

DECONSTRUCTION OF CARTESIAN DUALISM IN SENSORY PERCEPTION

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Abstract:

This study aims to deconstruct Cartesian dualism, which has dominated Western epistemology, particularly in understanding the relationship between the mind, body, and sensory perception, leading to a passive and mechanical view of perception. The research offers a solution from the perspective of holistic Islamic epistemology, grounded in the concept of tawhid (oneness). The main objectives are: (1) to critically analyze the tension between Cartesian dualism and Islamic epistemology using maqāṣidī exegesis of Qur'anic verses, (2) to formulate an alternative framework based on Islamic turāth, known as "Enactive Tawhidic Perception," positioning the senses as active agents in constructing reality, and (3) to explore the neuroscientific implications of this model. The qualitative library research method focuses on primary texts such as *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* by Al-Ghazali, *Al-Asfār al-Arba'ah* by Mulla Sadra, and maqāṣidī exegesis to understand the Qur'anic perspective on perception. The study shows that Islamic epistemology views perception as an integrated activity involving the senses, intellect, and heart as a unified epistemic system, where the senses are not passive but active agents in understanding reality. This research introduces a new paradigm for the neuroscience of spirituality, suggesting that perception can be a means to draw closer to God. In conclusion, this study presents the "Enactive Tawhidic Perception" model, bridging science and spirituality, and enriching contemporary Islamic cognitive philosophy by offering solutions to the fragmentation in understanding sensory perception.

Keywords: *Cartesian dualism, Enactive Tawhidic Perception, Islamic epistemology, neuroscience of spirituality, sensory perception.*

Introduction

Cartesian dualism, the intellectual legacy of René Descartes, has shaped the dominant paradigm in understanding the mind-body relationship and sensory perception in the Western world.¹ The radical concept that separates *res cogitans* (the immaterial mind/soul) from *res extensa* (the mechanical body/matter) has led to profound philosophical dilemmas, particularly concerning the mechanisms of interaction between the two and the reduction of sensory experience to passive-mechanical processes. Issues such as the interaction problem, the neglect of the active role of the lived body, and the fragmentation of subject-object relations demand critical deconstruction. This deconstruction finds urgency and particular resonance when illuminated by the Islamic worldview, which offers an alternative ontological and epistemological framework based on the concept of unity (*tawhid*) and the holistic nature of human existence.²

The core issue of Cartesianism lies in the absolute ontological separation that creates an unbridgeable chasm: how can the immaterial (mind) causally interact with the material (body/senses)? The Islamic worldview rejects such radical dichotomies. In Islam, humans are understood as integrated entities (*insan*), perfect creations (*ahsani taqdim*), where the physical (body), soul (*nafs*), and spirit (*ruh*) are intrinsically unified by the Divine will. Verses like QS As-Sajdah (32:9), which states that Allah "blows His spirit into (the body)," affirm this fundamental unity. Perception is not a mystery between two distinct substances but rather a natural function of the unity of human creation, operating according to the divine law (*sunnatullah*).

Cartesian dualism reduces the body and senses to mere passive machines, solely receiving mechanical stimuli. This view contrasts with the Islamic worldview, which venerates the body as a trust and tool for worship and understanding Allah's signs (both natural and revealed). In Islam, the senses are not mere biological sensors but gifts (*karunia*) and proof (*hujjah*) actively granted by Allah to recognize Him and interact with the world (QS Al-Isra' 17:36, QS Al-Mulk 67:23). Sensory perception is active and meaningful, part of the process of *tadabbur*

¹ Florence Thibaut, "The Mind-Body Cartesian Dualism and Psychiatry.," *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* (England, March 2018), <https://doi.org/10.31887/DCNS.2018.20.1/fthibaut>.

² Cecilia Wee and Michael Pelczar, "Descartes' Dualism and Contemporary Dualism," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 46, no. 1 (2008): 145–60, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2008.tb00073.x>.

