

DISCOURSE ON REASON AND REVELATION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PHILOSOPHY AND QURAN

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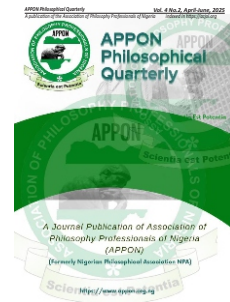
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ABSTRACT

The epoch's long debate between the Western and Islamic intellectual traditions on the boundaries between reason and revelation may be settled on the assumption of the distinctiveness of philosophy and religion as ontological systems. However, the problem is that, whereas as ontologies, they may be accepted for their explanatory powers, as epistemologies, there remain questions rooted in their conditions for justification. In other words, the supposed dichotomy between the validity of reason versus prophetic revelation remains an epistemic sour- point in dispelling the supposition of a conflict between philosophy and the Quran, for instance. It also poses a challenge for providing sufficient arguments for establishing their accordance as coherent truths about reality. In view of the above, this paper is a contemporary re-examination of the epistemological issues on the boundaries between religion and philosophy. It adopts a qualitative research approach and deploys the expository and critical methods of philosophical inquiry to highlight and explain the correlation between philosophy and the Qur'an in terms of subject matter and epistemic content (that is, what both seek to portray as knowledge). Exploring the arguments of critical Islamic thinkers such as Al-Kindi, the paper argues the case that, in terms of subject matter and theme, there is no inconsistency between philosophical and religious truth. It looks at some of these subject matter and themes under the branches of philosophy, and their correlates in the Quran. In the final analysis, the major point made is that philosophical truth and prophetic revelations are in accord with each other. Hence, if at all, there are technical and methodical differences, other than any logical inferiority of one over the other.

Keywords: Reason; Revelation; Philosophy; Religion; Qur'an.

Introduction

This paper discusses the relationship between the Qur'an and philosophy. It could also be interpreted to mean, in a broad sense, a discussion on the relationship between religion and philosophy. Al-Kindi, the

acclaimed first known philosopher in the Arab world, is reputed to have attempted a reconciliation of philosophy and religion. According to him, philosophy depends on reason because its method is logic, while religion depends upon revelation because faith is its way.¹ He tried to establish the

¹ Peter Adamson, "Al-Kindi: The Reception of Greek Philosophy". *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*. Ed. Peter Adamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 34.

point that there is harmony between philosophy and religion on the ground that prophetic revelation and philosophical truths are in accord with each other. He further made the point that there is no fundamental disagreement between philosophy and Islam, the same way there is no basic disagreement between Plato and Aristotle. Philosophy merely helps Muslims to have a better understanding of the Qur'an.

My concern in this paper is to highlight and explain the correlation between philosophy and the Qur'an in terms of subject matter and epistemic content (that is, what both seek to portray as knowledge). Philosophy has diverse branches even within given branches. For example, we have different schools under metaphysics, ethics, logic, and epistemology, which are the main branches. We also have the philosophy of other disciplines, which we call applied philosophy. This paper will look at some of the subject matter and themes under these branches of philosophy and look at their correlation and justification in the Quran.

Conception of Philosophy

The word philosophy is derived from two Greek words: *philos* and *sophia*. *Philos* means love while *sophia* means wisdom. Philosophy can therefore etymologically be defined as the love of wisdom. As the ancient philosophers discerned long ago, philosophy is a quest for wisdom. A person can have a great deal of knowledge and still lack the capacity to understand complex situations. The point of emphasis is that in our age of confusion and uncertainty, we need a sense of direction. Wisdom is what provides us with that sense of direction. Concerning wisdom, Abraham Kaplan states that:

Whatever else wisdom may be, it is in some sense an understanding of life. It is not a purely cerebral attainment;

wisdom is as much a matter of what we do and feel as it is of how we think. But thought is central to it... Wisdom is a matter of seeing things—but as they are, not subjectively. Wisdom is intelligent conduct of human affairs.²

Wisdom occupies a central place in Islamic philosophy. It shares the connotations of the Arabic term *hikma*, which may be extended to mean science or intellect. Muslim philosophers have offered various definitions of wisdom. For example, Ibn Sina defines wisdom as the perfection of the human soul through conceptualization of things and judgement of theoretical and practical realities to the measure of human ability.

