The Views of al-Fārābī and al-Ghazālī on Achieving Happiness through the Rational Faculty of the Human Soul: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Throughout history, Muslim thinkers from various schools of thought have tried to unleash the metaphysical insights of humanity while discovering its link to the material world. The Muslim philosopher Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī's (d. 339/950) psychology is deeply rooted in the theory of the faculties of the soul, especially the rational faculty, which according to him, is the source of ultimate happiness (saʻādah) in this life and the hereafter. A similar view is shared by the Muslim thinker Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), but the distinguishing factor in his understanding is that he classifies knowledge into two categories, mainly religious and intellectual, and places this rational power of the soul in the religious category, which according to him, ultimately becomes the source of eternal bliss. This article elaborates on this intellectual faculty of the human soul and its correlation with happiness (saʻādah) through the lenses of these two renowned thinkers.

Keywords

rational faculty, human soul, happiness, sa'ādah, al-Fārābī, al-Ghazālī.

Introduction

Human objectives may differ, but generally speaking, all human beings ultimately have one aim: to tread a path that leads to ultimate bliss and satisfaction. This is the reason why the question of locating happiness not only occupied the minds of early Greek philosophers like Plato (d. 347 BCE) and Aristotle (d. 322 BCE), but also some of the great Muslim thinkers like Abū Yūsuf Yaʻqūb b. Isḥāq al-Kindī (d. 256/873), Abū Naṣr Muḥammad al-Fārābī (d. 339/950), Abū 'Alī al-Ḥusayn b. 'Abd Allāh b. Sīnā (d. 427/1037), and Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111).

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Al-Fārābī, the founder of the peripatetic school of Islamic philosophy, had a strong influence on later philosophers like Ibn Sīnā and thinkers like al-Ghazālī. Fakhry argues that despite his considerable contribution to the field of philosophy, al-Fārābī has not been recognized enough in the West. Nevertheless, Arab biographers have always been full of immense praise for his contributions and achievements. Al-Fārābī is also known in history as the "Second Teacher" for preserving and following the methodology of Aristotle, the "First Teacher."

Deeply influenced by Greek philosophy, al-Fārābī places great significance on the rational faculty of the human soul. According to him, human rational faculty can be both theoretical and practical, but experiencing happiness (sa'ādah) is confined to the theoretical rational faculty of the soul. The other faculties cannot understand happiness.³ On the other hand, al-Ghazālī, one of the most famous theologians and jurists of his time with pre-dominant Sufi inclinations, has his unique way of reaching the ultimate success in this world and the hereafter, that is, through disciplining the human soul. Al-Ghazālī has written extensively on the topic of happiness. In his famous work Alchemy of Happiness, he associates true happiness with the intellect, which acts as an agent of the galb (heart), a stage reached when the soul transforms from worldliness to complete devotion to God. Although al-Ghazālī was equally wellversed in both philosophical and theological sciences, he was strongly inclined towards Sufism in his later years. He, therefore, denies the philosophical approach of al-Fārābī and other philosophers to arrive at the metaphysical truths of the human soul. However, in his work al-Risālat al-Laduniyyah, al-Ghazālī held that the rational soul has the same nature as that of the *galb* that the Sufis talk about. He explains,

Now the rational soul, by which I mean this substance, has a special name with every group of people: the philosophers call this substance "the rational soul," and the Qur'ān calls it "the soul at rest" and the "spirit which

¹ Majid Fakhry, *Al-Fārābī*, *Founder of Islamic Neoplatonism: His life Works and Influence* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2002), 6.

² For further details, see Therese-Anne Druart, "al-Farabi" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, ed. Winter 2021, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/alfarabi/.

³ Einollah Khademi, "A Study of the Views of al-Farābī and Ibn Sīnā on the Definition of Happiness and Its Relation to the Faculties of the Soul," *Religious Inquiries* 4, no. 7 (2015): 65-76.

 $^{^4}$ The spiritual heart will be referred to as qalb throughout the article to differentiate it from the physical heart.

