Lighting the Way of the Learner: Towards a Social Virtue
Epistemology in Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr’s The Faqīh’s Lantern

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Academic Abstract

This thesis offers an original translation and analysis of a West African didactic poem in Islamic ethics and law, by the Mālikī-Ashʿarī Mauritanian scholar Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr (d. 1272 AH/1856 CE) called The Faqīh’s Lantern (Miṣbāḥ al-Faqīh). In addition to the critical translation, I examine the poem thematically through the lens of social virtue epistemology. Chapter 1 sketches the background of the text and author, positioning the author historically as a product of a rich scholarly and pedagogical tradition while noting Mauritania’s contemporary place in the North American Muslim imagination. Chapter 2 is the translation of the text, making this classical poem accessible to the modern reader. Chapter 3 is an analysis of the poem centred around four major themes: intellectual virtues, embodiment, expert identification, and self-trust. This unique theoretical lens points to several nodes where Islamic studies and the Anglo-American philosophical tradition intersect, with respect to theories of knowledge.

Key words: epistemology, social virtue epistemology, Islamic law, Islamic ethics, information ethics, didactic poetry, West Africa, Mauritania
In the Information Age, navigating knowledge and expertise is a critical yet increasingly difficult task for the average person to undertake. It is all the more important for Muslims and people of other faiths seeking to educate themselves about their religious traditions. The ethics of seeking knowledge is one of the topics addressed in an instructional poem by a nineteenth-century African scholar from Mauritania named Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr (1809-1856). This thesis provides a partial translation of the poem, paying attention to sections related to the ethics of seeking knowledge and information. In these areas, the author addresses themes which, together, demonstrate his theory of knowledge or epistemology. Some of the questions he answers are: What are the traits, skills, and stages necessary for the one seeking knowledge? What criteria should we use to assess teachers and learning communities? What are the signs of a qualified, trustworthy expert? What do we do when we are unsure or doubtful of the information we receive? The poem points to the fact that the author’s theory of knowledge foregrounds social aspects and issues and the virtues needed to navigate epistemic spaces (e.g., trust, relationships with peers and experts, factors in a learner’s environment), making it a social virtue epistemology. Moreover, because the author addresses these issues from his perspective of Islamic theology and law, we may consider it an Islamic social virtue epistemology. Setting aside its focus on the Islamic legal and ethical tradition, the poem speaks to anyone navigating a new or contentious space in an age of disinformation and disrupted channels of trust, and so is full of insight for Muslims and non-Muslims, lay readers and specialists alike.
بسناب اrollment عنز
The Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said: “You are living in a time when those of understanding are many and orators are few, and questioners are few while those who can answer are many. During this time, working is better than knowledge. But a time will come upon the people when those of understanding will be few yet orators will be many, and there will be many questioners but few who can answer. During this time, knowledge will better than work.”

[Al-Adab Al-Mufrad, 789]
To my parents, who instilled my love for knowledge, and to lovers of learning everywhere
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Chapter 1: The Text, Context, and Texture of Religious Authority

INTRODUCTION

*Adab* comes before knowledge (*al-adab qabl al-talab*).¹

In a famous story, Imam Mālik ibn Anas (d. 179 AH/795 CE), eponymous founder of the Mālikī legal school, recounts the specific instructions his mother gave him before he began seeking sacred knowledge: “Go to Rabī’ah² and take from his *adab* before you take from his knowledge.”³

The word *adab* is difficult to translate. It is sometimes translated as etiquette or manners, but connotes much more than these. Zachary Wright, historian of Islam in West Africa, approximates *adab* with Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, explaining it is a complex, holistic, and integrated “way of being” as opposed to a simple set of rules.⁴ Islamic legal scholar Asaf A. Fyzee similarly notes the difficulty with translating this term. He too describes *adab* as a “way of life” and explains it carries more weight than the word “manners” carries in English because *adab* also “connotes an obligation or duty” though not quite “a legal norm.”⁵ Finding no English equivalent that captures the many connotations of *adab*, Fyzee ultimately chooses to leave it untranslated.

Matters are complicated further when we observe that *adab* appears as a subgenre or auxiliary field across a wide variety of Islamic disciplines. On one hand, *adab* texts can be found accompanying the ‘hard’ sciences of law and jurisprudence, such as the genre of *adab al-qāḍī*, referring to judicial comportment and procedural law.⁶ On the other hand, *adab* texts formulate a large part of the corpus of ‘soft’ sciences such as *tazkiya* or *tasāwuwuf* (Ṣūfism, Islamic mysticism) and *tarbiya* (personal discipline). An example is *Adab al-Ṣuḥbah* or *The Etiquettes of Companionship* by ʿAbdulwahhāb al-Shaʿrāni (d. 973 AH/1565 CE), a text reminiscent of Marcus Cicero’s treatise *On Friendship*.

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¹ Proverb.
² Rabī’ah ibn Abī ʿAbdulrahmān Farrūkh al-Madanī (d. 136 AH/753 CE) who belonged to the generation after the Prophet ﷺ (a successor or ṭābiʿ) and taught Imam Mālik.
³ Umm Isrāʾ bint ʿArafah Bayyūmī, *Nisāʾ Ṣanāʿaʾ ʿUlamāʾ* (Beirut: Dār al-Marifah, 2004), 64.
⁴ Zachary Wright, *The Spirit of Etiquette* (Ruh al-Adab) in *Jihad of the Pen: Sufi Literature of West Africa* by Amir Syed, Rudolph T. Ware, and Zachary Wright (The American University in Cairo Press, 2018), 169.
Adab eludes attempts at easy, straightforward definitions. It is primarily a moral and ethical consideration but one that is palpable and potent, not abstract. In terms of its power to influence behaviour, it lies somewhere between manners, which are recommended, and laws, which are enforceable. All the while, adab remains supremely practical and versatile in its areas of applicability. It is ubiquitous in all avenues of Islamic scholarship and can be found in a space as technical and bureaucratic as the operations of a court as well as in the intimate and familiar conduct between friends.

An example of an adab text that simultaneously occupies and straddles both the hard sciences of law as well as the soft sciences of interpersonal relations is the didactic poem by the Ash’arī-Mālikī Mauritanian scholar Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr ibn Ḥima Allah al-Muslimī al-Tishītī (d. 1272 AH/1856 CE) titled Miṣbāḥ al-Faqīh (The Faqīh’s Lantern). Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr was a prominent Mauritanian scholar in his time, though he is lesser known today. The Faqīh’s Lantern is a text that combines the genres of adab as well as ʿilm al-ifīā’, or juris-consultancy. In what follows, I provide a brief sketch of the author and his historical context, including the rich scholarship and tradition of didactic poetry in precolonial Mauritania. Having provided this context, I turn to the text itself to elaborate on the two genres it combines (ethics and law) and their relevance in current debates about religious authority. By tying the historical background to contemporary significance, The Faqīh’s Lantern emerges as a valuable and timely, even urgent, text with much to teach its readers when it comes to navigating their respective socio-epistemic landscapes.

The Author: Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr
Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr ibn Ḥima Allah al-Muslimī al-Tishītī belonged to the tribe Banū Muḥammad Muslim, giving him the surname “al-Muslimī,” and hailed from Tishīt, hence the sobriquet “al-Tishītī.” He was named Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr for short (meaning “The Little Aḥmad”). He later earned another nickname, Aḥmad al-Shugga, which comes from the word ashfagh, the indigenous Imazighen word for “jurist.”

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7 Ash’arism is one of the two schools in speculative theology (kalām) within Sunnī Islam that emerged in the tenth century, beginning with Abū Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (d. 324 AH/936 CE) after whom it was named. The Mālikī school of law is one of four legal schools in classical Sunnī law. Ashʿarī-Mālikī thought is predominant in North and West Africa, including Mauritania.
8 Also spelled Tichīt or Tichītt.
Tishīt was known in Al-Ṣaghīr’s time as a bustling trade center on the trans-Saharan route as well as a hub of scholarship, and is now a recognized UNESCO World Heritage Site. English sources reveal much more about Al-Ṣaghīr’s nineteenth-century Mauritania than they do about Al-Ṣaghīr himself. Precious little has been written about him in the sources I could access, although Sidi Ahmed Ould Ahmed Salim and Charles C. Stewart grant him an entry in their masterful survey of Mauritanian figures, *The Writings of Mauritania and the Western Sahara*. Arabic sources suggest his family was deeply embedded in the scholarly circles of Mauritanian society.\(^{10}\) He memorized the Qur’an at a young age, indicating he was likely surrounded by a network of scholarly relations in his formative years and beyond. Al-Ṣaghīr also suffered from an illness in his youth which impaired his vision – how severely, we can only speculate.\(^{11}\)

Despite this illness and his relatively early death at the age of forty-eight or forty-nine, Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr was a prolific writer, leaving behind at least fifty known works ranging from original poetry and treatises to lengthier commentaries, abridgements, and responses to other works. Many of his writings survived under the care of his son, Muḥammad, who compiled his father’s works into two large volumes.\(^{12}\) While much of his writings are extant, they remain in manuscript form, preserved in archives across Mauritania and Western Sahara. In fact, Ahmad al-Ṣaghīr’s library is one of the most prominent and complete manuscript archives in the region, and is particularly rich in legal writing.\(^{13}\) He wrote across many diverse disciplines including the following:

1) theology (‘aqīdah or ‘ilm al-tawḥīd);
2) Qur’anic sciences (‘ulūm al-Qur’an);
3) law (fiqh), legal theory and maxims (usūl and qawā‘id), and legal responsa;
4) prophetic biography (both sīrah and shamā‘ il\(^ {14}\) and works in praise of the Prophet ﷺ; 
5) mysticism (taṣawwuf, or Şūfism); and
6) the ancillary sciences of Arabic grammar and rhetoric (nahū and bayān).

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\(^{11}\) Stewart and Salem, *Writings of Mauritania*, 1474.


\(^{14}\) Sīrah works focus on prophetic biography, while shamā‘ il writing details the Prophet ﷺ’s physical and character descriptions.
Despite the lack of biographical work on Al-Ṣaghīr, the list of works and nature of his writing indirectly provide us with a wealth of information. The collection he left behind paints the image of an established scholar who was comfortable writing on a variety of topics. From the number of legal responses and treatises he wrote on contemporary issues and practices (mostly trading and transactions), we can infer that he was deeply engaged in what was going on in the Tishīt community and wider society. His engagement is also manifested in his membership in two Şūfi orders, prominent in West Africa, the Tijāniyya and Qādiriyya orders. Finally, as the product of a trans-historical tradition (Mālikī-Ashʿarism in North and West Africa), his writing shows in-depth engagement with previous scholars in his intellectual pedigree. Some of the notable works in which he brings past figures into contemporary conversation include a commentary (sharḥ) on Mukhtaṣar Khalīl, a foundational Mālikī text by Khalīl ibn Iṣḥāq al-Jundī and abridgements of two popular North African taṣawwuf texts. The first was by the sixteenth-century Egyptian scholar Abdulwahhāb al-Sharqānī and the second by the fourteenth-century Tunisian scholar and historian, Abdulraḥmān ibn Khaldūn, author of the famous Al-Muqaddimah.

Of the many works Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr left behind is Miṣbāḥ al-Faqīh (The Faqīh’s Lantern), a work in ʿilm al-ifṭāʾ or the science of juris-consultancy. It is also known by the alternative titles Miṣbāḥ Dhawī al-Tafaqquh (A Lantern for Those of Understanding) and Miṣbāḥ al-Tafaqquh wa-Naṣīḥah lil-Mutaʿallimīn (The Lantern of Understanding and a Counsel for the Learners). Before explaining the scope and significance of ‘ilm al-ifṭāʾ, let us situate the text and the author within the context of Mauritanian society in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.

THE CONTEXT: PRECOLONIAL MAURITANIA

Islam arrived in present-day Mauritania, a region named Takrūr at the time, in the early eleventh century with the conversion of King Warjābī ibn Rābīs who made it the official religion of the state. The oasis town of Tishīt was settled a century later (536 AH/1142 CE). The legendary,

15 See list of works in Stewart and Salem, The Writings of Mauritania, 1476-78.
16 Stewart and Salim, The Writings of Mauritania, 1474.
17 Discussed in the upcoming section, “The Context: Precolonial Mauritania.”
18 Stewart and Salim, The Writings of Mauritania, 1477.
19 Anwār al-Qudsiyyah fī Ma rifāl Qawāl id al-Ṣaṣiyyah.
20 Shiṭāʿ al-Sāʿ il wa-Tahdhīb al-Masāʾ il.
21 Stewart and Salim, The Writings of Mauritania, 1479.
22 The word for qiṣḥ is derived from the three-letter root verb ḥa-qa-qa which means to understand deeply.
23 Stewart and Salim, The Writings of Mauritania, 1477.
24 Lydon, “Inkwells,” 42.
founding story of Tishīṭ credits a man named Al-Sharīf ʿAbd al-Mūʿmin ibn Ṣāliḥ. As the story goes, Al-Sharīf ʿAbd al-Mūʿmin was crossing the Sahara on foot when his cane struck water, which is how it received the name “Tishīṭ,” mimicking the sound of gushing water.25

Since Islam entered the region, it grew through a series of developments that entrenched its presence – a particular Mālikī-Ashʿarī presence – in the region. By the early eighteenth century, Bilād Shinqīṭ, as Mauritania came to be known in Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr’s time, was synonymous with Islamic learning and scholarship. Two principal episodes in this period were the Almoravid movement and the Sharr Bubba War. The Almoravid reform movement (al-murābiṭūn) began in the eleventh century and was a reformist military and educational campaign aimed at consolidating political influence and implementing a standardized, unified religious identity. It was extremely successful in uniting the region under Sunnī Mālikī Islam and removing or marginalizing other sects (e.g., Khārījī, ʿIbāḍī, and Shīʿī minorities). Geographically, Almoravid rule stretched from the southern Saharan towns of Tishīṭ and Adrār across the Mediterranean to the Andalusian cities of Seville and Córdoba, while establishing new centres like Marrakesh along the way.26

Sharr Bubba or “Bubba’s struggle”27 was a shorter-lived development but nevertheless a pivotal war that took place from 1644 to 1674 between indigenous Imazighen Berbers and the Arabs of Banu Hasan. The region known as Mauritania today was home to a rich diversity of ethnic groups. Arabs conquered the region centuries prior, in the Umayyad period (661-750 CE) and grew in dominance over time. One historian of West Africa, Erin Pettigrew, explains that the exact make up of indigenous peoples before Islam entered the region is controversial in cultural memory. They are “a mysterious people identified as either ‘white’ or ‘black’ agriculturalists, depending on the source,”28 indicating that ‘indigeneity’ itself is understood and remembered very differently by different groups in the context of North and West Africa. Nevertheless, indigenous groups (both Berbers and Africans) came under Arab influence over time, immediately by a settler presence, and in the longer-term through cultural Arabization.

Mixed heritage came to be seen as a mark of superiority in Mauritanian culture, so that Mauritanians often claimed Arab ancestry retrospectively. The mixing of actual lineages with

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25 Lydon, “Inkwells,” 45. This legend is remarkably similar to the story of the well of zamzam and the establishment of the holy city of Mecca.
27 Also spelled Char Bouba.
aspirational ones complicates readings of the ethnic pluralism in the region, even as it evinces how much internalized Arab superiority had come to structure Mauritanian society and shape collective memory.\textsuperscript{29} By the time of the Sharr Bouba conflict, Saharans with mixed ancestry had begun to refer to themselves as the bīḍān (“the whites”) and they, in turn, dominated a class of occupational labourers and slaves.\textsuperscript{30} The dominant bīḍān class subdivided into a warrior group, the hasānis, and a scholarly group called the zwāyas.\textsuperscript{31}

The Sharr Bubba conflict was due in part to tensions between the warrior (hasāni) class and the religious and scholarly (zwāya) elites, who believed the hasāni were not providing sufficient protection from raids. In addition, the beginnings of colonialism had been felt in the region when a French trading post was established in nearby Saint-Louis, in present-day Senegal. This disrupted trade routes and intensified internal political and social tensions. By the end of the thirty-year conflict, the hasānis gained the upper hand. While the conflict renegotiated power relations between the bīḍān, it served to entrench their dominance as a class overall and paved the way for further Arabization of Bilād Shinqīṭ.\textsuperscript{32} Perhaps the best indication of the success and thoroughness of the Arabs’ victory is that, by the end of the seventeenth century, Arabic, and in particular the Hasāniya dialect, had replaced indigenous languages.\textsuperscript{33}

Where does Al-Ṣaghīr fit into this picture? He belonged to the scholarly zwāyas, and so, too, was part of the self-styled bīḍān. What was his take on the social, racial, and ethnic stratification in his society, one that continues to permeate and divide Mauritanian society today?\textsuperscript{34} It will be for future historians to answer this, by diving deeply into the extant writings of Al-Ṣaghīr and examining them less as legal texts and more as products of the social and economic history of Mauritania. For the purpose of this thesis, I bring up this aspect of Mauritanian history to note that Al-Ṣaghīr’s Mauritania was no utopia then, just as it is not one now (contrary to what some

\textsuperscript{29} Abubakar Sadiq Abdulkadir, “Verse Tradition, Muslim Scholars and Transmission of Islamic Knowledge in Mauritania, the ‘Land of a Million Poets,’” PhD diss., (University of Alberta, forthcoming).


\textsuperscript{31} The word “zwāya” is derived from Arabic for “corner” because teachers and students typically retreated to a corner of the mosque for lessons. Lydon, “Inkwells,” 46-7.


\textsuperscript{33} Lydon, “Inkwells,” 47.

characterizations might lead us to believe\textsuperscript{35}). Because we are about to encounter a text of Al-Ṣaghīr’s that deals largely with *adab*, comportment, and virtuous action, it is important to separate the poem’s aspirational content from its actual context to a certain degree. Divorcing them allows us to position Al-Ṣaghīr within the vicissitudes of his time and place. Every author occupies a certain space that is not universal, even if their message can be universalized in some respect. Positionality is central to this thesis, which will argue that considerations of time, place, and “situatedness”\textsuperscript{36} in general are part of virtuous epistemic practice. By noting Al-Ṣaghīr’s contingency and how his own commitments may or may not have been transferred on the ground, I acknowledge I am using his text in a particular way, one that views the *adab* discourse as valuable even if decontextualized. My interpretation takes the value of *adab* precepts to come less from their ability to describe and explain what was taking place in the background as they were being inscribed, and more from their potential to be applied fruitfully in evolving contexts, as will be elaborated below.\textsuperscript{37}

While the dearth of biographical sources leaves us with some unanswered questions about the author’s personal life and commitments, the broader society he inhabited and the rise of Islamic learning in this period is well-documented. The preceding discussion highlighted major historical developments – the Almoravid reforms and Sharr Bubba conflict – that elevated Islamic scholarship (a Mālikī-Ashʿarī Sunnī strand) and cemented the status of the scholarly class in Mauritanian society. Aside from these broader trends, several other factors contributed to the ‘economy of scholarship’ that eventually prevailed in precolonial Mauritania. For instance, pre-existing, extensive trade routes provided an infrastructure that easily lent itself to the dissemination of scholarship. Additionally, by the early eighteenth century, yearly caravans would depart Bilād Shinqīṭ en route to Hajj, which at the time was the leading forum for Muslims to engage with one another on a trans-regional scale.\textsuperscript{38} But perhaps the single most important factor in solidifying the

\textsuperscript{35}Mauritania’s place in the imagination of contemporary, traditional Muslims is discussed below. For an account of racial tensions in Mauritanian today and how scholars employ Islamic texts to rationalize discrimination and subjugation, see Essiessah, “The Construction of the Religious Basis of Racial Slavery,” 3-23.

\textsuperscript{36}Borrowing from Lorraine Code’s notion of “situated subjectivities,” which is brought up again in this Chapter (p. 12) and discussed at length in Chapter 3, “Part II: Al-Ṣaghīr on Embodiment.” See Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.

\textsuperscript{37}I discuss this approach at greater length in the following section, “The Text: The Faqīḥ’s Lantern.”

\textsuperscript{38}Salem, “Global Shinqīṭ,” 8. Salem has documented how the pilgrimage became a focal point for Mauritanian scholars to perform their Shinqīṭī identity and cement Mauritania as a place of religious scholarship in the global imagination of Muslims at the time.
‘economy of knowledge’ in precolonial Mauritania was the institution of the mahżara (pl. mahāzir).

The mahżara system is unique to the instructional style of Mauritania, and remains a prized feature that continues to attract students from around the Muslim world today. It was established at the time of the Almoravid Islamic reform movements and, in fact, the word for teacher (“murābiṭ”) comes from this period. The mahżara system was itinerant, a suitable setup for a nomadic society, and was centered around the scholarly figure or teacher. This differs markedly from the madrasa system popularized in the Middle East, especially in the Ottoman period, which was funded by charitable endowments (waqf, pl. awqāf). Madrasas functioned much like boarding schools where teachers, students, and staff were housed together, receiving stipends from the endowment while maintenance of the physical structure remained the responsibility of appointed administrators. While the madrasa system enjoyed certain advantages over the mahżara style – paralleling the advantages of a sedentary society over a nomadic one – it also had several disadvantages. For instance, the establishment of educational institutions in a fixed, physical setting often meant the gradual exclusion of women from madrasas. So while madrasas and the culture of scholarship around them became male-dominated over time, the same trend is not found in mahżaras which advocated for the education of young boys and girls equally. For instance, in her fieldwork in Mauritania, historian Ghislaine Lydon cites an oral tradition where an estimated three hundred young women in one town could recite the Muwatta of Imam Mālik ibn Anas by heart.

The emphasis on memorization itself is yet another striking aspect and prestigious mark of a mahżara education. In a community where itineracy is the norm, memorizing what one knows is of paramount importance. This created a culture where teachers were regarded as “cerebral libraries” and the details of who one learned from was emphasized over where one learned. Unlike a madrasa-based society where institutional affiliations took precedence, in the mahżaras of Mauritania, the mahżara itself was synonymous with its teacher: the teacher was the institution. Moreover, because they were not funded by endowments, teachers taught and housed students in

40 Lydon, “Inkwells,” 49.
41 A foundational text in the Mālikī legal school for advanced students, a collection of opinions from founder of the school himself.
their homes. Students became members of the family, carrying out household duties and contributing to the everyday operations of rural life. As such, a day in the life of an aspiring jurist in Mauritania differed drastically from the life of a student in a madrasa in Istanbul or Cairo. We find corresponding differences between teachers in both systems. In precolonial Mauritania, teachers’ success was not gauged by the size of the crowd of students attending their lessons, but rather by the reputation of their knowledge, especially how much they had memorized, who they in turned had studied with, and the ijāzas, or certificates and credentials, they acquired. Lydon explains this phenomenon using Pierre Bourdeiu’s notion of “embodied capital,” stating that scholars distinguished themselves through “the knowledge they derived from the investment of time in self-improvement through learning.”

Committing knowledge to memory was, in the Mauritanian context, achieved primary through poetry. Poetry came to be synonymous with knowledge, and scholars were often poets in their own right, earning Mauritania the title “The Land of a Million Poets.” Abubakar Sadiq Abdulkadir’s study of the social and intellectual developments that led to a rich verse tradition in Mauritania isolates several ‘waves’ or generational developments, stretching from the earliest poet-scholars in the seventeenth century to the consolidation of poetry by the nineteenth century, by which time it had become interwoven with Mauritanian scholarship and the pedagogy of Islamic sciences, including jurisprudence. Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr was writing in this latter period when didactic poems were well-established. He had mastered a corpus of key texts in each discipline and knew them by heart long before he began composing his own poems. In all likelihood, the blindness he suffered from only served to strengthen his memory and, in turn, shape his educational philosophy which is especially concerned with memorization and embodied knowledge.

The preceding overview has aimed to demonstrate several significant features of Mauritanian society in the nineteenth century. This was a society where scholars constituted a distinct, reputable class that had been growing in dominance over the centuries, a society that not only emphasized Islamic education but developed pedagogical styles to match local needs. In these glimpses, we have seen how learning and teaching were part and parcel of everyday life, and over time such traditions became harmoniously integrated with the pre-existing social landscape and cultural heritage. Seen in this light, Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr is a product of nineteenth-century Mauritania,

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44 Lydon, “Inkwells,” 49.
and his didactic poetry likewise organically arose out of the world he inhabited, a place of vibrant Islamic thought and scholarship that featured close-knit ties between scholars and students in the “The Land of a Million Poets.” All these features of Mauritanian scholarship suggest a heavy emphasis on social-environmental aspects in their worldview of knowledge, making it uniquely suited for a case study of applied social epistemology, and virtue epistemology in particular. It is also these same features – memorization standards, personal relationships with teachers, and so on – that maintain Mauritania’s rank in hierarchies of Islamic religious authority and normative thought today and ensure the enduring relevance of The Faqīh’s Lantern.

**THE TEXT: THE FAQĪH’S LANTERN**

Having contextualized the author historically, we must say something more about the intellectual locus that *The Faqīh’s Lantern* occupies. In doing so, we can appreciate its place in relation to Islamic legal writing, as well as the broader nature and scope of Islamic law and its relationship to ethics.

Scholars of Islamic law and legal history, most notably Wael Hallaq, have argued that ‘Islamic law’ is somewhat of a misnomer. Hallaq claims that law and legalism, in the minds of most, refers to the body of positive rules sanctioned by a nation-state and is distinct from the realm of morality. On this view, it is possible for someone to be a law-abiding citizen, yet an unethical and immoral person, without entailing any contradiction. Hallaq argues that the separation of law and morality – the belief that these have distinct domains which do not overlap – is an assumption and sensibility which, over time, became entrenched in Western legal philosophy. However, this trend is not found in Islamic legal thought where the opposite – the merging of morality and law – was usually assumed. The *sharīʿah* (Islamic sacred law) therefore contains both ethical imperatives and legal injunctions within its purview.

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48 Epistemology is the branch of Anglo-American analytic philosophy that studies theories of knowledge. Social epistemology is a recent development within this tradition of epistemology, and virtue epistemology is a growing set of approaches within it, approaches that highlight epistemic virtues and vices and give precedence to them in their epistemologies. It is explored more fully in the “Method” section at the start of Chapter 3.
50 The idea of Islamic law as Islamic ethics is one view espoused by thinkers including Wael Hallaq and Kevin Reinhart. See Kevin A. Reinhart, “Islamic Law as Islamic Ethics,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* (1983): 186-203. However, this picture has come under increasing scrutiny in recent scholarship. For example, Khaled Abou El Fadl is of the opinion that the scope of Islamic law is distinct from that of ethics. Sherman Jackson has problematized a space called the “Islamic secular” where Islamic ethics (but not necessarily law) operates. Marion Katz has conceived of Islamic law as simply one among many normative, disciplinary discourses that inform Islamic ethics, counteracting the notion of law as having a monopoly on ethics. These and
The clearest demonstration of this is in the taxonomy of Islamic legal acts. Human actions are classified not simply as right or wrong, legal or illegal. Instead, they may belong to any of five categories, ranging from obligatory (wājib), recommended (mandūb), and generally permissible (mubah), to disliked (makruh) and prohibited (harām) actions. Elsewhere, Hallaq explains that the inclusion of recommended and disliked acts (i.e., praiseworthy and blameworthy, virtuous and vicious acts) indicates that the sharīḥah is concerned not simply with legal norms but ethical norms as well. Islamic law is so closely intertwined with morality that it is perhaps most accurate to consistently use “ethico-legal” when discussing sharīʿah. For the sake of simplicity, in this thesis, the terms “law” and “legal” will be used in reference to “sharīʿah,” but I have “ethico-legal” in mind in these instances. In other words, the authority of sharīʿ (legal) imperatives does not simply denote a legal fact; rather, it simultaneously connotes an ethical assertion.

Islamic law as a discipline can refer to any one of several fields that form a network of interdependent specialities. In terms of content, a legal scholar can specialize in: (1) fiqh or positive law, practiced by a jurist (faqīh, pl. fuqahāʾ) or (2) uṣūl or legal theory and jurisprudence. Both are domains of theoretical knowledge. We can think of a faqīh as a law professor who conducts research and teaches incoming students in a professional law school, while an uṣūli scholar, essentially a legal philosopher, would be more comfortably housed in the philosophy department, alongside other legal (and moral) philosophers. These two (fiqh and uṣūl) in turn can be contrasted with ḥiftāʾ, the practical domain of juris-consultancy. Its practitioners are called mufīṭīs and they issue non-binding legal verdicts. The other practical domain of Islamic law is qaadāʾ or judgeship, practiced by ḥāfdīs, who issue enforceable judgements. These distinctions, while largely functional (specialists can and often do combine more than one) are necessary to properly situate the text at hand.

