

Epistemological Differences in Islam: Traditional, Rational, and Sufistic Approaches

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Abstract

Epistemology in Islam encompasses diverse schools of thought, each reflecting unique approaches to the sources and methods of acquiring knowledge. This research examines three main approaches in Islamic epistemology by focusing on three primary perspectives: traditional (*naqlī*), rational (*‘aqlī*), and Sūfī (*dhawqī*). The objective of this research is to explore how these epistemological frameworks have shaped the development of science, philosophy, and spirituality within the Islamic intellectual tradition. A qualitative descriptive method was employed, involving a comprehensive review of classical and contemporary literature from notable Islamic scholars, such as al-Ghazālī, Ibn Rushd, and Ibn ‘Arabī. The study critically examines their arguments, sources of knowledge, and methodologies to identify both convergences and divergences among these schools of thought. The findings reveal that *naqlī* epistemology emphasizes divine revelation (*wahy*) and textual authority, while *‘aqlī* prioritizes reason and logical analysis, and *dhawqī* focuses on inner spiritual experience and intuition (*kashf*). These approaches have not only influenced Islamic theology (*kalām*) and philosophy (*falsafah*) but also contributed to the broader development of knowledge systems and ethical frameworks in Muslim societies. The implications of this research highlight the importance of integrating these epistemological approaches to achieve a balanced understanding of science, spirituality, and human development in contemporary Islamic thought.

Keywords: Islamic epistemology, aqli, dzauqi, Islamic philosophy, sufism

INTRODUCTION

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy that examines the origins, structure, and validity of knowledge. In Islam, epistemology is considered an essential foundation because knowledge (*‘ilm*) is not merely a tool for intellectual development but also a means of attaining closeness to God and fulfilling religious duties. Unlike Western epistemology, which is largely secular and separates knowledge from divine values, Islamic epistemology emphasizes the relationship between humans and the Creator (Haneef & Furqani, 2015; Bouzenita & Al-Mahmali, 2019; Auda, 2020; Karim, 2021; Al-Shahrastani, 2023; Kamali, 2022; Badri, 2016; Alawiye, 2018). Therefore, Islamic scholars have developed various frameworks to understand knowledge, combining revelation, reason, and spiritual experience as complementary sources of truth.

The study of Islamic epistemology is rooted in the recognition that knowledge is both divine and human in nature. The divine aspect of knowledge comes from revelation (*wahy*) as delivered in the Qur’ān and Sunnah, while

the human aspect emerges from the effort of reasoning (*ijtihād*) and inner spiritual reflection. This dual nature of knowledge is what distinguishes Islamic epistemology from other philosophical traditions, as it integrates the metaphysical, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of understanding. Furthermore, Islamic epistemology is not monolithic; it has evolved into diverse schools of thought that offer different perspectives on how knowledge is acquired, validated, and applied.

This journal focuses on three main approaches to epistemology in Islam, namely the traditional (*naqlī*), rational (*‘aqlī*), and Sūfī (*dhawqī*) approaches. The *naqlī* approach prioritizes knowledge derived from divine texts, emphasizing the authority of revelation and the scholarly interpretation of religious scriptures. In contrast, the *‘aqlī* approach values reason, logic, and philosophical inquiry as essential tools for comprehending both divine and worldly truths. Meanwhile, the *dhawqī* approach highlights inner spiritual experiences, intuition, and heart-based knowledge as a means of achieving deeper understanding beyond rational analysis (Nasr, 2018; Lumbard, 2019; Kadi, 2015; Al-Attas, 2016; Al-Ghazali Centre, 2020; Haq & Said, 2021; Osman, 2017; Wan Daud, 2018).

Each of these epistemological approaches has its own methodological foundation and historical development. The *naqlī* approach is often associated with scholars like Imam al-Shāfi‘ī and Ibn Taymiyyah, who emphasized strict adherence to textual evidence. The *‘aqlī* approach can be seen in the works of philosophers such as al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, and Ibn Rushd, who harmonized Greek philosophical traditions with Islamic theology. The *dhawqī* approach is represented by figures like al-Ghazālī, Ibn ‘Arabī, and Jalāluddīn Rūmī, who emphasized spiritual purification and mystical insight as paths to attaining true knowledge. Together, these approaches create a rich and dynamic intellectual tradition within Islam (Yasin & Mamat, 2016; Rahman, 2017; Hussain, 2019; Amini, 2020; Ismail & Arifin, 2021; Saeed, 2022; Sholeh, 2015; Zarkasyi, 2018).

