

# Al-Ghazali's Conception of Dreams: The Mechanism of Dreams and the Soul's Role in Epistemological Knowledge

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores Al-Ghazali's conception of the soul and its role in the mechanism of dreams. According to Al-Ghazali, the soul is an intricate, metaphysical entity composed of interconnected elements — nafs (soul), 'aql (intellect), qalb (heart), and ruh (spirit)—that together shape human behavior and spiritual experiences. Al-Ghazali's view posits that dreams are not merely psychological or physiological events but metaphysical occurrences influenced by the soul's capacity to perceive divine knowledge. He argues that the purification of the soul, particularly the heart, is essential for accessing higher truths, with dreams serving as a medium for divine revelation. This metaphysical perspective marks a significant departure from earlier rationalist interpretations, highlighting the spiritual and intuitive aspects of knowledge. Al-Ghazali's framework of the soul's role in dreams contributes to the broader Islamic philosophical discourse on the acquisition of knowledge and spiritual development, bridging rationalist thought with mystical traditions.

**Keywords:** *Al-Ghazali, Dreams, Soul, Epistemology, Spiritual Knowledge.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of dreams in the classical Islamic intellectual tradition is a topic that received serious attention from Muslim thinkers, particularly in relation to its function as a source of knowledge and its epistemological validity [1]. Dreams were not merely regarded as personal psychological experiences but were often understood as a medium of communication between human consciousness and the transcendent realm. From the era of al-Kindi to al-Farabi, approaches to dreams were largely rationalistic—relying on Aristotelian logic and Neoplatonic metaphysics. While these frameworks laid important foundations for philosophical discussions about the soul and the cosmos, they did not fully encompass the spiritual and intuitive dimensions of dreams that later became central in Islamic thought [2].

The selection of Al-Ghazali's model of thought in this study is not intended solely to compare his ideas with those of earlier philosophers. More importantly, this research aims to explore how Al-Ghazali's conception of dreams reflects a significant shift in the philosophical understanding of dreams, particularly in the context of their relationship to the soul and the mechanisms that govern them. Al-Ghazali's work marks a critical turning point in Islamic philosophy by merging rational inquiry, religious experience, and spiritual intuition [3]. In doing so, he positions dreams as an epistemic source that offers access to knowledge beyond the scope of pure rationality. His major works, such as *al-Munqidh min al-Dhalal* and *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, emphasize that dreams are not simply psychological occurrences but significant forms of knowledge that can illuminate deeper truths about the nature of the soul and the spiritual realm.

The primary objective of this research is to investigate Al-Ghazali's unique contribution to the intellectual evolution of Islamic epistemology, particularly regarding the mechanisms of dreams and their relationship to the soul. Al-Ghazali's integration of Sufi spirituality with classical philosophy provides a new framework for understanding dreams as a legitimate source of

knowledge. This research explores how Al-Ghazali synthesizes earlier rationalist traditions, such as those of al-Kindi and al-Farabi, with his own spiritual and mystical insights [4]. By doing so, Al-Ghazali expanded the epistemological scope of classical Islamic philosophy and positioned dreams as a valuable category within this broader context.

The innovative aspect of this study lies in framing Al-Ghazali's conception of dreams as a central epistemic phenomenon within his broader philosophical and spiritual framework. This research aims to illuminate how the mechanisms of dreams, as related to the soul, provide a foundation for a deeper understanding of knowledge in Islamic tradition. Furthermore, this study contributes to contemporary scholarship by offering insights into the interdisciplinary connections between philosophy, psychology, theology, and spirituality, as they relate to the phenomenon of dreams. The study not only serves to enrich historical knowledge but also advances theoretical discussions on the relationship between reason, revelation, and personal spiritual experience within the epistemological structure of Islamic thought.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews key literature on Al-Ghazali's views on the soul, dreams, and epistemological foundations in Islamic philosophy:

### 2.1 *Al-Ghazālī on the Nature of the Soul: Material or Immaterial?*

This article examines the apparent contradictions in Al-Ghazali's views on the nature of the soul, particularly its status as either material or immaterial. It highlights the dualistic elements within Al-Ghazali's works, with some texts suggesting that the soul is material, while others defend its immateriality. In contrast, the current study focuses on Al-Ghazali's epistemological understanding of dreams, emphasizing the role of the soul in experiencing dreams as a form of knowledge. While both discussions engage with the nature of the soul, this article's focus on the material versus immaterial debate differs from the current research, which links the soul's nature directly to its involvement in dream experiences and their epistemological significance [5].

