

# Critiquing the Modern Western Theory of Knowledge and Insights into a Qur'anic Epistemology

*Farhan Mujahid Chak*

## Abstract

This article compares and contrasts a western post-Enlightenment theory of knowledge with a Qur'anic epistemology. It first analyzes the development of post-Enlightenment epistemology, which resulted in the disappearance of established meaning and the implanting of doubt. Thereafter, western epistemology began to deal with such questions as "What can I know?" and "How can I distinguish between those things that I am justified in believing over those things that I am not justified in believing?" Eventually, this developed into the two dominant and diverging paths that persist until today: "We might be able to know the truth" (plausibility) or "We are unable to know anything" (denial).

What makes this so important is its eventual influence upon the Muslim world with the advent of colonialism, European preeminence, and globalization. That influence, it is argued, has been disastrous because of its ability to uproot the indigenous Islamic epistemic tradition. Therefore this article, by focusing on various Qur'anic verses, shares insights for an alternative epistemology that would begin to rectify this dissonance. It does so by discussing the features of a Qur'anic epistemology, one that begins with the affirmation or certainty of "God knowing" with the potential for "human knowing." In other words, it establishes an optimistic attitude toward "true" knowledge being possible (viz., "I" may be wrong, although God knows) and the potentiality of certainty being ever-present.

---

Farhan Mujahid Chak is an assistant professor of international affairs, Department of International Affairs, Qatar University.

## Introduction

A comprehension of epistemology, also known as a theory of knowledge, is essential for understanding how a particular civilization inculcates learning, establishes a premise that governs the justification of belief, and thereby makes valid knowledge claims.<sup>1</sup> Relatedly, it enables us to grasp the unique processes of thought development therein, for undoubtedly the assembly of thought patterns is not fortuitous. Actually, to put it plainly, the manner in which we think is a byproduct of our socialization and leads to the formation of beliefs that empower us to distinguish between claims of truth and falsehood. That social construction, consequently, mandates what constitutes knowledge for those making assertions. This, in effect, is what epistemology provides: the foundation for a specific worldview, a general vision that defines how a people understand their own self, law, theology, philosophy, mysticism, art, or even the entire universe.<sup>2</sup> As Rahman highlights:

... an Islamic worldview does need to be worked out today and that this is an immediate imperative; for unless such a system is attempted, there is little that can be ministered through education. But, here, precisely we come up against the most vicious of all circles of contemporary Islam – that unless necessary and far-reaching adjustments are made in the present system of education, it is not even conceivable that creative minds will arise that will work out the desired systematic interpretation of Islam.<sup>3</sup>

Resolving this imperative is crucial, yet how is this to be done?

First, it is important to realize that many epistemic traditions construct different assumptions toward knowledge acquisition and the justification of belief. In particular, the modern post-Enlightenment epistemic tradition, which today holds considerable sway throughout the world through the globalization of life's "intimate and personal aspects," contrasts with a Qur'anic epistemology.<sup>4</sup> It is here, then, that we concentrate in order to unravel those divergent, deep-seated epistemic assumptions that later coalesce into a worldview. Yet enigmatic questions emerge: What is the significance of those dissimilar assumptions for acquiring knowledge? What are the distinguishing features of modern western epistemology? How does it differ from a Qur'anic epistemology? Is the presence of these conflicting epistemologies responsible for the contemporary intellectual dissonance in Muslim society?

To put this in perspective, the development of the modern western theory of knowledge is, principally, the unseemly consequence of the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment, in which the quest to achieve true knowledge replaced God with science.<sup>5</sup> This new deity also had a sole offspring: the

much-acclaimed “modern” individual who recklessly celebrated his/her new-found idol. Now, in a post-Enlightenment world, only science is considered worthy of loyalty. A peculiar conundrum arose from this changing of loyalties, however, for there was an epistemic paradigm shift. Given that life was no longer understood in the same way, whether it be axiology, ontology, or teleology, established meaning had disappeared. Granted, the disappearance of meaning instigated a plethora of creativity to reclaim lost spaces of understanding. However, replacing God resulted in the influx of doubt and consumed the hitherto “natural order” under the instrumentality of reason.<sup>6</sup> All that once stood firmly withered away.

Here it is, as it were, that the “enlightened” and “modern” person removes God from His Throne and seats himself/herself upon it. But one is confounded by one’s own clumsy limitations and thereby denies truth per se. As a result, Taylor’s “malaise of modernity” begins, a process that leads to the disenchantment of the world, its social relationships, and a skeptical approach to knowledge. In such a context, it is not surprising that epistemic studies in the West should reveal either a bewildering rejection of being able to attain true knowledge or merely a plausible acceptance of its potential. The “instrumentality of reason” would have it that reason and individual self-sufficiency allow people to emerge confident from the shackles of their intellectual servitude. Yet this hardly held true, for humanity has increasingly alienated itself from its surroundings. Kant concisely defines enlightenment as

man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-incurred when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. *Sapere Aude!* [Dare to be wise] “Have courage to use your own understanding!”<sup>7</sup>

In this intellectual milieu, individualism thrives. Yet despite all of the euphoria associated with individualism, and notwithstanding Kant’s caution against unbridled disregard for society, narcissism tramples the human responsibility to one another to fulfill Nietzsche’s nightmare of “miserable ease.”<sup>8</sup> These intellectual challenges continue to perplex contemporary western epistemology.

