



## A Comparative Narrative of the Position of Reason in the Thoughts of Descartes and Sheikh Ansari from an Educational Perspective

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: 02 June 2020            Revised: 01 December 2020            Accepted: 11 February 2021            Online: 15 January 2022</p>	<p>During the last four decades in Iran, there has been a relentless effort by the proponents of the theory of Islamic education to compare the intellectual, behavioral and educational ideas of Muslim thinkers with the views of world-renowned philosophers. The aim of the present study was a comparative narrative of the position of "reason" in the thoughts of the French philosopher René Descartes and the Shiite jurist Sheikh Morteza Ansari from the perspective of education. In terms of method, the present study is a comparatively qualitative research using philosophical hermeneutic approach. For data collection, researchers have used the documentary method and for data analysis (text comprehension) the history-oriented and commentator-centered approaches were used. The first findings showed that both Descartes and Sheikh Ansari are very similar in terms of their great influence on the thinkers of their time and "intellectual stream-making". Also, the most important similarity between the two philosophers is the acceptance of the superiority of reason over other sources of knowledge. The research findings also reveal differences between the two thinkers. Cartesian intellect is self-centered and Sheikh Ansari intellect is other-centered. While Descartes sees reason as the only real tool for measuring the accuracy of science, Sheikh Ansari considers it as one of the most important tools for discovering knowledge. In short, although Descartes and Sheikh Ansari were not in the conventional sense of the word "Educator", by emphasizing the position of reason, they were able to undermine the scientific structure of their society - such as traditional teaching- learning methods, teacher-centered and past-centered.</p>
<p>KEYWORDS</p> <p>Intellectual system            Islamic education            Reason            Descartes            Sheikh Ansari</p>	

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## 1. Introduction

The victory of the Iran's revolution in the late 1970s led to establishment of the government of the Islamic Republic and the administration of the country based on the theory of "*Velayat-e Faqih*". The theory of *Velayat-e-Faqih* is based on the premise of some Shiite jurists - including Imam Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic - that in Islam, religion and universe are intertwined and inseparable. Therefore, the Supreme Leader as the successor of the Prophet can and should determine the framework of action of individuals based on religious rules in all areas of life such as politics, economics, culture and education (Jan Bozorgi, 1997). The acceptance and dominance of this thought in the last four decades has caused the religious / political and educational systems of Iran to demand "Islamic education" against other forms of education such as "Western education" (Al Hosseini, Sajjadi, Sadeghzadeh Ghamsari & Mehr Mohammadi, 2013). In fact, proponents of this view cite two reasons: First, the views of non-Muslim philosophers are largely in line with their own culture and social conditions and lack the generalizability to Muslim societies. In their view, in the five main fields of theology, epistemology, ontology, axiology and psychology, there are fundamental differences between the philosophical and educational views of Islam and other schools (Kaviani 2019; Rafiei, 2011). Second, since Muslims believe that Islam is the most perfect religion - which has a purpose and program for all aspects of human existence - so following other educational schools will be meaningless (Rafiei, 2013).

However, accepting these two reasons does not mean completely rejecting the ideas of non-Muslim educational philosophers. In fact, during the last four decades in Iran, there has been a relentless effort by the proponents of the theory of Islamic education to compare the intellectual, behavioral and educational ideas of Muslim thinkers with the views of world famous philosophers (Atashi; Golestani & Shamschiri, 2020; Azarbayjani 2006; Khazaei & Ramadan, 2013; Mohammadi; Mazidi & Beheshti; 2018;). These comparisons have three main purposes: First, to introduce the educational perspectives of Muslim philosophers and educators to the rest of the world; Second, to show the similarities and differences between the educational views of Muslim thinkers and non-Muslim philosophers, and third, to prove the superiority or equality of the views of Muslim philosophers with non-Muslim philosophers.

