

Two 17th Century Intellectual Giants: A Comparison of Descartes and Al-Rānīrī's Metaphysical and Scientific Framework

Dua Tokoh Intelektual Abad Ke-17: Sebuah Perbandingan Kerangka Metafizik dan Sainifik antara Descartes dan Al-Rānīrī

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Abstract: One of the curious instances in history of ideas is the different outcome seen with regards to the intellectual traditions in the West and the Muslim world in the 17th century. In Europe, the mechanistic philosophy of science paved the way for the Enlightenment period and industrialization and one of philosophers responsible for this is René Descartes who charted a new epistemological and metaphysical approach on which modern science stands. However, little mention is placed on the intellectual tradition in the Malay world in the same period where Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī managed to elucidate the holistic metaphysical system of Islam in the Malay Language. In doing this, a scientific spirit is injected into the language and the knowledge tradition of the region. This paper aims to compare and contrast Descartes' and al-Rānīrī's intellectual project and seeks to answer the question on why the two projects have different outcome: a secular scientific revolution in Descartes's case but not in al-Rānīrī's case. A brief historical survey of these two figures and their times will be attempted followed by a philosophical analysis of their metaphysical-epistemological systems to understand what accounts for their differences/similarities. It is found that the difference was a result of different philosophical assumptions for their framework of science. The paper concludes by drawing attention to the need for a cogent philosophy of science drawn from Islamic metaphysical worldview to prepare Malaysian Muslims for the 21st century, following the steps of al-Rānīrī which did the same in the 17th century.

Keywords: Al-Rānīrī, Descartes, epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of science;

Abstrak: Satu pemerhatian yang dapat dibuat apabila meneliti sejarah perkembangan idea apabila membandingkan tradisi keilmuan Barat dan Islam pada abad ke-17 ialah hasil yang berbeza yang dicapai melalui tradisi ini. Di Eropah, falsafah sains mekanikal membawa kepada Zaman Pencerahan dan industrialisasi dan salah seorang ahli falsafah yang menyumbang ke arah perubahan ini ialah René Descartes dengan kaedah barunya dalam epistemologi dan metafizik yang seterusnya membentuk asas sains moden. Namun begitu, tradisi keilmuan di Alam Melayu pada masa yang sama kurang diberi perhatian di mana Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī juga turut mempunyai sumbangan dalam menghuraikan sistem metafizik Islam dalam Bahasa Melayu. Usaha ini berjaya menyuntik semangat saintifik ke dalam

Bahasa Melayu dan tradisi ilmu di rantau ini. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk membuat perbandingan antara projek keilmuan Descartes dan al-Rānīrī dan mencari jawapan kepada perbezaan ketara antara hasil kedua-dua projek tersebut di mana projek keilmuan Descartes menghasilkan revolusi sains yang sekular tetapi tidak untuk projek keilmuan al-Rānīrī. Tinjauan ringkas mengenai kedua-dua tokoh dan zaman mereka juga akan disertakan dalam kajian ini manakala analisa falsafah akan dibuat ke atas sistem metafizik dan epistemologi kedua-duanya. Ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan asas persamaan dan perbezaan mereka. Hasil analisa ini menunjukkan perbezaan antara hasil projek keilmuan mereka ialah disebabkan oleh andaian-andaian falsafah yang berbeza dalam membentuk kerangka sains mereka. Kajian ini membuat kesimpulan bahawa sebuah falsafah sains yang dibentuk dengan pandangan metafizik Islam amat perlu untuk menyediakan masyarakat Islam di Malaysia untuk abad ke-21.

Kata kunci: Al-Rānīrī, Descartes, epistemologi, metafizik, falsafah sains;

Introduction

A new age (*zaman baru*) is defined as an age that has important characteristics and nature which distinguishes it from the previous age as well as having a different worldview that gives birth to a new spirit for the people (al-Attas, 1972, p. 3). The modern age is called as such because its knowledge system is based on rational thinking, while its societal system prioritizes individual freedom from an irrational belief system whereas the pre-modern age is based on mythical beliefs and aesthetic explanations (al-Attas, 1972, p. 4). It has to be noted that for al-Attas, based on his definition of modern age, modernity in Europe is not in the 17th century, but it is the period where rational Greek works were first introduced as it is these that furnished Christian thinkers with a way to argue for religious truths rationally, and not relying on mystical/mythical elaboration or aesthetic ones.

