

Al-Ghazālī's Concept of Philosophy

Ulrich Rudolph

I

It is well known that al-Ghazālī's attitude towards philosophy is rather conflicted and unclear. On the one hand, he composed *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*), considered by most of its readers the harshest refutation of Arabic philosophy ever written. On the other, he shares quite a number of positions with the philosophers and made ample use of their writings in order to express his own ideas.

This ambivalence is puzzling and has led to much debate. Numerous scholars have tried to find a key to understanding al-Ghazālī's relationship with philosophy and an explanation as to why he reacted to philosophical reasoning in such a mystifying variety of ways. The explanations vary, but on the whole can be reduced to four interpretations, namely: (1) Al-Ghazālī's comments on philosophy changed as his attitude towards philosophy evolved over his lifetime, so that his later works reflect a position different from the earlier. (2) Al-Ghazālī's statements about philosophy depend on his audience, for he practised a kind of multi-level writing in order to speak to each audience in a way they understood and were willing to accept. (3) His comments depend on the subject, accepting philosophical concepts in some fields, but not in others, so that his approach to philosophy is selective, if not actually inconsistent. (4) He has a kind of master plan concerning philosophy, and all his comments, the critical as well as the affirmative, were parts of the same strategy and were meant to attain the same goal, though they may seem to diverge from one another upon first reading.¹

* A first draft of this paper has been presented at the Dies Academicus II of the Accademia Ambrosiana (Milan, November 7, 2011) and has been published in the proceedings of the Dies; cf. Rudolph, "How did al-Ghazālī conceptualize philosophy?"

1 Some of these interpretations can be traced back to older publications such as Obermann, *Subjektivismus*, Wensinck, *La pensée*, Abd-El-Jalil, "Autour de la sincérité," Jabre, *La notion de certitude*, idem, *La notion de la ma'rifa*, and Watt, *Muslim Intellectual*, which are still worth reading. The state of discussion, however, has considerably shifted since Richard M. Frank published, in the early 1990s, his article "Al-Ghazālī's Use of Avicenna's Philosophy" and two monographs, *Creation and the Cosmic System* and *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash'arite School*. Several

All these explanations are based on viable arguments and deserve further discussion. It may well be that al-Ghazālī's attitude towards philosophy is complex and multifarious, and we need a complex set of interpretations to adequately describe it. Given this assumption, however, our considerations should not be confined to the level of individual philosophical doctrines and arguments. We should also take into account how al-Ghazālī argues on a deeper, conceptual level. Therefore, I plan to ask what philosophy really is, according to al-Ghazālī. How does he conceptualize and define philosophy, or at least, how does he describe its different parts and its place among the sciences?

While evaluating these problems, I will argue that al-Ghazālī's concept of philosophy draws heavily on earlier models. This does not mean that his ideas about philosophy are not original, which goes without saying. It seems to me, however, that they rely at least partly on earlier ideas, the origin of which can still be discerned. In order to show this, my paper will be divided into three parts. In the first part, I will summarize three concepts of philosophy that were developed in the centuries before al-Ghazālī. Strictly speaking, I will outline (1) the concept developed by Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 339/950) and followed—with considerable modification—by Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, d. 428/1037); (2) the concept of the Islamic theologians (*mutakallimūn*), and (3) the concept shared by authors who can be assigned to the philosophical tradition of Abū Ishāq al-Kindī (d. 246/861–251/866), such as Abū l-Ḥasan al-ʿĀmirī (d. 381/992), Miskawayh (d. 421/1030), Abū Sulaymān as-Sijistānī (d. ca. 377/987), and al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 422/1031). In the second part of this paper, I will connect these models with al-Ghazālī's own idea of philosophy as he expressed it in the *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* and in particular in *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (*The Deliverer from Error*). In this manner, I will try to evaluate in which sense and to what extent they may have influenced al-Ghazālī. This evaluation will eventually lead us to some general considerations about al-Ghazālī's position in the intellectual history of Islam and about the way in which his position is viewed and analysed today. Far from exhaustive, these considerations will merely touch on

scholars heavily criticized Frank's suggestion to interpret al-Ghazālī along Avicennian lines, among them Marmura, "Ghazālian Causes and Intermediaries" (cf. idem, "Ghazali and Ash'arism Revisited"), Mayer in his review of Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash'arite School*, and Dallal, "Al-Ghazālī and the Perils of Interpretation." Notwithstanding this criticism, however, Frank's work led to a serious reconsideration of al-Ghazālī's attitude towards philosophy that proved on the whole promising and is still dominating the research agenda nowadays. For a short account of the vicissitudes of research on al-Ghazālī see Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought*, 1–4, and Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 179–82.

some points which seem to me striking in the current debate about al-Ghazālī and which deserve more thorough reflection.

