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A Comparative Review of Islamic and Western Epistemological Frameworks Between Mysticism and Secularism

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the fundamental foundations of knowledge by analyzing and comparing Irfani and Western epistemological paradigms. Using a qualitative library research method with a descriptive-analytical approach, this study examines how these two frameworks diverge and intersect. The findings reveal a primary distinction in the sources of knowledge: while the Western tradition encompassing Rationalism, Empiricism, and Criticism relies on reason, logic, and sensory perception, Irfani epistemology (Sufism) is rooted in intuition or direct spiritual experience (zhauqi). This study offers a novel perspective by highlighting that, despite the secularist-materialist bias often found in Western thought, both paradigms serve as essential conceptual frameworks for truth-seeking. The academic novelty of this research lies in its synthesis of "present knowledge" ('Ilm al-Laduny) and "acquired knowledge," demonstrating how Irfani thought utilizes reason to interpret spiritual phenomena, much like the collaborative effort between ratio and experience found in Criticism. Ultimately, the comparison underscores a complementary potential between Irfani's inner spiritual illumination and the Western emphasis on empirical verification.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The epistemology of science forms the philosophical foundation of all scientific activity. In the journey of exploring the mysteries of the universe, humans not only discover new facts but also continually question the foundations of their understanding of reality. From positivism, which emphasizes objective observation, to constructivism, which highlights the role of interpretation in constructing knowledge, the epistemology of science provides a conceptual framework for understanding the thought processes and argumentation that underpin science. The importance of the epistemology of science also lies in how we view the relationship between objective reality and social construction.(Maryani, Isropil Siregar, Ahmad Syukriss, 2024).

In the development of Islamic philosophy, epistemology has emerged as a new discipline that studies intuition and revelation. Intuition is knowledge that comes from God in the form of new insights without deduction, speculation, or observation. In Islam, this kind of knowledge is called 'Ilm

al-Wahbi' or 'Ilm al-Laduny', which ranks one level lower than revelation. There are three epistemologies of knowledge in Islam: bayani, irfani, and burhani. Bayani epistemology is based on religious texts and employs an orthodox approach; Burhani epistemology uses a philosophical approach; and Irfani epistemology uses a mystical approach(Ahmad Muzammil, Syamsuri, 2022).

In relation to religion and spiritual life, Western epistemology is unbalanced. It is unbalanced between the physical and spiritual aspects, between the material and the immaterial, between this world and the afterlife, between reason and the soul. Likewise, in matters of religion, Western epistemology seeks to distance itself from the influence and involvement of religion in the development and production of knowledge.(Diana Sari, 2020)

The rapid advancement of science in the West and the epistemological discourse between Islamic and Western intellectuals in the 21st century make this discussion very interesting and worthy of in-depth study. Naturally, this sparks a radical debate between the two perspectives on the nature of science: is it free of values, or must it be based on values (by-product)? Because the source of knowledge in a Western perspective relies solely on reason, logic, and the five senses rather than on revelation and religious belief, cultural traditions are strengthened by supporting secularist philosophies that emphasize human rationality. Thus, the emergence of Western epistemological schools of thought, namely: 1) rationalism, 2) empiricism, and 3) criticism. However, if epistemology is understood as a religious foundation, namely Islam, then the naqli arguments of the Qur'an and Hadith can be said to be the primary epistemological sources for addressing the problems of human life(Hafizh, Dina, Astuti, & Ningsih, 2023).

This study aims to identify and thoroughly analyze the sources of knowledge within the framework of Irfani and Western epistemology. In addition, this study aims to compare the spiritual-intuitive paradigm in Irfani thought with the rational-empirical foundations of Western philosophy to identify both points of convergence and fundamental differences. Through this analysis, a complementary contribution from both traditions to the development of contemporary knowledge can be formulated.