This differs from contemporary designation of the Modern Age where generally, it is understood as the age where the influence of the Church has been curbed, freeing philosophers and thinkers to theorize beyond the limits set by theological doctrine. European historians of ideas would designate modernity in Europe as having its beginning in the 17th century and its consolidation in the 18th century (Koselleck, 2004; Copleston, 1994). 17th century Europe is a time of rapid changes and transformation in philosophy and science; both the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment have their beginnings in this century. In Europe's historiography, this period marks the change from the Medieval Period (1100–1700) to the early Modern Period. For a Muslim thinker like al-Attas, although increased rationality is a mark of modernity, it does not mean that the influence of religion is automatically decreased. The history of Islam

shows that reason and religion can go hand in hand and is the foundation for the building of great civilizations. On the other hand, contemporary European discourse looks at the time where Christian monarchs rule alongside an influential Church as a regressive age.

17th century Europe saw the abandonment of classical philosophy to make way for a mechanistic and mathematized approach in studying nature. Classical philosophy consists of the assimilation of Aristotelian metaphysics as well as some Neoplatonic influence into the Catholic Church's doctrine, after some early restrictions in the 12th and 13th centuries. Therefore, when Aristotelian natural philosophy and metaphysics were called into question by several thinkers, the Church took this as an affront, condemning these thinkers and suppressing innovative ideas that go outside of its accepted doctrine. However, in the 17th century, despite the occurrence of perhaps the most famous example of one such incident of suppression, the condemnation of Galileo Galilei, alternatives to the Aristotelian method of studying nature are gaining grounds. This is the setting where René Descartes found himself in in the 17th century: he devised a new rationalistic epistemology and, in so doing, was often labeled as the Father of Modern Philosophy who ushered in a new age of European intellectual thought (Russell, 1967; Copleston, 1994; Gilson, 1999; Scruton, 2002). This was often seen as a triumph of human reason against the bind of authoritative forms of religion, rooted in Descartes' rejection of all accepted knowledge including the ones sanctioned and propagated by the Church.

How about the development of intellectual thought in the Malay world? Al-Attas in his work mentioned that the arrival of Islam to this region commenced the history of rational thinking and systematized body of knowledge

and exposed the people to rational Greek thought (al-Attas, 1972, pp. 20-21). He also lamented the fact that not much study is shone on Muslim scholarship in the Malay Archipelago with this thinking in mind. The period between 1400–1700 is deemed as the second phase of Islamization of the Malay Archipelago where theological and metaphysical Sufi works are produced by thinkers to consolidate the beliefs of Muslim Malays (Wan Daud & Muammar, 2009, p. 121).ⁱ This paper is written with this in mind, to show that it is important to put the history of Malay-Muslim intellectual thought in context with other scientific and rational civilizations. The 17th century is chosen because in both the Malay world and in Europe, a new *zeitgeist* consolidates itself to the people which then charts the direction of intellectual thought in that region, although as we will see below, they lead to different outcomes.

While it is easy to assume that there was no scientific revolution in the 17th century Malay Archipelago like the one in Europe, there is a shift into a higher and more intellectual discourse, marked by the modernization of the Malay language through its use as the medium to convey high metaphysical discussions, transforming it into a rational language (al-Attas, 1972, p. 21). This paper agrees with al-Attas in saying that there is scientific advancement in the Malay world in 17th century: when science is understood as the attempt to study or investigate nature with an organized method for exploring it, leading to factual or theoretical claims that have a standard wherewith the validity of these claims can be judged (Lindberg, 2007, p. 2). This is of course a broader definition of science compared to how it is usually understood now, where science is taken as only based on the experimental method and technological approach. The claims of scientific advancement in the Malay world being put forth by this article is of a more articulate and advanced manner, one that encompasses the entire reality and not just the empirical one, therefore it includes the enrichment of the Malay language and Malay literature in its discussion of the nature of reality. Just as how Europe in the 17th century saw Descartes and his peers charting a new direction of science, al-Rānīrī in Aceh also contributed significantly to the scientific venture in the Malay world, therefore justifying the comparison made between the two thinkers. Thus, this paper aims to compare Descartes and al-Rānīrī's intellectual project in the 17th century.

