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The Axiomatization (*Taq'id*) of the Critical Method (*Manhaj al-Naqd*) of Hadith Scholars: Responding to Anti-Intellectualism

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ABSTRACT

The Criteria of Authenticity (shurut al-sihha), as a set of rules (qawa'id), has in recent years come under severe scrutiny by contemporary hadith scholarship. This article will investigate one line of criticism which rejects the goal of developing theoretical rules (al-tanzir) altogether, and instead encourages the applied work (al-tatbiq) of analyzing Prophetic statements. This article will provide an epistemic analysis of the objection which situates it within a broadly anti-intellectualist framework. I will then respond to the objection by suggesting a different conception (tasawwur) of qawa'id and then arguing that the relationship between knowledge of theoretical rules, and knowledge in the form of skills or abilities, helps rebut, or at least weakens their objection. Finally, I will show that the critical method (manhaj al-naqd) of hadith scholars is an epistemic apparatus (ala ma'rifiyya), which aids those who apply it, in reasoning properly and protects them from making errors in epistemic judgement.

Keywords: *Criteria of Authenticity, Epistemology, Hadith, Rules, Skills.*

The Criteria of Authenticity (*shurut al-sihha*), or the CA, as a set of rules (*qawa'id*), has in recent years come under severe scrutiny by contemporary hadith scholarship. While a more robust historical analysis is still needed to make sense of this intellectual upheaval, for the time being, it will suffice to attribute this to a perceived weakness in the criteria themselves. According to the line of reasoning attributable to these critics, the CA does not help us accurately assess which testimonies are authentic (*sahih*) and which are not, nor does it help us manage hadith; such that we can practically and accurately choose the correct wording of one version of a Prophetic statement over another. If this is true, this is deeply threatening to the CA as an epistemic apparatus (*ala ma'rifiyya*), which ultimately purports to guide those who wish to engage in the critical evaluation of hadith in how to reason properly, and to protect them from making errors in epistemic judgement.

This contemporary debate around the *qawa'id* of classical hadith scholarship is still imprecise and has yet to settle. While it is far too early in this debate for us to speak of clearly defined views, nevertheless, there are clear lines of reasoning that have emerged. The hope is that this article will help further demarcate the exact dispute (*tahrir mahall al-niza'*) and provide solutions to part of the disagreement.

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Given the purported shortcomings of the CA mentioned above, one line of reasoning that has emerged rejects the axiomatization (*taq'id*) and stipulations (*istilahat*) of the classical period and instead encourages a renewed focus on how the early community of hadith scholars approached their epistemic work. This argument rests upon the idea that classical hadith scholars failed at formalizing the system and work of preclassical hadith scholars. While this argument is multi-faceted, it ultimately rejects the CA not because it is a formalized list of rules and criteria, rather it rejects it because it claims that the CA doesn't match the complex informal epistemic work performed by the early generations. One can further subcategorize this objection into a weaker and stronger form of the objection. The stronger form rejects outright the *taq'id* and *istilahat* of the classical period, while the weaker form rejects only certain forms of *taq'id* and *istilahat* and accept others.

A second line of reasoning rejects the goal of *taq'id* altogether, and instead encourages the applied work (*al-tatbiq*) of analyzing Prophetic statements. Although objections of this sort might agree with the first line of reasoning mentioned above, they seem to take it a step further. To them, any type of *taq'id* will ultimately fail, since managing and analyzing testimonies is not the type of work that can be formalized. They prefer instead to keep the epistemological work informal and skill oriented.

In this article, I will focus on the second objection. I will first motivate this objection to the CA and then provide an epistemic analysis that situates it within a broadly *anti-intellectualist* framework. I will then respond to the objection by suggesting a different conception (*tasawwur*) of *qawa'id* and then argue that the relationship between propositional knowledge, vis a vis knowledge of theoretical rules, and knowledge-how, in the form of skills or abilities, helps rebut, or at least weakens their objection. Finally, I will show that the critical method (*manhaj al-naqd*) of hadith scholars, as exemplified by the CA, is an epistemic apparatus (*ala ma'rifiyya*), which aids those who apply it in reasoning properly and protects them from making errors in epistemic judgement.

