

## Reviewing Al-Balkhī's Concept of the Soul and Its Relevance for Developmental Psychology

Nazariah Shar'ie Bt Janon

*International Islamic University Malaysia*

### ABSTRACT

*The work of the 9th-century Muslim scholar Abū Zayd al-Balkhī offers a profound historical and theoretical resource for contemporary developmental psychology. He articulated a sophisticated framework on the intricate relationship between the soul and body, centred on the dynamic interplay between the nafs (psyche) and the qalb (heart) to achieve holistic well-being. This study employs a qualitative methodology, integrating narrative review and historical textual analysis, to examine al-Balkhī's concept of the soul. This paper argues that al-Balkhī's conceptualization provides a robust framework for understanding spiritual resilience and cognitive agency as central components of human development, offering a valuable complement to modern biopsychosocial models. The analysis reveals that his model offers crucial insights into the cultivation of a virtuous character and provides a mechanism for how individuals can navigate adversity across the lifespan. Consequently, this paper explores the theoretical implications of al-Balkhī's concept of the soul for understanding physical, cognitive, and socioemotional development. Ultimately, this study positions al-Balkhī's work not merely as a historical artefact but as a vital and relevant paradigm for advancing a more holistic and cross-culturally informed science of human development.*

**Keywords:** *Al-Balkhī, Body and Soul, Developmental Psychology, Mental Health, Nafs and Qalb, Psychological State*

### INTRODUCTION

The contemporary field of developmental psychology, while dominated by Western theoretical frameworks, is increasingly recognising the value of cross-cultural and historical perspectives to achieve a more holistic understanding of human flourishing. In this search for diverse intellectual traditions, the work of 9th-century Muslim polymath Abū Zayd al-Balkhī emerges as a particularly rich and relevant source. His sophisticated integration of medicine, philosophy, and theology produced a cohesive model of the human psyche that predates many foundational concepts of modern psychology.

Of his extensive writings (Haque, 2020), *Masālih al-Abdān wa al-Anfus* (Sustenance of the Body and Soul) holds primary relevance for psychology. In this seminal text, al-Balkhī investigated the complex interplay of cognition, anxiety, and mood disorders, pioneering therapeutic approaches that many modern scholars identify as precursors to cognitive therapy (Awaad & Ali, 2016). Building upon this historical foundation, this paper argues that al-Balkhī's sophisticated conceptualisation of the soul - encompassing the dynamic relationship between the *nafs* (psyche) and the *qalb* (heart) - offers a cohesive biopsychospiritual framework with profound implications for modern developmental psychology (Saeed, Ahmed Sr., Kakamad, & Najmadden, 2024). Through this examination, the study will elucidate the

implications of his holistic model for contemporary theories of individual behaviour and mental processes, with particular attention to its relevance for development across the lifespan.

To substantiate this claim, the paper is structured as follows. First, it will examine the biographical and intellectual context of al-Balkhī's life to understand the foundations of his knowledge. Following this, it will provide a detailed analysis of his philosophical framework, defining his key concepts of the soul. The paper will then place this framework in a comparative dialogue with foundational Western developmental theories. Subsequently, it will explore the implications of al-Balkhī's model for developmental psychology before concluding with a synthesis of the findings.

### **ABŪ ZAYD AL-BALKHĪ: LIFE AND INTELLECTUAL FORMATION**

Abū Zayd Ahmed ibn Sahl al-Balkhī was born in 849 CE (235 AH) in the village of Shamistiyan, within the province of Balkh, Afghanistan - a region renowned as a vibrant crossroads of culture and learning- and passed away in 934 CE at the age of 85 (Badri, 2013). Historical accounts describe him as a quiet and contemplative individual who preferred solitude over social engagement. This introspective temperament became a defining characteristic of his identity as a brilliant, yet reserved, scholar (Badri, 2013; Al-Hamawi, 1980).

Following his initial education from his father, al-Balkhī relocated to Baghdad, the era's undisputed intellectual epicentre. During an intensive eight-year period, he pursued a comprehensive education in both religious and secular sciences. His studies under the renowned polymath Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī, often called "the philosopher of the Arabs," were particularly formative. Under al-Kindī's guidance, al-Balkhī was immersed in the intellectual currents of the Translation Movement, which brought Greek, Persian, and Indian texts into the Arabic-speaking world. This exposure was not merely academic; it involved a rigorous synthesis of Hellenistic philosophy - particularly the works of Aristotle and the Stoics - with Islamic theological principles. This provided him with a thorough foundation in a wide array of disciplines and shaped his multifaceted expertise (Badri, 2013).

