

2 Science and action

Science and action are twin sisters

I concluded the previous chapter with a discussion of al-Ghazālī's reformist thought, taking the role played by the Prophet Muhammad as an example. At the core of this reformist thought is the concept of balance (*mīzān*) between science and action. In the *Munqidh* al-Ghazālī claimed that Sufism is the best way to achieve knowledge. In the *Mīzān al-'amal* (*The Balance in Action*) he confirms that:

Sufism is a school that acknowledges in science and action [the path] leading to the knowledge of happiness; and this is the second method in order to acquire certainty. What [the *sūfīs*] say is true and they point out that certainty is acquired by inner struggle and exercise, as the Qur'ān affirms: 'Those who will struggle for Us (*allādhina jāhadū finā*), We will lead them on our paths' (Q. 29: 69). Therefore, you must devote yourself to the inner struggle (*jihād*) and to seeking [God]. Maybe [then] the truth of the [mystical] state will disclose itself to you either negatively or positively. The agreement between the three categories [of seekers cited before: theologians, philosophers and Bātinities] would be enough for you, in order to pursue the path of science and action. For your goal is not to dispute, but to find salvation. It is the same for a sick man who wants to get well without wasting his time with vain words: it would be enough for him that the doctors who are treating him are in agreement [about the method of treatment].

(Al-Ghazālī 2005: 114, ch. 3)

According to al-Ghazālī, and as expressed in the *Munqidh min al-dalāl*, it should be the *sūfīs* who espouse science and action. I will examine this idea in this chapter, taking as a starting point a discussion of a topical Qur'anic verse that al-Ghazālī quotes many times throughout all his works. The verse is Q. 17: 85: 'The Spirit [is] *min* the Command of my Lord, but you have little knowledge (*al-rūh min amri rabbī wa mā ūtītum min al-'ilm illā qaṭīlan*)'.

The verse is too elliptical and condensed to be understood literally: it needs (allegorical) interpretation. First, we have to focus on the preposition *min*. In

Arabic, it means both ‘coming from’ and ‘belonging to’. Intending *min* in the first or in the second way produces two different interpretations of the verse: (1) the spirit *comes down from* the command of God; or (2) the spirit *belongs to* the command of God. The two versions do not seem completely at odds with one another, because we can interpret the verse by translating it as follows: ‘The spirit which is part of God’s command comes down to earth affecting human beings and their behaviour’. Although the first version emphasizes an (ontologically) subordinate derivation of the spirit from the command, the second version involves a joint effort by the spirit and the command.

This very interesting passage from Ibn Qutayba (d. 889) highlights this issue:

They [the Jahmiyya and the anthropomorphists] said about Its saying, may It be exalted, ‘and [I] breathed into him of my Spirit’ (Q. 15: 29), that the Spirit (*rūh*) is the imperative (*amr*), meaning that ‘I [God] ordered that it should be’. They put forward Sulaymān’s and Abū Dardā’s arguments. Indeed, we arise and we laud Its Spirit, that is Its words (*kalām*). The Spirit (*rūh*), as they recalled, could be the words (*kalām*) of Allah in certain cases, according to Its saying: ‘By Its Command (*amr*) doth It send the Spirit (*rūh*) to any of Its servants It pleases’ (Q. 40: 15) and like Its saying, mighty and majestic, ‘And thus we have, by our Command (*amr*), sent inspiration (*wahy*) to thee [Muhammad]’.

(Q. 42: 52) (Ibn Qutayba 2014: 64)

Moreover, *rūh* (spirit, feminine in gender like the Hebrew *ruāh*) and *amr* (command) are polysemic words. ‘Spirit’ can be understood as ‘divine intelligence’, ‘core of the revealed message’, ‘angel (Gabriel)’, etc. ‘Command’ alludes to any order that compels men and women to obey, but also to the creative logic of God, to Its power and activity in producing and ordering the universe, as expressed in Q. 41: 11–12 (here my translation seeks to give every word its proper meaning, without worrying about elegance):

Then It [God] turned towards the sky – which was smoke – and said to it and to the Earth: either come obediently or under compulsion! And they say: we come in obedience. Then, following a precise plan, It [God] constructed seven Heavens in two days and to every one of them It [God] inspired its ordination [i.e. its way to be as it is] (*thumma’slawā ilā al-samā’ wa hiya dukhān fa- qāla lahā wa li’l-ard i’tiyā taw’an aw karhan qālatā ati’nā tā’ibīna fa-qadāhunna saba’a samāwāt fī yawmayn wa awhā fī kulli samā’ amruhā*).

(Q. 41: 11–12)

In the short booklet written in Arabic entitled *Kimiyyā’ al-sa’ūda* (*Alchemy of Happiness*) (a summary of the longest treatise having the same title written in Persian), al-Ghazālī defined precisely the meaning he gives to the verse Q. 17: 85:

If you ask which is the heart's true reality, the clearest expression in *sharī'a* is the saying of the Most High: 'They will ask you about the Spirit. Say: the Spirit is from the Command of my Lord (*al-rūh min amr rabbī*)' (Q. 17: 85). For the Spirit is a part of the whole of the divine power (*qudra*) and belongs to the world of Command (*amr*). God the Powerful and Sublime said: 'Verily, Its [God's] are the creation and the Command (*lahu al-khalq wa'l-amr*)' (Q. 7: 54). Now, from a certain point of view, man belongs to the world of creation, but, on the other hand, he belongs to the world of Command. Everything which has measure and modality is part of the world of creation. But the heart has no dimension nor measure nor can be divided [in part], for, if it could be divided, it would be part of the world of creation. Whosoever shares ignorance, is ignorant, and whosoever shares knowledge, is learned; it is absurd to be at the same time both learned and ignorant. Therefore [the heart] is part of the world of Command, because the world of Command contains the things which do not possess dimension or measure. Some people say that the Spirit is eternal, but they are wrong; others say that it is an accident, but they are wrong, because the accident is linked to something other (than it). The Spirit is the matrix (*asl*) of the human being, while the outer form (*qālib*) follows it: how is it possible that it [the Spirit] is an accident? Some people say that it is body, but they are also wrong, because a body would be divisible. The Spirit, which we call heart and which is the receptacle for the knowledge of God Most High, is neither body nor accident, but it shares the same angelic nature. The Spirit's knowledge is very difficult, because there is not in religion (*dīn*) one (unique) straight path to arrive at it. Religion does not involve the obligatory necessity of knowing it because religion is effort and [spiritual] struggle (*mujāhada*) and knowledge of the proper elements of the [right] guidance (*hidāya*), as the Most High – be praise to It – said: 'Those who will struggle for Us (*allādhina jāhadū fīnā*), We will lead them on our paths' (Q. 29: 69). Whosoever is not engaged with all his passion in effort (*ijtihād*), cannot earn the knowledge of the true reality of Spirit. The first basis of the [spiritual] struggle is the knowledge of the heart's armies, because [spiritual] *jihād* is not suitable for a man who does not know these armies.

(Al-Ghazālī 2005: 357)

The balance between science and action is achieved perfectly in the spiritual *jihād*, when the spirit of God (i.e. *rūh*), which is science and knowledge, is put in motion by God's command (*amr*). Human beings achieve knowledge acting along with God's command. The *Mizān al-'amal*, *al-Qistās al-mustaqīm* and the *Kimiyā' al-sa'āda* seem to find here a crossroad of encounters on the basis of the same Qur'anic verses. Sufism plays a large role here but it is mixed with the philosophical principle that universal reality is a well-constructed and ordinate system obeying God's projects and plans, and that the same spiritual knowledge must produce personal as well as social and juridical praxis.

Fazlur Rahman put forward an interpretation of Q. 17: 85 which is helpful in understanding al-Ghazālī (Rahman 1989: 95–102). The agent of revelation – he argued – is the spirit, and it is meaningful that the Qur’ān, in order to point to the agent of revelation, never describes it as an angel, but instead as spirit. Jesus has been supported by the spirit of sanctity (this is a better translation than ‘Holy Spirit’ because translating the Arabic *rūh al-quds* as ‘Holy Spirit’ is too ‘Christian’ as it were) which is also the agent of Qur’anic revelation. But there is also the suggestion that the spirit is the *content* of revelation (ibid., quoting Q. 42: 52 and 40: 15). On the other hand, the command (*amr*), sometimes so closely linked to the spirit, could be the ‘Preserved Tablet’ (*lawh mahfūz*) referred to in Q. 85: 22, or the ‘Mother of the Book’ (Q. 3: 7 and other verses), that is the original archetype (whether created or otherwise) in which God’s word is contained. In any case, the spirit is a constituent element of prophecy and orients prophecy towards operative choices: ‘While, in his ordinary moments, Muhammad struggled, often successfully, with the forces of history, it was the Spirit of Revelation that enabled him to take definitive decisions on certain issues of major moment’ (ibid.: 100). We detect here a Ghazalian balance between science and action involving the idea that Prophet Muhammad’s mission conveyed not only a spiritual but an eminently ethical/practical message.

It is therefore important to understand the concepts of ‘science’ and ‘action’ in al-Ghazālī in relation to epistemology, ethics and even politics.

Religious knowledge: the forty principles of *dīn* and the scholastic dialectical theology (*kalām*)

If, as I argued in the Introduction, thinking about Islam with al-Ghazālī entails continual reference to the Qur’ān, because his intellectual achievements stemmed from a diuturnal meditation and commentary of the Qur’ān, it is time to consider in more detail his approach to the Holy Book and assess his methodology. We need to examine al-Ghazālī’s masterpiece, the forty books of the *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (*The Revival of the Religious Sciences*).

I will compare the *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* with the *Kitāb al-arbaʿīn fī usūl al-dīn* (*The Book of the Forty Principles*), because the *Arbaʿīn* is a successful summary of the *Ihyā’*, and its synthetical form helps the reader to follow al-Ghazālī’s logic.

Both works are divided into four parts comprising ten sections. The first part is about the fundamentals of faith and creed.

Apparently, there is an asymmetry between the two indexes. The *Ihyā’*’s focus seems to be on the *‘ibādāt* (acts of worship) and the ‘five principles’ of *shahada* (professions of faith); while the *‘Arbaʿīn*’s focus seems to be on theology. The two are complementary, however. In the *Ihyā’* theology works at a juridical level; in the *Arbaʿīn* it operates at the *kalām* level.

The second part extends theology to behaviour in its social and anthropological outcomes, involving *muʿāmalāt* (the social-practical relations among

Table 2.1

<i>Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn</i> (<i>The Revival of the Religious Sciences</i>)	<i>Kitāb al-arbaʿīn fī usūl al-dīn</i> (<i>The Book of the Forty Principles</i>)
Science	God's essence
The principles of creed	God's holiness
The mysteries of purity	God's power
Ritual prayer (<i>ṣalāt</i>)	God's science
Almsgiving (<i>ṣakāt</i>)	God's will
Fasting of Ramadan (<i>sawm</i>)	God's hearing and sight
Pilgrimage (<i>hajj</i>)	God's word (speech)
Recitation of the Qur'ān	God's acts
Remembrance of God's name (<i>dhikr</i>)	The Last Day
Supererogatory prayers	Prophecy

humans) and the necessity – to which every Muslim is (at least morally) bound – to struggle in order 'to command good and prohibit what must be disavowed' (Q. 3: 104 and 110: *al-amr bi'l-ma'rūf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar*):

As it is apparent, a number of the *'ibādāt* discussed in the first part of the *Ihyā'* appear in the second quarter of the *Arbaʿīn*. There is a change in emphasis, but in general, as the second part of the *Ihyā'* is devoted to social intercourse (*mu'āmalāt*), the same happens in the last four sections of the *Arbaʿīn* dealing with the same social behaviour and the connected prescriptions regarding what is licit or illicit for Muslims. Theological and practical issues are in a sense intertwined; interiority and exteriority are intertwined; worship is one side of a coin while the other is public action in society. Therefore, the first and second parts of the two books are similar.