Markedly, Islam’s perspective on epistemology began on an entirely different premise and, nowadays, faces an altogether unusual crisis. It started with the Qur’anic verse of “Read, in the Name of your Lord who has created all that exists” (96:1).<sup>9</sup> From that historic moment onward revelation was introduced into a world of reason, and knowledge was to be pursued while being

cognizant of God through textual association. In fact, faith and knowledge became Islamic civilization's defining ethos.<sup>10</sup> This epistemic paradigm would remain intact, largely unchallenged, until the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) and Europe's consequent economic, political, and cultural ascendancy.<sup>11</sup>

Slowly, Islam's epistemic heritage would come under increasing threat, initially from within by those mesmerized by European preeminence. Yet it eventually capitulated under the brute force of colonialism. Of course, Muslim society was not alone in facing this imperialist onslaught. Toynbee speaks of "Western conquest" throughout the world, especially in the political and economic realms.<sup>12</sup> However, this imperial conquest imposed, or at least tried to impose, an epistemology on the subject peoples. Said, succinctly, reflects that colonialism continues unabated "in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological and social practices."<sup>13</sup> To be precise, this is where western epistemology encroaches upon the Muslim mind and develops into a crisis.<sup>14</sup> This makes articulating a coherent and relevant Islamic epistemology, one that begins with the Qur'an, all the more critical.

Today, everything from textbooks to English-language television programs largely reinforces a western epistemology that clashes with established meaning in Muslim society. Similarly, this imposing vernacular expresses an axiology, teleology, and ontology that convey contrasting conceptions of religion, politics, culture, gender, and even human beings. Elmessiri points out this discrepancy and then suggests that it results in dissonance by producing either rejectionists or mindless imitation.<sup>15</sup> This holds particularly true for intellectuals throughout Muslim society, who are socialized in their local epistemic tradition and yet institutionalized in a conflicting western epistemology. Perhaps this epistemic dissonance is the principal reason for the arrested scholarship in Muslim societies. People who seek to excel in building science, a competitive culture, or a progressive civilization must root their scholarship in their civilization's indigenous epistemology. The question is, though, how do we begin to understand that epistemology?

Muslims understand the Qur'an as God's infallible word that clarifies the origins, acquisition, and dissemination of knowledge.<sup>16</sup> The Qur'an shapes the mindset of those who read and accept it, thereby effecting socialization. It is here, then, that we look to decipher the contours of a Qur'anic epistemology and acquire a better appreciation of the development of a wider, more encompassing Islamic epistemology. Nevertheless, a Qur'anic epistemological account must contain an evaluative dimension, a means to distinguish between what we merely accept as knowledge and what real knowledge is. Moreover, it must provide the context within which to pursue this evaluative task. This article will neither answer all questions concerning a Qur'anic epistemology

nor insist that it is the only epistemology that may be articulated from the Qur'an, for its sole objective is to offer insights according to a Qur'anic textual analysis of the origins, acquisition, and dissemination of knowledge.

To begin, this article will identify and describe two primary trends in modern western epistemology: (a) plausibility, that we might be able to attain true knowledge if such a thing actually exists, and (b) denial, a skeptical approach stating that we cannot attain true knowledge because it does not exist. Thereafter, this article will expose insights for an alternative Qur'anic epistemology, one that begins with the affirmation or certainty of "God knowing" with the potential for "human knowing." In other words, it will establish an optimistic attitude of true knowledge being possible (viz., "I" may be wrong, though God knows) and the potentiality of certainty being ever-present and distinct from "my" perspective. Cautiously enough, this study seeks to assess and question the substance of epistemic assumptions in both the western and the Qur'anic traditions that have, as of yet, largely gone unexplored.

## Deconstructing Western Epistemology

Post-Enlightenment Europe embarked on a new epistemic journey that resulted in disenchantment with its hitherto natural order. That, consequently, let loose two forces: creativity and chaos. Freed from the shackles of blind faith, holding nothing sacred, and challenging all established meaning in society caused creativity to flourish. Yet after desacralizing established meaning, chaos ensued. The disappearance of meaning, then, implanted a doubt in all that was and how it was understood. Taylor mentions that "once society no longer has a sacred structure, once social arrangements and modes of action are no longer grounded in the order of things or Will of God, they are in a sense up for grabs."<sup>17</sup> Yet, interestingly enough, this loss of meaning had the unintended consequence of launching a search for true knowledge, which led to the development of the modern western field of epistemology. Of course, how could it not? If neither the religious text nor its guardians controlled understanding, then the field was open to new interpretations.

At that moment, western epistemology began to deal with such questions as "What can I know?" and "How can I distinguish between those things that I am justified in believing over those things that I am not justified in believing?"<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, two dominant and diverging paths appeared and persist to the present day: "We might be able to know the truth" (plausibility) or "We are unable to know anything" (denial). The plausibility of knowing assesses how we understand knowledge, its source and acquisition, and how we make valid knowledge claims. The denial of knowing, or skepticism, in-

sists that sustained reflection about knowledge will eventually generate a skeptical attitude toward any claims of certainty, that there are no absolutes, and that all knowledge is relative. Interestingly, both trends set the tone for learning in western civilization: the repugnance of certainty.

