



Conceptions of Happiness in Al-Ghazali and Mulla Sadra: A Comparative Philosophical Analysis

Noor un Nisa Khan

Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Iqra University. dr.noorunnisa@iqra.edu.pk

Syeda Samana Haider

M.Phil. Researcher in Philosophy, University of Karachi .
Samanayasir6785@gmail.com

Abstract

In Islamic intellectual tradition, discussions on happiness are centered around the concept of *Sa'ādah*, an Arabic term meaning happiness or bliss. However, *Sa'ādah* represents a comprehensive notion of happiness that is significantly different from the narrow and transient idea of happiness found in today's digitalized consumer culture and techno-materialist paradigm. It includes happiness, prosperity, self-actualization, perfection, contentment, and spiritual fulfillment, and is grounded in ethical, spiritual, and philosophical dimensions. This paper first explores the concept of *Sa'ādah* in detail through the thought of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111). In his view, happiness is a balanced integration of ethical conduct, intellectual development, and spiritual purification, where the refinement of character and closeness to God form the core of human fulfillment. It then examines Mulla Sadra (1572–1641), who develops a metaphysical account of happiness grounded in the soul's existential journey through the levels of being, ultimately culminating in perfection and unity with the Divine. The paper then offers a comparative analysis of both thinkers, highlighting their shared emphasis on self-knowledge, spiritual development, and divine proximity, while also noting their different methodological approaches—ethical-spiritual in al-Ghazali and ontological-metaphysical in Mulla Sadra. Finally, the study explores the contemporary relevance of *Sa'ādah* by engaging with modern philosophical and psychological discussions on happiness, including positive psychology and critiques of consumer culture. It argues that the Islamic conception of happiness offers a deeper and more sustainable alternative to the superficial and materialistic understanding of well-being in the modern world.

Keywords: *Sa'ādah*; happiness; al-Ghazali; Mulla Sadra; Islamic philosophy; self-realization; gnosis (*ma'rifah*); ethics; metaphysics; spiritual fulfillment; comparative philosophy; Islamic intellectual tradition

1. Introduction:

Nasr (2014, p. 77) argues that happiness is informed and shaped by the “*Weltanschauung*” of each culture. Since Islam is both a religion and a worldview, the concept of happiness and the ways to pursue it have been uniquely conceptualized in Islamic thought. Deeply rooted in Islamic metaphysics, the idea of happiness in Islamic philosophy significantly differs from modern conceptions of happiness shaped by consumerist and hedonist tendencies, which often reduce happiness to transient physical pleasures. Drawing on the ideas of ultimate reality and the nature of human beings, Muslim



thinkers have proposed the concept of *sa'ādah*, a form of enduring and everlasting happiness (Omais, 2025, pp. 45–46).

This paper examines the concept of happiness as articulated by two profound figures in the Islamic intellectual tradition: Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) and Sadr ad-Din Muhammad Shirazi, commonly known as Mulla Sadra (d. 1640). Al-Ghazali, a prominent and influential medieval jurist, philosopher, theologian, and Sufi mystic, made significant contributions across nearly all major Islamic sciences. However, in his mystical writings, such as *The Alchemy of Happiness* (al-Ghazali, 2001) and his magnum opus *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (*The Revival of the Religious Sciences*) (al-Ghazali, 1993), the theme of happiness emerges as a central focus. He draws upon the Qur'an, prophetic traditions, Sufi texts, and philosophy to develop a comprehensive understanding of human fulfillment.

Mulla Sadra is another influential thinker known for synthesizing earlier schools of Islamic thought into a new philosophical framework called “Transcendent Theosophy” (Nasr, 2006). He uniquely combined mysticism and philosophy, integrating mystical insight with rational thought in his work. As Farid (2004, p. 60) notes, Mulla Sadra’s philosophy enriches his mysticism, and his “philosophy is inspired by a rational cognitive mystical experience (revelation) drawn from the light of God.” The aim of this study is to explore how al-Ghazali and Mulla Sadra conceptualize happiness, or *sa'adah*, within the Islamic intellectual tradition. Additionally, it comparatively analyzes their views on happiness and its pursuit. Furthermore, an attempt is made to briefly interpret the relevance of their ideas of happiness in the modern context by contrasting them with the prevalent materialist hedonist view, which equates happiness with transient physical pleasures.

Although the concept of happiness in the works of al-Ghazali and Mulla Sadra has been explored individually by scholars, no study to date has undertaken a focused comparative analysis of their respective views. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first study that exclusively examines the idea of happiness in the thought of al-Ghazali and Mulla Sadra through a comparative lens. Accordingly, this research reviews the relevant literature, provides a detailed description of how both thinkers understand the concept of happiness, and contextualizes it within their broader philosophical frameworks. Following a thorough exploration, a comparative analysis is presented, concluding with a discussion of their relevance in the contemporary context. To achieve this objective, the study employs critical and comparative analytical methods.

2. Literature Review

As noted earlier, although many scholars have explored the idea of happiness (*sa'ādah*) in the works of al-Ghazali and Mulla Sadra, no study has compared their views. This section reviews the relevant literature to show how each thinker’s perspective on happiness has been explored and to situate the present study within the existing body of research.