II

(1) The first concept to be mentioned is the one by al-Fārābī. His thought can be characterized as a further development of the Aristotelian notion of philosophy. According to al-Fārābī, philosophy is more or less synonymous with universal science.² It comprises all cognitive activities that rely on true premises and valuable syllogisms, whose results must be accepted by all who understand them.³ This idea was expressed in several of his writings, including *The Enumeration of the Sciences* (*Iḥṣāʾ al-ʿulūm*). As al-Fārābī explains, we must distinguish between two kinds of sciences. First are disciplines that are limited in their scope and are based on arguments that do not necessarily have to be shared by all people. This category includes Arabic grammar and Islamic theology. Islamic theology, for instance, is only relevant for persons who accept Qurʾānic revelation, meant to defend revealed knowledge by dialectical arguments that may be convincing for Muslim believers but never attain the epistemological status of demonstrative proofs (singl. *burhān*). The second category of sciences is based on premises that are true and universally recognized; their arguments are indisputable because they consist of demonstrative syllogisms as described by Aristotle in *Posterior Analytics*. This category includes logic, mathematics, natural sciences, metaphysics, ethics and politics, constituting together the universal sciences, called “philosophy.”⁴

Philosophy as conceived in this manner is independent of any other kind of knowledge. In particular, it is independent of prophecy, which is not located in the realm of universally recognized premises and Aristotelian epistemological rules. Nevertheless, al-Fārābī accepted the existence of prophecy. According to him, prophets—like philosophers—have access to the Active Intellect and are thereby able to receive knowledge about things that were hitherto unknown. The crucial point is, however, that the knowledge they receive is not of the

2 For a general introduction into al-Fārābī’s philosophy, his life and his works see now Rudolph, “Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī.”

3 Endress, “The Defense of Reason,” 16–23.

4 For a detailed analysis of al-Fārābī’s classification of sciences as expressed in his *Iḥṣāʾ al-ʿulūm* see Mahdi, “Science, Philosophy, and Religion in al-Fārābī’s Enumeration of the Sciences,” and Schramm, “Theoretische und praktische Disziplin bei al-Fārābī.” The text was also influential in the Latin tradition; cf. al-Fārābī, *Über die Wissenschaften/De scientiis. Nach der lateinischen Übersetzung Gerhards von Cremona*, and idem, *De scientiis secundum versionem Dominici Gundisalvi/Über die Wissenschaften. Die Version des Dominicus Gundissalinus*.

same kind as the knowledge of philosophers. It is not demonstrative because prophets are neither interested nor in a position to grasp things as they really are. According to al-Fārābī, prophecy is confined rather to the representation of truth on the level of symbols, pictures and parables in order to make (a version of) truth accessible to the great majority of people who are not able to understand it on the philosophical level.⁵

On this, Avicenna disagrees. He is basically willing to accept al-Fārābī's notion of philosophy, which equates philosophy with universal science, and distinguishes it from religious forms of representing the truth. But Avicenna does not accept this notion of philosophy unconditionally. According to him, demonstrative reasoning and revelation are not opposed and exclusive as al-Fārābī suggests. They share at least one common feature, i.e. intuition (*ḥads*), a movement of the mind in its effort to acquire knowledge spontaneously.⁶

In principle, intuition is the apogee of rationality. Avicenna describes it as the ability to grasp the middle term of syllogisms instantly, without mediation and instruction. As such, it constitutes the highest cognitive act and the noblest way to acquire demonstrative, philosophic knowledge. At the same time, however, Avicenna uses the concept of intuition to bridge the gap between philosophy and prophecy. He considers *ḥads* to be a sacred faculty (*quwwa qudsiyya*) that is accessible to prophets too. Prophecy is thus not confined to the representation of truth on the level of symbols, pictures and parables but simultaneously acts on a second level: It enables those who are gifted with it to acquire demonstrative knowledge and to grasp things as they really are.⁷

5 For al-Fārābī's theory of prophecy cf. Walzer, "Al-Fārābī's Theory of Prophecy and Divination," and Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, 30–31, 36–38, 40–41, 57–61.

6 Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 179–201; Hasse, *Avicenna's De anima*, 155 and 163–5; for a detailed discussion of the different views on intuition which Ibn Sīnā developed during his life see Gutas, "Intuition and Thinking: The Evolving Structure of Avicenna's Epistemology."

7 The "classical" outlines of Ibn Sīnā's theory of prophecy are described in Gardet, *La pensée religieuse d'Avicenne*, 109–41, and Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, 30–64. Ibn Sīnā's theory has been further investigated by several scholars, among them Elamrani-Jamal, "De la multiplicité des modes de la prophétie chez Ibn Sīnā," and Michot, *La destinée de l'homme chez Avicenne*, 118–53. For a recent analysis of his doctrine of the "three properties of prophethood" see al-Akiti, "The Three Properties of Prophethood in Certain Works of Avicenna and al-Ġazālī," 190–95. Al-Akiti's analysis is mainly based on Ibn Sīnā's *Aḥwāl al-naḥs*, 114–126. Cf. also Frank, "The science of *kalām*," 28–29, and Griffel, "Al-Ġazālī's Concept of Prophecy," 114. The fact that Ibn Sīnā did not only accept prophecy in general but in particular acknowledged Muḥammad as a prophet is explicitly stated in his *Risāla fī l-thbāt al-nubuwwāt*, 53.1. The authenticity of this text has been disputed but there are still reasons to attribute it to him.

