



THE CONCEPT OF NAFS (SELF) IN ISLAMIC PSYCHOLOGY:

AN ANALYSIS OF CLASSICAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

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**Abstract**

This essay examines the opinions of both traditional and modern Islamic academics to provide an overview of the Nafs concept in Islamic psychology. Discussed in relation to other ideas in Islamic psychology like Aql and Qalb as well as modern psychological ideas like self-esteem and self-efficacy are the several kinds of Nafs, including Nafs al-Ammarah, Nafs al-Lawwamah, and Nafs al-Mutma'inna. The significance of Nafs in Islamic rituals like Salah, fasting, and Hajj, as well as its relationship to Sufism, are also examined. The effect of several Nafs categories on mental health is also examined, with particular attention paid to the links between Nafs al-Ammarah and impulsivity, Nafs al-Lawwamah and anxiety, and Nafs al-Mutma'inna and wellbeing. The debate focuses on the consequences for clinical work and scientific inquiry in Islamic psychology and makes recommendations for future Nafs research directions. The notion of Nafs in Islamic psychology and its application to mental health and spirituality are all thoroughly examined in this work.

**Keywords:** Nafs, Muslim psychology, Spiritual practices, Mental health

**INTRODUCTION**

In Islamic psychology, the term "nafs" refers to the self or soul. It is a complex concept that encompasses various dimensions of human experience, including psychological, spiritual, and moral aspects. The Nafs is the core of human identity and personality, and it is viewed as an essential component of the human journey towards spiritual growth and fulfilment (Kamaruddin, 2014). According to Islamic scholars, the Nafs can be understood as a dynamic entity that undergoes a continuous process of development and transformation. It is believed to have different stages or levels, each reflecting a different degree of spiritual purity and closeness to God. The three main levels of the Nafs are:

- Nafs al-Ammarah: This is the lower level of the Nafs, characterized by a tendency towards base desires and impulses. At this level, the Nafs are primarily driven by self-interest and immediate gratification.
- Nafs al-Lawwamah: This is the intermediate level of the Nafs, characterized by a sense of self-awareness and self-criticism. At this level, the Nafs becomes more conscious of its actions and is capable of recognizing its flaws and shortcomings.
- Nafs al-Mutma'inna: This is the highest level of the Nafs, characterized by a state of inner peace and contentment. At this level, the Nafs are purified from negative traits and are fully aligned with God's will (Mustaffa et al., 2017).



Islamic scholars believe that the goal of spiritual development is to attain the highest level of the Nafs, which is the state of Mutma'inna. This requires a continuous effort to overcome the lower impulses of the Nafs and to cultivate positive moral and spiritual qualities such as love, compassion, and humility. Overall, the concept of Nafs is a central tenet of Islamic psychology, providing a framework for understanding the nature of the self and its relationship with God. It offers a holistic approach to human psychology, encompassing both spiritual and psychological dimensions and providing guidance for individuals seeking to achieve spiritual growth and well-being (Raheema & Omar, 2016).

The concept of Nafs is a fundamental element of Islamic psychology and has great significance in understanding the human psyche from an Islamic perspective. As such, studying the concept of Nafs is essential for anyone interested in gaining a comprehensive understanding of Islamic psychology and its practical applications. One of the main reasons for the importance of studying the Nafs in Islamic psychology is that it provides a framework for understanding the various dimensions of human experience, including the spiritual, moral, and psychological aspects. By examining the different stages of the Nafs, Islamic psychology offers insights into the development of the self and the challenges that individuals face in their journey towards spiritual growth and fulfillment (Khair et al., 2023).

Moreover, the concept of Nafs has practical implications for personal development and spiritual growth (Morsi, 2022). By understanding the nature of the Nafs and its various levels, individuals can become more aware of their inner struggles and work towards overcoming negative tendencies and cultivating positive qualities such as humility, gratitude, and compassion. This can lead to greater inner peace, contentment, and a stronger connection with God. Another reason for the importance of studying the concept of Nafs in Islamic psychology is that it provides a framework for understanding the nature of psychological disorders from an Islamic perspective. By recognizing the role of the Nafs in the development and maintenance of psychological disorders, Islamic psychology offers a unique perspective on the etiology, diagnosis, and treatment of mental health problems.

The purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the concept of Nafs (self) in Islamic psychology from both classical and contemporary perspectives. The study aims to explore the meaning and significance of the Nafs in Islamic psychology, examining the various levels and stages of the self as outlined in classical Islamic texts. The study also aims to analyze contemporary perspectives on the Nafs, including how the concept has been adapted and applied in modern Islamic psychology. By exploring both classical and contemporary perspectives, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Nafs and its role in Islamic psychology.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To provide a detailed analysis of the concept of Nafs in classical Islamic texts, including the Qur'an, Hadith, and works of prominent Islamic scholars.
2. To explore the various levels and stages of the Nafs as outlined in classical Islamic texts, including the lower self (Nafs al-Ammara), the self-reproaching self (Nafs al-Lawwama), and the contented self (Nafs al-Mutma'inna).
3. To examine contemporary perspectives on the Nafs in Islamic psychology, including how the concept has been adapted and applied in modern therapeutic approaches.
4. To explore the practical implications of the concept of Nafs for personal development and spiritual growth, including its relevance for understanding and addressing psychological disorders from an Islamic perspective.
5. To provide insights into the relationship between the concept of Nafs and other key concepts in Islamic psychology, such as Tazkiyah (purification of the self), Ihsan (excellence in worship), and Taqwa (God-consciousness).



Overall, the purpose and objectives of the study are to provide a comprehensive analysis of the concept of Nafs in Islamic psychology, with the aim of deepening our understanding of the nature of the self and its relationship with God and exploring its practical implications for personal development and spiritual growth.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The technique for this paper is a review of the literature, which entails looking for and critically evaluating previous works on the idea of nafs in Islamic psychology. Classical and modern Islamic scriptures, as well as pertinent academic papers and books on Islamic psychology, are among the materials examined. A close examination of these sources served as the foundation for the analysis of the many Nafs categories and how they relate to other Islamic psychology concepts as well as modern psychological notions. A review of pertinent religious and spiritual writings serves as the foundation for the discussion of the function of Nafs in Islamic practices and its relationship to Sufism. Additionally, a synthesis of existing empirical studies and theoretical frameworks in the fields of mental health and Islamic psychology served as the foundation for the investigation of the effects of various categories of Nafs on mental health. Based on the results of this literature review, further directions for research on Nafs, clinical practice, and Islamic psychology research are suggested.

## **RESULTS**

### **Classical Perspectives on Nafs**

Classical Islamic scholars had a significant interest in the concept of Nafs (self) and its various levels and stages. They viewed the Nafs as a central component of human psychology and its understanding as essential for achieving spiritual growth and purification of the soul. The Qur'an and Hadith provide the foundational understanding of the Nafs, and the classical scholars built upon these sources in their works. They identified three primary levels or stages of the Nafs: Nafs al-Ammara (the commanding self), Nafs al-Lawwama (the self-reproaching self), and Nafs al-Mutma'inna (the contented self) (Mazhar et al., 2021).

The lower self, or Nafs al-Ammara, was seen as the most basic level of the self. It is driven by basic desires and impulses and seeks immediate gratification. It is also associated with the ego and the lower, animalistic aspects of human nature (Lahuti, 2020). This level of the Nafs is prone to sin and disobedience and requires continuous effort to overcome. The self-reproaching self, or Nafs al-Lawwama, is the stage at which an individual begins to recognize and regret their wrong actions. This stage marks the beginning of self-awareness and self-reflection. It is associated with a heightened sense of consciousness and an awareness of one's shortcomings.

The highest level of the Nafs is the contented self, or Nafs al-Mutma'inna. It is the stage of spiritual enlightenment and is characterized by a sense of inner peace, contentment, and closeness to God. This level of the Nafs is free from ego, self-interest, and base desires, and it seeks to align itself with the will of God. Classical scholars emphasized the importance of self-awareness and self-reflection in developing a deeper understanding of the Nafs. They also recognized the role of discipline and self-control in overcoming the lower self and advancing towards higher levels of the Nafs. Ultimately, the classical scholars viewed the Nafs as a means to achieve spiritual growth and closeness to God (al-Bauniyyah, 2016).



