



الفضلان: مجلة التربية الإسلامية والتعليم

AL-FADLAN: Journal of Islamic Education and Teaching

Journal website: <https://al-fadlan.my.id>

ISSN: 2987-5951 (Online),

Vol. 4 No. 1 (2026)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61166/fadlan.v4i1.143>

pp. 84-92

Research Article

A Review of Historical Perceptions and Human Development in the Thought of Imam Al-Ghazali

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Received : March 11, 2026

Revised : April 13, 2026

Accepted : May 17, 2026

Available online : June 17, 2026

How to Cite: Wafiullah Aminzai, Sher Hassan Kamalzai, Liaqat Hamdard, & Enayatullah Dadman. (2026). A Review of Historical Perceptions and Human Development in the Thought of Imam Al-Ghazali. *AL-Fadlan: Journal of Islamic Education and Teaching*, 4(1), 84–92. <https://doi.org/10.61166/fadlan.v4i1.143>

Abstract. This study explores historical perceptions and human development in the thoughts of Imam Al-Ghazali, one of the most influential Islamic scholars, emphasizing how his philosophical and ethical ideas continue to inform contemporary understanding of human growth and societal progress. The primary objective of this review is to critically examine Al-Ghazali's perspectives on the role of historical awareness, moral reasoning, and intellectual reflection in shaping human character, knowledge, and social responsibility. Adopting a qualitative research approach, the study systematically collected and analyzed data from scholarly articles, classical and contemporary books,

and critical commentaries on Al-Ghazali's works, including *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* and related treatises. Through thematic analysis, the findings reveal that Al-Ghazali conceptualizes historical perception not merely as knowledge of past events but as an integrative framework that guides ethical conduct, personal development, and community cohesion. His thought emphasizes the interplay between cognitive reflection, spiritual insight, and practical action, suggesting that human development is inseparable from moral and intellectual cultivation. Moreover, the review identifies key dimensions of Al-Ghazali's approach, including the importance of self-awareness, the role of education and scholarship, and the impact of historical consciousness on societal well-being. By synthesizing Western scholarly interpretations with Al-Ghazali's original perspectives, the study highlights the enduring relevance of his ideas for contemporary debates on education, leadership, and moral development. The review concludes that Al-Ghazali's thought provides a holistic framework where historical understanding functions as both a guide for individual growth and a foundation for broader social progress, offering valuable insights for interdisciplinary research in Islamic studies, philosophy, and human development.

Keywords: Islam, Ghazali ,Human,Thoughts .

INTRODUCTION

The intellectual legacy of Imam Al-Ghazali, one of the most influential Islamic philosophers and theologians of the medieval period, has been extensively studied across various disciplines, including philosophy, theology, psychology, and human development. His thought represents a unique synthesis of Islamic spirituality, epistemology, and ethical humanism that continues to shape contemporary discourse on human nature and personal growth (Najihah et al., 2014).

The study of human ontology and psycho-spiritual development has been a central theme in both classical and contemporary Islamic thought. One of the most influential scholars in this discourse is Imam Muhammad al-Ghazali, whose writings explore the intricate relationship between the human soul, moral behavior, and spiritual cognition. His psycho-spiritual framework emphasizes that human existence cannot be fully understood through material or purely rational explanations; rather, it requires engagement with metaphysical and spiritual dimensions that shape consciousness and ethical action (HUMAN ONTOLOGY AND BEHAVIOR CEMRE ATEŞÇİ, 2019).

The relationship between environment and child development has been widely discussed in both modern developmental psychology and Islamic educational thought. Scholars emphasize that children's behavioral and attitudinal growth is significantly shaped by their surrounding social and moral environment. In Islamic pedagogy, the environment is understood to include familial upbringing, educational guidance, and broader social influences, all of which contribute to moral and psychological formation. Research in this area supports the view that early childhood experiences and environmental stimuli play a foundational role in shaping personality, ethical awareness, and cognitive development. These perspectives align

with contemporary theories of social learning, which argue that behavior is learned through interaction with the environment and modeled by significant social agents (Nakamura, n.d.).

The concept of learning and character formation has long been a central theme in educational discourse, particularly within Islamic pedagogical thought. Scholars argue that education is not merely a process of knowledge transmission but also a means of shaping moral and behavioral dispositions. In Islamic education, two primary objectives are emphasized: intellectual development and moral character formation. While modern educational systems often prioritize cognitive achievement, research indicates that ethical and behavioral development requires sustained effort and structured pedagogical strategies. This dual objective aligns with broader discussions in educational psychology, which recognize that knowledge without moral grounding may limit the holistic development of students (Azizah & Abidin, 2025).