Consequently, Avicenna pays more attention to the Qur'an than al-Fārābī. He credits the revealed text as a source of real knowledge,⁸ in particular on practical matters.⁹ Thus, he writes a considerable number of specialised tracts on religious matters, including the exegesis of Qur'anic passage and discussions of prayer, prophecy, and the hereafter.¹⁰

The fact that Avicenna is responsive to the revealed text, however, did not imply that he abandons the notion of philosophy as universal science. On the contrary, he strengthens philosophy's position, for it is the only way to attain demonstrative knowledge on theoretical and on practical matters—including philosophical analysis of religious doctrines and issues to trace them back to their universal theoretical principles. Avicenna thus subscribes to al-Fārābī's concept of philosophy, and by enlarging it he confirms and stresses its importance. This becomes evident when Avicenna defines philosophy (*ḥikma*) much in Farabian terms as, "the perfection of the human soul through the conception (*taṣawwūr*) of things and the acknowledgement (*taṣdīq*, judgement) of the true theoretical and practical realities (*ḥaqā'iq*) as far as it is humanly possible."¹¹

(2) The second concept of philosophy developed in the centuries preceding Ghazālī, propagated by the Islamic theologians called *mutakallimūn*, is in a way the opposite of the ideas that I have just explained. In the opinion of the *mutakallimūn*, philosophy is anything but a universal science; it is simply a doctrine, and what is worse: it is a heretical doctrine concerning improper ideas about God and the world which He created. Hence, the only allowable reaction to philosophy is refutation. So, the *mutakallimūn* usually talk about philosophy when discussing erroneous opinions about God and His creation. They analyze all doubtful arguments (*ṣubah*) presented by their adversaries, be they Muslim heretics or stubborn infidels—the latter generally including philosophers.¹²

8 See e.g. Ibn Sīnā, *ʿUyūn al-ḥikma*, 17, where he explains that "the principles of the parts of theoretical philosophy are received from the masters of true religion by way of admonishment (*tanbīh*)," and "the principles of the parts of practical philosophy are received from the divine law (*al-sharīʿa l-ilāhiyya*)" (the English translation is taken from Endress, "The Defense of Reason," 31).

9 Janssens, "Ibn Sīnā (Avicenne): un projet 'religieux' de philosophie?"

10 Mahdi, "Avicenna. i. Introductory Note;" Janssens, "Avicenna and the Qur'an: A Survey of his Qur'anic Commentaries."

11 Ibn Sīnā, *ʿUyūn al-ḥikma*, 16 (the English translation is taken from Endress, "The Defense of Reason," 31).

12 Frank, "Reason and Revealed Law," 134–35.

This practice can be found in works by authors such as Abū l-Ḥasan al-Aṣʿarī (d. 323/935), who mentions the philosophers twice in his famous book on the Islamic doctrines (*Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*). In one place, they figure as part of a long list of infidels including the Manicheans, Marcionites, Dualists, Naturalists (*aṣḥāb al-ṭabāʾiʿ*), and Christians. In another, the Muʿtazilites are accused of having developed an erroneous doctrine about God's attributes because they followed the teachings of the philosophers.¹³

Another revealing example of the rejection of philosophy is in *The Book on God's Oneness* (*Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*) by Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 332/944). It contains a long chapter about God's essence, His names, and His attributes, beginning with al-Māturīdī's own teaching and continuing with the refutation of incorrect doctrines. Al-Māturīdī's first target are Muslim heretics, which for him include the Muʿtazilites, the Ismaʿīlites and the rival Hanafite school of Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Najjār (d.c. 235/850). Al-Māturīdī then turns to the infidels, which include not only the Skeptics, Manicheans, Marcionites, and Zoroastrians but also the so-called *dahriyya*, a group recorded as having maintained the doctrine of the eternity of the world, whose alleged leader was Aristotle.¹⁴

The list of *mutakallimūn* who followed the same practice could easily be extended. Many theologians writing in the 3rd/9th, 4th/10th or 5th/11th centuries included long refutations or at least short polemical remarks against philosophy within their expositions of the true doctrine.¹⁵ Obviously, most of them were convinced that the philosophers were nothing but heretics and should be treated as one of a panoply of erroneous groups and sects.¹⁶ We can thus confine ourselves to the two examples that I have just given and proceed to the third concept of philosophy which is relevant to our discussion.

(3) The ideas of the authors who can be characterized as working in the tradition of al-Kindī differ from both approaches to philosophy that I have already mentioned. They conceive of philosophy neither as a unique and absolutely privileged form of science nor as a doctrine which has to be rejected and disapproved. Instead, they try to integrate it into a wider spectrum of disciplines and modes of reflection. In their opinion, philosophy is one of several relevant ways of attaining knowledge that can possibly complement each other.

13 van Ess, *Der Eine und das Andere*, 1:460 and 474.

14 Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunni Theology in Samarqand*, 207, cf. 166–79.

15 For further examples see the texts translated in van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 5:70, no. 8; 5:229, no. 8; 5:285, no. 49, and idem, *Der Eine und das Andere*, 1:711–712.