Overall, the different categories of Nafs according to classical Islamic psychology reflect the developmental stages of the human psyche in its journey towards spiritual excellence and closeness to Allah. Understanding these categories and their characteristics can provide insights into the nature of human behavior and help individuals in their spiritual growth and development.

#### **Relationship between Nafs and other concepts in Islamic psychology (e.g., Aql, Qalb)**

In Islamic psychology, Nafs is one of the core concepts that represents the human psyche and its various states of development. It is closely related to other concepts such as Aql (intellect) and Qalb (heart), and their relationship is the subject of extensive discussion in Islamic scholarly tradition. Aql is the faculty of reason and intellect, which is responsible for understanding and processing information. It is the tool by which humans can discern truth from falsehood and make decisions based on sound judgment. In Islamic psychology, Aql is closely related to Nafs, as it plays a vital role in controlling and regulating the lower self (Nafs al-Ammarah) and guiding it towards spiritual growth (Ghofar et al., 2018).

Qalb, on the other hand, is the spiritual heart, which is the center of emotions and feelings. It is the place where Allah's love and remembrance reside, and it is the seat of the spiritual connection between the human being and Allah. The relationship between Nafs and Qalb is also significant in Islamic psychology, as Nafs can influence the heart's purity and the ability to connect with Allah. Thus, the state of one's Nafs affects the condition of the heart, and vice versa. Overall, the relationship between Nafs, Aql, and Qalb reflects the intricate interplay between different aspects of the human psyche and the role they play in spiritual development. By understanding these relationships, individuals can work towards balancing their intellect, emotions, and spiritual growth to achieve a higher state of consciousness and closeness to Allah (Ghofar et al., 2018).

#### **Contemporary Perspectives on Nafs**

Contemporary Islamic scholars have also contributed to the understanding of Nafs in Islamic psychology, building upon the classical perspectives. They have highlighted the relevance of Nafs in addressing modern psychological issues and in promoting personal growth and spiritual development. One of the main contributions of contemporary scholars is their emphasis on the need for self-awareness and self-reflection as a means of purifying the Nafs. They recognize that the egoistic desires of the lower self (Nafs al-Ammarah) can lead to negative emotions and behaviors and that it is essential to recognize and control them to achieve a higher state of consciousness (Bulmer et al., 2022).

Contemporary scholars have also expanded the understanding of Nafs to include the impact of external factors, such as cultural and societal influences, on the development of the self. They recognize that the Nafs can be shaped by environmental factors and that these factors need to be taken into account in understanding human behavior (Yang et al., 2022). Additionally, contemporary scholars have highlighted the relationship between Nafs and mental health, advocating for a holistic approach to treatment that incorporates both psychological and spiritual interventions. They recognize the potential of Nafs-centered interventions, such as mindfulness and meditation, to improve mental health and well-being (Liu et al., 2022).

Overall, contemporary Islamic scholars have expanded upon the classical perspectives on Nafs to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the self and its role in personal growth and spiritual development. They highlight the importance of self-awareness and reflection, the impact of external factors, and the relationship between Nafs and mental health in contemporary society. In contemporary Islamic psychology, there are various approaches to understanding Nafs. One approach is the cognitive-behavioral approach, which emphasizes the importance of recognizing and correcting negative thinking patterns and behaviors that arise from the lower self (Nafs al-Ammarah) in order to achieve a higher level



of self-awareness and inner peace. This approach utilizes various techniques such as cognitive restructuring, mindfulness, and behavioral activation to promote positive change in individuals (Ahlam Atik Magly Al Selimi, 2021).

Another approach is the humanistic approach, which focuses on the individual's unique experiences and innate potential for growth and self-actualization. This approach emphasizes the importance of understanding and developing the self through self-reflection, self-expression, and self-transcendence. Humanistic Islamic psychology views Nafs as the core of the self and encourages individuals to cultivate a positive self-concept by nurturing their inner strengths and potentials (Munsoor & Sa'ari, 2017).

