

# Attitudes of Western and Islamic Philosophers before the Twentieth Century and their Influence on the Leadership Style of Education

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## Abstract

*Philosophers of education in Islamic and Western countries have always been interested in analyzing and clarifying concepts and questions central to education. Depending on the time period, they have tried to find new methods to improve the quality of the education system. In some cases, they relied on the duties of teachers in education, and in other cases, they focused on student motivation. As a result, came proposals for new perspectives on teachers, students, and methods for student assessment and evaluation. This article will focus on two main schools of thought: Islamic and Western philosophy before the 20th century. Even though Western philosophers were able to present new ideas and criticize existing ones, I will illustrate those Islamic philosophers were unable to adopt the changes. Finally, in this article, I will try to answer two questions: Has Islamic philosophy restricted the development of education systems, especially the use of modern leadership styles? Has the student assessment system been different in Western and Islamic societies? This will be done through discussing specific terms regarding the expected qualities of such leadership roles and how, although these terms may have been acceptable at one time, they are not appropriate for a global society.*

## 1. Introduction

In the new century the world is becoming more heavily globalized, education systems are slowly changing and adapting accordingly. A properly functioning globalized society needs the harmonious cooperation of multiple diverse groups, which suggests that topics such as social justice and equality are of great significance. Hence, a globalized world requires an education system that includes a group of students for potentially engaging with diverse people and groups that have different approach about learning [16].

Philosophers of education are interested in analyzing and clarifying concepts and questions central to education. Depending on the time period, they tried to find new methods to improve the quality of the education system. However, before the Twentieth Century they often focused on the responsibilities of teachers and students. Therefore, they brought up a new definition of teachers and students. In the next section below, I will provide a brief background of the Western philosophers and Islamic philosophers approach about education.

## 2. Literature

In the 20th Century, philosophers and educators debated some questions that are familiar to philosophers of education in the 21st century [17], such as “Who should be educated?” “Should education differ according to natural interests and abilities?” “What role should the state play in education?” Usually, philosophers do not create theories of education but analyze them. This can result in enhancing existing arguments, revising arguments or theories, or outright abandoning theories [17]. This section will provide some background information about some famous philosophers, to clarify later evaluation of their similarities and differences and assessment methods.

### 2.1. Western Philosophers

According to Noddings [17], different approaches were raised by different philosophers. To better organize their arguments and theories, I tried to divide these schools of thought into two groups. Group one focused on teachers’ and students’ responsibilities. Group two focused on the responsibilities of the state for education:

- i. Group one - Socrates was the first person who believed that successful learning is “engaging

others in dialogue, not by writing” [17]. In other words, it is the students’ responsibility to ask questions and by the teacher answering questions this method will result in better learning. Although Aristotle was Plato’s student, he did not attempt to create an ideal state; “he sought out and described those people and behaviors representing the best in Athenian society” [17]. He believed that educators should take a special interest in teaching their students. Additionally, Aristotle recommended that students should be trained in morally suitable modes of conducts. The philosopher Neil believed that “children are naturally good and that pressures to make them grow up too fast ruin them, additionally, Neil condemned formal lessons and religious and moral education”. Summerhill believed, “children were free to play until they wanted to attend classes, and they had a say in how the school was to be run” [17].

The main and important similarity between Dewey and Rousseau is about the child’s own motivation and direct action. Montessori added to this group, suggesting that “children might lose the capacity for order if parents and teachers did not nurture it when its first signs appeared” [17]. Pestalozzi followed Rousseau and said that “children [should] be educated through the senses. He refined Rousseau’s ideas and, following John Locke, created an approach called the object lesson. An object lesson begins with the exhibition of an object and an invitation to students to describe it, tell how it works, and so on” [17]. Piaget provided what he called the cognitive structure theory, wherein he tried to clarify diverse developmental stages. For children, each stage of this theory characterizes a distinctive cognitive structure [4]. Piaget’s followers believe that learning should serve development. Therefore, teachers have a special responsibility to know what their students are ready to learn.

