

The Concept of Ma'rifat in Sufism: Comparison between Ibn Arabi and Al-Ghazali

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Abstract

This article discusses the concept of ma'rifat in the thoughts of Ibn Arabi and Al-Ghazali, which is a form of esoteric knowledge that transcends the limits of conventional and rational knowledge. Ibn Arabi emphasizes wahdat al-wujud, where individuals who attain ma'rifat realize that their essence is part of God. Meanwhile, Al-Ghazali emphasizes the attainment of ma'rifat through spiritual discipline and esoteric knowledge directly from Allah through spiritual practices. Although their approaches differ, both agree that ma'rifat is the highest goal in spiritual life, where humans truly know, love, and devote themselves to God. Despite their differences, both believe that ma'rifat is the key to true happiness and a deep understanding of the essence of existence. In practice, they both emphasize the importance of direct experience in achieving profound spiritual understanding, with Ibn Arabi through awareness of the unity of existence, while Al-Ghazali through spiritual discipline and self-control.

Keyword: Al-Ghazali; Ibn Arabi; Ma'rifat

Introduction

Humans naturally tend to seek the meaning and existence of God through existing traces. Although science can provide arguments on this issue, it seems that we have not fully understood or achieved a complete understanding of the existence of God. One of the themes that has always been interesting in the history of human thought is the question of God. This question is not only discussed in philosophy and theology, but also in the world of mysticism. The debate about this concept continues, with attempts to find an appropriate approach to understanding various religious concepts. Philosophy, which originates from rational thought and its development, seeks the roots of the essence of something in depth.

Unlike philosophy and theology, the understanding of God in

mysticism tends to be inclusive. Mystical understanding of God involves a deep inner experience, by sharpening the senses (zhauq) and through achieving unity with Divine love. This experience is difficult to communicate directly. In the context of Islam, this mystical expression is known as tasawwuf, or in Western literature it is known as sufism. Annemarie Schimmel describes this phenomenon as Islamic mysticism (Schimmel, 2000).

In the realm of theology, theologians tend to understand God through a dialectical process that refers to the texts of the Qur'an and is supported by rational arguments. However, theology is also bound to the authority of revelation which is open and sometimes tends to be exclusive. Theological thinking is sometimes considered rigid because it emphasizes the transcendence of God, so that humans who only rely on rational thinking do not realize the role of their inner being in understanding the inner being (Schimmel, 2000).

One of the famous Islamic mystics is Ibn Arabi, who is known for his concept of wahdatul wujud. Ibn Arabi's thinking is very unique because he was able to formulate his mystical experiences into the language of philosophy, so that his philosophy is not only rational, but also contains intuitive nuances. Another specialty of Ibn Arabi's thinking is his ability to trigger pros and cons among Islamic thinkers; some consider his teachings deviant because they are considered to go beyond the boundaries of religion. Therefore, the author intends to better understand and examine this unique Sufi concept of divinity.

Previous research conducted by Noor (2024), "Wahdat al-Ulum Paradigm (The Concept of Scientific Integrity Thought in the Views of Al-Ghazali and Ibn Sina and Its Relevance to Higher Education)" Halaqah: Journal of Multidisciplinary Islamic Studies. Islam as a religion that is rahmatan lil alamin must be understood from various aspects. This is so that the light of Islam becomes a light in human life. As the first revelation that came down, Muslims are required to view and understand all types of knowledge and not distinguish between knowledge that comes from religion and that comes from reading the universe (Science). The treasures of knowledge that come from religion, if understood textually, will often cause conflict with experimental science. In fact, both deserve to sit together to solve human problems. This kind of problem is not caused by religion, but by a wrong interpretation of religion. Also, the attitude of some people who are prejudiced against the relationship between religion and science. In fact, the interpretation of Islam in the context of Islamic sciences approaches the truth when these sciences can answer human problems. Not only is the sacred text conceptual-transcendent, but it must also be pragmatic-humanistic (Noor, 2024). There are differences between the current research and previous research. If the previous research discussed

the concept of wahdat al-ulum Imam Al-Ghazali and Ibn Sina, then the current research discusses the concept of ma'rifat according to Imam Al-Ghazali and Ibn Arabi.

