

Al-Ghazālī's Changing Attitude to Philosophy

Wilferd Madelung

Through his life, al-Ghazālī, a Muslim religious scholar basically educated in Shāfi'ī jurisprudence and Ash'arī theology and early initiated into Sufi theory and practice, felt profoundly challenged, fascinated, both attracted and repelled by philosophy. The challenge arose primarily from the teaching of Avicenna, who had claimed that the theological knowledge offered by Peripatetic philosophy and by the revelation of Islam was essentially identical, deriving from the same divine source. While the intellectual elite of philosophers could gain knowledge of the highest truths from its divine source through their effort of thought and reasoning, the common people needed an intermediary, a prophet, who would translate the metaphysical truths into images and language which they were able to comprehend. Avicenna and his disciples endeavored in their teaching and writing to demonstrate that their theological views, if correctly understood, agreed with those of the Muslim speculative theologians.

Avicenna's claim obviously was deeply disturbing to Muslim religious scholars. They had been taught that the ultimate truths had been revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the Qur'ān, the speech of God he alone had been privileged to receive. Could it be that these truths were attainable by others immediately and more clearly by their own effort of thought without an inspired and divinely chosen intermediary? As a young scholar assured of the truths of the Qur'ān, al-Ghazālī was determined to examine Avicenna's claim. Encouraged by his famous teacher Abū l-Ma'ālī l-Juwaynī,¹ he studied the philosopher's teaching comprehensively, yet with a critical mind.

Al-Ghazālī's first public venture into the field of philosophy was in his *Book on the Intentions of the Philosophers* (*Kitāb Maqāṣid al-falāsifa*), published early in his teaching career. In it he addressed an anonymous questioner, most likely one of his students, who had asked him to uncover the incoherence and contradictions of the teaching of the philosophers, their concealed deceit, and their seduction. Al-Ghazālī answered that such a refutation first requires an exposition of their teaching and beliefs, since a sound understanding of the

¹ See Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, Oxford University Press 2009, pp. 30–31.

falsehood of any doctrine is impossible without discernment of its claims and assertions. He would therefore, in his present book, succinctly recount the intentions of the philosophers in their sciences without distinguishing between truth and falsehood.

The philosophical disciplines, he explained, are four: mathematics, logics, physics and theology. He would not deal with mathematics since nothing of them can be denied or rejected. In contrast, most of the philosophers' theological doctrines are contrary to the truth, and soundness is rare in them. Most of their logic is sound, and the people of the truth, the Muslim religious scholars, differ from them only in terminology and method, not in substance. In their physics, truth is mixed with falsehood, as al-Ghazālī would explain in his future refutation of the philosophers.

Al-Ghazālī's exposition of the teaching of the philosophers was largely copied from the introductory manuals which the philosophers of the school of Avicenna had composed for the basic instruction of their pupils.² These manuals were ultimately based on Avicenna's *Dānish-nāma-yi 'Alā'ī*. Al-Ghazālī was familiar with them from his earlier study of philosophy and could quickly adapt their contents for his own presentation of the intentions of the philosophers. At the end of the book he assured the reader again that he had simply related their doctrines in logic, theology and physics without occupying himself with the distinction between 'the lean and the fat' and that he would next work on his book exposing the incoherence of their thought so that the falsehood of what was false in these views would become apparent.

Al-Ghazālī, it is evident, did not compose his own manual on the philosophical sciences only as a basis for his refutation of Avicennian theology. He wanted to encourage his students and Muslim religious scholars in general to study these sciences and benefit from what was rationally sound in them. While this was most definitely true of Aristotelian logics, it applied also to some extent to physics and even theology, though most of it in his view was false.