2.1. Literature on al- Ghazali

The review of literature from the last decade reflects increased interest in al-Ghazali’s work in general and in his concept of happiness in particular. For example, Arroisia et al. (2023) assess al-Ghazali’s philosophical dimensions in



the context of his spiritual ideology. Based on Islamic thought and Qur'anic teachings, the article explores ideas such as humanity, existence, and the pursuit of happiness in Ghazali's system. Discussing al-Ghazali's view of spirituality, the study implicitly highlights that in his system the self can only attain true happiness when it purifies itself from worldly desires and attains knowledge of God, which distinguishes humans from other creatures.

Another article explicitly investigates al-Ghazali's concept of happiness as presented in his famous work *The Alchemy of Happiness*. The authors use a quantitative content analysis approach. By situating al-Ghazali's idea of happiness within his broader philosophical framework, the study suggests that his psycho-spiritual approach to living a meaningful life can help individuals, particularly Muslims, attain a fulfilling and salvific life (Jalili & Ulfa, 2023).

Another study by Yahya et al. (2020) examines the elements of happiness in al-Ghazali's thought, highlighting their relevance for psychospiritual well-being. Drawing on the Prophet's guidance and Qur'anic principles, the study employed qualitative content analysis and found that al-Ghazali's insights on purification of the soul, intellect, and spiritual practices can promote inner well-being and have potential applicability beyond the original cultural context. Another relevant study employs a comparative literary analysis to examine the conception of happiness in the works of al-Ghazali and Hasan al-Basri (Mazaya & Soleh, 2023). It argues that, for al-Ghazali, happiness is primarily achieved through faith, piety, and devotion to God. It is culminated in the attainment of *ma'rifah* (gnosis of Allah) through self-knowledge and the proper governance of the heart over other human faculties. In contrast, Hasan al-Basri, situating happiness within a Sufi paradigm, emphasizes practices such as *zuhd* (detachment from worldly desires), *khauf* (fear of divine accountability), and *raja'* (hope in divine mercy). Further, the study attempts to connect these classical ideas with modern concepts of psychological well-being such as self-acceptance, positive relationships, environmental mastery, and life goals. However, its analysis is mostly descriptive and does not provide deep critical discussion or strong empirical evidence. Nonetheless, it highlights a link between Islamic spirituality and modern concepts of psychological well-being.

Halim (2022) compares al-Ghazali's and al-Farabi's views on achieving ultimate bliss (*sa'adah*) through the rational faculty of the human soul. The author argues that although both thinkers view the rational faculty as significant for ultimate bliss, they differ in their approaches. Influenced by Greek philosophy, al-Farabi views the theoretical rational faculty as the ultimate source of human perfection and happiness. His idea of ultimate bliss is closely linked to intellectual enlightenment in this world and the hereafter. In contrast to al-Farabi's philosophical approach, al-Ghazali offers a more ethical and spiritual approach to happiness. Al-Ghazali also considers the rational faculty important and believes that the perfection of the rational soul is essential for ultimate happiness or eternal bliss; however, he situates this perfection within an ethical and spiritual framework.

2.2 Literature on Mulla Sadra

The review of literature from recent publications on Mulla Sadra's Islamic Theosophy reflects increased interest in his philosophy among researchers; however, relatively little work has been done specifically on his concept of happiness.



One study presents a comparative analysis of Mulla Sadra and Aristotelian conceptions of happiness. It examines fundamental questions such as whether happiness is real or constructed, whether it belongs to this world or the hereafter, and whether it is innate or acquired (Raftari & Habibi, 2015, pp. 91–97). The study highlights that both philosophers address happiness within a metaphysical and ethical framework, though their conceptual foundations differ significantly.

Another study offers a comparative analysis of Mulla Sadra's and Kant's views on human essence. Although it does not directly focus on happiness, it contributes indirectly by linking human ontology to the possibility of fulfillment. According to Elahi et al. (2022), Mulla Sadra conceptualizes human beings as dynamic and divine manifestations with unlimited potential for perfection, rejecting the idea of a fixed essence. In contrast, Kant emphasizes human dignity and moral autonomy as the basis for achieving perfection, which is associated with happiness and felicity.

Yusefi-Rad (2021) implicitly examines Mulla Sadra's concept of happiness within a political-philosophical framework. Through content analysis, the study explores how Sadra's philosophical system influences the functioning of the state and its application in evaluating the Islamic Republic of Iran. The author argues that Mulla Sadra's concept of happiness involves the progressive development of the human being from a lower, animalistic state toward higher intellectual realization, ultimately culminating in unity with God. This progression is essential for understanding both individual and social dimensions of human life.

Finally, Shami Nezhad and Atrak (2020) analyze Mulla Sadra's doctrine of Substantial Motion, which explains the soul's gradual transformation from corporeal existence to incorporeal and ultimately super-abstract existence united with God. While the study primarily focuses on ontology and human development, it also connects these ideas to happiness through existential monotheism and worldview formation. The findings suggest that, in Mulla Sadra's philosophy, human happiness is achieved through the attainment of the highest level of perfection, culminating in union with God in a transcendent metaphysical state.