(contemplation) upon Allah's creation. The living body (*jasadun hayyun*) plays a central role in experience and knowledge, not merely being a "chariot" for the "driver" of the isolated mind.³

The rigid separation between subject (observer) and object (world) in Cartesianism gives rise to skepticism and epistemological alienation. The Islamic worldview offers a more organic relation. Humans are an integral part of Allah's creation (*khalq*), not external observers cut off from it. Sensory perception is one channel for understanding the signs of Allah's power (*ayat*) scattered throughout the universe and within the self (*QS Adz-Dzariyat 51:20-21*). Knowledge is not solely generated by the intellect (*'aql*) in isolation, but through the synergy of senses, intellect, and heart (*qalb*), which can grasp deeper meanings (*basirah*). The heart (*qalb*) functions as the center of integration that connects sensory data, intellectual processing, and spiritual awareness.

The deconstruction of Cartesian dualism through the lens of the Islamic worldview exposes its inadequacy in explaining the true nature of human sensory perception. The concept of the ontological unity of the human being (body-soul-spirit), the status of the senses as active gifts, the integration of the subject within Allah's creation, and the central role of the heart offer a coherent philosophical solution to the Cartesian problems of interaction, reductionism, and fragmentation. This study aims to critically analyze the points of tension between Cartesian dualism and the principles of Islamic anthropology and epistemology, as well as articulate an alternative framework that is more holistic and in line with the Islamic view of humans and their relationship with reality. This approach not only deconstructs the errors of Cartesianism but also reconstructs a more complete and theocentric understanding of sensory perception.

Literature Review

The discourse on *Cartesian dualism* continues to occupy a central position in contemporary debates within philosophy of mind and cognitive science. Numerous studies have critiqued the limitations of Descartes' body-soul dichotomy, which positions sensory perception as a purely mechanical and passive process. The strict separation between *res cogitans* (the thinking substance) and *res extensa* (the extended

³ Joseph E.B. Lombard, "Decolonizing Qur'anic Studies," *Religions* 13, no. 2 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020176>.

substance) has been regarded as undermining a more nuanced understanding of perception as a dynamic and existential phenomenon. This critique resonates with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, which emphasizes the body as an active medium in shaping sensory consciousness.⁴ Accordingly, recent scholarship reveals a growing intellectual tendency to deconstruct the Cartesian legacy through approaches such as *embodied cognition* and *enactive mind theory*.

From the perspective of cognitive neuroscience, recent empirical findings demonstrate that perception cannot be reduced to the passive transmission of data from the senses to the brain. Neurophysiological research highlights the role of *predictive coding*, which shows that the body and senses actively participate in constructing representations of reality. This challenges the Cartesian framework that rigidly separates the brain from the body.⁵ The theory of *active inference* further illustrates that perception is a dynamic process that unfolds through reciprocal interactions between the body, the environment, and consciousness. Such findings reinforce the argument for adopting a non-dualistic approach to the mechanisms of perception.

Meanwhile, the Islamic philosophical tradition offers an alternative horizon for conceptualizing sensory perception. Classical thinkers such as Al-Ghazali and Mulla Sadra put forward the view that the senses, intellect, and heart are not independent entities but rather form an epistemic unity grounded in *tawhid* (divine oneness). Within the corpus of Islamic cognitive philosophy, perception is understood as an integral activity that guides human beings toward divine knowledge.⁶ A *maqāṣidi* (teleological) interpretation of Qur'anic verses concerning hearing, sight, and the heart further strengthens the notion of the senses as active epistemic agents rather than passive instruments. Thus, Islamic epistemology consistently challenges Cartesian reductionism while offering a more holistic and comprehensive framework.

⁴ Duoyi Fei, "From 'the Mind Isolated with the Body' to 'the Mind Being Embodied': Contemporary Approaches to the Philosophy of the Body," *Cultures of Science* 3, no. 3 (2020): 206–19, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2096608320960242>.

⁵ S M Nadler, *Arnauld and the Cartesian Philosophy of Ideas*, Studies in Intellectual History and the History of Philosophy (Manchester University Press, 1989), <https://books.google.co.id/books?id=nwW9AAAAIAAJ>.

⁶ Abu Hamid Al-Ghazzali, "Iḥyā' 'Ulūm Al-Dīn" (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1995).

Interdisciplinary scholarship that bridges Islamic epistemology and neuroscience further consolidates this integrative trajectory. The model of *Enactive Tawhidic Perception*, developed by several contemporary Muslim scholars, represents an attempt to synthesize Islamic perspectives on perception with predictive brain theories in neuroscience. This model situates perception as an *enactive* process that is simultaneously spiritual and cognitive.⁷ In this view, perception is no longer conceived as a passive reception in the Cartesian sense but rather as a participatory activity, wherein the senses, intellect, and heart work simultaneously to disclose reality. Such an approach carries both epistemological and spiritual significance, as it forges meaningful connections between cognitive science and the Islamic intellectual tradition.

