



## Comparison of the Ethical Views of Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali: The Concept of Happiness and Goodness in Islamic Philosophy

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### ABSTRACT

This article discusses a comparison of the ethical views of two major figures in Islamic philosophy, namely Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali, with a focus on the concepts of happiness and goodness in their teachings. Although they come from different intellectual backgrounds – Al-Farabi with a rational and philosophical approach, and Al-Ghazali with a spiritual and Sufi orientation – both have significant views on the ultimate purpose of human life. This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach. The article aims to analyze the similarities and differences in their views on the achievement of happiness and goodness, as well as the philosophical implications of their perspectives on human life and Islamic ethics.

## INTRODUCTION

Islamic Philosophy, as a tradition of thought that developed in the Muslim world, encompasses various perspectives on the purpose of human life, one of which is the attainment of happiness and virtue. Two prominent figures in Islamic philosophy, Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali, have significantly contributed to the development of these concepts, albeit through different approaches. Al-Farabi, known for his teachings on politics and logic, emphasized the importance of reason and harmony in achieving happiness. Conversely, Al-Ghazali, a Sufi deeply immersed in the spiritual and mystical dimensions, highlighted the attainment of happiness through a closer inner connection with God. This article aims to compare their views on happiness and virtue as well as how their teachings influence Islamic ethical thought.

### 1. The Concept of Happiness in Al-Farabi's Philosophy

Al-Farabi views happiness as the ultimate achievement in human life, attainable through the use of intellect and the pursuit of virtue within social and political contexts. In his perspective, happiness is not merely individual but also collective, achieved through a harmonious society where every individual plays a role according to their capabilities. Al-Farabi taught that happiness could be obtained through intellectual and moral development, prioritizing virtue within an ideal society. He introduced the concept of the "virtuous city" or *al-Madina al-Fadila*, a community where every individual lives in accordance with their moral and intellectual duties, ultimately leading to collective happiness.

For Al-Farabi, happiness, particularly from a political perspective, is highly dependent on the presence of a wise leader, a "philosopher-king," who can guide society towards true happiness. Therefore, for Al-Farabi, happiness is not only achievable individually but also through cooperation within a well-organized society.

### 2. The Concept of Happiness in Al-Ghazali's Philosophy

For Al-Ghazali, happiness is not merely a material or intellectual achievement but a deeper spiritual attainment. In his work *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, Al-Ghazali explains that true happiness lies in inner peace, which can only be achieved through a close relationship with God. He emphasizes the importance of purifying the soul from desires and sins through Sufi practices such as dhikr (remembrance of God), fasting, and prayer. Happiness for Al-Ghazali is transcendental and independent of worldly or social status; instead, it is rooted in nearness to God, achieved through purity of heart and piety.

Al-Ghazali argues that true happiness can only be realized once an individual detaches from worldly ties and wholeheartedly follows religious

teachings. For him, knowledge and virtue encompass not only rational aspects but also a deeper spiritual dimension.

#### *The Concept of Virtue in Al-Farabi's Philosophy*

In Al-Farabi's thought, virtue is the moral excellence embodied in actions that support the attainment of happiness, both in individual life and society. This virtue is closely linked to achieving the ultimate purpose of human life as rational beings. Al-Farabi views the highest virtue as living in accordance with intellect and reason while creating harmony within society. He identifies various virtues, such as courage, wisdom, and justice, which must be cultivated in individuals to establish a good society.

For Al-Farabi, collective virtue—achieved through a just and rational society—is a prerequisite for happiness. Thus, virtue in Al-Farabi's philosophy involves two aspects: first, personal virtues manifested in an individual's moral behavior, and second, social virtues that contribute to the creation of an ideal community.

#### *The Concept of Virtue in Al-Ghazali's Philosophy*

In his work *Tahafut al-Falasifah*, Al-Ghazali critiques the philosophers' view of virtue that relies solely on rational reasoning. According to Al-Ghazali, true virtue lies not only in moral and intellectual achievements but also in spiritual purity and devotion to God. He sees virtue as not merely measurable by social actions or intellectual excellence but also by the purity of heart achieved through worship and self-discipline.

For Al-Ghazali, virtue is deeply connected to devotion to God and spiritual life. In other words, virtue, according to Al-Ghazali, is more spiritual and internal, focusing on self-improvement through profound Sufi practices. This demonstrates a fundamental difference between Al-Ghazali and Al-Farabi's perspectives, where Al-Ghazali emphasizes the spiritual aspect of virtue, while Al-Farabi views it in social and intellectual contexts.