Methodology

This paper uses a comparative method. There are several stark differences between the two: Descartes' new philosophical method facilitated the birth of a secular science, whereas al-Rānīrī's intellectual works contribute

to an intensification of Islamization in the region. The reason as to why this difference occurred is mainly due to Descartes and al-Rānīrī's possessing different metaphysical frameworks. A brief historical survey of these two figures and their times will be done to set the context. Next, a philosophical analysis of their metaphysical-epistemological systems will be discussed to show the different epistemological assumptions that form their respective frameworks of science.

Literature Review

Al-Attas gave a historical and political context to Aceh during the time of al-Rānīrī, as well as his biography and a comprehensive list of works in his two books on al-Rānīrī (al-Attas, 1966; al-Attas, 1986). It is in al-Attas' preface to his *Commentary on the Hujjat* that he pointed to the integrated metaphysical system elaborated by al-Rānīrī and its significance since it is the first such work in the Malay world. Al-Rānīrī also contributed to the consolidation of a rational religious thinking framework of the Malays via his theological work, *Durr al-Farā'id* (Wan Daud & Muammar, 2009) and to the codification of *zakat* in the Malay world via his work, *al-Sirat al-Mustaqīm* (Rosele, et al., 2018). Al-Rānīrī's discussion on the ontological status of things as elaborated in his *Latā'if al-Asrār* has also been summarized (Uthman, 2011) — altogether, these works give us a glimpse of the intricacy and high intellectuality of the 17th century Malay discourse on theology and devotional practices. The historical elements of his works have been extensively mapped, showing that not only does his encyclopaedic *Bustān al-Ṣalatīm* contain historical elements, but we find this also in his works on theology and *taṣawwuf* (Hamzah, Mohd Noor, & Denisova, 2017).

Al-Rānīrī's writings had a large impact on Islamic education in Indonesia, as seen in the popularity of his works in the *pesantren* and *madrasah* of the 17th century (Hamisi & Fahm, 2017). Taken together, all these greatly contribute to our understanding of the multi-faceted aspects of al-Rānīrī's thought, making him on par with other scholars in the Muslim world whose expansive writings in nature are not just limited to a single field. Most of the writings we have now on al-Rānīrī are textual studies and philosophical analysis of his thought; indeed such efforts are still needed due to the large corpus of al-Rānīrī's writings. However, we have yet to see a comparison done on al-Rānīrī with Descartes or his other contemporaries from the Western world, or any other milieu for that matter, although the fact of their being in the same era has been mentioned before. Through such a comparison, this paper therefore seeks to add another dimension to the study of al-Rānīrī and the 17th century Malay intellectual tradition. An exploration of Descartes'

intellectual project and his overarching influence will be given, followed by al-Rānīrī's own. Finally, a discussion of their differences from the metaphysical perspective is done.

Descartes' Intellectual Project and Outcome

Biography of Descartes

René Descartes was born in France's central province of Touraine in 1596. Both his father and grandfather were physicians and he was educated in the famed Jesuit college of La Flèche in France, where he spent eight years of his life studying the classics, liberal arts, philosophy and theology under the stringent academic curriculum taught at the college (Gaukroger, 1995). Over the course of his adult life, Descartes would move around frequently in cities and towns of France and the Netherlands. He died in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1650. Among Descartes' famous works include the *Discourse on Method* (1637), *Meditations to First Philosophy* (1641), and *Principles of Philosophy* (1644). It is to be remembered that apart from being a philosopher, Descartes was also a mathematician/scientist who had devised new theories and formulas in the field of geometry, hydrostatics, and optics.

