

## Testimony and the epistemic problem of society in

### *al-Risālat al-Kāmiliyya fī al-Sīrat al-Nabawiyya*

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This paper outlines some of the historical and epistemological themes of *al-Risālat al-Kāmiliyya fī al-Sīrat al-Nabawiyya* ('the Epistle of Kāmil on the life-story of the Prophet'; henceforth, *Risālat Kāmiliyya*) by Ibn al-Nafīs (d. 1288) in the context of discussions about testimony in Medieval Islamic intellectual milieus. The paper is divided into three parts.

The first one will offer a brief description of the place of testimony in Medieval epistemic discussions, with some comparative elements. The second part presents a short summary of *Risālat Kāmiliyya*'s close precedent, Ibn Ṭufayl's *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān*, with some remarks on the role of testimony in its epistemology. In the third part, *Risālat Kāmiliyya*'s original epistemic stance on testimony will be examined and discussed, with some proposals about its historical and philosophical significance.

*To Carola, thank you for all the curry.*

#### 1. Testimony and transmission in Medieval Islam

Testimony is defined (Strawson 1994, Fricker 1994) as the acquisition of valid knowledge through words from an external source.

It is common experience that testimony represents a basic source of a large portion of anyone's knowledge; furthermore, it operates as an essential feature of any kind of known culture. In particular, testimony underpins *socialized* knowledge; knowledge obtained through other means such as perception or inference would remain confined within the consciousness of the individual performing them, unless their awareness can be conveyed through intelligible words or other shared symbolic means.<sup>1</sup> The epistemic status of testimony among the instruments of knowledge has been a long-term focus of intellectual discussions in several cultures.<sup>2</sup>

A distinction of three main instruments of knowledge (the *pramānas* of Indian thought) amounting to perception, (inferential) reasoning and testimony respectively is found in different

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<sup>1</sup> "In order to recognise the distinctiveness of testimony one should start with the obvious point that we acquire testimonial knowledge through communication" (Faulkner 2000: 587).

<sup>2</sup> See Freschi in this volume.

cultural contexts; in India, most traditions of thought discussed these (*pratyakṣa*, *anumāna* and *śabda*<sup>3</sup> in Sanskrit, respectively) as the major *pramānas*. Likewise, Islamic theological and philosophical discussions from the ninth century onwards frequently offered a general tripartite division of sense perception (*ḥiss*), rational inquiry or speculation (*naẓar*) and report (*ḥabar*; Wisnovsky 2004: 66-67).<sup>4</sup>

These fundamental typologies may be expanded or reduced.

In contemporary Western epistemology, testimony as means of knowledge is contrasted with empirical perception, inference through independent reflection, and memory (Fricker 1995, Faulkner 2000). The Indian Nyāya school counted *upamāna*, rendered as ‘comparison,’ as a *pramāna* (this may recall *qiyās* ‘analogy’ in Arabic grammar and Islamic law)<sup>5</sup>. Other Indian traditions distinguished other more specific *pramānas*. However, *upamāna* and similar types may be seen as secondary and reducible to more broadly defined notions of ‘reason’ and ‘inference;’ memory may be construed as a repository, providing knowledge that had been previously perceived, deduced or received as a report. Therefore, perception, reason and testimony can be proposed to be the principal available instruments to acquire knowledge in the context of the present discussion, although this assertion would be incomplete under other aspects.<sup>6</sup>

Some traditions of thought have not considered testimony as independent instrument of knowledge. This is the case of Vaiśeṣika in India. Platonic and Aristotelian schools, which, in this regard, inspired many strains of Modern “Western” philosophy, tend to focus on intellectual, universal knowledge, accomplished by individuals through reasoning, particularly syllogistic, abstract reasoning. In general, the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition thus regards insights from sense perception and testimony as a necessary preliminary step to universal, “scientific” abstract knowledge based on rigorous rational reasoning, rather than constituting knowledge in themselves.

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<sup>3</sup> *Śabda* conveys a broader meaning than “testimony”; in some philosophical schools, the role of language is emphasised over that of the witness. Here I am using “testimony” as roughly equivalent to *śabda*, as knowledge transmitted through words. See Freschi in this volume.

<sup>4</sup> See below.

<sup>5</sup> *Qiyās* means ‘syllogism’ in other contexts. Generally, it may be defined as a heuristic procedure of reducing an unknown or abnormal phenomenon to known categories. See below.

<sup>6</sup> Ibn Sīnā’s reading of Aristotelian epistemology discusses memory (*dīkr*) and ‘experience’ (*taḡriba*) as intermediate modes of knowledge between pure sense perception and intellection. See Janssens (2004).

Interestingly, disciplines closely tied to word-transmitted cognition, such as grammar and history, receive relatively little epistemic attention in Aristotle's works.<sup>7</sup> Aristotle also goes as far as denying that perception is a source of 'scientific' knowledge;<sup>8</sup> while sense perception has a role in his epistemology, the Aristotelian approach regards *knowledge* (ἐπιστήμη, *epistḗmē*; 'ilm in Arabic) as inherently universal.<sup>9</sup> In this view, perception and testimony only convey awareness of particular things; therefore, they both take a secondary role.

A roughly comparable attitude to testimony exists among reductionist modern philosophers; while there is little question about testimony's instrumental role, they argue that it does not make an *independent* instrument for knowledge. Nevertheless, while a thorough epistemological discussion of testimony is, in general, a relatively recent feature of "Western" philosophical thought, the presence of testimony in the set of epistemic tools of "Western" philosophers is long established (Fricker 1994, Mohanty 1994, Faulkner 2000, Adler 2012, Freschi in this volume). Even Aristotle's writings often begin discussions on any given topic with a reference and review of previously transmitted opinions about it (although he does not appear to concede that this by itself provides *knowledge*); furthermore, Aristotle's corpus notoriously lies at the root of an extensive commentary tradition, whose cognitive enterprise thus features instances of testimony.

