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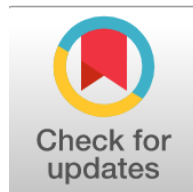

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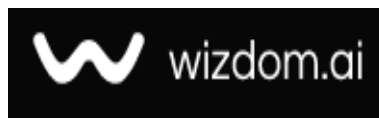
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The Ontological Foundations of Islamic Psychology: A Critical Comparison with Western Psychology and Its Theoretical Implications

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Abstract

General Background: Contemporary psychology has predominantly evolved within Western empiricist and materialist traditions that conceptualize human nature through biological, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. **Specific Background:** In contrast, Islamic Psychology is grounded in an Islamic worldview that understands human beings as an ontological unity comprising *ruh*, *qalb*, *nafs*, *'aql*, and *jasad*, each possessing distinct ontological status. **Knowledge Gap:** Despite increasing applied research in Islamic counseling and psychotherapy, the ontological foundations distinguishing Islamic Psychology as an autonomous scientific paradigm remain insufficiently articulated. **Aims:** This study aims to formulate a coherent ontological framework of Islamic Psychology and critically compare it with the dominant ontological assumptions of Western psychology. **Results:** Using a qualitative–philosophical library research approach, the study demonstrates that Islamic Psychology offers an integrative and hierarchical conception of the human soul that cannot be reduced to material or cognitive processes, while Western psychological paradigms largely operate within reductionist ontologies. **Novelty:** The study systematically articulates the ontological structure of *ruh*, *qalb*, *nafs*, *'aql*, and *jasad* as foundational elements of Islamic Psychology, positioning them as constitutive realities rather than symbolic constructs. **Implications:** This ontological clarification provides theoretical, methodological, and practical foundations for positioning Islamic Psychology as a philosophically autonomous and complementary paradigm within global psychological discourse, particularly in addressing spiritual and existential dimensions of human well-being.

Highlights:

- Islamic Psychology is grounded in an integrative ontological model uniting spiritual, rational, and bodily dimensions.

- Western psychological paradigms predominantly rely on materialistic and reductionist ontological assumptions.

- Ontological clarification strengthens Islamic Psychology as an autonomous and complementary scientific paradigm.

Keywords: Islamic psychology; ontology; human soul; spirituality; Western psychology

Introduction

Modern psychology has largely developed within the Western intellectual tradition, grounded in empiricism, positivism, and materialism. Human beings are primarily understood as biological and psychological entities whose behavior and mental experiences can be explained through neural mechanisms, cognitive processes, and environmental influences. While this approach has led to significant advances in diagnosis and psychological intervention, it has also generated a fundamental ontological problem: the ambiguity of the nature of the soul and the reduction of the spiritual dimension of human existence.

Islamic Psychology does not merely represent a cultural variation of psychology, but rather constitutes an alternative paradigm rooted in the Islamic worldview. Within this framework, human beings are understood as an ontological unity comprising *ruh*, *qalb*, *nafs*, *'aql*, and *jasad*. These elements are not symbolic metaphors but ontological realities that shape human existence, consciousness, and behavior [1][2]. Contemporary studies in the psychology of religion and spirituality further demonstrate that religious and spiritual dimensions are constitutive aspects of human experience, rather than supplementary variables in psychological well-being [3][4][5].

Despite the growing body of research in Islamic Psychology, much of the existing literature remains predominantly applicative—such as Islamic counseling or spiritually oriented psychotherapy—while insufficient attention has been paid to its ontological foundations. Without ontological clarity, Islamic Psychology risks being reduced to a spiritually complementary approach within Western psychology. Accordingly, this article specifically focuses on an ontological analysis of Islamic Psychology.

The novelty of this article lies in its formulation of an ontological framework of the human soul in Islamic Psychology as an integral and coherent system that is fundamentally distinct from the ontology of Western psychology. This study argues that *ruh*, *qalb*, *nafs*, *'aql*, and *jasad* constitute the ontological foundations of Islamic Psychology as a scientific paradigm. In doing so, the article contributes to positioning Islamic Psychology as a philosophically autonomous discipline rather than a subordinate extension of modern psychology.

Literature Review

Ontological Debates in Western Psychology

The ontological foundations of Western psychology have historically been shaped by empiricism and naturalism. Early schools such as behaviorism explicitly rejected inner reality, defining psychology solely as the study of observable behavior [6]. Psychoanalysis, while acknowledging inner psychic structures, conceptualized the psyche as an intrapsychic system devoid of transcendental reference [7]. Later developments in cognitive psychology and neuroscience reinforced ontological reductionism by equating consciousness with brain processes and information processing mechanisms [8].