Of course, there is another point to be made here, and that is that these comparisons have not been made solely by Iranian researchers, and in fact they are not necessarily pioneers in this field. There is a strong research literature to prove this point. For example, Adamson, (2011, 2013, and

2016); Efremova, (2020); Guhin, (2020); Lahmar, (2020); Khalidi, (2003); Kharma, (2020); and Nysanbaev, (2009) each compared the views of Muslim scholars with their Western counterparts. Kuwaiti researcher Alwahaib (2017) has compared the theories of Descartes and Ghazali from the stage of doubt to certainty. Zamir (2010) compared Al-Ghazali and Descartes's ideas about skepticism and found that not only are their conclusions very different, but they are even different in the early pessimistic movements. Leaman (2009) compared the views of Western and Muslim philosophers at a conference in Tehran. Yaldir (2009) compared Descartes and Ibn Sina's views on imagination and found that both philosophers believed in the separation of soul and body. In his article Goolam (2003) tried to prove the influence of Ghazali and Ibn Sina as Muslim philosophers on Descartes' thoughts. Akdogan (2003) focuses on the roots of the philosophical ideas of Ghazali, Descartes and Hume.

In Iran similar research has been conducted in recent years. For example, the study of Khazaneha & Seljuk (2018) showed that the reasons for the demise of Descartes' knowledge classification are unificationism and the comprehensive inclusion of sciences - including quantitative and behavioral sciences and humanities - and the classification of knowledge instead of classification science. Mehdizadeh & Karbasizadeh Esfahani (2017) emphasize that according to Mulla Sadra, rational principles are fixed and eternal in themselves, while Descartes considers these principles to be God's creation. Belvardi (2017) showed that Sheikh Ansari believes in accepting the rules of reason and the rules of Sharia - which are documented in the rules of reason -. Muzaffar, Sajjadi, Bagheri Novparast & Sadeghzadeh Ghamsari (2017) believed that the use of Cartesian doubt in the principles of teaching-learning requires the passage of linear skepticism. Mehdizadeh & Imam Jomeh (2014) by comparing the meaning, essence and ontology of reason in the philosophy of Mulla Sadra and Descartes found that two philosophers mean true perception in the light of reason. Also, while Mulla Sadr pays attention to the types of reason, Descartes focuses on the method of using reason. Esfandiari (2015) by examining the anthropological basis of the distinction between reason and faith according to Thomas Aquinas and Descartes determined that according to Aquinas reason governs faith, while for Descartes there is nothing beyond reason.

Rad (2015) by examining the views of Sheikh Morteza Ansari came to the conclusion that he uses both tools of reason and narration in interpreting the verses of the Qur'an. Sovlati (2015) with a comparative study of the views of Descartes and Allameh Tabatabai believes that the epistemological goal and method of both are fundamentally different from each other. Motalebi & Jamshidi (2014) specified that from Sheikh Ansari's point of view, the reason of wisdom supports

the reason of *Sharia*. According to Boroumand & Ayatollah (2013), unlike Descartes, Jean Buridan tries to avoid extreme doubt. Sadri & Rahmani (2011) by examining the works of Descartes and Al-Ghazali came to the conclusion that from Al-Ghazali's point of view doubt is a plague that destroys human certainty and we must save ourselves from it, but from Descartes' perspective skepticism in matters and objects is not a plague, but a tool for acquiring new knowledge. According to Abdi (2008), Descartes in his epistemological system, after presenting methodical doubt, moves towards skepticism - which is a stage of irrationality. According to Omid (1999), Descartes believes in two types of absolute doubt and prescription doubt. Absolute doubt includes theoretical and practical matters but prescription doubt includes only theoretical doubt. Ghanbari (2008) believes that for Descartes reason is a method close to faith. As it was observed, Iranian scholars have not limited their attention only to comparing the opinions of philosophers and have also considered the analysis of the views of Shiite jurists from the perspective of the philosophy of education. The present study also follows this procedure and its aim is to compare the views of Sheikh Morteza Ansari - a Shiite *mujtahid* - with the French philosopher René Descartes.

