

The Self and Its Perfection: Al-Ghazālī's Framework for Mental Health

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Abstract

This article analyses the views of Imām Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505 AH/1111 CE) on the human self, as presented in his major works, including *Ihyā' Ulūm al-Dīn*, *Ma'ārij al-Quds*, *Mizān al-'Amal*, *al-Risālah al-Ladunniyyah*, and *Kīmīyā' al-Sa'ādah*. In these works, he examines the nature of the soul and its potential, explores its relationship with the body, and identifies the factors that determine its happiness or misfortune. This study proposes his framework as a philosophical alternative for addressing the contemporary mental health crisis.

Keywords:

Al-Ghazālī, the self, human nature, knowledge, mental health

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Introduction

Due to increasing doubts and denials about the existence of the soul, the term “soul” is no longer considered relevant and has largely fallen out of use, both in everyday conversation and as a technical term in fields such as philosophy and psychology. According to Jerome Shaffer, the term is problematic because, beyond its religious and corporeal connotations, it also applies to all living things, including those that lack the ability to think.¹ The term “mind,” now more widely accepted, is associated with a physical entity, as reflected in *The Oxford Companion to the Mind*.² With the rejection of Cartesian dualism, materialism has become the dominant paradigm in modern science. Consequently, the meaning of self has also evolved, as the mind is no longer regarded as a spiritual (immaterial) substance independent of physical space but is instead equated with the brain. As a result, various aspects of mental life are now predominantly explained in terms of brain function and central nervous system activity.

This article examines the concept of the human self according to Imām Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī (d. 505 AH/1111 CE) to demonstrate how one’s perception of selfhood and life’s purpose fundamentally shapes a person’s actions, behaviour, and way of life. Building on this premise, the study explores the potential of al-Ghazālī’s perspective on human nature as an alternative philosophical framework for addressing the contemporary mental health crisis—an issue that has contributed to rising suicide rates and an increasing tendency toward self-harm.

The Self According to al-Ghazālī

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606 AH/1210 CE) states in *al-Matālib al-Āliyah* that there is no consensus among Muslim scholars on the definition of the self or the essence of a human being. According to the *Mutakallimūn*, the substance of a person is the soul, which they define as a subtle body. A group of medical doctors, however, argue that the soul is an accident (*‘arad*), while another group believes that the soul is blood. In short, they all perceive the soul as either a body or an accident residing in the body. A body or an accident, however, perishes upon death. This raises the question: will the resurrected person in the Hereafter be the same individual or an entirely new being? If a new entity is created, how can it be held accountable for the actions of the original person in this world? On this issue, scholars are divided into two main groups. The first consists of materialists, who argue that the human being is entirely a physical entity, composed of a specific mixture (*mizāj*). Among them are intellectuals trained

1. Jerome Shaffer, *Philosophy of Mind* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1968), 2–3.
2. Mortimer J. Adler, *Intellect, Mind Over Matter* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1990), vii–viii.

in scientific study and debate (*ahl al-baḥth wa al-naẓar*), who deny the existence of the soul and the afterlife. Others in this group, known as the followers of religious teachings (*ahl al-taqlīd wa al-āthār*), believe in the soul's existence and resurrection, yet paradoxically conceive of the soul as a body, failing to recognise the contradiction in their view. The second group includes scholars of *kalām*, some of whom attempt to reconcile both perspectives. They argue that God has the power to restore whatever has perished, while others claim that resurrection is impossible. Nevertheless, some assert that only the bodily mixture perishes, while the fundamental substance remains intact. According to this view, when the body's components are reassembled, the resurrected being will be the same individual who is then subject to divine judgment. This contradiction, however, does not affect those who maintain that the true essence of a human being is the soul, understood as a self-subsistent entity distinct from the body. Since they believe that the soul does not perish with death, the question of whether the resurrected person in the Afterlife is the same as the original does not arise.³

Al-Ghazālī, included in the second group mentioned above, states that human beings are created from two elements of opposite nature: the body and the soul. The body is inherently lowly and coarse, subject to growth and decay, composed of parts, and created from the earth. It attains perfection only through external mediation. The soul, on the other hand, is a simple, indivisible substance,⁴ capable of receiving divine guidance, understanding, directing the body, and perfecting it through the realisation of its higher moral and spiritual ends.⁵ According to the Qur'ān, the soul possesses a divine nature, and al-Ghazālī asserts that it is neither a body nor an accident, but a spiritual entity more noble than any physical form. His view is grounded in Qur'ānic texts, such as the verse that relates the soul to divine essence,⁶ to God's Command,⁷ and to His Majesty.⁸ According to al-Ghazālī, these verses demonstrate that the soul cannot be a body, as it is inconceivable for God's divine essence to be

3. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-Āliyah*, 9 Vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1999), 7:127–128. In philosophy, the first group is called “the monists” because they believe that man is only a physical entity, while the second group is “the dualists” because they hold that man consists of two elements, physical and spiritual. See Simon Blackburn, *Dictionary of Philosophy*, s.v. “monism” and “dualism.”
4. The term “*jawhar*” has many meanings, among which are: (i) an entity that stands on its own, and its opposite is *ʿarad* (accident); and (ii) *reality* and *essence*. With these two meanings *jawhar* might be used to refer to God, however the theologians hold that *jawhar* is specific to the created essences, not to the Essence of God. In reference to the soul, *jawhar* means a pure substance that is not a mass, not physical in nature, and not an accident that must of necessity occupy something that occupies space. Muḥammad ʿAlī b. ʿAlī al-Tahānawī, *Kashshāf Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Funūn*, 4 Vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1998), s.v. “*jawhar*.”
5. Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī, *al-Risālah al-Ladunniyyah*, English translation by Margaret Smith, *The Message From On High* (Kuala Lumpur: Islāmic Book Trust, 2010), 11.
6. *Sūrat al-Hijr* (15):29.
7. *Sūrat al-Isrāʾ* (17):86.
8. *Sūrat al-Tahrīm* (66):12.

associated with a perishable, mutable form. Similarly, the soul cannot be an accident, as several *ḥadīths* suggest its continued existence after bodily death. For instance, the *ḥadīth* stating, “The souls are like a line of soldiers,” and another describing the souls of martyrs as a flock of green birds, clearly affirm the soul’s posthumous persistence—a characteristic incompatible with an accident, which cannot subsist on its own.⁹

For al-Ghazālī, the existence of the soul is self-evident and requires no proof. The very presence of divine commands and prohibitions implies a recipient capable of understanding and acting upon them, and this recipient is what is meant by “the self” or “the soul.”¹⁰ Al-Ghazālī further clarifies that the self is not the animal spirit (*rūḥ ḥayawānī*), which governs sensory perception, movement, desires, and aversions; nor is it the life force within the heart that activates the senses and mobilises the limbs; nor is it the natural spirit (*rūḥ ṭabīʿī*) responsible for bodily functions such as digestion, nourishment, and waste elimination. These faculties—imagination, growth, and reproduction—are merely servants of the body, dependent on the animal spirit, which in turn triggers will and power for action. Instead, what is meant by “the self” is a substance (*jawhar*) that receives knowledge, responds, and governs the various spirits and their functions. Philosophers refer to this entity as “the rational soul” (*nafs nāṭiqah*), while the Sufis call it “the soul” or “the heart.” In the Qurʾān, it is referred to as “the tranquil soul” (*al-nafs al-muṭmaʾinnah*) and “that which proceeds from the command of God.” In essence, these terms all describe the rational soul, which is alive, capable of perceiving reality, understanding, and acting. The Ṣūfīs, following religious terminology, often use the term “nafs” to denote the animal spirit, as reflected in the well-known ḥadīth: “Your greatest enemy is your own lust.”¹¹

Al-Ghazālī uses four terms to denote the substance in question: spirit (*rūḥ*), intellect (*ʿaql*), soul (*nafs*), and heart (*qalb*). Each of these terms carries multiple meanings, referring to two fundamental aspects of the self: the physical or material aspect of a human being and the spiritual aspect, which constitutes the essence—a subtle entity (*latīfah*) within a person that enables knowledge and perception of reality. These terms describe different dimensions and modes

9. *Sūrat al-Hijr* (15):29; *Sūrat Ṣād* (38):72; *Sūrat al-Isrāʾ* (17):85; *Sūrat al-Tahrīm* (66):12. See explanation of the meanings of *nafk* and *taswīyah* in *Sūrat Ṣād* (38):72, in Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Ajwibah al-Ghazālīyyah ʿan al-Masāʾil al-Ukhrawīyyah*, published together with several other works in *Majmūʿah Rasāʾil al-Imām al-Ghazālī* (Cairo: Maktabah Tawfiqīyyah, n.d.), 122.

10. Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *Maʿārij al-Quds fi Madārij Maʿrifat al-Nafs* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1988), 42.