Although these paradigms have contributed significantly to empirical rigor, critics argue that they inadequately address questions of meaning, purpose, and ultimate reality. Recent scholarship within the psychology of religion and spirituality has increasingly highlighted the limitations of materialistic ontologies, particularly in explaining existential distress and spiritual experiences [5]. This critique signals a broader ontological reconsideration within contemporary psychology.

Islamic Psychology and the Ontology of the Human Soul

Islamic Psychology emerged as a critical response to the ontological assumptions of Western psychology. Early Muslim scholars such as Al-Ghazali, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Miskawayh articulated sophisticated models of the human soul that integrated spiritual, rational, and bodily dimensions. In this tradition, the human being is understood as a unified reality composed of *ruh*, *qalb*, *nafs*, *'aql*, and *jasad*, each possessing distinct ontological status and function [1][2][9][10].

Contemporary scholars have sought to systematize these classical insights within modern psychological discourse. Haque [11] emphasized the need for an Islamic paradigm grounded in its own philosophical foundations rather than uncritical adaptation of Western theories. Abu-Raiya [12] further proposed a Qur'anic-based theory of personality, highlighting the teleological nature of the soul and its orientation toward moral and spiritual growth.

Recent Q1 and Q2 journal publications strengthen the academic legitimacy of this ontological turn. Cucchi [3] demonstrates that integrating Islamic ontological principles with cognitive-behavioral frameworks yields a more comprehensive understanding of the human person. Similarly, Chalmiers [4] show that God-oriented constructs such as gratitude are not merely religious expressions but ontologically meaningful dimensions of psychological functioning. These studies indicate a growing convergence between Islamic ontological assumptions and contemporary critiques of reductionism in psychology.

Research Gap and Positioning of the Present Study

Despite these advances, most existing studies in Islamic Psychology remain focused on applied domains such as counseling, psychotherapy, and well-being interventions. The ontological foundations that distinguish Islamic Psychology as a coherent scientific paradigm are often treated implicitly or presupposed rather than systematically articulated.

Accordingly, a clear research gap exists at the level of ontology: the absence of a comprehensive and explicit ontological framework that differentiates Islamic Psychology from Western psychology at a paradigmatic level. The present study

addresses this gap by formulating an integrative ontology of the human soul rooted in Islamic intellectual tradition and engaging critically with contemporary psychological discourse. By doing so, this article positions itself not merely as an applied contribution, but as a foundational philosophical inquiry essential for the maturation of Islamic Psychology as an autonomous discipline.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative–philosophical approach through library research. [13][14] This method is appropriate given that the focus of the study lies in conceptual and ontological analysis rather than empirical measurement of psychological variables[15][16].

Primary sources include the Qur'an and Hadith, as well as classical works by Islamic scholars such as Al-Ghazali, Ibn Sina, Ibn Miskawayh, and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah. Secondary sources consist of Western psychological literature and contemporary studies in Islamic Psychology, including internationally indexed journal publications [11][12][2] .

Data analysis was conducted in three stages: (1) identifying ontological concepts of the human soul in Islamic sources, (2) systematizing these concepts into an ontological framework of Islamic Psychology, and (3) conducting a critical-comparative analysis with the ontological assumptions of Western psychology. This approach enables a paradigmatic distinction between the two traditions at the most fundamental level: the nature of human existence.

Result and Discussion

The Ontology of the Human Soul in Islamic Psychology

The findings indicate that Islamic Psychology is founded upon an integrative and hierarchical ontology of the human being. Humans are understood as an existential unity consisting of *ruh*, *qalb*, *nafs*, *'aql*, and *jasad*. *Ruh* represents the principle of life bestowed by God and cannot be reduced to material phenomena (Qur'an 32:9). Its existence affirms that human reality does not reside solely within the empirical domain.

Qalb functions as the center of consciousness and moral orientation. Ontologically, *qalb* is not merely a psychological function but a non-material entity that determines whether human existence is oriented toward truth or deviation [1]. *Nafs*, meanwhile, represents the dynamic dimension of the soul and serves as the locus of tension between instinctual impulses and moral awareness. The stages of *nafs* (*ammarah*, *lawwamah*, *muṭma'innah*) indicate that the human soul is teleological in nature, oriented toward ontological perfection.

