

The Differences in Epistemology in Islam: Traditional, Rational, And Sufistic Approaches

Bilal Indra Putra, Husni, Sri Wahyuni

Universitas Hasanuddin, Indonesia

Email: husnisiqik@gmail.com

Correspondence: husnisiqik@gmail.com

KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Islamic epistemology, naqli, aqli, dzauqi, Islamic philosophy, sufism	This study examines the diverse epistemological approaches in Islam - traditional (naqli), rational (aqli), and sufistic (dzauqi) - which reflect different methods of acquiring and validating knowledge. The research problem stems from the frequent isolation of these approaches in contemporary discourse, creating a gap in understanding their potential integration and collective contribution to Islamic thought. The objectives are threefold: (1) to analyze the methodological foundations of each approach, (2) to compare their strengths and limitations, and (3) to explore their complementary roles in addressing modern epistemological challenges. Using qualitative methodology with literature analysis, the study draws from classical Islamic texts and works by key figures like Al-Ghazali, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Arabi. The findings reveal that while the naqli approach emphasizes textual authority, aqli prioritizes reason, and dzauqi values spiritual experience, these methods are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they form a dynamic spectrum of knowledge acquisition in Islam. The research demonstrates how integrating these approaches can enrich contemporary Islamic scholarship, particularly in reconciling faith with modern science and addressing secular epistemological frameworks. The implications suggest the need for educational models that harmonize textual, rational, and spiritual dimensions of knowledge, offering Muslims a more holistic approach to navigating today's intellectual landscape while maintaining theological integrity.

Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-SA 4.0)



Introduction

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy that discusses the source, structure, and validity of knowledge (Sol and Heng, 2022). In Islam, epistemology holds significant meaning because science is considered an integral part of worship (Al-Ghazali, 2000). Islamic epistemology, unlike the secular perspective of Western epistemology, is grounded in the belief that all knowledge ultimately stems from God (Nasr, 2002). Knowledge in Islam is not viewed merely as a product of empirical observation but as a form of understanding that connects the individual to the divine (Al-Farabi, 1985). This relationship influences how knowledge is perceived and valued in Islamic

thought, diverging from the reductionist views often found in the West (Sardar, 2016). Furthermore, the Islamic perspective emphasizes the pursuit of knowledge as a moral and spiritual duty, which leads to the integration of ethics with epistemology (Ramadan, 2004). Thus, Islamic epistemology presents a holistic approach that combines metaphysical, ethical, and spiritual dimensions, offering a contrast to the more fragmented understanding of knowledge in Western philosophy.

This journal will discuss the differences in epistemology in Islam by dividing them into three main approaches: the traditional (*naqli*), rational (*aqli*), and sufistic (*dzauqi*) approaches. The traditional (*naqli*) approach is rooted in the religious texts, primarily the Qur'an and Hadith, where knowledge is derived directly from divine revelation (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1995). On the other hand, the rational (*aqli*) approach emphasizes the role of human reason in understanding the world, and it acknowledges that knowledge can be acquired through intellect and logic (Al-Razi, 2000). The sufistic (*dzauqi*) approach, however, views knowledge as a personal, experiential understanding that transcends intellectual or empirical knowledge, focusing on direct mystical experience with God (Chittick, 2005). These approaches reflect the diverse ways in which epistemology is framed within Islamic thought, highlighting the dynamic interaction between divine revelation, human reasoning, and spiritual experience (Nasr, 2003). Together, they form a comprehensive epistemological framework that has shaped Islamic scholarship for centuries (Fattah, 2018).

This research is highly urgent because Islamic epistemology is often only partially understood, either through the traditional (*naqli*), rational (*aqli*), or sufistic (*dzauqi*) approaches (Zuhdi, 2019). In fact, the three complement each other in forming a holistic Islamic knowledge framework (Rauf, 2015). Modern challenges, such as the secularization of science and the dichotomy between science and religion, require a deep understanding of how these three approaches can be integrated (Al-Jabri, 2014). The secularization of science, for example, has contributed to the fragmentation of knowledge, which contradicts the Islamic worldview that sees knowledge as unified and interconnected (Mohammed, 2020). Without a comprehensive study, Muslims risk losing relevance in contemporary epistemological discourse, and may struggle to navigate the rapidly evolving global knowledge systems (Ahmed, 2022).