16 Frank, "The science of *kalām*," 19.

The roots of this concept can be traced back to al-Kindī himself. As he writes in his *Epistle on the Quantity of the Books of Aristotle* (*Risāla fī Kammiyyat kutub Aristūṭālīs*), philosophy is not the only way of accessing truth. Prophets, too, have access to knowledge. Indeed, their knowledge is as complete and precise as the knowledge of philosophers, the only difference being that prophets understand everything at once, whereas philosophers need much time and effort in order to find the truth.¹⁷

Many authors from the 3rd/9th to the 5th/11th centuries share al-Kindī's view. In its general outlines, Aḥmad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Sarakhsī (d. 286/899),¹⁸ Abū Zayd al-Balkhī (d. 322/934),¹⁹ Abū l-Ḥasan al-ʿĀmirī²⁰ and Miskawayh²¹ follow al-Kindī's philosophy closely. Besides, there are authors who combine al-Kindī's philosophy with ideas from other traditions such as Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī and al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī. Abū Sulaymān follows al-Kindī in many respects, but he was also a pupil of Yaḥyā ibn ʿĀdī (d. 363/974), who had introduced him to the logical studies of the Baghdādī Aristotelians.²² Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, who lived at the turn of the 5th/11th century, connects Kindian Ethics (which he mainly takes from Miskawayh) with Šūfī convictions. This is all the more important in our discussion considering that al-Ghazālī draws heavily on al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī's teaching in his own ethical writings.²³

Although all these authors adhere, in principle, to al-Kindī's concept of philosophy, we must pay attention to the fact that they sometimes interpret his idea of multiple pathways to knowledge in different ways. Miskawayh, for example, has no problem combining these multiple pathways in the same argument and on the same level. In his treatises on Ethics he uses philosophical considerations taken from Plato and Aristotle side by side with traditions of

17 al-Kindī, *Risāla fī Kammiyyat kutub Aristūṭālīs wa-mā yuḥtāj ilayhi fī taḥṣīl al-falsafa*, 372–76.

18 For Sarakhsī's philosophy, his life and his works see now Biesterfeldt, "Aḥmad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Sarakhsī."

19 Biesterfeldt, "Abū Zaid al-Balkhī."

20 Wakelnig, "Abū l-Ḥasan al-ʿĀmirī."

21 Endress, "Antike Ethik-Traditionen für die islamische Gesellschaft: Abū ʿAlī Miskawaih."

22 For a detailed analysis of Abū Sulaymān's philosophical orientation see Endress, "Die Integration philosophischer Traditionen in der islamischen Gesellschaft des 4./10. Jahrhunderts: al-Taḥṣīdī and al-Sijistānī," in particular 201–209.

23 For al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī's teaching and his dependence on Miskawayh see Daiber, "Griechische Ethik in islamischem Gewand," Mohamed, "The Ethical Philosophy of al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī," idem, "The Concept of Justice in Miskawayh and Iṣfahānī," and idem, "Knowledge and the Purification of the Soul." For his impact on al-Ghazālī see Madelung, "Ar-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī und die Ethik al-Ghazālī," and Mohamed, "The Unifying Thread."

religious provenance.²⁴ Abū l-Ḥasan al-ʿĀmirī is less open-minded. Despite his deep philosophical interests, he insists on subordinating philosophy to religion. According to him, our soul can only profit from the light of intellect if it is guided by the light of religion.²⁵

The most interesting case, however, may be Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī. He is reported to have said: "... the reason which is the representative of God on this earth ..." (*al-ʿaql alladhī huwa khalīfat Allāh fi hādha l-ʿālam*)²⁶ what seems to be an unambiguous profession of the importance of rational thinking and thus of philosophy. Yet, at the same time, he is convinced that human beings can only attain their goal if they are also given what he calls "the dress of mercy" (*libās al-raḥma*), i.e. God's guidance.²⁷ Therefore, al-Sijistānī is very suspicious of people who, to his mind, overrated the importance of philosophy. This becomes evident in a passage where he sharply critiques the intentions of the so-called Brethren of Purity (*Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ*). As he explains, the *Ikhwān* try to improve religion through philosophy. According to them, religion is soiled by ignorance and can only be cleaned and purified by the enlightening effect of philosophy. However, this is a fatal error in al-Sijistānī's opinion. Philosophy is nothing but human knowledge, whereas religion is perfect wisdom because it has access to revelation as well as to the intelligible world.²⁸ Consequently, al-Sijistānī emphasizes the priority and the superiority of religion.²⁹ He is an interesting early example of a Muslim scholar who was engaged in philosophy and even taught philosophy, while at the same time insisting on its limitations.³⁰

24 For a concise description of his ethical theory see Endress, "Antike Ethiktraditionen," 232–38.

25 Wakelnig, "Abū l-Ḥasan al-ʿĀmirī," 184–85; how al-ʿĀmirī and some other representatives of the Kindian tradition conceived philosophy is also described by Adamson, "The Kindian Tradition: the Structure of Philosophy in Arabic Neoplatonism."

26 al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Muqābasāt*, 119.3; cf. 467.4–5.

