

Motivation From The Perspective Of Eastern Islamic Philosophy: A Synthesis Of Mulla Sadra And Al-Ghazali's Thought In The Context Of Contemporary Work Ethos

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Abstract : This study explores the contribution of Eastern Islamic philosophy to the modern concept of work motivation.

Objective : This synthesis offers a new paradigm of work motivation that balances worldly objectives with spiritual aspirations, making it relevant for the ethical framework of both public and private sector organizations.

Methodology : Employing a qualitative approach grounded in philosophical literature analysis, it synthesizes Mulla Sadra's notions of substantial motion (al-harakah al-jawhariyyah) and existential perfection, alongside Al-Ghazali's teachings on intention (niyyah), sincerity (ikhlas), and spiritual stations (maqamat) in labor.

Research results : The findings indicate that motivation should not be viewed merely as a psychological or material drive, but rather as an existential journey toward spiritual perfection. Work is thus positioned as a form of worship with transcendent value, particularly when rooted in pure intention, awareness of divine responsibility, and the pursuit of inner meaning.

Keywords : **Work Motivation, Eastern Islamic Philosophy, Mulla Sadra, Al-Ghazali, Intention, Existential Perfection.**

1. Introduction

Motivation is a critical factor in shaping productive and meaningful work behavior. Over the decades, various motivational theories have emerged, ranging from Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Herzberg's two-factor theory, to Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan 2000). However, most of these frameworks are rooted in Western psychological perspectives that emphasize individual needs and personal satisfaction.

In contrast, contemporary work environments—especially within value-based organizations, public service sectors, and faith-based institutions—reveal the growing importance of spirituality and the search for meaning, aspects that are inadequately captured by conventional motivational theories. This calls for an alternative approach that bridges the existential dimensions of the human self with the demands of professional work ethics.

Eastern Islamic philosophy, particularly the thoughts of (Mulla Sadra 1981) and (Al-Ghazali 2002), offers a distinct perspective on motivation as an existential movement (harakah) toward spiritual perfection (kamāl) and a spiritually grounded approach to labor. This study aims to synthesize these two philosophical viewpoints to construct a new conceptual framework of work motivation grounded in transcendental values.

In today's competitive and digitized work environment, employees face pressures that are not only material but also existential. Many individuals experience a loss of meaning in daily work routines, often leading to spiritual voids despite material sufficiency. It is in this context that Eastern Islamic philosophy becomes particularly relevant. As an intellectual tradition that unites rational inquiry with spiritual intuition, it presents a framework that emphasizes not only outcomes but also the inner purification of the self through work. This conceptual foundation is essential for shaping human resource policies, particularly in public service and educational organizations that emphasize moral and ethical values.

2. Theoretical review

The literature review in this study is divided into two main parts: modern motivational theories and the philosophical approach of Eastern Islamic thought.

Conventional motivational theories, such as Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, emphasize a progression toward self-actualization. Herzberg's (1959) two-factor theory distinguishes between motivators and hygiene factors. Meanwhile, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), as developed by (Deci and Ryan 2000), focuses on three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Although SDT offers a comprehensive psychological framework for understanding motivation, it assumes the universality of these needs without sufficiently addressing the influence of spiritual or transcendental values. In religiously affiliated workplaces such as Islamic institutions or public sector organizations in predominantly Muslim countries SDT's applicability appears limited. In response, the concept of workplace spirituality has emerged, highlighting meaning-making, interpersonal connection, and engagement with something greater than oneself.

Yet, even this approach often lacks engagement with the metaphysical and transcendental dimensions of motivation. Eastern Islamic philosophy, particularly the thought of (Mulla Sadra 1981), introduces the concept of the soul's substantial motion as part of a continuous process of becoming. Motivation is thus viewed as a spiritual drive to realize one's highest existential state. (Al-Ghazali 2002) complements this view with his emphasis on intention (niyyah), sincerity (ikhlas), and the spiritual stages (maqamat) as the foundation of meaningful action in everyday life.

(Mulla Sadra 1981) notion of substantial motion redefines work not as a mere means to external ends, but as a continuous process of inner transformation. (Al-Ghazali 2002), in his magnum opus *Ihya Ulum al-Din*, distinguishes between rewarded deeds and those lacking spiritual awareness. Both perspectives underscore the significance of the inner dimension in cultivating sustainable motivation. This synthesis remains underexplored in organizational behavior literature and contemporary work ethics, presenting a significant research gap.

