

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36719/2706-6185/54/99-105>

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Al-Ghazālī from the Perspective of Boukhari Hammana: Toward Contemporary Islamic Psychology

Abstract

Boukhari Hammana views Imām al-Ghazālī as a pioneer in the field of psychology who preceded many of its theorists. Hammana's work highlights the psychological dimensions of al-Ghazālī's thought, emphasising its contemporaneity and coherence with modern psychological knowledge, rendering it a legacy open to dialogue with the truths of our time. Al-Ghazālī's psychological insights are not merely a reflection of the knowledge of his era but constitute an original contribution that intersects and even coincides with scientific truths on our own. Boukhari Hammana is considered one of the first to lay the foundations for Arabised psychology. Therefore, in this paper, we attempt to address al-Ghazālī's foundational study of psychology to advocate for contemporary Islamic Arab psychology, which is distinct from Western psychology, as the Islamic conceptions of life, existence, humanity, and destiny differ fundamentally from the Western conception.

Keywords: *al-Ghazālī, psychology, foundation, formalist school, perception*

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Buxari Həmməna baxış bucağından Əl-Qəzəli: Müasir İslam psixologiyasına doğru

Xülasə

Buxari Hammana İmam əl-Qəzzalini psixologiya sahəsində bir çox nəzəriyyəçilərdən əvvəl çıxış etmiş bir öncül alim kimi dəyərləndirir. Hammana'nın tədqiqatları əl-Qəzzalinin düşüncəsindəki psixoloji ölçüləri ön plana çıxararaq bu düşüncənin müasirliyini və çağdaş psixoloji biliklərlə uyğunluğunu vurğulayır. Bu isə əl-Qəzzali irsini dövrümüzün elmi həqiqətləri ilə dialoqa açıq bir miras halına gətirir. Əl-Qəzzalinin psixoloji baxışları sadəcə onun yaşadığı dövrün biliklərinin əksi deyil, əksinə, müasir elmi həqiqətlərlə kəsişən, hətta bəzi hallarda onlarla üst-üstə düşən orijinal bir töhfədir. Buxari Hammana ərəbiləşdirilmiş psixologiyanın əsaslarını qoyan ilk tədqiqatçılardan biri hesab olunur. Bu məqalədə biz Qərb psixologiyasından fərqlənən müasir İslam-ərəb psixologiyasının müdafiəsi məqsədilə əl-Qəzzalinin psixologiya sahəsindəki əsaslı tədqiqatlarına müraciət edirik. Çünki İslam dünyagörüşündə həyat, varlıq, insan və tale anlayışları Qərb konsepsiyalarından köklü şəkildə fərqlənir.

Açar sözlər: *əl-Qəzzali, psixologiya, əsaslandırma, formalist məktəb, qavrayış*

Introduction

Dr. Boukhari Hammana considers Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī a landmark and a figure in the history of Islamic thought, whose influence continues to cast its shadow to this day. This has become a fact acknowledged by both his supporters and his opponents alike. Professor Boukhari Hammana is among the first academics to have engaged with psychology, Arabised it, and introduced psychological studies into the Arab world through his focus on al-Ghazālī, whom he regards as having preceded many psychologists in attending this field. He strives to demonstrate that the ideas and truths al-Ghazālī reached not only correspond to those of his time but also align with the realities of the modern and contemporary eras.

Research

Hammana further asserts that al-Ghazālī “preceded them in more than one aspect, which, to them, might appear as a form of fanaticism, exaggeration, and overburdening things with more than they can bear” (Boukhari Hammana, *Al-Idrāk al-Hissī ‘Ind al-Ghazālī: Dirāsa Nafsiyya Muqārana*, 2013). In all this, he seeks to counter preconceived and distorted notions of Islamic intellectual heritage, especially those perpetuated by Orientalists, while also emphasising the scarcity of Arab studies that have addressed this field. This scarcity explains the neglect of Muslim scholars and historians of modern psychology regarding the role and efforts of Muslims in this context, much as occurs in philosophical studies, where historical periodisation begins with the Greek phase, passes through the Middle Ages, and culminates in the Western Renaissance, without any reference to the contributions of Muslims and Arabs.

