

CHAPTER FOUR

THE HEART (*AL-QALB*) AND AL-GHAZĀLĪ'S MYSTICAL DISCUSSIONS OF THE SOUL

We now move into al-Ghazālī's more speculative, theoretical discussions on human nature, and the majority of these are found scattered throughout the voluminous *Ihyā'*, beginning with the very first book and concluding with the very last. More specifically, we will be looking closely at three *Ihyā'* texts in the course of this discussion: namely, the *Book of Knowledge* (*Kūtāb al-'ilm*), the *Commentary on the Wonders of the Heart* (*Kūtāb sharḥ 'ajā'ib al-qalb*), and the *Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife* (*Kūtāb dhikr al-mawt wa mā ba'dahu*).¹ And, no sooner do we enter into the first of these than one of the core verities asserts itself: whatever else this true human nature may be, it is and must be rational. Al-Ghazālī's numerous statements in the *Book of Knowledge* are very clear on this point. Early on in the book, in his explication of the "Virtue of Teaching", he tells us that

It is not hidden that the religious sciences, i.e., the *fiqh* of the next world,² are grasped through the perfection of the intellect and the purity of the intelligence. Now the intellect is the noblest of the human being's attributes, as its [forthcoming] explication will bring [forth], since through it the trust (*amāna*)³ of God is accepted and through it one can attain [the station of] proximity to God, be He praised.

And as for the all-pervasiveness of [its] benefit, it is not subject to doubt: for its benefit and fruit is the felicity of the next world.

As for the nobility of [its] receptacle (*al-maḥall*), how can it be hidden when the teacher treats the hearts and the souls of people? [This] class of humanity [form] the noblest existent on earth, and the noblest

¹ This, of course, does not mean that our discussion will be limited to these texts, for other relevant texts, such as the *Book of Forbearance and Thanksgiving*, the *Book of Love, Yearning, Intimate Friendship, and Contentment* and the *Book of Contemplation*, will also be brought forward in the course of this chapter.

² It should be noted how careful he is here to clarify that, by the "religious sciences", he intends an inner jurisprudence, a science of spiritual formation, and not the sciences more commonly represented by the term.

³ This usage of "trust" implies something entrusted to humanity: a responsibility, sacred duty.

part (*juzʿ*) from among the *jawāhir* of the human being is his heart. The teacher is the one occupied with its perfection, its [complete] exposure, its purification, and its direction toward the [ultimate] proximity to God—be He mighty, sublime.⁴

In the course of this passage, he shifts without hesitation or transition from “intellect” (*ʿaql*) to the term “heart” (*qalb*) in such a way as to give his reader the impression that the two terms are being used interchangeably. Upon closer examination, however, the “heart” appears to refer to the seat or “receptical” of the “attribute” of intellect. If this reading is correct, then we may wonder if the heart is physical and whether or not it is capable of housing other attributes (or faculties) as well, such as the imagination. He sheds no further light on the heart’s nature in this passage, however, and so the reader is left with dangling questions concerning the precise nature of the heart and its relation to the intellect, questions that will resurface time and again and will ultimately be answered by the *Book of Knowledge* and its sister books of mystical Unveiling in the *Ihyāʾ*. As is already becoming clear, al-Ghazālī’s answers typically are the kind that beget new questions; for example, the heart is referred to in this passage as a “part” (*juzʿ*) of the *jawāhir* that make up the person: a reference that, if understood in the context of the *kalām* terminology examined in the second chapter, implies that the heart is a single atom. Is this what he intends, or is there some equivocity at work in this non-*kalāmī* context? We will endeavor to sort out such puzzles as we explore more thoroughly his position on the heart’s true nature in this chapter and the ones following.

Earlier in the same book, in the section devoted to “the Virtue of Knowledge”, he recalls the words of Faṭḥ al-Mawṣilī: “does not the sick man die when food and drink are withheld from him for three days? . . . So too the heart, if wisdom and knowledge are withheld from it for three days, it will die.” Al-Ghazālī then adds,

he spoke truly. Wisdom and knowledge are the nourishment of the heart, and through them [it takes] its life, just as food is the nourishment of the body. The heart of the one who has lost knowledge is sick and its death is certain.⁵ However, he will not sense [the heart’s sickness and imminent death], since love of the world and his preoccupation with it paralyze his [inner] sensations.⁶

⁴ *Al-ʿilm*, 22.

⁵ More literally, “necessary” (*lāzim*).

⁶ *Al-ʿilm*, 15.

In these and countless other passages, the heart is not treated in a bodily way, and knowledge—its “food”—is depicted as the means to eternal life and the stuff of eternal happiness. Early on in the *Book of Knowledge*, he corroborates this further by saying,

if you look into knowledge, you will see it as something enjoyable in itself, and you will find it [to be] a means to the abode of the next world and its felicity and [also to be] a means to the [station of] proximity to God—be He exalted. One cannot attain [this proximity] save through [knowledge]. Now eternal felicity is the greatest thing properly belonging to the human being (*fi haqqi 'l-adamī*), and the most excellent thing is that which is the means to it. And one shall not attain [such felicity] save through knowledge and works (*al-'ilm wa'l-'amal*); [of course,] one can only get to works through the knowledge of how [they are to be performed].⁷

The term “knowledge”, then, is used to mean both the practical and theoretical dimensions of the the Science of the Way of the Afterlife. These two kinds of knowledge stand in a hierarchical relationship to one another: the theoretical clearly superior to the practical while being, at the same time, dependent upon it. This is a crucial point of interdependence that he makes again and again throughout the *Ihyā'*,⁸ and it provides a framework in which to better understand the relation between the respective sciences of Right Practice and of the Unveiling. The latter, being the more theoretical, is certainly deemed superior to its praxis-oriented sister, and yet it is, at the same time, absolutely dependent upon it. This dependence is not completely one-sided, however, as there are also key points in the science of Right Practice, he says, that cannot be grasped save through a measured dose of the Unveiling.⁹ Such areas, however, are relatively few and far between. We will touch upon the relation between these two interdependent ways of knowing again as the study unfolds.

Turning now to the nature of the intellect, which is the seat of both the practical and theoretical sciences, al-Ghazālī provides some

⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁸ And it is an observation shared by many scholars of al-Ghazālī. For example, see Umaruddin's *Ethical Philosophy of al-Ghazzālī* (Lahore: Sh.M. Ashraf, 1962, 1970), esp. 102–111 and 260–end. In a way, the entire book is a detailed explication of this single point. Also, see Lazarus-Yafeh, 359–363.

⁹ See, for example, his statement in *Kitāb al-tawhīd wa'l-tawakkul (Ihyā')*, vol. V), 118, where he explains that “some of the sciences of the Unveiling have a direct bearing on works, through the mediation of the [knowledge of] the states, and only through them can the science of Right Practice be made perfect.” This may also be the makings of an argument for the necessity of a shaykh in Sūfī formation.

clarification near the end of the book, specifically in the seventh chapter, "On the Intellect: Its Nobility and Reality and Divisions":

Know that this is among the things which do not require one to take pains in bringing it to light, especially in light of the fact that the nobility of knowledge was made clear in respect to the [noble nature of the] intellect. The intellect is the spring and starting point of knowledge [as well as] its foundation, and knowledge flows from it as the fruit comes from the tree and light from the sun and vision from the eye. How then can that which is the means for felicity in [both] this world and the next not be honored? Or how can it be doubted when [even] the beast, with [all] its shortcoming in discernment, becomes timid [before] the intellect, to the extent that even the greatest of beasts in terms of size and the most severe in terms of [inflicting] harm and the most powerful in terms of attack will, when it sees the image of a human being, become timid [before] it and be afraid of it . . .¹⁰

He continues in this vein, mentioning how the primitive nomads among the Turks, Kurds, and Arabs will naturally respect their leaders (*mashāyikh*) by virtue of their vast experience, which al-Ghazālī calls the "fruit" of the intellect. And so he comes to the rebellious Arabs (*al-mu'ānidūn*), who initially came to the Prophet with the intention of killing him:

When their eyes fell upon him they rejoiced¹¹ at [the sight of] his gracious countenance; they were in awe of him, and there appeared to them that which was glimmering on the ornament of his face of the light of prophecy, even though that was an inner thing (*bāṭin*) within his soul,¹² hidden within [him] in the same way the intellect [is hidden within the soul].¹³

Very striking here is the close comparison made between the prophetic light and the intellect. Does this suggest that prophecy is an *intellectual* phenomenon? Such a suggestion would mean that al-Ghazālī's understanding of prophecy has an undeniable resonance with that of Ibn Sīnā, who argued that the highest form of prophecy was intuit-

¹⁰ *Al-ilm*, 108.

¹¹ More literally, "their eyes were beautified with *kuhl* . . ." In this context, the usage is idiomatic, vividly expressing the joy on the faces (esp. in the eyes) of the Arabs.

¹² This could easily be rendered less technically as "his self" in light of the fact that the term *nafs* is equivocal and can be taken in either way. The context here, however, seems to warrant the more technical, psychological rendering. I thus opt for "soul" over the more reflexive "self".

