

An Examination of the Islamic Kalam and Akbarian Traditions as Viable Alternatives to Other Western Philosophies of Mind and Its Implications for Neuroscience

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Abstract

This paper examines two Islamic ontologies of the human self as alternatives to dominant approaches in contemporary philosophy of mind. These approaches avoid some of the pitfalls of some of the modern approaches to the mind-body problem. The first is drawn from the kalām tradition of philosophical theology. Kalām posits a substantial soul, but its conception differs from both Aristotelian hylomorphism and Cartesian dualism. The soul is neither merely the form of the body nor a “thinking substance.” Rather, al-Ghazālī describes the soul as an immaterial substance possessing its own accidents, just as the material substance of the body possesses its own accidents or properties. This framework avoids both the inextricable union of form and matter in Aristotle and the radical separation of mind and matter in Cartesian dualism. Kalām atomism further provides a unified metaphysical system in which the same general ontological and causal principles apply to body, soul, and their respective accidents. By placing mental and physical realities within a single metaphysical framework, it allows scientific investigation of the body and brain to proceed without generating an inherent conflict with the reality of the soul or consciousness. The second model is drawn from the Akbarian tradition of Islamic philosophical Sufism, which is interpreted here as a form of hierarchical monism. This framework bears important similarities to idealism and Platonism while providing a more comprehensive metaphysical and ontological account than physicalism. Rather than treating body and soul as distinct substances requiring causal interaction, Akbarian metaphysics understands the body as a manifestation of the soul at a lower ontological level. The mind-body

problem is thereby reframed as a relation between different levels of a unified reality rather than between separate substances. Whereas kalām provides a successful account of how the elements of reality function within an ordered system, Akbarian metaphysics seeks to explain what those realities ultimately are. Together, these traditions offer distinct but complementary Islamic approaches to consciousness, embodiment, causation, and the metaphysical nature of the human self.

Keywords

Islamic Theology, Neuroscience, Philosophy of Mind, Kalam, Ibn Arabi

1. Introduction

The Islamic tradition offers two solutions to the mind-body conundrum not found in the contemporary discussion in western philosophy of mind. The dominant framework in contemporary neuroscience and philosophy of mind is physicalism, the view that reality is fundamentally physical and that consciousness is ultimately grounded in physical processes. Some modern philosophers defend non-reductive forms of physicalism, including certain versions of panpsychism. The normative view contrasts Physicalism with Cartesian dualism as the alternative, which itself was a successor to Aristotelean hylomorphism.

In an important way, these choices reflect the lack of sophisticated philosophical grammar which can account for the reality of both conscious experience and its neurological basis. We might therefore ask: Are physicalism and dualism truly the only frameworks available for thinking through the mind-body problem (Chalmers, 1996; Kim, 1998)?

There are two such alternatives found within the Islamic theological tradition. One is found in the classical Kalam tradition of Islamic philosophical theology, as exemplified by Imam Ghazali. The second comes in the Akbarian tradition of Islamic philosophical sufism. In the first part of this paper the kalam tradition will be examined, whereas in the second part, the akbarian tradition will be presented.

The Islamic Kalam tradition of philosophical theology posited a substantial soul, but its conception was distinct from both Aristotle and Descartes. The soul is neither the form of the body, nor is it a “thinking substance.” Rather, according to Ghazali it is an “immaterial substance” which has its own accidents, just as the “material substance” of the body has its own accidents or properties. This avoids the inextricable link of form and matter in Aristotle and the radical cartesian dualism in which the soul and matter are part of two entirely different systems. Kalam atomism has the advantage of having a single unified functioning system in which the same set of laws apply to the soul, the body and their respective accidents.

The Akbarian tradition of Islamic philosophical sufism is a form of hierarchical

monism. It provides a comprehensive metaphysical and ontological framework which physicalism lacks. This view has similarities to idealism and platonism. It obviates the mind-body problem by essentially making the body a manifestation of the soul. This view avoids the interaction problems of various substances or of the mind and body. It provides depth of meaning, explaining not just how things work, as Kalam successfully did, but rather points to the reality of what they actually are.

2. Kalam Tradition and the Mind-Body Problem

The first framework is found within the tradition of Islamic philosophical theology. This is a broad tradition, this paper will take one of the interpretations of this tradition specifically related to the soul, namely as articulated by Imam Ghazali in his text, *Ma'ārij al-Quds fi Madārij Ma'rifat al-Nafs*. The Kalam view, also known as Islamic atomism, amounts to an alternative to physicalism and dualism by distinguishing between three different types of entities. These are: material substance, subtle immaterial substance, and accidents. This allows, as shall be demonstrated, consciousness to be treated neither as a physical process nor as a separate Cartesian mental realm, but as an accident inhering in the soul, while still allowing bodily and neurological processes to play a real role in ordinary experience.

As will be elucidated further, this presents us with considerable philosophical advantages. Kalam (taken in the Ghazalian tradition) is able to accommodate the empirical fact that conscious experience is deeply conditioned by bodily and neurological processes; however, it can also deny that this dependence equals identity. It is able to allow for the brain to be a necessary condition for experience, but it may not be the ultimate subject of experience. With its postulation of the soul as the underlying subject, Kalam can avoid the reductionism of materialism and the rigidity of Cartesian dualism (al-Ghazālī, 2023; Winter, 2008).

