exercise in a discipline, D, unless S recognizes or acknowledges E as an exercise in D* seems false for many, perhaps most, disciplines. Taking this principle to be true would mean that, for example, the amateur enthusiast who assembled a fine mahogany desk by herself has not engaged in carpentry if she does not recognize or acknowledge her accomplishment *as* carpentry. A similar thing can be said about accounting, archaeology, literature, meditation, and many other disciplines.

Another possible response to my assessment of the Hanbalī critic's stance is that I have carved out my hypothetical dialogue involving him in just *one particular way* that results in the inevitability of philosophy on his part. There are, a defender of the Hanbalī critic may protest, several *other* ways in which the claim that philosophy is not necessary can be defended, ways that do not inevitably constitute an exercise in philosophy. By way of reply, let me say two things. First, my hypothetical dialogue effectively encapsulates *the* objection to philosophy (and philosophical theology) by

Ibn Hanbal and Hanbalī critics.⁷ Second, all the other ways that I am aware of in which Hanbalī critics and their supporters (including those belonging to other schools of Islamic thought) object to philosophical speculation can be shown to be philosophical. Let's consider another familiar way in which the philosophical nature of Hanbalī objections to philosophy is revealed. In several cases, the chain of supporting reasons behind their objections can be traced to a commitment to various philosophical assumptions about metaphysics. Usually, these assumptions are about the limitations of human reason in discerning metaphysical matters, such as the nature of God. Towards the end of my hypothetical dialogue, the Hanbalī critic's final appeal is to a reason stating that fundamental matters of religion should be simply accepted without asking how (*Ar. bila kayf*). But notice, as the philosopher's last line of the dialogue shows, it still makes perfectly good sense to ask why we should accept this claim. In probing its plausibility, we see once again how the Hanbalī critic seems committed to a particular set of philosophical assumptions about metaphysical ignorance. Historically speaking, Muslim claims about accepting religious doctrine 'without asking how' have usually stemmed from concerns about applying human reason, frail as it is, to metaphysical claims. As a case in point, consider the excerpt below in which Ibn Qudama cites Ibn Hanbal, who explains his position on how we should understand apparently anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Qur'an and Prophetic traditions:

We believe in these traditions, we acknowledge them, and we allow them to pass intact as they have come down to us, *without being able to understand the how of them, nor to fathom their intended sense*, except in accordance with [God's] own description of Himself; and He is, according to His own description, the Hearing, the Seeing, boundless and immeasurable. His attributes proceed from Him and are His own. We do not go beyond the Koran or the traditions from the Prophet and his Companions; *nor do we know the how of these*, save by the acknowledgment of the Apostle and the confirmation of the Koran. (Makdisi 1985, 9; emphasis mine)

This position is described in a pithier fashion by the famous Medinan jurist Malik ibn Anas (d. 795) who, when asked to explain what is meant by God's 'sitting on the throne' (e.g., Qur'an 7:54, 20:5), is reported to have simply said: "The sitting is known, its modality is unknown. Belief in it is

⁷ See the similarities between my hypothetical dialogue involving the philosopher and the Hanbalī critic and Al-Ash'ari's summary account of the main Hanbalī-style argument for abstaining from *kalām* about religious matters (Renard 2014, 151-152).

an obligation and raising questions regarding it is a heresy” (Fakhry 2004, xix). Although the direct target of Ibn Hanbal’s and Malik’s censure in these remarks is the practice of attempting to interpret (instead of just accepting) anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Qur’an (e.g., by resorting to allegorical exegesis), it is evident that agnosticism about the metaphysical aspects of religious doctrine, such as the nature of God, is assumed to be correct. We do not ‘know the how’ of the divine attributes, as Ibn Hanbal says. But to adopt this stance before proceeding to articulate a set of reasons why philosophical speculation about metaphysical matters is inappropriate is to proffer a *philosophical argument*, as many philosophers will see. The core criteria for what constitutes such an argument have been met (i.e., being committed to a philosophical belief, about which philosophical questions can be raised, and offering a chain of reasons that stem from it to support a conclusion).

