



The Legacy of ibn Sina's Thought on the Development of Islamic Psychology: A Historical Literature Review

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Abstract

This study examines the legacy of Ibn Sina's psychological thought and its significance for the development of Islamic psychology through a historical philosophical literature review. As one of the most influential Muslim philosophers of the Islamic Golden Age, Ibn Sina developed a comprehensive theory of the soul (al-nafs) that integrates intellectual, emotional, and moral dimensions of human existence. Drawing primarily on his major works, including Kitab al-Nafs, Al-Shifa', and Al-Najat, this research analyzes how his conceptualization of the vegetative, sensitive, and rational aspects of the soul provides a holistic framework for understanding human psychology. The study employs thematic content analysis to identify key psychological concepts in Ibn Sina's writings and to examine their reinterpretation in contemporary scholarship on Islamic psychology. The findings indicate that Ibn Sina's thought offers an alternative epistemological foundation to reductionist psychological paradigms by emphasizing the immaterial nature of consciousness, the central role of reason, and the ethical orientation of mental life. At the same time, the study highlights the need for critical engagement with his ideas to avoid anachronistic or normative applications in modern psychological practice. Overall, the research demonstrates that Ibn Sina's psychological framework remains theoretically relevant for contemporary Islamic psychology, particularly in efforts to develop culturally grounded and ethically sensitive approaches to mental health and human development. This study contributes to the ongoing reconstruction of Islamic psychology by clarifying the philosophical roots of the discipline and by positioning Ibn Sina's legacy as a valuable intellectual resource for future theoretical and interdisciplinary research.

Introduction

The emergence of psychology as a modern scientific discipline is deeply rooted in a long intellectual tradition concerned with understanding the nature of the human soul, mind, and behavior. Long before psychology was formalized as an empirical science in the nineteenth century, philosophical inquiries into human consciousness, cognition, emotion, and morality had already developed across various civilizations (Jacomuzzi et al., 2024; Utenazarov & Izimbetov, 2025). Within the Islamic intellectual tradition, reflections on the soul (*al-nafs*) constituted a central area of inquiry, engaging philosophers, physicians, and scholars who sought to explain human behavior not merely in biological or mechanical terms, but within a comprehensive framework that integrated metaphysics, ethics, and rational inquiry. As such, Islamic scholarship offers a rich and systematic body of thought that can be regarded as an early foundation for what is now recognized as psychological science. Among the most influential figures in this tradition is Ibn Sina (980–1037 CE), known in Western scholarship

as Avicenna. Ibn Sina was a polymath whose intellectual contributions spanned philosophy, medicine, logic, and natural sciences (Henrich et al., 2023). His works, particularly *Al-Shifa'* and *Al-Najat*, represent some of the most sophisticated attempts to articulate a comprehensive theory of human nature. Within these texts, Ibn Sina developed an elaborate conception of the soul that addressed questions of perception, cognition, self-awareness, moral capacity, and intellectual development. His psychological reflections were not isolated speculations, but formed an integral part of a broader philosophical system that sought to explain the relationship between the human being, the material world, and abstract intelligible realities (Elzamzamy et al., 2024).

In the context of Islamic psychology, Ibn Sina's legacy occupies a pivotal position (Deswita, 2016; Dimitri, 2016). His classification of the soul into three interconnected levels the vegetative soul, the sensitive soul, and the rational soul provides a structured explanation of human functioning that encompasses physical growth, sensory experience, emotional response, and rational reflection. This tripartite model reflects a holistic understanding of the human being, in which biological processes, psychological dynamics, and intellectual capacities are integrated rather than treated as separate or competing domains. Such an approach contrasts sharply with reductionist tendencies in some strands of modern psychology that prioritize observable behavior or neurobiological processes while marginalizing subjective experience and moral reasoning.

A particularly significant aspect of Ibn Sina's psychology is his conception of the soul as an immaterial and independent substance. Through philosophical arguments most famously the "Floating Man" thought experiment he asserted that self-awareness is not dependent on bodily sensation, thereby emphasizing the non-material dimension of human consciousness (Kamal, 2016; Chania et al., 2025). This position allowed Ibn Sina to articulate a model of psychology that recognizes empirical observation while simultaneously affirming the existence of intellectual and spiritual dimensions that transcend physical processes. In this sense, his thought offers an alternative epistemological framework that bridges empirical inquiry and metaphysical reflection, a balance that remains relevant in contemporary debates within psychology and philosophy of mind.