⁵ Muḥammad al-Ghazzâlî, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, trans. Claud Field, rev. Elton I. Daniel (New York: M. E. Sharpe Inc., 1991), 8.

is of the *amr* of God" and the Sufis call it the "spirit" and sometimes the "heart," but though the names differ the meaning is one, it does not differ.⁶

Therefore, his earlier views about the approach adopted by the philosophers in understanding the human soul need further examination. This article aims to critically analyse the methodology adopted by al-Fārābī and al-Ghazālī in approaching the rational soul and its link to eternal bliss.

There are three main reasons for choosing these outstanding Muslim thinkers for this research. First, whereas al-Fārābī was the founder of the peripatetic school of Islamic philosophy, al-Ghazālī was an eminent theologian and jurist with Sufi inclinations. This makes an interesting ground for analysis. Second, al-Fārābī's status as the "Second Master" after Aristotle, the First Master, fully justifies that his views about the human soul be researched further. Third, al-Ghazālī's vehement criticism of the philosophers, yet his acceptance of their views about the rational soul is somewhat contradictory and requires further study.

This article investigates whether al-Fārābī's and al-Ghazālī's approaches to achieving happiness are similar or different since both extensively discussed the division between the theoretical and practical aspects of the intellect. Moreover, it assesses whether al-Ghazālī repeated the same distinction made by al-Fārābī or he introduced a new division.

Al-Fārābī's Classification of the Sciences and the Soul

Al-Fārābī believed in the unity and hierarchy of sciences. In his book *Treatise on the Excellence of the Sciences and the Arts*, he mentions three criteria to establish this hierarchy. The first is the nobility of the subject matter. The second is the profundity of the proofs. The third is the magnitude of the benefits. Significantly, he mentions the sciences of the *sharī'ah* as an example of knowledge which is deemed excellent on account of its usefulness because, in Islam, all human acts are judged and based upon the legal and ethical guidelines of the *sharī'ah*. Similarly, he divides the hierarchical process of the human soul and its faculties into five categories namely the vegetative, sensitive, appetitive, imaginative, and

⁶ Margaret Smith, trans., "Al-Risālat al-Laduniyya. By Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (450/1059-505/1111)," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* no. 2 (1938 April): 194.

⁷ Peripatetic means travelling from place to place, in particular working or based in various places for relatively short periods.

⁸ Osman Bakar, Classification of Knowledge in Islam (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1998), 46-47.

the most powerful of all, the rational soul. It is evident from the above classification that al-Fārābī is inspired by his Greek counterparts, Aristotle and Plato, although he does attempt to harmonize these philosophical ideas with Islam. Out of these five faculties, al-Fārābī further filters out the sensitive faculty, imaginative faculty, and rational faculty, as he believes that both the lower faculties (i.e., sensitive and imaginative) serve as the basis to reach the higher faculty of reason.

The Rational Soul and the Active Intellect

Through rational faculty, human beings comprehend things, acquire various forms of knowledge, and differentiate right from wrong. This rational faculty is partly practical and partly theoretical.9 The practical aspect of rationality includes a) the matter of skill through which certain skills like carpentry, horse riding, etc., are acquired and b) the reflective power which humans use to reflect and think deeply about the actions they want to perform. This practical aspect is changeable. The theoretical aspect of rationality, however, is fixed and cannot be altered. 10 Al-Fārābī states that it is this categorization of rational power through which humans acquire certain virtues, which then result in perfection and happiness. Al-Fārābī talks about a basic intellect that all human beings share, a "certain natural disposition" which he calls the potential intellect. This concept is similar to the human fitrah mentioned in the Qur'ān, upon which every human being has been created by God as mentioned in the following verse: "So direct your face toward the religion, inclining to truth. [Adhere to] the fitrah of Allah upon which He has created [all] people."11

According to al-Fārābī, true actualization occurs when this potential intellect gets transformed into a higher level of intellect called the "active intellect," which is then responsible for the acquisition of knowledge. This active intellect is an Aristotelian term that al-Fārābī describes as "an immaterial form which is not in the matter and could not subsist in the matter at all." He describes this relationship between the potential and

⁹ Muḥammad al-Fārābī, *Fusūl al-Madanī*, *Aphorisms of the Statesman*, trans. D. M. Dunlop (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 30-31.