The necessity of this research is based on two mental perceptions of the present researchers: First, the need of the current Iran society to reconsider the role of "reason" in the process of intellectual and educational development of the young generation. This need is especially important when we realize that half of the current population of Iran (about 42 million people) is less than 33 years old (Tasnim, 2020), young people who have been exposed to rapid technological and social changes and need help from a strong rational educational philosophy. The second mental conception of present researchers is based on the historical fact that both Descartes and Ansari played an undeniable role in the intellectual - and, of course, educational - reforms of their society regarding the place of reason. In fact, both scholars have, at some point in time, indirectly helped educational systems - to reject acceptance of ideas without rational consideration, to reject dogmatism, and to reject prejudice in the teaching / learning process (Jovana 2010, Sajjadi, 2011, Shamshiri 2007). Thus, the present researchers believe that in the first decades of this millennium, Iranian education specialists and philosophers - by looking again at the thoughts of these two great thinkers - can deny the mere transfer of past knowledge, teacher-centered, unintentional omission of learners in accepting content of textbooks, following stereotyped interpretations, and limiting the critical and questioning spirit of children and youth in the formal education system. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to describe the views of these two scientists on reason and then to determine the similarities and differences to provide possible guidance to the proponents of the theory of Islamic education.

## 2. Research Method

The present study is considered as a qualitative comparative research with a philosophical hermeneutic approach. Hermeneutics is the reading and understanding of discourses in relation to the interpretation of the text. In other words, hermeneutics is the art of understanding discourses such as language and texts and explaining the meaning of these discourses (Seebohm, 2004). To collect data, researchers have used the documentary method and to analyze the data (text comprehension) have used a historical and commentator-centered approach (Vaezi, 2001). The history-oriented approach in the analysis of texts pays attention to the temporal conditions influenced by events, traditions and presuppositions. Also, text analysis based on the interpreter-centered approach involves attention to the role of the reader of the works and transferring a set of meanings to the texts.

## 3. Findings

In this section, first a brief biography of Descartes and Ansari is presented to acquaint readers with their social / cultural and scientific roles. Then the theories of each scholar about reason are explained. In the third stage, the similarities and differences between the opinions of the two scientists are emphasized.

### 1. A brief Biography

Descartes (1650-1596), the great philosopher and mathematician of the Renaissance, lived in a rapidly evolving world. During this period, Descartes witnessed an ongoing religious conflict between French Catholics and Protestants and a fierce debate between proponents of Aristotle and Copernicus, Kepler & Galileo's new views on nature (Reiss 1991). Descartes's ideas influenced many of his contemporaries and later, and led to the development of theories of empiricism and rationalism (Ariew, 2015). Morteza Ansari (1781-1864) - known as Sheikh Ansari - one of the famous Shiite jurists and *mujtahids* was born in the city of Dezful, southwestern Iran and then studied in Najaf (Iraq). He has been nicknamed "*Khatam al-Fiqh wa al-Mujtahidin*" for writing works on the principles of religion and jurisprudence (Aghighi Bakhshayshi, 1993). Ansari also trained famous students such as Mirza Shirazi (A mujtahid who issued a fatwa banning tobacco), Seyyed Jamal al-Din al-Assadabadi (a political activist and Islamic ideologist), and Sheikh Fazlullah Nouri (Mujtahid and strong opponent of the constitutional movement). Sheikh Ansari was one of the supporters of *Velayat-e-Faqi's* theory.

## *2. Opinions about Reason*

### *A) Descartes*

Descartes initially faced two important issues of attainment of certain knowledge and relationship between body and soul (Sawday, 1995). He tried to answer his important questions in a systematic way. Therefore, he considered it necessary to apply four rules in any research (Smith, 2010): First) Improvisation: According to this rule, the researcher should accept only issues without research and reason that are completely certain and obvious. Second) Analysis: In order to study and recognize non-obvious problems, these problems should be broken down into their components and components should be examined one by one. Third) Composition: After examining and recognizing the components of a problem, it is necessary to combine those components and gain knowledge of the whole issue. Fourth) Counting affairs: The researcher must consider all the details during the analysis and composition of matters.

