

## Chapter 24 Ontology of Knowledge: Qur'an vs Modern Paradigms

### 24.1 Ontology, Truth, and the Foundations of Knowing

The question of *what exists* and *how reality is known* lies at the heart of every epistemological tradition. In the modern academy, ontology is often treated as the philosophical study of being, while epistemology is regarded as the study of knowledge and its justification. The Qur'anic worldview, however, does not separate these domains artificially. Instead, it advances an integrated structure in which *ontology grounds epistemology*, and *epistemology reveals ontology*. Knowing emerges from being because reality itself is constituted by the will, command, and signs (*ayat*) of Allah. Thus, the Qur'an establishes the principle that *truth is not merely discovered* - it is *disclosed, signified, and structured* by the Creator. Knowledge, therefore, requires both the cognitive capacity of the human being (*'aql*) and the metaphysical clarity furnished through revelation (*wahy*).

Modern knowledge paradigms, especially those influenced by post-Enlightenment rationalism and empiricism, tend to treat the universe as an autonomous physical system governed by impersonal laws. The Qur'an, by contrast, describes the cosmos as a deliberate, meaningful, and intelligible creation - a reality in which physical order reflects metaphysical purpose. The Qur'an asserts, "*Allah is the Creator of all things*" (Q. 39:62), grounding existence itself in divine intentionality. Every element of creation, from the "*heavens and the earth*" (Q. 3:190) to the "*alternation of night and day*" (Q. 2:164), functions not only as a physical phenomenon but as an epistemic sign (*ayah*) meant to guide the human intellect toward truth.

At the same time, the Qur'an rejects epistemic arrogance - the assumption that reason alone can reach certainty without metaphysical grounding. It declares: "*Of knowledge, you have been given only a little*" (Q. 17:85), indicating both the finitude of human cognition and the necessity of revealed guidance. Yet this is not an invitation to anti-intellectualism; rather, it establishes the limits within which inquiry must proceed. Modern epistemologies often assume neutrality or value-free inquiry, but the Qur'an does not recognise a separation between facts and values. Ontology is intrinsically moral. Truth carries ethical consequences because knowing is a form of responsibility (*amanah*). To misinterpret, distort, or conceal truth constitutes *zulm* (injustice), not merely epistemic error.

Thus, the Qur'an advances a unified ontological-epistemic model built on three foundational propositions:

- Reality is purposeful and divinely structured - nothing exists without meaning, law, or teleology.
- Knowledge is the human response to divine signs - perception, reflection, and reasoning are modes of engaging with the created order.
- Revelation is the criterion of truth - ensuring that human inquiry remains aligned with metaphysical reality.

This chapter explores these foundations by contrasting the Qur'anic ontology of knowledge with the dominant paradigms of the contemporary academy. It argues that the fragmentation of modern science - empiricism separated from metaphysics, facts separated from values, and reason isolated from purpose - has produced epistemological systems that are technically powerful yet spiritually and ethically anaemic. The Qur'an proposes an alternative: an ontology in which knowing is inseparable from being, meaning, and responsibility.

Section 24.2 examines the Qur'anic ontology of knowledge as rooted in divine reality (*al-ḥaqq*). Section 24.3 analyses how the Qur'an constructs an integrated epistemic structure based on *ayat*, *'aql*, *fitrah*, and *wahy*. Section 24.4 contrasts this model with modern ontologies - naturalism, materialism, and methodological secularism. Section 24.5 then evaluates the consequences of these divergent models for the methods, ethics, and aims of human inquiry.

The goal is not to reject modern scientific insight but to situate it within a broader metaphysical grounding that restores unity to the act of knowing. Through this comparative analysis, the chapter demonstrates why a Qur'anic ontology of knowledge is indispensable for reconstructing an Islamic epistemological framework capable of engaging contemporary intellectual challenges without surrendering to the philosophical assumptions of modernity.

## 24.2 Ontology as the Foundation of Method

Every research methodology-whether scientific, social-scientific, philosophical, or theological- rests upon an underlying ontology. Ontology determines what “exists,” what counts as “real,” and therefore what is considered “knowable.” Modern scientific methodologies usually proceed from a naturalist or empiricist ontology in which observable, measurable, and material phenomena are the primary locus of reality (Bunge, 2018). By contrast, many qualitative research traditions assume a constructivist ontology in which reality is socially mediated and contingent on interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In both cases, method follows ontology: what one believes the world to be determines how one studies it.