In addition to classical Islamic philosophy, contemporary Indonesian scholars have contributed to the discourse on motivation from a values-based perspective. Dr. Robertus (Suraji 2021), a philosopher and academic, argues that motivation in the Indonesian context must be grounded in the ontological and axiological nature of humans as both spiritual and social beings. He frames work as an existential expression of social responsibility and inner transcendence (Suraji 2021).

According to (Suraji 2021), genuine work motivation must transcend pragmatic and materialistic impulses. It should become an act imbued with noble values such as devotion, honesty, and sincerity. In the public sector, for instance, work serves as an expression of service to the community, aligning with the Islamic concept of fardh kifayah. This aligns with Al-Ghazali's and Mulla Sadra's perspectives, both of whom interpret motivation as a journey toward spiritual perfection.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative philosophical approach, employing interpretive hermeneutics to explore the deeper meanings embedded in classical texts and spiritual experiences within modern contexts. This approach is premised on the assumption that motivation, from the perspective of Eastern Islamic philosophy, is not merely an empirical construct but a conceptual structure shaped through the dynamic relationship between texts, interpreters, and historical-existential contexts.

3.1 Justification for the Philosophical Hermeneutic Approach

Hermeneutics is employed due to the nature of the primary sources namely the philosophical and metaphysical thought of (Mulla Sadra 1981) and (Al-Ghazali 2002) which demand deep interpretation. Hermeneutics enables researchers to :

1. Engage with the text as a "world of meaning," which is not static but open to re-actualization within modern frameworks,
2. Bridge the horizon of classical meaning with contemporary experiential horizons (e.g., modern work and motivation),

3. Understand motivation as an existential process—not merely a psychological variable but also a form of spiritual transcendence, as illustrated in Sadra’s philosophy of substantial motion and Al-Ghazali’s concept of spiritual *maqamat*.

3.2 Conceptual Validation Framework

Validation in this study does not rest on empirical replication, as in quantitative methods, but on logical coherence, interpretative depth, and conceptual relevance.

The conceptual validation framework consists of :

1. Epistemic Triangulation : Involving multiple primary sources (e.g., Mulla Sadra’s *Al-Asfar al-Arba’ah* and Al-Ghazali’s *Ihya’ Ulum al-Din*) and secondary literature on workplace spirituality and motivation,
2. Hermeneutic Validity : Achieved through the fusion of horizons (Gadamer), where classical meanings interact meaningfully with the realities of modern work culture,
3. Ontological Consistency : Core concepts such as substantial motion, intention, and spiritual perfection are examined in relation to human beings as ever-evolving entities aligning with work ethics that prioritize not just results but also inner purification processes,
4. Contextual Philosophical Confirmation : The contemporary ideas of scholars such as Robertus (Suraji 2021) are integrated to ensure cultural appropriateness and applicability within Indonesian public service and ethical frameworks.

3.3 Methodological Contribution and Innovation

By combining hermeneutic methods with transcendental conceptual analysis, this study offers a novel model of work motivation one that is not merely rational and instrumental but also metaphysical and existential. This serves as a step toward the epistemological decolonization of management science by drawing upon the intellectual heritage of Eastern Islamic thought.

3.4 Triangulation of Classical and Contemporary Literature

Triangulation in this study is not based on empirical data collection, but rather on conceptual and textual triangulation from three interrelated sources :

1. Classical Literature (Primary Sources)

These include original works by (Mulla Sadra 1981) (*Al-Asfar al-Arba'ah*) and (Al-Ghazali 2002) (*Ihya' Ulum al-Din*). Core concepts derived include :

- a. Substantial Motion (*al-harakah al-jawhariyyah*)
- b. Existential Perfection (*kamāl wujūdī*)
- c. Intention (*niyyah*), sincerity (*ikhlas*), and spiritual stages (*maqamat*)

Approach :

- d. Thematic reading of the texts, focusing on keywords such as *amal* (action), *niyyah*, *tahalli*, *tajalli*,
- e. Interpretation informed by historical context and the original author's philosophical objectives,
- f. Cross-referenced with commentaries by contemporary scholars such as (Nasr 1996), (Mutahhari 2010) and (Chittick 2001).

