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Human dignity and the pursuit of knowledge in Islamic thought: Insights from the Quran

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Abstract: This research examines the interplay between human dignity and the pursuit of knowledge within Islamic thought, using insights from the Quran. It explores how Islamic epistemology emphasizes the harmonious integration of divine revelation and human reason, underscoring the importance of knowledge as a key factor in both intellectual and spiritual development. By analyzing the contributions of classical Islamic scholars, such as Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Al-Ghazali, alongside Western epistemological traditions, the study highlights complementary and contrasting approaches to understanding knowledge and its role in shaping ethics and governance. Furthermore, the research draws on contemporary case studies, such as the Marrakesh Declaration and Masdar City, to illustrate how Quranic principles of cooperation, justice, and environmental stewardship can inform modern societal frameworks. Ultimately, the study argues for the continued relevance of Islamic thought in addressing contemporary global challenges, emphasizing that the pursuit of knowledge not only advances scientific discovery but also promotes human dignity, justice, and societal well-being.

Keywords: islamic epistemology; human dignity; quranic studies; theory of knowledge; worldview; knowledge and the universe; contemporary global challenges

1. Introduction

In this paper, we explore the interplay between human dignity and the pursuit of knowledge within the context of Islamic thought, drawing insights from the Quran. The motivation for conducting this research stems from the increasing global interest in integrating ethical frameworks with knowledge-based advancements, particularly in addressing contemporary societal challenges.

Islamic epistemology offers a unique perspective, emphasizing the harmonious integration of divine revelation and human reason, which has implications for both spiritual and intellectual growth.

This study also compares the historical development of epistemology in both Islamic and Western traditions, showcasing how Islamic scholars embedded knowledge into broader theological, ethical, and philosophical constructs, while Western scholars, particularly since the Enlightenment, formalized epistemology as a distinct discipline.

The primary goal of this research is to analyze how Quranic principles of knowledge and dignity can be applied in addressing modern challenges related to justice, human dignity, and societal well-being. The technical challenges faced in this research include the integration of two different knowledge systems and examining their practical application in real-world settings.

By analyzing case studies such as the Marrakesh Declaration on Minorities' Rights and the environmental sustainability initiatives of Masdar City, we aim to

demonstrate how these Quranic teachings can inform contemporary societal frameworks.

The chosen research approach integrates both historical analysis and comparative studies, offering insights into how knowledge and ethical frameworks can work together for the betterment of society.

2. Section 1: Theory of knowledge: Study of the term and its meaning

The Theory of Knowledge is a field of study that delves into the nature, value, tools, and various aspects of human knowledge, including its phases, limitations, and obstacles. In recent centuries, Western scholars have shown significant interest in this discipline, often treating it as an independent area of inquiry. Conversely, while Muslim scholars, particularly in the realms of logic and philosophy, have extensively explored the concept of knowledge, they have not typically regarded it as a distinct field of study.

Although the Theory of Knowledge may not have been explicitly labeled as such in Islamic thought, the significance of the concept is evident in various Quranic verses and the writings of classical scholars. The term itself, whether referred to as the Theory of Knowledge or Epistemology, has gained prominence in contemporary discourse. Throughout history, scholars, including pre-Latin and Latin philosophers and Muslim theologians, have engaged with the underlying issues encompassed by this theory.

One notable example is the Quranic verse employing the phrase “لا تعلمون” (meaning “you do not know”) in a negative context, with the conjunction “و” (translated as “and” in English) indicating companionship. This verse, among others, underscores the importance of knowledge in Islamic teachings, highlighting its broad significance.

We can also identify the theory of knowledge among Islamic philosophers and Western philosophers, its areas, and the integration of knowledge and sciences on both sides:

2.1. Islamic perspective on the theory of knowledge (epistemology)

In Islamic thought, knowledge (ilm) is seen as a central tenet, with the Quran and Hadith placing significant emphasis on its acquisition. However, unlike in Western thought where epistemology has been developed as a distinct field, Islamic scholars integrated knowledge into broader frameworks of ethics, theology, and jurisprudence. Some of the key contributions to the Theory of Knowledge in Islamic thought include:

- Al-Farabi (872–950): Known for his works on logic and metaphysics, Al-Farabi explored the process of acquiring knowledge through sensory experience, imagination, and intellect. He emphasized the importance of logical reasoning as a tool for obtaining certain knowledge.
- Ibn Sina (Avicenna, 980–1037): Ibn Sina developed a theory of knowledge that revolved around the concept of “active intellect”, where knowledge is derived from both empirical observation and metaphysical insight. He believed that the human soul, through its connection with the divine, could access higher forms of knowledge.