¹³ *Al-ilm*, 108.

tive, i.e., an immediate and total intellectual grasping of the intelligibles.¹⁴ As we will see in the course of this chapter, such parallels or points of resonance between the two thinkers abound. For now, we will hold off on further elaboration but will bear these points in mind as we journey further into the *Ihyā'* and related texts. In addition to all this, al-Ghazālī's identification of the intellect with the sun and knowledge with light is highly suggestive given his frequent employment of light as a symbol for mystical truth.¹⁵ The rest of the above passage serves to corroborate what we have already seen regarding the superior role played by the intellect in the attainment of true felicity, both in this world and the Hereafter.

As the discussion on the nobility and true nature of the intellect continues to unfold, al-Ghazālī seems to be drawn increasingly toward a more mysterious and less defined estimation of the intellect. Following immediately on the heels of the passage quoted above, he writes,

The nobility of the intellect is grasped by necessity. However, our purpose is to relate what has been conveyed by the Reports and the [Qur'ānic] *āyāt* concerning the mentioning of its nobility. God—be He exalted—called it "light" (*nūr*) in His utterance, "God is the light of the heavens and the earth; a semblance of His light is as a niche . . ."¹⁶ And the knowledge that is acquired from [this intellect] is called a spirit (*rūḥ*), a revelation (*wahī*), and a life (*hayāh*), for He—be He

¹⁴ The Avicennan doctrine seems to have its roots in al-Kindī's description of prophetic knowing *vis-à-vis* philosophical knowing, with additional nuance derived from Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*. For Ibn Sīnā's formulation, see his Arabic *De Anima*, F. Rahman, ed. (London: Oxford, 1959) 248–50, also summed-up in Rahman's translation of the psychological portion of *Kutāb al-naǧā(t)* entitled, *Avicenna's Psychology* (London: Oxford, 1952), 35ff.; for al-Kindī's earlier and somewhat rougher formulation, see his "Risāla fī kammīya(t) kutub Aristūṭālīs wa mā yuḥtāju ilayhi fī taḥṣīl al-falsafa" in *Rasā'il al-Kindī al-falsafiya*, ed. Abū Riḍā' (Cairo: 1950/1369), esp. 372–3. Al-Ghazālī's Avicennan leanings in his explication of prophecy show themselves again in the *Kutāb sharḥ 'ajā'ib al-qalb*, 119.

¹⁵ See Lazarus-Yafeh's chapter on the "Symbolism of Light in al-Ghazālī's Writings", 264–348, where she argues for the Neoplatonic character of this common motif in his writings. Of course, as we have already seen, the metaphor is also easily traced to the Qur'ān and the Prophetic traditions.

¹⁶ Of course, al-Ghazālī's intended audience needed little more than the first few words of any given *āya* to know the fuller reference, and so, for readers unfamiliar with the passage to which he refers, I will provide a slightly "fuller" reference here and in the following notes: "... in which there is a lamp, the lamp encased in glass; the glass as if it were a pearly star, lit from a blessed tree, an olive, neither of the east nor of the west, [a tree] whose oil is about to burst into light, though no fire has touched it. Light upon light, God guides whomsoever He wills to His light. And God strikes semblances for the people, and of all things God is knowing." *Al-Nūr* (24): 35.

exalted—said, “And just so did we reveal to you a spirit from Our command . . .”¹⁷ and He—be He praised—said, “or is the one who was dead, whom We revived and for whom We fashioned a light by which he would walk among the people . . .”¹⁸ Wherever He mentions light and darkness, He intends [by these expressions] knowledge and ignorance [respectively]. [This is] exemplified in His statement, “He brings them out of the [various kinds of] darkness and into the light . . .”¹⁹ And [the Prophet], may God bless him and grant him salvation, said . . .”²⁰

For the sake of brevity and concision, we will skip over his citation of this next Tradition; however, even as we do so, we must stress the preponderance of such citations in his writings. Al-Ghazālī goes to considerable length to include relevant Qur’ānic texts and Prophetic traditions, even ones that are of weak narration. These efforts can be seen, even in esoteric contexts, as tokens of his uncompromising support of the traditional Sunni creed and way of life. A few lines down, then, he continues:

And he [i.e. the Prophet], may God bless him and grant him salvation, said, “the Intellect is the very first [thing] created by God. He said to it, ‘approach’, and it drew nigh; he then said to it, ‘turn away’, and it turned away; then God, be He mighty, sublime, said, ‘by My might and My majesty, I did not create [anything] more noble [in my sight]²¹ than you. Through you I take, and through you I give; through you I reward, and through you I punish.”

If you were to say, “if this intellect is an accident, then how could it have been created prior to the bodies? And, if it were a *jawhar*, how

¹⁷ To finish the *āya*, in which two distinct voices can be detected and in which the primary voice calls the Qur’ān itself a “light”, “. . . ‘you did not know [before] what the Book was, nor what Belief [was], but we made the Qur’ān a light by which to guide whosoever We will from among Our servants.’ ‘Surely You guide [us along] the straight way.’” *Al-Shūrā* (42): 52.

¹⁸ “. . . [is he] like unto the one whose kind is in the [various kinds of] darkness, never emerging from them? Such is the pleasure of the ungrateful; they were not in the know.” *Al-An‘ām* (6): 122.

¹⁹ His citation is actually taken from the middle of the *āya*, and so we will cite it here in its entirety: “God is the Guardian of those who believe; He brings them out of the [various kinds of] darkness and into the light. And [as for] those who are ungrateful [to God], their patrons are evil; [for] they lead them from light into the [various kinds of] darkness; those are the companions of the fire, in which they [remain] forever.” *Al-Baqara* (2): 257.

²⁰ *Al-‘ilm*, 108. Many of these same *āyāt* are used in his explication of the highest meaning of “guidance” (*al-hidāya*) in the *Book of Forbearance and Thanksgiving* (*Kitāb al-ṣabr wa’l-shukr*, vol. IV, 368). We may understand, then, that Divine “guidance” is synonymous with the intellect in its most exalted sense.

²¹ Literally, “to me”.

could there be a *jawhar* that is self-subsisting and does not occupy space?"

Know that this [question] is [part] of the knowledge of the Unveiling. Its mentioning is not appropriate for [our explication of] the science of Right Practice,²² and we purpose now [in writing this work] to discuss the sciences of Right Practice . . .²³

He thus leads himself right into the heart of the trouble and deals with it by avoiding it; given his explicitly-stated intention in writing the *Ihyā'*, it is well within his rights to do this, but it is both frustrating and tantalizing all the same. As we will see, this is not the last time he will do this; however, each time he brings us to the threshold, he will give us something before he turns us away. Here, he gives us the knowledge that he is very well aware of our question and knows that there is a tension between what he has already explicitly stated in his *kalāmī* texts and what hides within the Unveiling.

Later in the same section, he explains that there is a problem of equivocation in people's usage of the term, "intellect".²⁴

Know that people differ in [their] definition (*hadd*) of "intellect" and its true nature, and the majority overlook [the fact that] this term is used for various meanings, and that has become the reason for their disagreement.

The truth is the remover of the veil in [this]: [namely] that "intellect" is a term used equivocally for four meanings, just as the term, "*al-'ayn*", for example, is used for numerous meanings, along with [other terms] of this sort.²⁵ One ought not to seek a single definition for all of its divisions; rather, each division should be singled out by uncovering its [unique meaning].

The first is [that] description by which the human being is distinguished from the rest of the animals, i.e., that by which [the individual] becomes prepared to receive the theoretical sciences and to manage those crafts that are rationally-derived and not self-evident (*al-ṣinā'āt al-khafiya al-fikriya*). It is that which al-Ḥārith bn Asad al-Muḥāsibī [d. 243/857] intended where he said about the definition of the intellect, "it is an instinct by which one becomes prepared to grasp the

²² We note here a printing error in the Arabic text: the ج (j) and second م (m) of *mu'āmala* have been inverted.

²³ *Al-'ilm*, 109.

²⁴ Indeed, his own usage of the term is not free of equivocation; in various works, we see him using the term to signify very different meanings, all of which he enumerates in the passage rendered here. Contrast his usage of "intellect" and "rational" in the *Munqidh*, for example, with that of the *Kitāb sharḥ 'ajā'ib al-qalb*.

²⁵ Literally, "[other terms] that run in this course".

theoretical sciences; it is as if it were a light that is cast into the heart, [a light] by which one becomes prepared to grasp everything" . . .²⁶

The second [constitutes] the sciences which arise, joining to the existence of the essence of a child [who can] distinguish [between] the possibility of the possible thing and the impossibility of the impossible thing: such as the knowledge that two are [numerically] greater than one and that a single individual cannot be in two places at the same time. It is that [definition] which some of the theologians have intended with regard to the definition of "intellect" about which [they] said, "it is some of the necessary [self-evident] sciences . . ." It [i.e., this usage] is also correct in its own right, because these sciences are present [in the soul] and are called "an exterior intellecting" . . .

The third [constitutes] sciences that benefit from [worldly] experience with the [natural] outcomes of situations. Hence, whosoever becomes seasoned [by his] experiences and polished [by various] ways of thinking, it is said that he is intelligent in habit . . .