2. METHODS

The approach used in this research is qualitative, in which researchers use data analysis techniques and other data collection methods to present subjects' responses and behavior.(Moleong, 2007) This type of research is Library Research, namely an effort to obtain data through libraries (library research)(Sugiyono, 2010). As is known, library research is a research technique that collects data and information from various materials found in the library. Primary data sources come from various literature directly related to the theme "Irfani epistemology and its comparison with Western epistemology," and secondary sources are various articles that indirectly support this study(Wiwin Yuliani, 2020). Both primary and secondary sources were searched in Google Scholar, limiting the literature to articles published within the past 5 years (Madum et al., 2025). The collected data were then analyzed using descriptive-analytical methods to uncover and examine the comparison between Islamic and Western epistemological paradigms(Wiwin Yuliani, 2020).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Irfani's Epistemology

In philosophy, `irfani is better known as intuition. With intuition, humans acquire knowledge suddenly, without a specific reasoning process. The characteristics of intuition include: zhauqi (feeling), which is through direct experience; ilmu hudluri, which is the presence of an object within the subject; and existential, which is without categorization but rather knowing it at its core(Akbar, Soleh, Islam, Maulana, & Ibrahim, n.d.). Irfani is a reasoning model based on a direct spiritual approach and experience of apparent reality. Irfani's aim is esoteric or inner; therefore, the ratio used is only to explain spiritual experience (Ma'rufi, Nisa, & Madum, 2023).

The Irfani methodology and approach are capable of compiling and developing Sufi knowledge. Irfani comes from the Arabic word Arafa. Irfani or makrifat has the same meaning as makrifat, which means knowledge. However, these two terms differ from scientific terms. Irfani, or makrifat, is knowledge obtained directly from God through spiritual experience, based on love or strong determination. Meanwhile, science is knowledge obtained through transformation or rational thought. According to Mehdi Hari Yazdi, Irfani's knowledge is "knowledge that is present," distinct from rational knowledge, which is "knowledge that is acquired." Meanwhile, according to Henri Bergson, Irfani's knowledge is referred to as "knowledge of," which is intuitive knowledge obtained directly, distinct from knowledge about, which is obtained through intermediaries or rational thought.(Ulliyah et al., 2024).

The uniqueness of Irfani with other Islamic sciences is because its model of knowledge is obtained from spiritual experience, which implies a condition where, at certain times, a person feels fana' in the Absolute reality (absolute realm), so it is difficult to express in ordinary language because it is a natural inner experience. Therefore, the epistemology of Irfani is called Sufism. The process in Sufism is carried out through a spiritual path, or in Sufi terms, called maqamat. According to Hakim Tirmidhi (a Sufi of the third and fourth centuries of the Hijri era), this path encompasses three major agendas, namely: first, emptying the soul of reprehensible deeds (takhalliy an-nafs), which are contained in the maqom tawbah, zuhud, and adawah annafs. Second, filling it with commendable deeds (tahalliy an-nafs) which are contained in the maqom mahabbah, qhat 'al-hawa, and al-khasyah. Third, the soul's exposure to reality (tajalliy an-nafs) is achieved through ahl al-qurbah, in which a person feels fana.

3.1.1 Takhalliy An-Nafs

Takhalli is the primary step a seeker must take. It is an effort to free oneself from a terrible state of mind and ethics. One of the lowly ethics that causes some of these lowly ethics is, among other things, excessive appreciation of shared endeavors. Takhalli can also be interpreted as freeing oneself from dependence on shared pleasures. This is achieved by abandoning disobedience in all its forms and striving to slay the driving force of evil desires (Hasan, n.d.).

According to Mustafa Zahri, the interpretation of takhalli is ridding oneself of all reprehensible traits. Conversely, according to Muhammad Hamdani Bakran adz-Dzaky, the interpretation of takhalli is a method of emptying oneself of traces of disobedience and denial (sin) towards Allah SWT through true repentance (nasuha). In this regard, humans are not asked to escape worldly problems completely, nor are they ordered to eliminate desires. However, they should always use the world solely for their own needs, suppressing urges that could disturb the stability of their thoughts and feelings. They do not give in to every desire, do not indulge their desires, but do not extinguish them either. They place everything in its proper proportion, so they do not pursue the world and do not hate it too much. If the heart has been infected with disease or reprehensible traits, then it must be addressed. The cure is to practice cleansing it first, namely, freeing oneself from reprehensible traits so that one can fill it with praiseworthy qualities to achieve true happiness.(Hasan, n.d.)