## Plausibility

From one standpoint, modern western epistemology follows a logic that we describe as the “plausibility of knowing.” Since epistemology studies knowing, it struggles to comprehend the criteria for distinguishing between true or adequate knowing from false or inadequate knowing. This, in turn, leads to assessing what methods of justification best achieve the objective of knowing something to be true.<sup>19</sup> Now, as always, epistemologists continue to devise increasingly complicated formulas to understand claims of knowledge. For instance, Audi uses the terms *intrinsic* (its value in and of itself) and *instrumental* (concerning its value through what it leads to) when contemplating the problematic associated with understanding western epistemology.<sup>20</sup> Alston, on the other hand, uses the terms *internal* and *external* methods of justification of belief.<sup>21</sup> Yet regardless of these differences, to convincingly know still remains only plausible. In other words, we might be able to know the truth but are unsure how, or even if, it exists at all. Here, the differences among epistemologists exist only in assessing the value of one model over another; that is, in methods of justification.<sup>22</sup>

Simply put, different formulas for justification include the methodology used to understand what is considered truer and may adequately be labeled “knowledge.” Audi’s methodology for acquiring knowledge employs the following six basic premises: “perceptual, memorial, introspection, a priori, inductive, and testimony-based.”<sup>23</sup> Much of western epistemology deals with the reliability of knowledge from these sources. For instance, a belief that the mug is coarse is *perceptual*, arising as it does from touch, a tactual perception. My belief that I walked through the streets of Seville on a sunny afternoon is *memorial*, since it is stored in my memory. My belief that I am imagining a rose garden is called *introspection* because it arises from “looking within,” the etymological meaning of introspection. Consider my belief that if a tiger is larger than a jaguar and a jaguar is larger than a snow leopard, then a tiger is larger than a snow leopard. A belief like this is called *a priori*, roughly based on what is prior to observational experience. It arises through reason based on an understanding of the physical world, and is thus dependent on the four basic sources. Collectively, Audi considers these four basic epistemic sources

that lead to a fifth and sixth: *induction* and *testimony*. My belief that a flower will not grow well without water for its roots is called *induction* because it is formed on the basis of generalization from similar experiences with flowers. Lastly, *testimony-based* knowledge arises when I form a belief on the basis of being given information by someone or something I trust that must have relied on one of the previous basic sources.

Taken together, these six methods of acquiring knowledge explain how we know and how we distinguish between true and false knowledge. The trouble, at least according to skeptics, is that fallible humans use them. Therefore, human fallibility is the fiercest argument that skeptics put forward to deny the existence of true knowledge.<sup>24</sup> For instance, a mug may be coarse to the touch, and we may then establish a belief that it is, indeed, coarse. However, some defect on our fingertips may give us a false sensation of coarseness when, in reality, the mug is smooth. In a similar vein, skeptics put forward countless hypothetical arguments to dispute that knowing is at all possible.

But despite this, epistemologists persist undeterred. While acknowledging their fallibility, they still seek true knowledge without commenting on whether such knowledge exists because only human beings are capable of the

kinds of cognition required to build an airplane ... to write Hamlet or compose a symphony ... how is it that we are able to engage in such sophisticated thought and arrive at the capacious knowledge that we use to direct both our everyday activities and our momentous achievements like flying to the moon?<sup>25</sup>

This perplexing paradox, along with being non-committal as to whether knowledge is possible leads, at best, to the attainment of knowledge being plausible.

Aside from this, another noteworthy feature of western epistemology that highlights the plausibility of knowing is the Gettier problem, a formula that assesses the criteria for the justification of belief. This formula is as follows: "S knows P—if and only if: (i) P is true, (ii) S believes P, and (iii) S is justified in believing P."<sup>26</sup> Chisholm slightly varies this by proposing the following formula as providing the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge: "S knows P—if and only if: (i) S accepts P, (ii) S has adequate evidence for P, and (iii) P is true."<sup>27</sup> Ayer suggests a formula for the sufficient conditions for knowledge: "S knows P—if and only if: (i) P is true, (ii) S is sure that P is true, and (iii) S has the right to be sure that P is true."<sup>28</sup>

Subtle differences aside, the above epistemologists are comparably suggesting that their formulas offer, at best, the plausibility of knowing since human fallibility precludes surety. Now, this is the most bewildering of epis-



temic circles for, as skeptics point out, human fallibility prohibits us from determining truth no matter how much we seek it and use various methods to justify it. In this respect, it is difficult to find fault with the skeptics, particularly when “S” (the human being) is the epicenter of their respective formulas. To be fair, however, it is possible to be justified in believing in something that is, in fact, false.

## Denial

The above-mentioned epistemic conundrum brings us to an alternative viewpoint on the modern western theory of knowledge: “Is knowledge possible at all?” Actually, skeptics doubt whether it is even possible for us to find out if there is anything we can know. By raising this proposition, they discredit any attempt to establish the justification of belief by arguing that “there are good reasons, after all, for supposing that we cannot know the kinds of things that most people think they can know.”<sup>29</sup> To support such claims, skeptics provide an impressive amount of information on human fallibility and thereby delegitimize any pursuit of true, non-relativist knowledge.

For instance, consider remembering a beautiful meadow framed by the majestic Karakoram mountain range, and then speculating that it may be nothing more than a hallucination. The method of justification, in this instance memorial, include the potential for the pervasive error that lies at the root of skeptical arguments.<sup>30</sup> As a matter of fact, this challenge can be “directed against all our beliefs about the external world, all our memory beliefs, all our beliefs about the future; indeed, all our beliefs about any subject provided they depend on our memory for their justification or for their status as knowledge.”<sup>31</sup> The rejection of memory-based justification is plausible, for memory is at least as fallible as vision. If any of the senses can deceive the viewer through hallucination, then beliefs grounded in the senses may also be justifiably undermined. Hence skeptics claim that the possibility of hallucination prevents the observation of physical objects from being justified and precludes “things seen” from constituting knowledge.

Concerning this pervasive error, skeptics insist that while we may perceive rain as falling from the sky, there are alternative explanations of how a person’s sensory faculties may wrongly believe this. For instance, Descartes’ reasoning that “some malicious demon of utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me” is theoretically plausible, and no contradiction is involved in assuming that all of our present experiences are caused by evil spirits.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Putnam imagines that an evil scientist has subjected a human being to an operation.





