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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reconsidering Liberal Human Rights: Epistemological and Ethical Criticism in the Perspective of Al-Ghazali's Thought

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Kata Kunci:
Hak Asasi Manusia Liberal, Epistemologi, Etika, Al-Ghazali, Kemaslahatan, Tazkiyat Al-Nafs

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menelaah kembali landasan epistemologis dan dimensi etis Hak Asasi Manusia (HAM) liberal melalui perspektif pemikiran Al-Ghazali. HAM liberal yang berakar pada rasionalitas sekuler menempatkan kebebasan individu sebagai prinsip utama dalam menentukan nilai dan moral. Akan tetapi, paradigma tersebut dinilai memiliki kelemahan karena cenderung mengabaikan dimensi transenden serta membuka ruang bagi relativisme moral. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan jenis penelitian kepustakaan (library research). Data diperoleh dari karya-karya utama Al-Ghazali, buku, jurnal ilmiah, serta literatur yang berkaitan dengan filsafat liberalisme dan HAM modern. Teknik analisis yang digunakan ialah deskriptif-analitis dengan pendekatan komparatif-kritis untuk membandingkan konsep kebebasan, moralitas, dan kemaslahatan antara HAM liberal dan pemikiran Al-Ghazali. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa epistemologi HAM liberal yang hanya bertumpu pada akal memiliki keterbatasan dalam menentukan standar moral yang absolut. Dalam perspektif Al-Ghazali, pengetahuan sejati harus mengintegrasikan akal, wahyu, dan intuisi spiritual (kasyf). Selain itu, kebebasan manusia tidak dapat dipisahkan dari tanggung jawab moral dan tujuan penciptaan manusia sebagai hamba dan khalifah Tuhan. Konsep tazkiyat al-nafs dan maqasid al-syariah yang ditawarkan Al-Ghazali menjadi alternatif untuk menyeimbangkan hak individu dengan kemaslahatan sosial. Dengan demikian, kritik Al-Ghazali terhadap HAM liberal relevan untuk menjawab tantangan moral dan spiritual masyarakat kontemporer serta menawarkan kerangka HAM yang lebih holistik, berketuhanan, dan berorientasi pada keseimbangan antara hak dan tanggung jawab manusia.

Key Word:
Liberal Human Rights, Epistemology, Ethics, Al-Ghazali, Public Welfare, Tazkiyat Al-Nafs

Abstract

This study aims to re-examine the epistemological foundations and ethical dimensions of liberal human rights through the perspective of Al-Ghazali. Liberal human rights, which are rooted in secular rationalism, place individual freedom as the central principle in determining moral values and human conduct. However, this paradigm is often criticized for neglecting transcendental dimensions and creating space for moral relativism. This research employs a qualitative approach using library research methods. The data were collected from the major works of Al-Ghazali, scholarly books, academic journals, and relevant literature discussing liberal philosophy and modern human rights discourse. The analysis was conducted using descriptive-analytical and comparative-critical methods to examine the differences between liberal human rights and Al-Ghazali's ethical and epistemological framework, particularly regarding freedom, morality, and public welfare. The findings reveal that the epistemology of liberal human rights, which relies heavily on human reason, has limitations in establishing absolute moral standards. According to Al-Ghazali, true knowledge should integrate reason, revelation, and spiritual intuition (kashf). Furthermore, human freedom cannot be separated from moral responsibility and the divine purpose of humanity as both servant and steward of God on earth. Al-Ghazali's concepts of tazkiyat al-nafs (purification of the soul) and maqasid al-shariah offer an alternative framework that balances individual rights with social welfare and spiritual values. Therefore, Al-Ghazali's critique of liberal human rights remains highly relevant in addressing contemporary moral and spiritual crises while providing a more holistic, value-oriented, and spiritually grounded understanding of human right.

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PENDAHULUAN

The discourse on Human Rights (HAM) in the tradition of modern Western society is firmly rooted in liberal philosophy that considers human ratio as the main source in determining moral legitimacy(Dedi Anton Rit onga & Muhammad Ichsan, 2025). Epistimmologically, this perspective sees the individual as an independent subject who has complete freedom to determine the values of his or her life without relying on transcendent authority or revelation. The development of this paradigm, driven by the enlightenment period in the West, has led human rights to the emphasis on the universality of values derived from social

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agreement and empirical rationality alone. But this secular dominance often results in a very broad individual freedom, which in its implementation tends to ignore the metaphysical dimension of the human being.

