

Toward an integrated paradigm of Islamic knowledge classification: Reconstructing Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali for contemporary Islamic scholarship

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Abstract

The classification of knowledge in the Islamic intellectual tradition has been widely examined; however, most studies remain limited to comparing classificatory structures rather than reconstructing the philosophical paradigm underlying the Islamic knowledge system. This study aims to reconstruct the paradigm of knowledge classification through a philosophical comparative analysis of Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali to formulate a conceptual framework for the development of the contemporary Islamic knowledge system. The research employs a qualitative library-based approach using philosophical comparative analysis through the stages of identification, comparison, interpretation, and reconstruction. The findings reveal that Al-Farabi conceptualizes knowledge classification as an *architecture of knowledge*, whereas Al-Ghazali frames it as a *legitimation of knowledge*, indicating a complementary rather than oppositional relationship. Based on this synthesis, the study proposes the *Integrated Paradigm of Islamic Knowledge Classification*, which integrates ontological, epistemological, axiological, and contemporary dimensions as a conceptual contribution to the development of a more integrative Islamic knowledge system.

Keywords: Knowledge classification; Al-Farabi; Al-Ghazali; Islamic philosophy of science; Islamic epistemology.

Abstrak

Klasifikasi ilmu dalam tradisi intelektual Islam telah banyak dikaji, namun sebagian besar penelitian masih berfokus pada perbandingan struktur klasifikasi sehingga belum merekonstruksi paradigma filosofis yang melandasi sistem keilmuan Islam. Penelitian ini bertujuan merekonstruksi paradigma klasifikasi ilmu melalui analisis komparatif filosofis terhadap pemikiran Al-Farabi dan Al-Ghazali guna merumuskan kerangka konseptual bagi pengembangan sistem keilmuan Islam kontemporer. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis kepustakaan dengan analisis komparatif filosofis melalui tahapan identifikasi, komparasi, interpretasi, dan rekonstruksi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Al-Farabi membangun klasifikasi ilmu sebagai *architecture of knowledge*, sedangkan Al-Ghazali memosisikannya sebagai *legitimation of knowledge*, sehingga keduanya bersifat komplementer, bukan oposisional. Berdasarkan sintesis tersebut, penelitian ini menghasilkan *Integrated Paradigm of Islamic Knowledge Classification* yang mengintegrasikan dimensi ontologis, epistemologis, aksiologis, dan implikasi kontemporer sebagai kontribusi konseptual bagi pengembangan sistem keilmuan Islam yang lebih integratif.

Kata Kunci: Klasifikasi ilmu; Al-Farabi; Al-Ghazali; Filsafat ilmu Islam; Epistemologi Islam.

Introduction

The rapid advancement of science in the contemporary era has introduced new challenges to the Islamic knowledge system, particularly in establishing a coherent relationship between Islamic sciences and modern scientific disciplines (Guessoum & Bigliardi, 2023). Amid the growing adoption of multidisciplinary and integrative approaches, the issue of knowledge classification has regained prominence because it shapes how an intellectual tradition understands, organizes, and develops knowledge (Matthews, 2024). Nevertheless, knowledge classification is still frequently understood merely as the categorization of disciplines based on their objects of inquiry or areas of specialization (Pelacho et al., 2021). Such an understanding overlooks the fact that every system of knowledge classification is grounded in a particular philosophical paradigm that reflects assumptions about the nature of knowledge, its sources, and the ultimate purpose of intellectual inquiry. Therefore, knowledge classification should be understood as an epistemological foundation that directs the development of the Islamic knowledge system as a whole.

This issue becomes increasingly significant in light of the persistent dichotomy between religious and secular knowledge within various contexts of Islamic education. Numerous initiatives have sought to promote knowledge integration through curriculum development, the establishment of multidisciplinary academic programs, and the adoption of interdisciplinary approaches (Klaassen, 2018). However, these efforts have largely emphasized institutional reform and academic implementation rather than revisiting the philosophical paradigm that underpins the organization of knowledge. Consequently, knowledge integration has often remained administrative in nature, failing to establish a genuinely coherent epistemological relationship among different fields of knowledge (Albuquerque et al., 2021). This condition suggests that the fundamental challenge lies not in the proliferation of academic disciplines but in the absence of a knowledge classification paradigm capable of integrating reason, revelation, and ethical orientation within a coherent system of knowledge.