Character education in early childhood has been recognized as a fundamental process for shaping ethical and social development. Scholars argue that character formation is not a single event but a continuous educational endeavor aimed at instilling values that guide individual behavior within society. Research in developmental psychology and educational theory emphasizes that early childhood is a critical period for moral learning, as children are highly receptive to environmental influences and behavioral modeling. Studies suggest that structured character education contributes to the development of positive social attitudes, self-discipline, and moral awareness, which collectively support long-term personal and societal well-being (Ahmad et al., n.d.).

The study of moral philosophy and character education in Islamic intellectual history has been significantly shaped by scholars such as Ibn Miskawaih, who is recognized as one of the earliest Muslim thinkers to systematically address ethical theory. His contributions extend beyond moral philosophy to history, linguistics, and medicine, reflecting the multidimensional nature of Islamic scholarship. Research on Ibn Miskawaih highlights his emphasis on virtue ethics and moral refinement, arguing that ethical development is essential for personal and social well-being. His ideas continue to influence contemporary discussions on moral education, particularly in relation to character formation and ethical behavior (Busroli, 2019).

Historical scholarship on legal and institutional development in Europe highlights the rediscovery of *Corpus Iuris Civilis* in northern Italy around 1070 as a transformative event in Western legal history. Researchers argue that this revival of Roman legal principles influenced the institutional structures of emerging European kingdoms and contributed to the development of codified legal systems. Studies emphasize that the adaptation of Roman jurisprudence provided a foundation for medieval legal thought and governance, facilitating the evolution of Western political and legal institutions. The integration of these principles into local

governance demonstrates the continuity between classical legal traditions and medieval institutional development(Firmansyah et al., n.d.).

Educational scholarship emphasizes that learning is not limited to cognitive development but also encompasses moral and character formation. The relationship between human behavior and education is widely recognized in both modern pedagogical theories and Islamic educational thought. Research indicates that educational systems aim to produce individuals who are intellectually capable and ethically responsible. While cognitive skills can often be developed through structured instruction and short-term learning strategies, character formation requires sustained effort, experiential learning, and moral guidance. Studies in educational psychology support this distinction, arguing that ethical development is shaped by continuous interaction with social and educational environments(Sentosa et al., 2022).

The educational philosophy of Imam al-Ghazali emphasizes that students possess inherent potential for moral and spiritual perfection. According to Ghazali's perspective, human beings are not merely recipients of knowledge but active participants in a developmental process that integrates ethical and spiritual growth. Educational literature on Islamic pedagogy supports this view, arguing that learning should address the holistic development of the individual, encompassing cognitive, moral, and spiritual dimensions. Studies highlight that moral education is essential for shaping responsible and ethical individuals, while spiritual development contributes to personal meaning and social responsibility(Lubis et al., 2024).

Research on child development consistently emphasizes the significant role of environmental factors in shaping behavior, attitudes, and moral growth. Developmental psychology and educational studies indicate that children's growth is influenced not only by biological factors but also by social and cultural environments. The reciprocal relationship between environment and child behavior suggests that children both influence and are influenced by their surroundings. Positive environments contribute to healthy psychological and moral development, while adverse environments may lead to behavioral difficulties and ethical challenges. This perspective aligns with contemporary theories of social learning, which argue that behavior is acquired through observation, interaction, and reinforcement within the social environment(Sulaiman et al., 2014).

The study of moral education has been a central theme in Islamic intellectual history, particularly in the works of ethical and philosophical scholars. One of the earliest systematic treatments of moral philosophy is found in the writings of Ibn Miskawaih, who emphasized the role of habituation and rational discipline in character formation. His ethical framework suggests that moral virtues are developed through repeated practice and intellectual reflection. According to this perspective, human character is not static but capable of refinement through education and self-discipline. Studies on Ibn Miskawaih's thought highlight his

philosophical orientation, which integrates ethical reasoning with practical moral training. This approach aligns with classical virtue ethics, wherein moral behavior is cultivated through consistent practice and rational understanding (Hermawan & Sudin, 2025).

