

Integrating Al-Ghazali’s Insights of Soul to the Study of Human Cognition

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ABSTRACT

Al-Ghazali (1058-1111), one of the most influential scholars in Islamic intellectual history, offered profound insights to the understanding of the human soul (nafs) through his integrative approach. This paper explores Al-Ghazali’s intellectual legacy, with a focus on his conception of the soul drawing from his biography and corpus of works such as Ihya’ Ulum al-Din (The Revival of the Religious Sciences) and Ma’ārij al-Quds fī Madārij Ma’rifat al-Nafs (The Ascension of the Holy in the Steps of Knowing the Soul). The discussion traces Al-Ghazali’s philosophical thoughts on the epistemological, ontological and axiological perspectives underpinning his conception of soul. The final section considers the contemporary relevance of Al-Ghazali’s thought to the modern study of human cognition. This paper calls for a renewed engagement with classical Islamic conceptions of human nature to expand the epistemological boundaries of the modern study of mind and behavior.

Keywords: *Al-Ghazali, Axiology, Epistemology, Ontology, Soul, Human cognition*

INTRODUCTION

Al-Ghazali is widely recognised as one of the most prominent, prolific, renowned, and distinguished scholars in the Muslim world (Griffel, 2014, Ali and Almulla, 2023). He is considered as one of the greatest classical Muslim thinkers whose ideas remain relevant across time and fresh to be discussed in modern times. The present paper aims to describe and discuss the thoughts of Al-Ghazali, particularly his thoughts on the nature and development of the soul and how it can be integrated to the contemporary study of human cognition.

The first part of the paper describes his biography and scholarly contributions to the understanding of soul. This is followed by his philosophical foundations on the nature and development of the soul relating to the epistemological, ontological and axiological aspects of knowledge. The paper concludes with a discussion and suggestions on how Al-Ghazali’s insights might be meaningfully integrated into contemporary study of human cognition.

In the following paragraphs, Al-Ghazali’s biography and some of his notable works and contributions are described. The description draws on a range of widely consulted scholarly and reference sources including the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (n.d), the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Nakamura, n.d.), and *Encyclopædia Britannica* (n.d.). Where relevant, details on Al-Ghazali’s background and notable works are supplemented with some academic reference works, as indicated below.

Background and Biography

The full name of Al-Ghazali is Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad. He was born in the year of 1058 CE, 450 *Hijra*. His birth town is Tabaran, which is located in a small village named Ghulazah. This village is in a district of Tus, in Khurasan, currently known as Iran. It was said that the name “Al-Ghazali” was due to his origin i.e., a small village named Ghulazah (Syafiril, 2017), while in other writings (e.g., Elkhaisy-Friemuth, 2006), it is said that the name of Al-Ghazali is due to his father who worked as a spinner (*Ghazzal*).

Al-Ghazali belongs to a family who put very high regard on learning and quest for knowledge. His early education started with his own father in his birthplace in Tus. He learned basic religious knowledge, the Qur’ān, and Prophetic traditions with his father. His father passed away while he was still at a young age, and his guardian, who took over to take care of him, sent him to get a proper education. At the age of 15, he continued studying Arabic language and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) under his tutor al-Radhkani. Three years later, he travelled to Jurjan, a flourishing centre of learning at that time and continued studying for another two years. Al-Ghazali spent some years of study under some scholars such as Imam Haramayn al-Juwayni, who was the most famous theologian and master of Islamic jurisprudence of his time in Nishapur. This means that even from an early age, Al-Ghazali has committed himself to the pursuit of knowledge at a great educational institution as well as under the teaching of a great scholar in the area.

In the year of 478 *Hijra*, when he was about 28 years old, he started to work under the leadership of Nizam al-Mulk. Nizam al-Mulk was a powerful vizier or a high-ranking political advisor for the Turkish Sultans, the rulers for the great Seljuk empires. Nizam al Mulk’s name was also closely referred to as the founder and patron of a series of educational centres in Iran and Iraq, which were called after his name Nizamiyyah. At the court of Nizam al-Mulk, Al-Ghazali lived the life of a ‘court jurist’. He took part in political debates, learned about political disputes and argumentation and wrote books. In addition, he pursued his core interest in studying philosophy, in particular, Greek and Islamic philosophy. He studied the philosophical thoughts of Aristotle, Plato and Plotinus, as well as those of Ibn Sina and al Farabi thoroughly. It was Nizam al-Mulk who noticed Al-Ghazali’s outstanding scholarship and intellectual ability, and because of that, he appointed him as a professor at the Nizamiyyah University of Baghdad, the most famous and one of the most reputable learning institutions in Baghdad at that time (Makdisi, 1961, Kaya, 2023). With the appointment, Al-Ghazali had attained a position of great importance and was most sought after in the academic world in his early 30s. Since then, his name continued to be known as a man with great intelligence. His fame spread and became the pride of that distinguished educational institution.

