

Al-Ghazali's Perspective on Intellect: Its Role and Potential in Achieving *Insān Kāmil*

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Abstract: In Islamic intellectual history, intellect (*'aql*) is not merely a cognitive faculty but a moral and spiritual instrument. However, contemporary discourse often reduces reason to technical rationality, neglecting its ethical and transcendent dimensions. This article examines al-Ghazali's understanding of intellect and its role in guiding human beings toward *insān kāmil* (the perfect human). The study adopts a qualitative library-based methodology, employing descriptive and analytical approaches. Primary sources include al-Ghazali's key works, notably *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* and *al-Munqidz min al-Dhalāl* complemented by classical and contemporary scholarly interpretations. The analysis focuses on al-Ghazali's classifications of intellect, its epistemological scope, and its relationship with revelation and spiritual practice. The findings show that al-Ghazali conceives intellect as a divine light residing in the heart and functioning as the primary source of knowledge. He distinguishes intellect into practical and theoretical types and outlines hierarchical stages culminating in the acquired intellect (*al-'aql al-mustafād*). Intellect is inseparable from revelation and moral discipline, as ultimate truth transcends sensory and rational limits and requires spiritual illumination. When harmonized with faith and ethical practice, intellect guides humans toward spiritual maturity, moral excellence, and social

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responsibility. The study concludes that al-Ghazali's integrated vision of intellect offers a normative model for achieving *insān kāmil* and remains relevant for addressing contemporary intellectual and moral challenges.

Keywords: *Al-Ghazali; Intellect; Role; Potential; Insān Kāmil.*

Abstrak: Akal (*'aql*) merupakan unsur fundamental dalam pemikiran Islam, namun dalam konteks modern sering dipisahkan dari nilai moral dan spiritual. Penelitian ini mengkaji konsep akal menurut al-Ghazali serta peran dan potensinya dalam mewujudkan *insān kāmil* (manusia sempurna). Kajian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh krisis intelektual dan moral kontemporer yang menunjukkan kegagalan akal ketika tidak disinergikan dengan iman dan etika. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif berbasis studi kepustakaan dengan pendekatan deskriptif-analitis. Sumber primer meliputi karya-karya utama al-Ghazali seperti *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* dan *al-Munqidz min al-Dhalāl*, yang didukung oleh literatur sekunder yang relevan. Analisis dilakukan melalui penafsiran teks untuk merekonstruksi pandangan al-Ghazali tentang akal, pengetahuan, dan kesempurnaan manusia. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa al-Ghazali memandang akal sebagai cahaya ilahi yang bersemayam di dalam hati dan menjadi sumber utama pengetahuan. Akal diklasifikasikan ke dalam akal praktis dan teoritis serta beberapa tingkatan yang berpuncak pada akal *mustafād*. Akal tidak berdiri sendiri, melainkan harus berjalan selaras dengan wahyu, moralitas, dan penyucian jiwa. Integrasi ini memungkinkan manusia mencapai kesempurnaan intelektual, moral, spiritual, dan sosial, yang menjadi ciri utama *insān kāmil*.

Kata Kunci: *Al-Ghazali; Akal; Peran; Potensi; Insān Kāmil.*

Introduction

Allah endows humans with a unique nature that distinguishes them from the intellects of other creatures.¹ The Qur'an describes humans as beings created in an ideal form, equipped with the capacity for intelligence and rational thought (Al-Tin [95]:1-50). This gift allows humans to address challenges, adhere to divine guidance, and develop civilizations.² The intellect

¹ Eka Damayanti et al., "Hakikat Manusia (Perspektif Filsafat Pendidikan Islam)," AL-QALAM: Jurnal Kajian Islam & Pendidikan 13, no. 1 (2021).

