

**REASON AND REVELATION IN ISLAMIC POLITICAL THEOLOGY: THE
EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF AL-GHĀZĀLĪ'S THEOCRACY**

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Abstract

In this thesis, I explore the epistemological dimensions in the political thought of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), a renowned Muslim theologian and philosopher, famous for the refutation of the peripatetic tradition by means of a thoroughgoing skepticism. His reflections on human understanding and the cognitive faculties led him to the following conclusion: since reason is not self-sufficient, humanity must abide by revealed laws. While al-Ghazālī maintains that strict obedience is necessary for certain commoners, he arrives at such theocratic conclusions by way of investigating human nature as well as metaphysical claims. In brief, al-Ghazālī's claim that humans must abide by revelation is grounded on two interrelated themes which are prevalent across his texts: (1) his view that God's power over the universe is unlimited and (2) his claim that humans are entirely feeble before His omnipotence. In this sense, al-Ghazālī's theology stands out as a negative philosophy; it is his use of philosophy that eventually undercuts independent philosophy, thus demanding that all persons submit to a higher source of truth, God's revelation. Alternatively, al-Ghazālī proposes a mystical doctrine to address humanity's perceptive shortcomings, claiming that the ascetic experience is the best means to attaining knowledge of the divine. I argue that, by pursuing a systemic inquiry into the nature of creation, which leads up to this mysticism, al-Ghazālī occasionally elevates reason to the ranks of revelation. This is because he arrives at this conclusion not by way of revelation, but through independent philosophical reflection and inquiry, one that makes use of particular theological notions. His skeptical refutation of certain philosophical doctrines is followed by his mysticism. In the later stages of my thesis, I extrapolate from this study to make larger claims about the nature of theocratic regimes. In the final analysis, I re-examine his theological and philosophical concepts to demonstrate how they are transposed to his political thought. I argue that al-Ghazālī's key theological notions strongly shape his main political writings, though he tones down the philosophical and mystical jargon. While addressing the rulers, al-Ghazālī hopes that they could adopt the humility of the ideal ascetic man he has in mind. In brief, al-Ghazālī articulates a politics of humility to warn against tyrannical practice by appealing to the importance of the heart. Lastly, though this thesis deals with al-Ghazālī's theological corpus, I also contribute to the literature on reason and revelation. I demonstrate that the theological may also contain reason at its foundation, especially when appealing to universal questions about humanity's welfare.

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Introduction

In the present thesis, I explore the epistemological dimensions in the political thought of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), a renowned Muslim theologian and philosopher, famous for the refutation of the peripatetic tradition by means of a thoroughgoing skepticism. His reflections on human understanding and the cognitive faculties led him to the following conclusion: since reason is not self-sufficient, humanity must abide by revealed laws. I argue that, by pursuing a systemic inquiry into the nature of creation, al-Ghazālī elevates reason to the ranks of revelation. This is because he arrives at this conclusion not by way of revelation, but through independent philosophical reflection and inquiry, one that makes use of particular theological notions. In the later stages of my thesis, I extrapolate from this study to make larger claims about the nature of the Islamic theocratic regime. The underlying scope of my thesis inquires into the boundaries between reason and faith in the context of Islamic political theology. In part, I do this by examining al-Ghazālī's theological opposition to aspects of Greek and Islamic philosophy. The purpose is twofold. First, I ask whether a revelationist form of Islamic theology contains reason at its foundation, all the while demonstrating what sets it apart from reason. Moreover, I use the case of Islamic theology to advance the following underlying tentative hypothesis: that theological and non-theological political discourses share significant overlapping epistemic outlooks. In particular, I examine al-Ghazālī's conception of reason to expound on his key theological notions, notably on the question of human salvation and welfare.

The underlying aim of this thesis is to problematize accounts which demarcate between reason and revelation. Reason as a concept is notoriously difficult to pin down, as the term has been subject to different kinds of interpretations and idiosyncrasies throughout history and among different cultures. But those who juxtapose it to revelation often define it similarly. Reason is a

faculty which allows humans to understand their place in the world. Further, reason is refined through philosophical activity wherein humans display self-realization by unshackling their minds from irrational sentiments. Naturally, those who define philosophy in this sense inevitably regard religion as an obstruction to independent reason. After all, revelation presupposes that humans are bestowed with knowledge from God that even the most superior and independent philosopher would never be able to attain independently. In Islam as well as the other Abrahamic faiths, revealed knowledge consists of content outside the scope of philosophical thinking, such as God's creative capacities and the actions of His angels. These supernatural phenomena elude thought altogether. It goes without saying that certain religious doctrines demand obedience and the repetition of customary practice imparted to us by way of religious canons. From the little we know of Socrates' life, we see that a quintessential freethinker can be very averse to this sort of strict obedience, as philosophers subject all moral precepts to speculative inquiry. A philosopher is not necessarily an impious person, but he or she demands knowledge of a precept's ontic base prior to committing to belief. The theologian, on the other hand, at least in the way he or she is defined by philosophers, is primarily interested in defending the doctrine.¹ Before unpacking al-Ghazālī's response to this perennial theme, an explanation of the underlying motivations behind this thesis is in order. The present thesis is motivated by two general, interrelated themes.

First, I am interested in the debate on the relationship between reason and revelation more generally. In fact, this reflection on the relationship between reason and revelation is not novel to al-Ghazālī's writing. This is a popular debate in the history of medieval and early modern political

¹ Thomas Pangle contends that, according to Socratic philosophy, "suprarational illumination" including the kind we find in the Abrahamic religions, must be subject to an "uneasy skepticism." See: Thomas L. Pangle, *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham* (Baltimore; London: John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 9. Carlos Fraenkel draws a similar observation regarding the Platonists, who he claims contend that "non-philosophers" have no desire "to know." See: Carlos Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 19.

thought and is raised recurrently by thinkers of the three Abrahamic traditions. In recent times, Leo Strauss has brought much scholarly attention to this debate, which he figuratively describes as a contest between “Jerusalem and Athens.” Simply put, Strauss contends that there are two competing forms of “wisdom,” one philosophical and the other based on internalized religious experience. In the former case, one arrives at truth through a contemplative process, whereas, in the second case, the pious individual adheres to God’s command out of *fear* (or reverence) of the divine. Since these forms of wisdom are irreconcilable, one is *almost* always forced to pick a side between Jerusalem and Athens.²

Strauss is quite familiar with this recurring debate in the works of the Muslim *falāsifa*, or philosophers, who construct a dichotomy between knowledge acquired through reason and revealed knowledge.³ Incidentally, this is a debate that al-Ghazālī was quite familiar with. In al-Ghazālī’s work, this dichotomy is often followed by a differentiation between prophetic/mystical knowledge, on the one side, and the rational faculty on the other, but there are different ways that this dichotomy or tension is framed. Sometimes we come across the ascetics – those who willfully submit to God out of pure selflessness and reverence versus the philosophers/theologians who use dialectic methods to prove their theological or metaphysical positions. When al-Ghazali does pick a side, as we will see in Chapter 4, he typically refers to the mystical form of knowledge as superior. More on al-Ghazali’s position to follow in a bit. Now, it is important to note that this dichotomy between the two sorts of *wisdoms* is not novel to al-Ghazālī. We can better appreciate al-Ghazālī’s position if we first consider the claims of his interlocutors.

² Leo Strauss, “Jerusalem and Athens,” in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 149-50.

³ *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 7-21.

Under two centuries before al-Ghazālī, Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 950), al-Ghazālī's posthumous interlocutor, was strongly animated by this tension, as noted in Strauss' introduction to *Persecution and the Art of Writing*.⁴ Strauss notes al-Fārābī's bold assertion that religion – and here he means revealed religion, is secondary to *falsafa*, or philosophy, an insinuation that religion is cognitively inferior. Moreover, Strauss is also attuned to the political implications of these reflections on revealed religion and how this hierarchy between philosophy and religion maps out in al-Fārābī's ideal city.⁵ According to al-Fārābī, a legitimate political order is one where the philosophical ruling class is animated by a philosophical conception of the good life, one that rests on an assumption of proper virtuous and ethical behaviour, and which rulers need to disseminate to the masses. While this conception of the good life can only be comprehended theoretically by those with philosophical aptitudes, a virtuous ruler understands that the masses must also be inculcated into virtue. One of the preliminary objectives of the virtuous ruler is to understand the hierarchy between the innate characteristics of people's souls and organize the city accordingly.⁶ In this political schema, al-Fārābī effectively reduces religion to a political craft, one that serves a mimetic function. Revelation conjures an evocative set of imagery that could convince the masses, who are cognitively inferior to rulers and their auxiliaries, of their ethical and political responsibilities without demanding a philosophical justification on their part. Thus, the religious masses adhere out of duty rather than theoretical conviction.⁷ Strauss seems to insinuate that, in view of its mimetic or imitative function (or “an approximation to the truth”), al-Fārābī associates revealed religion with the masses and deems it inferior to philosophy.⁸ In part, Strauss builds on

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 13-16.

⁶ Al-Fārābī, “The Attainment of Happiness,” in *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), §20.

⁷ Ibid., §55.

⁸ Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 16-17.

al-Fārābī's account to ascertain the existence of an incommensurable tension between revealed religion and philosophy.

Though adamant on a stringent distinction between reason and revelation, it is important to note that Strauss does not necessarily share al-Fārābī's sentiment concerning the cognitive inferiority of religion. His main contention, however, is that they represent irreconcilable epistemic states, a point explained succinctly by Sharon Portnoff. According to Portnoff, Strauss views philosophy as a step beyond "myth." In this instance, the mythical alludes to any narrative about the world that is not rationally explained. Although both philosophy and myth seek to account for "the origin of things," they are distinct modes of thought insofar as the former makes recourse to "nature" and the latter to transcendent beings, deities. In the absence of philosophy, the ancients conceived of the world as being under the whims of an incomprehensible, arbitrary "fate." This perception of how the world is constituted changed with the inclusion of nature as a concept whose palpable elements could be apprehended through philosophy. Myth did indeed provide answers about laws and governance; however, these values were unreflectively ascribed to the gods who "ordained" them. Conversely, philosophy has taught that gods emerge from "customs," and that there is something more elevated than custom, nature. That gods are inferior to nature – insofar as they are the product of our human experience that culminates into custom – means that philosophy must venture beyond the human sphere, contemplating higher principles. Philosophy must do this independently of revelation or myth; it comes to "formulate" what is lawful without gods, deriving its justification from nature.⁹

Incidentally, one of Strauss' students, Muhsin Mahdi, arrives at a similar conclusion regarding the relationship between reason and revelation while juxtaposing al-Ghazālī with the

⁹ Sharon Portnoff, *Reason and Revelation before Historicism: Strauss and Fackenheim* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 8-9.

falāsifa in his work on al-Fārābī’s political philosophy. Mahdi rightly contends that al-Ghazālī’s theological system negates the idea of a self-standing nature (a point we will examine in detail in Chapters 2 and 3). Instead, al-Ghazālī advocates the radical position – which I refer to as occasionalism below – that the universe and the totality of things are “sanctioned” by an external force, that of God. This is to say that there is no natural order, as all things are “prescribed” by God. As an orthodox theologian, al-Ghazālī regards what is perceivable as a natural order as merely customary, as God can overturn all things, including all acts that are deemed necessary for salvation according to “divine law.” As such, al-Ghazālī concludes that, in this “utterly unpredictable relation between himself and his Lord,” one ought to defer all judgement to God.¹⁰ Conversely, the *falāsifa* found that the means of human “perfection” could be contemplated. This would require a reconfiguration of our standing customs and the alignment of our societies with a natural conception of the good. As such, the *falāsifa* as well as their classical philosopher counterparts, took to the inquiry of nature from which they could derive the rules of perfectibility.¹¹

Consequently, revelation (which we can liken to the mythical for the purpose of this discussion) aims at a narrative about the world and creation. For Strauss, revelation as featured in the Bible even aim to impart comprehensive depictions of the world. This is especially true when we consider its way of depicting the world’s creation in *Genesis*. However, as mentioned above, what makes it fundamentally different from philosophy is its distinctive outlook on the source of law and what is rightful. This law is derived from the commands of God, who is, in turn, unintelligible to the human mind. And, despite our inability to fully comprehend Him, His ordinances must be fully obeyed.¹²

¹⁰ Muhsin Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 24-25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹² Portnoff, *Reason and Revelation before Historicism: Strauss and Fackenheim*, 60-65.

This discussion on revealed religion and philosophy, though greatly focused on the idea of nature versus custom, ought to bring us closer to the political dimensions of this debate. If philosophy requires an unconditional scrutiny of custom, the philosopher would have to tread carefully to avoid offending the sensibilities of the masses, who may be avid defenders of religious customs. In fact, Strauss observes that medieval philosophers who appropriated Platonism and Aristotelianism in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic contexts were mindful of the accusations that could be levelled against them by their own coreligionists. Surely, we cannot forget that Socrates was persecuted by fellow Athenians, who accused him of harbouring unconventional views, including certain impious positions. After the classical period, some ‘Western’ philosophers would contend with popular religious sentiments. These philosophers were forced to incorporate prevailing religious symbolism into what is, from the perspective of theologians, alien philosophical doctrine.¹³ Hence, the debate between Jerusalem and Athens is not only relevant as part of a history of ideas, one that provides rich insights into recurring debates within the medieval philosophical tradition. It also raises issues about a possible antagonism between the philosophical few and the masses who adhere to a stringent conception of custom. Such is al-Fārābī’s importance to Strauss. According to Strauss, al-Fārābī was only nominally pious, as his intermittent application of Islamic norms and concepts hints at something insincere, something rather instrumental. Strauss remarks that, in al-Fārābī’s writings, “religious speculation” is openly relegated to the basest stage of intellectual activities.¹⁴ Further, al-Fārābī maintains that religion is

¹³ In the context of the medieval Islamic world, Strauss contends that the philosopher was regarded as a member of “a suspect group of men” and that philosophy was in a precarious situation. For this reason, the philosopher, such as al-Fārābī had to use “exoteric teaching” – that is philosophy embellished in customary religious writing – to preserve philosophy. This embellished writing is a crucial way of concealing philosophical content, as texts become (more often than not) publicly available. See: Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 18.

¹⁴ “Farabi’s Plato,” in *Louis Ginzberg: Jubilee Volume* (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1945), 373-74.

akin to “language”; both are “essentially the property of a particular community.”¹⁵ According to Strauss, al-Fārābī not only deploys religious concepts to avoid eliciting attacks from the “vulgar,” the zealous upholders of religion, but also to disseminate the philosophical message to “potential philosophers” who are likewise wary of speaking openly.¹⁶ By performing philosophy under the guise of religiosity, al-Fārābī is able to work toward “the gradual replacement of the accepted opinions by the truth or an approximation of the truth.”¹⁷

This attempt to avoid “persecution” is, according to Strauss, facilitated by the categorical distinction between “lying in speech” as opposed to “lying in deed.” Al-Fārābī did not lie in speech; his writing conveyed the truth of his thought, albeit embellished in insincere rhetoric. It is by virtue of masquerading as an upholder of the “customary” mores – those of religion – that al-Fārābī lies in deed.¹⁸ Furthermore, by reducing religion to the customary, al-Fārābī seems to suggest that religious thought is unsatisfactory for the philosopher’s purpose, because it excludes the investigative aim of philosophy. As mentioned above, al-Fārābī’s critique of the religious and his (perhaps) unsubtle remarks about its inferior rank in the city is, for Strauss, a great illustration of the irreconcilable tension between Athens and Jerusalem and how this tension is not only of epistemological relevance but is also politically alarming.

In recent years, Carlos Fraenkel has responded critically to this aspect of Strauss’ writing. Fraenkel contends that the theological elements found in the writings of the *falāsifa* – a category of thinkers encompassing the likes of al-Fārābī and Ibn Rushd (or Averroes in the West) – and medieval Jewish philosophers are inextricable from their philosophical systems. According to

¹⁵ Ibid., 374.

¹⁶ Ibid., 382-84.

¹⁷ Ibid., 385.

¹⁸ Leo Strauss, “How Fārābī Read Plato’s *Laws*,” in *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 136.

Fraenkel, the *falāsifa* never acknowledged an irresolvable tension between reason and revelation. While they categorically treated philosophy and revealed knowledge as distinct epistemic fields, they supposedly regarded these differences as elusive. Rather, the main difference highlighted by the *falāsifa* is that religion and philosophy assume different roles for the same purpose of bettering the political community.¹⁹ I will get to this in a moment.

Fraenkel's critique is not merely directed at Strauss's demarcation between reason and revelation but also responds to a contemporary rationalist critique of religion, one that reduces religious sentiment to a state of pure obedience. In response, Fraenkel contends that the idea of obedience (to divine and moral law) was not as unsophisticated as some rationalists contend. Here, he responds to Jerome B. Schneewind, who argues that premodern obedience was reinforced by fear of God's wrath.²⁰ Simply put, adherents perform certain actions and desist from what is forbidden when threatened with God's punitive measures. Further, Schneewind believes that premodern theocratic thought forgoes any notion of autonomous reason, through which all persons assess the purpose of their acts.²¹ Rémi Brague proposes something similar, but only in relation to Islam, which he interprets as a religion based solely on imperatives. But the Judeo-Christian tradition, he tells us, spares its adherents from this sort of blind obedience, because it values a

¹⁹ Carlos Fraenkel, "Theocracy and Autonomy in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy," *Political Theory* 38, no. 3 (2010).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 341.

²¹ Schneewind claims that the view of "morality as self-governance" is a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century phenomenon. Before the advent of early modern political and moral philosophy, morality was understood as strict obedience toward God. Since it was understood that most individuals were incapable of apprehending the purpose of their moral obligation, morality was reinforced through threat of punitive measures. Modernity uprooted this anti-autonomous tradition by proclaiming that a sufficient level of reason is present in all individuals, such that they are equally capable of understanding the purpose of their moral obligations toward one another and toward their political community. See: Jerome B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4. I must add that painting the theological as an instrument used for state deterrence attests to rationalist idiosyncrasy. This view is nascent in the *Laws*, where the Athenian claims that "if the rule is given sufficient religious backing, it will get a grip on every soul and intimidate it into obeying the established laws." See: Plato, "Laws," in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 839c. As we will see later in this thesis, this rationalist appropriation of theology would be an affront to al-Ghazālī's insistence that piety demands the cultivation of an inward faculty, one that laws can never bend.

sentimental tie between humans and God, the likes of which the Qur'an supposedly does not offer. The Qur'an is, according to Brague, a text primarily concerned with imperatives, which is why, Brague contends, God is often personified as a political sovereign.²² These critiques, whether aimed at premodern theocracies generally or Islam more specifically, share the view that human autonomy is alien to certain pious notions of obedience. Fraenkel challenges such views. He insists that there is a prevailing trend in medieval Islamic (as well as Jewish) views of theocratic rule, which proposes "autonomy of all its citizens."²³ Fraenkel's contribution is valuable on many levels. Most importantly, he brings to the fore a tradition of Islamic scholarship that would unsettle our modern and liberal sensitivities toward obedience. Of course, the thinkers he examines, such as al-Fārābī and Averroes, never propose that lawmaking should originate in a deliberative space where some collective reason of the citizenry is actualized. These thinkers wrote at a time when revealed laws, such as the ruling on the consumption of alcohol, were strictly applied (as they continue to be in large parts of the world today). I bring up the ruling on alcohol as one example among many of laws that have no grounding in deliberative mechanisms and peoples' assemblies. Rather, these laws are deemed to have come down to the Prophet Muhammad from God Himself.

What do these Muslim *falāsifa* have to say about such divine commandments? In fact, how can one soundly reconcile divine laws (i.e., revealed laws or revelation) with a philosophical framework which reveres human reason? For the *falāsifa*, the answer is remarkably simple. While a significant body of *sharī'a* (law) stems from God, every one of its propositions and proclamations is aimed at the benefit of humans. The *falāsifa*, for example, provide a very systematic and

²² Rémi Brague, *Rémi Brague, La loi de dieu: Histoire philosophique d'une alliance* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 101-03, 78.

²³ Fraenkel, "Theocracy and Autonomy in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy," 342.

thoughtful reflection on the harmony between human reason and revelation.²⁴ Fraenkel offers a good and concise summary of the *falāsifa*'s general views on the subject. In brief, he explains the *falāsifa*'s view that there is a hidden (“esoteric”) meaning to divine law, whose rational basis can be unveiled through philosophical reasoning. Since people’s capacities to philosophize are uneven, not everyone is expected to obey the same laws for the same reasons. But those who truly understand (i.e., philosophers) the rational basis of a ruling adhere to its virtue and the purpose it bears. For this reason, the *falāsifa*, especially Averroes, believe that it is incumbent on elect Muslims, as Fraenkel explains, to inquire into the purpose of their divine laws.

Though most people are content with customary belief, we can expect a certain number of people (especially intellectuals) to ask questions about their beliefs and customs. Some people, as al-Ghazālī speaks of himself, demand “certain belief” (*yaqīn*) in view of the fact that they were born into certain customs and beliefs that they could have otherwise not have believed in had they been brought up by parents of different religious belief. If religion is to prove successful among adherents who are more curious than average persons, it ought to yield some substance which is in harmony with one’s reason. Quite frankly, if most adherents (even the non-philosophers) were told that their religion requires submission alone, forgoing any right to reflection on its norms, religions would no longer be appealing.²⁵ I am going to make the claim that at the heart of the religious imaginary on obedience (at least among the Abrahamic religions) is a rudimentary

²⁴ This is a point that Strauss himself would contest. He finds that, in view of the proclivity for legality in both Judaism and Islam, the two religions inevitably lend themselves to a thoroughgoing anti-philosophical attitude, thus making it more difficult to perform philosophy from within the tradition. On the contrary, the Christian religion had always been approached theologically, a discipline that was relatively comparable to philosophy if compared to the juristic tendencies of Judaism and Islam. See: Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 18-19.

²⁵ Al-Ghazālī exclaims that, for most people, belief is a form of customary practice conditioned by our proximate social circles. Personally, he was dissatisfied with this inadequate form of belief because he sought after certainty. This certainty ought to be as definitive as the feeling we get when we proclaim that ten is lesser than thirty. As such, he set out to examine different schools of thought which proclaimed to have squared this circle. See: Al-Ghazālī, “Deliverance from Error and Attachment to the Lord of Might and Majesty,” in *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazālī*, ed. W. Montgomery Watt (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1963), 21-22.

assumption. This is the view that piety appeals to common conceptions of what is beneficial to our wellbeing, whether these are regarded as otherworldly or this-worldly benefits. For al-Ghazālī's, religion offers the cure to the vices which beset our soul.

Fraenkel's thoroughgoing study of medieval Islamic theocracies is indispensable. It attempts to highlight an existing harmony between philosophical and religious modes of thought in the writings of key Islamic figures. However, Fraenkel's critique of Strauss is not entirely adequate. Fraenkel does not thoroughly address Strauss' observation that al-Fārābī reduces the religious to a mimetic function that is essential to statecraft. By mimetic, I mean the use of theological imagery conjured by the ruler to simplify truths which are otherwise incomprehensible to the common mind, one that is only familiar with simple custom. The role of religion as an inferior element of political craft is unsubtle to serious readers of al-Fārābī. (I would argue that this aspect of al-Fārābī's work is entirely unsubtle, considering his remarks that religion is *inferior* to philosophy). Hence, the presence of theological elements, at least in al-Fārābī's corpus, provides no striking evidence that the *falāsifa* conceptualized a harmony between reason and revelation. This is not to say that I agree with Strauss. But a reader of Strauss might, for example, ask us to consider al-Fārābī's remark that religious symbolism serves to impart virtues to commoners, as they cannot independently perceive their importance without prophetic pedagogy. Here, al-Fārābī describes religion as a sort of "sketch" that is intended "for the public to understand these things in themselves and the way they exist."²⁶ Matters are further complicated when we consider that more orthodox thinkers (such as al-Ghazālī) accuse the *falāsifa* of grave unbelief, a point we will examine below. While I am sympathetic to Fraenkel's critiques of Strauss's demarcation and the modern rationalist critique of religion, I am not convinced that the *falāsifa* provide a great example

²⁶ Al-Fārābī, *The Political Writings: "Political Regime" and "Summary of Plato's Laws"*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 75.

of an adequate harmony between reason and revelation. In the case of al-Fārābī, for example, the view that this tension exists is quite fleshed out, a point that Strauss avidly observes. However, neither am I convinced by Strauss' position that al-Fārābī's remarks on religion and the power of custom betrays an irreconcilable relationship between reason and revelation.

Strauss contends that, to avoid persecution, al-Fārābī had to be mindful of common sensibilities, which explains the presence of religious references across his texts. If we accept this possibility, must we not question the sincerity of the *falāsifa*'s position on religion? There is no denying that medieval philosophers were persecuted. However, Strauss overstates the clandestine impiety of al-Fārābī on one crucial point, that religion offers a mimetic purpose. To say that religion serves a mimetic function is not necessarily to devalue it, as I will demonstrate at the end of this thesis by examining al-Ghazālī's remarks on this issue.²⁷ As we will see in the present thesis, al-Ghazālī also believes that revealed knowledge is important for the instruction of less philosophically apt persons. As for political theology, Plato himself contemplated a theocratic government in the *Laws*, something that Fraenkel rightly observes in his comparative work.²⁸ But oftentimes, when we read Plato, the lines between reason and faith can be blurred. Since Plato's political philosophy is rife with religious symbolism, we can expect Islamic and Jewish thinkers who appropriate his thought to express similar forms of theocracies. Further, the *falāsifa* whom al-Ghazālī critiques did not outright negate the sacred. Rather, they demanded a rational justification to prove the existence of the divine. Of course, the demand for rationality can sometimes elicit a degree of skepticism which confounds our faith. As we will see below, at one point in time, al-

²⁷ This is the subject matter of his book *Incoherence of the Philosophers (Tahāfut al-falāsifa)*. See: Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2000).

²⁸ Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza*, 92-100.

Ghazālī admits to having suffered from skepticism, which he managed to suppress before it could harm his belief.

Conversely, one must also consider the possible concerns that, when belief is not complemented by rational argumentation, religious custom will necessarily lend itself to dogmatism, fundamentalism, or intolerance. This brings us to the second motivation for the present thesis. Al-Ghazālī is open to objection on the following grounds, which I hope to address in the latter parts of the thesis. He exalts a sort of piety that requires stringent submission and obedience to authority, a view that is consonant with his position on the dialectic between God and humans (we are nothing but God’s servants). As will be examined below, coupled with this position is a contempt for the *falāsifa* and theologians whose works omit the importance of pious acts and traditionalism. Now, the advent of religious fundamentalist organizations along with violent militancy have, in recent years, naturally stirred some popular opposition to theological traditionalism. The grounds of this opposition rests on the assumption that rationalism and tolerance, which are supposedly naturally complementary forces, are essential remedies for the supposed dangers of stringent traditionalism. Popular discourses aside, this position was recently observed by the late liberal Egyptian Muslim scholar, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd. Abū Zayd called for a return to a rationalist strand of Islamic hermeneutics, one that would build on the works of the *Mu‘tazila*, a medieval school of thought renowned for its staunch promotion of individual independence in scriptural independence.²⁹ Incidentally, and as we will see below, the *Mu‘tazila* are arguably as important as the *falāsifa* in al-Ghazālī’s critique. The logic behind Abū Zayd’s

²⁹ Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, *Al-Ittijāh al-‘aqlī fī l-tafsīr - Dirāsa fī qaḍīyyat al-majāz fī l-Qur’ān ‘ind al-mu‘tazila* (Beirut: Al-markaz al-thaqāfī al-‘arabī, 1998), 241-46.

“neo-Mu‘tazilism” is unsubtle.³⁰ The view that humans are rationally independent in the act of religious hermeneutics and interpretation lends strong support to a conception of human autonomy.

This rationalist position rests on the assumption that, when humans are exalted as the source of scriptural interpretation, they have sufficient authorship over normative values and principles and may, perhaps, replace antiquated customs with new ones. While humans are still bound to the same scriptural authority, this liberal hermeneutics could perhaps lend itself to a wider toleration of different customary practices to emerge from the varying interpretations of the same source. This explains why, among all the *falāsifa*, Averroes is perhaps the most relevant to modern liberal projects, notably because he is a proponent of the “freedom of rational investigation.”³¹ In the *Decisive Treatise*, Averroes expressly maintains that scripture tolerates different possible interpretations insofar as the Qur’an sanctions rational inquiry into the purpose of Law. He even decries the censorship of philosophical ideas, which would only cause great damage to the intellectual formation of Muslims. In the opening passages, he proclaims that “it is obligatory that we go about reflecting upon existing things by means of intellectual syllogistic reasoning.”³² Of course, it would be a bit of a stretch to portray Averroes as a nascent liberal thinker. We have to consider his staunch opposition to the dissemination of philosophy to commoners, whose supposed

³⁰ As observed by Devlet Khalid, the term of “neo-Mu‘tazilism” is a concept that, in large part, includes contemporary Muslim intellectuals (both Arab and non-Arab) who typically draw on certain aspects of *Mu‘tazilism* to “promote a modernist” hermeneutics. *Mu‘tazilism* is highly appealing to modernist scholars because of its emphasis on the role of an independent cognition, which lends itself to an unprecedented form of “liberalism.” Khalid remarks that the preservation of certain aspects of *Mu‘tazilism* in *Shī‘ī* Islam explains the presence of many contemporary *Shī‘ī* intellectuals who incline toward a modernist position. See: Devlet Khalid, “Some Aspects of Neo-Mu‘tazilism,” *Islamic Studies* 8, no. 4 (1969): 338.

³¹ Fauzi M. Najjar observes that the Averroes’ philosophy is crucial to modernist and secularist Muslim intellectuals who seek to inculcate their coreligionists into a liberal conception of the religion as well their intellectual struggle against religious “fundamentalism.” If Averroes is perceived by many Europeans as a forefather of the Enlightenment who promotes, it is assumed that his thought can have the same effect on the East. See: Fauzi M. Najjar, “Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and the Egyptian Enlightenment Movement,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 31, no. 2 (2004): 202-03.

³² Averroes, *Decisive Treatise: Determining the Connection Between the Law and Wisdom / Kitāb faṣl al-maqāl wa-taqrīr mā bayn al-sharī‘a wa-l-ḥikma min al-ittiṣāl*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2008), 2.

interpretative immaturity would make them incapable of reading philosophy without losing their faith,³³ a common trope that is shared by classical and medieval thinkers, including al-Ghazālī. Nevertheless, Averroes can be inevitably appealing to liberals for his claim that it is possible to interpret scripture in different ways – based on circumstantial factors as well as having to choose between allegorical or literal readings – without violating “consensus.”³⁴ Conversely, al-Ghazālī appears to place more emphasis on strict subservience in the political, traditional, customary, and religious sense, but this is not because he refutes the importance of reason or rational interpretation. On the contrary, he arrives at these views by way of philosophical considerations.

Mahdi observes that the *falāsifa* always refrained from mere customary belief, as they vehemently rejected the view that “divine law forbids...free inquiry.” Pointing to the objectives of Averroes’ *Decisive Treatise*, Mahdi contends that, by calling for unconditional free inquiry, the *falāsifa* accepted the view that humans were called upon to attain perfectibility through personal exertion, one that would require an unconditional exercise of their intellectual faculty.³⁵ Though Mahdi’s concern here is not with a liberal Islam, he tacitly accepts a link between a life of philosophical activity and toleration at the very least, and that is because theorizing compels the philosopher to always reconsider the reigning social customs, such that the philosopher never falls into dogmatism. “Theory requires open-mindedness, confession of ignorance, suspension of premature judgment, openness to new evidence, and willingness to reconsider.”³⁶ This is not the case for theology and jurisprudence – the latter of which Mahdi attributes to al-Ghazālī – forgo these sorts of questions about the juncture of humans in this world. In particular, Mahdi maintains

³³ Averroes insists that philosophical books should never end up in the hands of the “multitude.” Common folk will likely misunderstand the purpose of allegorical interpretation, which could lead to erroneous beliefs. See: *ibid.*, 29.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁵ Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, 27.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

al-Ghazālī's jurisprudence forgoes the following questions, which one would expect of a philosopher: "Why a divine law at all? Why this divine law rather than another? Why a regime based on this divine law rather than another? Why this way of organizing a human community rather than another?"³⁷

In fact, Mahdi observes that the common believer would dismiss such questions as either trifle "or a form of rebellion." Mahdi concedes that the theologians, who are a bit more curious than their jurist coreligionists, go beyond a mere reiteration of "divine law" and defend their theological positions by way of "rational" argumentation. However, they do this not because they pursue reason as an end, but because they seek to defend a "particular revelation."³⁸ Thus, theological writing comes short of philosophy in view of its apologetic objective. Mahdi insists that "the intention of Islamic theology was to defend the divine law, while it could not perform that function without going beyond the divine law and elaborating what it meant."³⁹ In large part, the present thesis aims to trouble this narrative that Islamic theology, particularly al-Ghazālī's, can be reduced to a mere apologetic defence of a *particular* revelatory doctrine and that it can be juxtaposed so starkly to philosophy on the grounds that it rejects "free inquiry" or the suspension of judgement in deference of custom and stringent traditionalism.

Therefore, the main reason I anchor al-Ghazālī in this discussion on reason and revelation is because he actively resisted the philosophers' metaphysical foundations, yet he presented philosophical arguments of his own. Of course, in most of his writings, he speculates about theology through a squarely orthodox lens. Rather than being animated by Plato's political dialogues or Aristotle's metaphysical treatises, al-Ghazālī broaches metaphysical questions

³⁷ Ibid., 21.

³⁸ Ibid., 20-21.

³⁹ Ibid., 21.

through references to Islamic scripture, the Qur'an and hadith, which report statements about and/or from the Prophet, in particular. It is easy to suggest that Islamic political philosophers find a harmony between their own presuppositions and those of theological claims, because both worlds were significant to them for varying reasons. But what about orthodox theological accounts? What do theologians who regard revelation as essential for all humans think of reason? If al-Ghazālī were as anti-philosophical as he sometimes leads on, this discussion would be meaningless. On the contrary, as we will see in this thesis, al-Ghazālī challenges certain foundations of the *falāsifa* by using logical premises and argumentation. In fact, he often contends that the *falāsifa*'s metaphysics are to be refuted because of their irrational presuppositions.⁴⁰ He also berates certain Islamic denominations for supposedly abandoning rational argumentation, such as the *Ismā'īliyya*. This school, whose central tenets I will explain in the next chapter, awaits an infallible *imām* (ruler) to impart his order to his followers.⁴¹ But al-Ghazālī's theocratic ruler is not superior to his followers in terms of perceptive capacity. Where he errs on religious matters, it is up to the commoner to respond by correcting his errors.⁴² Al-Ghazālī can confuse us, however. We will see that, at times, he responds to other theologians (*mutakallimūn*) by telling them to avoid exposing commoners to rationalistic arguments. The latter are better left simply believing through adherence to custom and following what they are told. So much for seeking certitude in belief!

I will demonstrate that the different roles he envisions for scholars (*'ulamā'*) and commoners is a crucial part to his theocratic imaginary. Later in this thesis, I will demonstrate that al-Ghazālī, not unlike Plato and his Muslim appropriators, believed that the healthy political community ought to be ordered in such a way that reflects the rankings of its citizens. This is to

⁴⁰ This is the purpose of his *Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*). See: Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*.

⁴¹ *Faḍā'ih al-bāṭiniyya* (Al-Maktaba al-ʿaṣriyya, 2014).

⁴² "Kitāb al-Amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-l-naḥī 'an al-munkar," in *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-kitāb al-ʿarabī, 2013).

say that the most learned must be ahead of their lay inferiors. But contrary to Plato's *Laws*, the political community is not ordered in such a way that reflects the divine, which is merely a symbol of a higher rational cosmic order. Al-Ghazālī's divine is a God who intervenes in socio-political affairs at will, and He has historically asserted His will to chosen communities through revelation. In Plato's theocracy, humanity perfects itself by contemplating and imitating the principles of divine virtue.⁴³ In al-Ghazālī's theocracy, God instructs humanity on how to become perfect. At this juncture, the pertinence of this discussion of reason and revelation to political theory are beginning to emerge.

At the most basic level, the discussion of the relationship between reason and revelation is an epistemological one. It is a question of how we come to know our world and our purpose. From the perspective of the *falāsifa*, humans are endowed with the special gift of reason through which they unveil the universe's governing principles. Although reason is generated by the primary cause, the world they inhabit is a demystified one. The divine does not graciously make His presence known through occasional intercessions that rescind natural laws. Their divine is an impersonal one; it stands as far away from the sensible world, and the rational human does not have to worry about being confounded by irregular occurrences, including those caused by a divine force. The human simply requires an astute mind to apprehend the universe's unchanging regularities. In this instance, the human is free to discover truths through investigation and inquiry. It must follow that a political community which privileges this supposedly natural component of humanity is one that can overcome the hurdles to this essential freedom. Though the universe

⁴³ This view is captured in the Athenian's response to the poets who seek to enter his state. The Athenian excludes the poets from entering his city in view of their imperfect "representation" of the good. Further, he remarks that the lawmaker, such as himself, also aims at representation, though one that is nobler and opposed to the poet's misrepresentations. This legislative representation is aimed at ordering the citizens toward "the finest and noblest life," which is the imitation of divine things. See: Plato, "Laws," 817bc.

follows a natural course, this view of the *falāsifa* does not lend itself to a deterministic view of human relations. It is precisely because the universal is constant that humans become free. In their capacity as thinking beings, humans are “free” to understand the world and its order.⁴⁴ Of course, the *falāsifa*’s notion of freedom is nothing close to the concept of liberty we have come to know from modern liberal political thought. I am not referring to the liberty afforded by democratic mechanisms which allow citizens to become lawmakers, nor am I describing freedom from tyrannical rule. The freedom I am referring to is much simpler. It is one that the premodern *falāsifa* inadvertently reflect on when thinking about humanity’s juncture in the universe. Humans are said to be free in the sense that they (as a species) approach the universe as their object of inquiry, while the universe awaits them passively as they do so.

The theological (i.e., revelationist) view which concerns me is on the opposite end. This is the view that humanity must be guided through divine intercession occurring at different historical junctures. As for political philosophy, the theologian does not discover the best regime by way of a typological study in which all regimes are ranked from best to basest.⁴⁵ Rather, the Muslim theologian learns about the appropriate laws from the Prophet, whose knowledge of these political matters is directly received from God. In the cosmological schema of theological thought, it is said that God speaks to humanity directly. This is because humans are incapable of implementing a virtuous life of their own. A life without divine intercession, for the theologians, is a life of

⁴⁴ By applying the term ‘freedom’ to Islamic political philosophy, we are not at risk of committing idiosyncrasy. In the *Virtuous City* (*Al-Madīna al-fāḍila*), al-Fārābī refers to “will” (*irāda*) as an intuitive faculty present in all sentient beings. This describes an animal’s inclination toward satisfying corporeal needs. Additionally, humans are endowed with a “choice” through which they seek to surmount their corporeal limitations by contemplating the world of intelligibles. See: Al-Fārābī, *On the Perfect State: Mabādi’ arā’ ahl al-madīnat al-fāḍila*, trans. Richard Walzer (Chicago: Kazi Publications/Great Books of the Islamic World, 1998), 89.

⁴⁵ Joshua Parens remarks that al-Fārābī “discovers hierarchy wherever he looks. To be specific, he consistently stresses hierarchy within the cosmos and within and among human communities.” See: Joshua Parens, *An Islamic Philosophy of Virtuous Religions: Introducing Alfarabi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 37. Later, we will see that, by contrast, al-Ghazālī does not articulate his political theology in view of a rationalist cosmological schema.

obscurity and aimless wandering. Certain Muslim theologians, such as al-Ghazālī, take this to mean that humans are servile before God. While the language of servitude evokes negative connotations for most political philosophers, it is seen in a more positive light for theologians. Of course, servitude should never define any bond between humans, at least not in Islam. As we will see later, al-Ghazālī strongly resists servitude within intra-human relations, since all humans are regarded as equals. But humanity's equality is premised on the view that all humans are equally subordinate to God. Perhaps a secularist would be indifferent to this crucial difference in that servitude is preserved, albeit in a theological form. But to al-Ghazālī, this type of servitude to God is not only humbling but also essential to curbing servitude between humans, a claim I explore in the final chapter. Further, we will see that the universe as described by al-Ghazālī is not independently ordered. If the universe appears to yield certain regular principles, it is only due to God's grace. The governing laws of this universe can be overturned at His will. In view of God's omnipotence, what does this tell us about humanity's this-worldly purpose? Are humans merely servants of a higher arbitrary will? Does a divine arbitrary will preclude independent human knowledge? Should humans even be commended for effectuating virtuous governments on earth when they derive all knowledge from divine revelation? This thesis will explain how al-Ghazālī grapples with these critical philosophical questions and the answers he provides throughout his prolific theological corpus.

The discussion of reason and revelation is inevitably a political discussion in that it evokes the contention between the irreconcilable notions of human autonomy and obedience. In recent years, Thomas Pangle has made an important observation on this issue. Religious symbolism, he claims, does not merely provide allegories to teach people about virtues and morals. Pangle contends that the basis of religion, at least the Abrahamic kind, presumes a crucial judgement about

humanity. This is the view that humans find their purpose by knowing “good and evil,” but only after learning through a pedagogically subordinate relationship to God. The story of Adam and Eve, which was transcribed in scripture, serves as a “parable” that humans must actively renounce their “own judgement” and showcase “obedience to divine law.”⁴⁶ Pangle seems to suggest that there is something intrinsically dogmatic about the theological position, but he refrains from using pejorative descriptions. The dogmatism lies in the claim that humanity depends entirely on divine power. While theology questions the scope of human understanding, it ultimately renounces any “skepticism” of a “divine call.” As he observes in Augustine, theologians demand “to sacrifice one’s intellect” and unquestionably maintain that humans learn mainly through revelation.⁴⁷ While philosophy also demands certain Truth, which yields knowledge of right and wrong, its skepticism extends to questioning the divine. This is the sort of impiety described by Strauss. Further, Pangle claims that, for the philosopher, it is “a matter of utmost urgency to inquire with precision into what is at stake.”⁴⁸ What is at stake are larger questions concerning the rightness or wrongness of our actions.

Later, we will see that this is the sort of rationalism, as expressed by the Muslim *falāsifa*, that initially alarmed al-Ghazālī and drove him to write thoroughgoing refutations in hopes of reaffirming a stringent Islamic orthodoxy. This lack of human agency and reason becomes even more pronounced when compared to the philosophers’ (or *falāsifa*’s) view of a passive God, whose powers are discovered through our own independent investigation. For example, as we will see later in this thesis, al-Fārābī stresses the view of a divine being who is remarkably remote from the mundane and human spheres. In view of this transcendence, humans are required to exercise their

⁴⁶ Pangle, *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham*, 68.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 10.

cognitive faculties so that they may attain knowledge of this divine being; they do so by observing a natural world around them through discursive thought (al-Fārābī's description of reason). In fact, as we will see, this striking gap between the divine and His creation we come across in the *falāsifa*'s writings is one that troubled al-Ghazālī on theological grounds.

Further, al-Fārābī's proclivity for elevating human reason to this autonomous stage is what captivated Strauss. In view of Strauss' reflections on faith and reason, we notice a systematic effort on the part of al-Fārābī to elevate the role of reason, whose purpose is to apprehend an entirely rational (or natural), cosmic order. When reason is held in such high esteem, what happens to faith and revelation? As we saw above, Strauss insists that al-Fārābī is subtly signaling to likeminded readers that revealed religion is inferior to the exercise of reason, i.e., philosophy. Further, he maintains that al-Fārābī's rationalism speaks to a larger irreconcilability between reason and revelation. Al-Fārābī's piety or lack thereof is a contentious matter. Without getting into this debate myself, I must mention that al-Ghazālī charged al-Fārābī as well as the rest of the *falāsifa* with impiety for the same reasons that Strauss revered them. Al-Ghazālī thought that certain philosophical doctrines contained pernicious influences on the religious community, the most dangerous outcome being the theoreticians' demotion or even forgoing of revealed knowledge.

This aspect of al-Ghazālī's critique of philosophical doctrines only bolsters the claim that al-Fārābī's doctrine displays an irreconcilable tension between reason and revelation. This is because al-Ghazālī seems to call for the rejection of reason. As we will demonstrate below, a surface reading of al-Ghazālī's corpus certainly reveals to us a theologian so concerned with reinforcing tradition that even crude obedience is occasionally preferred over speculation. Hence, one can easily point to al-Ghazālī's effort to buttress claims of contention between Athens and Jerusalem. My aim in this thesis is to demonstrate that al-Ghazālī's theological reflections are

preceded by thoroughgoing philosophical reflections. While al-Ghazālī certainly believes that strict obedience is necessary for certain commoners, he arrives at such theocratic conclusions by way of investigating human nature as well as metaphysical claims. In brief, al-Ghazālī's claim that humans must abide by revelation is grounded on two interrelated themes which are prevalent across his texts: (1) his view that God's power over the universe is unlimited and (2) his claim that humans are entirely feeble before His omnipotence. In this sense, al-Ghazālī's theology stands out as a negative philosophy; it is the use of philosophy that eventually negates independent philosophy, thus demanding that all persons submit to a higher source of Truth, God's revelation. In fact, al-Ghazālī himself complicates this issue by proposing that God is both transcendent and inexhaustibly proximate to our souls. God, as described by al-Ghazālī, is more proximate than the *falāsifa*'s deity. Al-Ghazālī views God even more proximately by positing that He can be known and ought to be known by each individual subject through inward reflection.

To sum up the scope of this thesis, I will be broaching the following questions: is it possible to locate a significant speculative element, or reasoning, at the base of Islamic political theology? To what extent is Islamic political theology merely a set of imperative rules ordained by God in the form of revelation? Furthermore, what does this tell us about the relationship between theology and political thought more generally in Islam? This idea brings us back to al-Ghazālī, who endeavours to reaffirm the view of a universe that is contingent on a higher will against the popular views of the *falāsifa* and other rationalists, whom he opposed not merely on dogmatic or polemical grounds but based on alleged logical fallacies of their rationalist ideations of a natural order. From a stringent orthodox position, the conception of a natural order, one that is independent of a divine will, can lend itself to a stringent denial of religious custom and values.

In fact, this is a recurring debate, and one of its most relevant modern iterations is found in Spinoza's thought. As we saw above, according to this view, philosophy requires an inquisitive disposition, which is said to liberate the mind from customary belief, a theme that I will later relate to al-Ghazālī's writings. In fact, the first early modern articulation of a cleavage between faith and reason is often attributed to Spinoza, who is renowned for having initiated the general secularization of Western thought in the seventeenth century.⁴⁹ In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza thoroughly reflects on the following question: whether religious rites, rituals, or conventions are or could be of any use and whether these contravene reason. His answer to this question is impious, as he states that there is nothing cogent about religious conventions, because they cannot teach us anything objective and scientific about the world around us. Spinoza's critique of the traditional Judeo-Christian outlook is grounded on a squarely rationalist claim, evidenced in his call for a science that seeks to apprehend the causal principles that constitute the natural world. This science is the only way of knowing anything about God. Hence, Spinoza provides us with a sense of a good life aimed at the pursuit of knowledge with the aim of demystifying "nature" as it is. Any supernatural account of divinity is symptomatic of ignorance. Rather, belief in the supernatural is driven by "fear" of the unknown. A person with a truly reasonable disposition would not believe in supernatural accounts unless he or she falls prey to this predicament. For Spinoza, the prophets and their Hebrew constituents are perfect examples of believers compelled by sentiment, such as fear, rather than reason. Their very personal experiences impressed on them different and, sometimes, conflicting "superstitions."⁵⁰ Additionally, Spinoza exclaims that belief in miracles is a blatant misapprehension of nature's "normal course."⁵¹

⁴⁹ According to Leo Strauss, Spinoza's critique of theology equally applies to Islam, as "Spinoza read the Bible as he read the Talmud and the Koran." See: Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens," 150.

⁵⁰ Benedictus de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 4-5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

At its most elementary level, Spinoza's critique seems to contend that religious expression is the manifestation of collective conformity. Typically, this conformity includes dogmatic belief in doctrines, such as the world's creation and God's enactment of miracles by way of divine intercessions. Though Strauss and Pangle, for example, express the view that the religious sentiment omits unconditional inquiry, this is not to say that philosophical enlightenment must replace the religious sentiment as the only viable cognitive state. However, Spinoza is vehemently antireligious. For Spinoza, the non-philosopher is missing out on the advantages of apprehending the natural laws on which our universe is founded. One can almost sense an ethical duty to this knowledge, which Spinoza hopes can help dispel the irrational forces that incite persecution.⁵² Also, Strauss does not entirely follow this enlightenment thinking. For one, the liberation of the mind from customary opinion is not the collective duty of all, as an enlightenment thinker like Spinoza would maintain.⁵³

On the contrary, Strauss seems to think that the conflict between the minority philosophers and commoners is historically recurring. The philosophers will always have to be wary that their own unconventional views could lead to their own demise. Hence, they do not wish to disseminate reason to a larger social constituency. Rather, the eternal contention between philosophy and conventional belief is at the heart of his politics. The philosophers will always be persecuted.

⁵² Spinoza states that "fear" is a mechanism used by the tyrant to reinforce his rule. The tyrant wishes to spread fear among the populace to engender an obedient populace, though this endeavour to "control people's minds" is near (if not completely) impossible. The heterogeneity of human intellects precludes the possibility that a society of individuals can ever be fully coerced into sharing the exact same judgements. Hence, persecution or "oppression," presumably the kind that is physically violent, emerges out of the need to suppress non-conforming minds. The purpose of Spinoza's political regime is to give citizens the option to freely choose belief without the threat of coercion weighing on their shoulders. See: *ibid.*, 250-52. This passage is even more telling in view of Spinoza's previous claim that religion is rooted in fear and superstition. One can only guess that he means to tell us that religion, which evokes sentiments and symbolisms of fear, would prove to be the tyrant's ideal mechanism for social control.

⁵³ To be clear, Spinoza does not claim that all people are endowed with the same cognitive capacities, as he insists that one's person's belief can be the source of another's laughter. Yet, he does hope that in "a spirit of sincerity and freedom," people will be afforded the freedom to choose what they believe in based on their independent judgement. This seems to suggest that even the commoner can enjoy the most rudimentary aspect of philosophy, speculation. See: *ibid.*, 10.

Further, Strauss does not intend to promote a doctrine of natural religion. In fact, based on our reading above, he only seems to extol the philosophers for their subtle critiques of conventional opinions, but he does not really praise them for providing a more rationally intelligible metaphysics, let alone an alternative natural religion. In a sense, we get the impression that Strauss is animated by philosophy for its critique of common opinion.⁵⁴ What is interesting to keep in mind is that al-Ghazālī critiques reason because it encourages skepticism, a point I will go over in detail below. Despite these important differences, Spinoza and Strauss’s respective views on reason share one crucial similarity. Both treat reason and rational inquiry as bulwarks against the dangers of popular opinion, which often lends itself to tyrannical purposes. For this reason, both thinkers relate the question of reason to political duties. But Strauss is hardly a Spinozian in the above sense. Spinoza’s rationalism is aimed at the supposed superstitions of religion *tout court*. Strauss, as suggested in his interest in al-Fārābī and the *falāsifa*, is squarely interested in the incommensurability between the naturalism of the *falāsifa* and rigid adherence to popular customs.

As we will see in chapters to come, al-Ghazālī was mostly troubled by the *falāsifa*’s assertion that the universe is governed by immutable laws. In fact, al-Ghazālī tackles the naturalist formulae which insist that an immutable universe can be known through independent speculation. This is a line that is familiar to readers of al-Fārābī, who, like Spinoza, expresses the view of a rational universe, one that is constituted by natural laws. Drawing on Aristotelian metaphysics, al-

⁵⁴ In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss exclaims that philosophy and myth (this includes the religious imaginary) both seek out the origins of existence. However, there is a stark difference, as the Old Testament does not signal any mature conception of “nature,” despite containing descriptions of “heaven and hell.” The concept of nature is squarely philosophical. At the level of normativity, the natural presupposes that all propositions, such as what constitutes justice, ought to be universally true, as these are true in themselves. On the contrary, religion is based on “custom,” nature’s “prephilosophic equivalent.” Only, custom is said to constitute an embryonic form of nature; its legitimacy is based not on the discovery by way of universal reason but because of its “ancestral” appeal. Simply put, the customary is something that is passed down to a given community, such as the law that Jews cannot eat pork or that Muslims cannot imbibe. For Strauss, the religious sentiment does not call upon us to inquire into the ontic base of these given laws. See: Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, Phoenix Edition ed. (The University of Chicago Press, 1965), 81-83.

Fārābī maintains that the hierarchy of beings, from which we derive our normative laws, can be known through human speculation. According to this view, revelation must accord with our human reason. In fact, the religious must serve as a set of symbolic expressions used to render philosophical truths recognizable to the intellectually inept.⁵⁵ By invoking al-Fārābī, Strauss underlines the incommensurability between the naturalist religions of the *falāsifa* and the theism of the theologians. While Strauss might not be avid believer in any specific sort of natural religion, he seems to extol its ties to the conception of an independent reason. And this is the point readers must retain throughout this thesis. Further, a mature and philosophically friendly religion must renounce its rudimentary mythical views by sidelining the divine to logically accord with the naturalist view of an immutable order.

The present thesis ventures into the thought of al-Ghazālī to trouble the above philosophical and rationalist critique, which claim that the conception of divine omnipotence or revealed knowledge squarely preclude human reason. On the contrary, al-Ghazālī offers a political theology wherein reason and revealed knowledge assume strongly, interconnected functions in the quest for understanding humanity's place in the cosmos as well as our juridico-political duties on earth.

Approach and methodology

My research does not purport to be theological in nature. This is to say that I will not be venturing into theological texts with the intent of grasping Islam's true essence. Any invocation of Islamic concepts found in my work will only be in attempt to showcase how theological principles have been appropriated by a particular current. In other words, when I deal with theological concepts,

⁵⁵ Al-Fārābī, *The Political Writings: "Political Regime" and "Summary of Plato's Laws"*, 74-75.

it is never my intention to assume the role of religious exegete.⁵⁶ Rather, I will only be doing so as part of a general explanation of how a theological principle has or could have been interpreted by a given school of thought. This is why I will not be citing primary religious texts independently, as this research is simply interested in exegetical work already made available by those operating from within the religious paradigm. My task is to evaluate the content of these paradigms. Therefore, for the purpose of this research, I will be conducting a study of religion, rather than offering my own theological reflections.⁵⁷

This brings me to the issue of my textual selection. Some will wonder why I will be drawing (on certain occasions) on non-Islamic thinkers to familiarize certain aspects of medieval Islamic thought. From the point of view of historians of ideas, we always run the risk of overlooking particularities whenever we ignore historical differences. We are told to be historically sensitive because each intellectual current is reflective of its time. This is to say that all thinking is constituted by an array of specific experiences that can never be fully experienced by predecessors or successors. Hence, for Quentin Skinner, it is futile to seek out a notion of social contract in antiquity, as this would be to do so before its inception. The argument being raised here is that retrospective evaluations of this sort are in search of a signifier that was never expressed, which implies that the conceptual implications of this signifier are just as absent.⁵⁸ My problem with this view is that it seems to assume that an ideational principle only comes into existence upon articulation.

⁵⁶ For direct quotes and citations in English, I will be using Yūsuf ‘Alī’s translation of the Qur’an at every instance. See: *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’ān*, trans. ‘Abdullah Yūsuf ‘Alī (Beltsville: Amana Publications, 1997).

⁵⁷ The difference between performing theology and studying religion is explained by Ludwig Feuerbach. The former seeks to understand religion from the inside. This is to say that theology is for adherents who want to understand what is asked of them. Conversely, the study of religion is at a distance, as it seeks to understand how adherents act upon religion. See: Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot, Philosophical Classics (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2008), x-xii.

⁵⁸ Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 10-12.

I believe this historicist view, represented in Skinner's method, is problematic for two reasons. First, it assumes that comparative research (the kind that seeks to move beyond temporal and spatial boundaries) is incapable of coming to terms with particularities. But Skinner wrongly assumes that seeking out affinities amounts to ignoring differences. Second, while the exact term is never omnipresent, the conceptual implications it entails could be, at least partially, encapsulated in another term or subtly implied but never articulated in a specific word. Take the example of the social contract, whose meaning, according to Skinner, could have only emerged in modern currents.⁵⁹ Does this mean that we cannot locate something akin to it in classical Greek texts, for example? When reading *Crito*, I cannot help but think of Socrates' refusal to escape the prison because of his loyalty for the same city that has condemned him to death as a partial reflection of what we moderns would think of as contractarianism. Of course, the *Crito* never accounts for legitimate law as being the byproduct of an amalgamated citizenry, but it certainly argues for the virtuous individual as being bound by the laws of his or her city, a necessary component we find in contractarianism.⁶⁰

To utilize the theme of social contract here would simply be to deploy it for methodical purposes, to help expound a seemingly unarticulated idea (i.e., one not fully encapsulated in a specific word within the confines of the given text) through an existent signifier that already, at least partially, assumes some of the conceptual components we are dealing with. My exegetical approach builds on Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics – his notion of the “fusion of horizons” in particular. Simply put, this approach acknowledges that every textual interpretation is necessarily novel. This is because the text is approached by a reader, and each reader's thinking is constituted by a set of intersecting qualities and experiences, which shape his or her reading of the

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Plato, “Crito,” in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 52a-d.

text. This “horizon” of qualities and experiences is what makes reading and interpretation possible, as it is the only scope through which we can “encounter” and appropriate the thoughts of others.⁶¹ Moreover, the normative aspect of my approach takes after Fred Dallmayr’s work on trans-historical and trans-cultural political theories. The goal in revisiting the Islamic classics is not to simply ruminate about the past, but to showcase the often-ignored affinities between their mode of thought and our contemporary thought, which is seemingly more inclined toward demystified rationalism.⁶²

My work, then, is trans-historical in nature. I am quite aware that some historians of ideas would object to this kind of work on the grounds I mentioned above. I believe my project can avoid the difficulties mentioned above by drawing on certain comparisons while being faithful to nuanced differences. Again, the point of my occasional comparisons is to help familiarize readers with striking similarities. All the while, I will remain sensible to differences, as drawing on affinities should never be thought of as pointing out sameness. In a world of fluid epistemic diversity, we are nonetheless able to conceive of interpretative currents because it is possible for us to identify shared concrete realities manifest in these interpretations. The point of the hermeneutical project is to become “conscious” of our horizons and those of the text we “encounter.” The more we read, the more we learn of particular experiences and vantage points. This encounter, in turn, teaches us how to think outside of our subjective stances while seeking commonalities in the encounter with the foreign.⁶³ While exploring al-Ghazālī’s theology, I will

⁶¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London; New York: Continuum, 2004). By drawing out these cross-historical and –cultural comparisons, my intention is not to collapse these ideas into a larger “universal” category. To do this would be antithetical to the “comparative” project. Rather, the intention is to make them speak through each other. See: Fred Dallmayr, “Hermeneutics and inter-cultural dialog: linking theory and practice,” *Ethics and Global Politics* 2, no. 1 (2009).

⁶² Dallmayr calls for this fusion between different epochs and cultures. See: “Beyond Monologue: For a Comparative Political Theory,” *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 2 (2004): 254.

⁶³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 304-05.

largely refrain from making largescale comparisons between his thought and that of contemporary Western thinkers. But, at key junctures, I will be using certain familiar terms from the lexicon of political theory to expound aspects of al-Ghazālī's political thought. It is fair to assume that I am speaking to an audience more familiar with Western thought, as many of the texts have only in recent years become popular. It is for these reasons that I believe I will be able to profit from key themes already familiar to my assumed audience.

Chapter breakdown

In Chapter 1, I will present a brief biography of al-Ghazālī's intellectual life, a summary of his historical period, and brief overviews of the popular currents whose thought he appropriated or opposed. Readers will be able to see that much of al-Ghazālī's theology is animated by varying theological and philosophical schools. This chapter will help me explain al-Ghazālī's relevance to the above research question. Al-Ghazālī's thought is more expansive than those of previous theologians, as he presents a synthesis of varying views that were otherwise disjointed before him. Namely, al-Ghazālī's corpus encompasses theological discourse, philosophical methods, and asceticism, sometimes within the same texts. As such, it has become difficult to pin down al-Ghazālī's theological identity. Hence, this chapter will also feature an overview of how other scholars (both contemporary and classic) have conflicted over interpreting al-Ghazālī. Further, despite seemingly varying positions he espouses across different texts, I argue that al-Ghazālī's larger and philosophical aims remained consistent throughout his intellectual life. I believe a historical background can help illuminate some of his persistent concerns throughout his intellectual career.

In Chapter 2, I explore al-Ghazālī's defense of "occasionalism." This view stipulates that all phenomena occur insofar as God willed them to be as they are, thus discounting the potential for a self-regulated universe whose order is owed to an interaction between causes and effects. While we observe that one entity leads to the existence of another, al-Ghazālī claims that this does not yield definitive proof of causality. This is to say that we merely observe a correlative relationship between the supposed cause and its effect. Al-Ghazālī's point is to assert God's absolute mastery over the universe and the way that events unfold.

Chapter 3 will build on the previous chapter by looking closely at al-Ghazālī's view of divine intercession and human freedom, or free will. I explain how this relationship between intercession and freedom can be perceived as a rejection of an independent human reason when greater weight is placed on the former. While the intertwining themes of intercession and free will are not central to my project, these are concepts that I cannot merely mention in passing. I will highlight the reason these concepts are presupposed in the larger discussion on reason and faith. Not only does the idea of interceding God inevitably undermine the possibility of a self-standing natural order, as mentioned above, but it also brings to question whether humans are truly free in exercising their reason. This chapter seeks to answer the following question: does al-Ghazālī attempt to reconcile the supposedly conflicting notions of an omnipotent God and an independent human reason? I will explain how this notion of intercession is not entirely indicative of determinism, given that the "reasonable" human is capable of apprehending why God is necessarily omnipotent and why humans are necessarily dependent. Despite God's regular intercession, al-Ghazālī argues that humans are endowed with certain cognitive capacities, enabling them to apprehend their environment, which, subsequently, leads them to acknowledge their dependence on an external power.

In Chapter 4, I will explore al-Ghazālī's detailed account of knowledge, a theme which relates to the previous chapter in two ways. First, al-Ghazālī's remarks on the attainability of knowledge by humans expands on the previous theme of human autonomy. His method of describing knowledge as a form of activity of the soul suggests that one must personally work toward his or her own salvation, rather than merely await God's grace. Al-Ghazālī has in mind a form of mystical knowledge, which he terms *taṣawwuf*, after the practice of the *Ṣūfīs*. This "knowledge," if one can call it that, is an experience or "taste" (*dhawq*) whereby an adherent is exposed to God's Truth after undertaking strenuous self-discipline by way of religious acts, rather than philosophical inquiry. Hence, al-Ghazālī's thoroughgoing *taṣawwuf* (or mysticism) is an indication that revelation is not merely a passive act where humans are expected to follow regulations stipulated by scripture. Obedience is not something merely imparted, but it is also subjectively felt. Here, al-Ghazālī introduces us to a notion of subjectivity in belief that is otherwise absent in earlier theological treatises. Further, al-Ghazālī emphasizes the spiritual and experiential aspect of revealed knowledge in a way that troubles any demarcation between reason and revelation.

In Chapter 5, I explore the political implications of this aspect of al-Ghazālī's ascetism. While not all humans are expected to attain mystical knowledge, al-Ghazālī's discussion of subjective piety yields more general reflections on the nature of erroneous belief. I hope to explain that al-Ghazālī's political theology is inextricable from one of his major epistemological positions, that erring in religious matters is largely an individualistic mistake on the part of the subject or larger communities whose scholars mislead their average lay audience. Further, this chapter will explore his remarks on the persecution of erroneous belief to demonstrate how his view of subjective piety yields a strong sense of moral culpability, which is expected of the scholarly elite.

At this juncture of the thesis, the political implications of al-Ghazālī's epistemology will become clearer to the reader.

The goal of Chapter 6 is to demonstrate the political implications of reason in al-Ghazālī's corpus. According to al-Ghazālī, reason is exercised in the form of theological speculation and writing wherein logical presuppositions help defend certain doctrinal principles. These enterprises are to be treated exclusively as pedagogical methods to shield the political community against the spread of erroneous doctrine. Al-Ghazālī's position on theological treatises gives us an ample understanding of his view on theocratic regimes and the role of clerics. Only the learned are entitled to produce works on theological matters, and their targeted audience should be other learned men who have adopted erroneous beliefs. The latter could be salvaged by being brought back to orthodoxy. Al-Ghazālī's account of religious sciences is rooted in a conception of a community of scholars who protect their fellow Muslims against the demagoguery of false scholars. Therefore, this chapter offers a preliminary summary of his theocratic state.

In Chapter 7, the final chapter, I will explore two major themes. First, I will discuss the *raison d'être* of the Muslim polity as an association premised on the realization of the common good. I will then proceed to compare al-Ghazālī's political theory with Aristotle's. The purpose of this comparison is to showcase al-Ghazālī's critique of absolutism and strong proximity to peripatetic political philosophy in some key respects. Second, despite convergences, I hope to illustrate the theoretical differences between a theocratic politics premised on revelation and orthodoxy and peripatetic philosophy.

Chapter 1 – *Biography*

Al-Ghazālī displays all the traits of a great thinker: he was a prolific writer credited for hundreds of books (many of which are likely not his); he elicited strong reactions from subsequent thinkers, both positively and negatively; he was an impassioned writer; his thought is unique and difficult to pin down to one school or doctrine and, most importantly, he left us with an autobiography wherein he details his intellectual struggles. As for al-Ghazālī's unclear affiliations, his elusiveness invited critical remarks. His succeeding peripatetic opponent, Averroes (d. 1189), born shortly after his death, remarks (perhaps mockingly) that al-Ghazālī “adhered to no single doctrine in his books. Rather, with the Ash‘arites he was Ash‘arite, with the Sufis a Sufi, and with the philosophers a philosopher.”⁶⁴ In his autobiographical work, *Deliverance from Error* (*Al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*), al-Ghazālī confesses that dabbling with a variety of schools had led him to an impasse, doubting his own belief. This genre was unlike any other for its time that even the American psychologist William James recommended it to his readers if they wished “to become acquainted with the inwardness of religions other than the Christian.”⁶⁵ Al-Ghazālī admitted that his epistemic crisis was self-inflicted, after years of misplaced interests. He believed he had dabbled with the wrong sort of intellectual activities for too long, thus distracting himself from what truly matters, preparing oneself for the afterlife. By the time al-Ghazālī had composed the *Deliverance*, he had shown astounding knowledge of philosophy (*falsafa*), theological speculation (*‘ilm al-kalām*) of the *Mu‘tazila* and *Ashā‘ira*, and the *Isma‘īlī Shī‘ī* creed.⁶⁶ He even tells us that he considered their arguments seriously, but none of these doctrines satisfied his desire for a truly pious life. The sort of piety that al-Ghazālī had envisioned was very elementary, consisting of

⁶⁴ Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*, 22.

⁶⁵ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: The Modern Library, 1994), 438.

⁶⁶ Al-Ghazālī, “*Deliverance from Error*,” 27-63.

seclusion from fame and glory, and concentration on religious deeds. This form of piety was offered by the *Ṣūfī* tradition, which placed emphasis on devotional acts above all else, including logical and theoretical speculation, in stark opposition to the philosopher's aim.⁶⁷

In view of al-Ghazālī's own confessions, it becomes simple to paint his corpus, or some aspects of his theology at least, as part of a larger anti-intellectual sentiment. Al-Ghazālī certainly invites readers to view his work as such when he boasts about forfeiting intellectual activity and adopting asceticism. He draws on the difference between a person who has an intellectual conception of drunkenness and a person who is truly drunk. The former theorizes about a foreign state, yet the latter experiences it.⁶⁸ Later in this thesis, I argue that his decision to become an ascetic himself is nascent in his earlier attitudes on philosophy and theology. As for al-Ghazālī's anti-intellectualism, such an interpretation would demand that we compress our definition of intellectuality. If by intellectuality we mean philosophical or rational expositions, then his writings on asceticism surely seem anti-intellectual in this specific sense. But this comes at the costs of ignoring the very obvious fact that al-Ghazālī's *Ṣūfī* writings are quite voluminous, which means that he put a lot of thought into these reflections. Not only did he write detailed accounts of what constitutes asceticism, but he also defended its purpose. This is coupled with the fact that his views on asceticism are strikingly concomitant with his earlier reflections on philosophy and theology. Perhaps the best way to profile al-Ghazālī is to regard his intermittent anti-intellectualism as a simple desire to reinstate elementary Islamic principles that had been undercut by principles that are either foreign or innovative to the religion. Ironically, however, al-Ghazālī's elementary notion of piety is underlined by an array of different concerns, some of which are epistemological while

⁶⁷ Ibid., 54-55.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 55.

others are normatively political. By the end of this thesis, it is my aim to make sure that readers have understood the implications of this last statement.

Al-Ghazālī, who was of Persian background, was born in the northeastern Iranian region of Khorasan, near the town of Tus. Frank Griffel estimates that his year of birth could have been around 1056, though previous estimates had suggested the year 1058.⁶⁹ It is possible that he and his younger brother Aḥmad became fatherless at a young age. Al-Ghazālī's first theological exposure occurred in the town of Gorgan, where he would be trained in *Sunnī* (or orthodox) jurisprudence.⁷⁰ It is presumed that al-Ghazālī's first rigorous philosophical exposure began in the Iranian city of Nishapur, where he would learn under the supervision of 'Abd al-Malik bin 'Allāh bin Muḥammad al-Juwaynī (d. 1085).⁷¹ Al-Juwaynī also imparted to his students teachings of the *Ash'arī* creed, an eponym for the 9th century theologian, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī. In brief, this school of thought teaches that God's divine essence, which is eternal, is accompanied by seven equally eternal characteristics. Additionally, the school advances an occasionalist position that the universe's laws are subject to God's divine will.⁷² Though he would diverge from the *Ash'arī* (plural) in later years, especially as he became more animated by *Ṣūfī* tradition, al-Ghazālī's would continue to advance some of their central tenets, as evidenced in his *Ash'arī* treatise, *Moderation in Belief* (*Al-Iqtisād fī-l-i'tiqād*).⁷³ Though less researched than his pupil, al-Juwaynī is renowned in the field of Islamic studies, namely for being (potentially) the first *Ash'arī* thinker to make use

⁶⁹ Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 23-24.

⁷⁰ W. Montgomery Watt, *Muslim Intellectual: A Study of Al-Ghazali* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1964), 20-21.

⁷¹ Gerard Böwering, "ĠAZĀLĪ I. BIOGRAPHY," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press, 2001), 358.

⁷² For an excellent classical reflection and exposition of different Islamic and non-Islamic creeds that existed before and during the middle ages, see Muḥammad bin 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī's (d. 1158) work. Al-Shahrastānī offers breakdowns of the basic tenets of each creed and their appropriation over time. His work reflects a genuine effort to understand the varying creeds and eschews any sentimental language when describing other beliefs. See: Al-Shahrastānī, *Al-Milal wa-l-niḥal* (Beirut: Manshūrat al-jamal, 2013), 171.

⁷³ Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation in Belief*, trans. Aladdin M. Yaqub (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

of Aristotelian and Avicennian syllogisms to sharpen theological argumentation. A number of contemporary scholars believe that there are visible Aristotelian traces in al-Ghazālī's theology. They claim that these had to be imparted to him during his formative years in Nishapur under al-Juwaynī's supervision at the *Nizāmiyya* School.⁷⁴ In fact, according to Richard Frank and later Griffel, al-Ghazālī's work is significantly influenced by Abū 'Alī Abū Sīnā (d. 1037) (known in the West as Avicenna), an Aristotelian himself. There is a strong case for the thesis on the Avicennian roots of parts of al-Ghazālī's theological corpus, though the fact that the latter's anti-philosophical critique was partly directed at aspects of Avicenna's metaphysics cannot be understated.⁷⁵

As far as I know, the first serious Avicennian interpretation of al-Ghazālī's work was conducted by Richard Frank. Frank believes that al-Ghazālī's remarks about God's absolute power over the universe are only intermittent. According to this interpretation, al-Ghazālī believed that God's creative power was not limitless, a thesis he likely borrowed from Avicenna.⁷⁶ Although al-Ghazālī often urged worshippers to simple piety by reminding themselves of God's omnipotence, his strong condemnation of Avicennian philosophy makes no mention of the philosopher's alleged impiety. But we know that al-Ghazālī's critique of the *falāsifa* is animated by a theistic thesis. In the *Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*), al-Ghazālī dissects and critiques twenty erroneous philosophical doctrines, three of which he condemns as unbelief (*kufṛ*), based on philosophical grounds. These are: (1) the world existed eternally, (2) God has knowledge only of the universals and not of the particulars, and (3) that the souls of the dead remain but their bodies

⁷⁴ Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 30-31. According to Richard M. Frank, al-Ghazālī's thoroughgoing research into Avicennian philosophy began during his tenure at Baghdad's *Nizāmiyya*, which he received in 1091, nearly half a decade after his teacher's passing. See: Richard M. Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash'arite School* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 1994), 2.

⁷⁵ According to al-Ghazālī, al-Fārābī and Avicenna are two of the "most reliable transmitters and verifiers among the philosophers in Islam" who introduced erroneous ideas. See: Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 4.

⁷⁶ Richard M. Frank, *Creation and the Cosmic System: Al-Ghazālī and Avicenna* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1992), 85.

are not resurrected in the hereafter.⁷⁷ The fact that al-Ghazālī's strong condemnation is limited to these three points, which are very specific, suggests that he did not object to the entirety of philosophy. In contrast, Michael E. Marmura's view that al-Ghazālī's general corpus is resoundingly occasionalist. But unlike his *Ash'arī* predecessors, al-Ghazālī situates his occasionalist doctrine in *taṣawwuf*.⁷⁸ Lastly, there is the most recent interpretation of Frank Griffel, which regards al-Ghazālī's theology as "perched between the Ash'arite and the Avicennian poles."⁷⁹ According to this view, al-Ghazālī's systematic appropriation of varying schools yields a unique theology that cannot be compartmentalized. However, Griffel maintains that al-Ghazālī's theology leans more to Avicenna's philosophy, and that his philosophical doctrines overshadow the presence of *Ash'arī* thought in terms of the breadth of content.⁸⁰

There are other invaluable interpretations which will become useful to my own interpretation later in this thesis. I only mentioned these three commentators for now because they offer the most thoroughgoing accounts of al-Ghazālī's relationship to philosophy and whether his theology is underlined by philosophical content. To be clear, this thesis will not attempt to resolve this debate concerning the extent of al-Ghazālī's appropriation of Avicennian thought or to resolve the question of whether al-Ghazālī was an Avicennian thinker. I am inclined to read al-Ghazālī's theology as a unique re-articulation of fundamental Islamic notions through a quasi-philosophical lens. Further, I do not want to lose sight of my main goal. I am interested in engaging with al-Ghazālī's most occasionalist and mystical reflections to showcase that even these are grounded in underlying philosophical concerns, albeit in the form of a negative philosophy. I claim that,

⁷⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*.

⁷⁸ Michael E. Marmura, "Ghazali and Ash'arism Revisited," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 12 (2002): 99; "Al-Ghazālī," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 153.

⁷⁹ Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 11.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

even during moments when al-Ghazālī questions the usefulness of philosophy, he is making a certain normative assessment grounded on a rational concern. These assessments become more cogent as we dig into their political implications. For now, I will continue my biography on al-Ghazālī.

Prior to al-Juwaynī, Muslim intellectuals (theologians and philosophers alike) were mostly responding to Aristotelian syllogisms. But al-Juwaynī's systemic incorporation of Avicennian logic and cosmology was imparted to al-Ghazālī. Hence, when the latter went on to challenge philosophical thought in his *Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*) in later years, his critique would be directed against the Muslim *falāsifa*, rather than the forefathers of philosophy, Plato and Aristotle. In fact, there is little mention of Plato and Aristotle in al-Ghazālī's later texts, aside from occasional references to the origins of the philosophical method. As one of the most erudite scholars of his age, al-Ghazālī could not have been shocked that different cultures adhered to different metaphysical claims. His charge of unbelief (*kufr*) is directed at those who subtly introduced principles which are antithetical to religion's central tenets by masquerading these as Islamic beliefs. To deal with this problem, he would later develop a criterion for differentiating between genuine belief and covert unbelief (*zandaqa*) in his *Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Masked Infidelity* (*Fayṣal al-tafrīqa bayn al-islām wa-l-zandaqa*).⁸¹ This text not only contends with philosophical doctrines but other doctrines as well. For now, it suffices to say that al-Ghazālī's study at the *Nizāmiyya* schools of Nishapur and/or Baghdad had helped him develop a strong knowledge of two different schools, the *Ash'arī* and Avicennian schools. These would later animate (in different ways) his theological corpus.

⁸¹ Al-Ghazālī, "Fayṣal al-Tafrīqa Bayna al-Islām wa al-Zandaqa - The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Masked Infidelity," in *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī's Fayṣal al-Tafrīqa: Bayna al-Islām wa al-Zandaqa* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

The highlight of al-Ghazālī's stay in Nishapur is not only his philosophical exposure but also his political one. Through his studies at the *Nizāmiyya* he came to know the Turkic Seljuk ruler, Malikshāh, and his reputable vizier Nizām al-Mulk, after whom the *Nizāmiyya* schools were named. Following al-Juwaynī's death in 1085, al-Ghazālī was appointed to the court of Nizām al-Mulk, who would later give him a professorial position at the *Nizāmiyya* of Baghdad in the same year.⁸² It seems that al-Ghazālī's main task at the school was to teach *Shāfi'ī* jurisprudence, but we know that during his four-year tenure there he also engaged in thoroughgoing study of philosophical doctrines, namely those of al-Fārābī and Avicenna, as well as *Ash'arī* theology, considering the content of his books. Further, during this period, he wrote one of his major political texts, the *Iniquities of the Esoteric Sects and the Virtues of the Mustazhariyya* (*Faḍā'ih al-bāṭiniyya wa-faḍā'il al-Mustazhariyya*) in defiance of supporters of the *Nizārī Ismā'īlī Shī'ī* doctrine in Iran, which branched off from the powerful *Fāṭimī* dynasty in Egypt.⁸³ After presenting a detailed critique of foundational *Ismā'īlī* principles, al-Ghazālī consecrates the last passages of this book to arguing for the legitimacy of the incumbent caliph in Baghdad, al-Mustazhir of the embattled 'Abbasid dynasty. In fact, the book is also referred to as *The Book of Mustazharī* (*Kitāb al-Mustazharī*), since it was "commissioned" by the caliph himself.⁸⁴ Despite some of the hyperbolic praises and condemnations featured in this book, it must be noted that al-Ghazālī did not write it as an opportunist. As we will see in the last chapter, al-Ghazālī's critique of the *Ismā'īliyya* featured in this book are concomitant with his general theological aims and beliefs.

⁸² Böwering, "ĠAZĀLĪ I. BIOGRAPHY," 358-59.

⁸³ Al-Ghazālī, *Faḍā'ih al-bāṭiniyya*. Farouk Mitha, who extensively researched this book, reiterates previous estimations this text was written near the end of al-Ghazālī's tenure in Baghdad. See: Farouk Mitha, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ismailis: A Debate on Reason and Authority in Medieval Islam* (London; New York: I.B.Tauris Publishers, 2001), 2-3.

⁸⁴ *Al-Ghazālī and the Ismailis*, 2-3.

Hence, an analysis of this book is invaluable to my claim that al-Ghazālī's political theory is epistemologically grounded.

A concise history of the Seljuk Empire (*al-Salājiqa*) and Abbasid caliphate (*al-‘Abāsiyyūn*) is in order here. Prior to the rise of the Seljuk state in Iran and Iraq, the Abbasid caliphate (whose capital was Baghdad) had long been disintegrating. These Arab Caliphs were mostly reliant on mercenaries of nomadic stock, namely Oghuz Turkic groups brought from the Oxus region of Central Asia. The late Islamologue Patricia Crone paints a picture of “slaves on horses” who formed the basis of the Arab rulers’ armies. It is not clear how slave-like they actually were when they were first incorporated into Muslim states, but Crone rightly recounts how these militarized nomads gradually seized *de facto* power.⁸⁵ The domination of Turkic tribes in the Levant, the place of the first two caliphal capitals (Damascus and Baghdad), did not come in a single wave, and their power was intermittent. The practice of building an army from nomadic groups was already in use by the previous caliphal dynasty, the Umayyads (*al-Umawīyyūn*), but it became a trademark of the Abbasids who overthrew them.⁸⁶ Whether the caliphs were weakened by their reliance on nomadic mercenaries or whether this reliance signals weakness is a matter for historians to deal with. It suffices to say that the Abbasids did not have complete control over Muslim territories, which greatly undermined their caliphal authority. The caliphate, after all, was initially intended to preside over all Muslim lands, and its incumbent was expected to wield all administrative and religious powers.

⁸⁵ Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 74-81. Ira M. Lapidus disputes the claim that these mercenaries were as “servile” as some commentators have presumed. This is because these soldiers could ascend to the ranks of ministers or generals in the army, which is unlikely for slaves in the traditional sense. See: Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 148.

⁸⁶ Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, 55-57.

In the 10th century, over a century before al-Ghazālī's birth, the *Sunnī* caliphate would experience a resounding blow. The Twelver *Shī'ī Buwayhī* dynasty of *Daylamī* background (a northern Iranian group) had marched on the caliphate's capital and ensured that incumbent caliphs would become their potentates for times to come. This presented a major blow to orthodox Muslims not just because the conquering dynasty upheld a different denomination, but because the highest political office in Islamic tradition was effectively reduced to a mere nominal title.⁸⁷ The *Sunnī* jurist and political thinker, al-Māwardī, who lived during this political turmoil, struggled with the *Buwayhī* "usurpation" of the caliphate.⁸⁸ By al-Ghazālī's time, it would have been futile to deny this usurpation. Devout Muslim thinkers could no longer deny the fact that their caliph had lost control over warring Muslim princes. The latter freely carved out their own quasi-independent territories at will. Even more problematic was the fact that those non-Arab rulers could not claim the caliphate for themselves, since *Sunnī* jurisprudence stipulates that the caliph must be a descendent of the Prophet Muhammad. For this reason, the Seljuk (as well as other groups before and after them) preserved the caliphal office in Baghdad.⁸⁹ The caliphs would remain in Baghdad until its invasion and desecration by the Mongol armies in 1258. Hence, at al-Ghazālī's time, a *Sunnī* jurist had to come to terms with the fact that the Muslim abode was shared by two powers, the religious office of the Caliphate and the *de facto* rule of the more powerful secular rulers, or sultans.