Ma'rifat is one aspect of the study of Sufism which refers to the sources of Islamic teachings, namely the Qur'an and the hadith or actions reflected in the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Although the word "ma'rifat" is not directly found in the Qur'an, its meaning can be understood as the essence of Sufism contained in the messages of the Qur'an. This word comes from the root word 'arafa which is mentioned 71 times in the Qur'an, and from this use it can be understood that ma'rifat has many meanings, such as knowing, knowing, very familiar, a proper relationship, a good relationship, and recognition based on deep knowledge. If all these meanings are combined, then ma'rifat in the context of the Qur'an can be interpreted as good and deep recognition based on comprehensive and detailed knowledge, as a result of a very close and good relationship.

Etymologically, the word "Sufism" comes from Arabic, namely *tasawwafa-yatashawwafu*. In addition, there is another explanation that states that "Sufism" comes from the word shuf, which means wool (Amin, 2012). This suggests that Sufism adherents live a simple life, have a noble heart, and avoid silk clothing, choosing to wear coarse woolen cloth made from sheep's wool. At that time, wearing coarse woolen cloth was common (Alba, 2012).

Research Methods

The author uses a qualitative research approach to understand the concept of ma'rifat in the thoughts of Ibn Arabi and Al-Ghazali. The qualitative research method is used because the main focus of this study is on an in-depth understanding of the views and thoughts of both of them on ma'rifat, and how this concept influences Islamic spirituality more broadly. The first step in this study is to identify relevant key sources, such as the writings of Ibn Arabi and Al-Ghazali that discuss ma'rifat. Then, the author collects data through a comprehensive literature study, collecting texts from these works that are related to the concept of ma'rifat. The collected data is then analyzed in depth to identify the main themes, key concepts, and arguments used by both of them in their thoughts on ma'rifat. This qualitative research method allows us to gain an in-depth understanding of the concept of ma'rifat in the thoughts of Ibn Arabi and Al-Ghazali, as well as to make a significant contribution to the understanding of Islamic spirituality.

Results and Discussion

1. Definition of Ma'rifat

Ma'rifat comes from the word *arafa*, *yu'rifu*, *irfan*, which means to know, to recognize (Munawwir, 2002), or divine knowledge (Amin & Jumantoro, 2005). Individuals who have ma'rifat are called a'rif. In terminology, ma'rifat means to understand and know various sciences in depth (Hamka, 1993), or it is also interpreted as knowledge or direct experience of the absolute reality of God (Muhammad Suhrawardi, 1998). This term is often used to describe one of the *maqam* (levels) or *hal* (psychological conditions) in Sufism. Therefore, in Sufistic discourse, ma'rifat is interpreted as knowledge of God through the heart. In Sufism, achieving ma'rifat to Allah Swt. (*ma'rifatullah*) is the main goal and core of the teachings of Sufism (Nata, 1996).

Ma'rifat is knowledge that focuses not on external things (exoteric), but more deeply on the internal aspects (esoteric) by understanding the secrets of God. This understanding is realized through spiritual experience or experience (Nata, 1996). Therefore, not everyone can achieve it; this knowledge has a higher intrinsic value compared to the knowledge that is usually possessed by people in general and does not contain the slightest doubt (Amin & Jumantoro, 2005).