Al-Ghazālī's refutation of Avicennian philosophy, his *Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*) promised in the *Maqāṣid al-falāsifa*, was probably completed some years after his announcement there. Unlike the *Maqāṣid* and some of his other books produced around this time, it could not quickly be composed by extensive copying from the works of others, but required much critical thought and careful formulation of his own. The refutation turned out to be not just a rational analysis of errors in reasoning; it was

2 See Wilferd Madelung, "Ibn al-Malāḥimī's Refutation of the Philosophers," in Camilla Adang, Sabine Schmidtke, David Sklare (eds.), *A Common Rationality: Mu'tazilism in Islam and Judaism*, Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2007, pp. 331–336, p. 334.

introduced by a furious attack on the philosophers themselves. They were a lot of immoral conceited fraudsters, who arrogantly looked down on the Muslim religious scholars and pretended that only their own theories constituted incontrovertible truth built upon apodeictic proof (*burhān*). Their claim that their theology agreed with Islam was sheer deception. In reality they denied God's essential attributes of life, will, power and knowledge recognized by the Muslims and held that the world eternally emanated from His essence by necessity. The God of the philosophers, an involuntary necessary cause of the world, was not the living creator God of Islam. Critically examining Avicennian philosophy, al-Ghazālī charged the Muslim philosophers with infidelity meriting the death penalty on three grounds, their doctrine of the pre-eternity of the world, their denial of God's immediate knowledge of particular events in the sublunar world, and their denial of the bodily Resurrection. On numerous other points he accused them merely of heretical innovation matched by deviant Muslim schools of thought, in particular the Mu'tazila.

In refuting the fraudulent teaching of the philosophers, al-Ghazālī explained, he would not seek to defend any specific theological school doctrine; rather, he would set forth the true doctrine in a future separate work. He evidently meant Ash'arī school doctrine, which nonetheless distinctly underlies most of his critical argument. There were, however, two major instances where he defended non-Ash'arī positions, one allowing secondary physical causality and the other admitting the immateriality of a self-subsistent human soul.³ Although he refuted ten of Avicenna's arguments for the immateriality and immortality of the soul, he affirmed that the existence of a self-subsistent spiritual soul that could survive the human body was not inconsistent with Islam and the dogma of the bodily resurrection. It even had some support in the religious law.

The work in which he, as envisaged in the *Tahāfut*, defended the true theological doctrine, was his *al-Iqtisād fī l-i'tiqād*. Here he distanced himself initially from both the Ḥashwiyya, the Sunnī traditionalists who adhered only to imitation in traditional belief without recourse to rational investigation, and from the philosophers and extremist Mu'tazila, who in their one-sided pursuit of reason ignored conclusive evidence of the revealed religious law. He briefly explained and then employed three methods of logical proof, among them the Aristotelian syllogism. Further on in his book he fully upheld the traditional Ash'arī position that God's omnipotence attaches directly to everything

3 This is duly noted by Michael Marmura in the Introduction to his translation of the *Tahāfut* (Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. by Michael Marmura, Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1997), pp. xxiii–xxvi.

possible and that He is the sole agent who creates everything and every event in the world, without admitting any secondary causality. He also reaffirmed the early Ash'arī doctrine that man is constituted by his material body and that life is merely an accident that inheres in the body. Implicitly rejecting Avicenna's emanationist thesis that restoration (*i'āda*) of anything lapsed or annihilated as absurd, he affirmed that reason allows for both the human body and the accident life to be restored after their annihilation by God, as He created them in the first instance. It was also possible, he noted, that the dead human body would remain in a decomposed state and that the accident life would be restored to it at the resurrection, or the like of it would be renewed in it. He, al-Ghazālī, had mentioned the possibility that a self-subsistent soul of man might survive the death of the body merely because some Muslim scholars considered restoration of accidents after annihilation to be impossible. This, he now insisted, was not the case, though proof of it fell beyond the scope of his present book.