- ii. Group two - Plato’s pattern of education is functionalist, meaning that “a model designed to produce competent adults to meet the needs of the state. Plato developed his thought on education in the context of describing the ideal state, and he could have argued that there is no inherent conflict between the individual and the state” [17]. Plato tried to create an ideal state, in which teachers were able to work to teach people who are both self-actualized and beneficial to the state. Aristotle and Plato had different approaches to the definition of epistemology and ontology. For Aristotle’s ontology, the universal or essence of things is in particular objects. In contrast, in Plato’s ontology the universal is a separate thing associated through

prototypes or exemplars. Thus, the epistemology of Aristotle is based on the study of particular phenomena which leads to the knowledge of universals; the epistemology of Plato is based on knowledge of the universals (the Forms) and this results in knowledge of their individuations [20].

Rousseau believed that humans were born good and free and that they are able to remain this way. He further argued that “having to live with other people and accommodate their needs begins a process of corruption in man that reaches its peak in the society characteristic of Rousseau’s time” [17]. Thus, in social philosophy, he is credited with impressive and fundamental work on “social contract theory” [17]. Herbart, who followed Rousseau, described the mind’s function and he called it an apperceptive mass [17]. Herbart believed that the fundamental units of the mind are ideas. He and the empiricists concur that ideas come from experience. He started from their view concerning what happens once ideas enter the mind and argued that once an idea entered the mind it has a life all of its own and thereafter can never be completely forgotten or destroyed [7]. A major difference between the ideas of Herbart and Piaget is that Herbart’s apperceptive mass possesses the actual content of experience, whereas Piaget’s cognitive structures are operational mechanisms. Herbart explained that teaching methods need to change and they should be designed to match how the mind works [17]. Froebel, who also followed Rousseau, placed emphasis on nurturance and growth. He believed educational materials must create a balance between freedom and structure. Additionally, he recognized the need of children to exercise and introduced the concept of “free work” [18]. Vygotsky’s followers focus on social interaction instead of the subject-object interaction. Vygotsky said that “every function in children’s cultural development appears first at the social settings with the level; that is, children can perform certain tasks in social setting with the help of other. Later the same functions appear at the psychological level and can be activated by the individual children” [17].

## 2.2. Islamic Philosophers

The Philosophy of Islamic Education involves the concepts and principles underlying education in Islamic texts, the main ones of which are the Quran, Hadith, and Nahjul-balagha [8]. Before tenth century, a group of Islamic philosophers started to learn and teach the ancient Greek philosophy and they had a different approach to subjects such as religion, ethics,

and education. The first muslim philosopher who was interested in Greek philosophy was Al-Kindi (801-873, A.D.). In his philosophical writing, he tried to find compatibility between philosophy and other “orthodox” Islamic sciences, particularly theology. In the topic of theology, he focused on some special subjects such as the nature of God, prophetic knowledge, and soul [19]. Although he had a close relationship with Mamoun, Moutasem, and Moutawakel (Muslim kings), finally he was exiled by Moutawakel because of differences in theology. Al-Razi (Rhazes, 854-925 or 935 A.D.) unsuccessfully argued for the separation of religion and ethics, despite being a believer in Islam, but did not consider revelation and prophecy acceptable [12].

The third person from this group is Ibn-Sina (Avicenna, 980-1037 A.D.). He was the most influential of all the Muslim philosophers, and he focused on Islamic philosophy and theology. The core of his philosophy is his conception of reality and reason, where reason allows progress through levels of understanding until one reaches God (ultimate truth). As such, gaining knowledge is very important and his theory of knowledge is based on four faculties: sense perception, retention, imagination, and estimation. Imagination is the primary one, since it can compare and construct images through which the universals can be accessed with God, the pure intellect, being the ultimate objective [22]. In metaphysics, Ibn-Sina distinguishes between the essence (the nature of things, separate from mental or physical realizations) and existence (mental or physical objects). This distinction applies for all things except God, who is both essence and existence since it is the first cause. Lastly, he argued that the soul cannot be destroyed, as it is incorporeal, and is the agent who chooses between good and evil, leading to reward or punishment [22].

Finally, Ibn Rushed (Averroes, 1126-1198 A.D.) studied Aristotle’s opinions and provided detailed commentaries on Aristotle. This earned him the title “The Commentator” in Europe. He tried to adapt Islamic thought with Aristotle’s thought, but he was not successful; a majority of Islamic scholars rejected him and his work was also condemned by the Christian church [15].

