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# Akbarian Skepticism in Islam: Qūnawī's Skeptical Arguments from Relativity and Disagreement

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**Abstract:** This study deals with the skeptical arguments by one of the most important figures in the philosophical Sufi tradition (the Akbarian school) and the foremost disciple of Ibn 'Arabī, Şadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī. Though not skeptic in the strict sense, Qūnawī employs skeptical arguments from relativity of rational knowledge and disagreement among philosophers to prove inefficacy of reason and rational procedures of knowledge in terms of achieving certain knowledge of metaphysical matters, namely of God and the ultimate principles of things. The paper questions Qūnawī's implicit assumption that if there is disagreement on a proposition  $p$ , then  $p$  is relative, and thus cannot provide certain knowledge. It aims to philosophically analyse and assess his skepticism as well as to shed light to the largely unknown terrain of skepticism in the medieval Islamic world.

**Keywords:** Skepticism, Sufism, the Akbarian School of Sufism, Şadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī, relativity, disagreement.

## Introduction

Skepticism never coalesced into a clear-cut school of thought in the Islamic world of the Middle Ages, but glimpses of skeptical arguments were always in evidence in philosophical and theological debates, usually as part the ancient dichotomy between reason and revelation, or philosophy and religion, which was arguably the most fundamental problem of Islamic thought.<sup>1</sup> A skeptical argument, therefore, might occasionally have taken its source from religious concerns and accordingly targeted the philosophical mind-set, while in other contexts skeptics with antireligious sentiments attacked religious knowledge and revelation. Intellectual strands that fall under the rubric of *taşawwuf* or "Islamic mysticism" generally adopt the former approach, considering reason, on religious and mystical grounds, an invalid

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<sup>1</sup> Although recent studies, such as Lagerlund, 2010 and Bolyard, 2017 shed considerable light on the general history of medieval skepticism in Christendom, studies on its counterpart in the Islamic world are rather limited and seem to be confined to the somewhat overstated skepticism of Ghazālī and its comparison to that of Western philosophers, like Descartes and Hume. As exceptional works, I shall mention van Ess, 1968 (repr. 2018); Heck, 2006; 2014; Shihadeh, 2007; Kukkonen, 2010 and Fatoorchi, 2013.

or at least an inadequate source of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> This study will deal with the skeptical arguments by one of the most important figures of the philosophical Sufi tradition (the Akbarian school) and the stepson and foremost disciple of Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240), Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 1274),<sup>3</sup> arguments meant to prove that reason and rational procedures are unable to achieve certain knowledge of metaphysical subjects, that is, God and the ultimate causes of things. The paper aims, on the one hand, to philosophically analyse and assess his skepticism of rational knowledge, based on the relativity of this kind of knowledge and apparent disagreement among philosophers, and, on the other, “to introduce Islam more fully into the history of skepticism” (Heck, 2014, p. 2).

Qūnawī has been chosen for the study for several reasons. For one, even though Ibn ‘Arabī is the “Greatest Master” (*al-Shaykh al-Akbar*) and the eponym of the Akbarian school, it is the “Great Master” (*al-Shaykh al-Kabīr*) Qūnawī who should be credited with the systematization of his master’s scattered ideas by reformulating them into a unified doctrine of the school. He appears to have strived to give that doctrine the soundness of a demonstrative system, while presenting it as something in strict compliance with the religious orthodoxy. Through his works and his direct and indirect disciples,<sup>4</sup> he exerted such an influence on the subsequent generations that he determined the way Akbarian doctrines came to be perceived (Kynsh, 1995, p. 39).<sup>5</sup> By doing so, Qūnawī ensured the Akbarian tradition a respected status among scholarly circles in different parts of the Islamic world, especially in the Ottoman and Persian spheres, and thus is aptly regarded by some scholars as the true founder of theoretical Sufism (Demirli, 2008). This might be corroborated further by the fact that Qūnawī is the first to recast *taṣawwuf* as a demonstrative science along Aristotelian lines,

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<sup>2</sup> For a case study of the anti-rationalist Sufi position, see Chittick, 2012 (pp. 201–209) on Rūmī’s wooden leg metaphor for reason.

<sup>3</sup> On Qūnawī’s life and work, see Chittick, 1978; 2004; Demirli, 2011 and Todd, 2014 especially pp. 13–43. None of Qūnawī’s works has been translated into Western languages yet, but English translation of selected passages are featured in Nasr & Aminrazavi, 2012, vol. IV, pp. 416–434, and Todd, 2014, pp. 195–213.

<sup>4</sup> Alongside being the author of probably the second-most studied text of philosophical Sufism, the *Key to the non-Manifest* (*Miftāḥ al-ghayb*) and the commentator of the most-studied (i.e., Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ al-hikam*), Qūnawī also encourages his disciples to write commentaries on the latter, thus initiating a commentary tradition thereupon (Demirli, 2008; 2011; Todd, 2014, p. 31).

<sup>5</sup> Early evidence of Qūnawī’s position in the tradition comes down to us from the eminent Sufi author of the fifteenth century, Mullā Jāmī (1289, p. 632), who states that it is almost impossible for one to properly understand the works and views of the Greatest Master without perusing beforehand Qūnawī’s explanations on the central issues. See also Chittick, 1989, p. xviii.

under the rubric of the “Divine Science” (*al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*). “Thus, he tries to build a science out of knowledge based solely on the Sufi’s individual experience” (Demirli, 2011, p. 57). Second, as is evident from his correspondence with Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 1274),<sup>6</sup> arguably the most prominent figure of Avicennan school of the time, Qūnawī was versed in, and preoccupied with, the philosophy of Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, d. 1037) and, perhaps because of this, he usually sets forth his ideas within philosophical and logical arguments suitable for sober philosophical analysis. Moreover, overshadowed by his master Ibn ‘Arabī,<sup>7</sup> Qūnawī has not been given due attention in the literature, which may count as another motivation of the study.<sup>8</sup>

In the paper, I will reformulate Qūnawī’s relevant ideas into two arguments, one of which is more general and non-skeptical while the other specific and skeptical. To begin with the former non-skeptical one, Qūnawī is often credited with presenting *taṣawwuf* for the first time as a formal discipline, or more precisely, as metaphysics at the top of the hierarchy of sciences by identifying its specific subject matter, principles, and problems. For him, the Divine Science deals with the Real Being (*wujūd al-Haqq*) as its subject matter, takes the divine names as its principles, and investigates the problems concerning the mutual relationship between God and the universe (Daşdemir, 2020; Demirli, 2011). In his attempt to recast Sufism as an Islamic metaphysics, Qūnawī may have viewed the metaphysics of Muslim Peripatetic philosophers as the most serious rival, or alternative, to his own system. Therefore, in order to eliminate this rival philosophical metaphysics,<sup>9</sup> he targeted its system of rational knowledge by claiming that true knowledge of the metaphysical subjects—God, His

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<sup>6</sup> For a general account of this correspondence, see Chittick, 1981.