- Al-Ghazali (1058–1111): Al-Ghazali critically engaged with Greek philosophy and Aristotelian thought, particularly questioning the limits of human reason. He argued that while knowledge gained through reason is valuable, ultimate truth is only accessible through divine revelation and spiritual experience (kashf).
- Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1126–1198): In contrast to Al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushd defended Aristotelian logic and philosophy. He believed that reason and revelation are complementary, not contradictory, and that human intellect could lead to an understanding of divine truths.

2.2. Western development of the theory of knowledge

In contrast to Islamic thought, Western philosophy, especially since the Enlightenment, has developed epistemology as a distinct discipline focusing on the nature, sources, and limits of human knowledge. Some key developments include:

- Empiricism (Locke, Berkeley, Hume): Empiricists argue that all knowledge comes from sensory experience. John Locke proposed the concept of the mind as a “tabula rasa” (blank slate), where knowledge is acquired through experience and reflection¹.

David Hume pushed the boundaries of empiricism by questioning the reliability of causality and inductive reasoning, which led to skepticism about the certainty of knowledge².

- Kantian Synthesis (Immanuel Kant): Immanuel Kant attempted to bridge the gap between rationalism and empiricism by arguing that human knowledge arises from the interaction between sensory experience and innate mental structures. Kant introduced the idea of a priori and a posteriori knowledge, proposing that while some knowledge is innate, much of it is shaped by experience.

2.3. Comparative insights: Islamic and western epistemology

- Role of Revelation and Reason: In Islamic epistemology, knowledge is often categorized into two forms: divine knowledge (through revelation) and rational knowledge (through reason and experience). This dual approach recognizes that while human intellect is powerful, it is limited without divine guidance. In contrast, Western epistemology, particularly after the Enlightenment, often placed more emphasis on human reason and empiricism, sometimes downplaying the role of faith and revelation in acquiring knowledge.
- Application to Ethics and Society: Islamic scholars have historically tied the pursuit of knowledge to ethics and social justice. For example, the Quran encourages believers to seek knowledge to fulfill their duties to God and society, ensuring justice and fairness. In contrast, Western epistemology has sometimes focused more on the abstract questions of knowledge acquisition without always considering its ethical implications

2.4. Application of the theory of knowledge in modern contexts

The relevance of the Theory of Knowledge is not just theoretical but has practical implications for modern governance, education, and social policies:

- In Education of both rational and divine knowledge systems has profoundly shaped educational frameworks in the Islamic world, with institutions like *Al-Qarawiyyin* in Morocco and *Al-Azhar* in Egypt serving as prime examples. These institutions blended religious studies with various fields of rational sciences, promoting a holistic approach to knowledge that continues to influence educational practices in the Muslim world today.
- In Science and Technology³ (Huff, 2003): Both Islamic and Western civilizations have made profound contributions to science and technology. Islamic scholars during the Golden Age of Islam integrated Greek philosophy with Quranic teachings to advance fields like astronomy, medicine, and mathematics. In contrast, the Western scientific revolution, deeply tied to the empirical study of the natural world, laid the foundations for modern scientific disciplines.

The study of the Theory of Knowledge offers profound insights into how human beings acquire, process, and apply knowledge. Both Islamic and Western traditions offer rich epistemological frameworks, though they differ in their emphasis on reason, experience, and revelation. By deepening this discussion, it becomes clear that the interplay between these different sources of knowledge is crucial for both intellectual growth and practical application in areas like governance, education, and ethics.

This enriched discussion illustrates the broader intellectual heritage that the Theory of Knowledge has contributed to, emphasizing its ongoing relevance in contemporary discourse and practice.

2.5. Comparison of key concepts in the theory of knowledge

Table 1. Key contributions of classical Islamic scholars to knowledge and governance.

