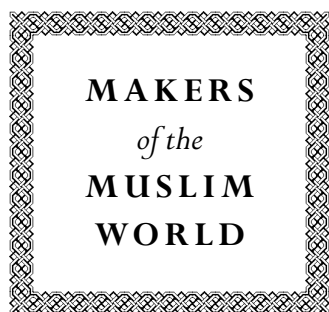


Ghazali

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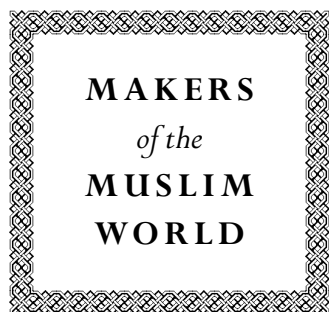


Ghazali

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Ghazali

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GHAZALI

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PREFACE

In this book, I aim to convey the essentials of the life and thought of a religious genius too little known beyond the specialist world. For the breadth, subtlety and influence of his work, Ghazali deserves to be counted among the great figures in intellectual history, worthy to be ranked with Augustine and Maimonides, Pascal and Kierkegaard. This book is intended for readers with no previous knowledge of Ghazali or indeed of Islamic intellectual history. This means I have been obliged to summarize and simplify many crucial points, though not, I hope, to over-simplify.

I refer to Ghazali's works by their original Arabic titles, often in shortened form; these are listed in the table of abbreviations. In referring to Ghazali's masterpiece, the *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, I have sometimes referred to it as *The Revival* and sometimes as the *Ihya'*. I've tried wherever possible to key my references to existing English translations (which I've occasionally modified); translations without attribution are my own. Since many Arabic names and terms used will be unfamiliar to non-specialist readers, I've included brief descriptions of the various political entities and schools of thought they represent in the introduction.

I would like to thank Professor Patricia Crone for inviting me to contribute this volume to the series. I am grateful too for her comments and suggestions which have improved the work throughout. The anonymous reader for Oneworld offered several criticisms from which I have benefited and for which I express my thanks. Finally, I am grateful to Mike Harpley at Oneworld, who has been a most patient and helpful editor.

ABBREVIATIONS

Bouyges	Maurice Bouyges, <i>Essai de chronologie des œuvres de Al-Ghazali (Algazel)</i>
CHI	<i>The Cambridge History of Iran</i>
EI ²	<i>The Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> (2nd edition)
<i>Faysal</i>	Ghazali, <i>Faysal al-tafriqa</i>
Hourani	“A Revised Chronology of Ghazali’s Writings” <i>JAOS</i> (1984)
<i>Ihya’</i>	Ghazali, <i>Ihya’ ‘ulum al-din</i>
<i>Iqtisad</i>	Ghazali, <i>al-Iqtisad fi’l-i’tiqad</i>
<i>Jawahir</i>	Ghazali, <i>Jawahir al-Qur’an</i>
<i>Letter</i>	Ghazali, <i>Letter to a Disciple: Ayyuha’l-Walad</i>
<i>Maqasid</i>	Ghazali, <i>Maqasid al-falasifa</i>
McCarthy	<i>Freedom and Fulfillment: an Annotated Translation of Al-Ghazali’s al-Munqidh min al-Dalal</i>
<i>Munqidh</i>	Ghazali, <i>al-Munqidh min al-Dalal</i>
Qur.	Qur’an (Koran)
<i>The Revival</i>	Ghazali, <i>Ihya’ ‘ulum al-din</i>
<i>Tahafut</i>	Ghazali, <i>Tahafut al-falasifa</i>

NAMES AND TERMS

Ash‘arite the school of Sunni theology founded by Ash‘ari (d. 938).

Buyid Shi‘ite dynasty in power from c. 932 to 1062, overthrown by the Seljuqs.

dhawq “taste,” a Sufi technical term for unmediated mystical experience.

Falsafa Islamic Aristotelean philosophy (from Greek “philosophia”).

Fatimids Shi‘ite Isma‘ili dynasty in Egypt and N. Africa from 909–1171.

fiqh Islamic law.

Hadith the attested words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad.

Hanafi The school of Sunni law based on the teachings of Abu Hanifa.

Hanbali The school of Sunni law based on the teachings of Ahmad ibn Hanbal.

Imam Prayer leader; in Shi‘ite tradition, the divinely designated guide of the community, sinless and infallible.

Isma‘ili Shi‘ite sect which broke from mainstream Shi‘ism after 762 and which acknowledges a line of seven imams; hence known as “Seveners.”

Kalam Islamic theology much given to dialectic and disputation (literally, “discourse”).

madhhab “school” of law or theology, e.g., the Hanbali school.

madrasa institution of learning, “college,” e.g., the Nizamiya madrasa.

Maliki the school of Sunni law deriving from the teachings of Malik ibn Anas.

Mu‘tazili school of theology characterized by pronounced rationalism.

Seljuq Sunni Turkic dynasty in power from c. 1038 to 1194.

Shafi'ite the school of Sunni law based on the teachings of Shafi'i.

Sunna prescribed, normative behavior modeled on the example of the Prophet.

taqlid belief based on authority, rather than independent reasoning.

usul al-fiqh legal theory, the "roots of the law."

CHRONOLOGY

- 1058**
c. 1072–73 Born in a village near Tus in northeast Iran. Studies at Tus under the Imam Radhakani and at Jurjan with the Imam Abu Nasr al-Isma‘ili.
- c. 1077–78** Returns to Tus for three further years of study. Travels to Nishapur where he pursues advanced studies with the jurist and theologian Juwayni and the Sufi master Farmadhi.
- 1085–86** Death of Juwayni. Attracts the patronage of the vizier Nizam al-Mulk and joins the court-camp of the Seljuq Sultan Malik Shah as professional jurist and theologian.
- June–July 1091** Appointed professor by Nizam al-Mulk at the Nizamiyya college in Baghdad.
- 1091–1095** Period of professional celebrity in Baghdad; present at the investiture of the Abbasid Caliph Mustazhir in 1093. Assassination of Nizam al-Mulk on 14 October 1092; death of Sultan Malik Shah one month later.
- July–Nov. 1095** Period of spiritual crisis leading to renunciation of his position and departure from Baghdad.
- 1095–97** Period of seclusion, first in Damascus for two years, with subsequent journeys to Jerusalem and Hebron; makes the pilgrimage; returns to Damascus. During the eleven-year

period from 1095 to 1106, writes the major Sufi works on which his fame rests, in particular, the *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, followed by several versions of the work in both Arabic and Persian.

- 1097** Returns to Iraq, with brief stays in Baghdad and Hamadhan.
- 1099–1106** At Tus, teaching and advising a circle of disciples.
- July–August 1106** Returns to teaching at the Nizamiyya in Nishapur at the urging of the vizier Fakhr al-Mulk. Composes his spiritual autobiography *al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*.
- 1109–1110** Withdraws from public teaching and returns to Tus where he acts as spiritual advisor to Sufi aspirants.
- December 18, 1111** Dies at Tus and is buried there.

INTRODUCTION

In July 1095, the celebrated jurist and theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazali experienced a sudden breakdown. He could neither eat nor sleep; even a sip of broth seemed too much. As his crisis worsened, he lost the power of speech. He was only thirty-seven years old. For a decade, as the darling of a young regime eager to promote a new form of orthodoxy, he had lectured to students in their hundreds at a recently-established university. He had frequently played a part in the courts of both the Abbasid Caliph and the Seljuq Sultan. As a lecturer and writer, he had been acclaimed for his eloquence; now, abruptly, he was inarticulate and forced to suspend his teaching. The doctors brought to his bedside gave conflicting diagnoses: all proved wrong. The breakdown lasted for six months. Though we know of this ordeal mainly from his own account, others noticed its effects on him; a student who knew him later would write, "I saw that the man had recovered from madness." In his own description of the episode, written some ten years later, Ghazali stated that his crisis was caused not by the doubt which had tormented him as a young man, but by something more devastating: he had discovered the truth but could not act on it. He was effectively paralyzed by the truth.

What was this "truth?" How did Ghazali come to it? It might be summed up in the phrase "the Sufi path," but that tells us little. He would argue that such truth couldn't be reached by intellectual methods, however rigorously applied, nor could it be acquired through books. Such ultimate truth – or "certainty," as he put it – had to be "tasted" to be known. It wasn't an intellectual truth – or not only that: it was truth as experienced, not fully expressible in words, but expressible only in action – by which of course he meant informed action.

I will show by what route Ghazali arrived at this conclusion. In later life, he would summarize his sense of final truth not only by invoking the mystical notion of “taste” – to be discussed in Chapter Five – but by use of the formula “knowledge and action” (*‘ilm wa-‘amal* in Arabic). For him, knowledge without action was futile; so was action without knowledge. Both had to be present for truth to become manifest. In a late Sufi work, he would go so far as to exhort a disciple: “Knowledge without action is madness and action without knowledge is void” (*Letter*, 16).

Because Ghazali possessed an unusual gift for expressing complex notions in simple and vivid terms – and because he often does so with an unexpectedly personal accent – his writings have a deceptive immediacy. He can seem improbably “modern.” This may account for his continuing popularity, and not only among Muslims. He appears to speak directly to his reader.

A millennium separates us from him and his world. To enter that world, even in a cursory way, it is essential to have some sense of the historical and intellectual context in which he flourished. His career was atypical in some respects. He stood out among his contemporaries, at times to his cost. To appreciate his distinctive originality, as well as the enduring contributions which he made, we must briefly sketch certain aspects of his *milieu*, together with the schools and traditions with which he engaged.

The crisis of July 1095 divides Ghazali’s life into before and after. He certainly saw it thus. By November 1095, when he finally formed his resolve to follow the Sufi way, he had become a different man. Even so, there was an inner continuity, a hidden coherence, to his career. The earlier phases, like certain of his earlier books, are mirrored and subtly transformed in his later works and deeds. Various external constants, ranging from political events to theological and legal wrangles, to less conspicuous but equally important developments in Sufism, exerted an influence on his life and thought. The aspirations and agendas of his Seljuq masters, and in particular the projects of Nizam al-Mulk, his formidable patron, profoundly affected him and the tendencies of the several “schools” of legal

theory played a decisive part in his life. Ghazali was a Shafi‘ite (as I shall discuss in Chapter Two), but came into frequent contact, often outright conflict, with Hanafis and Hanbalis, as well as with representatives of other traditions. In theology, or *Kalam* (treated in Chapter Three), he espoused Ash‘arism but dealt, often pugnaciously, with Mu‘tazilis, Isma‘ilis, and others. And there were proponents of *Falsafa*, or “philosophy,” to be countered, as I show in Chapter Four. For Ghazali, that powerful amalgam of Aristotelean teaching with Neo-Platonic thought – of which Ibn Sina (Avicenna) was the most daunting exponent – represented a challenge and an opportunity. These and other factors helped shape Ghazali’s mature position and his distinctive form of Sufism (which I describe in Chapters Five and Six).

Attempting to deal with Ghazali’s life and thought, as with that of any other medieval Muslim thinker, forces an engagement with a swarm of unfamiliar and often confusing names and terms, like those scattered throughout the preceding paragraph. In this introduction, I will briefly describe and characterize those which bear most directly on Ghazali’s life and thought. I hope that this approach will make it easier for the reader who is not a specialist to follow the more detailed discussions of later chapters.

THE SELJUQS

Ghazali’s career coincided with the rise and consolidation of the Seljuq dynasty and cannot be understood apart from it. The Seljuqs constituted a powerful clan with the larger Turkic confederation known as the Oghuz Turks – “the Ghuzz” to Arab chroniclers. (“Oghuz” means “nine” and refers to the various clans which formed the confederation.) The Seljuqs, eventually masters of a vast domain encompassing Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Central Asia and extending to the borders of China, took their name from their tenth-century leader Seljuq ibn Duqaq ibn Timur, the commander also known as Yaligh, “Iron Bow.” These Turks converted to Islam in the tenth century but

they brought into their new faith influences from a host of other traditions, including Buddhism, Manicheanism, Nestorian Christianity, and even Khazar Judaism, as well as their native shamanistic practises. More significantly from a political perspective, as one historian has put it, “the coming of the Seljuqs inaugurated the age of alien, especially Turkish, rule” in the Islamic heartlands (Bosworth, *CHI* 5:3).

From a doctrinal perspective, the Seljuqs were Sunni Muslims. They sought to impose strict Sunni practises on their conquered territories, both through conviction and as a way of creating political and civic unity. To this end, especially under the resolute administration of the powerful vizier Nizam al-Mulk (the Persian statesman whose thirty-year control of Seljuq policy led Ibn Athir, a later historian, to call it *al-dawla al-Nizamiya*, “the dynasty of Nizam” (*EP* 8:941)) the Seljuqs adopted a particular school of law – Shafi‘ite – and a specific form of orthodox Sunni theology – Ash‘arite – both of which they sought to promote and establish throughout their domains. This agenda was all the more important because their predecessors, the Buyids, who had controlled both the Caliphate and its territories for a century, had been Shi‘ites. In addition, the Seljuqs faced a continuing menace from the powerful Fatimid dynasty in Egypt; the Fatimids were Isma‘ilis, a sect which had broken away from mainstream Shi‘ism in the eighth century and which, beginning in the late ninth century, continually sent missionaries on proselytizing expeditions to all corners of the Islamic world. The Fatimids – and the Isma‘ilis elsewhere, but especially in Syria – thus represented both a military and a doctrinal threat to Seljuq interests.

The first incursions of the Seljuqs in the eleventh century brought them into Afghanistan and Khorasan, the north-eastern province of Iran, where Ghazali was born. They came as raiders intent on plunder but quickly settled. There were not only the Buyids to contend with, but also the Ghaznavids, a rival Turkic dynasty which had earlier invaded India under the formidable Mahmud of Ghazna. In 1038, after routing Ghaznavid armies in Afghanistan, the Seljuq commander Tughril Bey proceeded to Nishapur, in the very heart of

Khorasan, and had himself proclaimed Sultan; he ruled for the next twenty-five years, consolidating and extending Seljuq power. In 1055, three years before Ghazali's birth, Tughril triumphantly entered Baghdad, seat of the Caliphate. His Sultanate was confirmed by the Abbasid Caliph al-Qa'im, who went so far as to seat him on a throne and wrap a cloak of honor around him. The Caliphate thus came under the protection and the control of the victorious Seljuqs; this was crucial because, however feeble it had become, the Abbasid Caliphate still embodied authority and prestige in both religious and dynastic terms. Ghazali respected and upheld both offices; indeed, he puts "Caliphs, kings and Sultans" second only to the prophets – and ahead of scholars – in the ranks of the knowledgeable, though their knowledge, as he notes, is restricted to purely external matters (*Ihya'*, 1:24). During Ghazali's lifetime, both Sultan and Caliph would hold sway in Baghdad, with actual power invested in the Sultan but immense symbolic power represented by the Caliph. Ghazali would be welcomed, and play an occasional official role, at both courts. Indeed, he would often act as a liaison between the potentates, remarking "I served on several occasions as an envoy between the Sultan and the Commander of the Faithful [that is, the Caliph] on pressing questions" (Krawulsky, 66; Hogga, 46).

In several of his works, Ghazali sought to justify Seljuq sovereignty without compromising Abbasid authority: a delicate juggling act. In his masterpiece, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, he would come to the conclusion that "the Caliph is the person to whom the possessor of force pays allegiance" and he would elaborate further by saying, with obvious reference to the Seljuqs, that "anyone who seizes power by force and is obedient to the Caliph ... is a Sultan wielding valid jurisdiction and judgment" (*Ihya'*, 2:179; tr. Hillenbrand, 90). The Seljuqs ruled by justified might but the Abbasid Caliph embodied the Imamate itself, a sacrosanct office.

Tughril Bey had initiated the Seljuq doctrinal agenda of aggressively promoting Sunni orthodoxy. His son Alp Arslan, who succeeded Tughril in 1063, furthered this agenda, not least by appointing Nizam al-Mulk as his vizier. Alp Arslan was a commanding

figure – according to one chronicler, “he was tall, with moustaches so long that he used to tie up their ends when he wished to shoot” (Browne, 2:176). Under him, and his successor Malik Shah, the Seljuq dynasty achieved its greatest heights but these were often the results of their scheming, utterly ruthless, and dazzling vizier’s tireless machinations.

Malik Shah, Alp Arlan’s successor, ruled for twenty years, from 1072 until his death in 1092. Ghazali came to maturity and achieved renown during his reign; his rise owed much to the patronage of Nizam al-Mulk, who appointed him to an influential teaching position at the school in Baghdad which bore his name, the celebrated “Nizamiyya” madrasa. Ghazali, along with other like-minded jurists and theologians, played a key role in the vizier’s imposition of a new orthodoxy. After 1092, the year in which both Malik Shah and Nizam al-Mulk died, Ghazali’s life would begin to take a different and unexpected course, but his career, as well as certain central aspects of his thought, was influenced and to some extent defined by the prevailing Seljuq agenda.

THE “SCHOOLS” OF LAW

The term “school” – the usual translation of the Arabic word *madhhab* which also means a “road taken” and by extension, “doctrine” – is a bit misleading; it suggests a unified and consistent viewpoint. This was not invariably true of the different traditions of legal theory, nor were individual jurists and theorists unanimous in their views. Ghazali, though nominally an adherent of the Shafi‘ite school, often deviated from strict Shafi‘ism. His contemporary, the Baghdad jurist and theologian Ibn ‘Aqil, was even more individualistic; though a Hanbali, he took enough interest in both Mu‘tazili theology and in Sufism to earn several harsh rebukes and on at least one occasion he was obliged to disavow these tendencies publicly (Makdisi, 3–5). There are defining differences among the four or five principal traditions.

Shafi‘i and his School

The four Sunni schools took their names from their illustrious founders, all of whom commanded respect for their legal acumen, as well as their piety. In the *Ihya'*, Ghazali praises each of these four founders, beginning with Shafi‘i who, not surprisingly, receives his highest praise (*Ihya'*, 1:36–40). Two of the jurists, Malik ibn Anas (d. 795) and Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855) – eponyms of the Maliki and Hanbali schools, respectively – were also collectors and compilers of sacred tradition, the *hadiths* in which the words and deeds of the Prophet were recorded. Such traditions not only served as one of the two fundamental sources, or “roots,” of the law (the other was the Qur’an), but constituted the core of what Muslims call the *Sunna*, the basis of normative behavior, modeled on the attested example of the Prophet. The compilations of Malik and of Ahmad ibn Hanbal represent two of the four canonical collections of such *hadith* in Sunni tradition. The Hanbalis placed great emphasis on tradition; several of Ghazali’s Hanbali critics would display a certain relish in pointing out his supposed weakness in this religious “science.”

Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi‘i (767–820) – usually called “the Imam Shafi‘i” – belonged to the same Quraysh tribe as the Prophet, of whom he was a distant relation. He was originally a disciple of Malik ibn Anas, and had met Ahmad ibn Hanbal in Baghdad at least once. His distinctive contribution, however, lay not in the compilation of traditions but in the delineation and refinement of certain forms of legal reasoning. He particularly espoused and defended the rigorous use of analogy (*qiyas*), arrived at through “intellectual effort” (*ijtihad*), and was critical of “belief based on authority,” or *taqlid*, dear to many Malikis; though his insistence on analogy also represented an effort to curb the excesses of “personal opinion” (*ra‘y*), which he opposed (Shafi‘i, 31). Like other early jurists, he condemned the discipline of theology outright and was reported to have thundered:

My verdict on the people of *kalam* is that they should be beaten with whips and the soles of sandals, and then paraded through all the tribes

and encampments while it is proclaimed of them, “Such is the reward of those who forsake the Qur’an and *sunna* and give themselves up to the *kalam*.”

Goldziher 1981, 110

Shafi‘i is generally credited with creating the discipline of theoretical jurisprudence in Islam, the so-called science of “the roots of the law,” the principles of which he articulated in his famous *Risala*, or “Treatise.” Like the other founders of legal schools, Shafi‘i was revered for his exemplary piety and probity; Ghazali especially praises his ascetic way of life and his generosity, as well as his learning (*Ihya’*, 1:36–37). In later ages, he would be accorded the title of “Renewer of Religion” for his century. Ghazali frequently invokes him as a model of righteousness, not least perhaps because he aspired to be the “Renewer of Religion” for his own century.

The Hanbali School

This school, founded on the teaching of Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855), holds that the only valid sources of the law are the Qur’an and tradition. Not only is speculative theology – along with any figurative interpretation of scripture – condemned but so too is the use of “personal opinion” (*ra’y*) on the jurist’s part. The application of “analogy” (*qiyas*) is but sparingly allowed, though Ahmad himself resorted to it under other names; he apparently considered it the weakest of the principles of legal reasoning (Melchert, 71, 77). Doctrinally, Hanbalis held to a qualified literalism: God is the God of the Qur’an and He is as He describes Himself there. However, Hanbalis are not “fundamentalists” in any obvious sense. Ahmad ibn Hanbal combated both the anthropomorphism of those who took literally the various Qur’anic assertions that God possessed bodily attributes – a hand or a face – and the extreme “negative theology” of such early thinkers as Jahm ibn Safwan who denied such attributes outright. For the Hanbalis, the prescribed position was to accept these Qur’anic assertions “without knowing [or: asking] how.” This formula – the cele-

brated *bi-la kayf* – emerged during the notorious “inquisition” (*mihna*), initiated by the Abbasid Caliph Ma’mun, and was uttered by Ahmad ibn Hanbal with respect to the nature of the Qur’an. The Mu’tazili position, which the Caliph promoted, held that the Qur’an was created. Ahmad ibn Hanbal and his followers stuck to their position that scripture, as God’s speech, was eternal and uncreated, albeit *bi-la kayf*, “unknowably so.” The formula would eventually find its way into Ash‘arite doctrine.

In Ghazali’s lifetime, the Hanbalis were politically quite active in Baghdad, where they were the majority of the populace. Viewing Ash‘arism (also discussed below) as a form of “heresy,” certain Hanbali zealots launched personal attacks against Ash‘arite preachers. They also acted as moral vigilantes, destroying musical instruments and overturning jugs suspected of holding wine. In 1077, when Ghazali was still in his teens, a clash occurred between Hanbalis and Ash‘arites in which both sides hurled mud-brick missiles at one another (Cook, 120). (This sort of factional strife would lead Ghazali to exclaim, towards the conclusion of the *Ihya*, “O how much blood has been spilled to promote the causes of the masters of the schools of law!”) Finally, the Hanbalis, especially in Baghdad, were fervent upholders of the claims of the Caliphate; they were the “ropes” which held up the Caliphal “tent” and, as they liked to say, “if the rope fails, the tent collapses” (Cook, 122).

The Hanafi School

This tradition traces its origins to Abu Hanifa (699–767) and is the oldest of the Sunni schools of law. Its importance with respect to Ghazali lies in the fact that the Seljuqs themselves were initially fervent Hanafis. The struggle to impose Shafi‘ite principles, led by Nizam al-Mulk with the help of Ghazali and other scholars, was both an attempt to supplant the Hanafis and to reduce their influence within the ruling Seljuq circles. Theologically, Abu Hanifa had been a Murji‘i (that is, an upholder of the view that judgment of a

serious sinner should be “deferred” (*irja'*) and left to God alone), but his school was not conspicuously theological at the outset. He was attacked by other traditionists for permitting the use of “personal opinion” in legal judgments (*EI*², 3:162). Over time, his legal school would become allied with a theological tendency, parallel in orthodoxy to Ash‘arism and deriving from the teaching of Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. 944). Maturidism became widely influential, especially in Transoxiana, from where it spread among the Turks. It would represent “the theological face of Hanafism” (Cook, 307) by Ghazali’s time. The conquering Seljuqs adhered to this school, which they vigorously promoted when they first came to power.

Despite the fact that Shafi‘ite legal theory originally constituted a synthesis between the teachings of Abu Hanifa and those of Malik ibn Anas, conflicts and rivalry occurred between the Hanafi and Shafi‘ite schools virtually from their beginning. Many of Ghazali’s adversaries, in legal as well as doctrinal (and political) matters, would come from among the Hanafis, and towards the end of his life they would denounce him to the Sultan (Krawulsky, 63).

The Maliki School

This school, deriving its authority from Malik ibn Anas (d. 795), a native of Medina, would become particularly strong in the Maghrib. Several of Ghazali’s most prominent students were Malikis from the Islamic West; a few would also become his severest critics. Like Shafi‘ism, Malikism had no original theological stance, but adopted Ash‘arism outright. Despite this common ground, Western Malikis displayed a tendency towards extreme dogmatism; one of Ghazali’s pupils, Abu Abd Allah al-Mazari (d. 1141) – whom one scholar characterizes as a “fundamentalist” Ash‘arite (Cook, 358) – would later condemn his teacher for his forays into philosophy (Ormsby 1984, 101). The Maliki jurists and scholars denounced the *Ihya'* and in 1109 – two years before Ghazali’s death – copies were publicly burned in Almoravid Spain (Serrano Ruano, 137).

The Ash‘arite School of Islamic Theology (Kalam)

Nizam al-Mulk sought to pair Shafi‘ite legal teachings with Ash‘arite theology and to have both taught in the schools which he established. Ghazali taught this combination of legal theory and theology in Baghdad for about ten years. Ash‘arism, which eventually developed into the dominant form of Sunni orthodoxy, stemmed from the teachings of Abu al-Hasan al-Ash‘ari, a native of Basra, who died in 935. His particular strain of orthodoxy, steadily refined and codified in the century and a half before Ghazali’s involvement, may be seen as the product of a long effort of reconciliation between the pietistic demands of the Hanbalite tradition and the rationalistic methodology of the Mu‘tazilis. As we shall see, Ash‘ari was a Mu‘tazili until around the age of forty; he knew their methods and their positions from the inside.

Ash‘arism sometimes provoked vehement opposition but it did hold the possibility of dogmatic compromise: it enshrined pious tradition while allowing scope for logical reasoning (if mainly in method) and adherents of both the Shafi‘ite and the Maliki law-schools, with their strong traditionalist origins, would come to accept it. Under the Seljuqs, this would prove a winning, and quite successful, combination, thanks in no small part to Ghazali and his great teacher, Juwayni.

THE NOTION OF *KALAM*

Theology has always been a quarrelsome discipline, and in Islam, quite raucously so. Flourishing amid confrontation and polemic, it arose out of spoken disputations, the form and tenor of which are retained in its written manifestations. Even in later centuries, when the most intricate topics are explored, the verbal aspect continues to resound. “If an opponent says ...” is followed, in short order, by “then I respond.” Not surprisingly, the whole discipline came to be subsumed under the rubric of “speech,” (*kalam* in Arabic). Theologians

were known as “speakers” or “discourers” (*mutakallimun*), that is, “dialecticians” (on the pattern of the Greek *dialektikoi*). To more traditional Muslims, the discipline always bore a whiff of the presumptuous, if not the downright reprehensible. Neither scripture nor sacred tradition, they would say, provides for this mode of discourse; how then might it be sanctioned? And who are we to “speak,” let alone debate, about God? As we shall see in Chapter Three, this is a question which Ghazali would attempt to answer in his own way, not least by transforming the very mode of theological discourse in Islam.

THE MU‘TAZILI FACTOR

Ash‘arism was an offshoot of the broader movement known as Mu‘tazilism. The name derives from the Arabic verb “to withdraw” (*i‘tazala*), a reference to the fact that two of its founders had distanced themselves from the circle of their revered teacher al-Hasan al-Basri, over the vexed question of the status of sinners within the Islamic community. The Mu‘tazilis, who became dominant for a century or so under the Abbasids and endured as a school until the eleventh century, were the heirs of earlier tendencies. Their roots extended back to the earliest period of theological speculation in the eighth century, centred on the Qadariyah – or “free will” – movement in Syria and Iraq, most notably in cities such as Basra and Kufa. Though the Mu‘tazilis fell from favor in the middle of the ninth century – when the Caliph Mutawakkil repudiated their doctrines – they were still active (and a potent force at times) in Khorasan during Ghazali’s lifetime. In Baghdad, at the Nizamiyya College founded by Nizam al-Mulk, their doctrines were studied and taught. As we shall see, even as he combated them their principles influenced Ghazali.

To their opponents, the Mu‘tazilis exalted reason in unacceptable ways, giving the human intellect an almost autonomous role. Their rationalism led to conclusions – one example of which I discuss below – which forced Ghazali and others to attack them. He is careful to exempt them from any charge of “heresy” (*kufr*) and even

defends their figurative interpretation of scripture (*Faysal*, 109–111), but from his perspective – first as an Ash‘arite and later as a Sufi – reason could not be regarded as autonomous; he – and Ash‘arites generally – rejected any notion of “the intellect’s independent ability” to arrive at final truths. Reliance on reason had led Ghazali to his early disabling crisis of scepticism, long before the breakdown of 1095, and the experience doubtless coloured his view. Reason, their beloved “intellect,” led Mu‘tazilis down some strange, and untenable, paths; such forays, inspired by reason, prompted a backlash among more orthodox theologians.

Mu‘tazili thought could take bizarre twists. For example, in their zeal to maintain God’s unimpeachable justice – one of their five articles of faith – certain Mu‘tazilis argued that God not only does what is right and good, but that He must do so; in other words, God is morally obliged to perform the good. “It is incumbent upon God to do what is best,” some would declare, employing an Arabic term that connotes legal obligation (*wajib*). This follows from a narrowly rationalistic interpretation of justice. If we recognize justice, how much more so must God? Moreover, good and evil are objective values; all humans are capable of recognizing them, and God recognizes them too. How can a just God be other than supremely good, in ways that we can know and assess?

This is the doctrine of “the optimum” (*aslah*) and was too pun- gently rationalistic even for many Mu‘tazilis (who tended to hedge on the question of God’s involvement in the evils of His creation). Needless to say, it nauseated their adversaries.