'Aql occupies a strategic position as an epistemic instrument bridging empirical reality and revelation. However, reason is not absolutely autonomous; it requires guidance from revelation to avoid rational reductionism [17]. *Jasad*, as the material dimension of human existence, retains ontological significance as the medium through which the soul's potentials are actualized.

Ontological Critique of Western Psychology

In contrast, Western psychology generally operates within materialistic or naturalistic ontological frameworks. Psychoanalysis conceptualizes the psyche as an internal psychic structure (*id*, *ego*, *superego*) without reference to transcendence[7]. Behaviorism rejects inner reality altogether, reducing human behavior to stimulus–response mechanisms [6]. Cognitive psychology and neuroscience identify consciousness with brain function, thereby reducing the soul to neurobiological processes [8].

From an ontological perspective, these approaches are inherently partial, as they neglect the spiritual dimension of human existence. Islamic Psychology views such reductionism as a root cause of the crisis of meaning in modern psychology, contributing to rising existential and spiritual distress despite increasingly sophisticated psychological interventions [12][5].

Ontological Implications for Contemporary Psychological Theory and Practice

The ontological framework articulated by Islamic Psychology carries several significant implications for contemporary psychological theory and practice. First, at the theoretical level, Islamic Psychology challenges the dominance of materialistic ontology in modern psychology by reasserting the reality of non-material dimensions of the human person. The recognition of *ruh* and *qalb* as ontological entities implies that consciousness, intentionality, and moral agency cannot be fully explained through neurobiological or cognitive mechanisms alone. This perspective resonates with recent developments in the psychology of religion and spirituality that call for a broader ontological horizon beyond reductionist models[5].

Second, from a methodological perspective, the ontological assumptions of Islamic Psychology suggest that empirical approaches, while valuable, are insufficient to capture the full complexity of human experience. Psychological inquiry must therefore be complemented by interpretive, phenomenological, and normative approaches capable of engaging spiritual, ethical, and teleological dimensions of the human soul. This has important implications for research design, legitimizing multi-paradigmatic and integrative methodologies that bridge empirical investigation with philosophical and theological reflection.

Third, in terms of psychological practice, the ontological model of Islamic Psychology provides a foundation for more holistic forms of intervention. Psychological well-being is not limited to symptom reduction or behavioral adjustment, but is oriented toward the harmonization of *nafs*, the purification of *qalb*, and the alignment of *'aql* with transcendent values. Such an orientation has practical relevance for psychotherapy, counseling, and mental health services, particularly in religious and multicultural contexts where secular therapeutic models may fail to adequately address clients' existential and spiritual concerns. Recent studies demonstrate that incorporating religious and spiritual constructs grounded in Islamic ontology can enhance therapeutic effectiveness and meaning-making processes [3][4].

Finally, these ontological implications position Islamic Psychology as a critical interlocutor within global psychological discourse. Rather than functioning as an oppositional paradigm to Western psychology, Islamic Psychology offers a complementary framework that expands the conceptual and ontological boundaries of the discipline. By foregrounding spiritual reality as an essential dimension of human existence, Islamic Psychology contributes to ongoing efforts to develop a more integrative, ethically grounded, and humane science of psychology.

Conclusion

Islamic Psychology is grounded in an ontological framework fundamentally distinct from that of Western psychology. By conceptualizing human beings as an integral unity of *ruh*, *qalb*, *nafs*, *'aql*, and *jasad*, Islamic Psychology offers a more holistic and meaningful understanding of human nature. Its ultimate goal extends beyond worldly psychological well-being toward authentic happiness oriented to the hereafter.

This article affirms that Islamic Psychology is not merely an alternative approach, but a complementary paradigm capable of enriching contemporary psychological discourse. Critical integration between Islamic ontological insights and empirical findings from modern psychology holds the potential to foster a more comprehensive understanding of the human condition.

Furthermore, the ontological implications elaborated in this study underscore the relevance of Islamic Psychology beyond theoretical discourse. By challenging materialistic assumptions and reasserting the reality of spiritual dimensions, Islamic Psychology provides important theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions to contemporary psychological science. Its integrative ontological framework supports the development of more holistic research paradigms and culturally responsive psychological practices, particularly in contexts where spiritual and existential concerns play a central role in mental well-being. Future research is therefore encouraged to further operationalize these ontological insights within empirical and applied studies, while maintaining their philosophical coherence.

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