² Al-Ghazali, *The Savior from Error (Al-Munqidh Mina Al-Dalal)*, trans. Muhtar Holland (Al-Baz, 2010).

serves not only as a tool for problem-solving but also as the foundation for spiritual and moral development, enabling humans to fulfil their role as *'abd* (servants of Allah) and as caliphs (stewards) on earth.³

Despite its extraordinary potential, the contemporary world suffers from a concerning deficiency in intellectual and moral direction. The prevalence of wars, religious conflicts, oppression, fanaticism, and the exploitation of religion for political gain highlights humanity's failure to harness its intellect for the greater good. Instead of illuminating life, intellect is frequently overshadowed by egoism and misguided desires.

Humanity's intellectual journey is not a new phenomenon. Thales, a pioneer of Western philosophy, initiated systematic thought with his inquiries into the origins of existence, demonstrating the transformative power of intellect.⁴ Similarly, within the Islamic tradition, intellect is not merely a rational tool but also a spiritual faculty. It connects humans to metaphysical realities and encourages reflection on existence, the universe, and the Creator.⁵ Intellect complements revelation, leading to *ma'rifat Allāh* (knowledge of Allah),⁶ which combines rational understanding with spiritual insight.

Al-Ghazali, a towering figure in Islamic philosophy and Sufism, offers a profound perspective on the role and limitations of intellect. While acknowledging intellect as a source of knowledge, Al-Ghazali emphasises its dependence on divine guidance. He posits that ultimate truths transcend rational comprehension and can only be accessed through spiritual illumination and intuition.⁷

The study of Al-Ghazali's thought offers a framework for understanding how intellect serves as both a practical tool and a means to achieve spiritual perfection. This paper explores Al-Ghazali's concept of intellect, its theoretical

³ Ismail Raji 'Al-Faruq, *Islam Dan Kebudayaan*, ed. Jalaluddin Rakhmat, trans. Yustiono (Bandung: Mizan, 1984).

⁴ Praja Juhaya S., *Aliran-Aliran Filsafat Dan Etika* (Jakarta: Kencana, 2005).

⁵ Muhammad Izzuddin Taufiq, *Dalil Anfus Al-Qur'an Dan Embriologi (Ayat-Ayat Tentang Penciptaan Manusia)*, 1st ed. (Solo: Penerbit Tiga Serangkai, 2006).

⁶ Hamzah Ya'qub, *Filsafat Agama: Titik Temu Akal Dengan Wahyu* (Jakarta: Pedoman Ilmu Jaya, 1992).

⁷ Abdul Karim, "Sejarah Perkembangan Ilmu Pengetahuan", *Fikrah: Jurnal Ilmu Aqidah dan Studi Keagamaan* 2, no. 1 (2014).

and practical dimensions,⁸ And it has the potential to guide humanity toward becoming *insān kāmil*. Through this exploration, we aim to highlight the importance of integrating intellect and faith to address contemporary moral and intellectual crises effectively.⁹

Definition of Intellect According to al-Ghazali

Al-Ghazali portrays intellect as an extraordinary power bestowed upon humans, capable of exploring all dimensions of existence from the heavens to the earth and even the realm of angels. He compares the intellect to a bird free to traverse the universe, but stresses that it must be purified from impurities such as prejudice, illusion, and doubt to function optimally. A pure intellect becomes the key to uncovering universal truths and divine knowledge.¹⁰

Al-Ghazali emphasises that intellect is a divine gift, glorifying it as the greatest blessing given to humanity.¹¹ He draws a compelling analogy between the intellect and the senses: while the senses only perceive fragments of reality, like observing a part of the moon, the intellect comprehends the moon as a whole sphere. The intellect, described as light within the heart, illuminates understanding, enabling humans to grasp truths beyond the reach of sensory perception, such as mathematical concepts.¹²

Al-Ghazali categorises intellect into two types.¹³ First, Practical Intellect (*'Āmilah*), which focused on the material world and sensory experiences, it captures specific and concrete aspects of reality (e.g., colours and shapes) and guides daily actions. Second, Theoretical Intellect (*'Ālimah*), which is oriented

⁸ Imam al- Ghazali, *Ihya' Ulumuddin Menghidupkan Ilmu-Ilmu Agama*, trans. Ismail Yaqub (Semarang: Toha Putra, 1965).

