From Epistemic Rupture to Dehumanization: An Islamic Critique of Postmodern Thought

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Abstract

Postmodernism emerged as a critical reaction against the epistemic certainties of Enlightenment modernity, challenging universal truth, stable meaning, and essentialist conceptions of the human subject. While these critiques initially sought to expose hidden structures of power and domination, this article argues that postmodern epistemology has generated an unintended but profound consequence: the dehumanization of the human being. By rejecting objective truth (Lyotard) , destabilizing meaning through radical textual indeterminacy (Derrida), and reducing knowledge to power relations (Foucault), postmodern thought inaugurates an epistemic rupture that undermines the ontological, moral, and anthropological foundations of human dignity. This rupture manifests in multiple forms of dehumanization, including the erosion of moral accountability, the fragmentation of personal identity, and the detachment of selfhood from biological and moral reality. Contemporary phenomena such as radical identity fluidity, the separation of gender from biological sex, and emerging discourses of species dysphoria are analyzed not as isolated sociocultural developments but as symptomatic expressions of an epistemology that denies human nature and normativity. In this framework, the human being is reduced to a self-constructed project, severed from embodiment, purpose, and moral limits. Against this backdrop, the article advances an Islamic epistemological critique grounded in revelation (waḥy), reason (ʿaql), and the concept of fitrah. Islamic epistemology affirms objective truth, intrinsic human dignity (karāmah al-insān), and moral accountability (taklīf), offering a coherent rehumanizing framework capable of addressing the epistemic and anthropological deficiencies of postmodern thought. The article concludes that the contemporary crisis of the human cannot be resolved within postmodernism itself and that revelational guidance is epistemically necessary for restoring human dignity, meaning, and moral purpose.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Epistemic Rupture, Dehumanization, Human Nature, Identity Fragmentation, Gender Performativity, Islamic Epistemology, Fitrah, Human Dignity

1. Introduction: Postmodern Epistemology and the Eclipse of the Human

Postmodernism's Critique of Enlightenment Rationality:

In the last half of the twentieth century there was a major transformation in Western intellectual culture with the rise of postmodernism as a serious critique of Enlightenment rationality and modernist claims to universality. Modern philosophers had claimed to have achieved objective truth through their use of neutral reason and their confidence in stable human nature; however, postmodernists argued that these claims were based on the suppression of relations of power, exclusion and oppression (Lyotard, 1984; Foucault, 1980). Postmodernism presented itself as a liberatory movement intended to dismantle oppressive metanarratives and create space for pluralism, differences and marginalized voices.

From Epistemic Criticism to Ontological Erosion:

However, as postmodern epistemology continued to extend past its original criticism, it began to undermine the epistemic and ontological bases that would allow for a coherent idea of the human being. Objective truth, meaningfulness, and the notion of human essence were denied not only by abstract philosophers but also by ethicists, social theorists, and by contemporary notions of identity (Harvey, 1989). This article will argue that postmodernism's greatest legacy is the crisis of the human, in many forms of dehumanization, as well as the crisis of the human that is not limited to simply epistemological relativism.

Postmodern Reconfigurations of Knowledge:

At the epistemological level, postmodernism replaces truth with interpretation, objectivity with perspectivism and rational justification with discourse analysis. Claims to knowledge are now made not to correspond to reality but to identify the conditions under which claims arise linguistically, culturally, and politically (Rorty, 1979). While this approach to knowledge reveals historically contingent aspects of knowledge, it undermines the ability to base moral norms, human dignity, and responsibility for ethics upon something beyond social consensus or power relations.

Anthropological Consequences of the Postmodern Reconfiguration of Knowledge and the **Fragmentation of the Human Subject:**

The epistemological transformation of postmodernism has important anthropological consequences. When the human subject is no longer considered to possess a stable nature or an inherent purpose, identity is seen as fluid, performative and self-conceptualized. The moral responsibility of individuals is diminished when agency is attributed to structures rather than to individuals, and when the body loses its moral and normative value (Taylor, 1989). Consequently, the human being is redefined not as a morally accountable individual who exists in a comprehensible moral order, but as a product of contingency of discourse and power.