The fourth is that the faculty (*quwwa*) of that instinct [see #1] reaches [the point] where one knows the outcomes of things and subduces and [ultimately] conquers the lustful desire that incites [the soul] to temporal pleasure. Thus, when this faculty is attained, the one possessing it is called "intelligent" (*ʿāqil*) . . .²⁷

He thus identifies four distinct meanings: (1) an innate predisposition, capacity or instinct to understand and grasp the theoretical sciences; (2) what might be called the primary intelligibles, or the necessary knowledge that exists in the infant without learning, such as the possibility and impossibility of basic things and the knowledge that two are greater than one; (3) the knowledge that comes as the result of learning and experience; (4) the thoughtful and disciplined disposition of one who has become circumspect in his dealings and has won absolute mastery over the passions. It is worthy of note that this fourth and final definition of intellect assumes a practical mastery over the less rational aspects of the soul, a telling point that reveals his view of knowledge as something more than mere theoretical knowing, something that finds its complete fulfillment in practice.

²⁶ In the section deleted from the paragraph (for reasons of concision), al-Ghazālī clarifies two issues regarding this "instinct": (i) that it cannot be identified exclusively with the necessary truths, as "the instinct" remains present in the sleeper as well as in the person who is ignorant of the necessary truths; and (ii) that this instinct is unique to the human being *qua* human being and is thus nontransferable to other species. Thus it is not just a case of God's "habit" (*ʿjraʾ al-ʿāda*) in creating the sciences in the human mind while not creating them in the mind of the donkey; rather, by "intellect" he intends a faculty or capacity peculiar to the human being.

²⁷ *Al-ʿilm*, 111-12.

These then are the common usages of "intellect", the first being the most fundamental or basic meaning and the others being more extended or applied usages.²⁸ However, while all of these are valid meanings and usages, they are not necessarily what al-Ghazālī himself always intends when he uses the term. As we will see, his usage is very context-specific. For example, here in the more esoteric context of these final sections of the *Book of Knowledge*, where he discusses "inner vision"²⁹ (*baṣīra(t) al-bāṭin*), the various kinds of intellectual disparity among people, and the loftier levels of inspiration and revelation, his highest definition of the intellect—superceding all of the meanings enumerated above—begins to shine through:

the obvious truth about [the disparity of people's intellects] is to say, truly the disparity occurs [within each of] the four categories, save for the second category, which is the necessary knowledge . . . As for the three [remaining] categories, disparity occurs [within] them . . .

As for the first [category], which is the foundation (*al-aṣl*), i.e., the "instinct", there is no way to deny the disparity within it, for it is like a light that dawns upon the soul and brings its morning. The [main] principles of its dawning [come] at the age of discernment; then it continues to grow and increase, gradually progressing in an imperceptible manner, until one comes into maturity near [the age of] forty years. Its semblance is the light of the morning, for its beginning is hidden in such a way that its detection is very difficult. It then gradually increases to the point that the emergence of the [entire] disk of the sun is complete.

The light of inner vision (*nūr al-baṣīra*) varies [in people], just as the light of vision [itself] varies, and the difference [between the various levels] is grasped [more tangibly] between the one afflicted with an eye infection and the one [who is] keen-sighted. Indeed, the customary practice of God—be He mighty, sublime—flows gradually upon all of His creation in reference to [His] bringing [them] into existence, to the extent that [even] the instinct of sexual desire is not manifested suddenly, all at once upon the boy's coming of age; rather, it becomes manifested little by little, [increasing] gradually. So too with all of the faculties and attributes. Whoever denies the disparity of people in regard to this instinct is like one who has lost control of his mind. And whoever believes that the intellect of the Prophet (may God bless him and grant him salvation) is similar to the intellect of any one of the common peasants and desert roughnecks is himself more base than any one of [these] peasants.

²⁸ Ibid., 112.

²⁹ Ibid., 113.

How [then] can one deny the disparity of the [intellectual] instinct when, without it, people would not differ in [their] understanding of the sciences, nor would they divide into [the following categories:] a dull-wit who can only understand what is taught to him after the long labor of the teacher; a bright one who understands through [even] the slightest symbol and indication; a perfect [mind] in whose soul arise the realities of things without instruction, just as [God]—be He exalted—says, "... whose oil is just about to burst into light, though no fire has touched it; light upon light ..." That [last description] is like unto the prophets, may peace be upon them, since obscure things became clear to them [from] within their inmost reaches (*fi bawāṭinīhim*), [and this was] without any learning or instruction.³⁰ That [phenomenon] is expressed by [the term] "inspiration" (*al-ilhām*). The Prophet (may God bless him and grant him salvation) gave expression to its like where he said, "verily, the Holy Spirit blew [this] into my mind: 'love whom you will, for surely you will soon be parting from him; live how you [wish to] live, for surely you will soon be dead; do what you will, for surely you will be rewarded with it.'" This mode [of inspiration by which] the angels make [things] known to the prophets differs from pure revelation (*al-wahī*), which is the hearing of the voice through the sensation of the ear and the eyewitnessing of the angel through the sensation of vision. To that [effect], [the Prophet] informed [them] about this [inspiration of the Holy Spirit] by "the blowing into the mind". Now many are the degrees of revelation, but plunging into them does not bear on the knowledge of Right Practice; indeed, it is [part] of the knowledge of the Unveiling ...

With regard to the knowledge relayed [to us]³¹ indicating the disparity of the intellect is [an account of] what was narrated [concerning the fact that] 'Abd Allāh bn Salām—may God be pleased with him—asked the Prophet—may God bless him and grant him salvation—in a long conversation about the Hereafter, to describe the grandeur of the Throne (*'izām al-'arsh*). [According to this narration, the Prophet said] that the angels said, "O Lord! Hast thou created anything greater than the Throne?" He said, "Yes: the Intellect." They then said, "and how far does its capacity reach?" He said, "What a question! Its knowledge cannot be circumscribed. Do you have any knowledge of the number of [the grains of] sand?" They replied,

³⁰ Again, al-Ghazālī is extremely close here to Ibn Sīnā's theory of intuitive prophetic cognition; indeed, the language he employs here is almost identical to that used in passages of Ibn Sīnā and al-Kindī. Like al-Ghazālī, both Ibn Sīnā and al-Kindī equate prophetic intellection with inspiration (*al-ilhām*), and they argue that the prophet's knowledge comes without his seeking it, without effort, without instruction, without close study, without syllogistic reasoning, and without a long time.

³¹ Here he is referring to the body of knowledge received via the oral and written tradition (*al-naql*), which is the counterpart of the knowledge derived via the intellect (*al-'aql*).

"Nay." Then God—be He mighty, sublime—said, "Verily I have created the intellect in various kinds that are like the number of sand [grains]. Among the people [there are] those to whom is given a grain, and those to whom two grains are given, and those to whom three or four are given, and those to whom is given a portion, and those to whom a load is given, and those to whom [even] more than that is given."³²

He immediately goes on to explain that some of the Sufis have scorned the terms "intellect" (*al-'aql*) and "intelligible" (*al-ma'qūl*) due to the adoption of these terms by the scholastic/dogmatic theologians, who popularized a particular signification for these terms and used them in the context of their arguments and debates. The Sufis in question were thus confused as to the true meaning of these terms, he says.

[But] as for the light of inner vision by which God—be He exalted—and the truth of His emissaries are known, how could its disparagement be conceivable when God—be He exalted—[Himself] commends it? If it is reproved, then what after it would be praiseworthy? If that which is praiseworthy is the Revealed Law, then by what [faculty] does one come to know the truth of the Revealed Law? If one comes to know it through the blameworthy intellect, which cannot be trusted, then the Revealed Law [itself] must also be blameworthy. One must not pay attention to the one who says, "Surely it is grasped through the eye of certitude (*bi-'ayn al-yaqīn*) and through the light of faith, [but] not through the intellect," for by "intellect" we mean [precisely] what is intended by the "eye of certitude" and the "light of faith", which is the internal attribute by which the human being is distinguished from the beasts so that through it he may grasp the realities of things.

Most of these [verbal] bashings have arisen from the ignorance of people seeking verities from [linguistic] expressions, and so they clash [against one another] over them due to people's reckless usages of [such] expressions. This much then is sufficient in [our] explication of the intellect. And God knows better.³³

It need not be argued that this final section of the *Book of Knowledge* is extremely rich. Although most of it speaks for itself, we will highlight a few points and raise a few questions. For example, we may well ask: is this "light of inner vision", this "light of faith", this "inner attribute by which the human is distinguished from the beasts so that through it he may grasp the realities of things" the very same

³² *Al-'ilm*, 114–5.

³³ *Ibid.*, 116.

bodily “accident” for which he argues in the *Iqtisād* and the *Qawā'id*? Even at the beginning of the *Book of Knowledge* he still refers to the intellect as a “part from among the *jawāhir*” that make up the human being. Certainly a tension is already growing between his *kalāmī* treatments of the rational soul and these more mystically-oriented descriptions, but we must be careful when comparing genre-specific treatments of one kind with another. Besides, as evidence that he is already quite consciously aware of our questions, we have seen that he simply refuses to entertain them, for their answers reside in the hidden realm of the Unveiling, which is not his explicitly-stated focus here. Having raised the questions, he seems quite content here to leave them as questions lingering in our minds, as tantalizing ambiguities that pine for clarification.