What emerges from a consideration of these specific instances in which Hanbalī critics and their supporters object to philosophy is a more general but important point. It appears that *however the objection to philosophy is formulated*, it cannot escape being presented in a manner which, if sufficiently investigated, will disclose its philosophical nature. Philosophy, as we’ve seen, reveals itself in a piece of reasoning when we trace the chain of supporting reasons back to general and/or fundamental beliefs. These beliefs may include matters of logic, language, epistemology, metaphysics, or ethics (the traditional branches of philosophy). It appears impossible to conceptualize an objection to philosophy that is totally disconnected from and not dependent on *any* general or fundamental beliefs in these areas. The concept of such an objection seems incoherent, much like the position of naïve subjectivism about which Thomas Nagel critically comments as follows:

To put it schematically, the claim “Everything is subjective” must be nonsense, for it would itself have to be either subjective or objective. But it can’t be objective, since in that case it would be false if true. And it can’t be subjective, because then it would not rule out any objective claim, including the claim that it is objectively false. There may be some subjectivists, perhaps styling themselves as pragmatists, who present subjectivism as applying even to itself. But then it does not call for a reply, since it is just a report of what the subjectivist finds it agreeable to say. If he also invites us to join him, we need not offer any reason for declining, since he has offered us no reason to accept. Objections of this kind are as

old as the hills, but they seem to require constant repetition.
(Nagel 1997, 15)

As further supporting evidence for thinking that Muslim critics of philosophy relied on it themselves, we can refer to numerous examples in the history of Islamic thought. Even a cursory examination of this history shows that it is replete with instances of philosophical thinking and argumentation among even the most vociferous opponents of philosophy. In Ibn Hanbal's writings alone, we can, with relative ease, locate many philosophical beliefs and arguments pertaining to a variety of topics. Let me refer to just one of these topics to illustrate, the topic of 'free will'. The Beardsleys, recall, cite belief in free will as an example of a philosophical belief. As those who've read the Qur'an and perused the *hadith* literature are probably aware, it isn't clear from these texts whether we have free will. Some Qur'anic passages and *hadith* references suggest that we do, while others imply that God has determined everything, including human actions. The topic of free will was vigorously debated in the nascent Muslim community and appears to be one of the earliest philosophical issues that animated debate and dialogue. A. J. Wensinck goes as far as to say that "debates on predestination inaugurated rationalism in Islam" (Wensinck 2008, 53). In this controversy, Ibn Hanbal explicitly takes the side of those who reject free will but does so on the basis of several philosophical arguments. Here is one of them:

Whoever asserts that theft, wine drinking, and using unlawful gain are not by decree and destiny, but rather that man possesses the power to consume that which belongs to others, this one plainly speaks the doctrine of the Zoroastrians (...). The truth is rather that one who appropriates the possessions of others really consumes his own goods, and God had judged that he should consume them in the manner which he did. (Cragg and Speight 1980, 121)

The argument here, if fleshed out in some detail, seems to be something like this:

If we possess free will (which entails that we have some power over our choices), then this commits us to metaphysical dualism found in religions like Zoroastrianism. This is because the proponent of free will is positing two ultimate sources to account for the distribution of good and evil in the world (i.e., God is not the cause of a man stealing or drinking wine; the man is the cause). Metaphysical dualism is obviously false

from a Muslim perspective, as it contradicts the oneness of God (Ar. *tawhīd*). It cannot, therefore, be the case that we possess free will.

Now, whether Ibn Hanbal's philosophical argument here is good is not relevant for present purposes. The important thing to note is that he *has* given a philosophical argument. The excerpt from Ibn Hanbal that I've cited above is neither a Qur'anic passage nor from any *hadith*. It is an instance of Ibn Hanbal venturing beyond these sources and adopting a philosophical position to reject the idea of free will. Commenting more generally on this problem affecting Muslim opponents of philosophy, including the famous arch critic Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328), Georges Tamer writes:

[A]uthors seeking to renounce philosophy were ensnared by the very methods they sought to refute; al-Ghazālī, for instance, was viewed with suspicion among traditionalists for his speculative leanings and for his infusion of logic into *fiqh* [jurisprudence]; furthermore, he was roundly condemned for simultaneously employing and being inextricably entangled with the very philosophical methods he sought to disprove. Ibn Taymiyya, likewise, found himself criticized for his simultaneous rejection and absorption of philosophical principles. Though he railed against philosophers and repudiated the exalted position of their science, the Shāfi'ī scholar and historian Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), in a famous statement, excoriates Ibn Taymiyya for having "repeatedly swallowed the poison of the philosophers and their works" (*qad bala'ta sumūm al-falāsifa wa-muṣannaḫātihim marrāt*). As a result, Ibn Taymiyya's body had become addicted to the frequent use of poison so that it was secreted in the very bones; through this route, his speech had likewise been corrupted. Through an organic, reciprocal process which they, perhaps, had not consciously perceived, the enemies of *falsafa* had become philosophers themselves. (Tamer 2013, 331-332)