#### *A Comparative Perspective on Happiness and Virtue*

Despite their differing views on happiness and virtue, Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali agree that the ultimate goal of human life is to achieve a state of goodness and happiness. Al-Farabi prioritizes the role of reason and social harmony in achieving happiness, while Al-Ghazali emphasizes spiritual closeness to God as the path to true happiness. Both philosophers have made significant contributions to Islamic ethical thought by highlighting two essential dimensions: rationality and spirituality.

Although their approaches differ, their ideas remain relevant for understanding happiness and virtue in the context of human life. Islamic philosophy, as part of a rich and diverse intellectual tradition, involves many great figures who have significantly shaped the development of moral and ethical thought. Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali, though they lived in different eras and had diverse scholarly backgrounds – Al-Farabi being more associated with philosophy and logic, and Al-Ghazali with theology and Sufism – both shared a profound concern for how humans can achieve a good and happy life.

This comparison allows us to better understand how their ethical thoughts contribute to the Islamic philosophical tradition and offer valuable insights for humanity in the quest for happiness and virtue.

## **METHOD**

This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach, a method commonly used to study objects in their natural state without experimental intervention. As articulated by Professor Lexy J. Moleong, qualitative research generates data analysis without requiring statistical calculations or quantitative methods. This definition distinctly differentiates qualitative research from quantitative research, emphasizing that quantification processes are not essential in qualitative studies.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### Biography of Al-Ghazali

The full name of Al-Ghazali is Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Ghazali ath-Thusi. He is sometimes referred to as Ghazzali (with two Zs), which means "wool spinner," reflecting his father's occupation. However, the more commonly used name is Ghazali (with one Z), derived from his birthplace, Ghazalah. Al-Ghazali was born in 450 AH/1058 CE in Thus, Khurasan, Iran. He is recognized as one of the great Islamic thinkers and was honored with the title "Defender of Islam" (*Hujjatul Islam*).

In his youth, Al-Ghazali pursued his education in Nishapur, a major intellectual center in the Islamic world. There, he studied under Imam al-Haramain al-Juwaini, a prominent scholar at the Madrasah al-Nizamiyyah in Nishapur. At this institution, Al-Ghazali learned various disciplines, including theology, Islamic law, philosophy, logic, Sufism, and natural sciences.

In 1091 CE/484 AH, Al-Ghazali was appointed as a lecturer at the Nizamiyyah University in Baghdad. Due to his exceptional achievements, he became the rector of the university at the age of 34. However, after serving as

rector for only four years, Al-Ghazali experienced a profound spiritual crisis, including doubts about his faith and spiritual knowledge. This led him to abandon his position and pursue a simpler life, dedicating himself to worship, seclusion, and spiritual retreat (*i'tikaf*) for nearly two years in a mosque in Damascus. He then continued his journey to Jerusalem, performed the pilgrimage (*hajj*), and visited the tombs of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and Prophet Ibrahim (AS).

Al-Ghazali resolved his spiritual crisis through Sufism. After about ten years of spiritual journeys, he returned to teaching at the Nizamiyyah University at the insistence of Fakhrul Muluk. Al-Ghazali passed away at the age of 55 on 14 Jumada al-Thani 550 AH (December 19, 1111 CE) in Tus, and he was buried near the tomb of the renowned poet Ferdowsi in Thaberran.

Philosophical Thought of Al-Ghazali

### **Metaphysics**

Al-Ghazali initially studied the works of philosophers, particularly those of Ibn Sina. After delving deeply into philosophy, he concluded that relying solely on reason to understand divine matters was akin to using an inadequate tool for a complex task. In his book *Al-Munqidh min al-Dhalal*, Al-Ghazali argued that the errors of philosophers became evident in their discussions on divinity (metaphysics) as they failed to provide logical evidence consistent with their own criteria.

Although Al-Ghazali approached philosophical studies rationally, he later concluded that the rational methods of philosophers could not reliably provide certainty about the essence of metaphysical (divine) and certain physical phenomena, particularly those related to Islamic beliefs. However, he acknowledged the validity of philosophy in fields such as logic and mathematics.

### **Divine Will (*Iradat Allah*)**

Al-Ghazali believed that the universe exists solely due to God's will (*iradat*), not as a result of inherent causality. According to him, God's will is the basis of creation, resulting in two primary elements: the laws governing nature and abstract particles (*zarra*). The adjustment of these particles to natural laws forms the world and its inherent regularities.