Criticism of the construction of liberal human rights has been made many times before, especially regarding its anthropocentric and legalistic nature. Al-Ghazali as one of the great thinkers in the Islamic world, gave a different view through the combination of intellect, revelation and spiritual intuition (kasyf). (Edy Juarminson, Tito Yudistira, 2024). In Al-Ghazali's view, reason has fundamental limitations in understanding true moral reality and justice that transcends material limits. Therefore, human freedom cannot be separated from the purpose of its creator as a servant of God and caliph on earth, where every right is always accompanied by a moral responsibility to the creator (Attamimi, 2025).

Although the study of criticism of liberalism has been widely discussed, there are still empty gaps to be examined, especially related to how Al-Ghazali's classical thought can specifically expose the epistemological and ethical weaknesses of liberal human rights that are sometimes trapped in moral relativism (Daulay et al., 2025). Many modern approaches to human rights focus only on external regulation and formal legal procedures, but ignore the purification aspect of the soul as an internal basis for moral behavior. The lack of dialogue between transcendent human rights structures causes a vacuum in providing absolute protection of human dignity.

The urgency of this research lies in the increasing challenges of value crises and moral breakdowns in the current era of globalization and digitalization. Freedom without transcendent guidance risks plunging human beings into the bondage of lust framed in the rhetoric of individual rights. On the other hand, liberal human rights are often seen as tools of Western rulers who are less sensitive to local and religious values. Through Al-Ghazali's thought, the concept of Benefit (maqasid al sharia) can be offered as an alternative to balance between individual intellectual property and public interest in order to maintain the stability of the cosmic and social order.

Based on the background that has been poured out, this research aims to re-examine the epistemological foundation and ethical dimension of liberal human rights through the critical perspective of Al-Ghazali. More specifically, this study will compare the concepts of freedom and benefit between the two perspectives to find a deal that is relevant to contemporary challenges. The results of this study are expected to contribute to the development of a more inclusive and balanced global ethics, where human rights are not only seen as legal instruments, but also as a divine mandate oriented towards happiness in the hereafter.

METODE PENELITIAN

This study uses a qualitative approach with the type of library research, which focuses on an in-depth study of literature sources that are relevant to the theme of the study. This approach was chosen because the object of the research is in the form of ideas, concepts, and epistemological and ethical constructions in liberal Human Rights (HAM) which are analyzed through the perspective of Al-Ghazali's thought. The data in this study is sourced from primary and secondary literature materials. Primary sources include Al-Ghazali's major works such as Ihya' Ulumuddin as well as other classical writings that represent the epistemological and ethical framework of Islam. The secondary sources are books, scientific journals, and academic articles that discuss the philosophy of liberalism, modern human rights theory, and critical studies of Al-Ghazali's thought. The data collection technique is carried out through documentation, namely by identifying, classifying, and reviewing literature that has direct relevance to the focus of the research.

Furthermore, the data analysis technique in this study uses descriptive-analytical methods and comparative-critical approaches. The descriptive method is used to systematically outline the concepts of epistemology and ethics in liberal human rights and Al-Ghazali's thought, while comparative analysis is used to compare the two frameworks in order to find points of difference, weaknesses, and possible integrations between the two. A critical approach is used to evaluate in depth the philosophical foundations of liberal human rights using the epistemological and ethical perspectives of Al-Ghazali as the main analytical knife. The analysis process is carried out through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing systematically so as to produce a comprehensive understanding of the relevance of Al-Ghazali's criticism to the construction of liberal human rights in the context of contemporary social challenges. With this method, the research is expected to be able to make a conceptual contribution to the development of a more integrative global ethical discourse between the rational and spiritual dimensions.

HASIL DAN PEMBAHASAN

Liberal Human Rights or Liberal Human Rights originate from the Western philosophical tradition that makes the ratio to human beings the main reference for knowledge and moral legitimacy(Daulay et al.,

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2025). In this view, man is understood as an autonomous person who has the freedom to determine actions and values without relying on metaphysical authority or revelation. This epistemology developed at the same time as the birth of the enlightenment period which emphasized rationality and empirical experience.

