

Unveiling the Ghazalian Doctrine of Soul: A Contextual Analysis

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Abstract:

The current study is an attempt to comprehend and gain an insight into the nature of Ghazalian doctrine of soul. With his gigantic intellectual stature and an all-encompassing knowledge, Ghazali has exerted his influence on the Islamic thought for nearly nine centuries. Since soul is at the core of Ghazali's philosophical outlook, so his study of soul comprises the study of its origin, its true nature, its return after body's death, the purpose behind its creation, its union with body, its supremacy and causes of its pleasure and pain. Fundamentally, the present work focuses on the Ghazalian theory of soul and its philosophical considerations. This exhilarating odyssey inside human soul will open new panoramas of meaning and contribute to the growing area of research on Islamic thought.

Key words: Soul, Nafs, Reason, Mind, Unveiling

Introduction

Since the dawn of civilization, the existence or non-existence of soul has been the subject of much debate. As human being is an intricate machine so the most challenging and sensitive task is to triumph over its various features, more importantly the soul. Although soul has been studied from various speculations and theories, from the most ancient to the most modern times, however, each era provided its own concept and gave its own interpretation. In the last quarter of 11th century, the world witnessed

Imam Ghazali (1058-1111) who investigated the causes of human misery and happiness by focusing on the concept of the soul. He was undeniably one of the greatest philosophers in the history of Islamic thought who dealt with the issues of human soul, distinction of its faculties, and related virtues in his two major works of ethics, namely *Mizan-ul-A'mal* and *Ihya' Ulum-I Al-Dil*. He has been acclaimed by his contemporaries during his time as *Al-Imam* and *Hujjatul Islam*¹ and the most prominent Muslim philosopher, theologian and sufi mystic². He wrote quite extensively on personality development and produced extensive literature (nearly 400 books), such as *Ihya' ulumad-din* (The Revival of Religious Sciences) *Mukashafat al-Qulub* (Unveiling of Hearts), *Kimya as Saada* (The Alchemy of Happiness) and *al- Munqidh min ad-Dalal* (Rescuer from Error) etc³. Among them seventy books present his pioneering thoughts regarding human personality, self and soul which are quite popular in Muslim and non-Muslim circles. The present study attempts to explore the philosophical outlook of Ghazalian theory of soul with the central focus on the intellectual roots that paved the way for the formulation of his ideas. In his most distinguished book *The Revival of Religious Sciences*, he proposed a general framework for the structure of human personality⁴. Many western orientalist and Muslim writers still produce new books on Ghazali, which indicates the conclusive evidence of his high status in the world. In a similar vein, the most orthodox still calls Al Ghazali “by the highest academic title known as the *Authority of Islam*⁵.

It is noteworthy that the concept of soul in Ghazalian discourse focused on making its in-depth analysis, with its functions, its absolute purpose, and the factors that bring about its distress and delight. His definition of soul by four terms: *Qalb*, *Ruh*, *Nafs*, and *Aql*, translated in English as “heart, spirit, psyche and intellect” respectively, indicates a divine existence⁶ and they all possess a constant longing for an ideal with the potential to achieve it. Ghazali further explored the functions of various terms referring to *Al-Latifah al-Ruhaniyah*. An examination of the association between their particular states or *ahwal* reveals that when soul gets engaged in the process of reasoning, it is called ‘intellect’; when it directs the body, it is called ‘soul’; when it is involved in receiving intuitive illumination it is called ‘heart’; and when it returns to its

own world of intangible entities it is called 'spirit'. Thus, soul is always engaged in exhibiting itself in all its states⁷.

The Philosophical Considerations of Soul

The concept of soul has been approached from various perspectives in the field of religion, psychology, literature, neuroscience, sociology etc⁸. The diversity of opinions held by many Greek philosophers such as Anaximenes, Heraclitus and Anaxagoras reveals the extent to which this issue caused upheaval in intellectual circles of all times⁹. The definition of soul, offered by the ancient Egyptians was rather complicated as they defined it as the essence of being. They considered this essence more as a kind of spiritual development or several states of awareness meant for royalty and the "sacredly elite"¹⁰.