Al-Ghazālī's praise of the Seljuks would have been heartfelt. Despite being the caliph's suzerains, the Seljuks offered remarkable consolations for al-Ghazālī. Their invasion of the Iranian heartlands and parts of Mesopotamia, including the capital of Baghdad, ended the *Buwayhī*

⁸⁷ Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 139.

⁸⁸ Ann K. S. Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam* (London: Routledge, 2004), 87-89.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

chokehold on the *Sunnī* caliph. The Seljuks al-Ghazālī came to know were not the nomadic mercenaries that were initially brought in to bolster Muslim troops. They formed a functioning state, as evidenced by their proclivity for courts as well as educational institutions, such as the *Nizāmiyya*.⁹⁰ In fact, they are credited with building the first state-sanctioned system of courts founded on *Shāfiʿī* jurisprudence. In so doing, the Seljuks became a bulwark to the rising tide of *Shīʿī* power in other parts of the Muslim world, which would reach its zenith in the 11th century.⁹¹ Additionally, al-Ghazālī not only evaluated a state based on its religious merits but also its military strength (*shawka*).⁹² The Seljuk dynasty, not the caliphate, was able to push back against the expanding *Fāṭimī* dynasty to the east. The *Fāṭimiyya*, or Fatimids as they are known in English, began as a millenarian group in parts of North Africa. They became more remarkable once they captured Egypt and turned Cairo into their capital, where they set out to advance a rivaling view on rulership over the Muslim world. The *Shīʿī* view of legitimacy is more stringent than the *Sunnī* one. Orthodox *fuqahāʾ* (or jurists) stipulate that the ruler needs to be of the Prophet's tribe, the *Quraysh*. The *Shīʿa* maintain that the ruler, whom they often term *imām*, must be a direct descendent of the Prophet's cousin, ʿAlī bin abī Ṭālib. For this reason, contemporary Islamologues invariably refer to the varying *Shīʿa* groups which have emerged throughout history as ʿAlids.⁹³

Al-Ghazālī refutes the *Fāṭimiyya*'s claims for a number of reasons, as we will see in Chapter 6. But one of his most poignant points is made against the claim around the *imām*'s infallibility. The *Ismāʿīliyya*, along with other *Shīʿī* groups, maintain that an *imām* cannot err, and

⁹⁰ According to Lapidus, the Seljuks struggled with their initial inexperience in sedentary politics. Therefore, they sought to undercut Turkic influence within their own ranks by creating a military structure which absorbed local elements from the Caucasus and Middle East, such as Kurds, Persians, and Georgians. See: Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 145.

⁹¹ Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam*, 103-05.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 116.

⁹³ Farhad Daftary, "Ismaili History and Literary Traditions," in *An Anthology of Ismaili Literature: A Shiʿi Vision of Islam*, ed. Hermann Landolt, Samira Sheikh, and Kutub Kassam (London; New York: I.B.Tauris Publishers, 2008), 8-16.

that he imparts all esoteric (*bāṭinī*) religious knowledge to humans. Al-Ghazālī seeks to suggest that this elitism undermines the adherent's worth, as it presumes that he or she cannot individually seek answers about religion. Al-Ghazālī occasionally uses interchangeable terms to describe these groups. The first is *Ta'limiyya*, after the Arabic word of *ta'lim*, on account of the *imām*'s role as the sole religious pedagogue. The second is *Bāṭiniyya*, which entails something esoteric, on account of the *imām*'s capacity to reveal truths that are otherwise unknown to regular people. For al-Ghazālī, the most resounding flaw in *Ta'limī* teaching is its anti-rationalism, as it calls on believers to forgo the capacity to question erroneous beliefs. Thus, al-Ghazālī articulates a political view that demands some degree of rationalism.⁹⁴ Contrarily, it is the opposite extreme, an excess in rationalism, which drove al-Ghazālī to be disenchanted with theological speculation (*'ilm al-kalām*). This "science" (*'ilm*) was popular among *Sunnī* theologians (*mutakallimūn*). Much of this science's content consists of describing God's essence and His power over the universe.

Kalām was initially systematized by a group called the *Mu'tazila*. The *Mu'tazila*, whose thought will be explained through al-Ghazālī's critique, believe in a rationalist interpretation, which emphasizes an independent human volition. While all existing things are said to emanate from God, He furnishes humans with the capacity to freely contemplate and apprehend between right and wrong.⁹⁵ That humans are responsible for their own actions is, for *Mu'tazila*, indicative of God's just character.⁹⁶ Moreover, the *Mu'tazila* constantly make the effort to eschew any discussion of God's (material and personal) attributes – apart from his justness, fearing to reduce

⁹⁴ In the *Iniquities*, al-Ghazālī states that the *Ta'limiyya* creed rests on the "refutation of opinion and the refutation of the intellects' behaviours" (*ibṭāl al-ra'ī wa-ibṭāl taṣarruf al-'uqūl*). See: Al-Ghazālī, *Faḍā'ih al-bāṭiniyya*, 25.

⁹⁵ Though *kalām* is highly concerned with explaining divine attributes, theology (in this strict sense) is only one of its major components. The scope of *kalām* is of a "highly abstract nature," such that its proponents often probed the scope of political authority. See: Mohammad Fadel, "The True, the Good and the Reasonable: The Theological and Ethical Roots of Public Reason in Islamic Law," *The Canadian journal of law and jurisprudence* 21, no. 1 (2015): 22.

⁹⁶ Nouha Khalifa, *Hardship and Deliverance in the Islamic Tradition: Theology and Spirituality in the works of al-Tanūkhī* (London; New York: I.B.Tauris, 2010), 18-19.

Him to what He is not. Hence, any Qur’anic passages that describe the qualities of God ought to be read metaphorically to avoid likening him to His creation.⁹⁷ The *Ashā‘ira* take their name after Abū al-Hasan al-Ash‘arī, who broke from the *Mu‘tazila*, namely on account of how they erroneously reduced God’s powers. Subsequent *Ash‘arī* thinkers typically argued that we are dependent on God’s revelation when cultivating morals and that God’s intervention is, in some instances, literal.⁹⁸ This sometimes entails that depictions of God as a regal figure who will be made visible in the afterlife are to be read as they are presented. Though the *Ashā‘ira* diverge on the questions of human volition and divine attributes, they remained consistent to the argumentative method of *kalām* disputation by retaining the rationalism laid out by their *Mu‘tazilī* adversaries. As explained by Mohammad Fadel, *kalām* is principally a rational discipline aiming for incontrovertible truths in the interpretation of key theological categories. Insofar as *kalām* defends its propositions through rational arguments, it is a “universal science.” This means that more than one proposition cannot be simultaneously true – that is, the more logical conclusion would necessarily abrogate the other.⁹⁹

To some *Ash‘arī* thinkers, reason was conjoined to the question of salvation; rational inquiry was often regarded as a superior means of faith.¹⁰⁰ And, despite their ideational divergences, both the *Mu‘tazila* and *Ashā‘ira* converged on the superiority of reason, as they “rejected non-rational means, such as inspiration, authoritative instruction, or mysticism.”¹⁰¹ It is on the question of attainment and cultivation of faith that al-Ghazālī departed from traditional

⁹⁷ Henry Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, Collection Folio/essais (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 160-64.

⁹⁸ This sharp contrast is captured in Kambiz Ghaneabassiri’s comparison between the *Ash‘arī* Al-Bāqillānī and the *Mu‘tazilī* ‘Abd al-Jabbār. See: Kambiz Ghaneabassiri, “The Epistemological Foundation of Conceptions of Justice in Classical “Kalām”: A Study of ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s “Al-Mughnī” And ibn al-Bāqillānī’s “Al-Tamhīd,”” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 19, no. 1 (2009).

⁹⁹ Fadel, “The True, the Good and the Reasonable: The Theological and Ethical Roots of Public Reason in Islamic Law,” 22-23.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 32.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 33.

theological practice, while still adhering to some of their central tenets. While al-Ghazālī preserves some of the underlying *Ash‘arī* claims, as we will see in the first two chapters, he later treats them within a mystical context in his mid-late text the *Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*).¹⁰² Further, al-Ghazālī confines theology to a political, or communal, purpose. The pursuit of theology no longer becomes an end in itself, but rather becomes instrumental for protecting the community from false doctrine. He stipulates this in one of his most renowned theological texts, *Moderation*.

In Baghdad, al-Ghazālī had developed a penchant for *Ṣūfī* literature, which would eventually influence his decision to leave the city along with his professorial post. In his biography, al-Ghazālī exclaims that his immersion in theological speculation and philosophy had confounded his views. His perception of truth was inflicted by a troubling “doubt”. Though we are not told what precisely triggered his skepticism, we know that his overall religious conviction was unaffected, as he tells us that he wanted to find “certain knowledge”, the kind that “no possibility of error or illusion accompanies it.”¹⁰³ We also know that al-Ghazālī developed an aversion for fame and no longer wanted to be associated with courts and political offices. A life dedicated to political opportunity is antithetical to his ideal religious life, which should be consecrated for religious devotion in the form of acts. George F. Hourani remarks that this retirement occurred in November 1095, and it is during this period that he composed the voluminous *Revival*. The *Moderation*, which was written before the *Revival*, is perhaps one of his last texts to be composed

¹⁰² Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-kitāb al-‘arabī, 2013). This text is undoubtedly al-Ghazālī’s *magnum opus*. In classical Arabic literature, the term for book, *kitāb*, is also used synonymously for chapter. Each chapter in this book is referred to as a *kitāb*, each of which deals with a specific theological or devotional concept. While al-Ghazālī intended to present a holistic picture of religious sciences in this text, each *kitāb* in the *Revival* stands as an independent text that could very well have been published separately. In fact, the available English translations of the *Revival* have focused on individual chapters, as opposed to the entire book. From now on, I will be citing each *kitāb* as a separate work so that readers may properly identify which part of the *Revival* we are dealing with.

¹⁰³ “Deliverance from Error,” 21-22.

in Baghdad. Hourani doubts that such a text, which reads as a “prosaic piece of *kalām*,” could have been written during the period when al-Ghazālī was most animated by *Ṣūfī* thought.¹⁰⁴ Hourani’s observation is sound, considering that the language of the *Revival* and the even later *Ṣūfī* text, the *Niche of Light* (*Mishkāṭ al-anwār*), rely on more evocative imagery, especially concerning God’s graceful outpouring of His knowledge to His worshippers.¹⁰⁵ This imagery of divine outpouring is typically concomitant with the *Ṣūfī* conception of “taste” (*dhawq*), which al-Ghazālī would later describe in his *Deliverance*. In brief, *dhawq* is a state whereby an adherent detaches his or herself from the sensory world to experience divine grace internally. Only by way of this immersive experience, not study, does one attain certainty.¹⁰⁶

While studying under al-Ghazālī, the Andalusian *Ash‘arī* jurist Abū Bakr ibn al-‘Arabī (d.1148) observed his teacher’s devotion to rigid *Ṣūfī* tradition. He tells us that al-Ghazālī maintained a mystical view of knowledge, which presumes that a person comes to know Truth through his or her “heart” (*qalb*). But first, the heart must be cleared by way of repetitive religious practice and devotional work.¹⁰⁷ Ibn ‘Arabī claims to have had engaged in thorough discussions with al-Ghazālī, who became overly isolationist because of his mystical beliefs. (He tells us that this intellectual exchange occurred during the period when al-Ghazālī had completed his *Revival*, which is his most voluminous text on mysticism.) In one letter he received from al-Ghazālī, ibn ‘Arabī was advised that the most seasoned hearts are those detached from the sensory world. Further, proficiency in this mystic path is only accessible to those with rigorous “experience” (*tajriba*). And perhaps the most notable detail in this exchange is al-Ghazālī’s assertion that the

¹⁰⁴ George F. Hourani, “The Chronology of Ghazālī’s Writings,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 79, no. 4: 228.

¹⁰⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights*, trans. David Buchman (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1998).

¹⁰⁶ “Deliverance from Error,” 55.

¹⁰⁷ ibn al-‘Arabī, *Al-‘Awāṣim min al-qawāṣim* (Cairo: Maktabat dār al-turāth, 1997), 16-17.

heart is the locale where knowledge is stored,¹⁰⁸ a resounding departure from the *falāsifa*, who preferred a more overtly rationalist account of understanding. As we will see later, al-Fārābī (for example) had always asserted that the highest form of cogency or human understanding is attained through the “mind” (*‘aql*) and rational exercise rather than devotional work. The question that remains is whether the *Ṣūfī* heart bears the same (or at least similar) implications as the mind of the *falāsifa*. I will attempt to answer this in Chapter 4.

Al-Ghazālī’s post-retreat activities included travels to different cities and some degree of isolation in order to take up prolonged religious acts. We know that between the years 1095 and 1106, al-Ghazālī visited different cities. Prior to leaving Baghdad, his sponsor Nizām al-Mulk had been assassinated by rivals who collaborated with *Ismā‘īlī* assassins.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, the Seljuk sultanate was historically mired by a series of succession crises.¹¹⁰ If we take everything al-Ghazālī tells us in his autobiography at face value, we get the impression that the sole reason for his departure from Baghdad was to escape vainglorious desires. But biographies of al-Ghazālī suggest other motivations, which strike us as more political than the ones laid out in the *Deliverance*. Just after the passing of Malikshāh in 1092, which comes not long after Nizām al-Mulk’s assassination and shortly before al-Ghazālī’s departure, a civil war over succession had erupted between the sultan’s son and brother, Barkiyaruq and Tutush respectively. Duncan B. McDonald, for example, takes note of this political turmoil, stating that Barkiyaruq’s capture of Baghdad from his uncle’s forces was likely one of the major reasons for al-Ghazālī’s escape. At the time of the succession crisis, the caliphate had declared its backing for Malikshāh’s brother, Tutush. Given that al-Ghazālī

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰⁹ According to Griffel, the alleged killer himself was an *Ismā‘īlī*, but he was killed before proper interrogation. See: Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology*, 36.

¹¹⁰ Lapidus provides an insightful overview of the Seljuk dynastical period. As a formerly nomadic dynasty, the Seljuks were never able to shake off the internal strife that typically plagues tribal groups. The incumbent sultan often dissected his domain among his children, who would later carve out quasi-independent statelets. See: Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 135.

was working for the Abbasid court at the time, he would have likely fallen victim to guilt by association after the capital had been seized by Barkiyaruq's forces. The fact that al-Ghazālī would later return to Baghdad after Barkiyaruq's death only adds credence to this theory.¹¹¹ Another theory suggests that al-Ghazālī had been intimidated by his patron's assassination.¹¹² It is likely that he feared the reach of assassins of the *Nizārī* sect, an Iranian offshoot of the *Ismā'īlī Fatimids*. The *Nizāriyya* were likely responsible for Niẓām al-Mulk's murder. Though the *Fatimids* constituted the greatest threat to the Abbasid legitimacy and territorial control, it was the *Nizāriyya*'s clandestine violence by way of assassinations which struck fear in the hearts of their religious adversaries.¹¹³

In fact, although the *Iniquities* addresses the *Ismā'īlī* in the broadest sense, it is likely that al-Ghazālī wrote this text in response to *Nizārī* theologians more specifically. We must recall the circumstances in which al-Ghazālī wrote the *Iniquities*. While the *Iniquities* contains theoretical and philosophical elements which are familiar to us from his broader corpus, this text has more resoundingly political origins than his other Baghdad texts. As mentioned above, there was some degree of pressure, or "command," by the Abbasid caliph to compose a theoretical rebuttal of the *Ismā'īlī*'s creed.¹¹⁴ While there is no doubt that al-Ghazālī's polemical writing appears genuinely aligned with his theological views, one can only wonder whether he would have been ready to compose such rebuttals with the same level of enthusiasm in the aftermath of his patron's assassination. In view of our brief historical overview above, the political situation in Baghdad must have been very tense for any scholar who wanted to undertake theological debate, especially

¹¹¹ Duncan B. McDonald, "The Life of al-Ghazzālī, with Especial Reference to His Religious Experiences and Opinions," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (1899): 98.

¹¹² A.L. Tibawi, "PART I. Al-Ghazālī's Sojourn in Damascus and Jerusalem," *Islamic Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1965): 68.

¹¹³ Mitha, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ismailis*, 23-24.

¹¹⁴ McDonald, "The Life of al-Ghazzālī, with Especial Reference to His Religious Experiences and Opinions," 87.

against members of other schools of thought that were also competing for political legitimacy over the Muslim world. These theological debates were inseparable from the political contests which fuelled them. In fact, al-Ghazālī was only born three years after Baghdad had been liberated from the “yoke” of the *Buwayhī* rulers.¹¹⁵ The *Buwayhī* dynasty followed a different creed of *Shī‘ī* Islam to the one of the *Ismā‘īliyya*. Nevertheless, the force in which the *Ismā‘īliyya* challenged the Abbasid seat in Baghdad must have provoked fresh fears of yet another *Shī‘ī* usurpation of religious orthodoxy’s claim to power. As such, no matter how theologically and philosophically isolated a scholar wanted to be, the dynamic intrigues plaguing metropolises such as Baghdad obliged him to either get involved in the courts of ruling dynasties or to wander away from the seat of power, where one can find tranquility in undisturbed pious deeds. By the end of his intellectual career, al-Ghazālī had found a synthesis between both obligations. This thesis will return to the nature of this synthesis in the final chapter, though key elements of this aspect of al-Ghazālī’s journey will be raised throughout. One point to keep in mind is that al-Ghazālī would leave the political domain, only to return with more vivid reflections on the purpose of the theocratic order. But to get there, he needed much time to contemplate broader theological themes, including the purpose of our existence, away from this political context. Throughout this journey, he would discover several reasons for why the scholar should be politically involved. And these reasons, which we will explore throughout the thesis, do not merely involve disputing with non-orthodox polemicists. In the final chapter, we will see that al-Ghazālī was alarmed by an even graver vice, the impiety of the ruler, which could prove costly for the salvation of the Muslim community. As such, he would later reflect on the importance of wedding religious scholarship with political affairs.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 78.

Before I proceed further, I would like to clarify a few technical terms. Readers will notice that I will be frequently using the word “scholars” to refer to a body of Islamic intellectuals. Typically, the Arabic word for scholars (*‘ulamā*) refers to “religious scholars”, people trained in religious sciences, like jurisprudence. But many top Islamic jurists or scholars were erudite learners. As mentioned earlier, al-Ghazālī learned about the *falāsifa* through al-Juwaynī, a top *Shafi’ī* jurist of his time. Though al-Ghazālī was undeniably more prolific than most (if not all) his contemporaries, his erudite knowledge was no exception; it was expected of the scholarly tradition at the time. But he was exceptional in another sense. Al-Ghazālī was conceptually concerned with the status and activities of intellectuals in his time. As we will see throughout this thesis, he even dedicated a typology of various forms of scholarship to critique the erring ways of these intellectuals.¹¹⁶ Or, sometimes he even condemned the social and political consequences of their elitism. At times, he also distinguished between the learned and the commoners (*al-‘awāmm*), a term used to describe the unlettered or the majority that is unfamiliar with theological jargon.¹¹⁷ By the end of this thesis, understanding the relationship between intellectual and commoner will prove crucial for sketching out al-Ghazālī’s ideal vision of a theocratic order. But, first, we must stick preliminary question. Who were these intellectuals? And what was it that they studied?

For this answer, we do not have to look too far. Al-Ghazālī wrote on a variety of scholarship, from philosophy (*falsafa*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), rational theology (*‘ilm al-kalām*), and mystical science (*taṣawwuf*). Of all the scholars of medieval Islam, al-Ghazālī is definitely the most difficult to pin down. This is why current scholarship, like Griffel’s, now proposes we treat al-Ghazālī’s theology as multifaceted, especially on the question of philosophy versus theology.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Al-Ghazālī, “Deliverance from Error,” 26-27.

¹¹⁷ “Iljām al-‘awāmm ‘an ‘ilm al-kalām,” in *Majmū‘at rasā’il al-imām al-Ghazālī* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 2013).

¹¹⁸ Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology*, 11-12.

Al-Ghazālī was clearly influenced by different sources, schools of thought, and disciplinary methods, the *falāsifa* and Avicenna included. But we also know, from the *Deliverance*, that he was disenchanted with the different schools' claims of having attained higher knowledge. Only *taṣawwuf* could provide this lucid knowledge. Now, the *Deliverance* explains al-Ghazālī's personal voyage and internal intellectual struggles. But, as a scholarly member of society, he was also an engaged jurist (*faqīh*) with legal opinions. Though this dissertation will not examine al-Ghazālī's capacity as a jurist, I will make a few points here. Al-Ghazālī belonged to the *Shafī'ī* juristic school of thought, or *madhhab*. Naturally, he would have been well-versed with rational argumentation, which is a crucial methodical element of Islamic jurisprudence. This form of rationalism is not the kind that we are familiar with from the ancient Greeks. Though the Islamic jurist relied heavily on demonstrative proof, he also mobilized analogous thinking (*qiyās*).¹¹⁹ *Qiyās* is a form of analogical method through which jurists deduce laws to respond to novel situations, heretofore not seen in tradition. The deduction is conducted by way of scriptural interpretation. More importantly, al-Ghazālī also engaged in rational argumentation through *kalām*, or speculative theology. As such, he had to make "extensive use of logic and apodeictic demonstration."¹²⁰ As mentioned above, al-Ghazālī's theological inclinations were mostly *Ash'arī*, which means that he would have mobilized rational argumentation to defend the theistic thesis that all creative powers belong to God. This is his crucial point of disagreement with the *falāsifa*.

Incidentally, al-Ghazālī's patron, Nizām al-Mulk, was a follower of the *Ash'arī-Shafī'ī* schools.¹²¹ There is no surprise, then, that al-Ghazālī was employed by Seljuk officials. If we look at the official role the *Nizāmiyya* had in promoting a stratum of '*ulamā*', it is tempting to think of

¹¹⁹ Massimo Campanini, *Al-Ghazali and the Divine* (Boca Raton: Routledge, 2018), 10.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

¹²¹ Kenneth Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī and his Revival of the Religious Sciences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 20

this class as equivalent to the notion of the Christian clerical class. In Christendom, the clerics are a distinctive class of people who receive a theological education. Further, these persons who oversee their own quasi-autonomous ecclesiastical institutions and have exclusive right to conducting certain religious rites. Those outside the ecclesiastical institution are regarded as laypersons. At the theological level, no such stringent division between the secular and ecclesiastical institutions exists in Islam. This is why I prefer to speak of a division between scholars and commoners, as opposed to clerics and laypersons.

But, at the political and social level, one cannot ignore the fact that the *‘ulamā*’ had become a stratum distinct from the rest of the people, with a monopoly on the religious sciences and even the humanities. The social and political situation under the Seljuks was ripe for the emergence of this stratum. The *Nizāmiyya*, which were built to bring some sense of religious order, standardized religious scholarship. Some say that the *Nizāmiyya* aimed to propagate the *Shafi’ī* school as the official state doctrine. But, during the rise of the *Nizāmiyya*, most Seljuks officials were followers of the *Ḥanafī* creed. And there was a notable period in which followers of the *Shafi’ī* creed were persecuted by certain *Ḥanafī* sectarianists. If we consider this sectarian dynamic in Seljuk politics, it is also possible that the *Nizāmiyya* were simply intended to promote toleration and social harmony by making the creed widely available through its curriculum.¹²² Whatever the intention behind the *Nizāmiyya*, we know that they served to create a distinct body of scholars, some of whom were elevated to role of political functionaries.¹²³ Later, we will see that it is this life of court scholarship that al-Ghazālī vehemently rejected. When he is found speaking ill of scholars or intellectuals, it is simply because he believes that courtier scholarship brings about unwanted

¹²² Ibid., 20.

¹²³ Ibid.

social divisions or is not always conducive to a life of simple piety. No wonder that al-Ghazālī is not always fond of the scholar, though he was one himself.

It has already been noted above that the Seljuks were interested in erecting a state which institutionalized orthodox jurisprudence, or *fiqh*. Yet, despite being impassioned by the proliferation of Islamic scholarship, it is apparent that the ruling class had little to no bearing on the original content of religious scholarship. Though the Seljuks invested in these sorts of pedagogical institutions, the course of religious scholarship was largely outside their control.¹²⁴ With the exception of his treatise defending the title of the caliph al-Mustazhir as well as a later work in which he intermittently defends his Seljuk ruler, the content of al-Ghazālī's corpus is suggestive of the relative freedom theologians enjoyed from the courts of the ruling elite. After all, al-Ghazālī defends a form of religious orthodoxy whose rudimentary elements predate the foundation of the Seljuk state. And such is the importance of the *faqīh*, or jurist, in Islamic thought. His role, as al-Ghazālī describes it, is to harken back to the foundations of *shari'*, the provisions which can be derived from the Prophetic tradition (*Sunna*) corroborated by what is found in certain Qur'anic principles.¹²⁵ Later, we will see that these laws generally involve a variety of provisions, including devotional practices, such as ablution and prayer, as well as private contracts, such as marital rites. Most importantly in the context of Islamic political thought, as an expert on governance and administration, the *faqīh* was inevitably considered the executioner of such political practices.¹²⁶ And as a follower of the *Shāfi'ī* school, named after its founder Muḥammad

¹²⁴ In fact, according to Erwin L.J. Rosenthal, there is historical evidence to suggest that the jurists had sometimes seized powers at crucial moments, but this depended on the "weakness of the caliphs." See: Erwin L. J. Rosenthal, "The Role of the State in Islam: Theory and the Medieval Practice," *Der Islam* 50, no. 1 (1973): 8.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2, 15.

¹²⁶ Rosenthal rightly observes that the basis of Islamic political thought draws on the divine law revealed to the Prophet. This tradition, rooted in both the Qur'an and prophetic tradition, articulates a "practical purpose," namely humanity's "welfare." Since the original source of public Islamic law calls for the guarantee of the Muslim community's welfare, it is incumbent on legal practitioners (*fuqahā'*) to assist rulers in the execution of administrative duties. See: *ibid.*, 1-2.

ibn Idrīs al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 820), al-Ghazālī’s main source of legitimacy for religious provisions, including those involving religious governance, is a longstanding jurisprudential science that had developed relatively independently from the many Muslim dynasties.¹²⁷

It is quite practical to compartmentalize classical Islamic thought into different genres. When we look at al-Ghazālī’s corpus, for example, we come across a variety of different forms of texts whose addressees and textual purposes differ starkly. These differences will be made clearer throughout the thesis. In the earlier centuries of Islamic scholarship, the two major genres had been *uṣūl al-fiqh* (principles of jurisprudence) and *‘ilm al-kalām* (theological speculation). At the core, the study of *fiqh* signals a sense of “traditionalism” in that the discipline requires harkening back to statements made by the Prophet and his companions in order to legitimize the selection of certain provisions or rules while ruling out others. Conversely, *kalām* appears to give more intellectual liberty to the author, who is free to use syllogistic formulae so as long as he defends basic Islamic tenets, such as God’s omnipotence. As such, *kalām* can be defined as a practice in “rationalism,” which explains why I tend to define the *mutakallim* (the practitioner of *kalām*) as a rationalist. Though these disciplines may be historically rooted in different traditions, Wael Hallaq observes that efforts to syncretize them into a single “rudimentary synthesis” date as far back as al-Shāfi‘ī, who believed that revealed knowledge can be defended through reason.¹²⁸ By al-Ghazālī’s time, such syncretic works would come to include new genres and methodologies, such as *taṣawwuf* (especially in his case) and more politically-grounded texts, which make use of the procedural methods from *fiqh* by appending these to reflections on political legitimacy. Despite these variations, al-Ghazālī nevertheless insisted on a division of labour in religious scholarship. Though

¹²⁷ Ibid., 9.

¹²⁸ Wael B. Hallaq, “Was al-Shafi‘i the Master Architect of Islamic Jurisprudence,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 25, no. 4 (1993): 601.

his texts exhibit syncretic tendencies, sometimes to the point where the main genre eludes us, he recognizes that different forms of scholarship are suitable to specific audiences and purposes. I argue that, without sacrificing the need for a division of labour, al-Ghazālī imagines a holistic religious science to address the principal purpose of humans in this world. As such, the type of scholar he has in mind is not only a *faqīh* who dictates religious and devotional provisions but one who is knowledgeable in the corpus of religious sciences, as well as a practitioner of *taṣawwuf*, a point that will be addressed thoroughly in the final chapter. For now, it is important to keep in mind that al-Ghazālī believes that the ruler must be surrounded by these sorts of syncretic scholars in hopes that all the major elements of piety are properly dispensed to the entire Muslim community.

Lastly, I will conclude this section with one last brief historical overview. Al-Ghazālī's first destination out of Baghdad was Damascus. From Syria, he travelled to Jerusalem, followed by Medina and Mecca. He would later revisit Syria and Iraq, only to end up back in Nishapur, where he would return to teaching at a local *Nizāmiyya* due to pressure (and possible coercion) from his late patron's son, Fakhr al-Mulk ibn Nizām al-Mulk. Al-Ghazālī's isolation from Baghdad up until his return to Nishapur did not consist of a complete departure from intellectual activities but rather an escape from state-funded education.¹²⁹ At times, al-Ghazālī paints a very secluded image of himself, claiming he had shut himself in one of the Damascene mosques, refusing to do anything besides devotional works.¹³⁰ Yet it suffices to say that, sometime during his 'departure,' or "seclusion" as he terms it,¹³¹ al-Ghazālī composed his *magnum opus*, the *Revival* among other key texts. According to Gerard Böwering, this "monumental" text, which describes the elementary

¹²⁹ Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 53-54.

¹³⁰ Al-Ghazālī, "Deliverance from Error," 59.

¹³¹ Ibid.

aspects of *taṣawwuf* is suggestive of al-Ghazālī's zealous effort to "revive a true religiosity," the likes of which was in his view worrisomely absent in intellectual circles.¹³² After completing a series of other influential treatises on the topics of *taṣawwuf* and jurisprudence, al-Ghazālī passed away in his native Tus in 1111.¹³³ Now that the highlights of al-Ghazālī's intellectual life have been explained, we turn to his elementary theoretical and quasi-philosophical ideas. My starting point is his occasionalism, which finds its initial articulation during his post in Baghdad.

¹³² Böwering, "ĠAZĀLĪ I. BIOGRAPHY," 360-61.

¹³³ According to Eric Ormsby, in the last two years of his life, which were spent in Tus, al-Ghazālī spent most of his time penning eschatological texts and teaching *taṣawwuf* at his own *Ṣūfī* "convent". See: Eric L. Ormsby, *Ghazali: The Revival of Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Book, 2008), 25.

Chapter 2 – Occasionalism in al-Ghazālī's Main Theological Corpus

Al-Ghazālī's multifaceted and complex writings on the natural sciences have fueled a series of questions concerning his views on the relationship between faith and reason. Though he is intermittently interested in certain intellectual inquiries outside the scope of theology, al-Ghazālī asserts that philosophy can be superfluous to piety, if not detrimental. In the *Deliverance from Error*, al-Ghazālī exclaims that the *falāsifa*'s works are appealing because they have “mingled” religious concepts with their own “falsehood”. The commoners are particularly susceptible to these writings, as they cannot discern between true and false doctrine. For this reason, “it is necessary to abstain from reading their books on account of the danger and deception in them.”¹³⁴ Yet, al-Ghazālī was familiar with their books, but only because he needed the “antidote” to refute their erroneous ways.¹³⁵ In his *Decisive Treatise*, Averroes seems to allude to this aspect of al-Ghazālī's anti-philosophical sentiments when he vaguely criticizes “anyone who prevents someone suited to reflect upon the books of wisdom.” For Averroes, philosophical censorship is tantamount to preventing a person from drinking “cool water,” simply because a few people have previously choked on water. Further, Averroes remarks that some jurists have lost faith while pursuing their studies, yet we do not fault jurisprudence in this instance.¹³⁶ But, to be fair to al-Ghazālī, it is not only in view of religious devotion that he opposes philosophical practice. In fact, his opposition to Aristotelian and Avicennian philosophy is strongly animated by his own philosophical formulations, which undercut their understanding of causation. Though there is no shortage of strong and condemnatory polemic against Muslim Aristotelians in his writing, his critique of the natural sciences does not originate from religiously charged motivations.

¹³⁴ Al-Ghazālī, “Deliverance from Error,” 42.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 43.

¹³⁶ Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*, 7.

This chapter will explore the epistemic concerns, which, in my view, inform al-Ghazālī's critique of the natural sciences. As noted by Griffel, it is not the entirety of natural sciences that al-Ghazālī deems erroneous, but the "necessitarianism" propagated by the *falāsifa*, most notably Avicenna.¹³⁷ In brief, the term necessitarianism refers to cosmologies which regard the phenomenal world as being dictated by a set of immutable natural laws and principles. Since no phenomenon, within this orderly universe occurs randomly or spontaneously, an unknown occurrence is no miracle from the necessitarianism view, but rather something that has yet to be understood by the intellect.¹³⁸ All entities and occurrences in this world are interconnected through causality. To understand the essence of an entity, one must examine its position and purpose within the general gradation of cause and effect. While al-Ghazālī does not altogether discredit natural science, he does delimit its scope and purpose. Al-Ghazālī suggests that we infer a supposed relationship between a cause and its effect through habitual observation of their conjunction. This is to say that we assume an unbreakable (or intrinsic) relationship between the two due their perceived proximity within the limited scope of our observation. For example, we tend to observe death immediately after decapitation. Hence, we assume that death is caused by decapitation and characterize this relationship as one between a cause and its effect.¹³⁹

There are two major premises which influence al-Ghazālī's radical skepticism toward the causal sciences, natural philosophy, and the scope of human reason more generally. The purpose of this chapter is to establish a relationship between these aspects of al-Ghazālī's work and to

¹³⁷ Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 172.

¹³⁸ As a rationalist, Spinoza believes that any occurrence that seems to contradict the "natural course" of nature is deemed miraculous by those who misapprehend nature. Typically, this is the view of the "common people," who believe that the alleged rupture in nature is the work of a "divine." Further, Spinoza mentions that those who believe in miracles warn that a view of a natural course presupposes an "inactive" God. See: Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 81. The counter position is duly expressed by al-Ghazālī. The teaching "that God "acts" out of necessity...means for al-Ghazālī that God does not act at all." See: Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 185.

¹³⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 166.

respond to different, if not conflicting, interpretations to mine. As I will explain below, a number of scholars, such as Binyamin Abrahamov and George Giacaman and Raja Bahlul entertain the possibility that al-Ghazālī rejected the stringent theological interpretation of miracles as unnatural occurrences or even contend that he elevated human reason as the highest faculty to understanding natural occurrences.¹⁴⁰ While recognizing the importance of reason and scientific speculation in al-Ghazālī’s work, this chapter will demonstrate the subordinate role of human understanding in al-Ghazālī’s theological framework. The first premise that leads him toward skepticism is based on a logical thesis, the idea that God’s omnipotence supersedes the possibility of a self-standing and self-referential cosmic order. Al-Ghazālī’s cosmology can be situated within the “occasionalist” tradition. Simply put, occasionalism stipulates that all phenomena occur insofar as God willed them to be as they are, thus discounting the potential for a self-regulated universe whose order is mediated by an interaction between self-standing causes and effects.¹⁴¹ While this is a mainly logical premise – i.e., that immutable laws are precluded by an omnipotent God who can reverse them, it is not without its skeptical implications. The occasionalist notion that the

¹⁴⁰ The first view is expressed in one of Abrahamov’s publications on this topic. Building on Strauss’ line that medieval thinkers feared persecution, Abrahamov surmises that al-Ghazālī intentionally used the theological term *sunna*, which typically means “customary procedure,” in an esoteric philosophical sense. In his peculiar use, the term is intended as a substitute for ‘*āda*, which denotes nature for the *falāsifa*. This philosophical shift mostly occurs in al-Ghazālī’s work *Revival of the Religious Sciences (Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn)*. This text is written much after the *Incoherence*, where al-Ghazālī expressed views that were more in line with *Ash‘arī* occasionalism. Later, I will draw on evidence from the *Revival* to demonstrate that al-Ghazālī remained faithful to his previous theological thinking contra the *falāsifa* and other rationalist groups. See: Binyamin Abrahamov, “Al-Ghazālī’s Theory of Causality,” *Studia Islamica*, no. 67 (1988): 94. In another article, Abrahamov argues that prophetic knowledge of God is based on syllogism, and this is a type of knowledge that al-Ghazālī believed was incomprehensible to the common folk. Hence, he developed a subtle differentiation between piety-based knowledge, which was intended for commoners and a philosophical kind that only a select few among the sages could enjoy. See: “Al-Ghazālī’s Supreme Way to Know God,” *Studia Islamica*, no. 77 (1993): 165-67. Further Giacaman and Bahlul argue that al-Ghazālī “explain[s] miracles in ways that are compatible with belief in causality and necessary connection.” See: George Giacaman and Raja Bahlul, “Ghazali on Miracles and Necessary Connection,” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 9, no. 1 (2000): 41.

¹⁴¹ Carol Barger, “Re-thinking *Necessity (al-Darūra)* in al-Ghazālī’s Understanding of Physical Causation,” *Theology and Science* 5, no. 1 (2007): 22.

universe's rules, movements, structures, and other phenomena, are contingent on God's will precludes its objective apprehensibility.

Whereas a structured universe is accessible to the intellect, a universe that is contingent on God's will is hardly apprehensible in a larger objective sense, not independently at least. We may come to apprehend, or even perhaps observe, conjunctions between existents. But these conjunctions are not necessarily indicative of an intrinsic bond between them. As al-Ghazālī maintains, we observe them in relation to one another solely because God has chosen to bring them together. Ultimately, the oft-cited Muslim thesis regarding God's omnipotence serves, for al-Ghazālī, to problematize causal theses without fully eschewing them, as I will explain below. Coupled with this idea of an indeterminate (and hence unknowable) order, which is contingent on God's will, is our second premise. This premise is more radically and explicitly skeptical than the former in that it commences with an invitation to examine our own intellect. Through this introversion, al-Ghazālī finds that reason is inadequate for apprehending with "certain knowledge". In the *Deliverance*, al-Ghazālī denies that reason and logical formulae can concretize our faith in God, as rational exercise cannot possibly yield knowledge of the divine.¹⁴²

This chapter is divided in two subsections. The first subsection will examine al-Ghazālī's critique of natural philosophy, which is scattered throughout his *Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*) and *Moderation in Faith* (*Al-Iqtisād fī l-i'tiqād*). Second, I will explain al-Ghazālī's doubts concerning the capacity of the senses and the intellect. Then I will discuss al-Ghazālī's preference of ascetic knowledge over noetic knowledge. Al-Ghazālī's *taṣawwuf* (or *Ṣūfī* tradition) is no secret, as he openly credits this path for providing him with the clearest faith in God after two months of epistemic struggles and doubts. It is important to note that, in the

¹⁴² Al-Ghazālī, "Deliverance from Error," 22, 25.

Deliverance, al-Ghazālī claims that he was once a skeptic but is grateful to have been *delivered* from this “malady”.¹⁴³ Given his warnings against doubt and skepticism, I admit that a holistic account of al-Ghazālī’s method as a form of skepticism is dubious. For this reason, it is best to avoid holistic accounts of al-Ghazālī’s theology and to think of his skepticism as an intermittent stage in his thought process. Further, it goes without saying that al-Ghazālī is a prolific writer whose views are multifaceted. At times, these views can be contradictory, as his intellectual interests shifted throughout his life. Despite these challenges, I will explore al-Ghazālī’s recurrent and consistent critique of philosophical knowledge, which coheres throughout his different texts. This coherence involves a radical doubt of human understanding, which is why I argue that major aspects of his critique of natural philosophy are premised on a radical skepticism, one that is resoundingly philosophical in its own right.

Section I – *Elementary principles of al-Ghazālī’s occasionalism*

Some of the most important discussions surrounding al-Ghazālī’s theology are, of course, concerned with the nature of his cosmology. This is no surprise, as a Muslim theologian is almost always expected to comment on the creation of the universe. After all, the Qur’an is replete with passages reminding believers of God’s omnipotence by constantly pointing to His vast creation.¹⁴⁴ Naturally, ideas or systems of thought which undermine or challenge this principle are alarming for the orthodox theologian. As an orthodox theologian as far as canonical hermeneutics are

¹⁴³ Ibid., 25.

¹⁴⁴ The Qur’an (7:54) asks “is it not His to create and to govern?” (*alā lahu al-khalqu wa-l-amru*). God is depicted as the creator of the heavens: “Do they not look at the sky above them?—How We have made it and adorned it, and there are no flaws in it?” (*afalam yanẓirū ilā al-samā’ fawqahum kayfa banaynāhā wa-zayyannāhā wa-mā lahā min furūjin*) (50:6). The Qur’an (27:88) also affirms God’s absolute agency in the making of this world: “(such is) the artistry of Allah, who disposes of all things in perfect order: for he is well acquainted with all that ye do” (*ṣun‘ Allāh alladhī atqan kulla shay’in innahu khabīrun bimā taf‘alūn*).

concerned, al-Ghazālī would naturally be inclined to condemn the philosophers and rationalist theologians wherever their premises (either directly or indirectly) suggest a break from the *a priori* proposition of God’s omnipotence and supremacy over His creation. The *Incoherence* is intended as a critique of such erroneous beliefs, three of which warrant the charge of apostasy. To repeat, these are: (1) the thesis of a pre-eternal world, (2) God’s knowledge of the universals without the particulars, and (3) that souls are eternal, yet bodies will not be resurrected in the hereafter.

Though al-Ghazālī condemns the above philosophical positions as un-Islamic, contemporary Western scholars have identified some striking evidence of philosophical influence on his writing. Despite his education in *kalām*, some of these Western scholars argue (both implicitly and explicitly) that al-Ghazālī breaks from the stringent occasionalism of the *mutakallimūn*. While al-Ghazālī consistently maintains that God is the primary cause, he does not deny the existence of a natural order or claim that this order is constantly overturned by an interventionist deity. If anything, al-Ghazālī envisions a harmonious compromise between the theological view of divine omnipotence and naturalism. Some of these interlocutors, whose works I examine below, are Binyamin Abrahamov, Carol L. Barger, Frank Griffel, Anver J. Emon, Alexander Treiger, and Lenn E. Goodman. It is also important to note that most of these authors closely follow al-Ghazālī’s arguments in the *Incoherence*. We will also examine this text closely for the present section, as this is where we find al-Ghazālī’s most thoroughgoing discussion of causality.

These commentators expressly refute claims that al-Ghazālī articulates an uncompromising occasionalism or even a radical skepticism that denies all credibility to human understanding. For example, Abrahamov recognizes al-Ghazālī’s doctrine of a supreme God who constitutes the “First cause” of the universe and the totality of existents. While all things are contingent on God’s

primacy in time, Abrahamov remarks that this view does not preclude the existence of a universe founded on rational principles. “He [God] created a chain of cause and effect and He keeps it in continuous operation. He does not intervene in the world directly.”¹⁴⁵ This is to say that he does not posteriorly intervene after setting the stage for His initial “spontaneous” creation. The initial act of creation was certainly spontaneous, but the phase onward is rational. According to Abrahamov, this means that al-Ghazālī does not eschew causality, but rather conceives of a “theory of dual causality” in which the “divine” and the “natural” serve as reciprocal components. God’s will is the divine “power” which enables the natural order by endowing each existence with an “inhering...essence.”¹⁴⁶ This dual theory would allow al-Ghazālī to reconcile essential principles from both religion and philosophy. On the one hand, the idea that God is supreme and can never be surpassed by natural laws remains irrefutable. On the other, we may allow for a natural order accessible to our intellect insofar as its design is arranged rationally. Though I do not disagree with the claim that al-Ghazālī upholds a view of an orderly universe, he categorically denies the possibility of inhering essences to anything but God. Further, al-Ghazālī maintains the intellect’s inferences are mainly derived from habitual observations.

Griffel also challenges the view that al-Ghazālī is a radical denier of causality in the “outside world,” that is the world we observe through our senses. Griffel denies that this sort of “skepticism” exists in al-Ghazālī’s work. He suggests that this reading of al-Ghazālī as radical denier of causality “persists” among more contemporary scholars as well. These scholars (principally Marmura) argue that al-Ghazālī absolutely denies Aristotle’s “theory of natural efficient causation,” which is easily refutable by pointing to obvious themes in the theologian’s

¹⁴⁵ Abrahamov, “Al-Ghazālī’s Theory of Causality,” 83.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

work. Griffel's interpretation is undeniably a cautious one, as he warns that al-Ghazālī's critique of "necessitarianism" is no assertion of an uncompromising "occasionalist" stance. Though I stress the occasionalist elements in al-Ghazālī's work, I do not think that my interpretation conflicts with Griffel's. Griffel merely insists that al-Ghazālī does not forsake the view of a predictable order to the universe and the human capacity to apprehend this order, which is a convincing thesis. As I will clarify later, I believe it is perfectly possible to adhere to "skeptical" and/or "occasionalist" tendencies without having to fully deny orderliness and the possibility of accruing knowledge of the various existents. This is not to say that Griffel actively engages in a denial of skeptical or occasionalist tendencies in al-Ghazālī's writing, aside from one very brief comment.¹⁴⁷ However, his emphasis on al-Ghazālī's epistemology in which scientific inquiry plays a positive role is highly suggestive of his aim to bolster an interpretation of al-Ghazālī as a quasi-Aristotelian and -Avicennian philosopher.¹⁴⁸

This is where the separate works of Barger and Emon become invaluable. Barger recognizes that al-Ghazālī envisioned a reconciliation between the Qur'an's occasionalist dictums and the view of a comprehensible universe. Just because al-Ghazālī refutes "logical necessity," this does not preclude an "edifice of human knowledge."¹⁴⁹ Barger notes that al-Ghazālī maintains the belief in regular occurrences, which explains why he makes use of Aristotelian logic. A universe which is orderly lends itself to the scrutiny of our sense perceptions and rational faculty. Yet Barger insists that regular occurrences "do not evidence stability" for al-Ghazālī. This is an important distinction, because al-Ghazālī believed that the regular occurrences we can empirically

¹⁴⁷ By using the term skepticism, I do not think Griffel intended to deny that al-Ghazālī intermittently used a skeptical method to critique the necessitarian thesis. I think Griffel is merely describing nagging cynical attitudes.

¹⁴⁸ Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 147.

¹⁴⁹ Barger, "Re-thinking *Necessity (al-Darūra)* in al-Ghazālī's Understanding of Physical Causation," 28.

observe result from God's grace.¹⁵⁰ More recently, this connection between natural order and God's grace is a theme picked up and elaborated by Emon. He contends that al-Ghazālī does not object to the possibility that God may alter the natural order. Al-Ghazālī belongs to a tradition dubbed which Emon dubs as "Soft Natural Law" – this position seeks a compromise between the notions of divine grace and natural habit. This line of thought presumes that one can "rationally infer substantive norms of the natural world" while stipulating that God can (at any moment) intercede and reorder this nature. Yet, thinkers like al-Ghazālī are confident that this order is predictable insofar as they place their trust in God's grace. Further, Emon makes an important observation. He explains that al-Ghazālī's critique is animated by the theological concern that a stringent belief in nature "precluded God from entering the world to perform miracle)."¹⁵¹ While al-Ghazālī appeals to some form of natural order, al-Ghazālī is also animated by the idea of supernatural occurrences, or miracles.

Before venturing into al-Ghazālī's remarks on causality, I want to make a clarification concerning the role of 'essence' in this discussion. It is hardly possible to defend the notion of *inhering* essence (a concept presupposed in the study of causality) in al-Ghazālī's work. In the science of causality, the view that existents are interlocked in an infinite process of cause and effect rests on an assumption regarding essences. Getting to the essence of an entity can help us understand its function within the gradation of cause and effect. We can make use of al-Ghazālī's example of burning cotton to better appreciate his critique of strict causality. This example is found at the beginning of his seventeenth discussion of the *Incoherence*. Here, we have two existents with presumably distinct properties and, hence, essences: fire and cotton. The reason we infer that

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 33.

¹⁵¹ Anver M. Emon, "Islamic Natural Law Theories," in *Natural Law: A Jewish, Christian and Islamic Trialogue*, ed. Anver M. Emon, Matthew Levering, and David Novak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 184.

fire causes cotton to burn is because of inhering properties within fire (heat) and cotton, which is constituted by a combustible material. Hence, in examining the essence of a thing, we are able to better apprehend the conditions which render it a cause or an effect within a particular causal chain. If we are to follow a causal explanation, we would concede that the presence of fire or heat is a necessity for cotton to catch fire. But this relationship between fire and cotton is merely an observable fact. It does not prove any form of necessary relationship between the two. On this point, al-Ghazālī maintains that if something exists “*with* a thing” this is no proof “that it exists *by*” it.¹⁵²

Al-Ghazālī problematizes this relationship between causes, effects, and the necessary interaction between their essences in order to stress the importance of divine omnipotence. Al-Ghazālī openly states that causal relations are not “necessary”. He further stresses that the existence of one thing does not necessitate the existence of another, nor does the “negation” of something necessitate the existence or non-existence of another. Simply put, an existence does not exist or cease to exist by virtue of another existent or lack thereof. Though al-Ghazālī expands on the example of burning cotton to express his denial of necessary causes, he also lists other examples wherein necessary causes are typically presumed to exist. For example, he proclaims that drinking does not have to lead to satiation, or even more radically, that decapitation does not have to lead to death. Al-Ghazālī exclaims that the “connection between what is habitually believed to be a cause and what is habitually believed to be an effect is not necessary.”¹⁵³ This skeptical hypothesis is expounded in his example of burning cotton. If we assume a causal position, he tells us, the causal entity responsible for the burning of cotton would be fire. However, the process of burning on the part of fire is consequential to the properties intrinsic to fire, rather than

¹⁵² Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 167.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 166.

an agential or volitional act on the part of fire. Fire does not will the act of burning, which means that it does not actively choose to burn. For al-Ghazālī, given that fire lacks agency, it cannot be said to have caused burning. At first glance, it seems as though al-Ghazālī is conveying the following interpretation: God is the sole cause of all things; He has the power and choice to endow fire with the properties that make combustion possible.¹⁵⁴ But does al-Ghazālī really mean to doubt causal relations?

Al-Ghazālī's example of cotton is undoubtedly aimed at the necessitarian view of causality, but there is no striking evidence that it is raised in opposition to causality *tout court*. Perhaps al-Ghazālī simply means to tell us that God enables the conditions for causal connections, as Abrahamov concludes. After all, he tells us that God endows fire with the properties to burn while endowing cotton with the properties which make it receptive to being burned. What is clear is that al-Ghazālī's forceful critique is primarily aimed at the necessitarian thesis and the view of an inhering essence. In a subsequent passage, for example, he expressly denies that it is possible for humans to confirm an inhering essence in any being. Yet, he still comes short of denying causality *tout court*. Al-Ghazālī's wording is carefully aimed at the necessitarian thesis, as evidenced in the following skeptical question he poses to readers: what proof do we have that fire is indeed causing cotton to burn when we are simply assuming based on an "observation" of the process of burning? While observation allows us to see that burning occurs when fire and cotton come together, this perceived conjunctive relationship does not unveil any intrinsic relationship between the two existents. Al-Ghazālī is adamant to make a categorical distinction between observable conjunctions and necessary causalities.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 166-67.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 167.

Al-Ghazālī's link between empirical observation (or habit) and presumption of causality has led many commentators to compare him with David Hume. More specifically, these comparisons focus on the skepticism contained in the *Incoherence*.¹⁵⁶ Though most of these expositions tend to be brief in nature, they warrant our attention. We have to ask ourselves how a medieval theologian with occasionalist tendencies compares with a modern skeptical empiricist. Well, the answer lies in al-Ghazālī's own self-styled empiricism. Carol Bargerón believes al-Ghazālī advances a theory of "no necessary connection" which anticipates David Hume's empirical skepticism.¹⁵⁷ Citing the *Incoherence*, Stephen Riker laments the fact that "many scholars of modern philosophy are unaware that some of the most momentous philosophical issues to be dealt with in the modern period had already been discussed long before."¹⁵⁸ Riker, of course, is referring to the rejection of necessary causes, which is an idea typically attributed to Hume. Though both staunchly refute necessitarianism by way of skepticism, some commentators who approve of this comparison also underline crucial differences. According to Riker, al-Ghazālī's skepticism was theologically motivated, aiming to "preserve God's omnipotence particularly in reference to the ability to perform miracles."¹⁵⁹ Meanwhile, Hume's skepticism also extends to the occasionalist line on miracles.¹⁶⁰ Riker seems to suggest that al-Ghazālī was only partly skeptical.

I will now weigh in on this comparison to examine the extent of al-Ghazālī's skepticism. When we say that both thinkers are skeptics of sorts, we are primarily talking about their rejection of necessary causes by way of an empirical method. According to David Hume, the inference of

¹⁵⁶ Cemil Akdoğan, "Ghazālī, Descartes, and Hume: The Genealogy of Some Philosophical Ideas," *Islamic Studies* 42, no. 3 (2003); Bargerón, "Re-thinking Necessity (*al-Darūra*) in al-Ghazālī's Understanding of Physical Causation."; Taneli Kukkonen, "Al-Ghazālī's Skepticism Revisited," in *Rethinking the History of Skepticism: the Missing Medieval Background*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund (2009); Stephen Riker, "Al-Ghazali on Necessary Causality in *The Incoherence Of The Philosophers*," *The Monist* 79, no. 3 (1996).

¹⁵⁷ Bargerón, "Re-thinking Necessity (*al-Darūra*) in al-Ghazālī's Understanding of Physical Causation," 22.

¹⁵⁸ Riker, "Al-Ghazali on Necessary Causality in *The Incoherence Of The Philosophers*," 315.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 322.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 322-23.

necessity is, like al-Ghazālī, equally brought back to the question of observation. The observation of a “conjunction” between objects cannot duly provide us with definitive proof that there is indeed an intrinsic connection between both objects. Hume asserts that there is no possible way to “perceive the tie” between a cause and its effect.¹⁶¹ Without recurring patterns between two objects, our minds would never imagine causal relations in the first place. In Ghazālīan fashion, Hume asserts that habitual observation leads to the presumption of causality and necessity.¹⁶² But does Hume reject the idea of inhering causes? From the Humean position, this question is entirely futile, because the object perceived is inextricable from the mind. The mind appropriates external phenomena, after which it perceives causal qualities, like necessity or power.¹⁶³ “Upon the whole, necessity is something, that exists in the mind, not in objects.”¹⁶⁴ For Hume, the cause is merely the object which is temporally precedent to another when the two appear within a “contiguous” relationship.¹⁶⁵ Of course, this contiguous relationship is not necessary. It is purely a matter of proximity between objects in which one is temporally precedent to the other. When the mind perceives “physical necessity” between these objects, it is because the conjunction is recurrently observed.¹⁶⁶

It is on the point of habitual observation that al-Ghazālī and Hume converge remarkably on the question of necessity. Earlier, we saw how al-Ghazālī begins the refutation of necessitarianism with a simple statement about habitual observation. Like Hume, he tells us that recurring events compel perception of causal relations. Does he reject the possibility of inhering causal qualities between objects as forcefully as Hume? We already saw that, for Griffel and other

¹⁶¹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 213.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 215.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 216.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 220-21.

interpreters, he does not refute (at least not expressly) the Avicennian thesis on secondary causes. But I argued that al-Ghazālī's position nevertheless precludes any sense of inhering causality and tends toward occasionalism, simply because there is always the possibility that God may overturn the nature of things. And it is perhaps on this theistic point that al-Ghazālī and Hume begin to diverge. Interestingly, Hume disapprovingly refers to a theistic movement which confers every seemingly natural occurrence to a single source, a single deity. It is by way of "exertion of omnipotence" that this deity exerts its power over all occurrences,¹⁶⁷ a position which recalls al-Ghazālī's. Now, Hume would likely argue that these seemingly occasionalist theists and their necessitarian counterparts are equally errant. Take, for example, the causal quality of "power which unites causes and effects." The theist would attribute this power to God while the naturalist would state that it is inhering to objects.¹⁶⁸ Either way, power, like necessity, is an "internal impression of the mind."¹⁶⁹ Our thoughts are presumed to be generated by a mental will, and it is to this that we owe the idea of "power" or "force". After the mind discovers this power animating our internal thoughts, it abstracts power as a category to understand occurrences in external phenomena. In brief, the sequences of events in our epistemic state are used to understand the world of external phenomena.¹⁷⁰

According to Taneli Kukkonen, this form of "philosophical psychology", which we find in Hume, is absent in al-Ghazālī's writing. Like Riker, Kukkonen maintains that al-Ghazālī's skepticism is motivated by a theistic thesis. For al-Ghazālī, it is not human nature or the constitution of the mind which determines human cognition. And it is not through a sober understanding of human understanding that we correct our beliefs about causality but through the

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 209.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 216.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 215.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 216.

theistic vision that God controls causal relations. Further, it is God who plants the cognition of causal relations in our mind. (I will expand on this argument in detail below).¹⁷¹ On these grounds, Kukkonen concludes that al-Ghazālī was simply reaffirming the *Ash‘arī* thesis regarding God’s omnipotence over causal relations and our cognitive perception. “Every piece of knowledge, so called, is a contingent conjunction of a belief, implanted in us by God, with how things are (such states of affairs being likewise contingent).”¹⁷² As we will see below, Kukkonen is right to say that al-Ghazālī believes God produces our cognitive state. But he does understate the importance that al-Ghazālī places on philosophical psychology.

Certainly, Kukkonen is right to say that al-Ghazālī’s skepticism is largely motivated by an aim “to instil in us a firm faith in God, who is a free agent but benevolent regardless.”¹⁷³ This is al-Ghazālī’s aim, but he nevertheless arrives at this theistic position partly through a skepticism aimed at the limits of human understanding. In his *Moderation in Belief*, al-Ghazālī shows significant awareness of questions raised in philosophical psychology. In one instance, al-Ghazālī states that the “estimative faculty” produces broad generalizations, which obscure perception of differences between particular instances. The mind, he claims, errs through its natural propensity for generalizations, which is a cognitive state that we hardly seem to have mastery over.¹⁷⁴ This is strikingly similar to Hume’s position that reason “is nothing but a wonderful and unintelligible instinct in our souls, which carries us along a certain train of ideas, and endows them with particular qualities.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷¹ Kukkonen, “Al-Ghazālī’s Skepticism Revisited,” 42-43.

¹⁷² Ibid., 43.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*, 163-65.

¹⁷⁵ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 228.

So, al-Ghazālī's anti-necessitarian critique is not uniquely based on his view of divine omnipotence – that is, that God is the Sole creator of the universe. Al-Ghazālī suspects that human understanding is incapable of attaining an exhaustive grasp of causal relations and God's creations. In other words, al-Ghazālī is also, like Hume, expressing a skeptical account of human understanding. Say you find a man who has been blindfolded all his life, and (after living all his life in blindness) you finally grant his sight exposure to the external world during daytime. Let us also assume, al-Ghazālī tells us, that this man is unaware of the difference between day and night. When the cover is removed from his eyes and the man sets his eyes on varying shapes and forms and colours, he would initially assume that the cause of his perception is his eyesight. It is only when night befalls him that this man will come to know that the cause of his perception is the lighting from the sun.¹⁷⁶

This analogy of the blindfolded man disrupts the view of absolute proof by raising the point that there is always this nagging possibility that our understanding is hampered by its own shortsightedness. Let us take this occasion to stretch the use of al-Ghazālī's analogy further and pose the following question. If our knowledge of things is hampered by our perceptive faculties, how can we trust our own judgement? Add to this the truth that God is capable of rearranging natural order. In this case, how can we be certain of daily truths we take for granted? Al-Ghazālī is well aware that his critique of causality, which is animated by the complimentary propositions that God is omnipotent and human understanding is shortsighted, can be very troubling to some. Al-Ghazālī seeks to assuage fears that the occasionalist interpretation presupposes an arbitrary world, where all things are unpredictable. In so doing, his response lends itself to a larger theological theme concerning the scope of human epistemology and understanding: how do we

¹⁷⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 167-68.

understand the world we live in and the ethical and moral responsibilities expected of us when this very world is governed entirely by a divine will? I will expand on this theodical question as well as its normative implications regarding our ethical responsibilities in the following chapter. But, for now, let us examine the way in which al-Ghazālī addresses concerns regarding unpredictability and chaos of a nature governed by divine will.

As mentioned above, one popular interpretation is that al-Ghazālī concedes some points to the philosophers, a theme I problematize below. This is to say that, though al-Ghazālī disagrees with their method and reliance on reason, this refutation does not extend to their conclusions. While al-Ghazālī stresses that there is only one efficient cause, that being God, he nevertheless insists on the course of secondary causes. This position, which is supposedly shared with Avicenna, assumes a causal relationship between a chain of beings, all the while recognizing that all beings emanate from God. Though God is the sole Creator of the universe, this created world functions in an orderly, rational manner. And it is always possible for us to understand the course of events through rational investigation of the world and its causes. Conversely, an uncompromising occasionalist thesis would insist on divine intercession in every conceivable occurrence. In this instance, God is the unassisted regulator of all events. Al-Ghazālī is aware that the occasionalist line can be unsettling, as it entices doubt of even the simplest events. If there is no rational order to the universe, then everything is possible. Why even aim to understand the course of an event or the relationship between a cause and its effect when everything is possibly reversible? Al-Ghazālī invites us to think of a boy who is left at home. What if we return to find the boy transformed into a dog?¹⁷⁷ In such a world, knowledge is always uncertain, as laws are not invariable. There is the risk that we would all become epistemic nihilists.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 170.

With the example of the young boy turning into a dog, al-Ghazālī aims to relieve his readers of this fear that divine omnipotence is unpredictable. In this response, he seems to be toning down the occasionalist thesis. He describes a difference between the “possible” and the “necessary”.¹⁷⁸ This is to say that, while God could turn a boy into a dog, He has chosen not to. The current world we live in is the one God has chosen to enact and maintain. Though it is perfectly possible for Him to create an alternative world, this alternative world only exists in *possibility*. God has chosen not to enact it, and we ought to remain confident that the natural course of things will continue unabated (except for the occasional miracle, a point discussed below). This passage can perhaps suggest al-Ghazālī’s break from *Ash‘arī* occasionalism. But is al-Ghazali strictly affirming that the current world we live in follows stringent secondary causes? There is no evidence to suggest his denial of this thesis, certainly not expressly. But his emphasis is not with a self-standing rational order (one that we come to understand through reason) but rather our subjective state and the way we come to construe knowledge of this world.

Majid Fakhry makes a similar observation in his commentary on the *Incoherence*. For al-Ghazālī, necessity is limited to the sphere of sound “logical relations”.¹⁷⁹ For example, it is impossible to conceive of someone as being present in two different locales at the same time. Or it is impossible for an object to be both black and white, as one colour necessitates the negation of the other. But whatever is conceivable to the mind is *possible*. Since we may conceive a world with alternative contingent relations, it is within God’s capacity to enact such a world (even if He has not done so). Consequently, we cannot apply the rules of logical relations (e.g. blackness and whiteness being mutually exclusive) to the exterior world. “Outside this sphere of purely logical

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Majid Fakhry, *Islamic Occasionalism and its critique by Averroes and Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2008), 60.

relations necessity has absolutely no scope.”¹⁸⁰ Fakhry goes as far as to suggest that every truth that is accrued regarding the exterior world (that is, the world outside of our understanding) is of a “psychological” nature. Every form of contingency is conditional on observation, or experience. Hence, al-Ghazālī’s empiricism is remarkably Humean *avant la lettre*. In this sense, the only thing that experience can reveal is that the effect is what follows the cause. But the mere observation of a contingency does not confirm a strict causal relation.¹⁸¹ Based on the above reading of the *Incoherence*, there is no doubt that al-Ghazālī maintains a difference between observation of habit and proof of causality in the strict sense. But does Fakhry go too far in suggesting that knowledge of the exterior world is strictly subjective in al-Ghazālī’s view?

Frank Griffel casts doubt on the view that al-Ghazālī promotes some kind of psychology of “subjectivism” or “epistemological relativism”. He contends that there is enough evidence to maintain that al-Ghazālī believes in a congruence between human understanding and the outside world. Truth, therefore, is the “correspondence” between our knowledge and the known outside world.¹⁸² If we consider al-Ghazālī’s remarks on habit, relativism is perhaps too strong a word to paint his epistemology. Al-Ghazālī does not express the view that every possible interpretation of the world holds its own truth for its bearer. Al-Ghazālī is no agnostic. His assertion that contingencies are merely observed (and not known beyond doubt) does not stem from an unresolved skepticism of the likes of Hume. On the contrary, I will argue below that al-Ghazālī’s skepticism (which is aimed strictly at causality) toward contingencies rests on the following two assertions: (1) that all beings are created by God and (2) that the knowledge we have is bestowed by God.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 61.

¹⁸² Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology*, 161.

Though it is possible to envision an alternative world where humans spontaneously turn into animals, we can expect that this will not occur only because of much habitual observation on our parts. We see the conjunction between events, and we assume a regular relationship between these over times. Here, al-Ghazālī is denying the logic of necessitarianism. Events do not occur because of innate natures in themselves. Rather, we build an expectation that something will or will not occur based on prior experience, which is unmistakably a subjective one. It is habit (and not the discovery of innate laws) that “fixes unshakably in our minds the belief in their occurrence according to past habit.”¹⁸³ This is but one point to his response. Not only is it important to recognize the role of subjective experience but also its source. This subjective understanding, which allows us to identify recurring patterns, is bestowed by God. Though God could always decide to reconfigure reality, He typically defers from such actions. Consequently, it is *only* by God’s grace that we know that the world we inhabit is not going to be radically overturned. Further, not only does God choose not to commit to an alternative world, but He also instills in us the knowledge that He will remain committed to the world we live in.¹⁸⁴ Al-Ghazālī’s remarks here are strikingly occasionalist, though not necessarily in the way we would initially expect. While there is room to engage in scientific investigation, because conjunctions are habitually observed, He expressly defends God’s omnipotence in all events. The world may follow a habitual course, but this is not due to any inhering rational rules. And not only is it the case that what we observe is strictly owed to God’s grace, but even the knowledge we accrue is reflective of His ever-reaching powers. Through his grace, God relieves us of this endless cycle of doubt by instilling in us the knowledge that He will remain consistent.

¹⁸³ Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 170.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

Despite the strong emphasis on the habitual course of things, al-Ghazālī also adheres to notion of miracles. On this point, he strongly condemns a group among the *falāsifa* who deny all miracles. A true believer must believe in the truth of miracles. To deny the possibility of miracles is to assume that God’s hands are tied. Now, al-Ghazālī’s treatment of miracles is a peculiar one, because it is explained through the language of causality. For this reason, his account seems to lend itself to rational interpretations. Ironically, it is in his discussion of miracles that al-Ghazālī seems to tone down the occasionalist lens. In fact, the following segment of his *seventeenth discussion* is picked up by al-Ghazālī scholars who defend a rationalist interpretation of his theology. I will get to these rationalist interpretations shortly. But first, let us examine al-Ghazālī’s treatment of miracles.

There are two notable arguments that typically captivate al-Ghazālī scholars. First, al-Ghazālī discusses the Qur’anic story of Abraham’s casting into the fire. The Qur’an recounts the story of Abraham who was condemned to death by fire for destroying his community’s idols. When placed in the fire, it is said that God commanded the fire (21:69): “O Fire! be thou cool, and (a means of) safety for Abraham!” Against all expectations, Abraham did not burn when placed in the fire. Al-Ghazālī engages with the doubtful *falāsifa* by considering rational explanations. It is highly possible, he asserts, that Abraham survived the fire because of radical transformations to either the “quality” in the fire or in Abraham’s body.¹⁸⁵ In the first case, it is perfectly possible that God or an angel would have removed the quality of heat from the fire, thus rendering the fire obsolete. But it is also possible that Abraham’s body could have been coated with talc, thus making his body resistant to heat. Al-Ghazālī’s remarks on Abraham’s failed burning suggest that these qualities have inhering effects on bodies they come in contact with. The fact that there is something

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

inhering in these qualities suggests that there is an immutable course of nature that even God cannot bend.

Al-Ghazālī also evaluates the miracle of Moses’s staff, which God had transformed into a snake. In the habitual world, we would be deeply unsettled if an inanimate object were to suddenly turn into a sentient creature. But al-Ghazālī argues that this process might not be unnatural – as in, it might not be a break from natural occurrences. But he simply proposes we consider this miraculous occurrence in view of larger natural cycles. We already know that it is perfectly natural for earth to yield vegetation. When plants are consumed by animals, the consumed plants generate into blood which further generates into sperm. When sperm makes its way into a womb, it transforms into a live animal. The point that arises here is that God could have simply accelerated this abovementioned process of vegetation when transforming the staff into snake. I must admit that, after examining al-Ghazālī’s commentary on Moses’s staff, we come across a possibly rationalist interpretation of miracles. From this passage, it is clear that al-Ghazālī invites the doubtful philosophers to consider this cycle in order to stress that a naturalist thesis can be perfectly aligned with the Islamic conception of miracles. Perhaps, al-Ghazālī’s remarks on the changing of the staff and his general propositions about miracles suggests some conformity to the philosophical position.

George Giacaman and Raja Bahlul rightly conclude that al-Ghazālī’s account of miracles does not immediately lend itself to occasionalist thinking. If anything, the miracle as understood by al-Ghazālī can be confined to the “parameters” of a rational order.¹⁸⁶ Simply put, al-Ghazālī could have believed that, during the miraculous state, God had merely “accelerated” an ongoing process which would have eventually culminated into the same result, albeit within a more gradual

¹⁸⁶ Giacaman and Bahlul, “Ghazali on Miracles and Necessary Connection,” 48.

timeframe. How does this then distinguish God from a “scientist or an engineer [who are] able to produce extraordinary effects by appropriate use of laws”?¹⁸⁷ Giacaman and Bahlul point to al-Ghazālī’s example of the transformation of Moses’ staff into serpent as possibly hinting at a ‘God as engineer’ thesis.

Similarly, Lenn E. Goodman observes that al-Ghazālī does not regard a miracle as some fundamental breach of nature. Al-Ghazālī’s explanation conforms to the natural course of nature, except this process is merely accelerated. In other words, Goodman observes a difference between a clear-cut transgression of nature and an unexpected disturbance. It is supposedly clear, however, that al-Ghazālī does not regard the changing of the staff as something that is tantamount to a rupture from nature.¹⁸⁸ So, in what sense does al-Ghazālī break from the philosophers if he seems to adhere to a notion of secondary efficient causes? According to Goodman, al-Ghazālī identifies God as the sole creator of the universe, a point mentioned above. While the universe functions through a habitual course, the terms of this course are initially dictated by God. “Thus we have a causal nexus in empirically observed relations but not an intrinsically necessary one but rather a connection based on God’s ordering of events.”¹⁸⁹

While, at first glance, the view of a divine plan for the universe seems to align with that of the *Ashā’ira*, Goodman remarks that al-Ghazālī’s thesis is not an occasionalist one. First, al-Ghazālī eschews any theological reasoning in these passages. But, more importantly, al-Ghazālī’s belief in a *nexus* suggests a move away from *Ash’arī* occasionalism, which typically stresses God’s involvement in all temporal affairs. If anything, we should be reading him as a quasi-naturalist thinker since his language is remarkably causal. The major point of divergence between al-Ghazālī

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 46.

¹⁸⁸ Lenn E. Goodman, “Did Al-Ghazālī Deny Causality?,” *Studia islamica* 47 (1978): 113.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 87.

and his philosophical opponents is that he does not treat this *nexus* as necessary. Simply put, al-Ghazālī maintains that there is a *nexus*, but that this nexus is not upheld through inhering “physical natures”, a view commonly held by Aristotelians.¹⁹⁰ Goodman seems to think that there is no reason to ask whether al-Ghazālī’s theology is compatible with naturalism. It is perhaps better to inquire whether it is compatible with the occasionalism of the orthodox theologians.¹⁹¹ The more we dig into *Incoherence*, the more evidence we find to suggest that al-Ghazālī aligns himself with the philosophers on key points. As mentioned above, al-Ghazālī simply rejects the theory that the natural course is necessary in itself, yet the nexus remains. And, while he thinks that God is capable of creating alternative worlds, this by no means amounts to the position that we should expect spontaneous breaks in nature. Al-Ghazālī’s position is merely that nothing that is impossible is outside of God’s capability.¹⁹²

Griffel expands on this aspect of Goodman’s argument. As mentioned above, al-Ghazālī differentiates between possibility and necessity. Griffel explains that, according to al-Ghazālī, anything that is mentally conceivable or imaginable is within God’s capacity to enact. This is to say that, since we can imagine cotton that is not combusted by fire, it is within God’s capacity to enact such an event. It is also possible to enact decapitation without death, or to create humans who subsist without need for food. “God, however, did not choose to create such an alternative possible world. He chose to create this world among alternatives.”¹⁹³ According to Griffel, al-Ghazālī is evidently only opposed to Avicenna and the Islamic philosophers on the ground of their necessitarianism. But he does not reject their view of secondary causality; he merely redefines it. Though God does not break this habitual course, the connection between objects is one that is

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 114.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 87-88.

¹⁹² Ibid., 114.

¹⁹³ Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 172.

always “contingent”.¹⁹⁴ That being said, how aligned is al-Ghazālī with the *falāsifa* if he rejects their fundamental necessitarian position?

This question brings us back to the point above, that al-Ghazālī’s critique of the *falāsifa* is supposedly not grounded on theological discourse. Yet, al-Ghazālī’s occasional use of philosophical discourse does not evidence any stringent adherence to causal philosophy. We have to remember that al-Ghazālī’s stated purpose in the *Incoherence* is to respond to the *falāsifa* by appealing to universal logical grounds¹⁹⁵. When al-Ghazālī examines the possibility of a causal nexus, there is no clear sense that he is entirely convinced by the causal view. He merely contends that the existence of causality does not preclude the possibility of miracles, which are avidly rejected by some of the *falāsifa*. Al-Ghazālī merely explains that that which we identify as a miracle might not necessarily imply a violation of nature. However, he does not assert that the miracle itself is certainly an acceleration of natural processes but only that this can be one possible explanation. It is only fitting that al-Ghazālī would use some aspects of philosophical reasoning to undermine the *falāsifa*’s rejection of miracles.

To repeat, Goodman and Griffel rightly observe that al-Ghazālī’s remarks on miracles are not presented through an occasionalist lens. However, I would stress that the lack of occasionalism in the passages on miracles hardly prove that al-Ghazālī adopted the *falāsifa*’s logic simply because he touted their lines, as Goodman argues. As mentioned above, al-Ghazālī’s *Incoherence* aims to trouble some of the *falāsifa*’s conclusions by way of their own logic. But if we look elsewhere in the *Incoherence*, al-Ghazālī’s occasionalism is much more visible.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 173.

¹⁹⁵ He raises the following concern in the *Fourth introduction* to his *Incoherence*. The *falāsifa* assume that the art of logic is uniquely philosophical. Al-Ghazālī objects to this point, stating that the art of logic is not unique to philosophy. See: *ibid.*, 9.

In fact, al-Ghazālī adopts a staunchly occasionalist principle in the twentieth (and final) *discussion* of the *Incoherence*, one that is consistent with Qur’anic revelation. Al-Ghazālī acknowledges that the *falāsifa*’s doctrine of resurrection is not entirely erroneous. (We will examine this in more detail in the final chapter of this dissertation.) In brief, the *falāsifa* maintain that, upon death, the soul is severed from the body. It follows that all forms of reward and punishment in the afterlife are of a noncorporeal essence, as the soul is released from its shell. As for the Qur’anic passages describing hellfire, the *falāsifa* contend that these are merely metaphorical passages, intended to deter the impious through figurative language. It is impossible for the liberated (now incorporeal) soul to experience corporeal sensations as it once did. Al-Ghazālī acknowledges that the *falāsifa* make valid points, including that the soul is severed from the body or that there are pleasures beyond our imagination, given that they are noncorporeal. Yet, he insists that knowledge of these things is not confirmed by philosophy or logic, but revelation. “But we know this through religious law, since it has conveyed [that there is] resurrection.”¹⁹⁶ In this instance, al-Ghazālī’s belief in resurrection is confirmed by revelation, as opposed to apodictic proof.

Where the philosophers are wrong, however, is on the issue of bodily resurrection, which they vehemently deny, even though it is vividly described in the Qur’an. They argue that the body cannot be resurrected to its original form. To explain their argument, al-Ghazālī returns to theme of the natural cycle. Some *falāsifa* would use the case of nature to deny the idea of bodily resurrection based on the following grounds. No corporeal entity is entirely self-sufficient; we experience bodily growth by relying on a robust alimentary cycle. The animals we eat feed off vegetation, which grows from the soil. This soil, in turn, becomes more fertile as it amasses

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 213-14.

decomposing corpses. If we follow this long cycle of events, we conclude that each individual body contains elements of other decomposed sentient beings (animals and the human components, which contributed to fertile lands.) These *falāsifa* posit that it is farfetched to imagine that all of these corporeal entities would be resurrected in their pure form when their physical composition is interwoven.¹⁹⁷

Al-Ghazālī also spells another causal argument among the *falāsifa*. They argue that iron cannot be turned into a turban, except if iron is decomposed down to very basic particles, which are then recomposed into cotton, which would then be used to manufacture the turban.¹⁹⁸ The point is that divine power cannot just say “Be” to some object, only to spontaneously generate it into something unrelated. This critique applies to the theory of resurrection. Basically, the *falāsifa* (according to al-Ghazālī’s account) deny that divine power can overturn natural cycles by suddenly turning the soil into a living human. There is a whole process of generation that cannot be discounted. The human is conceived after a sperm, which is generated from blood, makes its way into the womb. This womb gradually develops into a complete human, with organs, veins, bones, and other bodily components. As mentioned above, this generation (which we attribute to the sperm entering the womb) cannot happen without nourishment. In this cycle of generation, we also have to account for the animals we eat, which eat plants. How can the soil alone simply yield a living human being when inception depends on this intricate set of causes?¹⁹⁹

To these objections, al-Ghazālī responds with two possible explanations. The first line has clear occasionalist overtones. However, in the second response, al-Ghazālī touts a moderate line, one that (yet again) appeals to the *falāsifa*’s belief in secondary causes. He concedes that, perhaps,

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 217-18.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 220.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 221.

God could resurrect our bodies by working through secondary causes. However, some are inclined to skepticism, because they have yet to discover the possible causes that would make resurrection possible. Ignorance of causes should not be our reason to negate a given occurrence. For example, if one were unaware of the force of magnets, they would think that a moving piece of metal is pulled by a hidden string. Hence, it is important to consider the possibility of an unknown causes. It is interesting to note that the example of the magnet is undeniably Avicennian. Avicenna uses this analogy (ignorance of magnetic properties) to shed light on the ignorance of people who deny the existence of inhering “power” (*qudra*) in objects, principally relating to “motions or actions.” The context in which Avicenna uses the example of the magnet is one that al-Ghazālī would undeniably reject. In this instance, Avicenna maintains that it is possible for motions or actions deriving from an object itself to “hold to a single course from which they do not deviate.”²⁰⁰ Later, Avicenna maintains that these bodies are moved by inhering powers “that are principles of their motions and actions.”²⁰¹ Of course, al-Ghazālī categorically denies the idea that any power or quality is inhering to an existent. So, it cannot be that, in his case, the magnet example serves as assertion that the deniers of miracles are unaware of inhering motions or actions that are part of a miraculous event. Al-Ghazālī simply means to point out that it is *possible* that God could be acting within a consistently natural framework. But God could also reverse this framework, if we consider al-Ghazālī’s first account of miracles. In the first account, al-Ghazālī reminds his reader that God need not rely on intermediary causes, which ought to never be regarded as “necessary”. He may, in this sense, create an alternative universe, defined by different habitual courses.²⁰² In fact, at the closing of the book, al-Ghazālī insists that the afterlife in paradise will be defined by “a new order”

²⁰⁰ Avicenna, *The Physics of The Healing - Books I & II*, trans. Jon McGinnis (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2009), 38.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁰² Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 222.

that is peculiar to us. God has the power, he says, to get rid of all things but Himself.²⁰³ In this case, the afterlife ought to be treated as the greatest hallmark of God's occasionalist capacities. Here, we come across a clear deviation from the Avicennian position that some motions can persist eternally "only as a result of powers in them."²⁰⁴ All things face possible reversal.

Occasionalism in al-Ghazālī's anti-Mu'tazilī critique

In the previous section, we examined some of al-Ghazālī's crucial disagreements with the *falāsifa* on key theological points as presented in the *Incoherence*. Despite its condemnatory tone, some al-Ghazālī scholars observe that the *Incoherence* makes some key concessions to the *falāsifa*. The belief in secondary causes is one of these supposed concessions. This belief is so strikingly philosophical that it calls into question the scope of al-Ghazālī's occasionalism in the *Incoherence*, even though the theologian himself begins the seventeenth discussion with an *Ash'arī* position. This is the statement that causes are merely empirically observed. I argued that al-Ghazālī's remarks on secondary causes appear hypothetical, and that there is no clear indication that he held any certain belief in secondary causes. Elsewhere, however, al-Ghazālī's tone is more boldly occasionalist and *Ash'arī* in his theological critiques. We now turn to his *Moderation in Belief* to expand our grasp of al-Ghazālī's general *Ash'arī* objections. This text was written shortly after the *Incoherence*, and it contains some key theological parallels and concerns to its predecessor – the most important being the defence of divine omnipotence against the view of philosophical naturalism. However, there are some marginal, albeit important, differences I should mention here. The *Moderation* is more assertive in its occasionalist tone, especially with how it rejects the notion of inhering natures. Moreover, instead of speaking to the *falāsifa*, the *Moderation* is aimed at the beliefs of the *Mu'tazila* theologians, whose key positions will be explained below. Finally, this

²⁰³ Ibid., 225.

²⁰⁴ Avicenna, *The Physics of The Healing* - Books I & II, 39.

text does not merely focus on metaphysics and causality. The *Moderation* also deals with questions regarding divine justice and theodicy more generally.

Despite this last difference, the underlying concern remains very similar in both texts, if not the same. In both texts, al-Ghazālī defends the view of divine omnipotence against philosophical or metaphysical claims that, by some logical consequence, he thinks amount to the confinement of God’s powers. While al-Ghazālī charges philosophers with delimiting God’s powers by subjecting Him to a natural order, he also accuses the *Mu‘tazila* of delimiting God’s powers to a stringent notion of divine justice. In both charges, the philosophers and the theologian rationalists are equally condemned for assuming that God is subject to inhering universal principles. Now, let us turn to al-Ghazālī’s critique of the *Mu‘tazila*’s notion of divine justice, which is mainly contained in the *Moderation*’s third treatise.