11. Smith, *The Message*, 12–14.

of the same entity, encompassing its nature and its powers related to both knowledge and the governance of the body. The soul, in particular, serves as the underlying cause of all human actions, whether good or bad.¹²

The soul is a created entity, yet it is immortal, meaning it continues to exist after death. Death does not damage, annihilate, or cause the soul to perish; rather, it is a temporary separation. According to religious texts, the soul will inevitably return to its body on the Day of Resurrection.¹³ However, upon death, the soul ceases to control the body, rendering the faculties inactive, with no further movement, speech, or action. Despite this, only the body is affected by death, as the soul is not dependent on the body, whereas the body is entirely dependent on the soul. For al-Ghazālī, this distinction underscores the superiority of the soul over the body. In Islām, the soul or the heart is of greater significance than the physical form, as it is the true essence of a human being.¹⁴

The Mind-Body Relation¹⁵

The soul is among the secrets of *Ālam al-Malakūt* or *Ālam al-Amr*, a realm beyond the perception of the senses, imagination, direction, place, or space. All entities in this realm are spiritual substances that can only be perceived by the intellect, whereas all physical entities, including the human body, belong to *Ālam al-Mulk* or *Ālam al-Khalq*.¹⁶ The soul is special, miraculous, and divine;

12. Al-Ghazālī, *Ma'arīj*, 39–42; idem, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (printed together with *al-Mughnī 'an Hamīl al-Asfār fī al-Asfār fī Takhrīj mā fī al-Ihyā' min al-Akhbār* by Zayn al-Dīn al-ʿIrāqī), 5 Vols. (Cairo: Dar al-Hadith, 2004), 3:4–6; cf. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Nature of Man and The Psychology of the Human Soul* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1990), 5. For the debate about the connection between intellect and heart with knowledge, see chapters two and three of Mohd. Zaidi Ismail, "The Sources of Knowledge in Ghazālī: A Psychological Framework of Epistemology," M.A. thesis (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1995), 29–69.
13. Smith, *The Message*, 16–17. For the arguments of Shariʿah and reason that prove the soul is a spiritual substance, see al-Ghazālī, *Ma'arīj*, 45–56.
14. See al-Ghazālī, *Ma'arīj*, 109–124.
15. In western philosophy, this problem is famously known as "the mind-body problem"; further see Jerome Shaffer, "Mind-body Problem," in Paul Edwards, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 336–346; idem, *Philosophy of Mind*, 60–76; Colin McGinn, *The Character of Mind*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 17–39. In his *Ta'rifāt*, ʿAlī al-Jurjānī (d. 816 AH/1413 CE) states that there are two states of soul-body relationship, namely: (1) when conscious, when the soul is in contact with every part of the body whether external or internal; and (2) during sleep, when the soul's connection with the external organs is severed. Death means the severance of the soul-body connection, and the end of one's duty as the ruler or administrator of the body. ʿAlī b. Muhammad al-Jurjānī, *al-Ta'rifāt*, ed. ʿAbd al-Munʿim al-Hafnī (Cairo: Dār al-Rashād, 1991), 271.
16. For an explanation of *Ālam al-Malakūt*'s relationship with *Ālam al-Mulk*, see al-Ghazālī, *Jawāhir al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Lubnānī, 1992), 38–39; see also idem, *Kitāb al-Arbaʿ in Fī Uṣūl al-Dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Jayl, 1988), 40. Cf. Kojiro Nakamura, "Imām Ghazālī's Cosmology Reconsidered with Special Reference to The Concept of *Jabarūt*," *Studia Islāmica* 80, (1994):29–46.

therefore, it tends to imitate divine attributes. However, most people cannot fully comprehend its essence through intellect alone. God has entrusted the soul with an onerous responsibility—one so great that even the earth and the mountains are unable to bear it. This signifies that human beings are uniquely capable of carrying this trust and are well-equipped to understand and fulfil its demands. The greatest attribute of human beings is their ability to perceive the universal form (*al-ṣūrah al-kullīyyah*) or the intelligibles (*ma'qūlāt*), enabling them to grasp the essence of something independent of its outward appearance and without reference to individual instances. For the Ṣūfīs, the “heart” functions like an “eye” that perceives inner reality and the unseen, with God’s permission, just as the physical eye perceives the external world.¹⁷

Al-Ghazālī regarded this peculiarity as further evidence for the existence of the soul as a substance (*jawhar*) independent of material things and their properties. He argued that since the universal is indivisible—meaning it cannot be divided into halves, thirds, or quarters—then “man” in the absolute sense also does not admit partition. That which manifests the universal must be a substance (*jawhar*), not a body or an accident (*ʿarad*) that inheres in a body. It has no spatial position or determinable location, and while its existence is grasped by the intellect rather than the senses, it is more real to the mind than any material entity.¹⁸

In *Kitāb ʿAjāʾib al-Qalb* (*The Book of Wonders of the Heart*) of *Ihyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, al-Ghazālī states that the greatness of man lies in his ability to know (*maʿrifah*) God, and the organ specifically created for this purpose is the heart (*qalb*), rather than any other bodily part. It is the heart that knows, performs good deeds, and comes to God, to whom all secrets are revealed, while the bodily parts are merely followers, servants, and tools used by the heart—just as a king commands his servants or a craftsman wields his tools. Thus, in the presence of God, it is the heart that is accepted, and likewise, it is the heart that is veiled from knowing Him, commanded, called, and reproached, and the one that experiences happiness or misery. Since it is ultimately the heart that obeys or disobeys God, while the limbs are only its executors, every person must first know himself before he can know his Lord. Al-Ghazālī describes this obligation as the foundation of religion (*aṣl al-dīn*) and the basis of the spiritual path (*asās ṭarīq al-sālikīn*).¹⁹