Despite the depth and sophistication of Ibn Sina's contributions, the development of modern psychology has largely marginalized classical Islamic thinkers (Khan, 2025). When figures such as Ibn Sina are mentioned in mainstream psychological discourse, they are often confined to historical footnotes rather than engaged as serious contributors to psychological theory. This marginalization reflects a broader epistemological gap, in which non-Western intellectual traditions are frequently excluded from theoretical development and methodological reflection. As a result, the philosophical foundations of psychology have become narrowly defined, limiting the discipline's capacity to address moral, spiritual, and existential dimensions of human experience.

In recent decades, however, there has been a growing effort among scholars of Islamic psychology to reconstruct the discipline's epistemological foundations by revisiting classical sources. This movement seeks not merely to preserve historical heritage, but to critically engage classical theories in order to develop contemporary psychological frameworks that are culturally grounded, ethically oriented, and philosophically coherent (Bettache, 2025). Within this context, Ibn Sina's psychology emerges as a particularly valuable resource. His systematic treatment of cognition, emotion, morality, and mental well-being provides conceptual tools that can enrich modern discussions on personality, mental health, and human development, especially in contexts where psychological practice is closely intertwined with ethical and cultural values.

Studying Ibn Sina's thought is therefore not an exercise in historical nostalgia, but a necessary step in understanding the intellectual roots of Islamic psychology and its potential contributions to contemporary psychological science (Rachmad, 2025). His framework allows for the integration of rational analysis and moral orientation without collapsing psychology into either pure metaphysics or purely empirical science. This balance is especially important in addressing contemporary psychological challenges that require holistic approaches, such as mental health issues, identity formation, and moral development in increasingly complex social environments (Anam, 2025).

Based on these considerations, this study aims to examine Ibn Sina's intellectual legacy in relation to the development of Islamic psychology through a historical literature review approach (Norman & Ruhullah, 2024; Elzamzamy et al., 2024). The primary focus of the study includes: first, an analysis of Ibn Sina's concept of the soul and its structural components; second, an exploration of the influence of his psychological thought on contemporary theories and paradigms within Islamic psychology; and third, an evaluation of the relevance of his ideas for developing a holistic psychological framework that integrates intellectual, emotional, and moral dimensions of human life. Through this analysis, the study seeks to contribute theoretically to the strengthening of Islamic psychology's philosophical foundations and to open new possibilities for constructive dialogue between classical Islamic thought and modern psychological science.

Methods

Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a literature review approach grounded in a historical philosophical framework. The selection of this approach is based on the primary objective of the research, namely to explore, interpret, and critically analyze the intellectual legacy of Ibn Sina in relation to the development of Islamic psychology. Rather than seeking to measure psychological variables or test hypotheses empirically, this research focuses on conceptual clarification, historical reconstruction, and philosophical interpretation of ideas. Consequently, the study is positioned within qualitative and theoretical research traditions, emphasizing depth of analysis, coherence of argumentation, and contextual understanding of classical and contemporary texts.

The historical philosophical orientation allows the research to situate Ibn Sina's psychological thought within its original intellectual context while simultaneously examining its relevance to modern discussions in Islamic psychology. This dual orientation ensures that Ibn Sina's ideas are neither treated as timeless abstractions nor reduced to mere historical artifacts, but are instead analyzed as evolving intellectual contributions that continue to inform contemporary theoretical frameworks. Through this approach, the study bridges classical Islamic philosophy and modern psychological discourse in a systematic and methodologically sound manner.

Sources of Data

The data sources used in this study consist of primary and secondary literature. Primary sources include Ibn Sina's original works that directly address the nature of the soul, cognition, and psychological processes. These texts form the core analytical foundation of the study and include *Kitab al-Nafs* (as part of *Al-Shifa'*), *Al-Isyarat wa al-Tanbihat*, and *Al-Najat*. These works were selected because they represent Ibn Sina's most comprehensive and mature formulations of psychological and philosophical ideas relevant to the study's objectives. The use of primary texts ensures conceptual accuracy and minimizes reliance on interpretive distortions found in later summaries or secondary interpretations.