<sup>7</sup> To what extent Qūnawī’s thought was original or faithful to Ibn ‘Arabī’s is beyond the scope of this paper, so let me limit myself to quoting this concise statement of Chittick, 1992, p. 180: “[I]n fact his chief contribution to Ibn ‘Arabī’s school probably lay in his ability to express his master’s ideas in a logically coherent mode and thus bring them into a certain harmony, at least in the style of exposition, with the works of the Muslim Peripatetics.” See also Todd, 2014, pp. 45–51.

<sup>8</sup> On the reasons of the relative scarcity of Qūnawī studies, see Todd, 2014, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> In this respect, Qūnawī seems to follow Ghazālī in criticising the metaphysics of the Muslim Peripatetics with particular emphasis on its epistemological deficiencies. As he states in the fourth introduction to his *Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*), Ghazālī’s overall aim therein is to show that the philosophers failed to justify their claims about metaphysical matters through demonstrative arguments (2000, p. 9; see also 2015, pp. 73–74). That is to say, unlike logic and mathematics, metaphysics of the Philosophers is not based on certain knowledge and thus not immune to criticism. Hence the *Incoherence* may have provided Qūnawī with a number of examples showing how limited the rational procedures are when it comes to solving metaphysical problems.

names and attributes, and the ultimate principles of things—cannot be achieved at all through reason.<sup>10</sup> As he clearly states (1381, p. 26; 1995, p. 32), if this philosophical system of knowledge is proved to be inefficient, its alternative, mystical knowledge, will remain as the only legitimate way to real and certain knowledge of the immutable world of divinity.<sup>11</sup> The first argument, which I call the “General Argument” (GA) of Qūnawī, then, can be stated like this:

(P1) True knowledge can only be achieved either by reason (*‘aql*) or mystical experience (*kashf* or *dhawq*).<sup>12</sup>

(P2) True knowledge cannot be achieved by reason.

(C1) Therefore, true knowledge can only be achieved by mystical experience.

This argument with a conclusion that asserts the possibility of true knowledge is obviously not skeptical. Its minor premise (P2), however, lies at the very centre of Qūnawī’s skepticism of reason and rationality. In order to justify this premise, he resorts to a skeptical argument—Qūnawī’s “Specific Argument” (SA)—that he grounds in relativity of rational knowledge and disagreement among its proponents. I will reformulate it as follows:

(P3) Relative knowledge is not true knowledge,

(P4) Rational knowledge is relative,

(J1) for we see that those who have rational knowledge always disagree with one another.

(C2) Therefore, rational knowledge is not true knowledge.

This paper will take the major premise P3 for granted for sake of argument and will focus on the minor premise P4 and its justification J1 by analysing Qūnawī’s reasoning from disagreement among philosophers to relativity of rational knowledge. I will try to show that to prop up relativity of certain kind of knowledge with the observation of disagreement among

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<sup>10</sup> There must have also been some religious concerns behind Qūnawī’s denial of a metaphysical system based on reason and rational knowledge. If reason is to be considered sufficient as a way of knowledge of the metaphysical domain, then religious knowledge will be at best expendable, as Ibn ‘Arabī states: “If reason were able to grasp the affairs of its felicity on its own, it would have no need for messengers, and the existence of the messengers would be useless (*‘abath*).” Ibn ‘Arabī, 1911, vol. III, p. 83; trans. by Chittick, 1989, p. 180.

<sup>11</sup> As will be seen, this does not mean that Qūnawī dismisses human reason as completely useless, but, in an attempt to make room for his mystical experience, he just challenges the authority of reason by setting forth its limitations and inefficacies in terms of acquiring true knowledge of metaphysical subjects.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Rāzī, 1987, vol. I, pp. 53–54.

those who use that knowledge is problematic and vulnerable to criticism in some respects as disagreement need not inherently presuppose relativity. Finally, I will argue that even if *SA* is held to be valid, it will not suffice to have *GA* go through because one can easily raise both arguments from relativity and disagreement against Qūnawī’s mystical knowledge as well. Such an attack to mystical knowledge, if successful, renders P2 false and thus *GA* unable to yield the intended conclusion C1, given that P1 is true.

Before moving on to the first section, I would like to underline the main thesis of the paper that though not a skeptic in the absolute, unqualified terms,—because he seems sure of the possibility of certain knowledge—Qūnawī may well be called “skeptic” in a sense qualified in two respects: his skepticism is limited to *rational knowledge of metaphysical matters*. I therefore argue for his skepticism towards the efficacy of a certain kind of knowledge (rational knowledge) in a certain domain (metaphysics), and call his approach “functional skepticism,”<sup>13</sup> to borrow a term used to describe Ghazālī’s skepticism (Halevi, 2002).

### 1. Relativity of Rational Knowledge

Relativists typically hold the view that “*x* is relative to *y*,” where *x* may stand for meaning; truth; ontology; epistemic, aesthetic or moral values, etc., while *y* for language, conceptual scheme, scientific paradigm, culture, community, individual, etc. (Haack, 1996). Therefore, they claim, there are multiple and alternative perspectives, for example, on truth (epistemic relativism) or good and evil (moral relativism). Such an idea may not necessarily count as skepticism, but it seems that the back door of relativism opens onto skepticism insofar as skeptics take the existence of more than one truth as the basis for their conviction that none of them are really true (O’Grady, 2002, pp. 91–92). Indeed, this is what Qūnawī does when he contends, as part of his skeptical stance on rational metaphysics, that reason-based propositions with metaphysical content are bound to be relative to the utterer’s individual characteristics, and therefore far from certainly true.

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<sup>13</sup> According to Halevi, 2002, p. 33, this form of skepticism, used as “a tool applied or withheld at one’s will, so as to negate a certain perspective in favour of another” is “partial and selective” and because of these features, it differs from the skepticism of the Ancient Greeks and Hume, which he dubs “existential skepticism.” Besides, Heck, 2006’s observation that “skepticism in classical Islam was used by various intellectuals not as a goal in itself” (p. 107) seems to put emphasis on this functionalist approach to skepticism by Muslim intellectuals. Also significant in this context is Perler’s distinction (2010, p. 385) between “skeptical position” and “skeptical method.”