2. Modern Academic Literature (Secondary Analytical Sources)

This includes contemporary theories such as :

- a. Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan 2000) – providing an epistemic contrast,
- b. Workplace spirituality (Gotsis and Kortezi 2008 ; Karakas 2010) – bridging spiritual frameworks with modern organizational settings,
- c. Islamic work ethics and value-based philosophy (Suraji and Sastrodiharjo 2021) – localizing concepts in the Indonesian organizational context.

Approach :

- d. Review of academic articles and scholarly books on spirituality, motivation, and work ethics,

- e. Mapping conceptual intersections and divergences between classical philosophy and modern theories,
- f. Analyzing overlaps between modern constructs (e.g., intrinsic motivation, calling, resilience) and classical concepts such as *niyyah* and *ikhlas*.

3. Contemporary Context (Empirical-Normative Lens)

Focuses on current motivational challenges and needs in modern organizations, including :

- a. Public institutions in Indonesia (e.g., BPJS Ketenagakerjaan, Ministry of Religious Affairs),
- b. The demand for meaningful work models, particularly among younger generations and value-driven organizations.

Approach :

- a. Linking textual insights with current organizational phenomena (e.g., meaninglessness in public-sector work),
- b. Highlighting how values such as *niyyah*, sincerity, and social devotion can address burnout, alienation, and value crises,
- c. Connecting with current practices such as Islamic ethics training in government and philanthropic institutions.

4. Research Result

The synthesis of (Mulla Sadra 1981) and (Al-Ghazali 2002) philosophical thought provides a renewed understanding of motivation as an existential journey. Work is conceptualized not merely as a worldly obligation but as a spiritual endeavor grounded in sincere intention, divine orientation, and ethical consciousness.

Mulla Sadra's theory of substantial motion implies that the human soul is in constant transformation, advancing toward higher ontological states. In the workplace context, this can be interpreted as a spiritual impetus for self-perfection through professional engagement. This resonates with the notion of intrinsic motivation, which emphasizes self-actualization and fulfillment through meaningful labor. Thus,

work serves as a medium not only for material achievement but also for inner transcendence.

Conversely, (Al-Ghazali 2002) places profound emphasis on the quality of intention (niyyah) and sincerity (ikhlas) in every human act. For him, genuine motivation lies in the conscious alignment of human action with divine purposes. In this framework, work becomes an act of worship when guided by pure intention and free from ostentation (riya’). Integrating these perspectives deepens our understanding of motivation by embedding it within both metaphysical and ethical dimensions.

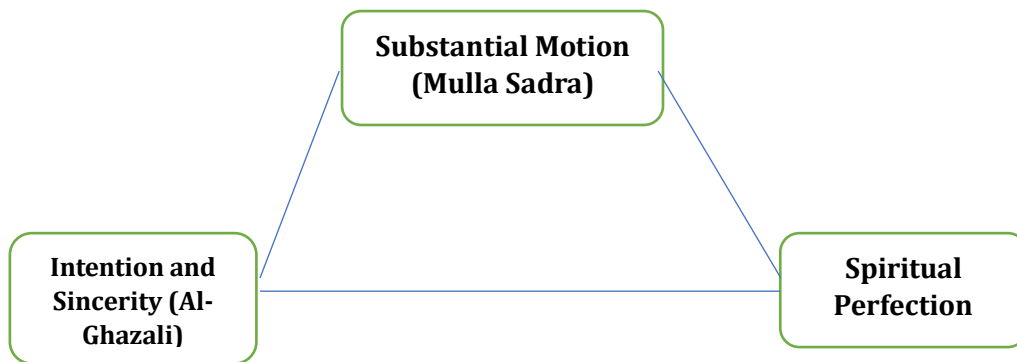


Figure 1. A Conceptual Model of Motivation in Eastern Islamic Philosophy

This integrated model demonstrates three core pillars :

- a. Substantial Motion (Mulla Sadra 1981) : The soul’s continuous movement toward existential perfection through work,
- b. Intention and Sincerity (Al-Ghazali 2002) : The ethical-spiritual basis of action,
- c. Spiritual Perfection (Kamāl Wujūdī) : The ultimate aim of meaningful labor in the divine order.

