

Al-Ghazālī on the Origins of Ethics

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Abstract

In his famous autobiography, *The Deliverer from Error*, al-Ghazālī reconstructs the way the science of ethics is supposed to have developed. Al-Ghazālī contends that the philosophical ethics taught by the Arabic Aristotelians necessarily depends upon prior revelations handed to religious aspirants of a vaguely Sufi stamp. Al-Ghazālī's argument is reminiscent of similar ones made in late antiquity; I maintain, however, that for al-Ghazālī the point bears added systematic significance. Given the central position held by the purification of the soul in al-Ghazālī's conception of true religion, he can hardly admit that the philosophers should have discovered independently any of the philosophical ethics al-Ghazālī himself espouses. It is the supernatural power of prescribed ritual acts that ultimately allows al-Ghazālī to maintain the superiority of religiously predicated ethics.

Keywords

al-Ghazālī – Islamic Neoplatonism – Platonic ethics – Islamic ethics – Sufism – history of religions – prophetology

Scholars today increasingly recognize that Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī's (1056–1111 CE) celebrated *Deliverer from Error*, far from providing a straightforward autobiography of al-Ghazālī and his intellectual journey, is in fact a literary construct of the highest order (Ess 1987; Menn 2003; Griffel 2009: 19–59; Garden 2011). On the one hand, the *Deliverer* constitutes a sly and sophisticated attempt to frame in a positive light the two turning points in Ghazālī's career that had provoked the most commotion, namely, his suddenly stepping down from a professorship in the Baghdad *nizāmiyya* college in 488 AH/1095 CE and

his return to public teaching twelve years later. Beyond this, only minimal biographical details are provided. On the other, the *Deliverer*, through recounting how al-Ghazālī's own life is supposed to have unfolded, carefully and methodically introduces several systematic concepts central to its author's overall intellectual agenda.

While the *Deliverer*'s status as a piece of public polemic and an *apologia pro vita sua* has received a reasonable amount of attention in recent times, its systematic dimension has continually been overlooked.¹ Seen in the light of the larger undertaking of the *Revival of Religious Sciences* and related works, however, the sheer audacity of al-Ghazālī's gambit comes into focus. The *Deliverer*, no less than the *Revival*, serves the purpose of realigning the reader's perspectives when it comes to the prevailing intellectual landscape. Its principal aim is to make it seem as though the diverse streams the book describes — philosophy, theology, Sufism — all form tributaries to the river that is al-Ghazālī's newly minted "science of the path of the hereafter" (*ilm ṭarīq al-ākhirā*).

It is the specific issue of syncretism in al-Ghazālī that I wish to address here, and in terms set by al-Ghazālī himself in the *Deliverer*. The present article picks out two passages that have not to my knowledge received much scholarly attention. Of the two, one passage comments on the similarities between the ethics of the philosophers and those of the Sufis; the second offers a novel proof for the veracity of Muḥammad's prophecy. Together, the two texts underline an often-noted but still underappreciated facet of al-Ghazālī's teachings, which is the importance to him of the prescriptions of the divine revelation as the one secure path to human happiness. The story as a whole highlights how aspects of late antique Platonism filtered down to al-Ghazālī — how, or why, remains a question for another day — and how through al-Ghazālī, these Platonic tenets acquired further cultural cachet.

Intellectual Heft and Intellectual Theft

We begin from a slice of purported intellectual history that is embedded in al-Ghazālī's account of the teachings of the philosophers. In the sixth and final section, which deals with ethics (*al-khulqīyya*), al-Ghazālī has this to say:

All that they teach on the subject comes down to an account of the attributes and moral characteristics of the soul (*ṣifāt al-naḥs wa-akhlāquhā*), a recollection of their genera and species, and the ways in which these may

1 Kukkonen 2010 represents a modest attempt on my part to redress the balance.

be treated and struggled against. These things [the philosophers] merely took over from the teachings of the Sufis. The latter are the godly men (*muta'allihūn*) who put great effort into the remembrance of God, opposition to the passions, and following the path to God through renouncing worldly pleasures.

In the course of their inner struggle certain things became unveiled to these [godly men] concerning the moral characteristics of the soul, its shortcomings, and the evils that afflict its actions. These they explicated: then the philosophers took those [same things] and mixed them in with their own teachings, using their luster to sell off their own vapidities. For you see, in their era, as in every era, there lived a congregation of godly men. God, after all, never deprives the world of them, since they are the pillars of the Earth through whose blessings mercy descends upon the people of the Earth, as the Prophet relates, "Because of them you receive rain, because of them you are nourished: to them belonged the Companions of the Cave." These existed in ancient times, as the Qur'ān says.²

There is an historical claim being made here as well as a substantive one. Historically, al-Ghazālī's contention is that the philosophers' ethical teachings derive from those of the Sufis or some appreciably similar group. On the theoretical front, he maintains that both share essentially the same perspective, that of perfecting the soul through a reformation of moral character. Both claims are remarkable and stand in need of explication.

Beginning from the history, the story al-Ghazālī spins is one of the philosophers first plagiarizing the achievements of the Sufis, then using these to tart up their own doctrines which, when taken on their own, are vapid and worthless (*bāṭil*). The language of admixture (*mazj*) that al-Ghazālī employs is purposefully chosen to prepare the grounds for the immediate follow-up, in which he advises the reader on the best way to deal with the philosophers' doctrines overall. Mirroring the way the philosophers had mixed the true in with the false, al-Ghazālī sees his own task — hazardous and difficult but necessary — as that of separating the two once more, showing the truth in the philosophers' truths as well as the falsity of their falsehoods. The case is similar to that of the proficient snake-handler or money-changer who will rightfully not withhold what is beneficial, once the harmful has been discarded through a careful process of extraction (Ghazālī 1967: 86–90).

2 Ghazālī 1967: 86[o]. All English translations in this article are my own.

Yet the claim appears quite preposterous on the face of it. How can al-Ghazālī credibly maintain that the Sufis' discoveries would predate those of the philosophers, when the latter would routinely trace back their ethical teachings to the firmly pre-Islamic trio of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle? Consonant with late antique testimony, in Islamic literature Socrates was presented as a teacher of the reformation of morals (*tahdhīb al-akhlāq*) and the art of disciplining the lower soul (*riyāḍat al-naḥs*) in preparation of ethical advancement and subsequent intellectual bliss (Alon 1991, 2006: 327–332). Plato's ethical teachings were similarly known in outline through the gnomological and doxographical literature, as well as through summaries and paraphrases, prominently those of the *Republic*, the *Laws*, and the *Timaeus* (Klein-Franke 1973; Strohmaier 2002; Endress 2007: 324–337; Arnzen 2009, 2011). Aristotle's views on moral psychology, meanwhile, could be studied through his actual writings, the *Nicomachean Ethics* in particular (Akasoy, Fidora, and Dunlop 2005; Hayes 2015). In some cases, though not all, pseudonymous works and testimonies sought to portray Aristotle, too, as pious and God-fearing. All these sources, readily available to an educated Arabic readership, testified to a strong and consistent interest in the care of the soul throughout the classical period of Greek philosophy.