In the First Proposition, al-Ghazālī responds to a faction of *Mu‘tazila* who think that God is obligated to create humans and to impose obligations on them. But this assumption presumes that God’s creation of humanity is “obligatory”, a view al-Ghazālī rejects.²⁰⁵ This concept of the obligatory might resonate with the conception of *necessity* discussed earlier, as both are cognate translations of the Arabic word *wājib*. In both instances, there is the assumption that God is bound by something. However, the translation of the *Moderation* also differentiates between the two terms. In one case, al-Ghazālī uses the term *wājib* (which the translation identifies as “necessary”) to describe habitual courses, like the setting of the sun. He tells his readers that this is not what he means by *wājib* for the present argument. Rather, the meaning of *wājib* here is in relation to obligatory tasks or actions, which would cause “definite harm” to an agent if left unperformed.²⁰⁶ There are two categories of definite harm we can think of – the first being based on revelation and

²⁰⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*, 170-71.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 158-59.

the second reason. The first kind regards our religious obligations. If revelation tells us that certain actions or lack thereof are obligatory, choosing to ignore revelation will incur us the definite harm of punishment in the hereafter. In the second instance, we may discern harmful consequences through rational assessment. Let us take the example of a man dying from hunger but who chooses not to eat. We could say it is *obligatory* for him to eat so as to avoid the definite harm of death.²⁰⁷ For al-Ghazālī, it is inconceivable that God would suffer definite harm in either sense, as this would conflict with the thesis of divine omnipotence.

According to al-Ghazālī, some of the *Mu‘tazila* also contend that creation is something that is “beneficial” to humans, hence why creation is obligatory. But al-Ghazālī questions the claim that creation is intrinsically beneficial for humans when the most reasonable of humans (including prophets and saints) have sometimes expressed a desire to no longer exist. Among the examples used in this argument is the case of the Virgin Mary who expressed her hope of dying during childbirth (19:23).²⁰⁸ In the following (Second) Proposition, al-Ghazālī seeks to further dismantle the *Mu‘tazilī* claim that our existence on this earth is somehow required of God because it is beneficial to us. What follows here is a generally radical position that the good has no intrinsic value. Consequently, God can also command us to commit to actions beyond our capabilities, even if we perceive these to be unjust. Of course, the *Mu‘tazila* are animated by the claim that God can only enjoin us to commit actions that are beneficial to us. Otherwise, he would be arbitrary and unwise. On the contrary, al-Ghazālī is troubled by this aspect of *Mu‘tazilī* theology, because he thinks it consequently assumes God’s limited powers. This is a position he later returns to in the Third Proposition.²⁰⁹ However, in the Second Proposition, al-Ghazālī also raises the point that

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 171.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 177.

some actions might be considered bad from a human perspective, but this does not make it bad for God. Perhaps, that which we deem to be bad might be something we have yet to understand. Al-Ghazālī cites the story of when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, only to backtrack on this decision, allowing Abraham to sacrifice a lamb instead. This is an evocative story, which explains the unpredictability of God's decisions and actions.²¹⁰

If we read the Fourth Proposition, we come across an even more evocative explanation of why humans are not in the place of judging God's actions. This is explained in a parable describing the stories of three Muslims awaiting their respective fates in the afterlife. The first dies in his youth while a believer, the second grows old and dies while a believer, and the third, a sinner, dies before he could ever repent from his wrongdoings. The Muslim adult receives the higher rank in heaven, the Muslim youth a lower one, and the sinner a place in hellfire. The younger Muslim asks God why He chose to give him a shorter life, as opposed to grow and become more devout with time to secure a higher rank in heaven. God responds that He had known the Muslim youth would stray from the righteous path, so He chose to end it before He would lose all ranks in heaven. If the unbeliever were to ask God why his life was not prolonged so that he would have been able to repent, God's would remain mute. One can presume that He had known that the sinner would have never repented. Since he would continue to sin, there would have been no point in extending his life.²¹¹ What is particularly interesting about this parable is that al-Ghazālī gives the impression that God is not particularly inclined to punish the believers and reward disbelievers – even if this is hypothetically possible. What we see in this example of the three Muslims is a case whereby each individual receives the just reward/punishment, with the second one even getting the most leniency. In fact, we do not see al-Ghazālī providing the example of a devout Muslim who is

²¹⁰ Ibid., 174-75.

²¹¹ Ibid., 178-80.

thrown into Hellfire. This suggests that al-Ghazālī considers God to be consistently and fair, even acting so in predictable fashion. However, it is important to stress that this only occurs out of voluntary grace, and not because of mere obligations.

Judging from these last passages, one might get the impression that al-Ghazālī is insinuating that God’s justice is hidden and incomprehensible to the human mind. But al-Ghazālī’s thesis, which emerges across this series of Propositions, is both simpler and more radical, and perhaps a little too cynical: the good is contingent on what God ordains and nothing more. The Third, Fourth, and Fifth Propositions are striking attestations to this occasionalist theology. In both instances, al-Ghazālī remarks that God is not *required* to show any sort mercy to His creation. In other words, He is not obligated to act in ways deemed beneficial for His creation. In the Third Proposition, he specifically responds to the *Mu‘tazila* who remark that God is “obligated” to resurrect any animal or insect which met a violent end. This is supposed to be some sort of compensation for the suffering inflicted on these innocent animals. In the following Proposition, he argues that God is not obligated to ensure the welfare of humans. And, in the Fifth Proposition, he refutes the general view that God is obligated to reward the pious and punish the impious. The underlying thesis in these three propositions remains generally the same. This is the view that God’s actions fall logically outside the scope of the common definition of the obligatory, which would incur some sort of definite harm if ignored. To assume that God is bound by inhering or immutable duties or standards is to erroneously assume a limitation on His will or volition.

Earlier, I stated that al-Ghazālī argues that all sense of the good is contingent on God’s volition. Equally, nothing that God does can be regarded as “bad”. Assuming that God refrains from committing to a certain action, it is inconceivable that He would suffer from refraining from the act. He does not need to act in any particular way to avoid harm, as God “is too exalted and

sanctified to have needs.”²¹² But the *Mu‘tazila* would have us consider the bad committed against His creation. Can God harm His subjects for no purpose? Al-Ghazālī’s brief response here gives us a glimpse of his general view on the relationship God and His creation, one that we will return to in more detail in later chapters. In brief, al-Ghazālī likens the relationship between God and humans to that of master and slave. A master need not compensate the slave for the tasks he or she is obligated to perform. The servitude we expect of a slave is unconditional. If the slave, however, were to demand some compensation for his or her service, then this is no longer slavery, but some form of symmetrical transaction.²¹³ Incidentally, the relationship between God and humans as understood by al-Ghazālī is entirely asymmetrical, which explains much of his points on theodicy and his conception of good and evil (explored in more detail in the following chapter).

Previously, we looked at al-Ghazālī’s occasionalist critique of causality in the *Incoherence*. The *Moderation* provides us with a peculiar sense of occasionalism. While it corresponds with the occasionalism found in the *Incoherence* (in that it also deals with the question of contingency), the *Moderation* treats the question of justice, one that is consistent with the spirit of *Ash‘arī* theology. This occasionalist definition of divine justice might be unsettling for the rationalist for the same reasons that one may find the rejection of causality troublesome. Perhaps, al-Ghazālī’s notion of divine justice might trouble the rationalist even more. While a world in which humans suddenly turn into dogs could offer a bit of comedic relief to some (especially if the person turned into dog is someone we dislike), the thought that our pious actions might not help us attain the reward we think we deserve in the afterlife is undoubtedly grim. Now, al-Ghazālī’s intention here is not to inflict psychological uncertainty on his readers (a point examined below) but to remain true to Qur’anic dictums concerning God’s absolute powers. His underlying point is that all things are

²¹² Ibid., 181.

²¹³ Ibid., 181-82.

contingent on God, be they apparent causal things or ethical principles such as justice. He uses the evocative case of property to solidify his point concerning the relationship between justice and contingency. When we think of injustice in quotidian life, we think of harm inflicted on something that does not belong to us, something that is not our property. But the Qur'an describes the universe and all of creation as God's dominion (*mulk*): "Blessed be He in Whose hands in Dominion; and He over all things hath Power" (67:1). Incidentally, the word *m-l-k* can be used to designate king (*malik*) and or property (*mulk*). In common usage, the proprietor is the *mālik*, but the Qur'an refers to God in this sense to illustrate His sovereignty over "Judgment" (1:4). Ultimately, God is the proprietor of the universe insofar as his absolute dominion is concerned. No action committed by God can amount to injustice, if all things fall under His proprietary powers. An injustice cannot be carried out against one's self.

In both critiques (of philosophers and theologian-rationalists), al-Ghazālī problematizes the idea of self-referential or self-standing principles which exist outside the scope of divine power. Though the *Mu'tazila* strongly vocalize their belief in God's omnipotence, according to al-Ghazālī, their notion of justice does not properly cohere with the genuine Islamic understanding of divine power. If we adhere to the Qur'anic principle that God is unequalled and surpasses everything and all, then even the most valued principles, such as justice, must be regarded as contingent. Al-Ghazālī's critique is a logical one, resting on a commitment to an *a priori* notion of God's omnipotence. Assessing whether *inhering* principles – whether these be causal relations, essences, or divine traits – are possible requires constant referencing and returning to this paramount notion of divine power. As mentioned above, the two critiques are premised on the same logic, referencing the same *a priori* to establish the credibility or lack thereof of the given theological argument.

However, the critique of the philosophers contains a more convincing line of argument in that it is not solely reliant on a logical claim which is, in turn, affixed to an *a priori* principle.

Coupled with this logical move, al-Ghazālī also provides an element of doubt regarding the possibility to establish a connection between a cause and its effect. As noted above, the reason we are able to infer connections between entities is owed to habitual experiences in observing the conjunction of things, rather than on logical objective bases. Barger and Emon rightly suggest that al-Ghazālī believes causal relations may be inferred in spite of contingency on God. While this “Soft Natural Law” doctrine, as Emon terms it, signals an adequate level of rationalism in al-Ghazālī’s writing, I find that this is overshadowed by the skepticism he displays toward reason. If we look to the *Deliverance* and al-Ghazālī’s general writing on *taṣawwuf*, we discover his rejection of the possibility of “certain knowledge”.²¹⁴ Hence, while logical moves are useful for countering other logical presuppositions, they are inadequate for establishing them. Logic can tell us that omnipotent God cannot be bound by justice or a natural order, but it cannot provide us with an alternative causal argument that is certain. Hence, what we recognize to be a causal relation is potentially merely an *assumption*, one grounded on *subjective* experience.

Section II - Al-Ghazālī’s intermittent skepticism

When Avicenna or the rest of the philosophers claim that causal connections are *necessary*, they mean to say that these are immutable, and that they have always been the same and will continue to be the same. The existents interact in a preconfigured manner such that the cosmos become intelligible to human understanding. Since the natural state of this world is never arbitrary – i.e., never diverges from its immutable course – it becomes possible for human understanding to

²¹⁴ Al-Ghazālī, “Deliverance from Error,” 22.

apprehend the world by identifying and observing its natural patterns. On the contrary, as argued above, al-Ghazālī maintains that the world we currently reside in is contingent on God’s will. Al-Ghazālī states that many observations and patterns may be established between things that are possible causes and correlating effects. However, the observable congruence between existents is owed to God’s will, rather than intrinsic properties that mediate their interaction. Al-Ghazālī argues that, since alternative worlds with radically different causes and effects can be conceived by the intellect, it is always possible for God to bring about these alterities. Therefore, the current functioning order, which mostly remains consistent and makes natural science a possibility, is only conditional. The fact that the alteration of this current world is always a “possibility” or in potentiality, even if never realized, demands that the connection between existents be contingent. “Although it is conceivable and therefore possible that God would break his habit or intervene in the assigned function of the secondary causes, an actual break in God’s habit is not required for the connections to be contingent.”²¹⁵

In the *Incoherence*, al-Ghazālī attributes the inference of causal relations to habitual observation. As for the certainty that God endows us regarding own knowledge of things, al-Ghazālī does not openly suggest that this stems from an innate understanding. Our certainty is owed to “habitual” patterns, which never seem to falter. When we return home, we are never confronted by a book that had transformed into a sentient being. This hint at habitual knowledge indicates that al-Ghazālī is discerning between certainty and objectivity. We may be certain about these patterns insofar as we have accustomed to their repetition over time. However, this does not preclude the possibility of a rupture in what we conceive of as a natural order. The fact that God does not enact an alternative structure or process to natural order from what we know is not enough

²¹⁵ Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology*, 172-73.

to deny its potentiality.²¹⁶ However, since habitual observation is enabled by eyesight (a sensory capacity), what we come to know may prove erroneous. To better understand the fallibility of causal knowledge, one must examine al-Ghazālī's discussion of certitude in the *Deliverance*. While not restricted to causality, this critique extends to all forms of knowledge claims, be they causal or concerned with the property (e.g. size or colour) of an entity. In brief, the *Deliverance* invites us to doubt our knowledge generally. One may extrapolate the following question from the text: how do we trust what we know?

In the *Deliverance*, al-Ghazālī argues that doubt begins with the limits of sense perceptions, the reason being that these provide us with the least complicated data. It is clear that al-Ghazālī would argue that speculation is convoluted, because it requires contemplation of the things perceived. After all, he states that sense perception is the most elementary exposure to existents without the active engagement of the intellect. Al-Ghazālī maintains that this over-simplicity does not exempt the senses from faltering or reaching erroneous conclusions. We understand that the intellect is sometimes misled when its possessor relies on unfounded or unreasonable logic, for example. The senses are also misled, but for different reasons. Al-Ghazālī insinuates that sense perceptions are inadequate for drawing conclusions about the characteristics of existents, let alone speculation. He gives the example of a shadow's movement to buttress his point. If we observe a shadow over a short period, we would perceive it as unmoving, and (if we were to solely rely on senses) assume it is permanently so. However, "by experiment and observation" we come to realize that the shadow is gradually moving, and that we were wrong about our initial inference. Al-Ghazālī provides a second example. When we observe a planet, we perceive it as the size of a dinar, but we acknowledge that it is significantly larger than it first appears to our eyes by way of

²¹⁶ Ibid., 169-70.

arithmetic knowledge. These two examples demonstrate that the senses are belied by a more superior faculty, that of the intellect.²¹⁷

The correction of these two above erroneous perceptions is made possible by speculative activities, such as observation, measurement, and logic. These are among a multitude of activities enabled by reason, which, in turn, enhances our apprehension of things and objects perceived. After recognizing the limitations of his sense perceptions, al-Ghazālī wonders whether a standalone reason would also falter, as with sense perceptions. Reason provides convenient certitudes that appear to be undeniable by the mind, such as: ten is superior to three, or a thing cannot be both “existent” and “non-existent”. However, al-Ghazālī hints at a doubt in a dialogue he imagines between the senses and reason. In this dialogue, the senses interrogate reason, asking whether they can be fully certain that they will not also be belied by another superior faculty, one that is yet unknown. If reason were inexistent, the possessor of the senses would forever assume that planets are the size of dinars and shadows are unmoving. This assumption would, by default, be upheld as certain truth, because the perceived quality (e.g. size of the planet) would never be negated, thus making a correction of the erroneous judgement impossible. What if something similar is occurring with reason yet we are unaware? To complicate matters further, al-Ghazālī suggests that being imperceptive to a faculty superior to reason should not preclude its existence. Reason’s capacities would be ineffectual at assessing or apprehending its superior, just as the senses cannot possibly scrutinize reason’s capacities.²¹⁸

Al-Ghazālī expands his skepticism toward certain knowledge by questioning the scope of our wakened state. When we dream, we perceive events as though as they are truly happening to us, and we do not doubt their reality. It is only when we are wakened that we come to realize that

²¹⁷ Al-Ghazālī, “Deliverance from Error,” 23.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 23-24.

the events we imagined to be true were mere fantasies of our imagination. As mentioned above, just as the senses are outranked by a superior faculty – i.e., reason, this superior faculty is potentially undermined by its immediate superior. Al-Ghazālī invites us to expand this ranking of certainty to include the state of wakefulness. If dreams are belied by our wakened states, how can we be certain that our current non-dreaming state would not be obscured by a more *wakened* state? After all, the Qur'an and Prophetic tradition, al-Ghazālī reminds us, both stipulate that this current world is akin to a dream in relation to what happens after death. After death, the veil of ignorance will be removed, allowing us to see what had previously been inaccessible to both sense perceptions and reason. Al-Ghazālī mentions that the *taṣawwuf* requires a negation of one's own sense perceptions, preferring inward immersion, precisely because the *Ṣūfī* seeks the more *wakened* state, as it is ulterior to this mundane world.²¹⁹ Whether he is sympathetic with this epistemology only becomes clearer as the text unfolds.

For now, I want to focus on al-Ghazālī's epistemic crisis. After having seriously adhered to the proposition that our wakened state is more elusive than we tend to presume, al-Ghazālī became a sceptic for a two-month period. During this period, his doubt expanded to all epistemic spheres, with the exception of the fundamental principles of faith. It is only until God "cured" him of this "malady" that al-Ghazālī became more resolute about his own beliefs. Al-Ghazālī states that he overcame doubt not "by systematic demonstration or marshalled argument, but by a light which God most high cast into [his] heart."²²⁰ This suggests that the journey to certain knowledge is not entirely a vocational act, but is also dependent on God's grace, a theme I will continue to

²¹⁹ Ibid., 24-25.

²²⁰ Ibid., 25.

expand on in the chapters to come. Al-Ghazālī describes this “light at certain times gushes from the spring of Divine generosity.”²²¹

This passage on light invites us to think of two interrelated questions. First, does science or reason become obsolete if one is simply granted this revelatory light? Or is there a subordinate role to be served by reason? Second, how can we soundly identify a latent skepticism in al-Ghazālī’s writing if he himself refers to skepticism as a pathology? These are questions I will continue to broach as the thesis progresses. For now, I will argue that al-Ghazālī is, in part, a skeptic even though he does not subject this concept of light to the same skeptical rigour that he does with the intellect. While he may forgo skepticism on this aspect of inward light, he is a firm sceptic as far as the senses, speculation, and reason are concerned. His rejection of these are not merely based on faith-based arguments. On the contrary, his doubt concerning the scope of sense perception and reason emerge from doubting their capacities. In his appraisal of *taṣawwuf*, al-Ghazālī begins to reveal a more doubtful tone toward the intellect and its capacity to apprehend things as they are. This skepticism toward sensory and intellectual faculties becomes even more evident in his evaluation of *taṣawwuf*.

Earlier, I examined some of the striking similarities between skepticism in al-Ghazālī’s and Hume’s respective works. I also went over a crucial difference, one that is explained by Riker and, more thoroughly, Kukkonen. Riker contends that al-Ghazālī is not absolutely devoted to skepticism like Hume, who questions the possibility of miracles. Kukkonen seems to suggest something similar by arguing that al-Ghazālī remains a theist who uses skepticism only intermittently, to defend *Ash‘arī* occasionalism. These authors are not wrong to suggest that al-Ghazālī is animated by an occasionalist line that Hume would have vehemently rejected. But I

²²¹ Ibid., 26.

would not go as far as suggesting that al-Ghazālī forgoes “philosophical psychology,” or a serious critical assessment of human understanding. As I will continue to demonstrate in this section, al-Ghazālī is seriously troubled by the limits of human reason. In large part, this skepticism is what motivates him to conclude that reason should be delimited in religious matters. If anything, intermittent skepticism is not only peculiar to al-Ghazālī. Skeptics recognize the social and personal dangers of full-fledged doubt. As we just saw, in the *Deliverance*, al-Ghazālī recounts his anxiety with skepticism. He decries the dangers of skepticism, not simply on the ground that it is an affront to theism, but also to one’s personal beliefs.

Hume also expresses the concern that skepticism can confound human understanding altogether. In one key passage, he describes reason as a sort of empire, “prescribing laws, and imposing maxims, with an absolute sway and authority.”²²² But reason is always confronted by a persistent skepticism, which tries to expose the “fallaciousness and imbecility of reason” by way of “rational argumentation.” In a sense, reason is used to undermine reason, much like al-Ghazālī uses logic to refute the *falāsifa*’s logical presuppositions. At this point, Hume exclaims that it is perhaps a gift of nature that the cycle of skepticism is typically broken, allowing for reason to finally reign supreme. If skepticism were to overtake reason, we would not be able to think of maxims and laws; all mores would be utterly shattered. Skepticism should never have “any considerable influence on understanding.”²²³ It is obvious here that Hume thinks there is some bliss to putting our trust in customary practices of our society (e.g. laws or mores), which we derive from understanding. Clearly, al-Ghazālī would agree that skepticism is an affront to veracity, but he diverges on the remedy. I think this divergence is much more pronounced than the one that Riker and Kukkonen seek to underline in their respective works. Whereas Hume praises social

²²² Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 237.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 237-38.

veracity, al-Ghazālī speaks of refining one’s heart to prepare it for the reception of divine knowledge. Such is the importance of *taṣawwuf* for al-Ghazālī.

Taṣawwuf

It is important to mention, however, that al-Ghazālī’s advocacy of *taṣawwuf* should not necessarily lend itself to an anti-rationalist sentiment or a full devaluation of reason. This is a point that Bargerón observes in her article on al-Ghazālī’s mysticism. She recognizes al-Ghazālī’s claim that reason can never guarantee transcendent or “certain” knowledge of the ulterior world. However, Bargerón suggests that this obscurity applies to reason’s perception of the ulterior. Al-Ghazālī is more generous in the way he defines reason in matters pertaining to the world of mundane senses. Hence, al-Ghazālī never maintains that reason is obsolete, despite its perceptive shortcomings. In fact, al-Ghazālī intends to say that reason is purposed for apprehending this world. “Unlike the certitude of divine revelation, the certainty of rational knowledge was neither absolute nor transcendental, but then it did not need to be.”²²⁴ Bargerón explains that, for al-Ghazālī, the ascetic faculty and reason are not antithetical faculties, but rather purposed for different forms of apprehension. The intellect apprehends through “objective verification,” whereas the ascetic faculty through “inner experiential knowledge.” These realms of knowledge are inaccessible to one another. Hence, they cannot actually invalidate each other.²²⁵ As I will demonstrate below, Bargerón misreads this aspect of al-Ghazālī’s *taṣawwuf*. In my opinion, al-Ghazālī invites readers to doubt the intellect’s capacity, without affirming an anti-rationalist stance. Moreover, his advocacy of *taṣawwuf* suggests a clear delimitation of reason’s role and capacity and its demotion

²²⁴ Carol Bargerón, “Sufism’s Role in Al-Ghazālī’s First Crisis of Knowledge,” *Medieval Encounters* 9, no. 1 (2003): 40.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

to a more ancillary role in relation to asceticism, rather than to split them into two irreconcilable camps. In Chapter 4, I examine the nature of this hierarchy more closely. In brief, I will demonstrate that his subordination of reason to the ascetic experience is concomitant with his view that the sensible world is inferior to the ulterior world. But before I can venture into this aspect of his cosmology, I must explain the elementary aspects of his *taṣawwuf*.

Before I proceed, I must mention that one can possibly observe notable variation in al-Ghazālī's *taṣawwuf* throughout his intellectual life. According to Maha Elkaisy-Friemuth, al-Ghazālī was familiar with and appropriated two schools of *taṣawwuf*, which were prevalent in the Muslim world. The first is observed in his *Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*) and the second in his *Niche of Lights* (*Mishkāṭ al-anwār*).²²⁶ Both texts will be explored at great lengths later on. In the *Revival*, al-Ghazālī uses the concept of *'ilm al-mukāshafa*, which I would describe as a “science of unveiling.” This approach outlines a set of “ethical” duties wherein the mystic purifies his or her soul in order to prepare for ascension and meeting with the divine. Al-Ghazālī hints at the second approach in the *Revival*. But his reference is intentionally brief given that he considers this approach to be suitable for an elect, or a people he refers to as the *al-‘ārifūn*, which Elkaisy-Friemuth translates as “Sufi saints.”²²⁷ This approach finds its best expression in the *Niche*, perhaps because this text is a lot less practical than the *Revival*. Al-Ghazālī uses the language of *fanā'*, which entails the concept of “annihilation” done to oneself. This self-annihilation is the way in which the *al-‘ārifūn* (who are seekers of gnosis) attain unity with God.²²⁸ Note, that the language of ascension is absent here, as the person and God are bound together within the human soul. This difference warrants mention, but I do not think it undermines a holistic

²²⁶ Maha Elkaisy-Friemuth, *God and Humans in Islamic Thought: 'Abd al-Jabbār, Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 139.

²²⁷ Ibid., 138-39; Al-Ghazālī, “Kitāb al-‘Ilm,” in *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-kitāb al-‘arabī, 2013), 31-32.

²²⁸ Elkaisy-Friemuth, *God and Humans in Islamic Thought: 'Abd al-Jabbār, Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī*, 140-42.

reading of al-Ghazālī's *taṣawwuf*. As we move on in this thesis, we will come to experience more of al-Ghazālī's figurative speech. In my opinion, what Elkaisy-Friemuth has described here is a set of parables which allude to varying degrees of mystical experiences, both of which are ultimately a state of mind.²²⁹ Further, al-Ghazālī's *Deliverance*, which was written later on (after both the *Revival* and the *Niche*), seems to paint a fairly holistic view of *taṣawwuf*, which can be generally described as a form of self-exertion seeking (non-rational) knowledge of the divine.

While describing *taṣawwuf*, al-Ghazālī juxtaposes it to other disciplines (presumably the rationalist ones), which he occasionally dismisses as vain. Additionally, we are told that these sciences say little about our otherworldly salvation, as they do not have the power to reinforce elementary devotional practices.²³⁰ It goes without saying that al-Ghazālī's theology favours devotional acts over philosophical speculation. The reason is that speculation, including the theological kind, do not prevent a person from committing sins. Though there is a need to refine our intellectual capacities, al-Ghazālī is more concerned with refining the "heart" (*qalb*), which accepts God's divine truths. Further, al-Ghazālī is largely animated by a basic Islamic eschatological premise, that we are fated to resurrection after death. In this resurrection, we will answer for our devotional deeds rather than our intellectual pursuits. Nothing beside the inward refinement of the heart, a theme I expand on in the fifth chapter, can subvert the diabolic forces of lust and passions which afflict souls and prevent them from attaining the good. Broadly put, *taṣawwuf* consists of the exercise of readying one's heart for the acceptance of Truth, which is knowledge of God. One of the most important aspects of the *Ṣūfī* path is to embrace one's finitude in view of God's omnipotence. In the *Alchemy of Happiness* (*Kimyā' al-sa'āda*), he describes this

²²⁹ Al-Ghazālī explicitly states that the "unification" (*ittiḥādān*) that one experiences in *fanā* is merely a "language of metaphor" (*bi-lisān al-majāz*). See: Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights*, 18.

²³⁰ "Deliverance from Error," 55-56.

as the act of “detachment from all things, the purification of the heart from everything” (*al-inqītā’ ‘an kull shay’*, *wa-taṭhīr min kull shay’*), followed by the humbling experience of entrusting God with everything.²³¹ In a sense, al-Ghazālī’s *taṣawwuf* is a practical manifestation; it is the act of living by the theological doctrine of occasionalism. Al-Ghazālī regards this sort of self-realized humility as a curative device to our lustful (*shahwa*) and irascible (*ghaḍab*) passions.²³² At times, al-Ghazālī defines pathology as an unwillingness to engage in the act of refining one’s heart and the misplaced interest in intellectual principles. Therefore, the pathological person which concerns al-Ghazālī in his *Ṣūfī* writing is typically a scholar who pursues false knowledge.

Though *taṣawwuf* begins with practice, it yields one of the most evocative forms of knowledge. As mentioned above, the initial phase consists of rejecting mundane desires and the consecration of one’s heart for God alone. The next stage is attaining knowledge. In *taṣawwuf* this knowledge is clearly distinguished from acquired, or rational, knowledge. The latter is something attainable through reading and reasoning, while mystical experience is solely attainable through rigorous asceticism. Al-Ghazālī illustrates this contrast by likening it to the difference between knowing about health and being healthy. One may know about the conditions of health and what leads to a healthy lifestyle, but one can only know what it is to be like in the state of healthiness by *being* healthy. Al-Ghazālī is by no means devaluing the role of theoretical sciences or inquiry. However, he points out that he had already believed in the fundamentals of faith without the help of rational sciences. These fundamentals are threefold: belief in God, His Prophet, and the afterlife. It is not immediately clear whether al-Ghazālī would dismiss the possibility that these could be

²³¹ “*Kimyā’ al-sa’āda*,” in *Majmū’at rasā’il al-imām al-Ghazālī* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-’ilmiyya, 2013), 137.

²³² In the *Alchemy of Happiness (Kimyā’ al-sa’āda)*, al-Ghazālī defines the devotional acts which help subvert these two dangerous enemies of the soul. See: *ibid.*, 178.

attainable through rationality. Yet it is clear that he himself came to believe in these by way of many personal experiences, rather than rational proof.²³³

Though Chapter 4 will explain this subject at length, I must briefly mention that al-Ghazālī's doctrine of *taṣawwuf* gives us an idea as to the subordinate role of reason in his writing. Herein, al-Ghazālī envisions a lesser role for rational proof and, consequently, the faculty through which it is exercised, reason. To attain the ideal ascetic state, one must first relinquish worldliness and its "pleasures". Among the major conditions of worldliness is the pursuit of "vain desire", which he struggled to overcome. Al-Ghazālī counts the unnecessary sciences he had once pursued as superfluous; they even distract us from genuine worship of God. These sciences served to attain "public recognition". As he becomes more accustomed to the life of asceticism, al-Ghazālī's worldly desires attempt to enchain him further. In response, his faith calls out to him, reminding him that worldliness and its pleasures are only temporary, and that time needed to secure a place in the afterlife is finite.²³⁴ What is interesting about this passage is that al-Ghazālī ranks unnecessary pursuit of knowledge with the general vices of worldliness. Typically, when religious authorities deride worldliness and the mundane vices, they have in mind pleasures with physical sensations, such as carnality or imbibing of alcohol. From al-Ghazālī's account in the *Deliverance*, we never get the impression that he struggled against desires for carnal pleasures or imbibing of alcohol. His struggle was rather intellectual.

This passage demonstrates that, according to al-Ghazālī, a life of unnecessary studies is similar to these other mundane desires. Namely, these different vices equally serve to distract us from preparing for the afterlife. These vainglorious concerns enchain us to a life of self-indulgence. This egotistic lifestyle, to which diabolic forces seek to enslave us, can only be remedied by the

²³³ Al-Ghazālī, "Deliverance from Error," 54-56.

²³⁴ Ibid., 56.

ascetic state. While, like the mundane kind, the ascetic pursuit also involves an internal indulgence, what is being indulged is not the self. Rather, this involves an intimate encounter with God, who is perceptible through the heart. For this reason, al-Ghazālī expresses the view “that it is above all the mystics who walk on the road of God...their life is the best life...their character the purest character.” The *Ṣūfī* path is superior to the best of scholarship combined, because it “brings illumination from the light of the lamp of prophetic light.”²³⁵ For those who do not engage in the life of mystical experience, their apprehension of the prophetic revelation is only nominal.²³⁶

In his or her natural state, the human is unaware, or even ignorant, of God’s multifaceted creation. According to the Qur’an, only God *knows* absolutely the entirety of His own creation. For humans, knowledge of the existents is acquired through perception (*idrāk*). The first degree of human perception is the capacity to discern between physical properties, such as the feelings of heat and cold or the sight of different colours. But the human is distinguished among God’s creation in his or her capacity to surpass perception of physical properties. Through the intellect, he or she is gifted with the capacity to apprehend between right and wrong. However, just as sense perception is obstructed from grasping and discerning between concepts, the intellect is obstructed from perceiving the non-intelligible. After the intellect, there emerges a superior faculty, one that is capable of perceiving future projections and the ulterior world. Al-Ghazālī refers to this as an “eye which sees the various types of intelligible objects.” While the intellect is responsible for the apprehension of concepts and principles, this additional eye, which is most excellent among prophets, provides a light that renders the ulterior world, otherwise unknowable to senses and the intellect, perceptible.²³⁷

²³⁵ Ibid., 60.

²³⁶ Ibid., 61.

²³⁷ Ibid., 64-65.

Conclusion

Key al-Ghazālī interpreters argue that his theology falls outside of the occasionalist tradition because he recognizes natural laws. While he maintains that the universe is a result of God’s sublimity, al-Ghazālī’s theology simultaneously allows for a self-referential cosmos whose laws remain consistent and constant. Consequently, this universe becomes comprehensible by virtue of its predictability. Hence, there remains a space for natural sciences within the scope of al-Ghazālī’s orthodox theology. I do not contest that al-Ghazālī recognizes a role for the natural sciences, albeit a limited one. It is clear that he does not devalue scientific inquiry, but he does regard it as superfluous in matters of faith. This is an important point that the abovementioned authors do not adequately acknowledge. As mentioned above, in the *Deliverance*, al-Ghazālī states that commoners may have a stronger and clearer perception of God. Some may point that there is a discrepancy between al-Ghazālī’s ideas across his different texts, given that he narrates his intellectual transformation through the years. Therefore, a cross-textual exegesis of al-Ghazālī that seeks to cohere his theology could prove dubious considering his intellectual positions can vary and even contradict each another. After all, al-Ghazālī mentions that he only fully adopted *taṣawwuf* in the later part of his intellectual career, after coming to the realization that other theological modes of thought were highly limited in scope.

It is very likely that his *Ṣūfī* ideas were not fully developed while composing the *Incoherence*, but the text displays an important skeptical attitude toward noetic knowledge that is consistent with his *taṣawwuf* elsewhere. His treatment of the matter is brief, but very clear: that we mainly infer causal relations from habitual observation. Ultimately, al-Ghazālī argues that the reality of the natural world (or the world external to our subjectivities) and our subjective

apprehension of this world may not *necessarily* cohere. If anything, this sentiment expressed in the *Incoherence* could point to his initiation into asceticism, which invites us to find certainty through subjective experience, as opposed to rational sciences. In the *Deliverance*, al-Ghazālī expands on why he doubts observation, even if habitual. Habit may correct previously erroneous ideas, but the senses and the intellect are incomplete. The former is always belied by the latter, while the latter can be belied by something more revelatory. Through habit, we come to know that the shadow does move, but this knowledge does not culminate into certainty. The *additional eye*, which the *Ṣūfiyya* encourage us to channel, will lead us to an even more awakened state where *certain* knowledge may become possible. The intellect and the senses are, on the other hand, subject to fallible conclusions.

The occasionalist passages of the *Moderation* and the *Incoherence* are surely grounded on the logical premise that divine power can never be outweighed or surpassed. In the *Incoherence*, this logic serves to undermine necessitarian causality, but not to objectively establish an alternative version. The main point is that we can only infer causalities from habitual observation. Both the *Moderation* and the *Incoherence* promote the notion that all principles and values are contingent on God's will. Therefore, there cannot be an objective and independent reality outside of His volition. Hence, there is no objective or inferable Truth as such with the exception of God alone. However, these logical presuppositions are intertwined with the following skeptical implication. The only objective locale we may direct ourselves toward is God, as nothing else is truly enduring, primordial, and eternal. All other forms of knowledge remain tentative for the following two reasons. First, our perceptive faculties (both sensory and intellectual) are fallible. Second, that which we perceive (the external and mundane world) is (in potentiality) always alterable. This

twofold epistemic crisis, which the devout Muslim readily accepts, account for our inability to truly *know* things.

In view of his strict denial of causality and his doubt of the senses and the intellect, a number of al-Ghazālī scholars have insisted that his theology contains elements of a quasi-Cartesian or a quasi-Humean skepticism.²³⁸ Yet, Syed Rizwan Zamir contends that the comparison is untenable considering al-Ghazālī's stipulations about divine knowledge attained through devotional works.²³⁹ However, both al-Ghazālī and Hume rely on skeptical observation to refute stringent naturalism. For Hume, the naturalists wrongly assume that "conjunction" is equivalent to a necessary relationship between cause and effect.²⁴⁰ Yet, the concept of necessity is a property of the mind, a view which casts doubt on whether the causal properties perceived by the mind exist in reality.²⁴¹

Like Hume, al-Ghazālī is captivated by the topics of certainty and the limits of subjective observation. As we saw from the *Deliverance*, he tells us that his thoughts were mired by skepticism after recognizing the limitations of reason. Also, like Hume, al-Ghazālī advances a

²³⁸ Comparisons with Descartes also warrant our attention. Cemil Akdogan observes that al-Ghazālī's assessment of the physical senses and reason anticipates Cartesian skepticism toward these two forms of perception. The concept of dreams is important in the skeptical formulations of both thinkers, as they doubt our current 'wakened' state. Both consider the possibility that we could be in another dreamlike state that can be belied by a more perceptive awakening. See: Akdogan, "Ghazālī, Descartes, and Hume: The Genealogy of Some Philosophical Ideas," 493-95. According to Akira O. Ruddle-Miyamoto, both al-Ghazālī and Descartes demand constant certitude in the knowledge that they accrue. This inability to find certitude at key junctures in their respective intellectual lives ignited a discomfiting doubt they struggled to shake off. See: Akira O. Ruddle-Miyamoto, "Regarding Doubt and Certainty in al-Ghazālī's *Deliverance From Error* and Descartes' *Meditations*," *Philosophy East & West* 67, no. 1 (2017): 160-63. According to Tamara Albertini, al-Ghazālī and Descartes contest the possibility that knowledge can be accrued through customary means. Rather, true "knowledge is a matter of critical self-appropriation." For al-Ghazālī, this self-appropriation takes place through *taṣṣawwuf*. See: Tamara Albertini, "Crisis and Certainty of Knowledge in al-Ghazālī (1058-1111) and Descartes (1596-1650)," *ibid.* 55 (2005): 6. As for the comparison with Hume, Stephen Riker notes the striking similarities in how both argue that "causality is not necessary in any way." See: Riker, "Al-Ghazali on Necessary Causality in *The Incoherence Of The Philosophers*," 322.

²³⁹ According to Zamir, al-Ghazālī cannot be placed among the sceptics because of his sincere belief in a "divine light" which is bestowed by God to those whom He wants to enlighten. See: Syed Rizwan Zamir, "Al-Ghazālī: Doubt Certitude and Light," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 49, no. 2 (2010): 244.

²⁴⁰ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 219.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 215.

claim that the reliance on empirical observation is what incites the thought of causality, rather than its logical affirmation. The counter-logic that al-Ghazālī pursues is to point to the tautological line of thinking present in naturalist thought. In the final analysis, one cannot assert that one's observation is true because one has observed it. Though there is a great deal of convergence between al-Ghazālī and Hume on this skeptical point, one cannot overlook some important differences. Hume is not necessarily denying the reality of natural causes. Rather, he does not think that these can be confirmed through human understanding, which is the only mode of assessment. Hence, Hume's skepticism is aimed at the human faculties and human understanding. One can say that Hume remains skeptical in his opposition to the naturalists, as he never asserts that inhering essences are impossible, only that they cannot be confirmed. On the contrary, al-Ghazālī cites God's limitless powers to boldly deny the concept of inhering causes. Not only is the human and his or her perceptive faculties feeble but the natural order is incomprehensible in view of divine power. Despite this difference, al-Ghazālī also places much importance on assessing the limits of human understanding. His occasionalist position is, in large part, supported by a thoroughgoing critique of human understanding.

The significant difference between the two forms of skepticism finds its most evocative expression in the realms of political and social relations. Al-Ghazālī and Hume insist that incessant skepticism can confound belief altogether. Of course, al-Ghazālī is principally concerned with atheism, whereas Hume worries about the loss of belief in social mores, like maxims and morals. We are also accustomed to observing a latent humanism in skeptical accounts of human understanding, certainly those that have been articulated within the liberal tradition. Take, for example, John Locke's claim that human understanding is limited and that essential "ideas" about the divine and religious truths are not innate to any human. It is not incidental, then, that Locke

advances a political doctrine of toleration which aims at respecting the dignity of varying opinions.²⁴² Later, we will see that al-Ghazālī also stresses a theory of toleration, but this by no means proceeds from his skepticism. Al-Ghazālī’s toleration emerges out of his aversion to human pride, and it is resoundingly consonant with his views on divine omnipotence. Now we move on to inspecting al-Ghazālī’s notion of divine omnipotence more closely and what this tells us about the agential capacities of humanity.

²⁴² In the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke argues that “ideas” or cognitive notions do not come to us naturally, and this holds true for ideas about deities and religions. This means that there are no “innate ideas” featured in the faculty of understanding, which explains why there is a multiplicity of beliefs in this world. See: John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996), 25-27. On the other hand, by accepting that the world contains differing religious views, Locke came to formulate his theory of political toleration. J. Jud Owen notes that authors have tended to ignore the epistemological principles informing Locke’s theory of toleration. While Locke explicitly presents his idea of toleration in the *Letter on Toleration*, the stronger philosophical premises for this notion are contained within his *Essay*. See: J. Judd Owen, “Locke’s Case for Religious Toleration: Its Neglected Foundation in the Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” *Journal of Politics* 69, no. 1 (2007).

Chapter 3 – *Al-Ghazālī's Theodicy: Between Occasionalism and Human Agency*

In the previous chapter, we examined aspects of al-Ghazālī's occasionalism, specifically across the *Incoherence* and the *Moderation*. We saw that his critique of causality (including its cognate concepts of necessity and the obligatory) is not strictly animated by a metaphysical concern. There is something quite normative to be taken from this aspect of al-Ghazālī's inquiry, especially when we consider some of the crucial passages in the *Moderation*. This normative inquiry, which I will expand on in the present chapter, concerns our agency in this world and our commitment to religious and ethical obligations. A question that arises here is that, if divine power is endless, are humans truly responsible for their actions? In another sense, are they the true agents of their acts? And can they be faulted for any wrongdoing they commit? We now come across a classical theme of theodicy, which is at the heart of al-Ghazālī's theological concerns. Yes, al-Ghazālī comforts the reader by reassuring that the world of causes is consistently maintained and that humans are endowed with sufficient understanding to recognize not only "causal" relations but also their religious and ethical obligations. For the Muslim theologian, the question of human agency is crucial, as the Qur'an is replete with passages describing eternal damnation for wrongdoers. Clearly, there must be a sense that humans have some agency over their own actions.

Recall al-Ghazālī's points on the obligatory and harmful (examined in the previous chapter). One of the two possible definitions of the obligatory is the idea that one incurs harm (or punishment) in the afterlife for refraining from mandatory religious duties. Additionally, al-Ghazālī's concern is not strictly soteriological. The religious and ethical obligations carry a strong political weight as well. In later chapters, we will see that this concern with human agency invokes a series of political concerns, namely the idea that humans need to be under the custody of a pious rulership that can oversee their actions. But why is it incumbent on us to erect political

communities serving this religious end when all sovereignty is attributed to God? Now, before we can treat this political question more directly, we need to consider some of al-Ghazālī's preliminary theological and philosophical points on human agency. Moreover, we cannot understand human agency without accounting for God's power, since al-Ghazālī maintains that this agency is contingent on His will. The question we need to keep in mind throughout this inquiry is whether this contingent relationship compromises a possibly sufficient human agency. The present chapter will unpack this intricate relationship between the divine and human agency in al-Ghazālī's theological corpus.

Al-Ghazālī's critique of the *falāsifa*'s description of God is a good starting point into this theodical discussion. It is in his description of divine will that we can begin to understand his account of a God who obligates His creation. Now, for the rationalist, the way that al-Ghazālī accounts for God's commands to the faithful might appear to be far too anthropomorphic. On the other hand, one of al-Ghazālī's main objections to the *falāsifa* is that they describe a God without a will; they do so by reducing God to the First among efficient causes. This "First Cause" (*al-sabab al-awwal*), as Al-Fārābī regards Him,²⁴³ is a passive being who does not *speak* or address humanity in the way that revelatory knowledge seems to demand.²⁴⁴ Revelation is reinterpreted by the *falāsifa* as an emanationist unfolding whereby superior intellects apprehend Truth by surmounting their corporeal selves through philosophical inquiry. To this extent, humans are autonomous agents who, through the application of their intellectual faculty, apprehend their "place in the natural whole".²⁴⁵ On the contrary, al-Ghazālī asserts that God brings down revelation (*tanzīl* – literally bringing down) through which He explicitly commands His servants to perform

²⁴³ Al-Fārābī, *The Political Writings: "Political Regime" and "Summary of Plato's Laws"*, 29.

²⁴⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*, 114-20.

²⁴⁵ Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, 31.

certain duties while refraining from certain actions. In this relationship between God and His creation, humans do not ascend to the superior realm of ideas through a dialectic method of inquiry. Rather, they are meant to purify themselves in this world through religious works and ascetic pursuits to allow God's influence to pour into their souls. When humans ascend to the ranks of the divine, according to al-Ghazālī, this is because God chooses to gracefully outpour His love into His servant's "heart" (*qalb*).²⁴⁶

Recall that, for al-Ghazālī, the relationship between God and humans is likened to that of master and slave. Later, we will come across passages in which al-Ghazālī likens worship to a sort of servitude. However, it is important to mention that this servitude is never burdensome. Rather, this relationship also presupposes a sentiment of love whereby humans encounter God's grace when they actively make their hearts susceptible to His presence. The philosophical account of God's relationship with humans is significantly different. The *falāsifa* as well as rationalist theologians reject these characterizations, because they want to avoid anthropomorphizing God. For al-Fārābī, these anthropomorphic characterizations of God need to be rejected, because they insinuate that God is somehow divisible.²⁴⁷ Further, the *falāsifa* avoid depictions of God which evoke a sense that He is a sovereign governing His realm.²⁴⁸ To al-Ghazālī, however, this is precisely the account of God we need. It is hardly anthropomorphic to speak of divine attributes. Al-Ghazālī lists and explains seven in the following order: "power", "knowledge", "life", "will", "hearing and sight", and "speech".²⁴⁹ On the contrary, these attributes, which we often used to describe human qualities are all bestowed by God. In fact, as George F. Hourani notes, al-Ghazālī's

²⁴⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Maqṣad al-asnā fī sharḥ asmā' Allāhi al-ḥusnā* (Damascus: Maṭba'at al-ṣabāḥ, 1999), 30.

²⁴⁷ Al-Fārābī, *The Political Writings: "Political Regime" and "Summary of Plato's Laws"*, 40.

²⁴⁸ Muhsin Mahdi argues that the Islamic philosophers rejected the traditional theological premise which depicted God as "a manager who concerns himself with all particular incidents and accidents and who promises material rewards and threatens material punishment." See: Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, 25.

²⁴⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*, 83-126.

“God remains a person, the only completely free one, and He is the decider of every event.”²⁵⁰

Most importantly, our capacity to pursue certain actions is made possible through a process of “acquisition” (*kasb*) in which God grants us the power to act, all the while maintaining the ability to revoke this power and render us completely powerless.²⁵¹

Though al-Ghazālī stresses the boundless nature of divine power, I argue that his occasionalist theology allows for a substantive notion of human agency. Moreover, this view of human agency lends itself a theory of moral culpability in which unbelievers are condemned as masters of their own wrongdoings, a theme whose political implications I will return to in detail in Chapter 5. Al-Ghazālī actively contemplates the scope of humanity’s freedom in the context of obedience. While he maintains that God is not obliged to reward pious acts and punish wrongdoing, he insists that God judges according to human choice. This is to say that God does not oblige one to commit wrongdoing, let alone punish this person for something he or she did not choose. Therefore, like the *Mu‘tazila*, he presupposes a degree of agency on the part of humans, whose deeds reflect their choices, rather than a predestined fate. However, the *Mu‘tazila* maintain that God is obliged to reward the good and punish the bad, because an unjust God is inconceivable. Against this claim, al-Ghazālī contends that God is the only absolutely free being, as He is unbound by obligation. Further, nothing He does can be regarded as unjust, because the universe and all His creation are His property.²⁵²

For Maria De Cillis, this view of a proprietary relationship between God and humans precludes the possibility of human autonomy in al-Ghazālī’s thought. Hence, De Cillis concludes that his theology is “predestinarian.” While al-Ghazālī deploys the *Ash‘arī* concept of *kasb*, which

²⁵⁰ George F. Hourani, “Ghazālī on the Ethics of Action,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 96, no. 69-88 (1976): 76.

²⁵¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*, 94-95.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 177-78.

presupposes that humans acquire their autonomous power from God, she suggests that he only does so superficially.²⁵³ She claims al-Ghazālī, unlike the *Ashā'ira*, is disinterested in resolving the tension between divine omnipotence and human actions, as his writing only insists on developing the first concept. This chapter demonstrates that al-Ghazālī articulates a theodicy that is firmly rooted in an *Ash'arī* tradition, which he complements with an ascetic purpose. I argue that al-Ghazālī's articulation of an unlimited divine power does not preclude the possibility of human autonomy in his corpus. Rather, these two concepts are harmonized into the same cosmological order. By inquiring into the scope of human autonomy within the mundane sphere while upholding the principle of divine omnipotence, al-Ghazālī seeks to resolve a problem of theodicy.

By using the theme of theodicy to interpret al-Ghazālī's corpus, I seek to nuance the ways in which we interpret his notion of an omnipotent being. A theodicy is generally understood as a form of theological inquiry into the following conundrum: how does an omnipotent God even allow evil to transpire when He has the power to nullify all that is against His will? If He is incapable of nullifying such evils, can we say that He is truly omnipotent? A thinker dealing with theodicy normally seeks to harmonize God's limitless power, which is taken for granted, with the existence of evil. This presupposes that, while God is capable of nullifying evil, He allows it to happen for reasons we may be able to understand through rational or theological inquiry. Eric L. Ormsby argues that "theodicy in Islam was first formulated in reaction to conceptions of God that stressed his unqualified omnipotence." Among the first to systematically deal with this issue were the *Mu'tazila*.²⁵⁴ In the theodicies of the *Mu'tazila*, we encounter a notion of evil that is equated

²⁵³ Maria De Cillis, *Free Will and Predestination in Islamic Thought: Theoretical compromises in the works of Aivcenna, al-Ghazālī and Ibn Arabī* (London; New York: Routledge, 2014), 117-20.

²⁵⁴ Eric L. Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute Over Al-Ghazali's Best of All Possible Worlds* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 16.

with human wrongdoing.²⁵⁵ The question is asked in the following way: if God is all-knowing, fully powerful, and just, why does He allow humans to commit sins? According to Harry A. Wolfson, the late *Muʿtazila* theologians would regard wrongdoing as part of human “creation,” a view which regards humans as capable of independently choosing between right and wrong.²⁵⁶ The *Ashāʿira* would later seek to correct these views by returning to “the earlier [theological] emphasis on divine omnipotence.”²⁵⁷

To al-Ghazālī and the *Ashāʿira* before him, the presupposition that evil exists independently of God’s power (or that anything can exist outside of His volition for that matter) is theologically troublesome. A Muslim theologian, al-Ghazālī claims, cannot forgo the principle that God is master over all things. This chapter examines al-Ghazālī’s contributions to what had already been a central theological debate in the Muslim world. In brief, I demonstrate that al-Ghazālī’s reiteration of the *Ashʿarī* doctrine of divine omnipotence cannot be disassociated from his attempts, elsewhere, to outline the scopes of human autonomy. Further, I argue that al-Ghazālī solves the problem of theodicy by ultimately positing that evil is inapplicable to any of His actions, even if He decides to punish the innocent and reward wrongdoers. Evil, or the “bad” (*al-qabīḥ*), according to al-Ghazālī is a signifier for distasteful human qualities and behaviour. Beyond its mundane usage there is no objective basis to apply a notion of evil to God’s will if we ascend to the divine realm, as He chooses to dispense with His creation as He wills.²⁵⁸ This is because of the proprietary nature I mentioned above.

²⁵⁵ Marmura, “Ghazali and Ashʿarism Revisited,” 103.

²⁵⁶ Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 622.

²⁵⁷ Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought*, 17.

²⁵⁸ The Arabic term for bad (*qabīḥ*) is coterminous with evil in the way that al-Ghazālī uses. He describes it as that which is deplorable to the state of a person or sentient being. See: Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*, 161-63.

This chapter is divided into three sections. First, I will examine al-Ghazālī's view of God's mastery over the universe and its implications for a master-slave relationship between the divine and humanity. In the second part, I will cover al-Ghazālī's *Ash'arī* understanding of divine essence and attributes. In this discussion, we get a grasp of al-Ghazālī's deliberate articulation of a "middle ground" position between the theologies of the agential (i.e., the *falāsifa* and the *Mu'tazila*) and the predestinarian (*Jabriyya*) schools.²⁵⁹ This comparison will allow me to argue that al-Ghazālī's theology is neither entirely predestinarian nor entirely agential, but somewhere in between. Lastly, in the third section, I will explain the implications of acquired human power (*kasb*), drawing briefly on resemblances with his *Ash'arī* predecessors. Further, I will highlight al-Ghazālī's thoroughgoing take on human autonomy by examining some of his ascetic principles, which he intentionally appends to his occasionalist doctrine. The idea of asceticism does not carry the same weight in earlier *Ash'arī* literature, at least not in the context of *kasb*. Though his occasionalism seems faithful to some of the *Ash'arī* literature, one may observe that al-Ghazālī moves beyond his theologian predecessors, whose concepts he alters by presenting them in a distinctly *Ṣūfī* light. The implications of asceticism on his view of human voluntary action has yet to be adequately explained by contemporary scholars of al-Ghazālī.

Section I – *Divine omnipotence*

²⁵⁹ Marmura, "Ghazali and Ash'arism Revisited," 109. Marmura also points out that "Ghazali argues...that *kasb* strikes the path of moderation between the Mu'tazilite doctrine that man creates his own acts (those ordinarily regarded as deliberate acts) and *jabr* [predestination]. *Kasb* is not identical with *jabr*, he argues, because the former is unable to differentiate between the compulsory spasm and the act we speak of as deliberate, a difference which we ourselves experience." See: "Ghazali's Chapter on Divine Power in the *Iqtisād*," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 4, no. 2 (1994): 290. According to Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (d. 1158), there are generally two types of *Jabriyya*. The more extreme among them reject the view that humans have any agency. The more "moderate" (*al-mutwassīṭa*) ones believe that human autonomy is highly marginal, though this seems to be a marginal difference. See: Al-Shahrastānī, *Al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*, 161.

In the *Moderation in Belief* (*Al-Iqtiṣād fī l-itiqād*), al-Ghazālī delivers his most elaborate theological defense of divine omnipotence in response to *Muʿtazilī* theodicy.²⁶⁰ This section explores the purpose and implications of this theological defense. If read in isolation, his reflections on divine omnipotence could be misconstrued as a defense of predestinarianism, as the text focuses on principles pertaining to God’s boundless capacities and humanity’s duty as servants of God. However, the text also aims to present the right balance between contentious theological positions, by aiming to reconcile the ideas of mastery over one’s own actions and God’s mastery over the cosmological order. Al-Ghazālī applies this “moderate” outlook across subsequent texts, such as the *Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*) and *Forty Principles of Religion* (*Kitāb al-arbaʿīn fī ʿulūm al-dīn*), which I will also be making recourse to in this analysis.²⁶¹ Further, I would like to mention that, while some of al-Ghazālī’s questions appear unoriginal (as these had been posed in the past) at first, his remarks on theodicy are far more elaborate than those of his *Ashʿarī* predecessors, as he introduces ascetic elements, which will become our focus in later chapters. In this chapter, I will largely focus on how al-Ghazālī appropriates the *Ashʿarī* notion of acquisition (*kasb*), which had already been outlined by Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013) and al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 1071),²⁶² but also goes beyond it by adopting a thoroughgoing ascetic system. But this is the subject for the last section of this chapter. For now, I want to pick up on where we left off in the previous chapter, the concept of occasionalism. Previously, I argued that occasionalism precludes efficient causes. If humans entirely lack authorship over their own actions, as one cannot say they cause their own actions, then at what point could we rightly speak of culpability in al-Ghazālī’s political thought? Further, what would be God’s purpose of issuing

²⁶⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*.

²⁶¹ *Kitāb al-Arbaʿīn fī ʿulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-jīl, 1988); *Iḥyāʾ*.

²⁶² Al-Bāqillānī, *Al-Inṣāf fīmā yajib iʿtiqāduh wa-lā yajūz al-jahl bih* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2007), 40-41; Al-Bāghdādī, *Uṣūl al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2002), 154-58.

commands to His servants only to punish them for disobedient acts they did not have the capacity to perform?²⁶³

The principle of human autonomy in al-Ghazālī's writing seems to conflict with his own recurring emphasis on divine omnipotence, which forms the basis for the majority of his theological claims. Drawing on Qur'anic language, al-Ghazālī ascertains that the Maker of this world is "powerful" (*qādir*), and the complexity of His creation manifests His infinite power.²⁶⁴ The world as we know it is inexplicably orderly and full of "marvels" (*'ajā'ib*) that baffle the onlooker. To illustrate this powerfulness, al-Ghazālī invites us to consider the following syllogistic premise. Anything that is orderly necessarily stems from a powerful act. Since this world is orderly, it must necessarily stem from a powerful act. Al-Ghazālī hopes that with this syllogism he can assert that all existing things are contingent on God's power. He is aware that some may object to this by claiming that the power of sentient beings (that is, the power over their own actions) cannot coexist with a deity that is omnipotent over all things. If one were to say that the power of sentient beings is free from dependency on God's power, then we would have to concede limitations to divine omnipotence. According to al-Ghazālī, a will that is free from God in the absolute sense cannot logically accord with divine omnipotence, a point I return to in detail below. Since divine omnipotence is a fundamental maxim in Islamic doctrine, al-Ghazālī objects to the idea of a will that is free (again, in the absolute sense) from God's reach.²⁶⁵ But does negating *absolute* free will necessarily imply a defense of predestinarianism?

²⁶³ Michael E. Marmura poses the question as follows: "If human power and its effect are both the direct creations of divine power, in what sense can the individual be held to be morally responsible for his acts?" See: Marmura, "Ghazali's Chapter on Divine Power in the *Iqtisād*," 290.

²⁶⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*, 88-99. The Qur'an (6:65) describes God as having the "power to send calamities on [unbelievers]" (*al-qādiru 'alā an yab'atha 'alaykum 'adhāban*).

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

Maria De Cillis argues that this line on divine omnipotence is predominant in al-Ghazālī's corpus, stating that the theologian maintains a consistently "predestinarian" pattern. This is especially the case for his later works, such as the *Niche of Lights* (*Mishkāt al-anwār*) and the *Revival*, which pursue two different objectives. The first text focuses on cosmological inquiries, whereas the latter outlines the ascetic method.²⁶⁶ While the *Revival* offers a series of guidelines on how individuals may properly perform religious rites, a move that would suggest a recognition of human autonomy, this text is not strictly a ritualistic manual. The text also offers thoroughgoing theological explanations of divine power and God's power over His creation. For De Cillis, these passages in which al-Ghazālī defends "the role of God as the unique Creator" suggest that his theology is undeniably predestinarian.²⁶⁷ In view of the available scholarship on al-Ghazālī, De Cillis' interpretation stands out as very peculiar considering that a number of scholars have observed a shift in the later thought of al-Ghazālī, who allegedly appropriates a cosmogony that is more familiar to the kind we find in the *falāsifa*'s works. But Maha Elkaisy-Friemuth's is just as invaluable for this chronological observation. Elkaisy-Friemuth notes that the earlier al-Ghazālī we know from the *Incoherence* had suggested that God is more directly involved in creation. But the al-Ghazālī of the *Alchemy of Happiness* (*Kimyā' al-sa'āda*) and the *Revival* seems to maintain that God orders the angels to create and order the universe, thus signalling a subtle backtrack from the earlier depiction of God who seemed more directly involved in the cosmos. Though this difference is notable, Elkaisy-Friemuth concludes that, in both the earlier and later writings, God is the one who orders, as the "angels are constrained to follow God's will and instruction."²⁶⁸ Hence, the interpretations of De Cillis and Elkaisy-Friemuth take opposite routes. De Cillis

²⁶⁶ De Cillis, *Free Will and Predestination in Islamic Thought*, 117.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

²⁶⁸ Elkaisy-Friemuth, *God and Humans in Islamic Thought: 'Abd al-Jabbār, Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī*, 128.

maintains that al-Ghazālī moved from a more agential-based theology to a squarely predestinarian one, while Elkaisy-Friemuth proposes the possibility that al-Ghazālī's occasionalism was toned down in some of his later writings. It is difficult to say which shift is more tenable, as al-Ghazālī occasionally shifts between different stylistic approaches based on his text and audience.

Though the predominance of stringent occasionalist passages is telling, al-Ghazālī's position is by no means unique in the history of Islamic theology. Further, not only is this view expressed in al-Ghazālī's *Revival*, but it is featured in the *Moderation* in a more systematically developed form. In fact, the *Moderation* aims to present a view that is consistent with the religious doctrine. This is to say that al-Ghazālī does not formulate his own theory of divine power or omnipotence, but he appropriates ideas that have been central in revelation. Therefore, any Muslim theologian who takes revelation seriously cannot possibly ignore this maxim of boundless divine power. This concept is even recognized, albeit in different forms, in the writings of the *falāsifa*, such as al-Fārābī and Avicenna, who are not nearly as concerned with revelation as al-Ghazālī is. Divine omnipotence is also central to the *Mu'tazila*. Therefore, by stressing the importance of divine power, al-Ghazālī's theology does not necessarily lend itself to a predestinarian line. However, at first glance, his view that all normative values have no intrinsic meaning can lead some, especially the rationalists, to believe that his theology is incompatible with the view of human agency. And if humans are not culpable for their actions (because they have no agency), what do we make of all the soteriological imagery in the Qur'an?

Further, al-Ghazālī rejects the view that there is a self-standing good we may infer through reason. This is a position that is thoroughly defended in the Third Treatise of the *Moderation*, which we explored in the previous chapter. At first glance, this interpretation casts doubt on the possibility that humans are independent knowers of the good. The good and bad reflect what God

ordains; should He command us to act in a way that had otherwise been considered wrong, then it would be good according to His new commandment. Al-Ghazālī defends this thesis in seven Propositions, the first five of which we explored above. I will (re)list these here: (1) God does not have to issue commandments to His servants, (2) He may order them to act in ways contrary to their capacity, (3) He can subject them to pain without compensation, (4) He is not obliged to care for them, (5) He is not obliged to reward righteousness or punish sinfulness, (6) He is not obliged to make His commandments by way of revelation intelligible to reason, (7) He does not have to send messengers; however, should He choose to send messengers, one may confirm their truthfulness through miracles.²⁶⁹

These interrelating propositions present a series of logically connected refutations of the *Muʿtazilī* position on ethical norms and values, like divine justice. We already know what al-Ghazālī has to say about the concept of the obligatory (*wājib*), as well as what constitutes the good and the bad. For the present chapter, it suffices to revisit some of the general ideas. Briefly put, his seven anti-*Muʿtazilī* propositions target the view that God is bound by some sort of obligation toward His subjects, or that His actions must always be oriented to an immutable notion of the good (i.e., justice), which is constantly opposed to the bad. In fact, al-Ghazālī believes that the theological errors espoused by some of his opponents often originate in a misunderstanding of the three essential terms of obligatory, good, and bad.²⁷⁰ Al-Ghazālī corrects this *Muʿtazilī* thesis by redefining the scope of what constitutes the obligatory. Essentially, when one neglects the obligatory, or *al-wājib*, he or she will incur some form of bad consequence, typically in the form

²⁶⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*, 170-95.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

of harm. Since God is the author of all that is good and bad, no harm can befall Him. It follows that God is never bound by the obligatory.²⁷¹

While God is not subject to what is *wājib*, we know that humans are expected to perform their obligations. But what is so compelling about committing to a particular act or refraining from another when these do not have inhering values (especially when these can be overturned)? Does al-Ghazālī's theory of divine justice inadvertently assume some form of ethical relativism? Perhaps, relativism would be too strong a word, but there is no denying that there is a subjectivist element to this aspect al-Ghazālī's ethics, as George F. Hourani notes in his work. The *Mu'tazila* argued that one is *objectively* blameworthy because of the inhering nature of the act. On the contrary, a subjectivist account typically awaits a "judge or observer" (be it a single person or a community) to designate what is lawful action.²⁷² For a group of Greek sophists, justice is determined by a particular community or city. Considering the variety of lands and places, a true subjectivist must expect the variety of customs. This view of "social subjectivism" is also expressed in modern social theories. Now, al-Ghazālī is certainly not a relativist (at least in this last sense), considering that his subjectivism takes on a "theistic form". Al-Ghazālī simply views the obligatory as that which is ordained by God. In this sense, he keeps true to the spirit of orthodox theologians, especially his *Ash'arī* predecessors. However, Hourani observes a subtle, albeit noteworthy, difference. Al-Ghazālī would agree with the *Ashā'ira* that no specific action is universally good for humans except for the fact that is "commanded by God." For Hourani, the "subtle" distinction lies in the fact that the *Ashā'ira* regarded the *wājib* as God's command,

²⁷¹ Ormsby rightly observes that Al-Ghazālī does away with the "question of the ultimate authorship of evil", a question that has been essential for Occidental theodicies. Al-Ghazālī maintains that God originates human suffering and misery. But since none of his actions amount to evil, then there is no true "author" of evil. See: Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought*, 54.

²⁷² Hourani, "Ghazālī on the Ethics of Action," 71-72.

whereas al-Ghazālī expressed the view that something becomes *wājib* when commanded by God.²⁷³ In fact, al-Ghazālī maintains that the refusal to adhere to actions ordained by divine commandments is to forsake the obligatory.²⁷⁴

In the previous chapter, we briefly discussed the two ways in which the obligatory is predicated according to al-Ghazālī. The first is based on revelation and the second reason or the intellect. The point we are about to examine here is crucial to the present thesis, because it gives insight into the categorical distinction between reason and revelation in al-Ghazālī's theology. Scripture is to be taken unquestionably because it is God's word. When scripture tells us that forsaking a certain act will incur definite harm, we can believe (with certainty) that this act is obligatory. In the case of an obligatory act that is predicated on reason, like eating to avoid famine, al-Ghazālī appears more cautious with his tone. As for harm identified through reason, "in this case too the act might be called "obligatory."²⁷⁵ Incidentally, the obligatory act that is predicated on reason appears to be provisional. Now, a few pages later, al-Ghazālī seems hopeful that the "pure intellect" (if not mired by misleading "estimations") can yield accurate knowledge of what is obligatory. But there is an important condition: this intellect must belong to a pious person who has been inspired by God.²⁷⁶ Even then, it is not entirely clear whether this knowledge can tell us anything about the ulterior world. This seems unlikely, however. Earlier, al-Ghazālī suggests that reason can only reveal knowledge concerning worldly events.²⁷⁷

²⁷³ Ibid., 72.

²⁷⁴ The words necessity (or "necessary") and "obligation" are both encompassed in the Arabic word *al-wājib*, as noted by Aladdin M. Yaqub, whose English translation of the *Moderation* I cite in the present thesis. In this specific case, it is more appropriate here to talk about obligation insofar as Al-Ghazālī discusses duties which are ordained by law. However, apart from this passage, I will continue to stick with necessity, as I find it to be the more appropriate word for my discussion on theodicy and the relationship between cause and effect or lack thereof. See: Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*, 158 n.6.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 159.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 165.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 159-60.

We already know that al-Ghazālī regards God as the sole author and judge of justice. But why can't humans properly estimate the difference between good and bad, let alone understand the principles of divine justice independently of scripture? The answer lies in al-Ghazālī's skepticism toward human understanding. Briefly put, al-Ghazālī observes that humans are incapable of reaching a consensus regarding value systems, even though they are endowed with intellect. In fact, he seems to imply that humans diverge on matters of moral principles because they are endowed with an intellect. The intellect, al-Ghazālī claims, typically designates whether something is good or bad depending on whether this thing is agreeable to the person.²⁷⁸ Since humans are enticed by varying purposes and desires, there cannot exist a universal value system through which every person agrees on the meaning of good and bad. An act deemed good by one person may be harmful to the other. For instance, a licentious man may boast about his affair with a married woman as "good" and condemn the person who exposes him as bad. Conversely, the pious man considers the one who exposes adultery as a good person.²⁷⁹ Now, the problem is not so much that humans err in their qualification of the good and bad, but that these qualifications are concomitant to different subjective experiences.

As seen above, these subjective inclinations are not strictly based on objects of carnal or material impulses. Even the intellect can hardly surmount that which is concomitant to a person's purpose. Matters are further complicated when we account for the "estimative faculty", which "estimates" partially. There are three ways in which the estimative faculty is said to err in this sense. In the first instance, al-Ghazālī appears to make cynical generalizations about human nature. He maintains that humans are typically incapable (or perhaps unwilling) of looking beyond their personal purposes, as they are consumed by personal interests. Even if something is concomitant

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 160.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 162.

with the purpose of another person, one will incline to think of this thing as bad if it does not align with his or her interests. The individual “does not pay attention to the other—since everyone by nature is consumed with himself and belittles the others—and hence he judges the act to be absolutely bad.”²⁸⁰ This passage brings us back to the earlier discussion regarding the subjectivist view and the plurality of judges. In this case, al-Ghazālī is wary that individuals can be their own judges, because he does not think that the intellect can rightly estimate what is good for every person. A similar concern is raised in the second and third points. However, in these cases al-Ghazālī is not dismayed by selfishness but is rather concerned with the perceptive or intellectual shortcomings in individuals more generally. The second error is that the estimative faculty is obscured by generalizations. For example, though lying is typically wrong in most cases, a person who was raised to value honesty might forget that, in certain cases, lying can be beneficial for some noble reasons. When we learn to treat certain things as general rules, we might develop certain aversions that are unwarranted under exceptional cases.²⁸¹ Thirdly, we might inadvertently confound unrelated events due to unsettling experiences from the past. For example, a person who has suffered a snakebite in the past might develop aversions to coloured ropes, because he or she would immediately recall the shape of a snake.²⁸²

Though al-Ghazālī states that the intellect may seek to correct these unsolicited aversions, which have no objective grounding outside the mind, the estimative faculty can sometimes have powerful bearings on the intellect, such that it is difficult to imagine a liberated intellect, or a pure intellect (as discussed previously). In a rather cynical tone, al-Ghazālī remarks the following: “Although the matter is clear to the intellect, it should not be ignored; for mankind’s eagerness and

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 163.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 163-64.

²⁸² Ibid., 64.

its reluctance to say, believe, and do certain things are based on such “estimations.””²⁸³ Moreover, the problem of intellectual shortcomings is not only found among the “common people”. Al-Ghazālī remarks that scholars are highly idiosyncratic in their pursuit of truth. “In their theorizing, they do not seek the truth, but they seek tricky proofs to support what they believe to be true through conformism and hearsay.”²⁸⁴ But what about the people who cultivate a pure intellect, one that is free from the chains of the erring estimative faculty? Do they also fall into the same dubious traps? In the *Moderation*, al-Ghazālī has little to say about the scope of this pure intellect, except (as explained above) that those who cultivate this faculty are people guided by God. Perhaps, al-Ghazālī means to say that the intellect can be illuminated through pious actions. Judging from this brief statement alone, however, it is difficult to unpack the implications of this pure intellect in this instance.

Yet, just before his comment on the pure intellect, al-Ghazālī offers a simpler and more practical solution to scholars who want to overcome the erring estimative faculty. He calls on the learned to constantly question their own estimations – that is, to be skeptical and doubtful of what they think they know. These learned people “should not believe anything at first; they should look at the proof and call what follows from it true and what is contrary to it false.”²⁸⁵ But what if one is entirely convinced that their method of proof has led to faultless conclusions? Though al-Ghazālī seems to hover around the question of skepticism in this passage, he does not indicate whether or not he thinks that the reason can overcome its shortcomings, including the looming intrusiveness of the estimative faculty. The question of whether we can truly trust reason is dealt with more expressly in his later writings, especially in his autobiographic work, the *Deliverance from Error*.

²⁸³ Ibid., 165.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 166.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

There, al-Ghazālī explains that he had feared that the faculty of reason could be belied by an even superior faculty, so he opted to remain cautious about what he learned through intellectual means.²⁸⁶ And we are encountering a similar skeptical sentiment in his *Moderation*, though there is a subtle difference. In the *Deliverance*, al-Ghazālī cautions about the possibility of a superior faculty, yet here he tells us that the intellect can be obscured by some defective estimations, which are aspects of the intellect. Regardless, this difference is not sufficient to distract us from the following diverging point in both texts: that the intellect is unfit for determining what constitutes legitimate acts.

Though this is a chapter on theodicy, readers might be wondering why I am treating the question of intellect (and relating subjects, like skepticism) so extensively. The theodical question cannot be duly broached without considering the question of the human intellect and subjectivism. This is largely a question about human culpability, a recurring theme in this thesis from hereon. It is a question about the scope of our actions, the way we understand our actions, and the source which predicates obligatory actions. Simply put, if humans do not have sufficient capacity to know and predicate what is obligatory in itself, what just grounds do we have in holding people morally responsible, let alone punishing them for their wrongful acts? The scope of moral culpability is further complicated when we recall al-Ghazālī's theistic thesis on justice, that God can constantly overturn norms and redefine what is right and also dispense with His creation at will. It becomes even more difficult to assert human agency when humans are described as servile. Now, for al-Ghazālī, this depreciation of the human is animated by the view that everything belongs to God, a position that is consistent with some of the Qur'an's most evocative passages on divine omnipotence. This leads to an even more complicated question, whether humans truly enjoy some

²⁸⁶ Al-Ghazālī, "Deliverance from Error," 24.

substantive degree of agency if everything falls under God's jurisdiction, including our motions, actions, and even will. We will get to this point in the last section of this chapter.

For now, I want to return to the imagery of slavery or servitude al-Ghazālī uses to describe the relationship between God and humans, which we have already examined briefly above. In what sense are humans servile to God? Is this relationship an arbitrary one in the way we understand the relationship between master and slave? There are a few instances in which al-Ghazālī likens us to slaves in the Third Treatise. We already came across one example in the previous chapter, but I will briefly mention it below. In the Fifth Proposition, al-Ghazālī refutes the *Mu'tazilī* claim that God must reward us for committing good acts. Al-Ghazālī points out that the master does not reward slaves for fulfilling their obligations. Similarly, when we talk about God's commands, we should not expect some sort of compensation. Otherwise, the relationship becomes transactional. There is another example worthy of mention, which occurs in the Second Proposition in which al-Ghazālī critiques the *Mu'tazilī* thesis that God only commands humans to commit to acts within their capabilities. Al-Ghazālī contends that the only requisite for a command to exist as such is the *statement* itself. Without the statement, there is no command. Hence, God can command His subjects to act in ways contrary to their capabilities. Similarly, a master can ask the crippled servant to stand, though this is contrary to the servant's capabilities. On this point, al-Ghazālī remains consistent with the *Ash'arī* view on God's relationship to humans. From the *Ash'arī* point of view, it suffices that the command be made known to the commanded. Beyond this point, there is no sense of determining whether the command itself is legitimate based on whether it is agreeable to the capabilities of the one commanded.²⁸⁷ Now, if a master is able to command servants, it is conceivable for God, whose ranking is infinitely superior to His creation, to do so.

²⁸⁷ *Moderation*, 172-77. Hourani notes that this aspect of al-Ghazālī's notion of divine commandment is consistent with the *Ash'arī* doctrine. Whereas the *Mu'tazila* regarded certain actions as good "in themselves," Al-Ghazālī argues

Is al-Ghazālī thinking that humans should avoid thinking of each other as slaves? It is difficult to make this assertion based on the above passage alone, but it is worth noting that this segment of the *Moderation* does allude to some crucial social themes. Recall al-Ghazālī’s analogy of the imagery of the proprietor in the Third Proposition in which he asserts that God can dispense with his creation as He chooses. In certain instances, he sometimes seems to deliberately avoid using the terminology of slavery when drawing parallels with human relations. This time, he gives the example of the proprietor who dispenses with his property and who is entitled to do what he wants with his property. It is evident here that al-Ghazālī uses the figure of the proprietor instead of the master and the slave, because he does not think that one human can have absolute dominion over another.²⁸⁸ This is a more fitting example, because proprietors can destroy their property if they so wish, but a human does not have this absolute dominion over another. Yes, al-Ghazālī uses the example of the master in the previous Proposition, but this is strictly in relation to a command that is issued by the master. He does not specify that a master cannot be unjust. Rather, he merely states that one can utter a command that cannot be met. Though he recognizes that humans can dominate others, he stops short of claiming that a master can never be unjust to his slaves. Property is very often an inanimate object, and al-Ghazālī means to say that a person can never be unjust toward his or her possessions. Further, he thinks that injustice can only be committed against that which does not belong to us. And humans only belong to God. Incidentally, al-Ghazālī invites us to think of God’s creation as His possession. Just as I may have the right to destroy my own tilth, God can do whatever He chooses with us without turning into an oppressor.

that “God’s commanding certain types of act was itself the essential characteristic that made them” obligatory. See: Hourani, “Ghazālī on the Ethics of Action,” 72.

²⁸⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*, 178.

Now, al-Ghazālī recognizes that slavery exists in his times and had also existed previously. And he would have acknowledged that humans impose dominion over others, though it would be surprising if he had argued that dominion of one person over another can be absolute. This would go against the entirety of his occasionalist thinking in which he specifies that only God has mastery over His creation. And though he makes use of the human master as an analogy to explain God's absolute power, he would have acknowledged that the two concepts are ultimately diverging. And when he compares God to the master, the imagery is strictly figurative. A human master relies on slavery to accrue certain ends through the labour of others. Yet, this master cannot be said to have omnipotent powers, because his satisfaction of ends is contingent on the force of others. And we already know that, for al-Ghazālī, contingency is a sign of deficiency. This human master is only so by virtue of his dominion over others, which entails that his power as master remains conditional. Conversely, al-Ghazālī would have also recognized that God is not a master in the above sense; He does not rely on the force of others for the realization of ends. While the master's power is conditional on enslavement of others, God's power is unconditional. He *is* by virtue of Himself, and without His power there is nothingness.

In the remainder of this thesis, we will see that the premise that creation is nothing without God is central to al-Ghazālī's corpus. In the *Foundations of Religious Principles* (*Kitāb qawā'id al-'aqā'id*), al-Ghazālī returns to the figure of the proprietor to illustrate this central premise. He also explains why this proprietary relationship cannot exist between humans. The underlying argument is similar to the one in the *Moderation*: God cannot be unjust to His creation, because everything falls under his dominion. When certain human actions strike us as unjust, this is not only because we perceive these as harmful, but also because there is no everlasting "proprietary" (*mulkan*) relationship between humans. An action can only be harmful when it is committed

against something which does not belong to us. Even though kings and subjects, or masters and slaves, exist, these relationships exist conditionally within the mundane social or political realms.²⁸⁹ Therefore, the proprietary relationship is bound to dissipate upon death or possible severance of authority of the superior over his or her inferior. No human rightly belongs to another human in absolute terms. Conversely, God's relationship to His creation is that of a proprietor, as He creates every existing being (sentient and non-sentient) from nothingness (*'adam*). God's actions toward His servants is not dictated by any external necessities, but rather by His sheer grace.²⁹⁰ I will return to the political implications of this cosmological scheme in the last chapter.

So far, we have seen al-Ghazālī compare the human to a slave insofar as our subordination to God is concerned. Naturally, this aspect of al-Ghazālī's writing can lend itself to a predestinarian interpretation. Coupled with this is the view (explained in the Sixth Proposition) that it is not necessary for humans to discover God and the good through the intellect. It only suffices that God's commands are issued to us, even if we do not grasp the meaning of His commands. This position is concomitant with al-Ghazālī's reflections on the servile nature of worship. It is not required for God's commandments to be thoroughly understood but only to be known at the most superficial level. A rationalist could claim that the minimization of understanding the good (which is fitting for a servile person) is a strain on human agency. The exercise of reason is, for the rationalist, a crucial component of freedom, or agency. Without substantive understanding, there cannot be true agency, as the person acts not out of deliberation but coercion. Though al-Ghazālī insists on this view that we are in servile relation to God, his theology does not preclude a substantive notion of human agency. In fact, he attempts to position a theory of human agency in his general theology without compromising the theistic view. In so doing, al-Ghazālī develops a

²⁸⁹ "Kitāb Qawā'id al-'aqā'id," 117.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

thoroughgoing theodicy. Before exploring how al-Ghazālī explains this theory of human agency, there are a few preliminary points about divine power we need to examine first.

Section II – *God’s essence and His attributes*

We cannot understand al-Ghazālī’s theodicy without broaching the way he defines divine power. It is in this theistic theme that we find answers to central theodical questions, namely how human agency is possible despite God’s omnipotence. We also encounter the question of whether human agency is possible despite God’s foreknowledge, which is one critical aspect of divine power. In other words, does the view that God knows every act that will occur in this world necessarily imply predestinarianism?

If we want to understand the basics of al-Ghazālī’s theory of divine power, a good starting point is his notion of divine attributes. These attributes allow us to understand the ways in which God exercises His power over His creation. In the *Incoherence* and the *Moderation*, al-Ghazālī adopts a faithful *Ash‘arī* approach to explain the varying attributes. In brief, al-Ghazālī grapples with the question of whether the idea of multiple attributes is compatible with the idea of an indivisible essence, especially since one of the central tenets of Islam is God’s indivisible oneness. Moreover, for newcomers to Islamic thought, this theme would prove a useful introduction to one of the most crucial debates in the history of medieval Islamic philosophy. Without getting lost in the technical terms of this very peculiar theological debate, I hope readers will come out from this section with a firm grasp of the most crucial philosophical and theological terminology available in al-Ghazālī’s time. Further, it is within this same context that al-Ghazālī develops a theory of human agency, which will be duly examined in the subsequent section.

