

Analyzing Sandra Harding's Standpoint Epistemology through the Lens of Islamic Epistemology on Knowledge

Nadaa Afifah Silmi¹, Syamsuddin Arif²

¹²Aqidah and Islamic Philosophy, Universitas Darussalam Gontor,
Jl. Raya Siman, Dusun I, Demangan, Kec. Siman, Kabupaten Ponorogo, Jawa Timur 63471. Tel. +62 81 3337 31713.

Corresponding author

nadaafifahsilmi17@student.afi.unida.gontor.ac.id

Abstract: Sandra Harding's standpoint epistemology has emerged as a significant critique of modern scientific claims to neutrality and objectivity. However, this framework also raises fundamental philosophical concerns, particularly regarding truth relativism and the fragmentation of epistemic authority. The urgency of this research lies in offering an alternative epistemological framework that not only exposes the inherent biases of Western science but also provides an integral and transcendent foundation for knowledge. Islamic epistemology, grounded in the principle of *tawhid* (divine unity), offers a holistic conceptual framework that harmonizes rational, empirical, and revelatory dimensions as sources of truth. Nevertheless, studies that directly critique standpoint epistemology from an Islamic perspective remain rare. This research aims to examine Sandra Harding's standpoint epistemology critically and to formulate a *tawhid*-based Islamic epistemology as a conceptual alternative to relativistic epistemic frameworks. Employing a qualitative method based on library research and a descriptive-analytical approach, this study further strengthens its conceptual foundation through in-depth interviews with two experts in philosophy of science and Islamic philosophy. The findings suggest that while standpoint theory effectively exposes power relations in knowledge production, it lacks the metaphysical grounding necessary to sustain a coherent concept of truth. In contrast, al-Attas's *tawhid*-based epistemology provides a spiritually rooted and ontologically unified framework. This study contributes to contemporary Islamic epistemological discourse by proposing an ethically oriented and theologically grounded model of knowledge that integrates lived experience with divine revelation, offering a richer, more coherent, and genuinely objective understanding of reality.

Keywords: Islamic Epistemology; Sandra Harding; Standpoint Epistemology; *Tawhid*.

Introduction

The rise of modern science, with its claims to universal objectivity and value-neutral inquiry, has long dominated the intellectual landscape. However, the latter half of the 20th century witnessed a powerful intellectual upheaval against this positivist paradigm. Feminist critiques, in particular, have systematically deconstructed the alleged neutrality of science, revealing its deeply embedded androcentric and Western biases (Harding 1986, 9–15). Among the most influential figures in this movement is Sandra Harding, whose standpoint epistemology argues that knowledge is inherently situated within specific social, historical, and political

contexts (Harding 1991, 119–20). Harding's seminal concepts of "strong objectivity" and "situated knowledge" propose that starting scientific inquiry from the lives of marginalized groups, particularly women, provides a more critical and complete understanding of the world, as it forces an examination of the power structures that traditional science takes for granted (Harding 1993, 149–50).

While Harding's work has been groundbreaking in exposing the power dynamics within knowledge production, it inadvertently generates a new set of profound epistemological problems. By grounding knowledge primarily in socially situated experience, standpoint theory struggles to avoid the pitfalls of epistemic relativism (Longino 1999, 327–53). If all knowledge claims are reflections of their

social location, by what ultimate standard can we adjudicate between competing claims to truth? This leads to what critics have termed the "bias paradox"(Antony 1993, 188–89): the theory's own claim to reveal bias is itself a situated perspective, undermining its authority to declare any standpoint as epistemically superior. Consequently, standpoint epistemology, despite its critical power, risks leading to a fragmented intellectual landscape where the very notion of objective truth becomes untenable, leaving no solid foundation for a coherent and unified understanding of reality(Rolin 2006, 125–36).