Islamic Philosophy Defined

Islamic philosophy, just like classical Western philosophy, cannot be narrowed down to a univocal definition. This is because of its diverse nature, historical circumstance, and the subject matter. Islamic philosophy could be defined as the reflection of the worldview of Muslims. It thereby refers to the philosophical activities within the Muslim world. It is a reflection, a rigorous and critical analysis of the lives and cultures of Muslims. In a way, it means the kind of philosophy produced in an Islamic society. It is not necessarily concerned with religious issues, nor exclusively produced by Muslims. This point is that Islamic philosophy may not necessarily be produced by Muslims, as there is an abundance of philosophers who are not Muslims and yet whose works were clearly in the area of Islamic philosophy. There are also many thinkers whose works on logic are part of Islamic philosophy. These works have no direct religious relevance. It is therefore safe to describe the nature of Islamic philosophy as the tradition of philosophy which arose

² Abraham Kaplan, *In Pursuit of Wisdom*, (Beverly Hills, Calif: Glencoe Press, 1977), 16.

out of Islamic culture.³

The Holy Qur'an

The *Qur'an* is the divine book of the Islamic religion. It is an essentially religious book and not purely philosophical. It deals with problems that both religion and philosophy have in common. For vivid illustrations, the concept of God, the metaphysical problems of appearance and reality, permanence and change, the problems of knowledge, values, justice, freedom and determinism, among others. The *Qur'an* provides divine insights and legislation on the above perennial philosophical problems and concepts. The intellectual background at the time of its revelation makes it possible for the Arabs to easily understand the revelation of the *Qur'an*. Also, the fluidity of its expression makes it relatively appealing for easy interpretation and comprehension of its messages and meaning. Its messages cover all aspects of human endeavour, ranging from science, technology, arts, architecture, geography, economics, and health, among others. Indeed, the *Qur'an* can be viewed not only as a book of wisdom, but also as a book of life.

Philosophy and the Quran

The great Islamic philosopher, Ibn Rushd, in his treatise maintained that philosophy is recognized by religion. According to him, the function of philosophy is nothing more than speculating on the beings and considering them in so far as they lead to the knowledge of the Creator.⁴ For vivid illustration, the *Qur'an* enjoins man of rational consideration in several verses such

as: "consider, you who have vision". The expression "consideration" is a Qur'anic term, which can be translated to mean something more than getting the unknown from the known by way of inference. This type of reasoning in philosophy is called deduction. Thus, the *Qur'an* urges man to study philosophy insofar as he must speculate on the universe and consider different kinds of beings. Consequently, the objective of religion as defined in philosophical terms is to obtain the true theory and the true practice.⁵

The ultimate reality: The question of ultimate reality falls under metaphysics. Metaphysics is one of the core areas of philosophy. It is the branch of philosophy that deals with the study of the totality of being; that is, it studies the nature and structure of reality as a whole.⁶ *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines it as "the philosophical study whose object is to determine the real nature of things – to determine the meaning, structure and principles of whatever is, insofar as it is".⁷ The horizon of metaphysics is very broad and all-embracing, since it encompasses the whole of reality. The basic questions in metaphysics are: What is being? What is the ground of being? What is the source of all beings, etc.? Now being is both the foundation as well as the unity of all beings. The question then is: what is this being as being, or pure being? Aristotle identifies it with God. God is Pure Being or Being qua Being.⁸ This Aristotelian conception of God as the ultimate Being or reality finds expression in the Holy Quran. The Quran categorically affirms God as the ultimate

³ Oliver Leaman, *An Introduction to Medieval Islamic Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1-21.

⁴ George F. Hourani, *Averroes on the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy*, (Oxford: The E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 2012), 23-25.

⁵ George F. Hourani, *Averroes on the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy*, 25.

