
Criticism of Positivism and Its Relevance to Az-Zahabi's Criticism of Ibn 'Arabi's Interpretation

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Article History:

Received: 24 Desember 2025

Revised: 28 Februari 2026

Accepted: 16 Maret 2026

Keywords: Positivism, Ibn 'Arabi, Az-Zahabi, Qur'anic Interpretation, Epistemology

Abstract: Since the 19th century, positivism has prevailed in modern science via empirical observation, sensory verification, and objective reason. Although it has propelled advancements in science and technology, positivism fosters reductionism, thereby marginalizing unquantifiable entities, including spiritual and metaphysical realities. This constraint is particularly manifest in Islamic studies, notably in Sufi exegesis of the Qur'an, which depends on symbolism, inner signs, and spiritual experiences. Ibn 'Arabi, a distinguished Sufi philosopher, offers speculative and figurative exegeses in texts such as *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah* and *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, sometimes criticised for straying from literal orthodoxy. Az-Zahabi, a distinguished hadith scholar, denounced these interpretations as perilous, emphasising textual integrity and rational criteria over spiritual insights. These discussions highlight epistemological challenges between empirical rigor and transcendent sources of knowledge. This study uses a qualitative library research methodology to epistemologically examine Az-Zahabi's critique of Ibn 'Arabi's interpretations of the Qur'an. An interdisciplinary approach integrates the philosophy of science with Qur'anic exegesis. Primary sources encompass Az-Zahabi's *Siyar A'lām al-Nubalā'* and *Mizān al-I'tidal*, in addition to the principal works of Ibn 'Arabi. Secondary sources offer theoretical and contextual assistance. Data analysis employs descriptive and interpretive methodologies, including literature reviews, textual analyses to reveal interpretive assumptions, epistemological evaluations, and comparative syntheses. The findings demonstrate the insufficiency of positivism for esoteric religious knowledge, mirroring Az-Zahabi's argument centered on orthodoxy. Ibn 'Arabi's approach prioritises spiritual realisation above empirical constraints, facilitating a more profound understanding of texts. Critiquing positivism fosters an awareness of multiple Islamic epistemologies and methodological diversity, facilitating a comprehensive study of sacred texts.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 19th century, positivism has constituted the primary methodology of modern science. This epistemological approach emphasises empirical observation, sensory validation, and objective rationality as the fundamental methods for discerning truth (Firnando, 2024; Habibani & Fatimah, 2024; Jabar et al., 2024; Mohammed Khalili, 2024; Yus et al., 2024). Positivism has significantly contributed to the development of science and technology; nonetheless, its dominance has fostered a reductionist tendency in understanding reality. Phenomena that cannot be quantified, observed, or empirically evaluated are frequently regarded as unscientific or even as spurious knowledge. As a result, the philosophical, spiritual, and introspective dimensions of human experience are often neglected in modern scientific discussions.

The limitations of positivism become more apparent when it intersects with transcendent knowledge, including religion, mysticism, and spiritual experience (Jedlicka & Havenith, 2025; Porter et al., 2022; Yaden et al., 2017). Metaphysical realities do not constantly adhere to scientific causality, making positivistic methodologies inadequate for a thorough comprehension of the profound importance of religious writings and experiences (Firnando, 2024; Stoeber, 2015; Yaden et al., 2017). The controversy regarding Sufi interpretation in Islamic studies is evident, as it employs symbols, inner signs, and spiritual experiences to elucidate the Qur'an.

Ibn 'Arabi is a pivotal figure in Sufi exegesis. His interpretations and metaphysical concepts frequently stir disputes. Particular academics consider Ibn 'Arabi's interpretations to be too speculative, metaphorical, and deviant from the literal understanding of the text (Chittick, 2024; Fina, 2018; Halim, 2024; Izutsu et al., 1970). Az-Zahabi, a prominent historian and hadith scholar, was notably severe in his critique of Ibn 'Arabi. He believed that Ibn 'Arabi's concepts were perilous, contradicting the tenets of Ahlusunah (Moris, 2021), and were incompatible with the rigid and normative structure of Islamic learning (Burhanuddin, 2022). Az-Zahabi's critiques often depend on rigorous standards of textual orthodoxy and reason, which implicitly undermine the validity of spiritual experience as a source of knowledge.