The Faqīḥ’s Lantern is a text in ḥiftāʾ. While it is possible for a person to bridge legal specialities (theoretical fiqh and practical ḥiftāʾ), it is not necessary. As with any profession,
practitioners must know some theory, but theoreticians need not have practical experience. In other words, every mufīṭ knows fiqh, but not every faqīh knows iftā’. Because this poem is a work in iftā’ and not fiqh itself, Ahmad al-Ṣaghīr is not concerned primarily with detailing the legal rulings (ahkām) of the Mālikī legal school but more so with outlining the approaches, methods, and the adab (etiquettes or best practices) of those disseminating legal-ethical Islamic knowledge: teachers and jurist-consultants (mufīṭīs). It is written as a manual for legal scholars and teachers, while also serving as a guidebook for laypersons engaging with them, that is, students (ṭullab, sing. ṭālib) and questioners (mustafīṭīs). In this way, iftā’ is a trans-disciplinary science that bridges the theory of law with the lived reality and social domain of legal practice. In short, The Faqīh’s Lantern is a work in the adab of legal experts, both teachers and juris-consultants, as well as anyone interacting with or aspiring to become one.

A common feature of manuals and “how-to” books is that they equip their readers with prescriptions that are universal on the page yet applicable to the particular scenario just beyond the page. In this abstract space, authors tend to describe ideals as opposed to depicting or describing reality. Adab manuals in general and The Faqīh’s Lantern in specific are no different. This presents a problem for the historian interested in constructing accurate accounts of past practices, since an adab manual is not an archive any more than a wish list is an inventory of one’s actual possessions. However, this is less problematic for seeking to understand the ideals and ‘ways of seeing’ of an author or agent in a given time or place. In fact, as a repository of the author’s idealistic commitments, it is a treasure trove of material suited for reconstructing the writer’s worldview.

My treatment of The Faqīh’s Lantern proceeds on this understanding. The text paints an image of the ideal socio-epistemic landscape the author envisioned; as such, his prescriptions can be used as a window to construct his theory of knowledge, or his epistemology. My methodological choice to use an adab text to explore a particular thinker’s epistemology is not without problems, but neither is it without precedent. I will defer dealing with potential objections until the start of Chapter 3. At present, it is enough to note that social epistemologists such as Lorraine Code have noted the need to study epistemology and ethics alongside one another, given that “epistemic and ethical-political concerns are reciprocally informative” and are only separated at the expense of a deeper understanding of both.53 She explains that “theories of knowledge are neither self-contained

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53 Lorraine, Ecological Thinking. 4. Code’s ecological model for epistemic inquiry is taken up again in Chapter 3, Part II “Al-Ṣaghīr on Embodiment.”
within philosophy nor isolated from people’s lives in the societies where their ideals and standards prevail.”

Instead, epistemologies mutually “shape and are shaped by dominant social-political imaginaries.”

While the imaginary of an adab text like *The Faqih’s Lantern* does not describe how legal scholars, students, jurist-consultants, and questioners necessary were, it does describe how they *should aim to be.* As such it can be used to explore the interplay between the epistemic and ethical dimensions in a given time and place. The time and place in this case is nineteenth-century Mauritania, but as well shall see, because this space is seen as a site of retrieval, idealized and replicated within Muslim circles today, it is reified as a contemporary space as well. We therefore stand to learn much from *The Faqih’s Lantern* using this approach, which explicates the shared normative universe this group of practitioners inhabited or – if and when they did not succeed – wanted to inhabit or saw themselves as inhabiting.

**The Intersection of Law and Adab: The Texture of Religious Authority**

At this juncture, an important question arises: given the prescriptive bent of adab texts and their unreliability for imparting knowledge of how things actually unfolded on the ground, why are they significant? If a text represents nothing more than a single author’s ideals for how he or others should conduct themselves in a given space, what purpose can this serve? Can it function as anything more than a description of that person’s hopes and wishes?

As stated before, the enforceability of adab is such that it has far more moral and social sway than mere manners or etiquette. To illustrate this point further, I wish to draw on an important insight developed by Islamic legal scholar Khaled Abou El Fadl in his work *Speaking in God’s Name.* Abou El Fadl distinguishes between two types of authority: coercive authority and persuasive authority. He defines them in the following way:

Coercive authority is the ability to direct the conduct of another person through the use of inducements, benefits, threats or punishments so that a reasonable person would conclude that for all practical purposes they have no choice but to comply. Persuasive authority involves normative power. It is the ability to direct the belief or conduct of another person because of trust.

Abou El Fadl also likens this distinction to the difference Richard B. Friedman, a political philosopher, noted between “persons in authority” and “persons of authority.” The former, like a

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54 Code, Ecological Thinking, 4-5.
55 Code, Ecological Thinking, 4-5.
police officer for example, rely on indicators and symbols of power (e.g., uniform, badge) to enforce and practice their (coercive) authority. Yet, unlike the police officer, a person of authority enjoys a special status, often because of what Friedman calls an “epistemological presupposition” on the part of others who believe the authority knows something they do not. Consider the myriad technicians (e.g., the plumber, the mechanic, the electrician) and employees (e.g., the public servant, the store manager, the insurance adjuster) we cross paths with on a regular basis, and whom we have every reason to believe know something about the clogged sink or the system that we do not. Importantly, whether their specialized knowledge is real or imagined is of little relevance – it is enough that they are perceived as being more knowledgeable or competent for them to enjoy this status and the (persuasive) authority that comes with it.

The question of authority, in particular religious authority, is an important one for Muslims in North America. In her ethnographic study, *Islam is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority*, Zareena Grewal maps the American-Muslim religious imagination with an eye to debates around religious authority. Inasmuch as her remarks relate to Muslim minorities in North America, her insights apply equally to the Canadian context. She takes as her entry point for understanding Muslims’ debates around self-identity what she calls a “crisis of coherence.” The ethnic, social, and intra-religious diversity characterizing Muslim minorities in the United States, combined with the “highly decentralized structure of Sunni Islam” has led to “a sense that religious debates are becoming incoherent” because of a “loss of a common vocabulary.” Borrowing from Thomas’s Kuhn’s explanation of the trajectory of scientific revolutions, Grewal argues that traditions experience a similar cycle, “from the creation and establishment of authoritative knowledge and practices, to the emergence of crisis to the resolution of crisis through knowledge and practices that are not necessarily new but that reorder the world in a new way.”

Grewal explains that, since the late-twentieth century and into the twenty-first, especially post-9/11, American Muslims have become engrossed with the question ‘Who speaks for Islam?’ and ‘What does an authentically American Islam look like?’ For many, the answer rests in the retrieval of religious knowledge, usually construed as being ‘in the past’ and ‘over there’ (i.e., the

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57 Qtd in Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God’s Name*, 19.
60 Grewal, *Islam is a Foreign Country*, 41-42.
Among the main advocates of this particular solution to the crisis of Islamic authority in the US is a figure who studied extensively in Mauritania and popularized it as a place – the place – for the retrieval of traditional Islamic knowledge: Hamza Yusuf Hanson. Hanson “seized the popular religious imagination of Muslim Americans” and spread the idea of the rihla (travel) in pursuit of sacred Islamic knowledge. His life and story became a model for a trend of what Grewal calls “student-travellers” who seek knowledge abroad in the hopes of bringing it back to be established and preserved in American communities.

Mauritania is, of course, not the only destination of students travelling in search of religious knowledge. Grewal’s study focuses on the Middle East (Amman, Jordan; Cairo, Egypt; and Damascus, Syria) but other countries have increasingly enjoyed similar levels of attention from American and Canadian ‘spiritual tourists,’ including Yemen, Morocco, Turkey, and Malaysia, among others. One researcher who focuses on the trend of students travelling abroad for religious study, Walaa Quisay, has dubbed this “the Sufi retreat phenomenon” because of the particular emphasis on Islamic mysticism and the popular format that this programming often takes. The programs are marketed as intensive retreats, lasting anywhere from one week to one month to a year, where American- or Canadian-Muslims can expect an immersive ‘authentic’ Islamic experience in cities like Granada, Spain or Konya, Turkey. The isolation is an important feature of retreat culture, intensifying the distinction between ‘West’ and ‘East’ and contributing to the impression of “the Islamic East as an Archive of tradition.”

The structure of these retreats – a short-lived, insular enclave of non-locals under the direction of influential, celebrated personalities – makes them a prime example of a place where Friedman’s “epistemological presuppositions” are at work.

When compared to the range of other programming available to the average Canadian or American student-traveller, Mauritania stands out. It is not a populous region or regularly sought-after destination, boasts no great number of student-travellers, and in fact, is little-known to people outside circles of Islamic knowledge. Yet, for some, the designation of studying there is a priceless mark of ‘authenticity.’ It has gained a distinct reputation and enjoys a disproportionate pride of place in the religious imagination of many Muslim-Americans precisely because of Hanson’s

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61 Grewal, Islam is a Foreign Country, 156.
63 Grewal, Islam is a Foreign Country, 172.
immense popularity and emphasis on the advantages of studying in this small West African
country. Despite Hanson coming under increasing criticism for political stances in past years,\textsuperscript{64} he
seems to have placed Mauritania firmly on the map, where it continues to enjoy a certain reputation
for untouched, scholarly prestige. In Grewal’s words, Hanson presented Mauritania as “a
destination for the recovery of an intellectual heritage that would restore a universal criterion of
religious authority.”\textsuperscript{65} By the same token, he himself is a perfect example of Abou El Fadl’s
“persuasive authority” or what Freidman calls “persons of authority.” Grewal observes this too
when she writes, “Hamza Yusuf commands authority by making the deep history of Islam relevant
to Muslim Americans, reinvigorating their sense of a binding connection to their intellectual
tradition and precolonial history.”\textsuperscript{66} American leaders like him present a narrative in which they
offer a solution to the “crisis of authority” that is based in knowledge, one where “rather than
identity, knowledge would transcend the structures of power and equalize the field of religious
discourse.”\textsuperscript{67} So even as the reputation of certain figures and the brand of ‘neo-traditionalism’ they
popularized come under greater scrutiny,\textsuperscript{68} this underlying view – that ‘Islamic knowledge’ is the
answer, that this knowledge is accessible and retrievable, and that certain places like Mauritania
are more suitable for this retrieval than others – has endured.

Recall that persuasive authority works because of an “epistemological presupposition” on
the part of the learner – in this case, those Muslims in Canada and the US who are invested in
questions of religious authority and the future of Islam in their respective contexts. If the dynamic
of persuasive authority is true in our dealings with mechanics and administrators, how much more
must it be true of expert groups whose knowledge is even more specialized and advanced (or at
least perceived to be so)? The same question applies to bodies of knowledge that are remote and
inaccessible, \textit{precisely} because of the ways in which the religious imagination of North American
Muslims has been shaped to privilege distant lands (like Mauritania) and romanticize past centuries
(the premodern, precolonial period).

As if these factors are not enough in creating a highly imbalanced epistemic power
dynamic, Abou El Fadl also cites the inherent trust lay Muslims place in the ‘Islamic tradition’

\textsuperscript{64} See Chapter 4, “Hamza Yusuf and Abdallah Bin Bayyah: From Support to Opposition” in Usaama Al-Azami, \textit{Islam and the
Arab Revolutions: The Ulama Between Democracy and Autocracy} (London: Hurst & Company, 2021), 91-120.
\textsuperscript{65} Grewal, \textit{Islam is a Foreign Country}, 165.
\textsuperscript{66} Grewal, \textit{Islam is a Foreign Country}, 165.
\textsuperscript{67} Grewal, \textit{Islam is a Foreign Country}, 159.
\textsuperscript{68} Quisay, “Neo-traditionalism in the West,” PhD diss., (Oxford University, 2019).
(however differently conceived) and those they deem to be affiliated with it. That this tradition exists, at the very least as a construction, and is seen as retrievable – usually through the mediation of those we judge to be expert scholars – is sufficient enough for the functioning of persuasive authority and the emergence of normative force. Abou El Fadl captures this sentiment in theological terms: “It is my contention that the juristic concept of authority has become a firmly embedded part of Islamic dogma. As far as Islamic law is concerned, it is the juristic paradigms and categories that dominate all normative discourses on Islamic orthodoxy.”

All these factors – the weight of Islamic law in general, the intrinsic value juristic works carry, the heritage they are seen as representing, and the prestige of jurists themselves – converge to make a text like The Faqīh’s Lantern automatically command authority in some spaces. The author’s precolonial Mauritanian context furthers the aura of such a text. Finally, because the text is a work in adab, it carries special significance when we turn to consider the power of this genre itself, a point alluded to at the start of this discussion and to which we now turn.

So far, we have examined persuasive authority in conceptual and theoretical terms. However, when it comes to how persuasive authority unfolds on the ground, Abou El Fadl explains that it takes the shape of a dynamic wherein a layperson “surrenders private judgment in deference to the perceived special knowledge, wisdom or insight of an authority.” This differs from coercive authority, which demands compliance. We follow the instructions of a police officer, for example, because there are immediate consequences if we do not. In contrast, persuasive authorities inspire compliance; we voluntarily defer to a persuasive authority’s expertise due to a feeling of trust in the authority’s knowledge. It is not ‘enforced’ from without but rather from within: it involves “the exercise of influence and normative power upon someone.” Normative power influences people to “believe, act or refrain from acting in a certain fashion by persuading them that this is what ought to be (emphasis added).” Moreover, this “surrendering of private judgement” is not total in the case of persuasive authority, as might be the case with coercive authority. Once we no longer trust or believe in the epistemological superiority of a figure, their authority over us fades. Similarly, by perceiving (persuasive) authority in another person, we

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69 Abou El Fadl, Speaking in God’s Name, 31.
70 Abou El Fadl, Speaking in God’s Name, 18.
71 Abou El Fadl, Speaking in God’s Name, 22.
72 Abou El Fadl, Speaking in God’s Name, 22.
simultaneously confer it. Put differently, persuasive authority is in the eye of its beholders; in choosing to project it, we create it.

This discussion began with a question: Why are *adab* texts significant? The normative power that Abou El Fadl aptly describes is precisely the type of power that *adab* texts hold, especially those written by Islamic scholars. The imperatives of *adab* are neither purely legal nor purely moral, neither strictly enforceable nor merely suggested – they occupy an intermediate space. In fact, *adab*-rooted imperatives are arguably more potent than legal injunctions *because* of their voluntary nature, not despite it. The spirit of elective deference that permeates *adab* is precisely why this discourse is so deserving of our attention. Those inhabiting this normative space willingly choose to commit and bind themselves to these imperatives, even as they have the power to shape (or distort) them. Therefore, *The Faqīh’s Lantern*, as a hybrid work in law (*iftāʾ*) and *adab*, belonging to the former but written from the perspective of the latter, yields immense normative power – for those who commit to operating within its sphere.

**Conclusion**

Chapter 1 has provided an overview of the author and his context to better appreciate *The Faqīh’s Lantern*, then sketched the sensitivities of constructing religious authority, focusing on Mauritania as a case study. We have seen how there is a real, historical layer and an imagined layer that together complicate our perception of classical Mauritanian scholarship. We can think of the two layers as two lenses in a pair of binoculars, each one focused on a different point in the landscape, sharpening its features. So far, we have one eye trained on the historical background and the other on the contemporary foreground. Aside from this, there is one final consideration that is relevant to our discussion of *The Faqīh’s Lantern*. This factor functions less as a lens and more as an obstacle that impairs our visibility, lowering the quality of the epistemic environment: the phenomenon of spiritual abuse.

Spiritual abuse occurs when one “[uses] religion to manipulate, control and bully through the guise of religion, religious principles or claims to spirituality.” It can take two main forms: (1) the misuse of a religious position, and (2) the misuse and abuse of religious concepts, scripture, and spiritual rhetoric in interpersonal relationships, such as spousal

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73 “Introduction to Spiritual Abuse,” In Shaykh’s Clothing website, accessed on November 15, 2023, [https://inshaykhsclothing.com/home/intro/](https://inshaykhsclothing.com/home/intro/).
relationships and friendships. The first form of spiritual abuse is the one most pertinent to our discussion. The persuasive authority of Islamic law as a discipline and adab as an approach, especially when combined in the figure of a single charismatic figure, creates a situation where it is very likely that the vulnerable party in the power dynamic – the learner or student – will “surrender their private judgement” as Abou El Fadl calls it, sometimes wholesale, to the religious or spiritual authority at hand.

Spiritual abuse is the research focus of the Hurma Project by Ingrid Mattson, an initiative that exists to uphold the “sacred inviolability” (ḥurma) of community members in Islamic spaces, from mosques and schools to conferences and third spaces. It aims to achieve this by “elucidating the special responsibilities of those holding power and authority and by educating those who are vulnerable about their God-given dignity and rights.” Other academics are also working to address the phenomenon of spiritual abuse from different disciplinary angles, such as the psychology of spiritual abuse or issues from the perspective of litigation. While academic efforts focus on understanding the phenomenon of abuse and raising awareness, grassroots community-based efforts focus on educating and equipping community members on the ground. For instance, FACE (Facing Abuse in Community Environments) is a group that focuses on conducting investigations and formulating protocols to prevent abuses and respond to them appropriately when they arise. According to FACE,

> Members of the Muslim community are collectively coming to terms with the fact that among the people who are serving as leaders, including clergy, teachers and religious scholars, are those that abuse their positions of power and violate their ethical responsibilities... It is our responsibility as a community to address this accountability gap.

Other efforts in this vein include “In Shaykh’s Clothing,” a website dedicated to helping individuals identify and recover from abuse by sharing resources and providing individual coaching for those leaving spiritually abusive environments or relationships. One figure who deserves mention in this regard is Rami Nsour, another Mauritian-trained scholar, who studies spiritual abuse and is affiliated with “In Shaykh’s Clothing.” In one article, Nsour describes the types of cognitive distortion that religious leaders resort to in bids to maintain power. Of the many

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tactics, one is particularly relevant. It is what Nsour calls the “adab card.” This is when the abuser or others in the environment claim that reporting abuse is improper etiquette or “bad adab” because it goes against proper Islamic manners and decorum.⁷⁹ I mention this here to further demonstrate the power of the adab discourse and its influence on behaviour, particularly in group settings and teacher-student dynamics. Keeping this in mind, a text like The Faqīh’s Lantern, itself a product of the adab genre, becomes all the more important for its potential to demystify what proper comportment really entails. As we shall see, ʿAḥmad al-Ṣaghīr’s adab text does not preclude being critical of, and at times even harsh with, teachers.

It now becomes easier to appreciate how important The Faqīh’s Lantern is. From the very tradition that Muslims in North America romanticize and hail as authentic (Mauritania), from the very discipline of law that Muslims instinctively take to be authoritative (Islamic law), and from the very genre (adab) that Muslims defer to as a representation of Islamic values and ideals, emerges the voice of ʿAḥmad al-Ṣaghīr. Though he is lesser-known today, he comes – bearing all the necessary scholarly accoutrements and claims to legitimacy – to deliver an important message, one that is overwhelming conservative and cautious in tone. As the translation will show, ʿAḥmad al-Ṣaghīr’s advice in his poem emphasizes several simple but key principles, centered around the themes of being wary when navigating one’s epistemic environment, of being critical when assessing the other knowers in one’s space – especially those disseminating knowledge – and of learning to trust and rely on one’s internal stores of self-knowledge in times of doubt.

On a personal note, it was at a time of such self-doubt that ʿAḥmad al-Ṣaghīr was first introduced to me. I was navigating a challenging period in a new, insular community and grappling with questions that I have come to believe plague many Muslims across North America, especially when in search of religious knowledge, whether generally or in answer to a specific question or dilemma. The Faqīh’s Lantern allayed many of these doubts and gave me a foundation as well as the confidence to continue traversing these confusing, contentious spaces, where appearances do not always align with reality. While the counsel ʿAḥmad al-Ṣaghīr provides his readers is general and at times sounds deceivingly simple, it became a lifeline of sorts. I hope it can be the same for many people, not just formal students in the sacred sciences but also those seeking any information of a religious or spiritual nature. Perhaps most importantly, it can and should serve as an admonition for teachers and those in positions of real and especially perceived religious authority,

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⁷⁹ Rami Nsour, “My Reflections on Spiritual Abuse,” Journal of Islamic Faith and Practice 4, no. 1 (2022): 138:
calling them to discharge the trust (amānah) they carry in disseminating religious knowledge with a clear conscience as Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr instructs.80

Fortuitously, my encounter with The Faqīh’s Lantern also took place at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, adding another rich layer to my engagement with this text. As I pondered the poem during those difficult months, I was continuously struck by how relevant and helpful his advice could be, not just to lay Muslims seeking religious knowledge, but people of other faith or no faith communities who are committed to truth and accurate reporting in the wake of fake news and the ‘post-truth’ age. Many of the questions Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr takes up can be pondered fruitfully across a variety of contexts. For example, how do we know which experts to trust, from the health official to the alleged scholar or shaykh? Where do we draw the line between intellectual humility and intellectual cowardice? How do we cultivate self-trust in the face of epistemic nihilism, subjectivism, or sheer apathy and ambivalence to truth?81 What do we do – especially those from marginalized communities – when we experience the “epistemic friction”82 and cognitive dissonance that comes from having our self-knowledge or other indigenous and non-dominant ways of knowing be challenged, silenced, or erased?

I do not have the answers to these pressing questions, but I have found much solace and a way forward in The Faqīh’s Lantern by Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr. In producing and sharing this partial translation, I hope that others, too, find solace and the courage to continue choosing truth.

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80 Al-Ṣaghīr writes: “With good assumptions, they come to you, / Entrusting you with what’s most dear: / A curious mind, an attentive heart. / Discharge the trust with your conscience clear.” See § I, “On the Intention of Learners and Teachers,” line 11.
81 Harry Frankfurt has drawn attention to the fact that it is not only falsehoods and deliberate lies that epistemically virtuous agents must now guard against, but increasingly also “bullshitters” or those utterly unconcerned with truth which, in his view, “is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are.” See Harry Frankfurt, On Bullshit (Princeton University Press, 2005), 61.
Chapter 2: Annotated Translation of *The Faqīh’s Lantern* (*Miṣbāḥ al-Faqīh*)

**Note on the Translation**

Any translation comes with some difficulty, but translating poetry presents unique challenges. The overarching impetus behind this translation has been to render an accessible, engaging, and compelling equivalent of the original text in English. My hope has been to balance being grounded in the original message while also producing something that can stand on its own, without being riddled with brackets or other markings that may distract or burden the reader. The result is a more liberal and creative translation that, while preserving the author’s meaning, is not always a precise, word-for-word rendition.

Another challenge lies in the fact that the work is a combination of two styles of writing. As a didactic work, it is educational and informative, and as a poem, it contains literary devices and idiomatic elements. Therefore, to preserve the didacticism, I aimed to preserve as much of the rhetorical force of the original. Meanwhile, in its capacity as a poem, I also aimed to recreate the rhythm and literary quality of the author’s writing. Each line of verse (*bayt shiʿrī*) corresponds roughly to one, sometimes two, stanzas in the poem. This is reflected in the numbering. The poem is 616 lines, of which I have translated 122, roughly one-fifth of the original.

I was introduced to *Miṣbāḥ al-Faqīh* in 2021 when it was taught online by the contemporary Mālikī scholar Zohayr Qazzan through Markaz Imam Malik, a seminary in Cairo, Egypt. I relied heavily on his commentary on the text in producing the translation and contextualizing the author’s intended message. I chose to sometimes include a line or two, at times even an entire stanza, from his commentary in-text. These lines are italicized. Though they are not the original words of the author, I felt they were necessary to fully appreciate the meaning being conveyed. They may, for example, provide important information that was being implied or alluded to by the author, or serve to reiterate a point being made emphatically in Arabic. Aside from these italicized lines and phrases, further remarks from Zohayr Qazzan’s commentary can be found in the footnotes beginning with “ZQ.”

The footnotes also contain many other relevant details, including not only elaboration on the in-text commentary but also justification of word choices and contextual cues. This includes quotations from other texts, which the author regularly incorporates. Details of the authors and texts he draws from are provided in the footnotes, when possible. The footnotes also identify which
Qur’anic verses or hadith narrations the author has in mind when he alludes to them. Such references would have been immediately recalled by those in his milieu. Where a Qur’anic verse appears, it is from *The Qur’an: A New Translation* by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem.

Aside from a handful of oft-repeated words (Qur’an, hadith, sunnah, and Muhammad when referencing the Prophet ﷺ), Arabic words are transliterated according to the transliteration system of *The International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Arabic words are explained or translated either in-text or in the footnotes. When the Prophet Muhammad is mentioned, the sign that appears afterward (ﷺ) is an honorific meaning “peace be upon him.”

In the end, every translation is highly interpretive. This translation combines the commentary from my teachers with my own, less erudite efforts in grappling with the text, set against a backdrop of years of hearing these recurring messages and themes about seeking knowledge. I have aimed to be as clear as possible in distinguishing the various layers of interpretation, but am sure gaps remain. In many ways, this feature – interlocking levels of dialogue around a particular text – is the hallmark of Islamic scholarship which is rich in commentaries (ṣhrūḥ, sing. ṣhrḥ) and glosses (ḥwāshī, sing. ḥāshiyah). I hope this translation is a useful addition in understanding, appreciating, and engaging with this tradition further.
**Miṣbāḥ al-Faqīḥ**
by Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr b. Ḥima Allah al-Muslimī al-Tīshīfī (1223/1809 – 1272/1855)

**INTRODUCTION**

1
I begin in the name of God, Most High,
Seeking His divine aid before
Embarking on this text, and call
On Al-Ghafir,
seventy times or more.

2
All praise is due to God, the Source
Of each and every existent thing.
The One who maintains and sustains
Each and every created being.

3
The best, most beautiful of greetings
And peace and blessings we impart
Upon Muhammad, creation’s axis,
Who brings tranquility to our hearts,

4
And upon his family and wives,
And upon his blessed companions,
His noble, gracious company,
The best of generations.

5
Now I turn to the poem at hand,
Which addresses a number of topics
And issues that pertain to those
Who are on a path of learning fiqh.

6
Authors a book, composing a poem,
Producing a beneficial piece of art –

All this can count as worship, as long
As the intent endures within one’s heart.

7
I chose to write this poem, despite
Al-Nabighah writing on this before.
What a blessing it is to share his aim;
His contribution I cannot ignore.

8
I chose to give this poem the title:
“The Faqīh’s Lantern and Guiding Light.”
I ask God’s protection, both for me
And Al-Nabighah on the Day of Fright.

**PREAMBLE**

**ADVISING TRUE STUDENTS,**

**EXPOSING THE FALSE**

1–2
This text contains what every student,
Seeking God’s pleasure, can’t do without,
Nurtured with fruits from Al-Nabighah,
With many more insights throughout.

3
Avoid the slanderers of this text,
Who blindly point the finger of blame.
Know that a vessel can only pour out
The very substance that it contains.

4
Read it carefully with depth of thought,

---

1 One of the ninety-nine divine names meaning “The Most Forgiving”.
2 The Prophet ﷺ said: “The best of men are my generation, then those who come next to them, then those who come next to them.” [Mishkât al-Maṣābiḥ, 3767]
3 Islamic law or jurisprudence.
4 The Prophet ﷺ said: “(The value of) an action depends on the intention behind it. A man will be rewarded only for what he intended.” [Saḥīḥ Muslim, 1907]
5 The author is referring to the text Naẓm al-Boutlaykīyyah fi Zikr al-Mu’tamad min al-Kutub wal-Fatāwā ‘ind al-Mālikīyyah (Boutlaykīyyah Poem on the Relied Upon Books and Legal Edicts of the Mālikī School) by another Mauritanian scholar, Muhammad ibn ʿAmr Al-Nābighah Al-Ghallawi al-Shinqīfī. The author will draw from and build on the insights of this poem while clarifying and elaborating on many of the same points made by Al-Nābighah.
6 A faqīh is jurist. This is a distinct office from the muftī, a jurist who issues legal opinions that are non-binding, as well as a qāḍī (judge) whose legal edicts are enforceable. Etiquette of the muftī is the central topic of § IV below.
7 Resurrection or Day of Judgement.
8 See n. 5 above.
9 ZQ: In this stanza, the author is telling the reader that the instructions and advice within this text are such that he or she will benefit from it by studying it on its own, just as a vessel will benefit the person taking from it so long as its contents are good and pure (e.g., water, honey, etc.).
Give me fair counsel on any mistakes, 
Overlook the shortcomings you may find, 
And forgive my errors – for His sake.

As for those who reject this work, 
It is by whim that they are driven, 
Their only concern is arguing 
Out of vanity and ostentation.

As for the one who flatters me, 
What a blameworthy character trait! 
The same can be said for people who 
Reject things out of spite and hate.

I pray that God makes me content, 
Preserves my health, and will forgive 
My sins, and grants me certainty 
To live a life purely for Him.

May He bless me with openings, 
Sincere repentance and tawfiq, 
And grant me knowledge that benefits, 
with righteous action and true tahlīq.

And likewise for my brethren, 
And all believers who truly strive 
To do the good and call to good 
And those who say “Āmin” besides.

May He draw all people – body and soul –

To Him, their Maker and their Shaper.

So turn to Him, dear reader, for He 
Is The All-Powerful Caretaker.

