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# Ontology and Epistemology in Management Research: An Islamic Perspective

Naail Mohammed KAMIL <sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*From the Western value system, two kinds of ontological and epistemological standpoints are characterized in Management and Social Sciences research; realist ontology and subjectivist ontology or objectivist epistemology and subjectivist epistemology. The kind of ontology and epistemology a researcher commits to has inherent effects towards the researcher's way of contributing new knowledge. This short communication attempts to contribute new knowledge to the literature of philosophical standpoints in management research by discussing the ontological and epistemological stances with respect to Islam. It was shown that the Islamic viewpoint of ontology and epistemology is in the middle side between realist - subjectivist ontology and between objectivist – subjectivist epistemology. This stance of Islam on ontology and epistemology as elaborated in the Qur'an and the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) increases the resilience with which knowledge is contributed in a holistic manner regardless of social, cultural or political backgrounds.*

## Keywords:

*Philosophy, School of Thought, Islam, Ontology, Epistemology, Management Research.*

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## **Introduction**

Realist or subjectivist and Objectivist or subjectivist, are respectively, the two extremes that characterize the ontological and epistemological viewpoints in management research. This exploratory work attempts to shed light on these epistemological and ontological stances from an Islamic viewpoint. Understanding this standpoint from an Islamic viewpoint may increase the resilience with which social scientist in general and Muslim social scientists in particular may contribute knowledge in a holistic fashion.

## **Brief Discussion of Ontology and Epistemology**

As posited by Phil and Joanne (2003), an objectivist view of epistemology (Hindess, 1977) presupposes the possibility of a theory-neutral observational language where our sensory experience of the objects of reality provides the only secure foundation for social scientific knowledge (Ayer, 1971). In other words, an objectivist view of epistemology is the belief that the “knowledge of what exist” has an independent existence prior to human cognition and for that matter, our objective as Management researchers is to strive to seek for this particular “objective knowledge” out there, and we can get closer to this knowledge by our daily interactions with the objects of reality.

In contrast, a subjectivist view of epistemology repudiates the possibility of a theory neutral observational language (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Burr, 1995). The subjectivist epistemology is of the belief that there is nothing like “ultimate true knowledge” out there but whatever we perceive as “truth” is as a result of our intersubjective socio-cultural consensus of views, which is perceived as “reality” or “objectivity” in terms of knowledge. In short, the subjectivist epistemological stance is of the idea that we socially construct versions of reality through language games (Wittgenstein, 1975), or discourses (Foucault, 1977), or interests (Habermas, 1972), or traditions (Gadamer, 1975), or world views (Geertz, 1989).

Meanwhile, a realist view of ontology assumes that social and natural reality has an independent existence prior to human cognition whereas subjectivist ontology assumes that what we take to be reality is an output of human cognitive processes (Phil & Joanne, 2003). That is

to say that with subjectivist ontology, we tend to socially construct reality based on our experiences in our daily activities but there is nothing “real” that exist in its essence.

### **Ontology and Epistemology from Islamic viewpoint**

In order to have a better understanding of the topic of epistemology and ontology from an Islamic viewpoint, it is imperative to know the definition of “truth” from an Islamic perspective. Al-Qardawi (1987) defined “truth” as something that is firm/constant and which remains in its original state through the test of time. And anything that is untrue/false is that which is transient/short-lived and which changes with time. And if we closely focus on this definition, we can realize that there is nothing that is firm in its original state and remains to be the same through the test of time except the Creator (Allah), as He has been present before the time called “present” and He is living forever in His original state as Allah, the One and Only Creator of the Heavens and the Earth. This explanation about “truth” by Al-Qardawi leads us to the belief that the only “truth” is Allah. The justification for this claim has been mentioned in so many verses of chapters in the *Qur’an*, among which is in *Suratul Yunus* (chapter) *Yunus* “Such is Allah, your Lord in truth. So after the truth, what else can there be, save error? How then are you turned away?” (10:32). Also in *Suratul Hajj* “That is because Allah: He is the Truth, and it is He Who give life to the dead, and it is He Who is Able to do all things” (22:6). In the same *Surab*, Allah says “That is because Allah – He is the Truth (the Only True God of all that exists, Who has no partners or rivals with Him), and what they (the polytheists) invoke besides Him, it is *Batil* (falsehood). And verily, Allah – He is the Most High, the Most Great” (22:61). There are similar verses in some chapters in the *Qur’an* such as (4:105), (5:48), (6:115), (10:53), (18:98), (23:115-116), (24:25), (28:75), (31:33) (38:27), (42:17-18), (44:38-39), (45:28-29), (46:34), (50:19) among others.

All these verses provide proofs that Only the Creator is the “Truth” and Capable of establishing “truth” and bringing out “truth” to guide mankind when they are in confusion regarding “truth”. This, however, tells us that despite our subjectivities, the Only Objective “out there” is with the Creator, from Whom we need to define our reference point when seeking the truth. This has also been mentioned in *Qur’an*

“Mankind were one community and Allah sent Prophets with glad tidings and warnings, and with them He sent down the Scripture in truth to judge between people in matters wherein they differed. And only those to whom (the Scripture) was given differed concerning it after clear proofs had come to them through hatred, one to another. Then, Allah by His Leave guided those who believed to the truth of that wherein they differed. And Allah guides whom He wills to a Straight Path” (2:213).

The fact that we (human beings) are all the same because we are different from each other in terms of everything, has made it all the more imperative to get closer to Allah that He may guide us to the “truth”. His guidance is sent to us in the *Qur’an* through the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Another source of guidance is the *Sunnah* or *Hadith* which comprises the traditions of the Prophet from his sayings, actions, attestations and attributes.