⁹ Amroeni Drajat, *Filsafat Islam: Dimensi Teoritis Dan Praktis*, ed. Ja'far (Medan: Perdana Mulya Sarana, 2015).

¹⁰ Nurliana Damanik, *Tahapan Perkembangan Akal Dalam Menemukan Kebenaran (Metodologi Analisis Ibnu Tufail)*, ed. Nurur Risky Aulia Dalimunthe and Paisal Siregar, Cetakan 1 (Medan: CV. Prokreatif, 2023).

¹¹ Al-Ghazali, *Meretas Jalan Kebenaran Di Belantara Pertentangan Pemikiran Dan Madzhab-Madzhab*, trans. Masyhur Abadi (Surabaya: Pustaka Progressif, 2003).

¹² Damanik, *Tahapan Perkembangan Akal Dalam Menemukan Kebenaran (Metodologi Analisis Ibnu Tufail)*.

¹³ Harun Nasution, *Akal Dan Wahyu Dalam Islam* (Jakarta: UI Press, 1983).

toward abstract reasoning and the pursuit of universal truths, enabling humans to grasp overarching principles.

Al-Ghazali explains that the first two characteristics of intellect arise naturally, while the latter two require active effort and cultivation. He describes the intellect as a king governing human faculties, such as memory, discernment, and understanding, which act as its troops. Intellect enables humans to discern good from evil and control their desires, helping them achieve a higher level of understanding and control than other beings.

Intellect as the Main Source of Science

Al-Ghazali emphasises that intellect is synonymous with knowledge and serves as the primary means of acquiring it. He likens intellect to a divine light within humans (*lathifah rabbāniyah*)¹⁴, enabling the understanding of truth and reality. Intellect, he argues, is the foundation of knowledge, comparable to the fruit of a tree or the light of the sun. It distinguishes humans from animals, enabling them to navigate and dominate their surroundings through wisdom and rationality.

Citing the Prophet Muhammad SAW, Al-Ghazali highlights the elevated status of intellect as a divine gift, equating it with light (*nūr*) and associating it with God's essence as described in the Qur'an.¹⁵ He divides intellect into two categories are *gharīzi* intellect and *muhtasab* intellect¹⁶

In *al-Munqidz min al-Dhalāl*, Al-Ghazali asserts that ultimate knowledge stems from intuition (*ma'rifah*), a divine illumination granted by Allah.¹⁷ This mystical insight surpasses rational and empirical understanding, linking intellect with spiritual enlightenment. The Qur'an supports this view in surah Al-Nur (24:35), where divine knowledge is described as both light and life.

Intellect in Spiritual and Moral Perfection

¹⁴ Nurhayati Ali and Mahsyar Idris, *Peran Akal Dalam Tasawuf Menurut Pemikiran Al-Ghazali*, ed. Ahmad Dhiyaul Haq, 1st ed. (Depok: Rajawali Press, 2021).

¹⁵ Hamdi Yusliani, Saiful, and Rosnidarwati, "Implementasi Pendidikan Karakter: Perspektif Al-Ghazali & Thomas Lickona Di Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Terpadu (MIT) Meunara Baro Kabupaten Aceh Besar," *Edukasi Islami: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 11, no. 01 (February 2022): 721–39, <https://doi.org/10.30868/ei.v11i01.1900>.

¹⁶ Al-Ghazali, *Mizān Al-'Amal*, 1st ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1989).

¹⁷ Al-Ghazali, *Al-Munqidz Min Al-Dhalāl* (Kairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadītsah, 1974).

