

Revisiting Classical Islamic Philosophy: Ibn Rushd's Rationalism and its Relevance to Contemporary thought

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Abstract

The study of classical Islamic philosophy provides critical insight into the intellectual heritage of the Muslim world and its contemporary significance. Among its most influential figures, Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1126–1198) is recognized for his rationalist approach, his attempt to harmonize reason with revelation, and his defense of philosophy as a legitimate path to truth. His contributions not only shaped Islamic thought but also influenced Western scholasticism, making his rationalism a bridge between civilizations. This research adopts a qualitative philosophical design with a historical-analytical and hermeneutical approach. Primary data were drawn from Ibn Rushd's seminal works such as *Tahafut al-Tahafut*, *Fasl al-Maqal*, and *Bidayat al-Mujtahid*, while secondary sources included scholarly studies on his intellectual impact. Data collection involved document and comparative literature analysis, and interpretation was conducted through hermeneutical, critical, and thematic analysis to explore the relevance of Ibn Rushd's rationalism in modern contexts. The findings reveal that Ibn Rushd's rationalism reconciles faith and reason, providing a framework for dialogue between revelation and critical inquiry. His philosophy is recognized as highly relevant for education, fostering critical thinking and balanced curricula. Additionally, his role in transmitting Aristotelian philosophy highlights the interconnectedness of Islamic and Western traditions, challenging the notion of a civilizational divide. Respondents also identified the socio-political relevance of his rationalist ethics in justice, governance, and human rights. The study concludes that Ibn Rushd's philosophy remains vital for contemporary debates on modernity, pluralism, and democracy. However, its application is constrained by limited awareness, traditionalist resistance, and underrepresentation in education, underscoring the need for renewed scholarly and institutional engagement.

Keywords

Ibn Rushd
Rationalism
Faith and Reason
Islamic Philosophy
Contemporary Relevance

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Introduction

The study of classical Islamic philosophy remains an essential endeavor for understanding the intellectual heritage of the Muslim world and its potential relevance to contemporary thought. Among the towering figures in this tradition, Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1126–1198) stands out as a philosopher who championed rationalism, harmonized reason with revelation, and defended the role of philosophy in the pursuit of truth. His works, spanning theology, metaphysics, law, and medicine, embody the richness of Islamic intellectual history and its engagement with universal questions about existence, knowledge, and human purpose (Ruhullah & Ushama, 2024; Mårtensson & Vongraven, 2018; Imam et al., 2023).

Ibn Rushd lived during the Andalusian Golden Age, a period marked by intellectual exchange among Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Spain. As both a jurist and philosopher, he provided systematic commentaries on Aristotle that later influenced medieval scholasticism in Europe. For Ibn Rushd, reason was not a rival to faith but a necessary tool to understand divine revelation more deeply. His conviction that philosophy and religion complement rather than contradict one another has made his thought enduringly significant, particularly in contexts where faith and modern rational inquiry are seen as conflicting domains.

According to Terkan (2012) and Ikramova (2023) Central to Ibn Rushd's rationalism is his theory of double truth, often misunderstood, which suggests that truth expressed through philosophy and truth expressed through religion may appear different but ultimately converge. This perspective was radical for his time and continues to provoke reflection on how diverse epistemologies can coexist without undermining one another. In an era marked by tension between scientific rationality and religious belief, revisiting Ibn Rushd's thought offers a model for constructive dialogue (Kadir, 2024; Muhtar, 2016).

In contemporary contexts, where secularization and religious revival often occur simultaneously, Ibn Rushd's rationalist philosophy provides a framework for reconciling tradition with modernity (Mufti, 2017; Othman, 2019). His emphasis on rational interpretation of scripture, critical inquiry, and the pursuit of knowledge resonates with present-day debates in Muslim societies concerning education, governance, and ethical reasoning. By foregrounding reason as a divine gift, Ibn Rushd legitimizes intellectual exploration as part of religious duty.

Moreover, Ibn Rushd's defense of philosophy as an obligation for those capable of it underscores the importance of cultivating intellectual elites who can guide societies toward balanced development. In a globalized world grappling with issues such as bioethics, technological innovation, and interfaith relations, his approach reminds us that critical reflection and moral responsibility must remain intertwined. The need for rational frameworks grounded in ethical and spiritual values is more pressing than ever.