3. Problems with Dominant Contemporary Paradigm of Physicalism

A central difficulty in modern philosophy and science centers around the nature of consciousness. According to the dominant contemporary scientific worldview, conscious creatures are physical organisms whose mental lives depend intimately on bodily and neural processes. Some philosophers argue that conscious experience is identical with, or reducible to, physical processes. Others hold that consciousness is wholly grounded in the physical without being easily reducible to neurons, chemistry, or computation. In either case, the central challenge remains: how can a physical description account for the first-person character of experience (Chalmers, 1996; Kim, 1998)?

Neuroscience seeks to describe the physical substrates underlying conscious experience and identify correlations between brain states and mental states. However, subjective experience itself remains difficult to explain in purely physical terms. Nagel argues that what most centrally needs to be explained is precisely its

first-person character: that there is something it is like to have such an experience. There is something it is like to see the color red, experience happiness, or be a bat. Although neuroscience can identify the optical and neural pathways associated with seeing red, it cannot explain why these physical processes have something it is like attached to them (Nagel, 1974).

Philosophers call these felt, first-person experiences qualia, and they pose a serious difficulty for philosophical materialism. If all that exists is physical, then qualia must either be identical with physical processes or emerge entirely from those processes. Yet subjective experience is not captured by a physical description. A complete description of neural activity does not obviously tell us what it is like to undergo that experience (Jackson, 1982; Nagel, 1974).

This point is illustrated by Frank Jackson's thought experiment about Mary, a brilliant color scientist who has spent her entire life in a black-and-white room. Mary knows every physical fact about color vision. Yet when she sees red for the first time, she learns something new: what the color red looks like. Nagel's and Jackson's arguments suggest that even a complete physical account of conscious experience would still leave something out: qualia, or the subjective "what-it-is-like" character of experience (Jackson, 1982).

Chalmers formulated a related difficulty called the hard problem of consciousness. The "easy problems" concern identifying the physical substrates of experience, including the neurological and anatomical mechanisms underlying color vision. Although these problems are extremely complex, we know what solutions look like, such as descriptions of neural and optical architecture (Chalmers, 1996).

The hard problem asks: why are physical states accompanied by mental states? Why are certain neurological processes associated with experience? Chalmers argues that we have no idea what an answer would even look like. Philosophical materialism struggles not merely to answer the question, but to formulate an adequate framework for addressing it (Chalmers, 1996).

The same difficulty concerns the causal relationship between mind and matter. Qualia seem impossible to explain with reference to physical processes. Yet if qualia and physical phenomena share no common ground, how can one affect the other (Kim, 1998)?

4. Cartesian Dualism and the Definition of the Soul

Physicalism came to be the dominant theory due to the failure of Cartesian dualism. Descartes had divided reality into two discrete and fundamentally different ontological substances. The first is *res extensa*, or extended substances, which refers to physical objects, such as bodies, objects, and in short, anything that occupies space or has extension. The second category is *res cogitans*, or thinking substance. This refers primarily to the mind or soul, whose defining feature, according to Descartes, is thinking, feeling, willing, and doubting (Descartes, 1984).

Given that the latter lacked any empirical grounding, it lost favor in the western

tradition. All that exists must be extended substances, matter, thus leading to physicalism. This set of events had much to do with how Descartes framed the mind-body relationship. In the cartesian scheme the mind and body had mutually exclusive attributes (Descartes, 1984).

Descartes recasts the soul as a thinking subject against the extended body. Descartes writes, “I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks (*res cogitans*).” (*Meditations*, II) This identification of mind and soul is of critical philosophical significance, as Descartes reconceived the notion of a soul by identifying it with specific cognitive and volitional capacities, such as thinking, feeling, etc. In this more narrow definition, he dismisses other aspects of the soul which would be readily recognized in pre-modern or theological traditions, such as the soul’s receptive and intuitive aspects, immediate apprehension, and spiritual capacities. Although Descartes’ distinction between mind and body may initially seem natural and innocuous, it comes with far-reaching philosophical consequences (Descartes, 1984, p. 18).

On this account, a radically dualistic ontology emerges, dividing reality into two fundamental categories: the mental and the physical. Everything in the universe is made to fit neatly into one category or the other. The physical world becomes devoid of secondary qualities, Qualia, purpose and meaning, as all these qualitative features are solely assigned to the mind. As a result, the continuity between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge is called into question, leaving us with the puzzle of how subject and object relate to one another since they don’t have much in common. It is not clear how both the knowing subject and the object participate in the intelligible order of the world (Descartes, 1984).

5. Beyond Cartesian Dualism: The Layered Ontology of Kalām

Since much of Western philosophy and science’s thinking about this issue is subject to the influence of Descartes, it tends to skew how other traditions are approached. For example, dualism is a feature of the Islamic tradition, however, the Islamic dualism is significantly different from cartesian dualism. The Kalam dualism is not quite as radical as Descartes. It does not eliminate qualia from the physical world, nor does it reduce the soul to a thinking substance (Adamson, 2016; Winter, 2008).

Emerging in the first few centuries of Islam, kalām developed as a theological discipline that used rational analysis to defend Quranic doctrines about God, creation, and the nature of causality. Kalām, and Islamic philosophy in general, use, critique and build upon earlier neoplatonic and aristotelian conceptual tools. The two orthodox and mature schools of Kalam are the Ashari and Maturidi schools, which are largely similar but with a few minor methodological differences. The famous philosopher and theologian Imam Ghazali (d. 1111) is considered to generally fall within this tradition. For purposes of simplicity, this broad tradition, despite its internal diversity, is collectively referred to as Kalam in this paper. Spe-

cifically, however, Imam Ghazali's formulation of the ontology of human nature is utilized for this paper, which is at slight variance from the later Kalam tradition (Adamson, 2016; Griffel, 2021; Harvey, 2021; Winter, 2008).