Using the first rule, Descartes examines all his previous ideas using imperative doubt. The only thing he can have no doubt about is his own thought and existence. As a result, he achieves the famous phrase "I think, therefore I am" and from there he builds his philosophy. Continuing his philosophical implications, Descartes achieves three certainties: certainty of his own existence, certainty of the existence of God; and certainty in the existence of the body (Naqibzadeh, 1993). He then speaks of the mind and body as two independent essences and considers the nature of the mind to be "thought" and the nature of the body to be "expansive" (Papkin & Sterol, 2006). Descartes' thoughts on reason are also noteworthy. He believes that wisdom is better distributed than anything in the world, meaning that all human beings have benefited from it (Descartes 1985). He considers reason as the truth of humanity and the difference between men and animal, although in his opinion, what distinguishes people is not the abundance of reason, but the way they use reason (Foroughi, 2006). Descartes does not explain the meaning of reason any further because he considers it a simple concept that is self-evident. Thus the method of using reason - more than its definition - is important to Descartes. In the sphere of Descartes' thought, method and intellect are only conceptually different from each other, but in fact they are one thing (Mojtahedi, 2006). In fact, the necessity of Descartes' proposed method is that the mind follows a single path to be certain. From "I doubt" to "I think" and from it to "I am" and to "God is" and finally to "God is the guarantor of my methodical identification" (Mojtahedi, 2006, 44).

### B) Sheikh Morteza Ansari

Sheikh Ansari lived in a period when in the Islamic world, two "Usuli" and "Akhbari" ideas were in fierce conflict with each other. Most jurists consider the Qur'an, Sunnah, consensus, and reason to be the sources for deriving rulings, but the *Akhbariyya* are limited to the Qur'an and Sunnah. During the 15th to 17th centuries, there was disagreement among Shiite jurists in this regard (Ansari, 2005). The attention of the *Akhbaris* to the hadiths, due to the dignity of the Imams among the Shiites, had many supporters and at the same time with the dominance of the Akhbaris in the Safavid period, it found a stronger position. Of course, it was not the case that the Akhbārīs - especially in the main Shiite centers - completely prevailed, but this idea was able to gain a foothold in the scientific centers of proponents of propaganda and generally influenced the thought of Shiite jurists (Mazaheri Kohanestani & Mira Ahmadi, 2012). This movement was also active against philosophy and Sufism at the same time and also existed among a number of *Usulis*. The ideas of the Akhbari School - which had extremistly invaded reason - led to a deep rift in Shiite ijtehad. With the emergence of jurists such as Vahid Behbahani and Sheikh Ansari - from the second half of the 15th century onwards - the Akhbaris have been in the minority and since then Imami jurisprudence has followed the ideas of the *Usulis* (Heidari, 2001). The three factors of Sheikh Ansari's success in confronting Akhbari School can be briefly explained:

- a) Argumentativeism and rationalism: In Sheikh Ansari's thoughts, superficial and rootless perceptions have no way and thoughts should be based on reason (Ansari, 2004).
- b) Consensus and productivity: Scholars usually deal with opposing views in two ways: first, selecting one view and proposing the other, and second, summarizing opposing views. From the study of the history of Islamic sciences, it is concluded that the scientists who have chosen the method of summarizing, have both innovated and added to the richness of Islamic heritage (Izadpanah, 1994). Following this method can be seen in all of Sheikh Ansari's books. In the conflict of hadiths, Ansari does not reject them and does not rush the narrations to the slaughterhouse of "*Taqiyyah*" (Bojnourdi, 1998).
- c) Free-thinking and holistic: Intelligence, speed of transmission, strong memory and critique of ideas were among the prominent and famous characteristics of Sheikh Ansari. For this reason, the position of scientists never prevented him from examining and criticizing their opinions (Ansari, 1990).