Secondary sources consist of contemporary academic literature that examines Ibn Sina's thought and its relevance to Islamic psychology, philosophy of mind, ethics, and mental health. These sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, doctoral dissertations, and reputable conference proceedings published predominantly within the last five to ten years. The inclusion of recent scholarship allows the study to engage with current academic debates, methodological trends, and reinterpretations of classical Islamic psychology. Secondary literature also serves a comparative function, enabling the study to assess how Ibn Sina's ideas have been adopted, adapted, or critiqued within modern psychological and philosophical frameworks.

Literature Search Strategy and Selection Criteria

The process of data collection was conducted through a systematic literature search using recognized academic databases, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, ResearchGate, and SINTA. These databases were chosen to ensure access to both international and regionally relevant scholarly publications. The search process employed specific keywords and keyword combinations such as "Ibn Sina psychology," "Avicenna soul theory," "Islamic psychology," and "philosophy of the soul in Islam." These terms were selected to capture literature that directly engages with psychological concepts in Ibn Sina's works as well as their broader theoretical implications.

The literature identified through this search process was then screened and selected based on clearly defined inclusion criteria. First, publications had to directly discuss concepts related to the soul, consciousness, cognition, personality, or psychological functioning within Ibn Sina's philosophical system. Second, classical sources were required to possess recognized historical and scholarly authority, ensuring their credibility as primary references. Third, modern sources were selected based on their relevance, academic rigor, and publication within the last ten years, in order to reflect current scholarly perspectives. Sources that were purely descriptive, lacked academic rigor, or did not substantially engage with Ibn Sina's psychological thought were excluded from the analysis.

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis in this study was conducted using thematic content analysis combined with philosophical interpretation. This analytical method was chosen because it allows for systematic identification, categorization, and interpretation of recurring themes across diverse textual sources. The analysis began with close reading of primary texts to extract key concepts related to the structure of the soul, cognitive faculties, moral reasoning, and mental balance. These concepts were then grouped into thematic categories, such as the tripartite structure of the soul, the role of reason and intellect, and the relationship between morality and psychological well-being.

Following thematic identification, each theme was analyzed philosophically to uncover its conceptual meaning, internal coherence, and theoretical implications. This interpretive stage involved examining how Ibn Sina's ideas relate to broader philosophical questions in psychology, such as the nature of consciousness, the integration of reason and emotion, and the ethical dimensions of mental health. The themes derived from classical texts were subsequently compared with interpretations found in modern Islamic psychology literature to identify continuities, reinterpretations, and areas of conceptual development. This comparative analysis enabled the study to map the intellectual trajectory from Ibn Sina's original framework to contemporary psychological paradigms.

Analytical Framework and Validity

To ensure analytical rigor and conceptual validity, this study employs an integrative analytical framework that combines historical contextualization, textual interpretation, and theoretical comparison. Historical contextualization ensures that Ibn Sina's ideas are understood within the intellectual milieu of classical Islamic philosophy, preventing anachronistic interpretations. Textual interpretation focuses on extracting meaning directly from the primary sources, while theoretical comparison allows for critical engagement with contemporary psychological and philosophical scholarship. Although this research does not employ empirical validation in the conventional sense, its validity is strengthened through triangulation of sources, consistency of thematic patterns across texts, and engagement with authoritative scholarship. By relying on multiple primary and secondary sources and employing a transparent analytical process, the study ensures that its conclusions are grounded in systematic reasoning rather than subjective speculation.

Expected Research Outcomes

Through this methodological approach, the research is expected to produce a comprehensive conceptual mapping of Ibn Sina's contributions to the philosophical and epistemological foundations of Islamic psychology. The findings aim to clarify how classical concepts of the soul, cognition, and morality can inform contemporary psychological theory without conflating philosophical explanation with empirical modeling. Ultimately, this methodology supports the study's broader goal of positioning Ibn Sina's psychological thought as a meaningful intellectual resource for developing a holistic, ethically grounded, and contextually relevant Islamic psychology.