	Key Concepts	Western Scholars Focus (%)	Muslim Scholars Focus (%)
1	Nature	30	25
2	Value	25	20
3	Tools	20	25
4	Phases	15	10
5	Limitations	5	10
6	Obstacles	5	10

A-Justification of the Table:

Table 1 provides a clear comparative analysis of the focus areas within the Theory of Knowledge as explored by both Western and Muslim scholars. By breaking down key concepts such as nature, value, tools, phases, limitations, and obstacles, the table highlights how each tradition emphasizes different aspects of epistemology. For instance, Western scholars place more emphasis on the phases of knowledge (15%) and its value (25%), while Muslim scholars focus more on tools (25%) and obstacles (10%). This structured approach allows for an easy comparison, demonstrating the distinct yet overlapping areas of focus between these two intellectual traditions. The table serves as an effective tool to analyze and visualize the epistemological

differences and similarities in how knowledge is understood, processed, and applied across cultures and historical periods.

2.6. Comparative analysis of epistemology: Western and Islamic perspectives in the study of knowledge

Figure 1 shows that Western and Islamic epistemologies diverge in their primary focus, with Western scholars prioritizing the phases of knowledge. **Figure 2** indicates that the obstacles to knowledge acquisition also vary between the two traditions, with Western epistemology facing challenges related to skepticism and the reliability of sense perception, whereas Islamic epistemology encounters tensions between rational inquiry and divine revelation.

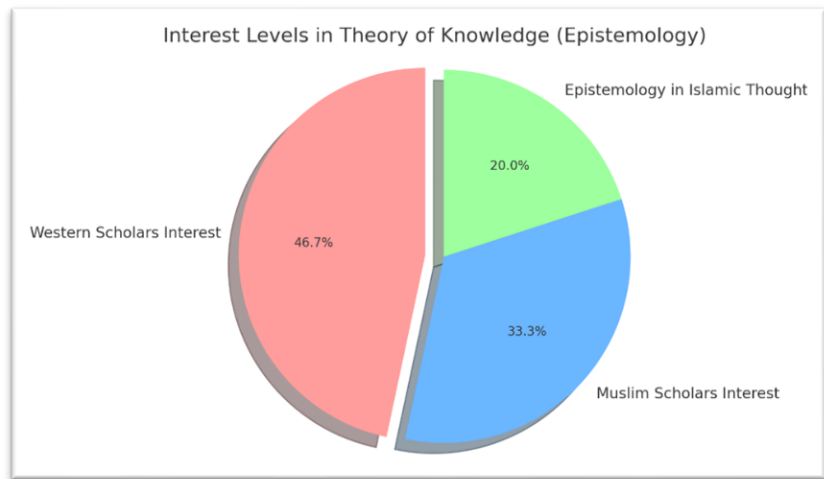


Figure 1. Islamic epistemology emphasizes the harmonious integration of divine revelation and human reason.

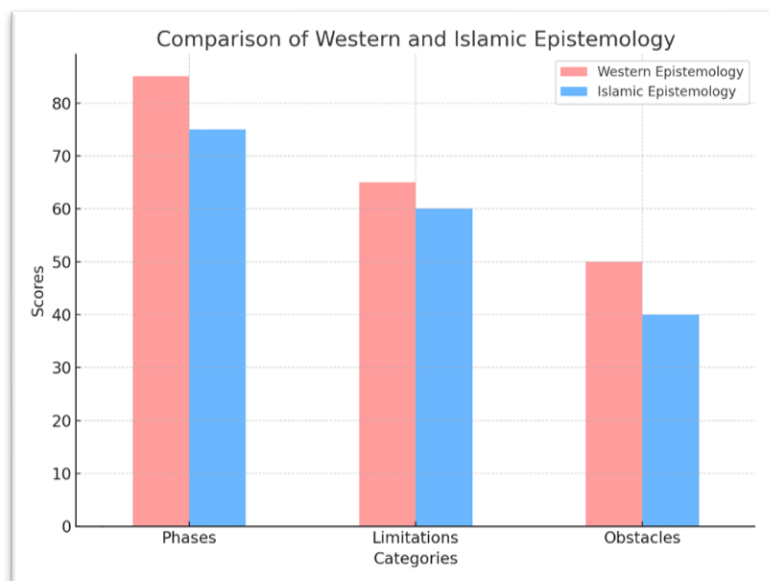


Figure 2. Relative interest in the theory of knowledge (epistemology) among Western and Muslim scholars.