Identity, Normativity, and Contemporary Forms of Dehumanization:

The contemporary proliferation of identity-based frameworks—specifically those that separate personal identity from biologically, morally, and metaphysically grounded identities, must be understood within the broader epistemological context. Such phenomena as radical gender fluidity, separating sex from gender, and recent discussions of species dysphoria should be viewed as philosophical symptoms of an epistemology that rejects human nature and normativity (Butler, 1990). These examples illustrate what this paper refers to as dehumanization: not the denial of human rights themselves, but the erosion of the philosophical and conceptual foundations that render such rights intelligible.

Toward a Rehumanizing Epistemological Alternative:

Consequently, the article concludes that the crisis of the human cannot be solved within postmodernism itself. A truly rehumanizing alternative to postmodernism must provide an epistemology that supports objective truth, moral realism, and a coherent philosophical anthropology. Islamic epistemology, which is based on divine revelation (waḥy), reason (ʿaql), and the concept of fitra, offers one such alternative. Through affirmations of human dignity (karāmah al-insān) and human accountability (taklīf) and the intelligibility of creation, Islamic epistemology presents a strong counter to the postmodernistic rupture of epistemic unity, and a constructive alternative to restore the human condition to meaningfulness (al-Attas, 1978; Nasr, 1989).

2. Methodology

The study is designed with a qualitative analytical-critical methodology which examines the connection between postmodern thought and current processes of dehumanization; the research does not seek to provide empiricism or sociology; instead it is based upon philosophical foundations because conceptions of humans are created from epistemic and ontological beliefs.

A first aspect of this methodology is through a critical analysis of the primary postmodern authors - Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty - to analyze the epistemic assumptions of the rejection of objective truths, stable meanings and human essences of these authors (Ricoeur, 1970; Skinner, 2002); the texts are analyzed not only for the purpose of understanding the intent of the authors and the historical context, but also for the logical and anthropological implications of these ideas if they were to be systematically adopted.

Secondly, the study uses immanent criticism, a common method within critical philosophy where a theory is critiqued based on its own internal presuppositions and claims (Habermas, 1987); this provides a means to illustrate how the postmodern ethics and emancipation aspirations are weakened by its epistemic relativism and anti-essentialism concerning moral normativity, responsibility and human dignity.

Finally, the study includes comparative epistemological analysis; Islamic epistemology is introduced as a constructive and corrective framework. Islamic thought is examined philosophically, and not confessionalally, as a coherent epistemic system founded in reason (ʿaql), revelation (waḥy) and moral realism (al-Attas, 1995; Nasr, 2006); central concepts of Islamic thought, such as fitrah (the innate human nature), taklīf (moral accountability) and karāmah al-insān (intrinsic human dignity), are analyzed for their ability to solve the epistemic and anthropological problems in postmodern thought.

Thus, the use of this methodology will allow the study to be both analytically rigorous and normatively evaluative, and avoid both descriptive neutrality and ideological polemic. Through the combination of critical philosophy and comparative epistemology, the study provides a systemic explanation of dehumanization as an epistemic issue and outlines a fundamental framework for addressing it.

3. Postmodernism as Epistemic Rupture

3.1 The Displacement of Truth-Centered Epistemology

Postmodernism provides an epistemological break with previous epistemologies (e.g., classical, medieval, and modern) regarding our ability to understand the world and know the

truth (even though we can never have complete certainty). Classical, medieval, and modern epistemologists assumed that knowledge is possible based on reality and can be true regardless of how much we do not know. Classical realists like Aristotle and Thomistic metaphysicians assumed that there is an objective order in the world that can be understood and known through reason (Aristotle, 1924; Aquinas, 1947). Rationalists, from the Enlightenment forward, assumed that knowledge could be obtained using reason. Immanuel Kant critiqued earlier rationalism and argued that while we can use reason to obtain knowledge, it is limited by the fact that it can only deal with appearances of objects. Thus, while Kant's philosophy did provide some limits to the scope of knowledge, it still provided a basis for understanding what is objectively true. Postmodernism does not simply modify or refine the basic assumptions of previous epistemologies regarding the acquisition of knowledge. Instead, postmodernism transforms the very notion of epistemology by radically questioning whether it is even possible to understand objective reality. Postmodernism questions whether the category of "truth" is meaningful and whether there is a way to acquire knowledge that is independent of how knowledge is represented or interpreted (Bernstein, 1983).

