A Review of Contemporary Philosophy
ISSN: 1841-5261, e-ISSN: 2471-089X
Vol 24 (01) 2025
pp. 379 - 391

"Epistemological Aims and the Determination of Useful Sciences: A Comparative Study of al-Fārābī and al-Ghazālī in the Classification of Practical and Theoretical Knowledge"

Khaled Sindawi, Jamal Assadi, Mahmoud Na'amneh

Abstract

This research aims to clarify the differences in defining cognitive goals and beneficial sciences between Al-Fārābī and Al-Ghazālī, based on their theoretical and practical classifications of the sciences. To achieve its objectives, the study adopts three main methodologies: the descriptive approach, the analytical approach, and the comparative approach. The findings indicate that Al-Fārābī classifies the sciences from a logical and philosophical perspective, while Al-Ghazālī approaches them from a purely religious and Sufi standpoint. However, both thinkers agree that the ultimate purpose of these sciences is to achieve human happiness. According to Al-Fārābī, beneficial sciences are those that develop the intellect and contribute to the well-being of society within the framework of the ideal city. He views knowledge as an end in itself and maintains that the advancement of human beings in the theoretical sciences brings them closer to true happiness. In contrast, Al-Ghazālī defines beneficial sciences as those that strengthen faith and purify the soul, thereby leading to eternal happiness. He considers knowledge not as an end, but as a means to righteous action, where the correct application of knowledge enables self-purification. If misused, however, knowledge may become a source of harm to its possessor.

Keywords: **Al-Ghazālī, classification of sciences, practical sciences, theoretical sciences, cognitive goals.**

Received: 15 Feb 2025 **Accepted:** 04 April 2025 **Published:** 15 April 2025

Introduction

The Islamic epistemological system has long been distinguished by its richness and diversity, which compelled scholars to seek effective methods for preserving and organizing knowledge—particularly given the vast range of disciplines that emerged over time. This necessity gave rise to the science of the classification of knowledge, a discipline that aims to encompass various fields of learning and explore their internal philosophical, logical, and doctrinal issues. As such, the classification of sciences served not only as a framework for organizing knowledge but also as a pedagogical tool that facilitated access to and understanding of intellectual traditions.

The act of classifying knowledge encompasses an expansive intellectual space in which numerous disciplines intersect—including logic, philosophy, history, jurisprudence, and theology. In today's era of accelerating information, the relevance of knowledge classification becomes even more pressing. It helps to organize intellectual constructs, articulate philosophical viewpoints, and optimize the transmission of knowledge. Naturally, the structure and priorities of such classifications are shaped by the historical moment and the social, political, economic, and cultural conditions in which they are produced (Fetouh 2023, 20–21).

Muslim thinkers and philosophers played a crucial role in the development of taxonomies of knowledge, providing conceptual frameworks that enabled individuals to manage both their religious and worldly affairs. Among the most prominent of these figures was al-Fārābī, who combined Platonic and Aristotelian

thought and sought to reconcile philosophical, ethical, theological, and political concerns within a unified system. In his classification, al-Fārābī distinguished between rational sciences such as logic, practical sciences like linguistics and instructional disciplines, and metaphysical sciences concerning divine matters. His system addressed shortcomings in earlier taxonomies with remarkable precision and depth (Kheloufi 2021, 20–21).

Likewise, al-Ghazālī emerged as one of the leading intellectuals in Islamic thought, contributing significantly to the foundations of epistemology. His work resulted in an Islamic theory of knowledge that continues to influence Muslim thought to this day (Hussein and Nuseirat 2014, 364). Notably, the classifications proposed by different philosophers diverged in terms of their content and structure, a divergence often driven by both internal factors (such as the scholar's intellectual leanings and priorities) and external influences, including the socio-political and cultural contexts of their time (Beyoud 2022, 1–2).

This paper aims to highlight the significant contributions of al-Fārābī and al-Ghazālī to the classification of both practical and theoretical sciences—fields deeply embedded in the lived realities of people and responsive to their political, social, and intellectual environments. In doing so, we seek to offer an original perspective on the comparative epistemological aims of both thinkers, focusing on how each of them conceptualized "useful knowledge" (*ʿilm nāfiʿ*) and the practical application of their respective systems of classification.

Certainly. Below is a polished English translation of your research section titled "The Research Problem and Questions," maintaining fidelity to the original Arabic structure, tone, and content, and including in-text citations and a final references list in APA style.

The Research Problem and Its Questions

A close examination of the numerous classifications by which sciences have been organized reveals what may seem to be an overabundance. This perception stems from the significant differences in the methodologies employed in organizing knowledge, making it difficult to identify common denominators among the various classifications. Some of these systems encompass all sciences broadly, others address only a limited set, while some focus exclusively on a single discipline (Daziri, 2023, p. 3).

Given the importance of the classification of knowledge in human thought and its capacity to offer a clear methodological framework for studying subjects and avoiding fragmentation, it becomes essential to highlight the epistemological goals underlying these classifications. However, a review of the relevant literature reveals a notable gap: no previous study has specifically addressed the epistemic purposes and the beneficial sciences (*al-ʿulūm al-nāfiʿa*) derived from the classifications of sciences by al-Fārābī and al-Ghazālī. Moreover, references to al-Ghazālī's classification of sciences are particularly scarce, underscoring a significant research gap in this area.

Accordingly, the current study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How did al-Fārābī classify the practical and theoretical sciences?

2. How did al-Ghazālī classify the practical and theoretical sciences?

3. What are the differences between al-Fārābī and al-Ghazālī in determining the epistemological aims and the beneficial sciences in their classifications of practical and theoretical knowledge?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in the urgent need to re-examine the history of Islamic philosophy in a specialized manner, grounded in reliable scholarly sources and guided by rigorous methodologies that can illuminate the complexities surrounding the classification of knowledge and the various foundations employed by philosophers in organizing the sciences.