⁶ Joseph Omoregbe, *Metaphysics without Tears: A Systematic and Historical Study* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers, 2006), ix.

⁷ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, 1981, 10.

⁸ Joseph Omoregbe, *Metaphysics without Tears*, xi.

Being or reality. There is none but Him.⁹ In his conception of God as the ultimate being, Al-Farabi, using Aristotle's categorization of being into necessary being and contingent being, integrates a philosophical interpretation of God as the Necessary Being. A Necessary Being for Al-Farabi is a Self-Subsisting Being, Who cannot but exist and Whose essence involves His existence.

The Attributes of God: The Qur'an testifies that God has several and most beautiful names.¹⁰ The attributes of God are best described in the Qur'an. For example, the Qur'an describes God thus:

God is He, other than whom there is no deity, Knower of the unseen and the witnessed. He is the Beneficent, the Merciful... the Sovereign, the Pure, the Perfection, the Bestower of faith, the Overseer, the Exalted in might, the Compeller, the Superior... the Creator, the Inventor, the Fashioner... the Exalted in might, the Wise.¹¹

Under the classification of metaphysical theology by Al-Farabi, he submits that the nature and attributes of God can be inferred by means of a two-fold process, namely: (i) the process of exclusion, and (ii) the process of pre-eminence. The process of exclusion is the process by which we remove from the idea of God whatever implies defect, such as limitation, dependence, mutability, etc. Under the process of pre-eminence, we attribute to God, in an infinite degree all such perfections as we can think of, such as Most Beneficent, Most Merciful, the All-Knowing, All-Hearing, etc.¹²

Knowledge of God: In his philosophical

analysis on the knowability of God, Al-Farabi holds that it requires an extraordinary level of intellectual acumen, spiritual, and philosophic wisdom to know who God is in His real essence, because of the limitation of human intellect and its union with matter. He analyses that just as light is the principle by which colours become visible, in like manner, it would seem logical to say that a perfect light should produce a perfect vision. Instead, the very opposite occurs. This is simply because perfect light dazzles the vision. The same is true of God. The imperfect knowledge we have of God is due to the fact that He is infinitely perfect. That explains why God's infinitely perfect being bewilders our mind to its very foundations. Our knowledge of God is imperfect in view of His infinite perfection. Furthermore, the Qur'an describes God as "*Al-Zahir Wal Batnu*," meaning that "God is evident and hidden".¹³

Cosmology: Cosmology is a branch of metaphysics that studies the origin of the universe. The Qur'an states that God is the primal origin of everything; He is the Creator, Who began the process of creation and adds to creation as He pleases.¹⁴ On the philosophical issue of the eternity of the world, Al-Kindi opposes the Aristotelian metaphysics strongly. For example, Aristotle says that God does not know the world nor has He anything to do with it, but the Qur'an says God created the world and takes care of it; that is, the world is guided by divine providence. "And not an atom's weight in the earth, or the sky escaped your Lord, nor what is less than that or greater than that, but it is written in a clear Book".¹⁵ Aristotle contradicts himself in his argument by saying that infinity cannot exist in

⁹ Qur'an 2:255.

¹⁰ Qur'an., 8:180; 17:110.

¹¹ Qur'an., 59:21-24.

¹² Al-Farabi, *The Knowledge of God* (Beirut: Malouf Edde and Cheiko, 2011), 21-22.

¹³ Al-Farabi, *The Knowledge of God*, 57:3.

¹⁴ Al-Farabi, *The Knowledge of God*, 10:4.

¹⁵ Al-Farabi, *The Knowledge of God*, 10:62.

actuality, and at the same time he stated that the actual existent world is eternal and therefore is infinite.