By nature, the soul is more noble than the body and is not inherently drawn to it. Nevertheless, it cares for the body, benefits it, and is generous toward it. The soul’s primary concern in this world is knowledge, for this will serve as its adornment in the afterlife, and only through knowledge will it be

17. Smith, *The Message*, 18–19.

18. Al-Ghazālī, *Maʿārij*, 43.

19. Idem, *Ihyāʾ*, 3:3–4.

satisfied. Therefore, throughout life, the soul continually seeks knowledge until the time comes for it to return to God.²⁰ Eternal happiness cannot be separated from righteous deeds performed in this world, and for this reason, the soul and body must work together.²¹ Yet, how can a spiritual substance that is non-spatial interact and cooperate with the body, which occupies space?²² As a spiritual entity, the soul is not bound to a physical location, nor is it connected to or separated from the body in a material sense. The body does not serve as the dwelling place of the soul; rather, it is merely a tool or vehicle for it.²³

Al-Ghazālī describes the relationship between the soul and the body as a profound mystery that confounds most people. He compares it to the relationship between an accident and the body, or between an attribute and that which it qualifies (*maṣṣūf*), classifying it among the hidden secrets of the spiritual realm that cannot be fully disclosed to the public.²⁴ Consequently, Al-Ghazālī explains this relationship using analogies: the soul and body are like a king and his kingdom, his officials, and his subjects; or like a hunter and his horse, dog, and prey.²⁵ These comparisons serve to distinguish the true agent from the tools through which actions are carried out.

The relationship between the soul and the body, according to al-Ghazālī, is akin to an army. One part of this army is visible to the naked eye—the body parts that serve as obedient instruments of the soul—while the other part is perceived only with the eye of the heart. The eyes, hands, feet, and all bodily limbs are servants of the heart, created to carry out its commands. The soul's dependence on the body is like that of a traveller relying on a vehicle and provisions: the body is his vehicle, knowledge is his provision, and the goal of his journey is to meet and know God. The success or failure of this journey depends on knowledge and righteous actions. Therefore, the traveller must ensure the well-being of his body while living in this world, for life itself is a station that must be passed through, where all necessary provisions for the final journey can be gathered. Since the body requires sustenance and shelter, two types of armies are specifically assigned for this purpose: the inner army, consisting of desire and anger, and the external army, comprising the bodily faculties that execute the commands of desire and anger. However, these forces

20. Smith, *The Message*, 21–23.

21. For an exposition of knowledge as prerequisites for eternal happiness, see Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *Mizān al-ʿAmal*, with notes by Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1989).

22. Smith, *The Message*, 21–23.

23. Al-Ghazālī, *Ajwibah*, 119–120.

24. Idem, *Iḥyāʾ*, 3:4 & 64.

25. Idem, *Maʾarīj*, 105–106.

must be guided by reason and spiritual insight, which serve to determine what should be desired or avoided, forming the foundation of moral principles and the understanding of good and evil.²⁶

Human actions are distinguished by two fundamental characteristics: knowledge and will. Knowledge encompasses both worldly and otherworldly understanding, as well as the intellectual principles unique to human beings. Will, on the other hand, refers to awareness of consequences, meaning it does not stem from base desires but rather from reasoned judgment. These two attributes set humans apart from animals and children. The differences among individuals arise from the rank and depth of their knowledge and the means by which they acquire it, which in turn explains the varying degrees of scholars (*ulamāʾ*), sages (*hukamāʾ*), saints (*awliyāʾ*), and prophets (*anbiyāʾ*).

What prevents the heart from receiving knowledge is its stain and impurity, as well as its preoccupation with everything other than God. Only through knowledge of the divine essence, God's attributes, and His actions can one attain true honour, happiness, and perfection. When all bodily faculties and powers are employed in the pursuit of knowledge and righteous action, the rank of a human being rises beyond that of the angels. However, if one submits to the dictates of evil desires, his status falls to the level of animals—or even lower, to the rank of devils.²⁷

In short, only those who use all their limbs and senses as tools to reach God will be successful and happy, while others will lose and be disappointed. By nature, the heart is created to know the truth, either through learning or direct experience. Knowledge obtained directly, without study and evidence, is called *ilhām* (inspiration), while the knowledge given specifically to the Prophets is called *wahy* (revelation). This path is favoured by the Sūfīs, who do not prioritise formal learning but instead strive to eliminate blameworthy attributes, turn to God completely, and await His revelation of the hidden world's secrets. Although this path is not denied by students and researchers (*nuzẓār*), they consider it difficult to achieve and riskier than learning from a teacher. Without the guidance of an experienced teacher, a person may make mistakes that could hinder his journey.²⁸