The choice of this research topic is rooted in a scholarly and academic interest in highlighting the epistemological achievements of Islamic intellectual history, and in uncovering the philosophical and

cognitive indicators that informed the classifications proposed by al-Fārābī and al-Ghazālī. By engaging in such analysis, the study aims to deepen interest in Islamic intellectual thought and clarify its organic relationship to the civilization in which it developed.

Furthermore, highlighting the epistemological aims emerging from the classification of theoretical and practical sciences contributes to the understanding of the originality and historical depth of Islamic philosophy and its role in shaping scientific disciplines. Most prior research has treated the classifications of individual philosophers in isolation, without attempting to compare them or uncover the conceptual foundations underpinning their taxonomies.

Thus, this study focuses on the contributions of al-Fārābī and al-Ghazālī to the classification of knowledge, while taking into account the social and political contexts that influenced their theoretical and practical frameworks—particularly the practical sciences that directly impact people's lived realities and everyday affairs.

Research Methodology

To achieve the objectives of the current study, three main methodological approaches will be adopted:

1. **Descriptive Method**: Used to define and describe the key concepts and terminologies relevant to the study.

2. **Analytical Method**: Employed to analyze the approaches adopted by both al-Fārābī and al-Ghazālī in their classifications, as well as to assess the influence of the prevailing socio-political contexts on their organization of theoretical and practical sciences. This method will also aid in evaluating each classification system to pave the way for a comparative analysis.

3. **Comparative Method**: Utilized to compare the two classification systems and to elucidate the differences in their identification of epistemological goals and the notion of beneficial sciences based on their respective theoretical and practical frameworks.

The Classification of Sciences: Concept and Importance

The concept of classification refers to the organization and differentiation of types based on specific criteria, such as degree of importance. Within such a framework, particular elements are included depending on the main criterion that governs the classification process. In its broader sense, the science of classification also involves organizing topics hierarchically—from general to more specific—so as to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter (Al-ʿUmrī, 2012, p. 290).

More specifically, the classification of sciences represents a systematic method developed by Muslim scholars to express and organize knowledge in a way that facilitates accessibility. The principal aim of classification, then, is to help individuals easily refer to and benefit from scientific knowledge—especially given the proliferation of disciplines and their intricate details. Such an endeavor necessitates regulation and a focus on intended purposes (ʿAbd al-Salām, 2017, p. 148).

The science of classification also holds great pedagogical value. When a person seeks to learn a particular branch of knowledge, they can rely on the established classification to understand the content more clearly. Classification provides a normative and cognitive framework that presents knowledge in a structured, intelligible manner consistent with rational inquiry (Khalūfī, 2021, p. 8). Furthermore, the classification of sciences is closely linked to both historical development and logic, and has even been labeled a "science of logic." These classifications are typically accompanied by historical information about their authors, including their life details and intellectual contributions (Ibid).

The science of classification emerged among Muslim scholars in the fourth century AH (10th century CE) and continued to evolve until the twelfth century AH (18th century CE). It became a critical component of Islamic philosophy, integrating various branches of knowledge with human development and reflection. In doing so, it created a rich intellectual space upon which Muslims could rely in managing both religious and worldly affairs (al-Tahānawī, 1998, Vol. 1, p. 5).

The Concept of Theoretical and Practical Sciences

Theoretical sciences refer to branches of knowledge in which human beings have no direct involvement in the execution or alteration of their objects. These sciences are concerned with understanding realities that cannot be changed from one state to another and are thus apprehended through pure rational contemplation without the necessity of action. For instance, the concept that the number one is odd is a fixed truth that cannot be altered to make it even. Theoretical sciences include disciplines such as natural sciences and divine (metaphysical) sciences. Consequently, theoretical sciences are typically taught through persuasive and imaginative methods that facilitate comprehension once the mind has reached intellectual maturity (Khalūfī, 2021, p. 22).

On the other hand, **practical sciences** pertain specifically to *action*—to domains in which human beings are able to exert influence and bring about change. These are areas of knowledge that can be acquired through experience and practice. For example, professions such as medicine, commerce, and agriculture are practical in nature, as they involve action and aim at producing tangible outcomes or results. The goal of these disciplines is rooted in action and the attainment of specific objectives through labor and engagement (Khalūfī, 2021, p. 45).

Thus, while theoretical sciences deal with phenomena beyond human intervention and do not rely on practical application, practical sciences are directly linked to human agency. In this sense, the human being is the central factor in the existence and development of practical sciences.

Al-Fārābī's Classification of the Sciences

I. Introduction to al-Fārābī

Abū Naṣr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ṭarkhān al-Fārābī was one of the most prominent philosophers in the history of Islamic thought. He was born in the region of Farab in 873 CE (Al-Maʿāyiṭa, 2008, p. 137). His intellectual journey took him to Baghdad, where he composed the majority of his works. He later traveled to Egypt and then to the Levant. Al-Fārābī mastered numerous fields, including philosophy and literature, and acquired fluency in several languages of his time, most notably Greek (Ṣidūqī, 2020, p. 31).

Al-Fārābī possessed a rare intellectual brilliance that earned him an esteemed place among Muslim thinkers. His legacy even reached the Western world, where several prominent scholars and writers acknowledged his genius and philosophical depth (Al-ʿArabī, 2003). Despite living during a period marked by political and ideological turmoil, al-Fārābī devoted his works to reconciling philosophy and religion—an endeavor that is evident in his seminal text *Iḥṣāʾ al-ʿUlūm* (The Enumeration of the Sciences), composed at the beginning of the fourth Islamic century (Khalūfī, 2021, p. 18).