The differing views of Ibn 'Arabi and his detractors are not merely religious but also epistemic (Husni & Hayden, 2024; Lala, 2021, 2022). An individual's perspective on an interpretation is significantly shaped by their perception of the sources, methodologies, and criteria of knowledge. A critique of positivism is essential for cultivating a more nuanced understanding of the diverse interpretive approaches in Islam. This article aims to illustrate that the discrepancies in the assessment of Sufi interpretations are inherently connected to fundamental differences in epistemological frameworks by examining the limitations of positivism and relating them to Az-Zahabi's critique of Ibn 'Arabi's interpretation.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative library research design to analyze Az-Zahabi's criticism of Ibn 'Arabi's Qur'anic interpretation from an epistemological perspective. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the object of the study consists of classical texts and scholarly works that contain conceptual arguments, interpretive frameworks, and epistemic assumptions rather than empirical data (Khasani, 2025). The research adopts an interdisciplinary approach combining philosophy of science (epistemology) and Qur'anic exegesis studies.

Data Sources

The data sources in this study are divided into primary and secondary sources. Primary sources

comprise original works by Az-Zahabi and Ibn ‘Arabi that directly reflect their critical and exegetical perspectives. Secondary sources include scholarly literature that provides theoretical and methodological support. Data were selected based on their relevance to the epistemological focus of the study

Table 1. Research Data Sources

Type of Data	Description	Data Sources
Primary Data	Core texts directly related to Az-Zahabi’s critique and Ibn Arabi’s exegetical thought	Az-Zahabi: <i>Siyar A‘lam al-Nubala’</i> , <i>Mizān al-I‘tidal</i> ; Ibn Arabi: <i>al-Futuḥat al-Makkiyyah</i> , <i>Fusūs al-Ḥikam</i>
Secondary Data	Supporting literature providing theoretical and contextual analysis	Books and journal articles on epistemology, philosophy of science, Sufi exegesis, Qur’anic interpretation

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis was conducted using a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretive method with an emphasis on epistemological critique. The study involved several stages, including textual analysis, epistemological evaluation, and comparative synthesis.

Table 2. Data Analysis Techniques

Analytical Stage	Method	Purpose
Data Collection	Literature inventory and classification	Identifying relevant texts on Az-Zahabi and Ibn ‘Arabi
Textual Analysis	Descriptive–interpretive analysis	Revealing interpretive methods and epistemic assumptions
Epistemological Analysis	Critical analysis based on the philosophy of science	Evaluating the epistemic basis of Az-Zahabi’s critique
Comparative Synthesis	Comparison and synthesis of findings	Formulating core epistemological differences

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Positivism in the Philosophy of Science

Positivism emerged as a philosophical movement in the 19th century, primarily through the work of Auguste Comte, who founded classical positivism. Comte proposed that human knowledge progresses through three stages: the theological (explaining phenomena via gods), the metaphysical (via abstract forces), and the positive or scientific stage, where truth is derived exclusively from observable facts and empirical verification (Habibani & Fatimah, 2024; Jabar et al., 2024; Mohammed Khalili, 2024). This approach revolutionized the social sciences by advocating a methodical, law-like understanding of society, akin to that of the natural sciences. In the 20th century, logical positivism, associated with the Vienna Circle (e.g., Moritz Schlick, Rudolf Carnap), refined these ideas by introducing the verification principle: statements are meaningful only if they are empirically verifiable or analytically accurate. Neopositivism, or logical empiricism, further evolved this through figures like Carl Hempel and Rudolf Carnap, emphasizing deductive-nomological models and operationalism in scientific explanation (Yus et

al., 2024).

The epistemological assumptions of positivism rest on strict empiricism, positing that genuine knowledge arises solely from sensory experience and inductive generalization (Habibani & Fatimah, 2024). Central is the verification criterion, later challenged but foundational, which dismisses non-empirical claims as meaningless. Positivism rejects metaphysics as speculative and unverifiable, viewing it as a remnant of pre-scientific thought (Mohammed Khalili, 2024). Science is often regarded as objective and value-neutral, with researchers acting as impartial observers whose theories can be tested against objective data, ensuring universality and progress through falsifiable hypotheses.

