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REVIEW ARTICLE

The concept of the soul according to Ibn Sina: A comparative analysis of scholarly criticisms

Yasin Md Rafangi @ Md Rafee*, Mohd Radhi Ibrahim and Mohd Rosmizi Abd Rahman

Faculty of Leadership and Management, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

Abstract: This study aims to explore Ibn Sīnā's philosophical conception of the soul (*al-Nafs*), which serves as the foundation of his metaphysical and psychological understanding of human existence. The research employs a qualitative library-based analytical method. It focuses on textual analysis of Ibn Sīnā's psychological works such as *al-Shifā', Maqālah fī al-Nafs* and *Risālah fī al-Nafs al-Nāṭiqah*. The purpose is to examine the definition, origin, division, and nature of the soul as articulated by Ibn Sīnā. The findings reveal that Ibn Sīnā defines the soul as an immaterial essence that governs life, perception, and motion, and distinguishes living beings from inanimate matter. He classifies the soul into three types which are vegetative, animal and rational. Each possessing specific capacities that correspond to different forms of existence. The rational soul, being immaterial and eternal, connects human beings to the realm of intellect and enables the pursuit of truth and perfection. The study further finds that the origin of the soul is divine, and its ultimate purpose is to achieve unity with the higher intellect. The implications of this research demonstrate that Ibn Sīnā's view of the soul provides a profound understanding of human nature, the harmony between body and soul, and the metaphysical journey toward divine truth.

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1. Introduction

Abū ʿAlī al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn Sīnā (d. 428 AH/1037 CE), known in the Latin West as Avicenna, was one of the most influential philosophers, physicians, and metaphysicians in the history of Islamic intellectual tradition. One of the major themes in his philosophical system, the concept of the soul (*al-nafs*) occupies a central position. His discussion of the soul is not merely psychological in nature, but is deeply connected to metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophical anthropology. Ibn Sīnā views the soul as the principle of life, perception, and intellect. Specifically, he treats the rational soul as an immaterial and self-subsisting substance capable of surviving beyond the death of the body. As a result, the doctrine of the soul became one of the most significant aspects of his philosophy and later influenced both Islamic and Western intellectual traditions. (Gutas, 2016; Sharif, 1963).

Ibn Sīnā develops a systematic hierarchical framework of the soul consisting of the plant soul, animal soul, and rational soul. Each level possesses distinct faculties and functions corresponding to different forms of living existence. Among these divisions, the rational soul occupies the highest rank because it is capable of rational reflection, intellectual perception, and the apprehension of universal truths. Through this framework, Ibn Sīnā explains the nature of human existence and the soul's ultimate perfection through conjunction with the higher intellect. Despite the importance of Ibn Sīnā's doctrine of the soul, contemporary scholarship continues to demonstrate interpretive fragmentation and inconsistencies regarding its nature, origin, and relationship with the body. Some studies approach Ibn Sīnā's psychology separately from his broader metaphysical system. This results in partial or reductionist interpretations of the soul's ontological status. Other recent studies focus primarily on applied dimensions such as ethics, spirituality, and education, but gives less attention to the metaphysical foundations of the soul itself. Consequently, important issues such as the substantiality, immateriality, immortality, and teleological purpose of the rational soul remain insufficiently examined in contemporary discourse. (Bertolacci, 2020; Fauzaman, 2026; Saruhan, 2025)

Furthermore, scholars continue to debate the philosophical basis of Ibn Sīnā's doctrine of the soul, particularly whether his theory should be understood primarily within an Aristotelian framework or as a synthesis influenced by Neoplatonic emanationism. This debate has produced various interpretations concerning the soul's separability from the body, its persistence after death, and its relationship with the Active Intellect. In addition, criticisms raised by scholars such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Ibn al-Nafīs, together with modern philosophical critiques, demonstrate that Ibn Sīnā's theory of the soul continues to hold major philosophical significance. (Gutas, 2014; Hasse, 2000; Druart, 2014). Therefore, a comprehensive re-examination of Ibn Sīnā's conception of the soul remains necessary in order to clarify the definition, division, and nature of the soul within his broader metaphysical framework. This study aims to analyse Ibn Sīnā's definition of the soul and his concept of perfection (*kamāl*), examine his division of the soul together with its faculties and functions, and investigate the nature of the rational soul particularly in relation to its immateriality, substantiality, subsistence, and immortality. The study also seeks to analyse major criticisms and contemporary interpretations of Ibn Sīnā's doctrine of the soul while evaluating its significance within Islamic philosophy and metaphysics.

This study is significant because it provides a systematic and integrative analysis of Ibn Sīnā's doctrine of the soul within the context of his philosophical thought. Unlike studies that focus only on isolated aspects of Avicennian psychology, this research examines the relationship between the soul, intellect, body, and human existence in a more

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comprehensive manner. Through its analysis of the rational soul as an immaterial and self-subsisting substance, the study contributes to broader philosophical discussions concerning consciousness, self-awareness, and personal identity. In addition, by engaging with both classical and contemporary criticisms, the study highlights the continuing relevance of Ibn Sīnā's psychology within Islamic philosophy, particularly in discussions related to metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophical anthropology.