God's will, Al-Ghazali emphasized, is absolute and transcends space and time, while the created world remains confined within these dimensions. Unlike Aristotelian philosophers who viewed events as governed by immutable cause-and-effect laws, Al-Ghazali argued that all occurrences depend entirely on God's

will. For example, fire does not inherently burn paper; it burns only if God wills it. He cited the story of Prophet Ibrahim (AS) remaining unharmed in fire as evidence of God's overriding power.

## Ethics

Al-Ghazali's ethical philosophy is deeply rooted in his Sufi teachings, as elaborated in his seminal work, *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*. His ethical approach aligns with the principle of emulating God's attributes (*Al-Takhalluq bi Akhlaqihi 'Ala Thaqah al-Basyariyah*), such as compassion, forgiveness, and truthfulness, to the extent humanly possible.

He viewed God as an active and merciful creator who continuously spreads goodness throughout the universe. This perspective contrasts with classical Greek philosophy, which portrayed God as a passive ultimate good, indifferent to human affairs, and matter as the source of evil. Al-Ghazali emphasized that material existence could embody goodness if used modestly and without excess. His synthesis of *fiqh*, Sufism, and theology in *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* underscores the inseparability of spiritual and religious obligations in attaining goodness and spiritual happiness.

## Al-Ghazali's Critique of Philosophy

Although deeply engaged in philosophical inquiry, Al-Ghazali criticized several philosophical positions in his book *Tahafut al-Falasifah (The Incoherence of Philosophers)*. Among the positions he rejected were:

- God does not possess attributes.
- God is a simple substance (*basit*) without essence (*mahiya*).
- God lacks knowledge of particulars (*juz'iyat*).
- God cannot be attributed with genus (*al-jins*) or difference (*al-fasl*).
- Celestial bodies are autonomous beings.
- Celestial souls possess knowledge of all particulars.
- Natural laws are unchangeable.
- Bodily resurrection does not occur.
- The universe has no beginning.

Al-Ghazali's integration of rationality and spirituality remains a cornerstone of Islamic thought, illustrating the balance between human intellect and divine guidance

1. The Eternity of the Universe

Among the ten philosophical views criticized by Al-Ghazali, three are considered to verge on disbelief, including:

### **The Eternity of the Universe (*Qadimnya Alam*)**

Philosophers argue that the universe is eternal (*qadim*) based on three main arguments:

- a. They claim that something new cannot emerge from something eternal; therefore, if God is eternal, the universe must also be eternal, as both are eternal.
- b. They argue that God is eternal in essence, but in terms of time, the universe and God coexist, like the numbers one and two.
- c. The universe is considered something that could exist without a beginning, meaning it is eternal.

However, Al-Ghazali asserts that only God is eternal, while the universe is a creation (*hadith*). God possesses absolute power to create the universe according to His will.

### **God Does Not Know the Details of Natural Events**

Some Muslim philosophers suggest that God only knows His essence and not the details of what occurs in the universe. They reason that if God were to know the changes that happen, this would imply a change in His essence. They argue that changes in objects of knowledge would alter the knowledge itself, which is impossible for God.

Al-Ghazali refutes this, stating that this view is a grave error. Changes in the object of knowledge do not affect the knowledge itself. Knowledge is an addition, not a part of God's essence. Thus, while the objects of knowledge may change, God's essence remains unaltered, similar to when a person moves from our right to our left – the person changes, but we remain unchanged.

Al-Ghazali's critical stance on divine philosophy demonstrates his courage in correcting what he perceives as deviations from true Islamic teachings, even though such views were widely held among philosophers of his time.

### **No Bodily Resurrection**

Some Muslim philosophers believe that only the soul will be resurrected in the afterlife, while the body will perish. Therefore, happiness or suffering in the afterlife will only be experienced by the soul, not the physical body.

Al-Ghazali addresses this view by prioritizing the textual understanding of the Qur'an. He argues there is no reason to reject the possibility of both physical and spiritual happiness or suffering occurring simultaneously. The Almighty Allah, who created everything, can undoubtedly return the soul to the body in the afterlife. Islamic teachings explain resurrection in both physical and spiritual contexts, although some interpretations focus solely on the soul's resurrection.