This historical observation makes sense given the soundness of Al-Kindi's protreptic argument. Although its basic formulation may be reasonably rejected by Muslim critics of philosophy, a more careful statement and clarification of it shows that it is a good argument. An examination of the history of Islamic thought where Muslims have objected to philosophy provides ample corroborating evidence. Although the protreptic argument is not frequently mentioned by contemporary defenders of philosophy in

an Islamic context, it does on occasion get an airing even if only in an approximate or inchoate form. In a 2012 lecture titled ‘Philosophy Matters’, the Islamic philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr had this to say:

You might say that philosophy is like politics. You can have good politics or bad politics. But there is no society that will have no politics. It is the same way with philosophy. Everyone, whether he or she is aware or not, has some kind of a philosophical view of life, of action, of ethics, of thinking, of what is good, what is bad, what is true, what is false, what is beautiful, what is ugly, and so forth and so on. And so, it is really impossible to do without philosophy. (Nasr 2012)

I agree with Nasr, which should come as no surprise given my discussion thus far. His points above can easily be molded into the protreptic argument proper, which offers an important and dialectically effective tool, I think, in responding to Muslim (and non-Muslim) opponents of philosophy.

4. Conclusion

In this article, I have shown how the position of Islamic antiphilosophy collapses when faced with a revised version of Al-Kindi’s protreptic argument. With some adjustments to the original, mainly to clarify the nature of philosophy, the argument succeeds. In bringing my discussion to a close, I want to end by extending an olive branch to the Islamic antiphilosophy camp. In saying that philosophy *as a discipline* is inevitable, I am not saying that all sorts of *specific philosophical positions* are unavoidable. Perhaps some are (e.g., assumptions about logic, epistemology, etc.), but others can be coherently rejected. Those who maintain that Islamic antiphilosophy is correct may remain deeply suspicious of the protreptic argument and of philosophy as a whole because they think that philosophers are necessarily committed to a wide array of philosophical views that flatly contradict fundamental Islamic doctrine. They may cite Al-Ghazali (d. 1111), who concludes his famous critique of philosophy in the *Incoherence of The Philosophers* (Ar. *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*) by giving a verdict on three of its tenets that (according to him) are completely incompatible with Islam:

Pronouncing [the philosophers] infidels is necessary in three questions. One of them is the question of the world’s pre-eternity and their statement that all substances are pre-eternal. The second is their statement that God’s knowledge does not

encompass the temporal particulars among individual [existents]. The third is their denial of the resurrection of bodies and their assembly at the day of judgment. These three doctrines do not agree with Islam in any respect. (Marmura 2000, 226)

In the early pages of the *Incoherence*, however, Al-Ghazali makes it clear that by ‘philosophy’ he means philosophy *as understood by* Al-Farabi (d. 950) and Ibn Sina (d. 1037), and that he will confine his criticisms of philosophy to what these two men have said about it (Marmura 2000, 4-5). To consider just one of Al-Ghazali’s points of contention, it is true that Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina both maintained the eternity of the world, but philosophers in general are not, of course, committed to agreeing with them. In classical Islamic philosophy, Al-Kindi is an example of a philosopher who believed that the universe had a beginning.⁸ Just as one may reject *specific* legal, theological, or political views without rejecting jurisprudence, theology, or politics, one may also reject *specific* philosophical views without rejecting philosophy. Certainly, those in the camp of Islamic antiphilosophy can help to illuminate some of the blind spots, missteps, and errors made by philosophers. But one can graciously accept their assistance in dismissing untenable philosophical views without rejecting philosophy *in toto*. If the revised version of Al-Kindi’s protreptic argument is correct, as I believe it to be, this is simply not an available option.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to John Bishop, the editors of this special issue of the *EuJAP* (Abbas Ahsan and Marzuqa Karima), and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

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⁸ See Al-Kindi, *On First Philosophy*, Chapter 2 (Ivry 1974).

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