Soon after the publication of his *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* and *al-Iqtisād fī l-i'tiqād*, al-Ghazālī gave up his prestigious teaching position at the Nizāmiyya Madrasa in Baghdad in the throes of the famous spiritual crisis of his life. On the surface, the crisis had a political dimension. Al-Ghazālī felt that the patronage of the Seljuq regime and the caliph to which he owed his teaching position was compromising the freedom of his religious conscience and thought.⁴ At a deeper level, however, the crisis signified a sharp anti-rationalist turn of his religious thought towards Sufi mysticism as well as Sunnī traditionalism. Al-Ghazālī, to be sure, never had been a genuine rationalist despite his early enthusiasm for Aristotelian logic. The Ash'arī school of *kalām* theology, in which he grew up, had emerged as a vigorous reaction against the rationalist *kalām* of the Mu'tazila. From a Ḥanbalī traditionalist point of view, all *kalām* could be judged and condemned as rationalist, but this holds true only at a secondary level. Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī had in fact proposed to defend Ibn Ḥanbal's traditionalist theology by rational argument against Mu'tazilī rationalist criticism. At the primary level Ash'arī theology ever was predominantly anti-rationalist.

Although al-Ghazālī never expressly depreciated Aristotelian logic, he rarely appealed to it in his later life; more and more he questioned the competence of human reason in the acquisition of supreme knowledge. His critical examination of the theological doctrine of Avicenna and his followers must have convinced him that the use of logic was of little epistemological benefit in metaphysics. The philosophers' claims of apodeictic proof for their incoherent emanationist scheme had proved to be sham, and al-Ghazālī felt confirmed in

4 See Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, pp. 36–44.

his early belief that the ultimate truths could not be discovered by any effort of rational enquiry. True knowledge could only be attained as a gift from God by revelation. This did not mean for him, however, that only prophets could directly obtain it. He was well aware from his youth that Sufi saints also professed a claim of privileged knowledge of the divine, not by rational thought, but by mystical 'taste' or intuition. As the age of prophethood had definitely ended with the Prophet Muhammad, religious knowledge could still be gained or refreshed by Sufi mystical intuition.

As al-Ghazālī emerged from his spiritual crisis, he felt called upon to revitalize the Muslim religion comprehensively and composed his monumental *Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Ihyā' 'ulūm ad-dīn*) which has secured him wide recognition as the greatest reformist religious scholar of Islam. The book deals primarily with religious practice, ethical conduct with a view to eternal reward in the hereafter, from a distinctly Sufi perspective. Rational theology, with which al-Ghazālī was concerned in the *Tahāfut* and the *Iqtīṣād*, are hardly touched. It may be noted, however, that al-Ghazālī now fully accepted, against his denial in the *Iqtīṣād*, the existence of a self-subsistent spiritual soul that would survive the death of the human body. He based his view not on rational considerations, but on the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet: "*Man māta fa-qad qāmat qiyāmatuh* (whoever dies, his resurrection is taking place [at that time])." In the *Book of Steadfastness* (*Kitāb aṣ-Ṣabr*) of the *Ihyā'* he explained that this statement of the Prophet referred to the minor personal resurrection that is experienced by every human being individually immediately after death and in which all the horrors and conditions of the future universal Resurrection are anticipated.⁵

Sufi mysticism, insofar as it claims a privileged supernatural vision of God and the universe, is, to be sure, not necessarily anti-rational. It may view human reason, though inadequate to reach and penetrate the mysteries of that vision, still absolutely reliable as far as it reaches. The sense of superiority of the mystic visionary, however, easily turns into depreciation of rational thought and the conviction that the human intellect is merely a slave of human emotions and passions. Al-Ghazālī's avowed Sufi thought in the *Ihyā'* is not explicitly anti-rational and quite consistent with a respect for rational argument. It is in works al-Ghazālī composed after the *Ihyā'* during the last teaching phase of his life that his anti-rationalism becomes fully apparent.