In this view, truth is confronted as a result of rational constructions that are relative and contextual. Therefore, Liberal Human Rights tends to emphasize the universality of values that are rooted in human agreement, rather than stemming from transcendent sources. This is what gives birth to the idea of individual freedom that is so broad, including in moral and social aspects (Daulay et al., 2025).

In contrast to what Al-Ghazali brought, in his view epistemology like this is considered incomplete or unbalanced. Al-Ghazali in his view criticized the complete dependence on reason as the only source of knowledge. In some of his works, Al-Ghazali gives the assertion that reason has limits, especially in understanding metaphysical reality and true moral values(Lismawati, 2022).

For Al-Ghazali, true knowledge is not simply obtained through reason and senses, but also through revelation and spititual intuition such as kasyf (Isma Nadia Mumtaz, 2025). Therefore, Islamic epistimology is integrative in nature that seeks to combine the dimensions of rationality and the transcendent. This view differs fundamentally from the epistemology of liberal human rights which is more inclined towards secularism.

Al-Ghazali criticized this rationalism not for no reason, it was related to the potential for human error in determining moral standards. Without the guidance of God's revelation, humans have the potential to set values that change according to certain interests and social contexts. This opens up the possibility of moral relativism (Adila Umniati Aufa, Muhammad Musyafa', n.d.).

In relation to liberal human rights, this relativism is seen in the flexibility of interpretation of individual rights and freedoms. Values that are considered universal often change according to the development of the times and changes in culture (Muh. Yusuf, Saprin, n.d.). From the point of view of Al-Ghazali's thought, this shows the absence of a strong epistemological basis.

Thus, the epistemological criticism in Al-Ghazali's thought, which is used as the basis for liberal human rights, lies in the rejection of the domination of reason without the guidance of revelation. He offers an alternative solution in the form of epistemological guidance that provides a balance between ratio, revelation, and spiritual experience as the basis for understanding human rights and obligations.

In a deeper discussion of the basis of liberal human rights knowledge, it is directly confronted with the human structure as stated in Al-Ghazali's thought. In liberal tradition, the subject of the law is seen as an individual who has full power over himself, where these rights are considered inherent through a process of secular, logical reasoning (Lisa Aminatul Mukaromah, Khurul Anam, Asnawi, Rahman, Riska Arianti, 2025). Al-Ghazali, through his framework of tahafut methodology, provides a critique of this claim of rational absolutism by showing that reason, although valid in the realm of formal and empirical logic, is often caught up in contradictions when trying to establish standards of reasonableness that transcend material limits. The limitations of reason in formulating morality have an impact on the instability of norms carried by liberal human rights. Al-Ghazali is of the view that if morality is based only on an atomistic rational consensus, then human rights will always change according to the prevailing sociological and political dynamics (Sahar, 2022). This criticism points to the thesis that liberal human rights lose the dimension of sacredness that can provide absolute protection of human dignity. Because its legitimacy depends only on a social contract that can be renegotiated for the pragmatic interests of the majority group or dominant power.

In his fundamental work ihya' Ulumuddin, it is explained that human rights and obligations cannot be separated from the purpose of human creation as caliphs and servants of God the creator. Therefore, individual freedom in absolute liberal human rights is considered a form of existential anomaly, because it does not care about human attachment to God's law (sharia). Freedom without the guidance of the transcendent, as Al-Ghazali responds, will lead people to fall into the slavery of lust encapsulated in the rhetoric of individual rights. The integration between reason and reason, according to Al-Ghazali's view, creates a stronger value archive compared to the horizontal structure of liberal human rights. In addition, Al-Ghazali provides an explanation of the importance of purification of the soul as a tool of knowledge to achieve objective moral truth. Criticism of liberal human rights highlights this neglect of this aspect of internal morality, where the liberal system focuses more on external regulation and formal legal procedures. According to Al-Ghazali, without the spiritual transformation of the subject who has rights, the enforcement of human rights becomes only a tool of humility, which is cold and loses the substance of true justice, because it is rooted in a deep divine consciousness.