27 Ibid., 134.3.

28 al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Imtāʿ wa-l-muʿānasa*, 2:21.10–22.19; cf. 2:5.15–11.2. For a discussion of the whole passage see Endress, "The Limits to Reason: Some Aspects of Islamic Philosophy in the Būyid Period," 122–23, and the recent article by Griffel and Hachmeyer, "Prophets as Physicians of the Soul" which contains a comprehensive English translation of the passage.

29 al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Imtāʿ wa-l-muʿānasa*, 2:10.3; cf. 2:18.8–11.

30 Abū Sulaymān's statements about the relation between philosophy and religion are discussed in detail by Kraemer, *Philosophy in the Renaissance of Islam*, 230–43; cf. Endress, "Die Integration philosophischer Traditionen," 204–5.

III

Let us now turn to our principal subject, al-Ghazālī. He expresses his views on philosophy on several occasions, but it seems appropriate to start our investigation with the famous passage in his autobiographical book *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* where he describes his experiences with different disciplines and modes of reflection that include philosophy, theology, Isma'ili teaching and Sufism.

According to this text, philosophy should not be subject to simple, general judgments. Every part of the philosophical sciences should be evaluated in its own right in order to recognize its characteristics and specific value. The evaluation actually presented in al-Ghazālī's *Munqidh* is quite long but its conclusion can be summarised as follows: First, the mathematical sciences have to be accepted without reservation. As he explains, "(...) nothing in them entails denial or affirmation of religious matters. On the contrary, they concern rigorously demonstrated facts which can in no wise be denied once they are known and understood."³¹ The same is true for logic: "There is nothing in this which must be rejected. On the contrary, it is the sort of thing mentioned by the *mutakallimūn* and the partisans of reasoning in connection with the proofs they use (...)" the only difference being that the modes of expression and the methods of proof which the philosophers have learnt to apply are much more refined than those of the *mutakallimūn*.³² The natural sciences is a more complicated case. In principle it is a useful science, but when studying it the philosophers tend to forget that physical phenomena are not to be explained in and of themselves. As al-Ghazālī puts it: "The basic point regarding all of them is for you to know that nature is totally subject to God Most High: it does not act of itself but is used as an instrument by its Creator."³³ Metaphysics seems to be the crucial point of the whole evaluation for, "it is in the metaphysical sciences that most of the philosopher's errors are found. Owing to the fact that they could not carry out apodictic demonstration according to the conditions they had postulated in logic, they differed a great deal about metaphysical questions."³⁴ For that reason, the philosophers developed several doctrines which according to al-Ghazālī must be considered either heresy or unbelief. In contrast, the political sciences and the moral sciences are less problematic. In these two fields, the philosophers do not contradict the

31 al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh*, 20.20–22; Engl. transl. in McCarthy, *Deliverance From Error*, 63.

32 Ibid., 22.13–14; Engl. transl. in McCarthy, *Deliverance From Error*, 65.

33 Ibid., 23.11–12; Engl. transl. in McCarthy, *Deliverance From Error*, 66.

34 Ibid., 23.14–15; Engl. transl. in McCarthy, *Deliverance From Error*, 66.

teaching of religion but rather depend on it. As far as political ideas are concerned, al-Ghazālī affirms: "They (i.e. the philosophers) simply took these over from the scriptures revealed to the prophets by God Most High and from the maxims handed down from the predecessors of the prophets," and concerning philosophical teachings on ethics and on the soul, its qualities and habits, he hurries to add: "This they simply took over from the sayings of the Sufis."³⁵

In sum, we thus have a threefold division. In al-Ghazālī's opinion, logic and mathematics are universally acknowledged sciences, natural sciences, and metaphysics include or tend to include heretical doctrines, and ethics and politics can be considered a valuable means to access to knowledge insofar as they argue in the same manner as prophets and Sufis.

This tripartitioning corresponds, in its general outlines, to the three concepts of philosophy we have already discussed: Al-Ghazālī describes logic and mathematics more or less the way al-Fārābī and Avicenna describe philosophy, natural sciences, and metaphysics like the *mutakallimūn*, and ethics and politics like the followers of al-Kindī. The last point is not even surprising. As we have seen, al-Kindī's followers focus their writings on the fate of the soul and on ethical questions, and al-Ghazālī draws heavily on their teaching when writing his own ethical works.³⁶

We should, however, not stop at this stage of our evaluation. Up to now, we have only made the general observation that al-Ghazālī knows these earlier concepts and makes use of them. We have not yet specified in which way he combines them. Thus, we have to reconsider all three concepts in detail in order to see how he applies them and how he describes their respective function and contribution to his own ideas.