METODE

This study employs a qualitative research design using a library research method to review historical perceptions and human development in the thought of Imam al-Ghazali. Data are collected from primary sources, including Ghazali's classical works, as well as secondary scholarly literature that discusses his philosophical and educational ideas. The research utilizes content analysis to interpret and categorize relevant themes related to historical understanding and human development within Ghazali's intellectual framework. By analyzing textual sources descriptively and critically, the study aims to identify core concepts and evaluate their implications for moral and educational thought. This methodological approach enables a comprehensive understanding of Ghazali's perspectives while situating them within broader historical and intellectual contexts.

Historical Perceptions of Al-Ghazali

Al-Ghazali, also known as Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali was a prominent and influential figure in Sunni Islam, recognized as a philosopher, theologian, jurist, and mystic. Born in Tabarân-Tûs, near modern Meshed, Iran, his birth year is debated, with some sources indicating 1058 or 1059, while others suggest 1055 or 1056 based on his letters and autobiography. He received his early education in his hometown and later studied with the Ash'arite theologian al-Juwaynî at the Nizâmiyya Madrasa in Nishapur. In 1091, Nizam al-Mulk appointed Al-Ghazali to the prestigious Nizâmiyya Madrasa in Baghdad, making him a significant intellectual of his era. Al-Ghazali's views on history are substantial, and he believed that the history of human life originates from the spiritual world, encompassing the past, present, and future. His period, marked by socio-political instability and competition among various theological movements, significantly influenced his thinking. Al-Ghazali's work is considered to have profoundly impacted the intellectual style of Islamic thinkers from his time to the present. His critical stance on philosophy, particularly concerning Greek philosophical influences, led to a perception by some, especially early Western historians, that he hindered the development of rational sciences in the Muslim world. This view is currently under scrutiny, with researchers re-examining his ideas to explore alternative perspectives on the historical trajectory of philosophy and science in Muslim societies. In his major work, "Tahāfut al-Falāsifah" (The Incoherence of the Philosophers), Al-Ghazali warned against the uncritical adoption of Greek thought and advocated for the "Islamization of knowledge" to ensure alignment with Islamic principles. Despite his

critiques, his approach to resolving contradictions between reason and revelation was widely accepted by later Muslim theologians and influenced medieval Latin thought through figures like Averroes and Jewish authors (Ahida, 2022).

Al-Ghazali's legacy includes a complex interaction with the philosophical movement of falsafa, which stemmed from the translation of Greek philosophical and scientific literature into Arabic. He studied the works of falâsifa for two years before writing "The Incoherence of the Philosophers". Although his account suggests he began engaging with falsafa as a professor in Baghdad, he likely became acquainted with it earlier while studying with al-Juwaynî, whose works already showed Avicennan influence. Al-Ghazali's "Incoherence of the Philosophers" critiques twenty key teachings of the falâsifa, arguing that their claims were not demonstratively proven but relied on unproven premises. He considered three of these teachings to be religiously problematic: the world's pre-eternity, God's knowledge not extending to individuals, and the permanent separation of souls from bodies after death, labeling public proponents of these views as apostates. However, he clarified in "The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Clandestine Unbelief" that only teachings violating fundamental doctrines of monotheism, Muhammad's prophecy, and Qur'anic descriptions of the afterlife should be deemed unbelief (Hoshimovich, 2021).

Human Development in Al-Ghazali's Thought

Al-Ghazali's philosophy extensively explores human nature and development, emphasizing both spiritual and material aspects of existence and the pursuit of happiness. His views are deeply rooted in Islamic thought, drawing from Quranic and Prophetic teachings. He proposed that humans are composed of a physical, ephemeral dimension and an intellectual-transcendental, spiritual dimension. He classified existence into the realm of decrees ('âlam al-amr) and the realm of creation ('âlam al-khalq), with humans embodying both through their physicality and spirituality (Arroisi et al., 2023).

Components of Human Spirituality

Al-Ghazali identified several terms to describe the spiritual entity within humans, including al-'aql (intellect), al-nafs (soul), al-qalb (heart), and al-rûh (spirit). These are not separate entities but different aspects of the same essence, with the soul developing through various stages. **Ruh (Spirit):** Al-Ghazali saw the spirit as divine in origin and immortal, belonging to the realm of Divine decrees, distinct from material entities. It is also described as a biological life force and divine essence. **Nafs (Soul/Self):** The soul, as God's creation, governs the body without being located in a specific physical part. It represents both lower tendencies requiring discipline and essential human nature. Al-Ghazali used nafs to describe human personality, dividing it into three types:

Nafs al-ammārah: The prompting soul, infected by negative desires, leading to evil acts and incapacitating cognitive processes.