All Muslims, as well as the *falāsifa* al-Ghazālī accuses as covert unbelievers, will passionately defend the view of God’s indivisible essence. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the scope of this indivisibleness had been subject to a series of interpretative (and even sectarian) battles, though these exegetical battles were never as politically impassioned as the ones to emerge from the Christological debates which wreaked havoc to Europe and the Mediterranean world. However, this specific debate concerning essence (or *jawhar* in Arabic) is not without its own contentious implications. The refutation of an allegedly wrongful interpretation is often the prelude to the accusation of unbelief. While a medieval Muslim theologian or a philosopher may appear to defend the notion of divine unity, for example, his intellectual adversaries were likely always ready to pick out a subtle detail from the author’s own words that could be deemed logically incompatible with the idea of a perfect God. Al-Ghazālī’s careful (and sometimes pedantic) discussion of divine essence and attributes suggests that he had to tread carefully in this sort of sectarian environment. As with the *Ashā’ira*, al-Ghazālī expressed the view that one may describe a number of divine attributes (namely seven) without compromising one’s faithfulness to the Islamic premise of God’s indivisible essence. In the *Moderation*, al-Ghazālī states that theologians and commoners may use the following terminology to speak of His seven attributes. These attributes merely denote different ways to describe different aspects of His omnipotence. The philosophers (and some of the *Mu’tazila*) have eschewed this approach to naming God on the basis that it undermines the notions of God’s indivisibleness and His anterior existence. It would be wrong, so they claim, to maintain that He has multiple attributes, as categorical division undermines the notion of an indivisible God whose essence is singular. However, al-Ghazālī is cautious with his wording, suggesting that these seven ways of describing God’s being are not

ways of denoting *essences*, but are rather attributes or traits. In so doing, one remains committed, so he claims, to the view of an indivisible divine essence.²⁹¹

The bulk of al-Ghazālī's *Ash 'arī* critique of the theologies of the *Mu'tazila* and the *falāsifa* revolves around the attributes of divine knowledge (*'ilm*) and will (*irāda*), which we will examine closely in this section. In response to the philosophers, al-Ghazālī states that God is knowledgeable of all existing and non-existing beings, rather than merely having knowledge of Himself. The existing beings, which are all subject to God's knowledge, are split into two categories, the "anteriorly eternal" and the "occurrent". God's "essence" and "attributes" fall into the category of the anterior. Further, since God necessarily knows all existing things, He must also know of his own essence and traits. Most importantly, al-Ghazālī maintains that there is no end to God's knowledge. While existing beings are finite, God has the capacity to render an infinite amount of non-existing beings into existence. This entails that God is knowledgeable of potential beings, which, while currently non-existing, could be willed into existence.²⁹²

Al-Ghazālī anticipates that his opponents could accuse him of describing God with notions that are external to His being. This accusation could be levelled against him because he describes God's essence and His attributes separately. To some, especially al-Ghazālī's philosophical opponents, this conflict between a single essence and multiple attributes could present a possible disjuncture within God. But when one utters the name God, al-Ghazālī claims, one necessarily recalls His essence and His attributes simultaneously. This is the same for created beings. Al-Ghazālī reminds us that this categorization is an inescapable feature of speech. When we identify a person by name, such as Zayd, this Zayd cannot be disassociated from his hands. However, it would be wrong to conflate the person of Zayd with his hands. Zayd is not, in essence, his hand,

²⁹¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*, 75.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 104.

but he also cannot be separated from it. The middle ground, which al-Ghazālī claims to espouse, is to understand a being’s essence along with the attributes that “exist” (*qā’ima*) within it. Therefore, God is characterized by His essence and the seven attributes discussed above. Similarly, when we think of Zayd, we think of a being with an indivisible essence along with attributes, such as having hands.²⁹³

As readers have seen so far, al-Ghazālī’s defense of *Ash‘arī* attributionism is grounded on a thoroughgoing semantic and linguistic discussion. This discussion is also evidently an epistemological one, as it is concerned with how the human intellect grasps the world of intelligibles and knowledge of God. Perhaps the richest example of this peculiar of linguistic-theological writing is observed in a later treatise, *The Best Means in Explaining God’s Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names* (*Al-Maqṣad al-asnā fī sharḥ asmā’ Allāhu al-ḥusnā*). Here, al-Ghazālī outlines a detailed refutation of the philosophical critique of attributes by demarcating between the external world and human speech. One of the fundamental questions he raises in this text is whether God’s essence is coterminous with His attributes, which are human words used to describe His capacities. Al-Ghazālī distinguishes between the named thing and the concept itself, asking whether the being itself is the same as the name used to describe it. He gives the example of the sky, which exists in itself, but also exists in our intellects. When the image of the sky is “imprinted in our sight” (*tanṭabi‘ fī abṣārinā*) it makes its way into our “minds” (*adhhānunā*), and it is then assembled by our “imagination” (*khayālunā*). Al-Ghazālī argues that the representation of the being would remain in our imagination even if its existence were to come to an end; it suffices that we came to know it exteriorly at some point in time.²⁹⁴ The point of this is to illustrate the discrepancy between

²⁹³ Ibid., 135-36.

²⁹⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-maqṣad al-asnā*, 9.

what exists externally to us and what exists in our perception (including what we name according to our perception).

According to al-Ghazālī, words are used to signify existing beings we come to know through perception. Hence, the name we use to identify an existent is not necessarily coterminous with the existent, as the former serves as “signification” (*dalāla*) for the latter. Al-Ghazālī also claims that this act of signification is indicative of “human choice” (*al-ikhtiyār al-insānī*).²⁹⁵ While he does not explicitly outline the implications of this choice in this instance – i.e., (whether it is absolutely free or not), al-Ghazālī describes the act of naming as an artifice made possible by human volition. In every process of signifying, we find an author (the one who names), the process of naming, and that which is being named.²⁹⁶ This serves to illustrate that the object being named is independent of the discursive act, which is grounded on the human choice to apprehend and interpret an external, objective world. To this, al-Ghazālī continues, some may object that the process of applying names to God’s attributes is erroneous, because names are “occurrent” (*hāditha*) whereas God’s existence is “primordial” (*fī l-azal*). Since there were no “utterance” (*lafīz*) and “utterer” (*lāfīz*) during the primordial state, the attributes we use to understand God’s power are posterior to Him. Al-Ghazālī refutes this position on the basis that the divine attributes being described have existed primordially, but languages (which are occurrent) facilitate our understanding of these eternal attributes. Whether we came to name them or not, the attributes have constantly existed independently of our discursive acts.²⁹⁷

Al-Ghazālī’s defense of divine attributes showcases significant appropriation of logical and linguistic methods, yet neither discipline is the prime object or end of his theological thinking.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 10.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 11.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 19.

Though what I just said is evident, I believe it merits mention, because it is rather easy to get lost in the technicalities of theological discourse, especially al-Ghazālī's. The logical and syllogistic moves observed across al-Ghazālī's texts are frequent. The main object in al-Ghazālī's theological treatises, which we should keep our sight on, is to faithfully defend and interpret basic Islamic maxims for the community of the faithful. If we focus specifically on this aspect of his work, al-Ghazālī appears as a very conventional writer for his time. More on this will follow in Chapter 6. In fact, al-Ghazālī's appropriation of the attributionist thesis underlies a defense of God's omnipotence, as opposed to compromising the view of divine essence, as his intellectual adversaries would contend.

As mentioned above, some of the theological and philosophical schools maintain that God's "attributes" cannot be primordial, or anterior. These groups contend that God, who is primordial, must have created these attributes at a certain point. In the *Moderation*, al-Ghazālī denies his opponents' view that God's attributes are non-anterior but are rather created in time. These contrarians typically deny the anteriority of three attributes, knowledge, will, and speech. Yet al-Ghazālī observes that these opponents (namely the *Mu'tazila* and *Karāmiyya*) do not deny the anteriority of life and power in God, as this would completely undermine their own position on divine omnipotence.²⁹⁸ Al-Ghazālī's strongest objection is raised against those who deny God's anterior will. Some skeptics speculate, so he claims, that, if the will is eternal, then it must immediately precede the act of creation. Therefore, if God's will is anterior, so is His creation. This would mean that God is not the only anterior being but so is His creation, because will and act (i.e., creation) are always proximately conjoined. As long as the will is unhinged, it must immediately carry out the act that is willed, creation. Why would God delay His will if He is

²⁹⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*, 145-46.

unhinged?²⁹⁹ Lastly, he challenges the anti-anthropomorphic view which denies God's anterior speech. One may raise the question about how God would address the prophets, as He does in the Qur'an, prior to having created them. In other words, how can one maintain, as al-Ghazālī does, the position that the words in the Qur'an are eternal when they address specific historical instances? A further question which arises here is: how can God issue commands when the addressee had not been created? From the perspective of al-Ghazālī's opponents, His being a *speaker* follows the occasioning of His creation. Since it follows an occasioned creation (i.e., humanity), then divine speech itself must be occasioned according to the above position.³⁰⁰

Al-Ghazālī responds by reiterating that God's being cannot include occasioned things. He states that God had always known (anteriorly) that the world would come to exist through His volition. Al-Ghazālī refers to this knowledge as boundless:

The Creator (Exalted is He) has known since eternity that the world comes into existence at the time of its origination. This knowledge is a single cognition that entails in anterior eternity the knowledge that the world would later be, at the time of its occurrence that it is, and after that it was. These states of the world follow each other, while this cognition remains evident to God and unchanging. Rather, what changes is the states of the world.³⁰¹

These three "states" of the world occur in sequence of one another. However, God's knowledge of these occurrences remains anterior. His knowledge had always consisted of knowing that the world would traverse through this threefold change.³⁰² As for the anterior will, God's will to create the world had always existed, but He willed creation for a later point in time. Al-Ghazālī stresses that God's act of creation had always been willed, maintaining that the will is crucial for realization of an act, such as creation. Though al-Ghazālī's discussion on divine foreknowledge serves as a refutation of the thesis that creation is primordial, we can extend this discussion further. This

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 146.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Ibid., 146-47.

discussion gives us partial insight into his theory of human agency. One can always ask, since God's will is primordial, does this not lead us to some form of predestinarian conclusion? Al-Ghazālī means to argue that the divine will is ever present, even if He effectuates His will at later points. But could this also imply that the human actions which follow through time had been predetermined by way of God's primordial will? Most importantly, is there no sense that humans have some independent agency in the course of determining their actions?

Al-Ghazālī is clear that there is no *absolute* agency except for God's. So, we cannot begin to speak of human agency if we do not address the first agent. Some of his elementary ideas about agency are found in the *Incoherence*, namely when he responds to a faction of the *falāsifa* who deny the existence of a divine will. For al-Ghazālī, this denial is incompatible with their proclamation that God is an agent insofar as he is the world's creator. What follows is a categorical discussion about who (or what) is considered an "agent" and what constitutes a volitional "act". The *falāsifa* remark that attributes (including the will) detract from God's perfection. If there is a will, so they claim, it follows that He seeks to compensate for some imperfection or deficiency. When the *falāsifa* define God as an agent, they only mean accidentally, because His capacity as creator is a necessary consequence of His perfection. In fact, the philosophers are adamant to reject all attributes, including the will, as they shun the use of anthropomorphic categories or depictions of God.³⁰³ Al-Ghazālī challenges these presuppositions by redefining the meaning of an agent and the act. He defines the agent as the "one from whom the act proceeds".³⁰⁴ Therefore, one would be misled to think that a lamp is the agential "maker" of light or that a human is the agential maker of shadows. In both cases, there is no specific will to produce the act. For a being to be considered a "maker", which presupposes agency, it is insufficient to identify it as the "cause". Its function as

³⁰³ Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 55.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

a cause of an event must be preceded by “will” and “choice”. We cannot soundly speak of agency in the case of walls or stones, or any “inanimate” being for that matter, because will and choice are found exclusively in sentient beings. The problem with this philosophical claim, according to al-Ghazālī, is that it confounds causality (or perceived causality) with agency, such that fire enacts heat or that walls enact shadows.³⁰⁵ It is very likely that he had Avicenna in mind here, because the example of fire and burning features in Avicenna’s definition of the agent and agential powers.

In the *Physics of the Healing*, Avicenna identifies the agent as one of the four possible causes (the others being, “matter, form, and end”). For Avicenna, the agent does not require any volitional capacity. The agent is principally the thing that is “the principle of another’s motion.” Further, motion need not be willed; it is merely the principle of rendering something from “potency to act.” Avicenna proceeds to provide the example of a physician curing another person. Since the physician is other than the patient (as he is external to his patient), he is said to be the agent in this instance of setting in motion the curing of his patient.³⁰⁶ But one can merely point out that this analogous case requires a volitional act, as the physician is acting within a rational capacity. This is to say that he is not compelled to heal his patient by some natural occurrence. In a subsequent chapter, however, Avicenna provides examples of agency arising from natural forces with no indication of rational volition. We see this in his distinction between “simple” and “compound” agency – that is the difference between a single or collective force rendering motion in another existent. On the point of compound agents, Avicenna points to the motion of hunger that is propelled by senses and desire. But, more interestingly for the purpose of our comparison, Avicenna points to fire and burning. The relationship between fire and burning is an insightful example, because it is applicable to both “actual” and “potential” agency. In the first instance, fire

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 56.

³⁰⁶ Avicenna, *The Physics of The Healing - Books I & II*, 64.

is *actual* because it alters another object through its natural combustive effect, or *potential* in relation to an object that it will necessarily burn upon exposure.³⁰⁷

Note al-Ghazālī's radical break from the Avicennian definition of the agent. This difference serves to illustrate al-Ghazālī's occasionalist attitude on the question of necessary causality. Al-Ghazālī buttresses his occasionalist thesis by way of a categorical distinction between agent and inanimate being. Al-Ghazālī states that the intellect readily recognizes this distinction between agential beings and inanimate beings when we raise the issue of culpability. When there is an accident, for example, the intellect immediately inclines to singling out the source of agency in the given chain of events. This is to say that the intellect identifies agency where there is will and choice. If a person were to willfully throw another person in fire, it would be absurd to claim that the fire is responsible for the person's death on the basis of its combustive properties. While figures of speech allow us to say that fire burns or that swords kill, the intellect allows us to identify an agent who enacts a certain event, even if this agent's action is succeeded by the inanimate object in the given chain of events. The person had *chosen* to throw the other into the fire, even if they did not with their hands. However, when we say that fire is a "killer" (*al-qātil*) in regular speech, we can only mean this metaphorically to signify fire's harmful properties in the context of this event. This is to say that fire was used to kill this person. However, the true killer, the one with the agency to enact the murder, is the one who engaged in the act of shoving the other into the fire.³⁰⁸ It follows that an agent must be able to will.

Al-Ghazālī's defense of the *Ash'arī* attributes presents us with a detailed account of divine omnipotence. We are confronted with the position that God foreknows all things and that nothing can escape His command, as He reigns absolutely through His limitless power and will. Al-Ghazālī

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 76.

³⁰⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 58-59.

tells us that agential capacity is only possible through will. Based on the above definition of agency, it seems that al-Ghazālī would admit that humans are agents in some capacity, given that his evocative case is that of a person choosing to throw another into fire. But the question that remains is whether humans are endowed with choice? And if God determines everything, does al-Ghazālī concede that human action is lacking some degree of free will and power?

Judging from the above passages, it is clear that al-Ghazālī intends to depict a cosmology wherein God reigns supreme. This brings us back to the last chapter wherein we examined al-Ghazālī's refutation of the *falāsifa*'s cosmogony. The *falāsifa* maintain that the cosmos is governed by a set of immutable laws and that God could not have possibly created an alternative order. For al-Ghazālī, this naturalist thesis is alarming for a number of theological (as well as logical) reasons, namely for its tacit denial that God is active in the making of this world. If we dig deeper into his critique, we get the impression that al-Ghazālī is not only unsettled by the *falāsifa*'s denial of the original act of creation but also the way they exclude God's agential capacity more generally. This brings us back to the original theme of this thesis. In the introduction, I had stated that the *falāsifa* express a notion of an independent human intellect in view of their belief in an immutable universe. Perhaps God's only real contribution to our social and political affairs is that He endowed us with reason through which we come to assess this world. But even this is hardly a contribution as God's creative capacity, according to the *falāsifa*, is driven by necessity rather than a graceful will. In opposition to this necessitarian thesis, al-Ghazālī seeks to defend the basic Muslim tenet that God's power is unconditional. By reinstating God's will, which he does by emphasizing His creative actions, al-Ghazālī inevitably minimizes absolute freedom in human acts while asserting our need to rely on revelation and divine grace.

Section III – *Human agency through “acquisition” (kasb)*

In Ghazālīan and *Ash‘arī* theology, the discussion of God’s will is often succeeded by the question of human agency. In the previous section, we went over al-Ghazālī’s defense of *Ash‘arī* attributionism according to its sequential order from his corpus. At this point it is fitting to examine his considerations on human agency. As I had mentioned previously, medieval Muslim theologians typically ask the question of human agency in relation to God’s omnipotence. This is no less true of al-Ghazālī, who seems to admit that the reconciliation between the two notions demands a high degree of philosophical activity. Al-Ghazālī recognizes the difficulty of maintaining the two concepts simultaneously. If one were to concede that sentient beings have sufficient command over their own actions, then we are confronted with another dilemma, the idea that power is found in more than one place. Some would object to this on the ground that power must be localized in one place. In the case where power is multiplied, one power would have to nullify another, thus rendering the nullified power into non-power. But al-Ghazālī exclaims that it would be erroneous to conclude from this skeptical analysis that sentient beings do not have power (*qudra*) over their own actions.³⁰⁹ The fact that revelation expects humans to commit to certain actions is highly suggestive of a significant level of agential power on the part of humans. In Chapter 5, I will explain how his view of human agency plays out more generally in his political theory, especially when he considers the possibility of moral culpability. The fact that al-Ghazālī recognizes that humans are culpable for their conduct, a line that is familiar to readers of the Qur’an, is only further proof that he thought it was theologically pressing to articulate a theory of human agency.³¹⁰

Below, we will turn to a number of key passages from his cosmogonic literature to showcase the

³⁰⁹ *Moderation*, 92.

³¹⁰ The Qur’an (6:164) is strict about moral culpability on an individual basis as we find in the following statement: “Every soul draws the meed of its acts on none but itself: no bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another” (*wa-lā taksibu nafsin illā ‘alayhā wa-lā tazirū wāziratun wizra ukhrā*).

salience of human agency in his thought. Additionally, this section will seek to provide a general overview of what al-Ghazālī intends to tell us about our human volition as well as the intellectual origins of his position.

As mentioned above, De Cillis believes al-Ghazālī's critique of the *Mu'tazilī* position on human volition underlies a strong predestinarian view. However, the passage to which she refers from the *Revival* makes no direct reference to the *Mu'tazilī* thesis of human volition. This passage simply presents God as the primary author of all created beings.³¹¹ Further, De Cillis argues that al-Ghazālī maintains the *Ash'arī* "view of God as the only Creator and unique Agent and Determiner."³¹² It is important to mention that the main *Ash'arī* critique of the *Mu'tazila* is levelled against their idea that God's actions can be predicted, as I explained above. Al-Ghazālī and the *Ashā'ira* maintain that God's limitless powers render Him free from predetermined principles, such as justice or the good. The good is contingent on His will alone. However, this statement regarding God's omnipotence should not be interpreted as a full rejection of human agency, as De Cillis' reading suggests. She rightly claims that the *Ash'arī* doctrine regards all forms of good and justice as being contingent on God's power without explicitly falling into wholesale theory of predestinarianism. The relationship between human autonomy and divine power is a very complicated matter in *Ash'arī* as well as Ghazālīan thought.

The *Ashā'ira* believed that humans acquired their capacity for volitional autonomy through God's grace. But this is not the same for al-Ghazālī, according to De Cillis, who appropriates the concept of *kasb* for different purposes. The evidence she provides is that al-Ghazālī does not firmly maintain that God bestows humans with volitional autonomy, a point the *Ashā'ira* are keen to stress in their theodicy. Rather, she thinks al-Ghazālī emphasizes God's capacity as creator of all

³¹¹ De Cillis, *Free Will and Predestination in Islamic Thought*, 118.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 119.

things, including the capacity to empower humans. De Cillis admits that this is only a “subtle” difference.³¹³ If taken alone, this subtle passage offers inadequate evidence, as al-Ghazālī’s theory of *kasb* is not only outlined in the *Revival*, but it appears in a more philosophical context in an earlier text, the *Moderation*. Surprisingly, the *Moderation*’s main principles remain underexplored in De Cillis’ interpretation, even though this text unarguably offers the most thorough explanation of acquisition in al-Ghazālī’s theological corpus. Further, one must bear in mind that al-Ghazālī often repeats the same cosmological and theological arguments across his texts. Many times, these concepts are summarized in later texts when they had been thoroughly explored in earlier ones. In fact, since the *Revival* is presented as a guideline for the pursuit of piety, one that applies indistinguishably to both scholar and commoner, one should not expect this text to yield a thoroughgoing philosophical justification of theodical themes, which is why I think it is much more useful to dig into his *Moderation* or the *Incoherence* for this topic. At times, al-Ghazālī stresses divine omnipotence to remind readers of their fallibility and their servitude to God. A similar observation is noted by Marmura, who argues that the *Revival* outlines “the practical conduct all Muslims should follow if they are to escape perdition and gain salvation in the hereafter.” In the *Revival*, the theological discussions of God’s omnipotence are secondary to this practical, ascetic purpose.³¹⁴

As I will explain in Chapter 6, al-Ghazālī persistently warns commoners against occupying themselves with unnecessary philosophical or theological disputation, an idea that is loaded with political implications. It is crucial for commoners to focus on obedience to revelation, but he is not stringently rejecting philosophical or theological inquiry into the cosmological order, provided one is worthy of such undertakings. In fact, al-Ghazālī pursues these types of questions in detail in his

³¹³ Ibid., 120-21.

³¹⁴ Marmura, “Ghazali and Ash‘arism Revisited,” 102.

theological treatise, the *Moderation*. Further, in *Foundations of the Revival*, the same text De Cillis references, al-Ghazālī suggests that the fact that God is the creator of all “motions” (*ḥarakāt*) does not negate the fact that humans have “power” (*qudra*) or sufficient command over their own actions. Al-Ghazālī states that God creates the capacity to enact actions through “choice” (*ikhtiyār*) and endows persons with the capacity to choose (*mukhtār*). He provides this power to humans, who become willing beings by way of “acquisition” (*iktisāb*). Therefore, al-Ghazālī concludes that a person’s capacity to perform actions is within his or her command. Hence, the difference between “tremor” (*raʿda*) and an action committed by choice is relevant. Though God is the creator of human agential powers, He has determined that humans will become agential beings.³¹⁵ Therefore, our freedom to decide and pursue certain actions as opposed to others does not conflict with His creative capacity; rather, it is merely a product of His creative omnipotence.

Typically, al-Ghazālī outlines some of the most crucial aspects of his cosmogonic view in the form of a hypothetical dialogue with adversaries, who are presented as either hardline predestinarian thinkers or dangerously unorthodox *falāsifa*. Al-Ghazālī briefly mentions that skeptics of human autonomy could point to the logical fact that power cannot possibly be localized in more than one place. If humans are agents of their actions, how can one simultaneously assert that God is responsible for all acts? This skeptical view, which al-Ghazālī aims to rectify, is informed by the view that power must be localized within one entity. In the case where power is multiplied, one power would have to nullify another, thus rendering the nullified power into non-power (this being the skeptical position toward human autonomy). However, for al-Ghazālī, it would be equally erroneous to conclude from this skeptical analysis that sentient beings do not have power over their own actions. When we take the case of humans, there is evidence of an

³¹⁵ Al-Ghazālī, “Qawāʾid,” 141.

agential force within them, otherwise revealed laws would be purposeless. These revealed laws are commandments for humans to perform and refrain from specified actions.³¹⁶ Al-Ghazālī's suggestion here is that the Qur'an's commandments to humans, which are perfectly in line with their powers, reveals a significant degree of agential capacity.

It is important to note that al-Ghazālī is not only alarmed by the predestinarians' conceptual shortcoming but also by the dangerous outcome of their normative views. Briefly put, the predestinarian does away with human culpability by conferring all actions to God. On a number of occasions, al-Ghazālī directly names the *Jabriyya*, an amalgamation of thinkers who emphasized predestination and who denied the possibility of human power over their actions by attributing all action to God alone. Consequently, this belief treats all actions as involuntary, as though human actions are all akin to tremors.³¹⁷ Al-Ghazālī offers us a clear summary of the *Jabriyya* position in his *Forty Principles*:

They conceive that good and evil [*sharr*] are from God, and they do conceive that any [voluntary] action [originates in] themselves, as they do did conceive this of inanimate things. In so doing, they sought to elevate God Exalted from incapacity, [but] they erred when they attributed injustice to Him. (*wa-ra'ū al-khayr wa-l-sharr min Allāh, wa-lam yarū min anfusihim fī 'lan, kamā lam yarū min al-jamādāt. Arādū bi-dhālik tanzīh Allāh ta'ālā 'an al-'ajz fa-dallū, idh nasabū al-zūlm ilayh*).³¹⁸

Al-Ghazālī accuses the *Jabriyya* of wanting to “exculpate” (*yubarri'ūn*) humans of their wrongdoing.³¹⁹ Opposed to the *Jabriyya* are the *Mu'tazila* who propose the unthinkable, that

³¹⁶ *Moderation*, 94-95.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

³¹⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *K. al-arba'īn*, 11. A similar line is expressed by Al-Shahrastānī, who argues that the *Jabriyya* wrongly conflate human action with the accidents of inanimate objects (*al-jamādāt*), which would be no different from stating that “the tree bore fruit, the water flowed, the rock moved, the sun rose and set, the sky clouded and it rained, the earth shook and [became] fertile, and so forth.” (*athmarat al-shajra, wa-jarā al-mā', wa-taḥarrak al-ḥajar, wa-ṭala 'at al-shams wa-gharabat, wa-taghayyamat al-samā' wa-amṭarat, wa-ihtazzat al-arḍ wa-anbatat, ilā ghayr dhālik*). See: Al-Shahrastānī, *Al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*, 162.

³¹⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *K. al-arba'īn*, 11.

human wrongdoing is not contingent on God's power.³²⁰ For al-Ghazālī, this last position leads to two major errors. First, the *Mu'tazila* deny God's sovereignty over the universe. Second, they wrongly assume that humans have absolute volition over their own actions when an observation of nature demonstrates otherwise. Al-Ghazālī maintains that sentient beings perform innumerable actions whose implications are unwilled. He invites us to take a look at nature and observe the numerous ways in which creatures perform sophisticated actions without the capacity for reason. His most evocative example is the spider who can spin sophisticated webs whose geometric shapes are bewildering to geometers. Al-Ghazālī exclaims that it is obvious that spiders have no knowledge of geometry to effectively plan and project the outcome of their webs.³²¹ He also recalls the ways in which bees construct their honeycombs by grouping hexagonal blocks side by side. From the perspective of a geometer, the assembling of a honeycomb is suggestive of a higher (divine) intelligence in that the use of hexagons is the most practical form of geometric assembly, one that we cannot expect a non-rational being to ever contemplate. As with the circle, the hexagon's shape is spacious, but unlike it, it does not leave superfluous space when it is placed against the same shape. Circles placed against circles would leave gaps, but this is impossible for hexagons against hexagons. While bees have no understanding of these geometric rules, their actions are indicative of the most practical truth, which, to al-Ghazālī, is proof of God's sovereignty over His creation.³²²

Through the spiders and bees examples, al-Ghazālī illustrates that some actions are clearly outside of a sentient being's volition. The world as we know it, he tells us, is constituted by

³²⁰ In *Forty Principles*, al-Ghazālī draws a careful distinction between the volitionist thought of the *Qadariyya* and the *Mu'tazila*. Whereas the latter only believed that wrongdoing and injustice are effectuated by humans, the *Qadariyya* maintain the bolder claim that all human action is within one's volition. See: *ibid.*, 11-12.

³²¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*, 91.

³²² *Ibid.*, 91-92.

wondrous creations that bewilder onlookers.³²³ Yet this anti-volitionist sentiment is coupled with the fact that somewhere within a proper cosmogony, one must recognize human volition. Additionally, the purpose of al-Ghazālī's assessment of the two extreme poles of *Jabriyya* and *Mu'tazila* is his most illustrative way of charting out his own middle ground position. The *Jabriyya* refuse to admit responsibility for their actions, while the *Mu'tazila* (and presumably other rationalists) think highly of human nature. At times, al-Ghazālī's language against the *Mu'tazila* seems a little more disparaging, as he accuses them of undermining the notion of God's magnificence by treating humans as "contributors" (*musahimūn*) to His sovereignty. Whether he disapproves of the *Mu'tazila* more than the *Jabriyya* is but a minor point. We do know, however, that his assessment of both schools, both of which he presents as unpromisingly opposed, informs his polemical method to invite the reader to consider the path of the *Sunnī* (orthodox) interpretation, which, he claims, aims at the middle ground between the two extremes. The "people of the tradition" (*ahl al-sunna*) seek "moderation in belief" (*al-iqtiṣād fī l-i'tiqād*) in all doctrinal matters. In this case, the moderate position upholds God's absolute omnipotence alongside the volition of humans. The point is to illustrate that two powers can harmoniously coexist within the same instance.³²⁴ This is a position he would later express in the *Forty Principles*:

As for the people of the tradition and consensus, they intermediated between [the volitionists and predestinarians], as they do not deny choice for themselves in totality, nor do they deny the dominion and omnipotence of God Exalted in totality; rather, they said: "the actions of servants are from God in one sense and from the servants [themselves] in another. And the servant has the choice in enacting his actions." (*wa-ammā ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamā'a, fatawassatū baynahum, fa-lam yanfū al-ikhtiyār 'an anfusihim bi-l-kullīyya, wa-lam yanfū al-qadā' wa-l-qadar 'an Allāh ta'ālā bi-l-kullīyya, bal qālū: af'āl al-'ibād min Allāh min wajh, wa-min al-'abd min wajh, wa-li-l-'abd ikhtiyār fī tājād af'āl*).³²⁵

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *K. al-arba'in*, 12.

At some crucial junctures in his *Moderation*, al-Ghazālī appears to agree with the *Jabriyya*. At one point, he exclaims that God is the exclusive “creator” (*khāliqan*) and “originator” (*mukhtari‘an*) of all actions. If He were to decide to move the hand of His servant (the human), then He could do so without conferring him or her with the ability to do so voluntarily. Consequently, the servant’s movement would be akin to a tremor, suggesting that the “motion” (*ḥaraka*) itself was involuntary. Though the tremor resonates with the *Jabriyya* view, al-Ghazālī introduces a principle that precludes us from reading his text along predestinarian lines. He tells us that, just as God can originate compulsive motions within humans, this omnipotence allows Him to create and confer a voluntary power to humans to perform such motions.³²⁶ On this point, Wolfson observes that, in this relationship between God and humans, “man [is] also an agent of the act, though not in the same sense in which God is its agent.”³²⁷ The motion itself and its voluntary power are both objects of His creation. Therefore, while we tend to cognitively regard persons as authors of their own actions, al-Ghazālī warns that, according to strict metaphysical understanding, titles of *creator* and *originator* should remain coterminous with divine power. This is a clear indication that al-Ghazālī never intends to deny human volition. Rather, he is unsettled by the misuse of honorific titles, which in the squarest sense, should remain for God. One who is mindful of this difference, as al-Ghazālī presents himself, must concede human power as a relative power, one that is received through “acquisition” (*kasb*).³²⁸

According to Marmura,

Ghazali affirms repeatedly the basic premise that underlies the Ash‘arite doctrine of acquisition, namely, that divine power is the direct creator [of] each and every human act. This, as Ghazali explicitly states, includes human choice.³²⁹

³²⁶ *Moderation*, 94-95.

³²⁷ Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, 709.

³²⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*, 94-95.

³²⁹ Marmura, “Ghazali and Ash‘arism Revisited,” 110.

Marmura is right. Little is novel about al-Ghazālī's definition of *kasb*, which had already been articulated by key *Ash'arī* thinkers, who also considered it as a moderate position between the views of volitionists and predestinarians. As al-Ghazālī would later argue, al-Bāqillānī had stated that the reasonable person (*al-'āqil*) should be able to distinguish between uncontrollable bodily spasms – i.e., tremors – and a person's decision to move their own hand. Nevertheless, al-Bāqillānī stresses that this volitional capacity to move one's own bodily organs is acquired from God. In this relationship, God is the "Creator" (*khāliq*) and the human the "acquirer" (*muktasib*). The point is that, within this relationship, the human can never be the real creator of his or her own volition, but it is not a radical rejection of human volition.³³⁰ Hence, there is a difference between suggesting that we do not create the capacity for our own volition and denying this volition altogether. For the *Ash'arī* and al-Ghazālī, only the former is true.

According to al-Baghdādī, those who reject the principle of acquisition (or *kasb*) tacitly assume that, prior to coming into being, "our actions were in the state of nonexistence" (*af'alunā kānat fī ḥāl 'adamiḥā*). Such a position is upheld by the *Qadariyya*, who emphasized absolute human free will. In response, al-Baghdādī remarks that God fashions the possibility of human actions through His limitless power (*bi-qudrat Allāh*).³³¹ Further, he names three schools of thought which hold differing views on the scope of human actions. The first is the school to which he belongs, that is the orthodox one (*ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamā'a*). Its followers uphold that all human actions are acquired through divine grace. The second is that of the *Jahmiyya*, a group al-Ghazālī also refutes, who proclaim that humans lack command over their own actions. What appears to be their "volitional movements [is simply] akin to the movements of veins" (*wa-inna ḥarakatahum*

³³⁰ Al-Bāqillānī, *Al-inṣāf*, 41.

³³¹ Al-Bāghdādī, *Uṣūl*, 156.

al-ikhtiyāriyya bi-manzilat ḥarakat al-ʿurūq). The last is that of the *Qadariyya*, which I just explained above. Al-Baghdādī argues that the *Qadariyya* regard humans as makers of their own powers and that God is entirely disengaged from what unfolds in the created world. For the more moderate *Qadariyya*, this implies that humans decide their own movements based on an independent volitional capacity. But the most extreme among them believe that God is even disengaged from determining “accidents” (*aʿrāḍ*) which concern His creation, such as colours, motions, life and death, and so forth.³³²

Note that al-Ghazālī would later build on the same attempt to harmonize the opposing schools of the predestinarians and the volitionists. According to Ormsby, this “middle course” was originated by the *Ashāʿira*, who sought to situate themselves between the *Muʿtazila*’s position on free choice and the *Jabriyya* who negated human autonomy. They stressed that “God alone created acts; man, however, “acquired” these acts and so could be deemed legally responsible for his deeds.”³³³ This threefold categorization of volitionist, moderate, and predestinarian serves as an argument that the orthodox position offers a tempered alternative between the extreme poles of the predestinarian and volitional views. Al-Baghdādī states that the Qurʾan itself provides evidence against both extreme positions, which are equally erroneous. While the *Qadariyya* negate divine power altogether, the *Jahmiyya* (a form of *Jabriyya* School) negate human volition. For al-Baghdādī, one must recognize the existence of human volition, albeit one that is antecedently shaped and provided by God. It is in this relationship between the divine and humanity that al-Baghdādī (like other *Ashāʿira* and al-Ghazālī) idealizes a reconciliation between both powers. Human volition regarding certain actions, such as the decision to obey or disobey, is intrinsically tied to God’s grace and His precedent will to create it. Al-Baghdādī stresses that, because God has

³³² Ibid., 156-57.

³³³ Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought*, 24.

the capacity to make human volition (as He does over anything else), He has the foreknowledge of how humans would eventually use their volition.³³⁴

Despite these major convergences, Frank Griffel briefly contends that al-Ghazālī's appropriation of *kasb* is novel in that it spells out a more radical understanding of free choice in a way that would have gone against the *Ashā'ira*'s intentions.³³⁵ Richard M. Frank expresses a similar view that al-Ghazālī maintains a more radical stance than the “occasionalism” of his *Ash'arī* predecessors, but the points of divergence are not fully explained.³³⁶ Both authors believe that al-Ghazālī significantly diverges from this *Ash'arī* position on human agency. Griffel, however, explains the points of this divergence more explicitly. Also, unlike Frank, he stresses that the classic *Ash'arī* position maintains that acquired power is an intermediary category between free choice and predestination, such that it is neither fully occasionalist nor volitionist, whereas al-Ghazālī's notion of *kasb* firmly argues that humans are “free agents”. Griffel claims

The human [according to al-Ghazālī] is a free agent (*mukhtār*) in the sense that he or she is the place (or substrate, *maḥall*) of the free choice (*ikhityār*). Free choice means that humans choose what appears most beneficial (*khayr*) for them; all human actions are motivated by self-interest, the human is forced by God to decide his or her own actions that are congruent with his or her self-interest.³³⁷

But the idea that the human is the “substrate” wherein God anchors an autonomous agency, which He creates, accords with the *Ash'arī* doctrine of *kasb*. Not long before al-Ghazālī's time, al-Baghdādī had claimed that God is the maker of acquisition, while the human is the “acquirer” (*al-muktasib*) such that “God is the maker of the servant's movement and the servant is the mover” (*Allāh khāliq ḥarakat al-'abd wa-l-'abd al-mutaḥarrik*).³³⁸ The second facet of Griffel's argument is more compelling though. Griffel argues that al-Ghazālī's insistence that God endows humans

³³⁴ Al-Bāghdādī, *Uṣūl*, 158.

³³⁵ Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 219.

³³⁶ Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash'arite School*, 46.

³³⁷ Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 219.

³³⁸ Al-Bāghdādī, *Uṣūl*, 158.

with sufficient rational capacities to independently discern between what is beneficial to their self-interest resonates with the *falāsifa*'s views on volition.³³⁹ Al-Ghazālī's emphasis on human reason, both in the context of *kasb* and related concepts, certainly distinguishes him from the *Ashā'ira*. But whether he understands the notion of reason along the same lines as the *falāsifa*, which is one of Griffel's main theses, is something we will examine in detail in the upcoming chapter.

For now, I do not want to lose sight on the more patent insights of al-Ghazālī's theory of human autonomy. Al-Ghazālī's conception of human autonomy is quite apparent in his reflections on piety and devotion, where we come across his most resounding reflections on the practical implications of this voluntary action. We have just finished exploring the theoretical basis to his theory of *kasb*, and now it is time to think of how he envisions this concept within the context of our normative behaviour, namely the devotional obligations of the Muslim. In so doing, readers will be able to get a better grasp of the purpose behind al-Ghazālī's theory of human agency in the more general context of daily religious practice. Further down the line, this will become very useful to gauging his view of human culpability, which is one of his most elementary concepts within his general political theory. Additionally, it will help us understand how al-Ghazālī contemplates a practicable purpose to his theoretical notions, which is a common approach he adopts throughout his political theory. As we will see at the end of this thesis, al-Ghazālī seeks to transpose his theological concepts to the realm of human action, including the political.

For now, let us stick to his most rudimentary understanding of devotion and piety and how he understands such concepts in view of human agency. In the *Foundations*, al-Ghazālī argues that "belief" (*imān*) presupposes some voluntary action on the part of the adherent. He refers to it as the most preferred form of human undertaking.³⁴⁰ Elsewhere, he tells us that *imān* is augmented

³³⁹ Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 219.

³⁴⁰ Al-Ghazālī, "Qawā'id," 148.

by performing religious works or undermined when the person abandons such acts.³⁴¹ These works increase belief in the same way that water affects a tree's growth, to use one of his analogies. For al-Ghazālī, a firm conviction is not necessarily commendable, because some may obstinately believe in falsehood. He claims Jews and Christians are a case in point in that their adherents are unfazed by threats, persuasion, or rational argumentation.³⁴² Nevertheless, he argues that true belief must be preceded by an active attempt to subdue one's own obstinate character, which only gives credence to his earlier cosmogonic claims that humans have acquired a sufficient degree of agency through God's grace to find salvation almost independently. Additionally, he tells us that real "submission" (*islām*) to Truth does not merely rely on the performance of religious works but is also an active contemplation about all factors which are detrimental to the soul. This self-reflection must be followed by abandoning obstinacy.³⁴³ Al-Ghazālī proposes that one has a choice to overcome disbelief by describing *islām* as an active struggle against uncompromising dogmatism, followed by surrendering one's heart to God's Truth. Not unlike religious works, this process of liberating one's soul from prejudices presupposes willful undertaking on the adherent's part.³⁴⁴ In the following chapter, we will get a better sense of what this struggle entails. Now we are beginning to get a better sense of how concomitant al-Ghazālī's cosmogonic concepts are to his writings on religious works. Simply put, al-Ghazālī describes a personal, ascetic struggle to find unity with God. It is a conscious effort to draw on the power that God gave us to eventually submit to God Himself. In this sense, al-Ghazālī's *kasb* finds its most practicable presence in his ascetic writings.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 155. Although Wolfson agrees that al-Ghazālī's notion of *kasb* presupposes a substance of human voluntary action, he presents a differing view elsewhere in his commentary. In brief, he argues that al-Ghazālī presents the human soul as a sphere of contestation between different impulses implanted by God, leaving little to no autonomy for human action. See: Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, 643-44.

³⁴² Al-Ghazālī, "Qawā'id," 153.

³⁴³ Ibid., 156.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

The idea that piety is tied to agential duty is also expressed in the *Ninety-nine Names*. The act of naming and iterating God’s divine attributes is not simply useful for epistemic purposes, so he claims, but also serves an ascetic end. When the “heart” (*qalb*) is exposed to these divine attributes – i.e., that is, when one continuously contemplates them, a glimmering sense “longing” (*shawq*) for God emerges in the adherent’s soul. Al-Ghazālī uses the analogy of a pupil who is exposed to his teacher’s vast knowledge. He claims that a pupil exposed to an excellent teacher would be inspired to follow in the same scholarly path. However, in the case that the pupil is distracted by corporeal factors, such as hunger, his sight on knowledge would be obfuscated. Similarly, the person who contemplates divine attributes should liberate his or her heart from all things that are irrelevant to divine attributes. This implies the negation of corporeal desires (*al-shahwāt*) within the heart.³⁴⁵ Al-Ghazālī argues that there must be a personal “exertion” (*saʿī*) on the part of the adherent, who ought to emulate these divine attributes. The process of signification (discussed above) is important because it makes these attributes comprehensible, but these concepts are insufficient without their practical implications. Al-Ghazālī argues that one must internalize and emulate these divine attributes as part of an exertive effort to become “divinelike” (*rabbāniyyan*). Al-Ghazālī suggests that this self-exertion elevates humanity’s standing to the community of angels, who are the most proximate beings to God’s divine attributes.³⁴⁶

Of all sentient beings, the angels occupy the highest ranking, because their “perception” (*idrāk*) is unaffected by proximity. Given that angels are immaterial beings, they are unaffected by the corporeal limitations in the way that humans or the inferior animals are. This is because corporeal “bodies are the lowest rank among existents” (*wa-l-ajsām akhass aqsām al-*

³⁴⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-maqṣad al-asnā*, 30.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

mawjudāt).³⁴⁷ The corporeal effects of “lust” (*shahwa*) and “wrath” (*ghaḍab*) detract from perception of divine things. Nonetheless, unlike other animals, humans are endowed with the capacity to attain spiritual perfection through personal exertion by resisting their own corporeal sentiments. As mentioned above, humans must forgo these corporeal enticements by emulating divine attributes. This is possible because humans are in a “medial rank between the two ranks, as though he is constituted by beastly and angelic [traits]” (*daraja mutawassiṭah bayn al-darajatayn, wa-ka’annahu murakkab min bahīmiyya wa-malakiyya*).³⁴⁸ The most important implication of this medial state is that humans are neither beasts nor angels, but that their actions orient their standing between these two rankings.³⁴⁹ Perhaps this imagery of humanity as a state between angels and beasts is al-Ghazālī’s subtle allusion to his earlier critique of the *Mu’tazila* and the *Jabriyya*. Let us recall that the former conferred too many divine attributes to the human condition while the latter dismissed humans as entirely impotent, which would make them no different than impulsive animals. This comparison allows al-Ghazālī to find a middle ground, that of the people of orthodoxy (*ahl al-sunna*). If his intention with the imagery on angels and beasts was to recall his earlier comparisons between the extreme sects, then al-Ghazālī is evidently telling us that the middle ground view (*Sunnī*) is the doctrine that is most compatible with the human condition. But in what way are humans bestial and in what way are they angelic?

The human is merely bestial in “his early composition” (*fī bidāyat amrih*), as his or her most rudimentary perception is acquired through sense faculties (*al-ḥawāss*). But God also bestows His servant with the capacity to know beyond sense perception, thus distinguishing them from mere animals. This gives the human the capacity to perceive things which are beyond

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 31.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 32.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

corporeal reach, including apprehension of immaterial things, such as knowledge of the harms caused by the pursuit of lust and the benefits of pursuing a pious life modeled on the angelic way. In fact, this prescient knowledge of our otherworldly outcome arouses within us a “desire for the attainment of perfection” (*rughba fī ṭalab al-kamāl*).

And if he overcomes lust and wrath to the point that he seizes them and undermines [their effects] on his mobility and idleness, in this sense he has assumed a resemblance to the angels. (*fa'in ghalaba al-shahwa wa-l-ghaḍab ḥattā malakhumā wa-ḍa'afā 'an taḥrīkih wa-taskīnih, akhadh bidhālik shubhan min al-malā'ika*).³⁵⁰

This is to say that the defective nature in humans, one that is neither exalted nor brutish by nature, presents humans with the choice to determine the outcome of this oscillation between contradictory states. But first the soul must learn to disengage from sense perception and the imagination, which are inferior forms of apprehension, learning to apprehend from the angelic way.³⁵¹ This is the human's volitional role in this world.

Conclusion

This chapter explored al-Ghazālī's grander cosmological scheme in hopes of explaining his understanding of the relationship between divine omnipotence and human autonomy. While al-Ghazālī regards God as the universe's sole author, he expresses the view that human actions are largely within the person's command. Like the *Mu'tazila*, al-Ghazālī does not forsake the idea that God applies judgement according to a person's deeds. However, al-Ghazālī rejects any naturalist view that God applies consistent judgement based on a fixed notion of the good to which He is subject. Rather, God rewards the good and punishes the wrong because He is gracious and trustworthy. Further, while the capacity for human action is created and granted by God, humans

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

are subsequently granted a (relative) freedom to apply this power by pursuing the deeds according to their choices. God does not steer or predetermine human actions, but He is aware about how such actions would transpire due to His foreknowledge and His role as the Originator of such powers. For the most part, al-Ghazālī pursues a traditional interpretation of human autonomy that is premised on the Ash‘arī conception of *kasb*. However, al-Ghazālī goes beyond the simple Ash‘arī view, which is oftentimes merely limited to a discussion of the acquisitive relationship between God and humans. He introduces ascetic principles and discusses the duties through which humans undergo self-amelioration, thus preparing themselves to receive divine influences.

Ash‘arī treatises were limited to theological debates about God’s essence, attributes, and His interaction with His creation. Al-Ghazālī’s theological corpus, however, goes further by offering practical guidelines which outline the methods and implications of ascetic practice. Some of al-Ghazālī’s texts, especially the later ones, convey a strong inclination to self-purification, a concept that is only featured embryonically in the works of his *Ash‘arī* predecessors. His later writing would consist of a blend of theological and ascetic material that goes beyond the classical theological treatise. In fact, in *Forty Principles*, al-Ghazālī proclaims that, while its surface purpose is to challenge popular theological claims, *The Moderation in Belief* ultimately

matures in [its] investigation [in that] it is closer to knocking on the door of gnosis [or mystical knowledge] than formal theology, which we encounter in the theologians’ books. (*ablagh fī al-taḥqīq, wa-aqrab ilā qar‘ abwāb al-ma‘rifa min al-kalām al-rasmī al-ladhī yuṣādaf fī kutub al-mutakallimīn*).³⁵²

As we will see in the work chapters, al-Ghazālī often reflects on the ascetic duty, a necessary step in achieving divinelike status after presenting a comprehensive study of God’s attributes through a systematic cosmological inquiry. Cosmological inquiry, for al-Ghazālī, is consecrated for

³⁵² Al-Ghazālī, *K. al-arba‘īn*, 21.

understanding the divine being whose qualities one must internalize through personal struggle by way of religious works. The implications of this ascetic thought are staggering, as I will demonstrate in subsequent chapters. In brief, al-Ghazālī's ascetic tradition ushers a thoroughgoing notion of moral culpability the likes of which is not found in orthodox circles before him. Asceticism is posited as a duty whereby humans exercise their will to perfect themselves and rid their souls of diabolic influences. Many who fall into error are not merely misguided or ignorant, but they are willfully obstinate to the Truth, as they have not attempted to purify their souls, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter. Further, al-Ghazālī envisions a politico-theocratic regime wherein a hierarchy is determined based on the perfectibility of souls. The purer a soul, the more befitting it is for the role of rulership. However, this purity is not merely premised on intellectual supremacy, as was the case for Neoplatonist thinkers, but is also determined by a soul's proximity to divine influence.

Chapter 4 – *The Role of Divine Light in al-Ghazālī's Taṣawwuf*

In the previous chapter, we examined al-Ghazālī's reflections on the relationship between God and humanity. We went over the way in which al-Ghazālī reconciles the *Ash'arī* doctrine of divine power with the concept of human agency. We also concluded with the point that the *Ash'arī* doctrine of commandments presumes some substantive degree of human choice, as humans are enjoined to perfect their moral character through volitional acts of worship and submission to God. The present chapter picks up on this theme of moral perfectibility by expanding on the concomitant theme of knowledge. We will see that al-Ghazālī's definition of knowledge is inseparable from his more general ideas concerning human agency, which were examined in the last chapter. He sometimes defines knowledge (or its pursuit) as a form of activity of the soul, which entails that humans have some degree of mastery over their piety. The aims of this activity are typically the purification of the soul or the attainment of salvation in the afterlife. In this sense, knowledge is sometimes presented as a practical grounding for his earlier theoretical considerations regarding human agency. Additionally, al-Ghazālī's theory of knowledge as purification bears striking resemblances to some aspects of classical philosophical tradition, notably Plato's and the Neo-Platonic canon. This comparison will prove insightful for this present chapter by allowing us to sketch out the most important convergences and divergences between the theological and philosophical traditions.

There is no denying that the convergences between Ghazālīan theology and the Platonic and Neoplatonist traditions are striking and significant. In al-Ghazālī's theology, we come across the the idea that humans are in a medial position between the ranks of angels and beasts. Al-Ghazālī scholar Taneli Kukkonen has observed that the theme of the medial rank (in which humans oscillate between the angelic and beastly) "is a commonplace in both philosophical tracts –

especially those of a Platonic stamp – and Sufi texts.”³⁵³ Additionally, we come across a shared concern for internal purification, or “a regimen of self-discipline” as Kukkonen refers to it. This is the idea that the human soul is prepared to become a receptacle for higher truths.³⁵⁴ For Kukkonen, such recurring Platonic themes in al-Ghazālī’s corpus are not coincidental. He believes there is considerable evidence that al-Ghazālī consciously borrowed from Neoplatonist tracts. Al-Ghazālī’s main Platonic sources were likely drawn from the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity* and some of Galen’s philosophical writings.³⁵⁵ Another principle shared with the Neoplatonists in his writing worth noting is the idea that internal justice is realized when carnal passions are bridled by the rational faculty, which is the soul’s crown faculty.³⁵⁶ Similarly, al-Ghazālī describes purification as an internal struggle in which passions finally give way to superior faculties, namely those concerned with knowledge broadly speaking. For both al-Ghazālī and the Neoplatonist thinker, there is a recurring emphasis on knowledge as some form of transcendence above base experience.³⁵⁷

But these crucial similarities are overshadowed by a technical difference we cannot ignore. Al-Ghazālī has in mind a form of mystical knowledge, which he terms *taṣawwuf*, after the practice of the *Ṣūfiyya*. This is not the kind of knowledge that is attained through a series of mental exercises. This knowledge is an experience or taste *dhawq* whereby an adherent is exposed to God’s Truth after undertaking strenuous self-discipline by way of religious acts, rather than philosophical inquiry.³⁵⁸ Scholars like Kukkonen inquire into whether al-Ghazālī’s *taṣawwuf* merely represents a technical difference in terminology or reveals a striking categorical difference.

³⁵³ Taneli Kukkonen, “Al-Ghazālī on the Origins of Ethics,” *Numen* 63, no. 2-3 (2016): 277.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 280.

³⁵⁶ This view is highly developed in the political writings of al-Fārābī. See: Al-Fārābī, *The Political Writings: “Political Regime” and “Summary of Plato’s Laws”*, 72.

³⁵⁷ Kukkonen, “Al-Ghazālī on the Origins of Ethics,” 277-80.

³⁵⁸ Al-Ghazālī, “Deliverance from Error,” 54-63.

I believe a compelling inquiry into this topic cannot ignore a comparison of al-Ghazālī's work to the primary source of inspiration for Neo-Platonism, Plato himself. To the best of my knowledge, a thorough comparison of the two thinkers has yet to be undertaken. There are pressing grounds to compare al-Ghazālī to Plato, considering that both share a somewhat similar view of the soul and the way it transcends corporeality. This is the view that the soul is entrapped by the body. Moreover, both seem to share the emanationist view that perception of truth becomes more lucid as the soul transcends corporeality. I will inquire into whether these crucial similarities are sufficient to describe al-Ghazālī as a Platonic thinker.

More broadly, this chapter also explores the different categorizations of “knowledge” and how these are ordered or ranked in al-Ghazālī's theology. In much of his epistemology, al-Ghazālī distinguishes and, at times, draws strict boundaries between different forms of sciences and epistemic faculties and the scope of their knowledge. Despite the varying terminology across his different texts, al-Ghazālī consistently presents us with two main epistemic states. The first pertains to rationality. Readers will note that I refer to all disciplines or approaches (be they syllogistic principles, theological dialectics, philosophical inquiries, and so forth) which require use of the rational faculty as components of human reason. To be clear, there is no immediate equivalent to this term in al-Ghazālī's corpus, but it is far from an anachronism. Al-Ghazālī occasionally uses the terms of “rational spirit” (*al-rūḥ al-‘aqlī*), or rational soul, and the “reflective spirit” (*al-rūḥ al-fikrī*), or discursive soul, to describe certain facets of human understanding.³⁵⁹ This rational capacity, which I explain below, is, to some extent, similar to its Platonic equivalent in terms of its purpose. As with Plato, al-Ghazālī maintains that reason has a practical purpose in guaranteeing our communal welfare. But al-Ghazālī's view of reason cannot be entirely Platonic,

³⁵⁹ *The Niche of Lights*, 36-37.

as he also maintains that worldly welfare is needed to prepare souls for the afterlife. The second epistemic power, which is mystical knowledge, extends beyond our volition in that it is more immediately tied to God's grace. Al-Ghazālī's mystical knowledge branches into different technical terms (some of which carry distinct implications), which are far too intricate to outline at the moment. I will return to these later in this chapter. For now, it is sufficient to say that the general view of mystical knowledge presumes that God bestows knowledge of Himself to one who is willing to purify his or her "heart" (*qalb*), a notion that is coterminous with the soul. Therefore, this object of knowledge, which is knowledge of the divine, is not entirely outside of our scope as humans – i.e., it is not *merely* granted – because it is one's responsibility to make his or her soul receptive to it.

Many scholars have thoroughly analyzed al-Ghazālī's views on the two kinds of epistemic states, the rational and the mystical, including Carol L. Barger, Michael E. Marmura, Binyamin Abrahamov, Frank Griffel, and Richard Frank.³⁶⁰ Most, if not all, of these interpretations have presented the view that there is no necessary clash between these two epistemic categories in al-Ghazālī's corpus. But Abrahamov goes further, stating that al-Ghazālī recognizes the rational faculty as the superior way of knowing God. Meanwhile, authors like Barger, Heath, and Janssens, attempt to debunk claims that reason and mysticism are contentious forces in al-Ghazālī's epistemology. In so doing, they lose sight of an important detail in al-Ghazālī's theological epistemology, that mystical knowledge is a more complete epistemic state. Instead of inquiring into whether these states are potentially contentious or harmonious forces, I propose we treat them as hierarchically situated in the way al-Ghazālī would have intended for us to view

³⁶⁰ Abrahamov, "Al-Ghazālī's Supreme Way to Know God."; Barger, "Sufism's Role in Al-Ghazālī's First Crisis of Knowledge."; Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash'arite School*; Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*; Marmura, "Ghazali and Ash'arism Revisited."

them. To better understand this gradation of knowledge, one must thoroughly examine al-Ghazālī's notion of "light" (*nūr*), which is mostly contained in his *Niche of Lights* (*Mishkāṭ al-anwār*).³⁶¹ Al-Ghazālī uses light as an analogy much like it is used in Plato's *Republic*; it is a symbol for knowledge which elucidates what is or what was otherwise unknown to us or has been obscure to the corresponding epistemic faculty within us. Al-Ghazālī draws on the imagery of light to explain that some epistemic states of knowledge are more illuminating than others.

This chapter will explain the centrality and predominance of mystical knowledge in al-Ghazālī's theology. This chapter will allow me to demonstrate that al-Ghazālī is, throughout many of his texts, consistent about the following position. All categories of knowledge are interconnected through a hierarchical order. When the human's faculties follow the rightful order, mystical knowledge must assume the highest rank, thus subordinating all other categories to its rule. Readers will notice that in this chapter, I make regular use of words signifying the two interrelating themes to vision and light, like 'seeing,' 'witnessing,' 'perceiving,' 'luminous,' because I want to provide a faithful interpretation of al-Ghazālī's categories. The point I want to illustrate is that these categories circulate around a central theme concerning knowledge of God. Knowledge of God, according to al-Ghazālī, is the supreme form of perception in that it is the most lucid or clearest way of knowing. It is pure certitude which cures one from the pathologies of absolute skepticism, a theme I will thoroughly examine in the chapter to come. For now, readers must keep in mind that al-Ghazālī regards skepticism as a form of pathology because, not only does it confound beliefs, but it also tempts us into disbelief.³⁶²

This chapter is divided into three sections. First, I will outline some of the different interpretations and problematize some of the issues raised in this literature. Also, this section will

³⁶¹ Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights*.

³⁶² "Deliverance from Error," 24-25.

allow me to better elaborate my interpretation by situating it within the wider literature. Second, I will defend the position that al-Ghazālī prioritizes mystical knowledge by exploring his account of proper ethical conduct. Third, I will thoroughly explore al-Ghazālī’s allegory of light contained in his *Niche of Lights* and compare this to Plato’s allegory of the cave. This last text cannot be overlooked by those interested in al-Ghazālī’s epistemology, because it explicitly outlines the gradation of humanity’s epistemic faculties.

Before proceeding, I would like to make a few clarifications concerning al-Ghazālī’s categories. The Arabic term *‘ilm* is used for both knowledge and science. Therefore, al-Ghazālī uses the term for both knowledge as an epistemic notion and, sometimes, more specifically to designate disciplinary sciences, such as religious or jurisprudential science, logic, or ascetic science. Readers of his Arabic texts will notice this, but this should not be a source of confusion, since the context in which he discusses this word reveals its intended definition. In any case, I will make sure to clarify the distinction when appropriate, though the distinction between the two is not always clear. This is because, for al-Ghazālī, the sciences are a consequence of our capacity to discern, categorize, memorize, comprehend, and so forth, all of which are elements of our epistemic capacities as humans.

There are also other aspects of al-Ghazālī’s theoretical categories on epistemology that can be quite confounding. The soul is one of them. According to Alexander Treiger, al-Ghazālī uses a “bewildering variety of terms” when discussing the soul and the faculties of human understanding. Despite his multifaceted lexicon, al-Ghazālī remains wholly “consistent and clear”. Treiger also maintains that al-Ghazālī’s notion of “heart” (*qalb*) is interchangeable with the philosophical concept of the “rational soul.” Only, al-Ghazālī preferred to use *qalb*, a term that would make his

theological writing more accessible to his coreligionist interlocutors.³⁶³ It even seems al-Ghazālī was conscious of his work’s own terminological perplexity. In the *Marvels of the Heart* (*Kitāb ‘ajā’ib al-qalb*), he outlines a series of definitions to explain similarities and differences between the following philosophical and theological terms: the “heart” (*qalb*), spirit (*rūḥ*), “soul” (*nafs*), and “intellect” (*‘aql*). In this set of definitions, the heart emerges as the most intelligizing faculty, as it seems to encompass the rest of these listed concepts along with additional capacities.³⁶⁴ The first concept, the heart, has two general meanings. The first definition pertains to the organ situated in a person’s chest, which flows blood to the rest of the body. The second entails the “gentle” (*laṭīfa*) faculty which demands “divine” and “spiritual” knowledge. While al-Ghazālī uses the term soul (*nafs*) to describe other aspects of the human constitution, we will continue to see that his notion of the *qalb* is quite aligned with the Platonic view of the soul. Further, al-Ghazālī tells us that the corporeal heart is a kind of depository (*makān*) wherein the immaterial heart resides. Here, al-Ghazālī appears to argue that a person’s corporeal shell is animated by an immaterial soul.³⁶⁵

Al-Ghazālī also speaks of a person’s spirit, which, like the heart, is subdivided between material and immaterial meanings. The corporeal definition of spirit, as ironic as this sounds, is used to explain the process which activates blood circulation from the heart across the entire human body. As for the genuine immaterial definition of spirit, al-Ghazālī obscurely exclaims that it is not much different from the immaterial heart he defines just before.³⁶⁶ Al-Ghazālī’s concept of *nafs* is obscurely defined as well. First, he speaks of *nafs* as a kind of internalized ego subsuming one’s natural inclination to “wrath” (*ghaḍab*) and “lust” (*shahwah*). Oftentimes, *nafs* in Arabic

³⁶³ Alexander Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought: Al-Ghazālī’s Theory of Mystical Cognition and its Avicennian Foundation* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 17-18.

³⁶⁴ Al-Ghazālī, “Kitāb Sharḥ ‘ajā’ib al-qalb,” 910.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 911.

usage (both common and religious) presupposes one's immaterial soul, as when the Qur'an mentions "soul...in (complete) rest" (*al-nafs al-muṭma'inna*) (89:27) to describe the soul of a pious person who is rewarded with God's grace after death. Al-Ghazālī refers to this Qur'anic passage to point out that souls oscillate between virtue and vice. The virtuous soul is one that distances itself from the ego's vices described above.³⁶⁷ While this view of *nafs* seems to approach Platonic territory, it is not quite there. Al-Ghazālī's definition of *nafs* lacks a crucial component to lend itself to a comparison with the philosophical view of the rational soul. This is the capacity for intelligence or understanding, or *'aql*. In a more colloquial usage, *'aql*, al-Ghazālī explains, signifies the totality of human sciences and inquiries. But it is also used to describe one of the heart's fundamental faculties; *'aql*, which is interchangeable with understanding, intelligence, or intellect, is the capacity to attain "knowledge" of things in themselves.³⁶⁸ Perhaps it is al-Ghazālī's concept of the heart, not soul (or *nafs*) that we should be comparing to Plato's concept of the soul. It is important to keep in mind that the definition that is most pertinent to the present thesis is the one equating the heart with the philosophical conception of the soul. There are many usages of *qalb* in al-Ghazālī's corpus, but (as we will see below) the one that stands out is the idea that the heart is the locale of knowledge of the divine as well as the intellect.

Al-Ghazālī's varying terminology aside, it is not impossible to trace a cogent and consistent account of epistemology across his texts. We are obviously confronted by the problem that al-Ghazālī uses the term knowledge variably to signify different disciplines or epistemic states, but the underlying position is clear. There are a variety of ways to know and a variety of things to know. However, I argue that al-Ghazālī regards the divine as the noblest object of knowledge and the ascetic method as the most advantageous. This is not to say that identifying a coherent account

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 912.

throughout al-Ghazālī's writing is an easy task. However, my purpose is to show that, despite the terminological complexity, a coherent set of interrelating positions on knowledge, its purpose, and functions exists and is also intended by al-Ghazālī. Namely, this is the idea that mystical knowledge and its relevant faculties are the most perennial forms of knowledge. In brief, al-Ghazālī consistently describes the knowledge accrued by the heart, which is activated through ascetic acts, as being superior to all other forms of knowledge.

Section I – *The general ideas of al-Ghazālī's epistemology*

In the scholarship on al-Ghazālī theology, there is a longstanding debate about which of the epistemic states he finds more advantageous. There is also the middle ground stance of Carol Bargeron, who argues that al-Ghazālī maintains that both epistemic states are reserved for different epistemic fields. Michael E. Marmura and (to a lesser extent) Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, are among the scholars who argue that al-Ghazālī's primary concern is with mystical knowledge. Marmura rightly observes that al-Ghazālī does not shun knowledge received from the intellect, such as theological writing.³⁶⁹ Though theoretical inquiry is only indispensable if used to help the ascetic overcome certain doctrinal doubts, but it is not necessary for the attainment of pure knowledge. We will see that everything outside of mystical knowledge of God is considered inferior.

Other commentators believe that al-Ghazālī is either mischaracterized as a sort of dogmatist or anti-philosopher mystic. These scholars call for a rationalist reinterpretation of al-Ghazālī's epistemic thought by focusing on or unearthing the philosophical aspects of his corpus. One of the most important interlocutors who defends this position is Binyamin Abrahamov, whose key arguments I explain below. Similar arguments can be found in the separate works of Jules

³⁶⁹ Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, "Place of the Religious Commandments in the Philosophy of Al-Ghazālī," *The Muslim World* 51, no. 3 (1961); Marmura, "Ghazali and Ash'arism Revisited."

Janssens and Peter Heath. Janssens suggests that there are traces of rationalism even in the most unsuspecting parts of al-Ghazālī's writing, his *taṣawwuf*.³⁷⁰ As for Peter Heath, he argues that it would be "erroneous" to assume that al-Ghazālī's theology is stringently opposed to the philosophical method or conclusions derived from reason. Even in his famed text dedicated to critiquing the doctrine of the *falāsifa*, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, al-Ghazālī draws a clear line between erroneous assumptions or fallacious argumentation and philosophy *tout court*. In fact, the *falāsifa* erred because of critical misapplication of logic.³⁷¹

Abrahamov shares similar concerns with the above authors, as he defends the claim that al-Ghazālī regards philosophy as "the best way to achieve belief in God."³⁷² Abrahamov argues that belief in God is best reinforced by way of syllogistic reasoning.³⁷³ Abrahamov relies on al-Ghazālī's *Restraining of the Commoners from the Theological Science* (*Iljām al- 'awāmm 'an 'ilm al-kalām*), which discusses four stages of knowledge and their respective levels of perspicacity.³⁷⁴ Abrahamov concludes that the philosophical way must be superior in al-Ghazālī's view after observing that mystical knowledge is not listed as one of the four levels of knowledge in the *Restraining*. But al-Ghazālī's silence on *taṣawwuf* hardly proves that he does not regard mystical knowledge to be more advantageous. As early as the *Incoherence*, al-Ghazālī acknowledged that theological disputation rests on some form of discursive reasoning. We also know that theological disputation is not mandatory; its main aim is to correct erroneous beliefs to ensure that scholars do not make critical exegetical mistakes that are an affront to central religious tenet.³⁷⁵

³⁷⁰ Jules Janssens, "Al-Ghazālī between Philosophy (*Falsafa*) and Sufism (*Taṣawwuf*): His Complex Attitude in the Marvels of the Heart (*'Ajā'ib al-Qalb*) of the *Ihya' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*," *The Muslim World* 101, no. 4 (2011).

³⁷¹ Peter Heath, "Reading al-Ghazālī: The Case of Psychology," in *Reason and Inspiration in Islam: Theology, Philosophy and Mysticism in Muslim Thought*, ed. Todd Lawson (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 193.

³⁷² Abrahamov, "Al-Ghazālī's Supreme Way to Know God," 145.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 165.

³⁷⁴ Al-Ghazālī, "Iljām."

³⁷⁵ *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 9.

Abrahamov believes al-Ghazālī only references mystical knowledge to give his writings more credence among commoners and to avoid being condemned as a heretic. He seems to presume that the language of *taṣawwuf* is more aligned with the popular view of Islam, whereas philosophy is a distinctly “elect” discipline.³⁷⁶ Abrahamov wrongly presumes that al-Ghazālī regards mystical experience as the commoner’s method to acquiring knowledge of God. On the contrary, al-Ghazālī portrays mystical knowledge, which he terms the *Ṣūfī* path as an activity of the elite by suggesting that its development is owed to rigorous “purification of the heart”, requiring self-mastery and discipline.³⁷⁷ Further, those who pursue mystical knowledge through the devotional methods of *taṣawwuf* are said to be enlightened by prophetic light.³⁷⁸ There is a strong hierarchical relationship between prophet and *Ṣūfī* within al-Ghazālī’s understanding of ascetic tradition. I also find that Abrahamov confounds al-Ghazālī’s concepts of intellect and the heart. If al-Ghazālī saw these as coterminous categories, Abrahamov’s thesis would stand strong. And since al-Ghazālī states that the heart is the faculty which receives knowledge of God, it means that the supreme way to know God is through intellectual inquiry.

There are two problems with this conclusion. First, al-Ghazālī explicitly states that the heart is the “locus” of intelligence, which only suggests that the intellect is merely a constitutive part of the heart (or soul), as opposed to its synonym. More on this will follow below. Second, Abrahamov at times tacitly uses concepts, like “thinking”, “knowledge”, and “intellect”, interchangeably. This is a tautological approach because, if we are to accept that al-Ghazālī equates thinking to intellect, then we are left with the idea that the intellect comes first in knowing God. For example, after mentioning that the heart must be purified and direct its thoughts to God,

³⁷⁶ Abrahamov, “Al-Ghazālī’s Supreme Way to Know God.”

³⁷⁷ Al-Ghazālī, “Deliverance from Error,” 60.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

Abrahamov concludes that, for al-Ghazālī, “man can obtain knowledge only by means of syllogisms.”³⁷⁹ But nowhere does Abrahamov demonstrate or cite a passage in which al-Ghazālī mentions that purification of one’s heart requires some form of syllogistic activity. In fact, not every form of thought, according to al-Ghazālī, is founded on reason and the intellect. One example is the activity of *Ṣūfī dhikr*, translated as “recollection”, which allows pious worshippers to instill their thoughts with the idea of God and rid their minds of base passions, especially of materialist things.³⁸⁰

Lastly, Abrahamov assumes that the *Restraining* ought to be treated as the culmination of al-Ghazālī’s thought, because it is his final work. But, as suggested by its own title, the book concerns itself with the science of *kalām* and its erroneous misuses by commoners. But *kalām* is a science concerned with logic games; its operation is within the realm of human reason, meaning that it is inapplicable to mystical knowledge. Further, it is not a mandatory science; its sole purpose should be confined to defending orthodoxy against the critique of heretical and non-Muslim polemics.³⁸¹ Therefore, it would be peculiar of al-Ghazālī to discuss the role of mystical knowledge in the context of *kalām* when he regards it as a strictly *rational* science.

Finally, Bargerón provides a more harmonious thesis. According to Bargerón, al-Ghazālī does not adopt a stringent view of the *Ṣūfī* category of *maʿrifa*, which roughly translates to “gnostic knowledge.” According to this view, knowledge is attained through an “intuitive” process, as opposed to being “intellectual or dialectical.” Hence, from the *Ṣūfī* position, knowledge of God is not achieved through an individual’s deployment of logic or syllogistic activity but is rather gracefully bestowed by God to those who shun worldliness. Upon the acquisition of truth, the role

³⁷⁹ Abrahamov, “Al-Ghazālī’s Supreme Way to Know God,” 150.

³⁸⁰ Al-Ghazālī, “Deliverance from Error,” 54, 59.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 43.

of reason becomes obsolete. This is because truth has already been acquired without aid from the intellect.³⁸² Al-Ghazālī supposedly rejects this view of knowledge. Bargerón claims that, whereupon al-Ghazālī critiques certain aspects of reason, he is referring to the erroneous application of “sense and reason.” Therefore, one should not presume that these critiques indicate a rejection of reason. She also stresses that al-Ghazālī never intends to “destroy the cognitive value” of reason.³⁸³ In my opinion, Bargerón is right to claim that al-Ghazālī does not undervalue the cognitive benefits of reason and human understanding, let alone reject them. But claiming that al-Ghazālī finds mystical knowledge to be more advantageous does not entail that he rejected the role of reason. This is why I prefer to think of this relationship between the two epistemic states as one of priority, or hierarchy. The crucial point I wish to illustrate from hereon is that esoteric knowledge and reason are not contentious forces, but that one is subordinate and relatively disadvantageous in relation to the other. I will return to this point later. Bargerón exclaims that al-Ghazālī is unsettled by some of the “extravagances of ascetic discipline.” Al-Ghazālī points to some overly zealous ascetics who lose themselves in the thought of God, such that their thoughts become extremely confounded, losing all common sense. Bargerón exclaims that, for al-Ghazālī, this hallucination occurs when “reason” is forfeited. Those who fall into this kind of madness mistakenly assume that they are gifted with esoteric truths.³⁸⁴ At first glance, al-Ghazālī’s account of the mad mystic seems to suggest that reason could correct erring mystical ways. But al-Ghazālī does not insinuate that reason is superior to the ascetic experience. It is important to note that al-Ghazālī has in mind false forms of ascetism. Equally, reason can lead to errant conclusions. The

³⁸² Bargerón, “Sufism’s Role in Al-Ghazālī’s First Crisis of Knowledge,” 53.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

madness described here is not intrinsic to the *Ṣūfī* method; it simply speaks to the delusional state of persons who misunderstand its purpose.

Bargerón plays close to attention to a brief moment in al-Ghazālī's life in which he struggled with a skeptical crisis, as described in his *Deliverance from Error*. Without getting into the intricacies of this event (as this will be addressed later on), it suffices to mention that al-Ghazālī suffered from a pathology, which he describes as the difficulty of believing in anything except for certain religious fundamentals. Al-Ghazālī sought out different spiritual and intellectual remedies to address the dangers of his skepticism, beginning with dialectical and rationalist activities.³⁸⁵ Upon realizing that he could not encounter the divine by way of "strict [rationalist] proofs", al-Ghazālī prepared for the light of God to "unveil" (*kashf*) divine truths within his self. It is at this point that, Bargerón claims, al-Ghazālī came to encounter the divine with "certitude". Bargerón proceeds to point out that, for al-Ghazālī, rationality cannot invalidate the mystical experience and the "possibility of acquiring *ma'rifa*". However, this does not mean that al-Ghazālī meant to suggest that rational knowledge was completely obsolete.³⁸⁶ Bargerón argues that al-Ghazālī intends to separate them into two distinctive spheres which are not necessarily clashing. Reason, as was explained in the previous chapter, serves the function of making sense of our surrounding world and immaterial intellectual concepts through use of logic, syllogisms, mathematics, and so forth. It also furnishes us with "innate" knowledge of irrefutable facts, such as knowledge of the fact that an entity cannot exist within two different locales or that one is lesser than two. However, "the only purpose that human knowledge does not serve is the soul's search for spiritual wisdom."³⁸⁷

³⁸⁵ The purpose of the *Deliverance* is twofold. First, he recounts his problems with doubt and warns other Muslims of the dangers of this pathology.

³⁸⁶ Bargerón, "Sufism's Role in Al-Ghazālī's First Crisis of Knowledge," 64.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 67.

Conversely, these “fundamental rational truths” cannot be acquired through mystical knowledge or “divine revelation”, but are only acquired through human reason.³⁸⁸ What we have here, according to Bargerón, is a clear-cut segregation between rational and mystical knowledge, both of which are concerned with their distinctive subjects; the latter being solely concerned with encountering the divine whose locale is the ulterior world. Further, these two forms of knowledge do not negatively encroach on each other. Rather, they contribute to equally important epistemic states, allowing humans to be simultaneously rational and spiritual beings, two discerning aspects which distinguish us from the rest of God’s creation in this mundane world. Therefore, these two forms of knowledge exist “in a different epistemic order as well as for a different epistemological order.”³⁸⁹ While I agree with the idea that the two epistemic orders are not contentious, I disagree with the second aspect of Bargerón’s thesis, the idea that they are two distinctive spheres which do not encroach on each other but fulfill two independent functions or purposes. Rather, I will argue that, according to al-Ghazālī, human reason is situated in a subordinate position to that of divine knowledge, namely because the latter is more consummate or complete.

The theme of gradation or hierarchy is highly recurring across al-Ghazālī’s cosmology. It all begins with the idea that all things are contingent on God’s will. The more proximate a being is to God, the nobler it is. This gradational system is illustrated in different, yet interrelated, ways. The earth is subordinate to the heavens; the mundane world to the ulterior; non-prophets to scholars, scholars to prophets; beasts to humans; and so forth. Most notably, this applies to the faculties of knowledge and their objects of knowledge. Simply put, certain faculties and powers within us are more *revealing* and the object of their knowledge more revelatory than their inferior forms. Certain forms of knowledge, which are organized in different scientific and disciplinary

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 75.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 78.

bodies, are more beneficial to our salvation than others. The superior kind of knowledge is not that of the theologians who seek to understand God's divine attributes. Rather, it is best described as the mystic's knowledge whereby one comes to *know* God through an inner and a deeply personal encounter with God. Since this is the most perennial form of knowledge, esoteric knowledge reigns supreme over all other forms of knowledge. It is not merely supreme in the sense that it is the most consummate object of knowledge – i.e., knowledge of the Creator upon which the entirety of existence is contingent. It is supreme because it is most necessary for our salvation.

According to Havah Lazarus-Yafeh, this knowledge is concerned with elevating humans from “the level of the beasts” to “the ranks of the angels.” It does not merely consist of posing technical questions about divine attributes, a merely distant observation of God. It also includes an intimate relationship of the divine through which one encounters God's presence. Further, this knowledge provides one with a “foretaste” of the pleasures of the afterlife. Though Lazarus-Yafeh describes this form of knowledge as a “science,” it is hardly scientific in the common sense of the term. This is to say that it lacks the rationalist methods one deploys to accrue knowledge of principles or an object of knowledge. Perhaps, her description of this science as “therapeutic” is a more fitting term; the persons who engage in this path learn to purge their hearts of lusts and sinful desires, actively vacating their hearts for God's influence.³⁹⁰

Lazarus-Yafeh maintains that mystical knowledge is superior to its rational counterpart. To illustrate this point, she references al-Ghazālī's oft-cited parable describing a contest between a Byzantine and a Chinese painter. The former is preoccupied with perfecting the intricacies of the painting's “designs and colours,” whereas the Chinese painter merely cleans the “surface” on which he is meant to draw. In turn, this surface reflects with far greater lucidity the image of the

³⁹⁰ Lazarus-Yafeh, “Place of the Religious Commandments in the Philosophy of Al-Ghazālī,” 174.

former. I will return to this parable at the end of this chapter. In brief, this parable illustrates the relationship between reason and mysticism; the latter offers a more lucid and clearer experience than the former. Mystical knowledge as understood by al-Ghazālī is experiential in that it is not simply knowledge as comprehension of certain intellectual categories or principles. It is internal as far as it is concerned with the heart's struggle against the vices of passions, which must be subverted. Hence, the purpose of religious commandments, which are absolute truth and infinitely superior to human reason, is to assist and guide humanity's course in the struggle against the passions.³⁹¹

Section II – *Knowledge of the divine as the fundamental human purpose*

As a Muslim theologian, al-Ghazālī inclines to the Islamic idea that the sensory world is an abode of passions which impede spiritual ascension, to which all humans are enjoined. But this idea is not peculiar to Abrahamic religions. It is a central tenet in Platonic philosophy and is thoroughly explored in dialogues like the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*. In both Ghazālīan and Platonic philosophy, we come across similar reflections on the dangers of the soul's entrapment by visceral and corporeal desires. Of course, al-Ghazālī's solution is peculiarly Islamic in that he calls for the performance of religious rites (prescribed in the Islamic canon) to rid these vices. But this should not detract us from a striking similarity. This is the idea that the object of a person's true struggle should be the soul's purification from visceral distractions and to strive for truth that is primordial and immaterial. In both cases, the way to a purified soul is a well-ordered soul in which the superior faculties reign supreme. No wonder why Plato's ideas gained popularity among Christian scholars

³⁹¹ Ibid., 176.

in the early and middle Medieval period. Now, before moving forward, it is worth noting that, by maintaining that the soul is superior to the body, al-Ghazālī's aim is not to encourage absolute contempt of the body. Rather, he promotes a sort of ethical disposition in which the individual learns to temper all corporeal impulses and orient his or her internal perception toward the ulterior world. This idea is suggested in the *Breaking the Two Desires* (*Kitāb Kasr al-shahwatayn*) of the *Revival*. He never condemns appetite or sexual desires as intrinsically evil feelings.³⁹² His main concern is whether these bodily impulses overtake the soul.

In the *Breaking*, we encounter wide-ranging points about the dangers of a disorderly soul, which is distinguished by its propensity for gluttony. One way to “break”, as the title of this book suggests, gluttony is to deliberately deprive the body of excessive food. For al-Ghazālī, gluttony is the source of “oppression” (*tughyān*) and “distraction from God” (*ghaflah ‘an Allāh*). When persons experience hunger, they are humbled by the realization of their own fallibility and vulnerability, thus turning to God for consolation.³⁹³ And when a community is overly fed, its members turn to two other vices, bad speech (such as conniving lies and gossip) and carnal passions. Hunger, whether it is undeliberate or self-inflicted, so al-Ghazālī claims, greatly undermines the motivations for vice. When a person suffers from hunger, he or she tends to speak less and his or her body does not easily incline to carnality. Hunger detracts from other, more harmful, worldly pursuits, thus bringing the devotional person into a vulnerable state wherein one is wakened by his or her own self-inflicted vulnerability.³⁹⁴ Al-Ghazālī explains that

the source of people's ruination is their clinging to the world, and the source of their clinging to the world is the stomach and the private part, and the source of the private part's passion is the stomach's passion (*sabab halāk al-nās ḥirṣahum ‘alā al-dunyā, wa-sabab*

³⁹² Al-Ghazālī, “Kitāb Kasr al-shahwatayn.”

³⁹³ Ibid., 1009.

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 1010.

*ḥirṣahum ‘alā al-dunyā al-baṭnu wa-l-faraj, wa-sabab shahwat al-faraj, shahwat al-baṭn).*³⁹⁵

Though the *Breaking* reads as a set of practical instructions for pious living, it is also motivated by an underlying philosophical concern. This is the idea that corporeality is an inferior condition which afflicts the soul’s natural inclinations toward spiritual ascension. The recurring theme is that worldly activities hamper the soul’s pursuit for immaterial truths. One telling example is the case of gluttonous people, who waste long hours of their day preparing and tasting complicated cuisine when they could simply consecrate this time for worship.³⁹⁶ The philosophical undertones in the *Breaking* become clearer when we corroborate these practical instructions with other aspects of al-Ghazālī’s writing.

But, before we proceed with the more apparent philosophical aspects of piety in al-Ghazālī’s writings, we can expound these practical ideas by making use of Platonic dualism. Al-Ghazālī sees a clear conflict between the soul’s ascension and the burdens of the material world. One of the most evocative illustrations which explains this dualism is Plato’s allegory of the cave. In this allegory, Plato derides the material world as a “prison dwelling.” The soul of the inquisitive person, Plato claims, undergoes an “upward journey” to ascend beyond the inferior sensory world,³⁹⁷ a claim that is equally essential in al-Ghazālī’s writing on the mystic. While the allegory of the cave is undoubtedly one of Plato’s most celebrated passages, the *Phaedrus* offers a more illustrative accounts of the soul’s ascension and dualism more generally. Here, Plato refers to the body as a “shell” which obscures the soul’s perception of truth.³⁹⁸ Similarly, al-Ghazālī finds that the soul’s perception is obscured by the material, a point I return to below. For Plato, this obscurity

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 1012.

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 1010-11.

³⁹⁷ Plato, “The Republic,” 517a.