In his late book on methodology of Islamic religious law, the *Kitāb al-Mustaṣfā min 'ilm al-uṣūl*, al-Ghazālī first presents a brief lesson on logic for

5 See W. Madelung, "Al-Ghazālī on Resurrection and the Road to Paradise," forthcoming, in S. Günther and T. Lawson (eds.), *Roads to Paradise*, Brill.

the benefit of Muslim jurists. He then argues against the rationalist doctrine of the Mu'tazila that good and evil are essentially discernible by the human mind. Al-Ghazālī insists that good and evil are known only by the command and prohibition of God transmitted by the prophets. The human intellect by itself neither orders nor prohibits anything. Al-Ghazālī's anti-Mu'tazilī argumentation here is initially based on Avicennian doctrine. Avicenna taught that thanking the benefactor or helping someone in need is not truly good since it is inevitably done for a selfish purpose. Only what is done without any purpose (*gharaḍ*) can be purely good. God is *summum bonum* because He emanates existence without the purpose to do good to any of His creatures.

At this point Avicenna and al-Ghazālī parted company. Avicenna asserted that good and evil are known to the elite of philosophers by reason. The Mu'tazila were mistaken because with their inferior intellects they adhered to mere *mashhūrāt*, widely held unproven beliefs, in asserting that to help the weak and needy is rationally good. In Avicenna's view, the universe and all that is in it was, as a necessary emanation from God, essentially good. The little amount of evil that occurs in the lower world necessarily and unintentionally results from secondary causation and cannot be prevented by God. The reality of this incapacity of God to prevent evil must be concealed from the common people lest they doubt His omnipotence.⁶ Avicenna did not hold that God commands and forbids, rewards obedience and punishes transgression. Mankind, when properly understanding good and evil, can make their own laws in their best interest.

From his Ash'arī perspective, al-Ghazālī could not conceive that the evil in this world might occur by necessity without being willed as such by God. It was firm Ash'arī dogma that everything and every event in the universe, good or evil, happens according to the eternal and unchangeable divine will. The philosophers' rational argument that all existence emanating from the Supreme Good must also essentially be good was to him equally specious as the assertion of the Mu'tazila that God creates only what is good while evil is produced by mankind. Human acts, al-Ghazālī maintained, are good or bad not intrinsically, but only by arbitrary designation by God, and their quality can thus only be known by His command and prohibition. Good are all actions for which God has promised eternal reward in the hereafter and evil are all actions for which He has threatened punishment. Al-Ghazālī consequently impugns the

6 See al-Ghazālī, *Maqāṣid al-falāsifa*, ed. Sulaymān Dunyā, Cairo, 1961, pp. 296–300.

competence of the human mind in judging good and evil with the common anti-rationalist argument that the intellect is ruled by selfish subjectivity.⁷

Kitāb al-Mustaṣfā was composed and published by al-Ghazālī as part of his late public teaching effort, addressed to a wide readership of Muslim religious scholars. Much of his late private teaching, however, was devoted and restricted to a select group of his close and trusted disciples. For them he wrote a number of esoteric works collectively designated as *maḍnūn bihī min ghayri ahlih*, "to be withheld from those not worthy of it." These works were not meant to be published and mostly never became widely known. A major treatise of them has only recently been critically edited and designated as the *Major Maḍnūn*⁸ and is to be published soon.

At the beginning of the *Major Maḍnūn* al-Ghazālī promises to set forth "the science of the recognition of God and the science of the Return" (*ʿilm maʿrifat Allāh wa-ʿilm al-maʿād*). By this, he explains, he neither means the creed which the commoners learn by tradition and imitation, nor the methods of the *kalām* theologians who defend this creed by dialectics and disputation. Rather he means "a kind of certain knowledge that is the fruit of a light God casts into a worshipper's heart which has been purified by exertion from abominations and reprehensible morals" (*nawʿ yaqīn huwa thamarat nūr yaqdhifuhu Allāhu fī qalb ʿabd ṭuḥḥir bi-l-mujāhada ʿan al-khabāʾith wa-l-akhlāq al-madhmūma*). Al-Ghazālī here is describing his book as representing Sufi inspiration rather than rational philosophical thought.

