

İSLÂMÎ KÖKTENCİLİK: EPISTEMİK BİR BAKIŞ *

ISLAMIC RADICALISM: AN EPISTEMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Öz:

Bu bildirinin amacı, İslâm dediğimiz şeyin özünde Kur’ân olduğunu göstermektir. Bu mantıkla, İslâm hakkında söylenip Kur’an’da yer almayan bir şey de İslâm değildir; onun bir yorumu ve bilginin yorumudur. Radikal anlamda bilgi her zaman düzeltmeye veya yeniden yorumlanmaya tabidir. İslâmi perspektiften radikalizm, Allah’ın sözlerini gerçek veya öz olarak hiçbir aracı olmadan, ancak evet, bilgi ve kanaat olarak kendi aklımızı kullanarak bilme ve anlamının sınırsız prosedürüne devam etmek anlamına gelir. Radikalizm, İslâmi bir bakış açısıyla, kelimenin kendisinin gerektirdiği gibi, insanlık için kurtuluştur. Bilgide kendi kendini lider ilan eden kişiler, bilgi edinme prosedürü lider tanımasa da, Allah ve sözleriyle uyum içinde yaşamamızın ana engelidir. Radikal olmak demek, Allah’ın sözlerine göre, sizin anladığımız şekilde hareket etmeye ve yaşamaya çalışmaktır. Yani, radikal olmakta yanlış bir şey yok. Sorun, radikal davranmadığımızda ortaya çıkıyor. Allah’ın sözlerine radikal bir şekilde davranmayanlar, olgunlaşmamış nesillerdir. Olgunlaşmamışlık ise, bir başkasının rehberliği olmadan birinin kendi aklını kullanamamasıdır.

Anahtar kelimeler: İslâm, Kur’ân, Bilgi, Köktencilik

Abstract:

This paper aims to show that what we call Islam is, in essence, the Qur’ân. In this context, all that is said about Islam but is not included in the Qur’ân is not Islam; it is merely an interpretation of it, an interpretation of knowledge. Knowledge in its radical sense is always subject to correction or re-interpretation. Radicalism from the Islamic perspective means continuation of the transfinite procedure of knowing and understanding God’s words with no mediator as truth or essence, but also as knowledge and opinion, using your mind. Radicalism from an Islamic perspective, as the word itself entails, means salvation for humanity. Self-proclaimed leaders in knowledge are the main obstacles to our living in harmony with God and His words, and knowledge-yielding procedures know no true leaders. Being radical means trying to act and live while following God’s words in the way you understand them. Thus, there is nothing wrong with being radical. On the contrary, problems arise when we do not act radically. Those who do not behave radically with God’s words are immature, meaning that they are unable to use their understanding without guidance from another.

Keywords: Islam, Qur’ân, Knowledge, Radicalism,

1. INTRODUCTION

Etymologically, the term “radical” has a Latin origin in *radix*, meaning root. What we call Islam is, in essence, the Qur’ân. In this context, all that is said about Islam but is not included in the Qur’ân is not Islam; it is merely an interpretation of it, an interpretation of knowledge. Knowledge in its *radical* sense is always subject to correction or re-interpretation. Radicalism from the Islamic perspective means the continuation of the transfinite procedure of

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knowing and understanding God’s words with no mediator as truth or essence, but also as knowledge and opinion, using your mind. God’s words are, in essence, a medicament for the wellbeing of humanity – if, of course, we are able to explore this aspect of the holy words. To be *radical* means to rely only upon God’s words and to see all other interpretations of those words as useful for either the confirmation or correction of your own interpretation.

From an Islamic perspective, radicalism, as the word itself entails, means salvation for humanity. Self-proclaimed leaders in knowledge are our main obstacles in living in harmony with God and His words, and knowledge-yielding procedures know no true leaders. Being *radical* means trying to act and live while following God’s words in the way that you understand them. Thus, there is nothing wrong with being radical. On the contrary, problems arise when we do *not* act radically. Those who do not behave radically with God’s words are immature, which means that they are unable to use their understanding without guidance from another.