### 2.3. Assessment methods

To addressing assessment methods, an overview of the distinction between assessment and evaluation is necessary. The purpose of assessment is to enhance quality while the purpose of evaluation is to judge quality. In other words, assessment focuses on feedback from the learners to the instructor about their learning, while evaluation refers to methods and measures used to judge learners’ learning and

understanding of the material for purposes of grading and reporting [14]. That is, evaluation is feedback from the instructor to the student regarding the student’s learning. Three methods are introduced for student evaluation, diagnostic, formative and summative. Each of the different evaluation methods are described below:

- i. Assessments for learning - This is a common assessment method used in most education systems. Assessment for learning is a type of formative assessment utilized by instructors for gaining an understanding of their students’ skills and knowledge to guide instruction. Apart from information about a learner’s comprehension and understanding of a skill or lesson during the teaching and learning process, this assessment serves to identify at-risk students early, so that instruction may be adjusted accordingly and immediately, and a learner’s progress can be monitored [14].
- ii. Assessment as learning - Also known as formative assessment, this kind of assessment focusses on teaching students the metacognitive processes required to evaluate and recognize their own learning and make adjustments. Assessment as learning enhances and supports learners’ metacognitive skills. It is crucial in helping students become lifelong learners. As learners engage in peer- and self-assessment, they learn to make sense of information, iterate it to prior knowledge and use it for unprecedented learning [14].
- iii. Assessment of learning - The third type of assessment indicates a summative assessment used primarily to compare learners and report progress. It is the snapshot in time that lets instructors, learners, and learners’ parents know how well each learner has completed the learning activities and tasks. Assessment of learning provides information about learner achievement. While it provides useful reporting information, it frequently has little effect on learning [14].

### 3. Discussion

A brief study of Islamic scholars shows that some of them tried to match an Islamic approach with Western opinions, or at least to Greek philosophy, but were not successful. However, if their names are saved in history, it is because their students and Western philosophers endeavored. Islamic countries follow a conservative approach, where the religion and

government are not separated. In other words, the clergy are the policymakers in these systems. Islamic supporters believe that Islam is the last religion sent to humanity and that Muhammad is the last messenger. Hence, in their opinion, the Quran includes all sciences and philosophy, especially ethics. However, as the world becomes more global and integrated, the limitations of this approach and the need for criticism like that performed by Western philosophers will become apparent. Heidegger has referred to all religious philosophy, like Islamic philosophy, as an ontotheology [6]. The ontotheology is a dialogue between the philosopher and his God, just as Aristotle talks with Athens' citizens when he wants to write "Policy". As an example of this, the remainder of this paper will discuss four ethical issues of the behavior and expectations of leaders from the Islamic perspective and how the definitions of these issues will be insufficient for the new state of the world.

### 3.1. Accountability

Accountability refers to a leader's willingness and ability to be held accountable for his decisions and actions. This is considered a necessary characteristic of a leader, in that being a leader requires having accountability [5, 11]. It conveys an image of trustworthiness and encourages a willingness in others to follow, to the point where it is now considered a symbol of good leadership performance [13].

The Quran seems to be encouraging of accountability, as can be seen from the following two quotations: "Then shall anyone who has done an atom's weight of good, see it! And anyone who has done an atom's weight of evil, shall see it" (Quran, 99:7-8), "Nor can a bearer of burdens bear another's burden. If one heavily laden should call another to (bear) his load, not the least portion of it can be carried (by the other), even though he is closely related to it" (Quran, 35:18). The encouragement from the Quran is to accept that which is expected of you, to see the results of your actions, and be willing to act in a righteous and trustworthy manner [13]. However, the one to whom leaders should be accountable is only God and His Messenger (Quran, 23:118). From an organizational perspective, this results in a vertical management structure and also brings into question whether leaders are accountable to other people. While it could be argued that leaders should be accountable to other people, historically, Islamic leaders have primarily said they are only accountable to God and His Messenger.

### 3.2. Proficiency

Alhabshi and Ghazali states that proficiency is meant doing more than the minimal amount of work or effort needed [2]. In other words, those with proficiency push themselves beyond the call of duty, are energized for higher performance, and are willing to sacrifice to accomplish their task [3]. Thus, the more proficient an individual is, the greater their performance. However, happiness and comfort are not sacrificed; a proficient individual enjoys putting in the extra effort. While this characteristic is considered important, it is only implied in the Quran such as: "But thou shall do good, as Allah has been good to thee." (Quran, 28:77)

### 3.3. Responsibility

Responsibility refers to the degree to which a leader acts in accordance with that which is required of him. In other words, a responsible leader knows what is expected of him, what his goal should be, what consequences there will be when mistakes occur, and uses all of this information to act accordingly [9]. This quality is related to but still distinct from accountability. A leader without responsibility does not care about what is required of him, whereas a leader without accountability suffers no punishment from bad actions and receives no reward for good actions.