Al-Ghazali’s intellectual journey is marked by a crucial turning point. After serving for several years in a prestigious academic position, he underwent a profound paradigm shift at the age of 38 years old, leading him to have a different outlook towards life. This shift of paradigm experienced by Al-Ghazali was referred to as a crisis (Albertini, 2005), and in some other writings (e.g., Rosmizi & Yacel, 2016, Marmura, 2002, Abdul Razak & Fatah Yasin, 2024)), it was explicitly termed a severe spiritual crisis or a soul-searching journey. This spiritual crisis which emerged at the height of his academic and professional success reflect a deep internal conflict between his engagement with the material world and his yearning for ultimate truth

and fulfilment in the hereafter. Despite his vast knowledge, great intellectual ability and celebrated academic position that he owned, he began to feel that all those are external, highly materialistic and were meant only for the present world. He felt those worldly affairs had diverted him from the absolute truth, and due to that, he started to embark in a spiritual, soul-searching journey in search of the absolute truth, certainty and inner peace.

The spiritual crisis that Al-Ghazali experienced may have resulted from the powerful influence of Sufism in his life. At a very young age, he was surrounded by people who were Sufis. His father was a Sufi, and after his father's death, Al-Ghazali was sent to learn from a great Sufi al-Radhkani. Nizam al Mulk, his leader and mentor at Nizamiyyah institution, was also inclined towards Sufism. Hence, with this close link to Sufism combined with the hunger to achieve pure spiritual truth, he left behind his high rank and renowned position of influence and other worldly possessions and secluded himself from public life.

In his late 30s, he started to leave his distinguished career in Baghdad and travelled to various Muslim countries such as Damascus, Jerusalem and Mecca in the pursuit of unveiling truth. After about 11 years in seclusion and spiritual journey, he returned to teaching by re-joining Nizamiyyah College in Nishapur. Not long after that, he went back to his hometown Tus and opened his own *madrakah* or religious school. On his return to Baghdad, he was a philosopher and a theologian who have attained spiritual certainty. He led an active spiritual public life who devoted himself to teaching, writing and sharing his personal spiritual experiences.

Al-Ghazali's depth of knowledge across multiple disciplines including philosophy, theology, politics, human psychology and spirituality and the sagacity of his writings underscore the remarkable breadth and depth of his intellectual and spiritual engagement. According to Watt, (1963), he can be viewed as the prototype of the Muslim intellectual. Owing to this exceptional scholarship, he was honoured with several distinguished titles throughout Islamic history. He was known as "*Hujjatul Islam*" or "*Al-hujjah al-Islam*" (The proof of Islam) (Rahman and Yücel, 2016, Marmura, 2002), "*Zayn al-din*" (The Ornament of Faith), "*Al-mujaddid*" (a reformist or renewer), and according to Sa'ari (1999) and Rahman and Yücel (2016), his great stature is comparable to the standard of the four *Imams* of *Sunni Mazhab* in Islam.

Al-Ghazali was indeed an outstanding and distinguished scholar. Al-Ghazali passed away in 1111 or 505 Hijra at the age of 53 in his hometown Tus. He led a remarkable life devoted to the pursuit of knowledge, spiritual refinement and intellectual reform. His legacy continues to inspire reflections and offer guidance in addressing intellectual and spiritual challenges of the modern days.

Notable Works and Contributions

Al-Ghazali was a prolific Muslim thinker and scholar with multiple expertise. He excelled as a philosopher, theologian, jurist, and at the same time a great *Sufi*. He was acknowledged as an expert in the field of philosophy, theology, jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and legal theory (*usul al-fiqh*), ethics and Sufism (Musrifah, 2019). His ability to embody these diverse roles stemmed from his vast encyclopaedic knowledge and insightful writings across each

discipline of knowledge. While the full scope of his works is too extensive to detail here, the following highlights represent Al-Ghazali's most notable and enduring contributions related to soul, many of which are considered seminal works in Islamic thought.

Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn (The Revival of the Religious Sciences)

Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn is considered as one of Al Ghazali's most renowned work. It was written during his spiritual solitude (Garden, 2014, Abdul Razak & Fatah Yasin, 2024) and its contents reflect the intellectual and spiritual transformation that he experienced during his period of seclusion. *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* is encyclopaedic in nature, covering a wide range of knowledge, including Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*'aqidah*), Sufism (*tasawwuf*), ethics, moral, and philosophy. The corpus of *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* is said to represent a series of new interpretations of Islamic thoughts in the sense that it advance people's understanding not only in general knowledge but in worship, ethics, morality, behaviour, purification of soul and spiritually destructive acts and conditions (Rosmizi & Yacel, 2016). In a similar vein, the book is regarded as very influential, and it was due to this greatest work that Al-Ghazali was known as '*Al Mujaddid*' (The Renewer) of the century (Garden, 2014).

Ihya' Ulum al-Din consists of four volumes, each of which comprises of ten chapters. The first volume is commonly known as The Book of Worship or devotional practice (*Rub' al-ibadat*). It deals with knowledge, belief, and individual forms of worship such as purity, prayer, charity, fasting, pilgrimage and so forth. The second volume is The Book of Worldly Affairs (*Rub' al-adat*), which deals with social responsibility and customs. The third and the fourth volumes are The Book of Destructive Evil (*Rub' al-muhlikat*) and The Book of Constructive Virtues (*Rub' al-munjiyat*), respectively. It is in both of these volumes Al Ghazali wrote about many aspects of the human soul or self (*nafs*). The third volume is devoted to a key section called *Kitāb Sharh 'Ajaib al-Qalb* (Marvels of the Heart) and it is in this section that Al-Ghazali wrote extensively about the four core faculties, namely the human heart (*qalb*), the soul (*nafs*), the spirit (*ruh*), the intellect (*'aql*). Al-Ghazali also wrote about the vices or diseases (*muhlikat*) that lead to the destruction of one's soul in the third volume, while the fourth volume presents the virtues and practices (*munjiyat*) that purify and elevate soul toward salvation (Ghazali.org, n.d).

