

Chapter 25: Modern Ontologies of Knowledge

25.1 Why Modern Ontologies Matter for Qur'anic Method Debates

Any meaningful dialogue between the Qur'anic research tradition and contemporary epistemological frameworks requires a careful examination of the ontological assumptions underlying modern scientific and human-scientific methods. Research methods-qualitative, quantitative, or mixed- are not neutral techniques; they are built upon specific conceptions of what exists and therefore what counts as knowledge. These conceptions are often implicit, absorbed through academic training and institutional norms rather than explicitly stated. As such, they shape inquiry long before data collection begins.

Modern epistemology has developed through a series of philosophical shifts: naturalism, empiricism, rationalism, positivism, post-positivism, interpretivism, phenomenology, constructivism, and critical theory. Each of these movements carries a distinct ontology: a claim about what constitutes reality and how human beings access it. These ontologies influence contemporary methodological practice across sciences, social sciences, humanities, and interdisciplinary fields.

For a Qur'anic research methodology to engage the modern academy meaningfully, it must understand these ontological positions, evaluate their assumptions, identify their strengths and limitations, and determine how they align or conflict with a tawhīdic epistemology. Without this critical engagement, any proposed synthesis between Qur'anic methods and modern research paradigms risks superficiality or incoherence. Thus, this section systematically analyses major modern ontologies and contrasts them with the Qur'anic worldview developed.

25.2 Naturalism and Materialism: The Dominant Scientific Ontology

25.2.1 Core Claim

In modern science, naturalism-especially methodological naturalism is the prevailing ontological assumption: only natural, physical, and material entities are considered real, measurable, and therefore accessible to knowledge (Bunge, 2018; Ladyman & Ross, 2007).

Under this ontology:

- Reality = matter + energy.
- Knowledge = measurement + observation.
- Causation = physical and deterministic.
- Method = experimentation + mathematical modelling.

Naturalism excludes metaphysical or transcendent entities not because they are disproven but because they lie outside the scope of the method's self-imposed limits.

25.2.2 Consequences for Methodology

Because naturalism restricts reality to the physical:

- Empirical verification is the highest (and often only) criterion of truth.
- Cosmology, biology, physics, and neuroscience treat the universe as self-contained.
- Consciousness is explained materially (neural patterns), not metaphysically.
- Purpose, meaning, and value are considered human projections, not ontological qualities.

This directly contrasts with the Qur'anic ontology, in which: *“To Allah belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth”* (Q. 57:2) *and in which creation is intrinsically purposeful (bi-l-ḥaqq, Q. 29:44).*

25.2.3 Limits of Naturalist Ontology

Naturalism successfully explains material processes but fails to account for:

- abstract entities (values, ethics, meaning),
- consciousness and self-awareness,
- metaphysical realities,
- moral obligations,
- purpose in creation,
- non-empirical knowledge.

The Qur'an, by contrast, integrates all these into a unified ontology.

25.3 Empiricism and Positivism: “To Know Is to Measure”

25.3.1 Empiricist Foundations

Empiricism holds that sense perception is the primary source of knowledge (Locke, Hume). Positivism extends this view by asserting that only observable and measurable phenomena are meaningful (Comte, 1853). This ontology dominated science for centuries and still shapes quantitative research.

25.3.2 Ontological Commitments

Empiricism assumes:

- The external world is stable, objective, and measurable.
- Only sensory data provide reliable knowledge.
- Reality is reducible to observable components.
- Anything not empirically verifiable is epistemically irrelevant.

This conflicts with the Qur'anic recognition of:

- *al-ghayb* (unseen reality),
- metaphysical causation,
- moral ontology,

- purpose in creation.

25.3.3 Epistemic Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths

- High reliability, replicability.
- Strong predictive power.
- Effective in natural sciences.

Weaknesses

- Reduction of complex realities to quantifiable variables.
- Exclusion of qualitative, phenomenological, or spiritual experiences.
- Blindness to metaphysical truths.

Empirical power does not equal epistemic totality.

25.4 Rationalism and Intellectualism: “To Know Is to Reason”

25.4.1 Rationalist Assumptions

Rationalism asserts that reason, not sensory experience, is the primary source of knowledge (Descartes; Kant's transcendental idealism).

Ontology here is mind-centred:

- The structure of thought shapes the structure of reality.
- Universal truths are accessible through logic and a priori reasoning.