2. Literature Review

Although Ibn Sīnā's doctrine of the soul occupies a central position in Islamic philosophy, contemporary scholarship continues to present fragmented and inconsistent interpretations of its nature, origin, and metaphysical status. Many studies discuss Ibn Sīnā's psychology separately from his metaphysical foundations. This results in partial explanations of the soul's substantiality, immateriality, and immortality (Bertolacci, 2020; Gutas, 2014). Other recent studies focus mainly on ethical, spiritual, and educational aspects of the soul while paying less attention to its ontological structure and its relationship with the intellect and the body (Fauzaman, 2026; Saruhan, 2025). In addition, scholarly debates concerning the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic influences on Ibn Sīnā's conception of the rational soul remain unresolved. (Hasse, 2000; Druart, 2014). Therefore, the main research gap in current scholarship is the lack of a systematic and integrative study that examines Ibn Sīnā's doctrine of the soul within the context of his metaphysical and philosophical thought as a whole. Important issues such as the definition of the soul, its divisions and faculties, the nature of the rational soul, and its relation to human existence are still insufficiently analysed in a comprehensive manner. Hence, this study seeks to address this gap by re-examining Ibn Sīnā's conception of the soul through a philosophical and analytical approach.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative library-based research method with a conceptual and philosophical approach. The research focuses on analysing Ibn Sīnā's conception of the soul (*al-nafs*) through a systematic examination of his philosophical writings and relevant scholarly literature. Since the study concerns metaphysical and philosophical issues related to the nature, division, and substantiality of the soul, the conceptual-philosophical method is considered the most suitable approach for this research. The study primarily applies the method of textual analysis (*taḥlīl al-nuṣūṣ*) in examining Ibn Sīnā's discussions on the soul. This method involves close reading, interpretation, and analytical examination of philosophical texts in order to identify Ibn Sīnā's arguments, conceptual developments, and metaphysical foundations regarding the soul. Particular attention is given to his definitions of the soul, the concept of perfection (kamāl), the division of the soul into vegetative, animal, and rational souls, and his arguments concerning the immateriality, substantiality, and immortality of the rational soul. The primary sources of this study consist mainly of Ibn Sīnā's major philosophical works related to psychology and metaphysics, particularly *al-Shifā'* (*Kitāb al-Nafs* and *al-Ilāhiyyāt*), *Maqālah fī al-Nafs*, and *Risālah fī al-Nafs al-Nāṭiqah*. These texts are analysed to understand Ibn Sīnā's original formulation of the doctrine of the soul and the development of his psychological thought across different works.

In addition, secondary sources consisting of classical and contemporary scholarly studies are utilised to support the analysis and provide critical engagement with Ibn Sīnā's theory of the soul. These include works by classical scholars such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Ibn al-Nafīs, as well as modern scholars including Dimitri Gutas, Peter Adamson, Michael E. Marmura, and Deborah L. Black. These secondary materials are important in evaluating contemporary interpretations, criticisms, and debates concerning Ibn Sīnā's conception of the soul. The collected data are analysed using descriptive, analytical, and comparative methods. The descriptive method is employed to present Ibn Sīnā's doctrine of the soul systematically. The analytical method is used to examine the philosophical structure and coherence of his arguments. The comparative method is also applied where necessary to compare Ibn Sīnā's views with criticisms and interpretations presented by other scholars. Through these methods, the study aims to produce a comprehensive understanding of Ibn Sīnā's conception of the soul and its significance in Islamic philosophy.

4. Results and Discussion

Muslim philosophers before Ibn Sīnā generally held that the soul belongs to the category of perfection (*kamāl/istikmāl*). For this reason, they often used the terms *tamāmiyyah* and *istikmāl* when defining the soul. For instance, Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb ibn Isḥāq al-Kindī (d. 252 AH/866 CE) defines the soul as the perfection of a natural body that has organs and the potential for life. In his explanation, he presents the soul as a principle of completion using the ideas of *tamāmiyyah* and *istikmāl* (Al-Kindī, 1950). The collected data are analysed using descriptive, analytical, and comparative methods. The descriptive method is employed to present Ibn Sīnā's doctrine of the soul systematically. The analytical method is used to examine the philosophical structure and coherence of his arguments. The comparative method is also applied where necessary to compare Ibn Sīnā's views with criticisms and interpretations presented by other scholars. Through these methods, the study aims to produce a comprehensive understanding of Ibn Sīnā's conception of the soul and its significance in Islamic philosophy.

According to al-Kindī, the soul gives the body the ability to live through an inner power. Here, "perfection" refers to the process in which a genus becomes complete and develops into a distinct species. It describes the stage where a natural body reaches full realisation and becomes a living being. This view also highlights the close relation between the soul and the physical body. The term "natural body" (*jism ṭabī'ī*) refers to a body that exists according to natural laws, not one that is artificially made (*jism ṣinā'ī*). The phrases "possessing life" and "having life with power" indicate that the soul is ready to receive life and has the capacity to actualise life-giving power. In this way, the soul is understood both as the source of life and as the receiver of life from a higher principle, showing a balance between natural capacity and divine

influence (Jarman Arroisi et al., 2023). In response to earlier philosophers, Ibn Sīnā develops his own understanding of the soul. Across his writings, he gradually refines this definition, sometimes even within the same text. His main discussions of the soul appear in *Maqālah fī al-Nafs*, *al-Shifā'*, and *Risālah fī al-Nafs al-Nāṭiqah*. In his early intellectual phase, Ibn Sīnā continues the traditional method of defining the soul through the concept of form (*ṣūrah*) (McGinnis, 2010). In *Maqālah fī al-Nafs*, he states: "The soul is a form, and forms are realized perfections, since through them the features and characteristics of things become complete" (Ibn Sīnā, 2007). This definition presents the soul in a metaphysical framework.

First, Ibn Sīnā describes the soul as a form (*ṣūrah*), meaning it is that which gives actuality to a living body. At this stage, McGinnis (2010) notes that Ibn Sīnā is still influenced by Aristotle's *De Anima*. Therefore, in his early view, the soul is still explained mainly through the idea of form. However, Ibn Sīnā seems to recognise that defining the soul only as form is not sufficient, because it does not fully capture its complexity. Such a definition may also reduce the soul to a physical reality and fail to explain its immaterial aspects. Moreover, in *al-Shifā'*, Ibn Sīnā also treats the soul as a substance in certain contexts. For this reason, a definition based only on form is not adequate to explain the full nature of the soul. Therefore, in the same definition, he adds that forms are realised perfections (*kamāl*). This means that form, including the soul, is understood as something that brings completion and fulfilment. Perfection here refers to a state of full realisation. In this sense, the soul is understood as a perfected reality that completes the existence of things. These forms also contribute to the formation and completion of the qualities and identities of beings in the world.