ASH‘ARI AND THE THREE BROTHERS

For a certain Mu‘tazili, Abu al-Hasan al-Ash‘ari, in Basra, the “optimum” proved the breaking point. He challenged his master to public debate over the doctrine. Their encounter illustrates fundamental differences between Mu‘tazili ways of thought and those of their critics. Ash‘ari asked his teacher whether God had performed the

optimum in the case of three individuals: a believer, an unbeliever, and a child, all of whom died and were, respectively, rewarded, punished, and “neither rewarded nor punished.” And, he asked, what if the child who died should say, “O Lord, if only you had let me live, it would have been ‘optimal,’ for then I would have entered paradise?” God, replied the teacher, would answer the child, “I knew that if you had lived, you would have become a sinner and then entered hell.” But then, countered Ash‘ari, the unbeliever would exclaim from hell, “O Lord! Why didn’t You kill me as a child too, so that I wouldn’t sin and then enter hell!” At this, al-Ash‘ari added, all the damned in hell would rise to thunder the same protest. The parable, we are told, left the Mu‘tazili master speechless.

Of this anecdote we can say “*Si non è vero è ben trovato*” (if it isn’t true, it’s well invented). Beyond its obvious point, it captures a fundamental difference between Mu‘tazilis and those who, like Ash‘ari, broke with them and rejected their doctrines. The Mu‘tazili expounds a grand principle which is impeccably rational; the Ash‘arite responds with gritty and indigestible particulars. (Ghazali was to prove a master of this strategy.) Doctrinal traps are set. The Ash‘arite will ask: if God is just and does what’s optimal, how do you explain the sufferings of innocent animals? They will be recompensed in the hereafter, the Mu‘tazili blithely replies. Does this mean, the Ash‘arite shoots back, that every mosquito we swat, every bedbug we squash, will receive a reward in paradise?

Ash‘ari died over a century before Ghazali’s birth. He had adopted certain features of the Mu‘tazili tradition, most notably their methods of argument, while rejecting some of their doctrinal principles. Or rather, he rejected them by turning them on their heads, as Ghazali would do later, in his own way.

On the question of divine justice, the Ash‘arite solution was more drastic. For the Ash‘arites, neither good nor evil could be said to exist objectively. God is the creator of moral values; He defines justice as He wills. What He does is, perforce, just and good and right, however questionable it may appear to us. Truthfulness is not intrinsically good nor is lying bad. They are good or bad because God has

determined them so. But God could command tomorrow that lying would be good and it would be good, just as He could command the rain to fall up instead of down. In the physical sphere as in the moral, no law of nature rules. The occurrence or non-occurrence of everything depends on the sovereign will of God, instant by instant.

Ghazali is ostensibly as anti-Mu‘tazili as his great founder; and yet, with his customary sly eclecticism, he is not impervious to all their arguments. He ridiculed the doctrine of the optimum but later, in key Sufi texts, he resurrected it for his own purposes, totally transformed, even if the taint of its origins would cling to his formulations.

PHILOSOPHY (*FALSAFA*)

Philosophy, in Islam, represents a quite specific tradition. Theology, in some form or another, would undoubtedly have developed within Islam, but philosophy had a pre-Islamic origin. It came to Muslims through translations from Greek, first into Syriac and then into Arabic; such translations, beginning in the eighth century, continued to be made for some three hundred years. The word is itself foreign: the Arabic *falsafa* is simply the Greek *philosophia* taken over entire, and a philosopher was a *faylasuf* (plural *falasifa*). Moreover, philosophy, during the centuries in which it was steadily infiltrating the Islamic *milieu*, was resolutely Aristotelean, though modified by the Neo-Platonic tradition of almost a millennium. This elaborate hybrid tradition, not merely injected into Arabic and Islamic culture but creatively assimilated and elaborated by men of genius, from Kindi to Ibn Rushd, constituted philosophy for Ghazali. Other ancient currents were represented: Plotinus (though the extant portions of his *Enneads* were thought to be by Aristotle), Galen, Alexander of Aphrodisias, and Ammonius were all important, as were the more fragmentary remnants of Pythagorean, Stoic, Epicurean, and Democritan teachings. But it was overwhelmingly the neo-Platonic Aristotelianism of late antiquity – mediated by

centuries of translation and interpretation and creatively transfigured by Kindi, Farabi, and Ibn Sina – which dominated. For Ghazali, this tradition was appealing; its methods, most especially the reliance on demonstrative proof, in the form of syllogisms, held out the possibility of a higher and more compelling discourse than that provided by *Kalam*. At the same time, he roundly rejected those tenets of the philosophers, such as the eternity of the world, which he deemed heretical. In dealing with *falsafa*, Ghazali found himself, as he said, in the position of the skilled snake-handler who must extract poison for useful purposes. I shall deal with this in more detail – and in particular, with Ghazali’s complex interactions with *falsafa* – in Chapter Four.

THE ISMA‘ILIS

The Isma‘ilis, a group from an opposed tradition, during Ghazali’s lifetime represented a considerable threat in the shape of the Fatimid Dynasty which was based in Cairo. The Fatimids were powerful rivals to the Seljuqs in political and military terms but they also constituted a subtler and more pervasive menace. According to tradition (though their activities are attested only from a century later), the Isma‘ilis had seceded from mainstream Shi‘ism upon the death of the Imam Ja’far al-Sadiq in 762, over the question of succession to the Imamate. Those who would become “Isma‘ilis” advocated the Imamate of Ja’far’s son, Isma‘il. They further upheld a line of seven Imams – hence, their designation as “Seveners” – whereas other Shi‘ites, the “Twelvers” (the majority of Shi‘ites in present-day Iran and Iraq), postulated a series of twelve. To the Twelvers, the Isma‘ilis were heretics (both factions are considered heretics by Sunnis).

Late in the ninth century, the Isma‘ilis began sending out propagandists and missionaries to every corner of the Islamic world, to proselytize and spread the faith. These missionaries (*da‘is* in Arabic), ranged far and wide. They had penetrated Khorasan well before Ghazali’s birth. (In his autobiography, Ibn Sina, who died some

twenty years before Ghazali was born, mentions that one such propagandist came to his house while he was quite young and succeeded in converting both his father and his brother, though he rejected the call.) Under the Fatimids, this proselytizing activity became institutionalized in a designated ministry and its agents routinely infiltrated the Seljuq domains. Isma‘ili activities posed a genuine danger. Small wonder that the Caliph Mustazhir would commission Ghazali to write anti-Isma‘ili polemics to counter the threat, an episode I shall discuss further in Chapter Five.

The danger was not solely doctrinal. A breakaway group of Isma‘ilis (afterwards known as the Nizaris), supporters of Nizar for the Fatimid Caliphate, engaged in targeted assassinations of adversaries. These Isma‘ilis, ensconced in their mountain stronghold of Alamut and under the leadership of Hasan-i Sabah, the “Old Man of the Mountain,” were the dreaded “Assassins” of Marco Polo, and later became well-known to the Crusaders, whom they harried effectively. (There is a fanciful legend that in their youth, Ghazali and Hasan-i Sabah, and the mathematician, philosopher, and poet Umar Khayyam, rubbed convivial shoulders, but this is clearly apocryphal.) The mortal danger posed by the Nizaris was brought home when Ghazali’s patron, the vizier Nizam al-Mulk, became the victim, on October 14, 1092, of a Nizari assassin’s dagger. (It is sometimes suggested that Malik Shah, the Seljuq Sultan who had long chafed under the dominance of his manipulative vizier, instigated his murder; if so, he reaped no benefit from the deed: he died a month after Nizam al-Mulk.)

For Ghazali, the Isma‘ilis constituted a political danger, but it was their doctrines that he especially sought to counter. He opposed their emphasis on a hidden (or esoteric) series of truths known only to the Imam, and objected to the corollary of this notion; that truth might be transmitted only on the authority of an Imam. This smacked too closely of “belief based on authority,” or *taqlid*, which he had succeeded in shaking off. In addition, it undermined reason and worse, it narrowed the path to truth, confining it to those with privileged access. We’ll come back to these, and further, objections to

Isma‘ilism later, when we consider Ghazali’s fourfold division of the ways to truth, as outlined in his autobiography.

SUFISM

By Ghazali’s time, Sufism had a long history. The Arabic word for this distinctive form of Islamic mysticism is *tasawwuf*, which derives from the word for “wool” (*suf*), presumably an allusion to the coarse woollen garments favored by the first Sufis. These early masters, emerging in the early eighth century, were ascetics, much given to fasting, wakefulness, constant prayer and meditation, and voluntary poverty. The tales of their exploits, tribulations, visions and insights, make up much of Sufi literature, and Ghazali draws on them liberally. The *Ihya’* abounds in vivid and pithy anecdotes of these saints. Their sayings and actions, as extravagant as they are enigmatic, provide a dramatic illustration of model behaviour for the aspiring mystic, and Ghazali often introduces such tales to clinch a point. He could draw on a rich body of literature which he exploited to the hilt, ransacking compilations from a century or so before along with those of his older contemporary, the great Ash‘arite theologian and mystic, Qushayri.

From such elements, both those which he accepted – Shafi‘ite jurisprudence, Ash‘arite theology, and Sufi theory and practise – and those which he rejected – Mu‘tazili doctrine and Aristotelian philosophy – Ghazali fashioned a new and compelling system of thought and action. I don’t want to present him as a rigid champion of official orthodoxies, whether legal or theological. He is the heir of shadier tendencies too, and these peep out, often unexpectedly, in the midst of unimpeachable discourse. They include not only the protracted tradition of philosophical skepticism (which he is often said to have brought to an end, but of which he was once – and in a certain sense remained – a bold exponent), but also the whole unruly, exploratory, suspect and at times dissident Iranian tradition that flourished in the century or so before his birth. Outwardly,

Ghazali seems the very antithesis of this tendency, but his intellectual restlessness, as well as his independence of mind, suggest otherwise. There are references to disreputable mystics such as Hallaj, executed for blasphemy in 922, whom Ghazali admired, sometimes quite openly (Ormsby 2000, 58). There are clear influences from traditions which he publicly repudiated and combated, such as the Mu‘tazili and the Isma‘ili. Early critics criticized him for a too-close familiarity with such crypto-Isma‘ili works as the *Epistles* of the Brethren of Purity, a work which, he tells us in his autobiography, he had studied; he clearly borrowed from it in later works (Hodgson, 2: 181–184; de Callatay, 109).

Ghazali’s honorific was “The Proof of Islam,” a title by which he is still known today. But the “proof” was composed of many elements. Chief among these was the place of his origins, the now-vanished city of Tus, in the north-eastern province of Iran, Khorasan.



THE RISE TO RENOWN

A CHILD OF KHORASAN

On November 18, 1933, the English traveller Robert Byron visited the shrine of Mashhad and the ruins of nearby Tus. In his classic work, *The Road to Oxiana*, he described the site:

Mounds and ridges betray the outlines of the old city. An antique bridge of eight arches spans the river. And a massive domed mausoleum, whose brick is the colour of dead rose-leaves, stands up against the blue mountains. No one knows whom this commemorated; though from its resemblance to the mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar at Merv, it seems to have been built in the XIIIth century. It alone survives of the splendours of Tus.

Flanked by mountain ranges to the north and the great desert to the south, Tus was a bustling and prestigious city until its destruction by the Mongols in 1220. Its most illustrious son was the poet Firdawsi, who was born in the nearby village of Razan and died there at an advanced age in 1025; his tomb has remained a site of veneration for almost a millennium. In the tenth century, Tus was the second most important town of Khorasan after Nishapur, and was famed for products such as stone jars made of serpentine, for gold, silver, copper and iron, and for semi-precious gemstones such as turquoise and malachite. The area had a lively export trade, particularly of such luxuries as truffles and “edible earth,” a strange greenish clay, used for desserts.

Tus was an amalgam of two towns, Nuqan and Tabaran, and benefited from its proximity to the great garden in the village of Sanabadh, where both the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid and the eighth Imam of the Twelver Shi'ah 'Ali al-Rida lay entombed. (Shi'ite pilgrims customarily kicked the Caliph's tomb, while calling down blessings on the Imam's.) Whatever lustre the ruins of Tus now possess comes from the magnificent shrine of the Imam at Mashhad, still the object of pilgrimage and fervent veneration.

Firdawsi had been dead for almost thirty years when, in 1058, Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Ghazali, later to be crowned with the honorific "The Proof of Islam," was born in a nearby village. His origins remain obscure. According to some accounts, he came from a family of poor but respectable gentry; according to others, he came from a line of scholars and jurists; according to yet another, his father was a rather austere Sufi. He had a younger brother, Ahmad Ghazali (d. 1126), who became a celebrated preacher and an influential Sufi theorist in his own right. But we know almost nothing of his background.

Even his name is a puzzle. Should it be spelled "Ghazzali" or "Ghazali"? According to the biographer Ibn Khallikan, born a century later, the double z, reflecting the use of the people of Khwarizm and Jurjan, is analogous with such names as Qassari or 'Attari, that is, a name drawn from a profession, such as "fuller" (*qassar*) or "perfumer" (*'attar*); in this case, the name would derive from the profession of "spinner" (*ghazzal*), but it may come from the place-name Ghazala, a village near Tus (Ibn Khallikan, 1:82). The latter – and more likely – form is commonly accepted and I'll use it here.

Ghazali was and remained a child of Khorasan, the north-eastern Iranian province of legendary troublemakers and mavericks; from here came the armies which overthrew the Umayyad Dynasty in the 740s and established the long-lived reign of the Abbasids, founders of the city of Baghdad in 762. When the Spanish philosopher Ibn Tufayl sought to express his scorn for Ghazali, he referred to him as "that fellow from Tus" and the phrase suggests a disdain that goes beyond the merely philosophical.

Tus, where Ghazali's roots lay, was a savagely contested city, where dreadful massacres had taken place in 1034, some twenty years before his birth. In that year, Tus declared war on Nishapur, but was defeated. The governor of the neighboring province of Kirman, who intervened with his cavalry, had 20,000 citizens of Tus rounded up, whom he "crucified on trees and along the roads" (*EI*², 10:742). The region suffered other upheavals: Nishapur, where Ghazali would later study, experienced a severe earthquake in 1145 and in 1153, a few years before his birth, the city was sacked and virtually destroyed by marauding Turks. In 1038, the Seljuq Tughril Bey had appeared in Tus with his forces, prompting the Ghaznavid Sultan Mas'ud to mount "a fast female elephant and set out for Tus with a detachment of the army," according to one chronicler (Nishapuri, 37).

The troubled region offered opportunities to the venturesome. This was not only because the Seljuq regime sought out promising young scholars to promote its doctrinal agenda – a program which benefited Ghazali at the outset of his career – but also because the area had long had a rich intellectual and spiritual history. It was especially propitious for mysticism; many of the saints and mystics whom Ghazali would later quote and hold up as models came from Khorasan, including such ecstatic Sufis as Abu Yazid Bistami (d. 877), whose wild sayings included the shocking "Glory be to me!" (a formulation normally reserved for God), to the popular and much-loved Abu Sa'id ibn abi'l-Khayr (d. 1049), who had once stayed in Tus. Khorasan "came to be known as the land whose product is saints" (Keeler, 107). In this context, Ghazali's later embrace of Sufism suggests a return to his spiritual roots. And it was to Tus, as well as to Nishapur, that he would actually return, as to his homeland, in the committed Sufi phase of his later years.

Sufism certainly prospered in Khorasan before and after Ghazali but in other areas of endeavor there seems to have been a strong sense of spiritual stagnation, of decline both in piety and learning. A generation earlier, another native, the great Persian poet, traveller, and Fatimid agent Nasir-i Khosraw (1004–1089?) lamented its fallen state in one of his odes:

The land of Khorasan once was culture's abode
 But now has become a pit of sordid devils.
 Balkh was wisdom's own dwelling-place but now
 That habitation has turned to waste-land and capsized grandeur.
 How has Khorasan, once the dominion of Solomon,
 Now become a kingdom of devils accursed?

Divan, 79

Nasir-i Khosraw, as an Isma'ili, had doctrinal as well as political axes to grind – his “devils” are none other than the Seljuq Turks – and yet, it isn't religious deviation that he laments but the decline in culture, learning, and “wisdom” (*hikmat*: another term for philosophy). Among the Seljuqs, the prevailing sentiment was that the region was in spiritual and cultural disarray. A firm desire to re-assert “orthodoxy” (in Sunni form), along with an energetic reforming impulse in areas such as education, characterized the dynasty from its beginnings. Ghazali shared this zeal. It echoes in his lifelong calls for revival – the very term emphasized in the title of his masterpiece – as well as in his stated ambition to become the “renewer of religion” for his own age.

THE STAGES OF HIS CAREER

Ghazali died in 1111, at the age of fifty-three or fifty-four. It has become customary to divide his life into four or five significant stages, with 1095 as a crucial demarcation (Bouyges, 6). In this year, as we know, he experienced the breakdown which changed his life utterly and led him to Sufism. (I describe this crisis in more detail in Chapter Five.) These stages are:

Early years (1058–1085): encompassing his childhood and early education, as well as his first writings on law; in these years he studied with various masters in Jurjan and Nishapur; the period ended with the death of Juwayni, his greatest teacher, in 1085.

The “public” decade (1085–1095) found him teaching at the Nizamiyya *madrasa* in Baghdad and enjoying the patronage of Nizam

al-Mulk, which gave him standing at both the Caliph's and the Sultan's court; during these years he wrote his first mature works on law, philosophy and logic, polemic and dogmatics.

The crisis and withdrawal from public life (1095–1106): these are the years following his breakdown when he embraced Sufism and left Baghdad for years of seclusion and wandering, first in Damascus, then in Jerusalem; he performed the pilgrimage; in the first two years, he composed the *Ihya'*, his masterpiece, as well as several other works on mysticism in both Arabic and Persian, along with his “Book of Counsel for Kings” (in Persian).

His second “public” period (1106–1109) saw Ghazali teaching in Nishapur; he wrote his autobiography, the *Munqidh min al-dalal*, and his final great work on legal theory; he acted as spiritual advisor to aspiring Sufis.

In his final years (1109–1111) of renewed retreat and seclusion, he reportedly established a Sufi “convent” and wrote works on eschatology and theology, the latter completed just days before his death in December 1111.

In this book, I will follow these stages loosely. In this chapter, for example, I touch on certain significant aspects of his early training and experience; in later chapters I will return to what seem to me the biographical factors most pertinent to an understanding of his thought. There is a reason for this erratic approach: a division into neat stages offers a convenient approach to a complex life; nevertheless, it is one which Ghazali probably would have rejected. Seen from outside, his life has swerves and detours; seen from within, it follows a hidden trajectory, with seemingly inevitable momentum. Perhaps this is how it presented itself to the eye of inner recollection when he came to write his spiritual autobiography, some time between 1106 and 1109. Not a series of fits and starts but a course dictated by the search for certainty, which disclosed its deepest coherence only after that certainty had been found. What is striking about Ghazali is that while he saw his life as broken in two by his terrible crisis, in retrospect he discovered an inner logic, a compelling momentum, in the course of his career, when viewed with the “eyes of the heart.” Seen

thus, the earlier stages, when he struggled blindly towards the truth, oddly prefigured and mirrored the later. To give one example: in his early scepticism Ghazali questioned the reliability of the senses, but in his later, altered perspective, the senses themselves, mysteriously transfigured, proved to be the touchstones of truth. Taste, the least communicable of the senses, offered the final certainty, serving as a metaphor for the ultimate mystical experience.

EARLY STUDIES: SUFI MASTERS AND THEOLOGIANS

Ghazali was orphaned early; however, his father left enough money for him to begin the study of law under the Imam and Sufi master Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Radhakani (or Radkani) in Tus while still a child. This scholar came from the village of Radkan, which lies “halfway between Khabushan and Tus” (LeStrange, 394). Radkan was also the birthplace of the vizier Nizam al-Mulk, later Ghazali’s patron. Such regional connections with the learned and the powerful among the “Tusian mafia” would remain a constant in Ghazali’s later career.

Somewhat later, Ghazali travelled to Jurjan to sit at the feet of the Imam Abu Nasr al-Isma‘ili. Around the same time he studied with the Sufi master Ahmad ‘Ali al-Farmadhi, another scholar from Tus, who reportedly had studied under Ghazali’s father. Farmadhi, once a pupil of Abu al-Qasim al-Qushayri, the renowned Ash‘arite theologian and Sufi master, was himself a quite eminent Sufi whose early influence on Ghazali seems to have been profound. He mentions him with great respect twice, once without directly naming him in his anti-Isma‘ili polemic, the *Mustazhiri* (Goldziher 1916, 30 and 108), and later explicitly, in his treatise on the divine names (*Maqсад*, 162). Even Nizam al-Mulk – no respecter of persons – honored Farmadhi. According to the chronicler Ibn al-Athir, whenever Qushayri or Juwayni came into Nizam al-Mulk’s presence, the vizier would rise to greet them, only to return quickly to his seat but:

when Abu Ali al-Farmadhi came in, he would rise to receive him, seat him where he himself had been, and take his seat before him. This was remarked on to him, and he said, “The first two and their like, when they come into my presence say to me, ‘You are such and such,’ and they praise me for what is not in me. Their words increase my self-satisfaction and pride. The latter shaykh tells me of my soul’s faults and how wicked I am. My spirit is thereby humbled and I recoil from much of what I am doing.”

Ibn al-Athir, 257

In his later years, Ghazali too would speak with frankness to figures of authority, inspired no doubt by the example of this master of his youth.

JUWAYNI

Ghazali’s first decisive opportunity occurred in 1077, when he was around nineteen, when he joined the circle of the illustrious theologian and jurist Abu al-Ma’ali al-Juwayni in Nishapur. Though Ghazali had been introduced to Sufi teaching at an early age, the influence of the formidable Juwayni, one of the greatest figures in the history of Islamic theology, proved more decisive in the short term, and it was as a jurist and theologian that Ghazali first came to prominence and won powerful patronage.

Juwayni was at the height of his influence during Ghazali’s student years. Though he had once taken refuge for four years in Mecca and Medina as a result of a factional dispute in which the anti-Ash’arite Seljuq vizier Kunduri played a part, his fortunes changed radically after Nizam al-Mulk – the rival vizier who later contrived to have Kunduri executed – instated an Ash’arite agenda and furthered the establishment of “colleges,” or *madrasas*, dedicated to Ash’arite and Shafi’ite principles. Juwayni, who had earned the honorific “Imam of the Two Sacred Shrines” (Mecca and Medina) during his exile, now basked in official favor. If his early biographers are to be believed, Ghazali soon became a star pupil. His quickness of mind dazzled his fellow students. Even Juwayni, not lavish with praise,

called him “a sea to drown in,” a standard compliment with a bit of an edge: though his teacher bragged about Ghazali, he is said secretly to have resented him. In an interesting prefiguration of Ghazali’s own later distrust of theology, Juwayni, who died in 1085, is reported to have turned in his final years to “the religion of the old women,” simple unquestioning piety rather than the pyrotechnics of dialectic. This is probably apocryphal; it is a well-known topos. Shortly before his death, St. Thomas Aquinas supposedly experienced a vision which showed him that his theological labours amounted to nothing but “straw,” and in the Islamic world, the later Ash‘arite theologian Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1209) reportedly repented of his lifelong devotion to theology on his death-bed.

Juwayni was a more rigorous thinker than his pupil. His theological works, especially his monumental *Irshad*, are characterized by precise formulations and tightly-constructed arguments. Throughout his technical works on theology and law, Ghazali followed his example, even as he refined and elaborated his master’s methods, particularly by the introduction of forms of argument drawn from Aristotelian logic. In this respect, Ghazali’s treatises furthered the development of a new form of theology destined to become dominant in the Sunni world; the construction of systematic, all-encompassing compendia, similar to the *summae* of scholastic theologians in the medieval Christian tradition.

But Juwayni’s legacy to Ghazali was not only formal. Certain fundamental principles link them, however much, in his later years, the pupil diverged from the master’s practise and example. One principle, articulated in Juwayni’s *Irshad*, is that “knowledge is the recognition of the thing known as it really is” (Juwayni, 8). (The formulation resembles the earlier philosopher Kindi’s dictum, drawn from Greek thought, that philosophy entails “a knowledge of the true natures of things in so far as this is possible to man.”) Ghazali restates this principle in the opening chapter of the *Ihya’* (1:41). In elucidating the point, Juwayni points out that such knowledge is not simply “conviction accompanied by a feeling of certitude.” An ignoramus can feel certain of his conviction, but he isn’t knowledgeable; a simple person

can claim to know something on the authority of another, but this too isn't truly knowledge, because it does not guarantee certainty. "Certainty" (*yaqin* in Arabic) poses its own problems, not only in terms of how it may be attained but also of how it may be recognized when attained. Can certainty be gained through dialectic or through demonstrative reasoning or must it inevitably come through the guidance of a divinely inspired authority? The question would preoccupy Ghazali intensely in later years. Genuine knowledge involves recognition of what actually is in both the temporal and the eternal realms; it avoids mere supposition as well as fancy. In his *Mi'yar al-'ilm* (Bouyges, 18), the treatise on logic, probably written towards the end of 1095, he defines "certain knowledge" as occurring when "you know that a thing with such-and-such a characteristic corresponds to a proposition about it in such a way that it cannot not be thus" (*Mi'yar*, 180). The foundation of Ghazali's emphasis on certainty rests on this bedrock. (The further problem of how you know that you know a certainty remains, and he would later tackle it.) Nevertheless, an exacting knowledge of actuality at its utmost would form his lifelong goal, even if the way to such knowledge remained problematic for a long time.

THE PATRONAGE OF THE POWERFUL

Ghazali's brilliance caught the attention of a powerful patron. At some point after 1085, he joined the Sultan's camp-court, where Nizam al-Mulk welcomed him. According to his earliest biographer, his former student Abd al-Ghafir al-Farisi, Nizam al-Mulk was interested in Ghazali largely because of "his excellence in disputation and his command of language." In the vizier's assemblies, Ghazali encountered "... tough adversaries. He disputed with luminaries and debated the distinguished. Thus, his name became known far and wide" ('Uthman, 42).

The encounter was to prove auspicious in other ways. Nizam al-Mulk arranged for Ghazali to be appointed to the Nizamiyya

madrasa of Baghdad, one of a network of nine schools which he established during the dynasty (and which bore his name), to inculcate Ash‘arite theology and Shafi‘ite law; others were founded in Balkh, Mawsil, Marw, and Nishapur. Ghazali became a popular teacher, revered by his pupils; he boasted of classes three hundred-strong. According to Farisi, his erstwhile student, Ghazali’s “teaching and disputation delighted everyone, and after holding the Imamate of Khurasan he became the Imam of Iraq.”

The title of Imam, which literally denotes the leader of prayer in a mosque, has a long history in Islam. For Sunni Muslims, the first Caliphs – especially Abu Bakr and ‘Umar – were Imams par excellence, embodying spiritual as well as political authority. The Caliph, in his role as Imam, was the prayer-leader of the community; he was also obliged to deliver the Friday sermon, or *khutba*. But over time, as the power of the caliphate weakened, the Caliph’s representatives – regional governors and other designated officials – could act as Imams in his stead (*EP* 6:674).

Among Shi‘ites, by contrast, the Imamate has a wholly different significance; the “Imami” Shi‘ites postulate a line of twelve Imams, all of whom are considered both sinless and infallible, as well as endowed with supernatural knowledge and power. For the Isma‘ilis – “Sevener” Shi‘ites as opposed to the “Twelver” tradition of the Imamis – only seven quasi-prophetic leaders are recognized, though the Caliphs of the Fatimids, the powerful Isma‘ili dynasty in Egypt which I mentioned earlier, were also reckoned as Isma‘ili Imams. In Ghazali’s case, his office represented an extension of caliphal spiritual authority. Like his teacher Juwayni, the “Imam of the Two Holy Shrines,” Ghazali the Imam would have been responsible for Shafi‘ite ritual practise, first in Khorasan and then in all Iraq; his duties would have included supervision of public prayer and the administration of mosques. The position brought Ghazali prestige, and he enjoyed it, as he frankly admits in his autobiography.

GHAZALI AT COURT

In 1092, on the death of the Sultan Malik Shah, the Caliph Muqtadi informed the Sultan's shrewd and scheming widow, Turkun Khatun, that her four-year-old son Mahmud would succeed his father as Sultan in name alone, with real power invested in the vizier, Unur (*EP* 8:942). She objected to this arrangement (which was probably engineered by Nizam al-Mulk's son, a bitter enemy). Ghazali was sent to persuade her; his authoritative statement, "your son is young and the Law does not allow him to be ruler" proved unanswerable. Somewhat later, on the death of the Caliph Muqtadi in 1093, we find Ghazali present at the investiture of his successor, the sixteen-year-old who took the throne-title al-Mustazhir bi-Allah. Ghazali stood alongside such notables as the vizier, as well as "the Sultan's emirs and all the holders of offices ... with their retinues, and the chief qadi" (Ibn al-Athir, 273). As a high-ranking member of the 'ulama', Ghazali offered condolences to the new Caliph on the death of his father and took the oath of allegiance, together with other dignitaries. Such glimpses give a sense of the privileged and influential role Ghazali played during his Baghdad years. As he admitted later, this role was immensely gratifying.

The place of scholars at the Seljuq – and Abbasid – courts was well-established. Nizam al-Mulk articulated this in his *Book of Government or Rules for Kings*, an early masterpiece of Persian prose, in passages such as:

It is incumbent upon the king to enquire into religious matters, to be acquainted with the divine precepts and prohibitions and put them into practise, and to obey the commands of God; it is his duty to respect doctors of religion and pay their salaries out of the treasury, and he should honor pious and abstemious men. Furthermore it is fitting that once or twice a week he should invite religious elders to his presence and hear from them the commands of The Truth ... During that time he should free his mind from worldly cares and give his ears and attention to them. Let him bid them take sides and hold a debate, and let him ask questions about what he does not understand; when he has learnt the answers let him commit them to memory.