Kimiya al Sa'adah (The Alchemy of Happiness)

Another notable book written by Al-Ghazali is *Kimiya al Sa'adah* (The Alchemy of Happiness). This is one of the great works that serves as a concise and simplified summary of *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*. The book is divided into four parts, mirroring the four volumes of *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, but in a much shorter version. The first part is on self-knowledge, which according to Al-Ghazali becomes the key to knowing God, while the second part deals with the purification of the soul. Part three of the book focuses on the conduct of worldly responsibilities and the final part maps out the spiritual path to God and the ultimate destiny of the soul. In short, in this book Al Ghazali describe how happiness or *sa'adah*, defined not as worldly pleasure, but as nearness to God, can be achieved by means of soul purification and transformation from the base self (*nafs*) into a pure and luminous soul. Al-Ghazali emphasises that the essence of eternal happiness resides in the soul's journey of self-knowledge, soul purification and spiritual transformation.

Ma'ārij al-Quds fī Madārij Ma'rifat al-Nafs (The Ascension of the Holy in the Steps of Knowing the Soul)

This essential work of Al Ghazali focuses almost entirely on the soul, its nature, diseases, purification and its ultimate journey toward God. This writing, which serves as a complement to his *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* is where Al Ghazali defined the four synonymous terms for the soul, which are heart (*qalb*), spirit (*ruh*), self (*nafs*) and intellect (*'aql*). In this book, Al-Ghazali emphasises the primacy of self-knowledge as a pathway to divine proximity. He asserts that “*he who knows himself knows his Lord (man 'arafanafsahu faqad 'arafa rabbahu)*” (Al-Ghazali.org, n.d).

Mishkat al 'Anwar (The Niche of Lights)

This is one of Al-Ghazali's most spiritually and philosophically significant works (Al Ghazali, 1998). Through the metaphor of light, Al-Ghazali discussed the metaphysical and spiritual dimensions of human existence represented by a hierarchy of reality in which God is the only True Light, and all created beings reflect that light to varying degrees based on their spiritual purity. Al-Ghazali discusses how the human soul, particularly the heart (*qalb*), can serve as a polished mirror that reflects divine truth. However, when obscured by worldly distractions and desires, the soul is veiled from reality. The heart is purified through remembrance (*dhikr*), discipline, and inner reflection and becomes receptive to higher knowledge. In this way, Al Ghazali offers not just a metaphysical theory but a deeply personal and transformative path toward awakening the soul to its divine origin.

In sum, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences), *Kimiya al Sa'adah* (The Alchemy of Happiness), *Ma'ārij al-Quds fī Madārij Ma'rifat al-Nafs (The Ascension of the Holy in the Steps of Knowing the Soul)* and *Mishkāt al-Anwār* (The Niche of Lights) collectively reflect the intellectual breadth and spiritual depth of Al-Ghazali's engagement with the human soul. Each work, in its own way, reveals his profound commitment to integrating reason, revelation, and spiritual practice in understanding the self. Together, they form a coherent and timeless body of thought that not only addresses the inner workings of the soul but also offers enduring insights into human nature, purpose, and the path toward inner peace and closeness to God. These works, along with many others in Al-Ghazali's corpus continue to serve as foundational references for many from the classical era to the present day.

CORE THEMES IN AL-GHAZALI'S PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHTS

Al-Ghazali is widely recognised as one of the most influential thinkers in the Islamic intellectual tradition. His philosophical thoughts integrate theology, mysticism, and rational inquiry. His works reflect a deeply integrated vision of human existence, one that harmonises the spiritual and rational dimensions of life. Central to his philosophy is the view that knowledge, existence, and ethical orientation are interconnected, with each playing a vital role in the development of the self and its relationship with Allah. This integrated framework is grounded solidly on *Tawhidic* theology, encompassing three foundational pillars of classical philosophy: ontology, axiology and epistemology. In the following section, each of these philosophical foundations is explained in relation to the discipline of psychology, with

particular emphasis on how each contribute to an understanding of human nature, values and processes of knowing.

Al-Ghazali's Ontological Perspective

Ontology refers to the philosophical study concerned with the nature of being. An ontological perspective explores fundamental questions about what it means to exist and what constitute reality (Lowe, 2002). Within the discipline of psychology, ontology addresses core questions about the nature of a human, what it means to be human and what constitutes the essence of a human and how these foundational aspects shape behaviour, consciousness and identity.