Motivating the Objection

It is helpful to think of the second objection as being made up of two parts: the problem and the solution. As for the problem, it involves pointing out that the *qawa'id* of the CA do not live up to what they claim to be. This argument rests upon the idea that *qawa'id* are defined as universals that apply to all their particulars (Al-Jurjani, 1985, p. 177). However, the purported *qawa'id* of the CA do not apply to every instance of hadith evaluation. In fact, there are countless hadith that break the purported *qawa'id* of the CA and therefore are not sound *qawa'id* for hadith criticism and evaluation.

We find echoes of this argument in the works of classical sources as well. For example, Ibn al-'Ajami (2016, pp. 26–27), in his gloss on al-Suyuti's, *Tadrib al-Rawi*, and Munla Hanafi (2021, pp. 35–36) both critique the idea of *qawa'id* of hadith criticism and whether they are indeed universal. Although contemporary critics are not basing their arguments on the work of classical scholars, it is nevertheless important to stress that this line of reasoning has persisted over time.

However, to truly understand this second objection, we must look beyond how the problem is characterized to the proposed solution. According to proponents of this view, early hadith scholars had the right idea in mind when they simply engaged in hadith criticism informally, in an applied fashion (*'amali/tatbiqi*), without trying to pin down any theoretical or formally axiomatized system. It was a mistake for classical scholars to try and make sense of the vast work performed by preclassical scholars through the expression of the CA.

Once again, opponents of the CA find support for this type of argument in the works of hadith scholars themselves. A common analogy used by hadith scholars, even in the classical era of the CA, is to liken their work to that of a goldsmith (Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, 2019, p. 92). The idea is that a goldsmith will be able to tell apart true gold from fool's gold, *intuitively*. He will not be able to explain to you the details of how he came to know, he just does. It took years of training and working with gold to gain that ability. If these opponents of the CA are right, and the work of hadith scholars is

ultimately like the work of a goldsmith, then formalization and the theoretical study (*al-taq'id wa al-tanzir*) of hadith criticism is a misinformed and incorrect method.

Although I ultimately disagree with this thesis, it is not as far-fetched as it might seem. Consider someone telling you that in order for you to learn to ride a bike, that you should sit and study the rules of riding a bike. Intuitively and experientially, most of us would find this silly and instead recommend that you get on the bike and learn through practice. The spirit of the second objection is motivated by a similar type of concern.

They find anecdotal support for this thesis in the inability of famous early hadith scholars to sometimes put into words why they rejected certain hadith and not others. When criticized for their rejection without some clear form of reasoning, they would tell their critics to ask other famous hadith scholars. Surprisingly, their judgements would all match (Al-Hakim al-Naysaburi, 2003, pp. 360–361). All of this served to cloak hadith scholarship in a shroud of mystery and mystique. These opponents of the CA do not think that hadith scholarship can or should be formalized. According to them, it should be informally applied, practiced, and lived, and in that way, it will be passed on from generation to generation.

While contemporary critics of the CA sometimes seem to indicate a total rejection of the theorization, formalization, and axiomatization of the classical era, at other times, they temper their assertions to a more limited scope. Similarly, while some of what they say concerning the possibility of theorization, formalization, and axiomatization indicates a more extreme view, rejecting it outright, at other times, their view is tempered with assertions that the theorization, formalization, and axiomatization of the classical era is useful as an introduction to the field.

Al-'Awni (1996, pp. 171–281), al-Muhammadi (2021, pp. 1–2), al-Sa'd (2018), Abu Samha (2012, pp. 19–25), and al-Malibari (2003, pp. 11–20) are all critics of the CA. Each of their approaches is different. Many of them seem to accept *taq'id* in theory, even if they object to certain expressions of it by classical scholars. This would render their work more akin to the first line of reasoning. However, despite this, the second line of reasoning, which rejects *taq'id* altogether, is still present in their writing to various degrees. I surmise that this is because popular views on this topic have yet to settle and therefore clear distinctions have not yet formed. Clarifying that ambiguity is one of the objectives of this article, to further demarcate the exact dispute (*tahrir mahall al-niza'*). In my estimation, serious scholars of hadith cannot embrace this second line of reasoning, due to all the negative consequences that it entails. If we can all agree on that, then the area of disagreement shrinks to which *qawa'id* are acceptable and which aren't. That would render the dispute much more manageable.