3. Analysis & Discussion

3.1. al-Ghazali's view of Happiness

The concept of happiness in al-Ghazali's thought is deeply rooted in Islamic metaphysics. It is informed and shaped by profound beliefs about ultimate reality (God), the true nature and purpose of human beings, and the meaning of life and death. Thus, his approach to happiness is holistic, integrating ethics, theology, and spirituality. Contrasting sharply with the fleeting nature of worldly pleasures, al-Ghazali articulates an idea of happiness that is both intellectual and spiritual, ultimately aiming for the eternal.

For al-Ghazali, knowledge of ultimate reality —God—is the source of joy and happiness (al-Ghazali, 2001, pp. 39–40). He further maintains that *ma'rifah* (gnostic or experiential knowledge of God) begins with self-knowledge, since understanding one's true self leads to the recognition of higher metaphysical realities and ultimately to awareness of the Divine (al-Ghazali, 1993, Vol. 3, p. 7). From this perspective, self-realization constitutes the first and essential step toward the pursuit and attainment of true happiness.

Aligned with broader Islamic teachings and deeply rooted in Sufi anthropology, al-Ghazali's concept of self-realization is closely connected to a teleological



understanding of the human self. In this view, human beings are created by God and endowed with a divine spirit (*rūḥ*), reflecting their spiritual origin and potential (al-Ghazali, 2001, pp. 59–60, 100). Al-Ghazali therefore does not regard the human being as merely a physical organism; rather, he presents a dual structure consisting of the physical body (*jism*) and an inner spiritual dimension. This inner reality is described through interrelated terms such as *rūḥ* (spirit), *naḥs* (self), *qalb* (heart), and *ʿaql* (intellect) (al-Ghazali, 1993, Vol. 3, pp. 7–10).

Within this framework, the body is temporary and bound to earthly existence, whereas the spiritual dimension represents the enduring aspect of the human being that transcends death. Although both dimensions are acknowledged, al-Ghazali prioritizes the non-physical self as the true essence of human identity (al-Ghazali, 2001, pp. 1–10). Human life is thus understood as a journey toward God, in which the body functions as a vehicle for the soul, and worldly existence serves as a temporary stage on the path to ultimate reality. This journey continues beyond physical death into a more enduring metaphysical existence (al-Ghazali, 1989, pp. 123–126). The distinctive quality of human beings, according to al-Ghazali, is their possession of knowledge and wisdom. The highest and noblest form of knowledge is knowledge of ultimate reality, namely God (al-Ghazali, 1993, Vol. 3, pp. 215–216). This knowledge, however, is not limited to formal theological understanding; rather, it refers to experiential and inspired knowledge that involves a profound sense of divine presence and nearness (al-Ghazali, 1993, Vol. 3, pp. 22–31). In this sense, the capacity for *maʿrifah* (gnosis) distinguishes human beings from other creatures. The soul, self, heart, and intellect—understood as spiritual faculties—are capable of receiving metaphysical realities.

Gnosis, for al-Ghazali, is not only a distinctive human quality but also the essence of human perfection. He argues that perfection is achieved when a being realizes its potential and fulfills the purpose for which it was created. Since the human soul is created for the attainment of *maʿrifah*, its perfection lies in the actualization of this capacity (al-Ghazali, 1993, Vol. 3, pp. 12–13; al-Ghazali, 2001, pp. 988–991). The concept of perfection is therefore central to his understanding of happiness, as true happiness is found in the realization of human perfection through *maʿrifah* (al-Ghazali, 2001, p. 38). Self-realization in his thought thus takes a distinctly spiritual meaning, involving movement toward ultimate reality through knowledge of one's true nature. Al-Ghazali further explains that all human beings possess the potential for this perfection; however, its realization requires the actualization of the higher self through spiritual and ethical discipline (al-Ghazali, 2001, p. 19). Spiritual transformation, in his view, is inseparable from ethical development. Accordingly, the attainment of true happiness requires engagement in spiritual practices such as prayer and contemplation alongside the cultivation of virtues and moral character. He emphasizes that spiritual elevation cannot occur without the refinement of character and ethical conduct (al-Ghazali, 1993, Vol. 3, pp. 47–68).

In his ethical discourse, al-Ghazali delineates three human faculties arranged in a natural hierarchy: the concupiscent faculty (associated with desire), the irascible faculty (associated with anger), and the faculty of intellect (al-Ghazali, 1993, Vol. 3, pp. 10–12). The first two faculties are lower in relation to the intellect and are shared with animals, whereas the intellect is regarded as a distinctively human and divinely oriented faculty. Animals, in this framework, do



not possess it in its full form. Al-Ghazali employs the term “intellect” in multiple senses, ranging from practical wisdom acquired through experience to the higher spiritual faculty through which *ma`rifah* (gnosis) is attained (al-Ghazali, 1993, Vol. 1, pp. 92–98).

His ethical theory is grounded in the dynamic interaction of these three faculties. Their relationship may take different forms: the concupiscent faculty may dominate, the irascible faculty may prevail, or the intellect may govern and regulate the other two (al-Ghazali, 1993, Vol. 3, pp. 10–12). Al-Ghazali maintains that the ideal condition is the last, in which the intellect rules and disciplines the lower faculties. These lower faculties serve secondary but necessary roles in the journey of self-realization: the concupiscent faculty generates pleasure and motivation, while the irascible faculty enables the avoidance of harm and protection from danger. Together, they support human survival and the spiritual journey toward God (Al-Ghazali, 1980, p. 314). The intellect, through knowledge and insight, regulates when and how these faculties should be satisfied. al-Ghazali warns that when the intellect is overpowered, a human being descends to a condition resembling that of animals, as behavior becomes governed solely by desire and anger. Such a condition represents a reversal of the natural hierarchy and is described as a form of moral and spiritual corruption (al-Ghazali, 2001, pp. 1–47).