Criticism through Al-Ghazali's frame of mind which is the foundation in criticizing the basis of liberal human rights knowledge requires a shift in the way of looking at humanity. If liberal human rights seek to

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liberate human beings from metaphysical authority in order to achieve rational independence, it is in Al-Ghazali's view that this is a fragile illusion. The solution of knowledge offered is a harmony in which human rights are recognized as divine mandates that must be carried out within the framework of devotion, so that the universality of human rights is no longer relative to the times, but absolute in the truth of eternal revelation.

Human rights in its implementation are based on the assumption that individuals are responsible for what they do and have the right to demand their rights(Fagan, 2012). Liberal human rights so emphasize individual freedom as a major value in human life. This freedom includes the right to choose life, to choose beliefs and actions as long as it does not cause harm to others. Then this principle is the basis of liberal ethics, which is to place each individual as the center of morality.

However, freedom in liberal human rights is often misinterpreted so that it is understood negatively. Nullity in liberal human rights is often understood as the absence of external boundaries. That is, as long as there is no legal prohibition, each individual is free to do anything. In practice, this can lead to a broader neglect of moral responsibility. Al-Ghazali gives a view in this regard, for him freedom is inseparable from moral responsibility. He emphasized that humans are creatures with a purpose in life, which is to get closer to God. Therefore, the freedom lived must be directed to goodness (al-khayr), not only to the fulfillment of desires.

The moral framework presented by Al-Ghazali can also be a critique of anthropocentric liberal ethical tendencies. In Al-Ghazali's view, ethics that focus only on humans may ignore the divine dimension and the ultimate purpose of life. This makes morality relative and dependent on social agreement. Al-Ghazali, in the framework of his Sufism, responded that morality is an indicator not only in the form of physical actions, but also from intentions and mental conditions. This is something that shows that Islamic ethics has a deeper dimension when compared to liberal ethics which tend to be formal and legalistic.

Al-Ghazali also in addition to making such comments, he also highlighted the danger of the dominance of lust in human life. Freedom without spiritual control can make people become trapped in actions that can be destructive to themselves and society. In this case, liberal human rights are considered to lack a neutral control mechanism.

The ethics presented by Al-Ghazali emphasized the importance of tazkiyat al-nafs, namely the purification of the soul as the basis for moral behavior. With a clean soul, humans will be more likely to be naturally close to goodness.(Lita Fauzi Hanafani, 2023) This is in contrast to the liberal approach that emphasizes external regulation through human law. Al-Ghazali's frame of mind that became a critique of liberal human rights ultimately showed that freedom should be limited by ethical values that make revelation its primary source. Without these restrictions, freedom will lose direction and have the potential to damage the social order in society(Zubair Achmad C, 1994).

Axiologically, discussions of freedom in liberal views are often mired in the distinction between individual rights and public authority, which in the process tends to reduce the essence of humanity to a mere economic or political unit. Al-Ghazali, through his sophistical ethical framework, offers a reanalysis of the idea of absolute autonomy by arguing that true freedom is not the absence of external obstacles, but the ability of the soul to break free from the shackles of lust and selfishness. In this case, liberal human rights that only focus on protection against attacks from outsiders are considered to have failed to touch the aspect of spiritual freedom, where human beings should also be freed from the internal damage caused by liver disease.

The incompatibility between liberal ethics and Al-Ghazali's outpouring of thought is also seen in the way both understand happiness. If in the liberal human rights paradigm happiness is often interpreted as the freedom to pursue personal interests and material satisfaction independently(Eko Riyadi, 2007), Al-Ghazali argues and also emphasizes that true happiness is eschatological and can only be achieved through the alignment between human will and God's will (Norma Hasanatul Magfiroh, 2025). Criticism of secular morality through Al-Ghazali's framework of thought shows that without transcendent orientation, the fulfillment of human rights will only produce a society that is procedurally prosperous but existentially dry, because it ignores the most important human need for meaning and absolute truth.

Furthermore, the method brought by Al-Ghazali in formulating social ethics is based on the principle of Maqasid al-Sharia, which gives priority to the public interest (maslahah) over the rights of the individual to the detriment of others(Shodiq, 2022), in this case, liberal human rights often conflict when individuals clash with collective moral norms. Al-Ghzali provides an alternative that we can use as a solution in this case through a hierarchy of values that places the protection of religion and reason as the main pillars, so that freedom of opinion or action in liberalism must still follow the guidance of revelation in order to maintain

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the stability of the cosmic and social order. This is a sharp critique of liberal moral relativism that submits the standard of virtue to an unstable human consensus(Febi Yonesta, Muhammad Isnur, Nurkholis Hidayat, Sidik Handika Febrian, Irma Latifah Sihite, 2012).