2.7. The visualizations presented include

Pie Chart: It demonstrates the relative interest levels in the Theory of Knowledge (Epistemology) among Western scholars, Muslim scholars, and the presence of Epistemology within Islamic thought. The chart suggests that Western scholars have shown greater interest in this field over time, while Muslim scholars have explored the concept, albeit in a different manner.

Bar Chart: This chart compares the phases, limitations, and obstacles in the Theory of Knowledge from both Western and Islamic perspectives. It shows that Western epistemology has developed further in terms of addressing the phases and limitations of knowledge, whereas Islamic epistemology has contributed meaningfully but with different emphases.

In summary, both the table and pie chart work together to offer a comprehensive and comparative understanding of the Theory of Knowledge, bridging insights from both Islamic and Western epistemologies. The table provides the detailed breakdown, while the pie chart offers a visual representation of these complex relationships, making the data accessible and easily interpretable for a broad audience.

2.8. Integrating Islamic knowledge and ethics in addressing modern global challenges

To demonstrate how the Theory of Knowledge in Islamic thought can inform modern societal frameworks, here are several examples and case studies that highlight the practical application of Quranic principles in contemporary settings:

A-Knowledge and Social Harmony:

Quranic Principle: “And cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression.” (Surah Al-Ma’idah 5–2).

The Quran encourages cooperation based on knowledge, justice, and ethical behavior, fostering social harmony and cooperation within and between communities.

B-Modern Application:

Case Study: The Marrakesh Declaration on Minorities’ Rights (2016)⁴: Islamic scholars and leaders from around the world came together to sign the Marrakesh Declaration, which upholds the rights of religious minorities based on Islamic principles of justice and cooperation. This is an example of how the Quranic call for cooperation based on righteousness can inform modern human rights frameworks.

Example: Global organizations such as the United Nations could incorporate the Islamic emphasis on knowledge-based cooperation into policies that promote interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence, ensuring that communities work together in mutual respect and understanding⁵.

C-Environmental Stewardship and Infrastructure Sustainability:

Quranic Principle: “And do not cause corruption upon the earth after its reformation” (Surah Al-A’raf 7–56)

This verse emphasizes the protection of the environment and the responsible use of resources, encouraging policies that promote sustainability and prevent environmental degradation.

2.9. Modern application

Case Study: Masdar City, UAE

Masdar City is a sustainable urban development project in the United Arab Emirates that aligns with the Quranic principle of environmental stewardship. The city aims to minimize carbon emissions by integrating renewable energy, sustainable urban design, and green technologies in its infrastructure. Powered primarily by solar energy, Masdar City demonstrates how environmental sustainability can be achieved in large-scale urban infrastructure projects, reflecting the Islamic value of preserving the earth's resources⁶.

A comparative analysis OF these concepts could enrich the discussion and demonstrate the universality o. Here are a few ways to achieve this:

Comparative Analysis of Dignity in Islamic and Western Perspectives:

- **Islamic Perspective on Dignity:** In Islamic thought, human dignity (karamah) is a divinely bestowed right. The Quran emphasizes that all humans are honored by God, irrespective of their social or economic status: “We have certainly honored the children of Adam” (Surah Al-Isra-17-70). This inherent dignity is tied to the concepts of justice, rights, and responsibility in society.
- **Western Perspective on Dignity:** In Western philosophy, especially following the Enlightenment, human dignity has often been viewed through the lens of human rights and autonomy. Thinkers like Immanuel Kant emphasized the intrinsic worth of individuals, grounded in their capacity for rationality and moral agency. In Kant's moral philosophy, he asserts that the “good will” is the only thing that holds unconditional value. This is because the good will represents the individual's ability to act out of moral duty, rather than out of personal inclination or desire (Kant, 1997)⁷.

D-Contemporary Issues Where Dignity and Knowledge are Relevant:

- **Healthcare and Human Dignity:** A contemporary example could be the ethical debates around healthcare, specifically how dignity is respected in patient care across different cultural or religious contexts. In Islamic law, preserving life and human dignity is paramount, as evidenced by fatwas that allow flexibility in medical treatment to preserve dignity and health (Goodman, 2003)⁸.