For lay people, ma'rifat is by looking at and contemplating the manifestation of the beauty and perfection of Allah Swt. directly through His creations in the universe (Al-Jailani, 2009). Thus, Allah Swt. can be known in this real world through His attributes that are visible to His creatures (Al-Jailani, 2009). According to Al-Husayn bin Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 921 AD), ma'rifat occurs when a servant reaches the level of ma'rifat, Allah Swt. makes deviant thoughts a means of inspiration, and guards his mind so that thoughts other than about Him do not arise. The sign of someone who has ma'rifat is that he is free from attachment to the world and the hereafter (Al-Qusyairi, 1994). Often, Sufis share their personal experiences when talking about ma'rifat, explaining what they experienced at certain times. One indication of ma'rifat is the achievement of peace in the heart; The deeper a person understands ma'rifat, the greater the sense of calm he feels. This experience brings benefits in the form of inner peace (Al-Qusyairi, 1994).

In the concept put forward by Harun Nasution (d. 1998 AD), ma'rifat means knowing God deeply so that the heart can see Him directly. This can be recognized through the following characteristics:

1. A knowledgeable person feels proud of his dependence on Allah Swt.; when Allah's name is mentioned, he feels proud, but when his name is mentioned, he feels inferior (Hamka, 1993).
2. When the "eyes" in the heart are open, the "eyes" in the head will close, and at that moment all one sees is Allah Swt.
3. Ma'rifat is like a mirror; when a knowledgeable (wise) person looks into the mirror, all he sees is Allah Swt.

4. Everything that a knowledgeable person sees, whether while sleeping or awake, is only Allah Swt
5. If knowledge could be realized in material form, everyone who saw it would die because they could not stand the extraordinary, brilliant, and beautiful beauty. Any light would be inferior compared to the light of beauty that it possesses (Teba, 2004).

From several definitions, it can be understood that ma'rifat is understanding the secrets of God by using the inner heart, which will produce knowledge that strengthens belief. This strong belief will bring peace and increase devotion to Allah Swt. According to Al-Ghazali's concept, ma'rifatullah is an effort to get closer to God through purification of the soul and dhikr which is done continuously. In this way, a person will eventually be able to know God through his conscience. According to Al-Ghazali, ma'rifatullah is the source and peak of pleasure in worship that can be felt by humans in this world. It also provides a broad view of happiness and pleasure in achieving ma'rifatullah. Knowing and loving the Creator completely makes humans feel extraordinary pleasure compared to others. Ma'rifat to Allah is a very noble trait.

2. Ibn Arabi's Approach to Ma'rifat

In general, mystics have similar inner experiences, though not always at the same level of depth. The inner experiences of mystics go far beyond ordinary human experience, because the objects they encounter in their minds are something completely different from what is known in the real world. Therefore, language is often unable to fully express these inner experiences. The inner experiences of mystics are sometimes considered contradictory or contrary to prevailing norms or what is considered normal in the general view. Controversy often arises when mystics state their mystical ecstatic experiences.

Usually, the experience of shatahat occurs when the inner state reaches its peak, namely when the individual is united with God. At that time, consciousness is no longer at the ordinary human level, but at a level of consciousness that transcends human, where human consciousness unites with divine consciousness. The problem that arises when consciousness is beyond the human level is the inability to express this very deep experience due to the limitations of the means of expression available.

The ma'rifat approach in Ibn Arabi's thought is a central concept that has had a wide influence on many spiritual thinkers and practitioners in the Islamic world. Ma'rifat, often interpreted as "inner knowledge" or "intuitive recognition", is a form of knowledge that goes beyond the boundaries of conventional and rational knowledge. For Ibn

Arabi, ma'rifat is direct knowledge of God obtained through deep spiritual experience.

Ibn Arabi believed that every individual has the potential to attain ma'rifat, but many are hindered by attachment to the material world and sensory experiences. For Ibn Arabi, the first step towards ma'rifat is to free oneself from worldly ties and develop a higher spiritual awareness. This involves practices such as meditation, dhikr, and deep introspection (Asiyah, 2021).

One of the main concepts in Ibn Arabi's thought is "al-wahdatul wujud" or "the unity of being." Ibn Arabi believed that God is the only real being, and everything in the universe is merely a manifestation of God. In this understanding, the individual who attains ma'rifat realizes that his essence is part of God and that nothing is separate from God (Muhyiddin, 2022).

