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Reciprocity in the Acquisition of Livelihood: Reclaiming Al-Isfahani's Spiritual Ethics of *al-Kasb*

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Abstract

The modern-day work activity, driven by a neoliberal economy, has led to deterioration and deprivation for most working-class people worldwide. Reducing labour to simply employment has induced social disparities between the elite and the working class, ultimately sacrificing society's welfare. This study aims to explore the concept of a reciprocal work ethic proposed by al-Raghib al-Isfahani, an intellectual whose ideas on this subject have yet to acquire adequate attention from contemporary scholars. This qualitative study employs content analysis on al-Isfahani's primary work, *al-Dhari'ah ila Makarim al-Shari'ah*, integrating his semantic approach to examine key Arabic terms related to the concept of work ethos *(al-Kasb)*. The findings reveal that al-Isfahani is a classical Islamic scholar who articulated a socio-religious work ethos grounded in his conception of humans as social beings. According to him, humans cannot live in isolation and require the assistance of others, necessitating mutual aid and cooperation within society. Each individual pursues a specific line of work based on their inclinations and expertise, which, in turn, enables society to continue to develop. Al-Isfahani conceptualises reciprocity in earning a livelihood, requiring every human work activity to be oriented toward social welfare. This finding makes an original contribution to the study of Islamic institutional values, serving as a foundation for establishing socially oriented rules and policies in contemporary working institutions.

Keywords: *al-Kasb, al-Raghib al-Isfahani, Islamic Economic Thought, reciprocal work ethic.*

Introduction

In today's busy world, people are caught up in the fast-paced work routine, with long working hours. People believe that being busy at work reflects a work ethic associated with productivity, which is considered a virtue.[1] In a 2023 Harvard Business Review article, it was even noted that Americans, the French, and South Koreans consider busy workers morally commendable. These findings show that work has become a dominant sign of social status.[2] However, this cultural fixation on work has taken its toll, with many cases of job-related illnesses caused by overwork and burnout.[3] The prevalent neoliberalism imposes the pretence of a work ethic on workers, compelling them to submit to the despotic authority of corporate employers.[4] Furious with the elite, the late Austrian-French philosopher-sociologist André Gorz harshly criticised the narrative of the work ethic as an attempt by the elite to enslave workers.[5]

Reducting of the meaning of work to mere employment has detrimental effects on the working class, which endures all forms of exploitation by elite employers. Resistance emerges from anarchist activists, such as Bob Black, in his essay, who believes that work is the source of nearly all human suffering in the world.[6] In a capitalist society, work becomes the cause of intellectual decline and organic defects. According to Cuban economist-activist Paul Lafargue, the enormous disparity between capitalists and the working class is caused by the delusion of the work ethic indoctrinated by Christian (Protestant) teachings.[7] In the context of modern life, the work ethic has become the cause of a crisis of meaning, as many people take on essentially useless jobs, which in turn makes the efforts of workers feel meaningless, a phenomenon referred to by American anthropologist David Graeber as "bullshit jobs."[8]

1 Clare Holdsworth, *The Social Life of Busyness* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2021), pp. 4-5

2 Adam Wyatz, 'Beware a Culture of Busyness', *Harvard Business Review* (Harvard, 2023), p. 60

3 Peter Fleming, *The Death of Homo Economicus* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), pp. 132-133

4 See Elizabeth Anderson, *Hijacked How Neoliberalism Turned the Work Ethic against Workers and How Workers Can Take It Back* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

5 André Gorz, *Critique of Economic Reason* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 66

6 Bob Black, *The Abolition of Work and Other Essays* (Port Townsend: Loompanics Unlimited, 1986), p. 17

7 Paul Lefargue, *The Right to Be Lazy* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1907), pp. 9-10

8 Graeber mentions five categories of bullshit job: 1) Flunkies: Exist to make others look important, such as receptionists who greet visitors; 2) Goons: Aggressive professions within a system, such as corporate lobbyists and aggressive marketers; 3) Duct Tapers: Jobs

Historically, the work ethic is believed to have originated from the Protestant ethos of the Reformation era, which placed work at the centre of life and condemned leisure as the sin of idleness.[9] Weber observed that Calvinists regarded their spiritual calling (*beruf*) as a justification for working and accumulating wealth, driven by the belief that they were fulfilling "*majorem Dei gloriam*" (for God's glory) on earth. According to Weber, in Calvinist teachings, work and the acquisition of wealth provided certainty to its adherents, who were chosen individuals destined to attain salvation.[10] This Protestant work ethic concept is inherently socially oriented and grounded in divine teachings, a framework Peter Singer refers to as effective altruism. However, through secularisation, the work ethic teachings that were originally theocentric shifted to anthropocentric, from "later" to "now" and from societal benefits to corporate profits, which American Political Philosopher Elizabeth Anderson refers to as the conservative work ethic.[11]

On the other hand, Islam is a religion that never separates the aspects of the world and the Hereafter, making the world closely related to the Hereafter.[12] However, unlike Christianity, whose beliefs have been influenced by secularisation, Islam, according to the scholar and proponent of Islamization of Knowledge, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, cannot be influenced by secularisation. The reason is that Islam has not undergone the same developmental process as Christianity, because its foundations have remained unchanged since its advent.[13] The concept of balance between the worldly and the hereafter does not mean that both are ontologically equal, but rather that the worldly is seen as preparation for the hereafter. Everything in Islam ultimately focuses on the Hereafter, but this does not mean neglecting worldly aspects; among them is work. Work in Islam does not constitute an end in itself but serves instead as an instrument for personal growth and social engagement.[14]

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that exist to fix problems that should not exist in the first place, such as IT employees who fix obsolete systems that the employer should replace; 4) Box Tickers: Jobs that exist solely for the sake of reports, documents, and other formalities, such as performance evaluators or internal survey fillers whose work is never read; and 5) Taskmasters: Middle managers who do not manage, such as supervisors who create tasks to make their subordinates appear busy. See David Graeber, *Bullshit Job a Theory* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018).

9 Elizabeth Anderson, *Hijacked...*, p. 2

10 See Stephen Kalberg in Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, ed. by Stephen Kalberg (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), pp. xxxiv-xli

11 Elizabeth Anderson, *Hijacked…,* pp. 66-67

12 Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1995), p. 1

13 Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: Ta'dib International, 2019), pp. 15-30

14 Abbas J. Ali and Abdullah Al-Owaihan, "Islamic Work Ethic: A Critical Review,"

Work in Islam is generally referred to as "*kasb*."[15] In a philosophical sense, the notion of *kasb* serves as a guide to understanding the essential meaning and purpose of Islamic economics.[16] Through conducting literary investigation, Orman notes that topics related to work ethic, such as encouragement to work and strive, are found in classical literature on *kasb*. Islamic scholars have written some literature on work in Islam over a millennium ago, including: 1) *Kitāb al-Kasb* by al-Shaibani (132-189 AH); 2) *al-Ḥaththh 'alā al-Tijārah* compiled by al-Khallal (234-331 AH); and *al-Barakah fī Faḍl al-Sa'y wa al-Ḥarakah* written by al-Hubaishi (712-762 AH).[17] However, there is a classical work not yet mentioned by Orman—neither as a general source nor a special source—that delves deeply into the concept and ethos of work in Islam: *al-Dharī'ah ilā Makārim al-Sharī'ah* by al-Raghib al-Isfahani. According to modern academic categories, this literature is classified as ethical literature, which falls under practical philosophy. Therefore, the study of this literature is highly relevant to the concept of work ethic.