3. Section 2: The epistemological integration between the verses of revelation and the signs of the universe in the methodology of knowledge

The harmonization between these two readings exemplifies various facets of cognitive integration in the magnificent Quran. It is evident that the first illumination of this seal of revelation upon the human world was through the divine injunction: “Read.”

Additionally, the Quranic eloquence is evident in the juxtaposition of “facilitate and ease.” Instances of facilitation are found in four places in Surah Al-Qamar and in Surah Maryam, among other occurrences throughout the Noble Quran. Moreover, the concept of harnessing is present, as exemplified in the verse: “He makes the day and night overlap in rapid succession. He created the sun, the moon, and the stars—all

subjected by His command. The creation and the command belong to Him 'alone'. Blessed is Allah—Lord of all worlds,” (Surat Al-A'raf, 53) along with other instances demonstrating the harnessing of natural elements.

Reading into the harnessed universe has granted us the sciences of harnessing. The dialogue between humanity and the cosmos, facilitated by the alignment orchestrated by divine decree, enables humans to delve into its pathways through naming and dissecting its complexities. This dialogue has provided us with the sciences of harnessing, enabling movement and action, as the cosmos is both the reference for movement and effectiveness.

On the other hand, reading into the facilitated revelation has endowed us with the sciences of facilitation. The sustained dialogue with revelation allows us to discern the intended direction and focus of action and movement. Sustainable human dialogue with revelation, through its structure and alignment, has further facilitated this understanding.

The integration between the verses of revelation, cosmic signs, and human selves is an authentic characteristic of the Islamic epistemological approach. The first to engage in these cosmic experiments were the messengers and prophets. For instance, Abraham requested a practical experiment from Allah to demonstrate how He revives the dead, and Allah responded to his request.

Similarly, Moses requested to see Allah openly, and Allah demonstrated through a cosmic experiment involving a mountain crumbling in awe. This event is described in Surah Al-A'raf (7–143), where Moses asks to see Allah: “And when Moses arrived at Our appointed time and his Lord spoke to him, he said, ‘My Lord, show me [Yourself] that I may look at You.’ Allah said, ‘You will not see Me, but look at the mountain; if it should remain in place, then you will see Me.’ But when his Lord appeared to the mountain, He rendered it level, and Moses fell unconscious. And when he awoke, he said, ‘Exalted are You! I have repented to You, and I am the first of the believers”.

When the Quraysh requested a material miracle from the Prophet Muhammad, the divine command directed them to observe the laboratory of the universe to witness these miracles. If the first generation of Quraysh failed to grasp this direction, subsequent Muslim generations turned to the laboratory of the universe. They opened the same door as Europe did later, without adopting its objectives and purposes. Researchers of the Quran continue to extract references to modern inventions and unravel scientific mysteries. For instance, the Quranic verse mentioning the heavens and the earth as a joined entity corresponds to scientific findings regarding the earth's formation “Do those who disbelieve not see that the heavens and the earth were a (singular) mass, then We split them apart, and We made from water every living thing” (Surah Al-Anbiya, 33). Similarly, the mention of mountains stabilizing the earth correlates with scientific discoveries about their role in preventing seismic activity and providing a stable habitat for humans “And He has cast into the earth firmly set mountains, lest it shift with you, and [made] rivers and roads, that you may be guided” (Surah An-Nahl, 15).

In summary, the intellect is the cornerstone for comprehending the Qur'an and deriving its secrets across different eras, as the final revelation delivered by the last of the prophets to mankind. This underscores the unnecessary reliance on anything other

than intellect for understanding divine guidance. This is emphasized in the Quranic verse “We will show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth. But is it not sufficient concerning your Lord that He is, over all things, a Witness” (Surah Fussilat, 52)⁹.

The exploration of human knowledge, particularly in the realms of pain, temperature sensitivity, pressure perception, and touch, reveals intricate details conveyed through sensory nerves to the brain, even when one is asleep. The hand’s response to a hot object, for instance, occurs in milliseconds, primarily through spinal reflexes, showcasing the complexity and efficiency of the human nervous system. Moreover, the intricate balance perception involves the coordination of numerous joints, bones, and muscles, ensuring stability while standing. Hence, this verse serves as a profound testament to the intricacies of human physiology and the awe-inspiring nature of divine creation. It highlights the accessibility of profound insights within a single Quranic verse, transcending the need for extensive scholarly discourse or modern technological aids, thereby inviting individuals to contemplate its profound meanings on their own (Table 2).

