

**Self-Transformation of Modern Man through Ma'rifat:
A Comparative Study of the Thought of Ibn Arabi and Al-Ghazali**

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Abstract

This article aims to discuss the concept of ma'rifat in the thoughts of Ibn Arabi and Al-Ghazali, which is a form of inner knowledge that transcends the boundaries of conventional and rational knowledge. This research uses a qualitative method with a literature study approach. This study found that Ibn Arabi emphasizes on wahdat al-wujud, where individuals who achieve ma'rifat realize that their essence is part of God. Meanwhile, Al-Ghazali emphasizes the attainment of ma'rifat through spiritual discipline and inner knowledge directly from God through spiritual practices. Despite their different approaches, both agree that ma'rifat is the highest goal in spiritual life, where man truly knows, loves and devotes himself to God. Despite their differences, both believe 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, 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; Self-Transformation

Introduction

Humans naturally tend to seek the meaning and existence of God through traces. Although science can provide arguments on this issue, it seems that humans have not fully understood or reached a complete understanding of God's existence. One theme 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 mystical world. Debates about this concept continue, with attempts to find suitable approaches to understanding various religious concepts.

In contrast to philosophy and theology, the understanding of God in mysticism tends to be inclusive (Chudzaifah et al., 2022). The mystical

understanding of God involves a deep inner experience, by sharpening the sense (zhauq) and through achieving oneness with divine love. This experience is difficult to communicate directly. In the Islamic context, this mystical expression is known as *tasawwuf*, or in Western literature as Sufism (Nasir, 2016). Annemarie Schimmel describes this phenomenon as Islamic mysticism (Marsudi, 2017).

One of the Islamic mystics is Ibn Arabi, who is known for his concept of *wahdatul wujud*. Ibn Arabi's thought is very unique because he was able to formulate his mystical experience into the language of philosophy, so that his philosophy is not only rational, but also contains intuitive nuances. Another specialty of Ibn Arabi's thought is his ability to trigger pros and cons among Islamic thinkers. Some people think that his teachings are deviant because they are considered to exceed the boundaries of religion. On the other hand, there is a mystic figure who is no less famous in the Islamic world, namely al-Ghazali. Through his knowledge, al-Ghazali seeks to achieve certain beliefs and know the essence of everything so as to build his critical thinking towards truth. This led him to explore the science of Sufism so that he succeeded in compromising and integrating Sufism and Sharia into a construction that was very satisfying among Sufis and fiqh scholars. Al-Ghazali also offered a dynamic and creative Sufism by seeing life as a process of self-perfection towards God (Fasya, 2022).

When viewed from their thoughts, these two figures both have a view of the concept of *ma'rifat* contained in the teachings of Sufism. Although Ibn 'Arabi is famous for his *wahdatul wujud* concept, this view boils down to *ma'rifat*. *Ma'rifat* is one aspect of the study in Sufism that refers to the source of Islamic teachings, namely the Qur'an and Hadith or actions reflected in the life of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH. 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 usage it can be understood that *ma'rifat* has many meanings, such as knowing, knowing, very familiar, proper relationship, 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 thorough and detailed knowledge, as a result of a very close and good relationship.

Some previous researchers have studied the thoughts of Ibn 'Arabi and al-Ghazali related to the concept of *ma'rifat*, one of which is *ma'rifat* as an anticipatory solution to epistemology-based religious radicalism. The research shows that at the level of common understanding, *ma'rifat* is used as a basis for building the unity of the people. While at the level of difference, theological and psychological paradigms are built into an

awareness that truth is plural so that in the reflection stage it will lead to mutual respect and respect for each other (Dahlan et al., 2013). In addition, other studies only focus on discussing the concept of ma'rifat from each figure. According to al-Ghazali, ma'rifat is the essence of taqarrub, as the fruit of the spiritual spark of divinity which is the essence of human reality even though the intellect cannot understand it (Zaini, 2016). The previous study became one of the previous studies that combined the thoughts of Ibn 'Arabi and al-Ghazali. But so far, it is still rare to find research that compares their thoughts related to the concept of ma'rifat, especially as an effort of self-transformation for modern humans. This is a research gap that needs to be closed by researchers.

