



## Skepticism and Mystical Epistemology in Al-Ghazali and Khayyam

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**Abstract :** *This article explores the contrasting perspectives on skepticism between Al-Ghazali and Umar Khayyam within the context of the Islamic Golden Age. The main focus is on Al-Ghazali's intellectual and spiritual autobiography, particularly his work *Al-Munqidh min al-Dhalal*, which details his profound crisis of faith and quest for epistemological certainty. Al-Ghazali critiques the limitations of reason and philosophical rationalism, ultimately embracing Sufism as the true path to soul purification and divine truth. In contrast, Umar Khayyam, through his poetic masterpiece *Rubaiyat*, expresses an existential and poetic skepticism, often portraying a cynical view of religious dogma and the absurdity of life. Employing a qualitative hermeneutic approach, this study analyzes their key works to uncover how both thinkers grappled with doubt, meaning, and the nature of knowledge. The findings reveal that Al-Ghazali synthesizes reason and mystical experience, asserting that true knowledge arises from spiritual enlightenment rather than intellectual speculation. Meanwhile, Khayyam affirms uncertainty as a fundamental aspect of human existence, advocating for the appreciation of life's fleeting pleasures as a form of philosophical resignation. This comparative exploration highlights two influential yet divergent responses to skepticism in Islamic thought one anchored in divine transcendence, the other in poetic existentialism. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of epistemology, spirituality, and the quest for meaning in Islamic intellectual history.*

**Keywords:** *Al-Ghazali; Islamic Epistemology; Mysticism; Poetic Skepticism; Umar Khayyam.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Skepticism, etymologically derived from the Greek word “skeptikos,” meaning “one who considers” or “one who doubts,” is an epistemological approach that questions the validity or certainty of knowledge. In the tradition of philosophy, skepticism does not merely signify a rejection of knowledge but rather serves as a critical method for filtering claims of truth. Skepticism poses fundamental questions: Can humans truly know anything with certainty? Can our reason and senses be trusted to obtain truth? In this context, skepticism is not merely passive doubt but a philosophical mechanism that drives the search for more authentic and reflective truth. Therefore, in many civilizations, including classical Islam, skepticism has an important place in shaping scientific and spiritual discourse.

The urgency of skepticism became particularly evident in the context of classical Islamic civilization, especially during the period often referred to as the Islamic Golden Age (8th to 13th centuries CE). This period was marked by an intellectual explosion, during which Muslim scholars intensively studied Greek philosophy, science, and Islamic theology. However, this intellectual dynamism was not without tension between revelation and reason, tradition and innovation, faith and rationality. Within this framework, skepticism served as a filter against authority both textual and institutional. This also formed the foundation for the two major

figures at the center of this essay: Al-Ghazali and Umar Khayyam. Both, despite their methodological and intellectual differences, demonstrate that skepticism can give rise to two contrasting yet equally profound responses to epistemological and spiritual issues.

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111 CE), a prominent theologian, philosopher, and Sufi, reflected skepticism in his monumental work *R*(The Deliverer from Error). In this text, Al-Ghazali writes honestly and personally about the epistemological crisis he experienced. He questioned the validity of knowledge obtained from the senses and reason, and realized that truth cannot be achieved through rationality alone. After going through a phase of deep uncertainty, he found that Sufism the spiritual path based on inner experience is the medium that can lead humans to knowledge that is absolute certainty (*yaqin*). In this case, Al-Ghazali's skepticism serves as a transition from rationalism to spirituality; from doubt about the outside world to belief in oneself.

In his journey, Al-Ghazali critically examined various schools of thought of his time: the *mutakallimun* (*theologians*), Peripatetic philosophers such as Ibn Sina and al-Farabi, as well as the *Batiniah* and Sufis. He found flaws in all these systems, as they did not provide absolute certainty and did not address the aspect of profound spiritual transformation. Ultimately, he concluded that only spiritual experience could provide true enlightenment. In his view, true truth (*al-haqq*) could only be found through the purification of the soul and spiritual enlightenment, not through logical argumentation or theological debate alone. Thus, Al-Ghazali's thought demonstrates how epistemological skepticism can serve as a stepping stone toward spiritual enlightenment.

In contrast, Umar Khayyam (1048–1131 CE), a polymath widely known as a poet, mathematician, and astronomer, expressed a different form of skepticism. Through his collection of poems *Rubaiyat*, Khayyam voices a more melancholic and satirical form of existential skepticism. He questions religious authority, destiny, and promises of the afterlife, which he believes cannot be proven rationally. In one of his poems, Khayyam wrote, “Drink wine, for tomorrow you may be gone” an expression that reflects a rejection of dogma and an invitation to live in the present moment (*carpe diem*). In this case, Khayyam's skepticism does not lead to a spiritual quest like that of Al-Ghazali, but rather to an acceptance of life's uncertainties and the absurdity of existence.