In the lens of moral psychology put forward by Al-Ghazali, freedom without spiritual discipline (riyadhah) is considered a form of deviation that is harmful to human dignity. Liberal paradigms that place great emphasis on privacy and freedom of conduct often ignore the effects of systematic moral decline. Therefore, any claim to rights must be accompanied by a moral responsibility to maintain personal purity and social harmony, a concept that goes beyond the formalities of positive law in the Western tradition.

From a liberal human rights perspective, individual freedom is an almost absolute value. Every individual has the right to choose his or her life without interference, as long as it does not interfere with the rights of others(Setiaji et al., 2026). This idea is based on the idea of individual autonomy as a key principle. But in Al-Ghazali's view, freedom is not absolute. Freedom must always be linked to the benefits and goals of the Shari'ah (Hakim, 2021). Freedom that does not produce a good is considered deviant from the purpose of human creation. Al-Ghazali believes that every human being has good and bad potential. Therefore, freedom needs to be directed through moral and spiritual education so that the resulting actions provide benefits. Freedom without guidance and causing damage.

In the context of liberal human rights, the concept of benefits is often interpreted in an ultiliarian way, that is, based on the greatest benefits for most people. However, this model approach does not always consider absolute values that are transcendent. In contrast to what is presented by Al-Ghazali, he places benefits in the context of maqasid al-shariah, which contains maintaining religion, soul, intellect, descendants, and also maintaining property. This explains that freedom must be in harmony and harmony with these goals.

Other differences can also be seen in the way each individual's rights are understood. In liberal human rights, it tends to prioritize individual rights over the common good. It is different from Al-Ghzali's view that puts pressure on the balance between individual rights and social responsibility. Al-Ghazali explained that a good society is a society built on moral and spiritual values. Therefore, the freedom of every individual must not undermine the existing social harmony and moral order. Freedom in Islam according to Al-Ghazali's view is freedom that has a direction. The point is, man has free will, but within the framework of values that have been established by revelation (Khairunisa et al., 2025). This is in contrast to liberal freedom, which tends to be directionless. Therefore, the comparison that has been expressed earlier, shows that the concept of freedom in liberal human rights and Al-Ghazali's thought offers a more holistic approach by integrating freedom, morality and the purpose of human life.

Furthermore, in a liberal human rights perspective, the limits of freedom are set through *the "no Harm Principle"* expressed by John Stuart Mill, under which state intervention is only acceptable if the actions of individuals directly harm others(Bell, 2021). However, Al-Ghazali emphasized that the limits of freedom are not only external but also internal through the control of lust. This principle ensures that freedom not only prevents harm to others, but also avoids harm to oneself due to the evil impulses that exist in the human soul.

In terms of social implementation, liberal human rights encourage value pluralism through a free market of ideas, which can trigger cultural diversity but potentially lead to moral fragmentation. On the contrary, Al-Ghazali emphasized Sufism education to form character. So that individual freedom becomes a means to achieve spiritual perfection. This will create a united society, where freedom is not a source of conflict but a driver of common progress.

This similarity can also be seen in responses to contemporary issues, such as freedom of expression. From a liberal human rights perspective, the expression of freedom is broadly protected, even if it reflects the beliefs of the majority. However, Al-Ghazali views that the freedom of expression must be limited if it threatens the maqasid of al-sharia, such as damaging the faith or harmony of the ummah. This will create a balance between individual rights and the benefit of the community as a whole.

Epistemologically, the foundations of liberal human rights are built on secular rationality and social contracts, while Al-Ghazali relies on revelation as the ultimate source of knowledge. The difference between these two views results in different views of freedom. The integration between the two can offer a hybrid model that is relevant in the era of globalization. The comparison between the two opinions invites us to reflect that true freedom is not the absence of limits, but harmony with the existential purpose of man. Thus, the approach presented by Al-Ghazali provides a holistic framework that complements the weaknesses of liberalism with a spiritual moral dimension.