Another tension, and one to which he calls our attention in this passage, stands between the linguistic expressions and the realities they signify. In effect, he cautions his reader against seeking ultimate understandings from literal expressions. Such “ignorance” gives rise to conflict and in no way advances the seeker in his quest for true knowledge. We may take this as a general directive when considering the “knowledge” yielded by the science of the *kalām*, which he admits is bound by linguistic expressions, vis-à-vis the knowledge won through mystical experience. More specifically, we may take this as a pointed reminder as we continue to search for linguistic clues pointing to the true nature of the intellect or heart.

Some further clarification does come, but not immediately and never all at once. Further into the *Ihyā'*, specifically in the *Kitāb sharḥ 'ajā'ib al-qalb*,³⁴ which serves as the threshold for his exposition of the inner vices and virtues, we find a much more detailed description of the heart. Here we find some of the most explicitly esoteric material to be found within the entire *Ihyā'*, and al-Ghazālī himself bears witness to this. For example, as he concludes his “Exposition of the Soldiers of the Heart” early in the book, he writes,

These, then, are the divisions of the heart's soldiers. To comment [upon] that so that the understanding[s] of the weak-minded (*al-du'afā'*) would be able to grasp it would take long, while the purpose of the likes of this book is that the strong-minded (*al-aqwīyā'*) and the luminaries among the religious intelligentsia (*al-fuḥūl min al-'ulamā'*) would

³⁴ *Ihyā'*, vol. III, 111–169.

derive benefit by means of it. However, we will strive to make the weak-minded understand by [proceeding with] the striking of sim-
 blences in order that this may bring them closer to their own under-
 standings.³⁵

Thus, regarding the esoteric nature and intended audience of his *sharḥ 'ajā'ib al-qalb*, al-Ghazālī himself makes the case for us. Although he admittedly makes an effort to render the text accessible to several levels of engagement, the intended audience is by no means popular.

As we saw above, al-Ghazālī strikes an intimate connection between the heart and the intellect in the *Book of Knowledge*. Among the esoteric points readily found in the *sharḥ 'ajā'ib al-qalb* is an explicit corroboration of that intimate connection. In fact, here he takes it a step further by striking a clear and absolute equivalence between the two. Immediately following the initial magnification and invocation of the book, he picks up right where he left off in the *Book of Knowledge*:

The human being's nobility and virtue, by which he completely surpasses the [various] classes of creation, is [won] through his preparation for the gnosis of God, be He praised, [that mystical knowledge] which is, in this world, his beauty and perfection and pride, and is, in [relation to] the Hereafter, his preparedness (*'uddatuhu*) and provision (*dhukhratuhu*). Indeed, he prepares [himself] for the gnosis [of God] through his heart and not through any one of his [bodily] extremities. For the heart is that which perceives³⁶ God, that which draws nigh unto God, that which works for [the sake of] God, that which rushes toward God, and that which unveils what is in God's proximity and possession (*mā 'inda Allāh wa ladayhi*). The [bodily] extremities, on the other hand, follow [the heart] and serve [it]. [They are] the tools which are used by the heart, [which makes use of them] in the way the king makes use of the slave, the way the shepherd utilizes the flock and the artisan the tool. For the heart is that which is accepted in the presence of God if it is delivered from [all] else besides God; and it is veiled from God whenever it becomes immersed in anything other than God. It is that of which [an account is] demanded, the one addressed [by God or perhaps by Munkar and Nakīr], and the one who is reproached. It is that which has the good fortune of sharing in the [blessed station of] proximity to God, for he [the individual] prospers when he purifies³⁷ it, and he fails and becomes wretched

³⁵ Ibid., 117. His Qur'anic tone here is quite unmasked. See, for example, *al-Nūr* (24): 35; *al-Ankabūt* (29): 43.

³⁶ Literally, "that which is knowing of God" (*al-'ālim bi'llāh*).

³⁷ Although there is no explicit indication of a doubled second radical in this

when he defiles it and corrupts it.³⁸ It [i.e., the heart] is that which, in reality, is in obeisance to God, while those acts of worship that flow out through the [bodily] extremities are its lights. And [the heart] is [also] that which is disobedient, rebelling against God, be He exalted, while the vile deeds that flow out through the [bodily] members³⁹ are its effects. Through its darkening and its illumination, the good qualities and their counterparts become manifest on the exterior, since every vessel exudes whatever [liquid] it contains.⁴⁰

It [i.e., the heart] is that which, if the human being comes to know it, he knows himself, and, if he comes to know himself, he has come to know his Lord. And it is that which, if the human being is ignorant of it, he is ignorant of himself, and, if he is ignorant of himself, then he is ignorant of his Lord. And whoever is ignorant of his [own] heart, is even more ignorant about other things, since most of the people are ignorant of their hearts and themselves. They have been obstructed from [knowing] themselves, for surely God places an obstruction between man and his heart, and His [act of] obstructing [man] is that He prevents [man] from witnessing it and [from] overseeing it and [from] the gnosis of its attributes. [And He prevents man from the gnosis of] the manner in which [the heart] is turned between two of the fingers of the Merciful⁴¹ and of how it falls in one moment to the lowest of the low, sinking to the horizon of the devils, and how it rises in another [moment] to the highest of the high, ascending to the realm of the angels, those who are brought nigh [unto God].⁴²

Whosoever does not know his [own] heart, so that he might oversee it and guide it, and [yet] observes [the stars] from among the storehouses of the *Malakūt* that gleam upon him and within him⁴³ is one of those about whom God—be He exalted—said, “they forget God, and so he causes them to forget themselves. Those are the iniquitous ones (*al-fāsiqūn*).”⁴⁴ The gnosis of the heart, then, and of the

verb (*zakkāhu*), I nevertheless infer one, as this is in accordance with the Qur’ānic usage (see 91:9 and 24:21) and best suits the sense of this passage. See the following note.

³⁸ This passage is actually a very slight but deft reshaping of *sūra* 91 (*al-Shams*), 9–10, which reads, “Truly he succeeds who purifies it [i.e., his own soul], and he fails who corrupts it.”

³⁹ Literally, “that which flows to the [bodily] members by way of vile deeds . . .”

⁴⁰ The paragraph break is my own insertion.

⁴¹ This is a reference to a well-known tradition, in which the Prophet is reported to have said, “There is no heart but that it is between two fingers of the fingers of the Merciful, the Lord of the Worlds.” See Aḥmad bn Ḥanbal’s *Musnad*, 4, 182, and Ibn Māja, Introduction (*muqaddima*), 13. See also the parallel tradition recorded in al-Tirmidhī, Book of Supplications (*al-da’wāt*), 89.

⁴² This is an embellished paraphrase of *Sūrat al-tīn* (95).

⁴³ Here he clearly indicates the fusion of the psyche and the cosmos, a union that wipes away all inner/outer dualism. In the next chapter, we refer to this as his “psycho-cosmology”.

⁴⁴ *Al-Hashr* (59): 19. Again, al-Ghazālī is only citing part of the *āya*. In full, it

reality of its characteristics (*ḥaqīqat awṣāfihī*) is the [very] fundament of religion, and the basis of the [mystical] path of the wayfarers.⁴⁵

He gradually becomes more explicit in his descriptions of the heart, eventually touching upon its true nature. After explaining the meaning of the physical heart, he writes:

the second meaning [of "heart"] is a divine, spiritual subtlety (*latīfā*) that has a connection [or relation] to this bodily heart. That "subtlety" is the reality of the human being, i.e., [the aspect] of the person that comprehends (*al-mudrik*), [intellectually] perceives (*al-ʿālim*), [experientially] knows (*al-ʿārif*), [the aspect that is] addressed (*mukhāṭab*), punished (*muʿāqab*), reproached (*muʿātab*), and of which [an accounting] is demanded (*muʿālab*). [This subtlety] has a connection with the bodily heart, but the intellects of most people have been bewildered over the meaning of its connection. This is because its connection resembles the connection [between] accidents and bodies, [between] the descriptions [of things] and the things described, or the connection [between] the user of a tool and the tool [itself], or the relation [between] the person residing [in a place] and the place [itself] (*al-makān*). Commenting upon that [relation] is among the [things] of which we are wary, [and this is] for two reasons: the first of which is that it has to do with the sciences of the Unveiling, while our only aim in this work is [to treat] the sciences of Right Practice; and the second is that its verification would necessitate a dissemination of the secret of the spirit (*al-rūḥ*), and that was among the things about which the Emissary of God (May God bless him and grant him salvation) would not speak. Thus it is not [appropriate] for someone other than him to speak of it.

Hence, when we use the expression, "heart", in this book, we mean by it this [divine, spiritual] subtlety, and we intend to treat its descriptions and states rather than its reality in its essence. [This is because] the knowledge [pertaining to] conduct makes necessary the cognizance of its descriptions and its states but does not necessitate the mentioning of its reality.⁴⁶

While it is becoming increasingly clear that there are matters al-Ghazālī will not openly disclose regarding the nature of the heart, he still gives us a great deal to go on here.