Nizam al-Mulk, 59–60

He continues, “Holding consultations on affairs is a sign of sound judgment, high intelligence and foresight.” Ghazali would have agreed. The scholar was the theological conscience of the sovereign. In his admonitory treatise to the Sultan, we read that:

The ruler should be always thirsting to meet devout ‘*ulama*’ and ask them for advice; and ... he should beware of meeting ‘*ulama*’ with worldly ambitions who might inveigle, flatter and seek to please him in order to gain control over his terrestrial body by stealth and deceit. The devout ‘*alim*’ is not one who has covetous designs on the treasury, but one who gives his knowledge in just measure.

Nasihah, 19

Though the second part of the treatise has been incorrectly ascribed to Ghazali (Crone, 167–192), this advice comes from the first, apparently genuine, segment of the work. The passage is noteworthy not only because of the emphasis Ghazali places on the religious scholar’s official role – and the gravity of his tone lifts it above the self-serving – but because of the caution he expresses; already that disillusionment with the scholarly class, which forms so harsh a theme in his later writings, is coming through loud and clear.

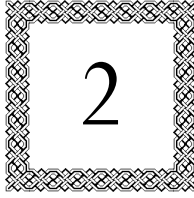
Official favor and its attendant prestige agreed with Ghazali. His ten or so years of public life were years of great productivity. His large and varied output, ranging from treatises on law to densely argued expositions and critiques of philosophy, from disquisitions on formal logic to austere manuals of theology and vigorous polemics, show that he was not exaggerating when later, in his autobiography, he described himself with becoming immodesty as a bold diver into the deepest seas of knowledge.

THE TEMPTATIONS OF PRESTIGE

The crisis of 1095 produced a changed man. Whatever inner coherence Ghazali might have discerned in his progress, the person who emerged from the ordeal of that year stood in obvious contrast to his

earlier self. For this, we have not only his own testimony but also that of his pupils. The transformation was most conspicuous in a single way: the young Ghazali had been driven by a thirst for truth but intense ambition drove him as well. Preferment, standing at court, social prestige, intellectual celebrity – these lures drew him and held him fast. Sufis identified such ambition with the quest for “place,” employing the Persian word *jāh* (which might be translated as “status,” with all that implies today). In the *Ihya'*, he devotes a chapter to status, in which he treats it as a vice and worse, an obstacle to salvation. Ghazali equates it with possessiveness: it is an attempt to own, not property, but the hearts of others; the status-conscious man manipulates others for his own ends, he is gluttonous for deference. As he says, “status and acquisitiveness are the twin pillars of this lower world.” He knew whereof he spoke: ambition and love of status proved Ghazali’s most troublesome hindrance on the Sufi path. Overcoming them consumed the last sixteen years of his life.

The works of Ghazali’s busy “public” decade, whether in theology, logic, or philosophy, form the foundation on which his later mystical thought firmly rests. In the next three chapters I will look at several of his most characteristic and significant writings from those years; some of these were composed in the immediate aftermath of the crisis – the demarcations of such a life cannot be tidy – but all had their origins in this decade. From certain disciplines, such as philosophy, Ghazali would pluck what was useful and benign while casting away what he considered harmful; others, such as logic or dialectical theology, would prove of more limited usefulness to him on the Sufi path. Theology in particular, for a variety of reasons, would continue to vex him to the end of his life, while the law would prove the mainstay of his career from beginning to end.



DEVOTION TO THE LAW

The constant in Ghazali's intellectual career is not to be found in "the quest for certainty" (as he himself claimed) or in the hurly-burly of dialectic or in the first principles of philosophy or even in the ineffable truths of Sufism, but rather, in his lifelong commitment to the law, and specifically, to the practise and theory of jurisprudence according to the tenets of the Shafi'ite school. Whatever his various excursions into almost every intellectual current of his time, it was with law that he began and with law that he ended. He trained as a jurist (*faqīh*); it was in this capacity that he first attracted the patronage and support of the powerful. His earliest compositions (now lost) were four technical treatises on methods of legal debate, written before 1086 (Hourani, 291); he regularly wrote and issued judicial rulings, or *fatwas*. Even during the busy decade of involvement at the Nizamiyya college, he found time to compile a huge book on theoretical jurisprudence (now lost), *Instruction in Legal Principles*. And his last major work, extant and published in two dense volumes, addressed the theoretical principles of law. This highly technical treatise, *al-Mustasfa min 'ilm al-usul*, was completed on August 5, 1109, a mere two years before his death.

GHAZALI'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO LAW

Ghazali's contributions to the development of Islamic law have not yet been sufficiently studied; though he continued and extended the

path marked out earlier by Juwayni, some of his initiatives were innovative. Ghazali was the first to introduce Aristotelian logic into discussions of theoretical jurisprudence (Hallaq, 39–40), even if that had little immediate effect. In his prescriptions for the time-honored injunction, fundamental to Islam, to “command the right and forbid the wrong,” Ghazali exerted lasting influence. His expositions of this topic, especially in the *Ihya’*, exhibit a scope and subtlety far beyond anything of which his predecessors, including Juwayni, were capable. His arguments shaped most subsequent discussions in the Shafi’ite tradition. As Michael Cook has shown, he not only devised new terminology but also organized legal discourse in a new and compelling manner. One impressive side-aspect of his achievement is its breadth; as Cook notes, “It is rare for a scholar to tell us whether it is incumbent on slaves and women to forbid wrong, and still more so for him to mention peasants, Beduin, Kurds and Turcomans” (Cook, 449). Such inclusiveness, especially with regard to women, is characteristic of the mature Ghazali. However, his method is also remarkable. He brings great sensitivity to human psychology to his treatment of legal issues, and his shrewd perceptions give unexpected depth to otherwise technical discussions. As we’ll see, after his commitment to Sufism, Ghazali would apply such insight to virtually every sphere of human endeavor; in his technical discourses on jurisprudence this is all the more striking because so unprecedented.

Ghazali’s lifelong commitment to law must be understood in context. As he acknowledged, mastery of the law remained important, both because it was meritorious in itself and, less loftily, because it enabled him to make a living. Towards the end of his life, he put it thus:

A specialization in this subject claimed me in the first flush of my youth because of its merits in both this world and the next, as well as the rewards of the life to come. Thus, it is fitting that I devote my heart to it in the time remaining to me and that I apportion to it a measure of what life is left to me. I have written many books on law – its theory as well as its practise – after which I turned to the Path of the Afterlife and the hidden secrets of religion.

Mustasfa, 1: 3

Ghazali revered the study of law but like theology, it could not produce that final certainty he sought; that was neither its province nor its purpose. And yet, somewhat to his own surprise, the law did lead him to God. He remarked later, “We became students for the sake of something else than God, but He was unwilling that it should be for the sake of anything but Himself” (Macdonald, 75). The law was his profession and he practised its skills to sustain himself and his family. But law also gave him the intellectual rigor and method to pursue the truth beyond its purlieus; it grounded him firmly in a reasoned grasp of the actual. His legal training and practise accorded well with his pronounced pragmatic streak and that in turn tinged even his more transcendent tendencies. His exposition of the Sufi way is marked throughout with the cautions of common sense.

THE EXAMPLE OF ANALOGY (*QIYAS*)

The use of analogy as a tool of legal reasoning distinguished the Shafi‘ite school from the beginning. Analogy entailed drawing out the implications of a broader ruling, as found in the Qur’an or the traditions, by applying *ijtihad*, or “mental effort.” As Shafi‘i explained in his *Risala*:

On all matters affecting a Muslim, there is either a binding decision or an indication as to the right answer. If there is a decision, it should be followed; if there is no indication as to the right answer, it should be sought by “mental effort,” and mental effort is “analogy.”

Shafi‘i, 288; tr. Khadduri; modified

For example, if wine is forbidden explicitly (as in Qur. 2:219), what is the status of a milder drink, such as *nabidh* or “palm wine?” It too is forbidden, for when we examine the underlying reason for the prohibition on wine, we realize that it is prohibited because it intoxicates. Intoxication is the factor which determines the prohibition; it is the “cause” (*‘illa* in legal parlance, what in Western legal theory would be termed the *ratio legis*, the reason for the law). Palm wine

intoxicates; therefore, by analogy, it too is prohibited, hence the formula: "All palm wine is intoxicating, therefore all palm wine is forbidden" (Brunschvig, 61).

In Shafi'ite legal theory, analogy falls into several categories. The term is also used, by Ghazali and others, to translate the Greek "syllogism." But legal analogy is not, and cannot be, expressive of an absolute truth in the same way as can a logical proof, as Ghazali recognized. Over the course of his career, he would come to define analogy and its uses rather more narrowly; at the same time, he would mix legal and logical discourse ever more freely, often employing examples drawn from jurisprudence in his expositions of Aristotelean logic. In his technical works on law, theology or logic, Ghazali was rigorous in his use of analogy. For example, in Qur. 17:23, kindness to one's parents is commanded in these words:

If either or both of them reach old age with you, say no word that shows impatience with them, and do not be harsh with them, but speak to them respectfully and, out of mercy, lower your wing in humility towards them and say, "Lord, have mercy on them, just as they cared for me when I was little."

tr. Abdel Halim, 176

May we infer from this that if speaking harshly to a father or mother is prohibited, then striking either of them must also be? The case seems obvious but the question is whether this represents a valid analogy, and Ghazali says that it does not. In his *Mankhul fi 'ilm al-usul* (Bouyges, 2), an early work, he argues that "both the context and the circumstances necessitate drawing this inference decisively" (Brunschvig, 62). The formulation of analogy cannot be immediate; it requires a modicum of careful reflection.

Nevertheless, Ghazali relies on analogy of a less rigorous sort throughout his work. The use of analogy characterizes his Sufi writings, where it crops up repeatedly as a form of analogical intuition. As in the legal process, in which *qiyas* must be the result of methodical consideration, so too, in the mystical path, meditation, contemplation, and reflection all must precede the onset of intuition.

Typically, that intuition involves some correspondence between, for example, creation and creator, in which the underlying cause – the *ratio legis*, if you will – is nothing less than divine wisdom. For Ghazali, it is the task of the initiate to draw such analogies from exemplary words and deeds – of the Prophet and his Companions, as well as the saints – and from visible phenomena, to discover the hidden ruling which lies beneath. The same method is at work in his resort to the (originally Mu‘tazilite) principle of “drawing inferences about the invisible from the visible.” In Ghazali’s hands, analogy becomes an instrument, based in scrupulous legal speculation, which can be extended, with modifications, to much wider fields of endeavor.

THE INDOLENCE OF THE LEARNED

The law was Ghazali’s chosen profession, but it wasn’t shouldered merely as a pious obligation. If at times he stood aloof from his profession, that may be because the law as then practised – and especially the behavior of its elite scholars, of whatever “school” – offended his sense of it as a sacred calling. He is scathing in his denunciations of the ‘*ulama*’, the learned, by which he seems to mean principally the jurists. In his view, they are grasping, venal, corrupt, and worldly. This is how he satirizes them in his *Faysal al-tafriqa* (Bouyges, 43), a late work on the definition of “unbelief” (*kufr*):

How could the hidden truths of the immaterial world manifest themselves to a people whose god is their undisciplined passions, whose object of worship is their leaders, whose direction of prayer is the *dinar*, whose religious law is their own frivolity, whose will is the promotion of reputation and carnal pleasures, whose worship is the service they render the rich ...?

Faysal, tr. Jackson, 87

That the jurists, the *fuqaha*, are the target of this diatribe becomes clear when he goes on to say that “all they possess of the religious

sciences is knowledge of such things as the rules of ritual purity and whether or not water distilled from saffron can be used for ritual purification.”

Throughout the *Ihya'*, he misses no opportunity of rebuking, condemning, and lampooning such scholars, sometimes with sarcastic gibes. Their hypocrisy scandalized and disillusioned him. He was most offended by their indolence, a vice for which he routinely lambasts them. The jurist is not supposed to be lazy in the service of the law; he must not merely serve the needs of his immediate fellows, but seek out those without benefit of legal expertise. Ghazali insists that the jurist has a duty “to go out into the rural hinterland of his town, and to the Beduin, the Kurds and the like, and to give them religious instruction” for “if you know that people are praying wrongly in the mosque, you cannot just sit at home, and much the same goes for the market-place” (Cook, 445). This is just one example of that practical form of Sufism Ghazali continually advocates; it is “knowledge in action” in the most mundane sense.

Ghazali was attacked by other scholars, particularly by Hanafites and traditionalist Hanbalites – constant instigators of disruption and upheaval in Seljuq Baghdad – and this must have nettled him. On the purely human level, his ambition and competitiveness vis-à-vis his colleagues cannot be discounted, but I think his fury had deeper roots. Sufis impressed him because they lived the lives they preached, while most scholars did not. And yet, the law represented the supreme expression of divine revelation elaborated for humans. To corrupt and betray it was reprehensible.

SHAFI‘I: THE BELOVED MODEL

It is instructive to note the high praise Ghazali constantly showers on the Imam Shafi‘i (767–820), the founder of his own legal “school.” Whenever Ghazali wishes to present a model of piety wedded to scholarship, he turns to Shafi‘i. With the exception of the Prophet himself, and perhaps Abu Bakr, the Companion of the Prophet (and

first Caliph), no one excites his admiration more than this early jurist. As he tells us, the Imam meticulously divided his nights into three activities: study, worship, and sleep. He read the Qur'an continually; whenever he came to verses invoking God's compassion, he would pause and ask God's mercy not only for himself but for all "Muslims and believers" and when he came to verses describing God's punishments, he would pause again and ask God's salvation not only for himself but for all believers. In this way, Ghazali remarks, "it was as if hope and fear were joined simultaneously within him" (*Ihya'*, 1:36). He praises Shafi'i's human traits too. His generosity was legendary and generosity, as Ghazali explains, "is the very basis of asceticism" since "only someone for whom this world is of small account will part from what he owns."

Shafi'i was also unusually sensitive to beauty, a trait which endeared him to Ghazali, who shared it. Once, when he heard a particularly beautiful recitation of Qur'an, the Imam "flushed and got goosebumps all over his skin and was stirred to his depths." In the *Maqсад*, his work on the divine names, Ghazali terms Shafi'i "a pious and perfect scholar," and introduces him as an instance of the unknowability we encounter in the presence of a profoundly learned man, an unknowability comparable (though on an infinitely lower level) to the unknowability of God Himself. Shafi'i appears throughout the *Ihya'* in similar guise. In his very human way, Shafi'i represents the consummate embodiment of that fusion of knowledge and action, which Ghazali came to see as indispensable to authentic spirituality. His reverent allusions to his master in all matters of jurisprudence as well as piety are not, I think, merely tacit rebukes to those false scholars who have degraded his example; his praise of Shafi'i constitutes a positive, and deeply felt, tribute to a model life, a life to be imitated.

FIDELITY TO THE LAW

I stress Ghazali's fidelity to law for three reasons. First, it reminds us that Ghazali stood, and continued to stand, within the Ash'arite and

Shafi‘ite traditions, however zealously he espoused Sufism and followed the Sufi path in later years (and however individual his interpretations of both the Ash‘arite and Shafi‘ite traditions). There was no contradiction in following Ash‘arism and professing Sufism: the renowned Qushayri, who influenced Ghazali, combined them with distinction. Nevertheless, his greatest and most influential teacher remained Juwayni – hardly a Sufi – who was not only a commanding theologian but an authority on legal theory, one of whose concise treatises on the subject is still studied as a classic treatment. And though he turned decisively to Sufism, Ghazali kept faith with this early influence.

Second, al-Ghazali’s devotion to legal studies colours our sense of him as a Sufi, suggesting how he differs both from his predecessors and his successors in the path. It’s difficult (though not impossible!) to imagine “drunken” Sufis, such as Abu Yazid al-Bistami or Hallaj, interrupting their raptures to delve into questions of the imperative mode and its force in legal injunctions. But Ghazali is a different sort of Sufi, not only because he does not belong to the ecstatic tendency of Sufism but because Sufism, for him, wasn’t an exclusive course; rather, it provided a method for integrating all significant knowledge under a single over-riding conception. Neither a visionary nor an abstract theoretician of Sufism, Ghazali’s contribution was to demonstrate, at length and in detail, how an ordinary life might be lived in accord with the highest spiritual principles; indeed, I’d put it even more strongly and say, how an ordinary life *must* be so lived. Daily life was to be infused with spirituality; the path was a continual ascent, day by day, not a succession of peaks. In this way, without becoming a popularizer of Sufism in the vulgar sense, he showed how the Path lay open to all who might seek it with sincere hearts.

Third, and perhaps most important, al-Ghazali’s fidelity to the study of jurisprudence reminds us that we oversimplify when we pigeon-hole medieval thinkers within categorical dovecotes of our own making. Ghazali later came to hold that reason could not be the final arbiter of truth; only “taste” could play that role. But it would be wrong to assume that he rejected reason. Throughout his Sufi

treatises, his most persuasive strategy relies neither on emotional appeals nor on appeals to mystical experience, but on logical methods and rational proof. To the end he remains a jurist in the woollen cloak of a Sufi. For him, the intellect remains “the arbiter who neither withdraws nor alters,” though intellect must be assisted by revealed truth which represents “the witness who is righteous and balanced” (*Mustasfa*, 1:3).

From the Ghazalian perspective, there is no contradiction between activity as a legal scholar and pursuit of the Sufi way. Knowledge itself, as he put it towards the end, is “a form of action;” at its best, knowledge is “the action of the heart,” itself “the most glorious of organs.” The underlying point, in sound Shafi‘ite fashion, lies in the intention. To be a judge or a lawyer – or for that matter, a bookseller, a scribe, a warrior or a merchant – while pursuing the highest truth, means only that one perform every requisite daily action of one’s profession or trade as well as one’s ritual obligations with a purified mind, and that ultimately one see all existence with “the eyes of the heart.” Perhaps the best description of the way in which jurisprudence and the mystical path were entwined in Ghazali’s personality and way of life comes from a later thinker, the fourteenth-century Hanbali theologian Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziya – a critical admirer – who described him as a “jurist of the soul.” The delicacy of the compliment lies in the fact that Ibn Qayyim is employing a term coined earlier by Ghazali for the practitioner of the Law who understands his calling as a spiritual mission, rather than the exercise of mere reasoning (*Ihya’*, 3:65 / Winter, 36).



THE DOUBLE-EDGED DISCIPLINE: GHAZALI AND THEOLOGY

Ghazali remained, by both training and by inclination, a theologian as well as a jurist from the beginning to the end of his career, but he was a peculiar theologian. He extolled theology as the most illustrious – and the most comprehensive – of the “sciences of religion,” and yet he was well aware of its limits. In part, this was a personal reaction; in his autobiography he confesses that theology “was inadequate in my case, nor was it a remedy for the illness of which I was complaining” (*Munqidh*, 16). More tellingly, in the last work he wrote he issued a warning to “ordinary folk” against the discipline, though only a few years previously he had exalted its merits. These reservations damaged his reputation. To judge from the five or six works of classical *Kalam* that he wrote over the course of his career, it seems clear that his attitude towards theology was colored by two factors: the audience he was addressing, and the context in which he was writing. When he writes for fellow scholars, he assigns theology its rightful place of honor but when he is addressing non-specialists, he sounds a note of caution. Even more pointedly, when discussing the driving quest for certainty that consumed him, he finds himself obliged to define the limits of the science. This is not inconsistency but a judicious assessment of the scope and objectives proper to theology.

He makes his reservations quite clear in his *Faysal*, his late work on the bounds of belief. In this, he says that involvement with *Kalam*

should be forbidden except for two types of people: first, “a man whose heart develops doubts which neither simple religious homilies nor prophetic reports will remove,” and second, “a person of superior intelligence who is firmly grounded in religion and whose faith is reinforced by the light of certainty who wants to acquire this discipline in order to be able to treat those who fall sick with doubts.” But he caps this by noting that belief based on the proofs of *Kalam* tends to be shaky, liable to collapse “upon encountering the simplest sophism” (*Faysal*, 123–124).

Ghazali chafed at the limitations of theology but he uses its arguments, terminology, and distinctive methodology throughout his later work. His Sufi writings are not only permeated by theological considerations but also held together in an important way by dialectical presuppositions. Philosophy came to furnish the intellectual structure and framework of his mystical treatises, and especially of the *Ihya'*, but theology supplied the foundations. You might even say that, for him, theology represented the unspoken propaedeutic of the Sufi approach; it was the ledge, however precarious, from which any bolder leap would have to be launched. And afterwards, even after truth had been “tasted” – that is, experienced in living practise – theology retained its proper standing and its appointed uses. It went as far as it could go, though that would not prove to be far enough.

THEOLOGY VS PHILOSOPHY

Ghazali's productivity as a theologian increased after his exposure to philosophy. In the flurry of works just before and following his existential crisis – all of which, amazingly enough, were written in a two-year period – he had already begun that cautious fusion of notions and methods which were to find so original an expression in his master-work. We might say that the critical engagement with philosophy revealed to him the radical shortcomings of theology, in much the same way as the insights of Sufism were to render

both philosophy and theology subsidiary to the search for final truth, however useful each might be in its own domain. There was a further difference: theology had been compromised by doctrinal and factional disagreements but philosophy was more problematic still, for several of its tenets were heretical, and damnably so; to deny the resurrection of the body, the creation of the world, or God's knowledge of particular things, was to fall into heresy. As a science of dialectic, relying on argument and counter-argument, theology possessed an inbuilt mechanism for correcting itself. Philosophy, notwithstanding the real and numerous differences of opinion among philosophers, was more dangerous; it presented a systematic and comprehensive view of the world. That meant that philosophy, if any of it were to be salvaged, had to be knocked apart from the inside.

Ghazali tells us that certainty was his constant goal. To know something with certainty, he says, is to know it in the same way you know that someday you will die. But there are degrees of cognition – the usual triad is “opinion,” “conviction,” and “knowledge,” in ascending order of importance – and only the last of these occurs through the right use of the intellect. Even so, Ghazali argues that there exists a “stage beyond intellect” which is not demonstrable. Only through that ultimate knowledge can certainty be attained.

AGAINST A “RELIGION OF DONKEYS”

Knowledge has degrees. The lowest of these is unquestioning acceptance of doctrine on the basis of authority, or *taqlid*; though a distinct step above outright ignorance and though quite appropriate for certain believers, it is reprehensible in scholars. Ghazali attacks *taqlid* of this sort, the unthinking credulity of the learned, but *taqlid* resembles innocence: once lost, it cannot be recovered. Ghazali tells us that at one moment in his development, he broke free of this protective ignorance which then, as he noted in a famous simile, “shattered like glass” (*Munqidh*, 15).

One way to consider Ghazali's intellectual development is to view it as an incessant struggle towards ever-greater awareness; that is how he himself saw it, and his works bear him out. It is to follow him farther and farther away from what one of his contemporaries called "a religion of donkeys:" a merely reflexive religion, the faith of those who are whipped along the way. It is important to stress, however, that he does not mean to disparage simple believers, whose piety he admired, remarking that "true faith is the faith of the masses that develops in their hearts from childhood" (*Faysal*, 124). Ghazali was not criticizing the "religion of the old women" – supposedly praised by Juwayni at the end of his life – but the lazy ignorance of the learned. To escape such ignorance, in all its literal asininity, impelled Ghazali to explore science after science, discipline after discipline, in the search for certainty.

GHAZALI THE THEOLOGIAN

To give some sense of Ghazali's involvement with *Kalam*, I will briefly consider two of his fundamental theological works: first, a formal manual of dogmatic theology, and second, a freer and more original work in which the infusion of philosophy by theology is unmistakable. Ghazali wrote a number of other theological works ranging from the *Qawa'id al-'Aqa'id*, a work he first composed during his stay in Jerusalem as an "epistle" for Muslims there (and later expanded and embedded in the second book of the *Ihya'*) to a series of polemical treatises attacking the Isma'ilis (or "Batinites"). But the line isn't always easy to draw. Though he stands in the tradition of Ash'arite *Kalam*, which he both promoted and refined, his theological works rarely conform to type. Even the most ostensibly "orthodox" are intermingled with other elements, drawn predominantly from philosophy. The boundaries of the genres, once so precise, become blurred with Ghazali. Thus, later in life, he would look back on his attack on philosophy in the *Tahafut* – to be discussed in the next chapter – as a work of "*Kalam*," though that book would strike most readers as resolutely "philosophical."

Theology vs Philosophy in Islam

As I noted in the Introduction, theology in Islam, though indebted to foreign influences in certain of its methods, was an indigenous discipline; it proceeded by rational modes of argument, typically presented in disputation, from revealed truths, and was dialectical: it thrived on argument and counter-argument. By contrast, philosophy, inherited from Greek sources in translation, proceeded from first principles by way of demonstration; it sought to be comprehensive and systematic.

Philosophers in the Aristotelian tradition – which includes most of the thinkers with whom Ghazali was engaged – found theologians annoying; they weren't concerned with discerning “the real natures of things,” the objective which Kindi, the first Muslim philosopher, had claimed as the true goal of knowledge. Theologians wanted only to score points and win debates. By the tenth century, the great pupil of Farabi, the Christian Aristotelian Yahya ibn 'Adi (who wrote in Arabic) could give vent to a cranky outburst against the presumptions of such theologians:

I'm astonished at hearing what our colleagues say ... “We are the discourses” (*mutakallimun*), “We are the masters of speech” (*kalam*), “Speech is ours” ... It's as though other people don't speak. And yet, aren't others also “people of discourse?” Perhaps for the theologians such people are mute or silent? But, sirs, doesn't the jurist speak? And the grammarian, the engineer, the logician, the astronomer, the scientist, the metaphysician, the historian, the Sufi ...?

Tawhidi, 204

Not much love would be lost between Islamic philosophers and theologians over ensuing centuries; each side walloped the other. Charges of “heresy” bubbled over; one divine could snap that Ibn Sina was “among the damned” (Ormsby 1984, 82), and he wasn't an isolated case. Ghazali tended to distance himself from such wild accusations of “heresy.” Unbelief, he argued, applied only to those who denied the truthfulness of the Prophet. Thus, on certain points involving their use of figurative interpretation, he even exempts

Isma‘ilis from the charge (*Faysal*, 109). In any case, he would remain one of the few major thinkers of his time, and perhaps the only one, to master both *Kalam* and *Falsafa*; he straddled both camps (and sometimes assailed them both).

It’s important not to exaggerate the gulf between philosophers and theologians. Their inquiries often overlapped. There were also fruitful currents of influence flowing between the disciplines. After all, theology had preceded philosophy in Islam in attempting to give a coherent picture of reality. As van Ess has noted:

The word [*Kalam*] suggests that the “dialecticians” were engaged in apologetics. That is only partly true, however; theology would soon make other claims. The role it envisaged for itself was to provide an authentic explanation of the world. Hence it was naturally taken to be a “philosophy” at a time when the true *falsafa*, that of al-Kindi and his circle, of al-Farabi and others, on up to Ibn Rushd – the only one that deserves to be called a philosophy in our modern view – had not yet made its appearance.

van Ess 2006, 2–3

The effort to “provide an authentic explanation of the world,” originally undertaken in the early Abbasid period by such brilliant theologians as Abu al-Hudhayl al-‘Allaf (d.c. 841) and his nephew and former pupil Nazzam (d.c. 845), was eventually taken over, as their rightful province, by the philosophers. But that earlier impulse resurfaces in Ghazali’s later selective appropriation of natural philosophy. Philosophers like Farabi or Ibn Sina had created coherent accounts of reality based on demonstrable principles. The urge to construct a comparable – and ultimately, superior – account, in which revealed truth, logical argument, and supernatural insight would be convincingly reconciled, motivated Ghazali and distinguishes his project.

This is not to say that philosophers rejected Islamic belief. According to some reports, Farabi was sometimes seen in Sufi garb and Ibn Sina composed a number of fervently mystical treatises. At least one philosopher subscribed to a theological school: Kindi

accepted Mu‘tazilite doctrine, an affiliation which may account for the disgrace and persecution which he and his students suffered when that school fell out of favor in the middle of the ninth century under the Caliph Mutawakkil. There is evidence too that on certain crucial questions – such as the celebrated distinction between essence and existence (which I shall discuss in the next chapter) – theologians and philosophers exerted powerful, if covert, influence on each other; the great Mu‘tazilite theologian, the Qadi ‘Abd al-Jabbar and his contemporary Avicenna – whether or not they ever met – echo each other’s conceptions in striking ways (Wisnovsky, 2004). The Ghazalian exploitation of the two streams of thought had deeper roots than is sometimes realized.

Ghazali’s attitude toward theology seems to change over the course of his intellectual career; these apparent changes have sometimes led to charges of inconsistency or even insincerity. In fact, his position with regard to *Kalam* remains constant from beginning to end; the discrepancies that exist arise because of the differing contexts of his remarks. Thus, his last treatise – the *Iljam al-‘awamm ‘an ‘ilm al-kalam*, finished just days before his death – warns against allowing theology to fall into the hands of untutored readers, not because theology is itself misguided but because, with its array of arguments, of objections and counter-objections, it can confuse the believer and endanger his faith. But for Ghazali, theology remained the queen of the religious sciences. In his last major work, the *Mustasfa*, he proclaimed that theology is “the most exalted science in rank” because it considers general truths, from which particular truths, such as those which concern jurisprudence and scriptural interpretation, are derived. Moreover, the theologian stands at a higher rank than the jurist; the former seeks universality, the latter deals with details. At the same time, Ghazali is well aware of the limits of theology. It may be the highest of the sciences without being a guarantee of certainty.