This epistemological crisis underscores the urgency for an alternative framework, one that can incorporate the critical insights of standpoint theory regarding social bias while simultaneously providing a robust, transcendent foundation for truth and objectivity. It is here that Islamic epistemology, particularly as articulated by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, offers a compelling solution(Al Attas 1995, 1–5). Grounded in the metaphysical principle of Tawhid (the Oneness of God), Islamic epistemology presents a holistic and integrated model of knowledge. It harmonizes reason, empirical observation, and intuitive spiritual insight under the ultimate guidance of divine revelation (wahy)(Al-Attas 1993, 92–93). In this framework, knowledge is not merely a social construct but the "arrival of meaning in the soul," a process that recognizes the proper place of everything within a God-centered cosmic order(Al-Attas 1980, 17–18).

Therefore, this paper arises from the critical need to engage in a constructive dialogue between these two epistemological traditions. It seeks to critically analyze the contributions and limitations of Sandra Harding's standpoint epistemology through the lens of the epistemological framework. The central problem is that while standpoint theory effectively deconstructs false universality, it fails to provide a positive, non-relativistic foundation for knowledge. This study posits that the Islamic epistemological paradigm, with its emphasis on transcendent unity and the integration of multiple sources of knowledge, can resolve the inherent tensions within standpoint theory(Muslih 2016, 145–50). It offers a path toward an epistemology that is both critically aware of social situatedness and firmly anchored in

a metaphysical reality, thereby achieving a genuine and comprehensive objectivity that has eluded both classical positivism and its postmodern critics.

Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design with a philosophical-analytical approach, focusing on critical textual analysis and conceptual comparison(Creswell 2018, 183–85). The primary method is library research, involving a systematic examination of Sandra Harding's seminal works on standpoint epistemology, particularly *The Science Question in Feminism* and *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*, alongside Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's key texts on Islamic epistemology, including *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* and *Islam and Secularism*(Zed 2004, 3–5). Through content analysis and critical interpretation, we identify core arguments, epistemological assumptions, and internal tensions within Harding's framework, while simultaneously reconstructing al-Attas's integrative model of knowledge based on, principles(Culler 1982, 130–32). The analytical process involves three main stages: deconstructing Harding's claims about strong objectivity and situated knowledge, evaluating their philosophical coherence, and assessing their compatibility with Islamic epistemological foundations.

To strengthen the validity and depth of the analysis, this research incorporates expert validation through in-depth interviews with two specialists: one in contemporary philosophy of science and another in Islamic philosophy(Parse 2001, 78–80). These interviews serve to triangulate the textual findings and ensure a balanced critical perspective(Denzin 2017, 304–6). The data from interviews are analyzed thematically to identify key insights regarding the strengths and limitations of both epistemological frameworks(Braun and Clarke 2006, 87–89). This methodological triangulation, combining textual analysis with expert perspectives, allows for a more nuanced understanding of how Islamic epistemology can address the theoretical gaps in standpoint theory while maintaining critical engagement with its

valuable contributions to the critique of scientific objectivity (Flick 2018, 215–17).

Results and Discussion

1. The Epistemic Fragmentation of Standpoint Theory: A Critical Diagnosis

Sandra Harding's standpoint epistemology represents one of the most sophisticated and influential challenges to traditional conceptions of scientific objectivity (Harding 1991, 1–5). Emerging from feminist critiques of science and drawing inspiration from Marxist theories of class consciousness, standpoint theory offers a compelling argument for why marginalized perspectives, particularly women's experiences, provide not just alternative viewpoints but epistemically privileged positions for understanding social reality (Harding 1986, 26–30). However, a thorough philosophical examination reveals significant internal tensions and limitations that ultimately undermine its coherence as an epistemological framework. This section provides a critical diagnosis of three fundamental problems within Harding's project: the bias paradox inherent in her concept of "strong objectivity," the specter of relativism that haunts her situated knowledge thesis, and the absence of metaphysical grounding that leaves her epistemology untethered from ultimate reality.

1.1. From "Strong Objectivity" to the Bias Paradox

Harding's central epistemological innovation lies in her reconceptualization of objectivity. She distinguishes between "weak objectivity", the traditional notion of value-neutrality that she argues actually masks androcentric biases, and "strong objectivity," which requires researchers to critically examine the social and historical conditions that shape knowledge production (Harding 1991, 138–42). For Harding, strong objectivity "starts thought from marginalized lives" because such perspectives provide critical leverage against dominant ideologies (Harding 1991, 150). As she argues, "starting from the lives of people in the dominant positions... tends to generate

faulty claims about them and everyone else" (Harding 1991, 124).

