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Learning Philosophy in Indonesian Islamic Universities: A Narrative Study of Theology and Islamic Philosophy Students

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ABSTRACT

In Indonesia, philosophy is often stigmatized as impractical, confusing, or threatening to faith, despite limited evidence reflecting students' lived experiences. This study explores how Theology and Islamic Philosophy students experience learning philosophy within Islamic higher education. A narrative inquiry design was employed with eight purposively selected final-year students (n = 8) from four State Islamic Universities in Central Java. Participants were drawn from Theology and Islamic Philosophy departments. Data were collected narrative frames and semi-structured interviews, and analyzed using thematic narrative analysis. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, audit trails, and reflexive journaling. Participants initially perceived philosophy as intellectually demanding and potentially threatening to faith, leading to academic and spiritual anxiety. Through active, reflective, and dialogical engagement, they gradually negotiated these tensions and reinterpreted philosophy as a meaningful resource for understanding faith and life. This transformation fostered enhanced critical reasoning, inclusivity, and reflective problem-solving practices.The findings suggest that students' negative preconceptions can be reshaped through pedagogical approaches that emphasize reflection and dialogue. Incorporating guided discussions and narrative writing into philosophy instruction may support deeper engagement and reduce perceived conflicts with faith. Such strategies contribute to more constructive and meaningful learning experiences in Islamic higher education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Philosophy is one of the subjects taught in State Islamic University. In some universities, it is also established as a department within the Faculty of Ushuluddin and integrated into the Department of Theology and Islamic Philosophy. However, it often attracts limited interest from both current and prospective students. This limited interest is partly influenced by persistent negative stigmas that portray philosophy as abstract, impractical, confusing, and even potentially threatening to one's faith (Head of the Department of Theology and Islamic Philosophy at UIN Walisongo and UIN Sunan Kudus, Interview). Such perceptions are further reinforced by instructional practices that tend to emphasize

the history of philosophical thought and the memorization of past philosophers' ideas (observations of several classroom sessions at UIN Sunan Kudus), rather than encouraging reflective and contextual engagement. As a result, the learning of philosophy is often perceived as detached from students' lived realities and their religious commitments, leading to low motivation and reluctance toward the subject. This situation indicates an important educational issue concerning how philosophy is taught and experienced within the context of Islamic higher education.

Philosophy education has been widely recognized as contributing to intellectual and character development. Several studies indicate that philosophy learning contributes to intellectual development (Haave et al., 2018). Haave et al. have analyzed the effects of philosophy assignments on the intellectual growth and mastery of students taking biology and biochemistry courses. They used pre and post-surveys to assess cognitive complexity. The results indicated that philosophical assignments helped prevent a decline in students' intellectual abilities. In addition, studying philosophy is essential for character formation and personality (Mansur, 2020; Wattimena, 2016). Wattimena said that if possible, philosophy should also be taught to Indonesian children, although they still have to consider local culture and should not be burdensome. Philosophy education is associated with the development of independence, creativity, openness, and non-fanatical attitudes. (Woodhouse, 2000). Such dispositions are crucial for navigating an increasingly pluralistic and rapidly changing world.

So far, research on philosophy learning can be classified into four areas: first, studies that associate philosophy learning with personality formation (Wattimena, 2016; Mansur, 2020); second, those linking it to intellectual abilities (Haave et al., 2018); third, studies examining its relationship with students' interest and learning outcomes (Abdullah, 2014); and fourth, research focusing on the experience of practicing philosophy in teaching contexts (Rasilim, 2019). However, these studies primarily emphasize learning outcomes and instructional practices rather than students' direct learning experiences. None of these studies specifically investigate how students themselves experience the process of learning philosophy. More importantly, it remains unclear how students negotiate faith-related anxieties, cognitive complexity, and academic challenges associated with studying philosophy, particularly within Islamic higher education contexts. Although experiential and narrative inquiry approaches have been applied in various educational fields—such as teacher professionalism (Diputro & Suwarso, 2020), parental involvement during the COVID-19 period (Nasution & Suharian, 2020), the teaching experiences of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) teachers (Ljalikova et al., 2021), collaborative writing practices (Rohmah et al., 2018), and students' motivation in studying criminology (Trebilcock & Griffiths, 2021)—such approaches have rarely been used to explore philosophy learning. Therefore, a narrative inquiry approach that focuses on students' lived learning experiences is necessary to address this research gap. To complement the existing research, this study examines the experience of Theology and Islamic Philosophy students in learning philosophy.