To the best of our knowledge, several recent studies have examined al-Isfahani's concept of ethics in his work *al-Dharī'ah*. Notable examples include Yasien Mohamad, who investigated al-Isfahani's philosophical concept of labour and crafts[18], his ethical philosophy[19] and educational ethics—concepts that later inspired al-Ghazali's *Mīzān al-ʿAmal*[20]; Amril M., whose dissertation explored al-Isfahani's moral philosophy through his ethical writings, including *al-Dharī'ah*[21]; and Hossein Atrak, who discussed the integration of philosophical and religious ethics as conceptualized by al-Isfahani in *al-Dharī'ah*.[22]

Cross Cultural Management: An International Journal 15, no. 1 (February 8, 2008): 5–19, https://doi.org/10.1108/13527600810848791.

15 John L. Esposito, Tamara Sonn, and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, 'Kasb', *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 167

16 Amru Sazali, "Kasb: A Comparative Study of the Concept of Economics in Islamic and Modern Economics," *TAFHIM: IKIM Journal of Islam and the Contemporary World* 16, no. 2 (2023): 89–111, https://doi.org/10.56389/tafhim.vol16no2.4.

17 Sabri Orman, "Sources of the History Islamic Economic Thought (II)," *Al-Shajarah ISTAC Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 3, no. 2 (1998): 1–17.

18 Yasien Mohamed, "The Islamic Philosophy of Labor and Crafts: The View of the Ikhwan Al-Safa', Isfahani, and Ibn Khaldun," *American Journal of Islam and Society* 23, no. 1 (January 2006): 35–51, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v23i1.434.

19 Yasien Mohamed, "The Ethical Philosophy of Al-Raghib Al-Isfahani," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 6, no. 1 (1995): 51–75.

20 Yasien Mohamed, "The Ethics of Education: Al-Isfahani's Al-Dhari'a as a Source of Inspiration for Al-Ghazali's Mizan Al-'Amal," *The Muslim World* 101 (2011): 254–68, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.2011.01369.x.

21 Amril M, "Studi Pemikiran Filsafat Moral Al-Isfahani (w. 1108 M)" Doctoral Dissertation (Yogyakarta: Institut Agama Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga, 2001).

22 Atrak Hossein, "The Combination of Philosophical and Religious Ethics in Raghib Isfahani's Al-Dhari'a," *The Journal of Ethical Reflections* 1, no. 1 (2020): 103–33.

Meanwhile, a key contemporary study addressing al-Isfahani's concept of work ethic is Yasien Mohamed's analysis in his book, *The Path to Virtue*, which provides an annotated translation and a critical introduction to *al-Dharī'ah*. In the chapter titled "Economic Ethics," Mohamed discusses al-Isfahani's notion of the work ethic, elabourating on the commendation of labour, moderation in livelihood, and financial expenditure. However, Mohamed overlooks the extent to which al-Isfahani's work ethic is intrinsically linked to his view of human social nature, which ultimately dictates an individual's orientation toward labour.[23] To bridge this scholarly gap, this study examines al-Isfahani's socio-religious ethos in *al-Dharī'ah* to uncover his comprehensive paradigm on the work ethic, which constitutes the primary novelty of this research.[24]

Method

This research used a library research method, which involves collecting and processing data from books, documents, or articles relevant to the research topic. Methodologically, this study employs content analysis to investigate the concepts of humanity, the significance of work, and wealth in *al-Dharīʿah* and other texts indicative of al-Isfahani's socio-religious paradigm. The primary sources encompass works such as *Mufradāt Alfāzh al-Qur'an* (*al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qurʾan*), *Muḥāḍarāt al-Udabāʾ*, *Adab al-Ikhtilāṭ bi al-Nās*, *Tafṣīl al-Nash'atayn wa Taḥṣīl al-Sa'ādatayn*, and *al-I'tiqādāt*. Additionally, a semantic analysis is applied to unpack the specific meanings of *'insān'*, *'kasb'*, and *'māl'* within al-Isfahani's framework. Al-Isfahani constructs an epistemology of meaning grounded in linguistic realism.[25] His semantic analysis integrates morphological and etymological analysis with the context of its usage in the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and classical Arabic poetry[26]. As demonstrated in his al-Mufradāt, al-Isfahani relied on tracing words back to their

23 In several of his works, such as *al-Dharī'ah ilā Makārim al-Sharī'ah, Mufradāt Alfāzh al-Qur'an, Adab al-Ikhtilāṭ bi al-Nās, Tafṣīl al-Nash›atayn wa Taḥṣīl al-Sa'ādatayn*, and even in his work on creed, *al-I'tiqādāt*, al-Isfahani consistently emphasises human social nature. This concept is central to al-Isfahani's worldview, as his understanding of humanity serves as the starting point for his exploration of its many aspects, including work ethic.

24 Yasien Mohamed, *The Path to Virtue* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 2006), pp. 377-386

25 Alan Saputra, Diyah Pratiwi, and Abdul Matin Bin Salman, "Filsafat Makna Qur'ani: Rekonstruksi Metodologi Semantik Leksikal Raghib Al-Asfahani," *Al-Afkar: Journal for Islamic Studies* 9, no. 3 (August 2026): 1412–20, https://doi.org/10.31943/afkarjournal.v9i3.3670.

26 S Arif, "Preserving the Semantic Structure of Islamic Key Terms and Concepts: Izutsu, Al-Attas, and Al-Raghib Al-Isfahani," *Islam & Science* 5, no. 2 (2007): 107–16, https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.13725.33769.

origins to comprehend the Quranic vocabulary in depth and accuracy.[27] This is accomplished by juxtaposing his conceptualisations with classical Arabic lexicographical sources such as Ibn Manzhur's *Lisān al-'Arab* and traditional literature on *kasb*, notably al-Shaybani's *Kitāb al-Kasb*. Such a methodological framework is particularly pertinent to the scope of this research, which centres on the textual analysis of al-Isfahani's corpus to generate insights drawn from his contextual usage.

Result And Discussions

Biography and Social Setting of al-Isfahani

Al-Raghib al-Isfahani's real name was Abu al-Qasim al-Husayn bin Muhammad bin al-Mufaddal, popularly known as al-Raghib al-Isfahani. He was known as a philosopher (*hakīm*), writer (*adīb*), exegete (*mufassir*), and theologian (*mutakallim*). Al-Bayhaqi[28] and al-Shahrazuri[29] categorised al-Isfahani as a philosopher. Al-Fairuzabadi[30], al-Suyuthi[31], al-Zirkili[32], Kurdi Ali[33], and Carl Brockelmann[34] included him among the literary scholars (philologists). Meanwhile, al-Dawudi[35] and Adil Nuwaihidh[36] cited him among the exegetes. As for al-Dhahabi, he referred to him as a skilled theologian.[37] Based on biographers' accounts, al-Isfahani can be described as a polymathic scholar. The Shi'ite biographer al-Khawansari, with great admiration, refers to him

27 Muhammad Syaikh Qasim, "Ashl al-Kalimah inda al-Raghib al-Isfahani wa Atsar Dzalik fi Fahm al-Kalimah wa Tafsiriha," *Majallah al-Ma'had al-Ali li al-Dirasah al-Nau'iyyah* 4, no. 1 (January 2024): 137–76, https://doi.org/10.21608/hiss.2024.331746.