Kalām ontology may be termed a type of dualism; however, the word connotes a different type of ontology than is meant by Cartesian dualism. In the Islamic kalām framework, as formulated by Imam Ghazali, there are *three* distinct entities which can be summarized as follows: body, soul, and accidents. Kalām conceives the world as being made up of indivisible particles (*jawāhir*) which come together to form a body or physical object (*jism*). In the case of the human being, Kalām theology posits the existence of an additional type of substance, *jawhar al-laṭīf* or subtle substance, which includes not only the human soul or *rūh*, but the souls of other creatures in Islamic cosmology, such as angels and jinn (al-Ghazālī, 2023; al-Taftāzānī, 1950; Winter, 2008).

Kalam theologians have taken different stances on the nature of this subtle substance. Some theologians understood the soul as a physical substance, though one of a finer and ordinarily imperceptible kind. For example, al-Jurjānī's description of it as a "subtle vaporous substance" (*jawhar bukhārī laṭīf*) appears, in modern terms, to place it within the physical realm: not explicitly immaterial, but as an exceptionally refined, vapor-like substance. In contemporary scientific terms, however, no such distinction between subtle and conventional material is drawn or is intelligible.

Others theologians use the term subtle to signify immateriality as such. Imam Ghazali follows this meaning in his *Maarīj*, where he describes the soul as an immaterial substance. He writes, "your soul is no part of the body and its attributes." (al-Ghazālī, 2023: p. 26).

In this case then, another distinct ontological entity is posited. The human being is then constituted by a material substance and an immaterial substance. This variety of usages reflects the internal diversity of the Kalam tradition and even within the writings of Imam Ghazali (Gianotti, 2001). For the purpose of this article, the immaterial interpretation of the subtle-substance will be utilized. This interpretation has value in terms of the mind-body problem (al-Ghazālī, 2023; al-Jurjānī, 1983).

This introduces a different kind of substance into the ontology, while also rejecting Aristotle's idea that the soul is simply the form of the body. In other words, kalām both removes Aristotelian form as an intrinsic explanatory principle and introduces the soul as a distinct, immaterial reality. So there is the addition of a different type of substance, along with the removal of the form. The immaterial soul, in the Islamic tradition, is not just a functional concept, but an independently existing substance of chief spiritual significance. The Quran states, "Successful indeed is the one who purifies their soul" (91:9). The soul is the locus of human spirituality and is capable of transformation. It is what allows for an inner journey of self-purification and nearness to the Divine. The Quran uses various additional terms which add to the richness of this concept. These include *qalb* (heart), *ʿaql*

(intellect), *rūḥ* (spirit), and *nafs* (self), to name a few (al-Ghazālī, 2023; Aristotle, 1984).

For Descartes, qualitative mental states belong exclusively to the soul. They are thereby removed from the physical world and located within a separate mental domain. The result is a radically dualistic ontology in which everything belongs either to the category of the mental or to that of the physical. The soul is consequently redefined as a “thinking substance,” effectively identifying it with the mind itself. It is this conceptual transformation that gives rise to the modern mind-body problem (Descartes, 1984).

Charles Taylor describes the broader historical shift as a movement from the “porous self” to the “buffered self,” for whom it comes to seem axiomatic that thought, feeling, purpose, and all the qualities ordinarily attributed to agents must be located within minds that are distinct from the “outer” world. This exacerbates the difference between the knowing subject and the objects of knowledge (Taylor, 2007).

A crucial difference between kalām and Cartesianism concerns the philosophical category of *a‘rāḍ*, or accidents. In kalām, physical objects are substances that possess properties or qualities. A body, for example, may possess color, shape, motion, and other attributes. Yet these accidents remain ontologically distinct from the substance in which they inhere, even as the object undergoes change. Subtle substances, including the soul, likewise possess accidents such as perception and intellection (*idrāk*). Although these mental qualities inhere in the soul, they are not identical with it. Whereas Cartesian accounts tend to identify the soul with its cognitive capacities, kalām distinguishes between the soul as a substance and its mental acts or qualitative properties as accidents (al-Taftāzānī, 1950; Winter, 2008).

The distinction between substance and accident in kalām offers an important philosophical resource for addressing the mind-body problem, in which both the soul and body have shared characteristics, namely substances and accidents. It affirms the reality of mental life without reducing the soul to its cognitive acts, experiences, or capacities.

In the contemporary context dualism evokes cartesian dualism. Kalam may appear to be a kind of dualism because it affirms both bodily and subtle substances. However, its ontology is more complex than Cartesian dualism because it also gives accidents an indispensable role. In modern terms, the kalam position may be better understood as a trifold ontology. Thus, while not a “trialism” in the strict sense of three independent substances, it provides a threefold explanatory structure: material substance, subtle substance, and dependent accidents. This nuance, distinguishes cartesian dualism from Islamic dualism and clears up some confusion caused by similar terminology. It can be summarized as follows (al-Ghazālī, 2023; Winter, 2008).

6. Substance, Soul, and Causality: From Aristotle to the Kalam Tradition

Kalām, and Islamic philosophy more broadly, developed within an intellectual

world deeply shaped by Aristotelian terminology, especially the language of substance, accident, matter, and form (see **Table 1**). According to Aristotle, the soul is not a separate substance existing alongside the body, but rather a form of the living body. The form is the intrinsic nature or essence of the material entity. In his hylomorphic framework, Aristotle argues that a living substance is a combination of matter and form. He also argues that the soul is not something that exists independently alongside or within the body, but the very principle by which the body is animated and organized (Adamson, 2016; Aristotle, 1984).

Table 1. Terminology of kalam ontology of the human.

