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TERMINOLOGICAL DRIFT AND THE REORDERING OF KNOWLEDGE FROM AL-GHAZALI'S PERSPECTIVE

Ahmad Faizuddin Ramli,^{*} Zulkiflee Haron^{**} and Ramli Awang^{***}

Abstract: This article examines al-Ghazali's (d. 505/1111) critique of terminological distortion in the *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences) as a diagnosis of epistemological disorder within the Islamic sciences. It argues that al-Ghazali understood semantic contraction not merely as a linguistic shift or rhetorical concern, but as a process that reshaped the hierarchy of knowledge, scholarly prestige, and the spiritual telos of learning. Focusing on five interrelated terms – *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *'ilm* (knowledge), *tawhīd* (the Oneness of God), *dhikr/tadhkīr* (remembrance/admonition), and *ḥikmah* (wisdom), the study traces a recurring pattern in which originally expansive concepts became narrowed through disciplinary capture, performative usage, or reduced doctrinal formulation. Methodologically, the article combines qualitative content analysis with close textual reading of the *Kitāb al-'Ilm* (Book of Knowledge) and related passages in the *Ihyā'*. It maintains interpretive discipline through repeated re-reading of chapters, cross-checking individual passages against the architecture of the *Kitāb al-'Ilm*, and limiting claims to meanings explicitly supported by the text. The article concludes that al-Ghazali's reflections on terminology are best understood as part of a wider sociology of the Islamic sciences, in which the governance of key terms helped order scholarly status, regulate authoritative knowledge, and shape the social life of learning in the Islamic Golden Age.

Keywords: *al-Ghazali, Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn, terminological drift, Islamic epistemology, hierarchy of sciences, sociology of knowledge*

INTRODUCTION

In the Islamic intellectual tradition, key religious and scholarly terms do not function merely as neutral labels. They order hierarchies of knowledge, shape scholarly authority, and mediate the moral purposes attached to learning. When such terms undergo semantic narrowing, social

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reappropriation, or disciplinary distortion, the consequences are not merely lexical. They also affect how knowledge is classified, pursued, displayed, and rewarded within learned communities. Among the classical Muslim scholars who addressed this problem with intensity, al-Ghazali occupies a distinctive place.¹ Across the *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences), especially the *Kitāb al-'Ilm* (Book of Knowledge), he repeatedly returns to the question of how once-expansive religious concepts became reduced, redirected, or detached from their earlier ethical and spiritual horizons.

The present article argues that al-Ghazali's concern is not confined to verbal imprecision. Rather, he treats semantic change as a symptom of deeper epistemological, moral, and institutional disorder within the Islamic sciences.² His well-known discussion of five terms – *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *'ilm* (knowledge), *tawḥīd* (the Oneness of God), *dhikr/tadhkīr* (emembrance/admonition), and *ḥikmah* (wisdom) – shows that language can become a site of disciplinary capture. Once names that formerly denoted inward understanding, God-consciousness, or wisdom are reattached to external performance, polemical skill, or social prestige, the hierarchy of the sciences is reordered.

This argument also bears directly on the sociology of the Islamic Golden Age. Terminological governance was not only a semantic matter; it helped structure social ranking within scholarly culture by defining which kinds of expertise were publicly legible, institutionally rewarded, and regarded as authoritative. In that sense, al-Ghazali's critique illuminates how contests over names were simultaneously about prestige, moral legitimacy, and the production of knowledge within the learned classes of the central Muslim lands.

Although al-Ghazali has been studied extensively as a jurist,³ theologian,⁴ philosopher,⁵ ethicist,⁶ and Ṣūfī thinker,⁷ comparatively less scholarship has foregrounded his critique of altered scholarly vocabulary as a central organising problem in the ordering of religious

¹ On al-Ghazali's life, education, and intellectual formation, see Kenneth Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver: Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and his Revival of the Religious Sciences* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 15–42; Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 1–18; Ahmad Faizuddin Ramli and Jaffary Awang, “Analyzing al-Ghazali's Perspective on Christianity: A Critical Examination of al-Raddu al-Jamīlu li Ilahiyyat 'Isā bi-Ṣarīḥi al-Injīli,” *The Muslim World* 115, no. 4 (2025), 251–52.

² Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* [The Revival of the Religious Sciences] (Dār Ibn Ḥazm lil-Ṭibā'ah wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 2005), 41.

³ Sofia Ridha, “Al-Ghazali's Theory of Islamic Law and its Relevance in the Development of Usul Fiqh,” *Al-Wadh'iyyah: Journal of Sharia Law and Legal Studies* 1, no. 3 (2025).