Thus, this research aims to examine the implications of one of the peak elements of Sufism, namely the concept of ma'rifat as an effort to transform modern humans into better individuals. This is studied according to the thoughts of two Sufism figures, Ibn 'Arabi and al-Ghazali, which in the end will show a comparison of the thoughts of the two figures in providing solutions to various problems of modern man. The main question of this research is how the implication of ma'rifat towards human self-transformation in the modern era, seen from the thoughts of Ibn 'Arabi and al-Ghazali.

Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach both in data collection and analysis. Qualitative research methods are used because the main focus of this research is on an in-depth understanding of the views and thoughts of Ibn 'Arabi and al-Ghazali about ma'rifat, and how this concept can have implications for modern human self-transformation efforts. The first step in this research is to identify relevant primary sources, such as Ibn 'Arabi and al-Ghazali's written works that discuss ma'rifat. Then, the author conducts data collection through a thorough literature study, both from journal articles, books and others, as a secondary source of this research. Then data analysis is carried out through three stages, namely data reduction, data presentation to conclusion drawing (Saadah et al., 2022).

Results and Discussion

1. The concept of Ma'rifat in the thought of Ibn 'Arabi and Al-Ghazali

In general, mystics have similar inner experiences, although not always at the same level of depth. Their inner experiences transcend those of ordinary human beings, as the objects they encounter inwardly are completely different from what is known in the real world. Therefore, language is often unable to fully express the depth of such inner experiences. These mystical experiences are sometimes considered to be

contradictory or contrary to prevailing norms or common views of reasonableness. Controversy often arises when mystics share their ecstatic experiences.

Usually, the experience of *syathahat* occurs when the state of mind reaches its peak, which is when the individual feels one with God. At that moment, consciousness is beyond the ordinary human level, but rather at a level that transcends humanity, where human consciousness merges with divine consciousness. The challenge that arises when consciousness is beyond the human level is the inability to express the depth of this experience, given the limitations of existing language.

The ma'rifat approach in Ibn Arabi's thought is a central concept that has had a wide influence among the spiritual thinkers and practitioners of the Islamic world (Zuhri, 2016). Ma'rifat is often translated as "inner knowledge" or "intuitive recognition" (Kurniawan & Zamzam, 2022), is a type of knowledge that transcends the boundaries of rational and conventional knowledge. According to Ibn Arabi, ma'rifat is a form of direct knowledge of God achieved through profound spiritual experience. He believed that every individual has the potential to attain ma'rifat, although many are hindered by attachment to the material world and sensory experiences. Ibn Arabi asserted that the first step towards ma'rifat is to detach oneself from worldly ties and develop a higher spiritual awareness, which can be done through a deep practice of meditation, dhikr, and muhasabah (Sabiq, 2016).

One of the main concepts in Ibn Arabi's thought is "al-wahdatul wujud" or "unity of existence". Ibn Arabi believed that God is the only real existence, while everything in the universe is merely a manifestation of God. In this understanding, the individual who attains ma'rifat realizes that his or her essence is part of God and nothing is separate from Him (Muhyiddin et al., 2022). Ibn Arabi's approach to ma'rifat also includes a deeper understanding of oneself. He believes that individuals must understand the true nature of their existence and realize that their essence is part of God. This involves deep self-exploration as well as the elimination of the ego to achieve this realization (Dahlan et al., 2013).

In practice, ma'rifat according to Ibn Arabi also involves a relationship with a spiritual teacher (shaykh) who can guide individuals on their spiritual journey. This spiritual teacher has deeper knowledge and experience of ma'rifat and can help individuals overcome any obstacles that may arise in their quest for higher consciousness. Ibn Arabi's ma'rifat approach also emphasizes the importance of direct experience in achieving deep spiritual understanding. He believed that spiritual experience is the key to understanding God, and individuals should seek this experience through appropriate spiritual practices (Nasiruddin & Fitriani, 2023).

Al-Ghazali, a renowned Sufi, was adept at formulating various concepts into outstanding works. Unlike the previous Sufis, Al-Ghazali emphasized clear characteristics and boundaries in formulating the concept of ma'rifat. For him, ma'rifat is not just rational understanding, but also involves inner experience and cleansing of the heart (Habib, 2018).