The third part, in contrast to positive behaviour, is devoted mostly to blameworthy behaviour, which hampers the believer who is trying to attain purification and a positive disposition towards appropriate living.

Correct action and behaviour are the argument of the fourth parts of the books, which represent the apex of spiritual search and the conditions for attaining bliss and peace:

Thus, the structure of the two books is similar, but not identical. However, their well-organized and ordered structures show the strict and intertwined link existing between *sharī'a*, worship, theology and prophetic tradition. In other words, the public dimension of religious behaviour and action is an extension of and a complement to the spiritual dimension of the search for God.

The forty principles are constituent of the Qur'anic sciences (*'ulūm al-Qur'ān*), i.e. of that entire discipline which in Islam takes the place of Western philosophy of religion. Al-Suyūṭi's *Kitāb al-itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (*The Refinement of Knowledge of the Qur'an*) is probably the best achievement of

Table 2.2

<i>Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn</i> (<i>The Revival of the Religious Sciences</i>)	<i>Kitāb al-arbaʿīn fī usūl al-dīn</i> (<i>The Book of the Forty Principles</i>)
Behaviour while eating	Prayer
Marriage	Legal alms
Good customs for gaining useful goods	The Ramadan fast
The licit and the illicit	Pilgrimage to Mecca
Life with other people and social intercourse	Recitation of the Qurʾān
The concealed life and intercourse with men	Remembering God's Name
Good customs while travelling	The licit and the illicit
Music and ecstasy	The rights of Muslims
Commanding right and forbidding wrong	Commanding right and forbidding wrong
The Prophet's life and character	Following the Prophet's <i>sunna</i>

the tradition of the classical Qurʾanic sciences. The Egyptian scholar Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūtī (d. 1505), distilling centuries of traditional exegesis, is considered to be a prosaic and somewhat dry writer, but, although the way in which he summarizes the knowledge of the Qurʾān is the most traditional one, he is aware that *tafsīr* means the clarification and progressive following of the text, with great care paid to historical details, while *taʾwīl* is a return closer to prophetic sources and roots, because 'it occupies itself with the meanings that the verses have' (al-Suyuti n.d.: vol. 2, 221–224), i.e. it involves hermeneutical effort.

Table 2.3

<i>Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn</i> (<i>The Revival of the Religious Sciences</i>)	<i>Kitāb al-arbaʿīn fī usūl al-dīn</i> (<i>The Book of the Forty Principles</i>)
The heart's marvels	The evils connected with food
The soul's satisfaction and the emendation	The evils of speaking (badly) about customs
The repression of the two desires (stomach and sex)	(The evils of) anger and sex
(The evils of bad) speaking	(The evils of) envy
(The evils of) anger, hatred and envy	Frivolity and love of fame
Contempt for mundane things	Love of the world's temptations
Contempt for wealth	Arrogance
Contempt for frivolity and fame	Pride
Arrogance and self-complaisance	Ostentation
Contempt for (all) vanities	Disclosure of the Hereafter

Table 2.4

<i>Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn</i> (<i>The Revival of the Religious Sciences</i>)	<i>Kitāb al-arbaʿīn fī usūl al-dīn</i> (<i>The Book of the Forty Principles</i>)
Repentance	Repentance
Patience and thankfulness	Fear of God
Fear and hope	Ascetism
Poverty and ascetism	Patience
God's unity and confidence in It	Thankfulness
Love and being satisfied with God's decree	Sincerity and sincere worship
Intention and sincerity	Full confidence in It
Self-control and examination of the soul	Love
Meditation	Being satisfied with God's decree
Death and afterlife	Remembering death

Al-Ghazālī describes the Qur'anic sciences in systematic and parallel ways in the *Ihyā'* and the *Arbaʿīn*, while in the *Jawāhir al-Qurʾān* (*The Jewels of the Qurʾān*) he describes the Qur'anic sciences and their reciprocal hierarchy by resorting to a metaphor: that of a seashell containing a pearl. The seashell represents exterior knowledge, and the pearl its inner meaning. In the shell there is a skin on the outside and a side closer to the pearl, and the pearl itself has a surface and a kernel. In the hierarchical order of excellence, utility and profundity we find at the bottom the phonetic knowledge of how to read and to pronounce the Qurʾān; then, ascending step by step, we find the science of recitation and grammar and finally that of traditional commentary (*tafsīr*). In the middle, after the linguistic sciences, there are the stories and the history of the prophets, placed at a level akin to dialectical theology (*kalām*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). The sciences of the kernel of the pearl, the fundamental sciences, are, in ascending order of importance, the science of acts, of attributes and finally of the essence of God. This classification and hierarchical structure evidently demonstrate the way in which al-Ghazālī holds the interpretation of the Holy text as a process of evolution towards a level which becomes increasingly speculative. Admittedly, sometimes speculation about God's essence is tinged with esotericism, but esotericism does not mean the gnostic and spiritual hermeneutics (*taʾwīl*) of the Ismaʿīlis, for example. Al-Ghazālī sees the Qur'anic sciences moving from the exteriority of the literal text (language, formal beauty and so on) towards the inner essence of God (as far as it can be discerned from the Qur'anic statements – the attributes or Beautiful Names), by following a route implying a more and more sophisticated understanding of the text's secret, which is not its immediately obvious meaning. From al-Ghazālī's point of view, we can use reason to work out which verses ought to be interpreted metaphorically: the intertwining of reason and spiritual 'disclosure' (*mukāshafa*) in order to avoid the contradiction between the esoteric and the exoteric.

In this sense it is possible to say that al-Ghazālī's work in the *Ihyā'* and the *Arbaʿīn* constitutes a commentary on the Qur'ān and develops systematically an enquiry into the sciences of the Qur'ān.

All of the above needs, obviously, a solid epistemological basis, and in fact the *Ihyā'* opens with a fundamental introductory book devoted to knowledge ('ilm). A text, dealing with the various kinds of sciences, placed at the very beginning of the book, therefore deserves close scrutiny (al-Ghazālī 1985: 27, vol. 1, 1988: 17–19).

First, al-Ghazālī wonders whether theology ('ilm al-kalām) and philosophy (*falsafa*) are blameworthy or praiseworthy sciences. His answer is that, on the one hand, theology contains clear and useful proofs (*adilla allāhī yantaḥiqi*) that are already present in the Qur'ān and the prophetic traditions. Insofar as they are legitimized by the holy texts, theology and its proofs are praiseworthy science and methods and can be used freely. On the other hand, anything that is not contained in the sacred books can be viewed as either reprehensible argumentation or even innovation (*bid'a*), or merely distinctions and topical amplification of different subjects. Thus, a considerable array of different opinions arise, most of which are forced in a particular direction and are nonsensical, while others have nothing to do with religion and were not customary in the first period of the *Salaf*, the Prophet's Companions, whose opinions are a common point of reference for true believers. Mind and sensation both reject reprehensible argumentations and innovations, seeing them as being clearly blameworthy.

Philosophy is regarded as a fundamental (*raʾīs*) science. As al-Ghazālī will repeat in *Munqidh min al-dalāl*, philosophy includes geometry, mathematics and logic (*mantiq*), all of which are permissible and no one is barred from studying them except those who might be led by their study to blameworthy behaviour. An excessive trust in logic and mathematics can lead to innovations and to unbelief. As to theology in the proper sense, the '*rerum divinarum* science' (*ilāhiyyāt*) is the study of the essence (*dhāt*) and attributes (*ṣifāt*) of God, but normally these were not studied by philosophers. Moreover, philosophers divided themselves into several schools and sects, some of whom became unbelievers (*kufīr*) while others became innovators (*bid'a*). Therefore, according to al-Ghazālī, the Mu'tazilite system does not, in itself, represent a proper branch of science, although Mu'tazilite thinkers are not so far from the philosophers' stance, being both specialists in the art of research and speculation. Both, however, committed many mistakes and shared many erroneous views. A branch of philosophy such as physics (*res naturales*, or *tabiʿiyyāt*) contains some areas which contradict the Law and the true religion, and are, therefore, blameworthy. However, as this is not science in proper sense of the word, in general there is no need to study physics and the natural sciences.

Al-Ghazālī outlines here a vague classification of the sciences (frequently practised by philosophers such as al-Fārābī); and, as he does in the *Munqidh*, he considers in parallel the speculative and traditional sciences. In the *Ihyā'*,

though, the tone is much milder with regard to philosophy and rational speculation in general than in his co-called autobiography. Moreover, theology seems to be again the focus of al-Ghazālī's worries owing to its alleged inconsistency. The most important elements of theology – intended here in the Western sense of knowledge of God's most inner essence – are contained in the Qur'ān, and the ideas of the *mutakallimūn* (theologians) seem to be excluded from a thorough consideration. Al-Ghazālī often contends that all we can know of God are the attributes described when It refers to Itself in the Qur'ān, whereas we have the whole Book of the universe to study in order to appreciate God's acts.

Passing to practice, Al-Ghazālī says that

By the science of practical religion I mean knowledge as well as action in accordance with that knowledge. This work will deal only with the science of practical religion. The science of practical religion is merely a path which leads to revelation and only through that path did the prophets of God communicate with the people and lead them to It. Concerning revelation in itself, the prophets spoke only figuratively and briefly through signs and symbols, because they realized the inability of man's mind to comprehend. Therefore, since the learned men are heirs of the prophets, they cannot but follow in their footsteps and emulate their way.

(Al-Ghazālī 1988: 14–15)

We find here:

- 1 A declaration of aims: scholars have a mission to realize, that is to carry on the mission of the prophets. It is a practical mission intended to be of help to the masses. Learned men walk in the footsteps of the prophets and follow the same path leading to God.
- 2 Consequently, it must be acknowledged that the *Ihya'* is a work written for a practical purpose.
- 3 Practising religious duties led the prophets to achieve revelation.
- 4 Apparently, revelation could be (only?) a sign and symbol: in other words, it could be only the theoretical framework within which the practical actions are carried out.
- 5 Outer (action) and inner (knowledge) dimensions of religion/revelation correspond to each other.

Theology as *kalām* is distinguished by al-Ghazālī as being different from jurisprudence (*fiqh*) in that the latter is superior. 'Indeed, a single jurist is more powerful against Satan than a thousand worshippers', he writes, commenting, 'Everything has its foundation and the foundation of this religion (Islam) is jurisprudence'. He quickly adds that jurisprudence is connected to religion, albeit not directly but indirectly through mundane affairs. We must remember that this world is the preparation for the Hereafter, and one of the

main objectives of religion, or perhaps *the* main objective of religion, is to gain the Hereafter.

Al-Ghazālī goes on to say that state and religion are twin sisters, a very important statement he repeats elsewhere very often. He writes:

Religion is the foundation while the state is the guard. That which has no foundation will certainly crumble and that which has no guard is lost. Without the magistrates there is neither government nor control, and no quarrels or other troubles could be settled without the Law. It is true that government and the application of jurisprudence by magistrates do not belong primarily to the science of religion. However, they are issues without which there is no religion. In the end, the result of jurisprudence is knowledge of the methods of government and control.

(Al-Ghazālī 1985: 13–14, vol. 1, 1988: 5 and 34).

This passage echoes a very similar one in the *Golden Mean in Belief* or *Iqtisād fī'l-i'tiqād* and confirms the close link that al-Ghazālī envisaged between jurisprudence/religion and society.