He further argues that a self that fails to fulfill its intended purpose is a diseased self. Using the analogy of bodily health, he explains that just as an organ is healthy only when it performs its proper function, the self is healthy only when it fulfills its spiritual and ethical purpose (al-Ghazali, 2001, pp. 748–755; al-Ghazali, 2010, p. 45). When dominated by the lower faculties, the self becomes excessively attached to worldly pleasures, thereby losing sight of divine knowledge, proximity to God, and true happiness. al-Ghazali therefore advocates moderation, in which each faculty functions within its proper limits. Extremes are considered vices, while balance represents moral virtue. A self in which all three faculties operate harmoniously under the guidance of the intellect is described as a just self (al-Ghazali, 2001, pp. 1–47).

Spiritual and ethical discipline is essential for freeing the self from domination by desire and anger. Al-Ghazali maintains that unchecked indulgence in these impulses gives rise to moral vices such as ignorance, greed, jealousy, hypocrisy, and arrogance (al-Ghazali, 1993, Vol. 3, pp. 69–90, 127, 152). These vices obstruct the realization of the higher self and veil the individual from metaphysical truth (al-Ghazali, 2010, pp. 59–60). Accordingly, attaining happiness requires purification from excessive attachment to worldly desires and base instincts.

However, al-Ghazali does not advocate neglect of the body. Rather, he redefines its role within the framework of spiritual purpose. The body must be maintained and its legitimate needs fulfilled, as it serves as the vehicle for the self on its journey toward God (al-Ghazali, 1980, p. 314). At the same time, excessive pursuit of bodily pleasure is cautioned against, as it disrupts spiritual progress and obstructs the attainment of perfection. The fulfillment of bodily needs is therefore not an end in itself but a means to a higher end.

Finally, in discussing happiness in al-Ghazali’s thought, it is necessary to consider his distinction between the present world and the hereafter (Al-Ghazali, 1977, p. 24). While his cosmological framework is complex, it is sufficient to note that he views the material world as transient in comparison to the enduring



reality of the afterlife (al-Ghazali, 1997, p. 124). The physical body belongs to the temporal world, whereas the spiritual essence of the human being—understood as soul, self, heart, and intellect—belongs to the metaphysical realm. This distinction is central to his conception of happiness (*sa'ādah*), as ultimate fulfillment is located not in worldly pleasure but in eternal spiritual reality (al-Ghazali, 2001, p. 40).

3.2. Mulla Sadra's view of Happiness

The concept of happiness (*sa'ādah*) in Mulla Sadra's philosophical system is closely tied to his understanding of Ultimate Reality. In his view, happiness is inseparable from the nature of existence (*wujūd*) and the soul's journey toward higher levels of being, aligning with his broader metaphysical, theological, and ethical framework.

Sadra's conception of Ultimate Reality is grounded in the primacy of Being. Through this lens, all qualities and states of existence are understood in relation to *wujūd*. To properly understand his notion of happiness, it is necessary to situate it within his philosophical system, known as Transcendent Theosophy (*al-ḥikmah al-muta'āliyah*), which integrates philosophy, theology, and mysticism.

The concept of the primacy of Being constitutes the foundation of Sadra's transcendent theosophy, emphasizing that existence (*wujūd*) is the only reality. As Mulla Sadra states, "The reality of *wujūd* is the most manifest of all things through presence and unveiling" (Mulla Sadra, 2014, p. 53). Being is all that is. At its core, his metaphysics is a study of Being itself rather than individual existents. Unlike Aristotelian metaphysics, which is concerned with beings as individual entities, Sadra focuses on existence itself—Being qua Being. Moreover, he argues that existence is more fundamental than essence. Essences, for him, are mental constructs imposed on reality to classify and understand it, as indicated in his statement that essences are not the reality of *wujūd* but only its mental abstraction (Mulla Sadra, 2014, p. 57). What truly exists is the reality of *wujūd* itself. (Nasr & Leaman, 1996, p. 646).

In Sadra's metaphysics, *wujūd* is self-manifest and self-evident, while all contingent beings depend upon it for their existence. The highest and most complete level of existence is pure *wujūd*, which is characterized by absolute perfection and intensity of being (Mulla Sadra, 2014, pp. 57- 61). Furthermore, Sadra argues for the unity of Being. He develops Ibn Arabi's idea of *Wahdat al-Wujūd* (Unity of Being) within his conceptual framework, making it another central idea in his Transcendent Theosophy. Sadra asserts that all existence is fundamentally one. The multiplicity of beings and objects that we perceive are merely different manifestations of a single underlying reality, which is Being itself (Nasr & Leaman, 1996, p. 42). It exists in the outside world by itself, and others—by which he means quirks—exist there via it, not independently (Mulla Sadra, 2014, p. 63). He illustrates this concept with an analogy of the Sun and its rays. All the multitude of beings and objects are like rays to Being. The rays are not the Sun, but they are also nothing but the Sun. The relationship that exists between it and that which is different from it is comparable to the relationship that would exist between the sun's beams and the bodies that they illuminate, even though the sun would not exist on its own (Mulla Sadra, 2014, p. 147). Therefore, only existence is the existence of Being; the multiplicity of existents is



superficial and not real. This unity means that true happiness is found in the awareness and realization of the interconnectedness and unity of all existence.