Responding to Objections

In order to properly respond to this objection, it is instructive to first offer an epistemic analysis of what is driving the criticism. If we take this line of reasoning to its natural conclusion, opponents of the CA are asserting that the epistemic work of preclassical hadith scholars cannot be reduced to *qawa'id*. Not only are the *qawa'id* of classical scholars incapable of representing the *manhaj al-naqd* of their predecessors, the *manhaj al-naqd* of the preclassical scholars is simply not the type of epistemic work that can be reduced.

Characterized in this fashion, the second objection ends up cohering well with what has been dubbed *anti-intellectualism*. *Anti-intellectualism* in the context of contemporary anglophone epistemology can be characterized as the view “that knowledge-how is irreducible to knowledge-that.” (Brownstein & Michaelson, 2016) In less technical terms, skills do not ultimately reduce to theoretical knowledge. This coheres well with the objection under epistemic analysis; the *manhaj al-naqd* of preclassical scholars is simply not the type of epistemic work that can be reduced. This idea rests upon the assumption that the skill (*malaka*) of preclassical hadith scholars is simply irreducible to *qawa'id*.

Having motivated the objection and provided an analysis of what the objection ultimately hinges upon, we can now turn to responding to both the problem and the proposed solution. As for the purported problem, that the *qawa'id* of the CA do not apply to every instance of hadith evaluation and therefore are not sound, this argument only works if we accept their characterization and definition of *qawa'id*. Although it is true that *qawa'id* are sometimes taken to mean universals that apply to all their particulars, that is not the only way that the technical term *qawa'id* is used. According to an alternative understanding and definition, *qawa'id* are defined as universal propositions (*qadaya kulliyya*) from which particular rulings (*ahkam*) are derived (Al-Fanari, 2023, p. 146).

In contrast to the first definition, the second definition does not necessitate that every instance of hadith evaluation fall under any given axiom. Instead, the second definition puts forward a much milder characterization of *qawa'id*, they are merely universal propositions that could, in theory, be used to derive particular rulings. This second definition and characterization of *qawa'id* avoids the problem put forward by the critics of the CA altogether. It is this second definition that better coheres with how classical scholars used the concept of *qawa'id* in the CA.

Before responding to the proposed solution, it behooves us to unpack their claim that the correct way to teach the *manhaj al-naqd* of hadith scholars is through application and practice (*al-'amal wa al-tatbiq*), without recourse to any theoretical or formally axiomatized system (*al-taq'id wa al-tanzir*). This claim can be read in one of two ways. The first is to say that formalization is a mistake, in that it isn't pedagogically sufficient, or perhaps that it is not even pedagogically useful. Alternatively, the argument can be read as a rejection of the idea that the skills/abilities (*malakat*) of hadith scholars of the preclassical era can be entirely reduced to *qawa'id*.

In response, I will begin by stating that regardless of which reading is intended, this line of criticism against the CA is misguided. All that needs to be proven in order to defend the formal framework of the CA, and thus repel the force of the objection, is that there is *some truthful relationship* between the *qawa'id* of the CA and the informal and applied work of preclassical hadith scholars. Whether or not the formalization of the *manhaj al-naqd* of hadith scholars and the *taq'id* of its rules is pedagogically sufficient, and whether or not the skills/abilities (*malakat*) of hadith scholars of the preclassical era can be wholly reduced to *qawa'id*, both questions do not need to be answered in order to defend the CA.

I do not mean that these stronger theses and questions are superfluous or unimportant, far from it. In fact, I find these questions incredibly worthwhile and important. These questions deserve attention and further research. In fact, these types of inquiries have parallels in contemporary anglophone epistemology and philosophy (Maier, 2022; Pavese, 2022; Roland, 1958; Ryle, 2009, pp. 14–48). The difference between axioms, rules, criteria, knowledge-that, knowledge-how, dispositions, habits, skills, and abilities, are topics of great concern in the contemporary literature.