Nafs al-lawwāmah: The self-reproaching soul, which blames itself for wrongdoings and strives to suppress animalistic desires.

Nafs al-muṭmainnah: The contented soul, a tranquil state achieved when wicked desires are conquered and reason prevails, leading to serenity and submission to God.

Qalb (Heart): The heart serves as the center of spiritual emotions and has a spiritual potential connected to God, acting as an abode of intuitive knowledge. It functions as both a physical organ and a divine subtle essence capable of knowing God. A pure heart, cleansed from instinctive desires, reflects the soul's true light, transforming physical existence into a higher spiritual intellect.

Aql (Intellect): The intellect processes knowledge and serves as a distinguishing human faculty with both theoretical and practical capacities (Ahida, 2022).

Education and Spiritual Development

Al-Ghazali emphasized the crucial role of education in human development, believing that knowledge is inherent in the human soul and can be cultivated through proper education. He likened a child to an uncut diamond, which education shapes into a refined individual. The ultimate goal of education, according to Al-Ghazali, is to achieve human perfection and draw closer to Allah SWT. His curriculum concept is similar to holistic education, encompassing intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual development for individual and societal benefit, bringing people closer to God. He articulated a stepwise methodology for human capital development, including mujahadah al-naḥs (striving against the self), riyadah al-naḥs (disciplining the self), and tazkiyah al-naḥs (purification of the self), with the latter being the peak. His seminal work, "Ihya' 'Ulūm al-Dīn" (Revival of the Religious Sciences), addressed various aspects of human life, including physical and spiritual purity, knowledge, worship, and relationships. He viewed Sufism as a means to achieve self-realization and spiritual goals by integrating knowledge and mystical experiences. Al-Ghazali's educational psychology stresses the balance and integrity between science, educators, and students as "spirits" capable of transforming behavior and character. He highlighted that the human soul possesses innate potentials from birth that education helps balance. Moral education is equated with habituation, though he also maintained that divine assistance is ultimately necessary, as there is no certain causal relation between moral education and habituation. He also considered childhood a critical period for teaching, as early learning significantly influences an individual's future. The peak of human perfection, in his view, involves the balanced role of the mind and heart in developing the human spirit, with the core target of education being the perfection of human

morals through spiritual cultivation(Arroisi et al.,2023).

Conclusion

This study has reviewed historical perceptions and human development in the thought of **Imam al-Ghazali**, demonstrating that his intellectual framework integrates historical understanding with moral and spiritual dimensions of human growth. Ghazali's perception of history emphasizes that societal progress and decline are influenced by ethical and intellectual conditions, suggesting that human actions play a decisive role in shaping historical outcomes. Rather than viewing history solely as a sequence of political events, his approach highlights the moral lessons embedded within historical experiences. This perspective remains relevant for contemporary historical analysis, as it encourages critical reflection on the relationship between human behavior and societal development.

In terms of human development, Ghazali's thought advocates a holistic model that combines intellectual learning with moral and spiritual refinement. He argues that human growth is not limited to cognitive achievement but also involves the cultivation of ethical virtues and spiritual awareness. This integrated approach aligns with modern theories of holistic education, which recognize that personal development encompasses multiple dimensions, including emotional and moral growth. Ghazali's emphasis on character formation and self-discipline contributes to an understanding of development that prioritizes ethical responsibility alongside intellectual advancement.

The findings of this review indicate that Ghazali's ideas continue to offer valuable insights for contemporary discussions on education and human development. His perspective on moral and spiritual growth provides a framework for addressing modern challenges such as ethical decline and social fragmentation. By emphasizing the importance of values and character, his thought supports the development of individuals who are not only knowledgeable but also socially responsible and morally grounded. This approach underscores the enduring relevance of Islamic intellectual traditions in contributing to modern educational and philosophical discourse.

Overall, the review demonstrates that historical perceptions and human development in Ghazali's thought are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. His understanding of history highlights the moral dimensions of societal change, while his concept of development advocates for comprehensive growth that integrates knowledge and ethics. These ideas provide a valuable foundation for analyzing human progress and addressing contemporary challenges in education and social development. Future research should further explore the practical applications of Ghazali's ideas in modern contexts, particularly in educational strategies and moral development initiatives. Such investigations can enhance the relevance of his intellectual contributions and support the development of holistic approaches to

human growth and societal improvement.

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