### 2.2 *Pemikiran Kefalsafahan Al-Ghazali Berkaitan Mimpi (Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Thinking on Dreams)*

This article explores Al-Ghazali's treatment of dreams as a legitimate source of knowledge, positioning dreams within his epistemological framework. It aligns with the present study by recognizing dreams as forms of knowledge that transcend rationality. However, the focus of this article is primarily on the philosophical arguments surrounding the epistemological status of dreams. In contrast, the current research emphasizes the deeper connection between the soul's dual nature and its engagement with dreams, examining how Al-Ghazali's broader philosophical and Sufi influences inform his approach to the epistemological role of dreams [6].

### 2.3 *The Notion of the Soul in al-Kindi: Building the Epistemological Foundation of Early Islamic Psychology*

Although This article doesn't highlights Al-Ghazali's view, Al-Kindi's rational exploration of the soul and its role in knowledge acquisition is important. Al-Kindi's thought laying the groundwork for early Islamic psychology. While it provides valuable historical context, it diverges from the present research, which focuses on Al-

Ghazali's synthesis of rational and mystical elements, particularly in his treatment of dreams as epistemic phenomena. The current study builds upon Al-Kindi's epistemological framework but extends it by integrating Sufi influences, which Al-Kindi's purely rational framework does not address. Thus, the present research focuses on Al-Ghazali's unique epistemological approach to dreams and their connection to the soul [7].

#### **2.4 *Ru'yā and Dream Interpretation: A Comparative Analysis of Islamic Tradition and Western Psychological Perspectives***

This article compares Islamic and Western perspectives on dreams, emphasizing their metaphysical and cognitive dimensions. It aligns with the present research by situating Al-Ghazali's conception of dreams within the Islamic tradition, where dreams are seen as potential channels for divine communication. However, while this study provides a broader comparative view, the current research narrows its focus to Al-Ghazali's specific epistemological framework, linking dreams with the soul's nature and exploring their significance within his philosophical and Sufi-influenced thought. The present study thus contributes to a more detailed understanding of how Al-Ghazali integrates dreams into the broader structure of Islamic epistemology [8].

The previous section highlighted key perspectives on Al-Ghazali's philosophical and epistemological approach to dreams, alongside contrasting views from other Islamic and Western thinkers. These discussions lay the foundation for understanding the multifaceted role of dreams within Al-Ghazali's thought, particularly in relation to the soul's nature and its epistemological functions. Building on this literature, the following section outlines the methodology employed in this study to investigate how Al-Ghazali's conceptualization of dreams intersects with his broader philosophical framework. By focusing on the epistemic role of dreams and the dual nature of the soul, the research aims to offer a deeper, more integrated analysis of Al-Ghazali's unique contributions to Islamic epistemology.

### **3. METHODS**

This research employs a qualitative approach with a comparative analysis method. The primary aim is to explore Al-Ghazali's conception of dreams within the broader context of Islamic epistemology, focusing on the interplay between rationalism, religious experience, and spiritual intuition. The research examines Al-Ghazali's ideas on dreams in relation to his views on the soul and epistemological foundations. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of Al-Ghazali's unique contribution to the intellectual shift in Islamic thought regarding non-rational sources of knowledge.

The research is classified as basic research, aiming to address theoretical questions regarding the transformation of philosophical views on dreams in Islamic thought. The object of the study consists of Al-Ghazali's writings, as well as relevant secondary sources that discuss his epistemological and ontological frameworks. Data collection is carried out using documentation techniques, including the review of books, academic articles, and other scholarly sources related to Al-Ghazali's philosophy and dream theory.