He established a distinct intellectual framework known as *al-Fārābiyyah*, a school of Islamic philosophy influenced by both Plato and Aristotle. His approach sought to synthesize Greek philosophical systems into a coherent Islamic worldview (Ḥasab Allāh, 2022, p. 86). Al-Fārābī's philosophy is noted for its analytical precision, conceptual depth, expressive clarity, and internal consistency (ʿAfīfī, 2009, p. 107).

In addition to his philosophical endeavors, al-Fārābī was known for his ascetic lifestyle. He avoided excess and lived simply, preferring solitude and quiet reflection. He also had a deep appreciation for music and often found solace in listening to it (Ḥusayn, 2002, p. 119).

II. Al-Fārābī's Classification of Theoretical and Practical Sciences

Certainly, ḥabībī. Below is the same academic text on **al-Fārābī's classification of theoretical and practical sciences**, now revised to include **English translations of all Arabic book titles**, either as translations or alongside the Arabic titles in parentheses. This version remains faithful, scholarly, and clear.

In his philosophical writings, al-Fārābī aimed to reconcile the views of Plato and Aristotle, particularly in matters related to logic, ethics, politics, and other disciplines. His approach is marked by logical coherence, analytical precision, and a consistent presentation of philosophical themes (Khalūfī, 2021, p. 21).

Al-Fārābī organized the sciences into five main categories, four of which fall under the theoretical sciences and one under the practical sciences. The latter comprises civil science (*al-ʿilm al-madanī*), jurisprudence (*ʿilm al-fiqh*), and theology (*ʿilm al-kalām*). This classification is most clearly outlined in his works such as *Iḥṣāʾ al-ʿUlūm* (*Enumeration of the Sciences*) and *Taḥṣīl al-Saʿādah* (*The Attainment of Happiness*).

In *Taḥṣīl al-Saʿādah*, al-Fārābī refers to theoretical sciences as "al-faḍāʾil al-naẓariyyah" (theoretical virtues), which he defines as knowledge of existing things attained through instruction and reflection, without involving practical action. These sciences include the science of language, logic, the mathematical sciences (collectively termed *ʿilm al-taʿālīm*), natural science, and divine science.

The science of language (*ʿilm al-lisān*) is concerned with the study of vocabulary—both individual and compound forms—in terms of structure and meaning. Al-Fārābī distinguishes two levels within this science: one dealing with the vocabulary used by various nations, including classifications of word types and their metrical forms; the other addressing the governing rules and principles of these expressions (Khalūfī, 2021, p. 30).

The science of logic (*ʿilm al-manṭiq*) deals with the analysis of various forms of syllogistic reasoning and the differentiation between types of discourse, including demonstrative (*burhānī*), dialectical (*jadalī*), sophistical (*safsāṭī*), rhetorical (*khiṭābī*), and poetic (*shiʿrī*) speech. Al-Fārābī viewed logic as the discipline that equips the human mind to distinguish truth from falsehood. He argued that rational concepts are innately grasped by the intellect, as if the human being were naturally predisposed to them (ʿAfīfī, 2009, p. 107).

The mathematical sciences (*ʿilm al-taʿālīm*) in al-Fārābī's classification include seven disciplines: arithmetic, geometry, optics, astronomy, music, mechanics, and ingenious devices. Arithmetic consists of both theoretical and practical branches. The theoretical aspect concerns abstract numbers and their relations—such as equality, proportion, and difference—while the practical side addresses enumeration and measurement using numerical tools.

Geometry also comprises a theoretical part, which examines spatial forms (lines, surfaces) abstractly, and a practical part, which applies geometrical reasoning to physical bodies. Optics (*ʿilm al-manāẓir*) investigates the nature of mirrors, light rays, and the reflection of images on surfaces. Astronomy (*ʿilm al-nujūm*) focuses on the study of celestial bodies and their influences, along with physical observations of heavenly phenomena. Music (*ʿilm al-mūsīqā*) is analyzed in terms of its philosophical foundations and societal functions—issues that were heavily debated among earlier scholars. Mechanics (*ʿilm al-athqāl*) is the science of weights and tools used for lifting and transporting heavy objects. Lastly, the science of ingenious devices (*ʿilm al-ḥiyal*) addresses the practical application of earlier sciences to natural bodies and technologies. In modern terminology, this could be viewed as a precursor to applied physics or tactical engineering.

Natural science (*ʿilm ṭabīʿī*) and divine science (*ʿilm ilāhī*) both deal with the study of existent things, but from different angles. Natural science examines physical entities—celestial, elemental, biological, and artificial—including the heavens, minerals, plants, animals, and the soul, along with phenomena such as generation, corruption, and motion. Divine science, on the other hand, investigates metaphysical entities and the first principles underlying all existence. It also analyzes the epistemological foundations of the theoretical disciplines such as logic, arithmetic, and geometry. In *Iḥṣāʾ al-ʿUlūm* (*Enumeration of the Sciences*), al-Fārābī writes: "Divine science investigates beings and the accidents that occur to them insofar as they are beings; it examines the first principles of demonstration in the particular theoretical sciences like logic, geometry, and arithmetic… and it investigates entities that are not physical bodies" (Al-Fārābī, 1931, p. 64).

In his treatment of the practical sciences, al-Fārābī dedicates a separate category to disciplines concerned with human behavior, social organization, and religious law. These include civil science, jurisprudence, and theology. Civil science, as he describes it, is concerned with ethics, actions, customs, and modes of governance. It analyzes how these actions are to be realized and the aims they are intended to achieve (Al-Qasimi, 2023, p. 620).