Epistemology: Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that deals with the analysis of knowledge. Some of the basic questions in epistemology are: What is the origin and nature of human knowledge? What can we know? What is the limit of human knowledge? What is truth? Philosophers have diverse views on what constitutes the source, certainty, limit, and justification of human knowledge. Attempts to provide satisfactory answers to these questions have created a philosophical conundrum and once again plunged philosophers into an avalanche of epistemic discourse. According to the Qur'an, God is the ultimate source of knowledge. He is the Truth.¹⁶ With Him are the keys of the unseen, the treasures that none knows but He.¹⁷ He witnesses all things, for every single thing is before His sight in due proportion. Verily, nothing on the earth or in the heavens is hidden from Him, not even as much as the weight of an atom. He has full knowledge of all things, open or secret.¹⁸

The Concept of Truth: One of the fundamental concepts in epistemology is the concept of truth. Epistemology is sometimes defined as the theory of truth. Philosophers down the ages have conceived truth differently. Plato conceived truth as an entity existing outside the mind, an entity in the intelligible world. The mind discovers it and participates in it.¹⁹ Truth in this conception is one, eternal, and unchanging. Plotinus identified truth with the "One" and by contemplating the "One" the mind

participates in truth.²⁰

The great medieval philosopher, St. Augustine, following the Platonic tradition, also conceived truth as an entity, one, eternal, and unchanging. He also used it to prove the existence of God as the source. What is the source of truth? It cannot be the human mind, he says, since the human mind is not eternal and unchanging. The human mind only discovers it; it does not invent it. Once it is discovered by the human mind, it imposes itself on it. Since it is eternal and immutable, its source must be an eternal and immutable being, and this is God. Thus, God is the source of truth, and it is only by divine illumination coming from God that the human mind is able to grasp it.²¹ The Augustinian conception of God as the Truth and Source of Truth finds expression in the Qur'an. According to the Quran, God is the Truth, and He is also the source of truth. He alone gives guidance to the Truth. No one is guided to the truth except the one He gives guidance.²² According to Al-Kindi, the objective of philosophy is truth, and surely, God is "The Truth".

The Concept of Justice: Justice is another important concept in socio political philosophy, which also finds expression and constitutes an important concept in the Qur'an. Justice could be conceived to mean giving everybody his due, or treating everybody equally. The foundation of justice is the equality of all men. The equality in question here is ontological equality, not social equality or any other kind of equality. It is an existential fact that all men are not equal socially, educationally, financially, in size, in weight, etc. But

¹⁶ Al-Farabi, *The Knowledge of God*, 10:32; 22:6.

¹⁷ Al-Farabi, *The Knowledge of God*, 6:59.

¹⁸ Qur'an., 10:61; 18:8; 59:22.

¹⁹ Plato, *The Republic*, Book VI.

²⁰ Gabriele Galluzzo, "Plotinus and the Identity Theory of Truth", retrieved September 4, 2026, <https://ore.exeter.ac.uk>.

²¹ Joseph Omoregbe, *Epistemology – A Systematic and Historical Study* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers, 2013), 39.

²² Qur'an 10:32; 35.

ontologically (i.e. as human beings) all men are equal.²³ The Sophist philosopher in ancient Greece, Thrasymachus, equated justice with might, saying that justice was the interest of the mightier. According to him, “might is right”. Strong men in society use their might to achieve their aim, and their actions are considered as ‘. just’. Plato equated justice with harmony in the soul or in society. This harmony results from each part of the soul or society performing its function effectively.²⁴

Aristotle described justice as the greatest of all virtues and defined it as “what is lawful”, again as “what is fair and equal”. He distinguished between universal justice, particular justice, remedial justice and commercial justice. He says anyone who has universal justice can exercise virtue towards his neighbour as well as towards himself. Universal justice, as it was conceived by Aristotle, is an attitude of fairness towards everybody. Particular justice has to do with particular instances of justice. Remedial justice has to do with fairness in human transactions. Commercial justice has to do with fairness in trade in business. Philosophers classified justice into different kinds, namely legal justice, social justice, distributive justice, communicative justice, and vindictive justice.

The Qur’an states that God commands justice, fairness, and equity without fear or favour.²⁵ The Qur’an describes God as an impartial judge, Who dispenses justice and never deals unjustly with man. God not only commands justice, He also enjoins people to be just and loves those who are just. The Qur’an describes justice as an attribute of God, and to stand firm for justice is to be a witness to God, even if it is detrimental to our own interest or the interest of those who

are near or dear to us. It is obvious that the Quranic conception of justice is higher than the various philosophical conceptions of justice.