One thing he clarifies is that, although the relationship between the "subtlety" and the material/physical heart is somewhat akin to the relationship of an accident to the body in which it inheres, the

reads, "Do not be like those who forgot God, for God caused them to forget themselves; surely those are the iniquitous ones."

⁴⁵ *Sharḥ ʿajāʾib al-qalb*, 112.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

two relations are not the same. Indeed, he intimates that equating the two (as many of his *mutakallimūn* confrères do) is a form of bewilderment. Thus, his *kalāmī* formulations, which sometimes espouse this model for the soul-body relation, are ruled out as real explanations—at least at this level of instruction. How then are they connected? He clearly intends a mode of connection that is different from anything he has previously laid out, but just what that mode is he will not say. He is not yet finished with his treatment of this connection, however, as we will see shortly.

Soon after this passage, al-Ghazālī goes on to resolve one of our lingering questions: the essential relationship between the heart and the intellect. Indeed, he exceeds the scope of our query and resolves for us questions we have not yet asked, questions caused by the equivocal usage of the terms “spirit” (*al-rūḥ*), “soul” (*al-nafs*), “heart” (*al-qalb*), and “intellect” (*al-ʿaql*). Each one of these, he says, has two meanings: one corporeal and the other “subtle”. The spirit, for example, can denote a “subtle body” (*jism laṭīf*) or “subtle vapor” (*bukhār laṭīf*) originating in the corporeal heart and spreading throughout the body so as to radiate life in the way that a lamp radiates light. This is the corporeal spirit (*al-rūḥ al-jismānī*). The second and more exalted definition, he says, is

the subtlety (*al-laṭīfa*) that is the knowing, understanding [faculty] in the human being. It is what we have commented on regarding one of the meanings of the heart, which God—be He exalted—intended by His utterance, “Say: the spirit is of my Lord’s *amr*.” And it is a wondrous, divine thing⁴⁷ (*amr ʿajīb rabbānī*), the grasping of whose reality is beyond the power of most intellects and understandings . . .⁴⁸

As we noted in the very beginning of this study, we see him employing the singular noun, *amr*, here as a “thing” or “matter” rather than as a “command”. We also take note here that this subtlety is qualified as “divine” (*rabbānī*), a significant addition to our slowly unfolding definition of the heart. This “divine” nature will be explored in the following pages. It is also worth noting that he refrains from saying that its understanding is beyond *all* intellects and understandings . . . just most. In other words, this “wondrous, divine thing”

⁴⁷ He will use this suggestive yet safe (and wonderfully elusive) description of the spirit over and over again throughout his psychological discussions; for a few more examples in the *sharḥ ʿajāʾib al-qalb*, see 122, 127.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 114.

is *intellectually* understandable, although he does not say how or by whom in this passage.

As for *al-nafs*, he says that the lower, corporeal meaning intended by this term is "that meaning which brings together (*al-ma'nā al-jāmi'*) the irascible faculty and the concupiscent faculty in the human being," or "the principle (*al-aṣl*) that brings together the blameworthy attributes of the human being." This latter definition, he admits, is the common usage of the Sufis (*ahl al-taṣawwuf*). The spiritual or essential meaning, however, is

the subtlety (*al-laṭīfa*) that we have mentioned, which is the human being in reality and is the soul of the person and his essence (*dhātuhu*), but it is described in various ways, according to its varying states (*biḥasbi ikhtilāf ahwālīhi*) . . .⁴⁹

And so it is with the intellect, whose meanings we have already examined. Here, however, he adds something to his former definitions. He says that "intellect" is sometimes used to mean the "knowledge of the true natures of things—being an expression for the attribute of the knowledge whose receptacle is the heart." This is the mundane meaning that is appropriate here, he says; on its highest level, intellect can denote

that which grasps the sciences, being itself the heart, i.e., that [same] subtlety. Now we know that belonging to every knower is an existence in his soul (*fī nafsihi wujūd*), an existence that is a self-subsisting principle (*aṣl qā'im bi-nafsihi*) in which knowledge resides as an attribute. The attribute is something other than that which is described, and the "intellect" may be used to denote [either] the attribute of the knower or the receptacle (*maḥall*) of the apprehension, by which I mean the knower itself. [This latter definition] is what was intended by his [the Prophet's] statement (may God bless him and grant him salvation): "the first thing God created was the Intellect . . ."⁵⁰ Knowledge is an accident, [and so] it is inconceivable that it could be the first creation; rather, it must be that the receptacle is created prior to it or concomitant with it. Otherwise, speaking to it would be impossible. And it is in the report that God—be He exalted—said to it "approach!" and it drew nigh. Then He said to it, "Be gone!" and it turned away.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ This tradition is cited more fully in the *Kuāb al-'ilm*, 109. See our complete rendering of that text earlier in the chapter.

⁵¹ Ibid., 114–5.

This highest definition of intellect is thus equated with the heart, i.e., with the very essence of the being who is [actually] knowing. To avoid any possible equivocation here, he stresses that this “subtlety” is by no means an accident, the possibility of which he left open in the *Book of Knowledge*. Here, he equates it with “a self-sub-sisting *principle* in which knowledge resides as an attribute.” This is a highly revealing step that he refuses to take in the other texts we have examined. “Self-sub-sisting” is also a qualification not mentioned elsewhere; indeed, we have seen him purposefully avoid such a qualification because it belongs to the knowledge of the Unveiling.

But what is it? What exactly does he mean here by “principle” here? What is its nature? Is it material or immaterial? He has revealed much, but still the puzzle is not yet solved, since our evolving understanding of his concept of the heart/intellect/spirit/soul is still troubled by a fundamental, essential ambiguity: on the one hand, he does not explicitly affirm its immateriality; on the other hand, he has not indicated that it is material. Rejecting one of the standard Ash‘arī explanations (namely, that of the soul’s being an accident inhering in the body), he is careful not to replace it with anything too definite: nowhere does he refer to this higher entity—i.e., the non-bodily heart—as a “subtle body” or “vapor”, nor does he use any term giving the slightest hint of corporality. The terms he does employ—*latīfa* (subtlety) and *asl* (principle)—seem intentionally ambiguous and give no hint of commitment on either side.

One thing is certainly clear at this point: the heart and the intellect—in their most elevated, subtle, essential forms—are absolutely synonymous for al-Ghazālī, and the single secret of their true nature, still a mystery, is contained within the theoretical science of *al-mukāshafa*, the experiential knowledge of the Unveiling. The objects of this mode of knowing are unattainable in this world, however, for they reside in the spiritual realm of the *malakūt*, a “world” that we will explore in the next chapter.

Turning to the mysterious and somewhat bewildering connection between the bodily heart and the “subtlety”, he ventures a bit further into the restricted regions of this knowledge at the very end of this first explication (*bayān*). Following his discussion of the meanings ascribed to the terms “heart”, “spirit” and “soul”, he writes,

If it has been unveiled to you that the meanings of these terms—i.e., the bodily heart, the bodily spirit, the impassioned soul, and the sci-

ences—are real,⁵² then these are four meanings for which the four expressions are used. And [there is] a fifth meaning, which is the subtlety, that [aspect] of the person which knows and grasps [the realities of things]. [All] four expressions come to it in turn. Hence, the meanings are five, while the expressions are four. Each expression is used for two meanings. The variance of these expressions, along with their successive [significations], have bewildered most of the learned, and thus you will see them talking about [their] notions, saying “this is the notion of the intellect, and this is the notion of the spirit, and this is the notion of the heart, and this is the notion of the soul,” while the speculator [really] has no comprehension of the meanings of these terms. In order to remove the covering from that, we have presented [in this book] a commentary⁵³ on these terms, since the expression, “heart”, has been mentioned in the Qur’ān and the *sunna*. That which is intended by it [in the sources] is the meaning from among [the various meanings of] “human being” that comprehends and comes to know the reality of things, and it has been metonymically expressed by the heart that is in the breast. [This is] because there is a special relation (*‘alāqa*) between that subtlety and the body of the heart. Even if it is connected to the rest of the body and is of use to it, still it is connected to it through the mediation of the [bodily] heart, for its first connection is with the heart. [It is] as if [the bodily heart] were its receptacle (*maḥall*) and its domain (*mamlaka*), its world and its riding mount. For that [reason], Sahl al-Tustarī likened the heart to the Throne (*al-‘arsh*), and the breast to the Footstool (*al-kursī*) . . . It is not [to be] believed that he regarded [the heart and the breast] as the [actual] Throne and Footstool of God, for that is impossible. Rather, he meant by it that [the bodily heart] is its [i.e., the subtlety’s] domain. And the first way [of comparing them] is due to [the subtlety’s] management and administration [of the body through the heart]. For the two of them [i.e., the heart and the breast] are in relation to it [i.e., the subtlety] as the Throne and the Footstool are in relation to God, be He exalted. This comparison is also only correct from some perspectives (*ba’d al-wujūh*), but commenting upon that [further] is also inappropriate for our purpose, and so let us pass over it.⁵⁴

In order for us to exploit more fully the meaning of this passage, we would have to know precisely which “perspectives” he has in mind. Also, we would need to identify what exactly constitutes the relation between God and the Throne and the Footstool in his

⁵² Literally, “are present” (*maʾjūda*).

