Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought
Al-Ghazālī’s theory of mystical cognition and its Avicennian foundation

Alexander Treiger
It has been customary to see the Muslim theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) as a vehement critic of philosophy, who rejected it in favor of Islamic mysticism (Sufism), a view which has come under increased scrutiny in recent years.

This book argues that al-Ghazālī was, instead, one of the greatest popularizers of philosophy in medieval Islam. The author supplies new evidence showing that al-Ghazālī was indebted to philosophy in his theory of mystical cognition and his eschatology, and that, moreover, in these two areas he accepted even those philosophical teachings which he ostensibly criticized. Through careful translation into English and detailed discussion of more than 80 key passages (with many more surveyed throughout the book), the author shows how al-Ghazālī’s understanding of “mystical cognition” is patterned after the philosophy of Avicenna (d. 1037). Arguing that despite overt criticism, al-Ghazālī never rejected Avicennian philosophy and that his mysticism itself is grounded in Avicenna’s teachings, the book offers a clear and systematic presentation of al-Ghazālī’s “philosophical mysticism.”

Challenging popular assumptions about one of the greatest Muslim theologians of all time, this is an important reference for scholars and laymen interested in Islamic theology and in the relations between philosophy and mysticism.

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Introduction

A new paradigm in Ghazālian studies

One of the greatest Muslim theologians of all time, the “Proof of Islam”1 Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī al-Ṭūsī was born in Ṭūs (near Mashhad in northeastern Iran) ca. 447/1055–6.2 He studied in Nīshāpūr with the celebrated Ashʿarite theologian Abū I-Maʿālī al-Juwaynī (Imām al-ḥaramayn, d. 478/1085–6) and with the Ṣūfī master Abū ʿAlī Fārmadhī (d. 477/1084–5).3 In 484/1091, he moved to Baghdad, where he was appointed professor at the Nizāmīya college, at the invitation of his powerful patron, the Seljūq vizier Nizām al-Mulk. In 488/1095, as a result of a spiritual crisis, described in his celebrated treatise The Deliverer from Error (al-Munqidh min al-dalāl), al-Ghazālī abruptly resigned his post, left Baghdad, and traveled to Damascus, Jerusalem, Hebron, and the Holy Places in Mecca and Medina. Having performed the ḥajj in 489/1096, he returned to his native town, Ṭūs. There he engaged in writing books and private instruction to a circle of like-minded disciples. In 499/1106, he accepted another teaching position at the Nizāmīya in Nīshāpūr. His second period of public teaching was fraught with controversy (discussed below). Shortly before his death al-Ghazālī resigned from teaching and returned to his home in Ṭūs. He died on Jumādā II 14 505/December 18 1111, leaving behind a rich legacy of works in Arabic and Persian covering a broad variety of subjects – from theology to Qur’ānic exegesis, from jurisprudence to philosophy, and from polemical refutations to encyclopedic works on outer and inner aspects of religious life.

Until some twenty years ago, the standard scholarly presentation of al-Ghazālī’s life and teachings was based primarily on the Deliverer. This presentation ran as follows. In his relentless search for Truth, al-Ghazālī scrutinized the four major religious methodologies of his time.4 Having considered rationalist theology (kalām), Graeco–Arabic philosophy (falsafa), and Ismāʿīli Shiʿism (taʿlīmiya: the path of authoritative teaching by the infallible Imam) and found them all unsatisfactory, al-Ghazālī eventually settled on the path of mystical praxis, or Ṣūfism (taṣawwuf). Al-Ghazālī’s rejection of kalām, philosophy, and Ismāʿīliya was due to the following reasons. Kalām, in his view, did not provide a valid path to the Truth and was capable only of defending religion against erroneous teachings. Philosophy was itself an erroneous teaching: three philosophical doctrines constituted unbelief (kufr), and seventeen others had no grounding in the Muslim tradition and were heterodox innovations (bidʿa).
The three particularly troublesome theses, on account of which al-Ghazālī proclaimed the philosophers to be infidels liable to capital punishment, were the philosophers’ denial of the creation of the world in time, of God’s knowledge of the particulars, and of bodily resurrection in the afterlife. Against the Ismā‘īlīya, which posed a major religious and political threat at the time, al-Ghazālī argued that the Prophet Muhammad was the infallible leader of the Muslim community. There was, accordingly, no need for another infallible Imam.

Al-Ghazālī’s celebrated refutation of the philosophers, The Precipitance of the Philosophers (Tahāfut al-falāsifā), fits neatly into the picture. In this work, al-Ghazālī scrutinizes the aforementioned twenty philosophical doctrines in detail. The Deliverer, in fact, explicitly refers to the Precipitance and reiterates this work’s critical assessment of the twenty doctrines. In the Deliverer, al-Ghazālī emphasizes that he studied philosophy “from books, merely from reading, without the help of a teacher” (min al-kutub bi-mujarrad al-mutāla‘a min ghayr isti‘āna bi-istādhdh), and with the purpose of refuting it later on. He claims that he accomplished this formidable task in “less than two years” (with an additional year devoted to further reflection), while he was in charge of teaching three hundred students in Baghdad.

This is echoed by al-Ghazālī’s Intentions of the Philosophers (Maqāsid al-falāsifā), an Arabic adaptation of Avicenna’s (d. 428/1037) Persian philosophical summa Book of Knowledge for ‘Alā’ al-Dawla (Dāneshnāme-ye ‘Alā’ī). In the introduction to the Intentions, al-Ghazālī states that “grasping the falsehood of methodologies is impossible without fully comprehending their principles; [doing otherwise] is a throw in the dark and an error.” Accordingly, he presents the Intentions as a necessary preamble to the Precipitance: “Therefore I have decided to add a brief statement containing a report (ḥikāya) of the [philosophers’] intentions (maqāṣidihim) in logical, physical, and metaphysical sciences, as an introduction to the elucidation of their precipitance (tahāfutihim).” This implies that the Intentions was written shortly before the Precipitance, i.e. in the two or three years when al-Ghazālī was studying philosophy in Baghdad, and as part of this study.

This stereotypical image of al-Ghazālī renouncing philosophy and endorsing Sūfism has served as a basis for most scholarly discussions of his contribution to Islamic thought. It became the standard presentation of al-Ghazālī’s life and intellectual trajectory, popularized, especially, by William Montgomery Watt. This image led readers to expect that al-Ghazālī’s “post-conversion” writings (Revival, Alchemy, Loftiest Goal, Niche, and others) would be “mystical” in spirit and devoid of philosophical influence.

This understanding is now crumbling, owing largely to Richard M. Frank’s groundbreaking studies of al-Ghazālī’s theology and cosmology. In a series of articles and two monographs devoted to the subject, Frank has convincingly shown that al-Ghazālī’s debt to the philosopher Avicenna in all his writings, including those written after the conversion, is more significant than previously realized. Although criticized by several scholars (Michael Marmura, Ahmad Dallal, and Toby Mayer, among others) for overstating the case for al-Ghazālī’s
Avicennianism, Frank’s contributions nevertheless demonstrate that Avicenna’s influence on al-Ghazālī’s works is pervasive and that al-Ghazālī’s thought cannot be understood without reference to Avicenna. Thus, while he was undoubtedly critical of some philosophical ideas, it is simply not true that al-Ghazālī renounced philosophy at any point in his life. His works, both before and after his conversion, are imbued with philosophical teachings, including, oddly enough, many ideas criticized and ostensibly refuted in the Precipitance.13

In addition, scholars have identified considerable problems with al-Ghazālī’s presentation of his engagement with philosophy.

1 First, al-Ghazālī’s refutation of the philosophers in the Precipitance is not based on the Intentions, nor does it even mention the Intentions. Furthermore, as shown by Jules Janssens, it uses totally different Avicennian sources than the latter work.14 This would be hard to explain if the Intentions was written, as al-Ghazālī claims it was, as an introduction to the Precipitance and only two or three years prior to it.

2 Second, it seems hardly credible that al-Ghazālī could have mastered all of philosophy in only two or three years and that he did so without formal instruction, at a time when he was overloaded with “writing and teaching on religious sciences” to three hundred students. The sophistication of the Precipitance testifies rather to a lifelong engagement with the philosophical tradition that must have begun long before the composition of this work.

3 Third, the Deliverer is an apologetic work.15 It is to be read against the backdrop of a fierce controversy about al-Ghazālī’s ideas that broke out upon al-Ghazālī’s return to teaching in Nishāpūr.16 What came under fire was precisely some of al-Ghazālī’s unorthodox and philosophically inspired ideas.17 It was only natural that al-Ghazālī tried to defend himself, both in the Deliverer and in the introduction to the Intentions, by claiming that his engagement with philosophy had been brief, was not based on formal instruction, and had only been undertaken to refute philosophy later on. These apologetic remarks must therefore be taken with a grain of salt.

Given these problems, there can hardly be any doubt that al-Ghazālī had studied Avicennian philosophy already as a young man, possibly under al-Juwaynī’s guidance. This is, of course, only to be expected. Due to the tremendous impact of Avicenna on all areas of Islamic thought from the mid-eleventh century on, philosophy had become the scientific language of al-Ghazālī’s time and it would have been impossible for a young scholar of his caliber and intellectual disposition to neglect it in his education.18 In fact, it has been proposed, in my view quite convincingly, that al-Ghazālī wrote the Intentions in his youth, as a philosophical “dissertation” or ta’līqa.19 If this is the case, the Intentions did not originally include its current introduction, for at the time of its composition no refutation of philosophy had yet been envisioned. Later on, probably as a response to the Nishāpūr controversy and certainly after the Precipitance had been completed, al-Ghazālī decided to “repackage” the Intentions. He added the introduction,
camouflaging the true nature of the work and presenting it as a preparatory study expounding the philosophical ideas refuted in the Precipitance.20

There is another problematic aspect of al-Ghazālī’s self-presentation that needs to be corrected. In the Deliverer, al-Ghazālī presents himself as merely a critic who examined already existing claims for Truth among the four methodologies (“the Truth cannot escape these four kinds [of seekers],” he writes)21 and settled on the one that seemed to him the most compelling. This presentation deliberately downplays al-Ghazālī’s own radical theological project, which cannot be pigeonholed into any single one of the four methodologies, not even into Şūfism that al-Ghazālī professes to have endorsed.

Al-Ghazālī saw himself as a religious reformer, indeed as a divinely appointed “reviver” of Islam at the beginning of the sixth Islamic century (501/1107–8).22 In his theological manifesto the Revival of the Religious Sciences (Iḥyāʾ ‘ulūm al-dīn),23 he develops a new spiritual discipline: the science of the afterlife (‘ilm al-ākhira). Al-Ghazālī boldly claims that this science, completely unknown to his contemporaries, was not new at all, but had been the core of the religious knowledge of the “Righteous Forebears” (al-salaf al-ṣālih), i.e. the first generations of Muslims after the Prophet Muhammad. He argues that it had become forgotten in his age, due to the disproportionate and stifling influence of kalām (dogmatic theology) and fiqh (jurisprudence) on Islamic thought, and was therefore in need of revival.

The science of the afterlife has two branches: the science of practice (‘ilm al-muʿāmalat) and the science of unveiling (‘ilm al-mukāshafat), to be discussed extensively in Chapter 2. It is especially the latter that owes much to Avicennian philosophy and is certainly not identical with Şūfism.24 Though the Revival has all too often been read as an attempt to “graft [Şūfism] to Islam and [to] establish … its orthodoxy,”25 it is now becoming clear that it is Avicennian philosophy rather than Şūfism that al-Ghazālī was grafting onto Islamic thought. Şūfism, by that time, had already firmly become its integral part.26

These findings and considerations have produced a powerful and still ongoing “paradigm shift” in Ghazālian studies. A new scholarly consensus is gradually emerging. Instead of a relentless critic of philosophy who turned to Şūfism as the only valid path to the Truth, al-Ghazālī now appears as a radical religious reformer whose complex theological vision embraced and integrated both Şūfism and Avicennian philosophy. The question of al-Ghazālī’s intellectual leanings, his attitude to philosophy, his methodology, and his theological agenda has therefore to be opened anew.

**Methodological principles of the present study**

Al-Ghazālī is a versatile and prolific thinker, who wrote in different genres and for diverse audiences. His elusive style of writing, “fluctuating” and seemingly imprecise terminology, and tantalizing allusions to undisclosed “mysteries” make an accurate interpretation of his thought extremely complicated. The difficulty is further aggravated by the fact that al-Ghazālī seems to contradict himself in his writings. Did he have a consistent position on major theological issues and if so,
how is it to be determined from seemingly contradictory evidence, or was he – as famously claimed by his critic Averroes – “an Ash’arite with the Ash’arites, a Ṣūfī with the Ṣūfis, and a philosopher with the philosophers”? There is still no scholarly consensus on this important issue.

Facing this complex challenge, every interpreter of al-Ghazālī’s œuvre is inevitably led to developing hermeneutical criteria that guide him or her in the task of interpretation. It is therefore appropriate to lay out the methodological assumptions that have guided me in interpreting al-Ghazālī’s works. The following principles are, I believe, the most important ones. They have been carefully followed throughout this study.

1 Al-Ghazālī is a Theologian (in the generic sense of the term “theology,” not identical with kalām).

In Islamic studies, the term “theology” is often used synonymously with kalām. In my opinion, this is misleading, for kalām is essentially a methodology, while theology in the proper sense – the discourse about God – is a field of inquiry. Thus, while kalām may deal with theology as one of its subjects, it also deals with other subjects, e.g. physics. Conversely, there are types of Islamic theology distinct from and independent of kalām. Philosophical theology, Ṣūfī theology, and Ismā’īlī theology are obvious examples, but there is also a somewhat nebulous group of thinkers that, regrettably, has no name in Islamic studies and, partly for this reason, is not treated comprehensively as a distinct and influential trend of early Islamic theology. It includes several Neoplatonizing philosophers, who belong to the so-called Kindian tradition (al-Kindī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, Isaac Israeli, al-Āmirī, Ibn Miskawayh, al-Isfizarī, and al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī); several Ismā’īlī thinkers (Abū Ya’qūb al-Sijistānī, Ḥamūd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, al-Mu’ayyad fī al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī, and Nāṣer-e Khosrow); the anonymous authors of such works as the pseudo-Aristotelian Sirr al-asrār and Sirr al-khalīqa; and the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-safā’). The influence of these thinkers on al-Ghazālī (and through him on the later Islamic tradition) is a promising avenue of inquiry.

The common misidentification of theology with kalām deprives the scholars of al-Ghazālī of the crucial and much-needed term “theologian.” We are left with the choice of treating al-Ghazālī either as a mutakallim, or as a thinker indebted to (though critical of) philosophy, or else as a Ṣūfī, and forfeit an important term needed to describe his thought. In my view, al-Ghazālī is first and foremost a theologian in the sense defined above: a thinker who engages in discourse about God. His theological vision, aptly called “higher theology” by Richard M. Frank to distinguish it from kalām, is expressed in his science of unveiling (ʿilm al-mukāshafa). Al-Ghazālī’s theology transcends the divisions between the different methodologies outlined above, drawing freely on them all.

2 Avicenna’s philosophy is a key for understanding al-Ghazālī.

I argue that Avicenna’s philosophy provides the “intertext” against which al-Ghazālī’s works are to be read. This method of reading yields a
more nuanced and accurate interpretation of al-Ghazālī’s doctrines than hitherto available.

His debt to Avicenna is camouflaged by the fact that al-Ghazālī often devises his own terminology for philosophical terms, calling, for instance, the rational soul “heart,” the material intellect, “an intrinsic feature,” ethics, “the science of practice,” and theology, “the science of unveiling.” Knowing full well that any attempt to reform Islam using philosophical ideas as a basis would inevitably meet with opposition – as in fact it did when the *Revival* was published – al-Ghazālī never explicitly acknowledged his debt to the philosophical tradition, consciously devising his own terminology for originally philosophical concepts and disguising their philosophical origin, a process amply documented in this book. Wishing to “graft” (aspects of) Avicennianism onto Islamic thought, he naturally took precautions that it would not be rejected right away as an alien body.

In other cases, al-Ghazālī does employ key Avicennian expressions, but his somewhat mystifying use of them has prevented earlier scholars from recognizing their Avicennian pedigree. This is the case, for instance, with perhaps the most characteristically Ghazālian term of all: the famous “tasting” (*dhawq*), i.e. direct experience of spiritual realities. In Chapter 3 below, I show, for the first time, that the term “tasting” originates in Avicenna’s *Pointers and Reminders* (*al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt*). I then document how it is used by al-Ghazālī in his accounts of Avicenna’s philosophy in both the *Intentions* and the *Precipitance* and how it is gradually transformed in his later works to become a cornerstone in his own theological edifice.

Contrary to popular belief, I argue that al-Ghazālī’s disagreements with Avicenna – at least in the areas under discussion in this book – were minimal, and that his polemic against the philosophers is not to be always taken on face value. I demonstrate, first, that in the *Precipitance*, al-Ghazālī often critiques those same Avicennian doctrines that he openly advocates elsewhere. This implies that al-Ghazālī’s refutation of the philosophers was not in fact meant to negate the philosophers’ conclusions, but only to undermine their reasoning (and the public confidence in the philosophers’ intellectual achievements), leaving the door open for al-Ghazālī to endorse these same conclusions in his later works. In this way, under the guise of criticism, al-Ghazālī effectively “despoils” the philosophers, invalidating their proofs, yet appropriating many of their doctrines, so as to put them, subsequently, to his own use.

One cannot study al-Ghazālī’s theology by examining only one, or only some, of his works in isolation; one has to consider synoptically his entire corpus. Al-Ghazālī often treats the same subject in different works, presenting it from different angles depending on the context and the audience. All the parallel discussions of any given subject in al-Ghazālī’s works must be examined synoptically and brought to bear on one another if his thought is to be accurately understood. It is through such constant cross-referencing that al-Ghazālī’s position on major issues – often concealed by his elusive style, fluctuating terminology, and limitations of esoteric discourse – comes
to light. Therefore, I made every attempt to take into account and to synoptically present all the major discussions of any given subject (both in Arabic and Persian), in order to obtain, through their juxtaposition and comparison, a nuanced picture of al-Ghazālī’s position.  

Unless there is clear evidence to the contrary, one ought to assume that al-Ghazālī is consistent in his thought even if he appears inconsistent in his terminology and manner of presentation.

This presumption of consistency of thought is, in my view, a methodologically sounder approach to al-Ghazālī’s œuvre than the frequently invoked – and frequently abused – “chronological” solution, which assumes that al-Ghazālī changed his mind over time. Since chronological solution owes its existence to a naïve reading of the Deliverer, a reading that disregards the Deliverer’s apologetic dimension, I avoid it completely and make every effort to read al-Ghazālī as a consistent thinker. Thus I presume that on the level of conceptual analysis, his writings are internally consistent. This, however, is not necessarily evident on the surface, where various pedagogical considerations may interfere and influence his manner of writing, approach, and terminology, creating an appearance of inconsistency. What is consistent is, therefore, only the “deep structure” which can be unraveled from a careful comparison of different attestations of any given idea, but not necessarily the “surface structure,” which is audience- and context-dependent.

Al-Ghazālī’s way of writing is pedagogic rather than scientific. More needs to be said about al-Ghazālī’s pedagogical considerations. Al-Ghazālī is concerned with having his readers attain the cognition of God in this life and felicity (saʿāda) in the afterlife, or barring that, having them attain a lesser degree of paradisiacal bliss called “salvation” (najāt). This is the telos of his entire system. This is why his writings are not expository (the way philosophical and scientific treatises typically are) but pedagogic, in the literal, etymological sense of the term: leading his readers step by step, like children, to the fullness of the Islamic message, to the degree accessible to them.

Al-Ghazālī believes that there are different levels of preparation to accommodate this message. Broadly speaking, he divides his audience in two categories: the commoners (ʿawāmm) and the elect (khwāss). Sometimes, a third level, the elect among the elect (khwāss al-khwāss) is introduced. Contrary to what one might think, the commoners are not simply illiterate Muslims, for these would not have access to al-Ghazālī’s works altogether. Rather, these are religious scholars (ʿulamāʾ) who lack the special insight and the rigorous ethical and philosophical training, required by al-Ghazālī from the inner circle of like-minded disciples.

Al-Ghazālī is keenly aware that each of these categories requires a separate approach. Just as babies must not be given solid food but milk, so commoners must be given instruction on their level. A person who gives an infant “meat and bread” will kill him. In the same way commoners who ask about issues beyond their level should be “driven back, restrained, and struck with a whip.” It would be dangerous to disclose to the commoners some of
the higher truths intended for the elect, for they will misunderstand them and will go astray, losing faith altogether.\textsuperscript{42}

Al-Ghazālī’s “pedagogy of salvation” leads him to develop a theory of levels of instruction. The \textit{locus classicus} is found in the last chapter of the \textit{Scale of Action} (\textit{Mızān al-‘amal}), where al-Ghazālī distinguishes between three types of doctrinal allegiance (\textit{madhhab}): (1) doctrine adhered to dogmatically in disputations; (2) doctrine employed in teaching and hence “customized” according to the qualifications and the intellectual capacities of the students; and (3) doctrine held in secret between oneself and God (\textit{sīr-rūn baynahū wa-bayn Allāh}) and shared only with like-minded colleagues.\textsuperscript{43}

The fact that al-Ghazālī’s writings are always “tailored” to a specific audience and are esoterically “stratified” has radical hermeneutical implications. In reading al-Ghazālī, one has to be constantly aware of the possibility that he might not be disclosing his beliefs fully. His frequent esoteric remarks (e.g. “this subject is deeper than what this book can bear”) are important indicators that this is indeed the case.\textsuperscript{44} Moreover, we must take into account the possibility that on occasion, al-Ghazālī might deliberately make a false statement, to dissuade his readers from spiritual danger (just as a parent might tell the children, falsely, that there are crocodiles in the river to prevent them from approaching it). An interpreter of al-Ghazālī’s thought must be aware that this is a possible source of perceived inconsistencies in al-Ghazālī’s writings.\textsuperscript{45}

**Objectives and structure of the present study**

The present study is an exploration of al-Ghazālī’s theory of mystical cognition and of its Avicennian underpinnings. This study is also intended – and can be used – as an analytical glossary of the major technical terms of al-Ghazālī’s noetics. By no means comprehensive in its coverage of terms – many more need to be identified and analyzed – it nevertheless attempts to be as comprehensive and systematic as possible in the material adduced for the terms that do get treated. For each term, I have provided references to the major discussions of it in all of al-Ghazālī’s works, analyzing these occurrences synoptically in order to determine as accurately as possible the term’s precise meaning.\textsuperscript{46}

In addition to the Introduction and Conclusion, the book comprises five chapters and two appendices. Chapter 1 (“Heart, intelligence, knowledge”) presents three key terms of al-Ghazālī’s theory of mystical cognition: heart, intelligence, and knowledge. I show that “heart” – which al-Ghazālī defines as the non-bodily and immortal locus of human cognition – is identical to what the philosophers call the rational soul. Al-Ghazālī’s definition of “intelligence” is indebted to Avicenna’s understanding of the gradations of human intellect, from material intellect (the pure “predisposition” to receive intelligibles), to intellect \textit{in habitu}, to actual intellect, and finally to the prophetic, “sanctified” intellect. In its basic, “predispositional” form, intelligence refers to the special “intrinsic feature” in virtue of which the human heart is able to apprehend intelligibles. If the heart is analogous to a mirror – a comparison al-Ghazālī constantly employs in his works
– intelligence is analogous to the mirror’s polish. Finally, I examine al-Ghazālī’s understanding of knowledge as the heart’s “reflection” of intelligible forms and his distinction between knowledge and opinion. I also analyze the term “cognition” (ma‘rifah) and its relation to knowledge (‘ilm).

Chapter 2 (“The science of unveiling”) examines al-Ghazālī’s “higher theology,” developed in the Revival. I show that al-Ghazālī conceives of the science of unveiling (‘ilm al-mukāsha’fah) as an esoteric discipline, which must not be disclosed to the public. This esoteric science is concerned with five fields: God, cosmology, religious psychology (including the theory of prophecy), eschatology, and principles of Qur‘ān interpretation. Finally, I show that it is this science of unveiling that, in al-Ghazālī’s view, secures felicity (sa‘āda) in the afterlife. Those who have not acquired this science in this life will fall short of felicity and will only attain “salvation” (najāt), i.e. “safety” from hellfire, devoid of ultimate bliss. I demonstrate that both the notion of felicity and al-Ghazālī’s unconventional view that only knowledge secures felicity in the afterlife are derived from the philosophical tradition.

Chapter 3 (“Tasting and witnessing”) presents two Ghazālian terms that underlie his theory of mystical cognition: “tasting” (the famous dhawq) and “witnessing” (mushāhada). I show that despite their mystical overtones, both terms are derived from Avicenna’s noetics, yet are developed by al-Ghazālī in original ways. Following Avicenna, al-Ghazālī presents prophecy as simply the highest point of the normal functioning of the human intellect. Furthermore, he urges his readers to come as close as possible to achieving this highest point, arguing that though prophecy itself is no longer available to humans, mystical cognition, virtually identical to it, can still be “tasted” by all. Next, I examine al-Ghazālī’s views on the vision of God (ru’yat Allāh) in the afterlife. I show that al-Ghazālī is reluctant to accept the traditional Ash’arīte view that God will be seen in the afterlife with bodily eyes. This, I argue, is an important indicator that al-Ghazālī – like Avicenna – did not believe in bodily resurrection in the afterlife. I show also that al-Ghazālī’s theory of witnessing (mushāhada) is grounded in Avicenna’s theory of intellectual vision of intelligibles. Contrary to Avicenna, however, al-Ghazālī tacitly omits the crucial stipulation that witnessing should always have a syllogistic structure. This implies that in contradistinction to Avicenna, al-Ghazālī effectively presents witnessing as non-syllogistic. This, I argue, is precisely what separates Avicenna the philosopher and al-Ghazālī the mystic.

Chapter 4 (“Inspiration and revelation”) deals with inspiration (ilhām) and revelation (wahy) – the modes of cognition available to “saints” (awliyā’) and prophets. I examine two models that al-Ghazālī uses to explain how these types of cognition work. According to the first model, the heart and the celestial “Preserved Tablet” are two mirrors facing one another. When the veil separating them is removed, the heart reflects some of the content of the Preserved Tablet, including information about future events recorded therein. According to the second model, the heart is similar to a pond which can be filled with water either from outside or from “within.” It is this second type of cognition – cognition from within – that is called “knowledge from on high” (‘ilm laduni), a highly influential mystical concept developed and popularized by al-Ghazālī. Finally, I examine connections between al-Ghazālī’s theory of prophecy and Avicenna’s theory of “intuition”
Introduction

Building on the insights of other scholars, such as Herbert Davidson and Martin Whittingham, I also compare the two thinkers’ interpretations of the famous Verse of Light (Qur’an 24:35) and show in what ways al-Ghazālī was influenced by Avicenna’s interpretation of it.

Chapter 5 (“al-Ghazālī and the philosophical tradition”) revisits al-Ghazālī’s attitude to the philosophical tradition. I show, first, that in the Precipitance, al-Ghazālī criticizes some Avicennian theories that he openly endorses elsewhere. This leads, second, to a re-examination of the nature of the Precipitance as a polemical work. I argue that al-Ghazālī’s refutation is of a very peculiar kind: it attacks the philosophers’ reasoning, but does not invalidate their conclusions. I also show that al-Ghazālī employed a number of strategies to create the impression that his disagreement with the philosophers ran deeper than it actually did. I suggest, for instance, that al-Ghazālī might have accepted the philosophical idea that there will be no bodily resurrection in the afterlife and endorsed Avicenna’s influential notion of an “imaginal afterlife.” Finally, I examine al-Ghazālī’s response to the charge of philosophical influence, leveled at him during the so-called “Nishāpur controversy” (ca. 500/1106–7). His response is preserved in one of his Persian letters and in the Deliverer, both of which are analyzed in this chapter.

Finally, Appendix A analyzes the role of the “Pen” (al-qalam) and the “Preserved Tablet” (al-lawh al-mahfūz) in al-Ghazālī’s cosmology and theory of prophecy, while Appendix B focuses on the term tahāfut. I suggest that this term should be taken to mean “precipitance” rather than “incoherence”: the philosophers’ precipitance consists in their putting forward what al-Ghazālī considers to be (or at least presents as) unfounded and ill-thought-out statements. A brief analysis of the use of the term tahāfut by the twelfth-century Jewish thinker Mūsā ibn Maymūn/Mōshe bēn Maymōn (Maimonides) follows.

Al-Ghazālī’s books used in this study and their chronology

In this study, I used twenty-four of al-Ghazālī’s works, which I shall now list in their approximate chronological order. The evidence for this chronology is best presented in a tabular form. The first column includes the original full title of the work in Arabic or Persian. The second column includes my English translation of the title, under (a shortened form of) which the work will be referred to throughout this study (with the exception of notes, geared towards specialists in Islamic studies, where, for this reason, Arabic and Persian titles will be used). Finally, the third column will include chronological information on this work, including a survey of references of each work to al-Ghazālī’s other works. These references provide precious information on the relative chronology of al-Ghazālī’s writings.

Al-Ghazālī’s works fall into three main periods: (1) from the beginning of his writing career until his departure from Baghdad in Dhū al-Qa’dā 488/November 1095; (2) from his departure from Baghdad until his return to public teaching in Nishāpūr in Dhū al-Qa’dā 499/July 1106; (3) from his return to public teaching until his death in Jumādā II 505/December 1111. I shall now deal with these three periods in this order in the following tables.
Table 0.1  Al-Ghazālī’s books from the beginning of his writing career until his departure from Baghdad

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original title</th>
<th>English title</th>
<th>Chronological information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>al-Mankhūl min ta’līqāt al-usūl</td>
<td>The Sifted Notes on the Principles [of Jurisprudence]</td>
<td>ca. 470/1077–850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maqāṣid al-falāsifa</td>
<td>Intentions of the Philosophers</td>
<td>Belongs to the early period of philosophical studies, certainly before the Tahāfut, with the introduction probably added later, close to the time of the Munqidh.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fadā‘īh al-bātīniyya wa-fadā‘ī il al-mustazhirīya</td>
<td>Infamies of the Bātinites and Virtues of the Supporters of al-Mustazhir</td>
<td>Between Muḥarram and Dhū al-Ḥijja 487/February–December 1094 (after the ascension to the throne of the caliph al-Mustazhir, who commissioned the work, but before the Fāṭimid caliph al-Mustanṣir’s death).52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tahāfut al-falāsifa</td>
<td>Precipitance of the Philosophers</td>
<td>Written during “nearly a year” of critical reflection on philosophy.54 Completed on Muḥarram 11 488/January 21 1095.55 Announces the Mi’yār as a logical “supplement” (madmūm) to the Tahāfut, under the provisional titles Mi’yār al-‘aql and Madārik al-‘uqūl.56 Seems to announce the Iqtisād under the provisional title of Qawā‘id al-‘aqā‘id.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mi’yār al-‘ilm</td>
<td>Standard of Knowledge</td>
<td>Refers to the Tahāfut58 as well as to four no longer extant legal works: Ma’ākhīd al-khilāf, Lubāb al-nazār, Taḥṣīn al-ma’ākhīd, and al-Mabādī’ wa-l-ghayyūt. Announces the Mizān.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miḥakk al-nāṣar fī al-maṣṭaṣīq</td>
<td>Touchstone of Reasoning in Logic</td>
<td>Another work, connected to the Tahāfut and written shortly after it. Refers to the Mi’yār (under the title Mi’yār al-‘ulīm), Tahāfut, and two legal works: al-Mabādī’ wa-l-ghayyūt and Shifā‘ al-‘ālīl.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-Iqtisād fī al-i’tiqād</td>
<td>A Fair Approach to Creedal Matters</td>
<td>Refers to Fadā‘īh, Tahāfut, Mi’yār, Miḥakk.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original title</td>
<td>English title</td>
<td>Chronological information</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mīzān al-‘amal</td>
<td>The Scale of Action</td>
<td>A sequel to the Mi’yār, probably written shortly after departure from Baghdad. Refers to the Mi’yār. Refers to Mi’yār. Internal evidence indicates that it is earlier than the Iḥyā’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-Risāla al-Qudsiyya (incorporated into Iḥyā’, Book 2)</td>
<td>The Jerusalem Epistle</td>
<td>Written during al-Ghazālī’s stay in Jerusalem in spring or summer of 489/1096.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qānūn al-ta’wil</td>
<td>Rule of Interpretation</td>
<td>Refers to Book 21 of the Iḥyā’. Does not mention any other work. Makes no reference to the Faysal despite similar subject. I put it tentatively immediately after the Iḥyā’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-Maqsad al-asnā fī sharḥ āsmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā</td>
<td>The Loftiest Goal in Explicating the Meanings of God’s Most-Beautiful Names</td>
<td>Refers to Iḥyā’ and Tahāfut.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jawāhīr al-Qur’ān</td>
<td>Jewels of the Qur’ān</td>
<td>Refers to Qudsiyya, Iqtiṣād, Iḥyā’, several anti-Ismā’īlī treatises (including Fadā’iḥ), Mishkāt, Mi’yār, Tahāfut, the triad of legal works Basīt, Waṣīt, Wajīz. No post-Iḥyā’ work seems to be mentioned, except Wajīz. Since Wajīz was composed in Safar 495/December 1101, Jawāhīr can be dated to after that date. Jawāhīr also refers to the Arba’in as its sequel. At least four substantial works were written between Jawāhīr and the return to teaching in 499/1106: Arba’in, Qistās, Mishkāt, and Kimiyā’. It seems therefore likely that Jawāhīr was written in or shortly after 495/1101–2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic Title</td>
<td>English Title</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-Qiṣṭās al-mustaqīm</td>
<td><em>The Straight Balance</em></td>
<td>Refers to Jawāhir, anti-Īṣmā’īlī treatises (Qawāṣīm, Jawāb Muḥāṣṣal al-khīlāf, and Faḍā ‘iḥ), Miḥakk, Mi’yār, and Iqtiṣād.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mishkāt al-anwār</td>
<td><em>The Niche of Lights</em></td>
<td>Refers to Ḥiyā’, Maqṣad, Qistās, Miḥakk, and Mi’yār.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kīmiyā-ye saʿādat</td>
<td><em>The Alchemy of Felicity</em></td>
<td>Must have been written shortly before return to teaching, since it is mentioned in two works written immediately after: the Munqidh and the Persian letter to Fakhr al-Mulk (the latter must have been written before Fakhr al-Mulk’s assassination on Muḥarram 10 500/September 9 1106). The Mustaṣḥ also seems to imply that Kīmiyā was written before return to teaching. Refers to Ḥiyā’, Bidāyat al-hidāya, Maqṣad (under the title Maʿānī asmāʾ Allāh), Jawāhir, and Mishkāt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ey Farzand (better known in the medieval Arabic translation Ayyuhā l-walad)</td>
<td><em>O Child</em></td>
<td>It is impossible to date the work with precision. The introduction (not written by al-Ghazālī) explains the occasion for the composition of this treatise. It mentions that the addressee of the treatise had already been familiar with Ḥiyā’, Kīmiyā, Jawāhir, Minhāj al-sunnah, and “other treatises” (dāgar resālehā) – which would imply that the Ey Farzand is posterior to all these works. The text itself also refers to Ḥiyā’, Kīmiyā, and unspecified “other works.” The medieval Arabic translation Ayyuhā l-walad refers only to the Ḥiyā’ and “other” works (ghayrihī). The introduction to Muḥammad Amin al-Kurdī’s Arabic translation of Ey Farzand, entitled Khulāṣat al-taṣāmīnī, refers to Ḥiyā’, Kīmiyā, Jawāhir, Mizān, Qistās, Mi’rāj [sic] al-quds, Minhāj al-ʿābidin, and “the like” (amthālihā).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faysal al-tafrīqa bayn al-islām wa-l-zandaqa</td>
<td><em>The Demarcating Criterion between Islam and Godlessness</em></td>
<td>Date unknown, but must be before 500/1106–7, because this work is mentioned in the Munqidh. Refers to Qistās and Miḥakk.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 0.3 Al-Ghazālī’s books from his return to public teaching in Nīshāpūr until his death

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original title</th>
<th>English title</th>
<th>Chronological information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| *al-Munqīdhi min al-ḍalāl* | *The Deliverer from Error* | Completed in the early months of 500/fall 1106: apparently the first work written after return to teaching; was written in response to the Nīshāpūr controversy. Refers to *Fāḍāʾil, Tahāfūt, Iḥyāʾ, Maqṣad, Faysal, Qīṣṭās, Kīmiyā*.
| *al-Imlāʾ fī ishkālāt al-Iḥyāʾ* | *A Composition on the Difficult Places of the Revival* | Ca. 501/1107–8: was written in response to the Nīshāpūr controversy.
| *al-Mustasfī min ‘ilm al-usūl* | *A Distillation of the Science of the Principles [of Jurisprudence]* | Completed Muḥarram 6 503/August 5 1109. Refers to *Mankhūl, Tahdhib al-usūl, Jawāhir, Kīmiyā, and Faysal*.
| *Iljām al-‘awāmm ‘an ‘ilm al-kalām* | *Restraining the Commoners from Engaging in the Science of Kalām* | Refers to *Maqṣad*. Completed Jumādā II 505/December 1111, 92 days before al-Ghazālī’s death on Jumādā II 14 505/December 18 1111.
A note on works of doubtful authenticity

Scholars have raised doubts regarding the authenticity of several treatises ascribed to al-Ghazālī in the manuscript tradition. These works include al-Maḍnīn bihī ‘alā ghayr ahlīhī, al-Ajwība al-Ghazāliya fi l-masāʾ il al-ukhrawīya (also known as al-Nafkh wa-l-taswiya or al-Maḍnīn al-ṣaghīr), Maʿārij al-quds, al-Risāla al-Laduniya, al-Maʿārif al-ʿaqliya, and several others.93 One of the arguments against the authenticity of some of these works is their use of philosophical terminology, which some scholars (particularly Hava Lazarus-Yafeh) deemed to be uncharacteristic of al-Ghazālī.94 However, given what we now know about the scope of philosophical influence on al-Ghazālī, there is nothing improbable in the possibility that al-Ghazālī could have used philosophical terminology in some of his works (especially those written to like-minded disciples). The question of these works’ authenticity needs therefore to be revisited.95

Since this difficult task lies beyond the scope of the present study, I will be using – tentatively – only two such works: al-Risāla al-Laduniya (Epistle on Knowledge from On High) and Maʿārij al-quds (Ascents to the Holy Realm), with occasional references to others.96 These works are never used as a main source of my analysis and are adduced only as corroborative evidence, insofar as they present and develop ideas found in al-Ghazālī’s unquestionably authentic works.

Transliteration and translation

Finally, several remarks on transliteration and translation are in order. Arabic (except for common words, such as Islam, imam, etc.) is transliterated according to the system of the Encyclopaedia of Islam with the exception of j for jīm and q for qāf. Final vowels (with the exception of tanwīn-fatha) are disregarded, except in the transliteration of Qurʾānic verses. Transliteration of Persian follows the same system for the consonants (with the exception of the consonantal wāw, transliterated as v, and the addition of ch, g, p, and zh). It follows Modern Persian pronunciation for the vowels (e and o for the short vowels and ey and ow for the diphthongs).97

All translations from Arabic and Persian are mine, unless otherwise indicated. In translating the text, my aim was to render the original as accurately as possible, yet without compromising English grammar and style. The translation had to make sense, and philosophical sense in particular. This is why syntactic constructions peculiar to Arabic (e.g. the mā ... min construction) were not slavishly transposed into English. In translating the sentence, active voice was sometimes converted into passive and vice versa as English style required. Words and explanations, added to the translation for the sake of clarity, were always enclosed in square brackets. Standard honorifics (taʿālā, ʿazza wa-jaḷla, ʿalayhi l-salām, etc.) were often omitted, with no disrespect intended, with the sole purpose of making the texts more easily accessible to the English reader.

I tried to be as consistent as possible in rendering al-Ghazālī’s technical terms. In cases where a single term has several distinct and clearly definable meanings,
I used distinct English equivalents for each of these meanings. In some cases, after careful consideration, I opted for a translation different from the generally accepted. Thus, ‘aql was translated as intelligence rather than intellect, and i‘tiqād as opinion rather than belief or conviction. All such cases are justified in the text and/or in the notes.
1 Heart, intelligence, knowledge

Heart (qalb)

As we embark on a study of al-Ghazālī’s theory of mystical cognition, we must begin with the most elementary building blocks of al-Ghazālī’s noetics. Its most fundamental element is surely the concept of “heart” (Ar. qalb, Pers. del). By heart al-Ghazālī means the locus of cognition peculiar to humans, which differentiates them from non-rational animals. More specifically, it is defined as the “locus of [human] cognition of God” (maḥall maʿrifat Allāh, Pers. maḥall-e maʿrifat-e Khodāy). Being unique to humans, it is characterized as the core and the true reality of a human being (jawhar al-ādamī, ḥaqīqat al-īnsān). It is a “lordly and spiritual subtle entity” (latīfa rabbāniya rūhāniya) that has a certain connection (ʿalāqa, tāʾalluq) to the physical heart and governs the body through it. Yet, it is distinct from the physical heart in that it is immaterial and immortal. Hence, in contrast to the physical heart, it belongs to the suprasensible, intelligible world, which al-Ghazālī calls the “world of dominion” (ʿālam al-malakūt).

The heart can also be called spirit (Ar. rūḥ, Pers. rūh or jān), soul (nafs) (especially the “tranquil soul,” al-nafs al-mutma’inna), and intellect (ʿaql). In several contexts al-Ghazālī calls it the “inner eye” (ʿayn bāṭina), which is characterized by insight (baṣira) the way the external, physical eye (ʿayn zāhira) is characterized by sight (baṣar).

Al-Ghazālī also calls the heart a “divine (or lordly) amr” (amr ilāhī or amr rabbānī), which literally means divine command, or divine affair, but here implies the divine element or spark in man. This idea is grounded in the Qur’ānic verse “They shall ask you about the spirit; say: the spirit is from the command of my Lord (min amr rabbī)” (Q. 17:85). Since “command” is also employed as a shortcut for the “world of command” (ʿālam al-amr) – yet another term designating the suprasensible, intelligible world – al-Ghazālī interprets this verse as an additional piece of evidence that the heart belongs to the suprasensible world, the ʿālam al-amr or ʿālam al-malakūt.

As mentioned above, the heart is indestructible and immortal. At the time of death it does not disintegrate, but merely enters another state, being disengaged from attachments to the sensible world and released from its prison, the physical body.

Despite the bewildering variety of terms employed by al-Ghazālī, the underlying meaning of his discussion is consistent and clear. The heart corresponds
to what the philosophical tradition calls the rational soul (al-nafs al-nāṭiqā) or intellect (‘aql). Like al-Ghazālī’s heart, the rational soul is the immaterial and immortal locus of cognition peculiar to humans. In calling it heart rather than rational soul or intellect, al-Ghazālī did not intend any radical departure from philosophical noetics in the direction of a more “emotional” noetics of the heart. He merely intended to defuse the concept’s philosophical connotations so as to make it more palatable to the broader circles of religious scholars (‘ulamā’), while leaving its content essentially the same.

In fact, in all this, al-Ghazālī seems to follow Avicenna’s example. At the beginning of his last work, Epistle on the Rational Soul (Risāla fi l-Kalām ‘alā al-Nafs al-nāṭiqā) – a treatise which al-Ghazālī no doubt studied very carefully – Avicenna calls the rational soul, among other names, “tranquil soul” (nafsan muṭma‘īna ‘inna), “sacred soul” (nafsan qudṣīya), “spiritual spirit” (rūḥan rūḥānīya), “spirit [from] the command [of my Lord]” (rūḥan amrīyan), “divine secret” (sīr-ran ilāhīyan), and ultimately “the real heart” (qalban ḥaqīqīyan). Moreover, Avicenna’s description of the rational soul in this treatise matches exactly al-Ghazālī’s understanding of the heart. Avicenna stresses that the rational soul is an immaterial and immortal entity, which has a connection (‘alāqa, ta‘alluq) to the body. When after death this connection is severed, the rational soul is not destroyed, but enters another state (ḥāla), which is either “felicity and pleasure” (sa‘āda wa-ladḥda) or “misery and pain” (shaqāwa wa-alam).

There was perhaps one additional – and perhaps crucial – reason that might have prompted al-Ghazālī to opt for the term “heart.” Because of its religious connotations, the heart, more so than the intellect or the rational soul, is an appropriate meeting point of the two dimensions of spiritual life: the ascetic praxis (Ar. mu‘āmala, purification of the self) and the mystical theoria (Ar. mukāshafa, “unveiling” and illumination with divine realities).

More will be said on praxis and theoria and the relationship between them in a later chapter of this book. For now, it is important to stress that al-Ghazālī deploys a powerful analogy that clarifies this relationship between praxis and theoria and explains how they converge in the heart. This is the analogy of the mirror. The heart is compared to a mirror, made – as ancient and medieval mirrors were – of metal, not of glass. Ascetic praxis is defined as “polishing” the mirror of the heart and removing the tarnish of the vices that mar and erode its surface. This polishing leads, ultimately, to mystical theoria, whereby forms (ṣuwar) and realities (ḥaqa‘iq) of things are reflected in the polished mirror of the heart. Even as an unpolished mirror cannot reflect visible objects, so an impure heart is unable to contemplate these forms and realities. Ascetic praxis is therefore a prerequisite for, and a gateway to, mystical theoria.

Intelligence (‘aql)

Let us now move on to the second fundamental term of al-Ghazālī’s noetics: intelligence (‘aql). In Ghazālian context, I translate ‘aql as intelligence rather than intellect, because, as we shall see shortly, it denotes a quality, rather than an
entity in its own right.\textsuperscript{20} Al-Ghazālī defines intelligence as the intrinsic feature (gharīza)\textsuperscript{21} in virtue of which the human heart, i.e. the rational soul, is able to apprehend knowable objects.

\textbf{[T1]} Just as life is an intrinsic feature [investing] a body with the capacity for voluntary movements and sensory perceptions, so intelligence is an intrinsic feature [investing] some animals [i.e. humans] with the capacity for theoretical knowledge.\textsuperscript{22}

Intelligence is not identical with the heart. Rather, it is a quality of the heart, its specific configuration in virtue of which the heart becomes receptive of the imprints of intelligible forms. If the heart is analogous to a mirror, intelligence can be compared to this mirror’s specific configuration – its polish – in virtue of which it is able to receive imprints of the forms of visible objects. Because the heart is unique to humans, intelligence too is a uniquely human feature.

\textbf{[T2]} Intelligence (‘aql) is ... the characteristic (wasf) that distinguishes a human being from other animals and predisposes him to receive theoretical knowledge (al-‘ulūm al-nazarīya) and manage subtle crafts involving cogitation (tadbīr al-šinā‘āt al-khāfiya al-fikriya). This is what al-Ḥārith ibn Asad al-Muḥāsibī meant when he defined intelligence as an intrinsic feature (gharīza) that enables [one] to apprehend theoretical knowledge (idrāk al-‘ulūm al-nazarīya). [Intelligence] is similar to a light cast into the heart (ka-annaḥā nūr yuqdhaf fī l-qalb) that predisposes one to apprehend things. ... This is analogous to a mirror, which differs from other bodies by [its capacity] to imitate forms and colors (ḥikāyat al-ṣuwar wa-l-alwān) in virtue of its unique quality (bi-ṣifa ikhtāṣat bihā), namely, its polish.\textsuperscript{23}

There is a lot to unpack in this passage. Al-Ghazālī invokes the name of the early Śūfī al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857), whose works he perused, as he tells us in the Munqīd.\textsuperscript{24} Indeed, al-Muḥāsibī’s short treatise Book of the Essence and True Meaning of Intelligence offers the following definition of intelligence: “In its real meaning (fi l-ma‘nā wa-l-hāqiqā)\textsuperscript{25} and per se, it is an intrinsic feature (gharīza) that God planted in the majority of humans (fi ākthar khalqīhā).\textsuperscript{26} People cannot perceive it in one another or in themselves by means of sight or the sense of taste. Rather, it is only through their intelligence [itself] (bi-l-‘aql minhum) that God made them recognize it (‘arrāfahum ... īyāhu).”\textsuperscript{27} Al-Ghazālī’s use of the term “intrinsic feature” (gharīza) is, therefore, surely indebted to al-Muḥāsibī’s definition.

Another aspect of al-Ghazālī’s text which calls for a comment is the expression “light cast into the heart” (nūr yuqdhaf fī l-qalb). Intelligence is thus a kind of light. It can even be called “divine light” or “light of faith and certainty.”\textsuperscript{28} This is echoed by a passage from al-Ghazālī’s Persian work The Alchemy of Felicity (Kīmiyā-ye sa‘ādat), where intelligence is said to be created for the sake of the heart as its candle and lamp, which enlightens the heart so it may see the divine presence (ḥadrat-e olūthīyat) – “divine presence” being al-Ghazālī’s term for the totality of all beings.\textsuperscript{29}
The expression “light cast into the heart” comes from a variety of sources. First, it occurs in a saying attributed to Mālik ibn Anas (d. 179/795), the eponymous founder of the Mālikī school of Sunnī law. Al-Ghazālī could have encountered it in Abū Tālib al-Makki’s Sūfī manual The Nourishment of Hearts (Qūṭ al-qulūb) – a book he extensively used. In fact, cites two sayings, one by the Prophet’s companion Ibn Mas’ūd, and the other, by an unnamed “man of understanding” (presumably Mālik), as follows: “Ibn Mas’ūd used to say: Knowledge does not consist in transmitting much [hadīth]; rather, knowledge is nothing but fear of God (innamā l-‘ilm al-khashya). Another man of understanding (ghayruhū min al-fuqahā) said: Knowledge is nothing but a light that God the exalted casts into one’s heart.” It is possible that in al-Ghazālī’s manuscript of al-Makki’s work a few words had fallen out and the two sayings got conflated as follows: “Ibn Mas’ūd used to say: Knowledge does not consist in transmitting much [hadīth]; rather, knowledge is nothing but a light that God the exalted casts into the heart.” This is exactly the form in which al-Ghazālī himself sometimes quotes the saying, attributing the whole – including the second part of the saying presumably originating with Mālik – to Ibn Mas’ūd. The second source is surely an exegetical one, but it, too, occurs in al-Makki’s The Nourishment of Hearts and was probably lifted by al-Ghazālī from there. A number of commentaries on the Qur’ānic verse “Whomever God wills to guide, He renders his chest open to submission/Islam (yashrah sadrāthu li-l-islām)” (Q. 6:125; cf. Q. 39:22) report the Prophet’s comments on this verse. When asked how it is that God will render the person’s chest open to submission, the Prophet reportedly declared: “Light will be cast in it and it will be rendered open and get dilated (nūr yuqdhafu fīhī fa-yansharihu wa-yanfasihu).” When questioned further about the external sign of this dilation, the Prophet responded: “Turning to the abode of eternity, shunning the abode of delusion, and preparing to die before death.”

It is this exegetical tradition that al-Ghazālī invokes in the Deliverer, when he describes how he was cured from his first epistemological crisis, the crisis of scepticism, which lasted approximately two months. According to his description, he was cured not by systematic reasoning (nazm dalīl) and orderly argumentation (tarīḥ kalām), but by a light which God the exalted cast into my chest; this light is the key to the majority of cognitions. Whoever thinks that unveiling (kashf) is conditional on crafty arguments (mawqūf ‘alā al-adilla al-muḥarrara) is effectively putting limits on God’s boundless mercy.

After these comments, al-Ghazālī recounts the Prophet’s explanation of the dilation of the chest, cited above, and then continues:

It is from this light that one ought to seek unveiling, for this light gushes forth from the divine goodness (yanbajisu min al-jūd al-ilāhī) at certain times. One ought to prepare oneself for it, as the Prophet said: “Indeed your
Lord has gentle breezes (*nafahāt*) [for you] all the days of your life; will you not expose yourselves to them?"41

The foregoing discussion can be summarized as follows: intelligence is an intrinsic feature of the heart which differentiates human beings from non-rational animals. It is in virtue of this feature that humans are able to grasp theoretical knowledge in general and knowledge of God in particular. If the heart (human rational soul) is analogous to a mirror, intelligence is analogous to that mirror’s polish. Intelligence thus corresponds to what, in philosophical language, would be called potentiality (*qūwa*) of the rational soul to receive theoretical knowledge. More specifically, it corresponds to what the philosophers called “material intellect” (*al-‘aql al-haylānī*), the intellect in its purely “potential” form, i.e. a pure potentiality (*qūwa*) or predisposition (*isti’dād*) of the human intellect to receive intelligibles, before it has actually received any.

Intelligence is God-given, its source being God’s goodness (*jūd*) and boundless mercy (*rahmā*), which is the ultimate origin of divinely given knowledge. Intelligence is called “divine light,” “light of faith and certainty,” and “light cast into the heart,” and it is the key to the majority of cognitions. More specifically, it is the key to divine unveiling (*kashf*) – a term we shall discuss in more detail below. One ought to prepare oneself to receive such unveiling, by exposing oneself, so to speak, to the divine “breezes” (*nafahāt*). Systematic reasoning, orderly argumentation, and crafty arguments – all the things in which Muslim dogmatic theologians (*mutakallimūn*) excel – are of no use in receiving unveiling. The preparation for unveiling involves instead some sort of ascetic and ethical practice, analogous to polishing the mirror of the heart.

It may be added that intelligence is different from person to person, reaching its height in the prophets, who are endowed with an extremely powerful acumen making them capable of receiving the supreme degree of unveiling, called divine inspiration (*ilhām*).42

[T5] How can one deny gradation (*tafāwut*) [in] the intrinsic feature (*gharīza*) [i.e. intelligence]?! Were it not for [this gradation], people would not differ in their understanding of the sciences and would not be divided into foolish (*balīd*), who understand only with great difficulty even when instructed by the teacher, smart (*dhakī*), who understand the slightest hint and allusion, and perfect (*kāmil*), from whose soul the realities of things (*haqā‘iq al-umūr*) emerge without instruction, according to God’s word: “Whose oil nearly shines, even if no fire touched it, light upon light” (Q. 24:35). This is similar to the prophets, for obscure matters become clear to them in their interiors (*fī bawātīnihih*), without learning or instruction (*samā‘*). This is called inspiration (*ilhām*).43

This passage and its implications – and in particular the meaning of the term “inspiration” (*ilhām*) – will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4 below.
Besides intrinsic feature (gharīza), the term “intelligence” (‘aql) is used, according to al-Ghazālī, in a variety of other meanings. He explains this in the following passage, which, despite its considerable length, deserves to be quoted in full.