The strength of Harding's approach lies in its ability to expose how power relations distort knowledge. By insisting that all knowledge is socially situated, she reveals how what passes for universal truth often reflects the particular interests and experiences of dominant groups (Harding 1986, 45–48). Her methodological prescription, to begin research from women's lives and experiences, aims to produce more complete and accurate accounts of reality by incorporating perspectives that have been systematically excluded from traditional scientific inquiry (Harding 1991, 119–21).

However, this very strength gives rise to what has been termed the "bias paradox" (Antony 1993, 188–89). If all knowledge is socially situated and reflects particular standpoints, then the knowledge claims of standpoint theory itself must be similarly situated and partial. As Louise Antony pointedly asks, "If it is a virtue to be 'situated,' then what is the special virtue of the feminist situation?" The paradox emerges clearly: Harding's thesis that all knowledge is perspectival undermines her ability to claim that feminist standpoints are epistemically privileged.

Harding attempts to resolve this paradox by arguing that some social locations, specifically, those of marginalized groups, provide "epistemic advantages" because they offer critical perspectives on social relations that remain invisible to those in dominant positions (Harding 1991, 124–26). She writes, "The activities of those at the bottom of social hierarchies can provide starting points for thought, for everyone's research and scholarship, from which humans' relations with each other and the natural world can become visible". This move, while politically appealing, creates a circularity in her argument: the epistemic privilege of marginalized standpoints is justified by the very theory that these standpoints are supposed to ground.

The deeper philosophical problem concerns Harding's criteria for identifying which marginalized perspectives provide epistemic advantage. She suggests that oppressed groups have "less interest in ignorance" about social relations, but this psychological explanation fails to provide adequate epistemological warrant. As

Helen Longino notes, "The mere fact of oppression does not, in itself, guarantee clearer vision"(Longino 1999, 337). Without independent criteria for evaluating competing knowledge claims, Harding's strong objectivity collapses into a relativistic assertion that marginalized perspectives are superior simply because they are marginalized.

Furthermore, Harding's solution creates what we might call the "problem of multiple marginalities"(Collins 1991, 22–25). In contemporary societies, individuals occupy multiple social positions simultaneously, they may be marginalized by gender but privileged by race, class, or other factors. Harding's framework provides no clear method for determining which aspects of one's social location should provide the starting point for knowledge production, or how to adjudicate between potentially conflicting insights from different marginalized standpoints(Collins 1991, 26–28).

1.2. The Specter of Relativism and the Problem of Foundational Criteria

The second major problem confronting Harding's standpoint epistemology concerns its relationship to relativism. Harding explicitly rejects what she calls "judgmental relativism", the view that all perspectives are equally valid, and insists that her project aims to produce "less partial and distorted" accounts of reality(Harding 1991, 142–44). Yet her thoroughgoing commitment to the social situatedness of all knowledge makes it difficult to see how she can avoid the relativistic implications of her position.

Harding's attempted escape from relativism relies on what she terms "historical relativism", the recognition that knowledge claims emerge from specific historical and social contexts, while rejecting "judgmental relativism"(Harding 1991, 156–57). She argues that acknowledging the historical contingency of knowledge does not preclude making rational judgments about which claims are more or less adequate. However, this distinction proves difficult to maintain in practice. If there are no context-transcendent standards for evaluating knowledge claims, then the choice between competing standpoints appears to be ultimately arbitrary or political rather than epistemological(Hekman 1997, 348–50).

The core issue concerns Harding's criteria for evaluating knowledge claims. She suggests that standpoints should be judged by their ability to explain the experiences of marginalized groups and reveal previously hidden power relations(Harding 1991, 127–29). But this criterion is essentially pragmatic and circular: feminist standpoints are validated by their ability to generate the kinds of insights that feminist theory values. As Cassandra Pinnick observes, "The thesis of epistemic privilege should be treated as an empirical hypothesis"(Pinnick 1994, 650), yet Harding provides little empirical evidence that marginalized perspectives consistently yield more accurate knowledge across different domains.