With respect to the *mutakallimūn*'s, it is quite easy to answer this question. Its purpose was confined to detecting and refuting heretical doctrines (in the realm of the natural sciences and metaphysics), and it was exactly in this sense that al-Ghazālī made use of it. Wherever he treats *kalām* topics and argues as a *kalām* author, he applies the *mutakallimūn*'s insistence on refuting philosophy. This is particularly the case in *al-Iqtisād fī l-i'tiqād* (*The Balanced Book on What-To-Believe*) where he attacks the philosophers just as al-Ash'arī, al-Māturīdī and many *mutakallimūn* had done before him.³⁷ Yet, to a lesser degree, he does the same in *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*), of

35 Ibid., 24.14–15, 24.17–18; Engl. transl. in McCarthy, *Deliverance From Error*, 67.

36 See above p. 38 and in particular n. 23.

37 al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtisād fī l-i'tiqād*, 1.12; 27.6; 103.12; 129.10; 132.2; 137.8; 250.9.

course a more ambitious work than the *Iqtisād* that nonetheless shares some features with *kalām* writings.³⁸

The scope of these refutations in *kalām* style is, however, rather limited. As al-Ghazālī himself explains, theological arguments are useful to defend religious teachings but they are not meant to analyze reality and to study the true nature of things. Theology (*kalām*), as he puts it, is an auxiliary discipline which is limited in its range and function: "(...) I found it a science adequate for its own aim, but inadequate for mine."³⁹ As a consequence, theological arguments can only be a first approach to complicated matters and issues. When it comes to evaluating philosophy, they are particularly provisional and incomplete. In al-Ghazālī's own words: "What the *mutakallimūn* had to say in their books, where they were engaged in refuting the philosophers, was nothing but abstruse, scattered remarks, patently inconsistent and false, which could not conceivably hoodwink an ordinary intelligent person, to say nothing of one familiar with the subtleties of the philosophical sciences."⁴⁰

The *kalām* approach to philosophy thus leaves much to be improved. It must be completed by other approaches. This leads al-Ghazālī to refer to the second concept mentioned above which conceives philosophy as a real science whose results cannot be denied once they are known and understood. At first glance, al-Ghazālī had restricted the application of this concept to mathematics and logic, but closer examination shows that this is only a preliminary judgment. Al-Ghazālī's distinction between the scientific and the doctrinal parts of philosophy is not as evident and absolute as it may have appeared in the sentences from the *Munqidh* quoted earlier.

In the end, al-Ghazālī is willing to accept that philosophy—in all its parts—is able to reveal the true nature of things. For him, philosophy is the only science which is able to study the true nature of things, because all the other ways, namely *kalām*, the Isma'ili doctrine, and Sufism, are either not in a position to find it or are not interested in studying created things at all. There is, however, a very important qualification: According to al-Ghazālī, philosophy is not an autonomous science. It is subject to certain conditions which cannot be defined by the philosophers themselves. This point had often been neglected by the philosophers and, as a consequence, they failed to recognize the

38 See e.g. al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* / *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, 1.11–2.21; 4.3–5.4. In the *Tahāfut* the philosophers are conceived as a *firqa*, "sect," (e.g. *ibid.*, 5.5) and their doctrines are sometimes opposed to the doctrines of other *firaq*, "sects," (or religious groups) such as the Mu'tazila, the Karrāmiyya and the Ash'ariyya (e.g. *ibid.*, 50.15–52.17); Shihadeh, "From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī," 143; Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 98–99.

39 al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh*, 16.3–4; Engl. transl. in McCarthy, *Deliverance From Error*, 59.

40 *Ibid.*, 18.7–9; Engl. transl. in McCarthy, *Deliverance From Error*, 60–61.

limitations of their own science. As we have already seen, al-Ghazālī explained this by saying that the philosophers study the natural phenomena without recognizing the underlying point, namely “that nature is totally subject to God (...): it does not act of itself but is used as an instrument by its Creator.”⁴¹ As a result, actual philosophical teachings are a melting pot of divergent doctrines and arguments. To quote al-Ghazālī, they contain “truth” and “error”, “gold ... mixed with dirt”, “pure gold” and “false and counterfeit coins.”⁴² If we want to find the true elements in them we must act like a man who is willing to find “honey ... in a cupper’s glass.”⁴³ To distinguish truth and error is, however, quite a difficult task. If we want to accomplish it, we cannot confine ourselves to philosophical studies. We rather need the assistance of other disciplines and other sources of knowledge. This is finally the point where the third concept of philosophy, used by al-Kindī’s followers, comes into play.

As has been pointed out, al-Kindī’s followers tried to combine philosophy with other ways to attain knowledge. In particular, they insist on the fact that every scholar, including the philosophers, has to accept knowledge that has been revealed to the prophets by God. This affirmation corresponds exactly with al-Ghazālī’s own conviction. As we are told in the later parts of *al-Munqidh*, prophecy is an indispensable source of wisdom that we must all acknowledge.⁴⁴ Philosophers, too, have to respect prophecy as the unquestionable and indispensable fundament of all knowledge. Only when prophetic knowledge is accepted can philosophy become a respectable way to study the true nature of things.