Khayyam saw that life is filled with contradictions that cannot be fully explained through logic or religion. Therefore, he chose the path of aesthetics and poetic reflection as a way to understand the world. In his poetry, he uses symbols such as wine, gardens, and the moon as metaphors for impermanence, fleeting pleasure, and humanity's longing for meaning.

Khayyam's attitude reflects a kind of hedonistic skepticism that does not succumb to despair, but rather seeks to find beauty and wisdom in transience. He does not reject religion outright, but subtly expresses his doubts about unverifiable absolute claims.

The central question in the thought of both figures is: what is the truth of doctrine? For Al-Ghazali, truth is something absolute, originating from God, and can only be attained through deep spiritual experience. He does not reject reason, but acknowledges its limitations, and places it as a complement in the search for truth. In Al-Ghazali's paradigm, truth is not the result of argument or experiment, but the fruit of purification of the heart and spiritual enlightenment. Therefore, a seeker of truth must go through a phase of skepticism to reach a state of mind ready to receive divine light (*nur ilahi*).

Conversely, in Khayyam's view, truth is relative and ambiguous. He is skeptical of teachings that claim to hold the sole truth, as for him, life is full of paradoxes and mysteries. He does not seek certainty outside himself but instead tries to reconcile with uncertainty itself. Truth, in his poetry, is a subjective experience that cannot be measured by theological or scientific standards. This makes Khayyam a symbol of free thinking that tries to balance reason, emotion, and aesthetics in responding to reality.

Thus, this paper will discuss in depth how these two great figures Al-Ghazali and Umar Khayyam articulate skepticism within the framework of epistemology and spirituality. Although they started from similar concerns about authority and dogma, their thoughts offer two different paths: the mystical-transcendental path and the aesthetic-existential path. Through an analysis of their major works, this article aims to reveal how skepticism does not always end in nihilism, but can be a medium for the search for authentic meaning in complex and ambiguous human life.

## **2. METHOD**

This study adopts a qualitative method with a hermeneutic-philosophical approach to deeply understand the concept of skepticism in the works of *Al-Ghazali* and *Omar Khayyam*. This method is appropriate due to the nature of the primary texts philosophical and religious literature which contain reflective, existential, and spiritual dimensions. The focus lies on interpreting meaning through historical, biographical, and discursive contexts embedded in the texts.

## Respondents

This research does not involve human respondents, as it is entirely text-based. The "respondents" in this context refer to the texts themselves and the philosophical narratives constructed by *Al-Ghazali* and *Omar Khayyam*. Thus, the object of analysis comprises intellectual and literary productions as conveyors of philosophical meaning.

## Instruments

The primary research instrument is the researcher as interpreter, equipped with the following supporting tools:

### *Primary texts:*

- a. *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl* by Al-Ghazali
- b. *Rubā'iyāt* by Omar Khayyam (Edward FitzGerald's translation)

### *Secondary sources:*

- a) Peer-reviewed journal articles
- b) Books on Islamic philosophy, Sufism, and epistemology.

Analytical frameworks include thematic interpretation, discourse analysis, and symbolic-existential reading of metaphors and philosophical language in the texts.

## Procedures

The research procedure involves several stages:

- 1) Close reading of primary texts to uncover key themes and tensions.
- 2) Contextual analysis, incorporating the historical and biographical background of each thinker.
- 3) Layered hermeneutical interpretation, consisting of:
  - a. Literal level (what is said)
  - b. Contextual level (why it is said)
  - c. Philosophical level (what deeper meaning is implied)
- 4) Cross-validation using secondary literature and contemporary scholarly discussions on skepticism, Islamic epistemology, and mystical thought.
- 5) Comparative reflection of the two figures concerning their response to uncertainty, reason, and the pursuit of truth.

## Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through a hermeneutic-philosophical lens, drawing inspiration from thinkers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. The process includes: 1) Identifying key themes: skepticism, the limits of reason, spiritual knowledge, the search for truth. 2) Examining literary and symbolic structures within prose and poetry. 3) Constructing

philosophical contrasts between *Al-Ghazali's* mystical resolution and *Khayyam's* existential affirmation. 4) Interpreting the epistemological implications of each author's worldview in the broader context of Islamic intellectual tradition.