Up until this point a fundamental practical dimension of knowledge has emerged. But al-Ghazālī's theory of the relation between religious, juridical and speculative sciences is far from being simple. In order to understand better his aims, it is necessary to go a step further in epistemology, and discuss the problem of the relationship between 'truth' and 'reality'. In Arabic, there is a very strong and meaningful word that includes both the dimensions of 'truth' and 'reality', and that is *haqq*. It is not surprising that *haqq* is one of the Beautiful Names of God, indeed perhaps 'the' most meaningful Beautiful Name, full of philosophical implications: God is 'true' and 'real' in the fullest sense. But how about creatures or things (animals, humans, plants but also inanimate objects)?

What or who is able to guarantee that the 'true' things are also 'real' and vice versa? In God, this equivalence is automatic: God is true because It is *ipso facto* real, really and necessarily existent (see Chapter 3). But if we consider the mundane things (our Ghazalian reference book here is again the *Munqidh*), we (that is al-Ghazālī in person) acknowledge that reason refutes sensation (for example, the stars seem very small when we look at them at night, but geometry demonstrates that they are far bigger than the Earth); and, on the other hand, not necessarily mathematical entities, like a number of geometrical solids, correspond to 'real', concrete things. Consequently, al-Ghazālī suggests that reason could be refuted by another faculty whose 'objects' are not potentially 'real' in the same sense they are in our sensible world, the only world our human reason is accustomed to evaluating and contemplating. Human reason classifies and studies objects and phenomena that fall under the five senses found in animals and considers them real. But the reality of these objects and phenomena could not correspond to the supposed third level of knowledge which may go beyond human reason – the level of spiritual intuition and illuminative disclosure.

In the *Munqidh*, al-Ghazālī argues that, even though we doubt something, the first principles of knowledge (like Descartes' *ideae innatae*) remain firm in our mind and cannot be contradicted by external interventions. Al-Ghazālī himself says that the evidence that ten is greater than three is not contradicted by someone who claims to be able to transform a stick into a snake. Therefore, the clear evidence of Qur'anic truths is not contradicted by the possibility of a different vocalization of its words, nor it is contradicted if we put the *sūras* in a different order.

At the very beginning of the *Munqidh* al-Ghazālī alludes to the difficulty of following this path. For example, he was conscious that the intuitive certainty claimed by mystics also belongs to mathematics; unfortunately, mathematics, like other philosophical sciences, risks diverting unlearned people from faith, because they become convinced that the demonstrative rigour of mathematics is shared by all rational sciences. On the contrary, metaphysics does not possess the same essential consequentiality: in *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* (*Incoherence of the Philosophers*) al-Ghazālī develops many arguments to stress the limits of a purely speculative approach to theological issues. The 'divine science' of metaphysics, which claims to fathom the secrets of God's essence, turns around itself and philosophers become unbelievers with respect to three vital aspects of religion. In conclusion, philosophy in itself is not able to solve methodical doubt (and here we are very far from Descartes). We must go further in seeking a knowledge that espouses all three levels of approach to truth.

In al-Ghazālī's view, *sūfī* spiritual knowledge allows the knowledge of truth deriving from intuitive and certain evidence (as with Descartes). The 'taste' of God perceived by the spiritually advanced also appease the intellect's anxiety, and speculative people are consequently able to carry out their rational enquiries with their souls free from doubt. On the other hand, through living in society and in a continuous relationship with other human beings, learned people can devote a balanced space to jurisprudence, without losing themselves in casuistry and in empty minutiae, but taking care of the real needs of the common people.

This tripartite path is reflected in the systematic structure of the *Ihyā* and *Arbaʿīn*. First, there is creed, second, behaviour, and third, the attainment of spiritual happiness. In any case, al-Ghazālī's thought is inspired by a deep practical aim. In order to be it is necessary to act. Science comes first and, without science, behaviour is flawed and unstable. In *Bidāyat al-hidāya* (*The Beginning of Guidance*), he writes that 'human nature is most inclined to share in what is done than to follow what is said' (al-Ghazālī 1994: 98).

As paradoxical as it can seem, al-Ghazālī can be likened to the German physicist Ludwig Boltzmann. Like this 'algebraic terrorist',¹ al-Ghazālī appreciated the logical coherence of mathematics; he was more inclined to evaluate the correctness and rigour of a theory than its truth, and mainly to wonder what its utility is. How can science be useful for achieving eternal bliss? Or, for one who does not believe in the Hereafter, how can science allow man to live in peace, along with welfare and justice?

Another central point is that science (*‘ilm*), when al-Ghazālī gives it the particular meaning of ‘knowledge of God’ (*ma‘rifā*), is by no means secret and incommunicable as so often is the Bātinīte/Isma‘īlī esoteric science (and the *sūfī* science too!), especially if reserved for the *imāms* (or to the *turuq shaykhs*, or spiritual leaders). On the contrary, science must be taught – admittedly only to those skilled enough to learn it – and serve to pursue the straight path (*al-qistās al-mustaqīm*) of ethical behaviour.

There are two kinds of science: the science of God and the science of God’s acts (in other words, the natural sciences that examine the universe and what it contains) and there is the practice of those who walk along God’s path to arrive at Its presence.

In *Jawāhir al-Qur’ān* al-Ghazālī is very clear saying that:

The knowledge of God Most High includes the knowledge of the essence, of the attributes and the acts. These three are referred to as the ruby, the blue sapphire and the yellow sapphire, respectively. These three forms of knowledge are not of the same rank but are classified according to their preciousness. The most precious is no doubt the knowledge of the essence; the second is the knowledge of the attributes and the third the knowledge of the acts. As to the essence, the Qur’ān only contains allusions and reduces it simply to the qualification of Absolute Holiness (*taqdīs mutlaq*) like in the words of God: ‘There is nothing like It’ (Q. 42: 11) and ‘Nothing is comparable to It’ (Q. 112: 4), or to the Absolute Greatness (*ta‘zīm mutlaq*) as It said: ‘Exalted and lofty It is above what they allege [of It]! Creator from nothing of the Heavens and the Earth’ (Q. 6: 100–101). As for the attributes, the light is brighter and the possibility to study is wider.² Therefore many verses are devoted to science, power, life, word, wisdom, hearing, sight and so on. The acts of God are so numerous as to be tantamount to an ocean without shores. Their quantity is so great that even the most profound study is unable to fathom them all. As a matter of fact, nothing exists other than God and Its acts and everything that exists is Its effect (*bal laysa fi’l-wujūd illā allāh wa af’āluhu wa kullumā siwāhu fi’luhu*). The Qur’ān contains clear signs of this in relation to the material world: the Heavens, the stars, the Earth, the mountains, the trees, the animals, the waters, the sending down of rain, and the other phenomena producing the green of vegetation and the springing out of life. All these things are easily attainable through sensation. ...

Approaching God can only be attained through complete devotion to It – as It said: ‘Turn to It devoutly’ (Q. 83: 8), that it consecrate yourself to It. Consecration involves the turning completely towards It abandoning everything that is not It. This is by all means what Its saying conveys: ‘The Lord of East and West, there is no God but It! Chose It as master’ (Q. 73: 9). Indeed, turning to It entirely does mean the continuous remembering of Its name; and the giving up of all that is not It does mean rejecting carnal

lusts and passions, discarding worldly rubbish and purifying the heart. A satisfied well-being will emerge as the Most High said: 'He certainly prospered who purified himself and prayed' (Q. 87: 14–15). ...

Then, three levels, the loftiest of which is [God's] essence – but this is a level which cannot be understood. Therefore, men have been told: 'Reflect on God's creation, not on God's essence'.

(Al-Ghazālī 2015: 91–95 and 123, chs 3 and 4)

The construction of these Qur'anic quotations confirms that al-Ghazālī does not want to go beyond the boundaries of the Holy Book which contains 'all sciences'. The 'Mother of the Book', the archetype of the Scripture which the Qur'an hints at, is the jewellery box in which all the knowledge permitted to humans is contained. The descending gradation of knowledge has at the top the essence of God, which is unknowable; the attributes of God are small holes through which we perceive a little of God's sublimity; nature and the universe are the factual demonstrations of God's existence, activity and bounty: they constitute the field of human research. God's essence is unknowable (a presupposition dividing Islam sharply from Christianity that claims to grasp the true essence of God through the Trinity, as I will discuss in Chapter 4), but the effects of God's actions are easily discernible, so that al-Ghazālī can say that we have to reflect on God's creation, that is on the book of nature, but not on God's essence. As to the apparently monistic expression: 'all that really exists are only God and Its acts and what is not God is God's effect (*bal laysa fī'l-wujūd illā allāh wa af'āluhu wa kullu mā siwāhu fī'luhu*)', I will discuss in-depth the concept underlying it in Chapter 3 in relation to Ibn 'Arabī, but it is possible to anticipate that al-Ghazālī's monism is only apparent, because he tries to safeguard the ontological reality of the creatures.

Therefore, science and action correspond to each other: science leads action and action is supported by science. Al-Ghazālī seeks a balance between the two, however: for example, if a person runs the risk of losing himself/herself following his/her whims without any restraint, al-Ghazālī stresses the need to remain close to *sharī'a* (al-Ghazālī 1991: 7).

The balance of the middle way between science and action is reflected in the necessary balance that must exist between exteriority and interiority. Again in *Bidāyat al-hidāya*: 'Above all you must realize that the guidance which is a fruit of knowledge has a beginning and an ending, an outward aspect and an inward. No one can reach the ending until he has completed the beginning; no one can discover the inward aspect until he has mastered the outward' (al-Ghazālī 1994: 95–96). To this end, al-Ghazālī emphasizes the implementation of the Prophet's *sunna*, for example in this long passage:

Know that the key to happiness is following the *sunna* and conforming to the example of God's Messenger – God save him and give him eternal peace! – in everything he made and said, even in the smallest particulars:

how he moved and how he stopped, how he ate and how he behaved, how he slept or spoke. I don't mean only his behaviour in worship (*'ibādāt*), because, in worship, it would be absurd not to follow the *sunna*, but I mean all the everyday gestures of life. God Most High said: '[Muhammad speaking] If you love God, follow me and God will love you' (Q. 3: 31); and again: 'Whatever the Messenger gives you, take it, and whatever the Messenger forbids you, leave it' (Q. 59: 7).

Therefore, when you are sitting, you must cover your trousers, and when you are standing, you must wear the turban; you must get your shoes on using your right hand, and you must use your right hand to eat your food. Nails must be cut beginning from the forefinger of the right hand and rings must be worn only on your thumb. As for the foot, [the nails must be cut] beginning with the right little toe and rings put on beginning from the left little toe. This is valid for all the gestures you perform when moving or sitting. Remember that Muhammad Ibn Aslam did not eat cucumbers because he did not know if the Messenger of God ate them; and if sometimes, when distracted, he put on his shoes with his left hand, he amended the fault with a *kurr* (measure) of wheat of alms. Don't be negligent in these things saying: They have nothing to do with worship! Or: it is illogical to perform these things! On the contrary, [negligence] closes the doors to Paradise.

Now, perhaps you would like to know why it is desirable to conform to these behaviours, because you think that it is unlikely that they are so important as to justify severe punishment for making a mistake. Although it would be too long for the aims of this book to peruse the meaning of each of these behaviours, notice that it is necessary to know that the *sunna* contains some secrets.