[T6] The second [meaning of ‘aql] is knowledge (‘ulūm) concerning the possibility of possibles and impossibility of impossibles (jawāz al-jā‘izāt wa-stihālat al-mustaḥilāt) that comes to exist in the essence [i.e. mind] of a child who has [reached the age of] discernment (fī dhāt al-ṭifl al-mumayyiz), such as the knowledge that two is more than one and that one individual cannot be present in two places at the same time. This is what was intended by one of the mutakallimūn when he defined intelligence as some necessary knowledge (ba‘d al-‘ulūm al-dārūrīya), such as the knowledge concerning the possibility of possibles and the impossibility of impossibles.

The third [meaning of ‘aql]: knowledge acquired from experience in various situations (‘ulūm tustafādu min al-tajārīb bi-majārī l-ahwāl), for he who acquired much experience and learned from the school of life is commonly called intelligent (‘āqil). …

The fourth [meaning of ‘aql]: that the power (qūwa) of this intrinsic feature (gharīza) should reach the point when one cognizes the outcome of things (‘awāqib al-umār), subduing and overcoming the desire for immediate gratification. When this power is obtained, such a person is called intelligent (‘āqil) since he acts and abstains from action following a consideration of the outcome rather than whims of desire. …

[Intelligence in] the first [sense] [i.e. the intrinsic feature, gharīza] is the foundation, origin, and source [of the other kinds of intelligence]; the second is its closest ramification; the third, a ramification of the first and the second, since knowledge derived from experience (‘ulūm al-tajārīb) is acquired through the power of the intrinsic feature [on the one hand] and necessary knowledge [on the other]; the fourth, [finally,] is the last fruit and the ultimate purpose. The first two come about naturally (bi-l-ṭab‘), while the last two are to be acquired (bi-l-iktisāb).44

This passage – coming from the first book of al-Ghazālī’s Revival – traces a number of successive stages in human development, each of which is called “intelligence” (‘aql). To analyze these stages we need to take a closer look at al-Ghazālī’s works where a comparable ladder of stages (atwār) is presented. Though the term atwār is derived from Q. 71:14, al-Ghazālī’s ladder of the stages of human development is decidedly Stoic in character.45

In the Deliverer, al-Ghazālī speaks of the following stages. The substance of a human being (jawhar al-ādamī), i.e. the heart, is in its original disposition (fī aṣl al-fītra) created as a tabula rasa, devoid of any knowledge about God’s worlds (khāliyan sādhajan lā khabara ma‘ahī min ‘awālim Allāh). Next, senses are created (this stage is common to humans and non-rational animals). Next,
discernment (tamyīz) comes about at approximately the age of seven. As we learn from al-Ghazālī’s other works, it is at the age of discernment that the child receives necessary knowledge (al-ʿulūm al-ṭarîṣṭa). After discernment, the person reaches the state of intelligence (ʿaql), which comes – according to the parallel discussion in another work – at approximately the age of fifteen. Finally, in exceptional cases, one also receives the “eye of prophecy” – to be discussed later in this book.

Similarly, in the second part of The Niche of Lights (Mishkāt al-anwār), al-Ghazālī describes the “five spirits,” i.e. faculties of the soul: the sensory spirit (al-rūḥ al-haṣṣās) (common to human beings and all non-rational animals); the spirit of “imagery” (al-rūḥ al-khayālī) (common to human beings and some non-rational animals); the spirit of intelligence (al-rūḥ al-ʿaqūlī); the cogitative spirit (al-rūḥ al-fikrī); and finally the sacred prophetic spirit (al-rūḥ al-qudsī al-nabawī). Al-Ghazālī explains that the spirit of intelligence cognizes universal necessary truths (al-maʿārif al-ṭarîṣṭa), whereas the cogitative spirit is in charge of combining these truths so as to produce new cognitions – a clear reference to what the philosophers call syllogistic reasoning.

The two passages are presented synoptically in Table 1.1. In the rightmost column the corresponding meanings of the term “intelligence” (ʿaql) in the passage cited above ([T2]+[T6]) are presented.

It can be seen that al-Ghazālī’s terminology is far from consistent. The main reason for this lack of consistency is that al-Ghazālī is drawing on disparate terminological traditions: categories of adulthood (Deliverer), Avicennian categories of internal senses (Niche), and Avicennian categories of the grades of human

<table>
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<th>Niche</th>
<th>Revival, Book 1 Definition of ‘aql ([T2]+[T6])</th>
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intellect, on which, as we shall see shortly, al-Ghazālī draws in his definition of intelligence. This is why one and the same stage – the acquisition of necessary knowledge at the age of seven – is called *tamyiz* in the *Deliverer* and in the majority of other sources but ‘*aql*’ in the *Niche*. Similarly, the next stage – the stage of syllogistic reasoning and the acquisition of theoretical knowledge (*al-*‘*ūlūm al-naẓariyya*) – is called ‘*aql*’ in the *Deliverer* and fikr in the *Niche*.53

As for the *Revival* passage ([T2]+[T6]), it can be seen that the first two meanings of the term “intelligence” fit well in Table 1.1. As for the other two meanings, they seem to correspond to the last two stages of both the *Deliverer* and the *Niche*, receiving, however, a pronounced “practical” bent: syllogistic reasoning is replaced with “experience,” and prophecy with the rather vague expression “cognition of the outcome of things,” whose practical significance is underscored. Yet, if matched against the two other columns of the Table 1.1, the third and the fourth meanings of intelligence – whose function is otherwise quite vague – suddenly become clear. Al-Ghazālī’s vagueness notwithstanding, they are indeed supposed to correspond to the stage of syllogistic reasoning and the stage of prophecy respectively. It is only in this light that al-Ghazālī’s statements at the end of [T6] become intelligible. Let us repeat this somewhat enigmatic passage and comment on it as we go:

[Intelligence in] the first [sense] [i.e. the intrinsic feature, *gharīza*] is the foundation, origin, and source [of the other kinds of intelligence].

This means: the first meaning of intelligence – intrinsic feature – is the foundation for all subsequent intellection. Without it a human being is unable to intellect at all and is therefore not truly human.

The second is its closest ramification.

The second meaning of intelligence refers to knowledge of *a priori* truths, acquired by human beings at approximately the age of seven, such as the knowledge that the whole is greater than any of its parts, that no one thing can simultaneously and in the same respect have opposing characteristics, etc.54 It is the closest ramification of the first grade of intelligence in the sense that it provides a human individual with the most basic tools of intellection: the “axioms” of reason from which “theorems” can be deduced using syllogistic reasoning.

The third, a ramification of the first and the second, since knowledge derived from experience (*‘ūlūm al-tajärīb*) is acquired through the power of the intrinsic feature [on the one hand] and necessary knowledge [on the other].

Clearly, “experience” in the ordinary sense of the term makes no sense here. The sentence only makes sense if we assume that by “experience” al-Ghazālī means syllogistic reasoning. If that is the case, the sentence becomes crystal clear: syllogistic knowledge indeed depends on the person having both the intrinsic feature
“intelligence” (i.e. he must be *compos mentis*, not a madman, for example) and the necessary axiomatic knowledge. It is only through the combination of both that new knowledge can be acquired through syllogistic reasoning, somewhat euphemistically called by al-Ghazālī “experience.”

*The fourth, [finally,] is the last fruit and the ultimate purpose.*

This is prophetic knowledge which very few individuals possess. In al-Ghazālī, as we shall see below, this prophetic knowledge is not, however, limited to prophets. It is also accessible to the individuals called “saints” (*awliyā’*), the path to “saint-hood” being open to all.

*The first two come about naturally (bi-l-ṭab’), while the last two are to be acquired (bi-l-iktisāb)*.

This, too, now makes perfect sense. The intrinsic feature and the necessary, axiomatic, *a priori* knowledge are granted to human beings by God “naturally,” i.e. without any conscious effort on their part. The third and the fourth grades of intelligence, on the other hand, i.e. syllogistic knowledge and prophetic knowledge, though ultimately also granted by God, nevertheless involve conscious human effort and “acquisition”: study, reflection, and “polishing the mirror of the heart.”

It should be noted, at this point, that the four meanings of the term “intelligence” correspond to Avicenna’s hierarchy of the three lower grades of theoretical intellect (the material intellect, the intellect *in habitu*, and the actual intellect), with the prophetic, so-called “sacred intellect” (*al-‘aql al-qudsī* in Avicenna’s terminology) superadded. We shall discuss the “sacred intellect” at a later point in this book. Here, let us concentrate on the three lower grades of theoretical intellect, which Avicenna introduces as follows.

[T7] “Potentiality” (*qūwa*) has three meanings …: (1) pure predisposition (*al-isti’dād al-muṭlaq*)…, e.g. the potentiality of an infant to write; (2) this [same] predisposition when one has obtained [in addition] only that by means of which one can reach the acquisition of actuality without [further] intermediary, e.g. the potentiality, with respect to writing, of a child who has grown up and learned of the inkpot, the pen, and the simple letters; (3) … perfect predisposition allowing one to act whenever one wishes without the need for acquisition …, e.g. the potentiality of an accomplished scribe with respect to [his] craft when he is not [actually] writing. …

Now, the theoretical faculty sometimes relates to abstract forms as what is in absolute potentiality (*bi-l-qūwa l-muṭlaqa*) [=1] – … it is then called material intellect (*‘aqlan hayūlāniyān*); … sometimes, as what is in possible potentiality (*bi-l-qūwa l-mumkina*) [=2] – … this is called intellect *in habitu* (*‘aqlan bi-l-malaka*); sometimes, as what is in perfect potentiality (*bi-l-qūwa l-kāmilīyā*) [=3], when one has obtained acquired intelligible forms (*al-ṣuwar al-ma’qūla l-muktasabā*) in addition to *a priori* intelligible
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[forms] (al-maʿqūla l-awwāliyya) but does not consult or resort to them in actuality, rather it is as if they are stored with him and whenever he wishes he consults these forms in actuality – … this is called actual intellect (ʿaqlan bi-l-fiʿl), for it is an intellect that can intellect whenever it wishes without the need for [additional] acquisition (bi-lā takalluf iktisāb).56

There can be no doubt that al-Ghazālī was familiar with this definition, for he employs and reformulates it in two of his works: The Scale of Action (Mīzân al-ʿamal) and Book 21 of the Revival. Interestingly enough, these reformulations present a link between Avicenna’s discussion ([T7]) and al-Ghazālī’s definition of intelligence in Book 1 of the Revival ([T2]+[T6]). The evidence for this is best presented in parallel columns (see Table 1.2), where the two texts, from the Balance and from Book 21 of the Revival, are cited side by side, flanked by references to Avicenna’s discussion (leftmost column) and al-Ghazālī’s definition of intelligence from Book 1 of the Revival (rightmost column).

It is clear from this synoptic presentation that the two texts represent a link between Avicenna’s discussion ([T7], first column) and the definition of intelligence ([T2]+[T6], fourth column). The version of the Balance ([T8], second column) stands closest to Avicenna. It reproduces all the three gradations of theoretical intellect, preserves the Avicennian framework of the discussion and is more faithful to Avicenna’s example: the relation of an infant, a child, and an accomplished scribe to the art of writing.57

The Revival version ([T9], third column) adds several details absent in Avicenna. It is noteworthy that these additions subsequently reappear in the definition of intelligence ([T2]+[T6], fourth column). Thus, for instance, the phrase “impossibility of impossibles and possibility of what is manifestly possible,” absent in the Avicennian text, appears in the third column. In the fourth column, it shows up again, with only slight variations, and is specifically ascribed to “one of the mutakallīmūn,” who is to be identified as al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013). Similarly, the statement that the last stage, parallel to Avicenna’s actual intellect, is obtained “through experience and cogitation” is found for the first time in the third column. In the fourth column, this phrase appears again, but crucially “cognition” (i.e. syllogistic reasoning) is edited out and only “experience” remains.

A careful comparison of all the passages59 would, no doubt, reveal important features of al-Ghazālī’s editorial technique as he proceeds from the most “Avicennian” (and chronologically the earliest) version of the discussion (second column), gradually editing Avicenna out (third column), and introducing references to al-Muhāṣibī and al-Bāqillānī instead (fourth column). It is also noteworthy that in this process, al-Ghazālī gradually recasts Avicenna’s noetics in terms borrowed from the traditional kalām distinction between necessary and acquired knowledge, ‘ilm darūrī and ‘ilm muktasab.60 Compare, for instance, Avicenna’s “a priori intelligible forms” (al-ṣuwar ... al-maʿqūla l-awwāliyya) with “necessary a priori intelligibles” (al-maʿqūlāt al-awwāliyya l-darūrīya) (second column), where the kalām term “necessary” is introduced, and finally with “a priori necessary knowledge” (al-ʿulūm al-darūrīya al-awwāliyya) (third column),
Table 1.2 Definitions and grades of intellect in Avicenna and al-Ghazālī

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avicenna ([T7])</th>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Revival, Book 21</th>
<th>Revival, Book 1 ([T2]+[T6])</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[T8] This [theoretical] faculty has three levels with respect to the knowledge obtained by it.</td>
<td>[T9] The child has two levels with respect to obtaining this knowledge (ʿulūm):</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material intellect:</td>
<td>First, like the relation of the state of an infant to writing, for the infant has the potentiality to write, but this potentiality is remote from actuality. Similar is his potentiality with respect to knowledge.</td>
<td>First meaning: the unique human characteristic that predisposes them to theoretical knowledge. Muhāsibī called it “intrinsic feature” (gharīza).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A pure predisposition/absolute potentiality. (Example: the potentiality of an infant to write.)</td>
<td>The second level is when [this faculty] has obtained all necessary a priori intelligibles (jumla min al-maʿūlāt al-awwalīya l-ʿadūrīya), like the state of a child who has [reached] discernment and approaches puberty. The child has a similar potentiality with respect to writing after he has learned about the inkpot, the pen and the single letters but not [their] combinations; he had not been like that in the cradle, for then he had had only the absolute potentiality (qiwa mutlaqa), remote from actuality.</td>
<td>Second meaning: knowledge of the possibility of possibles and impossibility of impossibles that comes to exist in the mind of a child who has reached discernment. One of the mutakallimūn defined intelligence as some necessary knowledge, such as the knowledge concerning the possibility of possibles and the impossibility of impossibles.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellect in habitū:</td>
<td>First, when his heart contains all a priori necessary knowledge (al-ʿulūm al-ʿadūrīya al-awwalīya), like the knowledge concerning the impossibility of impossibles and possibility of what is manifestly possible (istihālat al-mustahālat wa-jawāb al-jāʿiz al-zāhib). He has not yet obtained theoretical knowledge (al-ʿulūm al-nazarīya), yet this has become possible (mumkīna). … His state with respect to [this] knowledge is like that of an [apprentice] scribe who cognizes nothing about writing except the inkpot, the pen and the single letters but not [their] combinations; he has approached writing but not reached it yet.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The predisposition of someone who has obtained the a priori concepts by which he can reach actuality without further intermediary. (Example: a child who has grown up and learned of the inkpot, the pen, and the simple letters.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Actual intellect:
A perfect predisposition, when one has obtained acquired intelligible forms in addition to a priori intelligibles but does not resort to them in actuality, yet they are stored with him and whenever he wishes he consults them in actuality.

(Example: an accomplished scribe with respect to his craft when he is not actually writing.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avicenna (IT7)</th>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Revival, Book 21</th>
<th>Revival, Book 1 ([T2]+[T6])</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Actual intellect:</strong></td>
<td>The third level is when he has obtained in actuality all acquisitional intelligibles (al-ma‘ūlāt al-kasbiyya) and it is as if they are stored with him and whenever he wishes he can resort to them and whenever he resorts to them he masters them (tamakkana minhā). His state with respect to knowledge is similar to that of an expert scribe and artisan, who is not [currently] engaged in writing, for he is predisposed to it in proximate potentiality with the most perfect predisposition. This is the utmost human level but it encompasses innumerable gradations.⁶¹</td>
<td>Second, when he has obtained the knowledge acquired from experience and cogitation (al-‘ulūm al-muktasaba bi-l-tajārib wa-l-fikr); it is as if [this knowledge] is stored with him and whenever he wishes he can resort to it. His state is similar to that of an expert in [the art of] writing, for [the expert] is called a scribe although he does not pursue writing [in actuality], being [however] capable of it. This is the utmost level of humanity but it encompasses innumerable gradations.⁶²</td>
<td>Third meaning: knowledge acquired from experience in various situations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
where the order of “a priori” and “necessary” is reversed, giving more weight to the kalām term “necessary,” and the loaded philosophical term “intelligibles” is replaced with the more innocuously sounding “knowledge.”

The conclusion seems unavoidable that al-Ghazālī’s definition of intelligence (fourth column) is ultimately modeled after Avicenna’s discussion of the gradations of theoretical intellect. However, al-Ghazālī – no doubt deliberately – omits any reference to Avicenna. Moreover, he gradually rewrites the discussion, eliminating, in a number of well-documented stages, any textual similarity to his Avicennian source. He does so, first, by replacing philosophical terminology with terminology borrowed from the kalām distinction between necessary and acquired knowledge; second, by providing references to two thinkers standing outside the philosophical tradition – the Sūfī al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī and the mutakallim al-Bāqillānī; and third, by eliminating the reference to “cogitation,” i.e. syllogistic reasoning, implied (though not mentioned explicitly) in Avicenna’s definition.

Knowledge (‘ilm)

Al-Ghazālī provides no definition of knowledge (‘ilm) in the strict philosophical sense of the term “definition” – a formula that includes a thing’s genus (jins) and specific differentia (fāsīl).63 Indeed, in one of his last works, A Distillation of the Science of the Principles [of Jurisprudence] (al-Mustasfā min ‘ilm al-usūl), he admits that he would be hard-pressed to provide such a formula: “It seems difficult to define [knowledge] in the true sense [of definition], with an accurate formula including [its] genus and essential differentia.”64 He adds, however, that it is difficult to provide such definitions for most concepts, even for most objects of sense perception, all the more so when it comes to defining the kinds of perception itself.65 This is why, if one is to understand what knowledge is, one has to rely on divisions and distinctions (taqsīm, tamyiz), which allow differentiating between knowledge and related concepts, and on an analogy (mithāl). In the absence of a formal definition, the former method helps establish what true knowledge is not; the latter, what it is.66

As far as distinctions are concerned, I shall omit the relatively self-explanatory part of al-Ghazālī’s discussion where he differentiates between knowledge and ignorance (jahl), doubt (shakk), and supposition (zann) and will concentrate on the more important distinction between knowledge and i’tiqād.

The term i’tiqād is difficult to translate. It is not to be translated as belief, for belief usually denotes mental assent (tasdīq) to, or acceptance of, an already existing proposition.67 Nor is it to be translated as conviction, for conviction implies a degree of subjective certainty about the proposition that i’tiqād, in and of itself, need not possess. I’tiqād, rather, is the act of maintaining a certain view or opinion on a given subject, regardless of the degree of one’s certainty about it and without the implication that this view be already given prior to the act of maintaining it. I’tiqād is, thus, the exact equivalent of the Classical Greek δόξα (as in the word “doxography,” for instance) and the Latin opinio. I shall translate it as opinion, despite some undesirable connotations of this word in modern English usage.68
Al-Ghazālī begins his discussion by criticizing a Mu‘tazilī definition of knowledge as “opining a thing to be as it [really] is” (i’tiqād al-shay‘ ‘alā mā huwa bihī). In his view, this definition is to be rejected on two grounds. First, because it is too restrictive: al-Ghazālī argues that the non-existent (al-ma‘dūm) is a valid object of knowledge (one can know, for instance, that it does not exist); yet, the term “thing” (shay‘) employed in the Mu‘tazilī definition cannot, in his view (‘indanā), apply to something non-existent. Hence the Mu‘tazilī definition fails to cover the entire spectrum of knowledge. In another respect, however, the definition is too inclusive, for it implies that an opinion based on taqlīd – uncritical acceptance of authority – would qualify as knowledge should this opinion happen to be correct. Much like Plato before him, al-Ghazālī found the view that knowledge is merely a correct opinion untenable. It is in order to reject it that he presents his own understanding of knowledge and of how it is to be distinguished from mere opinion.

Al-Ghazālī defines opinion as:

[T10] Unreflected adherence (sabq) to one of the two [alternative] views maintained by a person in doubt (mu‘takaṭad al-shākāk), holding it [uncritically] (ma‘a l-wuqūf ‘alayhi), without making oneself aware of the other alternative (min ghayr ikhtāra naqīdīhī bi-l-bāl) or allowing this alternative to reside in the soul.

The term i’tiqād often refers to holding not just any of the two alternatives, but more specifically the correct one, albeit uncritically and by mere chance. Thus, al-Ghazālī says, a person in doubt will claim, for instance, that the world is perhaps originated and perhaps not originated – hesitating whether to accept one or the other of the two alternative views. A person who has i’tiqād will claim (correctly) that the world is originated, “without having his chest expand” (lā yattasi‘u sadruhū) to allow (and subsequently to reject) the possibility that the world is eternal. An ignorant person will simply claim that the world is eternal. Thus, despite conforming to the actual state of affairs, i’tiqād (here: correct opinion) is in reality a kind of ignorance (jins min al-jahl), for it is by mere chance that it happens to be correct.

Al-Ghazālī compares opinion to a “knot” on a person’s heart – a clever pun, exploiting the fact that the Arabic words for knot (‘uqda) and opinion (i’tiqād) come from the same root. True knowledge is, thus, the untying of the knots of opinions (inhilāl al-‘uqad), characterized by unveiling and dilation of the chest (kashf wa-nshīrāh). Correct opinion – al-Ghazālī continues – further differs from knowledge in that it can be undermined by a deceptive counter-argument (shubha), which would make one admit that the opposite of what one opines may be correct, whereas knowledge can never be so undermined. If presented with a counter-argument, the knower will always realize that the argument must be false and will find a way to reject it, even if unable to put his rejection immediately into words.

One must emphasize the intimate connection between i’tiqād (opinion) and kalām. Kalām (including al-Ghazālī’s own kalām treatises, both expository and
polemical) operates totally on the level of i’tiqād (opinion), not on the level of knowledge. Its task is to lay out the opinions incumbent upon the common folk and to defend these opinions against external and internal ideological challenges. Al-Ghazālī thus repeatedly contrasts true knowledge with the expertise of the mutakallim, which is simply an ability to defend correct opinions and refute incorrect ones by means of arguments.78

This process of “untying the knots of opinions” is best illustrated by how this reportedly happened to al-Ghazālī himself. In the Deliverer, al-Ghazālī provides the following famous account.

[T11] The thirst to grasp the realities of things (dark ḥaqā’iq al-umūr) was my habit and wont in my early years and in the prime of my youth. [It was] an intrinsic feature and a natural disposition (gharīzatan wa-fītratan) placed in my makeup by God, and not by my own choice or device. As a result, I was set free from fetters of blind imitation [of authority] (inhallat ‘anni rábitat al-taqlīd) and released from inherited opinions (wa-nkasarat ‘alayya al-‘aqā’id al-mawrūtha) when I was still close to the age of childhood. I had observed that Christian children invariably grew up Christian, Jewish children invariably grew up Jewish, and Muslim children invariably grew up Muslim. I had also heard the prophetic hadīth that “Every newborn is born according to the natural disposition (‘alā l-fīṭra), and it is his parents who make him a Jew, a Christian, or a Magian.” My innermost self was therefore moved to seek the true reality of the original natural disposition (ḥaqīqat al-fīṭra al-aṣliya) and the true meaning of opinions that come about through blind imitation of parents and teachers. I wanted to sift through these opinions, which originate in instruction, for there are [substantial] disagreements as to how to distinguish those among them which are true from those which are false.79

Clearly, al-Ghazālī does not identify – as Muslim theologians often do – the natural disposition (fīṭra) simply with “Islam.” For him, the majority of Muslims are as guilty of uncritical emulation of authority – and therefore as remote from the natural disposition – as Jews and Christians are. The only difference between such Muslims on the one hand, and Jews and Christians on the other is that their opinions, or at least some of them, happen to be in line with Islamic teachings and thus, from al-Ghazālī’s perspective, “correct,” but they are opinions nonetheless, and not true knowledge. In the same way that the rust of vices obscures the mirror of the heart and needs to be polished away if the heart is to reflect intelligible objects, so also opinions held uncritically in imitation of parents or teachers are to be removed if the heart is to receive true knowledge.

The mirror analogy

As explained above, al-Ghazālī does not think that a proper philosophical definition of knowledge can be provided (or at least he opts not to provide such a
definition in a text intended for legal scholars). Having differentiated between knowledge and related concepts, he now suggests an “analogy” (mithāl) that, he suggests, would drive the point home and help clarify what knowledge really is. This is the mirror analogy, which we have already encountered above, in connection to “heart” and “intelligence” ([T2]). Using this analogy, al-Ghazālī characterizes knowledge as follows:

[T12] Know that the locus of knowledge (mahāll al-‘ilm) is the heart. … It relates to the realities of knowable concepts (ḥaqā‘iq al-ma‘lūmāt) as a mirror does to the forms of colored objects (sūwar al-mutarwāwināt). Just as [every] colored object has a form (ṣūra) whose image (mithāl) is impressed upon and appears in the mirror, so every knowable concept has a reality (ḥaqīqa) whose form is impressed upon and becomes manifest in the mirror of the heart. Just as in the former case there are three distinct aspects – the mirror, the forms of individual objects, and the appearance of their images in the mirror – so in the latter case there are three [distinct] aspects as well: the heart, the realities of things, and the fact of these realities’ appearance and presence in the heart. Thus, the [term] “knower” refers to the heart wherein the image of the realities of things is located (yahullu mithāl ḥaqā‘iq al-ashyā), the [term] “knowable” denotes these realities, and the term “knowledge,” the appearance of [their] image[s] in the mirror [of the heart].

Notice that al-Ghazālī is careful to say that it is not the objects of knowledge themselves but their realities (ḥaqā‘iq), i.e. their intelligible forms,81 that are reflected in the mirror of the heart and, furthermore, that it is not the forms themselves but their likes, or images (mithāl, pl. amthila), that appear therein. This is in perfect agreement with the mirror analogy, for the mirror does not reflect visible objects as such (i.e. including their non-visible characteristics, such as taste and smell) but only their visible forms or shapes. Furthermore, it is not the shapes themselves that appear in the mirror – for these are, strictly speaking, inseparable from the visible objects – but the likes or images of these shapes.

Al-Ghazālī’s insistence that the knower is doubly removed from the object of knowledge is not accidental. Its significance lies in precluding any possibility of union with the object of knowledge, of the type sometimes affirmed by the philosophers when they claim that the subject of intellection (āqīl) becomes identical with the intellecuted object (ma‘qūl) in the act of intellection (‘aql).82 According to al-Ghazālī, the object of knowledge does not become united or identical with the heart, nor can it be said to indwell (hulūl) it; it is merely reflected in it, which means that only an “image” of its “reality” is impressed upon the heart. This is made clear in the following passage from the Distillation. Notice the repeated use of the expression “as if” (ka-anna) throughout this passage.

[T13] Just as the sky, the earth, trees, and rivers can be seen in a mirror, as if they exist in the mirror and as if the mirror encompasses them all, so also
the entire divine presence (al-hadra al-ilahiya) can be impressed upon the human soul. The term “divine presence” refers to all existents, since all of them [originate] from the divine presence, for there is nothing in existence save God and His acts. When [the soul] is impressed therewith, it becomes as if it were the entire world, for it encompasses it, in representing [it] and receiving [its] imprint (tasawwuran wa-nтикā’an).

At that moment, a person who lacks understanding might perhaps think that [the world] indwells (hulul) [the soul], like someone who thinks that a form indwells (halla) the mirror, but this is erroneous for [the form] is not in the mirror but only [seems] as if it is in the mirror.

The radical impossibility of being united with, or “indwelled” by, the object of knowledge becomes especially significant when the object of knowledge is God. In the Jewels of the Qur’an (Jawahir al-Qur’an), using the mirror analogy again, al-Ghazālī cautions the reader that God does not appear in the heart but merely reveals Himself to it. This is proven by a sort of reductio ad absurdum. If an image did indwell the mirror (hallat fi l-mir’ah), it could not appear simultaneously in other mirrors, yet this is manifestly false. Similarly, it is false that God indwells a human heart, for He reveals Himself (yatajalla) simultaneously and all at once (duf’atan) to the totality of those who cognize Him (jumla min al-arifin).

As was already observed by W.H.T. Gairdner, al-Ghazālī attached enormous importance “to this conception of the reflector, … [precisely] as a defence against the assaults of pantheistic ideas consequent on ecstasy.” Indeed, al-Ghazālī frequently denounces the double error of union (ittiḥād) and indwelling (hulul) that led many a Sufi to perilous misinterpretations of their mystical states (ahwāl). As a case in point, he refers to the “ecstatic pronouncements” (shatatḥāt) of al-Hallaj and al-Bistāmī – “I am the Real” and “Glory be to me” respectively. Al-Ghazālī thinks that al-Hallaj and al-Bistāmī were intoxicated by their states and were consequently unable to interpret them correctly. In reality, God was merely revealed to and reflected in their hearts, while they mistakenly thought that He indwelt them or was united with them. It is this misinterpretation of their mystical states that, according to al-Ghazālī, led them to their ecstatic pronouncements.

Cognition (ma’rifah)

Before the end of this chapter a few remarks on another important term – the term ma’rifah (cognition) – are in order. It must be stated at the outset that the distinction between ma’rifah (cognition) and ‘ilm (knowledge) is, in al-Ghazālī, a “soft” distinction, where the two terms are used in roughly the same sense and only in certain technical contexts are assigned separate functions. It certainly cannot be assumed that ma’rifah in al-Ghazālī is always somehow “deeper” and more “mystical” than ‘ilm. For this reason, too, ma’rifah is not to be translated as “gnosis.” In the great majority of cases, ma’rifah and ‘ilm (and the corresponding verbs ‘arafa and ‘alima) are virtually interchangeable, and the distinction between them is merely grammatical. On one occasion al-Ghazālī even explicitly disqualifies
the definition of ‘ilm as ma’rifa on the grounds that it is tautological, because the two terms are synonyms.91

It is only on certain occasions that the term ma’rifa (often with the qualification al-ma’rifa al-haqqiyya, “true cognition”) can designate a higher degree of knowledge than ‘ilm. Specifically, al-Ghazâli is consistent in using the term ma’rifa rather than ‘ilm to designate the type of knowledge that leads to felicity (sa’ada) in the afterlife. Furthermore, in the following passage, ma’rifa and ‘ilm seem to refer to the two dimensions of spiritual life, already briefly mentioned above: theoria (mukâshafa) and praxis (mu’âmala) respectively. Since theoria is superior to praxis, ma’rifa, in this context at least, is superior to ‘ilm.

[T14] Know that one can avoid [delusion (ghurûr)] by means of three things: intelligence (‘aql), ‘ilm, and ma’rifa. These three things are indispensable (lā budda minhā). By intelligence I mean the intrinsic primordial nature (al-fitrā l-gharizīya) and the original light (al-nūr al-aslī) in virtue of which one apprehends the realities of things. … Second, ma’rifa, by which I mean that one should cognize (ya’rif) four things: oneself (or one’s soul, nafsahū), one’s Lord, this world, and the afterlife.92 … The third aspect is ‘ilm, by which I mean the cognition (NB: ma’rifa!) of how to proceed on the path toward God as well as the knowledge (‘ilm) of what brings one closer to or farther away from God and the knowledge (‘ilm) of the dangers, obstacles, and perils of the path. We have discussed all this in the books of The Revival of the Religious Sciences.93

One has to bear in mind that al-Ghazâli does not carry this distinction all the way through. In some contexts, he differentiates between ma’rifa and ‘ilm in ways that have nothing to do with theoria and praxis. In one passage, for instance, ma’rifa and ‘ilm are said to correspond to the philosophical terms tasawwur (concept) and tasdiq (proposition) respectively.94 This, too, is of course an ad hoc distinction that has no bearing on the other contexts in which the terms ma’rifa and ‘ilm are used.
2 The science of unveiling

Unveiling (mukāshafa) is a key term of al-Ghazālī’s noetics, and the so-called “science of unveiling” (‘ilm al-mukāshafa) is one of the two components of the spiritual discipline which al-Ghazālī sets out to “revive” in his magnum opus, The Revival of the Religious Sciences. Both unveiling as a general term and the science of unveiling in particular deserve close consideration. Introducing The Revival of the Religious Sciences is a good place to start.

The Revival of the Religious Sciences: What sciences are being revived?

Al-Ghazālī’s Revival, written for the most part during his travels in Syria and Palestine in 488–90/1095–7, is the most programmatic and explicit of all his works about his aims as a religious scholar. According to one of al-Ghazālī’s favorite hadiths, “Scholars are heirs to the prophets” (al-‘ulamā’ warathat al-anbiyā’).1 Al-Ghazālī interprets this hadith to mean that scholars “inherit” the prophetic mission of admonishing fellow human beings to repent, to change their ways, and to be mindful of God and the afterlife. The main duty of a religious scholar, in his view, is to carry forth the work of the prophets and to lead his readers to salvation (najāt) and felicity (sa’āda) in the afterlife – a task somewhat analogous, in a Christian context, to the function of bishops and priests vis-à-vis their flock.2 Al-Ghazālī calls those religious scholars who live up to their vocation “scholars of the afterlife” (‘ulamā’ al-ākhira) and distinguishes them sharply from “scholars of this world” (‘ulamā’ al-dunyā), whom he disparagingly identifies as mere “lawyers” (fuqahā’). The call to renounce the world (dunyā) and devote oneself exclusively to the afterlife (ākhira) is a central theme in al-Ghazālī’s writings. Even his spiritual autobiography The Deliverer from Error is, among other things, a story of his own transformation from a scholar of this world, concerned with fame, social status, and prestige, to a scholar of the afterlife.

In the exordium (khutba) of the Revival, al-Ghazālī lays out the reasons that led him to the composition of this book. He laments the fact that in his generation there remained only scholars of this world, while scholars of the afterlife are difficult to come by. According to al-Ghazālī, the true religious science, the “Science of the Path to the Afterlife” (‘ilm ṭariq al-ākhira), taught by the Prophet...
Muḥammad and pursued by the first generations of Muslims, is well-nigh forgotten. It is as a spokesman of this, allegedly forgotten science, seeking to bring it back to life that al-Ghazālī writes The Revival of the Religious Sciences.

[T15] [A disease] has afflicted numerous people and overcome the masses: the inability to discern this matter’s importance and the ignorance of the fact that the problem is serious and the crisis severe. The afterlife is [rapidly] approaching, and this world is fleeting. Death is near, and the journey is long. Supplies are short, the danger is great, and the road is blocked. The insightful observer knows that only knowledge and practice fully devoted to the face of God avail. Traversing the path to the afterlife, abounding as it does in misfortunes, with neither guide nor companion, is arduous and exhausting. For the guides on the road are the scholars (‘ulamā’) who are heirs to the prophets. But the [present] age is devoid of them, and there remain only imitators, most of whom have been overpowered by Satan and seduced by tyranny. Every one of them pursues his immediate fortune and has come to see right (ma’rūf) as wrong (munkar) and wrong as right. The knowledge of religion [i.e. Islam] has vanished and the torch of guidance has been extinguished throughout the earth.

They caused people to imagine that there is no other knowledge than an authoritative ruling (fatwā), employed by the judges in settling a dispute when the mob riots, or debating [tricks] (jadāl) with which a seeker of vanity arms himself to overcome and silence [his opponent], or embellished rhymed prose (saj’) employed by the preacher to influence the common folk. … As for the Science of the Path to the Afterlife (‘ilm tarīq al-ākhirā), the [science] which the righteous forebears (al-salaf al-sālih) pursued and which God in His Book called Understanding (fiqh), Wisdom, Knowledge, Brightness, Light, Guidance, and Direction, it has vanished among the people and is completely forgotten. As this was a serious breach in the edifice of religion and a desperate situation, I realized that it was crucial to devote myself to composing this book, in order to revive the religious sciences (ihyā’an lī-‘ulūm al-dīn), to reveal the ways of the early authorities (al-’a’īmma al-mutaqaddimīn), and to clarify the kinds of knowledge that the prophets and the righteous forebears deemed beneficial.4

In this powerful passage, the Science of the Path to the Afterlife is contrasted with “an authoritative ruling,” “debating [tricks],” and “embellished rhymed prose,” i.e. fiqh (Islamic law), kalām (dogmatic theology), and rhetoric, respectively.5 These three disciplines only claim to be sciences, but are a far cry from what al-Ghazālī considers true religious knowledge. In fact, they are precisely the factors that, in al-Ghazālī’s view, have made Islam moribund. The entire Revival is an attempt to “resuscitate” Islam on the basis of the Science of the Path to the Afterlife and to demote the “worldly” sciences, in particular fiqh and kalām, which in al-Ghazālī’s view usurped the rightful place of the Science of the Path to the Afterlife. Fiqh has even usurped one of this Science’s names, for as al-Ghazālī
hints in the passage just quoted, the original Qur’ānic meaning of *fiqh* is “understanding,” which in his view refers to True Understanding, i.e. to the Science of the Path to the Afterlife.

What is this mysterious Science of the Path to the Afterlife that al-Ghazālī preaches so powerfully and with such an intense sense of urgency? Al-Ghazālī explains that this science is divided into two branches, called the science of practice and the science of unveiling: ‘ilm al-mu‘āmala and ‘ilm al-mukāshafa, respectively.⁶ As proven by Avner Gil’adi, this division is modeled after the Aristotelian division of philosophy (and consequently of the sciences) into practical and theoretical (contemplative).⁷ In Aristotelian terms, sciences that aim at the acquisition of knowledge for the sake of putting it into practice are called practical (‘ulūm ‘amaliya), while those that aim solely at the knowledge of truth are called theoretical (‘ulūm nazarīya).³ This is precisely the distinction between ‘ilm al-mu‘āmala and ‘ilm al-mukāshafa. Al-Ghazālī makes this explicit in the following significant passage.

[T16] Knowledge by means of which one progresses toward the afterlife (al-‘ilm alladhī yutawajjahu bihī ilā l-ākhira) is divided into ‘ilm al-mu‘āmala and ‘ilm al-mukāshafa. I mean by ‘ilm al-mukāshafa [the kind of knowledge] that aims only at the disclosure of the object of knowledge (kashf al-ma’lūm faqat). I mean by ‘ilm al-mu‘āmala [the kind of knowledge] that in addition to disclosure [of the object of knowledge] seeks to put it into practice (ma‘a l-kashf al-‘amal bihī).⁹

This passage can be read in two ways. On the one hand, it can be read simply as a description of the two sciences – the science of practice and the science of unveiling, which makes clear that the former is practical, and the latter, theoretical (in the Aristotelian sense of “practical” and “theoretical” outlined above). On the other hand, the passage can also be read as a definition of the special sense in which al-Ghazālī employs the terms mu‘āmala and mukāshafa. He seems to be saying that the terms mu‘āmala and mukāshafa are to be understood simply as equivalents of the Greek terms praxis and theoria (more commonly translated into Arabic as ‘amal and nazar). Thus, ‘ilm al-mu‘āmala and ‘ilm al-mukāshafa are nothing but practical and theoretical knowledge, i.e. the practical (applied) and the theoretical (contemplative) branches of the Science of the Path to the Afterlife, and this is what their names signify.¹⁰

The science of practice deals, according to al-Ghazālī, with human actions of two types: “exterior” actions of the body and “interior” actions of the heart. The former are subdivided into acts of worship and acts of daily life, the latter, into blameworthy and praiseworthy, thus creating a fourfold division.¹¹

The *Revival* presents itself as a work covering the science of practice alone, to the exclusion of the science of unveiling.¹² Its division into four volumes (or quarters, arba‘), dealing with acts of worship, acts of daily life, qualities leading to perdition, and qualities leading to salvation (‘ibādāt, ‘ādāt, muḥlikāt, and munjīyāt), mirrors the fourfold structure of the science of practice. Thus, simply
by looking at the table of contents of the Revival, as shown in Table 2.1, one can get a good idea of what the science of practice contains.

It can be seen that the science of practice is essentially a religious ethics with a pronounced element of askesis (“training” of the soul). It focuses on the ethical aspects of religious and social life (vols 1–2), and on combating one’s vices, cultivating the virtues, and developing proper religious attitudes, such as renunciation of the world, patience and thankfulness to God, reliance on God (tawakkul), and mindfulness of death and the afterlife (vols 3–4).

The relation between the two branches of the Science of the Path to the Afterlife – the science of practice and the science of unveiling – is that of the means and the goal. The science of practice is the means to the practice itself, which in turn is the means to the attainment of unveiling (mukāṣhafa). Finally, the utmost goal of unveiling is the attainment of the cognition of God (maʿrīfāt Allāh) in this world and of felicity (saʿāda) in the afterlife. Felicity in the afterlife is conditional upon the cognition of God in this life, as we shall see below.

The science of practice teaches, essentially, how to polish “the mirror of the heart” – an image we have already encountered in the preceding chapter – so that it may reflect “divine realities.” When the heart is polished and directed towards

Table 2.1 Table of contents of the Revival

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God, divine realities become disclosed to it. It is these divine realities that, when communicated to a human individual, constitute the science of unveiling.

[T17] By the science of unveiling we mean the lifting of the veil to the point that the plain truth (jaliyat al-haqq) in these matters becomes apparent as [in the case of] eyewitnessing ('iyan), which is never in doubt. This is indeed possible for the substance of a human being (jawhar al-insan), were it not for the fact that the mirror of the heart (mir'at al-qalb) accumulates rust and filth due to the defilements of this world (qadhurat al-dunyay).

By the Science of the Path to the Afterlife [i.e. its practical part, the science of practice] we mean the science that teaches how to polish the mirror [of the heart] from these accretions. They are a veil [separating us] from God and from the cognition of His attributes and acts (ma'rifat sifatih wa-af'alihi). Cleansing and purifying [the mirror of the heart] is made possible only by abstaining from desires and following the prophets' example in all their states.

To the degree that the [surface of] the heart is laid bare [through the practice of polishing it] and [the heart] is directed towards the Real, His realities will shine in it (yatala'la'u fih h.āqā'īquhū) [this corresponds to the science of unveiling]. … This is the knowledge that is neither to be committed to writing nor to be spoken about by those who have some of it revealed to them by God. [One may speak about it] only with those who are worthy of it (ahlīhi) and partake of it already, [and even then only] by way of reminder and in secret ('alā sabīl al-mudhākara wa-bi-ṭarīq al-īsrār).

Al-Ghazālī repeatedly asserts that the science of unveiling is an esoteric science, which one must not commit to writing: “It is not permitted to record it in books.” Prophets spoke about it only “in hints and allusions, symbolically and succinctly” (bi-l-ramz wa-l-īmāl 'alā sabīl al-tamthīl wa-l-ījāl), and the scholars, who are heirs to the prophets, are required to follow their example.

Despite all this, however, the Revival has numerous, no doubt deliberate, digressions into the science of unveiling that typically begin as follows:

[T18] Revealing this mystery belongs to the science of unveiling. It is reserved [only for those worthy of it] (madnūn bihī) and must not be divulged. The most one is allowed to mention is the following …

[T19] Know that this is the utmost end of the science of unveiling. The mysteries of this science must not be committed to writing. Indeed one of those who cognize (al-‘ārifūn) said: “Divulging the secret of Lordship is unbelief” (ifshā’ sirr al-rubūbiya kufr). Nor does this subject have any bearing on the science of practice. It is possible, however, to mention something that would breach the wall of your incredulity (istib‘ād). This is the following …

At the end of these digressions, al-Ghazālī typically offers an apology and returns to the main subject:
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This discussion touches upon the sciences of unveiling and stirs up their waves. This was not our aim, so let us return to the previous investigation.

Since we have delved too deeply into the oceans of unveiling, let us hold the reins and return to what befits the science of practice.

As Lazarus-Yafeh pointed out, it is as if al-Ghazālī speaks with a double voice: “[S]ometimes, while perusing the book, the reader would get the impression that a section had been penned by two different authors simultaneously; or that the author had addressed the average reader in a loud and confident voice, while at the same time whispering additional hints to that reader who belonged to the chosen few, who was able to understand more than the average reader and probe further into the real meaning of things.”

The content of the science of unveiling

What are these hints? Here is a thematic index of such esoteric remarks, interspersed throughout the Revival and often preceded or followed by longer digressions. Though by no means exhaustive, this index allows determining the subjects, which, according to al-Ghazālī, are covered by the science of unveiling. These can be categorized under five broad sections: (1) God, (2) Cosmology, (3) Prophetology and Religious Psychology, (4) Eschatology, and (5) Principles of Qurʾān interpretation.

1. God
   a. the degrees of tawḥīd (including the highest degree: God as the only being in existence)
   b. the difference between God’s attributes (will, love, etc.) and human attributes bearing the same name
   c. God’s being free from imperfections (taqaddus, tanazzuh)
   d. the human cognition of God

2. Cosmology
   a. the nature of the first created intellect
   b. the connection between the sensory “world of manifestation” (ʾālam al-shahāda) and the suprasensible, intelligible “world of dominion” (ʾālam al-malakūt)
   c. the “mystery of predestination” (sirr al-qadar)
   d. the causal relation between the divine power (al-qudra al-ilāhīya, al-qudra al-azalīya) and human actions
   e. the paradox of unity and plurality (how the entire universe can be seen as one)
   f. that the order of the created universe is the most perfect and just order possible
   g. the way creatures testify to God’s creative wisdom and power
The science of unveiling is the science of the hidden (‘ilm al-batin), which is the apex of the [other] sciences (ghāyat al-‘ulūm). … This is the knowledge of the righteous (al-siddiqīn) and the privileged (al-muqarrabīn).45 … [The term “unveiling”] refers to a light that appears in the heart when it is cleansed and purified of its reprehensible qualities; many matters are disclosed (yankashifu) through this light … to the point that one achieves:

1 True cognition (al-ma’rifa al-haqiqīya) of the essence (dhāt) of God, His enduring and perfect attributes, and His acts;
2 His judgment in creating this world and the afterlife and the way in which He arranged the afterlife in relation to (‘alā) this world;
3 The cognition of the meaning of prophecy and prophet, revelation (wahy), Satan, the term[s] “angels” and “demons,” the manner in which demons assail man, the manner in which angel[s] appear to prophets and revelation reaches them; the cognition of the dominion of the heavens and the earth (malakūt al-samāwāt wa-l-ard),47 the cognition of the heart and the manner in which hosts of angels and demons clash there; the cognition of the difference between an angel’s visit and a demon’s visit;48
4 The cognition of the afterlife, paradise, hell, the punishment in the grave, the bridge [spread over hell], the balance, and the judgment, … encountering God and beholding His gracious face, being close to Him and dwelling in His proximity (al-nuzūl fi jiwārīhī), attaining felicity (ḥusūl al-sa’āda) through the companionship of the highest
assembly (al-mala‘ al-a‘lā)\textsuperscript{49} and the association with angels and prophets, the variation in ranks of the inhabitants of paradise; … and other things the explication of which would take too long.

People have different positions (maqāmāt) on the meanings of these [expressions], after accepting them in principle (ba‘d al-taṣādīq bi-uṣūlihā). Some of them think that all these are symbols (amthila), that what God has prepared for His righteous servants is “what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor has it ever occurred to the heart of man,”\textsuperscript{50} and that humans [in this world know] nothing about paradise except mere attributes and names.\textsuperscript{51} Others think that some of these [expressions] are symbols, while others match the realities conveyed by the terms. …

By the science of unveiling we mean the lifting of the veil to the point that the plain truth in these matters becomes apparent as [in the case of] eyewitnessing (‘iyān), which is never in doubt.\textsuperscript{52}

The term “unveiling” (mukāshafa): A Ṣūfī background

Though al-Ghazālī uses the term “unveiling” (mukāshafa) in a unique sense explained above, it is important to note that the term is of Ṣūfī provenance.\textsuperscript{53} Al-Ghazālī himself, in the Deliverer, uses the term twice to characterize the Ṣūfis (both times together with mushāhada, witnessing): the Ṣūfis are those who claim to be “the people of witnessing and unveiling” (ahl al-mushāhada wa-l-mukāshafa); “unveilings and witnessings commence from the beginning of the [Ṣūfī] path.”\textsuperscript{54} It is therefore appropriate to examine the Ṣūfī background of the term in order better to appreciate its connotations.

According to the early Ṣūfī author and Qur’ān commentator Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), unveiling (mukāshafa) is the first of the three stages of certainty. It is the beginning of certainty (ibtidā‘ al-yaqīn), followed by two more advanced stages of certainty: eyewitnessing (mu‘ayana) and witnessing (mushāhada).\textsuperscript{55} In another saying, also attributed to Sahl, the manifestation of God’s essence (tajallī dhāt) is called unveiling (mukāshafa), and the latter is immediately glossed as the “unveiling of the heart (kushūf al-‘iyān) in this world … and the unveiling of eyewitnessing (kushūf al-‘iyān) in the afterlife.”\textsuperscript{56}

Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988) similarly equates unveiling with certainty (yaqīn). He distinguishes between three varieties of unveiling (mukāshafa): (1) “unveiling of eyewitnessing with bodily eyes on the day of resurrection” (mukāshafat al-‘iyān bi-l-absār yawm al-qiyāma, i.e. the “beatific vision”), (2) “unveiling of the hearts with realities of faith through immediate access to certainty, without [asking] how and without [demanding] a definition” (mukāshafat al-qulūb bi-haqa‘iq al-‘imān bi-mubāsharat al-yaqīn bi-lā kayfa wa-lā hadd), and (3) “unveiling of the signs, through the manifestation of the power upon the prophets in the form of miracles and upon the rest in the form of charisms and the granting of requests” (mukāshafat al-‘ayāt bi-izhār al-qudra li-l-anbiyā’
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The first two varieties seem to correspond to Sahl’s “unveiling of eyewitnessing in the afterlife” and “unveiling of the heart in this world” respectively.

In al-Qushayrī’s (d. 465/1074) commentary on the Verse of Light (more specifically, on the phrase “light upon light,” Q. 24:35), unveiling signifies one of the stages of the outpouring of divine light on the Śūfi adept. This stage is associated with the manifestation of divine attributes. It is preceded by the state of attendance (muhādara) and followed by that of witnessing (mushāhada).

[T23] After that, comes the light of attendance (nūr al-muhādara), i.e. flashes appearing in the innermost depths of the heart (lawā ‘iḥ tabdū fī al-sarāʿīr). After that, comes the light of unveiling (nūr al-mukhāshafa), [achieved] through the manifestation of [divine] attributes. After that, comes the light of witnessing (nūr al-mushāhada), when one’s night turns into a day, stars into moons, moons into full moons, and full moons into suns.

In al-Qushayrī’s celebrated manual of Śūfism, Risāla fī ’Ilm al-taṣawwuf, a more extensive account is given. Attendance, unveiling, and witnessing – again in this order – are associated with being “bound,” then “expanded,” then “thrown,” following the manifestation of God’s signs, attributes, and essence respectively. Attendance, unveiling, and witnessing reflect three successive stages of knowledge: intellection (‘aql), based on demonstration (burḥān); then knowledge (‘ilm), which is no longer based on evidence (dali’il); and finally cognizance (ma’rifa). Remembrance of God (dhikr) is mentioned in connection to the first stage.

[T24] Attendance (muhādara) comes first, then unveiling (mukhāshafa), then witnessing (mushāhada). Attendance is the presence of the heart (huḍūr al-qalb) while it still depends on sequential demonstration (tawātūr al-burḥān). The heart is still behind a veil (warāʾ al-sitr), despite being present in virtue of the overpowering effect of the remembrance [of God] (dhikr). After that comes unveiling, which is the presence [of the heart] with the quality of [increased] clarity, in a state in which it no longer needs to examine evidence or seek the path, nor does it seek assistance from voices of doubt or is veiled from the realm of the hidden. After that comes witnessing, which is the presence of the Real without any residue of suspicion (tuhma). …

The possessor of attendance is bound by [God’s] signs (marbūṭ bi-āyāthī). The possessor of unveiling is expanded through [God’s] attributes (mabsūṭ bi-ṣifāthī). The possessor of witnessing is thrown into [God’s] essence (mulqān bi-dhāthī). The possessor of attendance is directed by his intellection (‘aqluḥū). The possessor of unveiling is drawn near by his knowledge (‘ilmuhū). The possessor of witnessing is obliterated by his cognizance (maʾrifatuhū).

Remarkably, al-Ghazālī himself offers a Śūfi definition of unveiling in his glossary of Śūfi terms in the introduction to the Composition on the Difficult Places of
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the Revival (al-Imlā’ fi ishkālāt al-Ihyā’), where he describes it somewhat enigmatically as follows:61

[T25] Unveiling (mukāshafa) is more perfect than witnessing (mushāhada).62 It has three meanings: unveiling of knowledge, i.e. attaining accurate understanding; unveiling of state (ḥāl), i.e. attaining the vision of the augmentation of state (ziyādat al-ḥāl); unveiling of the oneness [of God],63 i.e. attaining the true sense of an allusion (iṣhāra).64

In short, the Ṣūfī tradition connects unveiling to a particular stage of certainty, knowledge, and outpouring of the divine light. This stage, which is not presented consistently in the sources, is sometimes connected to the manifestation of divine attributes (al-Qushayrī) or even divine essence (Sahl al-Tustarī). It is often divided into several varieties (Sahl al-Tustarī, al-Sarrāj, al-Ghazālī) or becomes part of a larger sequence of illuminatory states (Sahl al-Tustarī, al-Qushayrī).

The difference between all these definitions (including al-Ghazālī’s own Ṣūfī definition in the Composition) and the understanding of unveiling in the Revival is that the distinctive noetics underlying the concept of unveiling in the Revival and involving, as its key component, the image of the heart as a polished mirror seems absent from the classical Ṣūfī tradition. Although al-Ghazālī’s use of the term “unveiling” does not constitute a rupture with the Ṣūfī tradition, he undoubt-edly enriches it, infusing new and original meaning into the old concept.

