

The Difference between Self-Knowledge in Islam and Western Schools of Thought

How Are Self-Knowledge and Humanology Related?

Self-knowledge has been one of the most fundamental issues in human life and has been highly discussed throughout history, to the extent that it can be considered the most recommended and important piece of advice offered by most thinkers.

The thinkers and schools of thought which invite people to **self-knowledge** are not limited to a specific one. This topic has been dealt with in both monotheistic schools of thought such as Islam and non-monotheistic ones such as Buddhism¹ and Hinduism². The only difference lies in the definition that each school gives of the word **self**, and in the result which it ultimately draws from this definition.

On the other hand, today, **humanology** refers to the knowledge that examines human beings, their existential dimensions, or a certain group of people. Since the definition of human beings in Western philosophy and materialist schools of thought is different from that in Islam, the kind of **self-knowledge** which is recommended by Western schools is different from the one recommended in Islam.

¹. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326481409_The_Ethics_of_Self-Knowledge_in_Platonic_and_Buddhist_Philosophy_Western_and_Buddhist_Philosophical_Traditions_in_Dialogue

². <https://www.thehindu.com/society/faith/self-knowledge/article27152345.ece/amp/#referrer=https://www.google.com&csi=0>

In the following sections, we will look at these differences and explain whether there is a difference between **self-knowledge** and **humanology** in Islamic philosophy, or whether these concepts are the same.

Self-Knowledge in Western Schools of Thought

The thinkers of different schools of thought agree on the importance and necessity of **self-knowledge**, and this shows that humankind has realized the existence of a truth called 'I' or the '**self**.' But there is a difference of opinion on who this **self** is, and to what dimension of human existence it belongs.

When we say, "know **yourself**," two questions are raised:

- What is this **SELF**?
- How can we know it?

The answer to the latter depends on the answer to the former.

If, like Western philosophers and materialist schools of thought, we consider the human as a one-dimensional being, which is nothing but a physical entity, then the '**self**' will be the same as the body. So **self-knowledge** will refer to knowing everything related to the body, from its physiology and genetics to issues such as emotions, learning, intelligence, interests, talents, personal beliefs, moral and behavioral characteristics, etc. (Of course, it should be noted that many of these categories are not related to our physical dimension, but rather they are related to the immaterial aspect of humans called the 'soul.' But since the materialist schools deny the existence of such an aspect, they attribute everything to the physical body).

The study of the above parameters is within the scope of what is known as 'psychology.' As a result, the meaning of **self-knowledge** has been degraded to

psychology among the general public, and what is introduced as **self-knowledge** is the same concept raised in psychology.

Since Western schools of thought limit everything to the material world, the ultimate goal of **self-knowledge** is confined to gaining material benefits. In fact, people discover and use their individual talents and abilities in order to make a better and more comfortable world for themselves and enjoy life more and more. However, this is not the ultimate goal of **self-knowledge** in Islam, and pleasures are not pursued the way Westerners have in mind.

Now, what is meant by the '**self**' in Islamic teachings, and what is the goal of Islamic **self-knowledge**?

Self-Knowledge in Islam

The concept of '**psyche**'³ in Islamic philosophy is completely different from what is frequently used in the West. In Islamic psychology, words like the spirit, heart, soul, psyche, etc., are used synonymously. They all refer to the immaterial essence which God has entrusted to humans, and the body gets its life from it.

In Islam, human beings have both a material and an immaterial dimension. It is the immaterial dimension which constitutes their '**true self.**' So **self-knowledge** in the teachings of the Quran and the Household of the Prophet (PBUT) refers to knowing the immaterial dimension or the '**true self.**' It is because of this

³. In Islamic philosophy, the concept of the psyche refers to the non-physical or spiritual aspect of human beings. It represents the incorporeal part of an individual, and it is naturally inclined towards its divine origin and seeks inner peace and fulfillment through a connection with God.

(https://www.google.com/books/edition/Qur%CA%BCanic_Concepts_of_Human_Psyche/H1oixi3ORWMC?hl=en&gbpv=1&bsq=psyche)

However, today, psychologists use the term "psyche" to describe what we commonly refer to as the "mind." It is important to understand that the mind is not the same thing as the physical brain. While different parts of the brain can influence our emotions and behaviors, the mind goes beyond the biological aspects. It includes our thoughts, inner voice, and the mental experiences we have inside our heads (<https://practicalpie.com/the-psyche/>).

dimension that we are called humans and the best of creations; otherwise, we share other dimensions with other creatures. The Western philosophy does not want to accept the existence of the spiritual dimension of human beings; therefore, it degrades humans to the level of a complicated and amazing animal.

The ultimate goal of **self-knowledge** in Islam is so great that it cannot be limited to worldly achievements. People who are well-acquainted with their **true self** are always happy, calm, and successful, no matter whether they are poor or rich, healthy or sick, which social class they belong to, or whether they are an employer or employee. This happiness and peace is totally different from the concept of pleasure-seeking that is getting promoted in the Western culture.

In other articles, we thoroughly discussed the following questions: What are the dimensions of our existence? To which dimensions does our **true self** belong? Which dimensions of our being do we share with other creatures? What does our true perfection lie in? etc.

But first, let us go back to the question that we raised in the first part, which is the main purpose of this article: Is there any difference between **self-knowledge** and **humanology** in the Islamic culture, or are these two concepts the same?

As we stated before, our **true self** forms the spiritual dimension of our existence. So in Islamic teachings, **humanology** is equivalent to **self-knowledge**. To be more precise, learning the tenets of **humanology** can raise all human beings to a general level of **self-knowledge** which is equally attainable by everyone.