This study is guided by three key concepts—stigma, learning experience, and narrative inquiry—along with transformative learning theory as its theoretical foundation**.** According to the Indonesian Dictionary (KBBI), stigma refers to a negative attribute attached to an individual due to social or environmental influences (https://kbbi.web.id/stigma). In this study, stigma refers to socially shared negative perceptions that label philosophy as useless or as threatening to religious faith. Learning experience is understood as students' subjective interpretations of their academic and emotional engagement in studying philosophy. Learning itself is viewed as a process involving cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions through which individuals construct knowledge, skills, and meaning (Winkel, 2004; Illeris, 2018). The study is further grounded in transformative learning theory, which conceptualizes learning as the process of effecting change in a frame of reference (Mezirow, 1991). This perspective explains how students critically reassess their prior assumptions about philosophy through reflective and active engagement, leading to shifts in their perspectives and attitudes. Methodologically, narrative inquiry—defined as the study of experience as story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000**;** Prosek and Gibson, 2021)—is employed to explore these transformations through participants' personal narratives,

enabling an in-depth understanding of how students negotiate stigma, faith-related concerns, and academic challenges in learning philosophy.

Finally, this study aims to explore how students of the Theology and Islamic Philosophy department from various State Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Central Java initially perceive the learning of philosophy, how they negotiate intellectual and faith-related tensions throughout the learning process, and what expectations they hold regarding the future of philosophy education. Examining these issues is important for bringing students' lived learning experiences into broader academic discourse, particularly to provide prospective students with a more authentic understanding of philosophy studies based on the direct experiences of those involved. By sharing these experiences, the study is expected to contribute to improving the quality of philosophy teaching and learning practices in the future

2. METHODS

This study employed a narrative inquiry design (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to explore how students of the Theology and Islamic Philosophy Department at State Islamic Higher Education Institution in Central Java make meaning of their lived experiences of learning philosophy over time. Narrative inquiry was selected because it conceptualizes experience as stories and enables researchers to understand how individuals interpret events across temporality (past, present, and future). This approach is particularly relevant for examining how students negotiate both intellectual and faith-related tensions in learning philosophy. Through participants' written and oral narratives, the study seeks to construct coherent and holistic accounts of their learning journeys rather than merely identifying fragmented themes. As a qualitative study, the researcher was actively involved in determining the research focus, selecting participants, collecting and analyzing data, interpreting findings, and drawing conclusions (Sugiyono, 2007, p.306).

Eight participants were purposively selected from four State Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Central Java offering the Department of Theology and Islamic Philosophy: UIN Sunan Kudus (A), UIN Walisongo (B), UIN Raden Mas Said (C), and UIN Salatiga (D). Two students from each university were chosen based on gender balance and their sustained engagement in philosophy learning. Final-year students were specifically recruited, as they were considered capable of providing comprehensive reflections on their learning experiences. The selection criteria were communicated to the heads of department, who acted as gatekeepers by distributing the research invitations. To reduce potential gatekeeper bias, participation was determined voluntarily and directly by the students. Participation had no academic consequences. All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection, and pseudonyms (N1–N8) were used to protect their anonymity, as shown in the table below:

Table 1. Participants

Name	Gender	University	Participants CODE
MB	Male	A	N1
NF	Female	A	N2
AF	Male	B	N3
VAW	Female	B	N4
SDH	Male	C	N5
NADFA	Female	C	N6
TBF	Male	D	N7
AA	Female	D	N8