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section will conduct an in-depth analysis of two paths of skepticism offered by two great Islamic thinkers: Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and Umar Khayyam. The analysis will focus on the core aspects of their thinking, namely epistemological crisis, the limitations of reason, mystical experience, and the meaning of death and existence. Through a comparative approach, this paper seeks to examine how these two figures interpret truth, whether through Sufism and spiritual enlightenment (in the case of Al-Ghazali) or through affirmation of uncertainty and aesthetic expression (in the case of Umar Khayyam). In addition, this paper will also examine how they use language and literary forms—both through autobiographical narratives and poetic verses—to convey their existential reflections. Thus, this discussion is not only conceptual but also textual, referring to major works such as *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl* and *Rubā'iyāt*.

#### **Al-Ghazali's Epistemological Crisis and Spiritual Autobiography**

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111 CE) was one of the most influential thinkers in the tradition of Islamic philosophy and theology. One of the most notable aspects of his thought is his candor in acknowledging the epistemological crisis he experienced in his intellectual and spiritual journey. He documented this crisis reflectively in his philosophical-spiritual autobiography entitled *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl* (The Deliverer from Error). In this work, Al-Ghazali positions himself as an anxious seeker, a seeker of truth (ṭālib al-ḥaqīqah) who is dissatisfied with the authority of tradition or dogma that is based on taqlīd. He writes that from a young age he had a deep desire to find “truth as it is,” rather than simply accepting what was handed down by society or religious institutions.

As an intellectual trained in kalam theology, Peripatetic philosophy, and Islamic law, Al-Ghazali realized that each of these approaches had a systematic internal structure, but still could not give him absolute certainty (*yaqīnī*). He began to doubt the validity of knowledge obtained through the two main sources of human knowledge: the senses and reason. He stated that the five senses can sometimes be mistaken a shadow that appears straight in water may actually be crooked and if the senses can deceive, why can't reason? This doubt led him to question the ability of reason to grasp metaphysical realities such as the existence of God, the existence of the soul, and life after death. In his confession, Al-Ghazali wrote: “I realized that anything I could not know with absolute certainty (*yaqīn*) could not be relied upon as truth.” This

statement reflects the culmination of the cognitive and spiritual crisis he experienced. According to Eric Ormsby, this crisis was not destructive but transformative. He states that, “Ghazali’s doubt was not the end but the beginning of a higher form of certainty one that comes from divine illumination rather than from syllogism” (Ormsby, 2001).

As a result of this turmoil, Al-Ghazali dramatically resigned from his position as a leading professor at the Nizamiyyah in Baghdad, abandoning worldly fame and comfort, and secluded himself in a period of intense contemplation and spiritual practice for nearly a decade. It was during this phase that he turned to the world of Sufism, where knowledge is no longer obtained through logical argumentation, but through the purification of the soul and direct experience known as *kāsyf* and *dzawq*. He described how a purified heart will receive *nūr ilāhī* (divine light) that unveils the veil of truth.

Thus, the epistemological crisis experienced by Al-Ghazali was not an intellectual failure, but an important stage in the spiritual process. He constructed an integrative Islamic epistemological model: combining reason, heart, and revelation as a path to *al-ḥaqīqah*. In this paradigm, doubt is not something to be rejected, but rather transformed into a means of achieving higher certainty.

### **Epistemology, Reason, and Its Limitations**

Within the framework of classical Islamic epistemology, Al-Ghazali occupies a unique and critical position. He did not simply reject rationalism as some have accused him of doing, nor did he accept it unconditionally. He developed an epistemological model that acknowledges the importance of reason while also pointing out its limitations. For Al-Ghazali, reason is a valid tool for weighing truth, but it is not the ultimate source of truth itself. He provides a hierarchical framework of knowledge: starting from sensory knowledge (*hissī*), reason (*‘aqlī*), to transcendent knowledge through divine revelation (*kāsyf*).

Knowledge obtained through *kāsyf*, according to Al-Ghazali, can only be attained by those who purify their souls through *tazkiyah al-naḥs*. This knowledge cannot be transmitted through logic or discourse, but only through direct experience. In *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, he writes: “Knowledge obtained through spiritual experience is more convincing than logical arguments, because it comes from the light that Allah shines into the hearts of His sincere servants.”

This statement shows that Al-Ghazali was not anti-reason, but he recognized that logic has its limits, and that the highest truth can only be approached through spiritual enlightenment. This is further emphasized by William C. Chittick, who states: “Mystical experience, in the Sufi sense, is an unveiling *kāsyf* of hidden truths that the intellect cannot access” (Chittick, 1989).

Thus, Al-Ghazali's epistemology is integrative, combining burhān (logical demonstration) and ma'rifah (direct knowledge). He believed that logic can be an initial bridge to guide a person toward truth, but truth itself will only become clear through dzauq that is, a spiritual feeling or intuition that arises from a direct relationship with God.