All Sufis agree that the primary goal of Sufism is to attain a direct connection with God, thus feeling and consciously existing in God's presence. Being in God's presence is experienced as a truly profound pleasure and happiness. For Sufis, it is the human spirit that can achieve this presence because the human spirit is a reflection of the divine essence, and the human soul is an emanation of God. For Sufis, the path for the human spirit to connect directly with God is through spiritual purity, because God is a pure being. Achieving this purity of soul, for Sufis, involves regulating mental behavior and strict behavioral discipline, through which humans can identify themselves with their divine identity. Achieving this requires learning and mental training.(Miswar, 2015)

3.1.2 Tahalliy An-Nafs

Filling oneself with praiseworthy qualities, shining a light on one's heart by being physically and mentally obedient, is called Tahalli. Such a heart can easily receive Nurullah's radiance. Therefore, all his deeds and actions are always based on sincere intentions (pure from riya), and his acts of worship

are nothing other than seeking the approval of Allah SWT. That is why people like this can get closer to the Almighty. Therefore, Allah SWT always bestows grace and protection on him.(Drs. Samsul Munir Amin, 2022)

Amin Syukur explained that the interpretation of tahalli is to adorn oneself by adapting one's character, behavior, and good deeds. Meanwhile, Mustafa Zahri defines tahalli as adorning oneself with praiseworthy qualities. The steps to implement tahalli include fostering individuals to possess noble morals and remaining consistent with the previously established methods (in takhalli). Carrying out rigorous psychological training to adapt good behavior will ultimately create a perfect human being (insan kamil).(Syukur, 2002)

This Tahalli session is meant to fill the soul that was previously emptied. Because if a routine is abandoned but not quickly replaced, the resulting emptiness can lead to frustration. Therefore, whenever an old routine is abandoned, it must be quickly replaced with a new, good routine. From practice, a routine will become a habit, and from routine, character will be formed. The human soul, according to Al-Ghazali, can be trained, understood, changed, and shaped according to one's own will.(Hasan, n.d.)

3.1.3 Tajalli

To strengthen and expand the modules that have been passed in the tahalli stage until the learning series is idealized in the tajalli stage. This word implies the revelation of Nur Ghaib for the heart. If the soul is filled with ethical pearls and the organs of the body are accustomed to performing noble deeds, so that the results obtained are not diminished. It is necessary to experience the feeling of the heavenly realm. A schedule carried out with an ideal understanding and a deep sense of love will increase the feeling of longing for Him. Sufis agree that to achieve this level of opportunity for the purity of the soul, there is one way, more precisely: devotion to Allah SWT and developing that awe. With this virtue of the soul, it is as if at that moment the path will be opened to reach God. Without this way, it is impossible to understand how to achieve that goal, and the activities undertaken are not considered great deeds.(Miswar, 2015)

For Muhammad Hamdani Bakran adz-Dzaky, the translation of tajalli refers explicitly to the birth or development of the unused presence of people in modern activities, words, behavior, and development; modern nobility and status; modern qualities and characteristics; and unused self-substance. Therefore, it is said with the victory of Allah SWT. The birth of an individual from modern birth and in unused life and life is only because of the help of Allah SWT, the intervention of the Prophet Muhammad. and the prayers of the blessed apostles by His side through extraordinary efforts, struggles, penance and self-discipline in performing reverence within the framework of carrying out all His commands, maintaining a strategic distance from His prohibitions, and understanding His trials.(Adz-Dzaky, 2002)

3.2 Western Epistemology

The discussion of Western epistemology is fascinating when considered in relation to the postmodern era. The significant influence of this discussion has led to the rapid development of knowledge, namely Western ideas and patterns of thought. One of the impacts of Socrates' thinking on the development of values education in Greek philosophy is in accordance with his belief, namely, "that truth value could be achieved by way of knowledge. Thus, in order to give rise to well-behaved people, they must be educated by way of instillment of knowledge." This statement made him a pioneer in the development of knowledge about values in the world of philosophy. From Socrates' perspective, Western epistemology tends to be rational in accordance with empirical truth values, even separating them from what is irrational. In the development of Ancient Greek philosophy, several schools of thought emerged, which have had a significant influence on current epistemological patterns. If Western epistemology is reviewed, an imbalance is found between the physical and metaphysical aspects, between the physical and the spiritual, and between the two worlds. Western epistemology

seeks to separate the church from knowledge. The classification of sources of epistemology from the Western perspective is as follows:

3.2.1 Rationalism

The etymology of the word "rationalism" comes from the English word "rationalismo," meaning logic, while the Latin word "ratio," meaning reason, is "rationalism." The term "rationalism" refers to a school of thought that believes reason is a valid source of knowledge. Rationalism holds that reason is unique and independent of sensory observation, and that sensory observation serves to confirm and strengthen the knowledge generated by reason.