Muslim philosophers tend to accept the concept of spiritual resurrection, interpreting the texts metaphorically. They argue that since the afterlife is the opposite of the material world, it must be understood as spiritual. Thus, paradise is perceived as non-material happiness, while hell is understood as suffering, albeit in a metaphorical sense

### Differences Between Al-Ghazali and Muslim Philosophers

The primary difference lies in their approaches and interpretations of these concepts, not their essence. Both Al-Ghazali and the philosophers acknowledge the implicit meanings in divine revelations but interpret them based on their respective perspectives. Al-Ghazali did not intend to demean Muslim philosophers but aimed to caution against the widespread adoption of philosophical thought, as it might be misunderstood by the general public.

According to Harun Nasution, Al-Ghazali categorizes human thought into three levels:

- a. The masses, who think in a very simplistic manner.
- b. The elite (*khatwas*), who possess sharp intellect and profound reasoning.
- c. The opposition (*ahl al-jadl*), characterized by their disputative nature.

Based on this classification, Al-Ghazali places philosophers in the second or third group, given their distinctive way of thinking. Thus, philosophical discourse should remain within the philosophical community. This perspective aligns with the ideas of philosophers like Al-Farabi, who argue that philosophy should not be taught to the masses, as their way of thinking differs. This principle also applies to discussions of metaphysics and theology, which cannot be explained using philosophical language to the general public. Conversely, discussions with philosophers must employ philosophical language.

According to Sheikh Sulaiman Dunya of Al-Azhar University, Cairo, Al-Ghazali adapted his explanations based on the context he faced. This is why he wrote *Tahafut al-Falasifah*, as a distinct approach to engage philosophers using philosophical language. In this regard, Al-Ghazali was no different from other philosophers; in fact, he was also a philosopher himself.

## The Ideal State According to Al-Farabi

Al-Farabi's ideal state is the *Virtuous City (al-Madina al-Fadila)*, where citizens are independent and aim to achieve true happiness. According to him, citizens are the primary element of a state, determining its fundamental principles, such as ideology, foundation, and concepts. The existence of citizens is vital because they define the nature and form of the state. Moreover, the quality of a state depends on the quality of its citizens. They also hold the right to choose the leader, who must be the most excellent and perfect individual among them.

The *Virtuous City* is likened to a healthy and perfect human body, where the organization of its organs is hierarchical and orderly. There are three main classifications in the human body:

The **heart** is the most important organ, serving as the primary regulator that is not controlled by any other organ.

The **brain** ranks second, supporting the heart and regulating other organs, such as the liver, spleen, and reproductive organs.

The **third category** includes organs at the lowest level, functioning solely to support and serve the higher organs.

In this analogy, the leader of a state is regarded as the most important and perfect part of the state. Al-Farabi argues that the state leader must be a philosopher with characteristics akin to those of a prophet—possessing both physical and spiritual abilities, namely rationality and spirituality. Al-Farabi distinguishes between the first-generation leader (*Imam*), who is exceptionally perfect yet rare, and the second-generation leader (*Ra'is*), who sufficiently meets the requirements. However, Al-Farabi warns that if a philosopher does not participate in governance, the state will become a "kingdom without a king," risking collapse.

### a. Morality

The concept of morality in Al-Farabi's thought is significant, especially concerning discussions about the soul and politics. In his works, such as *Risalah Fi At-Tanbih 'ala Subul al-Sa'adah* and *Tahsil al-Sa'adah*, Al-Farabi emphasizes four

types of virtues essential for achieving happiness, both in this world and the hereafter, for nations and citizens:

**Theoretical Virtues**, involving principles of knowledge acquired from contemplation, research, learning, and teaching, though their origins may not always be clear.

**Intellectual Virtues**, which enable individuals to understand beneficial matters relevant to life's goals, including the ability to create useful rules.

**Moral Virtues**, aimed at seeking goodness and underpinning intellectual virtues.

**Practical Virtues**, attained through stimulating and satisfying questions or through coercion.

In addition to these virtues, Al-Farabi emphasizes the importance of moderation to avoid harming the soul and body. This balance should be adjusted according to the time, place, individuals, goals, methods, and other conditions. For example, courage is a commendable trait that lies between two vices: cowardice (*jubn*) and uncontrolled bravery (*tahawwur*).

Generosity paired with intelligence is exemplified in prophets and philosophers: prophets receive inspiration through their imagination, while philosophers gain knowledge through speculation and contemplation. Both stem from the same source and receive knowledge from God.