Al-Ghazali's criticism of rationalism is most evident in his monumental work, *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* (The Incoherence of the Philosophers). In it, he refutes 20 key principles in Peripatetic philosophy based on the thinking of Ibn Sina and al-Farabi. According to Al-Ghazali, philosophers are overly confident that human reason can explain all of reality, including metaphysical reality. He calls them people who have “fallen into a pit of speculation that yields no certainty.” In Al-Ghazali's view, metaphysical truth is not subject to deductive rules, but requires nūr ilāhī (divine light) to illuminate the human heart. Furthermore, Al-Ghazali asserts in *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl* that: “If we claim to know God and the afterlife solely through logic, then we are no different from philosophers who reject prophecy. Yet revelation and inner experience are far more powerful and profound.”

This view shows that although he once admired logic and philosophy, Al-Ghazali came to the conclusion that neither was sufficient to guide humans toward salvation and true meaning. Timothy J. Gianotti observes Al-Ghazali's view as a form of “epistemological humility” the awareness that reason must know its limits so as not to become arrogant and close off the possibility of truth coming from other directions. He notes that Al-Ghazali performed a profound “epistemological reversal” by shifting the center of knowledge from the head to the heart (Gianotti, 2001).

In practice, the path to kāsyf or spiritual revelation cannot be separated from disciplined spiritual practices: dzikr, muraqabah, mujāhadah, and tawakkul. In all of these, the direct experience felt by the seeker of truth is prioritized over mere discursive understanding. Al-Ghazali writes that: “Just as we cannot explain the sweetness of honey to someone who has never tasted it, so too can divine truth not be explained to those who have not experienced it inwardly.”

This concept implies that truth is not merely objective data, but an existential condition that transforms the human being as a whole. Therefore, in Al-Ghazali's epistemological system, reason is still respected, but it is subordinate to spiritual experience and the purification of the soul. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr also emphasizes: “Reason is limited by its nature; it cannot transcend the metaphysical veil. The mystic sees where the philosopher only speculates” (Nasr, 1981).

Thus, Al-Ghazali closes the door on rational absolutism and opens the door to a transcendent epistemological dimension. This is what distinguishes Al-Ghazali's epistemology from that of previous philosophers: he does not merely seek to know, but to experience; not merely to think, but to become. For Al-Ghazali, true truth is something that penetrates the mind and enters the soul illuminated by divine light.

### **Salvation of the Soul and the Purpose of Life in Al-Ghazali's Sufism**

In the philosophical and spiritual framework of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, the salvation of the soul (*najāt al-nafs*) is not merely a religious ideal, but the core of the entire existential purpose of humanity. Life in this world is understood as a phase of testing that determines the eternal fate of humanity, and therefore must be lived not only through deeds and worship, but also through inner struggle toward the purification of the soul. The path offered by Al-Ghazali is not one of extreme asceticism, but rather an integration of sharia, reason, and profound inner experience within the framework of Sufism.

Al-Ghazali emphasized the importance of *tazkiyah al-nafs* (purification of the soul) as the foundation of salvation. In his view, outward acts of worship such as prayer and fasting would be meaningless without a sincere inner dimension, free from hypocrisy, and directly connected to Allah. He stated that only through true self-knowledge can humans recognize their Lord. In *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, he writes: "Whoever knows himself will know his Lord."

This statement reflects the fundamental principle in Sufi philosophy that *makrifatullah* (knowledge of Allah) begins with *makrifat al-nafs* (knowledge of the self). A soul that does not know itself in the sense of not being aware of its spiritual nature will not be able to truly know its Creator. Thus, salvation is not understood as freedom from punishment, but as an existential transformation that enables the soul to encounter and unite with divine reality.

The salvation of the soul is also explained through three spiritual stages in Sufi teachings: *takhlīyah* (purification of the self from bad traits), *taḥlīyah* (adornment of the self with noble traits), and *tajallī* (the manifestation of God's light in the heart). These three stages form the methodological foundation for achieving salvation, for without them, humans would be trapped in ritualistic worship devoid of essence. Al-Ghazali describes true salvation as the result of a deep connection between humanity and God, a relationship no longer based on fear or self-interest, but on love and longing.

This idea is in stark contrast to a legalistic approach that emphasizes formal rituals alone. For Al-Ghazali, rituals without spirit are empty worship. He reminds us that: "Knowledge does not save without action, action does not save without sincerity, and sincerity cannot be attained except with the guidance of Allah." This statement indicates that salvation is the result of the

integration of human effort and divine grace. Thus, Sufism is not an escape from the world, but a way to revive the inner meaning in all aspects of life.