For the purposes of this article, it is sufficient to take that testimony may be an instrument of knowledge in practice, and that it constitutes a basic type alongside perception and reason, without question of either its further epistemic reducibility or independence.

The assessment of the reliability of transmitted information represents an important social task, in everyday life as well as philosophical discussion. Cultures and intellectual traditions differ in their epistemic strategies to define and assess the role of testimony.

The following remarks are generalizations that should not be taken as an exhaustive description of the epistemic options existing within the Medieval Islamicate high culture. Their main purpose is rather to provide an expanded frame of reference for the analysis of the complex epistemology of

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<sup>7</sup> "Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular." *Poetics*, 9, trans. S. H. Butcher. See also Faulkner (2000) and Adler (2012). However, history and grammar were not, overall, neglected fields in the Greek Aristotelian tradition as a whole.

<sup>8</sup> "Scientific knowledge is not possible through the act of perception." *Posterior Analytics*, I, 31, trans. G. Mure. This must be put into perspective by more nuanced views stated by Aristotle elsewhere and the broader context of Aristotelian epistemology.

<sup>9</sup> Adamson (2005) illustrates this point clearly, also clarifying the reception of this aspect of Aristotelian epistemology in the Arabic philosophical tradition. See also McGinnis (2003, 2007).

testimony featured, according to my analysis, in *Risālat Kāmiliyya*. Accordingly, I will focus on the epistemology of testimony in the Aristotelian philosophical traditions in Arabic, without delving into the related debate in natural philosophy on the epistemic value of experience and induction.<sup>10</sup> I will relate these epistemic discussions to aspects of mainstream Sunni theology and law, but this is not the place to discuss them in full. Likewise, the rich traditions of thought connected with Shi'ism and other relevant schools of thought such as the *Zāhirites*, or the lively Sufi discussions about the possibility to apprehend God directly, cannot be detailed here.

### 1.1. Islamic epistemic debates

In this section, I describe some dimensions within the epistemological debates shaping the Islamicate Medieval intellectual space with regard to testimony, in the context of the wider discussion that hinged on the relative place of rational, independent thinking and revealed, transmitted word in the overall social system of knowledge.

It is important to stress that these discussions did not usually create unbridgeable oppositions of mutually exclusive epistemic alternatives; I rather see a tension among different ideas about the appropriate balance between poles, which competed for epistemic primacy as bases for a socially viable body of knowledge.

The general epistemic attitude of the Medieval Islamicate culture may be described as “a genealogical conception of knowledge.”<sup>11</sup> Tracing the sources and the chain of transmission of a given statement or discourse usually played a key role in defining its validity. This pattern is based on the study of *ḥadīth*, the reports of sayings and deeds attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad, which emerged as a central element in the theological and political debates of the eighth and ninth centuries AD. Fabricated stories about the Prophet and the first generations of Muslim believers circulated in order to support theological or political positions; defining criteria and hierarchies of authoritativeness and authenticity became critical as the general epistemic validity of the *ḥadīth* was recognized. Some scholars devoted their whole life to examine hundreds of thousands of circulating sayings, in order to detect and preserve the authentic ones. The main criteria to do so were, in general, extrinsic, referring to the context in which the testimony had been delivered, involving examination of reliability in the transmission. A given statement was usually accepted as authentic on the

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<sup>10</sup> See McGinnis (2003, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> “Una concezione genealogica del sapere”. Capezone (1998: 27; my translation).

trustworthiness of each link in its attached chain of transmitters (*isnād*), with limited regard for its content (*matn*). This procedure extended beyond the critical analysis of sayings and deeds of the Prophet and came to be applied in many areas of knowledge, although with significant variations.

A transmitted statement whose validity is under consideration, normally composed of *isnād* and *matn*, is generally called a *ḥabar* (pl. *aḥbār*; in Modern Arabic, ‘news’), a ‘report,’ or a *ḥadīṭ* (pl. *aḥādīṭ*) ‘tale;’ the latter term is used mostly but not uniquely for Prophetic reports. The standard form of a *ḥabar* is often story-like, as “Zayd told me that ‘Umar reported he was sitting playing chess with Aḥmad who told him his tale about Zaynab,” thus frequently providing a context for the utterance of the statement reported. A *ḥabar* could then expand into a full story, or collection thereof. It is worth noting that *isnād* and *ḥabar* feature in the technical jargon of Arabic classical grammar as the two main ways to refer to grammatical predication, highlighting a possible link between report-based epistemology and linguistic analysis of logic and grammar (Lancioni 1991).

In traditional study of the Prophetic *ḥadīṭ* corpus, critical review of *isnād* grounds the reliability of single reports; an *isnād* may include a link that is not considered trustworthy, or may be rejected, for example, if it is known that two successive transmitters could not possibly have met. In general, reports that are known through multiple *isnād* chains that show no weakness such as unlikely meetings or known liars are considered the most secure and their authenticity is normally accepted. Many reports however have to rely upon one chain of transmission only. These traditions may be held to be valid, unless they have other defects, but are often considered somewhat less authoritative than the ones reported by several independent sources. This is in accord with the trend of classical Islamic legal practice to require more than one witness for valid proof; however, requirements are usually stricter in law than in the study of *ḥadīṭ*. In principle, there is no limit on the length of the chain of transmitters, provided that it has no gaps or unreliable witnesses in it.

The validity of information, especially normative information, in religion and law is thus normally based upon the traceability of its transmission to authoritative individuals, whose definition is close to the one of the Sanskrit *āpta*: competent in the matter, willing to convey knowledge and truthful in what is said.<sup>12</sup>

In a sense, classical Arabic literature could be described as an effort to organize, refer and systematize the whole corpus of (secular) *aḥbār* at its disposal in a coherent and useful frame. Narratives are frequently presented as reported rather than invented fiction, exemplary tales referred to identifiable (albeit fictional) sources (Drory 1994). The frame-tales such as the *Arabian*

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<sup>12</sup> See the contributions of Freschi and Rostalska in this volume.