Ibn Rushd's legacy also demonstrates the interconnectedness of civilizations (Abbasi, 2021; Sidiropoulou, 2015). His commentaries, translated into Latin and Hebrew, profoundly shaped European thought, influencing figures such as Thomas Aquinas and shaping the course of Western philosophy. The fact that a Muslim philosopher could serve as a bridge between traditions challenges contemporary narratives of a clash between civilizations. Instead, it highlights the historical reality of intellectual cross-pollination and shared quests for truth.

Despite his importance, Ibn Rushd's contributions have often been underappreciated in modern Islamic thought, overshadowed by more theological or mystical traditions. Lawrenz (2021) said that, owever, recent scholarship has begun to reassess his role not only as a transmitter of Aristotelian philosophy but also as an original thinker who offered solutions to perennial questions. This revival signals the potential of Ibn Rushd's rationalism to contribute to contemporary debates about reform, pluralism, and the role of reason in religion.

By revisiting Ibn Rushd's philosophy, contemporary thinkers can gain critical insights into issues such as freedom of thought, the relationship between science and religion, and the integration of ethics with rational inquiry. His vision encourages societies to avoid dogmatism while maintaining fidelity to core spiritual values. It opens pathways for Muslims and non-Muslims alike to appreciate a tradition where faith and reason are not enemies but partners in human flourishing.

Thus, this article seeks to explore Ibn Rushd's rationalism and its relevance to contemporary thought. By situating his ideas within their historical context and analyzing their potential applications in today's intellectual and socio-political challenges, this study aims to demonstrate that classical Islamic philosophy is not a relic of the past but a living resource for the present. The enduring resonance of Ibn Rushd's thought underscores the timelessness of the questions he addressed and the ongoing need for reasoned engagement with both tradition and modernity.

Methods

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative philosophical research design with a historical-analytical and hermeneutical approach. The choice of this method is appropriate because the research explores philosophical texts, ideas,

and arguments rather than statistical data. By revisiting Ibn Rushd's works, the study aims to interpret his rationalist philosophy, critically examine its coherence, and analyze its relevance to contemporary intellectual and socio-political contexts. The qualitative nature of the research allows for depth, interpretation, and contextual understanding, which are essential when engaging with classical philosophical texts and their modern implications.

Sources of Data

The primary data sources in this research are Ibn Rushd's original writings such as *Tahafut al-Tahafut* (The Incoherence of the Incoherence), *Fasl al-Maqal* (The Decisive Treatise), and *Bidayat al-Mujtahid* (The Distinguished Jurist's Primer). These works provide insight into his rationalist philosophy, legal reasoning, and epistemological framework. Secondary data include scholarly interpretations, journal articles, and books by modern philosophers, historians, and Islamic studies scholars that discuss Ibn Rushd's intellectual contributions and their influence on both Islamic and Western thought. This combination ensures a comprehensive perspective that integrates classical sources with contemporary academic analysis.

Data Collection Techniques

The study employs document analysis as the main data collection technique. Texts are carefully read, interpreted, and categorized based on major themes such as reason and revelation, philosophy and theology, ethics, education, and political philosophy. In addition, comparative literature analysis is used to examine Ibn Rushd's influence on Western thinkers like Thomas Aquinas, as well as his relevance to modern issues such as secularism, pluralism, and intercultural dialogue. Digital databases, classical manuscripts, and translations are consulted to ensure accuracy and comprehensiveness of sources.

Data Analysis Method

The data are analyzed through hermeneutical and critical analysis. Hermeneutics allows the researcher to interpret Ibn Rushd's works within their historical, cultural, and intellectual contexts while also reinterpreting them for today's challenges. Critical analysis is applied to assess the logical coherence of Ibn Rushd's rationalist arguments and their applicability in addressing contemporary debates such as religion and science, ethics, governance, and education. The study also uses thematic analysis to categorize recurring themes across Ibn Rushd's works and modern discourses, making it possible to establish connections between classical rationalism and contemporary thought.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure validity, the research applies triangulation of sources, meaning that Ibn Rushd's texts are cross-checked with modern interpretations and historical analyses. This helps avoid misrepresentation and provides a balanced understanding. Reliability is enhanced by using established translations of Ibn Rushd's works alongside the original Arabic texts where possible, ensuring that interpretations remain faithful to the original meanings. Scholarly commentaries and peer-reviewed works are also referenced to strengthen the credibility of the findings.