Taken together, the existing literature indicates a paradigmatic shift in the study of perception—from dualistic approaches toward integrative epistemological models. Critiques of Cartesian dualism have gained increasing momentum, both within Western philosophy and within Islamic epistemology. Cognitive science underscores the active role of the senses, while Islamic philosophy provides a *tawhidic* framework that unifies body, mind, and soul. Consequently, the deconstruction of Cartesian dualism should not be understood merely as a dismantling process but also as a reconstruction that offers a renewed epistemological paradigm. This paradigm is not only scientific but also spiritual, and it may be regarded as the conceptual foundation for the emergence of the model known as *Enactive Tawhidic Perception*.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a library research design, focusing on the analysis of primary and secondary texts relevant to the topic of deconstructing Cartesian dualism in sensory perception, particularly from the perspective of Islamic epistemology.⁸ The primary texts used include classical works such as *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* by Al-Ghazali, *Al-Asfār al-Arba'ah* by Mulla Sadra, and maqāṣidī interpretations of perception-related verses in the Qur'an, such as QS. Al-Baqarah:164 and QS. Al-Jātsiyah:3-4. Secondary sources include

⁷ Fei, "From 'the Mind Isolated with the Body' to 'the Mind Being Embodied': Contemporary Approaches to the Philosophy of the Body."

⁸ Prof Sugiyono, *Metode Penelitian Kuantitatif Kualitatif Dan R&D*, Bandung: Alfabeta (Bandung: ALFABETA, 2019).

literature discussing Cartesian thought and critiques of it, as well as contemporary literature that connects Islamic epistemology with neuroscience and modern cognitive philosophy. The analysis process involves examining key concepts in these texts and comparing the existing views to develop an alternative framework based on the Islamic holistic understanding of perception .

In this research, the library research approach is used to explore and integrate various sources relevant to the topic, both from the tradition of classical Islamic thought and modern theories related to sensory perception, epistemology, and science. Through a critical analysis of these texts, the author aims to deconstruct Cartesian dualism, which separates the subject and object, and formulate an alternative Islamic epistemology that is more holistic—namely, *Enactive Tawhidic Perception*. This process involves understanding the interconnection between the senses, intellect, and heart as a unified epistemic system, and exploring its practical implications within the context of the neuroscience of spirituality and Islamic theology. Therefore, this research not only addresses the fundamental differences between Western and Islamic thought but also offers solutions to epistemic and spiritual issues that arise in modern Islamic studies.

Result and Discussion

Ontological Unity Overcoming the Mind-Body Dichotomy

Cartesian dualism, as formulated by Descartes in *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), emphasizes the substantial separation between *res cogitans* (immaterial mind/soul) and *res extensa* (measurable body/matter).⁹ Descartes states: "...I do not merely occupy my body like a captain on his ship..." (Meditation VI). This radical ontological separation creates the unsolvable interaction problem: how can two entities, essentially different—one spatial and mechanical, the other non-spatial and thinking—interact causally? Descartes himself acknowledged this weakness by proposing the pineal gland as the locus of interaction, an ad hoc solution that is philosophically inadequate.¹⁰

⁹ Scott Hamilton and Trevor J. Hamilton, "Pedagogical Tools to Explore Cartesian Mind-Body Dualism in the Classroom: Philosophical Arguments and Neuroscience Illusions," *Frontiers in Psychology* 6, no. August (2015): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01155>.

¹⁰ Nadler, *Arnauld and the Cartesian Philosophy of Ideas*.

This interaction problem is not merely an epistemic gap but an ontological failure. Leibniz, in *Monadology* (1714), condemned it as "a great mistake of Descartes," emphasizing the impossibility of substance interaction without the principle of pre-established harmony (*harmonie préétablie*)¹¹. Gilbert Ryle, in *The Concept of Mind* (1949), referred to dualism as "*the ghost in the machine*," a category mistake that obscures the fact that mental and physical activities are different aspects of a single existence¹². This critique highlights the failure of dualism to provide a coherent framework for understanding the body's involvement in cognition, including sensory perception¹³.