Critiques of positivism abound, beginning with Karl Popper's falsificationism, which argued that theories cannot be conclusively verified but only potentially falsified, shifting emphasis from confirmation to refutation (Yus et al., 2024). Thomas Kuhn highlighted paradigm shifts in scientific revolutions, revealing science's social and historical contingency rather than cumulative objectivity, while Paul Feyerabend advocated "epistemological anarchism," rejecting methodological dogmatism (Mohammed Khalili, 2024). In humanities and religion, positivism falters by marginalizing non-quantifiable experiences like mysticism and spiritual insight, which defy empirical reduction (Jedlicka & Havenith, 2025; Porter et al., 2022; Stoeber, 2015; Yaden et al., 2017). For religious texts, such as Qur'anic exegesis, positivistic insistence on literalism and orthodoxy neglects symbolic, esoteric dimensions vital in Sufi interpretations like Ibn 'Arabi's, echoing critiques that demand pluralistic epistemologies (Husni & Hayden, 2024).

These critiques suggest a need for epistemological pluralism in the study of religious texts, which involves accommodating spiritual epistemologies alongside empirical ones. Positivism's limitations underscore why rigid textual orthodoxy, as in Az-Zahabi's assessments, may undervalue experiential knowledge, fostering deeper tolerance for interpretive diversity (Halim, 2024; Moris, 2021). Indeed, Karl Popper's critique, while rejecting logical positivism, still posited a form of positivism in his emphasis on falsifiability as the demarcation criterion for science, often leading to the dismissal of non-falsifiable fields like psychoanalysis as unscientific (Mazur, 2021).

B. Ibn 'Arabi's Interpretation and Sufi Epistemology

Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240), born in Murcia in Muslim Spain, stands as one of the most influential figures in Islamic intellectual and spiritual history, often hailed as the "Greatest Master" (al-Shaykh al-Akbar) among Sufi orders (Chittick, 2024). His vast oeuvre, including seminal works like *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah* and *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, reflects a profound synthesis of philosophy, theology, poetry, and mysticism, positioning him as a pivotal architect of Sufi metaphysics and exegesis (Chittick, 2024; Lala, 2022). Intellectually, Ibn 'Arabī engaged deeply with Qur'anic hermeneutics, prophetic traditions, and earlier Sufi luminaries, while his spiritual journey involved extensive travels, initiations, and direct encounters with divine realities, shaping his doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of being) and earning him reverence as the foremost mystical thinker in Islam (Halim, 2024; Izutsu et al., 1970).

Central to Ibn 'Arabī's exegesis is the *ta'wīl ishrāqī* (esoteric or illuminative interpretation), which employs symbolic language to unveil the inner (*bāṭin*) dimensions of the Qur'an beneath its apparent (*ẓāhir*) (Fina, 2018; Halim, 2024). He posits that every literal verse connects to a hidden spiritual reality, accessible through *kashf* (unveiling), *ilhām* (divine inspiration), and mystical experiences that transcend rational analysis (Lala, 2022; Moris, 2021). These faculties allow the adept to perceive the Qur'an as a living, multifaceted revelation mirroring divine names

and realities, where symbols bridge the exoteric legal (*fiqh*) readings critiqued by literalists and the esoteric insights of the spiritual elite (Fina, 2018; Izutsu et al., 1970).