28 Zahir al-Din Al-Bayhaqi, *Tārikh Ḥukamā' Al-Islām* (Damaskus: Maktabah al-Taraqqi, 1946), p. 112

29 Syams al-Din Al-Syahrazuri, *Nuzhah Al-Arwāḥ Wa Rawḍah Al-Afrāḥ* (Jum'iyyah al-Da'wah al-Islamiyyah al-Alamiyyah, 1988), p. 320

30 Majd al-Din Muhammad bin Ya'qub Al-Fayruz Abadi, *Al-Bulghah Fī Tarājum Aimmah Al-Naḥw Wa Al-Lughah* (Damaskus: Dar Sa'd al-Din, 2000), p. 122

31 Jalal al-Din Al-Suyuthi, *Bughyah Al-Wi'āh Fī Ṭabaqāt Al-Lughawiyyīn Wa Al-Nuḥāh,*(Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1979), Juz 2, p. 297

32 Khair al-Din Al-Zirkili, *Al-A'lām,* (Beirut: Dar al-Ilm li al-Malayin, 2002), Juz 2, p. 255

33 Muhammad Kurdi Ali, *Kunūz Al-Ajdād* (Damaskus: Dar al-Bayyinah, 2011), p. 284

34 Carl Brockelmann, *History of the Arabic Written Tradition*, (Leiden: Brill, 2016), Vol. 1, p. 299

35 Syams al-Din Muhammad bin Ali Al-Dawudi, *Ṭabaqāt Al-Mufassirīn,* (Kairo: Maktabah Wahbah, 2008), Juz 2, p. 271

36 Adil Nuwaihidh, *Mu'jam Al-Mufassirīn* (Nuwaihidh al-Tsaqafiyyah, 1988), p. 158

37 Syams al-Din Muhammad Al-Dzahabi, *Siyar A'lām Al-Nubalā',* (Beirut: Muassasah al-Risalah, 1996), Juz 18, pp. 120-121

as *al-Imām al-Ḥāfiẓ*, an expert in the sciences of the Qur'an, hadith, Arabic language, poetry, literature, ethics, philosophy (wisdom), theology, and traditional sciences.[38]

Researchers acknowledge that it is not known for certain when al-Isfahani was born. Some estimate that he lived in the first half of the 5th century AH, as suggested by al-Suyuthi[39] and al-Dawudi[40], while other researchers, such as al-Ajami, state that he lived in the second half of the 5th century AH.[41] Based on the oldest manuscript proving his work on the vocabulary of the Qur'an, an Arabic Literature scholar who also wrote about al-Isfahani, Alexander Key believes that al-Isfahani lived in or before the year 409 AH.[42] He was from the region of Isfahan (Asfahan) and later moved and settled in Baghdad.[43]

Like his birth, al-Isfahani's life is unclear and has given rise to differences of opinion among biographers. Shafwan Dawudi, editor of one of al-Isfahani's works, argues that al-Isfahani was a person who disliked popularity, so little information about him is available.[44] Kurdi Ali states that no *Ṭabaqāt* biographers of the school of thought wrote in detail about him, except for general information about his field of expertise.[45] Al-Ajami also shares Dawudi's opinion that al-Isfahani tried to hide his existence from the public, which is why historians overlooked him.[46] However, Dawudi strongly suspects that al-Isfahani studied under Abu Manshur al-Jabbal, a scholar who was an expert in Arabic and was praised by biographers.[47] Although his background is not well known, al-Isfahani's prominence is recognised by all prominent scholars. [48] He is known as a scholar who successfully combined Sharia and *Ḥikmah* (Philosophy),[49] an effort which, according to Yasien Mohamed, is referred to in modern terminology as Islamization.[50]

38 Muhammad Baqir Al-Musawi Al-Khawansari, *Rawḍah Al-Jinān,* (Muassasah Ismailiyan, 1971), Juz 3, p. 197

39 Jalal al-Din Al-Suyuthi, *Bughyah…,* Juz 2, p. 297

40 Syams al-Din Muhammad bin Ali Al-Dawudi, *Ṭabaqāt…,* p. 271

41 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah ilā Makārim al-Sharī'ah*, ed. Abu al-Yazid Abu Zaid Al-Ajami (Kairo: Dar al-Salam, 2007).

42 Alexander Key, *Language between God and The Poets: Ma'na in the Eleventh Century* (California: University of California Press, 2018), p. 11

43 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah…,* p. 23

44 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Mufradāt Alfāzh al-Qur'an*, ed. by Shafwan Dawudi (Damaskus: Dar al-Qalam, 2009), p. 1

45 Muhammad Kurdi Ali, *Kunūz…,* p. 284

46 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah…,* p. 24

47 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Mufradāt …,* pp. 1-2

48 Muhammad Baqir Al-Musawi Al-Khawansari, *Rawḍah…*, Juz 3, p. 197

49 Syams al-Din Al-Syahrazuri, *Nuzhah…*, p. 320

50 Yasien Mohamed, *The Path to Virtue* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 2006),p. 65

Al-Isfahani lived during the Buyids dynasty (320-454 AH).[51] According to Kraemer, efforts to assimilate and continue the intellectual heritage of ancient Greece flourished during this dynasty. An era that, according to him, can be called the Renaissance of Islam (Era of Islamic Revival).[52] However, Gutas argues that during the Buyids dynasty, all the classical works of ancient Greece had already been translated into Arabic since the second century of the Abbasid dynasty, so there was no longer a need to translate classical works of ancient Greece.[53] In fact, in the 10th and 11th centuries AD, scientific and philosophical works in Arabic became dominant and widespread in Islamic civilisation, surpassing translations of ancient Greek original works.[54] It is evident that al-Isfahani, as a scholar living in that era, often encountered philosophical ideas that he sought to islamize.

Al-Isfahani is widely known as a philosopher. Al-Baihaqi[55] and al-Syahrazuri[56] refer to al-Isfahani as one of the Islamic philosophers (*min Ḥukamā' al-Islām*). Griffel refers to al-Isfahani as a member of the Peripatetic philosophers of Baghdad.[57] The biographers differ in their opinions regarding al-Isfahani's beliefs, with some arguing that he was a Mu'tazili, others claiming he was a Shī'a, and others referring to him as a member of Ahl al-Sunnah. The strongest opinion states that al-Isfahani was a follower of Ahl al-Sunnah, as claimed by al-Razi[58] and followed by al-Suyuthi.[59] This is substantiated by al-Isfahani's statement in his book *al-I'tiqādāt*, which mentions groups such as al-Mushabbihah, Nufāt al-Ṣifāt, al-Qadariyyah, al-Murji'ah, al-Khawārij, al-Makhlūqiyyah, and al-Mutasyayyi'ah (Shī'a) as innovators. In contrast, he proclaims the saved group is Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah.[60] Regarding the school of jurisprudence, although some consider him a follower of the Shafi'i school, Dawudi argues that al-Isfahani was an independent and flexible *mujtahid* who did not bind himself to any particular school of thought.[61]