Al-Ghazali's ontological view can be traced from his writing on the first part of *Ma'ārij al-Quds fī Madārij Ma'rifat al-Nafs (The Ascension of the Holy in the Steps of Knowing the Soul)*. He wrote on the creation of human being with its dual nature and the relation of each one of them to the other. According to Al-Ghazali, human being is created by Allah with both physical and spiritual entities. The latter, the spiritual substance of man is referred to as the soul. In the first book in the third volume of *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* that is *The Marvels of the Heart*, Al-Ghazali describes the soul as a subtle, luminous and spiritual entity (*latifa rabbaniya ruhaniya*) (Shammas, 1963, Al Ghazali, 1986, 2005, p 18). The soul originates from the divine command, and it represents the true essence of a human being. Al-Ghazali firmly asserts the primacy of the soul in defining what it means to be a human. For Al-Ghazali, the essence of the human being lies not in the physical body but in the immaterial soul and because of this, this component is explained in detail in the other section of this paper. The other component of man is the physical body, which according to Al-Ghazali is temporal and perishable. The body serves merely as the vehicle or instrument through which the soul operates during worldly life.

Al-Ghazali's Axiological Perspective

Axiology is the philosophical study of values. It addresses questions related to what is considered as good, meaningful or worthy of pursuit (Rescher, 2013). In the context of psychological discipline, axiological perspectives helps shape one's understanding of the purpose and creation of human being, what are they for and what make them valuable.

According to Al-Ghazali, the ultimate aim of human's creation is to attain proximity to God and the soul is equipped for this noble purpose (Al-Ghazali, 1985). The soul is endowed with the capacity to reason and acquire knowledge that will lead to certainty and absolute truth. Central to this is Al-Ghazali's concept of *tazkiyatunnafs* (purification of soul), in that the soul needs to purify itself and strive to ensure its journey to bring man closer to God.

Al-Ghazali's Epistemological Perspective

Epistemology refers to the philosophical study that is concerned with the nature, origin and limits of human knowledge (Audi, 2011). It examines fundamental questions such as how knowledge is acquired, what counts as true knowledge and how certainty or truth is attained. In psychology, epistemological concerns are reflected in the study of how human beings acquire, process and validate knowledge (Sandoval, Greene, & Bråten, 2016).

Al-Ghazali's epistemological foundation of knowledge put equal emphasis on both revealed knowledge as found in the Qur'an and the hadith of the Prophet as well as on acquired knowledge, which come from human interactions with nature (Ali, 1994, Alam, 2021). According to him, human beings are capable of finding certainty or absolute truth through multiple sources of knowledge including sensory perception (*hissiyah*) and rational intellect (Poya & Rizapoor, 2023). However, Al-Ghazali argued that knowledge of senses and knowledge of intellect are both limited and not sufficient to bring man to the true knowledge.

Al-Ghazali affirms the role of intuition which is a deeper and inner form of knowing rooted in the Oneness of God (*Tawhid*) as one the primary source of knowledge (Hasib, Zarkasyi and Muslih, 2024). All in all, Al-Ghazali's epistemological thought is theocentric or God-centred in nature. He argued that the human soul, by its very nature (*fitrah*), is created with an inherent awareness of God. As mentioned in the Quran 7:172 " *And [mention] when your Lord took from the children of Adam – from their loins – their descendants and made them testify of themselves, [saying to them], "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes, we have testified". [This] – lest you should say on the day of Resurrection, "Indeed, we were of this unaware."* (Sahih International, 1997, Quran 7:172). Therefore, the pursuit of knowledge is essentially a return to this absolute truth. This perspective offers a spiritually rich framework that integrates reason, experience, and divine revelation. In this way, all forms of knowing are in a unified quest for divine understanding and spiritual fulfilment.

THE NATURE AND DEVELOPMENT OF SOUL ACCORDING TO AL-GHAZALI

Definition and Nature of the Soul

Al-Ghazali's ideas on the nature and development of the soul can be understood primarily from one of the volumes for his *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences) as well as his seminal works *Ma'ārij al-Quds fī Madārij Ma'rifat al-Nafs* (The Ascension of the Holy in the Steps of Knowing the Soul), *Al-Risalah al-Laduniyyah* and *Al-Miskat al-Anwar* (Sa'ari, 1998). The third volume of *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* consists of a book called *Kitab Sharh 'Ajaib al-Qalb* (Marvels of the Heart) and it is in this book that Al-Ghazali wrote extensively about the human heart (*qalb*), the soul (*nafs*), the spirit (*ruh*), the intellect (*'aql*). Similarly, in *Ma'ārij al-Quds fī Madārij Ma'rifat al-Nafs* (The Ascension of the Holy in the Steps of Knowing the Soul), Al-Ghazali argue that these four components are not separate entities. Rather they are of the same essence but with different functions. Al-Ghazali also wrote on the body (*jism*) and the knowledge (*'ilm*), and how these are related to the soul. This book also consists of his explanation of diseases or vices of the heart that lead to the destruction of one's soul. He also wrote about the soul in his other significant works, such as *Al Risalah al Laduniyyah* and *Al-Miskat Al-Anwar* (Sa'ari, 1998).