Al-Fārābī's ethical theory, which draws upon classical Greek moral philosophy, emphasizes that happiness alone does not suffice to establish the *virtuous city* (*al-madīnah al-fāḍilah*). Ethics, in his view, is a practical discipline rooted in the performance of moral actions. These actions, depending on their nature, may result in either praiseworthy or blameworthy behavior. However, al-Fārābī believed that moral habits can be transformed through persistent ethical training, allowing individuals to move from vice to virtue and thereby participate in the realization of collective well-being (Al-Fārābī, 2006, p. 46).

Al-Fārābī's Classification of the Sciences (Textual Form)

Al-Fārābī divides the sciences into five principal domains: linguistic sciences, logical sciences, mathematical sciences (referred to as *al-taʿālīm*), natural and divine sciences, and practical sciences.

The **linguistic sciences, to start with,** encompass the shared elements found in language structure, including nouns, verbs, grammar, morphology, prosody, and the principles of poetic composition. These elements are foundational for expression and the articulation of thought.

Next, the **logical sciences** consist of several layers of intellectual operations. They begin with premises and include various forms of reasoning such as syllogism and deduction, analogy or inductive reasoning, and second-order syllogisms. Al-Fārābī further includes the study of definitions and conceptual categories, as well as the classification of discourse into poetic imagination, rhetorical speech, and poetic expression. These sciences are designed to equip the mind with the tools needed to distinguish truth from falsehood and arrive at certainty through rational insight.

He believes the **mathematical sciences**, referred to collectively by al-Fārābī as *ʿilm al-taʿālīm*, include arithmetic and geometry, each subdivided into theoretical and practical branches. Theoretical arithmetic is concerned with abstract numerical relationships, while practical arithmetic deals with enumeration and quantification in concrete applications. Similarly, theoretical geometry focuses on spatial forms like lines and surfaces in the abstract, whereas practical geometry applies geometrical principles to physical construction and architecture. Additional disciplines in this group include optics, which examines mirrors and light behavior; astronomy, which studies the movements and meanings of celestial bodies; music, which al-Fārābī considers both scientifically and philosophically; mechanics (or the science of weights), which explores tools and balances for lifting and moving objects; and the science of ingenious devices (*ḥiyal*), which reflects the practical application of scientific knowledge to mechanical systems and technology.

According to him, the **natural and divine sciences** are concerned with the study of existence. Natural science (*ʿilm ṭabīʿī*) focuses on corporeal entities—natural and artificial—including celestial bodies, minerals, plants, animals, the human soul, and the phenomena of change, generation, and decay. Divine science (*ʿilm ilāhī*), by contrast, investigates non-material beings and metaphysical principles. It includes the study of God, the First Cause, ultimate ends, and the foundational principles of demonstration in the theoretical sciences. Al-Fārābī emphasizes that divine science examines beings inasmuch as they are beings, and seeks to understand what lies beyond the physical world through reasoned analysis.

Lastly, the **practical sciences** address the domains of human behavior, societal organization, and applied ethics. Civil science (*ʿilm madanī*) pertains to the moral virtues, customs, and systems of governance that regulate collective life. It is concerned with identifying the best forms of human interaction and the ethical principles that sustain the social order. Jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and theology (*kalām*) are also part of the practical sciences. They deal with laws and beliefs derived from religion and are concerned with guiding human actions toward their ultimate moral and spiritual aims. Practical philosophy, as al-Fārābī understands it, is not only a means of organizing the just city but also a pathway toward moral refinement and eventual happiness.

In total, in his classification of the sciences, Al-Fārābī sought to reconcile philosophy with religion and emphasized the foundational role of linguistic science (*ʿilm al-Lisān*) as the gateway to all other branches of knowledge. According to him, a person who masters linguistic contexts is inherently equipped to comprehend subsequent sciences, including logic in all its forms and subdivisions. Language, in this framework, serves as the indispensable tool for engaging with what al-Fārābī terms "secondary sciences." He further argues for the precedence of linguistic science over religious knowledge, asserting that the former is a necessary prerequisite for understanding the latter. In doing so, al-Fārābī positions language as the cornerstone for theology and for the acquisition of rational and philosophical disciplines as well. His epistemological model begins with language acquisition, which forms the basis for more advanced stages of learning, including reading, writing, and logical analysis (Ṣidūqī, 2020, p. 33).

Al-Ghazālī's Classification of the Sciences

I. Introduction to al-Ghazālī

Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Ṭūsī, known as al-Ghazālī (450–550 AH / 1058–1111 CE), was a prominent Islamic scholar affiliated with the Shāfiʿī school of jurisprudence. He was called "al-Ghazālī," possibly in reference to his father's profession in spinning wool (*ghazl*) or to his birthplace, Ghazāla, a village near Ṭūs. Al-Ghazālī was renowned for his exceptional intelligence and mastery across multiple disciplines, including jurisprudence, dialectics, kalām (Islamic theology), and philosophy (Jumʿah, 2002, p. 786).

Al-Ghazālī emerged as a towering intellectual figure in the 5th century AH, a period marked by intense socio-political and cultural transformations. During this era, the Abbasid Caliphate experienced significant decline and fragmentation. The weakening of central political authority led to widespread unrest and the rise of rival leaders and religious factions, exacerbating instability. This volatile environment gave rise to a proliferation of philosophical schools and sectarian ideologies that contributed to religious disarray and a growing detachment of the populace from the Qurʾān and the Prophetic Sunnah. The resulting schisms deepened divisions among religious groups—Shīʿites, Shāfiʿites, Ḥanafites, Ḥanbalites, Ṣūfīs, and others—creating further doctrinal conflict (Ḥusayn & Naṣīrāt, 2014, p. 368).