Qūnawī begins his exegesis of the first *sūra* of the Qur’an, the *Miraculous Exposition in the Exegesis of the Kernel of the Qur’an* (*I’jāz al-bayān fī tafsīr umm al-Qur’ān*),<sup>14</sup> with a lengthy introduction on the theoretical foundations of *taṣawwuf*, in which he devotes a chapter<sup>15</sup> to his objections against rational and theoretical methods of knowledge. It opens as follows:

[T1] You should know [...] that (i) it is virtually impossible (*muta’adhdhir*) to furnish logical proofs for questions (*maṭālib*) and prove them through rational arguments (*al-ḥujaj al-‘aqliyya*) so thoroughly as to preclude all argumentative doubts and dialectical objections. (ii) This is because theoretical judgments (*al-aḥkām al-naẓariyya*) differ according to (*bi-ḥasab*) the variation in the cognitive faculties (*madārik*) of those who apply them. Now, for their part, these cognitive faculties are consecutive to the [intellectual] attitudes (*tawajjuhāt*) of the cognizers (*mudrikūn*), and these attitudes are attendant upon their aims (*maqāṣid*) which, for their part, follow on from their doctrinal affiliations, mental habits, mixtures,<sup>16</sup> and natural affinities, all of which are in themselves (*fī nafs al-amr*) contingent upon the variation in the self-disclosures (*tajalliyyāt*) of the divine names which become determined and multiple in the levels of receptacles according to their capacity (1381, p. 22; 1995, p. 26; trans. partially by Todd, 2014, p. 202 with modifications).

The term “questions” (*maṭālib*) here is the key to determine the borders of Qūnawī’s skepticism of rational thinking because he is clear on the point that logical proofs and rational arguments are not functional in solving these “questions.” Just before this passage, Qūnawī gives helpful hints about how to interpret the questions here by making a rough division of the potential objects of knowledge into two classes: (1) that which man is independently able to know through his God-given faculties and tools, such as the existence of God, abstract souls (*al-arwāḥ al-mujarrada*) and simple notions (*al-ma’ānī al-basīṭa*), and (2) that which he is not, such as God’s essence and the reality of the Divine names and attributes as well as the way in which God is described with these names and attributes in the religious texts and philosophical discussions (1995, pp. 16–17). Qūnawī’s examples for both categories suggest

<sup>14</sup> For a review of the book, see Todd, 2014, pp. 32–35.

<sup>15</sup> The same chapter features also in a letter of Qūnawī’s to Ṭūsī. See Qūnawī, 1995, pp. 26–43.

<sup>16</sup> Qūnawī puts notable emphasis on the view that the mixtures of four fundamental fluids—blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile—determine psychological and cognitive as well as physiological states of man, which goes back to the ancient Greek theory of medicine (see Galen, 2018, for example) and takes it as a basis for his argument for relativity of rational knowledge. See Qūnawī, 1381, pp. 161–163 and cf. Sextus, 2000, pp. 14–15; 80.

that he is primarily concerned here with metaphysical questions,<sup>17</sup> but, alongside that, the examples of the former category show us how restricted a role he assigns to rational knowledge as far as metaphysics is concerned. Human reason can independently discover God's existence, but when it comes to the problem of God's nature and attributes, it has no access to that "formidable realm," in Qūnawī's terms (1995, p. 17).

It is clear, on the other hand, that the second part of the text (ii) constitutes the reason or justification of the first (i). The first ground of Qūnawī's skepticism, therefore, is that the outcomes of reasoning and rational proofs vary according to the individual circumstances of their agents and are thus relative to them in this respect. Qūnawī first justifies this claim within the framework of his theory of knowledge and then refers, as a manifestation of this relativity, to unresolvable disagreements among philosophers and theologians, who typically claim to base their opinions on rational inferences. Leaving the problem of disagreements for the next chapter, I will discuss here the first point to account for the relativity of rational knowledge according to Qūnawī's theory of knowledge.

Ideally, while passing a judgment (*ḥukm*), a judge (*ḥākim*) is expected to depend on the object of the judgment (*maḥkūm 'alayhi*): the former should change as the latter changes and remain the same as it does so. However, this is rarely the case since the judgments are often contingent on the judge and her knowledge tools, and thus might vary, due to the variation on the judge's part, even if the object remains to be the same (Qūnawī, 1375, p. 118, 142; 1342, p. 44). Nonetheless, the condition of the judge is in a state of constant transition, because, like everything else, the judge is a locus and recipient of divine manifestation, which is in constant renewal. God reveals Himself each and every instant in the entire universe and no instance of self-disclosure is the same as the previous one; there is no repetition in divine self-disclosure. This is because repetition would both compromise God's infinity and lead to redundancy in the sense of gaining what is already there (*taḥṣīl al-ḥāsil*). It would be useless (*'abath*) and empty of profit to create or gain what is already there, but God, the Real Actor (*al-Fā'il al-Ḥaqq*), is exalted above such a thing (Qūnawī, 1374, p. 13). Accordingly, no two different individuals are the same nor does one individual remain the same in two different instants, which is to say individuals are always different from each other while one and the same individual is in a ceaseless flux in terms of factors Qūnawī exemplified in [T1], such as

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<sup>17</sup> Qūnawī's criticisms against rational knowledge below may inevitably affect the theories of philosophers in other fields as well as metaphysics, but the fact that he hardly ever mentions or deals with these other fields can be taken as further evidence that he mainly targeted the philosophers' metaphysics.



affiliations, mental habits, balance of mixtures, and natural affinities. To put it in Qūnawī's own words, (1375, p. 120), "Nothing has persistence in a certain state from which it cannot be separated. On the contrary, everything is in a state of transition even though it seems to remain still to the eyes of perceivers." Therefore, it is inevitable that the judgments of the human mind, which is a part of the human individual constantly changing and re-created at every moment, will also change constantly.

Indeed, what makes possible to obtain knowledge of the external world through senses and reason is the fact that the external world and the human being are alike in that both are subject to a constant change. This similarity is essential to knowledge because, for Qūnawī, knowledge is possible only in the case of an affinity between the knower and the known (1374, pp. 14–15; 1375, p. 134) due to the fact that "[t]he thing knows nothing, but itself, and nothing knows anything except from itself" (Ibn 'Arabī, 1911, vol. III, p. 282). Reason, for example, is able to grasp only particulars because it is itself particular<sup>18</sup> and only attributes since it is an attribute of the human soul, but it cannot extend beyond the attributes to fathom the attributed (Qūnawī, 1995, pp. 35–36). However, if the knower and the known differ from each other by nature, no knowledge can possibly occur, as in the case of the human mind and the metaphysical world: the human intellect cannot grasp the metaphysical world since its nature is completely alien to that world. "The reason of ignorance about the Real and anything else is what brings about the difference (*imtiyāz*) and distinctiveness (*mubāyana*) between man and what he seeks to know" (Qūnawī, 1375, p. 137). Just as excessive physical distance between the beholder and the object prevents clear vision, so too the difference between the knower and the known in terms of their respective natures makes certain knowledge virtually impossible (Qūnawī, 1342, p. 44).

