

Al-Ghazālī

Biography / Overview

Al-Ghazālī (Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, 1058–1111 CE) was a Persian polymath, theologian, jurist, philosopher, and Sufi mystic whose works reconciled Islamic orthodoxy with rational inquiry and spiritual practice. Born in Ṭūs (near Mashhad, Iran), he studied Shāfiʿī jurisprudence and Ashʿarī theology under al-Juwaynī at Nishapur, rising to Baghdad’s prestigious Nizāmiyya madrasa in 1091. A profound spiritual crisis in 1095 led him to abandon public life for eleven years of ascetic wandering, teaching, and writing in Damascus, Jerusalem, Mecca, and Ṭūs. His magnum opus, *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (“Revival of the Religious Sciences”), integrated law, theology, ethics, and mysticism into a comprehensive guide for Muslim life.

Modern scholars interpret al-Ghazālī as the “Proof of Islam” (*Ḥujjat al-Islām*) who refuted philosophy’s metaphysical excesses while preserving logic, dismantled Ismāʿīlī esotericism, and elevated Sufism within Sunnism. His critique of causality and occasionalism shaped later Islamic thought, though his role in “closing the gate of *ijtihād*” is now seen as overstated. His legacy dominates madrasa curricula and Sufi orders worldwide.

Sources:

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Al-Ghazali – <https://iep.utm.edu/al-ghazali/>

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Al-Ghazali – <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/al-ghazali/>

World History Encyclopedia: Al-Ghazali – <https://www.worldhistory.org/Al-Ghazali/>

Bibliography / Primary Sources

Major Published Works:

Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn (Revival of the Religious Sciences)

Composed c. 1095–1105 CE.

Survives in 40 books (4 quarters: acts of worship, social customs, vices, virtues).

Original language: Arabic.

Tahāfut al-falāsifa (The Incoherence of the Philosophers)

Composed c. 1095 CE.

Survives in 20 chapters, refuting Avicenna and Aristotelian metaphysics.

Al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl (The Deliverer from Error)

Composed c. 1106–1109 CE.

Autobiographical treatise on his spiritual crisis and epistemological hierarchy.

Mīyār al-ʿilm (Criterion of Knowledge)

Logical primer based on Avicenna, used in madrasas.

Key Manuscripts and Editions:

Cairo 1930s edition of *Iḥyāʾ* (standard print);

Fons Vitae *Iḥyāʾ* English translation (ongoing, 40 vols.) – <https://fonsvitae.com>
Yale University Press: *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (trans. Marmura, 1997) – <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780842524664/the-incoherence-of-the-philosophers/>

Digital: Al-Maktaba al-Shamela (full Arabic texts) – <https://shamela.ws>

Birth Date / Death Date

Born: 1058 CE, Ṭūs, Khorasan (Seljuk Empire)

Died: December 19, 1111 CE, Ṭūs

Source: Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (Oxford, 2009)

Notable / Best-Known For

Author of *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*: Encyclopedic synthesis of Islamic sciences; “second Qurʾān” in popular piety.

Critique of Causality: Occasionalism—only God is true cause; refuted Avicenna’s necessary emanation.

Spiritual Autobiography: *Al-Munqidh* as model of intellectual and mystical conversion.

Sufi Legitimation: Elevated experiential knowledge (*dhawq*) within orthodoxy.

Sources:

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Al-Ghazali – <https://iep.utm.edu/al-ghazali/>

Griffel, Frank. *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (2009)

Famous Quotes

“The aim of the moral life is to become like unto God as far as possible.”

– *Iḥyāʾ*, Book 35 (Fons Vitae trans.)

“Know that a lie is not wrong in itself. If a lie is the only way to achieve a good result, it is permissible.”

– *Iḥyāʾ*, on white lies (controversial but contextual)

“I saw that Sufism consists in experiences, not in definitions.”

– *Al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*

Major Works / Textual Contents

Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn:

Quarter 1 (Books 1–10): Acts of worship (*ʿibādāt*)

Quarter 2 (11–20): Social customs (*ʿādāt*)

Quarter 3 (21–30): Path to perdition (vices)

Quarter 4 (31–40): Path to salvation (virtues)

Tahāfut al-falāsifa:

Problems 1–16: Physics (eternity of world, causality)

Problems 17–20: Metaphysics (God’s knowledge, resurrection)

Source:

Ihyā’ Table of Contents – Fons Vitae

Influences / Intellectual Context

Ash‘arī Theology: Al-Juwaynī; defended divine attributes and occasionalism.

Avicennian Philosophy: Mastered then refuted in *Tahāfut*.

Sufism: Al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī, al-Qushayrī; experiential path.

Shāfi‘ī Jurisprudence: Legal formalism balanced with spiritual intent.

Sources:

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Al-Ghazali – <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/al-ghazali/>

Garden, Kenneth. *The First Islamic Reviver* (Oxford, 2014)

Legacy and Modern Significance

Historical Dominance: Standardized Sunnī curriculum; *Ihyā’* in every madrasa.

Philosophical Impact: Ibn Rushd’s *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* (Incoherence of the Incoherence) as direct response.

Sufi Orders: Naqshbandī, Qādirī, Shādhilī cite *Ihyā’* as core text.

Modern Reappraisal: Reformed Islam (‘Abduh), Islamic psychology, ethics of intention.

Sources:

Moosa, Ebrahim. *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (UNC Press, 2005)

Modern Moments / Impact on 21st Century

1998–Present: Fons Vitae *Ihyā’* translation project (40 vols., ongoing) – <https://fonsvitae.com>

2007: UNESCO declared 900th anniversary of al-Ghazālī’s death; global conferences (Iran, Malaysia).

Ongoing (2000s–Present): Full Arabic texts digitized on Shamela, Al-Mostafa, Noor Library.

Ongoing (2010s–Present): Core in Islamic studies, philosophy, and Sufism curricula (SOAS, Georgetown, IIUM).

Ongoing (2000s–Present): Stanford/IEP maintain peer-reviewed entries.

2021: Oxford University Press published *Al-Ghazali’s Moderation in Belief* (new trans. of *Al-Iqtisād fī al-I‘tiqād*).

Ongoing (2020s): Cited in Islamic ethics, mindfulness studies, AI morality (Georgetown Berkley Center).

Suggested Reading and Resources

A. Secondary Literature (Scholarship)

Griffel, Frank. *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*. Oxford University Press, 2009 – <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/al-ghazalis-philosophical-theology-9780195331622>

Garden, Kenneth. *The First Islamic Reviver: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

Marmura, Michael (trans.). *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. Brigham Young University Press, 1997.

Moosa, Ebrahim. *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination*. UNC Press, 2005.

Al-Ghazali, *The Alchemy of Happiness* (trans. Claud Field, rev. Elton L. Daniel). Routledge, 2015.

B. Archival or Online Sources

Fons Vitae: *Revival of the Religious Sciences* (English) – <https://fonsvitae.com>

Al-Maktaba al-Shamela: Full Arabic works – <https://shamela.ws>

Ghazali.org: Translations & studies – <https://www.ghazali.org>

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Al-Ghazali – <https://iep.utm.edu/al-ghazali/>

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Al-Ghazali – <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/al-ghazali/>