Al-Ghazālī was distinguished by the force of his argumentation, the strength of his personality, and his deep rapport with the masses. The turbulent circumstances of his time shaped his intellectual orientation, prompting him to rigorously study the prevailing sects and philosophical movements in his society. His critical acumen and persuasive reasoning were directed toward reviving religious consciousness and reforming the moral and theological life of the Muslim community (Ḥusayn & Naṣīrāt, 2014, p. 369).

Al-Ghazālī's Classification of Practical and Theoretical Sciences

Scholarly attention to al-Ghazālī's classification of the sciences remains relatively limited in comparison with other thinkers. Nevertheless, the sources that do address his system emphasize both its comprehensiveness and its originality. Al-Ghazālī introduced a renewed conception of the term "science" (*ʿilm*)—one that explicitly incorporates religious and mystical dimensions. For him, spiritual knowledge is the foundation of all science, understood as knowledge related to being and existence (Ḥusayn & Naṣīrāt, 2014, p. 380).

Al-Ghazālī proposed a distinctive epistemological principle: the ultimate purpose of rational inquiry and scientific reasoning is to attain knowledge of the existence of God, exalted be He. Based on this foundational aim, he divided the sciences into two broad categories.

The first category consists of praiseworthy sciences (*ʿUlūm maḥmūda*), which include both individual obligations (*farḍ ʿayn*) and collective obligations (*farḍ kifāya*). Sciences classified under *farḍ ʿayn* are those that concern the proper performance of religious duties—namely, the knowledge of belief, action, and abstention. Al-Ghazālī refers to this as the *knowledge of transactions* (*ʿilm al-muʿāmalāt*), encompassing the internal acts of the heart, the commands God has enjoined, and the prohibitions He has set (al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, vol. 1, pp. 13–16; Ḥusayn & Naṣīrāt, 2014, p. 380). In contrast, *farḍ kifāya* includes the sciences that, if

acquired by some members of the community, absolve others of the duty to pursue them. These are the sciences essential for the worldly order and well-being of society. Al-Ghazālī divides them into two further branches: the religious sciences, which are transmitted from the prophets and require rational tools such as language to be understood, and the non-religious sciences, which originate from human reason and empirical experience, such as medicine and arithmetic (al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, vol. 1, pp. 16–18).

The second category includes blameworthy sciences (*ʿUlūm madhmūma*), which cause harm or deviation. For example, al-Ghazālī criticized magic, as it leads to the harm of others, and astrology, because it may cause one to forget the ultimate Cause by attributing influence to created phenomena. He also expressed reservations about philosophy, due to the risk of reaching conclusions that contradict religious doctrine. Hence, he advised that one should not examine such sciences beyond what is strictly necessary.

In his work *Mīzān al-ʿAmal*, al-Ghazālī offered another classification, dividing the sciences into theoretical and practical types (ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, 1990, p. 103). The theoretical sciences relate to the knowledge of God, His attributes, and the prophets. Their ultimate aim is knowledge of God, which al-Ghazālī in *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn* referred to as *ʿilm al-kāshifa* or *ʿilm al-bāṭin* (the science of inner unveiling). As for the practical sciences, al-Ghazālī divided them into three subfields: the science of the soul, which involves cultivating ethical behavior and struggling against carnal desires; the science of domestic life, related to family, servants, and child-rearing; and the science of politics, pertaining to the governance and regulation of cities.

Al-Ghazālī emphasized that religious and worldly sciences must be harmonized. A student who devotes himself only to theoretical disciplines, such as kalām (theology) or logic, without grounding them in religious practice, gains no benefit and wastes his life without acquiring what is truly useful in the afterlife. He famously stated, "Knowledge without action is madness, and action without knowledge is not valid" (al-Ghazālī, *Ayyuhā al-Walad*, pp. 11–12). Yet al-Ghazālī did not advocate neglecting any type of knowledge. Rather, he encouraged giving each science the degree of importance it deserves. Sciences, in his view, are either direct paths to God or assistive means along that path. The learner must prioritize, beginning with the most essential sciences and progressing to those of lesser importance, taking from each what is necessary and leaving aside the superfluous (Ḥusayn & Naṣīrāt, 2014, p. 381).

Moreover, al-Ghazālī recognized the necessity of integrating reason with revelation in the pursuit of certainty. For him, rational knowledge is essential for reaching epistemological conviction. He identified four fundamental sources of certain knowledge: the senses, reason, prophecy (divine knowledge revealed through God's communication with the Prophet), and unveiling (*kashf*). The latter is described as divine light that God casts into the heart—an intuitive form of insight or inspiration that reveals truth inwardly (Ḥusayn & Naṣīrāt, 2014, p. 370). In al-Ghazālī's view, true knowledge cannot be based on a single source; rather, all sources must be brought into harmony. Among them, prophecy is the most exalted, while the senses are the weakest (Ḥusayn & Naṣīrāt, 2014, p. 379).

Al-Fārābī and al-Ghazālī on the Classification of the Sciences: A Comparative Evaluation

Based on the foregoing discussion of the respective classifications of theoretical and practical sciences proposed by al-Fārābī and al-Ghazālī, this section offers a comprehensive evaluation of both systems and the underlying principles that shaped them.

Al-Fārābī's classification is notable for expanding the classical Hellenic schema of knowledge to include disciplines absent from the works of Plato and Aristotle—most significantly, the incorporation of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and dialectical theology (*kalām*). This creative augmentation reflects al-Fārābī's commitment to integrating the religious sciences into a comprehensive epistemological framework responsive to the intellectual and social realities of his time (Boushti al-Qasimi, 2023, p. 621).