In *Mishkāt al-Anwār* (Niche of Lights), Al-Ghazali uses the metaphor of light to explain the concept of spiritual enlightenment. He writes that a purified heart becomes like a mirror that reflects the light of truth. This concept is known as *nūr ilāhī*, the divine light that enters the human heart and enables them to understand reality in a way that cannot be reached by reason alone. Therefore, salvation is a state achieved by a heart that is enlightened and aware of the origin and purpose of life. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr asserts, “Reason is limited by its nature; it cannot transcend the metaphysical veil. The mystic sees where the philosopher only speculates” (Nasr, 1981).

This quote affirms Al-Ghazali's view that salvation will not be achieved through philosophical speculation or rational arguments, but through a pure, deep, and continuous spiritual experience. It is in this context that Al-Ghazali bridges the rational and spiritual worlds by introducing an epistemology of the inner self based on mystical experience and closeness to God.

As Timothy Gianotti also writes in his work on *Al-Munqidh*, “In *Al-Munqidh*, Al-Ghazali performs not merely an account of his life, but an epistemological pilgrimage.” (Gianotti, 2001) In other words, the salvation discussed in *Al-Munqidh* is not merely an afterlife status, but also an intellectual and spiritual process that runs concurrently. It does not stop at belief, but continues through doubt, reflection, and inner purification until it reaches an unshakable depth of faith.

It is also important to note that Al-Ghazali emphasizes that death is not the end of life, but the gateway to eternal reality. In his view, a soul that has attained salvation does not fear death because death is a meeting with the True Beloved. This is why Sufism in Al-Ghazali's thought is not a fatalistic or passive teaching, but an active teaching of life in preparing oneself to return to one's origin.

Salvation in Al-Ghazali's thought encompasses ontological (what is the essence of humanity), epistemological (how to know the truth), and eschatological (what is the ultimate purpose of life) dimensions. He constructs a paradigm that salvation can only be attained by comprehending three things in their entirety: the self, God, and the journey between the two.

Thus, for Al-Ghazali, the salvation of the soul is not the result of intellectual effort alone, but the fruit of sincere and earnest spiritual practice. The path of Sufism that he followed is not exclusive to elite Sufis, but a method that can be applied by anyone who is serious in their search for the meaning of life and ultimate truth.

## **Umar Khayyam's Attitude Towards Dogma and Existence**

The thoughts of Umar Khayyam (1048–1131 AD), a Persian mathematician, astronomer, and poet, continue to attract attention today because of the existential and skeptical nuances in his poetry, especially in the famous *Rubā'iyāt* translated by Edward FitzGerald. This work is not merely a collection of poetic verses but a profound philosophical expression on the meaning of life, death, time, and truth. In this context, Khayyam is often positioned as the antithesis of religious figures deeply bound by dogma, including comparisons with his contemporaries such as Al-Ghazali. As explained by Mehdi Aminrazavi, “Khayyam's quatrains do not preach atheism, but rather the humility of knowing that not all is knowable.” (Aminrazavi, 2005)

This statement underscores the essence of Khayyam's skeptical attitude, which is not anti-religious, but rather an expression of humanity's limitations in reaching absolute truth. In his poems, Khayyam repeatedly questions the validity of the arguments of theologians and philosophers, as well as the claims of the afterlife and destiny often promoted by religious institutions. Khayyam writes in one of his famous verses: “Myself when young did eagerly frequent / Doctor and Saint, and heard great argument / About it and about: but evermore / Came out by the same door as in I went.”

This verse reflects Khayyam's disappointment with religious and philosophical discourse, which he believed only produced an endless cycle of debate. Rather than leading to enlightenment, such debates often returned to the starting point, without yielding true existential certainty. This attitude underscores that Khayyam embodies a poetic skepticism a doubt that is not destructive but rather opens space for contemplation and intellectual honesty. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr notes, “Khayyam reminds us that even poetic skepticism can become a path to metaphysical humility an acknowledgment of the vastness of Being.” (Nasr, 2006)

Thus, Khayyam proposes a kind of spirituality without dogma a way of being in metaphysical submission without having to submit to rigid institutions or interpretations. He implies that uncertainty is not something to be avoided, but rather accepted as part of human nature. His attitude toward dogma is reflected in his tendency to use worldly symbols such as wine, feasts, and natural beauty to express existential reflections. In one of his *rubā'ī*, he writes: “A Book of Verses underneath the Bough, / A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread and Thou / Beside me singing in the Wilderness / Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!”