³⁹⁸ “Phaedrus,” 250c.

is a symptom found in persons who have become like animals. While the unobscured soul has the privilege of encountering truth in its perfect and immaterial form, the animalized person only perceives the material. This means that he or she is only exposed to partial truth and cannot appreciate an idea like Beauty in its purest form. The obscured soul does not regard beauty in terms of an intelligible phenomenon but only from a carnal perspective.³⁹⁹

Before proceeding, however, it is important to mention that al-Ghazālī's stance on dualism can be somewhat obscure. In fact, Jules Janssens observes that al-Ghazālī is not entirely clear on this question. Whereas Avicenna deals forcefully with this issue, Janssens believes al-Ghazālī does not convey a similarly "radical dualism between body and soul." In part, this obscurity is due to al-Ghazālī's cryptic concepts, which he never thoroughly develops. Janssens points to the fact that al-Ghazālī drops critical concepts, like the "subtle intellect" or the "spirit", without providing substantive definitions. Though al-Ghazālī evokes many mystical concepts, it is challenging to discern his stance, considering that he also rarely reveals his sources. The sources in Islamicate scholarship are particularly important, because many of the same critical concepts were appropriated for varying ends and meanings. Take Avicenna, for example, who was notorious for borrowing terms from literature on *taṣawwuf*, only to give them a philosophical spin.⁴⁰⁰ Similarly, Frank Griffel notes that al-Ghazālī is not entirely clear on the issue of dualism but not because of conceptual or linguistic obscurity. Griffel's central thesis in his *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* is that the theologian purposely took uncommittal stances on key debates between the *Ashā'ira* and the *falāsifa*. He typically thought to appease both possibilities, as long as these did not conflict with central religious tenets. Al-Ghazālī displays the same attitude on the question of

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 250d-51a.

⁴⁰⁰ Janssens, "Al-Ghazālī between Philosophy (*Falsafa*) and Sufism (*Taṣawwuf*): His Complex Attitude in the Marvels of the Heart (‘*Ajā’ib al-Qalb*) of the *Ihya’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*,” 619.

the body and the soul. His *Ashā'ira* predecessors believed that the intellect is contingent on the vitality of the corporeal body, which is composed of atoms. Conversely, the *falāsifa* upheld the doctrine that the soul is “an immaterial self-subsisting substance” contained within a body. Griffel observes that, at the beginning of his *Revival*, al-Ghazālī refused to comment on which of these positions is true. And, in different passages across the *Revival*, he entertains both theories as possible truths. For Griffel, al-Ghazālī was obscure on this issue not so much because he was indecisive. He simply did not want to be distracted by theoretical quarrels in a book (i.e., the *Revival*) whose stated purpose is providing readers with guidelines on ethical actions.⁴⁰¹

But for a book that is purportedly so stringently practical in scope, the *Revival* is animated by strong, underlying theoretical presuppositions about the soul and body. And these theoretical presuppositions about the soul can be, to a great extent, aligned with some of the *falāsifa*'s views. I will proceed to argue that not only is al-Ghazālī's attitude on dualism and the soul's ascension strikingly similar, but the imagery used to describe these concepts can be astonishingly similar in key places. First, al-Ghazālī distinguishes between two categories of people. The first, the people afflicted by vice, live according to the principle that true happiness is found on this earth. We just saw how Plato describes the material world as a prison for the soul. Well, this first category of people described by al-Ghazālī seem to think the inverse. For them, it is death that ought to be regarded as a “prison” (*sijnan*). They firmly believe that the state of mortality deprives them of true happiness. But the truly virtuous, the second category of people, rightly regard worldliness as their prison, because this state constantly weighs down on their souls. Since worldliness is merely an entrapment for the soul, these people are not only unfazed by death, but they also consider it to be liberating. Al-Ghazālī also tells us that the virtuous person does not merely await death but

⁴⁰¹ Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 285.

works toward this separation while alive. This person attempts to mimic death in part by negating corporeal passions, simply because these passions deprive the soul of truth.⁴⁰² In brief, al-Ghazālī's aversion to passions and lusts is informed by the sentiment that these vices are burdensome for our souls, as they distract our ascension to a higher form of good life that could be partly tapped into in our current, worldly state.

Both Plato and al-Ghazālī regard this ascension to the immaterial state as the highest form of human activity. Further, both maintain that, if the corporeal vices are to be surmounted, one must learn to distinguish between body and soul and recognize that the latter is more advantageous. As such, both are duly attentive to the human constitution and the internal disturbances afflicting the soul. For Plato as well as Neo-Platonists, this tension reflects a natural cosmological descent from truth to chaos. In Platonic parlance, the domain of the forms is situated atop the mundane world of matter, where beings are imperfect approximations of these forms. For this reason, al-Fārābī, who adopted the general principles of Platonic cosmology, duly asserted that the virtuous ruler is he who elevates himself and the political community beyond the sensory realm, thus attaining true "happiness" for himself and his subjects.⁴⁰³ One may say that, for al-Ghazālī, the ethical implications of this ascension are even more pressing, because the human is judged for his or her personal efforts by an ultimate arbiter of human affairs, God, who has the capacity to condemn him or her to eternal fire. Though the devout Muslim should certainly be motivated by this otherworldly concern, al-Ghazālī's notion of piety is not simply animated by the view of God's punitive action. Rather, al-Ghazālī's view of the virtuous soul strongly resonates with the Platonic view, even maintaining a similar cosmological scheme. This is the view that the just soul (or rightly balanced soul) is a good in itself.

⁴⁰² Al-Ghazālī, "Kitāb Kasr al-shahwatayn," 1017.

⁴⁰³ Al-Fārābī, *The Political Writings: "Political Regime" and "Summary of Plato's Laws"*, 69.

Kukkonen observes that, for al-Ghazālī and the Platonists, knowledge of the immaterial is something that yields a distinctive feeling of pleasure. This pleasure must be desired over bodily sensations and lesser forms of cognition, as it is superior to all of them. This idea, which was prevalent among early Platonists, assumes that the human’s ultimate course is the “soul’s ontological grounding in the divine realm.”⁴⁰⁴ Both al-Ghazālī and the Platonists believe that the way to this ontological grounding requires that the soul be steered by the rational faculty.⁴⁰⁵ Binyamin Abrahamov provides a more detailed overview of this concept of Platonic pleasure or happiness in al-Ghazālī’s writing. Like Plato, al-Ghazālī believes that the ultimate human end is a form of “spiritual pleasure”, which comes to fruition when divine truths are perceived. The five senses, therefore, are obstructions to this spiritual journey, as their objects of perception are worldly and consequently inferior to the immaterial divine.⁴⁰⁶ Self-mastery or discipline are supposed to actualize this ascension by steering the soul toward things that are good in themselves. The problem with the average, sensuous human is that he or she tends to find pleasure in things that are immediately beneficial to his or her material needs. But a discerning soul is one that recognizes “beauty” in an immaterial good, such as knowledge, because this concept is good in itself. Unlike sensuous pleasures, this spiritual pleasure is not caused by the satiation of material desire. The good is merely gratifying for the soul because it is pleasurable to behold in itself.⁴⁰⁷ For the soul to be this cultivated, it must be steered by the perennial faculty, the intellect. According to Abrahamov, the intellect and the *qalb* are coterminous in al-Ghazālī’s writing.⁴⁰⁸ This is a point I disagree with. Though Kukkonen’s and Abrahamov’s respective comparisons are confirmed by

⁴⁰⁴ Taneli Kukkonen, “Al-Ghazālī on the Emotions,” in *Islam and Rationality: The Impact of al-Ghazālī - Papers Collected on His 900th Anniversary* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2015), 142.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Binyamin Abrahamov, *Divine Love in Islamic Mysticism: The Teachings of al-Ghazālī and al-Dabbāgh* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 45.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 45-49.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 44.

much of what we have seen above, al-Ghazālī is not entirely Platonic on the question of the rational faculty and its leading role within the soul’s constitution. For al-Ghazālī, there is an additional (and even superior faculty) within the soul’s constitution, and this is of a mystical kind that is quite peculiar to his *taṣawwuf*. I will return to this shortly. However, the comparison between al-Ghazālī and the Platonists is very compelling, of course, namely because they treat human happiness (which al-Ghazālī ties to the religious conception of salvation) as the soul’s exposure to immaterial truths and the shunning of worldly distractions.

For al-Ghazālī, virtuous action demands negating things which incite one toward prioritizing or fixating on worldly affairs. The heart is at the forefront of this struggle against worldliness. It must be resolute enough to withstand the passions, as it can be tempted by anger, lust, and other visceral inclinations. Only when the heart is purified from these passions can it truly encounter God. Al-Ghazālī describes

hearts [as] akin to pots which, when filled by water, block the entrance of wind; [similarly], hearts distracted by other than God do not permit the entrance of knowledge of God’s supreme majesty (*al-qulūb ka-l-awānī fa-mā dāmat mumtali ‘a b-il-mā’ lā yadkhuluhā al-hawā’ f-al-qulūb al-mashgūla bi-ghayr Allāh lā tadkhuluhā al-ma’rifa bi-jalāl Allāh ta’ālā*).⁴⁰⁹

While al-Ghazālī would hardly define this desire for higher knowledge as *eros* for rational Truth, there are some suspicions that he is presenting his own peculiar and stylized Platonism.⁴¹⁰ Further, like al-Fārābī, al-Ghazālī asserts that knowledge of the ultimate Being (i.e., God) leads to humanity’s “happiness” (*sa’āda*). And both consider this knowledge as ennobling to the human, the only sentient species endowed with this higher purpose.⁴¹¹ Take, for example, al-Ghazālī’s portrayal of the human condition, which is “between the ranks of brutes and angels; whereby the

⁴⁰⁹ Al-Ghazālī, “‘Ajā’ib al-qalb,” 917.

⁴¹⁰ Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies in al-Ghazzālī* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1975), 267-68.

⁴¹¹ Al-Ghazālī considers this the “noblest” (*ashraf*) of knowledge. See: Al-Ghazālī, “‘Ajā’ib al-qalb,” 917.

human is nourished he is [akin] to plants; and whereby he senses and moves by choice he is animal” (*‘alā ritba bayn al-bahā’im wa-l-malā’ika*). The human, so he claims, is discernible from brutes by being able to *know*, and different from the angels because he or she is provided with the “choice” of seeking Truth and subduing sinfulness, whereas angels are by nature knowledgeable and sinless.⁴¹² This interchangeability between the two epistemic fields of theology and philosophy is highly suggestive of their congruence at key junctures, most notably regarding the human’s soul within the cosmos. Islamic notions of hierarchy and angels lend themselves to a rationalist Platonic reinterpretation, just as quasi-Platonic notions can be remarked in key aspects of al-Ghazālī’s theological corpus.

Further, al-Ghazālī’s view of “monotheism” (*tawḥīd*), which he interprets through an epistemic lens, is aligned with some key Platonic ideas. This is the view the physical world derives its reality from transcendent, universal Ideas. Only, al-Ghazālī maintains that the world is derived from one transcendent source, God, which forms the basis for *tawḥīd*. At the most surface level, *tawḥīd* presumes submission to God by way of the following utterance, “there is no God but God” (*lā ilāha illā Allāh*). In the *Book of Monotheism and Reliance on God* (*Kitāb al-tawḥīd w-al-tawakkul*) in the *Revival*, al-Ghazālī tells us that monotheism can be divided into four different ranks. The first two are esoterically empty. In fact, the first kind is insincere; it is when “hypocrites” (*munāfiqīn*) make the utterance while their hearts are in denial. The second is the belief of the commoners whose hearts merely accept the terms of the statement. But it is only at the third stage of faith that the adherent contemplates God’s being, but only by means of examining and contemplating the many, which are part of His creation. It is at the fourth stage that one achieves the highest form of monotheism, the realization that the entirety of creation belongs to

⁴¹² Ibid., 917-18.

God and that one is unimportant in this larger universal context. Thus, the true ascetic adherent neglects all things but God in that no being (whether sentient or insentient) has any self-referential value but Him.⁴¹³

Al-Ghazālī notes the difficulty in readily imagining an indivisible ontic base for our universe, when everywhere we look, we are confronted by diversity and multiplicity of beings. But al-Ghazālī ascertains that observable multiplicities do not negate a primordial, indivisible Being. Pointing to the human composition as a case in point, he argues that one can speak of a person's soul, body, and organs, all the while treating this person as a singular being. The same attitude must be developed in our quest to identify the primary source of creation. Al-Ghazālī stresses that to attain *tawakkul*, which roughly translates to reliance on God, one must learn to ascend beyond multiplicity, thus thinking about the singular Being that constitutes all others.⁴¹⁴ In certain ways, al-Ghazālī thinks similarly of the primordial Being, using the popular Aristotelian phrase "primary mover" (*al-muḥarrik al-awwal*) to describe God as this primary originator, only, in the theologian's case, creation is the manifestation of divine will. It is in this sense that al-Ghazālī diverges from the philosophers' rationalism. Al-Fārābī's primary cause (*al-sabab al-awwal*), on the other hand, lacks the character of a personable being, designating a rational truth instead. To return to al-Ghazālī, the assumption that diversity of being precludes Oneness is not the only way one fails to attain *tawakkul*. Certain people may erroneously ascribe the status of *muḥarrik al-awwal* to the wrong being. This short-sightedness is likened to an ant's perception of a pen writing on the surface of paper. Because its vision is limited to the pen's tip, the ant is unaware that the pen is moved by a person's hand. The short-sighted person who does not see God's originating act is likened to this ant, as he or she is unable to distinguish between an efficient

⁴¹³ Al-Ghazālī, "Kitāb al-Tawḥīd wa-l-tawakkul," 1686.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 1687-88.

cause and the medium through which the cause exercises its creative capacity.⁴¹⁵ This analogy on short-sightedness is one among many of al-Ghazālī's attempts to impart an explanation on how souls perceive or misperceive truth.

What is most intriguing about al-Ghazālī's critique of sin is how much of it is infused with philosophical content. When we think of sin in the Islamic context, particularly the Qur'anic injunctions detailing the rules of moral behaviour, it is not unsound to think of eternal damnation and other punitive measures. While these injunctions are integral to Islam's moral principles, they are not one's only incentive to refrain from impiety, at least not for al-Ghazālī. Sinfulness is also gravely concerning given its detriments to the soul's purpose. When inflicted by sinfulness, the heart (i.e., soul) becomes inept at perceiving Truth (*ḥaqq*) and the truthfulness of religion, thus becoming imperceptive to otherworldly things. This indulgence in worldly pleasures leads to the kind of entrapment the soul experiences, as discussed above. This is why the heart must be purified, as it is the "locale" (*makān*) of knowledge and is bestowed with mastery over all bodily organs. It is where ideas or concepts of entities are imprinted. The heart is akin to a "mirror" (*mir'a*) that is obscured by black fumes when neglected; the clearer (i.e., more purified) it is within, the more lucid is its representation, or concepts, of that which it reflects.⁴¹⁶

As we can see, al-Ghazālī, in part, regards sin as an epistemic error; it is the failure to attain a higher form of perception. Just as the world is divided in two separate realms, so is perception. First, we have the most basic form of perception by way of our physical senses. When one looks at an object, one is said to 'see' by virtue of eyesight. But there is another kind of *seeing*, one that is esoteric in nature, which transcends the corporeal realm. Readers will note that, in this case, he distinguishes between sensory and mystical experience, without mentioning the status of

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 1688-89.

⁴¹⁶ Al-Ghazālī, "'Ajā'ib al-qalb," 921-22.

theoretical knowledge. But if we return to his definition of the heart, we know that al-Ghazālī finds rational inquiry ennobling; only it is surpassed by mystical experience, which provides more consummate exposure to knowledge of immaterial truths and even, at times, the privilege of clairvoyance. The prophets typify the importance of mystical knowledge and its ability to provide insight into future events otherwise inaccessible to the five senses or speculative thought. Regular persons can receive visions while asleep, because physical senses are “repressed” during our sleep, thus allowing our esoteric perception to be more lucid. Prophets are exceptional in that they can repress their physical senses, which is why they can perceive the ulterior world while awake. For al-Ghazālī, the above point is yet again meant to illustrate that the soul, to which the divine esoteric projection is directed, is held captive by the mundane and vulgar aspects (e.g. material desires and lusts) of the physical senses. Though we are tied to this corporeal world, it is not impossible to escape it. Al-Ghazālī argues that it is a “ladder to the rational [immaterial] world.” Without this ladder, “climbing to the rational world would be blocked.”⁴¹⁷

To reiterate, al-Ghazālī does not intend to deride any of the human functions and faculties, let alone the human intellect. He firmly believes that the intellect provides us with important and sometimes indispensable forms of knowledge, as I will demonstrate later. Rather, al-Ghazālī is suggesting that these faculties cannot be unrestrained or fully independent of the highest human faculties. In the case of appetite, sexuality, and other forms of corporeal impulses, al-Ghazālī is clear that these must be controlled and tamed by our higher faculties. As we will see in the following section, at a certain point, the intellect must also be subordinated to its superior faculty. What this faculty entails will be thoroughly discussed below. In other words, this hierarchical principle also corresponds with the soul’s various states. Undoubtedly, this role or rank assigned

⁴¹⁷ *The Niche of Lights*, 26.

to the intellect is a significantly nobler one than the senses, but it is not the superior function. For now, the idea to keep in mind is that al-Ghazālī's epistemology rests on an understanding of a hierarchized human constitution whereby each constitutive part must be governed by its superior. These constitutive parts fulfill different partial roles in accruing knowledge. But when these constitutive parts are not within their designated ranks, unruliness and disorder ensues within the human soul, leading to a general obfuscation of our perception.

On numerous occasions, al-Ghazālī explains what occurs to the soul when the material passions and lusts are unleashed. This results in the human becoming beastlike or animalistic, a life far removed from the consummate human potential. Of course, unbridled reason, one that is not subservient to the highest faculty of the human soul, does not result in animalistic life, because animals lack reason altogether. It is not entirely clear whether al-Ghazālī believes that unbridled reason causes a breakdown of the human constitution, or whether there is such thing as unbridled reason. In certain passages, al-Ghazālī suggests that the intellect can provide us with a grasp of religious notions and help expand our religious sciences. Some come to know aspects of God through rational activity. But he is also adamant that reason is sometimes restricted to knowing philosophical truths, but it is insufficient for exposure to divine knowledge. In fact, there are instances in which scholars become too self-involved in philosophical and rational activities, such that they forget that knowledge should serve the Muslim community. Therefore, al-Ghazālī believes pious commoners – who have little or no knowledge of philosophical notions – are far more valuable to their communities and nobler than impious scholars. One may consecrate much of one's life pursuing knowledge, but this can be for sinful purposes. In fact, some scholars pursue

knowledge because of vainglorious desires, while others do so for more sinister purposes, as with heretics who deliberately seek to mislead the Muslim community.⁴¹⁸

The point is that, much like bodily functions, the intellect can be misused or misdirected. In this sense, one can say that the intellect or reason is not strictly inclined toward good or evil; it is more so a neutral force because it can be utilized for good or bad. The heart, on the other hand, in which the intellect is located, is perhaps the only faculty that is most proximate to the good. When it fails to see the good, this is because its perception has been obscured. This obscurity is a symptom of an imbalance within the human constitution or soul, one that will be more thoroughly explored in the next chapter. For now, it is important to keep in mind that proper knowledge of God is only possible within the human constitution (soul) when all the constitutive parts are subordinated to the heart's command.

Section III – *Knowledge as “light” (nūr) in Niche of Lights*

In the *Niche of Lights*, al-Ghazālī provides his most thorough exposition of the human soul, its constitutive parts, and the ways in which the different faculties are exposed to varying kinds of knowledge. At first glance, al-Ghazālī's definition of light can be cryptic, because he applies it to different phenomena and uses it in varying contexts. But the passages on light become clearer when we treat them as al-Ghazālī intended, allegorically. And it is in this spirit that the *Niche* unfolds as a text on epistemology. Here, light is conjured to intimate perception, notably the kind that perceives divine truths. This is evident from the introduction, when al-Ghazālī states that his starting point is the following Qur'anic passage: “Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth.” Additionally, al-Ghazālī references a hadith in which the Prophet states that God conceals the truth

⁴¹⁸ “Mishkāt al-anwār,” 22.

from us through seventy thousand veils made of light and darkness. Should these veils be removed, the spectator, the one perceiving the truth (i.e., God), would have his face burned. This imagery suggests that the truth cannot be fully absorbed, as human perception is not sufficiently developed for this sort of exposure.⁴¹⁹ Yet again, we come across another astonishingly quasi-Platonic aspect of al-Ghazālī's writing. The parable of blinding light recalls the philosopher, in Plato's *Republic*, who is overwhelmed by light after leaving the cave.

As mentioned above, al-Ghazālī regards the soul (i.e., heart) as a receptacle for truth. He maintains that the soul is blinded from seeing truth when obscured by sensory impulses. In the *Marvels of the Heart*, al-Ghazālī maintains that the soul is capable of apprehending truth both sensibly and metaphysically, the first being inferior to the second. Here, al-Ghazālī conjures imagery that immediately recalls Plato's allegory of the cave. Pointing to the difference between the sun in itself and its reflection against water's surface, al-Ghazālī expresses a categorical distinction between truth and its "imitation" (*muḥākka*). In Platonic fashion, al-Ghazālī uses this analogy of sun and its reflection on water to invite his readers to think of imitation as an inferior state, stressing that the corporeal world reflects a partial form of immaterial and unseen world (*malakūt*). He then reverts to Islamic ascetic language, exclaiming that true knowledge is attained when the "veil" (*hijāb*) between the soul and the object of knowledge is removed. But for al-Ghazālī, unlike his interlocutors among the *falāsifa*, unveiling occurs through *dhikr*, the constant remembering of God.⁴²⁰ It is also important to remind readers that al-Ghazālī's understanding of divine knowledge does not figuratively imply a kind of rational truth as described by al-Fārābī or even Plato. Al-Ghazālī's notion of divinity presupposes an absolute, free being whose adherents could encounter His grace through religious works. I will return to this distinction shortly.

⁴¹⁹ *The Niche of Lights*, 1.

⁴²⁰ "'Ajā'ib al-qalb," 932.

Plato's and al-Ghazālī's respective views of divine or rational luminosity suggest an emanationist doctrine in both cases, as the two thinkers assert that "light", or *nūr* in Arabic, has origins in a primal source. In both cases, this divinelike luminosity is essential for the soul's capacity to perceive higher, immaterial truths. For Plato, the good is analogous to the sun's capacity to make beings in the sensory world perceivable to sight. Only, the good illuminates a higher form of perception, one that is immaterial and accessible through reasoning. But Socrates remarks to Glaucon that the good cannot be adequately understood without use of an "analogue" from our sensory world. Just as our eye is only capable of seeing things "illuminated" by light, the soul is only capable of perceiving truths illuminated by the good. Consequently, an unilluminated thing is concealed to the perceiving faculty, whether this is the soul or the eye. Despite the original luminosity's descent to subsidiary sources, there is only one originating source in this hierarchy. While light emanates from the sun's rays and while the eye helps us see, only the sun is truly luminous. Light and the eye are considered "sunlike" but are not interchangeable with the sun. Likewise, knowledge and truth are "goodlike" but are not the good.⁴²¹

A similar view of luminosity is developed in al-Ghazālī's *Niche* in which the recurring premise is that luminosity is only truly applicable to one original source, God. Like Plato, al-Ghazālī maintains that immaterial ideas can best be apprehended through analogies pertaining to sensory phenomena.⁴²² In other words, since it is difficult to convey in writing what it is like to perceive knowledge of the divine, al-Ghazālī is compelled to borrow from an analogous

⁴²¹ Plato, "The Republic," 508a-09a.

⁴²² Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights*, 14-15. A similar argument is made in the *Incoherence*. To explain the intense pleasure of sudden exposure to God, al-Ghazālī gives the example of a person whose taste is suddenly brought back after not being able to taste for long. Upon enjoying good food, this man is bewildered by "great pleasure." The intensity of a first encounter with God is greater, but it cannot be explained without drawing on analogies from the world of senses. "These pleasures, however, are base in relation to spiritual and intellectual pleasures. But one cannot explain this except through examples taken from what people experience in this life." See: *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 209.

perception, that of sight. The use of analogies is strikingly similar, because al-Ghazālī also points to the sun as the primary source in a gradation of luminosity. Say we come across light shining on the floor’s surface in the middle of the night. A discerning person will recognize that the light which made its way into the house through the mirror reflecting moonlight is, in fact, derived from the sun. This is because the moon, which transmits light to the mirror, borrows its light from the sun. The sun’s role in this gradation is unequalled. If we were to remove the sun from this gradation, all luminosity would cease. The light found in other objects is only conditional, because it is acquired. In this very mundane sense, only the sun can be regarded as the origin of all luminosity, as it dispenses light to its inferior counterparts, the moon and the mirror on the wall. Though al-Ghazālī conjures this imagery to explain a key aspect of his epistemology, the above analogy carries key implications for his views about social hierarchy and a theocratic regime, ideas we will expand on in the following chapters. Briefly put, through this analogy, al-Ghazālī underlines why it is crucial to discern between the different epistemic states among different classes of people. In the realm of human associations, the prophets receive the highest form of reverence as providers of “light”. They serve as guiding lamps for the rest of humanity and their knowledge is never derived from fellow humans.⁴²³

In his recent book on al-Ghazālī, Massimo Capani asserts that the analogy of light is both Platonist and Ghazālīan. Presumably, what he means here is that they draw on light as an analogy for similar reflections on metaphysics and human ethics. Unfortunately, he does not expand on this comparative point. He does, however, explain a subtle, yet crucial, point about al-Ghazālī’s allegory. And, as we will see in the next paragraph, this point recalls a crucial detail in Plato’s metaphysics. In al-Ghazālī’s case, not only does the analogy of light intimate God’s superior role

⁴²³ *The Niche of Lights*, 12-13.

as Creator in the hierarchy of beings, as I have been explaining, but also the “unattainable transcendence of God.”⁴²⁴ Light is a convenient analogy, because it is “impalpable” and “incorporeal”, though it is highly familiar to us. Light is a convenient and acceptable means to “symbolize God” considering its immateriality. “God *is* light in a sense and the symbols we draw from this ontological similitude are the tentative images by which we can try to grasp, very vaguely and only by way of allegory, *what* God is.”⁴²⁵

Now, when we refer to anything that is not God as light, the term is only conditional. This includes the light provided by prophets or the sun. This is consistent with the Platonic conception of the true being and its inferior approximations. Socrates makes a similar observation in his discussion on what constitutes the sunlike and the goodlike. Al-Ghazālī’s analogy of moonlight suggests that all hierarchal orders can be traced to a primary point, one that always derives its capacity through itself. If we hold true to this doctrine, then all inferior approximations (anything that is not God) can only be referred to as light in a strictly metaphorical sense. The one that borrows cannot simultaneously be a provider in a true sense. Similarly, a poor person who suddenly becomes rich due the grace of a rich person is not rich in himself, but only rich conditionally. If the graces of the rich person were annulled, he would return to a life of poverty. In this interaction, it is only the one who lends, or provides, that can truly be called rich.⁴²⁶

Al-Ghazālī is clearly promoting the theistic view that no aspect of God’s creation is inherently self-referential or independent of His creative capacity. And this proclamation does not merely rest on the simple fact that only God is light. Al-Ghazālī is promoting an even more radical view, one that we encountered in the previous chapter. This is the view that nothing truly *is* but

⁴²⁴ Campanini, *Al-Ghazali and the Divine*, 86.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights*, 15.

Him. Existence cannot be an intrinsic capacity of that which is created, as illumination is not intrinsic capacity of that which borrows light. Moreover, all created things inevitably perish, as determined by God. It is only that which is imperishable that truly is. Hence, “the only existent is the Face of God.”⁴²⁷ Therefore, the sole source of knowledge derives from God in that everything is contingent on His will and volition. He created all beings and created the capacity within us to *know* such things and, more importantly, to know Him. Such *knowing* requires a personal “voyage” to the ulterior realm, one that is remarkably familiar to readers of the *Phaedrus*. Al-Ghazālī asserts that “if a person does not travel to [the ulterior] world...he remains deprived of the specific characteristics of humanity.” The person voyaging to the ulterior realm transcends the mundane world, seeking superior truth that would otherwise be inaccessible or unreachable. Once again, al-Ghazālī expresses the view that the person who does not undertake this voyage is beastlike.⁴²⁸

As mentioned above, the true light is God alone and the use of the word light to describe something other than Him should only be considered metaphorical, or an analogue if we think of it through Plato’s terms. According to the commoners, light entails that which facilitates the “manifestation” of other things. Hence, commoners would praise the faculty of eyesight for its ability to make objects manifest. In the realm of visual sensation, there are three categories ranging from a spectrum of non-perceivable to perceivable things. The first kind are imperceptible on their own, an example being “dark bodies” which would require light to be seen. The second kind are perceivable on their own, while lacking the capacity to make other things visible, such as stars or bodies that are luminating without being “afame”. The third kind is what we may rightfully call light, as it is both perceivable on its own and can make other things perceivable. This includes the sun, the moon, and luminating entities. For example, the sun is considered light in that it makes

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 11.

things visible when they are otherwise not. Light, in this sense, denotes any luminous entity which does not derive its source from other entities but rather from itself.⁴²⁹

Considering the above comparative points, it is hardly surprising that contemporary scholars have begun to inquire into the possible Platonic and Neoplatonic influences on al-Ghazālī's theology. Kukkonen identifies some striking points of convergence, though these are spelled out very briefly. One of these points, which we have already examined above, is the idea that the soul seeks solace in the realm of immaterial and divine truths.⁴³⁰ Equally, there is the concern that the lower parts of the soul, namely the appetite, draws people away from the immaterial truth – which is God in al-Ghazālī's case. There is an intrinsic problem with the human constitution: the human soul oscillates between higher and lower ends. This internal strife is why humans find themselves in this medial rank between angels and beasts.⁴³¹

While al-Ghazālī defines the terms of this ascension to the immaterial world and illumination in strikingly similar fashion to Platonic philosophy, we cannot forgo an important distinction on the soul that sets him apart from Plato and Neo-Platonists, like al-Fārābī. Al-Ghazālī also describes a faculty within the soul that is superior to the intellect, one that he explicitly identifies in the *Niche* and the *Deliverance*. According to al-Ghazālī, the soul is animated by different states of illumination, or perception, and these are ordered according to their significance. First, there is the “sensible spirit” (*al-rūḥ al-ḥassās*), which is responsible for collection and apprehension of things encountered by the senses. This is present in children and animals, and thus constitutes the lowest aspect of the soul, as it is the basest among all sentient beings. Second is the “imaginal spirit” (*al-rūḥ al-khayālī*). Its purpose is to collect memories of occurrences accrued

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 3-4.

⁴³⁰ Kukkonen, “Al-Ghazālī on the Origins of Ethics,” 280.

⁴³¹ “Al-Ghazālī on the Emotions,” 144-45.

from the senses and to provide these to the third faculty, the “rational spirit” (*al-rūḥ al-‘āqlī*), when needed. The imaginative faculty is not present among newborns. This is proven when we observe newborns wanting an object before them and then completely forgetting about it when it is removed from their sight. The lack of an imaginative faculty entails that the child is incapable of perceiving something when it is not currently being imprinted on his or her senses. This is to say that newborn may be able see the toy, but he or she will never be able to imagine it, let alone contemplate it posteriorly. Third, rationality accrues knowledge of the immaterial aspects of entities and comes to know “necessary knowledge” which al-Ghazālī explains earlier in the text. The “reflective spirit” (*al-rūḥ al-fikrī*), which comes fourth, collects the objects of knowledge derived from reason and apprehends their constitutive elements. Moreover, the rational soul can infer a new fact from the prior coupling of two statements, a clear allusion to syllogistic reasoning.⁴³²

The fifth and last of these faculties is the “holy prophetic spirit” (*al-rūḥ al-qudsī al-nabawī*), which is also discussed in the *Deliverance* under the less salient term of “faculty of prophecy”.⁴³³ This concept certainly gives the impression that it is only designated for prophets, which would preclude non-prophets from experiencing something similar, let alone prophetic illumination. But this is far from the case, as al-Ghazālī maintains in the *Niche* that this soul is also applicable to saints (*awliyā’*).⁴³⁴ Whether prophecy and sainthood are innate or activated by personal struggle is not straightforwardly stated here. I will return to this shortly. In fact, the content of this faculty, which endows one with perception of the ulterior world, is obscurely defined. This immaterial realm is beyond the reach of the faculties of reason and rationality, and

⁴³² Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights*, 36-37.

⁴³³ Ibid., 37; Al-Ghazālī, “Deliverance from Error,” 64.

⁴³⁴ David Buchman translates the word *awliyā’* to “friends of God”: *The Niche of Lights*, 41.. A more appropriate usage is “saints”.

it is not apprehensible to people who lack or cannot cultivate the prophetic faculty.⁴³⁵ Perhaps this explains al-Ghazālī's reluctance to detail this faculty to the same extent that he does with the others. The prophetic faculty can only be appreciated by those who have tapped into it. The previous faculties are clearly inferior, as al-Ghazālī seems to suggest their use is more quotidian.

Now, the reluctance to describe this prophetic faculty is further complicated by the fact that some who have never experience it will obstinately deny its existence. But al-Ghazālī insists that lack of experience does not amount to compelling proof that something is nonexistent. And this is where we get back to the idea of experiential knowledge, which we glossed over in the second chapter. Al-Ghazālī insists that not all forms of knowledge can be known rationally. And this is not just the case for the prophetic faculty. Take the example of poets, he says. They marvel at the varying evocative emotions and sentiments conjured in poems. Conversely, those who are uninitiated will only see poetry prosaically, and they will never be able to tap into the evocative emotions behind the carefully chosen words that make up the poem. The same assumption of ignorance should be accorded to those who have not tapped into the abovementioned prophetic faculty. It is a higher form of knowledge, which appears to be a perfected form of *taṣawwuf*. And I say *taṣawwuf* here because it is experiential knowledge based on “tasting” (*dhawq*), which is the defining feature of mystical knowledge. This mystical experience, founded on taste, surpasses theoretical “knowledge”, which in turn surpasses simple “faith”.⁴³⁶

Though al-Ghazālī thinks prophets can bypass theoretical and discursive knowledge, he ascribes a very important role for the intellect as a corrective faculty for the senses. Al-Ghazālī presents what is perhaps his strongest defense of the intellect in the *Niche*'s introductory passages, as he explains its superiority to sensory perception. Take sight for example. There is so much the

⁴³⁵ “Deliverance from Error,” 64-65; *The Niche of Lights*, 38.

⁴³⁶ *The Niche of Lights*, 38.

eye can perceive, but it cannot perceive itself nor can it perceive emotions, such as anger, wrath, happiness, and so on. The intellect can categorize these feelings, and it is also conscious of itself, and it is conscious of its own consciousness, and so on. In both the *Deliverance* and the *Niche*, al-Ghazālī exclaims that the sensory faculties (if unassisted by the intellect) can lead one to the false assumption that the moon is the size of a dinar. But with the theoretical sciences, this view stands corrected.

In the *Deliverance* al-Ghazālī speaks of the possibility that the intellect could always be corrected by a superior faculty. In the *Niche*, however, the central problem concerns poor judgement and delusional imagination. When the intellect overcomes these, it can see the truth of things. While this last position suggests that the intellect is capable of overcoming error, it is difficult to assert from this passage alone whether al-Ghazālī finds these deficiencies to be intrinsic to the intellect or not. One reason for this confusion is that al-Ghazālī does not clarify whether all imagination, as used in this context, necessarily obfuscates rational thinking or if he is specifically describing a form of *delusional* imagination. Also, readers are not told whether imagination is a property of the intellect or an additional counterpart. One thing is clear, however, and that is al-Ghazālī's belief that, unlike eyesight, the intellect can, at least potentially, overcome misperception. However, he makes it clear that this consummation of intellectual perception only occurs upon death. At best, al-Ghazālī intends to say that the intellect's true functions – to know things as they are – are constantly impeded by erroneous judgements while we live within body. Therefore, as far the mundane world is concerned, the intellect is haunted by constant impediments, but these limitations are inevitably lifted when the person dies and transcends his or her corporeal shell. Based on this passage, we get the sense that, for al-Ghazālī, the intellect is, at

least in potentiality, an infallible perceptive faculty with regards to what it perceives. Its problems do not originate from itself, but rather they stem from its imprisonment within the human body.⁴³⁷

Though a refined intellect yields lucid perception, al-Ghazālī wants us to know that the scope of what it perceives is ultimately limited. The intellect deals specifically with logical premises, like the idea that a being cannot be simultaneously existent and nonexistent. Sometimes, the intellect is “kindled” through “rational consideration.” In this second sense, he is referring to acquired knowledge. It is in this discussion that al-Ghazālī states that humans become most perceptive through the Qur’an’s revelation, as it reveals knowledge otherwise unknown independently. Al-Ghazālī likens the Qur’an’s relationship with the intellect to that of sunlight with the eye. This suggests that the Qur’an’s revelation is a more transcendent form of light relative to human reason. The term “eye” (*‘ayn*) signifies a twofold sense. The first is the exoteric kind, which designates knowledge of the world of senses. The second meaning is esoteric, entailing the non-physical perception of the ulterior world. For either eye is a “sun” (*shams*) or light which lightens its path. For the exoteric eye, this is the literal sun, whereas for the esoteric one it is the Qur’an. It is through the Qur’an that the esoteric eye may perceive or encounter the ulterior world.⁴³⁸

The impact of revealed knowledge on the soul is further expounded in the *Marvels*. Al-Ghazālī uses the term “religious science” (*‘ulūm al-dīniyya*) to denote “imitation” (*taqlīd*) of the prophets’ laws which are handed down through scripture. Al-Ghazālī argues that knowledge acquired through the intellect is insufficient for the heart’s salvation. As a commoner is better off not questioning a physician’s prescribed “medicines” (*adwiya*), pious commoners must treat revelation as their curative device. Al-Ghazālī likens rational knowledge to “nutrition” (*aghdiya*),

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 9-10.

topping this off with a remark that nutrition without medicine cannot heal one's pathology. Similarly, the heart's pathology is only treatable through its proper figurative medicine – i.e., the religious acts prescribed in revealed law.⁴³⁹ Readers must consider the complexity of al-Ghazālī's attitude toward *taqlīd*. In the *Deliverance*, he exclaims that Jews, Christians, and even Muslims blindly adopt the religions of their forebears without aiming for “certain knowledge” (*‘ilm al-yaqīnī*). As noted by Syed Rizwan Zamir, this has prompted modern commentators to erroneously present al-Ghazālī as a devoted critic of rigid traditionalism and, at times, a predecessor of early modern rationalism.⁴⁴⁰ While al-Ghazālī is certainly unique in his own right, this very brief mention of traditionalism, if we are to interpret it as a thoroughgoing critique, is overshadowed by al-Ghazālī's consistent position that commoners ought to avoid theorizing on matters of faith. I will explore this subject thoroughly in the following chapter. In brief, I do not consider this passage from the *Deliverance* as a presentation of an uncompromising critique of imitation, as this would be a false insinuation that al-Ghazālī did not sincerely believe in revelation. Rather, pure *taqlīd* was something that al-Ghazālī was trying to avoid for himself and likeminded people. The view that certain people need to imitate tradition is perfectly in line with al-Ghazālī's hierarchical view of epistemology, which assumes that some people's perceptive capacities are baser than others. As for himself, al-Ghazālī is dissatisfied with merely having knowledge imparted to him from an unquestioned source. His curiosity, as he himself claims in his autobiography, demanded certitude for his own soul.⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁹ Al-Ghazālī, “‘Ajā’ib al-qalb,” 927-28. Typically, when medieval Muslim *Sunnī* jurists speak of *taqlīd*, they are referring to the legal practice of undercutting innovative interpretations to “put a limit on legal pluralism.” This conservative practice privileges the status of former legal rulings imparted by jurist “masters.” See: Mohammad Fadel, “Nature, Revelation and the State in Pre-Modern Sunni Theological, Legal and Political Thought,” *Muslim World* 106, no. 2 (2016): 282-83. It is evident that al-Ghazālī is using this term in a particular philosophical sense to describe conformity to religious concepts more generally.

⁴⁴⁰ Zamir, “Al-Ghazālī: Doubt Certitude and Light,” 219-22.

⁴⁴¹ Al-Ghazālī, “Deliverance from Error,” 19-22.

This certitude is not attained dialogically, as is the case for the philosophers. While commoners learn through *taqlīd*, the elite among the faithful are exposed to more *certain* knowledge through personal, experiential means. Yet again, we find theoretical knowledge assuming an ancillary role, but this time to the experiential knowledge gained by the *Ṣūfī*, who, according to al-Ghazālī, attains an imperfect version of prophetic knowledge. In fact, al-Ghazālī devotes an entire section on differentiating between the knowledge of the *Ṣūfīyya* and knowledge of “theoreticians” (*nuzzār*) in the *Marvels*.⁴⁴² The first is the kind which “enters the heart as though it is hurled from an unknown place” (*ka’annahū ulqī min ḥayth lā yadrī*), whereas the second is based on “deductions” (*istidlāl*) and mental exercise. The fundamental distinction between these two forms of knowledge is that the first does not rely on apodictic proofs, whereas the second relies on the didactic efforts of the theoretician who is searching cognitive certitude. Al-Ghazālī further subdivides the first form of knowledge into two kinds: (1) “inspirational” (*ilhāman*), which is for saints and sages, and (2) “revelation” (*waḥī*), which is prophetic knowledge. These are the underlying differences between the different forms of knowledge. At first glance, al-Ghazālī appears to take a more distant tone as though he is merely outlining differences for a rather descriptive purpose.⁴⁴³ The *Ṣūfīyya*, he tells us, believe that they can bypass didactic learning by solely relying on inspirational knowledge. This passage becomes more interesting if we consider al-Ghazālī’s distant tone; he spells out their position by stating that “they said” (*qālū*) as though he is a mere observer. In brief, he tells us that the *Ṣūfīyya* maintain that inspiration is attained through “struggle” (*mujāhada*) whereby adherents detach themselves from worldliness. It is only after this internal struggle by the individual adherent that God pours His light into the heart, thus exposing the adherent to “metaphysical” (*ilāhiyāt*) truths. This raises

⁴⁴² “‘Ajā’ib al-qalb,” 928.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 929.

another issue. Although his way of defining inspiration clearly presupposes an element of grace in that God illuminates the heart, one cannot say that this grace is unsolicited. Al-Ghazālī stresses the element of personal struggle as integral to this graceful outpouring.⁴⁴⁴

As for the first point, despite his descriptive or passive tone, al-Ghazālī is evidently unsubtle about what form of knowledge he finds more complete or perfect. Divine illumination is superior to didactic reasoning. According to the Islamic tradition, the prophets are exemplary figures whose values and traditions ought to be mimicked by everyone, a position al-Ghazālī adheres to himself. Although non-prophets would never become akin to prophets, revelation and the prophetic tradition function as average reference points for daily religious practice. In this way, inspirational knowledge of the saints is simply a lesser form of revelation. Al-Ghazālī's description of prophetic knowledge is almost identical to his treatment of ascetic inspiration. The prophets were exposed to divine illumination without reliance on didactic learning, but rather because they chose to detach themselves from worldliness until knowledge of God became the sole object of their souls. The only major difference is that prophetic knowledge is a more lucid ascetic experience.⁴⁴⁵ What is most interesting about this passage on prophetic knowledge is al-Ghazālī's own silence on the issue of angelic transmission. At the heart of much of Muhammad's *waḥī*, for example, is the Archangel Gabriel's role as transmitter of divine knowledge. But al-Ghazālī's major emphasis is on the prophet's personal struggles and the rendition of his own soul as a receptacle for divine exposure, which is in line with his description of *taṣawwuf*. The absence of Gabriel's role in this discussion could not be anything but purposeful, as it alludes that Muhammad and other prophets were not passive receptors who were chosen but were rather people who

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 930.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid.

personally *worked* toward prophecy.⁴⁴⁶ This is a hint that the ascetic ideal, as depicted by the prophetic way, ought to be mimicked by sages and other ascetic followers. These ascetic people can never achieve *wahī*, but their inspiration (or *ilhām*) is certainly the noblest divine exposure to be achieved by a non-prophet.

While al-Ghazālī appears to stress the importance of the theoreticians’ knowledge, as he does in other texts, its importance, at least as conceived in the *Marvels* and other books within the *Revival*, is not symmetrical to divine exposure. Al-Ghazālī argues that theoreticians do not deny the importance of the ascetic way but are rather cautious of its misuse. When certain *Ṣūfīs* wrongly apply asceticism, they may degenerate into questionable behaviour bordering insanity. Hence, certain people maintain that mental exercise is the way to keep inspirational faculties under check, as didactic thinking helps discern between wrongful delusions (*khayalāt fāsida*) and exposure to Truth.⁴⁴⁷ This is clearly a favourable position toward theoretical knowledge, which, I have argued, al-Ghazālī does not eschew. But I maintain that the role of reason is favoured only because of its subordinate purpose to ascetic experience and correcting erroneous religious practices. Theoretical knowledge helps clarify or distinguish between right or wrong sources of knowledge. Since theoretical knowledge may correct ascetic experience, this might imply that the former is superior. However, al-Ghazālī only suggests that the intellect is capable of identifying obscurities, but never mentions that is capable of apprehending or grasping divine truth amounting to one’s soul being illuminated by God. Further, al-Ghazālī clearly argues that prophetic knowledge is wholesome without reliance on theoretical knowledge. This suggests that any flaw stemming from ascetic practice is due to deficiencies within one’s soul. Since theoretical knowledge is unnecessary for

⁴⁴⁶ The Qur’an (53:4) depicts revelation as “inspiration sent down to [the Prophet]” (*in huwa illā wahyun yūhā*).

⁴⁴⁷ Al-Ghazālī, “‘Ajā’ib al-qalb,” 930-31.

prophets but meanwhile instrumental for their subordinates, the non-prophets, ascetic practice, which yields inspired knowledge, stands out as the more complete form of perception.

As he begins to conclude his discussion of the difference between *taṣawwuf* and reason, al-Ghazālī's tone becomes more conspicuous. He maintains his position through a parable that has garnered attention from scholars interested in his epistemology. The parable describes an artistic competition between Byzantines and Chinese artists. In this competition, kings stood as arbiters to designate the artwork that would produce the most compelling effects. The Byzantines, who are emblematic of the theoretical science, adorned their artwork with complex colours and shapes. The Chinese, who represent the ascetics in this story, produced a perfectly polished artwork whose surface nonetheless strongly emitted colours despite not being painted. Compelled by this Chinese craft, the arbiters would conclude that polished surfaces, which are simple and unadorned by superfluous content, emit the most compelling effects. One may presume that the paint on the Byzantine artwork alludes to the intellect's inferiority in that it is restricted by sensory content. The Byzantines had to imitate the effects of natural colour by way of painting, a process bypassed by the Chinese, who merely presented a simple, polished glass that would emit *real* colours.⁴⁴⁸ This account of theoretical knowledge as an imitative process is a clear divergence from the Platonic philosophy. The most notable and significant element of quasi-Platonism in al-Ghazālī's asceticism is the idea that the soul's perception of Truth is infringed by corporeality; only, the difference is that al-Ghazālī maintains that the soul liberates itself with a faculty that is superior to the intellect and relies on religious works. For this to occur, the heart must rid itself of all superfluous content which would block its reception (i.e., perception) of truth. In al-Ghazālī's

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 933.

figurative terms, the heart must be polished and clear as though it is a “mirror” reflecting the object to which is facing.⁴⁴⁹

Conclusion

Al-Ghazālī’s constant use of the term of *heart* as opposed to *rational soul* (used by his philosophical contemporaries) throughout most of his epistemological corpus is telling. It evidences al-Ghazālī’s preference for mystical knowledge. Had he chosen to use the term *rational soul* instead, al-Ghazālī would have been restricting the scope of humanity’s epistemic condition to philosophical reasoning. As demonstrated above and in previous chapters, al-Ghazālī points out that humanity’s epistemic power reaches higher levels than syllogistic reasoning or philosophy in that our fundamental purpose is to know and encounter God. This is an encounter one cannot merely *contemplate* according to the terms of philosophical concepts or reasoning. This is not to say that human sciences are meaningless in his view, but that knowledge of the divine is the most illuminating of all, and the most consummate. It is knowledge of that upon which everything else is contingent and without which all things would be null. Knowledge of the divine must be treated superiorly to human sciences, which is why the revealed knowledge’s authority must be treated as unbending. In Chapter 6, we will see that this rule is especially pertinent in the realm of political science. The art of ruling must aim for guiding Muslims through the righteous path so that they may be prepared for the hereafter. Even something as seemingly secular as fiscal policies is seen as necessary for the world to come; humans should be allowed to prosper, to a certain extent, so that they can focus on pious activities. Furthermore, maintenance of the peace is intended to allow Muslims to live piously as opposed to get mired by infighting and bloodshed.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

Due to the limited scope of this chapter, more must be said about how the practice of mystical experience shapes the political elements of al-Ghazālī's theology. So far, I have shown to readers that mysticism differs from the rational in that it is not a simple cognition of the thing known. In this chapter, I have described mystical knowledge as a subjective and immersive experience whereby one *encounters* the divine. As mentioned above, God's grace does not merely effectuate it. The person who seeks the divine must also vacate their hearts and will this knowledge from firm conviction. Therefore, this subjective experience falls under the category of disciplinary religious acts as opposed to intellectual or philosophical reasoning. The two subsequent chapters will examine the normative implications of subjective belief, and more will be stated on how it ought to be practiced according to al-Ghazālī. Since one is individually responsible for their own place in the afterlife, the responsibility falls on the individual to vacate their hearts. A heart that is unprepared suffers from the pathologies of doubt or erroneous beliefs. It is only after covering these points that I may proceed to the political elements. As will be demonstrated from now on, al-Ghazālī's political theology is inextricable from one of his major epistemological positions, that erring in religious matters is largely an individualistic mistake on the part of the subject or larger communities whose scholars mislead their average lay audience.

Chapter 5 – *Subjective Piety and Culpability of Belief*

In the previous chapters, I discussed the epistemological implications of al-Ghazālī's *Ṣūfī* conception of the "heart" (*qalb*). I argued that al-Ghazālī's preferred use of this term is concomitant with his prevailing views on inspirational knowledge, which he squarely distinguishes from reason. To briefly repeat, al-Ghazālī argues that knowledge of ulterior Truth is only attainable by way of purifying the heart, such that it becomes perceptive of divine things. This is the highest form of piety a human being can attain, and it is not exclusive to prophets, though the latter are privileged with better perception than non-prophets. Further, the kind of piety imagined by al-Ghazālī is ripe with epistemic content. While this piety forgoes philosophical thinking, al-Ghazālī's commentaries on belief and the heart suggest that these concepts are epistemically grounded. This is because the heart's perception is activated after prolonged religious practice. In this sense, the knowledge attained by pious activity is empirical, rather than theoretical, as it demands practice and rigorous individual training rather than mental exercise. The obvious theme to emerge from this aspect of his epistemology is the implication of subjective belief. By elevating the heart as the highest faculty of perception, al-Ghazālī inadvertently deals with the subject of moral culpability at great lengths. Al-Ghazālī's remarks on the phenomena of piety and belief yield detailed imagery of an internal struggle within the individual, who must overcome all sentiments and feelings which obstruct perception of Truth. Further, in this chapter, I argue that al-Ghazālī's remarks on subjective piety contain significant political themes, even though they are formulated within an epistemological context.

A careful examination of al-Ghazālī's treatment of unbelief, namely the category of apostasy, reveals an inseparable link between his epistemological and political concerns. At this point, readers already know that al-Ghazālī endeavours to redefine the limits of a self-standing

Islamic theology. This is not to say that he regards the philosophical discipline as entirely erroneous or foreign to religion, but that there are certain elements which contradict the religious canon. In so doing, al-Ghazālī tries to restrict the intellectual activity of religious scholarship, insisting on a more self-enclosed Islamic theology, by suggesting that Avicennian cosmology must be forfeited. Nevertheless, he also formulates a theory of toleration while delimiting the role of philosophy. Al-Ghazālī remarks that contemporaneous theologians (*mutakallimūn*) have done disservice to the Islamic community by charging commoners with unbelief. According to al-Ghazālī, commoners are not equipped with the capacity to engage in thoroughgoing discussions about God’s divine traits or other theological matters, which demand refined logical and theoretical skills. Ann K. Lambton had incorrectly interpreted this aspect of al-Ghazālī’s politics as signaling a sentiment of “distrust of the common man.”⁴⁵⁰ But al-Ghazālī’s general view is on the contrary, at least as it is expressed in his *The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Masked Infidelity*.⁴⁵¹ This claim that commoners are unphilosophical is not motivated by scornful intellectualism but is rather a call for more learned people to tolerate those who lack theoretical proclivity. As Sherman A. Jackson rightly notes in his invaluable commentary on the *Criterion*, al-Ghazālī expands the definition of who counts as a Muslim to include a plurality of beliefs and safeguard commoners from harsh condemnations.⁴⁵² Hence, this text resonates with some aspects of modern treatises on toleration.

Naturally, we should expect any reflection on toleration to yield intolerant aspects as well. The question of whom to tolerate often presupposes certain limitations to toleration. This is no less true of the *Criterion*, which contains noticeable polemical condemnation of certain unbelievers.

⁴⁵⁰ Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam*, 127.

⁴⁵¹ Al-Ghazālī, “The Decisive Criterion.”

⁴⁵² Sherman A. Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī’s Fayṣal al-Tafriqa Bayna al-Isām wa al-Zandaqa* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 54.

This component of the *Criterion*, which is underexplored in Jackson's commentary, is important to our analysis. As mentioned above, al-Ghazālī's treatment of unbelief, as we find in his more specific category of apostasy, is rooted in a larger epistemic concern. As I demonstrate below, this is the view that the adherent is largely responsible for admitting these erroneous beliefs into his or her heart. In this chapter, I argue that al-Ghazālī's psychology of the heart, which contains some of his elementary epistemic concerns, reveals a thoroughgoing assessment of unbelief. To date, the closest thing to an examination of the epistemological roots of unbelief in al-Ghazālī's theology is found in Frank Griffel's research into the theologian's ruling on apostasy. Griffel remarks the severity of al-Ghazālī's condemnation, bringing a significant change to the way apostates were condemned to death. Al-Ghazālī's ruling replaced another ruling popular among many of his jurist predecessors, such as Abū 'Abdullāh Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī (d. 820), which allowed for the exoneration of apostates by giving them a chance to publicly deny the charges against them. This practice is known as *istitāba*. According to Griffel, al-Ghazālī worried that *istitāba* could be utilized by covert unbelievers (or apostates).⁴⁵³ As we will see below, the *Criterion* formulates a way to identify covert unbelief.

Al-Ghazālī's theology is perhaps one of the first within the classical Islamic tradition to probe into the epistemic roots of belief and unbelief. For example, prior to al-Ghazālī's contribution, the topics of unbelief and apostasy had been largely, if not exclusively, jurisprudential matters. Later, this chapter will briefly discuss this jurisprudential form of apostasy in the works of jurists al-Shāfi'ī and al-Ghazālī's *Shāfi'ī* tutor al-Juwaynī. The purpose of bringing these jurists into the discussions is to showcase the legal categories which had been in use before al-Ghazālī's contribution to the discussion. These same categories, particularly the concept of

⁴⁵³ Frank Griffel, "Toleration and Exclusion: al-Shāfi'ī and al-Ghazālī on the Treatment of Apostates," *Bulletin of SOAS* 64, no. 3 (2001): 350-54.

apostasy, would be reshaped by al-Ghazālī as part of a larger epistemological discussion about the source of erroneous belief and human understanding. In al-Ghazālī’s work, unbelief as well as apostasy are no longer merely treated as matters of legal injunctions, as was the case for his predecessors. Al-Ghazālī’s contribution is unique in that it probes into the origins of unbelief and the heart of the disbeliever, namely when it seeks to expose “Crypto-infidels” (*zanādiqa*), or secret unbelievers.⁴⁵⁴ At the heart of this discussion on intolerance are his key epistemological categories pertaining to ascetism and human understanding, which I will explain below.

This chapter enters uncharted territory by examining al-Ghazālī’s condemnation and critique of unbelief in view of his notion of *qalb*. In so doing, I move beyond Griffel’s research, which has offered a step in the right direction for understanding the relationship between al-Ghazālī’s politics and his larger epistemology. The bulk al-Ghazālī’s his reflections on unbelief is spread throughout his writings on faith and epistemology. Hence, the angle of al-Ghazālī’s theology I will be focusing on is his assessment of human understanding, particularly how humans attain true faith. His inquiry into how humans come to believe in the various religions they adopt from their parents is generally followed by a subsequent consideration: to what extent should the Muslim community tolerate a plurality of beliefs? This common concern found across al-Ghazālī’s writings on epistemology indicates that his reflections contain a normative political position. Therefore, in addition to understanding the epistemic undertones of his political theology, this chapter begins to probe al-Ghazālī’s theocratic aim of protecting the political community from erroneous doctrine.

The chapter is divided into three sections. Section I evaluates the scope of al-Ghazālī’s toleration (or lack thereof). In so doing, I will unpack his specific definition of unbelief, what he

⁴⁵⁴Al-Ghazālī, “The Decisive Criterion,” 92.

thinks amounts to erroneous beliefs, and his claims about the dangers these present to the Muslim adherent. These themes can offer us insight into his general theory of toleration. Section II returns to his conception of the heart, with emphasis on the idea that this faculty includes' human knowledge. The point is to show that, for al-Ghazālī, true faith is inextricable from knowledge. To avoid the promotion of erroneous belief, one must actively cultivate knowledge, which is the only path toward genuine belief. In a sense, we can say that unbelief for al-Ghazālī is a sin of an epistemic nature. In Section III, I will demonstrate that what makes this epistemic sin so abominable in his view, is its renunciation of the heart's "natural inclination" (*fiṭra*) toward the truth. The unbeliever, then, is one who obstinately neglects what his or her heart naturally believes in.

Section I – *What counts as unbelief?*

To date, the few extensive studies on the different categories of unbelief in Islamic thought (be they apostasy or heterodoxy) have centered on juridical rulings and scriptural interpretations, stopping short of examining the wider epistemological underpinnings informing these positions.⁴⁵⁵ To the best of my knowledge, Griffel offers an exception as far as he identifies an epistemological foundation to al-Ghazālī's ruling on apostasy. In the case of al-Ghazālī, there is sufficient reason to hold that his legal ruling on apostasy reflects his epistemological writings on the nature of belief. Unbelief, whatever its form, is considered the gravest sin in Islam. It amounts to the negation of the Prophet's revelation.⁴⁵⁶ This negation comes in different forms, from the heterodox beliefs within the religious community, outsiders to the religion (e.g. Arab pagans, Jews, and Christians),

⁴⁵⁵ Yohanan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Lloyd V. J. Ridgeon, *Islam and Religious Diversity: Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁴⁵⁶ Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 107.

but (most dangerously) former believers who openly renounce Islam or its cardinal tenets – i.e., apostates. For certain classical jurists, apostasy can only be reasonably established if the negation is openly confessed. On the contrary, for al-Ghazālī, it is sufficient that the offender expresses erroneous beliefs that contravene Islam’s fundamental premises. This means that the offender does not necessarily have to express his or her unbelief in explicit statements. Al-Ghazālī suspects certain sects which convey doctrines that are contrary to the faith. This form of erroneous unbelief is interchangeable with an explicit renunciation of Islam – i.e., apostasy. In fact, al-Ghazālī would conflate the category of apostasy with the promotion of erroneous doctrine (i.e., heterodoxy), since both, in his view, contribute to the undermining of the Muslim community.⁴⁵⁷

As mentioned above, legal rulings concerning apostasy were less stringent than al-Ghazālī’s interpretation. Al-Shāfi‘ī and al-Juwaynī are two names that are important in this discussion. As far as his theological conceptions are concerned, al-Ghazālī owes much to al-Juwaynī, who was his mentor during the earlier days of his intellectual career at the *Shāfi‘ī*-based *Nizāmiyya* institute. Even prior to al-Ghazālī, the charge of apostasy is one of the rare instances whereby a Muslim could be lawfully condemned to death. According to the Prophetic tradition, apostasy is as grave as the murder of an innocent person or as grave as adultery. These two accusations are the only other two cases whereby a Muslim could be lawfully executed. Al-Shāfi‘ī states that apostates who do not renounce their disbelief can be lawfully killed.⁴⁵⁸ Further, the jurist remarks that, upon the Prophet’s victory over the Arab polytheists, God had specifically ordained that the vanquished who did not submit to Islam had to be killed and their wealth seized by the vanquishing Muslim army. Later, the Prophet ordained that the person who renounces his or her belief in Islam ought to face the same condemnation as the “warring disbeliever” (*kāfir*

⁴⁵⁷ “Toleration and Exclusion: al-Shāfi‘ī and al-Ghazālī on the Treatment of Apostates,” 352.

⁴⁵⁸ Al-Shāfi‘ī, *Kitāb al-Umm*, vol. 7 (Mansura: Dār al-wafā’ lil-ṭibā’ wa-l-nashr wa-l-tawzī’, 2001), 393.

muḥāriban). In fact, al-Shāfiʿī maintains that the apostate's crime is graver than that of a person born into polytheism; the apostate's previous pious deeds, which were accomplished during the state of belief, become obsolete upon renunciation of the faith.⁴⁵⁹

According to Al-Shāfiʿī, when a person abandons disbelief by professing Islam, any charge of apostasy levelled against him or her prior to conversion must be discontinued. He adds that this annulment should be indifferent to the circumstances of the conversion. If a person's conversion is seemingly motivated by fear of death, as was the case for the Arab polytheists, his or her conversion should protect against capital punishment. Even if conversion is declared immediately before death, it does not lose its truthfulness. Hence, a public confession of faith is sufficient to determine one's faith.⁴⁶⁰ Thus, for Al-Shāfiʿī, an oral or public confession of one's faith is enough to protect one from capital punishment. Apostasy is proven under the strict condition whereby one publicly professes disbelief in God or disavows the faith openly. As we will see below, al-Ghazālī treats the concept of apostasy less juridically, and more conceptually. He establishes standards for measuring the faithfulness of nominal Muslims, which serve to determine the intentions behind their doctrines. Unlike al-Ghazālī, al-Shāfiʿī does not reflect on the concept in the context of theological disputation. Perhaps, this is owed to the fact that the theological science was relatively undeveloped during al-Shāfiʿī's time.

As noted by Griffel, al-Shāfiʿī prefers that apostates be given a chance to redeem themselves by way of a public profession of faith before the death penalty is applied. The death penalty can only be applied when it is determined that the apostate is firm about his or her disbelief after a charge of apostasy. Al-Shāfiʿī maintains strict timelines to allow accused apostates to repent. For example, if an inebriated person professes disbelief, authorities must wait for this

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 394.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 398.

person to sober up before he or she can be justly treated as a disbeliever. In fact, any statement which reveals apostasy cannot fully incriminate someone if it is made during a state of incapacitation. This is to say that the accused must be fully conscious and apprehend the implications of the accusation against them, which they could annul by professing belief. For example, if an accused loses consciousness after disavowing faith, the prosecuting authorities must wait until the former awakens to interrogate him about his or her alleged apostasy and provide him or her with a chance of *istitāba*.⁴⁶¹ Further, according to al-Shāfi‘ī, one cannot ignore the factor of age. In Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), the age of consent is puberty. Puberty is the threshold which determines the validity of faith. If a person who had converted to Islam prior to puberty renounces Islam after puberty, he or she cannot be deemed an apostate. This is because the person’s conversion is not reflective of a mature apprehensive state; hence, they cannot be said to be rejecting faith when they never understood its implications.⁴⁶²

Al-Juwaynī reiterates al-Shāfi‘ī’s position concerning the age and cognitive state of the accused apostate. Only persons with cognitive disabilities or those below the age of puberty can be exempted from the punishment for apostasy. The rest, whether male or female, freeperson or slave, must be tried for apostasy should they willfully abandon Islam. Al-Juwaynī seems to agree with al-Shāfi‘ī on many of the major points concerning the laws of apostasy. For a start, the former also believes that the apostate’s return to Islam should be accepted under coercive methods, such as the use of the sword.⁴⁶³ Al-Juwaynī also treats inebriation as a temporary state of incapacitation. Hence, a person who exhibits apostasy while drunk cannot be immediately held accountable, as the state of drunkenness is inadequate to measure a person’s convictions. Al-Juwaynī recognizes

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 399.

⁴⁶² Ibid., 400.

⁴⁶³ Al-Juwaynī, *Nihāyat al-maṭlab fī darāyat al-madhhab* (Jedda: Dār al-minhāj lil-nashr wa al-tawzī‘), 160.

that there are two opposing positions on the matter among contemporaries. The first position treats a drunk person's confession of apostasy as equivalent to that of a sober person. The second maintains that the apostate's confession is invalid if made during the state of inebriation. Rejecting both methods, al-Juwaynī explicitly positions himself in al-Shāfi'ī's camp by citing him. Al-Juwaynī reiterates al-Shāfi'ī's position that authorities must wait for the unconscious or inebriated person to wake up; only then could they present the accused with a chance at *istitāba*, the only method to justly gauge his or her convictions.⁴⁶⁴

It is important to note that al-Juwaynī believes that certain nonverbal acts can amount to apostasy, stating that these acts are akin to “words” (*aqwāl*). Therefore, the accused does not have to publicly and orally renounce his or her belief to be regarded as an apostate. For example, if we were to catch a supposedly Muslim person in the act of revering deities in the form of statues, an accusation against this individual would hold just as firmly.⁴⁶⁵ While covert idolaters do not verbally disavow faith, their actions are an explicit affront to the Islamic tenet of a singular, indivisible, and non-corporeal deity. Here, al-Juwaynī lays out certain grounds, albeit very limited ones, for identifying nonverbal apostasy, though his injunctions do not present a considerable breakthrough in this area of jurisprudence. Additionally, the type of covert apostasy imagined by al-Juwaynī did not present any major threat to the Muslim community during his time. The last major threat posed by polytheistic groups occurred in the early-middle 7th century, during the period that chroniclers refer to as *ḥurūb al-ridda* (or the wars of apostasy). After this war, their influence and presence had waned considerably with the crushing defeat of polytheists in the Arab peninsula and the consolidation of Islam among the tribes of the region during the reign of caliph

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 160-61.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 162.

Abū Bakr (d. 633),⁴⁶⁶ whose passing comes over a century before Al-Shāfi‘ī’s birth. Therefore, al-Juwaynī’s example of a man kneeling before statues should be read hypothetically considering the demographic makeup of his time, it does not quite fit his times.

The real ideational threat to al-Juwaynī’s conception of Islamic orthodoxy would have come from followers of “esoteric” sects (*al-bāṭiniyya*), rather than polytheists. The concept of esotericism in orthodox Islamic literature is often used polemically and invariably to categorize different groups that have adopted heterodox interpretations of scriptures. The word *bāṭiniyya*, which literally means “hidden” in Arabic, entails that these so-called erroneous interpretations seek out covert meanings to scripture otherwise *hidden* to lay readers. For the most part, the term has a more specific connotation in al-Ghazālī’s literature, often used polemically against followers of the *Ismā‘īlī* sect, which was the creed of the powerful contemporary *Fāṭimī* rulers in Egypt as well as the *Nizārī* sect in Iran.⁴⁶⁷ In fact, al-Ghazālī consecrated a full treatise on the subject, titled *Iniquities of the Esoteric Sect*, which he formulated as a critique of this sect and a defense of the incumbent *Sunnī* caliphate in Baghdad.⁴⁶⁸

One unique aspect of al-Juwaynī’s treatment of apostasy, making his work slightly different from al-Shāfi‘ī’s, is the introduction of two new concepts, the categories of the esoteric (*bāṭinī*) and “covert disbeliever” (*zindīq*). Al-Juwaynī believes that these two types of apostates should be given the opportunity to repent through *istitāba*.⁴⁶⁹ However, the theoretical critique against these apostasies, which had little to no considerable bearing in earlier Islamic jurisprudence, would become a major subject of al-Juwaynī’s pupil, al-Ghazālī. As I will explain

⁴⁶⁶ Elias Shoufani, *Al-Riddah and the Muslim conquest of Arabia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973). See chapter 2.

⁴⁶⁷ Mitha, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ismailis*, 19.

⁴⁶⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Faḍā‘ih al-bāṭiniyya*, 11-15.

⁴⁶⁹ Al-Juwaynī, *Nihāyat al-maṭlab fī darāyat al-madhhab* 162-63.

below and in the following chapters, readers will note that al-Ghazālī's condemnation is mostly aimed at theoretical material. In other words, al-Ghazālī is more concerned with the scholars than his predecessors. The scholar, in his view, is a person purporting to be in a position of knowledge, who professes erroneous doctrine.⁴⁷⁰ Since he specifically addresses the scholarly world of Islam, al-Ghazālī's harsh condemnations does not extend to unbelievers from the commoners, let alone non-Muslim commoners. Non-Muslims (e.g., Jews or Christians) cannot be faulted for a lack of knowledge in Islam, he says, because they have not been adequately exposed to Truth.⁴⁷¹ The worst form of unbelief is the promotion of false doctrine in the name of Islam.⁴⁷² Therefore, I will mostly focus on al-Ghazālī's critique of self-professed Muslim scholars.

Al-Ghazālī's *Criterion* presents a guideline on proper discernment between simple error (*dalāl*) and error that amounts to unbelief.⁴⁷³ At first, the modern reader may encounter what seems to be an obvious tension within the text. While, judging from its title, its stated purpose is to teach the proper standards of measuring unbelief, it simultaneously calls, as Sherman A. Jackson rightly notes, for a broad and pluralistic toleration and protection of differing Muslim viewpoints.⁴⁷⁴ The *Criterion* certainly reads as a treatise on toleration, as it contains one of the traditional elements of this genre, the author's personal (and sometimes desperate) attempt to make his or her coreligionists reflect on the dangers of persecution. At one point, al-Ghazālī beseeches his fellow theologians to reflect on the gravity of their accusations. He says that denominations are far too many to enumerate and determine whether they can be rightly considered Islamic. He even tells us that the *Ismā'īlīyya*, whom he had strongly condemned while in Baghdad, cannot be considered

⁴⁷⁰ Al-Ghazālī, "‘Ajā'ib al-qalb," 950.

⁴⁷¹ Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam*, 65.

⁴⁷² Griffel, "Toleration and Exclusion: al-Shāfi'ī and al-Ghazālī on the Treatment of Apostates," 350-54.

⁴⁷³ Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash'arite School*, 77; Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 105.

⁴⁷⁴ According to Jackson, the *Criterion* distances itself from the theological disputes of the time. Therefore, al-Ghazālī forgoes any attempts to determine which theological school is "right". See: Al-Ghazālī, "Iljām," 5.

apostates on the grounds of their views on the *imāma*. Al-Ghazālī maintains that the topic of political legitimacy is not one of Islam’s core tenets, hence an erroneous view on this matter does not disqualify someone as a Muslim. One should not “exaggerate the matter of the Imāmate and equate recognition of the Imām with faith in God and His Messenger.”⁴⁷⁵

The *Criterion* levels criticisms against theologians who falsely accuse their Muslim brethren of unbelief on the grounds of marginal intellectual differences; it seeks to broaden the category of a proper believer to guard those many genuine adherents who would otherwise be unjustly condemned.⁴⁷⁶ The “harshes” (*ashadd*) form of *takfīr* – the process of accusing someone of unbelief (*kufr*) – is expressed by the *mutakallimūn*, *kalām* theologians. Since *kalām* is a form of religious hermeneutics that presents its universal truths around Qur’anic precepts and religiously-based argumentation, the *mutakallimūn* oftentimes targeted people who were not well versed in their doctrines. Therefore, al-Ghazālī accuses them of having “narrowed the scope of God’s all encompassing mercy for His servants, rendering Paradise the exclusive preserve of a small band of speculative theologians.”⁴⁷⁷ According to al-Ghazālī, unbelief (*kufr*) occurs simply when one negates the truth of the most fundamental Muslim maxim (the *shahāda*): there is no God but God and Muhammad is His messenger. This also includes the rejection of all things mentioned by the Prophet. Simply put, unbelief “is to deem anything the Prophet brought to be a lie.”⁴⁷⁸

While al-Ghazālī states that those who constantly utter the *shahāda* are not unbelievers, he does not always mean this in a strict sense. In fact, many of the deeds he thinks qualify for the offence of unbelief do not require an explicit rejection of the *shahāda*. Griffel has highlighted that al-Ghazālī sought to revoke the exoneration of apostates to prosecute forms of religious error that

⁴⁷⁵ “The Decisive Criterion,” 113.

⁴⁷⁶ Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam*, 5-7.

⁴⁷⁷ Al-Ghazālī, “The Decisive Criterion,” 120.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

we would normally refer to as heresy. Al-Ghazālī's main divergence from his predecessors on the matter of toleration is that he thinks that public pronouncement of one's belief is insufficient. In fact, as I will demonstrate later, al-Ghazālī considers the propagation of erroneous beliefs to be the most dangerous forms of unbelief. This is to say that religious scholars are responsible for propagating accurate and rightful doctrines about the nature of God and His messenger. Otherwise, the foundations of faith would be, at the very least, denied tacitly, which is no less of a crime. In his explanation of the proper ruling on unbelief, al-Ghazālī draws a distinction between two theoretical domains. The first is tied to the "fundamental doctrines" (*uṣūl al-ʿaqā'id*) and the second to particulars. The fundamental doctrines are belief in God and His messengers. Denying these automatically earns one the charge of unbelief. However, regarding the particulars, which encompass the entirety of rites and beliefs of the Islamic religion, only one fallacy amounts to unbelief, rejecting religious principles or rules stipulated by the Prophet.⁴⁷⁹

This rejection does not have to always be explicitly uttered. Unbelief can also result from "interpretative" (*ta'wīl*) fallacies and not simply the explicit renunciation of Islam, as he seems to suggest at one point in the text. While, in the earlier passages of the *Criterion*, al-Ghazālī defines the unbeliever as someone who rejects the most fundamental tenet of Islam (i.e., the *shahāda*) he later points to examples of unbelief in which there is no explicit renunciation of God and His messenger. An example of clear unbelief in al-Ghazālī's eyes is found among an unnamed group of *bāṭiniyya*, who defend God's unity by pointing to the fact that He is creator of the numeric concept of one. Perhaps sarcastically, al-Ghazālī responds by asking why we do not call Him a plural God given that He is also creator of the numbers two, three, four, and so on. This suggests that the category of unbelief in al-Ghazālī's theology does not merely require an explicit renunciation of Islam, but

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 113.

it also denotes grave interpretative fallacies that inevitably equate to doubts about the truth of the One God and His messenger. The doctrinal understanding of a unitary God is necessarily undermined when it is interpreted in this esoteric way. To claim that God is One because He creates the numeric concept is to wrongfully ignore the real reason He is referred to as the One: he is One in essence.⁴⁸⁰

Al-Ghazālī's criterion of the believer is certainly notable for its period. In the *Criterion*, al-Ghazālī shifts the attention to the theoretical practices of the theologian. Further, his discussion of covert unbelief transforms this discussion of belief and unbelief into an epistemological concern. One of the most resounding aspects of this discussion is his thoroughgoing reflection on the psychology of the unbeliever. Additionally, the discussion near the end of the *Criterion* takes a striking turn. It focuses on the difference between the commoner and the scholar. In one section, al-Ghazālī remarks that the theologians of his time have developed unrealistic expectations of the commoners by condemning all those who do not understand their doctrines. This clearly demonstrates that al-Ghazālī situates theological speculation among the rationalist sciences. Further, these people maintain the delusional belief that Heaven is the theologian's abode. But al-Ghazālī reminds them that the Prophet Muhammad's mission had commenced with idolaters among the "uncivilized Arabs", who did not care for argumentative proof or other forms of rationalized truths. To claim that genuine belief is only attained through logical argumentation is to ridicule the majority of the Prophet's addressees. In this passage, al-Ghazālī repeats the claim that true faith is simple. For the Arabs, "the light of faith appeared like a white flash in their hearts."⁴⁸¹

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 166.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 113-14.

Al-Ghazālī proceeds to point to the fact that the prophetic mission was aimed at alleviating the heart, as opposed to the intellect. Further, the problem with the theological discipline is that it is unappealing for the “commoner”, because of its excessive verbosity. In fact, the theological discipline is even useless within its own intellectual community because it is rare to find a theologian who manages to convert his interlocutors through disputation. The discipline of *kalām* may even be a cause for stubbornness to take root in the commoner’s heart.⁴⁸² We may find these comments by al-Ghazālī to be ironic, in light of the *Ash ‘arī* theological treatises he had previously written in Baghdad, the *Incoherence* and the *Moderation*. These texts are excessively verbose and are certainly not mindful of the common adherent. But the potential irony is immediately dispelled by al-Ghazālī, who states in both texts that the purpose of his theological enterprise is to guard against false and erroneous doctrines. Never did he maintain that theological speculation and other forms of rational argumentation are a precondition for belief. The following chapter will deal with this subject in great length. At the end of the tenth section, al-Ghazālī leaves us with an invaluable remark that sheds light on his sympathy with the common person. He tells us that the faith of the *mutakallim* is “subject to collapsing upon encountering the simplest sophism.” On the contrary, “true faith (*al-imān al-rāsikh*) is the faith of the [commoners] that develops in their hearts from childhood due to constant exposure.” Finally, this faith is reinforced through constant worship and “remembrance” (*dhikr*).⁴⁸³

This brief remark gives us an insight into the intellectual crisis that had befallen him in Baghdad, and that he would later briefly mention in his *Deliverance*. The textual evidence from both treatises suggests that an excess in rationalism confounds the soul and leads persons to a dangerous nihilism. Further, as will be argued below, al-Ghazālī inclines toward an uncomplicated

⁴⁸² Ibid., 122.

⁴⁸³ Ibid., 124.

form of piety, which consists of rejecting worldliness and refining the heart so that it becomes receptive to God's grace. What follows next is a brief overview of al-Ghazālī's psychology of belief and unbelief, which is given fuller expression in the *Deliverance* than it is in the *Criterion*. This will in turn lead us to the final analysis on culpability.

Section II – *The source of unbelief*

Earlier, I mentioned that unbelief is a specific kind of error (*ḍalāl*), one that clearly contravenes the religious fundamentals. Not only does al-Ghazālī define the boundaries of unbelief, but he also spells out the means through which humans come to develop true or erroneous views. In his *Deliverance from Error*, al-Ghazālī acknowledges the difficulty of finding truth in a world populated by different religious communities. He wonders how it is that people follow the Jewish, Christian, or Muslim faiths despite being born with an innate disposition. Moreover, al-Ghazālī inquires into how we can find “certain knowledge” in a world of numerous, conflicting beliefs.⁴⁸⁴

Al-Ghazālī states that the human is born “in bareness and simplicity without any information about the worlds of God.”⁴⁸⁵ He or she comes to recognize the plurality in God's creation by encountering the world as it impresses itself on the senses. The senses, of course, are God's endowment, allowing humans to discern the different elements in this world. But it is the intellect, which elevates humans from creatures that merely perceive to creatures that cognize. Through understanding, humans contemplate concepts that are inaccessible to the senses and are able to discern proper ethical and moral conduct. Following the intellect is the additional eye that perceives the immaterial good. Just as the things perceived by the intellect are inaccessible to the faculty of discernment, the things perceived by this superior faculty are inaccessible to the intellect.

⁴⁸⁴ Al-Ghazālī, “*Deliverance from Error*,” 21.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

Al-Ghazālī is describing a gradation of faculties, with this last faculty being the crown, even standing above reason.⁴⁸⁶

It is in this passage of the *Deliverance*, in which he expands on the notion of the additional eye, that al-Ghazālī points out the origin of unbelief among thinkers. By entirely ignoring the additional eye, it is easy to dismiss its existence.⁴⁸⁷ It might be that his main target in this passage are the philosophers, who tend to designate intellect as the cardinal faculty for the attainment of certain knowledge. As al-Ghazālī argues, the proof of reason's universal existence is usually centered on the fact that humans devise different approaches to deduce ethical values or measure the world. But how can we prove that this faculty is universally innate to all humans? After all, this faculty implies subjective belief of the kind that cannot be explained on theoretical grounds. However, this makes it no less universal and natural to humanity from al-Ghazālī's perspective. Rather, it must be realized and cultivated within the individual, as it is not contingent on the processes of argumentative proof. In the *Deliverance*, al-Ghazālī considers *taṣawwuf* to be the most lucid way to assess the truth of a prophet's claims. This practice results in the experience of taste (*dhawq*), which is the grasping of truth through ascetic means. Prophecy is the supreme path to knowledge of ulterior truths, but the experience of *dhawq* by non-prophets is enough to assess the validity of those who claim to be prophets. Similarly, a person with knowledge of medicinal sciences could be able to tell if his or her physician is applying the proper treatment.⁴⁸⁸

For al-Ghazālī, ascetism is a partial form of prophecy; the *Ṣūfī* is constantly exposed to an ulterior world of ideas that are both impalpable to the human senses and unintelligible to the human mind. What is regularly unseen by us in our regular wakened state becomes perceptible in *dhawq*.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid., 63-65.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 65-66.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 66-67.

The degree to which ascetism is different from prophecy is not explicitly outlined by al-Ghazālī. However, he does make it clear that the latter is more consummate, insofar as the prophet's perception of otherworldly things is clearer. When it comes to proving the reality of this perceptive faculty, al-Ghazālī maintains an empirical position. As mentioned above, he rests his case on the claim that the reality of the additional eye is evidenced in our encounter with an ulterior world in dreams. Al-Ghazālī avoids an explanation, stating that the prophetic faculty is something that extends beyond the theoretical grasp and that human reason is largely incapable of demonstrating its existence. Rather, it is something that can only be kindled through God's grace, which, in turn, is made possible by partaking in *taṣawwuf*. On the other hand, al-Ghazālī states that "belief" is preceded by "understanding." This is to say that one cannot believe in the truth of prophecy without knowing its qualities, namely that of the *additional eye*. Therefore, in responding to skeptics of prophecy, he suggests that the latter presume its non-existence solely based on their ignorance of its reality. A person familiar with the qualities of prophecy would be able to properly discern between true and false prophets. In simpler terms, they will be able to identify prophecy upon encountering it. In fact, they will acquire the "necessary knowledge" that Muhammad is God's messenger.⁴⁸⁹

This personalization of faith brings us back to my initial remarks on the tension between knowledge and subjective belief in al-Ghazālī's theology. Al-Ghazālī's notion of subjective belief does not lend itself to a pluralist position on religious differences.⁴⁹⁰ One of the major themes of his *Deliverance* is, in fact, to understand why people follow different creeds when truth ought to

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 67-68; Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash'arite School*, 68.

⁴⁹⁰ This is a point that Jackson raises. Al-Ghazālī is not trying to convey the view that "esoteric subjectivism" is allowed. He is only trying to loosen the definition of Muslims so as to allow a broader community. See: Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam*, 54-55.

be striking.⁴⁹¹ Al-Ghazālī holds, as I have shown, that the Prophetic message must be believed in since it is *certain*. This means that the belief in something different is indicative of corrupted knowledge. This presupposes that the path to true belief (i.e., Islam) is only attainable through a subjective process that is the responsibility of the individual adherent. Although the faculty that enables true belief cannot be shown to exist through demonstrative proof, as al-Ghazālī concedes, he considers it to be no less universal. Those who reflect on their own selves will come to know that they indeed experience this faculty by way of dreams. This entails that the dream is an experiential phenomenon. Its universal character lies precisely in this fact that anyone can come to know it definitely through subjective experience.