The main instance of responsibility in the Quran is that people are responsible for following Islam. However, those who reject Islam have different responsibilities: "Whosoever obeys the Messenger, thereby, obeys Allah; and those who turn away (from the Right Path, they should know) we have not sent you (O, Messenger) to be a watcher over them" (Quran, 4:80); "Verily, those who divided the religion and have become sects, (O, Messenger) you should have no concern in them in the least; their affair is only with Allah Who then (on the Resurrection Day) will inform them about what they used to do" (Quran, 6:159).

In another sense though, people are responsible for doing that which is good: "Whatever of good reaches you (O, man) it is from Allah, but whatever of evil befalls you, it is from yourself. And (O, Messenger) we have sent you as a messenger to mankind (all) and Allah is sufficient as a Witness over this highly important issue" (Quran, 4:79). This verse could be interpreted to mean that people are responsible for their actions to ensure they are obedient to God. However, it could also be interpreted to mean that, since any action which is considered good is from God, people are not responsible for any action is good.

### 3.4. Justice

Justice in the context of this article refers to fairness, equity, and that which is good. Social justice is therefore fairness within a social context: among different members of a social group. In MBI, justice is considered a core value [3] and is necessary for keeping individual and collective affairs functioning [10]. Being just is a necessary quality in Islam: “Verily, Allah commands you to establish justice and goodness (in the community) and be generous to your relatives, and he forbids you all evil and indecent deeds and rebellion against the Truth.” (Quran, 16:90) Hence it is considered the foundation of the Islamic value system. In MBI, justice is necessary for enhanced performance, satisfaction and protection among members of an organization, and ensures people act according to their duties [1]. However, some researchers [e.g., 20] have suggested that there are statements in the Quran which are unjust or promote what would currently be considered socially unfair. While believers are instructed to “never kill a believer unless it is by mistake” and that a recompense should be paid in response (Quran, 4:92) yet in another context when fighting against non-believers they are to “kill them wherever you get hold of them and drive them out from where they have driven you out; since the evil of disbelief and polytheism is more grievous than killing” (Quran, 2:191). Similarly, several statements can be found that clearly favor men over women (e.g., Quran 2:282, 4:34). In addition, slavery is regulated (e.g., Quran 16:71) but not abolished.

### 3.5. Learning and assessment

The Qur'an refers to learning in various verses and suggests reading and understanding new sciences to its followers and even to its Prophet (e.g., 96:1). It gives priority to the wise in the comparison of the wise and the ignorant. Is he who supplicates in the watches of the night, prostrating and standing, apprehensive of the Hereafter and expecting the mercy of his Lord...? Say, ‘Are those who know equal to those who do not know?’ Only those who possess intellect take admonition (e.g., 39:9). However, the assessment as learning is not discussed among Islamic Philosophers.

### 4. Conclusion

The world is becoming a global society, but the difference between Islamic and Western countries in terms of education is very large. As was shown, Western philosophers are free to criticise other schools and produce new arguments and theories. However, in Islamic countries the basic source, especially for

ethics, is the Quran and Hadith; this means philosophers have to follow traditional morality or values. Hence philosophers are not able to criticise; at most, they can interpret these sources in a new way to match the current world circumstances. Responsibility, accountability, proficiency, and justice have a meaning that implies or requires obedience to God and his messenger alone without necessarily linking this to other people. This is in contrast with meanings of the same terms in developed countries. In Islamic countries, most philosophers believe that Islamic philosophy is not independent of Islamic ideology. Hence, this approach can lead to a dictatorial theocracy. Similarly, Islamic epistemology is tied with Islamic theology. Given the increasingly global character of our society, traditional morality as espoused by Islamic philosophers is insufficient primarily because it cannot be properly criticized when it does not respond to the current needs of citizens. Although a global society is inclusive, and respects other cultures, languages, and philosophical viewpoints, yet Islamic governments have to reform themselves at least in terms of their education system. The obligation to abide by traditional principles has prevented the stakeholders from devoting attention to assessment as learning in an education system, a type of assessment also relatively neglected in Western education systems.

### 5. References

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