Ontologic Entity	Arabic Term	Example	Aristotelian Term
Material	<i>Jawāhir</i> or <i>jism</i>	Brain	Material
Subtle or immaterial substance	<i>Jawhar al-laṭīf</i>	Soul (<i>rūh</i>)	Form
Accidents	<i>A'rāḍ</i>	Perception (<i>idrāk</i>)	Accidents

Islamic philosophers like Ibn Sina broke from Aristotle here. Utilizing his famous Flying man experiment, he posited that the soul is an independent substance from the body. In this experiment, one is able to recognize their own existence despite lack of any sense-perception. For Ibn Sina, this meant, the soul is immaterial and separate from the body, an idea which would persist in subsequent Islamic philosophical theology (Avicenna, 1959).

Kalām theologians objected to hylomorphism on a more fundamental basis. They felt it embedded intrinsic natures and powers within material things which interfered with the power and will of God. They stripped the material of any intrinsic nature or self-sufficient casual power. A created thing does not possess its own essence, purpose, or causal efficacy independently. Ghazali proves this by demonstrating the lack of necessary causation in the natural world. The regular course of nature then must be held together by an extrinsic power, namely God. Existence, properties, and operations depend at every moment on God's will and power. This required each element of creation to be distinct and separate, including the body, soul and their respective accidents. Some scholars, such as Hamza Karamali, have used the term contingent object instead of substance as a more accurate translation of *jawahir* (substance) and one which is in better conversation with modern philosophy (al-Ghazālī, 2000; Karamali, 2018).

In so far as intrinsic powers are removed from nature, the Islamic critique of Aristotelianism parallels similar critiques in the western tradition, Hume's debunking of necessary causation. The primary difference here lies in the western view lacking the occasionist framework which secured the regularity of nature. Modern empiricism lacks such an extrinsic causal power, relying solely on the habit of nature (Hume, 2007; Muhtaroğlu, 2017a).

In addition to the difference in how things interact, there is the difference in what types of things actually exist. The cartesian view consists of only material

and mind, whereas the Kalam view consists of three overlapping entities, material and immaterial substances and their respective accidents. This provides a superior explanatory framework than cartesian dualism (Descartes, 1984; Winter, 2008).

7. A Panpsychitic Solution and the Kalam Tradition

One physicalist solution to the modern scientific inability to account for consciousness is Panpsychism. It is an increasingly popular alternative to reductive materialism. To accommodate for the existence of consciousness in the universe, it adds it as a building block of nature. It considers consciousness to be an independently existing entity along with such things as matter and energy. As Philip Goff defines it, “Panpsychism is the view that consciousness is a fundamental and ubiquitous feature of the physical world.” Consciousness is in fact, the intrinsic nature of material objects (Goff, 2024, p. 55; Strawson, 2008, pp. 53-74).

Panpsychism faces the combination problem. If there are basic particles or physical entities with tiny units of consciousness, how do they combine to form a unified experience of consciousness in human beings? Chalmers asks how is it that microexperiences come together to “*yield the macrophenomenal structure of consciousness?*” (Chalmers, 2017, p. 183; Seager, 2017)

By distributing consciousness throughout the physical world, it avoids cartesian dualism. It no longer needs to explain how consciousness emerges from wholly unconscious matter, by affirming the existence of two ontologically distinct entities, namely “consciousness” and “material.” But it must now explain how countless fragments of consciousness become the unified experience of a single person. In a sense, panpsychism is just missing the third entity, namely the *jawahir al-latif*, the subtle immaterial substance which will be the subject of conscious experience, as explained below (Chalmers, 2017; Goff, 2019).

8. Kalām and the Mind-Body Problem: Bringing It Together

The preceding sections have outlined how a branch of Islamic theology offers an ontology distinct from both reductive materialism and Cartesian dualism by affirming the reality of the body, the soul, and also of accidents. Cartesian dualism, as we’ve seen, defines the soul primarily through thought, where thought can include not only reasoning but doubting, willing, imagining, sensing, etc. In this sense, Cartesian dualism makes conscious mental activity the *defining* mark of the soul. Although it would be somewhat anachronistic to say that Descartes simply equates the soul with “consciousness” in the modern sense, the formulation is still useful insofar as Descartes defines the soul primarily through its conscious operations (Descartes, 1984).

In contrast, Kalām provides a comprehensive ontological structure required for conscious experience to exist. The human being is composed of a material substance, immaterial substance, and accidents that are inherent in these substances. With this framework in place, we are now prepared to ask: what solutions, if any, can this account provide for the modern mind-body problem (al-Ghazālī, 2023;

Winter, 2008)?

Although the philosophical category of accidents may seem merely semantic, it is in fact an important philosophical nuance that provides several advantages. This category allows Kalam to distinguish between the soul and body on the one hand, but also between the soul and its various cognitive and volitional capacities, including thought, feelings, perceptions, and so on. The distinction allows them to argue that mental capacities belong to the soul just as physical properties belong to a physical substance. Kalam therefore provides what we might call a layered ontology: bodies and souls are kinds of substances, and each may possess accidents appropriate to their mode of being (al-Ghazālī, 2023; al-Taftāzānī, 1950).

When it comes to thinking through the relationships between the mind and the brain, this layered ontology gives Kalam a significant philosophical advantage over reductive materialism and Cartesian dualism. Kalām affirms that subjective experience is real and that it cannot be reduced to matter. In addition it postulates an underlying subject, i.e. the soul. Certain features of subjective experience seem to require a unified subject, the soul accounts for the subject. Ghazali writes, “there must be something which apprehends (mudrik)” (al-Ghazālī, 2023, p. 15).