The soteriological role of the science of unveiling:
Philosophical background

We have already observed that al-Ghazālī sees himself as a religious scholar leading his readers to salvation (najāt) and felicity (sa’āda) in the afterlife. We now need to explain these concepts.65 The difference between salvation and felicity, according to al-Ghazālī, is that the former merely “saves” from eternal punishment in hell, whereas the latter bestows the fullness of bliss in paradise with its pinnacle, the vision of God (ru’yat Allāh). The theory that there are at least two distinct levels among the inhabitants of paradise is grounded in al-Ghazālī’s exegesis of Q. 56:88–91. Al-Ghazālī interprets the Qur’ānic expression “people of the right side” (ašhāb al-yamīn) as referring to the saved (al-nājūn), and the expression “the privileged” (al-muqarrabūn) as referring to the attainers of felicity. The former will reside in “the gardens of Eden” (jannāt ‘adn), while the latter will dwell in the “Highest Paradise” (al-fīrdaws al-a’lā).66

[T26] Salvation (najāt) belongs to everyone who journeys on the path, if his aim is the True Goal (al-maqṣad al-ḥaqq). This is [simply] safety (salāma) [from hell]. As for attainment of felicity (fawz bi-l-sa’āda), it is gained only by those who cognize God (al-‘ārifiūna bi-llāh), who are “the privileged” (al-muqarrabūn, Q. 56:88), i.e. those who are blessed, in their proximity to God (fī jiwār Allāh), with “joy, fragrance, and gardens of bliss” (Q. 56:89).
As for those who are prevented from reaching the utmost limit of perfection, they have salvation \((\text{najāt})\) and safety \((\text{salāma})\), as God said: “If he is one of the privileged, he [has] joy, fragrance, and gardens of bliss, while if he is one of the people of the right side, peace/safety \((\text{salām})\) belongs to you on the right side” (Q. 56:88–91). All those who do not turn toward the Goal and do not apply themselves to It, or apply themselves toward It not with the intention of obedience and servitude, but for some current expediency, they are people of the left side and “those who go astray” (Q. 56:92). Theirs are “pourings of boiling water and burning in hell” (Q. 56:93–4). Know that “this is true certainty” (Q. 56:95) in the eyes of those firm in knowledge.67

In other texts, an intermediate degree between salvation and felicity is introduced, which is called “reward” \((\text{fawz})\) and defined as the attainment of the “lowest grade of bliss” \((\text{asl al-na'īm})\).68 On this threefold scheme, salvation \((\text{najāt})\) means, quite literally, safety from hell and nothing more. It is in this sense that the “saved” are sometimes spoken of as belonging neither to paradise nor hell, but as dwelling in a “limbo” \((\text{al-’a-rāf}, \text{Q. 7:46–9})\) between the two \((\text{manzila bayn al-manzilatayn wa-maqām bayn al-maqāmayn})\). According to al-Ghazālī, this group will include “the madmen, the children of the infidels, and the mentally disabled.”69 Elsewhere, however, salvation also includes all the “ignoramuses” \((\text{al-juhhāl, al-bulh})\), i.e. all those who lack cognition of God and are mere “imitators of authority” \((\text{muqallidūn})\), yet on account of their virtuous lives will gain some reward in the afterlife. It is in this broader sense that I will use the term “salvation” later on.

The difference between the three degrees – salvation, reward, and felicity – is explained in the following parable.

[T27] When a ruler gains control over a city and conquers it by force,70 whomever he did not kill or punish is saved \((\text{nājin})\), even if he be expelled from the city. Whomever he did not punish and allowed to stay in the city with his family and livelihood is, in addition, rewarded with salvation \((\text{jā’iz bi-l-najāt})\).71 [Finally,] whomever [the ruler] honored, allowing him to participate in his government and making him his deputy in the kingdom, he, in addition to being saved and rewarded, attains felicity \((\text{sa’īd})\).72

Al-Ghazālī further specifies that salvation is reached by those who have “belief” \((\text{ālim})\). The term “belief” is here used in the negative sense, synonymously with the term “opinion” \((\text{i’tiqād})\), discussed above.73 Like opinion and contrary to real knowledge, belief “lacks unveiling, insight, and dilation of the chest by the light of certainty” \((\text{laysa fihi kashf wa-ḥaṣira wa-nshirāḥ ṣadr bi-nūr al-yaqīn})\).74 Felicity, by contrast, is reached solely by those who, in addition to scrupulously observing the religious law (this being the sine qua non for entering paradise), also cognize God \((\text{al-’ārifin bi-llāh})\). Perfect felicity \((\text{kamāl al-sa’āda})\) is conditional upon the “cognition of the mysteries [of the Islamic doctrine], the pith of its meanings, and the real meaning of its terms” \((\text{ma’rifat asrārihā wa-lubāb ma’ānihā wa-ḥaqqat zawāhirihā})\).75
Al-Ghazālī insists that “knowledge (‘ilm) is the goal of human beings (maqṣūd al-insān) and their special characteristic (khāṣṣiyatuḥū), it is for this purpose that they were created.”\(^{76}\) “The [unique] characteristic [of human beings] is the cognition of the realities of things” (maʿrifat ḥaqāiq al-ashingā‘).\(^{77}\) The noblest kind of knowledge is the knowledge of God, His attributes, and acts. It is through this type of knowledge that human beings reach perfection (kamāl), attain felicity (saʿāda), and become worthy of “dwelling in the presence of divine sublimity and perfection” (jīwār ḥadrat al-jalāl wa-l-kamāl).\(^{78}\)

Clearly, the type of knowledge alluded to in all these passages as conducive to felicity in the afterlife is the science of unveiling.\(^{79}\) In order to attain felicity, one has to have become, already in this world, conversant with this science and to have attained knowledge of God. Moreover, al-Ghazālī argues that this science is not only a prerequisite for the attainment of felicity. \textit{It is felicity itself}, to the degree that it can be experienced here on earth.

In order to refer to this felicity, al-Ghazālī frequently cites the famous sacred hadīth (originating, ultimately, from the New Testament) “I have prepared for my righteous servants that which no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor has it ever occurred to the heart of man.”\(^{81}\) Sometimes the Qur’ānic verse “No soul knows the eye’s consolation hidden for them” (Q. 32:17) is cited for the same purpose.\(^{82}\)

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It is tempting to conclude that mere “salvation” does consist in “houris, castles, fruits, milk, honey, wine, jewelry, and bracelets,” but al-Ghazālī never actually says that. All he says is that the hearts of the ignorant and dumb (al-juhhāl, al-bulhā) will have “their heads turned around” (nākisa raʾsuhā), such that they will be “with their Lord” (ʿinda rabbihim), but instead of facing the “highest of the high” (aʾlāʾ illīyīn) and contemplating the “presence of Lordship” (ḥaḍrat al-rubūbiyya) they will face the “lowest of the low” (asfāl sāfilīn) and will be unable to contemplate that presence. According to a ḥadīth that al-Ghazālī frequently quotes, God “will give [even] the last person who escapes hell the like of this world tenfold (mithl al-dunyāʾ ashraṯ marraṯ/ʾasharat adʿāf).” Al-Ghazālī comments that “the like of this world tenfold” will be the like in value, not in size or quantity, and that it will consist of nothing sensory. If one were to understand the afterlife as sensory, one would not be human, but would be a “biped donkey” (himāran bi-rijlayn).

There is no doubt that al-Ghazālī’s understanding of felicity is indebted to the Arabic philosophical tradition, where the term “felicity” refers specifically to the bliss in the afterlife (al-sāʿāda al-quswā, ultimately going back to the Greek Εὐδομονία), and knowledge of God is regarded as the telos of human life and the prerequisite to the attainment of that bliss. Al-Ghazālī’s assertion that those who lack this knowledge will fall short of felicity and will reach only a lower paradisiacal state – called salvation or reward – is highly uncharacteristic of the earlier Muslim tradition (including early Sufism), but is common among the philosophers. In fact, al-Ghazālī himself attributes this view to the philosophers in Discussion 20 of the Precipitance of the Philosophers (Tahāfut al-falāsīfa), to be discussed in Chapter 5.
3 Tasting and witnessing

Tasting (dhawq)

“Tasting” (dhawq) – to be understood in the sense of direct personal experience – is one of the most significant and most innovative concepts of al-Ghazālī’s noet- ics. A great number of studies have touched on the meanings and implications of this term. Yet to this day, a comprehensive study of this concept and its sources is lacking. Several key passages in al-Ghazālī’s works have either been disre- garded altogether, or have not been brought to bear on the analysis of this term. Moreover, the Avicennian background of the term has been completely neglected. The following survey will attempt to be more comprehensive and to give due attention to the Avicennian background. It will follow the rough chronological order of al-Ghazālī’s works, established in the Introduction.

Already in the Intentions of the Philosophers, a work likely written by al-Ghazālī in his youth and largely based on Avicenna’s Persian philosophical summa the Book of Knowledge (Dāneshnāme), al-Ghazālī uses the term dhawq in connection to the philosophical notion of felicity (saʿāda), understood by the philosophers as intellectual pleasure (ladhdhaʿaqliya).

[T30] When the cognitions (maʿārif), required by the nature of the intellectual faculty, come to be present [in it] – namely the cognition of God, His angels, His books, His messengers, the way in which existence proceeds from Him, and other cognitions [of this kind] – to the degree that the soul becomes preoccupied with them, while still in the body, and is no longer engrossed in the body and its expediencies and no longer absorbed by its concerns, then – once its conjunction (ittiṣālūhā) [with the intelligibles] becomes permanent and its state is perfected after being separated from the body [at death] – the [intense] pleasure that it will experience from them will be such that no description can adequately capture. The only reason one does not strongly desire and long for this [pleasure] in this life is that one has not tasted it yet (li-ʿadam dhawqīhī) – just as if the pleasure of sexual intercourse were to be described to a child, who has no sexual desire, he would not long for it, but would perhaps even feel disgust at the description of sexual intercourse.
Al-Ghazālī develops this theme in the last discussion of the *Precipitance of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*), where he presents (and subsequently criticizes) the philosophers’ views on the afterlife. As part of his presentation, al-Ghazālī puts in the mouth of the philosophers the claim that “spiritual, intellectual pleasures” (*al-ladhhdhāt al-rūḥāniyya al-‘aqliyya*), to be experienced in the afterlife, are nobler than anything we experience in this life. Until we experience them directly by tasting (*bi-l-dhawq*), they can only be explained in symbols and analogies — which, according to the philosophers, is exactly what the prophets do when they come to speak about the afterlife. It is for this reason that the philosophers interpret all the Qur’ānic descriptions of the afterlife, including the famous wide-eyed houris, as symbols and allegories — an interpretation for which al-Ghazālī takes them to task later on. Here is what al-Ghazālī has to say in his account of the philosophers’ views:

[T31] [Bodily] pleasures [such as the pleasure of sexual intercourse] are base in comparison to spiritual, intellectual pleasures [to be experienced in the afterlife]. However the latter can only be explained using [base] similitudes (amthila) drawn from what people have actually witnessed in this life. Similarly, if we wished to explain the pleasure of sexual intercourse to a child or an impotent person (‘innīn) we would not be able to do so, except through comparing [this pleasure], in the case of the child, to a game (which in his view is the most pleasurable of things), and in the case of an impotent person, to the pleasure of eating delicious food after being extremely hungry. In this way, they would first accept on faith (yuṣaddīq) the very fact of this pleasure’s existence, and then learn that what they have understood through a similitude does not give them a true [understanding] of the pleasure of sexual intercourse, for it can be grasped only through tasting (*bi-l-dhawq*).³

In these passages, the term *dhawq* is used in the limited context of experiencing “intellectual pleasure” (*al-ladhhdhā al-‘aqliyya*) in the afterlife. Since we do not “taste” it here in this life, we do not long for it as we ought (and conversely, have a proclivity to other, baser pleasures that we have “tasted” and experienced in this life, be it food, drink, or sex). For this reason too, it is impossible to describe the true nature of this intellectual pleasure except by means of base and ultimately inadequate analogies, such as the pleasure of food, games, or sexual intercourse. This is why, the philosophers argue, the Qur’ānic promise of sexual gratification with the houris in the afterlife is to be understood as merely a symbolic pointer to this ineffable intellectual pleasure, a pointer which ultimately conveys nothing of the true nature of that pleasure.

In his later works, beginning with the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, al-Ghazālī starts working out the different implications of the term *dhawq* and gradually “generalizes” it, introducing it in a variety of other contexts. Thus, in Book 2 of the *Revival, dhawq* is contrasted with knowledge and is defined as the *perfection* or *entelechy* (*istikmāl*) of knowledge. Notice that “perfection” is not
opposed to, or essentially different from, that which it perfects. Rather, it renders it more detailed, clear, precise, and, al-Ghazālī adds in this context, deepens it. The standard opposition of rind (qishr) versus pith (lubāb) and exterior (zāhir) versus interior (bātin) is deployed to characterize this process of “deepening.”

[T32] A person apprehends an object first in general (jumlatan) and then in detail (tafsīlan) through realization (taḥqūq) and tasting (dhawq), whereby this becomes a state involving him (ḥālan mulābisan lahu). There is a difference between the two types of knowledge (al-‘ilmāni) [i.e. the general and the detailed]: the first is as rind and the second as pith, the first is as something exterior, the second as something interior. When one has a person’s [image] represented in one’s eye in the dark or at a distance, one has some knowledge about [that person]. However, when one sees [that person] close by or after the dissipation of darkness, one recognizes the difference between the two cases. Yet, the second case is not the opposite (didd) of the first. Rather it is its perfection (istikmāl lahu). Likewise, knowledge (‘ilm), belief (īmān), and acceptance on faith (tasdiq) [are perfected by dhawq]. One may accept on faith (qad yusaddiqu) the existence of love, disease, and death before their [actual] occurrence. Yet, one’s realization (taḥaqquq) of them at the time of their occurrence is more perfect than the realization before the occurrence. … Likewise, some religious knowledge (‘ulūm al-dīn) becomes a “tasting” (dhawqan) and is perfected, becoming as something interior in relation to what had existed before it. For there is a difference between a sick person’s knowledge of health and a healthy person’s knowledge of the same!4

This passage already contains in germ everything al-Ghazālī’s later discussions of dhawq have to offer, including the often repeated example of a sick person’s and a healthy person’s respective knowledge of health (or, in other discussions, disease).

Dhawq, thus defined, is the stage when knowledge has become so internalized as to be an integral part of one’s being, a psychological or cognitive state (ḥāl), analogous to a healthy person’s immediate and non-discursive knowledge – i.e. direct experience and awareness – of health, simply in virtue of being healthy. As any other psychological or cognitive state, it is incommunicable to others: just as one would be hard-pressed to explain the meaning of health to an ailing person who (suppose) had never been healthy, so the pleasure of cognizing God (ma’rifat Allāh), for instance, “can only be grasped through experience (bi-l-dhawq) and attempting to communicate it [to a person who has not experienced it] is of little use” (wa-l-hikāya fīhi qalīlat al-jadwā).5 This is the meaning of al-Ghazālī’s phrase “some religious knowledge (‘ulūm al-dīn) becomes a tasting (dhawqan) and is perfected, becoming as something interior in relation to what had existed before it.”

The description of dhawq as a perfection (entelechy) of knowledge and belief (īmān) – the latter synonymous with opinion (i’tiqād) and acceptance on
faith (tasādīq) – anticipates the famous triad īmān–‘ilm–dhawq, articulated in al-Ghazālī’s major works, starting from the following passage from the Book of Forty (Kitāb al-Arbaʿīn). In this passage, the example of sexual desire is chosen again to illustrate the incommunicable nature of dhawq.

[T33] Know that belief (īmān), knowledge (‘ilm), and tasting (dhawq) are three levels far removed from one another (mutabā‘ida). It is conceivable that an impotent person (‘īnān), for instance, may accept on faith (yusaddīq) the existence of sexual desire in another, by accepting [the testimony of] someone whom he trusts and does not suspect of lying. This is [called] belief (īmān). It is also conceivable that he may have knowledge of its existence in another [person] through demonstration (burhān). This is [called] knowledge (‘ilm). It is based on an analogy (qiyyās): he considers his desire for food, for instance, and infers by analogy (yaqīsu) about sexual desire. All this is far removed from apprehending the reality of [sexual] desire in virtue of [actually] having it (bi-wujūdihā lahit). Likewise, a healthy commoner (‘āmmī) can be cognizant with (yarafi) disease, and a healthy physician, through demonstration, which is [the meaning of] knowledge (‘ilm). However, as long as one has not actually fallen ill, one will not have attained dhawq. Similar is the case with obliteration in tawḥīd (al-fanā’ fi l-tawḥīd). Thus dhawq is witnessing (mushāhada), knowledge is analogy (qiyyās), and belief is acceptance of another’s testimony with trust and without suspicion.

In the last sentence, dhawq, knowledge, and belief are correlated, respectively, with witnessing (mushāhada), analogy (qiyyās), and accepting another’s testimony (what al-Ghazālī usually calls taqlīd). The triad īmān–‘ilm–dhawq is thus intimately connected to the triad taqlīd–qiyyās (or burhān)–mushāhada. Each element of the former triad is achieved through the corresponding element of the latter, and each element of the latter is an instrument for the corresponding element of the former.

The intermediate level, that of ‘ilm, seems to refer not only to the dogmatic theologians, mutakallimūn, with their “dialectical” reasoning, but also to the philosophers, as the inclusion of burhān, apodeictic demonstration, as a method of ‘ilm indicates. Al-Ghazālī’s dhawq is thus a stage of cognition that is, in a sense, “above” philosophical knowledge. Significantly, however, the knowledge achieved at this stage is not essentially different from philosophical knowledge. Rather, it is a “perfection” (istikmāl) of philosophical knowledge, achieved when that knowledge is internalized, reaches the level of the inner state of certitude and assurance (yaqīn), becomes a psychological or cognitive state (ḥāl), and ceases being mediated and discursive; when it becomes a “tasting” (dhawq) – i.e. a direct and incommunicable experience, analogous to an ailing person’s experience of his disease and a healthy person’s of his health – and a face-to-face encounter with, and an intellectual vision or witnessing of, objects of intellection (ru’ya, mushāhada).
In his *Loftiest Goal* (*al-Maqsad al-asnā*), al-Ghazālī employs the term *dhawq* in his elaborate and profound discussion of knowledge of God. He begins by using his stock example of explaining the pleasure of sexual intercourse to a child. There are, logically speaking, two ways to do so. The first way is to tell the child that this pleasure is analogous to other pleasures he or she is familiar with, such as the sweetness of sugar. The second way is to let the child grow and actually experience this pleasure. It is only the second way that leads to true cognition (*haqīqat al-ma‘rifā*), while the first way falls short of the level of “those who have tasted this pleasure and grasped it” (*man dhāqa tilka l-ladhdha wa-adrakahā*). Once the child has grown, and “sexual desire has emerged in him, and he has tasted [sexual intercourse]” (*mahmūd zaharat al-shahwa wa-dhāqa*), he or she will know for certain (*qat‘an*) that it is not similar to the sweetness of sugar.

Similarly, al-Ghazālī continues, there are two ways (*sabīlān*) to attain cognition of God. One way is cognizing God’s names and attributes by analogy with our own. Such analogy is necessarily imperfect, since the difference between God’s attributes and ours is greater than the difference between the pleasure of sexual intercourse and the sweetness of sugar. According to the Qur’ān, “there is nothing like God” (Q. 42:11), which means that God has a specific characteristic (*khāsīya*) which no one else has and which is similar to nothing else; hence no analogy can possibly capture it. Hence this way, learning about God’s attributes by analogy to our own – the way of kataphatic theology, to borrow a term from the Patristic tradition – is “inadequate” (*qāšir*).

The other way would logically be waiting till one acquires all the lordly attributes and becomes a “lord” (*rabb*) himself, just as a child waits till he or she experiences the pleasure of sexual intercourse. As it is impossible to “become” a lord, however, this way of cognizing God is “blocked” (*masdūd*): only God can know Himself in this way. Since it is only the second way that yields true cognition (*al-ma‘rifā al-muhāqqiqa*), one cannot have true cognition of God. The ultimate limit of what one *can* know about Him is to know that one is incapable of knowing Him – thus, negative, or apophatic theology triumphs over the kataphatic.

Similarly, al-Ghazālī argues, one cannot have a true cognition of prophecy without being a prophet – because prophets, too, have a specific characteristic (*khāsīya*) which they do not share with others and which cannot be captured by analogy to something else. Nor can one have a true cognition of the pleasures and pains of the afterlife while still in this world. With regard to the afterlife, we know only “attributes and names,” but not the true reality. Here al-Ghazālī harks back to the original context in which the term *dhawq* was used: the incommunicable nature of the intellectual pleasure in the afterlife. Al-Ghazālī argues that “similar is the case with everything of which one has only heard a name and an attribute, without having tasted it, grasped it, attained it, and become characterized by it” (*wa-kadhālika fī kull mā samī‘a l-insān ismahū wa-sifatahū wa-mā dhāqahū wa-mā adrakahū wa-lā intahā ilayhi wa-lā ittasafa bihi*).

The chronologically later – and somewhat better known – discussions of *dhawq* in al-Ghazālī’s *Niche of Lights* and *Deliverer from Error* reinforce and
enhance this picture, most importantly, by connecting *dhawq* to prophecy and establishing a continuum between the two. In the second part of the *Niche of Lights*, for instance – in his discussion of the five “spirits” already mentioned above – Al-Ghazālī argues as follows.

> [T34] It is not impossible, o you who dwells in the realm of intelligence (‘aql),¹⁴ that beyond intelligence there be another stage (tawr) at which is revealed what is not revealed at [the stage of] intelligence, just as it is not impossible that intelligence be a stage beyond discernment (tamyīz) and sensory perception (iḥsās), a stage in which amazing and wondrous things are disclosed of which sensory perception and discernment fall short. Do not think that perfection ends at your own level!¹⁵

If you seek a similitude (mithālān) taken from the set of observed qualities of some human beings, consider the musical taste (*dhawq al-shi‘r*) that distinguishes some people.¹⁶ … Even if all the intelligent people who have [this] taste (arbāb al-dhawq) were to gather together to explain the meaning of taste to someone [who does not have it] they would be unable to do so. This is a similitude taken from a base matter but close to your [level of] understanding. So infer by analogy (fa-qis) about the special prophetic taste (*al-dhawq al-khāṣṣ al-nabawī*).

Strive to become one of those who have a tasting (*dhawq*, i.e. direct experience) of some of this spirit [i.e. the sacred prophetic spirit], for the saints (awliyā’) have [this taste] in abundance. Failing that, strive to become one of those who have knowledge (‘ilm) of it through the analogies (aqyisā) that we mentioned and the clues (tanbīḥāt) to which we alluded. Failing that, make sure [at the very least] that you do not fall below those who have belief (īmān) in it.¹⁷ … Knowledge is above belief, and *dhawq* above knowledge. *Dhawq* is actual attainment (wijdān), knowledge is analogy (qiyyās), and belief is mere acceptance on authority (qabūl mujarrad bi-l-taqlīd). So have a positive opinion of those who attain (ahl al-wijdān) or those who have cognition (ahl al-‘īrfān).¹⁸

We see that *dhawq* is associated with the highest among the five “spirits”: the sacred prophetic spirit. The group singled out as having this kind of *dhawq* – i.e., in this context, taste, direct experience, or “inkling” of prophecy – are the saints (awliyā’) – a term designating a spiritual rank just below the prophets.¹⁹ The readers are encouraged to strive to attain some *dhawq* of prophecy themselves, and thus to become “saints,” who are almost-prophets. Failing that, they should try to achieve knowledge (‘ilm) of prophecy, using analogies and demonstrations, such as those offered by the philosophers and the dogmatic theologians (mutakallimūn).²⁰ Those falling short of this level too are encouraged at the very least to believe in the existence of prophecy through taqlīd.²¹

The *Deliverer* provides a further illustration of the incommunicable nature of *dhawq*. *Dhawq* is compared to inebriation. A sober person who cognizes the definition of inebriation (i.e. has ‘ilm of inebriation) is contrasted with a person
who does not cognize the definition of inebriation but is himself in the state of inebriation (i.e. has no ‘ilm of inebriation, but has dhawq of inebriation). The same, al-Ghazālī claims, is the difference between cognizing the definition of asceticism (zuhd) and its conditions and causes on the one hand, and actually being an ascetic on the other.22

Being the only work where al-Ghazālī unequivocally affiliates himself with the Ṣūfīs, the Deliverer seems also to be the only work that attributes to them the quality of dhawq. Thus in the following passage, the Ṣūfīs effectively take the place of the saints (awliyā’), mentioned in the passage cited from the Niche ([T34]).

[T35] I had acquired everything that can be acquired of the [Ṣūfī] path through learning and instruction. However, it became apparent to me that the most special of their characteristics (akhasṣ khawāṣṣihim) cannot be attained though learning but only through tasting, [experiencing a spiritual] state, and transformation of qualities (bi-l-dhawq wa-l-ḥāl wa-tabaddul al-ṣifāt). … I knew for certain that they are possessors of [spiritual] states, not people of idle talk (arbāb al-ahwāl, lā ʿashāb al-aqwāl) and that I have acquired what can be acquired by way of knowledge. What remained [for me to acquire] was that which could not be attained through instruction and learning but only through tasting and following the path (bi-l-dhawq wa-sulūk).23

Finally, echoing the final part of the Niche of Lights passage ([T34]), al-Ghazālī draws a connection between dhawq and prophecy.

[T36] Whoever has not been granted an inkling of [closeness to God]24 through direct experience, has no understanding of the true reality of prophecy except the name (man lam yurzaq minhu shay’an bi-l-dhawq fa-laysa yudriku min ḥaqīqat al-nubūwa illā l-ism). [It is indeed possible to gain such an inkling, because] the miracles of the saints (karāmāt al-awliyā’)25 are in reality the beginnings of [the states of] the prophets. This was the first state of the Messenger of God when he came to Mount Ḥirā’ where he used to seclude himself with his Lord and worship, so the Arabs said: “Muḥammad fell in love (ʿashīqa) with his Lord.” He who pursues this state will realize it through tasting (bi-l-dhawq).26

There is, then, a continuum between the states attainable through dhawq, the miracles of the saints, and the states of the prophets, so much so that one can attain through dhawq the state of closeness to God (qurb) and ardent love for Him (‘ishq), which formed the beginning of Muḥammad’s prophetic path. Indeed, there is not only continuity but also commonality between dhawq and prophecy. As a remarkable passage from the Niche of Lights makes clear,

[T37] The possessor of tasting (ṣāhib al-dhawq) has some states in common with the prophet. The [Qur’ānic] image for this commonality (mushāraka) is
warming oneself [by the fire] (al-iṣṭilā‘). Only he who has [access to the] fire can warm himself by the fire, not he who merely heard a report of it (khabarahā).27

Those who “merely heard a report” of the fire of prophecy are, of course, those who believe in prophecy through taqlīd and do not themselves have dhawq: a direct experience or an inkling of it. It is only the latter who have some access to the fire of prophecy and are able to “warm themselves” by being close to it.

From its “modest” beginnings – as a term designating the experience of intellectual pleasure in the afterlife, according to the philosophers’ teachings – the term dhawq receives a truly significant meaning in al-Ghazālī’s later works. This happens in two stages. First, the term dhawq is generalized to mean the “perfection” or “entelechy” of knowledge: that higher stage at which knowledge is internalized and transformed so as to become a psychological or cognitive state (ḥāl). On the second stage, dhawq is connected to prophecy. Indeed, it constitutes the link between ordinary cognition and prophecy: dhawq is essentially that degree of prophecy which is available to non-prophets. It is remarkable that al-Ghazālī calls upon fellow-Muslims to strive to attain dhawq of prophecy, because it is only through such “tasting” that they can have a true cognition (as opposed to mere “belief” or “opinion” based on hearsay) of what prophecy really is.

**Witnessing (mushāhada)**

We can now turn to the second term pertinent to our analysis: mushāhada (witnessing, in the sense of intellectual vision) – with the less frequently used variant, muʿāyana (eyewitnessing).

Several passages can help us understand the meaning of mushāhada. Let us consider, for instance, a passage from Book 21 of the Revival where al-Ghazālī differentiates between three levels of “belief” (īmān).28 Mushāhada plays a key role in his description of the third, and highest, level.

1. The first level of belief, according to this passage, is that of the common folk, ʿawāmm. This is sheer “imitation of authority” (al-taqlīd al-mahd), for it is based solely on reports of others.
2. The second level – not far removed from the first, al-Ghazālī poignantly adds – is the belief of the dogmatic theologians (mutakallimūn), which is mixed with a kind of inferential reasoning (mamzūj bi-naw’ istidlāl).
3. Finally, the third level is the belief of those who cognize (ʿārifīn), witnessed through the light of certainty (al-mushāhad bi-nūr al-yaqīn). This is real cognition and sure and certain witnessing (al-maʿrifā l-ḥaqiqīya wa-l-mushāhada l-yaqīnīya).

Al-Ghazālī offers an analogy to clarify the distinctions between these three levels. The level of the common folk is analogous to maintaining that Zayd is in the house solely on the basis of reports to that effect. The level of the mutakallimūn
is analogous to maintaining that Zayd is in the house upon hearing his voice from inside. Zayd’s voice serves as an indication (dalīl) that he must be in the house — and it is on indications such as this that the mutakallimūn’s inferential reasoning is based. The third level, finally, is analogous to maintaining that Zayd is in the house after one has entered the house and has actually seen Zayd there. On this level there still remains variation in the scope of knowledge (maqādir al-‘ulūm) and in degrees of unveiling (darajāt al-kashf). The former type of variation is analogous to seeing also ‘Amr and Bakr in the house rather than Zayd alone; the latter type of variation, to seeing details of Zayd’s face more clearly, depending on the quality of light in the house, the time of the day, etc.29

The distinction between the third and second levels — witnessing (mushāhada) and inferential reasoning (istidlāl) respectively — is important and appears also in other works. In the Niche of Lights, for instance, al-Ghazālī differentiates between those who know God by means of something else, i.e. infer His existence from other things (man yarā l-ashyā’ fa-yarāhu bi-l-ashyā’), and those who know all things through God (man yarā l-ashyā’ bihi), i.e. in the light of unveiling. The former way is called istidlāl and is ascribed to “scholars firmly rooted in knowledge” (al-‘ulamā’ al-rāsikhūn, who are evidently the mutakallimūn of the Revival);30 the latter is called mushāhada and ascribed to the “righteous” (al-ṣiddīqūn).31

Witnessing (mushāhada) differs from inferential reasoning (istidlāl) in that the former is immediate and direct, much like physical vision or a face-to-face encounter, and the latter mediated and indirect, insofar as it is based on an indication, dalīl. Using a loaded philosophical term, we can say that witnessing is non-discursive, that is, it does not involve syllogistic or any other reasoning of the type involved in inference. I shall return to this point towards the end of this chapter.

Witnessing is further described as sure and certain (yaqīnīya), i.e. free from the possibility of error (yastahālu ma’ākān al-khatā’), unlike the lower two levels.32 This immunity from error is due to the “light of certainty” — a particular (unspecified) type of divine illumination that allows it to occur. Finally, witnessing is presented as a mark of “those who cognize” (‘ārifūn). Al-Ghazālī adds that it is similar to the cognition of the privileged and of the righteous (ma’rifat al-muqarrabūn wa-l-ṣiddīqūn), which is also “based on” witnessing (an mushāhada). The distinction between “those who cognize” on the one hand and the privileged and the righteous on the other is not spelled out in the passage.

In another important discussion, from Book 36 of the Revival, mushāhada (with its synonyms liqā’, encounter, and ru’ya, intellectual vision) is defined as the perfection and entelechy (istikmāl) of intellection. Despite its considerable length, the passage is worth quoting in full:

[T38] Know that objects of apprehension (al-mudrakāt) are divided into those that are subject to imagination (mā yadkhulu fī l-khayāl) [i.e. physical objects] … and those that are not subject to imagination [i.e. non-physical objects], like the essence of God and anything that is not a body. … Now, when one sees a person and then closes his eyes, he finds [this person’s] form present
in his imagery (fi khayālihā) as if he is [still] looking at it.33 However, when one opens his eyes and looks [at the person] he realizes that the two [cases] are not the same. This does not amount to a [real] difference between the two forms, for the visible form agrees with the imagined one. Rather the difference is only in additional clarity and unveiling (mazād al-wudūḥ wa-l-kashf) [gained in the latter case], for vision renders the visible object’s form more perfect34 in unveiling and clarity. Thus, imagination (khayāl) is the elementary apprehension (awwal al-idrāk), while vision is a perfection (istikmāl) of the apprehension of the image, characterized by utmost unveiling (ghāyat al-kashf). It is on account of this utmost unveiling that it is called vision, not because it is [located] in the eye. Indeed, were God to create this perfectly unveiled perception (al-idrāk al-kāmil al-makshūf) in the forehead35 or in the chest, for instance, it would still deserve being called vision.

Now that you understand this [principle] in the case of imaginable objects, know that knowable objects that cannot be represented by the imagery (lā tatashakkal fi l-khayāl) are also cognized and apprehended on two levels, one of which is elementary (ūlā), and the other – its perfection (istikmāl lahā). The difference in unveiling and clarity between the two is the same as between what is imagined and what is seen. In relation to the first, the second level is called witnessing (mushāhada), encounter (liqā‘), and [intellectual] vision (ru‘ya). This appellation is true, for [physical] vision is [also] called vision because it is [characterized by] utmost unveiling (ghāyat al-kashf) [– not because it is located in the eye].36

This extremely elaborate passage makes the role of witnessing clear. Witnessing is related to intellection (which is what is meant by the elementary mode of cognition of non-physical objects) as physical vision is to imagination; it is essentially intellectual vision. This can be presented in Table 3.1.

In both cases, the difference between the higher (“perfect”) and the lower (“elementary”) modes of cognition is in the degree of “unveiling and clarity,” not in any actual difference in the apprehended form itself. Just as seeing a visible object is clearer and more distinct than imagining it (i.e. representing the object’s image in the mind), so also “witnessing” an intelligible concept is clearer and more distinct than intellection.

The essential characteristic of witnessing as opposed to intellection is, thus, clarity of vision. A second obvious characteristic is that witnessing, in contradistinction to intellection, requires no effort – the witnessed concepts are simply

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present to the mind the way physical objects are present to the eye. However, just as the physical eye has to be open in order for vision to occur, similarly the eye of the mind has to be open to render witnessing possible.

[T39] Just as it is God’s habit (sunnat Allāh)\footnote{T39} to have the closure of eyelids obstruct complete disclosure [of a visible object] through vision, [the eyelids] acting as a veil between the eyesight and the visible object, … so also it is required by God’s habit that as long as the soul is veiled by bodily accidents, follows the desires, and is controlled by human qualities it should not attain the witnessing of and the encounter with knowable objects, which transcend imagination. Indeed, this life [as a whole] is a veil necessarily [concealing such objects], just as eyelids are a veil [obstructing] physical vision.\footnote{T39}

Al-Ghazālī is arguing, in a nutshell, that attachment to the body – and life in the body in general – is an obstacle to what he calls witnessing, that is, immediate and non-discursive intellectual vision of the intelligibles. The more detached from the body the soul becomes, the easier it is for it to “witness” intelligible realities. Ultimately, it is only after death, when the soul is disengaged from the body completely, that it will be able to witness the intelligible realities as they really are.

Al-Ghazālī makes clear, however, that there is no essential difference – i.e. difference in content – between witnessing and intellection; the only difference is in the degree of “clarity and unveiling.” It is in this sense, too, that we are to understand the meaning of the “vision of God” (ru’yat Allāh) in the afterlife.

[T40] The vision [of God in the afterlife] (al-ru’ya) is real, as long as one does not understand by it the vision that is the perfection of imagination (istikmāl al-khayāl), [i.e. the physical vision] of an imaginable and representable object circumscribed by directions and space. The Lord of lords is greatly exalted above this! Rather, just as you have cognized Him in this world with a real and perfect cognition without imagination (takhayyul), representation (tašawwur), and ascribing [to Him] a shape and a form, likewise you shall “see” Him in the afterlife. Indeed, I say that it is the same cognition obtained in this world that shall become perfected [in the next world], reaching utmost unveiling and clarity and becoming witnessing (mushāhada). There shall be no difference between witnessing in the afterlife and [intellecting] the knowable object[s] in this world, except with respect to additional unveiling and clarity – like, in our analogy, imagination is perfected by [physical] vision (istikmāl al-khayāl bi-l-ru’ya). And just as cognition of God [in this life] does not involve [ascribing to Him] form or [spatial] direction (ithbāt ṣūra wa-jiha), so also the perfection of this very cognition [in the afterlife], as it will grow in clarity to the utmost degree of unveiling, will not involve direction and form, because it is this very [cognition which gets perfected], without any difference other than increase in unveiling – just as the form apprehended by vision is the very
same form that was present in the imagery, with the only exception of increase in unveiling.\textsuperscript{39}

It is significant that al-Ghazālī’s interpretation of the vision of God in the afterlife as (a perfection of) intellection runs contrary to the Ash’arite tradition of dogmatic theology, with which al-Ghazālī was formally affiliated, and reflects, instead, a clear philosophical bias.\textsuperscript{40} As is well known, the Ash’arites insisted on the literal interpretation of the vision of God in the afterlife as (1) seeing God (2) with one’s own eyes (bi-l-absār).\textsuperscript{41}

To be sure, later in the same section al-Ghazālī concedes the second (and only the second) aspect of the traditional interpretation, yet he does so with noticeable reluctance.\textsuperscript{42} He argues, first, that the question of whether the vision of God will be fixed in the eyes or in the heart is secondary to the pleasure of seeing God (“the intelligent person eats vegetables without asking whence they come”);\textsuperscript{43} second, that either location of vision is possible for the pre-eternal divine power (\textit{al-qudra al-azalīya}); third, that one is not allowed to depart from the literal interpretation of the vision of God without a “necessity” (\textit{dāruŋ}), i.e. an apodeictic demonstration that rules out the literal interpretation as philosophically untenable.\textsuperscript{44} Consequently, he concedes that the traditional interpretation that fixes the vision of God in the eyes – following the literal meaning of the verb “to see” – is the correct one. Yet the fact that he ends the argument with an inconclusive “God knows best” (\textit{wa-lāhu ta’āla al-‘alam}) indicates that he is not entirely at ease with this interpretation. His repeated insistence, in [T38], that it is on account of utmost unveiling that vision (\textit{ru’ya}) is called vision, \textit{not because it is fixed in the eye}, strengthens this impression.\textsuperscript{45}

The same kind of reluctance is observable in the parallel passage in al-Ghazālī’s Persian work \textit{The Alchemy of Felicity}. There, al-Ghazālī argues that

\textbf{[T41]} [physical] vision (\textit{dīdār}) is called vision because it is an entelechy of imagination (\textit{be kamāl rasidan-e khayāl}), not because it occurs in the eye. Even if vision were created in the forehead it would still be vision. So it is unnecessary to dwell too much on its location. Yet, because the term “vision” (\textit{dīdār}) appears [in the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth in connection to the afterlife],\textsuperscript{46} and its literal meaning is [vision with] the eye, you must hold the opinion (\textit{bāyad e’teqād konī})\textsuperscript{47} that the eye will have a share in this [vision] in the afterlife, but you must also know that the eye of the afterlife (\textit{chashm-e ākherat}) will not be like the eye of this world (\textit{chashm-e donyā}), because the eye [of this world] cannot see without [spatial] direction (\textit{jehat}), but the eye [of the afterlife] will see without direction (\textit{bī jehat}).\textsuperscript{48}

There is, in my view, little doubt that this “eye of the afterlife” is the intellect – especially if we recall that in the \textit{Niche of Lights} al-Ghazālī insists that the intellect is also a kind of “eye” of the heart analogous to the physical eye, yet much superior to the latter.\textsuperscript{49} Binyamin Abrahamov is clearly correct when he observes that “while making the impression that he follows the Tradition, al-Ghazālī constructs
his own theory which opposes the Tradition as understood by the majority of the Muslim doctors.”

To recapitulate, witnessing (mushāhada) is (1) the clear, effortless, immediate, and non-discursive intellectual vision of intelligible realities. (2) It is sure and certain (yaqīnīya), i.e. free from the possibility of error. (3) It is obtained through the “light of certainty” – a particular (unspecified) type of divine illumination. (4) It is the perfection (istiknāl) of intellection, the way physical vision is the perfection of imagination. (5) The difference between witnessing and intellection lies only in the degree of clarity and unveiling. (6) Due to the soul’s attachment to the body it is difficult for it to attain mushāhada in this life. (7) It is only after death that the soul will attain perfect witnessing of intelligible realities (but only of those realities that it had cognized during life, because witnessing is the perfection of those same cognitions that it had acquired before death). (8) This is the meaning of the vision of God in the afterlife (ru’ya). (9) However, since it is the same cognition obtained during life that one will “witness” after death, the degree of each person’s witnessing in the afterlife will depend on the degree of intellection in this world. Consequently, the vision of God will only be conferred on those who had achieved cognition of God (ma’rifat Allāh) during their lifetime. (10) Al-Ghazālī’s interpretation of the vision of God as a perfection of intellection runs contrary to the Ash’arite tradition and reflects philosophical influence. He does reluctantly concede that the vision of God may be fixed in the eyes, as the Ash’arites (and the traditionalists) interpret it. However, his true view is more likely to be that the vision of God will be fixed in the “heart” (i.e. in the human rational soul), as this vision is nothing but the perfection of the intellection of God acquired in this life, and this intellection is fixed in the heart.

The Avicennian foundation

Both al-Ghazālī’s analysis of dhawq and his analysis of mushāhada rest on a firm Avicennian foundation, which has not been sufficiently explored by modern research. At this point in our inquiry, a brief account of Avicenna’s use of the terms tajriba (experience) and dhawq (tasting) is needed.

In several works, Avicenna stresses that there is an experiential side to knowledge that cannot be captured by a syllogism: this is the intellectual pleasure (al-ladhdha al-‘aqlīya) associated with it. This is made clear, for instance, in the following two passages, one from the Origin and Destination (al-Mabda’ wa-l-ma’ād), the other, from the Commentary on the Theology of Aristotle.

[T42] It is evident that the proper pleasure (ladhdha) and felicity (sa’āda) [of the intellectual faculty] are loftier than the pleasure of a donkey in copulating and chewing food. Yet we do not desire this pleasure naturally, but only in virtue of the intellect. Nor do we crave this pleasure or can conceive of it (lā naḥinnu ilayhā wa-lā nataṣawwaruhā), even though both demonstration and the intellect urge us toward it. In this respect, we are similar to an
impotent person (‘innīn), who neither craves nor desires the pleasure of sexual intercourse, because he has never experienced it and has not come to know it (lam yujarrībhu wa-lam ya’rifhu), although both induction and uninterrupted reports [from others] (al-īstīqrā’ wa-l-tawātur) inform him of its existence and indicate to him that sexual intercourse is accompanied by pleasure. Such is our situation with regard to the pleasure of whose existence we are aware but of which we cannot conceive (na’rifu wujūdahā wa-lā nataṣawwuruhū).

[T43] All sensible and intellectual matters have aspects (ahwāl) that can be known through a syllogism (bi-l-qiyās) and characteristic states (khāwāṣṣ ahwāl) that are known [only] by experience (bi-l-tajriba). Just as neither flavor (tā’m) nor the ultimate nature of sensory pleasures (kunh al-ladhīhā al-hissīya) can be captured by a syllogism – for at most, syllogism can apprehend the affirmation of their [existence] (ithbātahā), devoid of specific details, – so in the case of intellectual pleasure (al-ladhīhā al-aqlīya) and the ultimate aspects of the witnessing of supreme beauty (kunh ahwāl al-mushāhada li-l-jamāl al-a’lā) syllogism can only inform you that they are superior in splendor. As for their specific characteristic (khāṣṣiyatuhā), however, it can only be known through direct appreciation (mubāshara), to which not everyone is guided.

Though in these passages Avicenna uses the term tajriba (experience) and mubāshara (direct appreciation) rather than dhawq, the identity of context (intellectual pleasure) and the identity of example (an impotent person vis-à-vis the pleasure of sexual intercourse) strongly suggest connection to al-Ghazālī’s ideas. In fact, it is virtually undeniable that al-Ghazālī got the example of an impotent person and sexual intercourse from Avicenna’s works – though sometimes, as we have seen above, he replaces the impotent person with a child, so as better to illustrate the possibility that while one is unable to experience this pleasure right now, one may still be able to do so in the future.

In yet another passage, in his Pointers and Reminders (al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīḥāt), where he explores the same theme of intellectual pleasure, Avicenna uses the term dhawq, rather than tajriba.

[T44] It may happen that [the existence of] a certain pleasure is affirmed with certainty, yet in the absence of the aspect (ma’nā) called “taste” (dhawqan), it is possible that one would not find desire for it. Similarly, it may happen that [the existence of] a certain pain is affirmed with certainty, yet in the absence of the aspect (ma’nā) called “suffering” (muqāsāt), it is possible that one would not take extreme care in avoiding it. An example of the former: the state of a person impotent from birth (al-‘innīn khīlqatan) with regard to the pleasure of sexual intercourse. An example of the latter: the state of a person who has never suffered an illness with regard to fever.
This passage not only uses the “Ghazālian” term ḏawq, but also employs the additional example of illness, which may have inspired al-Ghazālī to use illness (or health) as one of his stock examples (alongside inebriation, asceticism, and others), illustrating the difference between ‘ilm and dhawq.

Another interesting instance of ḏawq occurs at the end of Avicenna’s Epistle on the Rational Soul (Risāla fi l-Kalām ‘alā l-nafs al-nātiqa). There, Avicenna writes that forty years previously, at the beginning of his career (fi bidāyat amrī), he composed a compendious treatise on the soul,56

[T45] … following the method of those engaged in research-oriented philosophy (‘alā ṭarīqaḥ al-ḥikma l-bahthīya); let those who wish to gain cognition of [the soul] consult [this treatise] for it is suitable for research-oriented students (talabat al-bahth). However, God the exalted guides whomever He wishes to the method of those engaged in experiential philosophy (lit. philosophy of tasting, ṭarīq al-ḥikma al-ḍawqīya). May He make you and us among them, for He is in charge of, and capable of doing, this.57

Avicenna does not explain what he means by al-ḥikma al-ḍawqīya as opposed to al-ḥikma al-bahthīya. Most likely, a distinction between those who acquire philosophical knowledge through intuition (ḥads), and those who acquire it from teachers, books, and syllogistic reasoning is what he had in mind.58 Be that as it may, it is likely that Avicenna’s somewhat cryptic distinction between al-ḥikma al-bahthīya and al-ḥikma al-ḍawqīya lies in the background of al-Ghazālī’s distinction between ‘ilm and dhawq.59

To move now to the second term under discussion, the term mushāhada is used by Avicenna, as it is by al-Ghazālī, to designate an intellectual vision of intelligibles.60 In his analysis of mushāhada in his Discussions (Mubāḥathāt), Avicenna argues that what distinguishes mushāhada from mere intellection is that in mushāhada the intellect acquires certain “familiarity” (alf) with and “habitude” (malaka) to the intelligibles.61

It is striking that in his last work, Epistle on the Rational Soul, already mentioned above, Avicenna uses the image of the polished mirror to illustrate the function of the intellect’s “habitude” (malaka) to the intelligibles – an image made much of by al-Ghazālī. Even though this passage does not use the term, or specifically address the topic of, mushāhada, it is clear that this is what Avicenna has in mind.

[T46] The purification [of the rational soul] through knowledge of God consists in its gaining a habitude (malaka) by means of which it becomes prepared to make present all the intelligibles whenever it wishes, without the need for acquisition (iktisāb). At that point all the intelligibles become present to it in actuality, or in potentiality that is extremely close to actuality. The [rational] soul becomes as a polished mirror upon which the forms of things become impressed as they are [in reality] without distortion.62
In contrast to al-Ghazālī, Avicenna repeatedly insists that *mushāhada* is always accompanied by the middle term of the syllogism that underlies the witnessed intelligible, and hence is always discursive in the sense of having a syllogistic structure.\(^6\) It is only on one occasion that Avicenna comes close to suggesting that in *mushāhada*, the middle term becomes redundant and could be dispensed with, yet even in this passage the carefully placed “as if” (*ka’annahū*) indicates that he regarded the presence of the middle term to be as essential for *mushāhada* as it is for any other type of knowledge.\(^4\)

This, as pointed out by Dimitri Gutas, is due to the fact that throughout his career Avicenna could never give up his logical habits and his conviction that all knowledge, whatever its modalities and manifestations, must have a logical structure, … because the disposition to acquire the intelligible and the intimacy with it [i.e. the *malaka* and *alīf* respectively] are there permanently, the intellect does not need the middle terms *in order to have* its direct vision [i.e. *mushāhada*], although these middle terms are present as a matter of fact insofar as the knowledge that is gained is intellective knowledge which cannot but have a logical structure.\(^5\)

Not being a philosopher, al-Ghazālī, it seems, did not feel equally committed to maintaining the logical and syllogistic structure of knowledge. This allowed him to tacitly drop the crucial stipulation – carefully safeguarded by Avicenna – that *mushāhada* should always have, at least implicitly, a syllogistic structure. As a result, while maintaining Avicenna’s view that *mushāhada* is the perfection of intellection and as such is not essentially different from the lower stages of knowledge, al-Ghazālī nevertheless departs from Avicenna in effectively presenting it as non-discursive, in the sense of being non-syllogistic.\(^6\)

To recapitulate, (1) the evidence presented so far suggests a clear connection between al-Ghazālī’s theory of *dhawq* and Avicenna’s theory of incommunica-ble intellectual pleasure associated with knowledge, which can only be perceived directly through experience. Avicennian texts and examples underlie and inform al-Ghazālī’s analysis of *dhawq*, yet at the same time, al-Ghazālī’s analysis proceeds in several directions not anticipated by Avicenna. Similarly, (2) al-Ghazālī’s theory of witnessing (*mushāhada*) is grounded in Avicenna’s theory of intellectual vision of intelligibles, designated by the same term. In contradistinction to Avicenna, however, al-Ghazālī tacitly omits the crucial stipulation that witnessing should have, at least implicitly, a syllogistic structure. The implication of this omission is that contrary to Avicenna, al-Ghazālī effectively presents witnessing as non-discursive and non-syllogistic. This is a fine line, but it clearly separates Avicenna the philosopher and al-Ghazālī the mystic.
The preceding chapter made several references to prophecy. It is essential, at this point, to analyze al-Ghazālī’s noetics of prophetic cognition. As will become apparent, it has to be done in relation to Avicenna’s noetics, which provides the template and the foundation on which al-Ghazālī constructs his edifice. Although different aspects of this question have been treated in earlier studies, no comprehensive analysis is as yet available. Al-Ghazālī devotes much attention to the taxonomy of the various modes of cognition, including prophetic cognition. It might be useful, at the beginning of this chapter, to survey a number of passages in which he deals with this question.

Al-Ghazālī’s taxonomy of the modes of cognition (ṭuruq al-taḥṣīl)

In the sections of the Scale and the Revival immediately following [T8] and [T9] respectively, al-Ghazālī asserts that with regard to knowledge, human beings differ in several respects: in the quantity of what they know (kathrat al-ma’lūmat wa-qillatuhā); in the nobility (sharaf) of the subjects they know; in the speed of their acquisition of knowables; and finally, and most importantly, in their mode of cognition of them (ṭariq taḥṣīlihā). There are two such modes:

1. divine inspiration by way of direct intimation (?) and unveiling (ilhām ilāhī ‘alā sabīl al-mubāda’a wa-l-mukāshafā) on the one hand, and
2. learning and acquisition (ta’allum wa-ktisāb) on the other.

The highest level of cognition is that of a prophet to whom “all or most realities are disclosed without acquisition and effort, but rather by means of divine unveiling and in the shortest time” (tankashfū lahū kull al-ḥaqā’iq aw aktharuhā min ghayr iktisāb wa-takalluf, bal bi-kashf ilāhī fī asra‘ waqt). Thus, prophecy is characterized by effortless and virtually instantaneous apprehension of intelligibles through a particular mode of cognition, called divine inspiration (ilhām ilāhī) or divine unveiling (kashf ilāhī). In this context, the terms kashf and mukāshafā (“unveiling”) are used nearly synonymously with ilhām (“inspiration”).
In another passage, a more elaborate division is presented. Al-Ghazālī claims that knowledge is obtained in two ways:

1. either through reasoning and learning (\(\text{al-\textit{istidlāl wa-l-ta‘allum}}\)), as in the case of scholars – this is called consideration and reflection (\(\text{i‘tibārān wa-stibsāran}\));
2. or without learning, either through inspiration (\(\text{ilhām or nafath fi l-rū‘}\)), as in the case of the saints and the pure ones (\(\text{al-\textit{awliyā’ wa-l-asfiyā’}}\)), or through revelation (\(\text{wahy}\)), as in the case of the prophets.

The sole difference between saintly inspiration and prophetic revelation is that in the former, one is unaware of the origin of the knowledge acquired, whereas in the latter, one is able to perceive its source, i.e. the “angel who casts [it] into the heart.”

In the last passage (as well as in many others) al-Ghazālī virtually opens the door of prophecy to non-prophets. The non-prophets who have quasi-prophetic powers are called “saints and pure ones” (\(\text{al-\textit{awliyā’ wa-l-asfiyā’}}\)), and their mode of cognition is called inspiration (\(\text{ilhām}\)). The distinction between their mode of cognition and prophetic revelation in the strict sense (\(\text{wahy}\)) has nothing to do with the knowledge itself, but only with whether the recipient is able to perceive the angel who casts this knowledge into the heart.

It may be useful to cite Lazarus-Yafeh’s pertinent remark on sainthood. She points out that according to al-Ghazālī,

the stage of prophecy is only the highest and last stage of man’s development on earth. Indeed, it is achieved by a few people only, but it is not restricted to prophets, as orthodox Islam claims. Saints reach a similar level. … Al-Ghazzālī accepts the Şūfī doctrine of sainthood. But he goes even further and declares explicitly that the road to this highest stage is … open to everyone and that it is … man’s obligation to try to reach it, as this is his destiny on earth.8

It should be added that this is not only a Şūfī doctrine, but also an Avicennian one: as we shall see shortly, Avicenna’s explanation of the “mechanics” of prophecy presents prophecy as a natural and rationally explicable phenomenon, which is simply the highest point of the normal functioning of the human intellect. This theory implies that human beings whose intellect is particularly strong can have quasi-prophetic powers, even if they are not designated by God as prophets.9

Finally, there is an important discussion of the modes of cognition (\(\text{turūq al-tahṣīl}\)) in the Epistle on Knowledge from On High (\(\text{Risāla fī al-‘ilm al-ladunī or al-Risāla al-Ladunīya}\)), whose attribution to al-Ghazālī is still open to question. Chapter 4 of this treatise is especially pertinent for our purposes. There, the author – who may or may not be al-Ghazālī – draws a distinction between two major modes of cognition: (1) learning through human means (\(\text{al-ta‘allum al-insānī}\)) and (2) learning through “lordly,” or divine, means (\(\text{al-ta‘allum al-rabbānī}\)),...
corresponding to al-Ghazālī’s “acquisition” (iktisāb) and “inspiration” (ilhām) respectively. The former is subdivided into two varieties: (1a) learning “from outside,” from another individual (i.e. person or experience), which is learning in the proper sense of the term (ta'allum), and (1b) learning “from inside,” i.e. cogitation (tafakkur), derived from the Universal Soul (al-nafs al-kullīya). The author argues that most of the knowledge of the philosophers (hukamā’) is obtained through cogitation, by means of their pure mind (ṣafā’ dhihnihim), strong cogitative skills (qūwat fikrihim), and sharp intuition (hiddat ḥadsihim).