As to the first, consider the relationship that exists between the lower world (*mulk*) and the highest world (*malakūt*), between the body's limbs and the heart, and consider how the heart is influenced by the limbs. For the heart is like a mirror and the truths of reality are not reflected in it if it is not previously polished, enlightened and straightened. As to polishing, it consists in eliminating the unrestrained pleasures and blameworthy behaviour. As to enlightenment, it consists in the lights of *dhikr* [remembrance of God's name] and of gnosis (*ma'rifa*), and those are the ends of sincere worship, if we yearn to perform perfectly the worship due to God and required by the *sunna*. As to the straightening (*ta'dīl*), it consists in following, when you perform all the bodily movements, the correct rule (*qānūn al-'adl*), because the hand has no effect on the heart until it has acquired a right disposition and a perfect equilibrium. Consequently, the heart must be ruled following a right disposition (*ta'dīl*) in behaviour and in bodily acts. This is the reason why the lower world is the fertile field from which afterlife will spring up. This is the reason why the fear of death is stronger before the emendation (*ta'dīl*) – just because death bars the way of emendation cutting the

links between limbs and heart. Not only the limbs' movements but also the soul's movements must be balanced (*mawzūna*) according to a right rule, so that a right disposition prepares the heart to receive adequately the supreme realities (*haqā'iq*), in the same way that a plain mirror is adequately prepared to receive clear images without any wrongness. The meaning of justice ('*adl*') is to put things in their right place. For example, among the four directions of space, the noblest is the *qibla* [the direction of Mecca], and it is mandatory to turn towards it in every moment of the remembrance of God's name (*dhikr*), of worship and of ritual ablution, while it is a duty to turn elsewhere if we are satisfying a corporal need or when we have our intimate parts uncovered. This is this way the Messenger of God behaved. Indeed, if you take care to perform the right dispositions in any particular, even small, of your behaviour, correctness and rectitude will set up harmoniously in your heart and they will prepare it to earn happiness. God Most High said: 'When I shaped him [man] and breathed into him My Spirit' (Q. 15: 29), [it was determined that] God's Spirit (*rūh*), which is the key of the doors of happiness, cannot be breathed into man before he has acquired a harmonious conformation (*taswiya*) and has come back to the correct disposition (*ta'dīl*).

(Al-Ghazālī 1970: 102–105)

The technical words most frequently used by al-Ghazālī in this passage derive all from the verbal root '*-d-l*' (*'adl*, *ta'dīl*, etc.), involving a strong concept of balance and measure. The Prophet's actions were balanced and measured and the believer must imitate them. The middle way (*wasat*, see Q. 2: 143) is the Islamic supreme ethical way.

The *sunna* of the Prophet (and his Companions) is an inexhaustible source of indications for moral, social and everyday behaviour. Indeed, for al-Ghazālī the prophetic *sunna* is possibly even more important than the Qur'ān in order to orient the good Muslim's choices in everyday life, because the Prophet's example – all that the Prophet did or said in the minutiae of life – is considered not only meritorious but indispensable for acquiring bliss in the next world. Two principles can be derived from this example of the concrete and physical acts of the Prophet. First, the positive evaluation of the body: although the soul and the spirit are both vehicles of sanctity and of the contact with God, or at least the closest possible approaching It, corporality is not mere negativity or passivity; al-Ghazālī always stresses that the external world represents the preparation hall of the inner world, so that purification and rectification of the soul is not possible without purification and rectification of the body. Second, both in Qur'anic ethics and in the ethics derived from the prophetic *sunna*, religion appears as a synthesis of *dīn wa dunyā*, of worship and religious practices (*'ibādāt*) on the one hand, and of the world, on the other hand, intended explicitly as the web of social and mundane intercourse (*mu'āmalāt*).

The ethical level: how science becomes action. The right balance of action

At this point, the ethical problem becomes relevant not only as theory but as praxis, putting to work the theoretical presuppositions. In its authentic ethical and political developments, as I have already pointed out above, al-Ghazālī's true philosophy is convinced that 'human nature is more inclined to share what has been done than to follow what has been said' (al-Ghazālī 1994: 98). Consequently, in al-Ghazālī's view, one of the philosophers' worst mistakes is that they are too confident in abstract science, often disregarding action. He defines practical science as follows:

As to the practical science, it is divisible in three parts: the science of the soul, of her attributes and of her conduct. It is a knowledge involving exercise and effort against passions and it constitutes the kernel of this book. There is the science dealing with behaviour in family, with children, servants and slaves, who take care of you as the limbs and the parts of your body do; and as it is necessary to restrain the concupiscible and irascible impulses of the body, it is necessary to manage familiar ties. There is the science of government of the conquered countries' and provinces' peoples, and of the manner to keep them under control. Jurisprudence (*fiqh*) is the proper science for this latter goal, except for the acts of worship which are specifically connected with the soul. In the same framework, I put the magistrates' conduct – because they must be well acquainted with issues such as wedding procedures, buying and selling and collecting taxes.

The most important of these sciences is obviously the one which deals with the soul's perfection, the body's treatment, the right balance in character – an equilibrium which, if attained, communicates itself to the lower components of the family and to children, and, by extension, to citizens. [A prophetic *ḥadīth* says]: 'Everybody is accountable for his flock'. The same happens with regard to the minimum *zakat*; ³ for the light in regards to the Sun; for the shadow in regards to a tree. How is possible that the shadow is straight if the branch is bent? If a man is unable to manage himself and control himself, how is possible that he is able to do so with other people? This is the content of the practical sciences.

(Al-Ghazālī 2005: 140–141; *Mīzān al-'amal*, ch. 9)

Exteriority and interiority converge in the management of human affairs, starting from the body and arriving at political regime through management of the family. In the *Book of Knowledge* of the *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* al-Ghazālī puts forward an interesting distinction regarding happiness. He writes that the greatest achievement in the opinion of man is eternal happiness and the most excellent thing is the way which leads to it. This happiness will never be

attained except through knowledge and action. Obviously, action cannot be carried out without knowledge. Therefore, the basis for happiness in this world and the next is knowledge.

Obviously, there are so many branches of knowledge and some of them are more excellent than others. For example, the excellence of teaching and learning is manifest over any other works and occupations. Al-Ghazālī goes on to say that

If knowledge is the most excellent of things, the process of acquiring it would then be a search for the highest excellence, and teaching it would mean promoting the highest excellence. Human interests cover both the material and the spiritual worlds, and no order exists in the latter without existing in the former, because this world is preparation for the next and is the tool that leads anyone who uses it to God. The affairs of this world, however, cannot be set up except through human activities.

(Al-Ghazālī 2005: 207–208)

It is very interesting that a ‘spiritual man’ as al-Ghazālī is alleged to be, argues strongly that the supreme human activity is politics. Politics (*siyāsa*) is particularly needed in order to unify people and reform society. Moreover, reforming politics is among the highest aims: to guide people onto the straight path and to ensure consequently salvation in this world and the next. Al-Ghazālī divides politics into four classes: the first, the supreme, is the polity of the prophets which involves jurisdiction over thoughts and actions of all people, be they the privileged few or the common folk. The prophet’s politics is then universal. The second class is the polity of the caliphs, kings and sultans, which involves jurisdiction over the actions, but not the thoughts, of all the people, both the elite and the common folk. The caliphs’ and the kings’ politics is universal like that of the prophets, but its scope is a bit narrower and its effectiveness a bit weaker. The third kind of politics is the intellectual polity of the learned men who are the heirs of the prophets, as many *hadīths* stress. There are very few learned men, however; therefore, they have jurisdiction only over the thoughts of the privileged few, and their power to exercise authority is weak and therefore subject to compulsion or restraint. Finally, the polity of the preachers involves jurisdiction only over the thoughts of the common folk: it is far less important than the other classes and is less decisive so as to guarantee welfare in society (al-Ghazālī 1988: 19–21). Political management of life, in the broadest sense, is probably the main outcome of the balanced action of humans.

It is now the occasion to consider more thoroughly one of the most interesting books of al-Ghazālī’s maturity, the *Mizān al-‘amal* or *The Right Balance of Action*. Before beginning the analysis, it will be useful to provide a short survey of Islamic ethical thought. Islamic ethical thought’s first and foremost foundations are to be found obviously in the Qur’ān and Muhammad’s *sunna*. The normative reference to the sacred texts gets a major role not only because Islam is an orthopractical religion, but also because it is a religion ‘of the Book’.

Qur'anic ethics is very elaborate and conveys the image of active and engaged morals in an ongoing search for equilibrium between exteriority and interiority, both of which are characteristic of al-Ghazālī's ethical stance. He considered the *'ibādāt* and the *mu'āmalāt* as the exoteric expressions of the deep inner truths of faith and the inner convictions of the soul enlightened by the faith itself.

Another Qur'anic mark of Ghazalian ethics, so to speak, is the principle of middle way (*wasat*), aiming to keep the believer far away from excesses and exaggerations. The Qur'ān says: 'We made of you a middle-way community (*ja'alnākum ummatan wasatan*)' (Q. 2: 143).

The middle way does not just concern the individual's own deeds, which must be ordered and balanced, but in the first place it concerns the community which, on the whole, takes advantage of the honest and correct behaviour of any one of its members, but which is, at the same time, responsible for his/her deviance. A sense of community is very strong in Islam. The prescription of 'commanding right and forbidding wrong' (*al-amr bi'l-ma'rūf wa'l-nahy 'an al-munkar* – Q. 3: 104 and 110), which lies at the very basis of both Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite ethics, obliges the Muslim to correct wrongs (with the tongue, the word and the hand) and to propagate the message even putting at risk his/her life if necessary, because:

Are not the believers who stay sitting [in their homes] equal, except for those who are unable to act, and those who strive in the path of God [giving] their money and lives. God made who strives in the path of God [giving their money and lives] excellent over who stay sitting [in their homes] of [many] grades (*lā yastawī al-qā'idūn min al-mu'minīn ghayr ūlī al-darrar wa'l-mujāhidūn fī sabīl allāh bi-amwālihim wa anfusihim faddala allāhu al-mujāhidīn bi-amwālihim wa anfusihim 'alā al-qā'idīna darajatan*).

(Q. 4: 95)

Finally, the Qur'ān's ethics is supported by the pre-eminence of justice and is connected with balance in action. See, for example:

It [God] raised up the sky and set the balance. Don't exceed in balance! Weigh with fair correctness and do not impair the balance! (*wa al-samā' rafā'ahā wa wada'a al-mīzān a-lā tatghaū fī'l-mīzān wa-qīmū al-wazn bi'l-qist wa lā tudriū'l-mīzān*).

(Q. 55: 7–9)

In the only true political verse of the Qur'ān, the so-called *āyatu'l-umarā'*, the Holy Book urges those who hold power to be just:

Indeed God commands you to return back the deposits to whom are entitled to have them and to judge with justice when you judge among

people (*inna allāh ya'mrukum an tu'addū al-amānāt ilā ahlihā wa idhā hakamtum bayna al-nās an tahkumū bi'l-'adl*).

(Q. 4: 58)

All the ethical principles al-Ghazālī endorses can be found in the Qur'ān.

With regard to the historical development of Islamic ethics, three kinds of ethical thought developed: theological, philosophical and mystical. Broadly speaking, in the beginning there was the basic difference (differentiating also Islamic, on the one hand, and Western philosophical and juridical ethics on the other) between the objective and subjective conceptions of ethics. The former, supported mainly by philosophers and Mu'tazilite theologians, argues that good and evil are absolute and autonomously rationally grounded (and rationally demonstrable) principles: God Itself conforms Its action to these universal values. For example: life is a right that humans enjoy at the very moment of their birth; it must be preserved because it is 'bad', unnatural and contrary to reason to kill another human being. Subjective ethics, supported by almost all Muslim traditional thinkers and theologians, starting from the Ash'arites and obviously including al-Ghazālī, argues on the contrary that God decided what is good and what is bad along with Its will and foresight: good and evil are such because God preferred the one over the other. If God had decided that killing was 'good', murder would have been licit. But in Its supreme wisdom, God knew that humanity would have disappeared in that way, destroying itself; thus It commanded humans not to kill each other and revealed the Law in order to regulate human life along with those principles of right It has envisaged a priori as useful for the creatures. In other words, 'rights' (*huqūq* in Arabic) are not natural, but are guaranteed by God due to Its supreme wisdom.