Within the history of Islamic intellectual thought, Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali are two influential scholars who made significant contributions to the development of knowledge classification, despite building their ideas upon different philosophical foundations. Al-Farabi developed a system of knowledge classification based on rational order, the interrelationship among disciplines, and a systematic hierarchy of knowledge (Abedi & Delghandi, 2025), whereas Al-Ghazali constructed his classification according to value, obligation, and the moral as well as spiritual purposes of knowledge (Akbar & Soleh, 2025). These differences have often been interpreted as representing two opposing intellectual orientations, namely rationalism and religiosity. In reality, however, both scholars sought to establish a comprehensive

Islamic knowledge system, albeit from different philosophical starting points. Therefore, their differences should be regarded as an opportunity to reconstruct the paradigm of knowledge classification rather than merely contrasting their ideas within a descriptive comparative framework.

Studies on knowledge classification within the Islamic intellectual tradition have been conducted from a variety of perspectives. A study by Masykur (2025) demonstrates that Al-Farabi's classification of knowledge represents a rational and hierarchical epistemological system, whereas a study by Adnan et al. (2026) argues that Al-Ghazali's classification is primarily oriented toward values, utility, and the objectives of the Shari'ah. Comparative studies by Talgat E. and Nurila A. (2023) have also identified both similarities and differences in the principles underlying the hierarchical organization of knowledge proposed by the two scholars. Nevertheless, most existing studies remain focused on describing classificatory structures or conceptual distinctions between the two thinkers, without adequately explaining the philosophical paradigm underlying these differences. As a result, the relationship between the structure of knowledge and its moral orientation has yet to be understood as an integrated conceptual framework capable of addressing the contemporary challenges facing the development of the Islamic knowledge system.

Against this background, the present study aims to reconstruct the paradigm of knowledge classification in the Islamic intellectual tradition through a philosophical comparative analysis of the thought of Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali. This reconstruction is undertaken by identifying the ontological, epistemological, and axiological foundations underlying each scholar's system of knowledge classification and subsequently synthesizing them into a conceptual framework referred to as the *Integrated Paradigm of Islamic Knowledge Classification*. This framework not only offers a new interpretation of the relationship between the intellectual contributions of Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali but also provides a philosophical foundation for developing a more integrative Islamic knowledge system. Accordingly, this study seeks to enrich contemporary discourse in the Islamic philosophy of science while providing a conceptual basis for curriculum development, multidisciplinary research, and knowledge integration within Islamic higher education.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design using a *library research* approach and *philosophical comparative analysis* to reconstruct the paradigm of knowledge classification within the Islamic intellectual tradition (Howell, 2012). This approach was selected because the study sought not only to identify the similarities and differences between the knowledge classification systems of Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali but also to examine the ontological, epistemological, and axiological foundations underlying each scholar's classificatory framework. The primary sources comprised

Al-Farabi's *Ihṣā' al-'Ulūm* and Al-Ghazali's *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, while the secondary sources consisted of books, scholarly journal articles, and previous studies addressing the Islamic philosophy of science, Islamic epistemology, and the development of knowledge classification studies. All sources were selected based on their academic relevance and direct connection to the research focus in order to provide a comprehensive conceptual foundation for the analysis.

The data were analyzed through four interrelated stages: identification, comparison, interpretation, and reconstruction (Van de Vijver & Leung, 1997). The identification stage focused on identifying the principal concepts related to knowledge classification in the thought of Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali. Subsequently, the comparison stage examined the philosophical foundations, principles of classification, hierarchy of knowledge, and intellectual orientation proposed by the two scholars. The findings from this comparison were then interpreted philosophically to identify the relationships, distinctions, and points of convergence underlying their respective systems of knowledge classification. Finally, the reconstruction stage synthesized these findings into a conceptual framework termed the *Integrated Paradigm of Islamic Knowledge Classification*, which constitutes the principal contribution of this study in explaining the relationship between the structure of knowledge, moral legitimation, and the development of the contemporary Islamic knowledge system.