*Nights* exemplify this attitude (Kilito 1992, chapter 2). Thus, Medieval Arabic prose at large features a distinct educational and cognitive purpose, that also appears in the works considered here.

A defining point of contention in the formative discussions of Islamic law and theology was the role, if any, that independent, individual opinion (*ra'y*; epistemically close to 'inference') should have in relation to reported information (*ḥadīth*). A hierarchy of the sources of religious knowledge was set out by Wāṣil ibn 'Aṭā', an early theologian who lived in Iraq in the first half of the eighth century, as follows (Van Ess 2008: 106-107):

- The Qur'an, whenever its meaning is clear.
- Tradition (*aḥbār*) attested by several independent and reliable sources.
- Tradition attested by one source only, provided the source is reliable.
- Qualified use of reason (*'aql*).

This epistemic hierarchy reflects the important place assigned to testimony as a shared patrimony of the community. Likewise, the hierarchy of the "foundations of law" (*uṣūl al-fiqh*, sometimes less accurately rendered as "sources of law") upon which legal rulings were based came to be generally settled in this basic order:

- The Qur'an (reliable by definition).
- The *ḥadīth* corpus.
- The consensus or general agreement (*iḡmā'*) of the competent people (usually scholars).
- The analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) whereas the result of three above *uṣūl* is applied to new cases based on resemblance.<sup>13</sup>

Sunni scholars tended to avoid the explicit incorporation of personal opinion (*ra'y*) and reason (*'aql*) among the *uṣūl*. There was fear that this would have divisive consequences for the community of believers; thus, in principle (not always in practice) the scope of reasoning in law was limited to the relatively restricted application of precedent-based *qiyās*.

Consensus became the overarching concern, as the validity of the *ḥadīth* was in turn established, in part, through it. Acceptance of the Qur'an's authoritativeness was underpinned by the general

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<sup>13</sup> As a comparative note, in Classical Indian law according to the texts of the Dharmaśāstra corpus, the sources of law are: 1) the Vedas. 2) The tradition (*smṛti*) that is the texts based on the Vedas. 3) The custom of those who know the Vedas. 4) Individual judgement (sometimes translated as 'pleasure') of educated people.

The parallel with the Classical Islamic approach is striking and may deserve further analysis.

agreement of all Muslims.<sup>14</sup> In epistemic terms, one could consider the Qur'an a token of testimonial knowledge attested to those living after Muhammad by many independent sources although, to Muslims, its epistemic value is rooted in its divine origin, not in its social transmission.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout a large portion of Islamic intellectual history, however, theological, legal and even literary discussions relied on textual proof (*naṣṣ*) from either the Book or the *ḥadīth* heavily, in preference to individual reason or sense perception (Rosenthal 2007: 93 ff.). This form of textual knowledge has a social value marked by its testimonial character (Faulkner 2000).

The wide-ranging reception of Greek philosophical thought into the Islamicate intellectual space through translations and original works in Arabic fostered a tradition of thought known as *falsafa*, 'philosophy' in the Aristotelian-Platonic mode. *Falsafa* emphasized an intellectualist, 'individualist' epistemology oriented toward rigorously demonstrated, personally reached universal knowledge (*ḥikma*, 'wisdom' or 'philosophy'; *ilm*, 'science'). Islamic intellectual life thus experienced an epistemic polarity between the intellect or reason (*ʿaql*) and transmission or tradition (*naql*; Capezone 1998: 79, Wisnovsky 2009). After the eleventh century, the reception of Ibn Sīnā's (known as Avicenna in the West; d. 1037) vast philosophical work molded the terms of this epistemic debate (Wisnovsky 2005).

In the scientific and philosophical fields, a divide between 'traditional' (*naqlī*) and 'reason-based' (*ʿaqlī*) disciplines (*ʿulūm*, sg. *ilm* 'science'), grounded in their epistemological and historical status, came to be widely accepted; the different impact of reliably transmitted knowledge in the epistemological foundations of these groups of sciences was among the factors differentiating them, since traditional sciences depend much more on the importance of testimony.

This division tended to overlap with the division between 'Arabic' and 'Foreign' or 'Ancient' sciences, with the former roughly corresponding to the traditional ones.

We should not overstate, however, the rift between reason and transmission. "Rational" disciplines, which included logic, the mathematical disciplines, and various branches of natural philosophy, did not abandon the authoritativeness of transmission, relying on knowledge and commentary from the Greek translated texts. In theoretical matters there was, as will be shown, an emphasis on individual intellection. On the other hand, in more practically oriented disciplines such as medicine and politics the accepted, transmitted views were regarded as a valid epistemic tool, alongside experience extracted from sense perception through abstraction. These would provide

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<sup>14</sup> See also Gilliot (2007).

<sup>15</sup> See also Hallaq (2009, chapter 2).

needed information about particulars that are outside the grasp of rational, universal intellection.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, philosophers did not regard these particular insights, useful they might be, as *knowledge* in themselves (Adamson 2005).

Conversely, ‘traditional’ and ‘Arabic’ sciences like theology, law and grammar had room for independent inquiry based on reason; grammar and theology, in particular, quickly incorporated logic and other aspects of Greco-Arabic intellectual toolkit, especially after the tenth century.