May He facilitate and furnish 
Our learning of the sciences with ease, 
Strengthen us, and prevent fatigue 
In pursuits of knowledge and expertise.

Dear reader, make the same prayer 
To grant you the likes of all of these! 
May He bless you in this earthly life, 
And, in the next, make you well-pleased.

§ I
ON THE INTENTION OF LEARNERS AND THEORETICIES

Intend, by learning, to remove 
Your ignorance, and come to know 
God’s right upon you in all your acts, 
So the Prophet’s way, you may follow.

Intend in learning the instruments, 
To rely on them as aids and tools, 
To learn the Book and the sunnah, 
Understand His speech and the sharīʿ rules.

To these two intentions you may add,

---

10 Havā, sometimes also translated as caprice.
11 ZQ: The author is critiquing how, in Islamic scholarship and intellectual history, the works of some figures are sometimes rejected because of their social standing, tribal affiliations, lineage, race, and so on. The author reminds the reader not to let in-group dynamics (asabiyyah) dissuade them from engaging with his text. My addition: This applies equally to institutional dynamics (race, and so on. The author reminds the reader not to let in-group dynamics (asabiyyah, where one’s partisanship leads them to overgeneralize and dismiss, out of hand, those affiliated with a particular institution.
12 Tawfiq can be translated as “enabling grace” or “enabling success.”
13 Tahlīq has different meanings across the Islamic sciences. In Islamic theology (kalām), law (fiqh) and jurisprudence (usūl al-fiqh), it refers to the process of critical verification in scholarship. In Islamic mysticism, it means directly witnessing or experiencing theophanies (tajalliyāt). For a detailed discussion on the various meanings of tahlīq, see Walead Mossad, Islam Before Modernity: Ahmad al-Dardir and the Preservation of Traditional Knowledge (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2022): 89-93.
14 My addition: in reference to the divine names Al-Khāliq (The Maker) and Al-Muṣawwar (The Shaper).
15 In reference to the divine names Al-Ghālib (The All-Powerful) and Al-Rabb (The Caretaker).
16 A more literal translation would read “May He reward you in this life before the next.” I have opted to translate it as “well-pleased” based on the verse in Sūrat al-Bayyinah (Q. 98:8): “Their reward with their Lord is everlasting Gardens graced with flowing streams, where they will stay forever. God is well pleased with them and they with Him. All this is for those who stand in awe of their Lord.”
17 The instrumental sciences (uloom al-ʻalāh) are sciences not pursued for their own sake, but as prerequisites for other sciences (uloom al-maqaṣid). For example, logic (mantiq), grammar (nahī), and rhetoric (balāghah) are instrumental sciences.
18 The literal translation would read “To learn what God has commanded and stipulated in the sacred law (sharīʿah).” For greater clarity, I have explicitly added the Book and the sunnah, or prophetic teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (s), since the Qur’an and hadith corpus are primary sources for the other Islamic sciences, namely law which is the genre of this text. So when the author refers to God’s law or sharīʿah, he likely has His direct speech in mind (in the Qur’an) as well as what He revealed to the Prophet (s) in his capacity as legislator.
Many more and multiply;  
Like helping others, not just yourself:  
_Recall what true faith is, and comply._¹⁹

Should your intention incline toward,  
The thought of _dunyā_²⁰ and worldly gain,  
Beware God’s anger and tribulation,  
_and fleeting glories – don’t entertain._

_Do not forget the other extreme:_  
Avoiding knowledge out of arrogance.  
Both action and omission for others’ sake,  
Is not just arrogance, but its very essence.

Never forget, even for a moment,  
That you, your mind, and comprehension,  
And every body of human knowledge,  
Are simply – and solely – God’s creation.

So think of these instead as gifts,  
_and blessings endowed by God Most High;_  
Beware the _shirk_²¹ of taking credit  
For the favours upon which you rely.

Stay far away from the steps of Satan,  
And delusions of your capricious soul,  
_Commanding you to take credit_  
_For something in which you had no role._

There was a time when you were just  
A drop of semen, then flesh and bone,  
_Al-Qādir_²² who taught you everything

Can strip you of what you’ve come to know.

Even if you were a genius,  
With discoveries in every field,  
When death draws near, your knowledge won’t  
Help you, save you, or be your shield.

Nonetheless, the average person is  
Far removed from being that!  
Remember that you’re nothing more  
Than someone who transmits the facts.²³

_Now let us turn to one who teaches,_  
They must keep one thing in mind:  
A learner’s intellect is like a field  
That you till and water ‘til it’s refined.

_With good assumptions, they come to you,_  
_Entrusting you with what’s most dear:_  
_A curious mind, an attentive heart:_  
_Discharge the trust with a conscience clear._²⁴

To teachers who fear arrogance:  
_Take care to not let it affect_  
Obligatory acts of worship;  
_Farāʿid cannot have any defects._²⁵

_In learning and in teaching, both,_  
_Pray for sincerity of heart,_  
_Without ikhlaṣ_²⁶ knowledge becomes  
_Disobedience on your part._²⁷

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¹⁹ In reference to the report of the Prophet ﷺ: “No one of you becomes a true believer until he likes for his brother what he likes for himself.” [Riyāḍ al-Ṣalāḥ, 183]
²⁰ The life of this world or the lower, earthly realm of existence. The literal root of _dunyā_ comes from the word “low.”
²¹ _Shirk_ is polytheism. The author is speaking not of the literal polytheism of assigning partners or other deities to God, but rather the vice of failing to recognize God’s omnipotence by instead attributing the power to create acts or outcomes in the world to oneself.
²² One of the ninety-nine divine names meaning “The All-Powerful”.
²³ A _nāql_ is a transmitter, or someone familiar enough with the law or legal corpus of a school to transmit information about it, but without engaging in higher levels of juristic practice. Elsewhere in the poem, the author describes the different levels, including independent juristic reasoning (_ijthād_), derivation of rulings (_takhrīj_), and application of rulings (_tanzīl_). The author is saying that in many cases, even with years of learning and teaching in _fiqh_, legal practitioners often remain at the level of transmission.
²⁴ This stanza is not from the poem, but the commentary. I have included it to elaborate on the author’s meaning in the previous stanza.
²⁵ The _farāʿid_ are obligatory acts. ZQ: The author is stating one should not let fear of arrogance lead them to neglect their obligations, like the five daily prayers. For instance, a person should avoid leading an obligatory prayer if they suspect they are doing so out of arrogance. The author could also be implying a second meaning: that by recalling that a particular deed is obligatory, this should help combat feelings of arrogance when the person realizes that they are doing nothing more than fulfilling the basic demands of the sacred law.
²⁶ Sincerity, discussed again in § III below.
²⁷ An act that appears to be an act of piety on the surface, such as seeking knowledge, can become a means for the scholar or scholar-aspirant being punished in the hereafter, as alluded to in the saying...
Heed the advice within this poem:

“Make your intention pure for Him;
In doing so, you will have won
Everlasting reward in the Garden.

One gaining knowledge for other than
God’s beatific countenance,
Is swindled by Satan, the deceiver,
And robbed of his portion of Paradise.

Knowledge cannot be gained without,
The companionship of a true teacher,
And exertion, effort, and tireless strain,
And the broken state of being a seeker.

The stages of learning number eight,
Beginning with silence, then listening,
Then memorization – which captures knowledge
In your very being – then understanding,

Then comes the stage of explanation,
Then learning proofs, or istidlāl,
Then acting on what one has learned,
Then sharing it with those closest at hand.

of the Prophet ﷺ: “[On the Day of Judgement] a man will be brought forward who acquired knowledge and imparted it (to others) and recited the Qur’an. He will be brought and Allah will make him recount His blessings and he will recount them [and admit having enjoyed them in his lifetime]. Then Allah will ask, ‘What did you do [to replete these blessings]?’ He will say, ‘I acquired knowledge and disseminated it and recited the Qur’an seeking Your pleasure.’ Allah will say, ‘You have told a lie. You acquired knowledge so that you might be called a scholar, and you recited the Qur’an so that it might be said: ‘He is a reciter’ and this has been said. Then the order will be given and he shall be dragged with his face downward and cast into the Fire.” [Ṣaḥḥ Muslim, 1905]

28 Brokenness before God, i.e., recognition of one’s neediness and dependence on God alone.

29 There are several well-known Mauritanian proverbs in this regard.

(1) “My knowledge is mine, wherever I go I carry it with me; in my heart and not in a trunk. If I am at home, knowledge is with me; if I am at the market, knowledge is in the market.” See: Ghislaine Lydon, “Inkwells of the Sahara: Reflections on the Production of Islamic Knowledge in Bilād Shīnīḥ,” in The Transmission of Learning in Islamic Africa, ed. Scott S. Reese, pp. 39-71 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 50. (2) Knowledge is in the chests (ṣūdūr) of people, not the lines (ṣūfūr) of books. See Oladamini Ogunnaike, Deep Knowledge: Ways of Knowing in Sufism and Ifîs, Two West African Intellectual Traditions (Penn State University Press, 2020), 385.

30 Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 241 AH/855 CE) is the eponymous founder of another Sunnī legal school, the Hanbali school, who was also a famed muhaddith (specialized in collecting prophetic hadith).

19 Begin by learning the knowledge that
Is native to your own homeland.
Then venture beyond, in pursuit of learning
From other teachers, in person, firsthand.

20 If you narrate something of
The Prophet ﷺ, then follow this rule:
Always put to practice what you relate,
Like Ibn Ḥanbal did before you.

21 It is by acting on one’s knowledge
That one becomes a true preserver,
And by showing teachers their due respect,
The respect of a prince or worldly ruler.

22 As you sit with them, do not
Lengthen your lessons to the point,
That you or they begin to tire,
Of knowledge – which is not the point.

Beware of distinct but similar traits:
Excessive shyness and vain pride,
Both stop one from asking questions,

31 The word for memorization is the same as the word for preservation (ḥāfīdh). At a basic level, the author is saying you will truly master your lessons only once you start acting on what you have learned. However, ḥāfīdh in the science of hadith refers to a master narrator who has collected and memorized volumes-worth of narrations with their chains of transmission (asānad; sing. sanad). The word ḥāfīdh can refer to yet another category of people, not those who have necessarily memorized texts but who otherwise inherited, preserved, and passed on some aspect of Islamic knowledge to the next generation.

32 ZQ: From a theological and eschatological perspective, a sincere teacher benefits his students both in the worldly life and afterlife. As such, they are due more respect than someone with worldly power alone who can only benefit you materially. My addition: This needs further context. Attitudes towards religious authorities sometimes trespass beyond the realm of ‘respect’ into extreme reverence and even idolization, leading to harmful power dynamics if appropriate measures are not in place (e.g., transparency). See n. 28 above.

33 The Prophet ﷺ said: “Indeed, learning takes practice and exertion, and forbearance takes practice and exertion” [Ṣaḥḥ Jami’, 2328] and: “The religion is easy, but if anyone overdoes it, it gets better of him; so keep to the right course, approximate to perfection, rejoice, and ask help in the morning, the evening, and some of the latter part of the night.” [Mishkāt al-Maṣābīḥ, 1246].
Which, for learning, cannot be denied.

For memorization, always begin
With a small yet consistent amount,
Review things often and frequently,
And soon, they’re easy to recount.”

A student who lacks good listening
And humility – their case is dire.
For inattention and arrogance
Earns you your seat in the Fire.

As for engaging in debate,
There are two times when it is needed:
To demonstrate the truth and when
A falsehood needs to be defeated.

The two debaters must first meet
Certain conditions, which include,
Knowledge of what is being debated,
And munāẓarah, with all its rules.

Debaters must be sure to use
Proper questioning, and reply in kind,
For instance, one should not respond
To a “What” question with a “Why.”

Observe the proper etiquette,
Do not intimidate or impose,
Avoid wild gestures, and do not raise
Your voice, especially in the mosque.

Using fallacious arguments,
To confuse the other opponent,
Likewise, deflection and stubbornness,
All are from bad etiquette.

§ II
ON UNDERSTANDING AND MEMORIZING

Understanding is a light by which
The meanings of things are revealed
For those who have an intellect
And pause long enough to think and feel.

Understanding can be occluded by
Dullness and lack of striving.
To remove such dullness, exert yourself;
Ask questions to demystify things.

Don’t allow yourself to be afraid
Or overwhelmed by any subject.
You will never ask something of God
And come away from Him dejected.

The secret to unlocking faḥm,
Lies in striving truthfully.
How often does miraculous aid,
Come to those of sincerity!

“When memorizing, prioritize
The following times of day and night:
Before Fajr, and after Fajr,
Midday, and, finally, the night.

Fallacies (mughālatah) are studied in logic texts such as Al-Sullam al-Munavraq fi Fann al-Manṭiq by Abū Zayd ‘Abd al-Rahmān ibn Muhammad al-Ṣaghīr al-Akhdārī (d. 953 AH/1547 CE).

ZQ: Deflection includes suddenly changing topics or interrupting the opponent in an effort to distract while stubbornness occurs when interlocutors do not concede or acquiesce to the other side when it is warranted.

A more literal translation would read “those who expend effort in using their intellect”, i.e., exert themselves in reflection and contemplation. My addition: I have found that the challenges to these activities today have more to do with the capacity and willingness to pay attention, and so opted for a liberal translation here.

Understanding and insight.

The word used is sīdqa which combines truthfulness and sincere devotion.

The early morning prayer.
A modest amount of hunger is
The best aid for memorization,
And the ideal place for practice is
Closed rooms, away from vegetation.

Al-Fākahānī mentions this,
In the well-known commentary
On Al-Risālah, written by
Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī.”

Neglecting what you’ve memorized
Is the quickest path to forgetfulness.
By memorizing you bind yourself
To the text, like taking a covenant.

Two things cause absent-mindedness:
One is wishful thinking,
The other is extreme despair;
*The key is in the balancing.*

Those who err in memorization are:
One who comprehends without
Committing words to memory;
Such students eventually go off-route.

The other focuses on words alone.
These students won’t go very far.
*Memorizing what you don’t understand
Will merely grow your repertoire.*

The successful way to memorize
Is to take a middle path between
Knowing the words themselves by heart
While understanding what they mean.

Once you have grasped the text in hand,
Engage with issues that are secondary.
On this topic, a poet once wrote

The following lines, saying similarly:

13-14
“When reading, the custom’s to begin
By sticking closely to the text.
Going beyond it can be harmful
To students, who might be perplexed.”

15
“Some teachers like to repeat themselves
Or take their listeners on tangents
To impress others with what they know.
What a disservice to their students!”

16
Teachers and learners ought not to rush;
All subjects have general and specific matters.
Start with the roots before the branches,
Reversing them will leave you scattered.

As for the details and specifics,
These can be given, depending on
The level and readiness of the learner,
Like referencing or adding nuance.

“Now, when it comes to knowledge of fiqh,
The way to learn,” Zarrūq explains,
“Is from pious and expert teachers,
Connected through an unbroken chain.

The best teachers know to attend,
At first, to broad and basic themes
And not to burden the one who learns
With details until they have the means –

To understand and appreciate
The layers of a certain subject.
Otherwise, the learner’s attention and
Their focus will become deflected.

If your students are overwhelmed
Or struggling with some confusion

---

43 Unverified quotation, but they reference Tāj al-Dīn al-Fākahānī (d. 734 AH/1334 CE), author of Al-Talīrīr wal-Tamwīr, a commentary on text called Al-Risālah by ‘Abd Allāh Abū Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Rahmān ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī (d. 386 AH/996 CE).
44 ZQ: Wishful thinking leads to procrastination and putting things off, while despair leads to lack of motivation to put in the effort to learn. The author is prescribing a balanced dose of both, i.e., combining hope with a healthy sense of urgency.
45 Unverified quotation.
46 Unverified quotation.
47 ZQ: Examples would be citing detailed opinions for students to refer to, especially regarding issues with a difference of opinion, directing students to advanced texts, and so on.
48 Ahmad ibn Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Ḥasan al-Barnusi or simply Ahmad Zarrūq (d. 899 AH/1493 CE). These lines are from his Qawā’id al-Ṭaṣawwuf.
Try different ways of making the point,  
To lessen and ease them from the burden.

Knowledge functions just like food  
Which nourishes the body;  
A regular but modest intake  
Keeps the soul sound and healthy.

So, to the teachers, remember this:  
Knowledge will go on endlessly,  
But people have limits, in body and mind,  
So tailor your teaching accordingly.

§ III
ON THE ESSENTIAL TRAIT FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

1 The single most important trait  
Of a teacher is sincerity.\(^{49}\)  
Only take from those who have it and  
Avoid all without this quality.

2 Without this trait, a teacher won’t  
Have any real concern for you.\(^{50}\)  
The way to tell is feeling unassured;  
Remember that your soul is shrewd.

3 Scholars are insincere when they  
Follow caprice and grow content  
With their egos. So flee from them  
Even if you leave the continent.

4 It would be better to befriend  
Someone ignorant than one insincere.  
A person aware of their ignorance  
Has humility before all their peers.\(^{51}\)

5 A corrupt scholar has soiled his heart  
With blameworthy speech and action.  
So imitating him is not just invalid;  
His commands also have no traction.

6 His teaching will not pierce the hearts  
Of his listeners or his students.  
In this regard, I recall some lines;  
Take note of the author’s intent:

7 “The hearts of people are like trees  
While knowledge is like rain;  
Sweet rain will bring its like of fruit,  
Bitter rain will do the same.”\(^{52}\)

8 But if you live in a time or place  
Where true teachers are quite rare  
And you must abide the company of  
Insincere ones, then take good care –  
To only take from them what’s known  
And corroborated elsewhere.  
Suffer their presence as long as you must  
Then leave them to their own affair.

9 Run away from them, just as you would  
From one infected with disease.  
And ask your Lord, the Generous One,\(^{53}\)  
For guidance, gentleness, and ease.\(^{54}\)

10 Meanwhile, practice seclusion.  
Good teachers are like canaries;  
In disappearing, a siren sounds,  
So be watchful and be wary.\(^{55}\)

11 Look no further than the commentary  
Of Al-Sanūsī on Al-Jazā’irī;  

\(^{49}\) Ikhlās.  
\(^{50}\) The Prophet ﷺ said: “Religion is sincere counsel (al-dīn al-nasīḥah), religion is sincere counsel, religion is sincere counsel.” The companions said, “To whom, O Messenger of God?” He said: “To Allah, to His Book, to His Messenger, to the leaders of the Muslims and to the laity.” [Sunan al-Nasā’i, 4199]

\(^{51}\) The text in fact says “before all creation” meaning that someone with the virtues of sincerity and humility will not only be humble before their intellectual equals but others as well, such as beginner students, even if they are more advanced, children, illiterate individuals, etc. This can extend to other created beings as well, such as animals and plants, who likewise have a capacity to teach us something.

\(^{52}\) Unverified quotation.

\(^{53}\) In reference to the divine name Al-Karīm (The Generous).

\(^{54}\) In the search for righteous teachers.

\(^{55}\) ZQ: The author is implying that, when sincere and upright teachers are rare, this is a sign of a troubled time and/or place, or a morally or spiritually decadent culture. He therefore cautions the reader to beware not just of the corruption of teachers – that especially – but other segments of society.
He said: “Choose one who is obedient,
   And sincere, whose traits are lofty –
   Because we ‘steal’ the mannerisms
   Of those whom we accompany.’ 56

In choosing your friends, you choose the traits
   That, one day, you will embody.

§ IV
ON THE ETIQUETTE OF JURISTS 57

To the muftī, internalize this verse:
   “Verily…the heart shall be questioned” 58
   And let the phrase “I don’t know” become
   A sword, for your own protection. 59

When a questioner 60 approaches,
   Envision the Garden and the Fire
   On either side of you, and pray
   To God to overlook your error.

Meanwhile, the questioner ought to
   Avoid muftis who hasten to answer.
   Quick answering points either to ignorance
   Or a muftī with a spiritual cancer. 61

To answer before weighing carefully,
   Or deep thought and examination
   Brings a rapid end to one’s scholarly life,
   Ruining credibility and reputation.

56 Lines from a commentary by Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf al-Saḥīfī (d. 895 AH/1490 CE) called Al-Manḥaj al-Sadīd fi Sharḥ Kifāyat al-Murid on the didactic poem, Al-Jazā’irīyyah by Ahmad ibn ʿAbd Allah Al-Zawāwī Al-Jazā’irī (d. 884 AH/1479 CE).
57 A jurist who issues non-binding legal opinions (see n. 6 above).
58 In reference to the verse from Sūrat al-Iṣrā’ (Q. 17:36): “Do not follow blindly what you do not know to be true: ears, eyes, and heart, you will be questioned about these.”
59 This may be a reference to the proverb, often quoted by scholars and students alike, “Saying ‘I don’t know’ is half of knowledge.” It may also be in reference to several popular stories of Mālik ibn Anas, the eponymous founder of the Mālikī school to which the author belongs: (1) A scholar travelled a great distance to visit Mālik ibn Anas to ask him a legal question, to which he did not know the answer so he responded “I do not know.” The man responded, “What will I say when I return to my people?” Mālik responded: “Tell your people, ‘Mālik said, ‘I don’t know.’” (2) Mālik ibn Anas was once asked forty questions, and his answer to thirty-three of them was “I don’t know.”
60 A mustafīṭī, someone specifically seeking a legal opinion.

5 A muftī should not deploy a text
   Until they understand the situation,
   Compare and contrast relevant quyūd, 62
   And are sure of their application.

Unless the text itself in question
   Mentions quyūd, such as Khalīl,
Which nuances most of its rulings. 63
   It is to these texts you may appeal.

7 Looking for loopholes in iftā’ 64
   Is absolutely forbidden.
   Regarding what a muftī must observe,
   We lay out four more conditions:

“The muftī must be one who is
   Not only very knowledgeable,
   But someone of ʿadālah, 65 too –
   Or righteous, upright, and truthful.

A muftī cannot doubt himself,
   With opinions that go back and forth.
   They cannot be an imitator who
   Blindly follows what others purport.

In addition to all of this:
   The muftī must be someone who,
   Is diligent, 66 God-fearing, and
   Whose character’s been attested to.

61 The vice of vanity (ujab).
62 The conditions or constraints that make one legal case distinct from another.
63 A foundational text in Mālikī law and legal theory, by Khalīl ibn Iṣḥāq al-Junḍī (d. 767 AH/1366 CE).
64 ZQ: Tasāhul is the practice of looking for ways to minimize or bypass an legal ruling when its application is inconvenient for the questioner. To be differentiated from the practice of using a rukhsa (dispensation), which is when a legal ruling is not enforced temporarily due to extenuating circumstances.
65 Uprightness or rectitude. This also has a technical meaning in the study of hadith, referring to the condition of only relying on trustworthy narrators for the transmission of reports. In procedural law, it refers to the character of witnesses whose testimony is upheld in court. Teachers should combine elements of both meanings; they should be reliable in the knowledge they transmit and upright in their character.
66 War, usually translated as scrupulousness or diligence in religious matters, carefully to avoid what is wrong and blameworthy. Closely related to taqwā or God-consciousness.
For the questioner, it’s permissible
To ask for more proof and evidence
To understand the ruling firsthand
So the issue might make further sense.

In this case, a muftī should explain
How the ruling came to be derived
Unless he fears causing more confusion.
If so, the details are kept aside.”

**§ V**

[ON THE GENERAL CONDUCT OF LEARNERS] 68

Dear reader, leave what gives you doubt
And makes your heart grow restless.
Consult your soul and heed your heart,
Tend to that which brings calmness.

The soul, by nature, finds repose
In beauty and in goodness,
While evil agitates the heart,

Contracting it with anxiousness.

What constitutes the best of deeds
Depends upon the person. 70
So focus on the deeds with which
You’d long to meet Al-Hakam. 71

The acts you are commanded to,
Hasten towards them, waste no time,
But with regards to prohibitions,
Stay put – do not transgress the line. 72

When in doubt of a legal ruling,
Don’t risk it; leave it well alone.
With blameworthy innovations, 73 too,
It’s best to stay in the safe zone.

Don’t trivialize any good act, 74
Obey His commands, both big and small,
And never belittle an evil deed;
Nothing’s forgotten from the scroll. 75

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67 From the poem Marāqī Al-Sū‘ād by ʿAbd Allah ibn Ibrāhīm Al-ʿAlawī al-Shinqītī (d. 1233 AH/1818 CE).
68 This section is a subsection of the conclusion in the original poem. I have separated it here and titled it for clarity.
69 The literal translation of this line is: “Leave what gives you doubt in favour of what does not, and consult your heart even as others give you their own counsel and opinions.” The first half is almost a word-for-word rendition of the hadith where the Prophet ﷺ said: “Leave what makes you doubtful for what does not.” [Al-Arba‘īn al-Nawawiyyah, 11] The second half echoes a different hadith: “Consult your heart. Righteousness is that about which the soul feels at ease and the heart feels tranquil. And wrongdoing is that which wavers in the soul and causes uneasiness in the breast, even though people have repeatedly given their legal opinion [in its favour].” [Al-Arba‘īn al-Nawawiyyah, 27]
70 ZQ: The concepts of righteousness (bīr) and wrongdoing or evil (iḥm) apply to questions that are determined by reason, personal reflection, preference, etc. However, this does not extend to the realm of sacred law (ḥarī’ah) which is the purview of revelation, not reason, in the Ash’ārī worldview. In other words, the author is not saying “consult your heart” in theological doctrines or legal rulings (that are known by necessity), but rather in general matters.
71 ZQ: There are many prophetic narrations in which the Prophet ﷺ was asked “What is the best of deeds?” and he answered differently depending on the questioner. Many scholars have taken this to mean that what constitutes the best of deeds for one person (e.g., charity, fasting, seeking knowledge, etc.) may not be the same for someone else, so it is incumbent on each individual to cultivate habits of piety that are best for them, according to their unique talents, skills, and circumstances.
72 One of the ninety-nine divine names meaning “The Judge.”
Try your best to reduce evil
   Or chose the lesser, if necessary,
Safeguard the state of gratitude,
   Like a treasure that you always carry.

Wherever you go, maintain adab
   And uphold right relations.76
Stay true and steadfast on the path,
   Repent ‘til Resurrection.

For your own sake, remove yourself
   From grey areas of disagreement,
But acknowledge, for the sake of others,
   Diverse paths within his  al-maṣla blueprint.77

“Enjoin to good, forbid from evil,78
   But remember the conditions:
The one enjoining or forbidding
   Must be suited for admonition,
   And what you enjoin or forbid
   Must be clear beyond contestation,
   Unless the one that you advise
   Shares your fiqh affiliation.79

But if the issue is opaque
   Or each position is equally strong,
It’s no longer a matter of amr and nahī –
   Give general counsel80 and move along.

As for forbidding the disliked acts
   Most scholars say it’s recommended,
But Al-Ghazālī81 goes even further
   Saying sacred law, in fact, demands it.82

However, all of what came before,
   Needs some further qualifying:
Before you speak, conjure up excuses,83
   And you may never resort to spying.”84

76 ZQ: Adab entails giving everyone and everything its rightful due, which encompasses both our human and non-human relations. To include this meaning, I translated adab in this context as “maintaining right relations.”
77 This stanza is translated liberally. The literal translation of the line reads: “Remove yourself from disagreement, but use [dispensations and different opinions] to help you if you have chronic doubts (waswās) [that impede you from performing acts of worship], and be compassionate and gentle with others.” I opted to translate it as “acknowledge the diverse paths within the prophetic blueprint” in reference to a popular saying of one of the predecessors, sometimes attributed to the Prophet ﷺ, “The diversity within the community (ummah) is a mercy.” Taken together, the author is urging the reader to adopt two complementary attitudes with regards to issues over which scholars differ: with regards to oneself, one should tend towards caution; however, with regards to others, one should tend towards inclusivity and, indeed, marvel at the diverse ways the Prophet ﷺ’s example can be followed.
78 The principle of enjoining good and forbidding evil (al-amr bil-maṣla rāf and nahī an al-munkar) is a mainstay of Islamic ethics and a recurrent theme in Qur’ānic language when describing the types of communities that God loves, for example in Sūrat al-Tawbah (Q. 9:71): “The believers, both men and women, support each other; they order what is right and forbid what is wrong; they keep up the prayer and pay the prescribed alms; they obey God and His Messenger. God will give His mercy to such people: God is almighty and wise.” The words maṣla rāf and munkar literally mean “what is known” and “what is not known,” indicating a communal repository of knowledge and experience when it comes to discriminating good from evil. See Kevin Reinhart, “What We Know About ‘Ma ṭarīf,’” The Journal of Religious Ethics 1, no. 1-2 (2017): 51-82.
79 Stanza 9 above was referring to the general diversity of opinions across legal schools (madhhabs), which would prevent one from interfering or correcting someone who is following a different school, which is the general rule, while this stanza is more specific. ZQ: If the person belongs to and is striving to learn and implement the teachings of your own school, you may advise them if you see them going against the dominant opinion of your shared school.
80 Ḥadāḍ or admonition.
81 Abī Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505 AH/1111 CE).
82 To make sense of this stanza it is necessary to recount the five types of legal rulings: obligatory acts (wājīḥ), recommended (mustāḥabb), permissible (mubāḥ), disliked (makhruḥ), and prohibited (harām). Note that disliked acts (makhruḥ) are distinct from strictly forbidden acts (harām) and do not carry the same level of prohibition. Regarding these (the makhruḥ), there is the question of the act of deterring others from committing them — where does it fit into the five categories? The author explains that most scholars are of the opinion that deterring others from acts that are merely makhruḥ, but not harām, is itself recommended (mustāḥabb), however al-Ghazālī says it is obligatory (wājīḥ).
83 In reference to the saying of one of the pious predecessors (Ja’far al-Sādiq): “If you hear something about your brother or sister that you dislike, think of up to seventy excuses [for their behaviour].” [Shuʿab al-Imām, 7853]
84 Unverified quotation. The last line is in reference to a verse in Sūrat al-Ḥujūrūf and a hadith. “Believers, avoid making too many assumptions – some assumptions are sinful – and do not spy on one another or speak ill of people behind their backs: would any of you like to eat the flesh of your dead brother? No, you would hate it. So be mindful of God: God is ever relenting, most merciful.” (Q. 49:12) The Prophet ﷺ is also reported to have said: “Avoid suspicion for suspicion is the most lying form of talk. Do not be inquisitive about another one, or spy on one another.” [Sunan Abī Dawūd, 4917]
CONCLUSION

1
To end this poem, I name myself
Ahmad ibn Ḥimallah of Tishit.
It deciphered the path of knowledge and
Lit the way – my counsel’s complete.