Al-Ghazali situates intellect at the heart of spiritual and moral perfection by integrating it harmoniously with theology and mysticism.¹⁸ For him, intellect is not a purely rational or technical faculty; rather, it is a guiding light that must operate in close cooperation with the heart. When properly oriented, intellect directs human beings toward a deep awareness of God's greatness, nurturing humility, awe, and simplicity in life. These qualities, according to al-Ghazali, are essential for attaining inner peace and sustaining spiritual intimacy with the Creator. Intellect that leads to arrogance or excessive attachment to worldly concerns, by contrast, signals a failure to fulfil its true purpose.

In al-Ghazali's framework, intellect also plays a crucial role in moral cultivation. He views it as a means of self-examination, enabling individuals to recognise their inner flaws and correct their behaviour through ethical discipline. Moral growth, therefore, is not achieved through blind imitation but through reflective understanding that aligns knowledge with virtuous action. Intellect serves as the foundation for developing noble character traits such as honesty, patience, humility, compassion, and justice, which are indispensable to spiritual maturity.

Al-Ghazali further emphasises the importance of critical thinking and intellectual responsibility. He cautions against the uncritical acceptance of ideas, traditions, or information, insisting that intellect must actively filter, analyse, and evaluate claims in the search for objective truth. This intellectual vigilance remains highly relevant in the modern context, where information is abundant yet often misleading. For al-Ghazali, authentic knowledge is not merely the accumulation of data but the transformation of the self.

Ultimately, intellect functions as a bridge between knowledge and spiritual wisdom. When guided by faith and ethical values, it becomes a powerful instrument for self-refinement, moral integrity, and spiritual fulfilment, leading individuals toward a balanced and meaningful life grounded in devotion to God.

¹⁸ Djamil, F. *The Philosophy of Sufism of Ibn Arabi and Al-Ghazali: A Study of the Concept of Wihdat al-Wujud*, (Yogyakarta: LkiS, 2004), p. 72.

Intellect and Revelation according to Al-Ghazali

Al-Ghazali's perspective on intellect and revelation builds upon and enriches philosophical traditions such as Platonism and Neoplatonism. Plato considered intellect the soul's faculty that connects directly to the realm of ideas, enabling access to ultimate truths through recollection (*anamnesis*). Neoplatonism, especially in Plotinus's thought, views intellect as the first emanation of the One, serving as both the creator of the physical world and humanity's ultimate aspiration. These schools of thought emphasise intellect as the path to happiness and unity with higher realities.¹⁹

Al-Ghazali expands these ideas by introducing instinct (*fithrah*) as the foundation of intellect. He likens instinct to an inner light that provides raw material for the intellect to process into knowledge. Intellect serves as a lens that sharpens and focuses the light of instinct, transforming it into deeper understanding.²⁰ This synergy between intellect and instinct reflects Al-Ghazali's belief that knowledge arises not solely from external learning but also from innate human potential that has been embedded since creation.²¹

The Potential of Intellect towards *Insān Kāmil*

Al-Ghazali's concept of *insān kāmil* is pivotal in understanding his vision of the ideal human being, one who has perfected the integration of intellect, morality, and spirituality. In Al-Ghazali's framework, intellect is not solely for acquiring knowledge but for achieving a deeper, spiritual understanding of the self and the divine. A perfect person, or *insān kāmil*, balances the mind, heart, and spirit, leading to a life of moral excellence and spiritual depth.

In al-Ghazali's thought, *insān kāmil* is not defined by isolated qualities but by a harmonious integration of the human faculties. Central to this ideal is

¹⁹ Abdul Mujieb and Ahmad Ismail, *Ensiklopedia Tasawuf Imam Al-Ghazali* (Jakarta: MMU, 2009).

²⁰ Imam Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' Ulumuddin; Ringkasan Ihya' Ulumuddin*, ed. Bahrun Abu Bakar (Bandung: Sinar Baru Algensindo, 2011).