51 Clifford Edmund Bosworth, *The New Islamic Dynasties* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), pp. 154-156

52 Joel L. Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaisance of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), p. vii

53 Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbasid Society* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 152

54 Ibid., p. 153

55 Zahir al-Din Al-Bayhaqi, *Tārikh…,* p. 112

56 Syams al-Din Al-Syahrazuri, *Nuzhah…*, p. 320

57 Frank Griffel, *The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 95

58 Fakhruddin Al-Razi, *Ta'sīs Al-Taqdīs* (Damaskus: Dar Nur al-Shabah, 2011), p. 47

59 Jalal al-Din Al-Suyuthi, *Bughyah…,* Juz 2, p. 297

60 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-I'tiqādāt*, ed. by Syamran Al-'Ajli (Beirut: Muassasah al-Asyraf, 1988), pp. 25-26

61 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Mufradāt …,* pp. 10-11

As a scholar who lived in an era of scientific development and revival, al-Isfahani left behind many works. Dawudi recorded around 23 (twenty-three) works believed to have been written by al-Isfahani, as follows: 1) *al-Mufradāt fi Gharīb al-Qur'an*; 2) *Jāmi' al-Tafsīr*[62]*;* 3) *Durrah al-Ta'wīl fī Mutashābih al-Tanzīl* or *Durrah al-Ta'wīl fi Ḥill Mutashābihāt al-Qur'an;* 4) *Taḥqīq al-Bayān fī Ta'wīl al-Qur'an* (lost); 5) *Iḥtijāj al-Qurra';* 6) *al-Ma'ānī al-Akbar;* 7) *Muḥāḍarāt al-Udabā' wa Muḥāwarāt al-Bulaghā' wa al-Shu'arā';* 8) *Afanīn al-Balāghah*; 9) *Adab al-Shaṭranj;* 10) *Mukhtaṣar Iṣlāḥ al-Manṭiq;* 11) *Risālah fī Adāb Mukhalaṭah al-Nās;* 12) *Risalāh fi al-I'tiqād;* 13) *al-Dharī'ah ilā Makārim al-Sharī'ah;* 14) *Tafṣīl al-Nash'atayn wa Taḥṣīl al-Sa'ādatayn;* 15) *al-Imān wa al-Kufr*; 16) *Risālah fi Marātib al-'Ulūm;* 17) *Kitāb Kalimat al-Ṣaḥābah*; 18) *al-Risālah al-Munbihah fī Fawāid al-Qur'an;* 19) *Uṣūl al-Ishtiqāq;* 20) *Risālah fī Sharḥ Hadith Satafrariq Ummatī;* 21) *Kitāb Sharaf al-Taṣawwuf;* 22) *Taḥqīq al-Alfāẓ al-Mutarādifah 'alā al-Ma'nā al-Wāḥid;* dan 23) *Risālah Taḥqīq Munāsabāt al-Alfāẓ*.[63]

There is disagreement between historians on when al-Isfahani died, but most of them estimate that he died in 502 AH.[64] Historians also disagree on where he died. Some say he died in Asfahan, others say in Baghdad, and others believe he died and buried in Nisabur.[65]

The al-Dhari'ah ila Makarim al-Shari'ah

The validity of this book is attributed to al-Isfahani, recorded by Khalifah in *Kashf al-Ẓunūn*[66], Brockelmann in *Geschichte der Arabischen Litteratur*[67] and Kahalah in *Mu'jam al-Muallifīn*.[68] *Al-Dharī'ah* is a work on Islamic ethics. Al-Isfahani's prominence in Islamic ethics is recognised in the modern era through the studies of Madelung, Daiber, Fakhry, and Rowson on this work.[69] For example, Fakhry includes al-Isfahani as an exponent representing religious ethics in Islam[70], whose work influenced the thought of al-Ghaza-

62 This book is one of the references of al-Baidhawi in his *Tafsīr, Anwār al-Tanzīl*. See Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Mufradāt …,* p. 3

63 Ibid., pp. 2-6

64 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-I'tiqādāt*…, p. 6

65 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Risālah Fī Adab Ikhtilāṭ Al-Nās Wa Rasāil Ukhrā*, ed. Umar Abd al-Rahman Al-Sarisi (Amman: Arwiqah, 2010), p. 4

66 Haji Khalifah, *Kashf Al-Ẓunūn,* (Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turats al-Arabi), Juz 1, p. 867

67 Carl Brockelmann, *History...*, Vol. 1, p. 299

68 Umar Ridha Kahalah, *Mu'jam Al-Muallifīn Tarājum Muṣannifi Al-Kutub Al-'Arabiyyah,* (Beirut: Muassasah al-Risalah), Juz 1, p. 642

69 Yasien Mohamed, "The Evolution of Early Islamic Ethics," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Science* 18, no. 4 (2001): 89–132. <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v18i4.1983>

70 According to Fakhry, religious ethics originate from the Qur'an but have been influenced by Greek philosophy and Islamic theology. The basic content of reli-

li.[71] As Khalifah[72] and Brockelmann[73] noted, al-Ghazali greatly admired the *al-Dharī'ah* and always carried it with him on his travels. Even the studies conducted by Janssens[74] and Mohamed[75] demonstrate that al-Ghazali's Book *Mīzān al-'Amal* drew significant inspiration from al-Isfahani's *al-Dharī'ah*. According to Key, al-Isfahani's treatise on ethics (*al-Dharī'ah*) (along with his book on Qur'anic vocabulary, *al-Mufradāt*) proved to be the most popular in Islamic madrasas worldwide, as evidenced by the widespread distribution of manuscripts of the book across the globe.[76] As a Sunni scholar, al-Isfahani is believed to be the pioneer of Islamic ethics in the Sunni world.[77]

Al-Isfahani's exposition in *al-Dharī'ah* observes the method of Miskawayh, who wrote philosophical ethics using the Aristotelian-Platonic paradigm, particularly regarding categorising the three faculties of the soul.[78] However, the difference lies in al-Isfahani's terminology, which he borrowed from the Qur'an. For example, Miskawayh uses the term *nāṭiqah* for rational power, while al-Isfahani uses the term *fikriyyah*; Miskawayh uses the term *ghaḍabiyyah* for emotional power, while al-Isfahani uses the term *ḥamiyyah*.[79] Al-Isfahani is a scholar who is precise in using of linguistic symbols[80], as demonstrated in his Qur'anic lexicon, *Mufradāt Alfāẓ al-Qur'an*.[81] In *al-Dharī'ah*, al-Isfahani frequently incorporates Qur'anic verses and the Prophet's hadith

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gious ethics is the worldview of the Qur'an, theological concepts, philosophical categories, and, in some cases, Sufism. See Majid Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), p. 8

71 Ibid.

72 Haji Khalifah, *Kashf…*, Juz 1, p. 867

73 Carl Brockelmann, *History…*, Vol. 1, p. 299

74 Jules Janssens, "Al-Ghazali's *Mīzān Al-'Amal*: An Ethical Summa Based on Ibn Sina and Al-Raghib Al-Isfahani," in *Islamic Thought in the Middle Ages*, ed. Anna Akasoy and Wim Raven (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 123–37

75 Mohamed, "The Ethics of Education: Al-Isfahani's Al-Dhari'a as a Source of Inspiration for Al-Ghazali's Mizan Al-'Amal."