Al-Ghazali, in many of his writings, consistently describe the soul as a subtle, luminous and spiritual entity (*latifa rabbaniya ruhaniya*) (Shammas, 1963, Sa'ari, 1998, Al Ghazali, 2005). The soul is a subtle, non-material substance, an inward component of man, hidden and invisible that becomes the core of human identity and the seat of knowledge. It is in itself and is not located in any part of the body (Elkhaisy-Friemuth, 2006). It is regarded as the 'King' to the body as it is the one that directs the body to act in accordance with what has been prescribed by the religion. It is the soul that brings individuals closer to Allah or away from Him (Ali,

1995). Al Ghazali asserts that the true essence of man lies in its spiritual component that is the soul.

The Four Faculties of the Soul and their Interactions

In the book of *Marvels of Heart*, Al-Ghazali wrote about the four faculties of the soul or the spiritual component of human being. They are the heart (*qalb*), intellect (*'aql*), soul (self/*nafs*) and spirit (*ruh*). In Al-Ghazali's works, these four concepts are used synonymously and are at the centre of this understanding of the essence of being human. Al-Attas (1990) reaffirmed these by saying that these concepts are different terminologies but can be used interchangeably to represent the spiritual component of man, i.e., the soul. In some other writings (e.g., Rothman & Coyle, 2018), these four aspects are said to represent the structures of the soul. They serve different functions or qualities, but they are all integrated and signify a subtle spiritual entity (Haque, 2004; Rothman & Coyle, 2018).

In his conceptualisation of the soul as *nafs* (self), Al-Ghazali, as cited in Sa'ari (2002), referred it to as "*a lustful force connected to the whole body jointly and is the place of origin of the blameworthy characteristics*" (page 103). This view corresponds to the Quranic notion of *nafs al ammarah bil su'*, which refers to the *nafs* that commands to evil, as mentioned in Surah Yusuf verse 53 (12:53). It denotes the state of self that is inclined to worldly desire and pleasure and may distract individuals from the remembrance of Allah. According to Al-Ghazali, this lower form of *nafs* is rooted in two fundamental drives of desire (*shahwah* or *hawa*) and anger (*ghadab*). These lower impulses are likened to internal enemies that can destruct the soul and distancing individuals from their divine origin.

Al-Ghazali conceptualised the *nafs* not just with those negative attributes. He asserts that, the *nafs* is capable of transformation and spiritual elevation. The *nafs* can be purified and be in its highest state perfection. This type of *nafs* is described in the Quran 89:27 "[*To the righteous it will be said*], "*O reassured soul*" (Sahih International, 1997, Quran 89:27). *Nafs muthmainnah*, referred to as the reassured soul or the soul at rest. Thus, the human self (*nafs*), by its very nature, contains both lower and higher tendencies. On one end, it is drawn to desires and impulses similar to those of animals and at the other end, it has the potential to rise toward purity and be in close divine proximity. Al-Ghazali also recognises another type of *nafs* that is *nafs al lawwamah*, the self-reproaching or self-blaming soul, which is consistent to what is stated in the Qur'an 75:2 "*And I swear by the reproaching soul [to the certainty of resurrection]*" (Sahih International, 1997, Quran 75:2). This type of *nafs* is described to involve constant self-accountability and ethical struggle.

On the basis of the above, Al-Ghazali's conceptualisation of the soul through the notion of *nafs* presents it with a dynamic and transformative nature. The *nafs* moves along a spiritual continuum and is capable of both moral decline and elevation. It has the potential to ascend from its base and desire-driven state to a level of perfection which is characterized by inner peace and spiritual excellence. This progression toward perfection, according to Al-Ghazali is made possible through the process of *tazkiyatunnafs* or purification of soul which involves disciplined spiritual practices, ethical conduct and conscious detachment from worldly attachments. Through this journey of self-purification, the *nafs* can be refined to reflect divine attributes and fulfil its higher purpose in drawing nearer to God.

Another subtle spiritual entity of the soul in Al-Ghazali's framework is spirit (*ruh*). In *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, Al-Ghazali wrote it as the driving force that is infused into the body by God. The *ruh* occupies the body and operates through it. The *ruh* allow individuals to perform bodily actions. In *Marvels of the Heart*, he further characterises the *ruh* as the *subtle, tenuous substance in the human being that knows and perceives* (page 7). In his other work, '*Risālah al-Laduniyyah*,', he refers to the *ruh* as originating from God, carrying a divine command or trust of God (*al ruh al amri*), consistent with what is stated in the Quran 15:29 "*And when I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My [created] soul, then fall down to him in prostration*" (Sahih International, 1997, Quran 15:29). Unlike the body, or aspects of self that undergo change, the *ruh* is not subject to change, decay or death. It will leave the body when the body dies and returns to its divine source that is the God. Al-Ghazali, however, did mention in *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* that as the Hadith and the Quran kept the details of *ruh* in silence, hence no detailed description of *ruh* is provided. This is in line with the Quran 17:85 "*And they ask you [O Muhammad], about the soul. Say, the soul is of the affair of my Lord and mankind have not been given of knowledge except a little*" (Sahih International, 1997, Quran 17:85). For this reason, he refrains from offering detailed analysis and instead acknowledges the divine secret surrounding the true nature of *ruh*.