²¹ Imam Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' Ulumuddin (Menghidupkan Ilmu-Ilmu Agama Islam)*, ed. Mohamad Zuhri (Semarang: CV. Asy Syifa', 2003).

the balance between intellect, passion, and morality.²² Al-Ghazali emphasizes that intellect alone is insufficient to guide human life unless it is accompanied by the purification of the heart and the regulation of desire. When reason governs passion in accordance with moral values, the individual is able to grow spiritually and ethically in a balanced manner.

This balance is cultivated through sustained spiritual practice. Al-Ghazali highlights *mujāhadah*, or spiritual struggle, as a vital process through which both intellect and character are refined.²³ Through disciplined worship, self-restraint, and inner struggle, a person gradually ascends toward divine knowledge (*ma'rifat Allāh*). Spiritual perfection, therefore, is not attained through abstract knowledge alone, but through lived practice that transforms the inner self.

For al-Ghazali, intellectual and moral perfection must develop together. True perfection requires not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the embodiment of virtues such as honesty, patience, justice, and humility. In this way, the individual reflects divine attributes in conduct, uniting theoretical understanding with practical action.

Al-Ghazali thus portrays *insān kāmil* as a person who reaches maturity across intellectual, moral, spiritual, and social dimensions.²⁴ Such an individual employs intellect to grasp religious and spiritual truths, manifests ethical excellence in daily interactions,²⁵ maintains deep spiritual closeness to God through continuous purification of the heart, and contributes positively to

²² Siti Ma'rifatul Hasanah, "Konsep Belajar Dalam Teori Konstruktivistik Dan Islam Klasik (Komparasi Pemikiran Bobbi De Porter dan Al-Ghazali)," *Jurnal Tarbiyatuna* 2, no. 2 (July 2017): 1–28.

²³ Abdul Wahid, "Konsep Ilmu Pengetahuan Menurut Al-Ghazali dan Ibnu Rusyd Serta Implikasinya Terhadap Pengembangan Pendidikan Islam," *Tesis*, (Malang: Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim, 2014).

²⁴ Hasanah, "Konsep Belajar Dalam Teori Konstruktivistik Dan Islam Klasik (Komparasi Pemikiran Bobbi De Porter dan Al-Ghazali)."

²⁵ Rina Ariani and Mahyudin Ritonga, "Analisis Pembinaan Karakter: Membangun Transformasi Insan Kamil Menurut Pemikiran Imam Al-Ghazali," *Jurnal Inovatif Manajemen Pendidikan Islam* 3, no. 2 (July 2024): 174–87, <https://doi.org/10.38073/jimpi.v3i2.1649>.

society. Leadership, in this vision, is expressed not through domination but through service, wisdom, justice, and compassion toward others.²⁶

Implications of Al-Ghazali's Perspective on Intellect for Personal and Societal Development

Al-Ghazali's perspective on intellect and knowledge emphasises the integration of moral and spiritual dimensions in education and personal development. He views education as a means to cultivate virtuous character and achieve worldly and spiritual fulfilment.²⁷ Al-Ghazali emphasises the importance of ethical education, grounded in concepts such as *tazkiyat al-nafs*, *ikhhlāsh*, *adab*, and *ḥusn al-khuluq*, to cultivate morally responsible individuals.²⁸ His educational philosophy encompasses religious, moral, intellectual, social, and physical aspects, emphasising the role of teachers as moral exemplars.²⁹

Al-Ghazali's perspective on intellect emphasises the harmony between intellect and revelation, the integration of religious and worldly sciences, and the importance of ethics, which impacts personal development through increased spirituality and morals, while guiding society in creating knowledge that is useful, ethical, and contributes to the solution of modern challenges.³⁰ Al-Ghazali views children's education as a holistic process of forming morals, faith, and physical and social potential, aiming to draw closer to Allah and create a perfect person through methods based on love, discipline, and the guidance of

²⁶ Nabila Huringiin and Alifah Yasmin, "Islamic Worldview as The Basic of Islamic Society toward Society 5.0," *Al Qalam* 38, no. 2 (January 2022): 235, <https://doi.org/10.32678/alqalam.v38i2.5360>.