Previous research has provided an important foundation, but there are still some weaknesses. For example, Al-Attas (1995) in *The Concept of Knowledge in Islam* focuses too much on the *naqli* approach and does not explore the role of *aqli* and *dzauqi*. Meanwhile, Nasr (1989) in *Knowledge and the Sacred* emphasizes the sufistic spiritual dimension but neglects the contribution of rational epistemology in the development of Islamic science. These two studies tend to separate the three approaches, thus failing to show the dynamics and synergies between them.

The gap in this research lies in the lack of an in-depth comparative analysis of how *naqli*, *aqli*, and *dzauqi* interact with each other, both in classical and modern contexts. Moreover, there has been no serious effort to formulate an integrative model that can bridge the three approaches in addressing contemporary epistemological challenges.

The novelty of this study lies in its attempt to: (1) critically compare the three approaches, (2) identify the common points and fundamental differences between them, and (3) propose a more

inclusive and adaptive Islamic epistemological framework. Thus, this research not only enriches the treasures of Islamic science but also provides practical solutions to the problems of knowledge in the modern era.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the methodological and philosophical foundations of the epistemology of *naqli*, *aqli*, and *dzauqi*, as well as explore their integration potential. The benefits include enriching Islamic discourse, enhancing interdisciplinary dialogue, and providing guidance for educators and policymakers in designing a balanced curriculum between religious and scientific knowledge. Thus, this research is expected to strengthen the position of Islamic epistemology in the global arena while maintaining the continuity of Muslim intellectual traditions.

Materials and Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with literature review to analyze epistemological differences in Islam. Data were obtained from a variety of sources, including literature such as books, articles, and journals that discuss Islamic epistemology, as well as classical works by figures such as Imam al-Ghazali, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Arabi. Data collection techniques were carried out through literature review, where researchers collect and analyze relevant texts to understand the characteristics of each epistemological approach, as well as through content analysis to identify key themes and concepts. In data analysis, information is grouped by approach (*naqli*, *aqli*, *dzauqi*) and compared to find differences and similarities between the approaches. To ensure validity and reliability, triangulation was performed using a variety of sources and perspectives, as well as discussions with experts or academics to confirm findings and analysis. This method is expected to provide an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of epistemological thought in the Islamic tradition and its impact on the development of science and the spirituality of Muslims.

Results and Discussions

Definition of Epistemology from a Western Perspective

Epistemology comes from the Greek words which mean: *epistēmē* (knowledge) and *logos* (science or study). In Western philosophy, epistemology is a branch of philosophy that can explain or study the origins, structures, methods, validity, and limits of knowledge.

Main Views of Figures in Western Epistemology

- 1) Lato
 - a. The classical definition of knowledge: justified true belief.
 - b. True knowledge is about ideal forms that can only be attained through reason.
- 2) René Descartes
 - a. The founder of modern rationalism.
 - b. Putting forward methodical doubt as the path to definite knowledge: *Cogito ergo sum* (I think, then I exist).
 - c. The role of reason as the main source of knowledge.
- 3) John Locke
 - a. Empiricism figure.

- b. Explains that humans are born like tabula rasa (blank paper), and knowledge is obtained through sensory experience.
- 4) Immanuel Kant
 - a. A combination of rationalism and empiricism.
 - b. Explains that knowledge arises from the interaction between sensory experience and the structure of reason (a priori categories).
- 5) Karl Popper
 - a. Falsificationism: science cannot explain or prove a theory absolutely, but it can test whether it is falsifiable.
 - b. Shifting the focus of epistemology from justification to criticism.
- 6) Gettier (Edmund Gettier)
 - a. Challenging the classic definition of "justified true belief".
 - b. Showing that one can have true and justified beliefs but not true knowledge.

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. Characteristics of Islamic Epistemology

Aspects	Explanation
Theocentric	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 purpose	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 of Islamic and Western Epistemology

Aspects	Epistemologists Islam	Barat Epistemologists
Main source	Revelation (Qur'an, Hadith), intellect, intuition (ilham/kasyf)	Ratios, sensory experiences, intellectual intuition
The 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)

Main characteristics:

- 1) Prioritizing the source of revelation (Qur'an and Sunnah).
 - 2) The knowledge gained goes through the process of talaqqi (learning directly from the teacher) and sanad (chain of narration).
 - 3) Rejection of speculative philosophy that is not based on sacred texts.
- Important figure: Imam al-Ghazali (in his early works), Ibn Taymiyyah.