⁴ Ramli and Awang. “Analyzing al-Ghazali's Perspective on Christianity”; Surni Kadir, “Comparative Study of Al-Ghazali Thought and Ibn Rushd in the Perspective of Islamic Theology,” *International Journal of Health, Economics, and Social Sciences* 6, no. 3 (2024).

⁵ Amie Primarni et al., “Islamic Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphysical Problems: A Study of the Works of Ibn Sina and Al-Ghazali,” *Journal of Noesantara Islamic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2025); Sultan Mujahidin, “The Supremacy of Revelation over Reason: Al-Ghazali's Critique of Rationalist Philosophy in Tahafut Al-Falasifah,” *Islamic Thought Review* 2, no. 2 (2024).

⁶ Muhammad Yahya et al., “The Relevance of Al-Ghazali's Thought to Modern Education: A Literature Review on Ethics, Morals, and Character Development,” *Khalaqa: Journal of Education and Learning* 3, no. 2 (2025).

⁷ Ravshan Mardonov et al., “Communication in Sufism: Situation, Problem, Solution (Based on the Teachings of Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali),” *International Journal on Culture, History, and Religion* 7, no. S11 (2025).

knowledge.⁸ Existing scholarship has illuminated his critique of legal formalism, theological abstraction, and the moral decline of scholarly culture, yet the semantic dimension of these critiques has not always been theorised as a coherent epistemological problem in its own right. This article therefore reads terminological drift not as a secondary rhetorical flourish, but as a major analytical key to al-Ghazali's diagnosis of intellectual disorder.

To develop this argument, the article examines five interrelated terms that occupy a central place in his critique: *fiqh*, *'ilm*, *tawhīd*, *dhikr/tadhkīr*, and *ḥikmah*. These terms are treated not as isolated lexical items, but as a semantic cluster through which al-Ghazali articulates the misordering of knowledge, the migration of scholarly prestige, and the displacement of the spiritual ends of learning. The article thus reconstructs al-Ghazali's normative hierarchy as a historically situated and analytically coherent intervention, without claiming that it exhausts the plurality of scholarly practices and epistemic commitments current in his wider milieu.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Modern scholarship has repeatedly emphasised that al-Ghazali's *Kitāb al-'Ilm* is not only epistemology but also a reform program: it reorders disciplines by their soteriological yield and critiques social practices that reward display-knowledge over transformative knowledge. A useful bridge between al-Ghazali's classification discourse and the sociology of disciplines is Treiger's analysis of al-Ghazali's classifications of the sciences, including the *'ilm mukāshafa* (science of unveiling). Treiger's account shows that classification is a contested arena: it organises legitimate contents, methods, and hierarchies, and it connects religious sciences (*kalam*, *fiqh*, *uṣūl*, *ḥadīth*, *tafsīr*) to an added science of the internal (*'ilm al-bāṭin*), which is described as the science of the heart and its purification.⁹

A second relevant axis is the debate over al-Ghazali's hermeneutics and language. Ahmad Dallal's discussion of the "perils of interpretation" is pertinent because it examines how al-Ghazali constrains *ta'wīl* – a valid interpretation must be preceded by demonstration that the literal sense is impossible, and disputes about his doctrinal alignment can sometimes be framed as conflicts at the level of language.¹⁰ This bears directly on our passage, where al-Ghazali attacks esoteric inner meanings that sever trust in language and dissolve the possibility of stable understanding.

A third axis concerns the historiography of authority and institutional reproduction of hermeneutics. Hallaq's work on legal authority foregrounds hierarchical hermeneutical

⁸ For major modern approaches to al-Ghazali, see Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*; Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 9–15; Alexander Treiger, "Classifications of the Sciences and Descriptions of the Highest Theoretical Science," *Divan: Disiplinlerarası Çalışmalar Dergisi* 16, no. 30 (2011); George Hourani, "Ghazali on the Ethics of Action," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 96, no. 1 (1976). For terminology, see Avner Gil'adi, "On the Origin of Two Key-Terms in al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*," *Arabica* 36 (1989).

⁹ Treiger, "Al-Ghazali's Classifications of the Sciences," 7.

¹⁰ Ahmad Dallal, "Ghazali and the Perils of Interpretation," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122, no. 4 (2002): 780, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/ghazali-perils-interpretation/docview/217139334/se-2>.

authority and its social reproduction through affiliation and loyalty and argues that typologies of jurists construct a history of the school as an interconnected structure of authority.¹¹ While Hallaq's argument is broadly about jurisprudence, it clarifies the sociological plausibility of al-Ghazali's complaint: professional authority requires stable labels, ranked competencies, and routinised demonstrations that can displace older, less formal meanings.