The person's brain has been removed from the body and placed in a vat of nutrients, which keeps the brain alive. The nerve endings have been connected to a super scientific computer which causes the person, whose brain it is, to have the illusion, that everything is perfectly normal. There seems to be people, objects, the sky, etc... but really all the person is experiencing is the result of electronic impulses from the computer to nerve endings.<sup>33</sup>

Both scenarios insinuate that it is logically possible to exist in this predicament and, since it cannot be disproven, we are not justified in believing otherwise. Note that skeptics are not saying we are living in a vat of nutrients or even that we are justified in believing so; rather, they are saying that we are not justified in believing otherwise. The skeptical position states: "You cannot rule out the possibility that you are a brain in a vat, and without being able to rule out that possibility, knowledge of the material world is impossible."<sup>34</sup>

In sum, skeptical arguments posit that every piece of empirical evidence we might rely on to prove that we are really here could be used to prove that we are not. From a skeptic's point of view, it is not reasonable for us to have the beliefs that we do about the things around us, and therefore knowledge is impossible. This led Hume to maintain that persistent contemplation on knowledge will eventually challenge our claims to certainty.<sup>35</sup> Kant also proclaims that it

remains a scandal to philosophy ... that the existence of things outside of us ... must be accepted merely on faith, and that, if anyone thinks good to doubt their own existence, we are unable to counter his doubts by any satisfactory proof.<sup>36</sup>

The skeptics' position leads to a *reductio ad absurdum*; that is, if we act upon our belief that there are familiar physical things around us, we will find that we have no justified beliefs. Moreover, skeptics show that we cannot have the kinds of knowledge that many of us claim to have. If they challenge our most basic kinds of knowledge, then they can easily undermine the sophisticated knowledge that is distinctive of human beings.

Such problems have played a central role in western epistemology. More recent western epistemological trends, however, have adopted a different attitude toward skepticism. Rather than responding to human fallibility, epistemologists struggle to promote better levels of understanding the justification for belief. It is plausible for an individual to answer the skeptics by showing that his/her beliefs can be securely defended by appealing to other beliefs that are not among those deemed problematic. But the skeptics maintain a mo-

nopoly on the construction of the argument, for they set the intellectual boundaries from which to react.

Every argument must proceed from some premise, and if the skeptic calls all relevant premises into doubt at the same time, then there is no way to reason with him. The whole enterprise of refuting the skeptic is ill founded because he will not allow us anything with which to work.<sup>37</sup>

Keeping in mind these restrictions placed on justifying belief as a result of human fallibility or pervasive error, epistemologists are moving toward lower levels of qualified belief or contextualization. Contextualization here refers to a naturalized approach to epistemology. Quine holds that “epistemology could find its answers by simply studying how believers justify their actions.”<sup>38</sup> Hence, the real problem involves searching for a one-size-fits-all answer to knowing or how to have true knowledge in all societies and circumstances. When confronted by human fallibility, this leads to plausibility or denial. Therefore, what is required is to simply understand how people rationalize their own actions and what their methods of justification are. That is, precisely, what we intend to accomplish by examining a Qur’anic epistemology.

### **A Qur’anic Epistemology: The Certainty of Knowing**

At its most basic level, epistemology provides an insight into how a certain society thinks. This is accomplished via social phenomenon and interactions that lead to experiences that ultimately involve some sort of knowledge, whether justifiable or not, as an integral part of life. In other words, any epistemic account must resort to fundamental principles that could explain life and the source and acquisition of knowledge, its limits, and its objectives. In addition, it must provide a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the world, the nature of human relations, and what they entail in terms of duties, rights, and proscriptions. As al-Alwani makes clear,

[S]ince people’s thinking stems from their overall worldview, their references, methods and theory of knowledge will be determined by their own doctrinal foundation and ideals ... which, in turn, is based on Qur’anic origins of thought.<sup>39</sup>

Therefore, the Qur’an is an obvious place to start from when developing an overarching Islamic epistemology. It must be recognized, however, that one may develop differing epistemologies from the Qur’anic text due to differing interpretations. One must realize that the Qur’an is not the same as

Islam writ large and that elements of Islamic epistemology could be derived from other sources. Yet this study is not tackling the totality of Islamic epistemology; rather, it is working on the assumption that this epistemology begins to develop coherently and legitimately based on insights found in the Qur'an. Thus, the relevant questions here are "What are the origins of knowledge in a Qur'anic epistemology?" and "How does the Qur'an approach knowing and justification of belief?"

It is "undeniable that various epistemological issues have been discussed in Muslim philosophy with a significantly different orientation from that of Western epistemology."<sup>40</sup> Those differing orientations include the role and limitations of the individual in seeking knowledge, including its purpose and source. For instance, by labeling a Qur'anic epistemology as the "certainty of knowing," we intend to reveal its inherent civilizational ethos and general assenting approach to knowing. There is a certainty, although it is neither necessarily instantaneous nor is it centered on "me"; rather it involves a process that includes a trifold relationship between the Qur'an, the individual, and the cosmos. By focusing on the Qur'an, this study by no means diminishes the importance of other sources of legitimacy in the Islamic tradition. But the Qur'an is the first point of reference, as a result of its being understood as the infallible Word of God. It informs the reader with a specific insight into "What can we know?" "What are the necessary and sufficient conditions to know?" and "How does one distinguish between true knowledge and false knowledge?" It is the guide for what amounts to knowledge and the yardstick used to assess justified belief. The following sections offer a Qur'anic epistemic response to the Gettier problem.