As mentioned earlier, in ancient Greece, philosophers drew a sharp distinction between body and soul. Pythagoreans (570-490) not only believed in the existence of soul but also believed in its potential to exist without body¹¹. Later Pythagoreans held the view that soul is ensnared by body which exercises a corrupting influence. The first identification of the term psyche with soul as conscious life is found in *Ionia*. Socrates provided its earliest identification with rational and emotional aspect of personality and considered it as "conscious self, its intellectual and moral personhood"¹². The early Greek philosophers considered psyche as "the personification of the human soul"¹³. Initially, there existed no opposition between soul and body. Plato's concept of soul as the prisoner in the body was borrowed from Orphic doctrine, which reached Greece from Scythia, before the era of Pythagoras, and was under the influence of the doctrine of transmigration. The word *alive* in Greece like its equivalent Latin word *animates* and its English derivative *animate* is etymologically the same as *ensouled*. Plato and Socrates gave similar identification of soul with a person who "reason, decides and acts"¹⁴. Moreover, according to these ancient philosophers, soul is entirely separated from flesh and blood, though it is the constant occupant of the corporeal being.

From the above discussion, it can be inferred safely that ancient philosophers considered man as the combination of two parts, the earthly stuff called body and divine stuff, called soul. Spinoza (1632-1677) considered body and soul ultimately the

two aspects of one reality. Thus, the Greek word that had been translated as *soul* or *mind*, became English Psyche¹⁵. This entire intellectual debate took many centuries and then the same phenomenon, later on, was endorsed by the founding father of modern philosophy, Rene Descartes (1596-1650), who announces in the very title page of his famous work, *Meditations* (1644/1897–1910) that one of the main aims of his work is to demonstrate the discrepancy between the human soul and the body. Descartes (1596 - 1650) suggested two worlds, mind and matter. Body comprises unthinking matter, whereas mind is non-material entity without any specific location and its essence lies in consciousness¹⁶. Additionally, as in Plato's writings the central emphasis is laid on man's rational soul (psyche or nous) and physical body (soma), in a similar vein, Descartes primarily focused on self-consciousness or the spiritual substance of man.

Thus, a very clear distinction has been presented between two separate entities, one possessing physical characteristics but without conscious, the other with mental features like consciousness but lacking physical properties, "the two closely bound up together to make a composite human being"¹⁷. In 19th century soul and will were the constituent parts of psychology and Freud, taking the word analysis from chemistry, left religion and philosophy for science, substituting soul and will with libido and unconscious wish¹⁸.

In the same way, although the word psyche initially meant soul or the human spirit, but the strange phenomenon is the disregard for human spirit in western psychology¹⁹. The materialistic trends of modern times lost the awareness and integration of soul, overlooked, or even deliberately evaded, which consequently resulted in a huge turmoil and havoc in human experience that ruined all efforts to make them harmonious and stable. As has been rightly observed:

A more familiar litany of descriptions of our fragmented world from any contemporary morning newspaper or evening notebook of a therapist, teacher, or priest would include: a sense of alienation, rootlessness, apathy, burnout, torpor, anxiety, cynicism, the fear of leading an inauthentic life. Every illness has its symptoms, and ours is betrayed by our obsessions, addictions, and violence; our corrosive loneliness, vague

purposelessness, and hall-of-mirrors narcissism. Soulless times are often marked by black humor reveling in the self-doubt that our lives are mere movie scripts, or, worse, that we're tourists rather than travelers on this road of life²⁰.

The denial of the existence of soul has destructive effects on the true appraisal of human mind and human struggle²¹. Moreover, after a comprehensive analysis of philosophical, anthropological and scientific attacks on God and the reality of the human soul, he mentions two causes for this denial, the gradual spread of secularization and progression of materialism in modern world. In addition, Turner, in his translation of Rank's, "Psychology and the Soul", undertook a comprehensive discussion of the word, *seelish*, and contends that English has lost the adjectives of *soular* and *soulish* which indicates the spiritual phenomenon. He further explains that spiritual has to do with the "living, conscious mind or soul and with the whole person"²².