The shift away from the idea that knowledge is a matter of discovering an objective reality and toward the view that knowledge is a product of interpretation or construction, reflects a significant break with the purpose of epistemology as it has been traditionally understood. Instead of asking how we might come to know the truth, postmodernism asks whether truth can ever be known. Rather than seeing knowledge as something that is acquired through experience and reason, postmodernism views knowledge as something that is created through interpretation and/or negotiation among individuals who have different experiences and perspectives (Eagleton, 1996).

Thus, the postmodern rejection of traditional notions of knowledge is not merely a refinement of epistemology, but instead a rejection of the purpose of epistemology. As such, postmodernism views epistemology as primarily a critique of all truth-claims rather than as an investigation into the nature of truth itself.

3.2 Lyotard and the Collapse of Meta-Narratives

Jean-François Lyotard's characterization of postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984), marked a major turning point in the development of postmodern epistemology. Metanarratives include religious, philosophical, scientific, or moral accounts of reality. Postmodernism rejects metanarratives as tools of oppression that enforce a false universality on diverse human experiences. According to Lyotard, knowledge is legitimated not by reference to reality or by coherence of truth, but by performance, efficiency, and utility in context.

While Lyotard was successful in identifying the ideological uses of meta-narratives, he was equally successful in eliminating the possibility of any universal account of human existence. With no universal epistemological horizon, concepts such as human nature, moral obligation, and human dignity are incomprehensible. Individuals are fragmented into local narratives that lack a common moral grammar. The human subject is therefore fragmented into isolated narratives without common moral values or principles.

3.3 Derrida, Différance, and the Indefinite Delay of Meaning

Jacques Derrida continued the postmodern rupture in epistemology with his deconstruction of both language and meaning. His concept of *différance*, which means "the perpetual deferral of meaning," denies the possibility of fixed or stable meanings (Derrida, 1976). Therefore,

meaning is forever deferred and related to other meanings. Since language no longer refers to reality, language exists as a separate system of signs that refer to each other indefinitely (Norris, 1982).

The loss of reference to reality eliminates the connection between words and things, knowledge and being, and thereby eliminates truth. It is not that the attainment of truth is made more difficult, but rather, the concept of truth is declared incoherent. The knowing subject is therefore grounded in nothing, and is therefore limited to participating in an endless play of interpreting texts, where meaning is never present, but is always delayed.

3.4 Foucault and the Reduction of Truth to Power

Michel Foucault extended the postmodern rupture in epistemology, by collapsing the difference between knowledge and power. In Foucault's genealogical studies, truth is produced, not discovered, within historically contingent regimes of power that discipline the body, regulate discourse, and normalize behavior (Foucault, 1977). Knowledge is therefore not a reflection of reality, but is a mechanism of social control located in institutions, such as prisons, hospitals, and scientific discourses.

Foucault's critical analysis reveals the previously unseen forms of power and domination that operate through knowledge, however, Foucault's analysis also undermines the normative authority of truth itself. If all truth claims are simply the products of power, then there is no standard against which to measure unjust treatment, oppression, or dehumanizing practices. Therefore, criticism of those practices is impossible and is therefore self-referential, depending on moral standards that postmodern epistemology cannot justify (Habermas, 1987).

3.5 Rorty and the Abandonment of Correspondence

Richard Rorty normalized the postmodern rupture in epistemology by explicitly abandoning the correspondence theory of truth. For Rorty, truth is not about accurately representing reality, but about reaching a consensus among members of linguistic communities (Rorty, 1989). Philosophy therefore gives up on providing a foundation for knowledge, and becomes a form of cultural conversation rather than a search for objective knowledge.

While Rorty's pragmatism celebrates diversity and tolerance, it does so at the cost of moral realism. Without truth as a regulative principle, moral norms lose their obligatory force, and human dignity is therefore dependent on social agreement rather than its own inherent value. Moral judgments are therefore reduced to preference, solidarity, or utility.