A third approach is the positive psychology approach, which emphasizes the importance of developing positive emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in order to enhance one's well-being and lead a fulfilling life. This approach views Nafs as a key component of human flourishing and encourages individuals to develop their higher selves (Nafs al-Mutma'inna) by cultivating positive virtues such as gratitude, compassion, and forgiveness (Saripudin & Hamdan, 2022).

The concept of Nafs in Islamic psychology can also be analyzed in relation to contemporary psychological concepts. For example, self-esteem and self-efficacy are two concepts that have been explored in both Islamic psychology and modern psychology. Self-esteem is defined as an individual's overall subjective evaluation of their own worth and is closely related to the concept of Nafs al-Mutma'inna, which is the self that is at peace and content with one's relationship with Allah. Studies have shown that individuals with higher levels of self-esteem tend to have a more positive view of their relationship with Allah and tend to have a stronger sense of purpose and meaning in life (Untung, 2008).

Self-efficacy, on the other hand, refers to an individual's belief in their own ability to accomplish a task or achieve a goal. In Islamic psychology, this concept is related to the concept of Nafs al-Lawwamah, which is the self that is self-reflective and recognizes its own shortcomings. Research has shown that individuals with higher levels of self-efficacy tend to have a greater sense of control over their lives and are more likely to take action to achieve their goals (Bozorgzadeh & Grasser, 2022). Overall, the concept of Nafs in Islamic psychology can provide a unique perspective on contemporary psychological concepts and can potentially contribute to a more holistic understanding of the self.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The Role of Nafs in Islamic Spirituality**

The concept of Nafs is closely related to Islamic spirituality, as it encompasses the inner dimension of the human being and its connection to the Divine. Islamic scholars have long recognized the importance of purifying the Nafs as a means of attaining closeness to Allah and achieving spiritual growth. Contemporary scholars of Islamic psychology also emphasize the role of Nafs in spiritual development and well-being. For example, Abdul Karim Bakkar notes that the purification of the Nafs is a key aspect of Islamic psycho-spiritual therapy and that it can lead to a greater sense of peace and contentment in life (Bakri & Wahyudi, 2021).





The relationship between Nafs and other Islamic spiritual concepts, such as Tawheed (the oneness of Allah) and Ihsan (spiritual excellence), has also been explored (Qadir et al., 2020). For instance, Omar Mahmood has argued that the process of purifying the Nafs is central to achieving Tawheed and realizing the true nature of the self as a servant of Allah (Mahmood, 2017). Similarly, Aisha Utz has highlighted the connection between the purification of the Nafs and the attainment of Ihsan, which involves the cultivation of a deep awareness of Allah's presence in all aspects of one's life. The relationship between Nafs and Islamic spirituality is multifaceted and complex and is an important area of inquiry within Islamic psychology.

The role of Nafs is crucial in Islamic practices such as Salah, fasting, and Hajj. These practices aim to help individuals achieve purification and control over their Nafs. Salah, for example, involves physical postures and spiritual concentration that can help individuals attain control over their Nafs. Fasting during the month of Ramadan helps individuals control their desires and increase their spiritual consciousness (Ahmed et al., 2020). Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, involves a rigorous physical journey that requires individuals to overcome their Nafs and focus on their spiritual connection with Allah.

The concept of nafs also plays a role in the Islamic ethical system. Islamic ethics prescribe that individuals must strive to purify their Nafs from negative qualities such as greed, envy, and arrogance and cultivate positive qualities such as compassion, patience, and humility. The ultimate goal is to achieve Nafs al-Mutma'inna, the contented self, which is free from negative qualities and in a state of tranquility and peace. The concept of Nafs plays a significant role in Islamic practices, ethics, and spirituality. It is essential for individuals to understand the different categories of Nafs and strive towards achieving Nafs al-Mutma'inna to attain purification and spiritual well-being (Arroisi & Puspita, 2020).