Results and Discussion

Paradigm of knowledge classification in the thought of Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali

Knowledge classification within the Islamic intellectual tradition is frequently understood as an effort to organize various branches of knowledge into distinct categories (Al-Attas, 1990). According to this article, however, such an interpretation does not fully capture the philosophical significance of knowledge classification itself. Knowledge classification is not merely a technical exercise in categorizing disciplines; rather, it represents a philosophical paradigm that reflects how a thinker understands the nature of knowledge, the sources of its legitimacy, and the ultimate purpose of intellectual inquiry. Therefore, the differences between the systems of knowledge classification proposed by Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali cannot be reduced simply to differences in the categories of knowledge they identified. Instead, they should be understood as reflecting distinct philosophical paradigms underlying the construction of their respective knowledge systems. From this perspective, this article argues that Al-Farabi (1949) developed an *architecture of knowledge*, whereas Al-Ghazali (1967) developed a *legitimation of knowledge*. In other words, the two scholars addressed different philosophical questions, making their differences fundamentally complementary rather than contradictory.

Al-Farabi's paradigm (1985) is grounded in the assumption that reality possesses a rational order, and consequently, knowledge as a representation of reality must also

be organized systematically. This assumption transforms knowledge classification from a mere inventory of disciplines into a philosophical project aimed at constructing a coherent architecture of knowledge. This perspective is clearly reflected in *Ihşā' al-'Ulūm*, where knowledge is arranged sequentially from language, logic, mathematics, and the natural sciences to metaphysics, followed by political and social sciences. This sequence is not an arbitrary pedagogical arrangement but rather illustrates the methodological and ontological relationships among the various branches of knowledge (Chongarov, 2023). Language functions as the instrument of scholarly communication, logic serves as the means of validating reasoning, mathematics provides the model of demonstrative certainty, the natural sciences investigate the empirical world, metaphysics represents the highest level of reflection on reality, and political science embodies the practical application of knowledge within social life (Suleimenov et al., 2025). Consequently, Al-Farabi's classification demonstrates that knowledge is conceived as a hierarchically structured system corresponding to the *order of being*.

In contrast, Al-Ghazali developed a fundamentally different paradigm. This article argues that Al-Ghazali (2005) was not concerned with constructing an architecture of knowledge in the manner of Al-Farabi; instead, he sought to establish the moral legitimacy of every branch of knowledge. Accordingly, the classification of knowledge in *Ihḃā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* is based neither on the object of inquiry nor on scientific methodology, but on the value, function, and ethical responsibility associated with each discipline. His categorization of knowledge into *farḃ 'ayn*, *farḃ kifāyah*, *faḃilah*, *mubāḃ*, and *madhmūmah* indicates that Al-Ghazali's primary philosophical concern (1963) was not "How should knowledge be organized?" but rather "For what purpose should knowledge be pursued?" From this perspective, the status of a discipline is determined not by its intellectual complexity but by its contribution to cultivating righteous individuals, promoting public welfare (*maṣlahah*), and realizing the objectives of the Shari'ah. Thus, Al-Ghazali's classification of knowledge functions as a normative instrument that directs intellectual activity toward moral and spiritual ends. The differences between these paradigms can be understood through the respective structures of knowledge classification developed by each scholar, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Paradigms of knowledge classification in the thought of Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali

Dimension	Al-Farabi	Al-Ghazali
Philosophical Question	How does knowledge attain order?	How does knowledge attain moral legitimacy?
Classification Structure	Language → Logic → Mathematics → Natural Sciences → Metaphysics → Politics	<i>Farḃ 'ayn</i> → <i>Farḃ kifāyah</i> → <i>Faḃilah</i> → <i>Mubāḃ</i> → <i>Madhmūmah</i>

Basis of Classification	Objects of inquiry, methodology, and interrelationships among disciplines	Value, obligation, benefit, and the objectives of the Shari'ah
Function of Classification	Constructing the architecture of knowledge	Determining the orientation and priority of knowledge
Ultimate Orientation	Intellectual perfection (<i>al-sa'adah</i>)	Moral-spiritual perfection (<i>al-sa'adah</i>)

Source: Authors' analysis.

Table 1 demonstrates that the distinction between Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali does not lie in their acceptance of either reason or revelation. Both acknowledge reason as an essential instrument for acquiring knowledge and recognize revelation as an authoritative source of truth. Their divergence instead stems from their respective philosophical points of departure. Al-Farabi begins his classification with an epistemological concern regarding how the structure of knowledge should be rationally constructed, whereas Al-Ghazali begins with an axiological concern regarding how knowledge acquires value and direction. Consequently, portraying the two scholars as representatives of rationalism and traditionalism constitutes an oversimplified reading of the complexity of their philosophical thought.