Plato was a pioneer of rationalism in the classical era, and Descartes and Leibniz in the modern era. This school of thought is fundamental to building a system of thought grounded in ideas. This school's view holds that knowledge is built on clear and definite "ideas" based on reason. The debate between Aristotle and Plato focused solely on the source of knowledge, whether the senses or reason. According to Plato, knowledge obtained from sensory observation is dynamic and unstable, thus lacking absolute truth. In his search for the Idea, Plato discovered knowledge derived from sensory observation, which is static. On the other hand, Aristotle does not recognize the existence of a world of ideas. He instead recognizes that continuous sensory observation of something can lead to concrete knowledge through the abstraction of ideas produced by reason (Madum, 2025).

René Descartes, a leading figure in European philosophy, proposed that absolute truth can be achieved through thought. The problem of human thought has two sides: error and understanding. This reality is the basis of Descartes' philosophical thinking and the starting point of philosophical beliefs. Rationalism does not deny the use of the senses, but rather the senses' role as stimulants and stimuli for reason, so that everything the senses touch is processed through reason, according to Leibniz. The final process is concrete knowledge whose validity has been guaranteed. Rationalism predominantly uses the deductive method, whereas empiricism uses the inductive method. Rationalism also holds that logic is the primary source of decision-making.(Hafizh et al., 2023).

In conclusion, this school of thought acknowledges the essence of the senses, but the senses serve only as a medium to stimulate the mind and provide information that the mind can digest. Thus, reason and the senses are interdependent in understanding a concept of nature. However, this school of thought predominantly relies on reason in decision-making.

3.2.2 Empiricism

Etymologically, empiricism derives from the Greek word "empeiria," meaning "experience." Terminologically, empiricism is the doctrine that all knowledge originates from experience (sensory perception). In this school, experience, rather than reason, is the source of epistemology. This school focuses on returning knowledge to sensory experience. Aristotle was a classical figure in this school, which later gave rise to modern figures such as F. Bacon, John Locke, T. Hobbes, J.S. Mill, and David Hume. Aristotle argued that all knowledge is based on empirical evidence and that there is no single natural idea as a precursor. However, according to him, knowledge that contains definitive conclusions about something concrete is called actual knowledge.

Aristotle's thinking emphasized the senses' role in discovering and revealing universal laws. The English philosopher Francis Bacon (1561-1626), who studied science at Cambridge, argued that humans cannot know various realities without the senses. Furthermore, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1678) argued that all knowledge originates from sensory experience. He believed that truth is something perceived by the senses, while intellectual knowledge (rationality) can only be processed after sensory data has been acquired. John Locke (1632-1704) likened reason to a blank sheet of paper that is painted with ideas based on experience, thus creating knowledge through connections and agreements (including disagreements) about those ideas.(Hasibuan, 2021).

Empiricism is a philosophical doctrine that emphasizes the acquisition of knowledge through experience and downplays the role of reason. Empiricist doctrine in philosophy focuses on experience

and disregards reason. The theories of meaning and knowledge are characteristic of the empiricist school. The theory of meaning is often put forward as a theory that explains where knowledge comes from, namely, how concepts are present and emerge. This is summarized in the statement "experience perceives it. Locke asserts that the observation made by the soul using reason is what is called experience.

The theory of knowledge regarding the existence of causes before an event occurs is based on the statement "according to rationalists there are general truths such as 'every incident must have a cause', basic mathematics and some basic ethical principles, and truths that are true by themselves which are known as acquired truth". The author provides a conclusion about empiricism, which holds that experience is a source of knowledge, subject to the suitability of empirical-experimental methods and inductive reasoning.

3.2.3 Criticism

Critical philosophy can be described as a school of thought that combines rationalism and empiricism, pioneered by Immanuel Kant (a German philosopher). This school was an attempt and response to the debate between empiricism and rationalism. Kant successfully combined the two schools and transformed culture, thereby giving rise to this school(Dinata, Islam, & Sunan, 2021).

History records that Criticalism is Immanuel Kant's philosophical thought, inspired by a review of the extent of reason's ability to acquire knowledge. Kant's philosophical questions concerned several requirements that must be met in the pursuit of knowledge, so that one will not become lost in the labyrinth of questionable knowledge after understanding them. Kant's core thoughts on knowledge, ethics, and aesthetics served as the foundation of Critical Theory, which emerged from questioning ontology, epistemology, and axiology.