Ethical writings issuing from later antiquity further drove home the understanding that the entirety of pre-Islamic ethics was oriented towards the formation and improvement of character (see Gutas 1990; Adamson 2011, 2014). Thus, for instance, the very title of Galen's *On Character Traits*, a treatise extant only in the Arabic, announces its intentions baldly and without room for misunderstanding (Kraus 1937; for an English translation, see Galen 2014: 135–172). Reflecting this reality, a whole Arabic literary genre was born that sought to popularize philosophical ethics under titles such as *The Improvements of Morals* or *The Refinement of Character*, both of which translate *tahdhīb al-akhlāq*, the name that Yahyā Ibn 'Adī (d. 364/974) and Miskawayh (d. 421/1030) gave to their respective works treating the subject (Ibn 'Adī 2002; Miskawayh 1967).

From all this, the more plausible conclusion to draw would surely be that the Sufis adopted their terminology of *tahdhīb al-akhlāq* and *riyāḍat al-naḥs* and, more importantly, the attendant theory from the Greeks, rather than the other way around. Crucially, this is not a judgment only a modern reader would make. Educated contemporaries of al-Ghazālī would have been inclined to view matters similarly based on the evidence, at least if their attention were drawn to the issue. Yet al-Ghazālī stubbornly claims exactly the opposite, effectively highlighting a problem where none need have been identified. Why?

A few suggestions readily present themselves. First, to begin from a superficial level, according to the renowned Sufi author al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988), previous generations of Muslims had made claims about the very term "Sufi" being

traceable to pre-Islamic historical sources (al-Sarrāj 1914: 21–22). Al-Ghazālī almost certainly had access to al-Sarrāj’s Sufi handbook, and he may have made note of a feature that could prove useful when crafting a history of spiritual striving that would include Sufism as a perennial component.

It must be said, however, that this is an exceedingly thin wedge on which to base such a significant assertion. Indeed, if one reads the text of the *Deliverer* more closely, it becomes apparent that al-Ghazālī pulls back from claiming actual pre-Islamic roots for the Sufis as a group operating under that particular name, gliding skillfully from Sufism in the second sentence to a more general “godliness” in the follow-up. It is pious people, of some indeterminate stripe, that have existed in every age, most prominently in that era in which philosophy also flourished initially.

One may object, of course, that the latter claim only manages to shift the goalposts a little. The revised account amounts to saying that Sufi-like (rather than Sufi-named) pre-Islamic monotheists would have served as an unacknowledged inspiration to the likes of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. And this seems no more plausible than al-Ghazālī’s opening gambit. But at least it keeps the timeline straight: and for the latter kind of claim, support of a more generic nature was available in al-Ghazālī’s day and age. To pick but one example, we have the philosopher al-ʿĀmirī’s (d. 381/992) story about the sage Luqmān teaching Empedocles, and another one that has Pythagoras similarly deriving his knowledge from the Egyptians (Rowson 1988: 70–71). Luqmān, a shadowy qurʾānic figure (Q. 31:12) who was supposedly a contemporary and countryman of king David, would, since he was a recognized sage (*al-ḥakīm*) according to the Islamic understanding of that word, be particularly well positioned to deliver the philosophical contents of a Semitic religious tradition to a Greek audience. This is essentially an Islamic version of the old Judaeo-Christian trope of Plato plagiarizing Moses.

More in general, there appears to have been in early Islamicate culture a strand of thought that sought to show how the intellectual and/or spiritual achievements conferred by the Greeks were themselves acquired from Middle Eastern sources, whether Babylonian or Persian (Gutas 1998: 34–45) or perhaps reaching back to antediluvian times (Yücesoy 2009). While much of the energy in these early acts of cultural appropriation went into making safe more secular sources of learning, the explanations could expand to include, e.g., the conflation of the pagan sage Hermes with the biblical prophet Enoch, who, in turn, was equated with the Arabic figure of Idrīs (Yücesoy 2009; van Bladel 2009). The explanatory model will have resonated with certain aspects of late antique teaching and Neoplatonism in particular: the latter, after all, itself suggested often enough that authentic wisdom originated in the life, and the cultic life

especially, of the ancient Near East (Egypt, Babylonia, Iran).³ And these stories in turn would find support in Plato's own account in the *Timaeus* and *Critias* of Solon traveling down to Egypt to learn the myth of Atlantis.

The "argument from anteriority," according to which temporal priority constitutes the best assurance of conceptual priority — essentially, a version of *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* — was a well-known trope from Christian antiquity as well, from which context we may assume it was transposed onto Islamic terrain.⁴ Crucially, it was anticipated already in the rhetorical strategies employed by the various Hellenistic traditions of learning when vying for supremacy, whence one also finds the notion that all respectable sources of wisdom ultimately have a common origin (Boys-Stones 2001). The ethnic character of the late antique debates between Christian and pagan authors has recently been emphasized by Aaron P. Johnson (2006: 94–125), who points out that Greek-speaking Christians learned to conceive of themselves as something other than Hellenes, and in the process found it necessary and advantageous to underline the non-Hellenic roots of the more divine forms of wisdom.

So we have at least some context for al-Ghazālī's method of arguing for the necessary primacy of religious revelation over secular investigation, in cases where the two coincide. There is precedent for such procedure, and in fact it finds reflection in al-Ghazālī's other works. In *The Just Balance* (*Al-Qisṭās al-mustaqīm*), which constitutes al-Ghazālī's idiosyncratic attempt to show how elementary syllogistic is both sanctioned by revelation and employed in the actual argumentation it contains, al-Ghazālī goes so far as to say that the rules of syllogistic propagated by the Greeks were similarly purloined from the books of Abraham and Moses (1983: 67.13–14). Al-Ghazālī in fact maintains that all true knowledge concerning the valid rules of inference must come from God via his angels and messengers (1983: 43).

Yet the underlying puzzle remains. Given that it is a stretch to postulate a congregation of pious worshippers lying just out of sight, yet responsible for the entire moral psychology (fundamentally Platonist) of the Greek philosophical heritage, why does al-Ghazālī nonetheless go through with it? Does he not run the risk of merely having the reader draw the opposite conclusion and decide

3 I owe this observation and the reference to al-Āmirī to a three-way discussion between Daniel De Smet, Ulrich Rudolph, and Peter Adamson (Goulet and Rudolph 2011: 316–317).

4 Thus Everett Rowson in commenting on al-Āmirī refers to Eusebius's *Preparation for the Gospel* and Augustine's *City of God* (Rowson 1988: 204–206). I take it that Rowson does not mean to say that Eusebius and Augustine would have been read in the Arabic milieu — they certainly were not, since no Latin Christian authors are believed to have reached a Muslim readership in the classical period of Islamicate culture.

that it must have been the philosophers who were first on the scene all along? Moreover, grant for the moment that al-Ghazālī is playing with his audience's familiarity with the Islamic tradition according to which every nation is sent a messenger (Q. 16:36), and that this is what undergirds his idea that the ancient Greeks, too, were privy to divine disclosures, through one means or another. (It would, after all, be a useful starting point for extending a certain ecumenism even in the direction of classical Greek culture.) In evoking the "companions of the Cave," does he really mean to say that the prophetic mission everywhere is necessarily supplemented by a Sufi-adjacent contingent of spiritual seekers, or that in this case it was actively supplanted by one?