Al-Ghazali also identified the intellect (*'aql*) as a central spiritual faculty of the human soul. It is this faculty that differentiates human beings from animals. He devoted a sizeable section in the Book of Knowledge of *Ihya Ulum'al din* to a discussion on the nature and function of human intellect. According to Marmura (2002), Al-Ghazali speaks about the intellect (*'aql*) as the privileged tool for receiving divine illumination. This is the intellectual faculty of man, which serves the main function to reason (Watt, 1963). This reasoning ability possessed by man represents the highest function of the soul, and it is with this function that the soul acquires a divine-like quality (*rabbaniyyah*) (Al Ghazali.org, n.d).

Al-Ghazali wrote quite extensively about the *'aql*, which he referred to as rational soul in his other writings such as '*Risālah al-Laduniyyah*,'. As Burhanuddin (2017) explains, Al-Ghazali's position as a philosopher, theologian, and at the same time Sufi, leads him to use different terms to describe the rational dimension of soul. For example, in Qur'ānic term, this rational soul corresponds to '*an nafs al-muthmainnah*' (the tranquil soul) and '*al ruh al-amr*' (the divine command spirit). From a Sufi perspective, this rational soul is often referred as the *qalb* or the spiritual heart, while for philosophers or *hukama*', this type of soul is understood as '*an nafs an-nathiqah*' (the rational soul), highlighting its capacity for abstract thought and metaphysical understanding (Burhanuddin, 2017)

Moreover, in '*Risālah al-Laduniyyah*, Al-Ghazali wrote on the classification of intellect. He describes the *'aql* in the form of natural intellect (*al-aqlul-ghariziy*), i.e., the one that is revealed by God to man. This form of natural intellect is tied to the Islamic concept of *fitrah*. According to Al-Ghazali, man is born with the knowledge of God, and it is through this natural intellect that man has the knowledge to recognise the truth, which is absolute. In addition to natural intellect, Al-Ghazali acknowledges another form of intellect known as experiential intellect, (*'aql al-tajribi*) i.e., the intellect that is acquired or comes from one's dealing with life experience. Ultimately, Al-Ghazali's view of the intellect reflects his broader conceptualisation of the soul as an entity designed for growth, accountability, and

transcendence, guided by divine revelation and directed toward closeness with Allah (Al-Ghazali, 1985, Marmura, 2002).

Al-Ghazali placed particular emphasis on an aspect of the soul that he termed as ‘*qalb*’ or the heart. His conception of the ‘*qalb*’ is a direct reflection of his Sufi orientation, where the heart is seen as the spiritual core and true essence of the human being. The *qalb*, according to Al-Ghazali, is not just a cone-shaped organ of flesh situated on the left side of the chest. It is the one that he clarifies as *latifa* (subtle), *rabbaniyya* (divine), and *ruhaniyya* (spiritual), the one that serves as the seat of spiritual perception, self-awareness and ultimately attain knowledge of God.

In the third volume of his *Ihya’ Ulum al-Din*, Al-Ghazali elaborates that it is through this *qalb* that allows man to know God, draw closeness to Him, and strives toward the ultimate purpose of existence. However, the heart can be corrupted by the lower self (*nafs al ammarah bil su’*) and bring the soul away from perfection. Al-Ghazali also write extensively in his *Ihya’ Ulum al-Din* about the vices or *muhlikat* of the *qalb*, such as greed, envy, pride and anger. All these are the illnesses of the soul that can keep one’s away from the truth and focal to the downfall of human character. Al-Ghazali write not only about the sources that make the *qalb* miserable. In the same book, he also wrote on the *munjiyat* or treatments of those soul illnesses as a way to purify the *qalb* to bring it back to its divine essence.

Drawing from *Ihya’ Ulum al-Din* and other works, it becomes clearer that Al-Ghazali views the soul as created by Allah, an immaterial and spiritual essence within every human being. Although invisible and immaterial, it plays the most vital role as it is the essence of one’s being, the one that shapes human thought, behaviour and spiritual destiny. While the soul can be described through its different functions, it remains the same essence and form the spiritual core of the human being and working in tandem with the physical body. In Al-Ghazali’s thought, it is this dual nature of man, the body and the soul, that defines what is means to be human. Clearly, Al-Ghazali upholds and affirms the position of the soul as the most essential, fundamental, and central to the nature of man.

INTEGRATING AL-GHAZALI’S INSIGHTS TO CONTEMPORARY STUDY OF HUMAN COGNITION

Al-Ghazali is no exception to the long-standing intellectual tradition of exploring the nature of the human being (Ali, 1995, Haque, 2004). His valuable insights have made significant contributions not only to philosophy and theology, but also to psychology, including its modern sub-discipline of cognitive psychology.

Cognitive psychology focuses on the scientific study of various mental processes, collectively known as mind or cognition (Goldstein, 2015, 2019). It investigates the various mental processes involved in processing environmental stimuli such as perception, attention, memory, knowledge formation, reasoning, decision making and problem solving. From a cognitive perspective, human behaviour is understood as the outward manifestation of these internal cognitive processes. Consequently, any attempt to describe, explain, predict and control of human behaviours requires a thorough understanding of the mechanism underlying human thought (Neisser, 1994, Goldstein, 2019, McBride et al., 2022).