As for his religious belief, although he uses a methodology that differed from Church-sanctioned rational methodology (Aristotelian philosophy), he was deeply motivated by theological concerns such as the existence of God, God's power, and the immortality of the soul. From his correspondences with other philosophers and theologians of his time (he corresponded with a number of famous thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and Pierre Gassendi), it could be seen that he lived a life of active learning, writing, and experimenting in collaboration as well as competition with his contemporaries. His ideas and name were already well-known during his lifetime in Western European countries, such that his theories in geometry and mathematics as well as philosophy were taught in universities.

Descartes' new metaphysics

Aristotelian metaphysics formed the scientific framework during the Medieval Period. An important feature of this is substance metaphysics, where things are understood as substances and made up of form and matter. The four causes of Aristotle are another feature in this metaphysics to explain how things come about. These causes are material cause, which provides the matter for a thing; the formal cause, which gives it its form; the efficient cause, which is the immediate agent that brings it about; and the final cause, a purpose that the thing is

intended to serve. Matter is said to have potentiality, and the form that is given to matter actualizes this potentiality. Therefore, substance metaphysics, the four causes, and the scheme of potentiality-actuality make up the effective scientific explanatory model under which medieval thinkers worked. As for the soul in this scheme, it is seen as the form to the body (matter), or an entelechy, which moves and gives life to the body (Aquinas, 1948, originally published 1485). For the Christian Scholastics, the final cause is always assigned to God: that is, man is the only being who has a rational part in his soul in order to contemplate God, thus giving due prominence and place to God in the scientific scheme of the day.

Descartes' role in the history of philosophy was to provide a justification for the rejection of all this. As a mathematician, Descartes thought there was evident need for a proper and systematic methodology, one that will provide a sound, clear conclusion from which a properly scientific theory of nature can be built. This is what he wished to do for philosophical problems, seeing that the mathematical method works well in other fields. Therefore, philosophy needs a starting point where everyone can agree on, one untainted by dogmatic belief. This explains why in proposing this new method, he suggested that all truth claims be subjected to radical doubt (Descartes, 1982, originally published 1644, p. 3). The senses too must be doubted because it can sometimes mislead us (Descartes, 1982, originally published 1644, p. 4).

Thus, he is left with the only thing that is indubitable and certain: the *cogito*, or the 'I think', for even if man is to doubt everything, there is one entity that is left whose existence is certain; and this is the entity that is doing the doubting and thinking, i.e., the 'I' (Descartes, 1982, originally published 1640, p. 17). It is this 'I' that will be made the judge and arbiter of what things or theories are to be believed. The certainty of God and other things (and other minds) are established using the same starting point of the 'I' or the 'Ego'. Therefore, although he discarded previous philosophies, he would arrive at the same conclusions as those Scholastic philosophers since he is ultimately still a Christian. What separates him from them is that he has a superior, certain method that were anyone else is to be in doubt, they too can regain their certainty by the same steps that Descartes has outlined. In other words, he is providing a method as formulaic as the one found in mathematical methods, but utilized for philosophical enquiries (Gilson, 1999, pp. 105, 111; Burrt, 2003, p. 106).

Outcome of the new metaphysics

However, in importing the mathematical method to philosophy, Descartes was in effect treating all objects of inquiry in philosophy as an analyzable and quantified object (Gilson, 1999, p. 113). The danger to this is that not all such objects can be subjected to a quantification or simplification, especially objects of philosophical enquiry like the soul, God, and free will. Descartes' philosophy started with three basic things: extended matter (*res extensa*), which is the physical thing; thinking thing (*res cogitans*) or non-physical/spiritual thing; and God. For our world, what is applicable is only the first two. Note that he uses matter to denote the physical thing: unlike Aristotelian substance, matter is understood as wholly physical, impenetrable; whereas substance in the Aristotelian scheme consists of the non-physical and abstract form, giving a space for the human soul. The new mechanistic philosophy also influenced him to imagine the physiology of man as a mechanical thing, with the matter being linked and moved by another matter. Mechanical philosophy is an alternative approach to study nature which uses matter and motion to explain natural phenomena (Roux, 2018, p. 26). The mechanistic model also only relies on efficient cause; it is the agent or another thing that causes something to immediately move, much like a machine where one turning wheel moves other parts of the machine.