Ibn Arabi's approach to ma'rifat also involves a deeper understanding of oneself. Ibn Arabi believed that individuals must understand the true nature of their existence and realize that their essence is part of God. This involves deep self-exploration and the removal of the ego in order to achieve higher consciousness (Dahlan, 2013). In practice, ma'rifat according to Ibn Arabi also involves a relationship with a spiritual teacher (sheikh) who can guide individuals on their spiritual journey. This spiritual teacher has deeper knowledge and experience in ma'rifat and can help individuals overcome obstacles they may face in achieving higher consciousness.

Ibn Arabi's ma'rifat approach also emphasizes the importance of direct experience in achieving deep spiritual understanding. Ibn Arabi believed that spiritual experience is the key to understanding God and that individuals should seek such experience through appropriate spiritual practices. Overall, Ibn Arabi's ma'rifat approach is an attempt to achieve a deeper understanding of God, oneself, and the universe. Through deep spiritual practices and a deeper understanding of the nature of existence, one can achieve ma'rifat and unite oneself with God.

3. Al-Ghazali's Approach to Ma'rifat

Al-Ghazali, a famous Sufi, was skilled in formulating various concepts into extraordinary works. Unlike previous Sufis, Al-Ghazali emphasized clear characteristics and limitations in formulating the concept of ma'rifat (Al-Taftazani, 1985). For him, ma'rifat is not only about rational understanding, but more about recognizing Allah Swt., understanding the existence of God that encompasses everything, where there is no existence other than Allah Swt (Hamka, 1993).

Al-Ghazali's theory of ma'rifat, according to al-Taftazani (1979), is considered a complementary and comprehensive theory. This is because

al-Ghazali discusses mystical knowledge in detail in terms of achievement, method, object, and purpose. His theory is considered to have made a major contribution to the development of Sufism (Al-Taftazani, 1985). Al-Ghazali classifies Sufism into two parts: first, Sufism as "the science of mu'amalah", and second, Sufism as "the science of ma'rifat". The science of mu'amalah is seen as a stage of the journey and struggle in Sufism, while the science of ma'rifat is seen as direct spiritual understanding. There is a fundamental difference in the essence of the two. In the context of the science of mu'amalah, the essence of Sufism is the effort of the salik (Sufi path seeker) to achieve morality both physically and mentally. The goal is to prepare the heart (qalb) to undertake a spiritual journey towards a higher metaphysical dimension, towards the presence of God. On the other hand, in the context of the science of ma'rifat, the essence of Sufism is the effort to achieve understanding and direct experience of absolute reality (*al-Haqq*) (Syukur, 1952).

Al-Ghazali sees ma'rifat as the ultimate goal that humans must achieve, and as the perfection in which true happiness is realized. According to him, through ma'rifat, humans will truly know God, and after knowing, will love and then devote themselves completely to Him. Al-Ghazali explains that for those who do not know or do not feel the delights of ma'rifatullah in the world, they will not experience the same delights in the afterlife. This is because what they do not feel in the world, they will not find in the afterlife. For him, perfect pleasure is when someone experiences ma'rifat with God. Therefore, enjoying heaven without witnessing its Creator will give rise to extraordinary curiosity, and often causes suffering (al-Ghazali, 1985).

Al-Ghazali taught that the pleasures of heaven are in line with the level of one's love for Allah Swt., which is proportional to the level of one's knowledge of Him. For Al-Ghazali, the essence of happiness is knowledge, which in religious law is likened to faith. In his work, *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, Al-Ghazali uses the analogy that the heart is like a mirror and knowledge is the image reflected in it. He explains that in order for a mirror to reflect an image well, the mirror must always be clean, in the right position, and there must be no obstructions between the image and the mirror. Likewise, a person's heart must be clean, free from obstructions, and in the right position in order to absorb the light of knowledge from God.