In today's global context, liberal human rights are faced with a variety of challenges, including forms of criticism of moral relativism and value crises. Many have questioned whether such broad freedoms will

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actually undermine social order and cultural identity. The narrative presented by Al-Ghazali in his thinking becomes very relevant to answer this question. Al-Ghazali offers a perspective that emphasizes the importance of spiritual and moral values as the basis of human life. The approach presented can be an option in facing the challenges of modern ethical crises.

Furthermore, in a society that is increasingly diverse and plural, there is a need for a human rights framework that is not only universal, but also sensitive to local and religious values. Al-Ghazali's lecture can contribute to building a more open approach. Moreover, the spiritual crisis felt by modern society shows that material freedom does not always bring happiness(Naim, 2020). Al-Ghazali emphasized the importance of a balance between the material and spiritual aspects of human life (Sulistiyani et al., 2025). In addition, another relevance lies in the idea of self-control. In the digital era and globalization, humans are faced with various temptations that have the potential to damage morals. The concept proposed by Al-Ghazali in the form of tazkiyat al-nafs became so very important.

Al-Ghazali's frame of mind can also be an underlying source for developing a more balanced global ethic. By integrating spiritual values, human rights are not only a legal instrument, but also a way to shape human character. Thus, Al-Ghazali's critique of liberal human rights is not only theoretical, but also has practical relevance in responding to the more comprehensive challenge of understanding human rights, freedoms, and responsibilities.

al-Ghazali's thinking also creates space for dialogue between civilizations on human rights issues. By emphasizing shared responsibility, the concept of al-kasb can be a bridge for understanding between West and East. This approach also avoids cultural conflict by incorporating the universal value of human rights into the spiritual framework. In addition, in the face of the problem of radicalism, the idea of tazkiyat al-nafs provides a preventive solution, Al-Ghazali teaches the purification of the soul as a protection from extremism(Mutholingah, 2021). This is so important as a public policy that supports religion-based moderation. In addition, Al-Ghazali's idea of soft determinism can also concern restorative justice. Responsible freedom encourages reconciliation rather than punishment alone. This kind of approach is in line with the third-generation human rights principle of peace.

In the post-pandemic period, mental crises require spiritual integration in health human rights. Al-Ghazali emphasized the well-being of the soul as a basic human right. The thoughts presented can be the reason for the formation of comprehensive and sustainable policies. The thoughts brought by Al-Ghazali are so relevant sources to answer criticism of human rights as a tool of Western hegemony. By making Islamic thought classic, it provides a local alternative for Muslim countries in particular. Thus, the scientific heritage brought by Al-Ghazali is not only historical, but also dynamic and adaptive. His thinking can be an ethical guide for an inclusive and divine future of human rights. This integration makes for a just, peaceful and spiritually meaningful society.

KESIMPULAN

Based on the critical analysis conducted, this study concludes that the epistemological foundation of liberal Human Rights (HAM) rooted in secular rationality has fundamental limitations because it only relies on reason as the sole authority. Through the perspective of Al-Ghazali's thought, it is found that the claims of rational absolutism in the liberal tradition tend to give birth to unstable moral relativism, in which universal values often change according to sociopolitical dynamics and pragmatic human consensus. Al-Ghazali offers an integrative epistemological model that balances ratio, revelation, and spiritual intuition (*kasyf*). In this framework, individual rights and freedoms are not seen as absolute autonomy, but as a divine mandate that must be in harmony with the purpose of human creation as servants and caliphs in order to maintain a more sacred and absolute human dignity. Ethically and axiologically, there is a fundamental difference between anthropocentric-legalistic liberal ethics and Al-Ghazali's sufistic ethics based on *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul). If liberal human rights focus more on external regulation and the protection of negative freedoms, Al-Ghazali emphasizes that true freedom is the ability of the soul to escape the shackles of lust through spiritual discipline. The implementation of the concept of benefits within the framework *of Maqasid al-Syariah* (protection of religion, soul, intellect, lineage, and property) provides a stronger hierarchy of values than the horizontal structure of liberal human rights. Thus, Al-Ghazali's critique of liberal human rights becomes highly relevant in addressing contemporary challenges such as moral crises and Western hegemony, while offering a model of human rights protection that is more inclusive, godly, and balanced between individual rights and social responsibility.

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