Ibn Sīnā repeats a similar definition in al-Shifā', but with a slight change in expression: "the soul is a form, or like a form, or like a perfection (*kamāl*)" (Ibn Sīnā, 1959). This shows that he still retains the idea of form, but he gradually moves toward the concept of perfection. Over time, he places more emphasis on the soul as perfection rather than only as form. In this development, forms and souls are understood as what bring completion to the qualities and identities of things. When shaped by such forms, the nature of things reaches a more complete and actualised state. In this way, forms contribute to the refinement and realisation of existing beings (Ibn Sīnā, 1959). In his refined explanation, Ibn Sīnā introduces the concept of *kamāl* (*kamāliyyah*), meaning perfection. He explains it using the example of a captain as the perfection of a ship (Ibn Sīnā, 1959). Based on this analogy, the soul governs the body, while the body follows its direction. However, this example is mainly used to explain separability and is not applicable to non-rational souls.

For Ibn Sīnā, the soul as perfection determines the classification of living beings. It is the soul that makes a being belong to a specific species. For example, the rational soul makes a human being human, while the animal soul makes a cat a living animal. He also explains that kamāl is broader than form, because although every soul is a perfection, not every perfection is a form. Some perfections exist independently of the things they perfect, such as a captain in relation to a ship or a king in relation to a state. Since some human souls are not merely forms in matter but can exist independently, the soul is better defined as the perfection of the body rather than only as form (Ibn Sīnā, 1959). Thus, perfection can refer either to form or to substance. In general, when Ibn Sīnā defines the soul as the perfection of the body, he is not directly addressing its substance. Instead, he is describing the functional relationship between soul and body. This is similar to defining a builder in relation to a building; the definition explains the relation, not the builder's nature as a human being. In this view, the soul actualises potential existence. The vegetative soul actualises a plant as a living plant, the animal soul actualises an animal as a living creature, and the rational soul actualises a human being as a fully rational being (Ibn Sīnā, 1959). This is what Ibn Sīnā means by perfection as realised identity.

However, Ibn Sīnā later refines this idea by introducing the term "first perfection" (*kamāl awwal*). In *Maqālah fī al-Nafs*, he writes: "the soul is the first perfection of a natural body potentially having life" (Ibn Sīnā, 2007). A similar definition appears in *al-Shifā'*, where the soul is described as the first perfection of a natural body with organs that perform life activities (Ibn Sīnā, 1959). This leads to the question of why he moves from "perfection" to "first perfection". He explains that "first perfection" refers to what makes a thing belong to a species. For example, the structure of a sword is its first perfection, while cutting is its second perfection (kamāl thānī). In short, the soul is called first perfection because it provides the basic capacity for life, even when it is not actively expressed, such as during sleep. Second perfection refers to the actual performance of life functions.

In summary, Ibn Sīnā distinguishes between two types of perfection. The first is the principle that produces actions and effects, while the second is the actions and their results. The soul is therefore a first perfection because it is the source of life and activity, not the outcome of another principle (Ibn Sīnā, 2007). From this discussion, it is clear that Ibn Sīnā consistently seeks a unified and comprehensive definition of the soul. Since he views the soul as a single unified substance, he uses "first perfection" as a general description. However, because different souls have different faculties, he also recognises different levels of perfection in different living beings. The next section will therefore discuss Ibn Sīnā's classification of the soul and the characteristics of each type.

5. The Division of the Soul

In *Maqālah fī al-Nafs* and *al-Shifā'*, Ibn Sīnā divides the soul into three categories: the vegetative soul (*al-nafs al-nabātiyyah*), the animal soul (*al-nafs al-ḥayawāniyyah*), and the rational soul (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqah*). He relates each type of soul to a different level of perfection (*kamāl*) in natural bodies. The vegetative soul is the lowest level of perfection and is responsible for basic functions such as growth, nutrition, and reproduction, which are necessary for life. The animal soul represents a higher level of perfection. It controls movement, sensory experience, and interaction with the external world. The rational soul is the highest level of perfection. It is unique to human beings and enables thinking, reasoning, and moral judgment (Ibn Sīnā, 1959).

This classification was later strongly criticised by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 607 AH/1210 CE). He examines the philosophical basis of Ibn Sīnā's view, especially the principle of *qāʿidat al-wāḥid* (the rule of one) and the unity of the soul. Al-Rāzī argues that if the soul is truly simple but still contains many distinct faculties, such as nutritive, growth, reproductive, sensory, motor, and rational powers that operate independently, then this would imply multiplicity within the soul itself. According to him, this contradicts the principle that "from the one only one proceeds," which states that a single simple cause cannot produce multiple distinct effects (Amirkhani et al., 2024).Al-Rāzī further maintains that if the simplicity of the soul prevents multiple actions from being directly attributed to it, then the introduction of separate faculties does not resolve the issue. He argues that if connecting the soul to different bodily organs already implies multiplicity, then dividing it into multiple faculties creates the same problem. For this reason, he suggests that the soul itself should be considered the direct agent of its actions, acting on the body without the need for intermediate faculties. He also criticises Ibn Sīnā for applying the "rule of one" in an inconsistent way, arguing that Ibn Sīnā treats "one" as a general or generic unity without clear justification, instead of defining it as an individual unity or another specific form of unity (Amirkhani et al., 2024).

5.1 Plant Soul

The concept of the plant soul is an important part of Ibn Sīnā's threefold division of the soul. This lowest level of the soul is responsible for basic life functions such as growth, nutrition, and reproduction. It is found in all living beings, especially plants. Through this concept, Ibn Sīnā presents life as a hierarchical structure in which each level of the soul performs necessary biological functions for survival (Ibn Sīnā, 1959). Based on his general definition of the soul, the plant soul is described as "the first perfection of a natural organic body insofar as it generates, grows, and nourishes." It is defined by its role in supporting essential biological processes. Unlike the higher levels of the soul (animal and rational), the plant soul has no consciousness or sensory ability. It only functions to maintain and continue life. Because it carries out three main activities, Ibn Sīnā explains that it has three faculties: growth (*nāmiyah*), nutrition (*ghādhiyah*), and reproduction (*muwallidah*) (Ibn Sīnā, 1959).