Finally, revisionist biography and reception studies complicate older stereotypes of al-Ghazali as simply anti-philosophy. Garden highlights a modern shift toward reading al-Ghazali as an engaged campaigner for revived religious sciences and notes how recent reassessments challenge "deliverer-based" narratives that overstate a clean break with philosophy.¹² This matters because semantic drift is a reformist tactic: al-Ghazali is not only lamenting change; he is intervening to reattach names to normative ends.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative content analysis combined with close textual reading to examine how al-Ghazali conceptualises terminological distortion in the *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*. The method is appropriate because the article is not concerned with measuring lexical frequency, but with reconstructing patterns of meaning, critique, and epistemological consequence across selected conceptual passages. The *Iḥyā'* was selected as the principal text because it offers an unusually comprehensive setting in which jurisprudence, ethics, spirituality, and the critique of learned culture intersect. The analysis focuses on the *Kitāb al-'Ilm*, where al-Ghazali sets out the ranking of sciences, distinguishes praiseworthy from blameworthy forms of learning, criticises the defects of disputation, and identifies the marks of scholars of the Hereafter. These passages were read alongside closely related sections that illuminate his division between *'ilm al-mu'āmalah* (the science of practice) and *'ilm al-mukāshafah* (the science of unveiling) and his account of the moral purpose of knowledge.

The five terms examined here – *fiqh*, *'ilm*, *tawḥīd*, *dhikr/tadhkīr*, and *ḥikmah* – were selected because each is explicitly discussed by al-Ghazali as an honoured name whose semantic scope had, in his view, been narrowed or redirected. Passages were selected according to three criteria: first, whether al-Ghazali explicitly discusses the meaning or scope of a term; second, whether he identifies a departure from what he presents as its earlier or fuller significance; and third, whether he links that semantic shift to broader epistemological, moral, or institutional consequences.

Analytically, the selected passages were coded according to four recurring functions: original semantic scope, later social or disciplinary reappropriation, semantic narrowing or displacement, and epistemological-moral consequence. Interpretive reliability was maintained through repeated re-reading of chapters, cross-checking individual claims against the chapter structure of the *Kitāb al-'Ilm*, and restricting the argument to passages where the textual

¹¹ Wael Hallaq, *Law and Legal Theory in Classical and Medieval Islam* (Routledge, 2022).

¹² Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 6.

evidence is explicit. The study does not claim to exhaust all instances of semantic reflection in al-Ghazali's corpus nor does it attempt a full comparative treatment of all Muslim thinkers. It instead offers a focused historical-analytical reconstruction of a key semantic cluster in the *Ihyā'*, with brief comparative reference to al-Shatibi¹³ and Mulla Sadra¹⁴ to clarify the wider intellectual stakes of the argument. Al-Shatibi and Mulla Sadra were selected because each provides a systematic reconstruction of one of the two principal axes destabilised in al-Ghazali's critique of terminological contraction. Al-Shatibi reconstructs the legal-purposive axis by reintegrating *fiqh*, *ḥikmah*, pedagogical judgment, and consideration of consequences within the rank of the *mujtahid*,¹⁵ whereas Mulla Sadra reconstructs the metaphysical-existential axis by defining *ḥikmah* and philosophy as the perfection of the soul through knowledge of reality as it truly is.¹⁶ Together, they allow al-Ghazali's semantic critique to be tested across the two most important post-Ghazālian trajectories of the Islamic sciences: legal teleology and transcendent wisdom.

TERMINOLOGICAL DRIFT AND THE REORDERING OF KNOWLEDGE

Al-Ghazali begins with a programmatic thesis: confusion arises because praiseworthy religious names were transferred to meanings driven by corrupt purposes, and he lists five terms: *fiqh*, *'ilm*, *tawḥīd*, *dhikr/tadhkīr*, and *ḥikmah*. In his view, these terms had been shifted from the meanings intended by the pious forebears to new meanings that were narrower, more external, or more closely tied to worldly interests.¹⁷

Al-Ghazali also explains that knowledge is divided into *'ilm al-mu'āmalah* and *'ilm al-mukāshafah*, and the knowledge that forms the basis of human moral responsibility directs action, corrects belief, and purifies the heart from its inward maladies. In other words, from the outset, al-Ghazali is constructing a hierarchy of knowledge centred on *'ilm al-ākhirah*, not on disciplinary prestige or the expansiveness of polemics.¹⁸ Garden likewise argues that the *Ihyā'* should be read as a project of the "Science of the Hereafter," rather than merely a work of Sufism in a narrow sense.¹⁹ On that basis, al-Ghazali's critique of these five terms forms part of his broader effort to restore the language of religious knowledge.²⁰

¹³ On Shatibi's life and intellectual milieu, see Ahmad al-Raysuni, *Imam al-Shatibi's Theory of the Higher Objectives and Intents of Islamic Law* (International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2005), 74–90; Muhammad Khalid Masud, *Shatibi's Philosophy of Islamic Law* (Adam Publishers, 2006), 3–28.