A prominent representative of *falsafa*, al-Fārābī (d. 950 AD), developed a classification of sciences which was oriented by a topic-driven, ordered pedagogical progression, rather than the more common epistemic-historical one (Capezzone 1998: 90.).<sup>17</sup>

Philosophers held inferential syllogism (*qiyās*) their central intellectual tool, conducive to certain (*yaqīn*) knowledge, namely universal knowledge, through a process of independent ‘inference’ that required specific training (Black 2006). Like Aristotle, al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā recognized the possibility to use data from experience (repeated, abstracted perception in controlled condition) as premises of syllogistic reasoning offering a qualified form of certainty.

Most Muslim philosophers, particularly Ibn Sīnā and his disciples, followed Aristotle in considering knowing something an actualization of its form in the intellect, in a sense becoming like it.<sup>18</sup> Ibn Sīnā argued for a direct, non-discursive intellectual apprehension or “taste” (*ḥads*) of universal truths, to be juxtaposed to and contrasted with the logical, cogitative progression to it (Adamson 2004, Black 2013, Ivry 2012, Gutas 2014: 213 ff.). This epistemology stressed the personal role of the individual in receiving intellection, which according to Ibn Sīnā is the apprehension of a pre-existing supra-sensible Form, that the mind can usually access after appropriate preparation through the exercise of reason.

This philosophical stance, giving preeminence to intellect and individual reason, generally downplayed (but, it is worth repeating, without a total rejection) testimony as a valid epistemic instrument, in accord with the general Greek approach. This contrasted in principle with the “genealogical” and consensual conception of knowledge described above, and its social value.

Ibn Ṭufayl’s *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān* and Ibn al-Nafīs’ *Risālat Kāmiliyya* represent, in my reading, two witnesses of this underlying epistemic and social tension.

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<sup>16</sup> See Forcada (2011).

<sup>17</sup> See also Rosenthal (2007).

<sup>18</sup> *De Anima* III 7-8.



## 2. Self-taught knowledge

The well-known Andalusian physician and philosopher Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185) developed *falsafa*'s reason-centered epistemology in his celebrated philosophical narrative treatise *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn Yaḡzān fī asrār ḥikmat mašriqiyya* (*The Epistle of Ḥayy Ibn Yaḡzān on the secrets of Oriental wisdom*), also known under the epistemically charged title of its Early Modern Latin translation, *Philosophus Autodidactus* (*The Self-Taught Philosopher*, 1671). This text has attracted significant philosophical and scholarly interest in both the Islamicate world and the West for a long time.<sup>19</sup>

Ibn Ṭufayl begins his work with an introduction in form of a letter, where he explicitly presents the text as a philosophical allegory created by the author himself, in order to point the way to apprehend the highest truths. He references to the work of his predecessors, such as al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, Ibn Bāḡḡa (d. 1137) and al-Ġazālī (d. 1111), assessing their philosophical significance. He declares that the book will present views elaborated particularly upon Ibn Sīnā's thought.<sup>20</sup>

The wording suggests the text to be taken as a *pointer* (*išāra*) to the path to truth, rather than a *communication about* it, which the author implies to be impossible. The intelligent reader should follow this path by himself in order to apprehend a glimpse of the reality that exists beyond words (Conrad 1996, Bürgel 1996, Kukkonen 2009).<sup>21</sup> Ibn Ṭufayl understands the 'taste' of Avicennian epistemology as a personal process that cannot be properly "taught;" but, it appears, it may be "hinted at" in metaphor.

It appears right away that, for Ibn Ṭufayl, the higher intellectual realities transcend the verbal world entirely, and would therefore be outside the grasp of testimonial knowledge, and, therefore, society.

The book proceeds to relate a tale on the authority of some unspecified "pious forefathers" (*salafnā ṣāliḥ*)<sup>22</sup> about an individual named Ḥayy Ibn Yaḡzān (The Living, Son of the Vigilant). The name comes from a from a philosophical tale by Ibn Sīnā equally titled *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn Yaḡzān*, with

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<sup>19</sup> See among others Hourani (1956), Hasanali (1995), Conrad et al. (1996), Germann (2008), Lauri (2013), Kukkonen (2014).

<sup>20</sup> See though Hawi (1976), Gutas (2000) and Kukkonen (2008).

<sup>21</sup> See also Yorke (2006).

<sup>22</sup> These 'ancestors' are sometimes speculated to be identified with the Iḥwān al-Ṣafā', an intellectual circle of Ismailite leanings who operated in Iraq in the tenth century. They authored a series of philosophical treatises, collectively forming an encyclopedia of sciences; these works offer some resemblances with Ibn Tufayl's text. See Kruk (1996).

which Ibn Ṭufayl's work is sometimes confused by later Arabic sources (Schacht and Meyerhof 1968: 29).

Ḥayy is either abandoned or spontaneously generated in an otherwise uninhabited island near the Equator.<sup>23</sup> Ibn Ṭufayl treats the two accounts of Ḥayy's birth as two contrasting reports of the tale, a common procedure in Arabic literature, which however he does not use in the rest of the narrative.<sup>24</sup> The testimonial structure is thus explicitly invoked for the descriptions of the island and Ḥayy's generation, and then largely abandoned in the following text.

Raised by a doe, Ḥayy gradually becomes aware of the use of his limbs and discovers the inner workings of the external world around him, described in general within the frames accepted by Aristotelian Arabic philosophers.<sup>25</sup> Ḥayy determines that everything around him, especially living beings, is well designed to fit in a well ordered, hierarchically structured whole according to a purposeful harmony. He notices the perfection of the celestial bodies and understands the incorporeality of the soul. Thus, Ḥayy deduces the existence of a Creator and understands that his own purpose as a rational being is to *know* Him as closely as possible. He deduces by himself a set of steps towards this knowledge, that is, according to an Aristotelian-Avicennian epistemology, towards the apprehension of intelligible Form. He thus elevates himself to the ineffable, non-communicable degree of pure contemplation (*mušāhada*)<sup>26</sup> of the incorporeal Forms and the underlying unity of all being, attained directly, without discursive thinking or verbal mediation.