Based on this analysis, the present study rejects the view that the systems of knowledge classification proposed by Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali represent two opposing models. Rather, they embody two distinct yet complementary dimensions within the broader framework of the Islamic philosophy of science. Al-Farabi explains how knowledge acquires structure and coherence, whereas Al-Ghazali explains how knowledge acquires meaning and ethical legitimacy. Without a rational structure, knowledge loses its systematic organization and intellectual clarity; conversely, without moral orientation, knowledge loses its direction and human responsibility. Accordingly, the differences between these paradigms should not be interpreted as an epistemological conflict within Islam but rather as complementary philosophical roles that create the possibility of developing a more integrated Islamic knowledge system.

Building upon this interpretation, this article argues that reconstructing the contemporary Islamic knowledge system cannot be achieved merely by adopting Al-Farabi's rational structure or Al-Ghazali's moral orientation independently. Rather, contemporary intellectual challenges require a synthesis of both perspectives: a system of knowledge grounded in a coherent epistemological architecture while simultaneously guided by moral and spiritual legitimacy. Such a synthesis provides the conceptual foundation for developing a paradigm of Islamic knowledge classification capable of addressing the contemporary demand for knowledge integration.

Reconstructing the paradigm of knowledge classification for the development of the contemporary Islamic knowledge system

Debates on knowledge classification within the Islamic intellectual tradition have largely focused on identifying the similarities and differences among classical Muslim scholars (Fancy et al., 2023). Although this approach has successfully demonstrated the diversity of classificatory systems, it has not fully explained the philosophical paradigms underlying these classifications. Consequently, knowledge classification has often been understood merely as a means of organizing academic disciplines rather than as a reflection of a particular worldview concerning reality, the sources of knowledge, and the ultimate purpose of intellectual inquiry (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2020). This study argues that the central issue is no longer how knowledge is classified but why classification is constructed according to particular philosophical principles. Therefore, reconstructing the underlying paradigm is more significant than merely comparing the classificatory structures developed by Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali.

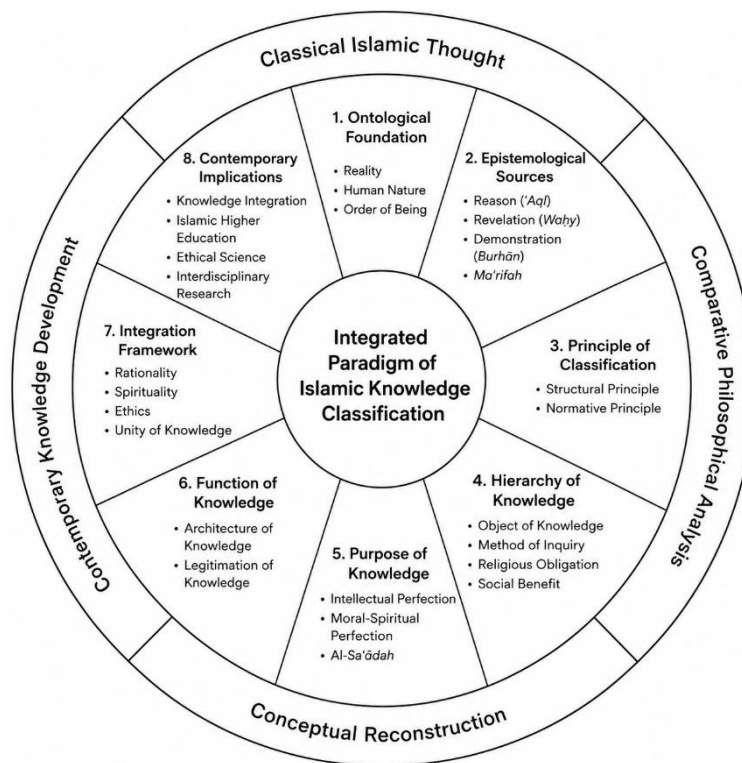


Figure 1. Integrated paradigm of Islamic knowledge classification based on the comparative analysis of Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali

Source: Developed by the authors (2026).