¹⁴ On Mulla Sadra's life and intellectual formation, see Ibrahim Kalin, *Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy: Mulla Sadra on Existence, Intellect, and Intuition* (Oxford University Press, 2010), xiii–xviii.

¹⁵ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Goals and Purposes of Shariah: Maqasid in Theory and Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2025).

¹⁶ Ibrahim Kalin, "Mulla Sadra's Realist Ontology of the Intelligibles and Theory of Knowledge," *Islam Arastirmalari Dergisi* 7 (2002).

¹⁷ Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, 41: "i.e., *fiqh*, *'ilm*, *tawhid*, *tadhkir* and *ḥikmah*."

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁹ Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, 10.

²⁰ Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, 41.

Fiqh: From Knowledge of the Path to the Hereafter to the Branches of Legal Opinion

The first term criticised by al-Ghazali is *fiqh*. In the *Ihyā'*, he argues that later scholars restricted the term to mastery of unusual juridical branches, intricate legal causes, and extended disputation over them, so the person most immersed in such details came to be regarded as the most learned in *fiqh*.²¹ Against this narrowing, he insists that in the earliest period, *fiqh* designated a broader and more spiritually serious form of understanding: knowledge of the path to the Hereafter, the maladies of the soul, and the corruptions that spoil human action. *Fiqh*, in this earlier sense, was not exhausted by technical competence in positive rulings, but referred to a mode of understanding that produced warning, reverent fear, and moral formation. Al-Ghazali supports this reading by invoking Qur'ān 9:122 – “that they may gain understanding in religion and warn their people” – as evidence that *fiqh* was originally inseparable from warning, moral formation, and fear of God. His objection, however, is not to outward jurisprudence. He explicitly recognises the necessity of legal knowledge for ordering worldly affairs and mediating disputes. The target of his critique is semantic absolutisation: when *fiqh* comes to mean little more than legal casuistry, the hierarchy of knowledge is distorted. A term that once denoted spiritually oriented understanding becomes a disciplinary badge tied to procedural mastery and public reputation.

Al-Ghazali does not, however, abolish outward *fiqh*. He explicitly acknowledges its necessity for ordering worldly life and mediating disputes, and thus for preserving the external conditions under which the path to the Hereafter may be pursued. His objection is not to jurisprudence, but to the absolutisation of juristic technique and the semantic contraction by which *fiqh* comes to mean little more than legal casuistry.²² Once that narrowing occurs, the hierarchy of knowledge is distorted: the science that should orient the believer toward self-reckoning, fear of God, and ultimate accountability becomes identified with a public grammar of procedural mastery. In this sense, al-Ghazali's critique of *fiqh* is not anti-juristic; it is a protest against the reduction of a spiritually expansive term to a narrower disciplinary badge.

ʿIlm: From Maʿrifah bi-llāh to Polemical Expertise

The second term is *ʿilm*. Al-Ghazali states explicitly that this term was originally applied to “knowledge of God Most High, His signs, and His acts among His servants and creation.”²³ To reinforce this point, he cites Ibn Masʿūd's statement after the death of ʿUmar: “Nine-tenths of knowledge have died,” and explains that what was meant was knowledge of God, not merely technical jurisprudence or dialectic. He then shows how the term *ʿilm* had been narrowed. According to him, later people glorified as a true *ʿālim* (scholar) the person who excelled in debating opponents in juridical and similar questions. One who did not follow that path was regarded as weak and excluded from the ranks of the learned. A person who possessed only

²¹ Ibid., 41–42.

²² Ibid., 42.

²³ Ibid., 43.

the formalities of dialectical technique could be celebrated as a great scholar even while remaining ignorant of *tafsīr* (exegesis), transmitted reports, or the inner core of religion.

Here it is crucial to read al-Ghazali in light of his framework of *‘ilm al-ākhirah*. He had already explained that the knowledge that is individually obligatory is how to perform one’s obligations properly at the appropriate time, including the correction of belief and treatment of the maladies of the heart.²⁴ Knowledge that merely increases one’s skill in debate without yielding inward advantage may fall under the category of knowledge that provides no true “benefit” to the one who seeks it. This helps us see that the term *‘ilm* in the *Ihyā’* is not anti-rational; rather, it is opposed to forms of knowledge that have lost their spiritual telos and scholarly *adab* (Islamic manners).²⁵