However, the bar that needs to be met to repel the objection does not require answering these big questions, because no one is claiming that the *qawa'id* of the CA are pedagogically sufficient, nor is anyone claiming that the *manhaj al-naqd* of hadith scholars is *entirely* reducible to the *qawa'id* of the CA. There seems to be an assumption by these critics, that proponents of the classical CA think that the skills/abilities (*malakat*) associated with the *manhaj al-naqd* of preclassical hadith scholars completely reduce to these *qawa'id*. But that is much too strong of a claim, and I doubt any proponent of the CA holds such a view. Rather, the claim is that these *qawa'id* represent *part* of the broader *manhaj al-naqd* of hadith scholars and are a work in progress. Thus, there is *some truthful relationship* between the *qawa'id* of the CA, and the target under analysis; the *manhaj al-naqd* of preclassical hadith scholars. This much weaker claim should be uncontroversial.

Finally, given the existence of a metaphilosophical analysis of the relationship between skills (*malakat*) and *qawa'id* in the Islamic tradition, it is instructive to consider what Islamic scholars have said about the relationship between theoretical knowledge and applied knowledge. Islamic scholars often characterize the word knowledge (*'ilm*) as being one of three things: a cognition, a science, or a

skill/ability (*malaka*) (Al-Kafawi, 1998, pp. 615–616; Al-Siyalkuti, 1911, p. 104; Al-Tahanawi, 1996, pp. 3–5). Given the subject matter of our investigation, it is this third usage of knowledge, knowledge as a *malaka*, that concerns us most. We will thus primarily rely on that meaning and will secondarily engage with knowledge as a science.

When expositing what knowledge as a *malaka* is, Islamic scholars characterize it as being gained through the knowledge of particulars or through repetition. This idea of knowledge of particulars yielding a *malaka*, or repetition yielding a *malaka*, directly relates to the question at hand. We can begin our analysis of their distinction by stating that their exposition does not necessitate some stronger form of *intellectualism*, where knowledge as a *malaka* totally reduces to some formalized set of *qawa'id*. In fact, they are quite clear that *malakat* can be gained through repetitive action. Nor does their exposition necessitate any strong form of *anti-intellectualism*, where knowledge as a *malaka* cannot reduce to a formalized set of *qawa'id*. Thus, their very conception of what a *malaka* is, allows for a more balanced position.

Turning our attention to the Islamic tradition's characterization of sciences, classical scholars had their own form of distinguishing between the categories of theoretical (*al-tanzir*) and applied (*al-tatbiq*) science mentioned earlier. However, they used slightly different language, generally characterizing it as a difference between theoretical sciences (*'ulum nazariyya*) and applied sciences (*'ulum 'amaliyya*). While explicating the difference between the two, al-Tahanawi (1996, p. 5) mentions that the theoretical vs. applied classification can be used to delineate sciences in more than one way.

It is instructive for us to consider the delineations most closely related to our question. Among the usages mentioned, is the stipulation that applied sciences (*'ulum 'amaliyya*) are ones that cannot be learned except through repetitive action. If that is what is meant by applied (*'amali*), then that excludes sciences like logic, Islamic law (*fiqh*), and hadith studies. Alternatively, according to another usage, applied sciences (*'ulum 'amaliyya*) are sciences that are related to some manner of action/application (*'amal*), while theoretical sciences (*'ulum nazariyya*) are ones that do not relate to any manner of *'amal*. On this classification, sciences like logic, Islamic law (*fiqh*), and hadith studies count as applied sciences (*'ulum 'amaliyya*). Because, according to al-Tahanawi (1996, p. 5), sciences like logic and Islamic law (*fiqh*), relate to some manner of *'amal*, even if that manner of *'amal* is mental as opposed to extramental.

Qutb al-Din al-Razi (d. 766/1365) (1975, p. 27) and Al-Tahanawi (1996, p. 6) mention another classification that is useful for our analysis. They mention that sciences can also be categorized according to whether they are sciences that are apparatuses (*aliyya*) or sciences that are not apparatuses. After explicating the meaning of apparatus (*ala*) in this context, Al-Tahanawi states that this distinction between sciences that are *aliyya* and those that are not, ends up collapsing onto the applied vs. theoretical classification mentioned above. If an *ala* is used for achieving something else, then it must, by its very nature, relate to the manner of which that other goal is achieved. Therefore, by definition, sciences that are *aliyya*, relate to some manner of *'amal*. This leads us to conclude that sciences that are *aliyya* are also applied sciences (*'ulum 'amaliyya*).