A key idea Sadra uses to explain diversity and multiplicity while maintaining the unity of Being is his concept of the gradation of existence (*Tashkik al- Wujūd*). According to Sadra, all distinct beings and objects are various modes of Being with differing intensities. Thus, existence comes in varying degrees of intensity and perfection, forming a hierarchy. In this hierarchy, at the lowest level are simple, inanimate objects, while at the highest level is the Divine or God. Human beings, with their intellectual and spiritual capabilities, occupy a higher level of existence compared to animals and plants (Nasr & Leaman, 1996, p. 668).

An example using light illustrates this concept well. The light of the Sun and the light of a candle are both light, yet they differ in intensity. Similarly, existents on different levels of Being differ due to the intensity of their existence but are similar because they all share an element of Being. Some levels in Sadra's hierarchy are closely intertwined with theology and eschatology. For instance, at the lowest level is the physical world. Above it is the Imaginal world, which includes "*Alam-e-Barzakh*," a temporary abode for souls that have left the material world. Higher still is the realm of Intelligible/Fixed entities, "*Alam-e-Mithal*," and above all is the realm of the Divine (Nasr & Leaman, 1996, p. 665). Corresponding to this hierarchy of Being, Sadra also posits levels and gradations of happiness. An individual stuck in sensory pleasures and desires is considered devoid of true happiness and intellect in the Sadrian system. In contrast, an individual who has detached from worldly and material needs prepares their consciousness for the unveiling of gnostic visions and ascends to higher intensities of Being. This higher intensity enables one to grasp a greater level of intellect and attain true happiness, or *sa'adah*. A dynamism, through the Sadarian principle of trans-substantial motion, is also at work in the context of Happiness. He states that existence is dynamic rather than static. According to this view, all the beings in the universe are in a constant state of motion and transformation, not just at the surface level of accidents/ qualities, but in their very substance. All beings are going towards perfection since this motion is teleological. Every individual can fluctuate in both intensity and strength. Furthermore, an aspect of that (being) that is continuously changed and enhanced in its substantiality by a continuous motion with the quality of continuous oneness is known as the substantial ipseity (of a person) (Mulla Sadra, 1981, p. 165). For Sadra, this perfection is achieved by reaching higher levels of existence and closer proximity to the Divine. The hierarchy of being reflects the idea that different beings possess different levels of reality with the ultimate goal being to ascend through these levels towards a more complete and intense form of existence. Accordingly, as an individual's intensity of being increases, the projection of the Light of Being elevates the individual in existence, and correspondingly in Intellect, felicity, and happiness. This upward motion represents the soul's journey towards higher levels of existence and, consequently, higher levels of happiness. Thus, concepts such as *sa'adah* (happiness), felicity, and contentment have a directly proportional relationship with Being. The more intense and complete an individual's state of being, the happier that individual will be (Nasr & Leaman, 1996, p. 669).

With all the components in place within Sadra's conceptual framework, we are in a position to analyze Transcendent Theosophy and its connection to the concept



of happiness. Due to Trans-Substantial Motion, every existent is moving vertically. Existents come into being by an act of Being (*wujūd*). Depending on the level for which the existent is created, it travels through different levels of hierarchy to its designated level and then backward to Being. In the same way that physical life marks the end of the movement of (ontic) descent from God, so too do the ends (of man's psychic and noetic ascent) of physical death correspond exactly to the "beginnings" (or First Principles of the descent of Being). Because there is an equivalent rank for each type of being in the arc of rise among the ranks of the arc of descent. For instance, look at human creation from the physical realm: sperm changes into the fetus, changes into birth, changes into growth, changes into decline, and changes into death. Similarly, all beings in different realms and the physical world are the impressions of the Light. Light (act) of *wujūd* projects light on archetypes in the realm of forms, and then through the "arc of descent," existents come into being. As the existents gather intensity of being in them, they begin their journey upwards through the "arc of ascent" back to the Principal Being (Mulla Sadra, 1981, pp. 225- 226).

The dynamism within the system is also teleological, meaning all movements have a purpose and are directed toward perfection in a theological sense. In the context of humans, this signifies the spiritual progress of humanity. This spiritual progress is intimately linked to the attainment of true happiness (*sa'ādah*). As beings move upward through the hierarchy of being, they experience increasing degrees of perfection and happiness.

Mulla Sadra shares with al-Ghazali, Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Arabi the view that knowledge and intellectual pursuits lead to happiness. What distinguishes him, however, is that in his system knowledge, intellection, and consequently happiness are not merely mental activities but qualities with an ontological status. The higher one ascends in intellection, the greater the happiness, and the more complete one's very being (*wujūd*) becomes. Thus, for Sadra, the saint is not simply a morally better person but one who participates more fully in existence itself (Nasr, 2014, pp. 82–89).