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<sup>23</sup> The spontaneous generation process is described in some detail, giving the author the opportunity to express his position on some contemporary physiological discussions with significant implications. This feature of the tale is rather striking to the modern reader and indeed interesting. It should be noted that the possibility of spontaneous generation of human beings was debated by Ibn Ṭufayl's forebears and contemporaries and is consistent with his interpretation of the Aristotelian-Avicennian scientific paradigm. See Kruk (1996), Richter-Bernburg (1996), Bertolacci (2012).

<sup>24</sup> Malti-Douglas (1996). Alternative accounts, however, are referred later as the result of Ḥayy's reflections on the eternity of creation of the world.

<sup>25</sup> See though Richter-Bernburg (1996).

<sup>26</sup> This term, used in Sufi milieus, is cognate with the Arabic word for the act of witness, *šahāda*. This latter word does not refer only to a report of eyewitness in a judicial context, but indicates the Muslim profession of faith: the believer accepts the basic religious tenets as personally testifying them, rather than believing them as implied in the corresponding Christian formula of *Credo*. The root Š-H-D, which forms *šahāda*, covers a semantic area roughly equivalent to the Greek μάρτυρ- (*martyr*-) and encompasses the notion of martyrdom; it normally refers more to a willingly accepted self-sacrifice for the faith rather than a suffered persecution. However, the root is not significantly invested with the epistemological meaning of "testimony" which is the topic of this article.

At this point, Ḥayy meets another man called Asāl, who had come to his island to live as a hermit from a neighboring, civilized community. Asāl is fascinated by Ḥayy's intellectual self-elevation to contemplative experience, that he himself had been seeking. In turn, Ḥayy is made aware of linguistic communication and organized society. He realizes that Asāl's people's religion (a thinly disguised Islam) underlies the same truths he had arrived at by himself, veiled in metaphoric language. He decides to join civilization to teach to Asāl's friends the true significance of these metaphors, so that they can partake in the blissful contemplative state he had reached. However, Asāl's people, while virtuous, only follow religious revelation with outwardly compliance. Attempts by Ḥayy to deepen their understanding of divine things through teaching are met with revulsion and bewilderment. Ḥayy realizes that shrouding truths in religious metaphor was necessary to those people, whose intellect is supposedly too weak to attain the truth; he sees that attempts to communicate them higher truths are pointless, if not dangerous. Then, he returns to his island with Asāl, where both end their life in blissful intellectual contemplation.

The focal point of the treatise has been debated, but epistemology and its relationship to social life clearly play a central part. Many readers have felt its principal subject to be the contention that independent thinking can reach knowledge with no reference whatsoever to previously known notions, actually without teachers or guides at all (Hourani 1956). It may also show that attempts to relate intellectually acquired, individual knowledge into society are problematic and may require a specific way of expression that Ḥayy does not possess.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, many interpreters have agreed in seeing the call for the self-sufficiency of human, individual reason, as opposed to society-based (and thus, word-based, although this has been rarely pointed out) knowledge, as a component of the core message of the treatise.

Ḥayy's epistemic journey is consistent with the Aristotelian epistemology of universal knowledge based on abstract reason, with experience from the senses as a (very important) preliminary step to it. It is also generally faithful to Ibn Sīnā's notion of non-discursive knowledge, with a markedly mystical bent.

On the other hand, verbal communication among individuals is not presented as an unalloyed epistemic failure: once Ḥayy familiarizes with language, both he and Asāl do not appear to have any difficulty in understanding or accepting the other's testimony. This is somewhat striking as Ḥayy had no previous experience of testimony as an epistemic tool, and the matters, such as the existence of social life, Asāl relates to him are entirely outside his previous experience and knowledge.

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<sup>27</sup> This conclusion is argued especially by Kochin (1999), but may be also implied in Marmura (1979).

This should not be read as a naïve approach to testimony that takes its epistemic possibility for granted.<sup>28</sup> Ḥayy may be implicitly operating under some underlying form of “acceptance principle”<sup>29</sup> in his communication with Asāl; but Ḥayy’s subsequent encounters with verbal communication present it more problematically; other people, described as irrational, question his words to the point of doubting his sanity. Ḥayy’s self-reliant epistemology does not pass the test of social life. At this point, Ḥayy resorts to deception, feigning having understood his error and exhorting the people to keep following the outwardly dimension of religion without further question into deeper matters, before leaving them and isolating himself again. While not proving to be socially effective, Ḥayy’s understanding of verbal communication is therefore sophisticated enough to include a form of “noble lie”.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Ḥayy’s earlier epistemic process actually *verifies* to the reader (if not to his audience in the story) the truth of revealed religion.

Ultimately, the overall epistemological position of *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān* discusses and considers perception and reason as being much more significant than testimony; Ḥayy can be an archetypal figure for the “autonomous knower” implied by the Greek philosophical tradition and many subsequent philosophers, most notably John Locke (Adler 2012). The treatise may have been, indeed, available to Locke in Latin translation (Russel 1994).

It is clear, however, that the text offers a more nuanced and sophisticated approach to epistemology in a social context than it appears at first sight. It represents an epistemic challenge to defenders of tradition in emphasizing the autonomy of reason, but it also suggests that reason alone is inadequate to the workings of social life.

### 3. Epistemology as a social problem

The renowned Syro-Egyptian physician and scholar Ibn al-Nafīs answered to some of Ibn Ṭufayl’s views in his *Risālat Kāmiliyya*, probably written around 1274 (Schacht and Meyerhof 1968: 34).

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<sup>28</sup> Aristotelian psychology does not assume a specific faculty for language, and, to my knowledge, does not generally see language as the bearer of any specific cognitive value. In *De Anima*, Aristotle appears to be taking grammar for granted.