The fruit of Sufi inspiration turns out to be pure Avicennian theology as described by al-Ghazālī in his *Maqāṣid al-falāsifa*. Although he never mentions Avicenna nor refers to his earlier book, the *Major Maḍnūn* is largely excerpted, often literally, from the sections on theology and physics of the *Maqāṣid*. In it, al-Ghazālī unreservedly upholds the truth of what he had condemned in his *Tahāfut* as unbelief requiring the death penalty: the eternity of the world as the necessary emanation from the Necessary Existent and the negation of God's knowledge of particulars except through universals. He describes the hereafter entirely in terms of the survival of the human soul without mention of a physical resurrection. He accepts Avicenna's cosmology with all its superior separate Intellects and Souls, the eternal circular motion of the spheres,

7 For an English translation of the relevant section of al-Ghazālī's *Kitāb al-Mustaṣfā min ʿilm al-uṣūl* see A. Kevin Reinhart, *Before Revelation: The Boundaries of Muslim Moral Thought*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.

8 M. Afifi al-Akiti, *The Maḍnūn of al-Ghazālī: A Critical Edition of the Unpublished Major Maḍnūn with Discussion of his Restricted, Philosophical Corpus*, D. Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 2007.

and a sublunar sphere of temporary existence and corruption which he had denounced as unproven despite the philosophers' claims of apodeictic proof. He adduces with evident approval the Avicennian proofs for the existence of a self-subsistent immaterial soul he had refuted in the *Tahāfut*. Against his position in *Kitāb al-Mustaṣfā*, he asserts mankind's need for prophets on the grounds of their function as keepers and enforcers of order and justice in this world, not as conveyors of God's promise of reward and warning of punishment in the hereafter.

How is this apparent volte-face in al-Ghazālī's attitude to Avicennian thought to be explained in the context of his spiritual development? Al-Ghazālī evidently saw Avicenna, without naming him, no longer as a rationalist philosopher, but rather as an inspired Sufi visionary. When describing the 'subtle and obscure' way of explaining divine omniscience according to Avicennian theory in spite of the fact that God can know particulars only in a universal way, al-Ghazālī remarks that no philosopher could attain such subtlety (*wa-l-falsafī lā yatanabbah li-hādhihi d-daḡīqa*). In his autobiographical *Deliverer from Error* (*al-Munqidh min aḍ-ḍalāl*), al-Ghazālī had already expressed his conviction that whatever is sound in philosophy and philosophical ethics must ultimately be derived from prophetic revelation or the inspiration of saintly ascetics.

On the other hand, al-Ghazālī's formulation that what he would present was 'a kind of certain knowledge' is significant. He did not mean to deny that the traditional creed of the ordinary Muslim or the dialectical apologetics of the *kalām* theologian could not equally provide a kind of certain knowledge. He had come to distinguish between objective truth and subjective certainty. Objective truth evidently was for him the Qur'ān, the very speech of God. The speech of God, however, could be understood differently by humans, and al-Ghazālī by now was convinced that human reason was incapable of deciding the right interpretation with certainty. He knew by his own long teaching experience how easy it was to argue reasonably now for one truth and tomorrow for another. Certainty might be cast by God into the believer's heart, but that was subjective certainty that might mislead others to doubt the objective truth of God's speech. This was the reason why Sufi wisdom, even though inspired by God, must be withheld from those who are not worthy of it.

While al-Ghazālī thus did not accept Avicenna's philosophical system as unquestionable reality, he was now satisfied that it could be interpreted so as to be consistent with the Qur'ān and Islam, as the followers of Avicenna were contending. In another unpublished text of the *Maḍnūn* corpus, the *Masā'il al-Maḍnūn*, he explained to his intimate disciples how the Qur'ānic Resurrection and some of the events and circumstances associated with it in

the Muslim creed could be reconciled with the philosophers' view of the eternity of the world.⁹ His proposal there of an endless return of similar cycles of existence with the possibility of a sudden revolutionary dissimilar cycle constituting a resurrection manifests an affinity to some Ismā'īlī speculations about cyclical recurrent *qiyāmas* in an ever ascending salvation history, an affinity he may well have found disturbing. Al-Ghazālī leaves no doubt that he considered the interpretation of the Qur'ānic Resurrection by the *kalām* theologians envisaging a sudden cataclysmic end of this world as equally reasonable.