2
While I do not consider myself
Anywhere near the scholars elite,
Prized knowledge.
His mercy and compassion, I entreat.

3
I do not claim or even hope
That my work is free of fault
But I read these lines by Al-ʿAlawi85
And from them, I have taken heart:

4 “To object to a text, the author must
Have invented some brand new approach,
But if one reiterates or repeats
What’s tried and tested, there’s no reproach.”

5 Whatever I have said or added
In this poem was simply to
Explain what better scholars have
Laid out before me, through and through.

6 I’ve named myself simply because
If I did not, I may have formed
Too high an opinion of myself.
So I turn and ask a Generous Lord:
To forgive my many sins,
My errors, and my shortcomings,
Whether I know of them or not,
I ask for a full pardoning.

7 Greetings of peace upon the one  ﷺ,
Who unlocked what had been closed,
Made knowledge near which had been far,
In whom God’s mercy was enclosed.86

Muhammad  ﷺ, the seal of prophethood,
Who was sent to teach us the way,
Without whom, we would not know how
To congregate as one and pray.

8 It is he who made the truth
Victorious and clear as day,
His mission was to guide creation
To the straight path, amid the fray.

9 May God shower His special peace
Upon the Prophet  ﷺ, as he deserves.
Grant him an outpouring of mercy
That’s limitless, without reserve.

10 Peace be upon his family and
Companions, the fortunate ones.
For in his presence one is ennobled;
A perfected human, one does become.

Peace be upon his inheritors,87 too
And all believers, ’til the Last Day
Who strive to follow and uphold
His unique legacy and way.88

11 I ask Allah, the One Most High,
To grant me a humble admission
Into the Garden; my Lord, do not
Deprive me of the beatific vision.89

12

85 ʿAbd Allah ibn Ibrahim Al-ʿAlawi al-Shinqitti, author of Taʾlīʿat al-Anwār and Marāqī Al-Suʿūd (see n. 34 and n. 67 above).
86 Based on the verse in Sūrat al-Anbiyāʾ (Q. 21:107): “It was only as a mercy that We sent you [O Prophet] to all people.”
87 In reference to the saying of the Prophet  ﷺ: “The learned (ʿulamāʾ) are the heirs of the prophets who bequeath neither dinar nor dirham but only bequeath knowledge. Whoever acquires it, has in fact acquired an abundant portion.” [Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn, 1388] The report is lengthier and lists many other virtues of students of knowledge. I added this stanza to include this narration, often quoted by students and scholars, because it is deeply illustrative of the ethos around knowledge and seeking knowledge.
88 ZQ: The family of the Prophet  ﷺ can include the whole community (ummah) of believers, especially during supplication or general praise of the Prophet  ﷺ.
89 In reference to the following verses in Sūrat Yūnus (Q. 10:26): “Those who did well will have the best reward and more besides. Neither darkness nor shame will cover their faces: these are the companions in Paradise, and there they will remain.” ZQ: A well-known interpretation or exegesis (tafsīr) of this verse mentions that “more besides” (ziyādah) refers to the believers’ gazing at God’s countenance in the afterlife.
Allow me to see my beloved

And join him in the final abode.

And when my time is up, I ask

The words of faith to be bestowed.

All praise and thanks is due to God

For finishing this poem at last,

In the blessed month of Sha’bān.

It’s lines are 630, all amassed.

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90 The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

91 In reference to the saying of the Prophet ﷺ: “If anyone’s last words are ‘There is no god but Allah’ he will enter Paradise.” [Sunan Abī Dawūd, 3116]

92 The eight month of the Islamic lunar calendar, preceding the holy month of Ramadān.

93 The original poem is slightly less (616 lines) than what the author calculated.
Chapter 3: Tracing Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr’s Social Virtue Epistemology

**METHOD**

*The Faqīh’s Lantern* is academic yet accessible. The translation attempted to preserve the spirit of Al-Ṣaghīr’s writing and tone, balancing the nuance and rigour of the subject matter (*ʿilm al-iftāʾ*) without alienating non-specialists by using technical language. Ultimately, the straightforward message of the poem allows it to stand on its own; a reader may immediately draw practical benefit, without needing to rely heavily on further analysis or commentary.

The poem’s simple, self-explanatory nature is certainly one of its many merits, so my hope in providing an analysis is not to obfuscate a clear, practical message but rather invite readers to think about it in a new way. To this end, the purpose of my analysis in this chapter is to elaborate upon and extend the author’s meaning by exploring the concepts he addresses in the language of another discipline, that of social epistemology, and social virtue epistemology specifically. In what follows, I provide an overview of this field and explain my methodological choice to use this particular lens by suggesting how Al-Ṣaghīr’s work may intersect with approaches within the discipline, and, in particular, interactionism. I then anticipate possible objections before outlining the remaining structure of this chapter.

**Background: Introducing Social Virtue Epistemology**

Social epistemology is a newer branch of traditional epistemology that pays special attention to the ways in which knowledge is primarily the result of human, and therefore social, processes. As such, an epistemology that does not account for relationships and social bonds in the construction of knowledge, or one that takes as its subject an isolated individual instead of a knower embedded in a community of other knowers, misses something essential. Meanwhile, virtue epistemology is a subset of approaches that make intellectual or epistemic virtues central to their accounts. Epistemic virtues, broadly speaking, can be conceived one of two ways. They can be viewed as personal traits that knowers acquire and cultivate through practice and habituation. This is the approach of virtue responsibilism. Virtue responsibilists consider knowledge a personal achievement or success on the part of individual knowers, achievements they attribute to knowers’ dispositions. The traits of intellectual humility, intellectual courage, and open-mindedness are

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1 I use “epistemic,” “intellectual,” and “cognitive” synonymously. I also use “knowers” and “agents” interchangeably.
examples of responsibilist virtues. The second major way of conceiving of intellectual virtues is virtue reliabilism. Virtue reliabilists view epistemic virtues less as traits and more as cognitive faculties or processes whose functioning is largely dependent on the external environment. Memory, vision, and numeric and inferential skills are examples of reliabilist virtues.2

Because responsibilists focus on internal traits of knowers, they tend to be person-specific. For example, a responsibilist may examine a virtue like open-mindedness by considering questions like: How can this trait become habituated in a person? What vices does one need to overcome to cultivate it? To what extent can it be developed in people by reflecting on the lives of exemplars who exhibit open-mindedness, or using other techniques? In contrast, virtue reliabilists tend to be situation-specific because of their focus on factors in the surrounding epistemic space. A reliabilist may examine memory or vision with questions such as these in mind: In what types of situations will these faculties allow cognitive agents to perform well? What circumstances compromise their stable functioning? What external measures may be put in place to preserve the integrity and health of environments such that agents can continue to reasonably rely on their cognitive faculties?3

Approach: Interactionism

Having outlined the responsibilist/reliabilist divide – and how the former focuses on the person while the latter takes the situation as its starting point – we can now complicate the picture. Recent research has shown that epistemic virtues cannot be neatly explained using an either/or logic (virtues are either responsibilist or reliabilist). Rather, both types of virtues can be studied more fruitfully with a both/and logic, that is, when both person-specific and situation-specific factors are examined in tandem. To illustrate this, consider the virtue of open-mindedness, typically regarded as a responsibilist virtue. Being a virtue, we might expect that, just as individuals who are open-minded tend to be better knowers, groups composed of open-minded individuals will also perform better than groups of less open-minded people. In other words, we might consider this

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3 The difference between virtue responsibilism and virtue reliabilism brings to mind the distinction in Islamic law between individual duties (fard ‘ayn) and collective, communal obligations (fard kifayah). A future study that explores epistemic duties from an Islamic perspective, using the individual/collective binary, could show whether this distinction maps onto the responsibilist/reliabilist divide in social virtue epistemology.
virtue to have a compounding effect; the more open-minded people come together, the more open-minded such a collective will be. Interestingly, however, this is not the case. Indeed, while open-mindedness is a virtue in individuals, it can actually inhibit the epistemic performance of groups. One reason for this is that open-minded individuals need to be open to all the evidence relevant to the issue under consideration, but when individuals in a group are individually less open-minded while each defending diverse positions, the relevant evidence is processed more thoroughly and more efficiently. As such, a collective comprised of less open-minded individuals may be more open-minded than one made up of more open-minded members. This demonstrates that traits that are typically of concern to one group – in this case, the responsibilist virtue of open-mindedness – can be studied both from the perspective of agents and from the perspective of situational factors to enrich our understanding of the nature of epistemic virtues.

The example just given points to a third approach in social virtue epistemology, called interactionism. Interactionists diverge from the traditional person/situation divide. At bottom, interactionism highlights neither the person nor the situation exclusively; rather, it looks at the interplay between them. Interactionism in social epistemology flows from insights in psychology, given that psychologists “now agree that behaviour is largely the result of interactions between personal and situational factors.” Epistemologists, including virtue epistemologists, are also increasingly eschewing the person/situation divide in favour of the “doctrine of interactionism” which recognizes that “situations are as much a function of the person as the person’s behavior is a function of the situation.” Interactionism has succeeded to the point that “almost no one can be found on the extremes of the internalist-externalist divide” any longer.

Interactionism operates on the insight that what gives rise to certain epistemic behaviours and dispositions is more than discrete factors that can be neatly categorized simply as either responsibilist or reliabilist, either person-dependent or situation-dependent. Rather, the relationship between both sides of these dichotomies is equally important. More profound understandings of epistemic virtues can be gleaned when we view them as the result of interactions between agents and their environments, where interaction is understood as a two-way relationship:

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knowers influence their epistemic environments and vice versa. This approach does not just yield fuller, richer, and more interesting accounts, but it is also able to explain more. Its explanatory power allows us to appreciate more deeply the complex, intricate ways that we – as the social, psychological, ethical, and political creatures that we are, in addition to being intellectual creatures – live our epistemic lives on the ground.

In what follows, I demonstrate that Al-Ṣaghīr’s epistemology is a social virtue epistemology that is interactionist in character. He views knowledge at times as a function of personal traits cultivated by individual agents and other times as a result of reliable processes functioning in a healthy epistemic environment. Most importantly, he does not view either knowers or their environments in isolation from one another. To ‘translate’ his epistemology into the vernacular of social virtue epistemology, I draw on reliabilist and responsibilist thinkers alike, however, my goal is not to point out when Al-Ṣaghīr falls squarely into one camp or the other. Rather, I aim to develop his epistemological framework on its own terms. The analysis will therefore follow Al-Ṣaghīr’s unique flow of ideas from one section to the next, while attending to the ways in which he equally emphasizes the agent and the environment in turn. My goal is to interpret and develop the themes in each section, themes that would resonate with other interactionist theories and gesture to the possibility of Al-Ṣaghīr’s theory being an interactionist social epistemology. However, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to argue for and advance an comprehensive interactionist framework. That will be left for future research.

**Possible Objections**

I anticipate several objections to this methodological approach. First, why have I elected to focus on epistemology in general to begin with? Second, why choose social virtue epistemology, especially given that it is a strand of contemporary Anglo-American epistemology and its application to a nineteenth-century West African text may be considered anachronistic? Related to this question is another: why have I chosen a comparative, interdisciplinary approach, considering the challenges that come with such methods? Lastly, why have I chosen social virtue epistemology as my lens despite my lack of formal training in this field?

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8 Note that the partial translation includes several quotations from other thinkers which Al-Ṣaghīr integrated. His choice to incorporate them directly indicates they reflect and/or capture his own ideas and thoughts. For that reason, and for the sake of simplicity, I do not distinguish between his original words and lines reproduced from other texts.
In answer to the first question, I restate the general sentiments described in Chapter 1. The intuition driving this project arises from my own experiences with knowledge practices in spaces where religious knowledge is sought and disseminated, spaces where I have seen firsthand how overriding and overpowering “epistemological presuppositions” can be. The need to study ethics and epistemology in tandem has already been noted. The main question driving the project is: How can these epistemic spaces be navigated practically and ethically? Answering this is at once pressing and promises to be enlightening.

In answer to the second question, the potential charge of anachronism is a serious one. I run the risk of reading too much into Al-Ṣaghīr’s poem by looking for ideas that are not there in my attempts to bring a classical West African text into conversation with a strand of contemporary Anglo-American epistemology. I may overinterpret his words or force a language and worldview that would not have resonated with his own. Because of this danger, I have opted to stick as closely to the text as possible (as the “Structure” section below details). In so doing, I hope to avoid superimposing foreign concepts onto Al-Ṣaghīr’s poem. This approach should organically bring out themes from the text, though it does aim to render them in a vernacular that a contemporary social epistemologist would recognize. In the end, I see Chapter 3 as a translation of Al-Ṣaghīr’s ideas and the substance of those ideas, just as much as Chapter 2 was a translation of his words.

What of the comparative and interdisciplinary challenges? As thorny as comparative approaches can be, I envision this thesis as an opportunity to experiment and explore the extent to which two intriguing traditions can be brought into conversation with one another. Though not an expert in the two fields which I engage (Islamic law and ethics, and social epistemology), I have glimpsed enough of each to find many striking parallels. Specifically, I notice a subset of similar questions converging and spilling over in each tradition. They coalesce around the sunnan, or patterns, of Islamic knowledge and social epistemology respectively. My hope is that the unique niche in each tradition stands to gain something by having connections drawn between them. A future project that successfully applies the methods of analytic philosophy to the corpus of Ash‘arī-Mālikī thought is sure to yield fascinating results theoretically, while paving the way for further avenues of research in the applied realm. In the meantime, however, I hope Al-Ṣaghīr’s poem will at least serve as an entry-point to these conversations.

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9 Friedman qtd in Abou El Fadl, Speaking in God’s Name, 19.
The approach I have selected has also forced me to grapple with interdisciplinarity. Social epistemology and Islamic studies are both inherently interdisciplinary, and my thesis reflects this. Interdisciplinarity is fitting for a study of Al-Ṣaghīr’s poem which is, by and large, a case for applied epistemology. He is fundamentally driven by the practical benefit and utility of his prescriptions. As such, his theory spans topics from theology and ethics, to law and education, to philosophical anthropology and psychology. It is concerned with the whole person, and the multifaceted angles that contribute to one’s epistemic flourishing. I follow in this vein by drawing from a vast array of secondary literature in the social sciences and humanities to ‘translate’ and fully explicate Al-Ṣaghīr’s thought. All too aware of the potential setbacks and how poor interdisciplinary research can be, I have opted (as in the case of anachronism above) to ground my analysis textually. So while the secondary sources are eclectic – coming from Muslim and non-Muslims authors in addition to featuring disciplinary diversity – they have been carefully selected to interpret or extend Al-Ṣaghīr’s ideas further. Secondary literature is therefore included only insofar as it adds something meaningful and constructive to my interpretation of his epistemology. Footnotes add any content necessary for the non-specialist in one or more fields, as well as point to further reading.

Finally, why engage with social epistemology if I lack training in the analytic tradition from which I draw? Notwithstanding my interest in this area, I am decidedly not a social epistemologist (a field which itself is rather new, as the lifespan of a disciplines goes), so why settle on this approach? As I grappled with this question, I found myself reviewing the poem once again and was comforted by this line: “Don’t allow yourself to be afraid / Or overwhelmed by any subject. / You will never ask something of God / And come away from Him dejected.”¹¹ These words encouraged me to continue my investigation, while the next line reminded me of the principle that ought to guide my engagement: “The secret to unlocking fahm [understanding] / Lies in striving truthfully.”¹² Being truthful includes owning one’s limitations. While I may be able to make general observations about epistemic practices, I am not in a position to make epistemological arguments using the tools or methods of social epistemology. Therefore, in what follows, I recount the epistemological views of some thinkers in the field, but do not necessarily offer any of my own. I do however, draw on their conclusions to extrapolate from them, apply

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¹¹ § II, line 3.
¹² § II, line 4.
them, and otherwise engage them to make an argument about epistemology, namely, Al-Ṣaghīr’s epistemology. My own argument may not be *epistemological*, but it is nevertheless *epistemic*, because it an argument about knowledge and the conditions that matter to knowledge. I am especially interested in how other dimensions (psychological, ethical, and so on) converge to have a bearing on our epistemic lives. All the while, I use Al-Ṣaghīr as a case study and opportunity to discuss the epistemological arguments (of others) and bring them into conversation with his own thinking, ultimately to service the goal of outlining his own commitments. In short, I am talking *about* epistemology in Al-Ṣaghīr’s poem but not necessarily doing epistemology (at least, not according to the ‘rules of the game’ of the Anglo-American tradition).

**Structure**

Above, I alluded to the textual approach I have opted to take. Not only is this a better fit for my history background, but it also aligns with the advice Al-Ṣaghīr himself gives readers, that of “sticking closely to the text.”\(^{13}\) As such, my analysis flows from the themes that emerge in the text itself, proceeding more or less chronologically. All the while, my sight is trained on a specific subset of themes, namely those that a social epistemologist may find interesting. To render these ideas accurately, an in-depth, line-by-line study is occasionally necessary. Other times the words of the poem themselves are self-explanatory but theoretical background or framing is needed to elucidate the worldview behind the lines or even a specific word or words the author has chosen. As such, in some cases, one or two key terms may be the focal point of the analysis, while at other times, a more loose, discursive engagement between Al-Ṣaghīr and contemporary thinkers is more fitting.

Structurally, Chapter 3 excavates the architecture of Al-Ṣaghīr’s thought, paying attention to his philosophy of knowledge. This excavation reveals four major themes in the poem: (1) Al-Ṣaghīr’s understanding of intellectual virtues and vices; (2) the significance of embodiment for Al-Ṣaghīr; (3) Al-Ṣaghīr’s view of experts and how to identify them; and, finally, (4) the roles that self-knowledge and self-trust play in Al-Ṣaghīr’s epistemology. The conclusion ties all four themes together to provide a holistic account of Al-Ṣaghīr’s social virtue epistemology. His theory suggests an interactionist model. For him, knowledge and knowledge-practices are dependent on

\(^{13}\) § II, lines 13-14.
the proper functioning both of agents and of their environments, and a mutually healthy relationship between them.
PART I: AL-ṢAGHĪR ON INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES AND VICES

Never forget, even for a moment,
That you, your mind, and comprehension,
And every body of human knowledge
Are simply – and solely – God’s creation.\textsuperscript{14}

Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr begins the poem with three sections which, together, equip the student with the building blocks of his epistemology. The introduction reminds readers of God’s omnipotence and omniscience, the preamble warns them of the primary intellectual vices, namely pride, and the first section then encourages them to cultivate intellectual virtues, especially sincerity which the author views as the principal virtue. Together, these early sections of the poem paint a picture of how Al-Ṣaghīr regards knowledge, where it comes from, and the virtues (both self-regarding and other-regarding) that are required to attain it in. By analyzing these sections, we can begin constructing a mental schematic and hierarchy of intellectual virtues and vices as Al-Ṣaghīr views them.

Human Action and Intentionality

Al-Ṣaghīr begins by praising God, the Source, Maintainer, and Sustainer of everything in creation and sending peace upon the Prophet\\(\text{ﷺ}\\)\textsuperscript{15}. He then explains his purpose in writing the poem and that the intended audience is “those on a path of learning fiqh.”\textsuperscript{15} He reminds the reader of the importance of the intention behind human actions, alluding to the narration in which the Prophet\\(\text{ﷺ}\\) says: “Acts are by their intentions.”\textsuperscript{16} This line foreshadows the next two sections of the poem, the “Preamble” and § I “On the Intention of Learners and Teachers,” where Al-Ṣaghīr discusses sincerity – an recurring theme through the text.

Al-Ṣaghīr’s understanding of intention and his theory of action cannot be fully appreciated without first sketching the Ashʿarī theological commitments underlying his view, especially with regards to divine and human action. In many ways, Islamic speculative theology (\textit{kalām}) in the classical period formed in the context of debates about precisely this topic: God’s will and power and how human will and power can be explained in relation to these divine attributes. This gave rise to the Muʿtazilī school, the first rational theologians, and the Ashʿarī school which grew in

\textsuperscript{14} § I, line 6.
\textsuperscript{15} Introduction, line 5.
\textsuperscript{16} The full hadith states: “Deeds are by their intentions, and a person will get the reward according to his intention. So whoever emigrated for Allah and His Messenger, his emigration will be for Allah and His Messenger; and whoever emigrated for worldly benefits or for a woman to marry, his emigration would be for what he emigrated for.” [Riyāḍ al-Ṣalāḥīn, 1] This hadith is central in Islamic discourses. Many hadith works cite it as the first narration in the collection.
response to it. A full account of these theological debates and their historical context is beyond the scope of this thesis, but a few general comments on Ashʿarīsm are necessary to lay the groundwork for later explications of Al-Ṣaghīr’s epistemological outlook.

Among the Ashʿarī criticisms of Muʿtazilī theology is that the latter school emphasized human will at the expense of preserving a conception of God’s total and all-encompassing power (qudra) and will (irādah). Ashʿarīs affirm the existence of human actions but stop short of Muʿtazilīs who claim that humans create their acts as well as the effects and consequences of those acts. That is, Ashʿarīs distinguish between the human performance of an act and the creation of it. God alone is the sole creator of everything in the cosmos, including human acts and their effects.\(^{17}\) The subtle separation between an action itself and its causal capacity entailed an apparent dilemma: if humans have the ability to perform an act but not create it, how can they be held responsible for that act?

In response to this question, Ashʿarīs developed the doctrine of acquisition (kasb), sometimes also called occasionalism. On this view, humans have the ability to acquire acts without being the creator of them. Humans acquire an action on the occasion that they intend a particular thing and that intention aligns with God’s creating – at that specific moment – the corresponding act they had intended.\(^{18}\) For instance, when I intend to raise both my arms and find that my limbs follow through with my intention, I acquire the act of raising my arms which, from my perspective, was voluntary. However, from the ‘perspective’ of God’s divine power and will, God pre-eternally willed for me to raise both my arms at that time, and only His will and power causally effected my movement. My arms did not rise because of any power of their own, and the movement was not caused by my own will or volition, but because of God’s power manifesting at that particular time, which accorded with my own intention and lived experience of voluntariness. As a contemporary Ashʿarī commentator explains it: “The ‘attribution’ of human acts to human beings themselves is a means by which they can comprehend the incomprehensible, and to ‘assuage their hearts’, but the real actor and creator in both attributions is God alone.”\(^{19}\)


\(^{18}\) Mossad, Islam Before Modernity, 132.

\(^{19}\) Mossad, Islam Before Modernity, 132.
**Intentionality and Sincerity**

This perspective is essential in understanding Al-Ṣaghīr’s applied epistemology at a fundamental level. The remainder of the poem discusses the ethics of seeking knowledge, the ‘do’s and don’ts’ of being a knower, whether a teacher, learner, jurist, or questioner. He exhorts, admonishes, warns, and advises us to act or not act in certain ways, with all the rhetorical force of grammatical imperatives (ʿilʾamr). However, in all these cases, Al-Ṣaghīr is still operating within an Ashʾarī understanding of God’s power and will and the severely limited efficacy of human acts. His prescription in the epigraph at the start of this section to “never forget” that one’s mind and knowledge are “simply and solely God’s creation”\(^{20}\) should remain top of mind as we analyze the text, particularly the section on intention.

Because of the circumscribed scope of human action in Ashʾarism, intentionality – the internal acts or deeds of the heart – takes on a larger role in Al-Ṣaghīr’s theory of action. Intentionality is key to the doctrine of kasb; we cannot make sense of what we acquire, theologically, without making sense of what we intend. Intention, as such, is the threshold, the metaphysical divide, between divine/human power and divine/human will. Intentionality is the root of all human action. A good intention entails doing something only seeking God, and this motivation is the source of every praiseworthy, virtuous act. The ultimate driving force for virtue lies in “mak[ing] your intention pure for Him,”\(^{21}\) which equally applies to acts relating to knowledge: “The one seeking knowledge” should be doing so solely for the sake of attaining God’s pleasure and His “beatific countenance.”\(^{22}\) This quality is ikhlāṣ, or sincerity. Al-Ṣaghīr isolates it as the primary intellectual virtue both for learners\(^{23}\) and teachers.\(^{24}\)

Just as sincerity is the primary intellectual virtue, the corresponding trait of arrogance is the primary vice in Al-Ṣaghīr’s schematic. Arrogance can express itself as one of two extremes: “excessive shyness or vain pride.”\(^{25}\) It is easier to see how pride is a manifestation of arrogance, but Al-Ṣaghīr also explains that shyness, which prevents one from asking questions, is also a result

\(^{20}\) § I, line 6.

\(^{21}\) § I, line 14.

\(^{22}\) § I, line 15.

\(^{23}\) § I, line 13.

\(^{24}\) § III, line 1.

\(^{25}\) § I, lines 5 and 22.
of arrogance, is in fact “its very essence.”

The way in which Al-Ṣaghīr discusses sincerity, pride, and shyness parallels the Aristotelian notion of virtue as a mean between extremes. It is interesting to consider Al-Ṣaghīr’s ideas around intellectual virtue and vice alongside virtue-theoretic accounts in social virtue epistemology, such as those of Alessandra Tanesini and Katherine Dormandy, whose examination of the intellectual virtue of humility has much in common with Al-Ṣaghīr’s understanding of sincerity. While it may prove fruitful to compare each thinker’s treatment of these virtues, I resist the temptation to draw neat parallels or equivalents between each tradition.

Alessandra Tanesini explores intellectual humility by contrasting it with the vices of arrogance and self-abasement. For her, the humble agent strikes a balance between these two extremes. Arrogant individuals do not possess enough humility, but someone who is “exceedingly humble” falls into self-abasement. This tells us how humility functions, but does not tell us exactly what it is, so Tanesini goes on to locate the source of humility in self-knowledge. According to Tanesini, an agent “must be cognisant of her good features and strengths to avoid belittling herself and thus losing all pride in self-abasement” but “must also be aware of her bad qualities or weaknesses lest she risks becoming arrogant.” The way to strike the balance between the vices of arrogance and self-abasement is having enough knowledge of one’s strengths as an epistemic agent, combined with enough knowledge of one’s weaknesses. We see the idea of virtuous humility as a mean in Katherine Dormandy’s work, as well. In her exploration of whether self-trust is necessary for humility, Dormandy describes the relationship between intellectual humility, arrogance, and what she calls servility. She finds the feature that marks someone as intellectually humble is that they are “epistemically motivated” which she contrasts with “intellectually arrogant and intellectually servile agents [who] are not epistemically motivated.”

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26 § I, line 5.
27 “Virtue must have the quality of aiming at the intermediate... For instance, both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity... may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue... Therefore virtue is a kind of mean.” Nicomachean Ethics, trans. W. D. Ross (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 1999), 27.
29 Tanesini, “Humility and Self-Knowledge,” 283.
Al-Ṣaghīr’s account is similar insofar as it also identifies sincerity as a mean between extremes. However, the theology underpinning it introduces an element that distinguishes it from these accounts. For Al-Ṣaghīr, intellectual sincerity consists of learning for the sake of God, the All-Knowing and All-Powerful Creator. Knowers ought to be motivated theologically as a precursor to being “epistemically motivated” in Dormandy’s words. The connection between epistemology and theology goes deeper when we add God’s attribute of divine knowledge or omniscience (ʿilm) to the other two attributes of power (qudra) and will (irādah) we explored above. Al-Ṣaghīr and Tanesini might agree that intellectual sincerity and humility require self-knowledge of some kind. But where Tanesini understands it as knowledge of one’s own intellectual strengths and weaknesses, Al-Ṣaghīr identifies it as knowledge of one’s relationship to an omniscient Creator. Bearing in mind that God is Al-ʿAlīm and Al-Hakīm, the All-Knowing and All-Wise, in addition to being the All-Powerful, an agent cannot help but see God as the source of all knowledge and all human epistemic activities. So it is recognition of one’s incapacity (theologically speaking) in all endeavours, knowledge included, that brings about intellectual sincerity for Al-Ṣaghīr.

