

Comparative Analysis of the Epistemology of Reason from the Perspective of 'Allama Majlisi and the School of Tafkik

Ali Ghadrddan Gharamaleki¹ 

1. Department of Islamic Studies, Faculty of Theology and Islamic Sciences, University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran. Email: a.ghadrddan@tabrizu.ac.ir

Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article type: Research Article Article history: Received 09 February 2026 Received in revised form 15 March 2026 Accepted 12 April 2026 Available online 22 June 2026 Keywords: epistemology, epistemology of reason, 'Allama Majlisi, School of Tafkik	In Islamic epistemology, reason ('aql) has consistently been a subject of discourse as a principal pillar of knowledge, with diverse perspectives advanced concerning its scope, validity, and role in understanding religion. In the contemporary period, the School of Tafkik (Separationism), setting aside the human rational faculty, subscribes to "illuminative reason" ('aql-i nūrī) or innate reason—conceived as a luminous entity external to material human existence—and restricts its role in religious knowledge to minimal functions, attributing to it a limited number of propositions. 'Allāma Majlisī, though characterized by a transmission-oriented (naql-garāyāna) approach, regards reason as a valid partner alongside transmission (naql) in religious knowledge—particularly its fundamental principles—and assigns it a broader scope. These differences necessitate a comparative examination of both perspectives to elucidate their commonalities and divergences. Aiming to analyze and comparatively evaluate the epistemology of reason from the viewpoints of 'Allāma Majlisī and the School of Tafkik, this study addresses the question: What is the epistemology of reason in these two approaches, and what are their commonalities and differences? Employing a library-based method, this theoretical and problem-oriented study extracts and expounds the views of both parties from original sources, subsequently comparing and evaluating them. Findings indicate that fundamental differences exist between the two perspectives—including the possibility of rational cognition, the validity of theoretical reason, the scope of reason's apprehensions, and its role in religious inquiry. 'Allāma Majlisī affirms the validity of these aspects, whereas the Tafkikīs reject or restrict them. These differences distinguish 'Allāma Majlisī's perspective from the School of Tafkik. Contrary to the prevalent assumption of 'Allāma's absolute traditionalism, his approach to the epistemology of reason is balanced and judicious, regarding reason as coextensive with transmission in religious knowledge. Thus, the fundamental objections raised against the School of Tafkik do not apply to 'Allāma Majlisī's perspective, and this approach presents an epistemological model harmonizing reason and transmission.
Cite this article: Qadardan Qaramaliki, A. (2026). Comparative Analysis of the Epistemology of Reason from the Perspective of 'Allama Majlisi and the School of Tafkik. <i>Theology Journal</i>, 13(1), 81-106. https://doi.org/10.22034/pke.2026.22586.2057	
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1. Introduction

ʿAllāma Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī (d. 1110/1699), renowned as the preeminent traditionist (muḥaddith) of the Akhbārī school and often characterized by a literalist (zāhir-garāyāna) approach, exhibits in his numerous works a substantial reliance upon rational arguments (adilla-yi ʿaqlī) and assigns a central role to reason (ʿaql) in the explication and understanding of religious knowledge (maʿārif-i dīnī). This apparent paradox—the simultaneous commitment to transmitted tradition (ḥadīth) and extensive recourse to rational demonstrations (barāhīn-i ʿaqlī)—combined with the presence of seemingly contradictory statements in his critiques of reason, generates a serious theoretical ambiguity: What precisely is ʿAllāma Majlisī's position concerning reason and rational knowledge? Does his opposition to philosophy (falsafa) suffice to establish his affiliation with the Akhbārī school?

In the contemporary period, the School of Taḥkīk (Separationism), which, through a literalist and tradition-centered approach, denies rational knowledge in the domain of religion, has sought to legitimize its own epistemological position concerning reason and rational perceptions by appealing to prominent Shīʿī figures. The adherents of this school, through numerous citations to ʿAllāma Majlisī, endeavor to present this eminent scholar as their intellectual root and foundation, thereby lending legitimacy to their own epistemology of reason and, more broadly, to their entire doctrinal framework.

The present study, by analyzing the epistemology of reason in ʿAllāma Majlisī's works, addresses the following question: Does a genuine intellectual affinity exist between ʿAllāma Majlisī and the School of Taḥkīk, or is the Taḥkīkīs' citation of him a form of "misappropriation" (istinād-i inḥirāfī)? The clarification of this question not only contributes to a more precise rereading of ʿAllāma Majlisī's thought, but also prevents potential misinterpretations of his scholarly legacy that might be employed to undermine the role of reason in understanding religion.

2. Methodology

This research has been conducted with a theoretical, problem-oriented, and developmental approach, building upon and complementing previous studies. The investigative process proceeds through the following stages:

Stage One: Data Collection — The required data were gathered using a library-based method, focusing on the works of ʿAllāma Majlisī and Taḥkīkī thinkers. Primary sources include ʿAllāma Majlisī's *Biḥār al-Anwār*, *Mirʿāt al-ʿUqūl*, and *ʿAyn al-Ḥayāt*, as well as the works of Mīrzā Maḥdī Iṣfahānī and his students.

Stage Two: Analysis and Evaluation — The collected data were evaluated through rational and transmitted (naqlī) analysis, with careful attention to the textual evidence and the internal coherence of each perspective.

Stage Three: Comparative Assessment — A comparative examination was conducted between the two perspectives to identify their commonalities and points

of divergence, particularly with respect to the foundational questions of epistemology.