76 Alexander Key, *Language...*, p. 12

77 Mohamed, "The Evolution of Early Islamic Ethics."

78 Mohamed, "The Ethical Philosophy of Al-Raghib Al-Isfahani."

79 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah…,* p. 88

80 Key explains that al-Isfahani paid close attention to the relationship between vocal form and mental content in terminology. Unlike hermeneutics, which always seeks a foundation for interpretation, for lexicographers such as al-Isfahani, the determination of meaning can always be verified through a lexicon). See Alexander Key, *Language...*, pp. 87-88

81 In his book *Mufradāt Alfāẓ al-Qur'an*, al-Isfahani argues that the knowledge needed to understand the Qur'an is linguistic knowledge (*al-ulūm al-lafẓiyyah*), which is the science that examines the semantic meaning of each word and term. He argues that this knowledge is beneficial for understanding all the sciences of Sharia. For more detail, see al-Isfahani's introduction in *Mufradāt Alfāẓ al-Qur'an.* Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Mufradāt…,* pp. 53-56

related to the meanings of the various themes he examined.[82]

The contents of the book *al-Dharī'ah* consist of seven chapters as follows: 1) About the condition, potential, and virtues of humans; 2) About reason, knowledge, and language (*nuṭq*); 3) Concerning carnal desire (*al-qiwā al-shahwiyyah*); 4) Concerning the power of anger (*al-qiwā al-ghaḍabiyyah*); 5) Concerning justice (*al-'adl*) injustice (*al-ẓulm*), love (*al-maḥabbah*) and hate (*al-bughḍ*); 6) Concerning crafts and industry (*al-shina'at*), expenditure (*al-infāq*), generosity (*al-jūd*) and miserly (*al-bukhl*); and 7) Concerning manners (*al-af'āl*).[83]

The Innate Human Drive for Social Connection

Al-Isfahani, in *al-Dharī'ah*, on the topic of the means of livelihood (*al-makāsib*), begins by explaining the social nature of man, who needs society to acquire a livelihood through labouring together.[84] Humans cannot live comfortably if all their needs are prepared alone, so they must cooperate and help one another.[85] This claim is grounded on al-Isfahani's semantic analysis of the meaning of man in the Arabic word *'insān'*. In *Mufradāt Alfāẓ al-Qur'an*, al-Isfahani analyses the root word *'a-n-s'*. [86] According to Ibn Manzur, this word has multifarious meanings: kind, gentle, sociable, easy to get along with, and friendly (*khilāf al-waḥshah*) depending on the context of the sentence.[87] The diverse derivatives of the word *'a-n-s'* established on the context of the sentence (*siyāq al-kalām*) have meanings related to social virtue, including forms of compassion, friendship, companionship, and camaraderie, taming or eliminating wildness in animals, creating a friendly and delighted ambience, and recognising and identifying its existence.[88] Al-Isfahani concludes that humans are called "*insān*" because they cannot prevail without living in society.[89]

The starting point of al-Isfahani's socio-economic ideas is the proverb "*al-insān madaniyyun bi al-ṭab'*"[90] which means that man cannot live without

82 Approximately 400 verses and 200 hadiths were used as references by al-Isfahani. Al-Raghib al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah…,* p. 42

83 Haji Khalifah, *Kashf…*, Juz 1, p. 867

84 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah…,* p. 265

85 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Tafṣīl al-Nash'atayn wa Taḥṣīl al-Sa'ādatayn*, (Beirut: Dar Maktabah al-Hayah, 1983), p. 54

86 Al-Raghib al-Ishfahani, *Mufradāt …,* p. 94

87 Ibnu Manzhur, *Lisān Al-'Arab,* (Beirut: Dar al-Shadir, 1990), Juz 6, p. 12

88 Ruhi Ba'labaki, *Al-Mawrid Qāmūs Arabi - Inkilizi* (Beirut: Dar al-Ilm li al-Malayin, 1995), p. 188

89 Al-Raghib al-Ishfahani, *Mufradāt …,* p. 94

90 This expression is an Arabic translation of Aristotle's statement in Politics: *'kai hoti ho anthropos phusei politikon zoon*', which is generally translated as: 'and a human being by nature is a political animal'. This translation follows a more refined modern style, with some even going further to translate it as: "...and man by nature is a social animal." Recently, some have attempted to translate it more literally to preserve its original meaning, such as

the role of others, and a human cannot fulfil all their needs alone.[91] Humans are forced to form societies in many situations due to their dependence on others for their needs.[92] Because of the need of some people for others, God has endowed humans with the potential for love (*quwwah maḥabbah*[93]) that no other living creature possesses. This potential enables humans to form social bonds.[94] Even the Sharia has obligated and encouraged humans to engage in community. In conclusion, al-Isfahani argues that the human welfare derived from gathering with others is greater than that derived from living in isolation.[95]

Correspondingly, the rationale for human social nature, as explained by al-Dihlawi, holds that humans help one another because they were designed without the biological means to survive in the wilderness. Instead, humans were inspired by God to build cities (*mudun*), manage households, and find appropriate ways to earn a living.[96] Therefore, al-Isfahani argues that human knowledge of how to work originates from divine revelation to chosen individuals (the Prophets), who then teach others the science of craftwork.[97] God has assigned (*taskhīr*) specific tasks and skills to each group, enabling them to assist one another.[98] Each individual in society then takes on a role (*ṣinā'at*) that suits their inclinations and skills. This diversity and difference in human roles cause unity, agreement, and togetherness to form a society.[99] According to him, God has designed diverse humans' intellectual and physical capacities, and they then assume roles that suit them. Those engaged in knowledge

Joe Sachs' translation: "and a human being by nature is an animal meant for the city." See Aristotle, *Politics*, ed. by Joe Sachs (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 2012), pp. xliii, 4

91 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Mufradāt ...,* p. 94

92 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Risālah Fī Adab Ikhtilāṭ...,* p. 55

93 Al-Isfahani defines *Maḥabbah* as a desire for something that is assumed and believed to be good, and it is classified into three types, namely: 1) Desire based on satisfaction (*lidhdhah*); 2) Desire based on benefit (*manfa'ah*); and 3) Desire based on virtue (*faḍīlah*). See Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Mufradāt ...,* p. 214

94 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Risālah Fī Adab Ikhtilāṭ...,* p. 56

95 Ibid., p. 57

96 Syah Waliyullah Al-Dihlawi, *Ḥujjatullah Al-Bālighah*, ed. by Sa'id Ahmad bin Yusuf Al-Palanpuri (Damaskus: Dar Ibn Katsir, 2012), Juz 1, p. 277

97 Al-Isfahani's theological view is based on the assumption that since humans need each other, it is only natural that those who are deficient should seek out those who are skilled to work together. There are only two possibilities: first, one individual who is deficient in skills seeks out another individual who is also deficient, and this regress infinitely, which is impossible; second, it ends with one individual being granted knowledge about how to work from Allah, whether through hearing from the Highest Assembly, through inspiration, or dreams, and this, in reality, originates from revelation. See Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah...,* p. 272