Such omission and neglect have had a profoundly negative impact on the imagination of later Muslim generations, who, unfortunately, have adopted these unfair ideas willingly or unwillingly. Accordingly, Professor Boukhari Hammana seeks to erase the traces of this systematic distortion by establishing the roots of this modern field of knowledge within Islamic intellectual heritage through his engagement with al-Ghazālī’s works. To this end, he has authored two books. (*Al-Idrāk al-Hissī ‘Ind al-Ghazālī*, 1986) Numerous articles and studies within this framework exist.

Al-Ghazālī’s Psychological Sources

Boukhari Hammana identifies, first and foremost, the Qur’ān and the ḥadīth as al-Ghazālī’s principal psychological sources. He substantiates this by citing Qur’ānic verses and prophetic traditions that discuss the soul and the spirit, the manner of human creation, behaviour, feelings, instincts, motives, and emotions. He also refers to unconscious dimensions, such as dreams, visions, illusions, inner impulses, hearts, and perceptive faculties, as well as the human senses of hearing and sight. In addition, he considers the discussions and reflections of Muslim thinkers, exegetes, theologians, and philosophers on these verses and traditions.

Second, Hammana highlights the interaction between Greek philosophy and Islamic intellectual heritage, whose thinkers, according to Hammana, preserved it from extinction and infused it with new vitality, thereby transforming it into a link of civilisational continuity. He addresses the Greek philosophical contribution to psychology through the views of Democritus, the Platonic dialogues *Phaedo* and *Timaeus*, That is because "the term 'dialogues' differs, as is well known, from 'discussions'... In Greek dialogue, it is about addressing intellectual issues and problems that require proofs, as well as teaching the art of dialogue and persuasion." (Ben Meziane Ben Cherki, 2020) Aristotle’s *De Anima*, and Stoicism and Neoplatonism. All these, he notes, “examined the soul in terms of its essence and cause rather than its activity and manifestations; consequently, Greek studies of the soul were, in general, closer to what we might call metapsychology (*métapsychologie*) than to psychology itself.” (Boukhari Hammana, p. 17) Al-Ghazālī’s indebtedness to Greek philosophy is evident in his study of the soul in his works *al-Risāla al-Laduniyya*, *Mishkāṭ al-Anwār*, and *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*.

Third, Hammana refers to Muslim philosophers and theologians. Among the latter, he mentions the *mutakallimūn*, such as the Mu‘tazilites, who were pioneers in this domain, for example, in their formulation of the “law of the threshold of sensation (*seuil de la sensation*)” and their distinction between sensation and perception. He cites Abū al-Hudhayl al-‘Allāf (135–235 AH) for his emphasis on the independence of each sense from the others and the distinctness of their respective functions. He also recalls the contributions of Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā’ī (d. 235 AH) and Ibrāhīm al-Nazzām (d. 221 AH). In contrast, philosophers such as al-Kindī, al-Fārābī, and Ibn Sīnā, in Hammana’s view, did not go beyond mere repetition of the opinions of the Greek philosophers.

Sufism

Sufism, in essence, is the elevation of the spirit above worldly pleasures and the desires of the knower; hence, it maintains a profound connection with psychology. We find that Al-Ghazali titled his most important book "Revival of Religious Sciences," and that this title was linked to a conviction that Al-Ghazali reached, which is that true knowledge and jurisprudence are those that are reflected

in a person's behavior as a result of his certainty that the Hereafter is better than this life. (Mohamed Lassoud, 2023, p. 12) Boukhari Hammana cites Lalande's statement: "Whatever judgement may be passed upon mysticism, it must be recognised that it contains distinctive and interconnected psychological states ... those states characterised by descent, and by what resembles the forms of sensory symbols and the concepts of abstract and inductive thought." (André Lalande)

