

Integration of Knowledge: Western & Islamic Perspectives

Waleed Fekry Faris, Muhammad Yusuf Patria*

* International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), International Islamic University Malaysia

* المعهد الدولي للفكر والحضارة الإسلامية (ISTAC)
الجامعة الإسلامية العالمية ماليزيا

E-mail:

patria.yusuf@live.iium.edu.my

ORCID:

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1219-8793>

Received: June 8, 2023

Accepted: July 10, 2023

Published: July 31, 2023

Citation:

Waleed, Fekry, "Integration of Knowledge: Western & Islamic Perspectives", Istanbul, The Journal of Risale-i Nur Studies 6:2 (2023), 1-13.

Abstract

In this paper we are examining the epistemology and its questions and implications from western perspective. Also, we look into few correlated ideas such as paradigm and concept of integration of knowledge.

Tracing the roots for these concepts from Islamic perspectives and looking into similarities and differences to lead to a better holistic approach to knowledge and its implications.

Keywords: Integration of Knowledge, Risale-i Nur, Islamic Perspectives

تكامُل المعرفة: منظور غربي وإسلامي

المستخلص

في هذه الورقة ندرس نظرية المعرفة وأسئلتها وأثارها من المنظور الغربي. أيضاً، نحن ننظر في بعض الأفكار المترابطة مثل النموذج ومفهوم تكامل المعرفة.

تتبع جذور هذه المفاهيم من وجهات النظر الإسلامية والنظر في أوجه التشابه والاختلاف للوصول إلى نهج شامل أفضل للمعرفة وأثارها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تكامل المعرفة، رسائل النور، منظور إسلامي

Introduction

Epistemology is the study of the nature of knowledge, justification, and the rationality of belief. [Merriam, 1913:45]

Epistemology created a continuous debate on four areas: (1) the philosophical analysis of the nature of knowledge and how it relates to such concepts as truth, belief, and justification, (2) various problems of skepticism, (3) the sources and scope of knowledge and justified belief, and (4) the criteria for knowledge and justification.

Epistemology addresses questions such as: "What makes justified beliefs justified?", "What does it mean to say that we know something?", and fundamentally "How do we know that we know?" [Wenning, 2009:33].

These questions are of very practical use in terms of education and measuring knowledge of someone and also of belief (Iman) issues.

Another issue related to epistemology is the definition of Knowledge.

In philosophy, the philosopher Plato famously defined knowledge as "justified true belief". This definition is currently of problematic nature among philosophers but there are many other definitions of knowledge that of more practical nature.

Classical dictionaries are defining knowledge as a familiarity, awareness, or understanding of someone or something, such as facts, information, descriptions, or skills, which is acquired through experience or education by perceiving, discovering, or learning.

Knowledge can refer to a theoretical or practical understanding of a subject. It can be implicit (as with practical skill or expertise) or explicit (as with the theoretical understanding of a subject); it can be more or less formal or systematic. [Oxford Dictionary]

Philosophers are differing on many classification of Knowledge, which complicates the epistemology even further if you plan to go for practical implications, some classify as apriori and posteriori knowledge, others implicit and explicit knowledge and so on.

Sources of knowledge have been also a core part of epistemology, beliefs arise in people for a wide variety of causes. Among them, we must list psychological factors such as desires, emotional needs, prejudice, and biases of various kinds. Obviously, when beliefs originate in sources like these, they don't qualify as knowledge even if true.

For true beliefs to count as knowledge, it is necessary that they originate in sources we have good reason to consider reliable. These are perception, introspection, memory, reason, and testimony.

Though these sources are matter of debate among philosophers but we can say that they are acknowledged by many of them to different degrees.

One of the major drawback of the epistemology theories from western perspective is its lack of certainty and also its lack of practical application in everyday life though some might dispute these issues but at the end the complexity and sceptical views of epistemology make it inaccessible to ordinary people and not attractive as an everyday tool.