A study by Iftikhar (2024), *Islamic and Scientific Epistemology: A Comparative Study*, highlights the intersection of Islamic epistemology with scientific methodologies and emphasizes the integration of reason, intuition, and empirical observation within the Islamic framework. While this research provides a broad thematic overview, it lacks an in-depth comparative analysis of the three main epistemological approaches (*naqlī*, *‘aqlī*, and *dhawqī*), treating them as part of a unified whole without exploring their methodological differences. Similarly, Ula (2025), in *The Epistemology of Knowledge in Classical Sūfism: A Study of al-Muḥāsibī’s Thought (781–857 AD)*, presents a

detailed exploration of Ṣūfī epistemology through the lens of a single figure, al-Muḥāsibī. While insightful, the study's narrow focus on mysticism does not account for the interaction of Ṣūfī epistemology with rational or traditional approaches.

The objective of this research is to explore the relationship and significance of the *naqlī*, *'aqlī*, and *dhawqī* approaches in Islamic epistemology, to highlight their individual contributions and intersections, and to assess their relevance for contemporary Muslim intellectual discourse. The findings are expected to enrich the academic study of Islamic philosophy, encourage the integration of rationality and spirituality in knowledge development, and provide a theoretical foundation for applying Islamic epistemology to modern scientific and ethical challenges.

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative method with a descriptive-analytical and comparative study approach, aiming to analyze the core concepts of Islamic epistemology through an in-depth examination of classical and contemporary literature. The study was categorized as library research, focusing on written sources as the primary material for exploration. Through this approach, the research sought to describe, interpret, and compare the key elements of epistemological thought within the Islamic intellectual tradition, particularly focusing on the three main approaches: *naqlī*, *'aqlī*, and *dhawqī*.

A philosophical approach underpinned the study, involving conceptual analysis to examine the definitions, characteristics, and structures of Islamic epistemology. Hermeneutics was applied to interpret classical and modern texts, while a phenomenological lens was used to understand the lived epistemological experiences within Islamic thought. Additionally, a comparative approach was adopted, which included horizontal comparisons between the three approaches of Islamic epistemology, vertical analysis of the historical development of epistemological ideas across different periods, and cross-traditional comparisons contrasting Islamic and Western epistemological frameworks.

The data sources included primary, secondary, and tertiary materials. Primary sources consisted of classical Islamic texts such as the Qur'an, Hadith, al-Ghazālī's *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* and *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, Ibn Sīnā's *Al-Shifā'*, Ibn Rushd's *Faṣl al-Maqāl*, and Sufī works by Ibn 'Arabī and al-Hallāj. Secondary sources comprised contemporary studies, including Seyyed Hossein Nasr's *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Fazlur Rahman's *Islam and Modernity*, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas' *The Concept of Knowledge in*

Islam, and William C. Chittick's works on Sufi epistemology. Tertiary sources encompassed academic journals, encyclopedias of philosophy and Islamic studies, as well as dissertations and theses related to Islamic epistemology.

Data collection techniques involved documentation and textual analysis. Documentation included compiling and cataloging relevant literature, digitizing classical texts, and organizing data into epistemological categories. Textual analysis was conducted through close reading to gain in-depth understanding, contextual analysis to situate texts within historical and cultural settings, and intertextual analysis to identify relationships and dialogues between different texts and authors.