THE DOGMATIC MANUAL *AL-IQTISAD FI'L-I'TIQAD*

In this short work, composed around 1095 (Hourani, 293), the year of his crisis, Ghazali follows the long-established mainstream of Ash'arite theology and in particular such earlier masters as Ash'ari, Baqillani, and his teacher, Juwayni. The work begins with certain preliminaries concerning the nature and importance of theology, and then proceeds to four major topics: God's essence, His attributes, His actions, and His emissaries. This concentrated focus on God Himself results from Ghazali's understanding of the purpose and objective of theology. As he says, "The objective of this science is the establishment of proofs for the existence of the Creator, His attributes and His acts, and for the truth of His messengers" (*Iqtisad*, 13). Theology is ideally suited for this endeavor, because it consists of "ordered discourse." That is, it proceeds according to the dictates of reason but in accord with revealed truth. This is that "just balance" to which the first word of Ghazali's title refers (*iqtisad*). Theology is the best method for achieving such a balance between "the obligatory precepts of revelation" and "the imperatives of reason." It is also a middle course between the rigid subservience to authority of certain traditionists and the presumptuous machinations of both philosophers and ultra-rationalist theologians, such as the Mu'tazilites, all of which are anathema. In his preface to this rather rigorous treatise – which remains untranslated, despite its importance – Ghazali lays to the right and the left of him, denouncing, mocking, and vilifying his opponents. A polemical, if not vituperative, note is struck from the outset. Perhaps it was this vehemence, and his evident enjoyment of it, which led him later to take a cooler, more cautious, view of this slashing discipline, of which he was so skilled a practitioner.

Even here, in a work written around the time of his turn to Sufism, we find Ghazali employing phrases and formulae which he will later use for quite different purposes. For example, he compares the intellect to "a healthy eye, free of all defects and diseases," a formula which will recur in transfigured guise in later mystical works

as “the eye of the heart.” (He also claims that theology can guide to the “lights of certainty,” a view he will come to modify.) The allusion to disease is important. As we shall see, perhaps no other writer in the Islamic tradition so frequently, indeed so obsessively, refers to sickness and health, healing and medicine; such references thread Ghazali’s works from start to finish. The human body, its wonders and its afflictions, furnishes him with an inexhaustible store of edifying analogies.

Theology serves to remove doubt; that is one of its crucial functions. Doubt is removed by proof. Proof illuminates: it requires the alliance of reason and revelation. The believer who relies solely on scripture is like someone who tries to block the light of the sun by closing his eyelids; he is no better than a blind man. Reason and scripture represent “light upon light,” an allusion to the famous verses in the Qur’an which describe God thus. Both lights are indispensable to belief (24:35).

GHAZALI’S MODE OF ARGUMENT IN “THE JUST BALANCE”

What does a Ghazalian proof look like? Ghazali begins with a syllogism which he then elaborates. His first task is to prove God’s existence. Like Ash’ari before him, he proceeds from the glaring fact of the world’s contingency – the fact that it is not self-caused but depends on something outside itself for its existence – which he establishes thus:

We say: Every contingent entity must have a cause for its contingency;
But the world is contingent;
From this it therefore follows that the world has a cause.

Iqtisad, 29

He then elaborates. By “world” he denotes “every existing thing except God” and by “every existing thing except God” he means “all bodies and their accidents.” Armed with these definitions Ghazali then delves into a more detailed exposition. For example, every

existing thing either occupies space or it does not. In the case of a spatially located thing that is non-composite, we term this “simple substance,” whereas a composite thing is termed a “body.” With regard to a non-spatially located entity, it may be the sort of thing whose existence requires a body in order to subsist; this we term an “accident;” such qualities as “redness,” “tallness,” and the like. Or it may be something non-spatial which does not require a body; this we call God (*Iqtisad*, 29).

Once set in motion, the mechanism of Ghazali’s argument pursues a rather predictable course. But along the way, certain questions and dilemmas emerge that deserve mention, for they shed light on his particular perspective. In elucidating the Arabic technical term for “a contingent thing,” Ghazali gives the definition as “what was non-existent then became existent.” And he explains it thus:

Prior to existence, a thing was either impossible or possible. But it is false to say it was impossible; the impossible is that which never can exist. Suppose it is possible: by ‘possible’ we mean exclusively that which has the possibility to exist and the possibility not to exist. But a contingent thing is non-existent [only] because its existence is not inherently necessary (otherwise, it would be necessary, not possible). On the contrary, for it to exist, it needs some preponderating factor in favor of existence as against non-existence, in such a way that its non-existence may be exchanged for its existence.

Iqtisad, 25

The passage, like so much in formal Islamic theology, is abstract and almost telegraphic in its succinctness. The point is this: anything which exists comes to exist only because something else, something outside it, caused it to exist; it contains no intrinsic factor which could cause its own existence. And the same holds for anything which does not exist; its non-existence is the result of another external agency. Things in themselves are neutral with respect to both existence and non-existence. This state of affairs is what is meant by contingency: the existence, or the non-existence, of a thing occurs because of some agency other than its own.

The passage is instructive, because it shows Ghazali weaving together theological and philosophical terminology in a novel way. The agenda is theological; the method is philosophical. The very concept of “existent” or of “being” – along with such terms as “possible,” “impossible,” and “necessary” – has been appropriated from the philosophers; theologians had tended to use other terms for their arguments. More importantly, the distinction on which the argument rests is taken over from the philosophers, and in particular, from Ibn Sina (Avicenna). The Avicennian concept of contingency, so fruitful for later thinkers, both Eastern and Western, plays a central role in Ghazali’s later Sufi thinking. Here Ghazali injects it into Ash‘arite discourse, just as later he will use it as the philosophical basis for his mystical world-view. Behind such leaden terms as “preponderating factor” lurks not only Ibn Sina’s First Cause, the One, but also – as Ghazali will develop such notions in his later work – the ineffable, quickening God of the Sufis, not to be known by the intellect but incommunicably, through “taste.”

It is important to remember that this rigorous little school treatise of dogmatic theology was written after Ghazali’s immersion in *Falsafa*; indeed, it was composed right on the heels of his two major works on philosophy. Though Ghazali probably first imbibed philosophical notions from Juwayni, who was already under their influence, it is striking to observe how effortlessly he weaves them into traditional theological discourse (Frank, 1992; Moosa, 38).

THE SHADOW OF IBN SINA

Ibn Sina died in 1037, some twenty years before Ghazali was born. His writings exerted an immense, if covert, influence, beginning with Ghazali’s own teacher, Juwayni. It is no exaggeration to say that neither philosophy nor theology would ever be the same afterwards, however suspect, or downright heretical, certain of his teachings would appear. Though the reasons for this – as well as the complex process by which his thought infiltrated such opposing disciplines as

Kalam – are too complex to be considered here (and have not, in any case, yet been fully unraveled), one factor may have been paramount, especially for Ghazali. Simply put, Ibn Sina constructed a systematic and coherent account of existence on rational grounds, which could be integrated, albeit with crucial modifications, into an over-arching world-view consistent with Islamic revelation. It was Ghazali’s achievement – and to a lesser extent, Juwayni’s – to have inaugurated this integration and to have carried it successfully forward. In the course of time, Ash‘arite and other theologians would continue to assimilate Avicennian concepts, until by the fourteenth century these would seem not only unremarkable but normal.

What is less conspicuous is that Ghazali, in particular, would make the fundamental components of the Avicennian system the foundation upon which he constructed and articulated a new and comprehensive mystical philosophy and practise, a systematic Sufism of compelling authority. As has long been recognized, Ghazali did not demolish philosophy with his caustic critique (in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*). Philosophy continued, not only in the works of Ibn Rushd (Averroes), Ghazali’s great opponent, but most conspicuously, in the east, and in particular, in Iran. (It thrives today, in the Shi‘ite seminaries of Qum and Najaf.) More significantly, it persisted within mainstream Islamic thought, folded into theological and mystical speculations so seamlessly as eventually to be taken for granted. Far from destroying philosophy, Ghazali sanitized it for his own purposes, as well as for later appropriation by both theologians and Sufis.

A HUMAN ACCENT

For all its arid tone, the *Iqtisad* contains moments of surprise. Something deeply human beckons between the tightly-strung syllogisms. One passage illustrates this sudden efflorescence amid deserts of dogma. Ghazali is engaged in a refutation of Mu‘tazilite optimism. The discussion revolves around a set question, already old by his time: wouldn’t it have been better, wouldn’t it in fact have been “optimal,” if

God had simply, from the outset, created mankind in paradise? The strategy of such a question is obvious; the Mu‘tazilite now has to embark on a lengthy – and not very convincing – explanation of why earthly life, with all its miseries, is preferable to immediate creation in paradise. The point of the question wasn’t to attack God. Rather, it was meant to show that God’s will is unsearchable; no merely rational scheme can encompass it. In the course of argument, Ghazali inserts a passage as characteristic as it is refreshing. We all believe that life in paradise would have been better for us, whatever the Mu‘tazilites may sputter. This life is nothing but heaviness and toil, if only because we are subject to all-encompassing religious obligation. Ghazali asks:

How can any intelligent man say that there is benefit in a creation where such obligation exists? Benefit has meaning only if obligation is absent. For obligation in its essence is the imposition of constraint, and that is pain.

Iqtisad, 176

Ghazali’s vehemence startles as he waxes eloquent on the miseries of existence; it’s not merely obligation but existence itself that weighs us down:

There would be benefit for man had he been created in paradise without pain or grief, but as for our present existence, all intelligent men desire non-being. One says, ‘Would that I were oblivious and forgotten!’ Another says, ‘Would that I were nothing!’ And still another, ‘Would that I were this piece of straw that is swept from the earth!’ And yet another says, while pointing to a bird, ‘Would that I were that bird!’ These are the words of prophets and saints who are intelligent men. Some of them desire cessation of existence while others desire cessation of responsibility to become inanimate matter or a bird.

Iqtisad, 176

This is an ancient sentiment. The Roman poet Lucretius asked, “What evil would we have suffered from not being created?” But Ghazali is not quoting the ancients; he is speaking from his own experience. He

has taken the question from age-old wrangles but he has made it personal. The ancient question now has overtones of a *cri de coeur*.

GHAZALI ON DIVINE NAMES

al-Maqsad al-asna fi sharh ma'ani asma' Allah al-husna

This treatise can be dated to sometime after the year 1097, that is, two years or so after Ghazali completed the *Ihya'* (Bouyges, 46; Hourani, 298). It is quite different from traditional works of *Kalam*, representing a theological sub-genre in which the ninety-nine “beautiful names” of God – those by which He is designated in the Qur'an – are enumerated and discussed. It is a discussion to which, a generation earlier, Ibn Hazm had contributed and which the Ash'arite theologian Fakhr al-Din al-Razi would carry forward in the next century. It is an exposition; a homily, rather than an apology.

The Paradox of the Nominal

Ghazali's approach rests on an insoluble paradox. As he puts it: “To know something is to know its essential reality and its identity, not the names derived from it” (*Maqsad*/Burrell, 37). This precept harkens back to Juwayni but gains force from Ghazali's deepened knowledge of philosophy. Names point to things but don't disclose the identities of those things by mere indication. Ghazali brings in a favorite example, drawn from human experience at its most fundamental:

Were a small boy or an impotent person to say to us: what is the way to know the pleasure of sexual intercourse, and to perceive its essential reality? We would say: there are two ways here: one of them is for us to describe it to you, so that you can know it: the other is to wait patiently until you experience the natural instinct of passion in yourself, and then for you to engage in intercourse so that you experience the pleasure of intercourse yourself, and so come to know it. This second way is the authentic way, leading to the reality of knowledge.

Maqsad, 50/ Burrell, 38

Ghazali is a master of vivid example. Nothing is too earthy or mundane to be used. He is fond not only of allusions to sex but of references to the pleasures of eating and of games, such as chess, to drive a point home. Ghazali draws on the example of impotence in the *Ihya'* and, more crudely, in another late work where he relates that:

an impotent man wrote to a friend of his to ask him what the pleasure of sex was like. So he wrote back to him in reply, "O so and so, I thought you were just impotent! Now I know that you are impotent and stupid!

Letter, 14

It's hard to imagine Ash'ari or Juwayni stooping to such examples, not because they were priggish but because they were concerned so doggedly with purely rational proofs. Ghazali, by contrast, delights in drawing on the vast grubbiness of human experience. And there's a sly humor in the example. Can we really imagine "a small boy" putting such a question, in such stilted terms, to a theologian? By such techniques Ghazali titillates, then captures his reader's attention.

The example, however droll, has a serious purpose. For we could ask the same question, stand in the same perplexity, with regard to our knowledge of God. To know His names is not to know Him. And yet, in truth, we both know Him and do not know Him. Here is how Ghazali builds upon his example:

There are two ways of knowing God ... one of them inadequate and the other closed. The inadequate way consists in mentioning names and attributes and proceeding to compare them with what we know from ourselves. For when we know ourselves to be powerful, knowing, living, speaking, and then hear those terms attributed to God ..., or when we come to know them by demonstration, in either case we understand them with an inadequate comprehension, much as the impotent person understood the pleasure of intercourse from what was described to him of the pleasure of sweets. Indeed, our life, power, and understanding are farther from the life, power, and understanding of God – great and glorious – than sugar's sweetness is from the

pleasure of intercourse. In fact, there is no correspondence between them.

Maqṣad, 51 / Burrell, 39; modified

To acknowledge the traditional attributes of God (powerful, living, knowing, etc.) or to intone His names, is not to know Him truly. We can draw on our experience of these attributes in ourselves but this understanding will be partial; no analogy is possible, because of God's utter unlikeness with anything created, as the Qur'an makes clear: "Nothing is comparable to Him" (42:11). As for the second way, which is "closed," that would be tantamount to experiencing God's nature as He Himself experiences it; and yet, "it is impossible for anyone other than God truly to know God most high." Unlike the clueless boy, who can wait for maturity to know sexual intercourse, we can never come to experience the reality of God. With respect to Him, we are all like the blind, who have no comprehension of sight, or the deaf, who cannot appreciate the force of hearing. What then is the point of all our knowledge? It is to bring us to the realization that we are unable – fundamentally and intrinsically unable – to know God. Recognition of our essential ignorance is exactly the point; that too is knowledge, perhaps the most crucial form of knowledge. Ghazali quotes a favorite saying, attributed to Abu Bakr, which he often introduces into such discussions: "The absence of insight is itself insight."

THE ABSENCE OF INSIGHT AS INSIGHT

This sounds like a riddle, and it is. It is the riddle of our condition. The fact that with regard to the mystery of God we are incapable of insight tells us something, both about ourselves and about God. (T. S. Eliot expressed something similar in a mystical passage of his *Four Quartets*, when he wrote: "And what you do not know is the only thing you know.") For Ghazali, there are fixed limits to our perception, quite apart from the fact that some people have greater insight than others; through recognition of such limits we come to confront

God's essential unknowability. This should not be considered mere mystical piffle; a vapid declaration of ineffability. It is, on the contrary, an epistemological principle of considerable depth. When we begin with an awareness of our ignorance, we may come to understand, albeit in a way that is "illusory and anthropomorphic," some small aspect of the traces, the signs, of the divine in His creation. Here is another aspect of Ghazali which differentiates him from his predecessors: he is resolutely focused on the particulars of creation, sometimes to the lowliest of details – from the gnat's wing or the scratching of an ant, to the wheeling of the stars of heaven – so that "the more a man comprehends of the details of the things which have been decreed, and the workmanship in the kingdom of the heavens, the more abundant his share will be in knowing the attribute of power." God is to be "known" in the very existence of things for they are the "traces" of His attributes.

Hence, by considering the ninety-nine names of God, by exploring their implications, by meditating on them, by seeking in our own fragmented and imperfect way to imagine them, we come a tiny bit closer to knowing them, though our knowledge will always, even in paradise, remain imperfect. As ever, Ghazali's object is not simply to correct human pretension but to emphasize the illimitable vastness of God.

And yet, we do know something: "whoever knows himself knows his Lord," is a famous tradition which Ghazali likes to cite. Both statements – "I know only God" and "Only God knows God" – are correct, however contradictory they appear. Out of the fact of our insightlessness a few glimmerings arise. And so the remainder of his treatise is devoted to examining the divine names, if only in an effort to approximate to some knowledge of their reality. The book isn't merely a theological excursion, laced with philosophical and mystical formulations, but offers a program of spiritual exercise in which the theological imagination is stretched to the limit (reminiscent, in this respect, of certain Zen manuals or the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola, both all works of meditative callisthenics).

A MANUAL FOR MEDITATION

I suspect that the treatise was meant for practical application, perhaps by Ghazali's novices during the years when he headed his own Sufi convent in Nishapur; and that it was, in fact, a handbook for meditation. It follows a bipartite structure in the discussion of individual names; each name is discussed and analyzed and there then follows a section in which the "human portion" accruing to each name is outlined. These have a practical feel, as though they were intended as outlines for actual step-by-step contemplation. If so, the treatise represents a practical script for the exercise of "knowledge and action" combined. Certain names (Powerful, Hearing, Living) lend themselves to this procedure fairly easily, but consider how Ghazali deals with names in which a human being would seem to have no "portion."

The divine name *Musawwir* means literally "He who gives form" (*sura*), a prerogative, *par excellence*, of divinity. This name belongs to God "inasmuch as He arranges the forms of things in the finest order, and forms them in the finest way." How can mere man partake of this attribute? According to Ghazali,

Man's share in this name lies in acquiring in his soul the form of existence of each thing with respect to its disposition and arrangement until he comprehends the organization of the universe and its arrangement throughout, as though he were looking at it; and then descends from the whole to details, looking on the human form, especially its body and bodily members, to come to know their kinds and number, their assembly and the wisdom in their creation and their arrangement

Maqсад, 82 / Burrell, 70

How can we do this? By the re-creation in our minds – the picturing, if you will – of the thing in question. When God knows a form, His knowledge organises its actual existence; when we know a form, we fashion a conceptual image in our minds. Our share is thus the "acquisition of the cognitive form corresponding to the existential form." As he explains:

Man benefits by knowing the meaning of the name *Musawwir* [Fashioner] among the names of God ... for by acquiring the form in his soul he also becomes a fashioner, as it were, even if that be put only metaphorically.

Maqsad, 83/ Burrell, 71

This act of imaginative replication entails understanding:

... the reason why the stars are on high while earth and water are below, as well as the kinds of order operative in the vast sectors of the universe ... Everyone who has a more abundant knowledge of these details has a greater comprehension of the meaning of the name *Musawwir*. And this arrangement and conception are found in every part of the world, however small, all the way to the ant and the atom and even in every one of the ant's organs.

Maqsad, 82/ Burrell, 70

Such scrupulous stock-taking of creation is man's proper portion, and Ghazali praises its benefits throughout his work. Note how smoothly Ghazali integrates theological, philosophical, and mystical argumentation and demonstration in a seamless discourse. The notion that knowledge involves an acquisition of the form known in the soul is philosophical, as is the assertion that this world exemplifies the finest possible order, a notion as old as Plato's *Timaeus* (excerpts from which appeared early in Arabic). The framework of the discussion, and indeed the entire import of the treatise, is theological; its tone and thrust are unmistakably Sufi in inspiration and spirit. This is no longer *Kalam* as it had been practised, but a bold theology, the implications of which would only become apparent in later generations.

GHAZALI'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS *KALAM*

Despite his respect for *Kalam*, Ghazali found it ultimately unsatisfying. His dissatisfaction may explain the novel approach taken in his treatise on the divine names; that is, a more inward-looking, non-disputational form of theological discourse. As for traditional *Kalam*,

as noted earlier, he states in his autobiography that it was a science adequate for its purposes, “but not for mine.” Dialectical theology had always been a double-edged discipline; dependent on proofs as well as on disputational adroitness, it could be misused, to prove now one point, now another, purely according to the skill of the dialectician. Yes, it can be used to prove the existence of God or the createdness of the world or the necessity of prophecy. But such proofs, even if iron-clad, only go so far. They can convince the head without persuading the heart.

To this must be added a strong sense of disillusionment which Ghazali voices frequently in his later works. His contempt for the learned at times brims over. He rarely misses an opportunity to skewer them, even in passing comments. For example, in Book 36 of the *Ihya'*, he makes an ironic justification for “heedlessness,” a reprehensible trait without which the world could not continue on its course, and he says:

Wisdom requires heedlessness to exist for the world to thrive. If all people were to eat only permitted food for forty days, the world would fall apart because of their austerity; markets, not to mention livelihoods, would be ruined. Even more, if religious scholars were to eat nothing but permitted foods, they would become occupied only with themselves; their tongues and their feet would grind to a halt and they would cease from much that they do to spread knowledge abroad.

Ihya', 3:355

Ghazali knew whereof he spoke: he had been a religious scholar. Ghazali's savage censure of the class to which he had once belonged may help to explain his shifting coolness towards theology itself. He had witnessed how it could be abused and that may have made him mistrust the discipline itself; it was a weapon, essential for defending the truths of the faith, but not an instrument by which truth itself could be found. It is apologetic rather than systematic; it demolishes but it does not build. For that, Ghazali would have to turn to a rival discipline.



THE POISON OF PHILOSOPHY AND ITS ANTIDOTE

DID GHAZALI DESTROY PHILOSOPHY IN ISLAM?

Ghazali has long been seen as the destroyer of philosophy in the Islamic world. Though it has become fashionable to discount or qualify this view, it has an element of truth. Certainly Ghazali delivered a double-whammy to philosophy, which left it reeling. True, philosophy continued briefly in Islamic Spain and even in Iraq – with Ibn Tufayl and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) in the West and such thinkers as Abu al-Barakat al-Baghdadi, a Jewish convert to Islam, in the East – but Baghdadi died around 1165, a mere half-century after Ghazali's death, and Ibn Rushd died in 1198, leaving no local legacy except that assimilated by his younger contemporary, the great Jewish philosopher Maimonides, who himself expired in 1204. Philosophy experienced a rather glorious resurgence in the East, culminating in the philosophers of the Isfahan School; a tradition that, by the way, continues today. And yet, the further elaboration of *Falsafa* was certainly thwarted; whether this was due solely to Ghazali's influence or to a combination of other circumstances, among which his attack must be considered decisive, remains open to question. As is well known, Islamic *Falsafa*, which had continued for over three hundred years, would henceforth pass, via Latin and Hebrew translations, to Western Scholastic theologians.

Among the European thinkers to whom Ghazali's philosophical writings eventually became available, a curious *volte-face* occurred.

He was first seen as a philosopher and Latinized as “Algazel,” on the basis of his preliminary exposition, *The Intentions of the Philosophers*, translated into Latin as *Intentiones Philosophorum*. But when Ibn Rushd’s counter-blast against Ghazali was translated into Latin, there could no longer be any doubt as to where “Algazel” stood. At that point, Ghazali – once regarded by the Latin Scholastics as Ibn Sina’s foremost disciple – stood nakedly “exposed as a philosophy-basher” (Wisnovsky 2003, 167).

Ghazali did bash philosophy; and yet, in a certain sense, he did something far subtler and ultimately more damaging. He demonstrated conclusively (*pace* Ibn Rushd) that a large number of its doctrines were utterly incompatible with Islamic revelation. Worse, he sought to prove that those doctrines were untenable in themselves. They weren’t only heretical but false. He carried this out by so thoroughly absorbing and mastering the vocabulary and the arguments of the philosophers that he could refute them on their own terms. It wasn’t enough merely to denounce them as heretics. Only the irrefutable proof that they were deluded would suffice. But the subtler aspect of his demolition efforts was in the end more damaging. *Falsafa* offered too much of value to be lightly discarded. Logic – and especially, Aristotelean syllogistic – had to be retained, and he would strenuously defend its value; like geometry or astronomy, it was doctrinally neutral, as well as enormously useful. As he put it in the autobiography, logic does not:

... have anything to do with religion by way of negation and affirmation
 ... Knowledge is either a concept, and the way to know it is the definition, or it is an assent, and the way to know it is the apodictic demonstration. There is nothing in this which must be rejected.

Munqidh, 22/ McCarthy, 74–75

His position on the neutrality of certain sciences – not only logic but astronomy and mathematics – would prove influential. Thus, we find the great Ash‘arite theologian ‘Adud al-Din al-Iji, who died in 1355, declaring that with regard to such sciences as astronomy, “prohibition does not extend to them, being neither an object of belief

nor subject to affirmation or negation” (Endress 2003, 159). But other features of philosophy, ranging from its precise technical terminology to certain fundamental concepts – the nature and categories of being, the distinction between essence and existence, the vexed question of causality – could not be sacrificed either. These notions are woven into his works of Ash‘arite *Kalam* from the outset; they betray an Avicennian flavour at virtually every turn. This is true not only of such later works as his treatise on divine names but in the *Iqtisad*, which we have already discussed. Once touched by philosophy, Ghazali could not let it go.

THE SEDUCTIVENESS OF SYSTEM

Most of all, beyond individual concepts and definitions, it was the systematic character of philosophy which held irresistible appeal. Shorn of its heretical precepts, philosophy offered the possibility of a cosmic structure which no other discipline – neither theology nor law nor Sufism – could provide. As Richard Frank has rightly observed:

There would seem to be little doubt that al-Ghazali’s agonizing quest for cognitive certitude was in large part resolved by his confidence in his own contemplative grasp of the operation of God’s activity in creation in the terms of his own adaptation of the Avicennian model.

Frank 1992, 17

Such a “cognitive grasp” might be fuelled by Sufism but it could only be articulated with full coherence through the system-building possibilities of philosophy.

THE EXPOSITION OF PHILOSOPHY: THE *MAQASID AL-FALASIFA*

This hefty treatise, whose title means “The Intentions of the Philosophers,” was probably completed in 1094. It is a neutral

exposition of philosophical doctrine, principally that of Ibn Sina. One of several titles written during the hectic period leading up to Ghazali's crisis, this exposition would be completed, a year or so later, by his methodical critique of philosophy in the *Tahafut al-Falasifa* ("The Incoherence of the Philosophers"). He tells us in his autobiography how he set about mastering the discipline:

I knew, of course, that undertaking to refute their doctrine before comprehending it and knowing it in depth would be a shot in the dark. So I girded myself for the task of learning that science by the perusal of their writings without seeking the help of a master and teacher. I devoted myself to that in the moments I had free from writing and lecturing on the legal sciences – and I was then burdened with the teaching and instruction of three hundred students in Baghdad. As it turned out, through mere reading in those embezzled moments, God Most High gave me an insight into the farthest reaches of the philosophers' sciences in less than two years. Then, having understood their doctrine, I continued to reflect assiduously on it for nearly a year, coming back to it constantly and repeatedly re-examining its intricacies and profundities.

Munqidh, 18/ McCarthy, 70

The passage has some of the braggadocio of Ibn Sina himself who boasted that he had mastered the science of medicine by the age of eighteen, because medicine "is not a difficult science." Ghazali's obvious mastery of philosophy after only three years of reading and reflection proves that he was as much of a quick study as his shadowy adversary (and there may even be a tacit one-upmanship in his boast).

In *The Intentions* his hostile intent is not yet evident; the book constitutes a valuable summary of the Avicennian system. In his preface, Ghazali explains that the work is meant as expository, and for good reason: "To consider the falsity of their teachings before having grasped the bases of their conceptions is impossible." He continues:

I saw that I might preface my exposure of their contradictory doctrine with a succinct discourse containing an account of their intentions in the sciences of logic, physics and metaphysics, without distinguishing

between what is true and what false in them. In fact, my sole purpose was to make the ultimate thrust of their doctrines comprehensible.

Maqasid, 31

This is in accord with the life-long guiding principle he articulates in the autobiography, where he asks, “How can that which has not been understood be either accepted or rejected?” (*Munqidh*, 20). To justify this procedure, he invokes the saying ascribed to ‘Ali: “Do not know the truth by men but rather, know the truth and you will know its adherents” (*Munqidh*/McCarthy, 78). It is adherence to this precept which enables him to discriminate boldly between what may be turned to use, and what discarded, in such suspect disciplines as philosophy.

The *Maqasid al-Falasifa* has never been translated into English, though it should be. I can touch on only a few salient points to demonstrate both how fluently Ghazali had mastered the technical jargon of philosophy – much of which he would adopt for his own purposes – as well as how firmly he grasped and appropriated several key notions which would serve him well in later works, again in the service of his spiritual agenda.

The work is divided into three sections: Logic, Metaphysics, and Physics (or Natural Science). This is odd. Usually metaphysics is treated last, not only because that was the traditional order, from Aristotle’s first editor on, but because “divine science” occupied the highest rank in the degrees of knowledge. Ghazali acknowledges this, noting that “it is the usual practise of the philosophers” to place physics before metaphysics and yet, he reverses the order because metaphysics, which is “the final end and goal of all the sciences,” is simply “more important.” This reshuffling may indicate a certain impatience on his part to arrive quickly at the heart of the matter.

Knowledge Theoretical and Practical

In the section on metaphysics, Ghazali begins his discussion with the distinction between practical and theoretical knowledge. As I noted

earlier, this ancient division would come to underpin his later Sufi insistence on the necessity for harmonizing knowledge and action. It underpins the insistence without determining it. For Ibn Sina, theoretical knowledge enjoys primacy over practical knowledge; for Ghazali, the two must be reconciled. (And indeed, in his style, the two are seamlessly interwoven, with theoretical flourishes always buttressed by practical, and often downright homely, examples.) But it is easy to see how the clarity of the distinction must have appealed to his systematic mind.

Practical knowledge is concerned with human actions; theoretical knowledge with “the conditions of existing things in such a way that the form of all existence, in its entirety and in its order, becomes present to our minds.” Practical knowledge deals with politics and statecraft, with economics, and with ethics, all subjects to which Ghazali would make important contributions. Theoretical knowledge comprises natural science, mathematics, and theology (or “first philosophy”). It progresses from what cannot be free of matter either in the mind or in actuality, for example, man himself, to what is free of matter in the mind but not in actuality, for example, geometrical figures, to that which is utterly free of matter, for example, the intellect, God Himself. Here, in the ascending scale of abstraction, we encounter the first traces of that hierarchical and interlocking systematization of reality characteristic of Neo-Platonic thought in general and of Avicennian thought in particular. Its seductiveness is compelling.

The distinction, not yet transfigured into an ethical imperative, began to shape Ghazali’s methods almost at once. We see it in the two-part structure of his philosophical enterprise, with the *Maqasid* representing knowledge and the *Tahafut* action. Later the dichotomy would be made explicit in such two-part discourses as the *Mi’yar al-‘ilm* (“The Criterion of Knowledge”), his exposition of logic, which (as he announces at the end of the book) would be complemented by the *Mizan al-‘amal* (“The Criterion of Action”), a treatise on ethics. Logic provides the criteria for valid knowledge, ethics the criteria for right action; they represent distinct disciplines and yet are inseparable.