## Sources of Knowledge

A Qur'anic epistemology holds that God is the principal cause, and thereby source, of knowledge. In support of this, the Qur'an depicts a heavenly scenario in which the angels converse with God, following Adam's creation.

And remember when your Lord said to the angels: "Verily, I am going to place (human) generations after generations on Earth." They said: "Will You place therein those who will make mischief and shed blood, while we glorify You with praises and thanks and sanctify You?" He (Allah) said: "I know that which you do not." (2:30)

This conversation showcases the angels questioning God's judgment about creating humanity. In response, God replies that He knows what they

do not, in effect establishing His ownership of all knowledge. The next verse, 2:32, proclaims:

And He taught Adam all the names (of everything),” then He showed the angels and said: ‘Tell Me the names of these, if you are truthful.’ They could not do so and, upon realizing their indebtedness to God for what they know, proclaimed: “Glory is to You; we have no knowledge except what You have taught us. Indeed, it is You who is the All-Knowing, the Wise.

Collectively, these verses assert that knowledge is not possible without God’s sanction and that He alone is worthy of the definitive description “All-Knowing, the Wise.” Moreover, these verses share three important insights of a Qur’anic epistemology, namely, (1) God, the primary source of all knowledge, imparted it to Adam; (2) knowing is impossible without His approval, and (3) it shifts the epistemic centrality toward God. This narrative on acquiring knowledge concludes with the imperative that God knows.

Taken together, this does not negate the existence of other sources of knowledge, such as our senses or intellect. It does, however, affirm that even if our senses are used to obtain knowledge, it is impossible to do so without the source of our senses – God – and that this fact should be acknowledged. In other words, attaining knowledge cannot be achieved solely through human effort. This perspective is supported by al-Farabi, who suggests that God requires no essence other than itself for knowing.<sup>41</sup> In addition, the Qur’an describes humans as having five distinct parts, namely, *rūh* (soul), *‘aql* (mind), *qalb* (heart), *jism* (body), and *nafs* (self), from which knowing may arise. Each part, however, functions differently in its potential to enable knowing. Indeed, the Qur’an establishes that God has given humans the capacity to potentially know through their own efforts, relying on sensory or mental faculties, including the heart, mind, and body. This, let’s say, is described as extrinsic knowing. We must be active participants in the acquisition of knowledge, or else we cannot be held accountable for our actions. And yet our efforts are understood to be ineffective unless God wills otherwise, a realization that occurs outside our scope of awareness.

On the other hand, humans also have the capacity to know in an intrinsic manner, in which knowing is indicative of the human condition, such as in our soul and self. Here, knowing is acquired by using our mental faculties to gain a proper awareness of our own human condition. Both intrinsic and extrinsic knowing differ in respect to the active participation of the human will and use of human faculties to affirm knowledge; however, both depend on God’s approval for acquisition.

## Intrinsic and Extrinsic Knowing

To be clear, *intrinsic* knowing involves innate knowing, the realization of which may occur by use of our mental faculties. This form of knowing is inherent in every human being, for it is part of what it means to be human. A Qur'anic epistemology accounts for this when it states

[Y]our Lord drew forth from the children of Adam, from their loins, their descendants, and made them testify concerning themselves [saying]: "Am I not your Lord?" they said: "Yes! We do testify!" [This was] lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection: "Of this we were unaware." (7:172)

This act of creation reveals the acknowledgement, by each and every human being, that God created them and that He alone is worthy of worship. This awareness can occur only as a result of knowledge. Granted, Qur'anic exegesis offers a multiplicity of explanations of this verse, ranging from the metaphorical to the literal.<sup>42</sup> The ensuing controversy revolves around the insinuation that human beings were aware of God prior to birth. Nevertheless, accepting the literal meaning indicates that human beings are imbued with an intrinsic ability to grasp knowledge. Similarly, the Qur'an further attests to this reality by declaring: "And on the Earth there are signs for those who have faith with certainty. And also in your own selves. Will you not then see?" (50: 20-21). Here, too, these verses substantiate the conviction that there is a "sign," an innate knowing that verifies that Qur'anic message. This leads to the ability to distinguish between truth and falsehood by examining our own self. This intrinsic knowing is a consequence of the human condition, an insight that God has shared with humanity via the Qur'an.

*Extrinsic* knowing occurs through human efforts by way of sensory or mental faculties. The Qur'an verifies this when it states: "And Allah has brought you forth from your mother's womb knowing nothing – but He has endowed you with hearing, and sight and hearts, so that you might have cause to be grateful" (16:78). However, it similarly cautions the reader: "And do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge. Indeed, the hearing, the sight and the heart – about all those [one] will be questioned" (17:36). Jointly, these verses reveal two facts: (a) knowing may occur with the use of sight, hearing, and our hearts and (b) we need to be cautious about the potential of false knowledge that may arise from these faculties. Here, a Qur'anic epistemology acknowledges sensory and mental faculties for knowing but then restrains the intemperate acceptance of any information gained thereof.

In addition, a Qur'anic epistemology adopts a unique perspective toward the heart, which it considers the seat of learning and knowledge acquisition. The Qur'an describes wayward people who have "hearts with which they do not understand" (7:179). Al-Farabi clarifies this by stating that the heart is the king of all human faculties involved in knowing and that the five senses are merely its messengers.<sup>43</sup> Western epistemology has understood the brain as the center of consciousness. But in a Qur'anic epistemology, the heart is viewed as the center of our being. The Qur'an mentions people who mocked Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and were entirely insincere in listening to his message, so God "placed over their hearts a covering that they may not understand it and in their ears (He placed) an acute deafness" (6:2). As Yusuf states: "Their inability to understand is a deviation from the spiritual function of a sound heart, just as their ears have been afflicted with a spiritual deafness. So we understand from this that the heart is center of the intellect, the center of human consciousness."<sup>44</sup> Even Arabic grammar contains a category *af'āl al-qulūb* (verbs of the hearts), which are clearly "verbs of thinking."<sup>45</sup> Yet even while emphasizing the importance of the heart in knowing, this verse further emphasizes that a corrupted heart may prohibit an accurate understanding of knowledge. This, then, precludes the heart as an ultimate source of knowing.