Tawhīd: Not Merely Kalām, but a Spiritual Station

The third term, *tawhīd*, receives one of al-Ghazali’s most penetrating semantic critiques.²⁶ He argues that, in his time, *tawhīd* had come to denote primarily the craft of *kalam* (Islamic theology): the ability to debate, formulate refutations, and defeat opponents in matters of doctrine. Some even identified themselves as *ahl al-‘adl wa-l-tawhīd* (the people of monotheism and justice), as though *tawhīd* was reducible to sectarian or theological technique.²⁷ Al-Ghazali rejects this equation. For him, *tawhīd* in the earlier religious sense was not merely assent to the proposition that God is one, but a mode of seeing in which all things are perceived as proceeding from God, thereby cutting off ultimate reliance on secondary causes and intermediaries. Its fruits are trust, surrender, and freedom from resentful fixation on creation.²⁸

To make this point, al-Ghazali distinguishes between the outer shell and inner core of *tawhīd*.²⁹ Verbal confession and doctrinal assent are not dismissed; they remain necessary. Yet they are only the exterior levels of a deeper reality; namely, the transformation of the heart’s orientation toward the One. His critique of *tawhīd* is therefore not a rejection of theology, but a rejection of theological reductionism. Once *tawhīd* is confined to polemics, disputation, or sectarian self-description, the term loses its ethical and ontological force. What should govern the inner life and reconfigure one’s relation to causality becomes instead a credential of argumentative competence.

Seen in this light, al-Ghazali’s analysis of *tawhīd* parallels his critique of *fiqh* and *‘ilm*. In each case, an originally expansive term is narrowed by disciplinary capture; public prestige migrates toward externally demonstrable expertise; and the spiritual telos of knowledge is displaced. *Tawhīd* is therefore not merely one concept among others in the *Ihyā’*. It functions

²⁴ Ibid., 49.

²⁵ Griffel, *Al-Ghazali’s Philosophical Theology*, 270.

²⁶ Al-Ghazali, *Ihya’ ‘Uhum al-Din*, 43.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

as a concentrated example of the article's larger claim: semantic change reorders the hierarchy of the sciences by detaching names from the forms of life they were meant to cultivate.

Dhikr and Tadhkīr: From Spiritual Reminder to Religious Performance

The fourth term is *dhikr* and *tadhkīr*.³⁰ Al-Ghazali begins this section by recalling the Qur'an's praise of *dhikrā*³¹ and the Prophetic reports concerning *majālis al-dhikr* (assemblies of remembrance),³² but he quickly insists that their meaning had been diverted to what many preachers of his time engaged in, which was mainly stories, poetry, ecstatic utterances, and bizarre spiritual claims: *al-qīṣaṣ* (storytelling),³³ *al-ash'ār* (poetry),³⁴ *al-shaḥḥ* (ecstatic utterances),³⁵ and *al-ṭāmāt* (extravagances).³⁶ In his view, this constituted a distortion of the true nature of *tadhkīr*.

By contrast, al-Ghazali defines the praiseworthy *tadhkīr* according to *Sharī'ah* in positive terms. It is speech that reminds people of death, exposes the soul's defects, explains the stratagems of Satan, recalls the blessings of God, reveals the contemptibility of this world, and awakens fear of the Hereafter. He writes with remarkable clarity: "This is the *tadhkīr* that is praiseworthy according to the *Sharī'ah*." *Tadhkīr*, therefore, is not emotional performance, sensational storytelling, or popular rhetoric, but a form of spiritual pedagogy.³⁷

This critique is significant because it shows that al-Ghazali is questioning not only scholarly disciplines but also the culture of religious communication. Once *tadhkīr* is displaced from self-reckoning to performance, the term loses its original function as a means of purification. Moreover, he warns that the same disease affects those devoted to preaching and admonition when they seek public acceptance, social standing, wealth, and honour through knowledge.³⁸ From this perspective, the term *tadhkīr* for al-Ghazali has undergone a shift from spiritual pedagogy to religious performativity.

Ḥikmah: From "Abundant Good" to a Social Title

The fifth term is *ḥikmah*.³⁹ This section is shorter but incisive. Al-Ghazali explains that anyone who simply follows current social usage of the term may imagine that whoever is called a *ḥakīm* in his day possesses the same rank as the *ḥikmah* praised by revelation. He corrects this misconception by noting that, in his time, the term *ḥakīm* was applied to physicians, poets, astrologers, and even certain street figures. He then reasserts the Qur'anic rank of *ḥikmah*.⁴⁰ In so doing, al-Ghazali exposes the gulf between Qur'anic *ḥikmah* and the social title *ḥakīm* as

³⁰ Ibid., 44.

³¹ Qur'an 51:55.

³² Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, 44.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 46.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 47.

³⁷ Ibid., 46.

³⁸ Ibid., 47.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 48.

used in common culture. This critique completes the pattern established in the previous four terms: a term that originally denoted an elevated and spiritually significant form of knowledge had been reduced to a marker of status, profession, or worldly expertise.