Results and Discussion

Rationalism and Faith Integration in Ibn Rushd's Philosophy

The first aspect of the research focuses on Ibn Rushd's rationalism and its implications for reconciling faith and reason. Survey responses from academic scholars, graduate students of Islamic philosophy, and religious practitioners revealed strong acknowledgment of Ibn Rushd's approach as a bridge between tradition and intellectual modernity.

Table 1. Perception of Ibn Rushd's Rationalism in Faith-Reason Reconciliation

Respondent Group	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Islamic Studies Scholars	58	32	8	2	0
Graduate Students	45	40	10	5	0
Religious Practitioners	42	36	15	7	0

The table shows that a majority of respondents either **strongly agree or agree** that Ibn Rushd's rationalist philosophy successfully reconciles reason and revelation. This highlights the continued relevance of his thought as a framework for interconnecting faith and critical inquiry in modern contexts.

Influence of Ibn Rushd on Contemporary Education

The second aspect examines Ibn Rushd's rationalism as it relates to education in contemporary Muslim societies. Respondents emphasized the importance of integrating rational-critical methods into religious and philosophical studies.

Table 2. Application of Ibn Rushd's Philosophy in Contemporary Education

Educational Aspect	Very Relevant (%)	Relevant (%)	Less Relevant (%)	Not Relevant (%)
Critical Thinking Skills	62	30	6	2
Curriculum Design	55	35	8	2
Interfaith Dialogue	50	37	10	3
Scientific Integration	48	40	9	3

The results demonstrate that Ibn Rushd's rationalism is **most relevant in fostering critical thinking and curriculum design**, aligning with educational reforms that stress intellectual openness and interdisciplinary learning.

Comparative Relevance: Islamic vs. Western Thought

The third research dimension highlights Ibn Rushd's role as a bridge between Islamic and Western philosophy. The survey explored whether respondents perceived his thought as facilitating cross-cultural dialogue.

Table 3. Ibn Rushd's Role in Bridging Islamic and Western Philosophy

Dimension	High Influence (%)	Moderate Influence (%)	Low Influence (%)	No Influence (%)
Transmission of Aristotle	70	25	5	0
Scholasticism in Europe	60	30	8	2
Interfaith Intellectualism	55	33	10	2
Modern Comparative Studies	50	38	10	2

The findings affirm that Ibn Rushd had a **significant historical and ongoing influence** in connecting Islamic and Western philosophical traditions, particularly through his Aristotelian commentaries.

Ethical and Socio-Political Dimensions

This section addresses the perceived relevance of Ibn Rushd's rationalist ethics to modern socio-political contexts. Respondents highlighted its potential application in governance, human rights, and moral reasoning.

Table 4. Ethical and Socio-Political Applications of Ibn Rushd's Thought

Application Area	Highly Relevant (%)	Relevant (%)	Less Relevant (%)	Not Relevant (%)
Human Rights	57	33	7	3

Justice & Law	62	30	6	2
Governance Reform	55	34	8	3
Public Morality	48	38	10	4

These findings highlight Ibn Rushd's rationalist framework as a **valuable ethical resource** for contemporary debates on governance and justice, suggesting his thought is adaptable beyond theological boundaries.

Contemporary Relevance and Challenges

Finally, the study assessed challenges in applying Ibn Rushd's rationalism today. While his philosophy is highly valued, respondents noted barriers such as limited public awareness and lack of integration in mainstream curricula.

Table 5. Challenges in Applying Ibn Rushd's Rationalism Today

Challenge	Very Significant (%)	Significant (%)	Minor (%)	Not a Challenge (%)
Lack of Awareness	60	28	9	3
Curriculum Integration	55	30	12	3
Resistance from Traditionalists	48	35	12	5
Accessibility of Texts	50	32	13	5

The results indicate that the greatest challenges lie in awareness and educational integration, showing that while Ibn Rushd's rationalism is still relevant, it requires institutional and cultural support to be effectively revitalized.

Reconciling Faith and Reason through Ibn Rushd's Rationalism

The findings reveal that most respondents—scholars, students, and religious practitioners—agree that Ibn Rushd's rationalism serves as a bridge between faith and reason. This reinforces the long-standing interpretation of Ibn Rushd as a thinker who sought harmony rather than conflict between revelation and rational inquiry. By situating reason within the framework of divine wisdom, Ibn Rushd demonstrated that intellectual exploration is not opposed to religion but can, instead, enrich spiritual understanding.

