

# The Concept of Moral Education in Imam Al-Ghazali's Thought as Presented in Ihya' 'Ulum Al-Din

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## Abstract

Moral education (akhlaq education) constitutes the core of Islamic education, aiming to shape individuals who are faithful, knowledgeable, and possess noble character. In the context of contemporary education, the moral crisis marked by declining integrity, honesty, and spirituality among learners indicates a widening gap between the mastery of knowledge and the internalization of moral values. Therefore, the thought of Imam al-Ghazali, particularly as articulated in his monumental work *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, remains highly relevant to be reexamined as a conceptual foundation for holistic and integrative moral education. This study aims to examine in depth the concept of moral education in Imam al-Ghazali's thought as presented in *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, encompassing the nature of morality, the objectives of moral education, methods of moral cultivation, and the roles of teachers and students, as well as its relevance to contemporary Islamic education. This research employs a qualitative approach using library research. The primary data source is *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* by Imam al-Ghazali, while secondary data sources include books, scholarly journals, and academic works related to moral education and Islamic thought. Data were collected through documentation techniques and analyzed using descriptive-analytical content analysis. The findings reveal that, according to Imam al-Ghazali, morality (akhlaq) is a stable disposition of the soul (*hay'ah rasikhah fi al-nafs*) that gives rise to spontaneous actions without external coercion. Moral education is understood as a process of *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul) and *tahdzib al-akhlaq* (moral refinement), aimed at attaining true happiness (*sa'adah*) and closeness to Allah SWT. The methods of moral education proposed by al-Ghazali include exemplary conduct, habituation and spiritual discipline, spiritual advice, self-reflection (*muhasabah*), and self-supervision (*muraqabah*). Teachers are positioned as *murabbi* and moral exemplars, while students are required to uphold proper conduct (*adab*), sincerity, and earnestness in seeking knowledge. This study concludes that Imam al-Ghazali's concept of moral education is holistic, integrative, and oriented toward spiritual-moral character formation. His thought has strong relevance to contemporary Islamic education, particularly in strengthening character education and cultivating morally upright individuals amid the challenges of globalization and moral degradation.

**Keywords:** Moral Education, Imam al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, Islamic Education, Character Formation.

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## **Introduction**

Education in Islam fundamentally aims to form human beings who are balanced in spiritual, intellectual, and moral aspects. This is affirmed in the Qur'anic verse QS. Al-Qalam [68]: 4: "And indeed, you are of a great moral character." This verse indicates that morality constitutes the essence of human personality and the primary objective of Islamic education. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) himself emphasized: "Indeed, I was sent to perfect noble character" (Reported by Ahmad).

Therefore, moral education becomes a central pillar in shaping the ideal human being (*insan kamil*). In the history of Islamic thought, Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (450–505 H / 1058–1111 CE) stands as one of the most influential figures in articulating the concept of moral education in depth. Through his monumental work *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, he successfully integrated jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Sufism (*tasawwuf*), and moral philosophy into a unified educational system aimed at achieving happiness in both this world and the hereafter (*sa'adah*). According to al-Ghazali, education is not merely intended to increase knowledge but also to purify the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) and shape behavior in accordance with Islamic values (Al-Ghazali, 2005).

Al-Ghazali explains that morality is a stable condition of the soul that motivates a person to act easily without prior rational deliberation. In other words, morality is the result of a deep process of habituation and spiritual discipline (*riyadhah al-nafs*) (Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, Vol. III). This concept emphasizes that moral education cannot be formed instantly but requires a long process involving the cultivation of the heart, control of desires, and guidance from a morally upright teacher.

The relevance of al-Ghazali's thought is strongly felt in contemporary education. Moral crises and ethical degradation have become global phenomena, including in educational institutions. Numerous studies indicate increasing deviant behavior among students, such as declining academic honesty, rising intolerance, and weakened social empathy (Hidayat, 2020; Rahman, 2022). These conditions reflect a gap between intellectual achievement and moral internalization.

In this context, al-Ghazali's ideas on moral education are highly relevant. He offers an integrative approach that unites knowledge and action, reason and heart. According to him, knowledge must lead a person closer to Allah and result in righteous deeds. If knowledge does not produce moral character, it is not only useless but potentially misleading (Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, Vol. I). This view aligns with Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's (1999) concept of Islamic education, which emphasizes *ta'dib* the proper recognition and acknowledgment of God's rightful place in existence.

Furthermore, al-Ghazali emphasizes the crucial role of teachers in moral education. A teacher, in his view, is not merely a transmitter of knowledge but a *murabbi* (spiritual nurturer) and a moral exemplar. This aligns with Marzuki's (2017) assertion that moral education is effective only when implemented through exemplary conduct, habituation, and a conducive environment.