By extension, Al-Ṣaghīr considers all tools and means of knowledge, both the internal (e.g., the faculty of one’s own mind) and the external (e.g., the teachers in one’s environment) as “gifts / and blessings endowed by God Most High.” Therefore, taking credit for anything in creation is tantamount to shirk or polytheism. While this may sound harsh at first, the Ashʿarī focus on preserving God’s pre-eternal power led them to distinguish different forms or gradations of shirk. Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf al-Sanūsī (d. 895 AH/1490 CE), a Mālikī-Ashʿarī predecessor of Al-Ṣaghīr whom he quotes elsewhere in the poem, distinguishes between six types of disbelief. Of these, four constitute disbelief-proper (shirk), taking the one who adheres to them outside the fold of Islam, while the remaining two types do not. These two are: (1) polytheism of proximate causes (al-asbāb) which is “to attribute (isnād) effects to empirical or nomic causes,” and (2) polytheism

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33 These two divine names are mentioned in the Qur’an in relation to the creation of Adam, to whom God taught all the names. Interestingly, in these verses, central to Islamic theological anthropology, Adam takes on the role of student and the role of teacher in turn: “He taught Adam all the names [of things], then He showed them to the angels and said, ‘Tell me the names of these if you truly [think you can]. They said, ‘May You be glorified! We have knowledge only of what You have taught us. You are the All-Knowing and All-Wise.’ Then He said, ‘Adam, tell them the names of these.’ When he told them their names, God said, ‘Did I not tell you that I know what is hidden in the heavens and the earth, and that I know what you reveal and what you conceal?’” See: Sūrat al-Baqarah (Q. 2:31-33).
34 § I, line 6.
35 See § III, line 10.
of purposes (al-aghrād) which is to perform acts for other than God” (my translation). Believing that one is the cause or creator of one’s own knowledge would fall into the former, and seeking or disseminating knowledge for other than God (e.g., out of ostentation or for worldly gain) falls into the latter. Al-Ṣaghīr, in typical Ashʿarī fashion, is highlighting for his readers God’s all-encompassing power and knowledge above all else, reminding them that, just as God enabled them to learn all that they know, God can just as easily “strip them” of that knowledge. Al-Ṣaghīr continuously emphasizes God’s utter omnipotence, contrasting it with the weakness and “broken state” of gaining knowledge which, without the right theological background, may begin to sound like Tanesini’s self-abasement or Dormandy’s servility. Yet, because of the theological commitments driving his epistemology, Al-Ṣaghīr’s conception of sincerity in seeking knowledge does not fit neatly with the notion of intellectual humility, though it does resemble it in some respects.

**Self-Regarding and Other-Regarding Intentions**

Sincerity is undoubtedly the principal virtue for Al-Ṣaghīr. It is the fundamental, overarching drive, the general intention that both learners and teachers should share. However, specific intentions, i.e., the practical reasons for doing one thing over another, can and even should differ depending on the educational role one occupies, as well as the context.

Al-Ṣaghīr names several intentions unique to students and to teachers. However, in both roles, some intentions are directed at oneself and some directed at others. We may call these self-regarding and other-regarding intentions or motivations. For instance, a student should specifically intend to remove their own ignorance by gaining knowledge of what God commands, a self-regarding intention. Likewise, teachers must concern themselves primarily with discharging the trust of disseminating knowledge with a clear conscience to avoid being “robbed of their portion of Paradise,” which is also self-regarding. However, a student may add the virtuous intention of

37 § I, line 8.
38 § I, line 16.
41 § I, line 11.
42 § I, line 15.
helping others, an other-regarding duty. Likewise, in order to teach effectively, a teacher must consider the state of the student, constantly putting themselves in their shoes, an other-regarding trait.

As Al-Ṣaghīr outlines the virtues of teaching, it becomes clear that other-regarding virtues play a much greater role in teaching than in learning. These passages demonstrate most clearly the centrality of teaching in his epistemology. Al-Ṣaghīr ideas around teaching dovetail with the work of Jason Kawall which also sheds light on other-regarding virtues and their role in epistemic communities. Kawall critiques the implicit emphasis on self-regarding virtues in mainstream virtue epistemology, which focuses on agents accumulating knowledge for themselves. In these theories, “an epistemic individualism is quietly assumed.” If the main concern of an epistemic community is individuals acquiring ever-new knowledge, then original discoveries by a few individuals must take precedence over the dissemination of knowledge (i.e., teaching) among larger groups within that community. Studying self-regarding duties in isolation from other-regarding ones fails to account for how spreading knowledge that an agent already has, but which may be beneficial to others, is virtuous. It goes against our sensibility that “within an epistemic community it would seem to be a virtue to contribute new truths to the community, even at the expense of the agent’s own acquisition of a personal body of knowledge.”

In light of this, Kawall calls on epistemologists to broaden their attention to consider other-regarding traits and integrate them within the purview of mainstream discussions. Other-regarding virtues and duties, including the duty of developing good teaching skills, are epistemic because “they tend to produce knowledge – not for the agent alone, but for her community.” Kawall is expressing the basic notion that agents who exemplify virtuous other-regarding behaviours are essential to the health of an epistemic community. Moreover, there is a tendency among the epistemic agents we tend to regard as virtuous to “see themselves as situated within an epistemic community” and work towards its betterment. These virtuous agents are keen “not simply to

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43 § 1, line 3. Interestingly, this can also be construed as a self-regarding virtue in light of the hadith that states by “loving for their brother or sister what one loves for oneself” a person actualizes their own faith (imān). The report goes: “No one of you becomes a true believer until he likes for his brother what he likes for himself.” [Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn, 183]
maximize their own personal stock of knowledge” but also “to [develop] a common body of knowledge.”

All these factors point to the importance of other-regarding virtues and the need to study them, in an integrated way, with self-regarding virtues. Kawall writes: “At present there seems to be a sharp divide; individual agents try to accumulate true beliefs, but then have distinct roles in knowledge creating-communities. The two tasks seem distinct (my goals vs. fulfilling my role in a social institution).” Transcending this divide begins by studying the virtuousness of teaching in its own right, as Al-Ṣaghīr does. In fact, the emphasis on teaching in his theory predates Kawall’s call to make “the study of teaching...an essential part of epistemology.”

To illustrate the centrality of other-regarding virtues for Al-Ṣaghīr, we may consider just one example: scaffolding. Scaffolding describes instructional design techniques that feature progressions leading students towards greater understanding and independence in the learning process. This can look like breaking down large tasks into smaller portions over which a student slowly gains mastery, or beginning with basic tasks that gradually increase in complexity. Al-Ṣaghīr urges teachers to scaffold their instruction throughout the poem. When describing the journey of the learner, he emphasizes successive stages required to build and grow a skillset. Next, regarding memorization, his advises students to memorize small amounts and eventually increase. Likewise, in his instruction to teachers, he goes to some length to reiterate the message ‘start with the basics,’ that is, always go from the general to the specific, stick closely to the text, and do not confuse or overburden learners with details that are not appropriate to their current level of understanding. A teacher following Al-Ṣaghīr’s guidelines cannot do so without empathy, that is, without putting him- or herself in the shoes of the learner in order to assess and reassess the student’s progress on the learning journey. By frequently evaluating progress from the learner’s perspective, a teacher honed this essential, other-regarding virtue.

53 § I, lines 17-18.
54 § I, line 22.
55 § II, lines 12-22.
Having commented on the foundational intellectual virtue of sincerity and corresponding vices (pride and shyness, the two extremes of arrogance) in Al-Ṣaghīr’s philosophy, we see the cultivation of other-regarding virtues emerge as a primary consideration for him. That it looms so large in his epistemology points to the importance of being cognizant of those in one’s epistemic environment, in particular those who hold more power in epistemic dynamics, like teachers. But what constitutes ‘the environment’ for Al-Ṣaghīr? Interestingly, a deeper look at his understanding of ‘the epistemic environment’ will reveal that, before all else, Al-Ṣaghīr conceives of it internally, not externally. In other words, even before considering the other knowers in one’s space – whether teachers, learners, peers, or experts – the primary sphere of epistemic concern for him is the learner him- or herself, and their embodied experience. We now turn to analyze this theme and the role it plays in Al-Ṣaghīr’s thought.
PART II: AL-ṢAGHĪR ON EMBODIMENT

Knowledge functions just like food
Which nourishes the body;
A regular but modest intake
Keeps the soul sound and healthy.⁵⁷

Al-Ṣaghīr’s theory of embodiment is manifested most clearly in § II “On Understanding and Memorizing,” although it appears elsewhere in the poem. It is foreshadowed in § I, when he lists the stages of learning and names silence and memorization as the initial two stages, indicating that there is a receptivity component to memorization. Memorizing is about the ‘uptake’ of knowledge in one’s being, which requires room or space to be created in the first place, in the same way that one cannot consume food if one is already satiated. In fact, Al-Ṣaghīr frequently likens knowledge to food, nourishment, and harvest or fruit. These metaphors paint a picture where his conception of learning and knowledge-seeking is, first and foremost, an embodied process.

Memorization and Embodiment

To begin, I must specify I am not using ‘embodiment’ in the sense that epistemologists and cognitive scientists use the term. Rather, I appeal to embodiment as discussed by scholars of Islam in West Africa, particularly those with a focus on Islamic mysticism, or Ṣūfism. In his study of Tijānī Ṣūfīsm – the order to which Al-Ṣaghīr belonged⁵⁸ – Oludamini Ogunnaike explores what he calls the “epistemological role of the body.”⁵⁹ In the theological anthropology of West African spirituality, “the physical body is seen as just ‘the tip of the iceberg’ of the human being.”⁶⁰ Indeed, he finds that embodiment plays so large a part in West African Ṣūfī epistemology that it cannot be understood without it. Ogunnaike explains that “within the Ṣūfī tradition, the body is integral to the acquisition of knowledge and, as a mode of being, identical with the knowledge it achieves.”⁶¹ The body functions as the site of disclosures of knowledge and “intellectual realization” in these theories.⁶² In this sense, the body and intellect are inseparable. They are a ‘package deal’ so to speak; the functioning of the body is intwined with cognitive functioning, and vice versa. West

⁵⁷ § II, line 22.
⁵⁸ Stewart and Salim, The Writings of Mauritania, 1474.
⁶⁰ Ogunnaike, Deep Knowledge, 387.
⁶¹ Ogunnaike, Deep Knowledge, 387.
⁶² Ogunnaike, Deep Knowledge, 385.
African theories of knowledge therefore viewed embodiment in spatial terms, as a physical and physiological space that ‘houses’ the psyche, intellect, heart, and spirit.

In what follows, I build on this specific sense of ‘embodiment.’ If we conceive of the body in this way, it is the first epistemic ‘space’ knowers must contend with, the primary environment or locus they occupy. I therefore occasionally refer to the corporeal ‘space’ as the ‘internal epistemic landscape.’ As the rest of Part II and Part III will show, while Al-Ṣaghīr distinguishes between the body and the external environment, he is careful to note the permeable boundary between them, bespeaking a theological anthropology where the internal landscape of individual knowers is highly sensitive to the external one.

Al-Ṣaghīr, growing up in the Ṣūfī intellectual and spiritual tradition just described, also developed a philosophy that gave prime of place to body. Memorization is one aspect of his epistemology where embodiment comes to the fore. Chapter 1 noted the emphasis on memorization as a primary feature of eighteen- and nineteen-century Mauritanian society and education. It also discussed the importance of oral culture to Mauritanian scholarship more broadly, as well as the rich tradition of poetry that grew out of this focus on orality. In her ethnographic research, Ghislaine Lydon observes that memorization, often of didactic poems, became a mark – the mark – of a serious scholar: “Saharan scholars distinguished themselves with their powers of memorization as their minds became literally imprinted with the volumes they added to their cerebral libraries.”

Anecdotes passed from teachers to students, like the famous story of the Persian scholar and mystic Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505 AH/1111 CE) and the bandits, which constantly stressed the importance of memorization. Al-Ṣaghīr imbued these messages over the course of his educational career. He may have even developed a greater appreciation for them considering he was blind. From a young age, he learned not to rely on books or texts and instead focused on memorizing and internalizing what he learned, thus cultivating a body of knowledge that would accompany him wherever he went.

More than being the mark of an erudite scholar, memorization was important on a communal level as it was the vehicle by which knowledge was preserved and transmitted. By guaranteeing that knowledge was bound to the student, on the one hand, it ensured that they were

64 Al-Ghazālī was travelling when he was attacked by bandits: “They began to take his books because books in those days were very valuable. He asked one of the brigands to at least leave his books and not take away his knowledge. The brigand responded, ‘What kind of knowledge is that if a person like me can take it away from you?’ [Al-Ghazālī] realized then that Allah (glory be to Him) had made him say that, and he resolved to memorize any knowledge he pursued in the future.” See: Lydon, “Inkwells,” 50.
bound by it, on the other. Being knowledgeable in this society did not merely entail having the functional skillset to look something up, but rather, it meant one constantly carried something that he or she was morally and ethically bound to put into practice and share with others. The importance of this principle is enshrined in Mauritanian proverbs like this one: “My knowledge is mine, wherever I go I carry it with me; in my heart and not in a trunk. If I am at home, knowledge is with me; if I am at the market, knowledge is in the market.”65 By anchoring one’s knowledge in memory, one can never plead ignorance for not having the information to conduct themselves according to its precepts.

Perhaps the educational setting that best exemplifies the role memorization plays in Islamic instruction is Qur’an schools, a phenomenon studied by Ingrid Mattson in The Story of the Qur’an and Rudolph Ware in The Walking Qur’an. At first glance, memorization may seem to be nothing more than empty regurgitation with no pedagogical value. Indeed, Qur’an schools have often been “dismissed as ‘rote learning’ and characterized as an unthinking absorption of tradition.”66 In reality, however, memorization cannot be appreciated without understanding its connection to embodiment and the philosophy of knowledge upon which it is based. Mattson draws on the ethnographic work of Helen Boyle who studied Qur’an schools in Morocco, Yemen, and Nigeria, and found that Qur’anic memorization is valuable because it is a process whereby children come to embody the Qur’an… Embodiment as a theory advances the notion that bodiliness is an inescapable part of the creation of culture by suggesting that the mind and body are intricately linked… Qur’anic memorization has been portrayed as a process of mindless rote learning…implying that the process of learning ends with the process of memorization. Embodiment theory facilitates a description of the ongoing learning process that begins with Qur’anic memorization.67

On this view, to memorize the Qur’an is to internalize and embody the word of God and the foundational primary source of the Islamic tradition. It is significant as both an act of worship and piety as well as an intellectual exercise that produces rigorous scholars. The “intellectual depth and creativity displayed by so many Muslim scholars through history – scholars whose education founded on Qur’anic memorization – are proof that traditional Islamic pedagogy was by no means a necessary impediment to intellectual growth and creativity.”68

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65 Lydon, “Inkwells,” 50.
66 Ingrid Mattson, The Story of the Qur’an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 123.
67 Boyle qtd in Mattson, The Story of the Qur’an, 124.
68 Mattson, The Story of the Qur’an, 123.
For Ware, memorization is far from being an impediment; it is actually the sign of a healthy and robust pedagogical tradition. Ware’s focus is West Africa, specifically Senegambia, but his insights extend to Al-Ṣaghīr’s Mauritanian context. Ware concedes Mattson’s point that Qur’an schools have often been misinterpreted, but goes further to explain the reason behind this. Memorization in Islamic educational settings is often viewed and studied “across a vast epistemological divide”\(^\text{69}\) that fails to appreciate human beings’ corporeality. West African schools evince an “implicit theory of knowledge”\(^\text{70}\) that cannot be understood without reference to the human body, where “the human being as a material reality...[is] essential for the classical epistemology of Islam to work.”\(^\text{71}\) By studying the pedagogical practices in Senegambia, interviewing students and teachers, and observing the communal and relational dynamics of these schools, Ware concludes that memorization is a key practice in actualizing and preserving embodied epistemology. Students like Al-Ṣaghīr who memorized the Qur’an, legal texts, and spiritual manuals absorbed knowledge “into the body through osmosis”\(^\text{72}\) and thereby “became the books they studied,”\(^\text{73}\) as the Mauritanian proverbs above allude to. Not only is memorization not an impediment to deep learning, this theory actually views the internalization of what is learned as a guard against producing “unthinking” people and practices.\(^\text{74}\) Ware’s study shows that “the epistemology of the Qur’an school creates dynamic yet disciplined bodies capable of actualizing Islam under difficult circumstances” and in “novel contexts.”\(^\text{75}\)

Ware laments the shift away from embodiment in Muslim instructional practices. He writes: “For many people, Islamic knowledge is increasingly separated from its embodied bearers and accessed primarily through unmediated texts rather than directly from people,”\(^\text{76}\) a move he links to increased radicalization and fundamentalism. The root of the problem for Ware lies in colonized “habits of the mind” that adopt Cartesian dualism and “discretely separate the mind from the body; then they exalt the former and degrade the latter.”\(^\text{77}\) He states that

Many modern Muslims apparently no longer believe that God’s Word is capable of healing or teaching the children of Adam from the inside out. With their deeds, they are saying that


\(^{70}\) Ware, *The Walking Qur’an*, 7.

\(^{71}\) Ware, *The Walking Qur’an*, 7.

\(^{72}\) Ware, *The Walking Qur’an*, 3.

\(^{73}\) Ware, *The Walking Qur’an*, 69.

\(^{74}\) Ware, *The Walking Qur’an*, 76.

\(^{75}\) Ware, *The Walking Qur’an*, 76.

\(^{76}\) Ware, *The Walking Qur’an*, 251.

\(^{77}\) Ware, *The Walking Qur’an*, 252.
understanding through the intellect, ‘aql must always mediate knowledge, as if people ‘know’ only with something called the mind.\textsuperscript{78}

This sentiment is a far cry from understandings of knowledge that see it an “intensely bodily” practice.\textsuperscript{79} West African epistemologies take people to be the mediums and barriers of knowledge, and give as much primacy to the embodied knowledge of epistemic agents as they do to books and texts, if not more. The popular saying ‘Knowledge is in the chests (sudūr) of people, not the lines (suṭūr) of books’ captures this notion.\textsuperscript{80} Ware concludes on the hopeful note that, because West African pedagogies continue to preserve traditional methods of stressing memorization and embodiment, their practices and philosophies can become a site of cultural and intellectual retrieval, as long as their sophisticated epistemology is approached and appreciated on its own terms.

\textit{Limitations of the Body}

Having established the importance of memorization to theories of embodiment in West Africa, we will now examine how this comes through in Al-Ṣaghīr’s text. Al-Ṣaghīr, too, endorses the importance of memorization as a general principle. A didactic work, his poem goes even further to give concrete advice to his readers that point to the practical considerations of having a body. The things he recommends that aid with memorization speak further to his view of embodiment, providing additional depth. These include prioritizing certain times of the day and night, maintaining a modest level of hunger, and being in closed rooms away from potential distractions.\textsuperscript{81}

The relationship of environmental cues, like the time of day, and bodily states, like hunger, to the exercise of one’s intellect is an important aspect of Al-Ṣaghīr’s embodiment theory. To memorize is to capture knowledge in one’s flesh, one’s very being, so any intellectual or mental activity is also a bodily one. As Ware demonstrated, the mind is not a disembodied faculty; cognition happens in an internal context first and foremost, in a landscape not just of neurons but blood, nutrients, hormones, and so on, and in the same fleshy vessel that experiences emotions such as love and hate, pleasure and pain.

\textsuperscript{78} Ware, \textit{The Walking Qur’an}, 251.
\textsuperscript{79} Ware, \textit{The Walking Qur’an}, 252.
\textsuperscript{80} For a variation of this saying, see: Ogunnaike, \textit{Deep Knowledge}, 385.
\textsuperscript{81} § II, lines 5-6.
An epistemology that takes embodiment seriously not only capitalizes on the advantages of having a body (e.g., taking knowledge with you wherever you go), but also recognizes the disadvantages, pitfalls, and limitations of being an embodied creature, prone to contingencies like hunger, exhaustion, and discomfort. Empirical data also shows that bodily states and environmental factors directly affect our cognitive and intellectual capacities. For example, studies that examine decisions by judges and judicial bodies (e.g., parole boards) find that factors that should have no bearing on legal outcomes, such as time of day, have an undue effect on judicial decisions. One such study consistently recorded that favourable rulings took place immediately after a break for food and declined steadily until the next break. Classic Islamic legal writings reveal an awareness of biases and heuristics, as well as their possible pitfalls, especially in the offices of iftāʾ (juris-consultancy) and qaḍāʾ (judgeship). Muftīs and qāḍīs “possess significant moral and persuasive force” as their decisions have the potential to drastically alter the course of a person’s life. To prevent against biases and the misapplication of heuristics, they developed ethical principles and guidelines for when a judge can and cannot render legal judgements, including this maxim: “The judge should not pass judgement when he is angry.” The meaning of this extends beyond anger to apply to any emotive or bodily state that could compromise, prejudice, or bias judges to rule unfavourably, including hunger or exhaustion.

The examples above have stuck to legal contexts where an authority can exercise undue influence. Yet if we broaden our scope, we find a wealth of evidence that reveals that we are all incredibly prone to cognitive biases and heuristics. These operate in our everyday judgements, from minor, everyday choices to larger decisions, like how and where to invest our savings.

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83 Broadly, a heuristic is a process, method, or technique whose purpose is to help guide problem-solving. They can be thought of as ‘rules of thumb’ or ‘mental shortcuts’ that are not strict but broad in application and practically useful most of the time. They enable us to make quick judgements that are often correct, but can also mislead us or be misapplied, leading to cognitive biases. In the Islamic sciences, one example of where heuristics are formalized and studied is the qawā’id literature in *fiqh* (law) and *usūl* (jurisprudence), which outlines general principles and maxims of the field. See: Musa Furber, “Reducing the Role of Decision-Making Biases in Muslim Responsum,” Tabah Foundation, *Analytic Briefs* no. 12 (2012); and Mohammad Hashim Kamali, “Qawa’id al-Fiqh: The Legal Maxims of Islamic Law,” *The Association of Muslim Lawyers* (2015): 1-7. Heuristics also operate non-consciously in our everyday lives, particularly in marketing and advertising techniques. Some relevant examples follow. (1) The fluency heuristic is the tendency to give more credence to an idea if it is communicated eloquently and skillfully. (2) The social proof heuristic describes the tendency to see the social acceptance of an idea, norm, etc. as evidence of its truth, acting as a shortcut to our approval. (3) The authority heuristic is the tendency to rely on those we perceive as authorities to lessen decision-making and research work for us, such as when a celebrity endorses a skin care product. For more on heuristics, see: Joyce Ehrlinger, Wilson O. Readinger, and Bora Kim, “Decision-Making and Cognitive Biases,” *Encyclopedia of Mental Health* 12, no. 3 (2016): 83-7.

84 Based on a hadith with similar wording (lā yaqāḍi al-qāḍi wa huwa ghaḍbān). [Sunan Ibn Mājah, 2316]

Being aware of these biases is important because we resort to them with alarming frequency. Moreover, evidence shows that they continue to “remain compelling even [when] one is fully aware of their nature.” In fact, our judgements may even worsen once we become aware of them. In our attempts at neutrality, we may ‘overshoot’ and exhibit a bias of “overcorrection,” where we develop an opposing bias out of extreme caution. If judges – who have decades of experience deliberating evidence upon which major decisions rest, such as sentencing – are prone to error when they are ‘hangry,’ then others – certainly muftis but also teachers, students, and questioners – are likely no exception.

Biases and heuristics indicate the extent to which we are highly sensitive to environmental cues and the surprisingly sizeable influence they can have on our epistemic behaviour. It demonstrates that mental limitations are tied to our bodily selves. Recall that the mind/body ‘dualism’ creates a false dichotomy. In contrast, theories of embodiment operate on a different understanding. In embodiment, it is not simply that these two sides (mind/body) are independent. It is not even accurate to say that they are mutually-dependent. Instead, they are two sides of the same coin. The mind is housed in the body, so we can conceive of the body as the agent’s internal environment. As the preceding paragraphs showed, we know this ‘environment’ can have an undue influence on the epistemic performance of an agent. In other words, an agent’s bodily health is the site or locus of his or her epistemic health. Likewise, bodily limitations translate into mental, cognitive, intellectual, epistemic limitations.

**Factors Contributing to Epistemic Health**

We have seen that embodiment views our constitution as corporeal beings as inseparable from our constitution as knowers. It evinces an underlying philosophy of the human being as a holistic, integrated creature whose bodily wellbeing is the bedrock for success in other domains, including the cognitive domain and its concomitant knowledge-seeking and -disseminating practices. Here, I wish to extend the idea of physical wellness one step further. While we can make conceptual distinctions between aspects of health – separating the bodily from the mental, the emotional from

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the psychological – the reality of wellness is one and wholistic. Being aware of our embodiment does not simply mean promoting our bodily health, but our emotional, spiritual, and psychological health, too. As we delve into Al-Ṣaghīr’s advice for teachers below, I invite you to broaden the scope of what ‘wellbeing’ entails beyond the physical. For instance, he writes: “So, to the teachers, remember this: / Knowledge will go on endlessly, / But people have limits, in body and mind, / So tailor your teaching accordingly.”89 I interpret this to mean that bodily limitations such as hunger or physical exhaustion include mental, emotional, and psychological barriers as well. It refers to any embodied and not just bodily needs that are unmet. Mental health, for example, is not directly physical or bodily, but it is an embodied experience because its effects are experienced in the body and by the body (the whole body, and not just the brain). As Ogunnaike puts it, just as “making yourself smile makes you happier, stretching your arms above your head makes you feel more confident,”90 and so on, in Tijānī thought, what happens to the body will affect and “even define our intellectual life.”91

Embodiment pays attention not only to the body itself, but the body as a medium, an internal landscape that is intimately connected with the external one, something that relates to and interacts with many other factors (e.g., hunger, poor mental health). In this sense, an embodied theory does not solely consider physical wellbeing and physical limitations, but anything that has a bearing on them. Understanding Al-Ṣaghīr’s theory of embodiment in this way, we can make better sense of his advice. For example, if we take ‘wellbeing’ to include mental health, this means that being exposed to chronic stress and anxiety is an impediment to learning. When this is the case, teachers cannot realistically expect their teaching (no matter how exemplary) to be effective, nor can they expect the learner (no matter how enthusiastic) to thrive. Much of his address to teachers is in this vein, reminding them of the limitations of students and listeners. Teachers must be attentive to all the considerations he lists, and those who circumvent the methods outlined are condemned in strong language.

Going from bodily to cognitive limitations, Al-Ṣaghīr demonstrates an awareness of the natural progression of the learning process. A teacher must refrain from beginning with details before providing the basics, giving nuances before a student is prepared to appreciate them, and going on lengthy tangents, among other things. This resonates with the virtue of scaffolding

89 § II, line 23.
90 Ogunnaike, Deep Knowledge, 385.
91 Ogunnaike, Deep Knowledge, 389.
mentioned in Part I, but it also points to something more, to the organic patterns of growth in learning. Al-Ṣaghīr uses ecological language to describe this: “Start with the roots before the branches.”92 In his eyes, not being attuned to limitations is a failure on the part of the teacher whose responsibility is to “till and water”93 the heart and mind of the student. Any tactics that deflect or burden the student beyond their current capacity for attention, retention, and engagement constitutes a great “disservice” to them94 and can harm them in the long-run.

**Thinking Ecologically about Embodiment**

The ecological language and metaphors that Al-Ṣaghīr uses are resonant with Lorraine Code’s work on “ecological thinking” about epistemic practice. In *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location*, she centres the situatedness of knowers in the dynamism of their living environments, understood both socially and politically, as a counterpoint to the hegemony of dominant epistemologies, or “epistemologies of mastery” as she calls them.95 Code critiques the way in which such theories produce “an epistemological monoculture in both the academy and in everyday life, whose consequences are to suppress and choke out [non-dominant] ways of knowing.”96 Hegemonic epistemologies function by “[implying] uniformity among knowing subjects and among objects of knowledge once they are extracted from the messiness of situation and circumstances.”97

Embodiment is part of the “messiness” of individual knowers. As Code says, “ecological thinking works with the conception of materially constituted and situated subjectivity” where “place, embodied locatedness, and discursive interdependence” take precedence.98 Code focuses on the “situatedness” of a knower in the socio-political landscape and the relation between bodies and places in theories of knowledge. While she does not focus on the internal landscape of embodied, corporeal beings, which is my focus, the body is no less epistemically significant for her. What I have been calling the internal and external environments, she refers to in one place as “text” and “context.” The two are inseparable. According to Code, “the text is best explained when

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92 § II, line 16.
93 § I, line 11.
94 § II, line 15.
it is inserted into or returned to the context” and any implication that they are distinct “bypasses their reciprocally constitutive effects.”