At the beginning of the *Deliverance*, al-Ghazālī suggests that all humans naturally incline toward Islam, but are then habituated by Jewish, Christian, or Muslim parents.⁴⁹² But what does this natural inclination mean? Is al-Ghazālī suggesting that we are born as believers of the Islamic faith, but that our innate ideas are subsequently corrupted due to false habituation? He simply suggests that we are born without any innate understanding of *things* God created, not God Himself. He claims that human understanding comes to perceive the created entities with the help of the subordinate faculty of the senses. But nowhere does he undermine the premise of an innate belief in God Himself. Furthermore, according to al-Ghazālī, unbelief (rejection of Islam's fundamental principles that is) is a form of culpability. This is to say that the unbeliever is culpable for turning away from Truth. In the *Criterion*, al-Ghazālī uses a hypothetical example of a person who denies that the Ka'ba in Mecca is the rightful place for pilgrimage. This person is, according to al-Ghazālī, an unbeliever, if he or she was contemporary to Islam – i.e., not born before Muhammad's prophetic mission. Al-Ghazālī states that this person must be held accountable

⁴⁹¹ Al-Ghazālī, "Deliverance from Error."; Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash'arite School*, 20-21.

⁴⁹² Al-Ghazālī, "Deliverance from Error."; Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash'arite School*, 21.

insofar as he or she could not possibly be ignorant of the Prophet's statements regarding the Ka'ba as the rightful place for pilgrimage. This denial is described "as simply an act of stubbornness." Al-Ghazālī is certain that while this person may deny truth "with his tongue, he cannot ignore the knowledge it produces in his heart."⁴⁹³

From this passage of the *Criterion*, we get a sense that the gravity of the offence connotes the fact that unbelievers know the Truth, but voluntarily choose obstinate denial. Therefore, this sin is a form of lie to oneself about something one knows to be true. This is where the culpability lies. As far as this Truth is exposed to the heart (*qalb*), it is engrained within the subject and must necessarily be known. The only difficulty here, however, is in establishing that this reference to the heart is not just some figure of speech. Perhaps al-Ghazālī uses this as an expression to depict a person who simply conceals his or her thoughts. The way in which the term *within the heart* is used here can simply designate a thought which is internal to the person and concealed to others. After all, in this passage alone, there is no clear indication that he invokes the heart as some faculty. In the coming section, I will expand on what he means by the faculties of understanding in the heart. This will allow me to explore the extent to which the faculty of the heart accounts for al-Ghazālī's intolerance toward unbelief.

By this point, readers should know that al-Ghazālī is not always perfectly systematic. The al-Ghazālī we have come to know throughout this thesis is one who deals with philosophy (including metaphysics and logic), jurisprudence, political thought, and asceticism. Therefore, one cannot fault Jackson for not digging sufficiently into the ascetic elements in the *Criterion*, which, I admit, are scarce.⁴⁹⁴ Certainly, al-Ghazālī's text predominantly reads as a sort of preliminary

⁴⁹³ Al-Ghazālī, "The Decisive Criterion," 113-14.

⁴⁹⁴ Jackson very briefly mentions the link between the *Sufi* aspects of the *Deliverance* and the *Criterion*. He says that there exists a latent skepticism of reason's force in the *Criterion*, which is "foreshadowed" in this text before it is later developed in his *Deliverance*. But this anti-rational skepticism, which is attached to his views of *taṣṣawwuf*, is not

political and legal treatise, one that reflects on the communal dangers of persecution and also staunchly condemns certain forms of unbelief. But we cannot ignore one salient point. Al-Ghazālī's reflections on the question of belief versus unbelief is one that is strikingly consonant with the ascetic elements in other crucial parts of this corpus. Al-Ghazālī makes this clear in the introduction to his *Criterion* when he calls upon the theologian (*mutakallim*) to reconsider his definitions of unbelief and faith. Al-Ghazālī states that truth does not come “to those whose hearts have been polluted by the pursuit of reputation and piling up of wealth.” Truth makes its way into purified hearts that “have been cleansed of the impurities and pollutants of this transient life.” In a language that recalls the *Niche of Lights*, al-Ghazālī argues that a purified light, which is reinforced through religious works, becomes “drenched in the light that arcs from the niche of prophethood.”⁴⁹⁵

As we have already seen previously, this is the type of language that typically marks his *Niche of Lights*, which was written before the *Criterion*. But this type of imagery concerning enlightened hearts was also already thoroughly developed in his *Revival*, which predates the above two texts. By evoking this sort of imagery, which remained consistent after al-Ghazālī's departure from Baghdad, we can safely assume that his treatment of human understanding (which is grounded on an ascetic ideal) is crucial to his definition of belief and unbelief. And it is in this thoroughgoing discussion of the heart that al-Ghazālī reveals his most systematic effort to define the scope of moral culpability. Moreover, this theory of moral culpability helps us understand his broader critique of unbelief.

simply foreshadowed in the *Criterion*. The *Criterion* actually builds on certain *Ṣūfī* elements from the *Revival*, as I proceed to demonstrate below. See: Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam*, 59.

⁴⁹⁵ Al-Ghazālī, “The Decisive Criterion,” 124

Section III – *The heart and the extent of culpability*

The idea of culpability in al-Ghazālī's theology is contained in his account of the heart's corruptibility. According to al-Ghazālī, the heart is the faculty in which faith is cultivated and maintained, but this effort is constantly being undermined by diabolic forces. This suggests a series of internal occurrences that seem to escape the subject's control. In *Book on the Marvels of the Heart* (*Kitāb Sharḥ 'ajā'ib al-qalb*) of the *Revival*, al-Ghazālī warns that a heart blinded by sinfulness cannot properly perceive Truth, stating:

In the case where sins are accumulated and are imprinted on the heart, it is then that the heart is blinded from apprehending the truth and the rightness of religion, and trivializes the afterlife, toward which it becomes less concerned, and venerates this world (*wa-mahmā tarākamat al-dhunūb ṭubi* 'alā al-qulūb, wa-'inda dhālik ya'ma al-qalb 'inda idrāk al-ḥaqq wa-ṣalāḥ al-dīn, wa-yastahīn bi-amr al-ākhirā wa-yasta'zim amr al-dunyā wa-yaṣīr maqṣūr al-hamm 'alayha).⁴⁹⁶

According to Harry Wolfson, since al-Ghazālī presents the heart as the seat of conflicting angelic and diabolic forces, humans lack sufficient mastery over their hearts. This struggle's outcome has already been predetermined by God. Wolfson identifies this determinism in al-Ghazālī's notion of "insights" (*khawāṭir*). These insights are spontaneous thoughts that impress on the heart; some call the person to be just while others seduce him or her to commit wrongdoing.⁴⁹⁷ This determinist interpretation contradicts my claim for an obvious reason. If al-Ghazālī holds that humans cannot possibly master the conflicts within their hearts, then the culpability thesis would be undermined. Considering this difficulty, I now aim to answer the following question: how much control does the human have over the conflicts within him or herself?

Below, I will explain al-Ghazālī's view that the human is pulled by these various forces existing within the heart. This idea is thoroughly discussed in the *Marvels*. If al-Ghazālī considers

⁴⁹⁶ "'Ajā'ib al-qalb," 921.

⁴⁹⁷ Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, 624-44.

that the human has sufficient command over the activity of his or her heart, then one can speak of a tangible notion of individual culpability in his theology. However, one cannot possibly deny the external effects on the heart in al-Ghazālī's theology. There is also the problem of "impressions" (*khawāṭir*), which impose themselves on the heart. These impressions are of two kinds: the good and the diabolic kinds. The human does not have full discretion over determining or quelling the emergence of these impressions, which not only compel us to imagine things but also help shape our actions. These impressions begin with "thoughts" (*afkār*) and "memories" (*adhkār*) to which the heart was initially "dormant" (*ghāfilan*). The *khawāṭir* stir "desire" (*raghba*), desire stirs the "determination" (*ʿazm*), the determination stirs the "intention" (*niyya*), and the intention stirs the bodily "organs" (*aḍḍā*). Within the heart, therefore, exists a recurrent "battle" (*ma'raka*) between angelic and diabolic forces seeking to influence the actions of the adherent.⁴⁹⁸

The heart is supported or protected by various "soldiers" (*junūd*). As we have seen before, throughout his different theological texts, al-Ghazālī points to the heart as the locale of faith. But it is not always clear whether it is the *adherent* who enjoys sufficient mastery over his or her heart's inclination towards faith. Therefore, proving this in the affirmative will allow us to establish that the adherent, according to al-Ghazālī, is mainly responsible for tending toward faith, as opposed to merely awaiting divine grace. Not all *soldiers* are servants of the heart. The soldiers of "wrath" (*ghaḍab*) and "lust" (*shahwa*) work to sabotage the heart, ensuring that it does not attain "happiness" (*sa'āda*). These can only be countered by the "rational soul," as T. J. Winter terms it in his translation of the *Marvels*.⁴⁹⁹ Al-Ghazālī uses three coterminous names to describe this soldier: (1) "knowledge" (*ʿilm*), (2) "wisdom" (*ḥikma*), and (3) "thought" (*tafakkur*). Those whose hearts succumb to the soldiers of wrath and lust are drawn to Satan. To overcome Satan's influence

⁴⁹⁸ Al-Ghazālī, "ʿAjā'ib al-qalb," 939.

⁴⁹⁹ *The Marvels of the Heart*, trans. Walter James Skellie (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2001), xix.

and tend toward God, the rational faculty must vanquish these base inclinations. These analogies suggest that there are affections that the heart is incapable of fully surmounting. Images of a symbolic battle between the forces of right and wrong are scattered across the *Marvels*. Al-Ghazālī maintains that diabolic influences can only be subdued through proper disposition. Al-Ghazālī also maintains that only humans enjoy this faculty and that it surpasses the senses. For example, it is through this intelligence that humans apprehend that it is impossible for a corporeal entity to be in more than one place simultaneously.⁵⁰⁰

For al-Ghazālī, the noblest knowledge is knowing God and His creation, and the heart naturally inclines toward knowledge of God and His creation.⁵⁰¹ But why do humans abandon this truth, to which they once inclined, for false belief? The answer to this question can be found in al-Ghazālī's distinction between three categories of belief, basing this on the analogy of a hypothetical character he names Zayd who resides in a hypothetical house. The first form of belief is the least genuine; it is belief in "custom" (*taqlīd*). To *customarily* believe that Zayd resides in a house, it only suffices for one to listen to others speak about Zayd residing there. Al-Ghazālī states that this form of belief is not only found among Jews and Christians who are "confident" (*muṭma'inna*) in the reports of their forefathers, but also certain Muslims who merely follow Islam for custom's sake. As for the second form, it would be to believe that Zayd is inhabiting the house after having heard his "voice" (*sawtuh*) emanating from the house, even though the voice emanated "from behind the walls" (*min warā' al-jidār*). To hear Zayd's voice would "increase certainty" (*azdadta bihi yaqīnan*). However, potential for error remains, as one may be mistaken by a voice that sounds similar to that of Zayd but is not, in fact, his. The third form of belief addresses the shortcomings of the former by having you "enter the house" (*tadkhul al-dār*) to "witness"

⁵⁰⁰ "'Ajā'ib al-qalb," 914-16.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., 922, 26.

(*tushāhid*) Zayd residing there for yourself. This is “witnessing through the light of certainty” (*al-mushāhada bi-nūr al-yaqīn*).⁵⁰² It is common theme in al-Ghazālī’s to critique “inherited knowledge” or belief – which is coterminous with blind faith – because he maintains that it leads people to accept the false religions of their forebears.⁵⁰³ As for Muslims who accept Islam without genuine contemplation, it seems that these people know the Truth only accidentally.

There are two forms of non-necessary knowledge useful for the attainment of Truth. The first, the knowledge of “inspiration”, (*ilhām*) occurs spontaneously “as though hurled” (*ka’annahū ulqī*) within the heart without the immediate knowledge of the knower. *Inspirational* knowledge is not acquired through “demonstration” (*al-dalīl*). The second form of knowledge is that of the “theorists” (*nuzzār*) who rely on demonstration and other forms of argumentation. The knowledge of prophets and sages is of the *inspirational* kind. The inspirational kind is the clearest possible way to *know* God – as far as humans can know God that is – without engaging in lengthy scholarship and studies. But it is not simply acquired through non-voluntary means (i.e., God’s grace). Those who acquire it pursue an “ascetic” (*zuhd*) lifestyle by renouncing worldliness, namely by purifying their hearts from superfluous things, like “money” (*māl*) and the comforts of home (*waṭan*). Moreover, these excellent humans never engage in lengthy and pedantic exegetical debates concerning Qur’anic passages. Their minds are fixed on knowing God as He is. They do so by constantly uttering His name such that their tongues become accustomed to this programmatic repetition. Eventually, His name becomes imprinted in their hearts. While this seems to be al-Ghazālī’s idea of the most blessed form of knowledge, he thinks most people cannot

⁵⁰² Ibid., 925-26.

⁵⁰³ Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī and his Revival of the Religious Sciences*, 2.

fully rely on it alone. He provides the example of the *Ṣūfī* who spends two decades contemplating the idea of God without reaching any clear understanding.⁵⁰⁴

Al-Ghazālī states that “theorists” (*nuzẓār*) would raise an objection to these isolationist ascetics claiming regular adherents – i.e., non-prophets – must be equipped with demonstrative and argumentative virtues to avoid erroneous belief. However, it is not entirely clear whether he prefers the position of these theorists, because he does not explicitly state his preferred form of knowledge in these passages. This is further complicated by the fact that al-Ghazālī believes that not everyone is sufficiently equipped with knowledge of the *Ṣūfī* kind.⁵⁰⁵ This lack of clarity has prompted much scholarly discussion regarding al-Ghazālī’s preferred path to the knowledge of God proper – i.e., whether he prefers a rationalist or a *Ṣūfī* approach. This debate, which we have examined earlier, has been summarized by Benyamin Abrahamov, who himself argues in support of the rationalist interpretation by citing syllogistic tendencies in al-Ghazālī’s many works.⁵⁰⁶

In fact, to get a better impression of what al-Ghazālī means by knowledge of God, one must seek his explanation in the *Deliverance*, which proposes a distinction between *certain knowledge* and erroneous belief. It is undeniable that he regards inspirational knowledge as superior to the rational kind in matters of faith, as he himself stresses. In his recent intellectual biography on al-Ghazālī, Kenneth Garden has also noted that al-Ghazālī’s “excessively detailed knowledge of the law and *kalām* for their own sake” would “distract” us from acts of worship.⁵⁰⁷ In this sense, al-Ghazālī defines a very specific kind of knowledge, one that cannot be dissociated from religious acts. Al-Ghazālī means to say that knowledge requires personal exertion, whose

⁵⁰⁴ Al-Ghazālī, “‘Ajā’ib al-qalb,” 929-31.

⁵⁰⁵ Janssens, “Al-Ghazālī between Philosophy (*Falsafa*) and Sufism (*Taṣawwuf*): His Complex Attitude in the Marvels of the Heart (‘*Ajā’ib al-Qalb*) of the *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*,” 626.

⁵⁰⁶ Abrahamov, “Al-Ghazālī’s Supreme Way to Know God.”

⁵⁰⁷ Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī and his Revival of the Religious Sciences*, 77.

main goal is the purification of the heart. Knowledge, in this instance, is an ascetic act aimed at surpassing corporeal passions that prevent reflection of truth – i.e., God. Simply put, unbelief is a willful act, or rather a decision not to act. The unbeliever, in this sense, lets him or herself go.

Given that knowledge is quite clearly, in al-Ghazālī's work, something to be sought, then unbelief, which arises from lack of knowledge, is naturally a culpable offense. This is made clear to us when we examine his prescriptions for overcoming Satan's influence in the latter parts of the *Marvels*. In one passage, al-Ghazālī speaks of commoners who never “exercise” (*yumārisū*) or “immerse” (*yatabaḥḥarū*) in knowledge and yet publicly opine about matters theological, propagating offensive views one would normally expect of an “unbeliever” (*kāfirān*) or “innovator” (*mubtadi*). For this reason, theological matters are better left for people who have the necessary credentials. In fact, the commoner, the person who lacks knowledge in the religious sciences, is less offensive when committing murder or theft than when publicizing false religious thought.⁵⁰⁸ This explains al-Ghazālī's frustration with religious propagators, as highlighted by Griffel. False propagators – essentially, commoners who publicize erroneous belief – have not set the pursuit of knowledge as their task. They are culpable as far as they allow diabolic affections to tamper with the heart's natural inclination toward truth. To put it simply, culpability is found precisely in (a) allowing the heart's corruptibility to ensue (b) imparting one's corruptibility to others in the form of false teachings.

Conclusion

The heart, according to al-Ghazālī, both performs multiple functions and is obstructed by antagonistic affections. The antagonism between these affections resembles a battle. The heart

⁵⁰⁸ Al-Ghazālī, “‘Aḥjā'ib al-qalb,” 950.

naturally inclines toward the Truth, but its function as such is obstructed by diabolic forces. Meanwhile, angelic forces constantly remind the adherent of the good. Eventually, one of the polarized sides wins over the heart. Depending on the outcome, the heart becomes either a receptor of good or evil. The heart is defeated whenever the adherent is off guard. Notwithstanding these uncontrollable effects, which every heart is subject to, adherents, particularly the scholarly class, have significant responsibility to shape, if not determine, the outcome of this battle. Knowledge must be consciously exercised and utilized for knowing God. The truly knowledgeable person must also renounce worldly goods and constantly remember God. This implies that a truly faithful person – i.e., one who reaches *certain knowledge* in matters of faith – is simultaneously one who rightly exercises knowledge and acts of faith.

Al-Ghazālī's omission of *istitāba* suggests a clear break from traditional jurisprudence in Islamic thought. In traditional Islamic jurisprudence, belief or unbelief were measured based on a person's public confession. But in al-Ghazālī's theological corpus, we learn that certain forms of theological or philosophical argumentation could signal covert unbelief. Al-Ghazālī's theology widens the meaning of a Muslim but also ascertains that erroneous doctrines evince something about the state of the subject's heart. In view of his stringent psychology of the heart, al-Ghazālī's theology contains elements of a serious degree of moral culpability. Al-Ghazālī's *Criterion*, which contains his most systematic assessment of what constitutes as belief or unbelief, offers a modest insight into the origins of erroneous thought and the character of a truly pious person. But given the genre of the text, it falls short of exhausting the epistemic concern on which it is seemingly grounded, according to its introduction. If we are to truly understand what al-Ghazālī meant by obstinacy and the state of an erring heart, which are the trademarks of unbelief, in the *Criterion*,

we need to look elsewhere where these concepts are much more elaborated upon. The *Marvels* or the *Deliverance* are indispensable for understanding this fleeting passage in the *Criterion*.

We also need to look at the way al-Ghazālī seems to concentrate on the scholarly class when condemning erring hearts. By neglecting their hearts, these clandestine unbelievers have succumbed to the diabolic forces that entrench erroneous beliefs in the soul. In fact, al-Ghazālī's case goes to show that the emphasis on subjective piety has far-reaching political implications, as he charges the unbeliever with a willful blindness to Truth in a way that had not been imagined by his intellectual predecessors. I will clarify the implications of this culpability within the context of his theocracy in the next chapters. The first outwardly 'political' theme we will now examine is al-Ghazālī's distinction between the scholarly class and the commoners, whose relationship is crucial to understanding his view of an Islamic political community.

Chapter 6 – *The Political Purpose of Theological Writing*

The previous chapter has set the stage for important political themes in al-Ghazālī's theological writing. In particular, the emphasis on the subjective aspect of piety stands out in his political thought, allowing him to develop a theory of moral culpability. I argued that al-Ghazālī's psychology of the heart yields a stringent conception of culpability, which has important implications for his political theory. This assessment of culpability is followed by an assertive critique of varying theologians who condemned their fellow Muslims. In response, al-Ghazālī shifts the focus on what it means to be an unbeliever. Throughout his condemnation of unbelief, we get the sense that erring hearts are the sign of an obstinate character that is affront to the religious virtue of humility. Additionally, not only is unbelief or any other form of rebellion against the religious creed manifest in an outward rejection of religion, but it is expressed in treatises that spread erroneous doctrines. Al-Ghazālī's psychology of the heart is crucial to this discussion as it helps identify the elementary principles of genuine piety. Al-Ghazālī was alarmed by the fact that certain theologians condemned commoners (*al-ʿawāmm*) for misunderstanding theological concepts. Most of this theological discipline is grounded on syllogisms and theoretical categories that are too convoluted for commoners. In response, al-Ghazālī asserts that the commoners exhibit a purer and nobler form of belief, a conspicuous suggestion that theoretical knowledge is nonessential to a person's salvation. Coupled with his statements in the *Deliverance from Error* (*Al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*), which discusses the virtues of an uncomplicated piety, the statements in his *The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Masked Infidelity* (*Fayṣal al-tafriqa bayn al-Islām wa-l-zandaqa*) give the impression that al-Ghazālī's reference point for the ideal Muslim is the commoner.

However, al-Ghazālī's praises of the commoner are called into question when we consider the considerable number of passages in which he describes a hierarchy of people based on their knowledge of God. In fact, al-Ghazālī aims to map out the hierarchy between people's different epistemic states in his idea of the political community, a point observed by Muhammad Fadel in his reading of al-Ghazālī's *Mizān al-ʿAmal* (*Scale of Action*). In the *Scale*, al-Ghazālī maintains a "tripartite" view of the soul with the three elements being embodied by of a particular social class: 1) the "intellectual" (*al-tafakkur*); 2) the "spirited" (*al-ghaḍab*); 3) and the "animal" (*al-shahwa*).⁵⁰⁹ In this instance, the third and most inferior of the soul's elements represents the commoners' sentiments, which is a peculiar position considering al-Ghazālī's defence of the commoners elsewhere in his corpus. In the *Scale*, al-Ghazālī expressly organizes the ideal city in a way that best represents the hierarchy between the different states of the soul, one that corresponds from the best to worse elements. This leads to a general conception of "justice in politics" (*wa-l-ʿadl fī l-siyāsa*), which he defines as

"the organization of the city's parts in ways corresponding to the organization of the soul's parts; until the *polis* [*madīna*, lit. city], through its composition and the reciprocity of its parts and the harmony of its sectors, [attains] the aims required of [political] organization [in ways resembling] the individual person (*ann turattab ajzāʾ al-madīna al-tartīb al-mushākil li-tartīb ajzāʾ al-nafs, hattā takūn al-madīna fī iʿtilāfuhā wa-tanāsub ajzāʾuhā, wa-taʿāwun arkānuhā, ʿalā al-gharḍ al-maṭlūb min al-ijtimāʿ, ka-l-shakhṣ al-wāḥid.*)⁵¹⁰

While this view of political justice undoubtedly displays a concern with the harmony of the soul's different parts and a *polis* that would correspond to this epistemic hierarchy, this imagery naturally places the commoners in the most inferior state. And while the spirited element, which is acquired by secular rulers and their military, is inferior to the intellect, it is a necessary requirement because it bridles the passions of the commoners. If left unchecked, the collective

⁵⁰⁹ Mohammad Fadel, "Islamic Law and Constitution Making: the Authoritarian Temptation and the Arab Spring," *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 53, no. 2 (2016): 484; Al-Ghazālī, *Mizān al-ʿAmal* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1964), 232-33.

⁵¹⁰ *Mizān al-ʿAmal*, 273.

passions of the masses can lead to catastrophic results. In the *Scale*, al-Ghazālī seems to hint that, since those governed by passions (i.e., the commoners) do not heed to theoretical instruction (as they do not comprehend it), there is a noble place for coercion. And this imagery of harmony inevitably yields a view of obedience because harmony entails, in this sense, not an egalitarian relationship, but a hierarchical relationship where the superior part governs its immediate inferior.⁵¹¹ According to Fadel, al-Ghazālī was conscious that only the Prophet could carry out a comprehensive command over people’s “moral” lives, one that does not rely exclusively on “coercive power.” In the absence of a Prophet, members of a “post-prophetic politics” can nevertheless found a proximate political regime by way of the rule of religious scholars and philosophers who disseminate their theoretical knowledge to the rulers. While the rulers can comprehend normative matters, their inclination toward honour can degenerate into irascible behaviour, which is why they require instruction from the intellectual class whose members are purely animated by the desire for knowledge. But the common persons occupy the lowest juncture in the political community. They require coercive power to bridle them because they are animated by corporeal pleasures and desire (*al-shahwa*).⁵¹² One can only suppose that theoretical instruction is impractical in their case. Since commoners are animated by passion, the only practical form of measure one can apply to bridle such a class outside of coercion is rhetorical (one must appeal to the common sentiments of these masses).⁵¹³

At first glance, these segments from al-Ghazālī’s *Scale of Action* recall a Platonic conception of the *polis*, though I do not think that these constitute sufficient grounds to describe his politics as Platonic for reasons I will expand on shortly. Plato aside, I would first like to

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

⁵¹² Fadel, “Islamic Law and Constitution Making: the Authoritarian Temptation and the Arab Spring,” 484-86.

⁵¹³ Al-Ghazālī, *Mizān al-‘Amal*, 237.

elaborate on another important point. While al-Ghazālī appears to harshly describe the commoners in the *Scale* (which appears inconsonant with the sympathy we examined above), this attitude is not necessarily peculiar to his writing or inconsistent with his general aims. Elsewhere, al-Ghazālī remarks that the commoners are intellectually inept, though he does not always forcefully insist on the need to check them through coercive power. However, he reflects on the measures and scope which scholars need to implement to restrain them from certain acts. In the last text he wrote before his death, *Restraining of the Commoners from Theological Science* (*Iljām al-‘awāmm ‘an ‘ilm al-kalām*), al-Ghazālī forcefully insisted that commoners refrain from complicated religious hermeneutics. They ought to be exposed to an uncomplicated truth, and they confine themselves to the Qur’an and prophetic statements. In the *Restraining*, theology is defined as a discipline of analytic dissection. This line of thought, while useful for polemic purposes against erroneous beliefs, obfuscates minds and leads people astray. For this reason, al-Ghazālī asserts that commoners should be exposed to the knowledge of the *salaf*, the rightful surrogates of the Prophet Muhammad. In *Sunnī*, or Orthodox, parlance, these people were the Prophet’s companions who had an adequate exposure to his life and could rightfully disseminate knowledge about what he stipulated. In fact, the science of *hadith* that is at the core of Islamic jurisprudence seeks to chronicle Prophetic statements by way of reports from the *salaf*, the Arabic term for predecessors. Hence, this major aspect which defines the *Restraining* does not offer anything ground-breaking. Al-Ghazālī is merely insisting on already well-defined form of orthodoxy that predates his work.⁵¹⁴

⁵¹⁴ According to Fiazuddin Shu‘ayb, al-Ghazālī adopts strict “traditionalism” in his *Revival*. Traditionalism was popular among jurists who “vehemently” opposed theological disputation, as we find in the work of Imām ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855). Shu‘ayb maintains that al-Ghazālī’s appropriation of the method of the *salaf* is further evidence of his inclination toward a traditionalist line of thought. Typically, the traditionalists rejected theological disputation in view of a stringent understanding of application of legal norms derived from the righteous predecessors (i.e., *salaf*). See: Fiazuddin Shu‘ayb, “Al-Ghazālī’s Final Word on Kalām,” *Islam and Science* 9, no. 2 (2011): 151-72. While al-Ghazālī clearly indicates this view of customary religious practice in the *Restraining* as well as other work, his insistence on a strict adherence to legal norms and customs is nothing novel if we compare it to his earlier writings. In fact, as we will see below, al-Ghazālī typically praises an elect group who seeks a solitary religious experience by

Nevertheless, al-Ghazālī's orthodox insistence here is of importance, considering his thoroughgoing critique of *taqlīd* elsewhere. Readers may recall that al-Ghazālī was dissatisfied with customary belief; that is the simple belief of trusting in the religion imparted by our parents. But here is he calling on commoners to trust in the statements of long deceased figures. Readers might wonder if this is not in contention with his notion of *'ilm yaqīn*, or certain knowledge. How can one be certain if he or she is merely following the right path? Does al-Ghazālī's insistence on the *salaf*, which presupposes the existence of a righteous path, not contradict his characterization of the heart as a personal, independent faculty where genuine religious conscience is attained? One might be inclined to think this is the case considering al-Ghazālī's own departure from Baghdad and his desire for solitude. But al-Ghazālī's solitude by way of an inward turn to the heart does not entirely preclude sociability. As noted by Sherman A. Jackson, al-Ghazālī never promotes doctrinal heterogeneity.⁵¹⁵ I would add that al-Ghazālī's conception of the heart is not meant to yield the type of subjectivity we find in liberal political thought, where inward conscience is a precursor for the defence of religious heterogeneity. Al-Ghazālī's aim was to find the largest possible common denominator between Muslims, rather than defend their varying doctrinal differences in the typical fashion of liberal toleration. Additionally, the fact that al-Ghazālī insists on a religious orthodoxy bears witness to his rigid belief in a communal understanding of religion. This Muslim community is defined by the timeless bond between the *salaf* and subsequent generations to come. In the very broad sense of the word, this relationship is a conservative one, as subsequent generations are asked to reinforce prophetic dictums. In this sense, al-Ghazālī is faithful to religious orthodoxy.

way of gnosis while suggesting that commoners are better off learning customary practice, *taqlīd*. This line is repeated in his *Restraining*, which only undermines a traditionalist interpretation of this text.

⁵¹⁵ Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam*, 5.

But what do we make of all the imagery of the solitary *Ṣūfī*, which is found across al-Ghazālī's post-Baghdad writings? In the *Restraining*, al-Ghazālī insists that mystical knowledge is only attained by a select few. While this is the most rewarding state to be in, one may recall that al-Ghazālī was drawn to mystic knowledge after suffering from a crippling skepticism that he desperately sought a way out of. In al-Ghazālī's theology, we are constantly reminded of the weighty liabilities of a learned person. And he occasionally signals that the loftiest form of piety is the one exhibited by the common folk. The search for *yaqīn* by way of direct divine illumination is not befitting for all persons, as we have seen in *Mishkāṭ al-anwār* (*Niche of Lights*). Some people are better off retaining what they learn through revelation and prophetic statements. In this chapter, I want to return to al-Ghazālī's hierarchical understanding of knowledge. I have already explained the importance of this hierarchy in some of his central works as well as demonstrated that the most lucid form of knowledge for non-prophets is the mystical kind, which is a proximate version of the kind experienced by prophets. While the terms of al-Ghazālī's reflections are epistemologically grounded, as he deals with the varying degrees of cogency, there is an underlying political concern that cannot be ignored. The present chapter will examine some elementary aspects of his political theology.

Al-Ghazālī's metaphysical hierarchy and political ideas are undeniably linked. Additionally, despite occasionally praising the piety of commoners, al-Ghazālī conveys an undeniably elitist view in his remarks on who can engage in theological disputation. Not only does al-Ghazālī maintain that gnosis (or mystical knowledge) is only accessible to a select few, but he also says the same of logic and other forms of reason-based disputation, to which the category of *kalām* belongs. Hence, this chapter will attempt to clarify two crucial, and interrelating, aspects in al-Ghazālī's corpus. First, we will examine his distinction between classes of Muslims and their

corresponding levels of cogency, allowing us to outline his vision of a theocratic order. Secondly, we will examine his general views on rational argumentation, including his view that commoners should refrain from theological disputation more specifically. This will resolve a topic that has been hovering in the background of previous chapters but not yet adequately concluded. In previous chapters, especially Chapter 4, I argued that al-Ghazālī expressly prefers mystical knowledge to rational argumentation and that he argues that the former leads to a more fulfilling encounter with God. Yet, al-Ghazālī also values reason, even though it does not immediately contribute to self-purification. In his exposition on *kalām*, al-Ghazālī expresses the belief that reason supplies scholars with an argumentative advantage over their opponents. This chapter will argue that al-Ghazālī instrumentalizes reason as a form of polemic activity to protect the religious community from erroneous beliefs.

In al-Ghazālī's theology, reason is typically tolerated for social and political matters. The purpose of the theological treatise is to defend the religious creed against external doctrines. Based on his *Iniquities of the Esoterics* (*Faḍā'ih al-bāṭiniyya*), we get the impression that al-Ghazālī found reason to be universally appealing. According to al-Ghazālī, the *Ismā'īliyya*, to whom he responds in the *Iniquities*, wrongly refuted reason's credibility, as they assumed that all knowledge concerning religious matters is bestowed by an infallible *Imām*. For al-Ghazālī, the problem with the *Ismā'īliyya*'s claim is that it bars people from assessing a doctrine's credibility. Yet al-Ghazālī also believed that misapplied reason could be a gateway to grave theological mistakes. In this sense, only the learned are entitled to produce works on theological matters, and their targeted audience should be other learned men who have adopted erroneous beliefs. The latter could be salvaged by being brought back to orthodoxy.⁵¹⁶ Al-Ghazālī's account of religious sciences is

⁵¹⁶ Ayman Shihadeh, "From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī: 6th/12th Century Developments in Muslim Philosophical Theology," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2005): 143.

rooted in a conception of a community of scholars who protect their fellow Muslims against the demagoguery of false scholars.⁵¹⁷ In this sense, theology is both pedagogical and political, resting on a community of scholars who aim for religious orthodoxy. This is evidenced in his discussion of who is entitled to write, the audience of these writings, and the scope of their content.

Several scholars, such as Richard Frank, Ebrahim Moosa, and Farouk Mitha, provide invaluable scholarship on the pedagogical nature of theological writing in al-Ghazālī work.⁵¹⁸ The three remark that there is a tendency for al-Ghazālī to use reason and/or the act of writing logical argumentation in defense of religious orthodoxy. In *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash‘arite School*, Frank examines the historical trajectory of al-Ghazālī’s intellectual transformations. Frank’s text demonstrates that al-Ghazālī espoused different views of speculation in theological and syllogistic reasoning throughout his intellectual life. However, the later al-Ghazālī reconciles reasoning with ascetism by confining its role to specific functions, such as combating erroneous belief, all the while barring commoners from speculation.⁵¹⁹ Similarly, Moosa is also important to this discussion because he notes a salient separation of higher (ascetic) truth and textual reasoning in al-Ghazālī’s writings, the kind that I have been discussing earlier. Unlike Frank and Moosa, Mitha mostly focuses on rationalist polemics, though he is not unaware of the prevalent ascetic elements in al-Ghazālī theology. But Mitha’s work is limited to an interpretation of the *Iniquities*, which presents a rational critique of the *Ismā‘īlī* doctrine of teaching at the hands of an infallible *Imām*, otherwise known as the *Ta‘līmī* creed. In my opinion, all three commentators successfully describe the political and pedagogical purpose of writing in al-Ghazālī’s corpus. However, they fail to

⁵¹⁷ Fadlou Shehadi, *Ghazali’s Unique and Unknowable God: A Critical Analysis of Some of the Problems Raised by Ghazali’s View of God as Utterly Unique and Unknowable* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964), 40-41.

⁵¹⁸ Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash‘arite School*; Mitha, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ismailis*; Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

⁵¹⁹ Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash‘arite School*, 23.

underline the theocratic norms which are latent in this aspect of his work. Al-Ghazālī's assessment on religious scholarship is theocratic in that it yields answers about a political order wherein those with the most profound level of piety and lucid apprehension of God are meant to guide the political community. As readers will notice by the end of this chapter, al-Ghazālī's question about who can read and write theological treatises is fundamentally a question about who can stipulate religious norms and concepts to the rest of the community.

Part I – *The limits of reason and al-Ghazālī's critique of theological writing*

According to Ebrahim Moosa, al-Ghazālī's distinction between written acts and ascetic experience is consonant with Platonic ideas, namely those found in the *Phaedrus* and *Seventh Letter*. Though Plato and al-Ghazālī wrote for quite different purposes, this comparison is not unsound. Plato and al-Ghazālī discuss the notion of an experiential knowledge at length. Additionally, they argue that this type of knowledge is superior to textual knowledge. According to Moosa, al-Ghazālī's corpus belongs to a "Muslim pedagogical tradition" which highly valued didactic processes. Rather than learning from "impersonal books," young Muslim scholars were encouraged to seek knowledge from senior teachers. In fact, this was consistent with the pedagogical approach of the Middle Ages, which insisted on "auditory" learning whereby teachers imparted knowledge to students through speech.⁵²⁰ Moosa also points out that, while the later al-Ghazālī considered writing an inferior way to impart knowledge, he remained a "prolific" writer up until his death. For al-Ghazālī, writing became subordinate to speech in that it served as a recollection of the latter. In other words, writing serves as "speech-in-memory," one that could be "recuperated" by subsequent

⁵²⁰ Moosa, *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination*, 97-98.

generations.⁵²¹ Pointing to the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter*, Moosa seeks to demonstrate that al-Ghazālī's critique of writing is strikingly similar to Plato's.

Just like some of al-Ghazālī's writings, Plato's *Seventh Letter* provides a strong reflection on the relationship between written knowledge and experiential knowledge. Both thinkers question the possibility that knowledge imparted through language can effectively illuminate higher truths. On the contrary, they suggest that higher knowledge is only attainable by way of the soul's (or *qalb*'s) cultivation. This knowledge is not learned didactically by way of teaching but is acquired through arduous effort on the part of the person seeking it. Plato's critique in the *Seventh Letter* is directed at the ruler Dionysius, who boasted about having authored a book on philosophy. In the *Letter*, Plato contends that people often speak of things they have not practiced. This is the case of Dionysus, whom Plato was initially educating on matters pertaining to governing the state and other public virtues. According to Plato's statement, Dionysus sought to regurgitate the former's views by way of writing. Plato's objection is that the text written by Dionysus could not possibly convey a clear and straightforward understanding of the given concepts. These concepts, according to Plato, are not things one could learn or teach through language, or the act of writing to be more specific. According to Moosa, while other "sciences" could be taught through texts, in this case, Plato suggests the existence of an alternative pedagogical phenomenon, one that is akin to "light flashing forth when a fire is kindled."⁵²² Further, he argues that this knowledge is kindled in the soul. As I have previously shown, the imagery of light as knowledge is a central theme in al-Ghazālī's epistemological framework.

Since the soul, according to Plato, seeks knowledge of immutable essences, rather than specific qualities, it cannot rely on language or writing. The use of language or speech is restricted

⁵²¹ Ibid., 99-100.

⁵²² Ibid., 106.

to baser forms of knowledge, pertaining to physical and material qualities. Plato remarks that most people have been accustomed to accruing knowledge of the “image” of something without ascending to absolute knowledge of that thing.⁵²³ Plato concludes this discussion by stating that a person with a “defective” soul cannot be *taught* virtues, even if this person is gifted with “quickness of learning [or] a good memory.” True knowledge comes “through long and earnest labor.” This implies that knowledge of virtues is mainly accrued internally, through the soul, as opposed to occurring through a dialogical relationship between master and pupil, or between author and audience. Plato points out that those who genuinely pursue “high matters” cannot entirely divulge their thoughts; this is because their highest thoughts are inexplicable in the form of language or speech.⁵²⁴

There are many salient grounds for Moosa’s comparison of Plato and al-Ghazālī. Surely, there are striking quasi-Platonic elements across al-Ghazālī’s texts. Some of these similarities explored thus far include: the imagery of light to explain the soul’s perceptive capacities, the limits of language and texts in the form of treatises, the view that knowledge requires arduous effort and mapping out the different epistemic states in the city. We also come across the shared concern that recognition of expertise belongs to those with some sufficient level of experiential initiation. On this supposed point of convergence, Moosa points to the older al-Ghazālī’s penchant for *Ṣūfī* ascetism. After concluding that ascetism is superior to theoretical knowledge, al-Ghazālī redefined writing in a “figurative” sense, hereon referring to it as the discipline of “heart-writing”. Writing no longer meant composing a book; it now came to mean marking the heart with divine truth.⁵²⁵ A true scholar should not waste time with letters; he should aim for “transforming the condition

⁵²³ Plato, “Phaedrus,” 344a-e.

⁵²⁴ Ibid., 344cd.

⁵²⁵ Moosa, *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination*, 104-05.

of the heart and the soul.”⁵²⁶ This transformation requires immersion with the divine, yielding “higher levels of intuition.”⁵²⁷

Surely, both thinkers believe that personal exertion is required for the soul to become sufficiently perceptive of truths. And Moosa finds this comparison even more striking considering that al-Ghazālī’s conception of *qalb*, or heart, is used “interchangeably” with the concept of “soul”.⁵²⁸ Though these convergences are undeniable, Moosa’s comparison is overstated. Plato’s philosophical method is not the same al-Ghazālī’s *taṣawwuf*. By underlining the ascetic element in al-Ghazālī’s writings, Moosa inadvertently troubles his own comparison. He is somewhat silent on the crucial difference between Plato and al-Ghazālī, which speaks volumes of the difference between Platonic philosophy and Islamic asceticism. I have touched on some parts of this difference in Chapter 4, but it is time to renew this discussion. For the sake of hermeneutic justice, we should not lose sight of the role of reason in Plato’s philosophy, despite the prevalent poesis in his dialogues. In the *Seventh Letter* and the *Phaedrus*, Plato contends that language is limited, not reason. Moosa is right to point to a similar critique of written language in al-Ghazālī’s corpus. But this critique is largely aimed at the faculty of reason (*‘aql*), rather than a square reflection on the scope of language. As mentioned above, there is a good deal of convergence between both thinkers, most notably the view that more elevated forms of knowledge are experienced by way of self-exertion. Nevertheless, the nature of this experience is resoundingly different. Plato explains that we learn about ‘virtue’ through practice.⁵²⁹ On the contrary, al-Ghazālī has in mind a sort of “gnosis” (*ma‘rifa*) whereby the adherent opens his or heart to God’s grace.

⁵²⁶ Ibid., 105.

⁵²⁷ Ibid., 106.

⁵²⁸ Ibid.

⁵²⁹ Plato, “Phaedrus,” 344cd.

Now to come back to the main theme of the present chapter. There is also something peculiarly political about al-Ghazālī's concern with theological disputation. Al-Ghazālī's remarks on the communal benefits and harms of theological disputation. There is no denying that al-Ghazālī regards writing (and all forms of theoretical disputation as inferior to ascetism), but he is also animated by an additional concern. Why is it that al-Ghazālī regards some theological writings to be more beneficial than others? In al-Ghazālī's theology, the purpose of the theological treatise is corrective; it is composed by a body of scholars to ward erroneous beliefs and to spread true knowledge. As I will explain below, al-Ghazālī intends to juxtapose this gnostic experience to reason-based argumentation, which is foundational to the art of theological disputation. As we will see below, this position is expressly conveyed in *Moderation in Belief* (*Al-Iqtisād fī l-i'tiqād*). Some might contend that the view of defending the community is not necessarily 'political,' or that it is elementary politics in view of his more salient political discussions elsewhere. But, in preparation for the following chapter, readers should bear in mind that the concept of guardianship of communal orthodoxy is intrinsic to al-Ghazālī's political theology as well as that of his intellectual predecessors.

Before I turn to an analysis of al-Ghazālī's view on the merits and vices of theological speculation, one final differentiation between him and Plato is in order. Al-Ghazālī is more sympathetic with the idea that commoners can have access to knowledge of high matters, as will be demonstrated later in this work. In his case, this is knowledge of God and His commandments. Plato is certainly more elitist in his understanding of knowledge, as depicted in his *Seventh Letter*. Those who attain knowledge of the essence of beings are certainly educated persons, because they are capable of composing texts. In turn, these texts conceal an even higher truth, one that is realized by way of "reason." But, for al-Ghazālī, the truth is principally about knowing God, an end for all

Muslims, irrespective of social standing and education. This is not the same as the classical conception of truth as virtue. To use Richard Frank's words, the implications of "this science is to have authentic knowledge of God's uniqueness as creator."⁵³⁰ In fact, when al-Ghazālī berates scholars, it is not merely out of intellectual disagreement, but because they complicate an otherwise uncomplicated message. The theologians of al-Ghazālī's time are mired in senseless theological speculations, which are a disservice to the promotion of a pious community. Pedantic concerns with God's attributes distract one from a genuine encounter with God.⁵³¹ Further, he accuses most of these scholars of being motivated by ulterior motives, mostly the pursuit of high offices. A true scholar should think of the afterlife.

Al-Ghazālī begins the *Moderation* by berating wasteful sciences which ignore the importance of salvation. A permissible science is one that promotes "eternal happiness." The most important principle of knowledge or inquiry, according to the Prophet, are theological questions regarding God's existence and whether this God is capable of speech so that He may command us. If this God is truly capable of such things, then one ought to know if He is capable of punishing those who transgress and rewarding those who abide by His commands.⁵³² Because theological speculation should serve a remedial purpose, notably for the heart, al-Ghazālī insists on the importance of expertise, as we do with physicians. Poor medical practice can be detrimental for the patient's health, while erring knowledge can lead people astray. But what does he mean by knowledge?

Al-Ghazālī provides a thoroughgoing exposition of the various meanings of knowledge or *‘ilm* in his *Book of Knowledge (Kitāb al-‘Ilm)* of the *Revival*, which reads as an epistemological

⁵³⁰ Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash‘arite School*, 23.

⁵³¹ Ibid., 23-27; Shehadi, *Ghazali's Unique and Unknowable God: A Critical Analysis of Some of the Problems Raised by Ghazali's View of God as Utterly Unique and Unknowable*, 101-03.

⁵³² Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*, 7-9.

treatise. The text considers an array of different definitions, from different disciplines to varying epistemic states.⁵³³ As the text unfolds, al-Ghazālī reveals that he is interested in knowledge as a conception tied to “virtue” (*faḍīla*). Knowledge, in this general sense, is unconditionally virtuous, a “good in itself” (*ladhīdhan fī nafsih*). It allows us to understand the different divine attributes, which is a distinctive feature found only in angels and humans.⁵³⁴ Al-Ghazālī purposely avoids getting too detailed about what this virtuous knowledge entails. He simply states that it is pleasurable in itself and required for eternal bliss in the hereafter.⁵³⁵ This intended vagueness recalls what we have already seen in the last chapter regarding al-Ghazālī’s defense of the commoners against the scholars’ elitism. Al-Ghazālī simply believes that true worship and submission do not rest on extensive theological speculation but a simple virtuous disposition. The commoners display just that by submitting to God.

Now, despite the *Book of Knowledge*’s stated epistemological aims, one cannot ignore this text’s salient political objectives. In fact, al-Ghazālī expressly states that the knowledge – which is interchangeable with worship of God – cannot be met without certain political means. Thus, the *Book of Knowledge* offers readers a glimpse into al-Ghazālī’s view on the necessity of politics. Al-Ghazālī insists that humanity’s salvation in the hereafter cannot be disassociated from our transient wellbeing in this world. To properly align our souls with the hereafter, certain conditions in this world need to be met. This means that the highest end, which is knowledge of God and the ulterior world, requires certain preliminary means, or crafts that help facilitate the acquisition of the end, and politics is just that end for the realization of this noble conception of knowledge. To understand the implications of this argument, al-Ghazālī provides us with quotidian examples. The various

⁵³³ “Kitāb al-‘Ilm,” 21.

⁵³⁴ Ibid., 21

⁵³⁵ Ibid.

crafts and activities that make up the social realm are intricately weaved together. Breadmaking would not exist without agriculture, and we would be incapable of carrying out the latter without ironwork. The varying industries and craft in this world complement each other, allowing us to attain different ends. These secular crafts are noble in proportion to the sort of end they help us attain. The “noblest” (*ashraf*) of the secular (or this-worldly) crafts is politics because, if carried out according to sincere aims, it brings order to the human realm. This noble craft – which is the highest of the worldly crafts – is essential because it reinforces social harmony and guides people toward piety. Thus, the qualifications for political office are more demanding than the qualifications for any other craft, such as farming or ironwork. Without a legitimate political class, people risk going awry and would lose a sense of eternal salvation.⁵³⁶

Consequently, al-Ghazālī envisions a hierarchy of political classes, the highest of which is the most capable of carrying a political community toward salvation. (This is similar to the point that was just raised in the brief analysis of the *Scale of Action* above.) First, there is the class of the prophets, who have full moral and corporeal command over people. The second class is that of the secular rulers – the Caliphs, emirs, and sultans – who wield coercive power but have no real authority over the consciences of persons. Third comes the class of learned men whose influence only extends to those who comprehend theoretical reflection, which are few and far between. Finally, al-Ghazālī identifies the class of ordinary preachers whose popular mode of speech make them relatable the simple minds of the people.⁵³⁷ Much like in the *Scale*, these classes must be organized hierarchically in a way that reflects their different abilities. Incidentally, the lowest of these political offices is the one that deals with the commoners. Yet again, we are confronted with the view that the commoners form the lowest component of the political community. What does

⁵³⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁵³⁷ Ibid., 23.

this make of al-Ghazālī's intermittent sympathy for the commoners? Below, I will set out to explore al-Ghazālī's enigmatic position on the commoners, which shifts from full-fledged sympathy to calls for restraining and subordinating them to the rule of an elite. If we want to resolve this enigma, we will have to explore his views on the relationship between commoners and scholars and their different paths toward *knowledge*.

Part II – *On the relationship between the commoners and scholars*

In the broadest and most universal sense, knowledge is the virtue of thinking about God; it is a general duty incumbent on all Muslims. Al-Ghazālī quotes the prophet as saying that the pursuit of knowledge is incumbent on every Muslim as an “individual duty” (*farḍ ‘ayn*). But some theoreticians have narrowed what it means to contemplate God. Some theologians of the *kalām* argue that piety consists in speculating about divine attributes. Jurists believe that one must undertake jurisprudence. The interpreters of prophetic tradition (*Sunna*) regard their subject matter as the most perennial. And, while followers of *taṣawwuf* are not united on what amounts to the highest form of knowledge, they tend to agree that ascetic practice is the best path.⁵³⁸ For al-Ghazālī, these various fields require expertise and are far too complicated for the average commoner to master. Since knowledge is incumbent on all Muslims, it follows that the base definition must be general enough to include non-experts and non-theoreticians. This broad definition of knowledge is consonant with al-Ghazālī's effort to expand the definition of the Muslim community in his *Criterion* against the narrow views of the *mutakallimūn*. The most elementary duty for every Muslim, he tells us, is knowledge of the *shahāda*, the statement that ‘there is no God but God, and Muhammad is His Messenger.’ This simple proclamation does not

⁵³⁸ Ibid., 21

have to be analyzed through rigorous speculation or philosophy; it is something that we may merely profess after having it imparted on us by way of “convention” (*taqlīd*). Al-Ghazālī argues that the Prophet expected the Bedouins to simply repeat the statement without engaging them with speculative notions and principles. He proclaimed it to them, and they simply repeated it, making their belief public through a simple statement.⁵³⁹ As a sidenote, it is possible that al-Ghazālī might be overstating the *mutakallimūn*’s condemnatory attitude, which he thinks ensues from their intellectual elitism. Muhammad Fadel explains that, though many theologians stressed the obligatory nature of reason, some also accepted “deference” to *taqlīd*. As for the theologians who refuted faith that is not grounded on reason, even they thought that the Bedouins were “capable of rational inquiry.”⁵⁴⁰ But al-Ghazālī makes it seem like *mutakallimūn* would have derided these Arabs. Perhaps, he was trying to present himself as a unique supporter of the common people.

Earlier, I mentioned that al-Ghazālī’s last text, the *Restraining*, restricts the commoners’ piety to a type of willful submission. He maintains that there are seven aspects of piety that commoners need to uphold. These sound resoundingly similar to the concept of obedience that he had begun to develop earlier in the *Revival*:

- (1) “Sanctification” (*al-taqdīs*): to deny any bodily or corporeal property to God.
- (2) “Attestation” (*al-taṣdīq*): this is the view that everything imparted by the Prophet Muhammad must be readily accepted.
- (3) Admitting to one’s own impotence (*al-i’tirāf bi-l-‘ajz*): knowledge of the fact that the absolute meaning of the Prophet’s message cannot be fully apprehended.
- (4) “Silence” (*al-sukūt*): they should avoid thorough questions about the meaning of the Prophet’s words, as this would amount to “innovation” (*bid‘a*).
- (5) “Restraint” (*al-imsāk*): they should refrain from “altering” (*tabdīl*) these words and try to stick to the original meaning as much as possible.
- (6) “Cease” (*al-kaff*): to stop oneself from over-contemplating about hidden meanings; basically, al-Ghazālī thinks commoners should not delve into exegetical works.

⁵³⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁰ Fadel, “The True, the Good and the Reasonable: The Theological and Ethical Roots of Public Reason in Islamic Law,” 32-33.

- (7) Accepting the authority of the “people of gnosis” (*al-taslīm li-ahl al-maʿrifa*): this is to concede that matters pertaining to superior knowledge should be left to “prophets” (*al-anbiyāʾ*) and the “elite” (*awliyāʾ*).⁵⁴¹

After introducing these seven categories followed by brief explanations, al-Ghazālī proceeds to dissect each individually. It would be far too lengthy to explain each one and perhaps even redundant, as the underlying implication is repeated in all. This is a sentiment which we have seen emerge in his writings time and time again. Al-Ghazālī is wary of allowing commoners to engage in rational speculation, since he assumes they lack the cognitive ability to do so. But we could briefly examine a couple of these concepts to get a better grasp of what he is trying to tell us about commoners more generally. The third category is very suggestive. In this passage, he cites the following statement, which he attributes to the caliph Abū Bakr: “the [conscience realization of the incapacity] to understand is itself understanding” (*al-ʿajz ʿan al-idrāk idrāk*).⁵⁴² This passage, which suggests that there is something honourable or noble about admission of one’s incomprehension, falls in line with his general plea in the *Deliverance* and his general views on devotion. As I have demonstrated earlier, al-Ghazālī tends to disparage the human condition in view of what he regards as humanity’s feebleness. The imagery of a fragile and weakly adherent who constantly kneels before God and is humbled by the inevitability of decay and death is crucial to his line of thought, his political views included. Our modern sensibilities are very averse to this kind of obedience, which we tend to dismiss as ‘servitude’ when we observe it within an interpersonal relationship between one human and another. But one of the most evocative aspects of al-Ghazālī’s thought is the non-pejorative understanding of obedience, which he constantly

⁵⁴¹ Al-Ghazālī, “Iljām,” 42.

⁵⁴² Ibid., 46.

anchors at key junctures in his different writings. To al-Ghazālī, servitude to God is nothing shameful, and precludes slavery between humans.⁵⁴³ I will get to this in the next and final chapter.

If we are not mindful of this crucial aspect in al-Ghazālī's thought, we might be seriously disturbed by his discussion on silence (*sukūt*) wherein he warns that the ignorant person can plunge into unbelief (*kufr*) by asking too many questions.⁵⁴⁴ Though we know that this view speaks to an aspect of his epistemological concerns, we cannot help but observe a possible inconsistency. Is al-Ghazālī not reinforcing a form of obedience that he had vehemently opposed in his *Deliverance*? There appears to be a tension in al-Ghazālī's work that, if left unsolved, could cause a great deal of confusion for his readers. At times, he berates blind followers, yet, in the *Restraining*, he praises simple obedience to divine commandments. This is the same type of obedience that buttresses the claim of a strict divide between philosophy and revelation.

Readers might find al-Ghazālī's position on commoners puzzling if we recall his remarks on mysticism (not to mention the abovementioned positions on political classes). Al-Ghazālī certainly gives the impression that absolute mystical knowledge is accessible to the few, which seems to imply a sort of elitism. Further, the prophets are portrayed as having the most profound knowledge of the divine. So, what warrants his praise of the commoner in this instance? Does it not present a tension in his writing? This tension is not as unresolvable as it appears. Earlier, when we talked about the heart's purification, we focused on the question of lucid understanding and how the heart ought to purge all superfluous content. Recall, al-Ghazālī contends that, for the heart to be receptive to divine knowledge, it must always remain vacant. While the commoner's knowledge of the divine might not be as profound as the mystic's, it is nevertheless at the

⁵⁴³ In Qur'anic language, *'ibāda* signifies our devotional duties to God (51:56). Uncoincidentally, the variation of this term, *isti'bād*, is used in Arabic to decry the enslavement of humans by other humans.

⁵⁴⁴ Al-Ghazālī, "Iljām," 46.

preliminary stage. The Bedouin's pure heart is not afflicted by superfluous content, as is the case for many insincere theologians.

In the *Moderation*, al-Ghazālī makes similar claims, but this time the discussion suggests the restraint of the common folk from demonstrative proof as well as theological reasoning. Their conviction in God and His messenger is uncomplicated. In fact, al-Ghazālī warns that these people should not undertake theoretical sciences, especially in religious matters, because their otherwise strong conviction would be confounded. Their intellectual inexperience makes them unreceptive to demonstrative proofs, so it is better to not confound their simple adherence. In this passage, al-Ghazālī also points out the Prophet's acceptance of nomadic Arab converts. During this conversion, he had not persuaded them through demonstrative sciences. Rather, he simply vocalized his religious principles to them, and their "hearts" were easily receptive to these.⁵⁴⁵

Since commoners cannot speculate, al-Ghazālī advances a notion of knowledge which is stripped of scientific procedure and technicalities. The knowledge he encourages for commoners is a form of devotional virtue, rather than resting on the mastery of one's own intellectual capacities. Richard Frank emphasizes this point that, according to al-Ghazālī, theological speculation at the individual level is "normally harmful." This is because the technicalities of theological (or even philosophical) speculation could obfuscate an otherwise pious commoner.⁵⁴⁶ The virtue of simple belief, which al-Ghazālī regards as uncomplicated, merely requires self-disciplining to become obedient to conventions of the prophet. As such, it is a *submissive* virtue whereby the majority entrust matters of faith to a body of learned men. Al-Ghazālī makes this clear when he lays out the simple duty of common believers in the *Book of Knowledge*:

⁵⁴⁵ *Moderation*, 10.

⁵⁴⁶ Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash'arite School*, 13.

Do not seek out the sciences which the law has deemed transgressive and warned against. Instead, it is necessary to imitate the companions (may God be pleased with them) and to confine [oneself] to obeying the [prophetic] tradition, as tranquility is [found] in obedience and danger in inquiry of things and independence [of thought] (*wa-lā takun baḥḥāthan ‘an ‘ulūm dhammahā al-shari’ wa-zajjar ‘anhā, wa-lāzim al-iqtidā’ bi-l-ṣaḥāba rāḍī Allāh ‘anhum, wa-aqṭasir ‘alā ittbā’ al-sunna, fa-l-salāma fī l-ittbā’, wa-l-khaṭar fī-l-baḥṭh ‘an al-ashyā’ wa-l-istiqlāl*).⁵⁴⁷

The concept of forbidden sciences is well-defined across al-Ghazālī’s texts. If we recall from the *Moderation* and the *Criterion*, the most obvious infractions are those which insist on principles that contravene the Qur’an and prophetic statements. The *Restraint* gives us an additional insight into how commoners are susceptible to erroneous beliefs. In this text, he asserts that any sort of religious “exegesis” (*ta’wīl*) is unlawful. Al-Ghazālī likens the common exegete to an amateur swimmer who must swim in deep waters (*baḥr mughraḡ*). In fact, God’s “gnosis” (*ma’rifa*) is deeper than any waters and is highly detrimental to the soul. To drown in waters is to die only corporeally, but to drown in gnosis is a form of spiritual death that one can never recover from. Al-Ghazālī rejects the view that commoners ought to be allowed partial access to exegesis, because going beyond designated boundaries can be tempting. This is like an amateur swimmer who would be tempted to travel into deeper waters despite warnings that he should remain near the shore.⁵⁴⁸

Coupled with the parable of the drowning swimmer is a peculiar definition of the commoner. Typically, al-Ghazālī defines the commoner as anyone who is unlettered in religious matters, jurisprudence and theology included. This is because, in most of his texts, including the *Restraining*, he maintains that theological speculation is needed for polemical defence against contending schools of thought. One would think that the theologian is among the elite, or *awliyā’*, given his indispensable role in defending faith through theological treatises. Perhaps sarcastically, however, al-Ghazālī includes the following intellectual classes among the commoners: “the

⁵⁴⁷ Al-Ghazālī, “Kitāb al-‘Ilm,” 44.

⁵⁴⁸ “Iljām,” 49.

scholar, the linguist, the scholar of *ḥadīth*, the exegete, the jurist, and the theologian” (*al-adīb wa-l-naḥwī, wa-l-muḥaddith wa-l-mufasssīr wa-l-faqīh wa-l-mutakallim*).⁵⁴⁹ Now, this is only a polemical definition serving to humble the vain scholar. So far, we have seen al-Ghazālī’s recurring conception of the commoner as an unlettered person. Clearly, al-Ghazālī does not regard these writers of treatises as “commoners”. If we recall al-Ghazālī’s general critique of the scholar, especially in the *Criterion*, we get the impression that this statement is intended as a blow to the theologian’s ego. As we saw in the last chapter, al-Ghazālī was highly troubled by the theologians’ derision of common folk, which led him to write a complete treatise on this topic. Al-Ghazālī simply means to depreciate these theoreticians’ rankings.

Polemics aside, while these scholars and theoreticians are certainly not commoners, they are not deserving of the title *awliyā’*, or elite, either. For this class of men, al-Ghazālī makes no mention of those who write theological, philosophical, or jurisprudential treatises. These *awliyā’*, who are few and far between, are simply defined by their aversion to worldliness. They are the people who

...look away from the world and [its] lusts; who are averse to wealth, fame, [other] people, and other pleasures; who are devoted to God through sciences and works; who commit to the entirety of the law’s restrictions and morals by undertaking obligations and foregoing the forbidden; who entirely empty their hearts from things not pertaining to God (the Exalted); who disparage this world but [favour] the afterlife and the highest paradise [to be] proximate to God’s (the Exalted) love. These are the people who [may] dive in the sea of gnosis (*al-ṣārifīn wujūhum ‘an al-dunyā wa-l-shahwāt, al-mu’riḍīn ‘an al-māl wa-l-jāh wa-l-khalq wa-sā’ir al-ladhdhāt al-mukhlīṣīn li-Allāh ta’ālā fī l-‘ulūm wa-l-a’māl, al-‘āmilīn bi-jamī’ ḥudūd al-sharī’a wa-adābihā fī l-qiyām bi-l-tā’āt wa-tark al-munkarāt, al-mufarrighīn qulūbahim bi-l-jamla ‘an ghayr Allāh ta’ālā, al-mustaḥqirīn li-l-dunyā bal al-ākhirā wa-l-firdaws al-a’lā fī janb maḥabbat Allāh ta’ālā, fa-hā’ulā’ hum ahl al-ghawṣ fī baḥr al-ma’rifa*).⁵⁵⁰

Note, in the above quotation, in particular al-Ghazālī’s remark that the *awliyā’* commit to their required duties (*tā’āt*) and works and empty their hearts of all superfluous content. This brings us

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid., 49

back to the original point above, that al-Ghazālī considers commoners to be closer to divine truth because they exhibit the preliminary stages of mystical knowledge, though they are not adequately there. Now, to be part of the *awliyā'* and reach the “sea of gnosis,” one must entirely reject worldliness, which is not a common practice. Yet, compared to the theologians, these commoners are undoubtedly more proximate to the *awliyā'* for the reasons explained above.

Al-Ghazālī's preference for the commoner is even more pronounced when it comes to the question of piety. As we have seen above, he thinks that the commoner is generally more pious than the theologian, who is commonly interested in personal gain. A truly pious person must shun worldliness and certainly refrain from a life of luxury. It follows that al-Ghazālī could not have been literal when he briefly defined these theologians as “commoners”. The theologians of al-Ghazālī's time could not have counted among these simple people, considering their political liaisons and proximity to the nexus of power. Fearing that he would become one of these people, al-Ghazālī left his post to pursue a life consisting of pious simplicity. This is the kind of simplicity that would strongly animate his post-Baghdad writing, but which was already nascent in his occasionalism, as we have seen in the first two chapters. It suffices to say that al-Ghazālī is relatively consistent in his view of piety as an uncomplicated and humbling *modus vivendi*. Since the theologians lack this simplicity, they cannot count among the *awliyā'*. But neither are they commoners, at least not in the socioeconomic sense, as they are certainly lettered and enjoy court privileges and are likely there for vainglorious pursuits.

Another important observation to be made here is al-Ghazālī's emphasis on gnosis, which immediately precedes his broad definition of the commoner. The fact that al-Ghazālī links *ta'wīl*, or exegesis, with *ma'rifa* suggests that he sees a strong bond between theology and mysticism. We know from previous texts that al-Ghazālī rejects the view of certain logicians (both philosophers

and theologians) that God can be known through rational inquiry. And we also know of al-Ghazālī's claim that theological discipline is useful for undercutting dangerous heresy. But al-Ghazālī's statement here suggests something deeper. This is the view that the theologian (as well as any learned person) must be adept with gnostic knowledge prior to engaging in any thoroughgoing religious interpretation. Therefore, we can safely surmise that the *mutakallimūn*, along with other forms of scholars, are all demoted to the class of commoners in view of what they lack, a mystical union with God which must precede attempts at exegesis. Al-Ghazālī's remarks in the *Restraining* appear stricter than what we find in his previous texts, wherein he tolerates theology strictly for the defence of religious orthodoxy. Prior to the *Restraining*, his problem with the *mutakallimūn* had been their conceit and contempt toward others. In the *Restraining*, however, we are explicitly told that theologians are not unlike the commoners they admonish. Though the view that all learned men must be trained in mysticism seems like a peculiar feature of the *Restraining*, we can observe that it is latent as far back as the *Revival*, at the very least.

In the *Book of Knowledge*, he adds that even practical religious disciplines, such as jurisprudence, should be imbued with some aspects of mysticism. Though jurisprudence is concerned with legal stipulations, the jurist must be aware of the science of the heart, knowledge of which is rudimentary to his mysticism, or gnostic notion of *ma'rifa*. Al-Ghazālī remarks that the practitioners of practical religion are not expected to immerse themselves in mysticism. Nevertheless, these practitioners must be aware of the heart's many "states" (*aḥwāl*), which incline between virtue and vice. Among the commendable conditions of the heart are "patience" (*ṣabr*), "gratitude" (*shukr*), and "piety" (*taqwā*). This rudimentary science of the heart concerns itself with the ways in which one may better cultivate these positive traits, all the while rooting out the transgressive aspects of the heart, such as "wrath" (*ghaḍab*), "enmity" (*ʿadāwa*), "conceit toward

the truth” (*istikbār ‘an al-ḥaqq*), and so forth.⁵⁵¹ Al-Ghazālī insists that knowledge of the heart is necessary for the salvation of all, not just for practical and communal purposes. While jurists and rulers can ordain people to follow certain rules and principles by threatening them with punitive measures, they cannot dictate the internal conditions of the heart. However, only God can know whether religious practices and works are carried out sincerely by an individual, one whose heart is informed by commendable virtues. While jurists can never gauge the virtues of the heart, they share the unanimous opinion that it is every believer’s individual duty (*farḍ ‘ayn*) to carry out this practical science.⁵⁵²

For these reasons, al-Ghazālī exclaims that “teaching” (*ta’līm*) is the noblest act, because the teacher is responsible for guiding souls toward righteousness, which was one of the Prophet’s fundamental goals. As such, al-Ghazālī regards scholars and intellectuals as the prophet’s auxiliaries, as opposed to sultans and magistrates, even though the latter are the guardians of stability. This is an important distinction because, as will be shown in the next chapter, it puts the onus of political rulership on the clerical class. This type of rulership is of a theocratic kind. The rudimentary aspect of rulership, in al-Ghazālī’s thought, is the maintenance of stability, but this is only to guarantee that the devout can be prepared for the hereafter. In principle, the secular ruler’s role is conceptually inferior to that of the scholars, who actively work on the theocratic function of the state, disseminating piety.⁵⁵³

Part III – On the varying roles of religious scholarship and the purposes of jurisprudence and theological disputation

⁵⁵¹ Al-Ghazālī, “Kitāb al-‘Ilm,” 32.

⁵⁵² Ibid.

⁵⁵³ Ibid., 23.

In the previous section, I discussed the implications of knowledge and science in al-Ghazālī's theology. I examined his claim that textual and speculative thought does not yield higher truths. Nevertheless, al-Ghazālī defines a social and political purpose for texts and theological speculation, which explains why he himself was a prolific theologian. Though al-Ghazālī does not regard reasoning or inquiry to be the path to divine ascension, he maintains a social utility for theological and philosophical practice. As mentioned above, a community without a basic body of science cannot guarantee the path to salvation for its members. In this section, I want to explore the social and political utility of theological writing and its intended use for the protection of the community against erroneous and heretical thought, which threaten to undo religious unity. Al-Ghazālī believes that it is the duty of religious scholars to cure erroneous and heretical thinking, which is often born out of internal doubt or skepticism.⁵⁵⁴ Thus, this section examines the broad role of the scholar in al-Ghazālī's theocratic imagination.

Al-Ghazālī argues that the science he presents in his *Moderation* is intended as a "collective duty" (*farḍ kifāya*) as opposed to an individual duty, despite his insistence that inquiry is detrimental to most people's beliefs. Even though doubt is something that occurs among a minority of people (those who inquire), skepticism presents a communal danger. The skeptic who succumbs to erroneous beliefs may begin to disseminate these to commoners and draw people to his false beliefs. No land or country is unsusceptible to the dangers of skepticism and error. Therefore, al-Ghazālī proclaims his science as obligatory for the collective. There must always be a body of scholars who monitor erroneous beliefs and counter them through similar theological tracts, which is the fundamental purpose of this text. When a community lacks these guardian scholars, it is in a situation as grave as lacking physicians and jurists. However, al-Ghazālī explains that if a

⁵⁵⁴ Shihadeh, "From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī: 6th/12th Century Developments in Muslim Philosophical Theology," 143-44.

community has no theologians and jurists, and one man was keen on learning both, it would be best for him to become a jurist (*faqīh*). Jurisprudence is a science that is applicable to all aspects of private and social life, such that it is constantly needed. Conversely, al-Ghazālī considers skepticism as a rare danger because it is only something that occurs among the learned.⁵⁵⁵ Al-Ghazālī's preference for the jurist is consistent with his position that theology is detrimental to the common folk. On the contrary, jurisprudence (*fiqh*) is applicable to all, as all humans require laws.

So far in this thesis, I have explained the centrality of theological disputation in al-Ghazālī's thought, but little has been said about what he tells us about *fiqh*. An explanation is in order here, as al-Ghazālī's views on jurisprudence reveal a great deal of detail about his ideal theocracy. This is not surprising, considering that the concept of jurisprudence is crucial to the foundations of Islamic political theology. In brief, al-Ghazālī regards *fiqh* as an essential science. In the *Book of Knowledge*, al-Ghazālī divides these sciences, which are required by collective duty, into religious and secular sciences. The divine sciences include prophetic knowledge; this science does not rest on the use of the "intellect" (*'aql*), as would be required of arithmetic, medicine, or language. The secular sciences are further divided into the "commendable" (*maḥmūd*), "transgressive" (*madhmūm*), and "permissible" (*mubāḥ*). Further, the commendable sciences can be regarded as a collective duty while others are simply virtuous (*faḍīla*), but not obligatory. The former are the sciences which no functioning community could possibly forgo. This includes medicine, necessary for the conservation of people's health, or mathematics, which is used to justly allocate inheritances. A community without these *collective* sciences is led astray. While al-Ghazālī regards these as duties of the collective, he maintains that whereupon one person learns one of these sciences, other members are exempted from having to learn it. In other words, it

⁵⁵⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*, 13-14.

suffices that one or a few can utilize these sciences for the collective good. They are dubbed collective in that the scope of their utilization extends to the community writ large, all the while they are practiced by a group of learned persons.⁵⁵⁶

Conversely, all the divine sciences are considered commendable. What is interesting is that al-Ghazālī excludes jurisprudence from the salvationist sciences and situates it among the secular ones, even though the Muslim jurist derives his understanding of law from revealed knowledge, as opposed to logic. Humans have been placed in a mundane condition since the fall of Adam and Eve. The purpose of divine laws is to address this profane fate which has befallen humanity, specifically to curtail discord. Moreover, this inevitable discord results from the desire for license, of which any living person may be tempted by in this world. Therefore, the jurist and his science of divine law are indispensable to the community, as they steer humans from what endangers their wellbeing. In fact, al-Ghazālī regards the jurist as the ruler’s “teacher” (*mu‘allim*) as far as the latter ought to embrace the former’s knowledge on orderliness.⁵⁵⁷

Al-Ghazālī claims that jurisprudence does not qualify as a divine science but is rather connected to the role of religion. At first glance, this is a curious position, considering that jurisprudence is derived from revelation and prophetic sayings. It is *connected* to religion because it aims for the arrangement of the social and political. Insofar as this world is regarded as the *tilth* for the next, as al-Ghazālī remarks, our current actions will affect our standing in the hereafter. In this sense, jurisprudence, which is reinforced by local jurists, is connected to the aim of divine science, salvation.⁵⁵⁸ Now, this division between the political/legal and the ulterior world seems to intimate a sort of secular order. Certainly, the divisions between the religious and secular are

⁵⁵⁶ “Kitāb al-‘Ilm,” 26.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., 26-28.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid., 28.

not reinforced through stringently separate jurisdictions in Islamic thought as they are in Christianity. But there are considerable elements to speak of a quasi-secular order, in al-Ghazālī's thought at least. In al-Ghazālī's cosmological imagery, religion is the "foundation" (*aṣl*) and political authority the "protector" (*hāris*) and both exist in a complimentary relationship, as though they are "twins" (*taw'amān*). Simply put, religion is the source of legitimacy and proper conduct, but it can only flourish when a political community is stable. Such is the role of political authority.⁵⁵⁹

What about the jurists? What "jurisdiction" do they fall under? Surely, they deal with religious matters, principally submission (*islām*), prayers, almsgiving, and regulating what is permissible and impermissible. Though these functions are essential for salvation, they remain largely regulatory. The jurist's role is a worldly one, he cannot govern the inward dedication of people or examine the extent to which their acts reflect true conviction. His only purpose is to see if the basics of the faith are being practiced outwardly. Further, the jurist is making known the principles of faith, so his duty is realized by way of "speech" (*al-lisān*). This is to say that he articulates what must be known to believers and evaluates whether they comply with what is articulated. This is the reason al-Ghazālī regards jurisprudence as a secular science; its purpose is to administer actions of people within this world, but it can never expect to apprehend the intentions of persons. Intentions and inward conviction are contained within the heart (*qalb*), a personal faculty belonging to everyone, one that is only apprehended by its own bearer.⁵⁶⁰ A person's outward actions can be tangible to others through visibility or audibility, such as performance of religious acts or profession of faith. However, what ensues in a person's heart is intangible to others. Herein lies the limitation of *fiqh*.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., 28

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid., 28-29

Therefore, al-Ghazālī's reason for regarding jurisprudence as a secular (or mundane) science is simple. While it derives its knowledge from religious precepts, it is only for administering the outward behaviours of people. However, the true judgement of people's character can only occur in the hereafter. Only God can unveil what is hidden in the heart. The jurist does not unveil the intentions of the heart. He simply complements the ruler, and the latter may use the "sword" or physical means to coerce people into making professions in favour of the faith. A reasonable jurist would know that the sword does not guarantee a genuine profession, but only one in *speech*. Hence, the jurist's scope, which is integrated within political authority, is occupied with tangible behaviour, such as speech and physical actions.⁵⁶¹

Useful and wasteful sciences

So far, I have discussed the useful aspects of jurisprudence. But al-Ghazālī also maintains that jurisprudence can be just as harmful as theological studies. Al-Ghazālī berates jurists who concern themselves with "meticulous details" (*al-tafri'āt al-daqīqa*) concerning matters such as divorce but ignore the abovementioned virtues of the heart as part of their knowledge. If asked about topics pertaining to financial distribution, they enthusiastically produce voluminous responses. He believes that some scholars are willing to undertake these studies simply for their own benefit – i.e., so that they may win favours with the ruling class. These studies are not sought out because they are intrinsically good, but rather because they are means to a selfish end.⁵⁶² Even though he makes blanket statements about the intentions of his jurist contemporaries, his criticism is not as polemical as it sounds. It offers a clear insight into his attitude about what makes some sciences or bodies of knowledge more foundational or purposeful for the common good than others.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid., 29

⁵⁶² Ibid., 33

Al-Ghazālī is concerned that some concepts used by the “righteous predecessors” (*salaf al-ṣāliḥ*) have been altered by contemporary scholars. The discipline of “jurisprudence” (*fiqh*) is a prime example. The classical jurists, according to al-Ghazālī, were more thoroughly engaged with religious works that contribute to the heart’s purification and one’s standing in the afterlife. But jurists of his time have become consumed with petty disputation over trivial details.⁵⁶³ Some theoreticians might remark that their technical sciences contribute to a more pious society. Though al-Ghazālī recognizes the social utility of lawmaking and legal interpretation, he means to say that its aim should always be the promotion of piety, not the author’s own fame. Hence, the innovative ideas being introduced by competing scholars of al-Ghazālī’s time are superfluous notions rooted in impious desires. Al-Ghazālī implies that no genuine pursuer of religious sciences would put their vanity or desire for status at the forefront of their studies. What is most interesting about this passage for my study are the noticeably clear political implications contained in al-Ghazālī’s critique of contemporary religious scholarship, a theme that is often repeated throughout his work. When a political community is beset by constant ideational feuds between its jurists, who are meant to promote righteousness, the field of jurisprudence suffers from a lack of cohesiveness and, consequently, no effective legal decisions can be made. Further, the laws being introduced are potentially erroneous, as they are far removed from their pious purpose.⁵⁶⁴

Immediately after berating the scholars of superfluous jurisprudence, he discusses his reasons for excluding philosophy and *kalām* as sciences which lead to salvation. Like jurisprudence, theological disputation as a discipline is mired by terrible practice. Much of the content found in theological treatises is redundant or even “innovative” (*bid‘a*) knowledge that is plain erroneous. In matters pertaining to piety, the theological treatise is redundant since all the

⁵⁶³ Ibid., 45.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid., 56.

articles of faith are already spelled out in the Qur'an.⁵⁶⁵ Elsewhere, al-Ghazālī forcefully warns against contemporary theological disputations, suggesting we avoid it as though it is “fatal poison” (*al-samm al-qāṭil*). These senseless disputations have become the source of endless contestation wherein men purporting to be learned exude vanity by trying to outdo each other through introduction of innovative ideas. Considering these tensions, al-Ghazālī seeks to comfort the commoner who is not well versed in the religious sciences against the following common saying: “people are the enemies of that which they do not know” (*al-nās a ‘dā’ mā jahalū*).⁵⁶⁶

Al-Ghazālī’s view is nonetheless more ambivalent than this abovementioned critique makes it seem. Al-Ghazālī proceeds to argue that, although theological speculation (in general) is not intrinsically necessary, it has become provisionally so because of its prevalence among heretical scholars who promote false views about God’s attributes and His creation.⁵⁶⁷ For al-Ghazālī, the most effective way to counteract this encroaching doctrinal danger is through deploying corresponding argumentative methods. The community must develop a body of *kalām* which espouses an orthodox and rightful doctrine in face of false doctrines which masquerade as theological speculation. In this sense, given the contemporary situation, *kalām* has become a collective obligation for the community of faithful. Similarly, the use of guards who protect roads leading to Mecca during time of pilgrimage had become a collective duty because of the high chance of roadside thievery. If the roads to the pilgrimage were deemed reasonably safe, this protection from hired guards would not receive the status of collective duty.⁵⁶⁸

In one key passage, al-Ghazālī alludes to the Islamic critique of idolatry, or *shirk*, and likens erroneous science to idolatry. He points to naturalist astronomical theories that regard the

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid., 33-34.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid., 56.

⁵⁶⁷ Marmura, “Ghazali and Ash‘arism Revisited,” 94.

⁵⁶⁸ Al-Ghazālī, “Kitāb al-‘Ilm,” 34.

sun's light as intrinsic to the sun, rather than God's creation.⁵⁶⁹ Al-Ghazālī's brief critique of astronomy serves to diagnose a serious consequence of myopic knowledge (if one can even call it knowledge). Erroneous perception could mislead one into falsely revering the wrong causalities. While celestial bodies do emanate light to the universe, their greatness is contingent on God's creative capacity, as opposed to a self-sufficient force. Perhaps, al-Ghazālī is warning that myopic insights are the initial source of polytheism. But al-Ghazālī also points out a simpler reason this secondary set of knowledge must be regarded as transgressive. It is simply wasteful for Muslims to place so much effort into these studies when the same effort could be placed on knowledge that is more immediate or pertinent for their wellbeing.⁵⁷⁰ These timewasters could also place more effort on their afterlife. The dangers of wasteful endeavours also play a major role in his critique of the third category of transgressive sciences. According to al-Ghazālī, theologians and philosophers alike are known to obsess with unanswerable questions concerning the nature of God and His attributes. These pedantic inquiries only lead thinkers into ceaseless intellectual stalemates, ones that are unsolvable, as the subject of their inquiry is only apprehensible by prophets and divinely inspired people. According to al-Ghazālī, it is dangerous to inquire into things independently.⁵⁷¹

This brings us to another important topic. Yet again, we are confronted with notable ambivalence in al-Ghazālī's thought. While contending with the premise of an independent reason presented by fellow *Sunnī* rationalists, al-Ghazālī also challenges anti-rationalist positions elsewhere. This critique is contained in his response to the *Ismā'īlī* doctrine of *Ta'lim* in the *Iniquities*. As explained in the first chapter, the *Ismā'īliyya* adhere to a strict notion of esotericism,

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid., 42-43.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid., 43-44.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., 44.

which disputes the possibility of attaining knowledge of divine truths and religious laws independently. Whereas al-Ghazālī is critical of the overly technical and rationalist tendencies of the theologians, he is outraged by the latter's rejection of common sense.⁵⁷² Of all his contemporaries, his greatest adversaries are undoubtedly these esoteric groups, which espouse the notion that knowledge can only be imparted by an infallible *Imām*. As we will see below, al-Ghazālī's polemic against the *Ismā'īlī* creed reveals the importance of reason in his doctrine and exemplifies the extremely specific political purpose of the theological treatise, which he outlines across different texts.