Figure 1 illustrates that the reconstructed paradigm of knowledge classification proposed in this study is built upon eight interrelated philosophical dimensions: *ontological foundation*, *epistemological sources*, *principle of classification*, *hierarchy of knowledge*, *purpose of knowledge*, *function of knowledge*, *integration framework*, and *contemporary implications*. The integration of these eight dimensions demonstrates that knowledge classification should not be understood as an independent system but

rather as the outcome of the interaction among ontological foundations, epistemological mechanisms, axiological orientations, and the broader context of knowledge development. Accordingly, the proposed paradigm does not replace the classical systems of classification developed by Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali. Instead, it reorganizes their philosophical foundations into a more comprehensive conceptual framework capable of explaining the relationship between the structure of knowledge, its values, and its development within the contemporary intellectual context.

Table 2. Reconstruction of the paradigm of Islamic knowledge classification based on the synthesis of Al-Farabi's and Al-Ghazali's Thought

Philosophical Dimension	Al-Farabi's Contribution	Al-Ghazali's Contribution	Reconstructed Paradigm
Ontological Foundation	Ordered Reality	Divine Reality	Integrated Ontology
Epistemological Sources	Reason, <i>Burhān</i>	Revelation, <i>Ma'rifah</i>	Complementary Epistemology
Principle of Classification	Structural Principle	Normative Principle	Integrated Classification
Hierarchy of Knowledge	Object and Method	Obligation and Benefit	Dynamic Knowledge Hierarchy
Purpose of Knowledge	Intellectual Perfection	Moral-Spiritual Perfection	Holistic Human Development
Function of Knowledge	Architecture of Knowledge	Legitimation of Knowledge	Ethical Knowledge System
Integration Framework	Rationality	Spirituality and Ethics	Unity of Knowledge
Contemporary Implications	Scientific Development	Moral Responsibility	Contemporary Islamic Scholarship

Source: Authors' analysis.

As presented in Table 2, the reconstruction of the paradigm proposed in this study is not achieved by simply combining the categories of knowledge formulated by the two scholars. Rather, it is derived from a synthesis of the philosophical dimensions underlying their respective classificatory systems. The ontological and epistemological dimensions provide the conceptual foundation explaining how knowledge acquires its legitimacy, whereas the principles of classification and the hierarchy of knowledge function as mechanisms for organizing relationships among academic disciplines. Built upon these foundations, the purpose and function of knowledge provide the normative direction for how knowledge should be developed. This structure demonstrates that knowledge classification is not a philosophically neutral activity but the outcome of fundamental assumptions concerning the relationship between reality, knowledge, and the purpose of human existence.

Within this framework, the present study proposes that the paradigm of knowledge classification should be understood as a system that progresses from philosophical foundations to intellectual orientation rather than as a mere inventory of knowledge categories. This progression is reflected in the *Reconstructed Paradigm* column of Table 2, which illustrates the transformation of the individual contributions of Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali into synthesized concepts such as *Integrated Ontology*, *Complementary Epistemology*, and *Unity of Knowledge*. These concepts indicate that Al-Farabi's rational structure and Al-Ghazali's moral orientation are not mutually exclusive; instead, they collectively form a more comprehensive philosophical framework. Consequently, this reconstructed paradigm not only explains the origins of knowledge classification but also offers a conceptual foundation for developing a more adaptive Islamic knowledge system capable of addressing contemporary intellectual challenges.

The reconstructed paradigm proposed in this study also offers a new perspective on previous scholarship concerning knowledge classification within the Islamic intellectual tradition. Consistent with the study by Mahmudin (2021), knowledge classification cannot be separated from the *worldview* that shapes the Islamic intellectual tradition. However, the present study demonstrates that knowledge classification extends beyond representing a worldview and functions instead as a mechanism that integrates ontology, epistemology, and axiology within a unified system of knowledge. Consequently, the paradigm of knowledge classification should no longer be regarded as a fixed historical construct but as a philosophical framework that continues to evolve in response to changing intellectual needs. This perspective extends previous discussions by positioning knowledge classification as a conceptual framework capable of explaining the relationship between the structure of knowledge, moral orientation, and the development of scholarship in contemporary contexts.