Moreover, Harding's rejection of traditional epistemological foundations leaves her without resources to explain why some standpoints might be epistemically superior to others. Her criteria remain largely internal to the theoretical framework of standpoint theory itself. As Susan Hekman notes, "The problem with standpoint theory is that it wants to have it both ways: to assert that all knowledge is situated and that some situated knowledge is better than others, without providing a non-question-begging account of why this is so"(Hekman 1997, 345).

This problem becomes particularly acute when we consider how standpoint theory would handle disagreements between different marginalized perspectives. If black feminist standpoints and white feminist standpoints yield conflicting accounts of social reality, Harding's framework provides no neutral arbitration procedure(Collins 1991, 35–38). The resolution of such conflicts appears to depend on political rather than epistemological considerations, despite Harding's insistence that her project aims at stronger objectivity.

Harding's attempts to ground knowledge in "women's experience" also face the problem of what postmodern feminists have called the "impossible unity" of women as a category(Haraway 1988, 586). As Donna Haraway argues, "There is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women together into a unified standpoint". The diversity of women's experiences across lines of race, class, sexuality, and culture undermines the notion of a singular feminist

standpoint, suggesting instead a multiplicity of potentially conflicting standpoints.

1.3. The Missing Metaphysical Ground: Knowledge Untethered from Ultimate Reality

The most profound limitation of Harding's epistemology concerns its lack of metaphysical grounding. By restricting her analysis to the social and historical dimensions of knowledge production, Harding offers what might be called a "horizontal" epistemology, one that examines how knowledge moves between different social positions but never transcends the human social realm to connect with ultimate reality (Nasr 1981, 1–5). This avoidance of metaphysical questions leaves her epistemology incomplete and ultimately unsatisfying from a philosophical perspective.

Harding's exclusive focus on the social construction of knowledge prevents her from addressing fundamental questions about the relationship between knowledge and reality. She rightly emphasizes that our access to reality is always mediated by social and conceptual frameworks, but she fails to provide an account of how these frameworks themselves connect to a reality beyond social construction (Harding 1986, 193–95). As Seyyed Hossein Nasr argues, "Every epistemology must ultimately rest upon an ontology, whether explicitly stated or implicitly assumed" (Nasr 1981, 1). Harding's implicit ontology appears to be a form of social constructivism that never adequately explains how socially constructed knowledge can claim to represent a reality independent of human societies.

This absence of metaphysical grounding becomes particularly problematic when we consider natural reality. While standpoint theory offers powerful insights for understanding social phenomena, its applicability to the natural sciences remains questionable (Pinnick 1994, 652–54). Harding argues that even natural scientific knowledge is shaped by social values and interests, but she provides no clear account of how socially situated knowledge can claim to represent natural realities that exist independently of human societies (Harding 1986, 229–31). The strong sociological emphasis in her work often seems to imply that natural reality itself is socially

constructed, a position that most philosophers of science would find deeply problematic.

The Islamic epistemological tradition, particularly as articulated by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, offers an illuminating contrast here. For al-Attas, knowledge is fundamentally about "the arrival of meaning in the soul" and the recognition of "the proper place of things in the order of creation" (Al Attas 1995, 133). This conception connects epistemology to metaphysics and theology, providing a vertical dimension that is entirely missing in Harding's framework. Where Harding's epistemology remains confined to human social relations, al-Attas's epistemology connects human knowing to divine reality, providing a transcendent foundation for knowledge claims (Al Attas 1995, 121–25).

Harding's avoidance of metaphysical questions also leaves her without resources to address what we might call the "normativity problem", the question of why we should prefer some standpoints over others (Taylor 1989, 3–8). From an Islamic perspective, the preference for certain types of knowledge is grounded in their relationship to ultimate reality and their ability to guide human beings toward their proper ends. Harding's political and ethical preferences appear as arbitrary starting points without deeper metaphysical justification.

Furthermore, Harding's exclusive focus on power relations as the primary determinant of knowledge leads to what Charles Taylor calls "a debunking stance" toward truth claims (Taylor 1989, 57–60). By always looking behind knowledge claims to the power interests they serve, standpoint theory risks reducing epistemology to ideology critique. While this critical stance is valuable for exposing bias and domination, it provides no positive account of how genuine knowledge is possible or what distinguishes knowledge from mere ideology (Taylor 1989, 61–63).