Data were collected using two complementary methods: a written narrative frame and semi-structured interviews. First, participants completed a narrative frame distributed via WhatsApp. The frame consisted of guiding prompts that encouraged them to recount their experiences chronologically, including their initial impressions, challenges, meaningful moments, and future aspirations related to learning philosophy. Participants were given three days to complete and return their written narratives. Second, follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted to deepen and clarify the stories shared

in the written narratives. Interviews lasted approximately 30–60 minutes and were conducted face-to-face. All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim. Selected excerpts were translated into English for reporting purposes. The narrative frame and interview guidelines were developed based on the following framework:

Table 2. Narrative Frame and Semi-Structured Interview Guidelines

Theme	Subtheme	Narrative frame and semi-structured interview guidelines
Philosophy is challenging and important: an early experience	Initial anxiety and theological concern	1.First impressions of studying philosophy: worries, doubts, or expectations at that time
	Changing perceptions and early transformation	2. A particular moment during the study that changed the way philosophy was viewed
Complexity during the study of philosophy	Cognitive disruption and emotional strain	3. Experience of feeling confused or overwhelmed while studying philosophy
	Negotiating difficulties (agency and support)	4. Experience of encountering difficulties: sources of support that enabled persistence
	Enlightenment and personal transformation	5. Changes experienced over time in ways of thinking, believing, and living daily
Expectations of future philosophy studies	Learning environment	6. Classroom atmosphere that supports effective learning of philosophy
	Teaching methods and lecturer role	7. Teaching approaches perceived as most helpful and the role of lecturers in supporting learning
	Content relevance	8. Philosophical topics or materials considered important to emphasize in the future

Data were analyzed using narrative analysis procedures conducted in several stages, beginning with a holistic reading of the written narratives and interview transcripts to gain an overall understanding, followed by open coding to identify significant events, emotions, tensions, and turning points. The coded data were then chronologically re-storied into coherent individual narratives accounts based on past, present, and future experiences while preserving the integrity of each participant's story. Cross-case comparison was undertaken to identify recurring narrative patterns and group them into broader themes, resulting in three overarching themes: (1) philosophy as challenging yet essential, (2) negotiating the complexity of philosophical learning, and (3) aspirations for future philosophy study. The entire process was documented through an audit trail to ensure analytical transparency.

Finally, trustworthiness was ensured through several strategies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking was conducted by returning reconstructed narratives to participants for confirmation of accuracy and meaning. Peer debriefing sessions with academic colleagues were undertaken to critically review interpretations. An audit trail was maintained to document analytic decisions. The researcher is a lecturer in State Islamic University who teaches philosophy. While this positionality provided contextual understanding, it also carried the potential for bias. Therefore, reflexive journals were maintained to critically examine assumptions and interpretations throughout the research process.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Philosophy is Challenging and Important: An Early Experience

Participants entered the philosophy program with predominantly negative preconceptions. Philosophy was viewed not only as intellectually demanding but also as emotionally and theologically

unsettling. Prior to any formal classroom exposure, several participants associated philosophy with scepticism, excessive questioning, and the possibility of undermining their faith. As a result, their initial engagement with the discipline was characterized by hesitation, anxiety, and inner conflict rather than curiosity. Overall, the participants stated their experiences as follows :

Philosophy is a discipline that requires critical thinking on everything, and it is hard for me (N2.1, Frame)

Since high school, I had always heard that philosophy makes people question everything—the world, human beings, even God. That really scared me. In my understanding, God should not be questioned. He is someone we simply believe in completely. So when I chose this department, I felt worried that studying philosophy might shake my faith or make me doubt things that should never be doubted. (N3.1, Interview)

Honestly, I felt guilty. It was like entering a forbidden area. We were taught to think about Allah's creation, not about Allah Himself. So I wondered, what if philosophy crosses that boundary? I was afraid that studying it would be sinful or lead me in the wrong direction (N4.1, Interview)

When I hear the word philosophy, my mind says it is complicated and difficult field of study (N7.1, Frame)

Philosophy, for me at that time, was the knowledge of thought. At that time, I was a little hesitant to pursue philosophy because it also deals with questions about God, so if you do not have a strong faith, it can lead to atheism (N8.1, Frame)