¹⁰ He gives the example of the numbers 3 and 4 to explain this concept, "For we cannot alter three so that it becomes even while remaining three. Nor four so that it becomes odd, while still four as we can alter a piece of wood so that it becomes round after square, remaining wood in both cases." Ibid.

¹¹ Our'ān 30:30.

¹² Bakar, Classification of Knowledge in Islam, 56.

¹³ Fakhry, Al-Fārābī, 74.

the active intellect using the analogy of the sun and the eye. Just like, it is the light of the sun that enables the eye to see things beyond darkness, it is the active intellect that transforms the potential intellect into a real intellect. He names this an acquired intellect, which is the most developed form of the human intellect, due to its proximity to the active intellect. This is the stage when ultimate happiness is achieved, which of course is the afterlife. This hierarchy of intellects is illustrated in Figure 1 with the active intellect being at the top which is acquired when the potential intellect gets transformed into the acquired intellect.

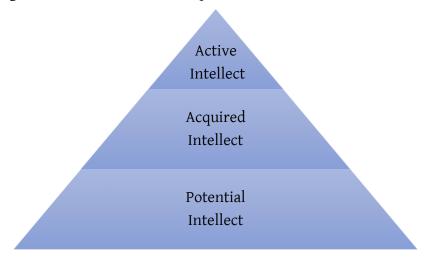


Figure 1: Hierarchy of the intellects

He also calls the perfect union between the acquired intellect and the active intellect prophetic intellect, thus admitting that divine revelation is, in fact, the highest source of knowledge. Through his definition of acquiring the active intellect, he attempts to bridge the gap between philosophy and Islam. Al-Fārābī describes that the purpose of active intellect is to attain "true and supreme happiness."

Attainment of Happiness through the Active Intellect

The human soul has played a major role in Islamic ethics because it is indeed the human soul that controls and manipulates all human actions.¹⁵

¹⁴ Jon McGinnis and David C. Reisman, *Classical Arabic Philosophy: An Anthology of Sources* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), 74-76.

¹⁵ Mukhtar Ali, "The Concept of Spiritual Perfection according to 'Alī ibn Sīnā and Sadr al-Din al-Qunāwī," *Journal of Shi*'a *Islamic Studies 2*, no. 2 (2009): 1-11.

According to al-Fārābī, the human soul is immortal in the sense that the connection of the soul in this life and the hereafter is never lost. The happiness of the afterlife is very much dependent on the happiness that the soul experiences in this material world. Thus, it is important to get rid of all the vices through a complete acquisition of virtues and a perfect state of mind. 16 This requires analysing al-Fārābī's theory of virtues. As discussed above, virtues are the real harbingers of eternal happiness. In his book, *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, al-Fārābī defines these virtues as follows: "The human things through which nations and citizens of cities attain earthly happiness in this life and supreme happiness in the life beyond are of four kinds: theoretical virtues, deliberative virtues, moral virtues, and practical arts."17 Furthermore, there is a strong connection between his classification of virtues and that of the rational faculty. It was explained earlier that al Fārābī classified the rational soul into partly theoretical and partly practical and that the practical intellect was further divided into the reflective faculty and the faculty of skill. He then matches the related virtues to the relevant faculty of the soul as explained in table 1 below.18

Faculties of the Human Soul	Related Virtues
Rational Faculty	Rational virtues
1. Theoretical intellect	1. Theoretical virtues
2. Practical intellect	2. Practical virtues
a) Reflective/deliberative faculty	a) Deliberative virtues
b) Faculty of skill	b) Practical/artistic virtues

Table 1

According to al-Fārābī, the best of all the virtues is the theoretical virtues, namely knowledge and wisdom, which are the fruits of the theoretical intellect. The ultimate perfection lies in the perfection of the theoretical intellect because when this intellect attains the level of perfection, this leads to knowledge, wisdom, and absolute good, which is the ultimate goal of all humans. He further believes that the absolute good is none other than God, meaning witnessing and seeing God in actuality,

¹⁶ Bakar, Classification of Knowledge in Islam, 107.

¹⁷ Muhsin Mahdi, trans., *Alfarabi: Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, rev. ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), pt. 1, p. 13.