The Reformation of the Soul

What compels al-Ghazālī to bring up the whole issue of priority is that there *is* a marked affinity between what the philosophers (Greek and Arabic) had proclaimed in their ethics and what one finds in certain texts of a more pronounced Islamic hue — none more so than al-Ghazālī's own. Explaining the equivalencies thus becomes no mere luxury for al-Ghazālī, but, instead, a pressing necessity.

To begin from a general level, the notion that humanity hangs suspended between a lower animal nature and an angelic contemplative mode of existence is a commonplace in both philosophical tracts — especially those of a Platonic stamp — and Sufi texts. The need for a close regimen of self-discipline is likewise common to the two traditions. The latter facet is sufficiently important for al-Ghazālī himself to devote a whole book in the *Revival* to the topic of disciplining the soul (*riyāḍat al-naḥs*); under the guise of the soul's purification (*tazkiyya*), it is highlighted already in the earliest substantial corpus of texts filed under the name of an author who later became identified as a prominent Sufi, namely, al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857). Al-Muḥāsibī, whose life's work — it is worth noticing — predates the formalization of Sufism, receives a nod in al-Ghazālī's *Deliverer* and is frequently referred to on the *Revival's* pages.⁵

The train of thought that exhorts constant vigilance, self-abnegation, and self-examination comes coupled with a broad opposition between the lower

5 For al-Muḥāsibī as a forerunner of al-Ghazālī, see Smith 1935: 86–110; for the theme of the soul's purification (*tazkiyyat al-naḥs*), see Picken 2011; al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. ca. 298/908) already has a treatise on *Disciplining the Soul* (*Riyāḍat al-naḥs*), thus mirroring al-Ghazālī's terminology quite precisely.

“soul” (*nafs*) and the higher ‘heart’ (*qalb*) as early as Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) (Böwering 1980: 241–261). The terms are similarly juxtaposed by al-Ghazālī in many of his works, following the further example set by al-Makkī (d. 386/996) in the latter’s important and influential *Nourishment of Hearts*, a work from which al-Ghazālī borrowed particularly liberally when drafting the *Revival of the Religious Sciences* (see Yazaki 2013). Each of these conceptual categories, plus the tendency to view the heart’s ultimate felicity in terms of contemplative bliss and an intimate knowledge of the divine reality, only became more dominant in subsequent centuries (see Renard 2004 for a collection of primary sources in translation). Thus, on the face of it, there would seem to be plenty of cause for concern for anyone who might fret about a possible philosophical influence on the early Sufis.

All of which renders it that much more curious that upon closer inspection, the similarities between the two traditions of psychomachy — Sufi and philosophical — do not appear to reach much beyond these surface impressions. In materials stemming from the early period of Islamic spirituality, one very rarely detects any concrete traces of specific philosophical tenets, not even on the generic level of the Platonic tripartition of the soul, the Aristotelian theory of habituation, or the presentation of the four cardinal virtues. Telling, for instance, is how Timothy Winter in his excellent introduction to the English translation of al-Ghazālī’s treatise *On Disciplining the Soul* treats the early Islamic discussion surrounding the treatment of the soul and the struggle (*jihād*) against its lower impulses, on the one hand, and the parallel ethical tradition found in Muslim Neoplatonism and Aristotelianism, on the other. The two are taken separately, with next to no narrative tissue conjoining the treatment of the two phenomena (Winter 1995: xxii–xxxv, xlv–lviii).

As a consequence, in the sturdier and historiographically more conscientious scholarship we now possess regarding early and classical Sufi thought, terms such as “Platonism” or “Neoplatonism” (for that matter, “Aristotelianism”) are hardly ever evoked. When Neoplatonism does make an appearance as a conceptual category, it is sometimes hard to see what exactly is meant. To take but one example, Gerhard Böwering, in what is by far the most analytical treatment to date of al-Tustarī’s thought, in the final end resorts to describing the latter’s particular brand of Sufism as being “partially inspired by the cultural matrix of his time which seems to include unspecified trends of neoplatonic philosophy, gnostic speculation, and patristic theology” (1980: 265). Böwering must surely be correct as far as the general statement goes. Yet the very way he makes his case — the fact that he does so in terms that are purposefully broad and non-committal — reflects how any putative Platonist stratum in early Sufism remains stubbornly subterranean and can only be referred to

in vague terms, if at all. The way that earlier scholars offhandedly referred to Neoplatonism as a principal ingredient in the formation of Sufism has by and large been exposed as an anachronistic projection.

But then, that already answers for us the question of why al-Ghazālī should choose to emphasize the affinities between Sufi and philosophical ethics and to project the relationship deep into a near-mythical past. For if it was the case that during the first formative centuries of Sufi practice and theorization, parallels with Neoplatonic tenets were mostly generic and indistinct, that situation certainly changed rapidly in the immediate lead-up to al-Ghazālī. Within al-Ghazālī's own work, moreover, these affinities reach a peak not seen until that point in time. To wit, the Bukharan philosopher Ibn Sīnā (the Latin Avicenna, d. 428/1037) in his mature works appeals to Sufi vocabulary in an attempt to put an Islamic gloss on his own theory of affective and ecstatic intellectual bliss, a theory that is nonetheless staunchly philosophical (Gutas 2006). And soon after, al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1062?), in what appears to be the first time in Islamic letters, explains Sufi practice full-throatedly in light of the philosophical moral psychology that was current in the late fourth/tenth Islamic century, which is to say, an amalgamation of Platonic, Aristotelian, and medical tenets (Galen by way of Miskawayh). The latter author in particular appears to have caught al-Ghazālī's eye. Al-Ghazālī's early *Scale of Action* (*Mizān al-'amal*), completed in 1095, adapts large sections of al-Rāghib's teachings alongside Avicenna's ethical treatises. And the materials taken from al-Rāghib get a further workout in the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*.⁶

This is not the place to enter into a detailed examination of al-Ghazālī's own views on human nature and moral character. Suffice it to say that recent scholarship has shown how virtually every aspect of al-Ghazālī's cognitive and moral psychology is suffused with philosophical psychology of a distinctly Neoplatonist stamp: 1) The division between the higher and the lower self is interpreted in Platonic terms as a division between the reasoning principle, on the one hand, and appetite and spirit, on the other (Kukkonen 2008); 2) the reasoning part of the soul, far from being relegated to making inferences about the natural world, finds its true home in the contemplation of eternal and immaterial, indeed divine, reality (Kukkonen 2012; Treiger 2012); 3) the passions, that is, the various manifestations of appetite and spirit are said to be the basis for the soul's turning towards the present world and its attachment to facets of it (Kukkonen 2015); and 4) the passions even lie at the heart of error

6 See Janssens 2008; on Avicenna's direct influence, which is harder to pin down, see Karlga 2002; on the different orders of secular and religious virtues in al-Ghazālī's *Revival*, see Sherif 1975.