The Critique of Pure Reason (1781) is the fruit of Kant's philosophical thinking on a concept consisting of three fundamental questions. The epistemology Kant put forward in this work discusses the definition and striking distinctions regarding the nature of knowledge, with its analysis-synthesis and a priori-a posteriori characteristics. Kant essentially agreed that experience must take precedence over reason and that experience is analytic and a priori(Buroker, 2006).

3.2.4 Comparison of Irfani and Western Epistemology

The fundamental difference between the two lies in the foundation of the sources of knowledge. Western epistemology is predominantly based on reason, logic, and the five senses, while Irfani epistemology is based on direct spiritual experience or intuition received directly from God.

The following table compares the differences between Irfani and Western epistemology:

Aspect	Irfani's Epistemology	Western Epistemology
Primary Source of Knowledge	Intuition (knowledge from God without deduction, speculation, or observation).	Ratio (Reason), Logic, and Five Senses (Experience).
Approach	Mystical/Spiritual, centered on spiritual experiences.	Rationalism, Empiricism, and Criticism (a combination of both).
Focus Shoot	Esoteric or inner/spiritual part (Absolute reality).	Objective and tends to separate things that are irrational.
The Nature of Knowledge	It is called "present knowledge" ('Ilm al-Laduny/al-Wahby), obtained directly (hudluri).	Called "acquired knowledge" (rational), it is obtained through rational thinking and intermediaries (observation).

Balance of Values	It has a connection with religion and spiritual life.	Imbalance between physical and spiritual, material and immaterial; trying to distance themselves from the influence of religion (secularism).

Despite the fundamental differences, there are points of contact that can be drawn from these two epistemologies, especially in the role of the process in achieving knowledge, although in different ways.

a. The Search for Truth/Knowledge: Both are conceptual frameworks for understanding the process of thinking and argumentation in seeking and developing knowledge.
b. The Role of Experience:
   1) Irfani places great emphasis on direct spiritual experience (zhauqi).
   2) The West (especially Empiricism) emphasizes sensory experience as a source of knowledge.
c. The Role of Reason/Ratio:
   1) Irfani uses ratios to explain the spiritual experiences he has had.
   2) The West (especially Rationalism) uses reason as the main source and the senses as a stimulus for reason..

In particular, the epistemology of Criticalism, which is one of the schools of thought in Western Epistemology, shows that there is a collaborative effort between reason and experience, which generally reflects that both parties acknowledge the existence of a process for gaining knowledge, both through reason (rational thinking) and experience (sensory/spiritual).

4. CONCLUSION

From the above explanation, it can be concluded that conceptually, Western epistemology is dominated by rationalism, empiricism, and criticalism, all of which establish reason (ration), logic, and the five senses (experience) as the primary sources of knowledge. Their approaches tend to be rational and empirical. The implication of this dominance is the emergence of secularist philosophy, characterized by efforts to distance itself from the influence of religion in the development of knowledge, and causing an imbalance between the physical and spiritual aspects (between the material and the immaterial).

Radically different from other epistemologies, Irfani epistemology (often called intuition or Sufism) establishes direct spiritual experience or intuition as its source of knowledge. The knowledge gained is called "knowledge that is present" ('Ilm al-Laduny/al-Wahbi), which comes directly from God without the process of deduction or observation. Irfani's focus is on the esoteric or inner/spiritual aspects (Absolute reality), where reason serves only to explain the spiritual experience obtained. This epistemology is closely related to religion and spiritual life.

Despite their contrasting sources and focuses, these two epistemologies share a fundamental common ground: they are conceptual frameworks for understanding the process of thinking and argumentation in the pursuit and development of knowledge. Both recognize the role of experience, with Irfani emphasizing spiritual experience (zhauqi), and Western empiricism emphasizing sensory experience. Similarly, reason plays a role; the West (rationalism) makes it the primary source, while Irfani uses it to interpret spiritual experience. In fact, the critical school of Western epistemology demonstrates a collaborative effort between reason and experience, reflecting a recognition of the complex process of acquiring knowledge. Thus, this comparison concludes that Irfani and Western epistemologies represent two different paradigms for the pursuit of truth: Irfani emphasizes inner truth through spiritual illumination. In contrast, the West emphasizes external truth through rational and empirical verification.

Further research is recommended to explore the practical application of integrating Irfani and Western epistemology in higher education curricula or in the development of scientific ethics in the

Islamic world. In addition, further studies on the syncretism of methods between Western criticism and the Irfani Riyadhah method would be a very valuable contribution.

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