Given the complexity of moral challenges in the era of globalization such as unrestricted information flows, erosion of religious values, and identity crises reexamining Imam al-Ghazali's concept of moral education becomes increasingly important. His thought can serve as a philosophical and methodological foundation for developing an Islamic education system that is more character-oriented, spiritual, and ethical.

Accordingly, this study seeks to explore in depth the concept of moral education in Imam al-Ghazali's thought as articulated in *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* and to analyze its relevance to contemporary Islamic education, particularly in the formation of students' character.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Concept of Moral Education in Islam**

The term *akhlaq* derives from the Arabic word *khuluq*, meaning disposition, temperament, or habit (Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-'Arab*, Vol. 10, p. 85). Terminologically, according to Imam al-

Ghazali, morality is “a condition of the soul that prompts actions without the need for prior deliberation” (Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din, Vol. III, p. 56). Morality thus serves as an indicator of one’s spiritual quality, as it stems from purity of heart and sincerity in action.

In the context of Islamic education, moral education refers to the process of shaping behavior, character, and personality based on the values of the Qur’an and Sunnah (Nata, 2001). It encompasses not only cognitive aspects but also affective and psychomotor dimensions integrated with spirituality.

According to Abuddin Nata (2011), moral education is a conscious effort to cultivate akhlaq karimah, characterized by awareness of one’s relationship with Allah (hablun min Allah), fellow human beings (hablun min al-nas), and the environment. Ahmad Tafsir (2006) emphasizes that moral education is the core of Islamic education, as its ultimate goal is to form individuals who are faithful and morally upright. Thus, moral education in Islam transcends normative moral instruction and constitutes a holistic process aimed at achieving happiness in this world and the hereafter (Saepul Anwar, 2014).

### **Objectives and Principles of Moral Education**

The primary objective of moral education in Islam is to form the insan kamil, a complete human being balanced in intellect, heart, and action. Imam al-Ghazali asserts that the goal of education is taqarrub ila Allah (drawing closer to Allah) and inner refinement to attain true happiness (sa’adah).

Zakiah Daradjat (1996) states that moral education aims to foster moral awareness and Islamic personality so that learners can align their daily lives with religious guidance. The key principles of moral education articulated by scholars include:

1. Exemplary Conduct (Uswah Hasanah) – Teachers and parents serve as real-life models of virtuous behavior (QS. Al-Ahzab: 21).
2. Habituation (Ta’wīd) – Moral character is formed through repeated good actions until they become habitual (Al-Ghazali, Ihya’, Vol. III).
3. Advice and Guidance (Mau’izhah) – Moral education is delivered through compassionate counsel (QS. An-Nahl: 125).
4. Self-Supervision (Muraqabah) – Learners are educated to feel constantly observed by Allah in all actions.

These principles emphasize that moral education is not merely theoretical moral instruction but the transformation of values into lived behavior through a continuous process.

### **Biography and Intellectual Background of Imam al-Ghazali**

Imam Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali al-Thusi al-Shafi’i was born in Thus, Khurasan (Iran) in 450 H / 1058 CE and passed away in 505 H / 1111 CE. He is widely known as Hujjat al-Islam due to his profound mastery of jurisprudence, theology, philosophy, and Sufism.

He received his early education from his father and later studied under Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni in Nishapur. Following his teacher’s death, al-Ghazali became a leading professor at the Nizamiyyah Madrasah in Baghdad. At the height of his career, he experienced a spiritual crisis that led him to withdraw from worldly positions and pursue the Sufi path. This transformative experience culminated in his magnum opus, Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din, which synthesizes Shari’ah, reason, and spirituality (Zarkasyi, 2019).

Al-Ghazali’s educational philosophy is rooted in the balance between knowledge and morality. Knowledge without morality leads to intellectual arrogance, while morality without knowledge results in religious ignorance.

### **The Concept of Moral Education According to Imam al-Ghazali in Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din**

In Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din, Imam al-Ghazali places moral education at the heart of human development. He states, “The purpose of education is to instill goodness and remove evil from

the human soul so that it may draw closer to Allah” (Ihya’, Vol. III, p. 15).