Furthermore, it may also be noted that the Qur'an highlights sight as a source of knowing: "Verily, proofs have come to you from your Lord, so whosoever sees, will do so for the good of his own self . . ." (6:104). Al-Farabi details the ability of sight to acquire knowledge.<sup>46</sup> The Qur'an does not dispute this ability, but it does qualify the reliability of perceptual knowledge as being dependent on God:

There has already been a sign for you in the two armies that met. One was fighting in the cause of God and as for the other, they were disbelievers. They, the believers, saw them with their own eyes as twice their number, (although they were thrice their number). And, Allah supports with His Victory who He Wills. Verily, in this is a lesson for those who understand. (3:13)

This verse makes the following features of a Qur'anic epistemology quite clear: It agrees that sight is a source of knowing and then illustrates that what was perceived was, in fact, false. Therefore, even though we may see, hear, or understand with our heart, we might do so inaccurately. And so the truth of what either is in front of us or what we heard or felt remains with God alone. In other words, a Qur'anic epistemology makes each individual a skeptic in himself/herself and a believer in a transcendental God.



Hence, upon both recognizing the ability of our sensory and mental faculties to lead to knowledge, a Qur'anic epistemology concedes that they alone are insufficient. This is why the Qur'an equates belief in the Unseen as part of having faith: "Those who believe in the Unseen and keep up prayer and spend out of what We have given them" (2:3). Consistently, the Qur'an continually encourages the reader to believe in what he/she cannot see. This, most definitely, does not diminish the importance of sight, although it does point out an important foundation of a Qur'anic epistemology, one in which perception is not necessarily a sufficient condition for knowing.

### How Can I Know?

The Arabic word *Qur'ān* means "reading," and implicit within this connotation is the necessity of acquiring and disseminating knowledge.<sup>47</sup> Its definition includes the concepts of reading, learning, and acting, all of which are essential to perfecting one's faith and attaining true knowledge. This provides the goal of a Qur'anic epistemology: to distinguish between truth and falsehood and act accordingly. Moreover, the Qur'an refers to itself as *al-Furqān*, "the criterion" that distinguishes truth from falsehood (25:1). It is, for all intents and purposes, essentially a theory of knowledge in and of itself par excellence. But how does it distinguish true from false knowledge? The first Qur'anic verse, given to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) at the cave in Hira, is insightful.

Read in the name of your Lord who created. He created human beings from a clot. Read, and your Lord is Most Honorable, Who taught (to write) with the pen. Taught human beings what they knew not. Nay! Human beings are most surely inordinate. Because he sees himself free from want. Surely to your Lord is the return. (96:1-8)

Here, two points are clear: (1) the method of distinguishing between true and false knowledge begins with reading and (2) reading is accompanied by the command to do so in God's name. These two points present the Qur'an's unique attitude toward the process of learning: faith and knowledge.

The Qur'anic approach to knowing is premised on the certainty of knowledge, acquired in an affirmative sense, that is self-transcending. The Qur'an provides a clear indication of this direction: "*Alif. Lām. Mīm.* This Book, there is no doubt in it (certainty), is a guide to those who guard (against evil)" (2:1-2). This passage informs the reader of how an individual should approach both the text itself as well as the process of acquiring knowledge, namely, with certainty and without doubt. This sets the tone for a Qur'anic epistemology





premiering itself on a self-transcending certainty. It tells the reader to go, seek knowledge, confident and assured that he/she will find that for which he/she is looking; to use his/her sensory and mental faculties, but also to be aware that they may be misleading; and that even if he/she does not find it, be certain that God knows.

### **The Gettier Problem and the Qur'anic Formula for Knowing**

The Gettier problem and the countless responses to it (e.g., Ayer and Chisholm) focus on a formula for justifying belief. The centrality of the individual "S," who seeks to achieve sufficient and necessary conditions for knowledge in order to distinguish between truth and falsehood, is essential for those formulas. Skeptics argue that human fallibility prevents those conditions from arising. However, a Qur'anic epistemological formula does not focus on the centrality of the individual or of "S." Of course, the individual is certainly involved in the process of acquiring knowledge and, as such, is the agent responsible for reading, learning, and acting. But one can acquire knowledge only from its source, God, which implies that the human being alone cannot acquire it on his/her own. Given this, we can only conclude that one must constantly reconnect with the Qur'an via a thorough reading of its methodology. In other words, a Qur'anic epistemology focuses on the Qur'an's centrality by outlining its self-transcendence. By taking the Qur'anic text as his/her primary source, the individual is encouraged to look within himself/herself and interact with his/her surroundings to initiate the process of obtaining the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge, knowing full well that even though he/she may not achieve it, truth nevertheless exists.

The Qur'anic model for epistemological justification is as follows: "Q (Qur'an) tells X (humans) (i) Q is true, (ii) Read Q to find out whether it is true, and (iii) Accept it or not." If X accepts Q, the following formula occurs: "X accepts Q as true, (i) X assesses A [any thought, feeling, or experience that requires belief] in relation to Q, (ii) X is justified in believing A is either true, false, or God knows." Two points are significant here: (1) a Qur'anic epistemology is not premised on the individual and how he/she reacts to stimuli as the starting point and (2) while X may falsely believe A to be true, may even be justified in believing it, he/she nevertheless is certain that he/she may not know, but that God does and that Q is true. Therefore, there is an element of certainty permeating the "true," "false," and "God knows" responses.