when it comes to religious matters, thanks to their pressing the imaginative and cogitative faculties in service of a faulty vision of what is truly valuable (Kukkonen 2016a). All of this is built principally on Avicennan foundations, although it is becoming increasingly clear that al-Ghazālī drew inspiration also from a range of more explicitly Platonic sources, whether this be the school of al-Kindī, the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*, or the philosophical works of Galen (which date back to a pre-Plotinian phase of Platonic theorization and hence cannot be dubbed Neoplatonic, though their main features gel rather well with the gist of mainstream Arabic Neoplatonism).⁷

Al-Ghazālī's innovations should additionally be situated in the broader context of a debate regarding the foundations of Islamic ethics as a whole. The early controversy was between the ethical naturalism of the Mu'tazilite school of theology and the divine voluntarism of the Ash'arites, where the latter strain of thought cashed out as the famous claim that the good simply *is* what God enjoins, while what is evil simply is what God expressly forbids (Hourani 1985). An early twentieth-century characterization of al-Ghazālī as a thoroughgoing divine command theorist in the Ash'arite vein has gradually given way to a more nuanced understanding, so much so that a legal scholar such as Anver Emon today can place al-Ghazālī in a projected camp of "soft" Islamic natural law theorists, for whom God's wisdom in creation provides the tools for pondering the final purposes of the divine commandments (Emon 2010).

Whether "soft natural law theorist" is an altogether accurate descriptor of al-Ghazālī as a legal scholar lies beyond the purview of this essay. But the fact that al-Ghazālī analyzes the fulfillment of the letter of the divine law in light of its salutary effect on the soul and its preparatory value in the seeking of ultimate felicity is both indisputable and quite striking. Most notably, al-Ghazālī plainly professes that even prescribed acts of ritual worship carry a purpose and that that purpose is to facilitate contemplation of the divine: "it is no secret that the *telos* (*ghāya*) at which acts of worship aim is the cogitation by which an intimate understanding and insight into the realities of He Who is Real (*al-ma'rifa wa-l-ibtisār bi-ḥaqā'iq al-ḥaqq*) is arrived at," al-Ghazālī avers in one of the central books in the *Revival* (*Iḥyā'* XXIII, *bayān* 2 = Ghazālī 2011: 5: 302.10–11). In another context, while discussing sincere intention (*nīyya*) in religion, al-Ghazālī proclaims pious deeds to be "the nourishment of the hearts" (*al-ṭā'āt ghidhā' al-qulūb*). They aim at the heart's healing, thereby ensuring its

7 The extent of al-Ghazālī's debt to the Brethren of Purity remains to be addressed: al-Ghazālī's outspoken disdain for the teachings contained in the *Epistles* may again mask a deeper appreciation. On the topic of the Brethren's philosophical religion in particular, notably including its Platonic and ritual component, see now Mattila 2016.

survival and wellbeing and ultimately its felicity in the hereafter (*Ihyā'* xxxvii, *bāb* 1, *bayān* 3 = Ghazālī 2011: 9: 26.12–14). We will have occasion to question the significance of these statements later in this essay.⁸

For now, let it merely be noted how at the very outset of the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, al-Ghazālī claims that originally and in the proper sense of the word by the sciences of religion (*'ulūm al-dīn*) “the science of the path of the hereafter” (*'ilm ṭarīq al-ākhirā*) was understood. This already shifts the parameters of the discussion away from jurisprudence and formal theology, the two fields that had dominated academic ethical inquiry within Islam up to that point, and tilts it in the direction of a science of the soul, whichever way the latter is construed (Gianotti 2011). Jules Janssens (2011) and Kenneth Garden (2015) echo centuries of Muslim commentary when they point out that it is hard to say where exactly Sufism ends and rationalism begins in al-Ghazālī (see also Garden 2014: 30–59). Yet it is the principle of the thing that matters most: within al-Ghazālī's overall authorship, a clear break from Ash'arite ethics is discernible, along with a shift towards a more character-based and eudaimonistic ethics.⁹ This of course is in part a shift from a theological (*kalāmī*) paradigm to a Sufi one. But the fact that al-Ghazālī so clearly employs philosophy, and specifically Neoplatonic philosophy, in the explication of the theoretical basis for this ethical outlook bespeaks an obvious infatuation on al-Ghazālī's part with the latter's explanatory potential.

Once we acknowledge the thoroughly philosophical character of al-Ghazālī's own ethics, the rhetorical moves he makes when discussing the “ethics of the philosophers” begin to make a different kind of sense. What al-Ghazālī aims to do is pre-empt a certain kind of criticism, whether real or imagined, that can be lobbied against his own presentation of a Muslim perfectionist ethics (i.e., character building leading up to contemplation). Al-Ghazālī consistently paints his “science of works” (both as a body of knowledge, as per the *Revival*, and as a practically implemented program) as the one secure path that will lead one to the “heart,” “core,” or “pit” of Islam — each of these terms is used

8 For the principle that the heart's natural status is to rejoice in the contemplation of God and His creation, see, e.g., *Ihyā'* xxii, *bayān* 6 = Ghazālī 2011, 5: 222.1–15.

9 This is a more general trend in Muslim thought at the time; see Kukkonen 2016b. As for al-Ghazālī, the early *Mean in Belief* (*al-Iqtisād fī l-ʿitiqād*) and the second book of the *Revival*, previously released as the *Jerusalem Letter*, are *kalām* works and thus retain Ash'arite arguments against a naturalistic interpretation of the concepts of good and evil and advocate a divine command theory, whereas this kind of argumentation is conspicuously missing from the larger part of the *Revival* and many related works. Al-Ghazālī's *al-Mustasfā min 'ilm al-uṣūl*, a late legal work, is a special case and deserves closer attention.

by al-Ghazālī in opposition to the mere “husk” that is religious observance without sincere devotion or an attempt to grasp its deeper meaning. This is a precariously positioned project as it is, and in fact al-Ghazālī had to expend considerable human and political capital in order to appear the appropriate vessel for such an inner revival of Islam (Garden 2011, 2014). Should someone now point out that the conceptual framework for al-Ghazālī’s practical science and study of the hearts resembles the Neoplatonism of Avicenna or Miskawayh more than it does anything found in the accounts of the virtues mapped out in the authoritative Sufi manuals, it is unlikely that a mere pointer to al-Rāghib would grant al-Ghazālī’s project the necessary Muslim *imprimatur*. In evoking a continuous line of monotheist spirituality stretching back to pre-Islamic times, al-Ghazālī is primarily creating room for himself to appropriate as much of the Greek tradition as he deems useful.¹⁰

In this connection the “Companions of the Cave” (*aṣḥāb al-kaḥf*) mentioned by al-Ghazālī in the *Deliverer* become of added interest. The Companions provide the initial focus to the *Ṣūra* of the Cave (Q. 18.9–26); their story so closely resembles that of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus that some Muslim commentators felt obliged to date the Companions back to early Christian times (Roberts 1993: 298–306). Among Sufi authors, the Companions’ retreat into the cave was read as a laudable determination to shun the world (thus, e.g., Qushayrī 1968–1971, 4: 50–51). A reference to them at this juncture would remind the audience that admitting or even celebrating the existence of a pre-Islamic pious community was no cause for alarm to the sophisticated Muslim, since such references are embedded even in the Qur’ān.