The Qur'an presents a fundamentally different ontology-one that cannot be reduced to naturalism, materialism, idealism, or constructivism. The Qur'anic ontology of knowledge is tawhīdic, meaning that it locates all existence within the unity, authorship, and oneness (*tawḥīd*) of Allah. In this ontology, the world is not self-generated nor independent; rather, it is *ayah*-sign, symbol, and communicative medium, revealing its Creator. Knowledge is thus inseparable from ontology because the act of knowing is itself an encounter with divine signs. The Qur'an repeatedly states that creation has been established “in truth” (*bi-l-ḥaqq*, Q. 29:44), that “to Allah belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth” (*lahu mulku al-samawati wa al-ard*, Q. 57:2), and that every phenomenon is embedded within purposeful design (*bi-qadar*, Q. 54:49).

To understand what the Qur'an means by *ilm* (knowledge), *ḥaqq* (truth), and *yaqīn* (certainty), one must first understand the Qur'anic ontology of existence. Ontology is not abstract metaphysics; it determines the methods by which knowledge is to be acquired, verified, and applied. Because modern research relies

on ontologies that often marginalise or ignore metaphysical dimensions, a methodological synthesis rooted in Qur'anic ontology offers an alternative that is both comprehensive and spiritually coherent.

This section aims to articulate the Qur'anic ontology of knowledge in a systematic form, suitable for dialogue with contemporary methodological debates. It examines foundational Qur'anic categories: divine authorship of existence, the created world as signs, the relationship between the seen and the unseen, the structure of human perception, and the ethical nature of reality. It then highlights how these ontological commitments shape the Qur'anic expectations for epistemic inquiry. In this way, Qur'anic ontology becomes the foundation for a distinct research paradigm—one not reducible to qualitative or quantitative models, but capable of engaging both from a position of epistemic integrity.

### 24.3 The Ontological Primacy of Allah (Allah) as the Source of All Knowledge

The Qur'anic ontology begins with the affirmation that Allah is the sole, ultimate reality—the Absolute (*al-Haqq*, Q. 22:6), the Originator (*al-Badi'*, Q. 2:117), and the One who “teaches” all knowledge (Q. 96:4-5). This ontological foundation establishes a unique epistemic principle: all knowledge originates from Divine will and disclosure. Human beings cannot generate or own knowledge independently; they merely receive, interpret, and apply what is made available through creation and revelation. The Qur'an states: *“He created all things and is Knowing of everything.”* (Q. 6:101)

The ontological structure here is clear: creation is derivative, contingent, and dependent; divine knowledge is primary, absolute, and exhaustive. Because Allah is the Creator of both the observable and the invisible dimensions of reality, the Qur'an affirms that knowledge cannot be limited to material phenomena alone: *“He knows the unseen and the seen.”* (Q. 59:22)

Epistemology, therefore, must be grounded in an ontology that recognises both dimensions. Modern scientific ontology, which restricts knowledge to empirically detectable phenomena, contrasts sharply with this comprehensive Qur'anic vision. Even qualitative and constructivist ontologies, which emphasise interpretation and meaning, remain within human-centred conceptual frameworks that lack an anchoring metaphysical source.

By contrast, the Qur'anic ontology asserts that the unseen (*al-ghayb*) is objectively real, not metaphorical. It is part of the structure of existence, and therefore part of the structure of knowledge. The Qur'an praises the believers as those: *“who believe in the unseen (al-ghayb)...”* (Q. 2:3)

Belief in the unseen is not anti-rational; it is a recognition that reality extends beyond sensory limits. This ontological principle has direct methodological implications: valid knowledge cannot be confined to empirical data alone.

### 24.4 The Created Universe as Communicative Reality: The Ontology of Signs (Ayat)

One of the most distinctive features of Qur'anic ontology is its portrayal of the cosmos as a semiotic structure: every part of creation is an *ayah*, a sign. This framing appears hundreds of times across the

Qur'an (Izutsu, 2002). Signs are ontological markers; they point beyond themselves toward divine purpose, wisdom, and unity.

Examples include:

- Natural phenomena: *"In the alternation of night and day... are signs"* (Q. 3:190).
- Cosmological structures: *"And We built the heaven with power"* (Q. 51:47).
- Biological processes: *"And in yourselves-will you not see?"* (Q. 51:21).
- History and civilisation: *"Travel through the earth and observe..."* (Q. 30:42).

In modern scientific ontology, nature is primarily matter-energy governed by physical laws. In Qur'anic ontology, nature is a text-a system of signs requiring interpretation. This does not negate empiricism; rather, it transforms it. Observing the world is not merely sensory measurement; it is interpretive engagement with divine communication. Thus, the Qur'anic method emphasises:

- *nazar* (attentive observation),
- *tafakkur* (analytical contemplation),
- *tadabbur* (deep reflection),
- *tadhakkur* (moral remembrance),
- *taḥqiq* (verification).

These methodological categories derive directly from the Qur'anic ontology: a world composed of signs requires an interpretive method of reading those signs.