The Qurʾān reminds us that the soul and the body are two elements of opposite nature. While in this world, both are engaged in an eternal battle—the struggle between the rational soul and the animal soul. The outcome of this struggle determines the final fate of the soul, with three possible results:

26. See idem, *Ihyāʾ*, 3:6–7; idem, *Maʿārij*, 105–106; and idem, *Mīzān*, 53–56. Cf. Al-Attas, *Nature of Man*, 16–17.

27. Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyāʾ*, 3:10–17.

28. Ibid., 25–26.

1. The rational soul prevails, successfully defeating and dominating the animal soul. With this victory, the soul attains peace and tranquillity; hence the Qur'ān refers to it as “the tranquil soul” (*al-naḥs al-muṭma'innah*).
2. The animal soul wins, causing the soul to be dominated by animalistic nature, making it prone to evil and immorality. This soul is referred to as “the soul that always commands evil” (*al-naḥs al-ammārah bi al-sū*).
3. The struggle remains unresolved, meaning the battle is still ongoing. Since the soul reproaches itself upon realising its inclination toward base desires, it is called “the soul that reproaches itself” (*al-naḥs al-lawwāmah*).²⁹

In the first case, the soul is considered to have successfully returned to its original nature as a servant of God. In contrast, the second case describes a person who has lost his true self, appearing human in form but, in reality, living according to the dictates of evil desires like an animal. For most people, however, the struggle is still ongoing, and the victor has yet to be determined. This battle, or *jihād* against lustful desires, is an obligation for every Muslim. From this duty arises the necessity of *ma'rifat al-naḥs* (self-knowledge) as a prerequisite, for only those who understand their “enemy” can recognise its tricks and have a better chance of overcoming it.

Obligation to Know the Self and to Strive for Its Perfection

Knowing oneself is the path to knowing God, as the self is the most evident sign (*āyāt*) of God's existence and His perfect attributes.³⁰ Only those who truly know themselves will embark on a spiritual journey (*sulūk*) that demands a serious and continuous effort to purify oneself from the impurities of lustful desire and anger (*mujāhadat al-naḥs*). Through this process, the soul becomes clear and polished like a mirror, enabling it to reflect the light of divine guidance.³¹

What must be understood is the essence or true nature of man—namely, the soul. As al-Ghazālī explains, the soul is that which knows God, draws near to Him, strives for His sake, and seeks Him with devotion, while the body and its faculties are merely instruments or servants under the soul's command, like a master directing his attendants, a shepherd tending his flock, or a craftsman wielding his tools. It is the soul that is accepted by God or veiled from Him, the one called upon, questioned, and held accountable. Ultimately, it is the soul that attains happiness and success or falls into disappointment and misery.³²

29. Idem, *Iḥyā'*, 3:5; idem, *Ma'ārij*, 39–40; and idem, *Mīzān*, 57–58.

30. Idem, *Ma'ārij*, 32.

31. Idem, *Kīmīya-e Saadat*, English translation from Persian by Claude Field, *The Alchemy of Happiness* (first published London: J Murray, 1909; Kuala Lumpur: Islāmic Book Trust, 2007), 6–7.

32. Idem, *Iḥyā'*, 3:3.

However, as a spiritual substance, the soul cannot be observed or studied through empirical methods. Consciousness, which characterises the human soul, is a subjective experience known only to the one who perceives it. In philosophy, statements about personal experience are referred to as “first-person accounts,” while statements concerning external facts that can be verified by a third party—such as human actions, behaviour, or speech—are called “third-person accounts.” For al-Ghazālī, both perspectives are valid sources of information that complement each other. However, by themselves, they are insufficient for attaining perfect and certain knowledge. Therefore, researchers must also refer to higher sources, such as revelation and inspiration.³³

Colin McGinn, a contemporary scholar in the philosophy of mind, concludes from his study of Western philosophy that empirical and rational methods cannot produce a satisfactory theory of mind. The concept of the mind that has developed in Western philosophy is shaped by the struggle between the two perspectives mentioned above, namely: (1) Cartesianism, which is based on the first-person account, and (2) behaviourism, which is based on the third-person account. Behaviourism, however, questions the objectivity of personal experience and argues that objective knowledge about the mind must be based on the observation of others’ mental states. McGinn contends that there is no epistemologically neutral concept of the mind, as all theories are necessarily grounded in one of these two perspectives. He further argues that any attempt to reconcile both perspectives will face significant challenges in doing justice to each, and that this, in his view, presents a fundamental obstacle to the development of a satisfactory theory of mind.³⁴ Below is a quote from McGinn’s conclusion:

Our efforts to arrive at a satisfactory theory of the relationship between mind and body have not met with total success. We have, it is true, gone some way towards explaining how the mind can be different in nature from the body yet be intimately connected with it. But we have not explained how a physical organ of the body, namely the brain, could be the basis of consciousness—how a physical object can come to have an inner aspect. One might be tempted to conclude that the mind-body problem, so stated, is insoluble: but it is hard to see how we can really accept this pessimistic conclusion, for surely there is something about brains that makes them conscious, whether we can know and understand it or not. We should persist in the hope that some day philosophy (or perhaps science) will find the answer.³⁵

33. Idem, *Tahāfut al-Falāsīfah* (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1990), 209–210.

34. McGinn, *The Character of Mind*, 6–8. See also Shaffer, *Philosophy of Mind*, 14–33.

35. McGinn, *The Character of Mind*, 39.

Another researcher, J. J. Chamblis, shares a similar sentiment. He argues that a convincing understanding of human nature is essential for comprehending human behaviour and formulating appropriate educational principles and methods of human development. However, based on his study of educational theories from Aristotle to John Searle, he concludes that they are all founded on unconvincing theories. As a result, we are left with no choice but to accept findings that are incomplete, potentially erroneous, and ultimately unconvincing.³⁶

The views of McGinn and Chamblis indirectly affirm al-Ghazālī's observation regarding the inadequacy of empirical and rational methods in achieving certainty about human nature. Therefore, it would be unwise to dismiss other sources of knowledge, such as intuition and revelation, outright.³⁷ Like the Sūfīs, al-Ghazālī believes that the ultimate purpose of knowledge is to attain "certainty"—that is, to grasp the truth in such a way that it becomes impossible to deny.³⁸ In Islām, the obligation to seek knowledge arises from the duty to obey Allāh in pursuit of eternal happiness in the afterlife. Consequently, all knowledge necessary for the completion of good deeds in this world is classified as beneficial and obligatory (*fard 'ayn*).³⁹ According to al-Ghazālī, the knowledge that is obligatory regarding oneself pertains to acts of worship and moral refinement—understanding the purpose of human existence, the faculties possessed in relation to the body, and the factors that lead to happiness or misery.⁴⁰

However, knowledge of the true nature of the soul is not included in these obligations, as it has no direct relevance to the fundamental duty of servitude to Allāh. Instead, it belongs to the secrets of *Ālam al-Malakūt*. This is affirmed in the words of Allāh:

They ask you (O Muḥammad) about the soul—say (to them): the soul is part of the affairs of my Lord! And I did not give you knowledge (about it) except a little.⁴¹

36. J. J. Chambliss, *Educational Theory as the Theory of Conduct* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), 4–5.

37. For the characteristics of the three groups of *sufastā'īyyah* (sophists), see Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id al-Nasafīyyah*, in *Majmū'at al-Hawāshī al-Bahīyyah 'alā al-'Aqā'id al-Nasafīyyah*, 2 vols. (Egyptian: Maṭba'ah Kurdistan al-Ilmiyyah, 1329 A.H.), 1:35; see also a summary in Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Oldest Known Malay Manuscript: A 16th Century Malay Translation of The 'Aqā'id of al-Nasafī* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya, 1988), 47–49.

38. For al-Ghazālī's criticism of the sophists attitude towards psychology, see al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā'*, 4:269.

39. See the explanation of the relationship of knowledge to charity and eternal happiness in idem, *Mizān*, 19–49.

40. See M. A. Quasem, *The Ethics of Ghazālī* (New York: Caravan Book, 1978), 43–78.

41. *Sūrat al-Isrā'* (17):151.

That “little knowledge,” however, is sufficient for the needs and uses of humans to know God and to fulfil their responsibilities to Him, and that knowledge is a gift from Him.⁴²

Human Action: A Reflection of the Soul, Its Faculties and Its Perfection

Included in the method of self-knowledge is the observation of human actions and behaviour in order to develop appropriate ways to educate and control people to ensure that their true happiness is achieved.⁴³ According to al-Ghazālī, human actions are included in things that can be witnessed (*umūr mushāhadah*), from which we infer the hidden qualities of the soul. Human actions and behaviour reflect the real actor, i.e., the soul, which has certain powers and potentialities, just as the universe reflects its Creator, His actions, and His attributes.⁴⁴

Al-Ghazālī divides the main power possessed by living things into two, namely the power of movement (*muḥarrikah*) and the power of perception (*mudrikah*). The power of movement is divided into two: (1) arouser (*bāʿithah*) and (2) actor (*fāʿilah*), and the arouser is divided into two: (1) lust (*shahwah*), which arouses the desire for something that brings benefits to oneself, and (2) anger (*ghadab*), which arouses hatred towards something harmful to oneself—and both are guided by external and internal perceptions which perceive sensible and intelligible objects and understand them. So there are three powers in total, namely:

1. the motivator or desire to do something beneficial to oneself or avoid something harmful to oneself;
2. the actor, which is the power that mobilises the relevant members to achieve its purpose; and
3. the perceiver, that provides knowledge about worldly matters, final destiny, and the principles of reason.