The Notion of Being

It is in the philosophical conception of being that the influence of philosophy, and its enduring impact, on Ghazali become most apparent. "Divine science" treats of being because it is "the most universal of subjects." For this reason, "the intellect should grasp being by way of simple apprehension." It has no choice but to do so, since being by its very nature permits neither description nor definition. It is the commonest of notions, innately known, and yet not susceptible to definition; there exists no larger category under which being can be subsumed and by which it might be defined. The science of being thus has as its object to identify and explore:

... the concomitants of being *per se* inasmuch as it is sheer being; that is, as substance and accident, universal and particular, one and many, cause and caused, potential and actual, congruent and divergent, necessary and possible... For these concomitants adhere to being purely as being. [They do not adhere] as in the case of a triangle or a square, in which they do so only after a being has become dimensional; nor as with even and odd which adhere only after a being has become numerical; nor as with white and black which adhere only after the being has become a physical entity.

Maqasid, 139

Though Ghazali is simply describing the distinctions made by the philosophers, he will adopt both those distinctions and the terminology that goes with them. In particular, the distinction between necessary and possible being will prove crucial. From it a formulation of contingency arises that Ghazali will make the cornerstone of his own Sufi world-view. The distinction was not novel. Earlier theologians, including Ash'ari, had employed it, though in different terms. For them, the telling contrast lay between what was eternal and what was temporal. Creation was temporal, or "created-in-time," and this very fact implied that it required a non-temporal creator to bring it forth from nothingness; that eternal creator was God. But the philosophical formulation was not merely a shift in terminology from "eternal"

to “necessary” and from “temporal” to “contingent”; it had profounder implications.

Necessary and Possible Being

Modal terms are notoriously circular; as Aristotle was the first to point out, they are definable only in terms of each other. Thus, the necessary may be defined as that the non-existence of which is impossible; similarly, the impossible is that the non-existence of which is necessary, while the possible is that which is neither necessary nor impossible. In Aristotle, these distinctions are logical; later, however, thanks largely to Farabi and Ibn Sina, they become ontological distinctions as well. If we describe God as necessary, we exclude both His possibility and His impossibility, and in so doing, we say something about His essential nature. As necessary being, He is uncaused; He is “the necessarily existing being” (*wajib al-wujud*). In the divine nature, essence and existence are one; *what* God is coincides with the fact *that* He is. Such unity of essence and existence does not obtain in other beings.

All beings other than God are possible, by definition. They can exist and they can not-exist. Furthermore, their essence – their whatness or “quiddity” – does not imply their existence. We can speak of a stone, a horse, or a man and ask, What is it? But the answer to our question does not entail the existence of that object. Existence is incidental to the identification of essence. But this procedure is no longer purely logical. For Ibn Sina, following Farabi, the distinction becomes ontological, a matter of being. There is nothing in the nature of man, or of anything else, to imply, let alone necessitate, his existence. Rather, existence is something separable which can be “added” to essence. This represents the very nature of the contingent: it is something the very existence and non-existence of which must be caused by something other than itself. As one historian of Islamic philosophy has put it:

If we examine any existing species, we find nothing in its essence to account for its existence. In itself, such an existent is only possible: it

can exist or not exist. From *what* it is, we cannot infer *that* it exists, although in fact it exists. Something has “specified” it with existence; and this something, argued Avicenna, must be its necessitating cause.

Marmura 1967, 227; his emphasis

So far, so good; but from this arises an important corollary. Once the merely contingent has been “specified” and brought into existence, it becomes necessary; not necessary *per se*, as God is the Necessarily Existent, but “necessary by another.” The very fact of existence confers necessity on its recipient. If not, the divine causation would be somehow imperfect, for its effects must follow inevitably from its specifying action. Ibn Sina would use this concept to argue for the eternity of the world, a notion abhorrent to Ghazali (and which he would contest in the *Tahafut*): if the Necessary Being is eternal, so too are the effects of His will. But while rejecting its implications, Ghazali would nevertheless appropriate the Avicennian notion of contingency, in its double sense, for his own purposes. The radical contingency of all created being would buttress Sufi perceptions of the momentariness of experience while the concomitant specifying and necessitating operation of divine will would both safeguard God’s power and testify to the necessary consequences of His wisdom. The Avicennian formulation would also underlie Ghazali’s startling elaboration of theodicy which he expressed in the controversial assertion, “Nothing in possibility is more wonderful than what is” (Ormsby, 1984).

Though the *Maqasid* represents a neutral outline of Avicennian doctrine, there are hints throughout the work of themes which Ghazali will later appropriate and develop. When he discusses the human senses, and in particular, that of taste (which he later develops into a fundamental precept), he restricts himself to the narrowly physiological; elsewhere, his summaries have a premonitory aspect. His treatment of the inference “from the visible to the invisible,” for example, betrays a sympathetic attention; it is an analogical procedure that he will employ repeatedly in discussions of divine wisdom in later works. And when he discusses the “generosity” of God, a

philosophical tenet originating in Plato, he says, “Generosity is the bestowal of what is fitting without any prior motive,” and continues:

The One emanates existence on all beings as it must be and in the measure that must be without any conceivable withholding [literally: hoarding] with respect to necessity, need or embellishment; and that, utterly without prior motivation or advantage. Rather, His nature is a nature from which there flows down onto every part of His creation that which is most suitable for it, for He is truly generous. Indeed, the name “generous” applied to anyone other than Him is merely a figure of speech.

Maqasid, 241

Though Ghazali opposes the suggestion of any necessity at work within the divine nature, such that He “must” be generous, nevertheless, he adopts certain key points here and employs them in his own way: not only the concept of divine generosity itself but even certain turns of phrase, such as the imputation of “hoarding.” By this is meant that if God had not produced the best world possible, He could be accused of “hoarding” a better one. Ghazali will appropriate this notion and present it verbatim in the *Ihya’*.

THE ATTACK: *TAHAFUT AL-FALASIFA*

Ghazali’s second work on philosophy, mockingly entitled “The Incoherence of the Philosophers,” offers a sustained attack on specific theses of the *falasifa* which Ghazali considered both heretical and downright fallacious. (The philosophers are the only group, by the way, to whom Ghazali explicitly applies the charge of “unbelief” (*kufir*) in such works as the *Faysal* [111].) He targets twenty doctrines in both metaphysics and natural science for demolition. His treatment is quite technical, his arguments highly intricate. Whatever their validity, they show how thoroughly Ghazali had mastered philosophical discourse; though he himself described the work as *kalam*, he confronts the philosophers on equal terms, using their own jargon and methods. And he certainly removes his gloves. He lambasts his adversaries roundly, reviling them as “dimwits” and worse.

The Philosophers as Mere Imitators

Ghazali's over-riding objection to the philosophers rests not only on their individual heresies but on something more problematic. In his preface, he accuses them of unthinking conformism. This is the *taqlid*, or credulous acceptance, which he decries in certain of the pious; philosophy in their hands is not a religion, but a "doctrine of donkeys." By the time he composed the *Tahafut* Ghazali had already undergone a siege of severe scepticism, described in his autobiography, during which his own tendency to unthinking belief had "shattered like glass." (In this sense, by a curious irony, *The Incoherence* may be considered an attack on philosophy by a radical sceptic rather than by a passionate believer: Ghazali was both, simultaneously.) But the philosophers and their hangers-on are guilty of the same dangerous tendency. They are unbelievers but "there is no basis for their unbelief other than traditional, conventional imitation, like the imitation of Jews and Christians" (*Tahafut*/Marmura, 2). Moreover, the *falasifa* and their followers are overly impressed by big names:

The source of their unbelief is their hearing high-sounding names such as "Socrates," "Hippocrates," "Plato," "Aristotle," and their likes, and the exaggeration and misguidedness of groups of their followers in describing their minds, the excellence of their principles, the exactitude of their geometrical, logical, natural, and metaphysical sciences.

Ibid.

Not only are these miscreants guilty of servile acceptance, which causes them to abandon the beliefs and practises of Islam, but they have exchanged the "imitation of the true" for the "imitation of the false." Even the stupidest fellow "among the masses" doesn't sink so low, for he has no desire "to become clever by emulating those who follow the ways of error." He remarks sarcastically, "Imbecility is thus nearer salvation than acumen severed [from belief]; blindness closer to wholeness than cross-eyed sight" (*ibid.*, 3). And he goes on:

When I perceived this vein of folly throbbing within these dimwits, I took it upon myself to write this book in refutation of the ancient

philosophers, to show the incoherence of their belief and the contradiction of their word in matters relating to metaphysics; to uncover the dangers of their doctrine and its shortcomings, which in truth ascertainable are objects of laughter for the rational and a lesson for the intelligent – I mean the kinds of diverse beliefs and opinions they particularly hold that set them aside from the populace and the common run of men – relating at the same time their doctrine as it actually is, so as to make it clear to those who embrace unbelief through imitation that all significant thinkers, past and present, agree in believing in God and the last day; that their differences reduce to matters of detail extraneous to those two pivotal points ...; that no one has denied these two beliefs other than a remnant of perverse minds who hold lopsided opinions, who are neither noticed nor taken into account in the deliberations of the speculative thinkers, counted only among the company of evil devils and in the throng of the dimwitted.

Tahafut/Marmura, 3; modified

The book is an attack on the Greek philosophers, and especially Aristotle; the Islamic philosophers are relegated to the ranks of bamboozled imitators. The vehemence of Ghazali's critique, which never flags, is important. The doctrines he assails are deleterious; they threaten the ultimate salvation of those who accept them. But this is also a form of intellectual surgery, if not outright vivisection. Only by excising and discarding the heretical components of philosophy can its valid doctrines and methods be adopted, and the more savagely this is done, the better. No one could later accuse Ghazali of being "soft" on philosophy, however extensively he might come to draw on it.

Heretical Doctrines

The twenty theses Ghazali singles out for rebuttal include sixteen metaphysical points and a mere four points within the domain of the natural sciences. They range from issues such as the eternity of the world (upheld by the philosophers, rejected by Ghazali) to God's

knowledge of particulars (denied by the philosophers, upheld by Ghazali), with related assaults designed to prove their incompetence to prove God's oneness or to show that God is incorporeal or even to demonstrate that He is the world's creator; these are the metaphysical theses. In natural science, Ghazali attacks the philosophers' notion of causality; he faults them for being unable to prove that the human soul is "a self-subsistent spiritual substance" and lastly, he sets out to refute their denial of bodily resurrection. Each of the twenty discussions merits close attention, particularly in conjunction with Ibn Rushd's later counter-attack. Taken as a whole, the book constitutes a devastating indictment. Here, however, I wish to comment on only one chapter, not just because it is representative and so conveys the flavour of the work at large, but because the complexity of Ghazali's approach suggests that the *Tahafut* is not quite as transparent as it has usually been taken to be.

Causality vs "Habit"

The seventeenth chapter of the *Tahafut* deals with causality and miracles. The philosophers affirm that:

... the connection between causes and effects that one observes in existence is a connection of necessary concomitance, so that it is within neither the realm of power nor within that of possibility to bring about the cause without the effect or the effect without the cause.

Tahafut/Marmura, 166

But this, Ghazali argues, renders miracles impossible and so is not only wrong but heretical. He is thinking specifically about miracles such as the biblical transformation of the staff into a serpent, and those attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, such as his splitting the moon; but the doctrine of the resurrection is also at stake. Whoever asserts a necessary connection between cause and effect in the realm of nature, as the philosophers do, makes such miracles impossible; they must be either interpreted metaphorically or denied outright.

Divine causality, which both theologians and philosophers accept, albeit in widely divergent ways, is not at issue, but what is usually termed “secondary causality” (that is, those sequences of effects which seem to ripple from one cause to the next: when I move my hand, the ring on my finger moves too, and so on). For the philosophers, a cosmos not bound together by interlocking chains of secondary causality represented an absurdity; nature as well as reason were at stake. (Ibn Rushd – and later, Maimonides, following in his footsteps – argued that if you remove causality from the scheme of things, you also remove rationality, for the very processes of the mind depend upon cause and effect, as in argument itself.) But for the theologians, especially those of the Ash‘arite persuasion, such a cosmos suggested a dangerous autonomy; a world in which necessity inheres in the nature of things infringes divine agency and compromises omnipotence.

For Ash‘arites, God is the sole agent whose will determines and effects every action. What we think of as causality is nothing but “God’s habit” (or “custom”). The world functions as it does, with apparent cause and effect, only because it is God’s habit for it to do so. Miracles are nothing more than “breaches of habit.” There are neither “laws of nature” nor natures intrinsic to things. God can alter His custom whenever He will; no reality exists in things themselves, despite appearances. All ultimately are fictive; subject to alteration or annihilation from moment to moment, and in the twinkling of an eye. Things as they are exist as they do only because God creates them, atom by atom, instant by instant, in continual pulsations of His will. If He were to decide that the rain should fall upward, it would instantly do so; this would represent a “breach of God’s habit,” a miracle, not a reversal of “nature.” What we call nature is itself nothing more than God’s habit.

This is the famous “occasionalism” of doctrinaire Ash‘arism at its most blatant. (This is the doctrine lampooned by Maimonides in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, where he reduces it to absurdity by noting that God must re-create the atoms of a cadaver at every instant of its decomposition; such a prospect would not have ruffled a convinced

Ash‘arite.) Elsewhere, Ghazali seems to affirm it unconditionally. In his autobiography, he affirms that “nature is totally subject to God Most High: it does not act of itself but is used as an instrument by its Creator. The sun, moon, stars, and the elements are subject to God’s command: none of them effects any act by and of itself” (*Munqidh*/McCarthy, 76). And in another late work, the *Kitab al-Arba’in* (“The Book of Forty [Traditions];” Bouyges, 38; Hourani, 299), composed sometime before 1106, he writes:

God wills existing things and sets things created in time in order, for there occur in this world and in the transcendent world neither few nor many, small nor great, good nor evil, benefit nor harm, belief nor unbelief, recognition nor denial, gain nor loss, increase nor diminishment, obedience nor disobedience, except as a result of God’s decree and predestination and wisdom and will. What He wishes, is; what He does not wish, is not. Not even the casual glance of a spectator nor the stray thought in the mind come to be outside the sphere of His will. He is the originator. He causes recurrence. He is the effector of what He wills.

Arba’in, 6/ Ormsby 1984, 53–54

Such a sweeping position would seem to obviate all secondary causation; even our glances and our passing thoughts result from God’s will. And yet, is that what is actually meant? Perhaps the answer is not as straightforward as it appears. I’ll return to this subject in a later chapter but here Ghazali’s more detailed exposition in *The Incoherence* is apposite, for he seems to reject causality emphatically.

“In our view,” he begins, “the link between what is usually believed to be a cause and what is usually believed to be an effect is not necessary” (and for “necessary” he pointedly uses the philosophical term (*daruri*) as a way of reinforcing the statement). He proceeds to a series of examples which fly in the face of common sense; he does this deliberately, I believe, to pose the issue in as extreme a way as possible. The examples include thirst and quenching thirst, satiation and eating, burning and the touch of fire, light and sunrise, death and

decapitation, and indeed, “everything observable among things that are linked in medicine, astronomy, arts and crafts” (*Tahafut/ Marmura*, 170). These events are connected solely because God has decreed their connection. If God so willed, He could create fullness without food or preserve life after beheading or any of the others; there is no inherent causal connection.

The Denial of Causality

Ghazali’s most famous – or perhaps, notorious – example is that of fire and cotton. Cotton burns when exposed to a flame, but this is not inevitable. Cotton could burn without being set on fire. The philosophers deny this; the flame, and that alone, they say, is the agent of burning and burning cannot occur otherwise. These phenomena coincide, Ghazali counters, but that doesn’t prove that they are causally linked. Here he introduces an analogy drawn, as is often his wont, from sexual life: the father ejaculates sperm into the womb but if conception occurs, it is not the father who has produced the son; rather, the son’s faculties come to be along with, but not because of, the father’s action. The action is coincident rather than causative. Or, a person blind from birth, who suddenly recovers his sight, imagines that the agent of his new vision is the removal of the film that covered his eyes; but at sunset, when light dwindles, he comes to realize that it is the sun, rather than himself, which is responsible for his vision. We continually mistake apparent causes for the true cause, which is God alone.

Even here, the matter is not straightforward. In the thirty-fifth book of the *Ihya’*, Ghazali invokes the same examples, but to different ends. There he says:

If you were to wait for God Most High to create satiety in you without bread, or to create in bread a motion towards you, or to enjoin an angel to chew it for you and see that it reaches your stomach – that would simply display your ignorance of the practise of God Most High.

Ihya’ / Burrell 2001, 74

God could do all these things, but He does not; they would be contrary to His “habit” (*sunnah*). To suppose otherwise is “idiocy.” This does not change the underlying point: God’s habit may be as predictable and unchanging as any causal laws of nature. But it is interesting, and not often noted, that Ghazali, no doubt deliberately, uses the same examples in his later work to uphold a form of causality as he had adduced in his earlier work to deny it.

This distinction would have some surprising consequences at later stages of the Ash‘arite tradition. For, while causality of a qualified sort would be accepted, it would also be severed from the actual world. For example, the theologian ‘Adud al-Din al-Iji, in the fourteenth century, would defend the principles of such sciences as astronomy but at the same time would state that they “are imaginary things that have no internal existence, mere imaginings more tenuous than a spider’s web” (Endress, 159–60). That is, causality might be employed within the theoretical confines of a scientific discipline but not extrapolated beyond it. And a century later, the astronomer and theologian ‘Ali al-Qushji, writing in Istanbul, would go so far as to declare that “what is stated in the science of astronomy does not depend upon physical and metaphysical premises,” an astonishing remark only conceivable in a world-view which admitted causality as an indispensable construct while simultaneously abolishing it from reality (*Ibid.*).

Ghazali distinguishes further between those philosophers who hold that effects occur because they “emanate from the bestower of forms” and those who maintain that they come about “necessarily and by nature.” The “bestower of forms” is the Agent Intellect in the Neo-Platonic system, through whom all knowledge in our “sphere below the moon” is transmitted to us; Ghazali equates this with the mediation of an angel. If this is accepted, it is no longer possible to argue that fire causes burning or that medicine produces health; these effects are bestowed angelically rather than occurring inherently. Those of the second opinion, however, entangle themselves in contradictions. For when they try to explain how Abraham fell into the fire without burning, they must argue either that the fire was

heatless – an impossibility – or that Abraham himself changed, in essence and in form, into stone or something else impervious to fire – another impossibility. Against the first group, it must be said that if the Agent can create the burning, then he can also create not-burning, even when something combustible is touched by fire.

Counter-Argument and Caricature

In addressing the second group – his true opponents, who uphold an intrinsic and necessary causality – Ghazali introduces a strange counter-argument, which he puts into his adversaries' mouths. In effect, he parodies the Ash'arite position, as it might be seen by an outsider, as leading to "distasteful contrariedades." The full passage is remarkable:

If one denies that the effects follow necessarily from their causes and relates them to the will of their Creator, the will having no specific designated course but capable of varying and changing in kind, then let each of us allow the possibility of there being in front of him ferocious beasts, raging fires, high mountains, or enemies ready with their weapons and he does not see them because God does not create [the sight] of them for him. And if someone leaves a book in the house, let him allow as possible its change on his returning home into a beardless slave boy – intelligent, busy with his tasks – or into an animal; or if he leaves a boy in the house, let him allow the possibility of his changing into a dog; or if he leaves ashes, the possibility of its change into musk; and let him allow the possibility of stone changing into gold and gold into stone. If asked about any of this, he ought to say: 'I don't know what's in the house at the moment. All I know is that I left a book in the house but maybe now it's a horse which has fouled my library with its piss and dung, and I've left a jar of water in the house too, but it may have turned into an apple tree by now. God is capable of everything; it isn't necessary for a horse to be created from sperm or a tree from seed. In fact, it isn't necessary for either of them to be created from anything. Maybe God has created things that didn't exist before.' Moreover, if such a person looks at somebody he has just seen and is asked whether such a person is a creature that was born, let him

hesitate and say that it's not impossible that some fruit in the marketplace has changed into a human, in fact, this very human. For God has power over every possible thing, and this thing is possible.

Tahafut/Marmura, 173–74; modified

What is remarkable about this passage is not only that it is humorous – a rare enough event in philosophy – but that the humor is directed against Ghazali's own nominal position. It is a caricature of the Ash'arite position, though ostensibly introduced for pre-emptive purposes. It reduces the (Ash'arite) theological notion of "intellectual admissibility" to apparent absurdity. This notion implied that whatever can be thought can also be; indeed, possibilities themselves, even when merely entertained in the mind, enjoyed a certain shadowy foretaste of existence, like players waiting in the wings for some unexpected cue. This was a corollary to the conviction that for God, all things were possible; whatever might be intellectually admissible, however improbable, was a potential object of God's power. To philosophers, this was a ridiculous concept; it was a function of imagination or fantasy – a lower order of cognition associated always with matter – rather than of intellect.

Tone is often significant in Ghazali's work. He deploys sarcasm, satire, irony, and exaggeration to make his points as much as sober argument. Here the tone is a little burlesque: he shows the absurdities to which a narrow Ash'arite occasionalist position can lead by placing the attack in the mouth of his opponent, but the comical touches – the horse defecating in the library, the fruit that turns into a man – suggest that he appreciated – and perhaps even partly shared – this sardonic view. He simply has too much fun with the proposition for it to be a mere straw man. To be sure, he goes on to argue that while these absurdities are possibilities in the strict sense, we can be reasonably sure that they will never occur, because they have never occurred in the past. God could make them happen but He does not, if we are to judge by His past habits.

The question of causality is still a vexed question in the study of Ghazali. He seems to reject it in certain passages and in others, slyly,

to admit it. There is strong evidence that he accepted certain aspects of secondary causality. As Richard M. Frank has pointed out, Ghazali often “employs vague formulations ... in such a way as to give the impression of asserting traditional teaching without actually doing so” (Frank 1992, 36). And he continues by pointing out that what Ghazali:

... attempts to do ... is to treat the traditional formulations concerning God’s creative activity in the world and Avicenna’s account of the determinate operation of the orders of secondary causes as they descend from the first cause as two alternative but fundamentally equivalent descriptions of the same phenomena. To accomplish this, however, he reinterprets the former in terms of the latter and in so doing rejects one of the basic tenets of classical Ash‘arism, e.g., the radical occasionalism according to which no created entity, whether an atom, a body, or an accident, has any causal effect ... on the being of any other.

For Frank, Ghazali’s purpose was none other than “to adapt the traditional language and formulations to his own, quasi-Avicennian vision of creation” (*Ibid.*). This seems true but Frank doesn’t go far enough in his analysis.

In his formidable response to Ghazali, penned a half century later, Ibn Rushd would dismiss the entire seventeenth chapter of the *Tahafut* as mere “sophistry.” He says:

Intelligence is nothing but the perception of things with their causes, and in this it distinguishes itself from all the other faculties of apprehension, and he who denies causes must deny the intellect. Logic implies the existence of causes and effects, and knowledge of these effects can only be rendered perfect through knowledge of their causes. Denial of cause implies the denial of knowledge, and denial of knowledge implies that nothing in this world can really be known, and that what is supposed to be known is nothing but opinion, that neither proof nor definition exist, and that the essential attributes which compose definitions are void. The man who denies the necessity of any item of knowledge must admit that even this, his own affirmation, is not necessary knowledge.

Tahafut al-tahafut, tr. Van den Bergh, I: 319

As Ibn Rushd points out, to reject causality as that force which acts in a predetermined manner dependent upon the specific natures of things, is to deny that anything can be distinguishable from anything else, and “all things would be one” (*Ibid.*, I:318). But this, of course, is precisely what Ghazali brings out in his satirical portrayal of the Ash‘arite position, adroitly placed in the mouth of his opponent: a pineapple might turn into a man, gold could become granite, a slave boy change into a horse.

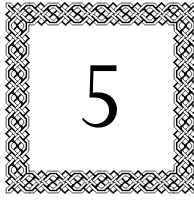
A Sceptical Resolution

Ghazali’s purpose in this bizarre chapter appears to be twofold. I would suggest that its doubleness of intent is significant.

Initially, Ghazali seems to deny secondary causality in the most exaggerated manner. Who believes that beheading doesn’t necessarily cause death? You could argue that just because beheading invariably leads to death, that doesn’t make it a cause; but this seems to me to misunderstand Ghazali’s intention in introducing such examples. Under the cover of a denial, he smuggles in a satiric summary of the Ash‘arite doctrine, a caricature immune to criticism once placed in the mouth of an adversary. His objective, I believe, is to cast doubt on both positions: the secondary causality of philosophy and the occasionalism of theology. It is a fundamentally sceptical objective. We cannot truly know, beyond sheer statistical probability, whether an effect occurs because of an antecedent cause or as a result of “God’s custom.” Here, however, his intention seems to me to be more radical than has previously been suggested. His position is fundamentally sceptical, but the scepticism is turned, not against the truths of faith, but against the self-assured certainties of the philosophers. For, in effect, there is no absolute way to establish beyond a statistical certainty whether certain conjoined events occur because of an inherent causality or because of “God’s custom.” Their outward manifestation is the same in either case. And I would argue further that for Ghazali – the problem of miracles aside – the difference was irrelevant. He wanted to demonstrate that it is not possible to prove the

existence of inherent cause and effect in things, and he succeeds in casting doubt on this; but at the same time, he wanted to expose the untenable consequences of the Ash‘arite position. The upshot is neither to disprove secondary causality definitively, nor to prove the operation of “God’s habit,” but to demonstrate that neither can be established with complete certainty. His object is to upset confident assumptions, to startle lazy thinking, to shatter conformism. It represents a strategic deployment of doubt in the search for what can be known.

In other words, it isn’t so much causality that Ghazali finds problematic as the element of indwelling necessity in the presumption. His arguments have the result both of confusing the issue – quite deliberately, in my opinion – and of clearing the ground for a more subtle and flexible version of causality. This, however, he would develop only later, after a shattering experience which prompted him to abandon many of his earlier assumptions, only to reassemble them, in transformed guise, under the overarching aegis of Sufi mysticism. It was a solution born out of crisis.



CRISIS AND RECOVERY

THE BREAKDOWN OF 1095

The crisis which led to Ghazali's adoption of the Sufi way began in July 1095; according to the Islamic calendar, Rajab 488. His stipulation of the precise date is significant: Rajab is one of the two sacred months in the calendar – Ramadan is the other – during which reflection and repentance are urged upon believers. The crisis, which lasted for some six months, led him to abandon his prestigious position at the Nizamiyya *madrassa* in Baghdad, relinquishing his duties in favor of his younger brother Ahmad. Secretly, amid a buzz of speculation by colleagues and students as to his true motives and conditions, Ghazali slipped out of Baghdad and embarked on a life of prayer and seclusion, which would last for some eleven years. Though the crisis is confirmed by scattered reports from a few of his students, almost all our information comes from Ghazali's own account, in his narrative *The Deliverer from Error* (*al-Munqidh min al-dalal*), composed several years later when the searing experience could be "recollected in tranquillity." (The title of the work alludes to Qur. 3:103: "You were on the brink of an abyss of fire and He delivered you from it.")

Here is how Ghazali describes the onset of his crisis:

I wavered incessantly between the strong pull of worldly desires and the promptings of the next world for almost six months from the month of Rajab 488. Then, in that month, I crossed the boundary from free will into constraint. God locked my tongue so that I could not

teach. I used to exert all my effort so that I might be able to teach for one day ... but my tongue could not master a single word.

Munqidh, 37

He consulted doctors but they couldn't cure him. He parodies their diagnoses in his account: "This is something which has settled in his heart and crept from it into his humors," he has them muttering. No doubt these doctors mentioned "melancholy." Ibn Sina, in his great *Canon of Medicine*, had already described the symptoms of what he called "*malankhuliyya*," using the Greek term transliterated into Arabic; they correspond in part to Ghazali's symptoms. Moreover, according to the tenth-century physician Ishaq ibn 'Imran, "If doctors, mathematicians or astronomers meditate, brood, memorize and investigate too much, they can fall prey to melancholy." It was a condition to which the learned were especially prone. Ghazali's sudden loss of speech during his breakdown isn't one of its symptoms; and yet, earlier experts had noted that such aphasia could be "caused by fear and perplexity." Certainly, both emotions dominated Ghazali at the time.

His crisis was precipitated, Ghazali claimed, by the fact that he had come to accept Sufism as the ultimate path to truth but could not bring himself to embrace the Sufi path. That demanded renunciation. The sacrifice seemed too harsh. It was neither the asceticism of Sufism, nor even the requirement that he renounce the comforts of family life, which deterred him. Rather, his attachment to his own status, to the prestige of his position – indeed, to the ambition that had propelled him from obscurity to renown – formed the true obstacles to renunciation. He could not bring himself to give up the acclaim he had won at such cost. To act on his new-found knowledge demanded that he embrace a life of obscurity and lowliness, that he no longer dazzle throngs of adoring students or play an influential role at court. Here is how he put it in his account, written later:

I carefully examined my situation and saw that I was immersed in attachments which encompassed me from all sides. I considered my

activities – the best of them being public and private instruction – and saw that in them I was applying myself to sciences which were trivial as well as useless on this pilgrimage to the next world. When I thought about my intentions in my public teaching, I realized that it was not motivated purely to God but was prompted and driven by a quest for fame and wide-spread prestige.

Munqidh, 36 / McCarthy, 91; modified

To embrace the Sufi way entailed an acceptance of anonymity; it required “correctness toward God the Exalted and withdrawal from mankind,” as he put it later (*Letter*, 38); hence, the suppression, if not the annihilation, of his public self.