Moreover, the story of the Companions only forms the first section of the *Ṣūra*. At a later point, the attention shifts to Moses — a prophet and a law-giver if ever there was one — and how the latter once sought guidance from a shadowy figure whom the later tradition identifies as al-Khiḍr or al-Khaḍir, “the Green one” (Q. 18.65–82; see Wensinck 1978). The encounter according to the Qur’ān did not go altogether smoothly. Despite the fact that Moses actively

10 Part of the reason why al-Ghazālī sees fit to co-opt the majority of previous Islamic spirituality is his position within the Islamic ascetic and contemplative tradition as a whole. From the point of view of Sufi historiography, al-Ghazālī arrives at the tail-end of a lengthy period of systematization and consolidation, one that sought to portray the entire breadth of Islamic asceticism and mysticism as being essentially of a piece (Knysh 2000: 116–149; for a list of the relevant Sufi manuals and treatises from the period leading up to al-Ghazālī, see Karamustafa 2007: 84–86). Within this framework it was natural not only to treat virtually all prior Muslim spiritual authors as “Sufis,” but to presume a harmony among their goals and methods as well.

solicited the wisdom of this mysterious sage, he nonetheless could not help but cast doubt on the stranger's ethics at first (18: 71, 74) before eventually coming around to extolling al-Khiḍr's character. Sufi authors, including al-Qushayrī (d. 1072), whom al-Ghazālī certainly uses, had seen in al-Khiḍr a pre-Islamic predecessor.¹¹ It is hard not to read al-Ghazālī hinting here — quite obliquely, it must be said — at the necessity of adopting a benevolent and forbearing attitude towards foreign ancient ethicists. If nothing else, on al-Ghazālī's story, they may unwittingly be bearing testimony from a distant past concerning prophetic revelations or saintly dispensations.

Natural and Supernatural

Al-Ghazālī, attracted to the moral psychology of the philosophers, was casting about for a conceptual scheme that would allow him to draw on these materials without fear of censure or reprisal. The argument from anteriority provided him with the means to do so, since by its lights, philosophical ethics had originally issued from within a monotheist line of prophets stretching back to Adam, Abraham, and Moses. If this article were solely an exercise in the history of religions, one might very well stop there.

However, a tantalizing question remains. What if al-Ghazālī had philosophical reasons as well as pragmatic ones for maintaining that, in ethical striving and character development, divine inspiration always comes first? In a couple of places in the *Deliverer*, al-Ghazālī appears to argue exactly that. He refers to the miraculous or unfathomable efficacy of the Prophet's exhortations in particular and maintains that these must therefore tap into aspects of reality beyond the ken of discursive reason. If this is right, then there is a deeper sense in which there is a necessary order of priority between revealed ordinances and philosophically explicated ethics.

That such a thing would be on al-Ghazālī's mind is hardly a stretch. For one thing, al-Fārābī (following him, Ibn Sīnā) had put it that the opposite is the case: religion always follows philosophy, temporally as well as conceptually, because already by definition religion consists of likenesses of philosophical propositions. According to al-Fārābī's conception, which by al-Ghazālī's time had already achieved some notoriety, religion is born in human society when theorists, satisfied that they have reached the truth concerning things, turn their attentions to teaching the multitude. Because rhetorical and poetic

11 See now Halman 2013 for a translation of al-Qushayrī's remarks on the qur'ānic account of al-Khiḍr and Moses.

instruction is better capable of persuading a philosophically unsophisticated audience, the lawgiver — al-Fārābī's equivalent of Plato's philosopher-king — will forge an affective narrative and cosmology that reproduces the essential truths of philosophy in the form of similes and symbols (Fārābī 1969: 152–161).

Religion, then, in al-Fārābī's notorious phrase, shows itself to be an imitation or likeness (*shabah*) of philosophy. Its special value lies in its ability to yoke philosophical discoveries and eternal truths to the service of advancing positive causes within a polity. What is more, even if the lawgiver is described as divinely inspired, the whole affair begins to look remarkably man-made. Recently, Peter Van Nuffelen has sought to show how this model of the basic relationship between reason and religion goes back to first-century BCE Platonism, as exemplified by the works of Numenius and Varro (2011: 27–83). Al-Fārābī's views on philosophy and religion, accordingly, are more Middle Platonist in character than Neoplatonist, as in fact Richard Walzer already suggested (Walzer 1985).

If, however, religious observance is merely an imitative activity, then its status as a necessary path to salvation looks to become at best conditional or transitory. Thus, for instance, the humanist scholar Abū Sulaymān al-Maḳdīsī, who in fifth/eleventh-century sources is routinely associated with the so-called Brethren of Purity (an eclectic Neoplatonist group of writers from the fourth/tenth century), is reported to have let slip in courtly conversation that while religious law is medicine for the sick, philosophy is medicine for the healthy. As Joel Kraemer points out, this is beginning to look distinctly antinomian. If those who have reached the rank of philosopher are of sound disposition, then they can transition from religious to a purely philosophical ethics without harm (Kraemer 1986: 171, commenting on the story in Ibn al-Qifṭī 1903: 82–88). Partly this is because the theory discussed makes for a distinctly intellectualist portrayal of the contents of religion. If religion is an intentionally crafted imitation of philosophy (whether by divine or by human agency — in this instance, it makes no difference), then by definition nothing enters into religion that would not translate a prior philosophical truth. Religion holds no mystery for the philosopher, which makes it easy for the philosopher to switch from one set of symbols to another (witness the facility with which the late antique Platonists approached the task of demonstrating the “translatability of deities,” to use Jan Assmann's phrase), but also ultimately to let go of the symbolic altogether.¹²

Switching to al-Ghazālī, we immediately observe several important departures from the philosophical model. Notice, for example, the precise way in

12 For a study of Assmann's notion of translatability see Smith 2010.

which al-Ghazali in the *Deliverer*, in our original passage, claims to illuminate the genesis of findings related to moral psychology. The directionality runs explicitly from practice to theorization: it was through ethical striving — al-Ghazali's celebrated greater *jihād* — that the god-fearing people of old came by their psychological discoveries and recorded them, rather than philosophers first hitting on the correct theory and then working out the moral implications. This is a real departure from the way the relation between theoretical and practical knowledge is presented in the Muslim Peripatetic materials. In the latter case, there can be no doubt that determining (through independent reasoning) how things *are* precedes the recognition of how they *ought* to be: locating the human being on the scale of nature and cataloguing the various psychological faculties is a prerequisite for drafting a program of moral improvement for all and sundry.