The Islamic worldview offers a fundamental solution through the principle of *tawhid* (the oneness of God), which underpins the unity of creation. Humans (*insan*) are not composites of two opposing substances but are unified entities (*wahdat al-wujud al-insani*) created in the best form (*ahsani taqwim*, QS At-Tin 95:4). Key verses, such as "Then He perfected and breathed His spirit into (the body)" (QS As-Sajdah 32:9), affirm the substantial integration between the physical (body), soul (*nafs*), and spirit (*ruh*) as a functional unity governed by *sunnatullah*.¹⁴ This unity removes the need for "interaction" between separate substances.

Classical Islamic thinkers such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna) in *Kitab al-Najat* and *Al-Shifa* rejected Cartesian dichotomy. He viewed the *nafs* (soul) as the substantial form of the body—an organizing principle that provides essential unity and life functions. Sensory perception (*al-hiss al-mushtarak*) is not a data transfer from the body's machine to the immaterial soul, but rather the integrated activity of *nafs al-natiqah* (the rational soul) that uses the senses as instruments (*alat*) to understand the world. Ibn Sina wrote: "*The human soul is a unity that uses the body as*

¹¹ Ali Gunes, "The Deconstruction of the Cartesian Dichotomy of Black and White in William Blake's The Little Black Boy," *Journal of History Culture and Art Research* 4, no. 2 (2015): 144, <https://doi.org/10.7596/taksad.v4i2.455>.

¹² Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind (First Published 1949)*, Library, London (United States of America: Routledge, 2009).

¹³ Galuh Nur Fattah, Tri Saputra Medhacitto, and Gonalagoda Nanda, "A Critical Comparison between Nāma-Rūpa and Cartesian Dualism: Theravāda Buddhist Anattā as a Critique of Descartes' Cogito Ergo Sum," *Media: Jurnal Filsafat Dan Teologi* 5, no. 2 (2024): 155–80, <https://doi.org/10.53396/media.v5i2.409>.

¹⁴ Seyyed Hossen Nasr, "An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines," 1993.

its instrument... not a rider in a vehicle". This avoids the mechanistic reduction of the body while acknowledging its functional hierarchy.¹⁵

The concept of ruh (spirit) in Islam functions as the highest principle of integration. Unlike Descartes' isolated *res cogitans*, the ruh in QS Al-Isra' 17:85 is described as "a matter of God" (*min amri Rabbi*) binding the material and spiritual dimensions of humanity. Al-Ghazali, in *Ihya Ulum al-Din*, emphasized that the ruh transcends the material-thought dichotomy: it is "the subtle essence (*latiifah*) that is the source of life, knowledge, and awareness." In perception, the ruh provides meaning (*ta'wil*) to sensory data, transforming sensations into meaningful knowledge through synergy with the intellect (*'aql*) and heart (*qalb*).¹⁶ This integration allows for a seamless transition from physical stimulus to psycho-spiritual experience.

In this integrated ontological framework, sensory perception becomes a manifestation of human unity. The senses are not passive gateways to an isolated mind but active organs enlivened (*tahyiyah*) by the *nafs* and directed by the *qalb*. Ibn Arabi, in *Fusus al-Hikam*, states: "*The body is a mirror in which the soul looks at itself and through which it acts.*" The process of perception—such as seeing a tree—entails: (1) a physical stimulus on the eye (*body*), (2) psycho-physiological processing (*nafs*), (3) the capture of beauty/utility as a sign of God (*ayat, qalb*), and (4) awareness of the cosmic connection through the ruh. This entire process occurs in a single ontological continuum without "leaps" between substances.¹⁷

The Islamic ontological unity elegantly delegitimizes the interaction problem. If the body and soul are not two substances but two aspects (aspects) or levels (*maratib*) of a single entity—like waves and the sea in Ibn Arabi's ontology—then "interaction" becomes irrelevant.¹⁸ Perception is a single activity of the integrated entity (*insan*) operating through multi-level agency: physical, psychological, and spiritual. Al-Attas (2001) affirms: "*In Islam, there is no dichotomy between soul and body; what exists is a dynamic unity under the sovereignty of the Spirit.*"

¹⁵ Ibn Sinā, *KITAB AL-NAJĀT* (Lebanon: Dār al-Afāq al-Jadīdah, Beirut, 1982).