In sum, the terminological drift and reordering of knowledge as presented by al-Ghazali can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Terminological drift and the reordering of knowledge according to al-Ghazali

Term	Classical meaning (as claimed by al-Ghazali)	Later meaning (as criticised by al-Ghazali)
<i>fiqh</i>	Understanding the path to the afterlife; knowledge of diseases of the soul, corruptions of deeds, fear of God	Narrow casuistry: uncommon legal branches, fatwa-details, dispute and memorisation
<i>‘ilm</i>	Knowledge of God (His acts, attributes) and lived worship/ethics	Label for those who debate and dispute in specialised scholastic arenas
<i>tawhīd</i>	Seeing all things from God; cutting reliance on intermediaries; a fruit of trust (<i>tawakkul</i>)	Technical <i>kalam</i> : art of speech, polemics, defeating opponents; sectarian badge (<i>ahl al-‘adl wa’l-tawhīd</i>)
<i>dhikr/tadhkīr</i>	Reminding toward death, afterlife, self-critique, divine favours ethically transformative exhortation	Storytelling embellished preaching genres, excessive poetry and rhetorical display
<i>ḥikmah</i>	Divinely praised wisdom; moral-intellectual benefit surpassing worldly goods	Title inflated: “ <i>ḥakīm</i> ” applied to physicians, poets, astrologers, street performers

Source: al-Ghazali, *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, 41–48.

DISCUSSION

Al-Ghazali’s terminological critique extends into interpretive ethics: he condemns *bāṭinī ta’wīl* (esoteric interpretation) that diverts words from their apparent sense without transmitted warrant or rational necessity, arguing that this nullifies trust in words and destroys the utility of Divine and prophetic speech. Yet he simultaneously defends interpretive reasoning: the hadith warning against interpreting the Qur’ān by opinion does not forbid *istinbāṭ* (derivation), since multiple meanings in *tafsīr* cannot all have been heard verbatim from the Prophet; some are derived by good understanding and long reflection. This double move is crucial for aligning the abstract’s epistemological diagnosis: al-Ghazali is mapping the boundary between stable, disciplined knowledge-production and interpretive practices that dissolve epistemic constraints. Dallal’s synthesis of al-Ghazali’s rule for *ta’wīl* – valid only when the literal sense is shown impossible – helps formalise this boundary as a methodological principle rather than mere polemic.⁴¹

Comparative Resonances: al-Shatibi, Mulla Sadra, and the Governance of Meaning

A brief comparison with al-Shatibi and Mulla Sadra helps clarify that al-Ghazali’s concern with terminological distortion was not an isolated complaint about imprecise language, but part of a broader Islamic effort to regulate the relationship between authoritative meaning, valid

⁴¹ Dallal, “Ghazali and the Perils of Interpretation,” 780.

knowledge, and the moral ends of learning. These two later thinkers do not repeat al-Ghazali's critique in the same vocabulary nor do they address the same social setting, yet each illuminates, from within a different disciplinary horizon, the larger problem at stake in the *Ihyā'*: how words, methods, and forms of expertise become authoritative, and under what conditions they remain tied to their proper ends. In this respect, al-Shatibi provides a juristic-hermeneutic analogue to al-Ghazali's semantic critique, whereas Mulla Sadra offers a philosophical reconstruction of *ḥikmah* that resists its reduction to nominal expertise or social title.

Al-Shatibi is relevant because he relocates juristic authority away from formal competence alone and toward a disciplined grasp of the purposes of revelation and the semantic conventions of the Arabic language. In *al-Muwāfaqāt*, he states that the rank of *ijtihād* (independent legal reasoning) is attained only by one who possesses two qualities: first, mastering an understanding of the objectives of *Sharī'ah*, and second, the ability to derive rulings on the basis of that understanding.⁴² The order is significant. Technical inference is not self-sufficient; it depends on a prior grasp of the law's purposes. This provides a striking point of comparison with al-Ghazali's recovery of *fiqh* as knowledge oriented to the Hereafter rather than to disputation and casuistry alone. Both thinkers resist the reduction of religious knowledge to demonstrable professional technique. Yet the difference is equally important. Al-Ghazali frames the problem primarily as semantic and moral corruption in the public life of the sciences, whereas al-Shatibi frames it as a question of juridical authority and the conditions of valid *ijtihād*. The deeper commonality lies in their shared insistence that formal mastery must remain subordinate to a higher ordering principle: for al-Ghazali, the spiritual telos of knowledge; for al-Shatibi, the *maqāṣid* (objectives) of *Sharī'ah*.