The latter type of learning – learning through divine means – is also subdivided in two kinds: (2a) revelation (wahy) and (2b) inspiration (ilhām). Revelation and inspiration have a different source: revelation comes from the Universal Intellect (al-‘aql al-kullī), inspiration, from the Universal Soul (al-nafs al-kullī [sic!]). Knowledge resulting from revelation is called prophetic knowledge (‘ilm nabawī), while knowledge resulting from inspiration is called knowledge from on high (‘ilm ladunī). Propphetic knowledge is higher than knowledge from on high, since the Universal Intellect is higher than the Universal Soul.

The noetic mechanism is the following. In the case of revelation, God takes the Universal Intellect as a “pen” and the human soul as a “tablet”; the human soul (called in this context “sanctified soul” – a term derived from Avicenna, as we shall see below) thus becomes a disciple of the Universal Intellect. Inspiration, by contrast, is “the Universal Soul’s intimation to a particular human soul” (tanbīḥ al-nafs al-kullī [sic!] li-l-nafs al-juz‘ī [sic!] al-ḥamsāni), which happens when the curtain separating the two is removed.

Two educational approaches: The “Ṣūfīs” versus the “theoreticians”

In a number of passages, al-Ghazālī takes the preceding discussion one step further and changes the focus from different modes of cognition to different educational approaches. A comprehensive discussion of the subject is found in the Scale of Action and in Book 21 of the Revival. The Scale of Action presents the issue as essentially an opposition between two rival approaches to learning, attributed to the “Ṣūfīs” and to the “theoreticians among the scholars” (al-muzzār min ahl al-‘ilm) respectively – a likely reference to the philosophers. The two groups are idealized and serve only as an illustration of the two approaches. Al-Ghazālī describes these approaches, offers arguments on behalf of both groups, and subsequently undertakes to adjudicate between them.

The “Ṣūfīs” throw in their lots wholly with inspiration (ilhām). Since, however, it is ultimately up to God to “inspire” a person, they argue that there is no use “in studying the sciences and perusing what [earlier] authors have written by way of research into the realities of things (fi l-baḥth ‘an ḥaqā’iq al-umūr).” Instead, they recommend purification of the soul from reprehensible qualities and directing one’s thoughts wholly to God as a necessary condition for the attainment of inspiration. This cannot be a sufficient condition, however, for inspiration ultimately depends on God.
The “theoreticians” (mużār) acknowledge that this is a valid way, for it is the basis for most19 states granted to saints and prophets, but “consider it beset with obstacles and unlikely to lead to the goal” (istaw’arū hādhā l-ṭariq wa-stab’adū ifḍā’ahū tāl l-maqsūd). In other words, without denying the validity of the “Ṣūfī” way as a mode of cognition, the “theoreticians” criticize it as an effective educational approach.

The “theoreticians” caution that the intense ascetic struggle (mujāhada), required by the S.ūfī path, may cause “corruption of the temperament (mizāj), confusion of the intellect, and illness of the body, leading to black bile disease (al-mālīkhūliyā).”20 Furthermore, a person whose soul has not been properly trained in the intellectual sciences can easily fall victim to erroneous ideas (khayālāt): “Many a Sūfī remained for ten years captive to a wrong idea before he was able to emancipate himself from it; but if he had first mastered the sciences he would have emancipated himself from it right away.”21 The theoreticians consequently insist on a thorough study of the sciences through research and theoretical investigation (bi-ṭariq al-baḥth wa-l-nāzār) of the achievements of the ancients (mā hasṣalahū l-awwalūn).22

In his evaluation of the two approaches, al-Ghazālī gives the impression that in this imaginary debate he sides with the “theoreticians” against the “Ṣūfīs.” He makes clear, however, that the theoreticians’ approach is suitable only for “an intelligent person (dhakī) who became aware of the [goal] in his youth, is predisposed to understanding the sciences, and has encountered a [teacher who is] a scholar [investigating] the sciences independently (mustaqillan),” i.e. does not accept them on authority (taqlīd) as do the majority of scholars. Such and only such a person “is ready for either of the two ways, but it is better for him to choose the path of learning and to acquire by labor and study the apodeictic knowledge (al-‘ulūm al-burhāniyā) that is within human capacity to apprehend.”23 Only then it is “unobjectionable” (lā ba’ş) that he should “renounce the world, devote himself wholly to God, and wait, perhaps He will reveal to him through the other [i.e. the Ṣūfī] way what causes confusion (iṭtabasa) to the followers of this [i.e. the intellectual] way.”24 To all the rest – older people, young people who do not possess a sufficiently sharp acumen to follow the intellectual way, as well as those who do have the qualifications required, but have not had the good fortune of meeting a suitable teacher – al-Ghazālī recommends to focus on practice and practical knowledge and to follow the Ṣūfī way, if they so wish.

In both the Scale and the Revival, al-Ghazālī offers a parable (mithāl) to clarify the difference between the two approaches. However, in contradistinction to the passage where he evaluates the two approaches, giving the impression that he sides with the “theoreticians” against the “Ṣūfīs,” the parable, by contrast, extols the Ṣūfī way. It is possible that al-Ghazālī is speaking here only of those who embark on the Ṣūfī path after having received a thorough training in the sciences and therefore can avoid the pitfalls associated with it.25 Alternatively, it is possible that here al-Ghazālī is comparing the two ways as modes of cognition, not as educational approaches, whereas as an educational approach the philosophical way is superior (provided, of course, one has the requisite qualifications).
The parable runs as follows. Once upon a time, Chinese and Byzantine artists held a competition in the art of engraving and painting in the presence of a king. Each team was assigned to decorate one of the two facing walls of a porch (ṣuффa). When the curtain (ḥijāb) separating the two walls was removed, the Byzantine painting was reflected in the opposite wall, which had become like a polished mirror. The mirror was so perfect that the reflection surpassed the original painting in beauty and splendor.

To sum up, al-Ghazālī juxtaposes two modes of cognition and two educational approaches, one based on inspiration, ilhām (ascribed to the “Sūfis”), and the other, on systematic study of the sciences (ascribed to the “theoreticians among the scholars” – a reference to the philosophers). He seems to value the ilhām-based mode of cognition more than the study-based one. Yet his attitude to them as educational approaches is the reverse: the study-based approach is ultimately superior to the ilhām-based. However, the study-based approach is only suitable for a well-defined group of individuals who meet a strict set of criteria (young age, intelligence, awareness of the goal, having a suitable teacher); all the rest, who are not so qualified, are encouraged to follow the ilhām-based approach ascribed to the “Sūfis.”

Inspiration explained: Model A – the Preserved Tablet and a curtain

This leads us to an examination of the models by means of which al-Ghazālī explains the “mechanism” of inspiration (ilhām). In his discussion of the above parable, al-Ghazālī states that the soul is the “locus” (mahall) where theological knowledge (al-ʿulūm al-ilāhīya) is “engraved” (naqsh). This “engraving” can be done in one of the following two ways: either through the act of engraving itself, following the method of the Byzantines, or through preparation (istiʿdād) to “receiving” the engraving from outside. “From outside” here means, as al-Ghazālī explains, from the Preserved Tablet (al-lawh al-mahfūz) and the souls of the angels (nufūs al-malāʾika), who have this engraving perpetually in actuality.

Al-Ghazālī then explores the possible reasons on account of which the realities of things, contained in the Preserved Tablet, may not be reflected in the mirror of the heart. He observes that the mirror may fail to reflect an object for one (or more) of the following five reasons:

1 because the mirror is deficient, e.g. when its surface did not receive the appropriate shape;
2 because its surface is soiled and tarnished;
3 because it is diverted away from the right direction;
4 because there is a veil between the mirror and the object;
5 and finally, because one is ignorant of the direction in which the object is to be found.
Similarly, the “heart” may fail to apprehend the intelligibles for the following five reasons:

1. when it is deficient, as, e.g., in the case of the heart of a child;32
2. when it is stained by acts of disobedience to God and by indulgence in bodily desires;
3. when one does not apply one’s heart to reflecting on “the presence of lordship and the hidden divine realities” (ḥaḍrat al-rubūbiyya wa-l-ḥaqāʾiq al-khafiyya al-ilāhīya);
4. when one is veiled from the truth by an opinion accepted on authority (iʿtiqād sabaqa ilayhi ... ‘alā sabīl al-taqlīd);33
5. and finally, when one fails to find the two propositions that must be combined to obtain new knowledge, and when one is ignorant of the rules of such combinations – an obvious reference to syllogistic logic, which al-Ghazālī calls in this context “ways of reasoning” (ṭuruq al-iʿtibār).

Al-Ghazālī compares these five obstacles taken together to a “curtain” (ḥijāb) separating the mirror of the heart from the Preserved Tablet.34 When the curtain between them is removed, some of the content of the Preserved Tablet is reflected in the mirror of the heart. This can occur during sleep – in a veridical dream whereby one can know the future – or in the state of wakefulness. The latter happens very rarely, since in the state of wakefulness the mind is busy processing information received from the senses. Regardless of whether this happens during sleep or in the state of wakefulness, the period of the curtain’s removal is usually exceedingly brief, “as a flash of lightning” (kāl barq al-ḥijāb), and only seldom lasts longer.35 The curtain between the heart and the Preserved Tablet will be completely removed only after death.36

Al-Ghazālī indicates further that the curtain between the heart and the Preserved Tablet can be removed either by the “winds of [divine] grace” or “by [human] hand,” alluding once again to the two modes of cognition: inspiration (ilḥām) and “acquisition” (iktisāb, i.e. cogitation).37 He stresses that there is no difference in content, locus, or source (lit. cause, sabab) between the knowledge received through inspiration and the knowledge received through acquisition. The only difference is in the manner in which the curtain is removed.

[T47] Inspiration (ilḥām) differs from acquisition (iktisāb) neither in the knowledge itself, nor in its locus, nor in its cause. It differs from it [only] in the mode of removing the curtain (zawāl al-ḥijāb), for the former (dhālika) [way of its removal] is not left to one’s choice.38

In short, al-Ghazālī’s noetic model is that of illumination from a celestial archetype. For this type of illumination, both ethical and intellectual preparation is needed: one’s heart has to be cleansed from disobedience to God and excessive attachment to bodily desires, and at the same time one has to have knowledge of syllogistic reasoning and to be free from preconceived notions. In addition,
Inspiration and revelation

one has to apply one’s heart to reflecting on “the presence of lordship and the hidden divine realities.” This is especially important, for it presupposes almost meditation-like stillness of mind in which the mind is to be fixed on God and the supernal world. In the following passage, indeed, al-Ghazālī describes a type of solitary meditation (“invocation” of God, dhikr) based on continuous repetition of the divine name Allāh and followed by unveiling. Despite its length, this passage deserves to be quoted in full, especially as it may contain autobiographic details of al-Ghazālī’s own practices and experiences.

[T48] Prophets and saints are acquainted with this. Light illumines their chests not through learning, study, and writing books, but through renouncing the world, severing the ties to it, emptying the heart from its occupations, and turning unswervingly to God. He who is devoted to God, God is devoted to him. … In order to reach this … a person’s heart has to reach a stage when he is indifferent to any particular thing’s presence or absence. Then he goes into a place of seclusion, confining himself to observances and acts of devotion. He sits there with an empty heart and focused intention, without distracting himself with reading the Qur’ān, examining its interpretation, consulting books on prophetic traditions, or anything else. Instead, he strives to ensure that nothing but God enters his mind. After sitting like that in seclusion, he keeps uttering with his tongue “God! God!” over and over again, with presence of heart. Eventually he reaches the stage when he ceases to move the tongue and yet sees the word, as it were, still reverberating upon it. He continues like that until it disappears from the tongue, yet he finds his heart still mentioning (dhikr) it. He continues like that until the form and letters of the utterance and the configuration of the word disappear, but its naked meaning remains present in the heart as if it were inseparable from it. … At this point, if his will is strong, intention pure, and perseverance stable, if bodily desires or internal speech do not distract him with ties of this world, then flashes of Truth will shine forth in his heart. At the beginning, they come as a flash of lightning (ka-l-barq al-khāṭif), and disappear without remaining. After that, they appear again, possibly after delay. On second appearance, they can stay or disappear immediately. If they stay, they can stay for a longer or a shorter period of time. Similar visions [of other types?] can subsequently occur, or else they can remain confined to one and the same type.

Inspiration explained (contd.): Model B – A pond with two openings

In the Revival, an additional model is offered. Let us assume, al-Ghazālī argues, that there is a pond that can be filled with water either from the outside, from streams that empty into it, or from inside, from subterranean waters, which are purer, more permanent, and oftentimes more abundant. Our heart, al-Ghazālī explains, is like this pond, for it, too, can be filled with knowledge from without,
“by means of the streams of the senses and the reflection on observed phenomena” (bi-wāṣiṭat anhār al-ḥawāss wa-l-iʿtibār bi-l-mushāḥadāt), or “from within,” i.e. with the knowledge received from the Preserved Tablet.

Al-Ghazālī further explains that the world exists, as it were, on four levels:

1 the ideal existence upon the Preserved Tablet, which is, as it were, the “blueprint” and archetype of the world; it is in accordance with this blueprint that the world was created;
2 the real (actual) existence;
3 the imaginal existence, i.e. the existence in the [common] sense and imagery (fī l-hiss wa-l-khayāl), and finally
4 the intellectual existence, i.e. the presence of the form in the heart.

The two modes of cognition use two distinct openings (bābānī) in the heart: one internal, directed toward the “world of dominion” (ʿālam al-malakūt), i.e. to the Preserved Tablet and the angelic realm; the other external, directed, through the five senses, toward the “world of manifestation” (ʿālam al-shahāda).

Knowledge can be derived through either of the two openings: either directly from the Preserved Tablet, the blueprint and archetype of the world (1→4) or from the physical world itself (2→3→4). The knowledge of saints and prophets is derived through the former, and the knowledge of scholars and philosophers (ḥukamāʾ), through the latter.

[T49] The difference between the knowledge of saints and prophets and that of scholars and philosophers is this: The knowledge of the former comes from inside the heart, through the opening facing the world of dominion (ʿālam al-malakūt), whereas philosophical knowledge (ʿilm al-ḥikma) is obtained through the openings of the senses facing the world of possession (ʿālam al-mulk).

Al-Ghazālī calls the knowledge obtained through the inner opening “knowledge from on high” (ʿilm ladunī). As far as I am aware, he uses this term only on two occasions in his unquestionably authentic works: in the Revival and in the Persian Alchemy of Felicity. In both works, al-Ghazālī presents what sounds like a definition of ʿilm ladunī.

[T50] Abū Yazīd [al-Bistāmī] and others said: “The knower (ʿālim) is not someone who has memorized books but if he were to forget what he has memorized he would become ignorant. [Rather] the knower is someone who takes his knowledge from his Lord whenever he wishes, without memorization or study.” This is lordly knowledge (al-ʿilm al-rabbānī), and it is [this type of knowledge] that is mentioned in God’s saying “and whom We had taught knowledge proceeding from Us” (wa-ʿallamnāhu min ladunnā ʿilman, Q. 18:65). To be sure, all knowledge [ultimately] comes from [God] (min ladunhu), but some of it comes through the intermediary of human
inspiration; this [type of knowledge] is not called knowledge from on high (‘ilm ladunī). Rather, [‘ilm] ladunī is the [type of knowledge] that opens up in the innermost part of the heart (fī sirr al-galb), without any [secondary] cause arranged from the outside.48

[T51] Whatever knowledge common people gain through study, [a prophet] gains from inside himself (az bāten-e khwīsh) without study. Since it is possible for someone who is smart and pure of heart (ṣāfī del) to gain some knowledge in his mind without study, it is possible for someone who is purer and stronger to obtain the knowledge of all the crafts – or most of them or a great part of them – from [within] himself. This is called knowledge from on high (‘elm-e ladunī), as God the exalted said: “and whom We had taught knowledge proceeding from Us” (Q. 18:65).49

Al-Ghazālī’s definition of knowledge from on high in both the Revival and the Alchemy stresses two points. First, this type of knowledge is gained without instruction, and directly from God. Second, ‘ilm ladunī is described as coming “from inside” the person to whom this knowledge is communicated (az bāten-e khwīsh); it is opened “in the innermost part of the heart” (fī sirr al-galb) – a reference to the heart’s inner opening.

When compared with Model A, Model B poses several interrelated problems.50 First, it is at odds with al-Ghazālī’s claim (in [T47] above) that there is no difference in source between the knowledge received through the two modes of cognition: inspiration and acquisition. According to Model B, the source of knowledge is different in the two cases: the world of dominion (and the Preserved Tablet) and the world of manifestation respectively. It is true that the ultimate source of both types of knowledge is the same, insofar as “the world of possession and manifestation imitates, in some sense, the world of dominion”51 and insofar as both worlds have the Preserved Tablet as their ultimate archetype. Yet, it is hard to ignore the fact that the proximate source of knowledge is not the same in the two cases.

Second, Model B is at odds with al-Ghazālī’s claim (also in [T47] above) that the only difference between the two modes of cognition is the manner in which the curtain between the heart and the Preserved Tablet is removed. In sharp contrast to this claim, Model B suggests that the curtain is involved only in one type of cognition: the cognition that has its origin in the Preserved Tablet. As for the other type of cognition – the cognition based on the senses – there is no curtain there to speak of to begin with.

Third, Model B leaves one wondering where cogitation, emblemized by the removal of the curtain “by hand,” enters into the picture. Is it subsumed under “the reflection on observed phenomena” (al-i’tibār bi-l-mushāhadāt)? If this is so, this hardly does justice to an important aspect of the non-inspirational mode of cognition.

In order to answer these questions we need to differentiate between two aspects of the non-inspirational mode of cognition: learning about the external world through the five senses on the one hand and philosophical reasoning (cogitation) on the other. It is clear that Model B downplays philosophical reasoning. As a
As a result, it focuses on inspiration (cognition from inside) versus learning through the five senses (\textit{al-i'tibār bi-l-mushāhādāt}, cognition from outside). Model A, by contrast, does not take into account the five senses as a valid source of cognition. As a result, it concentrates on inspiration versus cogitation, two approaches symbolized by removing the curtain by the winds of grace and by hand respectively.

This distinction \textit{within} the non-inspirational mode of cognition is not brought out explicitly in al-Ghazālī's unquestionably authentic works. It is present, however, in a text whose attribution to al-Ghazālī is still open to doubt: the \textit{Epistle on Knowledge from On High}, already mentioned above.\textsuperscript{52} This work opens with the following fascinating introduction, which deserves to be quoted in full.

[T52] Know, may God assist you, that one of our friends told [us] that a certain scholar denied [the existence of] knowledge from on high of the unseen (\textit{al-‘ilm al-ghaybī al-ladunī}), on which the Sūfis rely and with which people of the Path associate themselves, saying that knowledge from on high is more powerful and solid than acquisitional sciences gained through learning. [My friend] reported that this so-called scholar (\textit{al-muddātī}) said: I can make no sense of the science of the Sūfis; nor do I think that anyone in the world can speak with true knowledge [merely] from his thought and deliberation (\textit{min fikrīhī wa-rawīyatīhī}) without learning and acquisition (\textit{ta’allum wa-kāsh}).

I said: It is as if he has no clue about the methods of gaining [knowledge] (\textit{ṭuruq al-tahsīl}) and has not attained [an understanding of] the human soul, its attributes, and the ways in which it receives traces of the unseen and knowledge of the spiritual realm (\textit{malakūt}).

My friend said: Indeed, this person claims that only jurisprudence, Qur’ānic exegesis, and \textit{kalām} are sciences, there being no science beyond these, and these sciences are acquired only through learning and study (\textit{al-ta’allum wa-l-tafqūh}).

I said: Well, but how is the science of exegesis to be known? The Qur’ān is an ocean encompassing all things, and many of its meanings and true interpretations are not reported in the books [on \textit{tafsīr}] known to the general public (\textit{‘awāmm}). Indeed, exegesis is not what this so-called scholar claims it to be.

My friend said: This person does not know except the well-known commentaries, attributed to al-Qushayrī,\textsuperscript{53} al-Tha’labī,\textsuperscript{54} al-Māwardī,\textsuperscript{55} and others.

I said: He is indeed far from the true path! For al-Sulamī has collected some exegetical material from the statements of those who have reached some sort of attainment (\textit{al-muḥaqqiqā shībah al-tahqīq}). These statements are not reported in other commentaries. It seems that this person, who counts only jurisprudence, \textit{kalām}, and this type of popular exegesis as science, knows nothing about the branches of the sciences, their divisions and levels, their outward and inward aspects, and their real meaning. It is all too common for one ignorant of something to deny this thing. This so-called scholar has not partaken of the taste of the potion of truth and is ignorant.
of the knowledge from on high. How can he acknowledge its [existence]?! And I would not be content with his acknowledging [it] merely from hearsay or guesswork, as long as he does not know [it truly].

This dear friend said: I would like you to touch upon the levels of the sciences and to confirm this knowledge from on high, which you claim for yourself, insisting on its existence.

I said: This is a very difficult subject to explain, but I shall offer some introductory remarks (muqaddimāt) as far as my condition and time permit, according to what comes to mind.56

Upon the friend’s request, the author of the Epistle embarks on a complex analysis of several interrelated subjects: the concept of knowledge, the nature of the human soul, classification of the sciences (including the science of Sūfism), the ways of acquisition of knowledge, and finally, the souls’ degrees with respect to acquisition of knowledge and the preparation required to obtain knowledge from on high.57

As we have seen above, the Epistle differentiates between two aspects of the non-inspirational mode of cognition: (1a) learning (derived from the outside world) and (1b) cogitation (derived, like inspiration, from the Universal Soul). Through this distinction, the author of the Epistle develops a more nuanced taxonomy of modes of cognition, capable of accommodating both the parable of the pond (Model B) and the analogy of the mirror and the curtain (Model A).

Just as the pond can be filled with water in two ways – from outside and from inside – so also the individual human soul can gain knowledge from an external instructor or experience (=learning) or from an internal intimation (tanbīh) of the Universal Soul (=inspiration). And just as in the Revival there is a curtain separating the heart and the Preserved Tablet, so in the Epistle there is a curtain separating the individual human soul and the Universal Soul. Since the Preserved Tablet is the standard equivalent of the Universal Soul in Neoplatonic terminology (and the Pen – of the Universal Intellect), the location of the curtain is identical in the two treatises. Finally, in both the Revival and the Epistle, the Preserved Tablet (=the Universal Soul) is the source of both cogitation (1b) and inspiration (2b). Thus, in both treatises the difference between the two modes of cognition is likely to be the same as well: the manner in which the curtain, separating the heart (=the individual human soul) and the Preserved Tablet (=the Universal Soul), is removed.

Avicennian background: Avicenna’s theory of intuition (ḥads)

As we have seen above, al-Ghazalī – following Avicenna – regards prophecy as the highest stage of the normal functioning of the human intellect. In the Deliverer from Error and in the Niche of Lights, this stage is associated, respectively, with the so-called “eye of prophecy” (‘ayn al-nubūwa) and “the sacred prophetic spirit” (al-rūḥ al-qudsī al-nabawi). This, prima facie, creates the impression that prophecy transcends the preceding stage, the stage of syllogistic reasoning, which is called “intelligence” (aql) in the Deliverer and “cogitative spirit” (al-rūḥ al-fikrī) in the Niche.
However, on closer reading of the *Niche*, we discover that the sacred prophetic spirit is not, strictly speaking, a separate spirit but simply the most luminous and purest part of the cogitative spirit.\(^{58}\) This is in line with al-Ghazālī’s (and Avicenna’s) position that prophecy is continuous with the normal activity of the human intellect and that some non-prophets (*awliyā‘* or “saints” in al-Ghazālī’s terminology) can possess quasi-prophetic powers.

[T53] The fifth spirit is the sacred prophetic spirit ascribed to the saints when it is at its most luminous and purest. [Since] the cogitative spirit is divided into that which is in need of external instruction, prompting (*tanbīḥ*, and assistance (*madad*) so that it may continue [acquiring various] types of cognitions (*anwā‘ al-ma‘ārif*) and [another] part which is so pure that it is prompted, as it were, by itself without external assistance, it is appropriate that the pure and completely predisposed part be indicated by [the words] “Whose oil nearly shines, even if no Fire touched it” (Q. 24:35). Indeed, there are saints whose light nearly illumines [of its own] and they can nearly dispense with the prophets’ assistance, and there are prophets whose light can nearly dispense with the angels’ assistance.\(^{59}\)

This is corroborated by the evidence of the *Scale of Action* and Book 21 of the *Revival*. In the passages from these two works cited as [T8] and [T9] in Table 1.2 above, al-Ghazālī treats Avicenna’s actual intellect (*‘aql bi-l-fī‘l*) as the highest level of cognition, adding that this level “encompasses innumerable gradations.” In the subsequent discussion, analyzed at the beginning of this chapter, he presents prophecy as the highest of these gradations. Thus, prophecy is not a separate stage distinct from, and superior to, the actual intellect, but is simply the highest point of the actual intellect’s activity.\(^{60}\)

It is highly significant that in the passage just quoted, the sacred prophetic spirit is described with the Qur’ānic phrase “whose oil nearly shines, even if no Fire touched it” (Q. 24:35, the famous “Verse of Light”). Earlier in the *Niche*, the cogitative spirit is compared to the Qur’ānic “olive tree” (*zaytūna*).\(^{61}\) Al-Ghazālī argues that the sacred prophetic spirit’s “oil” is kindled (*yuqtabasu*) from a celestial angel, called the “Supernal Divine Spirit” (*al-rūḥ al-ilāhīya al-‘ulwīya*) and compared to the Qur’ānic “Fire” (*nār*). Thus, the sacred prophetic spirit’s oil “nearly shines, even if no Fire touched it” (Q. 24:35); all the more so when “Fire” (i.e. the Supernal Divine Spirit) does touch it and it becomes “light upon light” (Q. 24:35).

[T54] The sacred prophetic spirit’s “oil nearly shines, even if no Fire touched it” (Q. 24:35), yet it becomes “light upon light” (*ibīd.*) only when Fire does touch it.\(^{62}\) The source from which earthly [prophetic] spirits are kindled is the Supernal Divine Spirit (*al-rūḥ al-ilāhīya al-‘ulwīya*), described by ‘Alī and Ibn ‘Abbās as follows: “God has an Angel who has seventy thousand faces, each face has seventy thousand tongues, and he glorifies God with them all.” This is the Angel that is juxtaposed with all [the other angels], when it is said that the Day of Judgment is “the day when the Spirit
and the angels shall stand in a row” (Q. 78:38). With respect to its being the Source from which earthly lamps (suruj) are kindled, [this Spirit] has no other similitude (mithāl) than Fire. One can become intimate with this [Fire] only “on the side of the Mount’ (Q. 28:29).

As pointed out by Herbert Davidson, Martin Whittingham, and others, all this finds an exact parallel in Avicenna’s commentary on the Verse of Light, embedded in his *Pointers and Reminders* (al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbihāt).

[T55] [Material intellect (al-‘aql al-hayūlānī)] is followed by another faculty that comes to the soul once it has attained the primary intelligibles, by means of which it is then prepared to acquire (iktisāb) the secondary intelligibles, either, if it is very weak, by means of cogitation (fikra) – which is the “olive tree” – or, if it is stronger than that, by means of intuition (hads) – which is also the “oil.” [This faculty] is then called “intellect in habitu.” … At its most sublime and consummate level, it is a sacred faculty (qūwa qudsīya), “whose oil nearly shines, even if no Fire touched it” (Q. 24:35). … That which brings the [intellect in] habitu into complete actuality, and the material [intellect] into [the state of intellect in] habitu is the Active Intellect (al-‘aql al-fa‘āl). It is the “Fire.”

In this passage, Avicenna differentiates between two ways in which the intellect in habitu, i.e. the intellect in possession of axiomatic knowledge (primary intelligibles), acquires new knowledge (secondary intelligibles). These two ways are called cogitation (fikra) and intuition (hads). They represent two different ways in which the middle term (al-hadd al-awsat) of the syllogism that proves a new piece of knowledge is found. In the case of cogitation, the intellect actively searches for an appropriate middle term. For instance, in order to prove that “All A are C” it searches for such B that the propositions “All A are B” and “All B are C” are already known to be true, so that the conclusion “All A are C” will follow. “B” is the middle term of the resulting syllogism. In the case of intuition, by contrast, the middle term presents itself instantaneously to the mind, without search or effort on its part. The ultimate difference between the two ways lies merely in the speed of acquisition: gradual in the case of cogitation, instantaneous in the case of intuition. A third way, not mentioned in this passage, is learning from teachers or books (ta‘allum), but this way is reducible to the other two, since all human knowledge is ultimately derived from someone who acquired it either through cogitation or through intuition.

According to Avicenna, the capacity for intuition varies from person to person. The prophets are those individuals who are endowed with (among other qualities) a superior intuition. Their intellect in habitu is called “sacred faculty” (al-qūwa al-qudsīya) or, sometimes, sacred soul, sacred intellect, or sacred (or sanctified) spirit (al-rūḥ al-qudsī or al-muqaddas). It is powerful to the degree that it can acquire all or most new knowledge through intuition, without recourse to cogitation or learning. This mode of cognition is called inspiration (ilhām) and revelation (wahy).
To recapitulate Avicenna’s commentary on the Verse of Light: Avicenna identifies cogitation (fikra) and intuition (hadis), the two basic ways in which the intellect in habitu acquires secondary intelligibles, with the Qur’anic “olive tree” and “oil” respectively. The prophetic intellect in habitu, which is more powerful than the ordinary intellect in habitu, is referred to as the “sacred faculty” or the “sacred spirit.” The Qur’anic words “whose oil nearly shines, even if no Fire touched it” (Q. 24:35) serve to describe it. The Active Intellect (al-‘aql al-fa‘āl), which in Avicenna’s cosmology and noetics is the lowest separate intellect in the hierarchy of celestial intellects and is the intellect that actualizes the human intellect, is identified with the Qur’anic “Fire.”

We can now see that virtually the same identifications are endorsed by al-Ghazālī in the Niche: the cogitative spirit is identified with the olive tree, the “sacred prophetic spirit” (corresponding to Avicenna’s “sacred spirit”) is described with the phrase “whose oil nearly shines, even if no Fire touched it” (Q. 24:35), and the Supernal Divine Spirit (corresponding to Avicenna’s Active Intellect) is identified with Fire. This can be seen in Table 4.1.

Although al-Ghazālī dispenses with Avicennian syllogistics and does not seem to use the term hadis in his unquestionably authentic works (except when expounding the philosophers’ doctrines), his understanding of prophecy is closely related to Avicenna’s. In fact, it can only be understood against the backdrop of the Avicennian theory of hadis. In the following passage, for instance (already quoted as [T5] above), al-Ghazālī maintains that some people have a more powerful acumen than others. He argues that the perfect – whose acumen is the most powerful – can acquire knowledge without instruction. Following Avicenna, he connects this mode of cognition to prophecy and calls it inspiration (ilhām).

How can one deny gradation (tafāwut) [in] the intrinsic feature (gharīza) [i.e. intelligence in the first sense of the term, discussed in Chapter 1 above]?! Were it not for [this gradation], people would not differ in their understanding of the sciences and would not be divided into foolish (balīd), who understand only with great difficulty even when instructed by the teacher, smart (dhakī), who understand the slightest hint and allusion, and perfect (kāmil), from whose soul the realities of things (haqā’iq al-umūr) emerge without instruction, according to God’s word: “Whose oil nearly shines, even if no Fire touched it, light upon light” (Q. 24:35). This is similar to prophets,
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for obscure matters become clear to them in their interiors (fī bawātīnīhīm), without learning or instruction (samā’). This is called inspiration (ilhām).71

This can be compared to several passages in Avicenna’s works in which he establishes the possibility of prophecy through the same division of people into foolish, smart, and perfect, depending on their acumen (dhakā’), i.e. the power of their intuition (hads). That al-Ghazālī was familiar with these Avicennian passages is evidenced by the fact that he himself summarized them while reporting the philosophers’ teachings in the Intentions and the Precipitance.72

Finally, a passage from Ascents to the Holy Realm (Maʿārij al-quds) – a work whose attribution to al-Ghazālī is still open to doubt – dots the i’s and crosses the t’s of the connection to Avicenna’s noetics and the theory of hads. The Qurʾānic verse “Whose oil nearly shines, even if no Fire touched it” is incorporated in this passage as well. In what follows, the passage is presented synoptically with the parallel discussion from Book 21 of the Revival (already quoted as [T47] above), on which it elaborates. The words added in (the second paragraph of) the Ascents are underlined.73 This can be seen in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Inspiration vs. acquisition

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Revival, Book 21</th>
<th>Ascents to the Holy Realm</th>
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<td>([T47])</td>
<td>[T56]</td>
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[When the soul is] noble, powerful, and luminous in itself, knowledge is obtained from the start (ibtidāʾan), as if without one’s choice: “Whose oil nearly shines” – with the light of the primordial nature (dawʾ al-fitra) – “even if the fire” – of cogitation (nār al-fikra)4 – “did not touch it” (Q. 24:35).

Inspiration (ilhām) differs from acquisition (iktisāb) neither in the knowledge itself, nor in its locus, nor in its cause. It differs from it [only] in the mode of removing the curtain (zawāl al-ḥijāb), for the former (dhālīka) [way of its removal] is not left to one’s choice.

The way of inspiration and intuition (tarīq al-ilhām wa-l-hads) differs from the way of acquisition and cogitation (tarīq al-iktisāb wa-l-fikr) neither in the knowledge itself, nor in its locus, nor in its cause, for the locus of knowledge is the soul and its cause is the Active Intellect or the Privileged Angel (al-malak al-muqarrab).75 The only difference is in the mode of removing the curtain (zawāl al-ḥijāb), for the former (dhālīka) [way of its removal] is not left to one’s choice.76
Avicennian background (contd.): Imagination-based prophecy

Strong intuition (ḥads) is, in Avicenna’s noetics, one of the three properties of prophethood, the other two being the capacity for divination related to the faculty of imagination and the capacity for affecting the natural world. The former property – the capacity for divination related to the faculty of imagination – is in the background of what I have called earlier “Model A”: al-Ghazālī’s model of cognition involving the heart and the Preserved Tablet with a curtain separating them.

Avicenna gives the following account of this property of prophethood in the De anima part of the Book of the Cure:

[T57] If the senses or the intellect use the [imagination] …, it is no longer free for other matters, like a mirror, when it is diverted away from one direction and turned towards another. … [This happens] regardless of whether the distraction comes from the senses or from the intellect’s control. Yet when any of them is removed, the requisite relation between the hidden realm (al-ghayb) on the one hand and the [rational] soul and the imaginative faculty on the other is ready to be established, as is [the relation] between the [rational] soul and the imaginative faculty. Then, something appears in [the imagination] in the way in which it appears (yalūḥu fihā l-lā’īh ‘alā nahw mā yalūḥu). …

The ideas (ma‘ānī) of all events happening in the world – past, present, and future – are present, in one respect, in the Creator’s and the intellectual angels’ knowledge, and in another respect, in the souls of the celestial angels. You will learn about both respects elsewhere.

Now, human souls are more closely related to these angelic substances than they are to sensible bodies. Since there is no veiling (ihṭijāb) or niggardliness (bukhl) on the part of the [angelic substances], veiling can occur only due to [a deficiency on the part of] the recipients [i.e. the human souls] (innamā l-ḥijāb li-l-qawābīh), either because they are preoccupied with [their] bodies or because they are soiled with matters that draw them downward. Yet, when they become free from these actions even for a short time, they gain a glimpse (muṭāla‘a) of what is present there [i.e. in the angelic substances].

We can see that, according to Avicenna, the soul can derive knowledge from the supernal realm. As has been pointed out by Dimitri Gutas, on the basis of this and other texts, this knowledge is twofold, incorporating, on the one hand, intelligible universal concepts, found “in the Creator’s and the intellectual angels’ knowledge,” and on the other hand, forms of the particulars, i.e. past, present, and future individuals and events, generated, and hence also thought, by the souls of the celestial spheres (called here “the souls of the celestial angels”). It is to these latter objects that Avicenna consistently refers by the term ghayb (or mughayyabāt). This is the background of al-Ghazālī’s assertion that information on all events, past, present, and future, is found in the Preserved Tablet and in the souls of
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the angels.84 One can also see how al-Ghazālī’s “Model A” (the analogy of the Preserved Tablet and a curtain) could have been inspired by this and similar passages in Avicenna. In the passage just quoted, Avicenna compares the imaginative faculty to a mirror that can turn in different directions, i.e. towards the senses, the intellect, or its own proper activity. Likewise, the (rational) soul is said to be diverted, or veiled, from the supernal realm through being preoccupied with the body or being soiled with matters that draw it downward. Avicenna makes clear that it is only due to this preoccupation and soiling that “veiling” occurs, for there is no “niggardliness” on the part of the supernal realm.

Al-Ghazālī takes over the idea that there is no niggardliness on the part of the supernal realm and that veiling is found only in the eye of the beholder.85 As we have seen above, he lists five reasons for the heart’s being “veiled” from the Preserved Tablet, all of which are due to different shortcomings of the heart itself. It is these five reasons, taken together, that constitute the “curtain” between the heart and the Preserved Tablet.

Finally, Avicenna indicates that in order for the connection to the supernal realm to occur, the imagination must be as free as possible from distractions from both the sense and the intellect. This, naturally, more easily happens during sleep, when the activity of the senses is drastically reduced. According to Avicenna, this is the origin of veridical dreams (ru'yā). Al-Ghazālī, too, as we have seen above, maintains that the curtain between the heart and the Preserved Tablet is more easily removed during sleep, when the heart is not preoccupied with information received from the senses, and he explains veridical dreams in the same fashion. The existence of veridical dreams constitutes, for al-Ghazālī as it does for Avicenna, a powerful argument for the existence of this mode of cognition.86

Unlike Avicenna, however, al-Ghazālī does not seem to accord a special role to imagination in this process. Imagination, for al-Ghazālī, merely uses the information received by the heart and, should this happen during sleep, encodes it in images that need to be interpreted and deciphered later (ta'bīr). Neither does al-Ghazālī seem to differentiate between the two ways of connection to the supernal realm, carefully distinguished by Avicenna: the connection of the rational soul in its capacity as theoretical intellect, which is based on hads, and the connection of the rational soul in its capacity as practical intellect, which is based on imagination. In al-Ghazālī, both types of connection are attributed to the “heart” and their features are fused together.
5 Al-Ghazālī and the philosophical tradition

Al-Ghazālī’s profound dependence on Avicenna in virtually every issue explored so far leads us to the last question to be examined in this book: if, as shown above, al-Ghazālī was an Avicennian as far as his noetics is concerned, what do we make of his refutation of Avicennian philosophy, including noetics, in his celebrated Precipitance of the Philosophers (Tahāfut al-falāṣifā)? In what follows, I shall examine two of the Tahāfut’s discussions – Discussion 16 and Discussion 20 – in which reference is made to the ideas explored in the preceding chapters. I will show that al-Ghazālī in fact endorses many philosophical teachings that he ostensibly criticized. I will then comment on the nature of the Tahāfut as a polemical work, suggesting that it can be seen as a “pseudo-refutation.” Finally, I will examine al-Ghazālī’s response to the charge of philosophical influence – one of the accusations leveled against him during the so-called “Nishāpūr controversy,” which erupted in the year 500/1106–7.

Tahāfut, Discussions 16 and 20

In light of al-Ghazālī’s wholesale adoption of Avicenna’s noetics, it comes as somewhat of a surprise that in the Precipitance, al-Ghazālī attacks those same Avicennian doctrines that he openly advocates elsewhere. Thus, in the Sixteenth Discussion of the Precipitance, he sets out to “invalidate” (ibtāl) the philosophers’ claims that:

[T58] … the souls of the heavens observe all the particulars that come to be in this world. The [term] “Preserved Tablet” designates the souls of the heavens. The engraving (intiqāsh) of the particulars of [this] world upon it is similar to the engraving of memories in the storing faculty located in the human brain – not in the sense that [the Preserved Tablet] is a solid broad body on which things are written the way children write on a tablet.

Here the philosophers’ teachings that come under fire are identical with al-Ghazālī’s own! Even the telling comparison between the Preserved Tablet and the storing faculty of the human brain in the way they encode information is put forward by al-Ghazālī himself on a number of occasions, for instance in the following passage from the Revival.
Everything that God had predestined (qaddarahū) from the beginning of the creation of the world until the end is recorded (masṭūr) upon an entity created by God (khalq khalaqahū llāh) which is sometimes called [the Preserved] Tablet (Q. 85:22), sometimes the Clear Book (al-kitāb al-mubīn, Q. 6:59), and sometimes a Clear Model (imām mubīn, Q. 36:12), as stated in the Qurʾān. Everything that has occurred in the world and everything that still is to occur is written and engraved (manqūsh) upon it in a way not observable by the [physical] eye. Do not think that this Tablet is made of wood, metal, or bone, or that this Book is made of paper or parchment. You must have a decisive understanding that God’s Tablet is not similar to human tablets and God’s Book is not similar to human books, just as His essence and attributes are not similar to human essence and attributes. If you would like to hear a similitude (mithālan) which will bring it closer to your understanding, you should know that the way in which the predestined events (maqādir) are fixed in the Tablet is similar to the way in which words and letters of the Qurʾān are fixed in the brain and heart of a person who has it memorized (ḥāfīz al-qurʾān), for [the Qurʾān] is recorded there and when he recites it, it is as if if he looks at this [recording]. Yet if you were to examine his brain piece by piece you would not be able to see even one letter from this writing. Just as there is no visible writing or observable letter[s] there, in the same fashion you should also understand how the Tablet is engraved (manqūshan) with all that which God had predestined and decreed (qaddarahū ... wa-qad.)

Among the Avicennian doctrines critiqued by al-Ghazālī in the Sixteenth Discussion of the Tahāfut, are also the following:

[The philosophers] believe that it is for this reason that a person can see future events during sleep in virtue of a connection (ittisāl) to the Preserved Tablet and through consulting it. … They believe that the connection to those [heavenly] souls is available to anyone (mabdhūl), for there is no veil there. However, we are distracted, while awake, by [information] supplied by the senses as well as by passions, and it is our being distracted by these sensory matters that diverts us from [this connection]. Yet, when some of the distracting [activity] of the senses is reduced during sleep, a certain disposition for [such] a connection appears. They believe that it is in this way, too, that the prophet glances at the hidden realm (al-ghayb), with the difference that the power of the prophet’s soul is such that external senses do not obstruct it and he can see while awake what others see during sleep. … Were it not for the fact that all future events are fixed (thābita) upon the Preserved Tablet, the prophet could not know the hidden, whether in the state of wakefulness or during sleep, but the Pen has run dry (i.e. exhausted itself, jaffā al-qalam) [recording upon the Preserved Tablet] what is to happen until the Day of Judgment.
Once again, we have seen al-Ghazālī openly advocate similar doctrines in his own works.

The objections raised by al-Ghazālī to the philosophers’ teachings are essentially the following:

1. The philosophers’ position postulates a created being (sc. the Preserved Tablet) that knows in actuality an infinite number of particulars, which “might be considered impossible” (rubbamā yu‘taqadu istihālatuhū).7

2. There is no justification for interpreting the Qur’ānic Preserved Tablet and Pen the way the philosophers do.

3. The philosophers have no way of refuting the possibility that a prophet, or a person who is asleep, could know the hidden (ghayb) directly from God or one of His angels (i.e. without having recourse to the Preserved Tablet and the souls of the spheres).

4. The philosophers’ position is based on the premise that since the celestial spheres cause all the sublunar particulars they (i.e. their souls) must also know them. This premise, however, is false, for there is no necessary connection between causing an effect and knowing it: we, human beings, for instance, are not aware of all the effects we cause.

5. If the philosophers should object that there is a difference between the celestial spheres and human beings in that only the latter are distracted by bodily accidents (‘awārid al-badan) preventing them from knowing all the effects of their actions, one can respond that the celestial spheres, too, may have distractions preventing them from knowing all the particulars caused by them, such as worshipping God and longing for Him, or some other accident unknown to us.

The first objection – based on the standard thesis of the impossibility of actual infinity – seems, philosophically, the strongest, and Averroes, in fact, endorses it in his refutation of al-Ghazālī, Tahāfut al-tahāfut, siding with al-Ghazālī against Avicenna.8 The second objection is, as phrased here, merely rhetorical, but it anticipates the “rule of interpretation” (qānūn al-ta‘wīl), developed in al-Ghazālī’s later works, especially in his Demarcating Criterion between Islam and Godlessness (Faysal al-tafriqa bayn al-islām wa-l-zandaqa) and in the short responsum entitled The Rule of Interpretation (Qānūn al-ta‘wīl).9

The third objection ostensibly dismisses the entire edifice of Avicennian noetics, rejecting the only available contemporary scientific explanation of veridical dreams and revelation, on the grounds that they may happen in some other, scientifically inexplicable way. There can hardly be any doubt that al-Ghazālī did not actually subscribe to this approach. It is also undeniable that he was completely aware that, from the philosophical standpoint, the angels are the intellects and the souls of the spheres, so his contrasting the former with the latter could only have the rhetorical purpose of undermining the (popular) belief in the apodeictic character of Avicenna’s noetics – a belief, incidentally, never held by Avicenna himself.10
The fourth and fifth objections, finally, have to be seen in conjunction with the question of whether or not matter (mādda) is the only possible impediment (māni’) to knowledge. Al-Ghazālī had already dealt with this question in the Eleventh Discussion of the Precipitance, where he concedes that matter is indeed an impediment to obtaining knowledge, but argues the philosophers have been unable to demonstrate that it is the only possible impediment.  

Unfortunately, we cannot be certain what Avicenna’s and his followers’ response to these objections would be – al-Ghazālī’s Precipitance, oddly enough, did not provoke much discussion and seems to have not been taken seriously in the Avicennian camp. Averroes’ Tahāfut al-tahāfut, it should be noted, is directed as much – if not more – against Avicenna as it is against al-Ghazālī. In fact, in the Sixteenth Discussion, Averroes frequently agrees with al-Ghazālī, saying that Avicenna’s view, criticized by al-Ghazālī, is idiosyncratic and unfounded. Averroes advocates a rejection of Avicenna’s philosophical “innovations” in favor of a stricter Aristotelianism, which, in his view, is immune to al-Ghazālī’s criticism.

More importantly for our purposes, we do not know how al-Ghazālī himself justified his endorsement, in his other works, of the philosophers’ positions. Clearly, he did not think the objections raised in the Precipitance were as damaging to Avicennian noetics as he made them out to be. The fact that he frequently followed Avicenna on precisely the points he criticized, and moreover, that he never acknowledged his debt to Avicenna, makes one suspect that his refutation of Avicennian philosophy is often a mere “stage combat” that creates an illusion of a real fight, while intending to inflict no damage on the opponent. I shall return to this point later on.

Another aspect of al-Ghazālī’s Precipitance that needs to be stressed is that al-Ghazālī often focuses on showing that the philosophers’ teachings are unproven, rather than incorrect. This leaves room for the possibility, suggested by several scholars, that while being critical of the philosophers’ proofs, he nevertheless subscribed to (at least some of) their conclusions. Not being a philosopher himself, al-Ghazālī surely did not consider himself obliged to furnish apodeictic proofs for all his statements. Even in the absence of an apodeictic proof, he might have believed that certain views were true on the basis of an inspirational experience (ilhām) of the sort described in the preceding chapter.

An analysis of al-Ghazālī’s critique of the philosophers in the Twentieth Discussion of the Precipitance presents a similar picture. He opens the discussion with a lengthy “explanation of the philosophers’ opinions on the afterlife” (taḥfīm mu’taqaḍihim fī al-ummūr al-ukhrawīya), at the end of which he concedes that most of their beliefs “do not conflict with religion” (layṣat ‘alā mukhālafat al-shar’). It is even more remarkable that al-Ghazālī in fact endorsed and actively promulgated many of these beliefs himself! Thus, for instance, he endorsed and promulgated the philosophical belief that absolute felicity (al-sa‘āda al-muṭlaqa) is attainable only through perfection [on the one hand] and purification and cleansing [on the other], perfection being achieved through knowledge, and purification, through action.
Similarly, he endorsed and promulgated the belief that the kind of knowledge needed for perfecting the soul consists of

[T62] the purely intellectual sciences (al-‘ulûm al-‘aqîya al-mahdâ), such as the knowledge of God, His attributes, His angels, His books, and the way in which things come to exist from Him.16

As we have seen in Chapter 2, this is precisely what al-Ghazâlî calls the “science of unveiling” (‘ilm al-mukâshafa), which, according to him, is the key to the soul’s felicity in the afterlife. Likewise, “purification and cleansing” refers, of course, to the “science of practice” (‘ilm al-mu‘âmala), the science of how to “polish” the mirror of the heart.

Al-Ghazâlî’s report of the philosophical teachings on the afterlife in the Twentieth Discussion of the Precipitance differentiates between four kinds of human destiny in the afterlife:

1. If one has neither practical nor theoretical virtue (neither virtuous character, nor knowledge), one is doomed to perdition (hâlik);17
2. If one has both practical and theoretical virtue, one is a “cognizer who worships” (al-‘ârif al-‘âbid), and he will attain absolute felicity (will be al-sa’îd al-mu‘âfaq);
3. If one has theoretical but not practical virtue, one is a “knower who sins” (al-‘âlim al-fâsiq) – he will undergo purgative suffering, but only for a limited period of time;
4. Finally, if one has practical but not theoretical virtue, one will attain safety and salvation from pain (yaslamu wa-yanjū ‘an al-alam), but will not reach perfect felicity (wa-lâ yahzâ bi-l-sa’âda al-kâmila).18

It is noteworthy that nowhere in the Precipitance does al-Ghazâlî criticize this scheme. In fact, as we have seen in Chapter 2, al-Ghazâlî openly endorses and promotes it in his other works – including the crucial distinction, to which he often comes back, between felicity (sa’âda) and salvation (najât). It is striking that even in the opening prayer of the Precipitance, a work ostensibly devoted to a refutation of philosophy, al-Ghazâlî explicitly and no doubt deliberately invokes the notion of felicity, i.e. the intellectual delight of the non-bodily vision of God, which, in his view, God has in stock for His philosophically adept “saints” (awliyâ’).

[T63] We ask God … that He may bring us to the felicity (sa’âda) that He had promised His prophets and saints; that upon our departure from this abode of delusion He may make us attain that bliss, happiness, delight, and joy which transcends the utmost extent of understanding (afhâm) and is exalted beyond the reach of the arrows of estimation (awhâm);19 and that after we enter the bliss of Paradise and escape the terror of the Day of Judgment He may grant us “that which no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor has it ever occurred to the heart of man.”20
The thrust of al-Ghazālī’s Twentieth Discussion is directed against one and only one philosophical thesis: the philosophers’ denial of bodily pleasures and pains in the afterlife. Al-Ghazālī argues that the philosophers have been unable to furnish a conclusive proof that there can be no bodily pleasures and pains in the afterlife, and in the absence of such a proof one must accept the account provided by the Qur‘ān as it is. Intellectual pleasures, postulated by the philosophers (the existence of which al-Ghazālī does not deny), can, al-Ghazālī argues, simply coexist with bodily ones. Since the Qur‘ān specifically affirms bodily pleasures in the afterlife (including food and sexual relations), denying their existence is tantamount to “giving the lie to the prophets” (takdīḥ al-anbiyāʾ). It is precisely the charge of giving the lie to the prophets that leads al-Ghazālī to conclude that the philosophers are infidels (kuffār), with the implication that they are apostates from Islam liable to capital punishment. The conclusion seems unavoidable: al-Ghazālī is inexorably opposed to the philosophers’ view of an incorporeal afterlife. He believes this view conflicts with Islamic teachings, implying as it does “giving the lie to the prophets.” Al-Ghazālī is therefore prepared to send the philosophers to the gallows as infidels and apostates. But is he really? In what follows, I shall argue that once the Precipitance is compared to al-Ghazālī’s other works, things turn out to be not so simple.

It has been pointed out by Timothy Gianotti and others that in the Scale of Action (Mīzān al-‘amāl), a work written shortly after the Precipitance, al-Ghazālī takes a much more “eirenic” approach to the various positions on the afterlife. In the second chapter of this work, al-Ghazālī surveys the various views on the subject, differentiating between four groups:

1. those who believe in the literal sense of the Qur‘ānic and Ḥadīth descriptions of the afterlife (including food and sexual relations), but acknowledge also ineffable pleasures “which no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor has it ever occurred to the heart of man” – this view is ascribed to the totality of Muslims (al-muslimūn kāfītān), and even more generally to all those who follow the prophets, including Jews and Christians;

2. those who believe that the Qur‘ānic and Ḥadīth descriptions of the afterlife are true only in the imaginary sense (people engrossed in the sensibles will be experiencing in the afterlife imaginary pleasures and pains as in a dream) – this view is ascribed to “some Islamic theistic philosophers” (ba‘d al-ilāhiyyīn al-islāmiyyīn min al-falāsīfa; since this obviously refers to Avicenna’s theory of an “imaginal” afterlife, discussed below, there is no doubt that it is Avicenna and his followers whom al-Ghazālī has in mind);

3. those who do not believe that there will be sensory pleasures and pains in the afterlife at all, and who argue that the Qur‘ānic and Ḥadīth descriptions of the afterlife are symbolic of spiritual pleasures and pains – this view is ascribed to the Sūfis and to another group of “theistic philosophers”; and finally

4. those who do not believe in the afterlife at all.
The same division is reproduced in al-Ghazâlî’s later work, *The Book of Forty (Kitâb al-Arba’in).* The second and the third groups are introduced in the two works as follows.