In conclusion, within Sadra's framework, happiness is the ultimate state of being that results from the soul's journey through the hierarchical levels of existence, guided by the light of divine knowledge and gnosis. This journey, marked by the vertical movement of Trans-Substantial Motion, represents the soul's return to its source, culminating in the highest form of happiness through unity with the Principal Being.

3.3. Comparative Analysis

Though the ideas of al-Ghazali and Mulla Sadra are deeply rooted in Islamic metaphysics and both draw upon religious resources for their views and arguments, they take different approaches and develop distinct philosophical frameworks.

Ghazali's approach is deeply grounded in Islamic theology and Sufism. He integrates Qur'anic teachings, prophetic traditions, and Sufi methods into his understanding of happiness, making it accessible to everyday individuals and ethical practice (al-Ghazali, 2001, pp. 39–40; al-Ghazali, Vol. 3, pp. 47–68). In contrast, Sadra synthesizes philosophy, theology, and philosophical mysticism into a cohesive system known as Transcendent Theosophy. His approach is more abstract and metaphysical, centering on the primacy of existence (*wujūd*) as the foundation of reality (Mulla Sadra, 2014, pp. 53–57). Sadra's concept of



happiness involves understanding the nature of being itself and ascending through hierarchical levels of existence, which is the cornerstone of his metaphysical system (Mulla Sadra, 2014, pp. 57–61; Nasr & Leaman, 1996, p. 646).

Moreover, although both thinkers view self-actualization as essential for attaining happiness, they emphasize different dimensions of it. Al-Ghazali considers intellectual pursuit important, but prioritizes ethical refinement and spiritual discipline as central to self-realization. Knowledge must be complemented by virtuous conduct, purification of the self, and spiritual practices such as prayer and contemplation (al-Ghazali, Vol. 3, pp. 69–90). His path to happiness therefore involves practical steps that align the soul with divine will and moral perfection (al-Ghazali, 2001, pp. 1–47).

In contrast, Sadra emphasizes intellectual illumination and metaphysical realization as central to self-actualization. For him, happiness is achieved through the soul's ascent in existence and increasing intensity of being, where knowledge is not merely conceptual but ontological in nature (Mulla Sadra, 2014, pp. 57–61).

Despite these differences, there are notable similarities between their perspectives on real happiness. The concept of happiness (*sa'ādah*), in both philosophical frameworks, transcends physical and ephemeral pleasure. It is an intellectual and spiritual state deeply interwoven with metaphysical understandings of Ultimate Reality and the teleological nature of human existence. For al-Ghazali, knowledge of God is the ultimate source of happiness (al-Ghazali, 2001, pp. 39–40), and *ma'rifah* begins with self-knowledge (al-Ghazali, 1993, Vol. 3, p. 7). Likewise, Sadra grounds fulfillment in proximity to the highest intensity of being (Mulla Sadra, 2014, pp. 57–61). Both thinkers thus regard human existence as essentially teleological, oriented toward divine or ultimate realization, extending beyond bodily life into metaphysical continuity (al-Ghazali, 1989, pp. 123–126).

3.3.1. Gnosis (*ma'rifah*) as the ultimate goal

From the perspectives of al-Ghazali and Mulla Sadra, true happiness lies in knowledge of the Truth and the realization of God as Ultimate Reality. Al-Ghazali explicitly identifies *ma'rifah* (gnostic knowledge) as the highest form of knowledge and the foundation of human perfection (al-Ghazali, 2001, pp. 39–40, 988–991). He further argues that this experiential knowledge begins with self-awareness, which leads to divine realization (al-Ghazali, 1993, Vol. 3, p. 7).

Similarly, Sadra situates ultimate happiness in the ascent of being and the realization of higher intensities of existence, where knowledge becomes identical with ontological transformation (Mulla Sadra, 2014, pp. 57–61). In both frameworks, gnosis is not merely intellectual but constitutes the very essence of human perfection and fulfillment.

3.3.2. Self-realization

Both al-Ghazali and Mulla Sadra adopt a teleological view of human existence. For al-Ghazali, human beings are created with a divine purpose, and their true identity lies in the spiritual dimension rather than the physical body (al-Ghazali, 2001, pp. 59–60, 100). Human life is thus a journey toward God, continuing beyond physical death into metaphysical existence (al-Ghazali, 1989, pp. 123–126).



In this journey, self-knowledge becomes the first essential step toward realization of truth and ultimate happiness (al-Ghazali, 1993, Vol. 3, p. 7).

Similarly, Sadra frames existence as a dynamic process of trans-substantial motion, where the soul continuously moves toward higher levels of perfection (Mulla Sadra, 1981, pp. 225–226). Self-realization, therefore, is not static but an ongoing ontological ascent toward the Divine.

3.3.3. Intellectual pursuit, ethical development, and spiritual growth

Al-Ghazali and Mulla Sadra both agree that human perfection requires the integration of knowledge, ethics, and spirituality, although they differ in emphasis.

Al-Ghazali strongly emphasizes ethical refinement, purification of the self, and regulation of human faculties as essential conditions for spiritual progress (al-Ghazali, Vol. 3, pp. 69–90). He argues that moral discipline and spiritual practices are necessary for removing obstacles that veil the heart from divine reality (al-Ghazali, 2010, pp. 59–60).