In conclusion, while Harding's standpoint epistemology makes valuable contributions to our understanding of how social position affects knowledge production, its internal tensions and limitations prevent it from serving as a comprehensive epistemological framework. The bias paradox undermines its claims to epistemic privilege, its inability to escape relativism leaves it

without firm foundations, and its lack of metaphysical grounding severs knowledge from ultimate reality. The following section will explore how an Islamic epistemological framework based on tawhid can address these limitations while preserving Harding's important insights about the relationship between knowledge and social position.

Discussion

Tawhidic Epistemology: An Islamic Framework for Unifying Knowledge

Having critically examined the inherent tensions and limitations within Sandra Harding's standpoint epistemology, we now turn to an exploration of the Islamic epistemological alternative as articulated by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. This framework, grounded in the fundamental Islamic principle of tawhid (divine unity), offers a comprehensive solution to the problems of epistemic fragmentation, relativism, and metaphysical groundlessness that plague standpoint theory (Al Attas 1995, 1–5). Where Harding's epistemology remains confined to the horizontal plane of social relations, Islamic epistemology introduces a vertical dimension that connects human knowing to divine reality, providing both the metaphysical foundation and the integrative capacity that contemporary epistemology so desperately needs (Al Attas 1995, 121–25). This section will elaborate three central aspects of this tawhidic epistemology: its distinctive conception of knowledge as the recognition of meaning and proper place, its foundation in the unitive principle of tawhid, and its hierarchical model for integrating multiple sources of knowledge.

2.1. The Concept of Knowledge as the "Arrival of Meaning" and the Recognition of Place

At the heart of al-Attas's epistemological framework lies a profound reconceptualization of knowledge itself. Rejecting both the correspondence theory of traditional empiricism and the coherence theory of many postmodern approaches, al-Attas defines knowledge as "the arrival of meaning in the soul" (*husūl al-ma'nā fī al-nafs*) (Al Attas 1995, 133). This definition, drawn from the classical Islamic philosophical tradition, represents a radical departure from Western epistemological paradigms

and offers a sophisticated alternative to Harding's situated knowledge (Wan Daud 1998, 45–48).

The "arrival of meaning" signifies more than mere information acquisition or data processing. It denotes a transformative process wherein the human soul actively receives and comprehends intelligible forms (*suwar ma'qūlah*) that convey the essential reality of things (Al Attas 1995, 134). As al-Attas explains, "Knowledge is not just the collection of data or facts, but the recognition of the meaning of things that leads to the recognition of the proper place of things in the order of creation" (Al-Attas 1980, 17). This process involves both the arrival of meaning to the soul and the soul's arrival at meaning, a dynamic interaction between the knower and the known that acknowledges both the receptive and active dimensions of cognition (Al-Attas 1980, 18–19).

The concept of "meaning" (*ma'nā*) in this formulation carries profound philosophical significance. Meaning is not merely semantic content or linguistic representation but refers to the intelligible reality that underlies phenomenal appearances (Izutsu 1964, 15–18). It is through the grasp of meaning that human beings access the essential nature of things rather than their accidental properties (Izutsu 1964, 20–22). This epistemological realism stands in sharp contrast to the social constructivism implicit in Harding's framework, asserting that meaning is discovered rather than invented, recognized rather than constructed (Al Attas 1995, 136–38).

Crucially, this recognition of meaning necessarily involves what al-Attas terms the "recognition of proper place" (*ma'rifat al-martabah*) (Al-Attas 1980, 22). To know something truly is to recognize its position within the comprehensive hierarchy of existence, its relationship to other beings, to the cosmos as a whole, and ultimately to God (Al Attas 1995, 140–42). This spatial metaphor carries both ontological and ethical implications: ontological in that it reflects the actual structure of reality, and ethical in that right action depends on putting things in their proper places (Al-Attas 1980, 24). As al-Attas states, "The condition of knowledge is to know the proper places of things, and the condition of justice is to put things in their proper places".