Data analysis involves a comprehensive review of these texts, focusing on the specific passages that address dreams and their epistemic significance. The findings are then synthesized to identify key themes in Al-Ghazali's conception of dreams. The analysis concludes by providing

insights into how Al-Ghazali's views on dreams represent a turning point in the development of Islamic philosophical thought, particularly in relation to the role of the soul and non-rational sources of knowledge.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Soul According to Al-Ghazali

According to Al-Ghazali, the soul does not refer to a single entity, but rather to the essence of human existence composed of interconnected substances: the *nafs* (soul), *'aql* (intellect), *qalb* (heart), and *ruh* (spirit). These elements are inseparable and collectively shape human behavior, spiritual experiences, and the capacity for perceiving metaphysical realities such as dreams. He describes the soul as a fundamental substance (*jawhar*), not merely an accident (*'ard*), highlighting its central role in guiding human life. Al-Ghazali explains that humans possess both a physical, material aspect and a spiritual, intellectual aspect, with the soul governing the body without being confined to any specific physical part. In the context of dreams and spiritual experiences, the intellect and heart are key components that shape the quality of the soul and influence one's behavior and inner experiences [9]. Therefore, understanding dreams from an Islamic perspective cannot be separated from understanding the dynamics of the soul as conceptualized by Al-Ghazali, where the balance and harmony among the soul, intellect, heart, and spirit are essential for achieving true happiness and spiritual fulfillment [10].

The concept of *nafs* in Arabic refers to the soul, often associated with life, spirit, or character. In various religious and philosophical traditions, the soul is understood as a non-physical, immaterial substance. However, contemporary interpretations sometimes extend the meaning of the soul to include physical aspects. Linguistically, *nafs* carries multiple meanings, including the essence of a person, spirit (*ruh*), intellect (*'aql*), its relation to the body, the flow of blood, the act of breathing (*tanaffus*), and something subtle and intangible [11]. According to Al-Ghazali, the soul represents the essential, immutable identity of a human being — the knowing subject that exists independently of space and remains constant. For Al-Ghazali, the true essence of a human is not the physical body nor its functions, but the immaterial substance within. The body and its faculties, both internal and external, are mere attributes. Upon the death of the body, all bodily functions perish, but the soul itself remains intact and undestroyed. This understanding highlights the soul's central role in shaping human consciousness and spiritual experiences, including phenomena such as dreams [12].

Al-Ghazali said, *al-nafs* is divided into three primary components: the rational soul, the animal soul, and the bodily soul. This classification aims to explain how the soul governs human behavior and its potential for moral elevation or corruption depending on how these parts are managed. The rational soul (*al-nafs al-nātiqah*) is regarded as the highest faculty, responsible for controlling the other two, while the animal and bodily souls are tied to desires and instincts that may lead to moral degradation if left unchecked [12]. Furthermore, Al-Ghazali emphasizes the process of *tazkiyah al-nafs* (purification of the soul) as essential for cultivating noble traits such as patience and surrendering fully to God, attaining a tranquil soul that is receptive to divine guidance, whether through glad tidings or warnings [13]. In this framework, soul purification transcends mere self-control over worldly matters and enters a deeper spiritual realm where the ultimate goal is an intimate relationship with God [14]. Consequently, Al-Ghazali stresses the necessity of self-awareness in all aspects of life to avoid spiritual decay and to achieve true happiness, both in this world and the Hereafter. Educational efforts, accordingly, should nurture the faculties of reason (*al-'aql*), heart (*al-qalb*), and soul (*al-nafs*) in a holistic manner, free from material entanglements (Pohan, 2020). In the modern context, Al-Ghazali's view suggests a balanced model integrating rationality, emotion, and spirituality as a foundation for a meaningful and complete life [15].

### 4.2 The Role Of The Soul In Dreams' Mechanism According To Ghazali.

Al-Ghazali's model offers a unique perspective on how dreams are not merely the result of psychological or physiological processes, but part of a metaphysical mechanism linked to the soul's readiness to receive divine knowledge. His theory on dreams marks a significant turning point in Islamic philosophy, bridging earlier rationalist views with the more spiritual and intuitive framework that would later emerge in the *Hikmah al-Isyraq* (Illuminative Philosophy) and Sufi traditions. This examination aims to explore how Al-Ghazali's thoughts on dreams, particularly in terms of the soul's role, contributed to the philosophical discourse on the acquisition of knowledge and the human capacity to perceive higher realities [16].