In contrast, qualitative and quantitative methods treat phenomena as data, not divine communication. Where the Qur'an sees meaning, modern methods often see only description or measurement. This ontological difference leads to divergent epistemic practices.

### **24.5 The Seen (Shahadah) and the Unseen (Ghayb): Dual-Aspect Ontology**

The Qur'an distinguishes between the seen world (*al-shahadah*) and the unseen world (*al-ghayb*), not as separate realities but as two dimensions of one unified creation. This dual-aspect ontology expands the scope of knowledge beyond what is empirically accessible. Key verses: *"He is Knower of the unseen and the seen."* (Q. 59:22) *"You have been given knowledge only a little."* (Q. 17:85)

These verses underscore human cognitive limits within a vast ontological structure. No epistemology that ignores metaphysical reality can be fully adequate. Modern scientific ontology, by restricting itself to physical phenomena, deals with only one aspect of existence.

In qualitative methodology, the "unseen" might be analogised to subjective experience or tacit meaning, but this is not the Qur'anic *ghayb*. The Qur'anic unseen includes metaphysical realities (e.g., angels, divine decrees, resurrection), which cannot be constructed through social consensus or phenomenology.

Thus, a Qur'anic ontology requires a methodology capable of integrating:

- empirical observation,

- rational analysis,
- revealed knowledge,
- ethical-moral cognition,
- metaphysical awareness.

This integrated model differs fundamentally from dominant Western methodologies.

## 24.6 Human Nature (Fiṭrah) and the Ontology of Cognition

The Qur'an describes human beings as created with an innate disposition (*fiṭrah*) aligned with truth: “*the fiṭrah of Allah upon which He created humanity*” (Q. 30:30)

Fiṭrah is an ontological constant—an embedded structure within human consciousness enabling recognition of signs, perception of meaning, and responsiveness to moral truth. This differs from modern constructivist ontology, which views cognition as socially constructed rather than inherently oriented toward truth. Moreover, the Qur'an emphasises that humans possess multiple cognitive faculties:

- qalb (heart-intellect)-moral cognition (Q. 22:46)
- aql (reasoning)-rational processing (Q. 3:190)
- baṣar (sight)-sensory perception (Q. 67:23)
- sam' (hearing)-reception of discourse (Q. 2:171)

These faculties form an epistemic ecology—a multi-dimensional cognitive system operating within a divinely-designed ontological structure. Modern epistemology tends to isolate or privilege certain faculties (e.g., reason in rationalism, sense-perception in empiricism), but the Qur'anic ontology mandates integrative cognition.

Thus, the Qur'anic ontology of knowledge is inseparable from a Qur'anic anthropology of the human knower.

## 24.7 Ontology as Ethical: The Moral Structure of Reality

Unlike Western metaphysics, which often separates ontology from ethics, the Qur'an presents reality as morally configured. Truth (*ḥaqq*) and falsehood (*baṭil*) are not conceptual abstractions; they are ontological categories: “*That is because Allah is the Truth, and what they call upon besides Him is falsehood.*” (Q. 22:62)

Thus, truth and falsehood exist as objective qualities *in* reality. Knowledge, therefore, is inherently moral. One cannot isolate methodological rigour from ethical responsibility. This differs significantly from modern scientific ontology, which treats reality as value-neutral and separates fact from value.

In Qur'anic ontology, knowledge is always linked to moral accountability: “*Do not pursue that of which you do not know.*” (Q. 17:36)

This ontological moralization of knowledge has profound methodological consequences. It implies that the method cannot be purely technical; it must be ethical.

## 24.8 Implications of Qur'anic Ontology for Research Methodology

The Qur'anic ontology of knowledge generates several methodological implications:

- Multi-dimensional epistemology: Empirical observation is necessary but insufficient. Interpretation, reflection, revelation, and ethical discernment are also epistemically required.
- Integration of metaphysical and physical realities: The unseen is part of reality and thus part of the epistemic domain.
- Moral accountability embedded in method: Methodological rigour requires ethical rigour; misuse of knowledge is ontologically deviant.
- The cosmos as text: Natural phenomena must be read, not merely measured.
- Revelation as epistemic anchor: Revelation defines the limits, purposes, and hierarchies of knowledge.

The Qur'anic ontology of knowledge offers a comprehensive metaphysical foundation for a distinctive research methodology. Unlike naturalist, constructivist, or rationalist ontologies, the Qur'anic model integrates divine authorship, cosmic signification, metaphysical dimensions, human cognitive structure, and moral order. As the foundation of the new Part VII, this ontological framework prepares the ground for a rigorous, Qur'anic critique of contemporary methods and the development of a synthesised model of inquiry capable of engaging qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches through a tawhīdic lens.