What distinguishes al-Fārābī's classification is its fivefold structure, in which he harmonizes philosophy and religion under a unified schema. This classification rests on an explicitly epistemological foundation, prioritizing knowledge of the Divine as the key to understanding all other forms of existence. For al-Fārābī, theoretical sciences take precedence over practical sciences because knowledge of the contingent world is

necessarily predicated upon knowledge of God, who is the ultimate cause and ground of all being (ibid., p. 621).

In his view, sciences concerned with the sensory realm are inferior to those derived from metaphysical and divine principles. He identifies mathematics (*ʿilm al-taʿālīm*) as a mediating discipline between natural and divine knowledge. Moreover, al-Fārābī's classification is ontologically grounded: it posits a single truth for each subject matter, a truth that is either philosophical or religious in origin. Accordingly, he divides existence into two domains—spiritual and material—using the former to assess truth and error, and the latter to distinguish between good and evil (ibid., pp. 621–622).

Al-Fārābī thus grants the classification of the sciences both an ontological and an epistemological dimension. His system distinguishes between theoretical and practical sciences based on pedagogical function while simultaneously asserting that human action and ethical conduct derive from theoretical insight. In his view, contemplation paves the way for action and facilitates the realization of moral goodness (ibid., p. 622).

Nonetheless, his hierarchical schema—moving from theoretical to practical knowledge—should not be interpreted as implying that practical sciences are ontologically dependent on theoretical ones. Rather, this hierarchy reflects a moral or teleological purpose, not a productive necessity. Knowledge, for al-Fārābī, is pursued for its own sake, and the knowledge of divine realities is the highest goal. As such, the ranking of the sciences in his system points to an ethical orientation rather than to functionality or instrumentality (ibid., p. 621).

His taxonomy also reflects the hierarchy of cognitive faculties. Just as his account of knowledge moves from wisdom to rhetoric to calculation, so too does the soul progress from intellect to imagination to deliberation (ibid., p. 625). This same logic underpins his classification of individuals within the virtuous city: philosophers, theologians, poets, orators, skilled artisans, warriors, and financiers. Each group contributes to the city's collective happiness, which is made possible through mutual cooperation. Al-Fārābī emphasizes that individual fulfillment is unattainable in isolation; happiness is achieved collectively, through social harmony and shared intellectual and ethical labor (ibid., p. 628).

It is important to note that al-Fārābī's reflections on the ideal city and the structure of knowledge are informed by the socio-political conditions of the fourth century AH. His awareness of people's needs and concerns lends his classification both practical relevance and visionary depth, positioning it as an effort to align intellectual inquiry with the realities of the time.

In contrast, al-Ghazālī's classification of knowledge draws its distinctiveness from the spirit of Ṣūfism, which suffuses his epistemology and value system. What lends his classification enduring significance in Islamic intellectual history is its grounding in mystical ethics and spiritual cultivation. He frames the sciences not only in terms of their subject matter but in terms of their moral and religious implications.

Al-Ghazālī structures his classification according to the legitimacy and value of knowledge—praising or condemning each science based on its alignment with divine purpose and its role in the soul's journey. For al-Ghazālī, the most noble sciences are those that bring the human being closer to God. He advises the seeker of eternal salvation to focus on the science of the inward self, while reserving the "instruments" of worldly knowledge for those who have completed that inner purification (al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, vol. 1, pp. 66–69).

His epistemology rests on four principal sources: the senses, reason, prophecy, and mystical unveiling (*kashf*), with prophecy as the highest and sensory knowledge as the lowest. He insists on the integration of religious and worldly sciences, while encouraging a structured progression from the most spiritually beneficial to the least. The utility of knowledge is measured by its eschatological fruit.

For al-Ghazālī, the science of religion is the most noble because it is oriented toward the afterlife and facilitates eternal felicity. Knowledge is more than an abstract pursuit; it is a path to the ultimate goal of salvation. As such, his classification is not merely epistemic—it is soteriological.

In sum, the systems proposed by al-Fārābī and al-Ghazālī diverge significantly in orientation and structure. Al-Fārābī's classification is philosophical, rationalist, and civic in its telos, while al-Ghazālī's is religious, mystical, and eschatological. The former emphasizes contemplation and cosmic order; the latter prioritizes spiritual purification and divine proximity. Their differences are evident in their views on the purpose of knowledge, the hierarchy of the sciences, the role of Sufism, the sources of knowledge, and the nature of human happiness. Taken together, their contributions reflect the diversity and dynamism of Islamic intellectual thought, and the many paths it carved toward the harmonization of reason, revelation, and the human pursuit of truth.

To consolidate the comparative insights drawn from the preceding analysis, it is helpful to distill the core distinctions between al-Fārābī's and al-Ghazālī's classifications into a structured format. The two thinkers, though united in their pursuit of human happiness through knowledge, differ substantially in their epistemological orientations, the sources they privilege, and the criteria they use to judge the utility of the sciences. Al-Fārābī's classification reflects a philosophical commitment to rational inquiry, civic organization, and metaphysical hierarchy, whereas al-Ghazālī's taxonomy is grounded in religious jurisprudence, Ṣūfī ethics, and eschatological aims. These contrasting frameworks influence their attitudes toward theoretical and practical knowledge, the role of Sufism, and the integration of philosophy and theology. The table below synthesizes these findings into a concise comparative overview.