Western epistemology also only depends on rationalism and empiricism, left behind and marginalized religions. Particularly, the knowledge produced by the West became anthropomorphic which neglects the higher principle and considers human as the sole measurement and criterion of nowadays realities. This Western-produced knowledge also became reductionistic since it separates reason and revelation and reject the latter as a reliable source of knowledge. [Nasr, 1975:340]

Rather than bringing justice and peace, Western-produced knowledge has produced confusion and skepticism. Further, that knowledge brought chaos to the world of animals, vegetal, and minerals. [al-Attas, 1993: 97]

Muslim scholars posed a different view on this concept that we are going to look into it in the following sections.

Paradigms

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a paradigm as "a typical example or pattern of something; a pattern or model".

Many have been using the term in both natural and social sciences but Kuhn [Kuhn, 1996: 45] made the term a mainstream since the publication of his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in 1970.

Kuhn defines a scientific paradigm as: "universally recognized scientific achievements that, for a time, provide model problems and solutions for a community of practitioners" [Kuhn, 1996: 45], so paradigm is translated into practical steps that go as follows:

- 1- what is to be observed and scrutinized
- 2- the kind of questions that are supposed to be asked and probed for answers in relation to this subject
- 3- how these questions are to be structured
- 4- what predictions made by the primary theory within the discipline
- 5- how the results of scientific investigations should be interpreted
- 6- how an experiment is to be conducted, and what equipment is available to conduct the experiment.

In his book, Kuhn saw the sciences as going through alternating periods of normal science, when an existing model of reality dominates a protracted period of puzzle-solving, and revolution, when the model of reality itself undergoes sudden drastic change.

In fact, what Kuhn did was to operationalize the epistemology in a way approachable to scientists and practitioners rather being an aloof discipline of interest to philosophers only.

Masterman [Silvia, 2015:247] inventoried 21 different manners used by Kuhn to define a paradigm, subsequently regrouping them into three categories of paradigms:

a- The metaphysical paradigm or the metaparadigm: for the analogies or

equivalences made by Kuhn between the word paradigm and a set of beliefs, a myth, a successful metaphysical speculation, a standard, a new way of seeing, an organizing principle determining the perception or defining a large part of the reality;

b- The sociological paradigm: for the analogies or equivalences between the word paradigm and a concrete scientific discovery, a set of political institutions, a concept meant to be structured and perceived under newer or stricter conditions;

c- The artifactual paradigm: in the cases in which Kuhn uses the word paradigm in a more concrete sense, referring to a scientific textbook or a classical scientific text, a source of research tools, a technique or a system of apparatuses.

Godfrey-Smith analyses the use of paradigm in Kuhn's Magnum Opus, *the Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and divides it into two; first in the broad sense, paradigm is a view of the world and a way of doing science, and second in the narrow sense, is one particular scientific achievement that becomes an inspiration to others by suggesting a new way to investigate the world. [Smith, 2003: 350]

Regarding the scientific revolution alluded before, Kuhn explains that it is occurred because of what he calls "paradigm shift". A scientific revolution occurs when a crisis happens, and a new paradigm appears. If only a crisis happened, the revolution will not take place because the existing paradigm cannot be falsified only by a crisis. Also, a radical change will not occur without a crisis. [8]

When the new paradigm appears and solves the crisis, Kuhn asserts that that is when the revolution happens. [8]

Further, he explains that this phenomenon cannot be described by an explicit philosophical theory of evidence and testing. The shift to a new paradigm is a conversion phenomenon where the cause of conversion is not proof but belief. Kuhn states [8; p. 158] "the man who embraces a new paradigm at an early stage must often do so in defiance of the evidence provided by problem-solving. He must, that is, have faith that the new paradigm will succeed with the many large problems that confront it, knowing only that the older paradigm has failed with a few. A decision of that kind can only made on faith."

Interestingly, this classification echoes the classical Islamic view of Knowledge and its relationship with God (Metaphysics), Man (Social), and products of Knowledge (artifacts). [11]

Knowledge and Integration of Knowledge: An Islamic perspective

'Knowledge' falls short of expressing all the aspects of 'ilm. Knowledge in the Western world means information about something, divine or corporeal, while 'ilm is an all-embracing term covering theory, action and education [12].