3.6 The Epistemic Reconstruction of the Human Subject

In total, these postmodern conceptions of knowledge constitute an epistemic rupture that separates knowledge from reality, meaning from truth, and ethics from moral objectivity. The human subject is no longer viewed as a rational and morally responsible agent that can know the truth, but is instead seen as a constructed entity formed through discourse, language, and power relationships (Taylor, 1989). This reconstruction of the human subject does not merely pluralize perspectives; it destroys the epistemic foundation for the understanding of humanity that has traditionally existed (MacIntyre, 1981).

3.7 Epistemic Rupture and Dehumanization

This article will argue that such an epistemic rupture leads to the process of dehumanization. When truth is destroyed, human dignity loses ontological ground. When meaning is constantly deferred, moral accountability loses meaning. When knowledge is seen as a

function of power, human beings cease to exist as ends in themselves and are transformed into a strategic outcome of discourse.

The next section discusses how the epistemic rupture of postmodernism manifests itself as an ontological, moral, and anthropological form of dehumanization.

4. Dehumanization as the Consequence of Epistemic Rupture

Insofar as the epistemic break introduced by postmodernism has not remained restricted to debates around knowledge and truth, it has had far-reaching implications for how humans are perceived, valued and treated. Where postmodern epistemology abdicates the pursuit of objective truth, fixed meaning and moral realism, the human being is deprived of the ontological and moral foundation that has provided dignity, responsibility and purpose throughout history. This paper will argue that postmodern epistemology results in dehumanization at three interconnected levels: ontological, moral and anthropological.

4.1 Ontological Dehumanization - The Denial of Human Essence

On the ontological level, postmodernism denies that the human being possesses a fixed human essence. Drawing upon anti-essentialist philosophic traditions, the human being is viewed as a contingent construction produced by socio-historical, linguistical and cultural forces (Foucault, 1972). Although this rejection of human essence is meant to dismantle exclusionary hierarchical structures, it simultaneously undermines the metaphysical base of an intrinsic human dignity. Since human beings do not possess a common nature, their dignity can no longer be seen as inherent but will be dependent upon the context, negotiated and conditioned.

Ontological leveling down, thereby, renders the human being into a functional or discursively produced unit rather than a morally significant entity. If there is no human essence, the human being cannot be distinguished from other socially constructed units, and the term "the human" ceases to have philosophical coherence. As Alasdair MacIntyre notes, with the abandonment of both teleology and essence, the remnants of an older moral language survive only in fragmented forms (MacIntyre, 1981).

Thus, ontological dehumanization preconditions and enables moral dehumanization.

4.2 Moral Dehumanization - The Dissolution of Accountability and Normativity

Postmodern epistemology dehumanizes the subject at the moral level by eroding accountability. By interpreting the human being's actions primarily within frameworks of discourse, power and social conditioning, postmodern thought transfers agency from the individual to the system (Foucault, 1980). With the substitution of explanation for moral judgment, the sense of moral responsibility disappears into causal explanations based on the context. While postmodernism reveals structural injustices, it simultaneously makes moral culpability unintelligible.

Furthermore, the epistemic relativism associated with postmodernism diminishes the normative character of moral assertions. If truths are perspectival and values are socially constructed, then moral obligations lack objectivity. Disputes regarding ethics become impossible to resolve, and justice becomes a matter of competing narrative constructions rather than moral truth. Zygmunt Bauman calls this situation "liquid modernity," where the moral responsibility of the human being is diffused and the moral certainty of the human being disappears (Bauman, 2000). In this type of framework, the human being is no longer a morally accountable actor, but is instead a product of the circumstances of his/her life.

4.3 Anthropological Dehumanization - Shattering of the Unity of the Self

At the anthropological level, postmodernism transforms the understanding of identity from a fluid, performative and eternally changing one. Through influences of linguistic and social constructivist thinking, the self is no longer considered to be a single unit or directed towards a goal, but instead consists of multiple shifting roles and expressions (Giddens, 1991). Rather than continuity of the identity of the person over time, the human being experiences unending self-invention, and he/she loses personal cohesion and unity.

A paradigmatic example of this transformation of the understanding of self is Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (Butler, 1990). Performativity views identity as performed rather than grounded in nature, therefore detaching selfhood from the body and biological reality. While this view aims to reject essentialism, it also eliminates the meaningful connection between the body, identity and moral accountability. The human being becomes a place for experimentation and not a carrier of intelligible purpose.