**[T64]** The second group: These are some Muslim theistic philosophers (*ba’d al-ilâhiyin al-islamiyin min al-falasifa*). They acknowledge that there will be a kind of pleasure [in the afterlife] of which the manner has never occurred to the heart of man. They call it “intellectual pleasure” (*ladhdha ‘aqliya*). As for sensory [pleasures], they have denied their existence [in the afterlife] in the objective sense (*min kharij*), but they affirm their existence by way of imagination (*‘alâ tariq al-takhayyl*), as in the state of sleep, with the difference that one’s sleep can be interrupted by awakening, while this state will not be interrupted but will continue eternally. They believe that this [state] will befall a group of people engrossed in the sensibles, those whose souls do not go beyond [sensory perceptions] and do not rise to intellectual pleasures. …

The third group: They deny the existence of sensory pleasure[s] in the afterlife altogether, both in objective reality and in the imagination. … They believe that sensory matters are extremely deficient in comparison to the pleasures to be [experienced] in the afterlife. [Sensory matters] are as far from these [pleasures] as perceiving the smell of delicious food is from tasting it (*dhawqih*), and seeing the face of the lover from enjoying a sexual intercourse with him, and even farther than that. They believe also that because this transcends the understanding of the masses, these pleasures have been represented in symbols (*miththilat*) taken from sensory matters with which they are familiar. Similarly, a child busies himself with study in order to become a judge or a minister. However, in his young age he does not [yet] realize the pleasure of these two [careers], so he is being promised things in which he often takes pleasure: a hockey-stick (*sawla‘an*) with which he toys, a bird with which he plays, and the like. How far is the pleasure of playing with a bird from the pleasure of being a king or a minister! Yet, because his understanding is insufficient to grasp what is higher, [this higher goal] has been represented by these base symbols (*miththila bi-l-akhass*) to whet his appetite and to lure him gradually into doing that wherein lies his felicity.

**[T65]** The second category: They do not affirm the [actual] existence of sensory pleasures and pains [in the afterlife], yet they do affirm their existence by way of imagination (*alâ sabîl al-takhyil*), as during sleep, so that each person in paradise or in hell will experience them subjectively (lit. alone, *wahda‘ti*). They believe that it will have the same impact on him as real [pleasures and pain] have, for [imaginary] suffering experienced in a dream is like the suffering experienced while awake. While one can get liberated from [suffering experienced in a dream] by awakening, that in the afterlife will be perpetual and unceasing.
The third category: They affirm the existence of intellectual pains and intellectual pleasures and believe that these [pains and pleasures] are greater than bodily ones. They compare this symbolically to the experience of the pleasure of kingship and to the experience of being deprived of it. The king would rather have himself subjected to numerous bodily pains than have his enemy triumph over him, take his kingdom, and mock and deride him, even though the enemy’s victory causes no pain to the body.

The two views presented here – which I shall call the “imaginalist view” and the “symbolist view” respectively – both deny the literal sense of the Qur’ānic and Ḥadith descriptions of the afterlife. On the imaginalist view, these descriptions are true, but only in the “imaginal” sense: some human beings (those “engrossed in the sensibles”) will be experiencing the pleasures and pains described in the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth in their imagination. Notice that the “imaginalist view” does not involve “giving the lie to the prophets.” It is in fact immune to this accusation, because it acknowledges that the scriptural eschatological descriptions are accurate, except that they refer to pleasures and pains to be experienced subjectively in one’s imagination, rather than objectively in the external reality. On the symbolist view, the scriptural eschatological descriptions act as “dissimilar symbols.” They are not literally true, but are pointers to otherwise inexpressible realities. This is the view discussed and condemned in the Precipitance as giving the lie to the prophets.

What is important is that in neither of the two works does al-Ghazālī offer any criticism of these views. To the contrary, he stresses that these views are no less conducive to leading a proper religious, God-oriented and afterlife-oriented life than the “orthodox” view (the belief in the literal sense of the scriptural eschatological descriptions). It is true that in the Scale and the Forty al-Ghazālī does not explicitly endorse the two philosophical views either, but the very fact that he gives them a voice and does so without criticism is telling. Moreover, instead of criticism, the philosophers (ḥukamā’), supposedly al-Ghazālī’s arch-enemies, are grouped in a rather “matter-of-fact” way together with “saints and prophets” as one of the groups affirming “eternal felicity and eternal misery.” Contrast this with the modern editors’ footnote to al-Ghazālī’s Book of Forty. The editors, Syrian scholars ‘Abdallāh ‘Urwānī and Sheikh Muhammad Bashir al-Shaqfa, note with indignation that “failure to affirm sensory pleasures and sensory pains [in the afterlife] is error and unbelief (dalāl wa-kufr), because it gives the lie (takhdīb) to what is transmitted on God’s authority in His books revealed to His messengers and gives the lie to the messengers, prayer and peace be upon them.” This is precisely what al-Ghazālī had said himself in the Precipitance, but in the Scale and the Forty he quite tellingly, and I believe deliberately, refrains from saying it.

The same “suspension of judgment” is evident in the following passage from al-Ghazālī’s Revival, already cited as part of [T22] above.

People have different positions (maqāmāt) on the meanings of these [eschatological expressions], after accepting them in principle (ba’d al-taṣdīq bi-uṣūlihā). Some of them think that all these are symbols (amthila), that what God has
prepared for His righteous servants is “what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor has it ever occurred to the heart of man,”36 and that humans [in this world know] nothing about paradise except mere attributes and names. Others think that some of these [expressions] are symbols, while others match the realities conveyed by the terms.37

Here again, al-Ghazālī presents the symbolist view without the slightest judgment, let alone condemnation. Strikingly, this passage also argues that the symbolist position is not incompatible with “acceptance” (tasdīq) of the prophetic discourse.

In the Jewels of the Qurʾān, al-Ghazālī continues the same line of thought, adding that the literal sense of eschatological descriptions is the “food” of the common folk (tajrī majrā al-ghidhāʾ li-ʿumūm al-khalq), while these same descriptions have “deep mysteries” which are the “life” of the elect (asrāʿ ghāmidā tajrī majrā al-ḥayāt li-khusūs al-khalq).38 It is clear that al-Ghazālī counts himself among the elect, who are clearly dissatisfied with the literal sense of the Qurʾānic eschatological descriptions.

Moreover, in a significant passage from the Loftiest Goal, largely neglected by earlier scholarship, al-Ghazālī himself sounds very much like a spokesman for the “symbolist view” – precisely the position condemned in the Precipitance. Here is the passage in question.

[T66] No one can cognize the true reality of death and the true reality of paradise and hell until after death and after one’s entrance into paradise or hell. This is because “paradise” is an expression designating pleasurable causes (asbāb mulīdhā), and if we were to postulate a person who has never experienced pleasure at all, it would be completely impossible for us to convey to him the meaning of paradise in such a way as to make him desirous to seek it. [Similarly], hell is an expression designating painful causes (asbāb muʿlima), and if we were to postulate a person who has never suffered pain at all, it would be completely impossible for us to convey to him the meaning of hell. However, if he has suffered [some] pain, we can convey to him the meaning of hell by comparing it to the most intense pain he has suffered: the pain of fire. Likewise, if he has experienced some kind of pleasure, we can attempt to convey to him the meaning of paradise by comparing it to the greatest pleasures he has enjoyed: food, sexual intercourse, and [taking delight in a beautiful] sight. Now, if there is pleasure in paradise different from these pleasures, there is no other way to convey it to him except by comparing it to these pleasures, just as – as we have mentioned – the pleasure of sexual intercourse might be compared to the sweetness of sugar [in order to have it explained to a child]. But the pleasures of paradise are farther away from any pleasure we have experienced in this world than even the pleasure of sexual intercourse is from the sweetness of sugar. So the correct expression for the [pleasures of the afterlife] is that they are “that which no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor has it ever occurred to the heart of man.”39 If we symbolize it by food, we have to qualify: “It is not
like this [earthly] food.” If we symbolize it by sexual intercourse, we have to say: “It is not like the sexual intercourse available in this world.”

What comes out clearly in this passage is that, according to al-Ghazālī, there is simply no other way to speak about paradise and hell except by means of dissimilar symbolism. Hence it is precisely this kind of symbolism that the Qur’ān employs. And hence it is completely legitimate to offer “dissimilar allegorical interpretations” of these symbols – by arguing that earthly images (food, sex, etc.) employed in the Qur’ān are nothing but pointers to otherwise inexpressible realities. This is exactly the philosophers’ “symbolist” position vis-à-vis scriptural eschatological imagery. Al-Ghazālī therefore does not hesitate to openly endorse the symbolist view. His argument in the *Loftiest Goal* implies that, far from giving the lie to the prophets, such allegorical interpretations are legitimate (provided they are put forward by qualified interpreters and are not shared with the masses) and moreover that they alone unravel the Qur’ān’s real intention. If this passage in the *Loftiest Goal* is taken seriously, as I believe it should, it would follow that al-Ghazālī’s condemnation of the “symbolist” approach as giving the lie to the prophets is a mere smokescreen, behind which lies in reality an acceptance of the “symbolist” position.

This impression is confirmed by al-Ghazālī’s discussion of the fates of human beings in the afterlife in Book 31 of the *Revival*. He begins his discussion by saying that “this present life (al-dunyā) belongs to the world of possession and manifestation (‘ālam al-mulk wa-l-shahāda), while the afterlife (al-ākhira) belongs to the world of the hidden and of dominion (‘ālam al-ghayb wa-l-malakūt).” Since the “world of possession and manifestation” and “the world of the hidden and of dominion” are al-Ghazālī’s terms for the sensible world and the intelligible world respectively, it follows that the afterlife belongs to the intelligible realm – with the implication that it must be incorporeal and devoid of sensory pleasures and pains. Al-Ghazālī continues by saying that

[T67] it is impossible to explain the world of dominion, while being in the world of possession, except by coining images (darb al-amthāl). … This is because the world of possession is [like] a dream in relation to the world of dominion …, and [just as] the events of the waking state do not become apparent to you while in a dream except when they are encoded in images which require deciphering (ta‘bīr), so also the events of that other waking state – which is the afterlife – do not become apparent to you while you are in this [present] dream – which is this life – except when they are encoded in multiple images.

Al-Ghazālī then clarifies what he means by “image” (mathal).

[T68] By “image” (mathal) I mean conveying a certain meaning by means of a form, such that if that meaning is considered the [image] is found to be true, but if the form is considered, the [image] is found to be false. … The
prophets have no choice but to speak to people through [such] images, because they are commissioned to address people according to their level of understanding (‘alā qadr ‘uğūlihim), and their level of understanding [in this life] is that they are asleep, and nothing can be disclosed to a person who is asleep except through an image. When they die, they will wake up and cognize that the image is true.43

In these passages, al-Ghazālī provides a philosophical justification for the prophets’ use of “dissimilar symbols,” i.e. images whose literal sense (“form”) is false, but whose interpretation (“meaning”) – to most people only to be disclosed in the afterlife – is true. The prophets are bound to use such symbols, because human beings in the present life are “asleep.” Such prophetic “dissimilar symbols” are in fact of the same type that our imagination uses in a dream when it, too, encodes information received from the supernal world in dissimilar images. Both kinds of dissimilar images require the same type of allegorical explanation, called ta’wil in the case of scriptural images, and ta’bir in the case of dreams.44 This allegorical explanation unravels the intellectual meaning (ma’nā), true reality (ḥaqīqa), and “spirit” (rūḥ) of an image, effectively discarding its sensory form.45

Thus, contrary to his anti-philosophical declarations in the Precipitance (as well as Fair Approach, Demarcating Criterion, and other works), the above passages suggest that al-Ghazālī himself endorsed the symbolist position and that he did not think it involved giving the lie to the prophets. To the contrary, he believed that the symbolist position was, in fact, superior to the “orthodox” view in that it more accurately understood the nature of reality and the nature of prophetic discourse.

But what about the other philosophical view presented in the Scale and the Forty: the “imaginalist” position – evidently a reference to Avicenna’s influential theory of an “imaginal afterlife”? According to this theory, while the perfect (i.e. the philosophers) will enjoy the fullness of felicity and non-bodily vision of God in paradise, the non-perfect (non-philosophers) will imagine the bodily pleasures (or pains) described in the Qur’ān. Thus, the wide-eyed houris, for instance, will not be physically available to the non-perfect inhabitants of paradise, but will nonetheless enjoyed by them in their imagination. Their afterlife will consist, effectively, of a “virtual reality,” an unceasing “dream,” involving imaginary sensual pleasures.46

It is striking that nowhere in the Twentieth Discussion of the Precipitance does al-Ghazālī ever mention this theory, even though he was intimately familiar with it. We know this because it is referenced in both the Scale and the Forty, as we have seen above, and also in al-Ghazālī’s report of the philosophers’ teachings in the Intentions, a work based on Avicenna’s Book of Knowledge (Dāneshnāme) and written prior to the Precipitance.

[T69] Intellectual pleasure will only be available [in the afterlife] to a soul that had become perfect in this world. [As for a soul] that is free from vices, but devoid of knowledge, whose whole care is given to imagined things
Al-Ghazālī and the philosophical tradition

(hammuhā maṣrūf ilā l-mutakhayvalāt), it is likely (fa-lā yab’udu)⁴⁷ that it will imagine [in the afterlife] a pleasurable form (al-ṣūra al-mulidhdha) as in a dream. It will imagine, while in paradise, a certain depiction (waṣf) of sensory beings. One (or: some, ba’d) of the celestial bodies will serve as a [material] substrate (mawdū‘) for its imaginings, for imagination is impossible except in a body.⁴⁸

If al-Ghazālī was familiar with this theory, why then did he choose to ignore it in the Precipitance? It is unlikely that this omission is accidental, for it is precisely this theory that “saves” Avicenna and his followers from the charge of giving the lie to the prophets. If Avicenna acknowledged the possibility of an “imaginal” afterlife, as he did, then he is merely guilty of moving from the “real,” physical sense of the Qur’ānic eschatological descriptions to their “imaginal” sense, but not of dismissing these descriptions altogether. He might be accused of undertaking an unwarranted interpretative move, but not of giving the lie to the prophets. Surely this is a mitigating circumstance, which, for fairness’ sake, would need to be brought out. Furthermore, if al-Ghazālī disagreed with this important theory, one would expect him to discuss it, as he discussed Avicenna’s other doctrines, and to mention specifically what exactly in it contradicts the Islamic teachings on the afterlife. Why, then, did he not do so, but chose instead to sweep this theory under the carpet?

In my view, the likeliest explanation of this curious phenomenon is that al-Ghazālī felt that engaging with the imaginalist view would complicate his discussion and interfere with his intention to issue a blanket condemnation of the philosophers as infidels guilty of giving the lie to the prophets. Moreover, since there is no inherent contradiction between the symbolist and the imaginalist views, and one could in principle hold both, it is possible that al-Ghazālī was sympathetic to the imaginalist view.⁴⁹ This would dovetail well with al-Ghazālī’s distinction between felicity (sa‘āda) and salvation (najāt), discussed above. An “imaginal afterlife” is, in fact, a plausible candidate for what al-Ghazālī might have understood by salvation. It is noteworthy that Avicenna introduces the imaginalist position in the context of the fate of the “dumb souls” (al-nūfūs al-bulh), which is precisely the category that, according to al-Ghazālī, will inherit salvation.⁵⁰ However, since to the best of my knowledge, al-Ghazālī never explicitly identifies salvation with an imaginal afterlife and offers no obvious clues that lead in that direction, this possibility cannot at present be proven.

Be it as it may, it seems evident that al-Ghazālī accepted the major tenets of Avicenna’s eschatology and worked entirely within an Avicennian framework. Whether he still adhered to the doctrine of bodily resurrection is a moot question, and in light of the evidence presented above, I am inclined to answer it in the negative.⁵¹ He certainly did not believe that the souls will return into the same bodies as they had in this life, and he says so explicitly in the Alchemy of Felicity.⁵² Moreover, he must have surely believed that it will be the soul and the soul alone (the “heart”) that will be experiencing the reward or the punishment in the afterlife, and so if it were to re-attach itself to some other body, that body would be
virtually redundant. It may also be recalled that in his discussion of “witnessing” (mushāhāda) and vision of God (ru‘yat Allāh) in the afterlife, analyzed in Chapter 3 above, al-Ghazālī is extremely reluctant to accept the Ash’arite view that the vision of God will be located in the bodily eyes, and hints that it might be located in the “heart.” The most plausible explanation for his reluctance and for his esoteric hints is that he simply did not believe bodily eyes will be present in the afterlife.

If – and at this stage this must remain a speculation – al-Ghazālī did believe in Avicenna’s imaginal afterlife, he might have maintained that the body will be “resurrected” in the imaginal sense, and only in the case of those non-philosophical souls which will attain salvation and fall short of true incorporeal felicity. These souls would imagine themselves to have bodies, and would then be experiencing imaginary pleasures or pains through them, while – as Avicenna had suggested – one of the celestial bodies would serve as a substrate for these imaginings. Since al-Ghazālī was not committed to the idea of having the souls return into the same bodies that they had in this life, he might have considered this celestial substrate as the “resurrection body” to which the non-philosophical souls will be attached. Possibly this is the meaning of his cryptic statement that in the afterlife, the ignorant and the dumb will have “their heads turned around,” facing downwards, to the “lowest of the low,” as mentioned at the end of Chapter 2 above.

**Tahāfut: A pseudo-refutation?**

The above analysis shows that the Precipitance is an extremely complicated work, where, under the guise of a refutation, al-Ghazālī in fact prepares the ground for an acceptance of key philosophical beliefs to a degree unprecedented in Islamic theology. This is done both overtly and covertly. Many philosophical beliefs are explicitly said to be “acceptable” in the Precipitance. Thus, philosophical soteriology, for instance, “does not conflict with religion” (laysat ‘alā mukhālafat al-shar‘) and is thus entirely acceptable. Having been “laundered” in the Precipitance, it subsequently becomes the backbone of al-Ghazālī’s own soteriology in his later works, beginning with the Scale and the Revival.

Other philosophical ideas are said to be “possible” – al-Ghazālī only disputes the philosophers’ claim that they were able to prove them apodeictically. His critique in such cases only concerns the philosophers’ proofs, but not their conclusions. A case in point is the Fourteenth Discussion, where al-Ghazālī seeks to show the philosophers’ “inability” (‘ajz) to prove their claim that the heaven is an “animal (hayawān), which obeys God in its circular motion.” Al-Ghazālī’s verdict is that this theory is “possible,” but the philosophers are unable to prove it using only rational argumentation (dalīl al-‘aql). “If this is true” (in kāna ṣaḥīḥan), al-Ghazālī continues,

[T70] this is something that only prophets can know through inspiration or revelation (ilhām ... aw wahy) from God, whereas rational syllogism does not teach it. Admittedly, it is not impossible (lā yab‘udu) that something like this could be known through a [rational] argument, if such an argument were
to be found and to prove useful. Yet we insist that what the [philosophers] have adduced as an argument is only sufficient to establish a conjecture (zann), but is not sufficient to produce conclusive [knowledge].

Even when al-Ghazzālī professes to “invalidate” (ibtāl) philosophical teachings, his focus is on criticizing the proofs rather than the conclusions. The fact that he later endorsed and promoted many of these teachings himself shows that he deemed the conclusions valid. The term ibtāl, as used by al-Ghazzālī in the Precipitance, therefore connotes “showing a doctrine to be unfounded or unproven” rather than “showing it to be incorrect.” Though unfounded and unproven, these doctrines can still be correct, and al-Ghazzālī often believes they are.

It is thus obvious that al-Ghazzālī’s “refutation” of the philosophers is of a very peculiar kind. It focuses on the validity of proofs mounted by the philosophers in support of their assertions, without seeking to negate these assertions themselves. Why then does al-Ghazzālī go to such a great length criticizing philosophical proofs, if he in fact accepted many of their conclusions? This, I believe, is the most fundamental question that needs to be resolved if we are to adequately understand the Precipitance, and, indeed, al-Ghazzālī’s attitude to the philosophical tradition as a whole.

A solution has been recently proposed by Frank Griffel: “By criticizing a selected number of teachings in the falāsifah’s metaphysics and the natural sciences, al-Ghazzālī aims to make room for the epistemological claims of revelation.” This is an important and perspicacious remark, which I believe needs to be expanded. Revelation must be understood in the broad sense, so as to include both prophecy and the post-prophetic mystical cognition: īlāhām (inspiration) and mukāshafa (unveiling). Al-Ghazzālī’s goal was to make room for the epistemological claims of Revelation in this broad sense: i.e. for the epistemological claims of both prophecy and mystical cognition. He aimed, first, to delineate areas of investigation inaccessible to philosophical inquiry, and second, to declare these areas accessible to both prophecy and the post-prophetic mystical cognition. While the mechanism of prophecy and mystical cognition was philosophically and scientificaly explicable (here al-Ghazzālī simply adopted Avicennian noetics), the knowledge obtained through such cognition lay, in al-Ghazzālī’s view, beyond the reach of philosophy and science. To be sure, it did not contradict any of the apodeictically proven philosophical statements, but it included some knowledge which apodeixis, unaided by prophecy and unveiling, was powerless to reach.

Al-Ghazzālī believed, accordingly, that the apodeictic method was a much less powerful tool than the philosophers gave it credit for being. True, whenever apodeictic demonstration was properly applied it invariably yielded sure and certain knowledge – its conclusions being irrefutable – yet it was severely limited in how much sure and certain knowledge it could produce. In their overconfidence, the philosophers were rash to assume that the apodeictic method was capable of providing a comprehensive account of reality. Al-Ghazzālī’s task was to debunk this claim. He believed that though infallible (yielding, if properly applied, only sure and certain knowledge), the apodeictic method was limited in scope and
thus fundamentally insufficient. Al-Ghazālī argued against the common scientific procedure, employed by the philosophers (as it still is by modern scientists), of complementing apodeixis with hypotheses and conjectures.\textsuperscript{56} In his view, only the evidence of Revelation can, and should be allowed to, complement apodeixis.\textsuperscript{57}

One last remark needs to be made here: in the \textit{Precipitance}, al-Ghazālī also deploys a variety of techniques to give the false appearance of “refuting” certain notions to which he in fact subscribed. As we have seen above, this may even include the philosophical view of an incorporeal afterlife – one of the three reasons for al-Ghazālī’s condemnation of the philosophers as infidels (\textit{kuffār})! Since al-Ghazālī’s proclaimed goal was to “tear down” (\textit{hadm}) and deconstruct philosophy – i.e. to prove it to be insufficient and unable to reach the goals that it sets out to reach – he felt himself at liberty to use specious argumentation, including the frequent “yes, but it could also be otherwise” argument. At least in some cases, there is evidence that he was completely aware of the specious nature of his argumentation. His insistence, in the Sixteenth Discussion, that God could disclose knowledge either directly or through an angel, without recourse to the Preserved Tablet or the souls of the spheres, is a case in point. Al-Ghazālī no doubt believed that attaining “direct” knowledge from God was impossible (as he repeatedly argues in his other works, it is God’s unchangeable “habit” to act and bestow knowledge through intermediaries). Moreover, he was completely aware that from the philosophical standpoint the souls of the spheres are angels. In fact, he had mentioned this just a few pages previously, in the Fifteenth Discussion of the \textit{Precipitance}.\textsuperscript{58} Thus, despite the fact that he did not believe in his own arguments and fully accepted the philosophical notions which these arguments set out to refute, al-Ghazālī nevertheless did not hesitate to deploy them against the philosophers, no doubt because of their rhetorical force.

It is in this sense that al-Ghazālī’s \textit{Precipitance} can be described as a “pseudo-refutation,” a kind of exercise in deconstructionist rhetoric and dialectic, in which al-Ghazālī apparently never fully believed. The \textit{Precipitance} operates on the level of \textit{i'tiqād} (opinion) rather than \textit{ma'rifa} (cognition) and is written for the \textit{mutakallīmūn}, a class of scholars about whom al-Ghazālī always speaks with disdain, numbering them among the “common folk” (\textit{'awāmm}). The \textit{Precipitance} is thus essentially a work of \textit{kalām}, aiming at safeguarding the commoners’ creed (\textit{'aqīdat al-‘awāmm}, nothing more and nothing less.\textsuperscript{59} It has nothing to do with al-Ghazālī’s own esoteric ideas, which go well beyond (and may frequently contradict) the commoners’ creed. These ideas, as al-Ghazālī himself suggested, must be sought in his other books.

\textbf{[T71]} If you wish to get a whiff of the scent of cognition, you will find a small amount of it scattered in the “Book of Patience and Thankfulness,” the “Book of Love,” and the chapter on God’s oneness at the beginning of the “Book of Reliance on God,” all these being parts of the \textit{Revival} [Books 32, 36, and 35 respectively]. You will find a decent portion of it that will teach you how to knock on the gates of cognition (\textit{kayfiyat qar’ bāb al-ma'rifa}) in the treatise \textit{The Loftiest Goal in Explicating the Meanings of God’s
Most-Beautiful Names, especially in the [discussion of] names derived from verbs/actions. But if you wish [to hear] explicit teaching (ṣarīḥ al-maʿrifa) on the true realities of the [Islamic] creed (ḥaqāʾiq hādhihi l-ʿaqīda), without equivocation or guardedness, you will not find it except in one/some of our books to be withheld from those unworthy of them (fī baʿd kutubin al-maḏnūn bihā ʿalā ghayr ahlīhā).60

In addition to being a “pseudo-refutation,” written for the mutakallimūn and on their level and aiming at safeguarding the commoners’ creed without disclosing al-Ghazālī’s real views, the Precipitance also provided al-Ghazālī with a handy “alibi” that he had rejected the most extreme philosophical teachings, had dissociated himself from the philosophers, and was therefore free from their pernicious influence. This is the main reason why al-Ghazālī keeps referring to the Precipitance in his later works (notably the Deliverer). Despite al-Ghazālī’s best attempts to conceal it, however, the fact that he was under the sway of philosophical influence was not lost on his contemporaries. Al-Ghazālī’s response to the charge of philosophical influence will be examined in the next section.

The Nishāpur controversy: Al-Ghazālī’s response to the charge of philosophical influence

Abundant evidence has been presented above that al-Ghazālī’s thought is heavily indebted to Avicenna’s philosophy. This fact was not lost on his contemporaries, who accused him of drawing on philosophical ideas. The controversy erupted in 500/1006–7, following al-Ghazālī’s return to teaching at the Nizāmiya college in Nishāpur in the preceding year. The controversy’s importance was first pointed out by Dorothea Krawulsky – in the introduction to her German translation of the most important primary source on this event, the collection of al-Ghazālī’s Persian letters. More recently, Kenneth Garden and Frank Griffel have refined Krawulsky’s analysis. Garden summarizes the sequence of events as follows:

The picture of the controversy that emerges, then, is that in 500/1106–7 a group of Nishapuri religious scholars, Hanafis and Shafii’s, took issue with certain aspects of al-Ghazālī’s thought found in Mishkāt al-anwār, Kīmiyyā-yi saʿādat, al-Munqidh min al-dalāl and other writings, accusing him of holding and promoting philosophical, heretical, and Zoroastrian doctrines. They recruited [the North African scholar] al-Māzarī al-Dhakī to their cause. … Al-Māzarī went to the court of Sanjar, won access on the basis of his having been a tutor to the royal household, and brought these charges before the “King of the East.” This effort may have raised doubts about al-Ghazālī in Sanjar’s mind, but the further effort of calling the Hanafi Sanjar’s attention to al-Ghazālī’s youthful critiques of Abū Ḥanīfa were [sic] required to bring about al-Ghazālī’s summons for a hearing. Al-Ghazālī’s testimony won his acquittal and the further favor of Sanjar. With this, the controversy seems to have ended.61
What is important for our purposes is that the charge of philosophical influence played a role in this controversy. We see a trace of it in one of al-Ghazālī’s Persian letters, in which he responds to the allegation that his idea that “human spirit (rūḥ-e ādamī) is a stranger (gharīb) in this world” is the “teaching of the philosophers and the Christians (sokhan-e fālāsefe o nasārā)” al-Ghazālī begins his response by pointing out that the fact that Christians (or philosophers) hold a certain idea does not, in itself, make the idea false. Al-Ghazālī’s example is the (supposed) Christian teaching that “there is no god but God, and Jesus is the spirit of God.” Al-Ghazālī counsels his addressee to follow the advice of ‘Alī: “Do not judge the truth by men; rather cognize the truth [first], and you will know its adherents.”

As we see, al-Ghazālī does not dispute the fact that this idea may be shared by philosophers (and even Christians), yet he argues that it is known independently both from the Islamic scripture and the spiritual insight (Pers. baṣīrat).

In the Deliverer from Error – a work which was written as an apologetic response to his critics in Nīshāpūr in the midst of the controversy and which is therefore to be read against the backdrop of this controversy – al-Ghazālī also addresses the charge of philosophical influence.

Objections have been raised against some statements scattered in our works on the mysteries of the religious sciences (asrār ‘ulūm al-dīn), by those whose innermost hearts have not been firmly grounded in the sciences and whose insights have not opened up to the utmost goal of all the religious schools (madhāhib). They thought that these are statements [taken] from the sayings of the ancient [philosophers] (kalâm al-awā’il), although some
are independent ideas [of mine] (for it is not impossible that a horse’s hoof should [accidentally] fall on the print left by another), others are found in the books of religion (al-kutub al-shar’īya), and the sense of most is found in the books of the Sufis.

But let us assume [for the sake of the argument] that they are not found except in the books of [the ancients]. If these statements are reasonable in themselves (ma’qūlān fī nasīḥī), are corroborated by a demonstrative proof, and do not contradict the Qur’ān and the Sunna, why should they be abandoned and rejected? Indeed, if we were to open this door68 and go as far as denying every bit of truth acknowledged by the mind of a person of falsehood, we would have to deny much of the truth. We would be compelled to deny a lot of Qur’ānic verses, prophetic traditions, reports about the first generations of Muslims, and statements of sages and Sufis because the author of the book of the Brethren of Purity recorded them in his work, seeking to find in them confirmation [for his erroneous ideas] and to attract the hearts of the foolish to his nonsense by their means.69 This would deteriorate to the degree that the people of falsehood would wrest the truth from our hands by recording it in their books!70

On the surface, in the first paragraph just quoted, al-Ghazālī pleads not guilty and rejects the accusation of philosophical influence, yet the overall tenor of the passage suggests that this accusation is true; in fact, this passage can be read as a veiled acknowledgement on al-Ghazālī’s part of having perused the books of the ancients. Why else would he acknowledge that his “independent” ideas conformed to the ancients’ views (“a horse’s hoof may [accidentally] fall on the print left by another”) and proceed to justify the use of the books of the ancients by saying that their statements “are reasonable in themselves, corroborated by a demonstrative proof, and do not contradict the Qur’ān and the Sunna”?

This understanding is corroborated by other passages where al-Ghazālī defends his right as an expert religious scholar to handle philosophical material, at the same time denying the same right to unqualified “commoners,” ‘awāmm, who, in al-Ghazālī’s view, include even the majority of scholars. To quote the Deliverer again:

[T74] The intelligent and knowledgeable person first cognizes the truth. Then he considers the statement [that he hears], and if it is true he accepts it, regardless of whether the speaker is a person of falsehood or of truth (muḥtīlān aw muḥiqqa). He may even be eager to extract the truth from the sayings of the misguided (ahl al-dalāl), for he is aware that gold is mined from sand. Indeed, there is no harm if a money-changer should put his hand in a forger’s bag and extract the pure gold from among the counterfeit [coins], as long as he has confidence in his expertise (baṣīra). It is only the villager who is to be restrained from dealing with the forger, not the expert money-changer, just as it is the fool who is to be prohibited from approaching the seashore, not the expert swimmer, and the child from touching the snake, not the excellent snake-charmer (al-muʿazzim al-bāriʿ).
By my life, as most human beings are convinced that they are smart, excellent, and have perfect intelligence and sound capacity to distinguish truth from falsehood and guidance from leading astray, it is necessary to close the door completely, preventing everyone, as far as possible, from consulting the books of the misguided.

In the following passage, al-Ghazālī goes one step further and argues that if he handles philosophical material, he does so for the benefit of the entire Muslim community. Instead of finding fault with expert scholars like himself, the community should be grateful and accept this material from him, for it has been carefully “sifted” and what is beneficial in it has been carefully separated from what is harmful.

[T75] The expert snake-charmer (al-mu‘azzim al-ḥādhiq) who has taken hold of the snake, separated the theriac (tiryāq) from the venom, extracted the theriac, and neutralized the venom should not refuse the theriac to those who are in need of it. Likewise, the judicious and expert money-changer, having put his hand in a forger’s bag, extracted the pure gold, and thrown away the counterfeit, should not withhold the good and acceptable part from those who need it. The scholar [should act] in the same way.

He who needs the theriac but feels aversion to it, knowing that it was taken from a snake, the source of poison, and the poor person who needs money but shuns away from accepting the gold, knowing that it was extracted from the forger’s bag, should both be instructed that their aversion is sheer ignorance, and moreover is the cause of their being deprived of the benefit they seek. They should be taught that the proximity of the counterfeit to the genuine neither turns the genuine into counterfeit nor the counterfeit into genuine. So also the proximity of truth and falsehood neither turns truth into falsehood nor falsehood into truth.

The necessity to sift through philosophical material is derived from the fact that the philosophers have mixed the grains of truth stolen from others with their own false doctrines to attract readers. We have already seen (in [T73] above) this charge brought against the Brethren of Purity. The philosophers, according to al-Ghazālī, employ the same stratagem, most conspicuously in the field of ethics.

[T76] The philosophers took [their teachings on ethics] from the statements of the Ṣūfis, who are divine men (mутa‘allihūn), persevering in constant recollection of God, resisting the passions, following the path to God, and refraining from the pleasures of this world. The [Ṣūfis] expressly stated what had been disclosed (inkashafa) to them in their ascetic struggle (mujāhada) about the qualities and the flaws of the soul and the dangers inherent in [the soul’s] acts. The philosophers then took [these statements] and mixed them into their discussion, in order to embellish it and to increase thereby the appeal of their false teachings. In their age, and indeed in every age, there existed
a group of divine men (jamāʿa min al-mutaʿallihūn). God never leaves the world without them, for they are the supports of the earth (awtād al-ard).

… The People of the Cave (aṣḥāb al-kahf) were among them, and they lived in ancient times, as the Qurʾānic tells us (Q. 18:9–27).⁷⁴

Here al-Ghazālī anachronistically reverses the actual state of affairs. When he says that the philosophers took their ethical teachings from the Sūfis, he is immediately faced with a problem: there were no Sūfis in ancient Greece, the cradle of philosophy. In order to solve this difficulty, al-Ghazālī postulates a perennial Sūfī tradition. He argues that there had always been people like the Sūfis throughout human history. These are the “divine men” (mutaʿallihūn), the “supports of the earth” (awtād al-ard). As a case in point, al-Ghazālī invokes the Qurʾānic reference to the People of the Cave (the Qurʾānic retelling of the Christian legend about the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus).⁷⁵

It is ironic that the very example al-Ghazālī uses to prove that the philosophers “stole” knowledge from the (proto-)Sūfis, the example of the People of the Cave, who ostensibly belong to the perennial tradition of “divine men,” is inspired by a philosophical source, most likely by Avicenna’s chapter on time from the Physics of the Book of the Cure.⁷⁶ There, Avicenna writes:

[T77] Whoever does not feel motion does not feel time, like the People of the Cave, who, because they did not feel the motions between the moment when they began to settle down to sleep and the moment of their awakening, did not realize that they [had slept] for more than one day. The First Teacher [Aristotle] also reported that a similar phenomenon occurred to a group of “divine men” (mutaʿallihūn) who History teaches had lived before the People of the Cave.⁷⁷

In Avicenna, we find a reference to the People of the Cave who are connected to the mutaʿallihūn⁷⁸ and furthermore, to a group of mutaʿallihūn before the time of Aristotle. As the term mutaʿallihūn occurs in Avicenna’s paraphrase of Aristotle, we can attempt to identify this reference and find out what this term corresponds to in the Greek text. The quotation can be identified; it comes from Aristotle’s Physics:

[T78] But neither does time exist without change; for when the state of our own minds does not change at all, or we have not noticed its changing, we do not realize that time has elapsed, any more than those who are fabled to sleep among the heroes in Sardinia do (καθότερεν οὐδὲ τοῖς ἐν Σαρδοίν μνημονεύοντες καθεύδειν παρὰ τοῖς ἑρωσίν) when they are awakened; for they connect the earlier “now” with the later and make them one, cutting out the interval because of their failure to notice it.⁷⁹

The Arabic translation of Aristotle’s Physics, prepared in the late ninth or early tenth-century by the Christian scholar Ishāq ibn Ḥunayn – the son of the
famous translator Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq – employs the term *muta’allihūn* to render the Greek word ἥρωες, “heroes.” Needless to say, neither Aristotle’s text, nor its Arabic translation, nor Avicenna’s interpretation of the latter supports al-Ghazālī’s contention that there has always existed a perennial tradition of “divine men” (*muta’allihūn*), leading to the Sūfis of the Islamic times. The very term *muta’allihūn*, which *prima facie* sounds remarkably “Sūfi,” is the result of an attempt of a Christian translator to render into Arabic the term “hero,” originating from ancient Greek mythology and religion.

To summarize, in his apologetic defense of his use of philosophical material, al-Ghazālī employs several techniques. At first, he explicitly denies using such material. Second, he argues (in a somewhat veiled way) that such use is legitimate and even beneficial to the Muslim community, provided this is done by an expert scholar like al-Ghazālī himself. He presents himself as an expert “snake-charmer” who takes it upon himself to handle the “hydra” of philosophy in order to extract the precious theriac and to use it in preparation of the spiritual medicine needed to revive Islam and to cure the Muslim community. Third, al-Ghazālī argues that this material is not philosophical in origin. It belongs to the perennial tradition of “divine men” and “supports of the earth,” who allegedly existed throughout human history (the People of the Cave are cited as an ancient example) and who are, in al-Ghazālī’s own age, the Sūfis. According to al-Ghazālī’s fanciful historical interpretation, it was the philosophers who drew on this tradition, rather than the other way round. Al-Ghazālī’s adoption of philosophical material is thus, according to him, nothing else but tapping into the same perennial tradition of “divine men,” to which the philosophers themselves are indebted, and to which they owe the plagiarized grains of truth hidden among their otherwise erroneous teachings.
Conclusion

In his celebrated “apologetic autobiography” *The Deliverer from Error (al-Munqidh min al-Da’al)*, al-Ghazālī uses a series of striking images to characterize his attitude to the Graeco-Arabic philosophical tradition, especially to the philosophy of al-Fārābī and Avicenna. In one of these images, perhaps the most telling one, philosophy is compared to a snake, and the expert theologian, al-Ghazālī himself, is presented as a “skilled snake-charmer” (*al-mu’azzim al-bārī* or *al-hādhīq*). The theologian’s task is to neutralize the snake’s venom (*samm*) and to distill the theriac (*tiryāq*) required to cure the Muslim community from its spiritual disease. Despite the fact that the theriac administered by the theologian is derived from the snake of philosophy (the word “theriac,” Gr. θηριακή, means, literally, “[taken] from the beast”), ordinary Muslims ought to feel no aversion to it, but to gratefully accept the treatment, for it is necessary for curing their ailment.

Despite al-Ghazālī’s criticism of twenty philosophical teachings in his anti-philosophical treatise *Precipitance of the Philosophers (Tahāfut al-falāsīfa)*, curing spiritual disease with philosophical theriac is precisely what he sets outs to do in his other works, beginning with the *Scale of Action (Mīzān al-‘amal)* and *The Revival of the Religious Sciences (Iḥyāʾ ‘ulūm al-dīn)*. Though apparently critical of certain philosophical teachings, al-Ghazālī is appreciative of philosophy as a whole and resorts to it constantly, though almost always covertly, in order to cure the Muslim community from its spiritual disease and to revive and reinvigorate the Islam of his day.

But how critical is al-Ghazālī of philosophical teachings? There is, I believe, overwhelming evidence that he in fact accepted many of the philosophical notions criticized and ostensibly refuted in the *Precipitance*. Several such cases have been presented and analyzed in Chapter 5. Most strikingly, he seems to accept the philosophers’ belief in an incorporeal afterlife – one of the three notions on account of which he brands the philosophers “infidels” (*kuffār*), with the implication that they are apostates from Islam liable to capital punishment. (The other two notions are the philosophers’ denial of the world’s origination in time and of God’s knowledge of the particulars, which are left outside the scope of this book.) Though final judgment about the *Precipitance* must be deferred until the entire treatise is carefully and systematically compared to both Avicenna’s and al-Ghazālī’s other works, the evidence already surveyed suggests that the *Precipitance* is a kind of
“pseudo-refutation,” which gives the appearance that the opponent’s teachings have been refuted without intending to reject them in actuality.

As argued in the present study, al-Ghazālī’s “refutation” of the philosophers was not meant to negate the philosophers’ conclusions, but only to undermine their reasoning (and the public confidence in the philosophers’ intellectual achievements), leaving the door open for al-Ghazālī to endorse these same conclusions in his later works. Under the guise of criticism and while publicly denouncing their views, al-Ghazālī effectively “despoils” the philosophers. He invalidates their demonstrations (the “venom”), yet appropriates their theories (the “theriace”), so as to put these theories, subsequently, to his own use. In his later works, al-Ghazālī frequently camouflages appropriated philosophical notions with his own, mystically sounding terminology (e.g. “heart,” “intrinsic feature,” “unveiling”) and feeds them to the masses – which is precisely what the theologian (the “snake-charmer”) is said to be doing in the Deliverer.

The process of camouflaging philosophical ideas is furthered by their subordination to a mystical framework which al-Ghazālī develops entirely on the basis of Avicenna’s noetics and theory of prophecy (including Avicenna’s theory of intuition, hads). Though Avicenna was not a mystic but a rationalist philosopher, his poetic and allusive language in his Pointers and Reminders (al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīḥāt) is nevertheless such that it lends itself to mystical interpretations. Al-Ghazālī consciously put forward one such interpretation, co-opting Avicenna’s theory of prophecy and transforming it into a full-fledged theory of mystical cognition. This theory of mystical cognition served as a template for later writers – Ibn Ṭufayl, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī, and Ibn ‘Arabī, among others – who followed in al-Ghazālī’s footsteps and continued to engage with Avicenna’s legacy in similar ways.

In order to “mystify” Avicenna’s noetics and theory of prophecy, al-Ghazālī emphasizes the continuity between prophecy and the post-prophetic mystical cognition, called “inspiration” (ilhām, a term already found in Avicenna for hads-based cognition) or “unveiling” (mukāshafā or kashf). This post-prophetic mystical cognition is said to be available, in principle, to every human being, though it is reached, in practice, only by the select few. Al-Ghazālī argues that the philosophers have been unable to prove many of their teachings, suggesting that these teachings can be grasped instead by the “saints” (awliyā’) through inspiration and unveiling. As these teachings are now wrested from the hands of the philosophers, “repackaged” in mystical trappings, and sanctioned with a quasi-prophetic authority, al-Ghazālī has no qualms about promoting them. Needless to say, while doing so, he makes no reference to Avicenna or the philosophical tradition.

Al-Ghazālī’s use of the term dhawq (tasting) provides additional evidence for his despoil-and-repackage technique. Originating in Avicenna’s descriptions of the experience of intellectual pleasure in the afterlife – a fact hitherto unnoticed by scholars – the term dhawq receives a radically different meaning in al-Ghazālī’s works. It becomes generalized so as to mean the entelechy of knowledge and is connected to prophecy, signifying the degree of prophecy available
Conclusion

to non-prophets. Al-Ghazālī calls upon his intellectually adept followers to strive to attain the “taste” of prophecy, because it is only through “tasting” that they can have a true cognition of prophecy, and consequently a true cognition of the philosophical theories which the philosophers themselves were (allegedly) unable to prove, but which are nevertheless validated by quasi-prophetic inspiration and unveiling. Clearly, *dhawq* – originally an Avicennian term – is made to serve al-Ghazālī’s agenda of “distilling the theriac,” i.e. despoiling the philosophers, redefining philosophical notions as inspirational ones, and subsequently administering these notions, in a mystical garb, as “medicine” to the Muslim community.

In this book, I have attempted to survey the entire spectrum of al-Ghazālī’s engagement with philosophical noetics and theory of prophecy. Al-Ghazālī’s debt to the philosophical tradition is, arguably, one of the most salient features of his writing, and so is his constant refusal to openly acknowledge this fact, even when it is pointed out by critics. Al-Ghazālī likes to present himself as an adversary of philosophy, though enlightened enough to accept a limited number of philosophical teachings which do not contradict religion. In reality, however, he is more accurately described as a clandestine sympathizer and popularizer of philosophy, who is willing to accept even the most radical philosophical doctrines, while giving the appearance of denouncing them. So was al-Ghazālī “charming” the snake of philosophy, as he wants us to believe, or was he, rather, charmed by this snake? The abundant evidence presented in the present study strongly suggests that he was “charmed” by and enamored of philosophy, particularly Avicennian noetics and theory of prophecy, and clandestinely popularized it himself.

This book will have hopefully put to rest some of the popular misconceptions still surrounding al-Ghazālī: especially the facile view that al-Ghazālī was simply an enemy of philosophy and that, moreover, he was somehow responsible for its alleged downfall in Islamic lands. Nothing could be further from the truth. To cite al-Ghazālī’s critic Averroes, al-Ghazālī instead “came and flooded the villages, by disclosing all of philosophy to the general public” (*jā’a ... fa-ṭamma l-wādī ‘alā l-qurā, wa-dhālika annahū šarrāha bi-l-ḥikma kullihā li-l-jumhūr*). The present study shows that Averroes’ assessment of al-Ghazālī’s achievement is absolutely correct. It documents how, in the guise of a critic, al-Ghazālī was, in fact, one of the greatest popularizers of philosophy in medieval Islam, indeed a kind of “Trojan horse,” which brought Avicenna’s philosophy into the heart of Islamic thought. After al-Ghazālī, Islam became once and for all inundated with Avicennian ideas. Far from causing a downfall of philosophy (itself an invention of Western historians of Arabic philosophy), al-Ghazālī was in fact a key contributor to a deep philosophical transformation of all aspects of Islamic thought – including *Kalām* and Sufism – and to an unprecedented flourishing of Avicennian philosophy itself.
Appendix A

The Pen and the Tablet

The Pen (al-galam, Q. 68:1, 96:4) and the Preserved Tablet (al-lawh al-mahfūz, Q. 85:22) are important concepts of al-Ghazâlî’s theory of prophecy and mystical cognition. It is therefore crucial to analyze them in detail, especially as there is no coherent explanation of their identity in modern studies touching on the subject.

The Pen is one of al-Ghazâlî’s terms for the Active Intellect.1 The Active Intellect is, however, not identical with the lowest (tenth) separate intellect (the intellect of the sublunar sphere) – as is the case in al-Fârâbî and Avicenna. In al-Ghazâlî, it is identical instead with the First Intellect (al-‘aql al-awwal), who is the First Originated Being (al-mubda’ al-awwal) and the mover of the Outermost Sphere. It is also called Fire, Spirit, Supernal Divine Spirit (al-rūh al-ilāhiya al-‘ulwīya), Holy Spirit (rūh al-quds), Angel with seventy thousand faces, and Privileged Angel (al-malak al-muqarrab). His proper name is Isrâfîl, and he is identified as the “Vizier” in the Alchemy of Felicity and as the “Moon-angel” in the Niche of Lights.

It would take us too long to document this completely, but the following can be said.2 The identification of Fire, Spirit, Supernal Divine Spirit, and Angel with seventy thousand faces is attested in the Niche of Lights.3 The same work hints at the identity of this entity with Isrâfîl and the Privileged Angel (al-muqarrab).4 Isrâfîl is explicitly said to be the Privileged Angel in Book 32 of the Revival.5 The Privileged Angel (Pers. ferîshe-te moqarrabatârîn) is called the “Vizier” in the Alchemy of Felicity, which also indicates that his “residence” (mostaqarr) is the Throne.6

The Throne (‘arsh), the Footstool (kursî), and the seven heavens are said to be bodily entities in the Demarcating Criterion, which makes it almost certain that the Throne and the Footstool are heavenly spheres: the Outermost Sphere and the Sphere of the Fixed Stars respectively.7 The Alchemy confirms this, making clear that the Throne (the “private chamber” of the parable) lies beyond the Sphere of the Fixed Stars (falak ol-kavākeb, the “portico” with twelve gates, corresponding to the twelve signs of the zodiac).8 Moreover, as another chapter of the same work makes clear, Isrâfîl is identical to the entity called Angel, Spirit, and Holy Spirit (rūh ol-qods). His task is to carry God’s “effect” (athar) from the Throne to the Footstool.9 It seems clear that, in astronomical terms, this entity is closely associated with the Outermost Sphere and is, presumably, also the mover of that sphere, and hence identical with the
“Moon-angel” of the Niché. This seems to be confirmed by another passage in the Alchemy, which argues that the “deputies of the Vizier are other angels, whose rank is below that of the Privileged Angel.” Since these “deputies” (nāyebān) are located at the level of the “portico,” i.e. the Sphere of the Fixed Stars, it is clear that they (together with the movers of the planetary spheres) correspond to the “Star-angels” of the Mishkāt, and hence the Vizier must correspond to the “Moon-angel.”

The Pen is identified with Fire most clearly in Book 35 of the Revival. In the Demarcating Criterion and in the Ascents to the Holy Realm, the Pen is said to be the First Intellect and the First Originated Being. The latter work, apparently speaking about the same entity, calls the First Originated Being (al-mubda’ al-awwal) Spirit and Holy Spirit.

This line of identifications raises the question as to the identity of the “Sun-angel” of the Niché, also known as the “Obeyed One” (al-mutā’). It would seem that the “Sun-angel” is identical to God’s “Hand” (yad) or “Right Hand” (yamīn), described in Book 35 of the Revival, or alternatively to God’s Power (qudra), which itself might be identical to God’s “Hand.” Being, strictly speaking, an attribute of God, it is thus higher than the First Originated Being.

Al-Ghazālī’s views have close affinity to (Pseudo?)-Avicenna’s Throne Epistle (al-Risāla al-‘Arshiyya) and may be influenced by it. This work defines God’s speech as the emanation (fayādān) of knowledge from God onto the “tablet” of the heart of the prophet (lawḥ qalb al-nabī) with the help of the “inscribing Pen” (al-qalam al-naqqāsh), which is also called Active Intellect (al-‘aql al-fā’āl) and the Privileged Angel (al-malak al-muqarrab). A subsequent passage in the Throne Epistle designates the Pen as the First Originated Being and the First Intellect (al-‘aql al-awwal), in much the same way as done by al-Ghazālī.

The Preserved Tablet is, according to al-Ghazālī, the blueprint of the world, drafted by God with the Pen before the creation. It is in accordance with this blueprint that God subsequently brought the world into existence. God’s “decree” (qadā’) from the beginning of creation till the Day of Judgment is inscribed upon it – not in any material fashion, to be sure, but in a manner similar to the way in which the Qur’ān is encoded in the brain of a person who has it memorized (hāfiz al-qur’ān). Moreover, according to al-Ghazālī, the Preserved Tablet is a mirror, containing “all the inscriptions of knowledge” (rusūm al-‘ilm kulluhā) and “the form of all beings” (sūrat-e jomle mowjūdāt). Thus, the human heart and the Preserved Tablet are two immaterial mirrors facing one another. The Niché of Lights states that the Preserved Tablet is the first (i.e. the highest) among the receptive substances upon which knowledge is inscribed and from which it is transmitted to others. The term “receptive substances” seems to refer to the heavenly souls. The cosmological-psychological (macrocosm-microcosm) analogy, adduced in the Alchemy, makes it clear that the Throne of the macrocosm corresponds to the bodily heart of the microcosm, the Footstool to the brain, and the Preserved Tablet to the “imagery” (khayāl) located in the front ventricle of the brain. Since the Footstool is the Sphere of the Fixed Stars, it would seem to follow that the Preserved Tablet is the Soul (not the intellect!) of the Sphere of the Fixed Stars, or perhaps more generally the Souls of the heavens collectively.

The
Preserved Tablet certainly cannot be identified with the Active Intellect or with the Throne, as suggested by several scholars.27 Al-Ghazālī equates the Preserved Tablet with some other Qur’ānic expressions: notably “Clear Book” (kitāb mubīn, Q. 6:59), “Clear Model” (imām mubīn, Q. 36:12),28 and “Spread Parchment” (al-raqq al-manshūr, Q. 52:3).29

The identification of the Pen with the “Universal Intellect” (al-‘aql al-kullī) and the Tablet with the “Universal Soul” (al-nafs al-kullīya) is found in both philosophical and Ismā‘īlī sources.30 Al-Ghazālī himself attributes to the Ismā‘īlīs the view that the terms “Pen” and “Tablet” refer to the (Universal) Intellect and the (Universal) Soul.31 In the Precipitance, al-Ghazālī attributes to the philosophers the view that the Preserved Tablet refers collectively to the souls of the spheres, and the Pen – to the separate intelligences.32 The Pen and the Preserved Tablet are mentioned briefly as part of the hierarchy of separate intelligences also in (Pseudo?)-Ghazālī’s Epistle on the Knowledge from On High.33

To summarize: on the basis of the above analysis, a number of identifications between al-Ghazālī’s technical terms can be proposed (see Table A.1).

Table A.1  Al-Ghazālī’s celestial hierarchy at a glance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditionalist Designations</th>
<th>Angelic Designations</th>
<th>Noetic Designations</th>
<th>Symbolic Designations</th>
<th>Astronomic Designations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>God’s Power/Right Hand/Hand</td>
<td>“Sun-angel”/the “Obeyed One”</td>
<td>Universal Intellect, First Intellect, the First Originated Being, Active Intellect</td>
<td>The “Padishah”</td>
<td>Mover of the Outermost Sphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pen</td>
<td>“Moon angel”/Spirit, Supernal Divine Spirit, Holy Spirit, Angel with 70,000 Faces, Privileged Angel, Isrāfīl</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Throne</td>
<td>“Star angels”</td>
<td>“Deputies of the Vizier”</td>
<td>Outermost Chamber, in which the Vizier resides</td>
<td>Movers of the Sphere of the Fixed Stars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tablet (the blueprint of the world)</td>
<td>Universal Soul</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Footstool</td>
<td>“Portico” with Twelve Gates</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sphere of the Fixed Stars with the Twelve Zodiacal Signs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

The term *Tahāfut* revisited

In this Appendix, I would like to revisit the old question of the meaning of the term *tahāfut*. Ever since Maurice Bouyges’s critical edition of al-Ghazālī’s *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* published in 1927, it has been customary to translate the title of this treatise as “Incoherence of the Philosophers.”1 This rendering was adopted by the two English translations of the work, by Sabih Ahmad Kamali and Michael Marmura, and has been followed in numerous scholarly publications.2 Bouyges’s argument in favor of the translation “Incoherence” runs as follows.