<sup>29</sup> This principle states that “a person is entitled to accept as true something that is presented as true and that is intelligible to him, unless there are stronger reasons not to do so” (see Faulkner 2000). (An interesting parallel to this principle can be found in Kumarila’s intrinsic validity theory, according to which every cognition should be accepted as true unless and until contrary evidence arises. Note by the Editor).

<sup>30</sup> On this point, I expand and partly correct what I argued in Lauri (2013), where I followed Kochin (1999) in pointing out Ḥayy’s failure to convey truth adequately in a verbal form. See also Lauri (2015).

Accounts on Ibn al-Nafīs' life are relatively scant, but they concur to portray a well-respected cultivated man, praised by his contemporaries for his mastery of medicine and his literary style. He is remembered as a physician through his discovery of pulmonary transit of blood. His scholarly curriculum included the usual strong focus on language, sciences and logic as a preliminary basis for further knowledge that frequently characterized Medieval Islamic scholarship in his time. He was also well acquainted with *falsafa* themes. He is credited with a vast corpus of writing, of which several texts have survived. While he mainly wrote about medical subjects, his expertise was, as common in his time, wide-ranging, and his production includes treatises on logic, *ḥadīth* study and Arabic grammar, most of which lost (Schacht and Meyerhof 1968: 22 ff.).

In the introductory lines of *Risālat Kāmiliyya*, Ibn al-Nafīs declares that his purpose is “to relate [*iqtīṣāṣ*, from *iqtaṣṣa* ‘tell,’ ‘narrate’] what Fāḍil bin Nāṭiq [an ominous name, meaning “the Virtuous, son of the Rational”<sup>31</sup>] transmitted [*ḍakara*] from the man called Kāmil [meaning “Perfect”] concerning [more literally: “on what relates to”] the life-story of the Prophet and the ordinances of religious law.”<sup>32</sup> The life-story of the Prophet was the topic of the genre of *Sīra Nabawiyya* (Prophetic Biography), which usually relied on *aḥbār* reported to that effect. “The ordinances of religious law” (*al-sunan al-ṣar‘iyya*) also are treated by a very large corpus of legal writing in Islam. However, these traditional matters are associated with other topics and presented in a strikingly original way in *Risālat Kāmiliyya*. The book is divided into four parts.

In the first part, the basic plot of *Risālat Kāmiliyya* resembles *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān* very closely. “The man called Kāmil,” as he is consistently called through the text, is spontaneously generated in a desert island, where he comes to know the material world by deduction from sensible experience, broadly mirroring, with considerably less detail, Ḥayy’s discoveries. His solitary reflection leads him to the understanding of the existence of a Creator, on the basis of the Avicennian argument *ex contingentia*.<sup>33</sup> Kāmil then wants to know how to honor and serve this Creator. At this point, however, *Risālat Kāmiliyya* dramatically diverges from Ibn Ṭufayl’s narrative: as noted by Fancy (2010), Kāmil does not come to fulfill his desire to know about God’s will in isolation. A ship wrecks on his island; he meets the crew and learns from them aspects of civilized life such as language, cooking and clothing.

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<sup>31</sup> As rendered by Mahdi (1970).

<sup>32</sup> Schacht and Meyerhof (1968: 38); text in square brackets is mine. I chose to highlight the Arabic lexicon pointing to testimony and transmission.

<sup>33</sup> For the Avicennian arguments for the existence of God, see Marmura (1980) and Wisnovsky (2005).

Kāmil agrees to leave his island with them to live in society, whose necessity he comes to know (*‘alima*).

Only then, from the second part of the book, Kāmil goes on applying his process of knowledge through deduction, on the basis of empirical data, to the knowledge of God, the Prophet, Islamic law and Islamic history. The necessity of Prophecy and the life-story of the last of the Prophets (Muḥammad, although he is not generally referred to by name) are discussed in the second part. In the third, the basic legal ordinances established by Islamic Law, traced to the Prophet, are explained through the same epistemic process. The fourth part discusses Islamic history after the death of the Prophet, including events of the time of Ibn al-Nafīs like the Mongol invasion, as well as Islamic eschatology, closing the text with detail on how bodily resurrection will occur. Only the first part details Kāmil’s spontaneous generation, solitary inquiry and initial meeting with other humans. Kāmil’s rational findings display general accord (although not total accord) with religious views as presented by preceding and contemporary tradition.<sup>34</sup> The original elements lie mostly in the way these matters and discussions are presented in a story of seemingly solitary learning. Then, the actual *topic* of the treatise appears to be, not the life of the Prophet in itself, but the way Kāmil comes to know it and everything else.

This is indeed emphasized in the titles of single chapters and sections, several of which include variations of “how the one called Kāmil came to know” (*ta’arrafa* or related expressions) while other section titles (mainly the ones referring specific features of the life-story of the Prophet) simply state the topic of the reflection. Many sections however begin reiterating that their content is the product of Kāmil’s thinking, with recurring expressions like “then the one called Kāmil reflected upon (*tafakkara fi*).”

Transmission, and language at large, are not featured explicitly as modes of knowledge available for Kāmil, except for the passing mention of him learning the language of the ship’s people to a good degree (Schacht and Meyerhof 1968: 45). Kāmil explicitly arrives at the notion that testimony can be a sound epistemological basis for socially accepted knowledge; but he is never described to make any epistemic use of it himself, except for practicalities: he is taught the use of clothes and cooking by others, in contrast with Ḥayy, who devises both by himself. Kāmil is never mentioned being taught such inherently testimony-based subjects as history or law, which make up the vast majority of his reflection.

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<sup>34</sup> See detailed discussion in Fancy (2006, chapters 2 and 3).