For the purpose of this study, a reliable connecting strand has been identified through numerous views, whereby soul gives the impression as a basic state of being: a life and a breath.

The Philosophical Outlook of Ghazalian Theory of Soul

Ghazali, in his theory of soul, reveals the dynamic role of reason or cognitive abilities in the human soul which has been bestowed with two peculiar propensities that tussle with each other to control and govern it; the first one is naturally evil, producing vices like "anger, sexual passions, gluttony, envy, love of wealth, miserliness, hatred"²³; the second tendency is fundamentally good and always gets motivated to the goodness; whereby good character trait and virtues exist such as wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice, also termed as animal and angelic characters, contending with one another²⁴. Accordingly, in Ghazalian tradition, the reality of soul has been referred to as *Nafs*²⁵, which is an immaterial entity having two connotations; the lower self or evil propensity which is in constant opposition to rational faculty; secondly, the higher self which has the potential to be pulled up to the divine world. For that reason, the

nafs denotes the general soul which possesses both the animal faculties as well as the higher faculties.

On account of these two peculiar faculties, there appear three types of *nafs*, namely; *nafs e ammara*, *nafs e mutmainna*, and *nafs e lawwama*. Man is in a state of dynamic flux, and experiences different states at different times²⁶. As *nafs* is a fundamental component in the theory of soul, Ghazali explored its two dimensions; the upward dimension which links human psyche to the spirit and the downward dimension joining it to the body. Moreover, it is worthwhile to mention that Sufi ideology considers *nafs* as the source of destructive power of anger and appetite, symbolizing all the evil features of a person. Though many Islamic intellectuals and scholars have categorized the *Nafs* up to seven stages, Ghazali has mentioned three main types of *nafs*, distributing it into *nafs e ammara*, *nafs e lawwama* and *nafs e mutmainna*. For Ghazali man dwells in a place which is in the middle between animals and angels and his distinctive superiority is knowledge²⁷. This distinguishing supremacy of knowledge either rises him to the level of angels or reduces to the status of animals, if he lets his anger and lust dominate him. These states are the developmental stages of self “which can be thought to be correlated with the degree of progressive illumination”²⁸.

Nafs e Ammara

The personality of *nafs e ammara* or evil-instigating soul is the base of all desires inflamed by passions and lust. It always urges a person to “immediate gratification, irrespective of moral consequences”²⁹ and develops when the evil has successfully dominated the human soul. This “evil commanding psyche”³⁰ forms the most integral component of *nafs*. Since the processes of *nafs e ammara* are unconscious, its existence can be comprehended from certain feelings, thoughts and behaviours which have been considered as the result of the “whisperings of devil”³¹. Moreover, its central function is to incite man to evil by breaching the moral boundaries³².

Nafs e ammara indicates the commanding pleasures and desires of man which pulls heart to baser levels and “incites to evil”³³. It yields itself to lusts and allows itself

to be seduced by evil, producing undesirable behaviour³⁴. This is the raw self of an untrained person³⁵, due to its being prone to lower aspects of the self which directs its owner towards every wrong action. The evil tendencies of *nafs* are the greatest barriers to the growth of man. When these dominate the self, man loses his insight and his total energies are diverted towards unnecessary activities and he gets engrossed with the fulfillment of the “immediate sense-perceived pleasures”³⁶. As a result, he starts believing deception as truth, fiction as reality and self-glorification as his highest goal in life. In this animal stage of *nafs*, a person’s actions are directed by those emotions which are mostly evil or damaging for the soul. When the animal forces drag soul down to the degrading depths of bestial nature, an individual remain captive of *nafs e ammara*³⁷. Furthermore, this stage of *nafs* is guided by the pleasure-seeking principle. It does not consider right or wrong and only takes into account the satisfaction of desires and is called “animalistic level of the self”³⁸. Thus, *nafs e ammara*, subjugated by erotic desires, is located in the world of senses.