However, these fears did not remain permanent. After several weeks of attending lectures and participating in classroom discussions, the participants began to encounter a reality that differed significantly from their initial expectations. Rather than being encouraged to reject their beliefs, they were introduced to structured reasoning, conceptual clarification, and systematic rational argumentation. The classroom gradually became a space where questioning was understood as intellectual exploration rather than an act of religious defiance. N8 described this change clearly:

After taking philosophy classes, I became convinced that studying philosophy does not make someone an atheist. That's just what people say when they have never actually studied it. What we really learned was how to think logically, analyze arguments, and understand ideas more deeply. It wasn't about rejecting God at all, but about training the way we think (N8.2, Interview)

This transformation was often accompanied by a sense of surprise as well as relief. Participants realized that their earlier fears had been based more on assumptions than on actual experience. N3 reflected:

I thought philosophy would only confuse me, but instead it helped me organize my thinking. When discussing matters of belief, I became more confident because I had reasons, not just feelings. In fact, it felt like my faith became stronger (N3.2, Interview)

Over time, the participants began to view philosophy as a foundational discipline that shaped the way they think, rather than merely a body of difficult terminology to memorize or a collection of past philosophers' ideas that often seemed confusing. They learned to ask questions critically, evaluate arguments, and articulate their opinions more carefully. This process gradually fostered intellectual independence. The transformation of their perceptions became more evident when examining each

individual's learning journey. N3, for instance, began his studies with a strong fear of losing his faith. During the first weeks, he was reluctant to express his opinions in class and preferred to listen cautiously. A turning point occurred when the lecturer explained philosophical arguments concerning the existence of God. This moment disrupted his earlier negative assumptions. He gradually developed an interest in reading philosophical literature and participating in discussions, eventually reshaping his view that philosophy did not threaten his faith but could, in fact, strengthen it (N3.2, Interview).

A similar transformation was experienced by N7. At first, he assumed that philosophy was complicated and difficult knowledge. However, after attending classes week by week, his perception slowly changed. The lecturers explained ideas step by step, and classroom discussions helped him realize that philosophy is not merely about abstract theories but about learning how to think clearly and critically. He began to see that philosophical thinking was closely connected to everyday life and even helped him understand his beliefs better. Over time, he became more confident in asking questions and expressing his opinions. What once felt intimidating gradually became interesting and enjoyable. Instead of viewing philosophy as complicated and burdensome, he came to see it as meaningful and valuable (N7.2, Interview).

These stories illustrate that the participants' perceptions of philosophy were not fixed but continuously constructed and reconstructed through lived learning experiences, interaction, and reflection. Taken together, these accounts suggest a clear developmental pattern in which early intellectual and theological anxieties were gradually replaced by reflective understanding and positive attitudes toward philosophy, eventually becoming an important foundation for their sustained commitment to the discipline.

3.2. Complexity during the Study of Philosophy

3.2.1 Entering Difficult Phases: Cognitive Disruption and Emotional Strain

As time progressed, participants became increasingly engaged in philosophy courses and immersed themselves more intensively in various philosophical studies. However, this deeper involvement was frequently accompanied by difficulties and confusion that left them feeling exhausted, frustrated, and at times as if they wanted to scream to release their mental burden. They were confronted with dense readings, unfamiliar terminology, and abstract arguments that disrupted their previously established ways of thinking. Philosophy was not merely perceived as "difficult"; it felt disorienting and, at times, seemingly meaningless or lacking practical relevance. As N1 explained:

> *I often experience difficulties because I do not really understand the material presented. As a result, I cannot apply philosophical thoughts or theories to analyze the reality around me. It feels like learning many ideas but not knowing how to use them (N1.3, Frame)*

Similar experiences were reported by N2, N3, N5 who described confusion arising from the volume of material and the complexity of discussions:

> *The materials require deeper understanding, and many terms are still unfamiliar to me (N2.3, Frame)*
> *The materials are numerous and varied, and their application in everyday life is still difficult (N3.3, Frame)*
>
> *Studying philosophy is confusing because there is a great deal of diverse information, and I have a hard time understanding the underlying reasons (N5.3, Frame)*

For some participants, these challenges were intensified by the learning conditions. N7, for instance, described attending classes dominated by long lectures with minimal interaction:

> *It does not feel enjoyable to study philosophy if the lecturer only lectures for hours without any dialogue with students (N7.3, Interview)*

He often left the classroom feeling unsettled and emotionally drained. The absence of dialogue made him feel disconnected from the ideas being discussed rather than intellectually engaged with them (N7.3, Interview).