Nevertheless, testimony occupies an important place in the epistemic toolkit of Ibn al-Nafīs' book. As quoted above, the story begins with its "isnād," presenting itself as reported on the authority of one Fāḍil Ibn Nāṭiq, of which however nothing is said at all, providing no instrument of extrinsic validation except for the meaning of his name. *Fāḍil Ibn Nāṭiq* is also the title by which the tale is recorded by Ibn al-Nafīs' subsequent biographers, in explicit contrastive parallel with *Ḥayy Ibn Yaḡzān* (which those biographers attribute to Ibn Sīnā). Each of the four parts of *Risālat Kāmiliyya* also starts with the opening formula *qāla Fadil bin Nāṭiq*, 'Fāḍil Ibn Nāṭiq said,' thus restating his epistemic responsibility.

As noted, *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn Yaḡzān* as well is presented as a report, to a point; but Ibn al-Nafīs seems more consistently committed to this framing, mentioning its "source" throughout instead of some unspecified "forefathers" at the beginning. This fictional presentation device is complementary to the picture of Ḥayy's and Kāmil's knowledge as essentially (although not entirely) perceptive and intellectual (but not explicitly syllogistic) in nature. Testimony is a "thin veil," a cover under which quotes from sources known to the readership such as Qur'anic quotations (more common in *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn Yaḡzān*) or the works of Ibn Sīnā (in *Risālat Kāmiliyya*) can be embedded.

The apparent purpose of *Risālat Kāmiliyya* would then appear to be a treatment of "traditional" sciences like history and law as rationally deducible into a frame that gives them validity independent from tradition, as products of inner workings of Kāmil's mind, validating transmitted truth through rational means.

The same epistemic process we have seen at work in *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn Yaḡzān* would be applied here to orthodox tenets, and, critically, social norms. This is the reading that Schacht and Meyerhof offer in their introduction to the critical edition and abridged translation of the text, justifying the title of *Theologus Autodidactus* they chose, implying it as counterpart to Ibn Ṭufayl's *Philosophus Autodidactus*.

The overall epistemic stance that emerges, though, appears puzzling. It has been re-examined recently by Nahyan Fancy. Fancy refutes Schacht's and Meyerhof's view of *Risālat Kāmiliyya* as a defense of "traditional" conclusions through rationalistic epistemology (Fancy 2010); rather, he reads it as a defense of the rationality of both traditional conclusions and traditionalist epistemology against the perceived challenge posed by *falsafa*, and particularly by Ibn Ṭufayl's radically autonomous, non-social knower.

It should be observed, however, that, Ibn Ṭufayl's work may be less radical than his Early Modern readership took him to be, as suggested above.



Fancy points to the mentions of specific names of historical or geographical relevance that would have made no sense if Kāmil's consideration of society, history and law had been entirely deductive and inferential. The presence of such concrete references had puzzled the editors of the treatise, who considered it slips on the author's part that undermine the self-consistency of Ibn al-Nafīs' supposed rationalist defense of dogma (Schacht and Meyerhof 1968: 35). In Fancy's analysis, these show that Kāmil's bases his reflection, after his meeting with the ship crew, on testimony, which he subsequently rationalizes: a procedure akin to what Aristotelian epistemology, as presented by the Arabic tradition, accepts in fields where particulars play an important part, such as medicine. We are not seeing individual intellectual inference in isolation: the *limits*, not the powers, of self-sufficient individual reason are what the treatise would highlight.

I agree, in general, with Fancy's assessment of the testimonial nature of historical and geographical references in the text. This reading makes justice of Ibn al-Nafīs' rigorous thinking, rather than positing widespread and unexplainable sloppiness in his core argument. Since Kāmil displays knowledge of particular instances of events and places, clearly outside his direct experiential access, he cannot be an entirely self-taught knower like the one Ḥayy is presumed to be, whose epistemic concerns mostly regard universal Forms.<sup>35</sup> Testimony plays, implicitly, a much larger role in *Risālat Kāmiliyya* than it would seem at first.

In partial contrast to Fancy's "traditionalist" interpretation, though, I would note that the language used by Ibn al-Nafīs emphasizes Kāmil's epistemic isolation very markedly, even after his socializing experience. The common expression is "Kāmil reflected [*tafakkara*] about [...] and said to himself [*qāla fī nafsihi*]" with variations. The specific chains of historical events and legal dispositions he reasons about are thus shown to conform an internal, deducible line of development in which they follow necessarily from some basic premises established by reasoning (the existence of a Creator) and experience/perception (the existence of society). Some testimonial data, such as the mentioned place names, operate likewise as secondary premises (alongside experiential data), and knowledge at large would be impossible without them, but they alone do not warrant a wholesale defense of "traditionalist" epistemology, although they do challenge the self-sufficiency of reason.

The question of what *Risālat Kāmiliyya* actually intends to demonstrate remains problematic. This paper cannot offer a final answer on this, for which deeper study would be necessary. It is clear that epistemology is a central concern of the treatise. Like *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn Yaḡzān*, it intends to

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<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, particular knowledge comes to Ḥayy through perception and, in the case of the specifics of religious law, through Asāl's testimony.



support some form of balance between rationalistic-inferential and traditional-testimonial epistemic resources, validating each other. The balance is, however, different in the two cases, in accord with the difference in the primary subject matters of the relevant knowledge itself.

It is also clear that *Risālat Kāmiliyya* is in a close, but tense relationship with *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn Yaḳẓān* and that the similarities between the two plots should be understood as marking the numerous theoretical differences between their authors. Fancy's compelling arguments that Kāmil is not, as it may appear at first, self-taught in the same integral way Ḥayy is, show that these differences extend into the respective epistemological conceptions, as well as conclusions.

I suggest that Ibn al-Nafis' choice to focus on an inference-driven presentation of inherently testimonial subjects such as history and law ultimately illustrates the social and political nature of his tension with Ibn Ṭufayl's philosophy, from which Ibn al-Nafis' implicit critique of self-teaching stems.