Al-Ghazali's theory of ma'rifat, according to al-Taftazani (1979), is considered a complete and comprehensive theory (Ja'far, 2015). This is due to al-Ghazali's detailed discussion of mystical knowledge in terms of attainment, method, object and goal. His theory is considered a major contribution to the development of Sufism. Al-Ghazali classified Sufism into two parts: first, Sufism as the "science of mu'amalah," and second, Sufism as the "science of ma'rifat" (Khamid, 2020). The science of mu'amalah is seen as a stage of travel and struggle in tasawwuf, while the science of ma'rifat is considered a direct spiritual understanding.

In the context of the science of mu'amalah, the essence of tasawwuf is the effort of the salik (Sufi seeker) to achieve morality both outwardly and inwardly. The aim is to prepare the heart (qalb) for a spiritual journey towards a higher metaphysical dimension, namely the presence of God. In contrast, in the context of the science of ma'rifat, the essence of tasawwuf is an attempt to achieve understanding and direct experience of absolute reality (al-Haqq) (Zaini, 2016).

Al-Ghazali viewed ma'rifat as the ultimate goal that humans must achieve, as well as the form of perfection in which true happiness is realized. According to him, through ma'rifat, humans can truly know God; having known Him, they will love and devote themselves completely to Him. Al-Ghazali explains that for those who do not know or experience the delights of ma'rifatullah in this world, they will not experience the same delights in the Allah (Fitridah & Asqalani, 2023). This is due to the fact that what they do not experience in this world they will not encounter in the hereafter. For him, perfect enjoyment occurs when one experiences ma'rifat with God. Therefore, enjoying paradise without witnessing its Creator would lead to immense curiosity, which often leads to suffering.

Al-Ghazali taught that the enjoyment of heaven is in line with one's level of love for Allah (Al-Ghazali, 2020), which is proportional to the level of ma'rifat towards Him. For Al-Ghazali, the essence of happiness is ma'rifat, which in the context of religious law is likened to faith. In his work, *Ihya' Ulumuddin*, Al-Ghazali uses the analogy that the heart is like a mirror and knowledge is the image reflected in it. He explains that for a mirror to reflect the image well, it must always be clean, in the right position, and there are no obstructions between the image and the mirror. Similarly, one's heart must be clean, free from obstructions, and in the right position in order to absorb the light of ma'rifat from God (Muchasan, 2018).

In al-Ghazali's view, there is a close relationship between the ratio and intuitive (Patih, 2022). He likens the person who gains knowledge through reason to a child (al-thifl), and the person who gains knowledge through intuition to an adolescent (al-mumayyiz). This analogy shows a stage that is interrelated rather than separate, which means that the human ratio after being able to capture basic knowledge (daruriyat) will show two abilities, namely the ability to produce knowledge through understanding the mind and through understanding feelings (Nisa, 2020). Al-Ghazali then explained that knowledge gained through understanding the mind uses the thinking tool located in the brain, while knowledge gained through understanding feelings uses the tool of the will centered in the heart. Thus, the brain is related to the ratio and the heart is related to intuition.

2. Comparison between Ibn Arabi and Al-Ghazali

Ibn Arabi and Al-Ghazali, as two important figures in Islamic thought, offer different but complementary approaches to understanding the concept of ma'rifat. Ibn Arabi, through his theory of wahdat al-wujud (Adenan & Nasution, 2020), emphasizes that God is the only true reality, while everything in the universe is merely a manifestation of Him. This approach highlights an inclusive mystical experience, where the individual who attains ma'rifat realizes that his or her essence is connected to God. It also asserts that all existence not only comes from God, but also returns to Him, creating an inseparable relationship.

In contrast, Al-Ghazali, while recognizing the importance of ma'rifat, focuses more on the process of attaining ma'rifat through spiritual disciplines and knowledge directly from God through spiritual practices that result in revelation (kashf) and direct experience (musyahadah) (Syofrianisda & Abduh, 2017). For Al-Ghazali, ma'rifat is the result of a deep inner understanding of God, which can be achieved through practices such as meditation, dhikr and introspection.

Ibn Arabi's approach tends to be more philosophical and theocentric, with the search for and understanding of God being the basis of all knowledge. In contrast, Al-Ghazali emphasizes the practical and ethical aspects, where the quest for ma'rifat must be balanced with adherence to religious teachings and spiritual discipline. Al-Ghazali also emphasized the importance of self-control and rejection of worldly desires that could distract from the spiritual quest.