²⁷ Mohammad Syaiful and Rifqi Khairul Anam, "The Concept of Moral Education According To Imam Al Ghazali And Relevance To Education In Indonesia," *At-Tajdid: Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Pemikiran Islam* 8, no. 2 (December 7, 2024): 601, <https://doi.org/10.24127/att.v8i2.3705>.

²⁸ Ummi Soleha, Rina Diniati, and Ika Kurnia Sofiani, "Membangun Pendidikan Berbasis Etika: Perspektif Al-Ghazali," *HEMAT: Journal of Humanities Education Management Accounting and Transportation* 1, no. 2 (July 31, 2024): 791–98, <https://doi.org/10.57235/hemat.v1i2.2829>.

²⁹ H Zulkifli Agus, "Pendidikan Islam Dalam Perspektif Al-Ghazali" *Raudhah Proud To Be Professionals: Jurnal Tarbiyah Islamiyah* 3, 2 (2018).

³⁰ Noor Liyana Selvia, "Konsep Pengembangan Ilmu Menurut Imam Al-Ghazali: Perspektif Epistemologi dan Eksplorasi Kontemporer," *SERUMPUN: Journal of Education, Politic, and Social Humaniora* 2, no. 1 (May 17, 2024): 8, <https://doi.org/10.61590/srp.v2i1.108>.

exemplary educators.³¹ Al-Ghazali's thoughts on Islamic education philosophy and character-building emphasise the importance of education as a means of drawing closer to God, cultivating individual morality and ethics, and fostering a harmonious society by integrating spiritual, social, and moral values into the learning process.³²

Conclusion

Al-Ghazali regards intellect (*'aql*) as the central faculty of human knowledge and understanding. He conceives intellect as residing in the heart and functioning as the primary means for discerning truth and attaining wisdom. Al-Ghazali distinguishes between two main types of intellect: practical intellect, which is connected to material reality, operates through memory and experience, and apprehends particulars (*juz'īyyāt*); and theoretical intellect, which is immaterial, independent of sensory data, and capable of grasping universals (*kullīyyāt*). He further elaborates four levels of intellect: material intellect, instinctual intellect, actual (active) intellect, and acquired intellect.

Intellect, as a divine gift from Allah SWT, differentiates human beings from other creatures and equips them with the potential to attain *insān kāmil* (the perfect human). It functions not only as a source of knowledge but also as a means of achieving spiritual and moral perfection, guiding humans toward happiness in both this world and the hereafter. Through the proper use of intellect, individuals may reach the highest levels of intellectual, moral, spiritual, and social excellence.

However, al-Ghazali emphasizes that intellect must operate in harmony with faith and morality. It transcends sensory perception by enabling access to truths beyond empirical knowledge, yet it remains ethically oriented. Consequently, the intellectually refined individual occupies a noble position,

³¹ Alimudin Alimudin, "Konsep Pendidikan Anak Dalam Perspektif Al-Ghazali," *TAJID: Jurnal Pemikiran Keislaman dan Kemanusiaan* 6, no. 1 (April 26, 2022): 86–98, <https://doi.org/10.52266/tadjud.v6i1.822>.

³² Indriani Kurniawati, Wina Silvy, and Herlini Puspika Sari, "Pemikiran Al-Ghazali Tentang Filsafat Pendidikan Islam Dan Pembentukan Karakter: Relevansinya Untuk Masyarakat," *Tawshiyah: Jurnal Sosial Keagamaan dan Pendidikan Islam* 18, no. 2 (December 20, 2023): 57–72, <https://doi.org/10.32923/taw.v18i2.4014>.

exhibits virtuous character, and demonstrates clarity and eloquence in thought and speech.[]

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