Reality is not science; reality is that which science seeks to explain, and our explanations will always be limited, open to being challenged by new ideas and theories. True science has always remained open-minded about the reality that it explores. Progress in knowledge brings disturbance and uncertainty to humanity as far as reality is concerned, and this makes humans doubt the stability of their lives. It seeds fears of doubt or of being wrong in relation to the present, past, and future.

People are generally unwilling to be disturbed. They want quietness because they think that when they are not disturbed they have achieved happiness. Thus, it seems to me that happiness for these people means not being disturbed. Panic arises when you try to change or criticize people’s habits and thoughts. Chains of habits and thoughts that are rooted in society make up the necessary constituents of a quiet and happy life. This is why social change always takes a long time. Most of the time, the members of elder generations die without changing their habits and thoughts, believing that change is the product of the ignorance of newer generations, which may put their lives in danger. Awareness of being on the wrong track or the possibility of exploring new directions makes them skeptical about whatever they have previously achieved and this disturbs them deeply. Whether our knowledge of today will be changed or reinterpreted in the short or the long run depends on future generations.

Some scholars and universities refer to revelation as “revealed knowledge.” This paper aims to show the inadequacy of that term in describing revelation. To unite what is revealed with knowledge is learned ignorance. It was not a mistake, however, to refer to revelation as “revealed knowledge” in the pre-positivistic and positivistic periods, because, for them, scientific knowledge was equal to truth. For both rationalists and empiricists, our knowledge is of a kind representing the apparent truth concerning reality. For Descartes, the truth of an idea or the reality of an object is its presence to the mind (*Cogito ergo sum*), but to Berkeley, it is the immediacy of perception (*Esse est percipi*). For positivists, however, the priority of science is primordial in terms of research inquiries that involve producing verified or confirmed knowledge.

Knowledge, which is based on practical consequences, is equated with truth by scholars such as Pierce, James, and Dewey. However, there is a difference between the simple cash value theories of William James and Pierce. The latter did, at least, leave the possibility of theoretical probability as a part of scientific knowledge and did not necessarily consider scientific

conclusions to be ultimate.¹ The usefulness of Pierce's epistemology in terms of our basic topic, Qur'anic revelation, has not yet been explored. The two basic mistakes of pre-positivistic and positivistic conceptual science lie in the understanding of science as individual efforts and the firm belief that scientific conclusions are indubitable and final. This mode of understanding science and scientific conclusions is the reason for us to prefer to speak of revelation as revealed knowledge. Our reference to revelation in this manner implies the unity of knowledge as truth, which is not in conformity with contemporary conceptions of scientific knowledge.

2. CONTEMPORARY CONCEPTION OF *EPISTEME* (SCIENTIFIC TRUTH)

With *episteme*, we mean real knowledge or scientific knowledge in its modern and contemporary form. What remains unchanged about science and philosophy in contemporary thought is, in general, their being the pursuit of truth. However, it is a fact that scientific conclusions regarding reality are no longer undisputed. They are always subject to the current conditions and are therefore also subject to change. This means that the contemporary epistemic outlook in science and decision-making processes has changed its presupposition. "Stability of knowledge can no longer be guaranteed."²

According to contemporary epistemologists, scientific knowledge is subject to change, not in the sense that it can no longer claim scientific status, but in the sense that even scientific knowledge is subject to flux and change. Thus, absolute certainty is not necessary for knowledge. According to contemporary epistemologists, knowledge requires reasonable justification, not absolute certainty.³

We will never be able to specify when a conclusion will be changed or when it will be reasonable to doubt it in terms of knowledge about some sort of reality. However, the possibility of change must be granted. The obvious fact of this instability of scientific knowledge has compelled scientists to distinguish between reality and scientific conclusions concerning reality or between the truth that we are trying to understand and our understanding of it. An interesting explanation of these two kinds of truth was provided by Harold Brown.⁴ He refers to the given, or the truth that we are trying to define, as T_1 and this represents, for him, reality as it is, in itself. After research concerning T_1 , the scientist comes to the conclusion of equating it to reality. This conclusion by the scientist, upon being accepted by the scientific community as such, represents scientific truth concerning reality, to which the scientist refers as T_2 . Based on this situation, every scientific conclusion is T_2 because it contains in itself the possibility of being changed in the future.⁵ It should also be added that Whitehead had already issued warnings in 1925 about the absolutist claims of scientific conclusions. In *Science and the*

¹ See *Pierce's Collected Papers*, the Indiana University Press edition.