According to Professor Boukhari, this highlights the objective foundations of al-Ghazālī's relationship with Sufism and refutes those who regarded Sufism as a reproach against him. Indeed, al-Ghazālī was born into a Sufi milieu and studied under great masters in this field. He found in Sufism a rich and living psychological substance, "a fertile material for his psychological study, the effects of which are clearly visible in his adoption of some of its concepts of the soul, in his literal application of its therapeutic methods, and in his marvellous ability to analyse it, as is evident in his writings." It should, however, not be inferred from the foregoing that we deny the limited influence of specific other sources on al-Ghazālī, such as Christianity and the Persian and Indian rituals. (Boukhari Hammana, *Al-Idrāk al-Ḥissī 'Ind al-Ghazālī*, p. 21)

Al-Ghazālī's Concept of Psychology

Boukhari Hammana sought to elucidate al-Ghazālī's concept of the nafs (soul or psyche), demonstrating its divergence from that of his contemporaries, its concordance with modern psychological theories, and, indeed, its precedence over them. Al-Ghazālī was, according to Hammana, the first in the history of psychology to distinguish between nafs as essence or substance and nafs as activity and behavior. The first aspect pertains to functions such as memory, retention, reflection, discernment, and vision through abstraction; the second concerns the various attributes of the human being, which differ according to his or her states, that is, the condition of the self (al-anā).

Hammana finds in al-Ghazālī's division of the sciences between the *'ulūm al-mukāshafa* (sciences of unveiling or theoretical sciences, concerned with essences) and the *'ulūm al-mu'āmalā* (practical sciences, concerned with the actions of the limbs), the foundation for this new conception of the soul. This should not be understood, however, to imply that al-Ghazālī denies the unity of the soul. For him, the concept of psychology is "the study of the activity of the soul and its states, whether that activity be intellectual or sensory, religious or worldly. The variations and transformations within this activity make it manifold and changeable since it issues from the same soul. This soul, although described by diverse and multiple attributes, expresses in all its states the personality of man and its contents a personality that nevertheless remains one, for it represents, in Bergson's words, a 'multiple unity and a unified multiplicity'" (Boukhari Hammana, *Al-Idrāk al-Ḥissī 'Ind al-Ghazālī*, p. 28).

With respect to behaviour, Boukhari Hammana affirms that al-Ghazālī transcended the purely philosophical study of behaviour to delve into its psychological dimension. This, according to Hammana, was due to several factors: al-Ghazālī's use of the introspective (*bāṭinī*) method during his period of seclusion in the crisis of doubt through which he passed; his reliance on external observation to trace and analyse human behaviour; and, finally, his application of analytical and therapeutic methods, such as the treatment of pride, hatred, anger, and obsession, as mentioned in his *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*.

For al-Ghazālī, behaviour consists of "impulses and motives that transform from unconscious drives into conscious motives, thus becoming incentives. These incentives, once represented in the mind, turn into thoughts that soon impel man to perform a particular behaviour. ... In this way, al-Ghazālī affirms that behaviour depends upon knowledge, for what prevents behaviour is the absence of will, and what prevents will is the absence of faith." (Boukhari Hammana, *Al-Idrāk al-Ḥissī 'Ind al-Ghazālī*.)

In his treatment of al-Ghazālī's concept of perception, Boukhari Hammana emphasises that al-Ghazālī differs from both his predecessors and his successors in that he does not confine knowledge to that which is provided by the senses, despite their importance, as they remain a necessary stage in the process of perception. Al-Ghazālī divides perception into two kinds: sensory perception, whose source is the external world through the senses, and intellectual perception, which is based on universals abstracted from sensory experience.