Ayman Shihadeh recently argued that Mu'tazilite ethics is grounded on three main principles: (a) that man is an agent (*fā'il*) who produces acts (*fi'l*), in such a way that they are similar to God; (b) that the ethical value of an act is objective; and (c) that for God it is impossible to perform 'bad' actions. Shihadeh calls this mental framework 'realistic' and its opposite – the ethics of classical Ash'arism – 'theological voluntarism'. Up until now, his suggestion has not seemed particularly innovative. Classical Ash'arism puts forward an 'anti-realistic' account of ethical values, because ethical values are not real attributes of acts and thus knowable by reason, and because ethical values' definition depends on divine command. Al-Ghazālī's thinking could easily be linked to the category of classical Ash'arism. Shihadeh, however, argues also that neo-Ash'arism (he quotes for example Ibn Fūrak, al-Ansarī and al-Juwaynī, the teacher of al-Ghazālī) stressed the variability of human (innate and/or acquired) dispositions, producing emotive impulses which arise within the agent's soul in relation to acts. These psychological attitudes are reflections of the ethical value and meaning of 'good' and 'bad'. Moreover, Shihadeh adds that al-Ghazālī developed a 'consequentialist' theory of ethics, better explained later by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī charged

early Ash'arites with not being able to contest the Mu'tazilite position since they targeted the notion that an act is good or bad on account of its essence (objectivism) demonstrating a poor understanding of the theory that ethics is connected to an act's configurations (*wajh*) (Shihadeh in Schmidtke 2016: 384–404; Shihadeh 2006).

Shihadeh candidly admits that 'the upshot of al-Rāzī's ethical subjectivism is that it does not apply to God's acts' (Shihadeh in Schmidtke 2016: 403). But this is the point. Subjective ethics in al-Ghazālī is *exclusively* justified by God's absolute freedom to decide and act accordingly, without and beyond any bounds or ties of rational and logical (in human terms) motivations. This is the reason why in *Qawā'id al-'aqā'id* of the *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, al-Ghazālī says plainly that God can, if It wants, condemn a wise man to Hell and put a murderer in Paradise. God does not do so, but God could do it, if It wanted to, because It is master in its kingdom and everything God does is 'just':

God is free to inflict pain on men and to torment them, without their having previously committed any offence, and without the necessity of compensating them with future rewards. For It has freedom of action among Its subjects and it is inconceivable that Its subjects would oppose Its freedom therein. Tyranny is dispensing with the possessions of others without their permission. But this is impossible in the case of God, because It does not confront possessions belonging to others besides Itself whereby Its dispensing with these possessions could be tyrannous.⁴

Al-Ghazālī's position is exactly the opposite of that of the Mu'tazilites, because the Mu'tazilites contend that God is *obliged* by reason and justice to do the best for Its creatures. For Mu'tazilites and philosophers, ethical norms are prior (a priori) to God's action and moreover they are grasped by reason without the support of revelation, even though, obviously, revelation seals them a posteriori. For theistic theologians like al-Ghazālī, on the contrary, justice and reason are submitted to divine sovereignty. We could recall the famous anecdote al-Ghazālī narrates in many of his books in order to ridicule Mu'tazilite theory:

The seventh principle [to be discussed] is that God does with Its servants whatever It wishes. It has no need to take into consideration that which is the best (*al-aslah*) for Its servants, because I [al-Ghazālī] have already said that nothing is necessary and incumbent upon God [in whichever action or will]. In fact, it is absurd to think that a [kind of] necessity could limit God's omnipotence. [The Qur'ān says]: 'It cannot be called to account for anything that It does, whereas they [the humans] will be called to account' (Q. 21: 23).

Let me [al-Ghazālī] put forward an apologue. I wonder what answer the Mu'tazilites would give when, in connection with their statement that

it is incumbent upon God to do what is good and the best for Its creatures, if we present him with the following problem. Suppose that in the Hereafter a quarrel takes place between two persons, a child and an adult, both of whom died Muslims. Now, according to the Mu'tazilites, God is obliged to exalt the rank of the adult and to give him/her preference over the child, because the former worked hard and laboured to perform acts of worship after he/she had attained maturity. According to the Mu'tazilites, it is obligatory to do so for God. Suppose then that the child asks: 'O my Lord! Why did you exalt the rank of that Muslim above mine?' And God would be obliged to answer: 'Because he attained maturity and worked hard and laboured to perform acts of worship'. Whereupon the child would reply, 'But Lord, you have caused me to die while still a child. Had you prolonged my life until I attained maturity, then I would have worked and laboured harder to perform acts of worship than my fellow Muslim. By making me die, Lord, you deviated from justice by favouring him with long life. Why did you do so?' God would then be obliged to reply: 'Because I knew that if you had lived to attain maturity, you would have committed many sins, and you would have become polytheist and disobedient. Hence it was best that you should die while a child'. Such would be the excuse of the Mu'tazilite on behalf of God. But then the unbelievers would shout from the fires of Hell: 'O Lord! Did you not know that had we lived to attain maturity we should have committed the sin of polytheism and other sins? Why did you not cause us to die in childhood before we could sin? We would have been content to enjoy in Heaven a lesser rank than that of the Muslim child'. What kind of answer could be given from God in response to this objection? (Nothing, it is implied.) Taking this example into consideration, is it not imperative to conclude that divine matters, in view of their majesty, transcend the evaluation and judgement of the followers of the Mu'tazilite school? ⁵

The problem of theodicy, of God's justice (why does evil exist? Why does not God suppress evil and suffering? Is It perhaps 'wicked' or impotent?) is probably the thorniest theological problem of all monotheisms⁶ and it has no real rational solution, although clever minds of all religions, from Augustine to al-Ghazālī to Emmanuel Levinas, tried to give it meaning. Al-Ghazālī supports a strong theistic solution: only God knows what is just and what is not; what is right and what is wrong, and Its decision is not open to appeal, yet It is just, reasonable and concerned with human welfare, although humans do not understand It and believe that they suffer unjustly. Al-Ghazālī's ethics is rigorously subjective.

It is well known that the Qur'ān contains verses claiming that human beings are free in their actions and choices, and verses claiming that only God creates everything in the world, human actions included, thus determining their direction. The middle way, the Qur'anic position, can be found perhaps in this *āya*:

God charges a soul only with the burden it can endure. [Every soul will receive a measure of] what it gained or did not gain [from his/her deeds]. O Our Lord, do not reprimand us if we are forgetful, nor if we make mistakes. Do not burden us with the same weight with which you burdened those who lived before us. O Our Lord, do not charge us with what we have not the strength to bear. Be with us full of forgiveness, pardon and mercy (*lā yukallif allāhu nafsān illā wus'ahā lahā mā kasabat wa lahā mā'ktasabat rabbanā lā tu'akhidhnā in nasīnā aw akhtānā rabbinā wa lā tahmil 'alaynā isran kamā hamaltahu 'alā alladhīna min qablinā rabbanā wa lā tuhmilnā mā lā tāqata lanā bihi wa'-fu 'annā wa'-ghfir lanā wa'-rhamnā*).

(Q. 2: 286)

Humans will be punished or rewarded in proportion to their (good or bad) deeds, but God can burden men with whatsoever weight It wants, although It does not do so without reason (although this reason is not known to us). Overall, Al-Ghazālī supports the idea that God is totally free in deciding if a man or woman (or the angels themselves⁷) should be punished by being sent to Hell or rewarded with Paradise, although God is not a capricious tyrant: what It decides is the best decision, however difficult it may be for us to understand. In the Qur'anic story of Moses and al-Khidr (Q. 18: 60–82), the latter apparently performs wicked or at least incomprehensible deeds (he makes a boat sink; kills a young boy; repairs a wall without asking for money), but there is a logic underlying these odd events. Al-Khidr explains that the boatmen would have been captured by pirates; that the young boy would have led his parents astray; that two orphans would have dug out a treasure trove. And admonishes: 'I did not do these things [because they stemmed] from my decision (*wa mā fa'altuhu 'an amrī*) (v. 82)'.

God determined them in line with Its wisdom, often in a manner incomprehensible to humans. The rational objective foundation of ethics by philosophers involves an explicit link between morals and politics. On the one hand, philosophers argue that nature is the basis for moral behaviour. On the other hand, correct behaviour and happiness are the goals of politics. The foremost supporter of this view in classical Islamic philosophy was probably al-Fārābī (particularly in the *Kitāb arā' ahl al-Madīna al-Fādila* or *The Ideas of the Dwellers of the Perfect State*; see al-Fārābī 1985; Campanini 1996) and also Ibn Rushd/Averroes, although the latter formulated his own specific theory. For al-Fārābī, the proper goal of ethics is the search for happiness, and happiness can only be achieved within a well-structured political community. Humans are social animals and only in society can they grow, protect each other and achieve welfare and peace (Ibn Khaldūn shared the same concept). There is, however, another trend, exemplified mainly by Ibn Tufayl (1972) and Ibn Bājja (Avempace) (2002), that, on the contrary, argues that only through isolation and departure from the wicked and corrupt city (Ibn Tufayl and Ibn Bājja thought that the cities they were living in were wicked and corrupt and therefore irredeemable) can we achieve perfection and bliss.

Both of these positions share the conviction that happiness is a mental and intellectual affair. It is only through the conjunction of human thought with a separate agent – intellect – are the best of human beings (in the first place the philosophers) able completely to perfect their personalities and characters and realize the best possible way of life.

Al-Ghazālī's concept is not completely at odds with this philosophical stance. Although he by no means stresses the role of intellect as the supreme vehicle of knowledge, he agrees with the social character of humans. As we shall see, when dealing with ethical issues, he uses political images, for example in *Nasīhat al-mulūk* (*Counsel for Kings*).

Mystical ethics could seem, at a first sight, an ethics of renunciation of worldly desires and passions. In fact, ascetism has a strong value for mystics, and Islamic mysticism (Sufism) was born primarily as ascetism. But ascetism does not completely rule out social interactions. In *Mizān al-'amal* and in *Kitāb al-Arba'in* alike, for example, al-Ghazālī contends that, although celibacy is advisable, it is better to marry in order not to be subjected to carnal temptations. Moreover, he is convinced that mystics are people who deal with facts and not with words, and who take action rather than engaging in pure contemplation. Mystics look for the 'taste' (*dhawq*) of God which allows them to experience contact with It (al-Ghazālī 1994: 56–57, *Munqih min al-dalāl*). Although the mystic must avoid interaction with politicians, warriors and other men of power, at least as far as it is possible, he/she has the duty to engage himself/herself in religious reform. This duty became al-Ghazālī's goal during the last phase of his life.

George Hourani acknowledged in the *Mizān al-'amal*, which al-Ghazālī wrote in order to explain the criteria for virtuous action, a kind of 'supremacy of reason', coupled with the necessity for a synthesis between science (*'ilm*) and action (*'amal*) in order to achieve happiness in this world and in the Hereafter (Hourani 1984: 294–295). The *Mizān* contains an elaborate web of themes, both philosophical and derived from the traditional religious sciences. Al-Ghazālī was almost certainly influenced by Avicenna's and Miskawayh's thought, but not, at least directly, by Plato and Aristotle. However, science (*'ilm*) must be intended first of all as religious knowledge, while action (*'amal*) is primarily aimed at establishing a perfect Muslim life. We discover here a clear difference between al-Ghazālī and the philosophers, the *falāsifa*: the former is interested in the reformulation of a specifically Islamic ethics, while the latter, although their reference to Islam is dutiful and often sincere, would have supported the same ideas be they Christians or Jews. According to al-Ghazālī, the accountability of the prophets and the saints is a guarantee for pursuing the straight path when we are tormented by doubts. For this reason, 'Alī, answering a man who was pestering him with insistent questions about the future life, said: 'If the thing is as you argue, both of us would be safe; but if I am right, I will go to Paradise while you would be damned to eternal pain' (al-Ghazālī 2005: 108; *Mizān al-'amal*, ch. 2).