Sheikh Ansari uses his own analytical method in examining the opinions of different groups. In the first stage, he explains the issue. In the second step, he states the importance of the issue and distinguishes between special and general matters. In the third step, after configuring the issue, he explains the reason for the differences between different statements of experts. In the fourth step, he presents the pros and cons of each promise. In the fifth step, by presenting his theory and gathering evidence, he rejects the criticism (Elahi Khorasani, 2020). In jurisprudence, Sheikh Ansari did not suffice only with rules, principles and evidences, but also used the data of other sciences. Citing dozens of hadiths about the position of the intellect, he considers it as the esoteric and natural argument of God for human beings (Muzaffar, 1991). Thus, according to Sheikh Ansari, the precedence of narrative reason over rational reason is contrary to human nature. In his thought the appearance of a hadith - even if it is consecutive - in the presence of argument and reason, can not resist (Alikhani, 2011). In the supremacy of reason and rational rules, he proposes the view of the *Akhbarians* and criticizes it. *Akhbarians* do not rely on the certainty that comes from rational premise because of the many mistakes of reason (Manafi, 2017).

Sheikh Ansari defends reason against this statement. According to him, if the rational discovery of the rules of *Shari'a* is invalid due to a great mistake of reason, the discovery of the rules through *hadith* will be the same. In fact, due to the ambiguities that have pervaded the hadiths, many mistakes occur in it (Ghomashi, 2010). He considers the reason as a Sharia within man and the Sharia as an intellect outside man (Ibid., P. 23). Based on this thought, Sheikh Ansari considers the opinion of Sharia as the opinion of reason and does not see any conflict between the two.

### *3. Comparing the opinions of two scientists*

This first section discusses the scientific similarities between the two scientists. The first similarity was the profound impact of the scientific works of Descartes and Sheikh Ansari on their contemporary scientists and the groundwork for great reforms in various scientific fields. According to Cowen (2000), these two changed the "reading of the world". Descartes plays a key role in shaping modern philosophy in the Western world so that it can be divided into two periods before and after Descartes. Sheikh Ansari also introduced a new system in Islamic principles and jurisprudence with his innovations and caused a fundamental weakening of the school of *Akhbari* among Shiite jurists. The second important similarity between Descartes and Sheikh Ansari goes back to their intellectual sources, namely, the influence of the views of Greek philosophers (Ismaili 2019; Smith 2010). Of course, despite the time interval between Descartes and Sheikh Ansari

(about 2 centuries), there is no evidence of Descartes' influence on Sheikh Ansari's opinions on the role of reason.

The third and most important similarity between Descartes and Sheikh Ansari is the acceptance of the superiority of reason over other sources of knowledge. Descartes's attempt to give independence to reason to understand and consolidate the foundations of science and technology results in unquestioned domination of nature. Sheikh Ansari also considers reason as one of the forms of human existence that can go beyond nature (Mehdizadeh & Imam Juma'i, 2014). The fourth similarity is due to the acceptance that the similarity of the views of these two people is partly due to the fact that Cartesian reason does not deny its metaphysical roots, and this has brought him closer to the views of Muslim thinkers such as Sheikh Ansari. Another similarity is the influence of both thinkers on education and changing the traditional learning methods. In fact, although Descartes did not directly have a specific view of the teaching-learning methods, his most important influence on education can be attributed to his innovative view of reason to form real knowledge.

Descartes' view of the right or wrong of past knowledge caused a fundamental reform in teachers' view of the role of reason, the acquisition of knowledge regardless of traditions, names and prejudices, and the avoidance of excesses. Sheikh Ansari also caused the dynamism of religious thought through the preference of reason over tradition, the appearance of narrations and verses, and consensus in religious schools (Motalebi & Jamshidi, 2014). In other words, both Descartes and Sheikh Ansari were forced to confront dogmatic ideas that rejected change and hated accepting innovation. Descartes was afraid of the opposition of the clergy to his thoughts and Ansari was forced to defend religion against those who promoted intellectual stagnation by denying reason (Mazaheri Kohanestani & Mirahmadi, 2012). In addition to these similarities, we can also see differences in the views of Descartes and Sheikh Ansari.