Sensory perception itself can be further divided into two types: perception that occurs through the five known external senses and that which occurs through the internal senses, such as *common sense* (*al-hiss al-mushtarak*), imagination, estimation, memory, and representational faculty. Intellectual perception, which distinguishes human beings from animals, occurs through the abstraction of sensory data from matter by means of induction, analogy, and comparison methods characteristic of scholars and philosophers. It may also occur through nonsensory sources, such as revelation (*wahy*) and unveiling (*kashf*), which are specific to prophets and mystics.

Hammana highlights here the interrelation between sensation, perception, and thought in al-Ghazālī's view, a correspondence fully recognised by modern psychology, which also acknowledges this gradation among their levels. This is confirmed by the following statement: "Sensation, in its modern sense, is nothing but the impression produced upon one of our senses as a result of an external stimulus; perception is the process of interpreting and recognising that impression, while reflection upon the meaning, consequences, and effects of that impression transforms it into abstract mental concepts, or into second-order operations." (James Drever, p. 37) This, he notes, "is what we now call abstract thinking." (James Drever, p. 37) Alternatively, as al-Ghazālī defines it, perception is "the taking of the image of the perceived, and that by successive degrees of ascent." (Al-Ghazālī, *Maqāṣid al-Falāsifa*, 1961)

Boukhari Hammana maintains that al-Ghazālī affirms the very principle later known in modern psychology as the law of thresholds (*les lois du seuil*), meaning that sensation is a perception of difference; it is the variation that occurs in the state of the sensory organ. Al-Ghazālī's own words confirm this: "We perceive only what is hotter or colder; as long as there is change, there is sensation, but once that change ceases, sensation ceases, that is, the sensible object becomes, as it were, almost imperceptible in its coldness or heat." (Al-Ghazālī, *Maqāṣid al-Falāsifa*)

Furthermore, al-Ghazālī distinguishes, as modern psychology does, between *sensation* and *the sensible object* (*le sensible-sensation*). In this respect, he does not differ from many other Muslim thinkers. However, he adds what Boukhari calls *the sense of physical pain* (*le sens algique*), a notion later confirmed by German researchers such as physiologists Von Frey and O. Forster.

Most significant, in Boukhari Hammana's view, is the role al-Ghazālī assigns to the affective element in the process of sensation, that is, what psychology now terms the psychological conditions of sensation. Sensation, for al-Ghazālī, is never isolated from the emotional states of the perceiver; perception cannot occur in the absence of this element. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls *preperception* (*la préperception*). Al-Ghazālī writes, "If God had created for you sight whereby you could perceive nourishment from afar, but had not created in your nature an inclination and longing for it that urges you to movement, then sight would be rendered useless." (Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*) Thus, for al-Ghazālī, sensation and perception cannot occur without the affective or psychological element.

Our esteemed professor also addresses what modern psychology terms an optical illusion, upon which the art of cinema itself is founded. Although al-Ghazālī attached great importance to the senses, he did not rely upon them absolutely, as Condillac did, for instance, who rejected any form of knowledge not derived from sensory experience. Al-Ghazālī, by contrast, maintained that the sense of sight is not without its deficiencies:

- a. It perceives other things but does not perceive itself.
- b. It does not perceive what is too distant nor what is too near.
- c. It does not perceive what lies behind a veil.
- d. It perceives only the outwards aspect of things.
- e. It perceives some existents but not all.
- f. It perceives finite things, not infinite ones.
- g. It errs in its perceptions, seeing what is large as small, what is distant as near, and what is motionless as moving or still (Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Mishkāṭ*, p. 72).

Thus, al-Ghazālī stands in opposition to the formalist and sensualist schools, which place excessive reliance on the senses and regard them as an unfailing means of attaining actual knowledge.

For these senses, as al-Ghazālī himself observes, often deceive us and make us see “things that appear motionless although they are in truth moving, and others that appear small although they are greater than we imagine.” (Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, p. 72)

Al-Ghazālī and the Gestalt School (*La Gestalt Theorie*)

As a culmination of his efforts to highlight the original aspects of al-Ghazālī’s conception of the soul comparable to the significant advances achieved by modern psychology, Boukhari Hammana concludes by drawing a comparison between al-Ghazālī’s understanding of the phenomenon of perception and that of the Gestalt school, which emerged as a reaction against behaviourism and associationism, rejecting their arbitrary atomistic analysis of psychological phenomena.