- 1) The Nature of Morality. Al-Ghazali distinguishes between akhlaq mahmudah (praiseworthy morals) and akhlaq mazmumah (blameworthy morals). The cultivation of praiseworthy morals is achieved through soul purification (tazkiyat al-nafs) and spiritual discipline (riyadhah al-nafs). He emphasizes that good character is not innate but acquired through education and habituation, stating: “Good qualities can be trained and habituated just as one learns to write or swim” (Ihya’, Vol. III, p. 59).
- 2) Objectives of Moral Education. According to al-Ghazali, the objectives of moral education include attaining true happiness (sa’adah), purifying the soul and controlling desires, and forming individuals who are obedient to Allah and beneficial to others.
- 3) Methods of Moral Education. Al-Ghazali proposes several effective methods for moral education: Role modeling (uswah hasanah): Teachers serve as moral exemplars for their students. Habituation (ta’wīd): The repetition of good behavior until it becomes a stable habit. Moral advice and spiritual guidance: Providing ethical encouragement and warning against the dangers of reprehensible conduct. Self-supervision (muhasabah): Teaching learners to engage in self-reflection and introspection regarding their actions.
- 4) Roles of Teachers and Students. In al-Ghazali’s view, teachers bear great responsibility as spiritual guides rather than mere transmitters of knowledge. He writes: “A teacher is one who leads people from bad character to good character” (Ihya’, Vol. III, p. 77). Students, meanwhile, are expected to cultivate respect, humility, and sincerity in seeking knowledge.
- 5) Relevance to Contemporary Islamic Education. Al-Ghazali’s concept aligns closely with modern emphases on character building. Values such as honesty, simplicity, sincerity, and responsibility form the foundation of global moral education. In Indonesia, his thought resonates with national education policies that emphasize religious and moral character formation (Ministry of Education Regulation No. 20 of 2018 on Strengthening Character Education).

## Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design using a library research approach, as the object of study is a classical intellectual work, namely *Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din* by Imam al-Ghazali. According to Zed (2004), library research utilizes written sources such as books, journals, documents, and other literature to obtain theoretical and conceptual data. Accordingly, this study does not involve field observation but focuses on systematic exploration, reading, analysis, and interpretation of relevant texts.

Thus, this research is descriptive-analytical, aiming to describe and analyze al-Ghazali’s thought on moral education and to identify its relevance to contemporary Islamic education.

Data sources are divided into primary and secondary sources. The primary source is *Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din* by Imam al-Ghazali (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2005). Secondary sources include books on al-Ghazali’s thought, literature on moral and Islamic education, and relevant academic journals, theses, and dissertations.

## Results

### Ontological Foundations of Moral Education in al-Ghazali’s Thought

The findings indicate that al-Ghazali’s moral education is grounded in an ontological understanding of human nature. Humans are not merely rational beings (hayawan nathiq) but spiritual beings possessing physical, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. In *Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din*, al-Ghazali asserts that the essence of humanity lies in the qalb (heart), which serves as the center of moral and spiritual consciousness.

Morality, in al-Ghazali’s view, is not an artificial outward behavior but a reflection of one’s inner state. He defines morality as hay’ah rasikhah fi al-nafs, from which actions emerge spontaneously. This definition underscores that moral education cannot be reduced to normative instruction but must focus on forming a stable inner disposition.

This finding shows that al-Ghazali adopts an internal ethical approach akin to virtue ethics, emphasizing inner disposition rather than external compliance. While comparable to Aristotelian virtue ethics, al-Ghazali transcends it by grounding morality in a strong theological and spiritual foundation (Hourani, 1985; Nasr, 1997).

### **Moral Education as a Process of Tazkiyat al-Nafs and Tahdzib al-Akhlaq**

The study reveals that moral education in al-Ghazali's thought is synonymous with soul purification (tazkiyat al-nafs) and moral refinement (tahdzib al-akhlaq). He identifies uncontrolled desires (ghadab and shahwah) as the primary sources of moral فساد.

Al-Ghazali categorizes heart diseases such as love of the world (hub al-dunya), arrogance (kibr), ostentation (riya'), envy (hasad), and greed. Moral education aims to cleanse these vices and replace them with virtues such as sincerity, patience, humility, gratitude, and asceticism (zuhd).

In this context, moral education is both preventive and curative. Al-Ghazali likens educators to spiritual physicians who diagnose and treat moral diseases, highlighting the personal and contextual nature of moral education (Abdul Halim Mahmud, 1993).

### **Objectives of Moral Education: Sa'adah and Human Perfection**

Research findings show that the goal of moral education in Imam al-Ghazali's thinking is to achieve sa'adah (true happiness). This happiness is not merely material or psychological happiness, but spiritual happiness that is rooted in closeness to Allah SWT.

Al-Ghazali emphasized that true happiness can only be achieved if humans are able to:

1. Getting to know Allah (ma'rifatullah),
2. Controlling lust,
3. Applying knowledge in real life,
4. Make noble morals a permanent character.