⁵³ Literally, “the commentary . . .”

⁵⁴ *Sharḥ ‘ajā’ib al-qalb*, 115.

esoteric cosmology. These are very challenging, if not impossible, tasks, but we have no alternative but to try.

One of the first places where we can learn something of this relation is—surprisingly—in the context of one of the *kalām* texts, specifically the *Qawā'id al-'aqā'id*, where al-Ghazālī explains that the Throne and God's "mounting" of it must be taken allegorically if the Divine is to be understood in an appropriate way. The meaning of this, he explains, can only involve

that which does not deny the [Divine] description of Grandeur (*al-kibriyā'*) and that which the characteristics of creation and extinction do not touch . . . [such a text] can only be [understood] by way of subjugating [the real meaning] and appropriating [an apt image], just as the poet said: "a man mounted Iraq without a sword or blood spilled."⁵⁵

This, he tells the reader, is the interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of the "folk of the Truth", he says, and so we may rely upon it with a degree of confidence, even though the discussion is framed within a very mainstream *kalāmī* context.

Much later in the *Ihyā'*, indeed almost at the very end of the very last volume, he again touches upon the topic of the Throne. This comes in a more esoteric context—the *Book of Contemplation* (*Kitāb al-tafakkur*),⁵⁶ specifically in his "explication of how to contemplate the creation of God, be He exalted", the discussion that marks the final section of the book. Here, he explains how the furthest and most sublime goals can only be attained after one has traversed the nearest and most immediate challenges. He writes:

and the closest thing to you is your soul; then [comes] the earth, which is your dwelling place; then [comes] the air that is sufficient for you [to breathe]; then [come] the plants and the animals and all that is on the face of the earth; then [come] the wonders of the atmosphere, which is between heaven and earth; then [come] the seven heavens and their spheres; then [comes] the Footstool; then [comes] the Throne; then the angels who are themselves the bearers of the Throne and the Reservoir (*khazān*) of the heavens; then, from [the Throne] you go further to [the point of] looking upon the Lord of the Throne and the Footstool and the heavens and the earth and all that is between the two. Between you and these [existents] are the enormous deserts,

⁵⁵ *Qawā'id al-'aqā'id*, 141.

⁵⁶ *Ihyā'*, vol. VI, 43–72.

the vast distances and the towering mountain passes. And you, after [all this], have not rid [yourself] of the [most] proximate, sloping mountain road, which is the gnosis of the external aspect of yourself. Then you begin to loosen your tongue with your impudence, claiming [that you have won] the gnosis of your Lord and saying that you have come to know Him and His creation. And [then you ask] so what should I contemplate? And whence should I turn my gaze?⁵⁷

What follows is an eloquent guide to the contemplation of the universe, but the larger discussion goes wide of our mark just now. For our present purposes, which have to do only with the nature of the Throne and the relation between it and God, we focus on a single aspect of the passage cited above. Al-Ghazālī depicts the Throne as the closest created existent to God. While shedding no new light on the true nature of the Throne itself, the passage serves to corroborate what we have already seen from the *Qawā'id* regarding the need for allegorical interpretation in the case of the Throne and the other divine features of his spiritual cosmology.

The Throne, it seems, is the most sublime existent in the highest created realm, just as the bodily heart is the most exalted organ within the human body. The Throne manifests God's power through being "mounted"—i.e., through God's subjugation of it and through His management of it and absolute mastery over it. So too the human heart, we might venture, manifests the attributes of power and mastery that originate in the "subtlety", which exercises its power and mastery over the bodily heart. Such "mastery" apparently entails ruling the rest of the body through the mediation of the bodily heart, just as God rules the created universe through the mediation of the Throne, the Footstool, and through the angels who uphold and serve them.

Such a speculative comparison between the two relations (namely, God and the Throne, on the one hand, and the "subtlety" and the bodily heart, on the other) seems to concur with what we have gleaned from the *sharḥ 'ajā'ib al-qalb*. The question of the precise nature of the relation or connection itself still remains something of an enigma, however. Does this analogy imply that the "subtlety" is totally separate from the bodily heart, just as God is from the whole of creation? Does it imply that the bodily heart is just a tool through which the subtlety acts while it is occupied with the material domain?

⁵⁷ Ibid., 69.

Al-Ghazālī's comparison gives rise to many questions but few answers, once again, and some of these questions will have to wait until we investigate his psycho-cosmology in chapter five. For the "subtlety" that is the spiritual heart properly belongs in the realm of the *malakūt*, he says, whereas the bodily heart belongs to this world of *mulk*, and so the relation between the spirit and the body ought to match the relation between the realm of *al-malakūt* and the world of *al-mulk*.⁵⁸ Thus, a full understanding of his psychology can only be won through unlocking the mysteries of his cosmology.

Before we leave the *Sharḥ 'ajā'ib al-qalb* in this chapter, however, it may prove useful to summarize some of the parallels and contrasts that are emerging between al-Ghazālī's psychological discussions and those of Ibn Sīnā, for nowhere do we find the parallels more pronounced than here in this *Commentary*. Indeed, in places al-Ghazālī reads as an Avicennean, but without the complete array of Ibn Sīnā's technical terms.⁵⁹ One parallel that we have already noted occurs in the course of his description of intellectual prophetic cognition. Another extremely clear, although somewhat less profound, parallel comes here in the course of his explanation of animal psychology. Here, Ibn Sīnā's doctrine of the estimative faculty (*al-quwwa al-waḥmīya*) is clearly appropriated and reformulated in al-Ghazālī's own terms, namely, in the idiom of the heart. For example, in the very beginning of his "Explication of the Special Characteristic (*khāṣṣiyya*) of the Human Being," he writes:

Know that God has blessed all of the animals (in addition to the human being) with the entirety of what we have mentioned [in the section on the "Soldiers of the Heart"], since the animal[s] have concupiscence, irascibility, the external senses, and the internal [senses] as well, such that, if a ewe sees a wolf with its eye, it knows [the wolf's] enmity through [the faculties of] its heart. Hence, it flees from [the wolf]. That is the inner apprehension (*al-idrāk al-bāṭin*). Let us then mention that [feature] by which the human heart is set apart . . .⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Among other places, this is quite explicitly stated in his *al-Arbāʿīn fī uṣūl al-dīn*, where he speaks of a third, intermediary "world" that joins the two. Much more will be said of this in chapter five. See Lazarus-Yafeh, 514–15; also Kojiro Nakamura's "Imam Ghazālī's Cosmology Reconsidered with Special Reference to the Concept of Jabarūt" in *Studia Islamica*, vol. 80 (1994), 29–46.

⁵⁹ This may remind us of Professor Nakamura's remark near the end of the second chapter, where he suggests that al-Ghazālī "is inclined privately or unofficially to the philosophical view of the soul (though not in philosophical terms) . . ." See *supra*.

⁶⁰ *Sharḥ 'ajā'ib al-qalb*, 119.

The discussion continues, of course, to explain the unique features of human knowledge and human will, which together form the distinguishing characteristics of the human heart vis-à-vis the animal heart. While the ensuing discussion is worthy of attention, what is most interesting for us to note here is the fact that both the substance and even the language of this quotation are taken from Ibn Sīnā's *De Anima*,⁶¹ with a different name and a few slight modifications to make it less technical (and thus less Avicennian). Put simply, al-Ghazālī has essentially co-opted Ibn Sīnā's animal psychology, complete with an animal faculty of estimation (exemplified in the cwe's estimative perception of the wolf's enmity), with slight terminological alterations that make the philosophical psychology more malleable in this context. Any reader, having seen this for what it really is, cannot help but wonder whether he has done something similar in the case of Ibn Sīnā's human psychology. More will be said of this once we have a better grasp of al-Ghazālī's true position on the nature of the spiritual heart or "subtlety" in the next chapter. Although we still do not have sufficient evidence at this point to start hurling accusations of Avicennianism at al-Ghazālī, we do have more than enough evidence to state that, whatever his esoteric position is on the soul, it bears a certain resemblance to the Avicennian psychology. Certainly we have seen enough to state with confidence that the psychology of the *Sharḥ 'ajā'ib al-qalb* is quite different from the *kalāmī* formulations we found in the *Iqtisād* and the *Qawā'id*.

In the Book of *Forbearance and Thanksgiving* (*Kitāb al-sabr wa'l-shukr*),⁶² which is the second book in the final quarter (devoted to the saving virtues), al-Ghazālī makes this difference even more evident. Here, in his explication of the "graces of God in [reference to] the creation of the power [of motion] and the moving instruments [of the body]," al-Ghazālī clears up a question about the spirit. This question comes immediately after his description of the corporeal spirit, the nature of which he also treats in the *Sharḥ 'ajā'ib al-qalb*.

If you were to say: you have then described and exemplified the spirit when the Emissary of God (may God bless him and grant him salvation) did not go beyond saying "Say: the spirit is my Lord's affair" when he was asked about the spirit. Thus he did not describe it for them along these lines.⁶³

⁶¹ See *Avicenna's De Anima* (Arabic Text), 166–9.