3. Literature Review and Research Background

A review of the research background reveals that while numerous studies have examined 'Allāma Majlisī's epistemology of reason, none have specifically compared his epistemology of reason with the School of Tafsīk. Articles such as "The Instruments and Means of Religious Knowledge from the Perspective of 'Allāma Majlisī" (Sorkhehī and Khodādādi), "Approachology of 'Allāma Majlisī Regarding Human Knowledge: Philosophy, Mysticism, and Principles of Jurisprudence," and "The Place of Reason in 'Allāma Majlisī's Theological Methodology" ('Aẓīmī and Ghafūrīnezhād) examine 'Allāma Majlisī's epistemology and methodology, but none establish a connection with the School of Tafsīk. Similarly, the article "Ontology and Epistemology of Reason in the Tafsīkī Perspective" (Shākirīn) analyzes the ontology and epistemology of reason in the Tafsīkī school but never engages with 'Allāma Majlisī's perspective. The article "Critique of Tafsīkī Theology from the Philosophical Perspective of 'Allāma Majlisī" (Imām Jum'a), although it addresses both perspectives in combination, focuses on theology and offers no analysis or comparison in the domain of rational knowledge.

4. Findings

4.1 'Allāma Majlisī Validates Rational Perceptions

'Allāma Majlisī regards rational perceptions (idrākāt-i 'aqlī) as valid and authoritative. However, this validity does not imply that everything that exists in the cosmos falls within the domain of rational apprehension. In truth, just as many realities are comprehensible through reason, many others lie beyond reason's reach, and reason lacks the capacity to encompass them. He maintains that the principles of religion (uṣūl al-dīn) fall within the domain of reason, and that reason, by employing sound demonstrations (barāhīn-i mutqan), is capable of understanding them. However, in the domain of the branches of religion (furū' al-dīn), reason is often unable to provide the necessary guidance, and even those perceptions that reason might offer in this field are deemed invalid.

4.2 Fundamental Differences between 'Allāma Majlisī and the School of Tafsīk

Through a comparison of the views of 'Allāma Majlisī and the School of Tafsīk, it becomes clear that they hold fundamentally divergent positions on the central questions of the epistemology of reason, including: the possibility of rational cognition and knowledge; the validity or invalidity of the rational faculty; the scope and extent of reason's apprehensions; and the minimal or maximal role of reason in religious knowledge.

4.3 The Philosophical Basis of the Disagreement

Having established the divergence between 'Allāma Majlisī and the School of Tafkīk, it is necessary to identify the underlying reasons for this disagreement. Upon examination of the respective views, it becomes clear that the divergence arises from differences in the ontology of reason, the manner of engaging with erroneous rational perceptions, and the role of philosophy (falsafa) in discrediting rational knowledge.

5. Discussion

'Allāma Majlisī is known for his literalist approach and, on certain occasions, critiques philosophy, appearing on this point to align with the Tafkīkīs. Nevertheless, he employs rational arguments in his works. This duality has given rise to divergent interpretations of his position. Some scholars, such as Mahdī Naṣīrī in an interview titled "I am Close to the Uṣūlīs, Not the Akhbārīs," have advanced eight arguments demonstrating that 'Allāma Majlisī was not an Akhbārī. 'Alī Malikī Miyānjī has also addressed this question in his book *Was 'Allāma Majlisī an Akhbārī or an Uṣūlī?* Thus, contrary to the prevailing assumption of 'Allāma Majlisī's Akhbārī affiliation, the matter is far from settled and demands careful investigation. The significance of this research lies in the fact that without resolving this enigma, a proper understanding of the architecture of 'Allāma Majlisī's intellectual system cannot be attained, and one-sided judgments may be made regarding his Akhbārī orientation and his proximity to the School of Tafkīk.

6. Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that 'Allāma Majlisī adopts an affirmative (ījābī) approach to rational knowledge, assigning to it great value and significance, particularly in the cognition of the principles of religion. Therefore, the notion that he opposed rationality and rational knowledge is a misperception, unfounded and without basis. Furthermore, the findings of this research reveal that 'Allāma Majlisī's epistemology diverges fundamentally from the School of Tafkīk on questions such as the possibility of rational cognition, the validity of the rational faculty, the scope of reason's apprehensions, and the role of reason in religious inquiry. 'Allāma Majlisī accorded reason a lofty value and regarded it, alongside transmission (naql), as a partner in religious knowledge. By contrast, the Tafkīkīs deem rational knowledge invalid and delegate the majority of questions to transmission. Nevertheless, limited commonalities are observed between them concerning the validity of self-evident (badīhī) reason and the apprehension of the goodness and evil of actions (ḥusn wa qubḥ al-af'āl).

In light of the foregoing, it is unequivocally clear that 'Allāma Majlisī maintained a comprehensive approach to epistemology and demonstrated fundamental differences from the adherents of the School of Tafkīk. Therefore, the assumption of intellectual alignment or the characterization of him as a Tafkīkī thinker is an erroneous and scientifically untenable notion.

Declarations

Authors' Contributions: This article is single-authored.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: The author does not acknowledge any individual or institution.

Ethical Considerations: The author has observed all ethical principles in conducting and publishing this scientific research, and this has been confirmed by the author.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest: According to the author's declaration, this article has no conflict of interest.

Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies Statement: Generative AI was not used in data collection, analysis, or conclusions. AI tools (Sider, ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Scinto) were used for literary editing and grammatical revision. After using these tools, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and assumes full responsibility for the published content.