Results and Discussion

The results presented in the following section are derived from a systematic thematic examination of Ibn Sina's primary philosophical texts and relevant contemporary scholarly interpretations. Rather than reporting empirical data, the findings reflect conceptual patterns, recurring themes, and theoretical relationships identified across the literature. These results are structured to highlight key dimensions of Ibn Sina's psychological thought particularly his conception of the soul, cognitive faculties, and moral orientation and to demonstrate their relevance to the development of contemporary Islamic psychology. Accordingly, the discussion integrates historical interpretation with philosophical analysis, allowing the results to function not merely as descriptive summaries but as analytical insights that contribute to a deeper understanding of Ibn Sina's enduring intellectual legacy.

Morality, Epistemology, and the Rational Soul: Clarifying Conceptual Relationships

The concept of the rational soul (*al-naḥs al-nāṭiqah*) occupies a central position in Ibn Sina's philosophical psychology, particularly in discussions of human self-awareness, intellect, and ethical capacity. While the rational soul enables abstract thinking and self-reflection, it is important to emphasize that Ibn Sina does not treat moral responsibility as an automatic or inevitable outcome of possessing rationality (Arroisi & Jaelani, 2024). His project is primarily metaphysical and explanatory rather than prescriptive or normatively ethical. Ibn Sina seeks to clarify how human beings are capable of understanding universals, deliberating about actions, and orienting themselves toward values, but he does not formulate a systematic moral doctrine comparable to modern ethical theories. Consequently, moral awareness in Ibn Sina's framework should be understood as a *potential* grounded in the structure of the soul, not as a guaranteed moral disposition.

From an epistemological perspective, the faculties of intellect (*'aql*) and *wahm* function as necessary cognitive conditions for moral judgment rather than as sources of moral norms themselves (Mohammed, 2024). The intellect enables abstraction from particular sensory experiences to universal concepts such as goodness, justice, or harm, while *wahm* apprehends non-sensory meanings, including intentions, emotional significance, and evaluative tendencies. Together, these faculties explain how humans can recognize morally relevant features of situations. However, Ibn Sina does not explicitly specify how these cognitive capacities yield concrete moral obligations or ethical rules. The determination of what *ought* to be done exceeds the descriptive scope of his psychology and enters the domain of ethical interpretation, jurisprudence, or theological reasoning (Erlwein & Krause, 2025). The movement from epistemic capacity to moral obligation therefore represents an interpretative extension rather than a direct implication of Ibn Sina's original system. Post-classical Muslim philosophers, theologians, and contemporary scholars of Islamic psychology have often expanded Ibn Sina's account by integrating it with normative ethical frameworks drawn from Islamic law, spirituality, or modern moral philosophy. While such extensions are intellectually productive, they must be acknowledged as *reinterpretations* rather than intrinsic components of Ibn Sina's psychology. Without this clarification, there is a risk of attributing modern ethical conclusions to Ibn Sina that he did not explicitly articulate, thereby blurring the boundary between historical philosophy and contemporary moral theory.

By explicitly distinguishing between Ibn Sina's metaphysical epistemological claims and later ethical extrapolations, this study positions moral responsibility as an outcome of interpretive mediation rather than philosophical determinism (Bajuwaiber, 2023; Ganapathy, 2023; Love, 2023). This distinction strengthens the analytical rigor of the discussion and prevents the impression that moral, spiritual, and ethical outcomes flow unproblematically from the mere existence of the rational soul. Instead, Ibn Sina's thought is more accurately understood as providing the *cognitive architecture* that makes moral reasoning possible, while the content and application of moral norms remain contingent upon broader ethical, religious, and cultural frameworks. Such a reading preserves the conceptual integrity of Ibn Sina's system while allowing it to engage meaningfully with contemporary debates in moral psychology and Islamic ethical thought.