This conception of knowledge as recognition of place provides an elegant solution to the problem of multiple marginalities that troubled Harding's framework. Where standpoint theory struggles to adjudicate between competing perspectives from different social locations, the Islamic framework evaluates knowledge claims according to their correspondence with the actual order of existence (Nasr 1981, 67–70). A perspective is not privileged because it emerges from a particular social location but because it more accurately reflects the true nature of reality and the proper place of things within it.

Furthermore, this understanding of knowledge transcends the subject-object dichotomy that undergirds both traditional empiricism and its postmodern critiques (Al Attas 1995, 148–50). The "arrival of meaning in the soul" represents a participatory epistemology in which knower and known are united through the medium of meaning (Al Attas 1995, 152). This unity does not collapse the distinction between subject and object but rather situates both within a larger ontological framework that includes divine, cosmic, and human dimensions (Rahman 1982, 45–48).

The process of knowing, in this view, involves multiple human faculties operating in concert. Al-Attas identifies several cognitive instruments: the senses (*hawās*) for perceiving physical phenomena, reason (*'aql*) for conceptual analysis and logical inference, intuition (*hads*) for immediate spiritual insight, and the heart (*qalb*) as the organ of comprehensive understanding (Al Attas 1995, 160–62). Where Harding privileges experience and standpoint, the Islamic framework acknowledges the legitimate role of all these faculties while recognizing their proper scope and limitations.

2.2. Tawhid as the Unifying Principle of Reality and Knowing

The metaphysical foundation of Islamic epistemology lies in the principle of *tawhid*, the assertion of God's absolute oneness and unity (Al Attas 1995, 25–28). This principle is not merely theological but has profound epistemological implications, serving as what al-Attas calls "the organizing principle" that integrates all domains of knowledge into a coherent whole (Al Attas 1995, 30).

Where Harding's epistemology fragments knowledge into competing social perspectives, *tawhidic* epistemology unifies knowledge through its reference to a single ultimate reality.

Tawhid asserts first and foremost the unity of truth (*wahdat al-haqīqah*) (Nasr 1981, 85–88). Since God is the ultimate source of all reality and all knowledge, and since God is one, truth must ultimately be one²⁶. This does not mean that all human perspectives are equally valid, quite the contrary. It means that conflicting truth claims cannot all be correct and that the purpose of epistemology is to discern which claims correspond to reality as God has created it (Al-Attas 1993, 50–52). As the Qur'an states, "Had [the truth] been from other than God, they would have found much discrepancy in it" (4:82) (Ali 1989, 218). The unity of truth provides the metaphysical ground for rejecting the relativism that haunts standpoint theory.

This unity extends to the knower as well. The human self in the Islamic conception is not a fragmented collection of social identities but an integrated spiritual substance (*nafs*) whose ultimate purpose is to know and worship God (Al Attas 1995, 90–92). Social positions, including gender, race, and class, are accidental attributes that do not define the essential nature of the human being (Al Attas 1995, 94–96). While these attributes may influence one's perspective, they do not determine one's capacity to know truth (Al Attas 1995, 98–100). The epistemological subject in Islamic thought is ultimately the God-conscious self, not the socially situated individual.

The principle of *tawhid* also unifies the objects of knowledge. Since all things derive their existence from God and reflect divine attributes in various measures, the entire cosmos constitutes a unified system of signs (*āyāt*) pointing toward their Creator (Nasr 1981, 95–98). The famous Islamic maxim "There is no god but God" (*lā ilāha illā Allāh*) implies not only theological monotheism but ontological and epistemological unity as well, all reality manifests the divine unity, and all true knowledge ultimately leads to recognition of that unity.

This unitive vision stands in stark contrast to the dualisms that characterize much of Western

thought, including the subject-object dichotomy, the fact-value distinction, and the sacred-secular divide that Harding's framework inadvertently perpetuates. Islamic epistemology recognizes these as false dichotomies arising from a fragmented worldview (Rahman 1982, 75–82). In the tawhidic perspective, the spiritual and material, the sacred and profane, the normative and descriptive are integrated dimensions of a single reality.