² Paul Feyerabend, *Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 71.

³ Garrett Thompson, *An Introduction to Modern Philosophy* (San Francisco: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1993), 17. John Dewey in his Gifford lectures (see *The Quest for Certainty*, 1928) made the point that even Descartes and his followers thought of scientific knowledge as something that is utilized for "playing it safe" in terms of reality. They were seeking to attain absolute secure knowledge.

⁴ Harold Brown, *Perception Theory and Commitment* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1977), 151-2. In a pioneering work and a classic of the philosophy of science in its own right, E. A. Burtt in *The Metaphysical Foundation of Modern Science* (New York: Anchor Book, 1923, and many reprints) convincingly showed, using Newton as a case study, that science indeed operates based on presuppositions. See R. G. Collingwood, *Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), which works out a metaphysics of presupposition.

⁵ The work of Stephen Toulmin is useful in dealing with this situation. See his two volumes of *Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

Modern World, he pointed to the “illusion of finality” among positivistically oriented scientists. T_2 is equal to T_1 if and only if we have the adequate expression of reality, about which we can never be sure. It is clear that scientific truth in contemporary Western philosophy is based on neither an indubitable foundation nor on individual efforts.⁶ Every conclusion made by any individual scientist in any field must be tested and consensus must be reached by the community of scientists in the respective field, for, as Brown claims:

Scientific knowledge in any era is what the scientist actively takes as such, and the scientific knowledge of an era may be rejected as an error in the next. But the rejection of previously accepted claims will itself be made based on the currently accepted views, which are themselves fallible.⁷

It is clear by now that the contemporary conception of scientific knowledge, or *episteme*, differs from the pre-positivistic and positivistic conception of knowledge in two important ways. First, scientific knowledge is an inter-subjective decision-making process, and second, it is always subject to change. “There is always the possibility that a new form of thought will arrange matters differently and will lead to a transformation even of the most immediate impressions we receive from the world.”⁸

Now let us see how we can relate the contemporary understanding of scientific knowledge to revelation in the Qur’anic sense. To do so, we must first make clear what revelation, and more particularly the Qur’ān, is in its essence. It would be of great interest at this point to compare the conception of revelation as we find it discussed by Newton and in Western scientific tradition. Newton and the Enlightenment scientists, usually known as natural philosophers, understood revelation as the revealing of the book of nature, written by God in the language of mathematics. Needless to say, this was a very clever strategy, since Western scientists could proclaim that they practiced science to reveal the wonders of God’s creation. However, it did not press them on the metaphysical status of revelation as such. This is why scientific activity in the West was divorced from religious presupposition: revelation was not interpreted as being fundamental to religion, but rather as a metaphor to describe something about which no one could say anything conclusive, for the very reason that revelation could not be subject to scientific verification. In that sense, Qur’anic revelation attains a totally different ontological status than revelation as discussed in a Christian context by Newton and his followers.

3. THE QUR’ĀN

The Qur’ān is a book that contains God’s words in itself. They are words said by God to His Prophet. The Qur’ān as a book is an absolute reality for every Muslim. No one has the right to add or remove any words from the text of the Qur’ān. This is reality; this is how we behave with the Qur’ān as sincere and true believers. The only right we have concerning the Qur’ān is to understand it to be able to apply it in our daily lives. Thus, the Qur’ān, to be applied as

⁶ This conception of truth as being part of the future and therefore subject to change is Peircean in character. See Nicholas Rescher’s *Peirce’s Scientific Method* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 1985).

⁷ Brown, *Perception Theory*, 151.

⁸ Feyerabend, *Philosophical Papers*, 71.

absolute and unconditional reality, has to be understood. This is why the first Qur’anic order is the promotion of progress in knowledge. Every Qur’anic command is wholly imperative upon every Muslim. The Qur’ân is the exclusive common reality, understood as absolute reality, by Muslims. As a book that contains God’s words, the Qur’ân is a textual revelation in the sense that there is no other text entitled “Qur’ân” and accepted as an original absolute and unconditional book by Muslims. Every Qur’anic verse expresses reality, as the Qur’ân in itself is an unchanging absolute and perfect reality.