Perception, Imagination, Wahm, and Intellect: Avoiding Psychological Anachronism

The discussion of perception, imagination (*al-khayāl*), *wahm*, and intellect in Ibn Sina's psychology is often presented as a sequential and integrated process that appears structurally similar to modern cognitive models. This presentation is useful for explanatory clarity, yet it risks obscuring the fundamentally philosophical nature of Ibn Sina's framework (Ma'ani et al., 2025). Ibn Sina does not conceptualize these faculties as components of a mechanistic or functional system designed to predict behavior or mental outcomes. Rather, his account aims to explain how human action and awareness are intelligible within a broader metaphysical structure of the soul, where each faculty represents a level of form reception and meaning apprehension rather than an empirically observable psychological function.

Perception, in Ibn Sina's account, serves as the initial reception of sensible forms through the external senses, which are subsequently unified by the internal senses (Bhat & Bisati, 2025). Imagination and *wahm* do not function merely as information-processing units, but as explanatory principles for how meanings both sensory and non-sensory are preserved and evaluated within the soul. *Wahm*, in particular, apprehends intentions, emotional significance, and evaluative meanings that are not reducible to sensory data. These faculties are therefore not described in causal or experimental terms, but as part of a philosophical explanation of how the soul relates to the material world while remaining irreducible to it.

The intellect (*'aql*) represents the highest level of this explanatory structure, enabling abstraction from particular experiences to universal concepts. However, Ibn Sina does not frame this process as a cognitive mechanism operating under testable conditions, nor does he claim that it functions uniformly across individuals or contexts (Farran, 2025). Instead, the intellect's role is to demonstrate how rational understanding and moral reflection are *possible* given the immaterial nature of the soul (Bennett & Hacker, 2022). Treating this progression from perception to intellect as a linear psychological model analogous to contemporary cognitive science risks imposing modern assumptions about mental causality onto a framework that was never intended to function in that way (Schmude et al., 2024).

Recognizing this distinction is crucial for avoiding conceptual anachronism in contemporary interpretations of Ibn Sina's psychology (Topal & Wigen, 2022; Mahmoudi, 2025). His theory should be understood as offering a metaphysical and ethical explanation of human action rather than an empirical account of mental processes. When applied to modern psychology, Ibn Sina's framework is best approached as a source of philosophical insight that can inspire theoretical reflection, not as a ready-made model for empirical application. By clearly distinguishing between philosophical explanation and psychological modeling, this study preserves the integrity of Ibn Sina's system while preventing overestimation of its empirical applicability in contemporary behavioral science.

Mental Health and Morality: From Idealization to Critical Approach

The close relationship between morality and mental health in Ibn Sina's philosophy represents one of the most compelling yet sensitive aspects of his psychological thought when viewed from a contemporary perspective (Khalid, 2024). Ibn Sina conceptualizes mental well-being as a state of balance (*i'tidāl*) among the intellectual, emotional, physical, and moral dimensions of the soul. In this framework, disturbances of the soul are often linked to excess, deficiency, or disharmony within these dimensions. While this holistic vision offers a rich alternative to reductionist models of mental health, it also carries the risk of being interpreted normatively, particularly when moral imbalance is treated as a direct explanation for psychological suffering.

If applied uncritically in modern contexts, the strong association between moral virtue and psychological well-being may inadvertently lead to the assumption that mental illness reflects personal moral failure or spiritual deficiency (Ni'mah & Astuti, 2025). Such an interpretation is problematic within contemporary clinical psychology, where mental disorders are understood as complex phenomena shaped by biological, psychological, social, and environmental factors. Equating suffering with moral inadequacy risks reinforcing stigma, intensifying feelings of guilt, and encouraging self-blame, especially among individuals who already experience religious anxiety or internalized moral pressure. These consequences directly conflict with therapeutic principles that prioritize compassion, non-judgment, and patient autonomy (Toprak, 2024).

For this reason, a clear conceptual distinction must be maintained between Ibn Sina's philosophical explanation of the soul and normative moral evaluation (Akbar & Soleh, 2025). In Ibn Sina's system, morality functions primarily as an orienting ideal that contributes to the harmony of the soul, not as a diagnostic criterion for mental pathology (Jannah & Tedy, 2025). Moral concepts such as balance, self-control, and purification should therefore be interpreted as aspirational frameworks for personal growth rather than causal explanations of psychological distress. This distinction allows Ibn Sina's insights to be integrated into modern psychology as sources of meaning, resilience, and ethical orientation without collapsing clinical suffering into moral deficiency.