Here, the emphasis is on the Qur'an's centrality, and thereby on God's centrality, as to what/who informs the reader of the Qur'an's truth and certainty. In other words, the Qur'an "speaks" to the reader, informing him/her that it contains no doubt (32:2). The formula is to read the text and understand its methodology in order to distinguish between true and false knowledge. The Qur'an encourages its readers, who interact with its text, to look inside themselves and toward their surroundings to verify the truth. Therefore, the methods of justification of belief constantly have a Qur'anic input. A tripartite relationship is formed by an individual continuously seeking guidance from the text, thereby, "naturalizing" epistemology.

Similarly, once they accept the possibility of truth in the Qur'anic text, the readers proceed with that certainty (not in their own selves) to examine their justification of belief by using both their mental and sensory faculties. Yet there must be a constant reconnecting to the text in order to receive guidance on "What can we know?" and "How do we know it?" Finally, in recognizing these intellectual quests, a Qur'anic epistemology confidently affirms that humans can know; that there is certainty; and that even if their certainty does not materialize, God knows.

## Conclusion

Europe embarked on its epistemic journey after becoming disenchanted with its hitherto natural order. Freeing itself from the chains of blind faith, Europe then largely rid itself of established meaning and thereby implanted doubt in all that was and how it was understood. Rather than sit back and become dismayed at the ensuing destructiveness, its philosophers confidently stood up and peered ahead with exceedingly high hopes in what could be. Using science they forged ahead, ready to erect a new era of knowledge.

Consequently, western epistemology began to deal with such questions as "What can I know?" and "How can I distinguish between those things that I am justified in believing over those things that I am not justified in believing?" This development was only natural, for the disappearance of meaning necessitated a reevaluation of truth and increased efforts to regain lost meaning. Eventually, two dominant and diverging paths appeared and have persisted until today: "We might be able to know the truth" (plausibility) and "We are unable to know anything" (denial). The skeptics' ridicule of any attempt to acquire knowledge via human fallibility and pervasive error led to the assertion that all of our claims to knowledge, being in one form or another dependent upon our senses, could not be considered true knowledge. What began

enthusiastically as a search for tangible, hard proof of truth quickly fell into relativity. Refusing to accept that there is no truth, western epistemologists developed sophisticated methods of justification without insisting that knowledge is actually possible.

Doubt, then, became the cornerstone of this particular intellectual tradition. In the universities and colleges of Europe and North America, the most striking aspect of education was this supplanting of doubt. This doubt-infested paradigm, when poorly transplanted into Muslim society through its educational institutions, produced chaos. This is hardly surprising, for imitation without understanding cannot engender creativity. What liberated Europe enslaved the Muslim world. Therefore, this study sought to differentiate between societies and their respective epistemic traditions.

A Qur'anic epistemology begins with the affirmation of the certainty of knowing founded on a scriptural tradition that is self-transcending and God-centric. "I" am not the center, even though "I" am the agent responsible for reading, learning, and acting. Moreover, it defines the sources of knowledge (God) as well as the tools used to derive knowledge: revelation (the Qur'an) and reason, including one's sensory and mental faculties. But it cautions people in regard to the limitations of all sensory and mental knowledge by reminding them that acquiring knowledge is not possible without His sanction. In addition, it describes two kinds of knowing: *intrinsic* (innately connected to the human condition) and *extrinsic* (acquired via one's sensory or mental faculties). Still, acquiring knowledge is impossible, in either form of knowing, without God's approval.

All in all, a Qur'anic epistemology contains an air of optimism, one that dares to say truth exists and that even if "I" do not know it, God does. This is so because the source and origins of knowledge begin with God and the process of obtaining it is initiated by the human being (the agent responsible for reading, learning, and acting) constantly returning to the Qur'anic text for guidance. In essence, this epistemology combines a reading of revelation and creation in its search for true knowledge. Granted, obtaining knowledge is not a given, for it is understood as a gift that God bestows upon whomsoever He pleases. What is learned is not necessarily certain, but God is and He knows best.

Thus only the Qur'an contains certain knowledge, because the individual is prone to err. Therefore, a Qur'anic epistemology acknowledges that there is doubt; however, this doubt exists within the person, as opposed to within the Qur'an or God. Doubt, to be clear, exists in our own ability to understand the sacred text and God. Here, we struggle through evidence in our attempt to

understand the correct way, fully aware that we may be wrong, but at least secure in the knowledge that truth or an objective reality exists and that God is aware of it. It is particularly important to reiterate that, in comparison to other epistemic traditions, here it is the Qur'an, and not the individual, that is central. Revelation is first: this was thoroughly explained by means of the Gettier problem. The implications of this are significant, since the question of human fallibility is not the primary factor for justifying belief due to the premise of self-transcendence. In other words, one may be wrong about his/her understanding of the text, but the text is nevertheless a certainty. In the end, a Qur'anic epistemology explains the aversion to saying "I don't know" in Muslim societies. When a Muslim cannot answer a specific question, his/her response is "*Allāhu a'lam*" (God knows).