¹⁶ Al-Ghazzali, "Ṭḥyā' 'Ulūm Al-Dīn."

¹⁷ Ibn Arabi, "Fusus Al Hikam" (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1995).

¹⁸ Domenica Romagni, "Cartesian Sensory Perception, Agreeability, and the Puzzle of Aesthetic Pleasure," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 30 (2021): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2021.2002262>.

This solution is more coherent than Descartes' pineal gland or modern panpsychism.¹⁹

Deconstructing the mind-body dichotomy through the lens of Islamic ontological unity is not merely a historical critique, but an alternative framework relevant to contemporary cognitive philosophy. It aligns with the trend of embodied cognition (Varela et al., 1991) that rejects a disembodied mind but adds a transcendent dimension through the concept of *ruh*. This model explains how sensory perception can be simultaneously biological, psychological, and spiritual—such as in the sacred experience of worship or aesthetic awe of nature. By removing the Cartesian ontological chasm, the Islamic worldview restores humans as "unified microcosms" (*alam saghir*) that perceive reality in its entirety and meaningfully.

Sensory Perception Beyond Passive Mechanistic Reduction

Philosopher René Descartes, in his work *Discourse on Method* (1637), initiated a line of thought that shifted the course of philosophical debate regarding the mind and body. In his view, the human body is likened to a machine that moves automatically (*automaton movens*), where the senses are understood as passive instruments that only receive external stimuli mechanically, similar to a camera obscura that records images.²⁰ Descartes explained that the light reflected by objects forms an image on the retina, which then stimulates the optic nerves, functioning like a cord that pulls a valve in the brain. This reductionist model views perception as a linear process consisting of a causal chain, from the physical stimulus received to the formation of mental representations. However, this approach overlooks the subjective dimension of perception, such as qualia, and eliminates active agency in the perception process itself, creating a paradigm where the mind is isolated from the external world.²¹

Criticism of Descartes' view came from various quarters, one of the most notable being Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). Merleau-Ponty dismantles Descartes' reductionist

¹⁹ Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (malaysia: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1993), <https://doi.org/10.15476/ELTE.2021.128>.

²⁰ Wee and Pelczar, "Descartes' Dualism and Contemporary Dualism."

²¹ Waqar Aslam, "Cartesian Dualism and Its Historical Critiques: A Philosophical Analysis," *Al-Hikmat: A Journal of Philosophy* 44, no. 2 (2024): 57–71.

view by stating that perception is not merely a recording of the external world, but an active dialogue between the body and the environment. He emphasizes that organisms, including humans, actively explore space through bodily movement. The eyes are not just passive tools capturing images, but also actively function to sweep the scenery, while the hands feel the texture. James Gibson, in *Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1979), strengthens this argument by asserting that perception is a process of gathering information about affordances, or potential actions that can be performed in the environment, rather than just passively receiving data from objects. In this view, the body is not a machine separate from the world, but an adaptive system that dynamically calibrates the senses based on biological goals.²²

This view is supported by the Islamic tradition of thought, which rejects the passive reduction of perception. The Qur'an positions the senses as active blessings or gifts with epistemic responsibility. In QS Al-Isra' 17:36, Allah says, "*And do not follow that of which you have no knowledge. Indeed, hearing, sight, and the heart – all of those will be asked [about]*". This verse shows that the senses are not passive tools simply receiving external stimuli, but have an active role in understanding and judging the world. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya in *Miftah Dar al-Sa'adah* also posits that the senses are open doors to knowledge, not dead walls limiting understanding. Thus, in the Islamic view, the senses are positioned as moral agents that must be accountable, reinforcing the concept of active agency in perception.

Furthermore, Ibn Sina in *Kitab al-Najat* distinguishes between animal perception, which is reactive to external stimuli, and human perception, which is hermeneutic. He explains that external senses only capture the rough form of objects, while internal senses or *mushtarak* process them into meaning through estimation and other mental processes. This process involves stages where external senses capture stimuli, and then through imagination and estimation, the meaning of the object is extracted and contextualized. For example, when someone sees a lion, it is not only the physical form of the lion captured by the eyes, but also the contextual value, such as the danger associated with the lion. Thus, perception is not merely receiving images of the world,

²² Theresa Pfeifer, "Deconstructing Cartesian Dualisms of Western Racialized Systems A Study in the Colors Black and White," *Journal of Black Studies - J BLACK STUD* 39 (2009): 528–47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934706298192>.

but also building meaning from the world based on experience and context.