For data analysis, the research employed content analysis, comparative analysis, and hermeneutical analysis. Content analysis involved thematic identification of major ideas, categorization of epistemological concepts, and frequency analysis to track recurring terms and themes. Comparative analysis used matrices to highlight similarities and differences among the three approaches and employed dialectical methods to uncover debates and integration potentials. Hermeneutical analysis applied the interpretive circle to relate individual elements to the whole, the historical-critical method to trace the evolution of ideas, and phenomenological reduction to distill the essence of epistemological experiences in Islamic thought.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Definition of Epistemology from a Western Perspective

Epistemology originates from the Greek words *epistēmē* (knowledge) and *logos* (science or study). In Western philosophy, epistemology is recognized as a branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and scope of knowledge. It seeks to explain the origins, structures, methods, validity, and limits of human knowledge. This field addresses fundamental questions such as: What is knowledge? How is knowledge acquired? What differentiates true knowledge from mere belief or opinion? By examining these aspects, Western epistemology provides a systematic framework to understand the processes of knowing and the criteria for truth.

Main Views of Figures in Western Epistemology

Plato, one of the earliest and most influential figures, defines knowledge as "justified true belief." He emphasizes that true knowledge pertains to ideal forms, which are eternal and unchanging, and can only be accessed through the use of reason. For Plato, sensory experience is

insufficient for attaining genuine knowledge because the physical world is in constant flux and merely reflects imperfect copies of these ideal forms.

René Descartes, often regarded as the father of modern rationalism, introduces methodical doubt as a means to arrive at certain knowledge. His famous proposition, *Cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), emphasizes that reason is the primary source of knowledge. Descartes' rationalist approach prioritizes the use of logic and deduction to achieve truth, asserting that certainty can only be established through reason rather than sensory perception.

John Locke, in contrast, represents the empiricist tradition. He argues that human beings are born as *tabula rasa* (blank slates) and that all knowledge originates from sensory experiences. For Locke, the mind is shaped by external stimuli, and knowledge is developed through observation, reflection, and experience. This perspective marks a fundamental shift from innate ideas to experience-based understanding.

Immanuel Kant bridges rationalism and empiricism by proposing that knowledge results from the interaction between sensory data and the innate structures of reason, which he calls a priori categories. According to Kant, while experience provides the content of knowledge, the human mind imposes form and structure upon that content, making knowledge both empirical and structured by reason. This synthesis creates a comprehensive approach that accommodates both sensory experience and intellectual frameworks.

Karl Popper argues that science advances through a process of conjectures and refutations, where hypotheses are continually subjected to empirical tests aimed at disproving them. For Popper, a theory's scientific value lies in its falsifiability—its capacity to be tested and potentially proven false. This approach shifts epistemology from the pursuit of absolute certainty to a critical, dynamic process of eliminating errors, thereby refining and improving human understanding of the world.

Edmund Gettier's critique sparked extensive debate in epistemology, leading philosophers to reconsider and refine the definition of knowledge. His work underscores the complexity of epistemic justification and the need for additional conditions—beyond truth and justification—to accurately define what it means to “know” something.

Definition of Epistemology from an Islamic Perspective

Epistemology in Islam is a branch of Islamic philosophy that explains the origins, sources, methods, and limits of knowledge with the main foundation of revelation, namely the Qur'an and Hadith. In Arabic,

epistemology is often referred to as "*naẓariyyah al-ma'rifah*", which means the theory of knowledge. Islam holds that all knowledge comes from Allah and is obtained through revelation and emphasizes the importance of the Qur'an and Hadith as the basis of knowledge.

Characteristics of Islamic Epistemology

Table 1. Islamic Epistemology Characteristics

Aspects	Explanation
Theocentris	The source and purpose of knowledge centered on God.
Integrative	Combining revelation, reason, senses, and intuition
Holistic	It includes both external (empirical) and inner (spiritual) aspects.
Normative and ethical	Knowledge must have benefits, goodness, which is in accordance with the sharia.
Transcendental goals	For the happiness of this world and the hereafter, it is not just the domination of the world.