Aesthetics: Philosophy is not just the study of knowledge, truth, goodness, existence, and abstract speculation; it is also about the beautiful.²⁶ Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy that deals with the study of the nature of beauty and the philosophy of arts. Today the word aesthetics means the study of all the aesthetic phenomena; the study of the perception of such phenomena; the study of what is considered to be artificially worthwhile or notable or “good”, as a specific expression of what is perceived as being aesthetic. This branch of philosophy also finds expression in the Qur’an. The Qur’an uses synonymous words for beauty and goodness. The word radiance or light is also used to signify beauty. God is the beauty of the heavens and the earth, and His names are also most beautiful. Expressions such as “everything created by God is harmonious and of great beauty”; “notice the beauty of trees and fields and the starry heaven”,²⁷ reveal the teleological order and the aesthetic elements in the Qur’an.

The Concept of Virtue: Virtue is a trait of character that is to be admired. Plato talks about the four cardinal virtues, namely wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. Justice for Plato is the highest virtue. Virtue, according to Aristotle, is the result of a habit; it is an internal disposition, a permanent state of mind inclined towards good actions, which spring spontaneously from it. This means that virtue is the state of mind which spontaneously gives rise to good actions as a matter of habit. Virtue according to Stoic ethics is to live according to nature. The central point of Stoic ethics is their

²³ Joseph Omoregbe, *Socio-Political Philosophy and International Relations* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers, 2014), 45.

²⁴ Joseph Omoregbe, *Socio-Political Philosophy and International Relations*, 45.

²⁵ Qur’an 16:90; 4:58, 135.

²⁶ Robert C. Solomon, *Introducing Philosophy*, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 668.

²⁷ Qur’an 32:7; 37:6.

insistence that man should live according to nature. The purpose of life is happiness, and the way to attain happiness is by living according to nature. The British empiricist philosopher, David Hume, considered utility as the criterion of virtue. Hume insists that for anything to be considered a virtue, it must be useful and it must promote man's well-being; otherwise, it does not deserve to be called virtue. The well-being of mankind must be the basis for considering anything as a virtue.

The concept of virtue as a moral value is also central in Islamic ethics. The Qur'an lays the greatest stress on the beauty of action. It exhorts mankind to do the deeds of high value, for God loves those who do excellent deeds. It wants men to return greetings with greetings of great excellence and repel evil with what is best, for in so doing, they enhance the excellence of their own souls.²⁸

The Concept of Free Will– Human freedom, or freedom of the will, is a fundamental theme in existentialist philosophy. Existentialism can be defined as the philosophy of human existence, a philosophy preoccupied with what it means for a human being to exist. Existentialism emphasizes the existence of the person as a free and responsible agent determining his own development through the act of the will. The theme of freedom is at the heart of existentialism.²⁹ Human freedom for the existentialists is an ontological structure of man's being and a basic condition of human existence. Freedom is the capacity of self-determination. That is, the capacity to decide what to do, the capacity to choose, the freedom to choose, to make a choice. Freedom is concretely realised and exercised in choice. Man is a choice-making being. He is free to choose. Human freedom

is freedom of choosing. That is why he is responsible for his actions because his actions are products of his free choices. To be free is *ipso facto* to be responsible.

St. Thomas Aquinas emphasizes that freedom of the will is a necessary presupposition of morality. This is because, if the will were not free, how could we account for the moral responsibility of one's actions? How could we blame or punish, praise or reward people for their actions if they were not acting freely? For Aquinas, therefore, the will is free and human actions are free actions.³⁰ However, some people deny human freedom and see it as an illusion. All human actions according to them are determined by certain causes. Every human action, they say, is an effect of a cause and is determined by the cause. Human actions can therefore be completely explained in terms of cause and effect without any recourse to freedom of the will. The view that man is not free in philosophy is known as determinism. Philosophers have classified determinism into various forms, namely metaphysical determinism, psychological determinism in various forms, theological determinism, economic determinism, and fatalism. The big question is, is man really free? Are his actions truly free? Does man really have free will? The Qur'an, being an everlasting book of life, provides solutions to this philosophical conundrum.