Here al-Ghazālī shows the importance and priority of knowledge over deeds or action because what arouses the will to do something is knowledge. According to him, every action begins with the actor’s perception of the expected consequences of that action for him, and from that perception arises the desire to either obtain what is thought to be good for him or avoid what is thought to be harmful to him, by doing an appropriate act. If what arises in a person’s mind is a consequence that he thinks is good for him, the desire will arise to

42. Al-Attas, *Nature of Man*, 1–2.

43. Al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut*, 209.

44. Idem, *Ihyāʾ*, 3:9.

encourage him to do something; and on the other hand, if what arises in the mind is something that he believes is harmful, anger will arise to remove or prevent it. Desire and anger only turn into action through the mediation of the power that moves the muscles and joints to perform their respective tasks, but the power needs to be awakened by the will, while the will is only awakened by the instruction of knowledge or at least a strong belief. In short, since will and power only obey the command of knowledge, if there is no certain or clear order, will and power will not arise, and there will be no action.⁴⁵

Al-Ghazālī further explains, what makes human movement (*harakah*) special is that it is a free movement. The movement of plants is limited to growing and dying, and their perfection is judged by the fruit they produce and the new seedlings they generate. Animals, on the other hand, are capable of moving in various directions, guided by perception, feelings, and will toward what is perceived as good. Their perfection depends on their usefulness—whether as riding animals, burden carriers, sources of food, work assistants, or for breeding and nursing purposes. Human movement is the most special because, in addition to possessing all the characteristics of animal movement, humans have two additional faculties which other animals lack—the power of thought and the power of speech. Therefore, the perfection of human movement is reflected not only in actions but also in thoughts and speech. Since humans are free to choose their actions, the perfect choice, according to al-Ghazālī, manifests in the form of right thoughts, true utterances, and good deeds. However, self-perfection is only achieved through effort. Just as plants need to be pruned (*tashdhīb*) and animals need to be trained (*tahdhīb*), humans need to be educated (*ta'dīb*).⁴⁶ Al-Ghazālī stipulates that three fundamental elements must be present in education aimed at producing a perfect human being:

1. *ta'yīd* (support) to attain the perfection of actions, ensuring that goodness (*khayr*) is chosen and evil (*sharr*) is avoided;
2. *tasdīd* (alignment) to achieve the perfection of speech, ensuring that only truth (*ṣidq*) is spoken and falsehood (*kidhb*) is avoided;⁴⁷ and
3. *ta'rif* (recognition) for the perfection of thought, ensuring that truth (*haqq*) and falsehood (*bāṭil*) are discerned in order to follow the former and avoid the latter.

45. Idem, *Ma'arīj*, 57.

46. The term *ta'dīb* as used by al-Ghazālī here in reference to “education” corroborates al-Attas’s view that it is the most accurate and appropriate term to refer to “Islamic education” instead of *tarbiyah* or *ta'lim*. See Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islām* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1999), 27–32.

47. Al-Ghazālī, *Ma'arīj*, 59.

In short, a person's perfection lies within the self, not in external things, and self-perfection is reflected in actions, words, and thoughts that are protected from defects—whether in the form of falsehood, lies, or evil—as a result of the education one receives. Yet, does such a person exist? The perfect human being, as envisioned by al-Ghazālī, is not merely an illusion but a reality that exists in the person of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him). He is the embodiment of human perfection, and thus, he is the most worthy to be taken as the role model and educator for all mankind, as stated by the Qur'ān:

Just as (We have perfected Our favour upon you) We have sent you a Messenger among you who recites Our verses to you and purifies you and teaches you the Book and the Wisdom (*Sunnah*), and teaches you what you do not yet know.⁴⁸

This verse points to the primacy of the spiritual element in human beings, whose function is the perception of reality. In this regard, the intellectual capacity of each human being differs, just as mirrors vary in their ability to reflect the images of objects.⁴⁹

Conclusion: Mental Problems Imply Sick and Imperfect Souls⁵⁰

The perfection of man lies in his ability to choose what is right, true, good, authentic, and commendable, whether in his thoughts, speech, or actions. If that ability is compromised or lost, his perfection will also be affected or diminished. From al-Ghazālī's perspective, a part of the body is considered "sick" when it is unable to perform its function or experiences difficulty in doing so; for example, hands are considered "sick" if they cannot grasp, and eyes are considered "sick" if they cannot see or have difficulty seeing. Similarly, the human mind, soul, or self must be regarded as "sick" if it is no longer able to fulfil the purpose of its existence, as stated in the words of God:

I did not create jinn and man except to worship Me!⁵¹

48. *Sūrat al-Baqarah* (2):151.