4.4 Contemporary Expressions - Gender and Species Dysphoria

The contemporary appearance of extreme identity claims - particularly those that separate identity from biological and ontological reference points - should be regarded as symptoms of postmodern epistemology and not as independent sociocultural phenomena. Discourses surrounding gender dysphoria, radical transgenderism and emerging discourses surrounding species dysphoria are indicative of a world-view in which the body possesses no normative authority and human nature is rejected (Taylor, 1991).

Therefore, under this epistemological framework, identity is entirely determined by the individual's definition of himself/herself, and the body is viewed as contingent or negotiable. The manifestations mentioned above represent a fundamental kind of dehumanization: the separation of the human being from biological reality, moral boundaries and ontological coherence. This article regards these phenomena as philosophical consequences of an epistemology that destroys the concept of the human itself, and not as medical or psychological illnesses.

4.5 Dehumanization and the Loss of Meaning

Ultimately, the result of ontological, moral and anthropological dehumanization is a general loss of meaning. If truth is relativized, essence is denied, and responsibility is diffused, human existence is devoid of both moral and existential direction. Thus, the human being is no longer oriented towards truth or good, but is instead an autonomous, self-construction entity that lacks an inherent purpose. Furthermore, this condition generates neither liberation, but disorientation and moral fatigue.

Therefore, postmodernism represents a paradox: in seeking to liberate the human being from metaphysical limitations, it deprivates the human of meaning. The next part of the article will examine how Islamic epistemology offers a coherent criticism of this state, and will provide a rehumanizing alternative, founded in truth, nature and moral responsibility.

5. Islamic Epistemological Critique of Postmodern Dehumanization

Dehumanization generated by postmodern epistemology comes primarily from its rejection of objective truth, human nature and moral normativity. An Islamic epistemology will provide a systematic critique of this condition by reaffirming the intelligibility of reality, the coherence of the human subject and the need for moral accountability. In contradistinction to the postmodern fragmentation of knowledge and identity, an Islamic epistemology can integrate

revelation (waḥy), reason (ʿaql) and nature (fitrah) into a single, unifying epistemic structure to preserve human dignity.

5.1 Truth and Knowledge: Establishing Epistemic Foundations

Islam asserts the reality and knowability of truth (ḥaqq). Knowledge is not simply a socially constructed or linguistically determined phenomenon, but an intelligible relationship between the knowing subject and a moral order based on the wisdom of God. Revelation provides not an alternative to reason, but a completion and correction to reason, protecting knowledge from relativism and skepticism (al-Attas, 1995).

This epistemic grounding is directly opposed to postmodern incredulity towards metanarratives. Postmodernism reduces truth to interpretation; Islamic epistemology establishes that truth is objective, morally obligatory and orientated toward human flourishing. Such an epistemic foundation is necessary for coherent ethical critique; without it, moral responsibility loses its intelligibility.

5.2 Fitrah and Human Nature: Overcoming Ontological Dehumanization

An Islamic anthropology is rooted in the concept of fitrah, the human disposition toward truth, goodness, and a moral order. Unlike postmodern anti-essentialism, fitrah affirms a stable human nature that exists beyond the extreme of rigid determinism, but also does not collapse into infinite malleability. Humans are neither infinitely malleable constructions of social and cultural forces, nor are humans simply biological entities; humans are morally purposeful agents created with meaningful boundaries and capabilities (Izutsu, 1966).

When postmodernism rejects human essence, it makes dignity conditional and negotiable. In contradistinction to this, an Islamic epistemology locates dignity (karāmah al-insān) in the creation of humanity itself, and not in recognition, performance or self-definition. This ontological location rehumanizes the subject by providing an inherent value and moral significance to the subject.

5.3 Moral Accountability and Agency: Recovering Responsibility

Postmodern epistemology diminishes moral responsibility by distributing agency across systems of discourse and power. An Islamic epistemology places the center of moral agency in the concept of taklīf, which posits that human beings are accountable moral agents who are responsible for their decisions. In Islam, freedom is not the absence of constraint, but the ability to act meaningfully within a moral order (Rahman, 1980).