We can therefore, put forward that from an objectivist epistemological point of view with respect to Islam, there exist an independent objective knowledge prior to human cognition and that it is from the *Qur’an* and the *Sunnah* as sources of guidance for mankind towards the right path (i.e. objectivity). However, this does not deny us accepting the fact that there also exist a subjectivist view of epistemology, whereby the consensus of the Muslim scholars (*Ijma*) or the concept of deductive analogy (*Qiyas*) innovate or create knowledge (*Ijtihad*) out of their individual experiences (subjective understandings) of the known Islamic Jurisprudence, to provide rulings on some issues that are not categorically mentioned in the *Qur’an* and the *Sunnah*.

From a realist ontological standpoint with respect to Islam, there exist independent social and natural reality prior to human cognition and this can be shown by drawing onto the verse in the *Qur’an* where Allah says “And He taught Adam all the names (of everything), then He showed them to the angels and said, “Tell Me the names of these if you are truthful”. They (angels) said: Glorified are You, we have no knowledge except what you have taught us. Verily, it is You, the All-Knower, the All-Wise” (2:31-32). Giving the explanation (*Tafseer*) of this verse, Ibn Katheer (1999) put forward that Allah showed the angels the high status and authority that He has blessed Adam with, such that He taught Adam the names (knowledge) of everything, and that is the reason for them bowing unto Adam. It was also mentioned in Ibn Kather

(1999) that Allah tested the angels to show them that Only He has the knowledge of everything. Further to the explanation of this verse by Ibn Katheer, Ibn Abass was reported to have said, that Adam was taught the names of his children (mankind) and animals, by saying to Adam “this is a camel, this is a horse, etc. until he knows the names of everything.

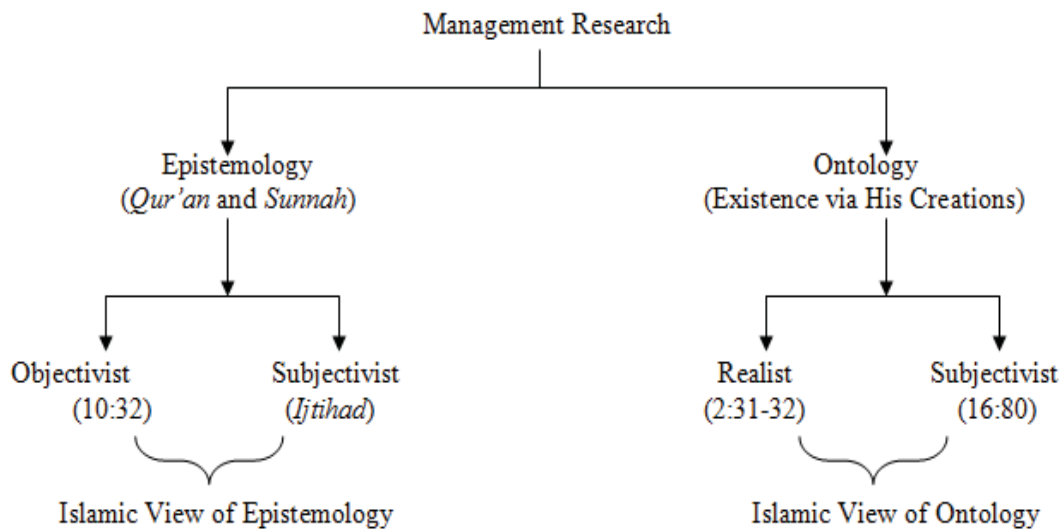
This leads us to the belief that natural and social reality has an independent existence prior to human cognition (i.e. realist view of ontology), as everything has a name that the Creator Has already ascribed to it, which whether we know or we do not know, remains to be the name provided to that “thing” by the Creator. This shows that “real” reality exists out there, but the Only One with that knowledge is Allah. To know this knowledge, we ought to be close to Allah that He may teach us, through the fear of Allah, as mentioned in a verse in the *Qur’an* “.... So be afraid of Allah; and Allah teaches you. And Allah is All-Knower of each and everything” (2:282).

From a subjectivist ontological standpoint with respect to Islam, there are also proofs that point to the fact that everything we perceive to be real is as a result of our experiences, out of which we socially construct our reality. Among these proofs is as stated in the *Qur’an* “And Allah has brought you out from the wombs of your mothers while you know nothing. And He gave you hearing, sight, and hearts that you might give thanks (to Allah)” (16:80). This verse clearly signifies that mankind came to the world without any knowledge whatsoever. But with time, acquires knowledge out of experience via the senses of hearing, seeing and feeling.

### **Conclusion**

The present short discussion has contributed new knowledge to the literature of philosophical standpoints in management research by discussing the ontological and epistemological stances with respect to Islam. It was shown that the ontological and epistemological standpoints with respect to Islam are between the two extremes of both objectivist-subjectivist epistemology, and realist-subjectivist ontology. It is worth noting that Muslims use the epistemology of Allah to know His ontology. The main source of knowledge is the *Qur’an* and the *Sunnah* through which we get to acquire the knowledge of Allah (epistemology) which will in turn, lead us to know His existence (ontology) as the sole

Creator via His Creations. This is captured in a pictorial overview from Fig. 1. Future research is encouraged to further expand and enrich the understanding of the philosophy of research from other religious perspectives.



*Fig.1* Pictorial Overview of Epistemology and Ontology from Islamic Viewpoint



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