The elimination of final cause results in an understanding of man that lacks the notion of a final purpose as to why he was created, as well as a concept of the soul that forms a unity with the body. The idea of the thinking 'I' in Descartes is simply a mental thing, not a rich conception of the soul that admits of the understanding of the Creator, the afterlife, or religious concepts such as sin or reward. This new metaphysical framework of man also lacks the idea of the soul that has the potentiality to intellect and cognize spiritual things, like in the Aristotelian-Catholic understanding of a rational soul. What this means to epistemology is that intuition or religiously inspired revelation has no place as a legitimate channel of knowledge. Human reason is made the ultimate judge and the ultimate channel that will lead to certainty. It is no surprise that the direction of intellectual thought in Europe after Descartes leans heavily towards man's own reason, whereas intuition (*ilhām*) and revelation (*wahy*) are deemed non-scientific.

Historians and philosophers of science have noted that among the main differences between modern science and classical science is the mathematization of physical space (Ariew, 2016). One of the notable features of mechanical philosophy is its insistence that its laws are universal and applicable to the natural world, which is assumed to be homogenous (Roux, 2018, p. 34). The impact of Descartes

to modern science is the confidence to apply the mathematical and mechanical model to all objects of enquiry, be it physical or non-physical. Descartes' metaphysical dualism of matter (body) and mind also problematizes the reality of the soul: if the body is moved or effected by the soul—and in the mechanical scheme, it works only via efficient cause—this means that they must be of similar nature, despite the mind being an abstract entity. This line of reasoning leads to physicalism or materialism, where the mind is seen as part of the body, and the term 'soul' and its faculties or powers are debunked as other concepts in medieval science, such as 'ether' or 'corpuscle'. Even the non-physicalist position would still attribute the mind as arising from the physiochemical activity of the brain. ^h

In philosophy, the impact of Descartes' skepticism would last until today, where the doubting of revelation or religious truth-claims is normalized, and all these truth-claims can be subjected under rational thinking. This is not to say that religious truth-claims and rationality are at odds, but rather, not all religious experience and truth claims can be subjected under rational proof and argumentation. Descartes' attack on religious dogma and Aristotelian science managed to sow seeds of doubt into these two, relegating and removing both from the crown of science and philosophy in the modern period. In ecology, Cartesian dualism has been blamed as the cause of ecological crisis for relegating entities other than the Ego as objects to be manipulated (Kureethadam, 2017) while decolonial thinkers have attributed Eurocentric modernity to the same dualism (Grosfoguel, 2013). To conclude, Descartes' method of doubt changes what is accepted as legitimate channels of knowledge, and this epistemological approach effectively produces a new metaphysical understanding based on a mechanical assumption of nature. One resulting legacy of this is the mind-body dualism, the transforming of the soul to mind, and the materialization of the mind. Doubt as a starting point in science is elevated, while the source of knowledge from revelation is relegated. The science that is produced from this kind of intellectual project is one that we are familiar with: a secular science with no space for God and religion.

Al-Rānīrī's intellectual project and outcome

Biography of al-Rānīrī

As for al-Rānīrī, he was born Nūr al-Dīn ibn 'Alī ibn Ḥasanjī ibn Muḥammad Ḥamīd al-Rānīrī in Ranir, Gujerat (al-Attas, 1986, p. 4). No exact birth date or year is known about him, although it is inferred that he was born towards the end of the 16th century (al-Attas, 1986, p. 4).ⁱⁱ He is of Arab and Malay descent (his mother is a