Nevertheless, amid this difficult phase, moments of interest and enjoyment began to emerge. When understanding was finally achieved, the experience felt deeply rewarding. N1 described such moments as feeling "enlightened," as though a new perspective on reality had suddenly opened up (N1.3, Interview). Similarly, N8 expressed that she greatly enjoyed studying philosophy because it allowed her to learn from the wisdom of philosophers and to approach problems logically rather than emotionally (N8.3, Interview). Other participants also expressed pride in studying a discipline they regarded as intellectually prestigious and foundational to many other fields of knowledge. Thus, confusion and curiosity coexisted. This tension characterized their initial encounters with philosophy: it felt both threatening and attractive, exhausting yet meaningful.

3.2.2 Being Strong and Staying: Negotiating Difficulties through Agency and Support

Despite experiencing repeated frustration, none of the participants chose to withdraw. Instead, they actively sought ways to overcome their difficulties. Their persistence was not a form of passive resignation but was expressed through deliberate strategies aimed at making philosophy more comprehensible. Several participants relied on external supports, particularly digital resources. Online platforms, especially YouTube, became practical companions in their learning process:

> *When I have difficulty, I open YouTube or search philosophy websites to find explanations. Sometimes I also ask seniors or lecturers (N1.4, Frame)*

N3 explained that explanatory videos and journal articles often felt easier to understand than textbooks:

> *I listen to explanatory videos or read journals because they are usually easier to understand than philosophy books (N3.4, Frame)*

Discussions with peers also fostered a sense of togetherness while simultaneously enhancing comprehension and motivation:

> *I prefer to exchange opinions with friends. When we discuss, the material becomes clearer and I feel more motivated (N2.4, Frame)*

At the same time, some participants adopted a more reflective and inward-oriented approach, as illustrated by N7's experience. After repeatedly feeling confused in lecture-centered classes, he gradually modified his study habits. He began rereading the material alone at night, contemplating it quietly, and even "meditating" on difficult ideas. What initially felt like helplessness slowly transformed into a personal routine of contemplation. He described lingering over a single paragraph, thinking deeply about it, and only moving on once the meaning truly made sense to him. Through this slow and reflective process, his confusion gradually diminished. Understanding did not emerge instantly but developed step by step (N7.4, Interview). A similar pattern appeared in N5's account: "*I engage in personal reflection*" (N5.4, Interview).

These narratives suggest that persisting in the study of philosophy required a combination of social and personal resources. In this study, participants negotiated their difficulties through dialogue, digital learning, and self-reflection, which simultaneously demonstrated their growing agency in directing and managing their own learning processes.

3.2.2 Feeling Enlightenment: Reframing Philosophy for Intellectual and Spiritual Strengthening

After a long and challenging journey of studying philosophy, participants began to experience various positive outcomes. They described noticeable changes in the ways they thought and interpreted both knowledge and faith. Philosophy was no longer perceived primarily as confusing or threatening; rather, it came to be understood as a transformative experience, both intellectually and theologically.

Participants reported significant personal development. Several described becoming more systematic, critical, rational, and inclusive :

Philosophy trains me to think systematically, critically, analogically, and rationally (N2.5, Frame)
Philosophy helps me solve complicated problems (N4.5, Frame)
I have become more appreciative of differences (N5.5, Frame)
Philosophy is useful for developing ways of thinking (N6.5, Frame)
Philosophy makes me wiser in living my daily life (N7.5, Frame)
I began to practice logical thinking and feel that I have developed a sense of wisdom (N8.5, Frame)