[This translation] seems to me to reflect the most accurately al-Ghazālī’s thought, while safeguarding the requirements of philology. It should not, however, be opposed to other [possible translations], because in doing so one would bestow on it a certain precision which the Arabic word *tahāfut* lacks. This term is applied, throughout the treatise [the *Tahāfut*], sometimes to “philosophers” and sometimes to their arguments or their theories. In the latter case, the secondary, dependent idea of “fall, breakdown, collapse” is not to be excluded, just as in the former case, one should not exclude the idea of “reckless precipitance” or “foolishness.” Between these two senses, or through their extension, there are other significations for which one can easily find textual support. It is for this reason that “incoherence,” in the title [of the treatise], seems to me to be an apt [translation] conveying the same ideas as *tahāfut*. I choose it then, because one has to make a choice. It would certainly be better to [simply] adopt the Arabic word, whose pronunciation and transcription offer no special difficulty for a European [reader].3

I must confess to having a sense of unease reading this passage. Bouyges is essentially arguing that the Arabic term *tahāfut* lacks precision, conveying several loosely interconnected ideas (fall, breakdown, collapse, reckless precipitance, and foolishness), and that he chose the term “incoherence,” first, simply because he had to make a choice, and second, because the term “incoherence” is sufficiently vague to convey much the same array of secondary connotations. In my view, this is a slim basis of evidence indeed. The translation “incoherence” is, thus, simply
an unproven scholarly conjecture. Moreover, the crucial problem with Bouyges’s approach is that it attributes imprecision to the original Arabic term *tahāfut*, i.e. blames it on al-Ghazālī, rather than on the modern readers’ inadequate understanding of this term. In my view, it is a safer strategy to assume that al-Ghazālī was being precise when he used the term. If we, modern readers, do not recognize this precision, it is not his failure, but ours.

So is incoherence what al-Ghazālī really meant? Some scholars have presented evidence that strongly points in a different direction. To begin with, Reinhart Dozy’s *Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes*, first published in 1881, notes that the verb *tahāfata* (with the preposition *ilā* or *‘alā*) means “*se jeter sur une chose, s’y porter avidement, s’y appliquer, la désirer, l’ambitionner.*” He provides several examples of this usage, including one from the *Muqaddima* of Ibn Khaldūn. In his translation of this passage from the *Muqaddima*, Franz Rosenthal renders the verb, correctly, as “jump at the opportunity,” without any special comment.

Similarly, in a study published in 1906, Miguel Asín Palacios maintained that the term *tahāfut* in the title of al-Ghazālī’s œuvre means “imprudent and reckless precipitance” (*précipitation imprudente et irréfléchie*) – a meaning listed by Bouyges as one of the “secondary, dependent ideas” conveyed by the term. Asín Palacios’ conclusion was based on a meticulous analysis of the entry *tahāfut* in al-Murtada al-Zabīdī’s Arabic dictionary *The Bridal Crown* (*Tāj al-‘arūs*), of al-Ghazālī’s own use of the term, and of Averroes’ use of it in his response to al-Ghazālī, the famous *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*.

Asín Palacios’ conclusions are echoed by David Baneth, who in his Hebrew article on Maimonides, published in 1952, noted that the meaning of the Arabic word [*tahāfata*] … is still debated in connection to the title of al-Ghazālī’s famous book *Tahāfut al-falāsifah*. … The verb [*tahāfata*] is used primarily in the following three meanings: (1) to collapse, to be destroyed; (2) to put oneself (or rather: throw oneself) vigorously, impulsively, and without consideration into something (especially as moths or butterflies throw themselves into the fire or as a person commits a reckless action), and (3) to be excited about something. It is clear that what is meant by the word in this context [Baneth is speaking about Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*, but this, I think, applies equally well to al-Ghazālī] is something like the second meaning.

Finally, Sarah Stroumsa has recently warned us that the standard translation of [al-Ghazālī’s] book’s title as *Incoherence of the Philosophers* is now commonly accepted. … This translation, however, does not reflect the gravity of the accusation leveled against them, and the moral and religious aspect of their hubris.

I believe that all these remarks are valid, and that especially Asín Palacios’ conclusion that the term *tahāfut* means “imprudent and reckless precipitance” cannot
be dismissed as reflecting simply a secondary connotation of the term. Instead, this seems to be the term’s primary meaning. It is clearly implied in several passages from al-Ghazālī’s *Revival*, which were carefully noted and analyzed by Asín Palacios. Significantly, in these passages al-Ghazālī is not speaking about the philosophers, and so one can safely assume that he uses the term *tahāfut* in its basic, everyday sense.

In two of these passages, al-Ghazālī cites the prophetic ḥadīth “You rush recklessly into the Fire, as moths do, while I hold you by the flaps of your garments” (*innakum tatahāfatūna ‘alā l-nār tahāfut al-farāsh, wa-anā ākhidh bi-ḥujazikum*, or in another version, *innī mumṣik bi-ḥujazikum ‘an al-nār, wa-antum tatahāfatūna fīhā tahāfut al-farāsh*). Al-Ghazālī comments that just as mosquitoes, whose vision is weak, are misled by the light and rush recklessly (*tatahāfatatu*) towards it, thinking that it is a window to an illumined place, so also human beings are misled by the lure of passions and throw themselves (*yarmī nafsahū*) into them, and ultimately into hellfire. In a passage from the *Niche of Lights*, also referenced by Asín Palacios, the moths make another appearance. Here al-Ghazālī argues that

[T79] some animals have [a capacity to retain images], while others do not. The moths rushing recklessly towards the fire (*al-farāsh al-mutahāfīt ‘alā l-nār*) do not have it, for they flock to the fire craving daylight and assuming the lamp is an open window which leads to the place of light. They cast themselves at [the lamp] and get injured by it. Yet after they fly past it and find themselves in the darkness, they come back to it time and again.11

Yet another passage in the *Revival*, analyzed by Asín Palacios, discusses the signs of the “scholars of the afterlife” (‘ulamā’ al-ākhira). One of these signs is that such scholars are always “sorrowful, contrite, lowly, and silent.” By contrast, “precipitance in speech (*al-tahāfut fī l-kalām*), boastfulness (*al-tashadduq*), indulgence in laughter (*al-istighrāq fī l-dāḥk*), and impetuosity in movements and expressions (*al-hidda fī l-harakā wa-l-nuṭq*)” are all signs of heedlessness (*ghafla*), rather than knowledge.13

These and other passages from al-Ghazālī’s works leave no room for doubt that the basic sense of the term *tahāfut*, as habitually used by al-Ghazālī, is exactly as defined by Asín Palacios more than one hundred years ago: imprudent and reckless precipitance. Precipitance, incidentally, is also etymologically an apt translation, coming as it does from the Latin verb *praecipitare*, which means “to throw headlong,” and its passive form *praecipitari*, frequently used in the reflexive sense of “throwing oneself headlong” – exactly what moths, mosquitoes, and heedless men do in al-Ghazālī’s examples. I therefore wish to suggest, following Asín Palacios’ excellent and unduly neglected analysis, that the title of al-Ghazālī’s anti-philosophical tract should be translated as *Precipitance of the Philosophers*.

Of course, when the term “precipitance” is applied to the philosophers it gains a special nuance: the philosophers’ “precipitance” consists, in al-Ghazālī’s view, in their putting forward bold and ill-thought-out claims and in their jumping to
unfounded conclusions which lack apodeictic support. As we have seen in Chapter 5, it is precisely the charge of the lack of apodeictic support that lies at the heart of al-Ghazālī’s critique of the philosophical method. The philosophers’ *tahāfut* consists in the rashness and temerity with which they put forward such unfounded claims.

As correctly pointed out by Bouyges, the term *tahāfut* also applies to these philosophical claims themselves. Yet rather than “incoherent,” *tahāfut* here means that these claims are ill-thought-out, in the sense of being unproven and unfounded. Contrary to what the philosophers want us to think, these claims, in al-Ghazālī’s view, lack apodeictic foundation. Whether or not in addition to being unfounded they are also incorrect is, of course, another matter altogether, and here al-Ghazālī, as we have seen in Chapter 5, is surprisingly prone to accepting them, sometimes explicitly, sometimes clandestinely, despite overt criticism.

At this point, I would like to adduce yet another crucial – and hitherto neglected – piece of evidence that comes from al-Ghazālī himself. As already noted by Bouyges, al-Ghazālī used the term *tahāfut* in his early work on Islamic jurisprudence *The Sifted Notes on the Principles [of Jurisprudence] (al-Mankhūl min ta‘līqāt al-usūl)*. Bouyges duly takes note of this occurrence, but does not analyze it. Yet, the passage bears close examination. The context there is whether or not a consensus of the Muslim community of scholars (*ijmāʿ*) is a valid tool (*ḥujja*) in legal reasoning. Al-Ghazālī argues as follows:

[T80] If someone were to ask: “What is, in your view, the proper way to justify consensus [as a valid tool in legal reasoning] (*fa-mā al-mukhtar ‘indakum fi ithbāt al-ijmāʿ*)?” – we shall say: There is no hope [of justifying it] by an intellectual argument (*maslak ‘aqli*), because no [intellectual argument] proves it. As far as tradition is concerned, there is neither an uninterruptedly transmitted report nor scriptural proof-text that bears witness to it. Justifying consensus through consensus is [an instance of] precipitance (*tahāfut*). Finally, an assumption-based analogy cannot be used where a conclusive answer is required (*wa-l-qiyās al-maznūn lā majāl laḥū fi l-qat‘ iyyāt*). We have exhausted the sources of legal rulings (*madārik al-‘urf*). Beyond these, there remain only customary norms (*masālik al-‘urf*). Let us see if [validity of consensus] can be established based on them. Therefore we say … [discussion continues].

The word *tahāfut* occurs here in a fairly specific context. Al-Ghazālī is arguing that one cannot establish a conclusion using that conclusion itself as a premise. To do so would be a case of “precipitance,” i.e. jumping to an unfounded conclusion (in this case, the logical fallacy of *petitio principii*). This is precisely the sense in which I believe we are to understand the term *tahāfut* in the title of al-Ghazālī’s *Precipitance of the Philosophers*. The philosophers’ precipitance consists in their jumping to unwarranted, ill-founded conclusions which have not been apodeictically proven – much like the precipitance of someone who would fall into the trap of *petitio principii* and would uncritically accept a conclusion as proven based on
that conclusion itself. Granted, such fallacious argumentation is of course also, broadly speaking, a case of “incoherence,” but incoherence suggests that arguments either do not make sense or do not fully stick together (“cohere”), i.e. are somehow contradictory and do not work well with one another. In al-Ghazālī’s Precipitance, the meaning of the term seems to be that, incoherent or not, philosophical arguments do not prove what they set out to prove, and as a result, the conclusions, to which the philosophers precipitately and uncritically adhere, remain unfounded.  

Maimonides on Tahāfut as hubris

In about 1190, the Cairo-based Jewish scholar Mūsā ibn Maymūn/Mūsā ibn Maymôn (Maimonides) issued the following stern warning to readers of his Arabic treatise The Guide of the Perplexed (Dalālat al-ḥā’irīn, Heb. Mōrēh han-nōbōkîm):

[T81] Whoever will read my treatise, I adjure you by God the exalted: you must not interpret even one word of it, or explain to others, unless you have found it clearly elucidated in the writings of my predecessors, the famous scholars of our religion. As for those things that you do not understand and that other famous scholars have not stated, you must neither explain them to others, nor rush precipitately to respond to them (wa-lā yataḥāfat li-l-radd). It may well be that what you have understood from my explanation is the opposite of what I had intended. So you will have harmed me, who was eager to benefit you, and will have rewarded evil for good.

One word in this passage piqued the curiosity of the Guide’s Hebrew translator Samuel ibn Tibbon (ca. 1165–1232), who sought Maimonides’ advice on how best to translate it (as well as some other terms from the Guide) from Arabic into Hebrew. As it happens, this is the verb tahāfata, rendered here as “rush precipitately.” Initially, Ibn Tibbon had translated it as “cast oneself down.” It was certainly an acceptable rendering, but the translator felt it failed to capture the author’s intention. As Maimonides was still alive, he decided to send him a letter, hoping that the author himself would contribute a better translation. Maimonides generously responded and recommended that the difficult word be translated as “force one’s way through,” a suggestion which Ibn Tibbon eagerly adopted and followed throughout the Guide.

It is worth noting that the “forcing one’s way through” to which Maimonides was somewhat casually referring had the connotation of performing a sacrilegious act. The Hebrew word suggested by Maimonides was hāras, a verb that goes back to the book of Exodus, where it occurs twice in a very specific context. It is found at the crucial moment immediately after Moses was instructed to seal off Mount Sinai, which was about to become the locus of God’s awe-inspiring self-manifestation.
The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up, and the LORD said to him, “Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the LORD (pen yehersū ’el YHWH lir’ōt) and many of them perish. Even the priests, who approach the LORD, must consecrate themselves, or the LORD will break out against them.” Moses said to the LORD, “The people cannot come up Mount Sinai, because You Yourself warned us, ‘Put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy’.” The LORD replied, “Go down and bring Aaron up with you. But the priests and the people must not force their way through to come up to the LORD (’al yehersū la’ālōt ’el YHWH), or He will break out against them.”

Maimonides used the Arabic verb tahāfata – in the sense of rushing and forcing one’s way through to a sacred abode – several times throughout the Guide. This term appears to be connected to one of the central themes of Maimonides’ treatise: his criticism of the Aristotelian philosophers. Maimonides is critical of the philosophers’ overconfidence, even hubris, which manifested itself in their brazen and methodologically unsound preoccupation with subtle metaphysical questions, the kind of preoccupation for which trespassing Mount Sinai’s sacred boundary is a particularly apt image.

The question of creation of the world is a case in point. Aristotelian philosophers (both Aristotle himself and his Muslim followers al-Fārābī and Avicenna) argued that the world had no beginning in time (was eternal a parte ante). Maimonides rejected this view. In Chapter II.25 of the Guide, he explains that he did not reject this view simply because it contradicts a certain passage (or passages) from the Scriptures. Though such passages do of course exist, there is always a way to interpret them figuratively (ta’wil), in the same way that Maimonides interpreted figuratively all the scriptural texts that ascribe corporeality to God. Why, then, does he refrain from doing the same with the scriptural texts on the creation of the world?

Maimonides’ answer to this question is twofold. First, he argues that there is a rigorous philosophical proof (burhān) that God is not a body. Hence scriptural passages that seem, prima facie, to ascribe corporeality to God must be reinterpreted in a non-bodily sense. By contrast, there is, according to Maimonides, no conclusive proof that the world is eternal. Hence one is not allowed to interpret figuratively scriptural texts on the creation of the world.

Second, in the case of anthropomorphic descriptions of God, a rejection of the literal sense of Scripture does not undermine the foundations of the Jewish religion; nor does it give the lie to the prophets. In the case of creation of the world, however, a rejection of the literal sense of Scripture would undermine the foundations of the Jewish religion (specifically by making the universe completely naturalistic such that miracles would become impossible) and would give the lie to the prophets.

The methodological impasse which Maimonides is trying to resolve here is that there is, in his view, no philosophical proof either that the world is created or that the world is eternal. Philosophical methods are simply insufficient to prove
(or disprove) either proposition. Were it not for Scripture, there would be no way to decide which of these two possibilities is correct. In the absence of a philosophical, rational proof of either possibility, it is therefore scriptural evidence that, according to Maimonides, tips the scale in favor of the doctrine of creation in its literal interpretation.

Maimonides concludes his chapter in the following manner:

[T83] Were it the case that [the world’s] origination was proven, … all the [arguments] impertinently mounted against us by the philosophers (mā tahāfatat biḥī lanā al-falāṣifā) would collapse. Similarly, were it the case that the philosophers] had a rigorous proof of [the world’s] eternity, as Aristotle understands it, Religion as a whole would collapse and other opinions would have to be followed. I have explained to you that everything hinges on this problem, so know it.27

In this passage, I have translated the verb tahāfata as “mounting impertinent arguments.”28 The meaning is clearly that the philosophers are guilty of a brazen assault on the doctrine of creation, without having a rigorous, apodeictic proof that would justify a rejection of the literal sense of Scripture in favor of a figurative interpretation. This brazen assault on the mysteries of metaphysics is structurally similar to an unauthorized “forcing one’s way through” to the sacred abode of Mount Sinai.

The passage from Chapter II.25 of the Guide is, of course, crucial because it juxtaposes the two terms tahāfut and philosophers in much the same way as al-Ghazālī does in the title of his polemical work. This can hardly be accidental. Maimonides was clearly aware of al-Ghazālī’s Tahāfut, and his use of the term must therefore be dependent on how he understood al-Ghazālī’s intention in using it. The reader will also not fail to notice how heavily indebted Maimonides’ approach in Chapter II.25 is to al-Ghazālī’s “rule of interpretation” (qānūn al-ta’wil), mentioned in Chapter 5. Though neither in this section nor anywhere else in the Guide does Maimonides refer to al-Ghazālī by name, it seems likely that his argument is based on al-Ghazālī’s Precipitance, and possibly also on his Demarcating Criterion. Certainly, the idea that the philosophers do not have a rigorous demonstration of the eternity of the world comes straight out of al-Ghazālī’s Precipitance, and the consequences of the absence of a rigorous demonstration are worked out in the way modeled after al-Ghazālī’s Demarcating Criterion. Likewise, Maimonides’ use of the term tahāfut is clearly indebted to al-Ghazālī.29

What is interesting is that Maimonides does not understand tahāfut simply as “precipitance,” the way al-Ghazālī usually does, but as “overconfident precipitance,” best captured by the Greek word hubris.30 It is the philosophers’ hubris and their assault on the mysteries of divine science that evokes Maimonides’ indignation. It is for this reason that he advised Ibn Tibbon to translate the verb tahāfata as hāras, in a pregnant allusion to the sacrilegious – and, were it to happen, no doubt lethal – act of trespassing the boundary of Mount Sinai at the time of God’s awe-inspiring self-manifestation.
As a final note, it should be mentioned that in post-Biblical Hebrew the verb *hāras* often means “to destroy,” rather than “to force one’s way through.” It is possible that the medieval Latin translation of the title of al-Ghazālī’s work *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* as *Destructio philosophorum* is due to a misinterpretation – by the Jewish translators of Averroes’ *Tahāfut al-tahāfut* into Latin – of the Hebrew verb *hāras*. Like Ibn Tibbon, these translators equated the Arabic verb *tahāfata* with the Hebrew *hāras*. Yet while Ibn Tibbon (following Maimonides’ own suggestion) used *hāras* in its original, and more archaic, Biblical sense of “forcing one’s way through,” one of the translators might have understood it in its later meaning of “destruction.”

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Notes

Introduction

1 *Hujjat al-islām*, i.e. the proof that Islam is the true religion. Such honorifics are typically given to outstanding authorities of great influence and fame. One may think of al-Fārābī, “the Second Teacher” (i.e. second only to Aristotle), Avicenna, “the Chief Master” (*al-shaykh al-ra‘īs*), and Ibn ‘Arabi, “the Greatest Master” (*al-shaykh al-akbar*). Similar titles were in vogue in medieval Europe and Byzantium, e.g. Thomas Aquinas “the Angelic Doctor,” Duns Scotus “the Subtle Doctor,” and Symeon “the New Theologian.”

2 I accept Griffel’s early dating of al-Ghazālī’s birth (Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology*, pp. 23–5), but 447 seems to me to be a more likely date than 448 (cf. Notes to Introduction, n. 49 below). The twelve years of observing the vow not to appear before rulers must have begun, “retroactively,” as Griffel suggested, with al-Ghazālī’s departure from Baghdad in 488 (rather than with the vow itself in 489) and lasted until 500. Al-Ghazālī’s biography, briefly sketched below, is surveyed in great detail in Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology*, pp. 19–59. See also MacDonald, “Life of al-Ghazzālī”; Tibawi, “al-Ghazālī’s Sojourn”; Krawulsky, *Briefe und Reden*. Since Krawulsky accepts the traditional date of al-Ghazālī’s birth (450), many of her dates are offset by three years.

3 M. Achena, art. “Abū ‘Alī ... al-Fārmādī [sic!],” in: *EI2*, Supplement, pp. 14b–15a; N. Godhashte, art. “Abū ‘Alī Fārmādī,” in: *Dāyerat ol-Ma‘āref-e bozorg-e eslāmī*, vol. 6, pp. 53–4; Malamud, “Ṣūfi Organizations,” pp. 435f.; Karamustafa, *Ṣājīfīsīm*, p. 113, n. 68. Gerhard Böwering (art. “Gāzālī,” *Elr*, vol. 10, p. 358b) mentions that Fārmadhī was a disciple of Abū Sa‘īd ibn Abī I-Khayr, Abū I-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, and Abū l-Qāsim Korrakānī/Gorgānī (Korrakānī/Gorgānī was also the teacher of the famous Persian mystic Hojvīrī, see Böwering, art. “Hojvīrī,” *Elr*). Al-Ghazālī himself mentions Fārmadhī in *Iḥyā‘*, Book 33, *šatr* 2, *bāyān* 7, IV:248:11ff., stating that Fārmadhī taught him obedience to the shaykh. Fārmadhī’s shaykh is mentioned there as Abū l-Qāsim al-Kirmānī, but this is a mistake for Korrakānī/Gorgānī. Fārmadhī and his teacher Korrakānī/Gorgānī are also mentioned in *Maqṣad*, p. 162:10 and *Kīmiyā‘*, II:34 and II:156; in *Kīmiyā‘*, I:453, I:480, and II:310, only Korrakānī/Gorgānī is mentioned. In the *Fadā‘īth*, pp. 109–10 Fārmadhī and Korrakānī/Gorgānī are described but not mentioned by name; the identity, however, is certain, given that the context is similar to that of the *Maqṣad*.


For this translation of the title instead of the more common, yet, in my view, unsatisfactory rendering “Incoherence of the Philosophers” see Appendix B.

Munqidh, §§46–8, pp. 78–80.

Munqidh, §27, pp. 69–70.

Janssens, “Le Dānesh-Nāmeh.”


For instance, his fourfold classification of the levels of tawḥīd. On this subject and its Avicennian background see Treiger, “Monism and Monotheism.”

Wisnovsky, “One Aspect of the Avicennian Turn.”


Wisnovsky, “One Aspect of the Avicennian Turn.”


For this view, see E. Graef, Review: “M. Türker, Uç Teahfüt,” pp. 162–3: “Aus all diesen Beobachtungen geht hervor, daß die Maqāsid nicht als philosophische Propädeutik zum Tahāfūt konzipiert worden sind. Sie stammen wohl sicher von Gazzālī, aber aus der Zeit seines Philosophiestudiums, in der ihm dessen Fruchtlosigkeit noch nicht aufgegangen war; die auffälligen Übereinstimmungen mit dem Dānīnāme Ibn Sinā’s … müssen noch genauer nachgeprüft werden. M.E. hat Gazzālī die uns jetzt vorliegende Einleitung und den Schluß der Maqāsid erst nach Entstehen des Tahāfūt formuliert.” An alternative solution, which seems unconvinving to me, is that the entire Maqāsid, together with the introduction, was written after the Tahāfūt. This has been recently proposed by Griffel, “Ms London,” p. 10.

It is noteworthy that Abū ‘Abdallāh al-Māzarī (al-Māzārī al-Imām, not al-Māzārī al-dhakī), claims that al-Gnazālī qara’a ‘ilm al-falsafa qabla istibbārīhī fi fann al-usūl (apud Zabīdī, Ithāf al-sāda, Introduction, ch. 19, section Dhikr ta’n Abī ‘Abdallāh al-Māzārī wa-Abī l-Walid al-Tūrūsī, I:39:1; for other references see Griffel, al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology, p. 339, n. 138). Obviously, this remark is made in a highly polemical context, but may nevertheless contain a grain of truth.

Munqidh, §19, p. 64:9.

Munqidh, §137, p. 115:9ff. This passage is based on the hadīth “God the exalted shall send to this community someone to renew its religion for it at the turn of every century.” Notice that in the Munqidh, al-Ghazālī alludes to this hadīth but speaks of
a revival (ihyāʾ) rather than renewal (tajdīd) of religion. This is a clear reference to al-Ghazālī’s own work The Revival of the Religious Sciences (Iḥyāʾ ‘ulūm al-dīn) and an important testimony to al-Ghazālī’s self-understanding as the “reviver” of Islam.

23 Literally: Reviving the Religious Sciences.

24 Cf. Garden, “al-Ghazālī’s Contested Revival,” p. 82: “At the end of the Munqidh, [al-Ghazālī] portrays himself as having arrived decisively at the school of Sūfism. However, in Iḥyāʾ ‘ulūm al-dīn … he declares his allegiance not to Sūfism, but to the less specific ‘otherworldly science [‘ilm al-akhirah],’ writing of the Sūfis sympathetically, but as a third party”; cf. pp. 30–1, 58, 74. See also Abrahamov, “al-Ghazālī’s Supreme Way,” p. 158, who comments on the fact that in his discussion of the fourth level of tawḥīd, al-Ghazālī speaks about Ṣūfī terminology in the third person and with some disapproval. On al-Ghazālī’s criticism of the Sūfis who spoke about “union” with God and uttered ecstatic pronouncements, see Chapter 1.


26 The naïve understanding of al-Ghazālī’s Revival as “grafting” Ṣūfism onto Islam and establishing its orthodoxy is based on two problematic assumptions: first, that Ṣūfism had been, before al-Ghazālī’s time, at odds with “orthodoxy” and, second, that al-Ghazālī himself was a champion of that “orthodoxy.” In connection to the second assumption, especially, it should be noted that al-Ghazālī held a number of highly idiosyncratic views – many of which are Avicennian in provenance – and that Muslim scholars who were aware of that did not hesitate to call his orthodoxy into question. Devin Stewart’s remarks on al-Ghazālī (p. 14, n. 35 and p. 15 of his unpublished article mentioned in the previous note) are especially pertinent: “Al-Ghazālī has been hailed as the architect of Sunni orthodoxy since the work of Duncan Black MacDonald and this idea has been parroted by many others since, including Goldziher, Bello, Esposito, and many others. Goldziher states, for example, ‘Orthodox Islam regards Ghazālī as the final authority’ (Goldziher, Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law, 162). It is clear from the present discussion, as well as in many of al-Ghazālī’s writings, that his views were quite idiosyncratic and can hardly be taken as representative of the general opinion of Shāfī`ī legal scholars of his time, let alone all Muslim opinion in general since that time”: “Al-Ghazālī is [often] seen as the creator of an orthodoxy based on the synthesis of Islamic law and mysticism, or in other terms, of incorporating mysticism into orthodox Islam, and Ibn ‘Arabi is seen as fusing together mysticism with philosophy. In both cases, these thinkers are viewed as having established their beliefs as mainstream and acceptable through a masterful process of intellectual synthesis, but it cannot be denied that both scholars, and especially Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 638/1240), were often viewed as heretics in later times, and that their views were not as widely accepted as the secondary literature would have us believe.”

27 Averroes, Faṣl al-maqā'il, §54, p. 113:19–20: lam y'alaz madhhaban min al-madhāhib fī kutubihī, bal huwa ma'a l-ash'āriyya ash'āri wa-ma'a l-sūfiyya ṣūfi wa-ma'a l-falāsiṣfa faylasūf; cf. also Averroes’ criticism of Ghazālī’s inconsistency in Kashf, bāb 2, section 9, §§161–3, pp. 150–2.

28 The distinction between kalām, philosophy, and (theoretical) Ṣūfism – insofar as they treat theological subjects – is essentially that of methodology. Cf. Chittick, Heart of Islamic Philosophy, pp. 31–2: “The objects of faith came to be discussed under three basic rubrics, known as the ‘three principles’ of the religion – asserting unity (tawḥīd), prophecy
(mubuwwa), and the ‘return’ to God (ma‘ād). Muslim intellectuals who investigated and explained these issues can be classified more or less according to the point of view they adopted. The terms Kalam, theoretical Sufism, and philosophy simply indicate in a rough sort of way three basic perspectives. In earlier Islamic history, it is usually clear which perspective an author is advocating, but in later texts, the perspectives tend to be more and more mixed. Already in Ghazâlî, we have a thinker who cannot be classified according to this scheme, because he writes works from each point of view, and he sometimes mixes the perspectives. More than anything else, the three intellectual perspectives differ in their methodology and goals, not in the objects of investigation. All three schools of thought wanted to understand God, prophecy, and the return to God.”


30 Philosophical theology, called the “divine science” (al-‘ilm al-ilâhî) or the “science of God’s lordship” (‘ilm al-rubûbiyya), is, properly speaking, a subdivision of metaphysics (‘ilm mā ba‘d al-‘abî’a). Both al-‘ilm al-ilâhî and ‘ilm al-rubûbiyya are translations of the Greek ΘΕΟΛΟΓΙΑ. The former term can sometimes mean metaphysics as a whole. See Bertolacci, Reception, Appendix D: “Names of Aristotle’s Metaphysics and of Metaphysics as a Discipline in Avicenna’s Works,” pp. 593–605.

31 Adamson, al-Kindî, ch. 1; Adamson, “Kindian Tradition.”


33 Frank, al-Ghazâlî and the Ash’arite School, pp. 22ff. The term “higher theology” was criticized, I think largely unjustly, by Dallal in his review of Frank’s book (Dallal, “Ghazâlî and the Perils of Interpretation”). See Treiger, “al-Ghazâlî’s Classifications” for a criticism of Dallal’s position.

34 Cf. Gutas, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition, pp. 283–5; Gutas, “Ibn ʿAtfayl,” p. 239, n. 35. In the latter article, Gutas argued that al-Ghazâlî deliberately “obfuscated” Avicennian philosophy: “what Ibn Sinâ with philosophical rigor had clarified and incorporated into a rational system is obfuscated by al-Ghazâlî and Ibn ʿAtfayl.” Considering al-Ghazâlî’s constant attempts to devise his own terminology for Avicennian concepts, this is certainly a valid judgment. However, one also has to answer the question of why al-Ghazâlî was doing this. My tentative answer is presented in this and the following paragraphs. On al-Ghazâlî’s technique of “masking” philosophical ideas with his own terminology see also al-Akitî, “Three Properties,” pp. 207–8 and p. 207, n. 50; Lazarus-Yafeh, Studies, pp. 249ff.; Frank, al-Ghazâlî and the Ash’arite School, pp. 21 and 94; Badawi, “al-Ghazâlî wa-maṣaḍiruhî l-yûnâniyya,” pp. 234–5.

35 To use a philological analogy: just as one has to consult a number of manuscripts to establish a critical text, so also one has to consult a number of parallel passages from different works to obtain an accurate understanding of any given idea. Of course, while the need to consult different manuscripts arises from the fact that the text had been corrupted by generations of copyists, in al-Ghazâlî’s case, by contrast, he is himself responsible for disparate presentations of the same idea.

36 Even such a careful and sophisticated scholar as Richard Frank is guilty of underestimating the systematic aspect of al-Ghazâlî’s theology when he describes al-Ghazâlî, in surprisingly derogatory terms, as “a very complex and problematic personality, intellectually pompous,
yet beset by inner uncertainties and often conversicus superficialy in his treatment of important questions”; or when he sees al-Ghazâlî’s language as “lack[ing] – or fail[ing] anyhow to convey – precision and distinctness regarding the finer (and sometimes crucial) detail of the propositions that are apparently asserted” (Frank, al-Ghazâlî and the Ash’ârite School, pp. x [my emphasis] and 92; cf. also p. 101).

The difference between felicity and salvation will be explained in Chapter 2.


Al-Ghazâlî explains this clearly in the following remarkable passage: “Among the commoners are included the littérateurs, the grammarians, the scholars of Hadith, the commentators, the experts in fiqh, and the mutakallimîn, indeed all scholars except those totally devoted to learning how to swim in the oceans of knowledge, dedicate their lives wholly to this task, turn their faces away from this world and the desires, pay no attention to money, status, people, and other pleasures, are completely devoted to God in knowledge and in action, observe all the precepts and customs of religious law in performing acts of obedience and abstaining from what is objectionable (munkarât), empty their hearts completely from everything beside God for the sake of God [alone], despise this world and even the next world and the supreme paradise in comparison to the love of God. They are the [pearl] divers of the sea of cognition, and even so, they too face a danger so great that nine out of ten of them perish, and only one comes out [of the sea alive] (reading: yas’adu for yas’udu) with the hidden pearl and the cherished mystery. These are those who have a good lot (al-‘husnâ) from God awaiting them and who are the rewarded (al-fâ’izûn)” (Iljâm, bâb 1, pp. 326:28–327:7).

1Cor 3:2 offers an interesting parallel: “I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able”; cf. Heb. 5:12–14. The idea is a popular topos among Patristic writers.


Al-Ghazâlî frequently prohibits telling the commoners that “God is neither inside the world nor outside it, neither connected to the world nor disconnected from it,” since if they were to be told this they would lose their faith in God altogether. See e.g. Mizân, ch. 32, p. 407:13–18 [in the discussion of the second type of madhhab]; Iljâm, bâb 3, p. 345:24ff.; cf. Miskhât, Part 3, §23, p. 49 for a parallel. This prohibition goes back to Avicenna, Shîfâ, Ilâhîyat, Book 10, ch. 2, §5, pp. 365–6; translated and discussed in Gutas, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition, p. 300.


Al-Ghazâlî’s esotericism will be briefly discussed in Chapter 2.

A detailed study of al-Ghazâlî’s theory of esoteric instruction, levels of discourse, and “sociology of knowledge” is an important desideratum. A comparison between al-Ghazâlî and Maimonides in this regard would be highly illuminating. The third kind of doctrine (the doctrine held in secret between oneself and God and shared only with like-minded colleagues) corresponds to what Maimonides calls “transmitting the chapter headings.” In the Introduction to the Guide of the Perplexed, he identifies “the Account of the Chariot”
(maʿāšēh merkābāh) with “divine science” (metaphysics) and quotes Babylonian Talmud, Ḥagigāh, 11b, 13a: “The Account of the Chariot ought not to be taught even to one man, except if he be wise and able to understand by himself, in which case only the chapter headings may be transmitted to him” (tr. Pines, vol. 1, p. 6). A preliminary study comparing al-Ghazālī and Maimonides has been published by Harvey, “Alghazali and Maimonides” (with references to earlier literature), but more remains to be done.

46 An “impressionistic” approach to al-Ghazālī’s terminology does not work: we need to know what he means by such terms as ʿaqīl, ʿilm, zann, ʾiṭiqād, yaqīn, etc. in order to understand his theory. This is especially true for such “mystically” sounding terms as qalḥ, inshirāḥ al-ṣadr, ilḥām, qadḥ al-nūr, kashf al-ghīṭāʾ, mushūḥada, dhawq, ḥaḍrat al-rubūʿīyya, and others. Appealing to the supposed “Neoplatonic” provenance of some such terms (as done, e.g., by Lazarus-Yafeh, Studies, pp. 264ff., 307ff., and passim) does little to help understand and elucidate them in a given context.

47 Apart from page numbers, I usually refer to the chapter and section to make the references easier to trace for scholars who might use a different edition. The primary texts translated in the present study are numbered ([T1], [T2] etc.) to facilitate cross-references.

48 These references are a major source of Hourani’s two studies on the chronology of al-Ghazālī’s writings. However, as Hourani has overlooked many of these references, his studies are in need of a serious revision. The below discussion will tacitly correct some of their inaccuracies.

49 The beginning of this period is marked by the so-called “Nishāpūr controversy,” surrounding al-Ghazālī’s works. This controversy is datable, based on an important testimony of al-Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ, to the year 500/1106–7 – see Garden, “al-Māzārī al-dhakī,” p. 102. Since in his letter, sent at this time to the Seljūq ruler and “king of the East” Sanjar, al-Ghazālī mentioned that he was 53 years old, he must have been born in 447/1055–6.

50 Krawulsky, Briefe und Reden, pp. 15–16 dates this work to 473 (followed by Griffel, al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology, p. XII). This, however, is based on the erroneous assumption that the Nishāpūr controversy erupted in 503, hence al-Ghazālī’s reference to “30 years ago” would take us back to 473. However, as we now know, the Nishāpūr controversy is datable to the year 500 (see the previous note). Hence, the Mankhūl must have been composed ca. 470. According to Subkī, this work was written during Juwaynī’s lifetime (i.e. before his death in 478/1085–6).

51 See Notes to Introduction, n. 20 above.

52 Hourani, “Revised Chronology,” p. 293.

53 Faḍāʾiḥ, bāb 8, faṣl 3, p. 161.

54 Munqidh, §27, p. 70:1.

55 According to a note in MS Istanbul, Fatih 2921. See Bouyges, Essai, p. 23, No. 16.

56 Tāhāfut, Introduction, §27, pp. 9–10; §29, p. 11; Disc. 11, §9, p. 130.

57 Tāhāfut, Disc. 1, §134, p. 46. On the term Qawāʾid al-ʿaqīd see the interesting observations of al-Akītī, “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly,” pp. 54–6, 88–90, esp. p. 90, n. 87. Al-Akītī is arguing that the term Qawāʾid al-ʿaqīd does not refer only to the Iḥtīṣād, but to al-Ghazālī’s entire theological project, which incorporates a whole set of writings, including the Madnūn treatises.


59 Miʿyār, p. 348.

60 Miḥakk, p. 133 (Miʿyār); p. 51 (Tāhāfut); p. 91 (al-Mabādī wa-l-ghāyāt and Shifāʾ al-ʿālī).

61 See references in Iḥtiṣād, Index, p. 262.

62 Mizān, Introduction, p. 179; ch. 4, p. 205; ch. 7, p. 224; ch. 9, p. 233; ch. 11, p. 242; ch. 27, pp. 347, 349.

63 Janssens, “al-Ghazzālī and His Use of Avicennian Texts,” p. 48 comes to the conclusion that Mizān is earlier than Book 21 of the Iḥyāʾ. His conclusion is based on
a general examination of the evolution of al-Ghazālī’s use of Avicennian terminology for internal senses. The same is evident from Gil’adi’s comparison of al-Ghazālī’s treatment of the division between the theoretical and the practical sciences in the Mizān and in the Ihyā’. See Griffel, “On the Origin of Two Key-Terms,” pp. 85ff. Al-Aktī reaches the same conclusion in “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly,” p. 59, n. 19. Additional evidence is presented in Chapter 1.

64 Griffel, al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology, pp. 45–7.
65 al-Ghazālī mentions Naṣr ibn Ibrāhīm al-Maqdisī’s book Manāqib al-Shāfi’ī as a source of some of the material cited in the Ihyā’. See Ihyā’, Book 1, I:47:4, where Maqdisī’s name is mentioned with the eulogy rahimahullāh. The date of Maqdisī’s death is given in Griffel, al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology, p. 48.
66 Griffel, al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology, pp. 48–9.
67 Ihyā’, Book 1, bāb 5, ważīfa 7 of the student, I:83:23.
69 The Iqtiṣād is referred to in Ihyā’, Book 35, shatr 1, bayān 2, IV:344:12; Book 2, fasāl 2, I:151:12 (mentioning that it deals only with qaωā’id al-‘aqā’id, not with the other, prohibited issues with which the mutakallimūn deal). The Faḍā ’ih is referenced in Ihyā’, Book 14, bāb 5, II:201:13.
70 Qānūn, pp. 28–9.
71 See Maqṣad, Index, p. 203.
72 Jawāhir, Part 1, ch. 4, p. 39 (Qudsīya, Iqtiṣād, Tahāfut, Faḍā’ih, Ḥujjat al-haqq, Qawāṣim al-bāṭinīya, Muğḥāṣil al-khilāf fī uṣūl al-dīn, Miḥakk, Mi’yrār); p. 40 (Bāṣīt, Wāṣīt, Wājīz, Khulāṣat al-mukhtasar); p. 41 (Ihyā’).
73 According to a note in a Cairo manuscript (Bouyges, Essai, p. 49). The dating is supported by Bouyges but rejected, in my view without justification, by Badawi, Lazarus-Yafeh, and Hourani.
74 Jawāhir, Fihrist, p. 18.
75 Arba’īn, pp. 27, 39, 74 (Maqṣad); pp. 38, 65, 85, 94, 116, 118, 182, 222, 223, 237, 246, 255, 293 (Ihyā’); p. 38 (Qudsīya); p. 39 (Iqtiṣād and Madnūn); pp. 45, 107 (Bidāyat al-hidāya); p. 288 (Jawāhir).
76 Qistās, ch. 6 refers to other anti-Islāmī’i treatises: Qawāṣīm, Jawāb Muṣāṣal al-khilāf (also referred to in ch. 9 where it is said to contain 12 chapters), and Faḍā’ih. Chs 6 and 8 refer to the Jawāhir. Ch. 7 refers to Miḥakk and Mi’yrār. Ch. 9 refers to Iqtiṣād.
77 Mishkāt, Part 1, §17 (Ihyā’); Part 1, §44 (Maqṣad); Part 2, §62 (Qistās); Part 1, §20 (Miḥakk and Mi’yrār).
78 Makāṭīb, pp. 27–8.
79 See references in Kīmiyā, Index, I:545–8; II:645. The reference to the Ma’ānī asmā’ Allāh (i.e. Maqṣad), not given in the Index, is Kīmiyā, `onvān 1, fasāl 14, I:35. The fact that Kīmiyā refers to Mishkāt is correctly pointed out by Landolt (“Ghazālī und Religionswissenschaft,” p. 24, n. 18, followed by Whittingham, al-Ghazālī and the Qur’ān, p. 38). This bit of information is crucial, for it allows placing the Mishkāt firmly in the second period (before al-Ghazālī’s return to teaching).
80 I tentatively assign it to the end of the second period, though it might belong to the third period. It is surely posterior to the Kīmiyā.
81 Ey Farzand, p. 99:2.
82 This work thus belongs to the very end of the second period, or to the very beginning of the third.
83 Faysal, ch. 7 and ch. 10 (Qistās); ch. 7 and ch. 10 (Miḥakk).
84 Munqidh, §137, pp. 115 speaks of the start of a new century; §5, p. 57 mentions that al-Ghazālī is “over 50” years old. The work must belong to the early stages of the Nishāpur controversy datable to 500/1106–7 (after al-Ghazālī was accused of philosophical influence, a charge addressed in the Munqidh, but before he was accused of slandering Abū Ḥanīfa and summoned before Sanjar).
85 Munqidh, §§45–6 (Tahāfut), §48 (Faysal), §§68 and 70 (Qisṭās), §76 (Faḍāʼīh, Qisṭās, and some lost anti-Ismāʿīlī treatises) §96 (Maqṣād), §98 (Iḥyāʾ), §140 (Qisṭās and Kīmiyā).
86 Makātīb, p. 22 (Iḥyāʾ and Jawāhir); pp. 12, 20 [allusion: ān ketāb], 21, 22 (Mishkāt); pp. 12, 22 (Kīmiyā). Garden, “al-Ghazālī’s Contested Revival,” p. 106, n. 70 points out that the letter refers to Iḥyāʾ, Kīmiyā, and Jawāhir (probably the full work, i.e. Jawāhir + Arba’īn) – the same works mentioned in the Mustasfā as representing, respectively, an extensive (basīt), intermediate (wasīt), and concise (wa{jī}z) explication of the science of the afterlife. Garden’s argument (“al-Ghazālī’s Contested Revival,” pp. 105–6) that the letter predates the Munqidh since it responds to the same charge of philosophical influence to which the Munqidh responds as well does not seem compelling to me.
87 Garden, “al-Ghazālī’s Contested Revival,” p. 124 dates the Imlāʾ to shortly after the appearance before Sanjar.
89 All these works are mentioned in Mustasfā, Introduction, I:33–4.
90 Bouyges, Essai, p. 58, n. 3.
91 Iljām, bāb 1, p. 337.
92 According to a note in Istanbul, MS Şehit Ali Paşa 1712.
93 W.M. Watt has gone to an extreme in denying the authenticity of, e.g., parts of the Mīzān and the third part of the Mishkāt (Watt, “Authenticity”; Watt, “Forgery”). His views on the subject, rejected now by the majority of scholars, will be disregarded.
94 Lazarus-Yafeh, Studies, pp. 251–2.
95 Afifi al-Akiti’s Oxford DPhil dissertation on al-Ghazālī’s “Maḏnūn corpus” – which is the most important recent attempt to revisit the question – has remained inaccessible to me. See also his “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.”
97 As a result of the application of these rules, one and the same word may be transliterated differently, depending on the language in which it appears: e.g. tawḥīd/towḥīd, tawākku/tawakkol. Note also that Arabic quotations (as opposed to single words) embedded in Persian are transliterated according to the Arabic rules. I also avoided the unnecessarily awkward “granting assent” for tasdiq, translating it simply as “acceptance.”

1 Heart, intelligence, knowledge

2 Iḥyāʾ, Book 21, bayān 1, III:4:21–2. On the term ḥaqiqga see Notes to Chapter 1, n. 81 below.
3 Iḥyāʾ, Book 21, bayān 6, III:18:4–5. On the nature of this connection see Iḥyāʾ, Book 21, bayān 1, III:4:22–4, III:7:4–10. There al-Ghazālī argues, with reference to Sahl al-Tustari, that the physical heart and chest are related to the reality of a human being (i.e. to the spiritual heart) as the Throne (ʿarsh) and the Footstool (kursī) respectively are related to God (the spiritual heart governs the body through the bodily heart; God governs the world through the Throne); yet, he cautions, this analogy is useful only in some respects and inadequate in others. Cf. Iḥyāʾ, Book 1, bāb 5, waẓīfa 10 of the
student, I:86:16–17, where the physical heart is called the “first riding beast” (*al-mat'īya al-tāla*) of the spiritual heart, through the mediation of which the entire body becomes subservient to it as its riding beast and tool (*mat'īya wā-'āla*).

4 Al-Ghazālī’s repeated assertion that by heart he does not mean the physical heart (referred to as ḥādāh l-lām al-sanawbarī) goes back to Rasā‘īl Ikhwān al-safā‘ī, *risālā* 3.7 [38], III:287:21–3, as already noted by Diwald, *Arabische Philosophie und Wissenschaft*, p. 336. Of course, the word *qalb* can also be used to denote the physical heart, but this need not concern us here.

5 Cf. Mishkāt, Part 1, §26, p. 10 (where the term “inner eye” is used to designate the heart).

6 Iḥyā‘, Book 1, bāb 5, ważīfa 10 of the student, I:86:15.

7 To be distinguished from “intelligence” designated by the same term. See Iḥyā‘, Book 21, bayān 1, III:5:14–16,22; Kīmiyā‘, ‘onvān 1, fāṣl 1, I:15–16 (where the terms used are: *nafs*, jān, and *del*). Al-Ghazālī explains that the other meaning of spirit is the so-called “vital spirit,” which is a subtle volume produced by the heat contained in the physical heart; while the other meaning of soul, used especially by the Ṣūfīs, refers collectively to the irascible and concupiscent faculties.


10 The Qur‘ānic verse “Is it not to [God] that the creation and the command belong!” (Q. 7:54) is frequently understood to refer to the two worlds, the sensible world and the intelligible world, called “the world of creation” (‘ālam al-khālq) and “the world of command” (‘ālam al-amr) respectively.


12 Iḥyā‘, Book 36, bayān 4, IV:427:ult.–428:2: al-mawt lā yaḥdimu mahall ma‘rifat Allāh ta`ālā, wa-maḥalluhā al-rūḥ alladāh huwa amr rabbānī samāwī, wa-innāma l-mawt yughayyiru ahwālah wa-yaqta‘u shawāghilahā wa-‘awwāqah wa-yukhallilahā min ḥabsihā, fa-amma an yu’dimah fa-lā. The idea that the body is a prison or tomb of the soul has well-known Platonic (*Gorgias* 493a; *Cratylus* 400b-c) and earlier Orphic and Pythagorean roots.

13 Human beings share the animal soul (*al-nafs al-hayawānīya*) with animals and the vegetative soul (*al-nafs al-nabātīya*) with animals and plants.

14 On the identification of *qalb* with *‘aqil* cf. van Ess, *Gedankenwelt*, p. 32.
Though the terms praxis and theoria, in their ascetic and mystical senses, are derived from the Greek Patristic tradition, they seem applicable to al-Ghazālī. Indeed, as we shall discuss in Chapter 2 below, these two dimensions are embodied, respectively, in the two sciences – the science of practice (mu‘āmala) and the science of unveiling (mukāshafa) – which feature prominently in al-Ghazālī’s Ihyā‘. The term “heart” has a long pedigree as a meeting point of ethics and theology. Let us not forget that according to the New Testament it is the “pure of heart” (ethics) who “shall see God” (theology) (Mt. 5:8). It is remarkable that the eighth-century East Syriac mystical author John of Dalyatha comments that the pure of heart shall see God “in their heart” (see Brock, “Imagery of the Spiritual Mirror,” p. 14b). This is also the view of al-Ghazālī. I intend to explore the possible connections between al-Ghazālī and Syriac mysticism in later publications. See Treiger, “al-Ghazālī’s ‘Mirror Christology’” for a first step in that direction.

On the need to polish mirrors from tarnish – see Ignatenko, Zerkalo islama, p. 19; Brock, “Imagery of the Spiritual Mirror,” at p. 3b. See also Kimiyā, ‘onvān 1, faṣl 8, I:25:4–15.


In some cases, however, ‘aqīl is used synonymously with heart (qalb) (e.g. in the passage from the Mustaṣfā cited in Notes to Chapter 1, n. 80 below). In those specific cases, ‘aqīl will be translated as intellect rather than intelligence.

Kindi defined gharāṭa as ṭabi‘a hāilla fi l-qalb uʿiddat fihī li-yunāla biḥī (read biḥā?) l-hayāh (Risāla fi Ḥudūd al-ashyā‘ wa-rusūmihā, in: Kindī, Rasāʾīl, I:169:7). On the origin of the term gharāṭa in this meaning see the interesting note by al-Akiti, “Three Properties,” pp. 198–9, n. 27. The term is sometimes inaccurately translated as “instinct.”

Ihyā‘, Book 1, bāb 7, bayān 2, I:131:16–18.

Ihyā‘, Book 1, bāb 7, bayān 2, I:131:9–132:5. This is the first among the four meanings of the term “intelligence” (‘aqīl). The other meanings will be discussed below.


Cf. the expression haqīqat maʿnāhū in the title of the work.

I take khalq to refer specifically to humans, rather than to creatures in general (otherwise the passage would not make sense, as most creatures are devoid of intelligence). By humans who do not have intelligence, al-Muhāsibī evidently means madmen and, presumably, children.


See, for instance, the following passage: “The heart has an intrinsic feature (gharızza) which is called ‘divine light,’ following God’s statement ‘If God renders one’s heart open to submission/Islam, he will be following a light from his Lord’ (Q. 39:22). It can also be called ‘intelligence’ (‘aqīl) or ‘internal insight’ (al-bāṣira al-bātīna). It can also be termed ‘light of faith and certainty.’ There is no point to quibble about these names, because it is the terms [alone] that are different. A dim-witted person may think that there is also a difference in the underlying concepts, because such a person seeks to understand the concepts through the terms, which is the opposite of what is required. So [let us say:] the heart differs from other bodily parts in that it has a characteristic (ṣifa) in virtue of which it grasps concepts which are neither imagined
For instance al-Qādī ʿiyād in Ṭarīq al-madārīk wa-taqrīb al-masālik li-maʿrifat aʾlām madhhab Mālik (chapter bāb fī ḥikamīḥ wa-waṣāyāḥu wa-aḍābīḥi) mentions the following sayings of Imām Mālik: “Knowledge does not consist in transmitting much [ḥadīth]; it is but a light that God installs in the hearts (nūr yadāʿūhū lāḥū fī l-qulūb)” (al-Qādī ʿiyād comments that this saying is also reported on the authority of Ibn Masʿūd); “knowledge is a light that does not join except a pious and humble heart”; “wisdom is a light that God casts in the servant’s heart (nūr yaqdhiḥū lāḥū fī qalb al-ʿabd).” Al-ʾIsfahānī, Ḥiyāyat al-ʾalwiyyāʾ, VI:319 quotes the following from Mālik: “Knowledge is light, which God deposits wherever He wills; it does not consist in transmitting much [ḥadīth] (al-ʿilm nūr yāf al-ʿulūḥū lāḥū ḥayṭhū yashāʿu, layṣa bi-kathrat al-riwāya).”


The translation “man of understanding” rather than “legal scholar” seems to be called for here, as Renard also translates: “another person who possessed deep comprehension.”


Due to homoioteleuton. Of course, the homoioteleuton could have happened also at a later stage, in our manuscripts of the Iḥyāʿ.

Iḥyāʾ, Book 1, bāb 5, waẓīfa 1 of the student, I:79:17–18.


These comments are usually reported on the authority of Abū Jaʿfar ʿAbdallāh ibn (al-)Miswar ibn ʿAwn ibn Jaʿfar ibn Abī Tālib al-Ḥāshimī, who lived in al-Madāʾin and was a disciple of ʿAlī ibn Abī Tālib’s son Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya (d. 81/700–1). Being affiliated with the ʿAlids (and himself a great-grandson of ʿAlī’s brother Jaʿfar and, presumably, a grandson of ʿAlī’s daughter Umm Kulthum), he was highly suspect in the eyes of Sunnī traditionalists. Nevertheless, al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, al-Suyūṭī (in al-Durr al-maḥṭūr), and other Sunnī Qurʿān commentators report these comments on his authority in their commentaries on Q. 6:125. Some other isnāds choose to trace the same report to a much more “respectable” (from the Sunnī perspective) traditionalist Ibn Masʿūd. By contrast, the Shīʿī Qurʿān commentator al-Ṭabarī (d. 548/1154) merely calls it a trustworthy report (riwāyāt ṣaḥīḥa), without indicating its source.

For an interesting analysis of this crisis see Bargeron, “Sūfism’s Role.” This tradition is also used in Faṣāḥ, ch. 10, pp. 79–80.


Munqidh, §16, p. 63:7–9. This has a parallel in the Mīzān, ch. 4, pp. 205ff.

In this regard, as in many others, al-Ghazālī is following Avicenna. I shall discuss this below.
43 *Iḥyāʿ*, Book 1, bāb 7, bayān 3, I:136:10–14. This passage is translated and discussed in al-Akiti, “Three Properties,” p. 198, n. 27, who correctly connects it to Avicenna’s second property of prophethood, the one dependent on “intuition” (*ḥads*).