49. Five reasons that may prevent the heart from seeing the truth: (1) unreadiness for it, for example small children; (2) sin and immorality; (3) preoccupation with unrelated matters; (4) mental blockades such as blind following and fanaticism; and (5) ignorance of correct methods of reasoning and inference. Al-Ghazālī, *Ma'ārij*, 100–105.

50. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health does not mean the absence of mental disorders, but "...a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community." <http://www.who.int/features/qa/62/en/index.html>

51. *Sūrat al-Dhāriyāt* (51):56.

Servitude to God, or “worship,” according to al-Ghazālī, is not limited to external obedience through physical actions but, more importantly, involves the complete surrender of oneself solely to God. Since man’s superiority lies in his ability to perceive realities, rather than in the mere pursuit of eating, drinking, and sexual gratification like other animals, then if he fails to know God and instead knows only everything else, he is considered “sick.” Elsewhere, the Qur’ān explains that the proof of knowledge is love, and the proof of love for God is when He is prioritised above all else, as stated in the words of God:

Say (O Muḥammad): If your fathers and your children and your brothers and your wives (or husbands) and your families and the property you have worked for and the business you are worried about will decline, and the houses of residence that you like, (if all of them) become the things that you love more than Allāh and His Messenger and (than) striving for His religion, then wait until Allāh brings His judgment (punishment); because Allāh will not guide the wicked.⁵²

Also understood from this verse is that love for anything other than God (i.e., His creatures), when it exceeds love for God, is the true cause of mental illness. The severity or mildness of this illness depends on the strength of a person’s attachment to the world and worldly life—the stronger the attachment, the more severe the illness. Therefore, in order to treat it, the attachment must first be unravelled through learning and education before the soul can be restored to its original, healthy state.⁵³

A healthy soul, according to al-Ghazālī, is a balanced soul—one that can recognise and choose the middle path between two extremes and vile tendencies. That balance, however, is very difficult to achieve, as most people tend to incline toward extreme traits condemned by religion, whereas the Qur’ān advocates the straight path (*al-ṣirāt al-mustaqīm*) as the safe path for all believers to follow. Although not many people are blessed to attain this path in this world, it is not a reason to give up hope, for every servant must make every effort to attain steadfastness (*istiḳāmah*), even if he may not fully achieve it, as stated in the words of Allāh:

Therefore, you (O Muḥammad) should always remain firm on the right path as you were commanded”⁵⁴

52. *Sūrat al-Tawbah* (9):24.

53. What becomes an obstacle to knowledge is actually the disease of the heart originating from a reckless love of the worldly pleasures, so when the obstacle is removed the heart will return to its original state, and it will be able to return to receiving images of reality.

54. *Sūrah Hūd* (11):112.

The souls of the Prophets and Messengers (peace be upon them!) are the most healthy and perfect, enabling them to receive revelation and divine assistance from Allāh, as well as to be bestowed with miracles that prove their truth. Ordinary human beings, too, in their original and pure state (i.e., before being afflicted with disease), are naturally capable of receiving knowledge. *Al-Baqarah* verse 151 clearly states that the true duty of the Prophets and Messengers (peace be upon them!) is to purify human souls from abominable traits by calling mankind to turn away from love of the world and direct their love toward Allāh. Accordingly, they are the true healers of the soul, and only through their help and guidance can human beings hope to cure their spiritual malaise and elevate their rank. Those who turn away from them will never succeed and will face disappointment in the Hereafter.

Al-Ghazālī offers an alternative framework to secular materialism and other modern ideologies that underlie the crisis of identity and meaninglessness plaguing contemporary society. He consistently emphasises the crucial role of knowledge and faith as the foundation of happiness in both this world and the Hereafter. In his major works, he highlights the importance of reason, orderly thinking, and education as essential for the perfection of the soul, beginning with knowledge and certainty. The confusion underlying modern thought, which leads to moral crisis, is rooted in doubt regarding the existence of the soul and the ultimate destiny of man. This has resulted in a widespread rejection of religion and an embrace of hedonistic lifestyles. Yet a life deprived of meaning or purpose beyond worldly concerns only breeds greater anxiety, hopelessness, and despair. From al-Ghazālī's perspective, what is recognised today as a "mental health problem" is nothing other than a soul that has become sick and miserable due to forgetting its true nature and final destiny. Only through religious guidance can a true solution be found.

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