Science is preliminary to action, and therefore theoretically more important, because the former leads and the latter is led (al-Ghazālī 2005: 124–128; *Mizān al-'amal*, ch. 5); however, it is action that has an impact on human existence, both in everyday behaviour and in spiritual research. In *Mizān al-'amal*, al-Ghazālī understands action fundamentally as obedience to the Law, the practice of worship according to the rules established by the Law, and, reserved for the most privileged men and women, whose spiritual qualities are highly refined, the soul's perfection and nearness to God. We do not find in the *Mizān* an explicit and wholehearted commitment to Sufism: on the contrary, there are some apparent perplexities about the *sūfis'* tendency to underplay reason and speculation. Al-Ghazālī does not conceal, however, his total appreciation for a number of mystical actions and acknowledges the spiritual value of Sufism.

The ethical level: how science becomes action. The political and juridical dimensions

Medietas (the pursuit of a behavioural middle way) is also the inspiring principle of politics, the other face of the ethical coin. As we have seen, although the Qur'ān can by no means be considered a political book, the principle of justice ('*adl*') is overwhelming, and justice involves equilibrium and balanced judgement.

Al-Ghazālī argues that justice in politics means to establish among the components of a city an order which is tantamount to the order of the balanced soul. If grounded on solidarity, harmony and cooperation the city will realize that harmony among the citizens which will help to achieve its goal – as if it is an individual organism. Everybody and everything will find in the just city their rightful place: citizens will be divided between people who are looked after and do not serve others; people who look after each other and are not served by others; and a third class of people, who at the same time serve and are served. Exactly the same happens for the faculties of the soul:

The body looks like a city and the intellect looks like the king who governs it; its sensory and perceptive abilities, external and internal, looks like armies or bodyguards. The limbs are like the subjects; the soul leaning towards bad qualities as lust and violence look like the enemies who fight the king's government and try to exterminate his subjects. Because the body is like a fortress or a castle, the soul is like the garrison quartered therein. If the garrison [the soul] fights against the enemies, compels them to surrender and becomes their master, as it is its duty, [the garrison] is worthy of praise when he or she enters the presence of the Most High, as it is said: "God has exalted in rank those who struggle on the path of God with their possessions and selves over those who sit at home. God promised the greatest reward" (Q. 4: 95). But if, on the contrary, [the

garrison] loses the castle and compels the subjects to escape, it will be worthy of condemnation and will endure a terrible punishment when he or she is in the presence of the Most High. According to a *ḥadīth*, on the Day of Judgement God will say: 'O wicked shepherd, you have eaten the meat and drunk the milk, but you did not rescue the [lost] sheep nor did you treat its broken bones! Today, I will take vengeance on you!'

Pronouncing the word *jihād* rejoices and sustains the human spirit, but performing it really through action does mean submit the spirit to a strong tension. Only those who are able to renounce passion will understand its importance. This is the reason why the [Prophet's] Companions said: 'We turn from the lesser to the greatest war (*jihād*)', meaning with 'lesser *jihād*' the war waged against unbelievers. The Messenger of God was asked: 'O Messenger of God, which is the best *jihād*?' He answered: 'The struggle against our own desires'. Moreover, he said: 'There is no strength in frenzy. Strong is he who is able to control his wrath'.

A third metaphor. The intellect looks like a hunting knight; the passion is his horse and wrath is the hound which is with him. If the hunter is brave, the horse tamed and the hound well trained, the hunt will be successful. But if the knight is weak, recalcitrant the horse and wrathful the hound, so that the horse cannot be led and the hound does not obey his commands, it is right that [the hunter] should perish rather than achieving his goal.

(Al-Ghazālī 2005: 145–146; *Mīzān al-ʿamal*, ch. 10)

Again al-Ghazālī is not so far from philosophical positions like those of al-Fārābī (1985 and 1996), whose work he was surely familiar with.

Mundane felicity, therefore, involves concrete social engagement. On the other hand, although the supreme felicity is that of the Hereafter, in *this* world, the vestibule of the Hereafter, provided that a spiritual felicity is possible in connection with the intellect, practical felicity is possible in connection with action. The former is the felicity derived from science (*ʿilm*), the latter is the felicity derived from practice (*ʿamal*), first through worship (*ʿibādāt*) and second through the rules associated with life, among which can be counted the imperative of 'commanding right and forbidding wrong' and, obviously, the purification of behaviour. When I speak of 'spiritual felicity in connection with intellect', I do not mean the situation of Ibn Bājja's regimen of the solitary (*tadbīr al-mutawahhid*). As a philosopher Ibn Bājja upheld the notion that intellectual perfection is the only straight path to felicity, while for al-Ghazālī this path cannot be purely epistemological, but must involve the ethical dimension of a renewed moral interiority.

A last point of interest is that this morality – at least in *Mīzān al-ʿamal* – is by no means 'natural', i.e. independent of religion (as was the case for Mis-kawayh for example): ethical rules are, however, grounded upon God's will and determination, although al-Ghazālī insists on the role of intellect as a reliable instrument for understanding and singling out the 'right path'.

Politics in the strict sense of ‘governance of cities and peoples’ is not the main focus of this book. Jurisprudence is a central theme, insofar as Islam is a normative religion and, as is well known, the Law (*sharī’a*) is of divine origin. Through the revealed basis of the Law (the *sharī’a*) and the consequent human elaboration of positive jurisprudence (*fiqh*), God made manifest Its will both in social life and in politics: the Law became the basis of Islamic political theology. Al-Ghazālī, who was a celebrated jurist and professor of Law, grasped this possible foundation of Islamic political theology because he linked the inner dimension of science with the outer dimension of legal acts. He wrote that ‘Everything has its foundation and the foundation of this religion (Islam) is jurisprudence. Islamic political theology is the fulfilment of the decreed divine Law.

I will now discuss at length the most important book al-Ghazālī devoted to jurisprudence – the *Al-Mustasfā min ‘ilm al-usūl* (*Selection in the Science of the Principles of Law*), which was completed, as the manuscript’s colophon informs us, on the sixth of Muharram of the 503 H., that is 5 August 1109. Therefore, the *Mustasfā* is one of the very last works written by al-Ghazālī (albeit not the very last one) and thus it contains a final systematization of his legal theories. 503 H./AD 1109 is the year when he finally abandoned teaching in Nishāpūr and retired to his native Tūs. Although al-Ghazālī was still fully immersed in spiritual research (the composition of *Munqidh min al-dalāl* is roughly coeval), he returned to jurisprudence. It is not necessary to suppose a new political engagement in this renewed interest in the Law. However, the book demonstrates once again that al-Ghazālī never excluded practical issues in his activity.

The *Mustasfā* deals with the roots (*usūl*) of Islamic jurisprudence in large agreement with al-Shāfi‘ī’s codification, but a few original themes emerge. Al-Ghazālī, a member of the Shāfi‘ite school, acknowledges the four traditional roots of jurisprudence: the Qur’ān, the *sunna* of the Prophet, the community consensus (*ijmā’*) and analogical reasoning (*qiyās*), but adds to them the *istihsāb* that is ‘presumption of continuity if there are no operating factors of change’. Al-Ghazālī stresses the centrality of the Qur’ān and the *sunna*: however, the latter, as al-Shāfi‘ī argued, has to be legitimized by the Holy Book. On the other hand, al-Ghazālī shows deep mistrust towards other sources of the Law like the Hanafite *istihsān* or ‘criterion of justice’ and the Malikite *istislāh* or ‘prevalence of community welfare’. Even the Companions’ opinion is quoted more as pious behaviour to be praised than as binding normative advice.

A major problem faced by al-Ghazālī in *Mustasfā* is that of *maqāsid al-sharī’a* or ‘aims of the religious Law’. The issue is very important because it is widely discussed in contemporary Islamic reformism. Briefly, al-Ghazālī argues that there are five aims of religious law, which were largely accepted later, and these involve the preservation, implementation and promotion of:

- 1 Religion
- 2 Reason
- 3 Life

- 4 Wealth
- 5 Chastity (in order to suppress adultery and fornication, and guarantee the lineage of offspring).

Broadly speaking al-Ghazālī says that

Every interest which is not based on preservation of an objective which may be understood from the Qur'ān, the *sunna*, and the consensus of the Muslim community, but which is, rather, a foreign interest which is inconsistent with the behaviour called for by Islamic Law, is invalid and unacceptable. As for an interest which is based on the preservation of a legitimate objective which is known to be the intent of the Qur'ān, the *sunna* and consensus of the Muslim community, it is not outside the purview of these principles; however, it is not referred to as an analogy, but rather as an unrestricted interest.

(Al-Ghazālī 1993: 310–311)

According to al-Ghazālī, God and the Prophet are both considered lawgivers and anything that does not correspond to their intentions is wrong. Al-Ghazālī emphasizes once more the role and centrality of the Prophet along with the Qur'ān. His mature theory of *maqāsid al-sharī'a* seeks balance between interiority and exteriority. He does not make a distinction between the spiritual and the wordly aspects in pursuing human *maslaha* (welfare) because, as Ahmad al-Raysuni put it, 'the prohibition against shameful and unjust deeds is in itself a prohibition [which] aims to preserve interests which are both spiritual and worldly' (2006: 19).

It is useful to make a comparison with the Andalusian jurist al-Shātībī (d. 1333), who is considered today, especially by reform-minded Muslims, to be the leading theoretician of the *maqāsid al-sharī'a*. With respect to al-Ghazālī, al-Shātībī gives *maqāsid al-sharī'a* a higher and more decisive status with regard to the principles of jurisprudence. Moreover, his interpretation of the Law's aims is centred on the idea of 'interest' (al-Raysuni 2006). The idea of interest fits well into that 'community welfare' (*istislāh*) characteristic of Malikite jurisprudence (al-Shātībī was a Malikite), but was rejected by al-Ghazālī. The lawgiver promulgated the Law in order to benefit humans and to enhance their well-being (*maslaha*), on the one hand, and in order to avoid harm, on the other. In this sense, al-Shātībī divides the 'interests' into three categories: (1) the necessary or *darūriyyāt*, that is things essential for the achievement of human beings' spiritual and material welfare in this world and in the Hereafter; (2) things that are needed or *hājiyyāt*, that is things which, when fulfilled, help to relieve hardship and create ease; and (3) the embellishment or *tahsīniyyāt*, which can be considered, in a sense, superfluous, but which, when fulfilled, enhance and complete the first two categories. Al-Shātībī's aims of the law are not in themselves so different from al-Ghazālī's principles (protection of life, property, religion, reason; avoiding innovation, apostasy,

harmful behaviour, and so on); he stresses that they are proportionate to the needs of humans, as individuals, as members of a family and community. The contemporary scholar Jasser Auda described al-Shātībī's theory as a complete philosophy of Islamic law (Auda 2008). But the 'interests' theory involves a risk: the transformation of a particular need (the need of an individual for example) into a universal obligation and duty. For instance, it is contrary to human freedom of choice to prohibit everybody from drinking wine simply because a single individual can be harmed by consuming alcohol (Auda argues in this way). The risk is the imposition from above of particular rules to all men and women replacing the right of everyone to decide for himself/herself.