On the other hand, this study also offers a reinterpretation of previous comparative studies on Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali. Unlike the study by Rozali and Lubis (2023), which primarily emphasizes identifying similarities and differences between the two scholars' classificatory systems, the present study argues that these differences are fundamentally consequences of distinct philosophical paradigms. Al-Farabi developed his classification to explain the rational and systematic structure of knowledge, whereas Al-Ghazali formulated his classification to establish the moral orientation and legitimacy of knowledge. Accordingly, this study maintains that their perspectives should not be viewed as oppositional but as complementary approaches operating at two different levels of philosophical analysis. This interpretation shifts the focus of inquiry from *how knowledge is classified* to *why knowledge is classified according to a particular philosophical paradigm*.

The conceptual contribution of this study also extends contemporary discussions on knowledge integration within Islamic higher education. This finding expands the

study by Anwar and Elfiah (2019), which interprets knowledge integration primarily as the unification of religious and secular sciences. The present study argues that a more fundamental form of integration should begin with reconstructing the paradigm of knowledge classification underlying both domains of knowledge. By integrating Al-Farabi's epistemological structure with Al-Ghazali's axiological orientation, the proposed paradigm unifies not only academic disciplines but also the ways in which the nature, function, and purpose of knowledge are understood. Such an approach creates opportunities for developing a more coherent, multidisciplinary, and responsive Islamic knowledge system capable of addressing the rapid advancement of modern science.

From a theoretical perspective, this study demonstrates that knowledge classification should no longer be understood merely as a taxonomic device for organizing branches of knowledge but rather as a philosophical paradigm that directs the development of scholarship. The reconstruction presented through Figure 1 and elaborated in Table 2 demonstrates that ontology, epistemology, axiology, and the function of knowledge constitute inseparable dimensions in building an Islamic knowledge system. Accordingly, the principal contribution of this study lies in shifting scholarly attention from the question of *how knowledge is classified* to the more fundamental question of *why a particular paradigm of knowledge classification is necessary for constructing a coherent Islamic knowledge system*. This conceptual shift enriches contemporary discussions in the Islamic philosophy of science, which have traditionally emphasized historical and descriptive analyses.

From a practical perspective, the paradigm proposed in this study may serve as a conceptual foundation for developing Islamic knowledge systems within higher education, particularly in curriculum design, multidisciplinary research, and the formulation of academic policies oriented toward knowledge integration. The proposed model also provides a philosophical framework for emerging fields that require a balance between rationality, revelation, and ethical responsibility, including artificial intelligence, bioethics, and digital transformation in Islamic education. Accordingly, this study not only offers a reinterpretation of the intellectual legacy of Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali but also introduces the *Integrated Paradigm of Islamic Knowledge Classification* as a conceptual model that can serve as a philosophical foundation for developing a more integrative, adaptive, and socially responsive Islamic knowledge system.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the differences in knowledge classification between Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali lie not merely in the way they categorize branches of knowledge but, more fundamentally, in the philosophical paradigms underlying their classificatory systems. Al-Farabi conceptualizes knowledge classification as an

architecture of knowledge that emphasizes ontological order and the epistemological structure of knowledge, whereas Al-Ghazali develops knowledge classification as a *legitimation of knowledge* oriented toward values, purposes, and the moral responsibilities of intellectual inquiry. Based on this philosophical comparative analysis, the study reconstructs the *Integrated Paradigm of Islamic Knowledge Classification*, which integrates ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions with contemporary intellectual orientations into a coherent conceptual framework. This reconstruction demonstrates that the relationship between the two scholars is more appropriately understood as complementary rather than oppositional, thereby redefining knowledge classification not as a merely taxonomic device but as a philosophical paradigm that guides the development of the Islamic knowledge system.

The principal contribution of this study lies in proposing a conceptual model that shifts scholarly attention from the question of *how knowledge is classified* to the more fundamental question of *why a paradigm of knowledge classification is necessary* for developing an integrative Islamic knowledge system. The proposed model is expected to provide a philosophical foundation for curriculum development, knowledge integration, and multidisciplinary research within Islamic higher education. Nevertheless, this study is limited to a conceptual analysis of the thought of Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali and therefore does not examine the practical implementation of the proposed paradigm within educational institutions or contemporary scientific practices. Future research may extend this model through empirical investigations in Islamic higher education, comparative analyses involving other Muslim thinkers, or explorations of its application in strategic fields such as artificial intelligence, bioethics, and digital transformation. Such efforts would strengthen not only the philosophical validity of the proposed paradigm but also its practical relevance in addressing the evolving challenges of contemporary knowledge development.

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