The faculty of growth refers to the ability of a living body to increase in size and develop over time (Ibn Sīnā, 2014). In plants, this can be seen in roots, stems, leaves, flowers, and fruits. Growth allows the organism to repair damage, replace lost parts, and expand its physical structure. It is an essential process that supports survival and adaptation in different environments (Ibn Sīnā, 1959). Nutrition is another important faculty of the plant soul. It manages the intake and processing of nutrients needed for survival. In plants, this includes the absorption of water and minerals from the soil, as well as photosynthesis to produce energy. Nutrition supplies the materials required for growth and other life activities. Without it, a living organism cannot continue to survive or function properly (Ibn Sīnā, 1959). Reproduction is the third faculty. It allows living beings to continue their species across generations. In plants, reproduction happens through seeds, spores, or vegetative methods such as cuttings and runners. This process ensures continuity of life and also allows variation and adaptation over time (Ibn Sīnā, 1959).

However, Ibn Sīnā's division of the plant soul has been criticised. Fakhr al-Rāzī questions whether it is necessary to separate life functions into different faculties. He suggests that growth, nutrition, and reproduction may be better understood as connected processes within one natural system rather than as separate powers of the soul. He also doubts whether these functions should be seen as independent faculties, since they may result from the natural constitution of the body (*ṭabīʿah*) rather than from a separate vegetative soul (Al-Rāzī, 1879). In response, Ibn Sīnā argues that the regularity and purpose found in these processes cannot be explained only by physical nature. For him, the soul is not simply a result of bodily structure, but a principle that organises life in an ordered and purposeful way. Without such a principle, it would be difficult to clearly distinguish between living and non-living things. Ibn al-Nafīs offers a different view. He rejects the idea that the soul acts through specific organs or directly causes physiological functions. Instead, he argues that the soul is not the cause of biological processes but the perfection of a body already prepared to receive life (Ibn al-Nafīs, 2001). From this perspective, nutritive functions are natural effects of bodily structure and temperament, not the result of a separate vegetative soul. However, Ibn Sīnā maintains that bodily structure alone cannot fully explain these processes. In *al-Nafs* (within *al-Shifāʾ*), he argues that although organs are necessary tools, the principle that organises life must be immaterial. The order, direction, and purpose (*ghāyah*) found in growth, nutrition, and reproduction show the presence of a governing principle beyond matter (Ibn Sīnā, 1952).

Despite these criticisms, Ibn Sīnā's theory still has strong philosophical value. His model provides a clear hierarchical structure of life that matches observable differences between plants, animals, and humans. The vegetative faculties are not only descriptive but also explanatory, since they link biological processes to a metaphysical principle of life. As Peter Adamson notes, Ibn Sīnā's theory of the soul offers a broad metaphysical framework that avoids reducing life to purely material explanations (Adamson, 2002). In conclusion, although thinkers such as al-Rāzī and Ibn al-Nafīs raise important objections, Ibn Sīnā's account of the plant soul remains coherent and philosophically strong. It provides a detailed explanation of basic life functions and forms a foundation for understanding higher levels of the soul in his system. It also maintains a consistent connection between biology and metaphysics, making it still relevant in philosophical discussions today.

5.2 Animal Soul

The second type of soul in Ibn Sīnā's classification is the animal soul. He defines it as "the first perfection of a natural organic body insofar as it perceives particulars and moves by will" (Ibn Sīnā, 1959). This level of the soul is higher than the plant soul and is responsible for more advanced life functions such as sensation, movement, and desire. It is found in

animals and shows a more complex form of life activity. The animal soul develops from the basic functions of the plant soul and adds new abilities that allow animals to interact more actively with their environment. While the plant soul is limited to growth, nutrition, and reproduction, the animal soul introduces perception and movement. These abilities help animals respond to external conditions and act in more flexible ways (Ibn Sīnā, 2014).

According to Ibn Sīnā, the animal soul has two main faculties in addition to the vegetative ones: the faculty of motion (*muḥarrikah*) and the faculty of perception (mudrikah). The faculty of motion includes the appetitive power (*shawqiyyah* / *hā'ithah*) and the bodily movement power (nāqilah / fāʿil). The appetitive faculty contains two parts, namely desire (*shahwah*) and anger (*ghaḍab*). Desire pushes animals to seek pleasure and satisfy needs such as food, thirst, and reproduction, while also supporting survival behaviours. The faculty of motion also allows animals to perform voluntary and reflex actions. Through this faculty, animals can move in order to search for food, avoid danger, and interact with their surroundings. This makes adaptation and survival possible in different environments (Ibn Sīnā, 1959). The faculty of perception is further divided into external and internal senses. The five external senses are sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. These senses help animals receive information from the outside world, which is important for survival, such as finding food and avoiding threats. The internal senses include common sense, imagination, estimation, memory, and retention. These internal faculties process and organise sensory information, allowing animals to recognise patterns, store experiences, and respond appropriately to situations.

However, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī criticises Ibn Sīnā's theory of internal senses. In *Sharḥ ʿUyūn al-Ḥikmah*, he argues that faculties such as imagination and estimation are not clearly proven and can be explained by the brain as a single organ. For him, there is no need to divide these functions into separate powers of the soul, since they may all come from one physical system (Al-Rāzī, 1986). Ibn al-Nafīs also rejects the idea of separate faculties for sensation and movement. In his *Sharḥ Tashrīḥ al-Qānūn*, he explains that these functions come from the body's physical structure, the nervous system, and the movement of pneuma (life spirit). He states that sensation and movement do not require separate metaphysical powers, since they occur when the body is properly organised (Ibn al-Nafīs, 2001). In contrast, Deborah L. Black (1990) supports Ibn Sīnā's view. She argues that the theory of internal senses provides a clear and structured explanation of non-rational cognition. According to her, Ibn Sīnā's model helps to explain how animals and humans at a non-rational level process information, form impressions, and store memories in a systematic way.