This poem is often misinterpreted as pure hedonism, when it is more accurately read as a search for meaning in transience. Amidst metaphysical uncertainty, Khayyam does not reject meaning, but seeks it in concrete experiences in togetherness, beauty, and simplicity. This is a kind of affirmation of immanence (the presence of meaning in the world), as opposed to

transcendence (meaning that transcends the world), which is more common in Islamic mysticism. According to Ziad Elmarsafy, “Khayyam’s affirmation of the moment is a radical alternative to the metaphysics of postponement.” (Elmarsafy, 2009)

The metaphysics of postponement refers to the belief that meaning and happiness can only be attained in the afterlife, whereas Khayyam sees the value of life in the present moment. In this regard, Khayyam urges humanity not to be trapped by unverifiable metaphysical promises. He also adopts a sarcastic tone toward the concept of destiny. He writes: “The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ, / Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit / Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line, / Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.”

This verse is a declaration of determinism: what has happened has happened, and no power neither prayer nor wisdom can change it. Within this framework, Khayyam does not view religion as a means of controlling life and destiny, but rather as a form of solace in the face of uncertainty.

However, it is important to note that Khayyam did not openly attack religion. He wrote ambiguously, leaving room for multiple interpretations. Some verses show religious turmoil, while others express belief in an unattainable metaphysical truth. In one verse, he writes: “Strange is it not? that of the myriads who / Before us passed the door of Darkness through, / Not one returns to tell us of the Road, / Which to discover we must travel too.”

This verse is not a rejection of the afterlife, but an expression of honesty: that no one truly knows for certain what happens after death. Thus, Khayyam’s skepticism is the result of deep reflection on human limitations and the silence of the universe. In this context, Khayyam becomes a representation of existential agnosticism in classical Islam not an atheist, but an honest seeker in his doubts. Aminrazavi states that: “Khayyam’s poetry should not be read as a negation of religion, but as an inquiry into its epistemological foundations.” (Aminrazavi, 2005).

Thus, Khayyam does not reject faith, but rejects forms of faith that leave no room for doubt, search, and existential beauty. He presents a form of religiosity that is open, reflective, and human far from formalism that ignores the soul.

### **Systematic Comparison between Al-Ghazali and Umar Khayyam**

Comparing the thoughts of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and Umar Khayyam means bringing together two seemingly opposing poles that are actually both born from a deep awareness of the existential crisis in human life. Both were born in a relatively similar era, within the rapidly developing Islamic civilization of the 11th and 12th centuries, yet they took different paths in responding to fundamental questions about truth, the meaning of life, death, and God.

The fundamental difference between them lies in their approaches to epistemology and soteriology (the doctrine of salvation). Al-Ghazali began with a crisis of skepticism toward reason, but used it as a stepping stone toward a higher level of faith through Sufism. Conversely, Khayyam, who was also aware of the limitations of reason, did not attempt to penetrate the transcendental realm, but instead chose to affirm the beauty and absurdity of life through a poetic and existential approach. Nasr emphasizes that the difference between the two is not merely methodological but ontological: “The contrast between Ghazali and Khayyam reveals not only two divergent paths of inquiry, but also two fundamentally different responses to existential anxiety: one toward transcendence, the other toward aesthetic resolution.” (Nasr, 2006). This quote shows that Ghazali saw human doubt and anxiety as a sign of the need for self-purification and connection with God, while Khayyam saw it as an invitation to enjoy life with full awareness of uncertainty.

This difference in attitude is also reflected in their attitudes toward religion. Ghazali was highly critical of religious formalism, but he still upheld the spiritual essence of Islam. He rejected dogma if it was not accompanied by *dzawq* an inner feeling that arises from spiritual closeness. Conversely, Khayyam tended to be satirical toward religious dogma and questioned promises of the afterlife with an ironic tone. However, Khayyam's attitude was not a rejection of religion as a whole, but rather a doubt toward literal interpretations and religious absolutism. As Ziad Elmarsafy writes: “Ghazali represents the path of transcendence, Khayyam the affirmation of immanence. One seeks salvation beyond; the other seeks meaning within.” (Elmarsafy, 2009)

This difference is also reflected in how they interpret death. For Al-Ghazali, death is the gateway to eternity and union with God. Therefore, he emphasizes the importance of spiritual preparation in worldly life. For Khayyam, death is an unsolvable mystery and must therefore be accepted. In his poems, he does not deny the possibility of life after death, but he also does not pin his hopes on it.