In philosophical epistemology, as noted, subjects of such particular knowledge as history cannot be easily accommodated, while Ibn al-Nafis regards this kind of knowledge of particular facts and events as essential.

Conversely, in illustrating that the religious corpus of testimony is in accord with reason, he does not agree entirely with the traditionalist scholars who stood for a more purely genealogical conception of knowledge. This stance parallels Ibn al-Nafis' relatively unusual call for rational examination in his work on the study of the *ḥadīth*, where he contends that rational analysis of *matn* should play a role in their assessment alongside the usual analysis of *isnād*. He thus moves away from the extrinsic epistemology dominating that field (Fancy 2006: 57-72).

In my opinion, Ibn al-Nafis opposes Ḥayy's isolation, rather than his rational approach; the treatise appears to imply that knowledge is inherently, necessarily social in nature and aims, as it offers a rational understanding of society, law and history. Once this social nature is accepted, independent rational activity can be accommodated in an unproblematic way; its conclusion may converge with what is transmitted through socially validated testimony, as in reported historical and legal knowledge based on testimony.

As I discuss elsewhere, the tension between individual and society is a deep driving factor of Medieval Arabic philosophy that operates on the epistemic and political levels alike (Lauri 2015).

It is apparent that *Risālat Kāmiliyya* has a political dimension. Its fourth and last part describes what will happen after the Prophet's death, that is, Islamic history and eschatology. Kāmil's reflection focuses on three aspects: the conflict among early Muslims for the caliphate, the events of his own

age marked by the Mongol irruption and successful Mamlūk resistance against them, and the temporal end of the world with the final resurrection of the bodies.

The Mongol invasion was felt as a devastating blow to the Islamic community. Mongols were associated with the apocalyptic hordes of Gog and Magog; their sack of Baghdad destroyed the last remnants of the Abbasid Caliphate, and with it, a significant symbolic focus for Sunnis, although one largely deprived of actual political power. The Eastern half of the Islamic world went for some decades under the infidel rule of the Mongol Ilkhanids, until they converted to Islam.

Ibn al-Nafīs offers a rational understanding of these deeply worrying events in terms of providential historical necessity, inspired by Egyptian apocalyptic literature (Kruk 1995). In Fancy's reading, Kāmil would have known of the invasions testimonially and further proceeded to make sense of it inferentially. However, the wording of the text, in referring to actual historical events, is careful to keep their description abstract and general, and to stress that it is presenting Kāmil's thought process. Thus, in my reading, the text does not support Fancy's interpretation, which, in my opinion, would weaken the argument of the necessary nature of history.

Ibn al-Nafīs proceeds to illustrate how Muslim resistance to the Mongols is likewise a rational necessity. Necessarily, Kāmil thinks, a Muslim leader will emerge to stop the Mongol invasion.

His detailed description of this leader identifies the famous Mamlūk ruler Baybars, who had actually defeated the Mongols at 'Ayn Ğalūt in 1260; true to the presentation of Kāmil's knowledge as non-testimonial, Ibn al-Nafīs does not name him (Schacht and Meyerhof 1968: 34). The details given in the text strongly suggest that Ibn al-Nafīs knew Baybars personally, and it has been proposed, but not proven, that he could have been his court physician (Schacht and Meyerhof 1968: 34, Fancy 2006: 45-46).

The text then can be understood, among other things, as a call to Muslims to rally around the Mamlūk rule, and Sunni orthodoxy, grounded in a sophisticated epistemology where, paradoxically, testimony finds its way through attempts at validating means of knowledge supposedly independent of it, reinforcing the social nature of knowledge.

#### 4. Conclusion

In Western teaching traditions, Jewish and Islamic philosophies are often detached from the Western one and lumped together as "Oriental" philosophy, with the historically inaccurate inclusion of

Indian philosophy and Chinese traditions<sup>36</sup> of thought into the same category. These misconceptions contributed making the understanding of Islamic philosophy at large problematic. A long standing point of contention has been how to relate a tradition of thought which painted itself as based on independent, primarily not genealogical inquiry to the context of a culture where transmitted word represents the basis of knowledge. This contrast has led several scholars to see philosophy as only superficially linked to ‘Islamic culture.’<sup>37</sup>

This epistemic opposition should be nuanced, at the very least, among other things, based on the notes above. While Ibn al-Nafis adopts the hegemonic views shared by Sunni scholars of his time, he originally adapts epistemic preoccupations and philosophical strategies of knowledge that characterized *falsafa*. He found a narrative way to found the pillars of his world’s “traditional” sciences of social significance, such as history and law, on a non-social basis; on the other hand, he shows purely self-relying reason to be insufficient, bringing it again to its societal and testimonial dimensions.

It may be that Ibn al-Nafis realized that he needed to show epistemic isolation to demonstrate the social nature of knowledge. Testimony operates, according to him, in conjunction with independent reason in a shared epistemic space. In an original way, *Risālat Kāmiliyya* addresses what, in another context, Leonardo Capezzone has called “the political problem of knowledge in the city.”<sup>38</sup>

I conclude in the cooperative spirit of the project of which this article is part. In showing, through fictional epistemic isolation, the social character of knowledge, Ibn al-Nafis would have probably shared our conviction of the inherently collaborative nature of scholarly activity.

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<sup>36</sup> The expression “Chinese philosophy” is controversial; in this context I am reluctant to refer to it, given what appears to my limited knowledge a less central position of systematic rational argument in the discussion of areas such as ontology, epistemology and formal logic within a significant portion of Chinese thought. This is not to be intended as a judgment of value. See Cheng (2005).

<sup>37</sup> This point is discussed, and refuted, at length in Gutas (2002).

<sup>38</sup> “Il problema politico della conoscenza nella città cortese” (Capezzone 2010: 111; my translation).

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