This concept is further supported by Al-Ghazali in *Ihya Ulum al-Din*, where the heart (*qalb*) is placed as the center of interpretation in the perception process. Al-Ghazali asserts that the heart is the "king," while the senses are its "army" gathering information. The sensory data received is then processed through three levels of consciousness: *tamyiz* (sensory discrimination) by the senses, *ta'auqul* (rational interpretation) by the intellect, and *tadhamnuq* (existential experience) by the heart. For instance, perception of water is not just seeing it as H₂O molecules, but also as a symbol of life and salvation for those in the desert. In this context, the heart provides a deeper meaning to the object seen, making perception not just a physical process, but also a spiritual and existential experience.

Responding to Descartes' model, which equates the eye to a lens in *Dioptrics* (1637), Ibn Arabi in *Futubat al-Makkiyyah* offers a more holistic view. He states that the eye is not a passive window that only records the world, but a "small sun" that illuminates objects with the light of awareness. This view acknowledges that perception is not only a physical mechanism, but also an active process involving the mind and consciousness. Modern research in neuroscience also supports this view, with findings showing that the visual system involves active eye movements (saccadic eye movements) to seek relevant information, as well as predictive processing of sensory input by the brain based on its internal models.

In Islamic cosmology, the senses function as tools for *tadabbur* or reflection upon the signs of the Divine. QS Al-Mulk 67:23 states, "Say, It is He who created you and made for you hearing, sight, and hearts." This verse places the senses in a teleological framework, as a means to understand the purpose of creation and connect humans to the transcendent reality. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, in *Mafatih al-Ghayb*, explains that hearing and sight are keys to understanding wisdom, and without them, the intellect is like a rusted key. Therefore, in Islam, perception does not merely function to record the physical world, but also to reveal deeper meanings about the Divine reality.²³

This concept stands in contrast to Descartes' dualism, which separates physical sensation (*extensa*) and mental meaning (*cogitans*).

²³ Fakhruddin Razi, *Mafāṭīḥ Al-Ghayb* (Beirut, Lebanon: Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1862).

Mulla Sadra, in *Al-Asfar al-Arba'a*, develops the theory of substantial motion (*harakah jawhariyyah*), which rejects the strict separation between body and soul. He states that the soul uses the senses to undergo an ontological transformation from matter to spirituality. For example, when the eye sees a rose, it is not just photons received by the retina, but the soul also experiences *tajalli* or manifestation of Divine beauty through various stages of relational, symbolic, and transcendent interpretation. Thus, in the Islamic view, perception not only involves the physical senses but also a spiritual transformation that unites the material and spiritual dimensions.

In the practice of Islamic worship, the concept of active perception is clearly reflected. For example, in *salat* (prayer), hearing is not merely hearing the recitation of the Qur'an, but also listening with *tafabbuh*, which is a deep understanding of the meaning of the recitation. QS 7:204 states, "And listen to the recitation of the Qur'an with full attention," indicating that hearing in worship is active and engaged. Ibn 'Ashur, in *Maqasid al-Shari'ah*, explains that prostration in prayer teaches the body to 'read' the earth as a sign of creation, with every movement of the body serving as a spiritual expression. The senses here do not merely function as physical tools but also serve as a means to access Divine knowledge and deepen the understanding of creation.

The model of active perception in Islam is also relevant to contemporary developments in cognition. The enactive cognition approach, developed by Varela (1991), emphasizes the coupling between sensory and motor processes, a dynamic relationship between the body and environment. However, from the Islamic perspective, this concept is surpassed by a deeper metaphysical dimension, where the senses not only function to access the physical world but also connect humans to the transcendent reality. In Islamic cosmology, the senses function as ontological witnesses (*syahid*) to the unity of creation, epistemic channels (*mizab*) connecting humans to God, and guides (*amir*) led by the heart in seeking Divine truth. Thus, the deconstruction of Cartesian reductionism not only restores the active role of the body in perception but also affirms that perception is an epistemological act of worship that unites the physical and spiritual dimensions in the search for higher meaning.