¹⁸ Bakar, Classification of Knowledge in Islam, 108.

which is also mentioned in the Qur'ān.¹⁹ At this point, human beings become intellects i.e., they attain the level of the active intellect and transform from material beings into divine beings. That is why al-Fārābī identifies this active intellect as Gabriel/Holy Spirit.²⁰

Al-Ghazālī 's Classification of Sciences

To better understand al-Ghazālī's views about the faculties of the human soul and their impact on eternal happiness, it is fundamental to briefly study his classification of sciences and their hierarchy. Al-Ghazālī divides his classification into the following four main categories: 1) theoretical and practical sciences; 2) presential and attained knowledge; 3) religious and intellectual sciences; and 4) fard 'ayn and fard kifāyah sciences. Among these four categories, the most significant is his division between the religious and the intellectual sciences.²¹ The key difference here is that unlike al-Fārābī who inclines more towards Aristotelian and Platonic approaches in explaining the hierarchy of sciences, al-Ghazālī places all these ethical sciences under the science of religion. He also argues that religious and intellectual sciences never contradict each other, rather they complement each other. The difference lies in their source. The source of religious knowledge is revelation whereas that of the reason is human intellect. He divides religious sciences into the science of fundamental principles (al-uṣūl), which includes the science of divine unity and other sources of religious knowledge like the Qur'an and the sunnah etc., and the science of branches (furū') i.e., the derived principles. According to him, these fundamental principles are theoretical whereas the science of branches is practical. The science of the human being's obligation to the soul is put in this latter category. The intellectual sciences mainly contain various worldly sciences like mathematics, geometry, astronomy, medicine, metaphysics, etc. It is pertinent to mention here that al-Ghazālī's main aim in defining these two categories is to explore the existence of any dichotomy between these two sciences. The religious sciences are further classified into fard 'ayn and fard kifāyah, the former being the knowledge that is obligatory for every Muslim. This is further divided into exoteric²² (the science of devotional practice/'ilm

¹⁹ Qur'ān 13:22; 75:22-23.

²⁰ Fakhry, Al-Fārābī, 93.

²¹ Bakar, Classification of Knowledge in Islam, 203.

²² Intended for or likely to be understood by the general public.

al-mu'āmalah) and esoteric²³ (the science of unveiling/'ilm al-mukāshafah). This latter science, due to its esoteric nature is only for those who are already on the spiritual path. However, the exoteric science of devotional practice is the one that embodies all the doctrines of Islam, and perfection in this knowledge will eventually lead man to eternal bliss in the hereafter. Thus, it is $far\dot{q}$ 'ayn. In the intellectual sciences, he only considers the metaphysical sciences $far\dot{q}$ 'ayn and makes them a part of religious sciences.

This confirms the notion that he makes no clear-cut distinction between the religious and the intellectual sciences.²⁴ Suffice it to say that al-Ghazālī is strongly influenced by the works of earlier philosophers like al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā despite his scathing criticism of their methodology.²⁵ However, McGinnis and Reisman argue that this is not always the case, as there is a love/hate relationship that exists between al-Ghazālī and the philosophers. According to them, he simply incorporated their ideas into his own Islamic and philosophical theology. 26 Al-Ghazālī has absorbed the Platonic model of four cardinal virtues (wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice), their relationship with the three faculties of the soul (rational, irascible, and concupiscent), and the doctrine of mean in his theology. In this case, the concupiscent soul which depicts the value of temperance has been given a new meaning by him. This distinguishes his methodology from that of the philosophers and brings to the limelight his Sufi inclinations. According to him, temperance is a virtue not just associated with the concupiscent soul, but it applies to all the faculties of the soul and all the organs of the human body. He wants to discipline the soul by extending the domain of temperance from mere restraint of desires to complete abstinence from all those things that do not bring ultimate happiness.²⁷ He substantiates this claim through the following verse of the Qur'an, which according to him, implies Plato's four cardinal virtues: "The believers are only the ones who have believed in Allah and His Messenger and then doubt not but

 $^{^{23}}$ Intended for or likely to be understood by only a small number of people with specialized knowledge or interest.

²⁴ Bakar, Classification of Knowledge in Islam, 207-13.

²⁵ For al-Ghazālī's strong criticism of al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā for incorporating Greek philosophy into Islam, see Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Sabih Ahmad Kamali (Lahore: Pakistan Philosophical Congress Publication, 1963).