While al-Balkhī's early recognition stemmed from his contributions to geography - notably establishing the "Balkhi School" of terrestrial mapping - his most enduring legacy lies in the field of mental health. In the 9th century, at a time when mental distress was often attributed to supernatural causes, he made seminal contributions by differentiating between neurosis and psychosis and introducing early forms of cognitive therapy. This pioneering work in medicine and psychology was a direct result of his deep intellectual curiosity and introspective nature (Saeed, Ahmed Sr., Kakamad, & Najmadden, 2024).

Upon returning to Balkh, he served as a writer (kātib) for Prince Ahmad ibn Sahl ibn Hashim al-Marwazi, having deliberately declined a ministerial role to avoid the distractions of high office. This position was consistent with his reserved personality, affording him the solitude necessary for deep study and reflection while still keeping him engaged with the administrative and intellectual matters of the court. He remained dedicated to his research and writing throughout his long and productive life (Badri, 2013).

Given his rigorous intellectual training under al-Kindī, his lifelong dedication to scholarship, and his profound introspective disposition, al-Balkhī was uniquely positioned to develop a comprehensive framework concerning fundamental psychological concepts. This unique synthesis of personal disposition and profound intellectual training provided the direct

foundation for his sophisticated, Islamically-informed understanding of the body and soul, which will be detailed in the subsequent section (Badri, 2013).

### AL-BALKHĪ'S PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK

Al-Balkhī's ontological framework is founded on an interactionist dualism, positing that the immaterial soul (*nafs*) and the physical body are distinct yet deeply interrelated entities where the condition of one directly influences the other (Badri, 2013; Kadavath, 2024). Central to this interaction is the *nafs* itself, which he identifies as the locus of appetitive drive - desires, passions, and the pursuit of self-gratification. Using the example of hunger, al-Balkhī illustrates how the psyche generates cognitive strategies to mobilise bodily action, establishing a clear link between psychological processes and physical behaviour that prefigures modern theories of motivation (Deuraseh & Abu Talib, 2005).

To regulate these powerful drives, al-Balkhī introduces the *qalb* (heart) as a crucial intermediary. Transcending its physiological meaning, the *qalb* serves as the spiritual and psychological core where emotions, moral discernment, and inner perception converge. By positioning the *qalb* as the moderator of the *nafs*, al-Balkhī frames emotional and moral balance as essential for guiding ethical human action, an idea resonant with Prophetic traditions (Sahih Bukhari & Muslim). The *qalb* thus functions as the seat of moral cognition, a faculty that aligns individual desires with ethical awareness and divine guidance, anticipating modern concepts of affective regulation and conscience (Kamarulbahari, Noor, Matt & Yusoff, 2024).

Achieving a sound *qalb*, in turn, requires a holistic approach to health. Al-Balkhī proposed two integrated disciplines: al-Tibb al-Qalb (spiritual and psychological medicine) and al-Tibb al-Jismani (physical medicine). He asserted that true well-being necessitates preserving the health of both domains, arguing against the narrow focus on physical health common among his contemporaries. Therefore, a robust *qalb* – fortified by faith, moral conduct, and spiritual discipline - is paramount for achieving a balanced life (Deuraseh & Abu Talib, 2005).

This comprehensive model is grounded in a synthesised epistemology that integrates three complementary sources: empirical observation, rational deduction, and divine revelation. His use of systematic clinical observation reflects an early empiricism, while his training under al-Kindī enabled him to rationally classify disorders and devise cognitive interventions (Saeed et al., 2024). The defining feature of his system, however, is its anchoring in Islamic metaphysical principles. By treating revelation and reason as complementary, al-Balkhī established a teleological understanding of the soul, where self-knowledge is inseparable from knowledge of God (Badri, 2013; Kadavath, 2024; Liedstrand, 2023).

From this integrated framework, a clear axiology emerges, centred on the imperative to safeguard both body and soul from corruption. His work, *Masālih al-Abdān wa al-Anfus*, demonstrates that psychosomatic health arises from the harmonious interplay of the self's physical and psychological dimensions, both ultimately oriented toward the divine (Badri, 2013). Ultimately, al-Balkhī's legacy is twofold: he stands as a foundational figure in the history of psychology, and his work provides a timeless paradigm for contemporary developmental psychology by framing human development as the cultivation of the soul toward moral and spiritual maturity.