In a broadly Kantian sense, experience is not a collection of disconnected and discrete sensations. Instead, it is a unified field of awareness. Kalam interprets this unity metaphysically by locating mental accidents in the underlying subject, the soul (Kant, 1998).

9. Neuroscientific Applications

A kalām account allows for more nuance in explaining the relationship of the brain to the soul than does cartesian dualism. In the Kalam account some types of immaterial experiences maybe considered accidents (ar’ad) of the brain (jism). These may include things such as color or pain, since the brain may respond to these without necessarily being aware of them. However, second order consciousness which requires being aware of the content of sensations would then be an accident/idrak of the soul (jism latif).

According to contemporary neuroscience, certain areas of the brain correspond to various sense perceptions. This is generally known as neural correlates of consciousness. For example, visual stimuli activate the occipital cortex, and pain is associated with firing of C-fibers. These neural correlates may simply be accidents of the brain (Dubin & Patapoutian, 2010).

In order for one to be aware of the pain, however, and interpret it as suffering for example, requires an additional second order process elsewhere in the brain. The system responsible for this is termed the, default mode network (DMN). This is a set of generally midline cortical structures of the brain. For example, once vision is seen, and pain is perceived, it is processed via the DMN which allows for a higher order understanding of the meaning of the experience. Psychiatrists often use neurotransmitters such as dopamine and seratonin to treat disorders related to over or under activation of the DMN. These findings support the idea that ex-

perience is not a simple one-level phenomenon but a complex multi-layered phenomenon (Buckner et al., 2008).

The higher-order self-referential interpretation, essentially the function of the DMN, seems to align closely with the function of the soul in the kalam tradition. Whereas simple first order conscious experiences may simply be accidents belonging to the brain (Buckner et al., 2008).

A physicalist may respond that the DMN and other neural systems are themselves physical processes. Kalām can accept this point without accepting reductionism. The issue is not whether neural processes are involved; clearly they are. The issue is whether the conscious experience of pain, suffering, meaning, and self-awareness is identical with those processes. Kalām denies this identity. It holds instead that bodily and neurological processes provide the conditions and occasions for these experiences (which are accidents of either the brain or the soul). The experience itself is non-physical and requires a non-physical subject. The soul is the subject in which higher-order conscious accidents inhere. The fact that the qualitative experience and neurological processes coincide is simply due to Divine habit. In terms, Ghazali or Islamic occasionalists will explain, they are held together by Divine power and will on every occasion. Just like other causes and effects are held together in the natural world without any empirical observation to confirm their connection (al-Ghazālī, 2000; Muhtaroğlu, 2017b).

10. Mind & Matter Obey the Same “Laws”

Unlike cartesianism, kalam theology is able to apply the “laws of nature” to its ontology of the soul, without having to go outside it. The cartesian view only allowed natural laws to apply to material, whereas the mind was just a collection of qualitative features not following physical laws. This created the type of radical dualism which became impossible to bridge (al-Ghazālī, 2000; Descartes, 1984).

This gives kalām an advantage over a strict Cartesian dualism. Cartesian dualism tends to place all conscious qualities in the separate domain of mind or soul, thereby making it difficult to account for the deep dependence of ordinary experience upon the body and brain. Kalām offers a more layered account. It can affirm that the brain has physical accidents essential to sensation, emotion, and cognition, while also maintaining that unified conscious apprehension belongs to the soul. Thus, kalām can take neuroscience and consciousness seriously within a unified system of understanding both ontology and causation (al-Ghazālī, 2023; Winter, 2008).

Some have argued that, in fact, the Kalam view laid the foundation for modern science by allowing each discrete entity to be studied separately, and having bodies be “particularized forms of prime matter” as taught by *falasifa* and Aristotle. This simplicity of this ontology can be extended to neuroscience to include the study of the brain and consciousness. The brain can be studied as a physical organ with its own accidents and regularities, while consciousness can be studied in a broader ontology that includes the soul and its accidents. In this way, Kalam provides us a

way to conduct scientific inquiry without reducing the person to the brain alone (Griffel, 2021; Muhtaroglu & Koca, 2017).

Kalam also reframes the interaction problem. Whereas Cartesian dualism and modern science struggle because they assume that there are two radically different mechanisms for the material and thinking substances. Kalam posits that both work in exactly the same way. All substances act because of God's will. For example, the regularity of physical events exists because God sustains those associations. The relationship between mind and soul, therefore, is not more mysterious than any other type of causal relation. This does not mean that the relationship between body and soul is arbitrary. Divine custom establishes a stable and intelligible order. Human beings normally experience the world through bodily organs. Damage to the brain affects memory, perception, emotion, and personality. These facts are not denied by kalām. They are part of the regular order God has created. What kalām denies is the reductionist conclusion that the soul is therefore unnecessary or that consciousness is nothing but the brain. The dependence of ordinary human experience upon bodily conditions does not prove that the human person is identical with the body. It only shows that, in this life, the soul's operations are deeply associated with the body (al-Ghazālī, 2000; Muhtaroglu, 2017b).

The advantage of kalām's layered ontology is not merely that it is more elaborate than Cartesian dualism, but that it allows us to distinguish questions that Cartesianism tends to collapse. In the Cartesian framework, the soul is identified with thought, while the body is identified with extension. As a result, conscious experience is placed wholly on the side of the soul, while bodily processes are placed wholly on the side of mechanism. Kalām offers a more flexible account. It distinguishes the soul from its mental accidents, the body from its physical accidents, and both from the divine causality that sustains their ordered correlation. This allows kalām to affirm the neurological conditions of sensation, emotion, and cognition without reducing subjective experience to the brain, and to affirm the soul as the subject of experience without identifying the soul with consciousness itself. All the while the same set of laws govern all substances and accidents.