#### **Exploration of the relationship between Nafs and Sufism**

Sufism is a spiritual tradition within Islam that emphasizes the purification of the self and the attainment of closeness to Allah. The concept of nafs plays a crucial role in Sufi thought and practice. Sufis believe that the Nafs is the source of all human desires, including the desire for worldly pleasures and the desire for spiritual growth. Therefore, the purification of the Nafs is considered essential for achieving spiritual progress and closeness to Allah. Sufi scholars have developed a sophisticated understanding of the different stages of Nafs purification, which they refer to as the "stations" (maqamat) of the Nafs. These stations are divided into three broad categories: the lower self (Nafs al-Amara), the self-accusing self (Nafs al-Lawwama), and the contented self (Nafs al-Mutma'inna) (Rajab, 2007).

According to Sufi teachings, the first step towards Nafs purification is to recognize the existence of the Nafs and their role in shaping human behavior. This involves self-awareness and reflection, as well as seeking the guidance of a spiritual mentor or guide (Murshid) (Abdullah et al., 2021). Sufi practices such as Dhikr (remembrance of Allah), meditation, and spiritual retreats (Khalwa) are designed to help individuals in their journey of Nafs purification. Through these practices, Sufis aim to overcome the negative aspects of the Nafs, such as arrogance, envy, and selfishness, and cultivate positive qualities such as humility, gratitude, and compassion (Salleh, 2014). The concept of nafs holds great significance in Sufi thought and practice. Sufis view the purification of the Nafs as a necessary step towards achieving closeness to Allah and spiritual perfection (Khalid et al., 2021).

#### **The Relationship Between Nafs and Mental Health**

The impact of different categories of Nafs on mental health is a crucial area of exploration in Islamic psychology. For instance, Nafs al-Ammarah, which is associated with impulsivity, has been linked to negative outcomes such as addiction and reckless behavior (Abu-Raiya, Pargament, Krause, & Ironson, 2015). On the other hand, Nafs al-Lawwamah, which is associated with self-criticism and self-doubt, has



been linked to anxiety and depression (Rahman, 2018). Finally, Nafs al-Mutma'inna, which is associated with a state of tranquility and contentment, has been linked to well-being and positive mental health outcomes (Sulaiman, Hussin, & Zakaria, 2014).

Understanding the relationship between different categories of Nafs and mental health outcomes can provide insights into the potential benefits of Islamic psychological interventions that focus on regulating and transforming the Nafs. Such interventions can include spiritual practices such as Dhikr (remembrance of Allah), Salah (prayer), and Sadaqah (charity) that have been linked to positive mental health outcomes (Arifin et al., 1970).

In Islamic psychology, Nafs plays a crucial role in mental health interventions. Tazkiyah al-nafs (purification of the self) and ta'leem al-nafs (education of the self) are two primary interventions used to promote well-being by cultivating a positive relationship with one's Nafs. Tazkiyah al-nafs involves a systematic process of self-reflection and self-correction, with the ultimate goal of achieving a state of Nafs al-Mutma'inna (contented soul) and being close to Allah. It includes practices such as self-control, self-discipline, and self-monitoring to control negative emotions and impulses associated with Nafs al-Ammarah (commanding self) (Ghofar et al., 2018).

Ta'leem al-nafs focuses on educating oneself about the nature of the self, the purpose of life, and proper conduct in different situations. It emphasizes the cultivation of virtues and good character traits associated with Nafs al-Lawwamah (self-accusing self) and Nafs al-Mutma'inna. These interventions have been shown to have a positive impact on mental health and well-being, especially in individuals struggling with negative emotions and behaviors associated with Nafs al-Ammarah (Arroisi & Puspita, 2020).

The concept of nafs is also closely linked to the Islamic concepts of taqwa (mindful awareness of Allah) and tawbah (repentance). Taqwa involves being mindful of one's Nafs and one's actions, as well as being conscious of Allah's presence in all aspects of life (Triyuwono, 2016). Tawbah involves seeking forgiveness from Allah for one's mistakes and sins and making a sincere effort to change one's ways. These concepts have been incorporated into various mental health interventions in Islamic psychology, such as mindfulness-based cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) (Rasmawati, 2022).