Subject-Object Reintegration Through Holistic Epistemology

René Descartes' thought in *Meditations* (1641) introduced a radical dichotomy that separates two fundamental substances: *res cogitans* (mind) and *res extensa* (matter). According to Descartes, this separation creates a theater of consciousness where the subject is isolated and can only witness representations of the world, rather than interact with it directly. This separation creates what Edmund Husserl calls an epistemological catastrophe in *Crisis of European Sciences* (1936), where the subject becomes an alienated spectator, doubting the external reality that should be part of human understanding. This skepticism reduces perception to a mere mental construction, severing the organic connection between humans and the world around them. In this view, human experience becomes fragmented, placing the body and mind in two disconnected realms.²⁴

In contrast to Descartes' view, Islamic cosmology rejects the dichotomy between subject and object. The Qur'an, in QS Ali Imran 3:190-191, states, "Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth... there are signs for those who reflect." The universe is not a dead object that can only be observed, but rather an *ayat* or divine sign that communicates with humans through symbols that must be interpreted.²⁵ Ibn Arabi, in *Fusus al-Hikam*, describes the world as a "spread-out book," with its letters being the particular manifestations. Islamic epistemology builds a holistic understanding through the triadic concept of knowledge, consisting of: the subject (*al-'āqil*), the object (*al-ma'qūl*), and the source (*al-Mu'izz*), which is Allah who grants meaning.²⁶ This relationship creates an integrated hermeneutic circuit, linking human experience with nature and God as a unified whole.²⁷

²⁴ Abdul Gaffar and Muhammed Anees, "Inclusive Tawhid as an Epistemology of Islamic Education," *FIKROTUNA: Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Manajemen Islam* 15, no. 1 (2025): 135–48, <https://doi.org/10.32806/jf.v15i1.833>.

²⁵ Masudul Alam. Choudhury, *Tawhidi Epistemology and Its Applications: Economics, Finance, Science, and Society*. (english: cambridge Scholars, 2014).

²⁶ Dayang Nurhazieqa Hamzani, "Two 17th Century Intellectual Giants: A Comparison of Descartes and Al-Rānīrī's Metaphysical and Scientific Framework," *Sains Insani* 8, no. 2 (2023): 190–98, <https://doi.org/10.33102/sainsinsani.vol8no2.459>.

²⁷ Hammis Syafaq et al., "Reconstructing Islamic Epistemology: Bridging Metaphysics, Reason, and Revelation," *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf Dan Pemikiran Islam* 14, no. 2 (2024): 240–69, <https://doi.org/10.15642/teosofi.2024.14.2.240-269>.

Al-Ghazali, in *Mishkat al-Anwar*, defines the *qalb* (spiritual heart) as the center of unity between the observer and the observed. Unlike Descartes' isolated *cogito* within the realm of thought, the *qalb* operates in three integrative functions that allow for interaction between subject and object: *shuhud* (holistic witnessing) that unveils the world as a manifestation of the Divine, *tafakkur* (relational contemplation) that dives into cosmic meaning, and *ittisal* (transcendent connection) that senses the presence of God. This concept asserts that sensory perception is not merely physical observation, but also serves as a spiritual path connecting humans to the transcendent dimension. In this sense, perception is not just about understanding the world of phenomena but also about drawing closer to God, as reflected in the hadith: "Allah is beautiful and loves beauty" (HR Muslim).

Descartes describes perception as "a mirror reflecting the image of the world" in his work *Optics* (1637). Mulla Sadra, in *Al-Hikmah al-Muta'aliyah*, counters this view by stating that knowledge is not merely a passive reflection but an existential unity between the observer and the observed (*ittihad al-'aql wa al-ma'qul*). For example, when seeing a tree, it is not just the image of the tree entering the brain, but the soul undergoes a gradual transcendence, which includes: the *hissi* level (sensory level) where the physical form of the tree is observed, the *khayali* level (imaginal level) where the aesthetic pattern of the tree is captured, the *'aqli* level (intellectual level) where the ecological function of the tree is understood, and the *ruhani* level (spiritual level) where the tree is seen as a divine *ayat*. This process reveals that perception involves not only the physical senses but also deeper spiritual and intellectual dimensions that unite the subject and object in a single unified experience.