In Western philosophy, and especially in Kantian philosophy, we do have the problem of things in the world that cannot be apprehended in themselves. As far as Kant is concerned, human conditions do not allow us to speak of having real knowledge of things in themselves. They are understood only as empirically real or transcendently ideal. Kant’s doctrine of *Ding an sich* is controversial but still relevant. This topic is highly charged with potential insights when we relate it to Qur’anic revelation. One thing is certain: Kant’s position, if understood sincerely and with a positive outlook, supports the idea (in Western language) of Qur’anic revelation precisely because it is an act of faith and not subject to empirical verification, since it does not need to be verified. It is, in that sense, revelation in itself, i.e. Qur’anic. Kant never spoke of revelation in itself since it could not be verified, but Qur’anic revelation, whereby we may disagree with Kant, does not lend itself to Kantian categories of understanding. It is beyond space and time, not part of them.

The Qur’ân is not something ideal; it is a factual reality in the sense that we come into contact with it via our senses. We can see, touch, and read it. This means that it is an empirical reality that exists among us. In this sense, it is the given, the immediate. For Muslims, the universe is the given *created* by God and the Qur’ân is the given *said* by God. As a book, it is the given absolute and factual truth, accepted as such through an act of belief. It is a kind of truth that we deal with, we attempt to understand, and we come to terms with through sincere acts of interpretation.

Thus, if we apply this basic presupposition to the contemporary understanding of scientific knowledge (*episteme*), we will see that the Qur’ân is T_1 , the absolute and unchanged reality, or the reality that we try to come to terms with and understand. Every Qur’anic expression is T_1 in itself. No Muslim doubts the absolute certainty of any Qur’anic expression, but every Muslim has the right to offer his or her own scientific understanding of any Qur’anic expression if he or she can do so. Our interpretation of the Qur’ân qualifies knowledge related to it. If this interpretation is accepted by the scientific community, i.e. if a consensus is reached, it is then a scientific interpretation and it is T_2 , which is always subject to change.

Thus, scientific knowledge related to the Qur’ân is subject to change, as well. We can never be sure whether our understanding of any Qur’anic expression today will be changed in the future. To change someone’s interpretation of the Qur’ân does not mean to change the Qur’ân itself, and if our interpretation is changed by somebody else, or by a future generation, that does not mean that we become unbelievers. All it means is that we erred in understanding a Qur’anic expression, which reflects the human condition quite well. We must not forget that the possibility of making mistakes is always present in knowledge-yielding procedures, as in all human affairs.

Thus, the Qur’ân for us is, in fact, a conceptual reality regarding our perceptual universe. The two are fundamental facts for us, constituting “sense experiences” for believers. In this

case, one is said by God and the other is created by God, and sense experiences, for a contemporary scientific mind, are nothing other than:

...the given subject matter. But the theory that shall interpret them is man-made. It is the result of an extremely laborious process of adaptation: hypothetical, never completely final, always subject to question and doubt.⁹

I think it is clear by now that for the contemporary scientific mind the standard of "absolute certainty" for knowledge is neither possible nor necessary, and the only book that possesses this certainty for a Muslim believer is the Qur'ân, which is not mere knowledge but rather revealed truth. All Muslims are united on this point, but when we try to explain the truth sometimes, differences between interpretations emerge, which is very normal. To be critical of somebody's understanding of any Qur'anic expression or to replace it with another understanding is our task. Only in this way can we progress in understanding God's absolute word, T₁. However, we must be aware of one important point: We are not changing revealed truth. We are only changing our knowledge regarding it. Knowledge, understood as T₂, is always subject to change and makes our progress in this field possible, giving the Qur'ân its rightful place as "absolute and unchanged truth." It protects us from the great mistake of confusing absolute truth with knowledge, the latter of which is produced by humans.

Every Qur'anic interpretation must be open to critique. The concept of critique as used by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* is useful at this point. "Critique" means to show the limitation of the human mind to grasp things that are unconditional and absolute. Interpretation is valid precisely because the human mind is not capable of scientifically penetrating into "things in themselves." That is why Kant left "room for faith" and was still able to be consistent in his work. Again, Kant's notion of "critique" has not yet been explored in relation to Qur'anic interpretation. This is the only understanding that gives every generation an opportunity to participate in understanding the absolute with its intellectual and scientific power.