What is surprising, perhaps, is that when the systematic dimension of al-Ghazālī's polemics is considered, the outline of an argument emerges that is effectively analogous to certain developments in late antique Neoplatonism. To be specific, al-Ghazālī's take on the origins and efficacy of revealed religion, and the need for certain prescribed ritual acts in order for the soul's purification to get underway, resembles the defense of religious activity advanced by Iamblichus of Chalcis (d. ca. 325 CE).¹³ This raises more questions about the shape of al-Ghazālī's overall philosophical theology than it does about the Greek sources to Islamic thought (I do not believe that al-Ghazālī had access to late antique texts).

The first key passage comes at a pivotal point in the *Deliverer* when al-Ghazālī argues for humanity's need for a prophet. In the course of establishing this postulate, al-Ghazālī goes off on a tangent on how to recognize a true prophet:

If a doubt occurs to you as to whether a certain individual is a prophet or not, certainty regarding the matter can only be gained through an intimate understanding of that person's states [*ma'rifa ahwāli-hi*], either through a direct witnessing or through occurrent notions and hearsay. If you are intimately acquainted with medicine or law you are able to recognize the jurists and the physicians through witnessing their states; if you have not witnessed them yourself, you may listen to what they have said. Therefore you are not unable to know that al-Shāfi'ī is a scholar of jurisprudence or that Galen is a physician. Knowledge of this

13 Space does not allow for a full consideration of Iamblichus' sophisticated theory of theurgy and divine causality, let alone the many competing versions that sprang up in antiquity; for a primer, see Shaw 1995.

truth does not arise through blindly following authority [*taqlīd*], but by way of learning something about jurisprudence and medicine. Thus you will gain necessary knowledge [*‘ilm ḍarūrī*] concerning their states.

Similarly, once you comprehend the meaning of prophecy and strive to understand the Qurʾān and the Prophetic traditions, you will attain necessary knowledge concerning the fact that he [*scil.* Muḥammad] was a prophet of the highest rank. This [conviction] is further bolstered when you experience what he said about acts of worship and the effect that such acts have on cleansing hearts. How true was his saying, “To the one who acts according to what he knows God shall grant knowledge of what he does not know,” and how true his saying, “God delivers one who aids somebody who is benighted into that person’s hands,” and how true his saying, “The one who distils his cares into a single care, God will deliver from the cares of this world and the next.” When you have experienced this a thousand, two thousand, indeed thousands upon thousands of times, you will attain necessary and unassailable knowledge in the matter.

Therefore seek certitude regarding prophecy in this manner, not from [an examination of] how the staff was turned into a serpent or the moon cut in two . . . (1967: 112–114)

The first lesson to take away is that the proof of prophecy is not to be found in any magical demonstration of power; rather, it is located in the prophet’s own character and his conduct (Menn 2003: 171–172). Any claim to prophethood is to be tested on the merits of its message and — as a first exemplar of what the message is meant to achieve — the moral caliber of its messenger.

Al-Ghazālī is confident that both the Messenger of Islam and the message Muḥammad conveyed pass the test with flying colors, indeed by overwhelming intellectual force. In the above citation, al-Ghazālī actually posits that through repeatedly receiving confirmation of such a hypothesis, one attains necessary and unshakeable knowledge regarding its veracity. Clearly something other than demonstrative certainty is meant hereby. Al-Ghazālī in fact appeals to the Islamic notion of *tawātur*, a class of common knowledge regarding the past that becomes incontrovertible when testimony in favor of it becomes recognized as being both unanimous and widespread (Weiss 1985). Al-Ghazālī contends that any survey, whether small or large, regarding the effects of Islam will result in an agreement that the Prophet’s words and his example have resulted in the most good the world has ever seen. This is *prima facie* very strong evidence for the veracity of Islam’s claims as well as Muḥammad’s claims to prophethood.

Al-Ghazālī, however, next takes his case beyond mere moral exhortations and into the realm of ritual ordinances. Here the question of what constitutes evidence becomes trickier, since the connection between action and character-building is not quite so manifest. Al-Ghazālī draws a parallel between his spiritual medicine and the pharmacological knowledge of the day:

To the naturalist [*tabīʿī*] we therefore say, “It is incumbent on you to admit that opium has a special property [*al-khāssiyya*] that induces clotting, the fact notwithstanding that this is not [included] in the intellectual inferences made in physics. Why, then, would it not be allowable that in the religious statutes [*al-awḍāʿ al-sharʿiyya*] there should be special properties [that bring about] the healing and purification of hearts, ones that intellectual wisdom does not perceive — indeed, ones into which insight can be gained only through the eye of prophecy?”

In truth, they acknowledge special properties more marvellous than these in what is recorded in their books. An example of such a marvellous property is [what is used in] the treatment of a pregnant woman for whom childbirth is difficult by means of this figure:

4	9	2	d	ṭ	b
3	5	7	j	h	z
8	1	6	ḥ	ʿ	w

... written on two strips of cloth that water has not touched. The pregnant woman stares at these and lays them under her feet, after which the child comes out with haste. The naturalists acknowledge the possibility of this and record it in *The Marvels of the Special Properties*. In the figure there are nine squares, with specific numbers inscribed in each so that they add up to fifteen in each line, whether [read] orthogonally or diagonally.

What rot! That someone should accept this and then be so small-minded as to refuse to accept that the ordainment of two *rakʿas* during the morning prayer, and of four at noon, and of three at sunset, is [due to] special properties unknown through rational speculation. The reason [for their being so ordained] lies in the difference between these hours, and these special properties are only perceptible through the eye of prophecy. (Ghazālī 1967: 126.1–127.5)

Al-Ghazālī’s initial point is that anyone who believes in the marvelous properties of mundane substances — in this case, the assistance that opium lends to the clotting of blood — should be open to the idea that a true prophet may

exert powers and display faculties that appear properly supernatural. Notice how the medical analogy indicates that we are not necessarily dealing with miracles in either case — certainly, what the medical profession documents in its extensive lists of medicaments and drugs are actual features and structural properties of the world: it is just that countless relations and equivalencies, etc. are beyond our ability (yet) to set in their rightful rational context. (By extension, one would assume that the rather amazing birth-giving aid so vividly described by al-Ghazālī also relates to some real features of the world; certainly al-Ghazālī would have frowned upon the notion that one could manipulate spirits through such means, or that one should. The example appears to fall somewhere along the spectrum of natural and symbolic magic.) The point is that on numerous occasions in our everyday life, “this has been shown to work, time and time again” is a perfectly valid reason to subscribe to a given practice, even in the absence of a theoretical understanding of what might explain the efficacy in question.

What is interesting for our purposes is that al-Ghazālī, far from reverting to the well-worn trope of the prophet’s being able to predict the future or perform miracles, once more chooses to highlight the prophet’s ability to offer instruction that contributes to the amelioration of one’s character, and to do so in a way that is beyond any person — whether philosopher or commoner — who is not divinely inspired. Al-Ghazālī heavily implies that the precise instructions to perform a certain number of prostrations during prayer in the morning, a different number at noon, and yet again a different number during the evening all latch on to complex psychophysical processes, thus assisting us in purifying our souls.