However, the contemporary reformer Tariq Ramadan draws attention to al-Ghazālī's summary about the *maqāsid al-sharī'a*, which is as follows:

In its deep meaning, *maslaha* is a word that means 'to search for something of useful and avoiding something of harmful'. For searching for utility and avoiding evil are the aims (*maqāsid*) of creation and the good of mankind's creation consists in the implementation of these objectives. What we mean by *maslaha* is the preservation of the Law's (*shar'*) aims consisting of five things: preservation of religion (*dīn*), life (*nafs*), reason ('*aql*), progeny (*nasl*) and property (*amwāl*). All that guarantees the preservation of these five aims is *maslaha*; all that is against their preservation is *mafsada* [corruption], and avoiding [corruption] is again *maslaha*
(Al-Ghazālī 1993: 78)

In response, Ramadan comments:

Contemporary Islamic thought shows great difficulty freeing itself from formalism and immobility. The study of the superior aims of ethics and their possible performance at the level of social and political projects provides evidence of five basic principles which, in their diversity, are the same pursued by democratic models: a state based on justice, egalitarian citizenship, universal suffrage, controlled and measured delegation of power (in English: *accountability*) and separation of powers. In the light of these principles and superior aims, the societies where Muslims are the majority ought to enter a process of democratization which considers fundamental the implementation of laws along with their objectives, and adapting the model to the wide range of modern political and environmental concerns
(Ramadan 2008: 318; emphasis in the original)

The interesting point is that al-Ghazālī, al-Shātībī and Ramadan are all in favour of human rights from an Islamic point of view, often considered as 'universal'.

From a strictly legal perspective, al-Ghazālī's technical stance did not satisfy the jurists who followed him. For example, Ibn Taymiyya, who

assumed a middle position between the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites regarding good and evil, supporting the Mu'tazilite view that they are discernible by reason, not just revelation, consequently labelled al-Ghazālī as a conservative, because he would have been primarily concerned with the punishment of transgressions rather than with the implementation of *maslaha* or public welfare and justice (see Vasalou 2015).

Overall, the *Mustasfā* is not simply a systematization of al-Ghazālī's final legal opinions, but also an epistemological treatise that is useful for understanding the way in which his thought developed during the last phase of his life. He does not conceal his ongoing interest in speculative issues and, indeed, he seems to consider jurisprudence to be a speculative science. Moreover, al-Ghazālī extolls once again the ethical/practical dimension of (juridical) knowledge, pointing out its social value. Finally, we can detect a silent re-evaluation of classical Islamic scholastic theology, the *kalām*, to which al-Ghazālī attributes goals and methods that are not very dissimilar from the philosophical theory.

Let me quote at length from the Introduction of the *Mustasfā*:

Know that you cannot understand the principles of jurisprudence (*usūl al-fiqh*) if previously you didn't understand the meaning of *fiqh*. Now, it is a word that points to the knowledge ('*ilm*) and comprehension (*fahm*) of a presupposed fact. ... The word 'jurist' (*faqīh*) ... is fitting for those learned men who deal with the Law's rules pertaining to human acts, like the duties and the prohibitions, the licit, the permissible or the reprehensible things; whether an agreement is valid, invalid or imperfect; if an act of worship is prescribed or supererogatory, etc. Notice attentively that all acts have rational fundamentals or fundamentals that can be grasped by intellect: for example, if they are accidents or if they inhere continuously in a substrate; whether they differ in essence or imply movement or rest. However, these last arguments are not of pertinence to the jurist, but of a scholastic theologian (*mutakallim*). ...

Know that the sciences can be divided into rational categories, like medicine, mathematics and geometry – but it is not our aim to deal with them here – and into religious categories, like theology, jurisprudence and its principles, the science of Traditions and the Qur'anic commentary, and the inner science ('*ilm bātin*'), that is that which deals with the heart and its purification from blameworthy behaviour. ... The scholastic theologian is who studies the most general things, like the existent, and who distinguishes in the existent the substance from the accident, and then, in the accident, distinguishes what life necessarily brings about it, like knowledge, will, power, speaking, hearing and sight, from what is subjective at all, like colours, smells and tastes. Moreover, the scholastic theologian is able to distinguish the essence of animals from that of plants and inorganic bodies, and clarify which are their differences in species and accidents. Then, he devotes his study to the Eternal [Being]

(*qadīm*) and demonstrates that It is not subjected to multiplicity, nor is affected by divisibility like the contingent beings: therefore there is no doubt that [the Eternal] is One and absolutely different from contingents, either for the attributes which inhere in It necessarily, or for other things which are impossible to attribute to It, although they are not necessary in themselves nor impossible in themselves. In fact, the scholastic theologian distinguishes between what is possible, necessary and impossible in regards to the Highest True (*haqq*) [God]. Furthermore, he clarifies that the act is subjected to God's will [literarily: the principle of action is legitimate to It (*asl al-fi'l jā'iz 'alayhi*)] and that the world is under Its arbitrary action and that this arbitrariness (*jawāz*) is lacking in the contingent. The sending of prophets is one of the arbitrary acts of God who is able to make their truthfulness known through miracles. All this is absolutely evident, and, given this immediate evidence, the theologian's research and the intellect's activity must stop, although the intellect is able, however, to demonstrate the truthfulness of prophecy. ...

The jurist deals with a thing in particular, that is the acts of a legally capable person (*mukallif*), studying them along with the prescriptions of religious Law (*shar'*), in relation to what is obligatory, prohibited or licit. The scholar of *usūl* deals in particular with the Prophet's sayings, whose truthfulness has been demonstrated by the theologian, and he studies them insofar as they are indications of principles either verbally uttered or understood in their meaning or again deduced [by reasoning].

(Al-Ghazālī 1993: 5–7)

This text intertwines different threads of epistemological value. Theologians study matters normally reserved for philosophers (the existent, the substance and the accident, etc.) and deal with the *rational ontological* foundations of human acts, while the jurists deal with the normative (licit or illicit) dimensions of the same human acts. However, al-Ghazālī does not accept that reason has the absolute capacity to know everything: for example, some divine acts are arbitrary and human reason is unable to grasp their inner logic. Reason, however, seems free to apply its instruments to the comprehension of basic philosophical problems like 'being' and its qualities (accidents). The jurist's field of intervention seems narrower: his/her duty is only to analyse prophetic traditions (Shāfi'ism insisted particularly on the *sunna* and the *hadīths*), applying them to the solution of juridical problems. A long quotation of a comment by Henri Laoust regarding the *Mustasfā* passage quoted above, can be useful to clarify my critical perspective:

The *Mustasfā* distinguishes three categories of sciences. There are first of all the pure rational sciences (*'aqlī mahd*), like arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and other similar sciences. Religious law (*shar'*) neither compels us to study these sciences nor encourages us to do so. Therefore, starting from the five *ahkām*, the five legal statutes as the *Mustasfā*

defines them, the sciences of this category can be considered at most as licit (*mubāh*), but not obligatory (*wājib*), nor recommendable (*mandūb*), while, on the contrary, they could result in blameworthy (*munkar*) or even prohibited (*mahrūm*). ...

The sciences of the second category are the pure traditional sciences (*naqlī mahd*), 'like the *hadīths* and the Qur'anic commentaries' – 'old and young men can study them with the same success, because they are grounded first of all on memory and not much room remains for reason'. We can perceive here the echo of a critique waged against Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, who was recognized by some people as a great authority in traditions, while they refused to see in him the qualities of a jurist.

The noblest sciences are those which mix different elements and constitute the third category. They are the sciences which resort both to reason and tradition and through which personal opinion (*ra'y*) and revealed law work. *Fiqh* is one of these sciences, either dealing with the *usūl* [roots], or regarding the *furū'* [branches].

(Laoust 1983: 261–263)

Some of al-Ghazālī's fundamental ideas are confirmed here, such as his substantial indifference for the natural sciences. We can suggest that in the closing years of al-Ghazālī's life – the *Mustasfā* being consistent with his other works – he reveals not so much a diminution of spiritual inspiration, but a resumed and more constant attention to the pedagogical value of jurisprudence, and, if possible, an even more uncompromising re-evaluation of the centrality of Muhammad's figure and of Muhammad's *sunna* for a direct and authentic faith and belief and behaviour. Perhaps it is not by chance that al-Ghazālī's 'mystical' works belong almost exclusively to the 'occultation' period when he disappeared from public view, while, during the last years of his life and activity, moral, social and juridical problems gain the upper hand again. *Fiqh* is an Islamic rationality, not a purely philosophical rationality like that of Ibn Bājja or al-Fārābī. Al-Ghazālī's last speculations maintain their value within a normative and ethical/behavioural framework inspired by religion.

The ethical level: the metaphor of the journey of the soul

In order to explain the importance of the balance between science and action, it is useful to compare al-Ghazālī and a number of mystical thinkers, using journey as a metaphor. This metaphor is commonplace in Islamic mystical thought (Amir-Moezzi 2015) and it would be enough to remember Farīd al-Dīn 'Attār, Ibn 'Arabī and Suhrawardī. The first pilgrim of the soul was the Prophet Muhammad himself with the celebrated *isrā'* and *mi'rāj*, the night journeys from Mecca to Jerusalem and then from Jerusalem to the Heavens and Paradise, which were allegedly described in Q. 17: 1 and Q. 53: 1–18. The journey in search of knowledge has also a soteriological end: going towards the 'East' (*mashriq*) for the illuminationist Suhrawardī (d. 1191) denoted the

way out from the darkness of matter and body and entering the light of Paradise. In Avicenna's mystical booklet *Hayy Ibn Yaqzān* (with the same name as Ibn Tufayl's hero⁸) the protagonist, whose name means 'the living son of the Awakened', argues that his home is the heavenly Jerusalem; his destiny is to travel continuously throughout the universe, while his invitation to humans, 'after having revealed the true Orient, is to *orient* [point] the mystical pilgrim towards that Eastern direction' (Avicenna 1999: 164–175; emphasis in the original). Furthermore, Avicenna wrote a *Risālat al-tayr* (*Epistle of the Bird*) with the same framework of reference.

In Henri Corbin's interpretation, the soul's opposite directions (East and West, Happiness and Sorrow, Good and Evil) are hypostatized: they are not symbolic places, but real, authentic *loci* wherein positive religion – the religion of Muhammad, Islam – sublimates in gnostic esotericism. In order to demonstrate this contention, Corbin, among others, quotes the Isma'ili thinker Nasīr-i Khusraw: '*Sharī'at* is the exoteric side (*zāhir*) of the true and deep reality (*haqīqa*). From its side, the true and deep reality is the esoteric face (*bātin*) of *sharī'at*. The exoteric is the front page of the esoteric (*zāhir 'enwāne bātin ast*). *Sharī'at* is the symbol (*mathal*), while the true and deep reality is the symbolized (*mamthūl*)' (Avicenna 1999: 43). This hypostatization of the *logoi* is heralding polytheism and pantheism at the same time, insofar as it claims to put 'outside' God what is inside It, Its inner ipseity, rendering specular the outward manifestation with the inward essence (the classic Qur'anic verse is Q. 57: 4, '*huwa al-zāhir wa'l-bātin*'). As we shall see in Chapter 3, al-Ghazālī rejected this dangerous leaning towards pantheism.

Farid al-Dīn 'Attār (d. 1229) described the soul as a bird that flies in search of its creator, whose symbol is the Simurgh, the fabulous king of the birds living at the extreme boundaries of the world. Yearning for God and for achieving – at least for a transitory moment – Its closeness, the soul-bird faces a dangerous journey. Very few souls-birds will arrive at God/Simurgh's presence: most of them will die. Not all souls have the spiritual qualities to overcome God's proximity. The annihilation of the soul in God (after having achieved perfection, the birds become similar to the Simurgh) represent the highest level of mystical union. Again, al-Ghazālī refused the total identification (*ittihād*) or inhabitation (*hulūl*) of God in a man/woman, fearing, again, the risk of monism or pantheism.