²⁶ McGinnis and Reisman, Classical Arabic Philosophy, 238.

²⁷ Mohamed Ahmed Sherif, *Ghazali's Theory of Virtue* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1975), 64-65.

strive with their properties and their lives in the cause of Allah. It is those who are truthful."²⁸

According to al-Ghazālī's interpretation, having faith in God with no doubts is the fruit of the rational power, which is intellect. Striving with one's wealth encourages temperance, thus controlling the concupiscent power, and striving with one's self is a trait of the irascible faculty of the soul, i.e., courage.

Achieving Happiness (Sa'ādah)

In his book *Alchemy of Happiness*, al-Ghazālī describes four ways in which real happiness (sa'ādah) may be achieved: 1) the knowledge of self; 2) the knowledge of God; 3) The knowledge of this world; and 4) the knowledge of the next world.²⁹ This classical definition of happiness is in stark contrast to our modern interpretation of the term. He further elaborates that the love of God is the highest level of all these categories.³⁰ Philosophers actualize the soul through the use of the intellect only. However, al-Ghazālī reaches this level through the purification of the *galb*, the reward of which is the attainment of ultimate happiness,³¹ reiterating the message given in the following Qur'anic verses: "He has succeeded who purifies it (soul), and he has failed who instils it (soul) [with corruption]."32 He explains the human soul through the following four aspects that it encompasses: nafs (self), galb (heart), 'agl (intellect), and rūh (spirit). It is worth mentioning that the galb that al-Ghazālī refers to is not the physical heart, but rather the spiritual heart, a medium through which human beings attain all the knowledge of God. The Qur'an refers to the same galb in the following verse: "Verily in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find satisfaction."33 He argues that only after purifying and disciplining the soul, human beings attain their ultimate goal, which is happiness via the knowledge of God. However, the galb cannot achieve this level of happiness without the support of the other elements of the

²⁸ Qur'ān 49:15.

²⁹ Al-Ghazzâlî, Alchemy of Happiness, 4.

³⁰ Ibid., 78

³¹ Timothy J. Winter, *Al-Ghazālī on Disciplining the Soul* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1995), 5.

³² Qur'ān 91:9-10.

³³ Ibid., 13:28.

soul, especially intellect. He explains this relationship in the following parable:

For the carrying on of this spiritual warfare by which the knowledge of oneself and of God is to be obtained, the body may be figured as a kingdom, the soul as its king, and the different senses and faculties as constituting an army. Reason may be called the vizier, or prime minister, passion the revenue-collector, and anger the police-officer. Under the guise of collecting revenue, passion is continually prone to plunder on its own account, while resentment is always inclined to harshness and extreme severity. Both of these, the revenue-collector and the police-officer, have to be kept in due subordination to the king, but not killed or excelled, as they have their own proper functions to fulfill. But if passion and resentment master reason, the ruin of the soul infallibly ensues.³⁴

Figure 2 best describes the *qalb*'s governing nature over the entire body.

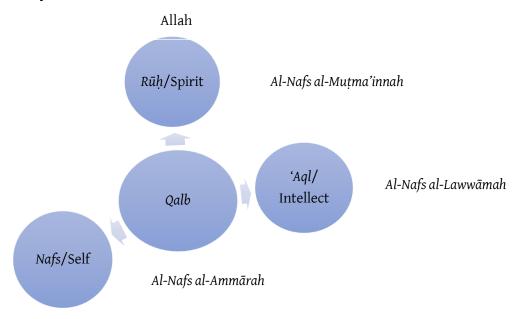


Figure 2: Relation between the qalb and body

Attainment of Eternal Bliss through the Qalb and the Intellect

We see in the above figure that the *qalb* controls all the aspects of the soul including the intellect and self. As the *qalb* is purified and cleansed of all vices, the human soul goes up the ladder from *nafs ammārah*³⁵ to *nafs*

³⁴ Al-Ghazzâlî, Alchemy of Happiness, 7-8.