Boukhari addresses the principal points of similarity between the two in their interpretation of perception in general and of visual perception in particular:

a. Form as a Fundamental Element in Perception.

In the Gestalt school, *form* (*Gestalt*) is regarded as an essential component in the perceptual process, one that imposes itself even in acts of memory and imagination. This is precisely what al-Ghazālī expresses when he writes:

“Sight perceives colours and forms, then imagination acts upon the sensible objects, composing from the visible things diverse forms and combinations. For instance, you are capable of imagining a horse with a human head; yet you cannot conceive of simple entities other than what you have already seen indeed, even if you wished to, you would be unable to do so.” (Al-Ghazālī, *Mi ‘yār al-‘Ilm*, 1964)

b. The Law of Tension or the Phenomenon of the Field

The *field* refers to the dynamic relationships that connect the human being with their environment, as both an influence upon their behaviour and the domain in which their behaviour exerts influence. The Gestalt school considers man, in this respect, as both an agent and a recipient of continual tension. This state impels him to seek new behavioural patterns through which he adapts to his *field*, that is, his surrounding environment. This, in turn, affects their perception and behaviour. Al-Ghazālī alludes to this same dynamic in his discussion of longing (*shawq*) and perception, when he writes:

“That whose perfection you have fully perceived, you do not long for; and that which you have not perceived at all, you do not long for either. Longing is born when man discovers that there remain things obscure to him, although he knows they exist; and he knows that what has escaped him is greater than what is present to him. Thus, he continues to yearn to acquire the remaining knowledge of what he has never known neither clearly nor obscurely.” (Al-Ghazālī, *Mi ‘yār al-‘Ilm*, p. 128)

c. Perception of Movement

This corresponds to what the Gestalt school terms *apparent motion* (*le mouvement apparent*), which finds concrete expression in cinema and advertising. In the latter, we see a light moving from one point to another. In reality, one light flashes and then extinguishes, followed by the ignition of another nearby light, thereby producing the illusion of movement or *motion deception*.

In cinema, we see a moving scene that is in truth a series of distinct, still images of the same object, rapidly succeeding one another. The Gestalt School found this phenomenon of apparent motion to be crucial support for its view of movement and perception, which is grounded in the holistic nature of psychic life. Movement, from this perspective, is no longer a mere composite of successive positions; rather, it is “a reality we feel and perceive directly, as a total form that differs from the constituent elements or parts that compose it” (Boukhari Hammana, *Al-Idrāk al-Ḥissī ‘Ind al-Ghazālī*, p. 132).

Boukhari Hammana observes that al-Ghazālī does not stray far from this same understanding of the phenomenon, as seen in his example of moving a spark of fire horizontally or circularly, where the luminous point appears to have become a straight line or a circle. This, according to al-Ghazālī, results from the sensations or phenomena generated in our perception by that movement. Hammana further noted that al-Ghazālī was the first to address the illusion of motion in both its forms, rapid movement (the spark of fire) and slow movement (the blossoming of a flower or the movement of a shadow). This very idea, he remarks, underlies the functioning of television, cinema, and various precise scientific instruments, all of which produce our perception of things according to the manner

in which they are presented to us.