This goal places moral education at the core of the entire Islamic education process. Knowledge that is not oriented towards moral improvement is considered useless, even dangerous. This view is in line with the concept of ta'dib put forward by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1999), who emphasized that the aim of Islamic education is the formation of civilized humans who know and place everything according to their position.

### **Methods of Moral Education in Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din**

#### **1) Role Modeling (Uswah Hasanah)**

The findings of this study indicate that role modeling is the primary method of moral education according to al-Ghazali. He emphasizes that a teacher's behavior has a far greater influence than verbal advice. The moral conduct of the teacher directly shapes the student's character through processes of imitation and internalization of values. Al-Ghazali asserts that a teacher who does not practice his knowledge is like a candle that burns itself in order to illuminate others. This method of role modeling is consistent with Bandura's social learning theory, which highlights the role of modeling in the formation of behavior (Bandura, 1977).

#### **2) Habituation and Spiritual Training (Ta'wīd and Riyāḍah)**

Al-Ghazali views moral character not as an innate trait, but as something that can be formed through habituation. He argues that the human soul is inherently malleable and can be directed. Continuous habituation of good deeds will give rise to good character, just as physical exercise develops bodily strength. These findings emphasize that moral education requires continuity, consistency, and a supportive environment. Moral character is not formed through brief lectures, but through a long process involving spiritual discipline and self-control.

#### **3) Moral Advice, Muhāsabah, and Murāqabah**

Al-Ghazali underscores the importance of advice that touches the heart and is delivered with compassion. In addition, he teaches muhāsabah (self-introspection) and murāqabah (awareness of Allah's constant supervision) as means of internalizing moral values. This method aims to cultivate intrinsic moral awareness rather than superficial or merely formal obedience.

### **The Role of Teachers as Murabbi and Moral Exemplars**

The findings indicate that al-Ghazali positions teachers as central figures in moral education. Teachers are not merely mu'allim but murabbi and spiritual guides (mursyid),

characterized by sincerity, asceticism, patience, and consistency between words and deeds. Students, on the other hand, are required to uphold adab, sincerity, and humility. The teacher-student relationship in al-Ghazali's thought is ethical, spiritual, and transformative.

### **Relevance of al-Ghazali's Moral Education in Contemporary Islamic Education**

The analysis shows that Al-Ghazali's concept of moral education is highly relevant to the problems of modern education, which tends to emphasize cognitive and technocratic aspects. The moral crisis, the degradation of academic ethics, and the weakening of students' spirituality demonstrate the failure of education that is detached from moral values.

Al-Ghazali's concept offers an integrative educational paradigm that unites knowledge, faith, and good deeds. In the Indonesian context, this thinking aligns with the Strengthening Character Education policy and the vision of Islamic Religious Education, which focuses on developing individuals with faith and noble character.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the analysis of Imam al-Ghazali's concept of moral education as articulated in *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, it can be concluded that moral education occupies a central position within the Islamic educational system. For al-Ghazali, education is not merely a process of knowledge transmission but a comprehensive endeavor to form a stable disposition of the soul (*hay'ah rasikhah fi al-nafs*) that generates noble behavior spontaneously and sustainably. Morality is thus understood as the result of value internalization rooted in purity of heart and spiritual closeness to Allah SWT.

This study confirms that the primary objective of moral education according to Imam al-Ghazali is the attainment of true happiness (*sa'adah*) through *tazkiyat al-nafs* and self-control. Moral education aims to form individuals who are faithful, knowledgeable, and virtuous, positioning knowledge as a means of drawing closer to Allah and benefiting others. Knowledge without moral cultivation is viewed as not only useless but potentially harmful.

The findings further indicate that al-Ghazali proposes holistic and applicable methods of moral education, including exemplary conduct, habituation and spiritual discipline, moral advice, *muhasabah*, and *muraqabah*. These methods affirm that moral formation is a continuous process integrating cognitive, affective, spiritual, and behavioral dimensions.

Moreover, the role of teachers in al-Ghazali's moral education is fundamental. Teachers function as *murabbi* and moral exemplars who nurture students' souls, while students are expected to uphold proper conduct, sincerity, and earnestness in seeking knowledge. The teacher-student relationship is ethical, spiritual, and transformative.

Overall, Imam al-Ghazali's concept of moral education remains highly relevant to contemporary Islamic education in addressing moral crises and character degradation in the era of globalization. His thought provides a philosophical and methodological foundation for developing Islamic education oriented toward character formation, spiritual strengthening, and the integration of knowledge, faith, and action. Thus, this study affirms that al-Ghazali's ideas are not merely historical or normative but also contextual and applicable to present and future Islamic education.

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