Al-Ghazālī also wrote a *Risālat al-tayr* (*Epistle of the Bird*) about the metaphor of a journey. And a journey was the vehicle of his spiritual recovery, if we are to believe the *Munqidh*'s narrative. He tells us of his spiritual crisis in 1095 when, as a teacher in Baghdad, he was at the height of his career, and was healed by a direct intervention of God: God opened his breast to the light and he was saved. Two Qur'anic *āyāt* are worth quoting because they express perfectly al-Ghazālī's feelings:

Whosoever God opens his breast to Islam, he is in the light of his Lord.
Woe to those whose hearts are hardened at the remembrance of God's

[name]! They have clearly gone astray! God has sent down the best narration, a Scripture [containing] similarity in its often-repeated [verses] and that causes the skins of those who fear their Lord to shiver. Their skins and their hearts [shiver] remembering God. Such is God's guidance and God guides whosoever It wants. And whosoever God leads astray, he does not have any guide (*a-fa-man sharaha allāhu sadrahu li'l-islām fa-huwa 'alā nūr min rabbihi fa-wayl li'l-qāsiyati qulūbihum min dhikri'llāh ūlā'ika fī dalāl mubīn allāhu nazzala ahsan al-hadīth kitāban muta-shābihan mathānī taqsha'irru minhu julūdu'lladhīna yakhsha'ūna rabbahum thumma talīnu julūduhum wa qulūbuhum ilā dhikri'llāh dhalīka hūdā allāh yahdī bihi man yashā' wa man yudlil allāhu fa-mā lahu min hādīn*).

(Q. 39: 22–23)

Be it as it may, in November/December 1095, al-Ghazālī left Baghdad and undertook the most important physical journey in the life of a Muslim – the pilgrimage to the holy places, from Baghdad to Damascus, Damascus to Jerusalem, and thence to Mecca and Medina.

We do not know many of the details of this journey. Al-Ghazālī tells us that in Damascus he spent a lot of time in prayer and meditation staying all day in the great Umayyad mosque and closing the door behind himself. It is unlikely that he made a short visit in Egypt, despite what a number of biographers tell us. Rather, having left Damascus he arrived in Palestine and visited Jerusalem and Hebron where he paid due homage to the tomb of Abraham, the friend of God and father of the believers. In that very particular *Bildungsroman* of his psychological and spiritual evolution which is the *Munqidh*, al-Ghazālī does not reveal many more particulars of his experiences. After the *hajj* to Mecca and Medina, he spent a short time in Baghdad before returning to Tūs. His report comes to an end with the *hajj*, however, and this means that he viewed the pilgrimage more as an achievement of the soul than a journey of the body. We can imagine him meditating in the wide and silent court of Damascus' Umayyad mosque or prostrating himself in the al-Aqsā mosque of Jerusalem, the third holiest place in the world for a Muslim. His soul was directed to grasp the 'taste of God' in a continuous remembrance of God's name (*dhikr*). Agiography? Perhaps. But I believe that al-Ghazālī was intimately sincere in feeling to be reproducing the behaviour of the Prophet, meditating daily on the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān, the never-ending ocean full of jewels and pearls, as he said in one of his most important works, *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*. The analysis of the pages of this book and of *Mishkāt al-anwār* are remarkable for the subtleties and richness of interpretations he was able to extract from the literal expressions of Scripture.

According to the *Munqidh min al-dalāl*, al-Ghazālī, after the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, was plagued by many problems, including family cares and other, probably quite mundane, troubles, perhaps connected with his teaching and preaching activities. Thus, he decided to return to his home country, despite having convinced himself that he would never do so. He

claimed to have sought after ten years retirement, solitude and purification of the heart in order to continuously remember God. He admitted to having experienced ecstasy only occasionally. The events of history and family life, though, changed his mind and spurred him to overcome these obstacles. However, he remained persuaded that

it is above all the mystics who walk on the road of God; their life is the best life, their method the soundest method, their character the purest character; indeed, were the intellect of the intellectuals and the learning of the learned and the scholarship of the scholars, who are versed in the profundities of revealed truth, brought together in the attempt to improve the life and character of the mystics, they would find no way of doing so; for to the mystics all movement and all rest, whether external or internal, brings illumination from the light of the lamp of prophetic revelation, and behind the light of prophetic revelation there is no other light on the face of the earth from which illumination may be received.

In general, then, how is a mystic 'way' (*tarīqa*) described? The purity which is the first condition of it is the purification of the heart completely from what is other than God Most High; the key to it, which corresponds to the opening act of adoration in prayer, is the sinking of the heart completely in the recollection of God; and the end of it is complete absorption (*fanā*) in God.

(Al-Ghazālī 1994: 62–63)

Al-Ghazālī speaks of *fanā*, 'extinction' in God, annihilation of the self and the conscience, but never suggests the possibility of 'inhabitation' (*hulūl*) of God into the mystic's body, tantamount to al-Hallāj, nor of 'unification' (*ittihād*) of the mystic with God. It is a demonstration of his prudence, of his orthodoxy as it were: between God and man the distance must remain insuperable; God's ontological eminence – Its super-essentiality as we will see in the next chapter – prevents a creature from 'touching' or becoming God. On the contrary, in ecstasy al-Hallāj cried: 'I am God (*anā al-haqq*)', assuming a blameworthy antinomistic attitude. This prudence and an undoubted 'coolness' in speaking of *tasawwuf* led some to think (for example Farid Jabre) that al-Ghazālī's alleged mystical experiences were more intellectual than lived. However, al-Ghazālī is very precise in his description of the path to God, the *maqāmāt* approaching Its loftiness. In *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*, *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* and in the *Arbaʿīn* only ten *maqāmāt* are reserved for science, while thirty are reserved for action! The path to God concedes nothing to the *mundus imaginalis* of Avicenna or Suhrawardī or Ibn 'Arabī'.

The journey of the soul-bird in al-Ghazālī confirms this 'concreteness' so to speak. The short *Risālat al-tayr* (*Epistle of the Bird*) (in al-Ghazālī 2000) describes how the birds decide to put themselves under the protection of the most authoritative among them, Anqa' (whose Arabic name is feminine in gender), who lives on a faraway island. Their journey to reach her is, as usual, perilous, as

for 'Attār: they must fly through boundless deserts, climb mountains of dizzy heights, pass through the hottest and the coldest lands. As in the flight described by 'Attār, many birds die: the birds used to living in hot countries die when passing through cold places, the birds used to living in cold countries die passing through hot places (the metaphor hints at the soul's passions that can destroy her). To their great surprise, when they arrive at al-Anqa's court, the birds are not made welcome, but are forced to wait outside the palace. Anqa', however, is not a wicked queen: she just wants to prove to them that their suffering leads them to discover the truth of what the Qur'ān states: 'Do not despair of God's mercy because only the unbelievers despair of God's mercy (*lā tay'asū min rūhi'llāh innahu lā yay'asū min rūhi'llāh illā al-qawmu al-kāfirūna*)' (Q. 12: 87).

Many translators convey here for *rūh* the meaning of mercy (Abdel Haleem, Zilio Grandi, etc.; but Arberry translates it as 'comfort'). To be sure, using *rūh* which normally means 'spirit' as 'mercy' seems quite odd. The Muslim commentators themselves are irresolute: the Jalalayn understand 'mercy' (*rahma*), but Ibn 'Abbās has *faraj*, that is 'relief'. Be it as it may, al-Ghazālī's aim in quoting that verse is to emphasize that, when the soul grasps God and achieves full trustfulness in It, the soul achieves ease and peace surrendering to God's confidence (*tawakkul*). Even though human beings were not able to stand in God's presence, despite having exerted themselves (the spiritual *jihād*) on his path, they can be sure that God's bounty will accept them in Its never-ending mercy. Al-Ghazālī quotes two other *āyas*:

Anyone who leaves his home to follow the path of God will find on Earth plenty of comfortable refuges, and whoever leaves his home in order to emigrate towards God and Its Messenger and meets death, a great reward is prepared for him next to God, because God is a forgiver and is merciful (*man yuhājir fī sabīl allāh yajid fī'l-ard murāghaman kathīran wasa'an wa man yakhruj min baytihi muhājiran ilā allāh wa rasūlihi thumma yudrik-hu al-mawt fa-qad waqa'a ajruhu 'alā allāh wa allāh ghafūr rahīm*).

(Q. 4: 100)

And

Do not say of those who fight on the path of God that they are dead, because indeed they are alive (*wa mā taqūlū li-man yuqtal(u) fī sabīl allāh amwātun bal ahyā'(un)*).

(Q. 2: 145)

Spiritual fighting and *jihād*, that is the 'great *jihād*' according to a famous prophetic tradition, means striving to conquer and control the self – the most difficult challenge a man/woman can face.

All al-Ghazālī's 'orthodox' spirit springs out of this narration. First, the negation of the possibility that the mystic can 'unite' with God, as al-Hallāj (and perhaps Avicenna too) foresees. The mystic can only approach God

(*qurba*) and enfold himself/herself in the protection of God's wings. The souls/birds who arrive at the court of Anqa' are summoned to commit themselves entirely to her, trustful of her mercy and bounty, summoned indeed to become 'Muslims' in the fullest sense of the word. From this point of view, the two *Risālas al-tayr* of Avicenna and al-Ghazālī are completely at odds to one another. Avicenna's *récit* is a gnostic tale which contains no reference to the Scripture; al-Ghazālī's apologue is heavily grounded upon the Qur'anic concept of *tawakkul* – full trusteeship in God granted through revelation. *Tawakkul*, as we have seen at the beginning, is one of the most important *maqāma* on the path to God. It is not by chance that, alluding to the soul's relief, al-Ghazālī quotes another Qur'anic verse that is very popular with spiritual people and concerns the Day of Judgement:

No one will punish as It [God] punishes, and no one will bind as It binds.
And you, O peaceful soul, return to your Lord pleased and pleasing,
enter among my servants, enter my Paradise (*fa-yawma'idh lā yu'adhdhib
'adhābahu ahadan wa lā yuthiq wathāqahu ahadan yā ayyuhā an-nafsu al-
mutma'innatu'rji'i ilā rabbika rādiyyatan mardīyyatan fa-dkhulī fī 'ibādī
fa-dkhulī jannatī'*)

(Q. 89: 25–30)

Here, the journey of the soul which struggled on the path of God ends in the eternal rest of God's compliance.

Notes

- 1 See E. Bellone (2007) 'Filosofia di un terrorista algebrico', *Le Scienze*, no. 464 (April): 13.
- 2 The sentence is literal and perhaps too synthetic. Al-Ghazālī means that the attributes' science sheds more light than the essence's science, therefore there is more scope to study what God is (i.e. theology) and what might be the results of God's action.
- 3 Legal alms/tax, or *zakat*, were withdrawn from a number of goods (like gold or animals) established by law, but not from *all* the goods a man could own. Moreover, the amount varied in the four orthodox Sunni schools of jurisprudence.
- 4 This quotation is from the '*Aqīda Qudsiyya* in the *Ihyā 'ulūm al-dīn* (the fundamentals of creed in the *Revival of Religious Sciences*) translated by Nabil Faris and available at www.al-ghazali.org (accessed 29 July 2017).
- 5 This quotation is from the '*Aqīda Qudsiyya* in the *Ihyā 'ulūm al-dīn*. I translated it directly from Arabic and compared it with Nabil Faris's version, available at www.al-ghazali.org (accessed 29 July 2017).
- 6 For oriental philosophies like Daoism, grounded on the idea of an inner harmony of nature and on the idea that the universe obeys an unconscious principle of equilibrium, self-sufficiency and balanced reciprocal interactions among subjects, the problem of theodicy is meaningless. Theodicy is a problem insofar as God is a *person*, willing, deciding and judging – as God is in monotheistic religions – and thus could be accused of making unjust decisions.
- 7 A very famous *sūfi* narrative relates that Iblīs – the highest in degree of all angels – was in a sense *obliged* by God to rebel when he refused to prostrate himself before

- Adam (for example, see al-Hallāj's *Kitāb al-tawaṣīn*). Therefore, God's despatch of Iblīs to Hell, irrespective of that command, appeared self-contradictory.
- 8 The Andalusian esoteric philosopher Abū Bakr Ibn Tufayl (who was also one of the teachers of Averroes), died in 1185.

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