25.4.2 Qur'anic Convergence and Divergence

The Qur'an repeatedly invites human beings to use *'aql* (reason), but:

- reason is not autonomous,
- Revelation is necessary for ultimate truths,
- metaphysical realities cannot be reached by reason alone.

“They reflect upon the creation of the heavens and the earth...” (Q. 3:191)

Reason is a tool, but not a source of ontology.

25.4.3 Limits of Rationalist Ontology

- Over-intellectualisation of reality.
- Disconnection from empirical observation.
- Inability to address moral and metaphysical truths.

Thus, rationalism alone cannot form a complete epistemology.

25.5 Constructivist and Interpretivist Ontologies: “Reality Is Constructed”

25.5.1 Core Claim

Constructivism asserts:

- Reality is not “out there”; it is constructed through social interactions.
- Different groups construct different “truths.”
- Knowledge is shaped by culture, language, and power relations.

This dominates qualitative research traditions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

25.5.2 Ontological Implications

- Multiple realities (*relativism*).
- No single objective truth.
- Knowledge = meaning-making processes.

25.5.3 Qur’anic Response

The Qur’an affirms:

- A single, objective truth (*al-haqq*) (Q. 10:32).
- Knowledge grounded in divine reality, not social construction.
- Reality independent of human interpretation.

While the Qur’an acknowledges differing perspectives, it does not grant them ontological equivalence.

25.5.4 Constructivism’s Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths

- Sensitivity to context, meanings, cultures.
- Recognition of human subjectivity.

Weaknesses

- Relativism undermines truth claims.
- Ethics become subjective.
- Contradicts any revelation-centred ontology.

25.6 Critical Theory and Postmodern Ontologies: “Truth Is Power”

25.6.1 Ontological Commitments

Critical theory, poststructuralism, and postmodernism view:

- Truth as socially constructed by power.

- Knowledge as ideological.
- Reality as fluid, unstable, contested.

This influences research in sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies.

25.6.2 Qur'anic Critique

The Qur'an acknowledges unjust power structures (*ẓulm*, Q. 10:44) but insists on:

- objective truth (Q. 17:81),
- moral reality (Q. 91:7-10),
- epistemic accountability (Q. 17:36).

Postmodern denial of truth is incompatible with a Qur'anic ontology rooted in *tawhīd* and *ḥaqq*.

25.7 Modern Plural Ontologies: Fragmentation of Reality

Contemporary academia is divided between multiple ontologies:

- naturalist (laboratory sciences),
- constructivist (qualitative research),
- critical (cultural studies),
- computationalist (data science),
- phenomenological (psychology),
- emergentist (complex systems).

Each discipline treats “reality” differently. Modern science is not unified; it is ontologically fragmented. This fragmentation is foreign to the Qur'an, which insists that all reality is unified under *tawhīd*: “*He created all things and proportioned them*” (Q. 25:2).

A Qur'anic ontology, therefore, provides a unifying metaphysical foundation absent in modern paradigms.

25.8 Comparative Synthesis: Qur’anic vs. Modern Ontologies

Ontology	View of Reality	Source of Knowledge	Status of Metaphysics	Status of Ethics	Qur’anic Assessment
Naturalism	Physical-material	Empirical observation	Excluded	Non-essential	Too narrow
Empiricism/Positivism	Observable phenomena	Measurement	Rejected	Irrelevant	Incomplete
Rationalism	Mental/A priori	Reason	Limited	Abstract	Useful but limited
Constructivism	Socially constructed	Interpretation	Subjective	Relative	Contradicts <i>haqq</i>
Critical/Postmodern	Power-discourse	Deconstruction	Denied	Politicized	Rejects truth
Qur’anic Ontology	Divine creation	Revelation + reason + experience	Essential	Central	Comprehensive

25.9 Why Modern Ontologies Are Insufficient for Qur’anic Methodology

Modern ontologies-whether naturalist, rationalist, constructivist, or postmodern -each illuminate an aspect of reality but fail to provide a comprehensive epistemic foundation. They either restrict reality to the material, elevate human reason above revelation, reduce truth to social construction, or deny the objective existence of truth altogether. In contrast, the Qur’anic ontology integrates:

- metaphysical and physical reality,
- signs in nature and signs in revelation,
- reason and intuition,
- empirical observation and moral accountability.

It provides a unified metaphysical structure capable of grounding a distinctive research methodology.

Chapter 26 will therefore examine how these ontological assumptions shape modern research methods and how a Qur’anic reinterpretation can address methodological gaps in contemporary qualitative and quantitative approaches.