More riskily, it involved rejection of powerful patrons. As he says again in “Letter to a Disciple,” the Sufi must:

... have nothing to do with princes and rulers, nor see them, because the spectacle of them, gatherings with them and socializing with them are a serious danger. If you are put to the test by this, avoid praising them and complimenting them, for God the Exalted is angered if a wrongdoer or tyrant is praised.

Letter, 52

This injunction did not prevent Ghazali from composing a treatise of admonition, in Persian, for the Seljuq Sultan in his later years and yet, as we shall see from his letters, his communications with the powerful underwent a dramatic change after his espousal of Sufism.

There may have been another factor in his breakdown which, so far as I know, hasn't been mentioned before. Between 1094 and 1095, Ghazali penned no fewer than eight or nine works; and, as we know, he had devoted himself for three years to an intensive study of philosophy. His productions from this period include *The Intentions of the Philosophers* and *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, two books on logic, a polemic against the Isma'ilis (known as the *Mustazhiri* because supposedly written at the behest of the Caliph al-Mustazhir), *The Just Balance in Matters of Belief*, his manual of theology, and *The Criterion of*

Action, his work on practical ethics. This is an astounding record of productivity.

Even if we assume that *The Intentions* was begun earlier, the composition of any of the other treatises might well have occupied an average scholar for more than a single year. Ghazali wrote them while fully engaged in his teaching and juridical activities, as well as in his responsibilities to both Sultan and Caliph. Moreover, each book is concerned with a demanding topic, sometimes requiring mastery of intricate technical terminology, and each is meticulously and densely argued. Like other medieval Muslim authors, Ghazali composed quickly partly because he drew on earlier authors, often using large chunks of their writings verbatim. Even so, I can think of no other example in intellectual history, East or West, of such intense and prolific engagement over so short a span of time, and with such fruitful results (with the possible exception of Kierkegaard's brief and concentrated period of productivity between 1840 and 1844). It doesn't seem far-fetched to suggest that Ghazali was suffering from sheer mental and physical exhaustion and that this may have contributed to his spiritual distress.

SICKNESS AND HEALTH

Ghazali never mentions exhaustion; he presents his state as an inner conflict displaying the symptoms of an illness. This is telling. No motif plays a larger part in his later writings than illness; no figure is invoked more often than the physician. The contrast between sickness and health is played out with unflagging ingenuity in his Sufi works (though he had drawn on it in earlier writings). The human body, both in its miraculous construction and in the maladies that can assail it, provides a seemingly inexhaustible supply of analogies, maxims and metaphors, and he invokes the body repeatedly. This is good, homiletic technique; nothing is more familiar to us than our own flesh, and analogies spun from it tend to carry conviction. But Ghazali's repeated references to the body, to health and disease, are

so frequent as to suggest a deeper, more personal motivation. Sometimes the cumulative effect of his medical references leads one to wonder if he were not something of a hypochondriac.

I think there are at least two persuasive reasons for his reliance on this motif: first, he presents the aspect of a man who has come through a terrible ordeal. He is someone who has regained health after debilitating sickness. As noted earlier, his own student remarked that he seemed to be a man “who had recovered from madness.” (Perhaps it is significant that later Ghazali would remark, “Knowledge without action is madness” [*Letter*, 16] and use the same word which his pupil had applied to him; when he merely knew without acting upon his knowledge, he was perhaps, in his own view, spiritually a little “mad.”) The move from sickness to health is analogous to the ascent from ignorance to knowledge, from doubt to certainty. For Ghazali, as for many other medieval Muslim thinkers, ignorance is a spiritual ailment. To give but one example: he informs his unnamed correspondent that “the disease of ignorance is of four kinds. The first of them is curable, and the rest incurable” (*Letter*, 44); he then proceeds to elaborate these epistemological maladies. In the autobiography, he describes his youthful bout of scepticism as “a puzzling disease” of which God Himself “healed” him. After his later crisis, his simultaneous recovery of both intellectual and physical health must have impressed him profoundly.

Second, Islamic philosophers had routinely drawn analogies between health and sickness, knowledge and ignorance. For some, like the physician and philosopher Abu Bakr Zakariya’ al-Razi a century before, philosophy embodied the medicine which the human soul required; through philosophy man could become whole and sound and thereby achieve redemption. It was certainly no coincidence that Ibn Sina, himself an accomplished physician, titled his great work *al-Shifa’* (“The Healing”). Through the right use of the intellect, through reason and knowledge, human beings can ascend to their proper perfection. The fact that most Islamic philosophers were physicians first, and philosophers second, reinforced this connection. This may have given Ghazali a strong motive for drawing on medical analogies and for his much-loved contrast between the

doctor who heals the body and the doctor who restores the soul. This is, of course, an ancient and much-used theme but it is one which Ghazali employs too often to be merely rhetorical. Throughout the *Ihya'* he plays on this contrast, sometimes to a sententious degree. For him, in the end, it is not the philosophers, but the prophets – and pre-eminently, the Prophet Muhammad – who are the true “doctors who treat the illnesses of hearts,” for they have been given insight into a further dimension of reality “beyond the intellect.”

***AL-MUNQIDH MIN AL-DALAL* (“THE DELIVERER FROM ERROR”)**

The autobiography was probably written between 1106 and 1109. During this period, only a few years before his death, Ghazali was back in Nishapur, directing novices and perhaps still teaching. It’s possible that he wrote the work for his students; he addresses it to his “brother in religion” who has requested that he write the account – a conventional pretext. But the book is clearly intended to be an edifying testimonial from which others may profit.

Like so much of his later writing, the autobiography is intensely passionate. It has been suggested that Ghazali was inspired to tell his story in imitation of Ibn Sina who left behind an unfinished autobiography, but the two books could not be more different. Ghazali offers a compelling personal account of two distinct crises within a narrative of quest and bafflement, of doubt verging on despair, of scepticism carried to the point of madness, and of final vindication and the promise of deliverance. By contrast, Ibn Sina confesses to only one episode of uncertainty in the magisterial progress of his career (when he found himself unable to comprehend Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* after reading it forty times!). Ghazali reveals himself as lacerated by uncertainties. Ibn Sina’s sense of his own superiority appears unshakable. Ghazali (no shrinking violet) lays bare the moral flaws, together with the conflicts, that tormented him. Ibn Sina’s account is linear and chronological. Ghazali’s is structurally complex and quite artful

in design; it is a consciously written, and artistically conceived, account, of surprising subtlety. Finally, Ghazali's narrative is not entirely what it seems (as Ibn Sina's is): the *Munqidh* is a personal story but it is also a cunningly designed testimonial in which the narrator emerges both as a specific individual and as a moral example, an exemplum. Ghazali is creating himself as a spiritual type even as he is supplying exact factual details (Ormsby 1991, 133–134).

The Double Voice of the Narrative

The power of the work derives from this double approach. We witness a living man, with doubts, faults, and aspirations, slowly transformed into the pattern of a saint. Earlier Sufi biographies had included stories of the saints, usually chosen to illustrate and exemplify some instance of virtue; Ghazali would insert many of these into the *Ihya'* and other of his Sufi works. However, in his autobiography, the third person of hagiography has given way to the immediacy of the first person: the saint steps forward and speaks in his own distinctive voice. "I am the man; this is what I suffered; this is what I have found," the narrative seems to say, and the effect is electrifying; an effect heightened by the beauty of the writing. The beauty of Ghazali's best prose lies in its urgency. This is nowhere seen better than in the autobiography, with its language so poised and alert that we have the impression of catching a mind in the very swirl of its thoughts. In one passage, he writes: "I was convinced that I stood on the edge of a crumbling cliff and was coming close to hellfire if I did not take care to repair my inner state," and later, he exclaims, "To the road! To the road! Only a little life is left and you stand on the verge of a great voyage and all your knowledge and your deeds are nothing but sham and pretense!" (*Munqidh*/McCarthy, 91–92; modified). The note of urgency is calculated – Ghazali is an artful author – but that does not make it any less authentic, or persuasive.

Ghazali describes two crises which befell him. In the first, sometime in his youth, he experienced an ordeal of radical scepticism. Even as a young man he had been driven by a quest for knowledge;

not just any knowledge, but that which leads to certainty. He had “a thirst to grasp the true nature of things.” His deepest desire – the word he uses also means “instinct” – was to pursue truth relentlessly. God Himself had implanted this desire in him. He further describes himself as a bold and fearless diver who seeks out the depths of the sea. It is an image which recurs throughout his work; in the last book he wrote, a warning against the dangers of dialectical theology, he speaks contemptuously of those who hug the shore for safety. The image reverberates in subsequent Sufi literature: the Persian poet Hafiz, influenced both by Ghazali and by his brother Ahmad, will speak, over two centuries later, of:

Black night, the terror of breakers and the whirling sea—what dread!
How can those who cling to the shore even guess what we feel?

The personal accent, sustained throughout, serves a strategic purpose. In earlier books, whether on theology or logic or philosophy, Ghazali had adopted a dispassionate stance; he expounded a doctrine which he then accepted or rejected. Here, however, he explores theology, philosophy, Isma‘ili doctrine, and Sufism from his own personal vantage point. This adds weight, as well as urgency, to his arguments. His observations aren’t merely academic forays. He has explored these paths himself; his critiques have the force of personal experience.

SCEPTICISM AND GHAZALI: HIS EARLY CRISIS

Unlike his later crisis of 1095, precipitated by the discovery of truth, Ghazali’s early crisis was, first and foremost, one of doubt. As a teenager, he was shaken by a prolonged siege of scepticism. Nothing seemed certain. The information given by the senses was suspect; the senses erred, they could be deceived. To the naked eye, a star seems no larger than a coin, a stick plunged in water appears bent. But mathematical proofs make clear that the star must be bigger than the earth and the science of optics explains diffraction. The intellect thus corrects the senses. But is the intellect itself wholly trustworthy?

Ghazali took refuge in “First Principles,” or *a priori* truths (“the whole is greater than its parts,” etc.), but these too were unhelpful, for doubts arose. If the senses could deceive, might not the intellect also go astray? Ghazali began to envisage a potentially endless sequence of perceptions exposed as misperceptions by some as yet undiscovered arbiter of truth; he experienced an intellectual vertigo. As he writes:

Perhaps behind the perception of the intellect is yet another arbiter. When it appears, it will prove the intellect wrong in its judgment, just as the arbiter of intellect appeared and proved sense false in its judgment. The fact that this perception does not appear does not prove its impossibility.

Munqidh, 13/McCarthy, 65

By Ghazali’s time, scepticism had a long history in Islamic discourse. Probably the best-known early sceptic was the ninth-century Baghdadian, Salih Ibn ‘Abd al-Quddus, who composed a *Book of Doubts*. His stated object was to instill doubt in his readers. As he said: “Whoever reads it, doubts concerning what exists until he fancies that it does not exist, and concerning what does not exist until he thinks that it does exist” (Van Ess 1968, 1–18). As often happens – think of Samuel Johnson kicking a stone to refute Berkeley’s idealism – an unkind critic mocked Salih on the death of his son; if everything was doubtful, was not his son’s death as well? There are scattered reports of scepticism, and worse, in writings attributed to such supposed renegades as Ibn al-Rawandi. Ghazali survived his sceptical crisis and it has been claimed that in so doing, he brought the shaky tradition of systematic doubt both to a culmination and to an end.

This is perhaps overstated. I would argue that Ghazali retained much of his sceptical attitude after his first crisis, but that he applied its caustic techniques, not to the truths of faith, but to the various schools of thought and the different disciplines which he explored. He never fully shook off his distrust of formal reasoning, even when he relied on it and encouraged others to employ it. Though he praised

reason, and applied it rigorously, he remained cautious of its absolute claims. This may explain why, even in impassioned discourse, he remains hard-headed; he displays a fine sensitivity to bunkum and exposes it without remorse. He follows this course, not only in deflating the pretensions of theology or the suspect notions of the philosophers, but also in dealing with various Sufi tenets. In this respect, he can describe himself, in the autobiography – with particular reference to philosophy – as an intellectual snake-handler who knows how to “separate the antidote from the poison” or, even more mundanely, as a money-changer skilled in distinguishing the counterfeit from the true (*Munqidh*/McCarthy, 81). The lucidity of a sceptical perspective was what enabled him to extract the venom from philosophy and turn it into an antidote; that is the positive side of his doubting. But in general, there is a corrosive quality to his intellectualism which persists to the end as a distinctive faculty of subtle discernment. This ability may owe much to his youthful agonies of doubt.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DREAM

One of our commonest experiences supports his suspicion of knowledge conventionally acquired. We all dream, yet dreams reveal how precarious our vaunted knowledge can be. In dreams we believe in the truth of events that waking reveals as illusory. How can we know that what we believe when awake is not also illusory, in relation to some as yet unrevealed truth? Dreaming is significant because Ghazali, like Ibn Sina before him, found the phenomenon puzzling, holding that the senses were inoperative during sleep. Knowledge gained through dreams appeared to circumvent the vigilance of the waking senses. Moreover, according to one report, Ghazali first experienced the call to Sufism through a divinely inspired dream (Macdonald, 89–91). In the *Ihya'*, he will declare that “every dream has its cause in God.” When, after his decade of seclusion, the Seljuq vizier invited him to return to teaching, he was influenced to do so by

the dreams of “certain godly men” (Ormsby 2007). The subject of dreams thus bears a considerable emotional charge for him. In the autobiography he writes:

Don't you see that when you are asleep you believe certain things and imagine certain circumstances and believe they are fixed and lasting and entertain no doubts about that being their status? Then you wake up and know that all your imaginings and beliefs were groundless and insubstantial. So while everything you believe through sensation or intellection in your waking state may be true in relation to that state, what assurance have you that you may not suddenly experience a state which would have the same relation to your waking state as the latter has to your dreaming, and your waking state would be dreaming in relation to that new and further state? If you found yourself in such a state, you would be sure that all your rational beliefs were insubstantial fancies.

Munqidh, 13/McCarthy, 65

Ghazali's dilemma is reminiscent of that posed by the ancient Chinese philosopher Chuang-Tzu (though there is, of course, no connection between them!). Chuang-Tzu had a dream in which he was transformed into a butterfly. When he awoke, he wondered, “How do I know that I am not now a butterfly dreaming that I am Chuang-Tzu?” Ghazali, in one of his characteristic transpositions, affirms that dreams, however they may baffle our waking minds, are not only the best proof of the prophetic faculty but reveal to us that there is indeed a stage of knowledge “beyond the intellect” (Ormsby 2007).

His first crisis was resolved as suddenly as it occurred. Ghazali is cryptic about the outcome, remarking only that:

... this malady was mysterious and lasted for almost two months. During that time I was a sceptic, though not in utterance and doctrine. At last God cured me of that illness. My soul was restored to health and soundness and I again accepted the self-evident data of reason, relying on them with assurance and certainty. And yet, that wasn't achieved by constructing a proof or assembling an argument. Rather, it was the result of a light which God cast into my heart.

Munqidh/McCarthy, 66; modified

During this crisis, Ghazali remained at heart a sceptic, accepting religious truth only, as he says, in “verbal expression.” This is a startling disclosure; and yet, his blunt acknowledgement of near-disbelief lends added force to his subsequent surrender to a more compelling form of truth. He had visited the depths; only the strange light coming directly from God Himself had delivered him.

The experience helps to clarify Ghazali’s cautious attitude towards rationalism in general and theology in particular. As he put it in the autobiography, “Whoever thinks that illumination depends upon written proofs, narrows the vast compassion of God” (Ormsby 1991, 140). Like all scholars of his class and time, Ghazali was a thoroughly bookish man; his intellectual voracity drove him to read everything he could lay his hands on. Nevertheless, he understood that books alone do not lead to truth, let alone to salvation. In that case, paradise would be open exclusively to the learned (a thought that surely appalled him, given his opinion of scholars). Ghazali’s sense of the unimaginable scope of God’s mercy, as well as his own considerable compassion for people from all walks of life, denied such a limitation. (In this, he resembles Thomas à Kempis, who would later remark, in his *Imitation of Christ*, that at the Last Judgment we won’t be asked what books we’ve read but what actions we’ve performed.) Ghazali remarks, “Even if you studied for a hundred years and collected a thousand books, you would not be eligible for the mercy of God the Exalted except through action” (*Letter*, 8). From books and book-learning we get knowledge, but that alone cannot lead to salvation; for that, action informed by knowledge is required.

THE FOUR WAYS

Ever-systematic, for all his fervor, Ghazali examined four possible ways to the truth. These were theology (*Kalam*), Isma‘ili teaching, philosophy (*Falsafa*), and Sufism. Each way offered a distinctive approach. As he describes them, theology represented the way of

“independent judgment and reasoning,” Isma‘ili doctrine relied on authoritative and privileged knowledge, as imparted by an Imam, philosophy presented itself as based on logic and demonstration, and finally, Sufism held out the hope of vision and illumination. Each way stood in a different relation to reason. Theology relied on reason for polemical purposes, philosophy made it the highest good and the surest path to salvation, Isma‘ilism made it dependent on authority, Sufism sought to transcend it. I have already discussed two of the four ways – theology and philosophy – and will continue to refer to them. Ghazali’s Sufism will be treated in the next chapter. His views on Isma‘ili thought require a brief discussion at this point.

Ghazali and the “Batiniyah”

Ghazali uses several terms to designate – and denigrate – his Isma‘ili opponents. Invariably his labels are charged with contempt (Mitha, 19). Sometimes he calls them “esotericists” (*Batiniyya* in Arabic, from “*batin*,” meaning “inner” or “hidden”), that is, those who hold that reality is compounded of esoteric truths known only to a designated spiritual leader or Imam. He also terms them “advocates of authoritative teaching” (*Ta‘limiyya* in Arabic, from the word for “instruction”) to emphasize their dependence on secret doctrine imparted by an infallible leader. For him, they represent the ultimate instance of *taqlid*, understood in its most derogatory sense of “servile acceptance.” They are proponents of a truth handed down by authority, based neither on reason, independent judgment, nor mystical insight, as in the other three traditions he has explored.

This is a partial view of Isma‘ili thought, based on the doctrines propounded by Hasan-i Sabah, the mysterious leader of the Nizari Isma‘ilis in Syria, who represented a pressing threat to the Seljuqs. Hasan taught that human beings had to have a divinely guided teacher, since reason, by itself, could not grasp the truths of religion; his mistrust of unaided reason oddly mirrors Ghazali’s own

misgivings. For Hasan, such a teacher must be at once reliable and authoritative; moreover, there can be only one such teacher in any age – a proposition which tacitly sets at naught the authority, so prized by Sunni Muslims, of sanctioned scholars of law and theology (a class which, as we have seen, Ghazali also attacks). For Hasan, as for other Shi‘ites, Twelvers or Seveners, the crucial problem lay in the accurate recognition of the true teacher, or Imam (Daftary, 369–370). As I noted in the Introduction, Ghazali’s attacks on the Isma‘ilis, not only in his autobiography but in several polemical treatises, must be seen in this context.

Two factors should be kept in mind when considering Ghazali’s complex attitude toward the Isma‘ilis. First, for all his scornful denunciations of Isma‘ili doctrine, Ghazali betrays the influence of that tradition in many passages of his writing. He acknowledges in the autobiography that he “had already been struck by some of their novel utterances” (*Munqidh*/McCarthy, 82). More fundamentally, even the autobiographical form which he chose for the *Munqidh* had Isma‘ili antecedents of which he was surely aware (Hodgson, 2: 180–181). Perhaps too the defining concept of Isma‘ilism, that the world demands interpretive explanation – the process known as *ta’wil* or esoteric interpretation – was one such “novel utterance;” for it, or something quite similar, plays an important role in Ghazali’s Sufi speculations.

There is a vital distinction to be drawn. Whereas Isma‘ilis tended to believe in an endlessly stratified series of hidden truths, known only to the designated Imam, Ghazali believed that the world was potentially transparent; there were secrets but they were discoverable by “the eyes of the heart.” And yet, his recurrent insistence on the innumerable instances of divine wisdom, lovingly tucked away in the very fabric of existence, may owe something to the Isma‘ili emphasis on cosmic “exegesis.” For Ghazali, these instances could be recognized without the guidance of an Imam; recognition depended upon purification of the soul, insight remained accessible in principle to anyone, and the hidden splendours of creation stand all about us if we only have eyes to see them.

In a curious side-note, it's worth mentioning that Ghazali's more doctrinally flamboyant younger brother, Ahmad, repaired at the end of his life to an Isma'ili stronghold in Qazvin, where he died in 1126 (Ibn Khallikan, 1:81). This suggests that the doctrinal and even political demarcations, at least between Isma'ilis and Sufis, may have been more porous than is usually supposed.

Ghazali's attacks on the Isma'ilis are too diffuse (and often too distorted) to warrant extensive consideration here. He sometimes seems deliberately to misread their texts, though he had access to various Fatimid documents (Mitha, 43). Moreover, a disagreeable arrogance slants these polemics. He seems to object, in the end, not so much to their doctrine of the Imamate as to what he considers their "stupidity." As we've seen, he had occasionally used the strategy of personal attack in assailing the philosophers (whom he labelled "dimwits"). This is the brash and abrasive Ghazali, the "star pupil" of Juwayni's circle, seeking to dazzle and to dominate by intellectual bullying. Even when allowances are made for political circumstances and the genuine threat posed by Isma'ilis to Seljuq interests, we should keep in mind that it is not only in the early polemics, commissioned by the Caliph, but in his later works, after the turn to Sufism, that he stoops to vilifying his opponents: they are, yet again, "dimwits." He has nothing to say about the refined and intricate metaphysics of the Isma'ilis, though he assails their Neo-Platonic tendencies, but engages in casuistry. Thus, in the *Mustazhiri*, written for the Caliph al-Mustazhir, he summarizes the Isma'ili notion of the Imamate:

Their Imam equals the Prophet in infallibility and knowledge and in knowledge of the realities of the truth in all matters, except that revelation is not sent down to him, but he simply receives that from the Prophet.

Mitha, 45

In the autobiography, he seeks to poke holes in this doctrine. He especially objects to the Isma'ili emphasis on "authoritative teaching" (*ta'lim*) over "reasoned opinion" (he uses "*ra'y*", a legal term). What,

for example, should a believer do to resolve a ritual quandary when the “authoritative teacher,” the Imam, is not readily available? If he has a question about the direction of prayer, the *qibla*, he will have no choice but to rely on his own personal judgment:

For if he were to journey to the Imam’s town to learn about the *qibla*, the time for the prayer would elapse. Hence, the prayer performed facing a direction other than the *qibla* is lawful when based on conjecture.

Munqidh, 30/ McCarthy, 84

In yet another piece of casuistry, he discusses alms given to a poor man. The benefactor must rely on his own personal judgment as to whether the beggar is truly poor, for “one may judge the man to be poor, whereas he is really rich, but not outwardly because he hides his wealth” (*Ibid.*). Beyond such frivolous cavils, Ghazali sweeps aside the Isma‘ili doctrine of the Imamate by declaring that yes, indeed, we do require an “authoritative teacher” and we have him in the Prophet:

Our infallible teacher is Muhammad . . . If they say, “He is dead!” we say, “And your teacher is absent!” And when they say, “Our teacher has indeed taught his emissaries and scattered them throughout the countries, and he expects them to return to consult him if they disagree on some point or encounter some difficulty,” we say, “Our teacher has taught his emissaries and scattered them throughout the countries, and he has perfected this teaching, since God Most High has said: ‘Today I have perfected for you your religion and have accorded you My full favor’ (Qur. 5:5).” And once the teaching has been perfected, the death of the teacher works no harm, just as his absence works no harm.

Munqidh, 29/ McCarthy, 85

So run Ghazali’s arguments against his Isma‘ili adversaries. The contrast, in both tone and content, to his disputations with rival jurists – or even with philosophers – is marked; the tenor of the exchange is somewhat jejune. In the autobiography, he concludes his captious discussion of the Isma‘ilis by sputtering, “This, then, is the true nature of their situation. So try them, and you will hate them! Thus,

when we had had experience of them, we also washed our hands of them!" (*Ibid.*, 89).

Behind such irritated outbursts, Ghazali's attitude towards the Isma'ilis was clearly more complicated than it at first appears; he was perhaps attracted and repelled by their teachings in equal measure. The most searching and astute discussion of this was offered by Marshall Hodgson who asked why Ghazali even singled out Isma'ilis as exemplars of "authoritarian" doctrine when so many other candidates, such as the Hanbalites, were readily available. Hodgson suggested that Ghazali's almost obsessive concern with Isma'ilism arose because "he found something in their position to be persuasive" (Hodgson, 2:184). Specifically, both Ghazali and the Isma'ilis adopted a "kerygmatic tradition" (*kerygma*, literally "preaching" in Greek) that could only be "validated on the basis of a more or less incommunicable personal experience" (*Ibid.*). In other words, both Isma'ilis and Sufis advocated a "proclamation" of truth, which could not be proved by theological or philosophical means but depended upon the authority of experience, an experience which was ultimately ineffable.

Moreover, Isma'ilis and Sufis both held dear a fundamentally esoteric vision of truth. For the Isma'ilis, such truth could only be imparted by the Imam. For Ghazali, and other Sufis, spiritual truth lay hidden within the scope of what Ghazali would call the "science of illuminations" (*'ilm al-mukashafat*), which he defines, at the beginning of the *Ihya'*, as "knowledge of the hidden (*batin*)" and "the farthest goal of knowledge" (1:31). Throughout the *Ihya'*, he takes great pains not to encroach on this realm, instead dwelling expressly on "the science of [mystical] interactions" (*'ilm al-mu'amalat*), which he describes as "knowledge of the states of the heart" (1:32). The farthest truths of Sufism are thus as privileged as those of Isma'ilism. The Isma'ilis incorporated their *kerygma* in the institution of the Imamate, whereas Sufis entrusted theirs to what Hodgson calls "privileged individual but potentially universal awareness" in the persons of their saints. If this is true, and I think it is, then Isma'ilism nettled Ghazali not only because it represented a teaching

at once deviant and authoritarian, but also because it was a rival and alternative doctrine, a doctrine too close for comfort in some respects.

The Incommunicable Taste of Truth

Sufism, in contrast to the three other ways, offered something utterly intangible; something that could not be attained by words alone. In Ghazali's view, Sufis were not "purveyors of words" (though anyone contemplating the voluminous works of early masters, often in multiple volumes, might be persuaded otherwise!). Unlike theologians or philosophers or Isma'ilis, Sufis held out the promise of a knowledge put into living practise. Sufism offered a distinct spiritual itinerary, with meticulously delineated way-stations and stopping-places. Ghazali, despite his youthful exposure to Sufi teachings, approached it through intensive reading and study, but he soon realized that Sufism could not ultimately be theoretical. It demanded action. To pretend otherwise would be to repeat the folly of the impotent man who craves a description of sexual intercourse. Or, as he elaborates further, "How great the difference there is between knowing the definitions, causes and conditions of health and satiety, and being healthy and sated! And how great a difference there is between knowing the definition of drunkenness ... and actually being drunk!" (*Munqidh*/McCarthy, 90; modified). The truth Ghazali glimpsed as within his grasp depended not on words or proofs, of which he was a master, but on deeds, in which he was the merest novice. It was, moreover, a truth not communicable through language.

As Sulami, a Sufi of the preceding generation, had remarked, "The tongue cannot articulate what is in the heart." Ghazali would, characteristically, reduce this to one of his rhyming formulas: Sufism was not concerned with "utterances" but with "states" – with *ahwal* rather than *aqwal*. To compress the formula even more compactly, he had recourse to the concept of "taste" which henceforth would form the rubric under which he proceeded. Often, when he comes to

some ineffable juncture, he will conclude with the unanswerable maxim, “He who has tasted knows.”

The notion of “taste” (*dhawq* in Arabic) was already something of a commonplace, which Ghazali adapted for his own ends. To taste means to experience directly, without mediation. It is the confluence of perception and action. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, an Ash‘arite theologian of the next century, would define “taste” as “the root of perception” (Ormsby 1991, 141). But Sufis had used it well before Ghazali’s time (after him, and because of his emphasis, taste would be extensively invoked and discussed within the Sufi tradition, especially among Persian Sufis). Qushayri, for example, spoke of “the taste, the direct perception, of notions.” Sulami went so far as to declare that “Taste is the beginning of ecstatic love of God.” *Dhawq* also crops up in a treatise on psychology by Ibn Sina, in a similar context; in describing certain Sufis, the philosopher speaks of “the way of the practitioners of experiential wisdom” (literally, “tastable wisdom”). Ghazali himself turns to synesthesia to convey its force; it is, he says, “like witnessing with one’s own eyes and taking in one’s own hands.” It is unmistakable and incommunicable, but for Ghazali, taste represented the most specific, and defining, characteristic of the highest Sufi mystics.

In his Sufi writings, Ghazali uses “taste” as a coded metaphor for experience. The deepest truth is perceptible only through experience; truth must be tasted to be known. Taste has the paradoxical quality of being known and available to everyone, albeit in varying degrees, while remaining indescribable (imagine describing the taste of vanilla ice cream to someone who has never tasted it). In a further paradox, taste is located in the mouth, where speech occurs; it is a mute companion of articulate discourse. It is the most everyday, as well as the most ineffable, of the senses. It compresses, within a single syllable, the entire soaring structure of Ghazali’s cosmic vision in which nothing, however infinitesimal or however vast, can either be omitted or overlooked.

THE DECISIVE BREAK AND THE DEPARTURE FROM BAGHDAD

After his second crisis, in 1095, Ghazali teetered on the brink of commitment for six months. He had discovered the path to truth but could not bring himself to take it. He had knowledge in abundance; to act on it was the final obstacle. He had read and studied the treatises of earlier Sufi masters such as Abu Talib al-Makki, whose great compendium *Qut al-qulub* ("The Food of Hearts") he would later ransack for both examples and arguments, but he could not turn learning into practise.