Boukhari Hammana concludes that through his original inquiries in the field of psychology, al-Ghazālī arrived at truths that anticipated the findings of modern psychology and formulated ideas comparable to those reached by contemporary psychology research. This, Hammana argues, refutes the unjustness of Arab and Islamic intellectual heritage by historians and scholars of this discipline. This should encourage Arab researchers to pursue further studies in this field, drawing upon both the efforts of their forebears and the insights of Western thinkers in psychology, to contribute to Arab and Islamic intellectual renaissance. Hence, Boukhari Hammana, through his foundational study of al-Ghazālī's psychology, called for the establishment of an Islamic Arab psychology distinct from Western psychology because the Islamic conceptions of life, existence, man, and destiny differ fundamentally from the Western one. The former rests on the belief that existence is the creation of God, who preserves it, and that man is entrusted with it as God's vicegerent on earth; the latter, by contrast, is given over to material life, anxiety, and despair. This divergence is reflected in the relationship between the soul and the body: in Islamic thought, unlike in the Western tradition, which stems from Greek philosophy through modern psychology, this relationship is not one of contradiction or conflict but one that recognises the needs of the spirit without sacrificing the necessities of the body. A contemporary Islamic Arab psychology must purge Western psychological studies of their colonial, materialistic, and fragmentary content, adapting them instead to Islamic principles and to the unique civilisational and cultural reality of Muslims. Only then can it genuinely address the challenges faced by the contemporary Muslim individual. "The need of the Third World for ideas that originate from within itself and express its own reality is no less than its need for machines." (Boukhari Hammana, *Ta'ammulāt fī al-Dunyā wa al-Dīn*, 2012, p. 162)

This necessity has become even clearer after modern Western studies revealed the failure of psychology, in all its branches, to solve the problems faced by Western men, such as suicide, addiction, schizophrenia, and the increasing prevalence of mental illness, and in light of the mounting criticisms it has faced. Notably, in *Anti-Oedipus*, Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari argued that psychoanalysis is nothing more than an alliance between the psychoanalyst and capitalism, devised to subjugate man in the service of its ends. The use of a psychological approach to interpret the phenomenon of civilization in its spiritual and material manifestations of human activity leads us to a process of understanding and tracing this civilizational action, through what we call the vital capacity of the unseen and its effectiveness in stimulating souls, and thus its power to move the individual from the realm of faith to the realm of action and change (Hirche Soumia, 2023, p. 143). Islamic heritage, with its wealth of studies and insights, elevates concepts that Western psychology has often marginalised or excluded from its domain, concepts vital to human life, such as the unconscious, the dream, and faith. In Western thought, these are typically regarded as sources of repressed animal instincts, anxiety, and despair. For Muslims, however, they are sources of wisdom, release, tranquillity, and psychological balance, as well as wells of inspiration.

It must also be remembered that Muslim approaches to the treatment of the mentally ill and their care differ fundamentally from those of the West, which have long been marked by punishment, confinement, intolerance, exclusion, and isolation. Islamic civilisation, drawing upon the Qur'ān, the Sunnah, and the rich tradition of Sufism, together with its extensive studies and experiences in the psychological field, is uniquely equipped to engage in meaningful collaboration with Western psychology in addressing the problems of modern humanity, provided, as Boukhari Hammana stresses, that the following objective means and conditions are fulfilled.

a. Shedding light on the positive aspects of Arab-Islamic heritage in the fields of human and social sciences in general and psychology in particular.

b. Translating these texts and intellectual contributions into the world's major living languages and presenting them in specialised international psychology journals, as well as at international conferences and symposia.

c. Encouraging both theoretical and applied psychological research and making it an essential component of the process of development, as is currently the case in many Gulf countries.

d. Standardising psychological terminology across the Arab world through the concerted efforts of specialists in this field (Boukhari Hammana, *Ta'ammulāt fī al-Dunyā wa al-Dīn*, p. 235).

Conclusion

These, according to Boukhari Hammana, are the prerequisites and conditions necessary to liberate Islamic Arab psychology from its traditionalist confinement and render it truly contemporary, attuned to the concerns and problems of the modern Muslim individual. By restoring confidence to this disoriented human being, he argues, one enables him to deepen his understanding of himself, his environment, his problems, and his aspirations; thus, he becomes an active participant in the march toward development and progress, ultimately contributing to the restoration of balance within modern civilisation.

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Received: 05.09.2025

Accepted: 14.11.2025