The first difference goes back to Descartes' view of the broad function of reason in all fields of knowledge and Sheikh Ansari's special emphasis on the function of reason in deriving religious rulings. In fact, Descartes, as a philosopher, sought to build a new epistemology, while Ansari focused more on the function of reason in deriving religious knowledge. The second difference is that Cartesian skepticism is all-encompassing and profound, and Ansari skepticism is cross-sectional and relative. In other words, Cartesian skepticism is constructor and destroyer of foundations, while Sheikh Ansari's skepticism do not claim to deny common intellectual

foundations. The third difference is that Cartesian skepticism is self-centered but Ansari skepticism is other-centric. Descartes first doubts his existence and tries to prove himself first with the help of reason, while Sheikh Ansari's doubt is focused on different opinions and proving the correct opinion of himself or others with the help of reason.

The fourth difference is that Descartes's attempt to prove the superiority of the human intellect - as the only reliable source - for the acquisition of true knowledge, while Sheikh Ansari views the reason as one of the most important tools for the acquisition of religious knowledge. The fifth difference is that for Descartes, reason is a tool for destroying all the right and wrong thought structures of the past and establishing a new perspective on things, phenomena and the world. On the contrary, Sheikh Ansari sees reason only as an instrument for describing the various aspects of a problem, identifying existing perspectives for solving it, and explaining the strengths and weaknesses of solutions. The sixth difference is that Descartes relied on his own intellect and ignored other sources of knowledge. Descartes first used the method of introversion by denying others and wants to deny or prove the correctness of the beliefs of his predecessors only with the help of his reason, while Sheikh Ansari relies on the previous sources such as verses, narrations, tradition and consensus and judgment about each with the help of reason.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was a comparatively narrative of the position of reason in the thoughts of Descartes and Sheikh Ansari from the perspective of education. The necessity of this research arose from the fact that the Islamic world - and especially the Shiite society of Iran - in view of the developments of modern life still needs to re-read and think about the ideas and opinions of scientists who in the past caused a great intellectual reform in the sphere of thought and education system. Undoubtedly, the thoughts of Descartes and Sheikh Ansari from this perspective can still have many lessons for Iranians. Accordingly, the first findings of the study indicated that Descartes and Sheikh Ansari were very similar in terms of their great influence on the thinkers of their time and "intellectual flows". This finding supports the research of Akdamkan (2003), Gholam (2003), Khazaneh & Seljeqeh (2018), Lehman (2009), Yaldir (2009) and Zamir (2010), each of which has shown how Descartes and Sheikh Ansari with their works divided the history of thought into two periods of before and after of themselves. Another similarity between Descartes and Sheikh Ansari - in the words of Francis Bacon - was in breaking "mental idols." Descartes first resorted to doubt to break the mental idols. Cartesian doubt was not a fruitless

unbridled doubt emanating from a disabled or sick mind. Descartes' doubt is the path to access to certainty and the product of human thought. Therefore, nowadays this doubt has become one of the essential and inviolable principles in all scientific research. Sheikh Ansari also had to defeat the idols that fought against any kind of intellectual creativity in the name of hadith, tradition and narrations. This finding is consistent with findings of Adamson (2011, 2013, and 2016); Khalidi (2003), Belvardi (2017), Esfandiari (2015), Rad (2015) and Motalebi & Jamshidi (2014).

The findings of this study also indicate differences between Descartes and Sheikh Ansari's views on reason and its function and scope. While Descartes sees reason as the only real tool for measuring the accuracy of knowledge, Ansari considers it one of the most important instruments for discovering true knowledge. The findings of Iranian researchers such as Esfandiari (2015), Rad (2015), Boroumand & Ayatollah (2013) and Sadri & Rahmani (2011) are similar to the findings of the present study because these researchers also found differences in the interpretive views of people such as Ghazali, Thomas Aquinas and Sheikh Ansari and Descartes about role of reason. The final findings are in line with the findings of Khorasani (2020); Cowen, 2000, Ismaili (2019); Izadpanah (1994); Joanna (2010); Sajjadi (2011), Shamshiri (2007) and Smith (2010), which have shown that although both Descartes and Sheikh Ansari were not an "Educator", but by emphasizing the position of reason, they have been able to undermine traditional teaching-learning methods in educational settings.

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