This gives kalām a specific advantage in relation to the contemporary mind-body problem. It can accommodate the empirical fact that conscious life is deeply dependent upon bodily and neurological processes, while still denying that such dependence amounts to identity. Brain states may be necessary conditions for ordinary human experience, but they need not be the ultimate subject of experience. The soul remains the underlying subject in which higher-order mental acts (*idrak*) such as awareness, interpretation, self-consciousness, and intellection inhere. In this way, kalām avoids both the reductionism of materialism and the rigidity of Cartesian dualism.

As we can see here, Kalam is providing a more nuanced and integrated anthropology than either Cartesian dualism or modern science. Here, the human being is neither a ghost in a machine nor a machine producing the illusion of consciousness. Instead, a human is composed of various substances of both body and soul,

with accidents pertaining to each. Physical and mental processes each play their part in conscious experience, but ultimately conscious life occurs through divinely sustained relations between the bodily and spiritual dimensions of a human.

11. The Limits of Kalam, and the Role of Akbarian Metaphysics

Kalam dualism offers a coherent and workable model of reality. However, taken at face value, it remains unsatisfying as a complete explanation of what reality ultimately is. While it may function as a useful framework, it does not fully address the intrinsic nature of the entities it seeks to describe.

In Kalam theology, the elements of reality, namely *jawāhir* and *aʿrāḍ*, remain distinct and disconnected from each other and from God. The relationship between these elements is held together through occasionalism. This allows Kalam to explain how reality functions without committing to necessary causation and without limiting any of God's powers. It explains how things work, but it does not fully explain what reality is. Instead, it leaves reality divided into substances, accidents, and divine intervention (al-Ghazālī, 2000; Winter, 2008).

This section argues that Akbarian metaphysics provides a more integrated account of reality and the human being. Within the Islamic philosophical tradition, this view is most clearly articulated by the Andalusian philosopher Ibn ʿArabī and his student Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī. This view may be described as hierarchical monism because it understands reality as a unified structure of manifestation rather than as a collection of separate substances (Nettler, 2003; Spiker, 2021; Taş, 2024). In fact, many Kalam theologians were themselves inclined towards Akbarianism in terms of an ultimate understanding of the world (Spiker 2021).

The Akbarian framework roots itself in the Islamic and Qurʾanic tradition, while also drawing on earlier Muslim theologians such as Imam al-Ghazālī. In fact, the Kalam tradition may be seen as giving way to the Akbarian tradition in the post-classical Islamic period. While Kalam offers a useful model, Akbarian metaphysics aims to move beyond a merely workable framework toward an account of things as they truly are (Adamson, 2016; Dumairieh, 2021; El-Rouayheb, 2015; Griffel, 2021; Nettler, 2003; Spevack, 2025, pp. 1-16).

The Kalam modification of Aristotelianism separated form from matter, making the connection between substance and accident tentative rather than necessary. The Kalam theologians avoided granting essence to bodies because they feared that doing so would potentially limit God's power and will. The Aristotelian framework, in which form and body were inextricably linked, was therefore modified. Kalam disconnected form from body. The solution to their connection was found via occasionalism. However, the fragmentation had been created (Griffel, 2021; Muhtaroglu & Koca, 2017; Winter, 2008).

This separation made the theory powerful in one sense, because it protected divine omnipotence. However, it also made the theory susceptible to problems of interaction and to Occam's Razor. Occam's Razor, which advocates for the sim-

plest explanation, is often used in modern scientific discourse to discount metaphysical components of reality.

Although occasionalism provided an external mechanism for their connection, it nevertheless created the environment in which physicalism could eventually emerge. If the external connection is treated as unnecessary, reality can collapse into a purely physical account. Once the connection between substance and accident becomes extrinsic, later thinkers can begin to see the external mechanism itself as redundant.

This is why Kalam, though coherent, remains incomplete. It gives a model of dependence on God, but the elements of reality remain fragmented. Substances and accidents are treated as distinct, and the unity of reality is not fully explained from within the system itself.

12. Are Created Substances Really Distinct from Accidents?

Ibn Arabi's critique of the Kalam distinction between substance and accident exposes a major tension in their metaphysics. The kalam theologians correctly recognized that accidents are created moment by moment by God and therefore do not subsist in themselves. However, they failed to see that what they call a "substance" is nothing over and above the sum of its accidents (Ibn al-'Arabī, 2015).

According to Ibn Arabi, the accidents constitute the full definition and identity of a thing. There is no additional entity hidden beneath them. He writes (Ibn al-'Arabī, 2015).

Asharites did not realize that the whole cosmos is a sum of accidents, so that it is transformed in every duration, since the accident does not last for more than one duration... (Bezels of Wisdom, 154) (Ibn al-'Arabī, 2015, pp. 180-181)

This creates a paradox: non-self-subsisting accidents, once gathered together, are treated as though they reside in a self-subsisting substance. But if reality is only a set of accidents, then positing an extra substance adds nothing to the thing's identity. The substance of the Kalam theologians becomes an empty concept, a metaphysical placeholder rather than a real explanatory substance (Ibn al-'Arabī, 2015).

While Ashari/Maturidi kalam successfully defended Sunni doctrine against philosophical objections, it remained constrained by the very Aristotelian metaphysics it sought to reform. A more coherent account of reality requires moving beyond the substance-accident framework altogether. This is where Platonic and Akbarian metaphysics offers a more coherent universal framework. This framework finds some precursors in the original works of Ibn Sina and Ghazali (Nettler, 2003; Taş, 2024).