Beyond cognitive development, several participants also experienced a transformation in their theological understanding, particularly N1 and N3. For them, engaging deeply with philosophy reshaped their relationship with religion. N1 explained that studying philosophy encouraged him to remain critical, avoid superficial thinking, and refrain from accepting doctrines unquestioningly. As a result, he consciously tried to avoid blind imitation (*taqlid*) in practicing his faith (N1.5, Interview). Similarly, N3 initially perceived philosophical questioning of religious concepts as risky, fearing that it might weaken faith. However, over time, the act of questioning became a means of achieving deeper understanding. Rather than undermining belief, critical inquiry enabled him to examine the foundations underlying religious teachings. What had once generated anxiety gradually developed into confidence. For him, philosophy shifted from being a perceived threat to becoming a means of strengthening faith (N3.5, Interview).

These changes indicate that the outcomes of studying philosophy extended beyond cognitive gains to include shifts in attitudes and behaviors. Through repeated cycles of confusion, effort, reflection, and understanding, participants reconstructed how they think, believe, and act. In this sense, philosophy came to be experienced as a process of intellectual and personal reorientation, gradually shaping them into individuals who were more critical, reflective, open-minded, and religiously grounded. Finally, Although most participants eventually described intellectual and spiritual growth, not all transitions were smooth. N3 and N5, for instance, struggled longer than others. N3 initially perceived philosophical questioning as threatening to faith and needed considerable time before he could reinterpret it as strengthening belief. Likewise, N5 described repeatedly feeling lost in theoretical discussions and relying heavily on solitary reflection before gaining confidence. These experiences suggest that the path toward transformation was uneven and required different forms of adjustment for each student.

3.3. Expectations of Future Philosophy Studies: Learning Environment, Methods, and Content

After years of studying philosophy, participants articulated expectations that emerged naturally from the difficulties, frustrations, and small successes they experienced throughout their academic journeys. Their reflections illustrate how past struggles gradually shaped concrete ideas about what philosophy learning should look like in the future. Several participants explained that the classroom atmosphere strongly influenced their ability to think. Philosophy, which requires concentration and deep reflection, often became exhausting when the learning environment was noisy, tense, or overly formal. N1, for instance, recalled that during the early semesters he mostly sat quietly listening to long lectures filled with unfamiliar terminology. Despite his efforts to follow the explanations, he often felt left behind. The more rigid and serious the classroom atmosphere became, the more anxious he felt about speaking. Over time, he realized that this emotional pressure hindered his clarity of thought. Reflecting on his experience, he stated:

Learning philosophy requires a calm, conducive atmosphere and active classmates. When the class is noisy or too tense, I cannot focus. But when the atmosphere is relaxed, and there is discussion, I begin to think more critically (N1.6, Interview)

For him, meaningful learning occurred when the class was dialogical rather than monological. He added:

> *I want learning methods that are enjoyable and two-way, with discussions that examine current issues so that I can understand the material and apply it in real life (N1.7, Interview)*

This need for calmness and interaction was echoed by other participants, who described the ideal atmosphere as "calm and peaceful" (N3.6, Frame), "comfortable and dialogic" (N4.6, Frame), or "quiet and interactive" (N5.6, Frame). These descriptions suggest that tranquility was not merely a preference but a prerequisite for deep engagement in philosophical reasoning.

Beyond the physical environment, the attitudes and guidance of lecturers were also considered crucial for effective learning. As N4 expressed:

> *I feel enthusiastic about studying philosophy when lecturers make students feel comfortable and continuously encourage us to explore the material more deeply (N4.7, Frame)*

Such experiences gradually shaped the expectation that lecturers should not only deliver content but also create emotional safety and accompany students in their thinking processes. This sense of comfort ultimately fostered the courage to speak, ask questions, and interpret ideas.

While some participants emphasized the learning environment and lecturer support, others highlighted the relevance of course content. As their studies progressed, they began questioning the distance between philosophical theory and everyday life. N7 and N8, for example, felt that many classes stopped at conceptual explanations without demonstrating how philosophy could be practiced. After repeatedly encountering abstract discussions, they longed for learning experiences that extended beyond the classroom.