The present paper argues that Al-Ghazali's conception of the soul, its structure, faculties, and purpose offers a philosophical and spiritual perspective that enriches this understanding. In the following paragraphs, the way to integrate Al-Ghazali's thought to the contemporary study of human cognition is discussed. First, it discusses how his axiological, ontological, and epistemological foundations can provide an integrated framework for studying cognition. Second, it argues for the inclusion of the soul as a necessary component in understanding the full complexity of human cognitive functioning. Ultimately, understanding cognition through Al-Ghazali's lens offers a more holistic view of human cognition and allows one to see the mind not merely as a processor of information, but as a spiritual faculty with the capacity for growth, awareness, and transcendence.

The Axiological, Ontological and Epistemological Foundations as a Framework for Studying Human Cognition

Al-Ghazali's philosophical thoughts offer a comprehensive and integrative framework for understanding human cognition. Central to his thoughts are the three foundational philosophical dimensions of knowledge, i.e., ontology, axiology and epistemology, all of which provide a meaningful basis for exploring the core concerns of cognitive psychology.

Central to Al-Ghazali's ontological view is the belief that human beings consist of an outward form (*jasad*) and an inward spiritual self or soul. Al-Ghazali sees the soul as the true essence of the human self. It is this spiritual essence that connects man to the divine. As such, cognition and consequently all behaviour depend on the spiritual state of an individual (Ali, 1995). Al-Ghazali posits that the heart (*qalb*) is the core of human consciousness and is capable of receiving divine inspiration (*ilham*) and perceiving metaphysical truths beyond sensory data (Ali, 1995).

The ontological foundation of cognitive psychology gives a comprehensive and a meaningful picture of the nature and essence of being a human including what human cognition is all about in Islam. It enriches modern cognitive psychology and affirms that cognition is not merely a function of neural or material mechanisms but is rooted in a spiritual substance that transcends physical existence. The soul, in the form of heart is the seat of cognition (Al-Ghazali, 1985). It is dynamic, as it develops, ascends, or deteriorates depending on one's ethical and spiritual state. Hence, understanding cognition from an ontological perspective, in Al-Ghazali's framework, necessitates acknowledging the spiritual reality of the soul and its central role in shaping human thought and behaviour (Shehu, 2000; Griffel, 2014).

From Al-Ghazali's axiological perspective, all knowledge originates from Allah and is ultimately pursued for the purpose of knowing and attaining a deeper understanding of Him (Al Ghazali.org,n.d). Accordingly, the quest for cognitive psychology knowledge should begin with the intention (*niyyah*) to attain knowledge about Allah. Both students and educators are thus encouraged to engage with cognitive psychology not as an end in itself, but as a means of drawing nearer to Allah, the Absolute Creator of all beings (Hasib, Zarkasyi and Muslih, 2024). This orientation transforms the study of human cognition into a spiritual endeavour, wherein the pursuit of such knowledge becomes a means of attaining divine guidance (*hidayah*) from Allah and fostering a deeper closeness to Him. Therefore, the axiological foundation rooted in Al-Ghazali's thought, in that knowledge of human cognition goes far beyond the aim of

Western cognitive psychology discipline which attributes one's cognitive nature and ability solely to the influence of heredity and environment is valued as a means toward divine proximity.

Essentially, knowledge of human mind or cognition should be attained for the purpose of knowing the self and his Creator. Within the framework of cognitive psychology, axiological reflection helps determine the purpose and direction of cognitive functions, namely, what they are for and what makes them valuable. Al-Ghazali places significant emphasis on the moral and spiritual value of human cognition. He does not regard knowledge as an end in itself but as a means to achieve self-purification, ethical conduct, and closeness to God (Griffel, 2014). In *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, he writes extensively about the importance of sincerity (*ikhlas*), humility, and the correct intention (*niyyah*) behind the pursuit of knowledge (Al-Ghazali, 2007), which are all related to the functions of the *qalb*. The cognitive faculties, as Al-Ghazali (1964) states in *Mizān al-'Amal*, must be directed toward realising truth, refining the soul, and attaining eternal well-being. When cognition serves these higher purposes, it becomes a path to salvation. However, when cognition is misused for worldly and material gain, it results in spiritual ruin. This axiological dimension challenges the often value-neutral stance of contemporary cognitive psychology and invites a reassessment of the ends toward which cognitive efforts are directed. For Al-Ghazali, the value of knowledge lies in its ability to transform the self and align it with divine truth (Nasr, 2006).

Al-Ghazali's epistemological framework situates the study of human cognition in both rational inquiry and spiritual insights. According to Al-Ghazali, the acquisition of knowledge begins with sensory perception (Al-Ghazali, 2000, Poya and Rizapoor, 2023). This view aligns in part with foundational assumptions in modern cognitive psychology, which views perception as the gateway to cognitive processing (Goldstein, 2019, McBride et al., 2022). Al-Ghazali acknowledges that the external senses such as sight, hearing and touch play an essential role in forming the basis for empirical knowledge. To him, these are windows to the spiritual heart (Al-Ghazali.org, n.d). This parallels contemporary understanding of sensory input as the first stage in information processing, forming the raw data from which higher-order cognitive functions such as memory and reasoning operate (Goldstein, 2015).