For Ibn Arabi, true self-subsistence belongs only to God, the Real Existent, whose existence is not dependent on anything else. This same critique can be applied to *jawhar laṭīf*, the "subtle substance" sometimes used to explain the soul. If the soul is treated as a hidden substratum beneath the self, it risks becoming another empty concept. The "I" therefore functions less like a discoverable substance

and more like a central point of reference, similar in some ways to Kant's account of the "I think" (Ibn al-ʿArabī, 2015; Kant, 1998).

Yet for Ibn ʿArabī, self-awareness is not merely psychological. It is a manifestation of a higher metaphysical reality, rooted in an immaterial and ontologically superior level of being. The reality of the "I" in this world is the sum of its accidents, which are themselves manifestations of its reality in a higher ontological realm (Ibn al-ʿArabī, 2015; Nettler, 2003).

13. From Working Model to Things as They Actually Are

The Akbarian view overcomes the limitations of Kalam by making essence contingent upon God (who is the only self-subsisting substance) and the body a manifestation of that essence. Rather than treating reality as a collection of disconnected elements held together externally by occasionalism, Akbarian metaphysics presents reality as unified in an organic way while still remaining consistent with orthodox Islamic doctrine (Ibn al-ʿArabī, 2015; Nettler, 2003).

In many respects, this framework resembles idealism. Rather than treating the material world as fundamentally real, it understands physical reality, including substances and properties, as the manifestation of a deeper spiritual reality. The human being, in this view, is intrinsically immaterial and appears in the physical world as a body endowed with attributes (Nettler, 2003; Taş, 2024).

A key advantage of this approach is that it dissolves the traditional interaction problem. Instead of positing multiple distinct substances that must somehow causally interact, Akbarian metaphysics reinterprets multiplicity as manifestation rather than division. What appears as interaction is simply the unfolding of a single underlying reality across different levels (Dumairieh, 2021; Ibn al-ʿArabī, 2015; Nettler, 2003).

This view shares some similarities with panpsychism, which argues that consciousness is the intrinsic nature of material things, it differs in an important respect. Panpsychism typically operates within a broadly physicalist framework, whereas the Akbarian model is explicitly hierarchical and metaphysical. Reality is structured in layers, each level manifesting the one above it, much like the hierarchical ontology found in Platonic philosophy (Goff, 2019; Nettler, 2003).

The Akbarian framework can be clarified through comparison with Plato and Aristotle. In Plato's view, true reality is immaterial and consists of eternal, unchanging Forms, while the physical world derives its existence from them. This avoids the problem of granting equal ontological footing to form and matter, as occurs in Aristotle's scheme (Aristotle, 1984).

Similarly, the Akbarian framework describes a hierarchy in which the human being unfolds through successive levels of manifestation (Nettler, 2003; Spiker, 2023; Taş, 2024).

Fixed Essence → Rational Spirit → Imaginal Soul → Physical Body

At each stage, the same underlying reality appears in a different mode. The human being is therefore not composed of separate substances, but is a single reality

disclosed across multiple ontological levels. The physical body is a manifestation of the soul, which exists in a higher ontological realm (Nettler, 2003; Taş, 2024).

This leads to a fundamental contrast with dualist models such as those of Descartes or Kalam theologians, in which all of existence is treated as belonging to the same ontological domain. In Akbarian ontology, the soul and body are not distinct entities that interact. Rather, they are different expressions of one unified human self. What appears to be interaction is simply the same reality manifesting in different forms (Ibn al-‘Arabi, 2015; Nettler, 2003).

This also avoids a paradox within Aristotle’s ontology. Aristotle holds that reality is composed of particulars made up of a combination of form and matter, known as hylomorphism. Yet he also maintains that universals, such as essence or form, can be known as distinct from any particular body. If particulars are considered the basic building blocks of existence, it is not clear how universals can exist independently and separately from particulars (Aristotle, 1984; Spevack, 2025).

Aristotle is trying to hold on to immaterial form while moving toward an ontology in which reality is made up of particulars. This view lends itself to the later development of reductionism, in which reality becomes only physical. The Akbarian model avoids this by preserving the immateriality of essence without making it a separate substance that must interact with matter. Matter is simply the manifestation of the intrinsic essence (Aristotle, 1984).

14. Epistemology of the Self

How can one know that the world is organized in hierarchical monism? Akbarian metaphysics requires an epistemology beyond empirical observation, reason and revelation. It emphasizes introspection, or unveiling (*kashf*), as a source of knowledge. Ibn Sina’s Flying Man thought experiment, which argues that self-awareness can be known without sensory experience, implies knowledge of the immaterial self gained without empirical means. The Akbarian view builds upon this by adding that one has access to deeper levels of knowledge beyond simple self-awareness (Avicenna, 1959; Nettler, 2003).

Immanuel Kant’s challenge to this view is well known, and widely accepted in contemporary times. He argues that introspection reveals only appearances within inner experience, not the true nature of the self. According to Kant, introspection yields a stream of representations rather than access to a stable substance such as the soul (Kant, 1998; Spiker, 2022).

This criticism is not as damaging to Ibn Arabi’s ontology because Akbarian metaphysics does not insist on the soul being a substance in an immanent sense. The Kantian challenge to the existence of the soul substance is weakened when the insistence on “soul substance” is removed. In the Akbarian view, the self is not a hidden object discovered beneath experience, in a dualist sense. The self is, rather, a manifestation of a higher ontological reality, in an idealist sense (Kant, 1998; Nettler, 2003).