## 2. Relativity and Disagreement I

Qūnawī finds another, but this time factual, justification of his argument for the relativity of human reason in a historical phenomenon, that is the unresolved, or even seemingly unresolvable, disagreements among the people of reason and rational inquiry.

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<sup>18</sup> Quite contrary to the Muslim philosophers' view of intellect as a faculty of human soul that connects with the Active Intellect (*al-'aql al-fa'āl*) to assume universal knowledge of things, the Akbarian tradition views it as inextricably bound up with, and thus limited to, the sense perceptions of particular things. It is particular in this regard and hence unable to acquire universal knowledge. Then, it is mystical experience alone which can transcend the realm of particulars and conceive the universal knowledge of things. For this, see Ibn 'Arabī, 1911, vol. I, p. 125.

Since the very beginning of philosophical thinking, philosophers have engaged in a myriad of disagreements and debates, unintentionally bestowing skeptics a fertile land to sow the seeds of skepticism,<sup>19</sup> and Qūnawī was too acquainted with the long history of these never-ending controversies to miss the opportunities of this hospitable terrain. Right after the passage I just quoted in [T1], he connects his argument from relativity to the issue of disagreement with a view toward proving the former with the incontrovertible reality of the latter:

[T2] Therefore, we assert that owing to the factors listed above, the exponents of rational speculation (*al-'aql al-nazarī*) differ considerably with respect to the workings of their minds, the dictates of their thought, and their subsequent results. Hence the inevitable clash of opinions, such that what one holds to be correct another declares to be mistaken, and what some regard as proof (*dalīl*) others dismiss as doubt (*shubha*). Indeed, there is nothing upon which they can all agree. In effect, therefore, the truth in relation to each theoretician (*bi-l-nisba ilā kull nāzir*) is really that which he takes to be right, by virtue of his own preference, and with which he thus feels most at ease (1381, pp. 22–23; 1995, p. 27; trans. by Todd, 2014, p. 202 with modifications).<sup>20</sup>

In the passage that shows the extent to which the arguments from relativity and disagreements are intertwined in his skepticism, Qūnawī underlines the fact that as the exponents of rational thinking, philosophers have never been able to converge on any subject whatsoever. This, however, comes as no surprise given that he regards relativity as an essential feature of rational knowledge. If the truth of each and every instance of rational knowledge is relative to the individual situation of the knower, then every knower will have her own true and false and there will be no agreement among knowers at all. Therefore, we can conclude, Qūnawī takes disagreement as a necessary conclusion of relativity, but probably since the former is more evident and easier to defend, he seems to prefer proving the latter through existence of the former.

For Qūnawī, the conclusions of rational inferences, even the most reliable ones, demonstrations, are not immune to serious objections and criticisms and therefore they cannot provide a safe haven to take shelter in from disagreements (1381, p. 23; 1995, p. 27). For, it is always possible or even observable that a group of thinkers may firmly believe in the

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<sup>19</sup> On the force of disagreement as an independent skeptical argument and the idea that Agrippa's other modes are dependent on it, see Lammenranta, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Philo, 1930, p. 421.

conclusiveness of a demonstration so much that neither they themselves nor their contemporaries could notice any flaws in its premises and conclusion and thus suspect that it is an evident proof providing certain knowledge. However, after a while, the same thinkers or those after them realize that it has serious flaws that detract from it and decrease its value as a proof.<sup>21</sup>

To show the extent of disagreement among philosophers, Qūnawī comes up with a set of examples of disagreement on logical issues. Logic is a significant example in this context because it is both the scale (*mīzān*) of rational thinking and the most evident of philosophical disciplines. Avoiding details irrelevant to his purpose, given that logic is not his main concern, he reminds the reader of some well-known examples of divergent positions of philosophers on a few problems of logic, such as whether or not certain syllogistic figures yield a valid conclusion, whether certain propositions imply others by means of contradiction or conversion, and whether it is possible for one to rely solely on the pristine human disposition (*al-fiṭra al-salīma*) so as to render logic redundant for at least certain select people (1381, p. 24; 1995, p. 29). The conclusion Qūnawī seeks to reach here is clear: If the normative tool of rational thinking and the most evident of all philosophical disciplines, logic, is not above the conflicts of opinion, the other parts of philosophy cannot be either.

Is it possible then to prefer one of the contradictory views or conflicting positions over another in these disagreements? In other words, is it reasonable to hold that certain demonstrations are more robust and reliable than others? These questions bring us to the famous problem of equivalence of proofs (*takāfu' al-adilla*), which has always been one of the most powerful arguments of skeptical thought.<sup>22</sup> As might be expected, Qūnawī's answer to the questions above is negative because, he thinks, despite all apparent differences, all rational proofs and demonstrations are alike in terms of validity and therefore none is superior or inferior to the other. This is to say that there is no way to prefer one proof over the other because if such a preference is supposed to be based on another proof, this proof would not

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<sup>21</sup> For a similar argument, see Rāzī, 1991, p. 115, 123, and for counter-arguments, see Tūsī, 1985, p. 43, 51. For a discussion of the views of Rāzī and Tūsī, see Fatoorchi, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> In his voluminous encyclopaedia of religions and sects, *al-Faṣl*, Ibn Ḥazm of Cordoba devotes a lengthy chapter to “those who hold the equivalence of proofs” (1996, vol. V, pp. 253–270), which is to my best knowledge the most elaborate discussion of the arguments for and against the notion of equivalence in the classical age of Islam; for English translation of the chapter, see Perlmann, 1950, and for its analysis see, Turki, 1979. See also Tawḥīdī, 2011, pp. 392–403, and van Ess, 1968.

differ from the previous ones in terms of validity and infinite regress follows. If it is without proof, however, then there would occur this time a case of preference without reason (*tarjīh bi-lā murajjih*), which is preposterous (1381, p. 24; 1995, p. 28).