In modern organizational settings, especially within public service and social sectors, these values can shape a work ethic grounded in meaning and transcendence. Recent studies confirm that spiritual dimensions are positively correlated with organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and psychological resilience (Gotsis and Kortezi 2008 ; Karakas 2010). Therefore, Eastern Islamic philosophy has the potential to serve as a foundational framework for spiritually oriented human resource development.

4.1 Practical Implications in the Indonesian Public Sector

Spiritual values are already being implemented in several Indonesian public institutions through programs that integrate technical training with spiritual development. For example, mental and ethical training in ministries and zakat institutions illustrates how spiritual consciousness can nurture organizational loyalty, intrinsic dedication, and integrity. Institutions such as BPJS Ketenagakerjaan can adopt similar models to enhance intrinsic motivation by aligning work with mission awareness and social responsibility.

This philosophical approach offers a conceptual framework in which motivation is understood as a convergence of professional responsibility and spiritual actualization. It aligns with the broader notion of spiritual leadership, which emphasizes calling, service, and the formation of meaningful organizational communities. In the long run, this model can foster an organizational culture that is resilient, purposeful, and ethically grounded.

Furthermore, (Suraji and Sastrodiharjo 2021) contribution reinforces the core thesis of this study : that work is not merely an economic function, but a manifestation of existential and spiritual values. His thought emphasizes the revitalization of meaning in labor as part of an ethos of service. Within the context of public bureaucracy, motivation driven by sincere intention and social responsibility echoes Al-Ghazali's concepts of ikhlas and niyyah, as well as Mulla Sadra's view of the soul's journey toward perfection.

4.2 Operationalizing the Thought of Mulla Sadra and Al-Ghazali in Modern Organizations

The integration of (Mulla Sadra 1981) and (Al-Ghazali 2002) philosophical insights carries profound operational implications for modern organizations, particularly in building value-based motivation systems. However, translating these abstract concepts into practical management applications requires a contextual and critical approach.

4.3 Axiology Mulla Sadra: Substantial Motion as a Framework for Personal Growth

Mulla Sadra's concept of al-harakah al-jawhariyyah (substantial motion) suggests that each individual undergoes continuous essential transformation toward a more perfected state of being. In modern organizations, this principle can be implemented through :

- a. Existential Career Development Design: Organizations should offer development pathways that not only aim for quantitative targets but also foster personal and spiritual growth. This could involve contemplative training, value-based mentoring, and alignment of personal goals with institutional vision.
- b. Performance Evaluation Based on Value Transformation: Performance appraisals should go beyond output measurement and reflect the development of personal values, integrity, and commitment to higher organizational missions.
- c. HRM Policies that Facilitate Transcendence: By framing work as a path of tazkiyat al-nafs (purification of the soul), organizations can promote mindfulness practices, reflective spaces, and inner balance as part of work culture.

4.4 Al-Ghazali : Intention and Sincerity as Ethical Foundations

(Al-Ghazali 2002) emphasized that the worth of an act is determined by the intention and sincerity behind it. In organizational contexts, this implies :

- a. Spirituality-Based Leadership: Leaders who embody sincerity and service-oriented intentions (niyyah khidmah) foster a workplace characterized by trust and meaning, resonating with the spiritual leadership paradigm.
- b. Work Ethic as Worship: This principle can be operationalized through policies that prioritize social value, transparency, and honesty—especially in the public sector. Reinforcing the idea that work is a form of service to society and God cultivates intrinsic loyalty.
- c. Integrity-Based Reward Systems: Reward mechanisms should recognize not only outputs but also moral and spiritual virtues such as honesty, selfless dedication, and collective contribution.

4.5 Implementation Challenges

While relevant and powerful, applying (Mulla Sadra 1981) and (Al-Ghazali 2002) thoughts in contemporary organizational systems poses several challenges :

- a. Secularization of Work Systems: Modern organizations often prioritize technocratic rationality, making it difficult to incorporate transcendental motivation models without a shift in organizational culture.
- b. Measurement of Metaphysical Dimensions: Concepts such as intention, sincerity, and spiritual perfection are difficult to quantify. Organizations must innovate spiritual engagement indices or ethics-based performance metrics that maintain empirical validity.
- c. Pragmatic Resistance to Abstract Concepts: Managers accustomed to practical frameworks may view metaphysical ideas (e.g., ontological perfection, existential motivation) as utopian. A translation strategy is needed to render these concepts operationally relevant.