Following this line of reasoning and this conclusion, the *qawa'id* of classical hadith scholars, best exemplified by the CA, when used in tandem with suitable rules of inference (*nazar/istidlal*), are best understood as a type of epistemic apparatus (*ala ma'rifiyya*). That apparatus (*ala*) guides the hadith scholar in reasoning critically about the authenticity of hadith and protects him from incorrect epistemic judgements. If this conclusion is correct, then it turns out that the formalization of the *manhaj al-naqd* of hadith scholars and its *taq'id* into rules, is evidence of an applied system (*'amali*) that is meant to help the practitioner reason properly, as opposed to a theoretical (*tanziri*) one. This is of course the exact opposite conclusion of what critics of the CA would like us to believe.

Therefore, the CA, as a set of criteria and *qawa'id*, is meant to be implemented and acted upon to help foster in the practitioner the *malakat* associated with being a hadith scholar. This *ala*

ma'rifiyya is a tool that is supposed to help the critic in reasoning properly and to help him avoid errors in epistemic judgement. Tools are part of the epistemic process, not the entirety of it.

To conclude, this brief foray into what Islamic scholars have said about rules (*qawa'id*), axiomatization (*taq'id*), the relationship between theoretical knowledge (*al-'ilm al-nazari*) and applied knowledge (*al-'ilm al-'amali*), and skills/abilities (*malakat*), gives us a better picture of how we can respond to the second line of criticism. Notice, that if one relies on the views of classical scholars to make sense of the CA, at most, their view necessitates that there is *some truthful relationship* between the formalized *qawa'id* of the CA, and the critical epistemic method (*manhaj al-naqd*) of preclassical scholars. It does not necessitate the stronger *intellectualist* view that the *manhaj al-naqd* of preclassical scholars reduces *entirely* to the *qawa'id* found in their formalized system. Nor does it necessitate that the *qawa'id* of the CA are meant to be pedagogically sufficient.

It also helps us distinguish between various types of applied vs. theoretical classifications. While hadith studies is an applied science, it is not an applied science in the same way that sewing or riding a bike is an applied science. The latter two are learned entirely by practice, not by theoretical study. Whereas the former can be learned at least partially theoretically, in addition to being learned in an applied fashion. In fact, the *taq'id* of the *manhaj al-naqd* of preclassical hadith scholars, is best characterized as an epistemic apparatus (*ala ma'rifiyya*) that is supposed to help the practitioner to reason properly as he engages in hadith criticism and slowly develops the appropriate skills (*malakat*) to do so. The fact that some contemporaries misuse the *ala ma'rifiyya*, ignoring the value of practice and application (*al-tatbiq wa al-'amal*), is not the fault of the epistemic tool itself, rather, it is fault of the practitioner.

One last point can be made concerning this dispute. Critics of the CA should concede that there is *some truthful relationship* between the formalization and *taq'id* of classical hadith scholarship and their preclassical counterparts, because otherwise, they run the risk of accepting that the very development of criteria is impossible. If a critic were to reject the very possibility of criteria being delineated, they would have to accept that the epistemic work of critiquing hadith has no means of being judged of being proper or improper. In other words, such an objection collapses into a type of epistemic relativism. I doubt opponents of the CA would accept such an unhappy conclusion. Therefore, the only choice before them is to concur that there is *some truthful relationship* between the formalized *qawa'id* of the CA and the *manhaj al-naqd* of preclassical hadith scholars.

Thus, the second line of reasoning, given its natural consequence, is shown to be false. This of course does not weaken the force of the first line of reasoning, which objects to the axiomatization (*taq'id*) and stipulations (*istilahat*) of the classical period and encourages instead a renewed focus on how the early community of hadith scholars approached their epistemic work. That will require its own analysis and response.

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