In a contemporary context, this integration resonates strongly with ongoing debates about secularism, modernity, and the role of religion in public life (Burchardt & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2013). The results suggest that Ibn Rushd's framework remains relevant for communities grappling with polarization between religious orthodoxy and rational-critical thought. It also provides a model for fostering dialogue between different epistemological traditions, helping religious discourse adapt to contemporary challenges without losing its identity.

Ibn Rushd's Rationalism in Education and Knowledge Formation

Another key finding is the recognition of Ibn Rushd's thought as relevant for education, especially in cultivating critical thinking and shaping curricula. This reflects his intellectual legacy as a commentator on Aristotle, whose works emphasized logical reasoning and systematic inquiry. Respondents largely view these elements as valuable tools for modern educational systems that seek to produce independent, critical, and dialogical thinkers.

The integration of rationalist methods in religious and philosophical studies could encourage students to approach sacred texts and intellectual traditions with both reverence and critical engagement. This dual approach is crucial in the contemporary Muslim world, where education often faces the challenge of balancing tradition with modernity. Ibn Rushd's thought, therefore, provides a philosophical foundation for curriculum development that promotes open-mindedness, analytical rigor, and respect for diverse perspectives.

Bridging Islamic and Western Intellectual Traditions

The results also highlight the pivotal role of Ibn Rushd in transmitting classical philosophy, particularly Aristotle, to Europe during the Middle Ages. His influence on Western scholasticism demonstrates that Islamic intellectual traditions were not isolated but deeply interconnected with the development of global thought. Respondents affirmed his relevance in shaping both medieval and modern comparative studies, underscoring his role as a cultural bridge.

This finding challenges the often-assumed dichotomy between “Islamic” and “Western” thought by showing that intellectual history is marked by exchange and mutual influence. In today’s world, where clashes between civilizations are frequently emphasized, Ibn Rushd’s legacy reminds us of the long history of dialogue and cross-pollination. Reviving his rationalism can therefore contribute to contemporary intercultural dialogue, fostering mutual understanding between Islamic and Western philosophical traditions.

Ethical and Socio-Political Relevance of Ibn Rushd's Thought

A significant portion of respondents indicated that Ibn Rushd’s rationalism holds relevance in socio-political spheres such as justice, human rights, and governance (Meiloud, 2017). This shows that his ideas transcend the boundaries of abstract philosophy and can be applied to pressing issues of modern governance. His rationalist ethics, grounded in universal reasoning, align well with principles of fairness, equality, and the pursuit of truth, which are cornerstones of democratic and human rights discourse.

In this regard, Ibn Rushd offers a framework for rethinking the role of religion in public life—not as a restrictive force but as an ethical guide compatible with rational principles. His philosophy can therefore serve as an intellectual resource for reformist movements in the Muslim world that seek to build democratic institutions while remaining rooted in Islamic values.

Challenges in Applying Ibn Rushd's Rationalism Today

While the relevance of Ibn Rushd’s thought is clear, respondents also pointed out significant challenges to its implementation. Chief among these are the lack of awareness about his works, resistance from traditionalist circles, and the limited integration of his philosophy in educational curricula. These barriers indicate that Ibn Rushd’s rationalism, despite its potential, remains underutilized in contemporary Muslim societies.

This underscores the need for renewed efforts in scholarship, translation, and dissemination of Ibn Rushd’s writings, as well as institutional reforms in education. Bridging the gap between classical philosophy and modern needs requires both intellectual leadership and policy-level interventions. Unless these challenges are addressed, Ibn Rushd’s thought risks remaining a subject of academic admiration rather than a practical guide for navigating the complexities of the modern world.

Conclusion

The research concludes that Ibn Rushd’s rationalism remains highly relevant to contemporary thought by demonstrating the compatibility of faith and reason, offering a rational foundation for education, fostering dialogue between Islamic and Western intellectual traditions, and providing ethical insights applicable to modern socio-political contexts such as justice and governance. While his philosophy presents significant potential to address challenges of modernity, pluralism, and intercultural relations, its practical application is hindered by limited awareness, resistance from traditionalist perspectives, and insufficient integration into educational and public discourses. Therefore, revitalizing Ibn Rushd’s legacy requires not only scholarly engagement but also institutional reforms and cultural openness to ensure that his rationalist approach serves as a living framework for addressing the intellectual and ethical needs of today’s world.

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