This convergence becomes even clearer in al-Shatibi's reflections on language. He insists that understanding *Sharī'ah* requires following the semantic habits of the Arabs in whose language the Qur'ān was revealed.⁴³ He likewise treats Arabic not as a neutral vehicle but as a structured field of signification, distinguishing between primary and subordinate levels of indication and insisting that legal understanding must proceed in accordance with the language's operative conventions. The consequence for the present argument is substantial. If al-Ghazali diagnoses what happens when honoured terms are socially narrowed and redirected, al-Shatibi shows, from within *uṣūl al-fiqh* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence), why the regulation of meaning is indispensable to juridical normativity in the first place. In both cases, the problem is not merely lexical; it concerns the stability of interpretation, the legitimacy of authority, and the ordering of the sciences around ends intrinsic to revelation rather than around procedural prestige alone.

If al-Shatibi clarifies the juristic-hermeneutic side of the comparison, Mulla Sadra is most illuminating for the term *ḥikmah*. In al-Ghazali's analysis, *ḥikmah* had become socially inflated and detached from its Qur'ānic dignity, applied in common usage to physicians, poets,

⁴² Ibrahim al-Shatibi, *Kitāb al-Muwāfaqāt li-Abi Ishaq al-Shatibi* [The Book of Reconciliation by Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi] (Manshūrāt al-Bashīr Bena'ṭiyyah, 2017), 5:44.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3:147.

astrologers, and other figures whose expertise did not necessarily correspond to the moral-intellectual gravity of wisdom as praised in revelation. Mulla Sadra's project in *al-Ḥikmah al-Muta'āliyah* can be read, in part, as a later reconstruction of that lost density. As modern scholarship on Ṣadrā has emphasised, philosophy for him is not merely ratiocinative enquiry but a mode of being, a discipline of self-perfection, and a path in which theoretical and practical wisdom converge. Philosophy is described as the perfection of the human soul through demonstrative knowledge of the realities of beings, and wisdom is divided into theoretical and practical forms whose end is the soul's intellectual and existential perfection. This is important not simply because it offers another definition of philosophy, but because it restores *ḥikmah* to a transformative register: wisdom names not a profession or honorific title, but a disciplined relation between truth, demonstration, and the perfection of the knower.⁴⁴

This reconstruction becomes even more significant when read against Mulla Sadra's larger ontology. His thought is structured by the primacy of existence and gradation of being, which means that knowledge cannot be reduced to nominal possession of concepts or to public reputation. It is instead ordered according to depth, intensity, and existential realisation. In that sense, Ṣadrā provides a philosophical answer to the sort of semantic flattening al-Ghazali criticises. Once wisdom is redefined as existentially transformative and demonstratively grounded, the merely titular use of *ḥakīm* becomes philosophically inadequate. Yet here too the comparison should be stated carefully. Al-Ghazali's concern is principally moral-sociological: he tracks how prestige, disputation, and public performance deform the names of the sciences. Ṣadrā's concern is ontological and sapiential: he seeks to restore wisdom by reintegrating metaphysics, spiritual discipline, and demonstrative reasoning. The two projects are not identical, but they converge in rejecting dissociation between true knowledge and the perfection of the soul.

Read together, al-Ghazali, al-Shatibi, and Mulla Sadra make visible a broader pattern within Islamic intellectual history. Al-Ghazali diagnoses the semantic and social corruption that occurs when the names of the sciences are captured by prestige, polemics, or professional narrowing. Al-Shatibi secures the hermeneutic and purposive conditions under which authoritative understanding can remain tethered to revelation. Mulla Sadra, by contrast, reconstructs wisdom at the level of ontology and self-transformation, thereby resisting its reduction to nominal expertise. Their differences should not be collapsed. Yet all three, in distinct ways, testify to a recurring civilisational concern: the separation of names from realities, techniques from ends, and knowledge from human perfection. This broader resonance strengthens the claim that al-Ghazali's terminological critique is best understood not as an isolated moral protest, but as part of a larger Islamic discourse on the governance of meaning and the ordering of the sciences.

⁴⁴ Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi, *al-Ḥikmah al-Muta'āliyah fī al-Asfār al-'Aqliyyah al-Arba'ah* [The Sublime Wisdom in the Four Rational Journeys], vol. 1 (Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1999).

Historiographical Context

Three historiographical considerations help explain why al-Ghazali could plausibly treat terminological drift as a reordering of knowledge rather than as a merely lexical problem. First, the professionalisation of legal and theological discourse created settings in which public prestige increasingly attached to disputation, formal branching, and demonstrable technical skill. Makdisi's work on scholastic method shows that dialectical training and recorded difference formed part of the educational culture of the period.⁴⁵ This does not prove every aspect of al-Ghazali's diagnosis, but it provides a credible institutional background for his complaint that terms such as *fiqh* and *'ilm* could become tethered to publicly legible forms of performance.