Code’s work urges epistemologists to pay attention to what makes a particular knower, and their particular ways of knowing, unique from others. As she puts it, ecological thinking pays attention to “what precisely – however apparently small – distinguishes this woman...this place...this locality from that,” almost echoing Al-Ṣaghīr’s directive to teachers, to note what distinguishes one learner in one time, place, and stage of learning, from the next. Code’s remarks coincide with aspects of Al-Ṣaghīr’s epistemology, in that he too develops a locally-sensitive frame where the starting point is “the ecological situations and interconnections of knowers and knowings.” Such sensitivities were accommodated in the mahẓara system of precolonial Mauritania, discussed in Chapter 1, which deeply incorporated specificities of context into its epistemic practices. Ways of knowing, simply put, are stunningly diverse. From the perspective of a teacher, there are perhaps as many pathways to learning as there are the number of students in the room, if not more considering how often Al-Ṣaghīr urges teachers to repeat the same message in different ways when necessary.

The thoroughfares of knowledge can be studied at a remove, as abstract epistemologies do, and that perspective is not without value. However, I argue that Code and Al-Ṣaghīr jointly contend that epistemological investigation cannot stop there (and perhaps should not even begin there). Failing to complete the picture by discounting or discrediting particularities “on the ground” and being sensitive to the “situations and circumstances of specific knowers” means missing out on something essential. In Code’s words, we must be “prepared to take on the burdens and blessings of place, identity, materiality, and history, and to work within the locational possibilities and limitations, found and made, of human cognitive-corporeal lives.”

The foregoing parallels I have attempted to strike between Al-Ṣaghīr and Code are speculative and, while a full comparative analysis of their thinking is beyond my scope, I hope to have pointed to an interesting juncture. At the very least, both thinkers would agree that we stand to gain from thinking about knowledge in ecological terms.

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99 Code, Ecological Thinking, 5.
100 Code, Ecological Thinking, 18.
101 Code, Ecological Thinking, 6. The interconnectedness and embeddedness of knowers (as opposed to embodiment) is the subject of the next section, Part III “Al-Ṣaghīr on Identifying Experts.”
103 Code, Ecological Thinking, 5-6.
104 Code, Ecological Thinking, 5.
In Al-Ṣaghīr’s conception, our epistemic functioning is similar to that of living, breathing organisms in symbiosis with their surroundings; so long as we position ourselves appropriately and advantageously within a healthy epistemic environment, we flourish epistemically. At the risk of sounding reductive, it is as though Al-Ṣaghīr is saying if certain preconditions are met, then one cannot help but learn, memorize, and otherwise benefit from that environment. An agent has only to avail oneself of certain times of day, certain states, and follow certain self-evident rules of learning – with the important caveat of being in a place like nineteenth-century Mauritania – and the knowledge will flow or ‘be taken up’ naturally. I state this not to oversimplify or downplay Al-Ṣaghīr’s sophisticated epistemological outlook, but to sharpen the contours of his thought. Knowledge is not simply atomized units of information ‘out there’ to be seized. Rather, learning is a matter of availing oneself of certain currents and patterns in the landscape. The message seems to be that knowledge acquisition and transmission is a matter of getting certain things ‘right’ in the environment, first and foremost. This means that, internally, the embodied space must be animated, above all, with a sincere intention. Next, the corporeal locus of one’s body must be nourished and healthy, in all senses of the term. If this internal ‘niche’ is rectified, learners may then fruitfully attend to the landscape beyond themselves, shifting their focus from the internal epistemic environment to the external one.
PART III: AL-ṢAGHĪR ON IDENTIFYING EXPERTS

The muftī must be one who’s known,
Not only for being knowledgeable,
But someone of ʿadālah, too,
Or righteous, upright, and truthful.¹⁰⁵

As Part I “Al-Ṣaghīr on Intellectual Virtues and Vices” showed, intellectual sincerity is the most important trait illuminating the internal, embodied landscape.¹⁰⁶ Pivoting our attention from the environment within to the environment without, we see that this trait continues to play a large a role in how we assess other knowers. Beginning with § III of the poem, Al-Ṣaghīr once again reiterates the importance of sincerity in choosing a teacher: “only take from those who have [sincerity] and / avoid all without this quality.” The reason is that, without sincerity, “a teacher won’t / have any real concern for you.”¹⁰⁷ Here, he links an other-regarding virtue (care and concern for others) with the virtue of sincerity. Lack of sincerity is so serious in the case of teachers that Al-Ṣaghīr suggests students take any measures necessary to flee from insincere teachers.¹⁰⁸ He later likens their viciousness to an infectious disease which spreads by merely keeping company with them.¹⁰⁹

At first blush, Al-Ṣaghīr’s recommendations seem severe, but they make sense in light of an anthropology that views humans as being deeply embedded¹¹⁰ in their environments and stresses the basic human tendency to “‘steal’ the mannerisms / of those whom we accompany.”¹¹¹ Al-Ṣaghīr explains that an insincere teacher or scholar has corrupted and soiled the most intimate space they occupy – the heart – so their teaching cannot possibly “pierce the hearts” of anyone else.¹¹² Any commands this teacher or scholar makes of others will “have no traction” because he or she could not command their ego to rectify themselves inwardly to begin with. Based on his

¹⁰⁵ § IV, lines 8-10.
¹⁰⁶ § I, line 13.
¹⁰⁷ § III, lines 1-2.
¹⁰⁸ § III, line 3.
¹⁰⁹ § III, line 9.
¹¹⁰ As with ‘embodiment’ in Part II, I am not referring to the technical usage of ‘embeddedness’ in philosophy and cognitive science, but the plain, everyday usage of embeddedness. Embeddedness is related to embodiment in Mauritanian thought because of the emphasis of learning from and with others, as the proverb earlier stated: ‘Knowledge is in the chests (sudūr) of people, not the lines (ṣuṭūr) of books’ (see p. 56 above). If the body is the primary site of knowledge, being in the presence of and learning from those whose ‘internal landscapes’ are illuminated with knowledge is all the more important. Ogunnaike, too, notes the connection between embodiedness and embeddedness, stating that knowledge is a function of “embodied adab (comportment)...achieved through extended time in the physical presence of a master or masters.” See Ogunnaike, Deep Knowledge, 388.
¹¹¹ § III, line 11.
¹¹² § III, lines 5-6.
philosophy of embodiment, which flows from the internal to the external, it is as though Al-Šaghīr is posing the rhetorical question ‘How can someone who brings no benefit to himself expect to benefit anyone else? How can someone who has failed to reform their internal moral landscape hope to positively affect the external one?’ Not only are vicious teachers ineffectual and even insidious, their presence in an epistemic community is symptomatic of the broader decadence of that community. This suggests a view of things where a community’s epistemic health is connected with other aspects, like the social, moral, and spiritual health of the community. It also assumes that agents are embedded in the context of communities, and this context is essential for individuals to properly exercise their epistemic agency, as Al-Šaghīr’s treatment of experts shows.

**The Expert Identification Problem**

We can glean Al-Šaghīr’s ideals and standards for experts in his discussion of the two primary epistemic authorities dealt with in this text: teachers and muftīs or jurist-consults. (In what remains, I refer to muftīs as jurists for simplicity.) Teachers are the subject of § III “On the Most Important Trait for Teaching and Learning” while an extensive treatment of jurists appears in §IV “On the Etiquette of Jurists.” In what follows, I will focus on jurists as opposed to teachers, as this is the group to which Al-Šaghīr pays special attention. He goes beyond discussing the virtues of jurists to mention the conditions that signal qualified expertise. His discussion of qualified jurists roughly correlates with the “expert identification problem” in social epistemology. The problem can take two forms: (1) how does a layperson identify whether or not someone is an expert, relative to him- or herself (the novice/expert problem), and (2) how does one distinguish between putative experts themselves, especially when they differ (the novice/two-expert problem)?

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113 See § III, line 9 and n. 55 in Chapter 2.

114 Teachers may be considered experts in the subject taught, relative to the student, as well as experts of pedagogy. Even if the latter does not have a bearing on what is taught (i.e., they are not teaching a course in educational techniques), it will have a bearing on how effectively the material in question is conveyed. In this way, we can think of teachers as experts in a two-fold sense: they are content-experts in a certain domain relative to students, and expert disseminators of knowledge in that domain, relative to the average non-teacher. Relativism figures prominently in debates around how to defining what it is to be an “expert.” Carlo Martini explains that there is an inherent relativism in the notion of expertise because it only be defined in reference to another particular person or group of people. A medical student, for example, is an expert (in medical knowledge) relative to others not in medicine, but not an expert in comparison to an attending physician. An expert than, is anyone who is in a superior epistemic position relative to a given person or persons. Significantly, this ambiguity already begins to point to the necessity of knowing others within one’s epistemic community, and where one fits in relation to them. See: Carlo Martini, “The Epistemology of Expertise,” in The Routledge Handbook of Social Epistemology, eds. Miranda Fricker, Peter J. Graham, David Henderson, Nikolaj J. L. L. Pedersen, pp.115-122 (Routledge, 2019), 115.

115 “Novice,” “layperson,” and “non-specialist” will be used interchangeably.
Carlo Martini describes two dimensions relevant when evaluating experts: evaluations of past experience and evaluations of present competence. Experience depends on: (1) accurately determining what counts as relevant experience, and (2) relying on appropriate indicators of (relevant) experience. Meanwhile, forecasts of an expert’s present and future competence are much more difficult to make and still rely heavily on the track-record of the expert’s problem-solving ability. There is a certain circularity that is implied in the identification of experts; the layperson must know *something* of the domain in which they seek the expert opinion in order to determine how experienced and competent a given expert is in that domain. Martini accepts this limitation as inherent to the expert identification problem: “it follows that we can never detect expertise on a certain domain $D$ with full certainty… recognizing experts is a fallible activity: we can only rely on proxies for expertise, but we cannot detect expertise directly.”\textsuperscript{116} He then goes on to list some proxies, or indicators for expertise, such as objectivity, track-record, proportionality or social acclamation, content-knowledge, consistency, and discrimination ability, among others. These criteria are relevant for my discussion of Al-Ṣagḥīr’s proxies below, where I will expand upon them.\textsuperscript{117}

Alvin Goldman theorizes something similar to Martini’s notion of proxies, though his study focuses on the problem of deciding between conflicting experts (the novice/two-expert problem). He, too, identifies the problem of circularity: the layperson “thinks of the domain as properly requiring a certain expertise, and he does not view himself as possessing this expertise” therefore “he cannot use opinions of his own in the domain of expertise.”\textsuperscript{118} Yet Goldman notes that, despite this, a layperson may still locate, in the arguments of an expert or between experts, an epistemic reason to favour one or the other. This can be achieved by distinguishing between esoteric and exoteric statements: “esoteric statements belong to the relevant sphere of expertise, and their truth-values are inaccessible to [a novice]” while “exoteric statements are outside the domain of expertise; their truth-values may be accessible to [a novice].”\textsuperscript{119} The exoteric dimension takes into account, for example, the way that an expert delivers his or her arguments. Goldman mentions the “quickness and smoothness” when responding to another expert’s objections can indicate that they

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\textsuperscript{116} Martini, “The Epistemology of Expertise,” 117-18.

\textsuperscript{117} Martini, “The Epistemology of Expertise,” 119.


\textsuperscript{119} Goldman, “Experts,” 117.
have thought long and hard about the issue under debate. In other words, an expert who exhibits greater skill in communicating and debating with other experts may count as an epistemic reason for the layperson to have more trust in that expert. Goldman is quick to note that these metrics are not hard, fast rules. I would add they are problematic not only because they can be manipulated as faux indicators of expertise, as we shall see below, but they are also highly-dependent on socio-cultural factors. Other cultures may, for instance, actually consider slow answering to be a signal of careful deliberation.

I have mentioned Martini and Goldman here to highlight two things: (1) the inherent limitations of the expert identification problem, and (2) that laypeople can and often must look to external cues in evaluating experts. What these cues are, which are relevant, and when we can reliably use them are important questions from an applied epistemology perspective.

Al-Ṣaghīr’s Proxies
An applied, practical perspective is a mainstay of Al-Ṣaghīr’s poem, and it likewise applies in his discussion of experts, namely jurists. When addressing them, he does so directly, even harshly at times, and does not mince his words. He then turns to the questioner (mustastīfī) to explain what signals a qualified muftī.

Al-Ṣaghīr begins by addressing the would-be jurist to explain the high standards to which they should hold themselves. He warns them to “envision the Garden and Fire” when answering a questioner, directs them to contemplate Qur’anic verses stressing accountability, and exhorts them to constantly seek God’s forgiveness and guidance as they derive and disseminate legal rulings. After outlining the gravity of their task, theologically-speaking, Al-Ṣaghīr mentions several other conditions a jurist must meet. He must be “very knowledgeable” as well as being someone of ‘adālah (which will be discussed in more depth below). He also “cannot doubt himself / with

120 Goldman, “Experts,” 118.
121 For Al-Ṣaghīr, the superior debater is simply the one who follows the rules of munāẓarah most closely (see n. 35 in Chapter 2). Munāẓarah and how it relates to the epistemology of peer disagreement is fascinating, however, cannot be covered here due to space constraints. Suffice it to say that this reiterates the novice/two-expert problem because, in telling onlookers to give greater credence to debaters who follow the rules of dialectic, Al-Ṣaghīr implies that the onlooker is at least familiar with munāẓarah. However, aside from munāẓarah, Al-Ṣaghīr does provide readers with some basic pointers that anyone can use to differentiate between better and worse debaters (e.g., not intimidating, raising one’s voice, using tactics to deflect and distract, or being stubborn). For an in-depth study of dialectics and their role in Islamic legal hermeneutics in English, see Walter Edward Young, The Dialectical Forge: Juridical Disputation and the Evolution of Islamic Law (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017).
122 § IV, lines 1-2. For more on the different levels of juristic reasoning and legal derivation, see n. 23 in Chapter 2.
opinions that go back and forth.” Finally, he mentions several things that relate to jurists insofar as they serve an educational purpose or function. Here, a jurist must exhibit certain other-regarding traits, similar to teachers. For instance, a jurist cannot fully appreciate the slight differences from one legal case to the next and recognize which constraints (quyūd) are relevant to a particular scenario without adopting the questioner’s point of view and regarding the situation from his or her perspective. Likewise, if a questioner asks the jurist to elucidate how they arrived at a ruling, a jurist ought to first consider how much detail would be beneficial for each individual on a case-by-case basis, in order to satisfy the questioner without causing further confusion. The foregoing conditions correspond to many of the same proxies that Martini mentions, including the condition of knowledge, which corresponds to Martini’s content-knowledge; avoiding fluctuating edicts, similar to Martini’s notion of consistency; and considering quyūd, which aligns somewhat with Martini’s discrimination ability.

Al-Ṣaghīr mentions these proxies in his address to jurists, indicating that these are conditions experts should aim to meet themselves, and also look for when evaluating fellow jurists. Yet he occasionally redirects his attention from jurists to dedicate several lines to the questioner, in particular questioners seeking to tell apart qualified from unqualified jurists. In addressing both groups (jurists and questioners) in slightly different ways, Al-Ṣaghīr implicitly acknowledges, and arguably sidesteps, the circularity of the novice/expert problem. By differentiating which cues each group should look for, he effectively provides two sets of proxies, one for jurists to use among themselves, described above, and one for novices—a distinction that has much in common with Goldman’s esoteric versus exoteric proxies.

Turning to the passages addressing questioners, one ‘red flag’ he mentions is hastiness when responding to a legal question. Interestingly, this is the reverse of one of Goldman’s proxies. The two discussions are not exactly equivalent, of course, as Al-Ṣaghīr is examining the case of a

123 § IV, lines 8-10. At first, it seems that Al-Ṣaghīr is saying jurists should never doubt themselves in the process of deriving a legal ruling, which sounds like the opposite of the virtuous behaviour (e.g., open-mindedness) needed in the process of responsible deliberation. However, the phrase Al-Ṣaghīr uses is ḥusul al-qat’, referring to legal opinions or edicts. That is, they should deliberate until they reach a verdict and, once it’s rendered, jurists should not second-guess themselves or make a habit of retracting their decisions. The corollary here is that jurists ought to suspend issuing verdicts until they are sure and confident in the ruling.

124 § IV, line 5.

125 § IV, line 11.

126 Martini explains consistency and discrimination ability as follows: (1) “[giving] judgments that are internally consistent” and (2) “[being] able to discriminate between very similar but not completely equivalent cases.” See Martini, “The Epistemology of Expertise,” 119.

127 In § IV, lines 3 and 8-10.
questioner (novice) approaching a jurist (expert), while Goldman is seeking to provide an account of how a novice might judge between experts debating among themselves. Arguably, the difference between the two cases goes a step further; there is a theological dimension to Al-Ṣaghīr’s treatment of experts that is not present in Goldman’s. For Al-Ṣaghīr, “quick answering points either to ignorance / or a muftī with a spiritual cancer.”128 The ignorance he refers to can either be ignorance of the issue at hand, or ignorance of the gravity of the jurist’s role and the otherworldly dangers of speaking in God’s name, described at the start of § IV. As for spiritual diseases, that Al-Ṣaghīr mentions them alongside ignorance demonstrates that knowledge alone is not enough for him. A person’s moral character is equally important to consider, by experts and non-experts alike. Moral character is a major consideration for Al-Ṣaghīr and – just as sincerity was the leading virtue for him – it is perhaps the proxy in his theory of expert identification.

‘Adālah, Upright Character, and Trust

Al-Ṣaghīr clearly states knowledge is a necessary but not a sufficient condition in expert jurists, writing that “The muftī must be one who’s known / Not only for being knowledgeable, / But being someone of ‘adālah too / Or righteous, upright, and truthful.”129 Righteousness and good moral character is captured by the term ‘adālah. ‘Adālah is a concept that pervades Islamic sciences, from the study of hadith where it refers to trustworthy, reliable individuals who transmit a report, to procedural law where it is a condition for the admissibility of witnesses. Al-Ṣaghīr appeals to ‘adālah without further explanation, indicating that he believed such a critical concept would be familiar to his readers – unsurprisingly considering that ‘adālah is ubiquitous in Islamic sciences and law especially. Because of his reliance on ‘adālah, a few remarks on this concept are called for here. Without a grasp of this term, we cannot make sense of how or why Al-Ṣaghīr reflexively takes it as marker of trustworthy experts. I will restrict my remarks to three areas (hadith, Islamic legal history, and judicial procedure) which should suffice to demonstrate ‘adālah’s centrality.

After the Qur’an, the hadith corpus is the second primary source in Islamic thought. Methods for assessing the veracity of hadith are undertaken by hadith specialists (muhaddithūn) such as the celebrated Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241 AH/855 CE), the eponymous founder of one of

128 § IV, line 3.
129 § IV, line 8.
the four legal schools whom Al-Ṣaghīr mentions in the poem. This genre literally translates into “The Science of People” and refers to collected biographies of hadith transmitters. Such works enable hadith specialists to examine and verify chains of transmission, for example, by corroborating which transmitters were contemporaneous with one another. It also records which individuals met the qualities necessary for hadith transmission, such as ʿadālah (uprightness), thiqā (trustworthiness), and ḍabṭ (reputation for accurate reporting). Any inconsistencies in the verification process could adversely affect the strength or grade of the hadith in question.

The genre of ‘ilm al-rijāl is closely related to ʿtabaqāt literature or prosopography. While ʿtabaqāt works are not domain-specific, they are especially instrumental in the construction of Islamic law. Islamic legal scholar George Makdisi has shown that ʿtabaqāt works can be used to point to the existence and historical formation of a madhhāb or school of law over time. These works serve the dual function of retroactively describing a particular legal tradition and simultaneously prescribing future directions for the growth of and engagement with that tradition. As a back-projection, they legitimize specific scholarly pedigrees or lineages that henceforth become authoritative within the madhhāb. Meanwhile, as future-looking works, they become a source for the future perpetuation of that tradition, lending credence to the voices and contributions of some and making others peripheral. For the purposes of this study, it is sufficient to note the existence of ʿtabaqāt literature and the way it contours the social landscape – historically and into the present – by mapping the relationships between and among jurists, the guild of experts with which we are concerned. It also serves as a repository of reputational information, a point which we will address momentarily.

Finally, we turn to consider ʿadālah in judicial procedure, where it is a condition for testimony. The basis of testimony, at least according to classical Islamic law, is oral and not

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130 § I, line 20.
132 Collective biographies. There are many approaches within prosopographical research, but this definition comes closest to ʿtabaqāt literature: “By ‘prosopography’ we mean the database and the listing of all persons from a specific milieu defined chronologically and geographically established preparatory to a processing of the prosopographical material from various historical angles.” N. Bulst qtd in Koenraad Verboven, Myriam Carlier, and Jan Dumolyn, “A Short Manual to the Art of Prosopography,” in Prosopography Approaches and Applications: A Handbook, pp. 35-70 (Oxford: Unit for Prosopographical Research, 2007), 39.
written, such that even written documents need to be verified with a verbal notarization in order to be admissible. This means that deliberations over what constitutes ʿadālah is an ever-present dilemma in judicial law. Lawrence Rosen that

All evidence is regarded as essentially oral in nature. Witness testimony is the predominant form of proof... Even documents are regarded as the reduction to writing of oral testimony and the techniques for assessing their believability are not mainly those one thinks of for documentary proof—the correctness of form or the indication of forgery—but those associated with determining oral believability. Thus the main questions asked are: Who is this person who is testifying or whose words are inscribed here? What is his social background and to whom is he attached? … [T]he criteria for assessing believability remain those based on the face-to-face assessment of oral testimony.134 (emphasis added)

From the perspective of a classical jurist like Al-Ṣaghīr, the concept of ʿadālah underlines precisely the question ‘Who is this person?’ . This is the question that compels hadith specialists to compose works in ʿilm al-rijāl and that drives legal historians to author ṭabaqāt books. It is the same question a judge asks when weighing evidence, oral or otherwise. By including ʿadālah as a proxy, Al-Ṣaghīr is urging us to adopt this very line of questioning when deciding which experts are worthy of our trust: ‘Who are they? What is their background? To whom are their attached?’ and not simply ‘How much do they know?’. The notion of ʿadālah, as wide-ranging as its applications may be, has one thing in common across all these varied contexts: it is built upon the embeddedness of the person, in this case the expert, in their respective community.

Later in his book, after elucidating the social constitution of the legal subject in Islamic law, Rosen discusses the role of trust in these embedded community networks. His exploration shows that trust is an abiding feature of law and fixture in legal practices. In fact, a large part of Islamic juristic thinking cannot be understood without appreciating how its practitioners presume a basis of connectedness with and embeddedness in community to exist, as a default. In what follows, we shall see that what Rosen observes about the social and legal space can be applied to the epistemic landscape as well.

In his linguistic analysis of the term thiqa, the Arabic word for trust,135 Rosen explains that it connotes both the act of ‘relying on’ and ‘fettering oneself to’ another. Combining these meanings suggests “that the act of placing one’s trust in another produces a situation of being bound or fettered.”136 In other words, when we place our trust (thiqa) in someone else, we bind

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135 Also a condition in hadith transmission.
ourselves to them. For Al-Ṣaghīr and those in his milieu, “it is contexts of relationship... that most fully define a person, actively entangling them in webs of indebtedness.” Rosen notes that one of the most important ways in which social webs and bonds are navigated is etiquette, which “sets the baseline for being able to establish such bonds.” He states that

To receive another, to ingratiate oneself to another, to mark out who has created such bonds with who, is to establish the baseline for one’s own negotiated network. At present people often remark on the loss of just this complex of etiquette...they express regret at the limitations of being able to start from a base of not knowing one another.

For Rosen, getting to know the people in our shared “webs of indebtedness” is necessary for trust to function and the adālah criterion or ideal to be realized. His prescription also beautifully echoes Qur’anic language and its imperative to “come to know one another.”

Rosen’s idea of knowing one another is an appeal to cultivate awareness of the moral character and uprightness of those in our communities, and not their epistemic merits and virtues alone. Applying this notion of thiqa to the expert identification problem and Al-Ṣaghīr’s proxy of adālah, I understand Al-Ṣaghīr to be saying we must know the person whose expertise we are evaluating, or at the very least, if given the option between an expert who we know more and one we know less, we should err on the side of the one we know better. This insight also explains his prescription elsewhere to learn from local teachers, those who you are more likely to know and have a relationship with, before travelling to study with those whose character is, as yet, unknown to you. He tells us to begin “by learning the knowledge that / is native to your own homeland” before venturing beyond your locality. Al-Ṣaghīr is stressing the importance of approaching experts you know first and foremost. He is calling on his readers to build bonds of trust and even design spaces that will be conducive for mutual communication and for knowers to simply get to know one another.

It follows that, for Al-Ṣaghīr, a crucial step in assessing expertise is assessing a putative expert’s moral character. Arguably, asking the question ‘Who is this person?’ is perhaps more important than asking ‘What do they know?’. As we saw early on, the second question is circular

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138 Rosen, “Whom Do You Trust?”, 137.
140 Sūrat al-Hujurāt (Q. 49:13): “People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognize one another. In God’s eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware.” Here, M. A. S. Abdul Haleem has translated the Arabic ʿārafū as “so that you may recognize” each other, but others such as Marmaduke Pickthall translate it as so that you “know one another.”
141 § I, line 13.
and puts the onus on the questioner to know something of the domain in which they seek an expert opinion. On the other hand, moral character is, at least theoretically, more accessible to the layperson. It is an “exoteric” proxy, to borrow Goldman’s language. We can have gauge the kind of person someone is without knowing the details of the domain in which they specialize.

While this may avoid the circularity of relying on expertise to assess expertise, assessing a person’s moral character is a demanding criterion. While fully outlining the nature of Islamic moral virtue is not the purpose of this thesis, I will briefly allude to a rather interesting, internal proxy that Al-Ṣaghīr mentions, one which will be unpacked later. Al-Ṣaghīr reverts to sincerity when discussing which teachers to learn from. He says: “Without [sincerity], a teacher won’t / Have any real concern for you. / The way to tell is feeling unassured; / Remember that your soul is shrewd.” (Although he mentions teachers explicitly in these lines, we can apply the insight to jurists, the other class of experts he deals with.) In the final two lines of this stanza, Al-Ṣaghīr affirms the place of our personal, immediate, “exoteric” assessments of others. He seems to be saying there is something about another person’s character that we can access directly, without recourse to yet another domain of expertise. Al-Ṣaghīr is foreshadowing the importance of self-knowledge, which will be the subject of Part IV “Al-Ṣaghīr on the Role of Self-Trust.” The purpose of this section is simply to explore how both uprightness (ʿadālah) and trust (thiqa) are important for Al-Ṣaghīr’s social epistemology, and how these proxies in turn work best when an expert is embedded in community relationships.

**Reputation**

We have established that the external or exoteric signal of ʿadālah is essential to Al-Ṣaghīr’s treatment of the expert identification problem. It has the potential to resolve the circularity by asking the layperson to begin by considering, as best as they can, whether the putative expert is knowledgeable – Al-Ṣaghīr’s first proxy – but, importantly, he directs them not to stop short there.

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142 Via reputation, discussed below.
143 § III, line 2.
144 Insofar as ʿadālah is a moral designation, it appears subject to the same circularity inherent in any other domain of expertise; it implies that one must know something of morality to gauge the moral uprightness of others. There are several possible ways to begin countering this point. Firstly, there is a difference between knowing about morality and being moral. Neither the putative expert nor the novice need to have mastered a formal body of knowledge of moral theories and philosophies to exercise the ʿadālah criterion. Secondly, I do not suppose that Al-Ṣaghīr is equating ʿadālah with moral expertise (whether theoretical or practical), but rather with minimally upright conduct which, for him, is gauged collectively and over time through social relationships. Thirdly, Al-Ṣaghīr considers knowledge of goodness (birr) to be accessible to all knowers by virtue of their humanity and natural dispositions (fiṭrah), a point that the next and final section, Part IV “Al-Ṣaghīr on the Role of Self-Trust,” will expand upon.
Rather, a novice ought to look to their character as well, and gauge their uprightness. Choosing to enter into a relationship of *thiqā* with an expert, where one trusts and is in some sense bound to them, is not a decision to be made lightly. It is akin to entering into a contract or taking a covenant (*mithāq*) with them, a serious matter, legally- and ethically-speaking. As Rosen says, “The people one trusts and the people with whom one enters into contractual relationships are…the people by whom you will be known, and thus one can never fully divorce the question of *who they are* from the question of *who you are*” (emphasis added).\(^{145}\)

At this juncture it is important to distinguish *knowing* someone from *knowing of* someone, that is, reputation. In this section, I am interested not in an expert’s reputation among other experts, but rather in an expert’s *perceived* expertise among non-experts. We may call the former ‘scholarly reputation’ and the latter ‘general reputation’ – a distinction that notably mirrors the discussion of real and perceived authority in Chapter 1.\(^{146}\)

Goldman and Martini deal with the epistemological functioning of expertise, and so do not make general reputation the focus on their study, although they do make room for scholarly reputation. Goldman specifically states his interest is in “what it is to be an expert, not what it is to have a reputation for expertise.”\(^{147}\) For him, the former is an expert-proper and the latter is what he calls a “reputational expert,” that is, “someone widely believed to be an expert (in the objective sense), whether or not he really is one.”\(^{148}\) Martini does not mention reputation explicitly, although he does list social acclamation or proportionality\(^{149}\) and track-record\(^{150}\) as fallible proxies. Goldman, too, discusses track-record and appraisals of a purported expert’s expertise by others in the field.\(^{151}\) Such markers are related only to scholarly reputation since they point to the expert’s reputation among their peers.