The failure to distinguish between truth and knowledge was, and, I think, still is today, the main reason for many Muslim scholars to accuse each other of *kufur* when they deal with the Qur'ân. Thus, in my opinion, the main reason for Ghazali, for instance, to describe Muslim emanations as *kufur* is his understanding of knowledge as absolute certainty. The inability of his generation to realize that the standard of absolute certainty is too high for knowledge made him unable to distinguish between a scholar's mistake in interpretation of the Qur'ân, to which a scholar has every right, and the scholar's rejection of it. If we carefully analyze the dispute among them,¹⁰ we will realize that, in essence, which means in T₁, they are all united because the fact that the world is created by God is absolutely certain to all of them, meaning that they all accept the Qur'anic expression of the creation of the world. However, when they come to interpret it, they interpret it differently, which is very normal when we are dealing with the absolute. This means that they come with two different understandings and the decision about which one of them has understood it correctly, or whether those two understandings contain

⁹Albert Einstein, *Out of My Later Years* (Girinagar: Wings Books, 1993), 98.

¹⁰For the details of this problem, see Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 279-83.

mistakes, belongs to the generations that will follow. This is what makes possible the continuation and the growth of our knowledge regarding the absolute.

4. CONCLUSION

Every generation's understanding of any Qur'anic expression can be replaced with another understanding by a future generation because every generation has to try to understand revelation with their own minds, not with the minds of the previous generation. This process cannot be stopped because stopping this process means an end to knowledge. The end of knowledge in turn means the end of worship, which is a grave mistake for any generation to make. We all know that we are imperfect beings and perhaps we will not attain complete truth related to the absolute, but the advance towards understanding it by successive steps is not impossible. Those who try to place obstacles in our process of thought are great enemies of our progress as a society. All that is needed when a scientist presents a new interpretation of any Qur'anic expression is sincerity and the willingness to be objective about whether that interpretation is true or not. The community of scholars will decide that, but one can decide about the wrongness of a decision only with an alternative decision.

It is our duty to develop a novel interpretation related to any Qur'anic expression when we deem it necessary. We are aware that such a task is not easy; sometimes we face the opposition of the majority, but we must not forget that “progress comes through the gradual effect of a minority in converting opinion and altering custom.”¹¹ History shows us that scientists were never the majority in any society at any time, and “whenever any new fundamental issue arises, the majority are in the wrong because they are guided by prejudice and habit.”¹²

Despite all the difficulties that we face in the process of knowing, we must not forget that creative activity in the knowing process is indispensable for the development and extension of our scientific knowledge about the Qur'ān. Without this creative activity, there cannot be development in society, and the activity of knowing is the one upon which the success of all other activities depends. This is why the Qur'ān encourages it. To make successive steps in this field, we must criticize and change when the need arises, and we must not forget that we may also be criticized by others. All of this is useful and represents progress in understanding the absolute. There is no need for a quarrel between groups or individuals when faced with two different interpretations of the absolute. All that is needed is rational analysis and further development of the problem.

I think such quarrels can be stopped very easily if we realize that what we change and criticize is not the Qur'ān as absolute truth, or T_1 , but rather somebody's understanding of the Qur'ān, which is knowledge related to it, or T_2 . Moreover, we must not forget that academic freedom, without which healthy societal development cannot be achieved, is guaranteed by the Qur'ān itself. Again, the relationship between T_1 and T_2 must be reconsidered in light of the systematic problem inherent in the “thing in itself” doctrine propounded by Kant. The tension between what a human being questions and what he or she can answer remains unresolved.

In a following paper, we will focus more on this critical and relevant problem. We may formulate the problem dealt with here as follows: If T_1 is absolute knowledge and T_2 is a form

¹¹Bertrand Russell, *Political Ideals* (London: Routledge, 1977), 45.

¹²Ibid.

of interpretation, then how is knowledge possible in terms of the “thing in itself,” which Kant held as being closed to human understanding?

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