Mulla Sadra, while more metaphysical in orientation, also affirms that moral and spiritual development accompany the soul's ascent through levels of being. Ethical refinement facilitates the increase in intensity of existence and thus contributes to spiritual perfection (Mulla Sadra, 1981, pp. 165, 225–226).

3.3.4. Worldly attachments are obstacles

Both thinkers agree that attachment to worldly pleasures obstructs spiritual progress. Al-Ghazali repeatedly warns that excessive indulgence in desires leads to moral corruption and distance from divine knowledge, ultimately preventing true happiness (al-Ghazali, 2001, pp. 1–47; al-Ghazali, 2010, pp. 59–60). He therefore emphasizes purification of the self and moderation of bodily desires as necessary for spiritual balance.

Similarly, Mulla Sadra views attachment to material existence as a lower mode of being that limits the soul's ascent toward higher levels of existence (Mulla Sadra, 2014, pp. 57–61). For both thinkers, detachment from excessive worldly engagement is essential for achieving spiritual perfection.

4. Modern Relevance of their Concept of Happiness

In today's capitalist, materialist world, there is a growing trend of identifying oneself with one's material possessions. "Who am I?" is increasingly defined by "What do I have?" or "What and how much I buy" (Campbell, 2020, p. 27-44). Consequently, individuals attempt to define themselves by their bank balances, property, cars, branded accessories, and even relationships, which are often seen as possessions. This mentality promotes a culture where individuals see their worth concerning their possessions. To enhance their worth, they make the accumulation of possessions the purpose of their lives. This idea assumes that having more will bring fulfillment and happiness. However, studies report that individuals who indulge in constant acquisition tend to have lower life satisfaction, subjective happiness, and self-esteem (Rana et al., 2023, 177-184) (Ryan & Dziurawiec, 2001, p. 185-197).

The idea of self-actualization, which is the cornerstone in the discourse on happiness in the works of al-Ghazali and Mulla Sadra, encourages us to embark upon a self-journey; to discover the real self and explore aspects of the self that transcend material aspects. They challenge the prevailing materialist, illusory view of the self that is defined by "to have" and insist we review our identity,



which for them is greater than material aspects (Fromm, 2008, p.63). Thus, instead of searching for happiness in the accumulation of possessions, they direct us to look for it in self-realization and progressing towards perfection. Moreover, both emphasize living an authentic life characterized by thoughtfulness and contemplation.

Moreover, their idea of asceticism (*zuhd*), which demands moderation in our consumption of goods, presents a meaningful and relevant alternative to the exploitative consumerist lifestyle. This consumerist lifestyle stems directly from the materialist concept of happiness, which views happiness as being derived from excessive material possessions and gratification of desires. The idea that overconsumption increases human happiness or well-being has been already challenged by researchers (Cole, 2010; Helm et al., 2019, p. 264-284). There is already an awareness of the negative impact of a consumerist lifestyle on human well-being and the environment (Jain, 2019, p. 474-480). In recent years the emerging trend of minimalism has been witnessed, which promotes the reduction of consumption to the basic needs and stress to differentiate between needs and wants (Palafox, 2020, p. 474-480; Błoński & Witek, 2019). The idea of *zuhd* inspired us to live a simple life by reducing material possessions and thoughtful consumption (Defriono et al., 2023, p. 151-163). It stops us from establishing an exploitative relationship with nature and promotes environmental sustainability.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, al-Ghazali and Mulla Sadra share profound similarities in their views on happiness. Both thinkers emphasize spiritual and intellectual growth, self-knowledge, ethical development, and the ultimate goal of divine proximity. Despite their differences in approach—Ghazali's practical ethical focus versus Sadra's abstract metaphysical ascent—both see happiness as a holistic state achieved through the integration of ethical conduct, spiritual practices, and deep metaphysical understanding. This unified pursuit leads to the eternal journey of the soul toward ultimate fulfillment and divine proximity.

In light of these ideas, their concept of happiness also carries significant relevance for contemporary understandings of human well-being, especially in a world increasingly shaped by materialist values and consumerist definitions of identity.

References

- al-Ghazālī. (1977). *The jewels of the Qur'an: Al-Ghazālī's theory* (M. A. Quasem, Trans.). National University of Malaysia.
- al-Ghazālī. (1980). *Deliverance from error; Five key texts including his spiritual autobiography, al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (R. J. McCarthy, Trans.). Fons Vitae.
- al-Ghazālī. (1989). *The remembrance of death and the afterlife (Kitāb dhikr al-mawt wa-mā ba'dahu): Book XL of The revival of the religious sciences (Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn)* (T. J. Winter, Trans.). Islamic Texts Society.
- al-Ghazālī. (1993). *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn: Revival of religious learnings* (F. Karim, Trans., Vols. 1–4). Darul-Ishaat.
- al-Ghazālī. (1997). *Mishkāt al-anwār* (W. H. Gairdner, Trans.). Islamic Book Service.