However, in Al-Ghazali's epistemological basis, knowledge acquired through sensory and rational inquiry alone is insufficient and cannot lead to genuine knowledge or absolute certainty. For Al-Ghazali, certainty arises through a higher form of cognition, which he describes as intuitive knowledge (*ma'rifah*) (Hasib, Zarkasyi and Muslih, 2024). This knowledge is gained by the purified heart through spiritual refinement, revelation (*wahy*) or divine inspiration (*ilham*) and is only accessible to those who have undergone spiritual discipline (Kalin 2010, Hasib, Zarkasyi and Muslih, 2024). Therefore, while rational inquiry is a necessary component of human understanding, in Al-Ghazali's thought, it must be complemented and ultimately guided by divine illumination (Griffle, 2014, Marmura, 2002). This distinction marks a critical divergence from the secular empiricism that characterizes much of contemporary cognitive psychology, offering instead an epistemology that integrate reason, sense perception and spiritual insight into a unified pursuit of truth.

In short, Al-Ghazali's emphasis on the purpose of cognition (axiology), the spiritual essence of the human being (ontology), and the layered pathways to knowledge through both

reason and spiritual insight (epistemology), provides a richer and more holistic view to understand human cognition.

Inclusion of Soul in the Understanding Human Cognition

Another essential point for cognitive psychology as a scientific discipline to benefit from the works and ideas of Al-Ghazali is on the inclusion of the soul in the study of human cognition. Through many of his writings (e.g. *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn, Sharh 'Ajaib al-Qalb*), Al-Ghazali consistently reminds on soul as the vital component and true essence of human being. His insights highlight dimensions of human cognition that extend beyond observable behaviour, pointing to the inner faculties of the heart (*qalb*), spirit (*ruh*), self (*nafs*) and intellect (*'aql*). This perspective can complement the contemporary cognitive psychology discipline, where information-processing models are widely used to explain how the human mind operates (Mayer, 2024). By situating cognition within both spiritual and psychological frameworks, Al-Ghazali's thought offers a broader lens for understanding the cognitive processes such as perception, memory and reasoning. This suggests that a meaningful understanding of cognition requires perspectives that account not only for how we think, but also to why we think and what purpose our thinking ultimately serves. In this regard, the classical insights of Al-Ghazali offer a more holistic view by framing cognition as an integrated spiritual function of the soul.

The spiritual component of man, i.e., the soul, is the true essence of man. Hence, any description, explanation, prediction, and control of human behaviour has to be understood by referring to and including this spiritual component of man (Abubakar, 2000). While the soul is not accepted as part of contemporary cognitive psychology as its main subject matter, the inclusion of the soul in understanding human cognition has to be in the foreground. The understanding of man's behaviour and mental processes will never be complete without understanding how the soul can influence human behaviour. It is, therefore, highly essential to include the soul in the cognitive psychology discipline. In particular, the understanding of internal mental processes will not be complete if discussion and topics relating to the soul are excluded.

In addition, in many of Al-Ghazali's writings, he emphasised that the heart (*qalb*) is not merely a physical organ but a subtle spiritual faculty that governs human perception, reasoning and consciousness. This spiritual heart possesses a profound and mysterious connection with the physical heart and the human faculty of intellect, which encompasses the intellectual, rational and cognitive capacities and directly influences one's ability to grasp true knowledge rather than mere utilitarian know-how. Hence, it is the pure heart (*qalb*) that plays a pivotal role in shaping cognition and guides the soul towards perfection and divine connection. In light of this essential function, the heart (*qalb*) ought to be considered a central focal point in of the scholarly discourse of Islamic cognitive psychology. Understanding cognitive psychology through this lens shifts the focus toward understanding the *qalb* as a dynamic, spiritual entity, the one that is capable of perceiving truth, discerning right from wrong, and facilitating a meaningful relationship with the Creator. Approaching cognition through this lens expands the discipline's epistemological foundations and also enriches its ethical and spiritual dimensions.

In sum, by recognising the soul as the seat of cognitive activity, Al-Ghazali's framework invites a more comprehensive view of the human mind as the one that integrates perception, memory, and reasoning with purpose and spiritual orientation. For cognitive psychology, the inclusion of the soul in the study of cognition does not replace scientific

inquiry but rather broadens its scope, enabling a more holistic appreciation of how and why human beings think, act, and ultimately seek truth.

CONCLUSION

Al-Ghazali remains one of the greatest and most distinguished classical Muslim thinkers throughout his lifetime and is still praised and renowned in modern days. His ideas and teachings have enlightened many, including non-Muslim scholars and are very much relevant for the current time. He was a man with a deep, and profound gnostic insight, has a profound and comprehensive understanding and thorough analysis of any issues, and has produced great and influential works that touch upon multidisciplinary areas. Going through his life experience and his passion for spiritual knowledge is indeed an inspiration to all involved in academia and beyond. Although the term ‘cognitive psychology’ did not exist in any of his works, Al-Ghazali’s psycho-spiritual insights into human cognition have significantly shaped Islamic understandings of the self and continue to contribute meaningfully to the evolving discipline of Islamic psychology.

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