> *I appreciate lecturers who guide students closely and emphasize output-oriented learning, such as writing papers or creating content related to philosophy* (N7.7, Interview)

Meanwhile, N8 envisioned philosophy as something that should be explored directly through lived experience:

> *Lecturers who teach philosophy based on real-life situation, inviting students to conduct research and learn outside the classroom (N8.7, Frame)*

Their expectations also extended to the learning materials. Rather than purely theoretical texts, they preferred topics connected to human concerns and social realities :

> *Philosophy materials that are connected to social realities (N7.8, Frame)*
> *Humanistic philosophy materials (N8.8, Frame)*

Across these accounts, the participants' expectations gradually converged. They did not ask for philosophy to be simplified; rather, they wanted it to be revitalized—more dialogical, relevant, and meaningful. Overall, their hopes reveal how prolonged encounters with difficulty, passivity, and abstraction slowly encouraged them to imagine a different learning experience: a calm space for reflection, interactive dialogue, supportive lecturers, and materials that connect philosophical thinking with both theory and lived reality. Thus, their vision for the future grew directly from their past journeys with philosophy.

Discussion

The findings reveal that participants' initial encounters with philosophy varied considerably. Some held positive perceptions, while others expressed negative ones. Particularly among those with negative views, these perceptions were shaped by socially constructed stigma, in which philosophy was regarded as intellectually demanding and spiritually risky. Such assumptions generated feelings of anxiety and hesitation when engaging with philosophical study, as reflected in participants' fear of

questioning God or being led away from faith. These early responses indicate that the challenge of learning philosophy was not purely cognitive but also emotional and theological. From the perspective of transformative learning theory proposed by Mezirow, this condition can be understood as a disorienting dilemma—a situation in which previously taken-for-granted assumptions are gradually questioned (Mezirow, 1991). Although this tension initially functioned as an obstacle in learning philosophy, it simultaneously became the starting point for reflection and the construction of new meanings, marking the beginning of a deeper process of personal transformation rather than simple academic adjustment.

These negative perceptions gradually diminished after participants attended philosophy classes. As expressed by N8, *"After attending philosophy classes, I became convinced that studying philosophy does not make someone an atheist"* (N8.2, Interview). Meanwhile, those who had held positive perceptions from the beginning reported that such views further strengthened their commitment to the discipline. In this context, perception emerges as an important psychological factor influencing learning processes (Suryabrata, 1990, pp.249-254; Baharudin and Wahyuni, 2009; Getahun, 2022, p.1). Empirical evidence provided by Getahun shows that students with initially positive attitudes tend to achieve better learning outcomes than those without such attitudes (Getahun, 2022, pp.7-8). Thus, the participants' early concerns should not be viewed as an endpoint, but rather as the first stage of a longer transformative learning process. The classroom experience played a crucial role in reconstructing meaning, where questioning was reframed as intellectual exploration rather than religious defiance, enabling students to integrate critical thinking with their existing belief systems.

As their studies progressed from semester to semester and year to year, participants experienced significant cognitive disruptions. These challenges stemmed from unfamiliar terminology, the difficulty of applying abstract philosophical theories to everyday life, and the overall complexity of the subject matter. Despite these difficulties, none of them expressed a desire to withdraw from the Department of Theology and Islamic Philosophy. Instead, these challenges became important turning points that encouraged deeper reflection and the reorganization of their cognitive frameworks. Complexity, therefore, was not merely an obstacle but an essential condition that stimulated critical understanding and intellectual maturation. Learning is not simply a linear accumulation of knowledge; rather, it is a long and complex process of becoming and self-transformation (Gagné & Driscoll, 1988,p. 4; Gredler, 1986; Marton & Ramsden, 1988). The findings show that moments of confusion were often followed by moments of clarity or "enlightenment," indicating that struggle itself functioned as a pedagogical mechanism through which philosophical understanding gradually emerged.