³⁵ Qur'ān 12:53.

lawwāmah,³⁶ ultimately reaching nafs muṭma'innah,³⁷ his final abode. Therefore, it is the qalb that controls all these spiritual activities of the soul. The intellect, self, and spirit are all subservient to the qalb's commands and act like its soldiers. However, al-Ghazālī's firm belief in the effectiveness of the four cardinal virtues and their explanation through the above Qur'ānic verse proves that he considers rational enquiry as one of the important means to know God and reach the level of eternal bliss.³⁸ Zargar argues that the light of the qalb and sincere dedication to God become a source for finding felicity in the hereafter. Al-Ghazālī calls this the "science of hearts" or the "science of the path to the hereafter," the kind of religious knowledge that the Prophet (peace be on him), his Companions, and all the righteous predecessors taught and practised. He calls this practical knowledge and the cultivation of righteous character traits "virtue ethics."³⁹

Conclusion

It is evident from the above discussion that al-Ghazālī places intellect on a very high pedestal. In his book $I\hbar y\bar{a}$ ' $Ul\bar{u}m$ al- $D\bar{u}n$, al-Ghazālī describes intellect as something noble in nature, because, according to him, it is the fountainhead of knowledge through which man attains happiness ($sa'\bar{a}dah$) in this world and the next. The first thing that God created was intellect, so it is only through the intellect that all the divine truths are revealed. Therefore, one understands the revealed knowledge (which includes revelation and $ilh\bar{a}m/inspiration$) through the intellect, and the acquired knowledge that one attains is also derived from the intellect. Al-Fārābī, on the other hand, describes the intellect as both theoretical and practical and associates attaining happiness with the theoretical rational faculty of the soul exclusively. He refers to the concept of actualizing the potential of the soul through the power of the active intellect. Furthermore, knowledge and wisdom are the virtues that he identifies with the elimination of all vices and the attainment of eternal bliss.

Al-Ghazālī refers to this same intellect as purifying or disciplining the *qalb* or the soul. He accepts the bond that exists between the spiritual

³⁶ Ibid., 75:2.

³⁷ Ibid., 89:27.

³⁸ Georges Tamer, Islam, and Rationality: The Impact of al-Ghazālī (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 1:41.

³⁹ Cyrus Ali Zargar, *The Polished Mirror* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2017), 6.

⁴⁰ Nabih Amin Faris, trans., *The Book of Knowledge* (New Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 1962), 213.

heart and the intellect without using any excessive Greek-inspired jargon that al-Fārābī used. He also acknowledges that religious and intellectual knowledge complement each other and considers metaphysical sciences part of religious sciences. However, unlike al-Fārābī who connects the theoretical virtue of knowledge with eternal felicity, al-Ghazālī's definition of virtue is the knowledge that is put into action which ultimately becomes the means to happiness. al-Ghazālī's method of approaching the subject matter may be different from that of al-Fārābī. However, there seems to be no apparent contradiction between their views and overall objectives. Nonetheless, al-Ghazālī does believe that the philosophers' approach lacks the competence to unravel the metaphysical truths. Bakr explores al-Ghazālī's critique of Muslim philosophers as follows:

His general characterisation of Muslim philosophers whether they are followers of Aristotle or other Greeks is that they rely on reason to know all things and that consequently, *falsafah* ought to be identified with rational truths or human wisdom rather than with revealed *hikmah*.⁴¹

Bakr further argues that there seems to be an apparent contradiction in al-Ghazālī's stance on the philosophers' position. On one hand, he tries to give them the credit by subtly acknowledging that the rational soul is none other than the *qalb* as mentioned by the Sufis, yet he still avoids assigning them this supra-rational experience. Bakr, therefore, alludes to the fact that al-Ghazālī's stance on this issue may be an attempt to reserve this spiritual knowledge as intellectual property of the Sufis only. Al-Ghazālī's philosophy considers the *qalb* as the epicentre with the intellect acting in servitude to it. Moreover, he believes in the purification of the *qalb* and the use of intellect through practical deeds. The main objective of al-Fārābī on the other hand is the attainment of certain theoretical virtues in the form of true wisdom and knowledge of God, which he calls the active intellect. He tries to reach this elevated path by walking on various levels of intellect and once that level is attained, human beings attain complete and eternal felicity ($sa'\bar{a}dah$).

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⁴¹ Bakar, Classification of Knowledge in Islam, 186.

⁴² Ibid., 187.