Sufi exegesis, exemplified by Ibn ‘Arabī, rests on an epistemology integrating revelation (*wahy*), reason (*‘aql*), and spiritual intuition (*dhawq* and *kashf*), affirming the validity of non-empirical knowledge within Islam (Husni & Hayden, 2024; Lala, 2022). Unlike positivism’s empiricist confines, this framework validates mystical cognition—drawn from dreams, visions, and unveiling—as legitimate sources, grounded in prophetic precedents and Qur’anic ambiguity (*mutashābihāt*) (Halim, 2024; Moris, 2021). Critics like Az-Zahabī dismissed such approaches as speculative; yet, the Sufi tradition upholds their epistemic legitimacy, advocating for a pluralism that honors experiential insight alongside orthodoxy (Lala, 2022). Ibn ‘Arabī’s method, therefore, transcends a purely literal interpretation, positing that proper understanding of the Qur’an involves penetrating its outward façade to grasp deeper, esoteric meanings (Lala, 2021). This approach distinguishes between the superficial comprehension intended for the masses and the profound, inner knowledge reserved for gnostics, which aligns with his broader metaphysical framework (Lala, 2021). This interpretive methodology, which emphasizes the layers of Qur’anic perception, enables a more profound engagement with the sacred text, moving beyond mere surface-level understanding to uncover its more profound wisdom (Lala, 2021). This layered interpretation, rooted in the belief that every outer dimension (*zāhir*) of a text corresponds to an inner dimension (*bāṭin*), enriches the understanding of divine commands by revealing their multifaceted manifestations.

C. The Relevance of Criticism of Positivism in Assessing Az-Zahabi's Criticism

A striking parallel exists between the positivist paradigm and Az-Zahabi's approach to religious texts, particularly in their shared tendencies toward objectivism, textual literalism, and skepticism regarding metaphysical dimensions. Positivism, with its emphasis on empirical verifiability and rejection of metaphysics as unverifiable speculation (Mohammed Khalili, 2024), mirrors Az-Zahabi's rigid orthodoxy, which prioritizes the apparent (*zāhir*) textual meaning and dismisses esoteric interpretations as speculative deviations. Both frameworks position the interpreter as an impartial observer bound to "neutral" data—whether scientific observations or literal scriptural readings—eschewing subjective spiritual insights like *kashf* or *dhawq* that Sufis such as Ibn ‘Arabī deem essential (Halim, 2024; Lala, 2022). This methodological convergence underscores a research lens that, while rigorous in demanding falsifiability or doctrinal conformity (Mazur, 2021; Yus et al., 2024), risks impoverishing the interpretive process by confining it to surface-level analysis.

The limitations of this positivist-like approach become evident in Qur’anic interpretation, where it reduces the sacred text's meaning to its physical, literal aspects, neglecting its profound spiritual and existential dimensions. Positivism's insistence on quantifiable, empirical evidence falters in addressing *mutashābihāt* (ambiguous verses) or the *bāṭin* (inner realities), marginalizing non-empirical experiences such as mystical unveilings that Ibn ‘Arabī accesses through *ta’wil ishraqi* (Fina, 2018; Moris, 2021). Similarly, Az-Zahabi's textualism overlooks how divine commands manifest across layered realities, from exoteric *fiqh* to esoteric realizations, leading to a flattened hermeneutics that cannot accommodate the Qur’an as a "living" revelation mirroring divine name. In a qualitative research method attuned to interpretive pluralism, this reductionism hampers a holistic understanding, as spiritual epistemologies—validated by prophetic traditions—offer irreplaceable insights into human existence and divine proximity (Husni & Hayden, 2024; Jedlicka & Havenith, 2025).

Re-reading Az-Zahabi's criticisms through this lens reveals them as products of a particular epistemological paradigm akin to positivism, one that privileges orthodoxy over experiential diversity. His dismissals of Sufi exegeses reflect not objective neutrality but a paradigm-bound skepticism toward non-falsifiable or non-literal knowledge, much like Popper's demarcation criterion, which excludes metaphysics (Mazur, 2021). This invites a pluralistic epistemological approach in religious studies, integrating empirical textual analysis with spiritual intuition (*ilhām*, dreams, visions) (Izutsu et al., 1970; Porter et al., 2022), as advocated in Sufi tradition (Chittick, 2024). Such methodological pluralism, responsive to the research context of Islamic hermeneutics, fosters tolerance for interpretive multiplicity, enriching scholarly assessments beyond rigid dogmatism.