Al-Ghazālī was now deeply convinced of the impotence of the human intellect. He no longer could rationally prove the incoherence of philosophy as he had asserted in the *Tahāfut*, but he still could denounce the philosophers' arrogant claim that they knew the truth by their own rational thought better than the Muslim scholars and laymen who adhered to their traditional creed derived from the Qur'ān. He could now even envisage the possibility that the world might be eternal and that God knows particulars only in a universal way, but he was probably far from convinced of it. He was, however, certainly convinced now of the reality of a self-subsistent immaterial soul as described by Avicenna. He was well aware that by his age most Jewish and Christian theologians as well as Muslim Sufis upheld the thesis of a spiritual soul that could survive the destruction of the body. Here the traditional Ash'arī creed he had defended in *al-Iqtisād* was clearly mistaken.

In al-Ghazālī's last work, *Iljām al-'awāmm 'an 'ilm al-kalām* (*Restraining the Common People from the Science of Speculative Theology*), completed only days before his death, his progressive anti-rationalism and traditionalism become fully apparent. The book was, al-Ghazālī explains, written in answer to a question, presumably from one of his students, about *ḥadīth* reports suggestive of anthropomorphism and about the theological subjects that ought not be investigated rationally. Such anthropomorphist *ḥadīth* reports were frequently related among the rabble and ignorant Ḥashwiyya and ascribed to the *salaf*, the pious ancestors. Al-Ghazālī answers emphatically that the teaching of the *salaf* is indeed the truth and that the *ḥadīth* transmitted from them must be accepted, believed and exalted unconditionally. Apparently anthropomorphist *ḥadīth*, like the report that God descends to the lowest heavens every night, must not be rejected or explained away, since they are susceptible to various interpretations, and their real meaning cannot be known in this world. It is unshakable belief, faith in the truth of the Qur'ān, rather than knowledge that is required of the ignorant masses on earth. The common people must be

9 See Madelung, "Al-Ghazālī on Resurrection and the Road to Paradise."

restrained from thinking and from examining the sense of the holy texts and must accept them as an impenetrable mystery without further investigation.

What should he do, al-Ghazālī remarks, if someone were to ask him about the case of a common Muslim who was dissatisfied with mere religious beliefs without a rational proof (*dalīl*)? Would al-Ghazālī permit the inquirer to present the proof to the commoner? If al-Ghazālī permitted that, he would in fact allow rational thought and investigation. Al-Ghazālī answers that he would permit the commoner to hear the proof for the recognition of the Creator and His unity, the truthfulness of the Messenger and the certainty of the Last Day, on two conditions: the proof must not go beyond the proofs to be found in the Qurʾān, and the questioner must not question the belief seriously; rather, he must think about it only slightly without any penetrating investigation (*īghāl fī l-baḥṭh*).¹⁰ Al-Ghazālī here espouses the elitism of the philosophers with an anti-rationalist edge. Further on, he acknowledges that his interlocutor might contend that even firm conviction falls short of the real knowledge which God has imposed on man, since such conviction is mere belief which may be a kind of ignorance incapable of distinguishing between falsehood and truth. Al-Ghazālī counters that this view is erroneous. Rather the happiness (*saʿāda*) of mankind consists in firm belief that something really is as it is believed to be, so that the image that is imprinted in their hearts is in agreement with the real truth, and that when they die and the veil is lifted from them, they will witness that things are really as they imagined.¹¹ In contrast, the religious elite could receive true knowledge through Sufi inspiration already in this life and were allowed to meditate and think about it in their hearts. Yet the elite must not reveal this knowledge to the ignorant common people and must restrain them from seeking it through *kalām*, rational theological thought.