In the end, al-Ghazālī’s concept of philosophy is close to the concept held by some authors of 4th/10th and 5th/11th centuries who were working in al-Kindī’s tradition. We can even go one step further, for one scholar expressed views on philosophy that were particularly close to al-Ghazālī’s ideas, namely Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī. This may be surprising at first given the fact that—unlike al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī and Miskawayh—al-Sijistānī has not yet been credited as influencing al-Ghazālī in any noteworthy way. However, it seems that his name should be added to the Ghazalian dossier. In some points at least, the parallels between al-Sijistānī’s and al-Ghazālī’s ideas are striking. This applies to ethics (where both of them ultimately followed al-Kindī’s tradition)⁴⁵ and logic (where both of them followed al-Fārābī’s tradition) as well as their general

41 Ibid., 23.11–12; Engl. transl. in McCarthy, *Deliverance From Error*, 66.

42 Ibid., 25.14–23; Engl. transl. in McCarthy, *Deliverance From Error*, 68.

43 Ibid., 26.17–19; Engl. transl. in McCarthy, *Deliverance From Error*, 69.

44 Ibid., 41–44; Engl. transl. in McCarthy, *Deliverance From Error*, 83–87.

45 For al-Sijistānī’s views on ethics cf. Endress, “Die Integration philosophischer Traditionen,” 206–7.

approach to philosophy. As I pointed out above, al-Sijistānī engaged heavily in philosophy while insisting on its limitations. According to him, it is even dangerous to overrate the importance and the scope of philosophy as the *Ikhwān al-ṣafā* do.⁴⁶

Al-Ghazālī uses the same example. He mentions the *Ikhwān al-ṣafā* three times in his *Munqidh*, and every time they are subject to sharp attacks.⁴⁷ This does not mean that al-Ghazālī is only critical of the *Ikhwān*. As in many other cases, his relationship to them seems to have been rather ambivalent, for he sometimes takes passages from their *Rasā'il* and integrates them into his own writings.⁴⁸ In the *Munqidh*, however, his position towards the *Ikhwān* is clear. In his opinion, their way of philosophizing is wrong; it even compromises philosophy as a science. He expresses this, for example, as follows:

If we were to (...) aim at forgoing every truth which had been first formulated by the mind of one in error, we would have to forgo much of what is true. We would also have to give up a lot of the verses of the Qur'ān and the traditions of the Apostle and the recitals of our pious forebears and the sayings of the sages and the Sufis. For the author of *The Brethren of Purity* cites these in his own work, appealing to their authority and thereby enticing the minds of stupid men to embrace his false doctrine. That would be an invitation to those in error to wrest the truth from our hands by putting it into their own books.⁴⁹

Certainly, the parallel attacks on the *Ikhwān al-ṣafā* presented by al-Ghazālī and al-Sijistānī might have been pure chance, but this is not likely. Even in that case, it remains obvious that the attitude of both scholars toward philosophy was similar in many respects. We can thus summarize what has been said up to now as follows: When evaluating philosophy, al-Ghazālī draws on several earlier models which he connects skillfully for different purposes. The *kalām* approach serves him in his attack on unacceptable or, as he would perhaps say, anti-prophetical doctrines. The Farabian-Avicennian approach allows him to use the scientific methods and discoveries made by philosophers. Al-Sijistānī's approach, however, seems to be the one which most shaped his own attitude

46 Cf. above, n. 28.

47 al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh*, 26.14–15, 27.3, 33.21–22; Engl. transl. in McCarthy, *Deliverance From Error*, 69, 70, 77.

48 Landolt, "Al-Ghazālī and Religionswissenschaft," 23; De Smet, "Die Enzyklopädie der Iḥwān aṣ-Ṣafā," 530.

49 al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh*, 26.11–17; Engl. transl. in McCarthy, *Deliverance From Error*, 69.

toward philosophy and led him to be deeply engaged in philosophical discussions while, at the same, sharply critiquing them.

IV

Thus far, our discussion has focused on describing how al-Ghazālī conceptualized philosophy. I have tried to evaluate his position by comparing it to different approaches to philosophy developed by earlier authors in the Arabic tradition of which he was probably aware. In addition to these considerations, there is yet another dimension of our topic. It does not concern al-Ghazālī's conception of philosophy as such, but the conclusions we can draw from it. These conclusions deserve our attention too, because they allow us to situate his statements on philosophy in a wider historical context. This will bring us to some general considerations about al-Ghazālī's position in the intellectual history of Islam and about the way in which contemporary research views and analyzes this position.

Considering our discussion, three remarks seem to be appropriate. The first one relates to the observation that al-Ghazālī's concept of philosophy draws on several earlier models. As I have argued, he does not develop a single and unambiguous notion of what philosophy is and whether it is valid. This is revealing in several respects. On the one hand, it demonstrates al-Ghazālī's versatility, his intellectual curiosity and his open-mindedness. On the other hand, it appears that his approach to philosophy is not only shaped by conceptual reflections and theoretical reasons but also by pragmatic considerations. This does not mean that al-Ghazālī has no overarching strategy concerning philosophy. Obviously, he has one which he tried to apply whenever discussing a related topic. Still, this strategy seems to be less based on intrinsic and consistent theoretical reasons than on extrinsic considerations such as, for instance, the compatibility of a doctrine with revealed truth.