**Table 1.** Thematic Comparison between Al-Ghazali and Umar Khayyam.

Philosophical Theme	Al-Ghazali	Umar Khayyam
Role of Reason	Reason is useful but limited; ultimate truth is attained through <i>kāshf</i>	Reason cannot grasp absolute reality; logic is inherently doubtful
Truth	Reached through Sufism and purification of the soul	Truth is obscure; life is an existential riddle
Attitude toward Religion	Critiques formalism; seeks pure Islamic spirituality	Cynical toward dogma; questions religious promises
Meaning of Life	Life is for purifying the soul and reaching God	Life must be enjoyed; meaning remains uncertain
Death	The beginning of true life and union with God	An unresolved mystery; this life is the only certain reality
General Tone	Reflective, serious, and full of hope	Melancholic, ironic, and skeptical
Writing Style	Intellectual argumentative autobiography,	Reflective poetry, imaginative and symbolic

Methodologically, Ghazali develops his arguments through a narrative-philosophical structure in *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl*, while Khayyam conveys his reflections in the form of dense, metaphorical, and contemplative *Rubā'iyāt*. Ghazali wrote to stir the minds and hearts of his readers toward spiritual transformation, while Khayyam wrote to voice his doubts and celebrate the inevitable absurdity of life.

Nevertheless, both agreed on one thing: that reason cannot grasp the whole truth. Ghazali said in *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* that philosophers are trapped in the illusion of logic and fail to attain true knowledge. Khayyam, though he did not write a systematic treatise, conveys in his poetry that: “The secrets of eternity neither you nor I shall ever know.” This shows that both Ghazali and Khayyam acknowledge the epistemological limits of humanity’s search for truth. The difference is that Ghazali transcends those limits through spirituality and mystical experience, while Khayyam accepts them as an inescapable existential condition. According to Ali Dashti, a Persian literary critic, “Khayyam’s poetry is less about disbelief and more about disillusionment with superficial answers.” (Dashti, 1971) Meanwhile, T.J. Winter (Abdal Hakim Murad) states that: “Ghazali offers a cure for the disease of doubt, not by dismissing it, but by allowing it to lead toward deeper spiritual vision.” (Winter, 1995)

Thus, the comparison between Ghazali and Khayyam reveals two authentic responses to the spiritual and intellectual challenges of the Islamic Golden Age. One path leads to transcendence and spiritual liberation, the other to a poetic acknowledgment of humanity’s existential limitations.

## **Structural and Historical Analysis of *Rubā'iyāt* and *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl***

The philosophical thoughts and spiritual reflections of Umar Khayyam and Al-Ghazali reached their artistic form through their respective monumental works: *Rubā'iyāt* and *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl*. These two works not only reflect personal crises and the search for existential truth, but also serve as symbolic representations of two distinct strands of Islamic spirituality: transcendental mysticism (Ghazali) and aesthetic existentialism (Khayyam). In this section, the structural aspects, linguistic style, and philosophical content of both works will be analyzed, accompanied by thematic and historical comparisons.

### **Structure and Aesthetics of *Rubā'iyāt***

*Rubā'iyāt* is a collection of four-line poems (*rubā'ī*) written in an AABA rhyme scheme. This pattern creates a unique artistic tension: the first three lines build expectation, and the fourth line often provides enlightenment or an ironic twist.

Example:

*“A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,  
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread and Thou  
Beside me singing in the Wilderness  
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!”*

This structure is written in iambic pentameter, aligning natural rhythm with profound inner reflection. Khayyam employs language rich in imagery: wine, moon, garden, and woman as metaphorical symbols of life, pleasure, and transience. According to Aminrazavi: “Khayyam’s use of metaphor is not to indulge in sensuality but to expose the fragility of human assumptions.” (2005). His poetic style implies poetic skepticism, that is, an aesthetic and contemplative form of doubt toward dogma and absolute claims.

### **Historical Dimensions and Influence of the *Rubā'iyāt***

After being translated by Edward FitzGerald in 1859, the *Rubā'iyāt* gained a place in global literature, particularly due to its resonance with the spirit of the modern age that questions metaphysical certainty. Nasr refers to Khayyam as a “metaphysical poet in disguise” who questions theology not through debate but through beauty. “His verses carry a mystical message through the veil of secular imagery.” (Nasr, 2006)

### **The Narrative Structure of *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl***

In contrast, Al-Ghazali wrote *Al-Munqidh* in the form of an intellectual autobiography. He structured his search for truth through phases: skepticism, rejection of kalam, disappointment with philosophy, and acceptance of Sufism. This structure is not merely a narrative of life, but a form of epistemological self-inquiry. “To thirst after a comprehension

of things as they really are was my habit and custom from a very early age.” (Al-Ghazali). The language used is dense with arguments yet rich in religious metaphors: the sea of error, divine light, the heart as a mirror of truth. As Gianotti notes: “Al-Munqidh is not merely a memoir but a methodological treatise on spiritual epistemology.” (2001)