Malay) and he would have studied in Hadramawt on account of his Yemeni lineage. In 1637, he was given the office of *Mufti* by the Sultan of Aceh, Sultan Iskandar Thānī (1610-1641), where he produced religious works written in Malay relating to *fiqh* and *shāri'ah* such as on marriage, food and drink, social and personal ethics, as well as theological works relating to metaphysics and *taṣawwuf* (al-Attas, 1986, p. 9). Such works were the first written in Malay and were in line with the intense Islamizing effort spearheaded by al-Rānīrī for the Muslims in the Malay Archipelago. He also served under Aceh's Sultanah Taj al-'Ālam Ṣafīyyat al-Dīn Shāh (1641–1675), the wife of Sultan Iskandar Thānī who became the Sultanah after the demise of her husband. He returned to Ranir in 1644 and died there in 1658. He is a Muslim scholar of the Shāfi'ī school of law; in theology he followed the Ash'ariyyah school; like his family, he is a member of the Rifā'iyyah *Ṣūfi* order. During his years as a *mufti*, he engaged in polemics and debate against the false or deviant Wujudīyyah, a group that had distorted the *Ṣūfi* doctrine of *wahdatul wujud*. Al-Rānīrī devoted many works to clarify to the Malay public the right *Ṣūfi*s from the deviant ones. Among his works include *Ṣirāt al-Mustaqīm*, *Bustān al-Salāṭīn*, *Laṭā'if al-Asrār* and *Hujjat al-Ṣiddīq li daf' al-Zindīq*, among others. The first is a *fiqh* book written in Malay; the second is an encyclopedic work of the history of the world, the prophets, and kings written in Malay over seven books; while the latter two are works on *taṣawwuf* and metaphysics, also in Malay.

Rānīrī's metaphysics and epistemology

Al-Rānīrī's first book written in the Malay world was *Durr al-Farā'id bi Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id*, which is a translation of al-Taftazānī's commentary to *'Aqā'id al-Nasafī*. The *'Aqā'id al-Nasafī* is written by Imam al-Nasafī, a 12th century Muslim scholar, and it is a short instructive text that lists the basic beliefs a Muslim must have regarding God, the nature of things, on knowledge, what constitutes sinful acts, as well as topics regarding Islamic governance, among others. In other words, this book touches on metaphysics, epistemology, and theological concerns that form the worldview of the Muslims (Wan Daud & Muammar, 2009, p. 128). The text of *'Aqā'id al-Nasafī* has already been introduced into the Malay world in the second half of the 16th century and the topics touched on were already discussed by Muslims in Aceh before al-Rānīrī's time (al-Attas, 1988, pp. 33–34). Therefore, al-Rānīrī's translation is not to introduce the topic, but to provide a Malay commentary to an already well-known text. It is important to note that even before al-Rānīrī, the intellectual atmosphere in Aceh was already advanced enough to include discussions of metaphysics and epistemology. It is believed that the selection of this

commentary as his first work in the Malay world was a carefully considered choice because of the importance of correct beliefs or correct worldview for a Muslim to properly observe the *shāri'ah* (Wan Daud & Muammar, 2009, p. 137).

A significant feature of the text is the explanation of epistemic sources and the ontological status of things (metaphysics). The text explains that the sources of knowledge are three, which are the intellect, the five senses, and true report (*khabar ṣādiq*) (al-Attas, 1988, p. 53). On the nature of things, the text affirms that these things are real and established, and that our human reason can know about them (al-Attas, 1988, p. 53). Note that the intellect refers to rational thinking, the five senses to empirical observation, while true report includes Revelation (*wahy*). Al-Rānīrī in the *Durr al-Farā'id* emphasizes the importance of right reasoning, which is an important aspect of assent for believers; as Wan Mohd Nor and Khalif Muammar rightly point out, this is proof of the rational and scientific tendency propagated by al-Rānīrī, following the steps of other Muslim scholars before him (Wan Daud & Muammar, 2009, p. 138). In the *Laṭā'if al-Asrār* and the *Hujjat al-Ṣiddīq*, al-Rānīrī explains in detail another source of knowledge: intuition (*ilhām*), which includes spiritual unveiling (*kashf*) and direct spiritual testing (*dhawq*) (al-Attas, 1986, p. 87; Uthman, 2011, p. 35).