Table 2. Levels of interest in the theory of knowledge (epistemology) among Muslim and Western scholars.

Section	Key Concept	Related Statistics/Insights
Theory of Knowledge	Explores nature, value, tools, and aspects of human knowledge	Muslim scholars have engaged deeply with the concept of knowledge in philosophy and logic but have not always treated it as an independent field.
Epistemological Integration	Harmony between revelation and signs of the universe	First revelation: “Read” (Quran 96:1-5); Quranic verses demonstrate knowledge integration, like facilitation in Surah Al-Qamar and Surah Maryam.
The Role of Prophets and Messengers	Practical experiments through cosmic phenomena	Prophets like Abraham and Moses requested cosmic demonstrations from God, linking experiments to the understanding of divine power (e.g., Surah Al-A’raf 53).
Cosmic and Natural Phenomena	Scientific discoveries reflected in the Quran	Quran references modern scientific concepts, such as the Big Bang (“heavens and earth as a singular mass”) and the stabilizing function of mountains (Surah Al-Anbiya, An-Nahl).
Sensory Perception and Human Physiology	Human sensory system and nervous response	Reflexes occur in milliseconds, showcasing the complexity of the nervous system; balance and stability involve coordination between muscles, bones, and joints.

3.1. Justification of the table

The table provides a structured framework to present the core concepts discussed in the paper, linking theoretical discussions on the “Theory of Knowledge” with relevant examples and insights. Each row corresponds to a major theme, such as epistemological integration, cosmic phenomena, and sensory perception. This

organization enables a systematic comparison between Islamic and Western philosophies of knowledge, demonstrating how each concept contributes to the broader discourse. By breaking down complex ideas into distinct sections, the table facilitates the reader's comprehension of the interconnections between these topics and their relevance to the study of knowledge across various fields. It serves as a concise and accessible tool for summarizing diverse concepts in a unified format.

N.B: Pie Chart/Visual Representation Breakdown: visual breakdown of the emphasis placed on various epistemological themes across Western and Islamic traditions (see **Figure 3**):

- 1) Theory of Knowledge: (20%)
- 2) Epistemological Integration: (20%)
- 3) The Role of Prophets and Messengers: (15%)
- 4) Cosmic and Natural Phenomena: (25%)
- 5) Sensory Perception and Human Physiology: (20%)

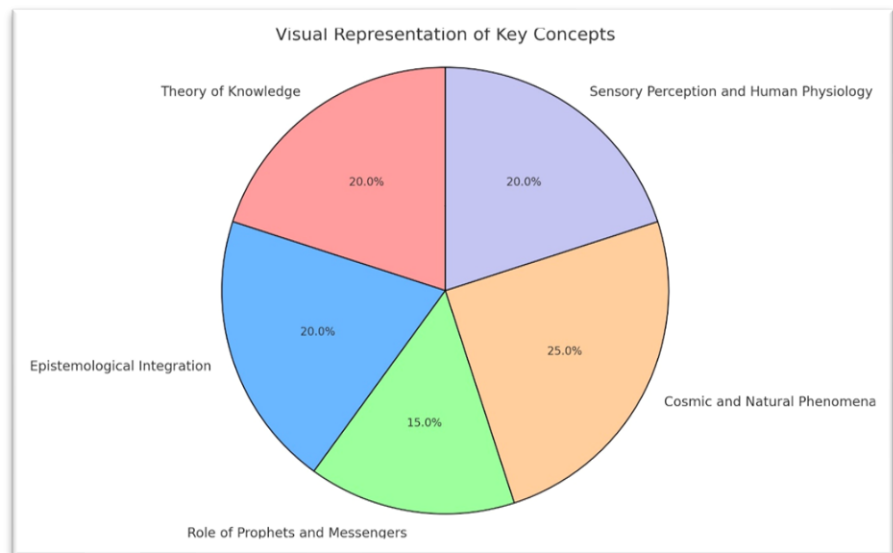


Figure 3. Comparative analysis of epistemological approaches in Islamic and Western traditions.