5.3 Rational Soul

According to Ibn Sīnā's definition, the rational soul is "the first perfection of a natural organic body insofar as it performs actions that come from rational choice, reflection, inference through opinion, and insofar as it perceives universal concepts" (Ibn Sīnā, 1959). In his view, human beings occupy a higher level in the hierarchy of living beings compared to plants and animals. For this reason, the human soul possesses more advanced faculties. In addition to the powers found in plant and animal souls, the rational soul has higher capacities that are unique to human beings. It is this rational faculty that distinguishes humans from animals. While the animal soul only perceives particular and material things, the rational soul is able to understand universal and immaterial realities. In *al-Shifāʾ* and *al-Najāt*, Ibn Sīnā divides the rational soul into two main faculties, namely the practical intellect (*al-ʿaql al-ʿamalī*) and the theoretical intellect (*al-ʿaql al-naẓarī*). The theoretical intellect is further divided into four stages: the potential or material intellect (*al-ḥayūlānī*), the actual intellect (*bi al-fiʿl*), the habitual intellect (*al-malakah*), and the acquired intellect (*al-mustafād*). The highest level is the acquired intellect, which is reached only by prophets and is also called the sacred intellect (*al-ʿaql al-qudsī*).

Ibn Sīnā gives special attention to the rational soul. In his final work, *Risālah fī al-Nafs al-Nāṭiqah*, he defines it as a substance that exists by itself. It is not located in the body or any physical object. Instead, it is separate and abstract from material things. However, it still has a connection with the body while a person is alive. This connection is not like a container and its contents, but more like a user and an instrument (Ibn Sīnā, 1988). From this explanation, the rational soul can be understood as a self-subsisting substance that is not located in the body, is separable from it, and uses the body as an instrument. By describing the soul as a substance, Ibn Sīnā argues that it does not depend on the body for its existence. Its relation to the body is temporary and accidental, not essential. The soul is therefore not produced by the body and does not exist inside matter in a material way. It is an independent and unchanging entity.

From this view, Ibn Sīnā supports the idea that the human soul can exist separately from the body. The soul does not depend on anything else to function, since it acts through its own essence. In this sense, the rational soul is not just a function of the body but a substance that determines itself. This position combines a functional explanation of the soul with a form of dualism similar to Cartesian substance dualism. Therefore, Ibn Sīnā considers the human soul as a higher reality in the hierarchy of being, capable of existing independently without the body. Among the three types of soul, only the rational soul qualifies as a true substance because it can exist on its own. Its theoretical faculty does not require bodily organs and allows it to receive universal intelligibles directly. For this reason, the body is only an instrument, while the rational soul is the real knowing subject (Dastagir, 1997).

6. The Nature of the Rational Soul

Based on Ibn Sīnā's definition and explanation, the nature of the rational soul can be identified as immaterial, self-subsistent, and immortal. Since it does not depend on the body for its existence, it can separate from the body and continue to exist after death. This survival beyond bodily death implies that the soul is incorruptible and does not perish.

6.1 Immaterial

Ibn Sīnā first argues for the immateriality of the soul by analysing intellectual thought. He explains that intellectual concepts are indivisible. A single coherent thought must be grasped as one complete unit by one intellect. If a thought is divided between different intellects, the unity of that thought will be lost. Each intellect would only understand a part, and the meaning would no longer be complete (Dastagir, 1999). From this, Ibn Sīnā concludes that the intellect itself must also be indivisible. If it were material, it would be divisible like physical objects and could not grasp unified meanings. Since intellectual understanding requires unity, the intellect must be non-material. Therefore, the rational soul, which contains the intellect, must also be immaterial. A second argument is that universal concepts are not produced by the soul alone. Instead, they are received from immaterial sources such as the Active Intellect (*al-ʿaql al-faʿʿāl*). This Active Intellect provides universal forms that make understanding possible. At its highest level, the theoretical intellect becomes the acquired intellect (*al-ʿaql al-mustafād*), which is fully actualised in prophets (Dastagir, 1999).

According to Ibn Sīnā, prophets receive knowledge directly from the Active Intellect without learning or reasoning in the normal way. This knowledge is clear and immediate. Since the source of these intelligible forms is immaterial, the forms themselves are also immaterial. Therefore, the intellect that receives them must also be immaterial (Ibn Sīnā, 1959). Ibn Sīnā also identifies the Active Intellect as a higher, non-material source of knowledge. This idea is consistent with the Qur'ānic teaching that God is the giver of understanding (al-Qurʾān, 20:52, 128). In this way, knowledge has a higher origin beyond the physical world. Since the source is immaterial, the human soul that receives knowledge must also be immaterial. Finally, Ibn Sīnā argues that the rational soul does not depend on bodily organs for understanding. Intellectual activity does not use physical instruments. However, material things are always divisible, while intelligible concepts are not. Therefore, the intellect must be independent from the body. In contrast, the practical intellect depends on bodily functions and is limited by material conditions. This shows that only the theoretical intellect is truly immaterial, while the rational soul transcends the physical body and connects with higher realities.

6.2 Substantial and Subsistence

Ibn Sīnā's extensive exploration of the rational soul as a substance (*jawhar*) is presented in both *al-Shifā'* and *Risālah fī al-Nafs al-Nātiqah*. In these works, he argues that the soul's ability to exist independently of the body and to apprehend intelligible forms confirms its nature as a substance. According to Ibn Sīnā, the rational soul, as a substance possesses different characteristics that set it apart from plant and animal souls, which exist merely as forms (Ibn Sīnā, 1959). To fully understand Ibn Sīnā's view on the substantiality of the soul, it is essential to first consider his broader metaphysical framework of substance.