This framework avoids both the authoritatively-based morality of traditionalism, and the permissive morality of relativism. Through establishing accountability without eliminating contextual factors, an Islamic epistemology retains the seriousness of ethics, while acknowledging human limitations. Dehumanization, in this view, is not caused by moral obligation, but by the loss of moral meaning.

5.4 Embodiment, Identity and Moral Significance

An Islamic epistemology refuses to separate the postmodern concepts of identity and embodiment. The human body is not a neutral, empty container waiting for subjective definition, but a morally intelligible dimension of the human identity. Sexual differentiation, bodily reality and biological existence are seen as purposeful aspects of fitrah, not as arbitrary constraints (Nasr, 1968).

This perspective offers a systematic approach to the fragmented identities of contemporary society. By integrating body, self and moral purpose, an Islamic epistemology counteracts the postmodern tendency to see identity as infinitely self-constructed. Thus, human freedom is restored to nature rather than being exercised against it.

5.5 Revelation as a Rehumanizing Framework

Finally, an Islamic epistemology posits that dehumanization cannot be resolved without revelation. When reason is disconnected from moral truth, it becomes an instrumentality; when identity is separated from nature, it becomes unstable. Revelation reconnects these elements by placing them within a meaningful and intelligible worldview (al-Faruqi, 1982).

This is not a dismissal of critique, but an affirmation of critique. An Islamic epistemology does not dismiss the historical abuses of power revealed by postmodernism; it dismisses only the conclusion that truth, essence and moral order should therefore be denied. In doing so, it presents a rehumanizing alternative to address the most profound effects of the postmodern epistemic rupture.

6. Conclusion: Rehumanizing Knowledge and the Human

This paper argued that Post Modernism is more than a critique of the Enlightenment; it is a fundamental Epistemic Breakdown which deconstructs the Ontological, Moral and Anthropological Foundations of Human Being. The rejection of Objective Truth, denial of human essence and dissolution of Moral Normativity all are consequences of post modern Epistemology that undermine the conceptual prerequisites for maintaining Human Dignity, Responsibility and Meaning. As this Study has demonstrated, dehumanization is not a by-product of post modern thought but is a Structural Consequence of its epistemic commitments.

This study established how post-modern Identity Fragmentation - specifically those forms that sever Self-hood from Biological and Moral Rootings - can be seen as the symptomatologies of this breakdown. If Truth is reduced to Interpretation then Identity is Performance based; if Nature loses Authority then Embodiment is Negotiable; if Moral Realism is Abandoned then Responsibility is lost in Discourse. Ultimately these Developments, which have been portrayed as liberating, leave the human being with no Ontological   Coherence   or   Ethical   Orientation.

As a result of this background, the paper presents Islamic Epistemology as a rigorous and necessary critique of post modern Dehumanization. Based on Revelation (Waḥy), Reason (ʿAql) and Fitrah, Islamic Epistemology establishes the Unity of Truth, Meaning and Human Nature without falling into Authoritarianism or Naive Foundationalism. Through Affirmations of Intrinsic Human Dignity (Karāmah Al-Insān), Moral Accountability (Taklīf) and the Intelligibility of Creation, it provides a Re-humanizing Framework that can address the   Philosophical   Failures   of   post   modern   Thought.

It is also important to note, that this critique is not dismissing the Legitimate Concerns of post modernism in regards to Power, Exclusion and Historical Contingency. This critique is arguing that these Concerns cannot be Resolved through the Rejection of Truth, Essence and Moral Order. A Critique of Domination Requires Moral Grounding; a Defense of Dignity Requires Human Nature; and Liberation Requires an Intelligible Account of the Good. Therefore, Islamic Epistemology is not rejecting Critique but completing it by Situating Human   Freedom   within   a   Coherent   Moral   and   Metaphysical   Order.

Therefore, this paper concludes that the Contemporary Crisis of the Human cannot be Overcome within post modern Epistemology. Re-humanization Demands an Epistemic Framework that Affirms Truth, Meaning and Moral Purpose as Real and Binding. In an Age

of Fragmentation and Disorientation, Revelational Guidance Emerges not as a Theological Excess but as an Epistemic Necessity for Reclaiming the Human.

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