44 *Iḥyāʿ*, Book 1, bāb 7, bayān 2, I:132:6–20. Regarding the last paragraph, cf. the division of intelligence (*aql*) into “intrinsic” (*gharārizī*) and “acquired” (*muqtasāb*) in *Mīzān*, ch. 26, p. 337:3ff. Intrinsic intelligence is defined as “the faculty predisposed to receive knowledge” (*al-qūwa l-mustaʿīdā li-qabāl al-ʿilm*) and seems to be equivalent to what the philosophers call “material intellect” (*aql hayālānī*); necessary knowledge (*al-ʿulūm al-darāṭīya*) is subsumed under acquired knowledge. See also the parallel discussions of the meanings of *aql* in the *Mīhakk* and in the much later *Mustasfā*, where parts of the *Mīhakk* are repeated verbatim: *Mīhakk*, qism 2 (*Fi Mīhakk al-hadd*), fann 2 (*imitāḥānāt*), “case studies”), imtiḥān 1, p. 111:7–13; *Mustasfā*, muqaddimāt, dī‘āma 1, fann 2, imtiḥān 1, I:64:14–65:2.

45 Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies*, pp. 297–8 offers a chart of these stages. Relevant texts are quoted on pp. 301ff. (*Iḥyāʿ*, Book 4, bāb 3, bayān 4, discussion of *tashahhud*, I:259:15–18, is also cited in Notes to Chapter 3, n. 15 below). On the Stoic background (to the best of my knowledge, not pointed out in earlier studies) see Aëtius, *Placita IV*. 11, ed. H. Diels, *Doxographi graeci*, Berlin: G. Reimer, 1879, p. 400 (= *Stoicorum Vetrum Fragmenta*, II:83): “The Stoics say: When a human being is born, the governing part of his soul is like a piece of paper ready to receive inscription[s], and he inscribes each one of [his new] notions (*ennoiōn*) into it. The first method of inscription is via the senses (*aisthēseōn*). For when they perceive something white, for example, they retain a memory (*mnēmēn*) of it once it has gone. When many memories similar in form come about, we say that they have experience (*empeirian*), for experience is a plurality of images (*fantasiōn*) similar in form. Some notions come about in the ways mentioned, naturally and without skill; others already require our teaching and attention. It is only the latter that are [properly] called “notions” (*ennoiai*), while the former are [more precisely] called “preconceptions” (*prolepsets*). Reason (*logos*), in virtue of which we are called “rational” [*animals*], is said to be constituted by preconceptions at around the age of seven.” I reproduce here, with some modifications, C. Brittain’s translation in his article “Common Sense,” in: D. Frede and B. Inwood (eds), *Language and Learning: Philosophy of Language in the Hellenistic Age*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 168. For Qustā ibn Lūqā’s Arabic translation of the same passage see Daiber, Aëtius Arabus, p. 198 (German tr. p. 199). Al-Ghazālī’s terminology does not match Qustā’s, making it unlikely that Qustā’s translation was his source; it is more likely that he got some such scheme from the Arabic translations of Galen.


49 *Khayyāl* is to be understood in the Avicennian sense of “imagery” as the faculty in charge of retaining and storing sense impressions – see Avicenna, *Shifāʿ*, *Nafs*, Book 1, ch. 5, p. 44:6–8.

50 According to al-Ghazālī, these “spirits” correspond to the following elements of Q, 24:35: the sensory spirit = niche (*mishkāt*), the spirit of the “imagery” = glass (*zujiyā*) (cf. *Mishkāt*, Part 2, §44, p. 35:8–9), the spirit of intelligence = lamp (*mishbāḥ*), the cogitative spirit = olive tree (*shajara, zaytiynā*), the sacred prophetic spirit = olive oil (*zayr*). On the “five spirits” cf. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes*, pp. 137ff. and Abrahamov, “al-Ghazālī’s Supreme Way,” pp. 162ff.

One can also refer to the definition of ‘aql from al-Ghazālī’s Mi‘yār al-ilm, Book 3, fann 2, p. 286:12ff. and its immediate source, Avicenna’s Kitāb al-Hudūd. (In the Mi‘yār, Book 3, fann 2, al-Ghazālī paraphrases or quotes verbatim – but without reference – Avicenna’s definitions from Kitāb al-Hudūd. See Janssens, “Le Mi‘yār al-ilm.”) For the parallel discussions of the definition of ‘aql in Miḥakk and Mustasfā see references in Notes to Chapter 1, n. 44 above. A shorter version of this discussion is given in Ihyyā’, Book 21, bayān 7, III:23. There, al-Ghazālī adds that drawing near God is only possible through acquired intelligence, since “drawing near through intrinsic feature of one’s primordial nature (bi-l-qarīzna l-fitrī) or through necessary knowledge (bi-l-‘ulīm al-ḍarūrī) is impossible” (III:23:20), presumably because these are given in equal measure to every individual.

On this distinction see, e.g. van Ess, Erkenntnislehre, pp. 164ff.; idem, Theologie und Gesellschaft, vol. 4, pp. 666–7.

As in the paradigmatic definition “man is a rational animal” where animal is the genus under which man is subsumed, and rational, the specific differentia, i.e. the quality that distinguishes between the species man and all the other species of the same genus.

This point is conceded by the philosophers as well. In the Ta‘liqāt Avicenna says, for instance, that we cannot know the essences of things (ḥaqā’iq al-ashyā’); rather many things are known through their properties, concomitants, and accidents, not through their essences – Ta‘liqāt, p. 34:17ff.; cf. J. Janssens, “Mullā Ṣadrā’s Use of Ibn Sinā’s Ta‘liqāt in the Asfār,” Journal of Islamic Studies 13, 2002, 1–13, at pp. 5–6.


This “point of distinction” is translated in Notes to Chapter 1, n. 80. Cf. Rosenthal, Knowledge Triumphant, p. 48. An additional difficulty mentioned by al-Ghazālī is that the word “knowledge” is an equivocal term (ism musttarak) that apart from intellectual apprehension (idrāk ‘aqlī) applies to a number of other concepts, each of which has a definition of its own: e.g. vision and sense perception, imagination, supposition, as well as God’s knowledge.

The acquired intellect (al-‘aql al-mustafād) is excluded because it does not introduce a new grade of the theoretical intellect but a practical application of the actual intellect.


In the Ihyyā’ version, the child (al-ṣabī) of the second stage is replaced with an apprentice scribe, for the child has already been used in the framework of the discussion. For the following discussion cf. Abrahamov, “Ibn Sinā’s Influence,” pp. 6–7.


One can also refer to the definition of ‘aql from al-Ghazālī’s Mi‘yār al-ilm, Book 3, fann 2, p. 286:12ff. and its immediate source, Avicenna’s Kitāb al-Hudūd. (In the Mi‘yār, Book 3, fann 2, al-Ghazālī paraphrases or quotes verbatim – but without reference – Avicenna’s definitions from Kitāb al-Hudūd. See Janssens, “Le Mi‘yār al-ilm.”) For the parallel discussions of the definition of ‘aql in Miḥakk and Mustasfā see references in Notes to Chapter 1, n. 44 above. A shorter version of this discussion is given in Ihyyā’, Book 21, bayān 7, III:23. There, al-Ghazālī adds that drawing near God is only possible through acquired intelligence, since “drawing near through intrinsic feature of one’s primordial nature (bi-l-qarīzna l-fitrī) or through necessary knowledge (bi-l-‘ulīm al-ḍarūrī) is impossible” (III:23:20), presumably because these are given in equal measure to every individual.

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Mustasfā, muqaddima, di‘āma 1, fann 2, imtiḥān 2, I:67:5–11; the “mithāl”-section is translated in Notes to Chapter 1, n. 80. Cf. Rosenthal, Knowledge Triumphant, p. 48. An additional difficulty mentioned by al-Ghazālī is that the word “knowledge” is an equivocal term (ism musttarak) that apart from intellectual apprehension (idrāk ‘aqlī) applies to a number of other concepts, each of which has a definition of its own: e.g. vision and sense perception, imagination, supposition, as well as God’s knowledge.

Cf. Richard Frank’s remark on taṣdīq: “In conformity with the earlier Ash‘arite tradition, thus, al-Ghazālī understands assent to be a reflex or second level judgement that a proposition (or set of propositions) is true. Without understanding, however, there can be neither assertion nor assent” (Frank, “al-Ghazālī on Taṣdīq,” p. 219).
Note also al-Ghazālī’s use of the expressions sūʿ ʾal-iʿtīqād (sāʿaʾ iʿtīqāduḥū) and ḥusn al-iʿtīqād (ḥusna iʿtīqāduḥū) — “having a negative/positive opinion” of someone (Munqīdh, §§44, 57, 58, pp. 77:6, 84:7, 84:12). For the correspondence doṣṣa’ – iʿtīqād see van Ess, Erkenntnislehre, pp. 71–2. The later meaning of doṣṣaʿ as “praise” or “glory” is irrelevant for our purposes.

This definition, often ascribed to the Muʿtazilī theologian Abū I-Qāsim al-Kaʿbī, is strongly reminiscent of Plato’s famous distinction between ἐπιστήμη (knowledge) and ἀλήθεία (opinion fortuitously corresponding to reality, correct opinion). For this distinction see Meno, 97a ff.; Symposium, 202a; Republic, Book V, 476d ff.; and the discussion in the Theaetetus of three definitions of knowledge, the second among which (187b5ff.) is knowledge as correct opinion. On the Theaetetus see now M. Narcy, “Qu’est-ce que la science? Réponses dans le Théétée,” in: M. Narcy (ed.), Platon: l’amour du savoir, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001, pp. 49–72; and on the Meno, G. Fine,

73 Lit.: opinions. I translate “views” to prevent the definition from being circular.


75 Since wrong opinions can be classified as ignorance, it is the epistemological status of correct opinions that needs to be clarified.

76 The example is implicitly used to slander the philosophers, who believed in the eternity of the world.


79 Munqīdī, § 6, p. 58.

80 Iḥyā’, Book 21, bayān 6, III:18:4–11 (I cite the Iḥyā’, rather than the Mustasfā, because the text there is somewhat clearer). Here is the Mustasfā version in which the three aspects of the mirror analogy are somewhat different. The fact that essentially the same definition of knowledge and the same analogy are presented in the Mustasfā, one of his last works, shows that al-Ghazālī maintained this idea consistently throughout his life. Intellect (‘aql) [=heart] is similar to a mirror upon which forms of intelligibles (suwar al-ma‘qūlāt), by which I mean their realities and quiddities (ḥaqā‘iqaḥ wa-māhiyātihā), are impressed as they are [in reality]. The term “knowledge” (‘ilm) thus designates the intellect’s [=the heart’s] apprehension in itself of the forms and configurations of intelligibles and their being impressed upon it (akhdh al-‘aql ṣuwar al-ma‘qūlāt wa-hay‘ātiḥā fī naʃsiḥi wa-nṭbiḥa ‘ihā fihī), in the same way the impression of forms in the mirror is conceived. [Just as] the mirror has three aspects – the iron [surface], its polish, and the form (ṣīra) impressed on it, so is [the case with a human being]. The substance of a human being (jawhar al-‘adāmī) is similar to the iron [surface] of the mirror. His intelligence (‘aql) is that configuration and intrinsic feature (hay‘a wa-gharīza) in his substance and soul in virtue of which he becomes capable (yatahayya‘u) of [receiving] the impressions of intelligibles, just as it is in virtue of its polish and roundness that a mirror is capable of imitating the forms [of external objects]. Thus, the appearance of the forms of intelligibles in the mirror of the intellect [=heart] ... is knowledge; the intrinsic feature by which one becomes capable of receiving these form[s] is the intelligence; and the soul, which is the reality of a human being (haqīqat al-‘adāmi) characterized by this intrinsic feature ..., is similar to a mirror (Mustasfā, muqaddima, di‘āma 1, fann 2, imtiḥān 2, I:68:21–69:5, shortly before [T13]).

Al-Ghazālī (if he is the author of this work) presents a slightly more elaborate version of this analogy in the Ma‘ārij. See Janssens, “L’âme-miroir,” pp. 205–8; and cf. Mī‘yar, pp. 101–2.

81 “Reality” (haqīqa) is defined in the Mustasfā (muqaddima, di‘āma 1, fann 2, imtiḥān 1, I:62:21) as follows: haqīqat kull shay‘ khāṣṣiyatuhī allattī laḥātī wa-layṣatī lī-ghayrīhī.

On “divine presence” (Ar. al-ḥadra al-ilāhīya, Pers. ḥadrat-e olūhīyat) see Iljām, bāb 1, p. 337:9–13; Kīmiyā, onvān 1, Introduction, I:14:14–15,24. In the latter passage, al-Ghazālī states that the “nourishment and felicity of angels consists in witnessing (moshāḥadat) the beauty of the divine presence.” The divine presence is called the “abode of felicity” (qarārgāh-e saʿādat) and identified with what the commoners call paradise (behesht) (cf. the passage just quoted from Ḫiyāʾ, Book 21; cf. also Kīmiyā, onvān 1, faṣl 6, I:20:ult.–21:4. The theory of “presences” was later adopted and developed by Ibn ʿArabī and his school. See especially Chittick, “Five Divine Presences”; Chittick, Sūfī Path of Knowledge, p. 5b. According to Chittick, al-ḥadra al-ilāhīya is the locus of God’s manifestation as Allāh, while al-ḥadra al-rubūḥīya – another term frequently used by al-Ghazālī – is the locus of God’s manifestation as the Lord, al-RABB. See Mishkāt, Part 2, §§33–4, pp. 31–2, where al-Ghazālī differentiates between al-ḥadra l-ilāhīya and al-ḥadra l-rubūḥīya. On the latter cf. Ḫiyāʾ, Book 21, bayān 6, III:21:10–14.


I discuss this material from a different angle in Treiger, “al-Ghazālī’s ‘Mirror Christology’.” Al-Ghazālī’s position with regard to al-Hallāj and al-Bistāmī is characteristic of the “Khurāsānian trend” in Sūfism. See M. Malamud’s remark in her “Sūfī Organizations,” p. 431: “The Sūfī piety Qushayrī and other Shāfiʿī Sūfis practiced was linked to the ‘sober’ Sūfism (ṣahw) of Junayd rather than the ‘intoxicated’ Sūfism (ṣukr) of Sūfis such as Mansūr al-Hallāj (d. 922). As we have noted, Qushayrī’s silsila connects him to Junayd by way of his Sūfī master Abū ‘Alī al-Daqqāq. Qushayrī and his circle avoided intoxicated Sūfism and the excessive behavior of certain Sūfis.” One may add that al-Ghazālī was connected to al-Qushayrī’s circle via his teacher Abū ‘Alī Fārmadhi, who was a student of al-Qushayrī (see Notes to Introduction, n. 3 above).


The difference between the verbs ‘alīma and ‘arafa is akin to that between wissen and (er)kennen in German, dānestan and shenākhtan in Persian, and ἐπιστήμων and γνώσις in Greek respectively.

Mustafā, muqaddima, diʿāma 1, fann 2, beginning of imtiḥān 2, I:66:2ff.
Cf. the titles of the four onvāns in the lengthy introduction to al-Ghazālī’s Kīmiyā. The connection to Kīmiyā is pointed out by Gianotti, al-Ghazālī’s Unspeakable Doctrine, p. 56, n. 108.
Iḥyāʾ, Book 30, bayān 2, sinf 4, III:560:14–15, 561:8–9, 561:23–562:1; partially translated in Gianotti, al-Ghazālī’s Unspeakable Doctrine, pp. 56–7. In referring to this passage, Smith writes that al-Ghazālī “makes the same distinction [as al-Muhāṣibī] between the knowledge which can be acquired by study (ʿilm) and the intuitive understanding (maʿṛifā) which is given, not acquired, by means of which man can learn to know himself and his Lord and the true worth of this world in comparison with the world to come” (Smith, al-Ghazālī the Mystic, p. 124).
Notes to Chapter 2

94 Mustasfā, muqaddimma, bayān ḥaṣr madārik al-‘ulūm, I:46:10–19: wa-qad sammā l-maṣṭaṭiqiyān ma‘rifat al-mufradat taṣawwurun wa-ma‘rifat al-nisba al-khabarīya baynahumā taṣdiqan, fa-qālū “al-‘ilm imma taṣawwur wa-imma taṣdiq” wa-sammā ba’d ‘ulamā‘ inā al-awwala ma‘rifatun wa-l-thāniya ‘ilmun ... wa-idhā fahimta iftirāq al-darbayn fa-lā mūshāḥaha fi l-alqāb, fa-naqāšlu al-ān inna l-īdārātā sārat maḥṣūra fi l-ma‘rifat wa-l-‘ilm, av fī l-taṣawwur wa-l-taṣdiq; cf. Mihakk, muqaddimma, pp. 5:6–6:2 (here, as elsewhere, the Mustasfā depends heavily on the Mihakk and at times even repeats it verbatim). The vague reference to the “logicians” in the Mustasfā refers in actuality to Avicenna, who famously opens the logical part of his Kitāb al-Najār with the statement: “Every knowledge and cognition is either a concept or a proposition” (kull ‘ilm wa-ma‘rifat fa-imma taṣawwur wa-imma taṣdiq). As usual, al-Ghazālī deliberately refrains from referring to Avicenna by name. In the parallel passage from the Mihakk, philosophical terminology is omitted altogether.

2 The science of unveiling

1 Mizān, ch. 15, p. 264:5. In some passages, this hadith is paraphrased: Iḥyā‘, Khutba, I:8:18 (part of [T15] below) and I:11:18, and Iḥyā‘ Book 1, bāb 1, bayān 3, I:28:3. This hadith is used already by al-Muḥāṣibī, Kitāb al-‘Ilm, ch. 8, p. 92:13 and Ikhwan al-safā‘, Rasā’īl, risāla 3.9 [40], III:327:1.

2 The terms “salvation” (najār) and “felicity” (sa‘āda) will be discussed later in this chapter.

3 The printed editions of the Iḥyā‘ have either li-manāḥī or li-mabābihī. I suggest reading li-mā hiya, as quoted by Kāshānī, Mahajja, I:3:14.


5 It is somewhat ironic that al-Ghazālī himself is using saj‘ in this passage. The saj‘ part is repeated, with some variations, in the Imlā‘, glossary of Sūfī terms, s.v. himma, V:283:23–299:7.

6 On ‘ilm al-mu‘āmalā and ‘ilm al-muḵāshafa see Lazarus-Yafeh, Studies, pp. 357ff. The term mu‘āmalā is used in a different (pejorative) sense (business, “transaction” between human beings and God) by Avicenna, Ishārāt, Metaph., namāt 9, ch. 3, IV:59. This may be an important source for al-Ghazālī.


10 It is perhaps significant that both terms are verbal nouns (masādir) of the third stem of the verb. The third stem often designates “attempted actions” or actions undertaken with a specific goal: thus qāṭala (to fight) is an attempt at qatl (killing), sābaqa (to compete) is an attempt at sabq (arriving before someone else); ghāzala (to flirt) is an attempt at ghazal (making love to a woman [though ghazal can also mean flirtling]), etc. It seems likely that ‘ilm al-muḵāshafa and ‘ilm al-mu‘āmalā are simply supposed to mean knowledge which aims at kashf (disclosure of the object of knowledge) and
knowledge which aims at ‘amal (action), thus theoretical (contemplative) knowledge and practical (applied) knowledge.


12 Despite this, however, the Revival contains numerous deliberate digressions into mukāshāfa, as we shall see below.


15 Al-Ghazālī’s terminology is not entirely consistent. Sometimes “Science of the Path to the Afterlife” refers to both the science of practice and the science of unveiling combined; at other times – as is evidently the case here – this expression refers specifically to both the science of practice and the science of unveiling.

16 Ihyā’, Book 1, bāb 2, bayān 2, I:38:9–17.


18 Ihyā’, Khutba, I:11:16–17. One may compare al-Ghazzālī’s esotericism to philosophical esotericism. See e.g. Gutas, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition, pp. 225–34, 299–307; Pseudo(?)–Avicenna, Iḥbāt al-nubūwāt, §16, p. 48:1–8: wa-qīla inna l-mushkataṯ ‘alā l-nābī an yakūna kalāmuhū ramzan wa-alfūzūhū īmān, wa-ka-mā yadhkuru Aflāṭūn fi Kitāb al-Nawāmis anna man lam yaqīf ‘alā ma‘ānī rumizt al-rusul lam yanal al-malakūt al-lālīh, wa-ka-dhūlika ajillat fālsafat Yūnān wa-anbiyā’uhammad kānū yasta’mīlna fi kutubihim al-mawrūzūmūz wa-l-īshrārūt allātī hashw fihā asrarāhum, ka-Fīthāgūrūs wa-Sūqrūt wa-Aflāṭūn, wa-ammā Aflāṭūn fa-qad ‘adhala Aris(<t.>) ‘āṯālīs fi idhā’athī fih-l-hikmah wa-izhārīhi l-’ilm ḥattā qāla Aristīṭālis: innī wa-in ‘amilū kadhā fa-qad tarāktu fi kutubī maḥāwīya kathīrā lā yaqīf ‘alayhā ilā l-sharīd min al-‘ulamā’ al-‘ugālā’ (David Reisman has kindly referred me to a similarly phrased passage in al-Shahrázūrī’s Sharḥ Ḥikmat al-īshrāq [ad Introduction, p. 10:15], ed. H. Ziai, Tehran, 1372/1993, p. 301:2–5); Mahdi, “Philosophical Literature,” pp. 80–7 (focusing on Pseudo-Fārābī’s Jam‘ baynā ra‘ yāl al-ḥakīmāyīn); Rowson, Muslim Philosopher, pp. 262–3 (with relevant material on Neoplatonic introductions to the study of philosophy); Klein-Braslavy, King Solomon, pp. 23–6; Marmura, “Avicenna’s Theory of Prophecy,” pp. 169–70 (=Marmura, Probing in Islamic Philosophy, p. 207); A. Guidi, “L’Obscurité intentionnelle du philosophe: thèmes néoplatoniciens et farabiens chez Maimonide,” Revue des Études Juives 166, 2007, 129–49. The authenticity of Iḥbāt al-nubūwāt is open to question – see Davidson, Alfarabī, Avicenna, and Averroes, p. 87, n. 56 (and discussion in Griffel, “al-Ġazālī’s Concept of Prophecy,” pp. 110–11, n. 31). Davidson’s doubts are prompted by the fact that the text refers to al-‘aqīl al-kullī and al-nafs al-kullīya – terms deemed to be uncharacteristic of Avicenna. The former term, however, is used in Avicenna’s earliest philosophical work, Compendium on the Soul, ch. 8, where it seems to refer to the Active Intellect (see Notes to Chapter 4, n. 69 below), and also in ch. 10 (see references in Gutas, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition, p. 85). The term al-nafs al-kullīya is also used in this treatise (Compendium on the Soul, p. 345:7–8) in the sense of absolute (mutlaqa) and generic (jinsīya) soul, see Gutas, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition, p. 85, note b.


20 This is an important saying frequently quoted by al-Ghazzālī. Besides this passage, it is attributed to ba’d al-‘ārīfīn in Ihyā’, Book 2, faṣl 2, 1:154:3 and Miskhāt, Introduction, §3, p. 2:2. In Imām, faṣl 6, V:310ff., al-Ghazzālī responds to a question about ḫāṣa’ sīr al-rubūbīya kufīr and the legal basis for it (cf. Garden, “al-Ghazzālī’s Contested Revival,”
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pp. 129–30). Buchman in his notes to the translation of the Mishkāt (p. 62, n. 3 to the Author’s Introduction) refers to Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Shi‘ism*, pp. 130–2. Ernst seems to imply that the original context of this saying was anti-Hallājīan (Sufī polemic against al-Hallāj). Al-Sayrāwī’s edition of the Mishkāt (Beirut, 1407/1986, p. 117, n. 3) traces the expression *fisḥā‘* *sirr al-rubūbiyya kafir* to Abū Tālib al-Makkī’s saying going back to Sahīl al-Tustārī: *lī-l-rubūbiyya sirr law kashīfā la-baṭalat al-nubūwa* (also cited by al-Ghazzālī in *Ihyā‘*, Book 2, *fasl* 2, I:154:3ff.).


*Ihyā‘*, Book 31, *rukūn* 1, *bayān* 2, IV:10:8–9 (after the famous parable of the blind men and the elephant).


The terms *siḍḍiqūn* and *muqarrabūn* are important for al-Ghazzālī and are used consistently throughout his works. In Book 35 of the *Ihyā‘*, for example, the fourth and third levels of *tawḥīd* respectively are assigned to these groups. On *siḍḍiqūn* see Mishkāt, Part 1, §62, p. 23:5–6; *Maqṣad*, p. 139:17–18; and esp. the discussion of Abū Bakr in the

46 The expression “the meaning of,” repeated throughout the following list, will be omitted in translation.

47 The term is taken from Q. 6:75 (wa-ka-dhā līā malakūta l-samāwātī wa-l-ard) often discussed by al-Ghazālī.

48 On lammat al-malak and lammat al-shaytān (based on a hadith found in al-Tirmidhī’s hadith collection; cf. Wensinek, Concordance, s.v. lamma, vol. 6, p. 146, and Ullmann, Wörterbuch der klassischen arabischen Sprache, s.v. lamma) see Jawāhirī, Part 1, ch. 6, pp. 49–50 and Faysal, ch. 5, p. 44 (in both cases, in connection with the hadith “the heart of the believer is between two of the fingers of the Merciful”; for a different interpretation of this hadith see Iḥyā’, Book 2, fiqh 2, I:157:1–4). Cf. Frank’s and Dallal’s translations of this passage: Frank, al-Ghazālī and the Ash‘arite School, p. 23; Dallal, “al-Ghazālī and the Perils of Interpretation,” p. 778b.

49 This is a Qur’ānic expression denoting the angelic realm (Q. 37:8, 38:69).

50 On this sacred hadith see Notes to Chapter 2, n. 81 below.

51 This may well be al-Ghazālī’s own position. See [T66] and discussion there.

52 Iḥyā’, Book 1, bāb 2, bayān 2, I:37:8–38:10 (the division into paragraphs and numbering is mine; the last paragraph has already been cited as part of [T17]). Cf. Frank’s and Dallal’s translations of this passage: Frank, al-Ghazālī and the Ash‘arite School, pp. 23; Dallal, “al-Ghazālī and the Perils of Interpretation,” p. 778b.


54 Munqīdah, §18, p. 64:8 and §96, p. 102:4.

55 Böwering, Mystical Vision of Existence, pp. 211ff. with detailed discussion and references to primary sources.


59 Tuḥma, literally accusation or blame, can also mean suspicion, e.g. in a number of texts by al-Ghazālī, for example, [T33] below.

60 Al-Qushayrī, Risāla, Bāb fi Taṣfīr al-fāz tadiro bayna ḥadīthiya l-tā‘ifa, section al-Muhādara wa-l-mukāshafa wa-l-mushāhada wa-l-mu‘ayyana, p. 67:13–21. On the progression from ‘aql to ‘ilm to ma‘rifah (and finally to taqwīd), with some intermediary steps cf. al-Qushayrī, Latā‘if, ad Q. 24:35, IV:283:10–12: “[Just as] God illumined the heaven with stars, according to the verse ‘We adorned the lower heaven with luminaries’ (Q. 41:12), so also He adorned the hearts with lights: the light of intellection (‘aql), the light of understanding (fahm), the light of knowledge (‘ilm), the light of certainty (yaqīn), the light of cognizance (ma‘rifah), and the light of [the realization of] God’s oneness (taqwīd). Each [heart] has a greater or a lesser share in these lights’ radiance in accordance with its capacity.” In the Risāla, al-Qushayrī proceeds with the following account of witnessing: “No one can add to the clarity of ‘Amr ibn ‘Uthmān al-Makki’s (d. 291/904, not to be confused with Abū Tālib al-Makki!) true account of witnessing. Here is the meaning of what he said: [Witnessing is when] lights of manifestation (anwār al-tajallī) frequently illumine the heart, without interference of veiling or interruption. If it were possible for lightnings
to be continuous then just as a dark night would become bright as day, when intense lightnings follow upon one another unceasingly, so also, when manifestation is lasting, the heart is illumined by the light of day, and night is no more.” This is echoed in the passage from al-Qushayrī’s commentary on the Verse of Light, cited as [T23] above.

Watt, “Authenticity,” p. 42 raises doubts about the attribution of this glossary to al-Ghazālī and argues that it might be a later addition.

Thus, in comparison to Sahl al-Tustarī and al-Qushayrī, who both argue that mushāhada is superior to mukāshafa, al-Ghazālī reverses the order. For the definition of mushāhada in the Ḥmlā’ see Notes to Chapter 3, n. 31 below.

Possibly, following Ibn ‘Arabī (see the next note), one should read bi-l-wajd for bi-l-tawḥīd.

Imlā’, V: 287:22–3. For the threefold structure of this definition, cf. a similar threefold division of the term sīr: sīr al-‘ilm, sīr al-ḥāl, sīr al-haqqā qa, the latter being defined as mā waqat bihi l-ishāra (Imlā’), glossary of Sūfi terms, V: 287:8–10. Cf. Ibn ‘Arabī, Futūhāt, ch. 210 (Fī l-mukāshafa ‘inda al-qawm tuṭla’u bi-izā’ al-amāna bi-l-fahm, wa-tuṭla’u bi-izā’ taḥqīq ziyādat al-ḥāl, wa-tuṭla’u bi-izā’ taḥqīq l-ishāra ... wa-l-mukāshafa ‘inda’nā atammin min al-mushāhada ... wa-bi-qavelnā āhādā taqālu ṭā’īfā kābirā min ahl Allāh, mittl Abī Ḥāmid [=al-Ghazālī] ... fa-l-mukāshafa kānā quhnā ‘alā thalāthat ma’ānin: mukāshafa bi-l-ilm wa-mukāshafa bi-l-ḥāl wa-mukāshafa bi-l-wajd. According to Asín Palacios (Espiritualidad, IV:82) and Watt (“Authenticity,” p. 42), Ibn ‘Arabī incorporates definitions from the Ḥmlā’ in his discussion in Futūhāt, providing in fact an extensive commentary on this part of the Ḥmlā’; see references and a brief discussion in Garden, “al-Ghazālī’s Contested Revival,” pp. 121–2, n. 107.


The distinction between the “gardens of Eden” (jannāt ‘adn) and the “Highest Garden” (al-firdaws al-a’lā) is spelled out in Iḥyā’, Book 31, rukn 2, bayān 2, IV: 38:2–3.


Arba’in, Part 1, khāṭima, p. 38.


Under Islamic law, different rules apply to cities conquered by Muslims by force (‘anwātān) and cities surrendered without a battle (ṣulhān), as laid out in the books of fiqh.

The text may be corrupt: should one read ma’a l-najāt fā’ iz (cf. ma’a l-najāt wa-l-fawz sa’id below) for ma’a dhālika fā’ iz bi-l-najāt? However, the expression al-fawz bi-l-najāt appears in the eleventh century Ismā’īlī author al-Mu‘ayyad fi al-Dīn al-Shirāzī (al-Mī’ a-l-Ūlā min al-majālis al-Mu ayyādiya, ed. Hātim Ḥāmid al-Dīn, Bombay, 1395/1975, majlis 23, p. 101:26–30) (I am grateful to Tahera Qutbuddin for bringing this passage to my attention).


I’tiqād (opinion) is one of the meanings of the term īmān. See Iḥyā’, Book 2, faṣl 2, I: 186:10ff., on the three meanings of the term īmān.
This sacred hadith is very fond of the lāwashī, “True Felicity,” p. 65); and references to the Ikhwān al-Safā. Avicenna, Ash’arism Revisited,” p. 98). The same distinction is drawn here between najāt (for the Qur’ānic ašbāb al-aymān) and an unspecified better destiny for the Qur’ānic muqarrabān. Cf. Iḥyā’, Book 31, rukn 2, bayān 2, IV:38:3ff., which distinguishes between two kinds of imān: imān taqādi and imān kashf, the former leading to salvation, the latter, to felicity.

Arba’īn, Part 1, khātima, p. 3.


Iḥyā’, Book 21, bayān 4, III:13:6–7. Notice that knowledge of ḥaqā iq al-āshyā to the degree that is possible to human beings is one of the definitions of philosophy in al-Kindī and Avicenna, going back to the Alexandrian tradition. See Marmura, “al-Ghazālī and Ash’arism,” p. 95 with references.


Indeed, some knowledge is useless and even harmful. Al-Ghazālī is very fond of the ḥadīth “We take refuge with God from useless knowledge” (na ‘ūdhu bi-llāh min ‘ilm la yanfa’u) (e.g. Iḥyā’, Khutba, I:9:14).


This sacred ḥadīth often appears in Arabic philosophical and quasi-philosophical works to refer to the afterlife: e.g. Avicenna, Shīfā’, Ilāhīyyāt, Book 10, ch. 2, §6, p. 366:15 (in a paraphrased form: dhālika shay’ lā ‘ayn ra’at-hu wa-lu’dhun sami’at-hu); Pseudo-Avicenna, Fī Ma’rifat al-nafs al-nātiqa wa-ahwalīhā, ch. 3, p. 187 (English tr. in S. Stroumsa, “True Felicity,” p. 65); and references to the Ikhwān al-Safā, Miskawayh, and Ibn Ṭufayl, given in Michot, “L’épitre sur la connaissance de l’âme rationelle et de ses états,” pp. 490–1, n. 87. Al-Ghazālī also frequently cites it: Tahāfut, Preface, p. 1; Disc. 20, §10, pp. 214–15; Mīzān, ch. 2, p. 182; Iḥyā’, Book 1, bāb 2, bayān 2, I:38:3–4 (translated as part of [T22]); Book 31, rukn 2, bayān 2, IV:43:6–7; Book 36, IV:429:24–5; Maqāṣid, pp. 53–4. On this sacred ḥadīth see William A. Graham, Divine Word and Prophetic Word: A Reconsideration of the Sources, with Special Reference to the Divine Saying or Ḥadith Qudsi, The Hague: Mouton, 1977, Saying 2, pp. 117–19. It has its origin in 1Cor. 2:9 (originally, according to Origen, a quotation from Apocalypsis Elias, now partially preserved only in Coptic); cf. the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, §17. The parallels to this saying have been collected by Michael E. Stone and John Strugnell, The Books of Elijah: Parts 1–2, Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979, pp. 41–73. It is important that this quotation is often used in the discussions of the afterlife in Syriac philosophical and spiritual literature (e.g. Job of Edessa, Encyclopaedia of Philosophical and Natural Sciences as taught in Baghdad about A.D. 817 or Book of Treasures by Job of Edessa, tr. A. Mingana, Cambridge, 1935, Disc. 6, ch. 9, pp. 283 and 288; ‘Abūshō’ī/ Joseph Ḥazzāyā, tr. A. Mingana, Woodbrooke Studies, vol. 7, Cambridge: W. Heffner & Sons, p. 159). See also S.A. Frantsuzov, “Ob odnoj novozavetnoj tsitate v arabomuš’ manskih sochinenijakh” [A Quotation from the New Testament in Muslim Writings in Arabic], Vestnik PSTGU III.1 (7), 2007, 99–106, which focuses on 1Cor. 2:9.

Tahāfut, Disc. 20, §10, p. 215. Both this sacred ḥadīth and Q. 32:17 are already cited by the Ikhwān al-safā in the same context (describing the soul’s vision after it has left the body), at the beginning of risāla II.13 [27] and elsewhere (note that this hadith and Q. 32:17 appear in conjunction to one another in al-Bukhārī’s Saḥīḥ, Kitāb bad’ al-khalq, and that this ḥadīth is quoted or paraphrased in several Qur’ān commentaries on Q. 32:17 as early as Muqāṭil). Q. 32:17 is also cited by al-‘Āmīrī, see Rowson, Muslim Philosopher, pp. 167, 324.

bal ka-annahum lā yaltafitūnā ilā tilka wa-in uṯūhā, wa-lā yastaʿizmūnāhā fī jannah hadhīhi al-saʿāda allāti hiya muqātirat al-Ḥaqq al-awwal. Note that “theist philosophers” (al-hukmāʾ al-ilāhiyyūn) are grouped together with the Sūfis in the Mīzān as both professing the “symbolist view” of the afterlife (discussed in Chapter 5; cf. Notes to Chapter 5, n. 25 below). In the Iḥyāʾ, however, following the present passage, only examples of Sūfi attitudes (e.g. al-Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya) are given.

84 Iḥyāʾ, Book 31, rukn 2, bayān 2, IV:40:15–24. This interpretation is based on Q. 32:12.


86 Al-Ghazālī’s presentation has certain common features with Pseudo-Avicenna’s Fī Maʿrifat al-nafs al-nāṭiqah wa-ahwālīhā, ch. 3, pp. 187–8, which differentiates between three levels in the afterlife, based on Q. 56:7–11: al-sābiqūn, ashāb al-maymana, and ashāb al-mashʿama. The three groups are those attached to the world of the intellect, the world of the soul, and the physical world respectively. (The relevant section is translated by Stroumsa, “True Felicity,” pp. 64–5, who takes this to be an authentic Avicennian passage.) Though the scholarly consensus seems to be that this work is spurious, but “imbued” with Avicennian thought (Gutas, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition, p. 305; Michot, “L’épître sur la connaissance de l’âme rationelle et de ses états,” pp. 480–1), it is of course possible both that al-Ghazālī was familiar with this treatise (if it had been written before his time) and that he took it to be an authentic work by Avicenna. It should be noted that al-Ghazālī’s interpretation of the degrees of souls in the afterlife is not entirely identical to Avicenna’s own. On Avicenna’s own view see Michot, La destinée de l’homme selon Avicenne; Heath, Allegory and Philosophy, pp. 68–9; Janssens, “Ibn Sinā’s Ideas of Ultimate Realities,” pp. 258–62; and T. Jaffer, “Avicenna and the Resurrection of the Body,” MA Thesis, McGill University, 1998, pp. 45–66 (despite the promising title, the article of K. Kennedy-Day, “Ibn Sinā on the Afterlife of the Soul,” Islamic Quarterly 46.4, 2002, 333–49 is misleading on many levels).

87 Tahāfut, Disc. 20, §15, p. 217.

3 Tasting and witnessing

1 Ormsby, “Taste of Truth”; Lazarus-Yafeh, Studies, pp. 298–9, 305, 341–2; Watt, “Authenticity,” pp. 26–8, 30; Whittingham, al-Ghazālī and the Qurʾān, pp. 118–23; on this term in two later authors, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Judah Halevi, see M. Levi, “Taste and See: On the Vision of God and the Pleasure of Tasting: A Study of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s Commentary Maṭfāḥ al-ghayb,” MA Thesis, McGill University, 89–102. W.M. Watt has argued (incorrectly) that this term is not found in the Iḥyāʾ and appears only at a later stage of al-Ghazālī’s spiritual development – when he supposedly put mystical intuition above reason – and that its use is thus helpful in determining the chronology of al-Ghazālī’s works. As we shall see shortly, both the term dhawq and the doctrine represented by it are well attested in the Iḥyāʾ, and roots of it appear even before the Iḥyāʾ, in the Maqāṣid and the Tahāfut!

2 Maqāṣid, Physics, pp. 63:15–64:3 (immediately before [T69]); cf. Dāneshnāme, Physics, §44; French tr., Physics, pp. 79–80. The example of explaining sexual pleasure to a child is al-Ghazālī’s own (it does not occur at this place in the Dāneshnāme), but it is inspired by Avicenna’s other texts, as we shall see below.

3 Tahāfut, Disc. 20, §§5–6, pp. 213–14.


wa-yata‘ajabu min nafsihā fi thabāthī wa-ḥtimāliḥī li-qūwat faraḥihī wa-surūriḥī, wa-ḥādhā mimmah lā yudraku illā bi-l-dhawq, wa-l-ḥikāya fihi qalīlat al-jadwā, fa-ḥādhā l-qadr yunabhhūkha ’alā anna ma‘rifat Allāh subḥānahā aladhhī al-ashyā’ wa-annahā lā ladhhdhata fawqahā.


7 See also al-Ghazālī’s resposnum to a disciple Ey Farzand, pp. 98:14–99:1 = Ayyuhā l-walad, pp. 25:9–27:1 = Khulāsat al-taṣānīf, p. 184:10–15, where the same example is deployed.

8 This is the realization that “there is nothing in existence save God.” See Treiger, “Monism and Monotheism.”

9 Arba‘īn, Part 2, ch. 6, pp. 70–1.

10 Maqṣūd, Part 1, ch. 4, pp. 50ff.

11 It should be noted, however, that al-Ghazālī qualifies this apophatic triumph by insisting that both the statement “No one cognizes God except God” and the statement “I do not cognize anything except God” are true (Maqṣūd, pp. 58–9). The former and the latter are, respectively, in the monotheistic and the monistic frameworks, which are complementary rather than mutually exclusive (on these two frameworks see Treiger, “Monism and Monotheism”). In the monistic framework, which al-Ghazālī frequently prefers to the monotheistic one, only God exists, and so human knowledge of God is redefined as the human being’s becoming a locus of manifestation (maḥall, maẓhar) for God’s knowledge of Himself. Thus, in the state of “obliteration in tawḥīd” (al-fanā‘ fi al-tawḥīd) one can have perfect knowledge of God, but only because in this state “there is nothing in existence save God” and one no longer exists as an independent entity, but merely as a locus of manifestation of God’s perfect knowledge of Himself – as a mirror that reflects God’s light. The Qur’ānic verse “You did not throw when you threw, but God threw” (Q. 8:17, cited Maqṣūd, p. 59; cf. also Mi‘yār, p. 124) is constantly quoted by al-Ghazālī as a hint to the third level of tawḥīd, on which all actions are attributed to God, and God is said to be, and is experienced as, the only Agent in existence. Thus, in al-Ghazālī, apophatic theology triumphs over the kataphatic, but ultimately monistic theology triumphs over the apophatic. It is this secret that al-Ghazālī refuses to openly disclose at the end of this chapter of the Maqṣūd (p. 59).

12 Cf. [T22], §5. The relevant passage on the afterlife is translated as [T66] below.

13 Maqṣūd, Part 1, ch. 4, p. 54.

14 Here and below intelligence is to be understood as referring to the “cognitive spirit” (al-rūḥ al-fikrī). The passage thus speaks of the fifth and highest spirit, the sacred prophetic spirit (al-rūḥ al-qudsī al-nabawī). Cf. Notes to Chapter 1, n. 53 above on the terminology of this passage.

16 The context (omitted in this citation) suggests musical performance of poetry, i.e. Sufi musical ceremony (sama') involving singing, rather than poetry as such. Cf. Kīmiyā', 'onvān 1, faṣl 14, I:36:5–11.


18 Mishkāt, Part 2, §§51–3, pp. 37:11–38:12. 'Irfān here is synonymous with 'ilm; it is not to be understood in the mystical sense of "gnosis."

19 The term is especially common among the Sufis, who often considered themselves as awliyā'. On the development of this idea see the useful summary of B. Radtke, art. wali (1. general survey), EI2, vol. 11, pp. 109b–112a, which however makes no reference to al-Ghazālī's views on the subject.

20 Possibly, al-Ghazālī is referring to his own “burhān,” offered, according to the Munjīd, in Book 21 of the Ihyā'. See the next note.

21 Cf. Munqidh, §§98–9, p. 103:6–12 (immediately following [T36]): “Whoever has not been granted direct experience (dhawq) will attain certainty regarding it through observation and listening (bi-l-tajriba wa-l-tasāmu) [to the Sufis], if he constantly seeks their company. … Whoever has not been granted their company, let him know the possibility of this with certainty through the testimonies of demonstration (bi-shawāhid al-burhān), as we indicated in the Book of the Wonders of the Heart [Book 21] of the Revival of the Religious Sciences. Realization through demonstration is knowledge. Being overcome by this very state is direct experience (mulābassāt 'ayn tilka l-hāla dhawq). Acceptance on the basis of listening and observation accompanied with trust (husn al-zann) is belief (īmān).”


24 The pronominal suffix in minhu probably refers to qurb, the state of closeness to God, mentioned a few lines earlier, in §96, p. 102:9.

25 According to L. Gardet's theory (art. karāma, EI2, vol. 4, pp. 615a–616b, at p. 615a), though the term karāmāt appears to be based on an Arabic root, its meaning is influenced by the Greek χαράματα. This is an intriguing theory, given that the Islamic notion of “sainthood” itself (wilāya) may have Christian roots, but more evidence is needed to substantiate it. The fact that the Greek term cited by Gardet seems to be unattested in Syriac speaks against this theory.

26 Munqidh, §§97–8, p. 103:2–6.

27 Mishkāt, Part 2, §24, p. 30:9–11. Moses’ words to his family after he saw the burning bush are in the background: umkuthū, innī ānastu nāran, la’ālitī ʿītikum minhā bi-khabarin aw jadhwatī mina l-nāri la’allakum taṣṭalīn (Q. 28:29); cf. Girdner, “Reasoning with Revelation,” pp. 271–3. In addition, the Fire stands for the celestial source of prophecy, the Supernal Divine Spirit (al-rūḥ al-ilāhīya l’-ulwīya), corresponding to the Active Intellect of the philosophers, as we shall see in Chapter 4.


29 To use a modern analogy: anyone who wears glasses or contact lenses can easily notice the difference in darajāt al-kashf after putting them on. A similar difference exists, al-Ghazālī would argue, in intellectual vision.

30 In principle, al-ʿulāmāʾ al-rāsikhān could also be identified with the philosophers. However, given that in this passage they are said to be using istidlāl rather than burhān, it is more likely that in this context at least, the term refers primarily to the mutakallimūn. It is interesting that in al-Ghazālī, the term al-ʿulāmāʾ al-rāsikhān does not designate the highest degree of human knowledge, as the term al-rāsikhān fī l-ʿilīm does in the Qurʾān (Q. 3:7 and 4:162).

the fourth stage are those who have seen God and after that have seen things through Him. Therefore, in the two worlds (al-dāraynī) they see nothing other than Him and observe in existence nothing but Him.” See also Makātib, p. 19; Maqasid, p. 139:14–18. In the Imlāʾ, muqaddima, glossary of Šūfī terms, V:287:20–1, al-Ghazālī presents mushāhada as a Šūfī term. He defines it as follows:

Witnessing has three meanings: (1) witnessing by [in light of?] the Real (mushāhada bi-l-haqq), i.e. seeing things by means of [as?] proofs of [God’s] oneness (ruʾyat al-ashyāʾ bi-dalāl ilʾal-tawḥīd); (2) witnessing towards the Real (mushāhada li-l-haqq), i.e. seeing the Real in things (ruʾyat al-haqq fī l-ashyāʾ); and (3) witnessing the Real (mushāhadat al-haqq), i.e. real certainty (haqiqat al-yaqīn) without doubt.

The text is difficult to interpret, but it seems likely that the first two meanings of witnessing correspond to different aspects of istidrāl of the Iḥyāʾ and Mishkāt, and the third one – to mushāhada.

32 This seems to imply that al-Ghazālī’s use of the term istidrāl, at least in this context, does not include syllogistic reasoning, which is also free from error.


34 Reading atamm for thumma.

35 Reading al-jabha for al-jiha, following the Maʾārij (and cf. the Persian parallel in [T41]).


37 “God’s habit” is an important concept of al-Ghazālī’s occasionalism. Its purpose is to indicate that the only agent and the direct cause of all events is God, and it is only in virtue of God’s habit that events are so arranged as to make the impression that there are actual causal connections between them (as, e.g., between closing the eyelids and interruption of vision). Since, however, God’s habit is unchangeable (according to the verse wa-lan taṣāda lān naṣūnna lālī tabdīlān, Q. 33:62 and 48:23, quoted, e.g., in Iḥjām, bāb 1, p. 328:1), a world functioning in accordance with God’s habit is virtually indistinguishable from a world run by causality. On al-Ghazālī’s occasionalism and his views of causality see Marmura, “Ghazālīan Causes and Intermediaries”; Perler and Rudolph, Occasionalismus, pp. 57–105; and Griffel, al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology.


40 In his Risāla fī Māḥīyat al-ṣalāt, p. 38, Avicenna argues that human beings will see God in the afterlife through intellectual witnessing (mushāhada ʿaglīya), not bodily witnessing (mushāhada jismānīya). Cf. Abrahamov, “Ibn Sināʾ’s Influence,” p. 15.

Notes to Chapter 3


42 Iḥyāʾ, Book 36, bayān 5, IV:436:4–12 (the passage is not reproduced in the Maʿārij); translated and discussed in Abrahamov, “al-Ghazālī’s Supreme Way,” pp. 156ff.


44 Al-Ghazālī appeals here to his rule of interpretation (qānūn al-ta’wil). For an exposition of this rule see al-Ghazālī’s Faysal as well as a short responsum entitled Qānūn al-ta’wil. See also Bello, Medieval Islamic Controversy; Griffel, al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology, pp. 111–22.

45 Faysal, ch. 6, p. 48:6–9 specifically discusses the possibility the someone “might think” (zharaʿ indahū) that the meaning of “vision of God” is “witnessing of the heart” (mushāhadat al-qalb). If that is the case, one is not allowed to mention this to others, since mentioning it is an innovation (bidʿa), as the pious forebears did not mention it. It is likely that al-Ghazālī is speaking about himself. This would explain his reluctance to say expressly that the vision of God in the afterlife will be located in the heart.

46 Q. 75:22–3 (“faces … glancing at their Lord,” ʾilā rabbihā nāzira) and the sound prophetic hadith “You shall see (tarawna) your Lord as you see this moon.”

47 Note that this is opinion (iʿtiqād), not real knowledge.

48 Kīmiyāʾ, Book 39, II:590:3–8. See also Iḥtiṣād, qutb 1, daʿ waʾū, pp. 60ff. where al-Ghazālī deals extensively with the subject of the vision of God. There too al-Ghazālī stresses that vision is called vision irrespective of the locus (mahāll) in which it takes place, and that the locus of the vision of God in the afterlife could be the eye or the “heart.”

49 Mishkāt, Part 1, §§10ff., pp. 5ff.


52 Avicenna, Commentary on the Theology of Aristotle, p. 44:12–16, as corrected by Gutas according to MS Cairo Hikma 6M, fol. 148r – see his “Intelect without Limits,” p. 368, n. 40 and his English translation of the passage, p. 368; another translation in Adamson, “Non-Discursive,” p. 108; I am grateful to Dimitri Gutas for putting at my disposal a copy of the Cairo manuscript. See also Avicenna, Commentary on the Theology of Aristotle, p. 56:8–12 (I have checked and corrected Badawi’s transcription according to MS Cairo Hikma 6M, fol. 150v–151r): wa-dhālika bahja wa-nūr yaʾti min ʿind Allāh bi-tawassuṭ al-ʿaql, layya yahdi ilayhi al-fikr wa-l-qiyyās illā min jihat al-tihbāt, wa-amān min jihat khāṣṣ māhiyyatiḥa wa-kayfiyyatiḥa fa-innamā yadduluʿ alayhi l-mushāhada, wa-lā yanālū tilka l-mushāhada illā man istaʿadda laḥā bi-siḥḥat mizāj al-nafs, kāmā anna man lam yadhulq al-hulw fa-sa-yuṣaddiqu bi-anannāridh bi-darib min al-qiyyās aw al-shahāda, wa-la yanālū khaṣṣat al-īlāmīhā bihī illā bi-l-taṭaʿ um, in kāna mustaʿiddan bi-siḥḥat mizāj al-badan (for an English translation see Lobel, Between Mysticism and Philosophy, p. 101).

53 It is noteworthy that Avicenna, like al-Ghazālī, speaks of some “special characteristic” that can only be recognized through experience. Al-Ghazālī, too, draws a connection between dhawq and a “special characteristic” which is only to be recognized through dhawq. See the Loftiest Goal, discussed above, and the passage from the Deliverer from Error ([T35]). It is also significant that al-Ghazālī, if he is the author of the Maʿārij, on one occasion replaces the Avicennian tajriba with dhawq. Compare Avicenna’s Ishārāt, namaṭ 10, faṣl 24, IV:149 (the text is translated and discussed in Gutas, “Imagination and Transcendental Knowledge in Avicenna,” pp. 352–3) with Maʿārij, bayān khawaṣṣ al-nubīwa, p. 146:5–10.

For this interpretation see Gutas, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition, p. 176.

It also underlies al-Suhrawardī’s celebrated distinction, in the introduction to Ḥikmat al-īshrāq, between bāḥth and ta ‘allūh (al-Suhrawardī, Ḥikmat al-īshrāq, Introduction, §§5–6, pp. 3–4; the term ta ‘allūh and its history in Arabic philosophy require a separate study). Notice that while al-Ghazālī keeps Avicenna’s dhawq and substitutes the apparently synonymous ‘ilm for Avicenna’s bāḥth, al-Suhrawardī does the exact opposite, keeping Avicenna’s bāḥth in place and replacing Avicenna’s dhawq with the apparently synonymous ta ‘allūh.

The relevant texts from Avicenna’s Commentary on the Theology of Aristotle and Mubāḥathāt are translated and analyzed with great precision by Gutas, “Intellect without Limits,” pp. 367 ff. See also Adamson, “Non-Discursive,” pp. 107–11 (who takes the term mushāhada to refer to a “divine revelation” to “pure intellect”).


Mubāḥathāt, §598, p. 199:11–12: lā yabrahū l-wasat ‘an al-tamaththul (“the middle [term] does not cease to be present”); English tr. in Gutas, “Intellect without Limits,” p. 370. Adamson, “Non-Discursive,” pp. 92 ff. differentiates between three meanings of “non-discursive” cognition: (a) it is instantaneous; (b) it has a simple object; and (c) it is non-syllogistic. For the purposes of the present study, non-discursive knowledge is taken to mean non-syllogistic (Adamson’s meaning c). As Adamson argues, according to Avicenna, there is no non-discursive knowledge in this sense: all knowledge is syllogistic: “Avicenna believes that the properly intellectual mode of thinking is non-discursive in senses (a) and (b), but not in sense (c). That is, it grasps its object ‘all at once’ and it grasps a simple object, but its grasp is nevertheless structured syllogistically” (p. 93). Similarly, in discussing Avicenna’s theory of “inspiration” (ilhām), Adamson suggests that Avicenna does not mean that “the ‘inspiration’ is non-syllogistic in form, but only that if you have an inspiration you may reach it without the trouble of going through the syllogism step-by-step. … The point seems to be that in this non-discursive sort of knowledge [i.e. non-discursive in the senses (a) and (b), but discursive in the sense (c)] the whole syllogism is grasped at once rather than that in such knowledge there is no syllogism to be grasped” (p. 97).

Mubāḥathāt, §726, pp. 247 ff.: “Although the middle term does accompany [mushāhada], it is as if it is [no longer] needed (wa-in sahibahā l-hadd al-awsat fa-ka’annaḥū ghayr muḥtaṭī ilayhi).” I take the pronominal suffix in ka’annaḥū to refer to the middle term and regard muḥtaṭī as a passive participle; cf. Gutas’s English tr. in “Intellect without Limits,” p. 370.