According to the Qur'an, God has given man the will to choose, decide, and resolve to do good or evil. He has endowed him with reason and various impulses so that by his own efforts he may strive and explore possibilities. He has also given him a just bias, a natural bias towards good. Besides this, He has guided him through revelation and inspiration, and has advised him to

²⁸ Qur'an, 2:195; 5:96; 4:86; 23:96; 17:7.

²⁹ Joseph Omoregbe, *A Simplified History of Western Philosophy*, Volume Three, (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers, 1991), 45.

³⁰ Joseph Omoregbe, *Ethics – A Systematic and Historical Study*, (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers, 2012), 38.

return evil with good to repel it with what is best. Hence, if a man chooses to do good, it is because in giving him these benefits God has willed him to do so. He never changes the gracious benefits which He has bestowed on a people until they change themselves. Therefore, whatever good comes from man or to man is ultimately from God. On the other hand, his nature has a bias against evil, his reason is opposed to it, and he has been given a warning against it through the revealed books; therefore, whatever evil comes from him or to him is from his own soul. If God had willed, He would have destroyed evil or would not have allowed it to exist, and if it were His will, the whole of mankind would have had faith, but that is not His plan. His plan envisages man's free use of the divine attribute of power or freedom to choose, and take all judicious and precautionary measures to suit different situations. In the providential scheme, man's role is not that of a blind, deaf, dumb, and driven herd of goats. So even his free choice of evil is a part of the scheme of things, and no one will choose a way unto God unless it fits into that scheme or is willed by God.³¹

Evaluation and Conclusion

This paper has examined the correlation between the Quran and philosophy. It has been able to establish that there are indeed correlations between the Quran and philosophy, between faith and reason. In their methods of reasoning, philosophers refer to logical demonstrations, thereby making philosophical arguments depend on the self-evident first principles of demonstration. Quranic arguments, being divine, are more sure, certain, and convincing than human philosophical arguments. The Qur'an gives solutions to some very important problems, such as the

creation of the world from nothing and resurrection.³²

Al-Ghazali, in his book *The Incoherence of Philosophers*, criticized the philosophers because their arguments were based mainly on intellect, while he insisted that not everything in religious teachings can be perceived by men's intellect, which is limited. For him, analogical and juridical deduction must stand side by side with the intellect. Regarding the relation between both analogical deduction and the intellect, Al-Ghazali said, "the intellect is the foundation on which the building of religion is constructed, and it is impossible to imagine a building without a foundation, and a foundation without a building is without use".³³ Thus, the relation between the two is so close that they cannot be separated. To reject the role of the intellect in religion is a sign of ignorance. The separation between both is totally rejected in Islam.³⁴ Nevertheless, man, being a finite being with finite intellect, should seek divine guidance in matters of Quranic interpretation.

The position of Al-Ghazali is in line with the Islamic teachings to the effect that each idea is subjected to either acceptance or rejection. Philosophers are also human beings who probably make mistakes and errors in their arguments, as God says in the Qur'an, "Of knowledge, it is only a little that is communicated to you".³⁵ In the final analysis, this paper cautions against the use of intellect alone in terms of studying problems related to God because the intellect is very limited and is unable to sink in this deep ocean of the Divine Mystery. The Qur'anic arguments are clear and comprehensive. Thus, they lead to certainty and conviction.

³¹ Quran 32:7; 13:22; 23:96; 8:53; 13:11; 6:07, 104; 18:29; 4:71; 2:171; 76:30.

³² Adamson, 36-38.

³³ Mohd Fakhrudin Abdul Mukti, "Al-Ghazzali and his Refutation of Philosophy", *Jurnal Usuluddin*, Bil 21, (2005), 11.

³⁴ Muhammad Yusuf Musa, *Al-Quran wa Al-Falsafah*, (Cairo: Dar al-Maarif, 1982), 64.

³⁵ Quran 17:85.

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