In the *Revival*, and especially in its book *On the Secrets and Duties of Prayer*, al-Ghazālī prominently foregrounds the efficacy of ritual prayer in cleansing the mirror of the soul. The mechanisms are in the first instance purely physiological: the limbs’ actions accustom the heart to desire the good and to establish an inclination towards it (*Iḥyā’* XXXVII, *bayān* 3 = Ghazālī 2011, 9: 28.15–16). But al-Ghazālī further states that correctly and mindfully performing the ritual prayer “occasions the advent of lights in the heart, lights that form the key to the sciences of divine disclosure” (*Iḥyā’* IV, *bāb* 3, *bayān* 4 = Ghazālī 2011, 1: 630.14–15). The metaphor of light is common coin among Platonists, as is al-Ghazālī’s use of the simile of the soul as a mirror in need of cleansing; but in what follows, al-Ghazālī taps into more specifically Neoplatonist (Plotinus and after) ideas. In the first instance, al-Ghazālī indicates that the illumination afforded by performative prayer may result in actual dream visions, visions that need to be channeled through the imaginative faculty. The vision brought on by each prayer is commensurate with the degree of purification achieved

by the supplicant from the impurities of the present world (*Iḥyā'* IV, *bāb* 3, *bayān* 4 = Ghazālī 2011, 1: 631.3). It will also be modulated by the individual's life-experience, so that the apparitions that one receives will come in a form that the individual's imagination is used to conjuring up, e.g., through his or her worldly occupation.

What we need to recognize is the general principle in operation. It is God who has announced to us how we should pray, and how often; and He has done so because He, and He alone, knows what combination of words and gestures and thoughts best contributes to the purification of every single person's soul. Paradoxically, this is because these activities have to reach well below the rational level, into the realm of animal souls where the philosophers' universal pronouncements no longer hold true due to the sheer variety of human dispositions.¹⁴ This, again, appears analogous to the Neoplatonism of the final phase of antiquity (fourth to sixth centuries): only the genuinely supra-rational can reach down to what is truly sub-rational, and to effect its return through means that in the initial phase are properly supernatural. We perform the ritual prayers in exactly the manner prescribed, not because we know what they accomplish and how they accomplish it, but precisely because we do not.¹⁵

For comparison, let us examine a treatise attributed to Ibn Sīnā, *On the Essence of Prayer* (Ibn Sīnā 1894: 28–43). Here we find a division similar to al-Ghazālī's between the external and internal aspects of prayer — not surprising, since that division is common to much of Muslim spiritual literature. But what is missing is any notion of the psychophysical effect that ritual prayer would have on the soul. Contrary to any such belief, the author describes the externalities of prayer as a trace (*athar*) of the soul's attitude, something that allows the body to imitate the perfection achieved by the soul. The Lawgiver

14 This is one area where the interplay between the prophets and the friends of God comes into its own. The prophets declare God's law, which miraculously ends up benefitting everyone, no matter what their set of humors, temperaments, and bodily and mental dispositions. The Sufi masters, by contrast, need to make constant adjustments to their philosophically worked-out programs of self-improvement, on the principle that the drug that benefits one patient may kill the other.

15 To take another example from al-Ghazālī's treatment of the prescribed religious ritual acts in Islam, when it comes to reciting the Qur'ān, al-Ghazālī contends that one must learn to take each commandment and prohibition to heart, reading each verse as being addressed directly to oneself somehow. Al-Ghazālī calls this act "particularization" (*takhsīs*): for his exhortations to make sense, one must assume both that (a) individual circumstances really *do* vary considerably and that (b) notwithstanding this diversity, the words of the Holy Book *do* have the power to shape and improve the life of each and every recipient individually (*Iḥyā'* VIII, *bāb* 3 = Ghazālī 2011, 2: 307).

(again, the Muslim equivalent to the Platonic philosopher-king) therefore prescribed outward prayer as a kind of trace of the intellectual adoration that is the human being's true duty: this is merely one application of the general principle according to which "the religious law follows reason as its trace" (Ibn Sīnā 1894: 36).

We can immediately see where certain antinomian tendencies might rear their head on this picture, and *On Prayer* does nothing to dispel the worry. Outward prayer is explicitly described as a duty incumbent on the masses, i.e., those whose intellects are too weak to carry out the higher calling of apprehending the Necessary Existent and performing the acts of true intellectual adoration. External prayer, which amounts to an orderly governance of the body, keeps the feeble-minded from lapsing into the imitation of beasts; it remains sensual and bodily in nature and can at most stand in symbolically for the cognitive attitude of the reflective believer. It is of little comfort to the religiously minded to read that there is "much benefit in this, and a general utility" (*fī hādhā maṣlahā kathīra wa-fā'ida āmma*; Ibn Sīnā 1894: 37), especially when in what follows, the author cheerily notes that God's Messenger himself — Muḥammad — when engaged in the veridical perception (*idrāk ḥaqīqī*) of God was sometimes prevented from sticking to the prescribed order and number of prayers. One is left with the distinct impression that such liberties are fully allowable to the philosopher as well — but not the layperson — so long as the pure inward intention is there. The outward prayer, after all, is only ever an expression of an outlook; it never materially affects the rational soul, since it never can do so. What *On Prayer* describes is a one-way street fully in keeping with al-Fārābī's and Ibn Sīnā's general presentation of religious ordinances. The latter have been created as imitations, semblances, and symbols of higher philosophical truths, principally so that the unintellectual masses may partake in the reality in the limited manner — and to the limited extent — that is open to them.¹⁶

None of this would have pleased al-Ghazālī. In the *Revival's* book on prayer, al-Ghazālī affirms that Friday is an especially powerful day (*yawm 'aẓīm*) when it comes to performing the ritual prayer, though he does not elaborate on why that is (*Iḥyā'* IV, *bāb* 5 = Ghazālī 2011, 1: 659). Al-Ghazālī furthermore devotes an entire book in the *Revival* to the *Ordering of the Assigned Times* (*tartīb al-awrād*) for worship, and in this context he refers numerous times to the particular

16 I refer to the author of *On Prayer* in the abstract due to the doubts expressed by Dimitri Gutas regarding its authenticity (2014: 489–490). Gutas reports that Heidrun Eichner, who has written on the epistle (an article I have not been able to obtain), regards the work as authentic but early-career.

efficacy of performing certain rituals at certain times, on certain days, and in a certain manner. What it is that might underwrite these particulars, al-Ghazālī again does not say: perhaps he is resolved simply to keeping the story straight and preserving God's secret knowledge as His and not al-Ghazālī's. In any case, al-Ghazālī is convinced that each and every one of the ritual acts prescribed in Islam contains a multitude of "secrets" (as per the names of the *Revival's* associated individual books), and that one of the consequences is that no sincere servant of God should ever give themselves permission to deviate from the literal interpretation of the divine commandments and prohibitions.¹⁷

God's Care for Us

In the *Scale of Action*, al-Ghazālī sketches out a hierarchy of virtues that has God's guidance listed at the bottom level, yet it is lauded as the most indispensable element of all. God's instructing humankind through His word and through the prophets is required in the first place for the various social goods to be achieved: these are needed in order to realize one's bodily goods; then these in turn are a prerequisite for the many goods related to the soul to be manifested, which in turn must be firmly ensconced for any human to achieve his or her ultimate aim, which is eternal bliss and the *visio Dei* (Ghazālī 1964: 294–295). What al-Ghazālī presents bears a clear family resemblance to the Neoplatonic scale of virtues as explicated in Porphyry and others (O'Meara 2003: 40–49; for one account of the scale, see Olympiodorus 2009: 116–125). Common to all these schemata is the understanding that an orderly society is needed even for garden-variety virtue to develop and thrive, to say nothing of the higher purificatory and contemplative forms of human excellence. And this is what al-Ghazālī affirms even at his most philosophical.