Nafs e Lawwama

It impels an examination of the moral aspects of any action as this “reproachful psyche” exists in the unconscious part of mind and functions as conscience, constantly developing the feelings of remorse on wrong doings³⁹. This dimension of *nafs* struggles to subdue human evil and compels self to “upbraids man and berates itself”⁴⁰. It is the stage which cannot respite in one state, since, at this stage, soul is in the middle of its voyage towards its evolution and perfection. It is in a state of continuous awareness, scrutinizing, criticizing and self-accusing⁴¹. This second stage of self-development starts when these overpowering passions of *nafs e ammara* are threatened by reason⁴². It detects evil deeds, criticizes itself for wrong doings and develops feelings of remorse. This stage of *nafs* has quite strange vicissitudes, it is always in the state of fluctuations⁴³. At this stage, *nafs* is in the mid of its voyage towards its spiritual evolution and perfection. This state is attained when appetent soul is opposed and driven off.

Ghazali considers this type of *nafs* as constantly in the state of self-observation, always criticizing man’s wrong actions, disobedience and the negligence of his responsibilities by enhancing his “sense of morality”⁴⁴. Besides, when *nafs e lawwama*

becomes aware of certain undesirable action, it feels remorse, thus, always remaining cognizant of its own deficiencies⁴⁵.

Nafs e Mutmainna

Nafs e mutmainnah is the third and the highest phase of *nafs*. Its adjective *mutmainna* is from the passive form of the verb meaning serenity and tranquility which comes from observing faith⁴⁶. Ghazali, while highlighting this state of *nafs* mentions that with the removal of evil passions, it “assumes calmness”⁴⁷. As a person advances to this stage, he attains the height of tranquility⁴⁸ while his personality gets equipped with the qualities of quietness, mildness, tolerance, forgiveness, and understanding of all beings with a strange experience of “deep relaxation”⁴⁹. This state indicates inner peace and happiness which ultimately leads to resolution of one’s inner conflicts and attainment of harmony with God⁵⁰. This serene state can only be achieved when human self is freed from “the bondage of passions, from all conventionalities of the prevalent cultures”⁵¹, consequently his personality is now tinted with God’s universal colour while his conduct echoes the Absolute being and the Ultimate Reality. An individual experiencing *nafs e mutmainna*, is satisfied with his worldly life and creator, emphasizing more towards a better hereafter⁵². This state and mentions that it is achieved when agitation has left it on account of its opposition to the fleshly appetites”⁵³. Likewise, when the “animalistic passions” are subdued and dominated, *nafs e mutmainna* is attained⁵⁴. Time and again, Ghazali emphasizes that in this state of serenity, the harmful satanic impulses exercise no effect on man’s psyche.

Conclusion

The concept of human nature in Ghazalian discourse focused on making an in-depth analysis of soul and the factors that bring about its distress and delight. Ghazalian theory of soul expounds, in very clear terms, a distinct concept about the existence of two fundamental tendencies in human soul; the evil tendency (animalistic), producing vices and the tendency which motivates an individual towards good (angelic). On account of these two peculiar tendencies, there appear three types of *nafs*, namely; *nafs e ammara* (the evil-instigating soul), *nafs e lawwama* (the reproaching soul), *nafs e*

mutmainna (the contented soul). In Ghazalian discourse man with an immortal soul and a mortal body, is neither good nor evil, though by nature he is closer to good than to evil. Furthermore, in a constrained framework, man is also endowed with two significant characteristics, awareness and knowledge which he derives from two sources, the deficient human traits of the senses and reason, allowing man to know the material world in which he lives; while the divine properties of revelation and inspiration enable him to discover the invisible world. A human being can attain this divine energy by submitting the primitive impulses to the authority of reason. This takes an individual to the highest level of spirituality and he achieves independence from baser elements of nature, ascending the steps of serenity, contentment and tranquility.

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