Even if the nature of the self as a substance is set aside, introspection remains a source of knowledge about subjectivity. It provides access to features such as awareness, the unity of consciousness, and intentionality that cannot be reduced to external observation. At this point, Kant's restriction of metaphysical knowledge on the basis of the limits of human cognition becomes relevant. This restriction is itself open to criticism, however, because Kant's account makes substantive claims about the nature and limits of cognition while simultaneously denying that cognition can attain knowledge beyond the conditions of possible experience. Spiker argues that this creates a metacritical problem for Kant's project: the critique of metaphysics must itself justify the epistemic standpoint from which it limits metaphysical knowledge (Spiker, 2022).

15. Neuroscience and Akbarian Metaphysics

A challenge arises, however, from modern neuroscience. If the body is merely a manifestation of the soul, how can changes in the physical brain, such as alterations in neurotransmitters, affect mental states?

The Akbarian view does not deny this relationship. Instead, it understands the human being as an integrated system in which different levels remain interconnected. Physical changes in the body can correspond to changes in mental states because body and soul are not two unrelated substances. They are different levels of one unified reality (Nettler, 2003).

The human being must therefore balance the lower animal, and higher angelic aspects of the self. Through this balance, the human being can orient themselves toward higher spiritual realization. The physical body is not rejected, but it is also not treated as the ultimate basis of the self. It is one level of the human being's manifestation (Nettler, 2003).

This allows the Akbarian model to accommodate neuroscientific findings without reducing consciousness to brain activity. Brain states matter, but in no way do they exhaust the reality of the self (Nettler, 2003).

16. David Chalmers, Cosmic Idealism, and Ibn "Arabī"

The progression from Kalam to Akbarian ontology in Islamic theology mirrors developments in contemporary philosophy of mind. David Chalmers quotes the following statement (Chalmers, 2020).

"One starts as a materialist, then one becomes a dualist, then a panpsychist, and one ends up as an idealist" (Chalmers, 2020, p. 353).

In this paper, the development of various philosophies of mind from physicalism to dualism to panpsychism to Kalam dualism is traced, finally culminating with Akbarian idealism, or hierarchical monism. This view is not too different from the conclusion that Chalmers himself reaches (Chalmers, 2020).

Chalmers argues that cosmic idealism, the view that reality is grounded in a universal consciousness, deserves serious consideration. He writes (Chalmers, 2020).

No position on the mind-body problem is plausible. Materialism is implausible. Dualism is implausible. Idealism is implausible. Neutral monism is implausible. None-of-the-above is implausible. But the probabilities of all of these views get a boost from the fact that one of them must be true. Idealism is not greatly less plausible than its main competitors. So even though idealism is implausible, there is a non-negligible probability that it is true (Chalmers, 2020, p. 373).

Cosmic idealism holds that individual minds are localized expressions of a broader cosmic mentality. In this respect, it closely parallels Akbarian monism, where all existence is understood as a manifestation of the Divine, the only true bearer of existence (Chalmers, 2020; Nettler, 2003).

17. Decombination Problem for Heirarchial Monism

Both views face a decombination problem: how can distinct individual consciousnesses arise from a single universal consciousness? Whereas panpsychism struggles to explain how many foci of consciousness could combine into one consciousness, the problem for cosmic idealism is how one consciousness could divide into many separate conscious subjects (Chalmers, 2020).

Chalmers addresses this through cosmopsychism, suggesting that individual minds are grounded in the mental states of a cosmic subject. A similar solution in the Akbarian system can be offered where God is substituted for the cosmic subject, and individually self-aware minds are manifestations of created fixed essences. Put differently, just as primordial matter may be conceived as differentiating into a plurality of distinct material substances, a single fundamental consciousness may likewise be conceived as differentiating into a plurality of subordinate centers of conscious subjectivity (Chalmers, 2020; Nettler, 2003).

18. Conclusion

The Kalam ontology provides a comprehensive integrated understanding of the physical, mental and spiritual elements of the human being. It provides a superior model for human essence and existence, which is compatible with rationality and natural scientific research concerning neural networks and mechanisms. The Kalam ontology is distinct from both Cartesian dualism and Aristotelian hylo-morphism, avoiding their pitfalls. It shares some features with Modern scientific understanding of material, but provides two additional ontologic entities, namely an immaterial substance and immaterial accidents. These three entities together open up a myriad of possibilities of neuroscientific research which does not directly conflict with theology. Instead, it provides a complete cohesive workable framework which allows for a comprehensive working understanding of human nature.

Whereas kalām offers a coherent and workable metaphysical model, Akbarian metaphysics seeks to ground that model within a more unified account of reality. This view affirms the extra-mental existence of the body, and places it as manifestations of the human self. This view obviates problems of mind-body interaction

by making multiplicity subordinated to unity. Human essence, and thus meaning, is restored to human materiality within a cosmic idealist framework. In the realm of science, this view offers compatibility, as it does not violate any of the “natural” law, rather enriches and provides metaphysical depth to the material world.

In fact, atomism can be considered a precursor to Modern science, providing a workable model of reality. It resembled a physicalist ontology, while still preserving certain metaphysical features. However, these metaphysical features were separable from material, which makes it susceptible to the slow emergence of physicalism. On the contrary, in the Akbarian system the metaphysical features of reality are not separable. They are in fact essential to its very existence on which it completely depends, in a more logically coherent manner than in Aristotelian hylomorphism. Although the decombination problem requires overcoming, it is a powerful theory. It helps obviate the interaction problems associated with dualist theories, in favor of the simplicity of hierarchical monism.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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