Circling back to the notion of the prophet as the healer (rather than the philosopher, as the Neoplatonists would contend), al-Ghazālī, in closing out the *Deliverer*, refers once more to the *tawātur* method of gaining certainty about the Messenger's status and about his skill in drafting individual prescriptions

17 It is no coincidence that al-Ghazālī's discussion of the indispensable yet sometimes inscrutable nature of the Prophet's message stands in close proximity to his treatment of Avicenna's antinomianism in the context of wine-drinking. Al-Ghazālī would regard it as self-evident that an imbibor such as Avicenna has through such an act immediately excluded himself from contention when it comes to being a reliable interlocutor in ethical matters.

for unique ailments, while acknowledging that the ways in which one's character is improved may seem inexplicable at first or even profoundly distasteful.

Suppose a man who has reached intellectual maturity has never experienced (sickness), then falls ill. He has a compassionate father, experienced in medicine, and he has heard testimonies about the father's intimate understanding of medicine since his mind matured. His father prepares a drug for him and says, "This will cure your sickness and heal you of your ailment." What should the man's intellect dictate, seeing as the drug tastes bitter and foul? That he should ingest it? Or that he should denounce it and say, "I do not understand what relationship this drug bears to the attainment of the cure, since I have not experienced it." No doubt you would consider him foolish if he did the latter! Similarly, the people distinguished by their insight [*ahl al-baṣā'ir*] consider you a fool because of your vacillations.

Should you say, "How can I become acquainted with the Prophet's compassion and his intimate understanding of this medicine?" I respond, "How did you know [your father's compassion]? This was not a sensory matter. Rather, you came to recognize it through reading his states and witnessing his actions on a daily basis, [resulting in] knowledge that was necessary and not up for questioning."

Whosoever reflects upon the sayings of God's Messenger, and upon the established reports regarding his care in guiding humankind, and his subtlety in enticing people in various ways that are gentle and kind to beautify their moral characteristics and better their distinctive essence, and in general [his propensity] for improving their afterlife as well as their present one, will arrive at necessary knowledge concerning the Messenger's compassion for his community, which is greater than the father's compassion for his son. (Ghazālī 1967: 128.14–129.8)

These remarks occasion a return one final time to the passage from which we began, and to al-Ghazālī's evocation of the Companions of the Cave. We have already seen how the Companions' status as plainly pre-Islamic yet unassailably pious and world-shunning believers lends support to al-Ghazālī's contention that holy men have walked the earth in every era. What I have not yet addressed is al-Ghazālī's choice of linking the Companions to the phenomena of nourishment and rain, both regularly used by al-Ghazālī to signify God's bounty and munificence, and his claim that the self-same link had been forged by the Prophet Muḥammad himself. Commentators have pointed out that if this is meant to be a *ḥadīth*, it does not find support in any of the standard

compilations or concordances. Nor have I come across this exact phrase in those Sufi commentaries on the Qurʾān (al-Tustarī's and al-Qushayrī's) to which al-Ghazālī likely had access. Why would al-Ghazālī risk offering a shaky prophetic tradition at such an important juncture in his argument?

The answer lies in the centrality of the metaphors of rain and sustenance in al-Ghazālī's conception of how divine illumination works. For al-Ghazālī, as we have already acknowledged, knowledge (*ʿilm*) and especially the intimate understanding of reality (*maʿrifa*) form the very hallmark of humanity; it is in cogitative acts that we as humans find our ultimate felicity, if such a thing is to be within our reach (Treiger 2012). At the same time, al-Ghazālī is adamant that any disclosure of the true nature of reality, from the most mundane phenomena to the most exalted visions of God, is in some sense God-given and God-driven. Starting with sense-perception, there is no veridical knowledge that would not itself count as a divine mercy and blessing (Kukkonen 2010); and since what is characteristic of humanity is the contemplative life, we constantly rely for the fulfillment of our specific perfection on God's munificence.

"The Sustainer" (*al-Razzāq*), meanwhile, is one of the divine names discussed by al-Ghazālī in his work on *God's Beautiful Names* (1992: 90–91). In that work, al-Ghazālī contends that the person most worthy of being regarded as a provider of sustenance is the spiritual guide, the religious teacher — in short, the one who reaches hearts and acts as an intermediary (*wāsiṭa*) so that God's mercy may reach his people. And this, of course, is where Muḥammad's example shines the brightest.

Al-Ghazālī and Islamic Platonism

Without a doubt, one of the most famous bird's-eye-view accounts of all when it comes to the various wisdom traditions within Islam is the visionary dream described by Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (d. 1191). In Suhrawardī's account, Aristotle appears to the martyred philosopher and, when quizzed by Suhrawardī, heaps praise on his teacher Plato and disparages the Arabic Aristotelians. Most remarkable of all, he lauds Sufis of the likes of al-Bisṭāmī and al-Tustarī as the true philosophers and sages (Suhrawardī 1976: 74). All this is established by way of preparing the reader for the revelation that it is only immediate, "presential" knowledge through divine illumination and direct experience that stands a chance of disclosing the real natures of things.

Some have treated Suhrawardī's musings as uncovering a whole underappreciated Platonist strand within Islamic thought, one more attuned to the spiritual yearnings of Muslim thinkers than the comparatively arid explorations of

the Peripatetics could ever accommodate (Walbridge 2000, 2001). Others have taken the more skeptical position that Suhrawardī in his dream is engaging in a wholly imaginative exercise, one that is substantially divorced from any real knowledge of Plato and untouched by any historiographical concern for the validity of the claims made concerning the relations between its various protagonists (Gutas 2003).

What I hope to have demonstrated is that in al-Ghazālī's work we begin to see the grounds prepared for a stance such as Suhrawardī's eventually to emerge. Al-Ghazālī explicitly elevates the Sufis above the philosophers when it comes to the kinds of knowledge each party enjoys, and he pegs this superiority directly to the immediacy and God-given (luminous as well as numinous) nature of said knowledge. Al-Ghazālī's theory of the divine attributes as paradigmatic causes for the world's coming to be forms another example of an antecedent to Suhrawardī and the later tradition of "Islamic Platonism" (Kukkonen 2011).

What is peculiar to al-Ghazālī, however, and in some respects most interesting, is the precise way in which he works alongside the tradition of Platonist ethics yet against it as well. Following al-Ghazālī, Platonic accounts of the virtues and of the two faces of the soul, etc., become increasingly prevalent and even commonplace. But the peculiar manner in which al-Ghazālī effects a synthesis between traditional Sufi materials and this Greek-derived theoretical framework still has no peer.

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