In the book of metaphysics (*kitāb al-Ilahiyyat*) of *al-Shifā*, Ibn Sīnā defines substance as something that exists independently and is not an attribute/accident (*Ñaraİ*) of something else. An accident in contrast is something that exists in another thing and cannot exist by itself (Ibn Sīnā, 2004). Ibn Sīnā metaphysically classifies substance into two division. The first one is the primary substance which exists by itself and independently. For instance, the rational soul which can exist separately from the body. Secondly, secondary substance, which is the essence of an individual, like species which cannot exist independently (Ibn Sīnā, 1959). Ibn Sīnā further identifies three main types of substances: body (*jism*), soul (*nafs*), and intellect (*Ñaql*). The body is a material substance characterized by physical dimensions such as length, width, and depth. The soul is an immaterial substance that can exist separately from the body but typically acts with it. The intellect is also an immaterial substance, which exists independently but is not tied to any physical form. (Ibn Sīnā, 2004). Ibn Sīnā also explains that substances can exist in different states. They can be part of a body, acting as its matter, or they can have a relationship of authority over the body, such as through movement. Furthermore, substances can be entirely free of matter and may exist independently. This understanding leads to the classification of substances into material and immaterial types. The body is a material substance, while the soul and intellect are immaterial substances. (Afnan, 1958).

In summary, Ibn Sīnā's concept of substance distinguishes between entities that exist independently and those that depend on others. By categorizing substances into primary and secondary types, and distinguishing material and immaterial substances, he provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the nature of existence. The rational soul, as a primary and immaterial substance, exemplifies the ability to exist independently and thus highlights its seperability. Based on this notion of substance developed in *al-Shifā'*, Ibn Sīnā argues for the substantiality of the human soul for its capability to exist independently of the body. For Ibn Sīnā, a substance is something that does not depend on anything else for its existence. This means that the soul is not a function or result of anything else; it is self-sustaining and self-determined. Unlike the rational soul, Ibn Sīnā argues that the plant and animal souls are dependant to the body. They cannot exist without it. In contrast, the rational soul is independent. It can exist on its own, separate from the body. This independence is central to its status as a substance. The rational soul performs intellectual functions such as thinking and reasoning without bodily support (Dastagir, 1999). These functions are not affected by the body's weakness, illness, or aging. While the body declines, the soul's reasoning remains intact. For Ibn Sīnā, this proves that the soul acts through its own essence. It is self-subsisting and not dependent on matter. This view affirms the rational soul's immortality and substantial nature. In addition to prove the substantiality of the soul, Ibn Sīnā presents a notable argument known as the 'Flying Man' argument. This thought experiment aims to demonstrate the soul's subsistence or independence from the body. In this scenario, imagine a person who, despite being mature and in full possession of their mental faculties, is completely isolated from sensory experiences and physical sensations. According to Ibn Sīnā, even in this state, the individual would still be aware of their own existence. This self-awareness is not dependent on the body or its functions but is a result of the soul's own nature. (Ibn Sīnā, 1959). Ibn Sīnā uses this argument to show that self-consciousness and the awareness of one's own existence do not rely on bodily sensations. Instead, they are intrinsic to the rational soul. He

argues that the rational soul exists independently of the body because self-consciousness remains intact even when all physical sensations are removed. This suggests that the rational soul is self-subsistent. (Ibn Sīnā. 1992).

Ibn Sīnā's Flying Man argument effectively supports the idea of the soul's independence. However, it raises some questions. For instance, why is the hypothetical individual in this argument described as mature? It implies that maturity and a properly functioning body are necessary for self-consciousness, which might suggest that the soul's independence is conditional on certain physical states. This aspect challenges the notion of the soul being entirely separate from the body, as proposed through this argument (Ibn Sīnā, 1975). Neverthelesss, Ibn Sīnā primary goal is to demonstrate that the rational soul, through its self-awareness, exists independently of the body. Ibn Sīnā's Flying Man argument, which suggests the subsistence of the soul is disputed by some scholars, including Peter Adamson. Adamson critiques the argument by questioning its ability to prove the substantiality of the soul. He argues that, while the Flying Man may be self-aware, this self-awareness does not necessarily show that the soul is distinct from the body. Adamson suggests that the self-awareness could simply be a function of the mind, which is rooted in the body's nervous system, rather than proving the existence of a separate immaterial soul. (Adamson, 2015)

In response to this criticism, it is apparent that Ibn Sīnā's thought experiment deliberately removes all bodily sensations and physical awareness, yet self-awareness persists. This demonstrating the independence of the soul from the body. In Ibn Sīnā's framework, the rational soul operates as a substantial and immaterial entity capable of pure intellectual awareness, distinct from bodily or neurological processes. Therefore, the 'Flying Man' shows that self-awareness comes from the soul, not from the body or mind, reinforcing Ibn Sīnā's claim of the soul's separability and substantiality. Nevertheless, the Flying Man argument is seen as having a significant impact on the world of philosophy. Rene Descartes (d. 1650) is linked to being inspired by Ibn Sīnā's argument with his famous statement, *Cogito ergo sum*. Descartes points out the existence of the conscious self as a turning point in epistemology, using the phrase "I think therefore I am". Meanwhile, Ibn Sīnā established an argument for the existence of knowledge by presence without any need for the existence of the body. Both theories are viewed as similar in their attempt to demonstrate the existence of consciousness independent of the body. They believed that the soul and self are something other than sense data. Additionally, Ibn Sīnā believed that there is no relation logically between the self and the body. In other words, there is no logical dependency between them.

Some scholars however refute the resemblance between these two arguments. Hertogh (2016) for instance argues that the logical frameworks of Ibn Sīnā's *Flying Man* and Descartes' *Cogito* are fundamentally different to support the idea that Descartes was aware of Ibn Sīnā's thought experiment when formulating his own *Cogito*. In other words, it is unlikely that Ibn Sīnā's Flying Man inspired Descartes' *Cogito*. However, based on the timeline, it remains possible that Descartes was familiar with Ibn Sīnā's works which may have influenced other aspects of his own writings. In fact, the *Cogito* is widely regarded as the clearest outcome of Descartes' method of doubt. Some scholars on the other hand argue that it reflects the influence of al-Ghazālī. rather than Ibn Sīnā's Flying Man argument. Nevertheless, both figures influences are evident in the ways they shape the understanding of self-consciousness and self-existence of the soul. Ibn Sīnā's *Flying Man* and Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum* both highlight the idea that self-consciousness can be proven independent of sensory experiences or the physical body. This clear similarity in their approaches illustrates how each has contributed to the discourse on consciousness. Al-Ghazālī's theory of doubt provides a broader framework of skepticism. Meanwhile, the specific focus on self-awareness in both Ibn Sīnā's and Descartes' arguments shows a direct influence that is noticeable in their respective treatments of the subject.