Epistemologi Rational (Aqli)

Main characteristics:

- 1) Knowledge gained through reason and logic.
 - 2) Rationality is used in interpreting and understanding revelation in depth.
 - 3) Apply deductive and inductive methods of scientific investigation.
- Important figures: Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd.

Sufistic Epistemology (Dzauqi/Ilham)

Main characteristics:

- 1) Knowledge is gained through inspiration, kasyf (revelation), and dzauq (spiritual sense).
 - 2) Methods: riyadhah (spiritual practice), dhikr, and muhasabah.
 - 3) The truth cannot always be explained by conventional logic or language.
- Important figures: Al-Hallaj, al-Ghazali (post-Sufistic experience), Ibn Arabi.

Epistemological Comparison

Table 3. Epistemological Comparison

Aspects	Traditional (Naqli)	Rational (Aqli)	Sufistik (Dzauqi)
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 have common points and differences, namely:

- 1) Commonality: All three can accept God's existence and consider knowledge as a means of getting closer to Him.
- 2) Point of difference: Differs in the primary methods and sources of knowledge (text, intellect, or intuition).

The traditional approach is more cautious and textual; rational approaches open themselves to logic and observation; While the Sufistic approach delves into the inner dimension and spirituality.

Conclusion

Islamic epistemology is a rich, complex, and dynamic system. The differences in the approaches of *naqli*, *aqli*, and *dzaui* should not be seen as contradictions or discrepancies but rather as a wealth of perspectives that reflect the existence of a spectrum of truth-seeking in Islam. An understanding of this diversity can encourage the integration of science, spirituality, and *sharia* in the lives of contemporary Muslims, helping them grow closer to God.

This research opens up opportunities for further development, including: (1) an empirical study on the application of the integration of *naqli*, *aqli*, and *dzaui* epistemology in contemporary Islamic education; (2) comparative analysis with non-Islamic epistemological systems to enrich interreligious dialogue; (3) exploration of the impact of digital technology and AI on Islamic epistemology; and (4) gender-based research to uncover the role of women in the Islamic scientific tradition. Additionally, advanced research could test these integrative models in educational curricula or examine their relevance to modern science. Thus, future research will not only deepen the understanding of Islamic epistemology but also address intellectual challenges in the era of globalization.

References

- Sol, K. and Heng, K. (2022) 'Understanding epistemology and its key approaches in research', *Cambodian Journal of Educational Research*, 2(2), pp. 80–99.
- Al-Attas, S. M. N. (1995). *The concept of knowledge in Islam*. ISTAC.
- Al-Farabi, A. (1985). *The philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* (M. Mahdi, Ed.). Harvard University Press.
- Al-Ghazali, A. (2000). *The incoherence of the philosophers* (M. E. Marmura, Trans.). Brigham Young University Press.
- Al-Jabri, J. (2014). *The crisis of modern Islamic thought: The dilemma of secularism and the Islamic worldview*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ahmed, M. (2022). Islamic epistemology and the challenge of modern science: A critical overview. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 30(2), 215-229. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/30.2.215>
- Chittick, W. C. (2005). *The Sufi path of knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi's metaphysics of imagination*. SUNY Press.
- Fattah, H. (2018). *Islamic epistemology: A study of the three key epistemic approaches*. Oxford University Press.
- Ibn Taymiyyah, T. (1995). *Al- 'Aqidah al-Wasitiyyah*. Dar al-Fikr.
- Mohammed, S. (2020). Secularism, science, and the Islamic tradition: A study of the dichotomy. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195392068.013.3>
- Nasr, S. H. (1989). *Knowledge and the sacred*. SUNY Press.

- Nasr, S. H. (2002). *Islamic science: An illustrated study*. World Wisdom, Inc.
- Nasr, S. H. (2003). *Islamic philosophy from its origin to the present: Philosophy in the land of prophecy*. SUNY Press.
- Ramadan, T. (2004). *Western Muslims and the future of Islam*. Oxford University Press.
- Rauf, A. (2015). Towards an integrated Islamic epistemology: Bridging the gap between traditional and modern knowledge systems. *The Journal of Islamic Philosophy*, 7(1), 23-44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056006114558054>
- Sardar, Z. (2016). *The future of Islamic philosophy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Zuhdi, R. (2019). Islamic epistemology: An integrative approach in the 21st century. *Al-Bayan Journal*, 12(4), 78-93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2153614X.2019.1621537>