In view of this pragmatism, it is not really surprising that al-Ghazālī sometimes argues on different levels. This is even true for logic: As we have seen, he acknowledges logic as a universally recognized science. Consequently, he wrote manuals such as *Mī'yār al-'ilm* (*Standard of Knowledge*) and *Mihakk an-naẓar* (*Touchstone of Reasoning*) in order to initiate serious logical studies among his colleagues.⁵⁰ Yet, at the same time, he produced *al-Qisṭās al-mustaqīm* (*The Straight Balance*) where he argued that all kinds of syllogisms can be

50 On al-Ghazālī's logic see Street, "Arabic Logic," 555–559, and my "Die Neubewertung der Logik."

derived from the Qur'an, hardly a theoretically based and logically demonstrable statement.⁵¹

When evaluating al-Ghazālī as a conceptual thinker, we are thus left with an ambiguous impression. There are certainly good reasons to declare: "al-Ghazālī was a very systematic thinker"⁵² But in view of al-Ghazālī's "flexibility" and his indecision in conceptual matters it also seems appropriate to say: "His theology appears to be comprehensive in its scope (...). On the other hand, it also appears to be curiously incomplete. Theses are set forth in formally conceptual terms, sometimes at length, with great assurance and even eloquence, but also superficially and inconclusively, as implications are left unclarified and apparent inconsistencies unresolved."⁵³

The second remark is in a certain sense connected to the first. It concerns the sources available to al-Ghazālī. Which books and writings did he know? How extensive was the corpus he read? Who were the authors that shaped his ideas on philosophical topics? At first sight, the answer to these questions seems simple. Al-Ghazālī often referred to Avicenna. By following these hints, scholars have for long been able to prove that al-Ghazālī actually studied and discussed his writings. Recent scholarship even goes one step further. As has been shown in articles since the early 1990s, al-Ghazālī's use of Avicenna's writings is much more extensive than previously thought. He even takes up sentences or whole passages from the books of his predecessor when he openly criticizes and contradicts Avicenna; still more often, he makes use of Avicenna's arguments and phrases without mentioning his name at all.⁵⁴

There can thus be no doubt that Avicenna is the principal source (and the principal target) when al-Ghazālī discusses any philosophical topic. But this does not necessarily mean that Avicenna is his only source of information and inspiration in this field. On the contrary: philosophical discourse (as intellectual discourse in general) always has a historical horizon beyond the immediate line of discussion. When Aristotle, for instance, reflected on philosophical topics, his main challenge was without doubt Plato; but this does not mean that Aristotle was not aware of the teachings of Parmenides, Anaxagoras and others who had a considerable impact on him, too.

The same seems to be true for al-Ghazālī. His main challenge was, without any doubt, Avicenna. But this does not prevent him from studying the writings of other philosophical authors whose ideas may have been closer to his own convictions. As far as ethical questions are concerned, this has already been

51 See Kleinknecht, "Al-Qiṣṭas al-mustaqīm."

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

53 Frank, "Al-Ghazālī's Use of Avicenna's Philosophy," 284.

54 See, in particular the articles by Frank and Janssens.

proven. When considering his overall conception of philosophy, however, one gets the impression that ethics was not an exceptional case. Al-Ghazālī seems to have shared a number of ideas and preoccupations with several authors who were working in the tradition of al-Kindī (e.g. al-Sijistānī, Miskawayh and al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī), which suggests that their teaching should be taken more into account in further research about him.

These considerations lead me finally to my third and final remark, which is once again on the relationship between al-Ghazālī and Avicenna. This time, however, the question is not whether or not al-Ghazālī exclusively studied Avicenna's books when he consulted philosophical writings, but whether or to which extent his own teaching can be interpreted in Avicennian lines.

The answers given to this question by scholarship have changed considerably during the last decades. In the past, Ghazālī was commonly assumed to have been a strict adversary of Avicenna. Accordingly, it seemed to be anathema to interpret his own teaching in terms of Avicenna's ideas. Nowadays, however, many scholars tend to the opposite assumption. Having detected that al-Ghazālī made extensive use of Avicenna's writings, they consider him as an author who was in many respects close to Avicenna. Sometimes al-Ghazālī is described as being fascinated by Avicenna's teaching. Sometimes he is even qualified as a kind of crypto-Avicennian. Alternatively, both of them are supposed to pursue basically the same philosophico-religious project continued later by other prominent authors such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī or even Ibn Taymiyya.

Many of these ideas are still unfolding. As a matter of fact, one of the most important results of recent scholarship is determining that al-Ghazālī cannot be seriously interpreted without considering Avicenna's impact on him. Yet, this line of interpretation, if exclusively applied, risks creating its own problems. Sometimes one gets the impression that Avicenna's impact on al-Ghazālī is unduly stressed or even fabricated. To search for affinities can be a hermeneutical tool but it can also be suggestive. One risks interpreting al-Ghazālī's writings from an Avicennian view while, at the same time, understanding Avicenna in a Ghazalian way.

It may thus be appropriate to diversify the field of interpretation without fixing it on one perspective. The fact that al-Ghazālī made ample use of Avicenna's writings does not necessarily imply that they both had the same intellectual project.⁵⁵ Al-Ghazālī rather seems to have pursued his own goals

55 Another example that may fit our context in a certain way: St. Augustine was an enthusiastic reader of Platonic writings but his own intellectual and religious project can hardly be qualified as a Platonic one. See the well-balanced considerations of Flasch, *Augustinus*, 37–41 and 292–299.

by following various sources and different lines of argumentation—a conclusion that can at least be drawn from the way he conceptualized philosophy.

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Islam and Rationality

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