The cause of the cloudiness or untruth of the mirror of the heart is disobedience, strong lust, and many sinful deeds. Therefore, to make the heart shine, a person must restrain himself from lust (riyadhah), always do good, have faith, and always obey Allah Swt. with all his heart. This will make the heart shine and clear, and from here a person will obtain

the knowledge given by Allah Swt.

Sufis tend to believe that gaining divine knowledge is not through conventionally learned knowledge. They believe that the way to achieve it is by prioritizing mujahadah (striving to fight against lust and draw closer to God) and cleansing oneself of despicable traits. Once a person has succeeded in doing this, Allah Swt. will give orders to the heart of His servant, illuminating his heart with the shining light of knowledge. When Allah Swt. has arranged the affairs of a person's heart, His mercy will overflow to the heart, its chest will be opened, the secrets of the angelic world will be revealed, and the heart will shine with the essence of Godhood so that the truth is seen without the slightest doubt.

Al-Ghazali believes that achieving knowledge in such a form cannot be measured only by rational parameters, but can be achieved through the qalb, or heart, and the two are interrelated. Al-Ghazali explains that the senses and reason have objects that can be observed in this world, while the qalb has an object in the form of the realm of malakut (the realm of the kingdom), which is a realm that lies behind this world (Hilal, 2002). In Al-Ghazali's view, there is a close relationship between reason and intuition. He likens a person who gains knowledge through reason to a small child (*al-thifl*), and a person who gains knowledge through intuition to a teenager (*al-mumayyiz*). This analogy shows a stage that is interrelated rather than separate, meaning that the human reason after being able to grasp basic knowledge (*daruriyat*) will show two abilities, namely the ability to produce knowledge through understanding the mind and through understanding feelings. Al-Ghazali then explains that knowledge gained through understanding the mind uses the thinking tool located in the brain, while knowledge gained through understanding feelings uses the will tool centered in the heart. Thus, the brain is related to reason and the heart is related to intuition.

In achieving ma'rifat there are several stages. First, knowledge and deeds. According to William C. Chittik, although the terms "knowledge" and "ma'rifat" have the same meaning, namely knowledge, there is a fundamental difference between the two. Knowledge refers to knowledge obtained outwardly through the learning process, while ma'rifat refers to inner or gnostic knowledge obtained directly from God through spiritual practices that result in revelation (*kasyf*) and witnessing (*musyahadah*). Meanwhile, according to Al-Ghazali, knowledge is the basis of everything, including the basis of faith, worship, and recognition (ma'rifat) of Allah Swt. For him, knowledge is the path to ma'rifat (Teba, 2004). Although ma'rifat is considered higher than knowledge, the position of knowledge is also very important, especially knowledge that provides benefits. Knowledge that is not

beneficial is knowledge that is disconnected from its source and essence, namely knowledge about God.

Second, contemplation. In the search for ma'rifat, reason also has an important role, where the process of thinking becomes the key to opening the light and preparing inner wisdom. Although according to Al-Ghazali, human reason cannot reach the essence of faith only through the knowledge it has or that it has attempted. Reason needs to be supported by sharia knowledge that comes from the Qur'an. The Qur'an has a very important position for reason, similar to the relationship between light and the eye which is very closely related.

Third, tazkiyat an-nafs. In a discussion about knowledge, Al-Ghazali explained that tazkiyat an-nafs, or purification of the soul, is a type of knowledge that is commendable and must be practiced by every Muslim. In the context of faith, Al-Ghazali sees tazkiyat an-nafs as a form of glorification and knowledge of Allah Swt. In the context of thaharah (purification), tazkiyat an-nafs involves purifying oneself from external uncleanness and purifying one's heart from despicable morals. In the context of the magic of the heart, Al-Ghazali considers tazkiyat an-nafs as the soul's awareness of itself and the desire to know Allah Swt (Solihin, 2000). In an effort to obtain ma'rifat, al-Ghazali conveyed the four pillars explained in his work *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, namely: first, distancing oneself from worldly relationships (*al-uzlah*); second, reflecting deeply (*as-samt*); third, experiencing deprivation or hunger (*al-ju'*); and fourth, keeping oneself awake at night (*as-sahar*). These four things act as protection for purity of the heart from disturbances of heart diseases or dangers from outside. It is important to note that these four things are not the main goal, but only as tools or means to reach Allah Swt. All of these things have significance in getting closer to Him, and without all of them Therefore, the process of the journey towards Allah Swt. can be hampered or even not run at all.