To understand Al-Ghazali's perspective, key questions emerge: What is the nature of his approach to dreams? Does his interpretation reflect a novel development compared to earlier thinkers? What role does the soul play in his conception of dreams, and how does this influence our understanding of epistemology? Al-Ghazali's theory suggests that dreams are not random or solely psychological events, but rather deeply connected to the soul's metaphysical qualities and its capacity to access divine knowledge. This inquiry will begin by analyzing how Al-Ghazali conceptualizes dreams and how his views contribute to broader epistemological discussions in Islamic philosophy [9].

Al-Ghazali views dreams as a direct result of the soul's metaphysical interaction with divine truths, a process he attributes to the state of the heart. Unlike previous thinkers who sought explanations rooted in psychological or rational faculties, Al-Ghazali places emphasis on the soul's spiritual readiness to perceive divine realities. He asserts that the human heart has the potential to grasp profound truths, but this capacity is often obstructed by the material attachments of the individual [17]. Thus, dreams are not merely physiological phenomena but spiritual occurrences that allow the soul to receive glimpses of transcendent knowledge. This highlights the soul's central role in mediating access to divine wisdom, with the heart serving as the instrument through which the soul engages with the unseen.

According to Al-Ghazali, the heart is obscured by worldly distractions that prevent it from perceiving higher truths [18]. These distractions serve as veils (*hijab*) that prevent the heart from reflecting the divine light of knowledge, which is recorded in the *Lauh Mahfuz* — the Preserved Tablet. According to the majority of religious scholars, the Preserved Tablet is a corporeal entity located above the seventh heaven, upon which is written everything that was and will be until the Day of Resurrection. According to the philosophers, however, it is the Active Intellect, imprinted with the forms of existing things as they truly are, from which knowledge is imprinted into the minds of humans [19]. When the soul undergoes purification, these veils begin to lift, and the heart becomes more receptive to divine emanations. In this state, the soul gains access to the divine knowledge recorded in the *Lauh Mahfuz*, which is the eternal repository of all decrees from God. Dreams, therefore, serve as an expression of this unveiling, where the soul, having purified itself, can access knowledge from the divine realm either directly or indirectly [20].

Indeed, this unveiling of the veil (*kasyf al-hijab*) is not limited to the state of sleep; as al-Ghazali also suggests, it may occur even while awake [21]. When the soul is purified and the heart illuminated with *taqwa*, divine realities can be perceived both in dreams and in states of full consciousness. In such moments, the heart becomes a mirror reflecting the truths of the unseen, and the individual may witness divine knowledge (*ma'arif rabbaniyya*) without mediation, through direct inspiration or spiritual vision.[22]. According to Al-Ghazali, when the soul undergoes purification, these veils begin to lift, and the heart becomes more receptive to divine emanations. In this state, the soul gains access to the divine knowledge recorded in the *Lauh Mahfuz*, which is the eternal repository of all decrees from God. Dreams, therefore, serve as an expression of this unveiling, where the soul, having purified itself, can access knowledge from the divine realm either directly or indirectly. Indeed, if the inner self of a human being is filled with *taqwa*, then the veil between the servant and his Lord will be lifted, the lights of *ma'rifah* will be unveiled, fountains of wisdom will gush forth from the heart, and the dominion of the *Malakut* will become clear. Knowledge will then

be easily granted without reliance on the newly introduced sciences ('ulum muhdathah) that were unknown during the era of the Sahabah and Tabi'in.[23]

Al-Ghazali distinguishes between two states in which the soul may receive divine knowledge: sleep and wakefulness. During sleep, the soul is freed from the distractions of the physical world and becomes more receptive to divine emanations. This is why dreams can reveal knowledge of future events or glimpses of divine destiny. In wakefulness, the soul can also experience moments of divine revelation, provided it has achieved a high level of spiritual purification. Both states, whether asleep or awake, allow the heart to receive knowledge from the *Lauh Mahfuz*, which Al-Ghazali likens to the reflection of an object in a mirror. This metaphor illustrates how knowledge from the divine realm is reflected into the human heart [24].