The classifications proposed by al-Fārābī and al-Ghazālī, though constructed upon distinct epistemological foundations—one philosophical and civic, the other religious and mystical—nonetheless converge around the broader aim of achieving human felicity. Al-Fārābī's model is characterized by a structured, ontological approach that links the ascent of knowledge from linguistic to metaphysical sciences with the formation of the virtuous city. In contrast, al-Ghazālī views knowledge as a means to purify the soul and attain nearness to God, grounding his classification in a theological and ethical framework shaped by Ṣūfī epistemology. This fundamental difference in orientation shapes their respective views on the legitimacy, function, and value of the sciences. While al-Fārābī values theoretical knowledge for its capacity to cultivate intellect and support civic well-being, al-Ghazālī prioritizes practical, religiously infused knowledge for its role in ensuring salvation. Additionally, their treatment of disciplines such as Sufism, jurisprudence, and speculative philosophy reflects their broader concerns—cosmic order versus moral rectitude, rational coherence versus spiritual certainty. The following table synthesizes these key contrasts, offering a concise visual summary of the major points of divergence and convergence between the two thinkers:

Table 1: Differences between al-Fārābī's and al-Ghazālī's Classification of Theoretical and Practical Sciences *(*Prepared by the researchers)

Point of Comparison	**al-Fārābī**	**al-Ghazālī**
Basis of Classification (Intellectual Influence)	Philosophical and logical (influenced by earlier philosophers, especially Aristotle and Plato)	Religious (jurisprudential) and mystical (Ṣūfī)
Purpose of Theoretical Sciences	Understanding cosmic and rational truths	Doctrinal and theological understanding
Purpose of Practical Sciences	Achieving the virtuous city through regulating individual and social behavior	Purification of the soul for attaining eternal happiness (in the afterlife)
Preference Between Types of Knowledge	Prioritized theoretical sciences over practical sciences	Prioritized practical sciences, especially those related to religion

Point of Comparison	al-Fārābī	al-Ghazālī
View on Sufism	Did not rely on it in his classification	Considered Sufism central to practical sciences and was deeply influenced by it
Epistemological Foundation	Based on philosophy	Based on religion and spiritual certainty (yaqīn)
Foundation of Happiness	Achieving the virtuous city through societal cooperation and political wisdom	Religious knowledge and righteous action

Epistemological Aims and Beneficial Sciences in the Thought of al-Fārābī and al-Ghazālī: A Comparative Perspective

Based on the preceding discussion concerning the classifications of theoretical and practical sciences proposed by al-Fārābī and al-Ghazālī, it becomes clear that both thinkers aimed to establish criteria for identifying beneficial sciences, even though their understandings of utility differ based on their respective intellectual frameworks. While al-Fārābī approached classification from a philosophical and logical standpoint, al-Ghazālī adopted a thoroughly religious and mystical (Ṣūfī) orientation. Nevertheless, they converge on a central aim: the pursuit of human happiness.

For al-Fārābī, beneficial sciences are those that help the human being comprehend truth and enable the orderly organization of life in a manner conducive to happiness within the ideal city. Within his classification of the theoretical sciences, logic serves to cultivate sound reasoning, mathematics trains the intellect and finds applications in daily life, and metaphysics (or divine science) is considered the highest form of knowledge, allowing the human being to comprehend the existence of God. As for practical sciences, such as ethics and politics, they are central to al-Fārābī's framework: ethics refines human conduct, and politics enables social cooperation and the regulation of collective affairs, all in the service of establishing the virtuous society and securing human happiness.

In contrast, al-Ghazālī—whose classification is rooted in religious doctrine and focused on the soul's salvation in the hereafter—considers any science that brings a person closer to God and contributes meaningfully to one's spiritual goal as beneficial and valuable. Jurisprudence and ritual practices, for example, are viewed as essential in guiding individuals in obligatory worship and social transactions. Ethics and Ṣūfism are considered particularly valuable in refining the soul and reaching the highest degrees of divine proximity. Al-Ghazālī also identifies sciences that are blameworthy—such as astrology, sorcery, and certain forms of speculative philosophy—not because they are inherently corrupt, but because of the potential misuse that could lead to doctrinal deviation or spiritual harm. For him, the evaluation of knowledge hinges upon its religious and eschatological value: whether it facilitates obedience to God and benefits the Muslim community.

Thus, al-Fārābī's reliance on religious sciences as a measure of utility does not reach the same degree of centrality seen in al-Ghazālī's thought. For al-Ghazālī, the religious sciences and Ṣūfism are foundational and indispensable in evaluating the value of knowledge, with Ṣūfism occupying a place among the noblest disciplines. Moreover, while al-Fārābī categorizes medicine, engineering, mathematics, and philosophy as inherently beneficial sciences without placing strict restrictions on their use, al-Ghazālī asserts that such sciences are only beneficial when employed correctly, in service of human wellbeing and within the ethical limits of Islamic law. They are tools, rather than ends, and must be directed by moral intent.

In summary, for al-Fārābī, the epistemological aim of beneficial knowledge is the cultivation of the intellect and the contribution to the good order of society within the virtuous city. Knowledge, in his view, is a goal in itself, and the more one excels in theoretical sciences, the closer one comes to achieving true happiness.

In contrast, for al-Ghazālī, beneficial sciences are those that strengthen a Muslim's faith and purify the soul in pursuit of eternal happiness in the afterlife. For him, knowledge is not an end but a means—one whose value lies in its capacity to inspire righteous action. If misused, knowledge can become a source of corruption rather than virtue.

Conclusion

Both al-Fārābī and al-Ghazālī made significant contributions to Islamic intellectual thought by offering comprehensive frameworks for classifying theoretical and practical sciences. Each thinker constructed their classification system based on distinct foundations, which appear to have been shaped, at least in part, by the political and social conditions of their respective eras.