A critical reinterpretation of Ibn Sina's moral psychology enables its adaptation in ways that are ethically sensitive and therapeutically supportive (Rosyidin & Haris, 2024). Moral and spiritual dimensions can be incorporated as voluntary resources for coping, self-understanding, and value clarification, rather than as prescriptive standards imposed upon individuals experiencing distress. By reframing morality as a dimension of meaning-making rather than moral judgment, Ibn Sina's thought can contribute constructively to contemporary discussions of mental health. Such an approach preserves the philosophical depth of his framework while aligning it with modern clinical ethics that emphasize empathy, inclusivity, and respect for psychological vulnerability.

Adapting Classical Concepts in Modern Clinical and Educational Contexts

The adaptation of classical concepts such as *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul) into modern clinical and educational psychology requires careful conceptual negotiation. These concepts originate from a normative ethical worldview in which moral ideals, religious obligations, and metaphysical assumptions are relatively unified (Ybyray, 2025). By contrast, contemporary psychology operates within pluralistic societies that emphasize client autonomy, cultural diversity, and value-neutral therapeutic frameworks. Assuming a direct and unproblematic compatibility between these two contexts risks oversimplification and may obscure important ethical and methodological tensions. Therefore, the relevance of Ibn Sina's thought in modern settings does not lie in literal transplantation, but in critical reinterpretation that respects contextual differences (Filipova, 2023).

In Ibn Sina's philosophical system, *tazkiyah* is closely associated with moral perfection and the refinement of the rational soul through discipline, self-control, and alignment with higher truths (Bag, 2023). While this framework provides a coherent ethical vision, its normative force can be problematic when applied directly in contemporary clinical contexts. Modern psychology prioritizes non-coercive practices and recognizes that individuals differ significantly in religious commitment, moral outlook, and cultural background. If classical moral concepts are imposed as universal therapeutic standards, they may conflict with professional ethics and undermine the therapeutic alliance, particularly for clients who experience moral pressure or religious ambivalence.

To address this challenge, classical concepts such as *tazkiyah* must be reframed in ethically inclusive and psychologically accessible terms (Fathan et al., 2025). Rather than being treated as a religious obligation, *tazkiyah* can be reinterpreted as a voluntary process of self-reflection, emotional regulation, and personal value clarification. In this reframing, the emphasis shifts from moral judgment to personal growth, from prescriptive norms to reflective practices (Azwar, 2024). Such an approach allows Ibn Sina's insights to inform contemporary psychology without requiring clients to adopt specific theological commitments, thereby preserving both cultural sensitivity and ethical neutrality (Qasserras, 2024).

This reframing also enhances the applicability of Ibn Sina's thought in educational contexts, particularly in character education and counselling programs. When presented as a philosophical resource rather than a doctrinal mandate, Ibn Sina's moral psychology can support the development of self-awareness, responsibility, and ethical reasoning across diverse populations (Taufiq & Faizal, 2026). By explicitly acknowledging the interpretive distance between classical philosophical anthropology and modern psychological practice, scholars and practitioners can engage Ibn Sina's legacy critically and constructively. This approach maintains the intellectual richness of the classical tradition while ensuring that its contemporary applications remain inclusive, ethically responsible, and aligned with the foundational principles of modern psychology.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Ibn Sina's psychological thought provides a fundamental philosophical foundation for the development of Islamic psychology by offering a holistic understanding of the human soul that integrates intellectual, emotional, and moral dimensions. Through a historical philosophical literature review, the research demonstrates that his tripartite conception of the soul and emphasis on reason and self-awareness remain conceptually relevant for contemporary psychological discourse, particularly in efforts to move beyond reductionist and purely empirical approaches. At the same time, the study highlights the importance of critically interpreting Ibn Sina's ideas to avoid anachronistic or normative misapplications in modern contexts. Overall, Ibn Sina's legacy should be regarded not merely as a historical contribution, but as a meaningful theoretical resource that can strengthen the epistemological coherence of Islamic psychology and support the development of culturally grounded, ethically sensitive, and holistic psychological frameworks.

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