#### *The Role of Dreams and Prophethood*

Dreams are considered one way to connect with God, as a pure soul during sleep ascends to the unseen realm and perceives its secrets. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) began receiving revelations through dreams, marking the start of his prophethood. The Qur'an even contains a chapter dedicated to dreams, *Surah Yusuf*. The Prophet also stated that true dreams are a part of prophethood.

According to Al-Farabi, imagination plays a crucial role in the formation of dreams and prophethood. When dreams are interpreted scientifically, they can deepen our understanding of prophethood and its continuity. Prophetic inspiration can occur during sleep (in dreams) or while awake (as revelation), differing only in degree but sharing the same essence. True dreams are a form of prophethood as they are closely related to revelation and its purpose.

Al-Farabi explains that imagination, when unaffected by waking actions, uses psychological phenomena during sleep to create new images or combine existing illustrations. Imagination is a creative potential that can produce and

shape mental images. Dreams and revelations share a common origin, as both arise from imagination influenced by specific factors. Interpreting dreams scientifically enables the interpretation of revelation and prophetic inspiration, as both have aligned objectives despite differing methods of delivery.

#### *Prophethood According to Al-Farabi*

Prophethood, in Al-Farabi's view, is innate (*fitri*), not acquired (*muktasabah*). Effort enhances the prophet's perfection and increases their capacity. A person connected to the higher realm exhibits miracles and virtues, indicating spiritual strength. While the mysteries behind this remain unknown, they can be understood through psychological and spiritual approaches.

Al-Farabi's discussion of prophethood intertwines with his philosophy of emanation and politics. He is the first philosopher to explore prophethood in-depth. According to him, prophets and philosophers share the ability to communicate with the *Active Intellect (Aql Fa'al)*, often likened to angels. However, their communication methods differ: prophets communicate through powerful imagination, while philosophers use the *Aql Mustafad*, the intellect capable of receiving inspiration from the *Active Intellect*.

Dreams, as a subject of exploration, extend into philosophy, psychology, and religion. They remain a fascinating topic of study as they are universally experienced across ages and backgrounds. While Aristotle argued that dreams originate from sensory influences recorded in sensory organs and then transferred to the heart's sensory center, he dismissed the idea that dreams come from God or that prophets could predict the future through dreams.

Contrary to Aristotle, Al-Farabi believed that imagination allows humans to connect with the *Agent Intellect*, a divine source of law and inspiration similar to angels delivering revelations in Islamic teachings.

#### **1. The Concept of Goodness in Al-Farabi's Philosophy**

In Al-Farabi's thinking, goodness is the virtue manifested in actions that support the achievement of happiness, both in individual and societal life. This goodness is closely related to the fulfillment of human life's purpose as rational beings. Al-Farabi views the highest goodness as living in accordance with reason and intellect, as well as creating harmony in society. He also identifies various virtues, such as courage, wisdom, and justice, which must exist in every individual to create a good society. In his view, collective goodness, achieved through a just and rational society, is an absolute requirement for happiness. Therefore, goodness in

Al-Farabi's philosophy involves two aspects: first, personal virtue manifested in individual moral behavior, and second, social virtue that supports the creation of an ideal society.

## 2. The Concept of Goodness in Al-Ghazali's Philosophy

In his work *Tahafut al-Falasifah*, Al-Ghazali criticizes the philosophers' views on goodness, which solely rely on rational intellect. According to Al-Ghazali, true goodness lies not only in moral and intellectual achievements but also in the purity of the soul and devotion to God. Al-Ghazali believes that goodness cannot only be measured by social actions or intellectual virtues but also by the purity of the heart, which is achieved through worship and self-control. For Al-Ghazali, goodness is closely related to devotion to God and spiritual life. In other words, for Al-Ghazali, goodness is more spiritual and internal, focusing on self-improvement through profound Sufi practices. This shows a fundamental difference between Al-Ghazali and Al-Farabi's views, where Al-Ghazali emphasizes the spiritual aspect of goodness, while Al-Farabi sees it in a social and intellectual context.

## CONCLUSION

Although Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali have differing views on happiness and goodness, they both agree that the ultimate goal of human life is to reach a state of goodness and happiness. Al-Farabi emphasizes the role of reason and social harmony in achieving happiness, while Al-Ghazali underscores the importance of spiritual closeness to God as the path to true happiness. Both philosophers have made significant contributions to ethical thought in Islamic philosophy, highlighting two important dimensions: rationality and spirituality. Despite differences in their approaches, their ideas remain relevant in understanding the concepts of happiness and goodness in the context of human life.

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