⁶² *Ihyā'*, vol. IV, 309–410.

⁶³ Literally, "according to this mode" (*'alāh hādha al-wajh*).

Know then that [all] this is a foolishness that [comes] from the commonly occurring equivocation in [the use of] the expression "spirit". For "spirit" is used for numerous meanings that would take long to mention. However, of all of them, we described a "subtle body" that is called a "spirit" by the physicians . . .

As for the spirit that is the [self-subsisting] principle, [the spirit] which, if it becomes corrupted, the rest of the body becomes corrupt because of it, that is among the secrets of God, be He exalted. We did not describe it. Nor is there a license [given] for describing it save to say, "it is a Divine matter" (*amr rabbānī*), just as [God], be he exalted, said, "Say: the spirit is my Lord's affair." Describing [such] Divine matters (*al-umūr al-rabbānīya*) would be unbearable for [people's] intellects. Indeed, most people's intellects are bewildered by them. And, as for the estimations and imaginations [of most people], they are necessarily incapable of [grasping] them [i.e., the Divine matters] in the same way [one's faculty of] sight is incapable of grasping sounds. The knots of [their] intellects, [which are] confined to the *jawhar* and the accident and [are] imprisoned within the narrow confines [of these categories], waver in mentioning the principles of its description. For nothing of its description can be grasped by the intellect; rather, [only] through another light that is higher and more noble than the intellect [can it be grasped]. And that light dawns in the world of prophecy and sainthood (*ʿālam al-nubūwa wa'l-wilāya*), and its relation to the intellect is like the relation between the intellect and the [faculties of] estimation and imagination.⁶⁴

He seems to dispel here any lingering suspicions we may have had concerning the continuing relevance of his Ash'arī atomism in these more esoteric contexts. The standard atomic formulations, he says, are tantamount to rational trappings that cannot but fail in their attempts to capture the essence of the spirit. We also cannot miss his casual employment of Ibn Sīnā's faculty of estimation, here within the context of human psychology.

It must be noted that his use of the term "intellect" in this passage raises another problem of equivocation. He speaks of it here in the context of the *kalāmī* formulations of the soul, and so it evokes the very meaning that he tells us was disparaged by the Sufis due to their confusion over the true meaning of "intellect".⁶⁵ His usage here, which is disparaging, can hardly be taken to mean the intellect in its most exalted sense, the sense that is nothing other than the "self-subsisting principle" and the very "Divine thing" about

⁶⁴ *Kutāb al-ṣabr wa'l-shukr*, 377.

⁶⁵ See *supra*.

which he is talking in this passage. Were that his intention here, it would have to be equated with the "other light" that "dawns in the World of Prophecy and Sainthood", for we have already seen al-Ghazālī equate the intellect—in its most sublime sense—with the Qur'ānic references to light, such as *sūrat al-Nūr* (24): 35.

All this having been said, it is becoming increasingly clear that the Ash'arī or *kalāmī* atomic formulation falls short of the mark in the context of his esoteric psychology. In spite of this growing clarity, we must admit that he does, in several seemingly esoteric places, use language that is highly evocative of the *kalāmī* formulations, such as his reference to the heart as a "part from among the *jawāhir* of the human being" in *Kūtāb al-ilm*. We will see similar language again as we continue our investigation through to the very end of the *Ihyā'*. His precise intention in using such *kalām*-like language is not clear, but the passage cited above makes it quite explicit that his esoteric position on the soul shares little if anything with his *kalām*.

Still seeking answers, then, we turn to the final book of the *Ihyā'*, *Kūtāb dhikr al-mawt wa mā ba'dahu*,⁶⁶ where al-Ghazālī treats the soul's experience of death, the separation of the spirit/soul/intellect/heart from the body, and the phenomena of the next world.⁶⁷ His tone here seems slightly less esoteric and more closely aligned with the literal eschatological teachings defended in his *kalāmī* works, but, upon closer investigation, the text reveals many subtleties.

One such example comes in chapter seven,⁶⁸ where he objects to three main views concerning the afterlife: (i) that of the unbelievers (*al-mulhidūn*) and "everyone who does not believe in God or the last day", who hold that death means extinction pure and simple, an end after which there is no resurrection or reckoning or anything;⁶⁹ (ii) the view of those who believe that the individual "becomes utterly extinct upon dying," experiences neither reward nor punishment "for as long as he is in the grave, until he is restored [to the body] at the time of the Gathering";⁷⁰ and (iii) the view of those who hold

⁶⁶ *Ihyā'*, vol. VI, 73–202.

⁶⁷ In the context of this chapter, we will exploit these discussions for their psychological relevance, saving a more focused treatment of their eschatological content for the sixth and final chapter.

⁶⁸ Specifically pp. 130–1.

⁶⁹ T.J. Winter takes this to be a reference to the Dahrīya, the Maṣūriya, the Mu'ammarīya, and the Khaṭṭābīya sects, as well as the pre-Islamic Arabs. See his note "A" on p. 121.

⁷⁰ This is, of course, one of the *kalāmī* doctrines mentioned in the *Iqtisād*, specifically

“that the spirit remains and does not fall into nonexistence with death; rather [they believe] the rewards and punishments are [for] the spirits without the bodies, which are neither resurrected nor gathered in any way.”⁷¹

As we will see more clearly below, he does not object here to the belief in the immaterial soul *per se*, nor to its complete separability from the body, as he does earlier in the *Iqtisād*, where he tells his reader that such a doctrine was only granted in the *Tahāfut* for the sake of argument; rather, in this passage he objects only to the coupling of a belief in the immaterial soul with a flat denial of an eventual return to an embodied state for judgement and eternity, which must include (but is in no way restricted to) bodily pleasures and/or torments. In the paragraph that immediately follows, he affirms that

all of these are false beliefs (*ẓunūn fāsida*), slanting away from the truth. However, that which is witnessed by the [various] avenues of expression and pronounced by the [Qur’ānic] *āyāt* and the [Prophetic] reports is that the meaning of death is just a change of state (*ḥāl*) and that the spirit remains after taking leave of the body [at death], either [to be] tormented or blessed. The meaning of [the spirit’s] taking leave of the body is the severing of its administration (*inqiṭā’ taṣarrufihā*) from the body, [this occurring] by way of the body’s forsaking [its role of] being obedient to it. For the [bodily] members are tools for the spirit to use, so that it may strike [a blow] with the hand, hear with the ear, see with the eye, and know the reality of things with the heart.⁷² “Heart” here is an expression for the “spirit”, which comes to know things on its own without [using] any tool. For that [reason], it is pos-

that formulation which equates the soul with an accident. Winter includes some of the Mu‘tazilī theologians, together with the Jahmī and Khārījī sects in this group. See his note “B” on p. 121.

⁷¹ *Dhikr al-mawt*, 130–1. This is, of course, the philosophical doctrine he summarizes and refutes in the *Tahāfut* and condemns in other places. Curiously, it is also the very doctrine attributed to the Sufis in the *Mizān al-‘amal*, to which Ibn Ṭufayl referred in the first chapter and to which we will return later in the study. Although not completely accurate in his reading of al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, Winter includes some useful comments on p. 122 of his translation.

⁷² While this is obviously not a direct allusion to the philosophical psychology earlier refuted, his language here shows some degree of affinity with the earlier, more philosophical descriptions of the soul’s relationship to the body. Specifically, the reader is reminded of Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī’s explanation of the intellect’s gradual liberation from the need to employ the “corporeal instruments” of the body. See his “Letter Regarding the Intellect” (*Risāla fī ‘l-‘aql*) in *Philosophy of the Middle Ages*, ed. A. Hyman and J. Walsh (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1973), esp. p. 220, where he discusses the true meaning of Afterlife and the final perfection/felicity of the human being.

sible that it suffers on its own from various kinds of sadness, misery, and sorrow; [alternatively,] it can experience pleasure from the various kinds of joy and happiness. And all of that has nothing to do⁷³ with its [bodily] members. Hence, everything that is a description for the spirit in itself remains with it after it has taken leave of the body, while everything that belongs to [the spirit] on account of the mediation of the [bodily] members becomes idle with the death of the body until the spirit is restored to the body. And it is not unlikely that the spirit is restored to the body in the grave; nor is it unlikely that it is held off until the Day of Resurrection. God knows best about that which He has ruled for each one of His servants.⁷⁴

Separability is no longer a problem, obviously, but questions still remain: namely, although we know that the spirit and the heart and the intellect and the soul are one, we still do not know exactly what it is. What is its nature? Is it some kind of subtle or ethereal material substance or is it totally immaterial and immortal, subsisting entirely on its own? Also, what exactly are the emotional or intellectual pleasures and pains that the heart can experience in total separation from the body and its members? Are they the same kind of next-worldly "pleasures superior to the sensible" whose reality he concedes in the *Tahāfut*?⁷⁵ And if the spirit can experience these more poignant rewards and punishments without the mediation of corporeal "tools", then why the necessity of upholding an embodied after-life? The answers to these and other questions remain locked within the secret of the spirit, which is the key to the true reality of the heart, and so we have no choice but to keep searching for clues.