**Table 2.** Comparison of Styles and Themes.

Aspect	Rubā‘iyāt Khayyam)	(Umar Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl (Al-Ghazali)
Form	Four-line quatrain (rubā‘ī)	Autobiographical argumentative narrative
Language Style	Poetic, symbolic, ironic	Metaphorical, analytical, spiritual
Purpose	Contemplation of the absurdity of life	Guidance toward salvation
Tone	Melancholic, cynical	Reflective, optimistic
Symbolism	Wine, moon, earth	Light, sea, mirror
Epistemology	Poetic agnosticism	Mystical transcendence

### Dominant Literary Devices

#### Khayyam:

- Metaphor: *wine = liberation, wilderness = life*
- Paradox: “*Paradise lies in this very wilderness.*”
- Anaphora: repetition for emotional intensity
- Imagery: sensual imagery for spiritual experiences

#### Al-Ghazali:

- Anecdote: personal experiences as illustrations of arguments
- Allusion: references to figures and schools of thought
- Metaphor: *sea, light, and home* as symbols of the journey of faith
- Apostrophe: speaking directly to truth and God

### Rhetorical Functions and Meaning Formation

Both works use literary forms not as decoration, but as vehicles of philosophical reflection. While Khayyam creates tension through irony and uncertainty, Al-Ghazali guides the reader through a transformation from doubt to enlightenment.

Both develop a critique of certainty, but in different directions:

- Khayyam affirms uncertainty as part of human condition.
- Al-Ghazali overcomes uncertainty through inner mystical experience.

Thus, both *Rubā'iyāt* and *Al-Munqidh* are products of the same era but voice two different spiritual strategies:

- I. One chooses freedom in aesthetics,
- II. The other pursues salvation through purification.

In the context of classical Islamic thought, both are two faces of honest and profound intellectual skepticism.

### **Similarities**

#### ***Unwilling to Believe Blindly***

- *Al-Ghazali*: criticized *taqlīd* (blind following).
- *Khayyam*: mocked dogmatic obedience.

#### ***Human Reason Has Limits***

- *Al-Ghazali*: “Reason cannot fully comprehend God.”
- *Khayyam*: “And their mouths are stop with dust.”

#### ***Search for the Meaning of Life***

- Both grapple with the meaning of existence.

#### ***Use of Figurative Language***

- *Al-Ghazali*: metaphors of the *sea*, *light*, and *mirror*.
- *Khayyam*: symbols of *wine*, *poetry*, and *feasts*.

### **Differences**

#### ***Ultimate Goal***

- *Al-Ghazali*: finding God and salvation through *Sufism*.
- *Khayyam*: accepting uncertainty and celebrating life.

#### ***Attitude Toward Religion***

- *Al-Ghazali*: remained within Islam, criticized formalism.
- *Khayyam*: more free, satirical, and questioning of dogma.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

This study shows that Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and Umar Khayyam offer two philosophical approaches that are both grounded in skepticism, yet lead to vastly different existential responses. Al-Ghazali began his journey with a profound epistemological crisis, questioning the validity of reason and the religious traditions that had been passed down. However, instead of stopping at doubt, he uses it as a starting point for spiritual transformation through Sufism. His work *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl* serves as a methodological testimony to this quest, where mystical experiences and the purification of the soul are the keys to attaining true knowledge.

In contrast, Umar Khayyam in his *Rubā'iyāt* presents a type of skepticism that does not seek an escape in the form of transcendence, but rather accepts uncertainty as a reality that must be faced with aesthetic wisdom. His poetry implies doubt about dogma, theological finality, and eschatological promises, while celebrating the beauty of fleeting life. In a melancholic tone and sensual symbolism, Khayyam presents a form of religiosity that is reflective and humanistic.

Both reject taqlīd and criticize religious claims that are not accompanied by inner experience. However, while Al-Ghazali seeks to transcend the limits of reason to reach God through kāsyf, Khayyam stops at the awareness of the unattainability of truth, and makes it the basis for living authentically in a world full of uncertainty.

By examining their major works structurally and philosophically, this study shows that their differences lie not only in method and language but also in ontological orientation: Ghazali toward transcendence and salvation in the afterlife, while Khayyam emphasizes immanence and the meaning of the present. Both make significant contributions to the Islamic intellectual tradition in understanding the complexity between faith, reason, and existence.

Through a hermeneutic approach and literary analysis, this article concludes that skepticism need not be seen as a threat to faith but rather as a contemplative space that can guide humanity toward two spiritual paths: mystical silence or poetic acceptance of life's transience. The thoughts of Al-Ghazali and Umar Khayyam demonstrate that even in doubt, there is still room for meaning, seeking, and wisdom.

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