As has been clear thus far, the clash between opposing philosophical positions so that none is superior to the other lies at the heart of Qūnawī's skepticism, which argues that actually none of them can provide us with the truth about the issues at stake. In his correspondence with Ṭūsī, Qūnawī puts forward this impasse of philosophical thought through some concrete examples, in an effort, I think, to force Ṭūsī to admit the weakness of speculative argumentation regarding certain problems of central importance to metaphysics, such as whether the existence of the Necessary Being (*wājib al-wujūd*) is extraneous to His reality, whether the quiddities of contingent things are created (*maj'ūla*), and the all-encompassing existence (*al-wujūd al-'ām*) is a possible existent. Through elongated discussions, Qūnawī tries to show that the arguments of both sides of the disagreements among philosophers about these problems inevitably end in impossibilities and absurdities. Moreover, we have nothing to prefer one side over the other because neither is superior or inferior to the other (Qūnawī, 1995, p. 48 ff.) This means that every position on the metaphysical issues, which depends on the rational procedures of knowledge, is in the final analysis, nothing but contradictions or dilemmas.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, this is where Qūnawī wants to arrive, but, curiously enough, when it comes to his own solution to these dilemmas, it turns out to be something identical, or very close, to either side of philosophical dilemmas. In the problem of the createdness of contingent quiddities, for example, he ends up defending a position practically identical to Ṭūsī's: the contingent quiddities, though not created, are existent in a sense. Then, what was Qūnawī's point when trying his best to show that each and every philosophical position inescapably reaches a dead end as far as metaphysical problems are concerned, if he was to eventually come to terms with that position? Is there a way out of this apparent difficulty on his part?

The wording Qūnawī uses to make plain his own view offers a possible solution to his seemingly inconsistent attitude. For he cautiously underlines the point that his position is “provided by the verified experience (*al-mu'āyana al-muḥaqqāqa*) and sound taste (*al-dhawq al-ṣaḥīh*)” (1995, p. 57; see also, 1375, p. 143). Then, we may surmise that his main concern

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's pessimistic conviction “Indeed, the yield of all minds is but presumptions (*ẓann*) and conjectures (*ḥisbān*), and the culmination of this pursuit is but estimations (*wahm*) and imaginations (*khayāl*)” Shihadeh, 2006, p. 182.

was not any philosophical position *per se*, but the way or method philosophers utilize to reach that—reason and rational procedures.<sup>24</sup> The philosopher may reach the same destination as the Sufi, but through different routes: the former uses rational demonstrative methods while the latter relies on mystical unveiling and immediate taste. The philosopher may hit the mark through his own method, but this happens very rarely and only by chance, or due to his sound nature (*bi-ṣiḥḥat al-fiṭra*), as is the case, Qūnawī acknowledges, with certain views of Avicenna (1995, p. 36). Yet, these random coincidences do not suffice for Qūnawī to count the human reason as a trustable means of knowledge, particularly regarding metaphysical issues. Opening the door for rational knowledge of metaphysics, even if in rather random cases, however, appears to stir up new troubles for Qūnawī in terms of his skepticism of reason and rational thinking. For one, this allows the exponent of philosophical knowledge to maintain that rational method can lead one to true knowledge, provided one complies with its strict conditions, as is obvious in Avicenna’s statement of the purpose of logic: “[l]ogic is intended to give the human being a canonical tool which, if attended to, preserves him from error in his thought” (1984, p. 117). If this happens very rarely, this is not because the rational method is intrinsically flawed, but because its conditions are hardly observed by potential thinkers.

Second, admitting the possibility of rational knowledge in metaphysics seems to imply that one of the conflicting sides in philosophical disagreements might well be right and thus arguments of this side are not necessarily equivalent to those of the other. In this case, it would not so easy to argue for the equivalence of proofs in philosophical disagreements. This, in turn, makes the relationship between disagreement and relativism somewhat problematic for Qūnawī, as will be discussed in the following section.

### **3. Relativity and Disagreement II**

To justify the minor premise (P4) in *SA*, “Rational knowledge is relative,” Qūnawī relies on the fact that there have been everlasting disagreements among philosophers. Having tried so far to set forth Qūnawī’s views on the relativity of rational knowledge and the phenomenon of philosophical disagreements, I would like in this section to elaborate my argument that his

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<sup>24</sup> In this regard, Qūnawī’s approach is strongly reminiscent again of that of Ghazālī. On the latter, see Treiger, 2012, that convincingly argues that Ghazālī’s refutation of the philosophers “attacks the philosophers’ reasoning, but does not invalidate their conclusions” (p. 10).

attempt to infer from disagreements among the adherents of rational thinking to the relativity of rational knowledge is by no means free of problems and troublesome consequences.

First of all, even though disagreement about a proposition  $p$  has been often used in favour of  $p$ 's relative truth, the relationship between relativity and disagreement may be so complex that it is hardly possible to defend both at the same time (see MacFarlane, 2007). Putting aside verbal or trivial disagreements of daily life, we can reasonably suggest that disagreement can function as a base of relativism if and only if it is "genuine disagreement" (Rovane, 2011, p. 32) or, in Kölbel's terms (2004), "faultless disagreement." For Kölbel, the disagreement between the philosophers A and B about  $p$  is genuine if it meets the following two stipulations together (2004, p. 54):

- (S1) A believes (judges) that  $p$  and B believes (judges) that not- $p$ ,
- (S2) Neither A nor B has made a mistake (is at fault).

Starting with the first, we cannot speak of genuine disagreement unless there is a contradiction between the theses held by the two sides. Therefore, even in the case that there is only one way to reconcile the theses, it will turn out that they are not contradictory in the real sense and thus the disagreement disappears.

If we apply this approach to the philosophical and theological disagreements, those who see, like Qūnawī, some sort of relativity in philosophical truths will have to convincingly prove that such disagreements between two philosophers, say Plato and Aristotle, are real, and the theses of the opposing sides are contradictory in such a manner that there is no way to reconcile them. But looking back at the history of philosophy, we witness an enormous intellectual endeavour by Greek and Arabic commentators to reconcile the seeming discrepancies between the systems of the two philosophers by showing, for instance, that there is no genuine disagreement, but terminological discrepancies not related to the essence of the systems of philosophers.<sup>25</sup> This raises a real difficulty for Qūnawī, which is to show

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<sup>25</sup> The core idea of this effort of reconciliation can be summarized as follows: "Aristotle can be read in continuity with Plato, provided that their respective doctrines are conceived of as accounting for different levels of the hierarchy of being, with Aristotle dominating logic, physics and metaphysics and Plato crowning the system of knowledge by his ethical and theological teaching, both centred on assimilation to God." D'Ancona, 2005, p. 47. For an in-depth examination of harmonization attempts by Greek commentators, see Hadot, 2015. The most important representative of this tradition in the Islamic world is *On the Harmony between the Views of the Two Sages, Plato the Divine and Aristotle* (*K. al-Jam' bayna ra'yay al-hakīmayn*), whose authorship has been

that all this effort by commentators has proven fruitless. It seems to reduce significantly the power of his inference from disagreement to relativism, given that it is always possible to argue, at least on the theoretical level, that the differences among philosophers are not deep enough to justify the claim of relative truth of their respective positions.