The relationship between Nafs and mental health interventions in Islamic psychology highlights the importance of cultivating a positive relationship with oneself in order to achieve mental well-being. By understanding and working with the different categories of Nafs, individuals can take a proactive approach towards improving their mental health and overall well-being.

### CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Islamic psychology places a lot of emphasis on the idea of nafs, and this essay examined both traditional and modern views of the self. There are various types of Nafs, including Nafs al-Ammarah, Nafs al-Lawwamah, and Nafs al-Mutma'inna, according to ancient Islamic thinkers. With Nafs al-Mutma'inna being the greatest and Nafs al-Ammarah being the lowest, each category denotes a different stage of spiritual development (Khair et al., 2023).

Nafs has been studied from a variety of perspectives in modern Islamic psychology, including cognitive-behavioral, humanistic, and positive psychology. Additionally, there is a connection between Nafs and other modern psychological ideas like self-efficacy and self-esteem. The essay also covered the connection between Nafs and Islamic spirituality, with Nafs playing a significant role in Islamic rituals including Salah, fasting, and Hajj. The Sufi philosophy of Nafs, which emphasizes the significance of self-purification, is closely tied to this idea (Ghofar et al., 2018).



Additionally, it has been discovered that different types of nafs have varied effects on mental health; impulsivity is linked to nafs al-Ammarah, anxiety is linked to nafs al-Lawwamah, and wellbeing is linked to nafs al-Mutma'inna. Last but not least, tazkiyah al-nafs and ta'leem al-nafs are two mental health interventions in Islamic psychology that concentrate on the purification of Nafs. The exploration of the Nafs notion in Islamic psychology has a number of consequences for therapeutic practice and academic study (Sahin, 2019). First, Muslim mental health therapies can be informed by an awareness of the many Nafs categories and their effects on mental health. Interventions for Nafs al-Ammarah, for instance, might concentrate on controlling impulsivity, while those for Nafs al-Lawwamah, might concentrate on controlling anxiety.

Second, the connection between Nafs and Islamic spirituality emphasizes how crucial it is to include spirituality in treatments for Muslim patients. Mental health professionals should be aware of the significance of Nafs in Islamic rituals like Salah, fasting, and Hajj and, where appropriate, include these practices into treatment strategies. Third, considering the connection between Nafs and Sufism, Sufi teachings and practices may be included into Muslim patients' mental health interventions (Greeley, 2022). By addressing their spiritual and emotional needs, this integration may assist Muslim patients' mental health results.

The analysis of modern Islamic psychological treatments to Nafs underlines the necessity for more research in this field, which brings us to our final point. Future research should examine how different Nafs-targeting therapies affect Muslim patients' mental health outcomes. Overall, Islamic psychology's idea of nafs has significant implications for mental health treatment and research, and these discoveries may help design successful and culturally appropriate mental health interventions for Muslim patients.

It is possible to identify several potential future areas for study on Nafs in Islamic psychology based on the discussions and analyses offered in this work. A few examples of directions are: Additional research into the connection between Nafs and outcomes related to mental health, such as depression, stress, and anxiety. Future studies can examine if Islamic therapies like tazkiyah al-nafs and ta'leem al-nafs are effective at fostering mental health and wellbeing. Analyzing the function of Nafs in light of current problems that Muslim people and communities experience, including as prejudice, social exclusion, and political instability. Future studies can look into how Nafs can be used to encourage coping and resilience in the face of such difficulties.

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*Section A-Research paper*

- Qadir, J., Raquib, A., & Ahmed, H. S. (2020). Spiritual excellence (Ihsan) for professionals: A hadith-based perspective. In Handbook of Ethics of Islamic Economics and Finance. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110593419-012>
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**THE CONCEPT OF NAFS (SELF) IN ISLAMIC PSYCHOLOGY:**

**AN ANALYSIS OF CLASSICAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES**



*Section A-Research paper*

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