Al-Ghazali grounds his metaphysical theory of dreams in the Qur'an, specifically in Surah al-Shura (42:51), which speaks of how God communicates with human beings through revelation, veils, or messengers. This verse supports Al-Ghazali's view that divine knowledge can enter the human heart indirectly, through veils or barriers that obscure the direct connection to God. Dreams, in this context, are seen as a form of divine communication that occurs when the soul is purified and able to receive knowledge from the unseen realm. Al-Ghazali interprets this as a form of indirect revelation, wherein the human heart, through its spiritual readiness, can access the divine knowledge stored in the *Lauh Mahfuz*[25].

Al-Ghazali's conception of dreams departs significantly from earlier interpretations, particularly those of classical exegetes and philosophers. While many had viewed dreams in literal, psychological, or rational terms, Al-Ghazali introduces a metaphysical perspective that emphasizes the role of the soul's purification in accessing divine knowledge. His approach integrates concepts of spiritual preparedness and the inner faculties of the soul, particularly the heart, which must be free from worldly distractions to perceive the divine truths that manifest in dreams[26]. This marks a shift from purely rational or material explanations to a more holistic, metaphysical understanding of the soul's capacity to engage with higher realities [27].

Al-Ghazali's conception of dreams emphasizes the connection between the soul's purification and its ability to receive divine knowledge. Through the metaphysical process of unveiling, the heart, as the central organ of the soul, reflects divine truths recorded in the *Lauh Mahfuz*. Dreams, in this framework, are not merely unconscious experiences but significant spiritual phenomena that reflect the state of the soul and its capacity to engage with higher realities. Al-Ghazali's model of dream interpretation provides a foundation for the later development of Isyraqi thought, especially in the works of Suhrawardi [28], who further developed the idea of spiritual illumination. Al-Ghazali's thought thus marks a critical turning point in the evolution of Islamic epistemology, bridging the rationalist philosophical tradition with mystical and intuitive approaches to knowledge [29].

According to Al-Ghazâlî, divine revelation is a direct transmission of divine knowledge from God to the prophets, originating from a source beyond human reason. This knowledge is implanted in the hearts of prophets and cannot be fully comprehended through reason alone; instead, it is accessed through the purification of the heart and the attainment of spiritual depth. Thus, Al-Ghazâlî regards divine revelation as a source of knowledge that transcends reason and finds meaning through one's spiritual experiences. Al-Ghazâlî emphasizes the importance of the soul (heart) in receiving revelation, stating that when the soul is purified from worldly desires and turns wholly towards God, it becomes receptive to divine knowledge[30]. This process is described as the soul becoming a tablet upon which God engraves all knowledge, allowing the individual to acquire knowledge effortlessly, without the need for learning or thought [31].

He also explains that the process of receiving divine revelation through the purification of the soul and heart can also occur in dreams. He describes that when the soul is purified and turns wholly towards God, it becomes receptive to divine knowledge, and this knowledge can be imprinted upon the soul even during sleep or in a dream state. In this way, the soul acquires

knowledge effortlessly, without the need for conscious learning or thought, as divine truths are revealed through dreams as well as through waking mystical experiences [16]. In summary, for Al-Ghazâlî, the process of revelation is not merely an intellectual event but a mystical and spiritual experience. The soul's purification and openness to God are essential for receiving divine knowledge, highlighting the central role of the heart and spiritual depth in understanding revelation.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Al-Ghazali's understanding of the soul emphasizes its central role in shaping human existence, behavior, and spiritual experiences, including dreams. He views the soul as a complex, interconnected essence composed of the *nafs* (soul), *'aql* (intellect), *qalb* (heart), and *ruh* (spirit), all of which contribute to a person's ability to perceive metaphysical realities. In the context of dreams, Al-Ghazali stresses that they are not mere psychological or physiological occurrences, but rather profound spiritual events influenced by the soul's readiness to receive divine knowledge. Through the purification of the soul, especially the heart, individuals become receptive to divine guidance, which can manifest in dreams as glimpses of transcendent truths. Al-Ghazali's metaphysical theory of dreams bridges earlier rationalist perspectives with more intuitive, spiritual understandings of knowledge and revelation. His emphasis on the purification of the soul, both in waking and sleeping states, underlines the importance of spiritual preparedness in accessing higher truths, marking a significant shift in Islamic epistemology and contributing to the later development of mystical thought.

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