Strict traditionalist Muslims have ever treasured al-Ghazālī's last work and at times have understood it as an invitation to burn his books on theology and philosophy. A case can be made for such an interpretation, for while al-Ghazālī clearly did not suggest to restrain the elite from meditating about religious questions, he wanted them to do so in their hearts only lest their thought might disturb the firm belief of the simple-minded. Books cannot easily be stopped from falling into the hands of those not qualified to understand them properly. Most likely, however, al-Ghazālī merely wished that these books would in future be classed together with his *Maḍnūn* works as 'to be withheld from the

10 Al-Ghazālī, *Iljām al-ʿawāmm ʿan ʿilm al-kalām*, ed. Muḥammad al-Muʿtaṣim bi-llāh al-Baghdādī, Beirut, 1406/1985, p. 78.

11 Al-Ghazālī, *Iljām*, p. 116.

unqualified.' Whether he would have wished modern rationalist students of Islamic thought to investigate them is debatable.

Throughout the bulk of his voluminous writings, al-Ghazālī comes across as a highly perceptive, intelligent and resourceful thinker with a broad range of interests and extraordinary power of absorption, critical analysis, as well as constructive imagination. He is justly admired as one of mankind's great teachers of religion and mystical thought far beyond the confines of his Ash'arī Sunnī background and of Islam. Some of his admirers find it difficult to accept his own confession in his autobiography that he turned away from both philosophy and *kalām* theology at face value. How could the author of *Maqāsid al-falāsifa*, the most widely read introductory volume to Avicennian philosophy, be denied the title of a philosopher? How can the author of *Tahāfut*, the most widely recognized refutation of Avicenna's system of thought from an at least partly Ash'arī point of view, be denied the title of both an outstanding theologian and a philosopher? These are obviously valid questions to ask; yet should not al-Ghazālī's own view and wishes be respected? Al-Ghazālī certainly did not wish to be considered a philosopher; his distaste for the perceived rationalist arrogance of the philosophers was clear and pervasive. When he presented Avicennian thought as the fruit of mystical inspiration in his *Major Maḍnūn*, he implicitly turned the philosopher into a Sufi saint. This was not entirely unreasonable, for Avicenna's thought contained a good deal of mystical elements which were criticized by more rationalist thinkers like the philosopher Ibn Rushd and the Mu'tazilī theologian Ibn al-Malāḥimī.¹²

Al-Ghazālī's aversion to *kalām* theology is more complex to explain. His religious creed always remained essentially Ash'arī, yet he progressively distanced himself from Ash'arī speculative theology, and in his *Ijām* advocated to curb its public teaching. It seems that in his later life he no longer understood the crucial difference between religions, which humans may choose, trust, and exchange by a 'leap of faith', and theology, a science like other sciences they can and must learn to acquire certain necessary knowledge. The reality of God was in al-Ghazālī's age a matter of knowledge, not merely of faith and belief, for theologians and philosophers alike. They all called God the Necessary Being, *Wājib al-wujūd*, a designation Avicenna popularized but that was used well before him by the rationalist *kalām* theologians. The concept goes much further back among the philosophers, for Aristotle's necessary

12 See Rukn ad-Dīn b. al-Malāḥimī al-Khwārazmī, *Tuhfat al-mutakallimīn fī r-radd 'alā l-falāsifa*, ed. Hassan Ansari and Wilferd Madelung, Tehran, 2008. Ibn al-Malāḥimī's rationalist refutation of Avicennian philosophy is far more comprehensive and incisive than al-Ghazālī's.

Unmoved Mover expressed the same idea. Al-Ghazālī himself had adopted the term and concept in his *Tahāfut*. He recognized then that God, unlike much of religion, is a rational necessity. To deny that the One necessarily precedes the many is to deny reason itself. Yet in *Iljām* he suggests that knowledge of the Creator is primarily a question of faith in the truth of the Qur'ān. Any proof of God's reality should not go beyond the word of the Qur'ān. Muslim rational theologians and philosophers had long realized that immature minors and the ignorant must first be taught to think rationally before they can appreciate any truth of the Qur'ān. The popularity of Ghazālī's religious thought, despite the apparent decline of his power of discrimination in his old age, has evidently contributed to the decline of rationalist theology in later Islam.

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