98 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-I'tiqādāt...,* p. 256

99 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah...,* p. 266

and the preservation of religion are people with pure souls, minds full of wisdom, gentle and balanced temperaments, and delicate bodies. At the same time, those involved in worldly work, such as agriculture or construction, are endowed with stern hearts, covert minds, rude temperaments, and sturdy bodies.[100]

According to al-Isfahani, poverty[101] and fear over it are the organised motivations of human livelihood. Both motivate human endurance and resilience in aiding society, whether voluntarily or out of necessity. If everyone could survive independently, the order of life would be disrupted: no one would take on work to fulfil others' needs, since no one can meet all necessities on their own; their dependency would be disastrous for humanity. Nonetheless, each person's work ethic is established on their fear of poverty. If it were not for poverty and the fear of it, people would not take on various jobs and roles, which, in turn, would ruin the order of life.[102]

Semantic Analysis of al-Isfahani's Conception of Work

Al-Isfahani employs various expressions to denote the meaning of work, one of which is *kasb*. Scholars commonly use this term to refer to work activities[103]. Established on its essential meaning, the trilateral root *k-s-b* generally denotes the act of acquiring or obtaining.[104] Al-Isfahani defines *al-kasb*[105] as anything humans engage in to obtain benefits and to actualise something achievable, such as seeking wealth (*kasb al-māl*). Sometimes, it is also used for matters that humans believe will bring benefits, but instead cause harm.[106] Al-Isfahani distinguishes the term *kasb* from its other derivative, *iktisāb*[107]. The

100 Ibid., 267

101 One of the universal attributes of humans, and indeed of all creation, is poverty, which al-Isfahani defines as absolute dependence (*al-ḥajah al-ḍarūriyyah*). This meaning includes dependence on other humans. Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Mufradāt ...,* p. 641

102 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah...,* p. 266

103 The nuance of the word *kasb* tends to refer to human actions aimed at obtaining worldly benefits, namely, efforts to avoid harm caused by the absence of income through the search for wealth and activities to earn a living. See Muhammad Hanif Al Hakim, *Makna Dan Pemikiran Al-Kasb Menurut Imam Al-Shaybani* (Kuala Lumpur: Halaqah Muamalah, 2020), pp. 43-87

104 Maryam Nazarbeigi, Mohsen Faryadres, and Zahra Norouzi, "A Semantic Analysis of the Word Kasb in the Holy Quran," *Studies of Qur'anic Sciences* 7, no. 2 (2025): 7–32, https://doi.org/10.22081/JQSS.2025.72026.1378.

105 The word *kasb* means to seek sustenance (*ṭalab al-rizq*), with the meaning of obtaining (*aṣāba*) and gathering (*jama'a*). See Ibnu Manzhur, *Lisān...,* Juz 1, p. 716

106 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Mufradāt ...,* p. 709

107 The word *iktisāb* follows the *ifta'ala* scale, meaning *al-taṣarruf* (seriousness), which means seriousness in work. See Abd al-Qahir Al-Jurjani, *Al-Miftāḥ Fī Al-Ṣarf* (Beirut: Muassasah al-Risalah, 1987), p. 50

word *kasb* applies to oneself and others, while *iktisāb* only applies to oneself; the relationship between the two is general and specific. Semantically, the word *kasb* refers to an action that benefits oneself and others, while *iktisāb* only applies to oneself.[108] However, when using *iktisāb* (earning), Al-Isfahani always unites it with *infāq* (provisioning), which means that work not only benefits oneself but must also benefit others through *infāq*.[109] In *al-Dharī'ah*, al-Isfahani employs the term *al-takassub*[110] in the context of work as an obligation and responsibility of every individual in society.[111] Notably, a contemporary study reveals that al-Shaybani's and al-Ghazali's concepts of work also link the personal pursuit of livelihood to social obligation.[112]

Al-Isfahani also utilises another expression to refer to the meaning of work, namely *al-ṣinā'ah*, in the context of roles or fields of work, i.e., a craftwork.[113] Al-Isfahani classifies various types of craft into three interconnected categories: essential (*uṣūl*), such as farming, clothing, building, and government administration; supporting crafs (*muraḥḥishah*); and crafts that add value to the results of essential crafts (*thamrah*).[114] The level of nobility of craftwork is assessed from three perspectives: based on its dominant potential (*quwwah*), the extent of its benefits, and the object of the craft.[115]

The term *al-ṭalab* (seeking diligently) is used in the context of obtaining means of livelihood (*ma'āsh*) and seeking wealth (*māl*).[116] According to Al-Isfahani, wealth is not a permanent possession of a man because it constantly circulates from one person to another; therefore, wealth is also referred to as *araḍ*[117] (accident). Wealth is viewed from two perspectives: first, wealth that functions as a medium of exchange (flow concept), which is important

108 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Mufradāt…,* p. 709

109 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Muḥāḍarāt al-Udabā' wa Muḥāwarāt al-Bulaghā' wa al-Shu'arā',* (Beirut: Dar al-Arqam, 1999), Juz 1, p. 572

110 Morphologically, this term follows the *tafa'ala* pattern, which contains the meaning of *takalluf* (burden), meaning the burden of doing work. See Abd al-Qahir Al-Jurjani, *Al-Miftāḥ…*, p. 50

111 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah…,* p. 268

112 Bayu Taufiq Possumah, "Searching for Islamic Perspectives on Livelihood Theory: Insights From Al-Ghazali and Al-Shaybani," *Afkar* 26, no. 1 (2024): 219–44, https://doi.org/10.22452/afkar.vol26no1.7.

113 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah…,* p. 265

114 Essential crafts, such as agriculture, clothing, construction, and government, are necessary for the world to function. Complementary crafts support essential crafts, such as blacksmiths for agriculture, the cotton industry, and weavers for clothing. Aesthetic crafts beautify or enhance the value of essential crafts, such as flour and breadmaking in agriculture. See Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah…,* p. 271

115 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah…,* p. 272

116 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Muḥāḍarāt…,* Juz 1, pp. 575-577

117 According to al-Isfahani, this term refers to anything that is not permanent (*thabat*). See Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Mufradāt …,* p. 560

for human welfare; second, wealth as property (stock concept), which is less crucial. Wealth as something that is acquired (*muqtanayyat*) is classified into three categories: 1) *nafsiyyah*; 2) *badaniyyah*; and 3) *khārijah*. The lowest category according to al-Isfahani is *khārijah*, and the lowest type within this category is money (*al-nāḍ*).[118] According to al-Isfahani, wealth is referred to as *al-khayrāt al-mutawassiṭah* (moderate goods) because it can potentially yield both good and evil.[119] Al-Isfahani's concept of wealth is quoted precisely by al-Ghazali in his *Mīzān al-'Amal*.[120]

Al-Isfahani also uses the term *al-sa'y* in the context of sincerity in seeking sustenance in a praiseworthy manner.[121] Islam honours diligence and sincerity in work and condemns laziness and idleness. According to him, lazy people are no longer worthy of their status as human beings, or even as living creatures, because humans have been endowed with three inherent faculties that must be cultivated to attain their virtues. The virtue of the *shahwiyyah* faculty demands that humans work to improve their lives; the *ghaḍabiyyah* faculty demands it through earnest effort to protect their lives; and the *fikriyyah* faculty demands it through knowledge to obtain guidance.[122] According to Yasien, the primary human motivation for continuing to work is the restlessness of the soul (*iḍṭirāb*), which seeks to fulfil the basic needs of these three inherent faculties.[123] According to al-Isfahani, diligence in work must adhere to the requirements of Sharia, obtaining wealth from and spending it on ways permitted by Sharia.[124]