Naquib al Attas had once made a very interesting observation. He noted that, "All wisdom is knowledge but all knowledge is not wisdom." Sometimes what we assume knowledge to be, is in real only the contemplation of man. The more this contemplation becomes consolidated with facts, the more it comes near to Truth, Wisdom. Therefore Wisdom can be considered the final stage of man's contemplation, which could be according to Qur'an, either, 'ilm al – yaqin' (Q:120:5), 'ain al yaqin'(Q:120:7), or 'haqqul yaqin' (Q:69:51). Hence the difference between Wisdom and Knowledge could be considered as the progress of human thought'.

Furthermore, al-Attas defines knowledge as the arrival of the meaning of a thing or an object of knowledge in the soul and the arrival of the soul at the meaning of a thing or an object of knowledge [7, 13].

Another prominent scholar of Islam, Said Nursi defines knowledge as description of thing obtained in the mind, either in the form of *tasawwur* (conception) or *tasdiq* (judgment). [14]

In the Islamic intellectual tradition, definition is divided into two kind; *hadd* (definition) and *rasm* (description), and the definition of knowledge by those two scholars show that the definition of knowledge in Islam belongs to the second kind. It is because the ultimate source of knowledge in Islam is God and thus, it is limitless. Accordingly, the nature of knowledge in Islam is integrated (*tawhid*), different from knowledge in Western tradition which is dichotomous. [15]

The commencement of Human thought is 'raib' (skepticism), (Q:9:25), and the end is yaqin (certainty) (Q:120:5&7). The beginning of this journey is aided by 'ta'wil' (interpretation). However, it should be done by those who have a firm ground in matters of knowledge; those, who are considered the people of understanding.[16]

Muslim scholars have exerted great efforts and discussions on the sources of knowledge as derived from the fundamental texts of Islam.

They classified the sources into three main categories:

1. Senses (experimentation)
2. Reason (logical deduction)
3. Truthful sources (revelation is included in this category) [17].

In fact, the above three sources are the basis of what is called now as Scientific Method, which defined as a method of procedure that has characterized natural science since the 17th century, consisting in systematic observation, measurement, and experiment, and the formulation, testing, and modification of hypotheses.[4]

Criticism is the backbone of the scientific method, which has been stressed by two major schools of thought in Islam Ashaari and Matrudi as the first step to verified faith.[18]

Other great scholars like Al Ghazali, add another source of knowledge which “intuition” though there are a lot of discussions on this last proposition, unfortunately not much recent studies on this matter has been done by scholars.

The whole discussion on knowledge in Islam is about producing a holistic human being who is balanced in reason, heart, and spirit. This approach has been recently becoming of interest to many western educationists because of the problematic output education has produced for the past decades.

Said Nursi is a great Turkish scholar who have a great impact in Turkey and outside Turkey. Many books have been written about his life and his contributions.[19,20]

Nursi’s writings comprise all matters of classical themes of theology, although they are not limited to these themes nor structured within a classical framework.

Two main reasons explain this observation. First, Nursi’s main audience is ordinary Muslims and non-Muslims who may have doubts or questions about God, the afterlife and other essentials of belief. Placing his discussion in a restrictive framework would have made his writings abstract and less interesting for the general reader. Second, analysis of Nursi’s works shows he deliberately avoids compartmentalising subject matters of theology and often covers various theological themes within the same argument for he sees them as closely linked

and supported by one another. Such links could not have been demonstrated if his arguments were placed within a rigid framework, reducing their effectiveness for the intended purpose and audience.