Despite their different approaches, both agree that ma'rifat is the highest goal in the spiritual life, where humans can truly know, love and devote themselves to God. Although in different ways, both believe that ma'rifat is the key to achieving true happiness and a deep understanding of the nature of existence. In practice, they emphasized the importance of direct experience in achieving deep spiritual understanding, albeit through

different paths: Ibn Arabi through realizing the unity of existence and Al-Ghazali through spiritual discipline and self-control.

3. Self-Transformation of Modern Man through Ma'rifat

In achieving ma'rifat, there are three stages. First, knowledge and charity. William C. Chittik explains that although “knowledge” and “ma'rifat” have the same meaning as knowledge, they are different from each other (Saepullah, 2021). Knowledge is acquired outwardly through learning, while ma'rifat is inner or gnostic knowledge gained directly from Allah through spiritual practices that result in revelation (kashf) and witnessing (musyahadah). Al-Ghazali emphasized that knowledge is the basis of faith, worship, and knowledge of Allah, making it the path to ma'rifat. Although ma'rifat is considered higher, useful knowledge is still important, especially knowledge that is connected to the knowledge of God. Next, tafakkur. In the quest for ma'rifat, the intellect plays an important role, where the thinking process becomes the key to unlocking light and gaining inner wisdom. However, according to Al-Ghazali, the intellect cannot reach the essence of faith through its knowledge alone; it needs the support of the knowledge of shari'ah sourced from the Qur'an, which functions like light for the eyes (Sodiq, 2017). Third, tazkiyat an-nafs. Al-Ghazali explains that tazkiyat an-nafs, or purification of the soul, is a praiseworthy science that every Muslim must practice (Sodiq, 2017). In the context of creed, tazkiyat an-nafs reflects the glorification of Allah, while in the context of thaharah, it involves outward and inward purification. Al-Ghazali considered tazkiyat an-nafs as the consciousness of the soul to know Allah.

In order to attain ma'rifat, Al-Ghazali listed four pillars in his work *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*: staying away from the company of the world, contemplating deeply, experiencing deprivation or hunger, and keeping oneself from sleeping at night. These four things are not the ultimate goal, but rather a means to get closer to Allah. Revelation (kashf) occurs perfectly from being istiqamah; without this attitude, revelation can be a mere illusion. During mujahadah, the body may suffer damage, but with proper mental training and understanding, destructive mental disorders can be avoided. Many Sufis experience this until Allah enlightens their hearts.

Ma'rifat offers various positive changes for the individual who achieves it. First, an increase in spiritual awareness. This is a manifestation of the taqarrub efforts made and is formed thanks to the frequency of worship performed in quality and continuity (Kamba, 2018). Second, tranquility and inner peace. The awareness of the relationship between individuals and God will lead to a person who is not thirsty for the world but does not completely abandon worldly life. Individuals will feel enough with what they have without having to pursue this mortal life. This reduces

pressure and stress as is often felt by modern people who are carried away by globalization (Effendi & Prayoga, 2024; Pellyani et al., 2024). The spaciousness of the heart, which is a spiritual hierarchy, makes individuals feel that the entire universe is like a speck of water in the ocean. The result of this condition makes the view clearer to be wiser in life (Khan, 1981). Third, the transformation of character and ethics. Through *mujahadah* and *tazkiyah an-nafs*, individuals will become accustomed to *takhalli* efforts to cleanse the diseases of the heart and refill it with *tahalli* that focuses on goodness and wisdom. Fourth, it improves concentration. Everyone has their own level of concentration, but one who seeks self-transformation through ma'rifat will find himself at a higher level of concentration. This is a result of *seclusion* with God where the mind is directed only towards Him (Khan, 2002).

Conclusion

Ma'rifat is the core of the spiritual journey in Islamic mysticism, where a deep understanding of God is the ultimate goal to achieve true happiness. Ibn Arabi and Al-Ghazali, despite their different approaches, agree that ma'rifat is achieved through direct experience and spiritual depth. Ibn Arabi taught *wahdat al-wujud*, the unity of all existence with God. While Al-Ghazali emphasized spiritual discipline and self-control as the path to ma'rifat. Through ma'rifat, humans can recognize, love and devote themselves fully to God, creating inner peace and harmony with God's essence. This research has limitations in terms of the validity of the findings and the in-depth study of empirical reality. Therefore, it is recommended for future research to conduct field research to obtain more recent and comprehensive data.

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