Another important historical context is that Islamization in the Malay world during the 16th and 17th centuries was facing a challenge from those who claimed to follow *taṣawwuf*, but whose metaphysics were against the creed of Islam; these are the pseudo-Sufis, the deviating *Wujudīyyah* (al-Attas, 1988, p. 33; Uthman, 2011, p. 12). The *Laṭā'if* and the *Hujjat*, unlike the *Durr al-Farā'id* which is more instructive in nature, go through different metaphysical theories of the philosophers (by which is meant the Peripatetic philosophers), the pseudo-Sufis, the logicians, and the theologians (*mutakallimīn*) in detail. The *Hujjat* is the first such work in Malay to explain the difference between correct interpretation of the *Ṣūfi* metaphysicians' doctrine from the false ones (al-Attas, p. 46). Al-Rānīrī affirms the existence of God as necessary and that the plurality of things that we see are in fact the accidents of existence—determinations of Existence actualized in modes and aspects into what seems to be particular existences, to our limited rational and empirical capacity (al-Attas, 1986, p. 240; Uthman, 2011, p. 195). However, this does not mean that all particular things in the world are God; i.e. that God is immanent in creation, leading to the view that God is in us mere mortals. This is the view of the pseudo-Sufis that al-Rānīrī attacked; as he explained, it is only the view of those that have yet to perfect their spiritual unveiling (al-Attas, 1986, pp. 138-139). His explanations in the *Hujjat*

regarding the relation of God and the world and the ontological status of both, to the modern student of philosophy, are reminiscent of philosophical discussions found in ibn Sīnā as well as that of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, but in conclusion, it follows that of al-Ghazālī and other high *Ṣūfī* metaphysicians before him like Jami, whom he quoted frequently. It is not the place of this paper to go into detail of his metaphysics as other writers before us have written extensively about it, but suffice to say that it is indeed amazing that 17th century Malay works had included complex philosophical discussion such as these. As a point of comparison, such discussions, as part of university curriculum nowadays, will only be taught to advanced students of philosophy in either their upper-undergraduate years or at the Master’s level.

Another interesting thing to note is that these works are all written in Malay. This shows al-Rānīrī’s excellent command of Malay in rendering complex philosophical ideas as well as Arabic and Greek technical terms and concepts into Malay. As pointed out by Wan Suhaimi, the translation method employed by al-Rānīrī in these highly philosophical works attest to his mastery and sharp grasp of the issues as well as the different groups’ doctrine (Wan Abdullah, 2003). Not all of these terms have their equivalent in Malay, so some terms are retained in their original Greek and Arabic renderings (e.g. *sufasta’iyyah* and the many Arabic technical terms in *taṣawwuf*), resulting in an enriched vocabulary in the Malay language, which also serves as an exposure for the Malay readers to the technical terms used in that field (Wan Abdullah, 2003, p. 160).

Comparison between Descartes and al-Rānīrī

In epistemology, it can be seen that Al-Raniri, from the very beginning, affirms that the channels of knowledge are reason, empirical observation, and true report, which includes revelation. In his works on metaphysics, he affirms another epistemological source, which is the spiritual experience of the true *Ṣūfī* metaphysicians. Hence, there is no dualism arising from his method that separates religion and rational thinking, or religion and science. Both the enrichment of the Malay language and the holistic epistemological framework result in a properly Islamic foundation for the investigation of nature and reality— in other words, a truly Islamic philosophy of science. As a result, al-Raniri’s scientific framework does not lead to theories that negate religious truth, but instead advances the Islamization of the Malay Archipelago. The nature of things, in al-Raniri’s very first work in the Malay world, are established, contrary to what the Sophists said. This precludes the radical doubt approach that Descartes had

chosen. Descartes, in his quest for a scientific and rational philosophy, doubted even the existence of things, thinking that he may be dreaming. The ontological affirmation in the creed of al-Nasafi shows that this kind of skepticism is unnecessary, not because the Muslim mind is uncritical, but because the kind of radical doubt unnecessarily limits the epistemological channels and in turn will distort our understanding of Reality.

Descartes’ conception of man, as summarized above, has led to a materialistic and mechanistic view of man, and the elevation of human reason over revelation. Al-Raniri, in the framework of a metaphysics that admits of the Absolute Existence of God, would instead regard the soul as a relative or particular existence created out of the unfolding of existence into lower degrees of existence. This does not mean that there is an identity between the creature and the Creator since existential gaps do exist logically and ontologically. Rather, what this means in the grand scheme of things is that man and God are not entirely separate; they don’t inhabit separate realms as dictated by Cartesian duality. The soul, too, is not severed from the world of unmanifested Reality, making things such as sins, punishment and rewards in the afterlife, duty of the self, *imān*, and God’s grace, all religious concepts that were rendered meaningless by secular science a real thing, similar to empirical entities.