The epistemological implications of tawhid extend to methodology as well. Since all legitimate methods of inquiry ultimately study different aspects of a unified reality, the findings of different disciplines should cohere rather than conflict (Wan Daud 1998, 120–23). Apparent contradictions between, for example, scientific discoveries and religious teachings indicate either methodological error or incomplete understanding rather than fundamental opposition between different domains of truth (Wan Daud 1998, 125–28). This integrative approach avoids both the scientific reductionism of positivism and the epistemological anarchy of radical relativism.

Furthermore, tawhid provides what might be called a "teleological unity" to knowledge (Nasr 1981, 105–8). All authentic knowledge ultimately serves the purpose of guiding human beings toward their proper end, the recognition and worship of God. This teleological orientation gives knowledge an inherent ethical dimension that is external to Harding's framework. Knowledge is not neutral information but carries responsibility and implies right action (Al-Attas 1980, 35–46). As the famous Islamic saying goes, "Knowledge without action is like a tree without fruit" (Al-Ghazali 2005, 1:45).

2.3. Integrating Reason, Experience, and Revelation: A Hierarchical Model for Objective Knowledge

Islamic epistemology offers a sophisticated model for integrating multiple sources of knowledge into a coherent hierarchy, with divine revelation (wahy) at the apex, followed by intuition (hads), reason ('aql), and sensory experience (tajribah) (Al Attas 1995, 165–68). This hierarchical integration provides what Harding's "strong objectivity" promised but failed to deliver: a method for achieving genuinely objective knowledge that transcends individual perspectives

while acknowledging the legitimate role of experience.

At the highest level of this hierarchy stands revelation, the divine communication that provides knowledge of realities beyond the reach of human reason and experience (Al Attas 1995, 170–73). Revelation serves several crucial epistemological functions: it provides foundational truths about God, the cosmos, and the human condition; it establishes the ultimate purposes and values that guide human inquiry; and it offers a comprehensive worldview within which particular discoveries find their proper place (Al Attas 1995, 175–78). Where standpoint theory treats all knowledge as socially constructed, Islamic epistemology recognizes revelation as divinely guaranteed knowledge that serves as the ultimate criterion for evaluating other truth claims.

The epistemological status of revelation in Islamic thought deserves careful attention. Revelation is not considered a substitute for human reason and investigation but rather their necessary complement and guide (Rahman 1982, 95–98). As Al-Attas explains, "Revelation does not contradict reason, but transcends it" (Al-Attas 1993, 87–90). The truths of revelation are not irrational but supra-rational, they include truths that reason can comprehend once revealed, truths that reason can partially understand, and truths that transcend reason's full comprehension but do not contradict it.

Below revelation in the epistemological hierarchy stands intuition (hads), the immediate, non-discursive apprehension of truth (Al Attas 1995, 180–83). Islamic epistemology recognizes various forms of intuitive knowledge, including intellectual intuition (hads 'aqlī) of self-evident truths and spiritual intuition (kashf) of higher realities (Nasr 1981, 115–18). Intuition serves as a bridge between discursive reason and revelatory knowledge, providing immediate certainty where rational demonstration would be lengthy or impossible (Nasr 1981, 120–23).

Reason ('aql) occupies the next level in the hierarchy. In the Islamic conception, reason is not autonomous but operates within boundaries established by revelation (Al Attas 1995, 185–92). Its proper function includes conceptual analysis, logical inference, and the systematic organization of knowledge. Reason serves to elaborate the

implications of revealed truths, to resolve apparent contradictions between different sources of knowledge, and to investigate those domains where revelation provides general principles rather than specific details (Rahman 1982, 105–8).

Sensory experience (*tajribah*) constitutes the foundation of the epistemological hierarchy, providing the empirical data that reason organizes and interprets (Al Attas 1995, 198–200). The Islamic tradition strongly affirms the value of empirical investigation while recognizing its limitations. Sensory knowledge is reliable within its proper domain but cannot access realities beyond the physical world. The famous Islamic philosopher al-Ghazālī illustrates this limitation with the analogy of a child who cannot comprehend abstract reasoning, just as the child's sensory knowledge is limited, human sensory knowledge is limited in comprehending spiritual realities (Al-Ghazali 2005, 1:78-90).