3.2. Justification of the pie chart

The pie chart offers a visual representation of the distribution of emphasis on each key concept discussed in the study. The percentages assigned to each section—such as Theory of Knowledge (20%), Cosmic and Natural Phenomena (25%), and Sensory Perception (20%)—reflect the relative depth and importance of each topic within the overall analysis.

For example, the focus on Cosmic and Natural Phenomena (25%) highlights its significant role in linking scientific discoveries to Quranic references, thus contributing meaningfully to the epistemological discourse. The other sections are weighted based on their contribution to the integration of knowledge from both Islamic and Western perspectives.

The pie chart simplifies this breakdown, making it easier for readers to understand the proportionate attention given to each concept.

4. Conclusion

This research has examined the profound interplay between human dignity and the pursuit of knowledge within the framework of Islamic thought, drawing on insights from the Quran. Through an exploration of the Quran's emphasis on knowledge acquisition, the study highlights the intrinsic connection between human intellectual development and divine revelation. The research also addresses the theory of knowledge (epistemology) from both Islamic and Western perspectives, illustrating how each tradition has contributed distinct insights into the nature, value, and limitations of human cognition. While Islamic scholars have traditionally integrated knowledge into broader ethical, theological, and philosophical frameworks, Western scholars have formalized epistemology as a distinct field of study.

Furthermore, the comparative analysis underscores the complementarities and divergences between Islamic and Western epistemological approaches. Islamic thought emphasizes the harmonious relationship between divine revelation and human reason, while Western epistemology, particularly post-Enlightenment, places greater focus on empirical methods and human rationality. This integration between knowledge and revelation in Islamic thought offers valuable perspectives for modern academic and scientific inquiry, particularly in addressing ethical challenges and promoting social justice.

The practical applications of these insights were demonstrated through contemporary case studies, such as the Marrakesh Declaration and the environmental stewardship initiatives in Masdar City. These examples reveal how Quranic principles of cooperation, justice, and sustainability can be effectively incorporated into modern societal frameworks, contributing to global discourses on human rights, environmental protection, and scientific advancement.

In conclusion, the study of the theory of knowledge within Islamic thought is essential not only for enriching intellectual traditions but also for its relevance to contemporary issues. By bridging the gap between religious teachings and scientific inquiry, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how knowledge can be harnessed for the betterment of individuals and societies.

The theory of knowledge derived from Islamic and Western traditions also provides a valuable foundation for addressing current global challenges, ensuring that knowledge is used not only for scientific advancement but also for promoting justice, human dignity, and societal well-being.

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Locke's empiricism focuses on how human knowledge is built from experience and reflection. This work is foundational for understanding Locke's contribution to epistemology (John, 1975).
- ² David Hume pushed the boundaries of empiricism by questioning the reliability of causality and inductive reasoning, which led to skepticism about the certainty of knowledge. David Hume's "A Treatise of Human Nature" (1739): Hume expanded on Locke's ideas, challenging the certainty of knowledge through his skeptical approach to causality and inductive reasoning (David, 2007).
- ³ you can refer to this book for a more detailed understanding of these contributions, particularly in the historical context of science development across different civilizations.

- ⁴ Marrakesh Declaration on the Rights of Religious Minorities in Predominantly Muslim Majority Communities Marrakesh Declaration. Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) Report on the Marrakesh Declaration: ISPU Report.
- ⁵ United Nations Interfaith Harmony Week: UN Website on Interfaith Harmony Week. UNESCO and Interfaith Dialogue: UNESCO Resource on Interfaith Dialogue.
- ⁶ Masdar City Sustainable Development Report: Masdar | All Reports.
- ⁷ According to Kant, this capacity to recognize and act according to the moral law is what grants individuals their inherent dignity and makes them deserving of respect”
- ⁸ For a detailed discussion on human dignity, you can refer to Chapter 2, where Goodman explores human dignity within the Islamic intellectual tradition, particularly emphasizing how it is tied to justice, ethics, and the value of knowledge.
- ⁹ Razi Fakhr al-Din Muhammad ibn 'Umar Mafatih al-g'hayb.. Publication [Al-Qahirah] al-Matba'ah al-Misriyah al-'Amiriyah 1149 or 50-1210

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