Al-Ghazālī continues to explain here that by "heart" he means "spirit" and that by "spirit" he means "that meaning (*ma'nā*) of 'human being' that apprehends the sciences and [feels] the pangs of grief, and the delights of joys." This, he says, is the real nature of the human being, that which "does not die" and "does not pass away". Furthermore, he says again that by "death" here he means "the severance of [the spirit's] administration of the body and the body's departure from [its status] of being [the spirit's] tool". He then affirms that "the reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of the human being is his soul (*nafsuhu*) and spirit (*rūḥuhu*), and it remains [after death] . . ."⁷⁶

⁷³ Literally, "is not connected with . . ."

⁷⁴ *Dhikr al-mawt*, 131.

⁷⁵ See Marmura, "Bodily Resurrection," 54. More will be said of this below.

⁷⁶ *Dhikr al-mawt*, 131.

This explanation, he admits, is hardly exhaustive, nor does he intend it to be, for he goes on to say a few paragraphs below that

It is impossible to remove the covering from the true nature of the reality of death, since death cannot be known by one who does not understand life, and the true knowledge of life is [attained] through the knowledge of the true nature of the spirit in its essence and through grasping the quiddity of its essence. It was not permitted for [even] the Emissary of God (may God bless him and grant him salvation) to speak of this, nor to say more than "the spirit is my Lord's affair."⁷⁷ Thus it is not for any of the doctors of religion to reveal the secret of the spirit, even if one were to come to know it. Indeed, all that is permitted is the mentioning of the state of the spirit after death . . .⁷⁸

As we are coming to expect, he leaves us with questions, unanswered and seemingly unanswerable. He also leaves us tantalized, for not by chance does he throw out the enigmatic, "even if one were to come to know [the secret of the spirit] . . ." He intimates that the secret is both knowable and known even as he raises the veil of pious restraint, effectively telling his reader that he cannot reveal anything more, at least not in this context.

Moving forward to the end of the seventh chapter, we find another important clue in the context of his discussion of Munkar, Nakir, and their dual interrogation of the soul in the grave. Following his full citation of a lengthy tradition related by Abū Hurayra, al-Ghazālī expounds upon the state of the dead person in the grave:

This is a text that clarifies [the fact] that the intellect does not change because of death. The body, however, and the limbs change. Thus the dead person is [still] thinking, understanding, conscious of the torments and the pleasures, whichever it may be. Nothing of his intellect changes. The intellect that is grasping [these things] is not [part of] these limbs; on the contrary, it is something [hidden] within, without length or breadth; indeed, that which does not subdivide in itself is that which grasps the things. [Even] if all the limbs of the human being were to be dispersed and the only [thing] remaining were the "part" (*al-juzʿ*) that does not break up into parts nor divide, the thinking person in his entirety would still be extant, abiding. And it is just so after death, for death does not undo that part, nor does nonexistence overtake it.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Qurʾān: *al-Isrāʾ* (17): 85. Variant readings are noted *supra*, n. 62.

⁷⁸ *Dhikr al-mawt*, 132.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 143.

While still referring to it as a “part”—just as he did early on in the *Book of Knowledge*—he grants that it has no length or breadth. In short, it is dimensionless, utterly non-spatial, even though it seems to be localized somehow in the body. Is it then material or immaterial? He does not explicitly say, and, based on the evidence he has given us, we cannot conclude anything for certain in this regard. His terminology, however, is highly evocative: “part”—a term synonymous with *jawhar* for the Ash‘arīs and the Mu‘tazilīs—certainly smacks of the *kalām*,⁸⁰ even though his context here is not explicitly dogmatic or theological. It gives us cause to wonder whether he is embracing the genre of *al-kalām* as a truth discourse after all, in spite of the fact that he refrains from using the hallmark term “*jawhar*” in this context. This suspicion is made even more weighty by the fact that he couches the term here in traditional *kalāmī* phraseology: “the part that does not break into parts nor divide” is a standard formula used in defining the atom. Even its status as being “without length or breadth” is consistent with the traditional Ash‘arī understanding (dating back to al-Jubbā‘ī, al-Ash‘arī’s Mu‘tazilī teacher), insofar as the individual atom, as a discrete “minimal part”, has no dimension.⁸¹ Still, al-Ash‘arī himself seems to have left no room in his definition for the isolated existence of a single atom in total separation from all other atoms⁸² as al-Ghazālī seems to affirm in the case of the “part” described above.

Might this “part” then be a single, separated material atom that is theoretically spatial and yet without dimension? Such an explanation would constitute a somewhat unique psychological application of a commonly held Ash‘arī position. Alternatively, the heart might be explained as an immaterial atom, thus taking after the Mu‘tazilī Mu‘ammar (d. 835), whom we mentioned briefly in the second chapter (p. 69). Is al-Ghazālī being sloppy and mixing genres here? His continual references to the “heart” as the receptacle (*mahall*) of knowledge⁸³ evoke *kalāmī* definitions of the atom as the

⁸⁰ See Dhanani’s section on “the equivalence of *jawhar* (substance) and *juz’* (atom)”, 55–62, esp. p. 58 (n. 12), where he cites from al-Juwaynī’s *al-Shāmīl*.

⁸¹ Ibid., 134.

⁸² See Kojiro Nakamura, “Was Ghazālī an Ash‘arite?”, 18–19. This is one of the key reasons Nakamura cites for rejecting an atomic explanation of al-Ghazālī’s psychology. He does not seem to have factored in the possibility, as Frank does, that al-Ghazālī may have simply modified the atomic model of al-Ash‘arī.

⁸³ This is a frequent occurrence even in the most esoteric of books, such as the *Kitāb sharḥ ‘ajā’ib al-qalb* (see, for example, p. 125).

receptacle of accidents, but it seems forced and rather out of context to impose a *kalāmī* reading onto a non-dogmatic text, especially one that simultaneously employs psychological terminology that we have come to associate with his mystical texts.

The passage cited several pages above from the *Kitāb al-ṣabr wa'l-shukr* seems to rule out any atomic theological formulation as a real answer. However, al-Ghazālī does, in other places, use atomic language when referring to this “subtlety” in contexts that are expressly non-dogmatic. In whatever way we wish to handle these complex tangles of terminology, we cannot discount the anomalies without a great deal of explaining. Continuing along this line of *kalāmī* speculation, then, the heart might be considered some kind of “subtle body” (*jism laṭīf*), such as that postulated by the Muʿtazilī al-Naẓẓām (d. 845), who conceived of the soul as a subtle body diffused equally throughout the physical body;⁸⁴ al-Ghazālī, however, identifies this in his *Commentary on the Wonders of the Heart* as one of the common understandings of the corporeal “spirit” that originates in the corporeal heart and spreads throughout the body.⁸⁵ Hence it cannot be equated with the “spiritual, divine” heart which is never described in such corporeal terms, no matter how subtle.

All we really know about al-Ghazālī’s understanding of the heart, then, is (i) that he calls it a “subtlety”, a “principle” and a “part”; (ii) that he describes it as being rational, divine, spiritual, self-subsisting, dimensionless, and indivisible; and (iii) that it remains quite conscious after the death and corruption of the body, although it seems to remain localized within the body throughout life (with the possible exception of sleep) and immediately after death. But what is its nature? Still we cannot say.

While we can, with certainty, rule out some of the possibilities, the true nature of the heart remains veiled to us. Some of the missing pieces of the puzzle might come together, and quickly, were we to examine less reliable texts, such as the disputed “Epistle of Presence” (*al-Risāla al-ladunīya*), where the human soul and spirit are treated in considerable detail and with astonishing philosophical candor. However, as the authenticity of this work is dubious at best, we cannot rely

⁸⁴ See M.E. Marmura, “Soul: Islamic Concepts” in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade, ed. Vol. XIII (NY: Columbia University Press, 1987), 462.

⁸⁵ See *Sharḥ ‘ajā’ib al-qalb*, 113, paraphrased *supra*. See also *Kitāb al-ṣabr wa'l-shukr*, 377.

upon it as hard evidence.⁸⁶ For better or worse, we opt to remain within the security of the *Ihyā'*, with occasional support and corroboration offered by other reliable texts within al-Ghazālī's known corpus. We are thus faced with what seems to be an impasse, a dead end, with few avenues left open to us.

While not answering all of our questions, this chapter has brought us much closer to unveiling the mysterious nature of the heart in the thought of al-Ghazālī, but it does not bring us to the end of our search. For that, our one and only remaining chance is to venture into the *malakūt*, the "World of the Unseen", which is the home of the heart and the theatre in which the Unveiling is witnessed. If we are able to come to some clear understanding of the nature of this aspect of al-Ghazālī's cosmology, it may well shed some light on the true nature of the heart, which belongs to this realm and ultimately returns to it in the Hereafter. It is finally to the world of the Unseen, then, that we go for answers.

⁸⁶ Nevertheless, in light of its extreme relevance to our investigation, we have included a large portion of this work (translation and commentary) as an appendix to this study. There, we also take up the question of its authenticity.

AL-GHAZĀLĪ'S UNSPEAKABLE DOCTRINE OF THE SOUL

*Unveiling the Esoteric Psychology and Eschatology
of the Iḥyā'*

BY

TIMOTHY J. GIANOTTI



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