Taken together with (S1), (S2) would be tantamount to saying that two contradictory theses are true at the same time. With the exception of certain domains notoriously open to subjectivity, such as preferences of taste or beauty, is it possible to maintain such a claim consistently? Not to stray too far from our primary concern, I recast the question as follows: Would Qūnawī maintain such a claim at the expense of the law of non-contradiction?<sup>26</sup> First of all, as we have implied above, Qūnawī's position on the putatively contradictory sides of philosophical disagreements is far from clear and there is a patent tension between his local relativism and skepticism of philosophical truths on the one hand and his dogmatism on the other. As a dogmatic, he holds in certain cases the same position as some philosophers, which implies that, for him, only one side of the disagreement is correct, while the other necessarily errs. Besides, he willingly enters into a correspondence with the philosopher-theologian Ṭūsī; consults him about his opinions on certain issues, stating openly his hope to benefit from Ṭūsī's ideas (1995, p. 14); and alludes to his agreement with philosophers as long as they are on the right path (1374, p. 122). All these provide sufficient reason to surmise that Qūnawī might have believed in the correctness of only one side in almost all philosophical disagreements, as is expected from a dogmatic. However, this also means that philosophers' disagreements used by him to justify the relativity of philosophical knowledge fall short of the S2 above. That is to say, they are not genuine disagreements, in which both sides are right at the same time. Thus, there is a serious dilemma in front of Qūnawī: He either accepts that only one of the contradictory positions in philosophical disagreements is true, hence relinquishes his argument for the relativity of rational knowledge of metaphysics, or the other

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recently opened to discussion although it was unanimously attributed to Fārābī in previous scholarship. Qūnawī, however, seems not to believe in such harmony between Plato and Aristotle because, more favourable towards pre-Aristotelian philosophy, he presents Aristotle as the inventor of dialectical method (*jadāl*), which, he implies, marks a notable degeneration in the history of philosophy (1381, pp. 19–20).

<sup>26</sup> Addressing the skeptical argument from disagreement, Ibn Ḥazm (1996, vol. V, p. 259), for example, has recourse to the strategy that only one of the conflicting ideas can be true. Qūnawī's most prominent commentator, Mullā Fanārī (1374, p. 33), is also much clearer on the point that one of contradictory theses will be inevitably false.

way around. To my best knowledge, however, he nowhere addresses this problem and leaves it as an open question diluting his skepticism.

The idea that both of conflicting opinions are correct at the same time will change relativity from a problem of knowledge into an ontological one. Suppose two individual philosophers A and B, who are in a genuine disagreement about the proposition  $p$ , so that one affirms  $p$ , while the other not- $p$ , but both are simultaneously correct. In this case, the ontological background, against which one examines the truth of  $p$  or not- $p$  must be realized in such a way as to verify both of contradictory pairs at the same time, which patently violates the law of non-contradiction. Indeed, there is some textual evidence suggesting that Qūnawī would not mind so much if the law is violated in the case of contingent things, and that he might have embraced a relativist ontology for the emanated world from the Real. His statement quoted above, “Nothing has persistence in a certain state from which it cannot be separated. On the contrary, everything is in a state of transition even though it seems to remain still to the eyes of perceivers” (1375, p. 120), and his apparent endorsement for the notion of equivalence of proofs in [T2] suggest that he would allow a permanent flux in the contingent world in the Heraclitean sense.<sup>27</sup> If the universe is in such a flux, then it is not sensible to speak of stable realities in this world or universally true statements about these realities. This kind of relativism and anti-realism of the external world, however, might lead to yet another problem of inconsistency on Qūnawī’s part. For, as I mentioned above in § 1, Qūnawī accepts that one can obtain knowledge of the external world on one’s own through the internal and external faculties, which requires the external world to have a certain degree of stability in a way that makes knowledge possible. This is because, in a world that is renewed at any moment and constantly transferred from one state to another, it would not be possible to acquire knowledge, especially due to the fact that the basic principles of such knowledge, like the law of non-contradiction, are violated. It seems that there would be no point in affirming the knowledge content of the proposition “This table is white” if its contradiction is equally true. However, Qūnawī seems to maintain both the relativity of the external world and the possibility of acquiring knowledge of it through rational means, with no explicit attempt to reconcile them.

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<sup>27</sup> Qūnawī’s master Ibn ‘Arabī (1911, vol. III, 398 and 525; vol. IV, p. 379; 2015, p. 91) admits a partial agreement with the Skeptics (*Ḥusbāniyya*, or *ahl al-ḥusbān*) about the view that the world is constantly renewed at every instant and there are no stable substances therein.



However, such an anti-realist relativism of the external world poses another problem for Qūnawī, as it might exclude the possibility of genuine disagreement. If every statement becomes true or false according to different reference frameworks, such as individual affiliations, mental habits, or orientations, then one should take each proposition with the initial condition of “according to,” such that “According to the reference framework R<sub>1</sub>, it is the case that *p*,” which does not contradict “According to the reference framework R<sub>2</sub>, it is not the case that *p*.” Since all reference frameworks are on par with, and independent of, each other, there is no way to prefer one over the other or to falsify one with reference to the other or to common ground between them, because they do not have such common ground, which is a *sine qua non* of disagreements. If there is no agreement at all, then there can be no disagreement either.<sup>28</sup> In this case, since the above condition S1 is not met, there would be no genuine disagreement, which makes Qūnawī’s reasoning from philosophical disagreements to the relativity of rational knowledge turns out to be unjustified once more.

To recapitulate, the relationship between relativity and disagreement, besides being far from linear as Qūnawī seems to suppose it to be, displays a rather paradoxical character. While only genuine disagreement on a proposition *p* can lead to the idea that the truth value of *p* is relative, such relativity poses a clear threat to the possibility of real conflict by eliminating its common ground. It can be argued that for Qūnawī the common ground of disagreements and the sphere of relative truth are not identical, so that relativism in his system does not eliminate the ground of disagreement. That is to say, the subject of relativity, according to him, is the external world, which emanates, and therefore is differentiated, from God, but the reference framework of disagreements is the realities of things in God’s knowledge. In order to determine which judgment about this world is true, one should make reference to the metaphysical realm, that is, God’s knowledge, neither changeable nor relative. This, however, can be done only by the gnostic (*‘ārif*) who has alone access to this realm. In his *Divine Breaths*, Qūnawī describes the attitude of such a gnostic towards different and relative judgments about the external world with an analogy (1375, p. 119): “Just as some colours like whiteness and then yellowness are relatively closer to the absolute colour, so too some states are more encompassing than others. [Similarly] the relation of a gnostic’s state, which is where the states of all the creatures end up (*yantahūn ilayhi*), is like the relation of the absolute colour to different colours.” Accordingly, the relative judgments of laymen about