It is important to note that al-Ghazālī had probably written the *Iniquities* with the mindset that disputation with anti-rationalists is a futile affair. But why, then, are there are so many followers of these esoteric sects when everything they espouse is unsound? According to al-Ghazālī, there are eight classes of people who are susceptible to the dangers of such heretical beliefs. Their varying reasons are too numerous to be explained here. It suffices to say that they all commonly reject the path of "moderation" (*i'tidāl*), which is the crucial means of theological disputation.⁵⁷³ But does this mean that he believes the esoteric groups have foregone all reason? In the *Moderation*, al-Ghazālī decries a group of unbelievers whose disbelief cannot be mended by "speech and demonstration" (*bi-l-burhān wa-l-lisān*). This group of people must be subdued by admonishment or the sword. As history demonstrates, some unbelievers have converted through military coercion. Yet al-Ghazālī argues that this fact does not make science futile. In fact, knowledge is an endowment from God, and it is attainable only by the few. Most people are blind to it "just as bats' eyes do not perceive the sunlight."⁵⁷⁴ Clearly, al-Ghazālī does not believe that

⁵⁷² Mitha, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ismailis*, 63.

⁵⁷³ Al-Ghazālī, *Faḍā'ih al-bāṭiniyya*, 38.

⁵⁷⁴ *Moderation*, 11.

these esoterics are so blinded if he wrote a treatise to refute their claims. Or perhaps, in view of what he tells us in the *Book of Knowledge*, he is worried that skeptical members of his own community will come across these erroneous teachings.

This view is also found in the *Moderation*, where he describes two types of people who could be salvaged. These are the people who conformed to Truth by way of tradition but are different from the first class because they are bestowed with an inquisitive mindset and higher intelligence. However, when these people begin to inquire, their beliefs are affected by doubt, as they are not adequately trained to undertake science. Their remedy must not be harsh. The average among them should be advised to perform religious actions, such as praying and reciting Qur'an. And the more intelligent and inquisitive among them should be persuaded through demonstrations and proofs that would ward off their skepticism and restore their unconditional faith.⁵⁷⁵ The second group of people have already accepted erroneous doctrine, but it is likely that they would accept the Truth upon encountering it. These people of high intellect need to be exposed to convincing demonstrative proof, as they would be capable of apprehending logic. Al-Ghazālī warns that hostile and aggressive and belligerent polemics would only drive this group away. In fact, al-Ghazālī always prefers a kind disposition during argumentation. Intellectual belligerence is a disservice to the community of learned people. Al-Ghazālī believes that oftentimes commoners have been led astray after belligerent scholars, who are on the right path, arrogantly addressed the former with contempt and disdain. These commoners naturally react with disinterest to the true doctrine, as they have been cast aside by those who should be their teachers.⁵⁷⁶ It does not seem plausible to me that al-Ghazālī would have written this polemic exposition of *Ismā'īlī* doctrine for those who have already accepted this creed. There is no attempt at gentleness here; it is rather a

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid.

straightforward attack. Perhaps the strong language is intended to warn those wandering skeptics to steer clear from this erroneous doctrine. Either way, this question is secondary to this chapter. What is more important is the notion of reason to come out of this discussion and the strong sentiment against blind obedience.

Al-Ghazālī's appeal to common sense in the Iniquities

Al-Ghazālī dissects the arguments of the esoteric *Ismā'īliyya*, which insists that the infallible *imām* imparts his knowledge to followers. Al-Ghazālī presents an epistemic critique, namely that this insistence on the pedagogical function of the *imām* undervalues the role of independent judgement. As we will see below, al-Ghazālī is equally concerned with the political consequences of this notion of infallibility, as the *imām* is judged to be the sole source of political authority. Mohammad Fadel states that:

In refuting the doctrine of infallibility that lay at the heart of the Fatimids' claim to political legitimacy, al-Ghazali reaffirmed the central role of rational judgment (*ijtihād*) in determining the content of the good and questions concerning political organization.⁵⁷⁷

Al-Ghazālī's critique of the *Ismā'īlī* doctrine clearly underlines his vision of a political order, which we briefly discussed earlier. By refuting the *Ismā'īlī* claim that the pious must concede all authority to an infallible figure, al-Ghazālī insisted on the *Sunnī* position that politics is a matter of "human convention," rather than an unconditional religious commandment.⁵⁷⁸ The followers of *ta'lim* assume that their *imām* is the only source of complete and certain knowledge regarding theological and political matters. But, at the core of this political concern, is al-Ghazālī's critique of the anti-rationalist tradition in the *ta'limī* creed. The general aim of al-Ghazālī's critique is to

⁵⁷⁷ Fadel, "The True, the Good and the Reasonable: The Theological and Ethical Roots of Public Reason in Islamic Law," 37.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid.

counter this anti-rationalism by proving that rational judgement cannot be foregone, especially in discussions about political legitimacy. What baffles al-Ghazālī is that proponents of *ta'lim* inadvertently proceed through reason and logical necessity (albeit flawed) in their own conclusions about anti-rationalism and the office of the *imām*.⁵⁷⁹

Let us now turn our attention to some of the main points raised in al-Ghazālī's critique. One apparent use of logic and necessity in their doctrine is their position on orthodoxy and the singularity of truth. The *Ismā'īliyya* proceed as though truth is singular, just like there is no other possible answer to five plus five equaling ten. Note that al-Ghazālī's concern here is not so much with the singularity of truth, as he himself does not refute orthodoxy, but the internal inconsistency of their argument. How can one effectively argue that truth is singular and yet completely neglect some form of logical necessity? The argument for orthodoxy seems to rely on the simple logical observation that the two following premises are necessarily incompatible: (a) truth is singular and (b) there can be a plurality of different truths.⁵⁸⁰ The *Ismā'īliyya* also err on the question of deferring all knowledge to the *imām*. The argument supporting this position rests on the claim that members of a community are incapable of using independent judgement to decide on jurisprudence and politics. There is a presupposition that the intellect needs assistance from a higher authority. Yet again, it is not necessarily the whole *Ismā'īlī* conclusion that al-Ghazālī denies here. We already know what al-Ghazālī thinks about the limitations of human reason. Rather, what he disagrees with is the uncompromising point that all judgement must be foregone (apart from the *imām's*). Al-Ghazālī remarks that this anti-rationalist position must rest on a compelling judgement about the limitations of reason.⁵⁸¹ This ties back to the central argument in this thesis, that al-

⁵⁷⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Faḍā'ih al-bāṭiniyya*, 75.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid., 76.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid., 77-78.

Ghazālī's refutation of reason is itself grounded on an appeal to reason. Ultimately, al-Ghazālī's skepticism rests on a thoroughgoing rational judgement, which he thinks the *Ismā'īlī* inadvertently slip into on occasions.

For all the rationalism that the *Ismā'īliyya* unwittingly adopt, they also occasionally slip into sophistry, which al-Ghazālī defines as a sort of nihilistic position. The sophists, he claims, think that all intellectual conceptions of necessity are the erroneous imaginations of a defective intellect. This extreme position would entail that if one were to see a person speak in front of one, one could not fully prove that this person was there in reality. What if one was merely in a dream state recalling imagery from past experiences? Reality, for the sophist, is merely "imagination with no foundation" (*khayālāt lā aṣl lahā*).⁵⁸² Now, the sophists are internally consistent because they are unconditional with their denial of all truth claims. But, while the *Ismā'īliyya* defer judgement, this deferral is obviously conditional, because they are simultaneously assured that the community must be led by an infallible *imām*.⁵⁸³ As we have just seen, this position on the *imām* is complemented by the view that truth is singular. Perhaps, what al-Ghazālī means to tell us here is that the *Ismā'īliyya* fail to be either rationalists or sophists, instead oscillating somewhere in between both poles. And this is precisely why their position is internally incoherent in his view.

Not all the arguments al-Ghazālī lists are unconditionally anti-rationalist. Al-Ghazālī acknowledges that some *ta'limī* thinkers are simply skeptical about the validity of the conclusions reached by way of rational judgement. Simply put, what is the guarantee that one's opinion is not entirely based on fallacies? After all, it is not uncommon for one to think of oneself as right and yet be in the wrong. Al-Ghazālī, of course, acknowledges that reason does not always yield certainty. Yet, perhaps in anticipation of the key problems he would later discuss in his

⁵⁸² Ibid., 82.

⁵⁸³ Ibid.

Deliverance, al-Ghazālī expresses his concerns with the dangers of unrelenting skepticism. This unrelenting skepticism risks turning into a persistent nagging sentiment in which one would always feel the need to question one’s wakened state or question whether one is truly in the location one thinks oneself is currently in. Basically, all aspects of quotidian life would regularly have to be called into question, such that one would fall into a vicious cycle of uncertainty.⁵⁸⁴ What al-Ghazālī means to tell us in this specific response is that, if skepticism toward reason is applied regularly and stringently, the *Ismā‘īlī* would inevitably be required to question the entire legitimacy of his infallibility doctrine. Sure, sometimes we may be uncertain where we are if we are lacking sleep or we might momentarily lapse into daydreaming. And if we can doubt these more certain situations, how can we be certain about more elusive ideas, like the nature of political legitimacy? And this is the point that al-Ghazālī insists on. If we are to doubt basic things, then we have no choice but to doubt these more difficult questions.

These are some of the charges laid by al-Ghazālī against the *Ismā‘īliyya*. Perhaps, the most forceful and convincing aspect of his critique is when he challenges them to admit to their own inadvertent use of logic and reliance on necessity. This was briefly mentioned above. However, earlier, it was mentioned that the *Ismā‘īliyya* unwittingly lapse into logical necessity. But al-Ghazālī also remarks that they sometimes rely on syllogistic argumentation without completing the syllogism. A syllogistic argument must be able to carry with it an element of necessity for it to be considered logical. He uses the following premises as an example: “the world is created, and every created [entity] has a cause” (*al-‘ālam ḥādith, wa-kull ḥādith fa-lahu sabab*).⁵⁸⁵ The conclusion stemming from these two interlinking premises is that the world, which is created, must have a cause. Necessity, in this case the correlation between an entity being created and having a

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid., 83.

cause, is revealed by the truth of the situation, one that syllogistic reasoning is tasked with explaining to rational minds.⁵⁸⁶

Al-Ghazālī's argument here is that the idea that one cannot possibly escape syllogistic reasoning or appeals to rationality and arguments resting on necessity. For a doctrine to be considered valid to the intellect, it must seek to convince by proving its premises as *necessarily* true or sound. While the *Ismā'īlī* believes that the *imām* is the only source of knowledge, at some point, belief in this ought to have stemmed from an autonomous conviction of the validity of such a position. Simply put, the *Ismā'īlī* surely must ask him or herself why "personal opinion" (*ra'ī*) is invalid and belief in the *imām* is truthful. But the moment he or she poses such a question, the *Ismā'īlī* would undermine his or her own doctrine in two ways. First, he or she is developing a conviction outside the scope of the *imām*'s authority, thus validating personal opinion. Second, he or she relapses to reason, which is an inevitable course one must take when seeking to *justify* a doctrine to others. Appealing to soundness is our way of drawing our opponents to our own belief systems.⁵⁸⁷ Following his refutation of the anti-rationalist position, al-Ghazālī states that one must not merely imitate the *mu'allim* (or teacher) but also learn from him. We learn from him, but only insofar as his arguments appeal to the soundness of our common sense. Should he err, then he loses his status as the teacher.⁵⁸⁸ This is al-Ghazālī's way of securing us from dogmatic adherence and respecting the autonomous aspect of personal conviction.

Conclusion

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid., 83-84.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid., 84.

Al-Ghazālī finds a crucial communal purpose to reason in his broader political theology. However, in some of key passages, al-Ghazālī expects commoners to avoid the skeptical pitfalls which befall those who investigate theological concepts and truths. Even some learned people are discouraged from doing so because one becomes more susceptible to the dangers of doubt when overthinking. The intellect, he tells us, was never intended to apprehend higher Truths, namely knowledge of God and His purpose. Al-Ghazālī requests that commoners remain simple in their worship and that they follow customary obedience, these being enough to guarantee someone a place in the afterlife. He seems to praise the obedience of the commoners. Remember, al-Ghazālī's aim here is not to defend customary belief at the expense of profound mystical experience. In fact, al-Ghazālī does not intend to defend a stringent view of customary belief but merely provide a pragmatic concession regarding two possible paths, one that is significantly more dangerous than the other. Either commoners stick to custom, or they risk getting lost in a world of erroneous ideas that would undermine their salvation. Recognizing that profound knowledge of the divine is hardly attainable by all, al-Ghazālī maintains that the commoner is, at the very least, not distracted by superfluous ideas and passions. This is a preliminary stage that anyone who embarks on the mystical path must take. In this sense, the commoner's belief is emblematic of a step we must all take. Though the commoner's belief is rudimentary, it is necessary. Of course, the true mystic is steps ahead of the commoner, but this view of superior knowledge is only consistent with al-Ghazālī's general position on the hierarchy of understanding.

Surely, commoners are not required to subject their belief to theoretical assessment. They do not need to reflect when revelation has been sent down to inform them. Despite his praise of simple belief, al-Ghazālī himself was an avid theological writer who composed prolifically throughout his life. Could this be an inconsistency on his part? As I have demonstrated in this

chapter, his reliance on reason is consistent with his notion of a *moderated* belief. To put it simply, this is the idea that one should avoid fanatical associations with any dogmatism, as the *mutakallimūn* are guilty of doing. While there is a virtue in composing theological treatises, which is al-Ghazālī's motivation, the theologians and logicians of his time have overly complicated the purpose of religious practice.

Instead of composing a treatise to combat erroneous beliefs, as is the purpose of the theological text (according to al-Ghazālī, at least), these scholars have overly complicated conceptions, which have only engendered their own erroneous doctrines. At the opposite extreme of the theologian/logician side are those who reject rationalism, reason, and the intellect. These are the followers of *Ta'lim*, who believe that rationalism cannot yield firm knowledge about matters pertaining to political life, authority, and piety. According to followers of *Ta'lim*, the faithful must await the authority of the *imām*; only he can impart them with knowledge about the righteous and the illegitimate. As al-Ghazālī explains, reason and theological writing becomes important to refute heretical and dangerous doctrines. In other words, syllogistic reasoning and dialectical texts, such as those of *kalām*, are utilized for political purposes, to protect the community against the disunity that may ensue from the proliferation of heresy. While al-Ghazālī consistently balances between the purposes of asceticism and the intellect, I find him to be inconsistent in one major aspect of his critique of the *Ismā'īliyya*. He accuses the *Ismā'īliyya* of being overly dogmatic about the notion of *imāma* as the legitimate authority. However, he exhibits the same reverence toward authority. In his case, it is scripture and revelation that assumes the highest role. His request for commoners to adhere without reflection can be met with the same criticism that he provides against the *Ismā'īliyya*. This will be a major topic in the concluding chapter.

Throughout his writings, al-Ghazālī depreciates the role of the intellectual, which normally presupposes a class of scholars who exert political and social influence. The elite he has in mind are people who are distant from political life, choosing to engage in theological disputation instead. While theology in the traditional sense of *kalām* was mainly concerned with divine attributes, al-Ghazālī fears that this sort of activity was tempted by superfluous desires, such as the desire for fame leading to vocational advantages. A life of strict gnosis, however, requires some degree of associability by way of isolation. This can only be attained through rigid discipline. An elite person in al-Ghazālī’s view learns to detach from all worldly pursuits and is preoccupied with refining the innermost faculty of the heart. While this is all clear, another conundrum arises. Though al-Ghazālī repeatedly admonishes the intelligentsia and praises the non-elite, there is no shortage of unflattering opinions on the “commoner,” or *al-‘āmmī*, in the *Restraining*. One may come to al-Ghazālī’s defense by pointing to the definition of commoner explored above. But al-Ghazālī’s definition does not disqualify the commoner. Rather, it merely includes the scholars with average commoners. Additionally, in view of what he has to say about the uncomplicated conversion of the Arabs, it is fair to surmise that these are not the people of gnosis, or the swimmers of the deep sea to use his figurative language. In fact, their conversion is faithful to the sevenfold criteria he lays out at the beginning of the *Restraining*, namely because they conferred all authority to the Prophet and did not pose questions. If we recall from the previous chapter, al-Ghazālī had appealed to this historical instance to remind fellow theologians about the hypocrisy of deriding or condemning believers. While it is far from his aim to accuse the commoner of unbelief in the *Restraining*, lest he or she opine about dangerous theological matters, al-Ghazālī’s earlier praises are withheld. But is al-Ghazālī not telling the commoners to adhere to the same type of irrational

submission for which he admonished the doctrine of *Ta'lim*? Further, has al-Ghazālī abandoned his claims from the *Criterion* and other earlier texts?

While al-Ghazālī cannot be entirely consistent on every topic or concept he contemplates, he is remarkably consistent on the status of the commoner in his writing. Al-Ghazālī had never intended to designate commoners as the elite, let alone a class worthy of using reason. But he did regard them as exemplary for their display of genuine piety. Perhaps it is by nature of their condition that their views are nobly uncomplicated, an idea that signals an apparent Platonic reversal. A person who is busy tilling the earth or herding livestock is at an advantage precisely because he or she is never exposed to the confounding views of theological and philosophical speculation. Al-Ghazālī's remarks on ascetic virtue, which we have explored previously, rely on substantive imagery. Al-Ghazālī's idea of the pious individual is a person who is poor yet not needy. It is a person who displays contentment with poverty. Ironically, if this person happens to find himself wealthy, he must live frugally. This rejection unlocks the elementary stages of deep-seated gnosis. If we follow al-Ghazālī's remarks in the *Deliverance*, we know that the *awliyā'* are voluntary pursuers of this simple life. Additionally, through this imagery of the poor individual, al-Ghazālī issues his most evocative call to emptying the heart from superfluous tendencies. Only then can the heart become receptive to divine knowledge. One may wonder, how is this remotely political? I now turn to al-Ghazālī's politics of humility to answer this question.

Chapter 7 – *Al-Ghazālī's Theocracy and the Politics of Humility*

In the previous chapters, we have looked at several outwardly political themes which are salient in al-Ghazālī's theological corpus. The first is the idea of moral and ethical culpability, which complements his doctrine of personal piety. Second, we have examined his views on social hierarchy as well as the social and political responsibilities of scholars. Lastly, we have looked at his critique of the *Ta'limī* doctrine, which supposedly insists that the *imām* is the sole authority on doctrinal interpretation. There are also several other concepts that are not political, yet they lend themselves to a serious political reading and have a strong bearing on his political thought. Most notably, his occasionalist view that the world is tied to God's will presupposes that the mundane world is contingent on this divine will. This undercuts the possibility of an agential human reason that is capable of deriving laws and mores autonomously. Instead, humans must await divine intercession by way of revelation and the Prophet's injunctions. This means that any legitimate political community is one which ennobles prophecy and is adherent to robust tradition. This final chapter will re-examine these concepts in hopes of understanding how they are transposed to al-Ghazālī's political reflections. As we will see below, al-Ghazālī's occasionalism emerges throughout his main political writings. Yet, in his political writing, occasionalism is stripped of its logical and philosophical terminology, the sort of language he uses while addressing fellow scholars and intellectuals.

The same could be said of his *Ṣūfī* thought, which I have shown to be complementary of his occasionalism, as it is also present in his political writings. Al-Ghazālī's writing on *Ṣūfī* practice is evidently less philosophically loaded than the material we find in his occasionalist critique of al-Fārābī and Avicenna. In brief, his *Ṣūfī* thought demonstrates a conscious effort to live by the creed that God is the master of the universe, as al-Ghazālī occasionally shuns the traditional

theological discipline of his time. Nevertheless, this practicable concept, which is the mark of his *Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*), is not explained through practical or common discourse. On the contrary, the heaviest passages on *taṣawwuf* normally feature lengthy metaphors, parables, and a very peculiar jargon, all of which signal an effort on al-Ghazālī's part to guard mysticism from erroneous interpretations by non-elites. Yet, his political writings transform his occasionalism and mysticism into a politically workable doctrine. In this political thought, we come across a well-developed eschatology, which places emphasis on decay and death. At times, his morbid language is tied to his effort to humble readers, who are oftentimes rulers, by appealing to their feebleness and mortality. In so doing, he also contributes to the medieval tradition of the mirror for princes, providing a uniquely Islamic eschatological contribution to the genre. Further, al-Ghazālī does not expect his entire readership to be drawn to *taṣawwuf*, which would result in the kind of associability he pursued after leaving Baghdad. But he does hope that they could adopt the humility of the ideal ascetic man he has in mind. In brief, al-Ghazālī articulates a politics of humility to warn against tyrannical practice by appealing to the importance of the heart. A just ruler is one who imposes God's law while shunning personal pleasures and gain.

It is important to bear in mind that al-Ghazālī's morbid expressions are not solely intended to scare rulers into being more pious. Al-Ghazālī's intent, as he states in the *Iniquities of the Esoterics* (*Faḍā'ih al-bāṭiniyya*), is to refine people's hearts, which is one of the perennial aims of his mystical science. It is only with refined hearts that people develop genuine belief.⁵⁸⁹ As for his

⁵⁸⁹ In the tenth chapter of the *Iniquities*, al-Ghazālī states that the *imāma* is founded on a series of pious obligations. The first two principles express ideas that are strikingly in line with his later writings on *taṣawwuf*. First, he reminds the ruler that the people of this world are like "voyagers" (*musāfirīn*) and that "destination of their travel is the abode of the afterlife" (*dār al-ākhirah maqṣad safarīhim*). As we have seen earlier, this sort of poetic language often appears in his description of the ascetic experience. The second principle is even more strikingly in line with his *taṣawwuf*. After learning that "piety" (*taqwā*) is a prerequisite for attaining salvation, one must be taught (presumably the *imām* in this context) that the "locale" (*maḥalluhā*) of *taqwā* is the heart (*qalb*), a repetition of his line from the *Revival*. The

occasionalism, it goes without saying that he was convinced that the non-philosophically apt should avoid theological speculation. Despite avoiding the use of theological jargon when appealing to rulers, al-Ghazālī had his own way of conveying occasionalism to the casual reader (including the ruler). By constantly appealing to death and decay of the flesh, al-Ghazālī wanted to imprint in the hearts of his readers the occasionalist view that the world is governed by God’s limitless power to effectively undercut a ruler’s feeling of self-worth.⁵⁹⁰ In the present chapter, I relate his politics of humility to his philosophical and theological claim that the mundane world is ancillary to our underlying purpose, salvation. I also aim demonstrate that he arrives at this salvationist conclusion by way of a skepticism toward human reason. Though he defends the view that we must derive our laws from revelation and tradition, he arrives at this conclusion through a negative philosophy. As demonstrated in previous chapters, this negative philosophy consists of stressing the consonance between the view that humans are feeble and the occasionalist emphasis on divine will and power. Thus, two things are in order here. First, we must look at al-Ghazālī’s politics in view of his larger theology. Second, we must revisit some aspects of his cosmology and epistemology to see how these appear in his political doctrine.

The literature on al-Ghazālī’s politics

Before treating some of the literature, I must mention that al-Ghazālī’s political thought does not align with the canonical texts of traditional political theorists. Even when secular political theorists,

heart must be prepared by way of “improvement” (*iṣlāḥ*) and its “purification” (*taḥhīruḥ*). This purification involves a rejection of this world. See: *ibid.*, 175-77.

⁵⁹⁰ This rhetorical practice can be observed in the opening passage of the *Counsel for Kings* (*Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk*). After a brief preface to the sultan, al-Ghazālī introduces the book’s main purpose by recalling human fallibility. He tells the sultan that every person, as well as every being in this world, is “created.” Through *mutakallim* parlance, al-Ghazālī spells out the divine attributes. See: Al-Ghazālī, *Ghazālī’s Book of Counsel for Kings* (*Naṣīḥat al-mulūk*), trans. F.R.C Bagley (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 8-9.

for example, engage with religious and mythical symbolism, they draw on these conceptions as parables to explain their political ideas. In specific instances, some political theorists delimit religion to its civil utility. For example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "civil religion" cultivates a sense of civil fervour to bolster the common good, teaching men to be citizens of a political order rather than private subjects.⁵⁹¹ Though al-Ghazālī acknowledges the importance of religion in a political order, piety never assumes a mere social utility. So, the inverse is true for al-Ghazālī's political theology; he primarily views politics as a medium for the realization of religious ends, namely humanity's salvation. Yet he can also be treated as a political thinker, albeit one who thinks of politics in a strictly theocratic sense. Hence, a political reading of al-Ghazālī's writings cannot ignore the theological and metaphysical themes on which it is grounded.

One such nuanced reading is Yazeed Said's *al-Ghazālī's Politics in Context*. This work deals with important ethical underpinnings of al-Ghazālī's politics. Said's book centers on the subjects of ethics and justice. Said expands on the *raison d'être* of al-Ghazālī's political order, especially on the implications of a "pessimistic anthropology" in his line of thinking, which recalls a Hobbesian line of thought.⁵⁹² A pessimistic anthropology would imply that al-Ghazālī regards the political community as a deterrent to social violence and humanity's bellicose nature. Despite al-Ghazālī's strong aversion to civil war and his insistence on an orderly state, I would advise against a Hobbesian reading of al-Ghazālī, as I assume most of my interlocutors would. This is for the obvious reason that the *raison d'être* of political life for al-Ghazālī is salvation in the afterlife, a repugnant notion for rationalist early modern thinkers, like Hobbes. I will return to this point

⁵⁹¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 96-103.

⁵⁹² Yazeed Said, *Ghazālī's Politics in Context* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 115. The term "pessimistic anthropology" is borrowed from Aziz Azmeh's work on theocratic absolutism in Islam. See: Aziz Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship: Power and the Sacred in Muslim, Christian and Pagan Polities* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 115.

below. Said's position, which I draw on at some junctures in this chapter, regards al-Ghazālī's political theology as offering much more than a reflection on the pessimistic nature of humans. Rather, it is grounded on the promotion of a "common good," that being the collective promotion of a moral life conducive with salvation in the hereafter.⁵⁹³ Henri Laoust's *La politique de Ghazālī* examines the epistemological underpinnings of al-Ghazālī's political thought while providing a detailed historical context.⁵⁹⁴ To date, no other work has matched the scope of Laoust's research. However, readers looking for a central thesis or claim will be disappointed. This book is intended as a general overview of al-Ghazālī's different political concepts, detailed in separate sections, coming at the expense of a coherent account. It is difficult to cohere all of al-Ghazālī's ideas for the reason that most of al-Ghazālī's texts, with the exception of much of the *Deliverance*, do not progress linearly.

Some al-Ghazālī scholars focus on more specific aspects of his political writing, such as the absolutism in his writings. Ann K. S. Lambton, Aziz Azmeh, and (to a lesser extent) Carole Hillenbrand generally assume that al-Ghazālī inclines toward a politics of absolutism and even divine absolutism – as all power is conferred to the ruler and this is sanctioned by God.⁵⁹⁵ There is a reason why one would draw this conclusion, which will be addressed more thoroughly in the body of this chapter. But it will be listed briefly here. First, al-Ghazālī's favoured political order is the institution of the caliphate (*al-khilāfa*). The caliph (*al-khalīfa*), its officeholder, is God's representative on earth and is responsible for enforcing God's law. Since the Caliphate is the only legitimate source of religious authority in the Muslim community, dissent against the ruler is

⁵⁹³ Said, *Ghazālī's Politics in Context*, 115.

⁵⁹⁴ Henri Laoust, *La politique de Ghazālī* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1970).

⁵⁹⁵ Carole Hillenbrand, "Islamic Orthodoxy or Realpolitik? Al-Ghazālī's Views on Government," *Iran* 26 (1988); Ann K. S. Lambton, "The Theory of Kingship in the Naṣīḥat ul-Mulūk of Ghazālī," *The Islamic Quarterly* 1 (1954); Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship: Power and the Sacred in Muslim, Christian and Pagan Politics*.

strongly discouraged, because it may lead to some form of rebellion. Aziz Azmeh has treated this aversion to rebellion as an indication of al-Ghazālī's (and that of other *Sunnī* theologians) wider support for a more absolutist politics.⁵⁹⁶ However, as we will see below, al-Ghazālī's position on dissent is more nuanced than certain interpretations suggest. In large part, al-Ghazālī opposes dissent for the pragmatic reason that it leads to political turmoil and the disintegration of the political community without insisting on the ruler's supremacy. Contrary to Lambton's claim, al-Ghazālī does not discourage dissent or rebellion because he is some defender of "divine right."⁵⁹⁷ As will be demonstrated below, this notion is alien to al-Ghazālī's political thought. At times, al-Ghazālī discourages rebellion altogether because it promotes political turmoil.⁵⁹⁸ However, in *Moderation in Belief*, he considers the possibility of deposing rulers whose knowledge in religious matters are significantly deficient.⁵⁹⁹

The implication here is that the ruler's power is grounded on the efficacy of maintaining stability and enforcing God's law, not strictly divine right. There is also every reason to think that al-Ghazālī treats the caliph's rule as conditional, rather than some inalienable right. Citing the above passage from the *Moderation*, Muhammad Fadel observes that, at most, al-Ghazālī regards political authority as contingent on the preservation of peace. The "thin politics" found in al-Ghazālī's writing is consistent with the medieval *Sunnī* view of government, which is regarded as an office that is erected for the preservation of "well-ordered" community. A sense of religious order "cannot be attained in the absence of physical health, personal security and adequate clothing, housing and food."⁶⁰⁰ Additionally, al-Ghazālī's political theory is consistent with his

⁵⁹⁶ *Muslim Kingship: Power and the Sacred in Muslim, Christian and Pagan Polities*, 115-18.

⁵⁹⁷ Lambton, "The Theory of Kingship in the *Naṣīḥat ul-Mulūk* of Ghazālī," 51.

⁵⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵⁹⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*, 233.

⁶⁰⁰ Fadel, "The True, the Good and the Reasonable: The Theological and Ethical Roots of Public Reason in Islamic Law," 38. It is also important to stress that classical *Sunnī* political thought purports to stand between "perfectionist" poles – those of the *Khawārij* and the *Shī'a*. Unlike the *Shī'a*, who place emphasis on the infallibility of a single

own theological position on human nature. As will be explained below, al-Ghazālī's politics is informed by his debasement of worldliness and the pleasures of the flesh, which is a typical position held by any Muslim. In brief, humans live on this earth temporarily. During their lifetime, they are steered by corporeal temptations which impede them from focusing on the worship of God and the attainment of salvation in the afterlife. The political order is established to allow Muslims to live in harmony so that they may continuously realize their perennial duty, worshipping God.⁶⁰¹ Al-Ghazālī reminds the ruler of his duty as a corporeal subject of God's creation. Without undermining the character of the ruler, al-Ghazālī nonetheless reminds him to humble himself as human and to refrain from arrogance and impetuosity. The relationship between ruler and ruled can never be akin to that of God and humanity, as ruler and ruled are indifferent before His eyes. This is suggested time and time again in al-Ghazālī's repetitive warnings to the ruler about his inevitable death.

This insistence on the humanity of the ruler is corroborated by al-Ghazālī's general view that the *imāma* is strictly a worldly (that is secular) institution and that the incumbent is not divinely appointed. In the *Iniquities*, al-Ghazālī alludes to this relationship in a passage dedicated to the supposed futility of the *Ismā'īliyya*'s infallibility doctrine. If we are to accept the premise that the *imām* is infallible – which al-Ghazālī vehemently rejects, of course – this does not automatically guarantee that the political institution will be carried out infallibly. The *imām*'s immediate subordinates are not infallible, and they can err in their judgements or even disseminate false

imām, the *Khawārij* were mostly “egalitarian” in their appointment of the ruler. However, both creeds emphasized the importance of perfected virtues. The *Sunnī* jurists strive for an appointment of a ruler that is more practically attainable. Instead of emphasizing the rule of “the most virtuous,” the *Sunnī* jurists simply required that the ruler be “adequately virtuous.” This view was consistent with the *Sunnī* doctrine that no human is intrinsically qualified to be obeyed. Rather, the *Caliph* was regarded as the overseer (over his equals) charged with managing the public affairs and laws of his community. See: “Nature, Revelation and the State in Pre-Modern Sunni Theological, Legal and Political Thought,” 284-85.

⁶⁰¹ Laoust, *La politique de Ghazālī*, 282; Said, *Ghazālī's Politics in Context*. 126.

doctrines. Thus, it matters not if the *imām* is infallible given that his political surrogates are not. Al-Ghazālī further elaborates that, even if he were to carry infallible knowledge, the infallible *imām* would not be able to disseminate his knowledge infallibly. This means that the chain of fallibility is already broken once the dissemination occurs, so the only beneficiary of infallibility is the infallible himself. The *imām*'s common partisans would have no choice but to rely on the fallible surrogates, which forecloses the possibility of an infallible rulership.⁶⁰² This critique speaks to al-Ghazālī's more general view that the legitimate *imāma* requires solemn piety and judicious religious opinion. This position not only lends itself to a critique of the conception of a divinely appointed ruler but also insists on the fallibility of the ruler. The view that the ruler can err and that he is not above other humans is central to al-Ghazālī's political thought.⁶⁰³

The most significant shortcoming in current analyses of al-Ghazālī's political thought is the exclusion of one important text, *Enjoining the Good and Forbidding the Wrong* (*Kitāb al-Amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-l-nahī 'an al-munkar*).⁶⁰⁴ It is surprising that this text has not been treated as an essential work by most commentators given its rich political content. In fact, this is perhaps al-Ghazālī's most profound political text. *Enjoining the Good* is a peculiar work in comparison with his other political writings. Typically, as with other Muslim thinkers of his time, al-Ghazālī considers the nature and scope of the ruler's authority as well as his responsibilities toward his subjects. *Enjoining the Good* focuses on the ruler at times, but it does away with lengthy descriptions of his public offices and required virtues. The real virtue al-Ghazālī celebrates in this text is a sort of pious fervour. This fervour consists in commanding Muslims to commit to divine

⁶⁰² Al-Ghazālī, *Faḍā'ih al-bāṭiniyya*, 91.

⁶⁰³ In the ninth chapter of the *Iniquities*, al-Ghazālī defends the *imāma* of al-Mustazhir on the grounds that he exhibits all of the necessary qualifications of a legitimate ruler. It is important to note that the most important qualification is *wara'*, or piety, which, needless to say, is a qualification that any devout Muslim can exhibit. Ibid., 167-68.

⁶⁰⁴ Al-Ghazālī, "Al-Amr bi-l-ma'rūf".

commandments, which alone offer injunctions on the good and bad. And the most peculiar aspect of this text is its egalitarian principle that all Muslims should be equally committed to religious fervour, even if this means reproaching their ruler for his wrongdoing. In my view, *Enjoining the Good* stands out as a profound statement on egalitarian ethics within a theocratic order.

Additionally, prior to and even after al-Ghazālī's contribution, Islamic political thought remained predominantly concerned with ruler-centric analyses. Thinkers such as al-Māwardī, his contemporary Abū Bakr al-Ṭurtūshī, and the traditionalist jurist Ibn Taymiyya, each exclaimed the view that a militarily stable authority (provided it applies the law, or *shari'*) provides the elementary bases for legitimacy. As we will see below, al-Ghazālī does not reject this view. In fact, he builds on it by stretching the scope of who can partake in the application of the law. Perhaps the exclusion of *Enjoining the Good* makes it convenient to paint an absolutist view of al-Ghazālī's politics. This text, which is part of his magnum opus, *Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*), undermines the very idea of an absolutist regime or the principle of divine right. Rather, it discusses a Muslim's entitlement to counsel, advise, and, at certain times, coerce fellow Muslims to maintain a pious society. According to this text, religious canon decrees that Muslims must be prepared to govern one another, using a spectrum of moderate to coercive methods, in times of error. Therefore, this chapter hopes to offer a novel contribution to the literature on al-Ghazālī's politics by including *Enjoining the Good* from the *Revival*.

This chapter will be divided into two main sections. First, I look at the idea of how the common good is realized in the Muslim polity according to al-Ghazālī. In *Enjoining the Good*, al-Ghazālī expresses the view that all members of the political community need to be involved in politics, while maintaining that the ruler needs to learn how to take commands from his subjects. This idea recalls the Aristotelian view of the virtuous ruler. Though there are no visible traces of

Aristotelian sources in al-Ghazālī's *Enjoining the Good*, a brief comparison with Aristotle's *Politics* is worthwhile. The two thinkers equally argue that the realization of the common good requires a collective effort. In Aristotle's *Politics*, this idea of equal participation is elementary to his conception of citizenship. Since al-Ghazālī also calls for the ruler to learn how to be ruled, it is worthwhile asking whether this sense of collective duty equally contributes to a theory of citizenship. In other words, is there enough substance to speak of a Ghazālian idea of citizenship? This topic could prove useful for those interested in tracing nascent notions of citizenship in medieval Islamic political thought.

In the second part, I move on to compare al-Ghazālī and al-Fārābī for the purpose of underlining the cosmological and epistemological foundations which result in fundamentally different political theories. In other words, this comparison will allow me to illustrate the theoretical differences between a theocratic politics whose principles are drawn from revelation and orthodoxy and classical philosophy, a return to the original theme of this thesis laid out in the introduction. Al-Fārābī is useful for this comparison because, as demonstrated previously, he is the most prolific political thinker among al-Ghazālī's intellectual adversaries. Further, as demonstrated in the introduction, al-Fārābī is regarded as the counterpart of religious orthodoxy within Islamicate tradition, which is a crucial theme for Leo Strauss and his students.⁶⁰⁵

Part I – *The Purpose of the Muslim polity*

Al-Ghazālī's first attempts at political writing occurred in Baghdad, where he composed the *Iniquities* and the *Moderation*. Yet neither text is exclusively political. In fact, both were written as theological refutations of what he considered erroneous doctrines, using systemic Aristotelian

⁶⁰⁵ Strauss, "How Fārābī Read Plato's *Laws*."

sylogisms along the way. However, both texts are concluded with political discussions. In the ninth chapter of the *Iniquities*, al-Ghazālī defends the legitimacy of his Abbasid patron, al-Mustazhir, in view of his own interpretation of *Sunnī* jurisprudence dealing with matters of political administration and legitimacy. Farouk Mitha has observed that this chapter falls in line with *siyāsa sharʿiyya*, a popular *Sunnī* genre typically concerned with outlining all the points of a legitimate Caliphate as well as non-Caliph rulers (often known as Sultans or Emirs). The most famous treatise in this genre was composed by al-Māwardī, who wrote during the *Shīʿī Buwayhī* control over the Caliph. *Siyāsa sharʿiyya*, which can be best translated to civil jurisprudence, includes a list of points which determine legitimacy. Typically, this ruler must be a male descendent of the Prophet’s tribe, the *Quraysh*, and be elected by a counsel or a powerful group or even an influential person. This process of election, known as *bayʿa* in Arabic, has garnered attention from contemporary scholars interested in civic and perhaps even democratic governance, but this is beside the point.⁶⁰⁶

Al-Ghazālī would later introduce the notion of a complementary relationship between Caliph and secular rulers (such as Sultans, Emirs, kings, and other non-theologically grounded political offices). Al-Ghazālī does just that in his ninth chapter to the *Iniquities*. Herein he briefly mentions the Turk, a reference to the ruling Seljuks who imposed their will on the embattled Caliph in Baghdad as did the non-*Sunnī Buwayhī* movement before them. He remarks that, while the Caliph wields symbolic religious authority, the sultan is responsible for maintaining the state’s civic and military apparatuses. He believed that the Turks wielded one of the most essential facets of legitimate rule, *shawka*, which is an Arabic term used to describe military prowess of sorts. Nowhere is *shawka* more evident, he claims, than in the Seljuk’s “resistance” (*niḍāl*) to the

⁶⁰⁶ Mitha, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ismailis*, 78-79.

unbelievers.⁶⁰⁷ There is every reason to believe that al-Ghazālī was being cautiously pragmatic when writing this chapter. We know that the relationship between caliph and Seljuk ruler was not exactly the most amicable one, as historians have noted the aggression in which these Turkish Sultans occasionally coerced members of the Abbasid dynasty.⁶⁰⁸ But al-Ghazālī was unprepared to adopt the radical solution of his teacher, al-Juwaynī, who proposed that a Turkish Sultan be crowned as *imām*. This would be in contradiction of the *Sunnī* convention that the Caliph must always be an Arab from the *Quraysh*.⁶⁰⁹

Instead, al-Ghazālī hoped that his caliph patron would recognize the invaluable military force that the Seljuks provided to the Muslim *umma*. Now, the framing suggests that this passage addresses possible counterarguments by doubtful *Ismāʿīlī* polemicists, who would call into question the whole nature of al-Ghazālī's notion of *shawka*. Al-Ghazālī presumes that these polemicists would point to the Seljuk ruler's unruly nature to argue against their legitimacy. Al-Ghazālī also celebrates their military successes against heretical groups and suggests that their military might is an indispensable asset for the Islamic community. But one cannot help but feel that, within this appraisal, lies a concealed appeal to his own *Sunnī* readers, namely his own caliph, to think with sobriety about the status of the Turkish conquerors. The tenth chapter of the *Iniquities* makes it undeniable that al-Ghazālī expected his text to be read by the Caliph and/or his inner circle. Hence, he must have known that his remarks on the Turkish military force in the previous chapter would come to al-Mustazhir's attention. In the tenth chapter, he shifts to the genre of the

⁶⁰⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *Faḍāʾih al-bāṭiniyya*, 164-65.

⁶⁰⁸ The relationship was sour even during al-Ghazālī's time. Frank Griffel mentions that, after Nizām al-Mulk's death, Malikshāh demanded that the Abbasids depart from their capital Baghdad and hand it over to the Seljuks. See: Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 36.

⁶⁰⁹ According to Wael Hallaq, Juwaynī allowed for a non-Quraysh member to assume the title of *imām* in the absence of a great number of available dynastical members. Besides, Juwaynī maintained that the designation of the *imāma* "was intended only to honor the Prophet's family." See: Wael B. Hallaq, "Caliphs, Jurists and the Saljūqs in the Political Thought of Juwaynī," *Muslim World* 74, no. 1 (1984): 38.

mirror for princes, using highly debasing language about humans as a ploy to remind his own patron about human fallibility. Despite the striking stylistic shift, al-Ghazālī's two final chapters are quite complementary. The idea of *shawka*, featured as a pragmatic issue in the ninth chapter, appears consonant with his underlying political ideals. In the tenth chapter, he exclaims that religion and kingship (*mulk*) are “twin brothers” (*akhawān taw'amān*).⁶¹⁰

Al-Ghazālī's pragmatist appeal to his reader is consistent with his general political theology, which is outlined in the tenth chapter as well as other texts. If the two forms of power (the religious and the political) are found within the same political association, however loose this may be, then it is incumbent on Muslims to accept it. This is far better, he claims, than opening the gates for civil war and the possibility of a religious-political vacuum, which would result in the abrogation of people's marriages, their property, wealth, and so forth.⁶¹¹ Perhaps the most suggestive implication in his understanding of a loose confederacy is how it debases the figure of the ruler. The *imām* as well as the secular rulers are equally important not because of their majestic status, but because each fulfills a specific role within the legitimate theocratic order he envisions. This is to say that al-Ghazālī gives credence to the maintenance of the law and the establishment of a military order. The fact that the legality is the superior authority is outlined in his outright claim that it is incumbent on Muslims to show obedience to the *imām* because he is the main enforcer of *shari'*, or law.⁶¹² Evidently, this law is divine law derived from revelation and Prophetic statements, or *ḥadīth*. As we will see below, this implies that the ruler can be equally admonished by the common folk for wrongdoing.

⁶¹⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *Faḍā'ih al-bāṭiniyya*, 184.

⁶¹¹ Ibid., 153; Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*, 231, 34.

⁶¹² *Moderation*, 231.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, al-Ghazālī's political thought, which is situated in a robust theological tradition, insists on the inclusion of jurists and religious scholars ('*ulamā'*') in political affairs. A theocracy is generally understood as a political community wherein the foundational juridical premises are derived from religious norms. In al-Ghazālī's case, as well as that of his teacher (al-Juwaynī), the execution of divine law demands that the ruler consult with jurists and scholars who specialize in religious scholarship and jurisprudence. The *Book of Knowledge of the Revival* gives us perhaps the most detailed account of the jurisprudential functionaries and their body of science. In this text, he insists, just as he does in the *Iniquities* and the *Counsel*, that the righteous ruler surround himself with this body of scholars, or '*ulamā'*'.⁶¹³ Interestingly, he situates jurisprudence, or the implementation of *shari'*, among the secular sciences. The sciences of the afterlife will be explained below.

We have already examined why al-Ghazālī relegates jurisprudence to the secular, but it is worthwhile revisiting the main ideas. Generally, the jurist helps the ruler introduce laws to tame people's "passions" (*shahwāt*). And the ruler who follows the jurist's recommendations is principally a "guardian" (*hāris*) of religion on earth. His main goal is taming (*dabtahum*) his own subjects. It is precisely because jurisprudence is concerned with management of worldly affairs that this discipline is regulated to the secular sciences.⁶¹⁴ But if laws are meant to promote piety and are beneficial to our standing in the hereafter, why is jurisprudence not properly a religious science? This recalls a recurring idea in the two previous chapters, the *qalb* and its relation to personal piety. True bliss is only attained by those with refined hearts and salvation by those with genuine, internal belief. It is only the internal belief of the heart that can determine one's standing

⁶¹³ Though this is a major theme in the *Book of Knowledge*, the *Iniquities* and the *Counsel* also outline the importance of this relationship. See: *Counsel for Kings*, 18; *Faḍā'iḥ al-bāṭiniyya*, 182.

⁶¹⁴ "Kitāb al-'Ilm," 28.

in the hereafter. Since laws are coercive, they can only produce outward acts. They cannot, however, shape internal convictions. The sultan and his jurists may detract crime by decreeing serious punishment, but they cannot reinforce personal piety. This suggests that law only concerns outward actions, but it is insufficient to make people good, even rulers. This idea leads us to a very crucial point about the role of law and coercion in al-Ghazālī's corpus. If laws, which are secular in the sense described above, have no sufficient bearing on personal piety, then what political principle does? Considering the limited scope of laws, al-Ghazālī must place weight on an ethics that is conducive to the psychology of the heart. In the present chapter, I would like to demonstrate that al-Ghazālī addresses this shortcoming by transposing his *Ṣūfī* thought into his political doctrine. There is no doubt that *taṣawwuf*, at least the kind that led al-Ghazālī out of Baghdad, demands serious isolation. Hence, it appears incompatible with political life.

The science of unveiling, which is associated with the mystics, requires that one abandons worldliness, in order to “lift the cover” (*yartaḥṣi al-ghaṭā'*) which obscures the heart's perception of truth. Al-Ghazali describes his “science of unveiling” (*ilm al-mukāshafa*), which presupposes a degree of personal exertion that the law can never reinforce. In this sense, which is familiar to the people of gnosis (*al-ʿārifīn*), the heart must ascend to the ulterior world, which requires a rejection of worldliness. Only then can the adherent truly understand religious concepts, such as monotheism or the notion of prophecy. Prior to this experience of unveiling, an adherent only knows of these concepts in speech. But their implications are illuminated when the heart is liberated from material confines.⁶¹⁵ I believe that al-Ghazālī's insistence on *mukāshafa* does not preclude the fact that the purification of the heart can have practical purposes. In fact, after laying out the foundations of *mukāshafa*, al-Ghazālī introduces a “science of conduct” (*ilm al-*

⁶¹⁵ Ibid., 31.

mu'āmalā), as a sub-discipline of the otherworldly sciences. This science is concerned with understanding the varying “states” (*aḥwāl*) of the heart and the vices which beset it. Now, al-Ghazālī is clear that this science is meant to prepare people for the afterlife. Yet the same could be said of jurisprudence and politics. Everything in al-Ghazālī’s theological corpus is aimed at supplementing our salvation, which underlies our existence. Further, this science of conduct yields a sort of ethic that is invaluable to the maintenance of an orderly association. Unlike the inward apprehension of divine traits and prophecy one gets from *mukāshafa*, those well versed in this practical science of the heart learn about the value of outward comportments, such as controlling wrath, losing vanity, respecting others, not flattering those in positions of power, and so forth.⁶¹⁶

These outward comportments are part of a set of ethics that are grounded on the belief that all humans are equally feeble before the eyes of God. It is also al-Ghazālī’s aim to teach fellow Muslims, elite and commoners alike, about these invaluable humbling traits. As mentioned above, al-Ghazālī considers a just society as one that is governed by a pious ruler. This should explain the purpose of al-Ghazālī’s mirror for princes, wherein he ventures to introduce his addressees to a politics of humility which is immediately derived from his mystical thought. In my opinion, al-Ghazālī’s mirror for princes attests to his belief that certain cardinal aspects of *taṣawwuf* could be extracted and transposed to political life.⁶¹⁷ While he does not expect the ruler to become a *Ṣūfī*, he certainly believes that he can benefit from the humbling tendencies which herald a refined heart and a truly pious inclination. This raises an important question. When al-Ghazālī refers to the scholars as the ruler’s teachers, is he subtly referring to himself as a *Ṣūfī* teacher to his rulers? For

⁶¹⁶ Ibid., 31-32.

⁶¹⁷ Lambton believes that al-Ghazālī’s politics in his mirror for princes avoids the *taṣawwuf* contained in the *Revival*. Al-Ghazālī does not expect the ruler to ascend to the realm of metaphysics, but to focus on worldly affairs and treat his subjects fairly. I would add that his views on the pious ruler are consonant with his own mystical and metaphysical doctrines. Surely, al-Ghazālī’s departure from civic life in Baghdad taught him a lot about the virtues of piety. See: Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam*, 126.

this question, we would mainly benefit from an analysis of his remarks to Caliph al-Mustazhir in the *Iniquities* and his later reflections in the *Moderation* as well as his later mirror for princes the *Counsel of Kings* (*Naṣīḥat al-mulūk*). Though there is no certainty about the identity of the *Counsel's* intended reader, it is possible that al-Ghazālī penned this for the Seljuk ruler, Muḥammad, the son of Malikshāh.⁶¹⁸ These texts often repeat the same principles and occasionally the same stories, appealing to the reader to think about his own fallibility and mortality. This morbid address to the ruler is consonant with al-Ghazālī's view that there is nothing majestic about any human, including the ruler. Hence, I have decided to term al-Ghazālī's view a 'politics of humility.' Al-Ghazālī makes it clear that he is trying to slowly introduce a practicable doctrine of *Ṣūfī* humility when he states that the ruler must constantly be exposed to the theme of death, which must be "rooted in the heart" (*yatarassakh fī l-qalb*) until piety is achieved.⁶¹⁹

Some of the most debasing language toward the ruler is to be found in the *Counsel*.⁶²⁰ This text contains some traditional elements of mirror for princes, such as the call for a strong state and

⁶¹⁸ In his English translation of the *Counsel*, F.R.C. Bagley explores the different earlier manuscripts of this text. The *Counsel* was originally written in Persian, and many scholars observe that some of the earlier Persian manuscripts omit Muḥammad's name. It is also possible that the text was addressed to Sanjar, Muḥammad's brother and adversary during a power struggle to cease the throne. See: Al-Ghazālī, *Counsel for Kings*, xvi-xvii. This is but a minor detail. The text speaks of governance in clearly general terms that is possible to treat it as a genuine insight into his political thought.

⁶¹⁹ *Faḍā'ih al-bāṭiniyya*, 178.

⁶²⁰ Before analyzing the *Counsel*, it must be mentioned that there is no unanimous position among al-Ghazālī scholars on the authenticity of this text, which was originally penned in Persian, especially the second portion of the book. According to Lazarus-Yafeh, there was a popular tradition of pseudo-authorship in the medieval world, including the Islamic one, where unfamed writers attributed their texts to known thinkers in hopes that the text would remain extant. See: Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies in al-Ghazzālī*, 256. But it is not merely in view of pseudo-authorship that some scholars refuse to recognize al-Ghazālī as the author of the *Counsel* in its entirety or its second part. According to Hillenbrand, the text ignores the theme of the *imām*, which she insists no devout Muslim would forgo. See: Hillenbrand, "Islamic Orthodoxy or Realpolitik? Al-Ghazālī's Views on Government," 92. This is an unconvincing interpretation. Since the *Counsel* addresses one of the Seljuk rulers, it would have been imprudent for al-Ghazālī to remind this sultan that his power is surpassed by another ruler on earth. As discussed above, the *Seljuk* rulers and the *imāma* were tied to a loose confederation wherein the former dominated politically and militarily. Perhaps, it would have been more practical for al-Ghazālī to remind his ruler-addressee about his obedience to God by encouraging a sense of pious virtue. For this reason, some scholars affirm that only the first part of the text to be genuinely his, as one can point to a rigid notion of piety that is expressed along similar lines in his other texts, such as the *Revival* and the *Iniquities*. I have noted some crucial similarities in the notes below. Further, in response to Crone and other commentators who share a similar opinion to hers, Yazeed Said contends that there is nothing peculiar about a Muslim scholar using non-Islamic

a powerful military. But the typical pragmatism, which prevails in this genre, is replaced with a forceful eschatological language in the *Counsel*. Here, al-Ghazālī enters very dangerous territory by stripping the ruler of his magnificence. While the text’s title suggests that it was written for kings, al-Ghazālī insists that the term king is inferior to *amīr*, which is the Arabic term for prince (not necessarily of the hereditary kind) or more appropriately governor. We may surmise that al-Ghazālī distances himself from kingship (*mulk*) because he does not approve of hereditary rule as the primary qualification. Kings (or sultans) are often the sons of kings. There is a great deal of danger that an unqualified person might become king. Further, al-Ghazālī’s political thought is animated by the history of the rightly guided caliphs (*al-khulafā’ al-rāshidūn*). These were the first caliphs, none of whom inherited his position. From the *Sunnī* perspective, these four rulers were elected by counsels of influential members. Hence, by avoiding terminology tied to kingship, al-Ghazālī remains committed to the Islamic juridico-political lexicon, which oftentimes includes the terms caliph or the coterminous *imām*, as well as *amīr*. In both *Counsel* and the *Iniquities*, al-Ghazālī references the same story to distinguish between worldly kingship and proper Islamic rulership.⁶²¹ The story goes as follows. Once a known monarch dispatched an emissary to the Caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb.⁶²² The emissary was astonished to discover that the Muslims claimed to have no “king” (*malik*), which he had initially assumed would be ‘Umar’s title, but rather an *amīr*. Once he was led to ‘Umar, the emissary found him in a non-kinglike state, lying in the sun and drenched in sweat. This anecdote is supposed to highlight ‘Umar’s humility, a trait every faithful leader should strive for. Most importantly, ‘Umar did not indulge in opulence as did the

“anecdotes” from Greek or Persian sources. Al-Ghazālī was, after all, a “polymath” who engaged with non-Islamic ideas. Yazeed goes on to state that there is nothing un-Islamic about a cross-cultural outlook by pointing to al-Ghazālī’s predecessor, al-Māwārdī, and his contemporary al-Ṭurṭūshī, both of whom are animated by other cultural and religious anecdotes in their respective mirrors for princes. See: Said, *Ghazālī’s Politics in Context*, 23.

⁶²¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Counsel for Kings*, 18; *Faḍā’ih al-bāṭiniyya*, 191.

⁶²² Curiously, this monarch is identified as the Persian Yazdegard III in the *Iniquities*, whereas al-Ghazālī names the emperor of the Byzantines in the *Counsel*.

kings of Persia or Byzantium. Upon reflecting on this stark difference between his ruler and ‘Umar, the emissary professed his belief in the Islamic faith and desired to convert but remained reluctant simply because he was bound by his diplomatic mission and feared the wrath of his ruler.⁶²³

This story signals al-Ghazālī’s strict differentiation between a worldly king – with kingliness being a worldly attribute – and the proper Muslim ruler. The rejection of worldliness and inclination toward salvation is an integral principle that should be upheld by all Muslims. Hence, not only is the Muslim ruler expected to comport himself piously, but he must first apprehend the purpose of his existence as both human and representative of humans on this earth. He is constantly reminded of his mortality by way of persistent religious studies. In the *Iniquities*, al-Ghazālī lists four important kinds of knowledge the *imām* is expected to master. First, he must know the purpose for which humans were created and placed in this world and the good they must strive for. This includes knowledge that this “abode” (*dār*) is intended as a “passage” (*mamarr*) as opposed to a permanent station, and humans are merely “travellers” (*musāfirīn*) passing through. Al-Ghazālī cites the following quote, which he attributes to Jesus: “the world is a bridge; so cross through it but do not build [on] it” (*al-dunyā qaṭara fa-a ‘birūhā wa-lā tu ‘ammirūhā*).⁶²⁴ Devotion stands as the perennial duty for every person, and it is the only way in which we may earn God’s grace in the afterlife. Elsewhere, al-Ghazālī references the Prophet’s description of this world as “a farm for the afterlife” (*mazra ‘at al-ākhirā*). A life without piety, or *taqwā*, is a life of injustice committed against oneself since God rejects those who do not fulfill to His commandments. Al-Ghazālī proceeds to claim that people must hasten to secure their salvation, as our life is as fleeting

⁶²³ In both versions of the story, the emissary expresses his desire for conversion and promises to return afterwards, presumably to ‘Umar after his mission is over. See: Al-Ghazālī, *Faḍā’ih al-bāṭiniyya*, 191; *Counsel for Kings*, 18.

⁶²⁴ *Faḍā’ih al-bāṭiniyya*, 175. Al-Ghazālī expresses very similar principles in the *Counsel*, though these are obviously aimed to the sultan instead of the *imām*. Further, instead of being divided into four pillars, these are packed in two. He refers to these principles as the “two springs which water the Tree of Faith”. The likening of the living human to a “traveler” and the statement that the world is a temporary passage is crucial to the first “spring” in the *Counsel*. See: *Counsel for Kings*, 32.

as a vendor's ice in the summertime. This ice is bound to melt while the merchant cries out for his diminishing "capital" (*ra's māl*). This imagery is meant to highlight the value of time and how its inevitable dissipation would eventually determine our place in the afterlife.⁶²⁵

The second object of knowledge for the *imām* is the locale of faith, which is the "heart" (*qalb*). He must learn how to liberate his heart from worldly desires. It seems here that this ruler is supposed to engage with the elementary practice of *taṣawwuf*; he must remind himself that this world is temporary and is the abode of vice, while contemplating about the "honour [which derives] from happiness in the afterlife, and its beauty" (*sharaf al-sa'āda fī l-dār al-ākhirā wa-zīnātuhā*).⁶²⁶ Further, al-Ghazālī invites the *imām* to compare the average length in this life to that of the afterlife. The lengthiest lifespans are perhaps around a hundred years, he exclaims, whereas the afterlife is eternal for all. In relation to the afterlife, the corporeal life is as miniscule as an "atom" (*dharra*). Conversely, no analogy can be provided to illustrate the length of the afterlife, because it escapes all temporality. Given the afterlife's superiority over corporeal life, al-Ghazālī beckons us to think how a "reasonable person" (*al-āqil*) would not "deprecate this world" (*yastahqir al-dunyā*).⁶²⁷

The heart's purification yields the third object of knowledge. This is to recognize that God's rule on earth stipulates righteousness by way of worshipping Him alone. Therefore, the *imām's* rule is to commit to God's law. Here, we are exposed to more of al-Ghazālī's notion of personal piety (or subjective belief) as well as its evident implications for political practice and legitimacy. Before the ruler can command a collective, he must gain mastery over his own soul.

⁶²⁵ *Faḍā'ih al-bāṭiniyya*, 176.

⁶²⁶ *Ibid.*, 177-78.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid.*, 178. In the *Counsel*, al-Ghazālī also identifies the *āqil*, or the reasonable person, as the one who learns to shun this world. Al-Ghazālī describes a group of "intelligent" persons who only think about how they "will take the faith with them safely". See: Al-Ghazālī, *Counsel for Kings*, 38.

This suggests that the communal (i.e., political) undertaking must begin with an internal and highly personalized struggle. It is only when this inward battle is achieved that the ruler can rightly transpose his values to the larger social sphere. Al-Ghazālī believes that the ruler must attempt to purify his own heart and to govern his own soul.⁶²⁸ As we will see below, this is strikingly similar to Aristotle’s ruler who must learn to be ruled. We are now getting the sense that al-Ghazālī steers away from absolutism and prefers to depict politics as a collective enterprise, one that aims for the “common good,” as Said is keen on suggesting. The ruler’s personal virtue is cultivated for the purpose of engendering and reinforcing a virtuous collective. The fourth object of knowledge expands on the scope of the ruler’s personal responsibility by stressing the importance of human agency. Now, we return to a concept we explored in the Chapter 3. This is the view that humans are in a middle ground between “angelic” (*malakiyya*) and “bestial” (*bahīmiyya*) characters, oscillating between them both. Humans have the capacity to surmount their bestial tendencies by imitating the angels.⁶²⁹ Of course, the angels are celebrated in Islam because of their unbending obedience to God’s laws. After all, the ideal political community al-Ghazālī has in mind is one whose members use their agency to maintain God’s laws.

This theocratic purpose to Islamic political theology is also observed by Leonard Binder, who suggests that being Muslim entails partaking in a community that is bound by belief. This belief takes the form of “obedience” to divine law, or *shari‘*. The *raison d’être* of Islamic polity is to impose divine law on this very community and to ensure that Muslims remain adherent to it.⁶³⁰ In large part, al-Ghazālī’s defence of the *imāma* is based on a strict observance to the commands

⁶²⁸ *Faḍā’ih al-bāṭiniyya*, 179. The virtue of governing oneself is also spelled out in the *Counsel*. Here, al-Ghazālī remarks that the ruler “should figure that he is the subject and that the other person is the holder of authority, and that [he should not sanction for others] anything that he would not sanction for himself.” See: *Counsel for Kings*, 28-29.

⁶²⁹ *Faḍā’ih al-bāṭiniyya*, 180.

⁶³⁰ Leonard Binder, “Al-Ghazālī’s Theory of Islamic Government,” *The Muslim World* 45, no. 3 (1955): 230.

of divine law and historical precedents from the Prophet's political community. Simply put, al-Ghazālī believes the Caliphate is necessary because God ordains it. But Binder even suggests that al-Ghazālī also articulates his justification in a “more logical fashion.”⁶³¹ Al-Ghazālī certainly does not conform to the *Mu‘tazilī* premise that political authority is based on “reason,” but he is apt to defend its “utility.” This way, al-Ghazālī is able to address the concerns of those seeking logical proofs for the caliphate.⁶³² I will clarify the implications of this utility shortly. For now, it suffices to say that the *imāma* is necessary for the maintenance of justice and order on this earth and not simply because God has ordained it. Therefore, Binder's interpretation is sound, but I must restate my forewarning at the beginning of this chapter. It would be incorrect to paint al-Ghazālī's political thought as some kind of political cynicism. Al-Ghazālī's political thought is certainly animated by his aversion to conflict but only in part. Al-Ghazālī also asserts that political order as well as guidance from prophets are necessary in view of the occasionalist idea that we are nothing before God. In so doing, he also provides a defense of his own political thought that is not squarely logical but also poetically evocative. The line of reasoning that al-Ghazālī often pursues consists of his haunting appeal to reflect on our own fallibility. It is by appealing to this axiomatic principle of decay that al-Ghazālī prepares one of his most evocative defenses of political order.

So far, I have mentioned that al-Ghazālī regards justice as one of the ruler's perennial duties. A little more must be said about this view of justice, so that we may properly discern its peculiar eschatological nature. Like other thinkers who thought about politics, al-Ghazālī is committed to rudimentary views of justice, such as the view that the ruler should never tyrannize his subjects and never act arbitrarily. The problem, however, is that al-Ghazālī's remarks on justice appear fragmentary. For the moment, I will turn my attention to his conception of justice and his

⁶³¹ Ibid., 232.

⁶³² Ibid., 234.

critique of arbitrary rule. According to al-Ghazālī, political justice is realized through a bond of religious and political authorities. He maintains that “Islam and the sultanate [the secular term for rulership] are twin brothers; neither is commensurate without its partner” (*fa-l-islām wa-l-sulṭān ikhwān taw’amān lā yaṣlah aḥadahumā illā bi-ṣāḥbih*). The *imāma* is of supreme significance, such that, when it fulfills its purpose of instilling “justice” (*‘adl*), it is considered the “highest worship” (*a lā al-‘ibādāt*) to God.⁶³³ Al-Ghazālī is also interested in character of the just ruler. This ruler, he tells us, must gain the loyalty of the governed through legitimate means, a suggestion that military might alone will not do. Al-Ghazālī warns that the leader who oppresses his people will earn the curse of God. Further, al-Ghazālī argues that the ruler guarantees the loyalty of the people when he governs in accordance with what religion deems legitimate, but he does not explain why this is the case.⁶³⁴ Although his idea regarding the relationship between good ruler and good subjects is elusive, there is no evidence that al-Ghazālī expressly builds his idea of politics on a pessimistic anthropology, one that assumes that humans are naturally quarrelsome or driven by greed and that their irascible passions must be curtailed by military might. As mentioned above, humans oscillate between the potential to be virtuous and iniquitous. If anything, this passage seems to suggest that lay Muslims are mostly good, and, if ruled by a just leader, would most likely carry out wholesome lives.

It is undeniable that al-Ghazālī stresses the importance of a powerful political authority that can guarantee people’s livelihood and security. But the political order is grounded on religious devotion first and foremost. While laying out the preliminary purposes of the *imāma*, al-Ghazālī states that

⁶³³ Al-Ghazālī, *Faḍā’ih al-bāṭiniyya*, 184.

⁶³⁴ Ibid., 189.

a sultan is necessary for achieving well-ordered religious affairs, and well-ordered worldly affairs are necessary for achieving well-ordered religious affairs.⁶³⁵

He is aware that some may be discomforted by his proposition to bind religion and politics. This is because the devout regard worldly affairs and religious affairs as antagonistic forces. Al-Ghazālī clarifies what he means, stating that worldliness carries two different meanings. The first is the pejorative sense used to describe opulence, which must be eschewed for obvious reasons. The second is the worldly state that requires humans look after their sustenance. In brief, we are all confined to corporeal limitations that cannot be surmounted if we reject our worldly state. Al-Ghazālī adds that a sensible theology must recognize that humans require basic sustenance before they are expected to carry out worship. Such is the importance of the *imāma*. Its purpose is to guarantee the security and sustenance of the governed to facilitate, or even enable, their commitment to their religious duties on earth.⁶³⁶ In the absence of political security, the community would descend into endless cycles of violence whereby the swords of the oppressors would impose tyranny and subsequently corrupt the community.⁶³⁷ The kind of justice that al-Ghazālī has in mind is eschatologically oriented. It requires that the *imām* consecrate his time on protecting his subjects' devotion.

According to Carole Hillenbrand, there is a salient pragmatic sentiment contained in al-Ghazālī's politics, namely in his "idea of symbiosis between the caliphate and the temporal authority."⁶³⁸ This idea, she claims, is suggestive of his desire to erect a worldly religious administration. Without the sword, religion would lose its social grounding, and, without religion, the sword would be tyrannical. This claim was not unsound for al-Ghazālī's time, as the caliph

⁶³⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*, 231.

⁶³⁶ Ibid., 229-31.

⁶³⁷ Ibid., 231.

⁶³⁸ Hillenbrand, "Islamic Orthodoxy or Realpolitik? Al-Ghazālī's Views on Government," 86.

ceased to hold the desired political power to make him exclusive ruler in the Muslim world. The Seljuks of his day were the ones with the effective political authority. Hillenbrand remarks that

To depict them [the Turks] as insubordinate, wayward creatures whose fundamental loyalty to Islam is nevertheless unswerving constitutes a plea for some kind of accommodation with this alien implant into the Islamic body politic.⁶³⁹

Further, Hillenbrand adds that al-Ghazālī wished to advise the “powerless” caliph of his time against attempting to “interfere with the sphere of operations of the temporal authorities.”⁶⁴⁰ I have examined the nature of this plea above. I do not deny that there is some significant degree of utility or pragmatism which influenced al-Ghazālī’s appeal. Al-Ghazālī’s theory of a symbiotic confederacy between the Arab Abbasids and the Seljuks hints at his awareness that the Caliph lacked any serious dominion to command Muslim lands. But I will continue to stress that his desire to reconcile the secular and the religious signals an evident eschatological crisis, which is what his theory of justice reveals. Political crisis worried al-Ghazālī insofar as it got in the way of the pressing need to prepare the faithful for the afterlife.

Al-Ghazālī’s assessment of the *imām*’s legitimacy offers us great insight into the eschatological purpose of the Islamic polity. Here, we get the clear sense that this legitimacy is provisional. It is only when the *imām* guarantees wider devotion among his subjects that his rule can be considered legitimated. Further, al-Ghazālī’s framework for the *imāma* deliberately avoids any characterization of a sovereign who is divinely appointed. One must look at the way he refutes the *Ismā‘īliyya*’s claim to political legitimacy. They believe that the *imām* is designated by religious scripture (*naṣṣ*).⁶⁴¹ Now, al-Ghazālī never says this outwardly, but we can surmise that he was discomforted by the inalienable nature of their *imām*’s enthronement. This is evident in the

⁶³⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁴¹ Patricia Crone, *God’s Rule: Government and Islam: Six Centuries of Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 2004), 121.

way he describes the numerous provisions which are used to assess legitimacy. First, he defends *Sunnī* jurisprudence, which maintains that the *imām* is appointed after “settlement” (*tafwīd*). But we must be mindful and not think of this appointment as some form of democratic procedure, even though it may involve some degree of election. The scope of election may range from the larger Muslim community to those who inhabit the capital in which the *imām* resides, to key influential men, to one man with unsurpassable military might, or *shawka*. It is perfectly permissible for the *imām* to derive his authority by way of designation from a single man should the latter provide the military might be necessary to protect the former’s rule.⁶⁴² It is safe to say that, for al-Ghazālī’s time, only the Turks wielded sufficient *shawka*. According to Hillenbrand, al-Ghazālī’s appraisal of the Turkish military force occupying much of the Levant and Iraq during his time is a tangible example of this reconciliation between the theocratic ruler and his secular arm. Turkish warlords were, in fact, *de facto* rulers over multiple statelets in the region. Al-Ghazālī believed that they could provide the caliph with the necessary *shawka* to elect him.⁶⁴³

Another provision is the *imām*’s knowledge. This is such an important provision that, in the *Moderation*, al-Ghazālī even considers the possibility of rebellion against an *imām* who is incompetent in religious knowledge and jurisprudence. Al-Ghazālī provides the example of an *imām* who is obeyed and is capable of placating the different opposing factions but is lacking knowledge. However, this *imām* relies on the religious scholars for matters pertaining to the religious sciences. Al-Ghazālī asks whether this person should be deposed should a more qualified descendent of *Quraysh* be available. Since knowledge is integral to al-Ghazālī’s understanding of the *imām*, he believes that under the right circumstances, the incumbent *imām* would have to be

⁶⁴² Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*, 233.

⁶⁴³ Hillenbrand, “Islamic Orthodoxy or Realpolitik? Al-Ghazālī’s Views on Government,” 83. See also: Crone, *God’s Rule: Government and Islam: Six Centuries of Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, 243-45.

deposed and replaced with the one who has knowledge. But this can only be done in the case that the dethronement does not result in civil unrest or war. In this case, the *imām* lacking knowledge would have to be obeyed so that the political community may remain intact and avoid disintegration. The primary role of the *Imāma* is to preserve the livelihood of the governed through security. While knowledge is the distinctive mark of the proper ruler, it must be conceded under the above circumstances given that no benefit would come of anyone's knowledge should a political community be embroiled in civil war. It would simply be preferable to have this ruler rely on the opinion of religious scholars, an idea found in the *Book of Knowledge*.⁶⁴⁴

These examples concerning the requirements of an *imām* paint a picture of a ruler whose claim to legitimacy is undercut by rigid legal norms, which are derived from religious norms. Yet not everyone seems to recognize this aspect of al-Ghazālī's politics. Building on the *Counsel*, Lambton identifies strong absolutist inclinations in al-Ghazālī's political theory. Though this text is meant to counsel the secular Turkish ruler about matters of justice, Lambton surmises that the text reads as a defense of the "despotic monarch." She does recognize that al-Ghazālī portrays the ruler as "a shepherd of his people," a description that, in my view, presupposes that the ruler is somehow accountable for his people. However, Lambton maintains that al-Ghazālī's constant insistence on the ruler's remarkable standing among his fellow humans suggests that his theoretical leanings were also formed against the backdrop of Persian notions of kingship, as opposed to being strictly founded on Islamic law.⁶⁴⁵ According to Lambton, the king's authority is derived from some form of "divine right" in al-Ghazālī's *Counsel*. This demonstrates al-Ghazālī's divergence from traditional Islamic political thought due to the revered light in which he describes the

⁶⁴⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*, 233.

⁶⁴⁵ Lambton, "The Theory of Kingship in the *Naṣīḥat ul-Mulūk* of Ghazālī," 48-51.

monarch. “He [al-Ghazālī] attaches to the conception of divine right an emphasis hardly warranted by Islamic tradition, though he nevertheless seeks to give Quranic sanction to his interpretation.”⁶⁴⁶

I disagree with Lambton’s interpretation two grounds. First, the premise that the ruler ought not to be opposed is not exclusive to his *Counsel*. In the *Moderation*, al-Ghazālī deals with the question of deposing the ruler. Though he concludes that a ruler must not be overthrown, al-Ghazālī does tolerate rebellions provided that they are swift and cause no bloodshed. This likely precludes almost every form of rebellion, since one can hardly imagine a ruler being deposed without violence or social repercussion. Further, al-Ghazālī is evidently concerned with political order and worship, rather than status of the ruler.⁶⁴⁷ Second, his praises of the ruler (even if he is somewhat hyperbolic) does not necessarily amount to a theory of despotic rule. As will be mentioned later, in his *Counsel*, al-Ghazālī roots injustice and social decadence in the actions of the ruler. In *Enjoining the Good*, he implores the faithful to remind their monarchs about righteous actions should they see them err. This is not to mention that the *Counsel* explicitly suggests that the righteous and truly faithful ruler would eschew the regal life, favouring simplicity instead, as we saw in the example of the Caliph ‘Umar.

Hillenbrand arrives at a similar conclusion to Lambton’s. But while Lambton focuses on al-Ghazālī’s praise of the secular Turkish ruler in the *Counsel*, Hillenbrand identifies these absolutist tendencies in al-Ghazālī’s provisions of the caliph, or *imām*, outlined in his *Iniquities*. According to al-Ghazālī, his contemporary caliph al-Mustazhir met all the above criteria (among others) that legitimated his position, thus making it “incumbent on all mankind” to obey the latter’s rule. Further, she points to the claim that all social and religious “functions” are dissolved in the

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid., 51.

⁶⁴⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation*, 231.

imām's absence as proof of his absolutism.⁶⁴⁸ Though I disagree with her final analysis, Hillenbrand is right to claim that al-Ghazālī believed in the pressing need to bind Muslims to a political order. I disagree that this claim leads up to a vision of a singular ruler, one who monopolizes power, as opposed to a “consultative council” of scholars.⁶⁴⁹ This claim is easily refutable. As we will see below, though al-Ghazālī thinks military power should be monopolized by secular authorities, he thinks religious law should apply to all temporal authority, including the *imām*'s. This is not to diminish the status of the *imām* in al-Ghazālī's work. However, one cannot ignore the fact that this *imām* is bound by religious norms and customs of his political community, such that his own rule is restricted.

There is ample evidence to suggest that al-Ghazālī regards the main source of political injustice as rooted in corrupt rulership, which is consonant with his evident view on the *imām*'s strict responsibilities.⁶⁵⁰ He names five behaviours that are sure to earn one a place in hellfire, two of which are directly, and one indirectly, related to political injustice: (1) a ruler who does not relieve his people from injustice; (2) a ruler who prefers the privileged over the deprived, but is rather distracted by “pleasure” (*al-hawā*); and, most importantly for my point, (3) a father who avoids practicing the virtues he preaches.⁶⁵¹ This last example can very well be applied to the ruler. As mentioned above, al-Ghazālī derides rulers who do not begin by counselling themselves about rightfulness. It is not entirely clear whether this example of the father serves as an allusion to some form of paternalistic power. Yet, it illustrates al-Ghazālī's point that a person who abandons a position as a custodian of sorts – whether this be a paternal figure or ruler – is in gross violation of their religious duty. Here, al-Ghazālī takes the occasion to warn that injustice is always met

⁶⁴⁸ Binder, “Al-Ghazālī's Theory of Islamic Government,” 82.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid., 84.

⁶⁵⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *Faḍā'ih al-bāṭiniyya*, 188.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid., 209.

with retribution, stating that there has never been an unjust ruler who was not met with retribution. Al-Ghazālī even states that God will cause the downfall of the oppressor if the oppressed call for His help.⁶⁵²

As we will see below, al-Ghazālī holds the rules of justice are equally binding for the ruler, an idea that precludes the view of absolutism in his political theory. Earlier, I mentioned that his theory of justice generally presumes the imposition of God's commands on humanity. The just ruler is he who governs for God, rather than personal whims. At this juncture, we also have a better picture of a just disposition, which demands that the ruler exhibit strong humility.⁶⁵³ Just as the son is entitled to inform and warn his father on matters of righteousness, al-Ghazālī maintains that the people can also counsel their ruler. The process of being counselled does not undermine one's social standing, but it certainly undercuts one's authority. Al-Ghazālī stresses that the ruler should never be disrespected in such a way that his standing is undermined. Of course, contempt for the ruler is highly discouraged but not because the ruler is regarded as sacred in any way. Rather, al-Ghazālī is always mindful that political vacancy could contribute to turmoil. Therefore, it is mainly for the preservation of the body politic and not necessarily the incumbent authority that al-Ghazālī discourages belligerency against the *imām*. The ruler is expected to behave according to the moral and ethical standards stipulated in revelation. Further, those who are ruled are not simply subjects of their ruler but are entitled to political participation within the framework of an Islamic ethics. This opens the question about whether we can speak of an Islamic theory of citizenship in al-Ghazālī's political theory. Now, can we say that this view of the *imām* resembles Aristotle's ruler who ought to know how be ruled?

⁶⁵² Ibid.

⁶⁵³ Said, *Ghazālī's Politics in Context*, 115-19.

The egalitarianism in Enjoining the Good

The Muslim polity is principally founded for the worship of God. But this political order cannot exist without a common view of political membership. The communal nature of the Muslim polity, as understood by al-Ghazālī, is captured by Said:

It is a society whose goal is, in good Ṣūfī fashion, closeness to God and whose social bonds aim at participating in God's own unity as al-Ghazālī contemplated it. The expression of those bonds is through the basic tenets of faith, which presuppose simple acts of worship that both help us aspire to God's character traits, and make us act for the common good.⁶⁵⁴

But is there a guarantee that the common good will always be congruous with the tenets of faith? What if divine injunctions are incongruent with popular demands espoused by members of a political community? Certainly, al-Ghazālī would disagree with modern views regarding the legislative autonomy of the citizen. And it is definitely not up to a body of citizens to define its own laws. Rather, they must legislate based on immutable injunctions derived from religious texts. Yet, we know from Aristotle's *Politics* that political membership and popular sovereignty are not always interchangeable categories. We can imagine a substantial view of citizenship in the absence of the popular vote. Further, the common good (or ideas concerning the good life) do not always reflect sentiments of a popular will. Hence, the common good can transcend the citizen's autonomy. Aristotle's *Politics* is a case in point. There, we find the view that the common good is aimed for the advantage of the city, rather than the will of the citizenry. For Aristotle, this view of the common good requires wide public participation, rotation in public offices, and a ruler who is equally a citizen like others. These are the elementary principles of Aristotelian citizenship.

In al-Ghazālī's *Counsel*, there is a clear vision of a ruler who is a caretaker of sorts. This vision of a paternalistic power seems incompatible with the basic tenets of citizenship, let alone a

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid., 136.

view of a participatory citizenry. Yet, in the book on *Enjoining the Good* in his *Revival*, al-Ghazālī seems to want to spur the common member of the Muslim polity to political action. We hardly get the impression that commoners are merely the ruler’s passive subjects or his herd. On the contrary, the imagery of the caretaker is entirely foregone. Instead, al-Ghazālī promotes a view of a political or civic virtue requiring all members of the political community to work in view of the common good. But does this form of political participation and public virtue yield sufficient content for a theory of citizenship?

According to Aristotle, a citizen is a person (or a man, in his narrow view) who is “entitled to share in an office involving deliberation or decision.” Further, these citizens cooperate within a political association on the principle that they work toward attaining a “self-sufficient life.”⁶⁵⁵ Though each citizen is tasked with a specific function, Aristotle maintains that all duties are meant to contribute to the common good, or the wellbeing of the community. The citizens, he tells us, are akin to “sailors” who collectively ensure their ship’s safe voyage. Only, the citizens’ “virtue” is oriented toward the wellbeing of their community.⁶⁵⁶ Not every political regime allows for this sort of collective virtue. Hence, Aristotle remarks that “political rule” obliges the ruler to become a member among the ruled. To rule over free citizens, the ruler must be levelled to the class of citizen. The ruler, he tells us, must know what it is like to be ruled. This relationship between ruler and ruled is no different than the military commander who must, at one point, have learned what it is like to be “commanded” before being able to issue commands.⁶⁵⁷ Al-Ghazālī also stretches the scope of political participation and demands a similar sort of public humility from the ruler. However, this collective practice is not realized through participation in public offices. Rather, al-

⁶⁵⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, 2 ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1275b.18-20.

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid., 1276b.26-31.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid., 1277b.8-19.

Ghazālī relies on the Islamic concept of *ḥisba*, which roughly translates to “accountability.” In the strictly juristic sense of the word, *ḥisba* is a government’s duty to reinforce *sharī‘a* and to ensure that people follow divine law. Traditionally, the role of *muḥtasib*, the one who carries out *ḥisba*, was typically reserved for the ruler or body of scholars. But al-Ghazālī proposes the radical view that any sane Muslim adult can participate in *ḥisba*, provided that this person is not incapacitated and is surrounded by other fellow sane Muslim adults.