7. Criticism

One of the major criticisms of Ibn Sīnā's concept of the rational soul comes from Zadyousefi (2022), who argues that there is a contradiction in Ibn Sīnā's explanation of the soul. If the soul contains intelligible forms (universal concepts that are abstract), it cannot be completely immaterial. The presence of these forms, according to Zadyousefi, indicates a dependence on material conditions, or at least on the human body. A similar line of critique appears in Mehraki's work, which states that Ibn Sina's reasoning is not logically strong. Mehraki (2025) favours the view of Mulla Ṣadrā, who proposed that the soul begins as a material substance and becomes immaterial through a process of essential change, known as substantial motion (*ḥarakah jawhariyyah*). According to this view, the soul does not start out immaterial, as Ibn Sīnā claimed, but acquires immateriality as it develops. Other scholars focus on problems with Ibn Sīnā's terminology and conceptual clarity. Marmura (2008) notes that Ibn Sīnā's writings on the soul's connection with the First Intellect and the process of its creation can be vague and difficult to interpret. Similarly, Druart (2000) questions whether the soul, once separated from the body, can still retain its personal identity. For her, Ibn Sīnā does not give a complete answer to the question of how an immaterial soul can remain the same individual without its bodily features. Another point of criticism relates to the unity between the soul and the body. Kaukua (2016) and Druart (2000) both express doubts about how Ibn Sīnā accounts for the connection between an immaterial soul and a material body. If the soul is fully immaterial, they argue, then it should not be affected by bodily changes. But in reality, bodily experiences and sensations clearly influence human thought and behaviour. This creates tension in Avicenna's model of the human being as a unity of soul and body.

However, other scholars have proposed more balanced or positive readings of Ibn Sīnā's position. Efremova (2024) and Alpina (2021) suggest that Ibn Sīnā's soul should be interpreted as both the form of the body and a separate substance capable of existing independently. Their approach acknowledges the dual role of the soul in Ibn Sīnā's system. Ibragim (2025) further argues that Ibn Sīnā's doctrine can be better understood when read together with theological traditions such as Ashʿarism and Māturīdism. These traditions offer more explicit teachings on resurrection and divine justice, which

may help address the concerns about personal identity and the soul's survival after death. Despite these criticisms, there are strong reasons to maintain confidence in Ibn Sīnā's core arguments. First, his famous thought experiment, the "Floating Man," shows that the soul is aware of itself without depending on the senses or the body. This supports the idea that the soul is not bodily in nature. Second, Ibn Sīnā argues that the soul is the form of the body, but not in a way that makes it dependent on bodily matter. The soul can exist apart from the body because its essential function (thinking) is not material. Ibn Sīnā's view is that the human intellect receives intelligible forms from the Active Intellect, which is itself immaterial. Since the origin of these forms is immaterial, the intellect that receives them must also be immaterial. The criticism from Mulla Ṣadrā is also important but does not fully replace Ibn Sīnā's theory. Instead, Ṣadrā builds upon it. His concept of substantial motion shows how the soul develops and becomes more perfect, but he agrees with Ibn Sīnā that the soul eventually becomes independent of the body and survives after death (Mehraki, 2025). Therefore, even when Ibn Sīnā's explanation is refined, the basic doctrine remains intact.

In conclusion, modern scholars have raised important challenges to Ibn Sīnā's doctrine of the immaterial soul. These include concerns about logical consistency, the connection between soul and body, and the persistence of personal identity after death. However, careful reading of Ibn Sīnā's texts shows that many of these concerns are addressed, though not always in the language expected by modern philosophy. Ibn Sīnā's theory continues to offer a valuable framework for understanding the human soul, especially in the Islamic philosophical tradition.

8. A Critical Assessment of the Criticisms to Ibn Sīnā's Theory of the Soul

The criticisms discussed above do not all challenge the same aspect of Ibn Sīnā's theory of the soul. Some question the ontological status of the rational soul, while others challenge the validity of particular arguments or the explanatory adequacy of his classification of the soul's faculties. These objections must therefore be assessed separately. A difficulty in explaining how a faculty operates does not necessarily establish that the soul does not exist, just as an argument for the soul's immateriality does not automatically establish the adequacy of every faculty attributed to it. The first issue concerns the ontological status of the rational soul. Ibn Sīnā argues that the rational soul is an immaterial substance capable of subsisting independently of the body. His position depends on the claim that intellectual activity cannot be reduced entirely to bodily processes. The Flying Man thought experiment supports this position by proposing that self-awareness remains possible even when awareness of the body and its sensory experiences is absent (Ibn Sīnā, 2014). However, the philosophical strength of this argument depends on the distinction between establishing the independence of self-awareness from bodily awareness and proving the independent existence of an immaterial substance. The former does not, by itself, establish the latter. As the criticism attributed to Adamson (2015) suggests, the possibility of self-awareness without explicit bodily awareness does not necessarily demonstrate that the subject of awareness exists independently of the body. This objection identifies a limitation in the inferential force of the Flying Man argument rather than conclusively disproving the existence of the rational soul. The thought experiment challenges the assumption that awareness of the self requires awareness of the body. Nevertheless, a further argument is required to establish that the self so apprehended is an immaterial substance capable of subsisting independently after bodily death. The argument is therefore philosophically significant as an account of self-awareness, but its success in establishing substantiality and post-mortem survival depends on additional premises within Ibn Sīnā's metaphysical framework.