According to Al-Ghazali, revelation (*kasyf*) will occur perfectly if it develops from an attitude of istiqamah, because revelation usually arises from holding back hunger, standing at night to worship, being silent, and isolating oneself. However, if there is no attitude of istiqamah, then the revelation will be similar to the skill of magic. The revelation referred to here is the revelation that grows from an attitude of istiqamah.

When performing mujahadah, sometimes the body experiences damage with the emergence of illness, pain, and mental restlessness. If it is not preceded by soul training and a correct understanding of the nature of knowledge, then destructive fantasies will appear and can last for an indefinite period of time. Many Sufis experience this condition until Allah Swt. enlightens their hearts.

4. Comparison Between Ibn Arabi and Al-Ghazali

Ibn Arabi and Al-Ghazali, two central figures in Islamic thought, have different but similar approaches in understanding ma'rifat. Ibn Arabi, in his concept of *wahdat al-wujud*, asserts that God is the only true existence, and everything in the universe is merely a manifestation of Him. This approach emphasizes an inclusive mystical experience, where the individual who attains ma'rifat realizes that his essence is part of God. Ibn Arabi also emphasizes the complete unity of existence, that everything not only comes from God but also returns to Him, creating a reality that is inseparable from Him.

On the other hand, Al-Ghazali, although also recognizing the importance of ma'rifat, emphasizes more on the process of achieving ma'rifat through spiritual discipline and inner knowledge directly from God through spiritual practices that result in revelation (*kasyf*) and direct testimony (*musyahadah*). For Al-Ghazali, ma'rifat is the result of deep inner knowledge of God, which can be achieved through spiritual practices such as meditation, *dhikr*, and introspection. Ibn Arabi's approach tends to be more philosophical and theocentric, where the search for God and understanding Him is the basis of all knowledge. Meanwhile, Al-Ghazali emphasizes more on the practical and ethical aspects, where the search for ma'rifat must be accompanied by obedience to religious teachings and spiritual discipline. Al-Ghazali also emphasizes that ma'rifat must be accompanied by self-control and rejection of worldly desires that neglect.

Nevertheless, both agree that ma'rifat is the highest goal in spiritual life, where man truly knows, loves, and devotes himself totally to God. Although with different approaches, both have the view that ma'rifat is the key to true happiness and a deep understanding of the nature of existence. In practice, both emphasize the importance of direct experience in achieving deep spiritual understanding, although through different paths: Ibn Arabi through awareness of the unity of existence, while Al-Ghazali through spiritual discipline and self-control.

Conclusion

Ma'rifat, which is a deep spiritual understanding of God, is the main goal in the spiritual life for Islamic mystics. Although Ibn Arabi and Al-Ghazali have different approaches, both agree that ma'rifat is the key to achieving true happiness and a deep understanding of the nature of existence. Ibn Arabi emphasizes the concept of *wahdat al-wujud*, where everything in the universe is a manifestation of God, while Al-Ghazali emphasizes the attainment of ma'rifat through spiritual discipline and direct inner knowledge of God. Although their approaches are different,

both emphasize the importance of direct experience in achieving deep spiritual understanding, albeit through different methods. Ibn Arabi emphasizes the awareness of the unity of existence, while Al-Ghazali focuses on spiritual discipline and self-control. Through a deep understanding of God, oneself, and the universe, ma'rifat allows humans to know, love, and devote themselves totally to God, achieve true happiness, and unite themselves with God.

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