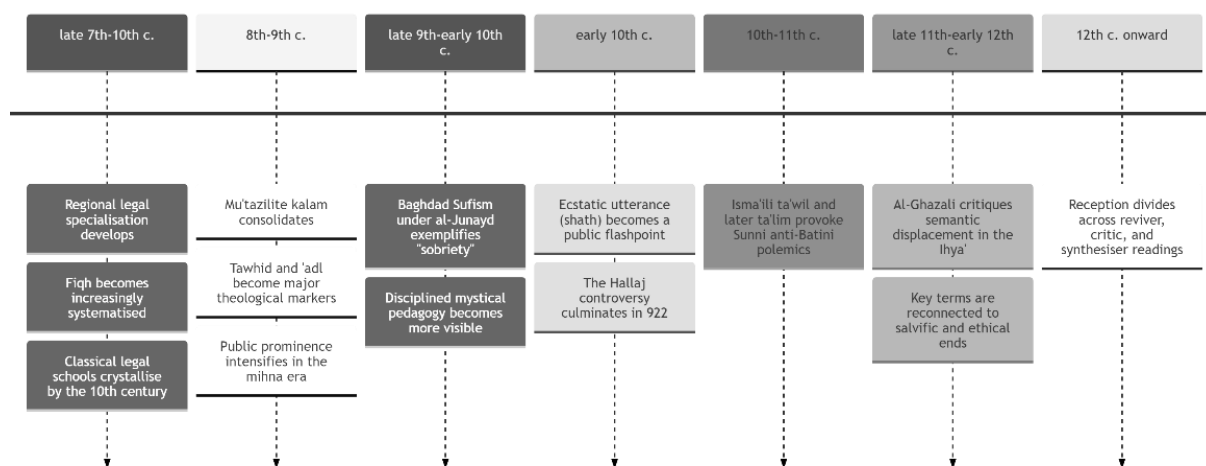
Second, traditions of legal and theological authority depended on ranked competencies and stable labels. Hallaq's work on legal authority helps clarify how such labels were socially consequential. When scholarly standing is mediated by demonstrable skill, the narrowing of terminology toward those skills becomes historically intelligible. One need not claim a simple causal chain to observe that semantic prestige and professional prestige can reinforce one another.

Third, intramural contestation over esotericism, sectarian alignment, and the limits of *ta'wīl* sharpened the stakes of interpretive control. Al-Ghazali's objections to unregulated inner interpretation make sense in a context where linguistic stability was bound up with the ability of scholarly communities to regulate doctrine and pedagogy. In that setting, contests over meaning were also contests over who could legitimately define the sciences and their ends.

These considerations do not turn al-Ghazali's critique into a neutral sociological report. His account remains normatively charged and shaped by his hierarchy of learning. Yet they show why the semantic problem he describes should be read historically as a problem of scholarly ordering, not merely as a complaint about vocabulary [see Figure 1].

⁴⁵ George Makdisi, "The Scholastic Method in Medieval Education: An Inquiry into its Origins in Law and Theology," *Speculum* 49, no. 4 (1974): 648.

Figure 1: Knowledge, authority and semantic contestation around al-Ghazali



CONCLUSION

This study has argued that al-Ghazali’s concern with terminological distortion is neither incidental nor merely rhetorical. Rather, it forms a coherent component of his broader diagnosis of epistemological disorder within the Islamic sciences. Across the five terms examined – *fiqh*, *‘ilm*, *tawhīd*, *dhikr/tadhkīr*, and *hikmah* – a recurring pattern becomes visible. In each case, al-Ghazali identifies a movement from an originally expansive semantic and ethical horizon toward a narrower social, disciplinary, or performative usage. These shifts do not simply alter vocabulary. They reshape what is recognised as authoritative knowledge, what kinds of expertise become publicly legible, and what forms of scholarly excellence come to be rewarded.

Read in this way, al-Ghazali’s reflections speak directly to the sociology of the Islamic sciences. They show that scholarly culture in the Islamic Golden Age was shaped not only by doctrinal content and intellectual achievement, but also by struggles over the meaning, scope, and prestige of the categories through which knowledge was ordered. Terminological governance helped organise social ranking within learned communities by distinguishing higher from lower forms of knowledge, inward from outward accomplishment, and genuinely transformative learning from merely display-oriented expertise.

The article has focused primarily on the *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* and has not attempted a full comparison with al-Ghazali’s wider corpus or with parallel developments in later Islamic thought. Those remain important directions for future research. Even so, the analysis presented here suggests that semantic critique in the *Ihyā’* should be read as more than a moral lament. It is also an early and analytically rich account of how language, authority, and scholarly prestige interact in the historical ordering of knowledge.

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