Al-Ṣaghīr acknowledges both scholarly reputation and general reputation. In fact, he uses experts’ instinct to preserve their reputation among their fellow experts in order to warn them against hasty answering. He writes: “To answer before weighing carefully, / Or deep thought and

\(^{145}\) Rosen, “Whom Do You Trust?”, 149.


\(^{147}\) Goldman, “Experts,” 114.


\(^{149}\) Martini identifies proportionality/social acclamation with the “degree of consensus” an expert enjoys in their respective field. Martini, “The Epistemology of Expertise,” 119.

\(^{150}\) For Martini, track-record is indicated by the professional credentials of the expert. Martini, “The Epistemology of Expertise,” 119.

examination / Brings a rapid end to one’s scholarly life, / Ruining credibility and reputation.”

However, when it comes to how laypeople relate to experts, he instructs them to weigh their general, moral reputation, as the discussion of ‘adālah showed. Scholarly reputation and peer review as methods of self-regulation within epistemic communities are interesting topics in their own right. In what follows however, I take up the issue of laypersons’ evaluation of experts, who may not be privy to an expert’s scholarly reputation among his or her peers, but may come to rely on their wider reputation and popular acceptance to get a sense of who they are.

Why is general reputation important to Al-Ṣaghīr? Recall for a moment a distinction drawn in Chapter 1, where we described the difference between a faqīḥ (jurist) and muftī (jurist-consultant) and established that The Faqīḥ’s Lantern is written for the latter audience. Unlike a faqīḥ whose theoretical work may be disengaged from interpersonal dynamics, the role of muftīs cannot be understood without the background of their community-engaged work. They issue non-binding legal verdicts, indicating that laypersons voluntarily approach them to ask questions pertaining to Islamic law based on their expertise.

An analogy may illustrate the difference between scholarly and general reputation, and show why the latter is important for iftā’.

A muftī, because of the community-engaged aspect of his or her work, is similar to a community-engaged scholar in the academy. General reputation is essential in understanding the dynamics of iftā’. Questioners (mustaftīs) are novices and, by definition, lack the legal expertise they need. As a result, they consult expert muftīs and are in large part driven in their decisions of who to approach based on the track-record of muftīs, not among other muftīs (information they are

152 § IV, line 4.
likely not privy to, just as they are not privy to the expertise they seek), but among other non-experts who have interacted with them.

General reputation is also significant for how it relates to ‘adālah. In the preceding paragraphs, I suggested that character cues including ‘adālah as a proxy may be more accessible to a layperson. Does reputation support or belie this claim? Can reputation help give us clarity regarding who is upright, or does it do the opposite? How does an expert’s general reputation, i.e., the perception of their expertise among non-specialists, factor into a layperson’s assessment of a putative expert? Reputation certainly promises to complicate determinations of ‘adālah. Although a full analysis of ‘adālah and reputation is beyond the scope of this paper, the remaining paragraphs aim to demonstrate some affinity between them.

Reputation arguably veers more closely to sociological studies of knowledge than social epistemology, and may not seem relevant to a purely epistemological analysis of expertise at first blush. Nevertheless, the study of reputation is essential to any discussion of the dynamic between laypeople (or novices) and experts because of the undue role it can play in the former’s evaluations of and interaction with the latter. It can therefore be treated within the purview of an applied social epistemology, as my engagement with Gloria Origgi’s work will demonstrate.

Origgi argues that while the concept of trust has been accepted as an epistemological notion and has since become a “mainstream concept for social epistemologists,” reputation lags behind and remains marginal.155 She makes a compelling case for why reputation ought to be studied alongside the expert problem. Studying reputation is important, in the first instance, given the ‘guru effect’ that can occlude expert identification (which Goldman, too, notes).156 Put simply, purported experts are not always true experts, and can manipulate many of the proxies of expertise that we have been discussing to make themselves appear to be the real thing. While fake gurus are an age-old problem,157 the second reason Origgi mentions is a result of more recent technological

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155 Gloria Origgi, “A Social Epistemology of Reputation,” Social Epistemology 26, no. 3-4 (2012): 400. I note her article is from 2012, but I am not familiar enough with the literature to know if her recommendations to study reputation within the purview of social epistemology-proper has been taken up or has fallen by the wayside since the publication of her article.
156 Goldman, “Experts,” 121; Origgi, “Reputation,” 414. The “guru effect” refers to when a figure, usually charismatic and pseudo-intellectual, is idolized. Without belittling the manipulative strategies of gurus, audiences also play a large part in creating a heightened aura of authority and even infallibility around the figure. For a scholarly analysis of the guru effect, see Dan Sperber, “The Guru Effect,” Review of Philosophy and Psychology 1, no. 4 (2010): 583-592.
157 The Bhagavad Gita (2:42–44), for example, warns against false, charismatic teachers and preachers: “There are men who have no vision, and yet they speak many words. They follow the letter of the Vedas, and they say: ‘There is nothing but this.’ Their soul is warped with selfish desires... They have prayers for pleasures and power, the reward of which is earthly rebirth. Those who love pleasure and power hear and follow their words.” The Bhagavad Gita, trans. Juan Mascaró (London: Penguin Books, 1962), 13.
advancements. She explains: “As information grows, our distance from reality seems to grow proportionally. Our judgements, evaluations and decisions are embedded more and more in networked systems that provide us with ratings, ‘likes’ and recommendations.”\textsuperscript{158} The layperson today must increasingly contend with a socio-epistemic landscape that is already “pre-evaluated” in Origgi’s words.\textsuperscript{159} A theory that is purely abstract in nature misses this. It would imply that knowers start with a ‘blank slate,’ and so only work when we assume that the landscape is, at best, ‘neutral’ when a layperson sets out in search of experts. The notion of ‘adālah is advantageous precisely because it does not assume this. We all have our biases, unique perspectives, and attachments. None of us is truly “objective”\textsuperscript{160} which is precisely why an agent should seek to know the people in his or her epistemic space as a matter of course. An agent ought to ask, paraphrasing Rosen’s words, ‘Who are they? What is their background? What are their attachments?’ Like ‘adālah, reputation concerns itself with many of these same questions. It provides “information about the social ties that flow towards you and say who you are and what you know.”\textsuperscript{161}

Origgi’s remarks paint a picture where laypeople today, dealing with an influx of information combined with algorithms that prematurely shape their ‘epistemic playing field,’ are confronted with a situation where identifying experts is, in a word, challenging. In the face of these pragmatic challenges, “when reality is vague, when checking the facts is difficult,” reputation can play a disproportionate role in deciding where we direct our attention, whether consciously or not.\textsuperscript{162} The harder it becomes to filter and navigate epistemic spaces, the more we rely on reputation as a crutch to help us. Like many other biases and heuristics, relying on reputation can be a double-edged sword.

Reputation can be helpful in that it acts as a ‘shortcut’ to sift through the social information around us. We can think of reputation as a packet of condensed, ready-to-use information. In theory, it tells us how others have evaluated the person under question and their collective determination of that person’s trustworthiness, competence, and any number of other

\textsuperscript{158} Origgi, “Reputation,” 400.
\textsuperscript{159} Origgi, “Reputation,” 400.
\textsuperscript{160} Objectivity is one of Martini’s proxies. Needless to say it is not so for Al-Ṣaghīr. I suspect that Al-Ṣaghīr would have eschewed the myth of objectivity. Our subjectivity is inescapable, but neither is it a weakness or detriment to be lamented. Rather, it should be embraced in a way that increases our awareness of our and others’ subjectivity, including our unique biases, backgrounds, and attachments.
\textsuperscript{161} Origgi, “Reputation,” 399.
\textsuperscript{162} Origgi, “Reputation,” 399.
epistemically-relevant factors. It therefore has the potential to reduce our individual workload and can divide epistemic and cognitive labour among a distributed network of knowers, taking the burden off any single member of the community.\textsuperscript{163}

The other advantage of cuing into an expert’s general reputation (i.e., their reputation among non-experts) is that, rather than using how other experts have assessed a given expert, or trying to assess their expertise directly, we instead use the assessments of those whose epistemic states may be more accessible to us: fellow laypeople but perhaps also friends and acquaintances. Of course, using the general side of an expert’s reputation can complicate matters, too. Now, instead of looking to experts directly (whose knowledge we are not in a position to evaluate), we are relying on aggregated evaluations of an even bigger, more amorphous group of people who are assessing them on a whole host of factors, from personality, to looks, to charisma. Yet the flipside is that we are arguably in a better position to evaluate people who are our peers especially if they are people we know, as Rosen emphasizes. For example, I might not be able to make an informed decision about which of two climate scientists has a better argument on a certain topic.\textsuperscript{164} If I discover, however, that several people in my social circle who have a track-record for being skeptical about climate change follow a new climate scientist and hold him or her in high repute, that can be a helpful indicator for me in assessing their purported expertise.

In an ideal world, reputation would be an accurate indicator and a helpful heuristic for novices to navigate their environment, just as scholarly reputation is among experts. In actuality, however, social reputation is less regulated and more volatile than scholarly consensus and peer-review (and even those are not fool-proof). Reputation is a messy pool of social information from people, by people, a “social property that is mutually constructed by the perceiver, the perceived, and the social context.”\textsuperscript{165} As such, reputation is only as good as the body of knowers that

\textsuperscript{163} Although division of cognitive labour is a common theme in social epistemology (see, for example: Geoffrey Brennan, “The Division of Epistemic Labour,” \textit{Analyse \& Kritik} 32, no. 2 (2010): 231-246, I am unaware of a scholarly work that examines reputation as a type of division of epistemic labour. I am, however, reminded of Neil Levy and Mark Alfano’s study of overimitation, typically considered a vice, and how it can be knowledge-conducive. An analysis of reputation along the same lines – examining how this seeming vice may lead to virtue in group settings – would make for an interesting study, if one does not already exist. See Neil Levy and Mark Alfano, “Knowledge from Vice: Deeply Social Epistemology,” \textit{Mind} 129, no. 515 (2020): 887-915.

\textsuperscript{164} I agree with Goldman that esoteric statements are inaccessible to laypersons, but I find that exoteric statements or cues (e.g., dialectic superiority) to be unsatisfying alternatives, which he seems to concede to a certain extent (see p. 65-66 above). Al-Ṣaghīr’s recommendation to look beyond knowledge to character and character cues like ‘adlālah may be more promising from an applied perspective.

\textsuperscript{165} Origgi, “Reputation,” 403.
collectively form reputational judgement. Reputational cuing may be subverted, especially when knowers in our environment are less scrupulous and conscientious than we would like. In this case, relying on reputation becomes more of a hindrance than a help, and actually increases our individual cognitive burden by demanding that we first filter out the false or unreliable information about a person if it abounds. It demands, too, that we contend with faulty reputational cues. As one concrete example of this, Origgi notes that when someone is held in high repute or holds (perceived) authority, we tend to exert even more effort in making sense of what they say and “look endlessly for an interpretation” of it, assuming it to be full of “depth and wisdom” only to discover that it is pure “nonsense.” In sum, the same social tool that once had the potential to make our lives as epistemic agents easier can, by the same token, make them far more difficult.

In this sense, reputation has much in common with many of the normative apparatuses featured in social-epistemic landscapes. Like the ‘ilm al-rijāl and ṭabaqāt genres described above, it is equal parts a genuine product and a projection of collective opinion. Reputation is at the mercy of and “in the eyes of others.” The very community of people who appraises the expert and has the power to confer upon him or her this crucial proxy also has the power to undercut it, deprecating its very value as a proxy. The gaze that, in ideal situations, helps guide our determinations of who is potentially trustworthy also has the potential to thwart them.

Understanding the power of reputation implies that novices are not passive actors in epistemic spaces. Even if we are unable to assess expertise, we have access to other proxies that we might profitably use and even have the power to shape. Our engagement with “exoteric” cues can contribute to their reliable functioning, on the one hand, or their distortion and futility, on the other. The discussion of reputation and ḍālalah indicates that, far from being passive agents, novices have an epistemic duty, firstly, to get to know other knowers in their space, and secondly, to use the collective social gaze responsibly. This includes being cognizant of the people we choose

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166 This dynamic is aptly captured in some cinematic and pop media representations. See for example: Community, season 5, episode 8, “App Development and Condiments” or Black Mirror, series 3, episode 1, “Nosedive.”
167 The phenomenon of “bullshitting” is just one trend that can compromise, or at least complicate our ability to assess the conscientiousness of other knowers at a baseline level. See Harry Frankfurt, On Bullshit (Princeton University Press, 2005) and John V. Petrocelli, “Antecedents of Bullshitting,” Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 76 (2018): 249-258.
170 Origgi, “Reputation,” 403.
to collectively hold in high repute, upon whom we confer “reputational expertise,”171 and around whom we perpetuate an aura of perceived authority.

This section began by sketching the practical drawback of the expert identification problem, its circularity led to an examination of proxies and the practical necessity of relying on cues like reputation. Reputation in turn led to a discussion of ‘adālah and how the prescription to ‘know one another’ can be used to navigate reputation by refocusing the gaze specifically on the agents in one’s environment, with whom one can develop relationships and create direct bonds of trust (thiqa).

Stepping back further, the analysis in Chapter 3 began with inward, individual virtues. It then flowed outward to consider the external environment and its relationship to the body through embodiment theories. The present section explored other knowers in that environment with all their idiosyncrasies and the problem of how to assess and when to trust those others, mainly putative experts. Transitioning to the next and final section, we will turn inward once more to deal with self-trust. As we shall see, self-trust becomes all the more important when we find ourselves struggling to ‘see’ clearly in our epistemic environment. In a time when visibility is worsened, when “epistemic pollution” is widespread,172 Al-Ṣaghīr’s call to trust oneself becomes extremely relevant and timely.

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PART IV: AL-ṢAGHĪR ON THE ROLE OF SELF-TRUST

Dear reader, leave what gives you doubt.
And makes your heart grow restless.
Consult your soul and heed your heart,
Tend to that which brings it calmness.\textsuperscript{173}

Al-Ṣaghīr’s prescription when it comes to experts is clear: approach qualified, sincere experts to the exclusion of all others.\textsuperscript{174} Yet we have seen how the ability to accurately assess and distinguish true from false expertise can sometimes be a luxury, and one that is arguably dissipating in the era of hyper-communication, increased mobility, and ‘fake news.’ We have also seen how the criterion of ʿadālah works in ideal scenarios where a jurist belongs to a particular community and maintains a steady track record there. ʿAdālah assumes, too, that the questioner is familiar with his or her community for this norm or pattern of expert identification to work. But what if this is not the case? Or what if other factors (e.g., false proxies, unconducive environments) complicate assessments of our fellow knowers? Does Al-Ṣaghīr consider these non-ideal scenarios? If so, how does he approach them?

Al-Ṣaghīr does indeed consider non-ideal epistemic cases and stresses the importance of self-knowledge in these situations. In fact, even when identifying experts, he foreshadowed self-knowledge in writing, regarding teachers: “Without [sincerity], a teacher won’t / Have any real concern for you. / The way to tell is feeling unassured; / Remember that your soul is shrewd.”\textsuperscript{175} Al-Ṣaghīr merely hints at self-knowledge in these lines, but his discussion becomes more robust at the start § V when he addresses self-doubt. § V is a subsection of the conclusion in the original text, however, I chose to render it as a stand-alone section in the translation and entitled it “On the General Conduct of Learners” as it contains his parting advice for readers. I will focus on the first three stanzas of this section, which I count among the most empowering parts of the poem. Here, Al-Ṣaghīr turns his attention to students and questioners, even adopting a personal tone to address them. He directly engages the party seeking knowledge as opposed to the one disseminating it, whether it be a student seeking knowledge generally or a questioner seeking a specific legal answer to a dilemma. In these passages, he recentres his focus on the more vulnerable party and highlights their epistemic agency.

\textsuperscript{173} § V, line 1.
\textsuperscript{174} § III, line 1.
\textsuperscript{175} § III, line 2.
The Nafs, Qalb, and Fiṭrah

Al-Ṣaghīr’s prescription when facing doubt is to suspend judgement in favour of a particular faculty or intuition, as the epigraph above suggests. What precisely is this intuitive faculty and when is it reliable? The answer lies in the next line where he explains that “The soul, by nature, finds repose / In beauty and in goodness, / While evil agitates the heart / Contracting it with anxiousness.”176 The Arabic is: “Al-birr ma iṭma’anati al-nafsu ilayh / wal-ʾithm ma aḍṭaraba al-qalbu ladayhi.” Al-Ṣaghīr is drawing upon the following hadith:

Wābiša ibn Ma’bad reported God’s Messenger as saying, “Have you come to ask about goodness (birr) and evil (ʾithm), Wābiša?” When he replied that he had, he joined his fingers and striking his breast with them said, “Ask yourself for a decision (istaftī qalbak), ask your heart (qalb) for a decision [saying it three times]. Goodness is that with which the soul (nafs) is tranquil and the heart (qalb) is tranquil, but evil is that which rouses suspicion in the soul and is perplexing in the chest, even if people give you a decision in its favour.”177

In the lines by Al-Ṣaghīr, I translated nafs as soul, qalb as heart, birr as beauty and goodness, and ʾithm as evil. Each of these terms are key concepts either in Islamic psychology (qalb, nafs) or ethics (birr, ʾithm), and so warrant a few remarks.

Nafs and qalb are central to Islamic models of psychology. Linguistically, nafs refers to “soul” or “spirit,”178 but it carries many other connotations. Nafs can also be translated as “lower self” or “ego,” depending on the context. Naveed Baig, who researches Muslim pastoral care and health, explains this ambiguity in defining the nafs. He describes it is an innate faculty that can fluctuate between several states “varying from the animalistic, to the self at peace and the pure angelic form.”179 In its “untrained form” it is appetitive; here it may be translated as “lower self” or “ego.” However, as it goes through stages of refinement, it can become angelic, a “soul at rest.”180

The qalb or heart, on the other hand, is considered the “organ of illumination and wisdom”181 and the “spiritual center of the human being”182 by Islamic psychologists. Al-Ṣaghīr

176 § V, line 2.
177 [Mishkāt al-Maṣābih, 2774]
179 Naveed Baig, “The Islamic Theology Behind Spiritual Care and Hospital Chaplaincy,” in Complexities of Spiritual Care in Plural Societies, eds. Simon Peng-Keller, Eckhard Frick, Christina Puchalski, and John Swinton, pp. 99-122 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 100.
180 Baig, “Spiritual Care,” 100.
181 Baig, “Spiritual Care,” 100.
is certainly using *qalb* according to this sense. However, he also uses it interchangeably in this line with the word *nafs*, suggesting *nafs* here is not in reference to the ego or lower self, but rather the general sense of *nafs* as “soul,” hence my translation. That Al-Ṣaghīr uses *nafs* and *qalb* interchangeably however, is interesting. He is referring to a single faculty by two different names. Not only that, but this particular faculty has certain, natural responses to good and evil. For these reasons, I believe it is more accurate to take Al-Ṣaghīr as referring to yet another faculty which he does not mention by name, but that his usages of *nafs* and *qalb* signify: the *fitrah*.

*Fitrah* is a key term in Islamic psychology and anthropology. Abdallah Rothman and Adrian Coyle, in a study of theoretical frameworks and models among Islamic psychologists, define *fitrah* as “human nature or natural disposition.” They also claim that an understanding of *fitrah* is “central to the conceptualization of an Islamic psychology.” Although it is difficult to define, there seems to be a consensus that the *fitrah* is a deep, fundamental aspect of human nature, sometimes called “a primordial disposition” to know and connect with God. This ability is “implanted” in human beings. In fact, *faṭara*, the root from which it is derived, means “‘to split,’ ‘to originate’...allud[ing] to an original blueprint.”

While all humans are born with the primordial *fitrah*, we also have the potential to lose touch with it, which is the primary reason for most psychological conditions according to the participants in Rothman and Coyle’s study. The way Al-Ṣaghīr’s uses the terms heart (*qalb*) and soul (*nafs*) is resonant with the idea of *fitrah*. Just as the *nafs* can be lowly or angelic, and the heart can be sound or corrupt, so can one’s *fitrah*. Yet, the heart seems to be more in tune with one’s *fitrah* than the *nafs*, perhaps because it is the human’s “spiritual center.” Skinner views the heart as the “part of the human being in which is felt the sense of *fitrah*...and the inherent sense of right and wrong.” His observation aligns with Al-Ṣaghīr, who says “the soul, by nature” will be drawn to *birr* (goodness) and repelled by *ʾithm* (evil). Because he implies a ‘natural’ state of the soul, what Al-Ṣaghīr really has in mind is someone in touch with their *fitrah*.

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190 Skinner, “Traditions, Paradigms and Basic Concepts,” 1090.
Birr and Ṭhīm

Having clarified the terms qalb and nafs, we turn to the next pair of terms that Al-Ṣaghīr employs: birr and ṭīhm. As with the previous two, translations fail to fully capture these key terms in Islamic ethics. In his examination of ethical terms in the Qur’an—including birr—Kevin Reinhart observes that many ethical words are not specified or defined in revelation, despite their numerous appearances in scripture. In fact, they seem “so amorphous, so underdetermined that one begins to suspect that their underdetermination is the point.” The widespread use of these words suggests that their meanings are ‘common sense,’ immediately and intuitively understood by those in the seventh-century Arabian community listening to these verses.

Regarding birr specifically, translations render it as piety, virtue, goodness, and righteousness. Yet Reinhart notes that in most cases, birr in the Qur’an is simply described in contrast to something else. These verses take the form of “a redefinition of the term by using a series of lists (birr is not X but Y).” The open-endedness of these key concepts is significant. Reinhart argues that by keeping the notion of birr, for example, vague and dynamic, a space is created “for all Muslims to engage with all the sources of contemporary ethical knowledge—social norms, the works of contemporary philosophers, people’s personal insight—in order to discover how to obey the Qur’ānic command” of exemplifying birr (emphasis added).

As Reinhart’s analysis shows, a large part of what exactly constitutes birr is highly contextual and depends on the mores and sensibilities of a given community and even on the individual person, who must ultimately decide what birr will look like in their specific case. Al-
Ṣaghīr’s usage of *birr* and ‘*ithm* aligns with their Qur’anic usage. He does not go into detail to elucidate or give examples of what this *birr* is, instead trusting the individual reader to make these determinations in light of their own circumstances and using their own internal faculties, that is, a heart and soul aligned with the *fitrah*.

As salient as these terms are in Islamic psychology and ethics, clarifying the finer points of *qalb* and *nafs*, *birr* and ‘*ithm* is not my point here. Yet being aware of the nuance is necessary to appreciate what Al-Ṣaghīr is saying. Bearing these terms in mind, I take Al-Ṣaghīr to be saying that by tuning into the *fitrah*, a person will readily recognize and incline to goodness (*birr*) and disincline from evil (‘*ithm*). He is referencing a kind of self-knowledge which is not necessarily identical from person to person, but shares the same knowledge source, as it harkens back to our primordial disposition. Moreover, it is highly sensitive to context, such that epistemic agents have recourse to it individually and privately. In what remains, I will refer to the tendency to be able to discern between *birr* and ‘*ithm* as one’s ‘*fitrawī* intuition’ and show how this intuition plays a significant epistemic role in cultivations of self-knowledge and self-trust.

*The Questioner (Mustaftī), Vulnerability, and Epistemic Self-Trust*

Let us revisit Al-Ṣaghīr’s own words for a moment. § V begins by explaining a situation where one is facing doubt: “Dear reader, leave what gives you doubt / And makes your heart grow restless.”

It is in the context of doubt that one ought to give precedence to one’s own intuitive, *fitrawī* sense of *birr* and ‘*ithm*, or right and wrong, good and evil. Before diving into self-knowledge and self-trust, something further needs to be said about this situation of doubt vis-à-vis the collective status of students and questioners and the epistemic realities they face.

Consider the following story Zareena Grewal shares in her study of Muslim knowledge-seekers. One of these seekers was Asma, a student Grewal met in Damascus. Previously, Asma underwent a long and painful process to attain an Islamic divorce. Because her husband was not willing to grant her one and she was living in the US at the time, with no recourse to Islamic courts, she was under the impression that she needed an *imam* or council of *imams* to grant it. After many disheartening months and frustrated attempts to explain her situation, she finally discovered that she could execute the divorce through the state, which is recognized in Islamic law, but not before becoming extremely skeptical of Islamic judicial spaces.

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196 § V, line 1.
Grewal cites this story in her discussion of authority to demonstrate its sway over us. Much like Rosen, she notes that when we take something to be authoritative, it “binds us to something beyond ourselves.” By trusting the imams, Asma vested them with authority and bound herself to them because, in her words, “I had so much trust in their knowledge.” She goes on to say

I was doing all this because I thought it was the right thing to do, the Islamic thing to do. I thought I had to go through it, that God was punishing me, that Islamically I had to, but it turns out this torture of hanging in the middle is just because of nothing.... What you realize is that what you think of as a divine legal process is just totally haphazard and subjective and dependent on the personalities of a bunch of middle-aged men who happen to be [scholars].

Though this story is specifically of a questioner (mustaftiyah) seeking a legal remedy, her predicament exemplifies the types of obstacles both questioners and students looking for a formal program of study routinely face. They are confronted with the “human limitations of Islamic law,” from the human flaws of those they take to be epistemic authorities, to the limited knowledge, both theoretical and practical, of the authorities themselves. Asma’s story highlights issues that relate to our previous discussion of identifying experts, but here I would like to focus on the part of her journey that relates to self-knowledge and self-trust. The authorities she inherently trusted betrayed that trust, and in so doing, caused her to doubt her choices and deliberations around Islamic legal, epistemic authority. Linda Zagzebski puts it eloquently: “An attack on a person’s trust in others is also an attack on her trust in herself. If someone’s trust in another is destroyed, she realizes that she cannot trust her own trust; she cannot trust what she trusts, and that includes herself.” Not only that, but Asma’s misplaced trust also affected her spiritually. She states, “These imams don’t realize what they do to people’s iman [faith].”

We will return to the relationship of authority and epistemic harm at the end of this section. For now, I have shared Asma’s story simply to illustrate the challenges students are prone to, helping us think through their process and journey as knowers especially before and after encountering authorities. Recall that Chapter 1 discussed persuasive authority at length and the “epistemological presupposition” that silently operates in the background of engagements between learners and (putative) teachers, questioners and (putative) jurists. Because it is a dynamic

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203 Friedman qtd in Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God’s Name*, 19.
built upon a real or perceived *epistemic* power differential, it is worthy of consideration within applied social epistemology.

Building on the story above, let us consider students and questioners not as an oppressed or marginalized epistemic group necessarily, but one that is prone to them all the same precisely because of the vulnerability the dynamic introduces. Nadja El Kassar has studied marginalized communities and the epistemic dimensions of their marginalization. Her study aligns with prior work, including José Medina on the epistemic effects of oppression and Miranda Fricker on epistemic injustice. Most scholarly attention has gone to the disadvantages faced by these groups, including having their voices and ways of knowing silenced, facing bias and prejudice by dominant groups, navigating educational barriers, and erosions of self-trust. The last of these is my current focus, but before going further, it is interesting to note that marginalized groups are in a position to experience epistemic *advantages* as well as disadvantages. El Kassar, drawing on Medina, explains how marginalized agents are, for example, uniquely able to cultivate intellectual virtues such as curiosity, humility, and open-mindedness. It is because of the disadvantages they face (e.g., prejudicial bias) that they can become more aware of their own biases and sensitive to when bias is operating. Likewise, because their ways of knowing are not recognized, they may develop greater awareness of diverse epistemologies. In El Kassar’s words, “they experience arrogant, closed-minded reactions by people who are ignorant about the reality of life...thereby realiz[ing] that there are limits to human knowledge.”204 Here, she is referring to the virtue of meta-lucidity, or “a subject’s awareness of the workings of epistemic practices.”205 For example, thinking back to Asma, her experience of the limitations of the reality of juristic practice has the potential to increase her meta-lucidity.206

For El Kassar, it is “essential for an oppressed and marginalized subject to be able to avail herself of the epistemic privileges that come with her social position.”207 How might this be achieved? She locates the answer in self-trust and communal support, which work in tandem, mutually reinforcing one another. She defines intellectual self-trust as the trust an agent has in her “cognitive powers.”208 Elsewhere, she describes it as an “optimistic, affective and cognitive stance

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206 Of course, whether or not an agent will gain from these situations and grow in virtue or succumb to vice depends on many other factors. The point is that epistemic disadvantage need not lead to epistemic vice.
that a subject takes toward her cognitive capacities, experiences, and thoughts.”