Moreover, we attempted to reveal the Qur'an's unique approach to acquiring and distinguishing between true and false knowledge, and thereby endowing Muslims with a particular epistemology. According to the Qur'an, each people possesses its own methodology, path, and law – in other words, epistemology. Therefore, God has ordained this unique epistemic tradition, implicitly found in the very meaning of *Qur'ān*: read, learn, and act. Therefore, its ultimate accountability and reference is to the Supreme Being: God. That is, people are required to (1) read, to find its source and principal reference in the Qur'an and the cosmos; (2) learn, to discover the attributes and basic principles that define its epistemic content; and (3) act, to live those principles in a dynamic form according to the surrounding context. These basic principles are not simplistically bound by the literal word of the Qur'an's verses. Rather, as al-Alwani proposes, "they will be found by applying the commandments of these Qur'anic verses by using sound human reason and sensory observation of the physical world and in human psychology and their social interaction."<sup>48</sup> The Qur'an insists that one apply the processes of rationality, deep observation, and empirical analysis to the topic or phenomenon being studied.

One may conjecture that if the possibility of individual certainty is not there, then why pursue knowledge at all? A Qur'anic epistemology does not guarantee that one may become certain about the correctness of his/her knowledge. Rather, it asks one to have faith in the certainty of its existence. Of course the possibility is there, and yet it is not entirely dependent upon our own effort. Knowledge is a gift and may be attained through human effort and God's will to confer certainty upon the individual who pursues it. Thus by reading the Qur'an and the cosmos, a Qur'anic epistemology firmly implants this idea: Believe in God and then in yourself.

## Endnotes

1. Robert Audi, *Belief, Justification, and Knowledge: An Introduction to Epistemology* (California: Wadsworth Publishing, 1988), 8.
2. Omar H. Kasule, "Islamization of Knowledge" (paper presented at the Intellectual Discourse Conference XVI, Palua Pagkor, Malaysia, May 1, 2000).
3. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), 86.
4. Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World* (London: Profile Books, 1999), 12.
5. Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, Canada: House of Anansi Press, 1991), 25.
6. *Ibid.*, 5.
7. Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 1.
8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 43.
9. *Interpretation of the Meaning of the Noble Qur'an*, trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan and Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Hilali (Riyadh: Darussalam Publishers, 1999).
10. "Islam: Empire of Faith," PBS (Public Broadcasting Corp.: 2000).
11. Arnold Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1948), 7.
12. *Ibid.*, 9.
13. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 9.
14. AbdulHamid AbuSulayman, *Crisis in the Muslim Mind* (Herndon, VA: IIIT, 1997), 2-5.
15. Abdelwahab Elmessiri, "The Gate of Ijtihad: An Introduction to the Study of Epistemological Bias," in *Epistemological Bias in the Physical and Social Science*, ed. Abdelwahab Elmessiri (London: IIIT, 2006), 17.
16. Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), xi.
17. Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 5.
18. Roderick M. Chisholm, *The Theory of Knowledge*, 3d ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1989), 1.
19. Robert Audi, *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*, 3d ed. (New York: Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, 2011), 2.
20. Audi, *Belief*, xvi.
21. William P. Alston, "Internalism and Externalism in Epistemology," in *Epistemology: The Big Questions*, ed. Linda Martin Alcoff (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1989), 45.
22. Alessandra Tanesini, "The Practices of Justification," in *ibid.*, 152.
23. Audi, *Epistemology*, 6.
24. Chisholm, *Theory*, 152.

25. John Pollock and Joseph Cruz, introduction to *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, 2d ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 1.
26. Edmund L. Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis* 23 (1963): 121-23.
27. Chisholm, *Theory*, 98.
28. A. J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1956), 32.
29. Chisholm, *Theory*, 2.
30. Audi, *Epistemology*, 334.
31. Audi, *Belief*, 137.
32. Rene Descartes, "Meditations: Meditations on First Philosophy," in *Epistemology*, 8.
33. Hillary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 5-6.
34. Pollock and Cruz, *Contemporary Theories*, 5.
35. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 328.
36. Immanuel Kant, "A Critique of Pure Reason," in *Cambridge Edition on the Works of Immanuel Kant*, eds. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Woods (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 121.
37. Pollock and Cruz, *Contemporary Theories*, 5.
38. W. V. O. Quine, "Epistemology Naturalized," in *Epistemology*, 253.
39. Taha Jabir al-Alwani, introduction to *The Qur'an and Politics*, by Eltigani Abdelgadir Hamid (London: IIIT, 2004), xiii.
40. Sayyid Wahid Akhtar, "The Islamic Concept of Knowledge," *Al-Tawhid: A Journal of Islamic Thought and Culture* 12, no. 3 (1997): 2.
41. Abu Nasr al-Farabi, *On the Perfect State*, trans. Richard Walzer (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 71.
42. Eltigani Abdelgadir Hamid, *The Qur'an and Politics: A Study of the Origins of Political Thought in the Makkan Qur'an* (Washington, DC: IIIT, 2004), 33.
43. Al-Farabi, *On the Perfect State*, 169.
44. Hamza Yusuf, *Purification of the Heart: Signs, Symptoms, and Cures of the Spiritual Diseases of the Heart* (USA: Starlatch Press, 2004), 4.
45. El Said Badawi, Michael Carter, and Adrian Gully, *Modern Written Arabic: A Comprehensive Grammar* (London: Routledge Taylor, and Francis Press, 2004), 372.
46. Al-Farabi, *On the Perfect State*, 171.
47. Mona Abul-Fadl, "Toward Global Cultural Renewal: Modernity and the Episteme of Transcendence," in *International Institute of Islamic Thought Occasional Papers* (Washington, DC: IIIT, 1998), 8.
48. Taha Jabir al-Alwani and Imad al Din Khalil, *The Qur'an and the Sunnah: The Time-Space Factor* (Maryland: International Graphics, 1991), 13.