Importantly, participants did not remain passive in the face of these challenges. Instead, they demonstrated agency in managing their learning processes by seeking alternative resources through digital media, engaging in peer discussions, and conducting independent personal reflection. These strategies reflect patterns of self-regulated learning and resilience, characterized by confidence developed through hard work, perseverance in dealing with difficulties, willingness to discuss ideas, and ongoing self-evaluation (Cahyani et al., 2018; Pulungan et al., 2022). This condition indicates that initial perceptions shape interest (Stroup & Branstetter, 2018), and interest subsequently drives motivation (Abdullah, 2014, p.144). Learners with strong motivation tend to invest greater effort and time in achieving their academic goals, supported by persistence and reflective capacity. Therefore, the ability to endure confusion reflects not only intellectual capacity but also psychological resilience. In this context, learning philosophy, especially in Islamic higher education, appears to cultivate both disciplined thinking and personal endurance, suggesting that the learning process itself contributes to character development as much as to cognitive growth.

Over time, sustained engagement with philosophical study resulted in significant transformations in both ways of thinking and ways of practicing religion. Participants described becoming more critical, systematic, open-minded, and reflective thinkers. Some even reported that their faith had grown stronger. These findings align with previous studies linking philosophical learning to intellectual development and character formation. Haave et al. (2018) highlight philosophy's contribution to

cognitive complexity, while Mansur (2020) and Wattimena (2016) emphasize its role in fostering independent and mature personalities. Similarly, Woodhouse (2000) argues that philosophical thinking promotes tolerance, intellectual autonomy, and freedom from dogmatism. The present study extends these arguments by demonstrating that the transformation experienced by students is not merely cognitive but also spiritual, as critical reflection helped them reconstruct their religious understanding more consciously.

Finally, participants' expectations for future philosophy learning carry important pedagogical implications. Their preference for dialogical classrooms, supportive lecturers, and contextualized materials indicates that meaningful learning emerges from active interaction and reflection rather than rote memorization. This finding is consistent with the argument that philosophy should be positioned as a methodology of thinking rather than merely a collection of historical ideas (Abdullah, 2000, pp.8-10). Interactive and dialogical approaches—reminiscent of the classical philosophical dialogical tradition (Hadiwiyono, 1980; Poedjawijatna, 1986, p.30)—create safe spaces for learners to question, interpret, and connect concepts with lived realities. Moreover, attention to social and environmental factors aligns with Ivashkevych et al. (2021), who emphasize the significant influence of external conditions on learning processes and outcomes.

By foregrounding students' lived experiences through a narrative approach, this study underscores the importance of reflective and participatory pedagogy in philosophy education within Islamic higher education, transforming philosophy from something perceived as threatening into a meaningful source of intellectual and spiritual growth.

4. CONCLUSION

The participants' narratives collectively reveal that students of Theology and Islamic Philosophy at State Islamic Universities in Central Java initially held ambivalent—and at times negative—perceptions of philosophy. On the one hand, they experienced anxiety about its perceived difficulty and the potential tension between philosophical inquiry and religiosity; on the other hand, they recognized it as an intellectual challenge that needed to be confronted. Over time, these impressions evolved into more positive appreciations, as philosophy was perceived to contribute to broader intellectual horizons, strengthened critical reasoning, personal maturity, and even the reinforcement of faith. These findings affirm the transformative dimension of students' engagement with philosophy within the context of Islamic higher education. The study implies that curriculum design should contextualize philosophical materials in more grounded ways; lecturer pedagogy should emphasize dialogical and interactive approaches; student support systems should aim to reduce initial anxieties; and recruitment messaging should communicate philosophy as an intellectually rigorous discipline that remains compatible with religious commitment.

This study is limited by its small sample size, potential nomination bias in participant selection, restricted regional focus, reliance on self-reported data, and possible translation inaccuracies. Future research should involve comparative studies across provinces, longitudinal tracking of students' intellectual development, exploration of lecturers' perspectives, the use of mixed-methods designs, and intervention-based research on innovative philosophy pedagogy. Ultimately, this study suggests that the study of philosophy does not merely present intellectual challenges but also opens a space for integrating critical rationality with deepened religiosity. Philosophy, therefore, may be understood not as a threat to faith, but as a means of fostering more mature and responsible religious reflection.

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