Al-Fārābī divided knowledge into five principal categories. Four of these fell under the umbrella of theoretical sciences—namely, linguistics, logic, mathematical disciplines, and metaphysics—while practical sciences were represented by civil knowledge, which included ethics, politics, the ideal city, jurisprudence, and kalām (theology). He asserted that theoretical sciences precede and guide practical ones, leading the human being toward happiness. However, this prioritization did not imply a dismissal of practical knowledge; rather, al-Fārābī emphasized the complementary importance of both domains.

Al-Ghazālī, on the other hand, grounded his classification in a religious and spiritual framework. He gave precedence to religious sciences, viewing them as essential tools for refining and purifying the human soul. For him, knowledge served as a means for achieving salvation in the hereafter, and he warned against the misuse of certain sciences that might detract from this ultimate purpose.

Although both thinkers agreed that the ultimate aim of knowledge is the attainment of happiness, the criteria for defining that happiness differed significantly. Al-Fārābī regarded beneficial knowledge as that which cultivates the intellect and contributes to the moral and civic flourishing of society within the ideal city. Al-Ghazālī, in contrast, saw beneficial knowledge as that which strengthens the individual's connection to God and leads to eternal happiness in the hereafter. He stressed the need for knowledge to be used within ethically and religiously appropriate frameworks so as not to cause harm to the interests of the Muslim community.

Based on the findings of this study, there is a clear need for a critical comparative analysis between early Islamic intellectual thought and contemporary Islamic philosophical discourse. Such research could illuminate both points of continuity and divergence. In particular, further studies might explore how the epistemological visions of al-Fārābī and al-Ghazālī intersect with or diverge from contemporary concerns, especially in relation to the ethical implications of scientific and technological advancement in the modern era.

References

1. Abd al-Latif, Ubada. *The Classification of Sciences in al-Ghazali's Thought*. ASJP 1, no. 1 (1990): 103.
2. Abd al-Salam, S. *Methodology for the Classification of Sciences in Islamic Thought: Between Imitation and Originality*. *Journal of Historical and Social Studies*, no. 21 (2017): 148.
3. Afifi, Zakariyya. *Natural and Divine Philosophy According to al-Farabi*. Cairo: Religious Culture Library, 2009.
4. al-ʿArabi, Salah. *Encyclopedia of Leading Intellectual Figures*. Vol. 4. Cairo: Egypt Library for Publishing, 2003.
5. al-Farabi. *Enumeration of the Sciences*. Edited by Uthman Muhammad Amin. Cairo: n.p., 1931.
6. al-Farabi. *The Attainment of Happiness*. Edited by Ali Abu Malham. Beirut: Dar Maktabat al-Hilal, 2006.
7. al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid. *Revival of the Religious Sciences*. Vol. 1. Beirut: Dar al-Maʿrifa, n.d., 13–18.
8. al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid. *O My Son*. Cairo: Isa al-Babi al-Halabi, n.d., 11–12.
9. al-Maʿayita, Muhammad. *Islamic Philosophy*. 1st ed. Riyadh: Dar al-Rayah for Publishing and Distribution, 2008.

10. al-Qasimi, Bushra. *The Problem of Classifying the Sciences and Its Relation to the Virtuous City in al-Farabi's Philosophy: The Creative Dimension of the Second Teacher's Thought*. *International Journal for the Publication of Research and Studies* 4, no. 47 (2023): 620.
11. al-Tahanawi, Muhammad A. *Dictionary of Technical Terms*. Vol. 1. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1998.
12. al-Umri, Muhammad. *The Classification of Sciences among the Muslims*. *Journal of the Asmari University for Applied Sciences*, no. 16 (2012): 290.
13. Beyoud, Yasmine. *Theory of Knowledge in Islamic Philosophy: al-Farabi as a Model*. Master's thesis, University of Mohamed Khider Biskra, 2022.
14. Boushti al-Qasimi, Bushra. *The Problem of the Classification of Sciences and Its Relation to the Virtuous City in al-Farabi: The Creative Face of the Second Teacher's Philosophy*. *Journal of Scientific Research*, 2023, 621–628.
15. Daziri, Abdelkader. *The Ranks of the Sciences: On the Classification of Sciences in the History of Islamic Thought*. Translated by M. Fetouh. Rabat: Nahda Center, 2023.
16. Fetouh, Mohammed. *Classification and Framing of the Sciences in Early Islam: A Glimpse into the Scholars' Views on Knowledge and the Evolution of Their Stance toward the Ancients' Sciences*. *Historical Growth Papers*, 2023, 20–21.
17. Hasab Allah, Khalid. *Philosophical Dimensions and the Intellectual Foundation of al-Farabi's State*. *Journal of the College of Islamic Studies for Women in Kafr al-Shaykh* 6, no. 2 (2022): 86.
18. Hussein, Ahmad, and Raedah Nuseirat. *The Theory of Knowledge According to al-Ghazali and Its Comparison with Educational Philosophies*. *Al-Quds Open University Journal for Research and Studies* 39, no. 2 (2014): 361–382.
19. Husayn, M. *Materialistic Currents in Arab-Islamic Philosophy*. 1st ed. Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2002.
20. Jum'ah, Muhammad A. *Al-Ghazali*. In *Encyclopedia of Leading Figures in Educational Thought*, edited by Mahmoud Zaqzouq, Vol. 1, 786. Cairo: Ministry of Religious Endowments, 2002.
21. Kheloufi, Fatima. *The Classification of the Sciences According to al-Farabi*. Master's thesis, University of Ziane Achour, 2021.
22. Sidouqi, Nasser. *The Map of Scientific Movement in al-Farabi's "Enumeration of the Sciences"*. *Journal of New Eras*, Series C, 10, no. 3 (2020): 31.