To be fair, al-Ghazālī never explicitly says that he drops the requirement that all knowledge must have syllogistic structure. He drops this requirement simply by not insisting on it.

Notes to Chapter 3 143
4 Inspiration and revelation

1 The following studies are especially useful: Davidson, Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes; Abrahamov, “al-Ghazālī’s Supreme Way”; Griffel, “al-Ghazālī’s Concept of Prophecy”; al-Aktī, “Three Properties of Prophethood” (al-Aktī’s article does not take into account Kīmiyā, ‘onvān 1, fāśl 14).


3 The text should probably be emended to mubādara. Alternatively, this expression may be connected to ʿibtidāʾan, “from the start,” in the Maʾārīj passage cited below.

4 The term “acquisition” stands for what is elsewhere called cogitation (fikr or tafakkur).


7 Cf. Gutas, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition, p. 162, n. 36.

8 Lazarus-Yafeh, Studies, p. 304.

9 Cf. the following passage evoking the image of the curtain between the human soul and the Universal Soul (identified with the Preserved Tablet) (see Appendix A below). Hence, I suggest emending the text to al-ʾaql al-kullī.

10 The concept of “knowledge from on high” (ʾilm ladunī) will be discussed below.

11 In the Marāgha manuscript (Laduniya, ch. 4, p. 114:6 and in the two editions (in the Majmūʿat Rasāʾīl and in ʿAṣīʿs al-Taṣrīr al-Qurʾānī) the reading is al-nafs al-kullī [sic!]. However, this reading does not make good sense, for in the following line it is the Universal Intellect, not the Universal Soul, that functions as a “teacher” of the sanctified soul. Similarly, at p. 115:15–16 the author argues that revelation has its origin in an emanation from the Universal Intellect, not from the Universal Soul (cited in Notes to Chapter 4, n. 10 above). Moreover, it is usually the Universal Intellect that corresponds to the Qurʾānīc “Pen” and the Universal Soul to the Qurʾānīc “Preserved Tablet” (see Appendix A below). Hence, I suggest emending the text to al-ʾaql al-kullī.

12 The concept of “knowledge from on high” (ʾilm ladunī) will be discussed below.

13 See also the brief discussion is based on the Mīzān; the discussion of the Ḩiyāʾ is largely parallel. Cf. Abrahamov, “al-Ghazālī’s Supreme Way,” pp. 150ff. for a similar analysis with roughly the same conclusions.

14 Griffel, “Review of N. Sinai,” p. 695 argues, on the basis of the distinction between nazār and burhān, that the term nuẓẓār refers to the mutakallimūn and not to the philosophers. (I am grateful to Frank Griffel for kindly sending me a copy of his review.) Despite the textual evidence adduced by Griffel, this seems doubtful to me, as burhān is one particular kind of nazār, and hence the term nuẓẓār can refer to the philosophers. In fact, I doubt al-Ghazālī would “bother” with this extensive discussion (and with the parable that follows), if it was only the mutakallimūn whom he had in mind; generally, he simply dismisses the mutakallimūn as a sub-class of the commoners (ʾawāmm). There are additional indications in the text that it is the philosophers whom al-Ghazālī has in mind (see nn. 17, 20, and 22 below). Moreover,
contrary to Griffel’s analysis, al-Ghazālī in fact also uses the term burhān (apodeictic demonstration, characteristic of the philosophers) to refer to the “theoreticians,” thus settling the issue completely. See Notes to Chapter 4, n. 23 below.

17 Mīzān, ch. 7, p. 221:19–20. This seems to be a reference to philosophical treatises.
18 Meditation/dhikr is given as an example of their practice aiming at directing one’s thoughts wholly to God. See [T48] below.
19 Reading akhār for akbar in Mīzān, ch. 7, p. 224:1.
20 Black bile disease, or melancholy, upsets the balance of the humors required for correct thinking. The “theoreticians” are thus well acquainted with the principles of Galenic medicine. This strengthens the impression that al-Ghazālī is speaking about the philosophers, many of whom earned their living as physicians.
22 This strengthens the impression that it is the philosophers whom al-Ghazālī has in mind. The “ancients” (al-awwālūn, or more frequently al-aṭwā‘īl) are, of course, the ancient Greeks.
23 The mention of al-‘ulūm al-burhāniyya makes it certain that it is the philosophers whom al-Ghazālī has in mind.
24 Mīzān, ch. 8, p. 228.
25 This has been suggested by Abrahamov, “al-Ghazālī’s Supreme Way,” pp. 152–3.
26 On this parable see now Van Ruymbke, “L’histoire du concours des peintres rūmīs et chinois.”
27 On this translation see Treiger, “Monism and Monotheism,” pp. 26–7, n. 83.
28 This is a reference to the fact that the Byzantines were famous for the visual arts (mosaics, frescoes, and iconography), whereas the Chinese were the exporters of mirrors to the Islamic world (see Ignatenko, Zerkalo, p. 18). Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (presumably because he is from Rūm) reverses the analogy in the Mathnawi (Book 1, vv. 3462–85, 3499); in his version, the Byzantines do the polishing and gain the upper hand—see R.A. Nicholson (tr.), The Mathnawi of Jalāludīn Rūmī, London and Leiden, 1925–40, vol. 7 (Commentary on Books 1–2), pp. 202–3.
29 The metaphor of engraving is used by Avicenna as well. See Gutas, “Imagination,” pp. 351–2 with references.
32 i.e. before the child has received necessary knowledge (primary intelligibles).
33 Cf. the definition of i’tiqād in [T10] above.
34 Iḥyā’, Book 21, bayān 8, III:26:15–18.
Compare the Stoic and Christian (Evagrian) ideal of a dispassionate state of the mind (apatheia) and the Buddhist ideal of non-attachment.

Literally, the expression (‘ilm ladun) means knowledge coming from (‘ilm ‘onvān), ‘onvān 1, faṣāl 11, I:29–30. In the Mīzān this is introduced as a piece of advice given to al-Ghazālī himself by an unnamed “prominent leader” of the Sūfis (mattāʾī ‘muqaddam min al-ṣūfiyya) when al-Ghazālī consulted his opinion (this “prominent leader” is also mentioned in a different context in Mīzān, ch. 3, p. 196:16–17). It is possible that this prominent leader is Abū al-Fath Naṣr al-Maḍqisī (d. 490/1096), the Sūfī shaykh with whom al-Ghazālī was affiliated in Damascus (see Griffel, al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology, pp. 43–8). Cf. the passage from the Munqidh, §92, p. 100, describing al-Ghazālī’s practices in Damascus and Jerusalem, which bear striking resemblance to those described in [T48], including seclusion and dhikr: thumma dakhaltu al-Shām wa-agantu bihi qariban min sanatayn lā shaghla li ʾllā l-ʾazla wa-l-khalwa wa-l-rīyāda wa-l-mujāhada, ishtighālān bi-tazkiyat al-nafs wa-tahdhib al-akhlāq wa-taṣfiyat al-qalb li-dhikr Allāh taʿāla, ka-mā kuntu ḥassaltuhu min kutub al-ṣūfiyya, fa-kunツ a’taқīfū muḍdā fī masjīd Dimashq, aš-adu manāralt al-masjid tūl al-nāhār wa-ugḥiliqū bābāhāʾ alā nafsī; thumma raḥaltu minhā ilā Bayt al-Maqdis, adkhulu kull yawn al-ṣakhra wa-ugḥiliqū bābāhāʾ alā nafsī.

Iḥyāʾ, Book 21, bayān 9, III:28:22ff. (omitted in the Mīzān). For the following parable of the pond see also Kīmiyāʾ, ‘onvān 1, faṣāl 15, I:36:12–37:4; and cf. the important passage in Iḥyāʾ, Book 1, bāb 7, bayān 2, I:133:15ff.

Both al-Ghazālī’s terminology and his explanation of this type of existence (Iḥyāʾ, Book 21, bayān 9, III:29:8–11) make it clear that it is Avicenna’s “common sense” and “imagery” that he has in mind.

Aḏwība, pp. 390–1 mentions, in a different context, the first two types of existence and emphasizes the role of the Preserved Tablet and the Pen: (1) existence in taqādūr upon the Preserved Tablet = the blueprint and (2) real existence. In Faysal, Chs 3–4, pp. 27–39 and Imlāʾ, qāʾida, V:289:24–5, five levels of existence are mentioned, though they are somewhat different from the ones mentioned here, and do not include the “ideal” existence upon the Preserved Tablet; cf. Griffel, “al-Ghazālī’s Concept of Prophecy,” pp. 127ff. and chart on p. 130.


Iḥyāʾ, Book 21, bayān 9, III:30:13–15.

Literally, the expression ilm ladun means knowledge coming from (min ladun) God. It is based on the Qur’ānic verse recounting Moses’ encounter with an unnamed servant of God, identified in the Muslim tradition as the legendary saint al-Khādīr (or al-Khādir). The verse reads: “Then they [Moses and his attendant] found one of Our servants unto whom We had given mercy from Us and whom We had taught knowledge proceeding from Us” (fa-wajadān ‘abdān min ‘ibādīn ātaynāhu raḥmatan min ‘indinā wa-‘ālamānāhu min ladunā ‘īlman, Q. 18:65). Qur’ān commentators offered a variety of opinions on ilm ladun and on what type of knowledge this is. A sample of these opinions can be found in al-Qushayrī’s commentary on this verse: “Knowledge from on high: (1) It is said: God-given knowledge (min ladun Allāh) is the [type of knowledge] obtained by inspiration (iḥbām) without taking the effort to seek it. (2) It is [also] said: it is the [type of knowledge] granted by God to his elect servants. (3) It is [also] said: it is the [type of knowledge] granted by God to his saints for the benefit of his servants. (4) It is [also] said: it is the [type of knowledge] that does not benefit its possessor; instead, it benefits [God’s] servants in what duly belongs to God. (5) It is [also] said: it is the [type of knowledge] that whoever has it...
This is observed by Abrahamov, “al-Ghazālī’s Classifications of the Sciences” includes an analysis of the classification presented in the Laduniya.


49 Kīmiyā, ‘onvān 1, faṣl 14, I:34f.

50 To the best of my knowledge, these problems have not been discussed in scholarly literature.


52 Admittedly, there are some differences between this text and the main body of al-Ghazālī’s authentic writings, yet, as we shall see below, most of the doctrines presented there are Ghazālian in spirit and the differences that do exist are no more radical than those existing between al-Ghazālī’s authentic writings themselves. Furthermore, whether or not it was composed by al-Ghazālī, the text casts new light on al-Ghazālī’s authentic writings and in particular on the distinction between the two types of cognition under discussion. For a comparison between Laduniya and *Ihyā’* see C.Z. Sa’āri, “Classification of Sciences: A Comparative Study of *Ihyā’* `ulūm al-dīn and al-Risālah al-Laduniyyah,” *Intellectual Discourse* (Kuala Lumpur) 7.1, 1999, 53–77; C.Z. Sa’āri, “al-Ghazālī’s Views on the Heart, the Spirit and the Soul: A Comparison between *Ihyā’* `ulūm al-dīn and al-Risālah al-Laduniyyah,” *Journal of Usuluddin* (Kuala Lumpur) 7, 1997, 193–208 (these articles were not accessible to me).

53 Here al-Qushayrī’s still unpublished non-Ṣūfī commentary is meant. See R. Ahmad (Jullandri), “Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushairī as a Theologian and Commentator,” *Islamic Quarterly* 13, 1969, 16–69. This article argues that there is a non-Ṣūfī commentary by al-Qushayrī, entitled *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (the preserved part covers Q. 57:21–66:12). See also the same author’s study “Qur’anic Exegesis and Classical Tafsīr,” *Islamic Quarterly* 12, 1968, 71–119. (It seems that the author had conducted research with Arberry and may have edited the unpublished tafsīr.) Walid Saleh has kindly referred me to an additional work where al-Qushayrī’s unpublished non-Ṣūfī commentary is discussed: I. Basyānī, *al-Imām al-Qushayrī*: *sīratuhū, āthārūhū, madhhabuhū fī l-taṣawwuf*, Cairo, 1972 (not seen).


57 My forthcoming study “al-Ghazālī’s Classifications of the Sciences” includes an analysis of the classification presented in the *Laduniya*.

58 This is observed by Abrahamov, “al-Ghazālī’s Supreme Way,” pp. 164–5; cf. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes*, pp. 139ff. for independent but largely similar conclusions.


56 It is only in the Munqidh that “the eye of prophecy” is unequivocally stated to constitute a sphere beyond reason (on this issue see Gutas, “‘Ibn ʿUṭayl,” pp. 238ff.). But this has to do with the nature of the Munqidh as an apologetic work in which al-Ghazālī sought to present himself in Ṣūfī light.


Notes to Chapter 4


66 Cogitation is, according to Avicenna, “a certain motion (ḥarākatun mā) of the [rational] soul through the notions (ma‘ānī), [conducted] usually with the aid of the imagination, whereby the middle term, or what fulfills its function, is sought” (Ishrārī, Physics, namāt 3, faṣāl 11, II:393:1–3).

67 Intuition, according to Avicenna, is when “the middle term presents itself to the mind instantaneously (duṣ‘atan) … without motion [on the part of the rational soul]” (Ishrārī, Physics, namāt 3, faṣāl 11, II:393:6–8; English tr. in Gutas, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition, p. 165. The passage is paraphrased in Ma‘ārij, bayān khawāṣṣ al-nubūwa, khāṣṣiya 2, p. 143:16–22. On Avicenna’s theory of ḥads see Gutas, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition, pp. 159–76; idem, “Intuition and Thinking.”


69 Avicenna, Compendium on the Soul, ch. 8, §4; tr. Gutas, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition, pp. 19 and 161: “In some people, keenness of mind (yaqza) and contact with the Universal Intellect (al-ittisāl bi-l-‘aql al-kullī) may so predispose the rational faculty as to free it from having recourse to syllogisms and reasoning (rawīya) in order to acquire knowledge; inspiration (ilḥām) and revelation (waḥy), rather, are sufficient sustenance for it. This specific property of the rational faculty is called sanctification (taqdīs), in accordance with which it is often called sanctified spirit (rūḥ muqaddas). None shall gain the enjoyment of this rank except prophets and messengers of God”; cf. also ch. 8, §2, tr. Gutas in Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition, pp. 17 and 161. The term ilḥām is also used in a passage in Avicenna’s Ahwāl al-Nafs and Najāt, tr. Gutas, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition, p. 162, §3 (the parallel passage in the Shi‘a’ omits the word) and in Risāla fī l-Kalām ‘alā al-nafs al-nāṭiqa, p. 197:19 (al-ilḥām al-rabbānī), tr. Gutas, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition, p. 76, §10 ("the inspiration coming from the Lord"). Of course the idea of ilḥām has a long history in Arabic philosophy. Already al-Kindī, in his On the Quantity of Aristotle’s Books, claimed that divine knowledge (al-‘ilm al-ilhām) can be acquired, to quote Peter Adamson’s translation (al-Kindī, p. 43), “without study, effort, or human methods, and without time”; the prophets “know through the will of Him, the great and exalted, and by their souls’ being purified and illuminated with the truth” (§V.1.2–2, al-Kindī, Rasā‘il, l:372–3).


72 The relevant texts can be found translated in Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition,* pp. 162–3 (Alwāl al-nafs = Shīfāʾ = Nājāt and Dāneshnāmeh) and p. 165 (a brief summary of the argument in the Ishārāt). Marmura summarizes this argument in his “Avicenna’s Psychological Proof of Prophecy,” p. 49, n. 1. As Marmura notes, al-Ghazālī reports this argument in his expositions of the philosophers’ theories: *Maqāsid,* Physics, pp. 73:ult.–75:8 (corresponding to the aforementioned passage from the Dāneshnāmeh) and *Tahāfut,* Physics, Introduction, §26, p. 168 (quoting “Whose oil nearly shines, even if no Fire touched it, light upon light.” Q. 24:35).

73 It is more likely that the *Iḥyāʾ* served as a source for the *Maʿārij* than the other way round, for the *Maʿārij* is essentially a running adaptation of, incorporating nearly verbatim quotations from, Avicenna and al-Ghazālī (including the *Iḥyāʾ*).

74 Notice that the Qurʾānic “Fire” no longer refers to the “Supernal Divine Spirit” (i.e. the Active Intellect) as in al-Ghazālī’s Mishḵāt, but to cogitation.


77 Al-Akiti, “Three Properties,” passim (p. 190, n. 5 for references to earlier literature).

78 The imaginative faculty is called “cogitative” (mufakkira) when used, or controlled, by the intellect [=the rational soul].

79 Notice the role of the rational soul (in its capacity as practical intellect) as a mediator between the imaginative faculty and the celestial realm. See Gutas, “Imagination,” p. 343.


81 In al-Mabdaʾ wa-l-maʿād, fasl 17, p. 117:14–17, Avicenna uses the term mujānasa to characterize the relation between the human souls and the celestial realm; the passage is translated in Gutas, “Imagination,” p. 339.

82 Avicenna, Shīfāʾ, Nafs, Book 4, ch. 2, p. 178:3–21. The first paragraph of this passage is translated in Gutas, “Imagination,” p. 346; cf. the following pages of Gutas’ article for a detailed discussion.


84 Al-Ghazālī ascribes this view to the philosophers in the *Tahāfut* – see [T58] and [T60] below.


5 Al-Ghazālī and the philosophical tradition

1 For this translation of the title instead of the common, yet, in my view, unsatisfactory rendering “Incoherence of the Philosophers” see Appendix B.
2 Fīhā. Grammatically this should refer to the souls of the heavens, but it makes more sense to take it as referring to the Preserved Tablet, their collective designation.
3 Lā annahū, introducing an argument put in the mouth of the philosophers.
6 Tahāfūt, Disc. 16, §§6–7, pp. 158:19–159:16. The last phrase “the Pen has run dry [recording] what is to happen until the Day of Judgment” is a verbatim quotation from al-‘Aqīda al-Tahāwīya by the Hanafi scholar al-Tahāwī (d. 321/933), ultimately going back to a hadith recorded by al-Bukhārī in Kitāb al-nikāh: yā Abā Hurayra, jaffa l-qalam bi-mā anta láqīn.
7 The underlying assumption is that only an infinite being, God, can know in actuality an infinite number of particulars. This, of course, is connected to al-Ghazālī’s position articulated in the Tahāfūt that God does know the particulars and not merely “in a universal way” as claimed by Avicenna.
8 Tahāfūt al-Tahāfūt, Disc. 16, II:754:13–19: wa-amma mā yaqūlūhū fī hādhā l-jašl fī sabab al-ru’ū yā wa-l-wahy fa-huwa shay’ infarada bihi Ibnu Sīnā, wa-ārā’ al-qudamā’ fī dhālika ghayar hādhā al-ra’y, wa-amma wujūd ’ilm li-ashkhāṣ ghayar mutanāḥiya bi-l-fi’l min jihaṭ mā huwa ‘ilm shakhṣī fa-shay’ mutmani’ (selecting the appropriate readings among those offered by the editor).
9 Griffel, al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology, pp. 111–22.
10 Avicenna never claims that his noetics is apodeictic. As a true scientist, he stresses that this is simply a plausible scientific theory aiming at explaining actual phenomena, including revelation and veridical dreams, in both of which Avicenna fully believed. See especially Ishrāq, Metaph., namat 10, §24, IV:149; translated and discussed in Gutas, “Imagination,” pp. 352–3 and n. 46 there.
12 The subject deserves to be studied further. Some useful material can be found in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s Munāzarāt, munāẓara 9, p. 149, where al-Rāzī dismisses some of al-Ghazālī’s arguments in the Tahāfūt as “useless and feeble talk worthy of no attention” (kalāmān fāsidan wāhiyān lā yajīb al-ilīfāt ilayhi). See Shihadeh, “From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī,” pp. 159–60.
13 This phenomenon has been noticed by several scholars. Timothy Gianiotti’s observation is of particular relevance here: “While our tendency might be to regard the psychological arguments of the Tahāfūt as outright refutations of Ibn Sīnā’s psychological and eschatological doctrines, a careful reading of the text reveals that al-Ghazālī’s challenges never attack the truth of the Avicennan premises; rather, some focus on the presence of other viable possibilities while others focus solely on the validity of the “demonstrations” by which “the philosophers” claim to prove their doctrines of immateriality [of the soul] (thereby denying the logical necessity of the philosophers’ assertions). … Thus, the Tahāfūt does not always directly attack the philosophical doctrines per se or even entertain
questions of truth, for it was never written to establish belief; rather it was designed to shake the proud foundations of the Avicennean positions, which were in his mind leading some intellectually curious Muslims into dangerous waters” (Gianotti, *al-Ghazâlî’s Unspeakeable Doctrine*, pp. 10–11). This is echoed by Frank Griffel: “[I]n his *Incoherence*, al-Ghazâlî does not set out to prove the falsehood of all of—or even of most of—the philosophical teachings discussed there. The great majority of the twenty chapters focus on the *falâsîfâ’s* inability to demonstrate given elements of their teachings…. Even unproven positions can still be correct…. We learn from many of his later works that al-Ghazâlî did not object to the position discussed in the fifteenth discussion [of the *Tahâfût*], namely, that the heavens are moved by souls, referred to as angels in the Qur’an. In these and in other cases, al-Ghazâlî accepts the truth of the *falâsîfâ’s* teaching but rejects their claim to knowing it through demonstration. These things are known from revelation, he objects, and the *falâsîfâ’s* so-called demonstrations are merely attempts of proving this knowledge *post factum* with arguments that do not fully convince” (Griffel, *al-Ghazâlî’s Philosophical Theology*, pp. 98, 100). And again: “The initial argument of the *Incoherence* focuses on apodeixis and the demonstrative character of the arguments refuted therein. While the book also touches on the truth of these teachings, it ‘refutes’ numerous positions whose truths al-Ghazâlî acknowledges or which he subscribed to in his later works. In these cases al-Ghazâlî wishes to show that while these particular philosophical teachings are sound and true, they are not demonstrated. The ultimate source of the *falâsîfâ’s* knowledge about God’s nature, the human soul, or about the heavenly spheres, for instance, are the revelations given to early prophets such as Abraham and Moses. Their information made it into the books of the ancient philosophers who falsely claimed that they gained these insights by reason alone” (Griffel, “Al-Ghazâlî,” Section 3).

17 Here al-Ghazâlî puts in the mouth of the philosophers the same Qur’ânic verses that he himself uses in this context in his own works (e.g., *Mizân*, ch. 4, p. 199): “He who has purified [the soul] is successful, but he who has corrupted it has failed” (Q. 91:9–10).
20 *Tahâfût*, Preface, §1, p. 1. On the sacred hadîth “that which no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor has it ever occurred to the heart of man” see Notes to Chapter 2, n. 81 above.
21 Though Avicenna, it seems, initially allows for the possibility of bodily pleasures and pains in the afterlife (*Shi‘a*, *Ilâhiyyât*, Book 9, ch. 7, §2, pp. 347–8), he argues that there is no way to prove their existence, except through “accepting” (*taṣdiq*) the prophetic report concerning them. Since bodily pleasures and pains are well known and have been discussed extensively in the *shari‘a*, Avicenna leaves them aside and focuses on intellectual pleasures and pains. His discussion of these implies that the body will not be present in the afterlife (e.g. *Shi‘a*, *Ilâhiyyât*, Book 9, ch. 7, §24, p. 355:17–18: *fa-tatâ‘adhdhabu ’adhdhaban shadidan bi-faqd al-badân wa-muqtadayat al-badân*).
22 *Tahâfût*, Disc. 20, §19, pp. 217–18. Here al-Ghazâlî implicitly invokes his famous “rule of interpretation” (*qâmin al-ta‘wil*), already mentioned above. According to this hermeneutical principle, one is allowed to resort to an allegorical interpretation (*ta‘wil*) of a Qur’ânic verse (or a prophetic hadîth) *if and only if* there is an apodeictic proof (*burhân*) that the literal meaning of the text is untenable (as for instance, when bodily characteristics are ascribed to God). If that is the case, a qualified interpreter must resort to an allegorical interpretation, and conversely, if that is *not* the case, he must refrain from doing so and accept the account provided by the Qur’ân as it is, *without*
interpreting it allegorically. It is undeniable that al-Ghazālī firmly accepted the first, “positive” half of the rule of interpretation: i.e. that once a burhān invalidating the literal meaning of a verse has been established, a qualified interpreter must resort to an allegorical interpretation. But did al-Ghazālī also wholeheartedly accept the second, “negative” half of the same rule: that in the absence of such a burhān one was obliged to refrain from allegorical interpretations? There are, I think, good reasons to doubt that. Al-Ghazālī seems to have employed this “negative half” primarily to castigate others – notably, the philosophers (as is the case here) and the Ismā‘īlīs. There is no evidence that he ever observed it too strictly himself: he seems, in fact, to have always afforded himself a certain hermeneutical freedom. He must have maintained that an inspirational experience – of the sort he surely believed to have had attained himself – could override the literal meaning of a Qur’ānic verse and justify an allegorical interpretation of it, even when there was no available rational apodeictic proof invalidating that literal meaning. Did, then, al-Ghazālī really have a problem with the philosophers’ denial of bodily pleasures and pains in the afterlife? I shall address this question in what follows.

23 Tahāfut, Conclusion, §3, p. 230; Iqtisād, qūṭb 4, bāb 4, pp. 249:6–250:8. In Faysal, ch. 2, pp. 25–6, al-Ghazālī, in fact, defines kufr as “giving the lie to the prophets.” In Faysal, Chs 3–6, pp. 27–51, al-Ghazālī explains his theory of “five levels of existence” and “rule of interpretation.” His verdict is that whoever interprets any specific Qur’ānic expression in accordance with one of these levels does not give the lie to the prophets. Therefore, scholars “should not declare each other infidels on the grounds that the other person is mistaken in what he believes is a demonstration” (Faysal, ch. 6, p. 49:10–11). According to this analysis, al-Ghazālī has no right to declare the philosophers to be infidels (cf. Notes to Chapter 5, n. 34 below). In Faysal, ch. 8, p. 67, however, al-Ghazālī hardens his position and argues that in matters touching on “important principles of the creed (usūl al-‘aqā‘id al-muhimma) it is necessary to declare anyone an infidel who changes the literal sense [of a verse] without an apodeictic demonstration (burhān qāṭī‘), such as anyone who denies bodily resurrection (ḥāshr al-ajsād) and denies sensory punishments in the afterlife, based on assumptions, conjectures, and presumptions of unlikelihood, without an apodeictic demonstration. It is necessary to unequivocally declare such a person to be an infidel, for there is no demonstration proving that the return of spirits into bodies is impossible. Even mentioning this is extremely harmful to religion, so it is necessary to declare anyone an infidel who espouses this view, this being the position of the majority of the philosophers.” This passage implies that in such cases it is mandatory to do takfīr even if this is a case of an unwarranted interpretative move which does not give the lie to the prophets.

24 On this sacred ḥadīth see Notes to Chapter 2, n. 81 above.
25 This term goes back to Avicenna’s discussion of the afterlife (ma‘ād) in Shīfā‘, Ilāhīyat, Book 9, ch. 7, §3, p. 348:5 (cited in Notes to Chapter 2, n. 83 above).
26 For an integral translation of this important text see Gianotti, al-Ghazālī’s Unspeakable Doctrine, pp. 22–4. It is also translated and discussed by Dallal, “Ghazālī and the Perils of Interpretation,” pp. 781–2. For reasons which will become clear in what follows, I disagree with Dallal’s reading of the passage and, by and large, accept Richard Frank’s interpretation, which Dallal set out to criticize (Frank, al-Ghazālī and the Ash‘arite School, pp. 95–6). It is also necessary to correct Dallal’s translation of the passage: regarding the third view attributed to both the philosophers and the Ṣūfīs, al-Ghazālī does not say “had it been correct,” as Dallal translates, but “if it is correct” (idhā ṣahīḥa). Far from implying that the view in question is incorrect, al-Ghazālī’s wording is in fact non-committal (cf. idhā kāna ṣahīḥan immediately preceding [T70]).
27 The parallel passage from Arba‘ in is overlooked by Gianotti, as it is by both Dallal and Frank.
28 Notice the term dhawq, discussed in Chapter 3 above.
Reading al-akhass for al-âkhar.

The text as printed (fa-inna zawâl al-mulk yâlman kathîra badaniyâ) is obviously corrupt. I suggest excluding zawâl, as being carried over from the previous clause, and reading yu’tîru instead of yûrîthu (the reading yu’tîru is indeed given in another edition: ed. Muhîy al-Dîn Şâbî al-Kurî, Cairo: al-Maktaba al-tijâriya al-kubrâ, 1344/1925, p. 119). The emended reading (translated here) is therefore: fa-inna l-mâlik yu’tîru yâlman kathîra badaniyâ.

I borrow this term from the famous Patristic writer (Pseudo-)Dionysius the Areopagite, who used it in a somewhat different context. See e.g. A. Louth, Denys the Areopagite, London and New York: Continuum, 2001, pp. 45–7. Though Dionysius’ works were translated into Arabic before al-Ghazâlî’s time (see A. Treiger, “The Arabic Versions of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite’s Mystical Theology, Chapter 1,” Le Muséon 120, 2007, 365–93), they seem to have circulated among Arab Christians. There is thus little chance that al-Ghazâlî knew them.

Contrary to the Tahâfut, according to the Faysal, this symbolist view would not be considered as “giving the lie to the prophets,” since it interprets scriptural symbols on the level of “intellectual existence” (wujûd ‘aqlî) and, as al-Ghazâlî clarifies, “whoever interprets (nazzala) any one of the Legislator’s [i.e. the prophet’s] statements according to one of these degrees [of existence] does uphold [the prophet’s] truthfulness (fa-huwa min al-musâaddiqin). [One is guilty of] giving the lie [to the prophet] only when one denies all of these aspects [of existence altogether] and believes that what [the prophet] said has no meaning and is a sheer lie, and that the prophet’s goal in his statement was either to deceive (talbîs) or to [present a true lie for the] benefit of the world (maşlaht al-dunyâ)” (Faysal, ch. 5, p. 41:3–6). On interpretations according to the level of “intellectual existence” (wujûd ‘aqlî) see references in Notes to Chapter 5, n. 45 below.

On this sacred hadîth see Notes to Chapter 2, n. 81 above.

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On this theory see Michot, La destinée de l’homme selon Avicenne; Mohammed Rustom, “Psychology, Eschatology, and Imagination in Mullâ Şadrâ Shîrâzî’s Commentary on the Ḥadîth of Awakening,” Islam and Science 5.1, 2007, 9–22, esp. pp. 18ff.

On this expression in al-Ghazâlî see Lazarus-Yafeh, Studies, pp. 150–3.

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On this expression in al-Ghazâlî see Lazarus-Yafeh, Studies, pp. 150–3.
This seems to be (if I read it correctly) also the conclusion of Gianotti, *al-Ghazālī’s Unspeakable Doctrine*, though he does not state it explicitly, preferring to focus instead on what he sees as the crucial difference between al-Ghazālī and the philosophers: al-Ghazālī’s *experiential* approach and his (supposed) lack of interest in ontological questions. Here is the relevant passage: “Is this, then, al-Ghazālī’s real position on the Afterlife? [Gianotti is referring specifically to Avicenna’s theory of an imaginal afterlife.] Is he a masked Avicennian after all? [Here, Gianotti shies away from stating his answer to this question, which I presume, based on what follows, would be: yes. Instead of answering the question, he offers some remarks as to why he thinks the question, as formulated above, is irrelevant and beyond the point.] We approach the question somewhat differently. While al-Ghazālī does indeed seem to concord with Ibn Sinā’s doctrine of an immaterial soul and *even with his concept of an Afterlife that affords no ontological status to the soul’s corporeal associations and experiences* [NB!], we argue that … what is most crucial to unlocking al-Ghazālī’s eschatology vis-à-vis the philosophical eschatology … is that, while the philosophical treatments of the soul and the Afterlife are all theoretically and ontologically oriented, al-Ghazālī’s consistent and almost exclusive focus is on the individual’s *experience* of these realities. … To him, ontological speculation about the ‘true natures’ of such matters is both irrelevant and distracting, a waste of valuable time, time that would be better spent preparing for the inevitable ordeals of death, reckoning, and eternity. … Hence, for al-Ghazālī, to assert an incorporeal Afterlife is to err more than to hit the mark, *even when the assertion is, theoretically speaking, true* [NB!]” (Gianotti, *al-Ghazālī’s Unspeakable Doctrine*, pp. 175–6; my emphasis). While Gianotti is right about al-Ghazālī’s experiential and soteriological concerns, I think it would be unfair to say that he was not interested in ontology. My position is that he was, and that he was committed to Avicenna’s views on the ontology of the afterlife. His apparent “disinterest” is always stated as a warning to the common folk, while at the same time he often divulges tantalizing ontological hints to the “elect.” This, in my view, is a clear indication that ontological concerns do play a role in al-Ghazālī’s views of the afterlife. It is just that he felt it to be dangerous to publicly disclose his ontology of the afterlife and to share it with anyone except like-minded disciples.

As argued by the twentieth-century philosopher of science Karl Popper, a scientific theory is never a fact, but is always a falsifiable conjecture put forward to explain the observed phenomena – a conjecture which must be put to test, and should it fail, must be put to rest and replaced by a new, more adequate conjecture. However, public opinion often regards scientific conjectures as facts. This naïve perception, current even among many intellectuals, was evidently widespread also in al-Ghazālī’s time. His struggle was directed against this public opinion. He strove to show that many scientific theories of his own age, especially in physics and metaphysics, were mere conjectures (*tahmināt*) and did not carry the apodeictic force that was alone entitled to override the explicit claims of Revelation. Unlike Popper, however, al-Ghazālī did not see this “conjectural” philosophical knowledge as knowledge at all. In his view, only certain knowledge (*yaqīn*) qualifies as knowledge. Apodeixis was, thus, to be...
complemented, yet not with the Popperian approach of conjectures and refutations – an approach which al-Ghazālī would probably consider ludicrous – but with the acceptance of the limits that apodictic method cannot transcend. Beyond these limits, Revelation was necessary.


58 Tahāfūt, Disc. 15, §3, p. 153. See also Maqāṣid, Metaph., maqāla 4, rukn 2, da’wā 7 [probably meant to be rukn 3], pp. 127:10–128:6, where al-Ghazālī distinguishes between “celestial spiritual angels” (=the souls of the spheres) and the “cherubs” (implicitly identified on p. 128 with the “privileged angels,” al-mālā’īka al-muqarrabūn = separate intellects); cf. Mī’yār, pp. 291ff. This distinction goes back to Avicenna, Shiḥa’, Ilāḥīyāt, Book 10, ch. 1, §1, p. 358 (Avicenna’s terminology is al-mālā’īka al-rūḥānīya al-mujarradā for the intellects of the spheres, and al-mālā’īka al-’amala [perhaps read al-hamala, i.e. al-hamalat al-’arsh?] for the souls of the spheres).

59 On al-Ghazālī’s attitude to kalām and the connection between kalām and i’tiqād (as opposed to ma’rifā) see Notes to Chapter 1, n. 78 above. On the Tahāfūt as a work of kalām see Jawāhir, Part 1, ch. 4, mabhāth 2, ṭabaqa 1, qism 2, p. 39:6–8: wa-maqsūd hādhā l-‘ilm [i.e. ‘ilm al-kalām] hirāsāt ‘aqīdāt al-‘awāmm ‘an tashwīsh al-mubtadī’ā, wa-lā yakūnu hādhā l-‘ilm malīyan bi-kashf al-ḥaqqā’iq, wa-bi-jinsīhi yata’allaq al-kitāb alladhi ṣanāfānūhū fi tahāfūt al-falāṣīfā.


61 Garden, “al-Māzāri al-dhakhī,” pp. 103–4; cf. Griffel, al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology, pp. 54–5, where the dating of the events is different.


63 The idea that the human spirit is a stranger in this world is found, for instance, in Kīmiyā, onvān 4, faṣīḥ 4, 1:87:11–12.


65 For this reading see Krawulsky, Briefe und Reden, p. 226, n. 2 to p. 22.


67 i.e. the cognition of God. Cf. Mīzān, ch. 27, p. 351:1–2: “Cognition of God is the utmost goal of all cognition and the fruit of every science in the opinion of all the religious schools (al-‘alā l-madhāhib kullihā).”

68 The expression fataḥa l-bāb means “to allow.” Cf. ḥasama l-bāb, “to prohibit” in [T74] below.

69 The Brethren of Purity are mentioned three times in the Munqidh. Apart from this passage, see §58, p. 84:10ff. (at the beginning of the discussion of the second āfa); interestingly, the Brethren of Purity serve here as an example of the philosophers. Later on (in the section on the Ta’līmiya), al-Ghazālī explains the connection between the Brethren and the philosophers, §78, p. 93:13ff.
Conclusion


2. Without attempting to answer the question of what constitutes the “demarcation criterion” between philosophy and mysticism generally, I shall simply mention that there is an important difference between al-Ghazālī and Avicenna in how they treat the question of whether all knowledge is syllogistic. As shown by Dimitri Gutas (Gutas, “Intellect without Limits”), Avicenna consistently insists on the requirement that all knowledge be syllogistic, whereas al-Ghazālī disregards this requirement and implicitly allows for a non-syllogistic mode of knowledge. It is in this sense that I speak of Avicenna as a philosopher and of al-Ghazālī as a mystic. The evidence for this has been presented in Chapter 3.

3. On al-Ghazālī’s influence on al-Rāzī see, e.g., Shihadeh, “From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī” (where mostly al-Ghazālī’s anti-philosophical side is examined); T. Jaffer, “Fahr al-Din al-Razi (d. 606/1210): Philosopher and Theologian as Exegete,” PhD Dissertation, Yale University, 2005, esp. pp. 96–102, 114–222 (parallels to al-Ghazālī are not always explicitly pointed out, but will nevertheless be obvious).


5. I fully accept Robert Wisnovsky’s conclusion (Wisnovsky, “One Aspect of the Avicennian Turn”) that the process of Avicenna’s integration into Islamic theology had begun before al-Ghazālī, arguably already during Avicenna’s lifetime. My point is simply that al-Ghazālī played a key role in this development, precisely the kind of role which is attributed to him by Averroes.

At the same time, it seems undeniable that in his anti-philosophical declarations – even if they were only made to camouflage his pro-philosophical agenda – al-Ghazālī stands at the beginning of the directly opposite, anti-philosophical trend which continues down to modern times. Already Averroes mentioned that al-Ghazālī’s condemnation of philosophy had caused a certain group of people to “find fault with philosophers and philosophy” (Kashf, bāb 2, section 9, §162, p. 151:14). This anti-philosophical trend was reinforced by the Ḥanbalite theologian Ibn Taymiyya, even as he was himself a keen reader of Avicenna (S. al-Sarḥān, al-Ḥikma al-maslīhah: madkhal ʾilā mawqīf Ibn Taymiyya min al-falsafa, Baysān, 2008; on Ibn Taymiyya as a reader of Avicenna see Michot, “A Mamleḵ Theologian’s Commentary”; cf. J. Hoover, Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007). In a vulgarized form, this anti-philosophical trend is becoming increasingly influential in the Islamic world today, where Wahḥābīsm, rapidly establishing itself as a kind of modern “orthodoxy,” enthusiastically embraces al-Ghazālī’s condemnation of the philosophers as part of its extreme anti-innovationist stance. The idea that Muslim philosophers are infidels is frequently found in Wahḥābī and Wahḥābī-influenced publications and on Wahḥābī websites. Thus, for instance, Shaykh Samīr al-Mālikī’s pamphlet al-Radd ʿalā man ʿazzama al-falāṣifa al-malāḥīda Ibn Sinā, al-Rāzī, al-Fārābī wa-ashyāʾ ʾahum is widely available on the Internet, including the author’s website: http://www.saaid.net/Doat/samer/index.htm (accessed December 12 2010). Al-Ghazālī himself is, of course, also frequently denounced as an infidel by Salafī and Wahḥābī authors (e.g. ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Wakīl, Ḥādhīhi hiya al-Ṣūfīya, Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmīyya, 1979, pp. 47–56), mostly on account of his “Ṣūfī” views, i.e. precisely those views which, as I have shown in this book, exhibit a strong Avicennian influence.

Appendix A

1 On the Pen see Iḥyāʾ, Book 21, bayān 7, III:24; Imlāʾ, faṣl 13, V:321:4–10 (throughout this section, read qalam instead of ‘ilm!).

2 Concerning the following, cf. Landolt, “Ghazālī and Religionswissenschaft,” pp. 46–8 (I agree with much of Landolt’s discussion, except his identification of the Vizier with the Sun-angel/the Obeyed One; in my view, explained below, the Vizier is the Moon-angel). Landolt, ibid., pp. 24–5, n. 23 and Davidson, Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, p. 137 point out that already Ibn Ṭufayl explicitly identified al-Ghazālī’s “Supernal Divine Spirit” with the Active Intellect. Cf. also al-Fārābī’s identification of the Active Intellect with al-Rūḥ al-amin or Rūḥ al-quds (al-Fārābī, al-Siyāsah al-madāniyya, p. 23).


7 Faysal, faṣl 4, p. 33.

8 Kīmiyāʾ, onvān 2, faṣl 7.


11 Kīmiyāʾ, onvān 2, faṣl 7, I:60:11–12.

Al-Ghazālī’s view is somewhat similar to Plato’s theory that the Demiurge used the Eternal Model (Timaeus, 28a ff.). On the fate of the Arsh (Eliksir schastja), Chast' 1 (‘unvany 1–4, rukn 1) in making the world (Timaeus, paraideigma) in making the world (Timaeus, 28a ff.). On the fate of the Timaeus in the Arabic and Islamic world see now C. D’Ancona, “The Timaeus Model for Creation and Providence: An Example of Continuity and Adaptation in Early Arabic Philosophical Literature,” in: G.J. Reydams-Schils (ed.), Plato’s Timaeus as Cultural Icon, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003, pp. 206–37, which mainly focuses on al-Kindī.

The word nah (“not”) in nah in del-e zāher in Kīmīyā, ‘onvān 2, fasl 3, I:53:9 should, I think, be secluded. It does not seem to exist in the St Petersburg manuscript of the Kīmīyā (Oriental Institute, MS B928, dated 1495), to judge from Khismatulin’s Russian translation of the Kīmīyā, based on that manuscript (A.A. Khismatulin (tr.), Kīmīyā-yi sa’ādat (Elikisr schastja), Chast’ 1 (‘unvany 1–4, rukn 1), St Petersburg, 2002, p. 44).
26 Cf. [T58], where al-Ghazālī puts the latter identification in the mouth of the philosophers.
27 Frank, Creation and the Cosmic System, p. 45, n. 81 is rather vague: “The Cherished Tablet … would seem here to be allegorically identified with the Throne or with the entire celestial world or perhaps with the heavens and the angels that move them”; Frank, al-Ghazālī and the Ash‘urite School, pp. 26–7 (identifies the Preserved Tablet, incorrectly, with the angel associated with the Outermost Sphere) and p. 127, n. 59 (identifies the Preserved Tablet, incorrectly, with both the Active Intellect and the Throne); Griffel, al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology, p. 194.
29 Mishkāt, Part 2, §28, p. 31.
30 In al-‘Amīrī’s Fūṣūl fī l-ma‘ālim il-silāḥiya, ch. 2, the philosophers are said to identify the Pen with the “Universal Intellect” and the Tablet with the “Universal Soul.” See Wakelnig, Feder, Tafel, Mensch, pp. 84–7 (edition and translation) and pp. 158ff. (analysis); cf. E.K. Rowson, “An Unpublished Work by al-‘Amīrī and the Date of the Arabic De Causis,” Journal of the American Oriental Society 104, 1984, 193–9, at p. 196a and Rowson, Muslim Philosopher, pp. 250–1. Wakelnig points to the Ismā‘īlī origin of this identification, but without reference to primary sources. She mentions, however (p. 159), that al-Muṭṭahhar ibn Tāhir al-Maqdisī polemicized against this doctrine in his al-Bad‘ wa-l-ta‘rīkh, I:168:4–10; in this text, al-Maqdisī refers to the unidentified ahl al-zaygh, who are presumably the Ismā‘īlīs (though Wakelnig does not explicitly draw this connection). See also Pseudo-Fārābī, Fūṣūs, §47, pp. 77–8 (=Pseudo-Avicenna, Fī l-Taṣawwuf/al-Firdaws fī māḥiyat al-insān, ed. ‘Āṣī, al-Tafsīr al-Qur‘ānī, pp. 141–2).
31 Fadā‘īh, ch. 4, pp. 38–9 (cf. the brief discussion of this point in Ibn al-Walīd’s Dūmīg al-bāṭīl, ch. 6, 1:133–4).
33 Laduniya, ch. 2, p. 105:3–5: al-‘aqūl al-awwal wa-l-lawh wa-l-qalam, wa-hiyā l-jawāhir al-mufrada al-mufārikha ‘an al-mawādd, bal hiya sūra mujarrada ma‘qūla ghayr mahsīsa. In this passage, al-‘aqūl al-awwal wa-l-lawh wa-l-qalam all seem to be different entities, and hence the Pen cannot be identical with the First Intellect. Can it still be identical with the Universal Intellect if the Universal Intellect and the First Intellect are taken to be two different entities?

Appendix B

1 See Bouyges, Algazel, Tahafot al-falasifat, pp. X-XI, for his explanation of the choice of the word.
3 Bouyges, Algazel, Tahafot al-falasifat, p. XI. Marmura (Tahāfūt, “Translator’s Introduction,” p. xxvi) follows Bouyges: “The term tahāfūt has been variously translated—for example, as ‘destructio’ by the Latins, ‘inconsistency,’ ‘disintegration,’ ‘collapse,’ as well as ‘incoherence,’ by modern scholars. A common meaning is ‘collapse,’ or ‘collapsed,’ sometimes with the nuance of rushing headlong and crowding to fall into disaster, into hellfire. It also is used to convey the idea of rushing and swarming into combat. The term also relates to haft, discourse that is not well thought out, that is unintelligible, incoherent. M. Bouyges, in the introduction to his edition of the text,
gives a succinct discussion of the ways this term has been translated in English and other languages. He chose ‘incoherence’ as perhaps conveying best what al-Ghazâlî meant by the term tahâfût. His reasons for this choice are quite convincing and hence I have followed him in the translation of the term.”

6 Asín Palacios, “Le sens du mot tehâfût.”
9 Stroumsa, Maimonides in His World, pp. 44–5, n. 75; cf. pp. 52, 133.
11 Mishkât, Part 2, §48, p. 36:8–11, referenced by Asín Palacios, “Le sens du mot tehâfût,” p. 193, n. 1. It is obvious from the context that the moths do not actually “fall” into the fire, for they come to return to it over and over again. Cf. Kimiyâ, ’onvân 4, fašl 14, I:110–1, where a similar example is used in a somewhat different context.
12 This term is discussed at the beginning of Chapter 2 above.
13 Ilhya’, Book 1, bâb 6, ‘alâma 9, I:117.
14 E.g. Fadâ’ih, ch. 9, p. 171:18. Neither Asín Palacios nor Bouyges mentions this passage.
15 Bouyges, Al gazel, Tahafot al-falasifat, p. XI.
16 Mankhût, p. 306:5–11. For a slightly different translation see Ahmad Hasan, The Doctrine of Ijmâ’ in Islam, Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 1978, p. 67 (where the word tahâfût is translated as “incoherence”).
17 It may be argued that the term tahâfût must mean “incoherence,” because it often occurs in conjunction with tanâqûd, “mutual contradiction” (Tahafot, Introduction, §3, p. 3:5; §22, p. 7:16; Disc. 18, §22, p. 188:15), and so the two terms must be synonymous. This is, of course, a non sequitur. Al-Ghazâlî may well have seen the two terms as complementary, rather than synonymous: i.e. that philosophical doctrines are both contradictory and precipitate (unfounded). Besides, in another passage, tahâfût is grouped with ‘ajz (inability to prove the point) and iftid (disgrace) at falsely claiming knowledge that one does not actually have and at being caught, so to speak, with one’s pants down – see Tahafot, Disc. 6, §44, p. 107:20.
19 wa-lâ’ yapîl ‘asmô lâhâshîb (“and he shall not cast himself down to answer”). This pre-correction variant is still preserved in one of the manuscripts of his translation – see C. Fraenkel, Min hâ-Ramb”m li-Shomû’el Ibn Tibbôn: darkô shel Dalâlat al-hâ’irin lô-Môrêh han-nôbôkîm, Jerusalem: Magnes, 2007, p. 83.
20 More precisely: “and he shall not force his way through and jump to respond to my words” (wa-lô’ yahârûs wa-yiqpûs lâhâshîb ‘al dâbâray) – see Maimonides’ letter to Ibn Tibbon in Maimonides, Iggorôt, vol. 2, p. 533.
22 On the other meaning of the Hebrew verb hâras – “to destroy” – see below.
23 Ex. 19:20–4 (New International Version). The Septuagint translates the relevant sections as: mîpotê énôsosn pôrû tov ðovôn katañôstsa kai mî bîaçêsthwsan ãvabînâ
πρός τὸν θεόν (in the first case, simply “draw near,” in the latter, “force one’s way through”). The Syriac Peshitta has, in both cases, for unknown reason, yarahūn, “depart.”


26 The assumption here is that a rigorous philosophical proof always yields a true conclusion, and hence Scripture, which is also by definition necessarily true, must be understood in light of this conclusion.

27 Maimonides, Guide, Part 2, ch. 25, p. 230:21–5; cf. Pines’ translation, vol. 2, p. 330: “if creation in time were demonstrated … all the overhasty [footnote: or incoherent] claims made to us on this point by the philosophers [i.e. the claim that the world is eternal] would become void. In the same way, if the philosophers would succeed in demonstrating eternity [of the world] as Aristotle understands it, the Law as a whole would become void, and a shift to other opinions would take place.”

28 Cf. Stroumsa’s translation of the same verb in Guide, Part 3, ch. 19 as “assault (the prophets’ discourse)” and her arguments in favor of this translation (Stroumsa, Maimonides In His World, p. 52), which seem to me to be quite compelling.

29 Pines expresses himself with great caution on whether or not Maimonides knew the Tahāfūt: “No absolutely certain answer can be given to it; however, the probabilities are that at the time of the writing of the Guide Maimonides had read the celebrated work. No philosopher who wished to keep abreast of the intellectual debate of this period could have afforded not to have done so; and such a lacuna in Maimonides’ knowledge of Arabic theological literature would have been most uncharacteristic” (Pines, Introduction to his translation of the Guide, p. cccxvii). On Maimonides’ use of al-Ghazālī see now Stroumsa, Maimonides In His World, pp. 25–6 and references given there.

30 One of the referees at Routledge has helpfully pointed out to me that “[e]ven the hubris that Maimonides associates with the attitude of the falāṣīfīa is anticipated in al-Ghazālī, see the first muqadimma of the Tahāfūt and its analysis in … Griffel, “Taqlīd of the Philosophers,” … pp. 282–87.”

31 Averroes’ Tahāfūt al-tahāfūt was first translated into Latin by the Jewish scholar Calonymos ben Calonymos ben Meir of Arles directly from Arabic in 1328, under the title Destructio destructionum (this translation does not include the four last discussions on Physics). Virtually simultaneously, the Tahāfūt al-tahāfūt was translated from Arabic into Hebrew by Calonymos ben David ben Todros (Calonymos ben David the Elder) under the title Happāłat ha-happālāẖ (lit. “the Downfall of the Downfall”). Subsequently, this Hebrew translation was rendered into Latin by Calo Calonymos (Calonymos ben David the Younger), also under the title Destructio destructionum. This was an integral translation, first published in 1527 in Venice. For a critical edition of this translation see B.H. Zedler (ed.), Averroes’ Destructio Destructionum Philosophiae Alqazelis in the Latin Version of Calo Calonymos, Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1961. Gad Freudenthal is suggesting to me that one of these translations could have been done by two translators working “à quatre mains,” such that the first translator rendered the Arabic term tahāfūt as hārisāḥ, while the second misunderstood hārisāḥ as “destructio.”
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Abbreviations

EI2 = Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition  
Elr = Encyclopaedia Iranica  

Al-Ghazālī’s works and select translations

Ayyuhā l-walad – see Ey Farzand  
Ey Farzand = Makāṭīb, pp. 91–112  
[English, from the Arabic] ibid.  
Faḍāʾiḥ = Faḍāʾiḥ al-bāṭinīya, ed. ‘A. Badawī, Cairo, 1383/1964  
Faḍāʾil al-anām – see Makāṭīb  
Faysāl = Faysal al-tafrīqa bayna al-islām wa-l-zandaqa, ed. M. Bījū, Damascus, 1413/1993  
Ilḥām = Ilḥām al-ʿawāmm ṣanʿ ʿilm al-kalām, in: MRIG, pp. 319–55 [the edition of M.M. Baghdādī, Beirut, 1406/1985 is full of mistakes and is to be avoided]

Imlāʾ = al-Imlāʾ fī ishkālāt al-Iḥyāʾ, in the appendix to the Iḥyāʾ, V:282–326


Jawāhir = Jawāhir al-Qurʾān, ed. R.R. al-Qābānī, Beirut: Dār iḥrān Jawāhir, 1406/1985 is full of mistakes and is to be avoided

Khulāṣat al-taṣāwīfī – see Ey Farzand


[Russian, partial] A.A. Khismatulin (tr.), Chast’ Āliksir schastja, Chast’ 1 (unvany 1–4, rukn 1), St Petersburg, 2002


Maḥānūn al-ṣagīrī – see Ajwība

Maḥātib = Makāṭib-e fārsī-ye Ghazzālī be-nām-e Faḍāʾīl al-anām min rasāʾīl Ḥujjat al-islām, ed. A. Eqbāl, Tehrān, 1333/1954

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Mi‘yār = Mi‘yār al-‘ilm, edited under the title Mi‘yār al-‘ilm, ed. M. Bn Bn, Damascus, 1413/1992

Muntiq = al-Munqidh min al-dalal, ed. S. Dunyā, Cairo: Dār al-ma‘ārif, 1961

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Qīstās = al-Qīstās al-mustaqīm, ed. V. Chelhot, Beirut, 1959


Tahāfut = M.E. Marmura (ed. and tr.), al-Ghazālī, The Incoherence of the Philosophers, Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1997 [the critical edition Tahāfot al-falāsifat, ed. M. Bouyges, Beirut: Imprimerie catholique, 1927, has also been consulted]

[English] ibid.

Wa‘ziyya = al-Risāla al-Wa‘ziyya, in: MRIG, pp. 316–19

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Ibn Rushd – see Averroes

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