Work as a Socio-Religious Imperative in al-Isfahani's Thought

Al-Isfahani imposes socio-religious reasons to declare that work is an obligation. According to him, humans cannot adequately perform their religious obligations (worship) unless they fulfil their basic needs, so fulfilling these needs also becomes an obligation.[125] This concept by al-Isfahani echoes the earlier work of al-Shaybani in *Kitāb al-Kasb*.[126] To fulfil these basic needs,

118 Al-Isfahani considers money to be the lowest form of wealth because it only serves others, and nothing serves it. He gives the example that the body serves the soul, food and clothing serve the body, and money serves food and clothing, but nothing else serves money. See Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah…*, pp. 273-274

119 Ibid., p. 275

120 Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *Mīzān Al-'Amal* (Beirut: Dar al-Minhaj, 2023), p. 215

121 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah…*, p. 269

122 Ibid.

123 Yasien Mohamed, *The Path…*, p. 380

124 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Muḥāḍarāt…*, Juz 1, p. 574

125 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah…*, p. 268

126 Al-Shaybani contends that working to fulfill basic needs is considered a religious obligation (*wājib*). See Muhammad bin Hasan Al-Syaibani, *Kitāb Al-Kasb*, ed.

humans require assistance from others, making it essential to live in society.[127] Since humans must live in society and the fulfilment of their basic needs is generally obtained through the efforts of others, it becomes their duty to reciprocate with an equivalent effort. If they fail to do so, they have acted unjustly. The same principle applies to attaining the amenity of life. In other words, the benefits someone receives from others must be reciprocated with equal effort to benefit others; this is the meaning of *ta'āwun* in the Qur'an.[128]

Al-Isfahani criticised the Sufis who did not perpetuate livelihood under the allegation of *tawakkul*, as he believed they were causing difficulty for the lives of others and bringing harm to society.[129] Al-Khallal also expressed the same criticism in his treatise *al-Ḥaththth 'alā al-Tijārah*, directed at deviant Sufis who claim to rely on *tawakkul* yet live by begging from society.[130] According to al-Isfahani, this harmful behaviour is extremely reprehensible because God Himself condemns those who consume their wealth excessively, let alone those who consume others' wealth without providing commensurate benefit in return. He explains that proper *tawakkul* is when people meet their own needs by working minimally when they have nothing, without burdening themselves with their needs for the next day.[131]

The Socio-Religious Dimensions of Wealth in al-Isfahani's Ethical Framework

According to al-Isfahani, wealth is unsettled things and constantly circulates from one hand to another, as indicated by the semantic meaning of the word *'māl'*, which signifies constant fluctuation (*māilan abadan*) and disappearance.[132] Wealth, when considered as a medium of exchange, holds great significance according to al-Isfahani. Since humans depend on one another, they must cooperate, and each person must undertake work that supports others. When a person receives assistance from others, they must reciprocate with an equivalent action. Thus, Allah has provided them with money as a standard so that humans can give it to those who have benefited them according to the extent of their work, thereby organising their affairs through it. Therefore, according to him, money is a fair judge in resolving human af-

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by Abd al-fattah Abu Ghuddah (Beirut: Dar al-Basyair al-Islamiyyah, 1997), pp. 73-75

127 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-I'tiqādāt…*, p. 256

128 Q.S. al-Maidah (5): 2. Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah…*, p. 268

129 Ibid.

130 Abu Bakr Ahmad Al-Khallal, *Al-Ḥaththth 'ala Al-Tijārah Wa Al-Ṣinā'ah Wa Al-'Amal Wa Al-Inkār Ala Man Yadda'i Al-Tawakkul Fī Tark Al-'Amal Wa Al-Hujjah Alayhim Fī Dhālika*, ed. Abd al-Fattah Abu Ghuddah (Kairo: Dar al-Salam, 2020).

131 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah…*, p. 269

132 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Mufradāt …*, p. 784

fairs, and people are forbidden from hoarding it.[133] This notion is in line with the modern theoretical definition of money as a medium of exchange and the final means of payment in all transactions.[134] In other words, in al-Isfahani's view, money functions as a social instrument. This view resonates with Qur'anic teachings and the Prophetic tradition on the social role of wealth.[135]

As for wealth, when considered in terms of anything humans can acquire, it is categorised as *khārijah*, which can lead to both good and evil. However, according to al-Isfahani, wealth benefits humans in many circumstances, and its owners generally receive respect from others.[136] Wealth can be beneficial for both worldly and afterlife matters.[137] However, wealth must be utilised appropriately, without hoarding or unlawfully spending it.[138] Wealth should be sought with diligence, but the heart must not become attached to it.[139] Wealth must be managed and maintained correctly so that one can become self-reliant.[140] People must allocate their wealth to family members in proportion, and spending more during times of plenty is highly recommended.[141] The fundamental principle established by al-Isfahani regarding wealth is to use it properly as it should be; this action is called *ihsan* and is privileged to get a reward from God. [142]

Al-Isfahani, in *Muḥāḍarāt al-Udabā'*, writes a point about the recommendation to seek a livelihood while also considering matters of the Hereafter, citing the Prophet's hadith, the report from Abu Darda', and the words of the people of wisdom concerning the balance between worldly and hereafter deeds.[143] Wealth obtained through work, according to al-Isfahani, is referred to as worldly wealth (*al-a'rāḍ al-dunyawiyyah*), which is a trust from God that the receiver at the end of the day must return the trust to Him, and the reciever spends it solely based on necessity.[144] Worldly wealth can be either blameworthy or praiseworthy; if the world is made the goal, it is blameworthy; if it is used and spent on praiseworthy matters, it is praiseworthy.[145] Regarding

133 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah…*, p. 273

134 Joseph T. Salerno, *Money, Sound and Unsound* (Auburn: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2010), p. 115-116

135 Yudi Surono and Aan Gunawan, "Konsep Amwal Dalam Al-Quran'an Dan Hadits," *Socius: Jurnal Penelitian Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial* 2, no. 7 (2025): 22–23, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14998251.