This second crisis, which left him speechless and paralyzed, was kindled not by doubt, but by certainty. For Ghazali, with his glib and voluble brilliance, his versatility, his unremitting curiosity, study of the truth came more easily than application. "Knowledge was easier for me," he wrote, "than practise." The more he immersed himself in Sufism, poring over classic treatises by authorities such as Qushayri, his older contemporary, or by earlier masters such as Muhasibi, the greater loomed his awareness of his own imperfections. The more he became convinced of the truth of Sufism, the more he vacillated:

One day I would firmly resolve to leave Baghdad and disentangle myself from those circumstances, and the next day I would annul my resolution. I put one foot forward and the other back. At morning I would sincerely desire to seek the things of the world to come. By evening the hosts of passion would assail my resolve and turn it tepid.

Worldly desires tugged at me with their chains to keep me as I was while the crier of the faith kept calling, "Away! To the road! ... If you don't prepare now for the life to come, when will you? If you don't sever your attachments now, when will you sever them? And then the call would sound again. I would firmly decide to escape. But Satan returned to the attack and said, "This is a passing state. Beware of giving in to it! It will soon vanish. Once you've surrendered and relinquished your present renown and your splendid position,

free from vexation, and have abandoned your secure situation, untroubled by the contention of your enemies, your soul may cast longing eyes again at all that. But then it won't be so easy to return!"

Munqidh, 36/McCarthy, 91–92; modified

His vacillation is understandable; he had much to give up. Nor was his hesitation particularly unusual. To cite but one example, the great French poet and playwright Paul Claudel experienced an overwhelming sensation, in Notre-Dame Cathedral, on Christmas Eve 1890, of what he called "the eternal childhood of God." He regained his Catholic faith on the spot and yet it took a full five years to act on his new-found faith, simply because he was painfully conscious of "human regard." Ghazali had a similar hurdle to leap: his ambition, and the place in the world which it had won for him. As he acknowledged years later, after his return to teaching in Nishapur:

I know well that, even though I have returned to teaching, I have not really returned. For returning is coming back to what was. Formerly I used to impart the knowledge by which glory is gained for glory's sake, and to invite men to it by my words and deeds, and *that* was my aim and my intention. But now I invite men to the knowledge by which glory is renounced and its lowly rank recognized.

Munqidh, 49–50/McCarthy, 107

Ghazali finally did act. When he had sunk into a state of utter helplessness, he turned to God, who "made it easy" for him "to turn away from fame and fortune, family, children and associates" (*Munqidh*/McCarthy, 92). In November 1095, he slipped quietly out of Baghdad, on the pretext that he was making the pilgrimage; he would roam for the next eleven years. In Sufi legend, such reversals are often described as sudden and dramatic. For example, the conversion of Ghazali's earlier compatriot, Ibrahim ibn Adham, prince of Balkh, occurred when he was out hunting, a favorite pastime. He heard a voice thundering at him, "Is it for this that you were created?"

Though Ibrahim ignored the summons, it came again, even more loudly. The third time the voice arose from the pommel of his saddle and he instantly dismounted, put on the woollen garments of the Sufi, and embarked on an ascetic life (Ormsby 1991, 147). By contrast, Ghazali's acceptance of the path was slow, methodical and cautious. He tells us frankly that he made "clever use of subtle stratagems about leaving Baghdad, while firmly resolved never to return to it."

BAGHDAD, THE "NEST OF DARKNESS"

There are indications that his departure from Baghdad wasn't an undue wrench. In the *Ihya'*, Ghazali takes a certain glee in including traditions and sayings that disparage the city. Thus, in his "Book of Love," the thirty-sixth treatise of the work, he quotes Ibn al-Mubarak, a fellow Khorasanian, who supposedly exclaimed, "I've roamed in both East and West but never have I found a city wickeder than Baghdad!" When asked his opinion of Baghdad, after he had returned home, Ibn al-Mubarak stated, "There I saw only raging police, anxious businessmen, and baffled reciters of the Qur'an." Ghazali further informs us that the Sufi Fudayl ibn 'Iyad called Baghdad "a nest of darkness," and that another early Sufi, Bishr ibn al-Harith, went so far as to proclaim: "He who worships God in Baghdad is like someone who worships Him in the shit-house!" (*Ihya'*, 4:373–74). In repeating these unsavory opinions, Ghazali states, rather disingenuously, that he means no slander; but the reader, even at this distance, will detect the rasp of old axes being ground.

He planned his departure well. He distributed his wealth, keeping only enough for his maintenance; he arranged for the support of his family, drawing on a special pious endowment in Iraq, intended for scholars and their dependents. This shows the commonsensical side of the man, even as he stands at the most momentous of junctures; it also suggests, perhaps unfairly, that his heart was as hard as his head. What would happen to his wife (or wives) and children, left to the

support of public funds, however piously established? To be sure, he does remark, later in the autobiography, that “the appeals of my children drew me back to my native land” and further, that “important family matters,” along with the need to make a living, “troubled the serenity of my solitude” (*Munqidh*/McCarthy, 94). Still, even a millennium later, it smacks of selfishness. There is a ruthlessness at the core of conversion that isn’t always noted, and Ghazali displays it. To be sure, the practise of withdrawing from one’s family was of long standing, especially among ascetics. In the *Ihya’*, Ghazali would exhort his readers by saying, “Your wives and children are enemies to you, so guard against them!” (4:60; Ormsby 1984, 256). This casts a somewhat chilling light on his frequent mentions of the joys and responsibilities of fatherhood.

THE ROLE OF AHMAD GHAZALI

What finally prompted his resolve? In one account, his brother Ahmad supplied the final shove. Ahmad visited him on his sickbed and sang:

You’ve bestowed guidance on others but are not well guided yourself.
 You’ve heard the homily but you haven’t heeded it.
 O whetstone, how long will you sharpen the iron and not cut?

Zabidi, 1:8

As Ghazali informs us, speculation about his motives was rampant. Some were convinced that he left the capital for fear of the authorities; others, who knew this to be untrue, fell back on more occult explanations, suggesting that the “evil eye” – all too often glowering at the learned – had prompted his flight. Others suggested that fear of Isma‘ili assassins had driven him into exile.

Ghazali headed first for Damascus. There, he spent two years in seclusion, solitude, and meditation. He frequented the Umayyad Mosque, spending so much of his time sequestered in one of its minarets that it is known to this day as “Ghazali’s Minaret.” In

Damascus, he began work on his monumental compendium, the *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, “The Revival of the Religious Sciences,” in forty volumes, which he completed, incredibly enough, in little more than two years. The *Ihya'* stands as a testimony to Ghazali's own inner transformation. More importantly, it would transform not only Sufism, but Islam itself.



THE REVIVAL OF ISLAM

THE CHARACTER OF THE *IHYA'*

“The Revival of the Religious Sciences” is Ghazali’s masterwork and a book like no other. Though he draws copiously from earlier sources, often to the point of outright appropriation, he orders his vast material so well, and infuses it with such intensity, that it all shines anew. It ranges from the most minute and mundane of details – the protocols of ritual ablution, how to hold a fork, the use of the toothpick – to the most lofty subjects – the love of God, and the blissful acceptance of death. It is simultaneously a compendium of law, sacred tradition, theology and philosophy, and Sufi lore and theory, as well as a vivid, if inadvertent, depiction of a world. Thanks to Ghazali’s love of punchy examples and homely, often humorous anecdotes, his eleventh-century *milieu* springs to life. However exalted Ghazali’s vision may be at moments, he keeps his sharp gaze trained on the world around him and little seems to escape it. As he put it in the *Ihya'*, in the course of a discussion on love, “Many are the acts of God, but let us search out the least, the lowest, and the tiniest of them and contemplate their wonders” (*Ihya'*, 4:335–6 / Ormsby 2008). He means not only the minuscule marvels of the natural world – bees, gnats, and ants are among his favorites – but the small humdrum details of daily life: games such as chess or polo, food, sexual behaviour, and the haggling of the marketplace.

Social historians have tended to ignore this rich source; the loss is theirs. For example, in attempting to convey what is meant by the

phrase “the friends of God,” Ghazali borrows a (dubious) tradition from the earlier Sufi writer Abu Nu‘aym al-Isfahani, in which God describes His friends as “those who are bent on love of Me the way a boy hankers after something.” Ghazali expands on this and remarks:

When a boy has set his heart on something, he won’t let go of it. If it’s taken from him, he does nothing but weep and scream until it’s given back. When he goes to sleep, he takes it with him inside his clothes and when he wakes, he returns to it and clutches it tight. When he has to part with it he cries; when he finds it again he laughs. He hates anyone who fights with him over it; he loves whoever gives it to him.

Ihya’ / Ormsby 2008

In such a passage, it isn’t the formidable “Proof of Islam” who is speaking but a father. And apparently, not an indifferent one but a father who has observed his children; who has understood, and sympathized with, their small passions and sorrows. Such a passage sits oddly with his recent abandonment of his family. Was it just a good example, ready to hand, or prompted by a moment of affectionate recollection? Whatever the truth, the observation persuades; it rings true because we detect an underlying note of tenderness. We grasp, at a stroke, how God’s friends must love Him. Ghazali’s shrewd eye for the humble realities of real life gives the entire work its immediacy.

Most accounts of the *Ihya’* make it sound dry, as though it were little more than an omnium gatherum of Sufi theory and practise. Or it is described as a “synthesis;” closer to the truth but still misleading. Such descriptions overlook the two most salient facts about the work. First, it is driven by intense ambition, and second, its originality and significance reside as much in its magisterial architecture as in its content.

Ambition Transformed

When Ghazali forsook Baghdad, he renounced the prestige to which his intellectual and professional ambition had led him, but his renunciation wasn’t entirely what it seemed. He had relinquished his

position, his place at court, the pleasures of family life, as well as his considerable celebrity, yet ambition had not left him; it had merely turned into something grander. Henceforth, as he stated obliquely in the autobiography, he would see himself as the “renewer of religion” for all Islam, as it approached the half-millennium of its establishment in the Muslim year 500 (1106 CE). He assigns this claim to certain “saintly men” who learned it through dreams, but this is probably nothing more than a decorous subterfuge. There is something a little quixotic in Ghazali’s presumption: no previous “renewer of religion” had designated himself. All the others had been posthumously acclaimed – and they included some of the most illustrious names in the Sunni tradition – in the first century, ‘Umar ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, the third “rightly guided Caliph,” in the second century Shafi‘i, in the third none other than Ash‘ari, and in the fourth, the theologian Isfara’ini (though Baqillani, another Ash‘arite theologian, was also a candidate). Ghazali would later be accorded this coveted title – along with the honorific by which he is most widely known: “The Proof of Islam” (*Hujjat al-Islam*) – but it seems somewhat grandiose, if not overweening, not only to aspire to it, but to say so.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE *IHYA’*

The impulse to renew propels *The Revival* from beginning to end. It is a tendentious masterpiece; seductive, hectoring, cajoling, caustic, rhapsodic, and densely, even obsessively, argued. But neither eloquence, subtlety of reasoning, nor profundity of insight accounts for the book’s greatness. Without the remarkable organizational skill needed to marshal such varied material into a cogent whole, the work might easily have failed its purpose. The *Ihya’* displays an architecture both rigorous and transparent. It is composed in four “quarters,” each of which contains ten books. Within each book, topics are considered according to a quadripartite scheme. Whether he is discussing ritual ablutions, the proper treatment of a guest, the role of the senses in the psychology of temptation, vices to be avoided or

virtues to be cultivated, Ghazali begins with proof-texts: first, verses from the Qur'an; second, pertinent sayings from Sacred Tradition; third, sayings of the Sufi masters, accompanied by edifying anecdotes. Only after he has described these does he launch into the fourth part, the discussion proper. In this way, he sets up a triple layer of authority before embarking on argument and exhortation.

The four-part structure of each book, together with the overall arrangement, suggests that the number four and its multiples had particular significance for Ghazali. Like most medieval thinkers, he had a strong, and sometimes superstitious, regard for the occult power of numerals. He concludes *The Deliverer from Error* with an enigmatic "magic square" in which numbers and letters are arranged in an ingenious grid. He comments that if such a square is written on two scraps of cloth and never exposed to water, it can be given to a woman in labor; the woman must gaze at the cloths and then place them under her feet to hasten childbirth. Below the colophon of the oldest manuscript of the same work, copied in 1115, four years after his death, a four-square grid appears, each square of which contains a cryptic letter (McCarthy, frontispiece). This probably served as an amulet. Ghazali entitled a later treatise *The Book of Forty*; in it, he elaborates on sacred traditions of particular significance. It's perhaps not coincidental that he began writing the *Ihya'* in 1096 or 1097, when he was around forty years of age (Hourani, 296). Such numerological matters, verging on the occult, preoccupied the soberest rationalists; in Ghazali's case, they are indicative of the fact that for him the supernatural constitutes a kind of spectrum, extending from the crudest manifestations to the most refined; a spectrum in which even quasi-magical manifestations attest to another realm.

Ghazali opens his work with a disquisition on knowledge. In this, he follows the structure of earlier compilations of Sacred Tradition, which begin with accounts of the true meaning of knowledge and then proceed to specific ritual, ethical, and legal subjects. No doubt he adopted this order so that his work would look familiar to its readers, despite the novelty of his treatment. In a deeper sense, the subject of knowledge is the key to the entire work. At every turn, he

invokes its centrality; it is the basis upon which a genuine spiritual quest must be founded. By prefacing his vast discourse with a treatment of the most fundamental of topics, he also introduces what is a determining, if not always openly stated, object of the entire work: *The Revival* embodies knowledge to be acted upon.

The Ihya' as "Script"

Unlike other texts, even within his own Sufi tradition, *The Revival* demands to be read in a particular, and perhaps unaccustomed, manner. To call it a "blueprint" for action would be inadequate; rather, it is more of a script, the exact import of which can only be realized in performance. As he repeatedly stresses, all four "quarters" of *The Revival* deal exclusively with "states [or actions] of the heart," as opposed to "illuminations" (the so-called *mu'amalat*, as opposed to the *mukashafat*). When, in the course of a discussion, Ghazali strays too close to hidden or privileged insights about the underlying significance of certain practises, he tends to draw back. These, he will say, refer to matters of illumination which it is impermissible to divulge in such a work. This caution would not always spare him from attack; he was occasionally criticized for disclosing, or touching too openly upon, such rarefied matters. Certain topics, it was claimed, should not be imparted to the uninitiated, simply because uncultivated souls wouldn't be able to absorb them in the proper spirit. Ghazali agreed with this restriction; however, no clear consensus existed as to quite where the boundaries of the discussable could be drawn.

The notion of the text as a "script" – that is, as a text which can be understood only by being put into action – has other corollaries. Most important perhaps is the provisional, or even hypothetical, nature of certain of Ghazali's treatments, especially in the fourth Quarter, where he moves into the most exalted and demanding Sufi terrain. By "provisional" I mean that certain injunctions and prescriptions offered throughout the text have an "as if" quality: the novice must act "as if" such-and-such were true. The path to

understanding is not only gradual but ramified. To move from one level to another may require a certain kind of play-acting, a performance; through performance, the role can become reality. This does not mean that the point in question is untrue; rather, it means that, first, the aspirant must practise a certain “suspension of disbelief” and, second, that the truth at issue is not necessarily the complete or the final truth; it is a truth unveiling itself, which will be grasped correctly only later, when deeper and more intricate aspects of the truth are clarified, and even then, only through action. In this respect, the text has the practical feel of a manual, along the lines of the treatise on the “beautiful names” of God, discussed earlier. The performative aspect of the *Ihya’* has not been remarked upon before but is essential. The work is not a straightforward “encyclopedia” of Sufi lore and practise, nor is it a simple “synthesis.” However the prose may soar, its insights were meant to be tested day by day, hour by hour, in the world of men and women. It contains “knowledge” which a reader is expected to transform into “action,” and its words can be understood properly only if “tasted.” It is the fullest possible elaboration of the Ghazalian dictum with which we began: “knowledge and action.”

Contents of the Ihya’

The first Quarter deals with worship and ritual obligations in their innermost significance – what Ghazali terms their “secrets” – and contains the following books:¹

- 1 The nature of knowledge*
- 2 Creedal principles (this is the treatise “Foundations and Creeds”)*

1 Marked with an asterisk are those books which have been translated into English. All forty books are currently being translated and published by the Islamic Texts Society of Cambridge, England; as of this writing, ten books have appeared. There are also partial translations into German, French, Italian, Dutch, and Persian.

- 3 Ritual purity*
- 4 Prayer
- 5 Almsgiving*
- 6 Fasting*
- 7 Pilgrimage
- 8 Recitation of the Qur'an
- 9 Invocations and supplications*
- 10 Prayers at set times

The second Quarter deals with manners, comprising not only etiquette but the conduct of personal relationships; it is thus a Sufi system of practical ethics. Its ten books are:

- 11 Table manners; eating and drinking*
- 12 Marriage
- 13 Gain and earning a livelihood
- 14 Lawful and unlawful things*
- 15 Association with friends and companions
- 16 Solitude
- 17 Travel
- 18 Listening (to music and poetry); ecstasy*
- 19 "Commanding the good and forbidding the wrong"
- 20 The life and ethical comportment of the Prophet

The third Quarter is concerned with psychology, especially the nature of the human self (or heart), and moves from there quite naturally into the various vices and sins, those acts and tendencies which are destructive and form obstacles to salvation:

- 21 Wonders of the heart*
- 22 Disciplining the self*
- 23 Breaking the two desires (gluttony and lust)*
- 24 Sins of the tongue

- 25 Against anger, malice, and envy
- 26 Contempt for the world
- 27 Against avarice and love of possessions
- 28 Against status and hypocrisy
- 29 Against haughtiness and pride
- 30 Against delusion

The final, and justly renowned, fourth Quarter of *The Revival* deals with salvation and the virtues and “states” which lead to it. These are:

- 31 Repentance
- 32 Patience and thankfulness*
- 33 Fear and hope*
- 34 Poverty and renunciation*
- 35 Belief in God’s oneness and trust in Him*
- 36 Love of God*
- 37 Intention, sincerity, and truthfulness*
- 38 Self-watchfulness; examination of conscience
- 39 Meditation
- 40 Remembrance of death*

As this list suggests, there is a progression in the chapters from the humblest duties of a believer to the highest pinnacles of insight. Each topic is a step in a slow ascent, each new theme depends upon the theme that precedes it. At the same time, however, nothing is superseded or supplanted. Realization of the innermost meaning of, say, ritual ablution is as important for the most accomplished initiate as it is for the merest novice. The aspiring mystic proceeds by stages, without ever neglecting or forgetting the step on which he first set his foot. The structure of the *Ihya’* is thus simultaneously hierarchical and circular.

One other characteristic of the work must be mentioned. Despite its imposing structure, despite the sense of mission which animates

it, *The Revival* is a very personal book. Ghazali speaks regularly in the first person, in his own voice, and autobiographical details are sprinkled throughout. Sometimes these are quite explicit; others may be inferred. The note is struck from the outset, when, in the opening pages, he declares that “God loosed the knot of silence from my tongue and encircled me ... with the necklace of rational speech.” (*Ihya'*, 1:9). This is an obvious allusion to his breakdown, when he was reduced to speechlessness. In *The Revival* and indeed, in all the later work, that knot is not only loosed but transformed into the most eloquent of necklaces.

Ghazali's Sufism

It's not possible to give a just sense of *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* in a few pages. It's not only a mighty book but often a maddening one. Ghazali can dwell on the minutiae of daily life to an almost obsessive degree at one moment, only to rise to ecstatic eloquence at another. For example, in discussing table manners he remarks that “one should do nothing that others hold to be unclean,” and continues:

Thus a person should not shake his hand in the dish [to remove any food clinging to it] nor move his head towards the dish when placing the morsel in his mouth. If he removes something from his mouth he should avert his face from the food and take it out with his left hand.

He must not immerse a greasy morsel in the vinegar, nor the vinegar in the greasy morsel, for others may not like this. He should not immerse in the broth or the vinegar what is left of any morsel he has cut with his teeth; nor should he talk about things that bring to mind things held to be unclean.

Ihya', 3:10 / Johnson-Davies, 16–17

In the same eleventh book, he offers advice of a more peculiar sort, as when he informs us that “four things increase one's sexual prowess: eating small birds, truffles, pistachio nuts, and watercress” or, more suggestively, that “four things strengthen the sight: sitting in the direction of the *qibla* [that is, towards Mecca, the direction of prayer],

wearing *kohl* when sleeping, looking at greenery, and the cleansing of garments” (*Ibid.*, 51). I cite these prescriptions not for their quaintness but because they illustrate his practical bent; this is the “avuncular” Ghazali. (Even here, however, we note the recurrence of the number four, as well as the stress laid upon certain topics: human sexuality, for example, or the beauty of growing things, for which he had a particular fondness.) At the other extreme he can open his discourse on divine love with the following magnificent oration:

Praised be God Who exalted the hearts of His saints above all concern for the vanities and the glamour of this world, Who purified their innermost beings from regard for anything but His presence, Who singled out their hearts for devotion on the prayer rug of His grandeur and disclosed to them His names and His attributes so that they shone with the very fire of knowing Him, Who then revealed to them the splendours of His face until they burned in the fire of His love; and Who then concealed from them the essence of His majesty so that they wandered in the deserts of His glory and His might. Then, whenever they trembled at a glimpse of His essential majesty, He darkened it with such astonishment as dusts the surface of both reason and perception.

Ihya', 4:311

It would be misleading to give the impression that the work veers only between extremes of the picayune and the grandiloquent. Ghazali has a fondness, perhaps a weakness, for immense contrasts which he delights in reconciling; paradox of both image and content is one of his favorite devices. But there is another voice heard throughout these forty books, a voice that is measured and commonsensical, and this predominates. Between morsels dipped in vinegar and the seraphic hosts gazing on the Most High, a distinctly human and sensible accent sounds. The *Ihya'* is a manual for salvation but along the way it offers much advice for the good conduct of life in the world.

Beyond such telling but superficial aspects lie essential themes which bind this vast work together. In exploring some of them, certain of the contours of Ghazali's distinctive Sufism – at once systematic and visionary – will emerge.

The Decipherment of the World

Seen with “the eyes of the heart,” the world discloses its double visage to the Sufi aspirant. In itself, the world is little more than a fiction, a metaphor of true reality; it is a “figure of speech” (*majaz*), not an “essential reality” (*haqiqah*). As Ghazali put it in one of his letters, written in Persian, “existence and non-existence do not arise from themselves but rather, from the divine nature.” Existence falls into two distinct realms: God, and everything-that-is-not-God. God is the only existing object, everything else exists only metaphorically. This view represents the spinning out of the Avicennian conception of contingency in mystical terms. In themselves, all beings and things are only possible; what actuality they possess comes from outside. And yet (to complicate matters further), all things bear within them that necessity imparted to them by the efficacious will of the Omnipotent. Reality – or what we like to call “reality” – is inherently paradoxical: it is at once intrinsically possible and extrinsically necessary. For this reason, phenomena display a double aspect to the enlightened. Man is simultaneously “a dungheap covered with skin” and “the most amazing” of creations, depending on whether we consider man in himself or man as the creature of God.

The figurative nature of created things doesn’t mean that they’re unreal. In one sense, they are illusory: everything we lust after in the world, whether it be pleasure, possession, or high prestige, forms a bramble of delusion; it falls under the heading of “lower world” (*dunya* in Arabic) – what we might refer to in English as “the world, the flesh, and the devil.” Seen truly, however, creation, which issues from the hand of God, is pristine and transparent with marvel. Only our eyes are clouded against its transparency.

Eyesight vs Insight

When we look with purified eyes into the depths of creation, we discover that it is dense with wisdom. A benign rationale lies coiled in all phenomena, waiting to be discovered. These rationales are what

Ghazali terms “instances of wisdom,” (using the plural (*hikam*) of the Arabic word for “wisdom” and “philosophy”). Each thing in the order of creation carries within it some such discernible wisdom, which is ours to discover. These are not “veiled” truths; they stand before us in their nakedness, if we can only learn to see them. Moreover, every instance leads to other such instances, with which it is inextricably linked. We have trouble discerning them not only because our eyes are impure, but also because the world and our minds connive to keep them hidden; there is a cognitive complicity in the structure both of our minds and of the world, which prevents us from seeing. The notion had already been voiced by Abu Talib al-Makki, one of Ghazali’s main sources, when he wrote:

God lets the world-order take its course in conformity with the intellect’s own order and the meanings of the customary and usual process of events, through well-known means and accepted instrumentalities, in accord with which the natural bent of the intellect and its innate propensity ... Hence, the excellence of the world-order and the beauty of the divine decree are by their very nature hidden.

Ormsby 1984, 58

This is a subtle point. In one sense, we are designed *not* to discern, just as the world has been designed not to be discernible, for “God conceals the ends and veils mysteries,” as Makki remarks. Building on this, Ghazali elsewhere quotes Qur. 8:24, “God comes between a man and his heart,” and comments, “God blocks man from direct knowledge, attentive observation and awareness of the mind’s attributes, and how it is turned this way and that between the fingers of the Merciful” (*Ihya’*, 3:3). This is why acceptance of the Sufi path and its considerable rigors is so imperative: only through radical purification of the senses and the intellect can we hope to see, can we hope to taste, what stands in all its obviousness right before our eyes.

I don’t wish to suggest that Ghazali believed truth to exist only on the surface of things; though he rejected the privileged wisdom of Isma‘ilis, he was not a proponent of the purely non-esoteric, after the

manner of the Zahiris. Rather, the more perception was refined, the more truths it would discover. Clarity has its own depths; the light is as infinitesimally stratified as the darkness – indeed, it is more so. In principle, insight could penetrate indefinitely into the secrets of things without touching bottom. An insight, that is, which relies neither on an infallible Imam, nor on mere logical thought, but on lived experience viewed through the “eyes of the heart.”

Ghazali often contrasts “eyesight” with “insight.” The refinement of insight allows one to penetrate more deeply into both sacred teaching and the world itself. In Book 35, Ghazali chooses a characteristically homely analogy to illustrate this point. To understand the principle of God’s unity, we should think of it as a nut. A nut has four layers: an outer shell, an inner husk, a kernel, and the oil within the kernel. Those who are content with the shell profess God’s oneness with their tongues, but not with their hearts. Those who reach the inner husk are conventional believers. Those who have approached the kernel have been accorded illumination; truth has been “unveiled,” at least in part, for them. But the deepest level is reached by those who pierce to the innermost oil of the nut; these rare individuals, “annihilated in their faith,” glimpse the divine oneness behind all phenomena; they “see only unity when they regard existence” (*Ihya’*, 4:262 / Burrell, 10; Landolt, 71).

Creation as Divine Text

Creation too is a kind of text; after all, the word for Qur’anic verse is the same in Arabic as the word for “natural sign,” and Ghazali, like many other commentators, loves to play on this. The farther our insight reaches, the more wisdom we discover woven into the very fabric of things. The human body provides innumerable instances of this wisdom. Consider your own hand:

God placed the fingers on one side and the thumb on the other side, so that the thumb could curve around them all. Now if all beings from the first to the last collaborated to devise by subtle thought another way of placing the fingers except as they have been placed ... they could not

do this. For by this arrangement the hand is best suited for grasping and letting go.

Ihya', 4:117

So, too, with the eye or the ear or the nose, so, too, with all the limbs and organs down to the veins, the nerves, the bones and the ligaments: all have been exquisitely positioned in the best possible arrangement, and this demonstrates the presence of a hidden wisdom in creation. This line of reasoning, which Ghazali continually exploits, came to him (as Joseph Schacht pointed out long ago) from Mu'tazilite doctrine; the Mu'tazilites had derived it from the Greek physician and philosopher Galen ("Jalinus" to the Arabs). Ghazali disinfests it of Mu'tazilism by removing the element of obligation which they had imposed upon God. For him, God's wisdom, like His choice, is utterly free and unconstrained. God wasn't obliged to provide us with opposable thumbs but in His wisdom and generosity He did.

So marvellous are human beings that Ghazali, drawing on an old commonplace, calls them each "a little world." This draws on the ancient notion of the microcosm; the philosopher Kindi, along with many other writers, had used it, remarking that "man is a little world since every force which exists in the All is to be found in him" (*Rasa'il*, 1:260). But Ghazali uses it to inspire amazement in his readers. "If we wished to mention the marvels in a bedbug, an ant, a bee or a spider ... in the way they build their houses, gather their food, consort with their mates, and store provisions, ... we would not be able to do so," he writes (*Ihya'*, 4:375). His guiding principle, enunciated in a later summary of *The Revival*, is that "the lowest is explicatory of the highest" (*Jawahir*, 41). The gnat is no less awesome than the elephant. Small creatures mirror larger ones: the gnat has a "trunk" as ingenious as the elephant's, though less conspicuous. If such wonders exist in these tiny beings, how much more so in humans? If we examine the structure of the human body with attentive eyes, we will see the entire cosmos reflected in its make-up. Not only are the things of the world placed in the best places for them, but they mirror one

another, and this is especially true of humans. The creation is a “divine copy” and we the mirrors of that facsimile. The world, in this sense, is perfect and so too are human beings, its apex. The world forms a complex web of correspondences, in which everything from the farthest star to the lowliest insect is bound together, and all phenomena intersect in the human creature.

The Enemy Self

From an early period, Sufi masters realized that the chief obstacle on the path was the human self; we house an intimate enemy. Ghazali cites the tradition which runs, “The most hostile of your enemies is that self of yours between your two sides.” The fact that the self is not intrinsically evil complicated this awareness. True, the Qur’an identifies a “self that incites to evil” (12:53) but that self was also recognized as a vital force. This entity within us, pesky yet indispensable, is the *nafs*, a word sometimes translated as the “carnal soul,” and deriving from the same Arabic root as the word for “breath.” It is an inner force, which must be tamed, and if possible annihilated, for union with God to occur; or rather, since a return to the world after “annihilation” constitutes a higher stage of spirituality, that self must be transformed. It must be emptied of everything that is not God.