Al-Ghazālī outlines four requirements for the *muḥtasib*, broad enough to encourage wider public participation. First, a certain cognitive threshold is required. The person should be cognizant enough (that is, not insane) to understand the scope of their accountability to rightly hold others accountable.⁶⁵⁸ Second, the *muḥtasib* requires “faith” (*imān*). The third requirement is “justice” (*‘adāla*). This is somewhat of a confusing requirement, because, while one must be just, al-Ghazālī argues that sinners can admonish other Muslims for wrongdoing. Sinning does not entirely absolve one’s duty to reinforce piety. Al-Ghazālī exclaims that certain prophets were more pious than others, while some prophets, like Adam, were not sinless. Therefore, it would be implausible to assume that only the faultless should be entitled to enjoin the good, because no one would be left to administer the good.⁶⁵⁹ In his fourth point on *ḥisba*, al-Ghazālī’s critiques the *Shī‘ī* view of *ḥisb*, which only accentuates his strong sentiment toward a collective practice of politics. He contends that it is not only the *imām* who should be entitled to enjoining the good and forbidding the bad. The religious canon, he claims, sanctions the right of every Muslim to reproach his fellow Muslim for wrongdoing. Contrary to what is religiously stipulated, the *Shī‘a* believe that, in the absence of an infallible *imām*, there is no legitimacy to *ḥisba* as a political (or even institutional) practice. Al-Ghazālī doubts that the average *Shī‘ī* person can live up to this idealist demand for an infallible

⁶⁵⁸ Al-Ghazālī, “Al-Amr bi-l-ma‘rūf” 820.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid.

ruler, because any reasonable person would want to seek legal arbitration (even in the absence of the *imām*) to compensate for an injurious activity, which is a tacit reliance on the principle of enjoining the good.⁶⁶⁰

It is important to mention a crucial difference between the political philosophy of Aristotle and the political theology of al-Ghazālī. There is no denying that both thinkers consider the importance of public participation and a collective bond premised on reinforcing a certain good. Not only do they differ on the content of the good, but they also diverge on the ideal political subject who carries out actions toward the good. Aristotle extols “political virtue,” whereas al-Ghazālī extols a fervent piety that is common to all. This piety must be pursued irrespective of the political circumstances, even if this could lead to one’s persecution. Aristotle, however, claims that the political community aims at “noble actions.”⁶⁶¹ We might be inclined to think that al-Ghazālī’s pious individual is no different than Aristotle’s noble citizen in view of their selfless devotion to the common good. Yet, there is a subtle difference which might complicate this comparison. Aristotle believes that citizens of the varying “correct regimes” do what is best “with the view to the common advantage.”⁶⁶² Conversely, the rulers of unjust regimes, such as oligarchies or tyrannies, govern for personal advantage. For al-Ghazālī, however, the tyrant is simply the obstinate ruler who thinks himself superior to God’s law.

But this obstinacy is typically coupled with the idea of a person who governs not only independently of God but society as well. This view of tyranny as rejection of God and the social bond is evoked in al-Ghazālī’s retelling of a story about the Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mūn. According to this story, the caliph was once notified about a man assuming the role of *muḥtasib* without his

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid., 823.

⁶⁶¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1279a.18-23.

⁶⁶² Ibid., 1277b.8-19.

permission. The man was eventually summoned to the caliph's chamber. During interrogation, the *muhtasib* noticed that al-Ma'mūn had accidentally dropped a book between his feet. The man promptly commanded his own caliph to remove the book between his feet, as it contained the name of God in its passages. Only then would the man listen to the words of his caliph. Though the caliph was alerted to his mistake, he proceeded to further interrogate the man while denying him the right to ordain the good. While acknowledging his ruler's legitimacy, the man reminded his caliph about the duty of all Muslims toward each other. The point of this story serves to illustrate that the ruler is not entirely above those he governs. In fact, the Qur'an describes believers as "custodians of each other" (*awliyā' ba'd*), which indicates equality between political subjects.⁶⁶³ Al-Ghazālī also extols this self-proclaimed *muhtasib* for the fervour he displayed by refusing to abandon divine commandments and his uncompromising reverence for God and religion. By extolling the pious who admonish the unjust in face of possible retribution, al-Ghazālī signals to his readers that civic virtue is a religious duty that all Muslims must undertake, even if this leads to their death.

Certainly, al-Ghazālī only extols martyrdom when it is intended for God, not the city. Yet, this principle of equality under God fosters a civic sentiment that precludes the idea of personal rule, engendering a nascent view of citizenship. Further, the recurring passages on the ruler's mortality support this civic aim. While Muslims are reminded of their civic duty, the ruler is constantly humbled and levelled to the status of the ruled. Consequently, the ruler's status is only provisional on the common good. Now, monarchies also aim for the common good. And usually, one crucial difference between the monarch and the tyrant is that the former welcomes being counselled on matters concerning the management of public affairs. So, in what way does al-

⁶⁶³ Al-Ghazālī, "Al-Amr bi-l-ma'rūf" 826.

Ghazālī's view of the common good, as expressed in *Enjoining the Good*, differ from a just monarchy? In principle, al-Ghazālī is not simply admonishing the counselling of a monarch. When we think of the monarch's counsellor, we think of a prudent person who tries to persuade the monarch into rightful action. But al-Ghazālī goes beyond mere counselling, expressly admonishing the ruler when his actions are deemed illegitimate. It is in this sense that al-Ghazālī promotes a sense of civic equality.

One could not, of course, see in this civic equality a version of the Aristotelian ideal of ruling and being ruled in turn. But this idea of public offices is grounded on a broader conception of citizenship. According to Aristotle, the citizen of the "best regime" exhibits a strong sense of civic virtue; he "intentionally chooses" the life of ruling and being ruled.⁶⁶⁴ To be a virtuous citizen, one be ready to "adjudicate and deliberate" among free citizens, which recalls al-Ma'mūn's encounter with the dissenting man. For Aristotle, this reciprocal adjudication is what it means to "live finely." The citizen cannot live finely in isolation. The collective participation of the "multitude" refines individual opinions. Aristotle compares the city to a "feast" whereby participants can deliberate and form a sound opinion on the food. When an individual is tasked with judging something alone, he may be taken by wrath or impassioned by other things that hamper reasoned judgement. Conversely, reciprocal judgement of "free persons" may help mitigate the passions of individuals, because it is rare to find a multitude whose individuals "err" simultaneously.⁶⁶⁵

Of course, al-Ghazālī conveys no sense of a free citizenry, but this does not necessarily complicate our comparison. For al-Ghazālī, an active body of conscientious people is the best barrier against the possibility of tyranny. These conscientious people are encouraged to deliberate

⁶⁶⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1284a.1-4.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid., 1286a.24-37.

on what constitute rightful norms, within the confines of immutable divine law of course. Though divine law is immutable, the idea that they are entitled to deliberate according to these divine injunctions seems to accord them some sufficient degree of legal autonomy. It does take a great deal of interpretative knowledge and understanding to become a custodian of the law. Surely, these conscientious citizens do not legislate in an assembly, but they are principally reinforcers of the law. Judging from the story about al-Ma'mūn, al-Ghazālī, like Aristotle, is confident that collective *ḥisba* can serve as a check on the ruler's passions. We now come to an especially important theme in *Enjoining the Good*, the question of egalitarianism. Though al-Ghazālī never uses the Arabic equivalent of the term egalitarianism, it is clearly implied throughout the text. Al-Ghazālī acknowledges that some people might find his ideas of equal deliberation unsettling or too radical. The reader might take issue with the idea of admonishing a ruler. What is the guarantee that all social relations will be respected in an environment where berating the ruler is not only acceptable, but encouraged? Can the son now simply go against his father? Or the slave against his master?

Yes, it is possible for a subordinate to behave like a custodian of his superior in certain instances. Remember, the custodian is only conferred this status for the preservation of the good, especially since his, in principle, deemed most suitable for this role. Once the custodian transgresses this standard, he steps out of his required duties. This explains why *ḥisba* is regarded as a common and public duty. Now, there is a categorical difference between *ḥisba* in speech and more coercive measures. Of course, *ḥisba* in speech is strongly advised for those in subordinate relationships. More specifically, coercive *ḥisba* can never be used against political authority. Al-Ghazālī gives the example of an unrighteous governor whose treasury is seized, and its money returned to the rightful owners, his clothing stripped of its silky material, and his wine cups smashed. This would only result in his "standing" (*ḥayba*) being undermined in front of the

governed.⁶⁶⁶ It is important to reiterate that al-Ghazālī's concern is not for the wellbeing of the ruler as such. We know this is the case because he mentions that tyrannical leaders will be cursed and condemned to hellfire. However, as mentioned above, he fears the possibility of political turmoil and would rather settle for an unjust ruler over a leaderless community condemned to cycles of internal turmoil.

Enjoining the Good might appear as a radical departure from the rest of al-Ghazālī's political texts, considering the unique emphasis he places on the common duty all participants. The political scope he ascribes to the commoner is certainly peculiar to this text. Yet the debasement of the ruler to the status of the common person is nothing innovative to his corpus, as this chapter aims to show. Further, al-Ghazālī's traditional divide between commoner and scholar is unsurprisingly featured in this text as well. In a later passage, al-Ghazālī states that a commoner who knows the rules of prayer must inform his fellow brethren about praying, otherwise he is "a partner in iniquity" (*sharīk fī l-ithm*). Undoubtedly, no one is gifted with innate knowledge of religious customs, as this knowledge is acquired communally – i.e., being taught by others. Whatever one learns with regards to religion and faith must be imparted unto others. Therefore, a negligent scholar is worse than a negligent commoner, because the former's knowledge is more comprehensive, and he is more aware of the significance of knowledge for the Muslim community. Al-Ghazālī proceeds to exclaim that "the scholars are the inheritors of the prophets" (*al-ʿulamāʾ warathat al-anbiyāʾ*).⁶⁶⁷ According to al-Ghazālī, all reasonable persons are obligated to govern others to one extent or another. For example, if a person discovers that attendants at his local mosque are not praying properly, it would be incumbent on him to attend the mosque and seek a way to rectify these mistakes. Similarly, if one is aware of wrongdoing occurring in the

⁶⁶⁶ Al-Ghazālī, "Al-Amr bi-l-maʿrūf" 826-27.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid., 855.

marketplace, one must not remain at home simply because he wishes to distance himself from sin. He must attend the marketplace with the aim of enjoining the good and forbidding the wrong. If he is incapable of convincing all wrongdoers, he may nonetheless strive to change a select few. In fact, a Muslim is ordained to begin with him or herself, before imparting one's knowledge to family members and the larger community. Therefore, no level of *ḥisba* is a trivial task.⁶⁶⁸

This is the most basic form of *ḥisba* one expects from all lay Muslims. But there is the more pressing need for participation of scholars. In *Enjoining the Good*, he points to the example of 'Umar bin Hubayra, a governor of Iraq, who surrounded himself with scholars. Ibn Hubayra, he tells us, rightly valued collective opinion. He summoned the most learned scholars from Iraq and Syria because he wanted to be counselled on the art of governing and how to win the loyalty of his subjects. The scholars collectively agreed that the *amīr* should seek to satisfy God before satisfying other humans. Only then would God facilitate his rule and guarantee his subjects' loyalty. Ibn Hubayra is informed that obedience to God is superior to all other forms of obedience. He is warned not to get complacent about God's primacy in all matters. In typical Ghazālīan fashion, we are told that God can strip any sultan of his power and send him to the grave.⁶⁶⁹ Through this evocative storytelling, al-Ghazālī uses eschatological imagery to define the purpose of politics. Unlike political philosophy, this politics does not require rulers to put things in order strictly for the city's benefit. Surely, a city needs to be well ordered but only insofar as this serves the principal religious aim. In fact, al-Ghazālī uses Ibn Hubayra's story to insist that politics is the application of divine commandments, which must always gain supremacy over the laws of men.

In contrast, the aim of Aristotelian politics is the benefit of the city, which is the basis of justice. Simply put, a just regime is one whose members legislate for the benefit of the city. It

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid., 856.

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid., 861.

follows that injustice (in the context of lawmaking) is detrimental to the city's wellbeing. According to Aristotle, the rule of the "multitude," for example, presents us with a clear case of justice that is not aimed for the wellbeing of the city but a particular group. Say the multitude proceed to strip the wealthy of their property and wealth. One cannot describe this as being justice, as defenders of the multitude would have, since it would amount to a use of force that would "destroy the city." Since the essential aspect of justice is its benefit to the city and the citizenry, when the multitude use force to seize the wealth of the aristocracy, this would be as unjust as a tyrant forcing the majority to abide by his commands.⁶⁷⁰ In a later passage, Aristotle deals with the question of how to properly differentiate between just and unjust laws. He concedes that the "quality" of the just law is difficult to grasp given that each regime demands its own particular laws. However, laws pertaining to "deviant" regimes do not meet the definition of justice spelled out above, because these regimes are antithetical to the wellbeing of the political community.⁶⁷¹ While justice, according to Aristotle, presumes different arrangements depending on the regime, it is clear that he would qualify a law as truly just based on the extent to which it benefits the political community.

It is when we consider the purpose of lawmaking that we finally arrive at a striking difference between Aristotelian and Ghazālian politics. Whereas justice for al-Ghazālī is universally unconditional, Aristotelian justice is peculiar to the makeup of the city. In this sense, justice is apprehended rationally as that which is good for the city. Further, Aristotle's virtuous citizen behaves according to what is good for the city. The implication here is that the city and the politics practiced within are good in themselves, as man is by nature a political animal. Therefore, the Aristotelian notion of citizenship assumes man's end within the city and politics being his most

⁶⁷⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1281a.15-24.

⁶⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 1282b.6-14.

noble function, at least in the *Politics*. Certainly, al-Ghazālī's conception of the common good warrants a civic sentiment, which is equally expected of every rational subject. But he would refrain from defining the human as intrinsically political. Any view of an intrinsic nature would go against the basic principles of his occasionalism, that no being is endowed with inhering qualities.

More specifically, this theory of man as political animal goes against al-Ghazālī's view of the aims of human perfection. The human's unconditional aim in this world is salvation. Certainly, a person can be a citizen of a given political community. But the praises of civic virtue in al-Ghazālī's politics are not motivated by a stringent conception of citizenship. As we have seen, such a stringent conception inevitably places the city or the political community in a superior position, which is not al-Ghazālī's intention. For al-Ghazālī, the purpose of salvation transcends all social bonds. Therefore, al-Ghazālī's politics are superseded by an extra-political concern, that of the hereafter in which justice is immutable. Not unlike humanity, the political community is temporal and bound to dissipate when humans are called upon by their Lord. This fundamental divergence marks the difference between the politics of the philosophers and that of the theologians. The following section traces this divergence by examining the underlying epistemological and cosmological antagonisms between the two.

Part II – The Epistemological and Cosmological Foundations of al-Ghazālī's Theocracy

In the previous section, we ended off with a brief comparison between Aristotle and al-Ghazālī. The point was to get us thinking about the similarities and dissimilarities between classic political philosophy and political theology. Strikingly, both thinkers commit to a similar view of public duties. The wider the participation, the more refined collective opinion is on matters of the

common good. In al-Ghazālī's theocracy, the ruler is taught humility and extolled for living like the common person. As for commoners, they are encouraged to reinforce the law in public places, such as markets and mosques. As such, the individual Muslim is treated as an equal member within a collective, answerable only to a law which stands above sovereign and commoner. But I also mentioned that al-Ghazālī presents a peculiar view of justice that is eschatologically grounded. The reinforcement of the law is not required as an end for the city but rather because God demands our obedience. This theme of a God who is both transcendent and involved in our social and public lives leads us back to the original theme informing this thesis.

In the introduction and earlier chapters, I examined a variety of theories relating to the idea of an immutable universe. I explained that the philosophical perspective of an immutable natural law can complement the idea of human agency, or even autonomy. The *falāsifa* critiqued in al-Ghazālī's work seem to think that humans are rational beings, free to understand the workings of their naturalist world. Incidentally, al-Ghazālī appears to limit human agency by conferring all power to God. By freedom, I do not mean the freedom cherished by the moderns, who are occupied with political rights against the tyrannical practices of individuals or the collective. Rather, the freedom I am discussing here relates to human independence from cosmological restraints.

Strauss observes that the philosopher is concerned with the contest between self-sufficient reason and the view of a spontaneous order found in supposedly irrational theologies. In fact, Strauss' view of a clash between Athens and Jerusalem is relatable to current political concerns since revealed religion continues to assert itself in our times. Further, for some stringent rationalists, revealed religion is a representation of the opinion of the blind multitude, because of its uncomplicated demand for "obedience." This is especially problematic when we think of zealous adherents as people who would persecute the philosopher for his unorthodox claims.

Strauss concludes that the philosophers often hide behind popular discourses of revealed religion to escape persecution. One of the archetypes of this art of philosophical writing is al-Fārābī, who (like al-Ghazālī) composed some of his texts in Baghdad. This thesis is not interested in resolving the issue of whether al-Fārābī or other medieval thinkers were sincere about their religious references. But this is worthy of mention because it gives readers a sense of Strauss' aversion to the anti-philosophical sentiment found among the religious multitude.

More importantly, however, is Strauss' demarcation between the epistemic outlooks of revealed religions and philosophy. I want to re-evaluate this crucial difference in the final analysis of this thesis. At this juncture, I believe it is time to tie back the earlier epistemological and cosmological themes to the later political ones. While the notion of occasionalism is not an outwardly political one, it certainly lends itself to a peculiar eschatological political framework, which I have referred to as political theology. The claim that the world was originally shaped and is eternally reshaped by an absolute divine sovereign is at the basis of the Ghazālīan position on obedience to divine law. Therefore, Strauss' point of departure is a sound one. Strauss seeks to identify the source of these contentious views on political life. After all, political philosophy, and political theology both opine about the political in view of a larger a cosmological claim. On this ground, Strauss is not entirely ungenerous to revealed religion, as he rightly attributes to it a systematic line of thinking. However, I find that Strauss excludes a key element to this line of thought. Though al-Ghazālī is strongly averse to independent reason by calling for submission to religious authority, I have argued that this aversion is grounded on a negative philosophy. It is only after contemplating our epistemic state within an occasionalist order that al-Ghazālī concludes the need for obedience. But, as I have explained throughout, this line of thought demands its own reason that is originally independent of scripture.

According to Strauss, religion and philosophy both endeavour to some kind of “wisdom”; both seek an explanation for humanity’s standing in the universe. However, since the terms of this wisdom are starkly different, one cannot soundly maintain that both positions are simultaneously true.⁶⁷² In brief, the tone of revealed religion is imperative, as it expects submission and unreflective conformity to scriptural authority. According to Strauss, this imperious nature is epitomized by the biblical genre, which specifically addresses adherents while being completely unconcerned with convincing or persuading unbelievers about the premises of its own truths. On the other hand, philosophy attempts to prove its own claims and presuppositions about the world and humanity’s standing. The difference can be summarized as follows. Both religion and philosophy put forth truth claims about the world and our existence within it. However, religion takes truth as revealed, and belief in this is unconditional.⁶⁷³ We ought to believe in them because they are dictates of God. Philosophy, on the other hand, begins from the justification of premises before these can be subsumed as beliefs. To put it simply, as Thomas Pangle does, while philosophy does not wholeheartedly reject the idea of submitting to God, its proponent would want to know what this submission entails.⁶⁷⁴

Thomas Pangle contends that the God of Abraham demands unconditional obedience, but there is a background story to this, or a justification if you will. The theological epistemic state, which Pangle claims is captured in Blaise Pascale’s theology, presupposes that humans are feeble insofar as they are rationally inept. According to the Pascalian view, human understanding is incapable of inferring truths based on an autonomous intellect. In a world where the only thing we can ascertain is our inability to know the purpose of our existence, reason must be adjourned.

⁶⁷² Leo Strauss, “Jerusalem and Athens: Some Introductory Reflections,” *Commentary* 43, no. 6 (1967): 45-46.

⁶⁷³ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶⁷⁴ Pangle, *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham*, 9-10. *ibid.*

Revelation is the curative device to this epistemic predicament, as it covers the truths outside the scope of our understanding.⁶⁷⁵ On the contrary, the philosophical position crowns human understanding. Pangle explains that this position is put forth by Aristotle, who portrays philosophical life as a didactic friendship between privileged men who are exempted from labour and minute household tasks. Women and slaves actively maintain the household, allowing leisured men to engage in truth-seeking as equal companions.⁶⁷⁶ Naturally, these two epistemic positions (the religious and the philosophical) will have to implicate radically different political theories. The former inclines toward obedience while the latter insists on cooperation among a body of citizens.

There are a few key interlocking reasons why I wish to compare al-Fārābī and al-Ghazālī's political theories. First, their respective political writings speak to the abovementioned relationship between cosmology – i.e., theory of the universal order – and political theory. This is to say that their political theories are contingent on their understandings of universal order, a point I wish to demonstrate below. In al-Fārābī's philosophy, this gap between divine and human actors is evoked as an illustration to stress humanity's task of ascending to godlike status. How this transcendence is cultivated through political life will be explained below. Al-Ghazālī's politics eschews the Fārābian discourse on humanity's perfectibility through the foundation of virtuous political orders. Not only does al-Ghazālī actively depreciate kings by constantly forewarning their own finitude, but he also uses the language of servitude to describe the inhabitants of the political community. The obedience that is owed to the king has nothing to do with greatness; it is simply ordained because the king is God's surrogate on earth, or, in other words, he "rules under God's shadow". Hence, the king is also a subject in this regard.

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid., 89-90.

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid., 63.

Second, it goes without saying that Strauss regards al-Fārābī as the theologians' philosophical adversary. Further, Strauss is not entirely incorrect to claim that al-Fārābī's writing captures the tension between philosophical and religious thinking. Not unlike Strauss, al-Ghazālī seems to believe that al-Fārābī's use of religious terminology is insincere. While al-Ghazālī would regard this insincerity as clandestine unbelief in religion and the Prophet, Strauss tells us that al-Fārābī only adopts contemporary religious discourse to shield an esoteric truth from the persecution of the commoners, who regard philosophy as an affront to their theological sentiments.⁶⁷⁷ Incidentally, al-Ghazālī would agree with the Strauss that the *falāsifa* give primacy to reason, but this is a view he troubles. Previously, we have looked at the theological purpose of rational-based argumentation. Hence, we should be wary of painting al-Ghazālī's theology as a kind of anti-rationalism. We should also recognize his efforts to limit rationalism to very specific lines of inquiry. For example, through regular observation, the mind knows that imbibing can cause intoxication. Al-Ghazālī does not question recurring events. Rather, he draws the line at the conclusion that the universe is held together by a natural hierarchy of causes and effects. These recurrent things are owed to God's grace. Below, we will see that, in the context of politics, al-Ghazālī presupposes different sort of outcomes depending on the ruler's actions, but he is sure to attribute the final outcome of any event – be it political or “natural” – to God's volition. Hence, al-Ghazālī promotes a strictly theological view of politics insofar as God's intervention in worldly and universal affairs are concerned.

In this thesis, my aim was never to fully dismiss Strauss' line on the tensions between religion and philosophy. There is some merit to discerning between a rigid emphasis on human agency and the idea of unconditional obedience in political theology. Hence, in comparing al-

⁶⁷⁷ Strauss, “How Fārābī Read Plato's *Laws*.”

Fārābī and al-Ghazālī, I am presuming that there is merit to this crucial distinction. Where I diverge from Strauss and Pangle (to a lesser extent) is on the issue of philosophy's skeptical scope. I initially set out to contest the view that the philosophical position is necessarily more skeptical than its supposed religious adversary. In comparing al-Fārābī and al-Ghazālī, I wish to make final suggestions that are underexplored or even unacknowledged in Strauss' dividing line between Athens and Jerusalem. If we are to carefully examine the relationship between cosmology and politics in al-Ghazālī's political theory, we find that the impetus for political obedience is largely rooted in a skeptical attitude about humanity's capacity. This skepticism, in turn, flows from a general anxiety about humanity's finitude; it is a skepticism directed at human autonomy. My task here is to highlight this relationship within al-Ghazālī's work and to explain the reason for its absence in al-Fārābī's.

The functions of the righteous ruler

According to al-Ghazālī, just rule relies on intelligence. Al-Ghazālī would define the "intelligent man", or more appropriately the sensible person, as someone who dedicates his or her life to pleasing God and pursuing the rewards of the afterlife. This is to say that reasonable people consecrate their thoughts and activities to higher and eternal ends. Conversely, the unreasonable people dedicate themselves to this world and indulge in its pleasures, unmindful that these are only accessible for a temporary period. Most people are tempted by the world's "spells" (*sihr*). The world is compared to a malicious sorceress who, though "continually moving," fools you into thinking that she is "stationary and fixed in relation to you."⁶⁷⁸ In Platonic fashion, al-Ghazālī asserts that the world is but a shadow; its delights trick the feeble human into thinking it is

⁶⁷⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Counsel for Kings*, 32-33.

permanent. But temporal existence is just as inconstant as a shadow. Since the mundane world is constituted by material things, its existence, and our place within it are forever bound by this eventual demise. Hence, the world's delights are constantly fleeting.⁶⁷⁹

The truly intelligent person, according to al-Ghazālī, “sees the spirit and reality of things and is not deceived by their forms”.⁶⁸⁰ He relates this theme of immaterial perception to the question of “happiness”, which we have already examined extensively in preceding chapters, especially Chapter 4. To reiterate, this is the view that eternal bliss is when the soul transcends the sensible world, becoming immersed in the immaterial good. In this instance, al-Ghazālī yet again juxtaposes true happiness to the sensuous passions of beastlike people. A truly reasonable person, he remarks, forgoes worldly vices relating to material needs.⁶⁸¹ Previously, I mentioned that the theme of happiness is found in the writings of al-Ghazālī and the *falāsifa*. In the most general sense, both camps describe happiness as a state of transcendence from material things. However, Chapter 4 explained some of crucial differences with how this transcendence is achieved. Moreover, the political implications of happiness are starkly different. This is what I would like to examine now.

The concept of happiness is very specific to al-Fārābī's thought. Happiness, he tells us, is attained when the soul is perfected. This perfection entails that the soul becomes “completely separated from matter”, becoming attuned to the immaterial. The highest human condition is the negation of things temporal. Happiness is an end in itself, and it is not outmatched by a higher purpose. The following principle applies across al-Fārābī's hierarchies of principles and entities: that which does not serve while served by the rest of things below it is the highest and most noble

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid., 33.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid.

entity within the given hierarchy.⁶⁸² This hierarchical principle applies to al-Fārābī's politics. In order to properly understand al-Fārābī's ideal political association and the role of its ruler, we need to look into his explanation of the human composition. Al-Fārābī uses the constitution of the individual human as a figurative to explain important aspects of the political association. But this comparison between the composition of the individual human and the political association does not simply rest on mere analogizing. Similar to what we find in Plato's *Republic*, al-Fārābī maintains that each element of the human soul corresponds with a given rank within the city based on the function it serves. True human perfection recognizes the importance of worldly detachment. The many sensuous pleasures are only "accidental," as they impress themselves on the body. Yet, true pleasure is only, the kind that is concerned with the immaterial, is universal.⁶⁸³ Al-Fārābī maintains that the ideal ruler is the person who uses deliberative capacities to contemplate the world of ideals while detaching from worldly pleasures.⁶⁸⁴ To put it simply, the virtuous ruler is he who excels most at contemplating happiness and devising ways to lead the citizens of his city to happiness. As with the deliberative faculty, the ruler of the virtuous city cannot be subject to the authority of another. His art (or vocation) is superior to all other arts in the city, as he organizes the city according to its citizens' "ranks".⁶⁸⁵

Like al-Fārābī, al-Ghazālī expresses the view that the intellect is superior to corporeality and he maintains that justice, which is known through intellect, is the detachment from worldly and base things. The just ruler must first ensure that his lust and anger do not gain mastery over him and that his religion is never taken "prisoner". The intellect is the noblest aspect of humankind, because its essence is among the angelic functions. Moreover, al-Ghazālī states that the realization

⁶⁸² Al-Fārābī, *Al-Madīna al-fāḍila*, 83.

⁶⁸³ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid., 241-45.

⁶⁸⁵ Al-Fārābī, *The Political Writings: "Political Regime" and "Summary of Plato's Laws"*, 73.

of justice is the “perfection of the intellect”. And the intellect is consummated when one is able “to see things as they (really) are and perceive the facts of their inner reality without being deceived by their outward appearance.”⁶⁸⁶ This brings him in proximity to al-Fārābī’s idea of reason, a mark of distinction from the rest of corporeal beings, which allows us to transcend our corporeal condition. Similarly, al-Ghazālī suggests that, through the intellect, humans contemplate the essence of things, as opposed to outside appearance. When it comes to ruling, al-Ghazālī also maintains that the reasonable ruler shuns base desires.⁶⁸⁷

While reason is politically useful for both, al-Fārābī and al-Ghazālī staunchly differ on the intertwining issues of human ranking and the role religion in the political association. According to al-Fārābī, the city is ordered based on “ranks”, determined in turn by people’s nature and education. And the first/primary ruler is the one who ranks people based on where they belong accordingly. The ranks are organized along a spectrum of leadership-obedience. The higher the rank, the more consummate the leader, and the lower the rank, the more obedience it assumes.⁶⁸⁸ So, what is an indication of leadership? These leaders are endowed with a philosophical understanding. Their rank is determined by the extent to which they cognize and apprehend happiness. This understanding is complete because their intellect imprints these principles within their minds. As for commoners, those who are below the leaders, these are people who do not immediately understand the principles of happiness. “For those people, an image ought to be made, by means of things that represent them.” Their imagination does not yield sufficient understanding of the immaterial truth. Regarding imagination, certain believers are capable of imagining principles more clearly than others. The clearer the imagination, the more proximate the imagined

⁶⁸⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Counsel for Kings*, 24.

⁶⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁸ Al-Fārābī, *The Political Writings: “Political Regime” and “Summary of Plato’s Laws”*, 75.

principle is to the truth.⁶⁸⁹ As for most people, they cannot understand the content of happiness without religious imagery.

The role of “religion”, according to al-Fārābī, is to devise accurate representations of principles pertaining to humanity’s happiness. Earlier, I examined al-Fārābī’s position that the soul is led by the deliberative faculty, which reigns over its immediate inferior, the imaginative faculty. Correspondingly, philosophy reigns over religion, as the former comes from the deliberative faculty while the latter from the imagination. What makes the lawmaker distinguished among his fellow citizens is his ability to reason without representation – i.e., religion – and his skilfulness of making ideas more universally accessible, which are otherwise inaccessible to commoners. As reason ought to rule over imagination, the virtuous ruler, whose reason is most consummate, is entitled to rule over his fellow citizens.⁶⁹⁰ This demonstrates that al-Fārābī views religion as inferior to the philosophical vocation of the virtuous ruler. As mentioned above, what makes one thing inferior to another is subservience. Religion, according to al-Fārābī, serves as a mechanism of politics in its principal function, dispensing the idea of happiness to the community. While this function is superfluous for the wise as far as their own apprehension of intelligible principles is concerned, it is necessary for dispensing these ideas to the common intellect.

This demotion of religion to the status of a mimetic and political device is entirely denied in al-Ghazālī’s writing. Recall, al-Ghazālī suggests that politics and religion assume complementary roles for the purpose of justice. “Religion” and “kingship” (*mulk*) are twins. On the one hand, religion humbles and teaches the king to abstain from pursuits of lust and other sinful acts. Kingship, on the other hand, is dedicated to ensuring concord among the people and the maintenance of stability and guarantee of some form of prosperity. Al-Ghazālī states that, if the

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid., 74.

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid., 73.

king satisfies the demands for stability and some modest level of prosperity, his subjects' loyalty is guaranteed. But does this mean that al-Ghazālī believes that the king must be wholly and invariably dedicated to the will of his people? What if they demand opulent or lustful things? Al-Ghazālī insinuates that an impious ruler encourages impiety among the populace. Religion constrains the character of the king, and the king diffuses his behaviour unto the populace. Consequently, the pious king encourages piety because populations always mirror their rulers. Al-Ghazālī defends this position by pointing to the rule of two Caliphs, Sulaymān bin Walīd ibn 'Abd al-Malik and 'Umar ibn Abd al-'Azīz. Since the former pursued the pleasures of taste, his subjects were mostly interested in the consumption of good foods. Conversely, the second caliph spent most of his time building palaces and gardening. As a result, the territories under his rule were renowned for their excess in gardens and palaces.⁶⁹¹ Earlier, we saw that, in the *Moderation*, al-Ghazālī allows for deposing the ruler in certain cases where there is a virtuous ruler to replace him. Now, if we take al-Ghazālī's remark that an impious ruler encourages general impiety, would it be possible to find a pious group of contenders to replace him?

One must keep in mind that al-Ghazālī's position in the *Counsel* is consistent with the genre of mirror for princes, namely on the point that population mirror their rulers. In fact, this point speaks volumes to his expectations of religion's rule over the political community throughout his political reflections. Although al-Ghazālī identifies a reciprocal bond between religion and kingship, the king is ultimately bound to religious principles. Religion can never serve as a mere mechanism for virtuous rulers seeking to make higher forms of knowledge intelligible to lesser intellects, as al-Fārābī's elitist philosophy would have. Ultimately, the king is not unlike any other human being, and since he is endowed with the highest rank among humans, there is particular

⁶⁹¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Counsel for Kings*, 60-61.

emphasis on him to be humbled – i.e., to be mindful of his own humanness. Kings are especially prone to the dangers of arrogance and tyranny because they rule over people. They must be constantly reminded that their rulership is endowed by God and that they rule by God’s grace, which is not to be mistaken as divine right. As David Decosimo points out, the *Counsel* serves as a reminder for al-Ghazālī’s sultan addressee of his own finitude.⁶⁹² Although this is a theme that I mentioned earlier in this chapter, I believe it is important to restate in this section. The depreciation of the ruler reduces his centrality in defining the terms of humanity’s happiness, a proposition which is salient in al-Fārābī’s political thought.

Decosimo observes that the purpose of the *Counsel*, which was to teach the sultan about his duties as just ruler, correlates with an especially important principle in al-Ghazālī’s theology. This idea, which is elaborated throughout the *Counsel*, is that no matter how much power we accrue on earth, our worldly dominion and power can be denied by God. According to Decosimo, this reminder of humanity’s finitude serves to promote a conception of radical equality between ruler and his subjects in al-Ghazālī’s political thought. Decosimo sets himself up against Patricia Crone, who argues that Muslim thinkers (with an emphasis on al-Ghazālī) lacked a robust understanding of freedom. While al-Ghazālī wants Muslims to be delivered from servitude to a king or secular ruler, his preferred “opposite” was servitude to God. Between this binary of being a king’s slave or being God’s slave, there is no room for freedom. Decosimo wants to correct this account of Islamic political thought by examining al-Ghazālī’s *Counsel*. Although this text does not explicitly name the concept of “freedom” or its Arabic equivalent, Decosimo is confident that

⁶⁹² David Decosimo, “An Umma of Accountability: Al-Ghazālī against Domination,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 98, no. 3 (2015): 266.

it does provide a critique of “domination.” Furthermore, this deliverance from domination is regarded “as among the highest of political goods.”⁶⁹³

Though I agree with much of Decosimo’s assessments, I must warn against overstating the presence of political ideals, such as freedom, in al-Ghazālī’s critique of tyranny. The main reason al-Ghazālī is averse to tyrants is because of their desire to become godlike. Thus, he states that one must remind the king and his successors, who are the most powerful figures on earth, that their power is derived from God alone. To repeat what we have stated above, al-Ghazālī reminds the ruler that he, like all humans, is a traveller (*musāfir*) who passes through an bridge, which is meant to symbolize life’s extreme brevity. If this bridge is built improperly, then the entirety of one’s life would be buried under the collapsed bridge. The bridge needs to serve as a passage directing one’s deeds and actions toward the afterlife. Those who lead immodest lives are ignorant and lacking in reason. The intelligent person dedicates his or her life to pleasing God and the attainment of salvation in the afterlife.⁶⁹⁴ According to Christian Lange, who endorses Azmeh’s theory of pessimistic anthropology, this constant use of eschatological imagery in the *Counsel* is indicative of al-Ghazālī’s absolutist sentiments. He claims that the constant use of Qur’anic depictions of God punishing the sinful through “violent retribution” is meant to allude to the king’s use of sheer force in a “grim” world.⁶⁹⁵

I highly disagree with Lange’s interpretation, because the treatise is strictly concerned with promoting a pious and magnanimous ruler, as opposed to a forceful one. As we continue to see, al-Ghazālī’s *Counsel* promotes traditional Islamic discourse on piety. Further, the reader needs to be reminded that this text is not addressing the average worshipper or adherent, despite its

⁶⁹³ Ibid., 261.

⁶⁹⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *Counsel for Kings*, 32.

⁶⁹⁵ Christian Lange, “Sitting by the ruler’s throne: Al-Ghazālī on justice and mercy in this world and the next,” *Crueldad y compasión en la literatura árabe e islámica* (2011): 144-45.

treatment of piety in a quite common and simple sense. This simple tone is intentional; it is indicative of al-Ghazālī's attitude toward pious rule and his endeavour to humble the Sultan. This treatise offers a radical take on politics, one that actively undermines the king's unrestrained grandeur. Simply put, the treatise reminds the ruler that he and the commoner both share the same inevitable fate, death, and judgement. Therefore, it is imperative that the ruler not think himself somehow superior to those he rules. When it comes to pious rule, al-Ghazālī is stating the obvious, but that is only because the ruler, who reigns over other humans, is particularly prone to forgetting the obvious – that he is human not unlike other humans.

I briefly mentioned that the themes of human ranking and the status of religion in the political community play complementary roles for both authors. Now is the occasion to expound this connection. When one of the cardinal premises of religion serves to remind us of our shared, inevitable destiny as humanity, then we are dealing with a doctrine of radical equality among humans. In al-Ghazālī's treatise, the religious warning is applicable to all; it does not discriminate between rank and status. The underlying position it seeks to impart is that all humans are feeble in the eyes of God. This is al-Ghazālī's position put simply. Al-Ghazālī and al-Fārābī's positions regarding the status of the ruler are at odds. Al-Fārābī's relegation of religion to the function of statecraft makes his politics significantly distinct from al-Ghazālī's pious rule. To suggest that the virtuous lawmaker utilizes religion to steer the commoners is to assert that select humans are above theological norms. From al-Ghazālī's point of view, this assertion implies that certain humans are supreme, a view that clearly contravenes his politics of humility.

Free will and divine intercession

Al-Fārābī's political philosophy stresses the role of the lawmaker in the ordering of the city and the realization of happiness. This lawmaker is aware that the majority of people are incapable of understanding the inward meaning of happiness as one's emancipation from corporeality. Hence, he must guide them by conjuring images which approximate to the original idea of happiness. This is because the commoners are incapable of understanding the philosophical reasoning informing this theory of happiness. Therefore, al-Fārābī squarely distinguishes between philosophy, which is reserved for the elite, and mimesis. In the case of divine attributes, the philosophical view would stress God's omnipotence by describing His immateriality, His eternality, and His essence as pure intellect. Since these concepts are appealing to the average mind, the mimetic art could help entrench the principle of divine omnipotence through more outward means. If al-Fārābī were a little more vocal about his views on Islam, perhaps he would have told us that the Qur'anic depictions of God's occasionalist powers, which al-Ghazālī understands literally, are exemplary forms of mimetic representation of his first principle.

It is not a stretch to surmise that al-Fārābī would encourage depictions of God as sovereign, as long as the philosophically minded understand its mimetic purpose. This anthropomorphism would ensure that commoners, in part at least, would understand the significance of the first principle's eminence within the cosmos, which is a prerequisite for the long chain of dialectic leading to our happiness. For al-Ghazālī, on the other hand, the idea of an eminent and sovereign God appears to be less metaphorical in scope. Yet he also believed that a rational interpretation of the Qur'an would reveal that the anthropomorphic passages, such as the one depicting God's throne or His elevation above the heavens, are intended to be read metaphorically. This is because al-Ghazālī challenged anthropomorphic literalism himself. The difference for al-Ghazālī, however, is that there is nothing profound or esoteric about the discovery that language can have multiple

layers of meaning. Some passages of the Qur'an were intended to be read as such, and even commoners should recognize this immateriality.⁶⁹⁶ Anthropomorphism aside, al-Ghazālī insists that God has a will and that He is active in the social and political sphere. This is a line that is forcefully expressed in his statement that kings rule under a “divine shadow”, which comes after he forewarns that injustice will lead to God’s wrath in this world and the next.⁶⁹⁷

However, this difference regarding God’s proximity to political life is owed to something more than political thought; it is grounded on two radically different cosmological propositions. According to al-Ghazālī, God’s providence extends to all temporal and created things, whether this be the political community or the life of an individual. God has the capacity to overrule all created things. Since all things are created, it follows that He can overrule all things. This is to say that, in al-Ghazālī’s political theology, God is involved in the minutest things. Since he believes justice to be one of humanity’s main obligations, we can safely presume that God, according to al-Ghazālī, presides over matters of justice. In fact, al-Ghazālī quotes Socrates as saying that the world is held together by justice.⁶⁹⁸ Even when things appear to be unjust, God’s justice will eventually be enacted when we least expect it. Injustice is always momentary; it does not last. This statement, which is attributed to Socrates with no evidence, is not followed up by an immediate example or explanation, but its importance lies in its intimation of God’s proximity (or even involvement) to our worldly affairs.⁶⁹⁹ The reason the *Counsel* is replete with warnings of humanity’s finitude and ineptitude (in the absence of God) reveals an intent to remind he who rules of his nothingness in the face of the absolute.

⁶⁹⁶ Al-Ghazālī, “Iljām,” 68-74.

⁶⁹⁷ *Counsel for Kings*, 73, n.5.

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid., 75.

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid.

As for understanding al-Ghazālī's Socratic maxim, we may find an example in his explanation of the relationship between ruler and ruled. Al-Ghazālī maintains that an unruly population reflects unjust rule. The proposition is simple: when a ruler is unjust, the populace will inevitably incline toward injustice. However, al-Ghazālī stipulates that an unjust ruler by no means justifies disobedience on the part of subjects. The disobedience of subjects is said to be far more consequential than the actions of an unjust ruler. Wherever there is disorder and conflict among peoples, God will blight them with an even more oppressive ruler who will coerce them into obedience. In this instance, the position that justice is always realized suggests that an unjust ruler may sometimes be an indication God's decision to restore justice.⁷⁰⁰

Al-Fārābī theory of the divine hints at a much more passive God. At the beginnings of both the *Virtuous City* and *Political Regimes*, al-Fārābī defines God as the First Cause (*al-sabab al-awwal*), which gives life to the entirety of created entities and beings. As mentioned above, the first cause is immaterial and is consequently unbound by shape or body. We get an initial sense of God's passive character when al-Fārābī suggests that the "First Cause," his Aristotelian term for God, is pure intellect.⁷⁰¹ This entails that it knows itself without knowing the rest of created entities. It does not need to have knowledge of other things, because it is the principal source of the universe. Hence, by knowing itself, it subsequently knows the whole. While the entities which are most proximate or immediate to the first cause are also immaterial, their intellect is demarcated; not only do they know themselves, but also the first cause, which created them. The further removed from pure intellect, the closer the entity is to pure corporeality. The basest entities, inanimate corporeal objects, such as rocks, can also said to be passive, but only insofar as they are

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁰¹ Al-Fārābī, *Al-Madīna al-fāḍila*, 81-85.

completely void of understanding and have no character of their own. Additionally, this first cause is passive because it lacks a will, a view that al-Ghazālī strongly condemns in his theology.

Free will, according to al-Fārābī, is peculiar to human nature, which exhibits medial position between the poles of intellect and corporeality. When humans discover intelligible concepts, they develop a will for immaterial internal thoughts. Al-Fārābī defines the will as the inclination toward known things. If it is simply a matter of inclining toward things that are known to us through the senses or imagination, then this is will in the general sense. All sentient beings are endowed with this elementary type of will, as they come to desire things they encounter through their senses and later form memories of through their imagination. But if this inclination is pursued through “deliberation”, then it is not simply will but “choice”. This choice, or free will, is specific to humans, whereas the rest of the animal kingdom is only gifted with basic, intuitive will, impelled by their appetites and senses. The humans are gifted with the capacity to seek the intelligible things useful for consummating their purpose, which is happiness – i.e., when humans learn to transcend their corporeal conditions.⁷⁰² It is almost as though al-Fārābī is stating that humans have a choice to make between the divine life and the purely animalistic life, which resonates with al-Ghazālī’s view on the median between angels and beasts. The role of the virtuous ruler is to contemplate and replicate the good intrinsic to the first cause. Earlier, when I stated that al-Fārābī’s God is passive, I was alluding to this very idea that the first cause is good by necessity. It does not become good out of will, let alone a free one, nor does it pursue its own good through some kind of volition. It is eternally good. Conversely, the human is endowed with the volition to strive toward goodness.

According to al-Fārābī’s peripatetic cosmology, God does not descend and command humanity to be good, nor does He interfere in the political association through providence. Al-

⁷⁰² Ibid., 205.

Fārābī's political theory rests on the position that human perfectibility depends on its rise to the status of the divine, rather than waiting on divine providence and regular divine interjections in human history as al-Ghazālī would have. For al-Fārābī, humanity's perfectibility rests on the freedom of the will, the freedom to emulate the divine. The virtuous ruler is likened to the first cause insofar as he is endowed with a creative function. Just as all created entities seek to emulate the first cause as much as their respective capacities allow, the citizenry must seek to emulate their ruler and assume different societal roles depending on the level of their intellect.⁷⁰³ Hence, the virtuous ruler is a God among humans. Conversely, al-Ghazālī's virtuous (or pious) ruler is merely a human among humans, one that must distinguish himself from others by way of superior piety. At the heart of this distinction between virtue and piety is a distinction between happiness and salvation. In al-Fārābī's peripatetic thought, humans are inclined to apprehend the conditions of their happiness by way of guidance from their superiors. For al-Ghazālī, happiness is replaced by salvation. While the world may be grim and full of hardships, from political persecution to war, the individual Muslim is ordained to promote the revealed good to him or herself and the community.

Conclusion

Al-Ghazālī's political theory is reflective of his larger epistemological and cosmological foundations. The political communities will dissipate, not unlike any worldly entity. For the time being, the *imāma* prepares the Muslim community for the afterlife, just as religious acts and practice prepare the Muslim on an individual basis. According to al-Ghazālī's cosmology, God intercedes in worldly affairs by way of revelation, thus reducing humans to a reliance on His will.

⁷⁰³Ibid., 229-47.

The state of humanity is feeble such that it requires a theocratic force to guide it through this temporal *bridge* toward eternal salvation. While the state serves a utilitarian purpose of preventing discord and conflict among fellow humans, its perennial founding point is extra-worldly. Even though stability is a key principle in al-Ghazālī's politics, it remains subordinate to a higher purpose: the maintenance and preservation of piety without which souls are forsaken to eternal damnation. In Chapter 4, I explained that the most certain source of knowledge is revelation wherein the universe is not self-standing, but rather contingent on the will of God. Since humanity cannot excel without divine guidance, revelation would demand that the faithful adhere to the political authority which is, in turn, ordained by God.

As I have stressed throughout this work, al-Ghazālī does not regard the religious commandments issued to humanity by way of revelation as being mere commandments. The need for divine commandments, as understood by al-Ghazālī, stems from a skeptical attitude about the universal order. A universe that can be created, altered, and ended arbitrarily at the whims of a divine force is unpredictable; it cannot be rationalized or fully apprehended. Further, the cognitive faculties needed to apprehend objects of knowledge are incapable of independently apprehending metaphysical objects of knowledge outside of their scope, let alone our destiny and the purpose for our existence. Under such circumstances, the *imāma* is regarded as the intermediary force between God's will and humanity. Nevertheless, the *imām* should not be treated as a divine character by any means. Al-Ghazālī diverges from the common kingship theories of his time by deprecating the grandeur of the *imām*. In brief, al-Ghazālī's is a politics centered on "humility."⁷⁰⁴ The most pious ruler is unashamed to live like a commoner and should never be tempted by personal gain. To put it simply, al-Ghazālī would be more inclined to suggest that the *imāma* is an

⁷⁰⁴ Said, *Ghazālī's Politics in Context*, 115.

obligatory office which can never be vacant, as opposed to reverse the character of the *imām*. Certainly, the *imām* is deserving of praise when he is pious, but these actions of piety are equally applicable to all Muslims.

Therefore, al-Ghazālī is adamant that the *imām* must be prepared to be counselled by fellow Muslims instead of making unilateral decisions. The Muslim community is a community of believers who collaborate on the attainment of salvation. But this comes short of being a theory of eudemonia whereby men realize self-sufficiency and excellence through political life. For al-Ghazālī, political life is a conduit for a non-worldly state. Further, the theory of citizenship presented in Aristotle's writing cannot be adequately applied to al-Ghazālī's politics. The former presupposes a life dedicated to the wellbeing of the city, whereas al-Ghazālī would only regard "living well" as legitimate on the condition that it serves to promote our wellbeing in the next life. Lastly, a brief observation must be made regarding the radical nature of theocracies and a potential contradiction within. In al-Fārābī's politics, the ruler (or legislator) is ennobled such that he could be regarded as a God among men. However, at times, al-Ghazālī's *imām* is no different from the lay Muslim. This hints at strong egalitarian elements in al-Ghazālī's theocracy, especially if we account to the commoner's entitlement to counsel others and the egalitarian sentiments he espouses between ruler and ruled. However, in other instances the ruler and the scholars are the sole authority on governing the Muslim community, especially when it comes to the production of religious sciences. Al-Ghazālī's political theory presents us with an enigma within Islamic theocratic thought, that of a tension between elitist and egalitarian sentiments. In the conclusion, I will discuss how al-Ghazālī resolves this tension.

Conclusion

The form of Islamic theology that al-Ghazālī inherited was somewhat self-enclosed. Though the *Ashā'ira* before him used logical formulae to defend a variety of theological theses, they did so only to defend religious orthodoxy. Of course, for al-Ghazālī, there is something quite noble about defending religious orthodoxy, as we have seen him note in some of his writings against religious heterodoxy. Yet, the theologians of his time were intolerant to theological difference, such that they expressly condemned their fellow Muslims. As we have seen above, al-Ghazālī was very troubled by this condemnatory attitude, and there is much evidence to this when we examine his theologically grounded writing on the importance of intra-religious toleration. However, this is not the main reason he critiqued theology. In stark opposition to the way that modern rationalists interpret revealed religion, al-Ghazālī found theological speculation to be overly rationalist. To us moderns, this anti-rationalist critique of theology might strike us as peculiar. When we think of the anti-religious critique, especially in the context of popular sentiment, the image that typically comes to mind is a run of the mill Spinozan condemnation, which is infuriated by religion's appeal to the mythical and its disdain for rationalism. Additionally, we also come across a more persuasive (as in more philosophically oriented) view, one that is familiar to students of the classics. This is the view that religion, including all modes of thought which are expressed through mythical symbolism, is the product of popular sentiments. Generally, opposition to this collective imagination, as we see in the case of Socrates, has been a cause for persecution. This is because the theological (as well as any non-philosophically derived truth) is allegedly nascent in dogmatic dispositions, which are all too common among the non-philosophical majority. Take the case of Euthyphro, for example, whom Socrates beseeches to produce a cogent definition of piety. Readers will likely recall that Euthyphro was on his way to testify against his father who murdered

a man for having killed a slave. Euthyphro had gone against convention by prosecuting a close family member (his father), incurring accusations of impiety by family members.⁷⁰⁵ What follows is a wider discussion about the meaning of piety. The average person would simply agree that impiety is an affront to religious and moral conventions. But, as a philosopher, Socrates wants to know more. He is compelled to inquire into the being, or essence, of piety, demanding an answer about whether piety is whatever God ordains or whether God ordains something because it is unconditionally pious. Instead of engaging in Socrates' dialogical exchange, Euthyphro scurries off to the trial.⁷⁰⁶

In the *Apology*, which depicts a later moment in Socrates' life, we learn what this sort of dialogical engagement does; it supposedly "corrupts the young." If we want to be fair to the belligerent Athenians, we have to try to unravel what they mean by corrupting the young.⁷⁰⁷ This is where we can make use of al-Ghazālī, who opposes theological speculation for its ability to possibly thwart genuine belief. To recall from his autobiography, speculation has the capacity to undermine, or *corrupt*, genuine belief in the foundations of religion. Much like the Athenians who condemned Socrates, al-Ghazālī believes that members of a community (in this case it is the religious community binding Muslims) should unequivocally adhere to customary knowledge, instead of wandering off into independent speculative thought. The sort of corruption one should fear from speculation is skepticism, namely the kind that leads to nihilism and (even worse) atheism.⁷⁰⁸ To this, a modern rationalist, especially one who associates with modern enlightenment, would likely protest al-Ghazālī's call for unequivocal obedience as dogmatism

⁷⁰⁵ Plato, "Euthyphro," 4c-e.

⁷⁰⁶ Ibid., 15e.

⁷⁰⁷ Plato, "Apology," 23d.

⁷⁰⁸ After all, Socrates exclaims that the wisdom attributed to him by the oracle of Delphi was none other than the self-reflective recognition that he does not know. Ibid., 21. While one might be extolled for the virtue in claiming to not know, the full extent of this maxim only seems to undermine one's belief in the gods, an accusation levelled against Socrates. See: ibid., 23d.

square and simple. One must admit that, from a modern standpoint, there is something democratically appealing about philosophical inquiry. The idea that truth is not readily apparent and that it requires dialogical exchange seems to presuppose that people should be ready to forfeit their beliefs in case they are persuaded by a counter view that is even more convincing. Hence, what naturally follows from his mutual respect is a more politically harmonious society. But if we look at the sort of speculation which pushed al-Ghazālī to refute aspects of *kalām*, we come across the very opposite. Throughout this thesis, we saw that al-Ghazālī not only contended that speculation engenders nihilism, but the exercise of reason is itself the cause of many abhorrent dogmatic tendencies. From a political point of view, al-Ghazālī worried that commoners were being unjustly condemned for their inevitable incomprehension of speculative thought.

Certainly, the classics and their Muslim appropriators never saw a democratic purpose to philosophy. Building on the Platonic city, al-Fārābī, for example, contends that the majority of a city's inhabitants are unphilosophical, and that they cannot know without mimetic aid. In this view of the philosophical city, al-Fārābī subverts the religious to the political aim of building an orderly city, using theological symbolism to imprint certain truths in the minds of commoners, who cannot comprehend these truths as philosophical concepts. Seeing that al-Ghazālī also calls for unequivocal obedience to religious knowledge for commoners, one might ask how he differs from the Platonists on this issue. Above, especially in the final two chapters, we explored al-Ghazālī's ambivalent commentary on the usefulness and dangers of *taqlīd*. Though this sort of simple piety is something that al-Ghazālī wanted to avoid for himself, we know that he commended the commoner's unequivocal and uncomplicated commitment to revelation. One of the most appealing aspects of the commoner's simple belief is that it is generally spared of the dangers of nihilism, which is latent in the skepticism that is an inevitable feature of speculative thought. Nevertheless,

there are striking differences between al-Ghazālī and his *falāsifa* counterparts. First, al-Ghazālī does not regard religion as an instrument of statecraft. For al-Ghazālī, all humans (including the *awliyāʾ*, or elite, he has mind) must be committed to the devotional duties prescribed by revelation as well as the theological premise that God is one. At other junctures, al-Ghazālī also pursues a mystical knowledge, which he terms *maʿrifa* or *taṣawwuf* (depending on his audience). This is clearly an experience for the few, and it is considerably nobler than *taqlīd*. In the highest stages of *taṣawwuf*, humans attain the most lucid degree of knowledge of God possible. Note that al-Fārābī draws on similar imagery, claiming that the ruler (who must be well-versed in philosophy in the context of the virtuous city) is the most cogent of the First Cause and its creation. However, the *falāsifa* and al-Ghazālī provide different interpretations of the objects of knowledge and interpret the faculties of knowledge differently. For al-Fārābī, the God we know merely signifies the starting point of a rational order. For al-Ghazālī, God is the freest Being who creates the world by way of an unconstrained will. Further, the *falāsifa* insist that the highest way of knowing the *sabab al-awwal* (First Cause) is through the exercise of reason, yet al-Ghazālī contends that the faculty of the heart (*qalb*) must be opened to God's grace through devotional practice, rather than mental exercise, such as logic or dialogical thought. Hence, one of the major points of contention between al-Ghazālī and his *falāsifa* counterparts is not merely to be found in some of his logical refutations of their naturalist philosophy in his *Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*). The underlying division is of a more general epistemological nature, one that has to do with the interactions between reason and revelation.

Though this thesis dealt with the epistemological foundations of al-Ghazālī's political theology at length, the underlying purpose was to trouble the traditional narratives on the divide between reason and revelation. In the introduction, we explored some of the most recognized

accounts of this divide, notably Strauss's position on the divide between reason and the revealed religion. Here, Strauss stresses that revealed religions demand rigid obedience to customs and principles, which are discomfiting to the philosophical mind. It is this point that I would now like to turn our attention to. Moreover, Strauss contends that the philosophers, who feared religious persecution, were forced to tread carefully, adopting insincere theological discourse to mask their true intentions. Behind these pseudo-religious references lay signals to other philosophers about uncongenial (i.e., impious) ideas. In brief, Strauss is animated by al-Fārābī's narrative of a philosophical class that is wary of a rabble that is, in turn, highly opposed to the ways of the philosophical elite.⁷⁰⁹ Contradictorily, a very careful reading of al-Ghazālī presents us with an alternative line on theology. In his corpus, it is the *falāsifa* who are occasionally ridiculed for their misuse of logic. Al-Ghazālī contests their views by way of their own syllogistic and rationalist methods. In al-Ghazālī's corpus, it is also the theologian who belittles the philosophers. He believed that his contemporary *falāsifa* were men of blind obedience who were partisan supporters of Plato and Aristotle without reflection. When we read al-Ghazālī, we occasionally get the impression that Athens and Jerusalem conflict, but not for the same reasons that Strauss surmised. More on this will follow below.

Building on this tension between philosophy and revealed religion (including within Islamic literature), Strauss contends that there is an irreconcilable relationship between the two forms of epistemic states. Religion, on the one hand, represents the fear of God, which requires a sort of submission *tout court*, whereas philosophy is an unconditional quest for truth. A thorough analysis of al-Ghazālī's theological system allows us to question this narrative of a stringent divide between philosophical inquiry and submission to God's Law. Yes, reason is subordinated to

⁷⁰⁹ Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 18.

revelation in the final analysis, and al-Ghazālī even concedes that it is superior to philosophical activity. Yet, before this final analysis, we notice that al-Ghazālī's theological system often obfuscates the boundaries between philosophical and theological in a way that we can no longer place these two epistemic states at odds. Al-Ghazālī's philosophical theology incapsulates this difficulty of a stringent divide, especially if we consider his position that the highest form of submission is preceded by philosophical inquiry, albeit one that is negative. Consequently, al-Ghazālī's theocratic system, which is based on a conception of religious orthodoxy, cannot be reduced to a view of stringent obedience to custom.

Of course, we can say that al-Ghazālī would conclude with the importance of obedience to custom and scripture and certain religious figures, such as the Prophet and his successors. In fact, his theocratic thought constantly evokes the imagery of a pious subject who is completely humbled by his own powerlessness before the eyes of God and who must adhere to the authority of custom. As I have demonstrated in the final two chapters, this politics of humility is derived from his mysticism, which demands an active debasement of oneself, a view that is grounded in his negative philosophy. Though al-Ghazālī does not expect rulers to become mystics – as it requires a sort of *gnostic* knowledge that would be far too demanding for non-elites – he does believe that the knowledge of *taṣawwuf* can be imparted to them practically. This recalls one of the underlying objectives of the present thesis. Surely, it is not particularly novel to trace the philosophical content informing al-Ghazālī's theological system, including his mystical science (see the works of Richard M. Frank and Frank Griffel for example). However, this analysis was developed further in the present thesis, as I have examined the bearings of al-Ghazālī's philosophical-theological system on a more practical aspect of his work. I have argued that his metaphysical system (which lends itself to an occasionalist line of thinking) is strongly reflected in his vision of political life,

which supposes a sort of dialectic between God and humans. In this relationship, humans are supposed to receive revelation, which forms the groundwork of their Laws. We cannot genuinely appreciate al-Ghazālī's political thought without grounding in this intricate constellation of metaphysical ideations.

In this sense, al-Ghazālī's most resounding political reflection resonates with Plato's philosopher who escapes the cave, and not simply because of the shared imagery of luminosity. As I have shown in Chapter 4, the luminosity that al-Ghazālī claims to have received is not the rationalist kind. It is one that God gracefully outpours in the hearts of his most devoted believers. Yet we would be mistaken to think that there is no sense of 'autonomy' or freedom throughout the process of attaining this divine knowledge. The pious person that animates al-Ghazālī's political theology is significantly 'free,' as he sets out to purify his own heart through inward struggle. Unlike the commoner, this person must tap into *yaqīn*, or certainty, independently of knowledge derived from social conventions, or *taqlīd*. But this individuation of belief is intermittent, as the *mutaṣawwif* must eventually return to society to rectify the wrongs by providing a practical purpose to this *taṣawwuf* just as Plato's philosopher must descend to the cave. It is this sense that I believe al-Ghazālī's *mutaṣawwif* resonates with the philosopher in Plato's cave.

The elements of the philosopher's struggle in the cave are certainly present in al-Ghazālī's self-reflection in the *Deliverance*. Recall that Plato's philosopher eventually aims to find truth beyond the shadows on the cave's walls, which are emblematic of representations, rather than Truth itself. The philosopher ascends beyond the cave, only to encounter a blinding light. This philosopher is initially unable to eye the ideas directly; he can only look at their reflection from the water's surface. After prolonged training, he descends to the cave with his philosophical

perception, presumably to rule over the people of the cave.⁷¹⁰ What happens next is a matter of debate. According to Strauss, Plato insists that the return to the cave results in an even bigger disjuncture between the philosopher's views and those of the commoners, who have no exposure to Truth. For this reason, the philosopher is in fact pushed to apolitical limits, preferring to distance himself from politics and the city's rabble.⁷¹¹ I am not interested in resolving whether the *Republic's* numerous passages on politics are merely allegories regarding human nature. But I must say that, since Socrates presents us with prolonged reflections on politics, it is fair to surmise that Plato at least entertained the possibility of philosophical rule over the city. What is interesting about al-Ghazālī's intellectual life is that it follows a similar trajectory to Plato's philosopher out of the cave, though I argue that the former is even more expressive about the political and social purpose of his journey. If we replace philosophic perception with *taṣawwuf*, or mysticism, we get a similar tale of the individuation of perception which is liberated from the perceptive shortcomings of customary belief. Al-Ghazālī did not only depart Baghdad because he feared that material indulgence would infringe on his capacity to contemplate the otherworldly, though this was undeniably one of his main concerns. He also isolated himself from customary scholarly practices, which to him amounted to sophistry. By detaching himself from the customary, al-Ghazālī believed that his heart (or soul) would be polished enough for a proper exposure to *yaqīn*, or certitude.

Though al-Ghazālī tells us that his interest in *taṣawwuf* began shortly before his departure from Baghdad and was later developed in Damascus. The reason for his departure is expressed in

⁷¹⁰ Plato, "The Republic," 514a-17b.

⁷¹¹ Strauss contends that the allegory of the cave is meant to convey the view that philosophers "know that the life not dedicated to philosophy and therefore even political life at its best is like life in a cave, so much so that the city can be identified with the Cave." See: Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 125.

peculiar philosophical fashion in his earlier logical critique of the *falāsifa*'s and *Mu'tazila*'s main doctrines. It is in Baghdad that he began to contemplate the feebleness of human nature in view of divine omnipotence. As I explained in the earlier chapters, this negative philosophy is a latent expression of his later mystical practice. Or perhaps his mystical practice is the fulfillment of this initial philosophical expression. Whichever it is, we know that *taṣawwuf* is the appropriation of the occasionalist doctrine to one's soul. At its most elementary level, it requires that one relinquish his or her sense of self-worth, resulting in a submission (*islām*) to a higher authority. But the realization of this submission, at least for al-Ghazālī, is not based on a negation of reason and unreflective adherence to custom. It is rather based on a subordination of reason to revelation, which occurs only after reason helps us discover our inferior epistemic state. Further, the inferiority of this epistemic state is described against the backdrop of a cosmological imaginary whereby everything originates from one divine source. Al-Ghazālī's conception of obedience to God does not merely rest on a stringent theological supposition but is rather grounded on rational argumentation.

This brings us back to one of the final points in the seventh chapter. For someone who is very opposed to *taqlīd* for himself, al-Ghazālī appears, at first glance, to contradict himself in his own theocratic vision, as he commends commoners for their simple devotion. Additionally, he conveys a sense of hierarchical distribution between different classes of understanding (see Chapters 4 and 6 in particular). But al-Ghazālī's hierarchy is not a stringent one. It merely refers to some hearts being more perceptive than others and, consequently, more receptive to divine knowledge. Take his own parable on the different classes of metals in the *Restraining* as an example. Here, al-Ghazālī exclaims that the difference between people should be likened to the difference between "gold and silver and the rest of jewels" (*al-dhahab wa-l-fuḍḍa wa-sā'ir al-*

jawāhir).⁷¹² While, to some, the use of imagery here may recall the Platonic myth of metals, al-Ghazālī simply means to tell us that some hearts are more astute than others. The most precious of hearts are the ones exposed to knowledge of God, while the baser ones are the ones beset by corporeal desires. Now, though al-Ghazālī does not convey ideations of social hierarchy in this specific passage, this does not mean that he also wants to do away with the class of the *‘ulamā’* elsewhere. Quite clearly, as we see in his admonishment of the scholars, al-Ghazālī wants religious scholarship to be brought back to its original objective, correcting the characters of people. Surely, this privilege of teaching and promulgation knowledge does not equate to moral superiority. Yet, al-Ghazālī insists that some people are more perceptive than others, and these are the *awliyā’*, or elites. This brings us back to a possible enigma regarding the status of the commoners in al-Ghazālī’s writing.

Let us recall al-Ghazālī’s position, which was mostly explored in the sixth chapter. Across his writing, al-Ghazālī commends the commoners (*al-‘awāmm*) for remaining uncorrupted and for having an astute and simple heart. We also observed that al-Ghazālī maintains that the best sort of piety resembles that of the common class because its members are not animated by superfluous thinking. Hence, at times, it appears that the erring scholars (philosophers and theologians alike) are the political community’s major antagonists. These erring scholars are often charged with disseminating false knowledge or vanity. It goes without saying that the first error is detrimental because commoners would be exposed to heterodox opinions. While al-Ghazālī is prepared to tolerate dissenting opinions, some of these unconventional ideas clearly go against religious fundamentals (think of the *falāsifa* who deny corporeal resurrection in the afterlife and how al-Ghazālī berates them on this point). On the second point, al-Ghazālī insists that some scholars

⁷¹² Al-Ghazālī, “Iljām,” 61.

indulge in unnecessary theological disputation, which rests on logical presuppositions and argumentation. Though these *apologetic* writings can be necessary in defence of the faith, especially against internal heterodox beliefs, al-Ghazālī warns that these are not required for divine illumination. They have little or no bearing on the piety in the heart, and, in fact, these texts can be quite pompous and vain, dealing with irrelevant things. Recall al-Ghazālī’s position from the *Book of Knowledge* in which he berates some *fuqahā’*, or jurists, for needless and endless debates on the technicalities of divorce. Even worse are those theologians (*mutakallimūn*) who contend that their religious counterparts who are unfamiliar with theology (i.e., the commoners) are forsaken and sinful. Al-Ghazālī condemns these scholars for deriding the commoners who are supposed to be their coreligionists.

Yet, this sympathy is not without restriction. We have seen above that, in the *Scale of Action*, al-Ghazālī identifies the common class with the lowest part of the soul, passion. We get the impression that, should the commoners go unbridled, they would cause great harm to the *polis*. We also covered a similar point from the *Restraining of the Commoners from Theological Science*, al-Ghazālī’s final work, in which the commoners are discouraged from exposure to theological disputation, as they are deemed unfit for this sort of practice. Al-Ghazālī expressly remarks that theological disputation ought to be reserved for the *awliyā’* (or elites) who are sufficiently trained in theological disputation and who have sufficient mastery of mystical knowledge. Recall that al-Ghazālī also likens the commoner who engages in theoretical reflection to an incompetent swimmer placed in a deep body of water. It is perhaps better for the commoner to remain in shallow waters to avoid drowning. It is also important to remember that it is not only the commoner who is excluded from the elite class, but also all erring scholars. In fact, as demonstrated in Chapter 6,

the *Restraining* provides a very stringent conception of an elite class, one that even excludes many scholars.

The present thesis contributes to explaining the abovementioned enigma. I have argued that, in al-Ghazālī's general theocratic views, there is no inconsonance between his sympathies for the masses (*al-ʿawāmm*) and the claim that the *awliyāʾ* ought to enjoy certain privileges in political office. When al-Ghazali commends or celebrates aspects of the commoner's beliefs, this is not to exalt him or her above other people. Al-Ghazali is conscious of the fact that *al-ʿawāmm*, or the masses, can be led astray or go awry, which is why he wants to shield them from erroneous belief and protect them from nagging skepticism. Of course, as a devout Muslim, al-Ghazālī would have to consider every human being unequivocally equal. But it is important to stress that, what al-Ghazālī is commending here is an unadulterated heart, one that is pure and simple. The ascetic individual that al-Ghazālī commends is also simplehearted. Simplicity is the first juncture of true piety. Only the heart that is not mired by superfluous and noxious content can be ready to accept God's truth. However, the journey of this mystical piety requires much more than a simple heart. It requires self-exertion, pious deeds, asceticism, and scholarship. While al-Ghazālī is undoubtedly solemn about his defense of the commoners against the accusation of vain scholars, the commoner's heart only serves as a juxtaposition against the corrupt and errant scholars, nothing more.

One might then call into question al-Ghazālī's intentions in *Enjoining the Good*. Since commoners get to berate their rulers for wrongdoing, it naturally follows that al-Ghazālī upholds strong egalitarian standards. It is important to mention here that the commoner does get to counsel the ruler on elementary religious things that are knowable to all. There are aspects of the Law that are not enigmatic, such as the prohibition of alcohol, committing to regular prayers, or respecting

the treasury. These are commonsensical things that every pious Muslim of a sound mind ought to know. Sometimes, the ruler (especially if he is pious) might break from the Law. It is important to stress that this does not somehow exalt the commoner to the status of a scholar. Scholars deal with meticulous and strenuous religious studies and matters, which require mastery and longstanding inculcation. But commoners may reproach the ruler when he transgresses. The emphasis on egalitarianism here is meant to accentuate the fiduciary relationship between ruler and ruled. The incumbent is simply a caretaker who adhere to the Law, and let us not forget that he is also assisted by jurists who are superior to him in knowledge. This levelling of ruler to the ranks of the subjects aims as a reminder that the incumbent acts within the confines of a human institution, one that is instituted for the wellbeing of humans.

Again, this does not mean that the ruler is not exceptional in some of his qualifications. He must be of sound mind, be learned to a certain extent, be able to carry out administrative duties (not everyone has his technocratic capacities) and display martial qualities for the protection of his community. Nevertheless, he is never really exalted beyond this point. But why is the ruler then compared to a commoner? Here comes another one of my contributions. The ruler is reminded of his humanity through the imagery of death and decay. This is the sort of imagery al-Ghazālī would like to stress to inculcate the ruler who is reading him – as intended in his *Counsel for Kings* – so that tyranny can be averted. By reminding the ruler of his shared commonality with his subjects, al-Ghazālī is indeed recalling his fiduciary duties. Behind this ruler is a class of elites who have a more lucid understanding of piety and who can inculcate this ruler into solemn piety.

Thus, one of the fundamental differences between the *falāsifa* and al-Ghazālī is found in their position on the ruler. For, al-Ghazālī, the ruler is not above other human beings. Not only is he grounded and is subordinate to God's Law, but he is also a coequal among humans, a point that

al-Ghazālī is apt on stressing, not only in his political writing, but also in his theological reflections. (This is a point I have covered in my analysis of his *Moderation in Belief*). We now come to understand the practical implications to come out of his theological reflections. The view of a God who transcends all living beings lends itself to al-Ghazālī's unequivocal position that all humans are unconditionally similar in their fallibility and in their feebleness. There is no reigning Being but God in this world. Therefore, the role of the political incumbent – oftentimes referred to as the *imām* – is that of a caretaker of sorts. To reach a deeper appreciation of these political themes (including al-Ghazālī's critique of the *Ismā'īlī* doctrine), one must trace the development of these themes to their metaphysical context. This is to say that we cannot fully grasp the implications of al-Ghazālī's political ideations without linking these back to his reflections on causality, divine omnipotence, the ensuing occasionalism in his writing, as well as his praise of those with the epistemic maturity to comprehend such metaphysical truths.

Thus, the hierarchization in the example of the metals, as well as the examples of social hierarchies we saw from the *Scale of Action* and the *Book of Knowledge* in Chapter 6, are among al-Ghazālī's many parables stressing that the most complete internalization of God's knowledge is only possible to a select few. While all must obey, only a select few are endowed with the perceptive capacity to realize the underlying reasons behind our need to obey. Simply put, this obedience is preceded by the realization of humanity's standing in the cosmos and its relation to God. If we trace al-Ghazālī's intellectual career, it seems as though he counted himself among these *awliyā'*, a term he uses adamantly in his *Restraining*. He denies this term to fellow *mutakallimūn*. Rather, he uses it strictly to identify those who have experienced this true, individualized knowledge, which he defines as a sort of divine or mystic *gnosis*. If al-Ghazālī intended his *mutaṣawwif* to be a permanently isolated figure, he would have undoubtedly never

returned to teaching and to proliferating practical elements of his *taṣawwuf* to both commoners and rulers. As we have seen throughout this thesis, much of this part of his post-Baghdad corpus teaches the virtues of self-depreciation, which is to be understood as a sort of virtuous humility, one that he hopes to transpose to public practice. In so doing, al-Ghazālī pioneers a political theology grounded on his epistemological interpretations of basic Islamic precepts.

Such is the importance of al-Ghazālī's theological contribution. Before al-Ghazālī, Islamic theology witnessed longstanding conflicts between fellow rationalists who disagreed on certain theological positions. Further, he thinks the *falāsifa* followed dubious metaphysics in which they allegedly denied God's true authorship over His creation. Additionally, within this intellectually hostile environment, al-Ghazālī identified an alarming problem. There was no sense of religious humility that ought to always accompany religious scholarship and devotional commitment. This concern of his was mostly aimed at religious scholars because he regarded the *falāsifa* as covert unbelievers to begin with. Based on the sections we examined from his confessions in his autobiography, it is fair to surmise that al-Ghazālī was trying to evade the dangers of vanity, which he constantly warned against throughout his intellectual life. He decided to fully commit to practices associated with mysticism, which he started to consider conceptually as early as his Baghdad writings. However, his departure from Baghdad signals a full devotional commitment to *taṣawwuf* as a practice. At first glance, his mystical science appears to be resoundingly anti-philosophical. First, he praises commoners for their unequivocal commitment to revealed knowledge. As for the elite, they get to experience a more vivid knowledge of this revelation by way of devotional works leading to the heart's purification. The *awliyā'* not only profess that God is One, as revelation commands every believer to do, but they get to experience the meaning of divine unity by having the concept imprinted in their hearts. Overall, al-Ghazālī's writing on

mysticism strikes us as unphilosophical for two reasons. First, the concept of unequivocal obedience contravenes the philosophical quest for speculative thought. Though the *falāsifa* of his time would agree that commoners should stick to unequivocal obedience, al-Ghazālī would add that mere profession of faith is sufficient for otherworldly salvation. Second, though the *awliyā'* get to experience a higher form of knowledge, this knowledge is not nascent in a refined intellect, one that makes use of analogies, syllogisms, and other like mental exercises.

Rather, *taṣawwuf* requires active detachment from the material realm and the full internalization of faith. Given that it is a highly experiential and subjective process, it cannot be explained through textual or dialogical means, as one would of a syllogism, which contains clear rules and patterns that can be made universally intelligible to others. As such, al-Ghazālī's later writings seem to contravene the philosophical and rationalist methods of many of his intellectual interlocutors. Nevertheless, al-Ghazālī's later anti-philosophical critique is grounded in its own philosophical presuppositions. In view of his skeptical critique of the limits of human reason as well as his occasionalist metaphysics, al-Ghazālī concludes that a revelationist doctrine is humanity's soundest path toward salvation from the sensory world, which is regarded as an obfuscation of our perception of higher truths. Like the *falāsifa*, al-Ghazālī is animated by the view that indulgence in the material world is an affront to our original purpose as beings who strive for the immaterial. Further, al-Ghazālī does not merely encourage commitment to revealed revelation to avoid God's wrath, in the way that modern rationalists like Thomas Pangle interpret religion. Rather, al-Ghazālī embarks on a speculative quest to articulate a theological doctrine that he believes is perfectly aligned with human nature and the human purpose in this world. It is in this sense that al-Ghazālī makes intermittent use of philosophical concepts to defend his revelationist theology.

Given his propensity for responding to intellectual adversaries, al-Ghazālī's theological corpus helps us map out some of the most crucial debates in Islamic theology, notably the contest between reason and revelation. Al-Ghazālī was particularly concerned with the rationalism of the *falāsifa* and the *Mu'tazila*. His response helps dispel many of the misconceptions of these Muslim rationalists, both the classics and their modern proponents, concerning the question of occasionalism. Earlier, we saw that the *falāsifa* also defend a theistic position but one that is inherently rational. The occasionalist qualities describing God as a speaker with his own will tacitly assume that God is somehow divisible. A will to perform an act or realize something underlies a deficit, one that needs to be reversed through the performance of an act. If God has a will, then not only is He incomplete, but He also seeks to accrue something beyond His current form; He becomes something else as a result.⁷¹³ Since we have already covered al-Ghazālī's response, I will not return to specifics. I simply want readers to recall that al-Ghazālī's refutation is logically grounded and philosophically motivated. Al-Ghazālī's theistic thesis, which lends itself to an occasionalist theology, is therefore supplemented with thoroughgoing logical disputation. The presence of logic is so salient in this aspect of al-Ghazālī's critique that the line between theology and philosophy is blurred in his corpus.

More importantly, the political aspects of his occasionalism are also defended by way of a thoroughgoing rationalism. Earlier, I mentioned that the ideas of traditionalism and unquestioned obedience can be troubling to modern rational minds, especially for liberals who place emphasis on individual conscience and autonomy. Today, one cannot refute human agency without raising major alarms. Simply put, forgoing reason would be an affront to human liberty. The idea that the human is an autonomous agent responsible for discerning between right and wrong is often

⁷¹³ Al-Fārābī, *The Political Writings: "Political Regime" and "Summary of Plato's Laws"*, 40.

coupled with the political sentiment of liberty. This view, which presupposes that human understanding is the source of human agency, is not unique to modern times. Al-Fārābī noted a direct connection between human intellect and freedom. However, this theme has become more politically pressing in modern times. With the advent of liberal principles, like individual liberties and human agency, it has become increasingly difficult, at least in liberal democracies, to justify any religious or philosophical doctrine without appealing to reason. Reason inevitably takes on a political function, as it is inseparable from the question of human “choice.”⁷¹⁴

In recent years, we have also seen a resurgence of religious dogmatism used to justify persecution and intolerance. Faced with these dangers, which primarily endanger Islamic communities, Muslim scholars have responded to the erroneous and unsound opinions of dogmatists and fundamentalists by appealing to the use of reason in religious interpretation. This is not a difficult task. There is ample evidence of a rationalist tradition in Islamic history and not just among the *falāsifa*. The late Egyptian Muslim Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, for example, drew on *Mu‘tazilī* theology to underline a rationalist interpretative line he believed should be revived in Islamic communities, questioning the current scope of contemporary religious orthodoxy. Though he mainly dealt with epistemic questions, which he related back to the question of theodicy, one can clearly sense an underlying political motivation in his work. Abū Zayd recounts the debates the way the *Mu‘tazila* responded to their *Ash‘arī* counterparts to shed light on an anti-tyrannical current in Islamic thought.⁷¹⁵ As explained in the introduction, the concept of reason-based interpretation does not, of course, immediately lend itself to democratic and liberal ideations. But modern rationalists tacitly assume that the exaltation of reason in religious interpretation would

⁷¹⁴ *Al-Madīna al-fāḍila*, 205.

⁷¹⁵ Zayd, *Al-Ittijāh al-‘aqlī fī l-tafsīr - Dirāsa fī qaḍīyyat al-majāz fī l-Qur‘ān ‘ind al-mu‘tazila*, 241-46.

grant primacy to human autonomy and, by consequence, human dignity. While humans might not be the authors of the Law or justice, they can nevertheless discover these by way of a hermeneutical practice, thus placing the onus of autonomy on the community and its members. This explains why *Muʿtazilism* is appealing to those seeking an alternative to contemporary authoritarian strands of Islamism.

The sentiment of reviving a bygone rationalist tradition in Islamic history is not uniquely modern. In the twelfth century, Averroes remarked that “reflection on the books of the Ancients is obligatory according to the law.” The philosophical method is consonant with revelation precisely because revelatory knowledge yields wisdom with due rational interpretation.⁷¹⁶ In his *Decisive Treatise*, Averroes contends that a society which does not exalt philosophy and rational inquiry would be forsaken. Much of the treatise is set up as a defense of a non-literal reading of the Qurʾan. But this is supposed to underscore the dangers a community would face by adopting a traditionalist position, which would be a dogmatic community. Oftentimes, Averroes is taken as a sort of liberal alternative, one whose works can be mobilized against the traditionalists and authoritarians.

Now, I am not saying that al-Ghazālī was a traditionalist *tout court*. Even Averroes recognizes al-Ghazali’s philosophical contribution. The label of pure traditionalist would go against my exposition of his work. Rather, al-Ghazālī was an intermittent traditionalist, at least when it came to the observation of custom on the part of the masses. It is incumbent for the masses to simply adhere to what they are told rather than engage in intellectual inquiry. Al-Ghazālī even goes further and asserts that inquiry be limited to certain subjects, but it should not become a mode of life. Finally, I conclude that al-Ghazali’s statement on traditionalism and the simple piety of the masses rests on a preceding system of thought in which he establishes God’s rule over the universe

⁷¹⁶ Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*, 6.

and one that lends itself to an extremely strict dialectic between God and humans, one that is strictly akin to that between master and slave. The sentiment of fear and reverence for traditionalism is not what primarily forced al-Ghazali to concede to the important revelation; there is something philosophical in the works, and this leads me to my concluding point.

By writing on al-Ghazālī, my aim was never to defend a view of religious orthodoxy or to argue that it is superior to its philosophical counterpart. As I have mentioned earlier, it is questionable whether al-Ghazālī could even be labelled an orthodox thinker for his time, considering his eclectic writings. But this is beside the point. Rather, I wanted to make a more general assessment about the relationship between reason and revelation, one that I think al-Ghazālī clarifies throughout his theological corpus. Though he promoted the view of stringent doctrinal obedience (a view that is the most salient in his final work), al-Ghazālī did not arrive at this view without the aid of reason. In other words, he arrived at this conclusion by way of a negative philosophy and skeptical analysis, which served to shed light on the limits of understanding. Al-Ghazālī was largely compelled by reason. In this sense, al-Ghazālī is no different from his *falāsifa* adversaries. Both the philosophers and the Ghazālian theologian eventually yield to conceptual categories drawn from reason. To return to the imagery of the *Euthyphro*, al-Ghazālī would not have merely concluded that piety is good because it is ordained by the gods. This theistic premise would require an underlying philosophical backdrop. Ultimately, al-Ghazālī's theology not only teaches us that traditionalism and rationalism are not mutually exclusive but that they can be quite complementary. For the Islamicate scholar concerned with critiquing traditionalism, perhaps his or her critique should begin by foreclosing the assumption of a contest between reason and traditionalism.

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