Meanwhile, communal support, including amplification of the marginalized person’s voice, is also a key ingredient for intellectual self-trust to take root and flourish.

Of these two interdependent elements (self-trust and communal support), I will focus primarily on self-trust. Self-trust is key for epistemically vulnerable persons to overcome their disadvantage according to El-Kassar. Marginalized agents typically downplay their epistemic merits and are critical of their ability to make cognitive judgements. They struggle with more self-doubt than others in assessing themselves and their surroundings. Without self-trust, an agent remains mired in this doubt: “An oppressed subject must have intellectual self-trust, that is, she must trust her cognitive capacities, her beliefs, her thoughts, her experiences....in order to be able to determine whether she is too humble, or too deferential, or has just the right amount of self-confidence” in her deliberations. Until marginalized agents cultivate the “optimistic stance” of self-trust, they struggle to overcome the harms of the injustices they face and, moreover, to turn their position of epistemic disadvantage into one of advantage.

Gaslighting and Epistemic Harm

El Kassar’s investigation has shown the importance of cultivating intellectual self-trust as a general, overarching strategy for marginalized and vulnerable agents to mobilize and assert themselves as knowers. Let us transition now from the general desirability of self-trust to a specific case where self-trust plays a crucial role: gaslighting. Gaslighting occurs when a person (the gaslighter) manipulates others in order to make them doubt themselves, as when a victim of a discriminatory act confronts the responsible party, only to be told that the incident did not take place, they are not recalling the details correctly, and so on.

Self-trust is paramount in situations of gaslighting because these often take place in the context of one-on-one relationships. We have seen that El Kassar links self-trust with communal support. Communities can foster self-trust by reminding vulnerable agents of their own epistemic merits by amplifying their voices and perspectives. This communal context is not just missing in the case of gaslighting; it’s absence is a key ingredient for it to function. Gaslighters deliberately

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isolate their victims precisely to interfere with their self-trust. They attempt to “[cut] off their victims from potential allies like family and friends... This is an important part of the process in individual gaslighting because allies are a lifeline, a link to reality and a source of self-trust.”

In what remains, we explore the epistemic mechanics of gaslighting as they relate to self-trust.

To appreciate the dynamics of gaslighting, I turn to Andrew Spear’s study of the epistemology at play in this phenomenon. Spear argues that previous studies have failed to give the epistemic side of gaslighting due attention. Nevertheless, gaslighting is uniquely epistemic for several reasons. Firstly, it involves a person (the gaslighter) laying claim to a special or privileged epistemic status relative to his victim, reminiscent of the “epistemological presupposition” central to this thesis. Secondly, after making this claim, the gaslighter introduces an element of cognitive dissonance. He or she creates a situation where the gaslighter’s epistemic superiority directly conflicts with the victim’s cognitive abilities in a general, diffuse way. It is general because the gaslighter does not simply call into question the victim’s knowledge or expertise in a specific domain or with regards to an isolated incident. He does not simply say ‘I think you misheard the doorbell that time.’ Rather his comments are of a generalized nature: ‘You keep imagining things’ and ‘You just don’t know what you’re saying.’ Thirdly, once he has fabricated this epistemic ‘dilemma,’ the gaslighter has successfully created a situation where the victim must choose to either trust the gaslighter or herself. Because the gaslighter has called into question the victim’s epistemic abilities in a global way, the two are mutually exclusive. The only way the situation can be resolved is by choosing either to trust the gaslighter at the expense of one’s own self-trust, or preserve self-trust but come to some unpleasant conclusions about the gaslighter.

For all these reasons, Spear convincingly argues that “gaslighting is a profoundly epistemic phenomenon having to do both with questions of epistemic self-trust and with the issue of epistemic peer- or even authority-disagreement.” His focus on self-trust intersects with and extends El Kassar’s observations. The whole point of gaslighting is to sow doubt in the trust an agent feels about his or her epistemic agency. The gaslighter “calls into question... [the victim’s] conception of herself as an independent locus of experience, thought, and judgement.”

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214 Friedman qtd in Abou El Fadl, Speaking in God’s Name, 19.
is therefore at the heart of what a gaslighter seeks to damage. Unless an agent’s self-trust is threatened, the phenomenon is not gaslighting-proper.

Once a gaslighter has succeeded in compromising the agent’s self-trust, what can possibly remedy the situation? Can self-trust be restored? How can erosions of self-trust be prevented or even proactively combatted in the first place? These questions present a thorny problem because “any attempt to justify belief in the trustworthiness of one’s cognitive faculties and standpoint will ultimately be circular.”217 An agent who is already skeptical of her own cognitive abilities no longer has recourse to those abilities to re-establish self-trust.

Spear ventures a way forward in proposing what he calls the “basic epistemic norm” for self-trust.218 He draws on Robert Pasnau’s work on peer disagreement, who argues that “self-trust is something intrinsically valuable that stands over against epistemic rationality.”219 So even in cases where we find ourselves differing from a (true) epistemic peer,220 we may still be warranted in holding fast to our position on the grounds of self-trust. That is, it is in our long-term interests as agents to maintain “coherence between [our] beliefs and [our] evidential perspective.”221 If it is true that maintaining coherence between our beliefs and the evidence we have access to is good for epistemic agents, then maintaining trust in the very ability to form beliefs based on evidence – i.e., self-trust – must be, too, and is even more fundamental. Spear’s argument to consider self-trust a “basic epistemic norm” is highly compelling.

Part of the evidence that Al-Ṣaghīr draws his readers’ attention to, when weighing all the evidence at their disposal that will shape their “evidential perspective”222 is the faculty I have been calling the ḥijāżārā intuition. The ḥijāżārā provides us with a kind of knowledge that operates deeply, and in ways we cannot always fully articulate, especially in the initial throes of doubt when encountering a unfamiliar epistemic space. Of all the recommendations Al-Ṣaghīr gives

220 The question of whether genuine epistemic peers exist is the subject of debate. In the epistemology of peer disagreement, there is a question of what we are epistemically justified in doing when we disagree with a peer, someone who shares the same body of evidence and cognitive abilities as us. Responses to this question range from modifying our beliefs by downgrading them to accommodate the epistemic peer’s conclusions (the ‘conciliationist view’) to arguments that it is reasonable to remain steadfast in our original position (the ‘uniqueness thesis’ or ‘steadfast view’). The epistemology of disagreement raises the antecedent question of what an epistemic peer is and whether true ones exist. How do we know the evidence and cognitive ability of both peers are exactly identical and are being accessed and/or used in the same way? For more, see Ernest Sosa, “The Epistemology of Disagreement,” in Social Epistemology, eds. Adrian Haddock, Alan Millar, and Duncan Pritchard, pp. 278-297 (Oxford University Press, 2010).
throughout the poem, this one at the start of § V may appear, at first blush, to be out of place. It seems to concern moral doubt, about moral matters, especially when we are unsure about another agent’s moral character. How is this an epistemic issue? I do not take Al-Ṣaghīr to be making a highly innovative or contentious claim, but one that has epistemic significance nonetheless. I interpret this recommendation to mean that it is merely permissible to suspend judgement in cases of doubt. This position alone neither affirms nor negates the value of any particular proposition. We need not conclude that, by suspending judgement, we are pronouncing some other person as having ʿadālah or not, or declaring the information from a putative expert, for example, to be categorically true or false. Suspension of judgement simply calls for a pause in our deliberations, and during this time, the epistemic onus is on us to continue investigating. The duty to investigate (until our fiṭrawī doubt is allayed) is an epistemic one. Although this has less to do with the positive content of our beliefs, it is an epistemic ‘best practice’ nonetheless. Simply put, fiṭrawī knowledge can be enough of a warrant to resort to the practice of suspending judgement according to Al-Ṣaghīr. This simple act, however, is not always so easily achieved. In fact, it can be a radical stance in cases where the norm has become to always have judgements and opinions at the ready, and on a vast range of topics, from things we know to things we don’t.224

Turning back to Al-Ṣaghīr, I wish to interpret his advice to readers along lines similar to Spear’s conception of self-trust as a fundamental epistemic principle. Al-Ṣaghīr does not use the language of self-trust or call it a “basic norm” that should rarely, if ever, be overturned.225 Despite not using this specific language, his message is more or less the same. Al-Ṣaghīr not only affirms the existence of self-knowledge and the role of the fiṭrah, explained above, but says that in cases

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223 Suspension of judgement may even be virtuous in these cases, exemplifying intellectual courage. In a recent study, Genia Schönbaumfeld, explored the phenomenon of “epistemic angst,” the reluctance of owning our epistemic limitations and the responsibilities that come with these, even if it ironically comes at the expense of holding wrong beliefs on the whole. Epistemically angsty agents “paradoxically, prefer the possibility of being globally wrong but epistemically blameless to being fallible but epistemically accountable.” She advocates for intellectual courage as an antidote. Her insights can perhaps be applied to suspensions of judgement because they involve owning one’s limited “evidential perspective,” and may therefore qualify as an instance of intellectual courage. See Genia Schönbaumfeld, “Epistemic Angst, Intellectual Courage, and Radical Skepticism,” *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 9, no. 3 (2019): 16.

224 In reference to the “obligation to provide an opinion hypothesis” in discussions of bullshitting. This position maintains that bullshitting occurs because “people often feel an implicit responsibility or obligation to hold and/or express an informed opinion about almost everything” to the point that they are even “willing to offer judgments and opinions about that which they could not possibly know anything about.” See Petrocelli, “Antecedents of Bullshitting,” 249.

225 The way in which Spear discusses the “basic epistemic norm” of self-trust is reminiscent of the Islamic legal maxim or heuristic “Certainty will not be overturned by doubt (al-yuqīn la yazālu bi-shād).” This maxim is often used in judicial contexts, like the presumption of innocence until proof of guilt is established. It arguably applies in the context of self-trust, as well. Just as Spear argues that global, internally-based epistemic self-trust is the default and the norm, likewise, certainty in one’s fundamental epistemic abilities should not be upended in cases of localized doubt. For more on this maxim, see Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, *Living Islam with Purpose* (Nawawi Foundation, 2004), 25-28.
of doubt, one ought to rely on it. In the final analysis, just as El Kassar and Spear highlight the importance of self-trust, so does Al-Ṣaghīr in his own way. Though he does not make an epistemological argument, his prescription effectively boosts the reader’s epistemic self-trust. Recall that he is speaking to students and questioners in these lines, people like Asma whose self-trust is lowered given the “epistemic presuppositions”226 at work. His advice is addressed to this class of epistemically vulnerable agents, and so serves to balance out their deliberations by encouraging them to give their fitrawi intuition a certain, if circumscribed, place in their decisions.

By appealing to the Islamic notions of fitrāh – that deep and enduring sense of who we are and what we know – and alluding to the words of the Prophetﷺ who explicitly instructed his community to “ask your heart” even if others counsel you,227 Al-Ṣaghīr draws from foundational Islamic ideas and sources to empower the reader. In these pivotal lines, Al-Ṣaghīr tells the reader to take their self-knowledge seriously and develop self-trust in the face of epistemic environments that, for one reason or another, cause us some trepidation. In so doing, he gives the reader perhaps the most effective personal tool to ensure that their experiences continue to yield positive and “beneficial epistemic friction” in El Kassar and Medina’s words. So when one encounters a situation like the one Asma did, their deference to authorities should never compromise their self-trust in a fundamental way. Instead, one’s awareness of the limitations of the fragile, fallible epistemic spaces we share with other knowers (authorities and experts included), ideally coupled with curiosity, open-mindedness, and a commitment to truth, can serve to motivate her to continue seeking answers elsewhere, or at least give her strength to suspend judgement until an answer that does not “agitate” her heart can be found.228 This suspense of judgement, it should be noted, applies to others (e.g., their qualifications) or the environment (whether or not it is conducive, “polluted,”229 etc.). It is not a suspension of judgement in the fundamental worth and merit of her skills as a knower, or in her basic ability to assess relevant factors. In this way, an agent can maintain her self-trust and continue developing an “optimistic stance”230 towards herself and her abilities, while warding off harmful tactics, like gaslighting, that seek to radically undermine her

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226 Freidman qtd in Abou El Fadl, Speaking in God’s Name, 19.
227 See n. 176 above.
228 § V, line 2.
well-being as a knower, by targeting the very foundations and prerequisites of her epistemic agency.

At the risk of overextending an already highly experimental thought process, I wish to mention one last thing in regards to self-knowledge and self-trust. Chapter 1 explained the significance of a text like *The Faqīh’s Lantern* to the phenomenon of spiritual abuse.231 Gaslighting is one of the many strategies of spiritual abusers, and the preceding discussion clearly applies to it. However, I did not encounter spiritual abuse discussed as a type of *epistemic* abuse or harm until very recently. In a recent panel, Ingrid Mattson noted that the most damaging aspect of spiritual abuse is the alienation of knowledge, especially a person’s innate knowledge of right and wrong. Her remarks are worth quoting at length:

> I would say...direct spiritual abuse really is about affecting a person’s understanding of themselves as a spiritual person, and this is often the thing that enables everything else. It is an extremely, very hierarchical view of religious knowledge. It is a view that demeans what it means to be a human being. [It’s] saying: ‘You, as a human being, have nothing. You have no knowledge, you have no relationships, you have no sense of what’s right and wrong [to] even judge whether the situation is abusive or not. It’s a very cultish technique that often begins things with telling the person ‘You have to completely empty yourself and I, as the authority, will fill you up with knowledge.’

> I very strongly believe that that is contrary to what God has taught us in the Qur’an and... what the Prophet Muhammad ☪ taught us, which is that every human being is built spiritually sound. Our spiritual foundation is sound. We have God-given intellect; we have God-given relationships; we have God-given creation around us that can teach us many lessons. We have many ways to...have a basic understanding of right and wrong. Yes, we can go astray. Yes, we need specialists in certain areas to help us access different kinds of knowledge. But we are not nothing. As human beings, we have this strong spiritual foundation and capacity to grow. So to me, spiritual abuse is the attempt to wipe all of that away and to say ‘You are nothing. You know nothing. Your instincts, your knowledge, your friends, your family...none of that matters...’ To me, that is the most profound and direct form of spiritual abuse. (emphasis added)232

Mattson’s observations lend credence to the argument that, in cases of spiritual abuse, the harm done is an *epistemic* harm and warrants consideration as a type of “epistemic injustice” in Mirada Fricker’s sense of the term, though making a case for it will not be attempted here.233 It is an epistemic harm because spiritual abuse alienates a person from their own, private reserves of *fitrawī* knowledge. Just as Spear showed the circularity of relying on self-trust to cultivate self-

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trust, an abuser who damages the spiritual relationship between a person and their “God-given” spiritual foundation (*fitrah*) strips them from an “internal compass”\(^{234}\) which is a basic requirement for navigating everything else. Imagine an abuser manipulating the same prophetic reports and sources we have been exploring that explain *fitrah* and *fitrah*-based knowledge to convince someone that their *fitrah* is not actually sound or that the discomfort and anxiousness they feel is not what I have been calling ‘*fitrawī* intuition’ but rather a prompting of their ego or lower self (*nafs*). We can imagine, too, individuals using Al-Ṣaghīr’s own words in other sections of the poem, where he stresses the rigours of the learning process, to their own ends. For instance, Al-Ṣaghīr states that knowledge is actualized only when one “[shows] teachers their due respect, / the respect of a prince or worldly ruler.”\(^{235}\) Elsewhere he says: “Knowledge cannot be gained without / The companionship of a true teacher, / And exertion, effort, and tireless strain, / And the broken state of being a seeker.”\(^{236}\) These passages must be read in light of Al-Ṣaghīr’s view of self-trust and the crucial role it plays in seeking knowledge. Any interpretations that fail to account for this crucial piece of his epistemology at that start of § V are not only unfaithful to a holistic reading of the poem, but an affront to the spirit in which Al-Ṣaghīr and others like him composed these very works. Seeking knowledge in no way entails the suspension or erosion of self-trust; in fact, self-trust is the bedrock of successful epistemic pursuits and our flourishing as epistemic agents.

The epistemic dimensions at play in spiritually abusive scenarios are essential for a sound understanding of this phenomenon. The epistemic damage that stems from spiritual abuse is deep, especially when sources that command persuasive authority, like Al-Ṣaghīr’s poem, are manipulated. Spiritual abusers deliberately perpetuate this type of damage. They seek to disrupt the inner channels of self-trust and sever a person’s way of relating to their own experiences and the meaning-making mechanisms tied to those experiences. This may not count as marginalization in a sociological sense, but the discrediting of a person’s or group’s lived experience of “agitation” and “anxiousness”\(^{237}\) must count for something. As an internal proxy, it has a part to play in any epistemology that wishes to centre the human as a socially-embedded, corporeally-embodied being in its account. This is all the more true when situations are engineered and techniques are used to systemically demean and disparage this entire class of *fitrawī* knowledge.

\(^{234}\) Rothman and Coyle, “An Islamic Model of the Soul,” 1735.
\(^{235}\) § I, line 21.
\(^{236}\) § I, line 16.
\(^{237}\) § V, line 2.
This final section has demonstrated that Al-Ṣaghīr’s epistemology makes room for a person’s feelings, even ‘gut-feelings’ that cannot necessarily be named, let alone articulated or justified to others. For him, ‘This just doesn’t feel right to me’ might be enough of a reason to suspend judgement, excuse oneself from a certain space, withdraw support from a particular organization, or unfollow a given speaker. The privileging of inner knowledge and embodiment in assessments of the external epistemic landscape points to a deep relationship between the knower and his or her surroundings, a framework where the agent and environment are fundamentally intertwined. The agent-environment interaction is a key feature of Al-Ṣaghīr’s epistemology and a theme that has been running all throughout the poem. I will now bring together the threads that have been woven so far and integrate them to show how *The Faqīh’s Lantern* ultimately advances a social virtue epistemology that is interactionist in character.
CONCLUSION

Adab and Al-Ṣaghīr’s Interactionist Social Virtue Epistemology

Each part of Chapter 3 has focused on a unique theme from the poem. Part I of the analysis demonstrated the importance of sincerity on both the part of teachers and learners, such that the ideal scenario is when both teachers and learners are sincere and humble in their epistemic pursuits. In the same discussion of virtues, we also saw how Al-Ṣaghīr distinguishes between self- and other-regarding epistemic duties, indicating when attention ought to be directed towards oneself versus others. Next, Part II focused on embodiment and the necessity of being in tune with one’s wellbeing, understood holistically, for knowledge to be ‘taken up’ fruitfully in the learner. Part III then extended the application of ‘embodiment’ to the external sphere, to consider other minds and other hearts – other knowers – and described proxies through which external agents, chiefly experts, might be identified. In these discussions, ʿadālah, trust, and reputation figured prominently. Finally, in Part IV we examined Al-Ṣaghīr’s treatment of non-ideal scenarios, cases where the external environment is somehow at odds with what one knows intuitively, or one’s fiṭrawī intuition. In cases where external and internal signals conflict, we saw that Al-Ṣaghīr gave precedence to self-knowledge, especially in cases where self-trust is fundamentally threatened. Each theme alluded in its own way to a balance between agent- and environment-based considerations. The balance between self- and other-regarding duties, self-embodiment and community-embeddedness, internal and external landscapes, and inner intuition and external expertise all evince an epistemological outlook that pays close attention to both person-based and situation-based considerations.

Recall that interactionism is an approach in social virtue epistemology that departs from the traditional person/situation divide. Interactionism instead views knowledge as a result of interactions between people and situations. Epistemic knowers and epistemic environments are mutually-dependent and -reinforcing. Given that Al-Ṣaghīr’s is attuned to both sides of this divide, his epistemology is a strong candidate for consideration as an interactionist theory. In the process of excavating this poem, his epistemology revealed itself as being supremely concerned with the person-environment relationship. Knowledge and knowledge-practices are dependent on agents and their environments such that the key to learning and teaching is a correct relationship between them. Interactionism is therefore a well-suited approach for making sense of his underlying
commitments. Considering both the person and the situation in turn, and putting all the relevant factors in their proper place is what constitutes adab for Al-Ṣaghīr. Adab is the state of upholding and observing right relations with everyone and everything in one’s concentric spheres of epistemic belonging. This, too, is perhaps the key to understanding the epigraph at the start of this thesis: adab comes before knowledge (al-adab qabl al-ṭalab). Our relationship with the epistemic environments around us, as well as the relationships within them, are necessary precursors for the successful exercising of our agency as knowers.

Epistemic “Light Upon Light”

The discussion of interactionism and the interplay between self and environment brings to mind a well-known verse from the Qur’an called ‘The Verse of Light.’ Knowledge is often symbolized as light in the Islamic tradition. Students of Imam Mālik ibn Anas (d. 178 AH/795 CE) recorded some of his aphorisms including “knowledge is a light that God has placed in the hearts of people” and “knowledge and wisdom are a light by which God guides whomever He wishes.” A popular line of poetry, usually attributed to Imam Muḥammad ibn Idrīs Al-Shāfīʿī (d. 204 AH/820 CE), goes: “I complained to Wakīʿ [my teacher] of my poor memory, / So he advised me to avoid sins, / For knowledge is a divine light, / And God’s light is not bestowed on the sinful.”

Al-Ṣaghīr follows the example of these early thinkers in writing about knowledge as light. He states: “Understanding is a light by which / The meanings of things are revealed.” He even chose to title his poem The Faqīḥ’s Lantern (Miṣbāḥ al-Faqīḥ) in the hopes that his counsel will light the way for the learner. The symbolism of learning as light in the context of interactionism has given me a newfound appreciation for the ‘Verse of Light.’

God is the Light of the heavens and earth. His Light is like this: there is a niche, and in it a lamp, the lamp inside a glass, a glass like a glittering star, fuelled from a blessed olive tree from neither east nor

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238 § V, line 8.
239 See Franz Rosenthal, “Knowledge is Light (Ṣūfism)” in Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam, pp. 155-193 (Leiden: Brill, 2007). Rosenthal surveys a vast array of thinkers stretching from the early period (to which Imam Mālik belongs) to classical thinkers whose spoke about epistemology and theology using the language of light, whether literally or metaphorically. Notably, this motif can be found across sectarian lines. In the Sunnī tradition, luminaries such as Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 504 AH/1111 CE) and Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 514 AH/1119 AH), despite leaving behind vastly different legacies, both wrote in this vein. Al-Ghazālī, a legalist celebrated for his synthesis of Islamic law and Sūfī ethics, viewed God’s light as literal while all other lights are metaphorical. For Al-Suhrawardī, founder of the illuminationist (iṣrāʿīl) school of philosophy, light is the overarching principle of his cosmology and metaphysics. See Rosenthal, Knowledge Triumphant, 159-160.
240 Rosenthal, Knowledge Triumphant, 71.
242 § II, line 1.
Recall that, for Al-Ṣaghīr, someone who embodies intellectual vices like arrogance is the proverbial ‘bad apple.’ They are dangerous not only for the epistemic harm they bring to themselves but also the havoc they wreak on others simply by virtue of being in the same ‘basket’ and sharing the same environment. He therefore censures vicious epistemic agents, especially teachers and other authorities, in the strongest language: If you “must abide [their] company” then “take good care” and only “suffer their presence as long as you must / then leave them to their own affair.”\(^{244}\) He counsels physically removing oneself from their company at all costs: “flee from them / even if you leave the continent”\(^{245}\) or quarantine yourself by “practicing seclusion” if necessary.\(^{246}\) Elsewhere, Al-Ṣaghīr calls on nothing less than divine intervention in these dire cases: “Run away from them just as you would / From one infected with disease. / And ask your Lord, the Generous One, / For guidance, gentleness, and ease.”\(^{247}\)

There is, of course, a degree of hyperbole here. As a didactic text, these emphatic statements were surely chosen in order to leave a lasting impression on the reader. However, we would be remiss to focus on the rhetorical element and neglect the deeply social ways of being and knowing that Al-Ṣaghīr is calling our attention to. The silver lining in all this is that it is not only vicious agents who influence the surrounding epistemic environment. By the same token, someone who embodies intellectual virtues — combining both knowledge (‘ilm) and character (‘adālah) — can have a pervasive positive effect. When an agent’s sincerity meets a conducive environment, when external factors and signals are tempered by internal wisdom, when qualified experts and laypeople meet and both sides exemplify intellectual virtues and best practices like good listening, respectful debate, and the myriad other qualities Al-Ṣaghīr enumerates — all these are manifestations of epistemic “light upon light.” Put differently, real knowledge has a tendency not

\(^{243}\) Sūrat al-Nūr (Q. 24:35). Interestingly, commentators differ regarding what “His light” (nūrihī) means. Is the pronoun referring to God or to the believer? Some understand it as meaning God guides to His divine light whomever He wills, in which case it is translated as “His light.” Others interpret the pronoun as referring to the believer, meaning God directs each believer to his or her own unique ‘portion’ of light and guidance. M. A. S. Abdul Haleem’s translation does not capitalize the pronoun, and so he appears to have favoured the second interpretation. The two interpretations are interesting in the context of interactionism. Taken together, they suggest not only an external reality to light and knowledge (i.e., God, who is The Light or Al-Nūr) but also an internal aspect to knowledge, included in each and every creature’s providential allotment. See Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*, 157.

\(^{244}\) § III, line 8.

\(^{245}\) § III, line 3.

\(^{246}\) § III, line 9.

\(^{247}\) § III, line 9.
only to be luminous in itself, for a single carrier; it can and should be illuminating for others. Aḥmad Al-Ṣaghīr is a prime example of such a person. His knowledge benefited not only himself but, in producing *The Faqīh’s Lantern*, he also “deciphered the path of knowledge” and illuminated the way of learning for generations to come.248

**Concluding Postscript**

This thesis began with a mother’s advice to her son, a young man who would later become a foundational figure in Islamic history and the eponymous founder of the Mālikī school, a vibrant legal tradition that continues until today. “Go to Rabī’ah,”249 she said, “and take from his *adab* before you take from his knowledge.”250 This research has attempted to operationalize the sincere counsel (*naṣīḥah*) of a mother to her child, by examining an *adab* text from the same legal tradition, albeit many centuries later.

Aḥmad Al-Ṣaghīr ibn Ḥima Allah al-Muslimī al-Tīshīfī, in his didactic poem *The Faqīh’s Lantern*, gives us the keys for unlocking a healthy agent-environment relationship, tracing the contours and broad strokes of what makes for a sound epistemic community. By distilling the most important personal traits and minimum conditions necessary, Al-Ṣaghīr’s poem provides an accessible map that teachers and learners, jurists and questioners, specialists and laypeople can all refer to when navigating their internal and external spheres of situatedness in search for answers.

Paraphrasing Al-Ṣaghīr, any reader, Muslim or not, who dips their hand into the vessel251 of *The Faqīh’s Lantern* stands to learn something from the insights he shares, particularly those of us today who find ourselves embroiled in increasingly polarized and perplexing debates on everything from religion to politics to science. This thesis has attempted to allay, in some small way, the “crisis of coherence”252 facing the Muslim community, and yet the crisis is not unique to Muslims or people of faith. Public discourse in general threatens to become incoherent if a common vocabulary and shared ground for regulating the ethics of information- and knowledge-practices is not preserved. Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr’s poem, which counsels caution and calls for wisdom,

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248 “Conclusion,” line 1.
249 Rabī’ah ibn Abī ʿAbdulrahmān Farrūkh al-Madānī (d. 136 AH/753 CE) who belonged to the generation after the Prophet (a predecessor or tābiʿī) and taught Imam Mālik.
250 Umm Isrāʾ bint ʿArafah Bayyūmī, *Nisāʾ Ṣanaʾ naʿUlumāʾ* (Beirut: Dār al-Marifah, 2004), 64.
251 “Preamble,” line 3.
can serve as a grounding voice in the midst of these interlapping crises and boost the vitality of our conversations.

وَفَوْقَ كُلٍّ ذِي عِلْمٍ عَلِيٌّ
وَاللَّهُ تَعَالَى أَعْلَىٰ وَأَعْلَمَ

“And above everyone who has knowledge, there is One who is all-knowing,”

Q. 12:76.

253 Sūrat Yūsuf (Q. 12:76).
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**Chapter 1**


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CHAPTER 2

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CHAPTER 3

Method


Part I: Al-Ṣaghīr on Intellectual Virtues and Vices


**Part II: Al-Ṣaghīr on Embodiment**


Part III: Al-Ṣaghîr on Identifying Experts


**Part IV: Al-Ṣaghîr on the Role of Self-Trust**


**Conclusion**