For Ghazali, as for earlier Sufis, the self is the seat of lust and greed and rage. It craves only satisfaction of its appetites, yet remains insatiable, but it also gives us courage, energy, and audacity. For Ghazali, the self may be understood in a second and deeper sense. It is “a subtle organ” and “man in the true sense,” it is “his very self and nature” (*Ihya’*, 3:5). He distinguishes several selves in the self. There is the “carnal self” but also the “serene soul,” which God will summon to Himself at death with the words, “O thou serene soul, return to thy Lord” (Qur. 89:27). And there is the “reproving soul” (or self), derived from Qur. 75:2, which fights our lower appetites.

Here, as elsewhere, Ghazali’s fundamental healthiness of outlook prevails. Sex, for example, is not bad in itself; on the contrary, it

prefigures the pleasures of paradise. As he says, offering an explicit analogy:

Know that man has been made subject to sexual desire for two beneficial reasons. The first of these is that by knowing its delight he is able to draw an analogy which suggests to him what the delight of the Afterlife must be like ... The second reason is that it allows the human race to continue and the world to abide.

Ihya', 3:107/Winter 1995, 165

But if sex forms the object of the self's cravings, it becomes a snare, especially when it causes exclusive attachment to one particular person. Ghazali condemns passionate attachments; it is preferable to enjoy multiple relations rather than to be besotted with one beloved; it is shameful for people to believe that "their lust can only be satisfied by one person" (*Ibid.*, 169). For later Sufis, and for Ghazali himself, such exclusive and overmastering erotic passion, when directed towards God, represents the highest stage of spiritual development. At that stage, the lover realizes that only one true Beloved exists.

The Human Heart

To reach this realization, the sly self must be outwitted and brought to heel; this is the proper function of the intellect. Only then can other, more refined human faculties come into their own. These are the "spirit" (*ruh*), the intellect, and above all, the "heart" (*qalb*). The word I translate as "heart" has a wider range of meaning in Arabic than in English; it comprises all that we mean by "mind" as well. It is a cognitive faculty of great subtlety and depth, far surpassing mere "intellect." (Pascal's famous aphorism, "*Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas*" (The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know), offers a parallel.) Here is how, in the third Quarter of the *Ihya'*, Ghazali characterizes the heart:

The piece of flesh, shaped like a pine-cone, lodged on the left side of the breast ... We don't intend to explain its form and function; that's

the task of doctors and has nothing to do with religious aims. This heart exists in the beasts, it exists in a corpse. But in this book, when we use the word “heart” we don’t mean that – a lump of flesh without any great value ... [We mean] “heart” in its second sense as a subtle spiritual and divine organ. This subtle faculty constitutes the true and essential nature of man; it is that part of man which perceives, which knows, which has insight.

Ihya’, 3:4

The heart, the primal seat of intellect, is “that in man which understands and knows the true nature of things.” He cites the earlier mystic Sahl al-Tustari approvingly, “The heart is the throne and the breast is its pedestal.”

Man also possesses a spirit, a “fine body ... which diffuses by means of the arteries to other parts of the body.” But here Ghazali draws one of his annoying veils: discussion of the spirit is not permitted. All he will say is that it is a “delicate organ of perception and knowledge.” He cites, as his reason for discretion, Qur. 17:85, in which the Prophet states: “The Spirit is part of my Lord’s domain.” Still, its qualities may be suggested. In one of those beautiful analogies which are part of the glory of the *Ihya’*, Ghazali compares the spirit to lamplight falling across a wall and says, “The flowing of the breath of life and its motion in the body is like the motion of a lamp in the corners of a house when someone moves it about” (*Ihya’*, 3:4). This is a homely image, understandable by anyone, yet which conveys the suggestion of a supreme mystery.

If we could decode all the elements that go into our making we would be dumbfounded. But we are signs indecipherable to ourselves. To help us decipher ourselves, Ghazali offers not only arguments but parables. Thus, the heart is like a king supplied with servants and assistants; the senses play the role of “the spies” of that king. The heart administers its “armies” the way God directs His angels. In this scenario, the self is like “the slave responsible for provisions who is deceitful, sly, crooked and malicious, taking on the shape of a good counselor while concealing lethal poison beneath his counsel” (*Ihya’*, 3:6). By such vivid analogies, Ghazali attempts to

bring home the wonders of our psychic architecture. For him the invisible is often embedded not only in the visible but in the physical. Through contemplation of the palpable and its analogies, we come to true knowledge, which is the prerequisite of faith. We must come to know ourselves, for “a knowledge of the mind and its true nature is the basis of religion and the foundation of the way of the godly” (*Ihya'*, 3:3).

Earlier, I compared Ghazali with Pascal. (The comparison was first made by Ghazali's early biographer Margaret Smith, but too vaguely, in my opinion.) Pascal saw man as positioned midway between the beast and the angel. Ghazali also draws this analogy: the human self, he says:

... drops at one time to the lowest of the low and sinks to the level of demons and yet, how it rises at other times to the highest of the high and ascends to the realm of the angels who bask in God's nearness!

Ihya', 3:3

But these two great thinkers were utterly different in the end. Pascal saw *l'homme sans Dieu*, “the man without God,” as incomplete; but for him, humans remained beings endowed with substance. For Ghazali, humans as humans have neither meaning nor substance; in themselves, viewed “without God,” humans are mere hypothetical beings, made actual only by the divine will. For Pascal the disparity was between faith – being “with God” – and disbelief – being “without God” – but an unbeliever could change. For Ghazali, the disparity is metaphysical; it lies in the nature of creation. In ourselves, as purely contingent beings, we cannot ever become “real” beings in the way that God is real unless we achieve union with Him.

Throughout the *Ihya'*, a double vision is in play, especially with regard to the human world. The whole huge work is an attempt to get us to see ourselves as we are; first, in our true circumstances, in ourselves, and second, in the more profound sense, as breathing artifacts of a wise creator. Our selves, with all their passions and cravings, obstruct us from a grasp of our own wondrousness. We must see those selves for what they are – greedy, lustful, arrogant, lazy, and

self-deluding — before we can see beyond them to what we truly are. “Man is the most amazing of creatures,” Ghazali says more than once, “and yet, he is not amazed at himself.”

The Child of the Instant

Earlier Sufis had described the genuine mystic as “the child of the instant” (*ibn al-waqt*, literally, the “son of the moment”). What does this odd phrase mean? It may be presumptuous to attempt any explanation. Like most of us, I live obsessively in the past, consumed by regret or nostalgia; when not immersed in the past, I feed on the future: hope and expectation preoccupy my thoughts. With unfailing ingenuity, I distract myself from the present moment. I not only cannot grasp the present moment, but I don’t really want to. To see with the eyes of the heart is to see only the present moment, and not to hang suspended between fear and hope. For the Sufi, fear and hope pertain not solely to this world but to the world to come; and yet, even the fear of hell and the hope of heaven must be relinquished in favor of the irreplaceable present instant. Only by living and acting in the moment can one manage to know and to act with equal authenticity. For some Sufis, whom Ghazali quotes approvingly, even the use of the future tense in speech is to be avoided, as is any resort to the hypothetical; according to Makki, “the future tense is one of the armies of Satan” (Ormsby 1984, 42).

The injunction to live in the present moment represents one of those “as if” scenarios I mentioned earlier. If we live as if only the present moment existed, we may come to glimpse something fundamental about reality. We know the present moment either in anticipation or in retrospect; we feel it arrive like a spike on a graph, but it passes even as we race to seize it. The true aspirant lives only on such discontinuous and fleeting pinnacles of time.

This is well-established Sufi practise, which Ghazali re-conceives in original terms. First, he systematizes the process, providing a step-by-step method through which one may open the eyes of the heart and glimpse the instant entire. Second, to this end, he offers not sim-

ply scattered sayings and anecdotes, but articulates his method within an overarching world-view, discreetly but firmly implanted in select doctrines and precepts taken, in sanitized form, from both philosophers and theologians. This gives his directions their signal sturdiness. His awareness of the moment is girded both by Ash'arite "occasionalism" and by Avicennian "contingency." Though neither is always explicitly invoked, each serves to lend a rational and plausible articulation of what would otherwise be a baffling directive. We can live in the moment, or "as if" in the moment, if we understand what a "moment" means. The world could be different at every instant. It emerges anew from the shaping hand and the specifying will of a wise Creator instant by instant. Each of these instants could be otherwise but once willed, each becomes necessary. To witness this innermost contingency and this infused necessity at each successive moment, and in precise detail, both within oneself and in all creation, is to be a child of the instant.

Trust in God (tawakkul)

When we see everything that is, moment by moment, with the awareness that each moment could be different and yet, is as it had to be, we discover no recourse but to trust absolutely in God. We know that He shapes each instant, and the world of each instant, and that within each one, He places depths of hidden wisdom. Without that lovingly concealed wisdom, the moment would never have come to be. If a particular time seems awful, we still know that it came to be through God's will and His wisdom. It is our task to uncover that wisdom, however horrendous its wrappings may appear. When we do this, when we see the momentary world with insight, we may discern the wisdom beneath the horror. But even if we fail to discern this, we still must trust in God.

Such utter trust, which Sufis call *tawakkul* (based on Qur. 11:56, among other verses) is a pre-eminent virtue. Ghazali couples it with his treatment of God's oneness in the *Ihya'*. There he shows how such trust is to be attained. Everything along the Sufi path depends on this

attitude of complete acceptance. The Sufi must become before God “like a corpse in the hands of the corpse-washer who turns him however he wishes, for there is no motion or self-direction in him” (Ormsby 1984, 43). Here too, “as if” comes into play. Even if I can’t believe that God intends all that befalls me, if I act as if I believed that, I may come to find myself on the first precarious rung of that infinite ladder of trust which leads ultimately to love.

For Ghazali, trust in God has more nuances than for the Sufi masters of old. For him, it isn’t just a simple attitude of stubborn confidence. He is aware of its wider implications, both philosophical and theological. He won’t argue that we should trust in God because He is the “necessarily existing being” from whom all existence and all good flow. Nor does he hold, with his Ash‘arite colleagues, that we should trust because whatever God wills, instant after instant, is good simply because God willed it, without regard for man’s benefit or indeed, for any discernible purpose. Ghazali is closer to his old adversaries, the Mu‘tazilites, on this point. God wills the good in everything, and in everything He wills there is benefit to humankind. But unlike the Mu‘tazilites, he rejects any notion that God is obliged so to will. For Ghazali, this is an “optimal” world but it is so, not “in the order of the good,” as the philosophers argued, nor as a consequence of divine obligation, but solely because God acts in accord with the dictates of wisdom.

This isn’t mere intellectual fancy dancing on his part. Neither necessity nor inscrutable will fairly characterizes God’s actions. He is free and He chooses freely. The Ghazalian insistence on wisdom which, carefully transformed, camouflages the old Mu‘tazilite insistence on divine justice safeguards His freedom. To say (with the Ash‘arites) that whatever happens to you must be good because God willed it and that His act of will defines the good, is rational, if unsatisfactory, at least on an emotional level. To say (with the philosophers) that what befell you did so as a final effect in a long sequence of causes and effects, the final outcome of which is to the universal good, is rational enough but offends the emotions equally. But to say, as Ghazali does, that what struck you could not have missed you

because the event was shaped and specified in God's wisdom for a benevolent, if hidden, purpose, is more satisfying to both heart and mind.

Ghazali's theodicy

Such considerations bring Ghazali to his notorious and much-discussed expression of theodicy (the justification of God's goodness in the face of the world's evil), drawn from numerous sources but in the end, all his own.

To trust in God, he argues, you must accept that "there is nothing in possibility more wonderful than what is" (*Ihya'* 4:275, in a variant formulation; Ormsby 1984). This statement, which Ghazali explained and defended in several later works, astonished, outraged, puzzled, vexed, enlightened, and inspired dozens of thinkers and mystics for centuries after his death. A sentence which prompts debate for almost 800 years must have touched theological nerves on distinctly sensitive points. Controversy raged during his lifetime, and it continues. Modern Muslim thinkers as disparate as the charismatic Turkish mystic Said Nursi (d. 1960) and the Iranian theologian Murtada Mutahhari (murdered 1979) both cite it with approval.

The sentence occurs in an intricate passage, which I quote at some length because it displays several Ghazalian devices quite typical of the *Ihya'*: his love of bravura assertions, his reliance on contrary-to-fact hypotheses, and above all, the complexity of his prose in full swing. Trust in God, he says, means that:

one believe with utter certainty ... that if God had created all creatures with the intelligence of the most intelligent among them and the knowledge of the most learned among them, and if He had created for them all the knowledge their souls could sustain and had poured out upon them wisdom of indescribable extent, then, had He given each the knowledge, wisdom, and intelligence of them all, and revealed to them the consequences of things and taught them the mysteries of the transcendent world, the subtleties of divine favor and the mysteries of final punishments, until they were made well aware of good and evil,

benefit and harm; then, if He had ordered them to arrange this world and the next in terms of the knowledge and wisdom they had received, even then, that ... wouldn't necessitate adding to the way in which God has arranged creation in this world and the next by so much as a gnat's wing, nor subtract from it by so much as a gnat's wing ... Their arrangement would not ward off sickness, fault, defect, poverty, or injury from one so afflicted; it would not remove health, perfection, wealth or advantage from one so favored.

The hyperbole is striking: even with God's help, humans could not alter the world substantially. For, as he continues:

Everything God apportions to man – sustenance, life-span, pleasure and pain, capacity and incapacity, belief and disbelief, obedience and sin – is all sheer justice, with no injustice in it; and pure right, with no wrong in it. The world God created is not merely “right,” it is insuperably so, and the most “wonderful” of imaginable worlds. The world as it is stands in the necessarily right order, in accord with what must be and as it must be and in the measure in which it must be. There does not exist in the realm of possibility anything more excellent, more perfect, and more complete than it.

Ihya', 4:274–75

I have analysed this passage in detail elsewhere; from preceding chapters, it should be obvious how skilfully Ghazali has woven together Qur'anic allusion (the gnat's wing), the philosophical (“necessarily right order”), the theological – especially the Mu'tazilite love of “sheer justice” – and mainstream doctrine into a seamless proposition. The basic premise he has lifted from Makki, but he has so shaped it and adorned it with new elements that it has become a quite different statement, not least because the implications left unspoken by Makki have been fully drawn out by Ghazali.

The Love of God

God's love for humans, and humankind's for God, occupies the thirty-sixth book of the *Ihya'*. Ghazali's treatment of the subject is pioneering, and would influence succeeding generations of Sufis.

Though he was not the first thinker to deal with divine love, he was the first to do so systematically. His discussion is as impressive for its strategy as for its content. In this way, it reveals yet a further aspect of the *Ihya'*, which I may not have emphasized enough: its unusual intelligence.

In treating divine love, Ghazali faced a vexing problem. Though earlier Sufis had preached a doctrine of love and had written on the subject, the love between God and man had remained a largely unexplored, as well as questionable, topic. The effect of Ghazali's treatment was to place mystical love at the very heart of Sufism. The problem lay in the fact that the notion of love between God and the human creature appeared a logical, as well as emotional, impossibility. How could there be love between a supreme being, utterly transcendent and utterly incomparable, and such fleeting, insubstantial, radically contingent beings as we are? The gulf appeared not only vast but unbridgeable. Is it conceivable that God, the paragon and source of all beauty and wisdom, could entertain any relationship with a human being? As we've seen, man may be a "wonder" with respect to the marvels of creation, but in himself he is, as Ghazali more than once puts it, "a dungheap covered with skin" and even, "a sack of shit."

The dilemma is ancient; it is first mentioned by none other than Aristotle (Goldziher 1919, 430). For certain theologians, as well as Sufis, it was not only insoluble but unmentionable; the early mystic Abu al-Husayn al-Nuri (d. 907), who reportedly wrote a book on the topic, was subject to judicial harassment on suspicion of blasphemy (Knysh, 60–61). The greatest exponent of love of God, the ecstatic mystic Hallaj, was executed, at least in part, for his wild utterances which led, in the eyes of certain jurists – though not in Ghazali's – to outright blasphemy. Ghazali's task, in defending love between God and humans, was to render a dubious – and rather touchy – subject both plausible and acceptable.

He employs a startling strategy. He founds love of God on self-love, a sentiment no one could deny. In rigorous steps, he sets out to prove that all our loves are ultimately grounded in self-love. What we think of as disinterested love, say, the love of parents for

their children, is actually the most intensely self-interested. Here is how he puts it:

For every living being the first object of love is its own self. Love of oneself signifies that in one's very nature there exists an inclination to prolong one's being and to avoid non-being and annihilation. There is a natural correspondence between him who loves and the object of his love. But what could be more perfectly in harmony with him than his own self and the prolongation of his own existence, and what could be more powerfully at variance with him than his own non-existence and destruction?

Ihya', 4:314/Ormsby 2008

There's something unflinching in Ghazali's analysis of self-love that makes modern readers squirm. This appears most sharply when he discusses parental love. The love of a father for his son, he argues, is in effect a love for the father's own continued existence. As he says, a father "bears troubles for his son's sake because he will succeed him in existence after his own death" (*Ibid.*). Even more bluntly, Ghazali contends that were a father forced to choose between his own death and that of his child, he would choose the death of his child – assuming, as he rather coldly adds, that the father has "a sound and well-balanced nature" – since actual survival is better than virtual.

Ghazali is deliberately plain-spoken. He wants to hammer home the premise upon which his whole case rests: that we act, when we act on our own, purely and exclusively out of self-love. God's love, by contrast, is not motivated by any benefit which He might derive from us. To persuade us of another form of love, a love without ulterior motives, Ghazali needs us to grant this initial irrefutable proposition. All the various forms of human love which he lists – love of those who do us good, love of those who do good to others, loved inspired by beauty, love based on mutual affinity – can be traced back to self-love. These forms of love aren't all on the same plane. What Ghazali wishes to persuade us of is that love for something in itself is possible. In this way, by beginning with the most obvious and undeniable type of love – our love for ourselves and our greed to go on living – he

slowly progresses to higher and higher manifestations of love. These are all tinged with self-interest, in steadily decreasing degrees; love prompted by beauty, for example, is less self-interested than love of a benefactor, it may even be the only sort of love which we experience for its own sake. Thus a higher love is conceivable.

Ghazali wants to convince us that, in the end, we love only one being, however much we may imagine otherwise. It is God whom we love, in various guises, in all our expressions of affection. The beggar loves his benefactor without realizing that it is God who has moved the benefactor's hand to bestow the alms; the benefactor is no more deserving of thanks than is the hand which distributes the coin. Behind the benefactor, behind the beggar, it is God alone who acts. We are shadows through whom He plays out His part.

Ghazali must then counter a larger objection. How is it possible to love something intangible and invisible? Again, by slow steps, he proves that we love many intangible things, from a melody to the memory of a vanished master (his example is, of course, Shafi'i). Even a scent may be beautiful. Ghazali recalls the tradition in which the Prophet said, "Three things in this world of yours are precious to me: perfume, women and prayer, but prayer most of all." (Ghazali comments, rather tellingly, that we know the beauty of women largely by the sense of touch.) Beauty, which is one of the prime causes of love, is even more seductive when it isn't merely physical but the manifestation of some inward beauty, beauty of character or virtue. God is supremely beautiful: Ghazali cites the tradition, "God is beautiful and loves beauty" as evidence. If we can love the beautiful character of a long-dead sage, whose body is now dust – he again uses Shafi'i as his example – why is it unthinkable to love an unseen and incorporeal being such as God?

Ghazali now reaches the heart of his argument. We most fully love that for which we feel an inner sympathy, a sense of likeness. For Ghazali, this is the key to love of God. But how is a creature to discover the secret affinity which links him or her with the most high God? He explains that this is "explicable neither as resemblance of form nor similarity in outward shape. Rather, such affinity is due to

secret precepts." These, he disappointingly claims, must be left "behind the veil of bafflement," for "they may not be mentioned in books." Still, it is possible to infer what is meant from hints which Ghazali drops elsewhere.

Affinity between God and man is to be sought in that willed imitation of God which both scripture and tradition command. "Mold your character to God's virtues," runs a famous maxim. This entails modeling oneself upon the divine attributes, especially those of knowledge, righteousness, kindness, and good counsel. We have seen how, in his treatise on the divine names, Ghazali prescribes a meditative exercise by which a human may become "godlike" through imagining the process by which God confers form on things. Furthermore, in accord with another tradition, in which the Prophet says, "God created Adam in His form," we come to realize that there must exist some spiritual form, hidden from the eyes of sense, which links God and humankind. Again, citing a so-called "holy tradition" (*hadith qudsi*) – that is, a tradition in which God speaks in the first person – Ghazali suggests how such concealed affinity may be understood. God says:

Let man not cease coming close to Me by works beyond what is prescribed, so that I may love him, for when I love him, I become the hearing by which he hears, the sight by which he sees, and the tongue with which he speaks.

In the end, knowledge of God, which is the basis of love, depends upon an occult or secret faculty, an "inner eye" which surpasses the eye of flesh. Knowledge and love are bound inseparably together. In a beautiful passage, Ghazali offers tribute to such knowledge:

The breadth of the knowledge of God is only comparable with the heavens and the earth. It leads the gaze beyond all measurable quantities for its extent is infinite. The initiate ceaselessly acquires such knowledge in paradise, the breadth of which is that of the heavens and the earth. In those gardens he revels and picks their fruit. He sips from their cisterns. He is safe from any cessation since the fruits of this garden are neither finite nor forbidden. The pleasure is everlasting;

death does not sever it, for death does not destroy the substrate of the knowledge of God. Its locus is the spirit which is a divine and heavenly thing. Death alters only its circumstances, death frees it from its captivity, but as for annihilating it? Absolutely not!

Ihya', 4:327/Ormsby 2008

The object of our striving must be to realize a love that is not self-interested. Through knowledge and practise of the virtues we may come to this realization, but the way is complicated, not only by our own faults, hesitations, and failures but by the very nature of love. In several daring chapters, Ghazali describes the lover's courtship of the beloved, who is God Himself, in erotic and amatory terms. As in human love, love of God causes fierce longing, intervals of despair, wheedling, coquetry, complaint, heartbreak, and self-deception, until finally, in rare instants, some indescribable intimacy may be achieved.

This intimacy is captured in a moving prayer by the early mystic Yahya ibn Mu'adh (d. 871), which Ghazali, with his eye for apt quotations, includes:

O God, I am standing in Your courtyard and am riven with Your praise. You took me to You when I was young. You clothed me in knowledge of You. You gave me strength through Your favor. You turned me this way and that, in all my actions, through veiling and repentance, renunciation and longing, contentment and love. You gave me to drink from Your cisterns. You let me wander untended in Your gardens. I clung to Your commandments and remained in love with Your word even after my mustache sprouted and the bird of my destiny appeared. Now that I am grown, how may I go away from You? There remains for me now in Your presence nothing but buzzing, and in entreating You nothing but humming, for I am a lover and every lover is rapt in his beloved and has no interest in anything but what he loves.

Ihya', 4:313/Ormsby 2008

CONCLUSION: KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION

Ghazali was around thirty-seven years old when he suffered his spiritual crisis and left Baghdad. If the years leading up to that crisis were devoted to the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge, the sixteen years remaining to him were dedicated to action. The works written around and after 1095 are no longer merely academic; they are engaged. They represent a knowledge gained from study and experience, converted into action. But the last part of his career was not spent in the writing of books, though he continued to be prolific: he wrote several summaries of the *Ihya'* in Arabic and Persian, together with works defending and commenting on its disputed or abstruse points, purely mystical treatises such as the famous *Mishkat al-anwar*, the "Niche of Lights," composed an admonitory treatise for the Sultan's edification (*Nasihah al-muluk*, or "Counsel for Kings"), penned his autobiography, wrote letters and legal opinions, as well as his imposing tract on theoretical jurisprudence. His final work, the *Ijlam al-'awamm*, completed a few days before his death, was a pamphlet warning the uninitiated against the possible dangers of theology. But during these years, he also instructed novices, founded a Sufi "convent," interacted and interceded with powerful government figures, and even returned, for around two years, to teaching in Nishapur.

THE RETURN TO TEACHING

By his own calculation, Ghazali spent eleven years in seclusion. In July 1106, he returned to Nishapur. He had been urged to return to teaching by Fakhr al-Mulk, the Seljuq vizier who had succeeded his

father, Ghazali's first patron. Two factors persuaded Ghazali to return. The first was the low spiritual condition he witnessed in his homeland: Khorasan was stagnating in spiritual apathy. His solitude now struck him as self-indulgent. He asked himself, "What do your solitude and seclusion avail you, when the disease is widespread, the doctors are sick, and the noblest people verge on destruction?" (*Munqidh*, 48). The second was his awareness that he had overcome his old weakness, the love of renown. Of this he remarks:

I know that even if I have returned to teaching, I haven't really returned. To return is to go back to what once was. Then I used to teach the knowledge by which prestige is acquired, and in both my words and my deeds I summoned men to that, that was my goal and my intention. But now I am summoning them to the knowledge by which prestige is relinquished and its low rank recognized.

Munqidh, 49–50

Another factor gave him pause. The sincere Sufi should neither consort with rulers nor carry out their bidding. He should serve only a Sultan who is "pious and powerful" (*Munqidh*, 48). Summoned before the Sultan Sanjar on trumped-up charges, Ghazali at first declined to appear, though eventually he was forced to comply. A group of Hanafi scholars had accused him of slandering the memory of Abu Hanifa. For good measure, they threw in accusations of heresy, claiming that Ghazali was in reality a follower of the philosophers and even – because of his discussion of "light" in the *Mishkat al-anwar* – a "Magian" or dualist (Landolt, 72). On other occasions during these years, he had declined invitations and offers of money from court. This was a pious scruple, practised by other Sufis: who could know what injustice lay at the origin of the money offered by the powerful? The funds of the powerful were as tainted as their motives. Even so, it took courage to refuse to appear on this occasion. Rather than complying with the first summons, Ghazali sent a letter to Sanjar. It is a bold message, full of admonition and exhortation; he urges the Sultan to contemplate the kingdom of heaven, beside which his own earthly realm is "petty and contemptible" (Krawulsky, 64). He

informs the ruler that he spent twenty years in Baghdad during “the days of Malik Shah” but then he:

... saw the world as it was and renounced it completely, stopping for a while in Jerusalem and in Mecca, where he vowed at the grave of Abraham henceforth never to go before any ruler nor to accept a ruler’s money, to engage in no further debates and to renounce all ambition.

Ibid., 66

But the most impressive and moving passage of this remarkable letter occurs when Ghazali intervenes with the Sultan on behalf of the people of Tus:

Have mercy on the people of Tus, who have endured much oppression, whose grain has been ruined by cold and drought, and whose century-old trees have withered from the roots, so that no peasant has anything left apart from a skin and a handful of hungry and naked children. If you approve that their skin be taken off their back, so that they must creep into the oven naked together with their children during the winter, then at least do not approve that their own skin is taken off them too. If you demand something from them, they will all flee and die in the mountains, and what would that be but skinning them?

Crone, 192

The letter impressed Sanjar. He issued the command that Ghazali “be impelled to appear before the throne so that we may hear his words.” When Ghazali relented and entered his tent, the Sultan “rose, embraced him and had him sit beside him on the throne” (Krawulsky, 68). In his youth, ambition had brought Ghazali to court; in his old age, the renunciation of ambition brought the court to him. But by that time, he no longer craved its favors.

DEATH AND POSTHUMOUS CAREER

In the fortieth and final book of the *Ihya'*, Ghazali welcomes death. He calls it an “encounter with the beloved.” He has no illusions about

the process of dying. He quotes an earlier mystic who said, "Death is crueller than the stroke of a sword, or being carved up with saws, or cut with scissors" (*Ihya'*, 4:491 / Winter, 39). His long descriptions of the final agonies make painful reading. He means to shock his readers into "remembrance of death." But he is too honest, as well as too realistic, to gloss over that terrible transition. The pain of dying is so intense because it strikes at the spirit and the body together:

A wound only afflicts the place where the blade has touched ... but the pain felt during the throes of death assails the spirit directly and engulfs every one of its parts. The dying man feels himself pulled and jerked from every artery, nerve, part and joint, from the root of every hair and the bottom layer of his skin from head to foot.

Ibid., Winter, 38; modified

Ghazali must have sat at many death-beds; his observations seem drawn from experience: the dying person's eyes "roll up to the top of their sockets and his lips are drawn back and his tongue contracts to its root, and his testicles rise up, and his fingertips turn a greenish-black" (*Ibid.*, 39). So excruciating is the final agony that the dead recall it with a shudder even fifty years later in their tombs. And yet, to the lover of God, death with its terrors appears slow to arrive. Death is the goal to which the path in all its stages leads, for it throws open the gates to union with God; but even for the unprepared, death is a final opportunity: repentance is possible up to the last death-rattle.

Ghazali died on December 18, 1111, in his home town of Tus. He was buried there and his grave became a site of veneration for his admirers. He was around fifty-three years old. His brother, Ahmad, would survive him for another fifteen years; during that time Ahmad composed a summary of the *Ihya'*, spread his brother's teaching (as well as his own more provocative doctrines) and met with such outstanding younger mystics as 'Ayn al-Qudat al-Hamadhani, who underwent the influence of both brothers' example and thought.

During Ghazali's lifetime, his work proved controversial. In the Maghrib it was found especially suspect; one of his former pupils contrived to have the *Ihya'* publicly burnt. But it had huge impact

too, and was widely celebrated. Ghazali himself read from it to attentive audiences in Baghdad. It inspired no fewer than twenty-six different summaries and was even committed to memory in its entirety by some ardent disciples (Cook, 451).

Its fame continued to grow and spread in succeeding centuries. In the seventeenth century, the Shi'ite author Fayd al-Kashani composed a multi-volume commentary and recapitulation of the work, and in the eighteenth, the erudite lexicographer and traditionist Murtada al-Zabidi devoted years to a rich and painstaking commentary, in ten thick volumes, on the entire *Ihya'*. These are but the most monumental responses to a work, and a life, which continue to resonate for all those, Muslim or not, who search for deeper insight and the ways to translate that knowledge into meaningful action.

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