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS WITH WESTERN PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES

A comparative analysis of al-Balkhī's psychotherapy with foundational Western theories reveals both striking parallels and profound divergences. His framework, while not a developmental theory in the vein of Jean Piaget or Lev Vygotsky (Santrock, 2024; Boyd & Bee, 2015) offers a compelling counterpoint. Whereas Piaget mapped the maturational stages of cognitive development - focusing on the universal structure of reasoning that evolves with age - al-Balkhī was concerned with correcting the pathological content of thought at any stage of life. This conceptual divergence has significant implications for understanding an individual's cognitive agency. Piaget's stage theory implies that certain logical errors are inevitable and insurmountable until a new developmental stage is reached, limiting the scope for immediate intervention (Siegler, 1994). In contrast, al-Balkhī's framework presumes an individual possesses the inherent rational capacity to self-correct, regardless of their life stage. The therapeutic goal is not to await cognitive maturation but to actively guide the individual in applying their existing cognitive abilities to challenge and amend their own faulty beliefs (Haque, 2004a). His therapeutic method is a clear precursor to modern cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), which aims to repair faulty thinking - a principle that directly anticipates Aaron Beck's (1976) model of cognitive distortions. Thus, while Piaget and Vygotsky explain how cognitive architecture is constructed, al-Balkhī provides a historically rich framework for repairing it, confirming that the core principles of CBT have deep cross-cultural roots.

The contrast becomes even more pronounced when compared with the psychodynamic theories of Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson (Santrock, 2024; Boyd & Bee, 2015). Freud attributed neurosis to unconscious conflicts rooted in early life, requiring therapies that excavate the subconscious. This model posits a locus of pathology that is, by definition, inaccessible to the individual's direct awareness, positioning the therapist as the primary agent of interpretation and change. Al-Balkhī, in stark opposition, located the source of neurosis in conscious, albeit illogical, thought processes. This distinction is critical: where Freudian therapy seeks to uncover hidden trauma through a process often dependent on the therapist's expertise, al-Balkhī's method empowers the individual by treating the problem as an accessible and correctable pattern of thought (Arroisi & Himaya, 2023). For instance, in treating social anxiety, a Freudian approach might investigate repressed childhood experiences of shame. Al-Balkhī's method, conversely, would focus on identifying and rationally challenging the patient's conscious, irrational beliefs, such as the fear that "speaking up will inevitably lead to ridicule. This technique is a clear antecedent to the cognitive restructuring central to modern Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). Similarly, while Erikson framed development as a series of psychosocial crises, al-Balkhī's analysis of depression as profound sorrow over the past focuses on the cognitive mechanism of processing events rather than the resolution of a life stage. This emphasis on conscious cognition provided a more agentic pathway to well-being that predates the Western cognitive revolution by centuries.

Finally, al-Balkhī's work complements Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory by elucidating the interplay between the internal and external worlds (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner argued that development is shaped by nested environmental systems; al-Balkhī acknowledged this by advising patients to avoid external triggers (the "microsystem"). However, his primary contribution lies in modelling the internal cognitive mediation of these external factors. While Bronfenbrenner masterfully outlines the external systems that influence an individual, al-Balkhī provides a specific mechanism for how

these events are processed internally to produce either psychological health or distress.

This distinction has profound implications for understanding both cognitive ability and socioemotional development across the lifespan. Bronfenbrenner's model, by emphasising the power of external systems, can inadvertently diminish the role of individual cognitive agency. In contrast, al-Balkhī's framework posits that an individual's cognitive ability is the ultimate filter through which all environmental influences must pass. This empowers the individual, suggesting that cognitive skills like rational self-talk and belief restructuring are critical tools for navigating socioemotional challenges posed by any system – from familial conflicts in the microsystem to societal pressures in the macrosystem. His work thereby enriches the person-environment model by emphasising that while the environment presents challenges, it is the individual's cognitive response that ultimately shapes their psychological state. Consequently, socioemotional development is framed not as a passive outcome of environmental forces, but as an active, lifelong process of cultivating the cognitive discipline needed to achieve resilience and well-being, regardless of external circumstances.

### **IMPLICATION OF AL-BALKHI'S CONCEPT OF SOUL IN DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY**

Drawing from al-Balkhī's holistic view of the soul, this section explores the significant implications of his framework for contemporary developmental psychology. While modern theories provide robust models for psychosocial and environmental influences, al-Balkhī's work offers a unique and complementary focus on internal spiritual resilience and conscious cognitive agency. This analysis will demonstrate how his concepts inform our understanding of physical, cognitive, and socioemotional development throughout the human lifespan.