4.6 Strategic Recommendations

- a. Establish corporate spiritual development units, particularly in public and educational sectors, to integrate value-based training, purpose contemplation, and character building.
- b. Develop hybrid HR–spirituality models that combine psychological theories such as SDT and positive psychology with Eastern Islamic values.
- c. Design leadership training curricula that include value philosophy, spiritual work ethics, and social consciousness.

4.7 Practical Implications and HRD Policy Recommendations

The Eastern Islamic philosophical perspective on motivation holds strategic significance for human resource development, particularly in shaping work ethics founded on transcendental values. Accordingly, this study proposes the following actionable models :

Implicitly, strategic theory must be redesigned as design science (Van Aken 2005), not as a static description. Strategic theory must not only explain phenomena but also offer relevant and ethical interventions for change.

The main limitation of this research is its conceptual and reflective nature it does not test the application of the new framework on real cases. However, this limitation presents an opportunity for further case-based and action research in organizations facing disruption.

4.7.1 HR Training Model : “Spiritual–Existential HR Framework”

Training should not only focus on technical skills and behavior but also include spiritual consciousness. One suggested program, *Work Meaning and Divine Awareness Training*, may include :

Table 1. HR Training Model

Module	Description	Philosophical Basis
Awareness of Work Intention	Reflection on “for whom and for what” one works	Al-Ghazali: niyyah, ikhlas
Self-Actualization through Work	Work as a path to self-perfection	Mulla Sadra: substantial motion
Ethics of Action and Social Responsibility	Connecting work with social values	Al-Ghazali: maqamat al-‘amal
Reflective Practice Sessions	Post-task contemplation and spiritual resilience	Spiritual inner strength

This training may take the form of retreats, coaching clinics, or blended learning programs embedded into regular HR development (e.g., civil servant onboarding).

4.7.2 Spiritual-Based Performance Evaluation Indicators

Beyond conventional KPIs, organizations can implement Spiritual-Based Performance Metrics (SBPM) evaluated through reflective methods and behavioral observations. Sample indicators include :

- a. **Integrity of Work Intention:** Self-assessed motivation scale (e.g., working for service vs. material gain)
- b. **Spiritual Resilience:** Ability to uphold ethical conduct under pressure
- c. **Value–Action Consistency:** Managerial observation of alignment between personal and organizational values
- d. **Meaning-Based Job Satisfaction:** Perceived meaningfulness of work (e.g., inspired work index)

4.7.3 Value-Based Organizational Policies

Organizations can institutionalize policies such as :

- a. **Transcendental Work Ethics:** Code of ethics positioning work as both social service and self-purification..
- b. **Spiritual Hour Policy:** Dedicated weekly time for reflection, prayer, or institutional *tafakkur* (e.g., internal CSR)
- c. **Recognition of Sincerity and Social Impact:** Rewards based not only on outcomes, but also on integrity and moral/social contributions.
- d. **Organizational Value Audits:** Annual reviews to assess the alignment between organizational mission and leadership values.

5. Conclusion

Work motivation must be reinterpreted as an integral component of spiritual perfection. The Eastern Islamic philosophical approach offers a renewed paradigm for human resource development rooted in transcendental values, applicable across public and private sectors.

This framework enables organizations to formulate holistic HR strategies—not only focused on technical competencies but also on spiritual intelligence and ethical maturity. The philosophical contributions of (Mulla Sadra 1981) and (Al-Ghazali 2002) provide the foundation for a motivational model that integrates worldly performance with inner transformation, and social responsibility with divine orientation.

Future research is encouraged to develop quantitative models that empirically measure the impact of spiritual motivation on performance and organizational commitment.

By embedding the philosophical vision of (Mulla Sadra 1981) and (Al-Ghazali 2002) into HR development practices, organizations can nurture a work paradigm that is both productive and meaningful. This approach is particularly timely in an era where professionals increasingly seek balance between external demands and internal fulfillment. Therefore, this study recommends the institutionalization of transcendental training models, value-based performance measurement, and spiritually grounded organizational policies as pillars of modern HRD.

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