Thus, Nursi's works should not be reduced to the level of ordinary theological treatise.[21]

He argued that "Islam is the master and guide of the sciences, and the chief and father of all true knowledge." [22] For integration of knowledge, his view is that religious subjects are taught in the new secular schools and that the positive sciences are taught in the religious schools. He argued that if the students are taught in this method, those in the secular schools will be saved from being without religion, while those in the religious schools will be saved from bigotry.[22]

According to him, the process of integration means; "to critically analyze the modern sciences, to identify differences and to incorporate them into curriculum of the Muslim universities within the framework of Islam. It is a process of critical evaluation as distinct from blind imitation, a process of sifting, filtering and reconstruction as distinct from wholesale rejection of Western thought. The aim is to critically appraise and reformulate social sciences within the framework of Islam for securing the future of Kurdistan, unity of the Empire and establishing centre for education for the eastern Islamic world.[22]

It is interesting to note that Nursi's concept of integration of knowledge and its characteristics, given in 1918s, are similar to those popularized it in the academic circles and propounded in mid-1930 by Sayyid Abul Ala AlMawdudi [19]. According to Mawdudi, it means: "to critically analyze the Western humanities and sciences" and to recast them in accordance with the teachings of Islam".[23]

In 1982, Al Faruqi also proposed the similar concept of Islamization and Integration of Knowledge in his book, Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Work Plan.[24] According to him, the Integration of knowledge is "to reorient systematically and restructure the entire field of human knowledge in accordance with a new set of criteria and categories, derived from, and based on the Islamic worldview.[24] The aim is to evaluate critically the current secular-religious duality of the educational system in the Muslim societies and the lack of

clear vision to guide and direct Muslim action and reformulate the existing educational system within the framework of Islam.[24]

Nursi proposed a new model for university that will incorporate his views on knowledge and epistemology and in the same time being a model of integration of knowledge.

The aim of his proposal was to produce a kind of leadership, who would be able to lead the society in every aspect of life according to the teachings of Islam. For establishing the university, he suggested the following: [24,25,26]

1. It would unite the three traditions in the educational system by representing the most superior normal school by the reason, the best religious school by heart and the most sacred Sufi corner by the conscience.
2. Religious subjects should be taught in the new secular schools and that the natural and human sciences are taught in the religious schools. As a result, students who study in secular schools will be saved from being without religion, while those in the religious schools will be saved from bigotry.
3. The purpose of this integration is to understand science from the Quranic perspective in order to prove its truths and reality.

Nursi's idea of integration of knowledge can be traced to his understanding of and explanation of knowledge. As mentioned before, Nursi explains that knowledge is a thing obtained in the mind, either in the form of conception (*tasawwur*) or judgment (*tasdiq*). This definition shows that Nursi emphasizes in the place and category of knowledge. This is, then, related to his understanding of the object of knowledge.

The object of knowledge in the Islamic intellectual tradition is not only related to the empirical world, but also to the non-empirical world. Nursi believes that the empirical world is the sign of God, and therefore it is very pivotal for man to prove His existence and Oneness. Hence, Nursi regards the empirical world as *al-Kitab al-Kabir*. [27]

Further, Nursi asserts the empirical world or the universe, with its all elements, symbolizes the necessary existence of the eternal Creator, and thus witnesses that there is no god but Allah. This way of understanding is one of the fundamental

elements of Islamic belief (*iman*) and the unity of God (*tawhid*). Therefore, the sense of perception and reason of man must be guided by the values of the unity of God in understanding the universe. [27]

Based on this, Nursi constructs his theory of integration of knowledge. Based on his theory, the religious and modern sciences should be taught together in schools and universities. Further, he asserts that the religious sciences should guide the modern sciences, and the modern sciences should validate and strengthen the truth of Islam. This is because he believes that Qur'an, the universe, and man are manifestations of one truth. [28,29]

Further, Nursi proposes a paradigm to understand the universe which he coined *al-Ma'na al-Harfi*. *Al-Harf* (alphabet) cannot mark for itself, it denotes the meaning of other than itself. In the same sense, the alphabet of the universe also cannot denote for itself, it denotes the Creator of it. It marks the existence of God. Hence, everything other than God does not come from itself but from Him. Therefore, the universe originated from the Will and Power of God that reflect His name and attributes. [30,31]

Conclusions

In this paper, we reviewed the epistemology and paradigms from western perspective and its pertaining questions and we reviewed fundamental ideas about it from Islamic perspective. We concluded by looking on knowledge and its integration which the practical implication from Islamic view.