Comparison of Islamic and Western Epistemology

Table 2. Comparison

Aspects	Islamic Epistemology	Western Epistemology
Main source	Revelation (Qur'an, Hadith), intellect, intuition (<i>ilham/kasyf</i>)	Ratios, sensory experiences, intellectual intuition
Position of revelation	Central and absolute	Not recognized as an epistemic source (generally)
The Role of Reason	Tools used to understand revelation and reality	Key tools for shaping and testing knowledge
Spiritual intuition	Recognized and valued in Sufism	Rarely considered objectively true

Traditional Epistemology (*Naqli*)

Traditional epistemology, or *naqli*, prioritizes revelation as the primary source of knowledge, specifically the Qur'an and Sunnah. Knowledge is transmitted through *talaqqi* (direct learning from a teacher) and verified via *sanad* (chain of narration) to ensure authenticity. This approach emphasizes strict adherence to sacred texts and tends to reject speculative philosophical reasoning that is not grounded in divine revelation. Scholars like Imam al-Ghazali, particularly in his early works, and Ibn Taymiyyah are notable figures who defended this approach, emphasizing that true knowledge must remain connected to divine sources and be guided by traditional Islamic scholarship.

Rational Epistemology (*Aqli*)

Rational epistemology, or *aqli*, highlights the role of reason and logic in acquiring and understanding knowledge. It recognizes rational thinking as a

tool to interpret revelation more deeply and to explore the natural and metaphysical realms. This approach applies both deductive and inductive methods of scientific and philosophical investigation, aiming to harmonize reason with faith. Prominent figures such as Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Rushd are known for their rationalist perspectives, which often sought to integrate Greek philosophical traditions with Islamic theology, thereby enriching the intellectual tradition of Islam.

Sufistic Epistemology (*Dzauqi/Ilham*)

Sufistic epistemology, also known as *dzauqi* or *ilham*, derives knowledge from inspiration, spiritual unveiling (*kasyf*), and the inner spiritual sense (*dzauq*). This approach emphasizes experiential knowledge that is attained through spiritual disciplines like *riyadhah* (spiritual training), constant *dhikr* (remembrance of God), and self-reflection (*muhasabah*). The truths discovered through this path often transcend conventional logic and language, relying instead on inner enlightenment and divine grace. Figures such as Al-Hallaj, Imam al-Ghazali (in his later Sufi phase), and Ibn Arabi are key representatives of this approach, which focuses on attaining deeper spiritual understanding beyond rational analysis.

Epistemological Comparison

Table 3. Epistemological Comparison			
Aspects	Traditional (<i>Naqli</i>)	Rational (<i>Aqli</i>)	Sufism (<i>Dzauqi</i>)
Main source	Revelation	Revelation & reason	Revelation & intuition
Method	Ijma', qiyas	Logic, philosophy	Tazkiyah, dhikr
Purpose	Maintaining orthodoxy	Understanding the truth	Being in Harmony with God
Validity of knowledge	Compatibility with nash	Logical coherence	The Authenticity of the Inner Experience
Criticism	Less innovative	Too speculative	Subjective and not universal

Comparison and Analysis

The three approaches to epistemology in Islam—traditional (*naqli*), rational (*aqli*), and sufistic (*dzauqi*)—share a fundamental commonality in that they all acknowledge the existence of God and view knowledge as a means to draw closer to Him. Despite this shared foundation, they differ significantly in their primary methods and sources of knowledge. The traditional approach

places strong emphasis on textual evidence from the Qur'an and Sunnah, relying on authentic transmission and interpretation by scholars to maintain the purity of knowledge. In contrast, the rational approach prioritizes the use of logic, reasoning, and observation, considering these tools essential for a deeper understanding of divine truths and the natural world. Meanwhile, the sufistic approach explores the inner dimension of knowledge through spiritual experiences, intuition, and divine inspiration, often reaching insights that transcend conventional reasoning and language. These differences reflect the diverse yet complementary ways Islamic epistemology approaches the pursuit of truth and understanding.

CONCLUSION

Islamic epistemology constitutes a rich and dynamic framework that integrates the *naqlī*, *'aqlī*, and *dhawqī* approaches as complementary rather than contradictory paths to knowledge, reflecting Islam's intellectual and spiritual depth. This study analyzed these three perspectives, highlighting their unique contributions and emphasizing their potential integration to foster a holistic understanding of knowledge that harmonizes revelation, reason, and spiritual experience. Such an integrated approach can help contemporary Muslims balance intellectual rigor with spiritual insight. Future research could investigate how these epistemological frameworks may be applied to contemporary scientific developments, ethical dilemmas, and educational practices, thereby enriching the dialogue between Islamic thought and global knowledge paradigms.

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