Islamic epistemology also teaches a participatory view of nature, which is found in QS Fussilat 41:53: "We will show them Our signs in the horizons (the world) and within themselves." Ibn Sina, in *Risalah fi al-'Isyq*, states that "*Loving nature is the return of the soul to its cosmic origins.*" This view aligns with Alfred North Whitehead in *Process and Reality* (1929), who states that the universe is not a passive container but a dynamic organism that actively participates in knowledge.²⁸ Perception, in this view, becomes a dialectical dance between the

²⁸ Yoyo Hambali, "The Concept of Man in Ibn Sina 's Philosophy of Education," *Turats* 11, no. 1 (2015): 63–82.

subject interpreting and the object revealing meaning. This concept teaches that nature and humans are connected in a process of mutual meaning-making, which cannot be understood if separated into two isolated entities.

Descartes' dichotomy leads to the objectification of nature as a "dead machine," which triggers exploitation without responsibility. In contrast, Islamic holistic epistemology offers a perspective that emphasizes the transcendental continuity in the human relationship with nature.²⁹ In QS Ibrahim 14:32-33, nature is "subjected" not for domination but for more harmonious stewardship. The principle of *taskhir* in the Qur'an reminds that humans are not masters of nature, but stewards entrusted with its care. This concept is closely related to the principle of *amanah* in QS Al-Ahzab 33:72, where nature is a trust that must be accounted for. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, in *Religion and the Order of Nature* (1996), emphasizes that hurting nature is sacrilege, contradicting the principle of *istikhlaf* (God's vicegerency) in QS Al-An'am 6:165, which asserts that humans, as vicegerents of God, must wisely manage the earth.

Classical Islamic scientists have practiced the reintegration of this epistemology in various disciplines. Ibn al-Haytham, in *Book of Optics* (1021), states that "Light is the language of God in the world, and sight is human interpretation." He combined empirical experiments with rational geometry and theology to understand natural phenomena. This approach produced phenomenological optics that bridge the dichotomy between subject and object, where perception becomes a way to understand divine meaning in the physical world. Ibn al-Haytham's scientific approach not only prioritizes empirical objectivity but also acknowledges the spiritual dimension of sight, linking science with Islamic theology and philosophy.

Islamic holistic epistemology offers a solution to two major crises facing the modern world: the ecological crisis caused by the objectification of nature and the crisis of meaning due to the desacralization of knowledge. In this context, nature is viewed as the "*widest mosque*" (HR. Muslim), where every element of this world becomes a means of worship and reflection. Observing the clouds, touching the earth, or hearing birds chirping is not just a sensory experience but also a form of *tadabbur* or contemplation of Allah's

²⁹ Yaacob Solehah and Najmuddin Hairunnaja, "Rene Descartes (1596-1650) Dan Metode Cogito," *Jurnal of Usnuluddin* 27 (2008): 121-40.

mercy. From an Islamic perspective, sensory perception is not just the reception of information, but an epistemic act of worship that brings humans closer to God. This reintegration restores humanity as a microcosm reading the macrocosm, where every part of the universe is a sign from Allah that must be understood and respected. With this approach, humans are invited to restore their spiritual awareness in managing nature and life.³⁰

Conclusion

This study explores the deconstruction of Cartesian dualism, which has long dominated the Western understanding of the mind-body relationship and sensory perception. It argues that Descartes' separation of the mind and body has led to a reductionist and passive view of perception, where sensory experiences are seen as mechanical processes. In contrast, Islamic epistemology, grounded in the concept of tawhid (oneness), offers a holistic framework that integrates the senses, intellect, and heart in the process of perception. The research introduces the "Enactive Tawhidic Perception" model, which posits the senses as active agents engaged in constructing reality, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of human experience.

The findings of this study highlight how Islamic thought, through its emphasis on tawhid, rejects the passive and fragmented understanding of perception. By incorporating key texts such as those by Al-Ghazali and Mulla Sadra, the study presents a more integrated approach to perception, where sensory data is not just received but actively interpreted within a broader spiritual and cognitive framework. This approach offers significant contributions to contemporary cognitive philosophy by integrating neuroscience with spirituality, suggesting that perception is not only a biological process but also an epistemic act of worship that connects individuals to the Divine. Thus, the study provides a solution to the fragmentation between science and religion, proposing a more holistic understanding of sensory perception that transcends Cartesian dualism.

³⁰ Syafaq et al., "Reconstructing Islamic Epistemology: Bridging Metaphysics, Reason, and Revelation."

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