References

1. *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*, G & C. Merriam Co., 1913, edited by Noah Porter
2. Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/epistemology/>
3. Carl J. Wenning, Scientific epistemology: How scientists know what they know, *J. Phys. Tchr. Educ. Online*, 5(2), Autumn 2009
4. Oxford Dictionary
https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/#m_en_us1261368
5. Syed Hossein Nasr, *Islam and the Plight of Modern Men*. London: Longman, 1975.

6. Syed Hossein Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968.
7. Syed Muhammad Naqib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*. Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993.
8. Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd Ed. Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996.
9. Silvia IACOB, Constanța POPESCU, and Ana Lucia RISTEA. *The Role of Epistemological Paradigms in Research in Social Sciences and Humanities, Theoretical and Applied Economics*, Volume XXII (2015), No. 4(605), Winter, pp. 247-252.
10. Peter Godfrey-Smith, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science: Theory and Reality*. Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 2003.
11. Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali and Kenneth Honerkamp. *The Book of Knowledge: Book 1 of The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, Fons Vitae; 2016.
12. Akhtar, Sayyid Wahid, *Al-Tawhid the Islamic Concept of Knowledge*, Al-Tawhid, Vol. 12 No.3.
13. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam*. Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995.
14. Said Nursi, Saiqul Islam. *Al-Qahirah*: Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyyah, 2004.
15. Osman Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam: A Study in Islamic Philosophies of Science*. Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 2006.
16. M.Azram, *Epistemology - An Islamic Perspective*, IIUM Engineering Journal, Vol. 12, No. 5, 2011.
17. Cureton Will and Abd Allh ibn Amad, *Umdat Aqdat Ahl Al-sunnah Wa-al-jamah: Pillar Of The Creed Of The Sunnites: Being A Brief Exposition Of Their Principal Tenets*, Nabu Press, 2011.
18. Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali and Khalid Williams. *The Principles of the Creed: Book 2 of the Revival of the Religious Sciences*, Fons Vitae; 2016.
19. Turner, Colin, and Hasan Horguc. *Said Nursi. Makers of Islamic Civilization*. London: I. B. Taurus, 2009.
20. Abu Rabi, Ibrahim M., ed. *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*. SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003.
21. Mehmet Ozalp, *God And Tawhid In Classical Islamic Theology And Said Nursi's Risale-I Nur*, PhD Thesis, University of Sydney, 2016.
22. Sukran VAHIDE, *The Author of the Risale-i-Nur Collection Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, Istanbul, 2004.

23. Moten, A. Rashid, Islamization of Knowledge in Theory and Practice: The Contribution of Sayyid Ala AlMawdudi, Islamic Studies, Islamabad, Pakistan, vol.43, Number 2, 2004.
24. Ismail R. al-Faruqi, Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Work Plan, Herndon, VA: IIIT, 1987.
25. Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, Munazarat,(trans. by Sükran Vahide), Istanbul, Sozler Nesriyat, 2004.
26. Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, Muhakamat,(trans. by Sükran Vahide), Istanbul, Sozler Nesriyat, 2004.
27. Said Nursi, Al-Mathnawi al-Arabi al-Nuri, Tahqiq: Hayrat. Istanbul: Hayrat al-Nashr, 2010.
28. Said Nursi, Isharat al-l'jaz fi Mazan al-ljaz, Tahqiq: Hayrat. Istanbul: Hayrat al-Nashr, 2010.
29. Said Nursi, al-Maktubat. Istanbul: Sozler, 2003.
30. Said Nursi, al-Lama'at, Trans. Ihsan Qasim al-Salihi. Al-Qahirah: Shirkah Suzlar li al-Nashr, 2004.
31. Said Nursi, Ana. Al-Qahirah: Shirkah Suzlar li al-Nashr, 2004.