Al-Raniri’s legacy is to bequeath a *tawhidic* framework of knowledge where God as the Absolute Existence is constantly involved in the world as the giver of existence to all existent things. To use the Aristotelian language of final purpose, in this scheme, man’s final purpose is tied to his ontological nature – a ‘being’ who is in debt to his Creator for his very existence, and whose duty in this world is as what God has outlined. The realization of other things in the natural world as modes and aspects of God’s existence will allow him to give proper respect and dignity to them and not see others, whether living beings or not, as objects to be manipulated, forming a revelation-based ethical framework.

Below is a table summarizing the different features between the two 17th century thinkers.

Table 1. Comparison between Descartes and al-Raniri

Descartes	Features	al-Raniri
The self	Starting point	Allah as the Absolute Existence
Reason	Sources of knowledge	Reason/intellect, five senses, true report, intuition
Uncertain, doubted, cannot know	Nature of reality	Real and established, and

about them from true report or five senses		we can know about them
Unspecified	Ethics and morality	Revelation-based
None	Teleology	Present – towards Allah’s pleasure, to know God

Conclusion

In conclusion, the differences between Descartes and al-Rānīrī is due to the different metaphysical-epistemological framework underlying their intellectual project. In Descartes’ case, the metaphysical understanding of man and the world as well as God is limited because of his epistemological approach that only admits rational thinking. The truth of revelation and intuition will no doubt be neglected in the resulting scientific framework. There is no denying that science after Descartes is a great venture in investigating the nature of the world and many wonderful technological advances have been achieved due to this. However, the success of science in the technological aspect fails to address the fundamental ‘why’ questions. The meaning and interpretation imputed to current scientific framework is still uncertain and at best are guess works. The venture of science that affirms human reason as the highest arbiter and judge of the truth of reality and only admits the mechanistic framework as its explanatory model is not a science that has been actualized to its full potential.

On the other hand, the intellectual project of al-Rānīrī shows that religion and science can work alongside one another and this is rooted in the higher Sufi’s own experience of the true nature of existence. The preliminary survey that we give to al-Rānīrī’s intellectual project shows that there is a lively culture of intellectual discourse in the 17th century and that this was motivated and rooted in the religious experience. The result is the enrichment of the Malay language which prepares the mind of the Malay people to receive and discuss highly philosophical concepts. The heritage of this Islamized Malay language is in such a way that it is supposed to guide subsequent Malay speakers of the metaphysical and epistemological worldview in order to investigate the nature of reality. Unfortunately, this Islamization process was disrupted when all of the Malay world fell under the administration of European colonizers, who changed our education system (Al-Attas, 1972). Several contemporary scholars have undertaken the task to formulate a philosophy of science that is agreeable to our Muslim belief and with respect to the Islamic intellectual tradition, to this we can

include Al-Attas as a primary example. Therefore, those scientific-minded Muslims who wish to find an Islamic framework of science are not starting the journey blind. Unlike the Spanish poet Antonio Machado’s famous poem which recounted a traveler who must create the way forward by creating the path himself, we have the path already open to us, created by previous Malay-Muslim scholars like al-Rānīrī and contemporary ones like al-Attas. The footprints are already there despite centuries of neglect by Malay-Muslim scientists and intellectuals themselves and it is our task to continue treading it.

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ⁱ According to Wan Mohd Nor and Khalif Muammar, the first phase is between 1200–1400 where the focus is on religious practices and education; the third phase is from mid-1700 onwards, which is a continuation of the two phases but with the added challenge of Western incursions.

ⁱⁱ A comprehensive account of al-Raniri's life along with a list of his works can be found in al-Attas' *A Commentary on the Hujjat al-Šiddiq of Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī* (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Culture Malaysia, 1986). It is from this work that we reproduce the relevant details of al-Rānīrī's life.