A second issue concerns the relationship between intellectual activity and immateriality. Ibn Sīnā maintains that the rational soul apprehends universal intelligible concepts, whereas bodily organs operate through material conditions. He consequently argues that the principle responsible for intellectual apprehension cannot itself be wholly material (Ibn Sīnā, 1959). The strength of this argument lies in its attempt to explain the distinctive character of universal cognition. However, the conclusion requires a further justification of the premise that the apprehension of universal concepts cannot depend on bodily processes in any relevant sense. If a critic rejects this premise, the argument for immateriality becomes less conclusive. The disagreement therefore concerns not merely whether the soul exists, but whether Ibn Sīnā has adequately established the non-material character of intellectual activity. The criticism associated with Mehraki (2025), which favours Mullā Ṣadrā's account of substantial motion, raises a related but distinct question about the soul's ontological development. The contrast concerns whether immateriality characterises the rational soul from its inception or emerges through its development. This alternative account challenges Ibn Sīnā's premises concerning the soul's origin and ontological status. It does not, however, follow that the existence of the soul is thereby disproved. Rather, the disagreement concerns the explanation of how the soul comes to possess its distinctive mode of existence. A proper assessment must therefore distinguish the rejection of Ibn Sīnā's account of the soul's origin from the rejection of the rational soul itself.

A different set of objections concerns the classification of the soul's faculties. In his criticism of Ibn Sīnā, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī questions how the unity and simplicity of the soul can be reconciled with its numerous faculties and activities. If the soul is one, the differentiation of nutritive, sensory, appetitive, motor, and rational functions requires an adequate explanation. Al-Rāzī's objection raises a question about the coherence of Ibn Sīnā's explanatory structure, particularly the relationship between the unity of the soul and the plurality of its powers (Amirkhani et al., 2024). It should not automatically be interpreted as a denial of the soul's existence. The central issue is whether the plurality of faculties entails a plurality of substances or whether distinct faculties can be understood as different powers of one underlying subject. Ibn Sīnā's classification can be defended if the faculties are interpreted as differentiated capacities through which one soul performs different functions. On this reading, the plurality of activities does not necessarily imply the plurality of the agent. Nevertheless, this response does not entirely resolve al-Rāzī's objection. Ibn Sīnā must still explain the grounds on which the faculties are distinguished and why these distinctions are necessary for understanding the activities

of living beings. The explanatory adequacy of his classification therefore depends on whether the proposed faculties identify genuine differences in function rather than merely assigning separate names to observable activities.

A similar distinction applies to the criticisms of the vegetative and animal faculties. Objections attributed to al-Rāzī and Ibn al-Nafīs question whether growth, nutrition, reproduction, sensation, and movement require distinct powers of the soul or can be explained through bodily organisation and natural processes (al-Rāzī, 1879; Ibn al-Nafīs, 2001). These objections challenge the explanatory necessity of Ibn Sīnā's faculty theory. They do not, without further argument, establish that the rational soul is material or that the soul does not exist. Instead, they raise the question of whether a metaphysical principle is necessary to explain biological and sensory activities that may also be described in terms of bodily processes. Ibn Sīnā's account retains explanatory value because it organises different kinds of life activity within a hierarchical framework. However, the existence of an orderly classification does not by itself prove that every faculty corresponds to a distinct metaphysical power. The stronger defence of his theory must demonstrate how the distinctions between faculties contribute to an explanation of life, perception, and action that cannot be adequately provided by a merely descriptive classification. The criticism thus remains relevant at the level of explanatory adequacy, even if it does not establish the non-existence of the soul.

Taken together, these objections reveal that the philosophical assessment of Ibn Sīnā's theory requires more than a general judgement that his position is either coherent or inconsistent. The arguments for the rational soul's immateriality and subsistence must be evaluated according to the premises and inferences on which they depend. Meanwhile, criticisms of the faculty theory must be assessed according to whether the distinctions proposed by Ibn Sīnā are conceptually justified and explanatorily necessary. This distinction makes it possible to recognise the strengths of Ibn Sīnā's systematic account without dismissing unresolved philosophical difficulties. His theory provides an integrated explanation of the soul, its faculties, and its relationship with the body, but the success of each component must be established through its own arguments rather than inferred from the coherence of the system as a whole.

9. Conclusion

Based on the discussion presented in this article, one could see the exclusivity of Ibn Sīnā's concept of human soul. It is developed based on his own system of thought that is independent from pure attachment of any ancient philosophical school of thought. Though Aristotle's influence is visible in such aspects as the definition and division of the soul, Ibn Sīnā concept of the soul is clearly not a resemblance of that of Aristotle. Rather, as told by Ibn Sīnā in his autobiography, it is developed based on the philosophical system that he has established since he was a teenager. This is the same system that he adhered to until before his last breath. The claim which that Ibn Sīnā was inconsistent with his views on the soul is apparently erroneous because his psychological views in his earlier, middle, and later works are remained unchanged. The content of his ideas on human soul in *Maqalah fi al-Nafs* is consistant with that in *Risālah fī al-Nafs al-Nāṭiqah* though they might be different in length and details. Ibn Sīnā from the beginning of his career asserted that the human soul is a substance which is self-subsistent and separable from the body, and capable to survive beyond the death of the body. Although he emphasizes dualistic nature of the soul and the body, he however disapproves any radical dualism which suggests the possibility of metempsychosis for the human soul. He maintained that the connection of the soul to the body is appropriate, as the soul needs the body for its perfection. Although he advocated the necessity of body for the soul, he rejects radical hylormorphic theory brought by Aristotle, who asserts that the soul would die entailing the death of the body. And although he holds on the immortality of the soul, he rejects radical Neoplatonic dualistic approach which proposed the transmigration of the soul (metempsychosis). It can be concluded that both radical theories of the soul are rejected by Ibn Sīnā. Instead, he stands firm on moderate position between these two theories, making the concept of the soul that he developed looks sound, unique, and independent.

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Mohd Radhi Ibrahim: Supervision
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Availability of Data and Materials

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Ethics Statement

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