136 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah…*, p. 275

137 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Muḥāḍarāt…*, Juz 1, p. 582

138 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah…*, p. 276

139 Ibid.

140 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Muḥāḍarāt…*, Juz 1, p. 579

141 Ibid., pp. 579-581.

142 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah…*, p. 280

143 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Muḥāḍarāt…*, Juz 1, p. 574

144 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah…*, p. 278

145 Ibid., p. 280

the management of the world and the Hereafter, according to al-Isfahani, those who balance worldly life and the Hereafter are the most noble among humanity, namely those referred to in the Qur'an as *al-sābiqūn*.[146] In al-Isfahani's view, worldly wealth is not about how little or how much is obtained, but rather about treating it as it should be and placing it where it belongs.[147]

The Teleology of Labour in al-Isfahani's Thought

The wealth obtained from work is ultimately spent on other purposes, as wealth is merely a means to achieve a specific goal. Al-Isfahani consistently links working (*iktisāb*) with its expenditure (*infāq*).[148] The term *infāq* in the Qur'an is generally used in the context of spending wealth or other things, whether obligatory or recommended.[149] Al-Isfahani explains that *infāq* is divided into two categories: praiseworthy and blameworthy. Praiseworthy *infāq* includes that which fosters justice (*'adalah*) in the giver, such as fulfilling the obligations demanded by Sharia, like obligatory charity (zakat) and *infāq* to dependent family members (*'iyāl*); *infāq* that brings reward, such as giving to those who are obligated to receive charity; and *infāq* that purifies the soul from greed and avarice toward worldly wealth (*ḥurriyyah*), such as giving what is recommended by Sharia to give, which can bring gratitude from people and reward from God. Disgraceful spending consists of two extremes: excess and deficiency (*ifrāṭ wa tafrīṭ*), namely extravagance and wastefulness on the side of excess, and stinginess and withholding on the side of deficiency.[150]

The habit of practising commendable *infāq* can ultimately cultivate the virtue of generosity, known as *al-sakhā'*[151] and *al-jūd*. The virtue of *al-sakhā'*, as regarded by Islamic ethical scholars such as Miskawayh[152], al-Thusi[153],al-

146 Ibid., p. 281

147 Ibid., p. 282

148 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Muḥāḍarāt…,* Juz 1, p. 572

149 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Mufradāt …,* p. 819

150 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah…,* p. 287

151 Islamic ethicists define *sakhā'* as an attitude of moderation (*tawassuṭ*) in giving, that is, giving wealth for the right cause, in the right amount, and to the right people. According to Miskawayh, al-Ghazali, and al-'Iji, this ethical principle has six sub-categories: *karam*, *īthār, nubl, musāwah, samāḥah*, and *musāḥamah*. Al-Thusi adds two more: *'afw* and *murū'ah*. See Abu 'Ali Ahmad Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb Al-Akhlāq*, ed. by 'Imad Al-Hilali (Beirut: Mansyurat al-Jumal, 2011), pp. 253, 255.

152 Ibid., p. 252

153 Nashir al-Din Al-Thusi, *Akhlāq Nāṣiri*, ed. by Muhammad Shadiq Fadl Allah (Beirut: Dar al-Hadi, 2008), p. 170

'Iji[154], and al-Ghazali[155], is a derivative of the virtue of '*iffah*[156] (temperance). *Sakhā'* is the soul's movement that drives a person to give what they have, the opposite of which is *shuḥḥ* (greed). Meanwhile, *jūd* is giving away one's possessions, the opposite of which is *bukhl* (stinginess). These two terms are often used interchangeably, but the difference is that *sakhā'* is a mental trait. At the same time, *jūd* is the actualization of that mental state in the form of conduct.[157] According to al-Isfahani, the behaviour of generosity (*al-jūd*) consists of five types: 1) The generosity of God; 2) The generosity of a king; 3) The generosity of the ordinary people; 4) The generosity of a poor traveller; and 5) The generosity of the ordinary person. The most praiseworthy behaviour is divine generosity, which is giving what one has, according to one's ability, to everyone in need, fairly, without making a fuss or hurting their feelings about the gift.[158]

Generosity (*jūd*) is praiseworthy conduct; according to al-Isfahani, there is no deed more similar to God's acts[159] than the conduct of generosity. According to al-Isfahani, in the Qur'an, Allah associates the mention of generosity with faith and describes generous people of faith with the attribute of *falāḥ*[160].[161] *Falāḥ* is a multidimensional concept that represents human well-being in this world and is closely tied to one's spiritual condition.[162] Thus, the act of generosity that resides within every human being as an economic agent enables the realization of an economic activity oriented toward the common good. This value of generosity in turn operates within Islamic philanthropic institutions, such as *infāq*, zakat, and *waqf*.[163] It can consequently be deduced that al-Isfahani's work ethic is directed toward spiritual realisation through social engagement. Al-Ghazali, drawing heavily on al-Isfahani's ethical framework, correspondingly maintains that work transcends mere material

154 Muhammad bin Yusuf bin 'Ali Al-Kirmani, *Sharḥ Risālah Al-Akhlāq Al-'Aḍudiyyah*, ed. by Muhammad Rajab 'Ali Hasan (Kairo: Dar al-Ihsan, 2024), p. 103

155 Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *Mīzān…*, p. 122

156 '*Iffah* is a state of mentality that can control carnal desire. See Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Mufradāt …,* p. 573

157 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah…,* p. 286

158 Ibid., p. 288

159 God has the attribute *al-Jawwād*, which means Most Generous. See Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Mufradāt …,* p. 211

160 *Falāḥ* is success through the attainment of the means of happiness that make life prosperous, namely, sustainability (*baqā'*), wealth (*ghinā'*) and glory (*'izz*). Ibid., p. 644

161 Al-Raghib Al-Ishfahani, *Al-Dharī'ah…,* p. 287

162 Nur Shadiq Sandimula, "Transcendental Abundance: A Theo-Cosmological Foundation of Islamic Economics," *Tsaqafah Jurnal Peradaban Islam* 20, no. 2 (2024): 249–74, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.21111/tsaqafah.v20i2.10437.

163 Naqibah Muhammad Faizul, "Islamic Philanthropy and the Qur'anic Approach to Scarcity: Wealth Redistribution as a Solution," *Journal of Islamic Economics and Philanthropy* 7, no. 4 (2025): 223–37, https://doi.org/10.21111/jiep.v7i4.13209.

fulfilment to embody spiritual discipline, moral awareness, and communal contribution.[164]

Al-Isfahani's explanation is essentially an economic idea oriented towards the common good that has been developed by other classical scholars such as al-Shaybani, al-Khallal, and al-Ghazali, which Adi Setia refers to as *'ilm al-kasb/al-iktisāb wa al-infāq*.[165] If working is to acquire wealth, and that wealth is then spent on praiseworthy things, which in turn fosters the virtue of generosity, thereby circulating welfare among other members of society reciprocally, then indirectly, the act of working returns to the benefit of society.

Conclusion

As a prominent scholar of Islamic ethics, al-Raghib al-Isfahani proposes the concept of a reciprocal work ethic, an awareness of social bonds to perpetuate work. Analysing the semantics of *insān*, *kasb*, and *māl*, al-Isfahani posits that labour transcends personal sustenance to become a communal imperative, mirroring humanity's designated role as vicegerents (*khalīfah*) on earth. Ultimately, his insights into the work ethic make a profound contribution to economic models geared toward the common good. This paradigm underscores the equitable distribution and sharing of resources, rooted in Islamic principles of generosity (*jūd)*. Theoretically, these findings contribute to the development of the *kasb* concept by unearthing and examining the notion of livelihood within the *turāth* (intellectual heritage) of classical Islamic scholars. Practically, al-Isfahani's ideas can serve as a foundational framework for policymaking in modern employment institutions. As this study is limited to a philosophical examination of al-Isfahani's work ethic, future research may explore its practical application in contemporary Islamic workplaces.

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164 Nina Wahidah Purnamawati, "The Ethical Philosophy of Kasb in Al-Ghazālī's Economic Thought: A Classical Framework for Contemporary Reform," *Journal of Economicate Studies* 8, no. 1 (2024): 1–17, https://doi.org/10.32506/joes.v8i1.871.

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