First, his framework introduces a crucial spiritual dimension often underemphasised in dominant developmental theories. Frameworks like Erikson's psychosocial stages (Santrock, 2024) or Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) masterfully explain how external experiences shape development. For example, Erikson's theory predicts that a child suffering paternal abuse might develop core traits of shame and doubt. While this accurately diagnoses the problem, al-Balkhī's work offers a vital supplement by focusing on internal mediation. His model posits that an individual's spiritual health - centred on the *nafs* (psyche) and *qalb* (heart) - can moderate adverse outcomes. A strong spiritual foundation, grounded in Islamic principles, can empower an individual to navigate adversity constructively (Haque, 2004b). Socioemotionally, this principle extends across the lifespan, suggesting that a fortified *qalb* can help an adolescent resist negative peer influences to maintain a stable identity, or allow an older adult to achieve integrity by finding spiritual meaning in the face of physical decline and loss. It proposes that holistic development requires not just a safe environment but also a fortified spiritual core, offering a theologically congruent model for promoting resilience (Kadavath, 2024).

Second, al-Balkhī's emphasis on conscious cognition presents a powerful alternative to psychoanalytic determinism and serves as a direct antecedent to modern cognitive therapies. In *Sustenance of the Body and Soul*, he argues that neurosis is induced by irrational thinking that can be corrected by "unlearning" maladaptive habits (Badri, 2013). This stands in stark contrast to Freudian theory, which attributes neurosis to unconscious conflicts. Whereas the Freudian model can imply a degree of determinism, al-Balkhī's concept empowers the

individual by locating psychological distress in conscious, and therefore mutable, thought processes. This has profound relevance for developmental psychology, as it suggests that detrimental behaviours learned in childhood are not immutable. Cognitively, this agency is critical at every life stage: it allows an adolescent to actively restructure negative self-perceptions during identity formation, a mid-life adult to reframe career or personal setbacks, and an older adult to challenge despondent thoughts about ageing (Awaad & Ali, 2016). His work thus provides a foundational pillar for Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), demonstrating that positive developmental trajectories can be achieved through cognitive restructuring (Awaad & Ali, 2016; Kamarulbahari et al., 2024).

Finally, al-Balkhī's integration of the *nafs* expands the modern biopsychosocial model into a more comprehensive biopsychospiritual framework. Contemporary psychology acknowledges the mind-body connection, but al-Balkhī introduced the pivotal role of the *nafs* as an immaterial entity governing thought, feeling, and behaviour. The state of the *nafs* - whether prone to evil (al-*ammārah*) or tranquil (al-*mutma'innah*) - directly shapes personality. The key to elevating the *nafs* is the purification of the *qalb* (heart), the centre of one's spiritual essence. This model directly addresses the physical dimension of development by formalising a psychosomatic link. For al-Balkhī, chronic negative emotional states like anger or anxiety, which stem from a disordered *nafs*, are not merely psychological - they are precursors to physical illness. This has direct implications for physical health across the lifespan, suggesting that the spiritual discipline of purifying the *qalb* can mitigate stress-related diseases in adulthood and promote healthier physiological ageing. This adds a crucial mechanism for character development that transcends simple behaviour modification. For developmental psychology, this implies that cultivating a virtuous character is an active, lifelong spiritual practice centred on purifying the *qalb* to achieve positive behaviour, emotional tranquillity, and consequently, physical well-being (Santrock, 2024; Boyd & Bee, 2015).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the work of the 9th-century polymath Abū Zayd al-Balkhī represents more than a historical curiosity; it offers a cohesive and remarkably modern framework for human psychology. By identifying irrational beliefs as the source of psychological distress and advocating for their conscious "unlearning," he established a clear antecedent to modern cognitive therapies (Awaad & Ali, 2015). Crucially, his framework was not limited to cognition. By stressing the intricate balance between the soul (*nafs*) and the body, and positioning the *qalb* (heart) as the spiritual core that mediates this relationship, he forged a truly biopsychospiritual model of human nature.

This holistic framework holds profound implications for developmental psychology. Al-Balkhī's concept of unlearning habits directly informs modern interventions for fostering positive development. More importantly, his emphasis on the *nafs* and *qalb* introduces a rich spiritual dimension that challenges the predominantly secular assumptions of many Western psychological models. This offers not only a congruent framework for Muslim psychologists but also provides a valuable paradigm for cross-cultural psychology, demonstrating how non-Western traditions can enrich our universal understanding of human flourishing. By providing a model where purifying the heart across the lifespan builds resilience and inner tranquillity, his work invites future research into the interplay between spiritual practices and mental well-being. Consequently, al-Balkhī's philosophy is not merely of historical interest but stands as

an essential and timeless paradigm for comprehending and advancing a truly holistic science of human development.

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