This hierarchical model achieves several important epistemological goals that elude standpoint theory. First, it establishes clear criteria for evaluating knowledge claims: compatibility with revelation, logical coherence, and empirical adequacy (Al-Attas 1980, 55–58). Second, it acknowledges the legitimate contributions of different cognitive faculties while defining their proper scope and limitations. Third, it integrates normative and descriptive knowledge, recognizing that facts and values ultimately derive from the same divine source (Al-Attas 1993, 95–98).

The objectivity achieved through this integrated approach differs significantly from both the "value-free" objectivity of positivism and the "strong objectivity" of standpoint theory. It might be termed "participatory objectivity", knowledge that reflects reality as it is, not as we might wish it to be, while acknowledging the knower's position within the cosmic order (Wan Daud 1998, 150–58). This objectivity requires not detachment but proper attachment, alignment with divine reality through submission (*islām*) to truth (Al-Attas 1980, 65–68).

This epistemological framework also resolves the bias paradox that troubled Harding's project. Where standpoint theory struggles to explain why feminist perspectives should be privileged over others, Islamic epistemology evaluates all

perspectives according to their correspondence with reality as revealed by God (Nasr 1981, 135–43). Bias is recognized not merely as social positioning but as deviation from truth due to personal inclinations, intellectual limitations, or spiritual defects. The remedy for bias is not switching to another social perspective but purifying the soul and aligning it with divine guidance (Al-Ghazali 2005, 3:25-33).

Furthermore, this model accommodates the valuable insights of standpoint theory while transcending its limitations. The Islamic tradition acknowledges that different social positions may provide different angles of vision on reality, and that marginalized perspectives may indeed notice aspects of social reality that dominant groups overlook (Rahman 1982, 120–28). However, these perspectives are evaluated not by their social location but by their truth content as measured against revelation, reason, and experience⁷.

In conclusion, the epistemology articulated by al-Attas offers a comprehensive alternative to both traditional empiricism and standpoint theory. Its conception of knowledge as the recognition of meaning and proper place, its foundation in the unitive principle of *tawhid*, and its hierarchical integration of multiple knowledge sources provide solutions to the fundamental problems that undermine Harding's project. This framework acknowledges the social dimensions of knowledge while grounding it in metaphysical reality, affirms the value of diverse perspectives while providing criteria for evaluating their truth claims, and integrates empirical investigation with spiritual insight in a comprehensive worldview oriented toward ultimate truth

Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that while Sandra Harding's standpoint epistemology offers a powerful critique of the false neutrality and hidden biases in modern scientific knowledge, it ultimately fails to provide a coherent epistemological foundation due to its internal contradictions. The bias paradox undermines its claims to epistemic privilege, its inability to escape relativism leaves it without firm criteria for evaluating truth claims,

and its lack of metaphysical grounding severs knowledge from any connection to ultimate reality. These limitations reveal the inherent inadequacy of any epistemological framework that remains confined to the horizontal plane of social relations and power dynamics without engaging with transcendent sources of truth and meaning.

In contrast, the epistemology articulated by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas presents a comprehensive alternative that addresses these fundamental problems while preserving standpoint theory's valuable insights about the relationship between social position and knowledge production. By defining knowledge as the "arrival of meaning in the soul" and the recognition of proper place within a God-centered cosmic order, Islamic epistemology provides the metaphysical foundation that standpoint theory lacks. The principle of tawhid serves as the unifying framework that integrates reason, experience, intuition, and revelation into a hierarchical model of knowledge, achieving genuine objectivity through alignment with divine reality rather than through impossible value-neutrality or problematic standpoint privilege.

Ultimately, this comparative analysis suggests that the most promising path forward for contemporary epistemology lies in frameworks that acknowledge the situatedness of human knowing while grounding it in transcendent reality. The Islamic epistemological tradition offers rich resources for developing such an approach, one that recognizes the value of diverse perspectives without succumbing to relativism, that critiques power structures without reducing truth to power, and that integrates empirical investigation with spiritual insight. By engaging in serious dialogue with this tradition, contemporary philosophy can move beyond the impasse between objectivism and relativism toward a more comprehensive understanding of knowledge that serves both human flourishing and the pursuit of ultimate truth

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