This approach acknowledges the need to move beyond methodological monism towards a comprehensive framework that integrates diverse epistemological tools for a richer understanding of religious phenomena (Liang, 2019). This allows for a nuanced assessment of figures like Ibn 'Arabi, whose interpretations, though mystical, resonate deeply within the broader Islamic intellectual tradition by offering a holistic comprehension of reality (Nugraha & Naupal, 2019). This holistic view, which sees knowledge as an integrated package of virtue, praxis, and sanctity, directly challenges the separation of law and spirituality inherent in more reductionist approaches. Furthermore, it aligns with approaches that consider human flourishing (*maqasid al-shari'ah*) and adaptable legal interpretations (*ijtihad*) within a broader ethical and rational framework, bridging classical Islamic thought with contemporary socio-legal realities (Syukri et al., 2025). Therefore, understanding Ibn 'Arabi's approach within this multifaceted epistemological framework is crucial for appreciating the depth and breadth of Islamic intellectual heritage, rather than dismissing it through a reductionist lens.

D. Theoretical Implications for Exegesis Studies

The epistemological critique of positivism and its application to Az-Zahabi's assessment of Ibn Arabi's tafsir yield several theoretical implications for contemporary exegesis studies, particularly concerning the validation of diverse interpretive methodologies. A key enrichment emerges in exegesis methodology through the integration of rational, textual, and spiritual approaches, fostering a holistic framework that transcends positivist reductionism. This triadic integration aligns with qualitative research paradigms emphasizing interpretive pluralism, where rational analysis (e.g., linguistic and historical scrutiny) complements textual literalism with spiritual epistemologies like *kashf* and *dhawq*, as championed by Ibn Arabi (Lala, 2021, 2022). Such methodological synergy, akin to hermeneutical circles in qualitative inquiry, allows scholars to navigate the Qur'an's multilayered realities—from *muḥkam* to *mutashābih*—yielding richer insights into divine wisdom without privileging empirical verifiability over experiential depth.

Central to this is the legitimacy of non-empirical knowledge within Islamic epistemology, underscored by Sufism's esteemed position as a validated pathway to divine proximity. Sufi traditions, rooted in prophetic precedents, affirm mystical unveilings (e.g., through *ta'wīl ishrāqī*) as epistemically robust, countering positivist dismissals of metaphysics as unverifiable (Mohammed Khalili, 2024; Nugraha & Naupal, 2019). Ibn Arabi's hermeneutics exemplifies this, positing the *bāṭin* as accessible via intuitive gnosis, which qualitative methods can validate through narrative and phenomenological analysis rather than falsifiability criteria (Fina, 2018; Moris, 2021). This legitimizes Sufism not as fringe speculation but as integral to Islamic intellectual heritage, enriching exegesis by incorporating spiritual experiences alongside orthodox tools (Chittick, 2024; Husni & Hayden, 2024).

Finally, this critique fosters a vital dialogue between the philosophy of science and ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān, where positivism’s limitations highlight contributions to contemporary Islamic studies. By exposing parallels between scientific objectivism and rigid textualism (e.g., Az-Zahabi’s orthodoxy), it advocates methodological pluralism, integrating empirical textual analysis with spiritual intuition to address interpretive multiplicity (Mazur, 2021). This dialogue, responsive to qualitative research’s emphasis on context and subjectivity, promotes tolerance for esoteric exegeses, bridging classical Sufi thought with modern socio-legal realities and advancing a comprehensive understanding of the Qur’an as a dynamic revelation (Izutsu et al., 1970; Syukri et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

In summary, the epistemological critique of Az-Zahabi’s positivist-leaning assessment of Ibn ‘Arabī’s tafsir reveals the limitations of methodological monism in Qur’anic exegesis. It advocates for a pluralistic integration of rational, textual, and spiritual epistemologies to fully capture the Qur’an’s multilayered realities, encompassing both exoteric and esoteric dimensions. This approach legitimizes Sufi methodologies, such as kashf and dhawq, as robust sources of knowledge, rooted in prophetic traditions and validated through qualitative paradigms, including phenomenological analysis. By bridging philosophy of science and ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān, this framework enriches contemporary exegesis studies, promoting tolerance for interpretive diversity and resolving tensions in Islamic intellectual heritage. It equips scholars to engage the Qur’an as a dynamic revelation amid evolving socio-legal contexts, fostering a holistic understanding that honors both empirical rigor and spiritual depth.

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