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Tūsī’s statement that “one cannot engage in refuting [the skeptical arguments] due to the absence of agreed upon principles of discussion” (1985, p. 45).

things, such as possibility, impossibility, etc., become colourless or absolute, if seen from the gnostic's point of view, by losing their particular, relative features and merging into the universal judgment. In short, the gnostic is aware of the fact that these judgments are relative and true only in regard to their subjects, and thus does not consider them true or false in the absolute sense. In other words, what the gnostic does is to preserve relativity at the expense of real disagreement. In this case, to return to our main issue, Qūnawī seems to save relativism to an extent, but the possibility of genuine disagreements seems to disappear. In other words, his reasoning from disagreement among philosophers to the relativity of rational knowledge of metaphysics in the minor premise of *SA* has proven unjustified, which renders *SA* inconclusive. It is time then to move on to the discussion of what if we direct Qūnawī arguments of relativism and disagreement to his mystical knowledge.

#### 4. Mystical Knowledge vis-à-vis Disagreement and Relativism

This final section is intended to show that even if Qūnawī's minor premise of *SA* is granted together with its justification—that is, even on the condition that rational knowledge is relative and this can be convincingly justified with reference to unresolvable disagreement among philosophers—these all might not be sufficient to get Qūnawī's main thesis *GA* off the ground, as these same arguments can be raised against mystical means of knowledge as well. In other words, it is quite possible to change P2 “True knowledge cannot be achieved by reason” to P2’ “True knowledge cannot be achieved by mystical experience.” In this case, it is obvious that Qūnawī's *GA* will not yield the intended conclusion. I will discuss first whether there have been conflicts of opinion among representatives of mystical knowledge and then to what extent mystical knowledge is immune to relativity.

According to Qūnawī (1381, p. 46), as people who obtain knowledge from God through direct experiential ways of knowledge, such as revelation, inspiration, unveiling, or tasting, prophets and saints do not disagree with each other, particularly about principal issues. But even a cursory glance at the history of *taṣawwuf* shows us that this claim can hardly be upheld historically. In the classics of *taṣawwuf*, for example, written as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the criticisms of Sufi authors against other Sufis or heretical mystical movements and attendant attempts to establish the orthodoxy of Sufism stand out as basic themes (see Demirli, 2011 pp. 20 ff.; Kynsh, 2000, pp. 116 ff.). Besides, the controversial doctrine of the Akbarian school, “Oneness of Being” (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), has been targeted by non-Akbarian Sufi critics as well as a number of Muslim scholars associated with other

Islamic sciences (Ansari, 1998; Nasr, 2006 pp. 75 ff.). The most well-known criticism of *wahdat al-wujūd* comes from the famous Sufi scholar of the seventeenth-century India, Ahmad al-Sirhindī (d. 1624), who, though acknowledges Ibn ‘Arabī’s high status as “the one who laid the foundations of the doctrine of the mystical knowledge of God” (Buehler, 2011, p. 139), raises objections against his doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd* on the religious and mystical grounds. For Sirhindī, mystical experience of the Sufi has three levels, the first of which is the level of pure union with God while the second is the experience of separation after union (*farq ba’d al-jam’*), in which Sufi is one with God in one sense and different from Him in another. In the third and final stage, the experience of union and oneness with God completely disappears and Sufi perceives God as transcending the world absolutely. To Sirhindī, Ibn ‘Arabī was one of those who lingered on in the second stage and failed to reach the final stage to separate God from the world. This is why he could not affirm His absolute otherness (Ansari, 1988, pp. 197–198; see also Buehler, 2011). Qūnawī, on the other hand, dedicates a chapter in his *Divine Breaths* (1375, pp. 113–114) to classifying erroneous Sufi beliefs and practices, which shows that Sufis may disagree with one another, holding different or even contradictory positions. We can conclude from these examples, therefore, that disagreement is a historical fact among Sufis, as well as philosophers and theologians.

Qūnawī comes up with several arguments to account for, or maybe explain away, the seeming disagreement among prophets and prominent Sufis. For one, he says that what has been narrated of them as examples of conflict is related to particular issues rather than basic principles. Every prophet, for instance, had to consider, while conveying the message of God, different features of his audience—cognitive capacity, cultural background, etc.—which accounts for the apparent differences between prophets’ messages. Second, disagreement usually occurs among newcomer or intermediate Sufis, who come to obtain the subject of experiential knowledge in a symbolic way (1381, p. 46). It is clear however that these arguments or the like are not specific to Sufis’ debates and therefore can easily be, and were in fact, employed to account for the examples of disagreement among philosophers.<sup>29</sup> So, accepting the existence of disagreement among the people of mystical knowledge and trying to explain it away, Qūnawī seems not to set forth convincing arguments to avoid possible application of his skeptical argument from disagreement to Sufism as well.

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<sup>29</sup> For example, Averroes (1997, p. 104) views the disagreement among philosophers and theologians about the problem of eternity of the universe as a terminological one.

As regards the relativity of Sufi knowledge, I think, the most serious problem Qūnawī is faced with is the rule- and criterion-defiant character of Sufism.<sup>30</sup> Since Sufism has depended largely on subjective religious experience,<sup>31</sup> Qūnawī has to address this aspect of Sufism in his attempt to recast it as a formal discipline and to set some objective criteria for it. Relating this view of Sufism, Qūnawī casts his interpretation as follows (1374, p. 7):

[T3] (i) What is to the effect that the Divine Science (*al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*) cannot follow any [normative] scale (*mīzān*) is due to its being too large and great to be governed by a determined set of rules (*qānūn muqannan*) or to be confined to a certain scale (*mīzān mu‘ayyan*). (ii) [This is] not because it has no scale. (iii) On the contrary, it has become clear for the verifying perfect men (*kummal*) among the folk of God that it [i.e., the Divine Science] has a scale according to every level and every name from the Divine names as well as every station (*maqām*), abode (*mawṭin*), state (*ḥāl*), moment (*waqt*), bestowment (*ni‘am*), and individual (*shakhs*).