- al-Ghazālī. (2001). *Kīmiyā-yi sa'ādat: Alchemy of eternal bliss* (M. A. Bilal, Trans.). Kazi Publications.
- al-Ghazālī. (2010). *Al-Ghazzali on disciplining the self (from Kīmiyā-yi sa'ādat / Alchemy of happiness)* (M. N. Abdus Salam, Trans.). Great Books of the Islamic World.
- Arroisia, J., et al. (2023). Pursuit of spiritual happiness: Abu Hamid al-Ghazali on the theory of human nature. *Progresiva: Jurnal Pemikiran dan Pendidikan Islam*, 12(2), 291–302.
- Błoński, K., & Witek, J. (2019). Minimalism in consumption. *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska, Sectio H: Oeconomia*, 53(2), 7–15. <https://doi.org/10.17951/h.2019.53.2.7-15>
- Campbell, C. (2021). I shop therefore I know that I am: The metaphysical basis of modern consumerism. In *Consumption and consumer society* (pp. 121–142). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-83681-8_8
- Cole, C. (2010, June 21). Overconsumption is costing us the earth and human happiness. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2010/jun/21/overconsumption-environment-relationships-annie-leonard>
- Defriono, I., Zaini, S. K., Nawal, A. F., & Hidayat, A. M. (2023). Zuhd and minimalism in a consumerist society: Exploring Al-Ghazali and Fumio Sasaki's thoughts. *Peradaban Journal of Religion and Society*, 2(2), 151–163.
- Elahi, M., Behesht, I., Razavi, S. H., Athar, S. A. A. M., & Hosseini, S. M. (2022). A comparative study of the status of the perfect human being from the perspective of Mulla Sadra and Kant. *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 6(3), 2543–2550. <https://doi.org/10.59001/jpsp.v6i3.12345>
- Farid, A. (2004). Mulla Ṣadrā's theory of knowledge. In *Mulla Sadra's school and Western philosophies* (p. 60). Sadra Islamic Philosophy Research Institute.
- Fromm, E. (2008). *To have or to be?* Continuum.
- Halim, N. (2022). The views of Al-Fārābī and al-Ghazālī on achieving happiness through the rational faculty of the human soul: A comparative study. *Islamic Studies*, 61(3), 293–304.
- Helm, S., Serido, J., Ahn, S. Y., Ligon, V., & Shim, S. (2019). Materialist values, financial and pro-environmental behaviors, and well-being. *Young Consumers*, 20(4), 264–284. <https://doi.org/10.1108/YC-10-2018-0867>
- Jain, P., & Jain, P. (2019). Ensuring sustainable development by curbing consumerism: An eco-spiritual perspective. *Sustainable Development*, 27(3), 474–480. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.1935>
- Jalili, I., & Ulfa, F. (2023). An analysis of Al-Ghazali's thought on happiness through his book: The alchemy of happiness. *Psikis: Jurnal Psikologi Islami*, 9(1), 30–39. <https://doi.org/10.19109/psikis.v9i1.16263>
- Mazaya, I. N., & Soleh, A. K. (2023). Al-Ghozali and Hasan Al Bashri's concept of happiness to improve psychological well-being. *El-Hekam: Jurnal Studi Keislaman*, 8(2), 335–346. <https://doi.org/10.31958/jeh.v8i2.8528>
- Mulla Sadra. (1981). *The wisdom of the throne: An introduction to the philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā* (J. W. Morris, Trans.). Princeton University Press.



- Mulla Sadra. (2014). *The book of metaphysical penetrations: A parallel English-Arabic text* (S. H. Nasr, Trans.; I. Kalin, Ed.). Brigham Young University Press.
- Nasr, S. H. (2006). *Islamic philosophy from its origin to the present: Philosophy in the land of prophecy*. State University of New York Press.
- Nasr, S. H. (2014). Happiness and the attainment of happiness: An Islamic perspective. *Journal of Law and Religion*, 29(1), 76–91.
- Nasr, S. H., & Leaman, O. (Eds.). (1996). *History of Islamic philosophy*. Routledge.
- Omais, S. (2025). The concepts of happiness in Islamic philosophy. In *Happiness and well-being in Islam* (pp. 45–60). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-95353-8_3
- Palafox, C. L. (2020). When less is more: Minimalism and the environment. *Environmental and Earth Law Journal*, 10, 474–480.
- Raftari, H., & Habibi, N. G. (2015). Happiness according to the viewpoint of Mulla Sadra and Aristotle. *Journal of Applied Science and Agriculture*, 10(6), 91–97.
- Rana, S., Bhatia, H., & Singh, M. K. (2023). Psychological correlates of materialism: Life satisfaction, subjective happiness, and self-esteem. *Education and Society*, 46, 177–184.
- Ryan, L., & Dziurawiec, S. (2001). Materialism and its relationship to life satisfaction. *Social Indicators Research*, 55(2), 185–197. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1011002123169>
- Shami Nezhad, M., & Atrak, H. (2020). The effects of super-abstraction attitude toward the soul on the human life style based on Mulla Sadra's philosophy. *Journal of Ontological Researches*, 9(17), 197–201.
- Yahya, N., et al. (2020). Element of happiness by Al Ghazali and relation in Islamic psychospiritual. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 10(11), 1248–1253. <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v10-i11/8202>
- Yusefi-Rad, M. (2021). The characteristics of the government in the philosophical system of Mulla Sadra. *Journal of Islamic Political Studies*, 3(5), 100–120. <https://doi.org/10.22081/jips.2021.72283>