In the first part of the passage (i), Qūnawī seems to admit that the Divine Science does not have universal and all-encompassing rules and principles. This is because, for him, Sufi knowledge is too large and comprehensive. But it must have some peculiar rules (ii). Thus here he conditionally grants the existence of a scale he denied in the first sentence in the absolute sense. The last part of the passage (iii) gives us a long list of conditions or factors by which the criterion of Sufism varies accordingly, such as the station, abode, state, or moment of the Sufi’s wayfaring. There must therefore be a different set of rules according to these sets of variables. Even if we leave aside whether the most prominent figures of theoretical Sufism, like Qūnawī, have developed such a large set of criteria addressing each and every variable listed above, the problem of whether such a set will raise a problem of relativity or even subjectivity remains to be significant in this respect. In other words, is the existence of so many different criteria tantamount to saying that there is indeed no set of criteria for Sufis, so that two individual Sufis, for example, would not share in the same criteria to determine

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<sup>30</sup> On this character of Sufism crouched in Ibn ‘Arabī’s lyrical expression, see Rosenthal, 1988. See also Qayṣarī, 1997, p. 111.

<sup>31</sup> Ghazālī (2015, p. 99) also lays emphasis on the practical and experiential core of Sufism: “Thus I have definitely understood that they [i.e., Sufis] are folk of [mystical] states (*aḥwāl*), not folk of [theoretical] statements (*aqwāl*) and that it is not possible to acquire it through knowledge I had acquired and therefore there remains only that to which there is no way through listening and learning, but through tasting (*dhawq*) and wayfaring (*sulūk*).”

whether the knowledge they received through a mystical unveiling is true or not.<sup>32</sup> Even one Sufi will rely on different criteria of truth in every station he reaches, or in every state he experiences, throughout his spiritual journey and therefore he will find out that it is wrong what he found true in the previous stations, states, or moments.<sup>33</sup> We can conclude, then, that Sufi knowledge is not further away from relativity than philosophical knowledge. Chittick (1989, p. 229) expresses the relativity of Sufism as follows: “There is no question of agreement since there is no argument. It is simply that each person who has travelled the path to God speaks from his own viewpoint and recounts his own experience.” Or, to go back the apparent disagreement between Ibn ‘Arabī and Sirhindī about the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd*, one can claim, as Buehler does (2011, p. 138), that “there is no real controversy” between these two Sufis because they are indeed representing “two ways of perceiving the One” and each is right from his own perspective, just like the imams of different Muslim legal schools, who might have held seemingly opposite takes on the same issue without none being at fault.

Now that I have so far shown the relativity of Sufi knowledge with reference to Qūnawī’s own words, I would like to raise a counter-argument against his SA as follows:

- (P3) Relative knowledge is not true knowledge,
- (P4’) Mystical knowledge is relative,
- (J2’) because we see that those who have mystical knowledge may disagree with one another.
- (C2’) Therefore, mystical knowledge is not true knowledge.

In this case, I shall recast Qūnawī’s GA as follows:

- (P1) True knowledge can only be achieved either by reason (*‘aql*) or mystical experience.

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<sup>32</sup> According to Ibn ‘Arabī (1911, vol. II, p. 476), two Sufis cannot experience one and the same thing even if both are in the same stage of their respective wayfaring, because the two recipients of this experience can by no means be identical to each other: “If they have been brought together in a single station, [...] the property of the self-disclosure in respect of manifestation is one, but in respect to what the recipients of self-disclosure find, it is diverse in tasting, because of their diversity in entities: The one gnostic is not the other, neither in natural or spiritual form, nor in location.” trans. by Chittick, 1989, p. 229.

<sup>33</sup> Sirhindī sets a rare example for this kind of situations when he apologizes for what he said in an earlier letter of his. See Buehler, 2011, p. 133.

(P2') True knowledge cannot be achieved by mystical experience.

(C1') Therefore, true knowledge can only be achieved by reason.

### Conclusion

This study of the skeptical arguments against reason and rational ways of knowledge raised by an influential figure of the Akbarian school and philosophical Sufism, Qūnawī, firstly differentiates two different arguments by him, one general (*GA*) and the other specific (*SA*). According to Qūnawī's general argument, real knowledge can be claimed to be acquired through either reason or mystical experience, but given that reason is unable to provide such knowledge, mystical experience remains the only way to real knowledge. Qūnawī forms a new argument to justify his minor premise in this argument, which constitutes his specific argument, according to which true knowledge is not relative, but rational knowledge is relative. Hence rational knowledge is not real knowledge. Here, Qūnawī appears to base his skepticism of rational knowledge on its relativity and this relativity in turn on everlasting disagreements among philosophers, who are typically regarded as the masters of rational knowledge and arguments. This is because, according to him, if there is disagreement over a proposition, then it is relative.

Regarding *SA*, the paper reaches the conclusion that Qūnawī's justification of the minor premise in the argument with reference to existence of disagreement among philosophers does not appear to be convincing, because disagreement does not constitute a sound justification for relativity as Qūnawī seems to have supposed it to do. This is because, in order for disagreement to function that way, it must be genuine or faultless disagreement, in which the opposing parts of the conflict hold contradictory theses, but are nevertheless both correct. It is not easy for Qūnawī to meet the first condition, because to do so he would have to demonstrate that philosophical debates are essentially unsolvable in such a manner that leaves all efforts of reconciliation inconclusive, which is practically impossible. Regarding the second condition, as is understood from his letters to Ṭūsī, Qūnawī occasionally takes a side in the philosophical disagreement, implying that only one view is correct, which means a violation of the second condition. This condition, on the other hand, leads to an anti-realist world view, which in fact undermines the concept of disagreement by rendering it impossible to occur. There is then a paradoxical relationship between disagreement and relativism: Unless disagreement is genuine, it does not function as ground for relativity, but once relativity is accepted, it renders real disagreement virtually impossible.

As for Qūnawī's *GA*, the study shows that his conclusion is not necessary, even in the case that his *SA* is granted, because his arguments against rational knowledge, namely its relativity and disagreement among its proponents, can simply be levelled against mystical knowledge as well. As is clear from history, there are also different, and at times contradictory, opinions held by Sufis with mystical experience, which suggests the relativity of mystical knowledge. Besides, as Qūnawī has stated, it is impossible to set universal criteria for correct mystical knowledge that will be binding for all Sufis. This can also be taken as further evidence to show that this kind of knowledge is relative as well. If this is true, mystical knowledge cannot be regarded as a way to real knowledge. Then we can return to the major premise of the *GA* that real knowledge can be achieved either through reason or mystical means. If it cannot be obtained through mystical insight, then a result will be obtained contrary to what Qūnawī wants to achieve, and the disjunct that real knowledge will be obtained through reason will be correct. However, the purpose of this study is not to prove or discuss this last proposition, but only to critically assess the skeptical arguments of Qūnawī and test their soundness. Therefore, I think, it has reached this purpose by showing that Qūnawī's more general and main skeptical argument does not necessarily yield its intended conclusion.

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